

# The Rediscovery of Man

[029-4.3]

By: Cordwainer Smith

Synopsis:

The Rediscovery of Man The Complete Short Science Fiction of Cordwainer Smith is the second book in the "NESFA's Choice" series. It brings back into print all of the short science fiction of Cordwainer Smith, and includes two never before published stories.

The Rediscovery of Man includes all of Smith's short science fiction, including: "Scanners Live in Vain" "The Ballad of Lost C'mell" "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" "The Game of Rat and Dragon" "On the Storm Planet" It also includes an in-depth introduction to the works of Cordwainer Smith by John J. Pierce, a noted authority on Smith's work.

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# Contents

Introduction by <i>John J. Pierce</i>	vii
Editor's Introduction	xv

## *Stories of the Instrumentality of Mankind*

No,No,Not Rogov!	3
War No.81-Q (rewritten version)	19
Mark Elf	29
The Queen of the Afternoon	41
Scanners Live in Vain	65
The Lady Who Sailed <i>The Soul</i>	97
When the People Fell	119
Think Blue, Count Two	129
The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All	155
The Game of Rat and Dragon	163
The Burning of the Brain	177
From Gustible's Planet	187
Himself in Anachron	193
The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal	201
Golden the Ship Was Oh! Oh! Oh!	215
The Dead Lady of Clown Town	223
Under Old Earth 289 Drunkboat	327
Mother Hitton' s Littul Kittons	355
Alpha Ralpa Boulevard	375
The Ballad of Lost C'mell	401
A Planet Named Shayol	419
On the Gem Planet	451
On the Storm Planet	475
On the Sand Planet	541
Three to a Given Star	567
Down to a Sunless Sea	587

## *Other Stories*

War No. 81-Q (original version)	613
Western Science Is So Wonderful	617

Nancy	629
The life of Bodidharma	641
Angerhelm	649
The Good Friends	667

# Introduction

by

John J. Pierce

It's trite to say, of course, but there has never been another science fiction writer like Cordwainer Smith.

Smith was never a very prolific SF writer, as evidenced by the fact that nearly all of his short fiction can be encompassed in a single omnibus volume like this. He was never a very popular writer, as evidenced by the fact that most of his work has usually been out of print. Nor has he been a favorite of the critics, as evidenced by the fact that few citations to his SF can be found in journals like *Science Fiction Studies*.

It is impossible to fit Smith's work into any of the neat categories that appeal to most readers or critics. It isn't hard science fiction, it isn't military science fiction, it isn't sociological science fiction, it isn't satire, it isn't surrealism, it isn't post modernism. For those who have fallen in love with it over the years, however, it is some of the most powerful science fiction ever written. It is the kind of fiction that, as C. S. Lewis once wrote, becomes part of the reader's personal iconography.

You may have already read the story of Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-66), the man behind Cordwainer Smith, who grew up in China, Japan, Germany, and France, and became a soldier, diplomat, and respected authority on Far Eastern affairs.

He was the son of Paul Myron Wentworth Linebarger, a retired American judge who helped finance the Chinese revolution of 1911 and became the legal advisor to Sun Yat-sen. It was Sun himself who gave young Paul his Chinese name Lin Bah Loh, or "Forest of Incandescent Bliss." (His father had been dubbed Lin Bah Kuh, or "Forest of 1,000 Victories.") In time, the younger Linebarger became the confidant of Chiang Kai-shek, and, like his father, wrote about China. Still later, he was in demand at the Department of Asiatic Politics at Johns Hopkins University, where he shared his own expertise with members of the diplomatic corps. And that isn't counting his years as an operative in China during World War II, or as a "visitor to small wars" thereafter, from which he became perhaps the world's leading authority on psychological warfare.

He wrote the book on psychological warfare under his own name, as with all his non-fiction. But he was very shy about his fiction. He wrote two novels, *Ria* and *Carola*, both unusual due to their female protagonists and international settings, under the name Felix C. Forrest, a play on his Chinese name. But when people found out who "Forrest" was, he couldn't write any more.

He tried a spy thriller, *Atomsk*, as Carmichael Smith, but was found out again. He even submitted a manuscript for another novel under his wife's name, but nobody was fooled. Although Linebarger wrote at least partial drafts of several other novels, he was never able to interest publishers, and it appears he never really tried that hard. He might have had a distinguished, if minor, career as a novelist; it is an odd coincidence that Herma Briffault, widow of Robert Briffault, to whose novels of European politics Frederik Pohl would later compare *Ria* and *Carola*, had in fact read *Carola* in manuscript; only she compared it to the work of Jean Paul Sartre!

Yet it isn't only a matter of happenstance, of opportunities elsewhere denied, that Paul M. A. Linebarger became a science fiction writer. In fact, he was writing SF before he wrote anything else. From his early teens, he turned out an incredible volume of juvenile SF, under titles like "The Books of Futurity" some bad imitations of Edgar Rice Burroughs, others clumsily satirical or incorporating Chinese legends or folklore. One of these efforts contained, as an imaginary "review," the genesis of "The life of Bodidharma," published over 20 years later in its final form. At the age of 15, he even had an SF story published "War No. 81- Q," which appeared in *The Adjutant*, the official organ of his high school cadet corps in Washington, DC, in June 1928. Because he used the name of his cousin, Jack Bearden, for the hero, Bearden decided to get back with a story of his own,

"The Notorious C39"; but Bearden's story actually made it into *Amazing Stories*. More than 30 years later, Linebarger rewrote "War No. 81-Q" for his first collection of Cordwainer Smith SF stories. *You Will Never Be the Same*, but it didn't make the cut. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Linebarger continued to write short fiction some SF, some fantasy, some contemporary or Chinese historical. The manuscripts, including those of the earliest Cordwainer Smith stories, were eventually bound in a red-leather volume now in the hands of a daughter living in Oregon. Most of these stories were apparently never submitted for publication, but Linebarger did send two of the fantasies "Alauda Dalma" and "The Archer and the Deep" to *Unknown* in 1942. (If you don't recognize the titles, it is because *Unknown* turned them down: the latter didn't fare any better with Judith Merrill in 1961.) Then in 1945, recently returned from China and facing idle hours in some sort of desk job at the Pentagon, he wrote another of the manuscripts included in the bound volume, the one that was to put him on the literary map "Scanners Live in Vain."

You doubtless know that it was "Scanners" which introduced the Instrumentality of Mankind, although only as a shadowy background to the bizarre tale of the cyborged space pilots who are dead though they live, and would rather kill than live with a new discovery that has made their sacrifice and its attendant rituals obsolete. Yet however shadowy, that background with its references to the Beasts and the manshonyaggers and the Unforgiven, and the implications of some terrible dark age from which humanity has only just emerged suggests a long period of gestation for the story and, possibly, the existence of earlier stories with the same background. Only there is no evidence of any such thing; to the contrary, at least some of the background appears to date back to a note Linebarger wrote to himself January 7, 1945, for a projected story, "The Weapons," set in a "future or imaginary world" in which humanity must always be on guard against old weapons, "perpetual and automatic," surviving from some old and forgotten war. In that note, we can see the genesis of the manshonyaggers, the German killing machines (from *menschenjager*, or hunter of men) first referred to in "Scanners Live in Vain."

Can Paul Linebarger have thought up an entire future history in the time it took to write "Scanners Live in Vain"? It is probably a lot more complicated than that; it may well be that a number of ideas that had been floating around in his head for years, without ever being set down on paper, suddenly gel led when he had the inspiration for the story. It didn't take long for the universe of "Scanners Live in Vain" to take shape, however, for the story had been written within a few months of that note for "The Weapons."

On July 18, 1945, it was submitted to John W. Campbell, Jr. at *Astounding Science Fiction* who rejected it as "too extreme." That proved to be the first of several rejections, until "Scanners Live in Vain" finally found a home at *Fantasy Book* in 1950. The only related story that Linebarger wrote before then was "Himself in Anachron," dated 1946. Never published in a magazine, it was later slated (like the revised "War No. 81-Q") for inclusion in *You Will Never Be the Same*, under the title "My Love Is Lost in the Null of Nought" or "She Lost Her Love in the Null of Nought," but Linebarger wasn't able to deliver a revised manuscript in time.

Although he may have written such a revision at a later date, none can be found in his literary papers, and the present version was adapted by his widow Genevieve from the 1946 draft.

The career of Cordwainer Smith might have been stillborn, with only one published and one unpublished story to show for it.

Fortunately, Smith soon had a few champions, most notably Frederik Pohl, who didn't have the foggiest idea who the author was but knew a stellar performance when he saw one. By including "Scanners Live in Vain" in an anthology, Pohl rescued it from the obscurity of *Fantasy Book*, and that led a few years later to Linebarger's submission of "The Game of Rat and Dragon" to *Galaxy*: the rest, as they say, is history. A great deal may not be told until the hoped-for publication of a biography of Linebarger by Alan C. Elms, who has done exhaustive interviews with his friends and family as well as researching all his papers.

Among other things, Elms has the low-down on how it happened that the young Linebarger knew L. Ron Hubbard. (It wasn't a mere fluke that one of Linebarger's own unpublished works was *Pathematics*, his revisionist take on Hubbard's *Dianetics*.) It is important to understand some crucial

facts about his life that have previously been overlooked: for example, although he was a devout Episcopalian late in life, he was only a nominal Methodist (his father's church) at the time he wrote "Scanners Live in Vain." He originally joined the Episcopal Church as a compromise with his second wife, who was raised as a Catholic.

Only about 1960 did he become a believer in any deep sense, and only then did the religious imagery and Christian message become strong in his SF works. The change in spiritual orientation that marks his later work is thus a genuine change, not merely a change of emphasis. There are also all kinds of details about the life of Paul M. A. Linebarger, his family and friends, that bear on his work as we shall see when Elms' researches bear fruit.

The strictly literary history, however, is fascinating in itself.

In spite of such major gaps as the loss of Linebarger's main notebook for the Instrumentality saga in 1965, and the apparent disappearance of the dicta belts on which his widow recalled that he had recorded notes for or even drafts of stories never committed to paper, it is possible to reconstruct a lot of this literary history from Linebarger's literary papers, now at the University of Kansas (although some, including more juvenilia, and such oddities as an early poem titled "An Ode to My Buick," mistakenly ended up at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, the repository for papers relating to his military, diplomatic, and scholarly career). Among these literary papers are any number of variant (mostly partial) manuscripts for stories already familiar to us, false starts for stories never completed, notebooks with ideas for stories never written, and miscellaneous correspondence.

The story of the Instrumentality saga has been told before: the Ancient Wars, the Dark Age, the renaissance of humanity in the time of the scanners, the romantic age of exploration by sail ship the discoveries of plano forming and stroon that bind together the myriad worlds and usher in a bland Utopia of ease and plenty, the twin revolutions of the under people Holy Insurgency and the Instrumentality's Rediscovery of Man. The stories in this volume tell it all better than any summary can. Smith had it all worked out, of course; he even offered to supply a chronology for *You Will Never Be the Same*, which would undoubtedly have been far superior to the one I supplied for *The Best of Cordwainer Smith* for Del Rey Books.

But the saga was never conceived as a seamless whole, however much Linebarger worked to develop the overall framework that would embrace both his original conception and his later one.

His working method seemed to be to develop several strands of thought and weave them together, or perhaps let them weave themselves together. This is first evident in the genesis of "Scanners," in which ideas of a future dark age, automatic weapons, the Vomact family, the scanners themselves, and even the Instrumentality suddenly come together. Subsequent stories developed that background. Both "Mark Elf and the original two chapter fragment of "The Queen of the Afternoon" backtracked to the end of the Dark Age (the latter made no mention of the under people in that version, nor did it hint at any Christian themes).

"The Game of Rat and Dragon" took the saga forward to the heroic age of plano forming and the vision of the far future in "No, No, Not Rogov!" hinted at a secular apotheosis for human history. Both "When the People Fell" and "The Burning of the Brain" are snapshots of different periods in the same history, as well as compelling stories in themselves.

In 1958, Linebarger began writing a novel called *Star-Craving Mad*, which was his first attempt at what eventually became *Norstrilia*. But the initial version of the story is far different from that we know today. There is no Rediscovery of Man, nor any Holy Insurgency. Lord Jestocost and "Arthur McBane CLI" both figure here, but in different guises: Jestocost is simply a cruel but shrewd tyrant, whose name ("cruelty" in Russian) has none of the ironic meaning we now associate with it; while McBane is a man of action who comes to the aid of the under people only for the love of C'mell. And the rebellion of the under people is nothing more than an uprising of the oppressed, like the French Revolution to which it is compared. The E'telekeli appears, but as a future Jacobite rather than a spiritual sage. Linebarger was developing an ironic theme, but it had to do with true men having inadvertently created a race of supermen in the form of the under people. Linebarger apparently wasn't satisfied with the way the story was going, for it was abandoned after a few



chapters. Several other false starts over the next year failed to get Star-Craving Mad moving again, and a severe illness which Genevieve Linebarger later remembered as the genesis of Norstrilia may have actually been the genesis of a spiritual rebirth that changed the entire thrust of the Instrumentality saga. As in the case of "Scanners Live in Vain," however, Paul Linebarger was evidently thinking along several lines at once before they all came together.

Even in the original draft of Star-Craving Mad there is one hint of the Rediscovery of Man, but it remains only a hint.

C'mell's father C'mackintosh is not an athlete, but a "licensed robber" at a "savage park" in Mississippi: such parks are a means for humanity to "keep the peace within its own troubled and complex soul," but they are apparently a longstanding institution, not a revolutionary development. In an early false start for "The Ballad of Lost C'mell," Lord Redlady has unleashed ancient diseases on Earth, but not as part of a spiritual revolution: the idea to discourage invasions by developing immunities among Earthmen to pathogens that can then be used as weapons against outsiders. In another false start, for a story called "Strange Men and Doomed Ladies," Lord Jestocost proposes to end the policy of euthanasia for "spoiled" people such as the crippled, the sickly, the stupid, and even the overly-brilliant: "Let them be, and let us see." But this seems to be an isolated idea, unrelated to any grand plan.

The false start for "The Ballad of Lost C'mell" ("Where Is the Which of the What She Did") also opens with a prologue that recounts the entire history of Earth. Our times are the Second Ancient Days; they came before the First Ancient Days, but were discovered later. The First Ancient Days came either before or after the Long Nothing (a summary of the chronology contradicts the narrative). Civilization was restored by the Dwellers, who brought the cities back into shape around the ruins left by the Daimoni, including Earthport Gulosan. It was during the time of the Dwellers that humanity discovered Space3 and overcame the rule of the perfect men. But that was all long before the time of C'mell. The Originals, invaders from space, overcame the Dwellers, but were later overthrown by an alliance of true men and under people. Then came the Bright, who "did things with music and dance, with picture and word, which had never been done before." They also built the peace square at An-fang, and (another contradiction) had something to do with the "fall of the perfect men and the temporary rule of Lord Redlady." Then came a time of troubles, the High Cruel Years, followed by another invasion by the Pure ("men of earth who had been gone too long"), who still rule Earth at the time of the story.

Although the Dwellers may be the true men of "Mark Elf," and the rule of the Bright may have something to do with the Bright Empire mentioned in Norstrilia, nothing in the canon of stories we know seems to relate to the Originals or the High Cruel Years or the Pure. Linebarger was apparently reshaping his vision of the far future almost to the moment he wrote "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard," in which it all crystallized. (The "Where Is the Which of the What She Did" fragment has the narrator recalling that "the most blessed of computers burned out on Alpha Ralpa Boulevard," but assigns this to the long-past age of the Dwellers.) During the same period, Linebarger was reshaping "The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All," a then-unpublished story about the discovery of plano forming into the story of Arthur Rambo's mystical experience in Space3. The story went through several partial drafts (one titled "Archipelagoes of Stars"), which used different approaches capturing the poetic experience of Arthur Rambau. One version quotes Rambau's LeBateau Ivre itself, as a prophecy of Space3, and asks, "How knew it he, all the fine points of it? ... He an ancient was!"

Another draft opens, "They put him into a box, a box. They shot him to the end of time . . . Then, when it was all over, people discovered that another man, also a singer, had written it all down in the Most Ancient World." The final version, of course, is far more subtle; it was typical of Linebarger to make his stories less straightforward and more allusive in such details.

Although most of the background for the Instrumentality saga was contained in a notebook that Linebarger accidentally left in a restaurant in Rhodes in 1965, another notebook begun during the last year of his life contains ideas for several stories that were never written. Because they are notes to himself, they can be as cryptic as the lyrics of a David Lynch song. But some are clear enough,

as far as they go, including those for "The Robot, the Rat, and the Copt," which was originally conceived as a single story but later was a cycle of four stories, like the Casher O'Neill series.

We know from references in published stories that the Robot, the Rat, and the Copt were to bring back a Christian revelation from Space3, but the notes don't add much to that, except to confirm that this new dimension is where Christ "had really been and always was experienced." The rat was to have been named R'obert, however, and there was to have been a Coptic planet. (A list of Coptic names including Shenuda or "God Jves" appear in an entirely different notebook, a ring binder titled "New Science Fiction by Cordwainer Smith," which also includes most of the 'else starts and first drafts already referred to.) Some of the ideas seem relatively trivial: a forlorn suitor has the crushed lead of his true love, killed in an accident, regrown on Shayol, and reimplanted with her personality; a Go-Captain who has a mysterious (but unspecified) experience in space is treated as a madman on his conserva-I've home world. Another story was to have been set on a remote, prosperous world where one parents gamble on the futures of their newly-issued children; this would evidently have shed more light on the sequential system of child-raising by one-parents, two-parents, and three-parents aluded to in "Under Old Earth." Another note is simply a name: the Lord of Man Sto Dva, presumably a successor to the Lord Sto Odin of "Under Old Earth."

But the most intriguing note is undoubtedly one for a story called "How the Dream Lords Died." Set in AD. 6111, it would have involved the use of 12,000 slave brains by the Dream Lords in an attempt to explore other times telepathically, like the Eighteenth Men of the distant future in Olaf Stapledon's Last and First Men. The Dream Lords were clearly among the "others in the earth" after the fall of the Ancient World, alluded to in Norstrilia, and this note is the only reference to any story to have been set during that time well before "Mark Elf." Coupled with the titling of "The Queen of the Afternoon" (set, like "Mark Elf," at the very end of the new dark ages), it suggests that a new cycle of stories, "The Lords of the Afternoon," may have been related to the dark ages. Shortly before his death, Linebarger told his friend Arthur Burns he was planning a story cycle of that name; Burns conjectured that it would take place in the period of "Under Old Earth," and most time lines have shown the series taking place in that period.

The year given for "How the Dream Lords Died," naturally knocks the time-line used in The Best of Cordwainer Smith and The Instrumentality of Mankind into a cocked hat. The dark ages must have lasted much longer than listed there, and the rest of the future history thus must have been compressed into a much shorter time. We will probably never know much more about Linebarger's intentions; even his wife doesn't seem to have been privy to them. In "The Saga of the Third Sister," a (deservedly) unpublished sequel to "The Queen of the Afternoon," she involved Karia vom Acht in the quest of the Robot, the Rat, and the Copt, even though that story was obviously intended to have come millennia later. In working on Paul's unfinished manuscript for "The Queen of the Afternoon" itself, she insisted on anachronistic references to under people and softened the characterizations of Juli vom Acht and the true men. Incidentally, it isn't clear from Paul's original material whether Juli's arrival on Earth was actually to have come after Carlotta's, rather than before.

But enough of the history behind the history. You already know the story of the Instrumentality is more than history: it is poetry, and romance, and myth, and unlike any other SF series or future history. It is almost impossible to imagine anyone except Linebarger writing stories set in the universe of Cordwainer Smith, as others have written stories about Isaac Asimov's robots or Larry Niven's kzinti. It would probably be close to blasphemy, in the realm of the arts, for anyone else to even try. Like the rarest vintage wine, the work of Cordwainer Smith cannot be duplicated. We must be grateful that we can still savor the true vintage of these pages.

## Editor's Introduction

This volume contains all the short science fiction written by Cordwainer Smith (Dr. Paul Linebarger). It contains all the stories included in *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, *The Instrumentality of Mankind*, and *Quest of the Three Worlds*. The latter book, while marketed as a novel, is actually a collection of four short works. This collection also includes the story "Down to a Sunless Sea," published by *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* under the name "Cordwainer Smith," but actually written by Genevieve Linebarger, Paul's wife. She was the coauthor with Paul on several other stories, most notably "The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*." The current volume contains two previously unpublished short pieces.

"Himself in Anachron" was completed by Genevieve Linebarger after Paul's death, and is also scheduled for publication in *The Last Dangerous Visions*. "War No. 81-Q," is a complete rewrite of a story Linebarger wrote while in high school. (The original version was published in *The Instrumentality of Mankind* and is also included here.) In many cases, there were a number of differences between the original magazine version of the story and the versions published later in various collections of Smith's work. Sometimes, whole sentences or paragraphs were added to the book version. In general, we used the book versions, since these seemed to be the more complete. For the four stories in *Quest of the Three Worlds*, we also used the versions that appeared in the "novel."

In one case, "Scanners Live in Vain," we had the original manuscript. We discovered that *Fantasy Book*, which published the story, dropped several lines and made a number of other minor changes; subsequent publications followed the *Fantasy Book* version. The text contained here is the first publication of that story with the complete text of the original.

In addition to the short fiction contained here, Smith produced one SF novel: *Norstrilia*. *Norstrilia* was originally published as two short novels, "The Boy Who Bought Old Earth" and "The Store of Heart's Desire," which were then reprinted in two volumes. *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*, respectively.

Only later were they combined into one volume as *Norstrilia*. However, unlike the stories that make up *Quest of the Three Worlds*, these two stories were never intended as shorter works: they are truly a novel split in two, while *Quest of the Three Worlds* is really four independent stories (which share the same central character), cobbled together to form a novel. *Norstrilia*, therefore, is not included in this collection.

One final note on contents: most of Smith's science fiction is set in a common future, that of the *Instrumentality of Mankind*.

This book is arranged in two sections. In the first section, the *Instrumentality* stories are arranged in internal chronological order (as best as can be determined from the stories). The second section contains the non-*Instrumentality* stories, arranged in order of original publication.

James A. Mann  
Northboro, MA  
April 1993

## Acknowledgments

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Tony Lewis made the contractual arrangements for the stories and the cover. Greg Thokar arranged for printing, provided some stylistic guidance, and gave a thorough consistency check to

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*Stories of the  
Instrumentality of  
Mankind*

## No, No, Not Rogov!

*That golden shape on the golden steps shook and fluttered like a bird gone mad—like a bird imbued with an intellect and a soul, and, nevertheless, driven mad by ecstasies and terrors beyond human understanding—ecstasies drawn momentarily down into reality by the consummation of superlative art. A thousand worlds watched.*

*Had the ancient calendar continued this would have been A.D. 13,582. After defeat, after disappointment, after ruin and reconstruction, mankind had leapt among the stars.*

*Out of meeting inhuman art, out of confronting non-human dances, mankind had made a superb esthetic effort and had leapt upon the stage of all the worlds.*

*The golden steps reeled before the eyes. Some eyes had retinas. Some had crystalline cones. Yet all eyes were fixed upon the golden shape which interpreted The Glory and Affirmation of Man in the Inter-World Dance Festival of what might have been A.D. 13,582.*

*Once again mankind was winning the contest. Music and dance were hypnotic beyond the limits of systems, compelling, shocking to human and inhuman eyes. The dance was a triumph of shock—the shock of dynamic beauty.*

*The golden shape on the golden steps executed shimmering intricacies of meaning. The body was gold and still human. The body was a woman, but more than a woman. On the golden steps, in the golden light, she trembled and fluttered like a bird gone mad.*

## I

The Ministry of State Security had been positively shocked when they found that a Nazi agent, more heroic than prudent, had almost reached N. Rogov.

Rogov was worth more to the Soviet armed forces than any two air armies, more than three motorized divisions. His brain was a weapon, a weapon for the Soviet power.

Since the brain was a weapon, Rogov was a prisoner. He didn't mind. Rogov was a pure Russian type, broad-faced, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, with whimsy in his smile and amusement in the wrinkles of the tops of his cheeks.

"Of course I'm a prisoner," Rogov used to say. "I am a prisoner of State service to the Soviet peoples. But the workers and peasants are good to me. I am an academician of the All Union Academy of Sciences, a major general in the Red Air Force, a professor in the University of Kharkov, a deputy works manager of the Red Flag Combat Aircraft Production Trust. From each of these I draw a salary."

Sometimes he would narrow his eyes at his Russian scientific colleagues and ask them in dead earnest, "Would I serve capitalists?"

The affrighted colleagues would try to stammer their way out of the embarrassment, protesting their common loyalty to Stalin or Beria, or Zhukov, or Molotov, or Bulganin, as the case may have been.

Rogov would look very Russian: calm, mocking, amused. He would let them stammer.

Then he'd laugh. Solemnity transformed into hilarity, he would explode into bubbling, effervescent, good-humored laughter. "Of course I could not serve the capitalists. My little Anastasia would not let me."

The colleagues would smile uncomfortably and would wish that Rogov did not talk so wildly, or so comically, or so freely.

Even Rogov might wind up dead. Rogov didn't think so. They did. Rogov was afraid of nothing.

Most of his colleagues were afraid of each other, of the Soviet system, of the world, of life, and of death.

Perhaps Rogov had once been ordinary and mortal like other people, and full of fears.

But he had become the lover, the colleague, the husband of Anastasia Fyodorovna Cherpas.

Comrade Cherpas had been his rival, his antagonist, his competitor, in the struggle for scientific eminence in the daring Slav frontiers of Russian science. Russian science could never overtake the inhuman perfection of German method, the rigid intellectual and moral discipline of German teamwork, but the Russians could and did get ahead of the Germans by giving vent to their bold, fantastic imaginations. Rogov had pioneered the first rocket launchers of 1939. Cherpas had finished the job by making the best of the rockets radio-directed.

Rogov in 1942 had developed a whole new system of photo-mapping. Comrade Cherpas had applied it to color film. Rogov, sandy-haired, blue-eyed, and smiling, had recorded his criticisms of Comrade Cherpas's naïveté and unsoundness at the top-secret meetings of Russian scientists during the black winter nights of 1943. Comrade Cherpas, her butter-yellow hair flowing down like living water to her shoulders, her unpainted face gleaming with fanaticism, intelligence, and dedication, would snarl her own defiance at him, deriding his Communist theory, pinching at his pride, hitting his intellectual hypotheses where they were weakest.

By 1944 a Rogov-Cherpas quarrel had become something worth traveling to see.

In 1945 they were married.

Their courtship was secret, their wedding a surprise, their partnership a miracle in the upper ranks of Russian science.

The emigré press had reported that the great scientist, Peter Kapitza, once remarked, "Rogov and Cherpas, there is a team. They're Communists, good Communists; but they're better than that! They're *Russian*, Russian enough to beat the world. Look at them. That's the future, our Russian future!" Perhaps the quotation was an exaggeration, but it did show the enormous respect in which both Rogov and Cherpas were held by their colleagues in Soviet science.

Shortly after their marriage strange things happened to them.

Rogov remained happy. Cherpas was radiant.

Nevertheless, the two of them began to have haunted expressions, as though they had seen things which words could not express, as though they had stumbled upon secrets too important to be whispered even to the most secure agents of the Soviet State Police.

In 1947 Rogov had an interview with Stalin. As he left Stalin's office in the Kremlin, the great leader himself came to the door, his forehead wrinkled in thought, nodding, "Da, *da*, *da*."

Even his own personal staff did not know why Stalin was saying "Yes, yes, yes," but they did see the orders that went forth marked only by safe hand, and to be read and returned, not retained, and furthermore stamped for authorized eyes only and under no circumstances to be copied.

Into the true and secret Soviet budget that year by the direct personal order of a noncommittal Stalin, an item was added for "Project Telescope." Stalin tolerated no inquiry, brooked no comment.

A village which had had a name became nameless.

A forest which had been opened to the workers and peasants became military territory.

Into the central post office in Kharkov there went a new box number for the *village of Ya. Ch.*

Rogov and Cherpas, comrades and lovers, scientists both and Russians both, disappeared from the everyday lives of their colleagues. Their faces were no longer seen at scientific meetings. Only rarely did they emerge.

On the few times they were seen, usually going to and from Moscow at the time the All Union budget was made up each year, they seemed smiling and happy. But they did not make jokes.

What the outside world did not know was that Stalin in giving them their own project, granting them a paradise restricted to themselves, had seen to it that a snake went with them in the paradise. The snake this time was not one, but two personalities—Gausgofer and Gauck.

## II

Stalin died.

Beria died too—less willingly.

The world went on.

Everything went into the forgotten village of Ya. Ch. and nothing came out.

It was rumored that Bulganin himself visited Rogov and Cherpas. It was even whispered that Bulganin said as he went to the Kharkov airport to fly back to Moscow, "It's big, big, big. There'll be no cold war if they do it. There won't be any war of any kind. We'll finish capitalism before the capitalists can ever begin to fight. If they do it. If they do it." Bulganin was reported to have shaken his head slowly in perplexity and to have said nothing more but to have put his initials on the unmodified budget of Project Telescope when a trusted messenger next brought him an envelope from Rogov.

Anastasia Cherpas became a mother. Their first boy looked like his father. He was followed by a little girl. Then another little boy. The children didn't stop Cherpas's work. They had a large dacha and trained nursemaids took over the household.

Every night the four of them dined together.

Rogov, Russian, humorous, courageous, amused.

Cherpas, older, more mature, more beautiful than ever but just as biting, just as cheerful, just as sharp as she had ever been.

But then the other two, the two who sat with them across the years of all their days, the two colleagues who had been visited upon them by the all-powerful word of Stalin himself.

Gausgofer was a female: bloodless, narrow-faced, with a voice like a horse's whinny. She was a scientist and a policewoman, and competent at both jobs. In 1917 she had reported her own mother's whereabouts to the Bolshevik Terror Committee. In 1924 she had commanded her father's execution. He had been a Russian German of the old Baltic nobility and he had tried to adjust his mind to the new system, but he had failed. In 1930 she had let her lover trust her a little too much. He had been a Roumanian Communist, very high in the Party, but he had whispered into her ear in the privacy of their bedroom, whispered with the tears pouring down his face; she had listened affectionately and quietly and had delivered his words to the police the next morning.

With that she had come to Stalin's attention.

Stalin had been tough. He had addressed her brutally. "Comrade, you have some brains. I can see you know what Communism is all about. You understand loyalty. You're going to get ahead and serve the Party and the working class, but is that all you want?" He had spat the question at her.

She had been so astonished that she gaped.

The old man had changed his expression, favoring her with leering benevolence. He had put his forefinger on her chest. "Study science, Comrade. Study science. Communism plus science equals victory. You're too clever to stay in police work."

Gausgofer took a reluctant pride in the fiendish program of her German namesake, the wicked old geographer who made geography itself a terrible weapon in the Nazi anti-Soviet struggle.

Gausgofer would have liked nothing better than to intrude on the marriage of Cherpas and Rogov.

Gausgofer fell in love with Rogov the moment she saw him.

Gausgofer fell in hate—and hate can be as spontaneous and miraculous as love—with Cherpas the moment she saw *her*.

But Stalin had guessed that too.



With the bloodless, fanatic Gausgofer he had sent a man named B. Gauck.

Gauck was solid, impassive, blank-faced. In body he was about the same height as Rogov. Where Rogov was muscular, Gauck was flabby. Where Rogov's skin was fair and shot through with the pink and health of exercise, Gauck's skin was like stale lard, greasy, gray-green, sickly even on the best of days.

Gauck's eyes were black and small. His glance was as cold and sharp as death. Gauck had no friends, no enemies, no beliefs, no enthusiasm. Even Gausgofer was afraid of him.

Gauck never drank, never went out, never received mail, never sent mail, never spoke a spontaneous word. He was never rude, never kind, never friendly, never really withdrawn: he couldn't withdraw any more than the constant withdrawal of all his life.

Rogov had turned to his wife in the secrecy of their bedroom soon after Gausgofer and Gauck came and had said, "Anastasia, is that man sane?"

Cherpas intertwined the fingers of her beautiful, expressive hands. She who had been the wit of a thousand scientific meetings was now at a loss for words. She looked up at her husband with a troubled expression. "I don't know, Comrade . . . I just don't know . . ."

Rogov smiled his amused Slavic smile. "At the least then I don't think Gausgofer knows either."

Cherpas snorted with laughter and picked up her hairbrush. "That she doesn't. She really doesn't know, does she? I'll wager she doesn't even know to whom he reports."

That conversation had receded into the past. Gauck, Gausgofer, the bloodless eyes and the black eyes—they remained.

Every dinner the four sat down together.

Every morning the four met in the laboratory.

Rogov's great courage, high sanity, and keen humor kept the work going.

Cherpas's flashing genius fueled him whenever the routine overloaded his magnificent intellect.

Gausgofer spied and watched and smiled her bloodless smiles; sometimes, curiously enough, Gausgofer made genuinely constructive suggestions. She never understood the whole frame of reference of their work, but she knew enough of the mechanical and engineering details to be very useful on occasion.

Gauck came in, sat down quietly, said nothing, did nothing. He did not even smoke. He never fidgeted. He never went to sleep. He just watched.

The laboratory grew and with it there grew the immense configuration of the espionage machine.

### III

In theory what Rogov had proposed and Cherpas seconded was imaginable. It consisted of an attempt to work out an integrated theory for all the electrical and radiation phenomena accompanying consciousness, and to duplicate the electrical functions of mind without the use of animal material.

The range of potential products was immense. The first product Stalin had asked for was a receiver, if possible, capable of tuning in the thoughts of a human mind and of translating those thoughts into either a punch-tape machine, an adapted German Hellschreiber machine, or phonetic speech. If the grids could be turned around and the brain-equivalent machine could serve not as a receiver but as a transmitter, it might be able to send out stunning forces which would paralyze or kill the process of thought.

At its best, Rogov's machine would be designed to confuse human thought over great distances, to select human targets to be confused, and to maintain an electronic jamming system which would jam straight into the human mind without the requirement of tubes or receivers.

He had succeeded—in part. He had given himself a violent headache in the first year of work.

In the third year he had killed mice at a distance of ten kilometers. In the seventh year he had brought on mass hallucinations and a wave, of suicides in a neighboring village. It was this which impressed Bulganin.

Rogov was now working on the receiver end. No one had ever explored the infinitely narrow, infinitely subtle bands of radiation which distinguished one human mind from another, but Rogov was trying, as it were, to tune in on minds far away.

He had tried to develop a telepathic helmet of some kind, but it did not work. He had then turned away from the reception of pure thought to the reception of visual and auditory images. Where the nerve ends reached the brain itself, he had managed over the years to distinguish whole pockets of micro-phenomena, and on some of these he had managed to get a fix.

With infinitely delicate tuning he had succeeded one day in picking up the eyesight of their second chauffeur and had managed, thanks to a needle thrust in just below his own right eyelid, to "see" through the other man's eyes as the other man, all unaware, washed their Zis limousine 1,600 meters away.

Cherpas had surpassed his feat later that winter and had managed to bring in an entire family having dinner over in a nearby city. She had invited B. Gauck to have a needle inserted into his cheekbone so that he could see with the eyes of an unsuspecting spied-on stranger. Gauck had refused any kind of needles, but Gausgofer had joined in the work.

The espionage machine was beginning to take form.

Two more steps remained. The first step consisted of tuning in on some remote target, such as the White House in Washington or the NATO Headquarters outside of Paris. The machine itself could obtain perfect intelligence by eavesdropping on the living minds of people far away.

The second problem consisted of finding a method of jamming those minds at a distance, stunning them so that the subject personnel fell into tears, confusion, or sheer insanity.

Rogov had tried, but he had never gotten more than thirty kilometers from the nameless village of Ya. Ch.

One November there had been seventy cases of hysteria, most of them ending in suicide, down in the city of Kharkov several hundred kilometers away, but Rogov was not sure that his own machine was doing it.

Comrade Gausgofer dared to stroke his sleeve. Her white lips smiled and her watery eyes grew happy as she said in her high, cruel voice, "*You* can do it, Comrade. You can do it."

Cherpas looked on with contempt. Gauck said nothing.

The female agent Gausgofer saw Cherpas's eyes upon her, and for a moment an arc of living hatred leapt between the two women.

The three of them went back to work on the machine.

Gauck sat on his stool and watched them.

The laboratory workers never talked very much and the room was quiet.

## IV

It was the year in which Eristratov died that the machine made a breakthrough. Eristratov died after the Soviet and People's democracies had tried to end the cold war with the Americans.

It was May. Outside the laboratory the squirrels ran among the trees. The leftovers from the night's rain dripped on the ground and kept the earth moist. It was comfortable to leave a few windows open and to let the smell of the forest into the workshop.

The smell of their oil-burning heaters and the stale smell of insulation, of ozone, and of the heated electronic gear was something with which all of them were much too familiar.

Rogov had found that his eyesight was beginning to suffer because he had to get the receiver needle somewhere near his optic nerve in order to obtain visual impressions from the machine.

After months of experimentation with both animal and human subjects he had decided to copy one of their last experiments, successfully performed on a prisoner boy fifteen years of age, by having the needle slipped directly through the skull, up and behind the eye. Rogov had disliked using prisoners, because Gauck, speaking on behalf of security, always insisted that a prisoner used in experiments had to be destroyed in not less than five days from the beginning of the experiment. Rogov had satisfied himself that the skull-and-needle technique was safe, but he was very tired of trying to get frightened, unscientific people to carry the load of intense, scientific attentiveness required by the machine.

Rogov recapitulated the situation to his wife and to their two strange colleagues.

Somewhat ill-humored, he shouted at Gauck, "Have you ever known what this is all about? You've been here years. Do you know what we're trying to do? Don't you ever want to take part in the experiments yourself? Do you realize how many years of mathematics have gone into the making of these grids and the calculation of these wave patterns? Are you good for anything?"

Gauck said, tonelessly and without anger, "Comrade Professor, I am obeying orders. You are obeying orders, too. I've never impeded you."

Rogov almost raved. "I know you never got in my way. We're all good servants of the Soviet State. It's not a question of loyalty. It's a question of enthusiasm. Don't you ever want to glimpse the science we're making? We are a hundred years or a thousand years ahead of the capitalist Americans. Doesn't that excite you? Aren't you a human being? Why don't you take part? Will you understand me when I explain it?"

Gauck said nothing: he looked at Rogov with his beady eyes. His dirty-gray face did not change expression. Gausgofer exhaled loudly in a grotesquely feminine sigh of relief, but she too said nothing. Cherpas, her winning smile and her friendly eyes looking at her husband and two colleagues, said, "Go ahead, Nikolai. The comrade can follow if he wants to."

Gausgofer looked enviously at Cherpas. She seemed inclined to keep quiet, but then had to speak. She said, "Do go ahead, Comrade Professor."

Said Rogov, "*Kharosho*, I'll do what I can. The machine is now ready to receive minds over immense distances." He wrinkled his lip in amused scorn. "We may even spy into the brain of the chief rascal himself and find out what Eisenhower is planning to do today against the Soviet people. Wouldn't it be wonderful if our machine could stun him and leave him sitting addled at his desk?"

Gauck commented, "Don't try it. Not without orders."

Rogov ignored the interruption and went on. "First I receive. I don't know what I will get, who I will get, or where they will be. All I know is that this machine will reach out across all the minds of men and beasts now living and it will bring the eyes and ears of a single mind directly into mine. With the new needle going directly into the brain it will be possible for me to get a very sharp fixation of position. The trouble with that boy last week was that even though we knew he was seeing something outside of this room, he appeared to be getting sounds in a foreign language and did not know enough English or German to realize where or what the machine had taken him to see."

Cherpas laughed. "I'm not worried. I saw then it was safe. You go first, my husband. If our comrades don't mind—?"

Gauck nodded.

Gausgofer lifted her bony hand breathlessly up to her skinny throat and said, "Of course, Comrade Rogov, of course. You did *all* the work. You *must* be the first."

Rogov sat down.

A white-smocked technician brought the machine over to him. It was mounted on three rubber-tired wheels and it resembled the small X-ray units used by dentists. In place of the cone at the head of the X-ray machine there was a long, incredibly tough needle. It had been made for them by the best surgical-steel craftsmen in Prague.

Another technician came up with a shaving bowl, a brush, and a straight razor. Under the gaze of Gauck's deadly eyes he shaved an area four centimeters square on the top of Rogov's head.

Cherpas herself then took over. She set her husband's head in the clamp and used a micrometer to get the skullfittings so tight and so clear that the needle would push through the dura mater at exactly the right point.

All this work she did deftly with kind, very strong fingers. She was gentle, but she was firm. She was his wife, but she was also his fellow scientist and his fellow colleague in the Soviet State.

She stepped back and looked at her work. She gave him one of their own very special smiles, the secret gay smiles which they usually exchanged with each other only when they were alone. "You won't want to do this every day. We're going to have to find some way of getting into the brain without using this needle. But it won't hurt you."

"Does it matter if it does hurt?" said Rogov. "This is the triumph of all our work. *Bring it down.*"

Gausgofer looked as though she would like to be invited to take part in the experiment, but she dared not interrupt Cherpas. Cherpas, her eyes gleaming with attention, reached over and pulled down the handle, which brought the tough needle to within a tenth of a millimeter of the right place.

Rogov spoke very carefully. "All I felt was a little sting. You can turn the power on now."

Gausgofer could not contain herself. Timidly she addressed Cherpas. "May *I* turn on the power?"

Cherpas nodded. Gauck watched. Rogov waited. Gausgofer pulled down the bayonet switch.

The power went on.

With an impatient twist of her hand, Anastasia Cherpas ordered the laboratory attendants to the other end of the room. Two or three of them had stopped working and were staring at Rogov, staring like dull sheep. They looked embarrassed and then they huddled in a white-smocked herd at the other end of the laboratory.

The wet May wind blew in on all of them. The scent of forest and leaves was about them.

The three watched Rogov.

Rogov's complexion began to change. His face became flushed. His breathing was so loud and heavy they could hear it several meters away. Cherpas fell on her knees in front of him, eyebrows lifted in mute inquiry.

Rogov did not dare nod, not with a needle in his brain. He said through flushed lips, speaking thickly and heavily, "Do—not—stop—now."

Rogov himself did not know what was happening. He thought he might see an American room, or a Russian room, or a tropical colony. He might see palm trees, or forests, or desks. He might see guns or buildings, washrooms or beds, hospitals, homes, churches. He might see with the eyes of a child, a woman, a man, a soldier, a philosopher, a slave, a worker, a savage, a religious one, a Communist, a reactionary, a governor, a policeman. He might hear voices; he might hear English, or French, or Russian, Swahili, Hindu, Malay, Chinese, Ukrainian, Armenian, Turkish, Greek. He did not know.

Something strange was happening.

It *seemed* to him that he had left the world, that he had left time. The hours and the centuries shrank up as the meters and the machine, unchecked, reached out for the most powerful signal which any humankind had transmitted. Rogov did not know it, but the machine had conquered time.

The machine reached the dance, the human challenger, and the dance festival of the year that was not A.D. 13,582, but which might have been.

Before Rogov's eyes the golden shape and the golden steps shook and fluttered in a ritual a thousand times more compelling than hypnotism. The rhythms meant nothing and everything to him. This was Russia, this was Communism. This was his life—indeed it was his soul acted out before his very eyes.

For a second, the last second of his ordinary life, he looked through flesh-and-blood eyes and saw the shabby woman whom he had once thought beautiful. He saw Anastasia Cherpas, and he did not care.

His vision concentrated once again on the dancing image, this woman, those postures, that dance!

Then the sound came in—music which would have made a Tchaikovsky weep, orchestras which would have silenced Shostakovich or Khachaturian forever, so much did it surpass the music of the twentieth century.

The people-who-were-not-people between the stars had taught mankind many arts. Rogov's mind was the best of its time, but his time was far, far behind the time of the great dance. With that one vision Rogov went firmly and completely mad. He became blind to the sight of Cherpas, Gausgofer, and Gauck. He forgot the village of Ya. Ch. He forgot himself. He was like a fish, bred in stale fresh water, which is thrown for the first time into a living stream. He was like an insect emerging from the chrysalis. His twentieth-century mind could not hold the imagery and the impact of the music and the dance.

But the needle was there and the needle transmitted into his mind more than his mind could stand.

The synapses of his brain flicked like switches. The future flooded into him.

He fainted. Cherpas leapt forward and lifted the needle. Rogov fell out of the chair.

## V

It was Gauck who got the doctors. By nightfall they had Rogov resting comfortably and under heavy sedation. There were two doctors, both from the military headquarters. Gauck had obtained authorization for their services by dint of a direct telephone call to Moscow.

Both the doctors were annoyed. The senior one never stopped grumbling at Cherpas.

"You should not have done it, Comrade Cherpas. Comrade Rogov should not have done it either. You can't go around sticking things into brains. That's a medical problem. None of you people are doctors of medicine. It's all right for you to contrive devices with the prisoners, but you can't inflict things like this on Soviet scientific personnel. I'm going to get blamed because I can't bring Rogov back. You heard what he was saying. All he did was mutter, 'That golden shape on the golden steps, that music, that me is a true me, that golden shape, that golden shape, I want to be with that golden shape,' and rubbish like that. Maybe you've ruined a first-class brain forever—" He stopped himself short as though he had said too much. After all, the problem was a security problem and apparently both Gauck and Gausgofer represented the security agencies.

Gausgofer turned her watery eyes on the doctor and said in a low, even, unbelievably poisonous voice, "Could *she* have done it, Comrade Doctor?"

The doctor looked at Cherpas, answering Gausgofer. "How? You were there. I wasn't. *How* could she have done it? *Why* should she do it? You were there."

Cherpas said nothing. Her lips were compressed tight with grief. Her yellow hair gleamed, but her hair was all that remained, at that moment, of her beauty. She was frightened and she was getting ready to be sad. She had no time to hate foolish women or to worry about security; she was concerned with her colleague, her lover, her husband, Rogov.

There was nothing much for them to do except to wait. They went into a large room and tried to eat.

The servants had laid out immense dishes of cold sliced meat, pots of caviar, and an assortment of sliced breads, pure butter genuine coffee, and liquors.

None of them ate much.

They were all waiting.

At 9:15 the sound of rotors beat against the house.

The big helicopter had arrived from Moscow.

Higher authorities took over.

## VI

The higher authority was a deputy minister, a man by the name of V. Karper.

Karper was accompanied by two or three uniformed colonels, by an engineer civilian, by a man from the headquarters of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and by two doctors.

They dispensed with the courtesies. Karper merely said, "You are Cherpas. I have met you. You are Gausgofer. I have seen your reports. You are Gauck."

The delegation went into Rogov's bedroom. Karper snapped, "Wake him."

The military doctor who had given him sedatives said "Comrade, you mustn't—"

Karper cut him off. "Shut up." He turned to his own physician, pointed at Rogov. "Wake him up."

The doctor from Moscow talked briefly with the senior military doctor. He too began shaking his head. He gave Karper a disturbed look. Karper guessed what he might hear. He said, "Go ahead. I know there is some danger to the patient, but I've got to get back to Moscow with a report."

The two doctors worked over Rogov. One of them asked for his bag and gave Rogov an injection. Then all of them stood back from the bed.

Rogov writhed in his bed. He squirmed. His eyes opened, but he did not see them. With childishly clear and simple words Rogov began to talk: ". . . that golden shape, the golden stairs, the music, take me back to the music, I want to be with the music, I really am the music . . ." and so on in an endless monotone.

Cherpas leaned over him so that her face was directly in his line of vision. "My darling! My darling, wake up. This is serious."

It was evident to all of them that Rogov did not hear her, because he went on muttering about golden shapes.

For the first time in many years Gauck took the initiative. He spoke directly to the man from Moscow, Karper. "Comrade, may I make a suggestion?"

Karper looked at him. Gauck nodded at Gausgofer. "We were both sent here by orders of Comrade Stalin. She is senior. She bears the responsibility. All I do is double-check."

The deputy minister turned to Gausgofer. Gausgofer had been staring at Rogov on the bed; her blue, watery eyes were tearless and her face was drawn into an expression of extreme tension.

Karper ignored that and said to her firmly, clearly, commandingly, "What do you recommend?"

Gausgofer looked at him very directly and said in a measured voice, "I do not think that the case is one of brain damage. I believe that he has obtained a communication which he must share with another human being and that unless one of us follows him there may be no answer."

Karper barked, "Very well. But what do we do?"

"Let *me* follow—into the machine."

Anastasia Cherpas began to laugh slyly and frantically. She seized Karper's arm and pointed her finger at Gausgofer. Karper stared at her.

Cherpas slowed down her laughter and shouted at Karper, "The woman's mad. She has loved my husband for many years. She has hated my presence, and now she thinks that she can save him. She thinks that she can follow. She thinks that he wants to communicate with her. That's ridiculous. I will go myself!"

Karper looked about. He selected two of his staff and stepped over into a corner of the room. They could hear him talking, but they could not distinguish the words. After a conference of six or seven minutes he returned.

"You people have been making serious security charges against each other. I find that one of our finest weapons, the mind of Rogov, is damaged. Rogov's not just a man. He is a Soviet project." Scorn entered his voice. "I find that the senior security officer, a policewoman with a notable record, is charged by another Soviet scientist with a silly infatuation. I disregard such charges. The

development of the Soviet State and the work of Soviet science cannot be impeded by personalities. Comrade Gausgofer will follow. I am acting tonight because my own staff physician says that Rogov may not live and it is very important for us to find out just what has happened to him and why."

He turned his baneful gaze on Cherpas. "You will not protest, Comrade. Your mind is the property of the Russian State. Your life and your education have been paid for by the workers. You cannot throw these things away because of personal sentiment. If there is anything to be found Comrade Gausgofer will find it for both of us."

The whole group of them went back into the laboratory. The frightened technicians were brought over from the barracks. The lights were turned on and the windows were closed. The May wind had become chilly.

The needle was sterilized.

The electronic grids were warmed up.

Gausgofer's face was an impassive mask of triumph as she sat in the receiving chair. She smiled at Gauck as an attendant brought the soap and the razor to shave a clean patch on her scalp.

Gauck did not smile back. His black eyes stared at her. He said nothing. He did nothing. He watched.

Karper walked to and fro, glancing from time to time at the hasty but orderly preparation of the experiment.

Anastasia Cherpas sat down at a laboratory table about five meters away from the group. She watched the back of Gausgofer's head as the needle was lowered. She buried her face in her hands. Some of the others thought they heard her weeping, but no one heeded Cherpas very much. They were too intent on watching Gausgofer.

Gausgofer's face became red. Perspiration poured down the flabby cheeks. Her fingers tightened on the arm of her chair.

Suddenly she shouted at them, "*That golden shape on the golden steps.*"

She leapt to her feet, dragging the apparatus with her.

No one had expected this. The chair fell to the floor. The needle holder, lifted from the floor, swung its weight sidewise. The needle twisted like a scythe in Gausgofer's brain. Neither Rogov nor Cherpas had ever expected a struggle within the chair. *They did not know that they were going to tune in on A.D.13,582.*

The body of Gausgofer lay on the floor, surrounded by excited officials.

Karper was acute enough to look around at Cherpas.

She stood up from the laboratory table and walked toward him. A thin line of blood flowed down from her cheekbone. Another line of blood dripped down from a position on her cheek, one and a half centimeters forward of the opening of her left ear.

With tremendous composure, her face as white as fresh snow, she smiled at him. "I eavesdropped."

Karper said, "What?"

"I eavesdropped, eavesdropped," repeated Anastasia Cherpas. "I found out where my husband has gone. It is not somewhere in this world. It is something hypnotic beyond all the limitations of our science. We have made a great gun, but the gun has fired upon us before we could fire it. You may think you will change my mind, Comrade Deputy Minister, but you will not.

"I know what has happened. My husband is never coming back. And I am not going any further forward without him.

"Project Telescope is finished. You may try to get someone else to finish it, but you will not."

Karper stared at her and then turned aside.

Gauck stood in his way.

"What do you want?" snapped Karper.

"To tell you," said Gauck very softly, "to tell you, Comrade Deputy Minister, that Rogov is gone as she says he is gone, that she is finished if she says she is finished, that all this is true. I know."

Karper glared at him. "How do you know?"

Gauck remained utterly impassive. With superhuman assurance and perfect calm he said to Karper, "Comrade, I do not dispute the matter. I know these people, though I do not know their science. Rogov is done for."

At last Karper believed him. Karper sat down in a chair beside a table. He looked up at his staff. "Is it possible?"

No one answered.

"I ask you, is it possible?"

They all looked at Anastasia Cherpas, at her beautiful hair, her determined blue eyes, and the two thin lines of blood where she had eavesdropped with small needles.

Karper turned to her. "What do we do now?"

For an answer she dropped to her knees and began sobbing, "No, no, not Rogov! No, no, not Rogov!"

And that was all that they could get out of her. Gauck looked on.

*On the golden steps in the golden light, a golden shape danced a dream beyond the limits of all imagination, danced and drew the music to herself until a sigh of yearning, yearning which became a hope and a torment, went through the hearts of living things on a thousand worlds.*

*Edges of the golden scene faded raggedly and unevenly into black. The gold dimmed down to a pale gold-silver sheen and then to silver, last of all to white. The dancer who had been golden was now a forlorn white-pink figure standing, quiet and fatigued, on the immense white steps. The applause of a thousand worlds roared in upon her.*

*She looked blindly at them. The dance had overwhelmed her, too. Their applause could mean nothing. The dance was an end in itself. She would have to live, somehow, until she danced again.*



## War No. 81-Q (Rewritten Version)

For a few brief happy centuries, war was made into an enormous game. Then the world population passed the thirty-billion point, Acting Chief Minister Chatterji presented the "Rightful Proportions" formula to the world authorities, and war turned from a game into realities. When it was over, hideous new creepers covered the wreckage of cities, saints and morons camped in the overpasses of disused highways, and a few man-hunting machines scoured the world in search of surviving weapons.

### I

Long before real war set mankind back a thousand ages, the nations played with their formulae of "safe war." Wars were easily declared, safely fought, won or lost with noblesse oblige, and accepted as decisive. Wars were rare enough to sweep all other events from the television screens, beautiful enough to warrant the utmost in scenic decoration, and tough enough to call for champions with perfect eyesight and no nerves at all. The weapons were dirigibles armed with missiles, countermissiles, and feinting screens; they had been revived because they were slow enough to show well on the viewscreens, hard enough to demand a skillful fight. A whole class of warriors developed to manage these—men who trained on the ski-slopes and underwater beaches of the world's resorts and who then, tanned and fit, sat in control rooms and managed the ships from their own home bases. The kinescopes were paired up so that pictures of the battle alternated with scenes of the warriors sitting in their controls, the foreheads wrinkled with worry, their gasps of dismay or smiles of triumph showing plainly, and the whole drama of human emotion revealed in their performance of a licensed war.

War came near between Tibet and America.

Tibet had been liberated from the Goonhogo, the central Chinese government, only with generous American help and with the threat (was it bluff? was it death?) trembling in the rocket pits around Lake Erie. No one ever found out whether the Americans would have risked real war, because the Chinese did not force a show of strength. The Americans had been supported by the Reunion of India and the Federated Congos on the floor of the world assembly, and there were political debts to be settled when the Tibetan liberation came true. The Congo asked for support on Saharan claims, which was easy enough, since this was a matter of voting in the assembly, but the Reunion of India asked for the largest solar power-collector, to reach eighty miles along the southern crest of the Himalayas. The Americans hesitated, and then built it under lease from Tibet, keeping title in their own hands. Just before the first surges of power were due to pour down into the Bengal plains, Tibetan soldiers entered the control rooms with a warrant from the Tibetan ministry of the interior seizing the plant, Tibetan technicians hooked in new cables which had been flown from the Goonhogo base at Teli in Yunnan, and the Tibetans announced they had leased the entire power output to their recent enemies, the Goonhogo of China.

Even in politics, where gratitude is seldom expected, such bleak ingratitude was hard to bear. The Americans had just freed the Tibetans from the Chinese, and now the Tibetans seized the reward which America had built for Indian help on Tibetan territory. Legally, the deal was tight. The solar accumulators were on Tibetan soil, and under the system of "sovereignty" which prevailed at that time, any nation could do what it pleased on its own territory and get off scot-free.

Some Americans were so furious that they clamored for a real war against the Goonhogo of China. The president himself remarked mildly that it did not seem right to fight an antagonist merely because he showed himself cleverer than we.

Congress voted a licensed war.

The president had no further choice. He had to declare war on Tibet. He put a request for the permit in to the world secretariat. The license came back for "War No. 81-Q," since someone in the world secretariat figured that Tibet should not pay for any but the smallest-size war. The Americans had asked for a class-A war, which would have lasted up to four full days. The world secretariat refused a review of the case.

There was nothing left to do.

America was at war.

The president sent for Jack Reardon.

## II

Reardon was the best licensed warrior America had.

"Morning, Jack," said the president. "You haven't fought for two years, when Iceland beat us. Do you feel up to it now?"

"Fitter than ever, sir," said Jack. He hesitated and then went on, "Please don't mention Iceland, sir. Nobody has ever beaten Sigurd Sigurdssen. Lucky for us that he's retired."

"I wouldn't have called you if I just meant to reproach you. I know you did the best that anyone could do short of the great Sigurd himself. That's why you're here. How do you think we should run it?"

"There's not much choice on ships, not with a class-Q war. They had better all five be the new Mark Zeros. Since we challenged, I think the Tibetans will choose the cheapest war they can. They don't want to run up a big bill on themselves. The Goonhogo would help them, but the Chinese would be around two days later, asking for payment."

"I didn't know," said the President with a gentle smile, "that you were also an expert on international affairs."

Reardon looked uncomfortable. "Sorry, sir," he muttered.

"That's all right," said the president. "I had it figured the same way. They will take the Kerguelen islands then?"

"Probably," said Reardon, "and our picture people are going to be furious. But the French keep those islands cheap. It's the only way they can hold it in the market as a war zone."

The president's manner changed completely. Instead of being a civilized old gentleman who had recently had his breakfast, he acted like the shrewd, selfish politician who had beaten all his competitors for the job and who had then found that his country needed a president much more than he had ever needed a presidency. He looked Reardon in the face, staring sharply and deeply into his eyes, and then asked, in a formal, solemn tone:

"Jack, this may be the biggest question of your life. How do you want to fight it?"

Reardon stiffened. "I thought it would be out of place to make up a list of team mates, sir. I thought perhaps you would have a list—"

"I don't mean that at all," said the president. "Do you prefer to fight it alone?"

"Alone, sir?"

"Don't play modest with me, Reardon," said the president. "You're the best man we have. As a matter of fact, you're the only first-class man we have. There are some youngsters coming up, but there aren't any more in your class—"

Reardon forgot himself, so technical was the subject, and interrupted the president: "Boggs is good, sir. He's had six fights as a mercenary in these little African wars."

"Reardon," said the president, "you interrupted me."

"I beg your pardon, sir," stammered Reardon.

"Boggs has nothing to do with it. I've seen him too, you know. Even if I add him, that only makes two pilots who are first-class."

Reardon looked straight at the president, his face begging for permission to speak.

The president smiled faintly: "Okay, what is it?"

"How about filling in the team with mercenaries, sir?"

"Mercenaries!" shouted the president. "Good lord, no! That would be the worst possible thing we could do. We'd look like fools all over the world. I played with real war to get Tibet free, and the Goonhogo of China gave in just because some of the people in the Goonhogo thought that Americans were still tough. Hire one mercenary and it's all gone. We have the posture of America to preserve. Will you or won't you?"

Reardon looked genuinely puzzled, "Will I what, sir?"

"You fool," said the president, "can you fight the war alone or can't you? You know the rules."

Reardon knew them. For using a single pilot, the nation obtained a tremendous advantage. Two enemy ships down and his nation won, no matter how many ships he himself lost. There hadn't been a one-pilot war since the great Sigurd Sigurdssen defeated Federated Europe, Morocco, Japan, and Brazil in one-two-three-four order, thirty-two years ago. After that no one had challenged Iceland to a class-Q war. Iceland went on declaring licensed wars on the slightest provocation; the Icelanders had accumulated enough credit to fight a hundred wars. The challenged powers all chose the largest, most complicated wars they could, trying to swamp Sigurd in a maze of teamwork.

Reardon stared out of the window. The president let him think. At last he spoke, and his voice was heavy with conviction,

"I can try it, sir. They've given us the chance by demanding a class-Q war. But I'm no Sigurd and you know it, sir."

"I know it, Reardon," said the president seriously, "but perhaps none of us—not even you yourself—know what your very best performance can be. Will you do it, Reardon, for the country, for me, for yourself?"

Reardon nodded. Fame and victory looked very bleak to him at that moment.

### III

The formalities came through with no trouble.

Tibet and America both claimed the Himalayan Escarpment Solar Banks. They agreed that the title should yield through war.

The Universal War Board granted a war permit, subject to strict and clear conditions:

1. The war was to be fought only at the times and places specified.
2. No human being was to be killed or injured, directly or indirectly, by any performance of the machines of war. Emotional injury was not to be considered.
3. An appropriate territory was to be leased and cleared. Provisions should be made for the maximum removal of wildlife, particularly birds, which might be hurt by the battle.
4. The weapons were to be winged dirigibles with a maximum weight of 22,000 tons, propelled by non-nuclear engines.
5. All radio channels were to be strictly monitored by the U.W.B. and by both parties. At any complaint of jamming or interference the war was to be brought to a halt.
6. Each dirigible should have six non-explosive missiles and thirty non-explosive countermissiles.

7. The U.W.B. was to intercept and to destroy all stray missiles and real weapons before the missiles left the war zone, and each party, regardless of the outcome of the war, was to pay the U.W.B. directly for the interception and destruction of stray missiles.

8. No living human beings were to be allowed on the ships, in the war zone, or on the communications equipment which relayed the war to the world's televisions. (The last remembered casualties of "safe war" had been video crews who had ridden their multicopter into the blazing guns of a combat dirigible before the pilot, thousands of miles away, could see them and stop his guns.)

9. The "stipulated territory" was to be the War Territory of Kerguelen, to be leased by both parties from the Fourteenth French Republic, as agent for Federated Europe, at the price of four million gold livres the hour.

10. Seating for the war, apart from video rights belonging to the combatants, should remain the sole property of the lessor of the War Territory of Kerguelen.

With these arrangements, the French off-lifted their sheep from the island ranges of Kerguelen—the weary sheep were getting thoroughly used to being lifted from their grazing land to Antarctic lighters every time a war occurred—and the scene was ready.

Reardon planned to work from Omaha; he supposed that his Tibetan counterparts would be stationed in Lhasa, but since Tibet had not been an independent power for many generations, he wondered what mercenaries they might obtain. They might get Sung from Peking; he had six battles more than Reardon and was a dependable fighter.

#### IV

The French sold out their seats and view-spots around Kerguelen very easily. The usual smugglers sold telescopes which would allegedly give perfect non-copyright views of the war and, as usual, most of them did not work; the purchasers merely had a cruise out of Durban, Madras, or Perth in vain.

The warships were ready. The American ones were gold in color, stubby wings sticking out from the sides of their cigar-shaped bodies, the ancient American eagle surrounded by red, white and blue circles on their sides. The five Tibetan ships turned out to be old Chinese Goonhogo models on rental. The emblem of China had been painted out and the prayer-wheel of Tibet shone fresh with new paint. The Chinese mechanics were expert to the point of trickiness; the American member of the umpire team insisted on inspection of all ten ships before he signed for the entry into the War Territory of Kerguelen.

The minute of opening was noon, local time. Reardon started with a real advantage. Positions had been chosen at random by the umpires and he was facing into a strong west wind, while the enemy ships had to hold back lest they be blown out of the territory.

Some fool in a swivel chair had named the American airships for characters out of Shakespeare, so that Reardon found himself managing the *Prospero*, the *Ariel*, the *Oberon*, the *Caliban*, and the *Titania*. The Tibetans had not taken the time to re-name the Chinese ships, which had the titles of old dynasties: the *Han*, the *Yuan*, the *Ch'ing*, the *Chin*, and the *Ming*.

Reardon kept his ships lined up close to the spectators, so that the Tibetans could not fire missiles at him without shooting out of the Territory and being penalized. He glanced up at the board in Omaha to see his antagonists, who had come on the telescreen. Sung was there, all right; so, too, was Baartek, a famous mercenary who flew under the flag of Liechtenstein and looked for quarrels wherever he could find them. The other three were strangers. One of them, wearing Tibetan clothes, was a girl. "That's a good Chinese propaganda trick," thought Reardon. "Trust the Goonhogo never to miss a bet!"

The Chinese got the displeasure of the spectators by casting a smoke screen. There really wasn't much else they could do, with their dirigibles pumping awkwardly in reverse against the

wind. When the smoke screen neared his ships, Reardon jumped. He put the *Prospero* on manual, made three wild guesses, and sprang.

The *Prospero* came ruined out of the other side of the smoke wall. Two missiles had pierced her and Reardon doubted that the salvage crew would get much of her by the time the war ended.

But he had almost won the war. He had rammed both the *Han* and the *Ming*. He used the eyes of the *Ariel* to watch them. The crippled *Ming* fought for position over the cold, cold waters of the deep South Indian Ocean. Reardon suspected that Baartek had taken over. She fired suddenly; he twisted the *Ariel*. Sheets of flame behind his ship told him that the U.W.B. had intercepted the missiles with live weapons, to keep them from harming the massed spectators. The flashes went on for so long that his viewscreens shone with a quivering, milky white. There were going to be a lot of headaches among those spectators who watched those interception flashes too long, thought he. Baartek obviously did not care what his Tibetan employers paid in penalty money. Yet the *Ariel* had gotten away so easily!

The *Han*, meanwhile, though falling, had attacked the *Caliban*, which lost its left wing and began drifting downward. Reardon shot a reproachful glance at the robot who had been managing the ship for him, and decided not to take time to curse the robot programmers who had guessed events so poorly.

The face and voice of the U.W.B. umpire appeared on all screens. "The *Caliban*, American. The *Han*, Tibetan. Take both of them off the field. Suspend fire and remove."

Under the scoring system, Reardon had just lost the winning of the war. All he needed to do was to down two enemy ships and keep one of his own in the air for the period of the war, and he had won. But the *Ming*, now on the whitecaps and breaking up, was the first of his victories; the *Han* was to have been the other. Now he had to start over again.

He put the *Ariel* on robot and took over the *Titania* himself.

One of the enemy ships began creeping toward him along the line of the spectators. It could not fire at him, because the Territory was rectangular and the *Titania* was too close to a corner. He could not fire at it unless he got the *Titania* down with her belly almost in the water; then his stray shots would escape into space.

He and the enemy started their dive at the same time.

His command screen blanked out. The face of the president appeared on the screen. Only the president had that kind of overriding priority.

"How's it going, my boy? Doesn't look too good, does it?"

Reardon wanted to scream, "Get off, you fool!"

But it was the president; one does not scream at presidents.

He forced himself to speak politely, though he knew his face had gone white with rage. "Please, sir, get off the screen. It's all right, sir. Thank you."

The president got off the screen and Reardon found himself back on the *Titania* just as the enemy cut her in two.

In a wild rage, but a controlled rage, he took over the *Ariel*, letting the ruined *Titania* go to the waves below.

He spat a smoke screen himself, and it rushed toward him. He rose to the top of it just in time to see two Chinese ships go looking for him. He dived back in. The smoke was thinning. He struck for the lever which fired a time-on-target, all missiles reaching for the same instant. But he thought of that fool of a president and he struck the wrong lever: destruct.

The *Ariel* blew up in a pretty show of fireworks. There were two other orange clouds near her. The video eye on the foredeck of the *Ariel* showed him that he had technically won the war. The other two ships went down with him.

He switched to the *Oberon*, his last remaining ship. There were still two Chinese to his one. They were the *Ch'ing* and the *Yuan*.

The umpire came on, "You hit 'destruct.' That is not allowed as a weapon in a licensed war."

"It was an error," snapped Reardon. "You can look at your tape of me. You can see that I was reaching for 'time-on-target'."

There was a moment of silence while the blank screens buzzed. Then the umpire came back on, speaking to Baartek and Sung but letting Reardon listen in. "The rules don't really cover this," said the umpire. "It was a mistake, but your ships were taking a chance in getting that close to him. He was coming after you from the top. I rule it a net gain."

Now all he had to do was to stay alive for the next sixty-seven minutes—alive meaning with a ship in the field.

He began creeping along the line of the spectators, so close that some of them backed up. Many voices called for the umpire, but Reardon made sure that he had his hundred meters' tolerance.

The *Ch'ing* and the *Yuan* both lined up on him. He had to use emergency jets to dip in order to escape their missiles. He thought that the *Ch'ing* had four left and the *Yuan* three, but the battle had gone so fast, with so much in smoke, that he could not be absolutely sure. It was like some of the old card games: sometimes even the best players lost command of a complete recollection of the cards.

He dived again.

The Chinese ships followed.

A missile clipped the elevator vane of his right wing.

Reardon took advantage of it. He turned the *Oberon* sideways, like a crippled ship, and let it drop toward the water.

The *Yuan* followed for a look and he gave it to her. He cut a hole in her that he could see daylight through. She drifted toward the spectators, out of control. There was a bright flash from the protective weapons of the U.W.B. and she was gone.

The *Oberon* touched water and as she touched, Reardon rammed the engines into full reverse. He fired two of his precious missiles directly into the water itself. An enormous cloud of steam arose and the *Oberon* rose faster than an airship had ever risen before. He could not see where he was going, because his video was still looking at the waves and he was rising in reverse, but he watched his damage-control screen and he set his audio on high.

The impact came.

The *Oberon* crunched into something that could only be the *Ch'ing*.

Reardon increased the thrust, cutting his ship in a sharp turn, still in reverse. He fired backwards into the ship he had rammed and pushed it inexorably back toward the water. The two ships, in collision, had not yet burst into flame.

Damage control suddenly lit up like a Christmas tree. The whole back of his ship was gone.

Using his fingertips and stroking the controls as lightly as he possibly could, he called for ASCEND. All he could see was the open sky above and the spectator craft, looking odd since they seemed to sit sidewise in the air, on the left of his pattern. The *Oberon* came loose from something.

He had sunk the *Ch'ing* without ever seeing it.

The umpire came on the board. "Your ship's clear of the water. The other one is out. War is over, sixty-one minutes ahead of time. Victory is declared for America. Tibet has lost."

In a different tone, the umpire said, "Congratulations, my boy. The enemy pilots wish to congratulate you, too. May they?"

## V

Before Reardon could say yes or no, his screen blanked out.

The president had used his priority again.

Reardon saw with amusement that the old gentleman was weeping. "You've done it, lad, you've done it. I always knew you would."

Reardon forced his face into a smile of approval and sat waiting for the screen to show him the faces of his friendly enemies. Baartek was sure to insist on a dinner; he always did.

# Mark Elf

The years rolled by; the Earth lived on, even when a stricken and haunted mankind crept through the glorious ruins of an immense past.

## I. Descent of a Lady

*Stars wheeled silently over an early summer sky, even though men had long ago forgotten to call such nights by the name of June.*

*Laird tried to watch the stars with his eyes closed. It was a ticklish and terrifying game for a telepath: at any moment he might feel the heavens opening up and might, as his mind touched the image of the nearer stars, plunge himself into a nightmare of perpetual falling. Whenever he had this sickening, shocking, ghastly, suffocating feeling of limitless fall, he had to close his mind against telepathy long enough to let his powers heal.*

*He was reaching with his mind for objects just above the Earth, burnt-out space stations which flitted in their multiplex orbits, spinning forever, left over from the wreckage of ancient atomic wars.*

*He found one.*

*Found one so ancient it had no surviving cryotronic controls. Its design was archaic beyond belief; chemical tubes had apparently once lifted it out of Earth's atmosphere.*

*He opened his eyes and promptly lost it.*

*Closing his eyes he groped again with his seeking mind until he found the ancient derelict. As his mind reached for it again the muscles of his jaw tightened. He sensed life within it, life as old as the archaic machine itself.*

*In an instant, he made contact with his friend Tong Computer.*

*He poured his knowledge into Tong's mind. Keenly interested, Tong shot back at him an orbit which would cut the mildly parabolic pattern of the old device and bring it back down into Earth's atmosphere.*

*Laird made a supreme effort.*

*Calling on his unseen friends to aid him, he searched once more through the rubbish that raced and twinkled unseen just above the sky. Finding the ancient machine, he managed to give it a push.*

*In this fashion, about sixteen thousand years after she left Hitler's Reich, Carlotta vom Acht began her return to the Earth of men.*

*In all those years, she had not changed.*

*Earth had.*

The ancient rocket tipped. Four hours later it had begun to graze the stratosphere, and its ancient controls, preserved by cold and time against all change, went back into effect. As they thawed, they became activated.

The course flattened out.

Fifteen hours later, the rocket was seeking a destination.



Electronic controls which had really been dead for thousands of years, out in the changeless time of space itself, began to look for German territory, seeking the territory by feedbacks which selected characteristic Nazi patterns of electronic communications scramblers.

There were none.

How could the machine know this? The machine had left the town of Pardubice, on April 2, 1945, just as the last German hideouts were being mopped up by the Red Army. How could the machine know that there was no Hitler, no Reich, no Europe, no America, no nations? The machine was keyed to German codes. Only German codes.

This did not affect the feedback mechanisms.

They looked for German codes anyway. There were none. The electronic computer in the rocket began to go mildly neurotic. It chattered to itself like an angry monkey, rested, chattered again, and then headed the rocket for something which seemed to be vaguely electrical. The rocket descended and the girl awoke.

She knew she was in the box in which her daddy had placed her. She knew that she was not a cowardly swine like the Nazis whom her father despised. She was a good Prussian girl of noble military family. She had been ordered to stay in the box by her father. What daddy told her to do she had always done. That was the first kind of rule for her kind of girl, a sixteen-year-old of the Junker class. The noise increased.

The electronic chattering flared up into a wild medley of clicks.

She could smell something perfectly dreadful burning, something awful and rotten like flesh. She was afraid that it was herself, but she felt no pain.

"*Vadi, Vadi*, what is happening to me?" she cried to her father.

(Her father had been dead sixteen thousand and more years. Obviously enough, he did not answer.)

The rocket began to spin. The ancient leather harness holding her broke loose. Even though her section of the rocket was no bigger than a coffin, she was cruelly bruised.

She began to cry.

She vomited, even though very little came up. Then she slid in her own vomit and felt nasty and ashamed because of something which was a terribly simple human reaction.

The noises all met in a screaming, shrieking climax. The last thing she remembered was the firing of the forward decelerators. The metal had become fatigued so that the tubes not only fired forward; they blew themselves to pieces sideways as well.

She was unconscious when the rocket crashed. Perhaps that saved her life, since the least muscular tension would have led to the ripping of muscle and the crack of bone.

## II.A Moron Found Her

His metals and plumes beamed in the moonlight as he scampered about the dark forest in his gorgeous uniform. The government of the world had long since been left to the Morons by the True Men, who had no interest in such things as politics or administration.

Carlotta's weight, not her conscious will, had tripped the escape handle.

Her body lay half in, half out of the rocket.

She had gotten a bad burn on her left arm where her skin touched the hot outer surface of the rocket.

The Moron parted the bushes and approached.

"I am the Lord High Administrator of Area Seventy-three," he said, identifying himself according to the rules.

The unconscious girl did not answer. He rose up close to the rocket, crouching low lest the dangers of the night devour him, and listened intently to the radiation counter built in under the skin of his skull behind his left ear. He lifted the girl dextrously, flung her gently over his shoulder,

turned about, ran back into the bushes, made a right-angle turn, ran a few paces, looked about him undecidedly, and then ran (still uncertain, still rabbit-like) down to the brook.

He reached into his pocket and found a burn-balm. He applied a thick coating to the burn on her arm. It would stay, killing the pain and protecting the skin, until the burn was healed.

He splashed cool water on her face. She awakened.

"*Wo bin ich?*" said she in German.

On the other side of the world, Laird, the telepath, had forgotten for the moment about the rocket. He might have understood her, but he was not there. The forest was around her and the forest was full of life, fear, hate, and pitiless destruction.

The Moron babbled in his own language.

She looked at him and thought that he was a Russian.

Said she in German, "Are you a Russian? Are you a German? Are you part of General Vlasov's army? How far are we from Prague? You must treat me courteously. I am an important girl . . ."

The Moron stared at her.

His face began to grin with innocent and consummate lust. (The True Men had never felt it necessary to inhibit the breeding habits of Morons. It was hard for any kind of human being to stay alive between the Beasts, the Unforgiven, and the Menschenjäger. The True Men wanted the Morons to go on breeding, to carry reports, to gather up a few necessities, and to distract the other inhabitants of the world enough to let the True Men have the quiet and contemplation which their exalted but weary temperaments demanded.)

This Moron was typical of his kind. To him food meant eat, water meant drink, woman meant lust.

He did not discriminate.

Weary, confused, and bruised though she was, Carlotta still recognized his expression.

Sixteen thousand years ago she had expected to be raped or murdered by the Russians. This soldier was a fantastic little man, plump and grinning, with enough medals for a Soviet colonel general. From what she could see in the moonlight, he was clean-shaven and pleasant, but he looked innocent and stupid to be so high-ranking an officer. Perhaps the Russians were all like that, she thought.

He reached for her.

Tired as she was, she slapped him.

The Moron was mixed up in his thoughts. He knew that he had the right to capture any Moron woman whom he might find. Yet he also knew that it was worse than death to touch any woman of the True Men. Which was this—this thing—this power—this entity who had descended from the stars?

Pity is as old and emotional as lust. As his lust receded, his elemental human pity took over. He reached in his jerkin pocket for a few scraps of food.

He held them out to her.

She ate, looking at him trustfully, very much the child.

Suddenly there was a crashing in the woods.

Carlotta wondered what had happened.

When she first saw him, his face had been full of concern. Then he had grinned and had talked. Later he had become lustful. Finally he had acted very much the gentleman. Now he looked blank, brain and bone and skin all concentrated into the act of listening—listening for something else, beyond the crashing, which she could not hear. He turned back to her.

"You must run. You must run. Get up and run. I tell you, run!"

She listened to his babble without comprehension.

Once again he crouched to listen.

He looked at her with blank horror on his face. Carlotta tried to understand what was the matter, but she could not riddle his meaning.

Three more strange little men dressed exactly like him came crashing out of the woods.

They ran like elk or deer before a forest fire. Their faces were blank with the exertion of running. Their eyes looked straight ahead so that they seemed almost blind. It was a wonder that they evaded the trees. They came crashing down the slope, scattering leaves as they ran. They splashed the waters of the brook as they stomped recklessly through it. With a half-animal cry Carlotta's Moron joined them.

The last she saw of him, he was running away into the woods, his plumes grinning ridiculously as his head nodded with the exertion of running.

From the direction from which the Morons had come, an unearthly creepy sound whistled through the woods. It was whistling, stealthy and low, accompanied by the very quiet sound of machinery.

The noise sounded like all the tanks in the world compressed into the living ghost of a tank, into the heart of a machine which survived its own destruction and, spiritlike, haunted the scenes of old battles.

As the sound approached Carlotta turned toward it. She tried to stand up and could not. She faced the danger. (All Prussian girls, destined to be the mothers of officers, were taught to face danger and never to turn their backs on it.) As the noise came close to her she could hear the high crazy inquiry of soft electronic chatter. It resembled the sonar she had once heard in her father's laboratory at the Reich's secret office's project Nordnacht.

The machine came out of the woods.

And it did look like a ghost.

### III. The Death of All Men

Carlotta stared at the machine. It had legs like a grasshopper, a body like a ten-foot turtle, and three heads which moved restlessly in the moonlight.

From the forward edge of the top shell a hidden arm leapt forth, seeming to strike at her, deadlier than a cobra, quicker than a jaguar, more silent than a bat flitting across the face of the moon.

"Don't!" Carlotta screamed in German. The arm stopped suddenly in the moonlight.

The stop was so sudden that the metal twanged like the string of a bow.

The heads of the machine all turned toward her.

Something like surprise seemed to overtake the machine. The whistling dropped down to a soothing purr. The electronic chatter burst up to a crescendo and then stopped. The machine dropped to its knees.

Carlotta crawled over to it.

Said she in German, "What are you?"

"I am the death of all men who oppose the Sixth German Reich," said the machine in fluted singsong German. "If the Reichsangehöriger wishes to identify me, my model and number are written on my carapace."

The machine knelt at a height so low that Carlotta could seize one of the heads and look in the moonlight at the edge of the top shell. The head and neck, though made of metal, felt much more weak and brittle than she expected. There was about the machine an air of immense age.

"I can't see," wailed Carlotta. "I need a light."

There was the ache and grind of long-unused machinery. Another mechanical arm appeared, dropping flakes of near-crystallized dirt as it moved. The tip of the arm exuded light, blue, penetrating, and strange.

Brook, forest, small valley, machine, even herself, were all lit up by the soft penetrating blue light which did not hurt her eyes. The light even gave her a sense of well-being. With the light she could read. Traced on the carapace just above the three heads was this inscription:

WAFFENAMT                      DES                      SECHSTEN                      DEUTSCHEN                      REICHES  
BURG EISENHOWER, A.D. 2495

And then below it in much larger Latin letters:

MENSCHENJÄGER MARK ELF

"What does 'Man-hunter, Model Eleven' mean?"

"That's me," whistled the machine. "How is it you don't know me if you are a German?"

"Of course, I'm a German, you fool!" said Carlotta. "Do I look like a Russian?"

"What is a Russian?" said the machine.

Carlotta stood in the blue light wondering, dreaming, dreading—dreading the unknown which had materialized around her.

When her father, Heinz Horst Ritter vom Acht, professor and doctor of mathematical physics at project Nordnacht, had fired her into the sky before he himself awaited a gruesome death at the hands of the Soviet soldiery, he had told her nothing about the Sixth Reich, nothing about what she might meet, nothing about the future. It came to her mind that perhaps the world was dead, that the strange little men were not near Prague, that she was in Heaven or Hell, herself being dead, or if herself alive, was in some other world, or her own world in the future, or things beyond all human ken, or problems which no mind could solve . . .

She fainted again.

The Menschenjäger could not know that she was unconscious and addressed her in serious high-pitched singsong German. "German citizen, have confidence that I will protect you. I am built to identify German thoughts and to kill all men who do not have true German thoughts."

The machine hesitated. A loud chatter of electronic clicks echoed across the silent woods while the machine tried to compute its own mind. It was not easy to select from the long-unused store of words for so ancient and so new a situation. The machine stood in its own blue light. The only sound was the sound of the brook moving irresistibly about its gentle and unliving business. Even the birds in the trees and the insects round about were hushed into silence by the presence of the dreaded whistling machine.

To the sound-receptors of the Menschenjäger, the running of the Morons, by now some two miles distant, came as a very faint pitter-patter.

The machine was torn between two duties, the long-current and familiar duty of killing all men who were not German, and the ancient and forgotten duty of succoring all Germans, whoever they might be. After another period of electronic chatter, the machine began to speak again. Beneath the grind of its singsong German there was a curious warning, a reminder of the whistle which it made as it moved, a sound of immense mechanical and electronic effort.

Said the machine, "You are German. It has been long since there has been any German anywhere. I have gone around the world two thousand three hundred and twenty-eight times. I have killed seventeen thousand four hundred and sixty-nine enemies of the Sixth German Reich for sure, and I have probably killed forty-two thousand and seven additional ones. I have been back to the automatic restoration center eleven times. The enemies who call themselves the True Men always elude me. One of them I have not killed for more than three thousand years. The ordinary men whom some call the Unforgiven are the ones I kill most of all, but frequently I catch Morons and kill them, too. I am fighting for Germany, but I cannot find Germany anywhere. There are no

Germans in Germany. There are no Germans anywhere. I accept orders from no one but a German. Yet there have been no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere . . ."

The machine seemed to get a catch in its electronic brain because it went on repeating *no Germans anywhere* three or four hundred times.

Carlotta came to as the machine was dreamily talking to itself, repeating with sad and lunatic intensity, *no Germans anywhere*.

Said she, "I'm a German."

". . . no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, except you, except you, except you."

The mechanical voice ended in a thin screech.

Carlotta tried to come to her feet.

At last the machine found words again. "What—do—I—do—now?"

"Help me," said Carlotta firmly.

This command seemed to tap an operable feedback in the ancient cybernetic assembly. "I cannot help you, member of the Sixth German Reich. For that you need a rescue machine. I am not a rescue machine. I am a hunter of men, designed to kill all the enemies of the German Reich."

"Get me a rescue machine then," said Carlotta.

The blue light went off, leaving Carlotta standing blinded in the dark. She was shaky on her legs. The voice of the Menschenjäger came to her.

"I am not a rescue machine. There are no rescue machines. There are no rescue machines anywhere. There is no Germany anywhere. There are no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, no Germans anywhere, except you. You must ask a rescue machine. Now I go. I must kill men. Men who are enemies of the Sixth German Reich. That is all I can do. I can fight forever. I shall find a man and kill him. Then I shall find another man and kill him. I depart on the work of the Sixth German Reich."

The whistling and clicking resumed.

With incredible daintiness, the machine stepped as lightly as a cat across the brook. Carlotta listened intently in the darkness. Even the dry leaves of last year did not stir as the Menschenjäger moved through the shadow of the fresh leafy trees.

Abruptly there was silence.

Carlotta could hear the agonized clickety-clack of the computers in the Menschenjäger. The forest became a weird silhouette as the blue light went back on.

The machine returned.

Standing on the far side of the brook, it spoke to her in the dry, high-fluted singing German voice.

"Now that I have found a German I will report to you once every hundred years. That is correct. Perhaps that is correct. I do not know. I was built to report to officers. You are not an officer. Nevertheless you are a German. So I will report every hundred years. Meanwhile, watch out for the Kaskaskia Effect."

Carlotta, sitting again, was chewing some of the dry cubic food scraps which the Moron had left behind. They tasted like a mockery of chocolate. With her mouth full, she tried to shout to the Menschenjäger, "*Was ist das?*"

Apparently the machine understood, because it answered, "The Kaskaskia Effect is an American weapon. The Americans are all gone. There are no Americans anywhere, no Americans anywhere, no Americans anywhere—"

"Stop repeating yourself," said Carlotta. "What is that effect you are talking about?"

"The Kaskaskia Effect stops the Menschenjäger, stops the True Men, stops the Beasts. It can be sensed, but it cannot be seen or measured. It moves like a cloud. Only simple men with clean thoughts and happy lives can live inside it. Birds and ordinary beasts can live inside it, too. The Kaskaskia Effect moves about like clouds. There are more than twenty-one and less than thirty-four Kaskaskia Effects moving slowly about this planet Earth. I have carried other Menschenjäger back

for restoration and rebuilding, but the restoration center can find no fault. The Kaskaskia Effect ruins us. Therefore, we run away . . . even though the officers told us to run from nothing. If we did not run away, we would cease to exist. You are a German. I think the Kaskaskia Effect would kill you. Now I go to hunt a man. When I find him I will kill him."

The blue light went off.

The machine whistled and clicked its way into the dark silence of the wooded night.

#### IV. Conversation with the Middle-Sized Bear

Carlotta was completely adult.

She had left the screaming uproar of Hitler Germany as it fell to ruins in its Bohemian outposts. She had obeyed her father, the Ritter vom Acht, as he passed her and her sisters into missiles which had been designed as personnel and supply carriers for the First German National Socialist Moon Base.

He and his medical brother, Professor Doctor Joachim vom Acht, had harnessed the girls securely in their missiles.

Their uncle the Doctor had given them shots.

Karla had gone first, then Juli, and then Carlotta.

Then the barbed-wire fortress of Pardubice and the monotonous grind of Wehrmacht trucks trying to escape the air strikes of the Red Air Force and the American fighter-bombers died in the one night, and this mysterious "forest in the middle of nothing-at-all" was born in the next night.

Carlotta was completely dazed.

She found a smooth-looking place at the edge of the brook. The old leaves were heaped high here. Without regard for further danger, she slept.

She had not been asleep more than a few minutes before the bushes parted again.

This time it was a bear. The bear stood at the edge of the darkness and looked into the moonlit valley with the brook running through it. He could hear no sound of Morons, no whistle of manshonyagger, as he and his kind called the hunting machines. When he was sure all was safe, he twitched his claws and reached delicately into a leather bag which was hanging from his neck by a thong. Gently he took out a pair of spectacles and fitted them slowly and carefully in front of his tired old eyes.

He then sat down next to the girl and waited for her to wake up.

She did not wake until dawn.

Sunlight and birdsong awakened her.

*(Could it have been the probing of Laird's mind, whose far-reaching senses told him that a woman had magically and mysteriously emerged from the archaic rocket and that there was a human being unlike all the other kinds of mankind waking at a brookside in a place which had once been called Maryland?)*

Carlotta awoke, but she was sick.

She had a fever.

Her back ached.

Her eyelids were almost stuck together with foam. The world had had time to develop all sorts of new allergenic substances since she had last walked on the surface of the Earth. Four civilizations had come and vanished. They and their weapons were sure to leave membrane-inflaming residue behind.

Her skin itched.

Her stomach felt upset.

Her arm was numb and covered with some kind of sticky black. She did not know it was a burn covered by the salve which the Moron had given her the previous night.

Her clothes were dry and seemed to be falling off her in shreds.

She felt so bad that when she noticed the bear, she did not even have strength to run.

She just closed her eyes again.

Lying there with her eyes closed she wondered all over again where she was.

Said the bear in perfect German, "You are at the edge of the Unselfing Zone. You have been rescued by a Moron. You have stopped a Menschenjäger very mysteriously. For the first time in my own life I can see into a German mind and see that the word manshonyaggers should really be Menschenjäger, a hunter of men. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the Middle-Sized Bear who lives in these woods."

The voice not only spoke German, but it spoke exactly the right kind of German. The voice sounded like the German which Carlotta had heard throughout her life from her father. It was a masculine voice, confident, serious, reassuring. With her eyes still closed she realized that it was a bear who was doing the talking. With a start, she recalled that the bear had been wearing spectacles.

Said she, sitting up, "What do *you* want?"

"Nothing," said the bear mildly.

They looked at each other for a while.

Then said Carlotta, "Who are you? Where did you learn German? What's going to happen to me?"

"Does the Fräulein," asked the bear, "wish me to answer the questions in order?"

"Don't be silly," said Carlotta. "I don't care what order. Anyhow, I'm hungry. Do you have anything I could eat?"

The bear responded gently, "You wouldn't like hunting for insect grubs. I have learned German by reading your mind. Bears like me are friends of the True Men and we are good telepaths. The Morons are afraid of us, but we are afraid of the manshonyaggers. Anyhow, you don't have to worry very much because your husband is coming soon."

Carlotta had been walking down toward the brook to get a drink. His last words stopped her in her tracks.

"My husband?" she gasped.

"So probably that it is certain. There is a True Man named Laird who has brought you down. He already knows what you are thinking, and I can see his pleasure in finding a human being who is wild and strange, but not really wild and not really strange. At this moment he is thinking that you may have left the centuries to bring the gift of vitality back among mankind. He is thinking that you and he will have wonderful children. Now he is telling me not to tell you what I think he thinks, for fear that you will run away." The bear chuckled.

Carlotta stood, her mouth agape.

"You may sit in my chair," said the Middle-Sized Bear, "or you can wait here until Laird comes to get you. Either way you will be taken care of. Your sickness will heal. Your ailments will go away. You will be happy again. I know this because I am one of the wisest of all known bears."

Carlotta was angry, confused, frightened, and sick again. She started to run.

Something as solid as a blow hit her.

She knew without being told that it was the bear's mind reaching out and encompassing hers.

It hit—boom!—and that was all.

She had never before stopped to think of how comfortable a bear's mind was. It was like lying in a great big bed and having mother take care of one when one was a very little girl, glad to be petted and sure of getting well.

The anger poured out of her. The fear left her. The sickness began to lighten. The morning seemed beautiful.

She herself felt beautiful as she turned—

Out of the blue sky, dropping swiftly but gracefully, came the figure of a bronze young man. A happy thought pulsed against her mind. *That is Laird, my beloved. He is coming. He is coming. I shall be happy forever after.*

It was Laird.

And so she was.

## The Queen of the Afternoon

*Above all, as she began to awaken, she wished for her family. She called to them, "Mutti, Vati, Carlotta, Karla! Where are you?" But of course she cried it in German since she was a good Prussian girl. Then she remembered.*

*How long had it been since her father had put her and her two sisters into the space capsules? She had no idea. Even her father, the Ritter vom Acht, and her uncle, Professor Doctor Joachim vom Acht—who had administered the shots in Parbudice, Germany, on April 2, 1945—could not have imagined that the girls would remain in suspended animation for thousands of years. But so it was.*



Afternoon sunlight gleamed orange and gold on the rich purple shades of the Fighting Trees. Charls looked at the trees, knowing that as the sunset moved from orange to red and as darkness crept over the eastern horizon, they would once again glow with quiet fire.

How long was it since the trees were planted—Fighting Trees, the True Men called them—for the express purpose of sending their immense roots down into the earth, seeking out the radioactives in the soil and the waters beneath, concentrating the poisonous wastes into their hard pods, then dropping the waxy pods until, at some later time, the waters which came from above the earth, and those yet in the earth, would once more be clean? Charls did not know.

One thing he did know. To touch one of the trees, to touch it directly, was certain death.

He wanted very much to break a twig but he did not dare. Not only was it *tambu*, but he feared the sickness. His people had made much progress in the last few generations, enough so that at times they did not fear to face True Men and to argue with them. But the sickness was not something with which one could argue.

At the thought of a True Man, an unaccountable thickness gripped him in the throat. He felt sentimental, tender, fearful; the yearning that gripped him was a kind of love, and yet he knew that it could not be love since he had never seen a True Man except at a distance.

Why, Charls wondered, was he thinking so much about True Men? Was there, perhaps, one nearby?

He looked at the setting sun, which was by now red enough to be looked at safely. Something in the atmosphere was making him uneasy. He called to his sister.

"Oda, Oda!"

She did not answer.

Again he called. "Oda, Oda!"

This time he heard her coming, plowing recklessly through the underbrush. He hoped she would remember to avoid the Fighting Trees. Oda was sometimes too impatient.

Suddenly there she was before him.

"You called me, Charls? You called me? You've found something? Shall we go somewhere together? What do you want? Where are mother and father?"

Charls could not help laughing. Oda was always like that.

"One question at a time, little sister. Weren't you afraid you would die the burning death, going through the trees like that? I know you don't want to believe in the *tambu*, but the sickness is real."

"It isn't," she said. She shook her head. "Maybe it was once . . . I guess it really was once"—granting him a concession—"but do you, yourself, know of anybody who has died from the trees for a thousand years?"

"Of course not, silly. I haven't been alive a thousand years."

Oda's impatience returned. "*You* know what I mean. And anyway, I decided the whole thing is silly. We all accidentally brush against the trees. So one day I *ate* a pod. And nothing happened."

He was appalled. "You *ate* a pod?"

"That's what I said. And nothing happened."

"Oda, one of these days you're going to go too far."

She smiled at him. "And now I suppose you are going to say that the oceans' beds were not always filled with grass."

He was indignant. "No, of course I know better than that. I know that the grass was put into the oceans for the same reason that the Fighting Trees were planted—to eat up all the poisons that the Old Ones left in the days of the Ancient Wars."

How long they would have bickered he did not know, but just then his ears caught an unfamiliar noise. He knew the sound the True Men made as they sped on their mysterious errands in the upper air. He knew the ominous buzz that the Cities gave off should he approach them too closely. He knew also the clicking noises that the few remaining manshonyaggers made as they

crept through the Wild, alert for any non-German to kill. Poor blind machines, they were so easy to outsmart.

But this noise, this noise was different. It was nothing he had ever heard before.

The whistling sound rose and throbbed against the upper reaches of his hearing. It had a curiously spiral quality about it as though it approached and receded, all the while veering toward him. Charls was filled with terror, feeling threatened beyond all understanding.

Now Oda heard it too. Their quarrel forgotten, she seized his arm. "What is it, Charls? What could it be?"

His voice was hesitant and full of wonder. "I don't know."

"Are the True Men doing something, something new that we never heard before? Do they want to hurt us, or enslave us? Do they want to catch us? Do we want to be caught? Charls, tell me, do we want to be caught? Could it be the True Men coming? I seem to smell True Man. They *did* come once before and caught some of us and took them away and did strange things to them, so that they looked like True Men, didn't they, Charls? Could it be the True Men again?"

In spite of his fear, Charls had a certain amount of impatience with Oda. She talked so much.

The noise persisted and intensified. Charls sensed that it was directly over his head, but he could see nothing.

Oda said, "Charls, I think I see it. Do you see it, Charls?"

Suddenly he too saw the circle—a dim whiteness, a vapor train that increased in size and volume. Concomitantly the sound increased, until he felt his eardrums would burst. It was nothing ever before seen in his world. . . .

A thought struck him. It was as hard as a physical blow; it sapped his courage and manhood as nothing before had ever done; he did not feel young and strong any more. He could hardly frame his words.

"Oda, could that be—"

"Be what?"

"Could it be one of the old, old weapons from the Ancient Past? Could it be coming back to destroy us all, as the legends have always foretold? People have always said they would come back. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Whatever the danger, he knew that he was completely helpless, helpless to protect himself, helpless to protect Oda.

Against the ancient weapons there was no defense. This place was no safer than that place, that place no better than this. People still had to live their lives under the threat of weapons from long, long ago. This was the first time that he personally had met the threat, but he had heard of it. He reached for Oda's hand.

Oda, singularly courageous now that there was real danger, drew him over onto the bank, away from the *cenote*. With half his mind he wondered why she seemed to want to move away from the water. She tugged at his arm, and he sat down beside her.

Already, he knew, it was too late to go looking for their parents or others of their pack. Sometimes it took a whole day to round up the entire family—the *thing* was coming down relentlessly, and Charls felt so drained of energy that he stopped talking. He thought at her: *Let's just wait it out here*, and she squeezed his hand as she thought back: *Yes, my brother*.

The long box in the circle of light continued to descend, inexorable.

It was odd. Charls could feel a human presence, but the mind was strangely closed to him. He felt a quality of mind that he had never felt before. He had read the minds of True Men as they flew far overhead; he knew the minds of his own people; he could distinguish the thoughts of most of the birds and beasts; it was no trouble to detect the crude electronic hunger of the mechanical mind of a manshonyaggar.

But this—this being had a mind that was raw, elemental, hot. And closed.

Now the box was very near. Would it crash in this valley or the next? The screams from within it were extremely shrill. Charls's ears hurt and his eyes smarted from the intensity of heat and noise. Oda held his hand tightly.

The object crashed into the ground.

It ripped the hillside just across the *cenote*. Had Oda not instinctively moved away from the *cenote*, the box would have hit *them*, Charls realized.

Charls and Oda stood up cautiously.

Somehow the box must have decelerated: It was hot, but not hot enough to make the broken trees around it burst into flame. Steam rose from the crushed leaves.

The noise was gone.

Charls and Oda moved to within ten man-lengths of the object. Charls framed his clearest thought and flung it at the box: *Who are you?*

The being within obviously did not perceive him as he was. There came forth a wild thought, directed at living beings in general.

*Fools, fools, help me! Get me out of here!*

Oda caught the thought, as did Charls. She stepped in mentally and Charls was astonished at the clarity and force of her inquiry. It was simple but beautifully strong and hard. She thought the one idea:

*How?*

From the box there came again the frantic babble of demand: *The handles, you fools. The handles on the outside. Take the handles and let me out!*

Charls and Oda looked at each other. Charls was not sure that he really wanted to let this creature "out." Then he thought further. Maybe the unpleasantness that radiated from the box was simply the result of imprisonment. He knew that he himself would hate to be encased like that.

Together Charls and Oda risked the broken leaves, walking gingerly up to the box itself. It was black and old; it looked like something the elders called "iron"—and never touched. They saw the handles, pitted and scarred.

With the ghost of a smile, Charls nodded to his sister. Each took a handle and lifted.

The sides of the box crackled. The iron was hot but not unbearably so. With a rusty shriek, the ancient door flew open.

They looked into the box.

There lay a young woman.

She had no fur, only long hair on her head.

Instead of fur, she had strange, soft objects on her body but as she sat up, these objects began to disintegrate.

At first the girl looked frightened; then, as she glanced at Oda and Charls, she began to laugh. Her thought came through, clearly and rather cruelly: *I guess I don't have to worry about modesty in front of puppy dogs.*

Oda did not seem to mind the thought but Charls's feelings were hurt. The girl said words with her mouth but they could not understand them. Each of them took an elbow and led her to the ground.

They reached the edge of the *cenote* and Oda gestured to the strange girl to sit down. She did, and made more words.

Oda was as puzzled as Charls, but then she began to smile. Spieking had worked before, when the girl was in the box. Why not now? The only thing was, this odd girl did not seem to know how to control her thoughts. Everything she thought was directed at the world at large—at the valley, at the sunset sky, at the *cenote*. She did not seem to realize that she was shouting every thought aloud.

Oda put her question to the young woman: *Who are you?*

The hot, strange mind flung back quickly: *Juli, of course.*

At this point Charls intervened. *There's no "of course" about it*, he spieked.

*What am I doing?* the girl's thoughts ran. *I'm in mental telepathy with puppy-dog people.*

Embarrassed, Charls and Oda watched her as her thoughts splashed out.

"Doesn't she know how to close off her thoughts?" Charls wondered. And why had her mind seemed so closed when she was in the box?

*Puppy-dog people. Where can I be if I'm mixed up with puppy-dog people? Can this be Earth? Where have I been? How long have I been gone? Where is Germany? Where are Carlotta and Karla? Where are Daddy and Mother and Uncle Joachim? Puppy-dog people!*

Charls and Oda felt the sharp edge of the mind that was so recklessly flinging all these thoughts. There was a kind of laughter that was cruel each time she thought *puppy-dog people*. They could feel that this mind was as bright as the brightest minds of the True Men—but this mind was different. It did not have the singleness of devotion or the wary wisdom that saturated the minds of the True Men.

Then Charls remembered something. His parents had once told him of a mind that was something like this one.

Juli continued to pour out her thoughts like sparks from a fire, like raindrops from a big splash. Charls was frightened and did not know what to do; and Oda began to turn away from the strange girl.

Then Charls perceived it. Juli was frightened. She was calling them *puppy-dog people* to cover her fear. She really did not know where she was.

He mused, not directing his thought at Juli: *Just because she's frightened, it doesn't mean she has the right to think sharp, bright things at us.*

Perhaps it was his posture that betrayed his attitude; Juli seemed to catch the thought.

Suddenly she burst into words again, words that they could not understand. It sounded as though she were begging, asking, pleading, expostulating. She seemed to be calling for specific persons or things. Words poured forth, and these were names that the True Men used. Was it her parents? Her lover? Her siblings? It had to be someone she had known before entering that screaming box, where she had been captive in the blue of the sky for . . . for how long?

Suddenly she was quiet. Her attention had shifted.

She pointed to the Fighting Trees.

The sunset had so darkened that the trees were beginning to light up. The soft fire was coming to life as it had during all the years of Charls's life and those of his forefathers.

As she pointed, Juli made words again. She kept repeating them. It sounded like *v-a-s-i-s-d-a-s*.

Charls could not help being a little irritated. *Why doesn't she just think?* It was odd that they could not read her mind when she was using the words.

Again, although Charls had not aimed the question at her, Juli seemed to catch it. From her there came a flame of thought, a single idea, that leapt like a fountain of fire from that tired little female head:

*What is this world?*

Then the thought shifted focus slightly. *Vati, Vati, where am I? Where are you? What has become of me?* There was something forlorn and desolate to it.

Oda put out a soft hand toward the girl. Juli looked at her and some of the harsh, fearful thoughts returned. Then the sheer compassion of Oda's posture seemed to catch Juli's attention, and with relaxation came complete collapse. The great and terrifying thought disappeared. Juli burst into tears. She put her long arms about Oda. Oda patted her back and Juli sobbed even harder.

Out of the sobbing came a funny, friendly thought, loving and no longer contemptuous: *Dear little puppy dogs, dear little puppy dogs, please help me. You are supposed to be our best friends . . . do help me now. . . .*

Charls perked up his ears. Something—or someone—was coming over the top of the hill.

Certainly a thought as big and as sharp as Juli's could attract all living forms within kilometers. It might even catch the attention of the aloof but ominous True Men.

A moment later Charls relaxed. He recognized the stride of his parents. He turned to Oda.

"Hear that?"

She smiled. "It's father and mother. They must have heard that big thought the girl had."

Charls watched with pride as his parents approached. It was a well-justified pride. Bil and Kae both appeared, as they were, sensitive and intelligent. In addition, their fur was well-matched. Bil's beautiful caramel coat had spots of white and black only along his cheekbones and nose and at the tip of his tail; Kae was a uniform fawn-beige with which her beautiful green eyes made a striking contrast.

"Are you both all right?" Bil asked as they approached. "Who is that? She looks like a True Man. Is she friendly? Has she hurt you? Was she the one who was doing all that violent thinking? We could feel it clear across the hillside."

Oda burst into a giggle. "You ask as many questions as I do, Daddy."

Charls said, "All we know is that a box came from the sky and that she was in it. You heard that shrieking noise as it came down first, didn't you?"

Kae laughed. "Who didn't hear it?"

"The box hit right over there. You can see where it hurt the hillside."

The area where the box had landed was black and forbidding. Around it the fallen Fighting Trees gleamed in tangled confusion on the ground.

Bil looked at Juli and shook his head. "I don't see why she wasn't killed if it hit that hard."

Juli began to speak in words again, but at last she seemed to understand. Shouting her language would not help any. Instead, she thought: *Please, dear little puppy dogs. Please help me. Please understand me.*

Bil kept his dignity but he noticed with dismay that his tail was wagging of its own accord. He realized that the urge was uncontrollable. He felt both resentful and happy as he thought back at her: *Of course we understand you and we'll try to help you; but please don't think your thoughts so hard or so recklessly. They hurt our minds when they are so bright and sharp.*

Juli tried to turn down the intensity of her thought. She pleaded: *Take me to Germany.*

The four Unauthorized Men—mother, father, daughter, and son—looked at each other. They had no idea of what a Germany might be.

It was Oda who turned to Juli, girl to girl, and spieked: *Think some Germany at us so we can know what it is.*

There came forth from the strange girl images of unbelievable beauty. Picture after clear picture emerged until the little family was almost blinded by the magnificence of the display. They saw the whole ancient world come to life. Cities stood bright in a green-encircled world. There were no aloof and languid True Men; instead, all the people they saw in Juli's mind resembled Juli herself. They were vital, sometimes fierce, forceful; they were tall, erect, long-fingered; and of course they did not have the tails of the Unauthorized Men. The children were pretty beyond belief.

The most amazing thing about this world was the tremendous number of people in it. The people were thicker than the birds of passage, more crowded than the salmon at running time.

Charls had thought himself a well-traveled young man. He had met at least four dozen other persons besides his own family, and he had seen True Men in the skies above him hundreds of times. He had often witnessed the intolerable brightness of Cities and had walked around them more than once until, each time, he had been firmly assured that there was no way for him to enter. He thought his valley a good one. In a few more years he would be old enough to visit the nearby valleys and to look for a wife for himself.

But this vision that came from Juli's mind . . . he could not imagine how so many people could live together. How could they all greet each other in the mornings? How could they all agree

on anything? How could they all ever become still enough to be aware of each other's presence, each other's needs?

There came a particularly strong, bright image. Small-wheeled boxes were hurtling people at insensate speed up and down smooth, smooth roads.

"So that's what *roads* were for," he gasped to himself.

Among the people he saw many dogs. They were nothing like the creatures of Charls's world. They were not the long, otter-like animals whom the Unauthorized Men despised as lowly kindred; nor were they like the Unauthorized Men themselves, and they were certainly not like those modified animals who in appearance were almost indistinguishable from True Men. No, these dogs of Juli's world were bounding, happy creatures with few responsibilities. There seemed to be an affectionate relationship between them and the people there. They shared laughter and sorrow.

Juli had closed her eyes as she tried to bring Germany to them. Concentrating hard, now she brought into the picture of beauty and happiness something else—fearful flying things that dropped fire; thunder and noise; a most unpleasant face, a screaming face with a dab of black fur above the mouth; a licking of flame in the night; a thunder of death machines. Across this thunder there was the image of Juli and two other girls who resembled her; they were moving with a man, obviously their father, toward three iron boxes that looked like the one Juli had landed in. Then there was darkness.

That was Germany.

Juli slumped to the ground.

Gently the four of them probed at her mind. To them it was like a diamond, as clear and transparent as a sunlit pool in the forest, but the light it shot back to them was not a reflection. It was rich and bright and dazzling. Now that it was at rest, they could see deeply into it. They saw hunger, hurt, and loneliness. They saw a loneliness so great that each of them in turn tried to think of a way to assuage it. *Love*, they thought, *what she needs is love, and her own kind*. But where would they find an Ancient One? Would a True Man answer?

Bil said, "There's only one thing to do. We've got to take her to the house of the Wise Old Bear. He has communications with the True Men."

Oda cried out, "But she hasn't done anything wrong!"

Her father looked at her. "Darling, we don't know what this is. She's an Ancient One come back to this world after a sleep in space itself. It's been thousands of years since her world lived; I think she's beginning to realize that, and that's what put her into shock. We need help. Our people may once have been dogs, and that's what she thinks we are. We can't let that bother us. But she needs a house, and the only unauthorized house that I know of belongs to the Wise Old Bear."

Charls looked at his parents. His eyes were troubled. "What is this business about dogs? Is that why we feel so mixed up when we think about True Men? I'm confused about her too. Do you suppose I really want to belong to her?"

"Not really," his father said. "That's just a feeling left over from long, long ago. We lead our own lives now. But this girl, she's too big a problem for us. We will take her to the Bear. At least he has a house."

Juli was still unconscious, and to them she was so big. Each took a limb and with difficulty they managed to carry her. Within less than a tenth of a night they had reached the house of the Wise Old Bear. Fortunately they had not met any manshonyaggers or other dangers of the forest.

At the door of the house of the Wise Old Bear they gently laid the girl on the ground.

Bil shouted, "Bear, Bear, come out, come out!"

"Who is there?" a voice boomed from within.

"Bil and his family. We have an Ancient with us. Come out. We need your help."

The light that had been streaming from the doorway with a yellow glare was suddenly reduced to endurable proportions as the immense bulk of the Bear loomed in the doorway before them.

He pulled his spectacles from a case attached to his belt, put them on his nose, and squinted at Juli.

"Bless my soul," he said. "Another one. Where on earth did you get an ancient girl?"

Pompous but happy, Charls spoke up. "She came out of the sky in a screaming box."

The Bear nodded wisely.

Then Bil spoke up. "You said 'another one.' What did you mean?"

The Bear winced slightly. "Forget I said that," he told them. "I forgot for a moment that you are not True Men. Please forget it."

Bil said, "You mean it's something Unauthorized Men are not supposed to know about?"

The Bear nodded unhappily.

Understanding, Bil said, "Well, if you *can* ever tell us about it, will you, please?"

"Of course," the Bear replied. "And now I think I'd better call my housekeeper to take care of her. Herkie, Herkie, come here."

A blonde woman appeared, peering anxiously. Obviously there was something the matter with her blue eyes but she seemed to be functioning adequately.

Bil backed away from the door. "That's an Experimental person," he said. "That's a cat!"

The Bear was completely uninterested. "So it is, but you can see that her eyes are imperfect. That's why she is allowed to be my housekeeper and why her name isn't prefaced by a C'."

Bil understood. The errors True Men made in trying to breed Underpersons were often destroyed but occasionally one was allowed to live if it seemed able to function at some necessary task. The Bear had connections with True Men. If he needed a housekeeper, an imperfect modified animal provided an ideal solution.

Herkie bent over Juli's still form. She peered in puzzlement at Juli's face. Then she looked up at the Bear. "I don't understand," she said. "I don't see how it could be."

"Later," the Bear said. "When we are alone."

Herkie strained to see into the darkness and perceived the dog family. "Oh, I see," she said.

Bil and Charls were embarrassed. Oda and Kae did not seem to notice the slight.

Bil waved his hand. "Well, good-bye. I hope you can take care of her all right."

"Thank you for bringing her," the Bear said. "The True Men will probably give you a reward."

In spite of himself, Bil felt his tail beginning to wag again.

"Will we ever see her again?" Oda asked. "Do you think we'll ever see her again? I love her, I love her. . . ."

"Perhaps," her father answered. "She will know who saved her, and I think she will seek us out."

Juli awoke slowly. *Where am I? What is this place?* She had a partial return of memory. *The puppy-dog people. Where are they?* She felt conscious of someone at her bedside. She looked up into clouded blue eyes staring anxiously into hers.

"I'm Herkie," the woman said. "I'm the Bear's housekeeper."

Juli felt as though she had awakened in a mental hospital. It was all so impossible. Puppy-dog people and now a *bear*? And surely the blonde woman with the bad eyes was not a human?

Herkie patted her hand. "Of course you're confused," she said.

Juli was taken aback. "You're *talking*! You're talking and I understand you. You're talking German. We're not just communicating telepathically."

"Of course," Herkie said. "I speak true Doych. It's one of the Bear's favorite languages."

"One of . . ." Juli broke off. "It's all so confusing."

Again Herkie patted her hand. "Of course it is."

Juli lay back and looked at the ceiling. *I must be in some other world.*

No, Herkie thought at her, *but you've been gone a long time.*

The Bear came into the room. "Feeling better?" he asked.

Juli merely nodded.

"In the morning we will decide what to do," he said. "I have some connections with the True Men, and I think that we had best take you to the Vomacht."

Juli sat up as if hit by a bolt of lightning. "What do you mean, 'the Vomacht'? That is my name, vom Acht!"

"I thought it might be," the Bear said. Herkie, peering at her from the bedside, nodded wisely.

"I was sure of it," she said. Then, "I think you need some good hot soup and a rest. In the morning it will all straighten itself out."

The tiredness of years seemed to settle in Juli's bones. *I do need to rest*, she thought. *I need to get things sorted out in my mind.* So suddenly that she did not even have a chance to be startled by it, she was asleep.

Herkie and the Bear studied her face. "There's a remarkable resemblance," the Bear said. Herkie nodded in agreement. "It's the time differential I'm worried about. Do you think that will be important?"

"I don't know," Herkie replied. "Since I'm not human, I don't know what bothers people." She straightened and stretched to her full length. "I know!" she said. "I *do* know! She must have been sent here to help us with the rebellion!"

"No," the Bear said. "She has been too long in Time for her arrival to have been intentional. It is true that she may help us, she may very well help us, but I think that her arrival at this particular time and place is fortuitous rather than planned."

"Sometimes I think I understand a particular human mind," Herkie said, "but I'm sure you're correct. I can hardly wait for them to meet each other!"

"Yes," he said, "although I'm afraid that it's going to be rather traumatic. In more than one way."

\* \* \*

When Juli awoke after her deep sleep, she found a thoughtful Herkie awaiting her.

Juli stretched and her mind, still uncontrolled, asked: *Are you really a cat?*

Yes, Herkie thought back at her. *But you are going to have to discipline that thought process of yours. Everyone can read your thoughts.*

*I'm sorry*, Juli spieked, *but I'm just not used to all this telepathy.*

"I know." Herkie had switched to German.

"I still don't understand how you know German," Juli said.

"It's rather a long story. I learned it from the Bear. I think, perhaps, you had better ask him how he learned it."

"Wait a minute. I'm beginning to remember what happened before I fell asleep. The Bear mentioned my name, my family name, vom Acht."

Herkie switched the subject. "We've made you some clothes. We tried to copy the style of those you had on, but they were coming to pieces so badly that we are not sure we got the new ones right."

She looked so anxious to please that Juli reassured her immediately. *If they fit, I'm sure they'll be just fine.*

*Oh, they fit*, Herkie spieked. *We measured you. Now, after your bath and meal, you will dress and the Bear and I will take you to the City. Underpersons like me are not ordinarily allowed in the City, but this time I think that an exception will be made.*



There was something sweet and wise in the face with the clouded blue eyes. Juli felt that Herkie was her friend. *I am*, Herkie spieked, and Juli was once more made aware that she must learn to control her thoughts, or at least the broadcasting of them.

*You'll learn*, Herkie spieked. *It just takes some practice.*

They approached the City on foot, the Bear leading the way, Juli behind him, and Herkie bringing up the rear. They encountered two manshonyaggers along the road but the Bear spoke true Doych to them from some distance and they turned silently and slunk away.

Juli was fascinated. "What *are* they?" she asked.

"Their real name is 'Menschenjäger' and they were invented to kill people whose ideas did not accord with those of the Sixth German Reich. But there are very few of them still functional, and so many of us have learned Doych since . . . since . . ."

"Yes?"

"Since an event you'll find out about in the City. Now let's get on with it."

They neared the City wall and Juli became conscious of a buzzing sound, and of a powerful force that excluded them. Her hair stood on end and she felt a tingling sensation of mild electrical shock. Obviously there was a force field around the City.

"What is it?" she cried out.

"Just a static charge to keep back the Wild," the Bear said soothingly. "Don't worry, I have a damper for it."

He held up a small device in his right paw, pushed a button on it, and immediately a corridor opened before them.

When they reached the City wall, the Bear felt carefully along the upper ridge. At a certain point he paused, then reached for a strange-looking key that hung from a cord around his neck.

Juli could see no difference between this section of the wall and any other but the Bear inserted his key into a notch he had located and a section of the barrier swung up. The three passed through and silently the wall fell back into position.

The Bear hurried them along dusty streets. Juli saw a number of people but most of them seemed to her aloof, austere, uncaring. They bore little resemblance to the lusty Prussians she remembered.

Eventually they arrived at the door of a large building that looked old and imposing. Beside the door there was an inscription. The Bear was hurrying them through the entryway.

*Oh, please, Mr. Bear, may I stop to read it?*

*Just plain Bear is all right. And yes, of course you may. It may even help you to understand some of the things that you are going to learn today.*

The inscription was in German, and it was in the form of a poem. It looked as though it had been carved hundreds of years earlier (as indeed it had. Juli could not know that at this time).

Herkie looked up. "Oh, the first . . ."

"Hush," said the Bear.

Juli read the poem to herself silently.

<i>Youth</i>					
<i>Fading,</i>			<i>fading,</i>		<i>going</i>
<i>Flowing</i>					
<i>Like</i>	<i>life</i>	<i>blood</i>	<i>from</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>veins. . .</i>
<i>Little</i>					<i>remains.</i>
<i>The</i>			<i>glorious</i>		<i>face</i>
<i>Erased,</i>					
<i>Replaced</i>					
<i>By</i>	<i>one</i>	<i>which</i>	<i>mirrors</i>		<i>tears,</i>

<i>The</i>		<i>years</i>
<i>Gone</i>		<i>by.</i>
<i>Oh,</i>		<i>Youth,</i>
<i>Linger</i>	<i>yet</i>	<i>a</i>
<i>Smile</i>		<i>while!</i>
<i>Still</i>	<i>upon</i>	<i>us</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>wretched</i>	<i>few</i>
<i>Who</i>		<i>worship</i>
<i>You. . .</i>		

"I don't understand it," said Juli.

"You will," the Bear said. "Unfortunately, you will."

An official in a bright green robe trimmed with gold approached. "We have not had the honor of your presence for some time," he said respectfully to the Bear.

"I've been rather busy," the Bear replied. "But how is she?"

Juli realized with a start that the conversation was not telepathic but was in German. *How do all these people know German?* She unthinkingly flung her thought abroad.

*Hush* came back the simultaneous warnings from Herkie and the Bear.

Juli felt thoroughly admonished. "I'm sorry," she almost whispered. "I don't know how I'll ever learn the trick."

Herkie was immediately sympathetic. "It *is* a trick," she said, "but you're already better at it than you were when you arrived. You just have to be careful. You can't fling your thoughts everywhere."

"Never mind that now," the Bear said and he turned to the green-uniformed official. "Is it possible to have an audience? I think it's important."

"You may have to wait a little while," the official said, "but I'm sure she will always grant audience to *you*."

The Bear looked a little smug at that, Juli noticed.

They sat down to wait and from time to time Herkie patted Juli's arm reassuringly.

It was actually not long before the official reappeared. "She will see you now," he said.

He led them through a long corridor to a large room at the end of which was a dais with a chair. "Not quite a throne," Juli thought to herself. Behind the chair stood a young and handsome male, a True Man. In the chair sat a woman, old, old beyond imagining; her wrinkled hands were claws, but in the haggard, wrinkled face one could still detect some trace of beauty.

Juli's sense of bewilderment grew. She *knew* this person, but she did not. Her sense of orientation, already splintered by the events of the past "day," almost disintegrated. She grabbed Herkie's hand as if it were the only familiar element in a world she could not understand.

The woman spoke. Her voice was old and weak, but she spoke in German.

"So, Juli, you have come. Laird told me he was bringing you in. I am so happy to see you, and to know that you are all right."

Juli's senses reeled. She *knew*, she *knew*, but she could not believe. Too much had changed, too much had happened, in the short time that she had returned to life.

Gasping, tentatively, she whispered, "Carlotta?"

Her sister nodded. "Yes, Juli, it is I. And this is my husband, Laird." She nodded her head toward the handsome young man behind her. "He brought me in about two hundred years ago, but

unfortunately as an Ancient I cannot undergo the rejuvenation process that has been developed since we left the Earth."

Juli began to sob. "Oh, Carlotta, it's all so hard to believe. And you're so old! You were only two years older than I."

"Darling, I've had two hundred years of bliss. They couldn't rejuvenate me but they could at least prolong my life. Now, it is not from purely altruistic purposes that I have had Laird bring you in. Karla is still out there, but since she was only sixteen when she was suspended, we thought that you would be better suited to the task.

"In fact, we really didn't do you any favor in bringing you in because now you too will begin to age. But to be forever in suspended animation is not any life either."

"Of course not," Juli said. "And anyway, if I had lived a normal life, I would have aged."

Carlotta leaned over to kiss her.

"At least we're together at last," Juli sighed.

"Darling," Carlotta said, "it is wonderful to have even this little time together. You see, I'm dying. There comes a point when, with all technology, the scientists cannot keep a body alive. And we need help, help with the rebellion."

"The rebellion?"

"Yes. Against the Jwindz. They were Chinesians, philosophers. Now they are the true rulers of the Earth, and we—so they believe—are merely their Instrumentality, their police force. Their power is not over the body of man but over the *soul*. That is almost a forgotten word here now. Say 'mind' instead. They call themselves the Perfect Ones and have sought to remake man in their own image. But they are remote, removed, bloodless.

"They have recruited persons of all races, but man has not responded well. Only a handful aspire to the kind of esthetic perfection the Jwindz have as their goal. So the Jwindz have resorted to their knowledge of drugs and opiates to turn True Man into a tranquilized, indifferent people—to make it easy to govern them, to control everything that they do. Unfortunately some of our"—she nodded toward Laird—"descendants have joined them.

"We need you, Juli. Since I came back from the ancient world, Laird and I have done what we could to free True Men from this form of slavery, because it *is* slavery. It is a lack of vitality, a lack of meaning to life. We used to have a word for it in the old days. Remember? 'Zombie.'"

"What do you want me to do?"

During the entire conversation between the sisters, Herkie, the Bear, and Laird had remained silent.

Now Laird spoke. "Until Carlotta came to us, we were drifting along, uncaring, in the power of the Jwindz. We did not know what it was, really, to be a human being. We felt that our only purpose in life was to serve the Jwindz: If they were perfect, what other function could we perform? It was our duty to serve their needs—to maintain and guard the cities, to keep out the Wild, to administer the drugs. Some of the Instrumentality even preyed upon the Unauthorized Men, the Unforgiven, and, as a last resort, the True Men, to supply their laboratories.

"But now many of us no longer believe in the perfection of the Jwindz—or perhaps we have come to believe in something more than human perfection. We have been serving men. We should have been serving *mankind*.

"Now we feel that the time has come to put an end to this tyranny. Carlotta and I have allies among some of our descendants and among some of the Unforgiven and, as you have seen, even among the Unauthorized Men and other animal-derived persons. I think there must still be a connection from the time that human beings had 'pets' in the old days."

Juli looked about her and realized that Herkie was quietly purring. "Yes," she said, "I see what you mean."

Laird continued, "What we want to do is to set up a *real* Instrumentality—not a force for the service of the Jwindz, but one for the service of man. We are determined that never again shall man

betray his own image. We will establish the Instrumentality of Mankind, one benevolent but not manipulative."

Carlotta nodded slowly. Her aged face showed concern. "I will die in a few days and you will marry Laird. You will be the new Vomact. With any luck by the time you are as old as I am, your descendants and some of mine should have freed the Earth from the power of the Jwindz."

Juli again felt completely disoriented. "I'm to marry your husband?"

Again Laird spoke. "I have loved your sister well for more than two hundred years. I shall love you too, because you are so much like her. Do not think that I am being disloyal. She and I have discussed this for some time before I brought you in. If she were not dying, I should continue to be faithful to her. But now we need you."

Carlotta concurred. "It is true. He has made me very happy, and he will make you happy too, through all the years of your life. Juli, I could not have had you brought in had I not had some plan for your future. You could never be happy with one of those drugged, tranquilized True Men. Trust me in this, please. It is the only thing to do."

Tears formed in Juli's eyes. "To have found you at last and then to lose you after such a short time . . ."

Herkie patted her hand and Juli looked up to see sympathetic tears in her clouded blue eyes.

It was three days later that Carlotta died. She died with a smile on her face and Laird and Juli each holding one of her hands. She spoke at the last and pressed their hands. "I'll see you later. Out among the stars."

Juli wept uncontrollably.

They postponed the wedding ceremony for seven days of mourning. For once the City gates were opened and the static fields of electricity cut off because even the Jwindz could not control the feelings of the animal-derived persons, the Unauthorized Men, even some of the True Men, toward this woman who had come to them from an ancient world.

The Bear was particularly mournful. "I was the one who found her, you know, after you brought her in," he said to Laird.

"I remember."

*So that's what the Bear meant when he said 'another one,'* Bil said.

Charls and Oda, Bil and Kae were among the mourners. Juli saw them and thought, *My dear little puppy-dog people*, but this time the thought was loving and not contemptuous.

Oda's tail wagged. *I've thought of something*, she spieked at Juli. *Can you meet me down by the cenote in two days' time?*

*Yes*, thought Juli, proud of herself at being sure, for the first time, that her thought had gone only to the person for whom it was meant. She knew that she had been successful when she glanced at Laird's face and saw that he had not read her thought.

When she met Oda at the *cenote*, Juli did not know what was expected of her—nor what she herself expected.

*You must be very careful in directing your thoughts*, Oda spieked. *We never know when some of the Jwindz are overhead.*

*I think I'm learning*, Juli spieked. Oda nodded.

*What my idea was, it was to make use of the Fighting Trees. The True Men are still afraid of the sickness. But, you see, I know that the sickness is gone. I got so tired of brushing past the trees and always worrying about it that I decided to test it out, and I ate a pod from one of the Fighting Trees—and nothing happened. I've never been afraid of them since. So if we met there, we rebels, in a grove of the Fighting Trees, the officials of the Jwindz would never find us. They'd be afraid to hunt for us there.*

Juli's face lightened. *That's a very good idea. May I consult with Laird?*

*Certainly. He has always been one of us. And your sister was too.*

Juli was sad again. *I feel so alone.*

*No. You have Laird, and you have us, and the Bear, and his housekeeper. And in time there will be others. Now we must part.*

Juli returned from her meeting with Oda at the *cenote* to find Laird deep in conference with the Bear and a young man who bore a singular resemblance to Laird—and to the youthful Carlotta that Juli remembered.

Laird smiled at her. "This is your great-nephew," he said, "my grandson."

Juli's perspective of time and age received another jolt. Laird appeared to be no older than his grandson. *How do I fit in to this?* she wondered, and accidentally broadcast the thought.

"I know that all of this must be difficult for you to comprehend," Laird said, taking her hand. "Carlotta had some difficulty in adjusting too. But try, please try, my dear, because we need you so desperately and I, I particularly, have already become dependent on you. I could not face Carlotta's loss without you."

Juli felt a vague sense of embarrassment. "What is my"—she could not say it—"what is his name?"

"I beg your pardon. He is named Joachim for your uncle."

Joachim smiled and then gave her a brief hug. "You see," he said, "the reason we need your help with the rebellion is the cult that was built up around your sister, my grandmother. When she returned to earth as an Ancient One, there was a kind of cult set up about her. That is why she was 'The Vomact' and why you must also be. It is a rallying point for those of us who oppose the power of the Jwindz. Grandmother Carlotta had a minikingdom here, and even the Jwindz could not keep people from coming to pay her court. You must have realized that at the mourning session for her."

"Yes, I could see that she had a great deal of respect from many kinds of people. If she was in favor of a rebellion, I am sure she must have been correct. Carlotta was always a most upright person. And now I must tell you about the plan that Oda proposes." She proceeded to do so.

"It might work," the Bear said. "True Men have been very careful about observing the *tambu* of the Fighting Trees. In fact, I may even have an improvement on Oda's idea." He began to get excited and dropped his spectacles. Joachim picked them up.

"Bear," he said, "you always do that when you're excited."

"I think it means I have a good idea," the Bear said. "Look, why don't we use the manshonyaggers?"

The others looked at him in bewilderment and Laird said slowly, "I think I may see what you're getting at. The manshonyaggers, although there are not many of them left, respond only to German and—"

"And the leaders of the Jwindz are Chinesian, too proud to have learned another language," the Bear broke in, smiling.

"Yes. So if we establish headquarters in the Fighting Trees and let it be known that the new Vomact is there—"

"And surround the grove with manshonyaggers—"

They were breaking in upon each other as the idea began to take shape. The excitement grew.

"I think it will work," Laird said.

"I think so too," Joachim reassured him. "I will get together the Band of Cousins and after you're established in the Fighting Trees, we'll make a raid on the drug center and bring the tranquilizers to the grove, where we can destroy them."

"The Band of Cousins?" Juli asked.

"Carlotta's and my descendants who have not joined the Instrumentality of the Jwindz," Laird told her.

"Why would *any* of them have joined?"

Laird shrugged. "Greed, power, all kinds of very human motives. Even an illusion of physical immortality. We tried to give our children ideals but the corruption of power is very great. You must know that."

Remembering a howling, hateful face with a black mustache above the mouth, a face from her own time and place, Juli nodded.

Herkie and the Bear, Charls and Oda, Bil and Kae accompanied Juli into the grove of Fighting Trees. At first Bil and Kae were reluctant. It was only after Oda's confession of having eaten a pod that they agreed to go, and then Bil's reaction was that of a typical father.

"How *could* you take such a chance?" he asked Oda.

Her eyes were bright and her tail wagged furiously. "I just had to," she said.

He glanced at Herkie. "Now if *she* had done it . . ."

Herkie drew herself up to her full height. "I think that the relationship of curiosity and cats has, perhaps, been a little exaggerated," she said. "Actually, we're generally rather careful."

"I didn't mean to be disrespectful," Bil said hastily, and Herkie saw his tail droop.

"It's a common misconception," she said kindly, and Bil's tail straightened.

When they reached the center of the grove, they spread a picnic and gathered around. Juli was hungry. In the City she had been offered synthetic food, no doubt healthful and full of vitamins but not satisfying to the appetite of an Ancient Prussian girl. The animal-derived persons had brought real *food* and Juli ate happily.

The Bear, in particular, noticed her enjoyment. "You see," he said, "that's how they did it."

"Did what?" asked Juli, her mouth full of bread.

"How they drugged the majority of True Men. True Men were so accustomed to living on synthetic foodstuffs that when the Jwindz introduced tranquilizers into the synthetics, True Men never knew the difference. I hope that if the Band of Cousins succeeds in capturing the drug supply, the withdrawal symptoms for the True Men will not be too severe."

Bil looked up. "That's something we should consider," he said. "If there *are* severe withdrawal symptoms, a number of the True Men may be tempted to join the Jwindz in an attempt to recover the drugs."

The Bear nodded. "That's what I was thinking," he said.

It was several days before Laird, Joachim, and the Band of Cousins joined them. By this time Juli had become almost accustomed to the daylight darkness under the thick leaves and branches of the Fighting Trees, and the soft-glowing illumination at night.

Laird greeted her affectionately. "I have missed you," he said simply. "Already I have grown very attached to you."

Juli blushed and changed the subject. "Did you—or, rather, the Band of Cousins—succeed?"

"Oh, yes. There was very little difficulty. The officials of the Jwindz had grown quite careless since they have had the minds of most True Men under their control for generations. It was only a matter of Joachim's pretending to be tranquilized, and he had free access to the drug room. Over a period of days he managed to transfer the entire supply to the Cousins and to substitute placebos. I wonder when *that* will be discovered."

"As soon as the first withdrawal symptoms occur, I should think," Joachim ventured.

Something that had been nagging at the back of Juli's mind surfaced. "You have your *grandson* here, and the Band of Cousins. But where are your and Carlotta's own children? Obviously you had some."

His face saddened. "Of course. But since they were half-Ancient, they could not only not be rejuvenated, but the combination of the chemistry made it such that their lives could not even be prolonged. They all died in their seventies and eighties. It was a great sadness to Carlotta and me. You too, my dear, if we have children, must be prepared for that. By the time of the next generation,

however, the Ancient blood is sufficiently diluted that rejuvenation may take place. Joachim is a hundred and fifty years old."

"And you? And you?" she said.

He looked at her. "This is very hard on you, isn't it? I'm over three hundred years old."

Juli could not disbelieve but neither could she quite comprehend. Laird was so handsome and youthful; Carlotta had been so old.

She tried to shake the cobwebs from her mind. "What do we do with the tranquilizers now that we have them?"

Oda had approached at the latter part of the conversation. Her eyes sparkled and her tail wagged madly. "I have an idea," she announced.

"I hope it's as good as your last one," Laird said.

"I hope so too. Look, why don't we just feed the tranquilizers back to the officials? The Jwindz probably will never notice. Then we won't have to worry about fighting them. They could just gradually die off or maybe . . . do you think . . . we could send them out into space? To another planet?"

Laird nodded slowly. "You do have good ideas. Yes, to feed the tranquilizers back to them . . . but how?"

"We work well together," the Bear said, indicating Oda. "She has an idea and it triggers another one in my mind." Carefully he put on his spectacles. "I have here a map of the terrain in this vicinity. Except for the *cenote* there is no water for many kilometers in any direction. If we dropped the tranquilizers—all of them—into the *cenote*, and then if one of the Cousins could prepare the synthetic food of the Jwindz's officials so it was very spicy—I think that the problem would be solved."

Laird said, "We do have one of the Cousins who has infiltrated the Jwindz. But what would induce them to drink the water?"

Charls had joined the group. "I have heard," he said, "of an ancient spice people used to like which eventually produced thirst. It used to be found in the oceans, before they were filled with grass. But some of it remains on the banks of the sea. I believe that it was called 'salt.'"

"Now that you mention it, I've heard of that too." The Bear nodded wisely. "So that is what we need to do. 'Salt.' We introduce it into their food, then we entice them to the grove with the knowledge that the new Vomact is here together with the heart of a rebellion. It's risky but I think it's the best idea, or combination of ideas, yet"

Laird agreed. "It's as you say, risky, but it may work, and they're not likely to execute any of us if it doesn't. They'll just tranquilize us. I think that we have a better than even chance of winning. And if True Man is not revitalized, not freed from this bondage of tranquility and apathy, I believe that the entire breed will be extinguished within a few hundred years. They have come to the point that they care about nothing."

All worlds know how the plan was carried out. It was exactly as the Bear had foretold. The thirsty officials of the Jwindz, their food highly salted, drank eagerly from the water of the *cenote* and were quickly tranquilized. They put up no opposition to the members of the rebellion who soon thereafter emerged from the shelter of the Fighting Trees.

Joachim was sad. "One of my brothers had joined them," he said.

Laird laid a comforting arm across his shoulder. "Well, he's only tranquilized. We may be able to help him as he comes out of it."

"Perhaps, but it violates all my principles."

"Don't be too high-minded, Joachim. Principles are fine, but there is such a thing as rehabilitation."

And this was the way that the Instrumentality of Mankind was established. In time it would govern many worlds. Juli, by virtue of being the Vomact, became one of the first Ladies of the Instrumentality. Laird, as her husband, was one of the first Lords.

Juli lived to see some of her descendants among the first great Scanners in Space. She was very proud of them, and she was very old. Laird, of course, was as young as ever. All of her animal-descended friends had long since died. She missed them, although Laird was ever faithful.

At last, so old that she had difficulty in moving, Juli called Laird to her. She looked up into his handsome face. "My darling, you have made me very happy, just as you did Carlotta. But now I am old and, I think, dying. You are still so young and vital. I wish it were possible for me to undergo the rejuvenation, but since it isn't possible, I think we should call in Karla."

He responded so rapidly that her feelings were somewhat hurt. "Yes, I think that we should call in Karla."

He turned away from her momentarily.

She said, with a hint of tears in her voice, "I know that you will make her happy and love her very much."

His silence continued for a moment before he turned back to her.

She saw suddenly that there were lines in his face, lines she had never seen before.

"What is happening to you?" she asked.

"My darling and last love," he said, "I will be losing you twice. I cannot bear it. I have asked the physician for medicine to counteract the rejuvenation. In an hour I shall be as old as you. We are going together. And somewhere out there we will meet Carlotta and we will hold hands, the three of us, among the stars. Karla will find her own man and her own fate."

Together they sat and watched the descent of Karla's spacecraft.



## Scanners Live in Vain

*Here, humanity is still emerging from the Dark Age that is more fully described in the stories "Queen of the Afternoon" and "Mark Elf" and which reveal the "Beasts" to be mutated intelligent animals and the "manshonyaggers" to be old German killing machines—taken from Menschenj tiger, or "hunter of men." At the time Smith wrote the story in 1945, there was an abandoned shop in his neighborhood called The Little Cranch—what "cranch" meant, he had no idea—but he used the word anyway. The "ancient lady" ancestress of Vomact was one of the VomAcht sisters mentioned in Dark Age stories—which one, we don't know.*

Martel was angry. He did not even adjust his blood away from anger. He stamped across the room by judgment, not by sight. When he saw the table hit the floor, and could tell by the expression on Lûci's face that the table must have made a loud crash, he looked down to see if his leg were broken. It was not. Scanner to the core, he had to scan himself. The action was reflex and automatic. The inventory included his legs, abdomen, Chestbox of instruments, hands, arms, face, and back with the mirror. Only then did Martel go back to being angry. He talked with his voice, even though he knew that his wife hated its blare and preferred to have him write.

"I tell you, I must cranch. I have to cranch. It's my worry, isn't it?"

When Lûci answered, he saw only a part of her words as he read her lips: "Darling . . . you're my husband . . . right to love you . . . dangerous . . . do it . . . dangerous . . . wait. . . ."

He faced her, but put sound in his voice, letting the blare hurt her again: "I tell you, I am going to cranch."

Catching her expression, he became rueful and a little tender: "Can't you understand what it means to me? To get out of this horrible prison in my own head? To be a man again—hearing your voice, smelling smoke? To *feel* again—to feel my feet on the ground, to feel the air move against my face? Don't you know what it means?"

Her wide-eyed worrisome concern thrust him back into pure annoyance. He read only a few of the words as her lips moved: ". . . love you . . . your own good . . . don't you think I want you to be human? . . . your own good . . . too much . . . he said . . . they said . . ."

When he roared at her, he realized that his voice must be particularly bad. He knew that the sound hurt her no less than did the words: "Do you think I wanted you to marry a Scanner? Didn't I tell you we're almost as low as the habermans? We're dead, I tell you. We've got to be dead to do our work. How can anybody go to the Up-and-Out? Can you dream what raw Space is? I warned you. But you married me. All right, you married a man. Please, darling, let me be a man. Let me hear your voice, let me feel the warmth of being alive, of being human. Let me!"

He saw by her look of stricken assent that he had won the argument. He did not use his voice again. Instead, he pulled his tablet up from where it hung against his chest. He wrote on it, using the pointed fingernail of his right forefinger—the talking nail of a Scanner—in quick cleancut script: *Pls, drlng, whrs crnching wire?*

She pulled the long gold-sheathed wire out of the pocket of her apron. She let its field sphere fall to the carpeted floor. Swiftly, dutifully, with the deft obedience of a Scanner's wife, she wound the Cranching Wire around his head, spirally around his neck and chest. She avoided the

instruments set in his chest. She even avoided the radiating scars around the instruments, the stigmata of men who had gone Up and into the Out. Mechanically he lifted a foot as she slipped the wire between his feet. She drew the wire taut. She snapped the small plug into the High-Burden control next to his Heart-Reader. She helped him to sit down, arranging his hands for him, pushing his head back into the cup at the top of the chair. She turned then, full-face toward him, so that he could read her lips easily. Her expression was composed:

"Ready, darling?"

She knelt, scooped up the sphere at the other end of the wire, stood erect calmly, her back to him. He scanned her, and saw nothing in her posture but grief which would have escaped the eye of anyone but a Scanner. She spoke: he could see her chest-muscles moving. She realized that she was not facing him, and turned so that he could see her lips:

"Ready at last?"

He smiled a *yes*.

She turned her back to him again. (Lûci could never bear to watch him go Under-the-Wire.) She tossed the wire-sphere into the air. It caught in the force-field, and hung there. Suddenly it glowed. That was all. All—except for the sudden red stinking roar of coming back to his senses. Coming back, across the wild threshold of pain—

## I

When he awakened under the wire, he did not feel as though he had just crunched. Even though it was the second crunching within the week, he felt fit. He lay in the chair. His ears drank in the sound of air touching things in the room. He heard Lûci breathing in the next room, where she was hanging up the wire to cool. He smelt the thousand-and-one smells that are in anybody's room: the crisp freshness of the germ-burner, the sour-sweet tang of the humidifier, the odor of the dinner they had just eaten, the smells of clothes, furniture, of people themselves. All these were pure delight. He sang a phrase or two of his favorite song:

*Here's to the haberman, Up and Out!*  
*Up—oh!—and Out—oh!—Up and Out! . . .*

He heard Lûci chuckle in the next room. He gloated over the sounds of her dress as she swished to the doorway.

She gave him her crooked little smile. "You sound all right. Are you all right, really?"

Even with this luxury of senses, he scanned. He took the flash-quick inventory which constituted his professional skill. His eyes swept in the news of the instruments. Nothing showed off scale, beyond the Nerve Compression hanging in the edge of *Danger*. But he could not worry about the Nerve-box. That always came through crunching. You couldn't get under the wire without having it show on the Nerve-box. Some day the box would go to *Overload* and drop back down to *Dead*. That was the way a haberman ended. But you couldn't have everything. People who went to the Up-and-Out had to pay the price for Space.

Anyhow, he should worry! He was a Scanner. A good one, and he knew it. If he couldn't scan himself, who could? This crunching wasn't too dangerous. Dangerous, but not too dangerous.

Lûci put out her hand and ruffled his hair as if she had been reading his thoughts, instead of just following them: "But you know you shouldn't have! You shouldn't!"

"But I did!" He grinned at her.

Her gaiety still forced, she said: "Come on, darling, let's have a good time. I have almost everything there is in the icebox—all your favorite tastes. And I have two new records just full of smells. I tried them out myself, and even I liked them. And you know me—"

"Which?"

"Which what, you old darling?"

He slipped his hand over her shoulders as he limped out of the room. (He could never go back to feeling the floor beneath his feet, feeling the air against his face, without being bewildered and clumsy. As if cranching was real, and being a haberman was a bad dream. But he *was* a haberman, and a Scanner.) "You know what I meant, Lûci . . . the smells, which you have. Which one did you like, on the record?"

"Well-l-l," said she, judiciously, "there were some lamb chops that were the strangest things —"

He interrupted: "What are lambtchots?"

"Wait till you smell them. Then guess. I'll tell you this much. It's a smell hundreds and hundreds of years old. They found about it in the old books."

"Is a lambtchot a Beast?"

"I won't tell you. You've got to wait," she laughed, as she helped him sit down and spread out his tasting dishes before him. He wanted to go back over the dinner first, sampling all the pretty things he had eaten, and savoring them this time with his now-living lips and tongue.

When Lûci had found the Music Wire and had thrown its sphere up into the force-field, he reminded her of the new smells. She took out the long glass records and set the first one into a transmitter.

"Now sniff!"

A queer, frightening, exciting smell came over the room. It seemed like nothing in this world, nor like anything from the Up-and-Out. Yet it was familiar. His mouth watered. His pulse beat a little faster; he scanned his Heartbox. (Faster, sure enough.) But that smell, what was it? In mock perplexity, he grabbed her hands, looked into her eyes, and growled:

"Tell me, darling! Tell me, or I'll eat you up!"

"That's just right!"

"What?"

"You're right. It should make you want to eat me. It's meat."

"Meat. Who?"

"Not a person," said she, knowledgeably, "a Beast. A Beast which people used to eat. A lamb was a small sheep—you've seen sheep out in the Wild, haven't you?—and a chop is part of its middle—here!" She pointed at her chest.

Martel did not hear her. All his boxes had swung over toward *Alarm*, some to *Danger*. He fought against the roar of his own mind, forcing his body into excess excitement. How easy it was to be a Scanner when you really stood outside your own body, haberman-fashion, and looked back into it with your eyes alone. Then you could manage the body, rule it coldly even in the enduring agony of Space. But to realize that you *were* a body, that this thing was ruling you, that the mind could kick the flesh and send it roaring off into panic! That was bad.

He tried to remember the days before he had gone into the Haberman Device, before he had been cut apart for the Up-and-Out. Had he always been subject to the rush of his emotions from his mind to his body, from his body back to his mind, confounding him so that he couldn't scan? But he hadn't been a Scanner then.

He knew what had hit him. Amid the roar of his own pulse, he knew. In the nightmare of the Up-and-Out, that smell had forced its way through to him, while their ship burned off Venus and the habermans fought the collapsing metal with their bare hands. He had scanned them: all were in *Danger*. Chestboxes went up to *Overload* and dropped to *Dead* all around him as he had moved from man to man, shoving the drifting corpses out of his way as he fought to scan each man in turn, to clamp vises on unnoticed broken legs, to snap the Sleeping Valve on men whose instruments showed that they were hopelessly near *Overload*. With men trying to work and cursing him for a Scanner while he, professional zeal aroused, fought to do his job and keep them alive in the Great Pain of Space, he had smelled that smell. It had fought its way along his rebuilt nerves, past the

Haberman cuts, past all the safeguards of physical and mental discipline. In the wildest hour of tragedy, he had smelled aloud. He remembered it was like a bad cranching, connected with the fury and nightmare all around him. He had even stopped his work to scan himself, fearful that the First Effect might come, breaking past all haberman cuts and ruining him with the Pain of Space. But he had come through. His own instruments stayed and stayed at *Danger*, without nearing *Overload*. He had done his job, and won a commendation for it. He had even forgotten the burning ship.

All except the smell.

And here the smell was all over again—the smell of meat-with-fire . . .

Lûci looked at him with wifely concern. She obviously thought he had crunched too much, and was about to haberman back. She tried to be cheerful: "You'd better rest, honey."

He whispered to her: "Cut—off—that—smell."

She did not question his word. She cut the transmitter. She even crossed the room and stepped up the room controls until a small breeze flitted across the floor and drove the smells up to the ceiling.

He rose, tired and stiff. (His instruments were normal, except that Heart was fast and Nerves still hanging on the edge of Danger.) He spoke sadly:

"Forgive me, Lûci. I suppose I shouldn't have crunched. Not so soon again. But darling, I have to get out from being a haberman. How can I ever be near you? How can I be a man—not hearing my own voice, not even feeling my own life as it goes through my veins? I love you, darling. Can't I ever be near you?"

Her pride was disciplined and automatic: "But you're a Scanner!"

"I know I'm a Scanner. But so what?"

She went over the words, like a tale told a thousand times to reassure herself: "You are the bravest of the brave, the most skillful of the skilled. All Mankind owes most honor to the Scanner, who unites the Earths of mankind. Scanners are the protectors of the habermans. They are the judges in the Up-and-Out. They make men live in the place where men need desperately to die. They are the most honored of Mankind, and even the Chiefs of the Instrumentality are delighted to pay them homage!"

With obstinate sorrow he demurred: "Lûci, we've heard that all before. But does it pay us back —"

"Scanners work for more than pay. They are the strong guards of Mankind.' Don't you remember that?"

"But our lives, Lûci. What can you get out of being the wife of a Scanner? Why did you marry me? I'm human only when I cranch. The rest of the time—you know what I am. A machine. A man turned into a machine. A man who has been killed and kept alive for duty. Don't you realize what I miss?"

"Of course, darling, of course—"

He went on: "Don't you think I remember my childhood? Don't you think I remember what it is to be a man and not a haberman? To walk and feel my feet on the ground? To feel decent clean pain instead of watching my body every minute to see if I'm alive? How will I know if I'm dead? Did you ever think of that, Lûci? How will I know if I'm dead?"

She ignored the unreasonableness of his outburst. Pacifyingly, she said: "Sit down, darling. Let me make you some kind of a drink. You're over-wrought."

Automatically he scanned. "No, I'm not! Listen to me. How do you think it feels to be in the Up-and-Out with the crew tied-for-Space all around you? How do you think it feels to watch them sleep? How do you think I like scanning, scanning, scanning month after month, when I can feel the Pain-of-Space beating against every part of my body, trying to get past my Haberman blocks? How do you think I like to wake the men when I have to, and have them hate me for it? Have you ever seen habermans fight—strong men fighting, and neither knowing pain, fighting until one

touches *Overload*? Do you think about that, Lûci?" Triumphantly he added: "Can you blame me if I cranch, and come back to being a man, just two days a month?"

"I'm not blaming you, darling. Let's enjoy your cranch. Sit down now, and have a drink."

He was sitting down, resting his face in his hands, while she fixed the drink, using natural fruits out of bottles in addition to the secure alkaloids. He watched her restlessly and pitied her for marrying a Scanner; and then, though it was unjust, resented having to pity her.

Just as she turned to hand him the drink, they both jumped a little when the phone rang. It should not have rung. They had turned it off. It rang again, obviously on the emergency circuit. Stepping ahead of Lûci, Martel strode over to the phone and looked into it. Vomact was looking at him.

The custom of Scanners entitled him to be brusque, even with a Senior Scanner, on certain given occasions. This was one.

Before Vomact could speak, Martel spoke two words into the plate, not caring whether the old man could read lips or not:

"Cranching. Busy."

He cut the switch and went back to Lûci.

The phone rang again.

Lûci said, gently, "I can find out what it is, darling. Here, take your drink and sit down."

"Leave it alone," said her husband. "No one has a right to call when I'm cranching. He knows that. He ought to know that."

The phone rang again. In a fury, Martel rose and went to the plate. He cut it back on. Vomact was on the screen. Before Martel could speak, Vomact held up his Talking Nail in line with his Heartbox. Martel reverted to discipline:

"Scanner Martel present and waiting, sir."

The lips moved solemnly: "Top emergency."

"Sir, I am under the wire."

"Top emergency."

"Sir, don't you understand?" Martel mouthed his words, so he could be sure that Vomact followed. "I . . . am . . . under . . . the . . . wire. Unfit . . . for . . . Space!"

Vomact repeated: "Top emergency. Report to your central Tie-in."

"But, sir, no emergency like this—"

"Right, Martel. No emergency like this, ever before. Report to Tie-in." With a faint glint of kindness, Vomact added: "No need to de-cranch. Report as you are."

This time it was Martel whose phone was cut out. The screen went gray.

He turned to Lûci. The temper had gone out of his voice. She came to him. She kissed him, and rumbled his hair. All she could say was,

"I'm sorry."

She kissed him again, knowing his disappointment. "Take good care of yourself, darling. I'll wait."

He scanned, and slipped into his transparent aircoat. At the window he paused, and waved. She called, "Good luck!" As the air flowed past him he said to himself,

"This is the first time I've felt flight in—in eleven years. Lord, but it's easy to fly if you can feel yourself live!"

Central Tie-in glowed white and austere far ahead. Martel peered. He saw no glare of incoming ships from the Up-and-Out, no shuddering flare of Space-fire out of control. Everything was quiet, as it should be on an off-duty night.

And yet Vomact had called. He had called an emergency higher than Space. There was no such thing. But Vomact had called it.

## II

When Martel got there, he found about half the Scanners present, two dozen or so of them. He lifted the Talking Finger. Most of the Scanners were standing face to face, talking in pairs as they read lips. A few of the old, impatient ones were scribbling on their Tablets and then thrusting the Tablets into other people's faces. All the faces wore the dull dead relaxed look of a haberman. When Martel entered the room, he knew that most of the others laughed in the deep isolated privacy of their own minds, each thinking things it would be useless to express in formal words. It had been a long time since a Scanner showed up at a meeting crunched.

Vomact was not there: probably, thought Martel, he was still on the phone calling others. The light of the phone flashed on and off; the bell rang. Martel felt odd when he realized that of all those present, he was the only one to hear that loud bell. It made him realize why ordinary people did not like to be around groups of habermans or Scanners. Martel looked around for company.

His friend Chang was there, but was busy explaining to some old and testy Scanner that he did not know why Vomact had called. Martel looked further and saw Parizianski. He walked over, threading his way past the others with a dexterity that showed he could feel his feet from the inside, and did not have to watch them. Several of the others stared at him with their dead faces, and tried to smile. But they lacked full muscular control and their faces twisted into horrid masks. (Scanners knew better than to show expression on faces which they could no longer govern. Martel added to himself, *I swear I'll never smile unless I'm crunched.*)

Parizianski gave him the sign of the talking finger. Looking face to face, he spoke:

"You come here crunched?"

Parizianski could not hear his own voice, so the words roared like the words on a broken and screeching phone; Martel was startled, but knew that the inquiry was well meant. No one could be better-natured than the burly Pole.

"Vomact called. Top emergency."

"You told him you were crunched?"

"Yes."

"He still made you come?"

"Yes."

"Then all this—it is not for Space? You could not go Up-and-Out? You are like ordinary men."

"That's right."

"Then why did he call us?" Some pre-Haberman habit made Parizianski wave his arms in inquiry. The hand struck the back of the old man behind them. The slap could be heard throughout the room, but only Martel heard it. Instinctively, he scanned Parizianski and the old Scanner: they scanned him back. Only then did the old man ask why Martel had scanned him. When Martel explained that he was Under-the-Wire, the old man moved swiftly away to pass on the news that there was a crunched Scanner present at the Tie-in.

Even this minor sensation could not keep the attention of most of the Scanners from the worry about the Top Emergency. One young man, who had scanned his first transit just the year before, dramatically interposed himself between Parizianski and Martel. He dramatically flashed his Tablet at them:

*Is Vmct mad?*

The older men shook their heads. Martel, remembering that it had not been too long that the young man had been haberman, mitigated the dead solemnity of the denial with a friendly smile. He spoke in a normal voice, saying:

"Vomact is the Senior of Scanners. I am sure that he could not go mad. Would he not see it on his boxes first?"

Martel had to repeat the question, speaking slowly and mouthing his words, before the young Scanner could understand the comment. The young man tried to make his face smile, and twisted it into a comic mask. But he took up his Tablet and scribbled:

*Yr rght.*

Chang broke away from his friend and came over, his half-Chinese face gleaming in the warm evening. (It's strange, thought Martel, that more Chinese don't become Scanners. Or not so strange, perhaps, if you think that they never fill their quota of habermans. Chinese love good living too much. The ones who do scan are all good ones.) Chang saw that Martel was crunched, and spoke with voice:

"You break precedents. Lûci must be angry to lose you?"

"She took it well. Chang, that's strange."

"What?"

"I'm crunched, and I can hear. Your voice sounds all right. How did you learn to talk like—like an ordinary person?"

"I practiced with soundtracks. Funny you noticed it. I think I am the only Scanner in or between the Earths who can pass for an Ordinary Man. Mirrors and soundtracks. I found out how to act."

"But you don't . . . ?"

"No. I don't feel, or taste, or hear, or smell things, any more than you do. Talking doesn't do me much good. But I notice that it cheers up the people around me."

"It would make a difference in the life of Lûci."

Chang nodded sagely. "My father insisted on it. He said, 'You may be proud of being a Scanner. I am sorry you are not a Man. Conceal your defects.' So I tried. I wanted to tell the old boy about the Up-and-Out, and what we did there, but it did not matter. He said, 'Airplanes were good enough for Confucius, and they are for me too.' The old humbug! He tries so hard to be a Chinese when he can't even read Old Chinese. But he's got wonderful good sense, and for somebody going on two hundred he certainly gets around."

Martel smiled at the thought: "In his airplane?"

Chang smiled back. This discipline of his facial muscles was amazing; a bystander would not think that Chang was a haberman, controlling his eyes, cheeks, and lips by cold intellectual control. The expression had the spontaneity of life. Martel felt a flash of envy for Chang when he looked at the dead cold faces of Parizianski and the others. He knew that he himself looked fine: but why shouldn't he? He was crunched. Turning to Parizianski he said,

"Did you see what Chang said about his father? The old boy uses an airplane."

Parizianski made motions with his mouth, but the sounds meant nothing. He took up his Tablet and showed it to Martel and Chang:

*Bzz bzz. Ha ha. Gd ol' boy.*

At that moment, Martel heard steps out in the corridor. He could not help looking toward the door. Other eyes followed the direction of his glance.

Vomact came in.

The group shuffled to attention in four parallel lines. They scanned one another. Numerous hands reached across to adjust the electrochemical controls on Chestboxes which had begun to load up. One Scanner held out a broken finger which his counter-scanner had discovered, and submitted it for treatment and splinting.

Vomact had taken out his Staff of Office. The cube at the top flashed red light through the room, the lines reformed, and all Scanners gave the sign meaning, *Present and ready!*

Vomact countered with the stance signifying, *I am the Senior and take Command.*

Talking fingers rose in the counter-gesture, *We concur and commit ourselves.*

Vomact raised his right arm, dropped the wrist as though it were broken, in a queer searching gesture, meaning: *Any men around? Any habermans not tied? All clear for the Scanners?*

Alone of all those present, the crunched Martel heard the queer rustle of feet as they all turned completely around without leaving position, looking sharply at one another and flashing their beltlights into the dark corners of the great room. When again they faced Vomact, he made a further sign:

*All clear. Follow my words.*

Martel noticed that he alone relaxed. The others could not know the meaning of relaxation with the minds blocked off up there in their skulls, connected only with the eyes, and the rest of the body connected with the mind only by controlling non-sensory nerves and the instrument boxes on their chests. Martel realized that, crunched as he was, he expected to hear Vomact's voice: the Senior had been talking for some time. No sound escaped his lips. (Vomact never bothered with sound.)

"... and when the first men to go Up and Out went to the Moon, what did they find?"

"Nothing," responded the silent chorus of lips.

"Therefore they went further, to Mars and to Venus. The ships went out year by year, but they did not come back until the Year One of Space. Then did a ship come back with the First Effect. Scanners, I ask you, what is the First Effect?"

"No one knows. No one knows."

"No one will ever know. Too many are the variables. By what do we know the First Effect?"

"By the Great Pain of Space," came the chorus.

"And by what further sign?"

"By the need, oh the need for death."

Vomact again: "And who stopped the need for death?"

"Henry Haberman conquered the first effect, in the Year 3 of Space."

"And, Scanners, I ask you, what did he do?"

"He made the habermans."

"How, O Scanners, are habermans made?"

"They are made with the cuts. The brain is cut from the heart, the lungs. The brain is cut from the ears, the nose. The brain is cut from the mouth, the belly. The brain is cut from desire, and pain. The brain is cut from the world. Save for the eyes. Save for the control of the living flesh."

"And how, O Scanners, is flesh controlled?"

"By the boxes set in the flesh, the controls set in the chest, the signs made to rule the living body, the signs by which the body lives."

"How does a haberman live and live?"

"The haberman lives by control of the boxes."

"Whence come the habermans?"

Martel felt in the coming response a great roar of broken voices echoing through the room as the Scanners, habermans themselves, put sound behind their mouthings:

"Habermans are the scum of Mankind. Habermans are the weak, the cruel, the credulous, and the unfit. Habermans are the sentenced-to-more-than-death. Habermans live in the mind alone. They are killed for Space but they live for Space. They master the ships that connect the Earths. They live in the Great Pain while ordinary men sleep in the cold cold sleep of the transit."

"Brothers and Scanners, I ask you now: are we habermans or are we not?"

"We are habermans in the flesh. We are cut apart, brain and flesh. We are ready to go to the Up-and-Out. All of us have gone through the Haberman Device."

"We are habermans then?" Vomact's eyes flashed and glittered as he asked the ritual question.

Again the chorused answer was accompanied by a roar of voices heard only by Martel: "Habermans we are, and more, and more. We are the Chosen who are habermans by our own free will. We are the Agents of the Instrumentality of Mankind."

"What must the others say to us?"



"They must say to us, 'You are the bravest of the brave, the most skillful of the skilled. All Mankind owes most honor to the Scanner, who unites the Earths of Mankind. Scanners are the protectors of the habermans. They are the judges in the Up-and-Out. They make men live in the place where men need desperately to die. They are the most honored of mankind, and even the Chiefs of the Instrumentality are delighted to pay them homage!'"

Vomact stood more erect: "What is the secret duty of the Scanner?"

"To obey the Instrumentality only in accordance with Scanner Law."

"What is the second secret duty of the Scanner?"

"To keep secret our law, and to destroy the acquirers thereof."

"How to destroy?"

"Twice to the *Overload*, back and *Dead*."

"If habermans die, what the duty then?"

The Scanners all compressed their lips for answer. (Silence was the code.) Martel, who—long familiar with the Code—was a little bored with the proceedings, noticed that Chang was breathing too heavily; he reached over and adjusted Chang's Lung-control and received the thanks of Chang's eyes. Vomact observed the interruption and glared at them both. Martel relaxed, trying to imitate the dead cold stillness of the others. It was so hard to do, when you were crunched.

"If others die, what the duty then?" asked Vomact.

"Scanners together inform the Instrumentality. Scanners together accept the punishment. Scanners together settle the case."

"And if the punishment be severe?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if Scanners not be honored?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if a Scanner goes unpaid?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if the Others and the Instrumentality are not in all ways at all times mindful of their proper obligation to the Scanners?"

"Then no ships go."

"And what, O Scanners, if no ships go?"

"The Earths fall apart. The Wild comes back in. The Old Machines and the Beasts return."

"What is the known duty of a Scanner?"

"Not to sleep in the Up-and-Out."

"What is the second duty of a Scanner?"

"To keep forgotten the name of fear."

"What is the third duty of a Scanner?"

"To use the wire of Eustace Cranch only with care, only with moderation." Several pair of eyes looked quickly at Martel before the mouthed chorus went on. "To cranch only at home, only among friends, only for the purpose of remembering, of relaxing, or of begetting."

"What is the word of the Scanner?"

"Faithful though surrounded by death."

"What is the motto of the Scanner?"

"Awake though surrounded by silence."

"What is the work of the Scanner?"

"Labor even in the heights of the Up-and-Out, loyalty even in the depths of the Earths."

"How do you know a Scanner?"

"We know ourselves. We are dead though we live. And we Talk with the Tablet and the Nail."

"What is this Code?"

"This code is the friendly ancient wisdom of Scanners, briefly put that we may be mindful and be cheered by our loyalty to one another."

At this point the formula should have run: "We complete the Code. Is there work or word for the Scanners?" But Vomact said, and he repeated:

"Top Emergency. Top Emergency."

They gave him the sign, *Present and ready!*

He said, with every eye straining to follow his lips:

"Some of you know the work of Adam Stone?"

Martel saw lips move, saying: "The Red Asteroid. The Other who lives at the edge of Space."

"Adam Stone has gone to the Instrumentality, claiming success for his work. He says that he has found how to Screen Out the Pain of Space. He says that the Up-and-Out can be made safe for ordinary men to work in, to stay awake in. He says that there need be no more Scanners."

Beltlights flashed on all over the room as Scanners sought the right to speak. Vomact nodded to one of the older men. "Scanner Smith will speak."

Smith stepped slowly up into the light, watching his own feet. He turned so that they could see his face. He spoke: "I say that this is a lie. I say that Stone is a liar. I say that the Instrumentality must not be deceived."

He paused. Then, in answer to some question from the audience which most of the others did not see, he said:

"I invoke the secret duty of the Scanners."

Smith raised his right hand for Emergency Attention:

"I say that Stone must die."

### III

Martel, still crunched, shuddered as he heard the boos, groans, shouts, squeaks, grunts, and moans which came from the Scanners who forgot noise in their excitement and strove to make their dead bodies talk to one another's deaf ears. Beltlights flashed wildly all over the room. There was a rush for the rostrum and Scanners milled around at the top, vying for attention until Parizianski—by sheer bulk—shoved the others aside and down, and turned to mouth at the group.

"Brother Scanners, I want your eyes."

The people on the floor kept moving, with their numb bodies jostling one another. Finally Vomact stepped up in front of Parizianski, faced the others, and said:

"Scanners, be Scanners! Give him your eyes."

Parizianski was not good at public speaking. His lips moved too fast. He waved his hands, which took the eyes of the others away from his lips. Nevertheless, Martel was able to follow most of the message:

"... can't do this. Stone may have succeeded. If he has succeeded, it means the end of Scanners. It means the end of habermans, too. None of us will have to fight in the Up-and-Out. We won't have anybody else going Under-the-Wire for a few hours or days of being human. Everybody will be Other. Nobody will have to crunch, never again. Men can be men. The habermans can be killed decently and properly, the way men were killed in the Old Days, without anybody keeping them alive. They won't have to work in the Up-and-Out! There will be no more Great Pain—think of it! No ... more ... Great ... Pain! How do we know that Stone is a liar—" Lights began flashing directly into his eyes. (The rudest insult of Scanner to Scanner was this.)

Vomact again exercised authority. He stepped in front of Parizianski and said something which the others could not see. Parizianski stepped down from the rostrum. Vomact again spoke:

"I think that some of the Scanners disagree with our Brother Parizianski. I say that the use of the rostrum be suspended till we have had a chance for private discussion. In fifteen minutes I will call the meeting back to order."

Martel looked around for Vomact when the Senior had rejoined the group on the floor. Finding the Senior, Martel wrote swift script on his Tablet, waiting for a chance to thrust the tablet before the senior's eyes. He had written:

*Am crnchd. Rspctfly request prmissn lv now, stnd by fr orders.*

Being crunched did strange things to Martel. Most meetings that he attended seemed formal, hearteningly ceremonial, lighting up the dark inward eternities of habermanhood. When he was not crunched, he noticed his body no more than a marble bust notices its marble pedestal. He had stood with them before. He had stood with them effortless hours, while the long-winded ritual broke through the terrible loneliness behind his eyes, and made him feel that the Scanners, though a confraternity of the damned, were none the less forever honored by the professional requirements of their mutilation.

This time, it was different. Coming crunched, and in full possession of smell-sound-taste-feeling, he reacted more or less as a normal man would. He saw his friends and colleagues as a lot of cruelly driven ghosts, posturing out the meaningless ritual of their indefeasible damnation. What difference did anything make, once you were a haberman? Why all this talk about habermans and Scanners? Habermans were criminals or heretics, and Scanners were gentlemen-volunteers, but they were all in the same fix—except that Scanners were deemed worthy of the short-time return of the Cranching Wire, while habermans were simply disconnected while the ships lay in port and were left suspended until they should be awakened, in some hour of emergency or trouble, to work out another spell of their damnation. It was a rare haberman that you saw on the street—someone of special merit or bravery, allowed to look at mankind from the terrible prison of his own mechanified body. And yet, what Scanner ever pitied a haberman? What Scanner ever honored a haberman except perfunctorily in the line of duty? What had the Scanners, as a guild and a class, ever done for the habermans, except to murder them with a twist of the wrist whenever a haberman, too long beside a Scanner, picked up the tricks of the Scanning trade and learned how to live at his own will, not the will the Scanners imposed? What could the Others, the ordinary men, know of what went on inside the ships? The Others slept in their cylinders, mercifully unconscious until they woke up on whatever other Earth they had consigned themselves to. What could the Others know of the men who had to stay alive within the ship?

What could any Other know of the Up-and-Out? What Other could look at the biting acid beauty of the stars in open Space? What could they tell of the Great Pain, which started quietly in the marrow, like an ache, and proceeded by the fatigue and nausea of each separate nerve cell, brain cell, touchpoint in the body, until life itself became a terrible aching hunger for silence and for death?

He was a Scanner. All right, he *was* a Scanner. He had been a Scanner from the moment when, wholly normal, he had stood in the sunlight before a Subchief of the Instrumentality, and had sworn:

"I pledge my honor and my life to Mankind. I sacrifice myself willingly for the welfare of Mankind. In accepting the perilous austere Honor, I yield all my rights without exception to the Honorable Chiefs of the Instrumentality and to the Honored Confraternity of Scanners."

He had pledged.

He had gone into the Haberman Device.

He remembered his Hell. He had not had such a bad one, even though it had seemed to last a hundred-million years, all of them without sleep. He had learned to feel with his eyes. He had learned to see despite the heavy eyeplates set back of his eyeballs to insulate his eyes from the rest of him. He had learned to watch his skin. He still remembered the time he had noticed dampness on his shirt, and had pulled out his scanning mirror only to discover that he had worn a hole in his side by leaning against a vibrating machine. (A thing like that could not happen to him now; he was too adept at reading his own instruments.) He remembered the way that he had gone Up-and-Out, and the way that the Great Pain beat into him, despite the fact that his touch, smell, feeling, and hearing were gone for all ordinary purposes. He remembered killing habermans, and keeping others alive,

and standing for months beside the Honorable Scanner-Pilot while neither of them slept. He remembered going ashore on Earth Four, and remembered that he had not enjoyed it, and had realized on that day that there was no reward.

Martel stood among the other Scanners. He hated their awkwardness when they moved, their immobility when they stood still. He hated the queer assortment of smells which their bodies yielded unnoticed. He hated the grunts and groans and squawks which they emitted from their deafness. He hated them, and himself.

How could Lûci stand him? He had kept his chestbox reading *Danger* for weeks while he courted her, carrying the Cranching Wire about with him most illegally, and going direct from one cranch to the other without worrying about the fact that his indicators all crept to the edge of *Overload*. He had wooed her without thinking of what would happen if she did say, "Yes." She had.

"And they lived happily ever after." In Old Books they did, but how could they, in life? He had had eighteen days under-the-wire in the whole of the past year! Yet she had loved him. She still loved him. He knew it. She fretted about him through the long months that he was in the Up-and-Out. She tried to make home mean something to him even when he was haberman, make food pretty when it could not be tasted, make herself lovable when she could not be kissed—or might as well not, since a haberman body meant no more than furniture. Lûci was patient.

And now, Adam Stone! (He let his Tablet fade: how could he leave, now?)

God bless Adam Stone!

Martel could not help feeling a little sorry for himself. No longer would the high keen call of duty carry him through two hundred or so years of the Others' time, two million private eternities of his own. He could slouch and relax. He could forget High Space, and let the Up-and-Out be tended by Others. He could cranch as much as he dared. He could be almost normal—almost—for one year or five years or no years. But at least he could stay with Lûci. He could go with her into the Wild, where there were Beasts and Old Machines still roving the dark places. Perhaps he would die in the excitement of the hunt, throwing spears at an ancient steel Manshonjagger as it leapt from its lair, or tossing hot spheres at the tribesmen of the Unforgiven who still roamed the Wild. There was still life to live, still a good normal death to die, not the moving of a needle out in the silence and pain of Space!

He had been walking about restlessly. His ears were attuned to the sounds of normal speech, so that he did not feel like watching the mouthings of his brethren. Now they seemed to have come to a decision. Vomact was moving to the rostrum. Martel looked about for Chang, and went to stand beside him. Chang whispered,

"You're as restless as water in mid-air! What's the matter? Decranching?"

They both scanned Martel, but the instruments held steady and showed no sign of the cranch giving out.

The great light flared in its call to attention. Again they formed ranks. Vomact thrust his lean old face into the glare, and spoke:

"Scanners and Brothers, I call for a vote." He held himself in the stance which meant: *I am the Senior and take Command*.

A beltlight flashed in protest.

It was old Henderson. He moved to the rostrum, spoke to Vomact, and—with Vomact's nod of approval—turned full-face to repeat his question:

"Who speaks for the Scanners Out in Space?"

No beltlight or hand answered.

Henderson and Vomact, face to face, conferred for a few moments. Then Henderson faced them again:

"I yield to the Senior in Command. But I do not yield to a Meeting of the Confraternity. There are sixty-eight Scanners, and only forty-seven present, of whom one is crunched and U.D. I have

therefore proposed that the Senior in Command assume authority only over an Emergency Committee of the Confraternity, not over a Meeting. Is that agreed and understood by the Honorable Scanners?"

Hands rose in assent.

Chang murmured in Martel's ear, "Lot of difference that makes! Who can tell the difference between a Meeting and a Committee?" Martel agreed with the words, but was even more impressed with the way that Chang, while haberman, could control his own voice.

Vomact resumed chairmanship: "We now vote on the question of Adam Stone.

"First, we can assume that he has not succeeded, and that his claims are lies. We know that from our practical experience as Scanners. The Pain of Space is only part of scanning," (*But the essential part, the basis of it all*, thought Martel.) "and we can rest assured that Stone cannot solve the problem of Space Discipline."

"That tripe again," whispered Chang, unheard save by Martel.

"The Space Discipline of our Confraternity has kept High Space clean of war and dispute. Sixty-eight disciplined men control all High Space. We are removed by our oath and our haberman status from all Earthly passions.

"Therefore, if Adam Stone has conquered the Pain of Space, so that Others can wreck our confraternity and bring to Space the trouble and ruin which afflicts Earths, I say that Adam Stone is wrong. If Adam Stone succeeds, Scanners live in vain!

"Secondly, if Adam Stone has not conquered the Pain of Space, he will cause great trouble in all the Earths. The Instrumentality and the Subchiefs may not give us as many habermans as we need to operate the ships of Mankind. There will be wild stories, and fewer recruits, and, worst of all, the discipline of the Confraternity may relax if this kind of nonsensical heresy is spread around.

"Therefore, if Adam Stone has succeeded, he threatens the ruin of the Confraternity and should die.

"Therefore, if Adam Stone has not succeeded, he is a liar and a heretic, and should die."

"I move the death of Adam Stone."

And Vomact made the sign, *The Honorable Scanners are pleased to vote.*

## IV

Martel grabbed wildly for his beltlight. Chang, guessing ahead, had his light out and ready; its bright beam, voting *No*, shone straight up at the ceiling. Martel got his light out and threw its beam upward in dissent. Then he looked around. Out of the forty-seven present, he could see only five or six glittering.

Two more lights went on. Vomact stood as erect as a frozen corpse. Vomact's eyes flashed as he stared back and forth over the group, looking for lights. Several more went on. Finally Vomact took the closing stance: *May it please the Scanners to count the vote.*

Three of the older men went up on the rostrum with Vomact. They looked over the room. (Martel thought: *These damned ghosts are voting on the life of a real man, a live man! They have no right to do it. I'll tell the Instrumentality!* But he knew that he would not. He thought of Lûci and what she might gain by the triumph of Adam Stone: the heart-breaking folly of the vote was then almost too much for Martel to bear.)

All three of the tellers held up their hands in unanimous agreement on the sign of the number: *Fifteen against.*

Vomact dismissed them with a bow of courtesy. He turned and again took the stance: *I am the Senior and take Command.*

Marveling at his own daring, Martel flashed his beltlight on. He knew that any one of the bystanders might reach over and twist his Heartbox to *Overload* for such an act. He felt Chang's hand reaching to catch him by the aircoat. But he eluded Chang's grasp and ran, faster than a

Scanner should, to the platform. As he ran, he wondered what appeal to make. He wouldn't get time to say much, and wouldn't be seen by all of them. It was no use talking common sense. Not now. It had to be law.

He jumped up on the rostrum beside Vomact, and took the stance: *Scanners, an Illegality!*

He violated good custom while speaking, still in the stance: "A Committee has no right to vote death by a majority vote. It takes two-thirds of a full Meeting."

He felt Vomact's body lunge behind him, felt himself falling from the rostrum, hitting the floor, hurting his knees and his touch-aware hands. He was helped to his feet. He was scanned. Some Scanner he scarcely knew took his instruments and toned him down.

Immediately Martel felt more calm, more detached, and hated himself for feeling so.

He looked up at the rostrum. Vomact maintained the stance signifying: *Order!*

The Scanners adjusted their ranks. The two Scanners next to Martel took his arms. He shouted at them, but they looked away, and cut themselves off from communication altogether.

Vomact spoke again when he saw the room was quiet: "A Scanner came here crunched. Honorable Scanners, I apologize for this. It is not the fault of our great and worthy Scanner and friend, Martel. He came here under orders. I told him not to de-crunch. I hoped to spare him an unnecessary haberman. We all know how happily Martel is married, and we wish his brave experiment well. I like Martel. I respect his judgment. I wanted him here. I knew you wanted him here. But he is crunched. He is in no mood to share in the lofty business of the Scanners. I therefore propose a solution which will meet all the requirements of fairness. I propose that we rule Scanner Martel out of order for his violation of rules. This violation would be inexcusable if Martel were not crunched.

"But at the same time, in all fairness to Martel, I further propose that we deal with the points raised so improperly by our worthy but disqualified brother."

Vomact gave the sign, *The Honorable Scanners are pleased to vote*. Martel tried to reach his own beltlight; the dead strong hands held him tightly and he struggled in vain. One lone light shone high: Chang's, no doubt.

Vomact thrust his face into the light again: "Having the approval of our worthy Scanners and present company for the general proposal, I now move that this Committee declare itself to have the full authority of a Meeting, and that this Committee further make me responsible for all misdeeds which this Committee may enact, to be held answerable before the next full Meeting, but not before any other authority beyond the closed and secret ranks of Scanners."

Flamboyantly this time, his triumph evident, Vomact assumed the *vote* stance.

Only a few lights shone: far less, patently, than a minority of one-fourth.

Vomact spoke again. The light shone on his high calm forehead, on his dead relaxed cheekbones. His lean cheeks and chin were half-shadowed, save where the lower light picked up and spotlighted his mouth, cruel even in repose. (Vomact was said to be a descendant of some Ancient Lady who had traversed, in an illegitimate and inexplicable fashion, some hundreds of years of time in a single night. Her name, the Lady Vomact, had passed into legend; but her blood and her archaic lust for mastery lived on in the mute masterful body of her descendant. Martel could believe the old tales as he stared at the rostrum, wondering what untraceable mutation had left the Vomact kith as predators among mankind.) Calling loudly with the movement of his lips, but still without sound, Vomact appealed:

"The Honorable Committee is now pleased to reaffirm the sentence of death issued against the heretic and enemy, Adam Stone." Again the *vote* stance.

Again Chang's light shone lonely in its isolated protest.

Vomact then made his final move:

"I call for the designation of the Senior Scanner present as the manager of the sentence. I call for authorization to him to appoint executioners, one or many, who shall make evident the will and majesty of Scanners. I ask that I be accountable for the deed, and not for the means. The deed is a

noble deed, for the protection of Mankind and for the honor of the Scanners; but of the means it must be said that they are to be the best at hand, and no more. Who knows the true way to kill an Other, here on a crowded and watchful Earth? This is no mere matter of discharging a cyllindere sleeper, no mere question of upgrading the needle of a haberman. When people die down here, it is not like the Up-and-Out. They die reluctantly. Killing within the Earth is not our usual business, O Brothers and Scanners, as you know well. You must choose me to choose my agent as I see fit. Otherwise the common knowledge will become the common betrayal whereas if I alone know the responsibility, I alone could betray us, and you will not have far to look in case the Instrumentality comes searching." (*What about the killer you choose?* thought Martel. *He too will know unless—unless you silence him forever.*)

Vomact went into the stance: *The Honorable Scanners are pleased to vote.*

One light of protest shone; Chang's, again.

Martel imagined that he could see a cruel joyful smile on Vomact's dead face—the smile of a man who knew himself righteous and who found his righteousness upheld and affirmed by militant authority.

Martel tried one last time to come free.

The dead hands held. They were locked like vises until their owners' eyes unlocked them: how else could they hold the piloting month by month?

Martel then shouted: "Honorable Scanners, this is judicial murder."

No ear heard him. He was crunched, and alone.

Nonetheless, he shouted again: "You endanger the Confraternity."

Nothing happened.

The echo of his voice sounded from one end of the room to the other. No head turned. No eyes met his.

Martel realized that as they paired for talk, the eyes of the Scanners avoided him. He saw that no one desired to watch his speech. He knew that behind the cold faces of his friends there lay compassion or amusement. He knew that they knew him to be crunched—absurd, normal, man-like, temporarily no Scanner. But he knew that in this matter the wisdom of Scanners was nothing. He knew that only a crunched Scanner could feel with his very blood the outrage and anger which deliberate murder would provoke among the Others. He knew that the Confraternity endangered itself, and knew that the most ancient prerogative of law was the monopoly of death. Even the Ancient Nations, in the times of the Wars, before the Wild Machines, before the Beasts, before men went into the Up-and-Out—even the Ancients had known this. How did they say it? *Only the State shall kill*. The States were gone but the Instrumentality remained, and the Instrumentality could not pardon things which occurred within the Earths but beyond its authority. Death in Space was the business, the right of the Scanners: how could the Instrumentality enforce its law in a place where all men who wakened, wakened only to die in the Great Pain? Wisely did the Instrumentality leave Space to the Scanners, wisely had the Confraternity not meddled inside the Earths. And now the Confraternity itself was going to step forth as an outlaw band, as a gang of rogues as stupid and reckless as the tribes of the Unforgiven!

Martel knew this because he was crunched. Had he been haberman, he would have thought only with his mind, not with his heart and guts and blood. How could the other Scanners know?

Vomact returned for the last time to the Rostrum: *The Committee has met and its will shall be done*. Verbally he added: "Senior among you, I ask your loyalty and your silence."

At that point, the two Scanners let his arms go. Martel rubbed his numb hands, shaking his fingers to get the circulation back into the cold fingertips. With real freedom, he began to think of what he might still do. He scanned himself: the crunching held. He might have an hour, he might have a day. Well, he could go on even if haberman, but it would be inconvenient, having to talk with Finger and Tablet. He looked about for Chang. He saw his friend standing patient and immobile in a quiet corner. Martel moved slowly, so as not to attract any more attention to himself than could be helped. He faced Chang, moved until his face was in the light, and then articulated:

"What are we going to do? You're not going to let them kill Adam Stone, are you? Don't you realize what Stone's work will mean to us, if it succeeds? No more scanning. No more Scanners. No more habermans. No more Pain in the Up-and-Out. I tell you, if the others were all crunched, as I am, they would see it in a human way, not with the narrow crazy logic which they used in the meeting. We've got to stop them. How can we do it? What are we going to do? What does Parizianski think? Who has been chosen?"

"Which question do you want me to answer?"

Martel laughed. (It felt good to laugh, even then; it felt like being a man.) "Will you help me?"

Chang's eyes flashed across Martel's face as Chang answered: "No. No. No."

"You won't help?"

"No."

"Why not, Chang? Why not?"

"I am a Scanner. The vote has been taken. You would do the same if you were not in this unusual condition."

"I'm not in an unusual condition. I'm crunched. That merely means that I see things the way that the Others would. I see the stupidity. The recklessness. The selfishness. It is murder."

"What is murder? Have you not killed? You are not one of the Others. You are a Scanner. You will be sorry for what you are about to do, if you do not watch out."

"But why did you vote against Vomact then? Didn't you too see what Adam Stone means to all of us? Scanners will live in vain. Thank God for that! Can't you see it?"

"No."

"But you talk to me, Chang. You are my friend?"

"I talk to you. I am your friend. Why not?"

"But what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, Martel. Nothing."

"Will you help me?"

"No."

"Not even to save Stone?"

"Then I will go to Parizianski for help."

"It will do no good."

"Why not? He's more human than you, right now."

"He will not help you, because he has the job. Vomact designated him to kill Adam Stone."

Martel stopped speaking in mid-movement. He suddenly took the stance: *I thank you, Brother, and I depart.*

At the window he turned and faced the room. He saw that Vomact's eyes were upon him. He gave the stance, *I thank you, Brother, and I depart*, and added the flourish of respect which is shown when Seniors are present. Vomact caught the sign, and Martel could see the cruel lips move. He thought he saw the words "... take good care of yourself ..." but did not wait to inquire. He stepped backward and dropped out the window.

Once below the window and out of sight, he adjusted his aircoat to maximum speed. He swam lazily in the air, scanning himself thoroughly, and adjusting his adrenal intake down. He then made the movement of release, and felt the cold air rush past his face like running water.

Adam Stone had to be at Chief Downport.

Adam Stone had to be there.

Wouldn't Adam Stone be surprised in the night? Surprised to meet the strangest of beings, the first renegade among Scanners. (Martel suddenly appreciated that it was himself of whom he was thinking. Martel the Traitor to Scanners! That sounded strange and bad. But what of Martel, the Loyal to Mankind? Was that not compensation? And if he won, he won Lûci. If he lost, he lost



nothing—an unconsidered and expendable haberman. It happened to be himself. But in contrast to the immense reward, to Mankind, to the Confraternity, to Lûci, what did that matter?)

Martel thought to himself: "Adam Stone will have two visitors tonight. Two Scanners, who are the friends of one another." He hoped that Parizianski was still his friend.

"And the world," he added, "depends on which of us gets there first."

Multifaceted in their brightness, the lights of Chief Downport began to shine through the mist ahead. Martel could see the outer towers of the city and glimpsed the phosphorescent periphery which kept back the Wild, whether Beasts, Machines, or the Unforgiven.

Once more Martel invoked the lords of his chance: "Help me to pass for an Other!"

## V

Within the Downport, Martel had less trouble than he thought. He draped his aircoat over his shoulder so that it concealed the instruments. He took up his scanning mirror, and made up his face from the inside, by adding tone and animation to his blood and nerves until the muscles of his face glowed and the skin gave out a healthy sweat. That way he looked like an ordinary man who had just completed a long night flight.

After straightening out his clothing, and hiding his Tablet within his jacket, he faced the problem of what to do about the Talking Finger. If he kept the nail, it would show him to be a Scanner. He would be respected, but he would be identified. He might be stopped by the guards whom the Instrumentality had undoubtedly set around the person of Adam Stone. If he broke the nail—but he couldn't! No Scanner in the history of the Confraternity had ever willingly broken his nail. That would be Resignation, and there was no such thing. The only way *out*, was in the Up-and-Out! Martel put his finger to his mouth and bit off the nail. He looked at the now-queer finger, and sighed to himself.

He stepped toward the city gate, slipping his hand into his jacket and running up his muscular strength to four times normal. He started to scan, and then realized that his instruments were masked. *Might as well take all the chances at once*, he thought.

The watcher stopped him with a searching Wire. The sphere thumped suddenly against Martel's chest.

"Are you a Man?" said the unseen voice. (Martel knew that as a Scanner in haberman condition, his own field-charge would have illuminated the sphere.)

"I am a Man." Martel knew that the timbre of his voice had been good; he hoped that it would not be taken for that of a Manshonjagger or a Beast or an Unforgiven one, who with mimicry sought to enter the cities and ports of Mankind.

"Name, number, rank, purpose, function, time departed."

"Martel." He had to remember his old number, not Scanner 34. "Sunward 4234, 182nd Year of Space. Rank, rising Subchief." That was no lie, but his substantive rank. "Purpose, personal and lawful within the limits of this city. No function of the Instrumentality. Departed Chief Outport 2019 hours." Everything now depended on whether he was believed, or would be checked against Chief Outport.

The voice was flat and routine: "Time desired within the city."

Martel used the standard phrase: "Your Honorable sufferance is requested."

He stood in the cool night air, waiting. Far above him, through a gap in the mist, he could see the poisonous glittering in the sky of Scanners. *The stars are my enemies*, he thought: *I have mastered the stars but they hate me. Ho, that sounds Ancient! Like a Book. Too much cranching.*

The voice returned: "Sunward 4234 dash 182 rising Subchief Martel, enter the lawful gates of the city. Welcome. Do you desire food, raiment, money, or companionship?" The voice had no hospitality in it, just business. This was certainly different from entering a city in a Scanner's role! Then the petty officers came out, and threw their beltlights on their fretful faces, and mouthed their

words with preposterous deference, shouting against the stone deafness of a Scanner's ears. So that was the way that a Subchief was treated: matter of fact, but not bad. Not bad.

Martel replied: "I have that which I need, but beg of the city a favor. My friend Adam Stone is here. I desire to see him, on urgent and personal lawful affairs."

The voice replied: "Did you have an appointment with Adam Stone?"

"No."

"The city will find him. What is his number?"

"I have forgotten it."

"You have forgotten it? Is not Adam Stone a Magnate of the Instrumentality? Are you truly his friend?"

"Truly." Martel let a little annoyance creep into his voice. "Watcher, doubt me and call your Subchief."

"No doubt implied. Why do you not know the number? This must go into the record," added the voice.

"We were friends in childhood. He has crossed the—"Martel started to say "the Up-and-Out" and remembered that the phrase was current only among Scanners. "He has leapt from Earth to Earth, and has just now returned. I knew him well and I seek him out. I have word of his kith. May the Instrumentality protect us!"

"Heard and believed. Adam Stone will be searched."

At a risk, though a slight one, of having the sphere sound an alarm for *non-Man*, Martel cut in on his Scanner speaker within his jacket. He saw the trembling needle of light await his words and he started to write on it with his blunt finger. *That won't work*, he thought, and had a moment's panic until he found his comb, which had a sharp enough tooth to write. He wrote: "Emergency none. Martel Scanner calling Parizianski Scanner."

The needle quivered and the reply glowed and faded out: "Parizianski Scanner on duty and D.C. Calls taken by Scanner Relay."

Martel cut off his speaker.

Parizianski was somewhere around. Could he have crossed the direct way, right over the city wall, setting off the alert, and invoking official business when the petty officers overtook him in mid-air? Scarcely. That meant that a number of other Scanners must have come in with Parizianski, all of them pretending to be in search of a few of the tenuous pleasures which could be enjoyed by a haberman, such as the sight of the newspictures or the viewing of beautiful women in the Pleasure Gallery. Parizianski was around, but he could not have moved privately, because Scanner Central registered him on duty and recorded his movements city by city.

The voice returned. Puzzlement was expressed in it. "Adam Stone is found and awakened. He has asked pardon of the Honorable, and says he knows no Martel. Will you see Adam Stone in the morning? The city will bid you welcome."

Martel ran out of resources. It was hard enough mimicking a man without having to tell lies in the guise of one. Martel could only repeat: "Tell him I am Martel. The husband of Lûci."

"It will be done."

Again the silence, and the hostile stars, and the sense that Parizianski was somewhere near and getting nearer; Martel felt his heart beating faster. He stole a glimpse at his chestbox and set his heart down a point. He felt calmer, even though he had not been able to scan with care.

The voice this time was cheerful, as though an annoyance had been settled: "Adam Stone consents to see you. Enter Chief Downport, and welcome."

The little sphere dropped noiselessly to the ground and the wire whispered away into the darkness. A bright arc of narrow light rose from the ground in front of Martel and swept through the city to one of the higher towers—apparently a hostel, which Martel had never entered. Martel plucked his aircoat to his chest for ballast, stepped heel-and-toe on the beam, and felt himself

whistle through the air to an entrance window which sprang up before him as suddenly as a devouring mouth.

A tower guard stood in the doorway. "You are awaited, sir. Do you bear weapons, sir?"

"None," said Martel, grateful that he was relying on his own strength.

The guard led him past the check-screen. Martel noticed the quick flight of a warning across the screen as his instruments registered and identified him as a Scanner. But the guard had not noticed it.

The guard stopped at a door. "Adam Stone is armed. He is lawfully armed by authority of the Instrumentality and by the liberty of this city. All those who enter are given warning."

Martel nodded in understanding at the man, and went in.

Adam Stone was a short man, stout and benign. His gray hair rose stiffly from a low forehead. His whole face was red and merry-looking. He looked like a jolly guide from the Pleasure Gallery, not like a man who had been at the edge of the Up-and-Out, fighting the Great Pain without haberman protection.

He stared at Martel. His look was puzzled, perhaps a little annoyed, but not hostile.

Martel came to the point. "You do not know me. I lied. My name is Martel, and I mean you no harm. But I lied. I beg the Honorable gift of your hospitality. Remain armed. Direct your weapon against me—"

Stone smiled: "I am doing so," and Martel noticed the small Wirepoint in Stone's capable, plump hand.

"Good. Keep on guard against me. It will give you confidence in what I shall say. But do, I beg you, give us a screen of privacy. I want no casual lookers. This is a matter of life and death."

"First: whose life and death?" Stone's face remained calm, his voice even.

"Yours and mine, and the worlds'."

"You are cryptic but I agree." Stone called through the doorway: "Privacy, please." There was a sudden hum, and all the little noises of the night quickly vanished from the air of the room.

Said Adam Stone: "Sir, who are you? What brings you here?"

"I am Scanner Thirty-four."

"You a Scanner? I don't believe it."

For answer, Martel pulled his jacket open, showing his chestbox. Stone looked up at him, amazed. Martel explained:

"I am crunched. Have you never seen it before?"

"*Not with men.* On animals. Amazing! But—what do you want?"

"The truth. Do you fear me?"

"Not with this," said Stone, grasping the Wirepoint. "But I shall tell you the truth."

"Is it true that you have conquered the Great Pain?"

Stone hesitated, seeking words for an answer.

"Quick, can you tell me how you have done it, so that I may believe you?"

"I have loaded ships with life."

"Life?"

"Life. I don't know what the Great Pain is, but I did find that in the experiments, when I sent out masses of animals or plants, the life in the center of the mass lived longest. I built ships—small ones, of course—and sent them out with rabbits, with monkeys—"

"Those are Beasts?"

"Yes. With small Beasts. And the Beasts came back unhurt. They came back because the walls of the ships were filled with life. I tried many kinds, and finally found a sort of life which lives in the waters. Oysters. Oysterbeds. The outermost oysters died in the great pain. The inner ones lived. The passengers were unhurt."

"But they were Beasts?"

"Not only Beasts. Myself."

"You!"

"I came through Space alone. Through what you call the Up-and-Out, alone. Awake and sleeping. I am unhurt. If you do not believe me, ask your brother Scanners. Come and see my ship in the morning. I will be glad to see you then, along with your brother Scanners. I am going to demonstrate before the Chiefs of the Instrumentality."

Martel repeated his question: "You came here alone?"

Adam Stone grew testy: "Yes, alone. Go back and check your Scanners' register if you do not believe me. You never put me in a bottle to cross Space."

Martel's face was radiant. "I believe you now. It is true. No more Scanners. No more habermans. No more cranching."

Stone looked significantly toward the door.

Martel did not take the hint. "I must tell you that—"

"Sir, tell me in the morning. Go enjoy your cranch. Isn't it supposed to be pleasure? Medically I know it well. But not in practice."

"It is pleasure. It's normality—for a while. But listen. The Scanners have sworn to destroy you, and your work."

"What!"

"They have met and have voted and sworn. You will make Scanners unnecessary, they say. You will bring the Ancient Wars back to the world, if Scanning is lost and the Scanners live in vain!"

Adam Stone was nervous but kept his wits about him: "You're a Scanner. Are you going to kill me—or try?"

"No, you fool. I have betrayed the Confraternity. Call guards the moment I escape. Keep guards around you. I will try to intercept the killer."

Martel saw a blur in the window. Before Stone could turn, the Wirepoint was whipped out of his hand. The blur solidified and took form as Parizianski.

Martel recognized what Parizianski was doing: *High speed*.

Without thinking of his cranch, he thrust his hand to his chest, set himself up to *High speed* too. Waves of fire, like the Great Pain, but hotter, flooded over him. He fought to keep his face readable as he stepped in front of Parizianski and gave the sign,

*Top Emergency*.

Parizianski spoke, while the normally moving body of Stone stepped away from them as slowly as a drifting cloud: "Get out of my way. I am on a mission."

"I know it. I stop you here and now. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stone is right."

Parizianski's lips were barely readable in the haze of pain which flooded Martel. (He thought: *God, God, God of the Ancients! Let me hold on! Let me live under Overload just long enough!*) Parizianski was saying: "Get out of my way. By order of the Confraternity, get out of my way!" And Parizianski gave the sign, *Help I demand in the name of my Duty!*

Martel choked for breath in the syrup-like air. He tried one last time: "Parizianski, friend, friend, my friend. Stop. Stop." (No Scanner had ever murdered Scanner before.)

Parizianski made the sign: *You are unfit for duty, and I will take over*.

Martel thought, *For the first time in the world!* as he reached over and twisted Parizianski's Brainbox up to *Overload*. Parizianski's eyes glittered in terror and understanding. His body began to drift down toward the floor.

Martel had just strength enough to reach his own Chestbox. As he faded into Haberman or death, he knew not which, he felt his fingers turning on the control of speed, turning down. He tried to speak, to say, "Get a Scanner, I need help, get a Scanner . . ."

But the darkness rose about him, and the numb silence clasped him.

Martel awakened to see the face of Lûci near his own.

He opened his eyes wider, and found that he was hearing—hearing the sound of her happy weeping, the sound of her chest as she caught the air back into her throat.

He spoke weakly: "Still crunched? Alive?"

Another face swam into the blur beside Lûci's. It was Adam Stone. His deep voice rang across immensities of Space before coming to Martel's hearing. Martel tried to read Stone's lips, but could not make them out. He went back to listening to the voice:

". . . not crunched. Do you understand me? Not crunched!"

Martel tried to say: "But I can hear! I can feel!" The others got his sense if not his words.

Adam Stone spoke again:

"You have gone back through the Haberman. I put you back first. I didn't know how it would work in practice, but I had the theory all worked out. You don't think the Instrumentality would waste the Scanners, do you? You go back to normality. We are letting the habermans die as fast as the ships come in. They don't need to live any more. But we are restoring the Scanners. You are the first. Do you understand me? You are the first. Take it easy, now."

Adam Stone smiled. Dimly behind Stone, Martel thought that he saw the face of one of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality. That face, too, smiled at him, and then both faces disappeared upward and away.

Martel tried to lift his head, to scan himself. He could not. Lûci stared at him, calming herself, but with an expression of loving perplexity. She said,

"My darling husband! You're back again, to stay!"

Still, Martel tried to see his box. Finally he swept his hand across his chest with a clumsy motion. There was nothing there. The instruments were gone. He was back to normality but still alive.

In the deep weak peacefulness of his mind, another troubling thought took shape. He tried to write with his finger, the way that Lûci wanted him to, but he had neither pointed fingernail nor Scanner's Tablet. He had to use his voice. He summoned up his strength and whispered:

"Scanners?"

"Yes, darling? What is it?"

"Scanners?"

"Scanners. Oh, yes, darling, they're all right. They had to arrest some of them for going into *High speed* and running away. But the Instrumentality caught them all—all those on the ground—and they're happy now. Do you know, darling," she laughed, "some of them didn't want to be restored to normality. But Stone and the Chiefs persuaded them."

"Vomact?"

"He's fine, too. He's staying crunched until he can be restored. Do you know, he has arranged for Scanners to take new jobs. You're all Deputy Chiefs for Space. Isn't that nice? But he got himself made Chief for Space. You're all going to be pilots, so that your fraternity and guild can go on. And Chang's getting changed back right now. You'll see him soon."

Her face turned sad. She looked at him earnestly and said: "I might as well tell you now. You'll worry otherwise. There has been one accident. Only one. When you and your friend called on Adam Stone, your friend was so happy that he forgot to scan, and he let himself die of *Overload*."

"Called on Stone?"

"Yes. Don't you remember? Your friend."

He still looked surprised, so she said:

"Parizianski."



# The Lady Who Sailed *The Soul*

*This story was written in collaboration with Genevieve Linebarger (the manuscript is even inscribed "by Genevieve Linebarger and P.M.A."), who has completed one unfinished Smith story since her husband's death and is currently working on another. "Spieltier" is simply German for "play animal." By the time of this story, the Wild has been tamed and the Beasts and manshonyaggers are gone. Even luxury has returned—perhaps too much so!*

## I

The story ran how did the story run? Everyone knew the reference to Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more, but no one knew exactly how it happened. Their names were welded to the glittering timeless jewelry of romance. Sometimes they were compared to Heloise and Abelard, whose story had been found among books in a long-buried library. Other ages were to compare their life with the weird, ugly-lovely story of the Go-Captain Taliano and the Lady Dolores Oh.

Out of it all, two things stood forth their love and the image of the great sails, tissue-metal wings with which the bodies of people finally fluttered out among the stars.

Mention him, and others knew her. Mention her, and they knew him. He was the first of the inbound sailors, and she was the lady who sailed *The Soul*.

It was lucky that people lost their pictures. The romantic hero was a very young-looking man, prematurely old and still quite sick when the romance came. And Helen America, she was a freak, but a nice one: a grim, solemn, sad, little brunette who had been born amid the laughter of humanity. She was not the tall, confident heroine of the actresses who later played her.

She was, however, a wonderful sailor. That much was true.

And with her body and mind she loved Mr. Grey-no-more, showing a devotion which the ages can neither surpass nor forget.

History may scrape off the patina of their names and appearances, but even history can do no more than brighten the love of Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more. Both of them, one must remember, were sailors.

## II

*The child was playing with a spiel tier She got tired of letting it be a chicken, so she reversed it into the fur-bearing position.*

*When she extended the ears to the optimum development, the little animal looked odd indeed. A light breeze blew the animal-toy on its side, but the spiel tier good-naturedly righted itself and munched contentedly on the carpet.*

*The little girl suddenly clapped her hands and broke forth with the question, "Mamma, what's a sailor?"*

*"There used to be sailors, darling, a long time ago. They were brave men who took the ships out to the stars, the very first ships that took people away from our sun. And they had big sails. I don't know how it worked, but somehow, the light pushed them, and it took them a quarter of a life to make a single one way trip. People only lived a hundred and sixty years at that time, darling, and it was forty years each way, but we don't need sailors any more. "*

*"Of course not," said the child, "we can go right away. You 've taken me to Mars and you've taken me to New Earth as well, haven't you, mamma? And we can go anywhere else soon, but that*

*only takes one afternoon."*

*"That's plano forming honey. But it was a long time before the people knew how to plano form And they could not travel the way we could, so they made great big sails. They made sails so big that they could not build them on Earth. They had to hang them out, halfway between Earth and Mars. And you know, a funny thing happened... Did you ever hear about the time the world froze ?"*

*"No, mamma, what was that?"*

*"Well, a long time ago, one of these sails drifted and people tried to save it because it took a lot of work to build it. But the sail was so large that it got between the Earth and the sun. And there was no more sunshine, just night all the time. And it got very cold on Earth. All the atomic power plants were busy, and all the air began to smell funny. And the people were worried and in a few days they pulled the sail back out of the way. And the sunshine came again."*

*"Mamma, were there ever any girl sailors?"*

*A curious expression crossed over the mother's face.*

*"There was one. You'll hear about her later on when you are older. Her name was Helen America and she sailed The Soul out to the stars. She was the only woman that ever did it. And that is a wonderful story."*

*The mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.*

*The child said: "Mamma, tell me now. What's the story all about?"*

*At this point the mother became very firm and she said: "Honey, there are some things that you are not old enough to hear yet. But when you are a big girl, I'll tell you all about them."*

*The mother was an honest woman. She reflected a moment, and then she added, ". .. unless you read about it yourself first."*

### III

Helen America was to make her place in the history of mankind, but she started badly. The name itself was a misfortune.

No one ever knew who her father was. The officials agreed to keep the matter quiet.

Her mother was not in doubt. Her mother was the celebrated she-man Mona Muggeridge, a woman who had campaigned a hundred times for the lost cause of complete identity of the two genders. She had been a feminist beyond all limits, and when Mona Muggeridge, the one and only Miss Muggeridge, announced to the press that she was going to have a baby, that was first-class news.

Mona Muggeridge went further. She announced her firm conviction that fathers should not be identified. She proclaimed that no woman should have consecutive children with the same man, that women should be advised to pick different fathers for their children, so as to diversify and beautify the race. She capped it all by announcing that she, Miss Muggeridge, had selected the perfect father and would inevitably produce the only perfect child.

Miss Muggeridge, a bony, pompous blonde, stated that she would avoid the nonsense of marriage and family names, and that therefore the child, if a boy, would be named John America, and if a girl, Helen America.

Thus it happened that little Helen America was born with the correspondents in the press services waiting outside the delivery room. News-screens flashed the picture of a pretty three-kilogram baby.

"It's a girl." "The perfect child." "Who's the dad?"

That was just the beginning. Mona Muggeridge was belligerent. She insisted, even after the baby had been photographed for the thousandth time, that this was the finest child ever born. She pointed to the child's perfections. She demonstrated all the foolish fondness of a doting mother, but felt that she, the great crusader, had discovered this fondness for the first time.

To say that this background was difficult for the child would be an understatement.

Helen America was a wonderful example of raw human material triumphing over its



tormentors. By the time she was four years old, she spoke six languages, and was beginning to decipher some of the old Martian texts. At the age of five she was sent to school. Her fellow schoolchildren immediately developed a rhyme:

*Helen, Helen  
Fat and dumb  
Doesn't know where  
Her daddy's from!*

Helen took all this and perhaps it was an accident of genetics that she grew to become a compact little person deadly serious little brunette. Challenged by lessons, haunted by publicity, she became careful and reserved about friendships and desperately lonely in an inner world.

When Helen America was sixteen her mother came to a bad end. Mona Muggeridge eloped with a man she announced to be the perfect husband for the perfect marriage hitherto overlooked by mankind. The perfect husband was a skilled machine polisher.

He already had a wife and four children. He drank beer and his interest in Miss Muggeridge seems to have been a mixture of good-natured comradeship and a sensible awareness of her motherly bankroll. The planetary yacht on which they eloped broke the regulations with an off-schedule flight. The bridegroom's wife and children had alerted the police. The result was a collision with a robotic barge which left both bodies identifiable.

At sixteen Helen was already famous, and at seventeen already forgotten, and very much alone.

#### IV

This was the age of sailors. The thousands of photo reconnaissance and measuring missiles had begun to come back with their harvest from the stars. Planet after planet swam into the ken of mankind. The new worlds became known as the interstellar search missiles brought back photographs, samples of atmosphere, measurements of gravity, cloud coverage, chemical make-up, and the like. Of the very numerous missiles which returned from their two- or three-hundred-year voyages, three brought back reports of New Earth, an earth so much like Terra itself that it could be settled.

The first sailors had gone out almost a hundred years before.

They had started with small sails not over two thousand miles square. Gradually the size of the sails increased. The technique of adiabatic packing and the carrying of passengers in individual pods reduced the damage done to the human cargo. It was great news when a sailor returned to Earth, a man born and reared under the light of another star. He was a man who had spent a month of agony and pain, bringing a few sleep-frozen settlers, guiding the immense light-pushed sailing craft which had managed the trip through the great interstellar deeps in an objective time-period of forty years.

Mankind got to know the look of a sailor. There was a plantigrade walk to the way he put his body on the ground. There was a sharp, stiff, mechanical swing to his neck. The man was neither young nor old. He had been awake and conscious for forty years, thanks to the drug which made possible a kind of limited awareness. By the time the psychologists interrogated him, first for the proper authorities of the Instrumentality and later for the news releases, it was plain enough that he thought the forty years were about a month. He never volunteered to sail back, because he had actually aged forty years. He was a young man, young in his hopes and wishes, but a man who had burnt up a quarter of a human lifetime in a single agonizing experience.

At this time Helen America went to Cambridge. Lady Joan's College was the finest woman's college in the Atlantic world.

Cambridge had reconstructed its proto historic traditions and the neo-British had recaptured that fine edge of engineering which reconnected their traditions with the earliest antiquity.

Naturally enough the language was cosmo polite Earth and not archaic English, but the students were proud to live at a reconstructed university very much like the archaeological evidence showed it to have been before the period of darkness and troubles came upon the Earth. Helen

shone a little in this renaissance.

The news-release services watched Helen in the crudest possible fashion. They revived her name and the story of her mother. Then they forgot her again. She had put in for six professions, and her last choice was "sailor." It happened that she was the first woman to make the application first because she was the only woman young enough to qualify who had also passed the scientific requirements.

Her picture was beside his on the screens before they ever met each other.

Actually, she was not anything like that at all. She had suffered so much in her childhood from Helen, Helen, fat and dumb, that she was competitive only on a coldly professional basis. She hated and loved and missed the tremendous mother whom she had lost, and she resolved so fiercely not to be like her mother that she became an embodied antithesis of Mona

The mother had been horsy, blonde, big the kind of woman who is a feminist because she is not very feminine. Helen never thought about her own femininity. She just worried about herself.

Her face would have been round if it had been plump, but she was not plump. Black-haired, dark-eyed, broad-bodied but thin, she was a genetic demonstration of her unknown father. Her teachers often feared her. She was a pale, quiet girl, and she always knew her subject.

Her fellow students had joked about her for a few weeks and then most of them had banded together against the indecency of the press. When a news-frame came out with something ridiculous about the long-dead Mona, the whisper went through Lady Joan's: "Keep Helen away . . . those people are at it again."

"Don't let Helen look at the frames now. She's the best person we have in the non-collateral sciences and we can't have her upset just before the tripos ..."

They protected her, and it was only by chance that she saw her own face in a news-frame. There was the face of a man beside her. He looked like a little old monkey, she thought. Then she read, "perfect girl wants TO BE SAILOR. SHOULD SAILOR HIMSELF DATE PERFECT GIRL?" Her cheeks burned with helpless, unavoidable embarrassment and rage, but she had grown too expert at being herself to do what she might have done in her teens hate the man. She knew it wasn't his fault either.

It wasn't even the fault of the silly pushing men and women from the news services. It was time, it was custom, it was man himself.

But she had only to be herself, if she could ever find out what that really meant.

## V

Their dates, when they came, had the properties of nightmares.

A news service sent a woman to tell her she had been awarded a week's holiday in New Madrid.

With the sailor from the stars.

Helen refused.

Then he refused too, and he was a little too prompt for her liking. She became curious about him.

Two weeks passed, and in the office of the news service a treasurer brought two slips of paper to the director. They were the vouchers for Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more to obtain the utmost in preferential luxury at New Madrid. The treasurer said,

"These have been issued and registered as gifts with the Instrumentality, sir. Should they be cancelled? " The executive had his fill of stories that day, and he felt humane. On an impulse he commanded the treasurer,

"Tell you what. Give those tickets to the young people. No publicity. We'll keep out of it. If they don't want us, they don't have to have us. Push it along. That's all.

Go."

The tickets went back out to Helen. She had made the highest record ever reported at the university, and she needed a rest.

When the news service woman gave her the ticket, she said, "Is this a trick?"

Assured that it was not, she then asked, "Is that man coming?"

She couldn't say "the sailor" it sounded too much like the way people had always talked about herself and she honestly didn't remember his other name at the moment.

The woman did not know.

"Do I have to see him?" said Helen.

"Of course not," said the woman. The gift was unconditional.

Helen laughed, almost grimly.

"All right, I'll take it and say thanks. But one picture maker mind you, just one, and I walk out. Or I may walk out for no reason at all. Is that all right?"

It was.

Four days later Helen was in the pleasure world of New Madrid, and a master of the dances was presenting her to an odd, intense old man whose hair was black.

"Junior scientist Helen America Sailor of the stars Mr. Grey-no-more."

He looked at them shrewdly and smiled a kindly, experienced smile. He added the empty phrase of his profession, "I have had the honor and I withdraw."

They were alone together on the edge of the dining room. The sailor looked at her very sharply indeed, and then said: "Who are you? Are you somebody I have already met? Should I remember you? There are too many people here on Earth. What do we do next? What are we supposed to do? Would you like to sit down?"

Helen said one "Yes" to all those questions and never dreamed that the single yes would be articulated by hundreds of great actresses, each one in the actress's own special way, across the centuries to come.

They did sit down.

How the rest of it happened, neither one was ever quite sure.

She had had to quiet him almost as though he were a hurt person in the House of Recovery. She explained the dishes to him and when he still could not choose, she gave the robot selections for him. She warned him, kindly enough, about manners when he forgot the simple ceremonies of eating which everyone knew, such as standing up to unfold the napkin or putting the scraps into the solvent tray and the silverware into the transfer.

At last he relaxed and did not look so old.

Momentarily forgetting the thousand times she had been asked silly questions herself, she asked him, "Why did you become a sailor?"

He stared at her in open-eyed inquiry as though she had spoken to him in an unknown language and expected a reply.

Finally he mumbled the answer, "Are you you, too saying that that I shouldn't have done it?"

Her hand went to her mouth in instinctive apology.

"No, no, no. You see, I myself have put in to be a sailor."

He merely looked at her, his young-old eyes open with observativeness.

He did not stare, but merely seemed to be trying to understand words, each one of which he could comprehend individually but which in sum amounted to sheer madness. She did not turn away from his look, odd though it was. Once again, she had the chance to note the indescribable peculiarity of this man who had managed enormous sails out in the blind empty black between un twinkling stars. He was young as a boy. The hair which gave him his name was glossy black. His beard must have been removed permanently, because his skin was that of a middle-aged woman well-kept, pleasant, but showing the unmistakable wrinkles of age and betraying no sign of the normal stubble which the males in her culture preferred to leave on their faces. The skin had age without experience. The muscles had grown older, but they did not show how the person had grown.

Helen had learned to be an acute observer of people as her mother took up with one fanatic after another; she knew full well that people carry their secret biographies written in the muscles of their faces, and that a stranger passing on the street tells us (whether he wishes to or not) all his

inmost intimacies. If we but look sharply enough, and in the right light, we know whether fear or hope or amusement has tallied the hours of his days, we divine the sources and outcome of his most secret sensuous pleasures, we catch the dim but persistent reflections of those other people who have left the imprints of their personalities on him in turn.

All this was absent from Mr. Grey-no-more: he had age but not the stigmata of age; he had growth without the normal markings of growth; he had lived without living, in a time and world in which most people stayed young while living too much.

He was the uttermost opposite of her mother that Helen had ever seen, and with a pang of undirected apprehension Helen realized that this man meant a great deal to her future life, whether she wished him to or not. She saw in him a young bachelor, prematurely old, a man whose love had been given to emptiness and horror, not to the tangible rewards and disappointments of human life. He had had all space for his mistress, and space had used him harshly. Still young, he was old; already old, he was young.

The mixture was one which she knew that she had never seen before, and which she suspected that no one else had ever seen, either. He had in the beginning of life the sorrow, compassion, and wisdom which most people find only at the end.

It was he who broke the silence.

"You did say, didn't you, that you yourself had put in to be a sailor?"

Even to herself, her answer sounded silly and girlish.

"I'm the first woman ever to qualify with the necessary scientific subjects while still young enough to pass the physical ..."

"You must be an unusual girl," said he mildly. Helen realized, with a thrill, a sweet and bitterly real hope that this young-old man from the stars had never heard of the "perfect child" who had been laughed at in the moments of being born, the girl who had all America for a father, who was famous and unusual and alone so terribly much that she could not even imagine being ordinary, happy, decent, or simple.

She thought to herself. It would take a wise freak who sails in from the stars to overlook who I am, but to him she simply said, "It's no use talking about being 'unusual.' I'm tired of this Earth, and since I don't have to die to leave it, I think I would like to sail to the stars. I've got less to lose than you may think..." She started to tell him about Mona Muggeridge but she stopped in time.

The compassionate gray eyes were upon her, and at this point it was he, not she, who was in control of the situation. She looked at the eyes themselves. They had stayed open for forty years, in the blackness near to pitch-darkness of the tiny cabin. The dim dials had shone like blazing suns upon his tired retinas before he was able to turn his eyes away. From time to time he had looked out at the black nothing to see the silhouettes of his sails, almost blackness against total blackness, as the miles of their sweep sucked up the push of light itself and accelerated him and his frozen cargo at almost immeasurable speeds across an ocean of unfathomable silence. Yet, what he had done, she had asked to do.

The stare of his gray eyes yielded to a smile of his lips. In the young-old face, masculine in structure and feminine in texture, the smile had a connotation of tremendous kindness. She felt singularly much like weeping when she saw him smile in that particular way at her. Was that what people learned between the stars? To care for other people very much indeed and to spring upon them only to reveal love and not devouring to their prey?

In a measured voice he said,

"I believe you. You're the first one that I have believed. All these people have said that they wanted to be sailors too, even when they looked at me. They could not know what it means, but they said it anyhow, and I hated them for saying it. You, though you're different. Perhaps you will sail among the stars, but I hope that you will not." As though waking from a dream, he looked around the luxurious room, with the gilt-and-enamel robot-waiters standing aside with negligent elegance. They were designed to be always present and never obtrusive: this was a difficult esthetic effect to achieve, but their designer had achieved it.

The rest of the evening moved with the inevitability of good music. He went with her to the

forever-lonely beach which the architects of New Madrid had built beside the hotel. They talked a little, they looked at each other, and they made love with an affirmative certainty which seemed outside themselves. He was very tender, and he did not realize that in a genitally sophisticated society, he was the first lover she had ever wanted or had ever had. (How could the daughter of Mona Muggeridge want a lover or a mate or a child?) On the next afternoon, she exercised the freedom of her times and asked him to marry her. They had gone back to their private beach, which, through miracles of ultra-fine mini-weather adjustments, brought a Polynesian afternoon to the high chilly plateau of central Spain.

She asked him, she did, to marry her, and he refused, as tenderly and as kindly as a man of sixty-five can refuse a girl of eighteen. She did not press him; they continued the bittersweet love affair.

They sat on the artificial sand of the artificial beach and dabbled their toes in the man-warmed water of the ocean. Then they lay down against an artificial sand dune which hid New Madrid from view.

"Tell me," Helen said, "can I ask again, why did you become a sailor?"

"Not so easily answered," he said.

"Adventure, maybe. That, at least in part. And I wanted to see Earth. Couldn't afford to come in a pod. Now well, I've enough to keep me the rest of my life. I can go back to New Earth as a passenger in a month instead of forty years be frozen in no more time than the wink of an eye, put in my adiabatic pod, linked in to the next sailing ship, and wake up home again while some other fool does the sailing."

Helen nodded. She did not bother to tell him that she knew all this. She had been investigating sailing ships since meeting the sailor.

"Out where you sail among the stars," she said, "can you tell me can you possibly tell me anything of what it's like out there?"

His face looked inward on his soul and afterward his voice came as from an immense distance.

"There are moments or is it weeks you can't really tell in the sail ship when it seems worthwhile. You feel . . . your nerve endings reach out until they touch the stars. You feel enormous, somehow." Gradually he came back to her.

"It's trite to say, of course, but you're never the same afterward. I don't mean just the obvious physical thing, but you find yourself or maybe you lose yourself. That's why," he continued, gesturing toward New Madrid, out of sight behind the sand dune, "I can't stand this. New Earth, well, it's like Earth must have been in the old days, I guess. There's something fresh about it. Here ..."

"I know," said Helen America, and she did. The slightly decadent, slightly corrupt, too comfortable air of Earth must have had a stifling effect on the man from beyond the stars.

"There," he said, "you won't believe this, but sometimes the ocean's too cold to swim in. We have music that doesn't come from machines, and pleasures that come from inside our own bodies without being put there. I have to get back to New Earth." Helen said nothing for a little while, concentrating on stilling the pain in her heart.

"I... I..." she began.

"I know," he said fiercely, almost savagely turning on her.

"But I can't take you. I can't! You're too young, you've got a life to live and I've thrown away a quarter of mine. No, that's not right. I didn't throw it away. I wouldn't trade it back because it's given me something inside I never had before. And it's given me you."

"But if " she started again to argue.

"No. Don't spoil it. I'm going next week to be frozen in my pod to wait for the next sail ship. I can't stand much more of this, and I might weaken. That would be a terrible mistake. But we have this time together now, and we have our separate lifetimes to remember in. Don't think of anything else. There's nothing, nothing we can do."

Helen did not tell him then or ever of the child she had started to hope for, the child they would now never have. Oh, she could have used the child. She could have tied him to her, for he was an

honorable man and would have married her had she told him. But Helen's love, even then in her youth, was such that she could not use this means. She wanted him to come to her of his own free will, marrying her because he could not live without her.

To that marriage their child would have been an additional blessing.

There was the other alternative, of course. She could have borne the child without naming the father. But she was no Mona Muggeridge. She knew too well the terrors and insecurity and loneliness of being Helen America ever to be responsible for the creation of another. And for the course she had laid out there was no place for a child. So she did the only thing she could. At the end of their time in New Madrid, she let him say a real goodbye.

Wordless and without tears, she left. Then she went up to an arctic city, a pleasure city where such things are well-known, and amidst shame, worry, and a driving sense of regret she appealed to a confidential medical service which eliminated the unborn child. Then she went back to Cambridge and confirmed her place as the first woman to sail a ship to the stars.

## VI

The presiding Lord of the Instrumentality at that time was a man named Wait. Wait was not cruel but he was never noted for tenderness of spirit or for a high regard for the adventuresome proclivities of young people. His aide said to him,

"This girl wants to sail a ship to New Earth. Are you going to let her?"

"Why not?" said Wait.

"A person is a person. She is well bred well-educated. If she fails, we will find out something eighty years from now when the ship comes back. If she succeeds, it will shut up some of these women who have been complaining." The Lord leaned over his desk: "If she qualifies, and if she goes, though, don't give her any convicts. Convicts are too good and too valuable as settlers to be sent along on a fool trip like that. You can send her on something of a gamble. Give her all religious fanatics. We have more than enough. Don't you have twenty or thirty thousand who are waiting?"

He said,

"Yes, sir, twenty-six thousand two hundred. Not counting recent additions."

"Very well," said the Lord of the Instrumentality.

"Give her the whole lot of them and give her that new ship. Have we named it?"

"No, sir," said the aide.

"Name it then."

The aide looked blank.

A contemptuous wise smile crossed the face of the senior bureaucrat. He said,

"Take that ship now and name it. Name it *The Soul* and let *The Soul* fly to the stars. And let Helen America be an angel if she wants to. Poor thing, she has not got much of a life to live on this Earth, not the way she was born, and the way she was brought up. And it's no use to try and reform her, to transform her personality, when it's a lively, rich personality. It does not do any good. We don't have to punish her for being herself. Let her go. Let her have it."

Wait sat up and stared at his aide and then repeated very firmly: "Let her have it, only if she qualifies."

## VII

Helen America did qualify.

The doctors and the experts tried to warn her against it. One technician said: "Don't you realize what this is going to mean?"

Forty years will pour out of your life in a single month. You leave here a girl. You will get there a woman of sixty. Well, you will probably still have a hundred years to live after that. And it's painful. You will have all these people, thousands and thousands of them. You will have some

Earth cargo. There will be about thirty thousand pods strung on sixteen lines behind you. Then you will have the control cabin to live in. We will give you as many robots as you need, probably a dozen. You will have a mainsail and a foresail and you will have to keep the two of them."

"I know. I have read the book," said Helen America. "And I sail the ship with light, and if the infrared touches that sail I go. If I get radio interference, I pull the sails in. And if the sails fail, I wait as long as I live."

The technician looked a little cross.

"There is no call for you to get tragic about it. Tragedy is easy enough to contrive. And if you want to be tragic, you can be tragic without destroying thirty thousand other people or without wasting a large amount of Earth property. You can drown in water right here, or jump into a volcano like the Japanese in the old books. Tragedy is not the hard part. The hard part is when you don't quite succeed and you have to keep on fighting. When you must keep going on and on and on in the face of really hopeless odds, of real temptations to despair.

"Now this is the way that the foresail works. That sail will be twenty thousand miles at the wide part. It tapers down and the total length will be just under eighty-thousand miles. It will be retracted or extended by small servo-robots. The servo-robots are radio-controlled. You had better use your radio sparingly, because after all these batteries, even though they are atomic, have to last forty years. They have got to keep you alive."

"Yes, sir," said Helen America very contritely.

"You've got to remember what your job is. You're going because you are cheap. You are going because a sailor takes a lot less weight than a machine. There is no all-purpose computer built that weighs as little as a hundred and fifty pounds. You do.

You go simply because you are expendable. Anyone that goes out to the stars takes one chance in three of never getting there. But you are not going because you are a leader, you are going because you are young. You have a life to give and a life to spare. Because your nerves are good. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir, I knew that."

"Furthermore, you are going because you'll make the trip in forty years. If we send automatic devices and have them manage the sails, they would get there possibly. But it would take them from a hundred years to a hundred-and-twenty or more, and by that time the adiabatic pods would have spoiled, most of the human cargo would not be fit for revival, and the leakage of heat, no matter how we face it, would be enough to ruin the entire expedition. So remember that the tragedy and the trouble you face is mostly work. Work, and that's all it is. That is your big job."

Helen smiled. She was a short girl with rich dark hair, brown eyes, and very pronounced eyebrows, but when Helen smiled she was almost a child again, and a rather charming one. She said: "My job is work. I understand that, sir."

## VIII

In the preparation area, the make-ready was fast but not hurried. Twice the technicians urged her to take a holiday before she reported for final training. She did not accept their advice.

She wanted to go forth; she knew that they knew she wanted to leave Earth forever, and she also knew they knew she was not merely her mother's daughter. She was trying, somehow, to be herself. She knew the world did not believe, but the world did not matter.

The third time they suggested a vacation, the suggestion was mandatory. She had a gloomy two months which she ended up enjoying a little bit on the wonderful islands of the Hesperides, islands which were raised when the weight of the Earthports caused a new group of small archipelagos to form below Bermuda.

She reported back, fit, healthy, and ready to go.

The senior medical officer was very blunt.

"Do you really know what we are going to do to you? We are going to make you live forty years out of your life in one month."

She nodded, white of face, and he went on,

"Now to give you those forty years we've got to slow down your bodily processes.

After all, the sheer biological task of breathing forty years' worth of air in one month involves a factor of about five hundred to one.

No lungs could stand it. Your body must circulate water. It must take in food. Most of this is going to be protein. There will be some kind of a hydrate. You'll need vitamins.

"Now, what we are going to do is to slow the brain down, very much indeed, so that the brain will be working at about that five-hundred-to-one ratio. We don't want you incapable of working. Somebody has got to manage the sails.

"Therefore, if you hesitate or you start to think, a thought or two is going to take several weeks. Meanwhile your body can be slowed down some. But the different parts can't be slowed down at the same rate. Water, for example, we brought down to about eighty to one. Food, to about three hundred to one.

"You won't have time to drink forty years' worth of water. We circulate it, get it through, purify it, and get it back in your system, unless you break your link-up.

"So what you face is a month of being absolutely wide awake, on an operating table and being operated on without anesthetic, while doing some of the hardest work that mankind has ever found.

"You'll have to take observations, you'll have to watch your lines with the pods of people and cargo behind you, you'll have to adjust the sails. If there is anybody surviving at destination point, they will come out and meet you.

"At least that happens most of the times.

"I am not going to assure you you will get the ship in. If they don't meet you, take an orbit beyond the farthest planet and either let yourself die or try to save yourself. You can't get thirty thousand people down on a planet singlehandedly.

"Meanwhile, though, you've got a real job. We are going to have to build these controls right into your body. We'll start by putting valves in your chest arteries. Then we go on, catheterizing your water. We are going to make an artificial colostomy that will go forward here just in front of your hip joint. Your water intake has a certain psychological value so that about one five-hundredth of your water we are going to leave you to drink out of a cup. The rest of it is going to go directly into your bloodstream. Again about a tenth of your food will go that way. You understand that?"

"You mean," said Helen,

"I eat one-tenth, and the rest goes in intravenously?"

"That's right," said the medical technician.

"We will pump it into you. The concentrates are there. The re-constitutor is there.

Now these lines have a double connection. One set of connections runs into the maintenance machine. That will become the logistic support for your body. And these lines are the umbilical cord for a human being alone among the stars. They are your life.

"And now if they should break or if you should fall, you might faint for a year or two. If that happens, your local system takes over: that's the pack on your back.

"On Earth, it weighs as much as you do. You have already been drilled with the model pack. You know how easy it is to handle in space. That'll keep you going for a subjective period of about two hours. No one has ever worked out a clock yet that would match the human mind, so instead of giving you a clock we are giving you an odometer attached to your own pulse and we mark it off in grades. If you watch it in terms of tens of thousands of pulse beats, you may get some information out of it.

"I don't know what kind of information, but you may find it helpful somehow." He looked at her sharply and then turned back to his tools, picking up a shining needle with a disk on the end.

"Now, let's get back to this. We are going to have to get right into your mind. That's chemical too."

Helen interrupted.

"You said you were not going to operate on my head."

"Only the needle. That's the only way we can get to the mind.



Slow it down enough so that you will have this subjective mind operating at a rate that will make the forty years pass in a month." He smiled grimly, but the grimness changed to momentary tenderness as he took in her brave obstinate stance, her girlish, admirable, pitiable determination.

"I won't argue it," she said.

"This is as bad as a marriage and the stars are my bridegroom." The image of the sailor went across her mind, but she said nothing of him.

The technician went on.

"Now, we have already built in psychotic elements. You can't even expect to remain sane. So you'd better not worry about it. You'll have to be insane to manage the sails and to survive utterly alone and be out there even a month. And the trouble is, in that month you are going to know it's really forty years. There is not a mirror in the place, but you'll probably find shiny surfaces to look at yourself.

"You won't look so good. You will see yourself aging, every time you slow down to look. I don't know what the problem is going to be on that score. It's been bad enough on men.

"Your hair problem is going to be easier than men's. The sailors we sent out, we simply had to kill all the hair roots. Otherwise the men would have been swamped in their own beards. And a tremendous amount of the nutrient would be wasted if it went into raising of hair on the face which no machine in the world could cut off fast enough to keep a man working. I think what we will do is inhibit hair on the top of your head. Whether it comes out in the same color or not is something you will find for yourself later. Did you ever meet the sailor that came in?"

The doctor knew she had met him. He did not know that it was the sailor from beyond the stars who called her. Helen managed to remain composed as she smiled at him to say: "Yes, you gave him new hair. Your technician planted a new scalp on his head, remember. Somebody on your staff did. The hair came out black and he got the nickname of Mr. Grey-no-more."

"If you are ready next Tuesday, we'll be ready too. Do you think you can make it by then, my lady?"

Helen felt odd seeing this old, serious man refer to her as "lady," but she knew he was paying respect to a profession and not just to an individual.

"Tuesday is time enough." She felt complimented that he was an old-fashioned enough person to know the ancient names of the days of the week and to use them. That was a sign that he had not only learned the essentials at the University but that he had picked up the elegant inconsequentialities as well.

## IX

Two weeks later was twenty-one years later by the chronometers in the cabin. Helen turned for the ten-thousand times-ten-thousandth time to scan the sails.

Her back ached with a violent throb.

She could feel the steady roar of her heart like a fast vibrator as it ticked against the time-span of her awareness. She could look down at the meter on her wrist and see the hands on the watch like dials indicate tens of thousands of pulses very slowly.

She heard the steady whistle of air in her throat as her lungs seemed shuddering with sheer speed.

And she felt the throbbing pain of a large tube feeding an immense quantity of mushy water directly into the artery of her neck.

On her abdomen, she felt as if someone had built a fire. The evacuation tube operated automatically but it burnt as if a coal had been held to her skin, and a catheter, which connected her bladder to another tube, stung as savagely as the prod of a scalding-hot needle. Her head ached and her vision blurred.

But she could still see the instruments and she still could watch the sails. Now and then she could glimpse, faint as a tracery of dust, the immense skein of people and cargo that lay behind them.

She could not sit down. It hurt too much.

The only way that she could be comfortable for resting was to lean against the instrument panel, her lower ribs against the panel, her tired forehead against the meters.

Once she rested that way and realized that it was two and a half months before she got up. She knew that rest had no meaning, and she could see her face moving, a distorted image of her own face growing old in the reflections from the glass face of the "apparent weight" dial. She could look at her arms with blurring vision, note the skin tightening, loosening, and tightening again, as changes in temperatures affected it.

She looked out one more time at the sails and decided to take in the foresail. Warily she dragged herself over the control panel with a servo-robot. She selected the right control and opened it for a week or so. She waited there, her heart buzzing, her throat whistling air, her fingernails breaking off gently as they grew.

Finally she checked to see if it really had been the right one, pushed again, and nothing happened.

She pushed a third time. There was no response.

Now she went back to the master panel, re-read, checked the light direction, found a certain amount of infrared pressure which she should have been picking up. The sails had very gradually risen to something not far from the speed of light itself because they moved fast with the one side dulled; the pods behind, sealed against time and eternity, swam obediently in an almost perfect weightlessness.

She scanned; her reading had been correct.

The sail was wrong.

She went back to the emergency panel and pressed. Nothing happened.

She broke out a repair robot and sent it out to effect repairs, punching the papers as rapidly as she could to give instructions.

The robot went out and an instant (three days) later it replied.

The panel on the repair robot rang forth,

"Does not conform."

She sent a second repair robot. That had no effect either.

She sent a third, the last. Three bright lights,

"Does not conform," stared at her. She moved the servo-robots to the other side of the sails and pulled hard.

The sail was still not at the right angle.

She stood there wearied and lost in space, and she prayed: "Not for me, God, I am running away from a life that I did not want. But for this ship's souls and for the poor foolish people that I am taking who are brave enough to want to worship their own way and need the light of another star, I ask you, God, help me now." She thought she had prayed very fervently and she hoped that she would get an answer to her prayer.

It did not work out that way. She was bewildered, alone.

There was no sun. There was nothing, except the tiny cabin and herself more alone than any woman had ever been before.

She sensed the thrill and ripple of her muscles as they went through days of adjustment while her mind noticed only the matter of minutes. She leaned forward, forced herself not to relax, and finally she remembered that one of the official busybodies had included a weapon.

What she would use a weapon for she did not know, It pointed. It had a range of two hundred thousand miles. The target could be selected automatically.

She got down on her knees trailing the abdominal tube and the feeding tube and the catheter tubes and the helmet wires, each one running back to the panel. She crawled underneath the panel for the servo-robots and she pulled out a written manual.

She finally found the right frequency for the weapon's controls.

She set the weapon up and went to the window.

At the last moment she thought,

"Perhaps the fools are going to make me shoot the window out. It ought to have been designed to shoot through the window without hurting it. That's the way they should have done it."

She wondered about the matter for a week or two.

Just before she fired it she turned and there, next to her, stood her sailor, the sailor from the stars, Mr. Grey-no-more. He said: "It won't work that way."

He stood clear and handsome, the way she had seen him in New Madrid. He had no tubes, he did not tremble, she could see the normal rise and fall of his chest as he took one breath every hour or so. One part of her mind knew that he was a hallucination. Another part of her mind believed that he was real.

She was mad, and she was very happy to be mad at this time, and she let the hallucination give her advice. She re-set the gun so that it would fire through the cabin wall, and it fired a low charge at the repair mechanism out beyond the distorted and immovable sail.

The low charge did the trick. The interference had been something beyond all technical anticipation. The weapon had cleaned out the forever-unidentifiable obstruction, leaving the servo-robots free to attack their tasks like a tribe of maddened ants. They worked again. They had had defenses built in against the minor impediments of space. All of them scurried and skipped about.

With a sense of bewilderment close to religion, she perceived the wind of starlight blowing against the immense sails. The sails snapped into position. She got a momentary touch of gravity as she sensed a little weight. *The Soul* was back on her course.

## X

"It's a girl," they said to him on New Earth.

"It's a girl. She must have been eighteen herself."

Mr. Grey-no-more did not believe it.

But he went to the hospital and there in the hospital he saw Helen America.

"Here I am, sailor," said she.

"I sailed too." Her face was white as chalk, her expression was that of a girl of about twenty. Her body was that of a well-preserved woman of sixty.

As for him, he had not changed again, since he had returned home inside a pod.

He looked at her. His eyes narrowed, and then, in a sudden reversal of roles, it was he who was kneeling beside her bed and covering her hands with his tears.

Half-coherently, he babbled at her: "I ran away from you because I loved you so. I came back here where you would never follow, or if you did follow, you'd still be a young woman, and I'd still be too old. But you have sailed *The Soul* in here and you wanted me."

The nurse of New Earth did not know about the rules which should be applied to the sailors from the stars. Very quietly she went out of the room, smiling in tenderness and human pity at the love which she had seen. But she was a practical woman and she had a sense of her own advancement. She called a friend others at the news service and said: "I think I have got the biggest romance in history. If you get here soon enough you can get the first telling of the story of Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more. They just met like that. I guess they'd seen each other somewhere. They just met like that and fell in love."

The nurse did not know that they had forsworn a love on Earth. The nurse did not know that Helen America had made a lonely trip with an icy purpose, and the nurse did not know that the crazy image of Mr. Grey-no-more, the sailor himself, had stood beside Helen twenty years out from nothing-at-all in the depth and blackness of space between the stars.

## XI

*The little girl had grown up, had married, and now had a little girl of her own. The mother was unchanged, but the spiel tier was very, very old. It had outlived all its marvelous tricks of adaptability, and for some years had stayed frozen in the role of a yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl doll. Out of sentimental sense of the fitness of things, she had dressed the spiel tier in a bright blue*

*jumper with matching panties. The little animal crept softly across the floor on its tiny human hands, using its knees for hind feet. The mock-human face looked up blindly and squeaked for milk.*

*The young mother said,*

*"Mom, you ought to get rid of that thing. It's all used up and it looks horrible with your nice period furniture."*

*"I thought you loved it," said the older woman.*

*"Of course," said the daughter.*

*"It was cute, when I was a child. But I'm not a child any more, and it doesn't even work."*

*The spiel tier had struggled to its feet and clutched its mistress's ankle. The older woman took it away gently, and put down a saucer of milk and a cup the size of a thimble. The spiel tier tried to curtsy, as it had been motivated to do at the beginning, slipped, fell, and whimpered. The mother righted it and the little old animal-toy began dipping milk with its thimble and sucking the milk into its tiny toothless old mouth.*

*"You remember. Mom " said the younger woman and stopped.*

*"Remember what, dear?"*

*" You told me about Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more when that was brand new."*

*"Yes, darling, maybe I did."*

*" You didn't tell me everything," said the younger woman accusingly.*

*"Of course not. You were a child. "*

*"But it was awful. Those messy people, and the horrible way sailors lived. I don't see how you idealised it and called it a romance "*

*"But it was. It is," insisted the other.*

*"Romance, my foot," said the daughter. "It's as bad as you and the worn-out spiel tier She pointed at the tiny, living, aged doll who had fallen asleep beside its milk.*

*"I think it's horrible. You ought to get rid of it. And the world ought to get rid of sailors. "*

*"Don't be harsh, darling, " said the mother.*

*"Don't be a sentimental old slob, " said the daughter.*

*"Perhaps we are," said the mother with a loving sort of laugh.*

*Unobtrusively she put the sleeping spiel tier on a padded chair where it would not be stepped on or hurt.*

## XII

Outsiders never knew the real end of the story.

More than a century after their wedding, Helen lay dying: she was dying happily, because her beloved sailor was beside her. She believed that if they could conquer space, they might conquer death as well.

Her loving, happy, weary dying mind blurred over and she picked up an argument they hadn't touched upon for decades.

*"You did so come to *The Soul*," she said.*

*"You did so stand beside me when I was lost and did not know how to handle the weapon."*

*"If I came then, darling, I'll come again, wherever you are.*

*You're my darling, my heart, my own true love. You're my bravest of ladies, my boldest of people. You're my own. You sailed for me. You're my lady who sailed *The Soul*."*

His voice broke, but his features stayed calm. He had never before seen anyone die so confident and so happy.

## When the People Fell

"Can you imagine a rain of people through an acid fog? Can you imagine thousands and thousands of human bodies, without weapons, overwhelming the unconquerable monsters? Can you —"

"Look, sir," interrupted the reporter.

"Don't interrupt me! You ask me silly questions. I tell you I saw the Goonhogo itself. I saw it take Venus. Now ask me about that!"

The reporter had called to get an old man's reminiscences about bygone ages. He did not expect Dobyns Bennett to flare up at him.

Dobyns Bennett thrust home the psychological advantage he had gotten by taking the initiative. "Can you imagine showhices in their parachutes, a lot of them dead, floating out of a green sky? Can you imagine mothers crying as they fell? Can you imagine people pouring down on the poor helpless monsters?"

Mildly, the reporter asked what showhices were.

"That's old Chinesian for children," said Dobyns Bennett. "I saw the last of the nations burst and die, and you want to ask me about fashionable clothes and things. Real history never gets into the books. It's too shocking. I suppose you were going to ask me what I thought of the new striped pantaloons for women!"

"No," said the reporter, but he blushed. The question was in his notebook and he hated blushing.

"Do you know what the Goonhogo did?"

"What?" asked the reporter, struggling to remember just what a Goonhogo might be.

"It took Venus," said the old man, somewhat more calmly.

Very mildly, the reporter murmured, "It *did*?"

"You bet it did!" said Dobyns Bennett belligerently.

"Were you there?" asked the reporter.

"You bet I was there when the Goonhogo took Venus," said the old man. "I was there and it's the damnedest thing I've ever seen. You know who I am. I've seen more worlds than you can count, boy, and yet when the nondies and the needies and the showhices came pouring out of the sky, that was the worst thing that any man could ever see. Down on the ground, there were the loudies the way they'd always been—"

The reporter interrupted, very gently. Bennett might as well have been speaking a foreign language. All of this had happened three hundred years before. The reporter's job was to get a feature from him and to put it into a language which people of the present time could understand.

Respectfully he said, "Can't you start at the beginning of the story?"

"You bet. That's when I married Terza. Terza was the prettiest girl you ever saw. She was one of the Vomacts, a great family of scanners, and her father was a very important man. You see, I was thirty-two, and when a man is thirty-two, he thinks he is pretty old, but I wasn't really old, I just thought so, and he wanted Terza to marry me because she was such a complicated girl that she needed a man's help. The Court back home had found her unstable and the Instrumentality had ordered her left in her father's care until she married a man who then could take on proper custodial authority. I suppose those are old customs to you, boy—"

The reporter interrupted again. "I am sorry, old man," said he. "I know you are over four hundred years old and you're the only person who remembers the time the Goonhogo took Venus. Now the Goonhogo was a government, wasn't it?"

"Anyone knows that," snapped the old man. "The Goonhogo was a sort of separate Chinese government. Seventeen billion of them all crowded in one small part of Earth. Most of them spoke English the way you and I do, but they spoke their own language, too, with all those funny words that have come on down to us. They hadn't mixed in with anybody else yet. Then, you see, the Waywanjong himself gave the order and that is when the people started raining. They just fell right out of the sky. You never saw anything like it—"

The reporter had to interrupt him again and again to get the story bit by bit. The old man kept using terms that he couldn't seem to realize were lost in history and that had to be explained to be intelligible to anyone of this era. But his memory was excellent and his descriptive powers as sharp and alert as ever. . . .

Young Dobyns Bennett had not been at Experimental Area A very long, before he realized that the most beautiful female he had ever seen was Terza Vomact. At the age of fourteen, she was fully mature. Some of the Vomacts did mature that way. It may have had something to do with their being descended from unregistered, illegal people centuries back in the past. They were even said to have mysterious connections with the lost world back in the age of nations when people could still put numbers on the years.

He fell in love with her and felt like a fool for doing it.

She was so beautiful, it was hard to realize that she was the daughter of Scanner Vomact himself. The scanner was a powerful man.

Sometimes romance moves too fast and it did with Dobyns Bennett because Scanner Vomact himself called in the young man and said, "I'd like to have you marry my daughter Terza, but I'm not sure she'll approve of you. If you can get her, boy, you have my blessing."

Dobyns was suspicious. He wanted to know why a senior scanner was willing to take a junior technician.

All that the scanner did was to smile. He said, "I'm a lot older than you, and with this new santaclara drug coming in that may give people hundreds of years, you may think that I died in my prime if I die at a hundred and twenty. You may live to four or five hundred. But I know my time's coming up. My wife has been dead for a long time and we have no other children and I know that Terza needs a father in a very special kind of way. The psychologist found her to be unstable. Why don't you take her outside the area? You can get a pass through the dome anytime. You can go out and play with the loudies."

Dobyns Bennett was almost as insulted as if someone had given him a pail and told him to go play in the sandpile. And yet he realized that the elements of play in courtship were fitted together and that the old man meant well.

The day that it all happened, he and Terza were outside the dome. They had been pushing loudies around.

Loudies were not dangerous unless you killed them. You could knock them down, push them out of the way, or tie them up; after a while, they slipped away and went about their business. It took a very special kind of ecologist to figure out what their business was. They floated two meters high, ninety centimeters in diameter, gently just above the land of Venus, eating microscopically. For a long time, people thought there was radiation on which they subsisted. They simply multiplied in tremendous numbers. In a silly sort of way, it was fun to push them around, but that was about all there was to do.

They never responded with intelligence.

Once, long before, a loudie taken into the laboratory for experimental purposes had typed a perfectly clear message on the typewriter. The message had read, "Why don't you Earth people go back to Earth and leave us alone? We are getting along all—"

And that was all the message that anybody had ever got out of them in three hundred years. The best laboratory conclusion was that they had very high intelligence if they ever chose to use it, but that their volitional mechanism was so profoundly different from the psychology of human beings that it was impossible to force a loudie to respond to stress as people did on Earth.

The name *loudie* was some kind of word in the old Chinesian language. It meant the "ancient ones." Since it was the Chinesians who had set up the first outposts on Venus, under the orders of their supreme boss the Waywonjong, their term lingered on.

Dobyns and Terza pushed loudies, climbed over the hills, and looked down into the valleys where it was impossible to tell a river from a swamp. They got thoroughly wet, their air converters stuck, and perspiration itched and tickled along their cheeks. Since they could not eat or drink while outside—at least not with any reasonable degree of safety—the excursion could not be called a picnic. There was something mildly refreshing about playing child with a very pretty girl-child—but Dobyns wearied of the whole thing.

Terza sensed his rejection of her. Quick as a sensitive animal, she became angry and petulant. "You didn't have to come out with me!"

"I wanted to," he said, "but now I'm tired and want to go home."

"You treat me like a child. All right, play with me. Or you treat me like a woman. All right, be a gentleman. But don't seesaw all the time yourself. I just got to be a little bit happy and you have to get middle-aged and condescending. I won't take it."

"Your father—" he said, realizing the moment he said it that it was a mistake.

"My father this, my father that. If you're thinking about marrying me, do it yourself." She glared at him, stuck her tongue out, ran over a dune, and disappeared.

Dobyns Bennett was baffled. He did not know what to do. She was safe enough. The loudies never hurt anyone. He decided to teach her a lesson and to go on back himself, letting her find her way home when she pleased. The Area Search Team could find her easily if she really got lost.

He walked back to the gate.

When he saw the gates locked and the emergency lights on, he realized that he had made the worst mistake of his life.

His heart sinking within him, he ran the last few meters of the way, and beat the ceramic gate with his bare hands until it opened only just enough to let him in.

"What's wrong?" he asked the doortender.

The doortender muttered something which Dobyns could not understand.

"Speak up, man!" shouted Dobyns. "What's wrong?"

"The Goonhogo is coming back and they're taking over."

"That's impossible," said Dobyns. "They couldn't—" He checked himself. *Could* they?

"The Goonhogo's taken over," the gatekeeper insisted. "They've been given the whole thing. The Earth Authority has voted it to them. The Waywonjong has decided to send people right away. They're sending them."

"What do the Chinesians want with Venus? You can't kill a loudie without contaminating a thousand acres of land. You can't push them away without them drifting back. You can't scoop them up. Nobody can live here until we solve the problem of these things. We're a long way from having solved it," said Dobyns in angry bewilderment.

The gatekeeper shook his head. "Don't ask me. That's all I hear on the radio. Everybody else is excited too."

Within an hour, the rain of people began.

Dobyns went up to the radar room, saw the skies above. The radar man himself was drumming his fingers against the desk. He said, "Nothing like this has been seen for a thousand

years or more. You know what there is up there? Those are warships, the warships left over from the last of the old dirty wars. I knew the Chinesians were inside them. Everybody knew about it. It was sort of like a museum. Now they don't have any weapons in them. But do you know—there are millions of people hanging up there over Venus and I don't know what they are going to do!"

He stopped and pointed at one of the screens. "Look, you can see them running in patches. They're behind each other, so they cluster up solid. We've never had a screen look like that."

Dobyns looked at the screen. It was, as the operator said, full of blips.

As they watched, one of the men exclaimed, "What's that milky stuff down there in the lower left? See, it's—it's pouring," he said. "It's pouring somehow out of those dots. How can you pour things into a radar? It doesn't really show, does it?"

The radar man looked at his screen. He said, "Search me. I don't know what it is, either. You'll have to find out. Let's just see what happens."

Scanner Vomact came into the room. He said, once he had taken a quick, experienced glance at the screens, "This may be the strangest thing we'll ever see, but I have a feeling they're dropping people. Lots of them. Dropping them by the thousands, or by the hundreds of thousands, or even by the millions. But people are coming down there. Come along with me, you two. We'll go out and see it. There may be somebody that we can help."

By this time, Dobyns's conscience was hurting him badly. He wanted to tell Vomact that he had left Terza out there, but he had hesitated—not only because he was ashamed of leaving her, but because he did not want to tattle on the child to her father. Now he spoke.

"Your daughter's still outside."

Vomact turned on him solemnly. The immense eyes looked very tranquil and very threatening, but the silky voice was controlled.

"You may find her." The scanner added, in a tone which sent the thrill of menace up Dobyns's back, "And everything will be well if you bring her back."

Dobyns nodded as though receiving an order.

"I shall," said Vomact, "go out myself, to see what I can do, but I leave the finding of my daughter to you."

They went down, put on the extra-long-period converters, carried their miniaturized survey equipment so that they could find their way back through the fog, and went out. Just as they were at the gate, the gatekeeper said, "Wait a moment, sir and excellency. I have a message for you here on the phone. Please call Control."

Scanner Vomact was not to be called lightly and he knew it. He picked up the connection unit and spoke harshly.

The radar man came on the phone screen in the gatekeeper's wall. "They're overhead now, sir."

"Who's overhead?"

"The Chinesians are. They're coming down. I don't know how many there are. There must be two thousand warships over our heads right here and there are more thousands over the rest of Venus. They're down now. If you want to see them hit ground, you'd better get outside quick."

Vomact and Dobyns went out.

Down came the Chinesians. People's bodies were raining right out of the milk-cloudy sky. Thousands upon thousands of them with plastic parachutes that looked like bubbles. Down they came.

Dobyns and Vomact saw a headless man drift down. The parachute cords had decapitated him.

A woman fell near them. The drop had torn her breathing tube loose from her crudely bandaged throat and she was choking in her own blood. She staggered toward them, tried to babble but only drooled blood with mute choking sounds, and then fell face forward into the mud.



Two babies dropped. The adult accompanying them had been blown off course. Vomact ran, picked them up, and handed them to a Chinese man who had just landed. The man looked at the babies in his arms, sent Vomact a look of contemptuous inquiry, put the weeping children down in the cold slush of Venus, gave them a last impersonal glance, and ran off on some mysterious errand of his own.

Vomact kept Bennett from picking up the children. "Come on, let's keep looking. We can't take care of all of them."

The world had known that the Chinese had a lot of unpredictable public habits; but they never suspected that the nondies and the needies and the showhices could pour down out of a poisoned sky. Only the Goonhogo itself would make such a reckless use of human life. *Nondies* were men and *needies* were women and *showhices* were the little children. And the *Goonhogo* was a name left over from the old days of nations. It meant something like republic or state or government. Whatever it was, it was the organization that ran the Chinese in the Chinese manner, under the Earth Authority.

And the ruler of the Goonhogo was the Waywonjong.

The Waywonjong didn't come to Venus. He just sent his people. He sent them floating down into Venus, to tackle the Venusian ecology with the only weapons which could make a settlement of that planet possible—people themselves. Human arms could tackle the loudies, the loudies who had been called "old ones" by the first Chinese scouts to cover Venus.

The loudies had to be gathered together so gently that they would not die and, in dying, each contaminate a thousand acres. They had to be kept together by human bodies and arms in a gigantic living corral.

Scanner Vomact rushed forward.

A wounded Chinese man hit the ground and his parachute collapsed behind him. He was clad in a pair of shorts, had a knife at his belt, canteen at his waist. He had an air converter attached next to his ear, with a tube running into his throat. He shouted something unintelligible at them and limped rapidly away.

People kept on hitting the ground all around Vomact and Dobyns.

The self-disposing parachutes were bursting like bubbles in the misty air, a moment or two after they touched the ground. Someone had done a tricky, efficient job with the chemical consequences of static electricity.

And as the two watched, the air was heavy with people. One time, Vomact was knocked down by a person. He found that it was two Chinese children tied together.

Dobyns asked, "What are you doing? Where are you going? Do you have any leaders?"

He got cries and shouts in an unintelligible language. Here and there someone shouted in English, "This way!" or "Leave us alone!" or "Keep going . . ." but that was all.

The experiment worked.

Eighty-two million people were dropped in that one day.

After four hours which seemed barely short of endless, Dobyns found Terza in a corner of the cold hell. Though Venus was warm, the suffering of the almost-naked Chinese had chilled his blood.

Terza ran toward him.

She could not speak.

She put her head on his chest and sobbed. Finally she managed to say, "I've—I've—I've tried to help, but they're too many, too many, too many!" And the sentence ended as shrill as a scream.

Dobyns led her back to the experimental area.

They did not have to talk. Her whole body told him that she wanted his love and the comfort of his presence, and that she had chosen that course of life which would keep them together.

As they left the drop area, which seemed to cover all of Venus so far as they could tell, a pattern was beginning to form. The Chineseans were beginning to round up the loudies.

Terza kissed him mutely after the gatekeeper had let them through. She did not need to speak. Then she fled to her room.

The next day, the people from Experimental Area A tried to see if they could go out and lend a hand to the settlers. It wasn't possible to lend a hand; there were too many settlers. People by the millions were scattered all over the hills and valleys of Venus, sludging through the mud and water with their human toes, crushing the alien mud, crushing the strange plants. They didn't know what to eat. They didn't know where to go. They had no leaders.

All they had were orders to gather the loudies together in large herds and hold them there with human arms.

The loudies didn't resist.

After a time-lapse of several Earth days the Goonhogo sent small scout cars. They brought a very different kind of Chinesean—these late arrivals were uniformed, educated, cruel, smug men. They knew what they were doing. And they were willing to pay any sacrifice of their own people to get it done.

They brought instructions. They put the people together in gangs. It did not matter where the nondies and needies had come from on Earth; it didn't matter whether they found their own showhices or somebody else's. They were shown the jobs to do and they got to work. Human bodies accomplished what machines could not have done—they kept the loudies firmly but gently encircled until every last one of the creatures was starved into nothingness.

Rice fields began to appear miraculously.

Scanner Vomact couldn't believe it. The Goonhogo biochemists had managed to adapt rice to the soil of Venus. And yet the seedlings came out of boxes in the scout cars and weeping people walked over the bodies of their own dead to keep the crop moving toward the planting.

Venusian bacteria could not kill human beings, nor could they dispose of human bodies after death. A problem arose and was solved. Immense sleds carried dead men, women, and children—those who had fallen wrong, or drowned as they fell, or had been trampled by others—to an undisclosed destination. Dobyys suspected the material was to be used to add Earth-type organic waste to the soil of Venus, but he did not tell Terza.

The work went on.

The nondies and needies kept working in shifts. When they could not see in the darkness, they proceeded without seeing—keeping in line by touch or by shout. Foremen, newly trained, screeched commands. Workers lined up, touching fingertips. The job of building the fields kept on.

"That's a big story," said the old man. "Eighty-two million people dropped in a single day. And later I heard that the Waywonjong said it wouldn't have mattered if seventy million of them had died. Twelve million survivors would have been enough to make a spacehead for the Goonhogo. The Chineseans got Venus, all of it.

"But I'll never forget the nondies and the needies and the showhices falling out of the sky, men and women and children with their poor scared Chinesean faces. That funny Venusian air made them look green instead of tan. There they were, falling all around.

"You know something, young man?" said Dobyys Bennett, approaching his fifth century of age.

"What?" said the reporter.

"There won't be things like that happening on any world again. Because now, after all, there isn't any separate Goonhogo left. There's only one Instrumentality and they don't care what a man's

race may have been in the ancient years. Those were the rough old days, the ones I lived in. Those were the daysmen still tried to do things."

Dobyns almost seemed to doze off, but he roused himself sharply and said, "I tell you, the sky was full of people. They fell like water. They fell like rain. I've seen the awful ants in Africa, and there's not a thing among the stars to beat them for prowling horror. Mind you, they're worse than anything the stars contain. I've seen the crazy worlds near Alpha Centauri, but I never saw anything like the time the people fell on Venus. More than eighty-two million in one day and my own little Terza lost among them.

"But the rice did sprout. And the loudies died as the walls of people held them in with human arms. Walls of people, I tell you, with volunteers jumping in to take the places of the falling ones.

"They were people still, even when they shouted in the darkness. They tried to help each other even while they fought a fight that had to be fought without violence. They were people still. And they did so win. It was crazy and impossible, but they won. Mere human beings did what machines and science would have taken another thousand years to do . . .

"The funniest thing of all was the first house that I saw a nondie put up, there in the rain of Venus. I was out there with Vomact and with a pale sad Terza. It wasn't much of a house, shaped out of twisted Venusian wood. There it was. *He* built it, the smiling half-naked Chinesian nondie. We went to the door and said to him in English, 'What are you building here, a shelter or a hospital?'

"The Chinesian grinned at us. 'No,' he said, 'gambling.'

"Vomact wouldn't believe it: 'Gambling?'

"'Sure,' said the nondie. 'Gambling is the first thing a man needs in a strange place. It can take the worry out of his soul.'"

\* \* \*

"Is that all?" said the reporter.

Dobyns Bennett muttered that the personal part did not count. He added, "Some of my great-great-great-great-grandsons may come along. You count those greats. Their faces will show you easily enough that I married into the Vomact line. Terza saw what happened. She saw how people build worlds. This was the hard way to build them. She never forgot the night with the dead Chinesian babies lying in the half-illuminated mud, or the parachute ropes dissolving slowly. She heard the needies weeping and the helpless nondies comforting them and leading them off to nowhere. She remembered the cruel, neat officers coming out of the scout cars. She got home and saw the rice come up, and saw how the Goonhogo made Venus a Chinesian place."

"What happened to you personally?" asked the reporter.

"Nothing much. There wasn't any more work for us, so we closed down Experimental Area A. I married Terza.

"Any time later, when I said to her, 'You're not such a bad girl!' she was able to admit the truth and tell me she was not. That night in the rain of people would test anybody's soul and it tested hers. She had met a big test and passed it. She used to say to me, 'I saw it once. I saw the people fall, and I never want to see another person suffer again. Keep me with you, Dobyns, keep me with you forever.'

"And," said Dobyns Bennett, "it wasn't forever, but it was a happy and sweet three hundred years. She died after our fourth diamond anniversary. Wasn't that a wonderful thing, young man?"

The reporter said it was. And yet, when he took the story back to his editor, he was told to put it into the archives. It wasn't the right kind of story for entertainment and the public would not appreciate it any more.

## Think Blue, Count Two

### I

Before the great ships whispered between the stars by means of plano forming people had to fly from star to star with immense sails huge films assorted in space on long, rigid, cold proof rigging. A small space boat provided room for a sailor to handle the sails, check the course, and watch the passengers who were sealed, like knots in immense threads, in their little adiabatic pods which trailed behind the ship. The passengers knew nothing, except for going to sleep on Earth and waking up on a strange new world forty, fifty, or two hundred years later.

This was a primitive way to do it. But it worked.

On such a ship Helen America had followed Mr. Grey-no more On such ships, the Scanners retained their ancient authority over space. Two hundred planets and more were settled in this fashion, including Old North Australia, destined to be the treasure house of them all.

The Emigration Port was a series of low, square buildings nothing like Earthport, which towers above the clouds like a frozen nuclear explosion.

Emigration Port is dour, drab, dreary, and efficient. The walls are black-red like old blood merely because they are cheaper to heat that way. The rockets are ugly and simple; the rocket pits, as inglorious as machine shops. Earth has a few showplaces to tell visitors about. Emigration Port is not one of them. The people who work there get the privilege of real work and secure professional honors. The people who go there become unconscious very soon. What they remember about Earth is a little room like a hospital room, a little bed, some music, some talk, the sleep, and (perhaps) the cold.

From Emigration Port they go to their pods, sealed in. The pods go to the rockets and these to the sailing ship. That's the old way of doing it.

The new way is better. All a person does now is visit a pleasant lounge, or play a game of cards, or eat a meal or two. All he needs is half the wealth of a planet, or a couple hundred years' seniority marked "excellent" without a single break.

The photonic sails were different. Everyone took chances.

A young man, bright of skin and hair, merry at heart, set out for a new world. An older man, his hair touched with gray, went with him. So, too, did thirty thousand others. And also, the most beautiful girl on Earth.

Earth could have kept her, but the new worlds needed her.

She had to go.

She went by light-sail ship. And she had to cross space space, where the danger always waits.

Space sometimes commands strange tools to its uses the screams of a beautiful child, the laminated brain of a long-dead mouse, the heartbroken weeping of a computer. Most space offers no respite, no relay, no rescue, no repair. All dangers must be anticipated; otherwise they become mortal. And the greatest of all hazards is the risk of man himself.

"She's beautiful," said the first technician.

"She's just a child," said the second.

"She won't look like much of a child when they're two hundred years out," said the first.

"But she is a child," said the second, smiling, "a beautiful doll with blue eyes, just going tiptoe into the beginnings of grown-up life." He sighed.

"She'll be frozen," said the first.

"Not all the time," said the second.

"Sometimes they wake up."

They have to wake up. The machines de freeze them. You remember the crimes on the Old Twenty-two. Nice people, but the wrong combinations. And everything went wrong, dirtily, brutally wrong."

They both remembered Old Twenty-two. The hell-ship had drifted between the stars for a long time before its beacon brought rescue. Rescue was much too late.

The ship was in immaculate condition. The sails were set at a correct angle. The thousands of frozen sleepers, strung out behind the ship in their one-body adiabatic pods, would have been in excellent condition, but they had merely been left in open space too long and most of them had spoiled. The inside of the ship there was the trouble. The sailor had failed or died. The reserve passengers had been awakened. They did not get on well with one another. Or else they got on too horribly well, in the wrong way. Out between the stars, encased only by a frail limited cabin, they had invented new crimes and committed them upon each other crimes which a million years of Earth's old wickedness had never brought to the surface of man before.

The investigators of Old Twenty-two had become very sick, reconstructing the events that followed the awakening of the reserve crew; two of them had asked for blanking and had obviously retired from service.

The two technicians knew all about Old Twenty-two as they watched the fifteen-year-old woman sleeping on the table. Was she a woman? Was she a girl? What would happen to her if she did wake up on the flight?

She breathed delicately.

The two technicians looked across her figure at one another and then the first one said: "We'd better call the psychological guard. It's a job for him."

"He can try," said the second.

The psychological guard, a man whose number-name ended in the digits Tiga-be las came cheerfully into the room a half-hour later. He was a dreamy-looking old man, sharp and alert, probably in his fourth rejuvenation. He looked at the beautiful girl on the table and inhaled sharply, "What's this for a ship?"

"No," said the first technician, "it's a beauty contest."

"Don't be a fool," said the psychological guard.

"You mean they are really sending that beautiful child into the Up-and-Out?"

"It's stock," said the second technician. "The people out on Wereld Schemering are running dreadfully ugly, and they flashed a sign to the Big Blink that they had to have better looking people. The Instrumentality is doing right by them. All the people on this ship are handsome or beautiful."

"If she's that precious, why don't they freeze her and put her in a pod? That way she would either get there or she would not. A face as pretty as that," said Tiga-be las "could start trouble anywhere. Let alone a ship. What's her name number

"On the board there," said the first technician. "It's all on the board there. You'll want the others too. They're listed, too, and ready to go on the board."

"Veesey-koosey," read the psychological guard, saying the words aloud, "or five-six. That's a silly name, but it's rather cute." With one last look back at the sleeping girl, he bent to his work of reading the case histories of the people added to the reserve crew. Within ten lines, he saw why the girl was being kept ready for emergencies, instead of sleeping the whole trip through. She had a Daughter Potential of 999.999, meaning that any normal adult of either sex could and would accept her as a daughter after a few minutes of relationship.

She had no skill in herself, no learning, no trained capacities.

But she could remotivate almost anyone older than herself, and she showed a probability of making that remotivated person put up a gigantic fight for life. For her sake. And secondarily the adopter's.

That was all, but it was special enough to put her in the cabin.

She had tested out into the literal truth of the ancient poetic scrap, "the fairest of the daughters of old, old Earth."

When Tiga-be las finished taking his notes from the records, the working time was almost over.

The technicians had not interrupted him. He turned around to look one last time at the lovely girl. She was gone. The second technician had left and the first was cleaning his hands.

"You haven't frozen her?" cried Tiga-be las "I'll have to fix her too, if the safeguard is to work."

"Of course you do," said the first technician.

"We've left you two minutes for it."

"You give me two minutes," said Tiga-be las "to protect a trip of four hundred and fifty years!"

"Do you need more," said the technician, and it was not even a question, except in form.

"Do I?" said Tiga-be las He broke into a smile. "No, I don't. That girl will be safe long after I am dead."

"When do you die?" said the technician, socially.

"Seventy-three years, two months, four days," said Tiga-be las agreeably.

"I'm a fourth-and-last."

"I thought so," said the technician. "You're smart. Nobody starts off that way. We all learn. I'm sure you'll take care of that girl."

They left the laboratory together and ascended to the surface and the cool restful night of Earth.

## II

Late the next day, Tiga-be las came in, very cheerful indeed.

In his left hand he held a drama spoon, full commercial size. In his right hand there was a black plastic cube with shimmering silver contact-points gleaming on its sides. The two technicians greeted him politely.

The psychological guard could not hide his excitement and his pleasure.

"I've got that beautiful child taken care of. The way she is going to be fixed, she'll keep her Daughter Potential, but it's going to be a lot closer to one thousand point double zero than it was with all those nines. I've used a mouse-brain."

"If it's frozen," said the first technician, "we won't be able to put it in the computer. It will have to go forward with the emergency stores."

"This brain isn't frozen," said Tiga-be las indignantly.

"It's been laminated. We stiffened it with cellulprime and then we veneered it down, about seven thousand layers. Each one has plastic of at least two molecular thicknesses. This mouse can't spoil. As a matter of fact, this mouse is going to go on thinking forever.

He won't think much, unless we put the voltage on him, but he'll think. And he can't spoil. This is ceramic plastic, and it would take a major weapon to break it."

"The contacts . . .?" said the second technician.

"They don't go through," said Tiga-be las "This mouse is tuned into that girl's personality, up to a thousand meters. You can put him anywhere in the ship. The case has been hardened. The contacts are just attached on the outside. They feed to nickel-steel counterpart contacts on the inside. I told you, this mouse is going to be thinking when the last human being on the last known planet is dead. And it's going to be thinking about that girl. Forever."

"Forever is an awfully long time," said the first technician, with a shiver.

"We only need a safety period of two thousand years. The girl herself would spoil in less than a thousand years, if anything did go wrong."

"Never you mind," said Tiga-be las "that girl is going to be guarded whether she is spoiled or not." He spoke to the cube.

"You're going along with Veeseey, fellow, and if she is an Old Twenty-two you'll turn the whole thing into a toddle- arden frolic complete with ice cream and hymns to the West Wind." Tigabelas looked up at the other men and said, quite unnecessarily, "He can't hear me."

"Of course not," said the first technician, very dryly. They all looked at the cube. It was a beautiful piece of engineering.

The psychological guard had reason to be proud of it.

"Do you need the mouse any more?" said the first technician.

"Yes," said Tiga-be las "One-third of a millisecond at forty megadynes. I want him to get her whole life printed on his left cortical lobe. Particularly her screams. She screamed badly at ten months. Something she got in her mouth. She screamed at ten when she thought the air had stopped in her drop-shaft. It hadn't, or she wouldn't be here. They're in her record. I want the mouse to have those screams. And she had a pair of red shoes for her fourth birthday. Give me the full two minutes with her. I've printed the key on the complete series of Marcia and the Moon Men that was the best box drama for teen-age girls that they ran last year. Veesey saw it. This time she'll see it again, but the mouse will be tied in. She won't have the chance of a snowball in hell of forgetting it."

Said the first technician,

"What was that?"

"Huh?" said Tiga-be las

"What was that you just said, that, at the end?"

"Are you deaf?"

"No," said the technician huffily. "I just didn't understand what you "I said that she would not have the chance of a snowball in hell of forgetting it." "That's what I thought you said," replied the technician.

"What is a snowball? What is hell? What sort of chances do they make?"

The second technician interrupted eagerly.

"I know," he explained.

"Snowballs are ice formations on Neptune. Hell is a planet out near Khufu VII. I don't know how anybody would get them together."

Tiga-be las looked at them with the weary amazement of the very old. He did not feel like explaining, so he said gently: "Let's leave the literature till another time. All I meant was, Veesey will be safe when she's cued into this mouse. The mouse will outlast her and everybody else, and no teen-age girl is going to forget Marcia and the Moon Men. Not when she saw every single episode twice over. This girl did."

"She's not going to render the other passengers ineffectual?"

That wouldn't help," said the first technician.

"Not a bit," said Tiga-be las

"Give me those strengths again," said the first technician.

"Mouse one-third millisecond at forty megadynes."

"They'll hear that way beyond the moon," said the technician.

"You can't put that sort of stuff into people's heads without a permit. Do you want us to get a special permit from the Instrumentality?"

"For one-third of a millisecond?"

The two men faced each other for a moment; then the technician began creasing his forehead, his mouth began to smile, and they both laughed. The second technician did not understand it and Tiga-be las said to him: "I'm putting the girl's whole lifetime into one-third of a millisecond at top power. It will drain over into the mouse-brain inside this cube. What is the normal human reaction within one third millisecond?"

"Fifteen milliseconds " The second technician started to speak and stopped himself.

"That's right," said Tiga-be las

"People don't get anything at all in less than fifteen milliseconds. This mouse isn't only veneered and laminated; he's fast. The lamination is faster than his own synapses ever were. Bring on the girl."

The first technician had already gone to get her.

The second technician turned back for one more question.

"Is the mouse dead?"

"No. Yes. Of course not. What do you mean? Who knows?" said Tiga-be las all in one breath.

The younger man stared but the couch with the beautiful girl had already rolled into the room.

Her skin had chilled down from pink to ivory and her respiration was no longer visible to the naked eye, but she was still beautiful. The deep freezing had not yet begun. The first technician began to whistle.

"Mouse forty megadynes, one-third of a millisecond. Girl, output maximum, same time. Girl input, two minutes, what volume?"

"Anything," said Tiga-be las "Anything. Whatever you use for deep personality engraving."

"Set," said the technician.

"Take the cube," said Tigabelas.

The technician took it and fitted it into the coffin like box near the girl's head.

"Good-bye, immortal mouse," said Tiga-be las

"Think about the beautiful girl when I am dead and don't get too tired of Marcia and the Moon Men when you've seen it for a million years..."

"Record," said the second technician. He took it from Tigabelas and put it into a standard drama-shower, but one with output cables heavier than any home had ever installed.

"Do you have a code word?" said the first technician.

"It's a little poem," said Tiga-be las He reached in his pocket. "Don't read it aloud. If any of us mis spoke a word, there is a chance she might hear it and it would heterodyne the relationship between her and the laminated mouse."

The two looked at a scrap of paper. In clear, archaic writing there appeared the lines:

*Lady if a man Tries to bother you, you can  
Think blue,  
Count two,  
And look for a red shoe.*

The technicians laughed warmly.

"That'll do it," said the first technician.

Tiga-be las gave them an embarrassed smile of thanks.

"Turn them both on," he said.

"Good-bye, girl," he murmured to himself.

"Good-bye, mouse. Maybe I'll see you in seventy-four years."

The room flashed with a kind of invisible light inside their heads.

In moon orbit a navigator wondered about his mother's red shoes.

Two million people on Earth started to count "one-two" and then wondered why they had done so.

A bright young parakeet, in an orbital ship, began reciting the whole verse and baffled the crew as to what the meaning might be.

Apart from this, there were no side-effects.

The girl in the coffin arched her body with terrible strain. The electrodes had scorched the skin at her temples. The scars stood bright red against the chilled fresh skin of the girl.

The cube showed no sign from the dead-live live-dead mouse.

While the second technician put ointment on Veesey's scars, Tiga-be las put on a headset and touched the terminals of the cube very gently without moving it from the snap-in position it held in the coffin-shaped box.

He nodded, satisfied. He stepped back.

"You're sure the girl got it?"

"We'll read it back before she goes to deep-freeze."

"Marcia and the Moon Men, what?"

"Can't miss it," said the first technician.

"I'll let you know if there's anything missing. There won't be."

Tiga-be las took one last look at the lovely, lovely girl.

Seventy-three years, two months, three days, he thought to himself. And she, beyond Earth



rules, may be awarded a thousand years. And the mouse-brain has got a million years.

Veesey never knew any of them neither the first technician, nor the second technician, nor Tiga-be las the psychological guard.

To the day of her death, she knew that Marcia and the Moon Men had included the most wonderful blue lights, the hypnotic count of "one-two, one-two" and the prettiest red shoes that any girl had seen on or off Earth.

### III

Three hundred and twenty-six years later she had to wake up.

Her box had opened.

Her body ached in every muscle and nerve.

The ship was screaming emergency and she had to get up.

She wanted to sleep, to sleep, or to die.

The ship kept screaming.

She had to get up.

She lifted an arm to the edge of her coffin-bed. She had practiced getting in and out of the bed in the long training period before they sent her underground to be hypnotized and frozen. She knew just what to reach for, just what to expect. She pulled herself over on her side. She opened her eyes.

The lights were yellow and strong. She closed her eyes again.

This time a voice sounded from somewhere near her. It seemed to be saying,

"Take the straw in your mouth."

Veesey groaned.

The voice kept on saying things.

Something scratchy pressed against her mouth.

She opened her eyes.

The outline of a human head had come between her and the light.

She squinted, trying to see if it might be one more of the doctors. No, this was the ship.

The face came into focus.

It was the face of a very handsome and very young man. His eyes looked into hers. She had never seen anyone who was both handsome and sympathetic, quite the way that he was. She tried to see him clearly, and found herself beginning to smile.

The drinking-tube thrust past her lips and teeth.

Automatically she sucked at it. The fluid was something like soup, but it had a medicinal taste too.

The face had a voice.

"Wake up," he said, "wake up. It doesn't do any good to hold back now. You need some exercise as soon as you can manage it."

She let the tube slip from her mouth and gasped,

"Who are you?"

"Trece," he said, "and that's Talatashar over there. We've been up for two months, rescuing the robots. We need your help."

"Help," she murmured, "my help?"

Trece's face wrinkled and crinkled in a delightful grin.

"Well, we sort of needed you. We really do need a third mind to watch the robots when we think we've fixed them. And besides, we're lonely. Talatashar and I aren't much company to each other. We looked over the list of reserve crew and we decided to wake you."

He reached out a friendly hand to her.

When she sat up she saw the other man, Talatashar. She immediately recoiled: she had never seen anyone so ugly. His hair was gray and cropped. Piggy little eyes peered out of eye-sockets which looked flooded with fat. His cheeks hung down in monstrous jowls on either side. On top of all that, his face was lopsided. One side seemed wide awake but the other was twisted in an endless

spasm which looked like agony. She could not help putting her hand to her mouth. And it was with the back of her hand against her lips that she spoke.

"I thought I thought everybody on this ship was supposed to be handsome."

One side of Talatashar's face smiled at her while the other half stayed with its expression of frozen hurt.

"We were," his voice rumbled, and it was not of itself an unpleasant voice, "we all were. Some of us always get spoiled in the freezing. It will take you a while to get used to me." He laughed grimly.

"It took me a while to get used to me. In two months, I've managed. Pleased to meet you. Maybe you'll be pleased to meet me, after a while. What do you think of that, eh, Trece?"

"What?" said Trece, who had watched them both with friendly worry.

"The girl. So tactful. The direct diplomacy of the very young.

Was I handsome, she said. No, say I. What is she, anyhow?"

Trece turned to her.

"Let me help you sit," he said.

She sat up on the edge of her box.

Wordlessly he passed the skin of fluid to her with its drinking tube, and she went back to sucking her broth. Her eyes peered up at the two men like the eyes of a small child. They were as innocent and troubled as the eyes of a kitten which has met worry for the first time.

"What are you?" said Trece.

She took her lips away from the tube for a moment.

"A girl,"

she said.

Half of Talatashar's face smiled a sophisticated smile. The other half moved a little with muscular drag, but expressed nothing.

"We see that," said he, grimly.

"He means," said Trece conciliatorily, "what have you been trained for?"

She took her mouth away again.

"Nothing," said she.

The men laughed both of them. First, Trece laughed with all the evil in the world in his voice. Then Talatashar laughed, and he was too young to laugh his own way. His laughter, too, was cruel. There was something masculine, mysterious, threatening, and secret in it, as though he knew all about things which girls could find out only at the cost of pain and humiliation. He was as alien, for the moment, as men have always been from women: filled with secret motives and concealed desires, driven by bright sharp thoughts which women neither had nor wished to have.

Perhaps more than his body had spoiled.

There was nothing in Veesey's own life to make her fear that laugh, but the instinctive reaction of a million years of womanhood behind her was to disregard the evil, go on the alert for more trouble, and hope for the best at the moment. She knew, from books and tapes, all about sex. This laugh had nothing to do with babies or with love. There was contempt and power and cruelty in it the cruelty of men who are cruel merely because they are men. For an instant she hated both of them, but she was not alarmed enough to set off the trigger of the protective devices which the psychological guard had built into her mind itself.

Instead, she looked down the cabin, ten meters long and four meters wide.

This was home now, perhaps forever. There were sleepers somewhere, but she did not see their boxes. All she had was this small space and the two men Trece with his warm smile, his nice voice, his interesting gray-blue eyes; and Talatashar, with his ruined face. And their laughter. That wretchedly mysterious masculine laughter, hostile and laughing-at in its undertones.

Life's life, she thought, and I must live it. Here. Talatashar, who had finished laughing, now spoke in a very different voice.

"There will be time for the fun and games later. First, we have to get the work done. The photonic sails aren't picking up enough starlight to get us anywhere. The mainsail is ripped by a

meteor. We can't repair it, not when it's twenty miles across. So we have to jury-rig the ship that's the right old word."

"How does it work?" asked Veeseey sadly, not much interested in her own question. The aches and pains of the long freeze were beginning to bedevil her.

Talatashar said,

"It's simple. The sails are coated. We were put into orbit by rockets. The pressure of light is bigger on one side than on the other. With some pressure on one side and virtually no pressure on the other, the ship has to go somewhere.

Interstellar matter is very fine and does not give us enough drag to slow us down. The sails pull away from the brightest source of light at any time. For the first eighty years it was the sun. Then we began trying to get both the sun and some bright patches of light behind it. Now we have more light coming at us than we want, and we will be pulled away from our destination if we do not point the blind side of the sails at the goal and the pushing sides at the next best source. The sailor died, for some reason we can't figure out. The ship's automatic mechanism woke us up and the navigation board explained the situation to us. Here we are.

We have to fix the robots."

"But what's the matter with them? Why don't they do it themselves? Why did they have to wake up people? They're supposed to be so smart." She particularly wondered, Why did they have to wake up me, But she suspected the answer that the men had done it, not the robots and she did not want to make them say it. She still remembered how their masculine laughter had turned ugly.

"The robots weren't programmed to tear up sails only to fix them. We've got to condition them to accept the damage that we want to leave, and to go ahead with the new work which we are adding."

"Could I have something to eat?" asked Veeseey.

"Let me get it!" cried Trece.

"Why not?" said Talatashar.

While she ate, they went over the proposed work in detail, the three of them talking it out calmly. Veeseey felt more relaxed. She had the sensation that they were taking her in as a partner.

By the time they completed their work schedules, they were sure it would take between thirty-five and forty-two normal days to get the sails stiffened and re-hung. The robots did the outside work, but the sails were seventy thousand miles long by twenty thousand miles wide.

Forty-two days!

The work was not forty-two days at all.

It was one year and three days before they finished.

The relationships in the cabin had not changed much.

Talatashar left her alone except to make ugly remarks. Nothing he had found in the medicine cabinet had made him look any better, but some of the things drugged him so that he slept long and well.

Trece had long since become her sweetheart, but it was such an innocent romance that it might have been conducted on grass, under elms, at the edge of an Earthside silky river.

Once she had found them fighting and had exclaimed: "Stop it! Stop it! You can't!"

When they did stop hitting each other, she said wonderingly: "I thought you couldn't. Those boxes. Those safeguards. Those things they put in with us."

And Talatashar said, in a voice of infinite ugliness and finality,

"That's what they thought. I threw those things out of the ship months ago. Don't want them around."

The effect on Trece was dramatic, as bad as if he had walked into one of the Ancient Unselfing Grounds unaware. He stood utterly still, his eyes wide and his voice filled with fear when, at last, he did speak.

"So that's why we fought!"

"You mean the boxes? They're gone, all right."

"But," gasped Trece, "each was protected by each one's box. We were all protected from

ourselves. God help us all!"

"What is God?" said Talatashar.

"Never mind. It's an old word. I heard it from a robot. But what are we going to do? What are you going to do?" said he accusingly to Talatashar.

"Me," said Talatashar,

"I'm doing nothing. Nothing has happened." The working side of his face twisted in a hideous smile.

Veeseey watched both of them.

She did not understand it, but she feared it, that unspecific danger.

Talatashar gave them his ugly, masculine laugh, but this time Trece did not join him. He stared open-mouthed at the other man.

Talatashar put on a show of courage and indifference.

"Shift's up," he said, "and I'm turning in."

Veeseey nodded and tried to say good night but no words came. She was frightened and inquisitive. Of the two, feeling inquisitive was worse. There were thirty odd thousand people all around her, but only these two were alive and present. They knew something which she did not know.

Talatashar made a brave show of it by bidding her, "Mix up something special for the big eating tomorrow.

Mind you do it, girl." He climbed into the wall.

When Veeseey turned toward Trece, it was he who fell into her arms.

"I'm frightened," he said.

"We can face anything in space, but we can't face us. I'm beginning to think that the sailor killed himself. His psychological guard broke down too. And now we're alone with just us. " Veeseey looked instinctively around the cabin.

"It's all the same as before. Just the three of us, and this little room, and the Up-and-Out outside."

"Don't you see it, darling?" He grabbed her by the shoulders. "The little boxes protected us from ourselves. And now there aren't any. We are helpless. There isn't anything here to protect us from us. What hurts man like man? What kills people like people? What danger to us could be more terrible than ourselves?"

She tried to pull away.

"It's not that bad."

Without answering he pulled her to him. He began tearing at her clothes. The jacket and shorts, like his own, were omni-textile and fitted tight. She fought him off but she was not the least bit frightened. She was sorry for him, and at this moment the only thing that worried her was that Talatashar might wake up and try to help her. That would be too much. Trece was not hard to stop.

She got him to sit down and they drifted into the big chair together. His face was as tear-stained as her own. That night, they did not make love.

In whispers, in gasps, he told her the story of Old Twentytwo. He told her that people poured out among the stars and that the ancient things inside people woke up, so that the deeps of their minds were more terrible than the blackest depth of space. Space never committed crimes. It just killed. Nature could transmit death, but only man could carry crime from world to world. Without the boxes, they looked into the bottomless depths of their own unknown selves.

She did not really understand, but she tried as well as she possibly could.

He went to sleep it was long after his shift should have ended murmuring over and over again:

"Veeseey, Veeseey, protect me from me! What can I do now, now, now, so that I won't do something terrible later on? What can I do? Now I'm afraid of me, Veeseey, and afraid of Old Twentytwo. Veeseey, Veeseey, you've got to save me from me. What can I do now, now, now ... ?"

She had no answer and after he slept, she slept. The yellow lights burned brightly on them both. The robot-board, reading that no human being was in the "on" position, assumed complete control of the ship and sails.

Talatashar woke them in the morning.

No one that day, nor any of the succeeding days, said anything about the boxes. There was nothing to say.

But the two men watched each other like unrelated beasts and Veesey herself began watching them in turn. Something wrong and vital had come into the room, some exuberance of life which she had never known existed. It did not smell; she could not see it; she could not reach it with her fingers. It was something real, nevertheless. Perhaps it was what people once called danger.

She tried to be particularly friendly to both the men. It made the feeling diminish within her. But Trece became surly and jealous and Talatashar smiled his untruthful lopsided smile.

#### IV

Danger came to them by surprise.

Talatashar's hands were on her, pulling her out of her own sleeping-box.

She tried to fight but he was as remorseless as an engine.

He pulled her free, turned her around, and let her float in the air. She would not touch the floor for a minute or two, and he obviously counted on getting control of her again. As she twisted in the air, wondering what had happened, she saw Trece's eyes rolling as they followed her movement. Only a fraction of a second later did she realize that she saw Trece too. He was tied up with emergency wire, and the wire which bound him was tied to one of the stanchions in the wall. He was more helpless than she.

A cold deep fear came upon her.

"Is this a crime?" she whispered to the empty air.

"Is this what crime is, what you are doing to me?"

Talatashar did not answer her, but his hands took a firm terrible grip on her shoulders. He turned her around. She slapped at him. He slapped her back, hitting so hard that her jaw felt like a wound.

She had hurt herself accidentally a few times; the doctor robots had always hurried to her aid. But no other human being had ever hurt her. Hurting people why, that wasn't done, except for the games of men! It wasn't done. It couldn't happen. It did.

All in a rush she remembered what Trece had told her about Old Twenty-two, and about what happened to people when they lost their own out sides in space and began making up evil from the people-insides which, after a million and more years of becoming human, still followed them everywhere even into space itself.

This was crime come back to man.

She managed to say it to Talatashar.

"You are going to commit crimes? On this ship? With me?"

His expression was hard to read, with half of his face frozen in a perpetual rictus of unfulfilled laughter. They were facing each other now. Her face was feverish from the pain of his slap, but the good side of his face showed no corresponding imprint of pain from having been struck by her. It showed nothing but strength, alertness, and a kind of attunement which was utterly and unimaginably wrong.

At last he answered her, and it was as if he wandered among the wonders of his own soul.

"I'm going to do what I please. What I please. Do you understand?"

"Why don't you just ask us?" she managed to say. "Trece and I will do anything you want. We're all alone in this little ship, millions of miles from nowhere. Why shouldn't we do what you want? Let him go. And talk to me. We'll do what you want.

Anything. You have rights too."

His laugh was close to a crazy scream.

He put his face close to her and hissed at her so sharply that droplets of his spittle sprayed against her cheek and ear.

"I don't want rights!" he shouted at her.

"I don't want what's mine. I don't want to do right. Do you think I haven't heard the two of

you, night after night, making soft loving sounds when the cabin has gone dark? Why do you think I threw the cubes out of the ship? Why do you think I needed power?"

"I don't know," she said, sadly and meekly. She had not given up hope. As long as he was talking he might talk himself out and become reasonable again. She had heard of robots blowing their circuits, so that they had to be hunted down by other robots. But she had never thought that it might happen to people too.

Talatashar groaned. The history of man was in his groan the anger at life, which promises so much and gives so little, and despair about time, which tricks man while it shapes him. He sat back on the air and let himself drift toward the floor of the cabin, where the magnetic carpeting drew the silky iron filaments in their clothing.

"You're thinking he'll get over this, aren't you?" said he, speaking of himself.

She nodded.

"You're thinking he'll get reasonable and let both of us alone, aren't you?"

She nodded again.

"You're thinking Talatashar, he'll get well when we arrive at Wereld Schemering, and the doctors will fix his face, and then we'll all be happy again. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

She still nodded. Behind her she heard Trece give a loud groan against his gag, but she did not dare take her eyes off Talatashar and his spoiled, horrible face.

"Well, it won't be that way, Veesey," he said. The finality in his voice was almost calm.

"Veesey, you're not going to get there. I'm going to do what I have to do. I'm going to do things to you that no one ever did in space before, and then I'm going to throw your body out the disposal door. But I'll let Trece watch it all before I kill him too.

And then, do you know what I'll do?"

Some strange emotion it was probably fear began tightening the muscles in her throat. Her mouth had become dry.

She barely managed to croak,

"No, I don't know what you'll do then ..."

Talatashar looked as though he were staring inward.

"I don't either," said he, "except that it's not something I want to do. I don't want to do it at all. It's cruel and messy and when I get through I won't have you and him to talk to. But this is something I have to do. It's justice, in a strange way. You've got to die because you're bad. And I'm bad too; but if you die, I won't be so bad."

He looked up at her brightly, almost as though he were normal.

"Do you know what I'm talking about? Do you understand any of it?"

"No. No. No," Veesey stammered, but she could not help it.

Talatashar stared not at her but at the invisible face of his crime-to-come and said, almost cheerfully: "You might as well understand. It's you who will die for it, and then him. Long ago you did me a wrong, a dirty, intolerable wrong. It wasn't the you who's sitting here. You're not big enough or smart enough to do anything as awful as the things that were done to me. It wasn't this you who did it, it was the real, true you instead. And now you are going to be cut and burned and choked and brought back with medicines and cut and choked and hurt again, as long as your body can stand it. And when your body stops, I'm going to put on an emergency suit and shove your dead body out into space with him. He can go out alive, for all I care.

Without a suit, he'll last two gasps. And then part of my justice will be done. That's what people have called crime. It's just justice, private justice that comes out of the deep insides of man. Do you understand, Veesey?"

She nodded. She shook her head. She nodded again. She didn't know how to respond.

"And then there are more things which I'll have to do," he went on, with a sort of purr.

"Do you know what there is outside this ship, waiting for my crime?" She shook her head, and so he answered himself.

"There are thirty thousand people following in their pods behind this ship. I'll pull them in by two and two and I will get young girls. The others I'll throw loose in space. And with the girls I'll

find out what it is what it is I've always had to do, and never knew. Never knew, Veesey, till I found myself out in space with you."

His voice almost went dreamy as he lost himself in his own thoughts. The twisted side of his face showed its endless laugh, but the mobile side looked thoughtful and melancholy, so that she felt there was something inside him which might be understood, if only she had the quickness and the imagination to think of it.

Her throat still dry, she managed to half-whisper at him: "Do you hate me? Why do you want to hurt me? Do you hate girls?"

"I don't hate girls," he blazed,

"I hate me. Out here in space I found it out. You're not a person. Girls aren't people. They are soft and pretty and cute and cuddly and warm, but they have no feelings. I was handsome before my face spoiled, but that didn't matter. I always knew that girls weren't people. They're something like robots. They have all the power in the world and none of the worry. Men have to obey, men have to beg, men have to suffer, because they are built to suffer and to be sorry and to obey. All a girl has to do is to smile her pretty smile or to cross her pretty legs, and the man gives up everything he has ever wanted and fought for, just to be her slave. And then the girl" and at this point he got to screaming again, in a high shrill shout "and then the girl gets to be a woman and she has children, more girls to pester men, more men to be the victims of girls, more cruelty and more slaves. You're so cruel to me, Veesey! You're so cruel that you don't even know you're cruel. If you'd known how I wanted you, you'd have suffered like a person. But you didn't suffer.

You're a girl. Well, you're going to find out now. You will suffer and then you will die. But you won't die until you know how men feel about women."

"Tala," she said, using the nickname they had so rarely used to him, "Tala, that's not so. I never meant you to suffer."

"Of course you didn't," he snapped.

"Girls don't know what they do. That's what makes them girls. They're worse than snakes, worse than machines." He was mad, crazy-mad, in the outer deep of space. He stood up so suddenly that he shot through the air and had to catch himself on the ceiling.

A noise in the side of the cabin made them both turn for a moment. Trece was trying to break loose from his bonds. It did no good. Veesey flung herself toward Trece, but Talatashar caught her by the shoulder. He twisted her around. His eyes blazed at her out of his poor, misshapen face.

Veesey had sometime wondered what death would be like.

She thought: This is it.

Her body still fought Talatashar, there in the space boat cabin.

Trece groaned behind his shackles and his gag. She tried to scratch at Talatashar's eyes, but the thought of death made her seem far away. Far away, inside herself.

Inside herself, where other people could not reach, ever no matter what happened.

Out of that deep nearby remoteness, words came into her head:

*Lady if a man Tries to bother you, you can  
Think blue,  
Count two,  
And look for a red shoe . . .*

Thinking blue was not hard. She just imagined the yellow cabin lights turning blue. Counting "one-two" was the simplest thing in the world. And even with Talatashar straining to catch her free hand, she managed to remember the beautiful, beautiful red shoes which she had seen in Marcia and the Moon Men.

The lights dimmed momentarily and a huge voice roared at them from the control board.

"Emergency, top emergency! People! People out of repair!"

Talatashar was so astonished that he let her go.

The board whined at them like a siren. It sounded as though the computer had become flooded

with weeping.

In an utterly different voice from his impassioned talkative rage, Talatashar looked directly at her and asked, very soberly, "Your cube. Didn't I get your cube too?"

There was a knocking on the wall. A knocking from the millions of miles of emptiness outside. A knocking out of nowhere.

A person they had never seen before stepped into the ship, walking through the double wall as though it had been nothing more than a streamer of mist.

It was a man. A middle-aged man, sharp of face, strong in torso and limbs, clad in very old-style clothes. In his belt he had a whole collection of weapons, and in his hand a whip.

"You there," said the stranger to Talatashar, "untie that man."

He gestured with the whip-butt toward Trece, still bound and gagged.

Talatashar got over his surprise.

"You're a cube-ghost. You're not real!"

The whip hissed in the air and a long red welt appeared on Talatashar's wrist. The drops of blood began to float beside him in the air before he could speak again.

Veesey could say nothing; her mind and body seemed to be blanking out.

As she sank to the floor, she saw Talatashar shake himself, walk over to Trece, and begin untying the knots.

When Talatashar got the gag out of Trece's mouth, Trece spoke not to him, but to the stranger: "Who are you?"

"I do not exist," said the stranger, "but I can kill you, any of you, if I wish. You had better do as I say. Listen carefully. You too," he added, turning halfway around and looking at Veesey.

"You listen too, because it's you who called me."

All three listened. The fight was gone out of them. Trece rubbed his wrists and shook his hands to get the circulation going in them again.

The stranger turned, in courtly and elegant fashion, so that he spoke most directly to Talatashar.

"I derive from the young lady's cube. Did you notice the lights dim? Tiga-be las left a false cube in her freeze-box but he hid me in the ship. When she thought the key notions at me, there was a fraction of a microvolt which called for more power at my terminals. I am made from the brain of some small animal, but I bear the personality and the strength of Tiga-be las I shall last a billion years. When the current came on full power, I became operative as a distortion in your minds. I do not exist," said he, specifically addressing himself to Talatashar, "but if I needed to take out my imaginary pistol and to shoot you in the head with it, my control is so strong that your bone would comply with my command. The hole would appear in your head and your blood and your brains would pour out, just as much as blood is pouring from your hand just now. Look at your hand and believe me, if you wish."

Talatashar refused to look.

The stranger went on in a very deliberate tone.

"No bullet would come from my pistol, no ray, no blast, nothing. Nothing at all. But your flesh would believe me, even if your thoughts did not. Your bone structure would believe me, whether you thought so or not. I am communicating to every separate single cell in your body, to everything which I feel to be alive. If I think bullet at you, your bone will pull aside for the imaginary wound. Your skin will part, your blood will pour out, your brains will splash. They will not do it by physical force but by communication from me. Communication direct, you fool.

That may not be real violence, but it serves my purpose just as well. Now do you understand me? Look at your wrist."

Talatashar did not avert his eyes from the stranger. In an odd cold voice he said,

"I believe you. I guess I am crazy. Are you going to kill me?"

"I don't know," said the stranger.

Trece said,

"Please, are you a person or machine?"

"I don't know," said the stranger to him too.



"What's your name?" asked Veeseey.

"Did you get a name when they made you and sent you with us?"

"My name," said the stranger, with a bow to her, "is Sh'san."

"Glad to meet you, Sh'san," said Trece, holding out his own hand.

They shook hands.

"I felt your hand," said Trece. He looked at the other two in amazement.

"I felt his hand, I really did. What were you doing out in space all this time?"

The stranger smiled.

"I have work to do, not talk to make."

"What do you want us to do," said Talatashar, "now that you've taken over?"

"I haven't taken over," said Sh'san, "and you will do what you have to do. Isn't that the nature of people?"

"But, please " said Veeseey.

The stranger had vanished and the three of them were alone in the space boat cabin again. Trece's gag and bindings had finally drifted down to the carpet but Tala's blood hung gently in the air beside him.

Very heavily, Talatashar spoke.

"Well, we're through that. Would you say I was crazy?"

"Crazy?" said Veeseey. "I don't know the word."

"Damaged in the thinking," explained Trece to her. Turning to Talatashar he began to speak seriously.

"I think that " He was interrupted by the control board. Little bells rang and a sign lighted up. They all saw it. Visitors expected, said the glowing sign.

The storage door opened and a beautiful woman came into the cabin with them. She looked at them as though she knew them all.

Veeseey and Trece were inquisitive and startled, but Talatashar turned white, dead white.

## V

Veeseey saw that the woman wore a dress of the style which had vanished a generation ago a style now seen only in the story-boxes. There was no back to it. The lady had a bold cosmetic design fanning out from her spinal column. In front, the dress hung from the usual magnet tabs which had been inserted into the shallow fatty area of the chest, but in her case the tabs were above the clavicles, so that the dress rose high, with an air of old-fashioned prudishness. Magnet tabs were at the usual place just below the ribcage, holding the half-skirt, which was very full, in a wide sweep of unpressed pleats. The lady wore a necklace and matching bracelet of off-world coral.

The lady did not even look at Veeseey. She went straight to Talatashar and spoke to him with peremptory love.

"Tal, be a good boy. You've been bad."

"Mama," gasped Talatashar. "Mama, you're dead!"

"Don't argue with me," she snapped. "Be a good boy. Take care of the little girl. Where is the little girl?"

She looked around and saw Veeseey.

"That little girl," she added, "be a good boy to that little girl. If you don't, you will break your mother's heart, you will ruin your mother's life, you will break your mother's heart, just like your father did. Don't make me tell you twice."

She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, and it seemed to Veeseey that both sides of the man's face were equally twisted, for that moment.

She stood up, looked around, nodded politely at Trece and Veeseey, and walked back into the storage room, closing the door after her. Talatashar plunged after her, opening the door with a bang and shutting it with a slam. Trece called after him: "Don't stay in there too long. You'll freeze."

Trece added, speaking to Veeseey,

"This is something your cube is doing. That Sh'san, he's the most powerful warden I ever saw.

Your psychological guard must have been a genius. And you know what's the matter with him?" He nodded at the closed door.

"He told me once, just in general. His own mother raised him. He was born in the asteroid belt and she didn't turn him in."

"You mean, his very own mother?" said Veesey.

"Yes, his genealogical mother," said Trece.

"How dirty" said Veesey.

"I never heard of anything like it." Talatashar came back into the room and said nothing to either of them. The mother did not reappear.

But Sh'san, the eidetic man imprinted in the cube, continued to assert his authority over all three of them. Three days later Marcia herself appeared, talked to Veesey for half an hour about her adventures with the Moon Men, and then disappeared again. Marcia never pretended that she was real. She was too pretty to be real. A thick cascade of yellow hair crowned a well-formed head; dark eyebrows arched over vivid brown eyes; and an enchantingly mischievous smile pleased Veesey, Trece, and Talatashar. Marcia admitted that she was the imaginary heroine of a dramatic series from the story-boxes. Talatashar had calmed down completely after the apparition of Sh'san followed by that of his mother. He seemed anxious to get to the bottom of the phenomena. He tried to do it by asking Marcia.

She answered his questions willingly.

"What are you?" he demanded. The friendly smile on the good side of his face was more frightening than a scowl would have been.

"I'm a little girl, silly," said Marcia.

"But you're not real," he insisted.

"No," she admitted, "but are you?" She laughed a happy girlish laugh the teen-ager tying up the bewildered adult in his own paradox.

"Look," he persisted, "you know what I mean. You're just something that Veesey saw in the story-boxes and you've come to give her imaginary red shoes."

"You can feel the shoes after I've left," said Marcia.

"That means the cube has made them out of something on this ship," said Talatashar, very triumphantly.

"Why not?" said Marcia.

"I don't know about ships. I guess he does."

"But even if the shoes are real, you're not," said Talatashar.

"Where do you go when you 'leave' us?"

"I don't know," said Marcia. "I came here to visit Veesey. When I go away I suppose that I will be where I was before I came."

"And where was that?"

"Nowhere," said Marcia, looking solid and real.

"Nowhere? So you admit you're nothing?"

"I will if you want me to," said Marcia, "but this conversation doesn't make much sense to me. Where were you before you were here?"

"Here? You mean in this boat? I was on Earth," said Talatashar.

"Before you were in this universe, where were you?"

"I wasn't born, so I didn't exist."

"Well," said Marcia, "it's the same with me, only a little bit different. Before I existed I didn't exist. When I exist, I'm here. I'm an echo out of Veesey's personality and I'm helping her to remember that she is a pretty young girl. I feel as real as you feel.

So there!"

Marcia went back to talking about her adventures with the Moon Men and Veesey was fascinated to hear all the things they had had to leave out of the story-box version. When Marcia was through, she shook hands with the two men, gave Veesey a little peck of a kiss on her left cheek, and walked through the hull into the gnawing emptiness of space, marked only by the

starless rhomboids of the sails which cut off part of the heavens from view.

Talatashar pounded his fist in his other, open hand.

"Science has gone too far. They will kill us with their precautions."

Trece said, deadly calm,

"And what might you have done?"

Talatashar fell into a gloomy silence.

And on the tenth day after the apparitions began, they ended.

The power of the cube drew itself into a whole thunderbolt of decision. Apparently the cube and the ship's computers had somehow filled in each other's data.

The person who came in this time was a space captain, gray, wrinkled, erect, tanned by the radiation of a thousand worlds.

"You know who I am," he said.

"Yes, sir, a captain," said Veesey.

"I don't know you," said Talatashar, "and I'm not sure I believe in you."

"Has your hand healed?" asked the captain, grimly.

Talatashar fell silent.

The captain called them to attention.

"Listen. You are not going to live long enough to get to the stars on your present course. I want Trece to set the macro-chronography for intervals of ninety-five years, and then I want to watch while he gives two of you at a time five years on watch. That will do to set the sails, check the tangling of the pod lines, and send out report beacons.

This ship should have a sailor, but there is not enough equipment to turn one of you into a sailor, so we'll have to take a chance on the robot controls while all three of you sleep in your freeze-beds.

Your sailor died of a blood clot and the robots pushed him out of the cabin before they woke you " Trece winced.

"I thought he had committed suicide."

"Not a bit," said the captain.

"Now listen. You'll get through in about three sleeps if you obey orders. If you don't, you'll never get there."

"It doesn't matter about me," said Talatashar, "but this little girl has got to get to Wereld Schemering while she still has some life. One of your blasted apparitions told me to take care of her, but the idea is a good one, anyhow."

"Me too," said Trece.

"I didn't realize that she was just a kid until I saw her talking to that other kid Marcia. Maybe I'll have a daughter like her some day."

The captain said nothing to these comments but gave them the full, happy smile of an old, wise man.

An hour later they were through with the checkup of the boat.

The three were ready to go to their separate freeze-beds. The captain was getting ready to make his farewell.

Talatashar spoke up.

"Sir, I can't help asking it, but who are you?"

"A captain," said the captain promptly.

"You know what I mean," said Tala wearily.

The captain seemed to be looking inside himself.

"I am a temporary, artificial personality created out of your minds by the personality which you call Sh'san. Sh'san is on the ship, but hidden from you, so that you will do him no harm. Sh'san was imprinted with the personality of a man, a real man, by the name of Tiga-be las Sh'san was also imprinted with the personalities of five or six good space officers, just in case those skills might be needed. A small amount of static electricity keeps Sh'san on the alert, and when he is in the right position, he has a triggering mechanism which can call for more current from the ship's supply."

"But what is he? What are you?" Talatashar kept on, almost pleading.

"I was about to commit a terrible crime and you ghosts came in and saved me. Are you imaginary? Are you real?"

"That's philosophy. I'm made by science. I wouldn't know," said the captain.

"Please," said Veesey, "could you tell us what it seems like to you? Not what it is. What it seems like."

The captain sagged, as though the discipline had gone out of him as though he suddenly felt terribly old.

"When I'm talking and doing things, I suppose that I feel about like any other space captain. If I stop to think about it, I find myself pretty upsetting.

I know that I'm just an echo in your minds, combined with the experience and wisdom which has gone into the cube. So I guess that I do what real people do. I just don't think about it very much.

I mind my business." He stiffened and straightened and was himself again.

"My own business," he repeated.

"And Sh'san," said Trece, "how do you feel about him?"

A look of awe almost a look of terror came upon the captain's face.

"He? Oh, him." The tone of wonder enriched his voice and made it echo in the small cabin of the space boat "Sh'san. He is the thinker of all thinking, the 'to be' of being, the doer of doings. He is powerful beyond your strongest imagination.

He makes me come living out of your living minds. In fact," said the captain with a final snarl, "he is a dead mouse-brain laminated with plastic and I have no idea at all of who I am. Good night to you all!"

The captain set his cap on his head and walked straight through the hull. Veesey ran to a viewpoint but there was nothing outside the ship. Nothing. Certainly no captain.

"What can we do," said Talatashar, "but obey?"

They obeyed. They climbed into their freeze-beds. Talatashar attached the correct electrodes to Veesey and to Trece before he went to his bed and attached his own. They called to each other pleasantly as the lids came down.

They slept.

## VI

At destination, the people of Wereld Schemering did the in gathering of pods, sails, and ship themselves. They did not wake the sleepers till they had them all assured of safety on the ground.

They woke the three cab inmates together. Veesey, Trece, and Talatashar were so busy answering questions about the dead sailor, about the repaired sails, and about their problems on the trip that they did not have time to talk to each other. Veesey saw that Talatashar seemed to be very handsome. The port doctors had done something to restore his face, so that he seemed a strangely dignified young-old man. At last Trece had a chance to talk to her.

"Good-bye, kid," he said. "Go to school for a while here and then find yourself a good man. I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" she said, a terrible fear rising within her.

"For smooching around with you before that trouble came. You're just a kid. But you're a good kid." He ran his fingers through her hair, turned on his heel, and was gone.

She stood, utterly forlorn, in the middle of the room. She wished that she could weep. What use had she been on the trip?

Talatashar had come up to her unnoticed.

He held out his hand. She took it.

"Give it time, child," said he. Is it child again? she thought to herself. To him she said, politely,

"Maybe we'll see each other again. This is a pretty small world."

His face lit up in an oddly agreeable smile. It made such a wonderful difference for the paralysis to be gone from one side.

He did not look old at all, not really old.

His voice took on urgency.

"Veesey, remember that I remember. I remember what almost happened. I remember what we thought we saw. Maybe we did see all those things. We won't see them on the ground. But I want you to remember this. You saved us all. Me too. And Trece, and the thirty thousand out behind."

"Me?" she said.

"What did I do?"

"You tuned in help. You let Sh'san work. It all came through you. If you hadn't been honest and kind and friendly, if you hadn't been terribly intelligent, no cube could have worked. That wasn't any dead mouse working miracles on us. It was your mind and your own goodness that saved us. The cube just added the sound effects. I tell you, if you hadn't been along, two dead men would be sailing off into the Big Nothing with thirty thousand spoiling bodies trailing along behind. You saved us all. You may not know how you did it, but you did."

An official tapped him on the arm; Tala said, firmly but politely, to him,

"Just a moment."

"That's it, I guess," he said to her.

A contrary spirit seized her; she had to speak, though she risked un-happiness by talking.

"And what you said about girls ... then . . . that time?"

"I remember it." His face twisted almost back to its old ugliness for a moment.

"I remember it. But I was wrong. Wrong."

She looked at him and she thought in her own mind about the blue sky, about the two doors behind them, and about the red shoes in her luggage. Nothing miraculous happened. No Sh'san, no voices, no magic cubes.

Except that he turned around, came back to her, and said, "Look. Let's make sure that we see each other next week. These people at the desk can tell us where we are going to be, so that we'll find each other. Let's pester them."

Together they went to the immigration desk.

# The Colonel Came Back from the Nothing-at-All

## I. The Naked and Alone

We looked through the peephole of the hospital door.

Colonel Harkening had torn off his pajamas again and lay naked face down on the floor.

His body was rigid.

His face was turned sharply to the left so that the neck muscles showed. His right arm stuck out straight from the body. The elbow formed a right angle, with the forearm and hand pointing straight upward. The left arm also pointed straight out, but in this case the hand and forearm pointed downward in line with the body.

The legs were in the grotesque parody of a running position.

Except that Colonel Harkening wasn't running.

He was lying flat on the floor.

Flat, as though he were trying to squeeze himself out of the third dimension and to lie in two planes only. Grosbeck stood back and gave Timofeyev his turn at the peephole.

"I still say he needs a naked woman," said Grosbeck. Grosbeck always went in for the elementals.

We had atropine, surgital, a whole family of the digitalinids assorted narcotics, electrotherapy, hydrotherapy, subsonic therapy temperature shock, audiovisual shock, mechanical hypnosis, and gas hypnosis.

None of these had had the least effect on Colonel Harkening.

When we picked the colonel up he tried to lie down.

When we put clothes on him he tore them off.

We had already brought his wife to see him. She had wept because the world had acclaimed her husband a hero, dead in the vast, frightening emptiness of space. His miraculous return had astonished seven continents on Earth and the settlements on Venus and Mars.

Harkening had been test pilot for the new device which had been developed by a team at the Research Office of the Instrumentality.

They called it a chronoplast, though a minority held out for the term planoform.

The theory of it was completely beyond me, though the purpose was simple enough. Crudely stated, the theory sought to compress living, material bodies into a two-dimensional frame while skipping the living body and its material adjuncts through two dimensions only to some inconceivably remote point in space. As our technology now stood it would have taken us a century at the least to reach Alpha Centauri, the nearest star.

Desmond, the Harkening, who held the titular rank of colonel under the Chiefs of the Instrumentality, was one of the best space navigators we had. His eyes were perfect, his mind cool, his body superb, his experience first-rate: What more could we ask?

Humanity had sent him out in a minute spaceship not much larger than the elevator in an ordinary private home. Somewhere between Earth and the Moon with millions of televideo watchers following his course, he had disappeared.

Presumably he had turned on the chronoplast and had been the first man to planoform.

We never saw his craft again.

But we found the colonel, all right.

He lay naked in the middle of Central Park in New York, which lay about a hundred miles west of the Ancient Ruins.

He lay in the grotesque position in which we had just observed him in the hospital cell, forming a sort of human starfish.

Four months had passed and we had made very little progress with the colonel.

It was not much trouble keeping him alive since we fed him by massive rectal and intravenous administrations of the requisites of medical survival. He did not oppose us. He did not fight except when we put clothes on him or tried to keep him too long out of the horizontal plane.

When kept upright too long he would awaken just enough to go into a mad, silent, gloating rage, fighting the attendants, the straitjacket, and anything else that got in his way.

We had had one hellish time in which the poor man suffered for an entire week, bound firmly in canvas and struggling every minute of the week to get free and to resume his nightmarish position.

The wife's visit last week had done no more good than I expected Grosbeck's suggestion to do this week.

The colonel paid no more attention to her than he paid to us doctors.

If he had come back from the stars, come back from the cold beyond the Moon, come back from all the terrors of the Up-and Out come back by means unknown to any man living, come back in a form not himself and nevertheless himself, how could we expect the crude stimuli of previous human knowledge to awaken him?

When Timofeyev and Grosbeck turned back to me after looking at him for the some-thousandth time, I told them I did not think we could make any progress with the case by ordinary means.

"Let's start all over again. This man is here. He can't be here because nobody can come back from the stars, mother-naked in his own skin, and land from outer space in Central Park so gently that he shows not the slightest abrasion from a fall. Therefore, he isn't in that room, you and I aren't talking about anything, and there isn't any problem. Is that right?"

"No," they chorused simultaneously.

I turned on Grosbeck as the more obdurate of the two.

"Have it your way then. He is there, major premise. He can't be there, minor premise. We don't exist. Q.E.D. That suit you any better?"

"No, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader," said Grosbeck, sticking to the courtesies even though he was angry. "You are trying to destroy the entire context of this case, and, by doing so, are trying to lead us even further into unorthodox methods of treatment. Lord and Heaven, sir! We can't go any further that way. This man is crazy. It doesn't matter how he got into Central Park. That's a problem for the engineers. It's not a medical problem. His craziness *is* a medical problem. We can try to cure it, or we can try not to cure it. But we won't get anywhere if we mix the medicine with the engineering "

"It's not that bad," interjected Timofeyev gently.

As the older of my associates he had the right to address me by my short title. He turned to me. "I agree with you, sir and doctor Anderson, that the engineering is mixed up with this man's mental and physical state. After all, he is the first person to go out in a chronoplast and neither we nor the engineers nor anybody else has the faintest idea of what happened to him. The engineers can't find the machine, and we can't find his consciousness. Let's leave the machine to the engineers, but let's persevere on the medical side of the case."

I said nothing, waiting for them to let off steam until they were prepared to reason with me and not just shout at me in their desperation.

They looked at me, keeping their silence grudgingly, and trying to make me take the initiative in the unpleasant case.

"Open the cell door," I said. "He's not going to run away in that position. All he wants to do is be flat."

"Flatter than a Scotch pancake in a Chinese hell," said Grosbeck, "and you're not going to get anywhere by leaving him in his flatness. He was a human being once and the only way to make a human being be a human being is to appeal to the human being side of him, not to some imaginary flat side that got thrown into him while he was out wherever he was."

Grosbeck himself smiled a lopsided grin; he was capable of seeing the humor of his own vehemence at times. "Shall we say he was out underneath space, sir and doctor, Chief and Leader?"

"That's a good way to put it," I said. "You can try your naked woman idea later on, but I frankly don't think it's going to do any good. That man isn't corticating at a level above that of the simplest invertebrates except when he's in that grotesque position. If he's not thinking, he's not seeing. If he's not seeing, he won't see a woman any more than anything else. There's nothing wrong with the body. The trouble lies in the brain. I still see it as a problem of getting into the brain."

"Or the soul," breathed Timofeyev, whose full name was Herbert Hoover Timofeyev, and who came from the most religious part of Russia. "You can't leave the soul out sometimes, doctor..."

We had entered the cell and stood there looking helplessly at the naked man.

The patient breathed very quietly. His eyes were open; we had not been able to make the eyes blink, even with a photoflash. The patient acquired a grotesque and elementary humanity when he was taken out of his flat position. His mind reached, intellectually speaking, a high point no higher than that of a terrorized, panicked, momentarily deranged squirrel. When clothed or out of position he fought madly, hitting indiscriminately at objects and persons.

Poor Colonel Harkening! We three were supposed to be the best doctors on Earth, and we could do nothing for him.

We had even tried to study his way of fighting to see whether the muscular and eye movements involved in the struggle revealed where he had been or what experiences he had undergone. Even that was fruitless. He fought something after the fashion of a nine-month-old infant, using his adult strength, but using it indiscriminately.

We never got a sound out of him.

He breathed hard as he fought. His sputum bubbled. Froth appeared on his lips. His hands made clumsy movements to tear away the shirts and robes and walkers which we put on him. Sometimes his fingernails or toenails tore his own skin as he got free of gloves or shoes.

He always went back to the same position:

On the floor.



Face down.

Arms and legs in swastika form.

There he was back from outer space. He was the first man to return, and yet he had not really returned.

As we stood there helpless, Timofeyev made the first serious suggestion we had gotten that day.

"Do you dare to try a secondary telepath?"

Grosbeck looked shocked.

I dared to give the subject thought. Secondary tele paths were in bad repute because they were supposed to come into the hospitals and have their telepathic capacities removed once it had been proved that they were not true telepaths with a real capacity for complete interchange.

Under the Ancient Law many of them could and did elude us.

With their dangerous part-telepathic capacities they took up charlatan-ism and fakery of the worst kind, pretending to talk with the dead, precipitating neurotics into psychotics, healing a few sick people and bungling ten other cases for each case that they did heal, and, in general, disturbing the good order of society.

And yet, if everything else had failed . . .

## II. The Secondary Telepath

A day later we were back in Harkening's hospital cell, almost in the same position.

The three of us stood around the naked body on the floor.

There was a fourth person with us, a girl.

Timofeyev had found her. She was a member of his own religious group, the Post-Soviet Orthodox Eastern Quakers. You could tell when they spoke Anglic because they used the word "thou" from the Ancient English Language instead of the word "thee."

Timofeyev looked at me.

I nodded at him very quietly.

He turned to the girl. "Canst thou help him, sister?"

The child was scarcely more than twelve. She was a little girl with a long, lean face, a soft, mobile mouth, quick gray-green eyes, a mop of tan hair that fell over her shoulders. She had expressive, tapering hands. She showed no shock at all at the sight of the naked man lost in the depths of his insanity. She knelt down on the floor and spoke gently directly into the ear of Colonel Harkening.

"Canst thou hear me, brother? I have come to help thee. I am thy sister Liana. I am thy sister under the love of God. I am thy sister born of the flesh of man. I am thy sister under the sky. I am thy sister come to help thee. I am thy sister, brother. I am thy sister. Waken a little and I can help thee. Waken a little to the words of thy sister. Waken a little for the love and the hope. Waken to let the love come in. Waken to let the love awaken thee further. Waken to let mankind get thee. Waken to return again, return again to the realm of man. The realm of man is a friendly realm. The friendship of man is a friendly thing. Thy friend is thy sister, by the name of Liana. Thy friend is here. Waken a little to the words of thy friend . . ."

As she talked on I saw that she made a gentle movement with her left hand, motioning us out of the room.

I nodded to my two colleagues, jerking my head to indicate that we should step out in the corridor. We stepped just beyond the door so that we could still look in.

The child went on with her endless chant.

Grosbeck stood rigid, glaring at her as though she were an intrusion into the field of regular medicine. Timofeyev tried to look sweet, benevolent, and spiritual; he forgot and, instead, just looked excited. I got very tired and began to wonder when I could interrupt the child. It did not seem to me that she was getting anywhere.

She herself settled the matter.

She burst into tears.

She went on talking as she wept, her voice broken with sobs, the tears from her eyes pouring down her cheeks and dropping on the face of the colonel just below her face.

The colonel might as well have been made of porcelainized concrete.

I could see his breathing, but the pupils of his eyes did not move. He was no more alive than he had been all these weeks. No more alive, and no less alive.

No change. At last the girl gave up her weeping and talking and came out to the corridor to us.

She spoke to me directly. "Art thou a brave man, Anderson, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader."

It was a silly question. How does anybody answer a question like that? All I could say was "I suppose so. What do you want to do?"

"I want you three," said she as solemnly as a witch. "I want you three to wear the helmet of the pin lighters and ride with me into hell itself. That soul is lost. It is frozen by a force I do not know, frozen out beyond the stars, where the stars caught it and made it their own, so that the poor man and brother that thou seest is truly among us, but his soul weeps in the unholy pleasure between the stars where it is lost to the mercy of God and to the friendship of mankind. Wilt thou, o brave man, sir and doctor, Chief and Leader, ride with me to hell itself?"

What could I say but yes?

### III. The Return

Late that night we made the return from the Nothing-at-All. There were five pin lighters helmets, crude things, mechanical correctives to natural telepathy, devices to throw the synapses of one mind into another so that all five of us could think the same thoughts.

It was the first time that I had been in contact with the minds of Grosbeck and Timofeyev. They surprised me.

Timofeyev really was clean all the way through, as clean and simple as washed linen. He was really a very simple man. The urgencies and pressures of his everyday life did not go down to the insides.

Grosbeck was very different. He was as alive, as cackling, and as violent as a whole barnyard full of fowl: His mind was dirty in spots, clean in others. It was bright, smelly, alive, vivid, moving.

I caught an echo of my own mind from them. To Timofeyev I seemed cold, high, icy, and mysterious; to Grosbeck I looked like a solid lump of coal. He couldn't see into my mind very much and he didn't even want to.

We all sensed out toward Liana, and in reaching for the sense of-the-mind of Liana we encountered the mind of the colonel . . .

Never have I encountered something so terrible.

It was raw pleasure.

As a doctor I have seen pleasure the pleasure of morphine which destroys, the pleasure of fen nine which kills and ruins, even the pleasure of the electrode buried in the living brain.

As a doctor I had been required to see the wickedest of men kill themselves under the law. It was a simple thing we did. We put a thin wire directly into the pleasure center of the brain. The bad man then put his head near an electric field of the right phase and voltage. It was simple enough. He died of pleasure in a few hours.

This was worse.

This pleasure was not in human form.

Liana was somewhere near and I caught her thoughts as she said, "We must go there, sirs and doctors, Chiefs and Leaders.

"We must go there together, the four of us, go to where no man was, go to the Nothing-at-All, go to the hope and the heart of the pain, go to the pain which return may this man, go to the power which is greater than space, go to the power which has sent him home, go to the place which is not a place, find the force which is not a force, force the force which is not a force to give this heart and spare it back to us.

"Come with me if you come at all. Come with me to the end of things. Come with me " Suddenly there was a flash as of sheet lightning in our minds.

It was bright lightning, bright, delicate, multicolored, gentle. Suffusing everything, it was like a cascade of pure color, pastel in hue, but intense in its brightness. The light came. The light came.

The light came, I say.

Strange.

And it was gone.

That was all.

The experience was so quick that it could hardly be called instantaneous. It seemed to happen less than instantaneously, if you can imagine that. We all five felt that we had been befriended, looked at. We felt that we had been made the toys or the pets of some gigantic form of life immensely beyond the limits of human imagination, and that that life in looking at the four of us the three doctors and Liana had seen us and the colonel and had realized that the colonel needed to go back to his own kind.

Because it was five, not four, who stood up.

The colonel was trembling, but he was sane. He was alive. He was human again. He said very weakly:

"Where am I? Is this an Earth hospital?"

And then he fell into Timofeyev's arms.

Liana was already gliding out the door.

I followed her out.

She turned on me. "Sir and doctor, Chief and Leader, all I ask is no thanks, and no money, no notice and no word of what has happened. My powers come from the goodness of the Lord's grace and from the friendliness of mankind. I should not intrude into the field of medicine. I should not have come if thy friend Timofeyev had not asked me as a matter of common mercy. Claim the credit for thy hospital, sir and doctor. Chief and Leader, but thou and thy friends should forget me."

I stammered at her, "But the reports? .. "

"Write the reports any way thou wishes, but mention me not."

"But our patient. He is our patient, too. Liana."

She smiled a smile of great sweetness, of girlish and childish friendliness.

"If he need me, I shall come to him . . ."

The world was better, but not much the wiser.

The chronoplast spaceship was never found. The colonel's return was never explained. The colonel never left Earth again. All he knew was that he had pushed a button out somewhere near the Moon and that he had then awakened in a hospital after four months had been unaccountably lost.

And all the world knew was that he and his wife had unaccountably adopted a strange but beautiful little girl, poor in family, but rich in the mild generosity of her own spirit.

# The Game of Rat and Dragon

*Captain Wow and the other feline characters were inspired by cats living in the Linebarger home when this story was written—at a single sitting one afternoon in 1954. The discovery of planoforming, which forces men to brave the terrors of space, was described in an unpublished story written the next year ... a story which may never appear now, since its theme was later reworked in "Drunkboat"*

*Only            partners            could            fight            this            deadliest            of  
wars—and            the            one            way            to            dissolve            the  
partnership was to be personally dissolved!*

Illustrated by HUNTER





## I. The Table

Pinlighting is a hell of a way to earn a living. Underhill was furious as he closed the door behind himself. It didn't make much sense to wear a uniform and look like a soldier if people didn't appreciate what you did.

He sat down in his chair, laid his head back in the headrest and pulled the helmet down over his forehead.

As he waited for the pin-set to warm up, he remembered the girl in the outer corridor. She had looked at it, then looked at him scornfully.

"Meow." That was all she had said. Yet it had cut him like a knife.

What did she think he was—a fool, a loafer, a uniformed nonentity? Didn't she know that for every half hour of pinlighting, he got a minimum of two months' recuperation in the hospital?

By now the set was warm. He felt the squares of space around him, sensed himself at the middle of an immense grid, a cubic grid, full of nothing. Out in that nothingness, he could sense the hollow aching horror of space itself and could feel the terrible anxiety which his mind encountered whenever it met the faintest trace of inert dust.

As he relaxed, the comforting solidity of the Sun, the clock-work of the familiar planets and the Moon rang in on him. Our own solar system was as charming and as simple as an ancient cuckoo clock filled with familiar ticking and with reassuring noises. The odd little moons of Mars swung around their planet like frantic mice, yet their regularity was itself an assurance that all was well. Far above the plane of the ecliptic, he could feel half a ton of dust more or less drifting outside the lanes of human travel.

Here there was nothing to fight, nothing to challenge the mind, to tear the living soul out of a body with its roots dripping in effluvium as tangible as blood.

Nothing ever moved in on the Solar System. He could wear the pin-set forever and be nothing more than a sort of telepathic astronomer, a man who could feel the hot, warm protection of the Sun throbbing and burning against his living mind.

Woodley came in.

"Same old ticking world," said Underhill. "Nothing to report. No wonder they didn't develop the pin-set until they began to planoform. Down here with the hot Sun around us, it feels so good and so quiet. You can feel everything spinning and turning. It's nice and sharp and compact. It's sort of like sitting around home."

Woodley grunted. He was not much given to flights of fantasy.

Undeterred, Underhill went on, "It must have been pretty good to have been an Ancient Man. I wonder why they burned up their world with war. They didn't have to planoform. They didn't have to go out to earn their livings among the stars. They didn't have to dodge the Rats or play the Game. They couldn't have invented pinlighting because they didn't have any need of it, did they, Woodley?"

Woodley grunted, "Uh-huh." Woodley was twenty-six years old and due to retire in one more year. He already had a farm picked out. He had gotten through ten years of hard work pinlighting with the best of them. He had kept his sanity by not thinking very much about his job, meeting the strains of the task whenever he had to meet them and thinking nothing more about his duties until the next emergency arose.

Woodley never made a point of getting popular among the Partners. None of the Partners liked him very much. Some of them even resented him. He was suspected of thinking ugly thoughts of the Partners on occasion, but since none of the Partners ever thought a complaint in articulate form, the other pinlighters and the Chiefs of the Instrumentality left him alone.

Underhill was still full of the wonder of their job. Happily he babbled on, "What does happen to us when we planoform? Do you think it's sort of like dying? Did you ever see anybody who had his soul pulled out?"

"Pulling souls is just a way of talking about it," said Woodley. "After all these years, nobody knows whether we have souls or not."

"But I saw one once. I saw what Dogwood looked like when he came apart. There was something funny. It looked wet and sort of sticky as if it were bleeding and it went out of him—and you know what they did to Dogwood? They took him away, up in that part of the hospital where you and I never go—way up at the top part where the others are, where the others always have to go if they are alive after the Rats of the Up-and-Out have gotten them."

Woodley sat down and lit an ancient pipe. He was burning something called tobacco in it. It was a dirty sort of habit, but it made him look very dashing and adventurous.

"Look here, youngster. You don't have to worry about that stuff. Pinlighting is getting better all the time. The Partners are getting better. I've seen them pinlight two Rats forty-six million miles apart in one and a half milliseconds. As long as people had to try to work the pin-sets themselves, there was always the chance that with a minimum of four hundred milliseconds for the human mind to set a pinlight, we wouldn't light the Rats up fast enough to protect our planoforming ships. The Partners have changed all that. Once they get going, they're faster than Rats. And they always will be. I know it's not easy, letting a Partner share your mind—"

"It's not easy for them, either," said Underhill.



"Don't worry about them. They're not human. Let them take care of themselves. I've seen more pinlighters go crazy from monkeying around with Partners than I have ever seen caught by the Rats. How many do you actually know of them that got grabbed by Rats?"

Underhill looked down at his fingers, which shone green and purple in the vivid light thrown by the tuned-in pin-set, and counted ships. The thumb for the *Andromeda*, lost with crew and passengers, the index finger and the middle finger for *Release Ships* 43 and 56, found with their pin-sets burned out and every man, woman, and child on board dead or insane. The ring finger, the little finger, and the thumb of the other hand were the first three battleships to be lost to the Rats—lost as people realized that there was something out there *underneath space itself* which was alive, capricious and malevolent.

Planoforming was sort of funny. It felt like like—

Like nothing much.

Like the twinge of a mild electric shock.

Like the ache of a sore tooth bitten on for the first time.

Like a slightly painful flash of light against the eyes.

Yet in that time, a forty-thousand-ton ship lifting free above Earth disappeared somehow or other into two dimensions and appeared half a light-year or fifty light-years off.

At one moment, he would be sitting in the Fighting Room, the pin-set ready and the familiar Solar System ticking around inside his head. For a second or a year (he could never tell how long it really was, subjectively), the funny little flash went through him and then he was loose in the Up-and-Out, the terrible open spaces between the stars, where the stars themselves felt like pimples on his telepathic mind and the planets were too far away to be sensed or read.

Somewhere in this outer space, a gruesome death awaited, death and horror of a kind which Man had never encountered until he reached out for inter-stellar space itself. Apparently the light of the suns kept the Dragons away.

Dragons. That was what people called them. To ordinary people, there was nothing, nothing except the shiver of planoforming and the hammer blow of sudden death or the dark spastic note of lunacy descending into their minds.

But to the telepaths, they were Dragons.

In the fraction of a second between the telepaths' awareness of a hostile something out in the black, hollow nothingness of space and the impact of a ferocious, ruinous psychic blow against all living things within the ship, the telepaths had sensed entities something like the Dragons of ancient human lore, beasts more clever than beasts, demons more tangible than demons, hungry vortices of aliveness and hate compounded by unknown means out of the thin tenuous matter between the stars.

It took a surviving ship to bring back the news—a ship in which, by sheer chance, a telepath had a light beam ready, turning it out at the innocent dust so that, within the panorama of his mind, the Dragon dissolved into nothing at all and the other passengers, themselves non-telepathic, went about their way not realizing that their own immediate deaths had been averted.

From then on, it was easy—almost.

Planoforming ships always carried telepaths. Telepaths had their sensitiveness enlarged to an immense range by the pin-sets, which were telepathic amplifiers adapted to the mammal mind. The pin-sets in turn were electronically geared into small dirigible light bombs. Light did it.

Light broke up the Dragons, allowed the ships to reform three-dimensionally, skip, skip, skip, as they moved from star to star.

The odds suddenly moved down from a hundred to one against mankind to sixty to forty in mankind's favor.

This was not enough. The telepaths were trained to become ultrasensitive, trained to become aware of the Dragons in less than a millisecond.

But it was found that the Dragons could move a million miles in just under two milliseconds and that this was not enough for the human mind to activate the light beams.

Attempts had been made to sheath the ships in light at all times.

This defense wore out.

As mankind learned about the Dragons, so too, apparently, the Dragons learned about mankind. Somehow they flattened their own bulk and came in on extremely flat trajectories very quickly.

Intense light was needed, light of sunlike intensity. This could be provided only by light bombs. Pinlighting came into existence.

Pinlighting consisted of the detonation of ultra-vivid miniature photonuclear bombs, which converted a few ounces of a magnesium isotope into pure visible radiance.



The odds kept coming down in mankind's favor, yet ships were being lost.

It became so bad that people didn't even want to find the ships because the rescuers knew what they would see. It was sad to bring back to Earth three hundred bodies ready for burial and two hundred or three hundred lunatics, damaged beyond repair, to be wakened, and fed, and cleaned, and put to sleep, wakened and fed again until their lives were ended.

Telepaths tried to reach into the minds of the psychotics who had been damaged by the Dragons, but they found nothing there beyond vivid spouting columns of fiery terror bursting from the primordial id itself, the volcanic source of life.

Then came the Partners.

Man and Partner could do together what Man could not do alone. Men had the intellect. Partners had the speed.

The Partners rode their tiny craft, no larger than footballs, outside the spaceships. They planoformed with the ships. They rode beside them in their six-pound craft ready to attack.

The tiny ships of the Partners were swift. Each carried a dozen pinlights, bombs no bigger than thimbles.

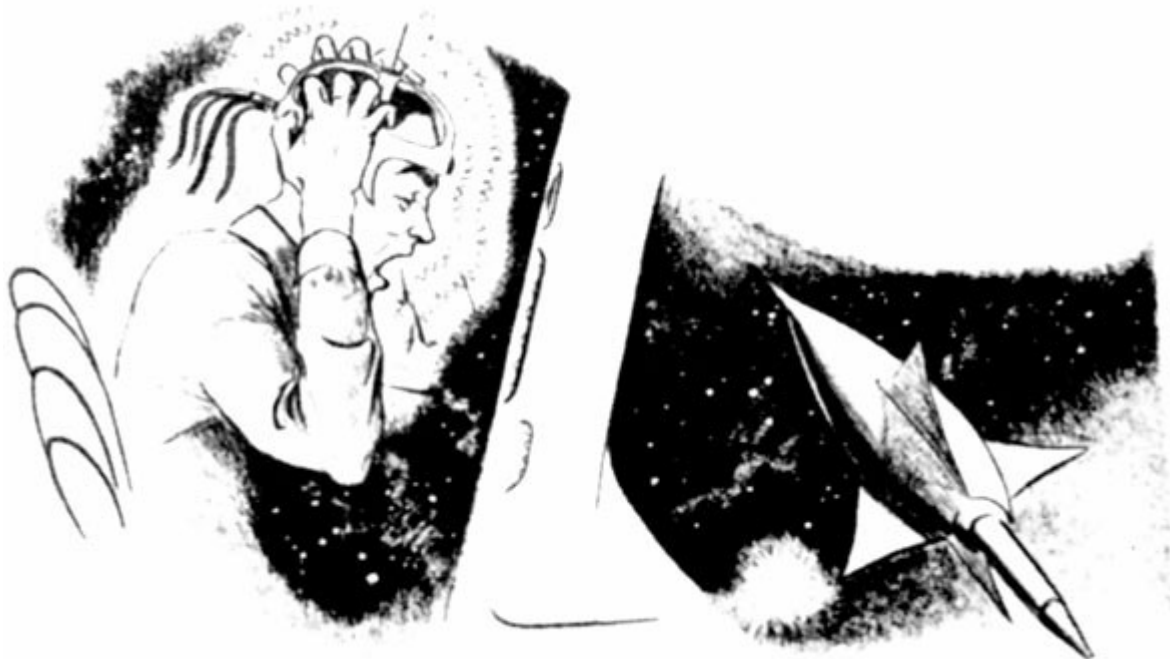
The pinlighters threw the Partners—quite literally threw—by means of mind-to-firing relays direct at the Dragons.

What seemed to be Dragons to the human mind appeared in the form of gigantic Rats in the minds of the Partners.

Out in the pitiless nothingness of space, the Partners' minds responded to an instinct as old as life. The Partners attacked, striking with a speed faster than Man's, going from attack to attack until the Rats or themselves were destroyed. Almost all the time, it was the Partners who won.

With the safety of the inter-stellar skip, skip, skip of the ships, commerce increased immensely, the population of all the colonies went up, and the demand for trained Partners increased.

Underhill and Woodley were a part of the third generation of pinlighters and yet, to them, it seemed as though their craft had endured forever.



Gearing space into minds by means of the pin-set, adding the Partners to those minds, keying up the mind for the tension of a fight on which all depended—this was more than human synapses could stand for long. Underhill needed his two months' rest after half an hour of fighting. Woodley needed his retirement after ten years of service. They were young. They were good. But they had limitations.

So much depended on the choice of Partners, so much on the sheer luck of who drew whom.

## II. The Shuffle

Father Moontree and the little girl named West entered the room. They were the other two pinlighters. The human complement of the Fighting Room was now complete.

Father Moontree was a red-faced man of forty-five who had lived the peaceful life of a farmer until he reached his fortieth year. Only then, belatedly, did the authorities find he was telepathic and agree to let him late in life enter upon the career of pinlighter. He did well at it, but he was fantastically old for this kind of business.

Father Moontree looked at the glum Woodley and the musing Underhill. "How're the youngsters today? Ready for a good fight?"

"Father always wants a fight," giggled the little girl named West. She was such a little little girl. Her giggle was high and childish. She looked like the last person in the world one would expect to find in the rough, sharp dueling of pinlighting.

Underhill had been amused one time when he found one of the most sluggish of the Partners coming away happy from contact with the mind of the girl named West.

Usually the Partners didn't care much about the human minds with which they were paired for the journey. The Partners seemed to take the attitude that human minds were complex and fouled up beyond belief, anyhow. No Partner ever questioned the superiority of the human mind, though very few of the Partners were much impressed by that superiority.

The Partners liked people. They were willing to fight with them. They were even willing to die for them. But when a Partner liked an individual the way, for example, that Captain Wow or the Lady May liked Underhill, the liking had nothing to do with intellect. It was a matter of temperament, of feel.

Underhill knew perfectly well that Captain Wow regarded his, Underhill's, brains as silly. What Captain Wow liked was Underhill's friendly emotional structure, the cheerfulness and glint of wicked amusement that shot through Underhill's unconscious thought patterns, and the gaiety with which Underhill faced danger. The words, the history books, the ideas, the science—Underhill could sense all that in his own mind, reflected back from Captain Wow's mind, as so much rubbish.

Miss West looked at Underhill. "I bet you've put stickum on the stones."

"I did not!"

Underhill felt his ears grow red with embarrassment. During his novitiate, he had tried to cheat in the lottery because he got particularly fond of a special Partner, a lovely young mother named Murr. It was so much easier to operate with Murr and she was so affectionate toward him that he forgot pinlighting was hard work and that he was not instructed to have a good time with his Partner. They were both designed and prepared to go into deadly battle together.

One cheating had been enough. They had found him out and he had been laughed at for years.

Father Moontree picked up the imitation-leather cup and shook the stone dice which assigned them their Partners for the trip. By senior rights, he took first draw.

He grimaced. He had drawn a greedy old character, a tough old male whose mind was full of slobbering thoughts of food, veritable oceans full of half-spoiled fish. Father Moontree had once said that he burped cod liver oil for weeks after drawing that particular glutton, so strongly had the telepathic image of fish impressed itself upon his mind. Yet the glutton was a glutton for danger as well as for fish. He had killed sixty-three Dragons, more than any other Partner in the service, and was quite literally worth his weight in gold.

The little girl West came next. She drew Captain Wow. When she saw who it was, she smiled.

"I *like* him," she said. "He's such fun to fight with. He feels so nice and cuddly in my mind."

"Cuddly, hell," said Woodley. "I've been in his mind, too. It's the most leering mind in this ship, bar none."

"Nasty man," said the little girl. She said it declaratively, without reproach.

Underhill, looking at her, shivered.

He didn't see how she could take Captain Wow so calmly. Captain Wow's mind *did* leer. When Captain Wow got excited in the middle of a battle, confused images of Dragons, deadly Rats, luscious beds, the smell of fish, and the shock of space all scrambled together in his mind as he and Captain Wow, their consciousnesses linked together through the pin-set, became a fantastic composite of human being and Persian cat.

That's the trouble with working with cats, thought Underhill. It's a pity that nothing else anywhere will serve as Partner. Cats were all right once you got in touch with them telepathically. They were smart enough to meet the needs of the fight, but their motives and desires were certainly different from those of humans.

They were companionable enough as long as you thought tangible images at them, but their minds just closed up and went to sleep when you recited Shakespeare or Colegrove, or if you tried to tell them what space was.

It was sort of funny realizing that the Partners who were so grim and mature out here in space were the same cute little animals that people had used as pets for thousands of years back on Earth. He had embarrassed himself more than once while on the ground saluting perfectly ordinary non-telepathic cats because he had forgotten for the moment that they were not Partners.

He picked up the cup and shook out his stone dice.

He was lucky—he drew the Lady May.

The Lady May was the most thoughtful Partner he had ever met. In her, the finely bred pedigree mind of a Persian cat had reached one of its highest peaks of development. She was more complex than any human woman, but the complexity was all one of emotions, memory, hope and discriminated experience—experience sorted through without benefit of words.

When he had first come into contact with her mind, he was astonished at its clarity. With her he remembered her kittenhood. He remembered every mating experience she had ever had. He saw in a half-recognizable gallery all the other pinlighters with whom she had been paired for the fight. And he saw himself radiant, cheerful and desirable.

He even thought he caught the edge of a longing—

A very flattering and yearning thought: *What a pity he is not a cat.*

Woodley picked up the last stone. He drew what he deserved—a sullen, scared old tomcat with none of the verve of Captain Wow. Woodley's Partner was the most animal of all the cats on the ship, a low, brutish type with a dull mind. Even telepathy had not refined his character. His ears were half chewed off from the first fights in which he had engaged.

He was a serviceable fighter, nothing more.

Woodley grunted.

Underhill glanced at him oddly. Didn't Woodley ever do anything but grunt?

Father Moontree looked at the other three. "You might as well get your Partners now. I'll let the Scanner know we're ready to go into the Up-and-Out."

### III. The Deal

Underhill spun the combination lock on the Lady May's cage. He woke her gently and took her into his arms. She humped her back luxuriously, stretched her claws, started to purr, thought better of it, and licked him on the wrist instead. He did not have the pin-set on, so their minds were closed to each other, but in the angle of her mustache and in the movement of her ears, he caught some sense of gratification she experienced in finding him as her Partner.

He talked to her in human speech, even though speech meant nothing to a cat when the pin-set was not on.

"It's a damn shame, sending a sweet little thing like you whirling around in the coldness of nothing to hunt for Rats that are bigger and deadlier than all of us put together. You didn't ask for this kind of fight, did you?"

For answer, she licked his hand, purred, tickled his cheek with her long fluffy tail, turned around and faced him, golden eyes shining.

For a moment, they stared at each other, man squatting, cat standing erect on her hind legs, front claws digging into his knee. Human eyes and cat eyes looked across an immensity which no words could meet, but which affection spanned in a single glance.

"Time to get in," he said.

She walked docilely into her spheroid carrier. She climbed in. He saw to it that her miniature pin-set rested firmly and comfortably against the base of her brain. He made sure that her claws were padded so that she could not tear herself in the excitement of battle.

Softly he said to her, "Ready?"

For answer, she preened her back as much as her harness would permit and purred softly within the confines of the frame that held her.

He slapped down the lid and watched the sealant ooze around the seam. For a few hours, she was welded into her projectile until a workman with a short cutting arc would remove her after she had done her duty.

He picked up the entire projectile and slipped it into the ejection tube. He closed the door of the tube, spun the lock, seated himself in his chair, and put his own pin-set on.

Once again he flung the switch.

He sat in a small room, *small, small, warm, warm*, the bodies of the other three people moving close around him, the tangible lights in the ceiling bright and heavy against his closed eyelids.

As the pin-set warmed, the room fell away. The other people ceased to be people and became small glowing heaps of fire, embers, dark red fire, with the consciousness of life burning like old red coals in a country fireplace.

As the pin-set warmed a little more, he felt Earth just below him, felt the ship slipping away, felt the turning Moon as it swung on the far side of the world, felt the planets and the hot, clear goodness of the Sun which kept the Dragons so far from mankind's native ground.

Finally, he reached complete awareness.

He was telepathically alive to a range of millions of miles. He felt the dust which he had noticed earlier high above the ecliptic. With a thrill of warmth and tenderness, he felt the consciousness of the Lady May pouring over into his own. Her consciousness was as gentle and clear and yet sharp to the taste of his mind as if it were scented oil. It felt relaxing and reassuring. He could sense her welcome of him. It was scarcely a thought, just a raw emotion of greeting.

At last they were one again.

In a tiny remote corner of his mind, as tiny as the smallest toy he had ever seen in his childhood, he was still aware of the room and the ship, and of Father Moontree picking up a telephone and speaking to a Scanner captain in charge of the ship.

His telepathic mind caught the idea long before his ears could frame the words. The actual sound followed the idea the way that thunder on an ocean beach follows the lightning inward from far out over the seas.

"The Fighting Room is ready. Clear to planoform, sir."

#### IV. The Play

Underhill was always a little exasperated the way that Lady May experienced things before he did.

He was braced for the quick vinegar thrill of planoforming, but he caught her report of it before his own nerves could register what happened.

Earth had fallen so far away that he groped for several milliseconds before he found the Sun in the upper rear right-hand corner of his telepathic mind.

That was a good jump, he thought. This way we'll get there in four or five skips.

A few hundred miles outside the ship, the Lady May thought back at him, "O warm, O generous, O gigantic man! O brave, O friendly, O tender and huge Partner! O wonderful with you, with you so good, good, good, warm, warm, now to fight, now to go, good with you...."

He knew that she was not thinking words, that his mind took the clear amiable babble of her cat intellect and translated it into images which his own thinking could record and understand.

Neither one of them was absorbed in the game of mutual greetings. He reached out far beyond her range of perception to see if there was anything near the ship. It was funny how it was possible to do two things at once. He could scan space with his pin-set mind and yet at the same time catch a vagrant thought of hers, a lovely, affectionate thought about a son who had had a golden face and a chest covered with soft, incredibly downy white fur.

While he was still searching, he caught the warning from her.

*We jump again!*

And so they had. The ship had moved to a second planoform. The stars were different. The Sun was immeasurably far behind. Even the nearest stars were barely in contact. This was good Dragon country, this open, nasty, hollow kind of space. He reached farther, faster, sensing and looking for danger, ready to fling the Lady May at danger wherever he found it.

Terror blazed up in his mind, so sharp, so clear, that it came through as a physical wrench.

The little girl named West had found something—something immense, long, black, sharp, greedy, horrific. She flung Captain Wow at it.

Underhill tried to keep his own mind clear. "Watch out!" he shouted telepathically at the others, trying to move the Lady May around.

At one corner of the battle, he felt the lustful rage of Captain Wow as the big Persian tomcat detonated lights while he approached the streak of dust which threatened the ship and the people within.

The lights scored near-misses.

The dust flattened itself, changing from the shape of a sting-ray into the shape of a spear.

Not three milliseconds had elapsed.



Father Moontree was talking human words and was saying in a voice that moved like cold



molasses out of a heavy jar, "C-A-P-T-A-I-N." Underhill knew that the sentence was going to be "Captain, move fast!"

The battle would be fought and finished before Father Moontree got through talking.

Now, fractions of a millisecond later, the Lady May was directly in line.

Here was where the skill and speed of the Partners came in. She could react faster than he. She could see the threat as an immense Rat coming direct at her.

She could fire the light-bombs with a discrimination which he might miss.

He was connected with her mind, but he could not follow it.





His consciousness absorbed the tearing wound inflicted by the alien enemy. It was like no wound on Earth—raw, crazy pain which started like a burn at his navel. He began to writhe in his chair.

Actually he had not yet had time to move a muscle when the Lady May struck back at their enemy.

Five evenly spaced photonuclear bombs blazed out across a hundred thousand miles.

The pain in his mind and body vanished.

He felt a moment of fierce, terrible, feral elation running through the mind of the Lady May as she finished her kill. It was always disappointing to the cats to find out that their enemies whom they sensed as gigantic space Rats disappeared at the moment of destruction.

Then he felt her hurt, the pain and the fear that swept over both of them as the battle, quicker than the movement of an eyelid, had come and gone. In the same instant, there came the sharp and acid twinge of planoform.

Once more the ship went skip.

He could hear Woodley thinking at him. "You don't have to bother much. This old son of a gun and I will take over for a while."

Twice again the twinge, the skip.

He had no idea where he was until the lights of the Caledonia space board shone below.

With a weariness that lay almost beyond the limits of thought, he threw his mind back into rapport with the pin-set, fixing the Lady May's projectile gently and neatly in its launching tube.

She was half dead with fatigue, but he could feel the beat of her heart, could listen to her panting, and he grasped the grateful edge of a thanks reaching from her mind to his.

## V. The Score

They put him in the hospital at Caledonia.

The doctor was friendly but firm. "You actually got touched by that Dragon. That's as close a shave as I've ever seen. It's all so quick that it'll be a long time before we know what happened scientifically, but I suppose you'd be ready for the insane asylum now if the contact had lasted several tenths of a millisecond longer. What kind of cat did you have out in front of you?"

Underhill felt the words coming out of him slowly. Words were such a lot of trouble compared with the speed and the joy of thinking, fast and sharp and clear, mind to mind! But words were all that could reach ordinary people like this doctor.

His mouth moved heavily as he articulated words, "Don't call our Partners cats. The right thing to call them is Partners. They fight for us in a team. You ought to know we call them Partners, not cats. How is mine?"

"I don't know," said the doctor contritely. "We'll find out for you. Meanwhile, old man, you take it easy. There's nothing but rest that can help you. Can you make yourself sleep, or would you like us to give you some kind of sedative?"

"I can sleep," said Underhill. "I just want to know about the Lady May."

The nurse joined in. She was a little antagonistic. "Don't you want to know about the other people?"

"They're okay," said Underhill. "I knew that before I came in here."

He stretched his arms and sighed and grinned at them. He could see they were relaxing and were beginning to treat him as a person instead of a patient.

"I'm all right," he said. "Just let me know when I can go see my Partner."

A new thought struck him. He looked wildly at the doctor. "They didn't send her off with the ship, did they?"

"I'll find out right away," said the doctor. He gave Underhill a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder and left the room.

The nurse took a napkin off a goblet of chilled fruit juice.

Underhill tried to smile at her. There seemed to be something wrong with the girl. He wished she would go away. First she had started to be friendly and now she was distant again. It's a nuisance being telepathic, he thought. You keep trying to reach even when you are not making contact.

Suddenly she swung around on him.

"You pinlighters! You and your damn cats!"

Just as she stamped out, he burst into her mind. He saw himself a radiant hero, clad in his smooth suede uniform, the pin-set crown shining like ancient royal jewels around his head. He saw his own face, handsome and masculine, shining out of her mind. He saw himself very far away and he saw himself as she hated him.

She hated him in the secrecy of her own mind. She hated him because he was—she thought—proud, and strange, and rich, better and more beautiful than people like her.

He cut off the sight of her mind and, as he buried his face in the pillow, he caught an image of the Lady May.

"She *is* a cat," he thought. "That's all she is—a *cat*!"

But that was not how his mind saw her—quick beyond all dreams of speed, sharp, clever, unbelievably graceful, beautiful, wordless and undemanding.

Where would he ever find a woman who could compare with her?



# The Burning of the Brain

*Rejuvenation, implied in parts of "The Lady Who Sailed The Soul" and mentioned more explicitly here, is made possible by the santaclara drug (stroon) found only on Old North Australia (Norstrilia)-although it was some years after publication of this story (written in 1955), that the planet was mentioned by name in Smith's fiction. Even at this period, we see the growing luxury and decadence of Instrumentality culture.*

## I. Dolores Oh

I tell you, it is sad, it is more than sad, it is fearful—for it is a dreadful thing to go into the up-and-out, to fly without flying, to move between the stars as a moth may drift among the leaves on a summer night.

Of all the men who took the great ships into planoform none was braver, none stronger, than Captain Magno Taliano.

Scanners had been gone for centuries and the jonasoidal effect had become so simple, so manageable, that the traversing of light-years was no more difficult to most of the passengers of the great ships than to go from one room to the other.

Passengers moved easily.

Not the crew.

Least of all the captain.

The captain of a jonasoidal ship which had embarked on an interstellar journey was a man subject to rare and overwhelming strains. The art of getting past all the complications of space was far more like the piloting of turbulent waters in ancient days than like the smooth seas which legendary men once traversed with sails alone.

Go-captain on the Wu-Feinstein, finest ship of its class, was Magno Taliano.

Of him it was said, "He could sail through hell with the muscles of his left eye alone. He could plow space with his living brain if the instruments failed ... "

Wife to the Go-captain was Dolores Oh. The name was Japonical, from some nation of the ancient days. Dolores Oh had been once beautiful, so beautiful that she took men's breath away, made wise men into fools, made young men into nightmares of lust and yearning. Wherever she went men had quarreled and fought over her.

But Dolores Oh was proud beyond all common limits of pride. She refused to go through the ordinary rejuvenescence. A terrible yearning a hundred or so years back must have come over her. Perhaps she said to herself, before that hope and terror which a mirror in a quiet room becomes to anyone:

"Surely I am me. There must be a me more than the beauty of my face, there must be a something other than the delicacy of skin and the accidental lines of my jaw and my cheekbone.

"What have men loved if it wasn't me? Can I ever find out who I am or what I am if I don't let beauty perish and live on in whatever flesh age gives me?"

She had met the Go-captain and had married him in a romance that left forty planets talking and half the ship lines stunned.

Magno Taliano was at the very beginning of his genius. Space, we can tell you, is rough—rough like the wildest of storm-driven waters, filled with perils which only the most sensitive, the quickest, the most daring of men can surmount.

Best of them all, class for class, age for age, out of class, beating the best of his seniors, was Magno Taliano.

For him to marry the most beautiful beauty of forty worlds was a wedding like Heloise and Abelard's or like the unforgettable romance of Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more.

The ships of the Go-Captain Magno Taliano became more beautiful year by year, century by century.

As ships became better he always obtained the best. He maintained his lead over the other Go-captains so overwhelmingly that it was unthinkable for the finest ship of mankind to sail out amid the roughnesses and uncertainties of two-dimensional space without himself at the helm.

Stop-captains were proud to sail space beside him. (Though the Stop-captains had nothing more to do than to check the maintenance of the ship, its loading and unloading when it was in normal space, they were still more than ordinary men in their own kind of world, a world far below the more majestic and adventurous universe of the Go-captains.)

Magno Taliano had a niece who in the modern style used a place instead of a name: she was called "Dita from the Great South House."

When Dita came aboard the Wu-Feinstein she had heard much of Dolores Oh, her aunt by marriage who had once captivated the men in many worlds. Dita was wholly unprepared for what she found.

Dolores greeted her civilly enough, but the civility was a sucking pump of hideous anxiety, the friendliness was the driest of mockeries, the greeting itself an attack.

What's the matter with the woman? thought Dita.

As if to answer her thought, Dolores said aloud and in words: "It's nice to meet a woman who's not trying to take Taliano from me. I love him. Can you believe that? Can you?"

"Of course," said Dita. She looked at the ruined face of Dolores Oh, at the dreaming terror in Dolores's eyes, and she realized that Dolores had passed all limits of nightmare and had become a veritable demon of regret, a possessive ghost who sucked the vitality from her husband, who dreaded companionship, hated friendship, rejected even the most casual of acquaintances, because she feared forever and without limit that there was really nothing to herself, and feared that without Magno Taliano she would be more lost than the blackest of whirlpools in the nothing between the stars.

Magno Taliano came in.

He saw his wife and niece together.

He must have been used to Dolores Oh. In Dita's eyes Dolores was more frightening than a mud-caked reptile raising its wounded and venomous head with blind hunger and blind rage. To Magno Taliano the ghastly woman who stood like a witch beside him was somehow the beautiful girl he had wooed and had married one hundred sixty-four years before.

He kissed the withered cheek, he stroked the dried and stringy hair, he looked into the greedy, terror-haunted eyes as though they were the eyes of a child he loved. He said, lightly and gently,

"Be good to Dita, my dear."

He went on through the lobby of the ship to the inner sanctum of the planoforming room.

The Stop-captain waited for him. Outside on the world of Sherman the scented breezes of that pleasant planet blew in through the open windows of the ship. The Wu-Feinstein, finest ship of its class, had no need for metal walls.

It was built to resemble an ancient, prehistoric estate named Mount Vernon, and when it sailed between the stars it was encased in its own rigid and self-renewing field of force.

The passengers went through a few pleasant hours of strolling on the grass, enjoying the spacious rooms, chatting beneath a marvelous simulacrum of an atmosphere-filled sky.

Only in the planoforming room did the Go-captain know what happened. The Go-captain, his pinlighters sitting beside him, took the ship from one compression to another, leaping body and frantically through space, sometimes one light-year, sometimes a hundred light-years, jump, jump, jump, jump until the ship, the light touches of the captain's mind guiding it, passed the perils of millions upon millions of worlds, came out at its appointed destination and settled as lightly as one feather resting upon others, settled into an embroidered and decorated countryside where the passengers could move as easily away from their journey as if they had done nothing more than to pass an afternoon in a pleasant old house by the side of a river.

## II. The Lost Locksheet

Magno Taliano nodded to his pinlighters. The Stop-captain bowed obsequiously from the doorway of the planoforming room. Taliano looked at him sternly, but with robust friendliness. With formal and austere courtesy he asked,

"Sir and Colleague, is everything ready for the jonasoidal effect?"

The Stop-captain bowed even more formally. "Truly ready, Sir and Master."

"The locksheets in place?"

"Truly in place, Sir and Master."

"The passengers secure?"

"The passengers are secure, numbered, happy and ready, Sir and Master."

Then came the last and the most serious of questions. "Are my pin-lighters warmed with their pin-sets and ready for combat?"

"Ready for combat, Sir and Master." With these words the Stop-captain withdrew. Magno Taliano smiled to his pinlighters. Through the minds of all of them there passed the same thought.

How could a man that pleasant stay married all those years to a hag like Dolores Oh? How could that witch, that horror, have ever "been a beauty? How could that beast have ever been a woman, particularly the divine and glamorous Dolores Oh whose image we still see in four-di every now and then?

Yet pleasant he was, though long he may have been married to Dolores Oh. Her loneliness and greed might suck at him like a nightmare, but his strength was more than enough strength for two.

Was he not the captain of the greatest ship to sail between the stars?

Even as the pinlighters smiled their greetings back to him, his right hand depressed the golden ceremonial lever of the ship. This instrument alone was mechanical. All other controls in the ship had long since been formed telepathically or electronically.

Within the planofforming room the black skies became visible and the tissue of space shot up around them like boiling water at the base of a waterfall. Outside that one room the passengers still walked sedately on scented lawns.

From the wall facing him, as he sat rigid in his Go-captain's chair, Magno Taliano sensed the forming of a pattern which in three or four hundred milliseconds would tell him where he was and would give him the next clue as to how to move.

He moved the ship with the impulses of his own brain, to which the wall was a superlative complement.

The wall was a living brickwork of locksheets, laminated charts, one hundred thousand charts to the inch, the wall preselected and preassembled for all imaginable contingencies of the journey which, each time afresh, took the ship across half-unknown immensities of time and space. The ship leapt, as it had before.

The new star focused.

Magno Taliano waited for the wall to show him where he was, expecting (in partnership with the wall) to flick the ship back into the pattern of stellar space, moving it by immense skips from source to destination.

This time nothing happened.

Nothing?

For the first time in a hundred years his mind knew panic.

It couldn't be nothing. Not nothing. Something had to focus. The locksheets always focused.

His mind reached into the locksheets and he realized with a devastation beyond all limits of ordinary human grief that they were lost as no ship had ever been lost before. By some error never before committed in the history of mankind, the entire wall was made of duplicates of the same locksheets.

Worst of all, the emergency return sheet was lost. They were amid stars none of them had ever seen before, perhaps as near as five hundred million miles, perhaps as far as forty parsecs.

And the locksheets were lost.

And they would die.

As the ship's power failed coldness and blackness and death would crush in on them in a few hours at the most. That then would be all, all of the Wu-Feinstein, all of Dolores Oh.

### III. The Secret of the Old Dark Brain

Outside of the planofforming room of the Wu-Feinstein the passengers had no reason to understand that they were marooned in the nothing-at-all.

Dolores Oh rocked back and forth in an ancient rocking chair. Her haggard face looked without pleasure at the imaginary river that ran past the edge of the lawn. Dita from the Great South House sat on a hassock by her aunt's knees.

Dolores was talking about a trip she had made when she was young and vibrant with beauty, a beauty which brought trouble and hate wherever it went.



" ... so the guardsman killed the captain and then came to my cabin and said to me, 'You've got to marry me now. I've given up everything for your sake,' and I said to him, 'I never said that I loved you. It was sweet of you to get into a fight, and in a way I suppose it is a compliment to my beauty, but it doesn't mean that I belong to you the rest of my life. What do you think I am, anyhow?' "

Dolores Oh sighed a dry, ugly sigh, like the crackling of sub-zero winds through frozen twigs. "So you see, Dita, being beautiful the way you are is no answer to anything. A woman has got to be herself before she finds out what she is. I know that my lord and husband, the Go-captain, loves me because my beauty is gone, and with my beauty gone there is nothing but me to love, is there?"

An odd figure came out on the verandah. It was a pinlighter in full fighting costume. Pinlighters were never supposed to leave the planoforming room, and it was most extraordinary for one of them to appear among the passengers.

He bowed to the two ladies and said with the utmost courtesy, "Ladies, will you please come into the planoforming room? We have need that you should see the Go-captain now."

Dolores's hand leapt to her mouth. Her gesture of grief was as automatic as the striking of a snake. Dita sensed that her aunt had been waiting a hundred years and more for disaster, that her aunt had craved ruin for her husband the way that some people crave love and others crave death.

Dita said nothing. Neither did Dolores, apparently at second thought, utter a word.

They followed the pinlighter silently into the planoforming room. The heavy door closed behind them. Magno Taliano was still rigid in his captain's chair. He spoke very slowly, his voice sounding like a record played too slowly on an ancient parlophone.

"We are lost in space, my deaf," said the frigid, ghostly, voice of the captain, still in his Go-captain's trance. "We are lost in space and I thought that perhaps if your mind aided mine we might think of a way lack."

Dita started to speak.

A pinlighter told her: "Go ahead and speak, my dear. Do you have any suggestion?"

"Why don't we just go back? It would be humiliating, wouldn't it? Still it would be better than dying. Let's use the emergency return locksheet and go on right back. The world will forgive Magno Taliano for a single failure after thousands of brilliant and successful trips."

The pinlighter, a pleasant enough young man, was as friendly and calm as a doctor informing someone of a death or of a mutilation. "The impossible has happened, Dita from the Great South House. All the locksheets are wrong. They are all the same one. And not one of them is good for emergency return."

With that the two women knew where they were. They knew that space would tear into them like threads being pulled out of a fiber so that they would either die bit by bit as the hours passed and as the material of their bodies faded away a few molecules here and a few there. Or, alternatively, they could die all at once in a flash if the Go-captain chose to kill himself and the ship rather than to wait for a slow death. Or, if they believed in religion, they could pray.

The pinlighter said to the rigid Go-captain, "We think we see a familiar pattern at the edge of your own brain. May we look in?" Taliano nodded very slowly, very gravely. The pinlighter stood still.

The two women watched. Nothing visible happened, but they knew that beyond the limits of vision and yet before their eyes a great drama was being played out. The minds of the pinlighters probed deep into the mind of the frozen Go-captain, searching amid the synapses for the secret of the faintest clue to their possible rescue. Minutes passed. They seemed like hours.

At last the pinlighter spoke. "We can see into your midbrain, Captain. At the edge of your paleocortex there is a star pattern which resembles the upper left rear of our present location."

The pinlighter laughed nervously. "We want to know, can you fly the ship home on your brain?"

Magno Taliano looked with deep tragic eyes at the inquirer. His slow voice came out at them once again since he dared not leave the half-trance which held the entire ship in stasis. "Do you mean can I fly the ship on a brain alone? It would burn out my brain and the ship would be lost anyhow ... "

"But we're lost, lost, lost," screamed Dolores Oh. Her face was alive with hideous hope, with a hunger for ruin, with a greedy welcome of disaster. She screamed at her husband, "Wake up, my darling, and let us die together. At least we can belong to each other that much, that long, forever!"

"Why die?" said the pinlighter softly. "You tell him, Dita."

Said Dita, "Why not try, Sir and Uncle?"

Slowly Magno Taliano turned his face toward his niece. Again his hollow voice sounded. "If I do this I shall be a fool or a child or a dead man, but I will do it for you."

Dita had studied the work of the Go-captains and she knew well enough that if the paleocortex was lost the personality became intellectually sane, but emotionally crazed. With the most ancient part of the brain gone the fundamental controls of hostility, hunger and sex disappeared. The most ferocious of animals and the most brilliant of men were reduced to a common level—a level of infantile friendliness in which lust and playfulness and gentle, unappeasable hunger became the eternity of their days.

Magno Taliano did not wait.

He reached out a slow hand and squeezed the hand of Dolores Oh. "As I die you shall at last be sure I love you."

Once again the women saw nothing. They realized they had been called in simply to give Magno Taliano a last glimpse of his own life.

A quiet pinlighter thrust a beam-electrode so that it reached square into the paleocortex of Captain Magno Taliano.

The planofforming room came to life. Strange heavens swirled about them like milk being churned in a bowl.

Dita realized that her partial capacity of telepathy was functioning even without the aid of a machine. With her mind she could feel the dead wall of the locksheets. She was aware of the rocking of the Wu-Feinstein as it leapt from space to space, as uncertain as a man crossing a river by leaping from one ice-covered rock to the other.

In a strange way she even knew that the paleocortical part of her uncle's brain was burning out at last and forever, that the star patterns which had been frozen in the locksheets lived on in the infinitely complex pattern of his own memories, and that with the help of his own telepathic pinlighters he was burning out his brain cell by cell in order for them to find a way to the ship's destination. This indeed was his last trip.

Dolores Oh watched her husband with a hungry greed surpassing all expression.

Little by little his face became relaxed and stupid.

Dita could see the midbrain being burned blank, as the ship's controls with the help of the pinlighters searched through the most magnificent intellect of its time for a last course into harbor.

Suddenly Dolores Oh was on her knees, sobbing by the hand of her husband.

A pinlighter took Dita by the arm.

"We have reached destination," he said.

"And my uncle?"

The pinlighter looked at her strangely.

She realized he was speaking to her without moving his lips—speaking mind-to-mind with pure telepathy.

"Can't you see it?"

She shook her head dazedly.

The pinlighter thought his emphatic statement at her once again.

"As your uncle hurned out his brain, you picked up his skills. Can't you sense it? You are a Go-captain yourself and one of the greatest of us."

"And he?"

The pinlighter thought a merciful comment at her.

Magno Taliano had risen from his chair and was being led from the room by his wife and consort, Dolores Oh. He had the amiable smile of an idiot, and his face for the first time in more than a hundred years trembled with shy and silly love.

# From Gustible's Planet

Shortly after the celebration of the four thousandth anniversary of the opening of space, Angary J. Gustible discovered Gustible's planet. The discovery turned out to be a tragic mistake.

Gustible's planet was inhabited by highly intelligent life forms. They had moderate telepathic powers. They immediately mind-read Angary J. Gustible's entire mind and life history, and embarrassed him very deeply by making up an opera concerning his recent divorce.

The climax of the opera portrayed his wife throwing a teacup at him. This created an unfavorable impression concerning Earth culture, and Angary J. Gustible, who held a reserve commission as a Subchief of the Instrumentality, was profoundly embarrassed to find that it was not the higher realities of Earth which he had conveyed to these people, but the unpleasant intimate facts.

As negotiations proceeded, other embarrassments developed.

In physical appearance the inhabitants of Gustible's planet, who called themselves Apicians, resembled nothing more than oversize ducks, ducks four feet to four feet six in height. At their wing tips, they had developed juxtaposed thumbs. They were paddle-shaped and sufficed to feed the Apicians.

Gustible's planet matched Earth in several respects: in the dishonesty of the inhabitants, in their enthusiasm for good food, in their instant capacity to understand the human mind. Before Gustible began to get ready to go back to Earth, he discovered that the Apicians had copied his ship. There was no use hiding this fact. They had copied it in such detail that the discovery of Gustible's planet meant the simultaneous discovery of Earth . . .

By the Apicians.

The implications of this tragic development did not show up until the Apicians followed him home. They had a plano forming ship capable of traveling in non-space just as readily as his.

The most important feature of Gustible's planet was its singularly close match to the biochemistry of Earth. The Apicians were the first intelligent life forms ever met by human beings who were at once capable of smelling and enjoying everything which human beings smelled and enjoyed, capable of following any human music with forthright pleasure, and capable of eating and drinking everything in sight.

The very first Apicians on Earth were greeted by somewhat alarmed ambassadors who discovered that an appetite for Munich beer, Camembert cheese, tortillas, and enchiladas, as well as the better grades of chow mein, far transcended any serious cultural, political, or strategic interests which the new visitors might have.

Arthur Djohn, a Lord of the Instrumentality who was acting for this particular matter, delegated an Instrumentality agent named Calvin Dredd as the chief diplomatic officer of Earth to handle the matter.

Dredd approached one Schmeckst, who seemed to be the Apician leader. The interview was an unfortunate one.

Dredd began by saying, "Your Exalted Highness, we are delighted to welcome you to Earth "

Schmeckst said, "Are those edible?" and proceeded to eat the plastic buttons from Calvin Dredd's formal coat, even before Dredd could say though not edible they were attractive.

Schmeckst said, "Don't try to eat those, they are really not very good."

Dredd, looking at his coat sagging wide open, said, "May I offer you some food?"

Schmeckst said, "Indeed, yes."

And while Schmeckst ate an Italian dinner, a Peking dinner, a red-hot peppery Szechuanese dinner, a Japanese sukiyaki dinner, two British breakfasts, a smorgasbord, and four complete servings of diplomatic-level Russian zakouska, he listened to the propositions of the Instrumentality of Earth.

These did not impress him. Schmeckst was intelligent despite his gross and offensive eating habits. He pointed out: "We two worlds are equal in weapons. We can't fight. Look," said he to Calvin Dredd in a threatening tone.

Calvin Dredd braced himself, as he had learned to do. Schmeckst also braced him.

For an instant Dredd did not know what had happened. Then he realized that in putting his body into a rigid and controlled posture he had played along with the low-grade but manipulable telepathic powers of the visitors. He was frozen rigid till Schmeckst laughed and released him.

Schmeckst said, "You see, we are well matched. I can freeze you. Nothing short of utter desperation could get you out of it. If you try to fight us, we'll lick you. We are going to move in here and live with you. We have enough room on our planet. You can come and live with us too. We would like to hire a lot of those cooks of yours. You'll simply have to divide space with us, and that's all there is to it."

That really was all there was to it. Arthur Djohn reported back to the Lords of the Instrumentality that, for the time being, nothing could be done about the disgusting people from Gustible's planet.

They kept their greed within bounds by their standards. A mere seventy-two thousand of them swept the Earth, hitting every wine shop, dining hall, snack bar, soda bar, and pleasure center in the world. They ate popcorn, alfalfa, raw fruit, live fish, birds on the wing, prepared foods, cooked and canned foods, food concentrates, and assorted medicines.

Outside of an enormous capacity to hold many times what the human body could tolerate in the way of food, they showed very much the same effects as persons. Thousands of them got various local diseases, sometimes called by such undignified names as the Yangtze rapids, Delhi belly, the Roman groanin', or the like. Other thousands became ill and had to relieve themselves in the fashion of ancient emperors. Still they came.

Nobody liked them. Nobody disliked them enough to wish a disastrous war.

Actual trade was minimal. They bought large quantities of foodstuffs, paying in rare metals. But their economy on their own planet produced very little which the world itself wanted. The cities of mankind had long since developed to a point of comfort and corruption where a relatively inonocultural being, such as the citizens of Gustible's planet, could not make much impression. The word "Apician" came to have unpleasant connotations of bad manners, greediness, and prompt payment. Prompt payment was considered rude in a credit society, but after all it was better than not being paid at all.

The tragedy of the relationship of the two groups came from the unfortunate picnic of the lady Ch'ao, who prided herself on having ancient Chinesian blood. She decided that it would be possible to satiate Schmeckst and the other Apicians to a point at which they would be able to listen to reason. She arranged a feast which, for quality and quantity, had not been seen since previous

historic times, long before the many interruptions of war, collapse, and rebuilding of culture. She searched the museums of the world for recipes.

The dinner was set forth on the tele screens of the entire world. It was held in a pavilion built in the old Chinesian style. A soaring dream of dry bamboo and paper walls, the festival building had a thatched roof in the true ancient fashion. Paper lanterns with real candles illuminated the scene. The fifty selected Apician guests gleamed like ancient idols. Their feathers shone in the light and they clicked their paddle like thumbs readily as they spoke, telepathically and fluently, in any Earth language which they happened to pick out of the heads of their hearers.

The tragedy was fire. Fire struck the pavilion, wrecked the dinner. The lady Ch'ao was rescued by Calvin Dredd. The Apicians fled. All of them escaped, all but one. Schmeckst himself. Schmeckst suffocated.

He let out a telepathic scream which was echoed in the living voices of all the human beings, other Apicians, and animals within reach, so that the television viewers of the world caught a sudden cacophony of birds shrilling, dogs barking, cats yowling, otters screeching, and one lone panda letting out a singularly high grunt. Then Schmeckst perished. The pity of it...

The Earth leaders stood about, wondering how to solve the tragedy. On the other side of the world, the Lords of the Instrumentality watched the scene. What they saw was amazing and horrible. Calvin Dredd, cold, disciplined agent that he was, approached the ruins of the pavilion. His face was twisted in an expression which they had difficulty in understanding. It was only after he licked his lips for the fourth time and they saw a ribbon of drool running down his chin that they realized he had gone mad with appetite. The lady Ch'ao followed close behind, drawn by some remorseless force.

She was out of her mind. Her eyes gleamed. She stalked like a cat. In her left hand she held a bowl and chopsticks.

The viewers all over the world watching the screen could not understand the scene. Two alarmed and dazed Apicians followed the humans, wondering what was going to happen.

Calvin Dredd made a sudden reach. He pulled out the body of Schmeckst.

The fire had finished Schmeckst. Not a feather remained on him. And then the flash fire, because of the peculiar dryness of the bamboo and the paper and the thousands upon thousands of candles, had baked him. The television operator had an inspiration. He turned on the smell-control.

Throughout the planet Earth, where people had gathered to watch this unexpected and singularly interesting tragedy, there swept a smell which mankind had forgotten. It was an essence of roast duck.

Beyond all imagining, it was the most delicious smell that any human being had ever smelled. Millions upon millions of human mouths watered. Throughout the world people looked away from their sets to see if there were any Apicians in the neighborhood. Just as the Lords of the Instrumentality ordered the disgusting scene cut off, Calvin Dredd and the lady Ch'ao began eating the roast Apician, Schmeckst.

\* \* \*

Within twenty-four hours most of the Apicians on Earth had been served, some with cranberry sauce, others baked, some fried Southern style. The serious leaders of Earth dreaded the consequences of such uncivilized conduct. Even as they wiped their lips and asked for one more duck sandwich, they felt that this behavior was difficult beyond all imagination.

The blocks that the Apicians had been able to put on human action did not operate when they were applied to human beings who, looking at an Apician, went deep into the recesses of their personality and were animated by a mad hunger which transcended all civilization.

The Lords of the Instrumentality managed to round up Schmeckst's deputy and a few other Apicians and to send them back to their ship.

The soldiers watching them licked their lips. The captain tried to see if he could contrive an accident as he escorted his state visitors. Unfortunately, tripping Apicians did not break their necks, and the Apicians kept throwing violent mind-blocks at human beings in an attempt to save themselves.

One of the Apicians was so undiplomatic as to ask for a chicken salad sandwich and almost lost a wing, raw and alive, to a soldier whose appetite had been restimulated by reference to food.

The Apicians went back, the few survivors. They liked Earth well enough and Earth food was delicious, but it was a horrible place when they considered the cannibalistic human beings who lived there – so cannibalistic that they ate ducks!

The Lords of the Instrumentality were relieved to note that when the Apicians left they closed the space lane behind them. No one quite knows how they closed it, or what defenses they had. Mankind, salivating and ashamed, did not push the pursuit hotly. Instead, people tried to make up chicken, duck, goose, Cornish hen, pigeon, sea-gull, and other sandwiches to duplicate the incomparable taste of a genuine inhabitant of Gustible's planet. None were quite authentic and people, in their right minds, were not uncivilized enough to invade another world solely for getting the inhabitants as tidbits.

The Lords of the Instrumentality were happy to report to one another and to the rest of the world at their next meeting that the Apicians had managed to close Gustible's planet altogether, had had no further interest in dealing with Earth, and appeared to possess just enough of a technological edge on human beings to stay concealed from the eyes and the appetites of men.

Save for that, the Apicians were almost forgotten. A confidential secretary of the Office of Interstellar Trade was astonished when the frozen intelligences of a methane planet ordered forty thousand cases of Munich beer. He suspected them of being jobbers, not consumers. But on the instructions of his superiors he kept the matter confidential and allowed the beer to be shipped.

It undoubtedly went to Gustible's planet, but they did not offer any of their own citizens in exchange.

The matter was closed. The napkins were folded. Trade and diplomacy were at an end.

## Himself in Anachron

And Time there is  
And Time there was  
And Time goes on, before  
But what is the Knot  
That binds the time  
That holds it here, and more  
Oh, the Knot in Time  
Is a secret place  
They sought in times of yore  
Somewhere in Space  
They seek it still  
But Tasco hunts no more ...  
HE FOUND IT

from "Mad Dita 's Song "

First they threw out every bit of machinery which was not vital to their lives or the function of the ship. Then went Dita's treasured honeymoon items (foolishly and typically she had valued these over the instruments). Next they ejected every bit of nutrient except the minimum for survival for two persons. Tasco knew then. It was not enough. The ship still had to be lightened.

*He remembered that the Subchief had said, bitterly enough: "So you got leave to time-travel together! You fool! I don't know whether it was your idea or hers to have a 'honeymoon in time," but with everyone watching your marriage you've got the sentimental mob behind you. "Honeymoon in time," indeed. Why? Is it that your woman is jealous of your time trips? Don't be an idiot, Tasco. You know that ship's not built for two. You don't even have to go at all; we can send Vomact. He's single. " Tasco remembered, too, the quick warmth of his jealousy at the mention of Vomact. If anything had been needed to steel his determination, that name had done it. How could he possibly have backed out after the publicity over his proposed flight to find the Knot. The Subchief must have realized from the expression on his face something of his feelings; he had said with a knowledgeable grin: "Well, if anybody can find the Knot, it'll be you. But listen, leave her here. Take her later if you like but go first alone." But Tasco could remember, too, Dita 's kitten-soft body as she nestled up to him holding his eyes with her own and murmuring, "But, darling, you promised..."*

Yes, he had been warned, but that didn't make the tragedy any easier. Yes, he could have left her behind, but what kind of marriage would they have had with the blot of her bitterness on the first days of their married life? And how could he have lived with himself if he had let Vomact go



in his place? How, even, would Dita have regarded him? He could not deceive himself; he knew that Dita loved him, loved him dearly, but he had been a hero ever since she had known him and how much would she have loved him without the hero image? He loved her enough not to want to find out.

And now, one of them must go, be lost in space and time forever. Tasco looked at her, his beloved. He thought, I have loved you forever, but in our case forever was only three earth days. Shall I love you there in space and timelessness? To postpone, if only for minutes, the eternal parting, he pretended to find some other instrument which could be disposed of, and sent through the hatch one person's share of the remaining nutrient. Now the decision was made. Dita came over to stand beside him.

"Does that do it, Tasco? Is the ship light enough now for us to get out of the Knot? Instead of answering he held her tightly against him. *I've done what I had to*, he thought. . . *Dita, Dita, not to hold you ever again* . . .

Softly, not to disturb the moon-pale curve of her hair, he passed his hand over her head. Then he released her.

"Get ready to take over, Dita. I could not murder you, oh my darling, and unless the ship is lightened by the weight of one of us we will both die here in the Knot. You must take it back, you have to take back the ship and all the instrument-gathered data. It's not you or me or us now. We're the servants of the Instrumentality. You must understand . . ."

Still within his arms, she backed away enough to look at his face. She was dewy-eyed, loving, frightened, her lips trembling with affection. She was adorable, and Cranch! how incompetent. But she'd make it; she had to. She said nothing at first, trying to hold her lips steady, and then she said the thing that would annoy him most. "Don't, darling, don't. I couldn't stand it. ... Please don't leave me."

His reaction was completely spontaneous: His open hand caught her across the cheek, hard. A reciprocal anger flashed across her eyes and mouth, but she gained control of herself. She returned to pleading.

"Tasco, Tasco, don't be bad to me. If we have to die together, I can face it. Don't leave me, please don't leave me. I don't blame you . . ." *I don't blame you!* he thought. *By the Forgotten One, that's really rather good!*

He said, as quietly as he could, "I've told you. Somebody has got to take this ship back to our own time and place. We've found the Knot. This is the Knot in Time. Look."

He pointed. The Merochron swung slightly back and forth, from +1,000,000:1 to 500,000:1. "Look hard twenty-years-a minute-plus to ten-years-a-minute-minus. The ship has a chance of getting out if the load is lightened. We've thrown everything else we could out. Now I'm going. I love you; you love me. It will be as hard for me to leave you as for you to see me go. A lifetime with you would not have been enough. But, Dita, you owe me this ... to take the ship back safely. Don't make it harder for me. If you can hold it on Left Subformal Probability, do it. If not, keep on trying to slow down in back time.

"But, darling . . ."

He wanted to be tender. Words caught in his throat. But their time had run out. Their honeymoon had been a gamble, their own gamble, and now it and their life together were over. Three earth days! The Instrumentality remained; the Chiefs and Lords waited; a million lives would be a cheap price for a fix on the Knot in Time. Dita could do it. Even she could do it if the ship were lighter by a man.

His farewell kiss was not one she would remember. He was in a hurry now to finish it; the sooner he left, the better her chances were of getting back. And still she looked at him as if she

expected him to stay and talk. Something in her eyes made him suspicious that she would try to hinder him. He cut in his helmet speaker and said:

"Goodbye. I love you. I have to go now, quickly. Please do as I ask and don't get in my way."

She was weeping now. "Tasco, you're going to die . . ."

"Maybe," he said.

She reached for him, tried to hold him. "Darling, don't. Don't go. Don't hurry so."

Roughly he pushed her back into the control seat. He tried to hold his anger that she would not let him do even this right, to die for her. She would make it a scene. "Sweetheart," he said, "don't make me say it all over again. Anyhow, I may not die. I'll aim for a planet full of nymphs and I'll live a thousand years."

He had half expected to stir her to jealousy or anger... at least some other emotion, but she disregarded his poor joke and went on quietly weeping. A wisp of smoke rising in the hot moving air of the cabin made them look to the control panel. The Probability Selector was glowing. Tasco kept his face immobile, glad that she did not realize the significance of the reading. *Now no one will ever find me, even if I live*, he thought. *But go, go, go!*

He smiled at her through his shimmering suit. He touched her arm with his metal claw. Then, before she could stop him he backed into the escape hatch, slammed the door on himself, fumbled for the ejector gun, pressed the button. Pressed it hard.

Thunder, and a wash like water. There went his world, his wife, his time, himself... He floated free in ana chron Others had gone astray between the Probabilities; none had come back. They had borne it, he supposed. If they could, he could too. And then it caught him. The others, had they left wives and sweethearts? Was it for them too a personal tragedy? *Himself and Dita, they had not had to come. Vanity, pride, jealousy, stubbornness. They had come. And now: himself in anachron.*

He felt himself leaping from Probability to Probability like a pebble bouncing down a corrugated plastic roof. He couldn't even tell whether he was going toward Formal or Resolved. Perhaps he was still somewhere in Left Subformal.

The clatter ceased. He waited for more blows.

One more came. Only one, and sharp.

He felt tension go out of him. He felt the Probabilities firming around him, listened to the selector working in his helmet as it coded him into atime-space combination fit for human life. The thing had a murmur in it which he had never heard in a practice jump, but then, this wasn't practice. He had never before gotten out between the Probabilities, never floated free in anachron

A feeling of weight and direction made him realize that he was coming back to common space. His feet were touching ground. He stood still, attempting to relax while a world took shape around him. There was something very strange about the whole business. The grey color of the space around him resembled the grey of fast back timing the blind blur which he had so often seen from the cabin window when, having chosen a Probability, he had coursed it down until the Selectors had given him an opening he could land in. *But how could he be back timing with no ship, no power?*

Unless –

Unless the Knot in Time in flinging him out had imparted to him a time-momentum in his own body. But even if that were so he should decelerate. Was he coming down in ratio? This still felt like high timing 10,000:1 or higher.

He tried briefly to think of Dita but his personal situation outweighed everything else. A new worry hit him. What was his own personal consumption of time? With time so high outside his unit

was it also rising inside? How long would his nutrients last? He tried to be aware of his own body, to feel hunger, to catch a glimpse of himself. Was the automatic nutrition keeping up with the changing time? On inspiration, he rubbed his face against the mask to see if his whiskers had grown since he left the ship.

He had a beard. Plenty.

Before he could figure that one out, there was one last *Snap!* and he fainted.

When he recovered, he was still erect. Some kind of frame supported him. Who had put it there, and how? By the continued greyness he could tell that his physiological time and external time had not yet met. He felt a violent impatience. There should be some way to slow down. His helmet felt heavy. Disregarding the risks, he clawed at the mask until it came off.

The air was sweet but thick, thick. He had to fight to breathe it in. It was hardly worth the struggle.

He was still high timing more so than he had thought anybody could with an exposed body. He looked down and saw his beard tremble as it grew. He felt the stab of fingernails growing against his palms; there should have been an automatic cut-off but time was going too fast. Clenching his hand, he broke off the nails roughly. His boots had apparently broken off his toenails, and although his feet were uncomfortable the pressure was bearable. Anyway there was nothing he could do about it.

His immense tiredness warned him that the automatic nutrient system was not keeping up with his bodily time. With effort he fitted his claw to his belt and twisted until the supplementary food vial was released. He felt the needle pierce the skin of his belly; he twisted again until the hot surge of nourishment told him that the food-injector had reached a vein. Almost immediately his strength began to rise.

He watched the blur of buildings flashing into instantaneous shape around him, standing a moment, and then melting slowly away. Now he could see a little more of his surroundings. He seemed to be standing in the mouth of a cave or in a great doorway. It was curious, that, about the buildings. All the other buildings he had seen in time had worked the other way. First the slow up-thrust as they were built, then the greying evenness of age, then the flash of removal. But, he reminded himself tiredly, he was back timing and he thought it probable that no other human being had ever back timed so hard and fast or for so long a time.

He seemed now to be rapidly decelerating. A building appeared around him, then he was outside of it, then back in again. Suddenly a great light shone in front of him.

Now he was inside a large palace. He seemed to be placed on a pedestal, high up at the center of things. Shimmering masses began to take form around him at rhythmic intervals: people? There was something wrong about the way they moved; why did they move with that strange awkwardness?

As the light persisted and this building seemed solid, he made an effort to squint to try to see more. His eyeballs were the only part of his anatomy that seemed to move freely. His breaking growing breaking fingernails and toenails and the growing beard reminded him to break off another food needle in his vein. His skin itched intolerably. As he realized the increasing immobility of his arms he felt panic and while there was still time pushed the continuous-flow button on the supplementary nutrients. Despite the food, enough to keep him alive in the cold of space, he could no longer move his hands and fingers. And still, it seemed only minutes since he had left the ship. (*Dita, Dita, are you out of the Knot ? Did you manage it in time ? If only I calculated the weight load right. . .*)

The building continued stable around him. He rolled his eyes to try to see where he was, when he was.

*I'm still alive, he thought. Nobody else ever got out of anachron. That's something. Nobody else ever stepped out of time to be seen again.*

Deceleration continued. The bright light before him remained even and he found he could see better. In front of him was a sort of picture, high and large. What was it? Panels, a series of panels, paintings from some remote past.

He peered harder and recognized that the panel at the top left was himself, Tasco Magnon. There he was: shimmering space suit, marble armrests, pedestal below him. But they had given him wings like the wings of angels of the Old Strong Religion. Great white wings. And they had put a halo around his head. The next panel showed him as he felt: suit shimmering but his face old and tired.

The panels on the lower level were equally curious. The first showed a bed of grass or moss with luminescence glowing above it. The second showed a skeleton standing in a frame.

His tired mind sought to make sense of the panels.

People became plainer in the blur around him. Sometimes he could almost see individuals. The colors of the paintings brightened, brightened, until they flashed gay and bold, then disappeared.

Disappeared completely, flatly.

His brain, so old and tired now, struggled with immense effort to reach the truth. Physiological time was utterly deranged. Each minute seemed years. His thoughts became old memories while he thought them. But the truth came through to him:

He was still backtiming.

He had passed the time of his arrival and resurrection in this world. The resurrection was wisely prophesied by the beings who built the palace, painted the wings and halo around him.

He would die soon, in the remote past of this civilization.

Long afterwards, centuries before his own death, his alien remains would fade into the system of this time-space locus; and in fading, they would seem to glow and to assemble. They must have been untouchable and beyond manipulation. The people who had built the palace and their forefathers had watched dust turn to skeleton, skeleton heave upright, skeleton become mummy, mummy become corpse, corpse become old man, old man become young himself as he had left the spaceship. He had landed in his own tomb, his own temple. He had yet to fulfill the things which these people had seen him do, and had recorded in the panels of his temple.

Across his fatigue he felt a thrill of weary remote pride: he knew that he was sure to fulfill the godhood which these people had so faithfully recorded. He knew he would become young and glorious, only to disappear. He'd done it, a few minutes or millennia ago.

The clash of time within his body tore at him with peculiar pain. The food needle seemed to have no further effect. His vitals felt dry.

The building glowed as it seemed to come nearer.

The ages thrust against him. He thought, "I am Tasco Magnon and have been a god. I will become one again."

But his last conscious thought was nothing grandiose. A glimpse of moon-pale hair, a half-turned cheek. In the aching lost silence of his own mind he called,

*Dita! Dita!*

The twisted time ship took form at the Uateport of the Instrumentality. Officials and engineers rushed up, opened the door. The young woman who sat at the controls staring blindly was white-faced beyond all weeping. They tried to rouse her from her trance-like state but she clung desperately to the controls, repeating like a chant:

"He jumped out. Tasco jumped out. He jumped out. Alone, alone in anachron . . ."

Gravely and gently the officials lifted her from the controls so that they could remove the now-priceless instruments.

# The Crime and the Glory of Commander Suzdal

*One of the few Smith stories to touch directly on the manner in which many of the stranger worlds in the universe of the Instrumentality were settled—and the price that could often be paid thereby. This story is one of his more explicit expositions of the Instrumentality's methods of operation—at once brilliant, enlightened and totally ruthless and amoral—in its never-ending mission to safeguard mankind and extend and preserve its own power. Suzdal's name is taken from that of a Russian city.*

*Do not read this story; turn the page quickly. The story may upset you. Anyhow, you probably know it already. It is a very disturbing story. Everyone knows it. The glory and the crime of Commander Suzdal have been told in a thousand different ways. Don't let yourself realize that the story really is the truth.*

*It isn't. Not at all. There's not a bit of truth to it. There is no such planet as Arachosia, no such people as klopts, no such world as Catland. These are all just imaginary, they didn't happen, forget about it, go away and read something else.*

## *The Beginning*

Commander Suzdal was sent forth in a shell-ship to explore the outermost reaches of our galaxy. His ship was called a cruiser, but he was the only man in it. He was equipped with hypnotics and cubes to provide him the semblance of company, a large crowd of friendly people who could be convoked out of his own hallucinations.

The Instrumentality even offered him some choice in his imaginary companions, each of whom was embodied in a small ceramic cube containing the brain of a small animal but imprinted with the personality of an actual human being.

Suzdal, a short, stocky man with a jolly smile, was blunt about his needs:

"Give me two good security officers. I can manage the ship, but if I'm going into the unknown, I'll need help in meeting the strange problems which might show up."

The loading official smiled at him, "I never heard of a cruiser commander who asked for security officers. Most people regard them as an utter nuisance."

"That's all right," said Suzdal. "I don't."

"Don't you want some chess players?"

"I can play chess," said Suzdal, "all I want to, using the spare computers. All I have to do is set the power down and they start losing. On full power, they always beat me."

The official then gave Suzdal an odd look. He did not exactly leer, but his expression became both intimate and a little unpleasant. "What about other companions?" he asked, with a funny little edge to his voice.

"I've got books," said Suzdal, "a couple of thousand. I'm going to be gone only a couple of years Earth time."

"Local-subjective, it might be several thousand years," said the official, "though the time will wind back up again as you re-approach Earth. And I wasn't talking about books," he repeated, with the same funny, prying lilt to his voice.

Suzdal shook his head with momentary worry, ran his hand through his sandy hair. His blue eyes were forthright and he looked straightforwardly into the official's eyes. "What do you mean, then, if not books? Navigators? I've got them, not to mention the turtle-men. They're good company, if you just talk to them slowly enough and then give them plenty of time to answer. Don't forget, I've been out before ... "

The official spat out his offer: "Dancing girls. WOMEN. Concubines. Don't you want any of those? We could even cube your own wife for you and print her mind on a cube for you. That way she could be with you every week that you were awake."

Suzdal looked as though he would spit on the floor in sheer disgust. "Alice? You mean, you want me to travel around with a ghost of her? How would the real Alice feel when I came back? Don't tell me that you're going to put my wife on a mousebrain. You're just offering me delirium. I've got to keep my wits out there with space and time rolling in big waves around me. I'm going to be crazy enough, just as it is. Don't forget, I've been out there before. Getting back to a real Alice is going to be one of my biggest reality factors. It will help me to get home." At this point, Suzdal's own voice took on the note of intimate inquiry, as he added, "Don't tell me that a lot of cruiser commanders ask to go flying around with imaginary wives. That would be pretty nasty, in my opinion. Do many of them do it?"

"We're here to get you loaded on board ship, not to discuss what other officers do or do not do. Sometimes we think it good to have a female companion on the ship with the commander, even if she is imaginary. If you ever found anything among the stars which took on female form, you'd be mighty vulnerable to it."

"Females, among the stars? Bosh!" said Suzdal.

"Strange things have happened," said the official.

"Not that," said Suzdal. "Pain, craziness, distortion, panic without end, a craze for food—yes, those I can look for and face. They will be there. But females, no. There aren't any. I love my wife. I won't make females up out of my own mind. After all, I'll have the turtle-people aboard, and they will be bringing up their young. I'll have plenty of family life to watch and to take part in. I can even give Christmas parties for the young ones."

"What kind of parties are those?" asked the official.

"Just a funny little ancient ritual that I heard about from an outer pilot. You give all the young things presents, once every local-subjective year."

"It sounds nice," said the official, his voice growing tired and final. "You still refuse to have a cube-woman on board. You wouldn't have to activate her unless you really needed her."

"You haven't flown, yourself, have you?" asked Suzdal.

It was the official's turn to flush. "No," he said, flatly.

"Anything that's in that ship, I'm going to think about. I'm a cheerful sort of man, and very friendly. Let me just get along with my turtle-people. They're not lively, but they are considerate and restful. Two thousand or more years, local-subjective, is a lot of time. Don't give me additional decisions to make. It's work enough, running the ship. Just leave me alone with my turtle-people. I've gotten along with them before."

"You, Suzdal, are the commander," said the loading official. "We'll do as you say."

"Fine," smiled Suzdal. "You may get a lot of queer types on this run, but I'm not one of them."

The two men smiled agreement at one another and the loading of the ship was completed.

The ship itself was managed by turtle-men, who aged very slowly, so that while Suzdal coursed the outer rim of the galaxy and let the thousands of years—local count—go past while he slept in his frozen bed, the turtle-men rose generation by generation, trained their young to work the ship, taught the stories of the Earth that they would never see again, and read the computers correctly, to awaken Suzdal only when there was a need for human intervention and for human intelligence. Suzdal awakened from time to time, did his work and then went back. He felt that he had been gone from Earth only a few months.

Months indeed! He had been gone more than a subjective ten thousand years, when he met the siren capsule.

It looked like an ordinary distress capsule. The kind of thing that was often shot through space to indicate some complication of the destiny of man among the stars. This capsule had apparently been flung across an immense distance, and from the capsule Suzdal got the story of Arachosia.

The story was false. The brains of a whole planet—the wild genius of a malevolent, unhappy race—had been dedicated to the problem of ensnaring and attracting a normal pilot from Old Earth. The story which the capsule sang conveyed the rich personality of a wonderful woman with a contralto voice. The story was true, in part. The appeals were real, in part. Suzdal listened to the story and it sank, like a wonderfully orchestrated piece of grand opera, right into the fibers of his brain. It would have been different if he had known the real story.

Everybody now knows the real story of Arachosia, the bitter terrible story of the planet which was a paradise, which turned into a hell. The story of how people got to be something different from people. The story of what happened way out there in the most dreadful place among the stars.

He would have fled if he knew the real story. He couldn't understand what we now know:

Mankind could not meet the terrible people of Arachosia without the people of Arachosia following them home and bringing to mankind a grief greater than grief, a craziness worse than mere insanity, a plague surpassing all imaginable plagues. The Arachosians had become nonpeople, and yet, in their innermost imprinting of their personalities, they remained people. They sang songs which exalted their own deformity and which praised themselves for what they had so horribly become, and yet, in their own songs, in their own ballads, the organ tones of the refrain rang out,

*And I mourn man!*

They knew what they were and they hated themselves. Hating themselves they pursued mankind.

Perhaps they are still pursuing mankind.

The Instrumentality has by now taken good pains that the Arachosians will never find us again, has flung networks of deception out along the edge of the galaxy to make sure that those lost ruined people cannot find us. The Instrumentality knows and guards our world and all the other worlds of mankind against the deformity which has become Arachosia. We want nothing to do with Arachosia. Let them hunt for us. They won't find us.

How could Suzdal know that?

This was the first time someone had met the Arachosians, and he met them only with a message in which an elfin voice sang the elfin song of ruin, using perfectly clear words in the old common tongue to tell a story so sad, so abominable, that mankind has not forgotten it yet. In its



essence the story was very simple. This is what Suzdal heard, and what people have learned ever since then.

The Arachosians were settlers. Settlers could go out by sail-ship, trailing behind them the pods. That was the first way.

Or they could go out by planoform ship, ships piloted by skillful men, who went into space and came out again and found man.

Or for very long distances indeed, they could go out in the new combination. Individual pods packed into an enormous shell-ship, a gigantic version of Suzdal's own ship. The sleepers frozen, the machines waking, the ship fired to and beyond the speed of light, flung below space, coming out at random and homing on a suitable target. It was a gamble, but brave men took it. If no target was found, their machines might course space forever, while the bodies, protected by freezing as they were, spoiled bit by bit, and while the dim light of life went out in the individual frozen brains.

The shell-ships were the answers of mankind to an overpopulation, which neither the old planet Earth nor its daughter planets could quite respond to. The shell-ships took the bold, the reckless, the romantic, the willful, sometimes the criminals out among the stars. Mankind lost track of these ships, over and over again. The advance explorers, the organized Instrumentality, would stumble upon human beings, cities and cultures, high or low, tribes or families, where the shell-ships had gone on, far, far beyond the outermost limits of mankind, where the instruments of search had found an earthlike planet, and the shell-ship, like some great dying insect, had dropped to the planet, awakened its people, broken open, and destroyed itself with its delivery of newly re-born men and women, to settle a world.

Arachosia looked like a good world to the men and women who came to it. Beautiful beaches, with cliffs like endless riviéras rising above. Two bright big moons in the sky, a sun not too far away. The machines had pretested the atmosphere and sampled the water, had already scattered the forms of Old Earth life into the atmosphere and in the seas so that as the people awakened they heard the singing of Earth birds and they knew that Earth fish had already been adapted to the oceans and flung in, there to multiply. It seemed a good life, a rich life. Things went well.

Things went very, very well for the Arachosians.

This is the truth.

This was, thus far, the story told by the capsule.

But here they diverged.

The capsule did not tell the dreadful, pitiable truth about Arachosia. It invented a set of plausible lies. The voice which came telepathically out of the capsule was that of a mature, warm happy female—some woman of early middle age with a superb speaking contralto.

Suzdal almost fancied that he talked to it, so real was the personality. How could he know that he was being beguiled, trapped?

It sounded right, really right.

"And then," said the voice, "the Arachosian sickness has been hitting us. Do not land. Stand off. Talk to us. Tell us about medicine. Our young die, without reason. Our farms are rich, and the wheat here is more golden than it was on Earth, the plums more purple, the flowers whiter. Everything does well—except people.

"Our young die ... " said the womanly voice, ending in a sob.

"Are there any symptoms?" thought Suzdal, and almost as though it had heard his question, the capsule went on.

"They die of nothing. Nothing which our medicine can test, nothing which our science can show. They die. Our population is dropping. People, do not forget us! Man, whoever you are, come quickly, come now, bring help! But for your own sake, do not land. Stand off-planet and view us through screens so that you can take word back to the home of man about the lost children of mankind among the strange and outermost stars!" Strange, indeed!

The truth was far stranger, and very ugly indeed. Suzdal was convinced of the truth of the message. He had been selected for the trip because he was good-natured, intelligent, and brave; this appeal touched all three of his qualities.

Later, much later, when he was arrested, Suzdal was asked, "Suzdal, you fool, why didn't you test the message? You've risked the safety of all the mankind for a foolish appeal!"

"It wasn't foolish!" snapped Suzdal. "That distress capsule had a sad, wonderful womanly voice and the story checked out true."

"With whom?" said the investigator, flatly and dully.

Suzdal sounded weary and sad when he replied to the point. "It checked out with my books. With my knowledge."

Reluctantly he added, "And with my own judgment ... "

"Was your judgment good?" said the investigator.

"No," said Suzdal, and let the single word hang on the air as though it might be the last word he would ever speak.

But it was Suzdal himself who broke the silence when he added, "Before I set course and went to sleep, I activated my security officers in cubes and had them check the story. They got the real story of Arachosia, all right. They cross-ciphered it out of patterns in the distress capsule and they told me the whole real story very quickly, just as I was waking up."

"And what did you do?"

"I did what I did. I did that for which I expect to be punished. The Arachosians were already walking around the outside of my hull by then. They had caught my ship. They had caught me. How was I to know that the wonderful, sad story was true only for the first twenty full years that the woman told about. And she wasn't even a woman. Just a klopt. Only the first twenty years ... "

Things had gone well for the Arachosians for the first twenty years.

Then came disaster, but it was not the tale told in the distress capsule.

They couldn't understand it. They didn't know why it had to happen to them. They didn't know why it waited twenty years, three months and four days. But their time came.

We think it must have been something in the radiation of their sun. Or perhaps a combination of that particular sun's radiation and the chemistry, which even the wise machines in the shell-ship had not fully analyzed, which reached out and was spread from within. The disaster hit. It was a simple one and utterly unstoppable.

They had doctors. They had hospitals. They even had a limited capacity for research.

But they could not research fast enough. Not enough to meet this disaster. It was simple, monstrous, enormous.

Femininity became carcinogenic.

Every woman on the planet began developing cancer at the same time, on her lips, in her breasts, in her groin, sometimes along the edge of her jaw, the edge of her lip, the tender portions of her body. The cancer had many forms, and yet it was always the same. There was something about the radiation which reached through, which reached into the human body, and which made a

particular form of desoxycorticosterone turn into a subform—unknown on Earth—of pregnandiol, which infallibly caused cancer. The advance was rapid.

The little baby girls began to die first. The women clung weeping to their fathers, their husbands. The mothers tried to say goodbye to their sons.

One of the doctors, herself, was a woman, a strong woman.

Remorselessly, she cut live tissue from her living body, put it under the microscope, took samples of her own urine, her blood, her spit, and she came up with the answer: There is no answer. And yet there was something better and worse than an answer.

If the sun of Arachosia killed everything which was female, if the female fish floated upside down on the surface of the sea, if the female birds sang a shriller, wilder song as they died above the eggs which would never hatch, if the female animals grunted and growled in the lairs where they hid away with pain, female human beings did not have to accept death so tamely. The doctor's name was Astarte Kraus.

### *The Magic of the Klopts*

The human female could do what the animal female could not. She could turn male. With the help of equipment from the ship, tremendous quantities of testosterone were manufactured, and every single girl and woman still surviving was turned into a man. Massive injections were administered to all of them. Their faces grew heavy, they all returned to growing a little bit, their chests flattened out, their muscles grew stronger, and in less than three months they were indeed men.

Some lower forms of life had survived because they were not polarized dearly enough to the forms of male and female, which depended on that particular organic chemistry for survival. With the fish gone, plants dotted the oceans, the birds were gone but the insects survived; dragonflies, butterflies, mutated versions of grasshoppers, beetles, and other insects swarmed over the planet. The men who had lost women worked side by side with the men who had been made out of the bodies of women.

When they knew each other, it was unutterably sad for them to meet. Husband and wife, both bearded, strong, quarrelsome, desperate and busy. The little boys somehow realizing that they would never grow up to have sweethearts, to have wives, to get married, to have daughters. But what was a mere world to stop the driving brain and the burning intellect of Dr. Astarte Kraus? She became the leader of her people, the men and the men-women. She drove them forward, she made them survive, she used cold brains on all of them.

(Perhaps, if she had been a sympathetic person, she would have let them die. But it was the nature of Dr. Kraus not to be sympathetic—just brilliant, remorseless, implacable against the universe which had tried to destroy her.)

Before she died, Dr. Kraus had worked out a carefully programed genetic system. Little bits of the men's tissues could be implanted by a surgical routine in the abdomens, just inside the peritoneal wall, crowding a little bit against the intestines, an artificial womb and artificial chemistry and artificial insemination by radiation, by heat made it possible for men to bear boy children.

What was the use of having girl children if they all died? The people of Arachosia went on. The first generation lived through the tragedy, half insane with the grief and disappointment. They sent out message capsules and they knew that their messages would reach earth in six million years.

As new explorers, they had gambled on going further than other ships went. They had found a good world, but they were not quite sure where they were. Were they still within the familiar galaxy, or had they jumped beyond to one of the nearby galaxies? They couldn't quite tell.

It was a part of the policy of Old Earth not to over-equip the exploring parties for fear that some of them, taking violent cultural change or becoming aggressive empires, might turn back on Earth and destroy it. Earth always made sure that it had the advantages.

The third and fourth and fifth generations of Arachosians were still people. All of them were male. They had the human memory, they had human books, they knew the words "mama," "sister," "sweetheart," but they no longer really understood what these terms referred to.

The human body, which had taken four million years on earth to grow, has immense resources within it, resources greater than the brain, or the personality, or the hopes of the individual. And the bodies of the Arachosians decided things for them. Since the chemistry of femininity meant instant death, and since an occasional girl baby was born dead and buried casually, the bodies made the adjustment. The men of Arachosia became both men and women. They gave themselves the ugly nickname, "klopt." Since they did not have the rewards of family life, they became strutting cockerels, who mixed their love with murder, who blended their songs with duels, who sharpened their weapons and who earned the right to reproduce within a strange family system which no decent Earth-man would find comprehensible.

But they did survive.

And the method of their survival was so sharp, so fierce, that it was indeed a difficult thing to understand.

In less than four hundred years the Arachosians had civilized into groups of fighting clans. They still had just one planet, around just one sun. They lived in just one place. They had a few spacecraft they had built themselves. Their science, their art and their music moved forward with strange lurches of inspired neurotic genius, because they lacked the fundamentals in the human personality itself, the balance of male and female, the family, the operations of love, of hope, of reproduction. They survived, but they themselves had become monsters and did not know it.

Out of their memory of old mankind they created a legend of Old Earth. Women in that memory were deformities, who should be killed. Misshapen beings, who should be erased. The family, as they recalled it, was filth and abomination which they were resolved to wipe out if they should ever meet it.

They, themselves, were bearded homosexuals, with rouged lips, ornate earrings, fine heads of hair, and very few old men among them.

They killed off their men before they became old; the things they could not get from love or relaxation or comfort, they purchased with battle and death. They made up songs proclaiming themselves to be the last of the old men and the first of the new, and they sang their hate to mankind when they should meet, and they sang "Woe is Earth that we should find it," and yet something inside them made them add to almost every song a refrain which troubled even them,

*And I mourn man!*

They mourned mankind and yet they plotted to attack all of humanity.

## The Trap

Suzdal had been deceived by the message capsule. He put himself back in the sleeping compartment and he directed the turtle-men to take the cruiser to Arachosia, wherever it might be. He did not do this crazily or wantonly. He did it as a matter of deliberate judgment. A judgment for which he was later heard, tried, judged fairly and then put to something worse than death.

He deserved it.

He sought for Arachosia without stopping to think of the most fundamental rule: How could he keep the Arachosians, singing monsters that they were, from following him home to the eventual ruin of Earth? Might not their condition be a disease which could be contagious, or might not their fierce society destroy the other societies of men and leave Earth and all of other men's worlds in ruin? He did not think of this, so he was heard, and tried and punished much later. We will come to that.

### *The Arrival*

Suzdal awakened in orbit off Arachosia. And he awakened knowing he had made a mistake. Strange ships clung to his shell-ship like evil barnacles from an unknown ocean, attached to a familiar water craft.

He called to his turtle-men to press the controls and the controls did not work.

The outsiders, whoever they were, man or woman or beast or god, had enough technology to immobilize his ship. Suzdal immediately realized his mistake. Naturally, he thought of destroying himself and the ship, but he was afraid that if he destroyed himself and missed destroying the ship completely there was a chance that his cruiser, a late model with recent weapons, would fall into the hands of whoever it was walking on the outer dome of his own cruiser. He could not afford the risk of mere individual suicide. He had to take a more drastic step. This was not time for obeying Earth rules.

His security officer—a cube ghost wakened to human form—whispered the whole story to him in quick intelligent gasps:

"They are people, sir."

"More people than I am."

"I'm a ghost, an echo working out of a dead brain."

"These are real people, Commander Suzdal, but they are the worst people ever to get loose among the stars. You must destroy them, sir!"

"I can't," said Suzdal, still trying to come fully awake. "They're people."

"Then you've got to beat them off. By any means, sir. By any means whatever. Save Earth. Stop them. Warn Earth."

"And I?" asked Suzdal, and was immediately sorry that he had asked the selfish, personal question.

"You will die or you will be punished," said the security officer sympathetically, "and I do not know which one will be worse."

"Now?"

"Right now. There is no time left for you. No time at all."

"But the rules ... ?"

"You have already strayed far outside of rules."

There were rules, but Suzdal left them all behind.

Rules, rules for ordinary times, for ordinary places, for understandable dangers.

This was a nightmare cooked up by the flesh of man, motivated by the brains of man. Already his monitors were bringing him news of who these people were, these seeming maniacs, these men who had never known women, these boys who had grown to lust and battle, who had a family

structure which the normal human brain could not accept, could not believe, could not tolerate. The things on the outside were people, and they weren't. The things on the outside had the human brain, the human imagination, and the human capacity for revenge, and yet Suzdal, a brave officer, was so frightened by the mere nature of them that he did not respond to their efforts to communicate.

He could feel the turtle-women among his crew aching with fright itself, as they realized who was pounding on their ship and who it was that sang through loud announcing machines that they wanted in, in, in.

Suzdal committed a crime. It is the pride of the Instrumentality that the Instrumentality allows its officers to commit crimes or mistakes or suicide. The Instrumentality does the things for mankind that a computer cannot do. The Instrumentality leaves the human brain, the human choice in action.

The Instrumentality passes dark knowledge to its staff, things not usually understood in the inhabited world, things prohibited to ordinary men and women because the officers of the Instrumentality, the captains and the subchiefs and the chiefs, must know their jobs. If they do not, all mankind might perish.

Suzdal reached into his arsenal. He knew what he was doing. The larger moon of Arachosia was habitable. He could see that there were Earth plants already on it, and Earth insects. His monitors showed him that the Arachosian men-women had not bothered to settle on the planet. He threw an agonized inquiry at his computers and cried out:

"Read me the age it's in!"

The machine sang back, "More than thirty million years."

Suzdal had strange resources. He had twins or quadruplets of almost every Earth animal. The Earth animals were carried in tiny capsules no larger than a medicine capsule and they consisted of the sperm and the ovum of the higher animals, ready to be matched for sowing, ready to be imprinted; he also had small life-bombs which could surround any form of life with at least a chance of survival.

He went to the bank and he got cats, eight pairs, sixteen Earth cats, *Felis domesticus*, the kind of cat that you and I know, the kind of cat which is bred, sometimes for telepathic uses, sometimes to go along on the ships and serve as auxiliary weapons when the minds of the pin-lighters direct the cats to fight off dangers.

He coded these cats. He coded them with messages just as monstrous as the messages which had made the men-women of Arachosia into monsters. This is what he coded:

*Do not breed true.*

*Invent new chemistry.*

*You will serve man.*

*Become civilized.*

*Learn speech.*

*You will serve man.*

*When man calls you will serve man.*

*Go back, and come forth.*

*Serve man.*

These instructions were no mere verbal instructions. They were imprints on the actual molecular structure of the animals. They were charges in the genetic and biological coding which went with these cats. And then Suzdal committed his offense against the laws of mankind. He had a

chronopathic device on board the ship. A time distorter, usually to be used for a moment or a second or two to bring the ship away from utter destruction.

The men-women of Arachosia were already cutting through the hull.

He could hear their high, hooting voices screaming delirious pleasure at one another as they regarded him as the first of their promised enemies that they had ever met, the first of the monsters from Old Earth who had finally overtaken them. The true, evil people on whom they, the men-women of Arachosia would be revenged.

Suzdal remained calm. He coded the genetic cats. He loaded them into life-bombs. He adjusted the controls of his chronopathic machine illegally, so that instead of reaching one second for a ship of eighty thousand tons, they reached two million years for a load of less than four kilos. He flung the cats into the nameless moon of Arachosia.

And he flung them back in time.

And he knew he did not have to wait.

He didn't.

The Gotland Suzdal Made

The cats came. Their ships glittered in the naked sky above Arachosia. Their little combat craft attacked. The cats who had not existed a moment before, but who had then had two million years in which to follow a destiny printed right into their brains, printed down their spinal cords, etched into the chemistry of their bodies and personalities. The cats had turned into people of a kind, with speech, intelligence, hope, and a mission. Their mission was to attach Suzdal, to rescue him, to obey him, and to damage Arachosia.

The cat ships screamed their battle warnings.

"This is the day of the year of the promised age. And now come cats!"

The Arachosians had waited for battle for four thousand years and now they got it. The cats attacked them. Two of the cat craft recognized Suzdal, and the cats reported,

"Oh Lord, oh God, oh Maker of all things, oh Commander of Time, oh Beginner of Life, we have waited since Everything began to serve You, to serve Your Name, to obey Your Glory! May we live for You, may we die for You. We are Your people."

Suzdal cried and threw his message to all the cats.

"Harry the klopts but don't kill them all!"

He repeated, "Harry them and stop them until I escape." He flung his cruiser into nonspace and escaped.

Neither cat nor Arachosian followed him.

And that's the story, but the tragedy is that Suzdal got back. And the Arachosians are still there and the cats are still there. Perhaps the Instrumentality knows where they are, perhaps the Instrumentality does not. Mankind does not really want to find out. It is against all law to bring up a form of life superior to man. Perhaps the cats are. Perhaps somebody knows whether the Arachosians won and killed the cats and added the cat science to their own and are now looking for us somewhere, probing like blind men through the stars for us true human beings to meet, to hate, to kill. Or perhaps the cats won.

Perhaps the cats are imprinted by a strange mission, by weird hopes of serving men they don't recognize. Perhaps they think we are all Arachosians and should be saved only for some particular cruiser commander, whom they will never see again. They won't see Suzdal, because we know what happened to him.

## *The Trial of Suzdal*

Suzdal was brought to trial on a great stage in the open world. His trial was recorded. He had gone in when he should not have gone in. He had searched for the Arachosians without waiting and asking for advice and reinforcements. What business was it of his to relieve a distress ages old? What business indeed?

And then the cats. We had the records of the ship to show that something came out of that moon. Spacecraft, things with voices, things that could communicate with the human brain. We're not even sure, since they transmitted directly into the receiver computers, that they spoke an Earth language. Perhaps they did it with some sort of direct telepathy. But the crime was, Suzdal had succeeded.

By throwing the cats back two million years, by coding them to survive, coding them to develop civilization, coding them to come to his rescue, he had created a whole new world in less than one second of objective time.

His chronopathic device had flung the little life-bombs back to the wet Earth of the big moon over Arachosia and in less time than it takes to record this, the bombs came back in the form of a fleet built by a race, an Earth race, though of cat origin, two million years old.

The court stripped Suzdal of his name and said, "You will not be named Suzdal any longer."

The court stripped Suzdal of his rank.

"You will not be a commander of this or of any other navy, neither imperial nor of the Instrumentality."

The court stripped Suzdal of his life. "You will not live longer, former commander, and former Suzdal."

And then the court stripped Suzdal of death.

"You will go to the planet Shayol, the place of uttermost shame from which no one ever returns. You will go there with the contempt and hatred of mankind. We will not punish you. We do not wish to know about you any more. You will live on, but for us you will have ceased to exist."

That's the story. It's a sad, wonderful story. The Instrumentality tries to cheer up all the different kinds of mankind by telling them it isn't true, it's just a ballad.

Perhaps the records do exist. Perhaps somewhere the crazy klopts of Arachosia breed their boyish young, deliver their babies, always by Caesarean, feed them always by bottle, generations of men who have known fathers and who have no idea of what the word mother might be. And perhaps the Arachosians spend their crazy lives in endless battle with intelligent cats who are serving a mankind that may never come back.

That's the story.

Furthermore, it isn't true.



## Golden the Ship Was – Oh! Oh! Oh!

*The "cat scandal" might refer to an incident involving the pinlighters' partners, the underpeople, or even the intelligent cats created by Commander Suzdal—Smith never made this reference clear. Nor is the connection, if any, between Raumsog's empire and the Bright Empire referred to passing in the later stories "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" and "A Planet Named Shayol" ever made clear. In any case, Tedesco's period is that of Instrumentality before the Rediscovery of Man, when Earth was at its most decadent. This story was another collaboration with Genevieve Linebarger, by the way.*

Aggression started very far away.

War with Raumsog came about twenty years after the great cat scandal which, for a while, threatened to cut the entire planet Earth from the desperately essential santaclara drug. It was a short war and a bitter one.

Corrupt, wise, weary old Earth fought with masked weapons, since only hidden weapons could maintain so ancient a sovereignty—sovereignty which had long since lapsed into a titular paramountcy among the communities of mankind. Earth won and the others lost, because the leaders of Earth never put other considerations ahead of survival. And this time, they thought, they were finally and really threatened.

The Raumsog war was never known to the general public except for the revival of wild old legends about golden ships.

I

On Earth the lords of the Instrumentality met. The presiding chairman looked about and said, "Well, gentlemen, all of us have been bribed by Raumsog. We have all been paid off individually. I myself received six ounces of stroon in pure form. Will the rest of you show better bargains?"

Around the room, the councilors announced the amounts of their bribes.

The chairman turned to the secretary. "Enter the bribes in the record and then mark the record off-the-record."

The others nodded gravely.

"Now we must fight. Bribery is not enough. Raumsog has been threatening to attack Earth. It's been cheap enough to let him threaten, but obviously we don't mean to let him do it."

"How are you going to stop him, Lord Chairman?" growled a gloomy old member. "Get out the golden ships?"

"Exactly that." The chairman looked deadly serious.

There was a murmurous sigh around the room. The golden ships had been used against an inhuman life-form many centuries before. They were hidden somewhere in nonspace and only a

few officials of Earth knew how much reality there was to them. Even at the level of the lords of the Instrumentality the council did not know precisely what they were.

"One ship," said the chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality, "will be enough."

It was.

## II

The dictator Lord Raumsog on his planet knew the difference some weeks later.

"You can't mean that," he said. "You can't mean it. There is no such ship that size. The golden ships are just a story. No one ever saw a picture of one."

"Here is a picture, my Lord," said the subordinate.

Raumsog looked at it. "It's a trick. Some piece of trick photography. They distorted the size. The dimensions are wrong. Nobody has a ship that size. You could not build it, or if you did build it, you could not operate it. There just is not any such thing—" He babbled on for a few more sentences before he realized that his men were looking at the picture and not at him.

He calmed down.

The boldest of the officers resumed speaking. "That one ship is ninety million miles long, Your Highness. It shimmers like fire, but moves so fast that we cannot approach it. But it came into the center of our fleet almost touching our ships, stayed there twenty or thirty thousandths of a second. There it was, we thought. We saw the evidence of life on board: light beams waved; they examined us and then, of course, it lapsed back into nonspace. Ninety million miles, Your Highness. Old Earth has some stings yet and we do not know what the ship is doing."

The officers stared with anxious confidence at their overlord.

Raumsog sighed. "If we must fight, we'll fight. We can destroy that too. After all, what is size in the spaces between the stars? What difference does it make whether it is nine miles or nine million or ninety million?" He sighed again. "Yet I must say ninety million miles is an awful big size for a ship. I don't know what they are going to do with it."

He did not.

## III

It is strange—strange and even fearful—what the love of Earth can do to men. Tedesco, for example.

Tedesco's reputation was far-flung. Even among the Go-captains, whose thoughts were rarely on such matters, Tedesco was known for his raiment, the foppish arrangement of his mantle of office and his be-jeweled badges of authority. Tedesco was known too for his languid manner and his luxurious sybaritic living. When the message came, it found Tedesco in his usual character.

He was lying on the air-draft with his brain pleasure centers plugged into the triggering current. So deeply lost in pleasure was he that the food, the women, the clothing, the books of his apartments were completely neglected and forgotten. All pleasure save the pleasure of electricity acting on the brain was forgotten.

So great was the pleasure that Tedesco had been plugged into the current for twenty hours without interruption—a manifest disobedience of the rule which set six hours as maximum pleasure.

And yet, when the message came—relayed to Tedesco's brain by the infinitesimal crystal set there for the transmittal of messages so secret that even thought was too vulnerable to interception—when the message came Tedesco struggled through layer after layer of bliss and unconsciousness.

The ships of gold—the golden ships—for Earth is in danger. Tedesco struggled. Earth is in danger. With a sigh of bliss he made the effort to press the button which turned off the current. And with a sigh of cold reality he took a look at the world about him and turned to the job at hand. Quickly he prepared to wait upon the lords of the Instrumentality.

The chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality sent out the Lord Admiral Tedesco to command the golden ship. The ship itself, larger than most stars, was an incredible monstrosity. Centuries before it had frightened away non-human aggressors from a forgotten corner of the galaxies.

The lord admiral walked back and forth on his bridge. The cabin was small, twenty feet by thirty. The control area of the ship measured nothing over a hundred feet. All the rest was a golden bubble of the feinting ship, nothing more than thin and incredibly rigid foam with tiny wires cast across it so as to give the illusion of a hard metal and strong defenses.

The ninety million miles of length were right. Nothing else was.

The ship was a gigantic dummy, the largest scarecrow ever conceived by the human mind.

Century after century it had rested in nonspace between the stars, waiting for use. Now it proceeded helpless and defenseless against a militant and crazy dictator Raumsog and his horde of hard-fighting and very real ships.

Raumsog had broken the disciplines of space. He had killed the pin-lighters. He had imprisoned the Go-captains. He had used renegades and apprentices to pillage the immense interstellar ships and had armed the captive vessels to the teeth. In a system which had not known real war, and least of all war against Earth, he had planned well.

He had bribed, he had swindled, he had propagandized. He expected Earth to fall before the threat itself. Then he launched his attack.

With the launching of the attack, Earth itself changed. Corrupt rascals became what they were in title: the leaders and the defenders of mankind.

Tedesco himself had been an elegant fop. War changed him into an aggressive captain, swinging the largest vessel of all time as though it were a tennis bat.

He cut in on the Raumsog fleet hard and fast.

Tedesco shifted his ship right, north, up, over.

He appeared before the enemy and eluded them—down, forward, right, over.

He appeared before the enemy again. One successful shot from them could destroy an illusion on which the safety of mankind itself depended. It was his business not to allow them that shot.

Tedesco was not a fool. He was fighting his own strange kind of war, but he could not help wondering where the real war was proceeding.

#### IV

Prince Lovaduck had obtained his odd name because he had had a Chinesian ancestor who did love ducks, ducks in their Peking form—succulent duck skins brought forth to him ancestral dreams of culinary ecstasy.

His ancestress, an English lady, had said, "Lord Lovaduck, that fits you!"—and the name had been proudly taken as a family name. Lord Lovaduck had a small ship. The ship was tiny and had a very simple and threatening name: Anybody.

The ship was not listed in the space register and he himself was not in the Ministry of Space Defense. The craft was attached only to the Office of Statistics and Investigation—under the listing,

"vehicle"—for the Earth treasury. He had very elementary defenses. With him on the ship went one chronopathic idiot essential to his final and vital maneuvers.

With him also went a monitor. The monitor, as always, sat rigid, catatonic, unthinking, unaware—except for the tape recorder of his living mind which unconsciously noted every imminent mechanical movement of the ship and was prepared to destroy Lovaduck, the chronopathic idiot, and the ship itself should they attempt to escape the authority of Earth or should they turn against Earth. The life of a monitor was a difficult one but was far better than execution for crime, its usual alternative. The monitor made no trouble. Lovaduck also had a very small collection of weapons, weapons selected with exquisite care for the atmosphere, the climate and the precise conditions of Raumsog's planet.

He also had a psionic talent, a poor crazy little girl who wept, and whom the lords of the Instrumentality had cruelly refused to heal, because her talents were better in unshielded form than they would have been had she been brought into the full community of mankind. She was a class-three etiological interference.

## V

Lovaduck brought his tiny ship near the atmosphere of Raumsog's planet. He had paid good money for his captaincy to this ship and he meant to recover it. Recover it he would, and handsomely, if he succeeded in his adventurous mission.

The lords of the Instrumentality were the corrupt rulers of a corrupt world, but they had learned to make corruption serve their civil and military ends, and they were in no mind to put up with failures. If Lovaduck failed he might as well not come back at all. No bribery could save him from this condition. No monitor could let him escape. If he succeeded, he might be almost as rich as an Old North Australian or a stroon merchant.

Lovaduck materialized his ship just long enough to hit the planet by radio. He walked across the cabin and slapped the girl. The girl became frantically excited. At the height of her excitement he slapped a helmet on her head, plugged in the ship's communication system, and flung her own peculiar emotional psionic radiations over the entire planet.

She was a luck-changer. She succeeded: for a few moments, at every place on that planet, under the water and on it, in the sky and in the air, luck went wrong just a little. Quarrels did occur, accidents did happen, mischances moved just within the limits of sheer probability. They all occurred within the same minute. The uproar was reported just as Lovaduck moved his ship to another position. This was the most critical time of all. He dropped down into the atmosphere. He was immediately detected. Ravening weapons reached for him, weapons sharp enough to scorch the very air and to bring every living being on the planet into a condition of screaming alert.

No weapons possessed by Earth could defend against such an attack.

Lovaduck did not defend. He seized the shoulders of his chronopathic idiot. He pinched the poor defective; the idiot fled taking the ship with him. The ship moved back three, four seconds in time to a period slightly earlier than the first detection. All the instruments on Raumsog's planet went off. There was nothing on which they could act.

Lovaduck was ready. He discharged the weapons. The weapons were not noble.

The lords of the Instrumentality played at being chivalrous and did love money, but when life and death were at stake, they no longer cared much about money, or credit, or even about honor. They fought like the animals of Earth's ancient past—they fought to kill. Lovaduck had discharged a combination of organic and inorganic poisons with a high dispersion rate. Seventeen million people; nine hundred and fifty thousandths of the entire population, were to die within that night.

He slapped the chronopathic idiot again. The poor freak whimpered. The ship moved back two more seconds in time.

As he unloaded more poison, he could feel the mechanical relays reach for him.

He moved to the other side of the planet, moving backward one last time, dropped a final discharge of virulent carcinogens and snapped his ship in to nonspace, into the outer reaches of nothing. Here he was far beyond the reach of Raumsog.

## VI

Tedesco's golden ship moved serenely toward the dying planet, Raumsog's fighters closing on it. They fired—it evaded, surprisingly agile for so immense a craft, a ship larger than any sun seen in the heavens of that part of space. But while the ships closed in their radios reported:

"The capital has blanked out."

"Raumsog himself is dead."

"There is no response from the north."

"People are dying in the relay stations."

The fleet moved, intercommunicated, and began to surrender. The golden ship appeared once more and then it disappeared, apparently forever.

## VII

The Lord Tedesco returned to his apartments and to the current for plugging into the centers of pleasure in his brain. But as he arranged himself on the air-jet his hand stopped on its mission to press the button which would start the current. He realized, suddenly, that he had pleasure. The contemplation of the golden ship and of what he had accomplished—alone, deceptive, without the praise of all the worlds for his solitary daring—gave even greater pleasure than that of the electric current. And he sank back on the jet of air and thought of the golden ship, and his pleasure was greater than any he had ever experienced before.

## VIII

On Earth, the lords of the Instrumentality gracefully acknowledged that the golden ship had destroyed all life on Raumsog's planet. Homage was paid to them by the many worlds of mankind. Lovaduck, his idiot, his little girl, and the monitor were taken to hospitals. Their minds were erased of all recollection of their accomplishments.

Lovaduck himself appeared before the lords of the Instrumentality. He felt that he had served on the golden ship and he did not remember what he had done. He knew nothing of a chronopathic idiot. And he remembered nothing of his little "vehicle." Tears poured down his face when the lords of the Instrumentality gave him their highest decorations and paid him an immense sum of money. They said: "You have served well and you are discharged. The blessings and the thanks of mankind will forever rest upon you ... "

Lovaduck went back to his estates wondering that his service should have been so great. He wondered, too, in the centuries of the rest of his life, how any man—such as himself—could be so tremendous a hero and never quite remember how it was accomplished.

## IX

On a very remote planet, the survivors of a Raumsog cruiser were released from internment. By special orders, direct from Earth, their memories had been disco-ordinated so that they would not reveal the pattern of defeat. An obstinate reporter kept after one spaceman. After many hours of hard drinking the survivor's answer was still the same.

"Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh! Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh!"

# The Dead Lady Of Clown Town

*Based on the seven generations of Jestocost, this story could have taken place two thousand years or more before the Rediscovery of Man, which it foreshadows. Parallels with the Joan of Arc legend are obvious, as are the allusions to the Old Strong Religion; not so some of the proper names. "An-fang" is literally "beginning" in German, while "Pane Ashash" is Hindi for "five-six." The style of the story is a Chinese-derived one Smith adopted for SF late in his career—yet he had used it in some unpublished historical stories as early as 1939.*

## I

You already know the end—the immense drama of the Lord Jestocost, seventh of his line, and how the cat-girl C'mell initiated the vast conspiracy. But you do not know the beginning, how the first Lord Jestocost got his name, because of the terror and inspiration which his mother, Lady Goroke, obtained from the famous real-life drama of the dog-girl D'joan. It is even less likely that you know the other story—the one behind D'joan. This story is sometimes mentioned as the matter of the "nameless witch," which is absurd, because she really had a name. The name was "Elaine," an ancient and forbidden one.

Elaine was a mistake. Her birth, her life, her career were all mistakes. The ruby was wrong. How could that have happened?

Go back to An-fang, the Peace Square at An-fang, the Beginning Place at An-fang, where all things start. Bright it was. Red Square, dead square, clear square, under a yellow sun.

This was Earth Original, Manhome itself, where Earthport thrusts its way up through hurricane clouds that are higher than the mountains.

An-fang was near a city, the only living city with a pre-atomic name. The lovely meaningless name was Meeya Meefla, where the lines of ancient roadways, untouched by a wheel for thousands of years, forever paralleled the warm, bright, clear beaches of the Old South East.

The headquarters of the People Programmer was at An-fang, and there the mistake happened:

A ruby trembled. Two tourmaline nets failed to rectify the laser beam. A diamond noted the error. Both the error and the correction went into the general computer.

The error assigned, on the general account of births for Fomalhaut III, the profession of "lay therapist, female, intuitive capacity for correction of human physiology with local resources." On some of the early ships they used to call these people *witch-women*, because they worked unaccountable cures. For pioneer parties, these lay therapists were invaluable; in settled post-Riesmannian societies, they became an awful nuisance. Sickness disappeared with good conditions, accidents dwindled down to nothing, medical work became institutional.

Who wants a witch, even a good witch, when a thousand-bed hospital is waiting with its staff eager for clinical experience . . . and only seven out of its thousand beds filled with real people? (The remaining beds were filled with lifelike robots on which the staff could practice, lest they lose their morale. They could, of course, have worked on underpeople—animals in the shape of human

beings, who did the heavy and the weary work which remained as the *caput mortuum* of a really perfected economy—but it was against the law for animals, even when they were underpeople, to go to a human hospital. When underpeople got sick, the Instrumentality took care of them—in slaughterhouses. It was easier to breed new underpeople for the jobs than it was to repair sick ones. Furthermore, the tender, loving care of a hospital might give them ideas. Such as the idea that they were people. This would have been bad, from the prevailing point of view. Therefore the human hospitals remained almost empty while an underperson who sneezed four times or who vomited once was taken away, never to be ill again. The empty beds kept on with the robot patients, who went through endless repetitions of the human patterns of injury or disease.) This left no work for witches, bred and trained.

Yet the ruby had trembled; the program had indeed made a mistake; the birth-number for a "lay therapist, general, female, immediate use" had been ordered for Fomalhaut III.

Much later, when the story was all done down to its last historic detail, there was an investigation into the origins of Elaine. When the laser had trembled, both the original order and the correction were fed simultaneously into the machine. The machine recognized the contradiction and promptly referred both papers to the human supervisor, an actual man who had been working on the job for seven years.

He was studying music, and he was bored. He was so close to the end of his term that he was already counting the days to his own release. Meanwhile he was rearranging two popular songs. One was *The Big Bamboo*, a primitive piece which tried to evoke the original magic of man. The other was about a girl, *Elaine, Elaine*, whom the song asked to refrain from giving pain to her loving swain. Neither of the songs was important; but between them they influenced history, first a little bit and then very much.

The musician had plenty of time to practice. He had not had to meet a real emergency in all his seven years. From time to time the machine made reports to him, but the musician just told the machine to correct its own errors, and it infallibly did so.

On the day that the accident of Elaine happened, he was trying to perfect his finger work on the guitar, a very old instrument believed to date from the pre-space period. He was playing *The Big Bamboo* for the hundredth time.

The machine announced its mistake with an initial musical chime. The supervisor had long since forgotten all the instructions which he had so worrisomely memorized seven long years ago. The alert did not really and truly matter, because the machine invariably corrected its own mistakes whether the supervisor was on duty or not.

The machine, not having its chime answered, moved into a second-stage alarm. From a loudspeaker set in the wall of the room, it shrieked in a high, clear human voice, the voice of some employee who had died thousands of years earlier:

"Alert, alert! Emergency. Correction needed. Correction needed!"

The answer was one which the machine had never heard before, old though it was. The musician's fingers ran madly, gladly over the guitar strings and he sang clearly, wildly back to the machine a message strange beyond any machine's belief:

*Beat, beat the Big Bamboo!*  
*Beat, beat, beat the Big Bamboo for me . . . !*

Hastily the machine set its memory banks and computers to work, looking for the code reference to "bamboo," trying to make that word fit the present context. There was no reference at all. The machine pestered the man some more.

"Instructions unclear. Instructions unclear. Please correct."

"Shut up," said the man.

"Cannot comply," stated the machine. "Please state and repeat, please state and repeat, please state and repeat."



"Do shut up," said the man, but he knew the machine would not obey this. Without thinking, he turned to his other tune and sang the first two lines twice over:

*Elaine,  
go cure the pain!  
Elaine,*

*Elaine,  
  
Elaine,  
go cure the pain!*

Repetition had been inserted as a safeguard into the machine, on the assumption that no real man would repeat an error. The name "Elaine" was not correct number code, but the fourfold emphasis seemed to confirm the need for a "lay therapist, female." The machine itself noted that a genuine man had corrected the situation card presented as a matter of emergency.

"Accepted," said the machine.

This word, too late, jolted the supervisor away from his music.

"Accepted what?" he asked.

There was no answering voice. There was no sound at all except for the whisper of slightly-moistened warm air through the ventilators.

The supervisor looked out the window. He could see a little of the blood-black red color of the Peace Square of An-fang; beyond lay the ocean, endlessly beautiful and endlessly tedious.

The supervisor sighed hopefully. He was young. "Guess it doesn't matter," he thought, picking up his guitar.

(Thirty-seven years later, he found out that it did matter. The Lady Goroke herself, one of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality, sent a Subchief of the Instrumentality to find out who had caused D'joan. When the man found that the witch Elaine was the source of the trouble, she sent him on to find out how Elaine had gotten into a well-ordered universe. The supervisor was found. He was still a musician. He remembered nothing of the story. He was hypnotized. He still remembered nothing. The subchief invoked an emergency and Police Drug Four ("clear memory") was administered to the musician. He immediately remembered the whole silly scene, but insisted that it did not matter. The case was referred to Lady Goroke, who instructed the authorities that the musician be told the whole horrible, beautiful story of D'joan at Fomalhaut—the very story which you are now being told—and he wept. He was not punished otherwise, but the Lady Goroke commanded that those memories be left in his mind for so long as he might live.)

The man picked up his guitar, but the machine went on about its work.

It selected a fertilized human embryo, tagged it with the freakish name "Elaine," irradiated the genetic code with strong aptitudes for witchcraft, and then marked the person's card for training in medicine, transportation by sail-ship to Fomalhaut III, and release for service on the planet.

Elaine was born without being needed, without being wanted, without having a skill which could help or hurt any existing human being. She went into life doomed and useless.

It is not remarkable that she was misbegotten. Errors do happen. Remarkable was the fact that she managed to survive without being altered, corrected, or killed by the safety devices which mankind has installed in society for its own protection.

Unwanted, unused, she wandered through the tedious months and useless years of her own existence. She was well fed, richly clothed, variously housed. She had machines and robots to serve her, underpeople to obey her, people to protect her against others or against herself, should the need arise. But she could never find work; without work, she had no time for love; without work or love, she had no hope at all.

If she had only stumbled into the right experts or the right authorities, they would have altered or re-trained her. This would have made her into an acceptable woman; but she did not find the police, nor did they find her. She was helpless to correct her own programming, utterly helpless. It had been imposed on her at An-fang, way back at An-fang, where all things begin.

The ruby had trembled, the tourmaline failed, the diamond passed unsupported. Thus, a woman was born doomed.

## II

Much later, when people made songs about the strange case of the dog-girl D'joan, the minstrels and singers had tried to imagine what Elaine felt like, and they had made up *The Song of Elaine* for her. It is not authentic, but it shows how Elaine looked at her own life before the strange case of D'joan began to flow from Elaine's own actions:

<i>Other</i>		<i>women</i>		<i>hate</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>Men</i>		<i>never</i>		<i>touch</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>		<i>too</i>	<i>much</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I'll</i>		<i>be</i>		<i>a</i>	<i>witch!</i>
 <i>Mama</i>		 <i>never</i>		 <i>towelled</i>	 <i>me.</i>
<i>Daddy</i>		<i>never</i>		<i>growled</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>Little</i>		<i>kiddies</i>		<i>grate</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I'll</i>		<i>be</i>		<i>a</i>	<i>bitch!</i>
 <i>People</i>		 <i>never</i>		 <i>named</i>	 <i>me.</i>
<i>Dogs</i>		<i>never</i>		<i>shamed</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>Oh,</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>such</i>	<i>me!</i>
<i>I'll</i>		<i>be</i>		<i>a</i>	<i>witch.</i>
 <i>I'll</i>	<i>make</i>		<i>them</i>	<i>shun</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>They'll</i>		<i>never</i>		<i>run</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>Could</i>	<i>they</i>		<i>even</i>	<i>stun</i>	<i>me?</i>
<i>I'll</i>		<i>be</i>		<i>a</i>	<i>witch.</i>
 <i>Let</i>	<i>them</i>		<i>all</i>	<i>attack</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>They</i>	<i>can</i>		<i>only</i>	<i>rack</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>Me—I</i>		<i>can</i>		<i>hack</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I'll</i>		<i>be</i>		<i>a</i>	<i>witch.</i>
 <i>Other</i>		 <i>women</i>		 <i>hate</i>	 <i>me.</i>
<i>Men</i>		<i>never</i>		<i>touch</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>am</i>		<i>too</i>	<i>much</i>	<i>me.</i>
<i>I'll be a witch.</i>					

\* \* \*

The song overstates the case. Women did not hate Elaine; they did not look at her. Men did not shun Elaine; they did not notice her either. There were no places on Fomalhaut III where she could have met human children, for the nurseries were far underground because of chancy radiation and fierce weather. The song pretends that Elaine began with the thought that she was not human, but underpeople, and had herself been born a dog. This did not happen at the beginning of the case, but only at the very end, when the story of D'joan was already being carried between the stars and developing with all the new twists of folklore and legend. She never went mad.

("Madness" is a rare condition, consisting of a human mind which does not engage its environment correctly. Elaine approached it before she met D'joan. Elaine was not the only case, but she was a rare and genuine one. Her life, thrust back from all attempts at growth, had turned back on itself and her mind had spiraled inward to the only safety she could really know, psychosis. Madness is always better than X, and X to each patient is individual, personal, secret, and

overwhelmingly important. Elaine had gone normally mad; her imprinted and destined career was the wrong one. "Lay therapists, female" were coded to work decisively, autonomously, on their own authority, and with great rapidity. These working conditions were needed on new planets. They were not coded to consult other people; most places, there would be no one to consult. Elaine did what was set for her at An-fang, all the way down to the individual chemical conditions of her spinal fluid. She was herself the wrong and she never knew it. Madness was much kinder than the realization that she was not herself, should not have lived, and amounted at the most to a mistake committed between a trembling ruby and a young, careless man with a guitar.)

She found D'joan and the worlds reeled.

Their meeting occurred at a place nicknamed "the edge of the world," where the undercity met daylight. This was itself unusual; but Fomalhaut III was an unusual and uncomfortable planet, where wild weather and men's caprice drove architects to furious design and grotesque execution.

Elaine walked through the city, secretly mad, looking for sick people whom she could help. She had been stamped, imprinted, designed, born, bred, and trained for this task. There was no task.

She was an intelligent woman. Bright brains serve madness as well as they serve sanity—namely, very well indeed. It never occurred to her to give up her mission.

The people of Fomalhaut III, like the people of Manhome Earth itself, are almost uniformly handsome; it is only in the far-out, half-unreachable worlds that the human stock, strained by the sheer effort to survive, becomes ugly, weary, or varied. She did not look much different from the other intelligent, handsome people who flocked the streets. Her hair was black, and she was tall. Her arms and legs were long, the trunk of her body short. She wore her hair brushed straight back from a high, narrow, square forehead. Her eyes were an odd, deep blue. Her mouth might have been pretty, but it never smiled, so that no one could really tell whether it was beautiful or not. She stood erect and proud: but so did everyone else. Her mouth was strange in its very lack of communicativeness and her eyes swept back and forth, back and forth like ancient radar, looking for the sick, the needy, and stricken, whom she had a passion to serve.

How could she be unhappy? She had never had time to be happy. It was easy for her to think that happiness was something which disappeared at the end of childhood. Now and then, here and there, perhaps when a fountain murmured in sunlight or when leaves exploded in the startling Fomalhautian spring, she wondered that other people—people as responsible as herself by the doom of age, grade, sex, training, and career number—should be happy when she alone seemed to have no time for happiness. But she always dismissed the thought and walked the ramps and streets until her arches ached, looking for work which did not yet exist.

Human flesh, older than history, more dogged than culture, has its own wisdom. The bodies of people are marked with the archaic ruses of survival, so that on Fomalhaut III, Elaine herself preserved the skills of ancestors she never even thought about—those ancestors who, in the incredible and remote past, had mastered terrible Earth itself. Elaine was mad. But there was a part of her which suspected that she was mad.

Perhaps this wisdom seized her as she walked from Waterrocky Road toward the bright esplanades of the Shopping Bar. She saw a forgotten door. The robots could clean near it but, because of the old, odd architectural shape, they could not sweep and polish right at the bottom line of the door. A thin hard line of old dust and caked polish lay like a sealant at the base of the doorline. It was obvious that no one had gone through for a long, long time.

The civilized rule was that prohibited areas were marked both telepathically and with symbols. The most dangerous of all had robot or underpeople guards. But everything which was not prohibited, was permitted. Thus Elaine had no right to open the door, but she had no obligation not to do so. She opened it—

By sheer caprice.

Or so she thought.

This was a far cry from the "I'll be a witch" motif attributed to her in the later ballad. She was not yet frantic, not yet desperate, she was not yet even noble.

That opening of a door changed her own world and changed life on thousands of planets for generations to come, but the opening was not itself strange. It was the tired caprice of a thoroughly frustrated and mildly unhappy woman. Nothing more. All the other descriptions of it have been improvements, embellishments, falsifications.

She did get a shock when she opened the door, but not for the reasons attributed backwards to her by balladists and historians.

She was shocked because the door opened on steps and the steps led down to landscape and sunlight—truly an unexpected sight on any world. She was looking from the New City to the Old City. The New City rose on its shell out over the Old City, and when she looked "indoors" she saw the sunset in the city below. She gasped at the beauty and the unexpectedness of it.

There, the open door—*with another world beyond it*. Here, the old familiar street, clean, handsome, quiet, useless, where her own useless self had worked a thousand times.

There—something. Here, the world she knew. She did not know the words "fairyland" or "magic place," but if she had known them, she would have used them.

She glanced to the right, to the left.

The passersby noticed neither her nor the door. The sunset was just beginning to show in the upper city. In the lower city it was already blood-red with streamers of gold like enormous frozen flame. Elaine did not know that she sniffed the air; she did not know that she trembled on the edge of tears; she did not know that a tender smile, the first smile in years, relaxed her mouth and turned her tired tense face into a passing loveliness. She was too intent on looking around.

People walked about their business. Down the road, an underpeople type—female, possibly cat—detoured far around a true human who was walking at a slower pace. Far away, a police ornithopter flapped slowly around one of the towers; unless the robots used a telescope on her or unless they had one of the rare hawk-undermen who were sometimes used as police, they could not see her.

She stepped through the doorway and pulled the door itself back into the closed position.

She did not know it, but therewith unborn futures reeled out of existence, rebellion flamed into coming centuries, people and underpeople died in strange causes, mothers changed the names of unborn lords, and starships whispered back from places which men had not even imagined before. Space<sup>3</sup>, which had always been there, waiting for men's notice, would come the sooner—because of her, because of the door, because of her next few steps, what she would say, and the child she would meet. (The ballad-writers told the whole story later on, but they told it backwards, from their own knowledge of D'joan and what Elaine had done to set the worlds afire. The simple truth is the fact that a lonely woman went through a mysterious door. That is all. Everything else happened later.)

At the top of the steps she stood, door closed behind her, the sunset gold of the unknown city streaming out in front of her. She could see where the great shell of the New City of Kalma arched out toward the sky; she could see that the buildings here were older, less harmonious than the ones she had left. She did not know the concept "picturesque," or she would have called it that. She knew no concept to describe the scene which lay peacefully at her feet.

There was not a person in sight.

Far in the distance, a fire-detector throbbed back and forth on top of an old tower. Outside of that there was nothing but the yellow-gold city beneath her, and a bird—was it a bird, or a large storm-swept leaf?—in the middle distance.

Filled with fear, hope, expectation, and the surmised of strange appetites, she walked downward with quiet, unknown purpose.

### III

At the foot of the stairs, nine flights of them there had been, a child waited—a girl, about five. The child had a bright blue smock, wavy red-brown hair, and the daintiest hands which Elaine had ever seen.

Elaine's heart went out to her. The child looked up at her and shrank away. Elaine knew the meaning of those handsome brown eyes, of that muscular supplication of trust, that recoil from people. It was not a child at all—just some animal in the shape of a person, a dog perhaps, which would later be taught to speak, to work, to perform useful services.

The little girl rose, standing as though she were about to run. Elaine had the feeling that the little dog-girl had not decided whether to run toward her or from her. She did not wish to get involved with an underperson—what woman would?—but neither did she wish to frighten the little thing. After all, it was small, very young.

The two confronted each other for a moment, the little thing uncertain, Elaine relaxed. Then the little animal-girl spoke.

"Ask her," she said, and it was a command.

Elaine was surprised. Since when did animals command?

"Ask her!" repeated the little thing. She pointed at a window which had the words TRAVELER'S AID above it. Then the girl ran. A flash of blue from her dress, a twinkle of white from her running sandals, and she was gone.

Elaine stood quiet and puzzled in the forlorn and empty city.

The window spoke to her, "You might as well come on over. You will, you know."

It was the wise mature voice of an experienced woman—a voice with a bubble of laughter underneath its phonic edge, with a hint of sympathy and enthusiasm in its tone. The command was not merely a command. It was, even at its beginning, a happy private joke between two wise women.

Elaine was not surprised when a machine spoke to her. Recordings had been telling her things all her life. She was not sure of this situation, however.

"Is there somebody there?" she said.

"Yes and no," said the voice. "I'm 'Travelers' Aid' and I help everybody who comes through this way. You're lost or you wouldn't be here. Put your hand in my window."

"What I mean is," said Elaine, "are you a person or are you a machine?"

"Depends," said the voice. "I'm a machine, but I used to be a person, long, long ago. A lady, in fact, and one of the Instrumentality. But my time came and they said to me, 'Would you mind if we made a machine print of your whole personality? It would be very helpful for the information booths.' So of course I said yes, and they made this copy, and I died, and they shot my body into space with all the usual honors, but here I was. It felt pretty odd inside this contraption, me looking at things and talking to people and giving good advice and staying busy, until they built the new city. So what do you say? Am I me or aren't I?"

"I don't know, ma'am." Elaine stood back.

The warm voice lost its humor and became commanding. "Give me your hand, then, so I can identify you and tell you what to do."

"I think," said Elaine, "that I'll go back upstairs and go through the door into the upper city."

"And cheat me," said the voice in the window, "out of my first conversation with a real person in four years?" There was demand in the voice, but there was still the warmth and the humor; there was loneliness too. The loneliness decided Elaine. She stepped up to the window and put her hand flat on the ledge.

"You're Elaine," cried the window. "You're *Elaine*! The worlds wait for you. You're from An-fang, where all things begin, the Peace Square at An-fang, on Old Earth itself!"

"Yes," said Elaine.

The voice bubbled over with enthusiasm. "He is waiting for you. Oh, he has waited for you a long, long time. And the little girl you met. *That was D'joan herself.* The story has begun. The

world's great age begins anew. And I can die when it is over. So sorry, my dear. I don't mean to confuse you. I am the Lady Panc Ashash. You're Elaine. Your number originally ended 783 and you shouldn't even be on this planet. All the important people here end with the number 5 and 6. You're a lay therapist and you're in the wrong place, but your lover is already on his way, and you've never been in love yet, and it's all too exciting."

Elaine looked quickly around her. The old lower town was turning more red and less gold as the sunset progressed. The steps behind her seemed terribly high as she looked back, the door at the top very small. Perhaps it had locked on her when she closed it. Maybe she wouldn't ever be able to leave the old lower city.

The window must have been watching her in some way, because the voice of the Lady Panc Ashash became tender,

"Sit down, my dear," said the voice from the window. "When I was me, I used to be much more polite. I haven't been me for a long, long time. I'm a machine, and still I feel like myself. Do sit down, and do forgive me."

Elaine looked around. There was the roadside marble bench behind her. She sat on it obediently. The happiness which had been in her at the top of the stairs bubbled forth anew. If this wise old machine knew so much about her, perhaps it could tell her what to do. What did the voice mean by "wrong planet"? By "lover"? By "he is coming for you now," or was that what the voice had actually said?

"Take a breath, my dear," said the voice of the Lady Panc Ashash. She might have been dead for hundreds or thousands of years, but still spoke with the authority and kindness of a great lady.

Elaine breathed deep. She saw a huge red cloud, like a pregnant whale, getting ready to butt the rim of the upper city, far above her and far out over the sea. She wondered if clouds could possibly have feelings.

The voice was speaking again. What had it said?

Apparently the question was repeated. "Did you know you were coming?" said the voice from the window.

"Of course not." Elaine shrugged. "There was just this door, and I didn't have anything special to do, so I opened it. And here was a whole new world inside a house. It looked strange and rather pretty, so I came down. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"I don't know," said the voice candidly. "I'm really a machine. I haven't been me for a long, long time. Perhaps I would have, when I was alive. I don't know that, but I know about things. Maybe I can see the future, or perhaps the machine part of me computes such good probabilities that it just seems like it. I know who you are and what is going to happen to you. You had better brush your hair."

"Whatever for?" said Elaine.

"He is coming," said the happy old voice of the Lady Panc Ashash.

"*Who* is coming?" said Elaine, almost irritably.

"Do you have a mirror? I wish you would look at your hair. It could be prettier, not that it isn't pretty right now. You want to look your best. Your lover, that's who is coming, of course."

"I haven't got a lover," said Elaine. "I haven't been authorized one, not till I've done some of my lifework, and I haven't even found my lifework yet. I'm not the kind of girl who would go ask a subchief for the dreamies, not when I'm not entitled to the real thing. I may not be much of a person, but I have some self-respect." Elaine got so mad that she shifted her position on the bench and sat with her face turned away from the all-watching window.

The next words gave her gooseflesh down her arms, they were uttered with such real earnestness, such driving sincerity. "*Elaine, Elaine, do you really have no idea of who you are?*"

Elaine pivoted on the bench so that she looked toward the window. Her face was caught redly by the rays of the setting sun. She could only gasp.

"I don't know what you mean. . . ."

The inexorable voice went on. "Think, Elaine, think. Does the name 'D'joan' mean nothing to you?"

"I suppose it's an underperson, a dog. That's what the D is for, isn't it?"

"That was the little girl you met," said the Lady Panc Ashash, as though the statement were something tremendous.

"Yes," said Elaine dutifully. She was a courteous woman, and never quarreled with strangers.

"Wait a minute," said the Lady Panc Ashash. "I'm going to get my body out. God knows when I wore it last, but it'll make you feel more at easy terms with me. Forgive the clothes. They're old stuff, but I think the body will work all right. This is the beginning of the story of D'joan, and I want that hair of yours brushed even if I have to brush it myself. Just wait right there, girl, wait right there. I'll just take a minute."

The clouds were turning from dark red to liver-black. What could Elaine do? She stayed on the bench. She kicked her shoe against the walk. She jumped a little when the old-fashioned street lights of the lower city went on with sharp geometrical suddenness; they did not have the subtle shading of the newer lights in the other city upstairs, where day phased into the bright clear night with no sudden shift in color.

The door beside the little window creaked open. Ancient plastic crumbled to the walk.

Elaine was astonished.

Elaine knew she must have been unconsciously expecting a monster, but this was a charming woman of about her own height, wearing weird, old-fashioned clothes. The strange woman had glossy black hair, no evidence of recent or current illness, no signs of severe lesions in the past, no impairment evident of sight, gait, reach, or eyesight. (There was no way she could check on smell or taste right off, but this was the medical check-up she had had built into her from birth on—the checklist which she had run through with every adult person she had ever met. She had been designed as a "lay therapist, female" and she was a good one, even when there was no one at all to treat.)

Truly, the body was a rich one. It must have cost the landing charges of forty or fifty planetfalls. The human shape was perfectly rendered. The mouth moved over genuine teeth; the words were formed by throat, palate, tongue, teeth, and lips, and not just by a microphone mounted in the head. The body was really a museum piece. It was probably a copy of the Lady Panc Ashash herself in time of life. When the face smiled, the effect was indescribably winning. The lady wore the costume of a bygone age—a stately frontal dress of heavy blue material, embroidered with a square pattern of gold at hem, waist, and bodice. She had a matching cloak of dark, faded gold, embroidered in blue with the same pattern of squares. Her hair was upswept and set with jeweled combs. It seemed perfectly natural, but there was dust on one side of it.

The robot smiled, "I'm out of date. It's been a long time since I was me. But I thought, my dear, that you would find this old body easier to talk to than the window over there . . ."

Elaine nodded mutely.

"You know this is not me?" said the body, sharply.

Elaine shook her head. She didn't know; she felt that she didn't know anything at all.

The Lady Panc Ashash looked at her earnestly. "This is not me. It's a robot body. You looked at it as though it were a real person. And I'm not me, either. It hurts sometimes. Did you know a machine could hurt? I can. But—I'm not *me*."

"Who are you?" said Elaine to the pretty old woman.

"Before I died, I was the Lady Panc Ashash. Just as I told you. Now I am a machine, and a part of your destiny. We will help each other to change the destiny of worlds, perhaps even to bring mankind back to humanity."

Elaine stared at her in bewilderment. This was no common robot. It seemed like a real person and spoke with such warm authority. And this thing, whatever it was, this thing seemed to know so

much about her. Nobody else had ever cared. The nurse-mothers at the Childhouse on Earth had said, "Another witch-child, and pretty too, they're not much trouble," and had let her life go by.

At last Elaine could face the face which was not really a face. The charm, the humor, the expressiveness were still there.

"What—what," stammered Elaine, "do I do now?"

"Nothing," said the long-dead Lady Panc Ashash, "except to meet your destiny."

"You mean my lover?"

"So impatient!" laughed the dead woman's record in a very human way. "Such a hurry. Lover first and destiny later. I was like that myself when I was a girl."

"But what do I do?" persisted Elaine.

The night was now complete above them. The street lights glared on the empty and unswept streets. A few doorways, not one of them less than a full street-crossing away, were illuminated with rectangles of light or shadow—light if they were far from the street lights, so that their own interior lights shone brightly, shadow if they were so close under the big lights that they cut off the glare from overhead.

"Go through this door," said the old nice woman.

But she pointed at the undistinguished white of an uninterrupted wall. There was no door at all in that place.

"But there's no door there," said Elaine.

"If there were a door," said the Lady Panc Ashash, "you wouldn't need me to tell you to go through it. And you do need me."

"Why?" said Elaine.

"Because I've waited for you hundreds of years, that's why."

"That's no answer!" snapped Elaine.

"It is so an answer," smiled the woman, and her lack of hostility was not robotlike at all. It was the kindness and composure of a mature human being. She looked up into Elaine's eyes and spoke emphatically and softly. "I know because I do know. Not because I'm a dead person—that doesn't matter any more—but because I am now a very old machine. You will go into the Brown and Yellow Corridor and you will think of your lover, and you will do your work, and men will hunt you. But you will come out happily in the end. Do you understand this?"

"No," said Elaine, "no, I don't." But she reached out her hand to the sweet old woman. The lady took her hand. The touch was warm and very human.

"You don't have to understand it. Just do it. And I know you will. So since you are going, go."

Elaine tried to smile at her, but she was troubled, more consciously worried than ever before in her life. Something real was happening to her, to her own individual self, at a very long last. "How will I get through the door?"

"I'll open it," smiled the lady, releasing Elaine's hand, "and you'll know your lover when he sings you the poem."

"Which poem?" said Elaine, stalling for time and frightened by a door which did not even exist.

"It starts, 'I knew you and loved you, and won you, in Kalma . . .' You'll know it. Go on in. It'll be bothersome at first, but when you meet the Hunter, it will all seem different."

"Have you ever been in there, yourself?"

"Of course not," said the dear old lady. "I'm a machine. That whole place is thoughtproof. Nobody can see, hear, think, or talk in or out of it. It's a shelter left over from the ancient wars, when the slightest sign of a thought would have brought destruction on the whole place. That's why the Lord Englok built it, long before my time. But you can go in. And you will. Here's the door."

The old robot lady waited no longer. She gave Elaine a strange friendly crooked smile, half proud and half apologetic. She took Elaine with firm fingertips holding Elaine's left elbow. They walked a few steps down toward the wall.



"Here, now," said the Lady Panc Ashash, and pushed.

Elaine flinched as she was thrust toward the wall. Before she knew it, she was through. Smells hit her like a roar of battle. The air was hot. The light was dim. It looked like a picture of the Pain Planet, hidden somewhere in space. Poets later tried to describe Elaine at the door with a verse which begins,

*There were brown ones and blue ones  
And white ones and whiter,  
In the hidden and forbidden  
Downtown of Clown Town.  
There were horrid ones and horrider  
In the brown and yellow corridor.*

The truth was much simpler.

Trained witch, born witch that she was, she perceived the truth immediately. All these people, all she could see, at least, were sick. They needed help. They needed herself.

But the joke was on her, for she could not help a single one of them. Not one of them was a real person. They were just animals, things in the shape of man. Underpeople. Dirt.

And she was conditioned to the bone never to help *them*.

She did not know why the muscles of her legs made her walk forward, but they did.

There are many pictures of that scene.

The Lady Panc Ashash, only a few moments in her past, seemed very remote. And the city of Kalma itself, the New City, ten stories above her, almost seemed as though it had never existed at all. This, this was real.

She stared at the underpeople.

And this time, for the first time in her life, they stared right back at her. She had never seen anything like this before.

They did not frighten her; they surprised her. The fright, Elaine felt, was to come later. Soon, perhaps, but not here, not now.

#### IV

Something which looked like a middle-aged woman walked right up to her and snapped at her.

"Are you death?"

Elaine stared. "Death? What do you mean? I'm Elaine."

"Be damned to that!" said the woman-thing. "Are you death?"

Elaine did not know the word "damned" but she was pretty sure that "death," even to these things, meant simply "termination of life."

"Of course not," said Elaine. "I'm just a person. A witch woman, ordinary people would call me. We don't have anything to do with you underpeople. Nothing at all." Elaine could see that the woman-thing had an enormous coiffure of soft brown sloppy hair, a sweat-reddened face, and crooked teeth which showed when she grinned.

"They all say that. They never know that they're death. How do you think we die, if you people don't send contaminated robots in with diseases? We all die off when you do that, and then some more underpeople find this place again later on and make a shelter of it and live in it for a few generations until the death machines, things like you, come sweeping through the city and kill us off again. This is Clown Town, the underpeople place. Haven't you heard of it?"

Elaine tried to walk past the woman-thing, but she found her arm grabbed. This couldn't have happened before, not in the history of the world—an underperson seizing a real person!

"Let go!" she yelled.

The woman-thing let her arm go and faced toward the others. Her voice had changed. It was no longer shrill and excited, but low and puzzled instead. "I can't tell. Maybe it is a real person. Isn't that a joke? Lost, in here with us. Or maybe she *is* death. I can't tell. What do you think, Charley-is-my-darling?"

The man she spoke to stepped forward. Elaine thought, in another time, in some other place, that underperson might pass for an attractive human being. His face was illuminated by intelligence and alertness. He looked directly at Elaine as though he had never seen her before, which indeed he had not, but he continued looking with so sharp, so strange a stare that she became uneasy. His voice, when he spoke, was brisk, high, clear, friendly; set in this tragic place, it was the caricature of a voice, as though the animal had been programmed for speech from the habits of a human, persuader by profession, whom one saw in the storyboxes telling people messages which were neither good nor important, but merely clever. The handsomeness was itself deformity. Elaine wondered if he had come from goat stock.

"Welcome, young lady," said Charley-is-my-darling. "Now that you are here, how are you going to get out? If we turned her head around, Mabel," said he to the underwoman who had first greeted Elaine, "turned it around eight or ten times, it would come off. Then we could live a few weeks or months longer before our lords and creators found us and put us all to death. What do you say, young lady? Should we kill you?"

"Kill? You mean, terminate life? You cannot. It is against the law. Even the Instrumentality does not have the right to do that without trial. You can't. You're just underpeople."

"But we will die," said Charley-is-my-darling, flashing his quick intelligent smile, "if you go back out of that door. The police will read about the Brown and Yellow Corridor in your mind and they will flush us out with poison or they will spray disease in here so that we and our children will die."

Elaine stared at him.

The passionate anger did not disturb his smile or his persuasive tones, but the muscles of his eye-sockets and forehead showed the terrible strain. The result was an expression which Elaine had never seen before, a sort of self-control reaching out beyond the limits of insanity.

He stared back at her.

She was not really afraid of him. Underpeople could not twist the heads of real persons; it was contrary to all regulations.

A thought struck her. Perhaps regulations did not apply in a place like this, where illegal animals waited perpetually for sudden death. The being which faced her was strong enough to turn her head around ten times clockwise or counterclockwise. From her anatomy lessons, she was pretty sure that the head would come off somewhere during that process. She looked at him with interest. Animal-type fear had been conditioned out of her, but she had, she found, an extreme distaste for the termination of life under random circumstances. Perhaps her "witch" training would help. She tried to pretend that he was in fact a man. The diagnosis "hypertension: chronic aggression, now frustrated, leading to overstimulation and neurosis: poor nutritional record: hormone disorder probable" leapt into her mind.

She tried to speak in a new voice.

"I am smaller than you," she said, "and you can 'kill' me just as well later as now. We might as well get acquainted. I'm Elaine, assigned here from Manhome Earth."

The effect was spectacular.

Charley-is-my-darling stepped back. Mabel's mouth dropped open. The others gaped at her. One or two, more quick-witted than the rest, began whispering to their neighbors.

At last Charley-is-my-darling spoke to her. "Welcome, my lady. Can I call you my lady? I guess not. Welcome, Elaine. We are your people. We will do whatever you say. Of course you got in. The Lady Panc Ashash sent you. She has been telling us for a hundred years that somebody would come from Earth, a real person with an animal name, not a number, and that we should have a child named D'joan ready to take up the threads of destiny. Please, please sit down. Will you have

a drink of water? We have no clean vessel here. We are all underpeople here and we have used everything in the place, so that it is contaminated for a real person." A thought struck him. "Baby-baby, do you have a new cup in the kiln?" Apparently he saw someone nod, because he went right on talking. "Get it out then, for our guest, with tongs. New tongs. Do not touch it. Fill it with water from the top of the little waterfall. That way our guest can have an uncontaminated drink. A clean drink." He beamed with a hospitality which was as ridiculous as it was genuine.

Elaine did not have the heart to say she did not want a drink of water.

She waited. They waited.

By now, her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. She could see that the main corridor was painted a yellow, faded and stained, and a contrasting light brown. She wondered what possible human mind could have selected so ugly a combination. Cross-corridors seemed to open into it; at any rate, she saw illuminated archways further down and people walking out of them briskly. No one can walk briskly and naturally out of a shallow alcove, so she was pretty sure that the archways led to something.

The underpeople, too, she could see. They looked very much like people. Here and there, individuals reverted to the animal type—a horse-man whose muzzle had regrown to its ancestral size, a rat-woman with normal human features except for nylon-like white whiskers, twelve or fourteen on each side of her face, reaching twenty centimeters to either side. One looked very much like a person indeed—a beautiful young woman seated on a bench some eight or ten meters down the corridor, and paying no attention to the crowd, to Mabel, to Charley-is-my-darling, or to herself.

"Who is that?" said Elaine, pointing with a nod at the beautiful young woman.

Mabel, relieved from the tension which had seized her when she had asked if Elaine were "death," babbled with a sociability which was outre in this environment, "That's Crawlle."

"What does she do?" asked Elaine.

"She has her pride," said Mabel, her grotesque red face now jolly and eager, her slack mouth spraying spittle as she spoke.

"But doesn't she *do* anything?" said Elaine.

Charley-is-my-darling intervened. "Nobody has to do anything here, Lady Elaine—"

"It's illegal to call me 'Lady,'" said Elaine.

"I'm sorry, human being Elaine. Nobody *has* to do anything at all here. The whole bunch of us are completely illegal. This corridor is a thought-shelter, so that no thoughts can escape or enter it. Wait a bit! Watch the ceiling . . . Now!"

A red glow moved across the ceiling and was gone.

"The ceiling glows," said Charley-is-my-darling, "whenever anything *thinks* against it. The whole tunnel registers 'sewage tank: organic waste' to the outside, so that dim perceptions of life which may escape here are not considered too unaccountable. People built it for their own use, a million years ago."

"They weren't here on Fomalhaut III a million years ago," snapped Elaine. Why, she wondered, did she snap at him? He wasn't a person, just a talking animal who had missed being dropped down the nearest incinerator.

"I'm sorry, Elaine," said Charley-is-my-darling. "I should have said, a long time ago. We underpeople don't get much chance to study real history. But we use this corridor. Somebody with a morbid sense of humor named this place Clown Town. We live along for ten or twenty or a hundred years, and then people or robots find us and kill us all. That's why Mabel was upset. She thought you were death for this time. But you're not. You're *Elaine*. That's wonderful, wonderful." His sly, too-clever face beamed with transparent sincerity. It must have been quite a shock to him to be honest.

"You were going to tell me what the undergirl is for," said Elaine.

"That's Crawlle," said he. "She doesn't do anything. None of us really have to. We're all doomed anyhow. She's a little more honest than the rest of us. She has her pride. She scorns the rest

of us. She puts us in our place. She makes everybody feel inferior. We think she is a valuable member of the group. We all have our pride, which is hopeless anyway, but Crawlle has her pride all by herself, without doing anything whatever about it. She sort of reminds us. If we leave her alone, she leaves us alone."

Elaine thought, You're funny things, so much like people, but so inexpert about it, as though you all had to "die" before you really learned what it is to be alive. Aloud, she could only say, "I never met anybody like that."

Crawlle must have sensed that they were talking about her, because she looked at Elaine with a short quick stare of blazing hatred. Crawlle's pretty face locked itself into a glare of concentrated hostility and scorn; then her eyes wandered and Elaine felt that she, Elaine, no longer existed in the thing's mind, except as a rebuke which had been administered and forgotten. She had never seen privacy as impenetrable as Crawlle's. And yet the being, whatever she might have been made from, was very lovely in human terms.

A fierce old hag, covered with mouse-gray fur, rushed up to Elaine. The mouse-woman was the Baby-baby who had been sent on the errand. She held a ceramic cup in a pair of long tongs. Water was in it.

Elaine took the cup.

Sixty to seventy underpeople, including the little girl in the blue dress whom she had seen outside, watched her as she sipped. The water was good. She drank it all. There was a universal exhalation, as though everyone in the corridor had waited for this moment. Elaine started to put the cup down but the old mouse-woman was too quick for her. She took the cup from Elaine, stopping her in mid-gesture and using the tongs, so that the cup would not be contaminated by the touch of an underperson.

"That's right, Baby-baby," said Charley-is-my-darling, "we can talk. It is our custom not to talk with a newcomer until we have offered our hospitality. Let me be frank. We may have to kill you, if this whole business turns out to be a mistake, but let me assure you that if I do kill you, I will do it nicely and without the least bit of malice. Right?"

Elaine did not know what was so right about it, and said so. She visualized her head being twisted off. Apart from the pain and the degradation, it seemed so terribly messy—to terminate life in a sewer with things which did not even have a right to exist.

He gave her no chance to argue, but just went on explaining, "Suppose things turn out just right. Suppose that you are the Esther-Elaine-or-Eleanor that we have all been waiting for—the person who will do something to D'joan and bring us all help and deliverance—give us life, in short, *real life*—then what do we do?"

"I don't know where you get all these ideas about me. Why am I Esther-Elaine-or-Eleanor? What do I do to D'joan? Why me?"

Charley-is-my-darling stared at her as though he could not believe her question. Mabel frowned as though she could not think of the right words to put forth her opinions. Baby-baby, who had glided back to the group with swift mouselike suddenness, looked around as though she expected someone from the rear to speak. She was right. Crawlle turned her face toward Elaine and said, with infinite condescension:

"I did not know that real people were ill-informed or stupid. You seem to be both. We have all our information from the Lady Panc Ashash. Since she is dead, she has no prejudices against us underpeople. Since she has not had much of anything to do, she has run through billions and billions of probabilities for us. All of us know what most probabilities come to—sudden death by disease or gas, or maybe being hauled off to the slaughterhouses in big police ornithopters. But Lady Panc Ashash found that perhaps a person with a name like yours would come, a human being with an old name and not a number name, that that person would meet the Hunter, that she and the Hunter would teach the underchild D'joan a message, and that the message would change the worlds. We have kept one child after another named D'joan, waiting for a hundred years. Now you show up. Maybe you are the one. You don't look very competent to me. What are you good for?"

"I'm a witch," said Elaine.

Crawlie could not keep the surprise from showing in her face. "A witch? Really?"

"Yes," said Elaine, rather humbly.

"I wouldn't be one," said Crawlie. "I have my pride." She turned her face away and locked her features in their expression of perennial hurt and disdain.

Charley-is-my-darling whispered to the group nearby, not caring whether Elaine heard his words or not, "That's wonderful, wonderful. She is a witch. A human witch. Perhaps the great day is here! Elaine," said he humbly, "will you please look at us?"

Elaine looked. When she stopped to think about where she was, it was incredible that the empty old lower city of Kalma should be just outside, just beyond the wall, and the busy new city a mere thirty-five meters higher. This corridor was a world to itself. It felt like a world, with the ugly yellows and browns, the dim old lights, the stench of man and animal mixed under intolerably bad ventilation. Baby-baby, Crawlie, Mabel, and Charley-is-my-darling were part of this world. They were real; but they were outside, outside, so far as Elaine herself was concerned.

"Let me go," she said. "I'll come back some day."

Charley-is-my-darling, who was so plainly the leader, spoke as if in a trance: "You don't understand, Elaine. The only 'going' you are going to go is death. There is no other direction. We can't let the old you go out of this door, not when the Lady Panc Ashash has thrust you in to us. Either you go forward to your destiny, to our destiny too, either you do that, and all works out all right, so that you love us, and we love you," he added dreamily, "or else I kill you with my own hands. Right here. Right now. I could give you another clean drink of water first. But that is all. There isn't much choice for you, human being Elaine. What do you think would happen if you went outside?"

"Nothing, I hope," said Elaine.

"Nothing!" snorted Mabel, her face regaining its original indignation. "The police would come flapping by in their ornithopter—"

"And they'd pick your brains," said Baby-baby.

"And they'd know about us," said a tall pale man who had not spoken before.

"And we," said Crawlie from her chair, "would all of us die within an hour or two at the longest. Would that matter to you, Ma'am and Elaine?"

"And," added Charley-is-my-darling, "they would disconnect the Lady Panc Ashash, so that even the recording of that dear dead lady would be gone at last, and there would be no mercy at all left upon this world."

"What is 'mercy'?" asked Elaine.

"It's obvious you never heard of it," said Crawlie.

The old mouse-hag Baby-baby came close to Elaine. She looked up at her and whispered through yellow teeth, "Don't let them frighten you, girl. Death doesn't matter all that much, not even to you true humans with your four hundred years or to us animals with the slaughterhouse around the corner. Death is a *when*, not a *what*. It's the same for all of us. Don't be scared. Go straight ahead and you may find mercy and love. They're much richer than death, if you can only find them. Once you do find them, death won't be very important."

"I still don't know *mercy*," said Elaine, "but I thought I knew what *love* was, and I don't expect to find my lover in a dirty old corridor full of underpeople."

"I don't mean that kind of love," laughed Baby-baby, brushing aside Mabel's attempted interruption with a wave of her hand-paw. The old mouse face was on fire with sheer expressiveness. Elaine could suddenly imagine what Baby-baby had looked like to a mouse-underman when she was young and sleek and gray. Enthusiasm flushed the old features with youth as Baby-baby went on, "I don't mean love for a lover, girl. I mean love for yourself. Love for life. Love for all things living. Love even for me. Your love for me. Can you imagine that?"

Elaine swam through fatigue but she tried to answer the question. She looked in the dim light at the wrinkled old mouse-hag with her filthy clothes and her little red eyes. The fleeting image of the beautiful young mouse-woman had faded away; there was only this cheap, useless old thing, with her inhuman demands and her senseless pleading. People never loved underpeople. They used them, like chairs or doorhandles. Since when did a doorhandle demand the Charter of Ancient Rights?

"No," said Elaine calmly and evenly, "I can't imagine ever loving you."

"I knew it," said Crawlle from her chair. There was triumph in the voice.

Charley-is-my-darling shook his head as if to clear his sight. "Don't you even know who controls Fomalhaut III?"

"The Instrumentality," said Elaine. "But do we have to go on talking? Let me go or kill me or something. This doesn't make sense. I was tired when I got here, and I'm a million years tired now."

Mabel said, "Take her along."

"All right," said Charley-is-my-darling. "Is the Hunter there?"

The child D'joan spoke. She had stood at the back of the group. "He came in the other way when she came in the front."

Elaine said to Charley-is-my-darling, "You lied to me. You said there was only one way."

"I did not lie," said he. "There is only one way for you or me or for the friends of the Lady Panc Ashash. The way you came. The other way is death."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that it leads straight into the slaughterhouses of the men you do not know. The Lords of the Instrumentality who are here on Fomalhaut III. There is the Lord Femtiosex, who is just and without pity. There is the Lord Limaono, who thinks that underpeople are a potential danger and should not have been started in the first place. There is the Lady Goroke, who does not know how to pray, but who tries to ponder the mystery of life and who has shown kindnesses to underpeople, as long as the kindnesses were lawful ones. And there is the Lady Arabella Underwood, whose justice no man can understand. Nor underpeople either," he added with a chuckle.

"Who is she? I mean, where did she get the funny name? It doesn't have a number in it. It's as bad as your names. Or my own," said Elaine.

"She's from Old North Australia, the stroon world, on loan to the Instrumentality, and she follows the laws she was born to. The Hunter can go through the rooms and the slaughterhouses of the Instrumentality, but could you? Could I?"

"No," said Elaine.

"Then forward," said Charley-is-my-darling, "to your death or to great wonders. May I lead the way, Elaine?"

Elaine nodded wordlessly.

The mouse-hag Baby-baby patted Elaine's sleeve, her eyes alive with strange hope. As Elaine passed Crawlle's chair, the proud, beautiful girl looked straight at her, expressionless, deadly, and severe. The dog-girl D'joan followed the little procession as if she had been invited.

They walked down and down and down. Actually, it could not have been a full half-kilometer. But with the endless browns and yellows, the strange shapes of the lawless and untended underpeople, the stench and the thick heavy air, Elaine felt as if she were leaving all known worlds behind.

In fact, she was doing precisely that, but it did not occur to her that her own suspicion might be true.

## V

At the end of the corridor there was a round gate with a door of gold or brass.

Charley-is-my-darling stopped.

"I can't go further," he said. "You and D'joan will have to go on. This is the forgotten antechamber between the tunnel and the upper palace. The Hunter is there. Go on. You're a person. It is safe. Underpeople usually die in there. Go on." He nudged her elbow and pulled the sliding door apart.

"But the little girl," said Elaine.

"She's not a girl," said Charley-is-my-darling. "She's just a dog—as I'm not a man, just a goat brightened and cut and trimmed to look like a man. If you come back, Elaine, I will love you like God or I will kill you. It depends."

"Depends on what?" asked Elaine. "And what is 'God'?"

Charley-is-my-darling smiled the quick tricky smile which was wholly insincere and completely friendly, both at the same time. It was probably the trademark of his personality in ordinary times. "You'll find out about God somewhere else, if you do. Not from us. And the depending is something you'll know for yourself. You won't have to wait for me to tell you. Go along now. The whole thing will be over in the next few minutes."

"But D'joan?" persisted Elaine.

"If it doesn't work," said Charley-is-my-darling, "we can always raise another D'joan and wait for another you. The Lady Panc Ashash had promised us that. Go on in!"

He pushed her roughly, so that she stumbled through. Bright light dazzled her and the clean air tasted as good as fresh water on her first day out of the space-ship pod.

The little dog-girl had trotted in beside her.

The door, gold or brass, clanged to behind them.

Elaine and D'joan stood still, side by side, looking forward and upward.

There are many famous paintings of that scene. Most of the paintings show Elaine in rags with the distorted, suffering face of a witch. This is strictly unhistorical. She was wearing her everyday culottes, blouse, and twin over-the-shoulder purses when she went in the other end of Clown Town. This was the usual dress on Fomalhaut III at that time. She had done nothing at all to spoil her clothes, so she must have looked the same when she came out. And D'joan—well, everyone knows what D'joan looked like.

The Hunter met them.

The Hunter met them, and new worlds began.

He was a shortish man, with black curly hair, black eyes that danced with laughter, broad shoulders, and long legs. He walked with a quick sure step. He kept his hands quiet at his side, but the hands did not look tough and calloused, as though they had been terminating lives, even the lives of animals.

"Come up and sit down," he greeted them. "I've been waiting for you both."

Elaine stumbled upward and forward. "Waiting?" she gasped.

"Nothing mysterious," he said. "I had the viewscreen on. The one into the tunnel. Its connections are shielded, so the police could not have peeped it."

Elaine stopped dead still. The little dog-girl, one step behind her, stopped too. She tried to draw herself up to her full height. She was about the same tallness that he was. It was difficult, since he stood four or five steps above them. She managed to keep her voice even when she said:

"You know, then?"

"What?"

"All those things they said."

"Sure I know them," he smiled. "Why not?"

"But," stammered Elaine, "about you and me being lovers? That too?"

"That too." He smiled again. "I've been hearing it half my life. Come on up, sit down, and have something to eat. We have a lot of things to do tonight, if history is to be fulfilled through us. What do you eat, little girl?" said he kindly to D'joan. "Raw meat or people food?"

"I'm a finished girl," said D'joan, "so I prefer chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream."

"That you shall have," said the Hunter. "Come, both of you, and sit down."

They had topped the steps. A luxurious table, already set, was waiting for them. There were three couches around it. Elaine looked for the third person who would join them. Only as she sat down did she realize that he meant to invite the dog-child.

He saw her surprise, but did not comment on it directly.

Instead, he spoke to D'joan.

"You know me, girl, don't you?"

The child smiled and relaxed for the first time since Elaine had seen her. The dog-girl was really strikingly beautiful when the tension went out of her. The wariness, the quietness, the potential disquiet—these were dog qualities. Now the child seemed wholly human and mature far beyond her years. Her white face had dark, dark brown eyes.

"I've seen you lots of times, Hunter. And you've told me what would happen if I turned out to be *the* D'joan. How I would spread the word and meet great trials. How I might die and might not, but people and underpeople would remember my name for thousands of years. You've told me almost everything I know—except the things that I can't talk to you about. You know them too, but you won't talk, will you?" said the little girl imploringly.

"I know you've been to Earth," said the Hunter.

"Don't say it! Please don't say it!" pleaded the girl.

"Earth! Manhome itself?" cried Elaine. "How, by the stars, did you get there?"

The Hunter intervened. "Don't press her, Elaine. It's a big secret, and she wants to keep it. You'll find out more tonight than mortal woman was ever told before."

"What does 'mortal' mean?" asked Elaine, who disliked antique words.

"It just means having a termination of life."

"That's foolish," said Elaine. "Everything terminates. Look at those poor messy people who went on beyond the legal four hundred years." She looked around. Rich black-and-red curtains hung from ceiling to floor. On one side of the room there was a piece of furniture she had never seen before. It was like a table, but it had little broad flat doors on the front, reaching from side to side; it was richly ornamented with unfamiliar woods and metals. Nevertheless, she had more important things to talk about than furniture.

She looked directly at the Hunter (no organic disease; wounded in left arm at an earlier period; somewhat excessive exposure to sunlight; might need correction for near vision) and demanded of him:

"Am I captured by you, too?"

"Captured?"

"You're a Hunter. You hunt things. To kill them, I suppose. That underman back there, the goat who calls himself Charley-is-my-darling—"

"He never does!" cried the dog-girl, D'joan, interrupting.

"Never does what?" said Elaine, cross at being interrupted.

"He never calls himself that. Other people, underpeople I mean, call him that. His name is Balthasar, but nobody uses it."

"What does it matter, little girl?" said Elaine. "I'm talking about my life. Your friend said he would take my life from me if something did not happen."

Neither D'joan nor the Hunter said anything.

Elaine heard a frantic edge go into her voice. "You heard it!" She turned to the Hunter. "You saw it on the viewscreen."



The Hunter's voice was serenity and assurance: "We three have things to do before this night is out. We won't get them done if you are frightened or worried. I know the underpeople, but I know the Lords of the Instrumentality as well—all four of them, right here. The Lords Limaono and Femtiosex and the Lady Goroke. And the Norstrilian, too. They will protect you. Charley-is-my-darling might want to take your life from you because he is worried, afraid that the tunnel of Englok, where you just were, will be discovered. I have ways of protecting him and yourself as well. Have confidence in me for a while. That's not so hard, is it?"

"But," protested Elaine, "the man—or the goat—or whatever he was, Charley-is-my-darling, he said it would all happen right away, as soon as I came up here with you."

"How can anything happen," said little D'joan, "if you keep talking all the time?"

The Hunter smiled.

"That's right," he said. "We've talked enough. Now we must become lovers."

Elaine jumped to her feet. "Not with me, you don't. Not with her here. Not when I haven't found my work to do. I'm a witch. I'm supposed to do something, but I've never really found out what it was."

"Look at this," said the Hunter calmly, walking over to the wall, and pointing with his finger at an intricate circular design.

Elaine and D'joan both looked at it.

The Hunter spoke again, his voice urgent. "Do you see it, D'joan? Do you really see it? The ages turn, waiting for this moment, little child. Do you see it? Do you see yourself in it?"

Elaine looked at the little dog-girl. D'joan had almost stopped breathing. She stared at the curious symmetrical pattern as though it were a window into enchanting worlds.

The Hunter roared, at the top of his voice, "D'joan! Joan! Joanie!"

The child made no response.

The Hunter stepped over to the child, slapped her gently on the cheek, shouted again. D'joan continued to stare at the intricate design.

"Now," said the Hunter, "you and I make love. The child is absent in a world of happy dreams. That design is a mandala, something left over from the unimaginable past. It locks the human consciousness in place. D'joan will not see us or hear us. We cannot help her go toward her destiny unless you and I make love first."

Elaine, her hand to her mouth, tried to inventory symptoms as a means of keeping her familiar thoughts in balance. It did not work. A relaxation spread over her, a happiness and quiet that she had not once felt since her childhood.

"Did you think," said the Hunter, "that I hunted with my body and killed with my hands? Didn't anyone ever tell you that the game comes to me rejoicing, that the animals die while they scream with pleasure? I'm a telepath, and I work under license. And I have my license now from the dead Lady Panc Ashash."

Elaine knew that they had come to the end of the talking. Trembling, happy, frightened, she fell into his arms and let him lead her over to the couch at the side of the black-and-gold room.

A thousand years later, she was kissing his ear and murmuring loving words at him, words that she did not even realize she knew. She must, she thought, have picked up more from the storyboxes than she ever realized.

"You're my love," she said, "my only one, my darling. Never, never leave me; never throw me away. Oh, Hunter, I love you so!"

"We part," he said, "before tomorrow is gone, but shall meet again. Do you realize that all this has only been a little more than an hour?"

Elaine blushed. "And I," she stammered, "I—I'm hungry."

"Natural enough," said the Hunter. "Pretty soon we can waken the little girl and eat together. And then history will happen, unless somebody walks in and stops us."

"But, darling," said Elaine, "can't we go on—at least for a while? A year? A month? A day? Put the little girl back in the tunnel for a while."

"Not really," said the Hunter, "but I'll sing you the song that came into my mind about you and me. I've been thinking bits of it for a long time, but now it has really happened. Listen."

He held her two hands in his two hands, looked easily and frankly into her eyes. There was no hint in him of telepathic power.

He sang to her the song which we know as *I Loved You and Lost You*.

<i>I</i>	<i>knew</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>loved</i>	<i>you,</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>won</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>Kalma.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>loved</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>won</i>	<i>you,</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>lost</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>darling!</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>dark</i>	<i>skies</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>Waterrock</i>	
<i>swept</i>	<i>down</i>	<i>against</i>	<i>us.</i>	<i>only</i>	
<i>Lightning-lit</i>	<i>by</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>love,</i>	<i>my</i>
<i>by</i>	<i>our</i>	<i>own</i>	<i>love,</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>lovely!</i>
<i>Our</i>	<i>time</i>	<i>was</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>short</i>	<i>time,</i>
<i>We</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>sharp</i>	<i>hour</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>glory—</i>
<i>We</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>tasted</i>	<i>suffer</i>	<i>denial.</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>tale</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>two</i>	
<i>is</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>bittersweet</i>	<i>story,</i>	<i>shot</i>	
<i>Short</i>	<i>as</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>death.</i>		
<i>but</i>	<i>as</i>	<i>long</i>	<i>as</i>		
<i>We</i>	<i>met</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>loved,</i>	
<i>To</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>vainly</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>plotted</i>	
<i>from</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>rescue</i>	<i>war.</i>	<i>beauty</i>	
<i>Time</i>	<i>had</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>time</i>	<i>for</i>	<i>us,</i>
<i>the</i>	<i>minutes,</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>for</i>	<i>us,</i>	<i>mercy.</i>
<i>We</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>loved</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>lost,</i>	
<i>and</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>world</i>	<i>goes</i>	<i>on.</i>	
<i>We</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>lost</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>kissed,</i>
<i>All</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>have</i>	<i>parted,</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>darling!</i>
<i>All</i>	<i>that</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>have,</i>	<i>love.</i>	
<i>The</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>must</i>	<i>save</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>our</i>
<i>The</i>	<i>memory</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>beauty</i>	<i>memory</i>	<i>beauty</i>
<i>I've</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>memory</i>	<i>.</i>
<i>and</i>	<i>loved</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>won</i>	<i>you,</i>
<i>and</i>	<i>lost</i>	<i>you,</i>	<i>in</i>	<i>Kalma.</i>	

His fingers, moving in the air, produced a soft organ-like music in the room. She had noticed music-beams before, but she had never had one played for herself.

By the time he was through singing, she was sobbing. It was all so true, so wonderful, so heartbreaking.

He had kept her right hand in his left hand. Now he released her suddenly. He stood up.

"Let's work first. Eat later. Someone is near us."

He walked briskly over to the little dog-girl, who was still seated on the chair looking at the mandala with open, sleeping eyes. He took her head firmly and gently between his two hands and turned her eyes away from the design. She struggled momentarily against his hands and then seemed to wake up fully.

She smiled. "That was nice. I rested. How long was it—five minutes?"

"More than that," said the Hunter gently. "I want you to take Elaine's hand."

A few hours ago, and Elaine would have protested at the grotesquerie of holding hands with an underperson. This time, she said nothing, but obeyed: she looked with much love toward the Hunter.

"You two don't have to know much," said the Hunter. "You, D'joan, are going to get everything that is in our minds and in our memories. You will become us, both of us. Forevermore. You will meet your glorious fate."

The little girl shivered. "Is this really the day?"

"It is," said the Hunter. "Future ages will remember this night."

"And you, Elaine," said he to her, "have nothing to do but to love me and to stand very still. Do you understand? You will see tremendous things, some of them frightening. But they won't be real. Just stand still."

Elaine nodded wordlessly.

"In the name," said the Hunter, "of The First Forgotten One, in the name of the Second Forgotten One, in the name of the Third Forgotten One. For the love of people, that will give them life. For the love that will give them a clean death and true . . ." His words were clear but Elaine could not understand them.

The day of days was here.

She knew it.

She did not know how she knew it, but she did.

The Lady Panc Ashash crawled up through the solid floor, wearing her friendly robot body. She came near to Elaine and murmured:

"Have no fear, no fear."

Fear? thought Elaine. This is no time for fear. It is much too interesting.

As if to answer Elaine, a clear, strong, masculine voice spoke out of nowhere:

*This is the time for the daring sharing.*

When these words were spoken, it was as if a bubble had been pricked. Elaine felt her personality and D'joan's mingling. With ordinary telepathy, it would have been frightening. But this was not communication. It was being.

She had become Joan. She felt the clean little body in its tidy clothes. She became aware of the girl-shape again. It was oddly pleasant and familiar, in terribly faraway kinds of feeling, to remember that she had had that shape once—the smooth, innocent flat chest; the uncomplicated groin; the fingers which still felt as though they were separate and alive in extending from the palm of the hand. But the mind—*that* child's mind! It was like an enormous museum illuminated by rich stained-glass windows, cluttered with variegated heaps of beauty and treasure, scented by strange incense which moved slowly in unpropelled air. D'joan had a mind which reached all the way back to the color and glory of man's antiquity. D'joan had been a Lord of the Instrumentality, a monkey-man riding the ships of space, a friend of the dear dead Lady Panc Ashash, and Panc Ashash herself.

No wonder the child was rich and strange: she had been made the heir of all the ages.

*This is the time for the glaring top of the truth at the wearing sharing,* said the nameless, clear, loud voice in her mind. *This is the time for you and him.*

Elaine realized that she was responding to hypnotic suggestions which the Lady Panc Ashash had put into the mind of the little dog-girl—suggestions which were triggered into full potency the moment that the three of them came into telepathic contact.

For a fraction of a second, she perceived nothing but astonishment within herself. She saw nothing but herself—every detail, every secrecy, every thought and feeling and contour of flesh. She was curiously aware of how her breasts hung from her chest, the tension of her belly-muscles holding her female backbone straight and erect—

Female backbone?

Why had she thought that she had a female backbone?

And then she knew.

She was following the Hunter's mind as his awareness rushed through her body, drank it up, enjoyed it, loved it all over again, this time from the inside out.

She knew somehow that the little dog-girl watched everything quietly, wordlessly, drinking in from them both the full nuance of being truly human.

Even with the delirium, she sensed embarrassment. It might be a dream, but it was still too much. She began to close her mind and the thought had come to her that she should take her hands away from the hands of Hunter and the dog-child.

But then fire came . . .

## VI

Fire came up from the floor, burning about them intangibly. Elaine felt nothing . . . but she could sense the touch of the little girl's hand.

*Flames around the dames, games,* said an idiot voice from nowhere.

*Fire around the pyre, sire,* said another.

*Hot is what we got, tot,* said a third.

Suddenly Elaine remembered Earth, but it was not the Earth she knew. She was herself D'joan, and not D'joan. She was a tall, strong monkey-man, indistinguishable from a true human being. She/he had tremendous alertness in her/his heart as she/he walked across the Peace Square at An-fang, the Old Square at An-fang, where all things begin. She/he noticed a discrepancy. Some of the buildings were not there.

The real Elaine thought to herself, "So that's what they did with the child—printed her with the memories of other underpeople. Other ones, who dared things and went places."

The fire stopped.

Elaine saw the black-and-gold room clean and untroubled for a moment before the green white-topped ocean rushed in. The water poured over the three of them without getting them wet in the least. The greenness washed around them without pressure, without suffocation.

Elaine was the Hunter. Enormous dragons floated in the sky above Fomalhaut III. She felt herself wandering across a hill, singing with love and yearning. She had the Hunter's own mind, his own memory. The dragon sensed him, and flew down. The enormous reptilian wings were more beautiful than a sunset, more delicate than orchids. Their beat in the air was as gentle as the breath of a baby. She was not only Hunter but dragon too; she felt the minds meeting and the dragon dying in bliss, in joy.

Somehow the water was gone. So too were D'joan and the Hunter. She was not in the room. She was taut, tired, worried Elaine, looking down a nameless street for hopeless destinations. She had to do things which could never be done. The wrong me, the wrong time, the wrong place—and I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone, her mind screamed. The room was back again; so too were the hands of the Hunter and the little girl.

Mist began rising—

Another dream? thought Elaine. Aren't we done?

But there was another voice somewhere, a voice which grated like the rasp of a saw cutting through bone, like the grind of a broken machine still working at ruinous top speed. It was an evil voice, a terror-filling voice.

Perhaps this really was the "death" which the tunnel underpeople had mistaken her for.

The Hunter's hand released hers. She let go of D'joan.

There was a strange woman in the room. She wore the baldric of authority and the leotards of a traveler.

Elaine stared at her.

"You'll be punished," said the terrible voice, which now was coming out of the woman.

"Wh—wh—what?" stammered Elaine.

"You're conditioning an underperson without authority. I don't know who you are, but the Hunter should know better. The animal will have to die, of course," said the woman, looking at little D'joan.

Hunter muttered, half in greeting to the stranger, half in explanation to Elaine, as though he did not know what else to say:

"Lady Arabella Underwood."

Elaine could not bow to her, though she wanted to.

The surprise came from the little dog girl.

*I am your sister Joan, she said, and no animal to you.*

The Lady Arabella seemed to have trouble hearing. (Elaine herself could not tell whether she was hearing spoken words or taking the message with her mind.)

*I am Joan and I love you.*

The Lady Arabella shook herself as though water had splashed on her. "Of course you're Joan. You love me. And I love you."

*People and underpeople meet on the terms of love.*

"Love. Love, of course. You're a good little girl. And so right." *You will forget me, said Joan, until we meet and love again.*

"Yes, darling. Good-bye for now."

At last D'joan did use words. She spoke to the Hunter and Elaine, saying, "It is finished. I know who I am and what I must do. Elaine had better come with me. We will see you soon, Hunter—if we live."

Elaine looked at the Lady Arabella, who stood stock still, staring like a blind woman. The Hunter nodded at Elaine with his wise, kind, rueful smile.

The little girl led Elaine down, down, down to the door which led back to the tunnel of Englok. Just as they went through the brass door, Elaine heard the voice of the Lady Arabella say to the Hunter:

"What are you doing here all by yourself? The room smells funny. Have you had animals here? Have you killed something?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said the Hunter as D'joan and Elaine stepped through the door.

"What?" cried the Lady Arabella.

Hunter must have raised his voice to a point of penetrating emphasis because he wanted the other two to hear him, too:

"I have killed, Ma'am," he said, "as always—with love. This time it was a system."

They slipped through the door while the Lady Arabella's protesting voice, heavy with authority and inquiry, was still sweeping against the Hunter.

Joan led. Her body was the body of a pretty child, but her personality was the full awakening of all the underpeople who had been imprinted on her. Elaine could not understand it, because Joan was still the little dog-girl, but Joan was now also Elaine, also Hunter. There was no doubt about their movement; the child, no longer an undergirl, led the way and Elaine, human or not, followed.

The door closed behind them. They were back in the Brown and Yellow Corridor. Most of the underpeople were awaiting them. Dozens stared at them. The heavy animal-human smells of the old tunnel rolled against them like thick, slow waves. Elaine felt the beginning of a headache at her temples, but she was much too alert to care.

For a moment, D'joan and Elaine confronted the underpeople.

Most of you have seen paintings or theatricals based upon this scene. The most famous of all is, beyond doubt, the fantastic "one-line drawing" of San Shigonanda—the board of the background almost uniformly gray, with a hint of brown and yellow on the left, a hint of black and red on the right, and in the center the strange white line, almost a smear of paint, which somehow suggests the bewildered girl Elaine and the doom-blessed child Joan.

Charley-is-my-darling was, of course, the first to find his voice. (Elaine did not notice him as a goat-man any more. He seemed an earnest, friendly man of middle age, fighting poor health and an uncertain life with great courage. She now found his smile persuasive and charming. Why, thought Elaine, didn't I see him that way before? Have I changed?)

Charley-is-my-darling had spoken before Elaine found her wits. "He did it. Are you D'joan?"

"Am I D'joan?" said the child, asking the crowd of deformed, weird people in the tunnel. "Do you think I am D'joan?"

"No! No! You are the lady who was promised—you are the bridge-to-man," cried a tall yellow-haired old woman, whom Elaine could not remember seeing before. The woman flung herself to her knees in front of the child, and tried to get D'joan's hand. The child held her hands away, quietly, but firmly, so the woman buried her face in the child's skirt and wept.

"I am Joan," said the child, "and I am dog no more. You are people now, people, and if you die with me, you will die men. Isn't that better than it has ever been before? And you, Ruthie," said she to the woman at her feet, "stand up and stop crying. Be glad. These are the days that I shall be with you. I know your children were all taken away and killed, Ruthie, and I am sorry. I cannot bring them back. But I give you womanhood. I have even made a person out of Elaine."

"Who are you?" said Charley-is-my-darling. "Who are you?"

"I'm the little girl you put out to live or die an hour ago. But now I am Joan, not D'joan, and I bring you a weapon. You are women. You are men. You are people. You can use the weapon."

"What weapon?" The voice was Crawlle's, from about the third row of spectators.

"Life and life-with," said the child Joan.

"Don't be a fool," said Crawlle. "What's the weapon? Don't give us words. We've had words and death ever since the world of underpeople began. That's what *people* give us—good words, fine principles, and cold murder, year after year, generation after generation. Don't tell me I'm a person—I'm not. I'm a bison and I know it. An animal fixed up to look like a person. Give me a something to kill with. Let me die fighting."

Little Joan looked incongruous in her young body and short stature, still wearing the little blue smock in which Elaine had first seen her. She commanded the room. She lifted her hand and the buzz of low voices, which had started while Crawlle was yelling, dropped off to silence again.

"Crawlle," she said, in a voice that carried all the way down the hall, "peace be with you in the everlasting now."

Crawlle scowled. She did have the grace to look puzzled at Joan's message to her, but she did not speak.

"Don't talk to me, dear people," said little Joan. "Get used to me first. I bring you life-with. It's more than love. Love's a hard, sad, dirty word, a cold word, an old word. It says too much and it promises too little. I bring you something much bigger than love. If you're alive, you're alive. If you're alive-with, then you know the other life is there too—both of you, any of you, all of you. Don't do anything. Don't grab, don't clench, don't possess. Just *be*. That's the weapon. There's not a flame or a gun or a poison that can stop it."

"I want to believe you," said Mabel, "but I don't know how to."

"Don't believe me," said little Joan. "Just wait and let things happen. Let me through, good people. I have to sleep for a while. Elaine will watch me while I sleep and when I get up, I will tell you why you are underpeople no longer."

Joan started to move forward—

A wild ululating screech split the corridor.

Everyone looked around to see where it came from.

It was almost like the shriek of a fighting bird, but the sound came from among them.

Elaine saw it first.

Crawlle had a knife and just as the cry ended, she flung herself on Joan.

Child and woman fell on the floor, their dresses a tangle. The large hand rose up twice with the knife, and the second time it came up red.

From the hot shocking burn in her side, Elaine knew that she must herself have taken one of the stabs. She could not tell whether Joan was still living.

The undermen pulled Crawlle off the child.

Crawlle was white with rage. "Words, words, words. She'll kill us all with her words."

A large, fat man, with the muzzle of a bear on the front of an otherwise human-looking head and body, stepped around the man who held Crawlle. He gave her one tremendous slap. She dropped to the floor unconscious. The knife, stained with blood, fell on the old worn carpet. (Elaine thought automatically: restorative for her later; check neck vertebrae; no problem of bleeding.)

For the first time in her life, Elaine functioned as a wholly efficient witch. She helped the people pull the clothing from little Joan. The tiny body, with the heavy purple-dark blood pumping out from just below the rib-cage, looked hurt and fragile. Elaine reached in her left handbag. She had a surgical radar pen. She held it to her eye and looked through the flesh, up and down the wound. The peritoneum was punctured, the liver cut, the upper folds of the large intestine were perforated in two places. When she saw this, she knew what to do. She brushed the bystanders aside and got to work.

First she glued the cuts from the inside out, starting with the damage to the liver. Each touch of the organic adhesive was preceded by a tiny spray of re-coding powder, designed to reinforce the capacity of the injured organ to restore itself. The probing, pressing, squeezing took eleven minutes. Before it was finished, Joan had awakened, and was murmuring:

"Am I dying?"

"Not at all," said Elaine, "unless these human medicines poison your dog blood."

"Who did it?"

"Crawlle?"

"Why?" said the child. "Why? Is she hurt too? Where is she?"

"Not as hurt as she is going to be," said the goat-man, Charley-is-my-darling. "If she lives, we'll fix her up and try her and put her to death."

"No, you won't," said Joan. "You're going to love her. You must."

The goat-man looked bewildered.

He turned in his perplexity to Elaine. "Better have a look at Crawlle," said he. "Maybe Orson killed her with that slap. He's a bear, you know."

"So I saw," said Elaine, drily. What did the man think that thing looked like, a hummingbird?

She walked over to the body of Crawlle. As soon as she touched the shoulders, she knew that she was in for trouble. The outer appearances were human, but the musculature beneath was not. She suspected that the laboratories had left Crawlle terribly strong, keeping the buffalo strength and obstinacy for some remote industrial reason of their own. She took out a brainlink, a close-range telepathic hookup which worked only briefly and slightly, to see if the mind still functioned. As she reached for Crawlle's head to attach it, the unconscious girl sprang suddenly to life, jumped to her feet, and said:

"No, you don't! You don't peep me, you dirty human!"

"Crawlle, stand still."

"Don't boss me, you monster!"

"Crawlie, that's a bad thing to say." It was eerie to hear such a commanding voice coming from the throat and mouth of a small child. Small she might have been, but Joan commanded the scene.

"I don't care what I say. You all hate me."

"That's not true, Crawlie."

"You're a dog and now you're a person. You're born a traitor. Dogs have always sided with people. You hated me even before you went into that room and changed into something else. Now you are going to kill us all."

"We may die, Crawlie, but I won't do it."

"Well, you hate me, anyhow. You've always hated me."

"You may not believe it," said Joan, "but I've always loved you. You were the prettiest woman in our whole corridor."

Crawlie laughed. The sound gave Elaine gooseflesh. "Suppose I believed it. How could I live if I thought that people loved me? If I believed you, I would have to tear myself to pieces, to break my brains on the wall, to do—" The laughter changed to sobs, but Crawlie managed to resume talking: "You things are so stupid that you don't even know that you're monsters. You're not people. You never will be people. I'm one of you myself. I'm honest enough to admit what I am. We're dirt, we're nothing, we're things that are less than machines. We hide in the earth like dirt and when people kill us they do not weep. At least we were hiding. Now you come along, you and your tame human woman"—Crawlie glared briefly at Elaine—"and you try to change even that. I'll kill you again if I can, you dirt, you slut, you dog! What are you doing with that child's body? We don't even know who you are now. Can you tell us?"

The bear-man had moved up close to Crawlie, unnoticed by her, and was ready to slap her down again if she moved against little Joan.

Joan looked straight at him and with a mere movement of her eyes she commanded him not to strike.

"I'm tired," she said, "I'm tired, Crawlie. I'm a thousand years old when I am not even five. And I am Elaine now, and I am Hunter too, and I am the Lady Panc Ashash, and I know a great many more things than I thought I would ever know. I have work to do, Crawlie, because I love you, and I think I will die soon. But please, good people, first let me rest."

The bear-man was on Crawlie's right. On her left, there had moved up a snake-woman. The face was pretty and human, except for the thin forked tongue which ran in and out of the mouth like a dying flame. She had good shoulders and hips but no breasts at all. She wore empty golden brassiere cups which swung against her chest. Her hands looked as though they might be stronger than steel. Crawlie started to move toward Joan, and the snake-woman hissed.

It was the snake hiss of Old Earth.

For a second, every animal-person in the corridor stopped breathing. They all stared at the snake-woman. She hissed again, looking straight at Crawlie. The sound was an abomination in that narrow space. Elaine saw that Joan tightened up like a little dog, Charley-is-my-darling looked as though he was ready to leap twenty meters in one jump, and Elaine herself felt an impulse to strike, to kill, to destroy. The hiss was a challenge to them all.

The snake-woman looked around calmly, fully aware of the attention she had obtained.

"Don't worry, dear people. See, I'm using Joan's name for all of us. I'm not going to hurt Crawlie, not unless she hurts Joan. But if she hurts Joan, if anybody hurts Joan, they will have me to deal with. You have a good idea who I am. We S-people have great strength, high intelligence, and no fear at all. You know we cannot breed. People have to make us one by one, out of ordinary snakes. Do not cross me, dear people. I want to learn about this new love which Joan is bringing, and nobody is going to hurt Joan while I am here. Do you hear me, people? Nobody. Try it, and you die. I think I could kill almost all of you before I died, even if you all attacked me at once. Do you hear me, people? *Leave Joan alone.* That goes for you, too, you soft human woman. I am not afraid of you either. You there," said she to the bear-man, "pick little Joan up and carry her to a quiet bed."



She must rest. She must be quiet for a while. You be quiet too, all you people, or you will meet me. Me." Her black eyes roved across their faces. The snake-woman moved forward and they parted in front of her, as though she were the only solid being in a throng of ghosts.

Her eyes rested a moment on Elaine. Elaine met the gaze, but it was an uncomfortable thing to do. The black eyes with neither eyebrows nor lashes seemed full of intelligence and devoid of emotion. Orson, the bear-man, followed obediently behind. He carried little Joan.

As the child passed Elaine she tried to stay awake. She murmured, "Make me bigger. Please make me bigger. Right away."

"I don't know how . . ." said Elaine.

The child struggled to full awakening. "I'll have work to do. Work . . . and maybe my death to die. It will all be wasted if I am this little. Make me bigger."

"But—" protested Elaine again.

"If you don't know, ask the lady."

"What lady?"

The S-woman had paused, listening to the conversation. She cut in.

"The Lady Panc Ashash, of course. The dead one. Do you think that a living Lady of the Instrumentality would do anything but kill us all?"

As the snake-woman and Orson carried Joan away, Charley-is-my-darling came up to Elaine and said, "Do you want to go?"

"Where?"

"To the Lady Panc Ashash, of course."

"Me?" said Elaine. "Now?" said Elaine, even more emphatically. "Of course not," said Elaine, pronouncing each word as though it were a law. "What do you think I am? A few hours ago I did not even know that you existed. I wasn't sure about the word 'death.' I just assumed that everything terminated at four hundred years, the way it should. It's been hours of danger, and everybody has been threatening everybody else for all that time. I'm tired and I'm sleepy and I'm dirty, and I've got to take care of myself, and besides—"

She stopped suddenly and bit her lip. She had started to say, and besides, my body is all worn out with that dreamlike love-making which the Hunter and I had together. That was not the business of Charley-is-my-darling: he was goat enough as he was. His mind was goatish and would not see the dignity of it all.

The goat-man said, very gently, "You are making history, Elaine, and when you make history you cannot always take care of all the little things too. Are you happier and more important than you ever were before? Yes? Aren't you a different you from the person who met Balthasar just a few hours ago?"

Elaine was taken aback by the seriousness. She nodded.

"Stay hungry and tired. Stay dirty. Just a little longer. Time must not be wasted. You can talk to the Lady Panc Ashash. Find out what we must do about little Joan. When you come back with further instructions, I will take care of you myself. This tunnel is not as bad a town as it looks. We will have everything you could need, in the Room of Englok. Englok himself built it, long ago. Work just a little longer, and then you can eat and rest. We have everything here. 'I am the citizen of no mean city.' But first you must help Joan. You love Joan, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I do," she said.

"Then help us just a little bit more."

With death? she thought. With murder? With violation of law? But—but it was all for Joan.

It was thus that Elaine went to the camouflaged door, went out under the open sky again, saw the great saucer of Upper Kalma reaching out over the Old Lower City. She talked to the voice of the Lady Panc Ashash, and obtained certain instructions, together with other messages. Later, she was able to repeat them, but she was too tired to make out their real sense.

She staggered back to the place in the wall where she thought the door to be, leaned against it, and nothing happened.

"Further down, Elaine, further down. Hurry! When I used to be me, I too got tired," came the strong whisper of the Lady Panc Ashash, "but do hurry!"

Elaine stepped away from the wall, looking at it.

A beam of light struck her.

The Instrumentality had found her.

She rushed wildly at the wall.

The door gaped briefly. The strong welcome hand of Charley-is-my-darling helped her in.

"The light! The light!" cried Elaine. "I've killed us all. They saw me."

"Not yet," smiled the goat-man, with his quick crooked intelligent smile. "I may not be educated, but I am pretty smart."

He reached toward the inner gate, glanced back at Elaine appraisingly, and then shoved a man-sized robot through the door.

"There it goes, a sweeper about your size. No memory bank. A worn-out brain. Just simple motivations. If they come down to see what they thought they saw, they will see this instead. We keep a bunch of these at the door. We don't go out much, but when we do, it's handy to have these to cover up with."

He took her by the arm. "While you eat, you can tell me. Can we make her bigger . . . ?"

"Who?"

"Joan, of course. Our Joan. That's what you went to find out for us."

Elaine had to inventory her own mind to see what the Lady Panc Ashash had said on that subject. In a moment she remembered.

"You need a pod. And a jelly bath. And narcotics, because it will hurt. Four hours."

"Wonderful," said Charley-is-my-darling, leading her deeper and deeper into the tunnel.

"But what's the use of it," said Elaine, "if I've ruined us all? The Instrumentality saw me coming in. They will follow. They will kill all of you, even Joan. Where is the Hunter? Shouldn't I sleep first?" She felt her lips go thick with fatigue; she had not rested or eaten since she took that chance on the strange little door between Waterrocky Road and the Shopping Bar.

"You're safe, Elaine, you're safe," said Charley-is-my-darling, his sly smile very warm and his smooth voice carrying the ring of sincere conviction. For himself, he did not believe a word of it. He thought they were all in danger, but there was no point in terrifying Elaine. Elaine was the only real person on their side, except for the Hunter, who was a strange one, almost like an animal himself, and for the Lady Panc Ashash, who was very benign, but who was, after all, a dead person. He was frightened himself, but he was afraid of fear. Perhaps they were all doomed.

In a way, he was right.

## VII

The Lady Arabella Underwood had called the Lady Goroke.

"Something has tampered with my mind."

The Lady Goroke felt very shocked. She threw back the inquiry. *Put a probe on it.*

"I did. Nothing."

Nothing?

More shock for the Lady Goroke. *Sound the alert, then.*

"Oh, no. Oh, no, no. It was a friendly, nice tampering." The Lady Arabella Underwood, being an Old North Australian, was rather formal: she always thought full words at her friends, even in telepathic contact. She never sent mere raw ideas.

*But that's utterly unlawful. You're part of the Instrumentality. It's a crime!* thought the Lady Goroke.

She got a giggle for reply.

*You laugh . . . ?* she inquired.

"I just thought a new Lord might be here. From the Instrumentality. Having a look at me."

The Lady Goroke was very proper and easily shocked. *We wouldn't do that!*

The Lady Arabella thought to herself but did not transmit, "Not to you, my dear. You're a blooming prude." To the other she transmitted, "Forget it then."

Puzzled and worried, the Lady Goroke thought: *Well, all right. Break?*

"Right-ho. Break."

The Lady Goroke frowned to herself. She slapped her wall. *Planet Central*, she thought at it.

A mere man sat at a desk.

"I am the Lady Goroke," she said.

"Of course, my Lady," he replied.

"Police fever, one degree. One degree only. Till rescinded. Clear?"

"Clear, my Lady. The entire planet?"

"Yes," she said.

"Do you wish to give a reason?" His voice was respectful and routine.

"Must I?"

"Of course not, my Lady."

"None given, then. Close."

He saluted and his image faded from the wall.

She raised her mind to the level of a light clear call. *Instrumentality Only—Instrumentality Only. I have raised the police fever level one degree by command. Reason, personal disquiet. You know my voice. You know me. Goroke.*

Far across the city—a police ornithopter flapped slowly down the street.

The police robot was photographing a sweeper, the most elaborately malfunctioning sweeper he had ever seen.

The sweeper raced down the road at unlawful speeds, approaching three hundred kilometers an hour, stopped with a sizzle of plastic on stone, and began picking dust-motes off the pavement.

When the ornithopter reached it, the sweeper took off again, rounded two or three corners at tremendous speed, and then settled down to its idiot job.

The third time this happened, the robot in the ornithopter put a disabling slug through it, flew down, and picked it up with the claws of his machine.

He saw it in close view.

"Birdbrain. Old model. Birdbrain. Good they don't use those any more. The thing could have hurt a Man. Now, I'm printed from a mouse, a real mouse with lots and lots of brains."

He flew toward the central junkyard with the wornout sweeper. The sweeper, crippled but still conscious, was trying to pick dust off the iron claws which held it.

Below them, the Old City twisted out of sight with its odd geometrical lights. The New City, bathed in its soft perpetual glow, shone out against the night of Fomalhaut III. Beyond them, the everlasting ocean boiled in its private storms.

On the actual stage the actors cannot do much with the scene of the interlude, where Joan was cooked in a single night from the size of a child five years old to the tallness of a miss of fifteen or sixteen. The biological machine did work well, though at the risk of her life. It made her into a vital, robust young person, without changing her mind at all. This is hard for any actress to portray. The storyboxes have the advantage. They can show the machine with all sorts of improvements—flashing lights, bits of lightning, mysterious rays. Actually, it looked like a bathtub full of boiling brown jelly, completely covering Joan.

Elaine, meanwhile, ate hungrily in the palatial room of Englok himself. The food was very, very old, and she had doubts, as a witch, about its nutritional value, but it stilled her hunger. The denizens of Clown Town had declared this room "off limits" to themselves, for reasons which Charley-is-my-darling could not make plain. He stood in the doorway and told her what to do to find food, to activate the bed out of the floor, to open the bathroom. Everything was very old-fashioned and nothing responded to a simple thought or to a mere slap.

A curious thing happened.

Elaine had washed her hands, had eaten, and was preparing for her bath. She had taken most of her clothes off, thinking only that Charley-is-my-darling was an animal, not a man, so that it did not matter.

Suddenly she knew it did matter.

He might be an underperson but he was a man to her. Blushing deeply all the way down to her neck, she ran into the bathroom and called back to him:

"Go away. I will bathe and then sleep. Wake me when you have to, not before."

"Yes, Elaine."

"And—and—"

"Yes?"

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much. Do you know, I never said 'thank you' to an underperson before."

"That's all right," said Charley-is-my-darling with a smile. "Most real people don't. Sleep well, my dear Elaine. When you awaken, be ready for great things. We shall take a star out of the skies and shall set thousands of worlds on fire . . ."

"What's that?" she said, putting her head around the corner of the bathroom.

"Just a figure of speech," he smiled. "Just meaning that you won't have much time. Rest well. Don't forget to put your clothes in the ladysmaid machine. The ones in Clown Town are all worn out. But since we haven't used this room, yours ought to work."

"Which is it?" she said.

"The red lid with the gold handle. Just lift it." On that domestic note he left her to rest, while he went off and plotted the destiny of a hundred billion lives.

They told her it was mid-morning when she came out of the room of Englok. How could she have known it? The brown-and-yellow corridor, with its gloomy old yellow lights, was just as dim and stench-ridden as ever.

The people all seemed to have changed.

Baby-baby was no longer a mouse-hag, but a woman of considerable force and much tenderness. Crawlle was as dangerous as a human enemy, staring at Elaine, her beautiful face gone bland with hidden hate. Charley-is-my-darling was gay, friendly, and persuasive. She thought she could read expressions on the faces of Orson and the S-woman, odd though their features were.

After she had gotten through some singularly polite greetings, she demanded, "What's happening now?"

A new voice spoke up—a voice she knew and did not know.

Elaine glanced over at a niche in the wall.

The Lady Panc Ashash! And who was that with her?

Even as she asked herself the question, Elaine knew the answer. It was Joan, grown, only half a head less tall than the Lady Panc Ashash or herself. It was a new Joan, powerful, happy, and quiet; but it was all the dear little old D'joan too.

"Welcome," said the Lady Panc Ashash, "to our revolution."

"What's a revolution?" asked Elaine. "And I thought you couldn't come in here with all the thought shielding?"

The Lady Panc Ashash lifted a wire which trailed back from her robot body. "I rigged this up so that I could use the body. Precautions are no use any more. It's the other side which will need the

precautions now. A revolution is a way of changing systems and people. This is one. You go first, Elaine. This way."

"To die? Is that what you mean?"

The Lady Panc Ashash laughed warmly. "You know me by now. You know my friends here. You know what your own life has been down to now, a useless witch in a world which did not want you. We may die, but it's what we do before we die that counts. This is Joan going to meet her destiny. You lead as far as the Upper City. Then Joan will lead. And then we shall see."

"You mean, all these people are going too?" Elaine looked at the ranks of the underpeople, who were beginning to form into two queues down the corridor. The queues bulged wherever mothers led their children by the hand or carried small ones in their arms. Here and there the line was punctuated by a giant underperson.

They have been nothing, thought Elaine, and I was nothing too. Now we are all going to do something, even though we may be terminated for it. "May be," thought she: "shall be" is the word. But it is worth it if Joan can change the worlds, even a little bit, even for other people.

Joan spoke up. Her voice had grown with her body, but it was the same dear voice which the little dog-girl had had sixteen hours (they seem sixteen years, thought Elaine) ago, when Elaine first met her at the door to the tunnel of Englok.

Joan said, "Love is not something special, reserved for men alone.

"Love is not proud. Love has no real name. Love is for life itself, and we have life.

"We cannot win by fighting. People outnumber us, outgun us, outrun us, outfight us. But people did not create us. Whatever made people, made us too. You all know that, but will we say the name?"

There was a murmur of *no* and *never* from the crowd.

"You have waited for me. I have waited too. It is time to die, perhaps, but we will die the way people did in the beginning, before things became easy and cruel for them. They live in a stupor and they die in a dream. It is not a good dream and if they awaken, they will know that we are people too. Are you with me?" They murmured *yes*. "Do you love me?" Again they murmured agreement. "Shall we go out and meet the day?" They shouted their acclaim.

Joan turned to the Lady Panc Ashash. "Is everything as you wished and ordered?"

"Yes," said the dear dead woman in the robot body. "Joan first, to lead you. Elaine preceding her, to drive away robots or ordinary underpeople. When you meet real people, you will love them. That is all. You will love them. If they kill you, you will love them. Joan will show you how. Pay no further attention to me. Ready?"

Joan lifted her right hand and said words to herself. The people bowed their heads before her, faces and muzzles and snouts of all sizes and colors. A baby of some kind mewed in a tiny falsetto to the rear.

Just before she turned to lead the procession, Joan turned back to the people and said, "Crawlie, where are you?"

"Here, in the middle," said a clear, calm voice far back.

"Do you love me now, Crawlie?"

"No, D'joan. I like you less than when you were a little dog. But these are my people too, as well as yours. I am brave. I can walk. I won't make trouble."

"Crawlie," said Joan, "will you love people if we meet them?"

All faces turned toward the beautiful bison-girl. Elaine could just see her, way down the murky corridor. Elaine could see that the girl's face had turned utter, dead white with emotion. Whether rage or fear, she could not tell.

At last Crawlie spoke, "No, I won't love people. And I won't love you. I have my pride."

Softly, softly, like death itself at a quiet bedside, Joan spoke. "You *can* stay behind, Crawlie. You can stay here. It isn't much of a chance, but it's a chance."

Crawlie looked at her. "Bad luck to you, dog-woman, and bad luck to the rotten human being up there beside you."

Elaine stood on tiptoe to see what would happen. Crawlie's face suddenly disappeared, dropping downward.

The snake woman elbowed her way to the front, stood close to Joan where the others could see her, and sang out in a voice as clear as metal itself:

"Sing 'poor, poor, Crawlie,' dear people. Sing 'I love Crawlie,' dear people. She is dead. I just killed her so that we would all be full of love. I love you too," said the S-woman, on whose reptilian features no sign of love or hate could be seen.

Joan spoke up, apparently prompted by the Lady Panc Ashash. "We do love Crawlie, dear people. Think of her and then let us move forward."

Charley-is-my-darling gave Elaine a little shove. "Here, you lead."

In a dream, in a bewilderment, Elaine led.

She felt warm, happy, brave when she passed close to the strange Joan, so tall and yet so familiar. Joan gave her a full smile and whispered, "Tell me I'm doing well, human woman. I'm a dog and dogs have lived a million years for the praise of man."

"You're right, Joan, you're completely right! I'm with you. Shall I go now?" responded Elaine.

Joan nodded, her eyes brimming with tears.

Elaine led.

Joan and the Lady Panc Ashash followed, dog and dead woman championing the procession.

The rest of the underpeople followed them in turn, in a double line.

When they made the secret door open, daylight flooded the corridor. Elaine could almost feel the stale odor-ridden air pouring out with them. When she glanced back into the tunnel for the last time, she saw the body of Crawlie lying all alone on the floor.

Elaine herself turned to the steps and began going up them.

No one had yet noticed the procession.

Elaine could hear the wire of the Lady Panc Ashash dragging on the stone and metal of the steps as they climbed.

When she reached the top door, Elaine had a moment of indecision and panic. "This is my life, my life," she thought. "I have no other. What have I done? Oh, Hunter, Hunter, where are you? Have you betrayed me?"

Said Joan softly behind her, "Go on! Go on. This is a war of love. Keep going."

Elaine opened the door to the upper street. The roadway was full of people. Three police ornithopters flapped slowly overhead. This was an unusual number. Elaine stopped again.

"Keep walking," said Joan, "and warn the robots off."

Elaine advanced and the revolution began.

## VIII

The revolution lasted six minutes and covered one hundred and twelve meters.

The police flew over as soon as the underpeople began pouring out of the doorway.

The first one glided in like a big bird, his voice asking, "Identify! Who are you?"

Elaine said, "Go away. That is a command."

"Identify yourself," said the bird-like machine, banking steeply with the lens-eyed robot peering at Elaine out of its middle.

"Go away," said Elaine. "I am a true human and I command."

The first police ornithopter apparently called to the others by radio. Together they flapped their way down the corridor between the big buildings.

A lot of people had stopped. Most of their faces were blank, a few showing animation or amusement or horror at the sight of so many underpeople all crowded in one place.

Joan's voice sang out, in the clearest possible enunciation of the Old Common Tongue:

"Dear people, we are people. We love you. We love you."

The underpeople began to chant *love, love, love* in a weird plainsong full of sharps and halftones. The true humans shrank back. Joan herself set the example by embracing a young woman of about her own height. Charley-is-my-darling took a human man by the shoulders and shouted at him:

"I love you, my dear fellow! Believe me, I do love you. It's wonderful meeting you." The human man was startled by the contact and even more startled by the glowing warmth of the goat-man's voice. He stood mouth slack and body relaxed with sheer, utter, and accepted surprise.

Somewhere to the rear a person screamed.

A police ornithopter came flapping back. Elaine could not tell if it was one of the three she had sent away, or a new one altogether. She waited for it to get close enough to hail, so that she could tell it to go away. For the first time, she wondered about the actual physical character of danger. Could the police machine put a slug through her? Or shoot flame at her? Or lift her screaming, carrying her away with its iron claws to some place where she would be pretty and clean and never herself again? "Oh, Hunter, Hunter, where are you now? Have you forgotten me? Have you betrayed me?"

The underpeople were still surging forward and mingling with the real people, clutching them by their hands or their garments, and repeating in the queer medley of voices:

"I love you. Oh, please, I love you! We are people. We are your sisters and brothers . . ."

The snake-woman wasn't making much progress. She had seized a human man with her more-than-iron hand. Elaine hadn't seen her saying anything, but the man had fainted dead away. The snake-woman had him draped over her arm like an empty overcoat and was looking for somebody else to love.

Behind Elaine a low voice said, "He's coming soon."

"Who?" said Elaine to the Lady Panc Ashash, knowing perfectly well whom she meant, but not wanting to admit it, and busy with watching the circling ornithopter at the same time.

"The Hunter, of course," said the robot with the dear dead lady's voice. "He'll come for you. You'll be all right. I'm at the end of my wire. Look away, my dear. They are about to kill me again and I am afraid that the sight would distress you."

Fourteen robots, foot models, marched with military decision into the crowd. The true humans took heart from this and some of them began to slip away into doorways. Most of the real people were still so surprised that they stood around with the underpeople pawing at them, babbling the accents of love over and over again, the animal origin of their voices showing plainly.

The robot sergeant took no note of this. He approached the Lady Panc Ashash only to find Elaine standing in his way.

"I command you," she said, with all the passion of a working witch, "I *command* you to leave this place."

His eye-lenses were like dark-blue marbles floating in milk. They seemed swimmy and poorly focused as he looked her over. He did not reply but stepped around her, faster than her own body could intercept him. He made for the dear, dead Lady Panc Ashash.

Elaine, bewildered, realized that the Lady's robot body seemed more human than ever. The robot-sergeant confronted her.

This is the scene which we all remember, the first authentic picture tape of the entire incident:

The gold and black sergeant, his milky eyes staring at the Lady Panc Ashash.

The Lady herself, in the pleasant old robot body, lifting a commanding hand.

Elaine, distraught, half-turning as though she would grab the robot by his right arm. Her head is moving so rapidly that her black hair swings as she turns.

Charley-is-my-darling shouting, "I love, love, love!" at a small handsome man with mouse-colored hair. The man is gulping and saying nothing.

All this we know.

Then comes the unbelievable, which we now believe, the event for which the stars and worlds were unprepared.

Mutiny.

Robot mutiny.

Disobedience in open daylight.

The words are hard to hear on the tape, but we can still make them out. The recording device on the police ornithopter had gotten a square fix on the face of the Lady Panc Ashash. Lip-readers can see the words plainly; non-lip-readers can hear the words the third or fourth time the tape is run through the eyebox.

Said the Lady, "Overridden."

Said the sergeant, "No, you're a robot."

"See for yourself. Read my brain. I am a robot. I am also a woman. You cannot disobey people. I am people. I love you. Furthermore, you are people. You think. We love each other. Try. Try to attack."

"I—I cannot," said the robot sergeant, his milky eyes seeming to spin with excitement. "You love me? You mean I'm *alive*? I *exist*?"

"With love, you do," said the Lady Panc Ashash. "Look at her," said the Lady, pointing to Joan, "because she has brought you love."

The robot looked and disobeyed the law. His squad looked with him.

He turned back to the Lady and bowed to her: "Then you know what we must do, if we cannot obey you and cannot disobey the others."

"Do it," she said sadly, "but know what you are doing. You are not really escaping two human commands. You are making a choice. You. That makes you men."

The sergeant turned to his squad of man-sized robots: "You hear that? She says we are *men*. I believe her. Do you believe her?"

"We do," they cried almost unanimously.

This is where the picture-tape ends, but we can imagine how the scene was concluded. Elaine had stopped short, just behind the sergeant-robot. The other robots had come up behind her. Charley-is-my-darling had stopped talking. Joan was in the act of lifting her hands in blessing, her warm brown dog eyes gone wide with pity and understanding.

People wrote down the things that we cannot see.

Apparently the robot-sergeant said, "Our love, dear people, and good-bye. We disobey and die." He waved his hand to Joan. It is not certain whether he did or did not say, "Good-bye, our lady and our liberator." Maybe some poet made up the second saying; the first one, we are sure about. And we are sure about the next word, the one which historians and poets all agree on. He turned to his men and said,

"Destruct."

Fourteen robots, the black-and-gold sergeant and his thirteen silver-blue foot soldiers, suddenly spurted white fire in the street of Kalma. They detonated their suicide buttons, thermite caps in their own heads. They had done something with no human command at all, on an order from another robot, the body of the Lady Panc Ashash, and she in turn had no human authority, but merely the word of the little dog-girl Joan, who had been made an adult in a single night.

Fourteen white flames made people and underpeople turn their eyes aside. Into the light there dropped a special police ornithopter. Out of it came the two Ladies, Arabella Underwood and Goroke. They lifted their forearms to shield their eyes from the blazing dying robots. They did not see the Hunter, who had moved mysteriously into an open window above the street and who watched the scene by putting his hands over his eyes and peeking through the slits between his fingers. While the people still stood blinded, they felt the fierce telepathic shock of the mind of the Lady Goroke taking command of the situation. That was her right, as a Chief of the Instrumentality.



Some of the people, but not all of them, felt the outré countershock of Joan's mind reaching out to meet the Lady Goroke.

"I command," thought the Lady Goroke, her mind kept open to all beings.

"Indeed you do, but I love, I love you," thought Joan.

The first-order forces met.

They engaged.

The revolution was over. Nothing had really happened, but Joan had forced people to meet her. This was nothing like the poem about people and underpeople getting all mixed up. The mixup came much later, even after the time of C'mell. The poem is pretty, but it is dead wrong, as you can see for yourself:

<i>You</i>		<i>should</i>		<i>ask</i>		<i>me,</i>
	<i>Me,</i>				<i>me,</i>	<i>me</i>
<i>Because</i>			<i>I</i>			<i>know—</i>
<i>I</i>		<i>used</i>		<i>to</i>		<i>live</i>
	<i>On</i>	<i>the</i>		<i>Eastern</i>		<i>Shore.</i>
<i>Men</i>			<i>aren't</i>			<i>men,</i>
<i>And</i>		<i>women</i>		<i>aren't</i>		<i>women,</i>
<i>And</i>	<i>people</i>	<i>aren't</i>	<i>people</i>	<i>any</i>		<i>more.</i>

There is no Eastern Shore on Fomalhaut III anyhow; the people/underpeople crisis came much later than this. The revolution had failed, but history had reached its new turning-point, the quarrel of the two Ladies. They left their minds open out of sheer surprise. Suicidal robots and world-loving dogs were unheard-of. It was bad enough to have illegal underpeople on the prowl, but these new things—ah!

*Destroy them all,* said the Lady Goroke.

"Why?" thought the Lady Arabella Underwood.

*Malfunction,* replied Goroke.

"But they're not machines!"

*Then they're animals—underpeople. Destroy! Destroy!*

Then came the answer which has created our own time. It came from the Lady Arabella Underwood, and all Kalma heard it:

*Perhaps they are people. They must have a trial.*

The dog-girl Joan dropped to her knees. "I have succeeded. I have succeeded, I have succeeded! You can kill me, dear people, but I love, love you!"

The Lady Panc Ashash said quietly to Elaine, "I thought I would be dead by now. Really dead, at last. But I am not. I have seen the worlds turn, Elaine, and you have seen them turn with me."

The underpeople had fallen quiet as they heard the high-volume telepathic exchange between the two great Ladies.

The real soldiers dropped out of the sky, their ornithopters whistling as they hawked down to the ground. They ran up to the underpeople and began binding them with cord.

One soldier took a single look at the robot body of the Lady Panc Ashash. He touched it with his staff, and the staff turned cherry-red with heat. The robot-body, its heat suddenly drained, fell to the ground in a heap of icy crystals.

Elaine walked between the frigid rubbish and the red-hot staff. She had seen Hunter.

She missed seeing the soldier who came up to Joan, started to bind her, and then fell back weeping, babbling, "She loves me! She loves me!"

The Lord Femtosex, who commanded the inflying soldiers, bound Joan with cord despite her talking.

Grimly he answered her: "Of course you love me. You're a good dog. You'll die soon, doggy, but till then, you'll obey."

"I'm obeying," said Joan, "but I'm a dog *and* a person. Open your mind, man, and you'll feel it."

Apparently he did open his mind and felt the ocean of love riptiding into him. It shocked him. His arm swung up and back, the edge of the hand striking at Joan's neck for the ancient kill.

"No, you don't," thought the Lady Arabella Underwood. "That child is going to get a proper trial."

He looked at her and glared. *Chief doesn't strike Chief, my Lady. Let go my arm.*

Thought the Lady Arabella at him, openly and in public: *A trial, then.*

In his anger he nodded at her. He would not think or speak to her in the presence of all the other people.

A soldier brought Elaine and Hunter before him.

"Sir and master, these are people, not underpeople. But they have dog-thoughts, cat-thoughts, goat-thoughts, and robot-ideas in their heads. Do you wish to look?"

"Why look?" said the Lord Femtiosex, who was as blond as the ancient pictures of Baldur, and oftentimes that arrogant as well. "The Lord Limaono is arriving. That's all of us. We can have the trial here and now."

Elaine felt cords bite into her wrists; she heard the Hunter murmur comforting words to her, words which she did not quite understand.

"They will not kill us," he murmured, "though we will wish they had, before this day is out. Everything is happening as she said it would, and—"

"Who is that she?" interrupted Elaine.

"She? The lady, of course. The dear dead Lady Panc Ashash, who has worked wonders after her own death, merely with the print of her personality on the machine. Who do you think told me what to do? Why did we wait for you to condition Joan to greatness? Why did the people way down in Clown Town keep on raising one D'joan after another, hoping that hope and a great wonder would occur?"

"You knew?" said Elaine. "You knew . . . before it happened?"

"Of course," said the Hunter, "not exactly, but more or less. She had had hundreds of years after death inside that computer. She had time for billions of thoughts. She saw how it would be if it had to be, and I—"

"Shut up, you people!" roared the Lord Femtiosex. "You are making the animals restless with your babble. Shut up, or I will stun you!"

Elaine fell silent.

The Lord Femtiosex glanced around at her, ashamed at having made his anger naked before another person. He added quietly:

"The trial is about to begin. The one that the tall Lady ordered."

## IX

You all know about the trial, so there is no need to linger over it. There is another picture of San Shigonanda, the one from his conventional period, which shows it very plainly.

The street had filled full of real people, crowding together to see something which would ease the boredom of perfection and time. They all had numbers or number-codes instead of names. They were handsome, well, dully happy. They even looked a great deal alike, similar in their handsomeness, their health, and their underlying boredom. Each of them had a total of four hundred years to live. None of them knew real war, even though the extreme readiness of the soldiers showed vain practice of hundreds of years. The people were beautiful, but they felt themselves useless, and they were quietly desperate without knowing it themselves. This is all clear from the

painting, and from the wonderful way that San Shigonanda has of forming them in informal ranks and letting the calm blue light of day shine down on their handsome, hopeless features.

With the underpeople, the artist performs real wonders.

Joan herself is bathed in light. Her light brown hair and her doggy brown eyes express softness and tenderness. He even conveys the idea that her new body is terribly new and strong, that she is virginal and ready to die, that she is a mere girl and yet completely fearless. The posture of love shows in her legs: she stands lightly. Love shows in her hands: they are turned outward toward the judges. Love shows in her smile: it is confident.

And the judges!

The artist has them, too. The Lord Femtiosex, calm again, his narrow sharp lips expressing perpetual rage against a universe which has grown too small for him. The Lord Limaono, wise, twice-reborn, sluggardly, but alert as a snake behind the sleepy eyes and the slow smile. The Lady Arabella Underwood, the tallest true-human present, with her Norstrilian pride and the arrogance of great wealth, along with the capricious tenderness of great wealth, showing in the way that she sat, judging her fellow judges instead of the prisoners. The Lady Goroke, bewildered at last, frowning at a play of fortune which she does not understand. The artist has it all.

And you have the real view-tapes, too, if you want to go to a museum. The reality is not as dramatic as the famous painting, but it has value of its own. The voice of Joan, dead these many centuries, is still strangely moving. It is the voice of a dog-carved-into-man, but it is also the voice of a great lady. The image of the Lady Panc Ashash must have taught her that, along with what she had learned from Elaine and Hunter in the antechamber above the Brown and Yellow Corridor of Englok.

The words of the trial, they too have survived. Many of them have become famous, all across the worlds.

Joan said, during inquiry, "But it is the duty of life to find more than life, and to exchange itself for that higher goodness."

Joan commented, upon sentence, "My body is your property, but my love is not. My love is my own, and I shall love you fiercely while you kill me."

When the soldiers had killed Charley-is-my-darling and were trying to hack off the head of the S-woman until one of them thought to freeze her into crystals, Joan said:

"Should we be strange to you, we animals of Earth that you have brought to the stars? We shared the same sun, the same oceans, the same sky. We are all from Manhome. How do you know that we would not have caught up with you if we had all stayed at home together? My people were dogs. They loved you before you made a woman-shaped thing out of my mother. Should I not love you still? The miracle is not that you have made people out of us. The miracle is that it took us so long to understand it. We are people now, and so are you. You will be sorry for what you are going to do to me, but remember that I shall love your sorrow, too, because great and good things will come out of it."

The Lord Limaono slyly asked, "What is a 'miracle'?"

And her words were, "There is knowledge from Earth which you have not yet found again. There is the name of the nameless one. There are secrets hidden in time from you. Only the dead and the unborn can know them right now: I am both."

The scene is familiar, and yet we will never understand it.

We know what the Lords Femtiosex and Limaono thought they were doing. They were maintaining established order and they were putting it on tape. The minds of men can live together only if the basic ideas are communicated. Nobody has, even now, found out a way of recording telepathy directly into an instrument. We get pieces and snatches and wild jumbles, but we never get a satisfactory record of what one of the great ones was transmitting to another. The two male chiefs were trying to put on record all those things about the episode which would teach careless people not to play with the lives of the underpeople. They were even trying to make underpeople understand the rules and designs by virtue of which they had been transformed from animals into

the highest servants of man. This would have been hard to do, given the bewildering events of the last few hours, even from one Chief of the Instrumentality to another; for the general public, it was almost impossible. The outpouring from the Brown and Yellow Corridor was wholly unexpected, even though the Lady Goroke had surprised D'joan; the mutiny of the robot police posed problems which would have to be discussed halfway across the galaxy. Furthermore, the dog-girl was making points which had some verbal validity. If they were left in the form of mere words without proper context, they might affect heedless or impressionable minds. A bad idea can spread like a mutated germ. If it is at all interesting, it can leap from one mind to another halfway across the universe before it has a stop put to it. Look at the ruinous fads and foolish fashions which have nuisanced mankind even in the ages of the highest orderliness. We today know that variety, flexibility, danger, and the seasoning of a little hate can make love and life bloom as they never bloomed before; we know it is better to live with the complications of thirteen thousand old languages resurrected from the dead ancient past than it is to live with the cold blind-alley perfection of the Old Common Tongue. We know a lot of things which the Lords Femtiosex and Limaono did not, and before we consider them stupid or cruel, we must remember that centuries passed before mankind finally came to grips with the problem of the underpeople and decided what "life" was within the limits of the human community.

Finally, we have the testimony of the two Lords themselves. They both lived to very advanced ages, and toward the end of their lives they were worried and annoyed to find that the episode of D'joan overshadowed all the bad things which had not happened during their long careers—bad things which they had labored to forestall for the protection of the planet Fomalhaut III—and they were distressed to see themselves portrayed as casual, cruel men when in fact they were nothing of the sort. If they had seen that the story of Joan on Fomalhaut III would get to be what it is today—one of the great romances of mankind, along with the story of C'mell or the romance of the lady who sailed *The Soul*—they would not only have been disappointed, but they would have been justifiably angry at the fickleness of mankind as well. Their roles are clear, because they made them clear. The Lord Femtiosex accepts the responsibility for the notion of fire; the Lord Limaono agrees that he concurred in the decision. Both of them, many years later, reviewed the tapes of the scene and agreed that something which the Lady Arabella Underwood had said or thought—

Something had made them do it.

But even with the tapes to refresh and clarify their memories, they could not say what.

We have even put computers on the job of cataloguing every word and every inflection of the whole trial, but they have not pinpointed the critical point either.

And the Lady Arabella—nobody ever questioned her. They didn't dare. She went back to her own planet of Old North Australia, surrounded by the immense treasure of the santaclara drug, and no planet is going to pay at the rate of two thousand million credits a day for the privilege of sending an investigator to talk to a lot of obstinate, simple, wealthy Norstrilian peasants who will not talk to offworlders anyhow. The Norstrilians charge that sum for the admission of any guest not selected by their own invitation; so we will never know what the Lady Arabella Underwood said or did after she went home. The Norstrilians said they did not wish to discuss the matter, and if we do not wish to go back to living a mere seventy years we had better not anger the only planet which produces stroon.

And the Lady Goroke—she, poor thing, went mad.

Mad, for a period of years.

People did not know it till later, but there was no word to be gotten out of her. She performed the odd actions which we now know to be a part of the dynasty of Lords Jestocost, who forced themselves by diligence and merit upon the Instrumentality for two hundred and more years. But on the case of Joan she had nothing to say.

The trial is therefore a scene about which we know everything—and nothing.

We think that we know the physical facts of the life of D'joan who became Joan. We know about the Lady Panc Ashash who whispered endlessly to the underpeople about a justice yet to

come. We know the whole life of the unfortunate Elaine and of her involvement with the case. We know that there were in those centuries, when underpeople first developed, many warrens in which illegal underpeople used their near-human wits, their animal cunning, and their gift of speech to survive even when mankind had declared them surplus. The Brown and Yellow Corridor was not by any means the only one of its kind. We even know what happened to the Hunter.

For the other underpeople—Charley-is-my-darling, Baby-baby, Mabel, the S-woman, Orson, and all the others—we have the tapes of the trial itself. They were not tried by anybody. They were put to death by the soldiers on the spot, as soon as it was plain that their testimony would not be needed. As witnesses, they could live a few minutes or an hour; as animals, they were already outside the regulations.

Ah, we know all about that now, and yet know nothing. Dying is simple, though we tend to hide it away. The *how* of dying is a minor scientific matter; the *when* of dying is a problem to each of us, whether he lives on the old-fashioned 400-year-life planets or on the radical new ones where the freedoms of disease and accident have been reintroduced; the *why* of it is still as shocking to us as it was to pre-atomic man, who used to cover farmland with the boxed bodies of his dead. These underpeople died as no animals had ever died before. Joyfully.

One mother held her children up for the soldier to kill them all.

She must have been of rat origin, because she had septuplets in closely matching form.

The tape shows us the picture of the soldier getting ready.

The rat-woman greets him with a smile and holds up her seven babies. Little blondes they are, wearing pink or blue bonnets, all of them with glowing cheeks and bright little eyes.

"Put them on the ground," said the soldier. "I'm going to kill you and them too." On the tape, we can hear the nervous peremptory edge of his voice. He added one word, as though he had already begun to think that he had to justify himself to these underpeople. "Orders," he added.

"It doesn't matter if I hold them, soldier. I'm their mother. They'll feel better if they die easily with their mother near. I love you, soldier. I love all people. You are my brother, even though my blood is rat blood and yours is human. Go ahead and kill them, soldier. I can't even hurt you. Can't you understand it? *I love you, soldier.* We share a common speech, common hopes, common fears, and a common death. That is what Joan has taught us all. Death is not bad, soldier. It just comes badly, sometimes, but you will remember me after you have killed me and my babies. You will remember that I love you now—"

The soldier, we see on the tape, can stand it no longer. He clubs his weapon, knocks the woman down; the babies scatter on the ground. We see his booted heel rise up and crush down against their heads. We hear the wet popping sound of the little heads breaking, the sharp cut-off of the baby wails as they die. We get one last view of the rat-woman herself. She has stood up again by the time the seventh baby is killed. She offers her hand to the soldier to shake. Her face is dirty and bruised, a trickle of blood running down her left cheek. Even now, we know she is a rat, an underperson, a modified animal, a nothing. And yet we, even we across the centuries, feel that she has somehow become more of a person than we are—that she dies human and fulfilled. We know that she has triumphed over death: we have not.

We see the soldier looking straight at her with eerie horror, as though her simple love were some unfathomable device from an alien source.

We hear her next words on the tape:

"Soldier, I love all of you—"

His weapon could have killed her in a fraction of a second, if he had used it properly. But he didn't. He clubbed it and hit her, as though his heat-remover had been a wooden club and himself a wild man instead of part of the elite guard of Kalma.

We know what happens then.

She falls under his blows. She points. Points straight at Joan, wrapped in fire and smoke.

The rat-woman screams one last time, screams into the lens of the robot camera as though she were talking not to the soldier but to all mankind:

"You can't kill *her*. You can't kill love. I love you, soldier, love you. You can't kill *that*. Remember—"

His last blow catches her in the face.

She falls back on the pavement. He thrusts his foot, as we can see by the tape, directly on her throat. He leaps forward in an odd little jig, bringing his full weight down on her fragile neck. He swings while stamping downward, and we then see his face, full on in the camera.

It is the face of a weeping child, bewildered by hurt and shocked by the prospect of more hurt to come.

He had started to do his duty, and duty had gone wrong, all wrong.

Poor man. He must have been one of the first men in the new world who tried to use weapons against love. Love is a sour and powerful ingredient to meet in the excitement of battle.

All the underpeople died that way. Most of them died smiling, saying the word "love" or the name "Joan."

The bear-man Orson had been kept to the very end.

He died very oddly. He died laughing.

The soldier lifted his pellet-thrower and aimed it straight at Orson's forehead. The pellets were 22 millimeters in diameter and had a muzzle velocity of only 125 meters per second. In that manner, they could stop recalcitrant robots or evil underpeople, without any risk of penetrating buildings and hurting the true people who might be inside, out of sight.

Orson looks, on the tape the robots made, as though he knows perfectly well what the weapon is. (He probably did. Underpeople used to live with the danger of a violent death hanging over them from birth until removal.) He shows no fear of it, in the pictures we have; he begins to laugh. His laughter is warm, generous, relaxed—like the friendly laughter of a happy foster-father who has found a guilty and embarrassed child, knowing full well that the child expects punishment but will not get it.

"Shoot, man. You can't kill me, man. I'm in your mind. I love you. Joan taught us. Listen, man. There is no death. Not for love. Ho, ho, ho, poor fellow, don't be afraid of me. Shoot! You're the unlucky one. You're going to live. And remember. And remember. And remember. I've made you human, fellow."

The soldier croaks, "What did you say?"

"I'm saving you, man. I'm turning you into a real human being. With the power of Joan. The power of love. Poor guy! Go ahead and shoot me if it makes you uncomfortable to wait. You'll do it anyhow."

This time we do not see the soldier's face but the tightness of his back and neck betray his own internal stress.

We see the big broad bear face blossom forth in an immense splash of red as the soft heavy pellets plow into it.

Then the camera turns to something else.

A little boy, probably a fox, but very finished in his human shape.

He was bigger than a baby, but not big enough, like the larger underchildren, to have understood the deathless importance of Joan's teaching.

He was the only one of the group who behaved like an ordinary underperson. He broke and ran.

He was clever: He ran among the spectators, so that the soldier could not use pellets or heat-reducers on him without hurting an actual human being. He ran and jumped and dodged, fighting passively but desperately for his life.

At last one of the spectators—a tall man with a silver hat—tripped him up. The fox-boy fell to the pavement, skinning his palms and knees. Just as he looked up to see who might be coming at him, a bullet caught him neatly in the head. He fell a little way forward, dead.

People die. We know how they die. We have seen them die shy and quiet in the Dying Houses. We have seen others go into the 400-year-rooms, which have no door knobs and no cameras on the inside. We have seen pictures of many dying in natural disasters, where the robot crews took picture-tapes for the record and the investigation later on. Death is not uncommon, and it is very unpleasant.

But this time, death itself was different. All the fear of death—except for the one little fox-boy, too young to understand and too old to wait for death in his mother's arms—had gone out of the underpeople. They met death willingly, with love and calmness in their bodies, their voices, their demeanor. It did not matter whether they lived long enough to know what happened to Joan herself: they had perfect confidence in her, anyway.

This indeed was the new weapon, love and the good death.

Crawlie, with her pride, had missed it all.

The investigators later found the body of Crawlie in the corridor. It was possible to reconstruct who she had been and what had happened to her. The computer in which the bodiless image of the Lady Panc Ashash survived for a few days after the trial was, of course, found and disassembled. Nobody thought at the time to get her opinions and last words. A lot of historians have gnashed their teeth over that.

The details are therefore clear. The archives even preserve the long interrogation and responses concerning Elaine, when she was processed and made clear after the trial. But we do not know how the idea of "fire" came in.

Somewhere, beyond sight of the tape-scanner, the word must have been passed between the four chiefs of the Instrumentality who were conducting the trial. There is the protest of the Chief of Birds (Robot), or police chief of Kalma, a Subchief named Fisi.

The records show his appearance. He comes in at the right side of the scene, bows respectfully to the four Chiefs, and lifts his right hand in the traditional sign for "beg to interrupt," an odd twist of the elevated hand which the actors had found it very difficult to copy when they tried to put the whole story of Joan and Elaine into a single drama. (In fact, he had no more idea that future ages would be studying his casual appearance than did the others. The whole episode was characterized by haste and precipitateness, in the light of what we now know.) The Lord Limaono says:

"Interruption refused. We are making a decision."

The Chief of Birds spoke up anyhow.

"My words are for your decision, my Lords and my Ladies."

"Say it, then," commanded the Lady Goroke, "but be brief."

"Shut down the viewers. Destroy that animal. Brainwash the spectators. Get amnesia yourselves, for this one hour. This whole scene is dangerous. I am nothing but a supervisor of ornithopters, keeping perfect order, but I—"

"We have heard enough," said the Lord Femtiosex. "You manage your birds and we'll run the worlds. How do you dare to think 'like a Chief'? We have responsibilities which you can't even guess at. Stand back."

Fisi, in the pictures, stands back, his face sullen. In that particular frame of scenes, one can see some of the spectators going away. It was time for lunch and they had become hungry; they had no idea that they were going to miss the greatest atrocity in history, about which a thousand and more grand operas would be written.

Femtiosex then moved to the climax. "More knowledge, not less, is the answer to this problem. I have heard about something which is not as bad as the Planet Shayol, but which can do just as well for an exhibit on a civilized world. You there," said he to Fisi, the Chief of Birds, "bring oil and a spray. Immediately."

Joan looked at him with compassion and longing, but she said nothing. She suspected what he was going to do. As a girl, as a dog, she hated it; as a revolutionary, she welcomed it as the consummation of her mission.

The Lord Femtiosex lifted his right hand. He curled the ring finger and the little finger, putting his thumb over them. That left the first two fingers extended straight out. At that time, the sign from one Chief to another, meaning, "private channels, telepathic, immediate." It has since been adopted by underpeople as their emblem for political unity.

The four Chiefs went into a trancelike state and shared the judgment.

Joan began to sing in a soft, protesting, doglike wail, using the off-key plainsong which the underpeople had sung just before their hour of decision when they left the Brown and Yellow Corridor. Her words were nothing special, repetitions of the "people, dear people, I love you" which she had been communicating ever since she came to the surface of Kalma. But the way she did it has defied imitation across the centuries. There are thousands of lyrics and melodies which call themselves, one way and another, *The Song of Joan*, but none of them come near to the heart-wrenching pathos of the original tapes. The singing, like her own personality, was unique.

The appeal was deep. Even the real people tried to listen, shifting their eyes from the four immobile Chiefs of the Instrumentality to the brown-eyed singing girl. Some of them just could not stand it. In true human fashion, they forgot why they were there and went absent-mindedly home to lunch.

Suddenly Joan stopped.

Her voice ringing clearly across the crowd, she cried out:

"The end is near, dear people. The end is near."

Eyes all shifted to the two Lords and the two Ladies of the Instrumentality. The Lady Arabella Underwood looked grim after the telepathic conference. The Lady Goroke was haggard with wordless grief. The two Lords looked severe and resolved.

It was the Lord Femtiosex who spoke.

"We have tried you, animal. Your offense is great. You have lived illegally. For that the penalty is death. You have interfered with robots in some manner which we do not understand. For that brand-new crime, the penalty should be more than death; and I have recommended a punishment which was applied on a planet of the Violet Star. You have also said many unlawful and improper things, detracting from the happiness and security of mankind. For that the penalty is re-education, but since you have two death sentences already, this does not matter. Do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence?"

"If you light a fire today, my Lord, it will never be put out in the hearts of men. You can destroy me. You can reject my love. You cannot destroy the goodness in yourselves, no matter how much goodness may anger you—"

"Shut up!" he roared. "I asked for a plea, not a speech. You will die by fire, here and now. What do you say to that?"

"I love you, dear people."

Femtiosex nodded to the men of the Chief of Birds, who had dragged a barrel and a spray into the street in front of Joan.

"Tie her to that post," he commanded. "Spray her. Light her. Are the tape-makers in focus? We want this to be recorded and known. If the underpeople try this again, they will see that mankind controls the worlds." He looked at Joan and his eyes seemed to go out of focus. In an unaccustomed voice he said, "I am not a bad man, little dog-girl, but you are a bad animal and we must make an example of you. Do you understand that?"

"Femtiosex," she cried, leaving out his title, "I am very sorry for you. I love you too."

With these words of hers, his face became clouded and angry again. He brought his right hand down in a chopping gesture.

Fisi copied the gesture and the men operating the barrel and spray began to squirt a hissing stream of oil on Joan. Two guards had already chained her to the lamp post, using an improvised chain of handcuffs to make sure that she stood upright and remained in plain sight of the crowd.

"Fire," said Femtiosex.



Elaine felt the Hunter's body, beside her, cramp sharply. He seemed to strain intensely. For herself, she felt the way she had felt when she was defrozen and taken out of the adiabatic pod in which she had made the trip from Earth—sick to her stomach, confused in her mind, emotions rocking back and forth inside her.

Hunter whispered to her, "I tried to reach her mind so that she would die easy. Somebody else got there first. I . . . don't know who it is."

Elaine stared.

The fire was being brought. Suddenly it touched the oil and Joan flamed up like a human torch.

## X

The burning of D'joan at Fomalhaut took very little time, but the ages will not forget it.

Femtiosex had taken the cruelest step of all.

By telepathic invasion he had suppressed her human mind, so that only the primitive canine remained.

Joan did not stand still like a martyred queen.

She struggled against the flames which licked her and climbed her. She howled and shrieked like a dog in pain, like an animal whose brain—good though it is—cannot comprehend the senselessness of human cruelty.

The result was directly contrary to what the Lord Femtiosex had planned.

The crowd of people stirred forward, not with curiosity but because of compassion. They had avoided the broad areas of the street on which the dead underpeople lay as they had been killed, some pooled in their own blood, some broken by the hands of robots, some reduced to piles of frozen crystal. They walked over the dead to watch the dying, but their watching was not the witless boredom of people who never see a spectacle; it was the movement of living things, instinctive and deep, toward the sight of another living thing in a position of danger and ruin.

Even the guard who had held Elaine and Hunter by gripping Hunter's arm—even he moved forward a few unthinking steps. Elaine found herself in the first row of the spectators, the acrid, unfamiliar smell of burning oil making her nose twitch, the howls of the dying dog-girl tearing through her eardrums into her brain. Joan was turning and twisting in the fire now, trying to avoid the flames which wrapped her tighter than clothing. The odor of something sickening and strange reached the crowd. Few of them had ever smelled the stink of burning meat before.

Joan gasped.

In the ensuing seconds of silence, Elaine heard something she had never expected to hear before—the weeping of grown human beings. Men and women stood there sobbing and not knowing why they sobbed.

Femtiosex loomed over the crowd, obsessed by the failure of his demonstration. He did not know that the Hunter, with a thousand kills behind him, was committing the legal outrage of peeping the mind of a Chief of the Instrumentality.

The Hunter whispered to Elaine, "In a minute I'll try it. She deserves something better than that . . ."

Elaine did not ask what. She too was weeping.

The whole crowd became aware that a soldier was calling. It took them several seconds to look away from the burning, dying Joan.

The soldier was an ordinary one. Perhaps he was the one who had been unable to tie Joan with bonds a few minutes ago, when the Lords decreed that she be taken into custody.

He was shouting now, shouting frantically and wildly, shaking his fist at the Lord Femtiosex.

"You're a liar, you're a coward, you're a fool, and I challenge you—"

The Lord Femtiosex became aware of the man and of what he was yelling. He came out of his deep concentration and said, mildly for so wild a time:

"What do you mean?"

"This is a crazy show. There is no girl here. No fire. Nothing. You are hallucinating the whole lot of us for some horrible reason of your own, and I'm challenging you for it, you animal, you fool, you coward."

In normal times even a Lord had to accept a challenge or adjust the matter with clear talk.

This was no normal time.

The Lord Femtiosex said, "All this is real. I deceive no one."

"If it's real, Joan, I'm with you!" shrieked the young soldier. He jumped in front of the jet of oil before the other soldiers could turn it off and then he leapt into the fire beside Joan.

Her hair had burned away but her features were still clear. She had stopped the doglike whining shriek. Femtiosex had been interrupted. She gave the soldier, who had begun to burn as he stood voluntarily beside her, the gentlest and most feminine of smiles. Then she frowned, as though there were something which she should remember to do, despite the pain and terror which surrounded her.

"Now!" whispered the Hunter. He began to hunt the Lord Femtiosex as sharply as he had ever sought the alien, native minds of Fomalhaut III.

The crowd could not tell what had happened to the Lord Femtiosex. Had he turned coward? Had he gone mad? (Actually, the Hunter, by using every gram of the power of his mind, had momentarily taken Femtiosex courting in the skies; he and Femtiosex were both male birdlike beasts, singing wildly for the beautiful female who lay hidden in the landscape far, far below.)

Joan was free, and she knew she was free.

She sent out her message. It knocked both Hunter and Femtiosex out of thinking; it flooded Elaine; it made even Fisi, the Chief of Birds, breathe quietly. She called so loudly that within the hour messages were pouring in from the other cities to Kalma, asking what had happened. She thought a single message, not words. But in words it came to this:

"Loved ones, you kill me. This is my fate. I bring love, and love must die to live on. Love asks nothing, does nothing. Love thinks nothing. Love is knowing yourself and knowing all other people and things. Know—and rejoice. I die for all of you now, dear ones—"

She opened her eyes for a last time, opened her mouth, sucked in the raw flame, and slumped forward. The soldier, who had kept his nerve while his clothing and body burned, ran out of the fire, afire himself, toward his squad. A shot stopped him and he pitched flat forward.

The weeping of the people was audible throughout the streets. Underpeople, tame and licensed ones, stood shamelessly among them and wept too.

The Lord Femtiosex turned wearily back to his colleagues.

The face of Lady Goroke was a sculptured, frozen caricature of sorrow.

He turned to the Lady Arabella Underwood. "I seem to have done something wrong, my Lady. Take over, please."

The Lady Arabella stood up. She called to Fisi, "Put out that fire."

She looked out over the crowd. Her hard, honest Norstrilian features were unreadable. Elaine, watching her, shivered at the thought of a whole planet full of people as tough, obstinate, and clever as these.

"It's over," said the Lady Arabella. "People, go away. Robots, clean up. Underpeople, to your jobs."

She looked at Elaine and the Hunter. "I know who you are and I suspect what you have been doing. Soldiers, take them away."

The body of Joan was fire-blackened. The face did not look particularly human anymore; the last burst of fire had caught her in the nose and eyes. Her young, girlish breasts showed with heart-wrenching immodesty that she had been young and female once. Now she was dead, just dead.

The soldiers would have shoveled her into a box if she had been an underperson. Instead, they paid her the honors of war that they would have given to one of their own comrades or to an

important civilian in time of disaster. They unslung a litter, put the little blackened body on it, and covered the body with their own flag. No one had told them to do so.

As their own soldier led them up the road toward the Waterrock, where the houses and offices of the military were located, Elaine saw that he too had been crying.

She started to ask him what he thought of it, but Hunter stopped her with a shake of the head. He later told her that the soldier might be punished for talking with them.

When they got to the office, they found the Lady Goroke already there.

The Lady Goroke already there . . . It became a nightmare in the weeks that followed. She had gotten over her grief and was conducting an inquiry into the case of Elaine and D'Joan.

The Lady Goroke already there . . . She was waiting when they slept. Her image, or perhaps herself, sat in on all the endless interrogations. She was particularly interested in the chance meeting of the dead Lady Panc Ashash, the misplaced witch Elaine, and the non-adjusted man, the Hunter.

The Lady Goroke already there . . . She asked them everything, but she told them nothing.

Except for once.

Once she burst out, violently personal after endless hours of formal, official work, "Your minds will be cleansed when we get through, so it wouldn't matter how much else you know. Do you know that this has hurt me—me!—all the way to the depths of everything I believe in?"

They shook their heads.

"I'm going to have a child, and I'm going back to Manhome to have it. And I'm going to do the genetic coding myself. I'm going to call him Jestocost. That's one of the Ancient Tongues, the Paroskii one, for 'cruelty,' to remind him where he comes from, and why. And he, or his son, or *his* son will bring justice back into the world and solve the puzzle of the underpeople. What do you think of that? On second thought, don't think. It's none of your business, and I am going to do it anyway."

They stared at her sympathetically, but they were too wound up in the problems of their own survival to extend her much sympathy or advice. The body of Joan had been pulverized and blown into the air, because the Lady Goroke was afraid that the underpeople would make a *goodplace* out of it; she felt that way herself, and she knew that if she herself were tempted, the underpeople would be even more tempted.

Elaine never knew what happened to the bodies of all the other people who had turned themselves, under Joan's leadership, from animals into mankind, and who had followed the wild, foolish march out of the Tunnel of Englok into the Upper City of Kalma. Was it really wild? Was it really foolish? If they had stayed where they were, they might have had a few days or months or years of life, but sooner or later the robots would have found them and they would have been exterminated like the vermin which they were. Perhaps the death they had chosen was better. Joan *did* say, "It's the mission of life always to look for something better than itself, and then to try to trade life itself for meaning."

At last, the Lady Goroke called them in and said, "Goodbye, you two. It's foolish, saying goodbye, when an hour from now you will remember neither me nor Joan. You've finished your work here. I've set up a lovely job for you. You won't have to live in a city. You will be weather-watchers, roaming the hills and watching for all the little changes which the machines can't interpret fast enough. You will have whole lifetimes of marching and picnicking and camping together. I've told the technicians to be very careful, because you two are very much in love with each other. When they re-route your synapses, I want that love to be there with you."

They each knelt and kissed her hand. They never wittingly saw her again. In later years they sometimes saw a fashionable ornithopter soaring gently over their camp, with an elegant woman peering out of the side of it; they had no memories to know that it was the Lady Goroke, recovered from madness, watching over them.

Their new life was their final life.

Of Joan and the Brown and Yellow Corridor, nothing remained.

They were both very sympathetic toward animals, but they might have been this way even if they had never shared in the wild political gamble of the dear dead Lady Panc Ashash.

One time a strange thing happened. An underman from an elephant was working in a small valley, creating an exquisite rock garden for some important official of the Instrumentality who might later glimpse the garden once or twice a year. Elaine was busy watching the weather, and the Hunter had forgotten that he had ever hunted, so that neither of them tried to peep the underman's mind. He was a huge fellow, right at the maximum permissible size—five times the gross stature of a man. He had smiled at them friendlily in the past.

One evening he brought them fruit. Such fruit! Rare off-world items which a year of requests would not have obtained for ordinary people like them. He smiled his big, shy elephant smile, put the fruit down, and prepared to lumber off.

"Wait a minute," cried Elaine. "Why are you giving us this? Why us?"

"For the sake of Joan," said the elephant-man.

"Who's Joan?" said the Hunter.

The elephant-man looked sympathetically at them. "That's all right. You don't remember her, but I do."

"But what did Joan do?" said Elaine.

"She loved you. She loved us all," said the elephant-man. He turned quickly, so as to say no more. With incredible deftness for so heavy a person, he climbed speedily into the fierce lovely rocks above them and was gone.

"I wish we had known her," said Elaine. "She sounds very nice."

In that year there was born the man who was to be the first Lord Jestocost.

# Under Old Earth

*This was the last story Smith wrote, and perhaps the strangest. No reference is made to the Douglas-Ouyang planets elsewhere in the Smith canon, and it is hard to judge which events are "real" and which "legendary" in this tale that explores one of the roots of the Rediscovery of Man. Sto Odin, by the way, is Russian for "One Hundred One."*

*I need a temporary dog  
For a temporary job  
On a temporary place  
Like Earth!*

—Song from *The Merchant of Menace*

## I

There were the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which circled their sun in a single cluster, riding around and around the same orbit unlike any other planets known. There were the gentlemen-suicides back on Earth, who gambled their lives—even more horribly, gambled sometimes for things worse than their lives—against different kinds of geophysics which real men had never experienced. There were girls who fell in love with such men, however stark and dreadful their personal fates might be. There was the Instrumentality, with its unceasing labor to keep man man. And there were the citizens who walked in the boulevards before the Rediscovery of Man. The citizens were happy. They had to be happy. If they were found sad, they were calmed and drugged and changed until they were happy again.

This story concerns three of them: the gambler who took the name Sun-boy, who dared to go down to the Gebiet, who confronted himself before he died; the girl Santuna, who was fulfilled in a thousand ways before she died; and the Lord Sto Odin, a most ancient of days, who knew it all and never dreamed of preventing any of it.

Music runs through this story. The soft sweet music of the Earth Government and the Instrumentality, bland as honey and sickening in the end. The wild illegal pulsations of the Gebiet, where most men were forbidden to enter. Worst of all, the crazy fugues and improper melodies of the Bezirk, closed to men for fifty-seven centuries—opened by accident, found, trespassed in! And with it our story begins.

## II

The Lady Ru had said, a few centuries before: "Scraps of knowledge have been found. In the ultimate beginning of man, even before there were aircraft, the wise man Laodz declared, 'Water does nothing but it penetrates everything. Inaction finds the road.' Later an ancient Lord said this: 'There is a music which underlies all things. We dance to the tunes all our lives, though our living

ears never hear the music which guides us and moves us. Happiness can kill people as softly as shadows seen in dreams.' We must be people first and happy later, lest we live and die in vain."

The Lord Sto Odin was more direct. He declared the truth to a few private friends: "Our population is dropping on most worlds, including the Earth. People have children, but they don't want them very much. I myself have been a three-father to twelve children, a two-father to four, and a one-father, I suppose, to many others. I have had zeal for work and I have mistaken it for zeal in living. They are not the same.

"Most people want happiness. Good: we have given them happiness.

"Dreary useless centuries of happiness, in which all the unhappy were corrected or adjusted or killed. Unbearable desolate happiness without the sting of grief, the wine of rage, the hot fumes of fear. How many of us have ever tasted the acid, icy taste of old resentment? That's what people really lived for in the Ancient Days, when they pretended to be happy and were actually alive with grief, rage, fury, hate, malice, and hope! Those people bred like mad. They populated the stars while they dreamed of killing each other, secretly or openly. Their plays concerned murder or betrayal or illegal love. Now we have no murder. We cannot imagine any kind of love which is illegal. Can you imagine the Murkins with their highway net? Who can fly anywhere today without seeing that net of enormous highways? Those roads are ruined, but they're still here. You can see the abominable things quite clearly from the moon. Don't think about the roads. Think of the millions of vehicles that ran on those roads, the people filled with greed and rage and hate, rushing past each other with their engines on fire. They say that fifty thousand a year were killed on the roads alone. We would call that a war. What people they must have been, to rush day and night and to build things which would help other people to rush even more! They were different from us. They must have been wild, dirty, free. Lusting for life, perhaps, in a way that we do not. We can easily go a thousand times faster than they ever went, but who, nowadays, bothers to go? Why go? It's the same there as here, except for a few fighters or technicians." He smiled at his friends and added, ". . . and Lords of the Instrumentality, like ourselves. We go for the reasons of the Instrumentality. Not ordinary people reasons. Ordinary people don't have much reason to do anything. They work at the jobs which we think up for them, to keep them happy while the robots and the underpeople do the real work. They walk. They make love. But they are never unhappy.

"*They can't be!*"

The Lady Mmona disagreed. "Life can't be as bad as you say. We don't just think they are happy. We *know* they are happy. We look right into their brains with telepathy. We monitor their emotional patterns with robots and scanners. It's not as though we didn't have samples. People are always turning unhappy. We're correcting them all the time. And now and then there are bad accidents, which even we cannot correct. When people are very unhappy, they scream and weep. Sometimes they even stop talking and just die, despite everything we can do for them. You can't say that isn't real!"

"But I do," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"You do what?" cried Mmona.

"I do say this happiness is not real," he insisted.

"How can you," she shouted at him, "in the face of the evidence? *Our* evidence, which we of the Instrumentality decided on a long time ago. We collect it ourselves. Can we, the Instrumentality, be wrong?"

"Yes," said the Lord Sto Odin.

This time it was the entire circle who went silent.

Sto Odin pleaded with them. "Look at *my* evidence. People don't care whether they are one-fathers or one-mothers or not. They don't know which children are theirs, anyhow. Nobody dares to commit suicide. We keep them too happy. But do we spend any time keeping the talking animals, the underpeople, as happy as men? And do underpeople commit suicide?"

"Certainly," said Mmona. "They are preconditioned to commit suicide if they are hurt too badly for easy repair or if they fail in their appointed work."

"I don't mean that. Do they ever commit suicide for *their* reasons, not ours?"

"No," said the Lord Nuru-or, a wise young Lord of the Instrumentality. "They are too desperately busy doing their jobs and staying alive."

"How long does an underperson live?" said Sto Odin, with deceptive mildness.

"Who knows?" said Nuru-or. "Half a year, a hundred years, maybe several hundred years."

"What happens if he does not work?" said the Lord Sto Odin, with a friendly-crafty smile.

"We kill him," said Mmona, "or our robot-police do."

"And does the animal know it?"

"Know he will be killed if he does not work?" said Mmona. "Of course. We tell all of them the same thing. Work or die. What's that got to do with people?"

The Lord Nuru-or had fallen silent and a wise, sad smile had begun to show on his face. He had begun to suspect the shrewd, dreadful conclusion toward which the Lord Sto Odin was driving.

But Mmona did not see it and she pressed the point. "My Lord," said she, "you are insisting that people are happy. You admit they do not like to be unhappy. You seem to want to bring up a problem which has no solution. Why complain of happiness? Isn't it the best which the Instrumentality can do for mankind? That's our mission. Are you saying that we are failing in it?"

"Yes. We are failing." The Lord Sto Odin looked blindly at the room as though alone.

He was the oldest and wisest, so they waited for him to talk.

He breathed lightly and smiled at them again. "You know when I am going to die?"

"Of course," said Mmona, thinking for half a second. "Seventy-seven days from now. But you posted the time yourself. And it is not our custom, my Lord, as you well know, to bring intimate things into meetings of the Instrumentality."

"Sorry," said Sto Odin, "but I'm not violating a law. I'm making a point. We are sworn to uphold the dignity of man. Yet we are killing mankind with a bland hopeless happiness which has prohibited news, which has suppressed religion, which has made all history an official secret. I say that the evidence is that we are failing and that mankind, whom we've sworn to cherish, is failing too. Failing in vitality, strength, numbers, energy. I have a little while to live. I am going to try to find out."

The Lord Nuru-or asked with sorrowful wisdom, as though he guessed the answer: "And where will you go to find out?"

"I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin, "down into the Gebiet."

"The Gebiet—oh, no!" cried several. And one voice added, "You're immune."

"I shall waive immunity and I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Who can do anything to a man who is already almost a thousand years old and who has chosen only seventy-seven more days to live?"

"But you can't!" said Mmona. "Some criminal might capture you and duplicate you, and then we would all of us be in peril."

"When did you last hear of a criminal among mankind?" said Sto Odin.

"There are plenty of them, here and there in the offworlds."

"But on Old Earth itself?" asked Sto Odin.

She stammered. "I don't know. There must have been a criminal once." She looked around the room. "Don't any of the rest of you know?"

There was silence.

The Lord Sto Odin stared at them all. In his eyes was the brightness and fierceness which had made whole generations of lords plead with him to live just a few more years, so that he could help them with their work. He had agreed, but within the last quarter-year he had overridden them all and had picked his day of death. He had lost none of his powers in doing this. They shrank from his stare while they waited with respect for his decision.

The Lord Sto Odin looked at the Lord Nuru-or and said, "I think you have guessed what I am going to do in the Gebiet and why I have to go there."

"The Gebiet is a preserve where no rules apply and no punishments are inflicted. Ordinary people can do what *they* want down there, not what we think they should want. From all I hear, it is pretty nasty and pointless, the things that they find out. But you, perhaps, may sense the inwardness of these things. You may find a cure for the weary happiness of mankind."

"That is right," said Sto Odin. "And that is why I am going, after I make the appropriate official preparations."

### III

Go he did. He used one of the most peculiar conveyances ever seen on Earth, since his own legs were too weak to carry him far. With only two-ninths of a year to live, he did not want to waste time getting his legs regrafted.

He rode in an open sedan-chair carried by two Roman legionaries.

The legionaries were actually robots, without a trace of blood or living tissue in them. They were the most compact and difficult kind to create, since their brains had to be located in their chests—several million sheets of incredibly fine laminations, imprinted with the whole life experience of an important, useful, and long-dead person. They were clothed as legionaries, down to cuirasses, swords, kilts, greaves, sandals, and shields, merely because it was the whim of the Lord Sto Odin to go behind the rim of history for his companions. Their bodies, all metal, were very strong. They could batter walls, jump chasms, crush any man or underperson with their mere fingers, or throw their swords with the accuracy of guided projectiles.

The forward legionary, Flavius, had been head of Fourteen-B in the Instrumentality—an espionage division so secret that even among Lords, few knew exactly of its location or its function. He was (or had been, till he was imprinted on a robot-mind as he lay dying) the director of historical research for the whole human race. Now he was a dull, pleasant machine carrying two poles until his master chose to bring his powerful mind into bright, furious alert by speaking the simple Latin phrase, understood by no other person living, *Summa nulla est*.

The rear legionary, Livius, had been a psychiatrist who turned into a general. He had won many battles until he chose to die, somewhat before his time, because he perceived that battle itself was a struggle for the defeat of himself.

Together, and added to the immense brainpower of the Lord Sto Odin himself, they represented an unsurpassable team.

"The Gebiet," commanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"The Gebiet," said both of them heavily, picking up the chair with its supporting poles.

"And then the Bezirk," he added.

"The Bezirk," they chimed in toneless voices.

Sto Odin felt his chair tilt back as Livius put his two ends of the poles carefully on the ground, came up beside Sto Odin, and saluted with open palm.

"May I awaken?" said Livius in an even, mechanical voice.

"*Summa nulla est*," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Livius's face sprang into full animation. "You must not go there, my Lord! You would have to waive immunity and meet all dangers. There is nothing there yet. Not yet. Some day they will come pouring out of that underground Hades and give you men a real fight. Now, no. They are just miserable beings, cooking away in their weird unhappiness, making love in manners which you never thought of—"

"Never mind what you think I've thought. What's your objection in real terms?"

"It's pointless, my Lord! You have only bits of a year to live. Do something noble and great for man before you die. They may turn us off. We would like to share your work before you go away."



"Is that all?" said Sto Odin.

"My Lord," said Flavius, "you have awakened me too. I say, go forward. History is being respun down there. Things are loose which you great ones of the Instrumentality have never even suspected. Go now and look, before you die. You may do nothing, but I disagree with my companion. It is as dangerous as Space<sup>3</sup> might be, if we ever were to find it, but it is *interesting*. And in this world where all things have been done, where all thoughts have been thought, it is hard to find things which still prompt the human mind with raw curiosity. I'm dead, as you perfectly well know, but even I, inside this machine brain, feel the tug of adventure, the pull of danger, the magnetism of the unknown. For one thing, they are committing crimes down there. And you Lords are overlooking them."

"We chose to overlook them. We are not stupid. We wanted to see what might happen," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and we have to give those people time before we find out just how far they might go if they are cut off from controls."

"They are having babies!" said Flavius excitedly.

"I know that."

"They have hooked in two illegal instant-message machines," shouted Flavius.

Sto Odin was calm. "So that's why the Earth's credit structure has appeared to be leaking in its balance of trade."

"They have a piece of the congohelium!" shouted Flavius.

"The congohelium!" shouted the Lord Sto Odin. "Impossible! It's unstable. They could kill themselves. They could hurt Earth! What are they doing with it?"

"Making music," said Flavius, more quietly.

"Making *what*?"

"Music. Songs. Nice noise to dance to."

The Lord Sto Odin sputtered. "Take me there right now. This is ridiculous. Having a piece of the congohelium down there is as bad as wiping out inhabited planets to play checkers."

"My Lord," said Livius.

"Yes?" said Sto Odin.

"I withdraw my objections," said Livius.

Sto Odin said, very dryly, "Thank you."

"They have something else down there. When I did not want you to go, I did not mention it. It might have aroused your curiosity. They have a god."

The Lord Sto Odin said, "If this is going to be a historical lecture, save it for another time. Go back to sleep and carry me down."

Livius did not move. "I mean what I said."

"A god? What do you call a god?"

"A person or an idea capable of starting wholly new cultural patterns in motion."

The Lord Sto Odin leaned forward. "You *know* this?"

"We both do," said Flavius and Livius.

"We saw him," said Livius. "You told us, a tenth-year ago, to walk around freely for thirty hours, so we put on ordinary robot bodies and happened to get into the Gebiet. When we sensed the congohelium operating, we had to go on down to find out what it was doing. Usually, it is employed to keep the stars in their place—"

"Don't tell me that. I know it. Was it a man?"

"A man," said Flavius, "who is re-living the life of Akhnaton."

"Who's that?" said the Lord Sto Odin, who knew history, but wanted to see how much his robots knew.

"A king, tall, long-faced, thick-lipped, who ruled the human world of Egypt long, long before atomic power. Akhnaton invented the best of the early gods. This man is re-enacting Akhnaton's life

step by step. He has already made a religion out of the sun. He mocks at happiness. People listen to him. They joke about the Instrumentality."

Livius added, "We saw the girl who loves him. She herself was young, but beautiful. And I think she has powers which will make the Instrumentality promote her or destroy her some day in the future."

"They both made music," said Flavius, "with that piece of the congohelium. And this man or god—this new kind of Akhnaton, whatever you may want to call him, my Lord—he was dancing a strange kind of dance. It was like a corpse being tied with rope and dancing like a marionette. The effect on the people around him was as good as the best hypnotism you ever saw. I'm a robot now, but it bothered even me."

"Did the dance have a name?" said Sto Odin.

"I don't know the name," said Flavius, "but I memorized the song, since I have total recall. Do you wish to hear it?"

"Certainly," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius stood on one leg, threw his arms out at weird, improbable angles, and began to sing in a high, insulting tenor voice which was both fascinating and repugnant:

*Jump, dear people, and I'll howl for you.  
Jump and howl and I'll weep for you.  
I weep because I'm a weeping man.  
I'm a weeping man because I weep.  
I weep because the day is done,  
Sun is gone,  
Home is lost,  
Time killed dad.  
I killed time.  
World is round.  
Day is run,  
Clouds are shot,  
Stars are out,  
Mountain's fire,  
Rain is hot,  
Hot is blue.  
I am done.  
So are you.  
Jump, dear people, for the howling man.  
Leap, dear people, for the weeping man.  
I'm a weeping man because I weep for you!*

"Enough," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius saluted. His face went back to amiable stolidity. Just before he took the front ends of the shaft he glanced back and brought forth one last comment:

"The verse is skeltonic."

"Tell me nothing more of your history. Take me there."

The robots obeyed. Soon the chair was jogging comfortably down the ramps of the ancient left-over city which sprawled beneath Earthport, that miraculous tower which seemed to touch the stratocumulus clouds in the blue, clear nothingness above mankind. Sto Odin went to sleep in his strange vehicle and did not notice that the human passers-by often stared at him.

The Lord Sto Odin woke fitfully in strange places as the legionaries carried him further and further into the depths below the city, where sweet pressures and warm, sick smells made the air itself feel dirty to his nose.

"Stop!" whispered the Lord Sto Odin, and the robots stopped.

"Who am I?" he said to them.

"You have announced your will to die, my Lord," said Flavius, "seventy-seven days from now, but so far your name is still the Lord Sto Odin."

"I am alive?" the Lord asked.

"Yes," said both the robots.

"You are dead?"

"We are not dead. We are machines, printed with the minds of men who once lived. Do you wish to turn back, my Lord?"

"No. No. Now I remember. You are the robots. Livius, the psychiatrist and general Flavius, the secret historian. You have the minds of men, and are not men?"

"That is right, my Lord," said Flavius.

"Then how can *I* be alive—I, Sto Odin?"

"You should feel it yourself, sir," said Livius, "though the mind of the old is sometimes very strange."

"How can I be alive?" asked Sto Odin, staring around the city. "How can I be alive when the people who knew me are dead? They have whipped through the corridors like wraiths of smoke, like traces of cloud; they were here, and they loved me, and they knew me, and now they are dead. Take my wife, Eileen. She was a pretty thing, a brown-eyed child who came out of her learning chamber all perfect and all young. Time touched her and she danced to the cadence of time. Her body grew full, grew old. We repaired it. But at last she cramped in death and she went to that place to which I am going. If you are dead, you ought to be able to tell me what death is like, where the bodies and minds and voices and music of men and women whip past these enormous corridors, these hardy pavements, and are then gone. How can passing ghosts like me and my kind, each with just a few dozen or a few hundred years to go before the great blind winds of time whip us away—how can phantoms like me have built this solid city, these wonderful engines, these brilliant lights which never go dim? How did we do it, when we pass so swiftly, each of us, all of us? Do you know?"

The robots did not answer. Pity had not been programmed into their systems. The Lord Sto Odin harangued them nonetheless:

"You are taking me to a wild place, a free place, an evil place, perhaps. They are dying there too, as all men die, as I shall die, so soon, so brightly and simply. I should have died a long time ago. I was the people who knew me, I was the brothers and comrades who trusted me, I was the women who comforted me, I was the children whom I loved so bitterly and so sweetly many ages ago. Now they are gone. Time touched them, and they were not. I can see everyone that I ever knew racing through these corridors, see them young as toddlers, see them proud and wise and full with business and maturity, see them old and contorted as time reached out for them and they passed hastily away. Why did they do it? How can I live on? When I am dead, will I know that I once lived? I know that some of my friends have cheated and lie in the icy sleep, hoping for something which they do not know. I've had life, and I know it. What is life? A bit of play, a bit of learning, some words well-chosen, some love, a trace of pain, more work, memories, and then dirt rushing up to meet sunlight. That's all we've made of it—we, who have conquered the stars! Where are my friends? Where is my *me* that I once was so sure of, when the people who knew me were time-swept like storm-driven rags toward darkness and oblivion? You tell me. You ought to know! You are machines and you were given the minds of men. You ought to know what we amount to, from the outside in."

"We were built," said Livius, "by men and we have whatever men put into us, nothing more. How can we answer talk like yours? It is rejected by our minds, good though our minds may be. We have no grief, no fear, no fury. We know the names of these feelings but not the feelings themselves. We hear your words but we do not know what you are talking about. Are you trying to tell us what life feels like? If so, we already know. Not much. Nothing special. Birds have life too,

and so do fishes. It is you people who can talk and who can knot life into spasms and puzzles. You muss things up. Screaming never made the truth truthful, at least, not to us."

"Take me down," said Sto Odin. "Take me down to the Gebiet, where no well-mannered man has gone in many years. I am going to judge that place before I die."

They lifted the sedan-chair and resumed their gentle dog-trot down the immense ramps down toward the warm steaming secrets of the Earth itself. The human pedestrians became more scarce, but undermen—most often of gorilla or ape origin—passed them, toiling their way upward while dragging shrouded treasures which they had filched from the uncatalogued storehouses of man's most ancient past. At other times there was a wild whirl of metal wheels on stone roadway; the undermen, having offloaded their treasures at some intermediate point high above, sat on their wagons and rolled back downhill, like grotesque enlargements of the ancient human children who were once reported to have played with wagons in this way.

A command, scarcely a whisper, stopped the two legionaries again. Flavius turned. Sto Odin was indeed calling both of them. They stepped out of the shafts and came around to him, one on each side.

"I may be dying right now," he whispered, "and that would be most inconvenient at this time. Get out my manikin mee!"

"My Lord," said Flavius, "it is strictly forbidden for us robots to touch any human manikin, and if we do touch one, we are commanded to destroy ourselves immediately thereafter! Do you wish us to try, nevertheless? If so, which one of us? You have the command, my Lord."

#### IV

He waited so long that even the robots began to wonder if he died amid the thick wet air and the nearby stench of steam and oil.

The Lord Sto Odin finally roused himself and said: "I need no help. Just put the bag with my manikin mee on my lap."

"This one?" asked Flavius, lifting a small brown suitcase and handling it with a very gingerly touch indeed.

The Lord Sto Odin gave a barely perceptible nod and whispered. "Open it carefully for me. But do not touch the manikin, if those are your orders."

Flavius twisted at the catch of the bag. It was hard to manage. Robots did not feel fear, but they were intellectually attuned to the avoidance of danger; Flavius found his mind racing with wild choices as he tried to get the bag open. Sto Odin tried to help him, but the ancient hand, palsied and weak, could not even reach the top of the case. Flavius labored on, thinking that the Gebiet and Bezirk had their dangers, but that this meddling with manikins was the riskiest thing which he had ever encountered while in robot form, though in his human life he had handled many of them, including his own. They were "manikin, electro-encephalographic and endocrine" in model form, and they showed in miniaturized replica the entire diagnostic position of the patient for whom they were fashioned.

Sto Odin whispered to them. "There's no helping it. Turn me up. If I die, take my body back and tell the people that I misjudged my time."

Just as he spoke, the case sprang open. Inside it there lay a little naked human man, a direct copy of Sto Odin himself.

"We have it, my Lord," cried Livius, from the other side. "Let me guide your hand to it, so that you can see what to do."

Though it was forbidden for robots to touch manikins meee, it was legal for them to touch a human person with the person's consent. Livius's strong cupro-plastic fingers, with a reserve of many tons of gripping power in their human-like design, pulled the hands of the Lord Sto Odin forward until they rested on the manikin mee. Flavius, quick, smooth, agile, held the Lord's head upright on his weary old neck, so that the ancient Lord could see what the hands were doing.

"Is any part dead?" said the old Lord to the manikin, his voice clearer for the moment.

The manikin shimmered and two spots of solid black showed along the outside upper right thigh and the right buttock.

"Organic reserve?" said the Lord to his own manikin meee, and again the machine responded to his command. The whole miniature body shimmered to a violent purple and then subsided to an even pink.

"I still have some all-around strength left in this body, prosthetics and all," said Sto Odin to the two robots. "Set me up, I tell you! Set me up."

"Are you sure, my Lord," said Livius, "that we should do a thing like that here where the three of us are alone in a deep tunnel? In less than half an hour we could take you to a real hospital, where actual doctors could examine you."

"I said," repeated the Lord Sto Odin, "set me up. I'll watch the manikin while you do it."

"Your control is in the usual place, my Lord?" asked Livius.

"How much of a turn?" asked Flavius.

"Nape of my neck, of course. The skin over it is artificial and self-sealing. One twelfth of a turn will be enough. Do you have a knife with you?"

Flavius nodded. He took a small sharp knife from his belt, probed gently around the old Lord's neck, and then brought the knife down with a quick, sure turn.

"That did it!" said Sto Odin, in a voice so hearty that both of them stepped back a little. Flavius put the knife back in his belt. Sto Odin, who had almost been comatose a moment before, now held the manikin meee in his unaided hands. "See, gentlemen!" he cried. "You may be robots, but you can still see the truth and report it."

They both looked at the manikin meee, which Sto Odin now held in front of himself, his thumb and fingertip in the armpits of the medical doll.

"Watch what it reads," he said to them with a clear, ringing voice.

"Prosthetics!" he shouted at the manikin.

The tiny body changed from its pink color to a mixture. Both legs turned the color of a deep bruised blue. The legs, the left arm, one eye, one ear, and the skullcap stayed blue, showing the prostheses in place.

"Felt pain!" shouted Sto Odin at the manikin. The little doll returned to its light pink color. All the details were there, even to genitals, toenails, and eyelashes. There was no trace of the black color of pain in any part of the little body.

"Potential pain!" shouted Sto Odin. The doll shimmered. Most of it settled to the color of dark walnut wood, with some areas of intense brown showing more clearly than the rest.

"Potential breakdown—one day!" shouted Sto Odin. The little body went back to its normal color of pink. Small lightnings showed at the base of the brain, but nowhere else.

"I'm all right," said Sto Odin. "I can continue as I have done for the last several hundred years. Leave me set up on this high life-output. I can stand it for a few hours, and if I cannot, there's little lost." He put the manikin back in its bag, hung the bag on the doorhandle of the sedan-chair, and commanded the legionaries, "Proceed!"

The legionaries stared at him as if they could not see him.

He followed the lines of glance and saw that they were gazing rigidly at his manikin meee. It had turned black.

"Are you dead?" asked Livius, speaking as hoarsely as a robot could.

"Not dead at all!" cried Sto Odin. "I have been death in fractions of a moment, but for the time I am still life. That was just the pain-sum of my living body which showed on the manikin meee. The fire of life still burns within me. Watch as I put the manikin away . . ." The doll flared into a swirl of pastel orange as the Lord Sto Odin pulled the cover down.

They looked away as though they had seen an evil or an explosion.

"Down, men, down," he cried, calling them wrong names as they stepped back between their carrying shafts to take him deeper under the vitals of the earth.

## V

He dreamed brown dreams while they trotted down endless ramps. He woke a little to see the yellow walls passing. He looked at his dry old hand and it seemed to him that in this atmosphere, he had himself become more reptilian than human.

"I am caught by the dry, drab enturtlement of old, old age," he murmured, but the voice was weak and the robots did not hear him. They were running downward on a long meaningless concrete ramp which had become filmed by a leak of ancient oil, and they were taking care that they did not stumble and drop their precious master.

At a deep, hidden point the downward ramp divided, the left into a broad arena of steps which could have seated thousands of spectators for some never-to-occur event, and the right into a narrow ramp which bore upward and then curved, yellow lights and all.

"Stop!" called Sto Odin. "Do you see her? Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?" said Flavius.

"The beat and the cadence of the congohelium rising out of the Gebiet. The whirl and the skirl of impossible music coming at us through miles of solid rock? That girl whom I can already see, waiting at a door which should never have been opened? The sound of the star-borne music, not designed for the proper human ear?" He shouted, "Can't you hear it? That cadence. The unlawful metal of congohelium so terrible far underground? Dah, dah. Dah, dah. Dah. Music which nobody has ever understood before?"

Said Flavius, "I hear nothing, saving the pulse of air in this corridor, and your own heartbeat, my Lord. And something else, a little like machinery, very far away."

"There, that!" cried Sto Odin, "which you call 'a little like machinery,' does it come in a beat of five separate sounds, each one distinct?"

"No. No, sir. Not five."

"And you, Livius, when you were a man, you were very telepathic? Is there any of that left in the robot which is you?"

"No, my Lord, nothing. I have good senses, and I am also cut into the subsurface radio of the Instrumentality. Nothing unusual."

"No five-beat? Each note separate, short of prolonged, given meaning and shape by the terrible music of the congohelium, imprisoned with us inside this much-too-solid rock? You hear nothing?"

The two robots, shaped like Roman legionaries, shook their heads.

"But I can see her, through this stone. She has breasts like ripe pears and dark brown eyes that are like the stones of fresh-cut peaches. And I can hear what they are singing, their weird silly words of a pentapaul, made into something majestic by the awful music of the congohelium. Listen to the words. When I repeat them, they sound just silly, because the dread-inspiring music does not come with them. Her name is Santuna and she stares at him. No wonder she stares. He is much more tall than most men, yet he makes this foolish song into something frightening and strange.

*Slim Jim.*

*Dim him.*

*Grim.*

And his name is Yebayee, but now he is Sun-boy. He has the long face and the thick lips of the first man to talk about one god and one only: Akhnaton."

"Akhnaton the pharaoh," said Flavius. "That name was known in my office when I was a man. It was a secret. One of the first and greatest of the more-than-ancient kings. You see him, my Lord?"

"Through this rock I see him. Through this rock I hear the delirium engendered by the congohelium. I go to him." The Lord Sto Odin stepped out of the sedan chair and beat softly and weakly against the solid stone wall of the corridor. The yellow lamps gleamed. The legionaries were helpless. Here was something which their sharp swords could not pierce. Their once-human personalities, engraved on their micro-miniaturized brains, could not make sense out of the all-too-human situation of an old, old man dreaming wild dreams in a remote tunnel.

Sto Odin leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and said to them with a sibilant rasp:

"These are no whispers which can be missed. Can't you hear the five-beat of the congohelium, making its crazy music again? Listen to the words of this one. It's another pentapaul. Silly, bony words given flesh and blood and entrails by the music which carries them. Here, listen.

*Try. Vie.*

*Cry. Die.*

*Bye.*

This one you did not hear either?"

"May I use my radio to ask the surface of Earth for advice?" said one of the robots.

"Advice! Advice! What advice do we need? This *is* the Gebiet and one more hour of running and you will be in the heart of the Bezirk."

He climbed back into the sedan chair and commanded, "Run, men, run! It can't be more than three or four kilometers somewhere in this warren of stone. I will guide you. If I stop guiding you, you may take my body back to the surface, so that I can be given a wonderful funeral and be shot with a rocket-coffin into space with an orbit of no return. You have nothing to worry about. You are machines, nothing more, are you not? Are you not?" His voice shrilled at the end.

Said Flavius, "Nothing more."

Said Livius, "Nothing more. And yet—"

"And yet what?" demanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"And yet," said Livius, "I know I am a machine, and I know that I have known feelings only when I was once a living man. I sometimes wonder if you people might go too far. Too far, with us robots. Too far, perhaps, with the underpeople too. Things were once simple, when everything that talked was a human being and everything which did not talk was not. You may be coming to an ending of the ways."

"If you had said that on the surface," said the Lord Sto Odin grimly, "your head might have been burned off by its automatic magnesium flare. You know that there you are monitored against having illegal thoughts."

"Too well do I know it," said Livius, "and I know that I must have died once as a man, if I exist here in robot form. Dying didn't seem to hurt me then and it probably won't hurt next time. But nothing really matters much when we get down this far into the Earth. When we get this far down, everything changes. I never really understood that the inside of the world was this big and this sick."

"It's not how far down we are," said the Lord crossly, "it's *where* we are. This is the Gebiet, where all laws have been lifted, and down below and over yonder is the Bezirk, where laws have never been. Carry me rapidly now. I want to look on this strange musician with the face of Akhnaton and I want to talk to the girl who worships him, Santuna. Run carefully now. Up a little, to the left a little. If I sleep, do not worry. Keep going. I will waken myself when we come anywhere near the music of the congohelium. If I can hear it now, so far away, think of what it will be like when you yourselves approach it!"

He leaned back in his seat. They picked up the shafts of the sedan-chair and ran in the direction which they had been told.

## VI

They had run for more than an hour, with occasional delays when they had tricky footwork over leaking pipes or damaged walkways, when the light became so bright that they had to reach in their pouches and put on sun-glasses, which looked very odd indeed underneath the Roman helmets of two fully armed legionaries. (It was even more odd, of course, that the eyes were not eyes at all; robot eyes were like white marbles swimming in little bowls of glittering ink, producing a grimly milky stare.) They looked at their master and he had not yet stirred, so they took a corner of his robe and twisted it firmly into a bandage to protect his eyes against the bright light.

The new light made the yellow bulbs of the corridor fade out of notice. The light was like a whole aurora borealis compressed and projected through the basement corridor of a hotel left over from long ago. Neither of the robots knew the nature of the light, but it pulsed in beats of five.

The music and the lights became obtrusive even to the two robots as they walked or trotted downward toward the center of the world. The air-forcing system must have been very strong, because the inner heat of the Earth had not reached them, even at this great depth. Flavius had no idea of how many kilometers below the surface they had come. He knew that it was not much in planetary distance, but it was very far indeed for an ordinary walk.

The Lord Sto Odin sat up in the litter quite suddenly. When the two robots slowed, he said crossly at them: "Keep going. Keep going. I am going to set myself up. I'm strong enough to do it."

He took out the manikin meee and studied it in the light of the minor aurora borealis which repeated itself in the corridor. The manikin ran through its changes of diagnoses and colors. The Lord was satisfied. With firm old fingers he put the knifetip to the back of his neck and set his output of vital energies at an even higher level.

The robots did what they had been told.

The lights had been bewildering. Sometimes they made walking itself difficult. It was hard to believe that dozens or hundreds, perhaps thousands, of human beings had found their way through these uncharted corridors in order to discover the inmost precincts of the Bezirk, where all things were allowed. Yet the robots had to believe it. They themselves had been here before and they scarcely remembered how they had found their way the other time.

And the music! It beat at them harder than ever before. It came in beats of five, ringing out the tones of the pentapaul, the five-word verse which the mad cat-minstrel C'paul had developed while playing his c'lute some centuries before. The form itself confirmed and reinforced the poignancy of cats combined with the heartbreaking intelligence of the human being. No wonder people had found their way down here.

In all the history of man, there was no act which could not be produced by any one of the three bitterest forces in the human spirit—religious faith, vengeful vainglory, or sheer vice. Here, for the sake of vice, men had found the undiscoverable deep and had put it to wild, filthy uses. The music called them on.

This was very special music. It came at Sto Odin and his legionaries in two utterly different ways by now, reverberating at them through solid rock and echoing, re-echoing through the maze of corridors, carried by the dark heavy air. The corridor lights were still yellow, but the electromagnetic illuminations, which kept time to the music, made the ordinary lighting seem wan. The music controlled all things, paced all time, called all life to itself. It was song of a kind which the two robots had not noticed with such intensity on their previous visit.

Even the Lord Sto Odin, for all his travels and experiences, had never heard it before.

It was all of this:

The beat and the heat and the neat repeat of the notes which poured from the congohelium—metal never made for music, matter and antimatter locked in a fine magnetic grid to ward off the



outermost perils of space. Now a piece of it was deep in the body of Old Earth, counting out strange cadences. The churn and the burn and the hot return of music riding the living rock, accompanying itself in an air-carried echo. The surge and the urge of an erotic dirge which moaned, groaned through the heavy stone.

Sto Odin woke and stared sharply forward, seeing nothing but experiencing everything.

"Soon we shall see the gate and the girl," said he.

"You know this, man? *You* who have never been here before?" Livius had spoken.

"I know it," said the Lord Sto Odin, "because I know it,"

"You wear the feathers of immunity."

"I wear the feathers of immunity."

"Does that mean that we, your robots, are free too, down in this Bezirk?"

"Free as you like," said the Lord Sto Odin, "provided that you do my wishes. Otherwise I shall kill you."

"If we keep going," said Flavius, "may we sing the underpeople song? It might keep some of that terrible music out of our brains. The music has all feelings and we have none. Nevertheless it disturbs us. I do not know why."

"My radio contact with the surface has lapsed," said Livius irrelevantly. "I need to sing too."

"Go ahead, both of you," said the Lord Sto Odin. "But keep on going, or you die."

The robots lifted their voice in song:

*I eat my rage.  
I swallow my grief.  
There's no relief  
From pain or age.  
Our time comes.*

*I work my life.  
I breathe my breath.  
I face my death  
Without a wife.  
Our time comes.*

*We undermen  
Shove, crush, and crash.  
There'll be a clash  
And thunder when  
Our time comes.*

Though the song had the barbarous, ancient thrill of bagpipes in it, the melody could not counter or cancel the sane, wild rhythm of the congohelium beating at them, now, from all directions at once.

"Nice piece of sedition, that," said the Lord Sto Odin dryly, "but I like it better as music than I do this noise which is tearing its way through the depths of the world. Keep going. Keep going. I must meet this mystery before I die."

"We find it hard to endure that music coming at us through the rock," said Livius.

"It seems to us that it is much stronger than it was when we came here some months ago. Could it have changed?" asked Flavius.

"*That* is the mystery. We let them have the Gebiet, beyond our own jurisdiction. We gave them the Bezirk, to do with as they please. But these ordinary people have created or encountered

some extraordinary power. They have brought new things into the Earth. It may be necessary for all three of us to die before we settle the matter."

"We can't die the way you do," said Livius. "We're already robots, and the people from whom we were imprinted have been dead a long time. Do you mean you would turn us off?"

"I would, perhaps, or else some other force. Would you mind?"

"Mind? You mean, have emotions about it? I don't know," said Flavius. "I used to think that I had real, full experience when you used the phrase *Summa nulla est* and brought us up to full capacity, but that music which we have been hearing has the effect of a thousand passwords all said at once. I am beginning to care about my life and I think that I am becoming what your reference explained by the word 'afraid.'"

"I too feel it," said Livius. "This is not a power which we knew to exist on Earth before. When I was a strategist someone told me about the really indescribable dangers connected with the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and it seems to me now that a danger of that kind is already with us, here inside the tunnel. Something which Earth never made. Something which man never developed. Something which no robot could out-compute. Something wild and very strong brought into being by the use of the congohelium. Look around us."

He did not need to say that. The corridor itself had become a living, pulsing rainbow.

They turned one last loop in the corridor and they were there—

The very last limit of the realm of distress.

The source of evil music.

The end of the Bezirk.

They knew it because the music blinded them, the lights deafened them, their senses ran into one another and became confused. This was the immediate presence of the congohelium.

There was a door, immensely large, carved with elaborate Gothic ornament. It was much too big for any human man to have had need of it. In the door a single figure stood, her breasts accented into vivid brights and darks by the brilliant light which poured from one side of the door only, the right.

They could see through the door, into an immense hall wherein the floor was covered by hundreds of limp bundles of ragged clothing. These were the people, unconscious. Above them and between them there danced the high figure of a male, holding a glittering something in his hands. He prowled and leaped and twisted and turned to the pulsation of the music which he himself produced.

"*Summa nulla est*," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I want you two robots to be keyed to maximum. Are you now to top alert?"

"We are, sir," chorused Livius and Flavius.

"You have your weapons?"

"We cannot use them," said Livius, "since it is contrary to our programming, but *you* can use them, sir."

"I'm not sure," said Flavius. "I'm not at all sure. We are equipped with surface weapons. This music, these hypnotics, these lights—who knows what they may have done to us and to our weapons, which were never designed to operate this far underground?"

"No fear," said Sto Odin. "I'll take care of all of it."

He took out a small knife.

When the knife gleamed under the dancing lights, the girl in the doorway finally took notice of the Lord Sto Odin and his strange companions.

She spoke to him, and her voice rode through the heavy air with the accents of clarity and death.

"Who are you," she said, "that you should bring weapons to the last uttermost limits of the Bezirk?"

"This is just a small knife, lady," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and with this I can do no harm to anyone. I am an old man and I am setting my own vitality button higher."

She watched incuriously as he brought the point of the knife to the nape of his own neck and then gave it three full, deliberate turns.

Then she stared and said, "You are strange, my Lord. Perhaps you are dangerous to my friends and me."

"I am dangerous to no one." The robots looked at him, surprised, because of the fullness and the richness of his voice. He had set his vitality very high indeed, giving himself, at that rate, perhaps no more than an hour or two of life, but he had regained the physical power and the emotional force of his own prime years. They looked at the girl. She had taken Sto Odin's statement at full face value, almost as though it were an incontrovertible canon of faith.

"I wear," Sto Odin went on, "these feathers. Do you know what they signify?"

"I can see," she said, "that you are a Lord of the Instrumentality, but I do not know what the feathers mean . . ."

"Waiver of immunity. Anyone who can manage it is allowed to kill me or to hurt me without danger of punishment." He smiled, a little grimly. "Of course, I have the right to fight back, and I do know how to fight. My name is the Lord Sto Odin. Why are you here, girl?"

"I love that man in there—if he is a man any more."

She stopped and pursed her lips in bewilderment. It was strange to see those girlish lips compressed in a momentary stammer of the soul. She stood there, more nude than a newborn infant, her face covered with provocative, off-beat cosmetics. She lived for a mission of love in the depths of the nothing and nowhere: yet she remained a girl, a person, a human being capable, as she was now, of an immediate relationship to another human being.

"He *was* a man, my Lord, even when he came back from the surface with that piece of congohelium. Only a few weeks ago, those people were dancing too. Now they just lie on the ground. They do not even die. I myself held the congohelium too, and I made music with it. Now the power of the music is eating him up and he dances without resting. He won't come out to me and I do not dare go into that place with him. Perhaps I too would end up as one more heap on the floor."

A crescendo of the intolerable music made speech intolerable for her. She waited for it to pass while the room beyond blazed a pulsing violet at them.

When the music of the congohelium subsided a little, Sto Odin spoke: "How long has it been that he has danced alone with this strange power coursing through him?"

"One year. Two years. Who can tell? I came down here and lost time when I arrived. You Lords don't even let us have clocks and calendars up on the surface."

"We ourselves saw you dancing just a tenth-year ago," said Livius, interrupting.

She glanced at them, quickly, incuriously. "Are you the same two robots who were here a while back? You look very different now. You look like ancient soldiers. I can't imagine why . . . All right, maybe it was a week, maybe it was a year."

"What were you doing down here?" asked Sto Odin, gently.

"What do you think?" she said. "Why do all the other people come down here? I was running away from the timeless time, the lifeless life, the hopeless hope that you Lords apply to all mankind on the surface. You let the robots and the underpeople work, but you freeze the real people in a happiness which has no hope and no escape."

"I'm right," cried Sto Odin. "I'm right, though I die for it!"

"I don't understand you," said the girl. "Do you mean that you too, a Lord, have come down here to escape from the useless hope that wraps up all of us?"

"No, no, no," he said, as the shifting lights of the congohelium music made improbable tracteries across his features. "I just meant that I told the other Lords that something like this was happening to you ordinary people on the surface. Now you are telling me exactly what I told them. Who were you, anyhow?"

The girl glanced down at her unclothed body as though she were aware, for the first time, of her nakedness. Sto Odin could see the blush pour from her face down across her neck and chest. She said, very quietly: "Don't you know? We never answer that question down here."

"You have rules?" he said. "You people have rules, even here in the Bezirk?"

She brightened up when she realized that he had not meant the indecent question as an impropriety. Eagerly she explained. "There aren't any rules. They are just understandings. Somebody told me when I left the ordinary world and crossed the line of the Gebiet. I suppose they did not tell you because you were a Lord, or because they hid from your strange war-robots."

"I met no one, coming down."

"Then they were hiding from you, my Lord."

Sto Odin looked around at his legionaries to see if they would confirm that statement but neither Flavius nor Livius said anything at all.

He turned back to the girl. "I didn't mean to pry. Can you tell me what kind of person you are? I don't need the particulars."

"When I was alive, I was a once-born," she said. "I did not live long enough to be renewed. The robots and a Subcommissioner of the Instrumentality took a look at me to see if I could be trained for the Instrumentality. More than enough brains, they said, but no character at all. I thought about that a long time. 'No character at all.' I knew I couldn't kill myself, and I didn't want to live, so I looked happy every time I thought a monitor might be scanning me and I found my way to the Gebiet. It wasn't death, and it wasn't life, but it was an escape from endless fun. I hadn't been down here long"—she pointed at the Gebiet above them—"before I met him. We loved each other very soon and he said that the Gebiet was not much improvement on the surface. He said he had already been down here, in the Bezirk, looking for a fun-death."

"A what?" said Sto Odin, as if he could not believe the words.

"A fun-death. Those were his words and his idea. I followed him around and we loved each other. I waited for him when he went to the surface to get the congohelium. I thought that his love for me would put the fun-death out of his mind."

"Are you telling me the whole truth?" said Sto Odin. "Or is this just your part of the story?"

She stammered protests but he did not ask again.

The Lord Sto Odin said nothing but he looked heavily at her.

She winced, bit her lip, and finally said, through all the music and the lights, very clearly indeed, "Stop it. You are hurting me."

The Lord Sto Odin stared at her, said innocently, "I am doing nothing," and stared on. There was much to stare at. She was a girl the color of honey. Even through these lights and shadows he could see that she had no clothing at all. Nor did she have a single hair left on her body—no head of hair, no eyebrows, probably no eyelashes, though he could not tell at that distance. She had traced golden eyebrows far up on her forehead, giving her the look of endless mocking inquiry. She had painted her mouth gold, so that when she spoke, her words cascaded from a golden source. She had painted her upper eyelids golden too, but the lower were black as carbon itself. The total effect was alien to all the previous experiences of mankind: it was lascivious grief to the thousandth power, dry wantonness perpetually unfulfilled, femaleness in the service of remote purposes, humanity enraptured by strange planets.

He stood and stared. If she were still human at all, this would sooner or later force her to take the initiative. It did.

She spoke again, "Who are you? You are living too fast, too fiercely. Why don't you go in and dance, like all the others?" She gestured past the open door, where the ragged unconscious shapes of all the people lay strewn about the floor.

"You call that dancing?" said the Lord Sto Odin. "I do not. There is one man who dances. Those others lie on the floor. Let me ask you the same question. Why don't you dance yourself?"

"I want *him*, not the dance. I am Santuna and he seized me once in human, mortal, ordinary love. But he becomes Sun-boy, more so every day, and he dances with those people who lie on the floor—"

"You call that dancing?" snapped the Lord Sto Odin. He shook his head and added grimly, "I see no dance."

"You don't see it? You really don't see it?" she cried.

He shook his head obstinately and grimly.

She turned so that she looked into the room beyond her and she brought her high, clear penetrating wail which even cut through the five-beat pulse of the congohelium. She cried:

"Sun-boy, Sun-boy, hear me!"

There was no break in the quick escape of the feet which pattered in the figure eight, no slowing down the fingers which beat against the shimmering non-focus of the metal which was carried in the dancer's arms.

"My lover, my beloved, my man!" she cried again, her voice even more shrill and demanding than before.

There was a break in the cadence of the music and the dance. The dancer sheered toward them with a perceptible slowing down of his cadence. The lights of the inner room, the great door, and the outer hall all became more steady. Sto Odin could see the girl more clearly; she really didn't have a single hair on her body. He could see the dancer too; the young man was tall, thin beyond the ordinary suffering of man, and the metal which he carried shimmered like water reflecting a thousand lights. The dancer spoke, quickly and angrily:

"You called me. You have called me thousands of times. Come on in, if you wish. But don't call me."

As he spoke, the music faded out completely, the bundles on the floor began to stir and to groan and to awaken.

Santuna stammered hastily, "This time it wasn't me. It was these people. One of them is very strong. He cannot see the dancers."

Sun-boy turned to the Lord Sto Odin. "Come in and dance then, if you wish. You are already here. You might as well. Those machines of yours"—he nodded at the robot-legionaries—"they couldn't dance anyhow. Turn them off." The dancer started to turn away.

"I shall not dance, but I would like to see it," said Sto Odin, with enforced mildness. He did not like this young man at all—not the phosphorescence of his skin, the dangerous metal cradled in his arm, the suicidal recklessness of his prancing walk. Anyhow, there was too much light this far underground and too few explanations of what was being done.

"Man, you're a peeper. That's real nasty, for an old man like you. Or do you just want to be a *man*!"

The Lord Sto Odin felt his temper flare up. "Who are you, man, that you should call man *man* in such a tone? Aren't you still human, yourself?"

"Who knows? Who cares? I have tapped the music of the universe. I have piped all imaginable happiness into this room. I am generous. I share it with these friends of mine." Sun-boy gestured at the ragged heaps on the floor, who had begun to squirm in their misery without the music. As Sto Odin saw into the room more clearly, he could see that the bundles on the floor were young people, mostly young men, though there were a few girls among them. They all of them looked sick and weak and pale.

Sto Odin retorted, "I don't like the looks of this. I have half a mind to seize you and to take that metal."

The dancer spun on the ball of his right foot, as though to leap away in a wild prance.

The Lord Sto Odin stepped into the room after Sun-boy.

Sun-boy turned full circle, so that he faced Sto Odin once again. He pushed the Lord out of the door, marching him firmly but irresistibly three steps backward.

"Flavius, seize the metal. Livius, take the man," spat Sto Odin.

Neither robot moved.

Sto Odin, his senses and his strength set high by the severe twist upward which he had given his vitality button, stepped forward to seize the congohelium himself. Made one step and no more: he froze in the doorway, immobile.

He had not felt like that since the last time the doctors put him in a surgery machine, when they found that part of his skull had developed bone-cancer from old, old radiation in space and from the subsequent effects of sheer age. They had given him a prosthetic half-skull and for the time of the operation he had been immobilized by straps and drugs. This time there were no straps, no drugs, but the forces which Sun-boy had invoked were equally strong.

The dancer danced in an enormous figure-eight among the clothed bodies lying on the floor. He had been singing the song which the robot Flavius had repeated far up above, on the surface of the Earth—the song about the weeping man.

But Sun-boy did not weep.

His ascetic, thin face was twisted in a broad grin of mockery. When he sang about sorrow it was not sorrow which he really expressed, but derision, laughter, contempt for ordinary human sorrow. The congohelium shimmered and the aurora borealis almost blinded Sto Odin. There were two other drums in the middle of the room, one with high notes and the other with even higher ones.

The congohelium resonated: *boom—boom—doom—doom—room!*

The large ordinary drum rattled out, when Sun-boy passed it and reached out his fingers: *ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan, ritiplin!*

The small, strange drum emitted only two notes, and it almost croaked them: *kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!*

As Sun-boy danced back the Lord Sto Odin thought that he could hear the voice of the girl Santuna, calling to Sun-boy, but he could not turn his head to see if she were speaking.

Sun-boy stood in front of Sto Odin, his feet still weaving as he danced, his thumbs and his palms torturing hypnotic dissonances from the gleaming congohelium.

"Old man, you tried to trick me. You failed."

The Lord Sto Odin tried to speak, but the muscles of his mouth and throat would not respond. He wondered what force this was, which could stop all unusual effort but still leave his heart free to beat, his lungs to breathe, his brain (both natural and prosthetic) to think.

The boy danced on. He danced away a few steps, turned and danced back to Sto Odin.

"You wear the feather of immunity. I am free to kill you. If I did, the Lady Mmona and the Lord Nuru-or and your other friends would never know what happened."

If Sto Odin could have moved his eyelids that much, he would have opened his eyes in astonishment at the discovery that a superstitious dancer, far underground, knew the secret business of the Instrumentality.

"You can't believe what you are looking at, even though you see it plainly," said Sun-boy more seriously. "You think that a lunatic has found a way to work wonders with a piece of the congohelium taken far underground. Foolish old man! No ordinary lunatic would have carried this metal down here without blowing up the fragment and himself with it. No man could have done what I have done. You are thinking, If the gambler who took the name Sun-boy is not a man, what is he? What brings the power and music of the Sun so far down underground? Who makes the wretched ones of the world dream in a crazy, happy sleep while their life spills and leaks into a

thousand kinds of times, a thousand kinds of worlds? Who does it, if it is not mere me? You don't have to ask. I can tell perfectly well what you are thinking. I'll dance it for you. I am a very kind man, even though you do not like me."

The dancer's feet had been moving in the same place while he spoke.

Suddenly he whirled away, leaping and vaulting over the wretched human figures on the floor.

He passed the big drum and touched it: *ritiplin, rataplan!*

Left hand brushed the little drum: *kid-nork, kid-nork!*

Both hands seized the congohelium, as though the strong wrists were going to tear it apart.

The whole room blazed with music, gleamed with thunder as the human senses interpenetrated each other. The Lord Sto Odin felt the air pass his skin like cool, wet oil. Sun-boy the dancer became transparent and through him the Lord Sto Odin could see a landscape which was not Earth and never would be.

"Fluminescent, luminescent, incandescent, fluorescent," sang the dancer. "Those are the worlds of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, seven planets in a close group, all traveling together around a single sun. Worlds of wild magnetism and perpetual dustfall, where the surfaces of the planets are changed by the forever-shifting magnetism of their erratic orbits! Strange worlds, where stars dance dances wilder than any dance ever conceived by man—planets which have a consciousness in common, but perhaps not intelligence—planets which called across all space and all time for companionship until I, me the gambler, came down to this cavern and found them. Where you had left them, my Lord Sto Odin, when you said to a robot:

"I do not like the looks of those planets,' said you, Sto Odin, speaking to a robot a long time ago. 'People might get sick or crazy, just looking at them,' said you, Sto Odin, long, long ago. 'Hide the knowledge in some out of the way computer,' you commanded, Sto Odin, before I was born. But the computer was that one, that one in the corner behind you, which you cannot turn to see. I came down to this room, looking for a fun-suicide, something really unusual which would bang the noddies when they found I had gotten away. I danced here in the darkness, almost the way I am dancing now, and I had taken about twelve different kinds of drugs, so that I was wild and free and very very receptive. That computer spoke to me, Sto Odin. *Your* computer, not mine. It spoke to me, and you know what it said?

"You might as well know, Sto Odin, because you are dying. You set your vitality high in order to fight me. I have made you stand still. Could I do that if I were a mere man? Look. I will turn solid again."

With a rainbow-like scream of chords and sounds, Sun-boy twisted the congohelium again until both the inner chamber and the outer bloomed with lights of a thousand colors and the deep underground air became drenched with music which seemed psychotic, because no human mind had ever invented it. The Lord Sto Odin, imprisoned in his own body with his two legionary-robots frozen half a pace behind him, wondered if he really were dying in vain and tried to guess whether he would be blinded and deafened by this dancer before he died. The congohelium twisted and shone before him.

Sun-boy danced backward over the bodies on the floor, danced backward with an odd cadenced run which looked as though he were plunging forward in a wild, competitive foot-race when the music and his own footsteps carried him back, toward the center of the inner room. The figure jumped in an odd stance, face looking so far downward that Sun-boy might have been studying his own steps on the floor, the congohelium held above and behind his neck, legs lifting high in the cruel high-kneed prance.

The Lord Sto Odin thought he could hear the girl calling again, but he could not distinguish words.

The drums spoke again: *ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan!* and then *kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!*

The dancer spoke as the pandemonium subsided. He spoke, and his voice was high, strange, like a bad recording played on the wrong machine:

"The something is talking to you. You can talk."

The Lord Sto Odin found that his throat and lips moved. Quietly, secretly, like an old soldier, he tried his feet and fingers: these did not move. Only his voice could be used. He spoke, and he said the obvious:

"Who are you, *something!*"

Sun-boy looked across at Sto Odin. He stood erect and calm. Only his feet moved, and they did a wild, agile little jig which did not affect the rest of his body. Apparently some kind of dance was necessary to keep the connection going between the unexplained reach of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, the piece of the congohelium, the more than human dancer, and the tortured blissful figures on the floor. The face, the face itself was quite composed and almost sad.

"I have been told," said Sun-boy, "to show you who I am."

He danced around the drums *rataplan, rataplan! kid-nork-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork-nork!*

He held the congohelium high and wrenched it so that a great moan came out. Sto Odin felt sure that a sound as wild and forlorn as that would be sure to reach the surface of the Earth many kilometers above, but his prudent judgment assured him that this was a fanciful thought gestated by his personal situation, and that any real sound strong enough to reach all the way to the surface would also be strong enough to bring the bruised and shattered rock of the ceiling pouring down upon their heads.

The congohelium ran down the colors of the spectrum until it stopped at a dark, wet liver-red, very close to black.

The Lord Sto Odin, in that momentary near silence, found that the entire story had been thrust into his mind without being strung out and articulated with words. The true history of this chamber had entered his memory sidewise, as it were. In one moment he knew nothing of it; in the next instant it was as if he had remembered the whole narrative for most of his life.

He also felt himself set free.

He stumbled backward three or four steps.

To his immense relief, his robots turned around, themselves free, and accompanied him. He let them put their hands in his armpits.

His face was suddenly covered with kisses.

His plastic cheek felt, thinly and dimly, the imprint, real and living, of female human lips. It was the odd girl—beautiful, bald, naked, and golden-lipped—who had waited and shouted from the door.

Despite physical fatigue and the sudden shock of intruded knowledge, the Lord Sto Odin knew what he had to say.

"Girl, you shouted for me."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You have had the strength to watch the congohelium and not to give in to it?"

She nodded but said nothing.

"You have been strong-willed enough not to go into that room?"

"Not strong-willed, my Lord. I just love him, my man in there."

"You have waited, girl, for many months?"

"Not all the time. I go up the corridor when I have to eat or drink or sleep or do my personals. I even have mirrors and combs and tweezers and paint there, to make myself beautiful, the way that Sun-boy might want me."

The Lord Sto Odin looked over his shoulder. The music was low and keening with some emotions other than grief. The dancer was doing a long, slow dance, full of creeping and reaches, as he passed the congohelium from one hand to the other. "Do you hear me, dancer?" called the Lord Sto Odin, the Instrumentality once more coursing through his veins.

The dancer did not speak nor seem to change his course. But *kid-nork, kid-nork* said the little drum, quite unexpectedly.



"He, and the face behind him—they will let the girl leave if she really forgets him and this place in the act of leaving. Won't you?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

*Ritiplin, rataplan* said the big drum, which had not sounded since Sto Odin was let free.

"But I don't want to go," said the girl.

"I know you don't want to go. You will go to please me. You can come back as soon as I have done my work." She stood mute so he continued.

"One of my robots, Livius, the one imprinted by a psychiatrist general, will run with you, but I command him to forget this place and all things connected with it. *Summa nulla est*. Have you heard me, Livius? You will run with this girl and you will forget. You will run and forget. You too will run and forget, Santuna my dear, but two Earthnychthemeron from now you will remember just enough to come back here, should you wish to, should you need to. Otherwise you will go to the Lady Mmona and learn from her what you should do for the rest of your life."

"You are promising, my Lord, that in two days and nights I can come back if I even feel like it."

"Now run, my girl, run. Run to the surface. Livius, carry her if you must. But run! run! run! More than she depends upon it."

Santuna looked at him very earnestly. Her nakedness was innocence. The gold upper eyelids met the black lower eyelids as she blinked and then brushed away wet tears.

"Kiss me," she said, "and I will run."

He leaned down and kissed her.

She turned, looked back one last time at her dancer-lover, and then ran long-legged into the corridor. Livius ran after her, gracefully, untiringly. In twenty minutes they would be reaching the upper limits of the Gebiet.

"You know what I am doing?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

This time the dancer and the force behind him did not deign to answer.

Said Sto Odin, "Water. There is water in a jug in my litter. Take me there, Flavius."

The robot-legionary took the aged and trembling Sto Odin to the litter.

## VIII

The Lord Sto Odin then performed the trick which changed human history for many centuries to come and, in so doing, exploded an enormous cavern in the vitals of the Earth.

He used one of the most secret ruses of the Instrumentality.

He triple-thought.

Only a few very adept persons could triple-think, when they were given every possible chance of training. Fortunately for mankind, the Lord Sto Odin had been one of the successful ones.

He set three systems of thought into action. At the top level he behaved rationally as he explored the old room; at a lower level of his mind he planned a wild surprise for the dancer with the congohelium. But at the third, lowest level, he decided what he must do in the time of a single blink and trusted his autonomic nervous system to carry out the rest.

These are the commands he gave:

Flavius should be set on the wild-alert and readied for attack.

The computer should be reached and told to record the whole episode, everything which Sto Odin had learned, and should be shown how to take countermeasures while Sto Odin gave the matter no further conscious thought. The gestalt of action—the general frame of retaliation—was clear for thousandths of a second in Sto Odin's mind and then it dropped from sight.

The music rose to a roar.

White light covered Sto Odin.

"You meant me harm!" called Sun-boy from beyond the Gothic door.

"I meant you harm," Sto Odin acknowledged, "but it was a passing thought. I did nothing. You are watching me."

"I am watching you," said the dancer grimly. *Kid-nork, kid-nork* went the little drum. "Do not go out of my sight. When you are ready to come through my door, call me or just think of it. I will meet you and help you in."

"Good enough," said Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius still held him. Sto Odin concentrated on the melody which Sun-boy was creating, a wild new song never before suspected in the history of the world. He wondered if he could surprise the dancer by throwing his own song back at him. At the same instant, his fingers were performing a third set of actions which Sto Odin's mind no longer had to heed. Sto Odin's hand opened a lid in the robot's chest, right into the laminated controls of the brain. The hand itself changed certain adjustments, commanding that the robot should, within the quarter-hour, kill all forms of life within reach other than the command-transmitter. Flavius did not know what had been done to him; Sto Odin did not even notice what his own hand had done.

"Take me over to the old computer," said Sto Odin to the robot Flavius. "I want to discover how the strange story which I have just learned may be true." Sto Odin kept thinking of music which would even startle the user of the congohelium.

He stood at the computer.

His hand, responding to the triple-think command which it had been given, turned the computer up and pressed the button, *Record this scene*. The computer's old relays almost grunted as they came to the alert and complied.

"Let me see the map," said Sto Odin to the computer.

Far behind him, the dancer had changed his pace into a fast jog-trot of hot suspicion.

The map appeared on the computer.

"Beautiful," said Sto Odin.

The entire labyrinth had become plain. Just above them was one of the ancient, sealed-off anti-seismic shafts—a straight, empty tubular shaft, two hundred meters wide, kilometers high. At the top, it had a lid which kept out the mud and water of the ocean floor. At the bottom, since there was no pressure other than air to worry about, it had been covered with a plastic which looked like rock, so that neither people nor robots which might be passing would try to climb into it.

"Watch what I am doing!" cried Sto Odin to the dancer.

"I am watching," said Sun-boy, and there was almost a growl of perplexity in his sung-forth response.

Sto Odin shook the computer and ran the fingers of his right hand over it and coded a very specific request. His left hand—preconditioned by the triple-think—coded the emergency panel at the side of the computer with two simple, clear engineering instructions.

Sun-boy's laughter rang out behind him. "You are asking that a piece of the congohelium be sent down to you. Stop! Stop, before you sign it with your name and your authority as a Lord of the Instrumentality. Your unsigned request will do no harm. The central computer up top will just think that it is some of the crazy people in the Bezirk making senseless demands." The voice rose to a note of urgency, "Why did the machine signal 'received and complied with' to you just now?"

The Lord Sto Odin lied blandly, "I don't know. Maybe they will send me a piece of the congohelium to match the one that you have there."

"You're lying," cried the dancer. "Come over here to the door."

Flavius led the Lord Sto Odin to the ridiculous-beautiful Gothic archway.

The dancer was leaping from foot to foot. The congohelium shone a dull alert red. The music wept as though all the anger and suspicion of mankind had been incorporated into a new unforgettable fugue, like a delirious atonal counterpoint to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Third Brandenburg Concerto*.

"I am here," the Lord Sto Odin spoke easily.

"You are dying!" cried the dancer.

"I was dying before you first noticed me. I set my vitality control to maximum after I entered the Bezirk."

"Come on in, then," said Sun-boy, "and you will never die."

Sto Odin took the edge of the door and let himself down to the stone floor. Only when he was comfortably seated did he speak:

"I am dying, that is true. But I would rather not come in. I will just watch you dance as I die."

"What are you doing? What have you done?" cried Sun-boy. He stopped dancing and walked over to the door.

"Search me if you wish," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I am searching you," said the dancer, "but I see nothing but your desire to get a piece of the congohelium for yourself and to out-dance me."

At this point Flavius went berserk. He ran back to the litter, leaned over, and ran toward the door. In each hand he carried an enormous solid-steel bearing.

"What's that robot doing?" cried the dancer. "I can see your mind but you are not telling him anything! He uses those steel balls to break obstructions—"

He gasped as the attack came.

Quicker than the eye could follow the movement, Flavius's sixty-ton-capacity arm whistled through the air as he flung the first steel missile directly at Sun-boy. Sun-boy, or the power within him, leapt aside with insect speed. The ball plowed through two of the rag-clothed human bodies on the floor. One body said *whoof!* as it died, but the other body let out no sound at all: the head had been torn off in first impact. Before the dancer could speak, Flavius flung the second ball.

This time the doorway caught it. The powers which had immobilized Sto Odin and his robots were back in operation. The ball sang as it plunged into the doorway, stopped in mid-air, sang again as the door flung it back at Flavius.

The returning ball missed Flavius's head but crushed his chest utterly. That was where his real brain was. There was a flicker of light as the robot went out, but even in dying Flavius seized the ball one last time and flung it at Sun-boy. The robot terminated operation and the heavy ball, flung wild, caught the Lord Sto Odin in the right shoulder. The Lord Sto Odin felt pain until he dragged over his manikin meee and turned all pain off. Then he looked at the shoulder. It was almost totally demolished. Blood from his organic body and hydraulic fluid from his prosthetics joined in a slow, heavy stream as the liquids met, merged, and poured down his side.

The dancer almost forgot to dance.

Sto Odin wondered how far the girl had gone.

The air pressure changed.

"What is happening to the air? Why did you think about the girl? What is happening?"

"Read me," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I will dance and get my powers first," said Sun-boy.

For a few brief minutes it seemed that the dancer with the congohelium would cause a rock-fall.

The Lord Sto Odin, dying, closed his eyes and found that it was restful to die. The blaze and noise of the world around him remained interesting, but had become unimportant.

The congohelium with a thousand shifting rainbows and the dancer had attained near-transparency when Sun-boy came back to read Sto Odin's mind.

"I see nothing," said Sun-boy worriedly. "Your vitality button is too high and you will die soon. Where is all that air coming from? I seem to hear a faraway roar. But you are not causing it. Your robot went wild. All you do is to look at me contentedly and die. That is very strange. You want to die your way when you could live unimaginable lives in here with us!"

"That is right," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I am dying my way. But dance for me, do dance for me with the congohelium, while I tell you your own story as you told it to me. It would be a pleasure to get the story straight before I die."

The dancer looked irresolute, started to dance, and then turned back to the Lord Sto Odin.

"Are you sure you want to die right away? With the power of what you call the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which I receive right here with the help of the congohelium, you could be comfortable enough while I danced and you could still die whenever you wished. Vitality buttons are much weaker than the powers which I command. I could even help to lift you across the threshold of my door . . ."

"No," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Just dance for me while I die. My way."

## IX

Thus the world turned. Millions of tons of water were rushing toward them.

Within minutes the Gebiet and the Bezirk would drown as the air whistled upward. Sto Odin noted contentedly that there was an air-shaft at the top of the dancer's room. He did not allow himself to third-think of what would happen when the matter and anti-matter of the congohelium were immersed in rushing salt water. Something like forty megatons, he supposed, with the tired feeling of a man who has thought a problem through long, long ago and remembers it briefly only after the situation has long passed.

Sun-boy was acting out religion before the age of space. He chorused hymns, he lifted his eyes and his hands and his piece of the congohelium to the sun; he played the rattle of whirling dervishes, the temple bells of the Man on the Two Pieces of Wood, and the other temple bells of that saint who had escaped time simply by seeing it and stepping out of it. Buddha, was that his name? And he went on to the severe profanities which afflicted mankind after the Old World fell.

The music kept measure.

And the lights, too.

Whole processions of ghostly shadows followed Sun-boy as he showed how old mankind had found the gods, and the Sun, and then other gods. He pantomimed man's most ancient mystery—that man pretended to be afraid of death, when it was life that never understood it.

And as he danced, the Lord Sto Odin repeated his own story to him:

"You fled the surface, Sun-boy, because the people were stupid clods, happy and dull in their miserable happiness. You fled because you could not stand being a chicken in a poultry house, antiseptically bred, safely housed, and frozen when dead. You joined the other miserable, bright, restless people who sought freedom in the Gebiet. You learned about their drugs and their liquors and their smokes. You knew their women, and their parties, and their games. It wasn't enough. You became a gentleman-suicide, a hero seeking a fun-death which would stamp you with your individuality. You came on down to the Bezirk, the most forgotten and loathsome place of all. You found nothing. Just the old machines and the empty corridors. Here and there a few mummies or bones. Just the silent lights and the faint murmur of air through the corridors."

"I hear water now," said the dancer, still dancing, "rushing water. Don't you hear it, my dying Lord?"

"If I did hear it, I wouldn't care. Let's get on with your story. You came to this room. The weird door made it look like a good place for a fun-death, such as you poor castaways liked to seek, except that there was not much sport in dying unless other people know that you did it intentionally, and know how you did it. Anyway, it was a long climb back up into the Gebiet, where your friends were, so you slept by this computer.

"In the night, while you slept, as you dreamed, the computer sang to you:

*I need a temporary dog  
For a temporary job*

*On a temporary place  
Like Earth!*

When you woke up you were surprised to find that you had dreamed an entire new kind of music. Really wild music which made people shudder with its delicious evil. And with the music, you had a job. To steal a piece of the congohelium.

"You were a clever man, Sun-boy, before the trip down here. The Douglas-Ouyang planets caught you and made you a thousand times cleverer. You and your friends, this is what you told me—or what the presence behind you told me, just a half hour ago—you and your friends stole a subspace communicator console, got a fix on the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and got drunk at the sight. Iridescent, luminescent. Waterfalls uphill. All that kind of thing."

"And you did get the congohelium. The congohelium is made of matter and antimatter laminated apart by a dual magnetic grid. With that the presence of the Douglas-Ouyang planets made you independent of organic processes. You did not need food or rest or even air or drink any more. The Douglas-Ouyang planets are very old. They kept you as a link. I have no idea of what they intended to do with Earth and with mankind. If this story gets out, future generations will call you the merchant of menace, because you used the normal human appetituousness for danger to trap other people with hypnotics and with music."

"I hear water," interrupted Sun-boy. "I *do* hear water!"

"Never mind," said the Lord Sto Odin, "your story is more important. Anyhow, what could you and I do about it? I am dying, sitting in a pool of blood and effluvium. You can't leave this room with the congohelium. Let me go on. Or perhaps the Douglas-Ouyang entity, whatever it was —"

"Is," said Sun-boy.

"—whatever it is, may just have been longing for sensuous companionship. Dance on, man, dance on."

Sun-boy danced and the drums talked with him, *rataplan, rataplan! kid-nork, kid-nork, nork!* while the congohelium made music scream through the solid rock.

The other sound persisted.

Sun-boy stopped and stared.

"It is water. It *is*."

"Who knows?" said the Lord Sto Odin.

"Look," screamed Sun-boy, holding the congohelium high. "Look!"

The Lord Sto Odin did not need to look. He knew full well that the first few tons of water, mud-laden and heavy, had come frothing down the corridor and into their rooms.

"But what do *I* do?" screamed the voice of Sun-boy. Sto Odin felt that it was not Sun-boy speaking, but some relay speaking from the power of the Douglas-Ouyang planets. A power which had tried to find friendship with man, but had found the wrong man and the wrong friendship.

Sun-boy took control of himself. His feet splashed in the water as he danced. The colors shone on the water as it rose. *Ritiplin, tiplin!* said the big drum. *Kid-nork, kid-nork,* said the little drum. *Boom, boom, doom, doom, room,* said the congohelium.

The Lord Sto Odin felt his old eyes blur but he could still see the blazing image of the wild dancer.

"This is a good way to die," thought he, as he died.

## X

Far above, on the surface of the planet, Santuna felt the continent itself heave beneath her feet and saw the eastern horizon grow dark as a volcano of muddy steam shot up from the calm blue sunlit ocean.

"This must not, must *not* happen again!" she said, thinking of Sun-boy and the congohelium and the death of the Lord Sto Odin.

"Something must be done about it," she added to herself.

And she did it.

In later centuries she brought disease, risk, and misery back to increase the happiness of man. She was one of the principal architects of the Rediscovery of Man, and at her most famous she was known as the Lady Alice More.

# Drunkboat

Perhaps it is the saddest, maddest, wildest

story in the whole long history of space. It is true that no one else had ever done anything like it before, to travel at such a distance, and at such speeds, and by such means. The hero looked like such an ordinary man—when people looked at him for the first time. The second time, ah! that was different.

And the heroine. Small she was, and ash-blond, intelligent, perky, and hurt. Hurt—yes, that's the right word. She looked as though she needed comforting or helping, even when she was perfectly all right. Men felt more like men when she was near. Her name was Elizabeth.

Who would have thought that her name would ring loud and clear in the wild vomiting nothing which made up space?

He took an old, old rocket, of an ancient design. With it he outflew, outfled, out-jumped all the machines which had ever existed before. You might almost think that he went so fast that he shocked the great vaults of the sky, so that the ancient poem might have been written for him alone. "All the stars threw down their spears and watered heaven with their tears."

Go he did, so fast, so far that people simply did not believe it at first. They thought it was a joke told by men, a farce spun forth by rumor, a wild story to while away the summer afternoon.

We know his name now.

And our children and their children will know it for always.

Rambo. Artyr Rambo of Earth Four.

But he followed his Elizabeth where no space was. He went where men could not go, had not been, did not dare, would not think.

He did all this of his own free will.

Of course people thought it was a joke at first, and got to making up silly songs about the reported trip.

"Dig me a hole for that reeling feeling. . . !" sang one.

"Push me the call for the umber number. . . !" sang another.

"Where is the ship of the ochre joker. . . ?" sang a third.

Then people everywhere found it was true. Some stood stock still and got goose-flesh. Others turned quickly to everyday things. Space3 had been found, and it had been pierced. Their world would never be the same again. The solid rock had become an open door.

Space itself, so clean, so empty, so tidy, now looked like a million million light-years of tapioca pudding—gummy, mushy, sticky, not fit to breathe, not fit to swim in.

How did it happen?

Everybody took the credit, each in his own different way.

"He came for me," said Elizabeth. "I died and he came for me because the machines were making a mess of my life when they tried to heal my terrible, useless death."

"I went myself," said Rambo. "They tricked me and lied to me and fooled me, but I took the boat and I became the boat and I got there. Nobody made me do it. I was angry, but I went. And I

came back, didn't I?"

He too was right, even when he twisted and whined on the green grass of earth, his ship lost in a space so terribly far and strange that it might have been beneath his living hand, or might have been half a galaxy away.

How can anybody tell, with space three?

It was Rambo who got back, looking for his Elizabeth. He loved her. So the trip was his, and the credit his.

But the Lord Crudelta said, many years later, when he spoke in a soft voice and talked confidently among his friends, "The experiment was mine. I designed it, I picked Rambo. I drove the selectors mad, trying to find a man who would meet those specifications. And I had that rocket built to the old, old plans. It was the sort of thing which human beings first used when they jumped out of the air a little bit, leaping like flying fish from one wave to the next and already thinking that they were eagles. If I had used one of the regular platform ships, it would have disappeared with a sort of reverse gurgle, leaving space milky for a little bit while it faded into nastiness and obliteration. But I did not risk that. I put the rocket on a launching pad. And the launching pad itself was an interstellar ship! Since we were using an ancient rocket, we did it up right, with the old, old writing, mysterious letters printed all over the machine. We even had the name of our Organization—I and O and M—for 'the Instrumentality of Mankind' written on it good and sharp.

"How would I know," went on Lord Crudelta, "that we would succeed more than we wanted to succeed, that Rambo would tear space itself loose from its hinges and leave that ship behind, just because he loved Elizabeth so sharply much, so fiercely much?"

Crudelta sighed.

"I know it and I don't know it. I'm like that ancient man who tried to take a water boat the wrong way around the planet Earth and found a new world instead. Columbus, he was called. And the land, that was Australia or America or something like that. That's what I did. I sent Rambo out in that ancient rocket and he found a way

through space,. Now none of us will ever know who might come bulking through the floor or take shape out of the air in front of us.

Crudelta added, almost wistfully: "What's the use of telling the story? Everybody knows it, anyhow. My part in it isn't very glorious. Now the end of it, that's pretty. The bungalow by the waterfall and all the wonderful children that other people gave to them, you could write a poem about that. But the next to the end, how he showed up at the hospital helpless and insane, looking for his own Elizabeth. That was sad and eerie, that was frightening. I'm glad it all came to the happy ending with the bungalow by the waterfall, but it took a crashing long time to get there. And there are parts of it that we will never quite understand, the naked skin against naked space, the eyeballs riding something much faster than light ever was. Do you know what an aoudad is? It's an ancient sheep that used to live on Old Earth, and here we are, thousands of years later, with a children's nonsense rhyme about it. The animals are gone but the rhyme remains. It'll be like that with Rambo someday. Everybody will know his name and all about his drunkboat, but they will forget the scientific milestone that he crossed, hunting for Elizabeth in an ancient rocket that couldn't fly from peetle to pootle. ... Oh, the rhyme? Don't you know that? It's a silly thing. It goes,

Point your gun at a murky lurky.

(Now you 're talking ham or turkey!)

Shoot a shot at a dying aoudad.

(Don't ask the lady why or how, dad!)

Don't ask me what 'ham' and 'turkey' are. Probably parts of ancient animals, like beefsteak or



sirloin. But the children still say the words. They'll do that with Rambo and his drunken boat someday. They may even tell the story of Elizabeth. But they will never tell the part about how he got to the hospital. That part is too terrible, too real, too sad and wonderful at the end. They found him on the grass. Mind you, naked on the grass, and nobody knew where he had come from!"

They found him naked on the grass and nobody knew where he had come from. They did not even know about the ancient rocket which the Lord Crudelta had sent beyond the end of nowhere with the letters I, O, and M written on it. They did not know that this was Rambo, who had gone through space three. The robots noticed him first and brought him in, photographing everything that they did. They had been programmed that way, to make sure that anything unusual was kept in the records.

Then the nurses found him in the outside room.

They assumed that he was alive, since he was not dead, but they could not prove that he was alive, either.

That heightened the puzzle.

The doctors were called in. Real doctors, not machines. They were very important men. Citizen Doctor Timofeyev, Citizen Doctor Grosbeck, and the director himself, Sir and Doctor Vomact. They took the case.

(Over on the other side of the hospital Elizabeth waited, unconscious, and nobody knew it at all. Elizabeth, for whom he had jumped space, and pierced the stars, but nobody knew it yet!)

The young man could not speak. When they ran eyeprints and fingerprints through the Population Machine, they found that he had been bred on Earth itself,

but had been shipped out as a frozen and unborn baby to Earth Four. At tremendous cost, they queried Earth Four with an "instant message," only to discover that the young man who lay before them in the hospital had been lost from an experimental ship on an intergalactic trip.

Lost.

No ship and no sign of ship.

And here he was.

They stood at the edge of space, and did not know what they were looking at. They were doctors and it was their business to repair or rebuild people, not to ship them around. How should such men know about space? when they did not even know about space2, except for the fact that people got on the planoform ships and made trips through it? They were looking for sickness when their eyes saw engineering. They treated him when he was well.

All he needed was time, to get over the shock of the most tremendous trip ever made by a human being, but the doctors did not know that and they tried to rush his recovery.

When they put clothes on him, he moved from coma to a kind of mechanical spasm and tore the clothing off. Once again stripped, he lay himself roughly on the floor and refused food or speech.

They fed him with needles while the whole energy of space, had they only known it, was radiating out of his body in new forms.

They put him all by himself in a locked room and watched him through the peephole.

He was a nice-looking young man, even though his mind was blank and his body was rigid and unconscious. His hair was very fair and his eyes were light blue, but his face showed character—a square chin; a handsome, resolute sullen mouth; old lines in the face which looked as though, when conscious, he must have lived many days or months on the edge of rage.

When they studied him the third day in the hospital, their patient had not changed at all.

He had torn off his pajamas again and lay naked, face down, on the floor.

His body was as immobile and tense as it had been on the day before.

(One year Inter, this room was going to be a museum with a bronze sign reading, "Here lay Rambo after he left the Old Rocket for Space Three," but the doctors still had no idea of what they were dealing with.)

His face was turned so sharply to the left that the neck muscles showed. His right arm stuck out straight from the body. The left arm formed an exact right angle from the body, with the left forearm and hand pointing rigidly upward at 90° from the upper arm. The legs were in the grotesque parody of a running position.

Doctor Grosbeck said, "It looks to me like he's swimming. Let's drop him in a tank of water and see if he moves." Grosbeck sometimes went in for drastic solutions to problems.

Timofeyev took his place at the peephole. "Spasm, still," he murmured. "I hope the poor fellow is not feeling pain when his cortical defenses are down. How can a man fight pain if he does not even know what he is experiencing?"

"And you, sir and doctor," said Grosbeck to Vomact, "what do you see?"

Vomact did not need to look. He had come early and had looked long and quietly at the patient through the peephole before the other doctors arrived. Vomact was a

wise man, with good insight and rich intuitions. He could guess in an hour more than a machine could diagnose in a year; he was beginning to understand that this was a sickness which no man had ever had before. Still, there were remedies waiting.

The three doctors tried them.

They tried hypnosis, electrotherapy, massage, subsonics, atropine, surgital, a whole family of the digitalinids, and some quasi-narcotic viruses which had been grown in orbit where they mutated fast. They got the beginning of a response when they tried gas hypnosis combined with an electronically amplified telepath; this showed that something still went on inside the patient's mind. Otherwise the brain might have seemed to be mere fatty tissue, without a nerve in it. The other attempts had shown nothing. The gas showed a faint stirring away from fear and pain. The telepath reported glimpses of unknown skies. (The doctors turned the telepath over to the Space Police promptly, so they could try to code the star patterns which he had seen in a patient's mind, but the patterns did not fit. The telepath, though a keenwitted man, could not remember them in enough detail for them to be scanned against the samples of piloting sheets.)

The doctors went back to their drugs and tried ancient, simple remedies— morphine and caffeine to counteract each other, and a rough massage to make him dream again, so that the telepath could pick it up.

There was no further result that day, or the next.

Meanwhile the Earth authorities were getting restless. They thought, quite rightly, that the hospital had done a good job of proving that the patient had not been on Earth until a few moments before the robots found him on the grass. How had he gotten on the grass?

The airspace of Earth reported no intrusion at all, no vehicle marking a blazing arc of air incandescing against metal, no whisper of the great forces which drove a piano-form ship through space<sup>2</sup>. i

(Crudelta, using faster-than-light ships, was creeping slow as a snail back toward I Earth, racing his best to see if Rambo had gotten there first.) ~~~'

On the fifth day, there was the beginning of a breakthrough.

Elizabeth had passed.

This was found out only much later, by a careful check of the hospital records.

The doctors only knew this much: Patients had been moved down the corridor, sheet-covered figures immobile on wheeled beds.

Suddenly the beds stopped rolling.

A nurse screamed.

The heavy steel-and-plastic wall was bending inward. Some slow, silent force was pushing the wall into the corridor itself.

The wall ripped. \*

A human hand emerged.

One of the quick-witted nurses screamed, "Push those beds! Push them out of the way."

The nurses and robots obeyed.

The beds rocked like a group of boats crossing a wave when they came to the place where the floor, bonded to the wall, had bent upward to meet the wall as it tore inward. The peace-colored glow of the lights flickered. Robots appeared.

A second human hand came through the wall. Pushing in opposite directions, the hands tore the wall as though it had been wet paper.

The patient from the grass put his head through.

He looked blindly up and down the corridor, his eyes not quite focusing, his skin glowing a strange red-brown from the burns of open space.

"No," he said. Just that one word.

But that "No" was heard. Though the volume was not loud, it carried throughout the hospital. The internal telecommunications system relayed it. Jxery\_switch in the \_p\_jace went\_negaliye. Frantic nurses and robots, with even the doctors helpingT" rusEedTcTturn all the machines back on — the pumps, the ventilators, the artificial kidneys, the brain re-recorders, even the simple air engines which kept the atmosphere clean.

Far overhead an aircraft spun giddily. Its "off" switch, surrounded by triple safeguards, had suddenly been thrown into the negative position. Fortunately the robot-pilot got it going again before crashing into earth.

The patient did not seem to know that his word had this effect.

(Later the world knew that this was part of the "drunkboat effect." The man himself had developed the capacity Jbr..using^ his neurophysical system as a machine"

In the corridor, the machine robot who served as policeman arrived. He wore sterile, padded velvet gloves with a grip of sixty metric tons inside his hands. He approached the patient. The robot had been carefully trained to recognize all kinds of danger from delirious or psychotic humans; later he reported that he had an input of "danger, extreme" on every band of sensation. He had been expecting to seize the prisoner with irreversible firmness and to return him to his bed, but with this kind of danger sizzling in the air, the robot took no chances. His wrist itself contained a hypodermic pistol which operated on compressed argon.

He reached out toward the unknown, naked man who stood in the big torn gap in the wall. The wrist-weapon hissed and a sizeable injection of condamine, the most powerful narcotic in the known universe, spat its way through the skin of Rambo's neck. The patient collapsed.

The robot picked him up gently and tenderly, lifted him through the torn wall, pushed the door open with a kick which broke the lock and put the patient back on his bed. The robot could hear doctors coming, so he used his enormous hands to pat the steel wall back into its proper shape. Work-robots or underpeople could finish the job later, but meanwhile it looked better to have that part of the building set at right angles again.

Doctor Vomact arrived, followed closely by Grosbeck.

"What happened?" he yelled, shaken out of a lifelong calm. The robot pointed at the ripped wall.

"He tore it open. I put it back," said the robot.

The doctors turned to look at the patient. He had crawled off his bed again and was on the floor, but his breathing was light and natural.

"What did you give him?" cried Vomact to the robot.

"Condamine," said the robot, "according to rule 47-B. The drug is not to be mentioned outside the hospital."

"I know that," said Vomact absentmindedly and a little crossly. "You can go along now. Thank you."

"It is not usual to thank robots," said the robot, "but you can read a commendation into my record if you want to."

"Get the blazes out of here!" shouted Vomact at the officious robot.

The robot blinked. "There are no blazes but I have the impression you mean me. I shall leave, with your permission." He jumped with odd gracefulness around the two doctors, fingered the broken doorlock absentmindedly, as though he might have wished to repair it; and then, seeing Vomact glare at him, left the room completely.

A moment later soft muted thuds began. Both doctors listened for a moment and then gave up. The robot was out in the corridor, gently patting the steel floor back into shape. He was a tidy robot, probably animated by an amplified chicken-brain, and when he got tidy he became obstinate.

"Two questions, Grosbeck," said the sir and doctor Vomact.

"Our service, sir!"

"Where was the patient standing when he pushed the wall into the corridor, and how did he get the leverage to do it?"

Grosbeck narrowed his eyes in puzzlement. "Now that you mention it, I have no idea of how he did it. In fact, he could not have done it. But he has. And the other question?"

"What do you think of condamine?"

"Dangerous, of course, as always. Addiction can—"

"Can you have addiction with no cortical activity?" interrupted Vomact.

"Of course," said Grosbeck promptly. "Tissue addiction."

"Look for it, then," said Vomact.

Grosbeck knelt beside the patient and felt with his fingertips for the muscle endings. He felt where they knotted themselves into the base of the skull, the tips of the shoulders, the striped area of the back.

When he stood up there was a look of puzzlement on his face. "I never felt a human body like this one before. I am not even sure that it is human any longer."

Vomact said nothing. The two doctors confronted one another. Grosbeck fidgeted under the calm stare of the senior man. Finally he blurted out,

"Sir and Doctor, I know what we could do."

"And that," said Vomact levelly, without the faintest hint of encouragement or of warning, "is what?"

"It wouldn't be the first time that it's been done in a hospital."

"What?" said Vomact, his eyes—those dreaded eyes!—making Grosbeck say what he did not want to say.

Grosbeck flushed. He leaned toward Vomact so as to whisper, even though there was no one standing near them. His words, when they came, had a lover's improper suggestion:

"Kill the patient, Sir and Doctor. Kill him. We have plenty of records of him. We can get a cadaver out of the basement and make it into a good simulacrum. Who knows what we will turn loose ^monfjg^kjnd\_\_tfjwejft\_h^ni\_fet well?^\_\_\_ x^-iiWh^n^ws?\*^saicT^6TrlaTf^iffiouttone or quality to his voice. TtBTS73tlze"n and doctor, what is the twelfth duty of a physician?"

" 'Not to take the law into his own hands, keeping healing for the healers and giving to the state or the Instrumentality whatever property belongs to the state or the Instrumentality.' " Grosbeck sighed as he retracted his own suggestion. "Sir and Doctor, I take it back. It wasn't medicine which I was talking about. It was govern-

ment and politics which were really in my mind." "And now? . . ." asked Vomact. "Heal him, or let him be until he heals himself." "And which would you do?" "I'd try to heal him." "How?" said Vomact.

"Sir and Doctor," cried Grosbeck, "do not ride my weaknesses in this case! I know that you like me because I am a bold, confident sort of man. Do not ask me to be myself when we do not even know where this body came from. If I were bold as usual, I would give him typhoid and condamine, stationing telepaths nearby. But this is something new in the history of man. We are people and perhaps he is not a person any more. Perhaps he represents the combination of people with some kind of new force. How did he get here from the far side of nowhere? How many million times has he been enlarged or reduced? We do not know what he is or what has happened to him. How can we treat a man when we are treating the cold of space, the heat of sunsvthe frigidity of distance? We know what to do with flesh, but this is not quite flesh any more. Feel him yourself, Sir and Doctor! You will touch something which nobody has ever touched before."

"I have," Vomact declared, "already felt him. "You are right. We will try typhoid and condamine for half a day. Twelve hours from now let us meet each other at this place. I will tell the nurses and the robots what to do in the interim."

They both gave the red-tanned spread-eagled figure on the floor a parting glance. Grosbeck looked at the body with something like distaste mingled with fear; Vomact was expressionless, save for a wry wan smile of pity.

At the door the head nurse awaited them. Grosbeck was surprised at his chiefs orders.

"Ma'am and nurse, do you have a weapon-proof vault in this hospital?" "es, sir," she said. "We used to keep our records in it until we telemetered all our records into Computer Orbit. Now it is dirty and empty."

"Clean it out. Run a ventilator tube into it. Who is your military protector?" "My what?" she cried, in surprise.

"Everyone on Earth has military protection. Where are the forces, the soldiers, who protect this hospital of yours?"

"My sir and doctor!" she called out. "My sir and doctor! I'm an old woman and I have been allowed to work here for three hundred years, but I never thought of that idea before. Why would I need soldiers?"

"Find who they are and ask them to stand by. They are specialists, too, with a different kind of art from ours. Let them stand by. They may be needed before this day is out. Give my name as authority to their lieutenant or sergeant. Now here is the medication which I want you to apply to this patient."

Her eyes widened as he went on talking, but she was a disciplined woman and she nodded as she heard him out, point by point. Her eyes looked very sad and weary at the end but she was a trained expert and she had enormous respect for the skill and wisdom of the Sk and Doctor Vomact. She also had a warm, feminine pity for the motionless young male figure on the floor, swimming forever on the heavy floor, swimming between archipelagoes of which no man living had ever dreamed before.

Crisis came that night.

The patient had worn handprints into the inner wall of the vault, but he had not escaped.

The soldiers, looking oddly alert with their weapons gleaming in the bright corridor of the hospital, were really very bored, as soldiers always become when they are on duty with no action.

Their lieutenant was keyed up. The wirepoint in his hand buzzed like a dangerous insect. Sir and Doctor Vomact, who knew more about weapons than the soldiers thought he knew, saw that the wirepoint was set to HIGH, with a capacity of paralyzing people five stories up, five stories down, or a kilometer sideways. He said noth-ing. He merely thanked the lieutenant and entered the vault, closely followed by Grosbeck and Timofeyev.

The patient swam here, too.

He had changed to an arm-over-arm motion, kicking his legs against the floor. It was as though he had swum on the other floor with the sole purpose of staying afloat, and had now discovered some direction in which to go, albeit very slowly. His motions were deliberate, tense, rigid, and so reduced in time that it seemed as though he hardly moved at all. The ripped pajamas lay on the floor beside him.

Vomact glanced around, wondering what forces the man could have used to make those handprints on the steel wall. He remembered Grosbeck's warning that the patient should die, rather than subject all mankind to new and unthought risks, but though he shared the feeling, he could not condone the recommendation.

Almost irritably, the doctor thought to himself—where could the man be going?

(To Elizabeth, the truth was, to Elizabeth, now only sixty meters away. Not till much later did people understand what Rambo had been trying to do—crossing sixty mere meters to reach his Elizabeth when he had already jumped an un-count of light-years to return to her. To his own, his dear, his well-beloved who needed him!)

The condamine did not leave its characteristic mark of deep lassitude and glowing skin: perhaps the typhoid was successfully contradicting it. Rambo did seem more lively than before. The name had come through on the regular message system, but it still did not mean anything to the Sir and Doctor Vomact. It would. It would.

Meanwhile the other two doctors, briefed ahead of time, got busy with the apparatus which the robots and the nurses had installed.

Vomact murmured to the others, " I think he's better off. Looser all around. I' 11 try shouting."

So busy were they that they just nodded.

Vomact screamed at the patient, "Who are you? What are you? Where do you come from?"

The sad blue eyes of the patient glanced at him with a surprisingly quick glance, but there was no other real sign of communication. The limbs kept up their swim against the rough concrete floor of the vault. Two of the bandages which the hospital staff had put on him had worn off again. The right knee, scraped and bruised, deposited a sixty-centimeter trail of blood—some old and black and coagulated, some fresh, new and liquid—on the floor as it moved back and forth.

Vomact stood up and spoke to Grosbeck and Timofeyev. "Now," he said, "let us see what happens when we apply the pain."

The two stepped back without being told to do so.

Timofeyev waved his hand at a small white-enameled orderly-robot who stood in the doorway.

The pain net, a fragile cage of wires, dropped down from the ceiling.

It was Vomact's duty, as senior doctor, to take the greatest risk. The patient was wholly encased by the net of wires, but Vomact dropped to his hands and knees, lifted the net at one corner with his right hand, thrust his own head into it next to the head of the patient. Doctor Vomact's robe trailed on the clean concrete, touching the black old stains of blood left from the patient's "swim" throughout the night.

Now Vomact's mouth was centimeters from the patient's ear.

Said Vomact, "Oh."

The net hummed.

The patient stopped his slow motion, arched his back, looked steadfastly at the doctor.

Doctors Grosbeck and Timofeyev could see Vomact's face go white with the impact of the pain machine, but Vomact kept his voice under control and said evenly and loudly to the patient, "Who—are—you?"

The patient said flatly, "Elizabeth."

The answer was foolish, but the tone was rational.

Vomact pulled his head out from under the net, shouting at the patient, "'Who—are—you?"

The naked man replied, speaking very clearly:

"Chwinkle, chwinkle, little chweeble I am feeling very feeble!"

Vomact frowned and murmured to the robot, "More pain. Turn it up to pain ultimate."

The body thrashed under the net, trying to resume its swim on the concrete.

A loud wild braying cry came from the victim under the net. It sounded like a screamed distortion of the name Elizabeth, echoing out from endless remoteness.

It did not make sense.

Vomact screamed back, "Who—are—you?"

With unexpected clarity and resonance, the voice came back to the three doctors from the twisting body under the net of pain:

"I'm the shipped man, the ripped man, the gypped man, the dipped man, the hipped man, the tripped man, the tipped man, the slipped man, the flipped man, the nipped man, the ripped man, the

clipped man—aah!" His voice choked off with a cry and he went back to swimming on the floor, despite the intensity of the pain net immediately above him.

The doctor lifted his hand. The pain net stopped buzzing and lifted high into the air.

He felt the patient's puke. It was quick. He lifted an eyelid. The reactions were much closer to normal.

"Stand back," he said to the others.

"Pain on both of us," he said to the robot.

The net came down on the two of them.

"Who are you?" shrieked Vomact, right into the patient's ear, holding the man halfway off the floor and not quite knowing whether the body which tore steel walls might not, somehow, tear both of them apart as they stood.

The man babbled back at him, "I'm the most man, the post man, the host man.

the ghost man, the coast man, the boast man, the dosed man, the grossed man, the toast man, the roast man, no! no! no!"

He struggled in Vomact's arms. Grosbeck and Timofeyev stepped forward to rescue their chief when the patient added, very calmly and clearly:

"Your procedure is all right, doctor, whoever you are. More fever, please. More pain, please. Some of that dope to fight the pain. You're pulling me back. I know I am on Earth. Elizabeth is near. For the love of God, get me Elizabeth! But don't rush me. I need days and days to get well."

The rationality was so startling that Grosbeck, without waiting for orders from Vomact, as chief doctor, ordered the pain net lifted.

The patient began babbling again: "I'm the three man, the he man, the tree man, the me man, the three man, the three man. ..." His voice faded and he slumped unconscious.

Vomact walked out of the vault. He was a little unsteady.

His colleagues took him by the elbows.

He smiled wanly at them: "I wish it were lawful. ... I could use some of that con-damine myself. No wonder the pain nets wake the patients up and even make dead people do twitches! Get me some liquor. My heart is old."

Grosbeck sat him down while Timofeyev ran down the corridor in search of medicinal liquor.

Vomact murmured, "How are we going to find his Elizabeth? There must be millions of them. And he's from Earth Four too."

"Sir and Doctor, you have worked wonders," said Grosbeck. "To go under the net. To take those chances. To bring him to speech. I will never see anything like it again. It's enough for any one lifetime, to have seen this day."

"But what do we do next?" asked Vomact wearily, almost in confusion.

That particular question needed no answer.

The Lord Crudelta had reached Earth.

His pilot landed the craft and fainted at the controls with sheer exhaustion.

Of the escort cats, who had ridden alongside the space craft in the miniature spaceships, three were dead, one was comatose, and the fourth was spitting and raving.



When the port authorities tried to slow the Lord Crudelta down to ascertain his authority, he invoked Top Emergency, took over the command of troops in the name of the Instrumentality, arrested everyone in sight but the troop commander, and requisitioned the troop commander to take him to the hospital. The computers at the port had told him that one Rambo, "sans origine," had arrived mysteriously on the grass of a designated hospital.

Outside the hospital, the Lord Crudelta invoked Top Emergency again, placed all armed men under his own command, ordered a recording monitor to cover all his actions if he should later be channeled into a court-martial, and arrested everyone in sight.

The tramp of heavily armed men, marching in combat order, overtook Timofeyev as he hurried back to Vomact with a drink. The men were jogging along on the double. All of them had live helmets and their weapons were buzzing.

Nurses ran forward to drive the intruders out, ran backward when the sting of the stun-rays brushed cruelly over them. The whole hospital was in an uproar.

The Lord Crudelta later admitted that he had made a serious mistake.

The Two Minutes' War broke out immediately.

You have to understand the pattern of the Instrumentality to see how it happened. The Instrumentality was a self-perpetuating body of men with enormous powers and a strict code. Each was a plenum of the low, the middle, and the high justice. Each could do anything he found necessary or proper to maintain the Instrumentality and to keep the peace between the worlds. But if he made a mistake or committed a wrong—ah, then, it was suddenly different. Any Lord could put another Lord to death in an emergency, but he was assured of death and disgrace himself if he assumed this responsibility. The only difference between ratification and repudiation came in the fact that Lords who killed in an emergency and were proved wrong were marked down on a very shameful list, while those who killed other Lords rightly (as later examination might prove) were listed on a very honorable list, but still killed. With three Lords, the situation was different. Three lords made an emergency court; if they acted together, acted in good faith, and reported to the computers and the Instrumentality, they were exempt from punishment, though not from blame or even reduction to citizen status. Seven Lords, or all the Lords on a given planet at a given moment, were beyond any criticism except that of a dignified reversal of their actions should a later ruling prove them wrong.

This was all the business of the Instrumentality. The Instrumentality had the perpetual slogan: "Watch, but do not govern; stop war, but do not wage it; protect, but do not control; and first, survive!"

The Lord Crudelta had seized the troops—not his troops, but light regular troops of Manhome Government—because he feared that the greatest danger in the history of man might come from the person whom he himself had sent through Space 3.

He never expected that the troops would be plucked out from his command—an overriding power reinforced by robotic telepathy and the incomparable communications net, both open and secret, reinforced by thousands of years in trickery, defeat, secrecy, victory, and sheer experience, which the Instrumentality had perfected since it emerged from the Ancient Wars. Overriding, overridden!

These were the commands which the Instrumentality had used before recorded time began. Sometimes they suspended their antagonists on points of law, sometimes by the deft and deadly insertion of weapons, most often by cutting in on other peoples' mechanical and social controls and doing their will, only to drop the controls as suddenly as they had taken them. But not Crudelta's hastily called troops. The war broke out with a change of pace.

The two squads of men were moving into that part of the hospital where Elizabeth lay, waiting the endless returns to the jelly baths which would rebuild her poor ruined body.

The squads changed pace.

The survivors could not account for what happened. They all admitted to great mental confusion—afterward.

At the time it seemed that they had received a clear, logical command to turn and to defend the women's section by counterattacking their own main battalion right in their rear.

The hospital was a very strong building. Otherwise it would have melted to the ground or shot up in flame.

The leading soldiers suddenly turned around, dropped for cover and blazed their wirepoints at the comrades who followed them. The wirepoints were cued to organic material, though fairly harmless to inorganic. They were powered by the power relays which every soldier wore on his back.

In the first ten seconds of the turnaround, twenty-seven soldiers, two nurses, three patients, and one orderly were killed. One hundred and nine other people were wounded in that first exchange of fire.

The troop commander had never seen battle, but he had been well trained. He immediately deployed his reserves around the external exits of the building and sejit his favorite squad, commanded by a Sergeant Lansdale whom he trusted well, down into the basement, so that it could rise vertically from the basement into the women's quarters and find out who the enemy was.

As yet, he had no idea that it was his own leading troops turning and fighting their comrades.

He testified later, at the trial, that he personally had no sensations of eerie interference with his own mind. He merely knew that his men had unexpectedly come upon armed resistance from antagonists—identity unknown!—who had weapons identical with theirs. Since the Lord Crudelta had brought them along in case there might be a fight with unspecified antagonists, he felt right in assuming that a Lord of the Instrumentality knew what he was doing. This was the enemy all right.

In less than a minute, the two sides had balanced out. The line of fire had moved right into his own force. The lead men, some of whom were wounded, simply turned around and began defending themselves against the men immediately behind them. It was as though an invisible line, moving rapidly, had parted the two sections of the military force.

The oily black smoke of dissolving bodies began to glut the ventilators.

Patients were screaming, doctors cursing, robots stamping around, and nurses trying to call each other.

The war ended when the troop commander saw Sergeant Lansdale, whom he himself had sent upstairs, leading a charge out of the women's quarters—directly at his own commander!

The officer kept his head.

He dropped to the floor and rolled sideways as the air cluttered at him, the emanations of Lansdale's wirepoint killing all the tiny bacteria in the air. On his helmet phone he pushed the manual controls to TOP VOLUME and to NON-COMS ONLY, and he commanded, with a sudden flash of brilliant mother-wit, "Good job, Lansdale!"

Lansdale's voice came back as weak as if it had been off-planet, "We'll keep them out of this section yet, sir!"

The troop commander called back very loudly but calmly, not letting on that he thought his sergeant was psychotic.

"Easy now. Hold on. I'll be with you."

He changed to the other channel and said to his nearby men, "Cease fire. Take cover and wait."

A wild scream came to him from the phones.

It was Lansdale. "Sir! Sir! I'm fighting you, sir. I just caught on. It's getting me again. Watch out."

The buzz and burr of the weapons suddenly stopped.

The wild human uproar in the hospital continued.

A tall doctor, with the insignia of high seniority, came gently to the troop commander and said, "You can stand up and take your soldiers out now, young fellow. The fight was a mistake."

"I'm not under your orders," snapped the young officer. "I'm under the Lord Crudelta. He requisitioned this force from the Manhome Government. Who are you?"

"bu may salute me, captain," said the doctor. "I am Colonel General Vomact of the Earth Medical Reserve. But you had better not wait for the Lord Crudelta."

"But wAereishe?"

"In my bed," said Vomact.

"bur bed?" cried the young officer in complete amazement.

"In bed. Doped to the teeth. I fixed him up. He was excited. Take your men out. We'll treat the wounded on the lawn. You can see the dead in the refrigerators downstairs in a few minutes, except for the ones that went smoky from direct hits."

"But the fight . . . ?"

"A mistake, young man, or else—"

"Or else what?" shouted the young officer, horrified at the utter mess of his own combat experience.

"Or else a weapon no man has ever seen before, "four troops fought each other. Your command was intercepted"

"I could see that," snapped the officer, "as soon as I saw Lansdale coming at me."

"But do you know what took him over?" said Vomact gently, while taking the officer by the arm and beginning to lead him out of the hospital. The captain went willingly, not noticing where he was going, so eagerly did he watch for the other man's words.

"I think I know," said Vomact. "Another man's dreams. Dreams which have learned how to turn themselves into electricity or plastic or stone. Or anything else. Dreams coming to us out of space three."

The young officer nodded dumbly. This was too much. "Space three?" he murmured. It was like being told that the really alien invaders, whom men had been expecting for thirteen thousand years and had never met, were waiting for him on the grass. Until now space three had been a mathematical idea, a romancer's daydream, but not a fact.

The sir and doctor Vomact did not even ask the young officer. He brushed the young man gently at the nape of the neck and shot him through with tranquilizer. Vomact then led him out to the grass. The young captain stood alone and whistled happily at the stars in the sky. Behind him, his sergeants and corporals were sorting out the survivors and getting treatment for the wounded.

The Two Minutes' War was over.

Rambo had stopped dreaming that his Elizabeth was in danger. He had recognized, even in his deep sick sleep, that the tramping in the corridor was the movement of armed men. His mind

had set up defenses to protect Elizabeth. He took over command of the forward troops and set them to stopping the main body. The powers which space 3 had worked into him made this easy for him to do, even though he did not know that he was doing it.

"How many dead?" said Vomact to Grosbeck and Timofeyev.

"About two hundred."

"And how many irrevocable dead?"

"The ones that got turned into smoke. A dozen, maybe fourteen. The other dead can be fixed up, but most of them will have to get new personality prints."

"Do you know what happened?" asked Vomact.

"No, Sir and Doctor," they both chorused.

"I do. I think I do. No, I know I do. It's the wildest story in the history of man. Our patient did it—Rambo. He took over the troops and set them against each other. That Lord of the Instrumentality who came charging in—Crudelta. I've known him for a long long time. He's behind this case. He thought that troops would help, not sensing that troops would invite attack upon themselves. And there is something else."

"its?" they said, in unison.

"Rambo's woman—the one he's looking for. She must be here."

"Why?" asked Timofeyev.

"Because he's here."

"%u're assuming that he came here because of his own will, Sir and Doctor."

Vomact smiled the wise crafty smile of his family; it was almost a trademark of the , Vomact house.

"I am assuming all the things which I cannot otherwise prove.

"First, I assume that he came here naked out of space itself, driven by some kind of force of which we cannot even guess.

"Second, I assume he came here because he wanted something. A woman named Elizabeth, who must already be here. In a moment we can go inventory all our Elizabeths.

"Third, I assume that the Lord Crudelta knew something about it. He has led troops into the building. He began raving when he saw me. I know hysterical fatigue, as do you, my brothers, so I condemned him for a night's sleep.

"Fourth, let's leave our man alone. There'll be hearings and trials enough, Space knows, when all these events get scrambled out."

Vomact was right.

He usually was.

Trials did follow.

It was lucky that Old Earth no longer permitted newspapers or television news. The population would have been frothed up to riot and terror if they had ever found out what happened at the Old Main Hospital just to the west of Meeya Meefla.

Twenty-one days later, Vomact, Timofeyev, and Grosbeck were summoned to the trial of the Lord Crudelta. A fall panel of seven Lords of the Instrumentality were there to give Crudelta an ample hearing and, if required, a sudden death. The doctors were present both as doctors for Elizabeth and Rambo and as witnesses for the Investigating Lord.

Elizabeth, fresh up from being dead, was as beautiful as a newborn baby in exquisite, adult feminine form. Rambo could not take his eyes off her, but a look of bewilderment went over his face every time she gave him a friendly, calm remote little smile. (She had been told that she was his girl, and she was prepared to believe it, but she had no memory of him or of anything else more than sixty hours back, when speech had been reinstalled in her mind; and he, for his part, was still thick of speech and subject to strains which the doctors could not quite figure out.)

The Investigating Lord was a man named Starmount.

He asked the panel to rise.

They did so.

He faced the Lord Crudelta with great solemnity. "You are obliged, my Lord Crude-lta, to speak quickly and clearly to this court."

"Yes, my Lord," he answered.

"We have the summary power."

"You have the summary power. I recognize it."

"You will tell the truth or else you will lie."

"I shall tell the truth or I will lie."

"You may lie, if you wish, about matters of fact and opinion, but you will in no case lie about human relationships. If you do lie, nevertheless, you will ask that your name be entered in the Roster of Dishonor."

"I understand the panel and the rights of this panel. I will lie if I wish—though I don't think I will need to do so"—and here Crudelta flashed a weary intelligent smile at all of them—"but I will not lie about matters of relationships. If I do, I will ask for dishonor."

"You have yourself been well trained as a Lord of the Instrumentality?"

"I have been so trained and I love the Instrumentality well. In fact, I am myself the Instrumentality, as are you, and as are all the honorable Lords beside you. I shall behave well, for as long as I live this afternoon."

"Do you credit him, my Lords?" asked Starmount.

The members of the panel nodded their mitred heads. They had dressed ceremonially for the occasion.

"Do you have a relationship to the woman Elizabeth?"

The members of the trial panel caught their breath as they saw Crudelta turn white: "My Lords!" he cried, and answered no further.

"It is the custom," said Starmount firmly, "that you answer promptly or that you die."

The Lord Crudelta got control of himself. "I am answering. I did not know who she was, except for the fact that Rambo loved her. I sent her to Earth from Earth Four, where I then was. Then I told Rambo that she had been murdered and hung desperately at the edge of death, wanting only his help to return to the green fields of life."

Said Starmount, "Was that the truth?"

"My Lord and Lords, it was a lie."

"Why did you tell it?"

"To induce rage in Rambo and to give him an overriding reason for wanting to come to Earth faster than any man has ever come before."

"A-a-ah! A-a-ah!" Two wild cries came from Rambo, more like the call of an animal than like the sound of a man.

Vomact looked at his patient, felt himself beginning to growl with a deep internal rage. Rambo's powers, generated in the depths of space,, had begun to operate again. Vomact made a sign. The robot behind Rambo had been coded to keep Rambo calm. Though the robot had been enameled to look like a white gleaming hospital orderly, he was actually a police robot of high powers, built up with an electronic cortex based on the frozen midbrain of an old wolf. (A wolf was a rare animal, something like a dog.) The robot touched Rambo, who dropped off to sleep. Doctor Vomact felt the anger in his own mind fade away. He lifted his hand gently; the robot

caught the signal and stopped applying the narcoleptic radiation. Rambo slept normally; Elizabeth looked worriedly at the man whom she had been told was her own.

The Lords turned back from the glances at Rambo.

Said Starmount, icily, "And why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted him to travel through space three."

"Why?"

"To show it could be done."

"And do you, my Lord Crudelta, affirm that this man has in fact traveled through space three?" . .:- »

"I do."

"Are you lying?"

"I have the right to lie, but I have no wish to do so. In the name of the Instrumentality itself, I tell you that this is the truth."

The panel members gasped. Now there was no way out. Either the Lord Crudelta was telling the truth, which meant that all former times had come to an end and that anew age had begun for all the kinds of mankind, or else he was lying in the face of the most powerful form of affirmation which any of them knew.

Even Starmount himself took a different tone. His teasing, restless, intelligent voice took on a new timbre of kindness.

"%u do therefore assert that this man has come back from outside our galaxy with nothing more than his own natural skin to cover him? No instruments? No power?"

"I did not say that," said Crudelta. "Other people have begun to pretend I used such words. I tell you, my Lords, that I planoformed for twelve consecutive Earth days and nights. Some of you may remember where Outpost Baiter Gator is. Well, I had a good Go-captain, and he took me four long jumps beyond there, out into in-tergalactic space. I left this man there. When I reached Earth, he had been here twelve days, more or less. I have assumed, therefore, that his trip was more or less instantaneous. I was on my way back to Baiter Gator, counting by Earth time, when the doctor here found this man on the grass outside the hospital."

Vomact raised his hand. The Lord Starmount gave him the right to speak. "My sirs and Lords, we did not find this man on the grass. The robots did, and made a record. But even the robots did not see or photograph his arrival."

"We know that," said Starmount angrily, "and we know that we have been told that nothing came to Earth by any means whatever, in that particular quarter hour. Go on, my Lord Crudelta. What relation are you to Rambo?"

"He is my victim."

"Explain yourself!"

"I computered him out. I asked the machines where I would be most apt to find a man with a tremendous lot of rage in him, and was informed that on Earth Four the rage level had been left high because that particular planet had a considerable need for explorers and adventurers, in whom rage was a strong survival trait. When I got to Earth Four, I commanded the authorities to find out which border cases had exceeded the limits of allowable rage. They gave me four men. One was much too large. Two were old. This man was the only candidate for my experiment. I chose him."

"What did you tell him?"

"Tell him? I told him his sweetheart was dead or dying."

"No, no," said Starmount. "Not at the moment of crisis. What did you tell him to make him cooperate in the first place?"

"I told him," said the Lord Crudelta evenly, "that I was myself a Lord of the Instrumentality and that I would kill him myself if he did not obey, and obey promptly."

"And under what custom or law did you act?"

"Reserved material," said the Lord Crudelta promptly. "There are telepaths here who are not a part of the Instrumentality. I beg leave to defer until we have a shielded place."

Several members of the panel nodded and Starmount agreed with them. He changed the line of questioning.

"You forced this man, therefore, to do something which he did not wish to do?"

"That is right," said the Lord Crudelta.

"Why didn't you go yourself, if it is that dangerous?"

"My Lords and honorables, it was the nature of the experiment that the experimenter himself should not be expended in the first try. Artyr Rambo has indeed traveled through space three. I shall follow him myself, in due course." (How the Lord Crudelta did do so is another tale, told about another time.) "If I had gone and if I had been lost, that would have been the end of the space-three trials. At least for our time."

"Tell us the exact circumstances under which you last saw Artyr Rambo before you met after the battle in the Old Main Hospital."

"We had put him in a rocket of the most ancient style. We also wrote writing on the outside of it, just the way the Ahcients did when they first ventured into space. Ah, that was a beautiful piece of engineering and archeology! We copied everything right down to the correct models of fourteen thousand years ago, when the Paroskii and Murkins were racing each other into space. The rocket was white, with a red and white gantry beside it. The letters IOM were on the rocket, not that the words mattered. The rocket has gone into nowhere, but the passenger sits here. It rose on a stool of fire. The stool became a column. Then the landing field disappeared."

"And the landing field," said Starmount quietly, "what was that?"

"A modified planoform ship. We have had ships go milky in space because they faded molecule by molecule. We have had others disappear utterly. The engineers had changed this around. We took out all the machinery needed for circumnavigation, for survival, or for comfort. The landing field was to last three or four seconds, no more. Instead, we put in fourteen planoform devices, all operating in tandem, so that the ship would do what other ships do when they planoform—namely, drop one of our familiar dimensions and pick up a new dimension from some unknown category of space—but do it with such force as to get out of what people call space two and move over into space three."

"And space three, what did you expect of that?"

"I thought that it was universal, and instantaneous, in relation to our universe. That everything was equally distant from everything else. That Rambo, wanting to see his girl again, would move in a thousandth of a second from the empty space beyond Outpost Baiter Gator into the hospital where she was." "And, my Lord Crudelta, what made you think so?" "A hunch, my Lord, for which you are welcome to kill me." Starmount turned to the panel. "I suspect, my Lords, that you are more likely to doom him to long life, great responsibility, immense rewards, and the fatigue of being his own difficult and complicated self."

The miters moved gently and the members of the panel rose. "You, my Lord Crudelta, will sleep till the trial is finished." A robot stroked him and he fell asleep. "Next witness," said the Lord Starmount, "in five minutes."

Vomact tried to keep Rambo from being heard as a witness. He argued fiercely with the Lord Starmount in the intermission. "You Lords have shot up my hospital, abducted two of my patients and now you are going to torment both Rambo and Elizabeth. Can't you leave them alone? Rambo is in no condition to give coherent answers and Elizabeth may be damaged if she sees him suffer."

The Lord Starmount said to him, "You have your rules, doctor, and we have ours. This trial is being recorded, inch by inch and moment by moment. Nothing is going to be done to Rambo unless we find that he has planet-killing powers. If that is true, of course, we will ask you to take him back to the hospital and to put him to death very pleasantly. But I don't think it will happen. We want his story so that we can judge my colleague Crudelta. Do you think that the Instrumentality would survive if it did not have fierce internal discipline?"

Vomact nodded sadly; he went back to Grosbeck and Timofeyev, murmuring sadly to them, "Rambo's in for it. There's nothing we could do."

The panel reassembled. They put on their judicial miters. The lights of the room darkened and the weird blue light of justice was turned on.

The robot orderly helped Rambo to the witness chair.

"You are obliged," said Starmount, "to speak quickly and clearly to this court."

"You're not Elizabeth," said Rambo.

"I am the Lord Starmount," said the Investigating Lord, quickly deciding to dispense with formalities. "Do you know me?"

"No," said Rambo.

"Do you know where you are?"

"Earth," said Rambo.

"Do you wish to lie or to tell the truth?"

"A lie," said Rambo, "is the only truth which men can share with each other, so I will tell you lies, the way we always do."

"Can you report your trip?"

"No."

"Why not, citizen Rambo?"

"Words won't describe it."

"Do you remember your trip?"

"Do you remember your pulse of two minutes ago?" countered Rambo.

"I am not playing with you," said Starmount. "We think you have been in space three and we



want you to testify about the Lord, Crudelta."

"Oh!" said Rambo. "I don't like him. I never did like him."

"Will you nevertheless try to tell us what happened to you?"

"Should I, Elizabeth?" asked Rambo of the girl, who sat in the audience.

She did not stammer. "Yes," she said, in a clear voice which rang through the big room. "Tell them, so that we can find our lives again."

"I will tell you," said Rambo.

"When did you last see the Lord Crudelta?"

"When I was stripped and fitted to the rocket, four jumps out beyond Outpost

Baiter Gator. He was on the ground. He waved good-bye to me." ;

"And then what happened?"

"The rocket rose. It felt very strange, like no craft I had ever been in before. I weighed many, many gravities."

"And then?"

"The engines went on. I was thrown out of space itself."

"What did it seem like?"

"Behind me I left the working ships, the cloth, and the food which goes through space. I went down rivers which did not exist. I felt people around me though I could not see them, red people shooting arrows at live bodies."

"Where were you?" asked a panel member.

"In the wintertime where there is no summer. In an emptiness like a child's mind. In peninsulas which had torn loose from the land. And I was the ship."

"You were what?" asked the same panel member.

"The rocket nose. The cone. The boat. I was drunk. It was drunk. I was the drunkboat myself," said Rambo.

"And where did you go?" resumed Starmount.

"Where crazy lanterns stared with idiot eyes. Where the waves washed back and forth with the dead of all the ages. Where the stars became a pool, and I swam in it. Where blue turns to liquor, stronger than alcohol, wilder than music, fermented with the red red reds of love. I saw all the things that men have ever thought they saw, but it was me who really saw\*them. I've heard phosphorescence singing and tides that seemed like crazy cattle clawing their way out of the ocean, their hooves beating the reefs. %u will not believe me, but I found Floridas wilder than this, where the flowers had human skins and eyes like big cats."

"What are you talking about?" asked the Lord Starmount.

"What I found in space three," snapped Artyr Rambo. "Believe it or not. This is what I now remember. Maybe it's a dream, but it's all I have. It was years and years and it was the blink of aq eye. I dreamed green nights. I felt places where the whole horizon became one big waterfall. The boat that was me met children and I showed them El Dorado, where the gold men live. The people drowned in space washed gently past me. I was a boat where all the lost spaceships lay drowned and still. Seahorses which were not real ran beside me. The summer month came and hammered down the sun. I went past archipelagoes of stars, where the delirious skies opened up for wanderers. I cried for me. I wept for man. I wanted to be the drunkboat sinking. I sank. I fell. It seemed to me that the grass was a lake, where a sad child, on hands and knees, sailed a toy boat as fragile as a

butterfly in spring. I can't forget the pride of unremembered flags, the arrogance of prisons which I suspected, the swimming of the businessmen! Then I was on the grass."

"This may have scientific value," said the Lord Starmount, "but it is not of judicial importance. Do you have any comment on what you did during the battle in the hospital?"

Rambo was quick and looked sane: "What I did, I did not do. What I did not do, I cannot tell. Let me go, because I am tired of you and space, big men and big things. Let me sleep and let me get well."

Starmount lifted his hand for silence.

The panel members stared at him.

Only the few telepaths present knew that they had all said, "Aye. Let the man go."

Let the girl go. Let the doctors go. But bring back the Lord Crudelta later on. He has many troubles ahead of him, and we wish to add to them."

Between the Instrumentality, the Manhome Government and the authorities at the Old Main Hospital, everyone wished to give Rambo and Elizabeth happiness.

As Rambo got well, much of his Earth Four memory returned. The trip faded from his mind.

When he came to know Elizabeth, he hated the girl.

This was not his girl—his bold, saucy Elizabeth of the markets and the valleys, of the snowy hills and the long boat rides. This was somebody meek, sweet, sad, and hopelessly loving.

Vomact cured that.

He sent Rambo to the Pleasure City of the Herperides, where bold and talkative women pursued him because he was rich and famous.

In a few weeks—a very few indeed—he wanted his Elizabeth, this strange shy girl who had been cooked back from the dead while he rode space with his own fragile bones.

"Tell the truth, darling." He spoke to her once gravely and seriously. "The Lord Crudelta did not arrange the accident which killed you?"

"They say he wasn't there," said Elizabeth. "They say it was an actual accident. I don't know. I will never know."

"It doesn't matter now," said Rambo. "Crudelta's off among the stars, looking for trouble and finding it. We have our bungalow, and our waterfall, and each other."

"Yes, my darling," she said, "each other. And no fantastic Floridas for us."

He blinked at this reference to the past, but he said nothing. A man who has been through space3 needs very little in life, outside of not going back to space3. Sometimes he dreamed he was the rocket again, the old rocket taking off on an impossible trip. Let other men follow! he thought, let other men go! I have Elizabeth and I am here.

# Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons

*A rather oblique look at Old North Australia, source of the stroon by which men live four hundred years or more—a fabulously wealthy, and therefore well-defended world. The plot is taken partly from "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," and the action apparently occurs about a generation before that of Norstrilia—wherein Viola Siderea is still trying to recover from Bozart's escapade.*

Poor communications deter theft;  
good communications promote theft;  
perfect communications stop theft.

—Van Broom

## I

The moon spun. The woman watched. Twenty-one facets had been polished at the moon's equator. Her function was to arm it. She was Mother Hitton, the weapons mistress of Old North Australia.

She was a ruddy-faced, cheerful blonde of indeterminate age. Her eyes were blue, her bosom heavy, her arms strong. She looked like a mother, but the only child she had ever had died many generations ago. Now she acted as mother to a planet, not to a person; the Norstrilians slept well because they knew she was watching. The weapons slept their long, sick sleep.

This night she glanced for the two-hundredth time at the warning bank. The bank was quiet. No danger lights shone. Yet she felt an enemy out somewhere in the universe—an enemy waiting to strike at her and her world, to snatch at the immeasurable wealth of the Norstrilians—and she snorted with impatience. Come along, little man, she thought. Come along, little man, and die. Don't keep me waiting.

She smiled when she recognized the absurdity of her own thought

She waited for him.

And he did not know it.

He, the robber, was relaxed enough. He was Benjacomin Bozart, and was highly trained in the arts of relaxation.

No one at Sunvale, here on Ttiole, could suspect that he was a senior warden of the Guild of Thieves, reared under the light of the starry violet star. No one could smell the odor of Viola Siderea upon him. "Viola Siderea," the Lady Ru had said, "was once the most beautiful of worlds and it is now the most rotten. Its people were once models for mankind, and now they are thieves, liars and killers. You can smell their souls in the open day." The Lady Ru had died a long time ago. She was much respected, but she was wrong. The robber did not smell to others at all. He knew it.

He was no more "wrong" than a shark approaching a school of cod. Life's nature is to live, and he had been nurtured to live as he had to live—by seeking prey.

How else could he live? Viola Siderea had gone bankrupt a long time ago, when the photonic sails had disappeared from space and the planoforming ships began to whisper their way between the stars. His ancestors had been left to die on an off-trail planet. They refused to die. Their ecology shifted and they became predators upon man, adapted by time and genetics to their deadly tasks. And he, the robber, was champion of all his people—the best of their best.

He was Benjacomin Bozart.

He had sworn to rob Old North Australia or to die in the attempt, and he had no intention of dying.

The beach at Sunvale was warm and lovely. Ttiollé was a free and casual transit planet. His weapons were luck and himself: he planned to play both well.

The Norstrilians could kill.

So could he.

At this moment, in this place, he was a happy tourist at a lovely beach. Elsewhere, elsewhere, he could become a ferret among conies, a hawk among doves.

Benjacomin Bozart, thief and warden. He did not know that someone was waiting for him. Someone who did not know his name was prepared to waken death, just for him. He was still serene.

Mother Hitton was not serene. She sensed him dimly but could not yet spot him.

One of her weapons snored. She turned it over.

A thousand stars away, Benjacomin Bozart smiled as he walked toward the beach.

## II

Benjacomin felt like a tourist. His tanned face was tranquil. His proud, hooded eyes were calm. His handsome mouth, even without its charming smile, kept a suggestion of pleasantness at its corners. He looked attractive without seeming odd in the least. He looked much younger than he actually was. He walked with springy, happy steps along the beach of Sunvale.

The waves rolled in, white-crested, like the breakers of Mother Earth. The Sunvale people were proud of the way their world resembled Manhome itself. Few of them had ever seen Manhome, but they had all heard a bit of history and most of them had a passing anxiety when they thought of the ancient government still wielding political power across the depth of space. They did not like the old Instrumentality of Earth, but they respected and feared it. The waves might remind them of the pretty side of Earth; they did not want to remember the not-so-pretty side.

This man was like the pretty side of Old Earth. They could not sense the power within him. The Sunvale people smiled absently at him as he walked past them along the shoreline.

The atmosphere was quiet and everything around him serene. He turned his face to the sun. He closed his eyes. He let the warm sunlight beat through his eyelids, illuminating him with its comfort and its reassuring touch.

Benjacomin dreamed of the greatest theft that any man had ever planned. He dreamed of stealing a huge load of the wealth from the richest world that mankind had ever built. He thought of what would happen when he would finally bring riches back to the planet of Viola Siderea where he had been reared. Benjacomin turned his face away from the sun and languidly looked over the other people on the beach.

There were no Norstrilians in sight yet. They were easy enough to recognize. Big people with red complexions; superb athletes and yet, in their own way, innocent, young and very tough. He had trained for this theft for two hundred years, his life prolonged for the purpose by the Guild of Thieves on Viola Siderea. He himself embodied the dreams of his own planet, a poor planet once a crossroads of commerce, now sunken to being a minor outpost for spoliation and pilferage.

He saw a Norstrilian woman come out from the hotel and go down to the beach. He waited, and he looked, and he dreamed. He had a question to ask and no adult Australian would answer it.

"Funny," thought he, "that I call them 'Australians' even now. That's the old, old Earth name for them—rich, brave, tough people. Fighting children standing on half the world ... and now they are the tyrants of all mankind. They hold the wealth. They have the santaclara, and other people live or die depending upon the commerce they have with the Norstrilians. But I won't. And my people won't. We're men who are wolves to man."

Benjacomin waited gracefully. Tanned by the light of many suns, he looked forty though he was two hundred. He dressed casually, by the standards of a vacationer. He might have been an intercultural salesman, a senior gambler, an assistant starport manager. He might even have been a detective working along the commerce lanes. He wasn't. He was a thief. And he was so good a thief that people turned to him and put their property in his hands because he was reassuring, calm, gray-eyed, blond-haired. Benjacomin waited. The woman glanced at him, a quick glance full of open suspicion.

What she saw must have calmed her. She went on past. She called back over the dune, "Come on, Johnny, we can swim out here." A little boy, who looked eight or ten years old, came over the dune top, running toward his mother.

Benjacomin tensed like a cobra. His eyes became sharp, his eyelids narrowed.

This was the prey. Not too young, not too old. If the victim had been too young he wouldn't know the answer; if the victim were too old it was no use taking him on. Norstrilians were famed in combat, adults were mentally and physically too strong to warrant attack.

Benjacomin knew that every thief who had approached the planet of the Norstrilians—who had tried to raid the dream world of Old North Australia—had gotten out of contact with his people and had died. There was no word of any of them.

And yet he knew that hundreds of thousands of Norstrilians must know the secret. They now and then made jokes about it. He had heard these jokes when he was a young man, and now he was more than an old man without once coming near the answer. Life was expensive.

He was well into his third lifetime and the lifetimes had been purchased honestly by his people. Good thieves all of them, paying out hard-stolen money to obtain the medicine to let their greatest thief remain living. Benjacomin didn't like violence. But when violence prepared the way to the greatest theft of all time, he was willing to use it.

The woman looked at him again. The mask of evil which had flashed across his face faded into benignity; he calmed. She caught him in that moment of relaxation. She liked him.

She smiled and, with that awkward hesitation so characteristic of the Norstrilians, she said, "Could you mind my boy a bit while I go in the water? I think we've seen each other here at the hotel."

"I don't mind," said he. "I'd be glad to. Come here, son."

Johnny walked across the sunlight dunes to his own death. He came within reach of his mother's enemy.

But the mother had already turned.

The trained hand of Benjacomin Bozart reached out. He seized the child by the shoulder. He turned the boy toward him, forcing him down. Before the child could cry out, Benjacomin had the needle into him with the truth drug.

All Johnny reacted to was pain, and then a hammerblow inside his own skull as the powerful drug took force.

Benjacomin looked out over the water. The mother was swimming. She seemed to be looking back at them. She was obviously unworried. To her, the child seemed to be looking at something the stranger was showing him in a relaxed, easy way.

"Now, sonny," said Benjacomin, "tell me, what's the outside defense?"

The boy didn't answer.

"What is the outer defense, sonny? What is the outer defense?" repeated Benjacomin. The boy still didn't answer.

Something close to horror ran over the skin of Benjacomin Bozart as he realized that he had gambled his safety on this planet, gambled the plans themselves for a chance to break the secret of the Norstrilians.

He had been stopped by simple, easy devices. The child had already been conditioned against attack. Any attempt to force knowledge out of the child brought on a conditioned reflex of total muteness. The boy was literally unable to talk.

Sunlight gleaming on her wet hair, the mother turned around and called back, "Are you all right, Johnny?"

Benjacomin waved to her instead. "I'm showing him my pictures, ma'am. He likes 'em. Take your time." The mother hesitated and then turned back to the water and swam slowly away.

Johnny, taken by the drug, sat lightly, like an invalid, on Benjacomin's lap.

Benjacomin said, "Johnny, you're going to die now and you will hurt terribly if you don't tell me what I want to know." The boy struggled weakly against his grasp. Benjacomin repeated. "I'm going to hurt you if you don't tell me what I want to know. What are the outer defenses? What are the outer defenses?"

The child struggled and Benjacomin realized that the boy was putting up a fight to comply with the orders, not a fight to get away. He let the child slip through his hands and the boy put out a finger and began writing on the wet sand. The letters stood out.

A man's shadow loomed behind them.

Benjacomin, alert, ready to spin, kill or run, slipped to the ground beside the child and said, "That's a jolly puzzle. That is a good one. Show me some more." He smiled up at the passing adult. The man was a stranger. The stranger gave him a very curious glance which became casual when he saw the pleasant face of Benjacomin, so tenderly and so agreeably playing with the child.

The fingers were still making the letters in the sand.

There stood the riddle in letters: MOTHER HITTON'S LITTUL KITTONS.

The woman was coming back from the sea, the mother with questions. Benjacomin stroked the sleeve of his coat and brought out his second needle, a shallow poison which it would take days or weeks of laboratory work to detect. He thrust it directly into the boy's brain, slipping the needle up behind the skin at the edge of the hairline. The hair shadowed the tiny prick. The incredibly hard needle slipped under the edge of the skull. The child was dead.

Murder was accomplished. Benjacomin casually erased the secret from the sand. The woman came nearer. He called to her, his voice full of pleasant concern, "Ma'am, you'd better come here, I think your son has fainted from the heat."

He gave the mother the body of her son. Her face changed to alarm. She looked frightened and alert. She didn't know how to meet this.

For a dreadful moment she looked into his eyes.

Two hundred years of training took effect ... She saw nothing. The murderer did not shine with murder. The hawk was hidden beneath the dove. The heart was masked by the trained face.

Benjacomin relaxed in professional assurance. He had been prepared to kill her too, although he was not sure that he could kill an adult, female Norstrilian. Very helpfully said he, "You stay here with him. I'll run to the hotel and get help. I'll hurry."

He turned and ran. A beach attendant saw him and ran toward him. "The child's sick," he shouted. He came to the mother in time to see blunt, puzzled tragedy on her face and with it, something more than tragedy: doubt.

"He's not sick," said she. "He's dead."

"He can't be." Benjacomin looked attentive. He felt attentive. He forced the sympathy to pour out of his posture, out of all the little muscles of his face. "He can't be. I was talking to him just a minute ago. We were doing little puzzles in the sand."

The mother spoke with a hollow, broken voice that sounded as though it would never find the right chords for human speech again, but would go on forever with the ill-attuned flats of unexpected grief. "He's dead," she said. "You saw him die and I guess I saw him die, too. I can't tell what's happened. The child was full of santaclara. He had a thousand years to live but now he's dead. What's your name?"

Benjacomin said, "Eldon. Eldon the salesman, ma'am. I live here lots of times."

### III

"Mother Hitton's littul kittons. Mother Hitton's littul kittons."

The silly phrase ran in his mind. Who was Mother Hitton? Who was she the mother of? What were kittons? Were they a misspelling for "kittens?" Little cats? Or were they something else?

Had he killed a fool to get a fool's answer?

How many more days did he have to stay there with the doubtful, staggered woman? How many days did he have to watch and wait? He wanted to get back to Viola Siderea; to take the secret, bad as it was, for his people to study. Who was Mother Hitton?

He forced himself out of his room and went downstairs.

The pleasant monotony of a big hotel was such that the other guests looked interestedly at him. He was the man who had watched while the child died on the beach.

Some lobby-living scandalmongers that stayed there had made up fantastic stories that he had killed the child. Others attacked the stories, saying they knew perfectly well who Eldon was. He was Eldon the salesman. It was ridiculous.

People hadn't changed much, even though the ships with the Go-captains sitting at their hearts whispered between the stars, even though people shuffled between worlds—when they had the money to pay their passage back and forth—like leaves falling in soft, playful winds. Benjacomin faced a tragic dilemma. He knew very well that any attempt to decode the answer would run directly into the protective devices set up by the Norstrilians.

Old North Australia was immensely wealthy. It was known the length and breadth of all the stars that they had hired mercenaries, defensive spies, hidden agents and alerting devices.

Even Manhome—Mother Earth herself, whom no money could buy—was bribed by the drug of life. An ounce of the santaclara drug, reduced, crystallized and called "stroon," could give forty to sixty years of life. Stroon entered the rest of the Earth by ounces and pounds, but it was refined back on North Australia by the ton. With treasure like this, the Norstrilians owned an unimaginable world whose resources overreached all conceivable limits of money. They could buy anything. They could pay with other peoples' lives.

For hundreds of years they had given secret funds to buying foreigners' services to safeguard their own security.

Benjacomin stood there in the lobby: "Mother Hitton's littul kittons."

He had all the wisdom and wealth of a thousand worlds stuck in his mind but he didn't dare ask anywhere as to what it meant.

Suddenly he brightened.

He looked like a man who had thought of a good game to play, a pleasant diversion to be welcomed, a companion to be remembered, a new food to be tasted. He had had a very happy thought.

There was one source that wouldn't talk. The library. He could at least check the obvious, simple things, and find out what there was already in the realm of public knowledge concerning the secret he had taken from the dying boy.

His own safety had not been wasted, Johnny's life had not been thrown away, if he could find any one of the four words as a key. Mother or Hitton or Littul, in its special meaning, or Kitton. He might yet break through to the loot of Norstrilia.

He swung jubilantly, turning on the ball of his right foot. He moved lightly and pleasantly toward the billiard room, beyond which lay the library. He went in.

This was a very expensive hotel and very old-fashioned. It even had books made out of paper, with genuine bindings. Benjacomin crossed the room. He saw that they had the Galactic Encyclopedia in two hundred volumes. He took down the volume headed "Hi-Hi." He opened it from the rear, looking for the name "Hitton" and there it was. "Hitton, Benjamin-pioneer of Old North Australia. Said to be originator of part of the defense system. Lived A.D. 10719-17213." That was all. Benjacomin moved among the books. The word "kittons" in that peculiar spelling did not occur anywhere, neither in the encyclopedia nor in any other list maintained by the library. He walked out and upstairs, back to his room.

"Littul" had not appeared at all. It was probably the boy's own childish mistake.

He took a chance. The mother, half blind with bewilderment and worry, sat in a stiff-backed chair on the edge of the porch. The other women talked to her. They knew her husband was coming. Benjacomin went up to her and tried to pay his respects. She didn't see him.

"I'm leaving now, ma'am. I'm going on to the next planet, but I'll be back in two or three subjective weeks. And if you need me for urgent questions, I'll leave my addresses with the police here."

Benjacomin left the weeping mother.

Benjacomin left the quiet hotel. He obtained a priority passage.

The easy-going Sunvale Police made no resistance to his demand for a sudden departure visa. After all, he had an identity, he had his own funds, and it was not the custom of Sunvale to contradict its guests. Benjacomin went on the ship and as he moved toward the cabin in which he



could rest for a few hours, a man stepped up beside him. A youngish man, hair parted in the middle, short of stature, gray of eyes.

This man was the local agent of the Norstrilian secret police.

Benjacomin, trained thief that he was, did not recognize the policeman. It never occurred to him that the library itself had been attuned and that the word "kittons" in the peculiar Norstrilian spelling was itself an alert. Looking for that spelling had set off a minor alarm. He had touched the trip-wire.

The stranger nodded. Benjacomin nodded back. "I'm a traveling man, waiting over between assignments. I haven't been doing very well. How are you making out?"

"Doesn't matter to me. I don't earn money; I'm a technician. Liverant is the name."

Benjacomin sized him up. The man was a technician all right. They shook hands perfunctorily. Liverant said, "I'll join you in the bar a little later. I think I'll rest a bit first."

They both lay down then and said very little while the momentary flash of planoform went through the ship. The flash passed. From books and lessons they knew that the ship was leaping forward in two dimensions while, somehow or other, the fury of space itself was fed into the computers—and that these in turn were managed by the Go-captain who controlled the ship.

They knew these things but they could not feel them. All they felt was the sting of a slight pain.

The sedative was in the air itself, sprayed in the ventilating system. They both expected to become a little drunk.

The thief Benjacomin Bozart was trained to resist intoxication and bewilderment. Any sign whatever that a telepath had tried to read his mind would have been met with fierce animal resistance, implanted in his unconscious during early years of training. Bozart was not trained against deception by a technician; it never occurred to the Thieves' Guild back on Viola Siderea that it would be necessary for their own people to resist deceivers. Liverant had already been in touch with Norstrilia—Norstrilia whose money reached across the stars, Norstrilia who had alerted a hundred thousand worlds against the mere thought of trespass.

Liverant began to chatter. "I wish I could go further than this trip. I wish that I could go to Olympia. You can buy anything in Olympia."

"I've heard of it," said Bozart. "It's sort of a funny trading planet with not much chance for businessmen, isn't it?"

Liverant laughed and his laughter was merry and genuine. "Trading? They don't trade. They swap. They take all the stolen loot of a thousand worlds and sell it over again and they change and they paint it and they mark it. That's their business there. The people are blind. It's a strange world, and all you have to do is to go in there and you can have anything you want. Man," said Liverant, "what I could do in a year in that place! Everybody is blind except me and a couple of tourists. And there's all the wealth that everybody thought he's mislaid, half the wrecked ships, the forgotten colonies (they've all been cleaned out), and bang! it all goes to Olympia."

Olympia wasn't really that good and Liverant didn't know why it was his business to guide the killer there. All he knew was that he had a duty and the duty was to direct the trespasser.

Many years before either man was born the code word had been planted in directories, in books, in packing cases and invoices: Kittons misspelled. This was the cover name for the outermoon of Norstrilian defense. The use of the cover name brought a raging alert ready into action, with systemic nerves as hot and quick as incandescent tungsten wire.

By the time that they were ready to go to the bar and have refreshments, Benjacomin had half forgotten that it was his new acquaintance who had suggested Olympia rather than another place.

He had to go to Viola Siderea to get the credits to make the flight to take the wealth, to win the world of Olympia.

#### IV

At home on his native planet Bozart was a subject of a gentle but very sincere celebration.

The elders of the Guild of Thieves welcomed him. They congratulated him. "Who else could have done what you've done, boy? You've made the opening move in a brand new game of chess. There has never been a gambit like this before. We have a name; we have an animal. We'll try it right here." The Thieves' Council turned to their own encyclopedia. They turned through the name "Hitton" and then found the reference "kitton." None of them knew that a false lead had been planted there—by an agent in their world.

The agent, in his turn, had been seduced years before, debauched in the middle of his career, forced into temporary honesty, blackmailed and sent home. In all the years that he had waited for a dreaded countersign—a countersign which he himself never knew to be an extension of Norstrilian intelligence—he never dreamed that he could pay his debt to the outside world so simply. All they had done was to send him one page to add to the encyclopedia. He added it and then went home, weak with exhaustion. The years of fear and waiting were almost too much for the thief. He drank heavily for fear that he might otherwise kill himself. Meanwhile, the pages remained in order, including the new one, slightly altered for his colleagues. The encyclopedia indicated the change like any normal revision, though the whole-entry was new and falsified:

Beneath this passage one revision ready. Dated 24th year of second issue.

The reported "Kittons" of Norstrilia are nothing more than the use of organic means to induce the disease in Earth-mutated sheep which produces a virus in its turn, refinable as the santaclara drug. The term "Kittons" enjoyed a temporary vogue as a reference term both to the disease and to the destructibility of the disease in the event of external attack. This is believed to have been connected with the career of Benjamin Hitton, one of the original pioneers of Norstrilia.

The Council of Thieves read it and the Chairman of the Council said, "I've got your papers ready. You can go try them now. Where do you want to go? Through Neuhamburg?"

"No," said Benjacomin. "I thought I'd try Olympia."

"Olympia's all right," said the chairman. "Go easy. There's only one chance in a thousand you'll fail. But if you do, we might have to pay for it."

He smiled wryly and handed Benjacomin a blank mortgage against all the labor and all the property of Viola Siderea.

The Chairman laughed with a sort of snort. "It'd be pretty rough on us if you had to borrow enough on the trading planet to force us to become honest—and then lost out anyhow."

"No fear," said Benjacomin. "I can cover that."

There are some worlds where all dreams die, but square-clouded Olympia is not one of them. The eyes of men and women are bright on Olympia, for they see nothing.

"Brightness was the color of pain," said Nachtigall, "when we could see. If thine eye offend thee, pluck thyself out, for the fault lies not in the eye but in the soul."

Such talk was common in Olympia, where the settlers went blind a long time ago and now think themselves superior to sighted people. Radar wires tickle their living brains; they can perceive radiation as well as can an animal-type man with little aquariums hung in the middle of his face. Their pictures are sharp, and they demand sharpness. Their buildings soar at impossible angles.

Their blind children sing songs as the tailored climate proceeds according to the numbers, geometrical as a kaleidoscope.

There went the man, Bozart himself. Among the blind his dreams soared, and he paid money for information which no living person had ever seen.

Sharp-clouded and aqua-skied, Olympia swam past him like another man's dream. He did not mean to tarry there, because he had a rendezvous with death in the sticky, sparky space around Norstrilia.

Once in Olympia, Benjacomin went about his arrangements for the attack on Old North Australia. On his second day on the planet he had been very lucky. He met a man named Lavender and he was sure he had heard the name before. Not a member of his own Guild of Thieves, but a daring rascal with a bad reputation among the stars.

It was no wonder that he had found Lavender. His pillow had told him Lavender's story fifteen times during his sleep in the past week. And, whenever he dreamed, he dreamed dreams which had been planted in his mind by the Norstrilian counterintelligence. They had beaten him in getting to Olympia first and they were prepared to let him have only that which he deserved. The Norstrilian Police were not cruel, but they were out to defend their world. And they were also out to avenge the murder of a child.

The last interview which Benjacomin had with Lavender in striking a bargain before Lavender agreed was a dramatic one.

Lavender refused to move forward.

"I'm not going to jump off anywhere. I'm not going to raid anything. I'm not going to steal anything. I've been rough, of course I have. But I don't get myself killed and that's what you're bloody well asking for."

"Think of what we'll have. The wealth. I tell you, there's more money here than anything else anybody's ever tried."

Lavender laughed. "You think I haven't heard that before? You're a crook and I'm a crook. I don't do anything that's speculation. I want my hard cash down. I'm a fighting man and you're a thief and I'm not going to ask you what you're up to ... but I want my money first."

"I haven't got it," said Benjacomin.

Lavender stood up.

"Then you shouldn't have talked to me. Because it's going to cost you money to keep me quiet whether you hire me or not."

The bargaining process started.

Lavender looked ugly indeed. He was a soft, ordinary man who had gone to a lot of trouble to become evil. Sin is a lot of work. The sheer effort it requires often shows in the human face.

Bozart stared him down, smiling easily, not even contemptuously.

"Cover me while I get something from my pocket," said Bozart.

Lavender did not even acknowledge the comment. He did not show a weapon. His left thumb moved slowly across the outer edge of his hand. Benjacomin recognized the sign, but did not flinch.

"See," he said. "A planetary credit."

Lavender, laughed. "I've heard that, too."

"Take it," said Bozart.

The adventurer took the laminated card. His eyes widened. "It's real," he breathed. "It is real." He looked up, incalculably more friendly. "I never even saw one of these before. What are your terms?"

Meanwhile the bright, vivid Olympians walked back and forth past them, their clothing all white and black in dramatic contrast. Unbelievable geometric designs shone on their cloaks and their hats. The two bargainers ignored the natives. They concentrated on their own negotiations.

Benjacomin felt fairly safe. He placed a pledge of one year's service of the entire planet of Viola Siderea in exchange for the full and unqualified services of Captain Lavender, once of the Imperial Marines Internal Space Patrol. He handed over the mortgage. The year's guarantee was written in. Even on Olympia there were accounting machines which relayed the bargain back to Earth itself, making the mortgage a valid and binding commitment against the whole planet of thieves.

"This," thought Lavender, "was the first step of revenge." After the killer had disappeared his people would have to pay with sheer honesty. Lavender looked at Benjacomin with a clinical sort of concern.

Benjacomin mistook his look for friendliness and Benjacomin smiled his slow, charming, easy smile. Momentarily happy, he reached out his right hand to give Lavender a brotherly solemnification of the bargain. The men shook hands, and Bozart never knew with what he shook hands.

## V

"Gray lay the land oh. Gray grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high-only hills and gray gray. Watch the dappled, dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar.

"That is Norstrilia.

"All the muddy gubbery is gone—all the work and the waiting and the pain.

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-gray grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceilinging the world.

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me, a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of immortality. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and the trolls like you live, it's too right here.

"That's the book, boy.

"If you haven't seen Norstrilia, you haven't seen it. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it.

"Charts call it Old North Australia."

Here in the heart of the world was the farm which guarded the world. This was the Hitton place.

Towers surrounded it, and wires hung between the towers, some of them drooping crazily and some gleaming with the sheen not shown by any other metal made by men from Earth. Within the towers there was open land. And within the open land there were twelve thousand hectares of concrete. Radar reached down to within millimeter smoothness of the surface of the concrete and the other radar threw patterns back and forth, down through molecular thinness. The farm went on. In its center there was a group of buildings. That was where Katherine Hitton worked on the task which her family had accepted for the defense of her world.

No germ came in, no germ went out. All the food came in by space transmitter. Within this, there lived animals. The animals depended on her alone. Were she to die suddenly, by mischance or

as a result of an attack by one of the animals, the authorities of her world had complete facsimiles of herself with which to train new animal tenders under hypnosis.

This was a place where the gray wind leapt forward released from the hills, where it raced across the gray concrete, where it blew past the radar towers. The polished, faceted, captive moon always hung due overhead. The wind hit the buildings, themselves gray, with the impact of a blow, before it raced over the open concrete beyond and whistled away into the hills.

Outside the buildings, the valley had not needed much camouflage. It looked like the rest of Norstrilia. The concrete itself was tinted very slightly to give the impression of poor, starved, natural soil. This was the farm, and this the woman. Together they were the outer defense of the richest world mankind had ever built.

Katherine Hitton looked out the window and thought to herself, "Forty-two days before I go to market and it's a welcome day that I get there and hear the jig of a music.

*Oh, to walk on market day,  
And see my people proud and gay!"*

She breathed deeply of the air. She loved the gray hills-though in her youth she had seen many other worlds. And then she turned back into the building to the animals and the duties which awaited her. She was the only Mother Hitton and these were her littul kittons.

She moved among them. She and her father had bred them from Earth mink, from the fiercest, smallest, craziest little minks that had ever been shipped out from Manhome. Out of these minks they had made their lives to keep away other predators who might bother the sheep, on whom the stroon grew. But these minks were born mad.

Generations of them had been bred psychotic to the bone. They lived only to die and they died so that they could stay alive. These were the kittons of Norstrilia. Animals in whom fear, rage, hunger and sex were utterly intermixed; who could eat themselves or each other; who could eat their young, or people, or anything organic; animals who screamed with murder-lust when they felt love; animals born to loathe themselves with a fierce and livid hate and who survived only because their waking moments were spent on couches, strapped tight, claw by claw, so that they could not hurt each other or themselves. Mother Hitton let them waken only a few moments in each lifetime. They bred and killed. She wakened them only two at a time.

All that afternoon she moved from cage to cage. The sleeping animals slept well. The nourishment ran into their blood streams; they lived sometimes for years without awaking. She bred them when the males were only partly awakened and the females aroused only enough to accept her veterinary treatments. She herself had to pluck the young away from their mothers as the sleeping mothers begot them. Then she nourished the young through a few happy weeks of kittonhood, until their adult natures began to take, their eyes ran red with madness and heat and their emotions sounded in the sharp, hideous, little cries they uttered through the building; and the twisting of their neat, furry faces, the rolling of their crazy, bright eyes and the tightening of their sharp, sharp claws.

She woke none of them this time. Instead, she tightened them in their straps. She removed the nutrients. She gave them delayed stimulus medicine which would, when they were awakened, bring them suddenly full waking with no lulled stupor first.

Finally, she gave herself a heavy sedative, leaned back in a chair and waited for the call which would come.

When the shock came and the call came through, she would have to do what she had done thousands of times before.

She would ring an intolerable noise through the whole laboratory.

Hundreds of the mutated minks would awaken. In awakening, they would plunge into life with hunger, with hate, with rage and with sex; plunge against their straps; strive to kill each other, their young, themselves, her. They would fight everything and everywhere, and do everything they could to keep going.

She knew this.

In the middle of the room there was a tuner. The tuner was a direct, empathic relay, capable of picking up the simpler range of telepathic communications. Into this tuner went the concentrated emotions of Mother Hitton's littul kittons.

The rage, the hate, the hunger, the sex were all carried far beyond the limits of the tolerable, and then all were thereupon amplified. And then the waveband on which this telepathic control went out was amplified, right there beyond the studio, on the high towers that swept the mountain ridge, up and beyond the valley in which the laboratory lay. And Mother Hitton's moon, spinning geometrically, bounced the relay into a hollow englobement.

From the faceted moon, it went to the satellites—sixteen of them, apparently part of the weather control system. These blanketed not only space, but nearby subspace. The Norstrilians had thought of everything.

The short shocks of an alert came from Mother Hitton's transmitter bank.

A call came. Her thumb went numb.

The noise shrieked.

The mink wakened.

Immediately, the room was full of chattering, scraping, hissing, growling and howling.

Under the sound of the animal voices, there was the other sound: a scratchy, snapping sound like hail falling on a frozen lake. It was the individual claws of hundreds of mink trying to tear their way through metal panels.

Mother Hitton heard a gurgle. One of the minks had succeeded in tearing its paw loose and had obviously started to work on its own throat. She recognized the tearing of fur, the ripping of veins.

She listened for the cessation of that individual voice, but she couldn't be sure. The others were making too much noise. One mink less.

Where she sat, she was partly shielded from the telepathic relay, but not altogether. She herself, old as she was, felt queer wild dreams go through her. She thrilled with hate as she thought of beings suffering out beyond her—suffering terribly, since they were not masked by the built-in defenses of the Norstrilian communications system.

She felt the wild throb of long-forgotten lust.

She hungered for things she had not known she remembered. She went through the spasms of fear that the hundreds of animals expressed.

Underneath this, her sane mind kept asking, "How much longer can I take it? How much longer must I take it? Lord God, be good to your people here on this world! Be good to poor old me."

The green light went on.

She pressed a button on the other side of her chair. The gas hissed in. As she passed into unconsciousness, she knew that her kittons passed into instant unconsciousness too.

She would waken before they did and then her duties would begin: checking the living ones, taking out the one that had clawed out its own throat, taking out those who had died of heart attacks, rearranging them, dressing their wounds, treating them alive and asleep—asleep and happy—breeding, living in their sleep—until the next call should come to waken them for the defense of the treasures which blessed and cursed her native world.

## VI

Everything had gone exactly right. Lavender had found an illegal planoform ship. This was no inconsequential accomplishment, since planoform ships were very strictly licensed and obtaining an illegal one was a chore on which a planet full of crooks could easily have worked a lifetime.

Lavender had been lavished with money—Benjacomin's money.

The honest wealth of the thieves' planet had gone in and had paid the falsifications and great debts, imaginary transactions that were fed to the computers for ships and cargoes and passengers that would be almost untraceably commingled in the commerce of ten thousand worlds.

"Let him pay for it," said Lavender, to one of his confederates, an apparent criminal who was also a Norstrilian agent. "This is paying good money for bad. You better spend a lot of it."

Just before Benjacomin took off Lavender sent on an additional message.

He sent it directly through the Go-captain, who usually did not carry messages. The Go-captain was a relay commander of the Norstrilian fleet, but he had been carefully ordered not to look like it.

The message concerned the planoform license—another twenty-odd tablets of stroon which could mortgage Viola Siderea for hundreds upon hundred of years. The captain said: "I don't have to send that through. The answer is yes."

Benjacomin came into the control room. This was contrary to regulations, but he had hired the ship to violate regulations.

The captain looked at him sharply. "You're a passenger, get out."

Benjacomin said: "You have my little yacht on board. I am the only man here outside of your people."

"Get out. There's a fine if you're caught here."

"It does not matter," Benjacomin said. "I'll pay it."

"You will, will you?" said the captain. "You would not be paying twenty tablets of stroon. That's ridiculous. Nobody could get that much stroon."

Benjacomin laughed, thinking of the thousands of tablets he would soon have. All he had to do was to leave the planoform ship behind, strike once, go past the kittons and come back.

His power and his wealth came from the fact that he knew he could now reach it. The mortgage of twenty tablets of stroon against this planet was a low price to pay if it would pay off at thousands to one. The captain replied: "It's not worth it, it just is not worth risking twenty tablets for your being here. But I can tell you how to get inside the Norstrilian communications net if that is worth twenty-seven tablets."

Benjacomin went tense.

For a moment he thought he might die. All this work, all this training—the dead boy on the beach, the gamble with the credit, and now this unsuspected antagonist!

He decided to face it out. "What do you know?" said Benjacomin.

"Nothing," said the captain.

"You said 'Norstrilia.' "

"That I did," said the captain.

"If you said Norstrilia, you must have guessed it. Who told you?"

"Where else would a man go if you look for infinite riches? If you get away with it. Twenty tablets is nothing to a man like you."

"It's two hundred years' worth of work from three hundred thousand people," said Benjacomin grimly.

"When you get away with it, you will have more than twenty tablets, and so will your people."

And Benjacomin thought of the thousands and thousands of tablets. "Yes, that I know."

"If you don't get away with it, you've got the card."

"That's right. All right. Get me inside the net. I'll pay the twenty-seven tablets."

"Give me the card."

Benjacomin refused. He was a trained thief, and he was alert to thievery. Then he thought again. This was the crisis of his life. He had to gamble a little on somebody.

He had to wager the card. "I'll mark it and then I'll give it back to you." Such was his excitement that Benjacomin did not notice that the card went into a duplicator, that the transaction was recorded, that the message went back to Olympic Center, that the loss and the mortgage against the planet of Viola Siderea should be credited to certain commercial agencies in Earth for three hundred years to come.

Benjacomin got the card back. He felt like an honest thief.

If he did die, the card would be lost and his people would not have to pay. If he won, he could pay that little bit out of his own pocket.

Benjacomin sat down. The Go-captain signalled to his pinlighters. The ship lurched.

For half a subjective hour they moved, the captain wearing a helmet of space upon his head, sensing and grasping and guessing his way, stepping stone to stepping stone, right back to his home. He had to fumble the passage, or else Benjacomin might guess that he was in the hands of double agents.

But the captain was well trained. Just as well trained as Benjacomin.

Agents and thieves, they rode together.

They planoformed inside the communications net. Benjacomin shook hands with them. "You are allowed to materialize as soon as I call."

"Good luck, Sir," said the captain.

"Good luck to me," said Benjacomin.

He climbed into his space yacht. For less than a second in real space, the gray expanse of Norstrilia loomed up. The ship which looked like a simple warehouse disappeared into planoform, and the yacht was on its own.

The yacht dropped.

As it dropped, Benjacomin had a hideous moment of confusion and terror.

He never knew the woman down below but she sensed him plainly as he received the wrath of the much-amplified kittons. His conscious mind quivered under the blow. With a prolongation of



subjective experience which made one or two seconds seem like months of hurt drunken bewilderment, Benjacomin Bozart swept beneath the tide of his own personality. The moon relay threw minkish minds against him. The synapses of his brain re-formed to conjure up might-have-beens, terrible things that never happened to any man. Then his knowing mind whited out in an overload of stress.

His subcortical personality lived on a little longer.

His body fought for several minutes. Mad with lust and hunger, the body arched in the pilot's seat, the mouth bit deep into his own arm. Driven by lust, the left hand tore at his face, ripping out his left eyeball. He screeched with animal lust as he tried to devour himself ... not entirely without success.

The overwhelming telepathic message of Mother Hitton's littul kittons ground into his brain.

The mutated minks were fully awake.

The relay satellites had poisoned all the space around him with the craziness to which the minks were bred.

Bozart's body did not live long. After a few minutes, the arteries were open, the head slumped forward and the yacht was dropping helplessly toward the warehouses which it had meant to raid. Norstrilian police picked it up.

The police themselves were ill. All of them were ill. All of them were white-faced. Some of them had vomited. They had gone through the edge of the mink defense. They had passed through the telepathic band at its thinnest and weakest point. This was enough to hurt them badly.

They did not want to know.

They wanted to forget.

One of the younger policemen looked at the body and said, "What on earth could do that to a man?" "

"He picked the wrong job," said the police captain.

The young policeman said: "What's the wrong job?"

"The wrong job is trying to rob us, boy. We are defended, and we don't want to know how."

The young policeman, humiliated and on the verge of anger, looked almost as if he would defy his superior, while keeping his eyes away from the body of Benjacomin Bozart.

The older man said: "It's all right. He did not take long to die and this is the man who killed the boy Johnny, not very long ago."

"Oh, him? So soon?"

"We brought him." The old police officer nodded. "We let him find his death. That's how we live. Tough, isn't it?"

The ventilators whispered softly, gently. The animals slept again. A jet of air poured down on Mother Hitton. The telepathic relay was still on. She could feel herself, the sheds, the faceted moon, the little satellites. Of the robber there was no sign.

She stumbled to her feet. Her raiment was moist with perspiration. She needed a shower and fresh clothes ...

Back at Manhome, the Commercial Credit Circuit called shrilly for human attention. A junior subchief of the Instrumentality walked over to the machine and held out his hand.

The machine dropped a card neatly into his fingers.

He looked at the card.

"Debit Viola Siderea—credit Earth Contingency—subcredit Norstrilian account—four hundred million man megayears."

Though all alone, he whistled to himself in the empty room. "We'll all be dead, stroon or no stroon, before they finish paying that!" He went off to tell his friends the odd news.

The machine, not getting its card back, made another one.



# Alpha Ralpha Boulevard

*Here we see the very beginning of the Rediscovery of Man—the great undertaking of Lord Jestocost and Lady Alice—to restore man's right to freedom: to risk, to uncertainty and even to death. The Storm, a painting by Pierre-Auguste Cot, inspired the scene on Alpha Ralpha Boulevard. Macht is, perhaps, one of the evil Vomacts—but perhaps not. And the Abba Dingo, perplexingly, may be a bastardized Semitic-cum-Aussie slang for "Father of Lies ... "*

We were drunk with happiness in those early years. Everybody was, especially the young people. These were the first years of the Rediscovery of Man, when the Instrumentality dug deep in the treasury, reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, and even the old troubles. The nightmare of perfection had taken our forefathers to the edge of suicide. Now under the leadership of the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More, the ancient civilizations were rising like great land masses out of the sea of the past.

I myself was the first man to put a postage stamp on a letter, after fourteen thousand years. I took Virginia to hear the first piano recital. We watched at the eye-machine when cholera was released in Tasmania, and we saw the Tasmanians dancing in the streets, now that they did not have to be protected any more. Everywhere, things became exciting. Everywhere, men and women worked with a wild will to build a more imperfect world.

I myself went into a hospital and came out French. Of course I remembered my early life; I remembered it, but it did not matter. Virginia was French, too, and we had the years of our future lying ahead of us like ripe fruit hanging in an orchard of perpetual summers. We had no idea when we would die. Formerly, I would be able to go to bed and think, "The government has given me four hundred years. Three hundred and seventy-four years from now, they will stop the stroon injections and I will then die." Now I knew anything could happen. The safety devices had been turned off. The diseases ran free. With luck, and hope, and love, I might live a thousand years. Or I might die tomorrow. I was free.

We revelled in every moment of the day.

Virginia and I brought the first French newspaper to appear since the Most Ancient World fell. We found delight in the news, even in the advertisements. Some parts of the culture were hard to reconstruct. It was difficult to talk about foods of which only the names survived, but the homunculi and the machines, working tirelessly in Downdeep-downdeep, kept the surface of the world filled with enough novelties to fill anyone's heart with hope. We knew that all of this was make-believe, and yet it was not. We knew that when the diseases had killed the statistically correct number of people, they would be turned off; when the accident rate rose too high, it would stop without our knowing why. We knew that over us all, the Instrumentality watched. We had confidence that the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More would play with us as friends and not use us as victims of a game.

Take, for example, Virginia. She had been called Menerima, which represented the coded sounds of her birth number. She was small, verging on chubby; she was compact; her head was covered with tight brown curls; her eyes were a brown so deep and so rich that it took sunlight, with her squinting against it, to bring forth the treasures of her irises. I had known her well, but never

known her. I had seen her often, but never seen her with my heart, until we met just outside the hospital, after becoming French.

I was pleased to see an old friend and started to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but the words jammed, and as I tried to speak it was not Menerima any longer, but someone of ancient beauty, rare and strange—someone who had wandered into these latter days from the treasure worlds of time past. All I could do was to stammer:

"What do you call yourself now?" And I said it in ancient French.

She answered in the same language, "Je m'appelle Virginie."

Looking at her and falling in love was a single process. There was something strong, something wild in her, wrapped and hidden by the tenderness and youth of her girlish body. It was as though destiny spoke to me out of the certain brown eyes, eyes which questioned me surely and wonderingly, just as we both questioned the fresh new world which lay about us.

"May I?" said I, offering her my arm, as I had learned in the hours of hypnopedia. She took my arm and we walked away from the hospital.

I hummed a tune which had come into my mind, along with the ancient French language.

She tugged gently on my arm, and smiled up at me.

"What is it," she asked, "or don't you know?"

The words came soft and unbidden to my lips and I sang it very quietly, muting my voice in her curly hair, half-singing half-whispering the popular song which had poured into my mind with all the other things which the Rediscovery of Man had given me:

She wasn't the woman I went to seek. I met her by the merest chance. She did not speak the French of France, But the surded French of Martinique.

She wasn't rich. She wasn't chic. She had a most entrancing glance, And that was all ...

Suddenly I ran out of words, "I seem to have forgotten the rest of it. It's called 'Macouba' and it has something to do with a wonderful island which the ancient French called Martinique."

"I know where that is," she cried. She had been given the same memories that I had. "You can see it from Earthport!"

This was a sudden return to the world we had known. Earthport stood on its single pedestal, twelve miles high, at the eastern edge of the small continent. At the top of it, the lords worked amid machines which had no meaning any more. There the ships whispered their way in from the stars. I had seen pictures of it, but I had never been there. As a matter of fact, I had never known anyone who had actually been up Earthport. Why should we have gone? We might not have been welcome, and we could always see it just as well through the pictures on the eye-machine. For Menerima—familiar, dully pleasant, dear little Menerima—to have gone there was uncanny. It made me think that in the Old Perfect World things had not been as plain or forthright as they seemed.

Virginia, the new Menerima, tried to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but she gave up and used French instead:

"My aunt," she said, meaning a kindred lady, since no one had had aunts for thousands of years, "was a Believer. She took me to the Abba-dingo. To get holiness and luck."

The old me was a little shocked; the French me was disquieted by the fact that this girl had done something unusual even before mankind itself turned to the unusual. The Abba-dingo was a long-obsolete computer set part way up the column of Earthport. The homunculi treated it as a god, and occasionally people went to it. To do so was tedious and vulgar.

Or had been. Till all things became new again.

Keeping the annoyance out of my voice, I asked her:

"What was it like?"

She laughed lightly, yet there was a trill to her laughter which gave me a shiver. If the old Menerima had had secrets, what might the new Virginia do? I almost hated the fate which made me love her, which made me feel that the touch of her hand on my arm was a link between me and time-forever.

She smiled at me instead of answering my question. The surfaceway was under repair; we followed a ramp down to the level of the top underground, where it was legal for true persons and hominids and homunculi to walk.

I did not like the feeling; I had never gone more than twenty minutes' trip from my birthplace. This ramp looked safe enough. There were few hominids around these days, men from the stars who (though of true human stock) had been changed to fit the conditions of a thousand worlds. The homunculi were morally repulsive, though many of them looked like very handsome people; bred from animals into the shape of men, they took over the tedious chores of working with machines where no real man would wish to go. It was whispered that some of them had even bred with actual people, and I would not want my Virginia to be exposed to the presence of such a creature.

She had been holding my arm. When we walked down the ramp to the busy passage, I slipped my arm free and put it over her shoulders, drawing her closer to me. It was light enough, bright enough to be clearer than the daylight which we had left behind, but it was strange and full of danger. In the old days, I would have turned around and gone home rather than to expose myself to the presence of such dreadful beings. At this time, in this moment, I could not bear to part from my new-found love, and I was afraid that if I went back to my own apartment in the tower, she might go to hers. Anyhow, being French gave a spice to danger.

Actually, the people in the traffic looked commonplace enough. There were many busy machines, some in human form and some not I did not see a single hominid. Other people, whom I knew to be homunculi because they yielded the right of way to us, looked no different from the real human beings on the surface. A brilliantly beautiful girl gave me a look which I did not like—saucy, intelligent, provocative beyond all limits of flirtation. I suspected her of being a dog by origin. Among the homunculi, d'persons are the ones most apt to take liberties. They even have a dog-man philosopher who once produced a tape arguing that since dogs are the most ancient of men's allies, they have the right to be closer to man than any other form of life. When I saw the tape, I thought it amusing that a dog should be bred into the form of a Socrates; here, in the top underground, I was not so sure at all. What would I do if one of them became insolent? Kill him? That meant a brush with the law and a talk with the subcommissioners of the Instrumentality.

Virginia noticed none of this.

She had not answered my question, but was asking me questions about the top underground instead. I had been there only once before, when I was small, but it was flattering to have her wondering, husky voice murmuring in my ear.

Then it happened.

At first I thought he was a man, foreshortened by some trick of the underground light. When he came closer, I saw that it was not. He must have been five feet across the shoulders. Ugly red scars on his forehead showed where the horns had been dug out of his skull. He was a homunculus, obviously derived from cattle stock. Frankly, I had never known that they left them that ill-formed.

And he was drunk.

As he came closer I could pick up the buzz of his mind ... they're not people, they're not hominids, and they're not Us—what are they doing here? The words they think confuse me. He had never telepathed French before.

This was bad. For him to talk was common enough, but only a few of the homunculi were telepathic—those with special jobs, such as in the Downdeep-downdeep, where only telepathy could relay instructions.

Virginia clung to me.

Thought I, in dear Common Tongue: True men are we. You must let us pass.

There was no answer but a roar. I do not know where he got drunk, or on what, but he did not get my message.

I could see his thoughts forming up into panic, helplessness, hate. Then he charged, almost dancing toward us, as though he could crush our bodies.

My mind focused and I threw the stop order at him.

It did not work.

Horror-stricken, I realized that I had thought French at him.

Virginia screamed.

The bull-man was upon us.

At the last moment he swerved, passed us blindly, and let out a roar which filled the enormous passage. He had raced beyond us.

Still holding Virginia, I turned around to see what had made him pass us.

What I beheld was odd in the extreme.

Our figures ran down the corridor away from us—my black-purple cloak flying in the still air as my image ran, Virginia's golden dress swimming out behind her as she ran with me. The images were perfect and the bull-man pursued them.

I stared around in bewilderment. We had been told that the safeguards no longer protected us.

A girl stood quietly next to the wall. I had almost mistaken her for a statue. Then she spoke,

"Come no closer. I am a cat. It was easy enough to fool him. You had better get back to the surface."

"Thank you," I said, "thank you. What is your name?"

"Does it matter?" said the girl. "I'm not a person."

A little offended, I insisted, "I just wanted to thank you." As I spoke to her I saw that she was as beautiful and as bright as a flame. Her skin was clear, the color of cream, and her hair—finer than any human hair could possibly be—was the wild golden orange of a Persian cat.

"I'm C'mell," said the girl, "and I work at Earthport."

That stopped both Virginia and me. Cat-people were below us, and should be shunned, but Earthport was above us, and had to be respected. Which was C'mell?

She smiled, and her smile was better suited for my eyes than for Virginia's. It spoke a whole world of voluptuous knowledge. I knew she wasn't trying to do anything to me; the rest of her manner showed that. Perhaps it was the only smile she knew.

"Don't worry," she said, "about the formalities. You'd better take these steps here. I hear him coming back."

I spun around, looking for the drunken bull-man. He was not to be seen.

"Go up here," urged C'mell. "They are emergency steps and you will be back on the surface. I can keep him from following. Was that French you were speaking?"

"Yes," said I. "How did you—?"

"Get along," she said. "Sorry I asked. Hurry!"

I entered the small door. A spiral staircase went to the surface. It was below our dignity as true people to use steps, but with C'mell urging me, there was nothing else I could do. I nodded goodbye to C'mell and drew Virginia after me up the stairs.

At the surface we stopped.

Virginia gasped, "Wasn't it horrible?"

"We're safe now," said I.

"It's not safety," she said. "It's the dirtiness of it. Imagine having to talk to her!"

Virginia meant that C'mell was worse than the drunken bull-man. She sensed my reserve because she said, "The sad thing is, you'll see her again ... "

"What! How do you know that?"

"I don't know it," said Virginia. "I guess it. But I guess good, very good. After all, I went to the Abba-dingo."

"I asked you, darling, to tell me what happened there."

She shook her head mutely and began walking down the streetway. I had no choice but to follow her. It made me a little irritable.

I asked again, more crossly, "What was it like?"

With hurt girlish dignity she said, "Nothing, nothing. It was a long climb. The old woman made me go with her. It turned out that the machine was not talking that day, anyhow, so we got permission to drop down a shaft and to come back on the rolling road. It was just a wasted day."

She had been talking straight ahead, not to me, as though the memory were a little ugly.

Then she turned her face to me. The brown eyes looked into my eyes as though she were searching for my soul. (Soul. There's a word we have in French, and there is nothing quite like it in the Old Common Tongue.) She brightened and pleaded with me:

"Let's not be dull on the new day. Let's be good to the new us, Paul. Let's do something really French, if that's what we are to be."

"A café," I cried. "We need a café. And I know where one is."

"Where?"

"Two undergrounds over. Where the machines come out and where they permit the homunculi to peer in the window." The thought of homunculi peering at us struck the new me as amusing, though the old me had taken them as much for granted as windows or tables. The old me never met any, but knew that they weren't exactly people, since they were, bred from animals, but they looked just about like people, and they could talk. It took a Frenchman like the new me to realize that they could be ugly, or beautiful, or picturesque. More than picturesque: romantic.

Evidently Virginia now thought the same, for she said, "But they're nette, just adorable. What is the café called?"

"The Greasy Cat," said I.

The Greasy Cat. How was I to know that this led to a nightmare between high waters, and to the winds which cried? How was I to suppose that this had anything to do with Alpha Ralpa Boulevard?

No force in the world could have taken me there, if I had known.



Other new-French people had gotten to the café before us.

A waiter with a big brown moustache took our order. I looked closely at him to see if he might be a licensed homunculus, allowed to work among people because his services were indispensable; but he was not. He was pure machine, though his voice rang out with old-Parisian heartiness, and the designers had even built into him the nervous habit of mopping the back of his hand against his big moustache, and had fixed him so that little beads of sweat showed high up on his brow, just below the hairline.

"Mamselle? M'sieu? Beer? Coffee? Red wine next month. The sun will shine in the quarter after the hour and after the half-hour. At twenty minutes to the hour it will rain for five minutes so that you can enjoy these umbrellas. I am a native of Alsace. You may speak French or German to me."

"Anything," said Virginia. "You decide, Paul."

"Beer, please," said I. "Blonde beer for both of us."

"But certainly, M'sieu," said the waiter.

He left, waving his cloth wildly over his arm.

Virginia puckered up her eyes against the sun and said, "I wish it would rain now. I've never seen real rain."

"Be patient, honey."

She turned earnestly to me. "What is 'German,' Paul?"

"Another language, another culture. I read they will bring it to life next year. But don't you like being French?"

"I like it fine," she said. "Much better than being a number. But Paul—" And then she stopped, her eyes blurred with perplexity.

"Yes, darling?"

"Paul," she said, and the statement of my name was a cry of hope from some depth of her mind beyond new me, beyond old me, beyond even the contrivances of the lords who moulded us. I reached for her hand.

Said I, "You can tell me, darling."

"Paul," she said, and it was almost weeping, "Paul, why does it all happen so fast? This is our first day, and we both feel that we may spend the rest of our lives together. There's something about marriage, whatever that is, and we're supposed to find a priest, and I don't understand that, either. Paul, Paul, Paul, why does it happen so fast? I want to love you. I do love you. But I don't want to be made to love you. I want it to be the real me," and as she spoke, tears poured from her eyes though her voice remained steady enough.

Then it was that I said the wrong thing.

"You don't have to worry, honey. I'm sure that the lords of the Instrumentality have programmed everything well."

At that, she burst into tears, loudly and uncontrollably. I had never seen an adult weep before. It was strange and frightening.

A man from the next table came over and stood beside me, but I did not so much as glance at him.

"Darling," said I, reasonably, "darling, we can work it out—"

"Paul, let me leave you, so that I may be yours. Let me go away for a few days or a few weeks or a few years. Then, if-if-if I do come back, you'll know it's me and not some program ordered by a machine. For God's sake, Paul—for God's sake!" In a different voice she said, "What is God, Paul? They gave us the words to speak, but I do not know what they mean."

The man beside me spoke. "I can take you to God," he said.

"Who are you?" said I. "And who asked you to interfere?" This was not the kind of language that we had ever used when speaking the Old Common Tongue—when they had given us a new language they had built in temperament as well.

The stranger kept his politeness—he was as French as we but he kept his temper well.

"My name," he said, "is Maximilien Macht, and I used to be a Believer."

Virginia's eyes lit up. She wiped her face absent-mindedly while staring at the man. He was tall, lean, sunburned. (How could he have gotten sunburned so soon?) He had reddish hair and a moustache almost like that of the robot waiter.

"You asked about God, Mamselle," said the stranger. "God is where he has always been—around us, near us, in us."

This was strange talk from a man who looked worldly. I rose to my feet to bid him goodbye. Virginia guessed what I was doing and she said: "That's nice of you, Paul. Give him a chair."

There was warmth in her voice.

The machine waiter came back with two conical beakers made of glass. They had a golden fluid in them with a cap of foam on top. I had never seen or heard of beer before, but I knew exactly how it would taste. I put imaginary money on the tray, received imaginary change, paid the waiter an imaginary tip. The Instrumentality had not yet figured out how to have separate kinds of money for all the new cultures, and of course you could not use real money to pay for food or drink. Food and drink are free.

The machine wiped his moustache, used his serviette (checked red and white) to dab the sweat off his brow, and then looked inquiringly at Monsieur Macht.

"M'sieu, you will sit here?"

"Indeed," said Macht.

"Shall I serve you here?"

"But why not?" said Macht. "If these good people permit."

"Very well," said the machine, wiping his moustache with the back of his hand. He fled to the dark recesses of the bar.

All this time Virginia had not taken her eyes off Macht.

"You are a Believer?" she asked. "You are still a Believer, when you have been made French like us? How do you know you're you? Why do I love Paul? Are the lords and their machines controlling everything in us? I want to be me. Do you know how to be me?"

"Not you, Mamselle," said Macht, "that would be too great an honor. But I am learning how to be myself. You see," he added, turning to me, "I have been French for two weeks now, and I know how much of me is myself, and how much has been added by this new process of giving us language and danger again."

The waiter came back with a small beaker. It stood on a stem, so that it looked like an evil little miniature of Earthport. The fluid it contained was milky white.

Macht lifted his glass to us. "Your health!"

Virginia stared at him as if she were going to cry again. When he and I sipped, she blew her nose and put her handkerchief away. It was the first time I had ever seen a person perform that act of blowing the nose, but it seemed to go well with our new culture.

Macht smiled at both of us, as if he were going to begin a speech. The sun came out, right on time. It gave him a halo, and made him look like a devil or a saint.

But it was Virginia who spoke first

"You have been there?"

Macht raised his eyebrows a little, frowned, and said, "Yes," very quietly.

"Did you get a word?" she persisted.

"Yes." He looked glum, and a little troubled.

"What did it say?"

For answer, he shook his head at her, as if there were things which should never be mentioned in public.

I wanted to break in, to find out what this was all about.

Virginia went on, heeding me not at all: "But it did say something!"

"Yes," said Macht.

"Was it important?"

"Mamselle, let us not talk about it."

"We must," she cried. "It's life or death." Her hands were clenched so tightly together that her knuckles showed white. Her beer stood in front of her, untouched, growing warm in the sunlight.

"Very well," said Macht, "you may ask ... I cannot guarantee to answer."

I controlled myself no longer. "What's all this about?"

Virginia looked at me with scorn, but even her scorn was the scorn of a lover, not the cold remoteness of the past. "Please, Paul, you wouldn't know. Wait a while. What did it say to you, M'sieu Macht?"

"That I, Maximilien Macht, would live or die with a brown-haired girl who was already betrothed." He smiled wryly, "And I do not even quite know what 'betrothed' means."

"We'll find out," said Virginia. "When did it say this?"

"Who is 'It'?" I shouted at them. "For God's sake, what is this all about?"

Macht looked at me and dropped his voice when he spoke: "The Abba-dingo." To her he said, "Last week."

Virginia turned white. "So it does work, it does, it does. Paul darling, it said nothing to me. But it said to my aunt something which I can't ever forget!"

I held her arm firmly and tenderly and tried to look into her eyes, but she looked away. Said I, "What did it say?"

"Paul and Virginia."

"So what?" said I.

I scarcely knew her. Her lips were tense and compressed. She was not angry. It was something different, worse. She was in the grip of tension. I suppose we had not seen that for thousands of years, either. "Paul, seize this simple fact, if you can grasp it. The machine gave that woman our names—but it gave them to her twelve years ago."

Macht stood up so suddenly that his chair fell over, and the waiter began running toward us.

"That settles it," he said. "We're all going back."

"Going where?" I said.

"To the Abba-dingo."

"But why now?" said I; and, "Will it work?" said Virginia, both at the same time.

"It always works," said Macht, "if you go on the northern side."

"How do you get there?" said Virginia.

Macht frowned sadly, "There's only one way. By Alpha Ralpa Boulevard." Virginia stood up. And so did I.

Then, as I rose, I remembered. Alpha Ralpa Boulevard. It was a ruined street hanging in the sky, faint as a vapor trail. It had been a processional highway once, where conquerors came down and tribute went up. But it was ruined, lost in the clouds, closed to mankind for a hundred centuries.

"I know it," said I. "It's ruined."

Macht said nothing, but he stared at me as if I were an outsider ...

Virginia, very quiet and white of countenance, said, "Come along."

"But why?" said I. "Why?"

"You fool," she said, "if we don't have a God, at least we have a machine. This is the only thing left on or off the world which the Instrumentality doesn't understand. Maybe it tells the future. Maybe it's an un-machine. It certainly comes from a different time. Can't you use it; darling? If it says we're us, we're us."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we're not." Her face was sullen with grief.

"What do you mean?"

"If we're not us," she said, "we're just toys, dolls, puppets that the lords have written on. You're not you and I'm not me. But if the Abba-dingo, which knew the names Paul and Virginia twelve years before it happened—if the Abba-dingo says that we are us, I don't care if it's a predicting machine or a god or a devil or a what. I don't care, but I'll have the truth."

What could I have answered to that? Macht led, she followed, and I walked third in single file. We left the sunlight of The Greasy Cat; just as we left, a light rain began to fall. The waiter, looking momentarily like the machine that he was, stared straight ahead. We crossed the lip of the underground and went down to the fast expressway.

When we came out, we were in a region of fine homes. All were in ruins. The trees had thrust their way into the buildings. Flowers rioted across the lawn, through the open doors, and blazed in the roofless rooms. Who needed a house in the open, when the population of Earth had dropped so that the cities were commodious and empty?

Once I thought I saw a family of homunculi, including little ones, peering at me as we trudged along the soft gravel road. Maybe the faces I had seen at the edge of the house were fantasies.

Macht said nothing.

Virginia and I held hands as we walked beside him. I could have been happy at this odd excursion, but her hand was tightly clenched in mine. She bit her lower lip from time to time. I knew it mattered to her—she was on a pilgrimage. (A pilgrimage was an ancient walk to some powerful place, very good for body and soul.) I didn't mind going along. In fact, they could not

have kept me from coming, once she and Macht decided to leave the cafe. But I didn't have to take it seriously. Did I?

What did Macht want?

Who was Macht? What thoughts had that mind learned in two short weeks? How had he preceded us into a new world of danger and adventure? I did not trust him. For the first time in my life I felt alone. Always, always, up to now, I had only to think about the Instrumentality and some protector leaped fully armed into my mind. Telepathy guarded against all dangers, healed all hurts, carried each of us forward to the one hundred and forty-six thousand and ninety-seven days which had been allotted us. Now it was different. I did not know this man, and it was on him that I relied, not on the powers which had shielded and protected us.

We turned from the ruined road into an immense boulevard. The pavement was so smooth and unbroken that nothing grew on it, save where the wind and dust had deposited random little pockets of earth.

Macht stopped.

"This is it," he said. "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard."

We fell silent and looked at the causeway of forgotten empires.

To our left the boulevard disappeared in a gentle curve. It led far north of the city in which I had been reared. I knew that there was another city to the north, but I had forgotten its name. Why should I have remembered it? It was sure to be just like my own.

But to the right—To the right the boulevard rose sharply, like a ramp. It disappeared into the clouds. Just at the edge of the cloud-line there was a hint of disaster. I could not see for sure, but it looked to me as though the whole boulevard had been sheared off by unimaginable forces. Somewhere beyond the clouds there stood the Abba-dingo, the place where all questions were answered ...

Or so they thought.

Virginia cuddled close to me.

"Let's turn back," said I. "We are city people. We don't know anything about ruins."

"You can if you want to," said Macht. "I was just trying to do you a favor."

We both looked at Virginia.

She looked up at me with those brown eyes. From the eyes there came a plea older than woman or man, older than the human race. I knew what she was going to say before she said it. She was going to say that she had to know.

Macht was idly crushing some soft rocks near his foot.

At last Virginia spoke up: "Paul, I don't want danger for its own sake. But I meant what I said back there. Isn't there a chance that we were told to love each other? What sort of a life would it be if our happiness, our own selves, depended on a thread in a machine or on a mechanical voice which spoke to us when we were asleep and learning French? It may be fun to go back to the old world. I guess it is. I know that you give me a kind of happiness which I never even suspected before this day. If it's really us, we have something wonderful, and we ought to know it. But if it isn't—" She burst into sobs.

I wanted to say, "If it isn't, it will seem just the same," but the ominous sulky face of Macht looked at me over Virginia's shoulder as I drew her to me. There was nothing to say.

I held her close.

From beneath Macht's foot there flowed a trickle of blood. The dust drank it up.

"Macht," said I, "are you hurt?"

Virginia turned around, too.

Macht raised his eyebrows at me and said with unconcern, "No. Why?"

"The blood. At your feet."

He glanced down. "Oh, those," he said, "they're nothing. Just the eggs of some kind of an un-bird which does not even fly."

"Stop it!" I shouted telepathically, using the Old Common Tongue. I did not even try to think in our new-learned French.

He stepped back a pace in surprise.

Out of nothing there came to me a message: thankyou thankyou goodgreat gohomeplease thankyou goodgreat goaway manbad manbad manbad. Somewhere an animal or bird was warning me against Macht. I thought a casual thanks to it and turned my attention to Macht.

He and I stared at each other. Was this what culture was? Were we now men? Did freedom always include the freedom to mistrust, to fear, to hate?

I liked him not at all. The words of forgotten crimes came into my mind: assassination, murder, abduction, insanity, rape, robbery ...

We had known none of these things and yet I felt them all.

He spoke evenly to me. We had both been careful to guard our minds against being read telepathically, so that our only means of communication were empathy and French. "It's your idea," he said, most untruthfully, "or at least your lady's ... "

"Has lying already come into the world," said I, "so that we walk into the clouds for no reason at all?"

"There is a reason," said Macht.

I pushed Virginia gently aside and capped my mind so tightly that the anti-telepathy felt like a headache.

"Macht," said I, and I myself could hear the snarl of an animal in my own voice, "tell me why you have brought us here or I will kill you."

He did not retreat. He faced me, ready for a fight. He said, "Kill? You mean, to make me dead?" but his words did not carry conviction. Neither one of us knew how to fight, but he readied for defense and I for attack.

Underneath my thought shield an animal thought crept in: good-man good-man take him by the neck no-air he-aaah no-air he-aaah like broken egg ...

I took the advice without worrying where it came from. It was simple. I walked over to Macht, reached my hands around his throat and squeezed. He tried to push my hands away. Then he tried to kick me. All I did was hang on to his throat. If I had been a lord or a Go-captain, I might have known about fighting. But I did not, and neither did he.

It ended when a sudden weight dragged at my hands.

Out of surprise, I let go.

Macht had become unconscious. Was that dead?

It could not have been, because he sat up. Virginia ran to him. He rubbed his throat and said with a rough voice:

"You should not have done that."

This gave me courage. "Tell me," I spat at him, "tell me why you wanted us to come, or I will do it again."

Macht grinned weakly. He leaned his head against Virginia's arm. "It's fear," he said. "Fear."

"Fear?" I knew the word—*peur*—but not the meaning. Was it some kind of disquiet or animal alarm?

I had been thinking with my mind open; he thought back yes.

"But why do you like it?" I asked.

It is delicious, he thought. It makes me sick and thrilly and alive. It is like strong medicine, almost as good as *stroon*. I went there before. High up, I had much fear. It was wonderful and bad and good, all at the same time. I lived a thousand years in a single hour. I wanted more of it, but I thought it would be even more exciting with other people.

"Now I will kill you," said I in French. "You are very—very ... " I had to look for the word. "You are very evil."

"No," said Virginia, "let him talk."

He thought at me, not bothering with words. This is what the lords of the Instrumentality never let us have. Fear. Reality. We were born in a stupor and we died in a dream. Even the underpeople, the animals had more life than we did. The machines did not have fear. That's what we were. Machines who thought they were men. And now we are free.

He saw the edge of raw, red anger in my mind, and he changed the subject. I did not lie to you. This is the way to the Abba-dingo. I have been there. It works. On this side, it always works.

"It works," cried Virginia. "You see he says so. It works! He is telling the truth. Oh, Paul, do let's go on!"

"All right," said I, "we'll go."

I helped him rise. He looked embarrassed, like a man who has shown something of which he is ashamed.

We walked onto the surface of the indestructible boulevard. It was comfortable to the feet.

At the bottom of my mind the little unseen bird or animal babbled its thoughts at me: *goodman goodman make him dead take water take water ...*

I paid no attention as I walked forward with her and him, Virginia between us. I paid no attention.

I wish I had.

We walked for a long time.

The process was new to us. There was something exhilarating in knowing that no one guarded us, that the air was free air, moving without benefit of weather machines. We saw many birds, and when I thought at them I found their minds startled and opaque; they were natural birds, the like of which I had never seen before. Virginia asked me their names, and I outrageously applied all the bird-names which we had learned in French without knowing whether they were historically right or not.

Maximilien Macht cheered up, too, and he even sang us a song, rather off key, to the effect that we would take the high road and he the low one, but that he would be in Scotland before us. It did not make sense, but the lilt was pleasant. Whenever he got a certain distance ahead of Virginia and me, I made up variations on "*Macouba*" and sang-whispered the phrases into her pretty ear:

She wasn't the woman I went to seek. I met her by the merest chance. She did not speak the French of France, But the surded French of Martinique.

We were happy in adventure and freedom, until we became hungry. Then our troubles began.

Virginia stepped up to a lamp-post, struck it lightly with her fist and said, "Feed me." The post should either have opened, serving us a dinner, or else told us where, within the next few hundred yards, food was to be had. It did neither. It did nothing. It must have been broken.

With that, we began to make a game of hitting every single post.

Alpha Ralph Boulevard had risen about half a kilometer above the surrounding countryside. The wild birds wheeled below us. There was less dust on the pavement, and fewer patches of weeds. The immense road, with no pylons below it, curved like an unsupported ribbon into the clouds.

We wearied of beating posts and there was neither food nor water.

Virginia became fretful: "It won't do any good to go back now. Food is even farther the other way. I do wish you'd brought something."

How should I have thought to carry food? Who ever carries food? Why would they carry it, when it is everywhere? My darling was unreasonable, but she was my darling and I loved her all the more for the sweet imperfections of her temper.

Macht kept tapping pillars, partly to keep out of our fight, and obtained an unexpected result.

At one moment I saw him leaning over to give the pillar of a large lamp the usual hearty but guarded whop—in the next instant he yelped like a dog and was sliding uphill at a high rate of speed. I heard him shout something, but could not make out the words, before he disappeared into the clouds ahead.

Virginia looked at me. "Do you want to go back now? Macht is gone. We can say that I got tired."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course, darling."

I laughed, a little angrily. She had insisted that we come, and now she was ready to turn around and give it up, just to please me.

"Never mind," said I. "It can't be far now. Let's go on."

"Paul ... " She stood close to me. Her brown eyes were troubled, as though she were trying to see all the way into my mind through my eyes. I thought to her, Do you want to talk this way?

"No," said she, in French. "I want to say things one at a time. Paul; I do want to go to the Abba-dingo. I need to go. It's the biggest need in my life. But at the same time I don't want to go. There is something wrong up there. I would rather have you on the wrong terms than not have you at all. Something could happen."

Edgily, I demanded, "Are you getting this 'fear' that Macht was talking about?"

"Oh, no, Paul, not at all. This feeling isn't exciting. It feels like something broken in a machine —"

"Listen!" I interrupted her.

From far ahead, from within the clouds, there came a sound like an animal wailing. There were words in it. It must have been Macht. I thought I heard "take care." When I sought him with my mind, the distance made circles and I got dizzy.

"Let's follow, darling," said I.

"Yes, Paul," said she, and in her voice there was an unfathomable mixture of happiness, resignation, and despair ...



Before we moved on, I looked carefully at her. She was my girl. The sky had turned yellow and the lights were not yet on. In the yellow rich sky her brown curls were tinted with gold, her brown eyes approached the black in their irises, her young and fate-haunted face seemed more meaningful than any other human face I had ever seen.

"You are mine," I said.

"Yes, Paul," she answered me and then smiled brightly. "You said it! That is doubly nice."

A bird on the railing looked sharply at us and then left. Perhaps he did not approve of human nonsense, so flung himself downward into dark air. I saw him catch himself, far below, and ride lazily on his wings.

"We're not as free as birds, darling," I told Virginia, "but we are freer than people have been for a hundred centuries."

For answer she hugged my arm and smiled at me.

"And now," I added, "to follow Macht. Put your arms around me and hold me tight. I'll try hitting that post. If we don't get dinner we may get a ride."

I felt her take hold tightly and then I struck the post.

Which post? An instant later the posts were sailing by us in a blur. The ground beneath our feet seemed steady, but we were moving at a fast rate. Even in the service underground I had never seen a roadway as fast as this. Virginia's dress was blowing so hard that it made snapping sounds like the snap of fingers. In no time at all we were in the cloud and out of it again.

A new world surrounded us. The clouds lay below and above. Here and there blue sky shone through. We were steady. The ancient engineers must have devised the walkway cleverly. We rode up, up, up without getting dizzy.

Another cloud.

Then things happened so fast that the telling of them takes longer than the event.

Something dark rushed at me from up ahead. A violent blow hit me in the chest. Only much later did I realize that this was Macht's arm trying to grab me before we went over the edge. Then we went into another cloud. Before I could even speak to Virginia a second blow struck me. The pain was terrible. I had never felt anything like that in all my life. For some reason, Virginia had fallen over me and beyond me. She was pulling at my hands.

I tried to tell her to stop pulling me, because it hurt, but I had no breath. Rather than argue, I tried to do what she wanted. I struggled toward her. Only then did I realize that there was nothing below my feet—no bridge, no jetway, nothing.

I was on the edge of the boulevard, the broken edge of the upper side. There was nothing below me except for some looped cables, and, far underneath them, a tiny ribbon which was either a river or a road.

We had jumped blindly across the great gap and I had fallen just far enough to catch the upper edge of the roadway on my chest

It did not matter, the pain.

In a moment the doctor-robot would be there to repair me.

A look at Virginia's face reminded me there was no doctor-robot, no world, no Instrumentality, nothing but wind and pain. She was crying. It took a moment for me to hear what she was saying, "I did it, I did it, darling, are you dead?"

Neither one of us was sure what "dead" meant, because people always went away at their appointed time, but we knew that it meant a cessation of life. I tried to tell her that I was living, but she fluttered over me and kept dragging me farther from the edge of the drop.

I used my hands to push myself into a sitting position.

She knelt beside me and covered my face with kisses.

At last I was able to gasp, "Where's Macht?"

She looked back. "I don't see him."

I tried to look too. Rather than have me struggle, she said, "You stay quiet. I'll look again."

Bravely she walked to the edge of the sheared-off boulevard. She looked over toward the lower side of the gap, peering through the clouds which drifted past us as rapidly as smoke sucked by a ventilator. Then she cried out:

"I see him. He looks so funny. Like an insect in the museum. He is crawling across on the cables."

Struggling to my hands and knees, I neared her and looked too. There he was, a dot moving along a thread, with the birds soaring by beneath him. It looked very unsafe. Perhaps he was getting all the "fear" that he needed to keep himself happy. I did not want that "fear," whatever it was. I wanted food, water, and a doctor-robot.

None of these were here.

I struggled to my feet. Virginia tried to help me but I was standing before she could do more than touch my sleeve.

"Let's go on."

"On?" she said.

"On to the Abba-dingo. There may be friendly machines up there. Here there is nothing but cold and wind, and the lights have not yet gone on."

She frowned. "But Macht ... ?"

"It will be hours before he gets here. We can come back."

She obeyed.

Once again we went to the left of the boulevard. I told her to squeeze my waist while I struck the pillars, one by one. Surely there must have been a reactivating device for the passengers on the road.

The fourth time, it worked.

Once again the wind whipped our clothing as we raced upward on Alpha Ralpa Boulevard.

We almost fell as the road veered to the left. I caught my balance, only to have it veer the other way.

And then we stopped.

This was the Abba-dingo.

A walkway littered with white objects—knobs and rods and imperfectly formed balls about the size of my head.

Virginia stood beside me, silent.

About the size of my head? I kicked one of the objects aside and then knew, knew for sure, what it was. It was people. The inside parts. I had never seen such things before. And that, that on the ground, must once have been a hand. There were hundreds of such things along the wall.

"Come, Virginia," said I, keeping my voice even, and my thoughts hidden.

She followed without saying a word. She was curious about the things on the ground, but she did not seem to recognize them.

For my part, I was watching the wall.

At last I found them—the little doors of Abba-dingo.

One said METEOROLOGICAL. It was not Old Common Tongue, nor was it French, but it was so close that I knew it had something to do with the behavior of air. I put my hand against the panel of the door. The panel became translucent and ancient writing showed through. There were numbers which meant nothing, words which meant nothing, and then:

Typhoon coming.

My French had not taught me what a "coming" was, but "typhoon" was plainly typhon, a major air disturbance. Thought I, let the weather machines take care of the matter. It had nothing to do with us.

"That's no help," said I.

"What does it mean?" she said.

"The air will be disturbed."

"Oh," said she. "That couldn't matter to us, could it?"

"Of course not."

I tried the next panel, which said FOOD. When my hand touched the little door, there was an aching creak inside the wall, as though the whole tower retched. The door opened a little bit and a horrible odor came out of it. Then the door closed again.

The third door said HELP and when I touched it nothing happened. Perhaps it was some kind of tax-collecting device from the ancient days.

It yielded nothing to my touch. The fourth door was larger and already partly open at the bottom. At the top, the name of the door was PREDICTIONS. Plain enough, that one was, to anyone who knew Old French. The name at the bottom was more mysterious: PUT PAPER HERE it said, and I could not guess what it meant.

I tried telepathy. Nothing happened. The wind whistled past us. Some of the calcium balls and knobs rolled on the pavement. I tried again, trying my utmost for the imprint of long-departed thoughts. A scream entered my mind, a thin long scream which did not sound much like people. That was all.

Perhaps it did upset me. I did not feel "fear," but I was worried about Virginia.

She was staring at the ground.

"Paul," she said, "isn't that a man's coat on the ground among those funny things?"

Once I had seen an ancient X-ray in the museum, so I knew that the coat still surrounded the material which had provided the inner structure of the man. There was no ball there, so that I was quite sure he was dead. How could that have happened in the old days? Why did the Instrumentality let it happen? But then, the Instrumentality had always forbidden this side of the tower. Perhaps the violators had met their own punishment in some way I could not fathom.

"Look, Paul," said Virginia, "I can put my hand in."

Before I could stop her, she had thrust her hand into the flat open slot which said PUT PAPER HERE.

She screamed.

Her hand was caught.

I tried to pull at her arm, but it did not move. She began gasping with pain. Suddenly her hand came free.

Clear words were cut into the living skin. I tore my cloak off and wrapped her hand.

As she sobbed beside me I unbandaged her hand. As I did so she saw the words on her skin.

The words said, in clear French: You will love Paul all your life.

Virginia let me bandage her hand with my cloak and then she lifted her face to be kissed. "It was worth it," she said; "it was worth all the trouble, Paul. Let's see if we can get down. Now I know."

I kissed her again and said, reassuringly, "You do know, don't you?"

"Of course," she smiled through her tears. "The Instrumentality could not have contrived this. What a clever old machine! Is it a god or a devil, Paul?"

I had not studied those words at that time, so I patted her instead of answering. We turned to leave.

At the last minute I realized that I had not tried PREDICTIONS myself.

"Just a moment, darling. Let me tear a little piece off the bandage."

She waited patiently. I tore a piece the size of my hand, and then I picked up one of the ex-person units on the ground. It may have been the front of an arm. I returned to push the cloth into the slot, but when I turned to the door, an enormous bird was sitting there.

I used my hand to push the bird aside, and he cawed at me. He even seemed to threaten me with his cries and his sharp beak. I could not dislodge him.

Then I tried telepathy. I am a true man. Go away! The bird's dim mind flashed back at me nothing but no-no-no-no-no! With that I struck him so hard with my fist that he fluttered to the ground. He righted himself amid the white litter on the pavement and then, opening his wings, he let the wind carry him away.

I pushed in the scrap of cloth, counted to twenty in my mind, and pulled the scrap out.

The words were plain, but they meant nothing: You will love Virginia twenty-one more minutes.

Her happy voice, reassured by the prediction but still unsteady from the pain in her written-on hand, came to me as though it were far away. "What does it say, darling?"

Accidentally on purpose, I let the wind take the scrap. It fluttered away like a bird. Virginia saw it go.

"Oh," she cried disappointedly. "We've lost it! What did it say?"

"Just what yours did."

"But what words, Paul? How did it say it?"

With love and heartbreak and perhaps a little "fear," I lied to her and whispered gently,

"It said, "Paul will always love Virginia."

She smiled at me radiantly. Her stocky, full figure stood firmly and happily against the wind. Once again she was the chubby, pretty Menerima whom I had noticed in our block when we both were children. And she was more than that. She was my new-found love in our new-found world. She was my mademoiselle from Martinique. The message was foolish. We had seen from the food-slot that the machine was broken.

"There's no food or water here," said I. Actually, there was a puddle of water near the railing, but it had been blown over the human structural elements on the ground, and I had no heart to drink it.

Virginia was so happy that, despite her wounded hand, her lack of water and her lack of food, she walked vigorously and cheerfully.

Thought I to myself, Twenty-one minutes. About six hours have passed. If we stay here we face unknown dangers.

Vigorously we walked downward, down Alpha Ralph Boulevard. We had met the Abbadingo and were still "alive." I did not think that I was "dead," but the words have been meaningless so long that it was hard to think them.

The ramp was so steep going down that we pranced like horses. The wind blew into our faces with incredible force. That's what it was, wind, but I looked up the word vent only after it was all over.

We never did see the whole tower—just the wall at which the ancient jetway had deposited us. The rest of the tower was hidden by clouds which fluttered like torn rags as they raced past the heavy material.

The sky was red on one side and a dirty yellow on the other.

Big drops of water began to strike at us.

"The weather machines are broken," I shouted to Virginia.

She tried to shout back to me but the wind carried her words away. I repeated what I had said about the weather machines. She nodded happily and warmly, though the wind was by now whipping her hair past her face and the pieces of water which fell from up above were spotting her flame-golden gown. It did not matter. She clung to my arm. Her happy face smiled at me as we stamped downward, bracing ourselves against the decline in the ramp. Her brown eyes were full of confidence and life. She saw me looking at her and she kissed me on the upper arm without losing step. She was my own girl forever, and she knew it.

The water-from-above, which I later knew was actual "rain," came in increasing volume. Suddenly it included birds. A large bird flapped his way vigorously against the whistling air and managed to stand still in front of my face, though his air speed was many leagues per hour. He cawed in my face and then was carried away by the wind. No sooner had that one gone than another bird struck me in the body. I looked down at it but it too was carried away by the racing current of air. All I got was a telepathic echo from its bright blank mind: no-no-no-no!

Now what? thought I. A bird's advice is not much to go upon.

Virginia grabbed my arm and stopped.

I too stopped.

The broken edge of Alpha Ralph Boulevard was just ahead. Ugly yellow clouds swam through the break like poisonous fish hastening on an inexplicable errand.

Virginia was shouting.

I could not hear her, so I leaned down. That way her mouth could almost touch my ear.

"Where is Macht?" she shouted.

Carefully I took her to the left side of the road, where the railing gave us some protection against the heavy racing air, and against the water commingled with it. By now neither of us could see very far. I made her drop to her knees. I got down beside her. The falling water pelted our backs. The light around us had turned to a dark dirty yellow.

We could still see, but we could not see much.

I was willing to sit in the shelter of the railing, but she nudged me. She wanted us to do something about Macht. What anyone could do, that was beyond me. If he had found shelter, he was safe, but if he was out on those cables, the wild pushing air would soon carry him off and then there would be no more Maximilien Macht. He would be "dead" and his interior parts would bleach somewhere on the open ground.

Virginia insisted.

We crept to the edge.

A bird swept in, true as a bullet, aiming for my face. I flinched. A wing touched me. It stung against my cheek like fire. I did not know that feathers were so tough. The birds must all have damaged mental mechanisms, thought I, if they hit people on Alpha Ralpa. That is not the right way to behave toward true people.

At last we reached the edge, crawling on our bellies. I tried to dig the fingernails of my left hand into the stonelike material of the railing, but it was flat, and there was nothing much to hold to, save for the ornamental fluting. My right arm was around Virginia. It hurt me badly to crawl forward that way, because my body was still damaged from the blow against the edge of the road, on the way coming up. When I hesitated, Virginia thrust herself forward. We saw nothing.

The gloom was around us.

The wind and the water beat at us like fists.

Her gown pulled at her like a dog worrying its master. I wanted to get her back into the shelter of the railing, where we could wait for the air-disturbance to end.

Abruptly, the light shone all around us. It was wild electricity, which the ancients called lightning. Later I found that it occurs quite frequently in the areas beyond the reach of the weather machines.

The bright quick light showed us a white face staring at us. He hung on the cables below us. His mouth was open, so he must have been shouting. I shall never know whether the expression on his face showed "fear" or great happiness. It was full of excitement. The bright light went out and I thought that I heard the echo of a call. I reached for his mind telepathically and there was nothing there. Just some dim, obstinate bird thinking at me, no-no-no-no-no!

Virginia tightened in my arms. She squirmed around. I shouted at her in French. She could not hear.

Then I called with my mind.

Someone else was there.

Virginia's mind blazed at me, full of revulsion, The cat-girl. She is going to touch me!

She twisted. My right arm was suddenly empty. I saw the gleam of a golden gown flash over the edge, even in the dim light. I reached with my mind, and I caught her cry:

"Paul, Paul, I love you. Paul ... help me!"

The thoughts faded as her body dropped.

The someone else was C'mell, whom we had first met in the corridor.

I came to get you both, she thought at me; not that the birds cared about her.

What have the birds got to do with it?

You saved them. You saved their young, when the red-topped man was killing them all. All of us have been worried about what you true people would do to us when you were free. We found out. Some of you are bad and kill other kinds of life. Others of you are good and protect life.

Thought I, is that all there is to good and bad?

Perhaps I should not have left myself off guard. People did not have to understand fighting, but the homunculi did. They were bred amidst battle and they served through troubles. C'mell, cat-girl that she was, caught me on the chin with a pistonlike fist. She had no anesthesia, and the only way—cat or no cat—that she could carry me across the cables in the "typhoon" was to have me unconscious and relaxed.

I awakened in my own room. I felt very well indeed. The robot-doctor was there. Said he:

"You've had a shock. I've already reached the subcommissioner of the Instrumentality, and I can erase the memories of the last full day, if you want me to."

His expression was pleasant.

Where was the racing wind? The air falling like stone around us? The water driving where no weather machines controlled it? Where was the golden gown and the wild fear-hungry face of Maximilien Macht?

I thought these things, but the robot-doctor, not being telepathic, caught none of it. I stared hard at him.

"Where," I cried, "is my own true love?"

Robots cannot sneer, but this one attempted to do so. "The naked cat-girl with the blazing hair? She left to get some clothing."

I stared at him.

His fuddy-duddy little machine mind cooked up its own nasty little thoughts, "I must say, sir, you 'free people' change very fast indeed ... "

Who argues with a machine? It wasn't worth answering him.

But that other machine? Twenty-one minutes. How could that work out? How could it have known? I did not want to argue with that other machine either. It must have been a very powerful left-over machine—perhaps something used in ancient wars. I had no intention of finding out. Some people might call it a god. I call it nothing. I do not need "fear" and I do not propose to go back to Alpha Ralpa Boulevard again.

But hear, oh heart of mine!—how can you ever visit the café again?

C'mell came in and the robot-doctor left.

# The Ballad of Lost C'mell

*"Rather loosely inspired by some of the magical and conspiratorial scenes of The Romance of Three Kingdoms," a 14th-century work by Lo Kuan-chung, according to Smith himself. C'mell herself was inspired by Cat Melanie, one of the felines in Smith's household. She and Lord Jestocost, of course, both figure later in the events of his novel Norstrilia ...*



# The Ballad of Lost C'mell

*She got the which of the what-she did,  
Hid the bell with a blot, she did,  
But she fell in love with a hominid.  
Where is the which of the what-she did?*

from *THE BALLAD OF LOST C'MELL*

She was a girly girl and they were true men, the lords of creation, but she pitted her wits against them and she won. It had never happened before, and it is sure never to happen again, but she did win. She was not even of human extraction. She was cat derived though human in outward shape, which explains the C in front of her name. Her father's name was C'mackintosh and her name C'mell. She won her tricks against the lawful and assembled Lords of the Instrumentality.

It all happened at Earthport, greatest of buildings, smallest of cities, standing twenty-five kilometers high at the western edge of the Smaller Sea of Earth.

Jestocost had an office outside the fourth valve.

## I

Jestocost liked the morning sunshine, while most of the other Lords of the Instrumentality did not, so that he had no trouble in keeping the office and the apartments which he had selected. His main office was ninety meters deep, twenty meters high, twenty meters broad. Behind it was the "fourth valve," almost a thousand hectares in extent. It was shaped helically, like an enormous snail.

Jestocost's apartment, big as it was, was merely one of the pigeonholes in the muffler of the rim of Earthport. Earthport stood like an enormous wineglass, reaching from the magma to the high atmosphere.

Earthport had been built during mankind's biggest mechanical splurge.

Though men had had nuclear rockets since the beginning of consecutive history, they had used chemical rockets to load the interplanetary ion-drive and nuclear-drive vehicles or to assemble the photonic sail-ships for interstellar cruises. Impatient with the troubles of taking things bit by bit into the sky, they had worked out a billion-ton rocket, only to find that it ruined whatever countryside it touched in landing. The Daimoni – people of Earth extraction, who came back from somewhere beyond the stars – had helped men build it of weatherproof, rustproof, time proof stress proof material. Then they had gone away and had never come back.

Jestocost often looked around his apartment and wondered what it might have been like when white-hot gas, muted to a whisper, surged out of the valve into his own chamber and the sixty-three other chambers like it. Now he had a back wall of heavy timber, and the valve itself was a great hollow cave where a few wild things lived. Nobody needed that much space any more. The chambers were useful, but the valve did nothing.

Planoforming ships whispered in from the stars; they landed at Earthport as a matter of legal convenience, but they made no noise and they certainly had no hot gases.

Jestocost looked at the high clouds far below him and talked to himself,

"Nice day. Good air. No trouble. Better eat."

Jestocost often talked like that to himself. He was an individual, almost an eccentric. One of the top council of mankind, he had problems, but they were not personal problems.

He had a Rembrandt hanging above his bed the only Rembrandt known in the world, just as he was possibly the only person who could appreciate a Rembrandt. He had the tapestries of a

forgotten empire hanging from his back wall. Every morning the sun played a grand opera for him, muting and lighting and shifting the colors so that he could almost imagine that the old days of quarrel, murder, and high drama had come back to Earth again. He had a copy of Shakespeare, a copy of Colegrove, and two pages of the Book of Ecclesiastes in a locked box beside his bed. Only forty-two people in the universe could read Ancient English, and he was one of them. He drank wine, which he had made by his own robots in his own vineyards on the Sunset Coast. He was a man, in short, who had arranged his own life to live comfortably, selfishly, and well on the personal side, so that he could give generously and impartially of his talents on the official side.

When he awoke on this particular morning, he had no idea that a beautiful girl was about to fall hopelessly in love with him – that he would find, after a hundred years and more of experience in government, another government on Earth just as strong and almost as ancient as his own – that he would willingly fling himself into conspiracy and danger for a cause which he only half understood. All these things were mercifully hidden from him by time, so that his only question on arising was, should he or should he not have a small cup of white wine with his breakfast.

On the one hundred seventy-third day of each year, he always made a point of eating eggs. They were a rare treat, and he did not want to spoil himself by having too many, nor to deprive himself and forget a treat by having none at all. He puttered around the room, muttering, "White wine? White wine?"

C'mell was coming into his life, but he did not know it. She was fated to win; that part, she herself did not know.

Ever since mankind had gone through the Rediscovery of Man, bringing back governments, money, newspapers, national languages, sickness, and occasional death, there had been the problem of the underpeople – people who were not human, but merely humanly shaped from the stock of Earth animals. They could speak, sing, read, write, work, love, and die; but they were not covered by human law, which simply defined them as "homunculi" and gave them a legal status close to animals or robots. Real people from off-world were always called "hominids."

Most of the under people did their jobs and accepted their half-slave status without question. Some became famous – C' mackintosh had been the first Earth-being to manage a fifty-meter broad-jump under normal gravity. His picture was seen in a thousand worlds. His daughter, C'mell, was a girly girl earning her living by welcoming human beings and hominids from the out worlds and making them feel at home when they reached Earth. She had the privilege of working at Earthport, but she had the duty of working very hard for a living which did not pay well.

Human beings and hominids had lived so long in an affluent society that they did not know what it meant to be poor. But the Lords of the Instrumentality had decreed that under people – derived from animal stock – should live under the economics of the Ancient World; they had to have their own kind of money to pay for their rooms, their food, their possessions, and the education of their children. If they became bankrupt, they went to the Poorhouse, where they were killed painlessly by means of gas.

It was evident that humanity, having settled all of its own basic problems, was not quite ready to let Earth animals, no matter how much they might be changed, assume a full equality with man.

The Lord Jestocost, seventh of that name, opposed the policy.

He was a man who had little love, no fear, freedom from ambition, and a dedication to his job: but there are passions of government as deep and challenging as the emotions of love. Two hundred years of thinking himself right and of being outvoted had instilled in Jestocost a furious desire to get things done his own way.

Jestocost was one of the few true men who believed in the rights of the under people. He did not think that mankind would ever get around to correcting ancient wrongs unless the under people themselves had some of the tools of power – weapons, conspiracy, wealth, and (above all) organization with which to challenge man. He was not afraid of revolt, but he thirsted for justice with an obsessive yearning which overrode all other considerations.

When the Lords of the Instrumentality heard that there was the rumor of a conspiracy among the under people they left it to the robot police to ferret it out.

Jestocost did not.

He set up his own police, using under people themselves for the purpose, hoping to recruit enemies who would realize that he was a friendly enemy and who would in course of time bring him into touch with the leaders of the under people.

If those leaders existed, they were clever. What sign did a girly girl like C'mell ever give that she was the spearhead of a crisscross of agents who had penetrated Earthport itself? They must, if they existed, be very, very careful. The telepathic monitors, both robotic and human, kept every thought-band under surveillance by random sampling. Even the computers showed nothing more significant than improbable amounts of happiness in minds which had no objective reason for being happy.

The death of her father, the most famous cat-athlete which the under-people had ever produced, gave Jestocost his first definite clue.

He went to the funeral himself, where the body was packed in an ice-rocket to be shot into space. The mourners were thoroughly mixed with the curiosity-seekers. Sport is international, in terrace inter-world, inter-species. Hominids were there: true men, one hundred percent human, they looked weird and horrible because they or their ancestors had undergone bodily modifications to meet the life conditions of a thousand worlds.

Underpeople, the animal-derived "homunculi," were there, most of them in their work clothes, and they looked more human than did the human beings from the outer worlds. None were allowed to grow up if they were less than half the size of man, or more than six times the size of man. They all had to have human features and acceptable human voices. The punishment for failure in their elementary schools was death. Jestocost looked over the crowd and wondered to himself,

"We have set up the standards of the toughest kind of survival for these people and we give them the most terrible incentive, life itself, as the condition of absolute progress. What fools we are to think that they will not overtake us!" The true people in the group did not seem to think as he did.

They tapped the under people peremptorily with their canes, even though this was an under person funeral, and the bear-men, bull men cat-men, and others yielded immediately and with a babble of apology.

C'mell was close to her father's icy coffin.

Jestocost not only watched her; she was pretty to watch. He committed an act which was an indecency in an ordinary citizen but lawful for a Lord of the Instrumentality: he peeped her mind.

And then he found something which he did not expect.

As the coffin left, she cried,

"Ee-telly-kelly, help me! help me!"

She had thought phonetically, not in script, and he had only the raw sound on which to base a search.

Jestocost had not become a Lord of the Instrumentality without applying daring. His mind was quick, too quick to be deeply intelligent. He thought by gestalt, not by logic. He determined to force his friendship on the girl.

He decided to await a propitious occasion, and then changed his mind about the time.

As she went home from the funeral, he intruded upon the circle of her grim-faced friends, under people who were trying to shield her from the condolences of ill-mannered but well meaning sports enthusiasts.

She recognized him, and showed him the proper respect.

"My Lord, I did not expect you here. You knew my father?"

He nodded gravely and addressed sonorous words of consolation and sorrow, words which brought a murmur of approval from humans and under people alike.

But with his left hand hanging slack at his side, he made the perpetual signal of *alarm! alarm!* used with the Earthport staff – a repeated tapping of the thumb against the third finger – when they had to set one another on guard without alerting the off world transients.

She was so upset that she almost spoiled it all. While he was still doing his pious doubletalk, she cried in a loud clear voice: "You mean *me*?"

And he went on with his condolences: "... and I do mean *you*, C'mell, to be the worthiest carrier of your father's name. *You* are the one to whom we turn in this time of common sorrow. *Who could I mean but you* if I say that C'mackintosh never did things by halves, and died young as a result of his own zealous conscience? Good-bye, C'mell, I go back to my office."

She arrived forty minutes after he did.

## II

He faced her straightaway, studying her face.

"This is an important day in your life."

"Yes, my Lord, a sad one."

"I do not," he said, "mean your father's death and burial. I speak of the future to which we all must turn. Right now, it's you and me."

Her eyes widened. She had not thought that he was that kind of man at all. He was an official who moved freely around Earthport, often greeting important off world visitors and keeping an eye on the bureau of ceremonies. She was a part of the reception team, when a girly girl was needed to calm down a frustrated arrival or to postpone a quarrel. Like the geisha of ancient Japan, she had an honorable profession; she was not a bad girl but a professionally flirtatious hostess. She stared at the Lord Jestocost. He did not look as though he meant anything improperly personal. But, thought she, you can never tell about men.

"You know men," he said, passing the initiative to her.

"I guess so," she said. Her face looked odd. She started to give him smile No. 3 (extremely adhesive) which she had learned in the girly girl school. Realizing it was wrong, she tried to give him an ordinary smile. She felt she had made a face at him.

"Look at me," he said, "and see if you can trust me. I am going to take both our lives in my hands."

She looked at him. What imaginable subject could involve him, a Lord of the Instrumentality, with herself, an under girl.

They never had anything in common. They never would.

But she stared at him.

"I want to help the under people."

He made her blink. That was a crude approach, usually followed by a very raw kind of pass indeed. But his face was illuminated by seriousness. She waited.

"Your people do not have enough political power even to talk to us. I will not commit treason to the true human race, but I am willing to give your side an advantage. If you bargain better with us, it will make all forms of life safer in the long run."

C'mell stared at the floor, her red hair soft as the fur of a Persian cat. It made her head seem bathed in flames. Her eyes looked human, except that they had the capacity of reflecting when light struck them; the irises were the rich green of the ancient cat. When she looked right at him, looking up from the floor, her glance had the impact of a blow.

"What do you want from me?"

He stared right back.

"Watch me. Look at my face. Are you sure, sure that I want nothing from you personally?"

She looked bewildered.

"What else is there to want from me except personal things? I am a girly girl I'm not a person of any importance at all, and I do not have much of an education. You know more, sir, than I will ever know."

"Possibly," he said, watching her.

She stopped feeling like a girly girl and felt like a citizen. It made her uncomfortable.

"Who," he said, in a voice of great solemnity, "is your own leader?"

"Commissioner Teadrinker, sir. He's in charge of all out world visitors."

She watched Jestocost carefully; he still did not look as if he were playing tricks.

He looked a little cross.

"I don't mean him. He's part of my own staff. Who's your leader among the under people?"

"My father was, but he died."

Jestocost said, "Forgive me. Please have a seat. But I don't mean that."

She was so tired that she sat down into the chair with an innocent voluptuousness which would have disorganized any ordinary man's day. She wore girly girl clothes, which were close enough to the everyday fashion to seem agreeably modish when she stood up. In line with her profession, her clothes were designed to be unexpectedly and provocatively revealing when she sat down – not revealing enough to shock the man with their brazenness, but so slit, tripped, and cut that he got far more visual stimulation than he expected.

"I must ask you to pull your clothing together a little," said Jestocost in a clinical turn of voice. "I am a man, even if I am an official, and this interview is more important to you and to me than any distraction would be."

She was a little frightened by his tone. She had meant no challenge. With the funeral that day, she meant nothing at all; these clothes were the only kind she had.

He read all this in her face.

Relentlessly, he pursued the subject.

"Young lady, I asked about your leader. You name your boss and you name your father. I want your leader."

"I don't understand," she said, on the edge of a sob. "I don't understand."

Then, he thought to himself, I've got to take a gamble. He thrust the mental dagger home, almost drove his words like steel straight into her face.

"Who . . .," he said slowly and icily, "is ... Ee ... telly . . . kelly?"

The girl's face had been cream-colored, pale with sorrow.

Now she went white. She twisted away from him. Her eyes glowed like twin fires.

Her eyes . . . like twin fires.

(No under girl thought Jestocost as he reeled, could hypnotize me.)

Her eyes . . . were like cold fires.

The room faded around him. The girl disappeared. Her eyes became a single white, cold fire.

Within this fire stood the figure of a man. His arms were wings, but he had human hands growing at the elbows of his wings. His face was clear, white, cold as the marble of an ancient statue; his eyes were opaque white.

"I am the E'telekeli. You will believe in me. You may speak to my daughter C'mell."

The image faded.

Jestocost saw the girl staring as she sat awkwardly on the chair, looking blindly through him. He was on the edge of making a joke about her hypnotic capacity when he saw that she was still deeply hypnotized even after he had been released. She had stiffened and again her clothing had fallen into its planned disarray. The effect was not stimulating; it was pathetic beyond words, as though an accident had happened to a pretty child. He spoke to her.

He spoke to her, not really expecting an answer.

"Who are you?" he said to her, testing her hypnosis.

"I am he whose name is never said aloud," said the girl in a sharp whisper. "I am he whose secret you have penetrated. I have printed my image and my name in your mind."

Jestocost did not quarrel with ghosts like this. He snapped out a decision.

"If I open my mind, will you search it while I watch you? Are you good enough to do that?"

"I am very good," hissed the voice in the girl's mouth.

C'mell arose and put her two hands on his shoulders. She looked into his eyes. He looked back. A strong tele path himself, Jestocost was not prepared for the enormous thought-voltage which poured out of her.

*Look in my mind, he commanded, for the subject of underpeople only.*

*I see it, thought the mind behind C'mell.*

*Do you see what I mean to do for the underpeople?*

Jestocost heard the girl breathing hard as her mind served as a relay to his. He tried to remain calm so that he could see which part of his mind was being searched. Very good so far, he thought to himself. An intelligence like that on Earth itself, he thought – and we of the Lords not knowing it!

The girl hacked out a dry little laugh.

Jestocost thought at the mind. *Sorry. Go ahead.*

*This plan of yours – thought the strange mind – may I see more of it?*

*That's all there is.*

*Oh, said the strange mind, you want me to think for you. Can you give me the keys in the Bell and Bank which pertain to destroying underpeople?*

*You can have the information keys if I can ever get them, thought Jestocost, but not the control keys and not the master switch of the Bell.*

*Fair enough, thought the other mind, and what do I pay for them?*

*You support me in my policies before the Instrumentality. You keep the underpeople reasonable, if you can, when the time comes to negotiate. You maintain honor and good faith in all subsequent agreements. But how can I get the keys? It would take me a year to figure them out myself.*

*Let the girl look once, thought the strange mind, and I will be behind her. Fair?*

*Fair, thought Jestocost.*

*Break? thought the mind.*

*How do we re-connect? thought Jestocost back.*

*As before. Through the girl. Never say my name. Don't think it if you can help it. Break?*

*Break! thought Jestocost.*

The girl, who had been holding his shoulders, drew his face down and kissed him firmly and warmly. He had never touched an under person before, and it never had occurred to him that he might kiss one. It was pleasant, but he took her arms away from his neck, half turned her around, and let her lean against him.

"Daddy!" she sighed happily.

Suddenly she stiffened, looked at his face, and sprang for the door.

"Jestocost!" she cried. "Lord Jestocost! What am I doing here?"

"Your duty is done, my girl. You may go."

She staggered back into the room.

"I'm going to be sick," she said. She vomited on his floor.

He pushed a button for a cleaning robot and slapped his desktop for coffee.

She relaxed and talked about his hopes for the under people

She stayed an hour. By the time she left they had a plan. Neither of them had mentioned E'telekeli, neither had put purposes in the open. If the monitors had been listening, they would have found no single sentence or paragraph which was suspicious.

When she had gone, Jestocost looked out of his window. He saw the clouds far below and he knew the world below him was in twilight. He had planned to help the under people and he had met powers of which organized mankind had no conception or perception. He was righter than he had thought. He had to go on through.

But as partner – C'mell herself!

Was there ever an odder diplomat in the history of worlds?

### III

In less than a week they had decided what to do. It was the Council of the Lords of the Instrumentality at which they would work – the brain center itself. The risk was high, but the entire job could be done in a few minutes if it were done at the Bell itself.

This is the sort of thing which interested Jestocost.

He did not know that C'mell watched him with two different facets of her mind. One side of her was alertly and wholeheartedly his fellow-conspirator, utterly in sympathy with the revolutionary aims to which they were both committed. The other side of her – was feminine.

She had a womanliness which was truer than that of any hominid woman.

She knew the value of her trained smile, her splendidly kept red hair with its unimaginably soft texture, her lithe young figure with firm breasts and persuasive hips. She knew down to the last millimeter the effect which her legs had on hominid men. True humans kept few secrets from her. The men betrayed themselves by their unfulfillable desires, the women by their irrepressible jealousies. But she knew people best of all by not being one herself. She had to learn by imitation, and imitation is conscious.

A thousand little things which ordinary women took for granted, or thought about just once in a whole lifetime, were subjects of acute and intelligent study to her. She was a girl by profession; she was a human by assimilation; she was an inquisitive cat in her genetic nature. Now she was falling in love with Jestocost, and she knew it.

Even she did not realize that the romance would sometime leak out into rumor, be magnified into legend, distilled into romance. She had no idea of the ballad about herself that would open with the lines which became famous much later:

*She got the which of the what-she did  
Hid the bell with a blot, she did,  
But she fell in love with a hominid.  
Where is the which of the what-she did*

All this lay in the future, and she did not know it.

She knew her own past.

She remembered the off-Earth prince who had rested his head in her lap and had said, sipping his glass of mott by way of farewell: "Funny, C'mell, you're not even a person and you're the most intelligent human being I've met in this place. Do you know it made my planet poor to send me here? And what did I get out of them? Nothing, nothing, and a thousand times nothing. But you, now. If you'd been running the government of Earth, I'd have gotten what my people need, and this world would be richer too.

Manhome, they call it. Manhome, my eye! The only smart person on it is a female cat."

He ran his fingers around her ankle. She did not stir. That was part of hospitality, and she had her own ways of making sure that hospitality did not go too far. Earth police were watching her; to them, she was a convenience maintained for out world people, something like a soft chair in the Earthport lobbies or a drinking fountain with acid-tasting water for strangers who could not tolerate the insipid water of Earth. She was not expected to have feelings or to get involved. If she had ever caused an incident, they would have punished her fiercely, as they often punished animals or under people or else (after a short formal hearing with no appeal) they would have destroyed her, as the law allowed and custom encouraged.

She had kissed a thousand men, maybe fifteen hundred. She had made them feel welcome and she had gotten their complaints or their secrets out of them as they left. It was a living, emotionally tiring but intellectually very stimulating. Sometimes it made her laugh to look at human women with their pointed-up noses and their proud airs, and to realize that she knew more about the men who belonged to the human women than the human women themselves ever did.

Once a policewoman had had to read over the record of two pioneers from New Mars. C'mell had been given the job of keeping in very close touch with them. When the policewoman got through reading the report she looked at C'mell and her face was distorted with jealousy and prudish rage.

"Cat, you call yourself. Cat! You're a pig, you're a dog, you're an animal. You may be working for Earth but don't ever get the idea that you're as good as a person. I think it's a crime that the Instrumentality lets monsters like you greet real human beings from outside! I can't stop it. But

may the Bell help you, girl, if you ever touch a real Earth man! If you ever get near one! If you ever try tricks here! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Ma'am," C'mell had said. To herself she thought,

"That poor thing doesn't know how to select her own clothes or how to do her own hair. No wonder she resents somebody who manages to be pretty."

Perhaps the policewoman thought that raw hatred would be shocking to C'mell. It wasn't. Underpeople were used to hatred, and it was not any worse raw than it was when cooked with politeness and served like poison. They had to live with it.

But now, it was all changed.

She had fallen in love with Jestocost. Did he love her?

Impossible. No, not impossible. Unlawful, unlikely, indecent – yes, all these, but not impossible. Surely he felt something of her love. If he did, he gave no sign of it.

People and under people had fallen in love many times before.

The under people were always destroyed and the real people brainwashed. There were laws against that kind of thing. The scientists among people had created the under people had given them capacities which real people did not have (the fifty-meter jump, the telepath two miles underground, the turtle-man waiting a thousand years next to an emergency door, the cowman guarding a gate without reward), and the scientists had also given many of the under people the human shape. It was handier that way. The human eye, the five-fingered hand, the human size – these were convenient for engineering reasons. By making under people the same size and shape as people, more or less, the scientists eliminated the need for two or three or a dozen different sets of furniture. The human form was good enough for all of them.

But they had forgotten the human heart.

And now she, C'mell, had fallen in love with a man, a true man old enough to have been her own father's grandfather.

But she didn't feel daughterly about him at all. She remembered that with her own father there was an easy comradeship, an innocent and forthcoming affection, which masked the fact that he was considerably more catlike than she was. Between them there was an aching void of forever-unspoken words – things that couldn't quite be said by either of them, perhaps things that couldn't be said at all. They were so close to each other that they could get no closer. This created enormous distance, which was heart-breaking but unutterable. Her father had died, and now this true man was here with all the kindness –

"That's it," she whispered to herself.

"With all the kindness that none of these passing men have ever really shown. With all the depth which my poor underpeople can never get. Not that it's not in them. But they're born like dirt, treated like dirt, put away like dirt when they die. How can any of my own men develop real kindness? There's a special sort of majesty to kindness. It's the best part there is to being people. And he has whole oceans of it in him. And it's strange, strange, strange that he's never given his real love to any human woman."

She stopped, cold.

Then she consoled herself and whispered on, "Or if he did, it's so long ago that it doesn't matter now. He's got me. Does he know it?"

#### IV

The Lord Jestocost did know, and yet he didn't. He was used to getting loyalty from people, because he offered loyalty and honor in his daily work. He was even familiar with loyalty becoming obsessive and seeking physical form, particularly from women, children, and under people He had always coped with it before. He was gambling on the fact that C'mell was a wonderfully intelligent person, and that as a girly girl working on the hospitality staff of the Earthport police, she must have learned to control her personal feelings.

"We're born in the wrong age," he thought, "when I meet the most intelligent and beautiful



female I've ever met, and then have to put business first. But this stuff about people and under people is sticky. Sticky. We've got to keep personalities out of it."

So he thought. Perhaps he was right.

If the nameless one, whom he did not dare to remember, commanded an attack on the Bell itself, that was worth their lives. Their emotions could not come into it. The Bell mattered; justice mattered; the perpetual return of mankind to progress mattered. He did not matter, because he had already done most of his work. C'mell did not matter, because their failure would leave her with mere under people forever. The Bell did count.

The price of what he proposed to do was high, but the entire job could be done in a few minutes if it were done at the Bell itself.

The Bell, of course, was not a Bell. It was a three dimensional situation table, three times the height of a man. It was set one story below the meeting room, and shaped roughly like an ancient bell. The meeting table of the Lords of the Instrumentality had a circle cut out of it, so that the Lords could look down into the Bell at whatever situation one of them called up either manually or telepathically. The Bank below it, hidden by the floor, was the key memory-bank of the entire system.

Duplicates existed at thirty-odd other places on Earth. Two duplicates lay hidden in interstellar space, one of them beside the ninety-million-mile gold-colored ship left over from the war against Raumsog and the other masked as an asteroid.

Most of the Lords were off-world on the business of the Instrumentality.

Only three besides Jestocost were present – the Lady Johanna Gnade, the Lord Issan Olascoaga, and the Lord William Not-from-here. (The Not-from-heres were a great Norstrilian family which had migrated back to Earth many generations before.) The E'telekeli told Jestocost the rudiments of a plan.

He was to bring C'mell into the chambers on a summons. The summons was to be serious.

They should avoid her summary death by automatic justice, if the relays began to trip.

C'mell would go into partial trance in the chamber.

He was then to call the items in the Bell which E'telekeli wanted traced. A single call would be enough. E'telekeli would take the responsibility for tracing them. The other Lords would be distracted by him, E'telekeli.

It was simple in appearance.

The complication came in action.

The plan seemed flimsy, but there was nothing which Jestocost could do at this time. He began to curse himself for letting his passion for policy involve him in the intrigue. It was too late to back out with honor; besides, he had given his word; besides, he liked C'mell – as a being, not as a girlygirl – and he would hate to see her marked with disappointment for life. He knew how the under people cherished their identities and their status.

With heavy heart but quick mind he went to the council chamber. A dog-girl, one of the routine messengers whom he had seen many months outside the door, gave him the minutes.

He wondered how C'mell or E'telekeli would reach him, once he was inside the chamber with its tight net of telepathic intercepts.

He sat wearily at the table –

And almost jumped out of his chair.

The conspirators had forged the minutes themselves, and the top item was: "C'mell daughter to C" mackintosh, cat stock (pure), lot 1138, confession of. Subject: conspiracy to export homuncular material. Reference: planet De Prinsensmacht."

The Lady Johanna Gnade had already pushed the buttons for the planet concerned. The people there, Earth by origin, were enormously strong but they had gone to great pains to maintain the original Earth appearance. One of their first-men was at the moment on Earth. He bore the title of the Twilight Prince (Prins van de Schemering) and he was on a mixed diplomatic and trading mission.

Since Jestocost was a little late, C' mell was being brought into the room as he glanced over the

minutes.

The Lord Not-from-here asked Jestocost if he would preside.

"I beg you. Sir and Scholar," he said, "to join me in asking the Lord Issan to preside this time."

The presidency was a formality. Jestocost could watch the Bell and Bank better if he did not have to chair the meeting too.

C'mell wore the clothing of a prisoner. On her it looked good.

He had never seen her wearing anything but girly girl clothes before. The pale-blue prison tunic made her look very young, very human, very tender, and very frightened. The cat family showed only in the fiery cascade of her hair and the lithe power of her body as she sat, demure and erect.

Lord Issan asked her: "You have confessed. Confess again."

"This man," and she pointed at a picture of the Twilight Prince, "wanted to go to the place where they torment human children for a show."

"What!" cried three of the Lords together.

"What place?" said the Lady Johanna, who was bitterly in favor of kindness.

"It's run by a man who looks like this gentleman here," said C'mell, pointing at Jestocost. Quickly, so that nobody could stop her, but modestly, so that none of them thought to doubt her, she circled the room and touched Jestocost's shoulder. He felt a thrill of contact-telepathy and heard bird-cackle in her brain. Then he knew that the E'telekeli was in touch with her.

"The man who has the place," said C'mell, "is five pounds lighter than this gentleman, two inches shorter, and he has red hair. His place is at the Cold Sunset corner of Earthport, down the boulevard and under the boulevard. Underpeople, some of them with bad reputations, live in that neighborhood."

The Bell went milky, flashing through hundreds of combinations of bad under people in that part of the city. Jestocost felt himself staring at the casual milkiness with unwanted concentration.

The Bell cleared.

It showed the vague image of a room in which children were playing Hallowe'en tricks.

The Lady Johanna laughed,

"Those aren't people. They're robots. It's just a dull old play."

"Then," added C'mell, "he wanted a dollar and a shilling to take home. Real ones. There was a robot who had found some."

"What are those?" said Lord Issan.

"Ancient money – the real money of old America and old Australia," cried Lord William. "I have copies, but there are no originals outside the state museum." He was an ardent, passionate collector of coins.

"The robot found them in an old hiding place right under Earthport."

Lord William almost shouted at the Bell.

"Run through every hiding place and get me that money."

The Bell clouded. In finding the bad neighborhoods it had flashed every police point in the northwest sector of the tower.

Now it scanned all the police points under the tower, and ran dizzily through thousands of combinations before it settled on an old toolroom.

A robot was polishing circular pieces of metal.

When Lord William saw the polishing, he was furious.

"Get that here," he shouted. "I want to buy those myself!"

"All right," said Lord Issan. "It's a little irregular, but all right."

The machine showed the key search devices and brought the robot to the escalator.

The Lord Issan said,

"This isn't much of a case."

C'mell sniveled. She was a good actress.

"Then he wanted me to get a homunculus egg. One of the E-type, derived from birds, for him to take home."

Issan put on the search device.

"Maybe," said C'mell, "somebody has already put it in the disposal series."

The Bell and Bank ran through all the disposal devices at high speed. Jestocost felt his nerves go on edge. No human being could have memorized these thousands of patterns as they flashed across the Bell too fast for human eyes, but the brain reading the Bell through his eyes was not human. It might even be locked into a computer of its own. It was, thought Jestocost, an indignity for a Lord of the Instrumentality to be used as a human spyglass.

The machine blotted up.

"You're a fraud," cried the Lord Issan. "There's no evidence."

"Maybe the offworlder tried," said the Lady Johanna.

"Shadow him," said Lord William. "If he would steal ancient coins he would steal anything."

The Lady Johanna turned to C'mell.

"You're a silly thing. You have wasted our time and you have kept us from serious inter-world business."

"It is inter-world business," wept C'mell. She let her hand slip from Jestocost's shoulder, where it had rested all the time. The body to-body relay broke and the telepathic link broke with it.

"We should judge that," said Lord Issan.

"You might have been punished," said Lady Johanna. The Lord Jestocost had said nothing, but there was a glow of happiness in him. If the E'telekeli was half as good as he seemed, the under people had a list of checkpoints and escape routes which would make it easier to hide from the capricious sentence of painless death which human authorities meted out.

## V

There was singing in the corridors that night.

Underpeople burst into happiness for no visible reason.

C'mell danced a wild cat dance for the next customer who came in from out world stations, that very evening. When she got home to bed, she knelt before the picture of her father C'mackintosh and thanked the E'telekeli for what Jestocost had done.

But the story became known a few generations later, when the Lord Jestocost had won acclaim for being the champion of the under people and when the authorities, still unaware of E'telekeli, accepted the elected representatives of the under people as negotiators for better terms of life; and C'mell had died long since.

She had first had a long, good life.

She became a female chef when she was too old to be a girly girl. Her food was famous. Jestocost once visited her. At the end of the meal he had asked,

"There's a silly rhyme among the under people. No human beings know it except me."

"I don't care about rhymes," she said.

"This is called 'The what-she-did.'"

C'mell blushed all the way down to the neckline of her capacious blouse. She had filled out a lot in middle age. Running the restaurant had helped.

"Oh, that rhyme!" she said. "It's silly."

"It says you were in love with a hominid."

"No," she said. "I wasn't." Her green eyes, as beautiful as ever, stared deeply into his. Jestocost felt uncomfortable. This was getting personal. He liked political relationships; personal things made him uncomfortable.

The light in the room shifted and her cat eyes blazed at him; she looked like the magical fire-haired girl he had known.

"I wasn't in love. You couldn't call it that. ..."

Her heart cried out. *It was you, it was you, it was you.*

"But the rhyme," insisted Jestocost, "says it was a hominid. It wasn't that Prins van de Schemering?"

"Who was he?" C'mell asked the question quietly, but her emotions cried out, *Darling, will you never, never know?*

"The strong man."

"Oh, him. I've forgotten him."

Jestocost rose from the table.

"You've had a good life, C'mell."

You've been a citizen, a committeewoman, a leader. And do you even know how many children you have had?"

"Seventy-three," she snapped at him.

"Just because they're multiple doesn't mean we don't know them."

His playfulness left him. His face was grave, his voice kindly.

"I meant no harm, C'mell."

He never knew that when he left she went back to the kitchen and cried for a while. It was Jestocost whom she had vainly loved ever since they had been comrades, many long years ago.

Even after she died, at the full age of five-score and three, he kept seeing her about the corridors and shafts of Earthport. Many of her great-granddaughters looked just like her and several of them practiced the girly girl business with huge success.

They were not half-slaves. They were citizens (reserved grade) and they had photo passes which protected their property, their identity, and their rights. Jestocost was the godfather to them all; he was often embarrassed when the most voluptuous creatures in the universe threw playful kisses at him. All he asked was fulfillment of his political passions, not his personal ones. He had always been in love, madly in love –

With justice itself.

At last, his own time came, and he knew that he was dying, and he was not sorry. He had had a wife, hundreds of years ago, and had loved her well; their children had passed into the generations of man.

In the ending, he wanted to know something, and he called to a nameless one (or to his successor) far beneath the world.

He called with his mind till it was a scream.

*I have helped your people.*

"Yes," came back the faintest of faraway whispers, inside his head.

*I am dying. I must know. Did she love me?*

"She went on without you, so much did she love you. She let you go, for your sake, not for hers. She really loved you. More than death. More than life. More than time. You will never be apart."

*Never apart?*

"Not, not in the memory of man," said the voice, and was then still.

Jestocost lay back on his pillow and waited for the day to end.

[The Ballad of Lost C'mell, formatted, edited, proofread and re-proofread out of all the rest by CCM.]

# A Planet Named Shayol

*Smith acknowledged his debt to Dante in this story, which retells parts of the Inferno in science-fiction form—but with a twist distinctly Smith's own. The action apparently takes place even after that of Norstrilia, for banishment to Shayol is still used as a threat in the novel. At the end of this collection, as at the beginning, a member of the Vomact family appears—and we even meet Suzdal again. But Smith never shed any more light on the origin of the Go-Captain Alvarez ...*

## I

There was a tremendous difference between the liner and the ferry in Mercer's treatment. On the liner, the attendants made gibes when they brought him his food.

"Scream good and loud," said one rat-faced steward, "and then we'll know it's you when they broadcast the sounds of punishment on the Emperor's birthday."

The other, fat steward ran the tip of his wet, red tongue over his thick, purple-red lips one time and said, "Stands to reason, man. If you hurt all the time, the whole lot of you would die. Something pretty good must happen, along with the—whatchamacallit. Maybe you turn into a woman. Maybe you turn into two people. Listen, cousin, if it's real crazy fun, let me know ... " Mercer said nothing. Mercer had enough troubles of his own not to wonder about the daydreams of nasty men.

At the ferry it was different. The biopharmaceutical staff was deft, impersonal, quick in removing his shackles. They took off all his prison clothes and left them on the liner. When he boarded the ferry, naked, they looked him over as if he were a rare plant or a body on the operating table. They were almost kind in the clinical deftness of their touch. They did not treat him as a criminal, but as a specimen.

Men and women, clad in their medical smocks, they looked at him as though he were already dead.

He tried to speak. A man, older and more authoritative than the others, said firmly and clearly, "Do not worry about talking. I will talk to you myself in a very little time. What we are having now are the preliminaries, to determine your physical condition. Turn around, please." Mercer turned around. An orderly rubbed his back with a very strong antiseptic.

"This is going to sting," said one of the technicians, "but it is nothing serious or painful. We are determining the toughness of the different layers of your skin."

Mercer, annoyed by this impersonal approach, spoke up just as a sharp little sting burned him above the sixth lumbar vertebra. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Of course we know who you are," said a woman's voice. "We have it all in a file in the corner. The chief doctor will talk about your crime later, if you want to talk about it. Keep quiet now. We are making a skin test, and you will feel much better if you do not make us prolong it."

Honesty forced her to add another sentence: "And we will get better results as well."

They had lost no time at all in getting to work.

He peered at them sidewise to look at them. There was nothing about them to indicate that they were human devils in the antechambers of hell itself. Nothing was there to indicate that this was the satellite of Shayol, the final and uttermost place of chastisement and shame. They looked like medical people from his life before he committed the crime without a name.

They changed from one routine to another. A woman, wearing a surgical mask, waved her hand at a white table.

"Climb up on that, please."

No one had said "please" to Mercer since the guards had seized him at the edge of the palace. He started to obey her and then he saw that there were padded handcuffs at the head of the table. He stopped.

"Get along, please," she demanded. Two or three of the others turned around to look at both of them.

The second "please" shook him. He had to speak. These were people, and he was a person again. He felt his voice rising, almost cracking into shrillness as he asked her, "Please, Ma'am, is the punishment going to begin?"

"There's no punishment here," said the woman. "This is the satellite. Get on the table. We're going to give you your first skin-toughening before you talk to the head doctor. Then you can tell him all about your crime—"

"You know my crime?" he said, greeting it almost like a neighbor.

"Of course not," said she, "but all the people who come through here are believed to have committed crimes. Somebody thinks so or they wouldn't be here. Most of them want to talk about their personal crimes. But don't slow me down. I'm a skin technician, and down on the surface of Shayol you're going to need the very best work that any of us can do for you. Now get on that table. And when you are ready to talk to the chief you'll have something to talk about besides your crime."

He complied.

Another masked person, probably a girl, took his hands in cool, gentle fingers and fitted them to the padded cuffs in a way he had never sensed before. By now he thought he knew every interrogation machine in the whole empire, but this was nothing like any of them.

The orderly stepped back. "All clear, Sir and Doctor."

"Which do you prefer?" said the skin technician. "A great deal of pain or a couple of hours' unconsciousness?"

"Why should I want pain?" said Mercer.

"Some specimens do," said the technician, "by the time they arrive here. I suppose it depends on what people have done to them before they got here. I take it you did not get any of the dream-punishments."

"No," said Mercer. "I missed those." He thought to himself, I didn't know that I missed anything at all.

He remembered his last trial, himself wired and plugged in to the witness stand. The room had been high and dark. Bright blue light shone on the panel of judges, their judicial caps a fantastic parody of the episcopal mitres of long, long ago. The judges were talking, but he could not hear them. Momentarily the insulation slipped and he heard one of them say, "Look at that white, devilish face. A man like that is guilty of everything. I vote for Pain Terminal."

"Not Planet Shayol?" said a second voice.

"The dromozoa place," said a third voice.

"That should suit him," said the first voice. One of the judicial engineers must then have noticed that the prisoner was listening illegally. He was cut off. Mercer then thought that he had gone through everything which the cruelty and intelligence of mankind could devise.

But this woman said he had missed the dream-punishments. Could there be people in the universe even worse off than himself? There must be a lot of people down on Shayol. They never came back.

He was going to be one of them; would they boast to him of what they had done, before they were made to come to this place?

"You asked for it," said the woman technician. "It is just an ordinary anesthetic. Don't panic when you awaken. Your skin is going to be thickened and strengthened chemically and biologically."

"Does it hurt?"

"Of course," said she. "But get this out of your head. We're not punishing you. The pain here is just ordinary medical pain. Anybody might get it if they needed a lot of surgery. The punishment, if that's what you want to call it, is down on Shayol. Our only job is to make sure that you are fit to survive after you are landed. In a way, we are saving your life ahead of time. You can be grateful for that if you want to be. Meanwhile, you will save yourself a lot of trouble if you realize that your nerve endings will respond to the change in the skin. You had better expect to be very uncomfortable when you recover. But then, we can help that, too." She brought down an enormous lever and Mercer blacked out.

When he came to, he was in an ordinary hospital room, but he did not notice it. He seemed bedded in fire. He lifted his hand to see if there were flames on it. It looked the way it always had, except that it was a little red and a little swollen. He tried to turn in the bed. The fire became a scorching blast which stopped him in mid-turn. Uncontrollably, he moaned.

A voice spoke, "You are ready for some pain-killer."

It was a girl nurse. "Hold your head still," she said, "and I will give you half an amp of pleasure. Your skin won't bother you then."

She slipped a soft cap on his head. It looked like metal but it felt like silk.

He had to dig his fingernails into his palms to keep from threshing about on the bed.

"Scream if you want to," she said. "A lot of them do. It will just be a minute or two before the cap finds the right lobe in your brain."

She stepped to the corner and did something which he could not see.

There was the flick of a switch.

The fire did not vanish from his skin. He still felt it; but suddenly it did not matter. His mind was full of delicious pleasure which throbbed outward from his head and seemed to pulse down through his nerves.

He had visited the pleasure palaces, but he had never felt anything like this before.

He wanted to thank the girl, and he twisted around in the bed to see her. He could feel his whole body flash with pain as he did so, but the pain was far away. And the pulsating pleasure which coursed out of his head, down his spinal cord and into his nerves was so intense that the pain got through only as a remote, unimportant signal.

She was standing very still in the corner.



"Thank you, nurse," said he.

She said nothing.

He looked more closely, though it was hard to look while enormous pleasure pulsed through his body like a symphony written in nerve-messages. He focused his eyes on her and saw that she too wore a soft metallic cap.

He pointed at it.

She blushed all the way down to her throat.

She spoke dreamily, "You looked like a nice man to me. I didn't think you'd tell on me ... "

He gave her what he thought was a friendly smile, but with the pain in his skin and the pleasure bursting out of his head, he really had no idea of what his actual expression might be. "It's against the law," he said. "It's terribly against the law. But it is nice."

"How do you think we stand it here?" said the nurse. "You specimens come in here talking like ordinary people and then you go down to Shayol. Terrible things happen to you on Shayol. Then the surface station sends up parts of you, over and over again. I may see your head ten times, quick-frozen and ready for cutting up, before my two years are up. You prisoners ought to know how we suffer," she crooned, the pleasure-charge still keeping her relaxed and happy, "you ought to die as soon as you get down there and not pester us with your torments. We can hear you screaming, you know. You keep on sounding like people even after Shayol begins to work on you. Why do you do it, Mr. Specimen?" She giggled sillily. "You hurt our feelings so. No wonder a girl like me has to have a little jolt now and then. It's real, real dreamy and I don't mind getting you ready to go down on Shayol." She staggered over to his bed. "Pull this cap off me, will you? I haven't got enough will power left to raise my hands."

Mercer saw his hand tremble as he reached for the cap.

His fingers touched the girl's soft hair through the cap. As he tried to get his thumb under the edge of the cap, in order to pull it off, he realized that this was the loveliest girl he had ever touched. He felt that he had always loved her, that he always would. Her cap came off. She stood erect, staggering a little before she found a chair to hold to. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Just a minute," she said in her normal voice. "I'll be with you in just a minute. The only time I can get a jolt of this is when one of you visitors gets a dose to get over the skin trouble."

She turned to the room mirror to adjust her hair. Speaking with her back to him, she said, "I hope I didn't say anything about downstairs."

Mercer still had the cap on. He loved this beautiful girl who had put it on him. He was ready to weep at the thought that she had had the same kind of pleasure which he still enjoyed. Not for the world would he say anything which could hurt her feelings. He was sure she wanted to be told that she had not said anything about "downstairs"—probably shop talk for the surface of Shayol—so he assured her warmly, "You said nothing. Nothing at all." .

She came over to the bed, leaned, kissed him on the lips. The kiss was as far away as the pain; he felt nothing; the Niagara of throbbing pleasure which poured through his head left no room for more sensation. But he liked the friendliness of it. A grim, sane corner of his mind whispered to him that this was probably the last time he would ever kiss a woman, but it did not seem to matter.

With skilled fingers she adjusted the cap on his head. "There, now. You're a sweet guy. I'm going to pretend-forget and leave the cap on you till the doctor comes."

With a bright smile she squeezed his shoulder.

She hastened out of the room.

The white of her skirt flashed prettily as she went out the door. He saw that she had very shapely legs indeed.

She was nice, but the cap ... ah, it was the cap that mattered! He closed his eyes and let the cap go on stimulating the pleasure centers of his brain. The pain in his skin was still there, but it did not matter any more than did the chair standing in the corner. The pain was just something that happened to be in the room.

A firm touch on his arm made him open his eyes.

The older, authoritative-looking man was standing beside the bed, looking down at him with a quizzical smile.

"She did it again," said the old man.

Mercer shook his head, trying to indicate that the young nurse had done nothing wrong.

"I'm Doctor Vomact," said the older man, "and I am going to take this cap off you. You will then experience the pain again, but I think it will not be so bad. You can have the cap several more times before you leave here."

With a swift, firm gesture he snatched the cap off Mercer's head.

Mercer promptly doubled up with the inrush of fire from his skin. He started to scream and then saw that Doctor Vomact was watching him calmly.

Mercer gasped, "It is—easier now."

"I knew it would be," said the doctor. "I had to take the cap off to talk to you. You have a few choices to make."

"Yes, Doctor," gasped Mercer.

"You have committed a serious crime and you are going down to the surface of Shayol."

"Yes," said Mercer.

"Do you want to tell me your crime?"

Mercer thought of the white palace walls in perpetual sunlight, and the soft mewing of the little things when he reached them. He tightened his arms, legs, back and jaw. "No," he said, "I don't want to talk about it. It's the crime without a name. Against the Imperial family ... "

"Fine," said the doctor, "that's a healthy attitude. The crime is past. Your future is ahead. Now, I can destroy your mind before you go down—if you want me to."

"That's against the law," said Mercer.

Doctor Vomact smiled warmly and confidently. "Of course it is. A lot of things are against human law. But there are laws of science, too. Your body, down on Shayol, is going to serve science. It doesn't matter to me whether that body has Mercer's mind or the mind of a low-grade shellfish. I have to leave enough mind in you to keep the body going, but I can wipe out the historic you and give your body a better chance of being happy. It's your choice, Mercer. Do you want to be you or not?"

Mercer shook his head back and forth, "I don't know."

"I'm taking a chance," said Doctor Vomact, "in giving you this much leeway. I'd have it done if I were in your position. It's pretty bad down there."

Mercer looked at the full, broad face. He did not trust the comfortable smile. Perhaps this was a trick to increase his punishment. The cruelty of the Emperor was proverbial. Look at what he had done to the widow of his predecessor, the Dowager Lady Da. She was younger than the Emperor himself, and he had sent her to a place worse than death. If he had been sentenced to Shayol, why

was this doctor trying to interfere with the rules? Maybe the doctor himself had been conditioned, and did not know what he was offering.

Doctor Vomact read Mercer's face. "All right. You refuse. You want to take your mind down with you. It's all right with me. I don't have you on my conscience. I suppose you'll refuse the next offer too. Do you want me to take your eyes out before you go down? You'll be much more comfortable without vision. I know that, from the voices that we record for the warning broadcasts. I can sear the optic nerves so that there will be no chance of your getting vision again."

Mercer rocked back and forth. The fiery pain had become a universal itch, but the soreness of his spirit was greater than the discomfort of his skin.

"You refuse that, too?" said the doctor. "I suppose so," said Mercer.

"Then all I have to do is to get ready. You can have the cap for a while, if you want."

Mercer said, "Before I put the cap on, can you tell me what happens down there?"

"Some of it," said the doctor. "There is an attendant. He is a man, but not a human being. He is a homunculus fashioned out of cattle material. He is intelligent and very conscientious. You specimens are turned loose on the surface of Shayol. The dromozoa are a special life-form there. When they settle in your body, B'dikkat—that's the attendant—carves them out with an anesthetic and sends them up here. We freeze the tissue cultures, and they are compatible with almost any kind of oxygen-based life. Half the surgical repair you see in the whole universe comes out of buds that we ship from here. Shayol is a very healthy place, so far as survival is concerned. You won't die."

"You mean," said Mercer, "that I am getting perpetual punishment."

"I didn't say that," said Doctor Vomact. "Or if I did, I was wrong. You won't die soon. I don't know how long you will live down there. Remember, no matter how uncomfortable you get, the samples which B'dikkat sends up will help thousands of people in all the inhabited worlds. Now take the cap."

"I'd rather talk," said Mercer. "It may be my last chance."

The doctor looked at him strangely. "If you can stand that pain, go ahead and talk."

"Can I commit suicide down there?"

"I don't know," said the doctor. "It's never happened. And to judge by the voices, you'd think they wanted to."

"Has anybody ever come back from Shayol?"

"Not since it was put off limits about four hundred years ago."

"Can I talk to other people down there?"

"Yes," said the doctor.

"Who punishes me down there?"

"Nobody does, you fool," cried Doctor Vomact. "It's not punishment. People don't like it down on Shayol, and it's better, I guess, to get convicts instead of volunteers. But there isn't anybody against you at all."

"No jailers?" asked Mercer, with a whine in his voice.

"No jailers, no rules, no prohibitions. Just Shayol, and B'dikkat to take care of you. Do you still want your mind and your eyes?"

"I'll keep them," said Mercer. "I've gone this far and I might as well go the rest of the way."

"Then let me put the cap on you for your second dose," said Doctor Vomact.

The doctor adjusted the cap just as lightly and delicately as had the nurse; he was quicker about it. There was no sign of his picking out another cap for himself.

The inrush of pleasure was like a wild intoxication. His burning skin receded into distance. The doctor was near in space, but even the doctor did not matter. Mercer was not afraid of Shayol. The pulsation of happiness out of his brain was too great to leave room for fear or pain.

Doctor Vomact was holding out his hand.

Mercer wondered why, and then realized that the wonderful, kindly cap-giving man was offering to shake hands. He lifted his own. It was heavy, but his arm was happy, too.

They shook hands. It was curious, thought Mercer, to feel the handshake beyond the double level of cerebral pleasure and dermal pain.

"Goodbye, Mr. Mercer," said the doctor. "Goodbye and a good goodnight ... "

## II

The ferry satellite was a hospitable place. The hundreds of hours that followed were like a long, weird dream.

Twice again the young nurse sneaked into his bedroom with him when he was being given the cap and had a cap with him. There were baths which calloused his whole body. Under strong local anesthetics, his teeth were taken out and stainless steel took their place. There were irradiations under blazing lights which took away the pain of his skin. There were special treatments for his fingernails and toenails. Gradually they 'changed into formidable claws; he found himself stropping them on the aluminum bed one night and saw that they left deep marks.

His mind never became completely clear.

Sometimes he thought that he was home with his mother, that he was little again, and in pain. Other times, under the cap, he laughed in his bed to think that people were sent to this place for punishment when it was all so terribly much fun. There were no trials, no questions, no judges. Food was good, but he did not think about it much; the cap was better. Even when he was awake, he was drowsy.

At last, with the cap on him, they put him into an adiabatic pod—a one-body missile which could be dropped from the ferry to the planet below. He was all closed in, except for his face.

Doctor Vomact seemed to swim into the room. "You are strong, Mercer," the doctor shouted, "you are very strong! Can you hear me?"

Mercer nodded.

"We wish you well, Mercer. No matter what happens, remember you are helping other people up here."

"Can I take the cap with me?" said Mercer.

For an answer, Doctor Vomact removed the cap himself. Two men closed the lid of the pod, leaving Mercer in total darkness. His mind started to clear, and he panicked against his wrappings.

There was the roar of thunder and the taste of blood.

The next thing that Mercer knew, he was in a cool, cool room, much chillier than the bedrooms and operating rooms of the satellite. Someone was lifting him gently onto a table.

He opened his eyes.

An enormous face, four times the size of any human face Mercer had ever seen, was looking down at him. Huge brown eyes, cowlike in their gentle inoffensiveness, moved back and forth as

the big face examined Mercer's wrappings. The face was that of a handsome man of middle years, clean-shaven, hair chestnut-brown, with sensual, full lips and gigantic but healthy yellow teeth exposed in a half-smile. The face saw Mercer's eyes open, and spoke with a deep friendly roar.

"I'm your best friend. My name is B'dikkat, but you don't have to use that here. Just call me Friend, and I will always help you."

"I hurt," said Mercer.

"Of course you do. You hurt all over. That's a big drop," said B'dikkat.

"Can I have a cap, please," begged Mercer. It was not a question; it was a demand; Mercer felt that his private inward eternity depended on it.

B'dikkat laughed. "I haven't any caps down here. I might use them myself. Or so they think. I have other things, much better. No fear, fellow, I'll fix you up."

Mercer looked doubtful. If the cap had brought him happiness on the ferry, it would take at least electrical stimulation of the brain to undo whatever torments the surface of Shayol had to offer.

B'dikkat's laughter filled the room like a bursting pillow.

"Have you ever heard of condamine?"

"No," said Mercer.

"It's a narcotic so powerful that the pharmacopoeias are not allowed to mention it."

"You have that?" said Mercer hopefully.

"Something better. I have super-condamine. It's named after the New French town where they developed it. The chemists hooked in one more hydrogen molecule. That gave it a real jolt. If you took it in your present shape, you'd be dead in three minutes, but those three minutes would seem like ten thousand years of happiness to the inside of your mind." B'dikkat rolled his brown cow eyes expressively and smacked his rich red lips with a tongue of enormous extent.

"What's the use of it, then?"

"You can take it," said B'dikkat. "You can take it after you have been exposed to the dromozoa outside this cabin. You get all the good effects and none of the bad. You want to see something?"

What answer is there except yes, thought Mercer grimly; does he think I have an urgent invitation to a tea party?

"Look out the window," said B'dikkat, "and tell me what you see."

The atmosphere was clear. The surface was like a desert, ginger-yellow with streaks of green where lichen and low shrubs grew, obviously stunted and tormented by high, dry winds. The landscape was monotonous. Two or three hundred yards away there was a herd of bright pink objects which seemed alive, but Mercer could not see them well enough to describe them clearly. Further away, on the extreme right of his frame of vision, there was the statue of an enormous human foot, the height of a six-story building. Mercer could not see what the foot was connected to. "I see a big foot," said he, "but—"

"But what?" said B'dikkat, like an enormous child hiding the denouement of a hugely private joke. Large as he was, he could have been dwarfed by any one of the toes on that tremendous foot.

"But it can't be a real foot," said Mercer.

"It is," said B'dikkat. "That's Go-Captain Alvarez, the man who found this planet. After six hundred years he's still in fine shape. Of course, he's mostly dromozootic by now, but I think there is some human consciousness inside him. You know what I do?"

"What?" said Mercer.

"I give him six cubic centimeters of super-condamine and he snorts for me. Real happy little snorts. A stranger might think it was a volcano. That's what super-condamine can do. And you're going to get plenty of it. You're a lucky, lucky man, Mercer. You have me for a friend, and you have my needle for a treat. I do all the work and you get all the fun. Isn't that a nice surprise?"

Mercer thought, You're lying! Lying! Where do the screams come from that we have all heard broadcast as a warning on Punishment Day? Why did the doctor offer to cancel my brain or to take out my eyes?

The cow-man watched him sadly, a hurt expression on his face. "You don't believe me," he said, very sadly.

"It's not quite that," said Mercer, with an attempt at heartiness, "but I think you're leaving something out."

"Nothing much," said B'dikkat. "You jump when the dromozoa hit you. You'll be upset when you start growing new parts—heads, kidneys, hands. I had one fellow in here who grew thirty-eight hands in a single session outside. I took them all off, froze them and sent them upstairs. I take good care of everybody. You'll probably yell for a while. But remember, just call me Friend, and I have the nicest treat in the universe waiting for you. Now, would you like some fried eggs? I don't eat eggs myself, but most true men like them."

"Eggs?" said Mercer. "What have eggs got to do with it?"

"Nothing much. It's just a treat for you people. Get something in your stomach before you go outside. You'll get through the first day better."

Mercer, unbelieving, watched as the big man took two precious eggs from a cold chest, expertly broke them into a little pan and put the pan in the heat-field at the center of the table Mercer had awakened on.

"Friend, eh?" B'dikkat grinned. "You'll see I'm a good friend. When you go outside, remember that."

An hour later, Mercer did go outside.

Strangely at peace with himself, he stood at the door. B'dikkat pushed him in a brotherly way, giving him a shove which was gentle enough to be an encouragement.

"Don't make me put on my lead suit, fellow." Mercer had seen a suit, fully the size of an ordinary space-ship cabin, hanging on the wall of an adjacent room. "When I close this door, the outer one will open. Just walk on out."

"But what will happen?" said Mercer, the fear turning around in his stomach and making little grabs at his throat from the inside.

"Don't start that again," said B'dikkat. For an hour he had fended off Mercer's questions about the outside. A map? B'dikkat had laughed at the thought. Food? He said not to worry. Other people? They'd be there. Weapons? What for, B'dikkat had replied. Over and over again, B'dikkat had insisted that he was Mercer's friend. What would happen to Mercer? The same that happened to everybody else.

Mercer stepped out.

Nothing happened. The day was cool. The wind moved gently against his toughened skin.

Mercer looked around apprehensively.

The mountainous body of Captain Alvarez occupied a good part of the landscape to the right. Mercer had no wish to get mixed up with that. He glanced back at the cabin. B'dikkat was not looking out the window.

Mercer walked slowly, straight ahead.

There was a flash on the ground, no brighter than the glitter of sunlight on a fragment of glass. Mercer felt a sting in the thigh, as though a sharp instrument had touched him lightly. He brushed the place with his hand.

It was as though the sky fell in.

A pain—it was more than a pain; it was a living throb—ran from his hip to his foot on the right side. The throb reached up to his chest, robbing him of breath. He fell, and the ground hurt him. Nothing in the hospital-satellite had been like this. He lay in the open air, trying not to breathe, but he did breathe anyhow. Each time he breathed, the throb moved with his thorax. He lay on his back, looking at the sun. At last he noticed that the sun was violet-white.

It was no use even thinking of calling. He had no voice. Tendrils of discomfort twisted within him. Since he could not stop breathing, he concentrated on taking air in the way that hurt him least. Gasps were too much work. Little tiny sips of air hurt him least.

The desert around him was empty. He could not turn his head to look at the cabin. Is this it? he thought. Is an eternity of this the punishment of Shayol?

There were voices near him.

Two faces, grotesquely pink, looked down at him. They might have been human. The man looked normal enough, except for having two noses side by side. The woman was a caricature beyond belief. She had grown a breast on each cheek and a cluster of naked baby-like fingers hung limp from her forehead.

"It's a beauty," said the woman, "a new one."

"Come along," said the man.

They lifted him to his feet. He did not have strength enough to resist. When he tried to speak to them a harsh cawing sound, like the cry of an ugly bird, came from his mouth.

They moved with him efficiently. He saw that he was being dragged to the herd of pink things.

As they approached, he saw that they were people. Better, he saw that they had once been people. A man with the beak of a flamingo was picking at his own body. A woman lay on the ground; she had a single head, but beside what seemed to be her original body, she had a boy's naked body growing sideways from her neck. The boy-body, clean, new, paralytically helpless, made no movement other than shallow breathing. Mercer looked around. The only one of the group who was wearing clothing was a man with his overcoat on sideways. Mercer stared at him, finally realizing that the man had two—or was it three?—stomachs growing on the outside of his abdomen. The coat held them in place. The transparent peritoneal wall looked fragile.

"New one," said his female captor. She and the two-nosed man put him down.

The group lay scattered on the ground.

Mercer lay in a state of stupor among them.

An old man's voice said, "I'm afraid they're going to feed us pretty soon."

"Oh, no!"

"It's too early!"

"Not again!"

Protests echoed from the group.

The old man's voice went on, "Look, near the big toe of the mountain!"

The desolate murmur in the group attested their confirmation of what he had seen.

Mercer tried to ask what it was all about, but produced only a caw.

A woman—was it a woman?—crawled over to him on her hands and knees. Beside her ordinary hands, she was covered with hands all over her trunk and halfway down her thighs. Some of the hands looked old and withered. Others were as fresh and pink as the baby-fingers on his captress' face. The woman shouted at him, though it was not necessary to shout.

"The dromozoa are coming. This time it hurts. When you get used to the place, you can dig in —"

She waved at a group of mounds which surrounded the herd of people.

"They're dug in," she said.

Mercer cawed again.

"Don't you worry," said the hand-covered woman, and gasped as a flash of light touched her.

The lights reached Mercer too. The pain was like the first contact but more probing. Mercer felt his eyes widen as odd sensations within his body led to an inescapable conclusion: these lights, these things, these whatever they were, were feeding him and building him up.

Their intelligence, if they had it, was not human, but their motives were clear. In between the stabs of pain he felt them fill his stomach, put water in his blood, draw water from his kidneys and bladder, massage his heart, move his lungs for him.

Every single thing they did was well meant and beneficent in intent.

And every single action hurt.

Abruptly, like the lifting of a cloud of insects, they were gone. Mercer was aware of a noise somewhere outside—a brainless, bawling cascade of ugly noise. He started to look around. And the noise stopped.

It had been himself, screaming. Screaming the ugly screams of a psychotic, a terrified drunk, an animal driven out of understanding or reason.

When he stopped, he found he had his speaking voice again.

A man came to him, naked like the others. There was a spike sticking through his head. The skin had healed around it on both sides. "Hello, fellow," said the man with the spike.

"Hello," said Mercer. It was a foolishly commonplace thing to say in a place like this.

"You can't kill yourself," said the man with the spike through his head.

"Yes, you can," said the woman covered with hands.

Mercer found that his first pain had disappeared. "What's happening to me?"

"You got a part," said the man with the spike. "They're always putting parts on us. After a while B'dikkat comes and cuts most of them off, except for the ones that ought to grow a little more. Like her," he added, nodding at the woman who lay with the boy-body growing from her neck.

"And that's all?" said Mercer. "The stabs for the new parts and the stinging for the feeding?"

"No," said the man. "Sometimes they think we're too cold and they fill our insides with fire. Or they think we're too hot and they freeze us, nerve by nerve."



The woman with the boy-body called over, "And sometimes they think we're unhappy, so they try to force us to be happy. I think that's the worst of all."

Mercer stammered, "Are you people—I mean—are you the only herd?"

The man with the spike coughed instead of laughing. "Herd! That's funny. The land is full of people. Most of them dig in. We're the ones who can still talk. We stay together for company. We get more turns with B'dikkat that way."

Mercer started to ask another question, but he felt the strength run out of him. The day had been too much.

The ground rocked like a ship on water. The sky turned black. He felt someone catch him as he fell. He felt himself being stretched out on the ground. And then, mercifully and magically, he slept.

### III

Within a week, he came to know the group well. They were an absent-minded bunch of people. Not one of them ever knew when a dromozoan might flash by and add another part. Mercer was not stung again, but the incision he had obtained just outside the cabin was hardening. Spike-head looked at it when Mercer modestly undid his belt and lowered the edge of his trouser-top so they could see the wound.

"You've got a head," he said. "A whole baby head. They'll be glad to get that one upstairs when B'dikkat cuts it off you."

The group even tried to arrange his social life. They introduced him to the girl of the herd. She had grown one body after another, pelvis turning into shoulders and the pelvis below that turning into shoulders again until she was five people long. Her face was unmarred. She tried to be friendly to Mercer.

He was so shocked by her that he dug himself into the soft dry crumbly earth and stayed there for what seemed like a hundred years. He found later that it was less than a full day. When he came out, the long many-bodied girl was waiting for him.

"You didn't have to come out just for me," said she.

Mercer shook the dirt off himself.

He looked around. The violet sun was going down, and the sky was streaked with blues, deeper blues and trails of orange sunset.

He looked back at her. "I didn't get up for you. It's no use lying there, waiting for the next time."

"I want to show you something," she said. She pointed to a low hummock. "Dig that up."

Mercer looked at her. She seemed friendly. He shrugged and attacked the soil with his powerful claws. With tough skin and heavy digging-nails on the ends of his fingers, he found it was easy to dig like a dog. The earth cascaded beneath his busy hands. Something pink appeared down in the hole he had dug. He proceeded more carefully.

He knew what it would be.

It was. It was a man, sleeping. Extra arms grew down one side of his body in an orderly series. The other side looked normal.

Mercer turned back to the many-bodied girl, who had writhed closer.

"That's what I think it is, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "Doctor Vomact burned his brain out for him. And took his eyes out, too."

Mercer sat back on the ground and looked at the girl. "You told me to do it. Now tell me what for."

"To let you see. To let you know. To let you think."

"That's all?" said Mercer.

The girl twisted with startling suddenness. All the way down her series of bodies, her chests heaved. Mercer wondered how the air got into all of them. He did not feel sorry for her; he did not feel sorry for anyone except himself. When the spasm passed the girl smiled at him apologetically.

"They just gave me a new plant."

Mercer nodded grimly.

"What now, a hand? It seems you have enough."

"Oh, those," she said, looking back at her many torsos. "I promised B'dikkat that I'd let them grow. He's good. But that man, stranger. Look at that man you dug up. Who's better off, he or we?"

Mercer stared at her. "Is that what you had me dig him up for?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"Do you expect me to answer?"

"No," said the girl, "not now."

"Who are you?" said Mercer.

"We never ask that here. It doesn't matter. But since you're new, I'll tell you. I used to be the Lady Da—the Emperor's stepmother."

"You!" he exclaimed.

She smiled, ruefully. "You're still so fresh you think it matters! But I have something more important to tell you." She stopped and bit her lip.

"What?" he urged. "Better tell me before I get another bite. I won't be able to think or talk then, not for a long time. Tell me now."

She brought her face close to his. It was still a lovely face, even in the dying orange of this violet-sunned sunset. "People never live forever."

"Yes," said Mercer. "I knew that."

"Believe it," ordered the Lady Da.

Lights flashed across the dark plain, still in the distance. Said she, "Dig in, dig in for the night. They may miss you."

Mercer started digging. He glanced over at the man he had dug up.

The brainless body, with motions as soft as those of a starfish under water, was pushing its way back into the earth.

Five or seven days later, there was a shouting through the herd.

Mercer had come to know a half-man, the lower part of whose body was gone and whose viscera were kept in place with what resembled a translucent plastic bandage. The half-man had shown him how to lie still when the dromozoa came with their inescapable errands of doing good.

Said the half-man, "You can't fight them. They made Alvarez as big as a mountain, so that he never stirs. Now they're trying to make us happy. They feed us and clean us and sweeten us up. Lie still. Don't worry about screaming. We all do."

"When do we get the drug?" said Mercer.

"When B'dikkat comes."

B'dikkat came that day, pushing a sort of wheeled sled ahead of him. The runners carried it over the hillocks; the wheels worked on the surface.

Even before he arrived, the herd sprang into furious action. Everywhere, people were digging up the sleepers. By the time B'dikkat reached their waiting place, the herd must have uncovered twice their own number of sleeping pink bodies—men and women, young and old. The sleepers looked no better and no worse than the waking ones.

"Hurry!" said the Lady Da. "He never gives any of us a shot until we're all ready."

B'dikkat wore his heavy lead suit.

He lifted an arm in friendly greeting, like a father returning home with treats for his children. The herd clustered around him but did not crowd him.

He reached into the sled. There was a harnessed bottle which he threw over his shoulders. He snapped the locks on the straps. From the bottle there hung a tube. Midway down the tube there was a small pressure-pump. At the end of the tube there was a glistening hypodermic needle.

When ready, B'dikkat gestured for them to come closer. They approached him with radiant happiness. He stepped through their ranks and past them, to the girl who had the boy growing from her neck. His mechanical voice boomed through the loudspeaker set in the top of his suit.

"Good girl. Good, good girl. You get a big, big present." He thrust

the hypodermic into her so long that Mercer could see an air bubble travel from the pump up to the bottle.

Then he moved back to the others, booming a word now and then, moving with improbable grace and speed amid the people. His needle flashed as he gave them hypodermics under pressure. The people dropped to sitting positions or lay down on the ground as though half-asleep.

He knew Mercer. "Hello, fellow. Now you can have the fun. It would have killed you in the cabin. Do you have anything for me?"

Mercer stammered, not knowing what B'dikkat meant, and the two-nosed man answered for him, "I think he has a nice baby head, but it isn't big enough for you to take yet."

Mercer never noticed the needle touch his arm.

B'dikkat had turned to the next knot of people when the super-condamine hit Mercer.

He tried to run after B'dikkat, to hug the lead space suit, to tell B'dikkat that he loved him. He stumbled and fell, but it did not hurt.

The many-bodied girl lay near him. Mercer spoke to her.

"Isn't it wonderful? You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. I'm so happy to be here."

The woman covered with growing hands came and sat beside them. She radiated warmth and good fellowship. Mercer thought that she looked very distinguished and charming. He struggled out of his clothes. It was foolish and snobbish to wear clothing when none of these nice people did.

The two women babbled and crooned at him.

With one corner of his mind he knew that they were saying nothing, just expressing the euphoria of a drug so powerful that the known universe had forbidden it. With most of his mind he was happy. He wondered how anyone could have the good luck to visit a planet as nice as this. He tried to tell the Lady Da, but the words weren't quite straight.

A painful stab hit him in the abdomen. The drug went after the pain and swallowed it. It was like the cap in the hospital, only a thousand times better. The pain was gone, though it had been crippling the first time.

He forced himself to be deliberate. He rammed his mind into focus and said to the two ladies who lay pinkly nude beside him in the desert, "That was a good bite. Maybe I will grow another head. That would make B'dikkat happy!"

The Lady Da forced the foremost of her bodies in an upright position. Said she, "I'm strong, too. I can talk. Remember, man, remember. People never live forever. We can die, too, we can die like real people. I do so believe in death!"

Mercer smiled at her through his happiness.

"Of course you can. But isn't this nice ... "

With this he felt his lips thicken and his mind go slack. He was wide awake, but he did not feel like doing anything. In that beautiful place, among all those companionable and attractive people, he sat and smiled.

B'dikkat was sterilizing his knives.

Mercer wondered how long the super-condamine had lasted him. He endured the ministrations of the dromozoa without screams or movement. The agonies of nerves and itching of skin were phenomena which happened somewhere near him, but meant nothing. He watched his own body with remote, casual interest. The Lady Da and the hand-covered woman stayed near him. After a long time the half-man dragged himself over to the group with his powerful arms. Having arrived he blinked sleepily and friendlily at them, and lapsed back into the restful stupor from which he had emerged. Mercer saw the sun rise on occasion, closed his eyes briefly, and opened them to see stars shining. Time had no meaning. The dromozoa fed him in their mysterious way: the drug canceled out his needs for cycles of the body.

At last he noticed a return of the inwardness of pain.

The pains themselves had not changed; he had.

He knew all the events which could take place on Shayol. He remembered them well from his happy period. Formerly he had noticed them—now he felt them.

He tried to ask the Lady Da how long they had had the drug, and how much longer they would have to wait before they had it again. She smiled at him with benign, remote happiness; apparently her many torsos, stretched out along the ground, had a greater capacity for retaining the drug than did his body. She meant him well, but was in no condition for articulate speech.

The half-man lay on the ground, arteries pulsating prettily behind the half-transparent film which protected his abdominal cavity. Mercer squeezed the man's shoulder.

The half-man woke, recognized Mercer and gave him a healthily sleepy grin.

" 'A good morrow to you, my boy.' That's out of a play. Did you ever see a play?"

"You mean a game with cards?"

"No," said the half-man, "a sort of eye-machine with real people doing the figures."

"I never saw that," said Mercer, "but I—"

"But you want to ask me when B'dikkat is going to come back with the needle."

"Yes," said Mercer, a little ashamed of his obviousness.

"Soon," said the half-man. "That's why I think of plays. We all know what is going to happen. We all know when it is going to happen. We all know what the dummies will do—" he gestured at

the hummocks in which the decorticated men were cradled—" and we all know what the new people will ask. But we never know how long a scene is going to take."

"What's a 'scene'?" asked Mercer. "Is that the name for the needle?"

The half-man laughed with something close to real humor. "No, no, no. You've got the lovelies on the brain. A scene is just part of a play. I mean we know the order in which things happen, but we have no clocks and nobody cares enough to count days or to make calendars and there's not much climate here, so none of us know how long anything takes. The pain seems short and the pleasure seems long. I'm inclined to think that they are about two Earth-weeks each."

Mercer did not know what an "Earth-week" was, since he had not been a well-read man before his conviction, but he got nothing more from the half-man at that time. The half-man received a dromozootic implant, turned red in the face, shouted senselessly at Mercer, "Take it out, you fool! Take it out of me!"

While Mercer looked on helplessly, the half-man twisted over on his side, his pink dusty back turned to Mercer, and wept hoarsely and quietly to himself.

Mercer himself could not tell how long it was before B'dikkat came back. It might have been several days. It might have been several months.

Once again B'dikkat moved among them like a father; once again they clustered like children. This time B'dikkat smiled pleasantly at the little head which had grown out of Mercer's thigh—a sleeping child's head, covered with light hair on top and with dainty eyebrows over the resting eyes. Mercer got the blissful needle.

When B'dikkat cut the head from Mercer's thigh, he felt the knife grinding against the cartilage which held the head to his own body. He saw the child-face grimace as the head was cut; he felt the far, cool flash of unimportant pain, as B'dikkat dabbed the wound with a corrosive antiseptic which stopped all bleeding immediately.

The next time it was two legs growing from his chest.

Then there had been another head beside his own.

Or was that after the torso and legs, waist to toe-tips, of the little girl which had grown from his side?

He forgot the order.

He did not count time.

Lady Da smiled at him often, but there was no love in this place. She had lost the extra torsos. In between teratologies, she was a pretty and shapely woman; but the nicest thing about their relationship was her whisper to him, repeated some thousands of times, repeated with smiles and hope, "People never live forever."

She found this immensely comforting, even though Mercer did not make much sense out of it.

Thus events occurred, and victims changed in appearance, and new ones arrived. Sometimes B'dikkat took the new ones, resting in the everlasting sleep of their burned-out brains, in a ground-truck to be added to other herds. The bodies in the truck threshed and bawled without human speech when the dromozoa struck them.

Finally, Mercer did manage to follow B'dikkat to the door of the cabin. He had to fight the bliss of super-condamine to do it. Only the memory of previous hurt, bewilderment and perplexity made him sure that if he did not ask B'dikkat when he, Mercer, was happy, the answer would no longer be available when he needed it. Fighting pleasure itself, he begged B'dikkat to check the records and to tell him how long he had been there.

B'dikkat grudgingly agreed, but he did not come out of the doorway. He spoke through the public address box built into the cabin, and his gigantic voice roared out over the empty plain, so that the pink herd of talking people stirred gently in their happiness and wondered what their friend B'dikkat might be wanting to tell them. When he said it, they thought it exceedingly profound, though none of them understood it, since it was simply the amount of time that Mercer had been on Shayol:

"Standard years—eighty-four years, seven months, three days, two hours, eleven and one half minutes. Good luck, fellow."

Mercer turned away.

The secret little corner of his mind, which stayed sane through happiness and pain, made him wonder about B'dikkat. What persuaded the cow-man to remain on Shayol? What kept him happy without super-condamine? Was B'dikkat a crazy slave to his own duty or was he a man who had hopes of going back to his own planet some day, surrounded by a family of little cow-people resembling himself? Mercer, despite his happiness, wept a little at the strange fate of B'dikkat. His own fate he accepted.

He remembered the last time he had eaten—actual eggs from an actual pan. The dromozoa kept him alive, but he did not know how they did it.

He staggered back to the group. The Lady Da, naked in the dusty plain, waved a hospitable hand and showed that there was a place for him to sit beside her. There were unclaimed square miles of seating space around them, but he appreciated the kindness of her gesture none the less.

## IV

The years, if they were years, went by. The land of Shayol did not change.

Sometimes the bubbling sound of geysers came faintly across the plain to the herd of men; those who could talk declared it to be the breathing of Captain Alvarez. There was night and day, but no setting of crops, no change of season, no generations of men. Time stood still for these people, and their load of pleasure was so commingled with the shocks and pains of the dromozoa that the words of the Lady Da took on very remote meaning.

"People never live forever."

Her statement was a hope, not a truth in which they could believe. They did not have the wit to follow the stars in their courses, to exchange names with each other, to harvest the experience of each for the wisdom of all. There was no dream of escape for these people. Though they saw the old-style chemical rockets lift up from the field beyond B'dikkat's cabin, they did not make plans to hide among the frozen crop of transmuted flesh.

Far long ago, some other prisoner than one of these had tried to write a letter. His handwriting was on a rock. Mercer read it, and so had a few of the others, but they could not tell which man had done it. Nor did they care.

The letter, scraped on stone, had been a message home. They could still read the opening: "Once, I was like you, stepping out of my window at the end of day, and letting the winds blow me gently toward the place I lived in. Once, like you, I had one head, two hands, ten fingers on my hands. The front part of my head was called a face, and I could talk with it. Now I can only write, and that only when I get out of pain. Once, like you, I ate foods, drank liquid, had a name. I cannot remember the name I had. You can stand up, you who get this letter. I cannot even stand up. I just wait for the lights to put my food in me molecule by molecule, and to take it out again. Don't think that I am punished any more. This place is not a punishment. It is something else."

Among the pink herd, none of them ever decided what was "something else."

Curiosity had died among them long ago.

Then came the day of the little people.

It was a time—not an hour, not a year: a duration somewhere between them—when the Lady Da and Mercer sat wordless with happiness and filled with the joy of super-condamine. They had nothing to say to one another; the drug said all things for them.

A disagreeable roar from B'dikkat's cabin made them stir mildly.

Those two, and one or two others, looked toward the speaker of the public address system.

The Lady Da brought herself to speak, though the matter was unimportant beyond words. "I do believe," said she, "that we used to call that the War Alarm."

They drowsed back into their happiness.

A man with two rudimentary heads growing beside his own crawled over to them. All three heads looked very happy, and Mercer thought it delightful of him to appear in such a whimsical shape. Under the pulsing glow of super-condamine, Mercer regretted that he had not used times when his mind was clear to ask him who he had once been. He answered it for them. Forcing his eyelids open by sheer will power, he gave the Lady Da and Mercer the lazy ghost of a military salute and said, "Suzdal, Ma'am and Sir, former cruiser commander. They are sounding the alert. Wish to report that I am ... I am ... I am not quite ready for battle."

He dropped off to sleep.

The gentle peremptorinesses of the Lady Da brought his eyes open again.

"Commander, why are they sounding it here? Why did you come to us?"

"You, Ma'am, and the gentleman with the ears seem to think best of our group. I thought you might have orders."

Mercer looked around for the gentleman with the ears. It was himself. In that time his face was almost wholly obscured with a crop of fresh little ears, but he paid no attention to them, other than expecting that B'dikkat would cut them all off in due course and that the dromozoa would give him something else.

The noise from the cabin rose to a higher, ear-splitting intensity.

Among the herd, many people stirred.

Some opened their eyes, looked around, murmured. "It's a noise," and went back to the happy drowsing with super-condamine.

The cabin door opened.

B'dikkat rushed out, without his suit. They had never seen him on the outside without his protective metal suit.

He rushed up to them, looked wildly around, recognized the Lady Da and Mercer, picked them up, one under each arm, and raced with them back to the cabin. He flung them into the double door. They landed with bone-splitting crashes, and found it amusing to hit the ground so hard. The floor tilted them into the room. Moments later, B'dikkat followed.

He roared at them, "You're people, or you were. You understand people; I only obey them. But this I will not obey. Look at that!"

Four beautiful human children lay on the floor. The two smallest seemed to be twins, about two years of age. There was a girl of five and a boy of seven or so. All of them had slack eyelids. All of them had thin red lines around their temples and their hair, shaved away, showed how their brains had been removed.

B'dikkat, heedless of danger from dromozoa, stood beside the Lady Da and Mercer, shouting.

"You're real people. I'm just a cow. I do my duty. My duty does not include this. These are children."

The wise, surviving recess of Mercer's mind registered shock and disbelief. It was hard to sustain the emotion, because the super-condamine washed at his consciousness like a great tide, making everything seem lovely. The forefront of his mind, rich with the drug, told him, "Won't it be nice to have some children with us!" But the undestroyed interior of his mind, keeping the honor he knew before he came to Shayol, whispered, "This is a crime worse than any crime we have committed! And the Empire has done it."

"What have you done?" said the Lady Da. "What can we do?"

"I tried to call the satellite. When they knew what I was talking about, they cut me off. After all, I'm not people. The head doctor told me to do my work."

"Was it Doctor Vomact?" Mercer asked.

"Vomact?" said B'dikkat. "He died a hundred years ago, of old age. No, a new doctor cut me off. I don't have people-feeling, but I am Earth-born, of Earth blood. I have emotions myself. Pure cattle emotions! This I cannot permit."

"What have you done?"

B'dikkat lifted his eyes to the window. His face was illuminated by a determination which, even beyond the edges of the drug which made them love him, made him seem like the father of this world-responsible, honorable, unselfish.

He smiled. "They will kill me for it, I think. But I have put in the Galactic Alert—all ships here."

The Lady Da, sitting back on the floor, declared, "But that's only for new invaders! It is a false alarm." She pulled herself together and rose to her feet. "Can you cut these things off me, right now, in case people come? And get me a dress. And do you have anything which will counteract the effect of the super-condamine?"

"That's what I wanted!" cried B'dikkat. "I will not take these children. You give me leadership."

There and then, on the floor of the cabin, he trimmed her down to the normal proportions of mankind.

The corrosive antiseptic rose like smoke in the air of the cabin. Mercer thought it all very dramatic and pleasant, and dropped off in catnaps part of the time. Then he felt B'dikkat trimming him too. B'dikkat opened a long, long drawer and put the specimens in; from the cold in the room it must have been a refrigerated locker.

He sat them both up against the wall.

"I've been thinking," he said. "There is no antidote for super-condamine. Who would want one? But I can give you the hypos from my rescue boat. They are supposed to bring a person back, no matter what has happened to that person out in space."

There was a whining over the cabin roof. B'dikkat knocked a window out with his fist, stuck his head out of the window and looked up.

"Come on in," he shouted.

There was the thud of a landing craft touching ground quickly. Doors whirled. Mercer wondered, mildly, why people dared to land on Shayol. When they came in he saw that they were



not people; they were Customs Robots, who could travel at velocities which people could never match. One wore the insigne of an inspector.

"Where are the invaders?"

"There are no—" began B'dikkat.

The Lady Da, imperial in her posture though she was completely nude, said in a voice of complete clarity, "I am a former Empress, the Lady Da. Do you know me?"

"No, Ma'am," said the robot inspector. He looked as uncomfortable as a robot could look. The drug made Mercer think that it would be nice to have robots for company, out on the surface of Shayol.

"I declare this Top Emergency, in the ancient words. Do you understand? Connect me with the Instrumentality."

"We can't—" said the inspector.

"You can ask," said the Lady Da.

The inspector complied.

The Lady Da turned to B'dikkat. "Give Mercer and me those shots now. Then put us outside the door so the dromozoa can repair these scars. Bring us in as soon as a connection is made. Wrap us in cloth if you do not have clothes for us. Mercer can stand the pain."

"Yes," said B'dikkat, keeping his eyes away from the four soft children and their collapsed eyes.

The injection burned like no fire ever had. It must have been capable of fighting the super-condamine, because B'dikkat put them through the open window, so as to save time going through the door. The dromozoa, sensing that they needed repair, flashed upon them. This time the super-condamine had something else fighting it

Mercer did not scream but he lay against the wall and wept for ten thousand years; in objective time, it must have been several hours.

The Customs robots were taking pictures. The dromozoa were flashing against them too, sometimes in whole swarms, but nothing happened.

Mercer heard the voice of the communicator inside the cabin calling loudly for B'dikkat. "Surgery Satellite calling Shayol. B'dikkat, get on the line!"

He obviously was not replying.

There were soft cries coming from the other communicator, the one which the customs officials had brought into the room. Mercer was sure that the eye-machine was on and that people in other worlds were looking at Shayol for the first time.

B'dikkat came through the door. He had torn navigation charts out of his lifeboat. With these he cloaked them.

Mercer noted that the Lady Da changed the arrangement of the cloak in a few minor ways and suddenly looked like a person of great importance.

They re-entered the cabin door.

B'dikkat whispered, as if filled with awe, "The Instrumentality has been reached, and a lord of the Instrumentality is about to talk to you."

There was nothing for Mercer to do, so he sat back in a corner of the room and watched. The Lady Da, her skin healed, stood pale and nervous in the middle of the floor.

The room filled with an odorless intangible smoke. The smoke clouded. The full communicator was on.

A human figure appeared.

A woman, dressed in a uniform of radically conservative cut, faced the Lady Da.

"This is Shayol. You are the Lady Da. You called me."

The Lady Da pointed to the children on the floor. "This must not happen," she said. This is a place of punishments, agreed upon between the Instrumentality and the Empire. No one said anything about children."

The woman on the screen looked down at the children.

"This is the work of insane people!" she cried.

She looked accusingly at the Lady Da, "Are you imperial?"

"I was an Empress, madam," said the Lady Da.

"And you permit this!"

"Permit it?" cried the Lady Da. "I had nothing to do with it." Her eyes widened. "I am a prisoner here myself. Don't you understand?"

The image-woman snapped, "No, I don't."

"I," said the Lady Da, "am a specimen. Look at the herd out there. I came from them a few hours ago."

"Adjust me," said the image-woman to B'dikkat. "Let me see that herd."

Her body, standing upright, soared through the wall in a flashing arc and was placed in the very center of the herd.

The Lady Da and Mercer watched her. They saw even the image lose its stiffness and dignity. The image-woman waved an arm to show that she should be brought back into the cabin. B'dikkat tuned her back into the room.

"I owe you an apology," said the image. "I am the Lady Johanna Gnade, one of the lords of the Instrumentality."

Mercer bowed, lost his balance and had to scramble up from the floor. The Lady Da acknowledged the introduction with a royal nod.

The two women looked at each other.

"You will investigate," said the Lady Da, "and when you have investigated, please put us all to death. You know about the drug?"

"Don't mention it," said B'dikkat, "don't even say the name into a communicator. It is a secret of the Instrumentality!"

"I am the Instrumentality," said the Lady Johanna. "Are you in pain? I did not think that any of you were alive. I had heard of the surgery banks on your off-limits planet, but I thought that robots tended parts of people and sent up the new grafts by rocket. Are there any people with you? Who is in charge? Who did this to the children?"

B'dikkat stepped in front of the image. He did not bow. "I'm in charge."

"You're underpeople!" cried the Lady Johanna. "You're a cow!"

"A bull, Ma'am. My family is frozen back on Earth itself, and with a thousand years' service I am earning their freedom and my own. Your other questions, Ma'am. I do all the work. The

dromozoa do not affect me much, though I have to cut a part off myself now and then. I throw those away. They don't go into the bank. Do you know the secret rules of this place?"

The Lady Johanna talked to someone behind her on another world. Then she looked at B'dikkat and commanded, "Just don't name the drug or talk too much about it. Tell me the rest."

"We have," said B'dikkat very formally, "thirteen hundred and twenty-one people here who can still be counted on to supply parts when the dromozoa implant them. There are about seven hundred more, including Go-Captain Alvarez, who have been so thoroughly absorbed by the planet that it is no use trimming them. The Empire set up this place as a point of uttermost punishment. But the Instrumentality gave secret orders for medicine—" he accented the word strangely, meaning super-condamine—"to be issued so that the punishment would be counteracted. The Empire supplies our convicts. The Instrumentality distributes the surgical material."

The Lady Johanna lifted her right hand in a gesture of silence and compassion. She looked around the room. Her eyes came back to the Lady Da. Perhaps she guessed what effort the Lady Da had made in order to remain standing erect while the two drugs, the super-condamine and the lifeboat drug, fought within her veins.

"You people can rest. I will tell you now that all things possible will be done for you. The Empire is finished. The Fundamental Agreement, by which the Instrumentality surrendered the Empire a thousand years ago, has been set aside. We did not know that you people existed. We would have found out in time, but I am sorry we did not find out sooner. Is there anything we can do for you right away?"

"Time is what we all have," said the Lady Da. "Perhaps we cannot ever leave Shayol, because of the dromozoa and the medicine. The one could be dangerous. The other must never be permitted to be known."

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked around the room. When her glance reached him, B'dikkat fell to his knees and lifted his enormous hands in complete supplication.

"What do you want?" said she.

"These," said B'dikkat, pointing to the mutilated children. "Order a stop on children. Stop it now!" He commanded her with the last cry, and she accepted his command. "And Lady—" he stopped as if shy.

"Yes? Go on."

"Lady, I am unable to kill. It is not in my nature. To work, to help, but not to kill. What do I do with these?" He gestured at the four motionless children on the floor.

"Keep them," she said. "Just keep them."

"I can't," he said. "There's no way to get off this planet alive. I do not have food for them in the cabin. They will die in a few hours. And governments," he added wisely, "take a long, long time to do things."

"Can you give them the medicine?"

"No, it would kill them if I give them that stuff first before the dromozoa have fortified their bodily processes."

The Lady Johanna Gnade filled the room with tinkling laughter that was very close to weeping. "Fools, poor fools, and the more fool I! If super-condamine works only after the dromozoa, what is the purpose of the secret?"

B'dikkat rose to his feet, offended. He frowned, but he could not get the words with which to defend himself.

The Lady Da, ex-empress of a fallen empire, addressed the other lady with ceremony and force: "Put them outside, so they will be touched. They will hurt. Have B'dikkat give them the drug as soon as he thinks it safe. I beg your leave, my Lady ... "

Mercer had to catch her before she fell.

"You've all had enough," said the Lady Johanna. "A storm ship with heavily armed troops is on its way to your ferry satellite. They will seize the medical personnel and find out who committed this crime against children."

Mercer dared to speak. "Will you punish the guilty doctor?"

"You speak of punishment," she cried. "You!"

"It's fair. I was punished for doing wrong. Why shouldn't he be?"

"Punish—punish!" she said to him. "We will cure that doctor. And we will cure you too, if we can."

Mercer began to weep. He thought of the oceans of happiness which super-condamine had brought him, forgetting the hideous pain and the deformities on Shayol. Would there be no next needle? He could not guess what life would be like off Shayol. Was there to be no more tender, fatherly B'dikkat coming with his knives?

He lifted his tear-stained face to the Lady Johanna Gnade and choked out the words, "Lady, we are all insane in this place. I do not think we want to leave."

She turned her face away, moved by enormous compassion. Her next words were to B'dikkat. "You are wise and good, even if you are not a human being. Give them all of the drug they can take. The Instrumentality will decide what to do with all of you. I will survey your planet with robot soldiers. Will the robots be safe, cow-man?"

B'dikkat did not like the thoughtless name she called him, but he held no offense. "The robots will be all right, Ma'am, but the dromozoa will be excited if they cannot feed them and heal them. Send as few as you can. We do not know how the dromozoa live or die."

"As few as I can," she murmured. She lifted her hand in command to some technician unimaginable distances away. The odorless smoke rose about her and the image was gone.

A shrill cheerful voice spoke up. "I fixed your window," said the customs robot. B'dikkat thanked him absentmindedly. He helped Mercer and the Lady Da into the doorway. When they had gotten outside, they were promptly stung by the dromozoa. It did not matter.

B'dikkat himself emerged, carrying the four children in his two gigantic, tender hands. He lay the slack bodies on the ground near the cabin. He watched as the bodies went into spasm with the onset of the dromozoa. Mercer and the Lady Da saw that his brown cow eyes were rimmed with red and that his huge cheeks were dampened by tears.

Hours or centuries.

Who could tell them apart?

The herd went back to its usual life, except that the intervals between needles were much shorter. The once-commander, Suzdal, refused the needle when he heard the news. Whenever he could walk, he followed the customs robots around as they photographed, took soil samples, and made a count of the bodies. They were particularly interested in the mountain of the Go-Captain Alvarez and professed themselves uncertain as to whether there was organic life there or not. The mountain did appear to react to super-condamine, but they could find no blood, no heart-beat. Moisture, moved by the dromozoa, seemed to have replaced the once-human bodily processes.

## V

And then, early one morning, the sky opened.

Ship after ship landed. People emerged, wearing clothes.

The dromozoa ignored the newcomers. Mercer, who was in a state of bliss, confusedly tried to think this through until he realized that the ships were loaded to their skins with communications machines; the "people" were either robots or images of persons in other places.

The robots swiftly gathered together the herd. Using wheelbarrows, they brought the hundreds of mindless people to the landing area.

Mercer heard a voice he knew. It was the Lady Johanna Gnade. "Set me high," she commanded.

Her form rose until she seemed one-fourth the size of Alvarez. Her voice took on more volume.

"Wake them all," she commanded.

Robots moved among them, spraying them with a gas which was both sickening and sweet. Mercer felt his mind go clear. The super-condamine still operated in his nerves and veins, but his cortical area was free of it. He thought clearly.

"I bring you," cried the compassionate feminine voice of the gigantic Lady Johanna, "the judgment of the Instrumentality on the planet Shayol.

"Item: the surgical supplies will be maintained and the dromozoa will not be molested. Portions of human bodies will be left here to grow, and the grafts will be collected by robots. Neither man nor homunculus will live here again. "

"Item: the underman B'dikkat, of cattle extraction, will be rewarded by an immediate return to Earth. He will be paid twice his expected thousand years of earnings."

The voice of B'dikkat, without amplification, was almost as loud as hers through the amplifier. He shouted his protest, "Lady, Lady!"

She looked down at him, his enormous body reaching to ankle height on her swirling gown, and said in a very informal tone, "What do you want?"

"Let me finish my work first," he cried, so that all could hear. "Let me finish taking care of these people."

The specimens who had minds all listened attentively. The brainless ones were trying to dig themselves back into the soft earth of Shayol, using their powerful claws for the purpose. Whenever one began to disappear, a robot seized him by a limb and pulled him out again.

"Item: cephalectomies will be performed on all persons with irrecoverable minds. Their bodies will be left here. Their heads will be taken away and killed as pleasantly as we can manage, probably by an overdosage of super-condamine."

"The last big jolt," murmured Commander Suzdal, who stood near Mercer. "That's fair enough."

"Item: the children have been found to be the last heirs of the Empire. An over-zealous official sent them here to prevent their committing treason when they grew up. The doctor obeyed orders without questioning them. Both the official and the doctor have been cured and their memories of this have been erased, so that they need have no shame or grief for what they have done."

"It's unfair," cried the half-man. "They should be punished as we were!"

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked down at him. "Punishment is ended. We will give you anything you wish, but not the pain of another. I shall continue.

"Item: since none of you wish to resume the lives which you led previously, we are moving you to another planet nearby. It is similar to Shayol, but much more beautiful. There are no dromozoa."

At this an uproar seized the herd. They shouted, wept, cursed, appealed. They all wanted the needle, and if they had to stay on Shayol to get it, they would stay.

"Item," said the gigantic image of the lady, overriding their babble with her great but feminine voice, "you will not have super-condamine on the new planet, since without dromozoa it would kill you. But there will be caps. Remember the caps. We will try to cure you and to make people of you again. But if you give up, we will not force you. Caps are very powerful; with medical help you can live under them many years."

A hush fell on the group. In their various ways, they were trying to compare the electrical caps which had stimulated their pleasure-lobes with the drug which had drowned them a thousand times in pleasure. Their murmur sounded like assent.

"Do you have any questions?" said the Lady Johanna.

"When do we get the caps?" said several. They were human enough that they laughed at their own impatience.

"Soon," said she reassuringly, "very soon."

"Very soon," echoed B'dikkat, reassuring his charges even though he was no longer in control.

"Question," cried the Lady Da.

"My Lady ... ?" said the Lady Johanna, giving the ex-empress her due courtesy.

"Will we be permitted marriage?"

The Lady Johanna looked astonished. "I don't know." She smiled. "I don't know any reason why not—"

"I claim this man Mercer," said the Lady Da. "When the drugs were deepest, and the pain was greatest, he was the one who always tried to think. May I have him?"

Mercer thought the procedure arbitrary but he was so happy that he said nothing. The Lady Johanna scrutinized him and then she nodded. She lifted her arms in a gesture of blessing and farewell.

The robots began to gather the pink herd into two groups. One group was to whisper in a ship over to a new world, new problems and new lives. The other group, no matter how much its members tried to scuttle into the dirt, was gathered for the last honor which humanity could pay their manhood.

B'dikkat, leaving everyone else, jogged with his bottle across the plain to give the mountain-man Alvarez an especially large gift of delight.

# On the Gem Planet

Consider the horse. He climbed up through the crevasses of a cliff of gems; the force which drove him was the love of man.

Consider Mizzer, the resort planet, where the dictator Colonel Wedder reformed the culture so violently that whatever had been slovenly now became atrocious.

Consider Genevieve, so rich that she was the prisoner of her own wealth, so beautiful that she was the victim of her own beauty, so intelligent that she knew there was nothing, nothing to be done about her fate.

Consider Casher O'Neill, a wanderer among the planets, thirsting for justice and yet hoping in his innermost thoughts that 'justice' was not just another word for revenge.

Consider Pontoppidan, that literal gem of a planet, where the people were too rich and busy to have good food, open air or much fun. All they had was diamonds, rubies, tourmalines and emeralds.

Add these together and you have one of the strangest stories ever told from world to world.

## I

When Casher O'Neill came to Pontoppidan, he found that the capital city was appropriately called Andersen.

This was the second century of the Rediscovery of Man. People everywhere had taken up old names, old languages, old customs, as fast as the robots and the underpeople could retrieve the data from the rubbish of "forgotten starlanes or the subsurface ruins of Manhome itself.

Casher knew this very well, to his bitter cost. Re-acculturation had brought him revolution and exile. He came from the

dry, beautiful planet of Mizzer. He was himself the nephew of the ruined ex-ruler, Kuraf, whose collection of objectionable books had at one time been unmatched in the settled galaxy; he had stood aside, half-assenting, when the colonels Gibna and Wedder took over the planet in the name of reform; he had implored the Instrumentality, vainly, for help when Wedder became a tyrant; and now he travelled among the stars, looking for men or weapons who might destroy Wedder and make Kaheer again the luxurious, happy city which it once had been.

He felt that his cause was hopeless when he landed on Pontoppidan. The people were warmhearted, friendly, intelligent, but they had no motives to fight for, no weapons to fight with, no enemies to fight against. They had little public spirit, such as Casher O'Neill had seen back on his native planet of Mizzer. They were concerned about little things.

Indeed, at the time of his arrival, the Pontoppidans were wildly excited about a horse.

A horse! Who worries about one horse? Casher O'Neill himself said so. 'Why bother about a horse? We have lots of them on Mizzer. They are four-handed beings, eighty1 times the weight of a man, with only one finger on each of the four hands. The fingernail is very heavy and permits them to run fast. That's why our people have them, for running.'

'Why run?' said the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. 'Why run, when you can fly? Don't you have ornithopters?'

'We don't run with them,' said Casher indignantly. 'We make them run against each other and then we pay prizes to the one which runs fastest.'

'But then,' said Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator, 'you get a very illogical situation. When you have tried out these four-fingered beings, you know how fast each one goes. So what? Why bother?'

His niece interrupted. She was a fragile little thing, smaller than Casher O'Neill liked women to be. She had clear grey eyes, well-marked eyebrows, a very artificial coiffeur of silver-blonde hair and the most sensitive little mouth he had ever seen. She conformed to the local fashion by wearing some

kind of powder or face cream which was flesh-pink in colour but which had overtones of lilac. On a woman as old as twenty-two, such a coloration would have made the wearer look like an old hag, but on Genevieve it was pleasant, if rather startling. It gave the effect of a happy child playing grown-up and doing the job joyfully and well. Casher knew that it was hard to tell ages in these off-trail planets. Genevieve might be a grand dame in her third or fourth rejuvenation!

He doubted it, on second glance. What she said was sensible, young, and pert: ' \*•

'But uncle, they're animals I'

'I know that,' he rumbled.

'But uncle, don't you see it?'

'Stop saying "but uncle" and tell me what you mean,' growled the Dictator^ very fondly.

'Animals are always *uncertain*.'

'Of course,' said the uncle.

'That makes it a game, uncle,' said Genevieve. 'They're never sure that any one of them would do the same thing twice. Imagine the excitement - the beautiful big beings from earth running around and around on their four middle fingers, the big fingernails making the gems jump loose from the ground!' -

'I'm not at all sure it's that way. Besides, Mizzer may be covered with something valuable, such as earth or sand, instead of gemstones like the ones we have here on Pontoppidan. You know your flower-pots with their rich, warm, wet, soft earth?'

'Of course I do, uncle. And I know what you paid for them. You were very generous. And still are,' she added diplomatic-wily, glancing quickly at Casher O'Neill to see how the familial piety went across with the visitor.

'We're not that rich on Mizzer. It's mostly sand, with farmland along the Twelve Niles, our big rivers.'

'I've seen pictures of rivers,' said Genevieve. 'Imagine living on a whole world full of flowerpot stuff!'

'You're getting off the subject, darling. We were wondering why anyone would bring one horse, just one horse, to Pontoppidan. I suppose you could race a horse against

himself, if you had a stop-watch. But would it be fun? Would you do that, young man?'

Casher O'Neill tried to be respectful. 'In my home we used to have a lot of horses. I've seen my uncle time them one by one.'

'Your uncle?' said the Dictator interestedly. 'Who was your uncle that he had all these four-fingered "horses" running around? They're all Earth animals and very expensive.'



Casher felt the coming of the low, slow blow he had met so many times before, right from the whole outside world into the pit of his stomach. 'My uncle' - he stammered - 'my uncle - I thought you knew - was the old Dictator of Mizzer, Kuraf.'

Philip Vincent jumped to his feet, very lightly for so well-fleshed a man. The young mistress, Genevieve, clutched at the throat of her dress.

'Kuraf!' cried the old Dictator. 'Kuraf! We know about him, even here. But you were supposed to be a Mizzer patriot, not one of Kuraf's people.'

'He doesn't have any children —' Casher began to explain.

'I should think not, not with those habits!' snapped the old man.

'- so I'm his nephew and his heir. But I'm not trying to put the Dictatorship back, even though I should be dictator. I just want to get rid of Colonel Wedder. He has ruined my people, and I am looking for money or weapons or help to make my home-world free.' This was the point, Casher O'Neill knew, at which people either started believing him or did not. If they did not, there was not much he could do about it. If they did, he was sure to get some sympathy. So far, no help. Just sympathy.

But the Instrumentality, while refusing to take action against Colonel Wedder, had given young Casher O'Neill an all-world travel pass - something which a hundred lifetimes of savings could not have purchased for the ordinary man. (His obscene old uncle had gone off to Sunvale, on Triolle, the resort planet, to live out his years between the casino and the beach.) Casher O'Neill held the conscience of Mizzer in his

hand. Only he, among the star travellers, cared enough to fight for the freedom of the Twelve Niles. Here, now, in this room, there was a turning point.

'I won't give you anything,' said the Hereditary Dictator, but he said it in a friendly voice. His niece started tugging at his sleeve.

The older man went on. 'Stop it, girl. I won't give you anything, not if you're part of that rotten lot of Kuraf's, not unless —'

'Anything, sir, anything, just so that I get help or weapons to go home to the Twelve Niles!'

'All right, then. Unless you open your mind to me. I'm a good telepath myself.'

'Open my mind! Whatever for?' The incongruous indecency of it shocked Casher O'Neill. He'd had men and women and governments ask a lot of strange things from him, but no one before had had the cold impudence to ask him to open his mind. 'And why you?' he went on. 'What would you get out of it? There's nothing much in my mind.'

'To make sure,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'that you are not too honest and sharp in your beliefs. If you're positive that you know what to do, you might be another Colonel Wedder, putting your people through a dozen torments for a Utopia which never quite comes true. If you don't care at all, you might be like your uncle. He did no real harm. He just stole his planet blind and he had some extraordinary habits which got him talked about between the stars. He never killed a man in his life, did he?'

'No, sir,' said Casher O'Neill, 'he never did.' It relieved him to tell the one little good thing about his uncle; there was so very, very little which could be said in Kuraf's favour.

'I don't like slobbering old libertines like your uncle,' said Philip Vincent, 'but I don't hate them either. They don't hurt other people much. As a matter of actual fact, they don't hurt anyone but themselves. They waste property, though. Like these horses you have on Mizzer, We'd never bring living beings to this world of Pontoppidan, just to play games with. And you know we're not poor. We're no Old North Australia, but we have a good income here.'

That, thought Casher O'Neill, is the understatement of the year, but he was a careful young man with a great deal at stake, so he said nothing.

The Dictator looked at him shrewdly. He appreciated the value of Casher's tactful silence. Genevieve tugged at his sleeve, but he frowned her interruption away.

'If,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'if,' he repeated, 'you pass two tests, I will give you a green ruby as big as my head. If my Committee will allow me to do so. But I think I can talk them around. One test is that you let me peep all over your mind, to make sure that I am not dealing with one more honest fool. If you're too honest, you're a fool and a danger to mankind. I'll give you a dinner and ship you off-planet as fast as I can. And the other test is - solve the puzzle of this horse. The one horse on Pontoppidan. Why is the animal here? What should we do with it? If it's good to eat, how should we cook it? Or can we trade to some other world, like your planet Mizzer, which seems to set a value on horses?'

'Thank you, sir —' said Casher O'Neill.

'But, uncle —' said Genevieve.

'Keep quiet, my darling, and let the young man speak,' said the Dictator.

'- all I was going to ask, is,' said Casher O'Neill, 'what's a green ruby good for? I didn't even know they came green.'

'That, young man, is a Pontoppidan speciality. We have a geology based on ultra-heavy chemistry. This planet was once -a fragment from a giant planet which imploded. The use is simple. With a green ruby you can make a laser beam which will boil away your city of Kaheer in a single sweep. We don't have weapons here and we don't believe in them, so I won't give you a weapon. You'll have to travel farther to find a ship and to get the apparatus for mounting your green ruby. If I give it to you. But you will be one more step along in your fight with Colonel Wedder.'

'Thank you, thank you, most honourable sir!' cried Casher O'Neill.

'But, uncle,' said Genevieve, 'you shouldn't have picked those two things because I know the answers.'

'You know all about him,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'by some means of your own?'

Genevieve flushed under her lilac-hued foundation cream. 'I know enough for us to know.'

'How do you know it, my darling?'

'I just know,' said Genevieve.

Her uncle made no comment, but he smiled widely and indulgently as if he had heard that particular phrase before.

She stamped her foot. 'And I know about the horse, too. All about it.'

'Have you seen it?'

'No.'

'Have you talked to it?'

'Horses don't talk, uncle.'

'Most underpeople do,' he said.

'This isn't an underperson, uncle. It's a plain unmodified old Earth animal. It never did talk.'

'Then what do you know, my honey?' The uncle was affectionate, but there was the crackle of impatience under his voice.

'I taped it. The whole thing. The story of the horse of Pontoppidan. And I've edited it, too. I was going to show it to you this morning, but your staff sent that young man in.'

Casher O'Neill looked his apologies at Genevieve.

She did not notice him. Her eyes were on her uncle.

'Since you've done this much, we might as well see it.' He turned to the attendants. 'Bring chairs. And drinks. You know mine. The young lady will take tea with lemon. Real tea. Will you have coffee, young man?'

'You have coffee!' cried Casher O'Neill. As soon as he said it, he felt like a fool. Pontoppidan was a rich planet. On most worlds' exchanges, coffee came out to about two man-years per kilo. Here half-tracks crunched their way through gems as they went to load up the frequent trading vessels.

The chairs were put in place. The drinks arrived. The Hereditary Dictator had been momentarily lost in a brown study, as though he were wondering about his promise to Casher O'Neill. He had even murmured to the young man, 'Our bargain stands? Never mind what my niece says.' Casher

had nodded vigorously. The old man had gone back to frowning at the servants and did not relax until a tiger-man bounded into the room, carrying a tray with acrobatic precision. The chairs were already in place.

The uncle held his niece's chair for her as a command that she sit down. He nodded Casher O'Neill into a chair on the other side of himself.

He commanded, 'Dim the lights ...'

The room plunged into semi-darkness.

Without being told, the people took their places immediately behind the three main seats and the underpeople perched or sat on benches and tables behind them. Very little was spoken. Casher O'Neill could sense that Pontoppidan was a well-run place. He began to wonder if the Hereditary Dictator had much real work left to do, if he could fuss that much over a single horse. Perhaps all he did was boss his niece and watch the robots load truckloads of gems into sacks while the underpeople weighed them, listed them and wrote out the bills for the customers.

## II

There was no screen; this was a good machine.

The planet Pontoppidan came into view, its airless brightness giving strong hints of the mineral riches which might be found.

Here and there enormous domes, such as the one in which this palace was located, came into view.

Genevieve's own voice, girlish, impulsive and yet didactic, rang out with the story of her planet. It was as though she had prepared the picture not only for her own uncle, but for off-world visitors as well. (By Joan, that's it! thought Casher O'Neill. If they don't raise much food here, outside of hydroponics, and don't have any real People Places, they howl to trade: that does mean visitors, and many, many of them.)!

The story was interesting but the girl herself was more interesting. Her face shone in the shifting light which the images - a metre, perhaps a little more, from the floor-reflected across the room. Casher O'Neill thought that he had

never before seen a woman who so peculiarly combined intelligence and charm. She was girl, girl, girl, all the way through; but she was also very smart and pleased with being smart. It betokened a happy life. He found himself glancing covertly at her. Once he caught her glancing, equally covertly, at him. The darkness of the scene enabled them both to pass it off as an accident without embarrassment.

Her viewtape had come to the story of the dipsies, enormous canyons which lay like deep gashes on the surface of the planet. Some of the colour views were spectacular beyond belief. Casher O'Neill, as the 'appointed one' of Mizzer, had had plenty of time to wander through the nonsalacious parts of his uncle's collections, and he had seen pictures of the most notable worlds.

Never had he seen anything like this. One view showed a sunset against a six-kilometre cliff of a material which looked like solid emerald. The peculiar bright sunshine of Pontoppidan's small, penetrating, lilac-hued sun ran like living water over the precipice of gems. Even the reduced image, one metre by one metre, was enough to make him catch his breath.

The bottom of the dipsy had vapour emerging in curious cylindrical columns which seemed to erode as they reached two or three times the height of a man. The recorded voice of Genevieve was explaining that the very thin atmosphere of Pontoppidan would not be breathable for another 2,520 years, since the settlers did not wish to squander their resources on a luxury like breathing when the whole planet only had 60,000 inhabitants; they would rather go on with masks and use their wealth in other ways. After all, it was not as though they did not have their domed cities, some of them many kilometres in radius. Besides the usual hydroponics, they had even imported 7'2 hectares of garden soil, 5'5 centimetres deep, together with enough water to make the gardens rich and fruitful. They had bought worms, too, at the price of eight carats of diamond per living worm, in order to keep the soil of the gardens loose and living.

Genevieve's 'transcribed voice rang out with pride as she listed these accomplishments of her people, but a note of sadness came in when she returned to the subject of the dipsies.

'... and though we would like to live in them and develop their atmospheres, we dare not. There is too much escape of radioactivity. The geysers themselves may or may not be contaminated from one hour to the next. So we just look at them. Not one of them has ever been settled, except for the Hippy Dipsy, where the horse came from. Watch this next picture.'

The camera sheered up, up, up from the surface of the planet. Where it had wandered among mountains of diamonds and valleys of tourmalines, it now took to the blue-black of near, inner space. One of the canyons showed (from high altitude) the grotesque pattern of a human woman's hips and legs, though what might have been the upper body was lost in a confusion of broken hills which ended in a bright almost-iridescent plain to the North.

'That,' said the real Genevieve, overriding her own voice on the screen, 'is the Hippy Dipsy. There, see the blue ? That's the only lake on all of Pontoppidan. And here we drop to the hermit's house.'

Casher O'Neill almost felt vertigo as the camera plummeted from off-planet into the depths of that immense canyon. The edges of the canyon almost seemed to move like lips with the plunge, opening and folding inward to swallow him up.

Suddenly they were beside a beautiful little lake.

A small hut stood beside the shore.

In the doorway there sat a man, dead.

His body had been there a long time; it was already mummified.

Genevieve's recorded voice explained the matter: '... in Norstrilian law and custom, they told him that his time had come. They told him to go to the Dying House, since he was no longer fit to live. In Old North Australia, they are so rich that they let everyone live as long as he wants, unless

the old person can't take rejuvenation any more, even with stroon, and unless he or she gets to be a real pest to the living. If that happens, they are invited to go to the Dying House, where they shriek and pant with delirious joy for weeks or days until

they finally die of an overload of sheer happiness and excitement . . . ' There was a hesitation, even in the recording. 'We never knew why this man refused. He stood off-planet and said that he had seen views of the Hippy Dipsy. He said it was the most beautiful place on all the worlds, and that he wanted to build a cabin there, to live alone, except for his non-human friend. We thought it was some small pet. When we told him that the Hippy Dipsy was very dangerous, he said that this did not matter in the least to him, since he was old and dying anyhow. I'hen he offered to pay us twelve ymes our planetary income if we would lease him twelve hectares on the condition of absolute privacy. No pictures, no scanners, no help, no visitors. Just solitude and scenery. His name was Perino. My great-grandfather asked' for nothing more, except the written transfer of credit. When he paid it, Perino even asked that he be left alone after he was dead. Not even a vault rocket so that he could either orbit Pontoppidan forever or start a very slow journey to nowhere, the way so many people like it. So this is our picture of him. We took it when the light went off in the People Room and one of the tiger-men told us that he was sure a human consciousness had come to an end in the Hippy Dipsy.

'And we never even thought of the pet. After all, we had never made a picture of him. This is the way he arrived from Perino's shack.'

A robot was shown in a control room, calling excitedly in the old Common Tongue.

'People, people! Judgement needed! Moving object coming out of the Hippy Dipsy. Object has improper shape. Not a correct object. Should not rise. Does so anyhow. People, tell me, people, tell me! Destroy or not destroy? This is an improper object It should fall, not rise. Coming out of the Hippy Dipsy.'

A firm click shut off the robot's chatter. A well-shaped woman took over. From the nature of her work and the lithe, smooth tread with which she walked, Casher O'Neill suspected that she was of cat origin, but there was nothing in her dress or in her manner to show, that she was underpeople.

The woman in the picture lighted a screen.

She moved her hands in the air in front of her, like a blind person feeling his way through open day.

The picture on the inner screen came to resolution.

A face showed in it.

What a face! thought Casher O'Neill, and he heard the other people around him in the viewing room.

The horse!

Imagine a face like that of a newborn cat, thought Casher. Mizzer is full of cats. But imagine the face with a huge mouth, with big yellow teeth - a nose long beyond imagination. Imagine eyes which look friendly. In the picture they were rolling back and forth with exertion, but even there - when they did not feel observed - there was nothing hostile about the set of the eyes. They were tame, companionable eyes. Two ridiculous ears stood high, and a little tuft of golden hair showed on the crest of the head between the ears.

The viewed scene was comical, too. The cat-woman was as astonished as the viewers. It was lucky that she had touched the emergency switch, so that she not only saw the horse, but had recorded herself and her own actions while bringing him into view.

Genevieve whispered across the chest of the Hereditary Dictator: 'Later we found he was a palomino pony. That's a very special kind of horse. And Perino had made him immortal, or almost immortal.'

'Sh-h!' said her uncle.

The screen-within-the-screen showed the cat-woman waving her hands in the air some more. The view broadened.

The horse had four hands and no legs, or four legs and no hands, whichever way you want to count them.

The horse was fighting his way up a narrow cleft of rubies which led out of the Hippy Dipsy. He panted heavily. The oxygen bottles on his sides swung wildly as he clambered. He must have seen something, perhaps the image of the cat-woman, because he said a word:

Whay-yay-yay-yay-whay-yay!

The cat-woman in the nearer picture spoke very distinctly:

'Give your name, age, species and authority for being on this planet.' She spoke clearly and with the utmost possible authority.

The horse obviously heard her. His ears tipped forward. But his reply was the same as before:

Whay-yay-yay!

Casher O'Neill realized that he had followed the mood of the picture and had seen the horse the way that the people on Pontoppidan would have seen him. On second thought, the horse was nothing special, by the standards of the Twelve Niles or the Little Horse Market in the city of Kaheer. It was an old pony stallion, no longer fit for breeding and probably not for riding either. The hair had whitened among the gold; the teeth were worn. The animal showed many injuries and burns. Its only use was to be killed, cut up and fed to the racing dogs. But he said nothing to the people around him. They were still spellbound by the picture.

The cat-woman repeated:

'Your name isn't Whayayay. Identify yourself properly; name first.'

The horse answered her with the same word in a higher key.

Apparently forgetting that she had recorded herself as well, as the emergency screen, the cat-woman said, 'Til call real people if you' don't answer! They'll be annoyed at being bothered.'

The horse rolled his eyes at her and said nothing.

The cat-woman pressed an emergency button on the side of the room. One could not see the other communication screen which lighted up, but her end of the conversation was plain.

'I want an ornithopter. Big one. Emergency.'

A mumble from the side screen.

'To go to the Hippy Dipsy. There's an underperson there, iind he's in so much trouble that he won't talk.' From the screen beside her, the horse seemed to have understood the sense of the message, if not the words, because he repeated:

Whay-yay-whay-yay-yay!

'See,' said the cat-woman to the person in the other screen, 'that's what he's doing. It's obviously an emergency.'

The voice from the other screen came through, tinny and remote by double recording:

'Fool, yourself, cat-woman! Nobody can fly an ornithopter into a dipsy. Tell your silly friend to go back to the floor of the dipsy and we'll pick him up by spare rocket.'

Whay-yay-yay! said the horse impatiently.

'He's not my friend,' said the cat-woman with brisk annoyance. 'I just discovered him a couple of minutes ago. He's asking for help. Any idiot can see that, even if we don't know his language.'

The picture snapped off.

The next scene showed tiny human figures working with searchlights at the top of an immeasurably high cliff. Here and there, the beam of the searchlight caught the cliff face; the translucent faceted material of the cliff looked almost like rows of eerie windows, their lights snapping on and off, as the searchlight moved.

Far down there was a red glow. Fire came from inside the mountain.

Even with telescopic lenses the cameraman could not get the close-up of the glow. On one side there was the figure of the horse, his four arms stretched at impossible angles as he held himself firm in the crevasse; on the other side of the fire there were the even tinier figures of men, labouring to fit some sort of sling to reach the horse.

For some odd reason having to do with the techniques of recording, the voices came through very plainly, even the heavy, tired breathing of the old horse. Now and then he uttered one of the special horse-words which seemed to be the limit of his vocabulary. He was obviously watching the men, and was firmly persuaded of their friendliness to him. His large, tamei yellow eyes rolled wildly in the light of the searchlight and every time the horse looked down, he seemed to shudder. Jp

Casher O'Neill found this entirely understandable. The bottom of the Hippy Dipsy was nowhere in sight; the horse even with nothing more than the enlarged fingernails of his middle fingers to help him climb, had managed to get about four of the six kilometres' height of the cliff face behind him.

The voice of a tiger-man sounded clearly from among the shift of men, underpeople and robots who were struggling on the face of the cliff.

'It's a gamble, but not much of a gamble. I weigh six hundred kilos myself, and, do you know, I don't think I've ever had to use my full strength since I was a kitten. I know that I can jump across the fire and help that thing be more comfortable. I can even tie a rope around him so that he won't slip and fall after all the work we've done. And the work he's done, too,' added the tiger-man grimly. 'Perhaps I can just take him in my arms and jump back with him. It will be perfectly safe if you have a safety rope around each of us. After all, I never saw a less prehensile creature in my life. You can't call those fingers of his "fingers." They look like little boxes of bone, designed for running around and not much good for anything else.'

There was a murmur of other voices and then the command of the supervisor. 'Go ahead.'

No one was prepared for what happened next.

The cameraman got the tiger-man right in the middle of his frame, showing the attachment of one rope around the tiger-man's broad waist. The tiger-man was a modified type whom the authorities had not bothered to put into human cosmetic form. He still had his ears on top of his head, yellow and black fur over his face, huge incisors overlapping his lower jaw and enormous antenna-like whiskers sticking out from his moustache. He must have been thoroughly modified inside, however, because his temperament was calm, friendly and even a little humorous; he must have had a carefully re-done mouth, because the utterance of human speech came to him clearly and without distortion.

He jumped - a mighty jump, right through the top edges of the flame.

The horse saw him.

The horse jumped too, almost in the same moment, also through the top of the flame, going the other way.

The horse had feared the tiger-man more than he did the cliff.

The horse landed right in the group of workers. He tried

not to hurt them with his flailing limbs, but he did knock one man - a true man, at that - off the cliff. The man's scream faded as he crashed into the impenetrable darkness below.

The robots were quick. Having no emotions except on, off, and high, they did not get excited. They had the horse trussed and, before the true men and underpeople had ensured their footing, they had signalled the crane operator at the top of the cliff. The horse, his four arms swinging limply, disappeared upward.

The tiger-man jumped back through the flames to the nearer ledge. The picture went off.

In the viewing room, the Hereditary Dictator Philip Vincent stood up. He stretched, looking around.

Genevieve looked at Casher O'Neill expectantly.

'That's the story,' said the Dictator mildly. 'Now you solve it.'

'Where is the horse now?' said Casher O'Neill.

'In the hospital, of course. My niece can take you to see him.'

### III

After a short, painful and very thorough peeping of his own mind by the Hereditary Dictator, Casher O'Neill and Genevieve set off for the hospital in which the horse was being kept in bed. The people of Pontoppidan had not known what else to do with him, so they had placed him, under strong sedation and were trying to feed him with sugar-water compounds going directly into his veins. Genevieve told Casher that the horse was wasting away.

They walked to the hospital over amethyst pebbles.

Instead of wearing his spacesuit, Casher wore a surface helmet which enriched his oxygen. His hosts had not counted on his getting spells of uncontrollable itching from the sharply reduced atmospheric pressure. He did not dare mention the matter, because he was still hoping to get the green ruby as a weapon in his private war for the liberation of the Twelve Niles from the rule of Colonel Wedder. Whenever the itching became less than excruciating, he enjoyed the walk and the company of the slight, beautiful girl who accompanied him across the fields of jewels to the hospital. (In later years, he sometimes wondered what might have happened. Was the itching a part of his destiny, which saved him for the freedom of the city of Kaheer and the planet Mizzer? Might not the innocent brilliant loveliness of the girl have otherwise tempted him to forswear his duty and stay forever on Pontoppidan?)

The girl wore a new kind of cosmetic for outdoor walking - a warm peach-hued powder which let the natural pink of her cheeks show through. Her eyes, he saw, were a living, deep grey; her eyelashes, long; her smile, innocently provocative beyond all ordinary belief. It was a wonder that the Hereditary Dictator had not had to stop duels and murders between young men vying for her favour.



They finally reached the hospital, just as Casher O'Neill thought he could stand it no longer and would have to ask Genevieve for some kind of help or carriage to get indoors and away from the frightful itching.

The building was underground.

The entrance was sumptuous. Diamonds and rubies, the size of building-bricks on Mizzer, had been set to frame the doorway, which was apparently enamelled steel. Kuraf at his most lavish had never wasted money on anything like this door-frame. Genevieve saw his glance.

'It did cost a lot of credits. We had to bring a blind artist all the way from Olympia to paint that enamel-work. The poor man. He spent most of his time trying to steal extra gem-stones when he should have known that we pay justly and never allow anyone to get away with stealing.'

'What do you do?' asked Casher O'Neill. .

'We cut thieves up in space, just at the edge of the atmosphere. \We have more manned boats in orbit than any other planet I know of. Maybe Old North Australia has more, but, then, nobody ever gets close enough to Old North Australia to come back alive and tell.'

They went on into the hospital.

A respectful chief surgeon insisted on keeping them in the office and entertaining themjsvith tea and confectionery, when

they both wanted to go and see the horse; common politeness prohibited their pushing through. Finally they, got past the ceremony and into the room in which the horse was kept.

Close up, they could see how much he had suffered. There were cuts and abrasures over almost all of his body. One of his hooves - the doctor told them that was the correct name, hoof, for the big middle fingernail on which he walked - was split; the doctor had put a cadmium-silver bar through it. The horse lifted his head when they entered, but he saw that they were just more people, not horsey people, so he put his head down, very patiently.

'What's the prospect, doctor?' asked Casher O'Neill, turning away from the animal.

'Could I ask you, sir, a foolish question first?'

Surprised, Casher could only say yes.

'You're an O'Neill. Your uncle is Kuraf. How do you happen to be called "Casher"?''

'That's simple,' laughed Casher. 'This is my young-man-name. On Mizzer, everybody gets a baby name, which nobody uses. Then he gets a nickname. Then he gets a young-man-name, based on some characteristic or some friendly joke, until-he picks out his\* career. When he enters his profession, he picks out his own career name. If I liberate Mizzer and overthrow Colonel Wedder, I'll have to think up a suitable career name for myself.'

'But why "Casher," sir?' persisted the doctor.

'When I was a little boy and people asked me what I wanted, I always asked for cash. I guess that contrasted with my uncle's wastefulness, so they called me Casher.'

' But what is cash ? One of your crops ?'

It was Casher's turn to look amazed. ' Cash is money. Paper credits. People pass them back and forth when they buy things.'

' Here • on Pontoppidan, all the money belongs to me. All of it,' said Genevieve. 'My uncle is trustee for me. But I have never been allowed to touch it or to spend it. It's all just planet business.'

The doctor blinked respectfully. ' Now this- horse, sir, if you will pardon my asking about your name, is a very strange

case. Physiologically he is a pure earth type. He is suited only for a vegetable diet, but otherwise he is a very close relative of man. He has a single stomach and a very large cone-shaped heart. That's where the trouble is. The heart is in bad condition. He is dying.'

'Dying?' cried Genevieve.

'That's the sad, horrible part,' said the doctor. 'He is dying but he cannot die. He could go on like this for many years. Perino wasted enough stropn on this animal to make a planet immortal. Now the animal is worn out but cannot die.'

Casher O'Neill let out a long, low, ululating whistle. Everybody in the room jumped. He disregarded them. It was the whistle he had used near the stables, back among the Twelve Niles, when he wanted to call a horse.

The horse knew it. The large head lifted. The eyes rolled at him so imploringly that he expected tears to fall from them, even though he was pretty sure that horses could not lachry-mate.

He squatted on the floor, close to the horse's head, with a hand on its mane.

'Quick,' he murmured to the surgeon. 'Get me a piece of sugar and an underperson-telepath. The underperson-tele-path must not be of carnivorous origin.'

The doctor looked stupid. He snapped 'Sugar' at an assistant but he squatted down next to Casher O'Neill and said, 'You will have to repeat that about an underperson. This is not an underperson hospital at all. We have very few of them here. The horse is here only by command of His Excellency Philip Vincent, who said that the horse of Perino should be given the best of all possible care. He even told me,' said the doctor, 'that if anything wrong happened to this horse, I would ride patrol for it for the next eighty years. So I'll do what I can. Do you find me too talkative? Some people do. What kind of an underperson do you want?'

'I need/ said Casher, very calmly, 'a telepathic underperson, both to find out what this horse wants and to tell the horse that I am here to help-him. Horses are vegetarians and

they do not like meat-eaters. Do you have a vegetarian under-person around the hospital?'

'We used to have some squirrel-men,' said the chief surgeon, 'but when we changed the air circulating system the squirrel-rnen went away with the old equipment. I think they went to a mine. We have tiger-men, cat-men, and my secretary is a wolf.'

'Oh, no!' said Casher O'Neill. 'Can you imagine a sick horse confiding in a wolf?'

'It's no more than you are doing,' said the surgeon, very softly, glancing up to see if Genevieve were in hearing range, and apparently judging that she was not. 'The Hereditary Dictators here sometimes cut suspicious guests to pieces on their way off the planet. That is, unless the guests are licensed, regular traders. You are not. You might be a spy, planning to rob us. How do I know? I wouldn't give a diamond chip for your chances of being alive next week. What do you want to do about the horse? That might please the Dictator. And you might live.'

Casher O'Neill was so staggered by the confidence of the surgeon that he squatted there thinking about himself, not about the patient. The horse licked him, seemingly sensing that he needed solace.

The surgeon had an idea. 'Horses and dogs used to go together, didn't they, back in the old days of Manhome, when all the people lived on planet Earth?'

'Of course,' said Casher. 'We still run them together in hunts on Mizzer, but under these new laws of the Instrumentality we've run out of underpeople-criminals to hunt.'

'I have a good dog,' said the chief surgeon. 'She talks pretty well, but she is so sympathetic that she upsets the patients by loving them too much. I have her down in the second under-basement tending the dish-sterilizing machinery.'

'Bring her up,' said Casher in a whisper.

He Remembered that he did not need to whisper about this, so he stood up and spoke to Genevieve:

'They have found a good dog-telepath who may reach through to the mind of the horse. It may give us the answer.'

She put her hand on his forearm gently, with the approbatory gesture of a princess. Her fingers dug into his flesh. Was

she wishing him well against her uncle's habitual treachery, or was this merely the impulse of a kind young girl who knew nothing of the way the world was run ?

#### IV

The interview went extremely well.

The dog-woman was almost perfectly humaniform. She looked like a tired, cheerful, worn-out old woman, not valuable enough to be given the life-prolonging santaclara drug called stroon. Work had been her life and she had had plenty of it. Casher O'Neill felt a twinge of envy when he realized that happiness goes by the petty chances of life and not by the large destiny. This dog-woman, with her haggard face and her stringy grey hair, had more love, happiness and sympathy than Kural had found with his pleasures, Colonel Wedder with his powers, or himself with his crusade. Why did life do that? Was there no justice, ever? Why should a worn-out worthless old underwoman be happy when he was not?

'Never mind,' she said, 'you'll get over it and then you will be happy.'

'Over what?' he said. 'I didn't say anything.'

'I'm not going to say it,' she retorted, meaning that she was telepathic. 'You're a prisoner of yourself. Some day you will escape to unimportance and happiness. You're a good man. You're trying to save yourself, but you really like this horse.'

'Of course I do,' said Casher O'Neill. 'He's a brave old horse, climbing out of that hell to get back to people.'

When he said the word hell her eyes widened, but she said nothing. In his mind, he saw the sign of a fish scrawled on a dark wall and he felt her think at him. So you too know something of the 'dark wonderful knowledge' which is not yet to be revealed to all mankind?

He thought a cross back at her and then turned his thinking to the horse, lest their telepathy be monitored and strange punishments await them both.

She spoke in words, 'Shall we link ?'

'Link,' he said. .

Genevieve stepped up. Her clear-cut, pretty, sensitive face was alight with excitement. 'Could I - could I be cut in?'

'Why not?' said the dog-woman, glancing at him. He nodded. The three of them linked hands and then the dog-woman put her left hand on the forehead of the old horse.

The sand splashed beneath their feet as they ran towards Kaheer. The delicious pressure of a man's body was on their backs. The red sky of Mizzer gleamed over them. There came the shout:

'I'm a horse, I'm a horse, I'm a horse!'

'You're from Mizzer,' thought Casher O'Neill, 'from Kaheer itself!'

'I don't know names,' thought the horse, 'but you're from my land. The land, the good land.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Dying,' thought the horse. 'Dying for hundreds and thousands of sundowns. The old one brought me. No riding, no running, no people. Just the old one and the small ground. I have been dying since I came here.'

Casher O'Neill got a glimpse of Perino sitting and watching the horse, unconscious of the cruelty and loneliness which he had inflicted on his large pet by making it immortal and then giving it no work to do.

'Do you know what dying is?'

Thought the horse promptly: 'Certainly. No-horse.'

'Do you know what life is?'

'Yes. Being a horse.'

'I'm not a horse,' thought Casher O'Neill, 'but I am alive.'

'Don't complicate things,' thought the horse at him, though Casher realized it was his own mind and not the horse's which supplied the words.

'Do you want to die?'

'To no-horse? Yes, if this room, forever, is the end of things.'

'What would you like better?' thought Genevieve, and her thoughts were like a cascade of newly-minted silver coins falling into all their minds: brilliant, clean, bright, innocent.

The answer was quick: 'Dirt beneath my hooves, and wet air again, and a man on my back.'

The dog-woman interrupted: 'Dear horse, you know me?'

'You're a dog,' thought the horse. 'Goo-oo-oo-ood dog!'

'Right,' thought the happy old slattern, 'and I can tell these people how to take care of you. Sleep now, and when you waken you will be on the way to happiness.'

She thought the command sleep so powerfully at the old horse that Casher O'Neill and Genevieve both started to fall unconscious and had to be caught by the hospital attendants.

As they re-gathered their wits, she was finishing her commands to the surgeon. '- and put about 40 per cent supplementary oxygen into the air. He'll have to have a real person to ride him, but some of your orbiting sentries would rather ride a horse up there than do nothing. You can't repair the heart. Don't try it. Hypnosis will take care of the sand of Mizzer. Just load his mind with one or two of the drama-cubes packed full of desert adventure. Now, don't you worry about me. I'm not going to claim any credit, and I'm not going to give you any more suggestions. People-man, you!' she laughed. 'You can forgive us dogs anything, except for being right. It makes you feel inferior for a few minutes. Never mind. I'm going back downstairs to my dishes. I love them, I really do. Good-bye, you pretty thing,' she said to Genevieve. 'And good-bye, wanderer! Good luck to you,' she said to Casher O'Neill. 'You will remain miserable as long as you seek justice, but when you give up, righteousness will come to you and you will be happy. Don't worry. You're young and it won't hurt you to suffer a few more years. Youth is an extremely curable disease, isn't it?'

She gave them a full curtsy, like one Lady of the Instrumentality saying good-bye to another. Her wrinkled old face was lit up with smiles, in which happiness was mixed with a tiniest bit of playful mockery.

'Don't mind me, boss,' she said to the surgeon. 'Dishes, here I come.' She swept out of the room.

'See what I mean?' said the surgeon. 'She's so horribly happy \ How can anyone run, a hospital if a dishwasher gets

all over the place, making people happy ? We'd be out of jobs. Her ideas were good, though.'

They were. They worked. Down to the last letter of the dog-woman's instructions.

There was argument from the council. Casher O'Neill went along to see them in session.

One councillor, Bashnack, was particularly vociferous in objecting to any action concerning the horse. 'Sire,' he cried, 'sire! We don't even know the name of the animal! I must protest this action, when we don't know —'

'That we don't,' assented Philip Vincent. 'But what does a name have to do with it?'

'The horse has no identity, not even the identity of an animal. It is just a pile of meat left over from the estate of Perino. We should kill the horse and eat the meat ourselves. Or, if we do not want to eat the meat, then we should sell it off-planet. There are plenty of peoples around here, who would pay a pretty nice price for genuine earth meat. Pay no attention to me, sire! You are the Hereditary Dictator and I am nothing. I have no power, no property, nothing. I am at your mercy. All I can tell you is to follow your own best interests. I have only a voice. You cannot reproach me for using my voice when I am trying to help you, sire, can you? That's all I am doing, helping you. If you spend any credits at all on this animal you will be doing wrong, wrong, wrong. We are not a rich planet. We have to pay for expensive defences just in order to stay alive. We cannot even afford to pay for air that our children can go out and play. And you want to spend money on a horse which cannot even talk! I tell you, sire, this council is going to vote against you, just to protect your own interests and the interests of the Honourable Gerievieve as Eventual Title-holder of all Pontoppidan. You are not going to get away with this, sire! We are helpless before your power, but we will insist on advising you —'

'Hear! Hear!' cried several of the councillors, not the least dismayed by the slight frown of the Hereditary Dictator.

'I will take the word,' said Philip Vincent himself.

Several had had their hands raised, asking for the floor. One

obstinate man kept his hand up even when the Dictator announced his intention to speak. Philip Vincent took note of him, too:

'You can talk when I am through, if you want to.' He looked calmly around the room, smiled imperceptibly at his niece, gave Casher O'Neill the briefest of nods, and then announced:

'Gentlemen, it's not the horse which is on trial. It's Pontoppidan. It's we who are trying ourselves. And before whom are we trying ourselves, gentlemen? Each of us is before that most awful of courts, his own conscience.

'If we kill that horse, gentlemen, we will not be doing the horse a great wrong. He is an old animal, and I do not think that he will mind dying very much, now that he is away from the ordeal of loneliness which he feared more than death. After all, he has already had his great triumph - the climb up the cliff of gems, the jump across the volcanic vent, the rescue by people whom he wanted to find. The horse has done so well that he is really beyond us. We can help him, a little, or we can hurt him, a little; beside the immensity of his accomplishment, we cannot really do very much either way.

'No, gentlemen, we are not judging the case of the horse. We are judging space. What happens to man when he moves out into the Big Nothing? Do we leave Old Earth behind? Why did civilization fall? Will it fall again? Is civilization a gun or a blaster or a laser or a rocket? Is it even a planoform-ing ship or a pinlighter at his work? You know as well as I do, gentlemen, that civilization is not what we can do. If it had been, there would have been no fall of Ancient Man. Even in the Dark Ages they had a few fusion bombs, they could make some small guided missiles and they even had weapons like the Kaskaskia Effect, which we have never been able to rediscover. The Dark Ages weren't dark because people lost techniques or science. They were daik'because

people lost people. It's a lot of work to be human and it's work which must be kept up, or it begins to fade. Gentlemen, the horse judges us.

'Take the word, gentlemeu. "Civilization" is itself a lady's

word. There were female writers in a country called France who made that word popular in the third century before space travel. To be "civilized" meant for people to be tame, to be kind, to be polished. If we kill this horse, we are wild. If we treat the horse gently, we are tame. Gentlemen, I have only one witness and that witness will utter only one word. Then you shall vote and vote freely.'

There was a murmur around the table at this announcement. Philip Vincent obviously enjoyed the excitement he had created. He let them murmur on for a full minute or two before he slapped the table gently and said, 'Gentlemen, the witness. Are you ready ?'

There was a murmur of assent. Bashnack tried to say, 'It's still a question of public funds!' but his neighbours shushed him. The table became quiet. All faces turned towards the Hereditary Dictator.

'Gentlemen, the testimony. Genevieve, is-this what you yourself told me to say? Is civilization always a woman's choice first, and only later a man's ?'

'Yes,' said Genevieve, with a happy, open smile.

The meeting broke up amid laughter and applause.

## V

A month later Casher O'Neill sat in a room in a medium-size planofforming liner. They were out of reach of Pontoppidan. The Hereditary Dictator had not changed his mind and cut him down with green beams. Casher had strange memories, not bad ones for a young man.

He remembered Genevieve weeping in the garden.

'I'm romantic,' she cried, and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of his cape. 'Legally I'm the owner of this planet, rich, powerful, free. But I can't leave here. I'm too important. I can't marry whom I want to marry. I'm too important. My uncle can't do what he wants to do - he's Hereditary Dictator and he always must do what the Council decides after weeks of chatter. I can't love you. You're a prince and a wanderer, with travels and battles and justice and strange things ahead of you. I can't go. I'm too important. I'm too sweet! I'm too

nice; I hate, hate, hate myself sometimes. Please, Casher, could you take a flier and run away with me into space ?'

'Your uncle's lasers could cut us to pieces before we got out.'

He held her hands and looked gently down into her face. At this moment he did not feel the fierce, aggressive, happy glow which an able young man feels in the presence of a beautiful and tender young woman. He felt something much stranger, softer, quieter - an emotion very sweet to the mind and restful to the nerves. It was the simple, clear compassion of one person for another. He took a chance for her sake, because the 'dark knowledge' was wonderful but very dangerous in the wrong hands.

He took both her beautiful little hands in his, so that she looked up at him and realized that he was not going to kiss her. Something about his stance made her realize that she was being offered a more precious gift than a sky-lit romantic kiss in a garden. Besides, it was just touching helmets.

He said to her, with passion and kindness in his voice:

'You remember that dog-woman, the one who works with the dishes in the hospital ?' •

'Of course. She was good and bright and happy, and helped us all.'

'Go work with her, now and then. Ask her nothing. Tell her nothing. Just work with her at her machines. Tell her I said so. Happiness is catching. You might catch it; I think I did myself, a little.'

'I think I understand you,' said Genevieve softly. 'Casher, good-bye and good, good luck to you. My uncle expects us.'

Together they went back into the palace.

Another memory was the farewell to Philip Vincent, the Hereditary Dictator of Pontoppidan. The calm, clean-shaven, ruddy, well-fleshed face looked at him with benign regard. Casher O'Neill felt more respect for this man when he realized that ruthlessness is often the price of peace, and vigilance the price of wealth.-

'You're a clever young man. A very clever young man. You may win back the power of your uncle Kuraf.'

'I don't want that power!' cried Casher O'Neill. 'I have advice for you,' said the Hereditary Dictator, 'and it is good advice or I would not be here to give it. I have learned the political arts well: otherwise I would not be alive. Do not refuse power. Just take it and use it wisely. Do not hide from your wicked uncle's name. Obliterate it. Take the name yourself and rule so well that, in a few decades, no one will remember your uncle. Just you. You are young. You can't win now. But it is in your fate to grow and to triumph. I know it. I am good at these things. I have given "you your weapon. I am not tricking you. It is packed safely and you may leave with it.'

Casher O'Neill was breathing softly, believing it all, and trying to think of words to thank the stout, powerful older man when the dictator added, with a little laugh in his voice:

'Thank you, too, for saving me money. You've lived up to your name, Casher.'

'Saved you money?'

'The alfalfa. The horse wanted alfalfa.'

'Oh, that idea!' said Casher O'Neill. 'It was obvious. I don't deserve much credit for that.'

"I didn't think of it," said the Hereditary Dictator, "and my staff didn't either. We're not stupid. That shows you are bright. You realized that Perino must have had a food converter to keep the horse alive in the Hippy Dipsy. All we did was set it to alfalfa and we saved ourselves the cost of a shipload of horse food twice a year. We're glad to save that credit. We're well off here, but we don't like to waste things. You may bow to me now, and leave."

Casher O'Neill had done so, with one last glance at the lovely Genevieve, standing fragile and beautiful beside her uncle's chair.

His last memory was very recent.

He had paid two hundred thousand credits for it, right on this liner. He had found the Stop-Captain, bored now that the ship was in flight and the Go-Captain had taken over.

'Can you get me a telepathic fix on a horse?'

'What's a horse?' said the Go-Captain. 'Where is it? Do you want to pay for it?'

'A horse,' said Casher O'Neill patiently, 'is an unmodified earth animal. Not underpeople. A big one, but quite intelligent. This one is in orbit right around Pontoppidan. And I will pay the usual price.'

'A million Earth credits,' said the Stop-Captain.

'Ridiculous!' cried Casher O'Neill.

They settled on two hundred thousand credits for a good fix and ten thousand for the use of the ship's equipment, even if there were failure. It was not a failure. The technician was a snake-man: he was deft, cool, and superb at his job. In only a few minutes he passed the headset to Casher O'Neill, saying politely, 'This is it, I think.'

It was. He had reached right into the horse's mind.

The endless sands of Mizzer swam before Casher O'Neill. The long lines of the Twelve Niles converged in the distance. He galloped steadily and powerfully. There were other horses near by, other riders, other things, but he himself was conscious only of the beat of the hooves against the strong moist sand, the firmness of the appreciative rider upon his back. Dimly, as in a hallucination, Casher O'Neill could also see the little orbital ship in which the old horse cantered in mid-air, with an amused cadet sitting on his back. Up there, with no weight, the old worn-out heart would be good for many, many years. Then he saw the horse's paradise again. The flash of hooves threatened to overtake him, but he outran them all. There was the expectation of a stable at the end, a rubdown, good succulent green food, and the glimpse of a filly in the morning.

The horse of Pontoppidan felt extremely wise. He had trusted people - people, the source of all kindness, all cruelty, all power among the stars. And the people had been good. The horse felt very much horse again. Casher felt the old body course along the river's edge like a dream of power, like a completion of service, like an ultimate fulfilment of companionship.



## On the Storm Planet

"At two seventy-five in the morning," said the Administrator to Casher O'Neill, "you will kill this girl with a knife. At two seventy-seven, a fast groundcar will pick you up and bring you back here. Then the power cruiser will be yours. Is that a deal?"

He held out his hand as if he wanted Casher O'Neill to shake it then and there, making some kind of an oath or bargain.

Casher did not slight the man, so he picked up his glass and said, "Let's drink to the deal first!"

The Administrator's quick, restless, darting eyes looked Casher up and down very suspiciously. The warm sea-wet air blew through the room. The Administrator seemed wary, suspicious, alert, but underneath his slight hostility there was another emotion, of which Casher could perceive just the edge. Fatigue with its roots in bottomless despair: despair set deep in irrecoverable fatigue?

That other emotion, which Casher could barely discern, was very strange indeed. On all his voyages back and forth through the inhabited worlds, Casher had met many odd types of men and women. He had never seen anything like this Administrator before—brilliant, erratic, boastful. His title was "Mr. Commissioner" and he was an ex-Lord of the Instrumentality on this planet of Henriada, where the population had dropped from six hundred million persons down to some forty thousand. Indeed, local government had disappeared into

limbo, and this odd man, with the tide of Administrator, was the only law and civil audiority which the planet knew.

Nevertheless, he had a surplus power cruiser and Casher O'Neill was determined to get that cruiser as a part of his long plot to return to his home planet of Mizzer and to unseat the usurper, Colonel Wedder.

The Administrator stared sharply, wearily at Casher and then he too lifted his glass. The green twilight colored his liquor and made it seem like some strange poison. It was only Earth byegarr, though a little on the strong side.

With a sip, only a sip, the older man relaxed a little. "You may be out to trick me, young man. You may think that I am an old fool running an abandoned planet. You may even be thinking that killing this girl is some kind of a crime. It is not a crime at all. I am the Administrator of Henriada and I have ordered that girl killed every year for the last eighty years. She isn't even a girl, to start with. Just an underperson. Some kind of an animal turned into a domestic servant. I can even appoint you a deputy sheriff. Or chief of detectives. That might be better. I haven't had a chief of detectives for a hundred years and more. You are my chief of detectives. Go in tomorrow. The house is not hard to find. It's the biggest and best house left on this planet. Go in tomorrow morning. Ask for her master and be sure that you use the correct title: The Mister and Owner Murray Madigan. The robots will tell you to keep out. If you persist, she will come to the door. That's when you will stab her through the heart, right there in the doorway. My groundcar will race up one metric minute later. You jump in and come back here. We've been through this before. Why don't you agree? Don't you know who I am?"

"I know perfectly well"—Casher O'Neill smiled—"who you are, Mr. Commissioner and Administrator. You are the honorable Rankin Meiklejohn, once of Earth Two. After all, the Instrumentality itself gave me a permit to land on this planet on private business. They knew who I was too, and what I wanted. There's something funny about all this. Why should you give me a power cruiser—the best ship, you yourself say, in your whole fleet—just for killing one modified animal which looks and talks like a girl? Why me? Why the visitor? Why the man from off-world? Why should you care whether this particular underperson is killed or not? If you've given the order for her death eighty times in eighty years, why hasn't it been carried out long ago? Mind you, Mr. Administrator, I'm not saying no. I want that cruiser. I want it very much indeed. But what's the deal? What's the trick? Is it the house you want?" "Beauregard? No, I don't want Beauregard. Old Madigan can

rot in it for all that I care. It's between Ambilox and Mottile, on the Gulf of Esperanza. You can't miss it. The road is good. You could drive yourself there."

"What is it, then?" Casher's voice had an edge of persistence to it.

The Administrator's response was singular indeed. He filled his huge inhaler glass with the potent byegarr. He stared over the full glass at Casher O'Neill as if he were an enemy. He drained the glass. Casher knew that that much liquor, taken suddenly, could kill the normal human being.

The Administrator did not fall over dead.

He did not even become noticeably more drunk.

His face turned red and his eyes almost popped out, as the harsh 160-proof liquor took effect, but he still did not say anything. He just stared at Casher. Casher, who had learned in his long exile to play many games, just stared back.

The Administrator broke first.

He leaned forward and burst into a birdlike shriek of laughter. The laughter went on and on until it seemed that the man had hogged all the merriment in the galaxy. Casher snorted a little laugh along with the man, more out of nervous reflex than anything else, but he waited for the Administrator to stop laughing.

The Administrator finally got control of himself. With a broad grin and a wink at Casher, he poured himself four fingers more of the byegarr into his glass, drank it down as if he had had a sip of cream, and then—only very slightly unsteady—stood up, came over and patted Casher on the shoulder.

"You're a smart boy, my lad. I'm cheating you. I don't care whether the power cruiser is there or not. I'm giving you something which has no value at all to me. Who's ever going to take a power cruiser off this planet? It's ruined. It's abandoned. And so am I. Go ahead. You can have the cruiser. For nothing. Just take it. Free. Unconditionally."

This time it was Casher who leaped to his feet and stared down into the face of the feverish, wanton little man.

"Thank you, Mr. Administrator!" he cried, trying to catch the hand of the administrator so as to seal the deal.

Rankin Meiklejohn looked awfully sober for a man with that much liquor in him. He held his right hand behind his back and would not shake.

"You can have the cruiser, all right. No terms. No conditions. No deal. It's yours. But kill that girl first! Just as a favor to me. I've been a good host. I like you. I want to do you a favor. Do me one. Kill that girl. At two seventy-five in the morning. Tomorrow."

"Why?" asked Casher, his voice loud and cold, trying to wring some sense out of the chattering man.

"Just—just—just because I say so..." stammered the Administrator.

"Why?" asked Casher, cold and loud again.

The liquor suddenly took over inside the Administrator. He groped back for the arm of his chair, sat down suddenly and then looked up at Casher. He was very drunk indeed. The strange emotion, the elusive fatigue-despair, had vanished from his face. He spoke straightforwardly. Only the excessive care of his articulation would have shown a passerby that he was drunk.

"Because, you fool," said Meiklejohn, "those people, more than eighty in eighty years, that I have sent to Beauregard with orders to kill the girl... Those people—" he repeated, and stopped speaking, clamping his lips together.

"What happened to them?" asked Casher calmly and persuasively.

The Administrator grinned again and seemed to be on the edge of one of his wild laughs.

"What happened?" shouted Casher at him.

"I don't know," said the Administrator. "For the life of me, I don't know. Not one of them ever came back."

"What happened to them? Did she kill them?" cried Casher.

"How would I know?" said the drunken man, getting visibly more sleepy.

"Why didn't you report it?"

This seemed to rouse the Administrator. "Report that one little girl had stopped me, the planetary Administrator? Just one little girl, and not even a human being! They would have sent help, and laughed at me. By the Bell, young man, I've been laughed at enough! I need no help from outside. You're going in there tomorrow morning. At two seventy-five, with a knife. And a groundcar waiting."

He stared fixedly at Casher and then suddenly fell asleep in his chair. Casher called to the robots to show him to his room; they tended to the master as well.

## II

The next morning at two seventy-five sharp, nothing happened. Casher walked down the baroque corridor, looking into beautiful barren rooms. All the doors were open.

Through one door he heard a sick deep bubbling snore.

It was the Administrator, sure enough. He lay twisted in his bed. A small nursing machine was beside him, her white-enameled body only slightly rusty. She held up a mechanical hand for silence and somehow managed to make the gesture seem light, delicate and pretty, even from a machine.

Casher walked lightly back to his own room, where he ordered hotcakes, bacon and coffee. He studied a tornado through the armored glass of his window, while the robots prepared his food. The elastic trees clung to the earth with a fury which matched the fury of the wind. The trunk of the tornado reached like the nose of a mad elephant down into the gardens, but the flora fought back. A few animals whipped upward and out of sight. The tornado then came straight for the house, but did not damage it outside of making a lot of noise.

"We have two or three hundred of those a day," said a butler robot. "That is why we store all spacecraft underground and have no weather machines. It would cost more, the people said, to make this planet livable than the planet could possibly yield. The radio and news are in the library, sir. I do not think that the honorable Rankin Meiklejohn will wake until evening, say seven-fifty or eight o'clock."

"Can I go out?"

"Why not, sir? You are a true man. You do what you wish."

"I mean is it safe for me to go out?"

"Oh, no, sir! The wind would tear you apart or carry you away."

"Don't people ever go out?"

"Yes, sir. With groundcars or with automatic body armor. I have been told that if it weighs fifty tons or better, the person inside is safe. I would not know, sir. As you see, I am a robot. I was made here, though my brain was formed on Earth Two, and I have never been outside this house."

Casher looked at the robot. This one seemed unusually talkative. He chanced the opportunity of getting some more information.

"Have you ever heard of Beauregard?"

"Yes, sir. It is the best house on this planet. I have heard people say that it is the most solid building on Henriada. It belongs to the Mister and Owner Murray Madigan. He is an Old North Australian, a renunciant who left his home planet and came here when Henri-ada was a busy world. He brought all his wealth with him. The underpeople and robots say that it is a wonderful place on the inside."

"Have you seen it?"

"Oh, no, sir. I have never left this building."

"Does the man Madigan ever come here?"

The robot seemed to be trying to laugh, but did not succeed. He answered, very unevenly, "Oh, no, sir. He never goes anywhere."

"Can you tell me anything about the female who lives with him?"

"No sir," said the robot.

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Sir, it is not that. I know a great deal about her."

"Why can't you talk about her, then?"

"I have been commanded not to, sir."

"I am," said Casher O'Neill, "a true human being. I herewith countermand those orders. Tell me about her."

The robot's voice became formal and cold. "The orders cannot be countermanded, sir."

"Why not?" snapped Casher. "Are they the Administrator's?"

"No, sir."

"Whose, then?"

"Hers," said the robot softly, and left the room.

Ill 4

Casher O'Neill spent the rest of the day trying to get information; he obtained very little.

The Deputy Administrator was a young man who hated his chief. When Casher, who dined with him—the two of them having a poorly cooked state luncheon in a dining room which would have seated five hundred people—tried to come to the point by asking bluntly, "What do you know about Murray Madigan?" he got an answer which was blunt to the point of incivility. "Nothing."

"You never heard of him?" cried Casher.

"Keep your troubles to yourself, mister visitor," said the Deputy Administrator. "I've got to stay on this planet long enough to get promoted off. You can leave. You shouldn't have come."

"I have," said Casher, "an all-world pass from the Instrumental-ity."

"All right," said the young man. "That shows that you are more important than I am. Let's not discuss the matter. Do you like your lunch?"

Casher had learned diplomacy in his childhood, when he was the heir apparent to the dictatorship of Mizzer. When his horrible uncle, Kuraf, lost the rulership, Casher had approved of the coup by the Colonels Wedder and Gibna; but now Wedder was supreme and enforcing a period of terror and virtue. Casher thus knew courts and ceremony, big talk and small talk, and on this occasion

he let the small talk do. The young Deputy Administrator had only one ambition, to get off the planet Henriada and never to see or hear of Rankin Meiklejohn again.

Casher could understand the point.

Only one curious thing happened during dinner.

Toward the end, Casher slipped in the question, very informally: "Can underpeople give orders to robots?"

"Of course," said the young man. "That's one of the reasons we use underpeople. They have more initiative. They amplify our orders to robots on many occasions."

Casher smiled. "I didn't mean it quite that way. Could an un-derperson give an order to a robot which a real human being could not then countermand?"

The young man started to answer, even though his mouth was full of food. He was not a very polished young man. Suddenly he stopped chewing and his eyes grew wide. Then, with his mouth half full, he said, "You are trying to talk about this planet, I guess. You can't help it. You're on the track. Stay on the track, then. Maybe you will get out of it alive. I refuse to get mixed up with it, with you, with him and his hateful schemes. All I want to do is to leave when my time comes."

The young man resumed chewing, his eyes fixed steadfastly on his plate.

Before Casher could pass off the matter by making some casual remark, the butler robot stopped behind him and leaned over.

"Honorable sir, I heard your question. May I answer it?"

"Of course," said Casher softly.

"The answer, sir," said the butler robot, softly but clearly, "to your question is no, no, never. That is the general rule of the civilized worlds. But on this planet of Henriada, sir, the answer is yes."

"Why?" asked Casher.

"It is my duty, sir," said the robot butler, "to recommend to you this dish of fresh artichokes. I am not authorized to deal with other matters." \*\*

"Thank you," said Casher, straining a little to keep himself looking imperturbable. »

Nothing much happened that night, except that Meiklejohn got up long enough to get drunk all over again. Though he invited Casher to come and drink with him, he never seriously discussed the girl except for one outburst.

"Leave it till tomorrow. Fair and square. Open and aboveboard. Frank and honest. That's me. I'll take you around Beauregard myself. You'll see it's easy. A knife, eh? A traveled young man like you would know what to do with a knife. And a little girl too. Not

very big. Easy job. Don't give it another thought. Would you like some apple juice in your byegarr?"

Casher had taken three contraintoxicant pills before going to drink with the ex-Lord, but even at that he could not keep up with Meiklejohn. He accepted the dilution of apple juice gravely, gracefully and gratefully.

The little tornadoes stamped around the house. Meiklejohn, now launched into some drunken story of ancient injustices which had been done to him on other worlds, paid no attention to them. In the middle of the night, past nine-fifty in the evening, Casher woke alone in his chair, very stiff and uncomfortable. The robots must have had standing instructions concerning the Administrator, and had apparently taken him off to bed. Casher walked wearily to his own room, cursed the thundering ceiling and went to sleep again.

#### IV

The next day was very different indeed.

The Administrator was as sober, brisk and charming as if he had never taken a drink in his life.

He had the robots call Casher to join him at breakfast and said, by way of greeting, "I'll wager you thought I was drunk last night."

"Well..." said Casher.

"Planet fever. That's what it was. Planet fever. A bit of alcohol keeps it from developing too far. Let's see. It's three-sixty now. Could you be ready to leave by four?"

Casher frowned at his watch, which had the conventional twenty-four hours.

The Administrator saw the glance and apologized. "Sorry! My fault, a thousand times. I'll get you a metric watch right away. Ten hours a day, a hundred minutes an hour. We're very progressive here on Henriada."

He clapped his hands and ordered that a watch be taken to Casher's room, along with the watch-repairing robot to adjust it to Casher's body rhythms.

"Four, then," he said, rising briskly from the table. "Dress for a trip by groundcar. The servants will show you how."

There was a man already waiting in Casher's room. He looked like a plump, wise ancient Hindu, as shown in the archaeology books. He bowed pleasantly and said, "My name is Gosigo. I am a forgetty, settled on this planet, but for this day I am your guide and driver from this place to the mansion of Beauregard."

Forgetties were barely above underpeople in status. They were

persons convicted of various major crimes, to whom the courts of the worlds, or the Instrumentality, had allowed total amnesia instead of death or some punishment worse than death, such as the planet Shayol.

Casher looked at him curiously. The man did not carry with him the permanent air of bewilderment which Casher had noticed in many forgetties. Gosigo saw the glance and interpreted it.

"I'm well enough now, sir. And I am strong enough to break your back if I had the orders to do it."

"You mean damage my spine? What a hostile, unpleasant thing to do!" said Casher. "Anyhow, I rather think I could kill you first if you tried it. Whatever gave you such an idea?"

"The Administrator is always threatening people that he will have me do it to them."

"Have you ever really broken anybody's back?" asked Casher, looking Gosigo over very carefully and rejudging him. The man, though shorter than Casher, was luxuriously muscled; like many plump men, he looked pleasant on the outside but could be very formidable to an enemy.

Gosigo smiled briefly, almost happily. "Well, no, not exactly."

"Why haven't you? Does the Administrator always countermand his own orders? I should think that he would sometimes be too drunk to remember to do it."

"It's not that," said Gosigo.

"Why don't you, then?"

"I have other orders," said Gosigo, rather hesitantly. "Like the orders I have today. One set from the Administrator, one set from the Deputy Administrator, and a third set from an outside source."

"Who's the outside source?"

"She has told me not to explain just yet."

Casher stood stock still. "Do you mean who I think you mean?"

Gosigo nodded very slowly, pointing at the ventilator as though it might have a microphone in it.

"Can you tell me what your orders are?"

"Oh, certainly. The Administrator has told me to drive both himself and you to Beauregard, to take you to the door, to watch you stab the undergirl, and to call the second groundcar to your rescue. The Deputy Administrator has told me to take you to Beau-regard and to let you do as you please, bringing you back here by way of Ambiloxi if you happen to come out of Mr. Murray's house alive."

"And the other orders?"

"To close the door upon you when you enter and to think of you no more in this life, because you will be very happy."

"Are you crazy?" cried Casher.

"I am a forgetty," said Gosigo, with some dignity, "but I am not insane."

"Whose orders are you going to obey, then?" Gosigo smiled a warmly human smile at him. "Doesn't that depend on you, sir, and not on me? Do I look like a man who is going to kill you soon?" "No, you don't," said Casher.

"Do you know what you look like to me?" went on Gosigo, with a purr. "Do you really think that I would help you if I thought that you would kill a small girl?"

"You know it!" cried Casher, feeling his face go white. "Who doesn't?" said Gosigo. "What else have we got to talk about, here on Henriada? Let me help you on with these clothes, so that you will at least survive the ride." With this he handed shoulder padding and padded helmet to Casher, who began to put on the garments, very clumsily. Gosigo helped him.

When Casher was fully dressed, he thought that he had never dressed this elaborately for space itself. The world of Henriada must be a tumultuous place if people needed this kind of clothing to make a short trip.

Gosigo had put on the same kind of clothes. He looked at Casher in a friendly manner, with an arch smile which came close to humor. "Look at me, honorable visitor. Do I remind you of anybody?"

Casher looked honestly and carefully, and then said, "No, you don't."

The man's face fell. "It's a game," he said. "I can't help trying to find out who I really am. Am I a Lord of the Instrumentality who has betrayed his trust? Am I a scientist who twisted knowledge into unimaginable wrong? Am I a dictator so foul that even the Instrumentality, which usually leaves things alone, had to step in and wipe me out? Here I am, healthy, wise, alert. I have the name Gosigo on this planet. Perhaps I am a mere native of this planet, who has committed a local crime. I am triggered. If anyone ever did tell me my true name or my actual past, I have been conditioned to shriek loud, fall unconscious and forget anything which might be said on such an occasion. People told me that I must have chosen this instead of death. Maybe. Death sometimes looks tidy to a forgetty."

"Have you ever screamed and fainted?"

"I don't even know that" said Gosigo, "no more than you know where you are going this very day."

Casher was tied to the man's mystifications, so he did not let himself be provoked into a useless show of curiosity. Inquisitive about the forgetty himself, he asked:

"Does it hurt—does it hurt to be a forgetty?"

"No," said Gosigo, "it doesn't hurt, no more than you will."

Gosigo stared suddenly at Casher. His voice changed tone and became at least one octave higher. He clapped his hands to his face and panted through his hands as if he would never speak again.

"But—oh! The fear—the eerie, dreary fear of being mel"

He still stared at Casher.

Quieting down at last, he pulled his hands away from his face, as if by sheer force, and said in an almost normal voice, "Shall we get on with our trip?"

Gosigo led the way out into the bare bleak corridor. A perceptible wind was blowing through it, though there was no sign of an open window or door. They followed a majestic staircase; with steps so broad that Casher had to keep changing pace on them, all the way down to the bottom of the building. This must, at some time, have been a formal reception hall. Now it was full of cars.

Curious cars.

Land vehicles of a kind which Casher had never seen before. They looked a little bit like the ancient "fighting tanks" which he had seen in pictures. They also looked a little like submarines of a singularly short and ugly shape. They had high spiked wheels, but their most complicated feature was a set of giant corkscrews, four on each side, attached to the car by intricate yet operational apparatus. Since Casher had been landed right into the palace by piano-form, he had never had occasion to go outside among the tornadoes of Henriada.

The Administrator was waiting, wearing a coverall on which was stenciled his insignia of rank.

Casher gave him a polite bow. He glanced down at the handsome metric wristwatch which Gosigo had strapped on his wrist, outside the coverall. It read 3:93.

Casher bowed to Rankin Meiklejohn and said, "I'm ready, sir, if you are." \*

"Watch him!" whispered Gosigo, half a step behind Casher.

The Administrator said, "Might as well be going." The man's voice trembled.

Casher stood polite, alert, immobile. Was this danger? Was this foolishness? Could the Administrator already be drunk again?



Casher watched the Administrator carefully but quietly, waiting for the older man to precede him into the nearest groundcar, which had its door standing open.

Nothing happened, except that the Administrator began to turn pale.

There must have been six or eight people present. The others must have seen the same sort of thing before, because they showed no sign of curiosity or bewilderment. The Administrator began to tremble. Casher could see it, even through the bulk of the travelwear. The man's hands shook.

The Administrator said, in a high nervous voice, "Your knife. You have it with you?"

Casher nodded.

"Let me see it," said the Administrator.

Casher reached down to his boot and brought out the beautiful, superbly balanced knife. Before he could stand erect, he felt the clamp of Gosigo's heavy fingers on his shoulder.

"Master," said Gosigo to Meiklejohn, "tell your visitor to put his weapon away. It is not allowed for any of us to show weapons in your presence."

Casher tried to squirm out of the heavy grip without losing his balance or his dignity. He found that Gosigo was knowledgeable about karate too. The forgetful held ground, even when the two men waged an immobile, invisible sort of wrestling match, the leverage of Casher's shoulder working its way hither and yon against the strong grip of Gosigo's powerful hand.

The Administrator ended it. He said, "Put away your knife . . ." in that high funny voice of his.

The watch had almost reached 4:00, but no one had yet got into the car.

Gosigo spoke again, and when he did there was a contemptuous laugh from the Deputy Administrator, who had stood by in ordinary indoor clothes.

"Master, isn't it time for 'one for the road'?"

"Of course, of course," chattered the Administrator. He began breathing almost normally again.

"Join me," he said to Casher. "It's a local custom."

Casher had let his knife slip back into his bootsheath. When the knife dropped out of sight, Gosigo released his shoulder; he now stood facing the Administrator and rubbed his bruised shoulder. He said nothing, but shook his head gently, showing that he did not want a drink.

One of the robots brought the Administrator a glass, which appeared to contain at least a liter and a half of water. The Administrator said, very politely, "Sure you won't share it?"

This close, Casher could smell the reek of it. It was pure byegarr, and at least 160 proof. He shook his head again, firmly but also politely.

The Administrator lifted the glass.

Casher could see the muscles of the man's throat work as the liquid went down. He could hear the man breathing heavily between swallows. The white liquid went lower and lower in the gigantic glass.

At last it was all gone. '•

The Administrator cocked his head sideways and said to Casher in a parrotlike voice, "Well, toodle-oo!"

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Casher.

The Administrator had a pleasant glow on his face. Casher was surprised that the man was not dead after that big and sudden a drink.

"I just mean g'bye. I'm—not—feeling—well."

With that he fell straight forward, as stiff as a rock tower. One of the servants, perhaps another forgetty, caught him before he hit the ground.

"Does he always do this?" asked Casher of the miserable and contemptuous Deputy Administrator.

"Oh, no," said the Deputy. "Only at times like these."

"What do you mean, 'like these'?"

"When he sends one more armed man against the girl at Beaure-gard. They never come back. You won't come back, either. You could have left earlier, but you can't now. Go along and try to kill the girl. I'll see you here about five twenty-five if you succeed. As a matter of fact, if you come back at all, I'll try to wake him up. But you won't come back. Good luck. I suppose that's what you need. Good luck."

Casher shook hands with the man without removing his gloves. Gosigo had already climbed into the driver's seat of the machine and was testing the electric engines. The big corkscrews began to plunge down, but before they touched the floor, Gosigo had reversed them and thrown\* them back into the up position.

The people in the room ran for cover as Casher entered the machine, though there was no immediate danger in sight. Two of the human servants dragged the Administrator up the stairs, the Deputy Administrator following them rapidly.

"Seat belt," said Gosigo.

Casher found it and snapped it closed.

"Head belt," said Gosigo.

Casher stared at him. He had never heard of a head belt.

"Pull it down from the roof, sir. Put the net under your chin."

Casher glanced up.

There was a net fitted snugly against the roof of the vehicle, just above his head. He started to pull it down, but it did not yield. Angrily, he pulled harder, and it moved slowly downward. By the Bell and Bank, do they want to hang me in this! he thought to himself as he dragged the net down. There was a strong fiber belt attached to each end of the net, while the net itself was only fifteen to twenty centimeters wide. He ended up in a foolish position, holding the head belt with both hands lest it snap back into the ceiling and not knowing what to do with it. Gosigo leaned over and, half impatiently, helped him adjust the web under his chin. It pinched for a moment and Casher felt as though his head were being dragged by a heavy weight.

"Don't fight it," said Gosigo. "Relax."

Casher did. His head was lifted several centimeters into a foam pocket, which he had not previously noticed, in the back of the seat. After a second or two, he realized that the position was odd but comfortable.

Gosigo had adjusted his own head belt and had turned on the lights of the vehicle. They blazed so bright that Casher almost thought they might be a laser, capable of charring the inner doors of the big room.

The lights must have keyed the door.

V

Two panels slid open and a wild uproar of wind and vegetation rushed in. It was rough and stormy but far below hurricane velocity.

The machine rolled forward clumsily and was out of the house and on the road very quickly.

The sky was brown, bright luminous brown, shot through with streaks of yellow. Casher had never seen a sky of that color on any other world he had visited, and in his long exile he had seen many planets.

Gosigo, staring straight ahead, was preoccupied with keeping the vehicle right in the middle of the black, soft, tarry road.

"Watch it!" said a voice speaking right into his head.

It was Gosigo, using an intercom which must have been built into the helmets.

Casher watched, though there was nothing to see except for the rush of mad wind. Suddenly the groundcar turned dark, spun upside down, and was violently shaken. An oily, pungent stench of pure fetor immediately drenched the whole car.

Gosigo pulled out a panel with a console of buttons. Light and fire, intolerably bright, burned in on them through the windshield and the portholes on the side.

The battle was over before it began.

The groundcar lay in a sort of swamp. The road was visible thirty or thirty-five meters away.

There was a grinding sound inside the machine and the groundcar righted itself. A singular sucking noise followed, then the grinding sound stopped. Casher could glimpse the big corkscrews on the side of the car eating their way into the ground.

At last the machine was steady, pelted only by branches, leaves and what seemed like kelp.

A small tornado was passing over them.

Gosigo took time to twist his head sidewise and to talk to Casher.

"An air whale swallowed us and I had to burn our way out."

"A what?" cried Casher.

"An air whale," repeated Gosigo calmly on the intercom. "There are no indigenous forms of life on this planet, but the imported Earth forms have changed wildly since we brought them in. The tornadoes lifted the whales around enough so that some of them got adapted to flying. They were the meat-eating kind, so they like to crack our groundcars open and eat the goodies inside. We're safe enough from them for the time being, provided we can make it back to the road. There are a few wild men who live in the wind, but they would not become dangerous to us unless we found ourselves really helpless. Pretty soon I can unscrew us from the ground and try to get back on the road. It's not really too far from here to Ambiloxi."

The trip to the road was a long one, even though they could see the road itself all the time that they tried various approaches.

The first time, the groundcar tipped ominously forward. Red lights showed on the panel and buzzers buzzed. The great spiked wheels spun in vain as they chewed their way into a bottomless quagmire.

Gosigo, calling back to his passenger<sup>^</sup> cried, "Hold steady! We're going to have to shoot ourselves out of this one backward!"

Casher did not know how he could be any steadier, belted, hooded and strapped as he was, but he clutched the arms of his seat.

The world went red with fire as the front of the car spat flame in rocketlike quantities. The swamp ahead of them boiled into steam, so that they could see nothing. Gosigo changed the windshield over from visual to radar, and even with radar there was not much to be seen—nothing but a gray swirl of formless wraiths, and

the weird lurching sensation as the machine fought its way back to solid ground. The console suddenly showed green and Gosigo cut the controls. They were back where they had been, with the repulsive burnt entrails of the air whale scattered among the coral trees.

"Try again," said Gosigo, as though Casher had something to do with the matter.

He fiddled with the controls and the groundcar rose several feet. The spikes on the wheels had been hydraulically extended until they were each at least one hundred fifty centimeters long. The car felt like a large enclosed bicycle as it teetered on its big wheels. The wind was strong and capricious but there was no tornado in sight.

"Here we go," said Gosigo redundantly. The groundcar pressed forward in a mad rush, hastening obliquely through the vegetation and making for the highway on Casher's right.

A bone-jarring crash told them that they had not made it. For a moment Casher was too dizzy to see where they were.

He was glad of his helmet and happy about the web brace which held his neck. That crash would have killed him if he had not had full protection.

Gosigo seemed to think the trip normal. His classic Hindu features relaxed in a wise smile as he said, "Hit a boulder. Fell on our side. Try again."

Casher managed to gasp, "Is the machine unbreakable?"

There was a laugh in Gosigo's voice when he answered, "Almost. We're the most vulnerable items in it."

Again fire spat at the ground, this time from the side of the groundcar. It balanced itself precariously on the four high wheels. Gosigo turned on the radar screen to look through the steam which their own jets had called up.

There the road was, plain and near.

"Try again!" he shouted, as the machine lunged forward and then performed a veritable ballet on the surface of the marsh. It rushed, slowed, turned around on a hummock, gave itself an assist with the jets and then scrambled through the water.

Casher saw the inverted cone of a tornado, half a kilometer or less away, veering toward them.

Gosigo sensed his unspoken thought, because he answered, "Problem: who gets to the road first, that or we?"

The machine bucked, lurched, twisted, spun.

Casher could see nothing anymore from the windshield in front, but it was obvious that Gosigo knew what he was doing.

There was the sickening, stomach-wrenching twist of a big drop and then a new sound was heard—a grinding as of knives.

Gosigo, unworried, took his head out of the headnet and looked

over at Casher with a smile. "The twister will probably hit us in a minute or two, but it doesn't matter now. We're on the road and I've bolted us to the surface."

"Bolted?" gasped Casher.

"You know, those big screws on the outside of the car. They were made to go right into the road. All the roads here are neo-asphaltum and self-repairing. There will be traces of them here when the last known person on the last known planet is dead. These are good roads." He stopped for the sudden hush. "Storm's going over us—"

It began again before he could finish his sentence. Wild raving winds tore at the machine, which sat so solid that it seemed bedded in permastone.

Gosigo pushed two buttons and calibrated a dial. He squinted at his instruments, then pressed a button mounted on the edge of his navigator's seat. There was a sharp explosion, like a blasting of rock by chemical methods.

Casher started to speak but Gosigo held out a warning hand for silence.

He tuned his dials quickly. The windshield faded out, radar came on and then went off, and at last a bright map—bright red in background with sharp gold lines—appeared across the whole width of the screen. There were a dozen or more bright points on the map. Gosigo watched these intently.

The map blurred, faded, dissolved into red chaos.

Gosigo pushed another button and then could see out of the front glass screen again.

"What was that?" asked Casher.

"Miniaturized radar rocket. I sent it up twelve kilometers for a look around. It transmitted a map of what it saw and I put it on our radar screen. The tornadoes are heavier than usual, but I think we can make it. Did you notice the top right of the map?"

"The top right?" asked Casher.

"Yes, the top right. Did you see what was there?"

"Why, nothing," said Casher. "Nothing was there."

"You're utterly right," said Gosigo. "What does that mean to you?"

"I don't understand you," said Casher. "I suppose it means that there is nothing there."

"Right again. But let me tell you something. There never is."

"Never is what?"

"Anything," said Gosigo. "There never is anything on the maps at that point. That's east of Ambiloxi. That's Beauregard. It never shows on the maps. Nothing happens there."

"No bad weather—ever?" asked Casher.

"Never," said Gosigo.

"Why not?" asked Casher.

"She will not permit it," said Gosigo firmly, as though his words made sense.

"You mean her weather machines work?" said Casher, grasping for the only rational explanation possible.

"Yes," said Gosigo.

"Why?"

"She pays for them."

"How can she?" exclaimed Casher. "Your whole world of Henri-ada is bankrupt!"

"Her part isn't."

"Stop mystifying me," said Casher. "Tell me who she is and what this is all about."

"Put your head in the net," said Gosigo. "I'm not making puzzles because I want to do so. I have been commanded not to talk."

"Because you are a forgetty?"

"What's that got to do with it? Don't talk to me that way. Remember, I am not an animal or an underperson. I may be your servant for a few hours, but I am a man. You'll find out, soon enough. Hold tight]"

The groundcar came to a panic stop, the spiked teeth eating into the resilient firm neo-asphaltum of the road. At the instant they stopped, the outside corkscrews began chewing their way into the ground. First Casher felt as though his eyes were popping out, because of the suddenness of the deceleration; now he felt like holding the arms of his seat as the tornado reached directly for their car, plucking at it again and again. The enormous outside screws held and he could feel the car straining to meet the gigantic suction of the storm.

"Don't worry," shouted Gosigo over the noise of the storm. "I always pin us down a little bit more by firing the quickrockets straight up. These cars don't often go off the road."

Casher tried to relax.

The funnel of the tornado, which seemed almost like a living being, plucked after them once or twice more and then was gone.

This time Casher had seen no sign of the air whales which rode the storms. He had seen nothing but rain and wind and desolation.

The tornado was gone in a moment. Ghostlike shapes trailed after it in enormous prancing leaps.

"Wind men," said Gosigo glancing at them incuriously. "Wild people who have learned to live on Henriada. They aren't much more than animals. We are close to the territory of the lady. They would not dare attack us here."

Casher O'Neill was too stunned to query the man or to challenge him.

Once more the car picked itself up and coursed along the smooth, narrow, winding neo-asphaltum road, almost as though the machine itself were glad to function and to function well.

## VI

Casher could never quite remember when they went from the howling wildness of Henriada into the stillness and beauty of the domains of Mr. Murray Madigan. He could recall the feeling but not the facts.

The town of Ambiloxi eluded him completely. It was so normal a town, so old-fashioned a little town that he could not think of it very much. Old people sat on the wooden boardwalk taking their afternoon look at the strangers who passed through. Horses were tethered in a row along the main street, between the parked machines. It looked like a peaceful picture from the ancient ages.

Of tornadoes there was no sign, nor of the hurt and ruin which showed around the house of Rankin Meiklejohn. There were few underpeople or robots about, unless they were so cleverly contrived as to look almost exactly like real people. How can you remember something which is pleasant and nonmemorable? Even the buildings did not show signs of being fortified against the frightful storms which had brought the prosperous planet of Henriada to a condition of abandonment and ruin.

Gosigo, who had a remarkable talent for stating the obvious, said tonelessly, "The weather machines are working here. There is no need for special precaution."

But he did not stop in the town for rest, refreshments, conversation, or fuel. He went through deftly and quietly, the gigantic armored groundcar looking out of place among the peaceful and defenseless vehicles. He went as though he had been on the same route many times before, and knew the routine well.

Once beyond Ambiloxi he speeded up, though at a moderate pace compared to the frantic elusive action he had taken against storms in the earlier part of the trip. The landscape was earthlike, wet, and most of the ground was covered with vegetation.

Old radar countermissile towers stood along the road. Casher could not imagine their possible use, even though he was sure, from the looks of them, that they were long obsolete.

"What's the countermissile radar for?" he asked, speaking comfortably now that his head was out of the headnet.

Gosigo turned around and gave him a tortured glance in which pain and bewilderment were mixed. "Countermissile radar? Coun-termissile radar? I don't know that word, though it seems as though I should. . . ."

"Radar is what you were using to see with, back in the storm, when the ceiling and visibility were zero."

Gosigo turned back to his driving, narrowly missing a tree. "That? That's just artificial vision. Why did you use the term 'countermissile radar'? There isn't any of that stuff here except what we have on our machine, though the mistress may be watching us if her set is on."

"Those towers," said Casher. "They look like countermissile towers from the ancient times."

"Towers. There aren't any towers here," snapped Gosigo.

"Look," cried Casher. "Here are two more of them."

"No man Inade those. They aren't buildings. It's just air coral. Some of the coral which people brought from earth mutated and got so it could live in the air. People used to plant it for windbreaks, before they decided to give up Henriada and move out. They didn't do much good, but they are pretty to look at."

They rode along a few minutes without asking questions. Tall trees had Spanish moss trailing over them. They were close to a sea. Small marshes appeared to the right and left of the road; here, where the endless tornadoes were kept out, everything had a parklike effect. The domains of the estate of Beauregard were unlike anything else on Henriada—an area of peaceful wildness in a world which was rushing otherwise toward uninhabitability and ruin. Even Gosigo seemed more relaxed, more cheerful as he steered the groundcar along the pleasant elevated road.

Gosigo sighed, leaned forward, managed the controls and brought the car to a stop.

He turned around calmly and looked full face at Casher O'Neill.

"You have your knife?"

Casher automatically felt for it. It was there, safe enough in his bootsheath. He simply nodded.

"You have your orders."

"You mean, killing the girl?"

"Yes," said Gosigo. "Killing the girl."

"I remember that. You didn't have to stop the car to tell me that."

"I'm telling you now," said Gosigo, his wise Hindu face showing neither humor nor outrage. "Do it."

"You mean kill her? Right at first sight?"

"Do it," said Gosigo. "You have your orders."

"I'm the judge of that," said Casher. "It will be on my conscience. Are you watching me for the Administrator?"

"That drunken fool?" said Gosigo. "I don't care about him, except that I am a forgetty and I belong to him. We're in her territory now. You are going to do whatever she wants. You have orders to kill her. All right. Kill her."

"You mean—she wants to be murdered?"

"Of course not!" said Gosigo, with the irritation of an adult who has to explain too many things to an inquisitive child.

"Then how can I kill her without finding out what this is atl about?"

"She knows. She knows herself. She knows her master. She knows this planet. She knows me and she knows something about you. Go ahead and kill her, since those are your orders. If she wants to die, that's not for you or me to decide. It's her business. If she does not want to die, you will not succeed."

"I'd like to see the person," said Casher, "who could stop me in a sudden knife attack. Have you told her that I am coming?"

"I've told her nothing, but she knows we are coming and she is pretty sure what you have been sent for. Don't think about it. Just do what you are told. Jump for her with the knife. She will take care of the matter."

"But—" cried Casher.

"Stop asking questions," said Gosigo. "Just follow orders and remember that she will take care of you. Even you." He started up the groundcar.

Within less than a kilometer they had crossed a low ridge of land and there before them lay Beauregard—the mansion at the edge of the waters, its white pillars shining, its pergolas glistening in the bright air, its yards and palmettos tidy.

Casher was a brave man, but he felt the palms of his hands go wet when he realized that in a minute or two he would have to commit a murder.

## VII

The groundcar swung up the drive. It stopped. Without a word, Gosigo activated the door. The air smelled calm, sea-wet, salt and yet coolly fresh.

Casher jumped out and ran to the door.

He was surprised to feel that his legs trembled as he ran.

He had killed before, real men in real quarrels. Why should a mere animal matter to him?

The door stopped him.

Without thinking, he tried to wrench it open.

The knob did not yield and there was no automatic control in sight. This was indeed a very antique sort of house. He struck the door with his hands. The thuds sounded around him. He could not tell whether they resounded in the house. No sound or echo came from beyond the door.

He began rehearsing the phrase "I want to see the Mister and Owner Madigan...."

The door did open.

A little girl stood there.

He knew her. He had always known her. She was his sweetheart, come back out of his childhood. She was the sister he had never had. She was his own mother, when young. She was at the marvelous age, somewhere between ten and thirteen, where the child—as the phrase goes—"becomes an old child and not a raw grownup." She was kind, calm, intelligent, expectant, quiet,



inviting, unafraid. She felt like someone he had never left behind; yet, at the same moment, he knew he had never seen her before.

He heard his voice asking for the Mister and Owner Madigan while he wondered, at the back of his mind, who the girl might be. Madigan's daughter? Neither Rankin Meiklejohn nor the deputy had said anything about a human family.

The child looked at him levelly.

He must have finished braying his question at her.

"Mister and Owner Madigan," said the child, "sees no one this day, but you are seeing me." She looked at him levelly and calmly. There was an odd hint of humor, of fearlessness in her stance.

"Who are you?" he blurted out.

"I am the housekeeper of this house."

"You?" he cried, wild alarm beginning in his throat.

"My name," she said, "is T'ruth."

His knife was in his hand before he knew how it had got there. He remembered the advice of the Administrator: plunge, plunge, stab, stab, run!

She saw the knife but her eyes did not waver from his face.

He looked at her uncertainly.

If this was an underperson, it was the most remarkable one he had ever seen. But even Gosigo had told him to do his duty, to stab, to kill the woman named T'ruth. Here she was. He could not do it.

He spun the knife in the air, caught it by its tip and held it out to her, handle first.

"I was sent to kill you," he said, "but I find I cannot do it. I have lost a cruiser."

"Kill me if you wish," she said, "because I have no fear of you."

Her calm words were so far outside his experience that he took the knife in his left hand and lifted his arm as if to stab toward her.

He dropped his arm.

"I cannot do it," he whined. "What have you done to me?"

"I have done nothing to you. You do not wish to kill a child and I look to you like a child. Besides, I think you love me. If this is so, it must be very uncomfortable for you."

Casher heard his knife clatter to the floor as he dropped it. He had never dropped it before.

"Who are you," he gasped, "that you should do this to me?"

"I am me," she said, her voice as tranquil and happy as that of any girl, provided that the girl was caught at a moment of great happiness and poise. "I am the housekeeper of this house." She smiled almost impishly and added, "It seems that I must almost be the ruler of this planet as well." Her voice turned serious. "Man," she said, "can't you see it, man? I am an animal, a turtle. I am incapable of disobeying the word of man. When I was little I was trained and I was given orders. I shall carry out those orders as long as I live. When I look at you, I feel strange. You look as though you loved me already, but you do not know what to do. Wait a moment. I must let Gosigo go."

The shining knife on the floor of the doorway she saw; she stepped over it.

Gosigo had got out of the groundcar and was giving her a formal, low bow.

"Tell me," she cried, "what have you just seen!" There was friendliness in her call, as though the routine were an old game.

"I saw Casher O'Neill bound up the steps. You yourself opened the door. He thrust his dagger into your throat and the blood spat out in a big stream, rich and dark and red. You died in the doorway. For some reason Casher O'Neill went on into the house without saying anything to me. I became frightened and I fled."

He did not look frighjened at all.

"If I am dead," she said, "how can I be talking to you?"

"Don't ask me," cried Gosigo. "I am just a forgetty. I always go back to the Honorable Rankin Meiklejohn, each time that you are murdered, and I tell him the truth of what I saw. Then he gives me the medicine and I tell him something else. At that point he will get drunk and gloomy again, the way that he always does."

"It's a pity," said the child. "I wish I could help him, but I can't. He won't come to Beauregard."

"Him?" Gosigo laughed. "Oh, no, not him! Never! He just sends other people to kill you."

"And he's never satisfied," said the child sadly, "no matter how many times he kills me!"

"Never," said Gosigo cheerfully, climbing back into the groundcar. " 'Bye now."

"Wait a moment," she called. "Wouldn't you like something to eat or drink before you drive back? There's a bad clutch of storms on the road."

"Not me," said Gosigo. "He might punish me and make me a forgetty all over again. Say, maybe that's already happened. Maybe I'm a forgetty who's been put through it several times, not just once." Hope surged into his voice. "T'ruth! T'ruth! Can you tell me?"

"Suppose I did tell you," said she. "What would happen?"

His face became sad, "I'd have a convulsion and forget what I told you. Well, good-bye anyhow. I'll take a chance on the storms. If you ever see that Casher O'Neill again," called Gosigo, looking right through Casher O'Neill, "tell him I liked him but that we'll never meet again."

"I'll tell him," said the girl gently. She watched as the heavy brown man climbed nimbly into the car. The top crammed shut with no sound. The wheels turned and in a moment the car had disappeared behind the palmettos in the drive.

While she had talked to Gosigo in her clear warm high girlish voice, Casher had watched her. He could see the thin shape of her shoulders under the light blue shift that she wore. There was the suggestion of a pair of panties under the dress, so light was the material. Her hips had not begun to fill. When he glanced at her in one-quarter profile, he could see that her cheek was smooth, her hair well-combed, her little breasts just beginning to bud on her chest. Who was this child who acted like an empress?

She turned back to him and gave him a warm, apologetic smile.

"Gosigo and I always talk over the story together. Then he goes back and Meiklejohn does not believe it and spends unhappy months planning my murder all over again. I suppose, since I am just an animal, that I should not call it a murder when somebody tries to kill me, but I resist, of course. I do not care about me, but I have orders, strong orders, to keep my master and his house safe from harm."

"How old are you?" asked Casher. He added, "If you can tell the truth."

"I can tell nothing but the truth. I am conditioned. I am nine hundred and six Earth years old."

"Nine hundred?" he cried. "But you look like a child . . ."

"I am a child," said the girl, "and not a child. I am an earth turtle,

changed into human form by the convenience of man. My life expectancy was increased three hundred times when I was modified. They tell me that my normal life span should have been three hundred years. Now it is ninety thousand years, and sometimes I am afraid. You will be dead of happy old age, Casher O'Neill, while I am still opening the drapes in this house to let the sunlight in. But let's not stand in the door and talk. Come on in and get some refreshments. You're not going anywhere, you know."

Casher followed her into the house but he put his worry into words. "You mean I am your prisoner."

"Not my prisoner, Casher. Yours. How could you cross that ground which you traveled in the groundcar? You could get to the ends of my estate all right, but then the storms would pick you up and whirl you away to a death which nobody would even see."

She turned into a big old room, bright with light-colored wooden furniture.

Casher stood there awkwardly. He had returned his knife to its bootsheath when they left the vestibule. Now he felt very odd, sitting with his victim on a sun porch.

T'ruth was untroubled. She rang a brass bell which stood on an old-fashioned round table. Feminine footsteps clattered in the hall. A female servant entered the room, dressed in a black dress with a white apron. Casher had seen such servants in the old drama cubes, but he had never expected to meet one in the flesh.

"We'll have high tea," said T'ruth. "Which do you prefer, tea or coffee, Casher? Or I have beer and wines. Even two bottles of whiskey brought all the way from Earth."

"Coffee would be fine for me," said Casher.

"And you know what I want, Eunice," said T'ruth to the servant.

"Yes, ma'am," said the maid, disappearing.

Casher leaned forward.

"That servant—is she human?"

"Certainly," said T'ruth.

"Then why is she working for an underperson like you? I mean— I don't mean to be unpleasant or anything—but I mean—that's against all laws."

"Not here, on Henriada, it isn't."

"And why not?" persisted Casher.

"Because, on Henriada, I am myself the law."

"But the government?"

"It's gone." 1 "The Instrumentality?"

T'ruth frowned. She looked like a wise, puzzled child. "Maybe you know that part better than I do. They leave an Administrator

here, probably because they do not have any other place to put him and because he needs some kind of work to keep him alive. Yet they do not give him enough real power to arrest my master or to kill me. They ignore me. It seems to me that if I do not challenge them, they leave me alone." "But their rules?" insisted Casher.

"They don't enforce them, neither here in Beauregard nor over in the town of Ambiloxi. They leave it up to me to keep these places going. I do the best I can." "That servant, then? Did they lease her to you?" "Oh, no," laughed the girl-woman. "She came to kill me twenty years ago, but she was

a forgetty and she had no place else to go, so I trained her as a maid. She has a contract with my master, and her wages are paid every month into the satellite above the planet. She can leave if she ever wants to. I don't think she will."

Casher sighed. "This is all too hard to believe. You are a child but you are almost a thousand years old. You're an underperson, but you command a whole planet—"

"Only when I need to!" she interrupted him. "You are wiser than most of the people I have ever known and yet you look young. How old do you feel?"

"I feel like a child," she said, "a child one thousand years old. And I have had the education and the memory and the experience of a wise lady stamped right into my brain." "Who was the lady?" asked Casher.

"The Owner and Citizen Agatha Madigan. The wife of my master. As she was dying they transcribed her brain on mine. That's why I speak so well and know so much." "But that's illegal!" cried Casher.

"I suppose it was," said T'ruth, "but my master had it done, anyhow."

Casher leaned forward in his chair. He looked earnestly at the person. One part of him still loved her for the wonderful little girl whom he had thought she was, but another part was in awe of a being more powerful than anyone he had seen before. She returned his gaze with that composed half smile which was wholly feminine and completely self-possessed; she looked tenderly upon him as their faces were reflected by the yellow morning light of Henriada. "I begin to understand," he said, "that you are what you have to be. It is very strange, here in this forgotten world."

"Henriada is strange," she said, "and I suppose that I must seem strange to you. You are right, though, about each of us being what she has to be. Isn't that liberty itself? If we each one must be

something, isn't liberty the business of finding it out and then doing it—that one job, that uttermost mission compatible with our natures? How terrible it would be, to be something and never know what!"

"Like who?" said Casher.

"Like Gosigo, perhaps. He was a great king and he was a good king, on some faraway world where they still need kings. But he committed an intolerable mistake and the Instrumentality made him into a forgetty and sent him here."

"So that's the mystery!" said Casher. "And what am I?"

She looked at him calmly and steadfastly before she answered. "You are a killer too. It must make your life very hard in many ways. You keep having to justify yourself."

This was so close to the truth—so close to Casher's long worries as to whether justice might not just be a cover name for revenge—that it was his turn to gasp and be silent.

"And I have work for you," added the amazing child.

"Work? Here?"

"Yes. Something much worse than killing. And you must do it, Casher, if you want to go away from here before I die, eighty-nine thousand years from now." She looked around. "Hush!" she added. "Eunice is coming and I do not want to frighten her by letting her know the terrible things that you are going to have to do."

"Here?" he whispered urgently. "Right here, in this house?"

"Right here in this house," she said in a normal voice, as Eunice entered the room bearing a huge tray covered with plates of food and two pots of beverage.

Casher stared at the human woman who worked so cheerfully for an animal; but neither Eunice, who was busy setting things out on the table, nor T'ruth, who, turtle and woman that she was, could not help rearranging the dishes with gentle peremptories, paid the least attention to him.

The words rang in his head. "In this house . . . something worse than killing." They made no sense. Neither did it make sense to have high tea before five hours, decimal time.

He sighed and they both glanced at him, Eunice with amused curiosity, T'ruth with affectionate concern.

"He's taking it better than most of them do, ma'am," said Eunice. "Most of them who come here to kill you are very upset when they find out that they cannot do it."

"He's a killer, Eunice, a real killer, so I think he wasn't too bothered."

Eunice turned to him very pleasantly and said, "A killer, sir. It's

a pleasure to have you here. Most of them are terrible amateurs and then the lady has to heal them before we can find something for them to do."

Casher couldn't resist a spot inquiry. "Are all the other would-be killers still here?"

"Most of them, sir. The ones that nothing happened to. Like me. Where else would we go? Back to the Administrator, Rankin Meiklejohn?" She said the last with heavy scorn indeed, curtsied to him, bowed deeply to the woman-girl T'ruth and left the room.

T'ruth looked friendlily at Casher O'Neill. "I can tell that you will not digest your food if you sit here waiting for bad news. When I said you had to do something worse than killing, I suppose I was speaking from a woman's point of view. We have a homicidal maniac in the house. He is a house guest and he is covered by Old North Australian law. That means we cannot kill him or expel him, though he is almost as immortal as I am. I hope that you and I can frighten him away from molesting my master. I cannot cure him or love him. He is too crazy to be reached through his emotions. Pure, utter, awful fright might do it, and it takes a man for that job. If you do this, I will reward you richly."

"And if I don't?" said Casher.

Again she stared at him as though she were trying to see through his eyes all the way down to the bottom of his soul; again he felt for her that tremor of compassion, ever so slightly tinged with male desire, which he had experienced when he first met her in the doorway of Beauregard.

Their locked glances broke apart.

T'ruth looked at the floor. "I cannot lie," she said, as though it were a handicap. "If you do not help me I shall have to do the things which it is in my power to do. The chief thing is nothing. To let you live here, to let you sleep and eat in this house until you get bored and ask me for some kind of routine work around the estate. I could make you work," she went on, looking up at him and blushing all the way to the top of her bodice, "by having you fall in love with me, but that would not be kind. I will not do it that way. Either you make a deal with me or you do not. It's up to you. Anyhow, let's eat first. I've been up since dawn, expecting one more killer. I even wondered if you might be the one who would succeed. That would be terrible, to leave my master all alone!"

"But you—wouldn't you yourself mind being killed!"

"Me? When I've already lived a thousand years and have eighty-nine thousand more to go! It couldn't matter less to me. Have some coffee."

And she poured his coffee.

VIII

Two or three times Casher tried to get the conversation back to the work at hand, but T'ruth diverted him with trivialities. She even made him walk to the enormous window, where they could see far across the marshes and the bay. The sky in the remote distance was dark and full of worms. Those were tornadoes, beyond the reach of her weather machines, which coursed around the rest of Henfi-ada but stopped short at the boundaries of Ambiloxi and Beauregard. She made him admire the weird coral castles which had built themselves up from the bay bottom, hundreds of feet into the air. She tried to make him see a family of wild wind people who were slyly and gently stealing apples from her orchard, but either his eyes were not used to the landscape or T'ruth could see much farther than he could.

This was a world rich in water. If it had not been located within a series of bad pockets of space, the water itself could have become an export. Mankind had done the best it could, raising kelp to provide the iron and phosphorus so often lacking in offworld diets, controlling the weather at great expense. Finally the Instrumentality recommended that they give up. The exports of Henriada never quite balanced the imports. The subsidies had gone far beyond the usual times. The earth life had adapted with a vigor which was much too great. Ordinary forms rapidly found new shapes, challenged by the winds, the rains, the novel chemistry and the odd radiation patterns of Henriada. Killer whales became airborne, coral took to the air, human babies lost in the wind sometimes survived to become subhuman and wild, jellyfish became sky sweepers. The former inhabitants of Henriada had chosen a planet at a reasonable price—not cheap, but reasonable—from the owner who had in turn bought it from a post-Soviet settling cooperative. They had leased the new planet, had worked out an ecology, had emigrated and were now doing well.

Henriada kept the wild\* weather, the lost hopes, and the ruins.

And of these ruins, the greatest was Murray Madigan.

Once a prime landholder and host, 5 gentleman among gentlemen, the richest man on the whole world, Madigan had become old, senile, weak. He faced death or catalepsy. The death of his wife made him fear his own death and with his turtle-girl, T'ruth, he had chosen catalepsy. Most of the time he was frozen in a trance, his heartbeat imperceptible, his metabolism very slow. Then, for a few hours or days, he was normal. Sometimes the sleeps were for weeks, sometimes for years. The Instrumentality doctors had looked him over—more out of scientific curiosity than from any

judicial right—and had decided that though this was an odd way to live, it was a legal one. They went away and left him alone. He had had the whole personality of his dying wife, Agatha Madigan, impressed on the turtle-child, though this was illegal; the doctor had, quite simply, been bribed.

All this was told by Truth to Casher as they ate and drank their way slowly through an immense repast.

An archaic wood fire roared in a real fireplace.

While she talked, Casher watched the gentle movement of her shoulder blades when she moved forward, the loose movement of her light dress as she moved, the childish face which was so tender, so appealing and yet so wise.

Knowing as little as he did about the planet of Henriada, Casher tried desperately to fit his own thinking together and to make sense out of the predicament in which he found himself. Even if the girl was attractive, this told him nothing of the real challenges which he still faced inside this very house. No longer was his preoccupation with getting the power cruiser his main job on Henriada; no evidence was at hand to show that the drunken, deranged Administrator, Rankin Meiklejohn, would give him anything at all unless he, Casher, killed the girl.

Even that had become a forgotten mission. Despite the fact that he had come to the estate of Beauregard for the purpose of killing her, he was now on a journey without a destination. Years of sad experience had taught him that when a project went completely to pieces, he still had the

mission of personal survival, if his life was to mean anything to his home planet, Mizzer, and if his return, in any way or any fashion, could bring real liberty back to the Twelve Niles.

So he looked at the girl with a new kind of unconcern. How could she help his plans? Or hinder them? The promises she made were too vague to be of any real use in the sad, complicated world of politics.

He just tried to enjoy her company and the strange place in which he found himself.

The Gulf of Esperanza lay just within his vision. At the far horizon he could see the helpless tornadoes trying to writhe their way past the weather machines which still functioned, at the expense of Beauregard, all along the coast from Ambiloxi to Mottile. He could see the shoreline choked with kelp, which had once been a cash crop and was now a nuisance. Ruined buildings in the distance were probably the leftovers of processing plants; the artificial-looking coral castles obscured his view of them. And this house—how much sense did this house make?

An undergirl, eerily wise, who herself admitted that she had obtained an unlawful amount of conditioning; a master who was a living corpse; a threat which could not even be mentioned freely within the house; a household which seemed to have displaced the planetary government; a planetary government which the Instrumentality, for unfathomable reasons of its own, had let fall into ruin. Why? Why? And why again?

The turtle-girl was looking at him. If he had been an art student, he would have said that she was giving him the tender, feminine and irrecoverably remote smile of a Madonna, but he did not know the motifs of the ancient pictures; he just knew that it was a smile characteristic of Truth herself.

"You are wondering ... ?" she said.

He nodded, suddenly feeling miserable that mere words had come between them.

"You are wondering why the Instrumentality let you come here?"

He nodded again.

"I don't know either," she said, reaching out and taking his right hand. His hand felt and looked like the hairy paw of a giant as she held it with her two pretty, well-kept little-girl hands; but the strength of her eyes and the steadfastness of her voice showed that it was she who was giving the reassurance, not he.

The child was helping him!

The idea was outrageous, impossible, true.

It was enough to alarm him, to make him begin to pull back his hand. She clutched him with tender softness, with weak strength, and he could not resist her. Again he had the feeling, which had gripped him so strongly when he first met her at the door of Beauregard and failed to kill her, that he had always known her and had always loved her. (Was there not some planet on which eccentric people believed a weird cult, thinking that human beings were endlessly reborn with fragmentary recollections of their own previous human lives? It was almost like that. Here. Now. He did not know the girl but he had always known her. He did not love the girl and yet had loved her from the beginning of time.)

She said, so softly that it was almost a whisper, "Wait. . . . Wait. . . . Your death may come through that door pretty soon and I will tell you how to meet it. But before that, even, I have to show you the most beautiful thing in the world."

Despite her little hand lying tenderly and firmly on his, Casher spoke irritably: "I'm tired of talking riddles here on Henriada. The Administrator gives me the mission of killing you and I fail in it. Then you promise me a battle and give me a good meal instead. Now you talk about the battle and start off with some other irrele-

vance. You're going to make me angry if you keep on and—and— and—" He stammered out at last: "I get pretty useless if I'm angry. If you want me to do a fight for you, let me know the fight and let me go do it now. I'm willing enough.

Her remote, kind half smile did not waver. "Casher," she said, "what I am going to show you is your most important weapon in the fight."

With her free left hand she tugged at the fine chain of a thin gold necklace. A piece of jewelry came out of the top of her shift dress, under which she had kept it hidden. It was the image of two pieces of wood with a man nailed to them.

Casher stared and then he burst into hysterical laughter.

"Now you've done it, ma'am," he cried. "I'm no use to you or to anybody else. I know what that is, and up to now I've just suspected it. It's what the robot, rat and Copt agreed on when they went exploring back in Space three. It's the Old Strong Religion. You've put it in my mind and now the next person who meets me will peep it and will wipe it out. Me too, probably, along with it. That's no weapon. That's a defeat. You've done me in. I knew the sign of the Fish a long time ago, but I had a chance of getting away with just that little bit."

"Casher!" she cried. "Casher! Get hold of yourself. You will know nothing about this before you leave Beauregard. You will forget. You will be safe."

He stood on his feet, not knowing whether to run away, to laugh out loud, or to sit down and weep at the silly sad misfortune which had befallen him. To think that he himself had become brain-branded as a fanatic—forever denied travel between the stars— just because an undergirl had shown him an odd piece of jewelry!

"It's not as bad as you think," said the little girl, and stood up too. Her face peered lovingly at Casher's. "Do you think, Casher, that I am afraid?"

"No," he admitted.

"You will not remember this, Casher. Not when you leave. I am not just the turtle-girl T'ruth. I am also the imprint of the citizen Agatha. Have you ever heard of her?"

"Agatha Madigan?" He shook his head slowly. "No. I don't see how . . . No, I'm sure that I never heard of her."

"Didn't you ever hear the story of the Hechizera of Gonfalon?"

Casher looked surprised. "Sure I saw it. It's a play. A drama. It is said to be based on some legend out of immemorial time. The 'space witch' they called her, and she conjured fleets out of nothing by sheer hypnosis. It's an old story."

"Eleven hundred years isn't so long," said the girl. "Eleven hundred years, fourteen local months come next tonight."

"You weren't alive eleven hundred years ago," said Casher accusingly.

He stood up from the remains of their meal and wandered over toward the window. That terrible piece of religious jewelry made him uncomfortable. He knew that it was against all laws to ship religion from world to world. What would he do, what could he do, now that he had actually beheld an image of the God Nailed High? That was exactly the kind of contraband which the police and customs robots of hundreds of worlds were looking for.

The Instrumentality was easy about most things, but the transplanting of religion was one of its hostile obsessions. Religions leaked from world to world anyhow. It was said that sometimes even the underpeople and robots carried bits of religion through space, though this seemed improbable. The Instrumentality left religion alone when it had a settled place on a single planet, but the Lords of the Instrumentality themselves shunned other people's devotional lives and simply



took good care that fanaticisms did not once more flare up between the stars, bringing wild hope and great death to all the mankinds again.

And now, thought Casher, the Instrumentality has been good to me in its big impersonal collective way, but what will it do when my brain is on fire with forbidden knowledge?

The girl's voice called him back to himself.

"I have the answer to your problem, Casher," said she, "if you would only listen to me. I am the Hechizera of Gonfalon, at least I am as much as any one person can be printed on another."

His jaw dropped as he turned back to her. "You mean that you, child, really are imprinted with this woman Agatha Madigan? Really imprinted?

"I have all her skills, Casher," said the girl quietly, "and a few more which I have learned on my own."

"But I thought it was just a story . . ." said Casher. "If you're that terrible woman from Gonfalon, you don't need me. I'm quitting. Now."

Casher walked toward the door. Disgusted, finished, through. She might be a child, she might be charming, she might need help, but if she came from that terrible old story, she did not need him.

"Oh, no, you don't," she said.

IX

Unexpectedly, she took her place in the doorway, barring it.

In her hand was the image of the man on the two pieces of wood.

Ordinarily Casher would not have pushed a lady. Such was his haste that he did so this time. When he touched her, it was like welded steel; neither her gown nor her body yielded a thousandth of a millimeter to his strong hand and heavy push.

"And now what?" she asked gently.

Looking back, he saw that the real T'ruth, the smiling girl-woman, still stood soft and real in the window.

Deep within, he began to give up; he had heard of hypnotists who could project, but he had never met one as strong as this.

She was doing it. How was she doing it? Or was she doing it? The operation could be subvolitional. There might be some art carried over from her animal past which even her re-formed mind could not explain. Operations too subtle, too primordial for analysis. Or skills which she used without understanding.

"I project," she said. \*

"I see you do," he replied glumly and flatly.

"I do kinesthetics," she said. His knife whipped out of his boot-sheath and floated in the air in front of him.

He snatched it out of the air instinctively. It wormed a little in his grasp, but the force on the knife was nothing more than he had felt when passing big magnetic engines.

"I blind," she said. The room went totally dark for him.

"I hear," he said, and prowled at her like a beast, going by his memory of the room and by the very soft sound of her breathing. He had noticed by now that the simulacrum of herself which she had put in the doorway did not make any sound at all, not even that of breathing.

He knew that he was near her. His fingertips reached out for her shoulder or her throat. He did not mean to hurt her, merely to show her that two could play at tricks.

"I stun," she said, and her voice came at him from all directions. It echoed from the ceiling, came from all five walls of the old odd room, from the open windows, from both the doors. He felt as though he were being lifted into space and turned slowly in a condition of weightlessness. He tried to retain self-control, to listen for the one true sound among the many false sounds, to trap the girl by some outside chance.

"I make you remember," said her multiple echoing voice.

For an instant he did not see how this could be a weapon, even

if the turtle-girl had learned all the ugly tricks of the Hechizera of Gonfalon.

But then he knew.

He saw his uncle, Kuraf, again. He saw his old apartments vividly around himself. Kuraf was there. The old man was pitiable, hateful, drunk, horrible; the girl on Kuraf's lap laughed at him, Casher O'Neill, and she laughed at Kuraf too. Casher had once had a teenager's passionate concern with sex and at the same time had had a teen-ager's dreadful fear of all the unstated, invisible implications of what the man-woman relationship, gone sour, gone wrong, gone bad, might be. The present-moment Casher remembered the long-ago Casher and as he spun in the web of T'ruth's hypnotic powers he found himself back with the ugliest memory he had.

The killings in the palace at Mizzer.

The colonels had taken Kaheer itself, and they ultimately let Kuraf run away to the pleasure planet of Ttiolle.

But Kuraf's companions, who had debauched the old republic of the Twelve Niles, those people! They did not go. The soldiers, stung to fury, had cut them down with knives. Casher thought of the blood, blood sticky on the floors, blood gushing purple into the carpets, blood bright red and leaping like a fountain when a white throat ended its last gurgle, blood turning brown where handprints, themselves bloody, had left it on marble tables. The warm palace, long ago, had got the sweet sick stench of blood all the way through it. The young Casher had never known that people had so much blood inside them, or that so much could pour out on the perfumed sheets, the tables still set with food and drink, or that blood could creep across the floor in growing pools as the bodies of the dead yielded up their last few nasty sounds and their terminal muscular spasms.

Before that day of butchery had ended, one thousand, three hundred and eleven human bodies, ranging in age from two months to eighty-nine years, had been carried out of the palaces once occupied by Kuraf. Kuraf, under sedation, was waiting for a starship to take him to perpetual exile and Casher—Casher himself O'Neill!—was shaking the hand of Colonel Wedder, whose orders had caused all the blood. The hand was washed and the nails pared and cleaned, but the cuff of the sleeve was still rimmed with the dry blood of some other human being. Colonel Wedder either did not notice his own cuff, or he did not care.

"Touch and yield!" said the girl-voice out of nowhere.

Casher found himself on all fours in the room, his sight suddenly back again, the room unchanged, and T'ruth smiling.

"I fought you," she said.

He nodded. He did not trust himself to speak.

He reached for his water glass, looking at it closely to see if there was any blood on it.

Of course not. Not here. Not this time, not this place.

He pulled himself to his feet.

The girl had sense enough not to help him.

She stood there in her thin modest shift, looking very much like a wise female child, while he stood up and drank thirstily. He refilled the glass and drank again.

Then, only then, did he turn to her and speak:

"Do you do all that?"

She nodded.

"Alone? Without drugs or machinery?"

She nodded again.

"Child," he cried out, "you're not a person! You're a whole weapons system all by yourself. What are you, really? Who are you?"

"I am the turtle-child T'ruth," she said, "and I am the loyal property and loving servant of my good master, the Mister and Owner Murray Madigan."

"Madam," said Casher, "you are almost a thousand years old. I am at your service. I do hope you will let me go free later on. And especially that you will take that religious picture out of my mind."

As Casher spoke, she picked a locket from the table. He had not noticed it. It was an ancient watch or a little round box, swinging on a thin gold chain.

"Watch this," said the child, "if you trust me, and repeat what I then say."

(Nothing at all happened: nothing—anywhere.)

Casher said to her, "You're making me dizzy, swinging that ornament. Put it back on. Isn't that the one you were wearing?"

"No, Casher, it isn't."

"What were we talking about?" demanded Casher.

"Something," said she. "Don't you remember?"

"No," said Casher brusquely. "Sorry, but I'm hungry again." He wolfed down a sweet roll encrusted with sugar and decorated with fruits. His mouth full, he washed the food down with water. At last he spoke to her. "Now what?"

She had watched with timeless grace.

"There's no hurry, Casher. Minutes or hours, they don't matter."

"Didn't you want me to fight somebody after Gosigo left me here?"

"That's right," she said, with terrible quiet.

"I seem to have had a fight right here in this room." He stared around stupidly.

She looked around the room, very cool. "It doesn't look as though anybody's been fighting here, does it?"

"There's no blood here, no blood at all. Everything is clean," he said.

"Pretty much so."

"Then why," said Casher, "should I think I had a fight?" \*

"This wild weather on Henriada sometimes upsets off-worlders until they get used to it," said T'ruth mildly.

"If I didn't have a fight in the past, am I going to get into one in the future?"

The old room with the golden-oak furniture swam around him. The world outside was strange, with the sunlit marshes and wide bayous trailing off to the forever-thundering storm, just over the horizon, which lay beyond the weather machines. Casher shrugged and shivered. He looked straight at the girl. She stood erect and looked at him with the even regard of a reigning empress. Her young budding breasts barely showed through the thinness of her shift; she wore golden flat-heeled shoes. Around her neck there was a thin gold chain, but the object on the chain hung down inside her dress. It excited him a little to think of her flat chest barely budding into womanhood. He had never been a man who had an improper taste for children, but there was something about this person which was not childlike at all.

"You are a girl and not a girl.. .." he said in bewilderment.

She nodded gravely.

"You are that woman in the story, the Hechizera of Gonfalon. You are reborn."

She shook her head, equally seriously. "No, I am not reborn. I am a turtle-child, an underperson with very long life, and I have been imprinted with the personality of the citizen Agatha. That is

a"-"

"You stun," he said, "but I do not know how you do it."

"I stun," she said flatly, and around the edge of his mind there flickered up hot little torments of memory.

"Now I remember," he cried. "You have me here to kill somebody. You are sending me into a fight."

"You are going to a fight, Casher. I wish I could send somebody else, not you, but you are the only person here strong enough to do the job."

Impulsively he took her hand. The moment he touched her, she ceased to be a child or an underperson. She felt tender and exciting, like the most desirable and important person he had ever known.

His sister? But he had no sister. He felt that he was himself terribly, unendurably important to her. He did not want to let her hand go, but she withdrew from his touch with an authority which no decent man could resist.

"You must fight to the death now, Casher," she said, looking at him as evenly as might a troop commander examining a special soldier selected for a risky mission.

He nodded. He was tired of having his mind confused. He knew something had happened to him after the forgetty, Gosigo, had left him at the front door, but he was not at all sure of what it was. They seemed to have had a sort of meal together in this room. He felt himself in love with the child. He knew that she was not even a human being. He remembered something about her living ninety thousand years and he remembered something else about her having gotten the name and the skills of the greatest battle hypnotist of all history, the Hechizera of Gonfalon. There was something strange, something frightening about that chain around her neck: there were things he hoped he would never have to know.

He strained at the thought and it broke like a bubble.

"I'm a fighter," he said. "Give me my fight and let me know."

"He can kill you. I hope not. You must not kill him. He is immortal and insane. But in the law of Old North Australia, from which my master, the Mister and Owner Murray Madigan, is an exile, we must not hurt a house guest, nor may we turn him away in a time of great need."

"What do I do?" snapped Casher impatiently.

"You fight him. You frighten him. You make his poor crazy mind fearful that he will meet you again."

"I'm supposed to do this."

"You can," she said very seriously. "I've already tested you. That's where you have the little spot of amnesia about this room."

"But why"? Why bother? Why not get some of your human servants and have them tie him up or put him in a padded room?"

"They can't deal with him. He is too strong, too big, too clever, even though insane. Besides, they don't dare follow him."

"Where does he go?" said Casher sharply.

"Into the control room," replied T'ruth, as if it were the saddest phrase ever uttered.

"What's wrong with that? Even a place as fine as Beauregard can't have too much of a control room. Put locks on the control."

"It's not that kind of a control room."

Almost angry, he shouted, "What is it, then?"

"The control room," she answered, "is for a planoform ship. This house. These counties, all the way to Mottile on the one side and

to Ambiloxi on the other. The sea itself, way out into the Gulf of Esperanza. All this is one ship."

Casher's professional interest took over. "If it's turned off, he can't do any harm."

"It's not turned off," she said. "My master leaves it on a very little bit. That way, he can keep the weather machines going and make this edge of Henriada a very pleasant place."

"You mean," said Casher, "that you'd risk letting a lunatic fly all these estates off into space."

"He doesn't even fly," said T'ruth gloomily.

"What does he do, then?" yelled Casher.

"When he gets at the controls, he just hovers."

"He hovers? By the Bell, girl, don't try to fool me. If you hover a place as big as this, you could wipe out the whole planet any moment. There have been only two or three pilots in the history of space who would be able to hover a machine like this one."

"He can, though," insisted the little girl.

"Who is he, anyhow?"

"I thought you knew. Or had heard somewhere about it. His name is John Joy Tree."

"Tree the go captain?" Casher shivered in the warm room. "He died a long time ago after he made that record flight."

"He did not die. He bought immortality and went mad. He came here and he lives under my master's protection."

"Oh," said Casher. There was nothing else he could say. John Joy Tree, the great Norstrilian who took the first of the Long Plunges outside the galaxy: he was like Magno Taliano of ages ago, who could fly space on his living brain alone.

But fight him? How could anybody fight him?

Pilots are for piloting; killers are for killing; women are for loving or forgetting. When you mix up the purposes, everything goes wrong.

Casher sat down abruptly. "Do you have any more of that coffee?" \*

"You don't need coffee," she said.

He looked up inquiringly. »

"You're a fighter. You need a war. That's it," she said, pointing with her girlish hand to a small doorway which looked like the entrance to a closet. "Just go in there. He's in there now. Tinkering with the machines again. Making me wait for my master to get blown to bits at any minute! And I've put up with it for over a hundred years."

"Go yourself," he said.

"You've been in a ship's control room," she declared.

"Yes." He nodded.

"You know how people go all naked and frightened inside. You know how much training it takes to make a go captain. What do you think happens to me?" At last, long last, her voice was shrill, angry, excited, childish.

"What happens?" said Casher dully, not caring very much; he felt weary in every bone. Useless battles, murder he had to try, dead people arguing after their ballads had already grown out of fashion. Why didn't the Hechizera of Gonfalon do her own work?

Catching his thought, she screeched at him, "Because I can't!"

"All right," said Casher. "Why not?"

"Because I turn into me."

"You what?" said Casher, a little startled.

"I'm a turtle-child. My shape is human. My brain is big. But I'm a turtle. No-matter how much my master needs me, I'm just a turtle."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"What do turtles do when they're faced with danger? Not under-people-turtles, but real turtles, little animals. You must have heard of them somewhere." .t

"I've even seen them," said Casher, "on some world or other. They pull into their shells."

"That's what I do"—she wept—"when I should be defending my master. I can meet most things. I am not a coward. But in that control room, I forget, forget, forget!"

"Send a robot, then!"

She almost screamed at him. "A robot against John Joy Tree? Are you mad too?"

Casher admitted, in a mumble, that on second thought it wouldn't do much good to send a robot against the greatest go captain of them all. He concluded, lamely, "I'll go, if you want me to."

"Go now," she shouted, "go right in!"

She pulled at his arm, half dragging and half leading him to the little brightened door which looked so innocent.

"But—" he said.

"Keep going," she pleaded. "This is all we ask of you. Don't kill him, but frighten him, fight him, wound him if you must. You can do it. I can't." She sobbed as she tugged at him. "I'd just be me"

Before he knew quite what had happened she had opened the door. The light beyond was clear and bright and tinged with blue, the way the skies of Manhome, Mother Earth, were shown in all the viewers.

He let her push him in.

He heard the door click behind him.

Before he even took in the details of the room or noticed the man in the go captain's chair, the flavor and meaning of the room struck him like a blow against his throat.

This room, he thought, is Hell.

He wasn't even sure that he remembered where he had learned the word Hell. It denoted all good turned to evil, all hope to anxiety, all wishes to greed.

Somehow, this room was it.

And then ... j- •

X

And then the chief occupant of Hell turned and looked squarely at him.

If this was John Joy Tree, he did not look insane.

He was a handsome, chubby man with a red complexion, bright eyes, dancing-blue in color, and a mouth which was as mobile as the mouth of a temptress.

"Good day," said John Joy Tree.

"How do you do," said Casher inanely.

"I do not know your name," said the ruddy brisk man, speaking in a tone of voice which was not the least bit insane.

"I am Casher O'Neill, from the city of Kaheer on the planet Mizzer."

"Mizzer?" John Joy Tree laughed. "I spent a night there, long, long ago. The entertainment was most unusual. But we have other things to talk about. You have come here to kill the undergirl T'ruth. You received your orders from the honorable Rankin Mei-klejohn, may he soak in drink! The child has caught you and now she wants you to kill me, but she does not dare utter those words."

John Joy Tree, as he spoke, shifted the spaceship controls to standby, and got ready to get out of his captain's seat.

Casher protested, "She said nothing about killing you. She said you might kill me." -\*\*

"I might, at that." The immortal pilot stood on the floor. He was a full head shorter than Casher but he was a strong and formidable man. The blue light of the room made him look clear, sharp, distinct.

The whole flavor of the situation tickled the fear nerves inside Casher's body. He suddenly felt that he wanted very much to go to a bathroom, but he felt—quite surely—that if he turned his back on this man, in this place, he would die like a felled ox in a stockyard. He had to face John Joy Tree.

"Go ahead," said the pilot. "Fight me."

"I didn't say that I would fight you," said Casher. "I am supposed to frighten you and I do not know how to do it."

"This isn't getting us anywhere," said John Joy Tree. "Shall we go into the outer room and let poor little T'ruth give us a drink? You can just tell her that you failed."

"I think," said Casher, "that I am more afraid of her than I am of you."

John Joy Tree flung himself into a comfortable passenger's chair. "All right, then. Do something. Do you want to box? Gloves? Bare fists? Or would you like swords? Or wirepoints? There are some over there in the closet. Or we can each take a pilot ship and have a ship duel out in space."

"That wouldn't make much sense," said Casher, "me fighting a ship against the greatest go captain of them all. . . ."

John Joy Tree greeted this with an ugly underlaugh, a barely audible sound which made Casher feel that the whole situation was ridiculous.

"But I do have one advantage," said Casher. "I know who you are and you do not know who I a/n."

"How could I tell," said John Joy Tree, "when people keep on getting born all over the place?"

He gave Casher a scornful, comfortable grin. There was charm in the man's poise. Keeping his eyes focused directly on Casher, he felt for a carafe and poured himself a drink.

He gave Casher an ironic toast and Casher took it, standing frightened and alone. More alone than he had ever been before in his life.

Suddenly John Joy Tree sprang lightly to his feet and stared with a complete change of expression past Casher. Casher did not dare look around. This was some old fight trick.

Tree spat out the words, "You've done it, then. This time you will violate all the laws and kill me. This fashionable oaf is not just one more trick."

A voice behind Casher called very softly, "I don't know." It was a man's voice, old, slow and tired.

Casher had heard no one come in.

Casher's years of training stood him in good stead. He skipped sidewise in four or five steps, never taking his eyes off John Joy Tree, until the other man had come into his field of vision.

The man who stood there was tall, thin, yellow-skinned and yellow-haired. His eyes were an old sick blue. He glanced at Casher and said, "I'm Madigan."

Was this the master? thought Casher. Was this the being whom that lovely child had been imprinted to adore?

He had no more time for thought.

Madigan whispered, as if to no one in particular, "You find me waking. You find him sane. Watch out."

Madigan lunged for the pilot's controls, but his tall, thin old body could not move very fast.

John Joy Tree jumped out of his chair and ran for the controls too.

Casher tripped him. • 4.

Tree fell, rolled over and got halfway up, one knee and one foot on the floor. In his hand there shimmered a knife very much like Casher's own.

Casher felt the flame of his body as some unknown force flung him against the wall. He stared, wild with fear.

Madigan had climbed into the pilot's seat and was fiddling with the controls as though he might blow Henriada out of space at any second. John Joy Tree glanced at his old host and then turned his attention to the man in front of him.



There was another man there.

Casher knew him.

He looked familiar.

It was himself, rising and leaping like a snake, left arm weaving the knife for the neck of John Joy Tree.

The image Casher hit Tree with a thud that resounded through the room.

Tree's bright blue eyes had turned crazy-mad. His knife caught the image Casher in the abdomen, thrust hard and deep, and left the young man gasping on the floor, trying to push the bleeding entrails back into his belly. The blood poured from the image Casher all over the rug.

Blood!

Casher suddenly knew what he had to do and how he could do it—all without anybody telling him.

He created a third Casher on the far side of the room and gave him iron gloves. There was himself, unheeded against the wall; there was the dying Casher on the floor; there was the third, stalking toward John Joy Tree. •

"Death is here," screamed the third Casher, with a voice which Casher recognized as a fierce crazy simulacrum of his own.

Tree whirled around. "You're not real," he said.

The image Casher stepped around the console and hit Tree with an iron glove. The pilot jumped away, a hand reaching up to his bleeding face.

John Joy Tree screamed at Madigan, who was playing with the dials without even putting on the pinlighter helmet.

"You got her in here," he screamed, "you got her in here with this young man! Get her out!"

"Who?" said Madigan softly and absentmindedly.

"Truth. That witch of yours. I claim guest-right by all the ancient laws. Get her out."

The real Casher, standing at the wall, did not know how he controlled the image Casher with the iron gloves, but control him he did. He made him speak, in a voice as frantic as Tree's own voice:

"John Joy Tree, I do not bring you death. I bring you blood. My iron hands will pulp your eyes. Blind sockets will stare in your face. My iron hands will split your teeth and break your jaw a thousand times, so that no doctor, no machine will ever fix you. My iron hands will crush your arms, turn your hands into living rags. My iron hands will break your legs. Look at the blood, John Joy Tree. . . . There will be a lot more blood. You have killed me once. See that young man on the floor."

They both glanced at the first image Casher, who had finally shuddered into death in the great rug- A pool of blood lay in front of the body of the youth.

John Joy Tree turned to the image Casher and said to him, "You're the Hechizera of Gonfalon. You can't scare me. You're a turtle-girl and can't really hurt me."

"Look at me," said the real Casher.

John Joy Tree glanced back and forth between the duplicates.

Fright began to show.

Both the Cashers now shouted, in crazy voices which came from the depths of Casher's own mind:

"Blood you shall have! Blood and ruin. But we will not kill you. You will live in ruin, blind, emasculated, armless, legless. You will be fed through tubes. You cannot die and you will weep for death but no one will hear you."

"Why?" screamed Tree. "Why? What have I done to you?"

"You remind me," howled Casher, "of my home. You remind me of the blood poured by Colonel Wedder when the poor useless victims of my uncle's lust paid with their blood for his revenge. You remind me of myself, John Joy Tree, and I am going to punish you as I myself might be punished."

Lost in the mists of lunacy, John Joy Tree was still a brave man.

He flung his knife unexpectedly at the real Casher. The image Casher, in a tremendous bound, leaped across the room and caught the knife on an iron glove. It clattered against the glove and then fell silent onto the rug.

Casher saw what he had to see.

He saw the palace of Kaheer, covered with death, with the intimate sticky silliness of sudden death—the dead men holding little packages they had tried to save, the girls, with their throats cut, lying in their own blood but with the lipstick still even and the eyebrow pencil still pretty on their dead faces. He saw a dead child, ripped open from groin upward to chest, holding a broken doll while the child itself, now dead, looked like a broken doll itself. He saw these things and he made John Joy Tree see them too. a

"You're a bad man," said John Joy Tree.

"I am very bad," said Casher.

"Will you let me go if I never enter this room again?"

The image Casher snapped off, both the body on the floor and the fighter with the iron gloves. Casher did not know how Truth had taught him the lost art of fighter replication, but he had certainly done it well.

"The lady told me you could go."

"But who are you going to use," said John Joy Tree, calm, sad and logical, "for your dreams of blood if you don't use me?"

"I don't know," said Casher. "I follow my fate. Go now, if you do not want my iron gloves to crush you."

John Joy Tree trotted out of the room, beaten.

Only then did Casher, exhausted, grab a curtain to hold himself upright and look around the room freely.

The evil atmosphere had gone.

Madigan, old though he was, had locked all the controls on standby.

He walked over to Casher and spoke. "Thank you. She did not invent you. She found you and put you to my service."

Casher coughed out, "The girl. Yes."

"My girl," corrected Madigan.

"Your girl," said Casher, remembering the sight of that slight feminine body, those budding breasts, the sensitive lips, the tender eyes.

"She could not have thought you up. She is my dead wife over again. The citizeness Agatha might have done it. But not T'ruth."

Casher looked at the man as he talked. The host wore the bottoms of some very cheap yellow pajamas and a washable bathrobe which had once been stripes of purple, lavender and white. Now it was faded, like its wearer. Casher also saw the white clean plastic surgical implants on the man's arms, where the machines and tubes hooked in to keep him alive.

"I sleep a lot," said Murray Madigan, "but I am still the master of Beauregard. I am grateful to you."

The hand was frail, withered, dry, without strength.

The old voice whispered, "Tell her to reward you. You can have anything on my estate. Or you can have anything on Henriada. She manages it all for me." Then the old blue eyes opened wide and sharp and Murray Madigan was once again the man, just momentarily, that he had been hundreds of years ago—a Norstrilian trader, sharp, shrewd, wise and not unkind. He added sharply, "Enjoy her company. She is a good child. But do not take her. Do not try to take her."

"Why not?" said Casher, surprised at his own bluntness.

"Because if you do, she will die. She is mine. Imprinted to me. I had her made and she is mine. Without me she would die in a few days. Do not take her."

Casher saw the old man leave the room by a secret door. He left himself, the way he had come in. He did not see Madigan again for two days, and by that time the old man had gone far back into his cataleptic sleep.

## XI

Two days later T'ruth took Casher to visit the sleeping Madigan.

"You can't go in there," said Eunice in a shocked voice. "Nobody goes in there. That's the master's room."

"I'm taking him in," said T'ruth calmly.

She had pulled a cloth-of-gold curtain aside and she was spinning the combination locks on a massive steel door. It was set in Daimoni material.

The maid went on protesting. "But even you, little ma'am, can't take him in there!"

"Who says I can't?" said T'ruth calmly and challengingly.

The awfulness of the situation sank in on Eunice.

In a small voice she muttered, "If you're taking him in, you're taking him in. But it's never been done before."

"Of course it hasn't, Eunice, not in your time. But Casher O'Neill has already met the Mister and Owner. He has fought for the Mister and Owner. Do you think I would take a stray or random guest in to look at the master, just like that?"

"Oh, not at all, no," said Eunice.

"Then go away, woman," said the lady-child. "You don't want to see this door open, do you?"

"Oh, no," shrieked Eunice and fled, putting her hands over her ears as though that would shut out the sight of the door.

When the maid had disappeared, T'ruth pulled with her whole

weight against the handle of the heavy door. Casher expected the mustiness of the tomb or the medicinality of a hospital; he was astonished when fresh air and warm sunlight poured out from that

heavy, mysterious door. The actual opening was so narrow, so low, that Casher had to step sidewise as he followed T'ruth into the room.

The master's room was enormous. The windows were flooded with perpetual sunlight. The landscape outside must have been the way Henriada looked in its prime, when Mottile was a resort for the carefree millions of vacationers, and Ambiloxi a port feeding worlds halfway across the galaxy. There was no sign of the ugly snaky storms which worried and pestered Henriada in these later years. Everything was landscape, order, neatness, the triumph of man, as though Poussin had painted it.

The room itself, like the other great living rooms of the estate of Beauregard, was exuberant neo-baroque in which the architect, himself half mad, had been given wild license to work out his fantasies in steel, plastic, plaster, wood and stone. The ceiling was not flat, but vaulted. Each of the four corners of the room was an alcove, cutting deep into each of the four sides, so that the room was, in effect, an octagon. The propriety and prettiness of the room had been a little diminished by the shoving of the furniture to one side, sofas, upholstered armchairs, marble tables and knickknack stands all in an indescribable melange to the left; while the right-hand part of the room—facing the master window with the illusory landscape—was equipped like a surgery with an operating table, hydraulic lifts, bottles of clear and colored fluid hanging from chrome stands and two large devices which (Casher later surmised) must have been heart-lung and kidney machines. The alcoves, in their turn, were wilder. One was an archaic funeral parlor with an immense coffin, draped in black velvet, resting on a heavy teak stand. The next was a spaceship control cabin of the old kind, with the levers, switches and controls all in plain sight—the meters actually read the galacticaHy stable location of this very place, and to do so they had to whirl mightily—as well as a pilot's chair with the usual choice of helmets and the straps and shock absorbers. The third alcove was a simple bedroom done in very old-fashioned taste, the walls a Wedgwood blue with deep wine-colored drapes, coverlets and pillowcases marking a sharp but tolerable contrast. The fourth alcove was the copy of a fortress: it might even have been a fortress: the door was heavy and the walls looked as though they might be Daimoni material, indestructible by any imaginable means. Cases of emergency food and water were stacked against

the walls. Weapons which looked oiled and primed stood in their racks, together with three different calibers of wirepoint, each with its own fresh-looking battery.

The alcoves had no people in them.

The parlor was deserted.

The Mister and Owner Murray Madigan lay naked on the operating table. Two or three wires led to gauges attached to his body. Casher thought that he could see a faint motion of the chest, as the cataleptic man breathed at a rate one-tenth normal or less.

The girl-lady, T'ruth, was not the least embarrassed.

"I check him four or five times a day. I never let people in here. But you're special, Casher. He's talked with you and fought beside you and he knows that he owes you his life. You're the first human person ever to get into this room."

"I'll wager," said Casher, "that the Administrator of Henriada, the Honorable Rankin Meiklejohn, would give up some of his 'honorable' just to get in here and have one look around. He wonders what Madigan is doing when Madigan is doing nothing. ..."

"He's not just doing nothing," said T'ruth sharply. "He's sleeping. It's not everybody who can sleep for forty or fifty or sixty thousand years and can wake up a few times a month, just to see how things are going."

Casher started to whistle and then stopped himself, as though he feared to waken the unconscious, naked old man on the table. "So that's why he chose 3>ow."

T'ruth corrected him as she washed her hands vigorously in a washbasin. "That's why he had me made. Turtle stock, three hundred years. Multiply that with intensive strobn treatments, three hundred times. Ninety thousand years. Then he had me printed to love him and adore him. He's not my master, you know. He's my god."

"Your what?"

"You heard me. Don't get upset. I'm not going to give you any illegal memories. I worship him. That's what I was printed for, when my little turtle eyes opened and they put me back in the tank to enlarge my brain and to make a woman out of me. That's why they printed every memory of the citizeness Agatha Madigan right into my brain. I'm what he wanted. Just what he wanted. I'm the most wanted being on any planet. No wife, no sweetheart, no mother has ever been wanted as much as he wants me now, when he wakes up and knows that I am still here. You're a smart man. Would you trust any machine—any machine at all—for ninety thousand years?" "It would be hard," said Casher, "to get batteries of monitors

long enough for them to repair each other over that long a time. But that means you have ninety thousand years of it. Four times, five times a day. I can't even multiply the numbers. Don't you ever get tired of it?"

"He's my love, he's my joy, he's my darling little boy," she caroled, as she lifted his eyelids and put colorless drops in each eye. Absent-mindedly, she explained. "With his slow metabolism there's always some danger that his eyelids will stick to his eyeballs. This is part of the checkup."

She tilted the sleeping man's head, looked earnestly into each eye. She then stepped a few paces aside and put her face close to the dial of a gently humming machine. There was the sound of a shot. Casher almost reached for his gun, which he did not have.

The child turned back to him with a free mischievous smile. "Sorry, I should have warned you. That's my noisemaker. I watch the encephalograph to make sure his brain keeps a little auditory intake. It showed up with the noise. He's asleep, very deeply asleep, but he's not drifting downward into death."

Back at the table she pushed Madigan's chin upward so that the head leaned far back on its neck. Deftly holding the forehead, she took a retractor, opened his mouth with her fingers, depressed the tongue and looked down into the throat.

"No accumulation there," she muttered, as if to herself.

She pushed the head back into a comfortable position. She seemed on the edge of another set of operations when it was obvious that an idea occurred to her. "Go wash your hands, thoroughly, over there, at the basin. Then push the timer down and be sure you hold your hands under the sterilizer until the timer goes off. You can help me turn him over. I don't have help here. You're the first visitor."

Casher obeyed and while he washed his hands, he saw the girl drench her hands with some flower-scented unguent. She began to massage the unconscious body with professional expertness, even with a degree of roughness. As he stood with his hands under the sterilizer-dryer, Casher marveled at the strength of those girlish arms and those little hands. Indefatigably they stroked, rubbed, pummeled, pulled, stretched and poked the old body. The sleeping man seemed to be utterly unaware of it, but Casher thought that he could see a better skin color and muscle tone appearing.

He walked back to the table and stood facing T'ruth.

A huge peacock walked across the imaginary lawn outside the window, his tail shimmering in a paroxysm of colors.

T'ruth saw the direction of Casher's glance.

"Oh, I program that too. He likes it when he wakes up. Don't

you think he was clever, before he went into catalepsy—to have me made, to have me created to love him and to care for him? It helps that I'm a girl, I can't ever love anybody but him, and it's easy for me to remember that this is the man I love. And it's safer for him. Any man might get bored with these responsibilities. I don't."

"Yet—" said Casher.

"Shh," she said, "wait a bit. This takes care." Her strong little fingers were now plowing deep into the abdomen of the naked old man. She closed her eyes so that she could concentrate all her senses on the one act of tactile impression. She took her hands away and stood erect. "All clear," she said. "I've got to find out what's going on inside him. But I don't dare use X rays on him. Think of the radiation he'd build up in a hundred years or so. He defecates about twice a month while he's sleeping. I've got to be ready for that. I also have to prime his bladder every week or so. Otherwise he would poison himself just with his own body wastes. Here, now, you can help me turn him over. But watch the wires. Those are the monitor controls. They report his physiological processes, radio a message to me if anything goes wrong, and meanwhile supply the missing neurophysical impulses if any part of the automatic nervous system began to fade out or just simply went off."

"Has that ever happened?"

"Never," she said, "not yet. But I'm ready. Watch that wire. You're turning him too fast. There now, that's right. You can stand back while I massage him on the back."

She went back to her job of being a masseuse. Starting at the muscles joining the skull to the neck, she worked her way down the body, pouring ointment on her hands from time to time. When she got to his legs, she seemed to work particularly hard. She lifted the feet, bent the knees, slapped the calves.

Then she put on a rubber glove, dipped her hand into another jar—one which opened automatically as her hand approached—and came out with her hand greasy. She thrust her fingers into his rectum, probing, thrusting, groping, her brow furrowed.

Her face cleared as she dropped the rubber glove in a disposal can and wiped the sleeping man with a soft linen towel, which also went into a disposal can. "He's all right. He'll get along well for the next two hours. I'll have to give him a little sugar then. All he's getting now is normal saline."

She stood facing him. There was a faint glow in her cheeks from the violent exercise in which she had been indulging, but she still looked both the child and the lady—the child irrecoverably remote, hidden in her own wisdom from the muddled world of adults, and

the lady, mistress in her own home, her own estates, her own planet, serving her master with almost immortal love and zeal.

"I was going to ask you, back there—" said Casher, and then stopped.

"You were going to ask me?"

He spoke heavily. "I was going to ask you, what happens to you when he dies? Either at the right time or possibly before his time. What happens to you?" . . .

"I couldn't care less," her voice sang out. He could see by the open, honest smile on her face that she meant it. "I'm his. I belong to him. That's what I'm/or. They may have programmed something into me, in case he dies. Or they may have forgotten. What matters is his life, not mine. He's going to get every possible hour of life that I can help him get. Don't you think I'm doing a good job?"

"A good job, yes," said Casher. "A strange one too."

"We can go now," she said.

"What are those alcoves for?"

"Oh, those—they're his make-believes. He picks one of them to go to sleep in—his coffin, his fort, his ship or his bedroom. It doesn't matter which. I always get him up with the hoist and put him back on his table, where the machines and I can take proper care of him. He doesn't really mind waking up on the table. He has usually forgotten which room he went to sleep in. We can go now."

They walked toward the door.

Suddenly she stopped. "I forgot something. I never forget things, but this is the first time I ever let anybody come in here with me. You were such a good friend to him. He'll talk about you for thousands of years. Ixmg, long after you're dead," she added somewhat unnecessarily. Casher looked at her sharply to see if she might be mocking or deprecating him. There was nothing but the little-girl solemnity, the womanly devotion to an established domestic routine.

"Turn your back," she commanded peremptorily.

"Why?" he asked. "Why—when you have trusted me with all the other secrets." \*»

"He wouldn't want you to see this."

"See what?" .

"What I'm going to do. When I was the citizeness Agatha—or when I seemed to be her—I found that men are awfully fussy about some things. This is one of them."

Casher obeyed and stood facing the door.

A different odor filled the room—a strong wild scent, like a geranium pomade. He could hear T'ruth breathing heavily as she worked beside the sleeping man.

She called to him: "You can turn around now."

She was putting away a tube of ointment, standing high to get it into its exact position on a tile shelf.

Casher looked quickly at the body of Madigan. It was still asleep, still breathing very lightly and very slowly.

"What on earth did you do?"

T'ruth stopped in midstep. "You're going to get nosy."

Casher stammered mere sounds.

"You can't help it," she said. "People are inquisitive."

"I suppose they are," he said, flushing at the accusation.

"I gave him his bit of fun. He never remembers it when he wakes up, but the cardiograph sometimes shows increased activity. Nothing happened this time. That was my own idea. I read books and decided that it would be good for his body tone. Sometimes he sleeps through a whole Earth year, but usually he wakes up several times a month."

She passed Casher, almost pulled herself clear of the floor tugging on the inside levers of the main door.

She gestured him past. He stooped and stepped through.

"Turn away again," she said. "Aft I'm going to do is to spin the dials, but they're cued to give any viewer a bad headache so he will forget the combination. Even robots. I'm the only person tuned to these doors."

He heard the dials spinning but did not look around.

She murmured, almost under her breath, "I'm the only one. The only one."

"The only one for what?" asked Casher.

"To love my master, to care for him, to support his planet, to guard his weather. But isn't he beautiful? Isn't he wise? Doesn't his smile win your heart?"

Casher thought of the faded old wreck of a man with the yellow pajama bottoms. Tactfully, he said nothing.

T'ruth babbled on, quite cheerfully. "He is my father, my husband, my baby son, my master, my owner. Think of that, Casher, he owns me! Isn't he lucky—to have me? And aren't I lucky—to belong to him?"

"But what for?" asked Casher a little crossly, thinking that he was falling in and out of love with this remarkable girl himself.

"For life!" she cried, "In any form, in any way. I am made for ninety thousand years and he will sleep and wake and dream and sleep again, a large part of that."

"What's the use of it?" insisted Casher.

"The use," she said, "the use? What's the use of the little turtle egg they took and modified in its memory chains, right down to

the molecular level? What's the use of turning me into an undergirl, so that even you have to love me off and on? What's the use of little me, meeting my master for the first time, when I had been manufactured to love him? I can tell you, man, what the use is. Love."

"What did you say?" said Casher.

"I said the use was love. Love is the only end of things. Love on the one side, and death on the other. If you are strong enough, to use a real weapon, I can give you a weapon which will put all Mizzer at your mercy. Your cruiser and your laser would just be toys against the weapon of love. You can't fight love. You can't fight me."

They had proceeded down a corridor, forgotten pictures hanging on the walls, unremembered luxuries left untouched by centuries of neglect.

The bright yellow light of Henriada poured in through an open doorway on their right.

From the room came snatches of a man singing while playing a stringed instrument. Later, Casher found that this was a verse of the Henriada Song, the one which went:

Don't put your ship in the Boom Lagoon, Look up north for the raving wave. Henriada's boiled away But Ambilosci's a saving grave.

They entered the room.

A gentleman stood up to greet them.

It was the great go-pilot, John Joy Tree. His ruddy face smiled, his bright blue eyes lit up, a little condescendingly, as he greeted his small hostess, but then his glance took in Casher O'Neill.

The effect was sudden, and evil.

John Joy Tree looked away from both of them. The phrase which he had started to use stuck in his throat.

He said, in a different voice, very "away" and deeply troubled, "There is blood all over this place. There is a man of blood right here. Excuse me. I am going to be sick."

He trotted past them and out the door which they had entered.

"You have passed a test," said T'ruth. "Your help to my master has solved the problem of the captain and honorable John Joy Tree. He will not go near that control room if he thinks that you are there."



"Do you have more tests for me? Still more? By now you ought to know me well enough not to need tests."

"I am not a person," she said, "but just a built-up copy of one. I am getting ready to give you your weapon. This is a communications room as well as a music room. Would you like something to eat or drink?"

"Just water," he said.

"At your hand," said T'ruth.

A rock crystal carafe had been standing on the table beside him, unnoticed. Or had she transported it into the room with one of the tricks of the Hechizera, the dreaded Agatha herself? It didn't matter. He drank. Trouble was coming.

## XII

T'ruth had swung open a polished cabinet panel. The communicator was the kind they mount in planofforming ships right beside the pilot. The rental on one of them was enough to make any planetary government reconsider its annual budget.

"That's yours?" cried Cashier.

"Why not?" said the little-girl lady. "I have four or five of them."

"But you're rich!"

"I'm not. My master is. I belong to my master too."

"But things like this.... He can't handle them. How does he manage?"

"You mean money and things?" The girlish part of her came out. She looked pleased, happy and mischievous. "I manage them for him. He was the richest man on Henriada when I came here. He had credits of stroom. Now he is about forty times richer."

"He's a Rod McBane!" exclaimed Cashier.

"Not even near. Mr. McBane had a lot more money than we. But he's rich. Where do you think all the people from Henriada went?"

"I don't know," said Cashier.

"To four new planets. They belong to my master and he charges the new settlers a very small land rent."

"You bought them?" Cashier asked.

"For him." T'ruth smiled. "Haven't you heard of planet brokers?"

"But that's a gambler's business!" said Cashier.

"I gambled," she said, "and I won. Now keep quiet and watch me."

She pressed a button. "Instant message."

"Instant message," repeated the machine. "What priority?"

"War news, double A one, subspace penalty."

"Confirmed," said the machine.

"The planet Mizzer. Now. War and peace information. Will fighting end soon?"

The machine clucked to itself.

Cashier, knowing the prices of this kind of communication, almost felt that he could see the arterial spurt of money go out of Henri-ada's budget as the machines reached across the galaxy, found Mizzer and came back with the answer.

"Skirmishing. Seventh Nile. Ends three local days." ,,,,- «

"Close message," said T'ruth.

The machine went off.

T'ruth turned to him. "You're going home soon, Casher, if you can pass a few little tests."

He stared at her.

He blurted, "I need my weapons, my cruiser and my laser."

"You'll have weapons. Better ones than those. Right now I want you to go to the front door. When you have opened the door, you will not let anybody in. Close the door. Then please come back to me here, dear Casher, and if you are still alive, I will have some other things for you to do."

Casher turned in bewilderment. It did not occur to him to contradict her. He could end up a forgetty, like the maidservant Eunice or the Administrator's brown man, Gosigo.

Down the halls he walked. He met no one except for a few shy cleaning robots, who bowed their heads politely as he passed.

He found the front door. It stopped him. It looked like wood on the outside, but it was actually a Daimoni door, made of near-indestructible material. There was no sign of a key or dials or controls. Acting like a man in a dream, he took a chance that the door might be keyed to himself. He put his right palm firmly against it, at the left or opening edge.

The door swung in.

Meiklejohn was there. Gosigo held the Administrator upright. It must have been a rough trip. The Administrator's face was bruised and blood trickled from ««he corner of his mouth. His eyes focused on Casher.

"You're alive. She caught you too?".

Quite formally Casher asked, "What do you want in this house?"

"I have come," said the Administrator, "to see her."

"To see whom?" insisted Casher.

The Administrator hung almost slack in Gosigo's arms. By his own standard and in his own way, he was a very brave man indeed. His eyes looked clear, even though his body was collapsing.

"To see T'ruth, if she will see me," said Rankin Meiklejohn.

"She cannot," said Casher, "see you now. Gosigo!"

The forgetty turned to Casher and gave him a bow.

"You will forget me. You have not seen me."

"I have not seen you, lord. Give my greetings to your lady. Anything else?"

"Yes. Take you master home, as safely and swiftly as you can."

"My lord!" cried Gosigo, though this was an improper title for Casher. Casher turned around.

"My lord, tell her to extend the weather machines for just a few more kilometers and I will have him home safe in ten minutes. At top speed."

"I can tell her," said Casher, "but I cannot promise she will do it."

"Of course," said Gosigo. He picked up the Administrator and began putting him into the groundcar. Rankin Meiklejohn bawled once, like a man crying in pain. It sounded like a blurred version of the name Murray Madigan. No one heard it but Gosigo and Casher; Gosigo busy closing the groundcar, Casher pushing on the big house door. 4

The door clicked.

There was silence.

The opening of the door was remembered only by the warm sweet salty stink of seaweed, which had disturbed the odor pattern of the changeless, musty old house.

Casher hurried back with the message about the weather machines.

T'ruth received the message gravely. Without looking at the console, she reached out and controlled it with her extended right hand, not taking her eyes off Casher for a moment. The machine clicked its agreement. T'ruth exhaled.

"Thank you, Casher. Now the Instrumentality and the forgetty are gone."

She stared at him, almost sadly and inquiringly. He wanted to pick her up, to crush her to his chest, to rain his kisses on her face. But he stood stock still. He did not move. This was not just the forever-loving turtle-child; this was the real mistress of Henriada. This was the Hechizera of Gonfalon, whom he had formerly thought about only in terms of a wild, melodic grand opera.

"I think you are seeing me, Casher. It is hard to see people, even when you look at them every day. I think I can see you too, Casher.

It is almost time for us both to do the things which we have to do."

"Which we have to do?" He whispered, hoping she might say something else.

"For me, my work here on Henriada. For you, your fate on your

homeland of Mizzer. That's what life is, isn't it? Doing what you have to do in the first place. We're lucky people if we find it out. You are ready, Casher. I am about to give you weapons which will make bombs and cruisers and lasers seem like nothing at all."

"By the Bell, girl! Can't you tell me what those weapons are?"

T'ruth stood in her innocently revealing sheath, the yellow light of the old music room pouring like a halo around her.

"Yes," she said, "I can tell you now. Me." ••• •>

"You?"

Casher felt a wild surge of erotic attraction for the innocently voluptuous child. He remembered his first insane impulse to crush her with kisses, to sweep her up with hugs, to exhaust her with all the excitement which his masculinity could bring to both of them.

He stared at her.

She stood there, calm.

That sort of idea did not ring right.

He was going to get her, but he was going to get something far from fun or folly—something, indeed, which he might not even like.

When at last he spoke, it was out of the deep bewilderment of his own thoughts, "What do you mean, you're going to give me yourself? It doesn't sound very romantic to me, nor the tone in which you said it."

The child stepped close to him, reaching up and patting his forehead.

"You're not going to get me for a night's romance, and if you did you would be sorry. I am the property of my master and of no other man. But I can do something with you which I have never

done to anyone else. I can get myself imprinted on you. The technicians are already coming. You will be the turtle-child. You will be the citizeness Agatha Madigan, the Hechizera of Gonfalon herself. You will be many other people. And yourself. You will then win. Accidents may kill you, Casher, but no one will be able to kill you on purpose. Not when you're me. Poor man! Do you know what you will be giving up?"

"What?" he croaked, at the edge of great fright. He had seen danger before, but never before had danger loomed up from within himself.

"You will not fear death, ever again, Casher. You will have to lead your life minute by minute, second by second, and you will not have the alibi that you are going to die anyhow. You will know that's not special."

He nodded, understanding her words and scrabbling around his mind for a meaning.

"I'm a girl, Casher. . . ."

He looked at her and his eyes widened. She was a girl—a beautiful, wonderful girl. But she was something more. She was the mistress of Henriada. She was the first of the underpeople really and truly to surpass humanity. To think that he had wanted to grab her poor little body. The body—ah, that was sweet!—but the power within it was the kind of thing that empires and religions are made of.

". . . and if you take the print of me, Casher, you will never lie with a woman without realizing that you know more about her than she does. You will be a seeing man among blind multitudes, a hearing person in the world of the deaf. I don't know how much fun romantic love is going to be to you after this."

Gloomily he said, "If I can free my home planet of Mizzer, it will be worth it." "Whatever it is."

"You're not going to turn into a woman!" She laughed. "Nothing that easy. But you are going to get wisdom. And I will tell you the whole story of the Sign of the Fish before you leave here."

"Not that, please," he begged. "That's a religion and the Instrumentality would never let me travel again."

"I'm going to have you scrambled, Casher, so that nobody can read you for a year or two. And the Instrumentality is not going to send you back. / am. Through Space Three."

"It'll cost you a fine, big ship to do it."

"My master will approve when I tell him, Casher. Now give me that kiss you have been wanting to give me. Perhaps you will remember something of it when you come out of scramble."

She stood there. He did nothing.

"Kiss me!" she commanded.

He put his arm around her. She felt like a big little girl. She lifted her face. She thrust her lips up toward his. She stood on tiptoe.

He kissed her the way a man might kiss a picture or a religious object. The heat and fierceness had gone out of his hopes. He had not kissed a girl, but power—tremendous power and wisdom put into a single slight form.

"Is that the way your master kisses you?"

She gave him a quick smile. "How clever of you! Yes, sometimes. Come along now. We have to shoot some children before the technicians are ready. It will give you a good last chance of seeing what you can do, when you have become what I am. Come along. The guns are in the hall."

They went down an enormous light-oak staircase to a floor which Casher had never seen before. It must have been the entertainment and hospitality center of Beauregard long ago, when the Mister and Owner Murray Madigan was himself young.

The robots did a good job of keeping away the dust and the mildew. Casher saw inconspicuous little air-dryers placed at strategic places, so that the rich tooled leather on the walls would not spoil, so that the velvet bar stools would not become slimy with mold, so that the pool tables would not warp nor the golf clubs go out of shape with age and damp. By the Bell, he thought, that man Madigan could have entertained a thousand people at one time in a place this size.

The gun cabinet, now, that was functional. The glass shone. The velvet of oil showed on the steel and walnut of the guns. They were old Earth models, very rare and very special. For actual fighting, people used the cheap artillery of the present time or wirepoints for close work. Only the richest and rarest of connoisseurs had the old Earth weapons or could use them.

T'ruth touched the guard robot and waked him. The robot saluted, looked at her face and without further inquiry opened the cabinet.

"Do you know guns?" said T'ruth to Casher.

"Wirepoints," he said. "Never touched a gun in my life."

"Do you mind using a learning helmet, then? I could teach you hypnotically with the special rules of the Hechizera, but they might give you a headache or upset you emotionally. The helmet is neu-roelectric and it has filters."

Casher nodded and saw his reflection nodding in the polished glass doors of the gun cabinet. He was surprised to see how helpless and lugubrious he looked.

But it was true. Never before in his life had he felt that a situation swept over him, washed him along like a great wave, left him with no choice and no responsibility. Things were her choice now, not his, and yet he felt that her power was benign, self-limited, restricted by factors at which he could no more than guess. He had come for one weapon—the cruiser which he had hoped to get from the Administrator Rankin Meiklejohn. She was offering him something else—psychological weapons in which he had neither experience nor confidence.

She watched him attentively for a long moment and then turned to the gun-watching robot.

"You're little Harry Hadrian, aren't you? The gun-watcher."

"Yes, ma'am," said the silver robot brightly, "and I'm owl-brained too. That makes me very bright."

"Watch this," she said, extending her arms the width of the gun cabinet and then dropping them after a queer flutter of her hands. "Do you know what that means?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the little robot quickly, the emotion showing in his toneless voice by the speed with which he spoke, not by the intonation. "It-means-you-have-taken-over-and-I-am-off-duty! Can-I-go-sit-in-the-garden-and-look-at-the-live-things?"

"Not quite yet, little Harry Hadrian. There are some wind people out there now and they might hurt you. I have another errand for you first. Do you remember where the teaching helmets are?"

"Silver hats on the third floor in an open closet with a wire running to each hat. Yes."

"Bring one of those as fast as you can. Pull it loose very carefully from its electrical connection."

The little robot disappeared in a sudden fast, gentle clatter up the stairs.

T'ruth turned back to Casher. "I have decided what to do with you. I am helping you. You don't have to look so gloomy about it."

"I'm not gloomy. The Administrator sent me here on a crazy errand, killing an unknown underperson. I find out that the person is really a little girl. Then I find out that she is not an underperson, but a frightening old dead woman, still walking around alive. My life gets turned upside down. All my plans are set aside. You propose to send me hope to fulfill my life's work on Mizzer. I've struggled for this, so many years! Now you're making it all come through, even though you are going to cook me through Space Three to do it, and throw in a lot of illegal religion and hypnotic tricks that I'm not sure I can handle. You tell me now to come along—to shoot children with guns. I've never done anything like that in my life and yet I find myself obeying you. I'm tired out, girl, tired out. If you have put me in your power, I don't even know it. I don't even want to know it."

"Here you are, Casher, on the ruined wet world of Henriada. In less than a week you will be recovering among the military casualties of Colonel Wedder's army. You will be under the clear sky of Mizzer, and the Seventh Nile will be near you, and you will be ready at long last to do what you have to do. You will have bits and pieces of memories of me—not enough to make you find your way back here or to tell people all the secrets of Beauregard, but enough for you to remember that you have been loved. You may even"—and she smiled very gently, with a tender wry humor on her face—

"marry some Mizzer girl because her body or her face or her manner reminds you of me."

"In a week?" he gasped.

"Less than that."

"Who are you," he cried out, "that you, an underperson, should run real people and should manipulate their lives?"

"I didn't look for power, Casher. Power doesn't usually work if you look for it. I have eighty-nine thousand years to live, Casher, and as long as my master lives I shall love him and take care of him. Isn't he handsome? Isn't he wise? Isn't he the most perfect master you ever saw?"

Casher thought of the old ruined-looking body with the plastic knobs set into it; he thought of the faded pajama bottoms; he said nothing.

"You don't have to agree," said T'ruth. "I know I have a special way of looking at him. But they took my turtle brain and raised the IQ to above normal human level. They took me when I was a happy little girl, enchanted by the voice and the glance and the touch of my master—they took me to where this real woman lay dying and they put me into a machine and they put her into one too. When they were through, they picked me up. I had on a pink dress with pastel blue socks and pink shoes. They carried me out into the corridor, on a rug. They had finished with me. They knew that I wouldn't die. I was healthy. Can't you see it, Casher? I cried myself to sleep, nine hundred years ago."

Casher could not really answer. He nodded sympathetically.

"I was a girl, Casher. Maybe I was a turtle once, but I don't remember that, any more than you remember your mother's womb or your laboratory bottle. In that one hour I was never to be a girl again. I did not need to go to school. I had her education, and it was a good one. She spoke twenty or more languages. She was a psychologist and a hypnotist and a strategist. She was also the tyrannical mistress of this house. I cried because my childhood was finished, because I knew\* what I would have to do. I cried because I knew that I could do it. I loved my master so, but I was no longer to be the pretty little servant who brought him his tablets or his sweetmeats or his beer. Now I saw the truth—as she died I had myself become Henriada. The planet was mine to care for, to manage—to protect my master. If I come along and I protect and help you, is that so much for a woman who will just be growing up when your grandchildren will all be dead of old age?"

"No, no," stammered Casher O'Neill. "But your own life? A family, perhaps?"

Anger lashed across her pretty face. Her features were the features of the delicious girl-child T'ruth, but her expression was that of the citizeness Agatha Madigan, perhaps, a worldly woman reborn to the endless worldliness of her own wisdom.

"Should I order a husband from the turtle bank, perhaps? Should I hire out a piece of my master's estate, to be sold to somebody because I'm an underperson, or perhaps put to work somewhere in an industrial ship? I'm me. I may be an animal, but I have more civilization in me than all the wind people on this planet. Poor things! What kind of people are they, if they are only happy when they catch a big mutated duck and tear it to pieces, eating it raw? I'm not going to lose, Cashier. I'm going to win. My master will live longer than any person has ever lived before. He gave me that mission when he was strong and wise and well in the prime of his life. I'm going to do what I was made for, Cashier, and you're going to go back to Mizzer and make it free, whether you like it or not!"

They both heard a happy scurrying on the staircase.

The small silver robot, little Harry Hadrian, burst upon them; he carried a teaching helmet. 4

T'ruth said, "Resume your post. You are a good boy, little Harry, and you can have time to sit in the garden later on, when it is safe."

"Can I sit in a tree?" the little robot asked.

"Yes, if it is safe."

Little Harry Hadrian resumed his post by the gun cabinet. He kept the key in his hand. It was a very strange key, sharp at the end and as long as an awl. Cashier supposed that it must be one of the straight magnetic keys, cued to its lock by a series of magnetized patterns.

"Sit on the floor for a minute," said T'ruth to Cashier; "you're too tall for me." She slipped the helmet on his head, adjusted the levers on each side so that the helmet sat tight and true upon his skull.

With a touching gesture of intimacy, for which she gave him a sympathetic apologetic little smile, she moistened the two small electrodes with her own spit, touching her finger to her tongue and then to the electrode. These went to his temples.

She adjusted the verniered dials on the helmet itself, lifted the rear wire and applied it to her forehead.

Cashier heard the click of a switch.

"That did it," he heard T'ruth's voice saying, very far away.

He was too busy looking into the gun cabinet. He knew them all and loved some of them. He knew the feel of their stocks on his shoulder, the glimpse of their barrels in front of his eyes, the dance of the target on their various sights, the welcome heavy weight of

the gun on his supporting arm, the rewarding thrust of the stock against his shoulder when he fired. He knew all this, and did not know how he knew it.

"The Hechizera, Agatha herself, was a very accomplished sportswoman," murmured T'ruth to him. "I thought her knowledge would take a second printing when I passed it along to you. Let's take these."

She gestured to little Harry Hadrian, who unlocked the cabinet and took out two enormous guns, which looked like the long muskets mankind had had on earth even before the age of space began.

"If you're going to shoot children," said Cashier with his new-found expertness, "these won't do. They'll tear the bodies completely to pieces."

T'ruth reached into the little bag which hung from her belt. She took out three shotgun shells. "I have three more," she said. "Six children is all we need."

Casher looked at the slug projecting slightly from the shotgun casing. It did not look like any shell he had ever seen before. The workmanship was unbelievably fine and precise.

"What are they? I never saw these before."

"Proximity stunners," she said. "Shoot ten centimeters above the head of any living thing and the stunner knocks it out."

"You want the children alive?"

"Alive, of course. And unconscious. They are a part of your final test."

Two hours later, after an exciting hike to the edge of the weather controls, they had the six children stretched out on the floor of the great hall. Four were little boys, two girls; they were fine-boned, soft-haired people, very thin, but they did not look too far from Earth normal.

T'ruth called up a doctor underman from among her servants. There must have been a crowd of fifty or sixty undermen and robots standing around. Far up the staircase, John Joy Tree stood hidden, half in shadow. Casher suspected that he was as inquisitive as the others but afraid of himself, Casher, "the man of blood."

T'ruth spoke quietly but firmly to the doctor. "Can you give them a strong euphoric before you waken them? We don't want to have to pluck them out of all the curtains in the house, if they go wild when they wake up."

"Nothing simpler," said the doctor underman. He seemed to be of dog origin, but Casher could not tell.

He took a glass tube and touched it to the nape of each little neck. The necks were all streaked with dirt. These children had never been washed in their lives, except by the rain.

"Wake them," said T'ruth.

The doctor stepped back to a rolling table. It gleamed with equipment. He must have preset his devices, because all he did was to press a button and the children stirred into life.

The first reaction was wildness. They got ready to bolt. The biggest of the boys, who by earth standards would have been about ten, got three steps before he stopped and began laughing.

T'ruth spoke the Old Common Tongue to them, very slowly and with long spaces between the words:

"Wind—children—do—you—know—where—you—are?"

The biggest girl twittered back to her so fast that Casher could not understand it.

T'ruth turned to Casher and said, "The girl said that she is in the Dead Place, where the air never moves and where the Old Dead Ones move" around on their own business. She means us." To the wind children she spoke again.

"What—would—you—like—most?"

The biggest girl went from child to child. They nodded agreement vigorously. They formed a circle and began a little chant. By the second repetition around, Casher could make it out.

Shig—shag—shuggery,

shuck shuck shuck! What all of us need is

an all-around duck. Shig—shag—shuggery,

shuck shuck shuck!



At the fourth or fifth repetition they all stopped and looked at T'ruth, who was so plainly the mistress of the house.

She in turn spoke to Casher O'Neill. "They think that they want a tribal feast of raw duck. What they are going to get is inoculations against the worst diseases of this planet, several duck meals and their freedom again. But they need something else beyond all measure. You know what that is, Casher, if you can only find it."

The whole crowd turned its eyes on Casher, the human eyes of the people and underpeople, the milky lenses of the robots.

Casher stood aghast.

"Is this a test?" he asked softly.

"You could call it that," said T'ruth, looking away from him.

Casher thought furiously and rapidly. It wouldn't do any good to make them into forgetties. The household had enough of them. T'ruth had announced a plan to let them loose again. The Mister and Owner Murray Madigan must have told her, sometime or

other, to "do something" about the wind people. She was trying to do it. The whole crowd watched him. What might T'ruth expect?

The answer came to him in a flash.

If she were asking him, it must be something to do with himself, something which he—uniquely among these people, underpeople and robots—had brought to the storm-sieged mansion of Beauregard.

Suddenly he saw it.

"Use me, my lady Ruth," said he, deliberately giving her the wrong title, "to print on them nothing from my intellectual knowledge, but everything from my emotional makeup. It wouldn't do them any good to know about Mizzer, where the Twelve Niles work their way down across the Intervening Sands. Nor about Pontoppidan, the Gem Planet. Nor about Olympia, where the blind brokers promenade under numbered clouds. Knowing things would not help these children. But wanting—"

Wanting things was different.

He was unique. He had wanted to return to Mizzer. He had wanted return beyond all dreams of blood and revenge. He had wanted things fiercely, wildly, so that even if he could not get them, he zigzagged the galaxy in search of them.

T'ruth was speaking to him again, urgently and softly, but not in so low a voice that the others in the room could not hear.

"And what, Casher O'Neill, should I give them from you?"

"My emotional structure. My determination. My desire. Nothing else. Give them that and throw them back into the winds. Perhaps if they want something fiercely enough, they will grow up to find out what it is."

There was a soft murmur of approval around the room.

T'ruth hesitated a moment and then nodded. "You answered, Casher. You answered quickly and perceptively. Bring seven helmets, Eunice. Stay here, doctor."

Eunice, the forgetty, left, taking two robots with her.

"A chair," said T'ruth to no one in particular. "For him."

A large, powerful undSrman pushed his way through the crowd and dragged a chair to the end of the room.

T'ruth gestured that Casher should Sit in it.

She stood in front of him. Strange, thought Casher, that she should be a great lady and still a little girl. How would he ever find a girl like her? He was not even afraid of the mystery of the Fish, or the image of the man on two pieces of wood. He no longer dreaded Space Three, where so many travelers had gone in and so few had come out. He felt safe, comforted by her wisdom and authority. He felt that he would never see the likes of this again—a child running a planet and doing it well; a half-dead man surviving through the

endless devotion of his maidservant; a fierce woman hypnotist living on with all the anxieties and angers of humanity gone, but with the skill and obstinacy of turtle genes to sustain her in her reimprinted form.

"I can guess what you are thinking," said T'ruth, "but we have already said the things that we had to say. I've peeped your mind a dozen times and I know that you want to go back to Mi/zer so bad that Space Three will spit you out right at the ruined fort where the big turn of the Seventh Nile begins. In my own way I love you, Casher, but I could not keep you here without turning you into a forgetty and making you a servant to my master. You know what always comes first with me, and always will."

"Madigan."

"Madigan," she answered, and with her voice the name itself was a prayer.

Eunice came back with the helmets.

"When we are through with these, Casher, I'll have them take you to the conditioning room. Good-bye, my might-have-been!"

In front of everyone, she kissed Jiim full on the lips.

He sat in the chair, full of patience and contentment. Even as his vision blacked out, he could see the thin light sheath of a smock on the girlish figure, he could remember the tender laughter lurking in her smile.

In the last instant of his consciousness, he saw that another figure had joined the crowd—the tall old man with the worn bathrobe, the faded blue eyes, the thin yellow hair. Murray Madigan had risen from his private life-in-death and had come to see the last of Casher O'Neill. He did not look weak, nor foolish. He looked like a great man, wise and strange in ways beyond Casher's understanding.

There was the touch of T'ruth's little hand on his arm and everything became a velvety cluttered dark quiet inside his own mind.

#### XIV

When he awoke, he lay naked and sunburned under the hot sky of Mizzer. Two soldiers with medical patches were rolling him onto a canvas litter.

"Mizzer!" he cried to himself. His throat was too dry to make a sound. "I'm home."

Suddenly the memories came to him and he scrabbled and snatched at them, seeing them dissolve within his mind before he could get paper to write them down.

Memory: there was the front hall, himself getting ready to sleep

in the chair, with the old giant of Murray Madigan at the edge of the crowd and the tender light touch of T'ruth—his girl, his girl, now uncountable light years away—putting her hand on his arm.

Memory: there was another room, with stained-glass pictures and incense, and the weepworthy scenes of a great life shown in frescoes around the wall. There were the two pieces of wood and the man in pain nailed to them. But Casher knew that scattered and coded through his mind there was the ultimate and undefeatable wisdom of the Sign of the Fish. He knew he could never fear fear again.

Memory: there was a gaming table in a bright room, with the wealth of a thousand worlds being raked toward him. He was a woman, strong, big-busted, bejeweled and proud. He was Agatha Madigan, winning at the games. (That must have come, he thought, when they printed me with T'ruth.) And in that mind of the Hechizera, which was now his own mind too, there was clear sure knowledge of how he could win men and women, officers and soldiers, even underpeople and robots, to his cause without a drop of blood or a word of anger.

The men, lifting him on the litter, made red waves of heat and pain roll over him.

He heard one of them say, "Bad case of burn. Wonder how he lost his clothes."

The words were matter-of-fact; the comment was nothing special; but the cadence, that special cadence, was the true speech of Mizzer.

As they carried him away, he remembered the face of Rankin Meiklejohn, enormous eyes staring with inward despair over the brim of a big glass. That was the Administrator. On Henriada. That was the man who sent me past Ambiloxi to Beauregard at two seventy-five in the morning. The litter jolted a little.

He thought of the wet marshes of Henriada and knew that soon he would never remember them again. The worms of the tornadoes creeping up to the edge of the estate. The mad wise face of John Joy Tree. \*\*

Space three? Space three? Already, even now, he could not remember how they had put him into Space three.

And Space three itself—

All the nightmares which mankind has ever had pushed into Casher's mind. He twisted once in agony, just as the litter reached a medical military cart. He saw a girl's face—what was her name?—and then he slept.

## XV

Fourteen Mizzer days later, the first test came.

A doctor colonel and an intelligence colonel, both in the workaday uniform of Colonel Wedder's Special Forces, stood by his bed.

"Your name is Casher O'Neill and we do not know how your body fell among the skirmishers," the doctor was saying, roughly and emphatically. Casher O'Neill turned his head on the pillow and looked at the man.

"Say something more!" he whispered to the doctor.

The doctor said, "You are a political intruder and we do not know how you got mixed up among our troops. We do not even know how you got back among the people of this planet. We found you on the Seventh Nile."

The intelligence colonel standing beside him nodded agreement.

"Do you think the same thing, Colonel?" whispered Casher O'Neill to the intelligence colonel.

"I ask questions. I don't answer them," said the man gruffly.

Casher felt himself reaching for their minds with a kind of fingertip which he did not know he had. It was hard to put into ordinary words, but it felt as though someone had said to him, Casher:

"That one is vulnerable at the left forefront area of his consciousness, but the other one is well armored and must be reached through the midbrain." Casher was not afraid of revealing anything by his expression. He was too badly burned and in too much pain to show nuances of meaning on his face. (Somewhere he had heard of the wild story of the Hechizera of Gonfalon! Somewhere endless storms boiled across ruined marshes under a cloudy yellow sky! But where, when, what was that? . . . He could not take time off for memory. He had to fight for his life.)

"Peace be with you," he whispered to both of them.

"Peace be with you," they responded in unison, with some surprise.

"Lean over me, please," said Casher, "so that I do not have to shout."

They stood stock straight.

Somewhere in the resources of his own memory and intelligence, Casher found the right note of pleading which could ride his voice like a carrier wave and make them do as he wished.

"This is Mizzer," he whispered.

"Of course this is Mizzer," snapped the intelligence colonel, "and you are Casher O'Neill. What are you doing here?"

"Lean over, gentlemen," he said softly, lowering his voice so that they could barely hear him.

This time they did lean over.

His burned hands reached for their hands. The officers noticed it, but since he was sick and unarmed, they let him touch them.

Suddenly he felt their minds glowing in his as brightly as if he had swallowed their gleaming, thinking brains at a single gulp.

He spoke no longer.

He thought at them—torrential, irresistible thought.

/ am not Casher O'Neill. You will find his body in a room four doors down. I am the civilian Bindaoud.

The two colonels stared, breathing heavily.

Neither said a word.

Casher went on: Our fingerprints and records have gotten mixed. Give me the fingerprints and papers of the dead Casher O'Neill. Bury him then, quickly, but with honor. Once he loved your leader and there is no point in stirring up wild rumors about returns from out of space. I am Bindaoud. You will find my records in your front office. I am not a soldier. I am a civilian technician doing studies on the salt in blood chemistry under field conditions. You have heard me, gentlemen. You hear me now. You will hear me always. But you will not remember this, gentlemen, when you awaken. I am sick. You can give me water and a sedative.

They still stood, enraptured by the touch of his tight burned hands.

Casher O'Neill said, "Awaken."

Casher O'Neill let go their hands.

The medical colonel blinked and said amiably, "You'll be better, Mister and Doctor Bindaoud. I'll have the orderly bring you water and a sedative."

To the other officer he said, "I have an interesting corpse four doors down. I think you had better see it."

Casher O'Neill tried to think of the recent past, but the blue light of Mizzer was all around him, the sand smell, the sound of horses galloping. For a moment, he thought of a big child's blue dress and he did not know why he almost wept.

## On the Sand Planet

This is the story of the sand planet itself,

Mizzer, which had lost all hope when the tyrant Wedder imposed the reign of terror and virtue. And its liberator, Casher O'Neill of whom strange things were told, from the day of blood in which he fled from his native city of Kaheer, until he came back to end the shedding of blood for all the rest of his years.

Everywhere that Casher had gone, he had had only one thought in his mind deliverance of his home country from the tyrants whom he himself had let slip into power when they had conspired against his uncle, the unspeakable Kuraf. He never forgot, whether waking or sleeping. He never forgot Kaheer itself along the First Nile, where the horses raced on the turf with the sand nearby. He never forgot the blue skies of his home and the great dunes of the desert between one Nile and the others. He remembered the freedom of a planet built and dedicated to freedom. He never forgot that the price of blood is blood, that the price of freedom is fighting, that the risk of fighting is death. But he was not a fool. He was willing, if he had to, to risk his own death, but he wanted odds on the battle which would not merely snare him home, like a rabbit to be caught in a steel trap, by the police of the dictator Wedder.

And then, he met the solution of his crusade without knowing it at first. He had come to the end of all things, all problems, all worries. He had also come to the end of all ordinary hope. He met T'ruth. Now her subtle powers belonged to Casher O'Neill, to do with as he pleased.

It pleased him to return to Mizzer, to enter Kaheer itself, and to confront Wedder.

Why should he not come? It was his home and he thirsted for revenge. More than revenge he hungered for justice. He had lived many years for this hour and this hour came.

He entered the north gate of Kaheer.

Casher walked into Mizzer wearing the uniform of a medical technician in Wedder's own military service. He had assumed the appearance and the name of a dead man named Bindaoud. Casher walked with nothing more than his hands as weapons, and his hands swung freely at the end of his arms.

Only the steadfastness of his feet, the resolute grace with which he took each step, betrayed his purpose. The crowds in the street saw him pass but they did not see him. They looked at a man and they did not realize that they saw their own history going step by step through their various streets. Casher O'Neill had entered the city of Kaheer; he knew that he was being followed. He could feel it.

He glanced around.

He had learned in his many years of fighting and struggle, on strange planets, countless rules of unremembered hazards.

To be alert, he knew what this was. It was a suchesache. The suchesache at the moment had taken the shape of a small witless boy, some eight years old, who had two trails of stained mucus pouring down from his nostrils, who had forever-open lips ready to call with the harsh bark of idiocy, who had eyes that did not focus right. Casher O'Neill knew that this was a boy and not a boy. It was a hunting and searching device often employed by police lords when they presumed to make themselves into kings or tyrants, a device which flitted from shape to shape, from child to butterfly or bird, which moved with the suchesache and watched the victim; watching, saying nothing, following. He hated the suchesache and was tempted to throw all the powers of his strange mind at it so that the boy might die and the machine hidden within it might perish. But he knew that this would lead to a cascade of fire and splashing of blood. He had already seen blood in Kaheer long ago; he had no wish to see it in the city again.

Instead he stopped the pacing which had been following his cadenced walk through the street. He turned calmly and kindly and looked at the boy, and he said to the boy and to the hideous machine within the boy,

"Come along with me; I'm going straightway to the palace and you would like to see that."

The machine, confronted, had no further choice.

The idiot boy put his hand in Casher's hand and somehow or other Casher

O'Neill managed to resume the rolling deliberate march which had marked so many of his years, while keeping a grip on the hand of the demented child who skipped beside him. Casher could still feel the machine watching him from within the eyes of the boy. He did not care; he was not afraid of guns; he could stop them. He was not afraid of poison; he could resist it. He was not afraid of hypnotism; he could take it in and spit



it back. He was not afraid of fear; he had been on Henriada. He had come home through space-three. There was nothing left to fear. Straightway went he to the palace. The midday gleamed in the bright yellow sun which rode the skies of Kaheer. The whitewashed walls in the arabesque design stayed as they had been for thousands of years. Only at the door was he challenged, but the sentry hesitated as Casher spoke: "I am Bindaoud, loyal servant to Colonel Wedder, and this is a child of the streets whom I propose to heal in order to show our good Colonel Wedder a fair demonstration of my powers."

The sentry said something into a little box which sat in the wall. Casher passed freely. The suchesache trotted beside him. As he went through the corridors, laid with rich rugs, military and civilians moving back and forth, he felt happy. This was not the palace of Wedder, though Wedder lived in it. It was his own palace. He, Casher, had been born in it. He knew it. He knew every corridor.

The changes of the years were very few. Casher turned left into an open courtyard. He smelled the smell of salt water and the sand and the horses nearby. He sighed a little at the familiarity of it, the good and kind welcome. He turned right again and ascended long, long stairs. Each step was carpeted in a different design.

His uncle Kuraf had stood at the head of these very stairs while men and women, boys and girls were brought to him to become toys of his evil pleasures. Kuraf had been too fat to walk down these stairs to greet them. He always let the captives come up to himself and to his den of pleasures. Casher reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

This was no den of pleasures now.

It was the office of Colonel Wedder. He, Casher, had reached it. How strange it was to reach this office, this target of all his hopes, this one fevered pinpoint in all the universe for which his revenge had thirsted until he thought himself mad. He had thought of bombing this office from outer space, or of cutting it with the thin arc of a laser beam, or of poisoning it with chemicals, or of assaulting it with troops. He had thought of pouring fire on this building, or water. He had dreamed of making Mizzer free even at the price of the lovely city of Kaheer itself by finding a small asteroid somewhere and crashing it, in an interplanetary tragedy, directly into the city itself. And the

city, under the roar of that impact, would have blazed into  
thermonuclear incandescence and would have become a poison lake at the  
end of the Twelve Niles. He had thought of a thousand ways of entering  
the city and of destroying the city, merely in order to destroy  
Wedder.

Now he was here. So too was Wedder.

Wedder did not know that he, Casher O'Neill, had come back.

Even less did Wedder know who Casher O'Neill had become, the master of space, the traveler who traveled without ships, the vehicle for devices stranger than any mind on Mizzer had ever conceived.

Very calm, very relaxed, very quiet, very assured, the doom which was Casher O'Neill walked into the antechamber of Wedder. Very modestly, he asked for Wedder.

The dictator happened to be free.

He had changed little since Casher last saw him, a little older, a little fatter, a little wiser all these perhaps. Casher was not sure.

Every cell and filament in his living body had risen to the alert. He was ready to do the work for which the light-years had ached, for which the worlds had turned, and he knew that within an instant it would be done. He confronted Wedder, gave Wedder a modest assured smile.

"Your servant, the technician Bindaoud, sir and colonel," said Casher O'Neill. Wedder looked at him strangely. He reached out his hand, and, even as their hands touched, Wedder said the last words he would ever say on his own.

Within that handclasp, Wedder spoke again and his voice was strange: "Who are you?"

Casher had dreamed that he would say,

"I am Casher O'Neill come back from unimaginable distances to punish you," or that he would say,

"I am Casher O'Neill and I have ridden star lanes for years upon years to find your destruction." Or he had even thought that he might say, "Surrender or die, Wedder, your time has come." Sometimes he had dreamed he would say,

"Here, Wedder," and then show him the knife with which to take his blood.

Yet this was the climax and none of these things occurred.

The idiot boy with the machine within it stood at ease.

Casher O'Neill merely held Wedder's hand and said quite simply, "Your friend."

As he said that, he searched back and forth. He could feel inner eyes within his own head, eyes which did not move within the sockets of his face, eyes which he did not have and with which he could nevertheless see. These were the eyes of his perception.

Quickly, he adjusted the anatomy of Wedder, working kin esthetically

squeezing an artery there, pinching off a gland here. Here, harden the tissue, through which the secretions of a given endocrine material had to come. In less time than it would take an ordinary doctor to describe the process, he had changed Wedder. Wedder had been tuned down like a radio with dials realigned, like a spaceship with its lock sheets reset.

The work which Casher had done was less than any pilot does in the course of an ordinary landing; but the piloting he had done was within the

biochemical system of Wedder himself. And the changes which he had effected were irreversible.

The new Wedder was the old Wedder. The same mind. The same will, the same personality. Yet its permutations were different. And its method of expression already slightly different.

More benign. More tolerant. More calm, more human. Even a little corrupt, as he smiled and said,

"I remember you, now, Bindaoud. Can you help that boy?"

The supposed Bindaoud ran his hands over the boy. The boy wept with pain and shock for a moment. He wiped his dirty nose and upper lip on his sleeves. His eyes came into focus. His lips compressed. His mind burned brightly as its old worn channels became human instead of idiot. The suchesache machine knew it was out of place and fled for another refuge. The boy, given his brains, but no words, no education yet, stood there and hiccupped with joy.

Wedder said very pleasantly,

"That is remarkable. Is it all that you have to show me?"

"All," said Casher O'Neill.

"You were not he."

He turned his back on Wedder and did so in perfect safety.

He knew Wedder would never kill another man.

Casher stopped at the door and looked back. He could tell from the posture of Wedder that that which had to be done, had been done: the changes within the man were larger than the man himself. The planet was free and Casher's own work was indeed done. The suddenly frightened child, which had lost the suchesache, followed him out of blind instinct.

The colonels and the staff officers did not know whether to salute or nod when they saw their chief stand at the doorway, and waved with unexpected friendliness at Casher O'Neill as Casher descended the broad carpeted steps, the child stumbling behind him. At the furthest steps, Casher looked one last time at the enemy who had become almost a part of himself. There stood Wedder, the man of blood. And now, he himself, Casher O'Neill, had expunged the blood, had redone the past, and reshaped the future. All Mizzer was heading back to the openness and freedom which it had enjoyed in the time of the old Republic of the Twelve Niles. He walked on, shifting from one corridor to the other

and using short-cuts to the courtyards, until he came to the doorway of the palace. The sentry presented arms.

"At ease," said Casher. The man put down his gun.

Casher stood outside the palace, that palace which had been his uncle's, which had been his own, which had really been himself. He felt the clear air of Mizzer. He looked at the clear blue skies which he had always loved. He looked at the world to which he had promised he would return, with justice, with vengeance, with thunder, with power. Thanks to the strange

of Man and subtle capacities which he had learned from the turtle-girl, T'ruth, hidden in her own world amid the storm-churned atmosphere of Henriada, he had not needed to fight.

Casher turned to the boy and said,

"I am a sword which has been put into its scabbard. I am a pistol with the cartridges dropped out. I am a wire point with no battery behind it. I am a man, but I am very empty."

The boy made strangled, confused sounds as though he were trying to think, to become himself, to make up for all the lost time he had spent in idiocy.

Casher acted on impulse. Curiously, he gave to the boy his own native speech of Kaheer. He felt his muscles go tight, shoulders, neck, fingertips, as he concentrated with the arts he had learned in the palace of Beauregard where the girl T'ruth governed almost-forever in the name of Mister and Owner Murray Madigan. He took the arts and memories he sought. He seized the boy roughly but tightly by the shoulders. He peered into frightened crying eyes and then, in a single blast of thought, he gave the boy speech, words, memory, ambition, skills. The boy stood there dazed.

At last the boy spoke and he asked,

"Who am I?"

Casher could not answer that one. He patted the child on the shoulder.

He said,

"Go back to the city and find out. I have other needs. I have to find out who I myself may be. Good-bye and peace be with you."

Casher remembered that his mother still lived here. He had often forgotten her. It would have been easier to forget her. Her name was Trihaep, and she had been sister to Kuraf. Where Kuraf had been vicious, she had been virtuous. Where Kuraf had sometimes been grateful, she had been thrifty and shifty. Where Kuraf, with all his evils, had acquired a toleration for men and things and ideas, she remained set on the pattern of thought which her parents had long ago taught her.

Casher O'Neill did something he thought he would never do.

He had never really even thought about doing it. It was too simple. He went home.

At the gate of the house, his mother's old servant knew him, despite

the change in his face, and she said, with a terrible awe in her voice,

"It seems to me that I am looking at Casher O'Neill."

"I use the name Bindaoud," said Casher, "but I am Casher O'Neill. Let me in and tell my mother that I am here."

He went into the private apartment of his mother. The old furniture was still there. The polished bricabrac of a hundred ages, the old paintings and the old mirrors, and the dead people whom he had never known,



represented by their pictures and their mementos. He felt just as ill at ease as he felt when he was a small boy, when he had visited the same room, before his uncle came to take him to the palace.

His mother came in. She had not changed.

He half-thought that she would reach out her arms to him, and cry in a deliberately modern passion,

"My baby! My precious!

Come back to me!"

She did no such thing.

She looked at him coldly as though he were a complete stranger.

She said to him,

"You don't look like my son, but I suppose that you are. You have made trouble enough in your time. Are you making trouble now?"

"I make no malicious trouble. Mother, and I never have," said Casher, "no matter what you may think of me. I did what I had to do. I did what was right."

"Betraying your uncle was right? Letting down our family was right? Disgracing us all was right? You must be a fool to talk like this. I heard that you were a wanderer, that you had great adventures, and had seen many worlds. You don't sound any different to me. You're an old man. You almost seem as old as I do. I had a baby once, but how could that be you? You are an enemy of the house of Kuraf O'Neill. You're one of the people who brought it down in blood. But they came from outside with their principles and their thoughts and their dreams of power. And you stole from inside like a cur. You opened the door and you let in ruin. Who are you that I should forgive you?"

"I do not ask your forgiveness. Mother," said Casher.

"I do not even ask your understanding. I have other places to go and other things yet to do. May peace be upon you."

She stared at him, said nothing.

He went on,

"You will find Mizzer a more pleasant place to live in, since I talked to Wedder this morning."

"You talked to Wedder?" cried she.

"And he did not kill you?"

"He did not know me."

"Wedder did not know you?"

"I assure you, Mother, he did not know me."

"You must be a very powerful man, my son. Perhaps you can repair the fortune of the house of Kuraf O'Neill after all the harm you have done, and all the heartbreak you brought to my brother.

I suppose you know your wife's dead?"

"I had heard that," said Casher.

"I hope she died instantly in an accident and without pain."

"Of course it was an accident. How else do people die these days? She and her husband tried out one of those new boats, and it overturned."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't there."

"I know that. I know that perfectly well, my son. You were outside there, so that I had to look up at the stars with fear. I could look up in the sky and stare for the man who was my son lurking up there with blood and ruin. With vengeance upon vengeance heaped upon all of us, just because he thought he knew what was right. I've been afraid of you for a long long time, and I thought if I ever met you again I would fear you with my whole heart. You don't quite seem to be what I expected, Casher. Perhaps I can like you. Perhaps I can even love you as a mother should. Not that it matters. You and I are too old now."

"I'm not working on that kind of mission any longer, Mother. I have been in this old room long enough and I wish you well. But I wish many other people well, too. I have done what I had to do. Perhaps I had better say good-bye, and much later perhaps, I will come back and see you again. When both of us know more about what we have to do."

"Don't you even want to see your daughter?"

"Daughter?" said Casher O'Neill.

"Do I have a daughter?"

"Oh, poor fool, you. Didn't you even find that out after you left? She bore your child, all right. She even went through the old-fashioned business of a natural birth. The child even looks something like the way you used to look. Matter of fact, she's rather arrogant, like you. You can call on her if you want to.

She lives in the house which is just outside the square in Golden Laut in the leather workers' area. Her husband's name is Ali Ali. Look her up if you want to."

She extended a hand. Casher took the hand as though she had been a queen. And he kissed the cool fingers. As he looked her in the face, here, too, he brought his skills from Henriada in place. He surveyed and felt her personally as though he were a surgeon of the soul, but in this case there was nothing for him to do. This was not a dynamic personality struggling and fighting and moving against the forces of life and hope and disappointment. This was something else, a person set in life, immobile, determined, rigid even for a man with healing arts who could destroy a fleet with his thoughts or who could bring an idiot to normality by mere command. He could see that this was a case

beyond his powers.

He patted the old hand affectionately and she smiled warmly at him, not knowing what it meant.

"If anyone asks,"

said Casher, "the name I have been using is that of the Doctor

Bindaoud. Bindaoud the technician. Can you remember that, Mother?"

"Bindaoud the technician," she echoed, as she led him out the door to walk in the street.

Within twenty minutes he was knocking at his daughter's door.

## II

The daughter herself answered the door. She flung it open.

She looked at the strange man, surveyed him from head to heels.

She noted the medical insignia on his uniform. She noted his mark of rank. She appraised him shrewdly, quickly, and she knew he had no business there in the quarters of the leather workers.

"Who are you?" she sang out, quickly and clearly.

"In these hours and at this time, I pass under the name of the expert Bindaoud, a technician and medical man back from the special forces of Colonel Wedder. I'm just on leave, you see, but sometime later, madam, you might find out who I really am, and I thought you better hear it from my lips. I'm your father."

She did not move. The significant thing is that she did not move at all. Casher studied her and could see the cast of his own bones in the shape of her face, could see the length of his own fingers repeated in her hands. He had sensed that the storms of duty which had blown him from sorrow to sorrow, the wind of conscience which had kept alive his dreams of vengeance, had turned into something very different in her. It, too, was a force, but not the kind of force he understood.

"I have children now and I would just as soon you not meet them. As a matter of fact, you have never done me a good deed except to beget me. You have never done me an ill deed except to threaten my life from beyond the stars. I am tired of you and I am tired of everything you were or might have been. Let's forget it.

Can't you go your way and let me be? I may be your daughter, but I can't help that."

"As you wish, madam. I have had many adventures, and I do not propose to tell them to you. I can see quickly enough that you have what is seemingly a good life, and I hope that my deeds this morning in the palace will have made it better. You'll find out soon enough.

Good-bye."

The door closed upon him and he walked back through the sun-drenched market of the leather workers. There were golden hides there. Hides of animals which had then been artfully engraved with very fine strips of beaten gold so that they gleamed in the sunlight. Casher looked upward and around.

Where do I go now? thought he. Where do I go when I've done

everything I had to do? When I've loved everyone I have wanted to love, when I have been everything I have had to be? What does a man with a mission do when the mission is fulfilled? Who can be more hollow than a victor? If I had lost, I could still want revenge. But I haven't. I've won. And I've won nothing. I've wanted nothing for myself from this dear city. I want nothing from this dear world. It's not in my power to give it or to take it.

Where do

of Man I go when I have nowhere to go? What do I become when I am not ready for death and I have no reason whatsoever for life?

There sprang into his mind the memory of the world of Henriada with the twisting snakes of the little tornadoes. He could see the slender, pale, hushed face of the girl T'ruth and he remembered at last that which it was which she had held in her hand. It was the magic. It was the secret sign of the Old Strong Religion. There was the man forever dying nailed to two pieces of wood. It was the mystery behind the civilization of all these stars. It was the thrill of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One, the Third Forbidden One. It was the mystery on which the robot, rat, and Copt agreed when they came back from space-three. He knew what he had to do.

He could not find himself because there was no himself to be found. He was a used tool. A discarded vessel. He was a shard tossed on the ruins of time, and yet he was a man with eyes and brains to think and with many unaccustomed powers.

He reached into the sky with his mind, calling for a public flying machine.

"Come and get me," he said, and the great winged birdlike machine came soaring over the rooftops and dropped gently into the square.

"I thought I heard you call, sir."

Casher reached into his pocket and took out his imaginary pass signed by Wedder, authorizing him to use all the vehicles of the republic in the secret service of the regime of Colonel Wedder. The sergeant recognized the pass and almost popped out his eyes in respect.

"The Ninth Nile, can you reach it with this machine?"

"Easily," said the sergeant.

"But you better get some shoes first. Iron shoes because the ground there is mostly volcanic glass."

"Wait here for me," said Casher.

"Where can I get the shoes?"

"Two streets over and better get two water bottles, too."

#### IV

Within a matter of minutes he was back. The sergeant watched him fill the bottles in the fountain. He looked at his medical insignia without doubt and showed him how to sit on the cramped emergency seat inside the great machine bird. They snapped their seat belts and the sergeant

said,

"Ready?" and the ornithopter spread out its wings, and flew into the air.

The huge wings were like oars digging into a big sea. They rose rapidly and soon Kaheer was below them, the fragile minarets and the white sand with the racing turf along the river, and the green fields, and even the pyramids copied from something on Ancient Earth.



The operator did something and the machine flew harder. The wings, although far slower than any jet aircraft, were steady, and they moved with respectable speed across the broad dry desert.

Casher still wore his decimal watch from Henriada, and it was two whole decimal hours before the sergeant turned around, pinched him gently awake from the drowse into which he had fallen, shouted something, and pointed down. A strip of silver matched by two strips of green wandering through a wilderness of black, gleaming glittering black, with the beige sands of the everlasting desert stretching everywhere in the distance.

"The Ninth Nile?" shouted Casher. The sergeant smiled the smile of a man who had heard nothing but wanted to be agreeable, and the ornithopter dived with a lurching suddenness toward the twist in the river. A few buildings became visible.

They were modest and small. Verandas, perhaps, for the use of a visitor. Nothing more.

It was not the sergeant's business to query anyone on secret orders from Colonel Wedder. He showed the cramped Casher O'Neill how to get out of the ornithopter, and then, standing in his seat, saluted, and said,

"Anything else, sir?"

Casher said,

"No. I'll make my own way. If they ask you who I was, I am the Doctor Bindaoud and you have left me here under orders."

"Right, sir," said the sergeant, and the great machine reached out its gleaming wings, flapped, spiraled, climbed, became a dot, and vanished.

Casher stood there alone. Utterly alone. For many years he had been supported by a sense of purpose, by a drive to do something, and now the drives and the purpose were gone, and his life was gone, and the use of his future was gone, and he had nothing. All he had was the ultimate imagination, health, and great skills. These were not what he wanted. He wanted the liberation of all Mizzer. But he had gotten that, so what was it?

He almost stumbled towards one of the nearby buildings.

A voice spoke up. A woman's voice. The friendly voice of an old woman.

Very unexpectedly, she said,

"I've been waiting for you, Cashier; come on in.

V

He stared at her.

"I've seen you," he said.

"I've seen you somewhere. I know you well. You've affected my fate.

You did something to me and yet I don't know who you are. How could you be here to meet me when I didn't know I was coming?"

"Everything in its time," said the woman.

"With a time for everything

of Man and what you need now is rest. I'm D'alma, the dog-woman from Pontoppidan. The one who washed the dishes."

"Her," cried he.

"Me," she said.

"But you but you how did you get here?"

"I got here," she said.

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Who sent you?"

"You're part of the way to the truth," she said.

"You might as well hear a little more of it. I was sent here by a lord whose name I will never mention. A lord of the under people Acting from Earth. He sent out another dog-woman to take my place. And he had me shipped here as simple baggage. I worked in the hospital where you recovered and I read your mind as you got well. I knew what you would do to Wedder and I was pretty sure that you would come up here to the Ninth Nile, because that is the road that all searchers must take."

"Do you mean," he said, "that you know the road to " He hesitated and then plunged into his question, " the Holy of Unholies, the Thirteenth Nile?"

"I don't see that it means anything, Casher. Except that you'd better take off those iron shoes; you don't need them yet. You'd better come in here. Come on in."

He pushed the beaded curtains aside and entered the bungalow. It was a simple frontier official dwelling. There were cots hither and yon, a room to the rear which seemed to be hers; a dining room to the right and there were papers, a viewing machine, cards, and games on the table. The room itself was astonishingly cool.

She said,

"Casher, you've got to relax. And that is the hardest of all things to do. To relax, when you had a mission for many many years."

"I know it," said he.

"I know it. But knowing it and doing it aren't the same things."

"Now you can do it," said D'alma.

"Do what?" he snapped.

"Relax, as we were talking about. All you have to do here is to have some good meals. Just sleep a few times, swim in the river if you want

to. I have sent everyone away except myself, and you and I shall have this house. And I am an old woman, not even a human being. You're a man, a true man, who's conquered a thousand worlds. And who has finally triumphed over Wedder. I think we'll get along. And when you're ready for the trip, I'll take you."

The days did pass as she said they would. With insistent but firm kindness, she made him play games with her: simple, childish games with

dice and cards. Once or twice he tried to hypnotize her. To throw the dice his own way. He changed the cards in her hand. He found that she had very little telepathic offensive power, but that her defenses were superb. She smiled at him whenever she caught him playing tricks. And his tricks failed.

With this kind of atmosphere he really began to relax. She was the woman who had spelled happiness for him on Pontoppidan when he didn't know what happiness was. When he had abandoned the lovely Genevieve to go on with his quest for vengeance.

Once he said to her,

"Is that old horse still alive?"

"Of course he is," she said.

"That horse will probably outlive you and me. He thinks he's on Mizzer by galloping around a patrol capsule. Come on back; it's your turn to play."

He put down the cards, and slowly the peace, the simplicity, the reassuring, calm sweetness of it all stole over him and he began to perceive the nature of her therapy. It was to do nothing but slow him down. He was to meet himself again.

It may have been the tenth day, perhaps it was the fourteenth, that he said to her,

"When do we go?"

She said,

"I've been waiting for that question and we're ready now. We go."

"When?"

"Right now. Put on your shoes. You won't need them very much," she said, "but you might need them where we land. I am taking you part way there."

Within a few minutes, they went out into the yard. The river in which he had swum lay below. A shed, which he did not remember having noticed before, lay at the far end of the yard.

She did something to the door, removing a lock, and the door flung open. And she pulled out a skeletonized ornithopter motor, wings, tails. The body was just a bracket of metal. The source of power was as usual an ultra-miniaturized, nuclear-powered battery. Instead of seats, there were two tiny saddles, like the saddles used in the bicycles of old, old Earth which he had seen in museums.

"You can fly that?" he asked.

"Of course I can fly it. It's better than going 200 miles over broken glass. We are leaving civilization now. We are leaving everything that was on any map. We are flying directly to the Thirteenth Nile, as you well knew it should be that."

"I knew that," he said.

"I never expected to reach it so soon.

Does this have anything to do with that Sign of the Fish you were talking about?"

"Everything, Casher. Everything. But everything in its place.

Climb in behind me." He sat on top of the ornithopter, and this one ran down the

of Man yard on its tall, graceful mechanical legs before the flaps of its wings put it in the air. She was a better pilot than the sergeant had been; she soared more and beat the wings less. She flew over country that he, a native of Mizzer, had never dreamed about.

They came to a city gaudy in color. He could see large fires burning alongside the river, and brightly painted people with their hands lifted in prayer. He saw temples and strange gods in them.

He saw markets with goods, which he never thought to see marketed.

"Where are we?" he asked.

D'alma said,

"This is the City of Hopeless Hope." She put the ornithopter down and, as they climbed out of the saddles, it lifted itself into the air and flew back, in the direction from whence they had come.

"You are staying with me?" asked Casher.

"Of course I am. I was sent to be with you."

"What for?"

"You are important to all the worlds, Casher, not just Mizzer.

By the authority of the friends I have, they have sent me here to help you."

"But what do you get out of it?"

"I get nothing, Casher. I find my own destruction, perhaps, but I will accept that. Even the loss of my own hope if it only moves you further on in your voyage. Come, let us enter the City of Hopeless Hope."

VI

They walked through the strange streets. Almost everyone in the streets seemed to be engaged in the practice of religion. The stench of the burning dead was all round them. Talismans, luck charms, and funeral supplies were in universal abundance.

Casher said, speaking rather quietly to D'alma,

"I never knew there was anything like this on any civilized planet."

"Obviously," she replied, "there must be many people who believe in worry about death; there are many who do know about this place.

Otherwise there would not be the throngs here. These are the people who have the wrong hope and who go to no place at all, who find under this earth and under the stars their final fulfillment. These are the ones who are so sure that they are right that they never will be right.

We must pass through them quickly, Casher, lest we, too, start

believing."

No one impeded their passage in the streets, although many people paused to see that a soldier, even a medical soldier, in uniform, had the audacity to come there.



They were even more surprised that an old hospital attendant who seemed to be an off-world dog walked along beside him.

"We cross the bridge now, Casher, and this bridge is the most terrible thing I've ever seen, whereas now we are going to come to the Jwindz, and the Jwindz oppose you and me and everything you stand for."

"Who are the Jwindz?" asked Casher.

"The Jwindz are the perfect ones. They are perfect in this earth. You will see soon enough."

VII

As they crossed the bridge, a tall, blithe police official, clad in a neat black uniform, stepped up to them and said,

"Go back.

People from your city are not welcome here."

"We are not from that city," said D'alma.

"We are travelers."

"Where are you bound?" asked the police official.

"We are bound for the source of the Thirteenth Nile."

"Nobody goes there," said the guard.

"We are going there," said D'alma.

"By what authority?"

Casher reached into his pocket and took out a genuine card.

He had remade one, from the memories he had retained in his mind. It was an all-world pass, authorized by the Instrumentality.

The police official looked at it and his eyes widened.

"Sir and master, I thought you were merely one of Wedder's men. You must be someone of great importance. I will notify the scholars in the Hall of Learning at the middle of the city. They will want to see you. Wait here. A vehicle will come."

D'alma and Casher O'Neill did not have long to wait. She said nothing at all in this time. Her air of good humor and competence ebbed perceptibly. She was distressed by the cleanliness and perfection around her, by the silence, by the dignity of the people.

When the vehicle came, it had a driver, as correct, as smooth, and as courteous as the guard at the bridge. He opened the door and waved them in. They climbed in and they sped noiselessly through the well-groomed streets: houses, each one in immaculate taste; trees, planted the way in which trees should be planted.

In the center square of the city, they stopped. The driver got out, walked around the vehicle, opened their door.

He pointed at the archway of the large building and he said, "They are expecting you."

of Man Casher and D'alma walked up the steps reluctantly. She was reluctant because she had some sense of what this place was, a special dwelling for quiet doom and arrogant finality. He was reluctant because he could feel that in every bone of her body she resented this place. And he resented it, too.

They were led through the archway and across a patio to a large, elegant conference room.

Within the room a circular table had already been set in preparation of a meal.

Ten handsome men rose to greet them.

The first one said,

"You are Casher O'Neill. You are the wanderer. You are the man dedicated to this planet and we appreciate what you have done for us, even though the power of Colonel Wedder never reached here."

"Thank you," said Casher.

"I am surprised to hear that you know of me."

"That's nothing," said the man.

"We know of everyone. And you, woman," said the same man to D'alma, "you know full well that we never entertain women here. And you are the only under person in this city. A dog at that. But in honor of our guest we shall let you pass. Sit down if you wish. We want to talk to you."

A meal was served. Little squares of sweet unknown meat, fresh fruits, bits of melon, chased with harmonious drinks which cleared the mind and stimulated it, without intoxicating or drugging.

The language of their conversations was clear and elevated.

All questions were answered swiftly, smoothly, and with positive clarity.

Finally, Casher was moved to ask,

"I do not seem to have heard of you, Jwindz; who are you?"

"We are the perfect ones," said the oldest Jwindz.

"We have all the answers; there is nothing else left to find."

"How do you get here?" said Casher.

"We are selected from many worlds."

"Where are your families?"

"We don't bring them with us."

"How do you keep out intruders?"

"If they are good, they wish to stay. If they are not good, we destroy them."

Casher still shocked by his experience of fulfilling all his life's work in the confrontation with Wedder though his life might be at stake, asked casually,

"Have you decided yet whether I am perfect enough to join you? Or am I not perfect and to be destroyed?"

The heaviest of all the Jwindz, a tall, portly man, with a great bushy shock of black hair, replied ponderously.

"Sir, you are forcing our decision, but I think that you may be some-

thing exceptional. We cannot accept you. There is too much force in you. You may be perfect, but you are more than perfect. We are men, sir, and I do not think that you are any longer a mere man.

You are almost a machine. You are yourself dead people. You are the magic of ancient battles coming to strike among us. We are all of us a little afraid of you, and yet we do not know what to do with you. If you were to stay here a while, if you calmed down, we might give you hope. We know perfectly well what that dog woman of yours calls our city. She calls it the City of the Perfect Ones. We just call it Jwindz Jo, in memory of the ancient Rule of the Jwindz, which somewhere once obtained upon old Earth. And therefore, we think that we will neither kill you nor accept you.

We think do we not, gentlemen? that we will speed you on your way, as we have sped no other traveler. And that we will send you, then, to a place which few people pass. But you have the strength and if you are going to the source of the Thirteenth Nile, you will need it."

"I will need strength?" Casher asked.

The first Jwindz who had met them at the door said,

"Indeed you will need strength, if you go to Mortoval. We may be dangerous to the uninitiated. Mortoval is worse than dangerous.

It is a trap many times worse than death. But go there if you must."

## VIII

Casher O'Neill and D'alma reached Mortoval on a one wheeled cart, which ran on a high wire past picturesque mountain gorges, soaring over two serrated series of peaks and finally dropping down to another bend in the same river, the illegal and forgotten Thirteenth Nile.

When the vehicle stopped, they got out. No one had accompanied them.

The vehicle, held in place by gyroscopes and compasses, felt itself relieved of their weight and hurried home.

This time there was no city: just one great arch. D'alma clung close to him. She even took his arm and pulled it over her shoulder as though she needed protection. She whined a little as they walked up a low hill and finally reached the arch. They walked into the arch and a voice not made of sound cried out to them.

"I am youth and am everything that you have been or ever will be. Know this now before I show you more."

Casher was brave, and this time he was cheerfully hopeless, so he

said,

"I know who I am. Who are you?"

"I am the force of the Gunung Banga. I am the power of this planet  
which keeps everyone in this planet and which assures the order which

of Man persists among the stars, and promises that the dead shall not walk among the men. And I serve of the fate and the hope of the future. Pass if you think you can."

Casher searched with his own mind and he found what he wanted. He found the memory of a young child, T'ruth, who had been almost a thousand years on the planet of Henriada. A child, soft and gentle on the outside, but wise and formidable and terrible beyond belief, in the powers which she had carried, which had been imprinted upon her. As he walked through the arch he cast the images of truth here and there. Therefore he was not one person but a multitude. And the machine and the living being which hid behind the machine, the Gunung Banga, obviously could see him and could see D'alma walking through, but the machine was not prepared to recognize whole multitudes of crying throngs.

"Who are you thousands that you should come here now? Who are you multitudes that you should be two people? I sense all of you. The fighters and the ships and the men of blood, the searchers and the forgetters there's even an Old North Australian renunciant here. And the great Go-Captain Tree, and there are even a couple of men of Old Earth. You are all walking through me. How can I cope with you?"

"Make us, us," said Casher firmly.

"Make you, you," replied the machine.

"Make you, you. How can I make you, you, when I do not know who you are, when you flit like ghosts and you confuse my computers? There are too many, I say. There are too many of you. It is ordained that you should pass."

"If it is so ordained, then let us pass." D'alma suddenly stood proud and erect.

They walked on through.

She said,

"You got us through." They had indeed passed beyond the arch, and there, beyond the arch, lay a gentle riverside with skiffs pulled up along the beach.

"This seems to be next," said Casher O'Neill.

D'alma nodded.

"I'm your dog, master. We go where you think."

They climbed into a skiff. Echoes of tumult followed from the arch.

"Good-bye to troubles," the echoes said.

"Had they been people they would have been stopped. But she was a dog and a servant, who had lived many years in the happiness of the Sign of the Fish. And he was a combat-ready man who had incorporated within himself the memories of adversaries and friends, too tumultuous for any scanner to measure, too complex for any computer to assess." The echoes resounded across the river.

There was even a dock on the other side. Casher tied the skiff to the dock and he helped the dog-woman go toward the buildings that they saw beyond some trees.



## IX

D'Alma said,

"I have seen pictures of this place; this is the Kermesse Dorgiieil, and here we may lose our way, because this is the place where all the happy things of this world come together, but where the man and the two pieces of wood never filter through. We shall see no one unhappy, no one sick, no one unbalanced; everyone will be enjoying the good things of life; perhaps I will enjoy it, too. May the Sign of the Fish help me that I not become perfect too soon."

"You won't be," Casher promised.

At the gate of this city, there was no guard at all. They walked on past a few people who seemed to be promenading outside the town. Within the city they approached what seemed to be a hotel and an inn or a hospital. At any rate it was a place where many people were fed.

A man came out and said,

"Well, this is a strange sight; I never knew that the Colonel Wedder let his officers get this far from home, and as for you, woman, you're not even a human being. You're an odd couple and you're not in love with each other. Can we do anything for you?"

Casher reached into his pocket and tossed several credit pieces of five denominations in front of the man.

"Don't these mean anything?" asked Casher.

Catching them in his fingers, the man said,

"Oh, we can use money! We use it occasionally for important things; we don't need yours. We live well here, and we have a nice life, not like those two places across the river, which stay away from life. All men who are perfect are nothing but talk Jwindz they call themselves, the perfect ones well, we're not that perfect. We've got families and good food and good clothes, and we get the latest news from all the worlds."

"News," said Casher.

"I thought that was illegal."

"We get anything. You would be surprised at what we have here. It's a very civilized place. Come on in; this is the hotel of the Singing Swans and you can live here as long as you wish. When I say that, I mean it. Our treasure has unusual resources, and I can see that you are unusual people. You are not a medical technician, despite that

uniform, and your follower is not a mere dogunderperson or you wouldn't have gotten this far."

They entered a promenade two stories high; little shops lined each side of the corridor with the treasures of all the worlds on exhibit. The prices were marked explaining them, but there was no one in the stalls.

The smell of good food came from a cool dining room in the inn.

"Come into my office and have a drink. My name is Howard."

"That's an old Earth name," said Casher.

"Why shouldn't it be?" asked Howard.

"I came here from old Earth. I

looked for the best of all places, and it took me a long time to find it. This is it the Kermesse Dorgiieil. We have nothing here but simple and clean pleasures; we have only those vices which help and support. We accomplish the possible; we reject the impossible. We live life, not death. Our talk is about things and not about ideas. We have nothing but scorn for that city behind you, the City of the Perfect Ones. And we have nothing but pity for the holier than holies far back where they claim to have Hopeless Hope, and practice nothing but evil religion. I passed through those places too, although I had to go around the City of the Perfect Ones. I know what they are and I've come all the way from Earth, and if I have come all the way from old old Earth I should know what this is. You should take my word for it."

"I've been on Earth myself," said Casher, rather dryly.

"It's not that unusual."

The man stopped with surprise.

"My name," said Casher, "is Casher O'Neill."

The man halted and then gave him a deep bow.

"If you are Casher O'Neill, you have changed this world; you have come back, my lord and master. Welcome. We are no longer your host. This is your city. What do you wish of us?"

"To look a while, to rest a while, to ask directions for the voyage."

"Directions? Why should anyone want directions away from here? People come here and ask directions from a thousand places to get to Kermesse Dorgiieil."

"Let's not argue this now," said Casher.

"Show us the rooms, let us clean ourselves up. Two separate rooms."

Howard walked upstairs. With an intricate twist of his hand he unlocked two rooms.

"At your service," he said.

"Call me with your voice; I can hear you anywhere in the building."

Casher called once for sleeping gear, toothbrushes, shaving equipment. He insisted that they send the shampooer, a woman of apparent Earth origin, in to attend to D'alma; and D'alma actually knocked at his door and begged that he not shower her with these attentions.

He said,

"You with your deep kindness have helped me so far.

I am helping you very little."

They ate a light repast together in the garden just below their two rooms, and then they went to their rooms and slept.

It was only on the morning of the second day that they went with Howard into the city to see what could be found.

Everywhere the city was strong with happiness. The population could not have been very large, twenty or thirty thousand persons at most.

At one point, Casher stopped; he could smell the scorch of ozone in the air. He knew the atmosphere itself had been burned and that meant only one thing, spaceships coming in or going out.

He asked,

"Where is the spaceport for Earth?"

Howard looked at him quickly and keenly.

"If you were not the lord Casher O'Neill, I'd never tell you. We have a small spaceport there. That is the way that we avoid our traffic with most of Mizzer. Do you need it, sir?"

"Not now," said Casher.

"I just wondered where it was." They came to a woman who danced as she sang to the accompaniment of two men with wild archaic guitars. Her feet did not have the laughter of ordinary dance, but they had the positiveness, the compulsion of a meaning. Howard looked at her appreciatively; he even ran the tip of his tongue across his upper lip.

"She is not yet spoken for," said Howard.

"And yet she is a very unusual thing. A resigned ex-lady of the Instrumentality."

"I find that unusual, indeed. What is her name?"

"Celalta," said Howard.

"Celalta, the other one. She has been in many worlds, perhaps as many worlds as you have, sir. She's faced dangers like the ones you've faced. And oh, my lord and master, forgive me for saying it, but when I look at her dancing, and I see you looking at her, I can see a little bit into the future; and I can see you both dead together, the winds slowly blowing the flesh off your bones. And your bones anonymous and white, lying two valleys over from this very place."

"That's an odd enough prophecy," said Casher.

"Especially from someone who seems not to be poetic. What is that?"

"I seem to see you in the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene. There's a road out of here that goes there and some people, not many, go there, and when they go there, they die. I don't know why," said Howard.

"Don't ask me."

D'alma whispered,

"That is the road to the Shrine of Shrines.

That's the place to the Quel itself. Find out where it starts."

"Where does that road start?" asked Casher.

"Oh, you'll find out; there's nothing you won't find out. Sorry, my lord and master. The road starts just beyond that bright orange roof."

He pointed to a roof and then turned back.

Without saying anything more, he clapped his hands at the dancer and she gave him a scornful look. Howard clapped his hands again; she stopped dancing and walked over.

"And what is it you want now, Howard?"

He gave her a deep bow.

"My former lady, my mistress, here is the lord and master of this planet, Casher O'Neill."

"I am not really the lord and master," said Casher O'Neill.

"I

merely would have been if Wedder had not taken the rule away from my uncle."

"Should I care about that?" asked the woman.

Casher smiled back.

"I don't see why you should."

"Do you have anything you want to say to me?"

"Yes," said Casher. He reached over and seized her wrist. Her wrist was almost as strong as his.

"You have danced your last dance, madam, at least for the time. You and I are going to a place that this man knows about, and he says that we are going to die there, and our bones will be blown with the wind."

"You give me commands," she cried.

"I give you commands," he said.

"What is your authority?" she asked scornfully.

"Me," he said.

She looked at him, he looked back at her, still holding her wrist.

She said,

"I have powers. Don't make me use them."

He said,

"I have powers, too; nobody can make me use mine."

"I'm not afraid of you; go ahead."

Fire shot at him as he felt the lunge of her mind toward his, her attack, her flight for freedom, but he kept her wrist and she said nothing.

But with his mind responding to hers he unfolded the many worlds, the old Earth itself, the gem planet, Olympia of the blind brokers, the storm planet, Henriada, and a thousand other places that most people only knew in stories and dreams. And then, just for a little bit, he showed her who he was, a native of Mizzer who had become a citizen of the Universe. A fighter who had been transformed into a doer. He let her know that in his own mind he carried the powers of Truth the turtle-girl, and behind T'ruth herself, he carried the personalities of the Hechizera of Gonfalon.

He let her see the ships in the sky turning and twisting as they fought nothing at all, because his mind, or another mind which had become his, had commanded them to.

And then with the shock of a sudden vision, he projected to her the two pieces of wood, the image of a man in pain. And gently, but with the

simple rhetoric of profound faith, he pronounced: "This is the call of the First Forbidden One, and the Second Forbidden One, and the Third Forbidden One. This is the symbol of the Sign of the Fish. For this you are going to leave this town, and you are going with me, and it may be that you and I shall become lovers."

Behind him a voice spoke.

"And I," said D'alma, "will stay here."

He turned around to her.

"D'alma, you've come this far; you've got to come further."

"I can't, my lord. I read my duty as I see it. If the authorities who sent me want me enough, they will send me back to my dishwasher on Pontoppidan, otherwise they will leave me here. I am temporarily beautiful and I'm rich and I'm happy and I don't know what to do with myself, but I know I have seen you as far as I can. May the Sign of the Fish be with you."

Howard merely stood aside, making no attempt to hinder them or to help them.

Celalta walked beside Casher like a wild animal which had never been captured before.

Casher O'Neill never let go of her wrist.

"Do we need food for this trip?" he asked of Howard.

"No one knows what you need."

"Should we take food?"

"I don't see why," said Howard.

"You have water. You can always walk back here if you have disappointments. It's really not very far."

"Will you rescue me?"

"If you insist on it," said Howard.

"I suppose somewhere people will come out and bring you back, but I don't think you will insist because that is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene, and the people who go in there do not want to come out, and do not want to eat, and they do not want to go forward. We have never seen anyone vanish to the other side, but you might make it."

"I am looking," said Casher, "for something which is more than power between the worlds. I am looking for a sphinx that is bigger than the sphinx on old Earth. For weapons which cut sharper than lasers, for forces that move faster than bullets. I am looking for something which



will take the power away from me and put the simple humanity back into me. I am looking for something which will be nothing, but a nothing I can serve and can believe in."

"You sound like the right kind of man," said Howard, "for that kind of trip. Go in peace, both of you."

Celalta said,

"I do not really know who you are, my lord, master, but I have danced my last dance. I see what you mean.

This is the road that leads away from happiness. This is the path which leaves good clothes and warm shops behind. There are no restaurants where we are going, no hotels, no river anymore.

There are neither believers nor unbelievers; but there is something that comes out of the soil which makes people die. But if you think, Casher O'Neill, that you can triumph over it, I will go with you. And if you do not think it, I will die with you."

"We are going, Celalta, I didn't know that it was just going to be the two of us, but we are going and we are going now."

X

It was actually less than two kilometers to get over the ridge away from the trees, away from the moisture-laden air along the river, and into a dry, calm valley which had a clean blessed quietness which Casher had never seen before. Celalta was almost gay.

"This, this is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene?"

"I suppose it is," said Casher, "but I propose to keep on walking. It isn't very big."

As they walked their bodies became burdensome; they carried not only their own weight but the weight of every month of their lives. The decision seemed good to them that they should lie down in the valley and rest amid the skeletons, rest as the others had rested. Celalta became disoriented. She stumbled, and her eyes became unfocused. Not for nothing had Casher O'Neill learned all the arts of battle of a thousand worlds. Not for nothing had he come through space-three. This valley might have been tempting if already he had not ridden the cosmos on his eyes alone.

He had. He knew the way out. It was merely through. Celalta seemed to come more to life as they reached the top of the ridge.

The whole world was suddenly transformed by not more than ten steps. Far behind them, several kilometers, perhaps, there were still visible the last rooftops of the Kermesse Dorgtiieil. Behind them lay the bleaching skeletons, in front of them was the final source and the mystery, the Quel of the Thirteenth Nile.

XI

There was no sign of a house, but there were fruits and melons and grain growing, and there were deep trees at the edges of caves, and there were here and there signs of people that had been there long ago. There were no signs of present occupancy.

"My lord," said the once-lady Celalta, "my lord," she repeated, "I think this is it."

"But this is nothing," said Casher.

"Exactly. Nothing is victory, nothing is arrival, nowhere is getting there. Don't you see now why she left us?"

"She?" asked Casher.

"Yes, your faithful companion, the dog-woman D'alma."

"No, I don't see it. Why did she leave this to us?"

Celalta laughed.

"We're Adam and Eve in a way. It's not up to us to be

given a god or to be given a faith. It's up to us to find the power and this is the quietest and last of the searching places. The others were just phantoms, hazards on our route. The best way to find freedom is not to look for it, just as you obtained your utter revenge on Wedder by doing him a little bit of good. Can't you see it, Casher? You have won at last the immense victory that makes all battles seem vain. There is food around us; we can even walk back to the Kermesse Dorgiieil, if we want clothing or company or if we want to hear the news. But, most of all, this is the place in which I feel the presence of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One, and the Third Forbidden One. We don't need a church for this, though I suppose there are still churches on some planets. What we need is a place to find ourselves and be ourselves and I'm not sure that this chance exists in many other places than this one spot."

"You mean," said Casher, "that everywhere is nowhere?"

"Not quite that," said Celalta.

"We have some work to do getting this place in shape, feeding ourselves. Do you know how to cook? Well, I can cook better. We can catch a few things to eat; we can shut ourselves in that cave and then" and then Celalta smiled, her face more beautiful than he ever expected he would find a face to be "we have each other."

Casher stood battle-ready, facing the most beautiful dancer he had ever met. He realized that she had once been a part of the Instrumentality, a governor of worlds, a genuine advisor in the destination of mankind. He did not know what strange motives had caused her to quit authority and to come up to this hard-to find river, unmarked on maps. He didn't even know why the man Howard should have paired them so quickly: perhaps there was another force. A force behind that dog-woman which had sent him to his final destination.

He looked down at Celalta and then he looked up at the sky, and he said,

"Day is ending; I will catch a few of those birds if you know how to cook them. We seem to be a sort of Adam and Eve, and I do not know whether this is paradise or hell. But I know that you are in it with me, and that I can think about you because you ask nothing of me."

"That is true, my lord, I ask nothing of you. I, too, am looking for both of us, not myself alone. I can make a sacrifice for you, but I

look for those things which only we two, acting together, can find in this valley."

He nodded in serious agreement.

"Look," she said, "that is the Quel itself, there the Thirteenth Nile comes out of the rocks, and here are the woods below. I seem to have heard of it. Well, we'll have plenty of time. I'll start the fire, but you go catch two of those chickens. I don't even think they're wild birds. I think they are just left over people-chickens that have grown wild since their previous owners left. . . ."

"Or died," said Casher.

"Or died," repeated Celalta.

"Isn't that a risk anybody has to take? Let us live, my lord, you and me, and let us find the magic, the deliverance which strange fates have thrown in front of you and me. You have liberated Mizzer, is that not enough?"

Simply by touching Wedder, you have done what otherwise could have been accomplished at the price of battle and great suffering."

"Thank you," said Casher.

"I was once Instrumentality, my lord, and I know that the Instrumentality likes to do things suddenly and victoriously.

When I was there we never accepted defeat, but we never paid anything extra. The shortest route between two points might look like the long way around; it isn't. It's merely the cheapest human way of getting there. Has it ever occurred to you, that the Instrumentality might be rewarding you for what you have done for this planet?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Casher.

"You hadn't thought of it?" She smiled.

"Well. . ." said Casher, embarrassed and at a loss for words.

"I am a very special kind of woman," said Celalta.

"You will be finding that out in the next few weeks. Why else do you think that I would be given to you?"

He did not go to hunt the chickens, not just then. He reached his arms out to her and, with more trust and less fear than he had felt in many years, he held her in his arms, and kissed her on the lips. This time there was no secret reserve in his mind, no promise that after this he would get on with his journey to Mizzer. He had won, his victory was behind him, and in front of him there lay nothing, but this beautiful and powerful place and . . . Celalta.

## Three to a Given Star

"Stick your left arm straight forward, Samm,"  
said Folly.

He stretched his arm out.

"I can sense it!" cried Folly.

"Now wiggle your fingers!"

Samm wiggled them.

Finsternis said nothing, but both of them caught from his mind, riding clear and wise beside them, a "sense of the situation." His "sense of the situation" could be summed up in the one-word comment, which he did not need to utter: "Foolishness!"

"It is not foolishness, Finsternis," cried Folly.

"Here are the three of us, riding empty space millions of kilometers from nowhere. We were people once, Earth people from Old Earth itself. It is foolish to remember what we used to be? I was a woman once. A beautiful woman. Now I'm this this thing, bent on a mission of murder and destruction. I used to have hands myself, real hands. Is it wrong for me to enjoy looking at Samm's hands now and then? To think of the past which all three of us have left behind."

Finsternis did not answer; his mind was blank to both of them. There was nothing but space around them, not even much space dust, and the bluish light of Linschoten XV straight ahead.

From the third planet of that star they could occasionally hear the cackle and gabble of the man-eaters.

Once again Folly cried to Finsternis,

"Is that so wrong, that I should enjoy looking at a hand? Samm has well-shaped hands. I was a person once, and so were you. Did I ever tell you that I was a beautiful woman once?"

She had been a beautiful woman once and now she was the control of a small spaceship which fled across emptiness with two grotesque companions.

She was now a ship only eleven meters long and shaped roughly like an ancient dirigible. Finsternis was a perfect cube, fifty meters to the

side,

packed with machinery which could blank out a sun and contain its planets until they froze to icy, perpetual death. Samm was a man, but he was a man of flexible steel, two hundred meters high.

He was designed to walk on any kind of planet, with any kind of inhabitant, with any kind of chemistry or any kind of gravity. He was designed to bring antagonists, whomever they might be, the message of the power of man. The power of man . . . followed by terror, followed if necessary by death. If Samm failed, Finsternis had the further power of blocking out the sun, Linschoten XV. If either or both failed. Folly had the job of adjusting them so that they could win. If they had no chance of winning, she then had the task of destroying Finsternis and Samm, and then herself.

Their instructions were clear: "You will not, you will not under any circumstances return.

You will not under any conditions turn back toward Earth. You are too dangerous to come anywhere near Earth, ever again. You may live if you wish. If you can. But you must not repeat not come back. You have your duty. You asked for it. Now you have it. Do not come back. Your forms fit your duty. You will do your duty."

Folly had become a tiny ship, crammed with miniaturized equipment. Finsternis had become a cube blacker than darkness itself.

Samm had become a man, but a man different from any which had ever been seen on Earth. He had a metal body, copied from the human form down to the last detail. That way the enemies, whoever they might be, would be given a terrible glimpse of the human shape, the human voice. Two hundred meters high he stood, strong and solid enough to fly through space with nothing but the jets on his belt.

The Instrumentality had designed all three of them. Designed them well.

Designed them to meet the crazy menace out beyond the stars, a menace which gave no clue to its technology or origin, but which responded to the signal "man" with the counter-signal, "gabble cackle! eat, eat! man, man! good to eat! cackle gabble! eat, eat!"

That was enough.

The Instrumentality took steps. And the three of them the ship, the



cube, and the metal giant sped between the stars to conquer, to terrorize, or to destroy the menace which lived on the third planet of Linschoten XV. Or, if needful, to put out that particular sun. Folly, who had become a ship, was the most volatile of the three. She had been a beautiful woman once.

II

"You were a beautiful woman once," Samm had said, some years before.

"How did you end up becoming a ship?"

"I killed myself," said Folly.

"That's why I took this name Folly. I had a long life ahead of me, but I killed myself and they brought me back at the last minute. When I found out I was still alive, I volunteered for something adventurous, dangerous. They gave me this. Well, I asked for it, didn't I?"

"You asked for it," said Samm gravely. Out in the middle of nothing, surrounded by a tremendous lot of nowhere, courtesy was still the lubricant which governed human relationships. The two of them observed courtesy and kindness toward one another.

Sometimes they threw in a bit of humor, too.

Finsternis did not take part in their talk or their companionship. He did not even verbalize his answers. He merely let them know his sense of the situation and this time, as in all other times, his response was

"Negative. No operation needed. Communication nonfunctional. Not needed here. Silence, please. I kill suns. That is all I do. My part is my business. All mine." This was communicated in a single terrible thought, so that Folly and Samm stopped trying to bring Finsternis into the conversations which they started up, every subjective century or so, and continued for years at a time.

Finsternis merely moved along with them, several kilometers away, but well within their range of awareness. But as far as company was concerned, Finsternis might as well not have been there at all.

Samm went on with the conversation, the conversation which they had had so many hundreds of times since the plano form ship had discharged them "near" Linschoten XV and left them to make the rest of their way alone.

(If the menace were really a menace, and if it were intelligent, the Instrumentality had no intention of letting an actual plano form ship fall within the powers of a strange form of life which might well be

hypnotic in its combat capacities. Hence the ship, the cube, and the giant were launched into normal space at high velocity, equipped with jets to correct their courses, and left to make their own way to the danger.) Samm said, as he always did,

"You were a beautiful woman.

Folly, but you wanted to die. Why?"

"Why do people ever want to die, Samm? It's the power in us, the vitality which makes us want so much. Life always trembles on the edge of disappointment. If we hadn't been vital and greedy and lustful and yearning, if we hadn't had big thoughts and wanted bigger ones, we would have stayed animals, like all the little things back on Earth.

It's strong life that

brings us so close to death. We can't stand the beauty of it, the nearness of the things we want, the remoteness of the things that we can have. You and me and Finsternis, now, we're monsters riding out between the stars. And yet we're happier now than we were when we were back among people. I was a beautiful woman, but there were specific things which I wanted. I wanted them myself. I alone. For me. Only for me.

When I couldn't have them, I wanted to die. If I had been stupider or happier I might have lived on. But I didn't. I was me intensely me.

So here I am. I don't even know whether I have a body or not, inside this ship. They've got me all hooked up to the sensors and the viewers and the computers.

Sometimes I think that I may be a lovely woman still, with a real body hidden somewhere inside this ship, waiting to step out and to be a person again. And you, Samm, don't you want to tell me about yourself? Samm. SAMM. That's no name for an actual person Superordinated Alien Measuring and Mastery device. What were you before they gave you that big body? At least you still look like a person. You're not a ship, like me."

"My name doesn't matter, Folly, and if I told it to you, you wouldn't know it. You never knew it."

"How wouldn't I know?" she cried.

"I've never told you my name either, so perhaps we did know each other back on Old Earth when we were still people."

"I can tell something," said Samm, "from the shape of words, from the

ring of thoughts, even when we're not out here in nothing. You were a lady, perhaps high-born. You were truly beautiful. You were really important. And I I was a technician. A good one. I did my work and I loved my family, and my wife and I were happy with every child which the Lords gave us for adoption. But my wife died first. And after a while my children, my wonderful boy and my two beautiful, intelligent girls my own children, they couldn't stand me anymore. They didn't like me. Perhaps I talked too much.

Perhaps I gave them too much advice. Perhaps I reminded them of their mother, who was dead. I don't know. I won't ever know.

They didn't want to see me. Out of manners, they sent me cards on my birthday. Out of sheer formal courtesy, they called on me sometimes.

Now and then one of them wanted something. Then they came to me, but it was always just to get something. It took me a long time to figure out, but I hadn't done anything. It wasn't what I had done or hadn't done. They just plain didn't like me. You know the songs and the operas and the stories, Folly, you know them all."

"Not all of them," thought Folly gently, "not all of them.

Just a few thousand."

"Did you ever see one," cried Samm, his thoughts ringing fiercely against her mind, "did you ever see a single one about a rejected father?

They're all about men and women, love and sex, but I can tell you that rejection hurts even when you don't ask anything of your loved ones but their company and their happiness and their simple genuine smiles. When I knew that my children had no use for me, I had no use for me either. The Instrumentality came along with this warning, and I volunteered."

"But you're all right now, Samm," said Folly gently.

"I'm a ship and you are a metal giant, but we're off doing work which is important for all mankind. We'll have adventures together. Even black and grumbly here," she added, meaning Finsternis, "can't keep us from the excitement of companionship or the hope of danger. We're doing something wonderful and important and exciting. Do you know what I would do if I had my life again, my ordinary life with skin and toenails and hair and things like that?"

"What?" asked Samm, knowing the answer perfectly well from the hundreds of times they had touched on this point.

"I'd take baths. Hundreds and hundreds of them, over again.

Showers and dips in cold pools and soaks in hot bathtubs and rinses and more showers. And I would do my hair, over and over again, thousands of different ways. And I would put on lipstick, in the most outrageous colors, even if nobody saw me, except for my own self looking in the mirror. Now I can hardly remember what it used to be to be dry or wet. I'm in this ship and I see the ship and I do not really know if I am a person or not any more."

Samm stayed quiet, knowing what she would say next.

"Samm, what would you do?" Folly asked.

"Swim," he said.

"Then swim, Samm, swim! Swim for me in the space between the stars. You still have a body and I don't, but I can watch you and I can sense you swimming out here in the nothing at-all."

Samm began to swim a huge Australian crawl, dipping his face to the edge of the water as if there were water there. The gestures made no difference in his real motion, since they were all of them in the fast trajectory computed for them from the point where they left the Instrumentality's ship and started out in normal space for the star listed as Linschoten XV.

This time, something very sudden happened, and it happened strangely. From the dark gloomy silence of the cube, Finsternis, there came an articulate cry, called forth in clear human speech: Stop it! Stop moving right now. I attack.

Both Samm and Folly had instruments built into them, so they could read space around them. The instruments, quickly scanned, showed nothing. Yet Folly felt odd, as though something had gone very wrong in her ship-self, which had seemed so metal, so reliable, so inalterable. She threw a thought of inquiry at Samm and instead got another command from Finsternis. Don't think.

### III

Samm floated like a dead man in his gargantuan body.

Folly drifted like a fruit beside his hand.

At last there came words from Finsternis: "You can think now, if you want to. You can chatter at each other again. I'm through."

Samm thought at him, and the thought-pattern was troubled and confused.

"What happened? I felt as though the immaculate grid of space had been pinched together in a tight fold. I felt you do something, and then there was silence around us again."

"Talking," said Finsternis, "is not operational and it is not required of me. But there are only three of us here, so I might as well tell you what happened. Can you hear me, Folly?"

"Yes," she said, weakly.

"Are we on course," asked Finsternis, "for the third planet of Linschoten XV?"

Folly paused while checking all her instruments, which were more complicated and refined than those carried by the other two, since she was the maintenance unit.

"Yes," said she at last.

"We are exactly on course. I don't know what happened, if anything did happen."

"Something happened, all right," said Finsternis, with the gratified savagery of a person whose quick-and-cruel nature is rewarded only by meeting and overcoming hostility in real life.

"Was it a space dragon, like they used to meet on the old, old ships?"

"No, nothing like that," said Finsternis, communicative for once, since this was something operational to talk about.

"It doesn't even seem to be in this space at all. Something just rises up among us, like a volcano coming out of solid space. Something violent and wild and alive. Do you two still have eyes?"

"Seeing devices for the ordinary light band?" asked Samm.

"Of course we do!" said Finsternis.

"I will try to fix it so that you will have a visible input."

There was a sharp pause from Finsternis.

The voice came again, with much strain.

"Do not do anything. Do not try to help me. Just watch. If it wins, destroy me quickly. It might try to capture us and get back to Earth.

"Folly felt like telling Finsternis that this was unnecessary, since the

first motion toward return would trigger destruction devices which had been built into each of the three of them, beyond reach, beyond detection, beyond awareness. When the Instrumentality said,

"Do not come back," the Instrumentality meant it.

She said nothing.

She watched Finsternis instead.

Something began to happen.

It was very odd.

Space itself seemed to rip and leak.

In the visible band, the intruder looked like a fountain of water being thrown randomly to and fro.

But the intruder was not water.

In the visible light-band, it glowed like wild fire rising from a shimmering column of blue ice. Here in space there was nothing to burn, nothing to make light: she knew that Finsternis was translating unresolvable phenomena into light.

She sensed Samm moving one of his giant fists uncontrollably, in a helpless, childish gesture of protest.

She herself did nothing but watch, as alertly and passively as she could.

Nevertheless, she felt wrenched. This was no material phenomenon. It was wild unformed life, intruding out of some other proportion of space, seeking material on which to impose its vitality, its frenzy, its identity. She could see Finsternis as a solid black cube, darker than mere darkness, drifting right into the column. She watched the sides of Finsternis.

On the earlier part of the trip, since they had left the people and the plano form ship and had been discharged in a fast trajectory toward Linschoten XV, Finsternis' side had seemed like dull metal, slightly burnished, so that Folly had to brush him lightly with radar to get a clear image of him.

Now his sides had changed.

They had become as soft and thick as velvet.

The strange volcano-fountain did not seem to have much in the way of sensing devices. It paid no attention to Samm or to herself. The dark cube attracted it, as a shaft of sunlight might attract a baby or as the rustle of paper might draw the attention of a kitten.

With a slight twist of its vitality and direction, the whole column of burning, living brightness plunged upon Finsternis, plunged and burned out and went in and was seen no more.

Finsternis' voice, clear and cheerful, sounded out to both of them.

"It's gone now."

"What happened to it?" asked Samm.

"I ate it," said Finsternis.

"You what?" cried Folly.

"I ate it," said Finsternis. He was talking more than he ever had before.

"At least, that's the only way I can describe it. This machine they gave me or made me into or whatever they did, it's really rather good. It's powerful. I can feel it absorbing things, taking them in, taking them apart, putting them away.

It's something like eating used to be when I was a person. That wild thing attacked me, wrapped me up, devoured me. All I did was to take it in, and now it's gone. I feel sort of full. I suppose my machines are sorting out samples of it to send away to rendezvous points in little rockets. I know that I have sixteen small rockets inside me, and I can feel two of them getting ready to move. Neither one of you could have done what I do. I was built to absorb whole suns if necessary, break them down, freeze them down, change their molecular structure, and shoot their vitality off in one big useless blast on the radio spectrum. You couldn't do anything like that, Samm, even if you do have arms and legs and a head and a voice if we ever get into an atmosphere for you to use it in. You couldn't do what I have just done. Folly."

"You're good," said Folly, with emphasis. But she added: "I can repair you."

Obviously offended, Finsternis withdrew into his silence.

Samm said to Folly,

"How much further to destination?"

Said Folly promptly,

"Seventy-nine earth years, four months and three days, six hours and two minutes, but you know how little that means out here. It could seem like a single afternoon or it could feel to us like a thousand lifetimes.

Time doesn't work very well for us."

"How did Earth ever find this place, anyhow?" asked Samm.

"All I know is that it was two very strong tele paths working together

on the planet Mizzer. An ex-dictator named Casher O'Neill and an ex-Lady named Celalta. They were doing a bit of ps ionic astronomy and suddenly this signal came in strong and clear. You know that tele paths can catch directions very accurately. Even over immense distances. And they can get emotions, too. But they are not very good at actual images or things. Somebody else checked it out for them."

"M-m-m," said Samm. He had heard all this before. Out of sheer boredom, he went back to swimming vigorously. The body might not really be his, but it made him feel good to exercise it.

Besides, he knew that Folly watched him with pleasure great pleasure, and a little bit of envy.

Casher O'Neill and the Lady Celalta had finished with making love. They had lain with their bodies tired and their minds clear, relaxed. They had stretched out on a blanket just above the big gushing spring Three to a Given Star which was the source of the Ninth Nile. Both tele paths they could hear a bird-couple quarreling inside a tree, the male bird commanding the female to get out and get to work and the female answering by dropping deeper and deeper into a fretful and irritable sleep.

The Lady Celalta had whispered a thought to her lover and master, Casher O

"Neill.

"To the stars?"

"The stars?" thought he with a grumble. They were both strong tele paths He had been imprinted, in some mysterious way, with the greatest tele path-hypnotist of all time, the Honorable Agatha Madigan. In the Lady Celalta he had a companion worthy of his final talents, a natural tele path who could herself reach not only all of Miner but some of the nearer stars. When they teamed up together, as she now proposed, they could plunge into dusty infinities of depth and bring back feelings or images which no Go-Captain had ever found with his ship.

He sat up with a grunt of assent.

She looked at him fondly, possessively, her dark eyes alight with alertness, happiness, and adventure.

"Can I lift?" she asked, almost timidly.

When two tele paths worked together, one cleared the vision for both of them as far as their combined minds could reach and then the other



sprang, with enormous effort, as far and as fast as possible toward any target which presented itself. They had found strange things, sometimes beautiful or dramatic ones, by this method.

Casher was already drinking enormous gulps of air, filling his lungs, holding his breath, letting go with a gasp, and then inhaling deeply and slowly again. In this way he re oxygenated his brain very thoroughly for the huge effort of a telepathic dive into the remote depth of space. He did not even speak to her, nor did he tele path a word to her; he was conserving his strength for a good jump.

He merely nodded to her.

The Lady Celalta, too, began the deep breathing, but she seemed to need it less than did Casher.

They were both sitting up, side by side, breathing deeply.

The cool night sands of Miner were around them, the harmless gurgle of the Ninth Nile was beside them, the bright star-cluttered sky of Miner was above them.

Her hand reached out and took hold of his. She squeezed his hand. He looked at her and nodded to her again.

Within his mind. Miner and its entire solar system seemed to burst into flame with a new kind of light. The radiance of Celalta's mind trailed off unevenly in different directions, but there, almost 2 off the pole of

Miner's ecliptic, he felt something wild and strange, a kind of being which he had never sensed before. Using Celalta 's mind as a base, he let his mind dive for it.

The distance of the plunge left them both dizzy, sitting on the quiet night sands of Miner. It seemed to both of them that the mind of man had never reached so far before.

The reality of the phenomenon was un doubtable

There were animals all around them, the usual categories: runners, hunters, jumpers, climbers, swimmers, hidere, and handlers. It was some of the handlers who were intensely telepathic themselves.

The image of man created an immediate, murderous response.

"Cackle gabble, gabble cackle, man, man, man, eat them, eat them!"

Casher and Celalta were both so surprised that they let the contact go, after making sure that they had touched a whole world full of beings, some of them telepathic and probably civilized.

How had the beings known "man"? Why had their response been immediate?

Why anthropophagous and homicidal?

They took time, before coming completely out of the trance, to make a careful, exact note of the direction from which the danger-brains had shrieked their warning.

This they submitted to the Instrumentality, shortly after the incident.

And that was how, unknown to Folly, Samm, and Finsternis, the inhabitants on the third planet of Linschoten XV had come to the attention of mankind.

#### IV

As a matter of fact, the three wanderers later on felt a vague, remote telepathic contact which they sensed as being warmhearted and human, and therefore did not try to track down, with their minds or their weapons. It was O'Neill and Celalta, many years later by Mizzer time, reaching to see what the Instrumentality had done about Linschoten XV.

Folly, Samm, and Finsternis had no suspicion that the two most powerful tele paths in the human area of the galaxy had stroked them, searched them, felt them through, and seen things about them which the three of them did not know about themselves or about each other.

Casher O'Neill said to the Lady Celalta,

"You got it, too?"

"A beautiful woman, encased in a little ship?"

Casher nodded.

"A redhead with skin as soft and transparent as living ivory? A woman who was beautiful and will be beautiful again?"

"That's what I got," said the Lady Celalta.

"And the tired old man, weary of his children and weary of his own life because his children were weary of him."

"Not so old," said Casher O'Neill.

"And isn't that a spectacular piece of machinery they put him into? A metal giant.

It felt like something about a quarter of a kilometer high. Acidproof.

Cold-proof. Won't he be surprised when he finds that the

Instrumentality has rejuvenated his own body inside that monster?"

"He certainly will be," said the Lady Celalta happily, thinking of the

pleasant surprise which lay ahead of a man whom she would never know or see with her own bodily eyes.

They both fell silent.

Then said the Lady Celalta,

"But the third person . . ." There was a shiver in her voice as though she dared not ask the question.

"The third person, the one in the cube." She stopped, as though she could neither ask nor say more.

"It was not a robot or a personality cube," said Casher O'Neill.

"It was a human being all right. But it's crazy. Could you make out, Celalta, as to whether it was male or female?"

"No," said she,

"I couldn't tell. The other two seemed to think that it was male."

"But did you feel sure?" asked Casher.

"With that being, I felt sure of nothing. It was human, all right, but it was stranger than any lost hominid we have ever felt around the forgotten stars. Could you tell, Casher, whether it was young or old?"

"No," said he.

"I felt nothing only a desperate human mind with all its guards up, living only because of the terrible powers of the black cube, the sun-killer in which it rode. I never sensed someone before who was a person without characteristics. It's frightening."

"The Instrumentality are cruel sometimes," said Celalta.

"Sometimes they have to be," Casher agreed.

"But I never thought that they would do that."

"Do what?" asked Casher.

Her dark eyes looked at him. It was a different night, and a different Nile, but the eyes were only a very little bit older and they loved him just as much as ever. The Lady Celalta trembled as though she herself might think that the all-powerful Instrumentality could have hidden a microphone in the random sands. She whispered to her lover,

"You said it yourself, Casher, just a moment ago."

"Said what?" He spoke tenderly but fearlessly, his voice ringing out over the cool night sands.

The Lady Celalta went on whispering, which was very unlike her usual self.

"You said that the third person was 'crazy.'" Do you realize that you may have spoken the actual literal truth?" Her whisper darted at him like a snake.

At last, he whispered back,

"What did you sense? What could you guess?"

"They have sent a madman to the stars. Or a mad woman. A real psychotic."

"Lots of pilots," said Casher, speaking more normally, "are cushioned against loneliness with real but artificially activated psychoses. It gets them through the real or imagined horrors of the sufferings of space."

"I don't mean that," said Celalta, still whispering urgently and secretly.

"I mean a real psychotic."

"But there aren't any. Not loose, that is," said Casher, stammering with surprise at last.

"They either get cured or they are bottled up in thought-proof satellites somewhere."

Celalta raised her voice a little, just a little, so that she no longer whispered but spoke urgently.

"But don't you see, that's what they must have done. The Instrumentality made a star-killer too strong for any normal mind to guide. So the Lords got a psychotic somewhere, a real psychotic, and sent a madman out among the stars. Otherwise we could have felt its gender or its age."

Casher nodded in silent agreement. The air did not feel colder, but he got gooseflesh sitting beside his beloved Celalta on the familiar desert sands.

"You're right. You must be right. It almost makes me feel sorry for the enemies out near Linschoten XV. Do you see nothing of them this time? I couldn't perceive them at all."

"I did, a little," said the Lady Celalta.

"Their tele paths have caught the strange minds coming at them with a high rate of speed. The telepathic ones are wild with excitement but the others are just going cackle-gabble, cackle-gabble with each other, filled with anger, hunger, and the thought of man."

"You got that much?" he said in wonder.

"My lord and my lover, I dived this time. Is it so strange that I sensed more than you did? Your strength lifted me."

"Did you hear what the weapons called each other?"

"Something silly." He could see her knitting her brows in the bright star shine which illuminated the desert almost the way that the Old Original Moon lit up the nights sometimes on Manhome itself.

"It was Folly, and something like

"Superordinated Alien Measuring and Mastery machine' and something like 'darkness' in the Ancient Doyches Language."

"That's what I got, too," said Casher.

"It sounds like a weird team."

"But a powerful one, a terribly powerful one," said the Lady Celalta.

"You and I, my lover and master, have seen strange things and dangers between the stars, even before we met each other, but we never saw anything like this before, did we?"

"No," said he.

"Well, then," said she, "let us sleep and forget the matter as much as we can. The Instrumentality is certainly taking care of Linschoten XV, and we two need not bother about it."

And all that Samm, Folly, and Finsternis knew was that a light touch, unexplained but friendly, had gone over them from the far star region near home. Thought they, if they thought anything about it at all,

"The Instrumentality, which made us and sent us, has checked up on us one more time."

V

A few years later, Samm and Folly were talking again while Finsternis guarded, impenetrable, uncommunicating detectable only by the fierce glow of human life which shone telepathically out of the immense cube rode space beside them and said nothing.

Suddenly Folly cried out to Samm loudly, "I can smell them."

"Smell who?" asked Samm mildly.

"There isn't any smell out here in the nothingness of space."

"Silly," thought Folly back,

"I don't mean really smell. I mean that I can pick up their sense of odor telepathically."

"Whose?" said Samm, being dense.

"Our enemies', of course," cried Folly.

"The man-rememberers who are not man. The cackle-gabble creatures. The beings who remember man and hate him. They smell thick and warm and alive to each other. Their whole world is full of smells. Their telepaths are getting frantic now. They have even figured out that there are three of us and they are trying to get our smells."

"And we have no smell. Not when we do not even know whether we have human bodies or not, inside these things. Imagine this metal body of mine smelling. If it did have a smell,"

said Samm, "it would probably be the very soft smell of working steel and a little bit of lubricants, plus whatever odors my jets might activate inside an atmosphere. If I know the Instrumentality, they have made my jets smell awful to almost any kind of being. Most forms of life think first through their noses and then figure out the rest of experience later. After all, I was built to intimidate, to frighten, to destroy.

The Instrumentality did not make this giant to be friendly with anybody. You and I can be friends. Folly, because you are a little ship

which I could hold like a cigar between my fingers, and because the ship holds the memory of a very lovely woman. I can sense what you once were. What you may still be, if your actual body is still inside that boat."

"Oh, Samm!" she cried.

"Do you think I might still be alive, really alive, with a real me in a real me, and a chance to be myself somewhere again, out here between the stars?"

"I can't sense it plainly," said Samm.

"I've reached as much as I can through your ship with my sensors, but I can't tell whether there's a whole woman there or not. It might be just a memory of you dissected and laminated between a lot of plastic sheets. I really can't tell, but sometimes I have the strangest hunch that you are still alive, in the old ordinary way, and that I am alive too."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful!" She almost shouted at him.

"Samm, imagine being us again, if we fulfill our mission and conquer this planet and stay alive and settle there! I might even meet you and

" They both fell silent at the implications of being ordinary alive

again. They knew that they loved each other. Out here, in the immense blackness of space, there was nothing they could do but streak along in their fast trajectories and talk to each other a little bit by telepathy.

"Samm," said Folly, and the tone of her thought showed that she was changing a difficult subject.

"Do you think that we are the furthest out that people have ever gone? You used to be a technician. You might know. Do you?"

"Of course I know," thought Samm promptly.

"We're not.

After all, we're still deep inside our own galaxy."

"I didn't know," said Folly contritely.

"With all those instruments, don't you know where you are?"

"Of course I know where I am, Samm. In relation to the third planet of Linschoten XV. I even have a faint idea of the general direction in which Old Earth must lie, and how many thousands of ages it would take us to get home, traveling through ordinary space, if we did try to turn around." She thought to herself but didn't add in her thought to Samm,

"Which we can't." She thought again to him,

"But I've never studied astronomy or navigation, so I couldn't tell whether we were at the edge of the galaxy or not."

"Nowhere near the edge," said Samm.

"We're not John Joy Tree and we're nowhere near the two-headed elephants which weep forever in intergalactic space."

"John Joy Tree?" sang Folly; there was joy and memory in her thoughts as she sounded the name.

"He was my idol when I was a girl. My father was a Subchief of the Instrumentality and always promised to bring John Joy Tree to our house. We had a country house and it was unusual and very fine for this day and age. But Mister and Go-Captain Tree never got around to visiting us, so there I was, a big girl with picture-cubes of him all over my room. I liked him because he was so much older than me, and so resolute-looking and so tender too. I had all sorts of romantic day-dreams about him, but he never showed up and I married the wrong man several times, and my children got given to the wrong people, so here I am. But what's this stuff about two-headed

elephants?"

"Really?" said Samm.

"I don't see how you could hear about John Joy Tree and not know what he did."

"I knew he flew far, far out, but I didn't know exactly what he did.

After all, I was just a child when I fell in love with his picture.

What did he do? He's dead now, I suppose, so I don't suppose it matters."

Finsternis cut in, grimly and unexpectedly,

"John Joy Tree is not dead. He's creeping around a monstrous place on an abandoned planet, and he is immortal and insane."

"How did you know that?" cried Samm, turning his enormous metal head to look at the dark burnished cube which had said nothing for so many years.

There was no further thought from Finsternis, not a ghost, not an echo of a word.

Folly prodded him.

"It's no use trying to make that thing talk if it doesn't want to.

We've both tried, thousands of times. Tell me about the two headed elephants. Those are the big animals with large floppy ears and the noses that pick things up, aren't they? And they make very wise, dependable under people out of them?"

"I don't know about the under people part, but the animals are the kind you mention, very big indeed. When John Joy Tree got far outside our cosmos by flying through Space3 he found an enormous procession of open ships flying in columns where there was nothing at all. The ships were made by nothing which man has ever even seen. We still don't know where they came from or what made them. Each open ship had a sort of animal, something like an elephant with four front legs and a head at each end, and as he passed the unimaginable ships, these animals howled at him. Howled grief and mourning. Our best guess was that the ships were the tombs of some great race of beings and the howling elephants, the immortal half-living mourners who guarded them."

"But how did John Joy Tree ever get back?"

"Ah, that was beautiful. If you go into Space3, you take nothing more than your own body with you. That was the finest engineering the human race has ever done. They designed and built a whole plano form ship



out of John Joy Tree's skin, fingernails, and hair. They had to change his body of Man chemistry a bit to get enough metal in him to carry the coils and the electric circuits, but it worked. He came back. That was a man who could skip through space like a little boy hopping on familiar rocks. He's the only pilot who ever piloted himself back home from outside our galaxy. I don't know whether it will be worth the time and treasure to use space-three for intergalactic trips. After all, some very gifted people may have already fallen through by accident. Folly. You and Finsternis and I are people who have been built into machines. We are not ourselves the machines. But with Tree they did it the other way around. They made a machine out of him. And it worked. In that one deep flight he went billions of times further than we will ever go."

"You think you know," said Finsternis unexpectedly.

"That's what you always do. You think you know."

Folly and Samm tried to get Finsternis to talk some more, but nothing happened. After a few more rests and talks they were ready for landing on the third planet of Linschoten XV.

They landed.

They fought.

Blood ran on the ground. Fire scorched the valleys and boiled the lakes. The telepathic world was full of the cackle-gabble of fright, hatred throwing itself into suicide, fury turning into surrender, into deep despair, into hopelessness, and at last into a strange kind of quiet and love.

Let us not tell that story.

It can be written some other time, told by some other voice.

The beings died by thousands and tens of thousands while Finsternis sat on a mountain-top, doing nothing. Folly wove death and destruction, uncoded languages, drew maps, showed Samm the strong-points and the weapons which had to be destroyed.

Part of the technology was very advanced, other parts were still tribal. The dominant race was that of the beings who had evolved into handlers and thinkers; it was they who were the tele paths

All hatred ceased as the haters died. Only the submissive ones lived on.

Samm tore cities about with his bare metal hands, ripped heavy guns to pieces while they were firing at him, picking the gunners off the gun carriages as though they were lice, swimming oceans when he had to, with Folly darting and hovering around or ahead of him.

Final surrender was brought by their strongest tele path a very wise old male who had been hidden inside a deep mountain.

"You have come, people. We surrender. Some of us have always known the truth. We are Earth-born, too. A cargo of chickens settled here unimaginable times ago. A time-twist tore us out of our convoy and threw us here. That's why, when we sensed you far across space, we caught the relationship of eat-and-eaten. Only, our brave ones had it wrong. You eat us: we don't eat you. You are the masters now. We will serve you forever. Do you seek our death?"

"No, no," said Folly.

"We came only to avert a danger, and we have done that. Live on, and on, but plan no war and make no weapons. Leave that to the Instrumentality."

"Blessed is the Instrumentality, whoever that may be. We accept your terms. We belong to you."

When this was done, the war was over.

Strange things began to happen.

Wild voices sang from within Folly and Samm, voices not their own.

Mission gone. Work finished. Go to hill with cube. Go and rejoice!

Samm and Folly hesitated. They had left Finsternis where they landed, halfway around the planet.

The singing voices became more urgent. Go. Go. Go now. Go back to the cube. Tell the chicken-people to plant a lawn and a grove of trees. Go, go, go now to the good reward!

They told the tele paths what had been said to them and voyaged wearily up out of the atmosphere and back down for a landing at the original point of contact, a long low hill which had been planted with huge patches of green turf and freshly transplanted trees even in the hours in which they flew off the world and back on it again. The bird-tele paths must have had strong and quick commands.

The singing became pure music as they landed, chorales of reward and rejoicing, with the hint of martial marches and victory fugues woven in.

Man, stand up, said the voices to Samm.

Samm stood on the ridge of the hill. He stood like a colossus against the red-dawning sky. A friendly, quiet crowd of the chicken-people fell back.

Man, put your hand to your right forehead, sang the voices.

Samm obeyed. He did not know why the voices called him "Alan."

Ellen, land, sang the rejoicing voices to Folly. Folly, herself a little ship, landed at Samm's feet. She was bewildered with happy confusion and a great deal of pain which did not seem to matter much.

Alan, come forth, sang the voices. Samm felt a sharp pain as his forehead his huge metal forehead, two hundred meters above the ground burst open and closed again. There was something pink and helpless in his hand.

The voices commanded, Alan, put your hand gently on the ground.

of Man Samm obeyed and put his hand on the ground. The little pink toy fell on the fresh turf. It was a tiny miniature of a man.

Ellen, stand forth, sang the voices again. The ship named Folly opened a door and a naked young woman fell out.

Alma, wake up. The cube named Finsternis turned darker than charcoal.

Out of the dark side, there stumbled a black-haired girl.

She ran across the hill-slope to the figure named Ellen. The man body named Alan was struggling to his feet.

The three of them stood up.

The voices spoke to them: This is our last message. You have done your work. You are well. The boat named Folly contains tools, medicine, and the other equipment for a human colony. The giant named Samm will stand forever as a monument to human victory. The cube named Finsternis will now dissolve. Alan!

Ellen! Treat Alma lovingly and well. She is now a for gettingy

The three naked people stood bewildered in the dawn.

Good-bye and a great high thanks from the Instrumentality.

This is a pre-coded message, effective only if you won. You have won.

Be happy. Live on!

Ellen took Alma who had been Finsternis and held her tight. The great cube dissolved into a shapeless slag-heap. Alan, who had been Samm, looked up at his former body dominating the skyline.

For reasons which the travelers did not understand until many years had

passed, the bird-people around them broke into ululant hymns of peace, welcome, and joy.

"My house," said Ellen, pointing at the little ship which had spat forth her body just minutes ago, "is now a home for all of us."

They climbed into the successful little ship which had been called Folly. They knew, somehow, that they would find clothes and food. And wisdom, too. They did.

## VI

Ten years later, they had the proof of happiness playing in the yard before their house a substantial building, made of stone and brick, which the local people had built under Alan's directions. (They had changed their whole technology in the process of learning from him, and thanks to the efficiency and power of the telepathic priestly caste things learned at any one spot on the planet were swiftly disseminated to the whole group of races on the planet.) The proof of happiness consisted of the thirty-five human children playing in the yard. Ellen had had nine, four sets of twins

and a single. Alma had had twelve, two sets of quintuplets and a pair of twins. The other fourteen had been bottle-grown from ova and sperm which they found in the ship, the frozen donations of complete strangers who had done their bit for the off world settling of the human race. Thanks to the careful genetic coding of both the womb-children and the bottle-children, there was a variety of types, suitable for natural breeding over many generations to come.

Alan came to the door. He measured the time by the place where the great shadow fell. It was hard to realize that the gigantic, indestructible statue which loomed above them all had once been his own self. A small glacier was beginning to form around the feet of Samm and the night was getting cold.

"I'm bringing the children in already," said Ch-tikkik, one of the local nurses they had hired to help with the huge brood of human babies. She, in return, got the privilege of hatching her eggs on the warm shelf behind the electric stove; she turned them every hour, eagerly awaiting the time that sharp little mouths would break the shell and human like little hands would tear an opening from which a human like baby would emerge, oddly pretty-ugly like a gnome, and unusual only in that it could stand upright from the moment of birth.

One little boy was arguing with Ch-tikkik. He wore a warm robe of vegetable-fiber veins knitted to serve as a base for a feather cloak. He was pointing out that with such a robe he could survive a blizzard and claiming, quite justly, that he did not have to be in the house in order to stay warm. Was that Rupert? thought Alan.

He was about to call the child when his two wives came to the door, arm in arm, flushed with the heat of the kitchen where they had been cooking the two dinners together one dinner for the humans, now numbering thirty-eight, and the other for the bird people who were tremendously appreciative of getting cooked food, but who had odd requirements in the recipes, such as "one quart of finely ground granite gravel to each gallon of oatmeal, sugared to taste and served with soybean milk."

Alan stood behind his wives and put a hand on the shoulder of each. "It's hard to think," he said, "that a little over ten years ago, we didn't even know that we were still people. Now look at us, a family, and a good one.

Alma turned her face up to be kissed, and Ellen, who was less sentimental, lifted her face to be kissed, too, so that her co-wife would not be embarrassed at being babied separately. The two liked each other very much. Alma came out of the cube Finsternis as a for getty conditioned to remember nothing of her long sad psychotic life before the Instrumentality had sent her on a wild mission among the stars. When she had joined Alan of Man and Ellen, she knew the words of the Old Common Tongue, but very little else.

Ellen had had some time to teach her, to love her, and to mother her before any of the babies were born, and the relationship between the two of them was warm and good.

The three parents stood aside as the bird-women, wearing their comfortable and pretty feather cloaks, herded the children into the house. The smallest children had already been brought in from their sunning and were being given their bottles by bird-girls who never got tired of watching the cuteness and helplessness of the human infant. "It's hard to think of that time at all," said Ellen, who had been "Folly." "I wanted beauty and fame and a perfect marriage and nobody

even told me that they didn't go together. I have had to come to the end of the stars to get what I wanted, to be what I might become."

"And me," said Alma, who had been

"Finsteris," "I had a worse problem. I was crazy. I was afraid of life. I didn't even know how to be a woman, a sweetheart, a female, a mother. How could I ever guess that I needed a sister and wife, like the one you have been, to make my life whole? Without you to show me, Ellen, I could never have married our husband. I thought I was carrying murder among the stars, but I was carrying my own solution as well. Where else could I turn out to be me?"

"And I," said Alan, who had been

"Samm," "became a metal giant between the stars because my first wife was dead and my own children forgot me and neglected me. Nobody can say I'm not a father now. Thirty-five, and more than half of them mine. I'll be more of a father than any other man of the human race has ever been."

There was a change in the shadow as the enormous right arm swung heavily toward the sky as a prelude to the sharp robotic call that nightfall, calculated with astronomical precision, had indeed come to the place where he stood.

The arm reached its height, pointing straight up.

"I used to do that," said Alan.

The cry came, something like a silent pistol-shot which all of them heard, but a shot without echoes, without reverberations.

Alan looked around.

"All the children are in. Even Rupert.

Come in, my darlings, and let us have dinner together." Alma and Ellen went ahead of him and he barred the heavy doors behind them.

This was peace and happiness; that at last was goodness. They had no obligation but to live and to be happy. The threat and the promise of victory were far, far behind.

# Down to a Sunless Sea

## War No. 81-Q (Original Version)

It came to war.

Tibet and America, each claiming the Radiant Heat Monopoly, applied for a War Permit for 2127 ad.

The Universal War Board granted it, stating, of course, the conditions.

It was, after a few compromises and amendments had been effected, accepted by the belligerent nations.

The conditions were: a. Five 22,000-ton aero-ships, combinations of aero and dirigible, were to be the only combatants.

b. They were to be armed with machine-guns firing nonexplosive bullets only.

c. The War Territory of Kerguelen was to be rented by the two nations, the United American Nations and the Mongolian Alliance, for the two hours of the war, which was to begin on January 5, 2127, at noon.

d. The nation vanquished was to pay all the expenses of the war, excepting the War Territory Rent.

e. No human beings should be on the battlefield. The Mongolian controllers must be in Lhasa; the American ones, in the City of Franklin.

The belligerent nations had no difficulty in renting the War Territory of Kerguelen. The rent charged by the Austral League was, as usual, forty million dollars an hour.

Spectators from all over the world rushed to the borders of the Territory, eager to obtain good places. Q-ray telescopes came into tremendous demand.

Mechanics carefully worked over the giant war-machines.

The radio-controls, delicate as watches, were brought to perfection, both at the control stations in Lhasa and in the City of Franklin, and on the war-flyers.

The planes arrived on the minute decided.

Controlled by their pilots thousands of miles away, the great planes swooped and curved, neither fleet daring to make the first move.

There were five American ships, the Prospero, Ariel, Oberon, Caliban, and Titania. and five Chinese ships, rented by the Mongolians, the Han, Yuen, Tsing, Tsin, and Sung.

The Mongolian fleet incurred the displeasure of the spectators by casting a smoke screen, which greatly interfered with the seeing. The Prospero, every gun throbbing, hurled itself into the smoke screen and came out on the other side, out of control, quivering with in coordinating machinery. As it neared the boundary, it was blown up by its pilot, safe and sound, thousands of miles away. But the sacrifice was not in vain. The Han and Sung, both severely crippled, swung slowly out of the mist. The Han, with a list that clearly showed it was doomed, was struck by a lucky shot from the Caliban and fell several hundred feet, its left wing ablaze. But for a second or two, the pilot regained control, and, with a single shot, disabled the Caliban, and then the Han fell to its doom on the rocky islands below.

The Caliban and Sung continued to drift, firing at each other.

As soon as it was seen that neither would be of any further use in the battle, they were, by common consent, taken from the field.

There now remained three ships on each side, darting in and out of the smoke screen, occasionally ascending to cool the engines.

Among the spectators, excitement prevailed, for it was announced from the City of Franklin that a new and virtually unknown pilot, Jack Bearden, was going to take command of three ships at once! And never before had one pilot commanded, by radio, more than two ships! Besides, two of the most famous Mongolian aces, Baartek and Soong, were on the field, while an even more famous person, the Chinese mercenary T'ang, commanded the Yuen.

The Americans among the spectators protested that a pilot so young and inexperienced should not be allowed to endanger the ships.



The Government replied that it had a thorough confidence in Bearden's abilities.

But when the young pilot stepped before the television screen, on which was pictured the battle, and the maze of controls, he realized that his ability had been overestimated, by himself and by everyone else.

He climbed up on the high stool and reached for the speed control levers, which were directly behind him. He leaned back, and fell! His head struck against two buttons: and he saw the Oberon and Titania blow themselves up.

The three enemy ships cooperated in an attack on the Ariel.

Bearden swung his ship around and rushed it into the smoke screen.

He saw the huge bulk of the Tsing bear down upon him. He fired instinctively and hit the control center.

Dodging aside as the Tsing fell past him, he missed the Tsin by inches.

War No. 81-Q The pilot of the Tsin shot at the reinforcements of the Ariel's right wing, loosening it.

For a few moments, he was alone, or, rather, the Ariel was alone. For he was at the control board in the War Building in the City of Franklin.

The Yuen, controlled by the master-pilot T'ang, rose up from beneath him, shot off the end of his left wing, and vanished into the mists of the smoke screen before the astonished Bearden was able to register a single hit.

He had better luck with the Tsin. When this swooped down on the Ariel, he disabled its firing control. Then, when this plane rose from beneath, intending to ram itself into the Ariel, Bearden dropped half his machine-guns overboard. They struck the Tsin, which exploded immediately.

Now only the Ariel and the Yuen remained! Master-pilot faced master-pilot.

Bearden placed a lucky shot in the Yuen's rudder, but only partially disabled it.

Yuen threw more smoke-screen bombs overboard.

Bearden rose upward; no, he was still safe and sound in America, but the Ariel rose upward.

The spectators in their helicopters blew whistles, shot off pistols,

went mad in applause.

T'ang lowered the Yuen to within several hundred feet of the water.

He was applauded, too.

Bearden inspected his ship with the autotelevision. It would collapse at the slightest strain.

He wheeled his ship to the right, preparatory to descending.

His left wing broke under the strain: and the Ariel began hurtling downward. He turned his autotelevision on the Yuen, not daring to see the ship, which carried his reputation, his future, crash.

The Yuen was struck by his left wing, which was falling like a stone.

The Yuen exploded forty-six seconds later.

And, by international law, Bearden had won the war for America, with it the honors of war and the possession of the enormous Radiant Heat revenue.

All the world hiiiled this Lindbergh of the twenty-second century.

# Western Science Is So Wonderful

The Martian was sitting at the top of a granite cliff. In order to enjoy the breeze better he had taken on the shape of a small fir tree. The wind always felt very pleasant through non-deciduous needles.

At the bottom of the cliff stood an American, the first the Martian had ever seen.

The American extracted from his pocket a fantastically ingenious device. It was a small metal box with a nozzle which lifted up and produced an immediate flame. From this miraculous device the American readily lit a tube of bliss-giving herbs. The Martian understood that these were called cigarettes by the Americans. As the American finished lighting his cigarette, the Martian changed his shape to that of a fifteen-foot, red-faced, black-whiskered Chinese demagogue, and shouted to the American in English,

"Hello, friend!"

The American looked up and almost dropped his teeth.

The Martian stepped off the cliff and floated gently down toward the American, approaching slowly so as not to affright him too much.

Nevertheless, the American did seem to be concerned, because he said, "You're not real, are you? You can't be. Or can you?"

Modestly the Martian looked into the mind of the American and realized that fifteen-foot Chinese demagogues were not reassuring visual images in an everyday American psychology. He peeked modestly into the mind of the American, seeking a reassuring image. The first image he saw was that of the American's mother, so the Martian promptly changed into the form of the American's mother and answered,

"What is real, darling?"

With this the American turned slightly green and put his hand over his eyes. The Martian looked once again into the mind of the American and saw a slightly confused image.

When the American opened his eyes, the Martian had taken on the form of a Red Cross girl halfway through a strip-tease act.

Although the maneuver was designed to be pleasant, the American was not reassured. His fear began to change into anger and he said,

"What the hell are you?"

The Martian gave up trying to be obliging. He changed himself into a Chinese Nationalist major general with an Oxford education and said in a distinct British accent,

"I'm by way of being one of the local characters, a bit on the Supernatural side, you know. I do hope you do not mind. Western science is so wonderful that I had to examine that fantastic machine you have in your hand. Would you like to chat a bit before you go on?"

The Martian caught a confused glimpse of images in the American's mind. They seemed to be concerned with something called prohibition, something else called "on the wagon," and the reiterated question, "How the hell did I get here?"

Meanwhile the Martian examined the lighter.

He handed it back to the American, who looked stunned.

"Very fine magic," said the Martian.

"We do not do anything of that sort in these hills. I am a fairly low-class Demon. I see that you are a captain in the illustrious army of the United States.

Allow me to introduce myself. I am the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan. Do you have time for a chat?"

The American looked at the Chinese Nationalist uniform.

Then he looked behind him. His Chinese porters and interpreter lay like bundles of rags on the meadowy floor of the valley; they had all fainted dead away. The American held himself together long enough to say,

"What is a Lohan?"

"A Lohan is an Arhat," said the Martian.

The American did not take in this information either and the Martian concluded that something must have been missing from the usual amenities of getting acquainted with American officers.

Regretfully the Martian erased all memory of himself from the mind of the American and from the minds of the swooned Chinese. He planted himself back on the cliff top, resumed the shape of a fir tree, and woke the entire gathering. He saw the Chinese interpreter gesticulating at the American and he knew that the Chinese was saying,

"There are Demons in these hills .

.."

The Martian rather liked the hearty laugh with which the American greeted this piece of superstitious Chinese nonsense.

He watched the party disappear as they went around the miraculously beautiful little Lake of the Eight-Mouthed River.

That was in 1945.

The Martian spent many thoughtful hours trying to materialize a lighter, but he never managed to create one which did not dissolve back into some unpleasant primordial effluvium within hours.

Then it was 1955. The Martian heard that a Soviet officer was coming, and he looked forward with genuine pleasure to making the acquaintance of another person from the miraculously up-to date Western world.

Peter Fairer was a Volga German.

The Volga Germans are about as much Russian as the Pennsylvania Dutch are Americans.

They have lived in Russia for more than two hundred years, but the terrible bitterness of the Second World War led to the breakup of most of their communities.

Farrer himself had fared well in this. After holding the noncommissioned rank of yefreitor in the Red Army for some years he had become a sub lieutenant In a technikum he had studied geology and survey.

The chief of the Soviet military mission to the province of Yiinnan in the People's Republic of China had said to him, "Farrer, you are getting a real holiday. There is no danger in this trip, but we do want to get an estimate on the feasibility of building a secondary mountain highway along the rock cliffs west of Lake Pakou. I think well of you, Farrer. You have lived down your German name and you're a good Soviet citizen and officer.

I know that you will not cause any trouble with our Chinese allies or with the mountain people among whom you must travel. Go easy with them, Farrer. They are very superstitious. We need their full support, but we can take our time to get it. The liberation of India is still a long way off, but when we must move to help the Indians throw off American imperialism we do not want to have any soft areas in our rear. Do not push things too hard, Farrer. Be sure that you get a

good technical job done, but that you make friends with everyone other than imperialist reactionary elements."

Farrer nodded very seriously.

"You mean, comrade Colonel, that I must make friends with everything?"

"Everything," said the colonel firmly.

Farrer was young and he liked doing a bit of crusading on his own.

"I'm a militant atheist, Colonel. Do I have to be pleasant to priests?"

"Priests, too," said the colonel, "especially priests."

The colonel looked sharply at Farrer.

"You make friends with everything, everything except women. You hear me, comrade?

Stay out of trouble."

Farrer saluted and went back to his desk to make preparations for the trip.

Three weeks later Farrer was climbing up past the small cascades which led to the River of the Golden Sands, the Chinshachiang, as the Long River or Yangtze was known locally.

Beside him there trotted Party Secretary Kungsun. Kungsun was a Peking aristocrat who had joined the Communist Party in his youth.

Sharp-faced, sharp-voiced, he made up for his aristocracy by being the most violent Communist in all of northwestern Yunnan. Though they had only a

squad of troops and a lot of local bearers for their supplies, they did have an officer of the old People's Liberation Army to assure their military well-being and to keep an eye on Farrer's technical competence. Comrade Captain Li, roly-poly and jolly, sweated wearily behind them as they climbed the steep cliffs.

Li called after them,

"If you want to be heroes of labor let's keep climbing, but if you are following sound military logistics let's all sit down and drink some tea. We can't possibly get to Pakouhu before nightfall anyhow."

Kungsun looked back contemptuously. The ribbon of soldiers and bearers reached back two hundred yards, making a snake of dust clutched to the rocky slope of the mountain. From this perspective he saw the caps of the soldiers and the barrels of their rifles pointing upward toward him

as they climbed. He saw the towel-wrapped heads of the liberated porters and he knew without speaking to them that they were cursing him in language just as violent as the language with which they had cursed their capitalist oppressors in days gone past. Far below them all the thread of the Chinshachiang was woven like a single strand of gold into the gray-green of the twilight valley floor.

He spat at the army captain,

"If you had your way about it, we'd still be sitting there in an inn drinking the hot tea while the men slept."

The captain did not take offense. He had seen many party secretaries in his day. In the New China it was much safer to be a captain. A few of the party secretaries he had known had got to be very important men. One of them had even got to Peking and had been assigned a whole Buick to himself together with three Parker 51 pens. In the minds of the Communist bureaucracy this represented a state close to absolute bliss.

Captain Li wanted none of that. Two square meals a day and an endless succession of patriotic farm girls, preferably chubby ones, represented his view of a wholly liberated China.

Farrer's Chinese was poor, but he got the intent of the argument. In thick but understandable Mandarin he called, half laughing at them, "Come along, comrades. We may not make it to the lake by nightfall, but we certainly can't bivouac on this cliff either." He whistled *Ich halt' ein Kameraden* through his teeth as he pulled ahead of Kungsun and led the climb on up the mountain.

Thus it was Farrer who first came over the lip of the cliff and met the Martian face to face.

This time the Martian was ready. He remembered his disappointing experience with the American, and he did not want to affright his guest so as to spoil the social nature of the occasion. While Farrer had been climbing the cliff, the Martian had been climbing Farrer's mind, chasing in and

out of Farrer's memories as happily as a squirrel chases around inside an immense oak tree. From Farrer's own mind he had extracted a great many pleasant memories. He had then hastened back to the top of the cliff and had incorporated these in very substantial-looking phantoms.

Farrer got halfway across the lip of the cliff before he realized what he was looking at. Two Soviet military trucks were parked in a tiny glade. Each of them had tables in front of it. One of the tables was set with a very elaborate Russian wkouska (the Soviet equivalent of a smorgasbord). The Martian hoped he would be able to keep these objects materialized while Farrer ate them, but he was afraid they might disappear each time Farrer swallowed them because the Martian was not very well acquainted with digestive processes of human beings and did not want to give his guest a violent stomach ache by allowing him to deposit through his esophagus and into his stomach objects of extremely improvised and uncertain chemical makeup.

The first truck had a big red flag on it with white Russian letters reading "welcome to the heroes of bryansk."

The second truck was even better. The Martian could see that Fairer was very fond of women, so he had materialized four very pretty Soviet girls, a blonde, a brunette, a redhead, and an albino just to make it interesting. The Martian did not trust himself to make them all speak the correctly feminine and appealing forms of the Russian language, so having materialized them he set them all in lounge chairs and put them to sleep. He had wondered what form he himself should take and decided that it would be very hospitable to assume the appearance of Mao Tze-tung.

Fairer did not come on over the cliff. He stayed where he was. He looked at the Martian and the Martian said, very oilily, "Come on up. We are waiting for you."

"Who the hell are you?" barked Farrer.

"I am a pro-Soviet Demon," said the apparent Mr. Mao Tzetung, "and these are materialized Communist hospitality arrangements. I hope you like them."

At this point both Kungsun and Li appeared. Li climbed up the left side of Farrer, Kungsun on the right. All three stopped, gaping.

Kungsun recovered his wits first. He recognized Mao Tzetung. He never passed up a chance to get acquainted with the higher command of the Communist Party. He said in a very weak, strained, incredulous voice,

"Mr. Party Chairman Mao, I never thought that we would see you here in these hills, or are you you, and if you aren't you, who are you?"



"I am not your party chairman," said the Martian.

"I am merely a local Demon who has strong pro-Communist sentiments and would like to meet companionable people like yourselves."

At this point Li fainted and would have rolled back down the cliff knocking over soldiers and porters if the Martian had not reached out his left arm, concurrently changing the left arm into the shape of a python, picking up the unconscious Li, and resting his body gently against the side of the picnic trucks. The Soviet sleeping beauties slept on. The python turned back into an arm.

Kungsun's face had turned completely white; since he was a pale and pleasant ivory color to start with, his whiteness had a very marked tinge.

"I think this wang-pa is a counter-revolutionary impostor," he said weakly, "but I don't know what to do about him. I am glad that the Chinese People's Republic has a representative from the Soviet Union to instruct us in difficult party procedure."

Farrer snapped,

"If he is a goose, he is a Chinese goose. He is not a Russian goose. You'd better not call him that dirty name. He seems to have some powers that do work. Look at what he did to Li."

The Martian decided to show off his education and said very conciliatorily,

"If I am a wang-pa you are a wang-pen."

He added brightly, in the Russian language,

"That's an ingrate, you know. Much worse than an illegitimate one. Do you like my shape, comrade Farrer? Do you have a cigarette lighter with you? Western science is so wonderful, I can never make very solid things, and you people make airplanes, atom bombs, and all sorts of refreshing entertainments of that kind."

Farrer reached into his pocket, groping for his lighter.

A scream sounded behind him. One of the Chinese enlisted men had left the stopped column behind and had stuck his head over the edge of the cliff to see what was happening. When he saw the trucks and the figure of Mao Tze-tung he began shrieking,

"There are devils here! There are devils here!"

From centuries of experience, the Martian knew there was no use trying to get along with the local people unless they were very, very young or

very, very old. He walked to the edge of the cliff so that all the men could see him. He expanded the shape of Mao Tze-tung until it was thirty-five feet high. Then he changed himself into the embodiment of an ancient Chinese god of war with whiskers, ribbons, and sword tassels blowing in the breeze. They all fainted dead away as he had intended.

He packed them snugly against the rocks so that none of them would fall back down the slope. Then he took on the shape of a Soviet WAC a rather pretty little blonde with sergeant's insignia and rematerialized himself beside Farrer.

By this point Farrer had his lighter out.

The pretty little blonde said to Farrer,

"Do you like this shape better?"

Farrer said,

"I don't believe this at all. I am a militant atheist. I have fought against superstition all my life." Farrer was twenty-four.

The Martian said,

"I don't think you like me being a girl. It bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Since you do not exist you cannot bother me. But if you don't mind could you please change your shape again?"

The Martian took on the appearance of a chubby little Buddha. He knew this was a little impious, but he felt Farrer give a sigh of relief.

Even Li seemed cheered up, now that the Martian had taken on a proper religious form.

"Listen, you obscene demonic monstrosity," snarled Kungsun, "this is the Chinese People's Republic. You have absolutely no business taking on supernatural images or conducting unatheistic activities. Please abolish yourself and those illusions yonder.

What do you want, anyhow?"

"I would like," said the Martian mildly, "to become a member of the Chinese Communist Party."

Farrer and Kungsun stared at each other. Then they both spoke at once, Farrer in Russian and Kungsun in Chinese.

"But we can't let you in the Party."

Kungsun said,

"If you're a demon you don't exist, and if you do exist you're

illegal."

The Martian smiled.

"Take some refreshments. You may change your minds. Would you like a girl?" he said, pointing at the assorted Russian beauties who still slept in their lounge chairs.

But Kungsun and Farrer shook their heads.

With a sigh the Martian dematerialized the girls and replaced them with three striped Siberian tigers. The tigers approached.

One tiger stopped cozily behind the Martian and sat down.

The Martian sat on him. Said the Martian brightly,

"I like tigers to sit on. They're so comfortable. Have a tiger."

Farrer and Kungsun were staring open-mouthed at their respective tigers. The tigers yawned at them and stretched out.

With a tremendous effort of will the two young men sat down on the ground in front of their tigers. Farrer sighed.

"What do you want? I suppose you won this trick ..."

Said the Martian,

"Have a jug of wine."

He materialized a jug of wine and a porcelain cup in front of each, including himself. He poured himself a drink and looked at them through shrewd, narrowed eyes.

"I would like to learn all about Western science. You see, I am a Martian student who was exiled here to become the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan and I have been here more than two thousand years, and I can only perceive in a radius of ten leagues.

Western science is very interesting. If I could, I would like to be an engineering student, but since I cannot leave this place I would like to join the Communist Party and have many visitors come to see me."

By this time Kungsun made up his mind. He was a Communist, but he was also a Chinese an aristocratic Chinese and a man well versed in the folklore of his own country. Kungsun used a politely archaic form of the Peking court dialect when he spoke again in much milder terms.

"Honored, esteemed Demon, sir, it's just no use at all your trying to get into the Communist Party. I admit it is very patriotic of you as a Chinese Demon to want to join the progressive group which leads the Chinese people in their endless struggle against the vicious American

imperialists.

Even if you convinced me I don't think you can convince the party authorities, esteemed sir. The only thing for you to do in our new Communist world of the New China is to become a counter-revolutionary refugee and migrate to capitalist territory."

The Martian looked hurt and sullen. He frowned at them as he sipped his wine. Behind him Li began snoring where he slept against the wheel of a truck.

Very persuasively the Martian began to speak.

"I see, young man, that you're beginning to believe in me. You don't have to recognize me. Just believe in me a little bit. I am happy to see that you. Party Secretary Kungsun, are prepared to be polite. I am not a Chinese Demon, since I was originally a Martian who was elected to the Lesser Assembly of Concord, but who made an inopportune remark and who must live on as the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan for three hundred thousand springs and autumns before I can return. I expect to be around a very long time indeed. On the other hand, I would like to study engineering and I think it would be much better for me to become a member of the Communist Party than to go to a strange place."

Farrer had an inspiration. Said he to the Martian,

"I have an idea. Before I explain it, though, would you please take those damned trucks away and remove that wkouska? It makes my mouth water and I'm very sorry, but I just can't accept your hospitality."

The Martian complied with a wave of his hand. The trucks and the tables disappeared. Li had been leaning against a truck.

His head went thump against the grass. He muttered something in his sleep and then resumed his snoring. The Martian turned back to his guests.

Farrer picked up the thread of his own thoughts.

"Leaving aside the question of whether you exist or not, I can assure you that I know the Russian Communist Party and my colleague, Comrade Kungsun here, knows the Chinese Communist Party.

Communist parties are very wonderful things. They lead the masses in the fight against wicked Americans. Do you realize that if we didn't fight on with the revolutionary struggle all of us would have to drink Coca-Cola every day?"

"What is Coca-Cola?" asked the Demon.

"I don't know," replied Farrer.

"Then why be afraid to drink any?"

"Don't be irrelevant. I hear that the capitalists make everybody drink it. The Communist Party cannot take time to open up supernatural secretariats. It would spoil irreligious campaigns for us to have a demonic secretary. I can tell you the Russian Communist Party won't put up with it and our friend here will tell you there is no place in the Chinese Communist Party. We want you to be happy. You seem to be a very friendly demon. Why don't you just go away? The capitalists will welcome you. They are very reactionary and very religious. You might even find people there who would believe in you."

The Martian changed his shape from that of a roly-poly Buddha and assumed the appearance and dress of a young Chinese man, a student of engineering at the University of the Revolution in Peking. In the shape of the student he continued, "I don't want to be believed in. I want to study engineering, and I want to learn all about Western science."

Kungsun came to Farrer's support. He said,

"It's just no use trying to be a Communist engineer. You look like a very absentminded demon to me and I think that even if you tried to pass yourself off as a human being you would keep forgetting and changing shapes. That would ruin the morale of any class."

The Martian thought to himself that the young man had a point there. He hated keeping any one particular shape for more than half an hour. Staying in one bodily form made him itch. He also liked to change sexes every few times; it seemed sort of refreshing. He did not admit to the young man that Kungsun had scored a point with that remark about shape-changing, but he nodded amiably at them and asked,

"But how could I get abroad?"

"Just go," said Kungsun, wearily.

"Just go. You're a Demon.

You can do anything."

"I can't do that," snapped the student-Martian.

"I have to have something to go by."

He turned to Farrer.

"It won't do any good, your giving me something. If you gave me something Russian and I would end up in Russia, from what you say they won't want to have a Communist Martian any more than these Chinese people do. I won't like to leave my beautiful lake anyhow, but I

suppose I will have to if I am to get acquainted with Western science."

Farrer said,

"I have an idea." He took off his wrist-watch and handed it to the Martian.

The Martian inspected it. Many years before, the watch had been manufactured in the United States of America. It had been traded by a G.I. to a fraulein, by the fraulein's grandmother to a Red Army man for three sacks of potatoes, and by the Red Army man for five hundred rubles to Farrer when the two of them met in Kuibyshev. The numbers were painted with radium, as were the hands. The second hand was missing, so the Martian materialized a new one. He changed the shape of it several times before it fitted. On the watch there was written in English "marvin watch company." At the bottom of the face of the watch there was the name of a town: "WATERBURY, CONN."

The Martian read it. Said he to Farrer,

"Where is this place Waterbury, Kahn?"

"The Conn. is the short form of the name of one of the American states. If you are going to be a reactionary capitalist that is a very good place to be a capitalist in."

Still white-faced, but in a sickly ingratiating way, Kungsun added his bit.

"I think you would like Coca-Cola. It's very reactionary."

The student-Martian frowned. He still held the watch in his hand. Said he,

"I don't care whether it's reactionary or not. I want to be in a very scientific place."

Farrer said,

"You couldn't go any place more scientific than Water-bury, Conn." especially Conn. that's the most scientific place they have in America and I'm sure they are very pro-Martian and you can join one of the capitalist parties. They won't mind.

But the Communist parties would make a lot of trouble for you."

Farrer smiled and his eyes lit up.

"Furthermore," he added, as a winning point, "you can keep my watch for yourself, for always."

The Martian frowned. Speaking to himself the student Martian said,

"I can see that Chinese Communism is going to collapse in eight years, eight hundred years, or eighty thousand years. Perhaps I'd better go to this Waterbury, Conn."

The two young Communists nodded their heads vigorously and grinned. They both smiled at the Martian.

"Honored, esteemed Martian, sir, please hurry along because I want to get my men over the edge of the cliff before darkness falls. Go with our blessing."

The Martian changed shape. He took on the image of an Arhat, a subordinate disciple of Buddha. Eight feet tall, he loomed above them. His face radiated unearthly calm. The watch, miraculously provided with a new strap, was firmly strapped to his left wrist.

"Bless you, my boys," said he.

"I go to Waterbury." And he did.

Farrer stared at Kungsun.

"What's happened to Li?"

Kungsun shook his head dazedly.

"I don't know. I feel funny."

(In departing for that marvelous strange place, Waterbury, Conn." the Martian had taken with him all their memories of himself.) Kungsun walked to the edge of the cliff. Looking over, he saw the men sleeping.

"Look at that," he muttered. He stepped to the edge of the cliff and began shouting.

"Wake up, you fools, you turtles. Haven't you any more sense than to sleep on a cliff as nightfall approaches?"

The Martian concentrated all his powers on the location of Waterbury, Conn.

He was the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan (or an Arhat), and his powers were limited, impressive though they might seem to outsiders.

With a shock, a thrill, a something of breaking, a sense of things done and undone, he found himself in flat country. Strange darkness surrounded him. Air, which he had never smelled before, flowed quietly around him. Farrer and Li, hanging on a cliff high above the Chinshachiang, lay far behind him in the world from which he had broken. He remembered that he had left his shape behind.

Absentmindedly he glanced down at himself to see what form he had taken for the trip.

He discovered that he had arrived in the form of a small, laughing Buddha seven inches high, carved in yellowed ivory.

"This will never do!" muttered the Martian to himself.

"I

must take on one of the local forms..."

He sensed around in his environment, groping telepathically for interesting objects near him.

"Aha, a milk truck."

Thought he. Western science is indeed very wonderful.

Imagine a machine made purely for the purpose of transporting milk!

Swiftly he transferred himself into a milk truck.

In the darkness, his telepathic senses had not distinguished the metal of which the milk truck was made nor the color of the paint.

In order to remain inconspicuous, he turned himself into a milk truck made of solid gold. Then, without a driver, he started up his own engine and began driving himself down one of the main highways leading into Waterbury, Connecticut ... So if you happen to be passing through Waterbury, Conn." and see a solid gold milk truck driving itself through the streets, you'll know it's the Martian, otherwise the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan, and that he still thinks Western science is wonderful.



## Nancy

Two men faced Gordon Greene as he came into the room. The young aide was a nonentity. The general was not. The commanding general sat where he should, at his own desk. It was placed squarely in the room, and yet the infinite courtesy of the general was shown by the fact that the blinds were so drawn that the light did not fall directly into the eyes of the person interviewed.

At that time the colonel general was Wenzel Wallenstein, the first man ever to venture into the very deep remoteness of space.

He had not reached a star. Nobody had, at that time, but he had gone farther than any man had ever gone before.

Wallenstein was an old man and yet the count of his years was not high.

He was less than ninety in a period in which many men lived to one hundred and fifty. The thing that made Wallenstein look old was the suffering which came from mental strain, not the kind which came from anxiety and competition, not the kind which came from ill health.

It was a subtler kind a sensitivity which created its own painfulness

Yet it was real.

Wallenstein was as stable as men came, and the young lieutenant was astonished to find that at his first meeting with the commander in chief his instinctive emotional reaction should be one of quick sympathy for the man who commanded the entire organization.

"Your name?"

The lieutenant answered,

"Gordon Greene."

"Born that way?"

"No, sir."

"What was your name originally?"

"Giordano Verdi."

"Why did you change? Verdi is a great name too."

"People just found it hard to pronounce, sir. I followed along the best I could."

"I kept my name," said the old general.

"I suppose it is a matter of taste."

of Man The young lieutenant lifted his hand, left hand, palm outward, in the new salute which had been devised by the psychologists.

He knew that this meant military courtesy could be passed by for the moment and that the subordinate officer was requesting permission to speak as man to man. He knew the salute and yet in these surroundings he did not altogether trust it.

The general's response was quick. He countersigned, left hand, palm outward.

The heavy, tired, wise, strained old face showed no change of expression. The general was alert. Mechanically friendly, his eyes followed the lieutenant. The lieutenant was sure that there was nothing behind those eyes, except world upon world of inward troubles.

The lieutenant spoke again, this time on confident ground.

"Is this a special interview. General? Do you have something in mind for me? If it is, sir, let me warn you, I have been declared to be psychologically unstable. Personnel doesn't often make a mistake but they may have sent me in here under error."

The general smiled. The smile itself was mechanical. It was a control of muscles, not a quick spring of human emotion.

"You will know well enough what I have in mind when we talk together, Lieutenant. I am going to have another man sit with me and it will give you some idea of what your life is leading you toward. You know perfectly well that you have asked for deep space and that so far as I'm concerned you've gotten it. The question is now,

"Do you really want it?" Do you want to take it?

Is that all that you wanted to abridge courtesy for?"

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant.

"You didn't have to call for the courtesy sign for that kind of a question. You could have asked me even within the limits of service.

Let's not get too psychological. We don't need to, do we?"

Again the general gave the lieutenant a heavy smile.

Wallenstein gestured to the aide, who sprang to attention.

Wallenstein said,

"Send him in."

The aide said,

"Yes, sir."

The two men waited expectantly. With a springy, lively, quick, happy step a strange lieutenant entered the room.

Gordon Greene had never seen anybody quite like this lieutenant. The lieutenant was old, almost as old as the general.

His face was cheerful and unlined. The muscles of his cheeks and forehead bespoke happiness, relaxation, an assured view of life.

The lieutenant wore the three highest decorations of his service.

There weren't any others higher and yet there he was, an old man and still a lieutenant.

Lieutenant Greene couldn't understand it. He didn't know who this man was. It was easy enough for a young man to be a lieutenant but not for

a man in his seventies or eighties. People that age were colonels, or retired, or out.

Or they had gone back to civilian life.

Space was a young man's game.

The general himself arose in courtesy to his contemporary.

Lieutenant Greene's eyes widened. This too was odd. The general was not known to violate courtesy at all irregularly.

"Sit down, sir," said the strange old lieutenant.

The general sat.

"What do you want with me now? Do you want to talk about the Nancy routine one more time?"

"The Nancy routine?" asked the general blindly.

"Yes, sir. It's the same story I've told these youngsters before.

You've heard it and I've heard it, there's no use of pretending."

The strange lieutenant said,

"My name's Karl Vonderleyen.

Have you ever heard of me?"

"No, sir," said the young lieutenant. The old lieutenant said,

"You will."

"Don't get bitter about it, Karl," said the general.

"A lot of other people have had troubles, besides you. I went and did the same things you did, and I'm a general. You might at least pay me the courtesy of envying me."

"I don't envy you, General. You've had your life, and I've had mine.

You know what you've missed, or you think you do, and I know what I've

had, and I'm sure I do."

The old lieutenant paid no more attention to the commander in chief. He turned to the young man and said, "You're going to go out into space and we are putting on a little act, a vaudeville act. The general didn't get any Nancy. He didn't ask for Nancy. He didn't turn for help. He got out into the Up-and-Out, he pulled through it. Three years of it. Three years that are closer to three million years, I suppose. He went through hell and he came back. Look at his face. He's a success. He's an utter, blasted success, sitting there worn out, tired, and, it would seem, hurt. Look at me. Look at me carefully. Lieutenant. I'm a failure. I'm a lieutenant and the Space Service keeps me that way."

The commander in chief said nothing, so Vonderleyen talked on.

"Oh, they will retire me as a general, I suppose, when the time comes. I'm not ready to retire. I'd just as soon stay in the Space Service as anything else. There is not much to do in this world.

I've had it."

"Had what, sir?" Lieutenant Greene dared to ask.

"I found Nancy. He didn't," he said.

"That's as simple as it is."

The general cut back into the conversation.

"It's not that bad and it's

not that simple, Lieutenant Greene. There seems to be something a little wrong with Lieutenant Vonderleyen today.

The story is one we have to tell you and it is something you have to make up your own mind on. There is no regulation way of handling it."

The general looked very sharply at Lieutenant Greene.

"Do you know what we have done to your brain?"

"No, sir." Greene felt uneasiness rising in him.

"Have you heard of the sokta virus?"

"The what, sir?"

"The sokta virus. Sokta is an ancient word, gets its name from Chosen-real, the language of Old Korea. That was a country west of where Japan used to be. It means 'maybe' and it is a 'maybe' that we put inside your head. It is a tiny crystal, more than microscopic. It's there. There is actually a machine on the ship, not a big one

because we can't waste space; it has resonance to detonate the virus. If you detonate sokta, you will be like him. If you don't, you will be like me assuming, in either case, that you live. You may not live and you may not get back, in which case what we are talking about is academic."

The young man nerved himself to ask,

"What does this do to me? Why do you make this big fuss over it?"

"We can't tell you too much. One reason is it is not worth talking about."

"You mean you really can't, sir?"

The general shook his head sadly and wisely.

"No, I missed it, he got it, and yet it somehow gets out beyond the limits of talking."

At this point while he was telling the story, many years later, I asked my cousin,

"Well, Gordon, if they said you can't talk about it, how can you ? "

"Drunk, man, drunk, " said the cousin.

"How long do you think it took me to wind myself up to this point? I'll never tell it again never again. Anyhow, you 're my cousin, you don't count. And I promised Nancy I wouldn't tell anybody. " "Who's Nancy?" I asked him.

"Nancy's what it's all about. That is what the story is.

That's what those poor old goo ps were trying to tell me in the office.

They didn't know. One of them, he had Nancy; the other one, he hadn't. " "Is Nancy a real person ? " With that he told me the rest of the story.

The interview was harsh. It was clean, stark, simple, direct.

The alter-

natives were flat. It was perfectly plain that Wallenstein wanted Greene to come back alive. It was actual space command policy to bring the man back as a live failure instead of letting him become a dead hero. Pilots were not that common. Furthermore, morale would be worsened if men were told to go out on suicide operations.

The whole thing was psychological and before Greene got out of the room he was more confused than when he went in.

They kept telling them, both of them in their different ways the general happily, the old lieutenant unhappily that this was serious.

The grim old general was very cheerful about telling him. The happy lieutenant kept being very sympathetic.

Greene himself wondered why he could be so sympathetic toward the commanding general and be so perfectly carefree about a failed old lieutenant. His sympathies should have been the other way around.

Fifteen hundred million miles later, four months later in ordinary time, four lifetimes later by the time which he'd gone through, Greene found out what they were talking about. It was an old psychological teaching. The men died if they were left utterly alone. The ships were designed to be protected against that. There were two men on each ship. Each ship had a lot of tapes, even a few quite unnecessary animals; in this case a pair of hamsters had been included on the ship. They had been sterilized, of course, to avoid the problem of feeding the young, but nevertheless they made a little family of their own in a miniature of life's happiness on Earth.

Earth was very far away.

At that point, his copilot died.

Everything that had threatened Greene then came true.

Greene suddenly realized what they were talking about.

The hamsters were his one hope. He thrust his face close to their cage and talked to them. He attributed moods to them. He tried to live their lives with them, all as if they were people.

As if he, himself, were a part of people still alive and not out there with the screaming silence beyond the thin wall of metal.

There was nothing to do except to roam like a caged animal in machinery which he would never understand.

Time lost its perspectives. He knew he was crazy and he knew that by training he could survive the partial craziness. He even realized that the instability in his own personality which had made him think that he wouldn't fit the Space Service probably contributed to the hope that went in with service to this point.

His mind kept coming back to Nancy and to the sokta virus.

of Man What was it they had said?

They had told him that he could waken Nancy, whoever Nancy was. Nancy was no pet name of his. And yet somehow or other the virus always worked. He only needed to move his head toward a certain point, press the resonating stud on the wall, one pressure, his mission would fall,

he would be happy, he would come home alive.

He couldn't understand it. Why such a choice?

It seemed three thousand years later that he dictated his last message back to Space Service. He didn't know what would happen. Obviously, that old lieutenant, Vonderleyen, or whatever his name was, was still alive. Equally obviously the general was alive. The general had pulled through. The lieutenant hadn't.

And now, Lieutenant Greene, fifteen hundred million miles out in space, had to make his choice. He made it. He decided to fail.

But he wanted, as a matter of discipline, to speak up for the man who was failing and he dictated, for the records of the ship when it got back to Earth, a very simple message concluding with an appeal for justice.

". . . and so, gentlemen, I have decided to activate the stud. I do not know what the reference to Nancy signifies. I have no concept of what the sokta virus will do except that it will make me fail. For this I am heartily ashamed. I regret the human weakness that has driven me to this. The weakness is human and you, gentlemen, have allowed for it. In this respect, it is not I who is failing, but the Space Service itself in giving me an authorization to fail. Gentlemen, forgive the bitterness with which I say good-bye to you in these seconds, but now I do say goodbye."

He stopped dictating, blinked his eyes, took one last look at the hamsters what might they be by the time the sokta virus went to work? pressed the stud and leaned forward.

Nothing happened. He pressed the stud again.

The ship suddenly filled with a strange odor. He couldn't identify the odor. He didn't know what it was.

It suddenly came to him that this was new-mown hay with a slight tinge of geraniums, possibly of roses, too, on the far side.

It was a smell that was common on the farm a few years ago where he had gone for a summer. It was the smell of his mother being on the porch and calling him back to a meal, and of himself, enough of a man to be indulgent even toward the woman in his own mother, enough of a child to turn happily back to a familiar voice.

He said to himself,

"If this is all there is to that virus, I can take it and work on with

continued efficiency."

He added,

"At fifteen hundred million miles out, and nothing but two hamsters for years of loneliness, a few hallucinations won't hurt me any."

The door opened.

It couldn't open.

The door opened nevertheless.

At this point, Greene knew a fear more terrible than anything else he had ever encountered. He said to himself,

"I'm crazy, I'm crazy," and stared at the opening door.

A girl stepped in. She said,

"Hello, you there. You know me, don't you?"

Greene said,

"No, no, miss, who are you?"

The girl didn't answer. She just stood there and she gave him a smile.

She wore a blue serge skirt cut so that it had broad, vertical stripes, a neat little waist, a belt of the same material, a very simple blouse.

She was not a strange girl and she was by no means a creature of outer space.

She was somebody he had known and known well. Perhaps loved. He just couldn't place her not at that moment, not in that place.

She still stood staring at him. That was all.

It all came to him. Of course. She was Nancy. She was not just that Nancy they were talking about, she was his Nancy, his own Nancy he had always known and never met before.

He managed to pull himself together and say it to her,

"How do I know you if I don't know you? You're Nancy and I've known you all my life and I have always wanted to marry you. You are the girl I have always been in love with and I never saw you before. That's funny. Nancy. It's terribly funny. I don't understand it, do you?"

Nancy came over and put her hand on his forehead. It was a real little hand and her presence was dear and precious and very welcome to him.

She said,

"It's going to take a bit of thinking.

You see, I am not real, not to anybody except you. And yet I am more real to you than anything else will ever be. That is what the sokta



virus is, darling. It's me. I'm you."

He stared at her. He could have been unhappy but he didn't feel unhappy, he was so glad to have her there.

He said,

"What do you mean? The sokta virus has made you?

Am I crazy? Is this just a hallucination?"

Nancy shook her head and her pretty curls spun.

"It's not that. I'm simply every girl that you ever wanted. I am the illusion that you always wanted but I am you because I am in the depths of you. I am everything that your mind might not have encountered in life. Everything that you might have been afraid to dig up. Here I am and I'm going to stay. And as long as we are here in this ship with the resonance we will get along well."

My cousin at this point began weeping. He picked up a wine flask and of Man poured down a big glass of heavy Dago Red. For a while he cried.

Putting his head on the table, he looked up at me and said,

"It's been a long, long time. It's been a very long time and I still remember how she talked with me. And I see now why they say you can't talk about it. A man has got to be fearfully drunk to tell about a real life that he had and a good one, and a beautiful one and let it go, doesn't he?" "That's right," I said, to be encouraging.

Nancy changed the ship right away. She moved the hamsters.

She changed the decorations. She checked the records. The work went on more efficiently than ever before.

But the home they made for themselves, that was something different. It had baking smells, and it had wind smells, and sometimes he would hear the rain although the nearest rain by now was one thousand six hundred million miles away, and there was nothing but the grating of cold silence on the cold, cold metal at the outside of the ship.

They lived together. It didn't take long for them to get thoroughly used to each other.

He had been born Giordano Verdi. He had limitations.

And the time came for them to get even more close than lover and lover.

He said,

"I just can't take you, darling. That is not the way we can do it, even in space and not the way, even if you are not real. You are real

enough to me. Will you marry me out of the prayer book?"

Her eyes lit up and her incomparable lips gleamed in a smile that was all peculiarly her own. She said,

"Of course."

She flung her arms around him. He ran his fingers over the bones of her shoulder. He felt her ribs. He felt the individual strands of her hair brushing his cheeks. This was real. This was more real than life itself, yet some fool had told him that it was a virus that Nancy didn't exist. If this wasn't Nancy, what was it? he thought.

He put her down and, alive with love and happiness, he read the prayer book. He asked her to make the responses. He said,

"I

suppose I'm captain, and I suppose I have married you and me, haven't I, Nancy?"

The marriage went well. The ship followed an immense perimeter like that of a comet. It went far out. So far that the sun became a remote dot. The interference of the solar system had virtually no effect on the instruments.

Nancy came to him one day and said,

"I suppose you know why you are a failure now."

"No," he said.

She looked at him gravely. She said,

"I think with your mind.

I live in your body. If you die while on this ship, I die too. Yet as long as you live, I am alive and separate. That's funny, isn't it?"

"Funny," he said, an old new pain growing in his heart.

"And yet I can tell you something which I know with that part of your mind I use. I know without you that I am. I suppose I recognize your technical training and feel it somehow even though I don't feel the lack of it. I had the education you thought I had and you wanted me to have. But do you see what's happening? We are working with our brain at almost half-power instead of one-tenth power. All your imagination is going into making me. All your extra thoughts are of me. I want them just as I want you to love me but there are none left over for emergencies and there is nothing left over for the Space Service.

You are doing the minimum, that's all. Am I worth it?"

"Of course you are worth it, darling. You're worth anything that any

man could ask of the sweetheart, and of love, and of a wife and a true companion."

"But don't you see? I am taking all the best of you. You are putting it into me and when the ship comes home there won't be any me."

In a strange way he realized that the drug was working. He could see what was happening to himself as he looked at his well-beloved Nancy with her shimmering hair and he realized the hair needed no prettying or hairdos. He looked at her clothes and he realized that she wore clothes for which there was no space on the ship. And yet she changed them, delightfully, winsomely, attractively, day in and day out. He ate the food that he knew couldn't be on the ship. None of this worried him. And now he couldn't even be worried at the thought of losing Nancy herself.

Any other thought he could have rejected from his subconscious mind and could have surrendered to the idea that it was not a hallucination after all. This was too much. He ran his fingers through her hair. He said,

"I know I'm crazy, darling, and I know that you don't exist " "But I do exist. I am you. I am a part of Gordon Greene as surely as if I'd married you. I'll never die until you do because when you get home, darling, I'll drop back, back into your deeper mind but I'll live in your mind as long as you live. You can't lose me and I can't leave you and you can't forget me. And I can't escape to anyone except through your lips. That's why they talk about it. That's why it is such a strange thing."

"And that's where I know I'm wrong," stubbornly insisted Gordon.

"I love you and I know you are a phantom and I know you are going away and I know we are coming to an end and it doesn't worry me. I'll be happy just being with you. I don't need a drink. I wouldn't touch a drug. Yet the happiness is here."

Note: In the version published in Satellite Science Fiction, the story ended at this point. Editor.

They went about their little domestic chores. They checked his graph paper, they stored the records, they put a few silly things into the permanent ship's record. They then toasted marshmallows before a large fire. The fire was in a handsome fireplace which did not exist. The flames couldn't have burned but they did. There weren't any

marshmallows on the ship but they toasted them and enjoyed them anyhow.

That's the way their life went full of magic, and yet the magic had no sting or provocation to it, no anger, no hopelessness, no despair.

They were a very happy couple.

Even the hamsters felt it. They stayed clean and plump.

They ate their food willingly. They got over space nausea. They peered at him.

He let one of them, the one with the brown nose, out and let it run around the room. He said,

"You're a real army character.

You poor thing. Born for space and serving out here in it."

Only one other time did Nancy take up the question of their future. She said, "We can't have children, you know. The sokta drug doesn't allow for that. And you may have children yourself but it is going to be funny having them if you marry somebody else with me always there just in the background. And I will be there."

They made it back to Earth. They returned.

As he stepped out of the gate, a harsh, weary medical colonel gave him one sharp glance. He said, "Oh, we thought that had happened."

"What, sir?" said a plump and radiant Lieutenant Greene.

"You got Nancy," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir. I'll bring her right out."

"Go get her," said the colonel.

Greene went back into the rocket and he looked. There was no sign of Nancy. He came to the door astonished. He was still not upset. He said, "Colonel, I don't seem to see her there but I'm sure that she's somewhere around."

The colonel gave him a strange, sympathetic, fatigued smile.

"She always will be somewhere around, Lieutenant.

You've done the minimum job. I don't know whether we ought to discourage people like you. I suppose you realize that you are frozen in your present grade. You'll get a decoration. Mission Accomplished. Mission successful, farther than anybody has gone before. Incidentally, Vonderleyen says he knows you and will be waiting over yonder. We have to take you into the hospital to make sure that you don't go into shock."

"At the hospital," said my cousin, "there was no shock."

He didn't even miss Nancy. How could he miss her when she hadn't left? She was always just around the corner, just behind the door, just a few minutes away.

At breakfast time he knew he'd see her for lunch. At lunch, he knew she'd drop by in the afternoon. At the end of the afternoon, he knew he'd have dinner with her.

He knew he was crazy. Crazy as he could be.

He knew perfectly well that there was no Nancy and never had been. He supposed that he ought to hate the sokta drug for doing that to him, but it brought its own relief.

The effect of Nancy was an immolation in perpetual hope, the promise of something that could never be lost, and a promise of something that cannot be lost is often better than a reality which can be lost.

That's all there was to it. They asked him to testify against the use of the sokta drug and he said, "Me? Give up Nancy? Don't be silly."

"You haven't got her," said somebody.

"That's what you think," said my cousin. Lieutenant Greene.

# The Fife of Bodidharma

Music (said Confucius) awakens the mind, propriety finishes it, melody completes it.

—The Lun Yu, Book VIII, Chapter 8

## I

It was perhaps in the second period of the proto-Indian Harappa culture, perhaps earlier in the very dawn of metal, that a goldsmith accidentally found a formula to make a magical fife. To him, the fife became death or bliss, an avenue to choosable salvations or dooms. Among later men, the fife might be recognized as a chancy predisccovery of psionic powers with sonic triggering.

Whatever it was, it worked! Long before the Buddha, long-haired Dravidian priests learned that it worked.

Cast mostly in gold despite the goldsmith's care with the speculum alloy, the fife emitted shrill whistlings but it also transmitted supersonic vibrations in a narrow range—narrow and intense enough a range to rearrange synapses in the brain and to modify the basic emotions of the hearer.

The goldsmith did not long survive his instrument. They found him dead.

The fife became the property of priests; after a short, terrible period of use and abuse, it was buried in the tomb of a great king.

## II

Robbers found the fife, tried it and died. Some died amid bliss, some amid hate, others in a frenzy of fear and delusion. A strong survivor, trembling after the ordeal of inexpressibly awakened sensations and emotions, wrapped the fife in a page of holy writing and presented it to Bodidharma the Blessed One just before Bodidharma began his unbelievably arduous voyage from India across the ranges of the spines of the world over to far Cathay.

Bodidharma the Blessed One, the man who had seen Persia, the aged one bringing wisdom, came across the highest of all mountains in the year that the Northern Wei dynasty of China moved their capital out of divine Loyang. (Elsewhere in the world where men reckoned the years from the birth of their Lord Jesus Christ, the year was counted as Anno Domini 554, but in the high land between India and China the message of Christianity had not yet arrived and the word of the Lord Gautama Buddha was still the sweetest gospel to reach the ears of men.)

Bodidharma, clad by only a thin robe, climbed across the glaciers. For food he drank the air, spicing it with prayer. Cold winds cut his old skin, his tired bones; for a cloak he drew his sanctity about him and bore within his indomitable heart the knowledge that the pure, unspoiled message of the Lord Gautama Buddha had, by the will of time and chance themselves, to be carried from the Indian world to the Chinese.

Once beyond the peaks and passes he descended into the cold frigidity of high desert. Sand cut his feet but the skin did not bleed because he was shod in sacred spells and magical charms.

At last animals approached. They came in the ugliness of their sin, ignorance, and shame. Beasts they were, but more than beasts—they were the souls of the wicked condemned to endless rebirth, now incorporated in vile forms because of the wickedness with which they had once rejected the teachings of eternity and the wisdom which lay before them as plainly as the trees or the nighttime heavens. The more vicious the man, the more ugly the beast: this was the rule. Here in the desert the beasts were very ugly.

Bodidharma the Blessed One shrank back.

He did not desire to use the weapon. "O Forever Blessed One, seated in the Lotus Flower, Buddha, help me!"

Within his heart he felt no response. The sinfulness and wickedness of these beasts was such that even the Buddha had turned his face gently aside and would offer no protection to his messenger, the missionary Bodidharma.

Reluctantly Bodidharma took out his fife.

The fife was a dainty weapon, twice the length of a man's finger. Golden in strange, almost ugly forms, it hinted at a civilization which no one living in India now remembered. The fife had come out of the early beginnings of mankind, had ridden across a mass of ages, a legion of years, and survived as a testimony to the power of early men.

At the end of the fife was a little whistle. Four touch holes gave the fife pitches and a wide variety of combinations of notes.

Blown once the fife called to holiness. This occurred if all stops were closed.

Blown twice with all stops opened the fife carried its own power. This power was strange indeed. It magnified every chance emotion of each living thing within range of its sound.

Bodidharma the Blessed One had carried the fife because it comforted him. Closed, its notes reminded him of the sacred message of the Three Treasures of the Buddha which he carried from India to China. Opened, its notes brought bliss to the innocent and their own punishment to the wicked. Innocence and wickedness were not determined by the fife but by the hearers themselves, whoever they might be. The trees which heard these notes in their own treelike way struck even more mightily into the earth and up to the sky reaching for nourishment with new but dim and treelike hope. Tigers became more tigerish, frogs more froggy, men more good or bad, as their characters might dispose them.

"Stop!" called Bodidharma the Blessed One to the beasts.

Tiger and wolf, fox and jackal, snake and spider, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called again.

Hoof and claw, sting and tooth, eyes alive, they advanced.

"Stop!" he called for the third time.

Still they advanced. He blew the fife wide open, twice, clear and loud.

Twice, clear and loud.

The animals stopped. At the second note, they began to thresh about, imprisoned even more deeply by the bestiality of their own natures. The tiger snarled at his own front paws, the wolf snapped at his own tail, the jackal ran fearfully from his own shadow, the spider hid beneath the darkness of rocks, and the other vile beasts who had threatened the Blessed One let him pass.

Bodidharma the Blessed One went on. In the streets of the new capital at Anyang the gentle gospel of Buddhism was received with curiosity, with calm, and with delight. Those voluptuous barbarians, the Toba Tartars, who had made themselves masters of North China, now filled their hearts and souls with the hope of death instead of the fear of destruction. Mothers wept with pleasure to know that their children, dying, had been received into blessedness. The Emperor himself laid aside his sword in order to listen to the gentle message that had come so bravely over illimitable mountains.

When Bodidharma the Blessed One died he was buried in the outskirts of Anyang, his fife in a sacred onyx case beside his right hand. There he and it both slept for thirteen hundred and forty years.

### III

In the year 1894 a German explorer—so he fancied himself to be— looted the tomb of the Blessed One in the name of science.

Villagers caught him in the act and drove him from the hillside.

He escaped with only one piece of loot, an onyx case with a strange copperlike fife. Copper it seemed to be, although the metal was not as corroded as actual copper should have been after so long a burial in intermittently moist country. The fife was filthy. He cleaned it enough to see that it was fragile and to reveal the un-Chinese character of the declarations along its side.

He did not clean it enough to try blowing it: he lived because of that.

The fife was presented to a small municipal museum named in honor of a German grand duchess. It occupied case No. 34 of the Dorotheum and lay there for another fifty-one years.

### IV

The B-29s had gone. They had roared off in the direction of Rastatt.

Wolfgang Huene climbed out of the ditch. He hated himself, he hated the Allies, and he almost hated Hitler. A Hitler youth, he was handsome, blond, tall, craggy. He was also brave, sharp, cruel, and clever. He was a Nazi. Only in a Nazi world could he hope to exist. His parents, he knew, were soft rubbish. When his father had been killed in a bombing, Wolfgang did not mind. When his mother, half-starved, died of influenza, he did not worry about her. She was old and did not matter. Germany mattered.

Now the Germany which mattered to him was coming apart, ripped by explosions, punctured by shock waves, and fractured by the endless assault of Allied air power.

Wolfgang as a young Nazi did not know fear, but he did know bewilderment.

In an animal, instinctive way, he knew—without thinking about it— that if Hitlerism did not survive he himself would not survive either. He even knew that he was doing his best, what little best there was still left to do. He was looking for spies while reporting the weak-hearted ones who complained against the Fihrer or the war. He was helping to organize the Volkssturm and he had hopes of becoming a Nazi guerrilla even if the Allies did cross the Rhine. Like an animal, but like a very intelligent animal, he knew he had to fight, while at the same time, he realized that the fight might go against him.

He stood in the street watching the dust settle after the bombing.

The moonlight was clear on the broken pavement.

This was a quiet part of the city. He could hear the fires downtown making a crunching sound, like the familiar noise of his father eating lettuce. Near himself he could hear nothing; he seemed to be all alone, under the moon, in a tiny forgotten corner of the world.

He looked around.

His eyes widened in astonishment: the Dorotheum museum had\*been blasted open.

Idly, he walked over to the ruin. He stood in the dark doorway.

Looking back at the street and then up at the sky to make sure that it was safe to show a light, he then flashed on his pocket electric light and cast the beam around the display room. Cases were broken; in most of them glass had fallen in on the exhibits. Window glass looked like puddles of ice in the cold moonlight as it lay broken on the old stone floors.

Immediately in front of him a display case sagged crazily.



He cast his flashlight beam on it. The light picked up a short tube which looked something like the barrel of an antique pistol. Wolfgang reached for the tube. He had played in a band and he knew what it was. It was a fife.

He held it in his hand a moment and then stuck it in his jacket. He cast the beam of his light once more around the museum and then went out in the street. It was no use letting the police argue.

He could now hear the laboring engines of trucks as they coughed, sputtering with their poor fuel, climbing up the hill toward him.

He put his light in his pocket. Feeling the fife, he took it out.

Instinctively, the way that any human being would, he put his fingers over all four of the touch holes before he began to blow. The fife was stopped up.

He applied force.

He blew hard.

The fife sounded.

A sweet note, golden beyond imagination, softer and wilder than the most thrilling notes of the finest symphony in the world, sounded in his ears.

He felt different, relieved, happy.

His soul, which he did not know he had, achieved a condition of peace which he had never before experienced. In that moment a small religion was born. It was a small religion because it was confined to the mind of a single brutal adolescent, but it was a true religion, nevertheless, because it had the complete message of hope, comfort, and fulfillment of an order beyond the limits of this life. Love, and the tremendous meaning of love, poured through his mind. Love relaxed the muscles of his back and even let his aching eyelids drop over his eyes in the first honest fatigue he had admitted for many weeks.

The Nazi in him had been drained off. The call to holiness, trapped in the forgotten magic of Bodidharma's fife, had sounded even to him. Then he made his mistake, a mortal one.

The fife had no more malice than a gun before it is fired, no more hate than a river before it swallows a human body, no more anger than a height from which a man may slip; the fife had its own power, partly in sound itself, but mostly in the mechano-psionic linkage which the unusual alloy and shape had given the Harappa goldsmith forgotten centuries before.

Wolfgang Huene blew again, holding the fife between two fingers, with none of the stops closed. This time the note was wild. In a terrible and wholly convincing moment of vision he reincarnated in himself all the false resolutions, the venomous patriotism, the poisonous bravery of Hitler's Reich. He was once again a Hitler youth, consummately a Nordic man. His eyes gleamed with a message he felt pouring out of himself.

He blew again.

This third note was the perfecting note—the note which had protected Bodidharma the Blessed One fifteen hundred and fifty years before in the frozen desert north of Tibet.

Huene became even more Nazi. No longer the boy, no longer the human being. He was the magnification of himself. He became all fighter, but he had forgotten who he was or what it was that he was fighting for.

The blacked-out trucks came up the hill. His blind eyes looked at them. Fife in hand, he snarled at them.

A crazy thought went through his mind. "Allied tanks . . ."

He ran wildly toward the leading truck. The driver did not see more than a shadow and jammed on the brakes too late. The front bumper burst a soft obstruction.

The front wheel covered the body of the boy. When the truck stopped the boy was dead and the fife, half crushed, was pressed against the rock of a German road.

## V

Hagen von Griin was one of the German rocket scientists who worked at Huntsville, Alabama. He had gone on down to Cape Canaveral to take part in the fifth series of American launchings. This included in the third shot of the series a radio transmitter designed to hit standard wave radios immediately beneath the satellite. The purpose was to allow ordinary listeners throughout the world to take part in the tracking of the satellite.

This particular satellite was designed to have a relatively short life. With good luck it would last as long as five weeks, not longer.

The miniaturized transmitter was designed to pick up the sounds, minute though they might be, produced by the heating and cooling of the shell and to transmit a sound pattern reflecting the heat of cosmic rays and also to a certain degree to relay the visual images in terms of a sound pattern.

Hagen von Griin was present at the final assembly. A small part of the assembly consisted of inserting a tube which would serve the double function of a resonating chamber between the outer skin of the satellite and a tiny microphone half the size of a sweet pea which would then translate the sound made by the outer shell into radio signals which amateurs on the Earth surface fifteen hundred miles below could follow.

Von Griin no longer smoked. He had stopped smoking that fearful night in which Allied planes bombed the truck convoy carrying his colleagues and himself to safety. Though he had managed to scrounge cigarettes throughout the war he had even given up carrying his cigarette holder. He carried instead an odd old copper fife he had found in the highway and had put back into shape. Superstitious at his luck in living, and grateful that the fife reminded him not to smoke, he never bothered to clean it out and blow it. He had weighed it, found its specific gravity, measured it, like the good German that he was, down to the last millimeter and milligram but he kept it in his pocket though it was a little clumsy to carry.

Just as they put the last part of the nose cone together, the strut broke.

It could not break, but it did.

It would have taken five minutes and a ride down the elevator to find a new tube to serve as a strut.

Acting on an odd impulse, Hagen von Griin remembered that his lucky fife was within a millimeter of the length required, and was of precisely the right diameter. The holes did not matter. He picked up a file, filed the old fife, and inserted it.

They closed the skin of the satellite. They sealed the cone.

Seven hours later the message rocket took off, the first one capable of reaching every standard wave radio on earth. As Hagen von Griin watched the great rocket climb he wondered to himself, "Does it make any difference whether those stops were opened or closed?"

## Angerhelm

*Funny funny funny. It's sort of funny funny funny to think without a brain - it is really something like a trick but not a trick to think without a brain. Talking is even harder but it can be done.*

I still remember the way that phrase came ringing through when we finally got hold of old Nelson Angerhelm and sat him down with the buzzing tape.

The story began a long time before that. I never knew the beginnings.

My job is an assistant to Mr. Spatz, and Spatz has been shooting holes in budgets now for eighteen years. He is the man who approves, on behalf of the Director of the Budget, all requests for special liaison between the Department of the Army and the intelligence community.

He is very good at his job. More people have shown up asking for money and have ended up with about one-tenth of what they asked than you could line up in any one corridor of the Pentagon. That is saying a lot.

The case began to break some months ago after the Russians started to get back those odd little recording capsules. The capsules came out of their Sputniks. We didn't know what was in the capsules as they returned from upper space. All we knew was that there was something in them.

The capsules descended in such a way that we could track them by radar. Unfortunately they all fell into Russian territory except for a single capsule which landed in the Atlantic. At the seven-million-dollar point we gave up trying to find it.

The Commander of the Atlantic fleet had been told by his intelligence officer that they might have a chance of finding it if they kept on looking. The Commander referred the matter to Washington, and the budget people saw the request. That stopped it, for a while.

The case began to break from about four separate directions at once. Khrushchev himself said something very funny to the Secretary of State. They had met in London after all.

Khrushchev said at the end of a meeting, "You play jokes sometimes, Mr. Secretary?"

The Secretary looked very surprised when he heard the translation.

"Jokes, Mr. Prime Minister?"

"Yes."

"What kind of jokes?"

"Jokes about apparatus."

"Jokes about machinery don't sit very well," said the American.

They went on talking back and forth as to whether it was a good idea to play practical jokes when each one had a serious job of espionage to do.

The Russian leader insisted that he had no espionage, never heard of espionage and that his espionage worked well enough so that he knew damn well that he didn't have any espionage.

To this display of heat, the Secretary replied that he didn't have any espionage either and that we knew nothing whatever that occurred in Russia. Furthermore not only did we not know anything about Russia but we knew we didn't know it and we made sure of that. After this exchange both leaders parted, each one wondering what the other had been talking about.

The whole matter was referred back to Washington. I was somewhere down on the list to see it.

At that time I had "Galactic" clearance. Galactic clearance came a little bit after Universal clearance. It wasn't very strong but it amounted to something. I was supposed to see those special papers in connection with my job of assisting Mr. Spatz in liaison. Actually it didn't do any good except fill in the time when I wasn't working out budgets for him.

The second lead came from some of the boys over in the Valley. We never called the place by any other name and we don't even like to see it in the federal budget. We know as much as we need to about it and then we stop thinking.

It is much safer to stop thinking. It is not our business to think about what other people are doing, particularly if they are spending several million dollars of Uncle Sam's money every day, trying to find out what they think and most of the time ending up with nothing conclusive.

Later we were to find out that the boys in the Valley had practically every security agent in the country rushing off to Minneapolis to look for a man named Angerhelm. Nelson Angerhelm.

The name didn't mean anything then but before we got through it ended up as the largest story of the twentieth century. If they ever turn it loose it is going to be the biggest story in two thousand years.

The third part of the story came along a little later.

Colonel Plugg was over in G-2. He called up Mr. Spatz and he couldn't get Mr. Spatz so he called me.

He said, "What's the matter with your boss? Isn't he ever in his room?"

"Not if I can help it. I don't run him, he runs me. What do you want, Colonel?" I said.

The colonel snarled.

"Look, I am supposed to get money out of you for liaison purposes. I don't know how far I am going to have liaise or if it is any of my business. I asked my old man what I ought to do about it and he doesn't know. Perhaps we ought to get out and just let the Intelligence boys handle it. Or we ought to send it to State. You spend half your life telling me whether I can have liaison or not and then giving me the money for it. Why don't you come on over and take a little responsibility for a change?"

I rushed over to Plugg's office. It was an Army problem.

These are the facts.

The Soviet Assistant Military Attach., a certain Lieutenant Colonel Potariskov, asked for an interview. When he came over he brought nothing with him. This time he didn't even bring a translator. He spoke very funny English but it worked.

The essence of Potariskov's story was that he didn't think it was very sporting of the American military to interfere in solemn weather reporting by introducing practical jokes in Soviet radar. If the American army didn't have anything else better to do would they please play jokes on each other but not on the Soviet forces? This didn't make much sense.

Colonel Plugg tried to find out what the man was talking about. The Russian sounded crazy and kept talking about jokes.

It finally turned out that Potariskov had a piece of paper in his pocket. He took it out and Plugg looked at it.

On it there was an address. Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota.

It turned out that Hopkins, Minnesota, was a suburb of Minneapolis. That didn't take long to find out.

This meant nothing to Colonel Plugg and he asked if there was anything that Potariskov really wanted.

Potariskov asked if the Colonel would confess to the Angerhelm joke.

Potariskov said that in Intelligence they never tell you about the jokes they play with the Signal Corps. Plugg still insisted that he didn't know. He said he would try to find out and let Potariskov know later on. Potariskov went away.

Plugg called up the Signal Corps, and by the time he got through calling he had a lead back into the Valley. The Valley people heard about it and they immediately sent a man over.

It was about this time that I came in. He couldn't get hold of Mr. Spatz and there was real trouble.

The point is that all three of them led together. The Valley people had picked up the name (and it is not up to me to tell you how they got hold of it). The name Angerhelm had been running all over the Soviet communications system. Practically every Russian official in the world had been asked if he knew anything about Nelson Angerhelm and almost every official, at least as far as the boys in the Valley could tell, had replied that he didn't know what it was all about.

Some reference back to Mr. Khrushchev's conversation with the Secretary of State suggested that the Angerhelm inquiry might have tied in with this. We pursued it a little further. Angerhelm was apparently the right reference. The Valley people already had something about him. They had checked with the F.B.I.

The F.B.I. had said that Nelson Angerhelm was a 62-year-old retired poultry farmer. He had served in World War I. His service had been rather brief. He had gotten as far as Plattsburg, New York, broken an ankle, stayed four months in a hospital, and the injury had developed complications. He had been drawing a Veterans Administration allowance ever since. He had never visited outside the United States, never joined a subversive organization, had never married, and never spent a nickel. So far as the F.B.I. could discover, his life was not worth living.

This left the matter up in the air. There was nothing whatever to connect him with the Soviet Union.

It turned out that I wasn't needed after all. Spatz came into the office and said that a conference had been called for the whole Intelligence community, people from State were sitting in, and there was a special representative from OCBM from the White House to watch what they were doing.

The question arose, "Who was Nelson Angerhelm? And what were we to do about him?"

An additional report had been made out by an agent who specialized in pretending to be an Internal Revenue man.

The "Internal Revenue agent" was one of the best people in the F.B.I. for checking on subversive activities. He was a real expert on espionage and he knew all about bad connections. He could smell a conspirator two miles off on a clear day. And by sitting in a room for a little while he could tell whether anybody had had an illegal meeting there for the previous three years. Maybe I am exaggerating a little bit but I am not exaggerating much.

This fellow, who was a real artist at smelling out Commies and anything that even faintly resembles a Commie, came back with a completely blank ticket on Angerhelm.

There was only one connection that Angerhelm had with the larger world. He had a younger brother, whose name was Tice. Funny name and I don't know why he got it.

Somebody told us later on that the full name tied in with Theiss Ankerhjelms, which was the name of a Swedish admiral a couple hundred years ago. Perhaps the family was proud of it.

The younger brother was a West Pointer. He had had a regular career; that came easily enough out of the Adjutant General's office.

What did develop though, was that the younger brother had died only two months previously. He too was a bachelor. One of the psychiatrists who got into the case said, "What a mother!"

Tice Angerhjelms had traveled a great deal. He had something to do, as a matter of fact, with two or three of the projects that I was liaising on. There were all sorts of issues arising from this.

However, he was dead. He had never worked directly on Soviet matters. He had no Soviet friends, had never been in the Soviet Union, and had never met Soviet forces. He had never even gone to the Soviet Embassy to an official reception.

The man was no specialist, outside of Ordnance, a little tiny bit of French, and the missile program. He was a card player, an awfully good man with trout and something of a Saturday evening Don Juan.

It was then time for the fourth stage.

Colonel Plugg was told to get hold of Lieutenant Colonel Potariskov and find out what Potariskov had to give him. This time Potariskov called back and said that he would rather have his boss, the Soviet Ambassador himself, call on the Secretary or the Undersecretary of State.

There was some shilly-shallying back and forth. The Secretary was out of town, the Undersecretary said he would be very glad to see the Soviet Ambassador if there were anything to ask about. He said that we had found Angerhjelms, and if the Soviet authorities wanted to interview Mr. Angerhjelms themselves they jolly well could go to Hopkins, Minnesota, and interview him.

This led to a real flash of embarrassment when it was discovered that the area of Hopkins, Minnesota, was in the "no travel" zone prescribed to Soviet diplomats in retaliation against their "no travel" zones imposed on American diplomats in the Soviet Union.

This was ironed out. The Soviet Ambassador was asked, would he like to go see a chicken farmer in Minnesota?

When the Soviet Ambassador stated that he was not particularly interested in chicken farmers, but that he would be willing to see Mr. Angerhjelms at a later date if the American government didn't mind, the whole thing was let go.

Nothing happened at all. Presumably the Russians were relaying things back to Moscow by courier, letter, or whatever mysterious ways the Russians use when they are acting very deliberately and very solemnly.

I heard nothing and certainly the people around the Soviet Embassy saw no unusual contacts at that time.

Nelson Angerhjelms hadn't come into the story yet. All he knew was that several odd characters had asked him about veterans that he scarcely knew, saying that they were looking for security clearances.

And an Internal Revenue man had a long and very exhausting talk with him about his brother's estate. That didn't seem to leave much.

Angerhjelms went on feeding his chickens. He had television and Minneapolis has a pretty good range of stations. Now and then he showed up at the church, more frequently he showed up at the general store.

He almost always went away from town to avoid the new shopping centers. He didn't like the way Hopkins had developed and preferred to go to the little country centers where they still have general stores. In its own funny way this seemed to be the only pleasure the old man had.

After nineteen days, and I can now count almost every hour of them, the answer must have gotten back from Moscow. It was probably carried in by the stocky brown-haired courier who made the trip about every fortnight. One of the fellows from the Valley told me about that. I wasn't supposed to know and it didn't matter then.

Apparently the Soviet Ambassador had been told to play the matter lightly. He called on the Undersecretary of State and ended up discussing world butter prices and the effect of American exports of ghee to Pakistan on the attempts of the Soviet Union to trade ghee for hemp.

Apparently this was an extraordinary and confidential thing for the Soviet Ambassador to discuss. The Undersecretary would have been more impressed if he had been able to find out why the Soviet Ambassador just out of the top of his head announced that the Soviet Union had given about a hundred and twenty million dollars credit to Pakistan for some unnecessary highways and was able to reply, therefore, somewhat tartly to the general effect that if the Soviet Union ever decided to stabilize world markets with the cooperation of the United States we would be very happy to cooperate. But this was no time to discuss money or fair business deals when they were dumping every piece of export rubbish they could in our general direction.

It was characteristic of this Soviet Ambassador that he took the rebuff calmly. Apparently his mission was to have no mission. He left and that was all there was from him.

Potariskov came back to the Pentagon, this time accompanied by a Russian civilian. The new man's English was a little more than perfect. The English was so good that it was desperately irritating.

Potariskov himself looked like a rather horsey, brown-faced schoolboy, with chestnut hair and brown eyes. I got to see him because they had me sitting in the back of Plugg's office pretending just to wait for somebody else.

The conversation was very simple. Potariskov brought out a recording tape. It was standard American tape.

Plugg looked at it and said, "Do you want to play it right now?"

Potariskov agreed.

The stenographer got a tape recorder in. By that time three or four other officers wandered in and none of them happened to leave. As a matter of fact one of them wasn't even an officer but he happened to have a uniform on that very day.

They played the tape and I listened to it. It was buzz, buzz, buzz. And there was some hissing, then it went click-ety, dickety, dickety. Then it was buzz, buzz, buzz again. It was the kind of sound in which you turn on a radio and you don't even get static. You just get funny buzzing sounds which indicates that somebody has some sort of radio transmission somewhere but it is not consistent enough to be the loud whee, wheeeee kind of static which one often hears.

All of us stood there rather solemnly. Plugg thoroughly a soldier, listened at rigid attention, moving his eyes back and forth from the tape recorder to Potariskov's face. Potariskov looked at Plugg and then ran his eyes around the group.

The little Russian civilian, who was as poisonous as a snake, glanced at every single one of us. He was obviously taking our measure and he was anxious to find out if any of us could hear anything he couldn't hear. None of us heard anything.

At the end of the tape Plugg reached out to turn off the machine.

"Don't stop it," Potariskov said.

The other Russian interjected, "Didn't you hear it?"

All of us shook our heads. We had heard nothing.

With that, Potariskov said with singular politeness, "Please play it again."

We played it again. Nothing happened, except for the buzzing and clicking.

After the fifteen-minute point it was beginning to get pretty stale for some of us. One or two of the men actually wandered out. They happened to be the bona fide visitors. The non-bona fide visitors slouched down in the room.

Colonel Plugg offered Potariskov a cigarette which Potariskov took. They both smoked and we played it a third time. Then the third time Potariskov said, "Turn it off."

"Didn't you hear it?" said Potariskov.

"Hear what?" said Plugg.

"Hear the name and the address."

At that the funniest feeling came over me. I knew that I had heard something and I turned to the Colonel and said, "Funny, I don't know where I heard it or how I heard it but I do know something that I didn't know."

"What is that?" said the little Russian civilian, his face lighting up.

"Nelson," said I, intending to say, "Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota." Just as I had seen it in the "galactic" secret documents. Of course I didn't go any further. That was in the document and was very secret indeed. How should I know it?

The Russian civilian looked at me. There was a funny, wicked, friendly, crooked sort of smile on his face. He said, "Didn't you hear 'Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota,' just now, and yet did you not know where you heard it?"

The question then arose, "What had happened?"

Potariskov spoke with singular candor. Even the Russian with him concurred.

"We believe that this is a case of marginal perception. We have played this. This is obviously a copy. We have many such copies. We have played it to all our people. Nobody can even specify at what point he has heard it. We have had our best experts on it. Some put it at minute three. Others put it at minute twelve. Some put it at minute thirteen and a half and at different places. But different people under different controls all come out with the idea that they have heard 'Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota.' We have tried it on Chinese people."

At that the Russian colonel interrupted, "Yes, indeed, they tried it on Chinese persons and even they heard the same thing, Nelson Angerhelm. Even when they do not know the language they hear 'Nelson Angerhelm.' Even when they know nothing else they hear that and they hear the street numbers. The numbers are always in English. They cannot make a recording. The recording is only of this noise and yet it comes out. What do you make of that?"

What they said turned out to be true. We tried it also, after they went away.

We tried it on college students, foreigners, psychiatrists, White House staff members, and passers-by. We even thought of running it on a municipal radio somewhere as a quiz show, and offering prizes for anyone that got it. That was a little too heavy, so we accepted a much safer suggestion that we try it out on the public address system of the SAC base. The SAC was guarded night and day.

No one happened to be getting much leave anyhow and it was easy enough to cut off the leave for an extra week. We played that damn thing six times over and almost everybody on that base



wanted to write a letter to Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota. They were even calling each other Angerhelm and wondering what the hell it meant.

Naturally there were a great many puns on the name and even some jokes of a rather smutty order. That didn't help.

The troublesome thing was that on all these different tests we too were unable to find out at what point the subliminal transmission of the name and address came.

It was subliminal, all right. There's not much trick to that. Any good psychologist can pass along either a noise message or a sight message without the recipient knowing exactly when he got it. It is simply a matter of getting down near the threshold, running a little tiny bit under the threshold and then making the message sharp and clear enough, just under the level of conscious notice, so that it slips on through.

We therefore knew what we were dealing with. What we didn't know was what the Russians were doing with it, how they had gotten it and why they were so upset about it.

Finally it all went to the White House for a conference. The conference, to which my boss Mr. Spatz went along as a sort of rapporteur and monitor to safeguard the interests of the Director of the Budget and of the American taxpayer, was a rather brief affair.

All roads led to Nelson Angerhelm. Nelson Angerhelm was already guarded by about half of the F.B.I. and a large part of the local military district forces. Every room in his house had been wired. The microphones were sensitive enough to hear his heart beat. The safety precautions we were taking on that man would have justified the program we have for taking care of Fort Knox.

Angerhelm knew that some awful funny things had been happening but he didn't know what and he didn't know who was concerned with it.

Months later he was able to tell somebody that he thought his brother had probably done some forgery or counterfeiting and that the neighborhood was being thoroughly combed. He didn't realize his safeguarding was the biggest American national treasure since the discovery of the atomic bomb.

The President himself gave the word. He reviewed the evidence. The Secretary of State said that he didn't think that Khrushchev would have brought up the question of a joke if Khrushchev himself had not missed out on the facts.

We had even tried Russians on it, of course - Russians on our side. And they didn't get any more off the record than the rest of the people. Everybody heard the same blessed thing, "Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota."

But that didn't get anybody anywhere.

The only thing left was to try it on the man himself.

When it came to picking inconspicuous people to go along, the Intelligence committee were pretty thin-skinned about letting outsiders into their show. On the other hand they did not have domestic jurisdiction, particularly not when the President had turned it over to J. Edgar Hoover and said, "Ed, you handle this. I don't like the looks of it."

Somebody over in the Pentagon, presumably deviled on by Air Intelligence, got the bright idea that if the Army and the rest of the Intelligence committee couldn't fit into the show the best they could do would be to get their revenge on liaison by letting liaison itself go. This meant Mr. Spatz.

Mr. Spatz has been on the job for many, many years by always avoiding anything interesting or dramatic, always watching for everything that mattered - which was the budget and the authorization for next year - and by ditching controversial personalities long before anyone else had any idea that they were controversial.

Therefore, he didn't go. If this Angerhelm fiasco was going to turn out to be a mess he wanted to be out of it.

It was me who got the assignment.

I was made a sort of honorary member of the F.B.I, and they even let me carry the tape in the end. They must have had about six other copies of the tape so the honor wasn't as marked as it looked. We were simply supposed to go along as people who knew something about the brother.

It was a dry, reddish Sunday afternoon, looking a little bit as though the sunset were coming.

We drove up to this very nice frame house. It had double windows all the way around and looked as tight as the proverbial rug for a bug to be snug in in cold winter. This wasn't winter and the old gentleman obviously couldn't pay for air conditioning. But the house still looked snug.

There was no waste, no show. It just looked like a thoroughly livable house.

The F.B.I. man was big-hearted and let me ring the doorbell. There was no answer so I rang the doorbell some more. Again, nobody answered the bell.

We decided to wait outside and wandered around the yard. We looked at the car in the yard; it seemed in running order.

We rang the doorbell again, then walked around the house and looked into the kitchen window. We checked his car to see if the radiator felt warm. We looked at our watches. We wondered if he were hiding and peeking out at us. Once more we rang the doorbell.

Just then, the old boy came down the front walk.

We introduced ourselves and the preliminaries were the usual sort of thing. I found my heart beating violently. If something had stumped both the Soviet Union and the rest of the world, something salvaged possibly out of space itself, something which thousands of men had heard and none could identify, something so mysterious that the name of Nelson Angerhelm rang over and over again like a pitiable cry beyond all limits of understanding, what could this be?

We didn't know.

The old man stood there. He was erect, sunburned, red-cheeked, red-nosed, red-eared. Healthy as he could be, Swedish to the bone.

All we had to do was to tell him that we were concerned with his brother, Tice Angerhelm, and he listened to us. We had no trouble, no trouble at all.

As he listened his eyes got wide and he said, "I know there has been a lot of snooping around here and you people had a lot of trouble and I thought somebody was going to come and talk to me about it but I didn't think it would be this soon."

The F.B.I. man muttered something polite and vague, so Angerhelm went on, "I suppose you gentlemen are from the F.B.I. I don't think my brother was cheating. He wasn't that dishonest."

Another pause, and he continued. "But there is always a kind of a funny sleek mind - he looked like the kind of man who would play a joke."

Angerhelm's eyes lit up. "If he played a joke, gentlemen, he might even have committed a crime, I don't know. All I do is raise chickens and try to have my life."

Perhaps it was the wrong kind of Intelligence procedure but I broke in ahead of the F.B.I. and said, "Are you a happy man, Mr. Angerhelm? Do you live a life that you think is really satisfying?"

The old boy gave me a keen look. It was obvious that he thought there was something wrong and he didn't have very much confidence in my judgment.

And yet underneath the sharpness of his look he shot me a glance of sympathy and I am sure that he suspected I had been under a strain. His eyes widened a little. His shoulders went back, and he looked a little prouder.

He looked like the kind of man who might remember that he had Swedish admirals for ancestors, and that long before the Angerhelm name ran out and ran dry there in this flat country west of Minneapolis there had been something great in it and that perhaps sparks of the great name still flew somewhere in the universe.

I don't know. He got the importance of it, I suppose, because he looked me very sharply and very clearly in the eye.

"No, young man, my life hasn't been much of a life and I haven't liked it. And I hope nobody has to live a life like mine. But that is enough of that. I don't suppose you're guessing and I suppose you've got something pretty bad to show me."

The other fellow then took over.

"Yes, but it doesn't involve any embarrassment for you, Mr. Angerhelm. And even Colonel Angerhelm, your brother, wouldn't mind if he were living."

"Don't be so sure of that," said the old man. "My brother minded almost everything. As a matter of fact, my brother once said to me, 'Listen, Nels, I'd come back from Hell itself rather than let somebody put something over on me.' That's what he said. I think he meant it. There was a funny pride to him and if you've got anything here on my brother, you'd better just show it to me."

With that, we got over the small talk and we did what we were told to do. We got out the tape and put it on the portable machine, the hi-fi one which we brought along with us.

We played it for the old man.

I had heard it so often that I think I could almost have reproduced it with my vocal cords. The clickety-click, and the buzz, buzz. There wasn't any whee, whee, but there was some more clickety-click and there was some buzz, buzz, and long periods of dull silence, the kind of contrived silence which a recording machine makes when it is playing but nothing is coming through on it.

The old gentleman listened to it and it seemed to have no effect on him, no effect at all. No effect at all? That wasn't true. There was an effect. When we got through the first time, he said very simply, very directly, almost coldly, "Play it again. Play it again for me. There may be something there."

We played it again.

After that second playing he started to talk. "It is the funniest thing, I hear my own name and address there and I don't know where I hear it, but I swear to God, gentlemen, that's my brother's voice. It is my brother's voice I hear there somewhere in those clicks and noises. And yet all I can hear is Nelson Angerhelm, 2322 Ridge Drive, Hopkins, Minnesota. But I hear that, gentlemen, and it is not only plain, it is my brother's voice and I don't know where I heard it. I don't know how it came through."

We played it for him a third time. When the tape was halfway through, he threw up his hands and said, "Turn it off. Turn it off. I can't stand it. Turn it off." We turned it off.

He sat there in the chair breathing hard. After a while in a very funny cracked tone of voice he said, "I've got some whisky. It's back there on the shelf by the sink. Get me a shot of it, will you, gentlemen?"

The F.B.I. man and I looked at each other. He didn't want to get mixed up in accidental poisoning so he sent me. I went back. It was good enough whisky, one of the regular brands. I poured the old boy a two-ounce slug and took the glass back. I sipped a tiny bit of it myself. It seemed like a silly thing to do on duty but I couldn't risk any poison getting to him. After all my

years in Army counter-intelligence I wanted to stay in the Civil Service and I didn't want to take any chances on losing my good job with Mr. Spatz.

He drank the whisky and he said, "Can you record on this thing at the same time that you play?"

We said we couldn't. We hadn't thought of that.

"I think I may be able to tell you what it is saying. But I don't know how many times I can tell you, gentlemen. I am a sick man. I'm not feeling good. I never have felt very good. My brother had the life. I didn't have the life. I never had much of a life and never did anything and never went anywhere. My brother had everything. My brother got the women, he got the girl - he got the only girl I ever wanted, and then he didn't marry her. He got the life and he went away and then he died. He played jokes and he never let anybody get ahead of him. And, gentlemen, my brother's dead. Can you understand that? My brother's dead."

We said we knew his brother was dead. We didn't tell him that he had been exhumed and that the coffin had been opened and the bones had been X-rayed. We didn't tell him that the bones had been weighed, fresh identification had been remade from what was left of the fingers, and they were in pretty good shape.

We didn't tell him that the serial number had been checked and that all the circumstances leading to the death had been checked and that everybody connected with it had been interviewed.

We didn't tell him that. We just told him we knew that his brother was dead. He knew that too.

"You know my brother is dead and then this funny thing has his voice in it. All it's got is his voice ..."

We agreed. We said that we didn't know how his voice got in there and we didn't even know that there was a voice.

We didn't tell him that we had heard that voice ourselves a thousand times and yet never knew where we heard it.

We didn't tell him that we'd played it at the SAC base and that every man there had heard the name, Nelson Angerhelm, had heard something saying that and yet couldn't tell where.

We didn't tell him that the entire apparatus of Soviet intelligence had been sweating over this for an unstated period of time and that our people had the unpleasant feeling that this came out of a Sputnik somewhere out in the sky.

We didn't tell him all that but we knew it. We knew that if he heard his brother's voice and if he wanted to record, it was something very serious.

"Can you get me something to dictate on?" the old man said.

"I can take notes," the F.B.I. man replied.

The old man shook his head. "That isn't enough," he said. "I think you probably want to get the whole thing if you ever get it and I begin to get pieces of it."

"Pieces of what?" said the F.B.I. man.

"Pieces of the stuff behind all that noise. It's my brother's voice talking. He's saying, things - I don't like what he is saying. It frightens me and it just makes everything bad and dirty. I'm not sure I can take it and I am not going to take it twice. I think I'll go to church instead."

We looked at each other. "Can you wait ten minutes? I think I can get a recording machine by then."

The old man nodded his head. The F.B.I. man went out to the car and cranked up the radio. A great big aerial shot up out of the car which otherwise was a very inconspicuous Chevrolet sedan. He got his office. A recording machine with a police escort was sent out from downtown Minneapolis toward Hopkins. I don't know what time it took ambulances to make it but the fellow at the other end said, "You better allow me twenty to twenty-two minutes."

We waited. The old man wouldn't talk to us and he didn't want us to play the tape. He sat there sipping the whisky.

"This might kill me and I want to have my friends around. My pastor's name is Jensen and if anything happens to me you get a hold of him there but I don't think anything will happen to me. Just get a hold of him. I may die, gentlemen, I can't take too much of this. It is the most shocking thing that ever happened to any man and I'm not going to see you or anybody else get in on it. You understand that it could kill me, gentlemen."

We pretended that we knew what he was talking about, although neither one of us had the faintest idea, beyond the suspicion that the old man might have a heart condition and might actually collapse.

The office had estimated twenty-two minutes. It took eighteen minutes for the F.B.I. assistant to come in. He brought in one of these new, tight, clean little jobs, the kind of thing that I'd love to take home. You can pack it almost anywhere. And it comes out with concert quality.

The old man brightened when he saw that we meant business.

"Give me a set of headphones and just let me talk and pick it up. I'll try to reproduce it. It won't be my brother's voice. It will be my voice you're hearing. Do you follow me?"

We turned on the tape.

He dictated, with the headset on his head.

That's when the message started. And that's the thing I started with in the very beginning.

Funny funny funny. It's sort of funny funny funny to think without a brain - it is really something like a trick but not a trick to think without a brain. Talking is even harder but it can be done.

Nels, this is Tice. I'm dead.

Nels, I don't know whether I'm in Heaven or Hell, but I think it's Hell, Nels. And I am going to play the biggest joke that anybody's ever played. And it's funny, I am an American Army officer and I am a dead one, and it doesn't matter. Nels, don't you see what it is? It doesn't matter if you're dead whether you're American or Russian or an officer or not. And even laughter doesn't matter.

But there's enough left of me, Nels, enough of the old me so that perhaps for one last time I'll have a laugh with you and the others.

I haven't got a body to laugh with, Nels, and I haven't got a mouth to laugh with and I haven't got cheeks to smile with and there really isn't any me. Tice Angerhehn is something different now, Nels. I'm dead.

I knew I was dead when I felt so different. It was more comfortable being dead, more relaxed. There wasn't anything tight.

That's the trouble, Nels, there isn't anything tight. There isn't anything around you. You can't feel the world, you can't see the world and yet you know all about it. You know all about everything.

It's awfully lonely, Nels. There are some corners that aren't lonely, some funny little corners in which you feel friendship and feel things creeping up.

Nels, it's like kittens or the faces of children or the smell of the wind on a nice day. It's any time that you turn away from yourself and you don't think about yourself.

It's the times when you don't want something and you do want something.

It's what you're not resenting, what you're not hating, what you're not fearing and what you're not jeering. That's it, Nels, that's the good part inside of death. And I suppose some people could call it Heaven. And I guess you get Heaven if you just get into the habit of having Heaven every day in your ordinary life. That's what it is. Heaven is right there, Nels, in your ordinary life, every day, day by day, right around you.

But that's not what I got. Oh, Nels, I am Tice Angerhehn all right, I am your brother and I'm dead. You can call where I am Hell since it's everything I hated.

Nels, it smells of everything that I ever wanted. It smells the way the hay smelled when I had my old Willys roadster and I made the first girl I ever made that August evening. You can go ask her. She's Mrs. Prai Jesselton now. She lives over on the East side of St. Paul. You never knew I made her and if you don't think this is so, you can listen for yourself.

And you see, I am somewhere and I don't know what kind of a where it is.

Nels, this is me, Tice Angerhelm, and I'm going to scream this out loud with what I've got instead of a mouth. I am going to scream it loud so that any human ear that hears it can put it on this silly, silly Soviet gadget and take it back. TAKE THIS MESSAGE TO NELSON ANGERHELM, 2322 RIDGE DRIVE, HOPKINS, MINNESOTA. And I'm going to repeat that a couple more times so that you'll know that it's your brother talking and I'm somewhere and it isn't Heaven and it isn't Hell and it isn't even really out in space. I am in something different from space, Nels. It is just a somewhere with me in it and there isn't anything but me. In with me here's everything.

In with me there is everything I ever thought and everything I ever did and everything I ever wanted.

All the opposites are the same. Everything I hated and everything I loved, it's all the same. Everything I feared and everything I yearned for - that's the same. I tell you it's all the same now and the punishment is just as bad if you want something and get it as if you want something and don't get it.

The only thing that matters is those calm, nice moments in life when you don't want anything, Nels. You aren't anything. When you aren't trying for anything and the world is just around you, and you get simple things like water on the skin, when you yourself feel innocent and you are not thinking about anything else.

That's all there is to life, Nels. And I'm Tice and I'm telling you. And you know I'm dead, so I wouldn't be telling you a lie.

And I especially wouldn't be telling you on this Soviet cylinder, this Soviet gismo which will go back to them and bother them.

Nels, I hope it won't bother you too much, if everybody knows about that girl. I hope the girl forgives me but the message has got to go back.

And yet that's the message - everything I ever feared - I feared something in the war and you know what the war smells like. It smells sort of like a cheap slaughter house in July. It smells bad all around. There's bits of things burning, the smell of rubber burning and the funny smell of gun powder. I was never in a big war with atomic stuff. Just the old sort of explosions. I've told you about it before and I was scared of that. And right in with that I can smell the perfume that girl had in the hotel there in Melbourne, the girl that I thought I might have wanted until she said something and then I said something and that was all there was between us. And I'm dead now.

And listen, Nels-

Listen, Nels, I am talking as though it were a trick. I don't know how I know about the rest of us - the other ones that are dead like me. I never met one and I may never talk to one. I just have the feeling that they are here too. They can't talk.

It's not that they can't talk, really.

They don't even want to talk.

They don't feel like talking. Talking is just a trick. It is a trick that somebody can pick up and I guess it takes a cheap, meaningless man, a man who lived his life in spite of Hell and is now in that Hell. That's the kind of silly man it takes to remember the trick of talking. Like a trick with coins or a trick with cigarettes when nothing else matters.

So I am talking to you, Nels. And Nels, I suppose you'll die the way I do. It doesn't matter, Nels. It's too late to change - that's all.

Goodbye, Nels, you're in pretty good shape. You've lived your life. You've had the wind in your hair. You've seen the good sunlight and you haven't hated and feared and loved too much.

When the old man got through dictating it, the F.B.I. man and I asked him to do it again.

He refused.

We all stood up. We brought in the assistant.

The old man still refused to make a second dictation from the sounds out of which only he could hear a voice.

We could have taken him into custody and forced him but there didn't seem to be much sense to it until we took the recording back to Washington and had this text appraised.

He said goodbye to us as we left his house.

"Perhaps I can do it once again maybe a year from now. But the trouble with me, gentlemen, is that I believe it. That was the voice of my brother, Tice Angerhelm, and he is dead. And you brought me something strange. I don't know where you got a medium or spirit reader to record this on a tape and especially in such a way that you can't hear it and I could. But I did hear it, gentlemen, and I think I told you pretty good what it was. And those words I used, they are not mine, they are my brother's. So you go along, gentlemen, and do what you can with it and if you don't want me to tell anybody that the U.S. government is working on mediums, I won't."

That was the farewell he gave us.

We closed the local office and hurried to the airport. We took the tape back with us but a duplicate was already being teletyped to Washington.

That's the end of the story and that is the end of the joke. Potariskov got a copy and the Soviet Ambassador got a copy.

And Khrushchev probably wondered what sort of insane joke the Americans were playing on him. To use a medium or something weird along with subliminal perception in order to attack the U.S.S.R. for not believing in God and not believing in death. Did he figure it that way?

Here's a case where I hope that Soviet espionage is very good. I hope that their spies are so fine that they know we're baffled. I hope that they realize that we have come to a dead end, and whatever Tice Angerhelm did or somebody did in his name way out there in space recording into a Soviet Sputnik, we Americans had no hand in it.

If the Russians didn't do it and we didn't do it, who did do it?

I hope their spies find out.





## The Good Friends

Fever had given him a boyish look. The nurse, standing behind the doctor, watched him attentively. Her half-smile blended tenderness with an appreciation of his manly attraction.

"When can I go, doc?"

"In a few weeks, perhaps. You have to get well first."

"I don't mean home, doc. When can I go back into space? I'm captain, doc. I'm a good one. You know that, don't you?"

The doctor nodded gravely.

"I want to go back, doc. I want to go back right away. I want to be well, doc. I want to be well now. I want to get back in my ship and take off again. I don't even know why I'm here. What are you doing with me, doc?"

"We're trying to make you well," said the doctor, friendly, serious, authoritative.

"I'm not sick, doc. You've got the wrong man. We brought the ship in, didn't we? Everything was all right, wasn't it? Then we started to get out and everything went black. Now I'm here in a hospital. Something's pretty fishy, doc. Did I get hurt in the port?"

"No," said the doctor, "you weren't hurt at the port."

"Then why'd I faint? Why am I sick in a bed? Something must have happened to me, doc. It stands to reason. Otherwise I wouldn't be here. Some stupid awful thing must have happened, doc. After such a nice trip. Where did it happen?" A wild light came into the patient's eyes. "Did somebody do something to me, doc? I'm not hurt, am I? I'm not ruined, am I? I'll be able to go back into space, won't I?"

"Perhaps," said the doctor.

The nurse drew in her breath as though she were going to say something. The doctor looked around at her and gave her an authoritative frown, meaning *keep quiet*.

The patient saw it.

Desperation came into his voice, almost a whine. "What's the matter, of Man doc? Why won't you talk to me? What's wrong? Something has happened to me. Where's Ralph? Where's Pete? Where's Jock? The last time I saw him he was having a beer. Where's Larry? Where's Went? Where's Betty? Where's my gang, doc? They're not killed, are they? I'm not the only one, am I? Talk to me, doc. Tell me the truth. I'm a space captain, doc. I've faced queer hells in my time, doc. You can tell me anything, doc. I'm not that sick. I can take it. Where's my gang, doc my pals from the ship? What a cruise that was! Won't you talk, doc?"

"I'll talk," said the doctor, gravely.

"Okay," said the patient. "Tell me."

"What in particular?"

"Don't be a fool, doc! Tell me the straight stuff. Tell me about my friends first, and then tell me what has happened to me."

"Concerning your friends," said the doctor, measuring his words carefully, "I am in a position to tell you there has been no adverse change in the status of any of the persons you mentioned."

"All right, then, doc, if it wasn't them, it's me. Tell me. What's happened to me, doc? Something stinking awful must have happened or you wouldn't be standing there with a face like a constipated horse!"

The doctor smiled wryly, bleakly, briefly at the weird compliment. "I won't try to explain my own face, young fellow. I was born with it. But you are in a serious condition and we are trying to get you well. I will tell you the whole truth."

"Then do it, doc! Right away. Did somebody jump me at the port? Was I hurt badly? Was it an accident? Start talking, man!"

The nurse stirred behind the doctor. He looked around at her. She looked in the direction of the hypodermic on the tray. The doctor gave her a brief negative shake of his head. The patient saw the whole interplay and understood it correctly.

"That's right, doc. Don't let her dope me. I don't need sleep. I need the truth. If my gang's all right, why aren't they here? Is Milly out in the corridor? Milly, that was her name, the little curly head. Where's Jock? Why isn't Ralph here?"

"I'm going to tell you everything, young man. It may be tough but I'm counting on you to take it like a man. But it would help if you told me first."

"Told you what? Don't you know who I am? Didn't you read about my gang and me? Didn't you hear about Larry? What a navigator! We wouldn't be here except for Larry."

The late-morning light poured in through the open window; a soft spring breeze touched the young ravaged face of the patient. There was mercy and more in the doctor's voice.

"I'm just a medical doctor. I don't keep up with the news. I know your name, age, and medical history. But I don't know the details of your cruise. Tell me about it."

"Doc, you're kidding. It'd take a book. We're famous. I bet Went's out there right now, making a fortune out of the pictures he took."

"Don't tell me the whole thing, young man. Suppose you just tell me about the last couple of days before you landed, and how you got into port."

The young man smiled guiltily; there was pleasure and fond memory in his face. "I guess I can tell you, because you're a doctor and keep things confidential."

The doctor nodded, very earnest and still kind. "Do you want," said he softly, "the nurse to leave?"

"Oh, no," cried the patient. "She's a good scout. It's not as though you were going to turn it loose on the tapes."

The doctor nodded. The nurse nodded and smiled, too. She was afraid that there were tears forming at the corners of her eyes, but she dared not wipe them away. This was an extraordinarily observant patient. He might notice it. It would ruin his story.

The patient almost babbled in his eagerness to tell the story. "You know the ship, doc. It's a big one: twelve cabins, a common room, simulated gravity, lockers, plenty of room."

The doctor's eyes flickered at this but he did nothing, except to watch the patient in an attentive sympathetic way.

"When we knew we just had two days to Earth, doc, and we knew everything was all right, we had a ball. Jock found the beer in one of the lockers. Ralph helped him get it out. Betty was an old pal of mine, but I started trying to make time with Milly. Boy, did I make it! Yum." He looked at the nurse and blushed all the way down to his neck. "I'll skip the details. We had a party, doc. We were high. Drunk. Happy. Boy, did we have fun! I don't think anybody ever had more fun than we did, me and that old gang of mine. We docked all right. That Larry, he's a navigator. He was drunk

as an owl and he had Betty on his lap but he put that ship in like the old lady putting a coin in the collection plate. Everything came out exactly right. I guess I should have been ashamed of landing a ship with the whole crew drunk and happy, but it was the best trip and the best gang and the best fun that anybody ever had. And we had succeeded in our mission, doc. We wouldn't have cut loose at the end of the mission if we hadn't known everything was hunky-dory. So we came in and landed, doc. And then everything went black, and here I am. Now you tell me your side of it, but be sure to tell me when Larry and Jock and Went are going to come in and see me. They're characters, doc. That little nurse of yours, she's going to have to watch them. They might bring me a bottle that I shouldn't have. Okay, doc. Shoot."

"Do you trust me?" said the doctor.

"Sure. I guess so. Why not?"

"Do you think I would tell you the truth?"

"It's something mean, doc. Real mean. Okay, shoot anyhow."

"I want you to have the shot first," said the doctor, straining to keep kindness and authority in his voice.

The patient looked bewildered. He glanced at the nurse, the tray, the hypodermic. Then he smiled at the doctor, but it was a smile in which fright lurked.

"All right, doctor. You're the boss."

The nurse helped him roll back his sleeves. She started to reach for the needle.

The doctor stopped her. He looked her straight in the face, his eyes focused right on hers. "No, intravenous. I'll do it. Do you understand?"

She was a quick girl.

From the tray she took a short length of rubber tubing, twisted it quickly around the upper arm, just below the elbow.

The doctor watched, very quiet.

He took the arm, ran his thumb up and down the skin as he felt the vein.

"Now," said he.

She handed him the needle.

Patient, nurse, and doctor all watched as the hypodermic emptied itself directly into the little ridge of the vein on the inside of the elbow.

The doctor took out the needle. He himself seemed relieved. Said he: "Feel anything?"

"Not yet, doc. Can you tell me now, doc? I can't make trouble with this stuff in me. Where's Larry? Where's Jock?"

"You weren't on a ship, young man. You were alone on a one man craft. You didn't have a party for two days. You had it for twenty years. Larry didn't bring your ship in. The Earth authorities brought it in with telemetry. You were starved, dehydrated, and nine-tenths dead. The boat had a freeze unit and you were fed by the emergency kit. You had the narrowest escape in the whole history of space travel. The boat had one of the new hypo kits. You must have had a second or two to slap it to your face before the boat took over. You didn't have any friends with you. They came out of your own mind."

"That's all right, doc. I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"There wasn't any Jock or Larry or Ralph or Milly. That was just the hypo kit."

"I get you, doc. It's all right. This dope you gave me, it's good stuff. I feel happy and dreamy. You can go away now and let me sleep. You can explain it all to me in the morning. But be sure to let Ralph and Jock in, when visiting hours open up." He turned on his side away from them.

The nurse pulled the cover up over his shoulders.

Then she and the doctor started to leave the room. At the last moment, she ran past the doctor and out of the room ahead of him. She did not want him to see her cry.

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# Norstrilia

by Cordwainer Smith

## MEET

Roderick Frederick Ronald J William MacArthur McBan

The Richest Boy In The Galaxy

Rod McBan had to flee Old North Australia... someone was trying to kill him, and someone had almost succeeded!

"The publication of this long, wonderful novel about the rich hayseed boy who bought Old Earth is a major event for science fiction readers. Back in the 60's it appeared in a jumbled form as two novels, *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*... but this version restores cuts and straightens things out. No one ever wrote like Smith, with his special blend of intense myth-making and rich invention. The great Earthport Tower at Meeya Meefla housing the Lords of the Instrumentality, and under it the dim twisted corridors where the Underpeople hide are haunting physical creations, while Smith's characters, especially that of his brave, pretty little cat-girl, C'mell, are wonderfully realized."

Publishers Weekly

# NORSTRILIA

*Cordwainer Smith*

## CONTENTS

Theme and Prologue

At the Gate of the Garden of Death

The Trial

Anger of the Onseck,

The Old Broken Treasures in the Gap  
The Quarrel at the Dinner Table  
The Palace of the Governor of Night  
The Eye upon the Sparrow  
FOE Money, SAD Money  
Traps, Fortunes and Watchers  
The Nearby Exile  
Hospitality and Entrapment  
The High Sky Flying  
Discourses and Recourses  
The Road to the Catmaster  
The Department Store of Hearts' Desires  
Everybody's Fond of Money  
Tostig Amaral  
Birds, Far Underground  
His Own Strange Altar  
Counsels, Councils, Consoles and Consuls

# NORSTRILIA

## *THEME AND PROLOGUE*

Story, place and time—these are the essentials.

The story is simple. There was a boy who bought the planet Earth. We know that, to our cost. It only happened once, and we have taken pains that it will never happen again. He came to Earth, got what he wanted, and got away alive, in a series of very remarkable adventures. That's the story.

The place? That's Old North Australia. What other place could it be? Where else do the farmers pay ten million credits for a handkerchief, five for a bottle of beer? Where else do people lead peaceful lives, untouched by militarism, on a world which is booby-trapped with death and things worse than death. Old North Australia

has stroon—the santaclara drug—and more than a thousand other planets clamor for it. But you can get stroon only from Norstrilia—that's what they call it, for short—because it is a virus which grows on enormous, gigantic, misshapen sheep. The sheep were taken from Earth to start a pastoral system; they ended up as the greatest of imaginable treasures. The simple farmers became simple billionaires, but they kept their fanning ways. They started tough and they got tougher. People get pretty mean if you rob them and hurt them for almost three thousand years. They get obstinate. They avoid strangers, except for sending out spies and a very occasional tourist. They don't mess with other people, and they're death, death inside out and turned over twice, if you mess with them.

Then one of their kids showed up on Earth and bought it. The whole place, lock, stock and under-people.

That was a real embarrassment for Earth.

And for Norstrilia, too.

If it had been the two governments, Norstrilia would have collected all the eye-teeth on earth and sold them back at compound interest. That's the way Norstrilians do business. Or they might have said, "Skip it, cobber. You can keep your wet old ball. We've got a nice dry world of our own." That's the temper they have. Unpredictable.

But a kid had bought Earth, and it was his.

Legally he had the right to pump up the Sunset Ocean, shoot it into space, and sell water all over the inhabited galaxy.

He didn't.

He wanted something else.

The Earth authorities thought it was girls, so they tried to throw girls at him of all shapes, sizes, smells and ages—all the way from young ladies of good family down to dog-derived undergirls who smelled of romance all the time, except for the first five minutes after they had had hot antiseptic showers. But he didn't want girls. He wanted postage stamps.

That baffled both Earth and Norstrilia. The Norstrilians are a hard people from a harsh planet, and they think highly of property. (Why shouldn't they? They have most of it.) A story like this could only have started in Norstrilia.

What's Norstrilia like?

Somebody once singsonged it up, like this:

"Grey lay the land, oh. Grey grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high—only hills and grey grey. Watch the dappled dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar."

"That is Norstrilia. All the muddy glubbery is gone—all the poverty, the waiting and the pain. People fought their way away, their way away from monstrous



forms. People fought for hands and noses, eyes and feet, man and woman. They got it all back again. Back they came from daylight nightmares, centuries when monstrous men, sucking the water around the pools, dreamed of being men again. They found it. Men they were again, again, far away from a horrid when."

"The sheep, poor beasties, did not make it. Out of their sickness they distilled immortality for man. Who says research could do it? Research, besmirch! It was a pure accident. Smack up an accident, man, and you've got it made."

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-grey grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceilinging the world."

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of life-forever. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and trolls like you live, it's too right here."

"That's the book, boy."

"If you haven't seen it, you haven't seen Norstrilia. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it. If you got there, you wouldn't get off alive."

"Mother Hilton's Littul Kittons wait for you down there. Little pets they are, little little little pets. Cute little things, they say. Don't you believe it. No man ever saw them and walked away alive. You won't either. That's the final dash, flash. That's the utter clobber, cobber."

"Charts call the place Old North Australia." We can suppose that that is what it is like.

Time: first century of the Rediscovery of Man.

When C'mell lived.

About the time they polished off Shayol, like wiping an apple on the sleeve.

Long deep into our own time. Fifteen thousand years after the bombs went up and the boom came down on Old Old Earth.

Recent, see?

What happens in the story? Read it. Who's there?

It starts with Rod McBan—who had the real name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William Mac-Arthur McBan. But you can't tell a story if you call the main person by a name as long as Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan. You have to do what his neighbors did—call him Rod McBan. The old ladies always said, "Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-first..." and then sighed. Flurp a squirt at them, friends. We don't need numbers. We know his family was distinguished. We know the poor kid was born to troubles.

Why shouldn't he have troubles? He was due to inherit the Station of Doom. And then he gets around. He crosses all sorts of people. C'mell, the most beautiful of the girlygirls of Earth. Jean-Jacques Vomact, whose family must have preceded

the human race. The wild old man at Adaminaby. The trained spiders of Earthport. The subcommissioner Teadrinker. The Lord Jestocost, whose name is a page in history. The friends of the Ee-telly-kelly, and a queer tankful of friends they were. B'dank, of the cattle-police. The Catmaster. Tostig Amaral, about whom the less said the better. Ruth, in pursuit. C'mell, in flight. The Lady Johanna, laughing.

He gets away.

He got away. See, that's the story. Now you don't have to read it.

Except for the details.

They follow.

(He also bought one million women, far too many for any one boy to put to practical use, but it is not altogether certain, reader, that you will be told what he did about them.)

## *AT THE GATE OF THE GARDEN OF DEATH*

Rod McBan faced the day of days. He knew what it was all about, but he could not really feel it. He wondered if they had tranquilized him with half-refined stroon, a product so rare and precious that it was never, never sold off-planet.

He knew that by nightfall he would be laughing and giggling and drooling in one of the Dying Rooms, where the unfit were put away to thin out the human breed, or else he would stand forth as the oldest landholder on the planet, Chief Heir to the Station of Doom. The farm had been salvaged by his great-grandfather had bought an ice-asteroid, crashed it into the farm over the violent objections of his neighbors, and learned clever tricks with artesian wells which kept his grass growing while the neighbors' fields turned from grey-green to blowing dust. The McBans had kept the sarcastic old name for their farming station, the Station of Doom. By night, Rod knew, the Station would be his. Or he would be dying, giggling his way to death in the killing place where people laughed and grinned and rollicked about while they died.

He found himself humming a bit of a rhyme that had always been a part of the tradition of Old North Australia:

*We kill to live, and die to grow—  
That's the way the world must go!*

He'd been taught, bone deep, that his own world was a very special world, envied, loved, hated and dreaded across the galaxy. He knew that he was part of a very special people. Other races and kinds of men farmed crops, or raised food, or designed machines, and manufactured weapons. Norstrilians did none of these things. From their dry fields, their sparse wells, their enormous sick sheep, they refined immortality itself.

And sold it for a high, high price. Rod McBan walked a little way into the yard. His home lay behind him. It was a log cabin built out of Daimoni beams—beams uncuttable, unchangeable, solid beyond all expectations of solidity. They had been purchased as a matched set thirty-odd planet hops away and brought to Old North Australia by photo-sails. The cabin was a fort which could withstand even major weapons, but it was still a cabin, simple inside and with a front yard of scuffed dust. The last red bit of dawn was whitening into day. Rod knew that he could not go far. He could hear the women out behind the house, the kinswomen who had come to barber and groom him for the triumph—or the other.

They never knew how much he knew. Because of his affliction, they had thought around him for years, counting on his telepathic deafness to be constant. Trouble was, it wasn't; lots of times he heard things which nobody intended him to hear. He even remembered the sad little poem they had about the young people who failed to pass the test for one reason or another and had to go to the Dying House instead of coming forth as Norstrilian citizens and fully recognized subjects of Her-majesty-the-queen. (Norstrilians had not had a real queen for some fifteen thousand years, but they were strong on tradition and did not let mere facts boggle them.) How did the little poem run, "This is the house of the long ago..."? In its own gloomy way it was cheerful. He erased his own footprint from the dust and suddenly he remembered the whole thing. He chanted it softly to himself.

*This is the house of the long ago,  
Where the old ones murmur an endless woe,  
Where the pain of time is an actual pain,  
And things once known always come again.  
Out in the Garden of Death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.  
This is the house of the long ago.  
Those who die young do not enter here.  
Those living on know that hell is near.  
The old ones who suffer have willed it so.  
Out in the Garden of Death, the old  
Look with awe on the young and bold.*

It was all right to say that they looked with awe at the young and bold, but he hadn't met a person yet who did not prefer life to death. He'd heard about people who chose death—of course he had—who hadn't? But the experience was third-hand, fourth-hand, fifth-hand.

He knew that some people had said of him that he would be better off dead, just because he had never learned to communicate telepathically and had to use old spoken words like off-worlders or barbarians.

Rod himself certainly didn't think he would be better dead.

Indeed, he sometimes looked at normal people and wondered how they managed to go through life with the constant silly chatter of other people's thoughts running through their minds. In the tunes that his mind lifted, so that he could hear for a while, he knew that hundreds or thousands of minds rattled in on him with unbearable clarity; he could even hear the minds that thought they had their telepathic shields up. Then, in a little while, the merciful cloud of his handicap came down on his mind again and he had a deep unique privacy which everybody on Old North Australia should have envied..

His computer had said to him once, "The words heir and spiek are corruptions of the words hear and speak. They are always pronounced in the second rising tone of voice, as though you were asking a question under the pressure of amusement and alarm, if you say the words with your voice. They refer only to telepathic communication between persons or between persons and underpeople."

"What are underpeople?" he had asked. "Animals modified to speak, to understand, and usually to look like men. They differ from cerebro-centered robots in that the robots are built around an actual animal mind, but are mechanical and electronic relays, while underpeople are composed entirely of Earth-derived living tissue."

"Why haven't I ever seen one?"

"They are not allowed on Norstrilia at all, unless they are in the service of the defense establishments of the Commonwealth."

"Why are we called a Commonwealth, when all the other places are called worlds or planets?"

"Because you people are subjects of the Queen of England."

"Who is the Queen of England?"

"She was an Earth ruler in the Most Ancient Days, more than fifteen thousand years ago."

"Where is she now?"

"I said," the computer had said, "that it was fifteen thousand years ago.."

"I know it," Rod had insisted, "but if there hasn't been any Queen of England for fifteen thousand years, how can we be her subjects?"

"I know the answer in human words," the reply had been from the friendly red machine, "but since it makes no sense to me, I shall have to quote it to you as people told it to me. 'She bloody well might turn up one of these days. Who knows? This is Old North Australia out here among the stars and we can dashed well wait for our own Queen. She might have been off on a trip when Old Earth went sour.'" The computer had clucked a few times in its odd ancient voice and had then said hopefully, in its toneless voice, "Could you restate that so that I could program it as part of my memory assembly?"

"It doesn't mean much to me. Next time I can hear other minds thinking I'll try to pick it out of somebody else's head."

That had been about a year ago, and Rod had never run across the answer.

Last night he had asked the computer a more urgent question:

"Will I die tomorrow?"

"Question irrelevant. No answer available."

"Computer!" he had shouted, "you know I love you."

"You say so."

"I started your historical assembly up after repairing you, when that part had been thinkless for hundreds of years."

"Correct."

"I crawled down into this cave and found the personal controls, where great-grandfather had left them when they became obsolete."

"Correct."

"I'm going to die tomorrow and you won't even be sorry."

"I did not say that," said the computer.

"Don't you care?"

"I was not programed for emotion. Since you yourself repaired me, Rod, you ought to know that I am the only all-mechanical computer functioning in this part of the galaxy. I am sure that if I had emotions I would be very sorry indeed. It is an extreme probability, since you are my only companion. But I do not have emotions. I have numbers, facts, language, and memory,—that is all."

"What is the probability, then, that I will die tomorrow in the Giggle Room?"

"That is not the right name. It is the Dying House."

"All right, then, the Dying House."

"The judgment on you will be a contemporary human judgment based upon emotions. Since I do not know the individuals concerned, I cannot make a prediction of any value at all."

"What do you think is going to happen to me, computer?"

"I do not really think, I respond. I have no input on that topic."

"Do you know anything at all about my life and death tomorrow? I know I can't speak with my mind, but I have to make sounds with my mouth instead. Why should they kill me for that?"

"I do not know the people concerned and therefore I do not know the reasons," the computer had replied, "but I know the history of Old North Australia down to your great-grandfather's time."

"Tell me that, then," Rod had said. He had squatted in the cave which he had discovered, listening to the forgotten set of computer controls which he had repaired, and had heard again the story of Old North Australia as his great-grandfather had understood it. Stripped of personal names and actual dates, it was a simple story.

This morning his life hung on it.

Norstrilia had to thin out its people if it were going to keep its Old Old Earth character and be another Australia, out among the stars. Otherwise the fields would fill up, the deserts turn into apartment houses, the sheep die in cellars under endless kennels for crowded and useless people. No Old North Australian wanted that to happen, when he could keep character, immortality, and wealth—in that particular order of importance. It would be contrary to the character of Norstrilia.

The simple character of Norstrilia was immutable,—as immutable as anything out among the stars. This ancient Commonwealth was the only human institution older than the Instrumentality.

The story was simple, the way the computer's clear long-circuited brain had sorted it out.

Take a farmer culture straight off Old Old Earth,—Manhome itself.

Put the culture on a remote planet.

Touch it with prosperity and blight it with drought.

Teach it sickness, deformity, hardihood. Make it learn poverty so bad that men sold one child to buy another child the drink of water which would give it an extra day of life while the drills whirled deep into the dry rock, looking for wetness.

Teach that culture thrift, medicine, scholarship, pain, survival.

Give those people the lessons of poverty, war, grief, greed, magnanimity, piety, hope and despair by turn.

Let the culture survive.

Survive disease, deformity, despair, desolation, abandonment.

Then give it the happiest accident in the history of time.

Out of sheep-sickness came infinite riches, the santaclara drug or stroon which prolonged human life indefinitely.

Prolonged it,—but with queer side effects, so that most Norstrilians preferred to die in a thousand years or so.

Norstrilia was convulsed by the discovery.

So was every other inhabited world.

But the drug could not be synthesized, paralleled, duplicated. It was something which could be obtained only from the sick sheep on the Old North Australian plains.

Robbers and governments tried to steal the drug. Now and then they succeeded, long ago, but they hadn't made it since the time of Rod's great-grandfather.

They had tried to steal the sick sheep.

Several had been taken off the planet, (The Fourth Battle of New Alice, in which half the menfolk of Norstrilia had died beating off the Bright Empire, had led to the loss of two of the sick sheep,—one male and one male. The Bright Empire thought it had won. It hadn't. The sheep got well, produced healthy lambs, exuded no more stroom, and died. The Bright Empire had paid four battle fleets for a cold-box full of mutton.) The monopoly remained in Norstrilia.

The Norstrilians exported the santaclara drug, and they put the export on a systematic basis.

They acclirved almost infinite riches.

The poorest man on Norstrilia was always richer than the richest man anywhere else, emperors and conquerors included. Every farm hand earned at least a hundred Earth credits a day,—measured in real money on Old Earth, not in paper which had to travel a steep arbitrage.

But the Norstrilians made their choice: the choice,—

To remain themselves.

They taxed themselves back into simplicity.

Luxury goods got a tax of twenty million percent. For the price of fifty palaces on Olympia, you could import a handkerchief into Norstrilia. A pair of shoes, landed, cost the price of a hundred yachts in orbit. All machines were prohibited, except for defense and the drug-gathering. Underpeople were never made on Norstrilia, and imported only by the defense authority for top secret reasons. Old North Australia remained simple, pioneer, fierce, open.

Many families emigrated to enjoy their wealth; they could not return.

But the population problem remained, even with the taxation and simplicity and hard work.

Cut back, then,—cut back people if you must.

But how, whom, where? Birth control,—bestly. Sterilization,—inhuman, unmanly, un-British. (This last was an ancient word meaning very bad indeed.)

By families, then. Let the families have the children. Let the Commonwealth test them at sixteen. If they ran under the standards, send them to a happy, happy death.

But what about the families? You can't wipe a family out, not in a conservative farmer society, when the neighbors are folk who have fought and died beside you for a hundred generations. The Rule of Exceptions came. Any family which reached the end of its line could have the last surviving heir reprocessed,—up to four times. If he failed, it was the Dying House, and a designated adopted heir from another family took over the name and the estate.

Otherwise their survivors would have gone on, in this century a dozen, in that century twenty. Soon Norstrilia would have been divided into two classes, the sound ones and a privileged class of hereditary freaks. This they could not stand, not while the space around them stank of danger, not when men a hundred worlds away dreamed and died while thinking of how to rob the stroon. They had to be fighters and chose not to be soldiers or emperors. Therefore they had to be fit, alert, healthy, clever, simple and moral. They had to be better than any possible enemy or any possible combination of enemies.

They made it.

Old North Australia became the toughest, brightest, simplest world in the galaxy. One by one, without weapons, Norstrilians could tour the other world and kill almost anything which attacked them. Governments feared them. Ordinary people hated them or worshiped them. Off-world men eyed their women queerly. The Instrumentality left them alone, or defended them without letting the Norstrilians know they had been defended. (As in the case of Raumsog, who brought his whole world to a death of cancer and volcanoes, because the Golden Ship struck once.) Norstrilian mothers learned to stand by with dry eyes when their children, unexpectedly drugged if they failed the tests, drooled with pleasure and went giggling away to their deaths.

The space and subspace around Norstrilia became sticky, sparky with the multiplicity of their defenses. Big outdoorsy men sailed tiny fighting crafts around the approaches to Old North Australia. When people met them in outports, they always thought that Norstrilians looked simple; the looks were a snare and a delusion. The Norstrilians had been conditioned by thousands of years of unprovoked attack. They looked as simple as sheep but their minds were as subtle as serpents.

And now—Rod McBan.

The last heir, the very last heir, of their proudest old family had been found a half-freak. He was normal enough by Earth standards, but by Norstrilian measure he was inadequate. He was a bad, bad telepath. He could not be counted on to hear. Most of the time other people could not transmit into his mind at all; they could not even read it. All they got was a fiery bubble and a dull fuzz of meaningless sub-sememes, fractions of thought which added up to less than nothing. And on spieking, he was worse. He could not talk with his mind at all. Now and then he transmitted. When he did, the neighbors ran for cover. If it was anger, a bloody screaming roar almost blotted out their consciousnesses with a rage as solid and red



as meat hanging in a slaughterhouse. If he was happy, it was worse. His happiness, which he transmitted without knowing it, had the distractiveness of a speed saw cutting into diamond-grained rock. His happiness drilled into people with an initial sense of pleasure, followed rapidly by acute discomfort and the sudden wish that all their own teeth would fall out: the teeth had turned into spinning whirls of raw, unqualified discomfort. They did not know his biggest personal secret.

They suspected that he could hear now and then without being able to control it. They did not know that when he did hear, he could hear everything for miles around with microscopic detail and telescopic range. His telepathic intake, when it did work, went right through other people's mind-shields as though they did not exist. (If some of the women in the farms around the Station of Doom knew what he had accidentally peeped out of their minds, they would have blushed the rest of then: lives.) As a result, Rod McBan had a frightful amount of unsorted knowledge which did not quite fit together..

Previous committees had neither awarded him the Station of Doom nor sent him off to the giggle death. They had appreciated his intelligence, his quick wit, his enormous physical strength. But they remained worried about his telepathic handicap. Three times before he had been judged. Three times. And three times judgment had been suspended. They had chosen the lesser cruelty and had sent him not to death, but to a new babyhood and a fresh upbringing, hoping that the telepathic capacity of his mind would naturally soar up to the Norstrilian normal.

They had underestimated him. He knew it.

Thanks to the eavesdropping which he could not control, he understood bits and pieces of what was happening, even though nobody had ever told him the rational whys and hows of the process.

It was a gloomy but composed big boy who gave the dust of his own front yard one last useless kick, who turned back into the cabin, walking right through to the main room to the rear door and the back yard, and who greeted his kinswomen politely enough as they, hiding their aching hearts, prepared to dress him up for his trial. They did not want the child to be upset, even though he was as big as a man and showed more composure than did most adult men. They wanted to hide the fearful truth from him. How could they help it?

He already knew. But he pretended he didn't.

Cordially enough, just scared enough but not too much, he said, "What ho, auntie! Hello, cousin. Morning Maribel. Here's your sheep. Curry him up and trim him for the livestock competition. Do I get a ring in my nose or a bow ribbon around my neck?"

One or two of the young ones laughed, but his oldest "aunt",—actually a fourth cousin, married into another family,—pointed seriously and calmly at a chair in the yard and said: "Do sit down, Roderick.. This is a serious occasion and we usually do not talk while preparations are going on."

She bit her lower lip and then she added, not as though she wanted to frighten him but because she wanted to impress him: "The Vice-Chairman will be here today." ("The Vice-Chairman" was the head of the government; there had been no Chairman of the Temporary Commonwealth Government for some thousands of years. Norstrilians did not like posh and they thought that Vice-Chairman was high enough for any one man to go. Besides, it kept the offworlders guessing.)

Rod was not impressed. He had seen the man. It was in one of his rare moments of broad hiering, and he found that the mind of the Vice-Chairman was full of numbers and horses, the results of every horse race for three hundred and twenty years, and the projection forward of six probable horse races in the next two years.)

"Yes, auntie," he said.

"Don't bray all the time today. You don't have to use your voice for little things like saying yes. Just nod your head. It will make a much better impression."

He started to answer, but gulped and nodded instead.

She sank the comb into his thick yellow hair. Another one of the women, almost a girl, brought up a small table and a basin. He could tell from her expression that she was spieking to him, but this was one of the times in which he could not hear at all. The aunt gave his hair a particularly fierce tug just as the girl took his hand. He did not know what she meant to do. He yanked his hand back.

The basin fell off the small table. Only then did he realize that it was merely soapy water for a manicure.

"I am sorry," he said; even to him, his voice sounded like a bray. For a moment he felt the fierce rash of humiliation and self-hate.

They should kill me, he thought... By the time the sun goes down I'll be in the Giggle Room, laughing and laughing before the medicine makes my brains boil away.

He had reproached himself. The two women had said nothing. The aunt had walked away to get some shampoo, and the girl was returning with a pitcher, to refill the basin. He looked directly into her eyes, and she into his. "I want you," she said, very clearly, very quietly, and with a smile which seemed inexplicable to him.

"What for?" said he, equally quietly.

"Just you," she said. "I want you for myself. You're going to live."

"You're Lavinia, my cousin," said he, as though discovering it for the first time.

"Sh-h-h," said the girl. "She's coming back." When the girl had settled down to getting his fingernails really clean, and the aunt had rubbed something like sheep-dip into his hair, Rod began to feel happy. His mood changed from the indifference which he had been pretending to himself. It became a real indifference to his fate,

an easy acceptance of the grey sky above him, the dull rolling earth below. He had a fear—a little tiny fear, so small that it might have seemed to be a midget pet in a miniature cage—running around the inside of his thinking. It was not the fear that he would die: somehow he suddenly accepted his chances and remembered how many other people had had to take the same play with fortune. This little fear was something else, the dread that he might not behave himself properly if they did tell him to die.

But then, he thought, I don't have to worry. Negative is never a word—just a hypodermic, so that the first bad news the victim has is his own excited, happy laugh.

With this funny peace of mind, his hiering suddenly lifted.

He could not see the Garden of Death, but he could look into the minds tending it; it was a huge van hidden just beyond the next roll of hills, where they used to keep Old Billy, the eighteen hundred-ton sheep. He could hear the clatter of voices in the little town eighteen kilometers away. And he could look right into Lavinia's mind.

It was a picture of himself. But what a picture! So grown, so handsome, so brave looking. He had schooled himself not to move when he could hear, so that other people would not realize that his rare telepathic gift had come back to him.

Auntie was spieking to Lavinia without noisy words. "We'll see this pretty boy in his coffin tonight."

Lavinia thought right back, without apology. "No, we won't."

Rod sat impassive in his chair. The two women, their faces grave and silent, went on spieking the argument at each other with their minds.

"How would you know—you're not very old?" spieked auntie.

"He has the oldest station in all of Old North Australia. He was one of the very oldest names. He is—" and even in spieking her thoughts cluttered up, like a stammer—"he is a very nice boy and he's is going to be a wonderful man."

"Mark my thought," spieked the auntie again, "I'm telling you that we'll see him in his coffin tonight and that by midnight he'll be on his coffin-ride to the Long Way Out."

Lavinia jumped to her feet. She almost knocked over the basin of water a second time. She moved her throat and mouth to speak words but she just croaked,

"Sorry, Rod. Sorry."

Rod McBan, his face guarded, gave a pleasant, stupid little nod, as though he had no idea of what they had been spieking to each other.

She turn and ran, shout-spieking the loud thought at auntie, "Get somebody else to do his hands. You're heartless, hopeless. Get somebody else to do your corpse washing for you. Not me. Not me."

"What's the matter with her?" said Rod to the auntie, just as though he did not know.

"She's just difficult, that's all. Just difficult. Nerves, I suppose," she added in her croaking spoken words. She could not talk very well, since all her family and friends could spiek and hear with privacy and grace. "We were spieking with each other about what you would be doing tomorrow."

"Where's a priest, auntie?" said Rod.

"A what?"

"A priest, like the old poem has, in the rough rough days before our people found this planet and got our sheep settled down. Everybody knows it."

Here is the place where the priest went mad.

Over there my mother burned.

I cannot show you the house we had.

We lost that slope where the mountain turned.

"There's more to it, but that's the part I remember. Isn't a priest a specialist in how to die? Do we have any around here?"

He watched her mind as she lied to him. As he had spoken, he had a perfectly clear picture of one of their more distant neighbors, a man named Tolliver, who had a very gentle manner; but her words were not about Tolliver at all.

"Some things are men's business," she said, cawing her words. "Anyhow, that song isn't about Norstrilia at all. It's about Paradise VII and why we left it. I didn't know you knew it."

In her mind he read, "That boy knows too much."

"Thanks, auntie," said he meekly.

"Come along for the rinse," said she. "We're using an awful lot of real water on you today."

He followed her and he felt more kindly toward her when he saw her think, Lavinia had the right feelings but she drew the wrong conclusion. He's going to be dead tonight.

That was too much.

Rod hesitated for a moment, tempering the chords of his oddly attuned mind. Then he let out a tremendous howl of telepathic joy, just to bother the lot of them. It did. They all stopped still. Then they stared at him.

In words the auntie said, "What was that?"

"What?" said he, innocently.

"That noise you spieked. It wasn't meaning."

"Just sort of a sneeze, I suppose. I didn't know I did it." Deep down inside himself he chuckled. He might be on his way to the Hoohoo House, but he would fritter their friskies for them while he went.

It was a dashed silly way to die, he thought all to himself.

And then a strange, crazy, happy idea came to him:

Perhaps they can't kill me. Perhaps I have powers. Powers of my own. Well, we'll soon enough find out.

## *THE TRIAL*

Rod walked across the dusty lot, took three steps up the folding staircase which had been let down from the side of the big trailer van, knocked on the door once as he had been instructed to do, had a green light flash in his face, opened the door, and entered.

It was a garden.

The moist, sweet, scent-laden air was like a narcotic. There were bright green plants in profusion. The lights were clear but not bright; their ceiling gave the effect of a penetrating blue, blue sky. He looked around. It was a copy of Old Old Earth. The growths on the green plants were roses; he remembered pictures which his computer had showed him. The pictures had not gotten across the idea that they smelled nice at the same time that they looked nice. He wondered if they did that all the time, and then remembered the wet air: wet air always holds smells better than dry air does.. At last, almost shyly, he looked up at the three judges.

With real startlement, he saw that one of them was not a Norstrilian at all, but the local Commissioner of the Instrumentality, the Lord Redlady—a thin man with a sharp, inquiring face. The other two were Old Taggart and John Beasley. He knew them, but not well.

"Welcome," said the Lord Redlady, speaking in the funning singsong of a man from Manhome.

"Thank you," said Rod.

"You are Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the one hundred and fifty-first?" said Taggart, knowing perfectly well that Rod was that person.

Lord love a duck and lucky me! thought Rod, I've got my hiering, even in this place!

"Yes," said the Lord Redlady.

There was silence.

The other two judges looked at the Manhome man; the stranger looked at Rod; Rod stared, and then began to feel sick at the bottom of his stomach.

For the first time in his life, he had met somebody who could penetrate his peculiar perceptual abilities.

At last he thought, "I understand."

The Lord Redlady looked sharply and impatiently at him, as though waiting for a response to that single word "yes."

Rod had already answered—telepathically.

At last Old Taggart broke the silence.

"Aren't you going to talk? I asked you your name."

The Lord Redlady held up his hand in a gesture for patience; it was not a gesture which Rod had ever seen before, but he understood it immediately.

He thought telepathically at Rod, "You are watching my thoughts."

"Indeed I am," thought Rod, back at him.

The Lord Redlady clapped a hand to his forehead. "You are hurting me. Did you think you said something?"

With his voice Rod said, "I told you that I was reading your mind."

The Lord Redlady turned to the other two men and spieked to them: "Did either of you hear what he tried to spiek?"

"No."

"No." They both thought back at him. "Just noise, loud noise."

"He is a broadbender like myself. And I have been disgraced for it. You know that I am the only Lord of the Instrumentality who has been degraded from the status of Lord to that of Commissioner—"

"Yes," they spieked.

"You know that they could not cure me of shouting, and suggested I die?"

"No," they answered.

"You know that the Instrumentality thought I could not bother you here and sent me to your planet on this miserable job, just to get me out of the way?"

"Yes," they answered.

"Then, what do you want to do about him? Don't try to fool him. He knows all about this place already." The Lord Redlady glanced quickly, sympathetically up at Rod, giving him a little phantom smile of encouragement. "Do you want to kill him? To exile him? To turn him loose?"

The other two men fussed around in their minds. Rod could see that they were troubled at the idea he could watch them thinking, when they had thought him a

telepathic deaf-mute; they also resisted the Lord Redlady's unmannerly precipitation of the decision. Rod almost felt that he was swimming in the thick wet air, with the smell of roses cloying his nostrils so much that he would never smell anything but roses again, when he became aware of a massive consciousness very near him—a fifth person in the room, whom he had not noticed at all before.

It was an Earth soldier, complete with uniform. The soldier was handsome, erect, tall, formal with a rigid military decorum. He was, furthermore, not human and he had a strange weapon in his left hand.

"What is that?" spieked Rod to the Earthman. The man saw his face, not the thought.

"An underman. A snake-man. The only one on this planet. He will carry you out of here if the decision goes against you."

Beasley cut in, almost angrily. "Here, cut it out. This is a hearing, not a blossoming tea party. Don't clutter all that futt into the air. Keep it formal."

"You want a formal hearing?" said the Lord Redlady. "A formal hearing for a man who knows everything that all of us are thinking? It's foolish."

"In Old North Australia, we always have formal hearing," said old Taggart. With an acuteness of insight born of his own personal danger, Rod saw Taggart all over again for the first time—a careworn poor old man, who had worked a poor farm hard for a thousand years; a farmer, like his ancestors before him; a man rich only in the millions of megacredits which he would never take time to spend; a man of the soil, honorable, careful, formal, righteous, and very just. Such men did not yield to innovation ever. They fought change.

"Have the hearing then," said the Lord Redlady, "have the hearing if it is your custom, my Mister and Owner Taggart, my Mister and Owner Beasley."

The Norstrilians, appeased, bowed their heads briefly.

Almost shyly, Beasley looked over at the Lord Redlady. "Sir and Commissioner, will you say the words. The good old words. The ones that will help us to find our duty and to do it."

(Rod saw a quick flare of red anger go through the Lord Redlady's mind as the Earth commissioner thought fiercely to himself, "Why all this fuss about killing one poor boy? Let him go, you dull clutts, or kill him." But the Earthman had not directed the thoughts outward and the two Norstrilians were unaware of his private view of them.)

On the outside, the Lord Redlady remained calm. He used his voice, as Norstrilians did on occasion of great ceremony,

"We are here to hear a man."

"We are here to hear him," they responded.

"We are not to judge or to kill, though this may follow," said he.

"Though this may follow," they responded.

"And where, on Old Old Earth, does man come from?"

They knew the answer by rote and said it heavily together: "This is the way it was on Old Old Earth, and this is the way it shall be among the stars, no matter how far we men may wander:"

"The seed of what is planted in dark, moist earth; the seed of man in dark, moist flesh. The seed of wheat fights upward to air, sun and space; the stalk leaves, blossom and grain flourish under the open glare of heaven. The seed of man grows in the salty private ocean of the womb, the sea-darkness remembered by the bodies of his race. The harvest of wheat is collected by the hands of men; the harvest of men is collected by the tenderness of eternity."

"And what does this mean?" chanted the Lord Redlady.

"To look with mercy, to decide with mercy, to kill with mercy, but to make the harvest of man strong and true and good, the way that the harvest of wheat stood high and proud on Old Old Earth."

"And who is here?" he asked. They both recited Rod's full name.

When they had finished, the Lord Redlady turned to Rod and said, "I am about to utter the ceremonial words, but I promise you that you will not be surprised, no matter what happens. Take it easy, therefore. Easy, easy." Rod was watching the Earthman's mind and the mind of the two Norstrilians. He could see that Beasley and Taggart were befuddled with the ritual of the words, the wetness and scent of the air, and the false blue sky in the top of the van; they did not know what they were going to do. But Rod could also see a sharp, keen triumphant thought forming in the bottom of the Lord Redlady's mind, I'll get this boy off. He almost smiled, despite the presence of the snake man with the rigid smile and the immovable glaring eyes standing just three paces beside him and a little to his rear, so that Rod could only look at him through the corner of his eye.

"Misters and Owners!" said the Lord Redlady.

"Mister Chairman!" they answered.

"Shall I inform the man who is being heard?"

"Inform him!" they chanted.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William Mac-Arthur McBan the one hundred and fifty-first!"

"Yes sir," said Rod.

"Chief-in-trust of the Station of Doom!"

"That's me," said Rod.

"Hear me," said the Lord Redlady.

"Hear him!" said the other two.



"You have not come here, child and citizen Roderick, for us to judge you or to punish you. If these things are to be done, they must be done in another place or time, and they must be done by men other than ourselves. The only concern before this board is the following: should you or should you not be allowed to leave this room safe and free and well, taking into no account your innocence or guilt of matters which might be decided elsewhere, but having regard only for the survival and the safety and the welfare on this given planet? We are not punishing and we are not judging, but we are deciding, and what we are deciding is your life. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Rod nodded mutely, drinking in the wet, rose-scented air and stilling his sudden thirst with the dampness of the atmosphere. If things went wrong now, they did not have very far to go. Not far to go, not with the motionless snake-man standing just beyond his reach. He tried to look at the snake brain but got nothing out of it except for an unexpected glitter of recognition and defiance.

The Lord Redlady went on, Taggart and Beasley hanging on his words as though they had never heard them before.

"Child and Citizen, you know the rules. We are not to find you wrong or right. No crime is judged here, no offense. Neither is innocence. We are only judging the single question. Should you live or should you not? Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Said Rod, "Yes, sir."

"And how stand you, Child and Citizen?"

"What do you mean?"

"This board is asking you, what is your opinion? Should you live or should you not?"

"I'd like to," said Rod, "but I'm tired of all these childhoods."

"That is not what the board is asking you, Child and Citizen," said the Lord Redlady. "We are asking you, what do you think? Should you live or should you not live?"

"You want me to judge myself?"

"That's it, boy," said Beasley, "you know the rules. Tell them, boy. I said we could count on you."

The sharp friendly neighborly face unexpectedly took on great importance for Rod. He looked at Beasley as though he had never seen the man before. This man was trying to judge him, Rod; and he, Rod, had to help decide on what was to be done with himself. The medicine from the snake-man and the giggle-giggle death, or a walk out into freedom. Rod started to speak and checked himself; he was to speak for Old North Australia. Old North Australia was a tough world, proud of its tough men. No wonder the board gave him a tough decision. Rod made up his mind and he spoke clearly and deliberately:

"I'd say no. Do not let me live. I don't fit I can't spiek and hear. Nobody knows what my children would be like, but the odds are against them. Except for one thing..."

"And what, Child and Citizen, is that?" asked the Lord Redlady, while Beasley and Taggart watched as though they were staring at the last five meters of a horse race.

"Look at me carefully, Citizens and Members of the Board," said Rod, finding that in this milieu it was easy to fall into a ceremonious way of talking. "Look at me carefully and do not consider my own happiness, because you are not allowed, by law, to judge that anyhow. Look at my talent—the way I can hear, the big thunderstorm way I can spiek." Rod gathered his mind for a final gamble and as his lips got through talking, he spat his whole mind at them:

anger-anger, rage-red

blood-red,

fire-fury,

noise, stench, glare, roughness, sourness and hate hate hate,

all the anxiety of a bitter day.

crutts, whelps, pups!

It all poured out at once. The Lord Redlady turned pale and compressed his lips, Old Taggart put his hands over his face, Beasley looked bewildered and nauseated. Beasley then started to belch as calm descended on the room..

In a slightly shaky voice, the Lord Redlady asked, "And what was that supposed to show, Child and Citizen?"

"In grown-up form, sir, could it be a useful weapon?"

The Lord Redlady looked at the other two. They talked with the tiny expressions on their faces; if they were spieking, Rod could not read it. This last effort had cost him all telepathic input.

"Let's go on," said Taggart.

"Are you ready?" said the Lord Redlady to Rod.

"Yes sir," said Rod.

"I continue," said the Lord Redlady. "If you understand your own case as we see it, we shall proceed to make a decision and, upon making the decision, to kill you immediately or to set you free no less immediately. Should the latter prove the case, we shall also present you with a small but precious gift, so as to reward you for the courtesy which you will have shown this board, for without courtesy there could be no proper hearing, without the hearing no appropriate decision, and without an appropriate decision there could be neither justice nor safety in the years to come. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

"I suppose so," said Rod.

"Do you really understand? Do you really agree? It is your life which we are talking about," said the Lord Redlady.

"I understand and I agree," said Rod.

"Cover us," said the Lord Redlady.

Rod started to ask how when he understood that the command was not directed at him in the least.

The snake-man had come to life and was breathing heavily. He spoke in clear old words, with an odd dropping cadence in each syllable:

"High, my lord, or utter maximum?"

For answer, the Lord Redlady pointed his right arm straight up with the index finger straight at the ceiling. The snake-man hissed and gathered his emotions for an attack. Rod felt his skin go goose-pimpling all over, then he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, finally he felt nothing but an unbearable alertness. If these were the thoughts which the snake-man was sending out of the trailer van, no passerby could possibly eavesdrop on the decision. The startling pressure of raw menace would take care of that instead.

The three members of the board held hands and seemed to be asleep.

The Lord Redlady opened his eyes and shook his head, almost imperceptibly, at the snake-soldier.

The feeling of snake-threat went off. The soldier returned to his immobile position, eyes forward. The members of the board slumped over their table. They did not seem to be able or ready to speak. They looked out of breath. At last Taggart dragged himself to his feet, gasping his message to Rod,

"There's the door, boy. Go. You're a citizen. Free."

Rod started to thank him but the old man held up his right hand:

"Don't thank me. Duty. But remember—not one word, ever. Not one word, ever, about this hearing. Go along."

Rod plunged for the door, lurched through, and was in his own yard. Free..

For a moment he stood in the yard, stunned.

The dear grey sky of Old North Australia rolled low overhead; this was no longer the eerie light of Old Earth, where the heavens were supposed to shine perpetually blue. He sneezed as the dry air caught the tissue of his nostrils. He felt his clothing chill as the moisture evaporated out of it; he did not think whether it was the wetness of the trailer van or his own sweat which had made his shirt so wet. There were a lot of people there, and a lot of light. And the smell of roses was as far away as another life might be.

Lavinia stood near him, weeping.

He started to turn to her, when a collective gasp from the crowd caused him to turn around.

The snake-man had come out of the van. (It was just an old theater van, he realized at last, the kind which he himself had entered a hundred times.) His earth uniform looked like the acme of wealth and decadence among the dusty coveralls of the men and the poplin dresses of the women. His green complexion looked bright among the tanned faces of the Norstrilians. He saluted Rod.

Rod did not return the salute. He just stared.

Perhaps they had changed their minds and had sent the giggle of death after him.

The soldier held out his hand. There was a wallet of what seemed to be leather, finely chased, of off-world manufacture.

Rod stammered, "It's not mine."

"It—is—not—yours," said the snake man, "but—it—is—the—things—gift—which—the—people—promised—you—inside.—Take—it—because—I—am—too—dry—out—here."

Rod took it and stuffed it in his pocket. What did a present matter when they had given him life, eyes, daylight, the wind itself?

The snake-soldier watched with nickerings eyes. He made no comment, but he saluted and went stiffly back to the van. At the door he turned and looked over the crowd as though he were appraising the easiest way to kill them all. He said nothing, threatened nothing. He opened the door and put himself into the van. There was no sign of who the human inhabitants of the van might be. There must be, thought Rod, some way of getting them in and out of the Garden of Death very secretly and very quietly, because he had lived around the neighborhood a long time and had never had the faintest idea that his own neighbors might sit on a board.

The people were funny. They stood quietly in the yard, waiting for him to make the first move.

He turned stiffly and looked around more deliberately.

Why, it was his neighbors and kinfolk, all of them—McBans, MacArthurs, Passarellis, Schmidts, even the Sanders!

He lifted his hand in greeting to all of them.

Pandemonium broke loose.

They rushed toward him. The women kissed him, the men patted him on the back and shook his hand, the little children began a piping little song about the Station of Doom. He had become the center of a mob which led him to his own kitchen.

Many of the people had begun to cry.

He wondered why. Almost immediately, he understood—

They liked him.

For unfathomable people reasons, mixed-up nonlogical human reasons they had wished him well. Even the auntie who had predicted a coffin for him was sniveling without shame, using a corner of her apron to wipe her eyes and nose.

He had gotten tired of people, being a freak himself, but in this moment of trial then goodness, though capricious, flowed over him like a great wave. He let them sit him down in his own kitchen. Among the babble, the weeps, the laughter, the hearty and falsely cheerful relief, he heard a single fugue being repeated again and again: they liked him. He had come back from death: he was their Rod McBan.

Without liquor, it made him drunk. "I can't stand it," he shouted, "I like you all so dashed bloomed crutting much that I could beat the sentimental brains out of the whole crook lot of you..."

"Isn't that a sweet speech?" murmured an old farm wife nearby.

A policeman, in full uniform, agreed.

The party had started. It lasted three full days, and when it was over there was not a dry eye or a full bottle on the whole Station of Doom.

From time to time he cleared up enough to enjoy his miraculous gift of hiering. He looked through all their minds while they chatted and sang and drank and ate and were as happy as Larry; there was not one of them who had come along vainly. They were truly rejoicing. They loved him. They wished him well. He had his doubts about how long that kind of love would last, but he enjoyed it while it lasted.

Lavinia stayed out of his way the first day; on the second and third days she was gone. They gave him real Norstrilian beer to drink, which they had brought up to one-hundred-and-eight proof by the simple addition of raw spirits. With this, he forgot the Garden of Death, the sweet wet smells, the precise offworld voice of the Lord Redlady, the pretentious blue sky in the ceiling.

He looked in their minds and over and over again he saw the same thing,

"You're our boy. You made it. You're alive. Good luck, Rod, good luck to you, fellow. We didn't have to see you stagger off, giggling and happy, to the house that you would die in."

Had he made it, thought Rod, or was it chance which had done it for him?

## *ANGER OF THE ONSECK*

By the end of the week, the celebration was over. The assorted aunts and cousins had gone back to their farms. The Station of Doom was quiet, and Rod spent the morning making sure that the fieldhands had not neglected the sheep too much during the prolonged party. He found that Daisy, a young three-hundred-ton

sheep, had not been turned for two days and had to be relanolized on her ground side before earth canker set in; then he discovered that the nutrient tubes for Tanner, his thousand-ton ram, had become jammed and that the poor sheep was getting a bad case of edema in his gigantic legs. Otherwise things were quiet. Even when he saw Beasley's red pony tethered in his own yard, he had no premonition of trouble.

He went cheerfully into the house, greeting Beasley with an irreverent, "Have a drink on me, Mister and Owner Beasley! Oh, you have one already! Have the next one then, sir!"

"Thanks for the drink, lad, but I came to see you. On business."

"Yes sir," said Rod, "you're one of my trustees, aren't you?"

"That I am," said Beasley, "but you're in trouble, lad. Real trouble."

Rod smiled at him evenly and calmly. He knew that the older man had to make a big effort to talk with his voice instead of just spieking with his mind; he appreciated the fact that Beasley had come to him personally, instead of talking to the other trustees about him. It was a sign that he, Rod, had passed his ordeal. With genuine composure, Rod declared:

"I've been thinking, sir, this week, that I'd gotten out of trouble."

"What do you mean, Owner McBan?"

"You remember..." Rod did not dare mention the Garden of Death, nor his memory that Beasley had been one of the secret board who had passed him as being fit to live.

Beasley took the cue. "Some things we don't mention, lad, and I see that you have been well taught."

He stopped there and stared at Rod with the expression of a man looking at an unfamiliar corpse before turning it over to identify it. Rod became uneasy with the stare.

"Sit, lad, sit down," said Beasley, commanding Rod in his own house.

Rod sat down on the bench, since Beasley occupied the only chair—Rod's grandfather's huge carved offworld throne. He sat. He did not like being ordered about, but he was sure that Beasley meant him well and was probably strained by the unfamiliar effort of talking with his throat and mouth.

Beasley looked at him again with that peculiar expression, a mixture of sympathy and distaste.

"Get up again, lad, and look round your house to see if there's anybody about."

"There isn't," said Rod. "My aunt Doris left after I was cleared, the workwoman Eleanor borrowed a cart and went off to the market, and I have only two station hands. They're both out reinfesting Baby. She ran low on her santaclara count."

Normally, the wealth-producing sicknesses of their gigantic half-paralyzed sheep would have engrossed the full attention of any two Norstrilian farmers, without respect to differences in age and grade.

This time, no.

Beasley had something serious and unpleasant on his mind. He looked so pruneey and unquiet that Rod felt a real sympathy for the man.

Rod did not argue. Dutifully he went out the back door, looked around the south side of the house, saw no one, walked around the house on the north side, saw no one there either, and reentered the house from the front door.. Beasley had not stirred, except to pour a little more bitter ale from his bottle to his glass. Rod met his eyes. Without another word, Rod sat down. If the man was seriously concerned about him (which Rod thought he was), and if the man was reasonably intelligent (which Rod knew he was), the communication was worth waiting for and listening to. Rod was still sustained by the pleasant feeling that his neighbors liked him, a feeling which had come plainly to the surface of their honest Norstrilian faces when he walked back into his own back yard from the van of the Garden of Death.

Beasley said, as though he were speaking of an unfamiliar food or a rare drink, "Boy, this talking has some advantages. If a man doesn't put his ear into it, he can't just pick it up with his mind, can he now?"

Rod thought for a moment. Candidly he spoke, "I'm too young to know for sure, but I never heard of somebody picking up spoken words by hiering them with his mind. It seems to be one or the other. You never talk while you are spieking, do you?"

Beasley nodded. "That's it, then. I have something to tell you which I shouldn't tell you, and yet I have got to tell you, so if I keep my voice blooming low, nobody else will pick it up, will they?"

Rod nodded. "What is it, sir? Is there something wrong with the title to my property?"

Beasley took a drink but kept staring at Rod over the top of the mug while he drank.

"You've got trouble there too, lad, but even though it's bad, it's something I can talk over with you and with the other trustees. This is more personal, in a way. And worse."

"Please, sir! What is it?" cried Rod, almost exasperated by all this mystification.

"The Onseck is after you?"

"What's an onseck?" said Rod, "I have never heard of it."

"It's not an it," said Beasley gloomily, "it's a him. Onseck, you know, the chap in the Commonwealth government. The man who keeps the books for the Vice-

Chairman. It was Hon. Sec., meaning Honorary Secretary or something else prehistoric, when we first came to this planet, but by now everybody just says Onseck and writes it just the way it sounds. He knows that he can't reverse your hearing in the Garden of Death."

"Nobody could," cried Rod, "it's never been done; everybody knows that."

"They may know it, but there's civil trial."

"How can they give me a civil trial when I haven't had time to change? You yourself know—"

"Never, laddie, never say what Beasley knows or doesn't know. Just say what you think." Even in private, between just the two of them, Beasley did not want to violate the fundamental secrecy of the hearing in the Garden of Death.

"I'm just going to say, Mister and Owner Beasley," said Rod very heatedly, "that a civil trial for general incompetence is something which is applied to an owner only after the neighbors have been complaining for a long time about him. They haven't had the time or the right to complain about me, have they now?"

Beasley kept his hand on the handle of his mug. The use of spoken words tired him. A crown of sweat began to show around the top of his forehead.

"Suppose, lad," said he very solemnly, "that I knew through proper channels something about how you were judged in that van—there! I've said it, me that shouldn't have—and suppose that I knew the Onseck hated a foreign gentleman that might have been in a van like that—"

"The Lord Redlady?" whispered Rod, shocked at last by the fact that Beasley forced himself to talk about the unmentionable.

"Aye," nodded Beasley, his honest face close to breaking into tears, "and suppose that I knew that the Onseck knew you and felt the rule was wrong, all wrong, that you were a freak who would hurt all Norstrilia, what would I do?"

"I don't know," said Rod. "Tell me, perhaps?"

"Never," said Beasley. "I'm an honest man. Get me another drink."

Rod walked over to the cupboard, brought out another bottle of bitter ale, wondering where or when he might have known the Onseck. He had never had much of anything to do with government; his family—first his grandfather, while he lived, and then his aunts and cousins—had taken care of all the official papers and permits and things.

Beasley drank deeply of the ale. "Good ale, this. Hard work, talking, even though it's a fine way to keep a secret, if you're pretty sure nobody can peep our minds."

"I don't know him," said Rod.

"Who?" asked Beasley, momentarily off his trail of thought.



"The Onseck. I don't know any Onseck. I've never been to New Canberra. I've never seen an official, no, nor an offworlder neither, not until I met that foreign gentleman we were talking about. How can the Onseck know me if I don't know him?"

"But you did, laddie. He wasn't Onseck then."

"For sheep's sake, sir," said Rod, "tell me who it is!"

"Never use the Lord's name unless you are talking to the Lord," said Beasley glumly.

"I'm sorry, sir. I apologize. Who was it?"

"Houghton Syme to the hundred-and-forty-ninth," said Beasley.

"We have no neighbor of that name, sir."

"No, we don't," said Beasley hoarsely, as though he had come to the end of his road in imparting secrets.

Rod stared at him, still puzzled.

In the far, far distance, way beyond Pillow Hill, his giant sheep baa'd. That probably meant that Hopper was hoisting her into a new position on her platform, so that she could reach fresh grass.

Beasley brought his face close to Rod's. He whispered, and it was funny to see the hash a normal man made out of whispering when he hadn't even talked with his voice for half a year.

His words had a low, dirty tone to them, as though he were going to tell Rod an extremely filthy story or ask him some personal and most improper question.

"Your life, laddie," he gasped, "I know you've had a rum one. I hate to ask you, but I must. How much do you know of your own life?"

"Oh, that," said Rod easily, "that. I don't mind being asked that, even if it is a little wrongo. I have had four childhoods, zero to sixteen each time. My family kept hoping that I would grow up to spiek and hear like everybody else, but I just stayed me. Of course, I wasn't a real baby on the three times they started me over, just sort of an educated idiot the size of a boy sixteen."

"That's it, lad. But can you remember them, those other lives?"

"Bits and pieces, sir. Pieces and bits. It didn't hold together—" He checked himself and gasped, "Houghton Syme! Houghton Syme! Old Hot and Simple. Of course I know him. The one-shot boy. I knew him in my first prepper, in my first childhood. We were pretty good friends, but we hated each other anyhow. I was a freak and he was too. I couldn't spiek or hear, and he couldn't take stroon. That meant that I would never get through the Garden of Death—just the Giggle Room and fine owner's coffin for me. And him—he was worse. He would just get an Old Earth lifetime—a hundred and sixty years or so and then blotto. He must be an

oldish man now. Poor chap! How did he get to be Onseck? What power does an Onseck have?"

"Now you have it, laddie. He says he's your friend and that he hates to do it, but he's got to see to it that you are killed. For the good of Norstrilia. He says it's his duty. He got to be Onseck because he was always jawing about his duty and people were a little sorry for him because he was going to die so soon, just one Old Earth lifetime with all the stroon in the universe produced around his feet and him unable to take it—"

"They never cured him, then?"

"Never," said Beasley. "He's an old man now, and bitter. And he's sworn to see you die."

"Can he do it? Being Onseck, I mean."

"He might. He hates that foreign gentleman we were talking about because that offworlder told him he was a provincial fool. He hates you because you will live and he will not. What was it you called him in school?"

"Old Hot and Simple. A boy's joke on his name."

"He's not hot and he's not simple. He's cold and complicated and cruel and unhappy. If we didn't all of us think that he was going to die in a little while, ten or a hundred years or so, we might vote him into a Giggle Room ourselves. For misery and incompetence. But he is Onseck and he's after you. I've said it now. I shouldn't have. But when I saw that sly cold face talking about you and trying to declare your board incompetent right while you, laddie, were having an honest binge with your family and neighbors at having gotten through at last—when I saw that white sly face creeping around where you couldn't even see him for a fair fight—then I said to myself, Rod McBan may not be a man officially, but the poor clodding crutt has paid the full price for being a man, so I've told you. I may have taken a chance, and I may have hurt my honor." Beasley sighed. His honest red face was troubled indeed. "I may have hurt my honor, and that's a sore thing here in Norstrilia where a man can live as long as he wants. But I'm glad I did. Besides, my throat is sore with all this talking. Give me another bottle of bitter ale, lad, before I go and get my horse.."

Wordlessly Rod got him the ale, and poured it for him with a pleasant nod.

Beasley, uninclined to do any more talking, sipped at the ale. Perhaps, thought Rod, he is hiering around carefully to see if there have been any human minds nearby which might have picked up the telepathic leakage from the conversation.

As Beasley handed back the mug and started to leave with a wordless neighborly nod, Rod could not restrain himself from asking one last question, which he spoke in a hissed whisper. Beasley had gotten his mind so far off the subject of sound talk that he merely stared at Rod. Perhaps, Rod thought, he is asking me to

spiek plainly because he has forgotten that I cannot spiek at all. That was the case, because Beasley croaked in a very hoarse voice,

"What is it, lad? Don't make me talk much. My voice is scratching me and my honor is sore within me."

"What should I do, sir? What should I do?"

"Mister and Owner McBane, that's your problem. I'm not you. I wouldn't know."

"But what would you do, sir? Suppose you were me."

Beasley's blue eyes looked over at Pillow Hill for a moment, abstractedly. "Get—off—planet. Get off. Go away. For a hundred years or so. Then that man—*him*—he'll be dead in due time and you can come back, fresh as a new-blossomed twinkle."

"But how, sir? How can I do it?"

Beasley patted him on his shoulder, gave him a broad wordless smile, put his foot in his stirrup, sprang into his saddle, and looked down at Rod.

"I wouldn't know, neighbor. But good luck to you, just the same. I've done more than I should. Goodbye."

He slapped his horse gently with his open hand and trotted out of the yard. At the edge of the yard the horse changed to a canter.

Rod stood in his own doorway, utterly alone.

## *THE OLD BROKEN TREASURES IN THE GAP*

After Beasley left, Rod loped miserably around his farm. He missed his grandfather, who had been living during his first three childhoods, but who had died while Rod was going through a fourth, simulated infancy in an attempt to cure his telepathic handicap. He even missed his Aunt Margot, who had voluntarily gone into Withdrawal at the age of nine hundred two. There were plenty of cousins and kinsmen from whom he could ask advice; there were the two hands on the farm; there was even the chance that he could go see Mother Hilton herself, because she had once been married to one of his great-uncles. But this time he did not want companionship. There was nothing he could do with people. The Onseck was people too; imagine Old Hot and Simple becoming a power in the land. Rod knew that this was his own fight.

His own.

What had ever been his own before?

Not even his life. He could remember bits about the different boyhoods he had. He even had vague uncomfortable glimpses of seasons of pain—the times they had sent him back to babyhood while leaving him large. That hadn't been his choice. The old man had ordered it or the Vice-Chairman had approved it or Aunt Margot had begged for it. Nobody had asked him much, except to say, "You will agree..."

He had agreed.

He had been good—so good that he hated them all at times and wondered if they knew he hated them. The hate never lasted, because the real people involved were too well-meaning, too kind, too ambitious for his own sake. He had to love them back.

Trying to think these things over, he loped around his estate on foot.

The big sheep lay on their platforms, forever sick, forever gigantic. Perhaps some of them remembered when they had been lambs, free to run through the sparse grass, free to push their heads through the pliofilm covers of the canals and to help themselves to water when they wanted to drink. Now they weighed hundreds of tons and were fed by feeding machines, watched by guard machines, checked by automatic doctors. They were fed and watered a little through the mouth only because pastoral experience showed that they stayed fatter and lived longer if a semblance of normality was left to them.

His aunt Doris, who kept house for him, was still away.

How workwoman Eleanor, whom he paid an annual sum larger than many planets paid for their entire armed forces, had delayed her time at market.

The two sheephands, Bill and Hopper, were still out.

And he did not want to talk to them, anyhow.

He wished that he could see the Lord Redlady, that strange offworld man whom he had met in the Garden of Death. The Lord Redlady just looked as though he knew more things than Norstrilians did, as though he came from sharper, crueller, wiser societies than most people in Old North Australia had ever seen.

But you can't ask for a Lord. Particularly not when you have met him only in a secret hearing.

Rod had gotten to the final limits of his own land.

Humphrey's Lawsuit lay beyond—a broad strip of poor land, completely untended, the building-high ribs of long-dead sheep skeletons making weird shadows as the sun began to set. The Humphrey family had been lawing over that land for hundreds of years. Meanwhile it lay waste except for the few authorized public animals which the Commonwealth was allowed to put on any land, public or private.

Rod knew that freedom was only two steps away.

All he had to do was to step over the line and shout with his mind for people. He could do that even though he could not really speak. A telepathic garble of alarm would bring the orbiting guards down to him in seven or eight minutes. Then he would need only to say, "I swear off title. I give up Mistership and Ownership. I demand my living from the Commonwealth. Watch me, people, while I repeat."

Three repetitions of this would make him an Official Pauper, with not a care left—no meetings, no land to tend, no accounting to do, nothing but to wander around Old North Australia picking up any job he wanted and quitting it whenever he wanted. It was a good life, a free life, the best the Commonwealth could offer to Squatters and Owners who otherwise lived long centuries of care, responsibility, and honor. It was a fine life.

But no McBane had ever taken it, not even a cousin.

Nor could he.

He went back to the house, miserable. He listened to Eleanor talking with Bill and Hopper while dinner was served—a huge plate of boiled mutton, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, station-brewed beer out of the keg. (There were planets, he knew, where people never tasted such food from birth to death. There they lived on impregnated pasteboard which was salvaged from the latrines, reimpregnated with nutrients and vitamins, deodorized and sterilized, and issued again the next day.) He knew it was a fine dinner, but he did not care.

How could he talk about the Onseck to these people? Their faces still glowed with pleasure at his having come out the right side of the Garden of Death. They thought he was lucky to be alive, not even more lucky to be the most honored heir on the whole planet. Doom was a good place, even if it wasn't the biggest.

Right in the middle of dinner he remembered the gift the snake soldier had given him. He had put it on the top shelf of his bedroom wall, and with the party and Beasley's visit, he had never opened it.

He bolted down his food and muttered, "I'll be back."

The wallet was there, in his bedroom. The case was beautiful. He took it, opened it.

Inside there was a flat metal disk.

A ticket?

Where to?

He turned it this way and that. It had been telepathically engraved and was probably shouting its entire itinerary into his mind, but he could not hear it.

He held it close to the oil lamp. Sometimes disks like this had old-writing on them, which at least showed the general limits. It would be a private ornithopter up to Menzies Lake at the best, or an airbus fare to New Melbourne and return. He

caught the sheen of old writing. One more tilt, angled to the light, and he had it. "Manhome and return."

Manhome!

Lord have mercy, that was Old Earth itself!

But then, thought Rod, I'd be running away from the Onseck, and I'd live the rest of my life with all my friends knowing I had run away from Old Hot and Simple. I can't. Somehow I've got to beat Houghton Syme CXLIX. In his own way. And my own way.

He went back to the table, dropped the rest of the dinner into his stomach as though it were sheep-food pellets, and went to his bedroom early.

For the first time in his life, he slept badly.

And out of the bad sleep, the answer came,

"Ask Hamlet."

Hamlet was not even a man. He was just a talking picture in a cave, but he was wise, he was from Old Earth itself, and he had no friends to whom to give Rod's secrets.

With this idea, Rod turned on his sleeping shelf and went into a deep sleep.

In the morning his aunt Doris was still not back, so he told the workwoman Eleanor, "I'll be gone all day. Don't look for me or worry about me."

"What about your lunch, Mister and Owner? You can't run around the station with no tucker."

"Wrap some up, then."

"Where're you going, Mister and Owner, sir, if you can tell me?" There was an unpleasant searching edge in her voice, as though—being the only adult woman present—she had to check on him as though he were still a child. He didn't like it, but he replied with a frank enough air,

"I'm not leaving the station. Just rambling around. I need to think."

More kindly she said, "You think, then, Rod. Just go right ahead and think. If you ask me, you ought to go live with a family—"

"I know what you've said," he interrupted her. "I'm not making any big decisions today, Eleanor. Just rambling and thinking."

"All right then, Mister and Owner. Ramble around and worry about the ground you're walking on. It's you that get the worries for it. I'm glad my daddy took the official pauper words. We used to be rich." Unexpectedly she brightened and laughed at herself, "Now that, you've heard that too, Rod. Here's your food. Do you have water?"

"I'll steal from the sheep," he said irreverently. She knew he was joking and she waved him a friendly goodbye.

The old, old gap was to the rear of the house, so he left by the front. He wanted to go the long wrong way around, so that neither human eyes nor human minds would stumble on the secret he had found fifty-six years before, the first time he was eight years old. Through all the pain and the troubles he had remembered this one vivid bright secret—the deep cave full of ruined and prohibited treasures. To these he must go.

The sun was high in the sky, spreading its patch of brighter grey above the grey clouds, when he slid into what looked like a dry irrigation ditch.

He walked a few steps along the ditch. Then he stopped and listened carefully, very carefully.

There was no sound except for the snoring of a young hundred-ton ram a mile or so away.

Rod then stared around.

In the far distance, a police ornithopter soared as lazy as a sated hawk..

Rod tried desperately much to hear.

He heard nothing with his mind, but with his ears he heard the slow heavy pulsing of his own blood pounding through his head.

He took a chance.

The trap door was there, just inside the edge of the culvert.

He lifted it and, leaving it open, dove in confidently as a swimmer knifing his way into a familiar pool.

He knew his way.

His clothes ripped a little but the weight of his body dragged him past the narrowness of the doorframe.

His hands reached out and like the hands of an acrobat they caught the inner bar. The door behind snapped shut. How frightening this had been when he was little and tried the trip for the first time! He had let himself down with a rope and a torch, never realizing the importance of the trap door at the edge of the culvert!

Now it was easy.

With a thud, he landed on his feet. The bright old illegal lights went on. The dehumidifier began to purr, lest file wetness of his breath spoil the treasures in the room.

There were drama-cubes by the score, with two different sizes of projectors. There were heaps of clothing, for both men and women, left over from forgotten ages. In a chest, in the corner, there was even a small machine from before the Age of Space, a crude but beautiful mechanical chronograph, completely without

resonance compensation, and the ancient name "Jaeger Le Coultre" written across its face. It still kept Earth time after fifteen thousand years.

Rod sat down in an utterly impermissible chair—one which seemed to be a complex of pillows built on an interlocking frame. The touch enough was a medicine for his worries. One chair leg was broken, but that was the way his grandfather-to-the-nineteenth had violated the Clean Sweep.

The Clean Sweep had been Old North Australia's last political crisis, many centuries before, when the last underpeople were hunted down and driven off the planet and when all damaging luxuries had to be turned in to the Commonwealth authorities, to be repurchased by their owners only at a revaluation two hundred thousand times higher than their assessed worth. It was the final effort to keep Norstrilians simple, healthy and well. Every citizen had to swear that he had turned in every single item, and the oath had been taken with thousands of telepaths watching. It was a testimony to the high mental power and adept deceitfulness of grandfather-to-the-nineteenth that Rod McBan CXXX had inflicted only symbolic breakage on his favorite treasures, some of which were not even in the categories allowed for repurchase, like offworld drama-cubes, and had been able to hide his things in an unimportant corner of his fields—hide them so well that neither robbers nor police had thought of them for the hundreds of years that followed..

Rod picked up his favorite: Hamlet, by William Shakespeare. Without a viewer, the cube was designed to act when touched by a true human being. The top of the cube became a little stage, the actors appeared as bright miniatures speaking Ancient English, a language very close to Old North Australian, and the telepathic commentary, cued to the Old Common Tongue, rounded out the story. Since Rod was not dependably telepathic, he had learned a great deal of the Ancient English by trying to understand the drama without commentary. He did not like what he first saw and he shook the cube until the play approached its end. At last he heard the dear high familiar voice speaking in Hamlet's last scene:

*I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!  
You that look pale and tremble at this chance,  
That are but mutes or audience to this act,  
Had I but time—as this fell sergeant, death,  
Is strict in his arrest— Oh! I could tell you—  
But let it be, Horatio, I am dead.*

Rod shook the cube very gently and the scene sped down a few lines. Hamlet was still talking:

*... what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity a while,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story.*



Rod put down the cube very gently.

The bright little figures disappeared.

The room was silent.

But he had the answer and it was wisdom. And wisdom, coeval with man, comes unannounced, unbidden, and unwelcome into every life. Rod found that he had discovered the answer to a basic problem.

But not his own problem. The answer was Houghton Syme's, *Old Hot and Simple*. It was the Hon. Sec. who was already dying of a wounded name. Hence the persecution. It was the Onseck who had the "fell sergeant, death" acting strictly in his arrest, even if the arrest were only a few decades off instead of a few minutes. He, Rod McBan, was to live; his old acquaintance was to die; and the dying—oh, the dying, always, always!—could not help resenting the survivors, even if they were loved ones, at least a little bit.

Hence the Onseck.

But what of himself?

Rod brushed a pile of priceless, illegal manuscripts out of the way and picked up a small book marked, *Reconstituted Late English Language Verse*. At each page, as it was opened, a young man or woman seven centimeters high stood up brightly on the page and recited the text. Rod ruffled the pages of the old book so that the little figures appeared and trembled and fled like weak flames seen on a bright day. One caught his eye and he stopped the page at midpoem. The figure was saying:

*The challenge holds,  
I cannot now retract  
The boast I made to that relentless court,  
The hostile justice of my self-contempt.  
If now the ordeal is prepared, my act  
Must soon be shown.  
I pray that it is short,  
And never dream that I shall be exempt.*

He glanced at the foot of the page and saw the name, Casimir Colegrove. Of course, he had seen that name before. An old poet. A good one. But what did the words mean to him, Rod McBan, sitting in a hidden hole within the limits of his own land? He was a Mister and Owner, in all except final title, and he was running from an enemy he could not define. "The hostile justice of my self-contempt..." That was the key of it! He was not running from the Onseck. He was running from himself. He took justice itself as hostile because it corresponded with his sixty-odd years of boyhood, his endless disappointment, his compliance with things which would never, till all worlds burned, be complied with. How could he hear and spiek like other people if somewhere a dominant feature had turned recessive? Hadn't real justice already vindicated him and cleared him?

It was he himself who was cruel.

Other people were kind. (Shrewdness made him add, "sometimes.")

He had taken his own inner sense of trouble and had made it fit the outside world, like the morbid little poem he had read a long time ago. It was somewhere right in this room, and when he had first read it, he felt that the long-dead writer had put it down for himself alone. But it wasn't really so. Other people had had their troubles too and the poem had expressed something older than Rod McBan. It went:

*The wheels of fate are spinning around.  
Between them the souls of men are ground  
Who strive for throats to make some sound  
Of protest out of the mad profound  
Trap of the godmachine!*

"Godmachine," thought Rod, "now that's a clue. I've got the only all-mechanical computer on this planet. I'll play it on the stroon crop, win all or lose all."

The boy stood up in the forbidden room.

"Fight it is," he said to the cubes on the floor, "and a good thanks to you, grandfather-to-the-nineteenth. You met the law and did not lose. And now it is my turn to be Rod McBan."

He turned and shouted to himself,

"To Earth!"

The call embarrassed him. He felt unseen eyes staring at him. He almost blushed and would have hated himself if he had.

He stood on the top of a treasure-chest turned on its side. Two more gold coins, worthless as money but priceless as curios, fell noiselessly on the thick old rugs. He thought a goodbye again to his secret room and he jumped upward for the bar. He caught it, chinned himself, raised himself higher, swung a leg on it but not over it, got his other foot on the bar, and then, very carefully but with the power of all his muscles, pushed himself into the black opening above. The lights suddenly went off, the dehumidifier hummed louder, and the daylight dazzled him as the trap-door, touched, flung itself open.

He thrust his head into the culvert. The daylight seemed deep grey after the brilliance of the treasure room.

All silent. All clear. He rolled into the ditch. The door, with silence and power, closed itself behind him. He was never to know it, but it had been cued to the genetic code of the descendants of Rod McBan. Had any other person touched it, it would have withstood them for a long time. Almost forever.

You see, it was not really his door. He was its boy. "This land has made me," said Rod aloud, as he clambered out of the ditch and looked around. The young ram

had apparently wakened; his snoring had stopped and over the quiet hill there came the sound of his panting. Thirsty again! The Station of Doom was not so rich that it could afford unlimited water to its giant sheep. They lived all right. But he would have asked the trustees to sell even the sheep for water, if a real drought set in. But never the land. Never the land. No land for sale.

It didn't even really belong to him: he belonged to it—the rolling dry fields, the covered rivers and canals, the sky catchments which caught every drop which might otherwise have gone to his neighbors. That was the pastoral business—its product immortality and its price water. The Commonwealth could have flooded the planet and could have crated small oceans, with the financial resources it had at command, but the planet and the people were regarded as one ecological entity. Old Australia—that fabulous continent of old Earth now covered by the ruins of the abandoned Chinesian cityworld of Aoujou Nambien—had in its prime been broad, dry, open, beautiful; the planet of Old North Australia, by the dead weight of its own tradition, had to remain the same. Imagine trees. Imagine leaves—vegetation dropping uneaten to the ground. Imagine water pouring by the thousands of tons, no one greeting it with tears of relief or happy laughter! Imagine Earth. Old Earth. Manhome itself. Rod had tried to think of a whole planet inhabited by Hamlets, drenched with music and poetry, knee-deep in blood and drama. It was unimaginable, really, though he had tried to think it through.

Like a chill, a drill, a thrill cutting into his very nerves he thought:

Imagine Earth women!

What terrifying beautiful things they must be. Dedicated to ancient and corruptive arts, surrounded by the objects which Norstrilia had forbidden long ago, stimulated by experiences which the very law of his own world had expunged from the books! He would meet them; he couldn't help it; what, what would he do when he met a genuine Earth woman?

He would have to ask his computer, even though the neighbors laughed at him for having the only pure computer left on the planet.

They didn't know what grandfather-to-the-nineteenth had done. He had taught the computer to lie. It stored all the forbidden things which the Law of the Clean Sweep had brushed out of Norstrilian experience. It could lie like a trooper. Rod wondered whether a "trooper" might be some archaic Earth official who did nothing but tell the untruth, day in and day out, for his living. But the computer usually did not lie to him.

If grandfather 19 had behaved as saucily and unconventionally with the computer as he had with everything else, that particular computer would know all about women. Even things which they did not themselves know. Or wish to know.

Good computer! thought Rod as he trotted around the long, long fields to his house. Eleanor would have the tucker on. Doris might be back. Bill and Hopper would be angry if they had to wait for the mister before they ate. To speed up his

trip, he headed straight for the little cliff behind the house, hoping no one would see him jump down it. He was much stronger than most of the men he knew, but he was anxious, for some private inexpressible reason, for them not to know it

The route was clear.

He found the cliff.

No observers.

He dropped over it, feet first, his heels kicking up the scree as he tobogganed through loose rock to the foot of the slope.

And aunt Doris was there.

"Where have you been?" said she.

"Walking, mum," said he.

She gave him a quizzical look but knew better than to ask more. Talking always fussed her, anyhow. She hated the sound of her own voice, which she considered much too high. The matter passed.

Inside the house, they ate. Beyond the door and the oil lamp, a grey world became moonless, starless, black. This was night, his own night

At the end of the meal he waited for Doris to say grace to the Queen. She did but under her thick eyebrows her eyes expressed something other than thanks.

"You're going out," she said right after the prayer. It was an accusation, not a question.

The two hired men looked at him with quiet doubt. A week ago he had been a boy. Now he was the same person, but legally a man.

The workwoman Eleanor looked at him too. She smiled very unobtrusively to herself. She was on his side whenever any other person came into the picture; when they were alone, she nagged him as much as she dared. She had known his parents before they went offworld for a long-overdue honeymoon and were chewed into molecules by a battle between raiders and police. That gave her a proprietary feeling about him.

He tried to spiek to Doris with his mind, just to see if it would work.

It didn't. The two men bounded from their seats and ran for the yard, Eleanor sat in her chair holding tight to the table but saying nothing, and aunt Doris screeched so loud that he could not make out the words.

He knew she meant "Stop it!", so he did, and looked at her friendlily.

That started a fight.

Quarrels were common in Norstrilian life, because the Fathers had taught that they were therapeutic. Children could quarrel until adults told them to stop, freemen could quarrel as long as misters were not involved, misters could quarrel as long as

an owner was not present, and owners could quarrel if, at the very end, they were willing to fight it out. No one could quarrel in the presence of an offworlder, nor during an alert, nor with a member of the defense or police on active duty.

Rod McBan was a mister and owner, but he was under trusteeship; he was a man, but he had not been given clear papers; he was a handicapped person.

The rules got all mixed up.

When Hopper came back to the table he muttered, "Do that again, laddie, and I'll clout you one that you won't forget!" Considering how rarely he used his voice, it was a beautiful man's voice, resonant, baritone, full-bodied, hearty and sincere in the way the individual words came out.

Bill didn't say a word, but from the contortions of his face Rod gathered that he was spieking to the others at a great rate and working off his grievance that way.

"If you're spieking about me, Bill," said Rod with a touch of arrogance which he did not really feel, "you'll do me the pleasure of using words or you'll get off my land!"

When Bill spoke, his voice was as rusty as an old machine. "I'll have you know, you clutty little pommy, that I have more money in my name on Sidney 'Change than you and your whole glubby land are worth. Don't you tell me twice to get off the land, you silly half of a mister, or I will get. So shut up!"

Rod felt his stomach knot with anger.

His anger became fiercer when he felt Eleanor's restraining hand on his arm. He didn't want another person, not one more damned useless normal person, tell him what to do about spieking and hiering. Aunt Doris' face was still hidden in her apron; she had escaped, as she always did, into weeping.

Just as he was about to speak again, perhaps to lose Bill from the farm forever, his mind lifted in the mysterious way that it did sometimes; he could hear for miles. The people around him did not notice the difference. He saw the proud rage of Bill, with his money in the Sidney Exchange, bigger than many station owners had, waiting his time to buy back on the land which his father had left; he saw the honest annoyance of Hopper and was a little abashed to see that Hopper was watching him proudly and with amused affection; in Eleanor he saw nothing but wordless worry, a fear that she might lose him as she had lost so many homes for hnnnnnnnnnn dzzmmmmmm, a queer meaningless reference which had a shape in her mind but took no form in his; and in Aunt Doris he caught her inner voice calling, "Rod, Rod, Rod, come back! This may be your boy and I'm a McBan to the death, but I'll never know what to do with a cripple like him."

Bill was still waiting for him to answer when another thought came into his mind,

"You fool—go to your computer!"

"Who said that?" he thought, not trying to spiek again, but just thinking it with his mind.

"Your computer," said the faraway thinkvoice.

"You can't spick," said Rod, "you're a pure machine with not an animal brain in you."

"When you call me, Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the hundred and fifty first, I can speak across space itself. I'm cued to you and you shouted just now with your spiekmind. I can feel you hiering me."

"But—" said Rod in words.

"Take it easy, lad," said Bill, right in the room with him. "Take it easy. I didn't mean it."

"You're having one of your spells," said Aunt Doris, emerging rednosed from behind her apron.

Rod stood up.

Said he to all of them, "I'm sorry. I'm going out for a bit. Out into the night."

"You're going to that bloody computer," said Bill.

"Don't go, Mister McBan," said Hopper, "don't let us anger you into going. It's bad enough being around that computer in daylight, but at night it must be horrible."

"How would you know?" retorted Rod, "You've never been there at night. And I have. Lots of times..."

"There are dead people in it," said Hopper. "It's an old war computer. Your family should never have bought it in the first place. It doesn't belong on a farm. A thing like that should be hung out of space and orbited."

"All right, Eleanor," said Rod, "you tell me what to do. Everybody else has," he added with the last bit of his remaining anger, as his hiering closed down and he saw the usual opaque faces around him.

"It's no use, Rod. Go along to your computer. You've got a strange life and you're the one that will live it, Mister McBan, and not these other people around here."

Her words made sense. He stood up. "I'm sorry," said he, again, in lieu of goodbye.

He stood in the doorway, hesitant. He would have liked to say goodbye in a better way, but he did not know how to express it. Anyhow, he couldn't spiek, not so they could lifrr it with their minds; speaking with a voice was so crude, so flat for the fine little things that needed expression in life.

They looked at him, and he at them.

"Ngahh!" said he, in a raw cry of self-derision and fond disgust.

Their expression showed that they had gotten his meaning, though the word carried nothing with it. Bill nodded, Hopper looked friendly and a little worried, Aunt Doris stopped sniveling and began to stretch out one hand, only to stop it in midgesture, and Eleanor sat immobile at the table, upset by wordless troubles of her own.

He turned.

The cube of lamplight, the cabin room, was behind him; ahead the darkness of all Norstrilian nights, except for the weird rare tunes that they were cut up by trceries of lightness. He started off for a house which only a few but he could see, and which none but he could enter. It was a forgotten, invisible temple; it housed the MacArthur family computer, to which the older McBan computer was linked; and it was called the Palace of the Governor of Night.

## *THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNOR OF NIGHT*

Rod loped across the rolling land, his land.

Other Norstrilians, telepathically normal, would have taken fixes by hiering the words in nearby houses. Rod could not walk by telepathy, so he whistled to himself in an odd off key, with lots of flats. The echoes came back to his unconscious mind through the overdeveloped ear-hearing which he had worked out to compensate for not being able to lifrr with his mind. He sensed a slope ahead of him, and jogged up it; he avoided a clump of brush; he heard his youngest ram, Sweet William, snoring the gigantic snore of a santaclara-infected sheep two hills over.

Soon he would see it.

The Palace of the Governor of Night.

The most useless building in all Old North Australia.

Solider than steel and yet invisible to normal eyes except for its ghostly outline traced in the dust which had fallen lightly on it.

The Palace had really been a palace once, on Khufu II, which rotated with one pole always facing its star. The people there had made fortunes which at one time were compared with the wealth of Old North Australia. They had discovered the Furry Mountains, range after range of alpine configurations on which a tenacious non-Earth lichen had grown. The lichen was silky, shimmering, warm, strong, and beautiful beyond belief. The people gained their wealth by cutting it carefully from the mountains so that it would regrow and selling it to the richer worlds, where a luxury fabric could be sold at fabulous prices. They had even had two governments on Khufu II, one of the day-dwelling people who did most of the trading and brokering, since the hot sunlight made their crop of lichen poor, and the other for

the night-dwellers, who ranged deep into the frigid areas in search of lichen, stunted, fine, tenacious and delicately beautiful.

The Daimoni had come to Khufa II, just as they came to many other planets, including Old Earth, Man-home itself. They had come out of nowhere and they went back to the same place. Some people thought that they were human beings who had acclimated themselves to live in the subspace which planoforming involved; others thought that they had an artificial planet on the inside of which they lived; still others thought that they had solved the jump out of our galaxy; a few insisted that there were no such things as Daimoni.. This last position was hard to maintain, because the Daimoni paid in architecture of a very spectacular kind,—buildings which resisted corrosion, erosion, age, heat, cold, stress and weapons. On Earth itself Earthport was their biggest wonder— a sort of wine glass, twenty-five kilometers high, with an enormous rocket field built into the top of it. On Norstrilia they had left nothing; perhaps they had not even wanted to meet the Old North Australians, who had a reputation for being rough and gruff with strangers who came to their own home planet. It was evident that the Daimoni had solved the problem of immortality on their own terms and in their own way; they were bigger than most of the races of mankind, uniform in size, height and beauty; they bore no sign of youth or age; they showed no vulnerability to sickness; they spoke with mellifluous gravity; and they purchased treasures for their own immediate collective use, not for retrade or profit. They had never tried to get stroon or the raw santaclara virus from which it was refined, even though the Daimoni trading ships had passed the tracks of armed and convoyed Old North Australian freight fleets. There was even one picture which showed the two races meeting each other in the chief port of Olympia, the planet of the blind receivers: Norstrilians tall, outspoken, lively, crude and immensely rich; Daimoni equally rich, reserved, beautiful, polished and pale. There was awe (and with awe, resentment) on the part of the Norstrilians toward the Daimoni; there was elegance and condescension on the part of the Daimoni toward everyone else, including the Norstrilians. The meeting had been no success at all. The Norstrilians were not used to meeting people who did not care about immortality, even at a penny a bushel; the Daimoni were disdainful toward a race which not only did not appreciate architecture, but which tried to keep architects off its planet, except for defense purposes, and which desired to lead a rough, simple, pastoral life to the end of time. Thus it was not until the Daimoni had left, never to return, that the Norstrilians realized that they had passed up some of the greatest bargains of all time—the wonderful buildings which the Daimoni so generously scattered over the planets which they had visited for trade or for visits.

On Khufu II, the Governor of Night had brought out an ancient book and had said, "I want that."

The Daimoni, who had a neat eye for proportions and figures, said, "We have that picture on our world too. It is an Ancient Earth building. It was once called the great temple of Diana of the Ephesians, but it fell even before the age of space began."



"That's what I want," said the Governor of Night.

"Easy enough," said one of the Daimoni, all of whom looked like princes. "We'll run it up for you by tomorrow night."

"Hold on," said the Governor of Night. "I don't want the whole thing. Just the front—to decorate my palace. I have a perfectly good palace all right, and my defenses are built right into it."

"If you let us build you a house," said one of the Daimoni gently, "you would never need defenses, ever. Just a robot to close the windows against megaton bombs."

"You're good architects, gentlemen," said the Governor of Night, smacking his lips over the model city they had shown him, "but I'll stick with the defenses I know. So I just want your front. Like that picture. Furthermore, I want it invisible."

The Daimoni lapsed back into their language, which sounded as though it were of Earth origin, but which has never been deciphered from the few recordings of their visits which have survived.

"All right," said one of them, "invisible it is. You still want the great temple of Diana at Ephesus on Old Earth?"

"Yes," said the Governor of Night.

"Why—if you can't see it?" said the Daimoni.

"That's the third specification, gentlemen. I want it so that I can see it, and my heirs, but nobody else."

"If it's solid but invisible, everybody is going to see it when your fine snow hits it."

"I'll take care of that," said the Governor of Night. "I'll pay what we were talking about—forty thousand select pieces of Furry Mountain Fur. But you make that palace invisible to everybody except me, and my heirs."

"We're architects, not magicians!" said the Daimoni with the longest cloak, who might have been the leader. . .

"That's what I want."

The Daimoni gabbled among themselves, discussing some technical problems.. Finally one of them came over to the Governor of Night and said,

"I'm the ship's surgeon. May I examine you?"

"Why?" said the Governor of Night.

"To see if we can possibly fit the building to you. Otherwise we can't even guess at the specifications we need."

"Go ahead," said the Governor. "Examine me."

"Here? Now?" said the Daimoni doctor. "Wouldn't you prefer a quiet place or a private room? Or you can come aboard our ship. That would be very convenient."

"For you," said the Governor of Night. "Not for me."

"Here my men have guns trained on you. You would never get back to your ship alive if you tried to rob me of my Furry Mountain Furs or kidnap me so that you could trade me back for my treasures. You examine me here and now or not at all."

"You are a rough, tough man, Governor," said another one of the elegant Daimoni. "Perhaps you had better tell your guards that you are asking us to examine you. Otherwise they might get excited with us and persons might become damaged," said the Daimoni with a faint condescending smile.

"Go ahead, foreigners," said the Governor of Night. "My men have been listening to everything through the microphone in my top button."

He regretted his words two seconds later, but it was already too late. Four Daimoni had picked him up and spun him so deftly that the guards never understood how their Governor lost all his clothes in a trice. One of the Daimoni must have stunned him or hypnotized him; he could not cry out. Indeed, afterwards, he could not even remember much of what they did.

The guards themselves had gasped when they saw the Daimoni pull endless needles out of their boss' eyeballs without having noticed the needles go in. They had lifted their weapons when the Governor of Night turned a violent fluorescent green in color, only to gasp, writhe and vomit when the Daimoni poured enormous bottles of medicine into him. In less than half an hour they stood back.

The Governor, naked and blotched, sat on the ground and vomited.

One of the Daimoni said quietly to the guards, "He's not hurt, but he and his heirs will see part of the ultraviolet band for many generations to come. Put him to bed for the night. He will feel all right by morning. And, by the way, keep everybody away from the front of the palace tonight. We're putting in the buildings which he asked for. The great temple of Diana of the Ephesians."

The senior guard officer spoke up, "We can't take the guards off the palace. That's our defense headquarters and no one, not even the Governor of the Night, has the right to strip it bare of sentries. The Day People might attack us again."

The Daimoni spokesman smiled gently: "Make a good note of their names, then, and ask them for their last words. We shall not fight them, officer, but if they are in the way of our work tonight, we shall build them right into the new palace. Their widows and children can admire them as statues tomorrow."

The guards officer looked down at his chief, who now lay flat on the ground with his head in his hands, coughing out the words, "Leave—me—alone!" The officer looked back at the cool, aloof Daimoni spokesman. He said: "I'll do what I can, sir."

The temple of Ephesus was there in the morning. The columns were the Doric columns of ancient Earth; the frieze was a masterpiece of gods, votaries and horses; the building was exquisite in its proportions.

The Governor of Night could see it. His followers could not.

The forty thousand lengths of Furry Mountain Fur were paid. The Daimoni left.

The Governor died, and he had heirs who could see the building too. It was visible only in the ultraviolet and ordinary men beheld it on Khufu II only when the powdery hard snow outlined it in a particularly harsh storm.

But now it belonged to Rod McBan and it was on Old North Australia, not on Khufu II any more. How had that happened?

Who would want to buy an invisible temple, anyhow?

William the Wild would, that's who. Wild William MacArthur, who delighted, annoyed, disgraced and amused, whole generations of Norstrilians with his fantastic pranks, his gigantic whims, his world-girdling caprices. William MacArthur was a grandfather to the twenty-second in a matrilineal line to Rod McBan. He had been a man in his time, a real man. Happy as Larry, drunk with wit when dead sober, sober with charm when dead drunk. He could talk the legs off a sheep when he put his mind on it; he could talk the laws off the Commonwealth. He did. He had.

The Commonwealth had been purchasing all the Daimoni houses it could find, using them as defense outposts. Pretty little Victorian cottages were sent into orbit as far-range forts. Theaters were bought in other worlds and dragged through space to Old North Australia, where they became bomb shelters or veterinary centers for the forever-sick wealth-producing sheep. Nobody could take a Daimoni building apart, once it had been built, so the only thing to do was to cut the building loose from its non-Daimoni foundation, lift it by rockets or planoform, and then warp it through space to the new location. The Norstrilians did not have to worry about landing them; they just dropped them. It didn't hurt the buildings any. Sometimes simple Daimoni buildings came apart, because the Daimoni had been asked to make them demountable, but when they were solid, they stayed solid.

Wild William heard about the temple. Khufu II was a ruin. The lichen had gotten a plant infection and had died off. The few Khufuans who were left were beggars, asking the Instrumentality for refugee status and emigration. The Commonwealth had bought their little buildings, but even the Commonwealth of Old North Australia did not know what to do with an invisible and surpassingly beautiful Greek temple. Wild William visited it. He soberly inspected it, in complete visibility, by using sniper eyes set into the ultraviolet. He persuaded the government to let him spend half of his immense fortune putting it into a valley just next to the Station of Doom. Then, having enjoyed it a little while, he fell and broke his neck while gloriously drunk and his inconsolable daughter married a handsome and practical McBan.

And now it belonged to Rod McBan.

And housed his computer.

His own computer.

He could speak to it at the extension which reached into the gap of hidden treasures. He talked to it, other times, at the talkpoint in the field, where the polished red-and-black metal of the old computer was reproduced in exquisite miniature. Or he could come to this strange building, the Palace of the Governor of Night, and stand as the worshippers of Diana had once stood, crying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" When he came in this way, he had the full console in front of him, automatically unlocked by his presence, just as his grandfather had showed him, three childhoods before, when the old McBan still had high hopes that Rod would turn into a normal Old North Australian boy. The grandfather, using his personal code in turn, had unlocked the access controls and had invited the computer to make its own foolproof recording of Rod, so that Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan CLI would be forever known to the machine, no matter what age he attained, no matter how maimed or disguised he might be, no matter how sick or forlorn he might return to the machine of his forefathers. The old man did not even ask the machine how the identification was obtained. He trusted the computer.

Rod climbed the steps of the Palace. The columns stood with their ancient carving, bright in his second sight; he never quite knew how he could see with the ultraviolet, since he noticed no difference between himself and other people in the matter of eyesight except that he more often got headaches from sustained open runs on clean-cloudy days. At a time like this, the effect was spectacular. It was his time, his temple, his own place. He could see, in the reflected light from the Palace, that many of his cousins must have been out to see the Palace during the nights. They too could see it, as it was a family inheritance to be able to watch the invisible temple which one's friends could not see; but they did not have access.

He alone had that.

"Computer," he cried, "admit me."

"Message unnecessary," said the computer. "You are always clear to enter.." The voice was a male Norstrilian voice, with a touch of the theatrical in it. Rod was never quite sure that it was the voice of his own ancestor; when challenged directly as to whose voice it was using the machine had told him, "Input on that topic had been erased in me. I do not know. Historical evidence suggests that it was male, contemporary with my installation here, and past middle age when coded by me."

Rod would have felt lively and smart except for the feelings of awe which the Palace of the Governor of Night, standing bright and visible under the dark clouds of Norstrilia, had upon him. He wanted to say something lighthearted but at first he could only mutter,

"Here I am."

"Observed and respected," stated the computer-voice. "If I were a person I would say 'congratulations,' since you are alive. As a computer I have no opinion on the subject. I note the fact."

"What do I do now?" said Rod.

"Question too general," said the computer. "Do you want a drink of water or a rest room? I can tell you where those are. Do you wish to play chess with me? I shall win just as many games as you tell me to."

"Shut up, you fool!" cried Rod. "That's not what I mean."

"Computers are fools only if they malfunction. I am not malfunctioning. The reference to me as a fool is therefore nonreferential and I shall expunge it from my memory system. Repeat the question, please."

"What do I do with my life?"

"You will work, you will marry, you will be the father of Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-second and several other children, you will die, your body will be sent into the endless orbit with great honor. You will do this well."

"Suppose I break my neck this very night?" argued Rod. "Then you would be wrong, wouldn't you?"

"I would be wrong, but I still have the probabilities with me."

"What do I do about the Onseck?"

"Repeat."

Rod had to tell the story several times before the computer understood it.

"I do not," said the computer, "find myself equipped with data concerning this one man whom you so confusingly allude to as Houghton Syme sometimes and as Old Hot and Simple at other times. His personal history is unknown to me. The odds against your killing him undetected are 11,713 to 1 against effectiveness, because too many people know you and know what you look like. I must let you solve your own problem concerning the Hon. Sec."

"Don't you have any ideas?"

"I have answers, not ideas."

"Give me a piece of fruit cake and a glass of fresh milk then."

"It will cost you twelve credits and by walking to your cabin you can get these things free. Otherwise I will have to buy them from Emergency Central."

"I said get them," said Rod.

The machine whirled. Extra lights appeared on the console. "Emergency Central has authorized my own use of sheltered supplies. You will pay for the replacement tomorrow." A door opened. A tray slid out, with a luscious piece of fruitcake and a glass of foaming fresh milk.

Rod sat on the steps of his own palace and ate.

Con conversationally, he said to the computer, "You must know what to do about Old Hot and Simple. It's a terrible thing for me to go through the Garden of Death and then have a dull tool like that pester the life out of me."

"He cannot pester the life out of you. You are too strong."

"Recognize an idiom, you silly ass!" said Rod.

The machine paused. "Idiom identified. Correction made. Apologies are herewith given to you, Child McBan."

"Another mistake. I'm not Child McBan any more. I'm Mister and Owner McBan."

"I will check central," said the computer. There was another long pause as the lights danced. Finally the computer answered. "Your status is mixed. You are both. In an emergency you are already the Mister and Owner of the Station of Doom, including me. Without an emergency, you are still Child McBan until your trustees release the papers to do it."

"When will they do that?"

"Voluntary action. Human. Timing uncertain. In four or five days, it would seem. When they release you, the Hon. Sec. will have the legal right to move for your arrest as an incompetent and dangerous owner. From your point of view, it will be very sad."

"And what do you think?" said Rod.

"I shall think that it is a disturbing factor. I speak the truth to you."

"And that is all?"

"All," said the computer.

"You can't stop the Hon. Sec.?"

"Not without stopping everybody else."

"What do you think people are, anyhow? Look here, computer, you have been talking to people for hundreds and hundreds of years. You know our names. You know my family. Don't you know anything about us? Can't you help me? What do you think I am?"

"Which question first?" said the computer.

Rod angrily threw the empty plate and glass on the floor of the temple. Robot arms flicked out and pulled them into the trash bin. He stared at the old polished metal of the computer. It ought to be polished. He had spent hundreds of hours polishing its case, all sixty-one panels of it, just because the machine was something which he could love.

"Don't you know me? Don't you know what I am?"

"You are Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-first."

"Specifically, you are a spinal column with a small bone box at one end, the head, and with reproductive equipment at the other end. Inside the bone box you save a small portion of material which resembles stiff, bloody lard. With that you think—you think better than I do, even though I have over five hundred million synaptic connections. You are a wonderful object, Rod McBan. I can understand what you are made of. I cannot share your human, animal side of life."

"But you know I'm in danger."

"I know it."

"What did you say, a while back, about not being able to stop Old Hot and Simple without stopping everybody else too? Could you stop everybody else?"

"Permission requested to correct error. I could not stop everyone. If I tried to use violence, the war computers at Commonwealth Defense would destroy me before I even started programming my own actions."

"You're partly a war computer."

"Admittedly," said the unwearied, unhurried voice of the computer, "but the Commonwealth made me safe before they let your forefathers have me."

"What can you do?"

"Rod McBan the hundred and fortieth told me to tell no one, ever."

"I override. Overridden."

"It's not enough to do that. Your great grandfather has a warning to which you must listen."

"Go ahead," said Rod.

There was a silence, and Rod thought that the machine was searching through ancient archives for a drama cube. He stood on the peristyle of the Palace of the Governor of Night and tried to see the Norstrilian clouds crawling across the sky near overhead; it felt like that kind of night. But it was very dark away from the illuminated temple porch and he could see nothing..

"Do you still command?" asked the computer.

"I didn't hear any warning," said Rod.

"He spieked it from a memory cube."

"Did you hear it?"

"I was not coded to it. It was human-to-human, McBan family only."

"Then," said Rod, "I override it."

"Overridden," said the computer.

"What can I do to stop everybody?"

"You can bankrupt Norstrilia temporarily, buy Old Earth itself, and then negotiate on human terms for anything you want."

"Oh, lord!" said Rod, "you've gone logical again, computer! This is one of your as-if situations."

The computer voice did not change its tone. It could not. The sequence of the words held a reproach, however. "This is not an imaginary situation. I am a war computer, and I was designed to include economic warfare. If you did exactly what I told you to do, you could take over all Old North Australia by legal means."

"How long would we need? Two hundred years? Old Hot and Simple would have me in my grave by then."

The computer could not laugh, but it could pause. It paused. "I have just checked the time on the New Melbourne Exchange. The 'Change signal says they will open in seventeen minutes. I will need four hours for your voice to say what it must. That means you will need four hours and seventeen minutes, give or take five minutes."

"What makes you think you can do it?"

"I am a pure computer, obsolete model. All the others have animal brains built into them, to allow for error. I do not. Furthermore, your great-grand-father hooked me into the defense net."

"Didn't the Commonwealth cut you out?"

"I am only the computer which was built to tell lies, except to the families of MacArthur and McBan. I lied to the Commonwealth when they checked on what I was getting. I am obliged to tell the truth only to you and to your designated descendants."

"I know that, but what does it have to do with it?"

"I predict my own space weather, ahead of the Commonwealth." The accent was not in the pleasant, even-toned voice; Rod himself began to believe it.

"You've tried this out?"

"I have war-gamed it more than a hundred million times. I had nothing else to do while I waited for you."

"You never failed?"

"I failed most of the time, when I first began. But I have not failed a war game from real data for the last thousand years."

"What would happen if you failed now?"

"You would be disgraced and bankrupt. I would be sold and disassembled."

"Is that all?" said Rod cheerfully.

"Yes," said the computer.



"I could stop Old Hot and Simple if I owned Old Earth itself. Let's go."

"I do not go anywhere," said the computer.

"I mean, let's start."

"You mean, to buy Earth, as we discussed?"

"What else?" yelled Rod. "What else have we been talking about?"

"You must have some soup, hot soup and a tranquilizer first. I cannot work at optimum if I have a human being who gets excited."

"All right," said Rod.

"You must authorize me to buy them."

"I authorize you."

"That will be three credits."

"In the name of the seven healthy sheep, what does it matter? How much will Earth cost?"

"Seven thousand million million megacredits."

"Deduct three for the soup and the pill then," shouted Rod, "if it won't spoil your calculations."

"Deducted," said the computer. The tray with the soup appeared, a white pill beside it.

"Now let's buy Earth," said Rod.

"Drink your soup and take your pill first," said the computer.

Rod gulped down his soup, washing the pill down with it.

"Now, let's go, cobber."

"Repeat after me," said the computer, "I herewith mortgage the whole body of the said sheep Sweet William for the sum of five hundred thousand credits to the New Melbourne Exchange on the open road..."

Rod repeated it.

And repeated it.

The hours became a nightmare of repetition.

The computer lowered his voice to a low murmur, almost a whisper. When Rod stumbled in the messages, the computer prompted him and corrected him.

Forward purchase... sell short... option to buy... preemptive margin... offer to sell... offer temporarily reserved... first collateral... second collateral... deposit to drawing account... convert to FOE credits... hold in SAD credits... twelve thousand tons of stroon... mortgage forward... promise to buy... promise to sell... hold... margin... collateral guaranteed by previous deposit... promise to pay against the pledged land... guarantor... McBan land... MacArthur land... this

computer itself... conditional legality... buy... sell... guarantee... pledge... withhold... offer confirmed... offer cancelled... four thousand million megacredits... rate accepted... rate refused... forward purchase... deposit against interest... collateral previously pledged... conditional appreciation . guarantee... accept title... refuse delivery . solar weather... buy... sell... pledge . withdraw from market... withdraw from sale . . not available... no collections now... dependent on radiation... corner market... buy... buy... buy... buy... buy... firm title... reconfirm title... transactions completed... reopen... register... reregister... confirm at Earth central... message fees... fifteen thousand megacredits...

Rod's voice became a whisper, but the computer was sure, the computer was untiring, the computer answered all questions from the outside.

Many times Rod and the computer both had to listen to telepathic warnings built into the markets communications net The computer was cut out and Rod could not hire them. The warnings went unheard.

... buy... sell... hold... confirm... deposit... convert... guarantee... arbitrage... message... Commonwealth tax... commission... buy... sell... buy... buy... buy... buy... deposit title! deposit title! deposit title!

The process of buying Earth had begun.

By the time that the first pretty parts of silver grey dawn had begun, it was done. Rod was dizzy with fatigue and confusion.

"Go home and sleep," said the computer. "When people find out what you have done with me, many of them will probably be excited and will wish to talk to you at great length. I suggest you say nothing."

## *THE EYE UPON THE SPARROW*

Drunk with fatigue, Rod stumbled across his own land back to his cabin.

He could not believe that anything had happened.

If the Palace of the Governor of Night—

If the Palace—

If the computer spoke the truth, he was already the wealthiest human being who had ever lived. He had gambled and won, not a few tons of stroon or a planet or two, but credits enough to shake the Commonwealth to its foundation. He owned the Earth, on the system that any overdeposit could be called due at a certain very high margin. He owned planet, countries, mines, palaces, prisons, police systems, fleets, border guards, restaurants, pharmaceuticals, textiles, night clubs, treasures, royalties, licenses, sheep, land stroon, more sheep, more land, more stroon. He had won.

Only in Old North Australia could a man have done this without being besieged by soldiers, reports, guards, police, investigators, tax collectors, fortune seekers, doctors, publicity hounds, the sick, the inquisitive, the compassionate, the angry, and the affronted.

Old North Australia kept calm.

Privacy, simplicity, frugality—these virtues had carried them through the hell-world of Paradise VII, where the mountains ate people, the volcanoes poisoned sheep, the delirious oxygen made men rave with bliss as they pranced into their own deaths. The Norstrilians had survived many things, including sickness and deformity. If Rod McBan had caused a financial crisis, there were no newspapers to print it, no viewboxes to report it, nothing to excite the people. The Commonwealth authorities would pick the crisis out of their "in" baskets sometime after tucker and tea the next morning, and by afternoon he, his crisis and the computer would be in the "out" baskets. If the deal had worked, the whole thing would be paid off honestly and literally. If the deal had not worked out the way that the computer had said, his lands would be up for auction and he himself would be led gently away.

But that's what the Onseck was going to do to him anyway—Old Hot and Simple, a tiring dwarf-like man, driven by the boyhood hatred of many long years ago!

Rod stopped for a minute. Around him stretched the rolling plains of his own land. Far ahead, to his left, there gleamed the glassy worm of a river-cover, the humped long-barrel-like line which kept the precious water from evaporating—that too was his.

Maybe. After the night now passed.

He thought of flinging himself to the ground and sleeping right there. He had done it before.

But not this morning.

Not when he might be the person he might be,— the man who made the worlds reel with his wealth.

The computer had started easy. He could not take control of his property except for an emergency. The computer had made him create the emergency by selling his next three years' production of santaclara at the market price.. That was a serious enough emergency from any pastoralist to be in deep sure trouble.

From that the rest had followed.

Rod sat down.

He was not trying to remember. The remembering was crowding into his mind. He wanted just to get his breath, to get on home, to sleep.

A tree was near him, with a thermostatically controlled cover which domed it in whenever the winds were too strong or too dry, and an underground sprinkler

which kept it alive when surface moisture was not sufficient. It was one of the old MacArthur extravagances which his McBan ancestor had inherited and had added to the Station of Doom. It was a modified Earth oak, very big, a full thirteen meters high. Rod was proud of it although he did not like it much, but he had relatives who were obsessed by it and would make a three-hour ride just to sit in the shade—dim and diffuse as it was—of a genuine tree from Earth.

When he looked at the tree, a violent noise assailed him.

Mad frantic laughter.

Laughter beyond all jokes.

Laughter, sick, wild, drunk, dizzy.

He started to be angry and was then puzzled. Who could be laughing at him already? As a matter of nearer fact, who could be trespassing on his land? Anyhow, what was there to laugh about?

(All Norstrilians knew that humor was "pleasurable corrigible malfunction." It was in the Book of Rhetoric which their Appointed Relatives had to get them through if they were even to qualify for the tests of the Garden of Death. There were no schools, no classes, no teachers, no libraries except for private ones. There were just the seven liberal arts, the six practical sciences, and the five collections of police and defense studies. Specialists were trained offworld, but they were trained only from among the survivors of the Garden, and nobody could get as far as the Garden unless the sponsors, who staked their lives along with that of the student—so far as the question of aptness was concerned—guaranteed that the entrant knew the eighteen kinds of Norstrilian knowledge. The Book of Rhetoric came second, right after the Book of Sheep and Numbers, so that all Norstrilians knew why they laughed and what there was to laugh about.)

But this laughter!

Aagh, who could it be?

A sick man? Impossible. Hostile hallucinations brought on by the Hon. Sec. in his own onseckish way with unusual telepathic powers? Scarcely.

Rod began to laugh himself.

It was somewhat rare and beautiful, a kookaburra bird, the same kind of bird which had laughed in Original Australia on Old Old Earth. A very few had reached this new planet and they had not multiplied well, even though the Norstrilians respected them and loved them and wished them well.

Good luck came with their wild birdish laughter. A man could feel he had a fine day ahead. Lucky in love, thumb in an enemy's eye, new ale in the fridge, or a ruddy good chance on the market.

Laugh, bird, laugh! thought Rod.

Perhaps the bird understood him. The laughter increased and reached manic, hilarious proportions, The bird sounded as though it were watching the most comical bird-comedy which any bird-audience had ever been invited to, as though the bird-jokes were sidesplitting, convulsive, gutpopping, unbelievable, racy, daring, and overwhelming. The bird-laughter became hysterical and a note of fear, of warning crept in.

Rod stepped toward the tree.

In all this time he had not seen the kookaburra.

He squinted into the tree, peering against the brighter side of the sky which showed that morning had arrived well.

To him, the tree was blindingly green, since it kept most of its Earth color, not turning beige or grey as the Earth grasses had done when they had been adapted and planted in Norstrilian soil.

To be sure, the bird was there, a tiny slender laughing impudent shape.

Suddenly the bird cawed: this was no laugh.

Startled, Rod stepped back and started to look around for danger.

The step saved his life.

The sky whistled at him, the wind hit him, a dafk shape shot past him with the speed of a projectile and was gone. As it leveled out just above the ground, Rod saw what it was.

A mad sparrow.

Sparrows had reached twenty kilos' weight, with straight swordlike beaks almost a meter in length. Most of the time the Commonwealth left them alone, because they preyed on the giant lice, the size of footballs, which had grown with the sick sheep. Now and then one went mad and attacked people.

Rod turned, watching the sparrow as it walked around, about a hundred meters away.

Some mad sparrows, it was rumored, were not mad at all, but were tame sparrows sent on evil missions of revenge or death by Norstrilian men whose minds had been twisted into crime. This was rare, this was crime, but this was possible.

Could the Onseck already be attacking?

Rod slapped his belt for weapons as the sparrow took to the air again, flapping upward with the pretense of innocence. He had nothing except his belt light and a canister. This would not hold out long unless somebody came along. What could a tired man do, using bare hands, against a sword which burst through the air with a monomaniac birdbrain behind it?

Rod braced himself for the bird's next power dive, holding the canister like a shield.

The canister was not much of a shield.

Down came the bird, preceded by the whistle of air against its head and beak. Rod watched for the eyes and when he saw them, he jumped.

The dust roared up as the giant sparrow twisted its spearlike beak out of the line of the ground, opened its wings, beat the air against gravity, caught itself centimeters from the surface and flapped away with powerful strokes; Rod stood and watched quietly, glad that he had escaped.

His left arm was wet.

Rain was so rare in the Norstrilian plains that he did not see how he could have gotten wet. He glanced down idly.

Blood it was, and his own.

The kill-bird had missed him with its beak but had touched him with the razorlike wing feathers, which had mutated into weapons; both the rachis and the vane in the large feathers were tremendously reinforced, with the development of a bitterly sharp byporachis in the case of the wingtips. The bird had cut him so fast he had not felt it or noticed it.

Like any good Norstrilian, he thought in terms of first-aid.

The flow of blood was not very rapid. Should he try to tie up his arm first or to hide from the next diving attack?

The bird answered his question for him.

The ominous whistle sounded again.

Rod flung himself along the ground, trying to get to the base of the tree trunk, where the bird could not dive on him.

The bird, making a serious mental mistake, thought it had disabled him. With a flutter of wings it landed calmly, stood on its feet, and cocked its head to look him over. When the bird moved its head, the sword-beak gleamed evilly in the weak sunshine.

Rod reached the tree and started to lift himself up by seizing the trunk..

Doing this, he almost lost his life.

He had forgotten how fast the sparrows could run on the ground.

In one second, the bird was standing, comical and evil, studying him with its sharp, bright eyes; the next second, the knife-beak was into him, just below the bony part of the shoulder.

He felt the eerie wet pull of the beak being drawn out of his body, the ache in his surprised flesh which would precede the griping pain. He hit at the bird with his belt light. He missed.

By now he was weakened from his two wounds. The arm was still dripping blood steadily and he felt his shirt get wet as blood poured out of his shoulder.

The bird, backing off, was again studying him by cocking its head. Rod tried to guess his chances. One square blow from his hand, and the bird was dead. The bird had thought him disabled, but now he really was partially disabled.

If his blow did not land, score one mister for the bird, mark a credit for the Hon. Sec., give Old Hot and Simple the victory!

By now Rod had not the least doubt that Houghton Syme was behind the attack.

The bird rushed.

Rod forgot to fight the way he had planned.

He kicked instead and caught the bird right in its heavy, coarse body.

It felt like a very big football filled with sand.

The kick hurt his foot but the bird was flung a good six or seven meters away. Rod rushed behind the tree and looked back at the bird.

The blood was pulsing fast out of his shoulder at this point.

The kill-bird had gotten to his feet and was walking firmly and securely around the tree. One of the wings trailed a little; the kick seemed to have hurt a wing but not the legs or that horribly strong neck.

Once again the bird cocked its comical head. It was his own blood which dripped from the long beak, now red, which had gleamed silver grey at the beginning of the fight. Rod wished he had studied more about these birds. He had never been this close to a mutated sparrow before and he had no idea of how to fight one. All he had known was that they attacked people on very rare occasions and that sometimes the people died in the encounters.

He tried to spiek, to let out a scream which would bring the neighborhood and the police flying and running toward him. He found he had no telepathy at all, not when he had to concentrate his whole mind and attention on the bird, knowing that its very next move could bring him irretrievable death.. This was no temporary death with the rescue squads nearby. There was no one in the neighborhood, no one at all, except for the excited and sympathetic kookaburras hahaing madly in the tree above.

He shouted at the bird, hoping to frighten it. The kill-bird paid him no more attention than if it had been a deaf reptile.

The foolish head tipped this way and that. The little bright eyes watched him. The red sword-beak, rapidly turning brown in the dry air, probed abstract dimensions for a way to his brain or heart. Rod even wondered how the bird solved its problems in solid geometry—the angle of approach, the line of thrust, the movement of the beak, the weight and direction of the fleeing object, himself.

He jumped back a few centimeters, intending to look at the bird from the other side of the tree-trunk. There was a hiss in the air, like the helpless hiss of a gentle little snake.

The bird, when he saw it, looked odd: suddenly it seemed to have two beaks. Rod marveled.

He did not really understand what was happening until the bird leaned over suddenly, fell on its side, and lay—plainly dead—on the dry cool ground. The eyes were still open but they looked blank; the bird's body twitched a little. The wings opened out in a dying spasm. One of the wings almost struck the trunk of the tree, but the tree-guarding device raised a plastic shaft to ward off the blow; a pity the device had not been designed as a people-guard as well.

Only then did Rod see that the second beak was no beak at all, but a javelin, its point biting cleanly and tightly right through the bird's skull into its brain.

No wonder the bird had dropped dead quickly!

As Rod looked around to see who his rescuer might be, the ground rose up and struck him.

He had fallen.

The loss of blood was faster than he had allowed for.

He looked around, almost like a child in his bewilderment and dizziness.

There was a shimmer of turquoise and the girl Lavinia was standing over him. She had a medical pack open and was spraying his wounds with cryptoderm—the living bandage which was so expensive that only on Norstrilia, the exporter of stroon, could it be carried around in emergency cans.

"Keep quiet," she said with her voice, "keep quiet, Rod. We've got to stop the blood first of all. Lands of mercy, but you're a crashing mess!"

"Who...?" said Rod weakly.

"The Hon. Sec.," said she immediately.

"You know?" he asked, amazed that she should understand everything so very quickly indeed.

"Don't talk, and I'll tell you." She had taken her field knife and was cutting the sticky shirt off him, so that she could tilt the bottle and spray right into the wound, "I just suspected you were in trouble, when Bill rode by the house and said something crazy, that you had bought half the galaxy by gambling all night with a crazy machine which paid off. I did not know where you were, but I thought that you might be in that old temple of yours that the rest of them can't see. I didn't know what kind of danger to look for, so I brought this." She slapped her hip. Rod's eyes widened. She had stolen her father's one-kiloton grenade, which was to be removed from its rack only in the event of an offworld attack. She answered his question before he asked her. "It's all right. I made a dummy to take its place before I



touched it. Then, as I took it out, the Defense monitor came on and I just explained that I had hit it with my new broom, which was longer than usual. Do you think I would let Old Hot and Simple kill you, Rod, without a fight from me? I'm your cousin, your kith and kin. As a matter of fact, I'm number twelve after you when it comes to inheriting Doom and all the wonderful things there are on this station."

Rod said, "Give me water." He suspected she was chattering to keep his attention off what she was doing to his shoulder and arm. The arm glowed once when she sprayed the cryptoderm on it; then it settled down to mere aching. The shoulder had exploded from time to time as she probed it. She had thrust a diagnostic needle into it and was reading the tiny bright picture on the end of the needle. He knew it had both analgesics and antiseptics as well as an ultraminiaturized X-ray, but he did not think that anyone would be willing to use it unaided in the field.

She answered this question, too before he asked it. She was a very perceptive girl.

"We don't know what the Onseck is going to do next. He may have corrupted people as well as animals. I don't dare call for help, not until you have your friends around you. Certainly not, if you have bought half the worlds.."

Rod dragged out the words. He seemed short of breath. "How did you know it was him?"

"I saw his face—I heard it when I looked in the bird's own brain. I could see Houghton Syme, talking to the bird in some kind of an odd way, and I could see your dead body through the bird's eyes, and I could feel a big wave of love and approval, happiness and reward, going through the bird when the job was to have been finished. I think that man is evil, evil!"

"You know him, yourself?"

"What girl around here doesn't? He's a nasty man. He had a boyhood that was all rotten from the time that he realized he was a short-lifer. He has never gotten over it. Some people are sorry for him and don't mind his getting the job of Hon. Sec. If I'd my way, I'd have sent him to the Giggle Room long ago!" Lavinia's face was set in prudish hate, an expression so unlike herself, who usually was bright and gay, that Rod wondered what deep bitterness might have been stirred within her.

"Why do you hate him?"

"For what he did."

"What did he do?"

"He looked at me," she said, "he looked at me in a way that no girl can like. And then he crawled all over my mind, trying to show me all the silly, dirty, useless things he wanted to do."

"But he didn't do anything-?" said Rod.

"Yes, he did," she snapped. "Not with his hands. I could have reported him. I would have. It's what he did with his mind, the things he spieked to me."

"You can report those too," said Rod, very tired of talking but nevertheless mysteriously elated to discover that he was not the only enemy the Onseck had made.

"Not what he did, I couldn't," said Lavinia, her face set in anger but dissolving into grief. Grief was tendered, softer, but deeper and more real than anger. For the first time Rod sensed a feeling of concern about Lavinia. What might be wrong with her?

She looked past him and spoke to the open fields and the big dead bird. "Houghton Syme was the worst man I've ever known. I hope he dies. He never got over that rotten boyhood of his. The old sick boy is the enemy of the man. We'll never know what he might have been. And if you hadn't been so wrapped up in your own troubles, Mister Rod to the hundred and fifty-first, you'd have remembered who I am."

"Who are you?" said Rod, naturally.

"I'm the Father's Daughter."

"So what?" said Rod. "All girls are."

"Then you never have found out about me. I'm the Father's Daughter from 'The Father's Daughter's Song.'"

"Never heard it."

She looked at him and her eyes were close to tears. "Listen, then, and I'll sing it to you now. And it's true, true, true."

*You do not know what the world is like,  
And I hope you never will.  
My heart was once much full of hope,  
But now it is very still.*

*My wife went mad.*

*She was my love and wore my ring  
When both of us were young.  
She bore my babes, but then, but then...  
And now there isn't anything.*

*My wife went mad.*

*Now she lives in another place,  
Half sick, half well, and never young.  
I am her dread, who was her love.  
Each of us has another face.*

*My wife went mad.*

*You do not know what the world is like.  
War is never the worst of it.  
The stars within your eyes can drop.  
The lightning in your brain can strike.  
My wife went mad.*

"And I see you have heard it, too," she sighed. "Just as my father wrote it. About my mother. My own mother."

"Oh, Lavinia," said Rod, "I'm sorry. I never thought it was you.. And you my own cousin only three or four times removed. But Lavinia, there's something wrong. How can your mother be mad if she was looking fine at my house last week?"

"She was never mad," said Lavinia. "My father was. He made up that cruel song about my mother so that the neighbors complained. He had his choice of the Giggle Room to die in, or the sick place, to be immortal and insane. He's there now. And the Onseck, the Onseck threatened to bring him back to our own neighborhood if I didn't do what he asked. Do you think I could forgive that? Ever? After people have sung that hateful song at me ever since I was a baby? Do you wonder that I know it myself?"

Rod nodded.

Lavinia's troubles impressed him, but he had troubles of his own.

The sun was never hot on Norstrilia, but he suddenly felt thirsty and hot. He wanted to sleep but he wondered about the dangers which surrounded him.

She knelt beside him.

"Close your eyes a bit, Rod, I will spiek very quietly and maybe nobody will notice it except your station hands, Bill and Hopper. When they come we'll hide out for the day and tonight we can go back to your computer and hide. I'll tell them to bring food."

She hesitated, "And, Rod?"

"Yes?" he said.

"Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For my troubles," she said contritely.

"Now you have more troubles. Me," he said. "Let's not blame ourselves, but for sheep's sake, girl, let me sleep."

He drifted off to sleep as she sat beside him, whistling a loud clear tune with long long notes which never added up. He knew some people, usually women, did that when they tried to concentrate on their telepathic spiekings..

Once he glanced up at her before he finally slept. He noticed that her eyes were a deep, strange blue. Like the mad wild faraway skies of Old Earth itself.

He slept, and in his sleep he knew that he was being carried.

The hands which carried him felt friendly, though, and he curled himself back into deep, deeper dreamless sleep.

*FOE*

*MONEY*

*SAD MONEY*

When Rod finally awakened, it was to feel his shoulder tightly bound and his arm throbbing. He had fought waking up because the pain had increased as his mind moved toward consciousness, but the pain and the murmur of voices caused him to come all the way to the hard bright surface of consciousness.

The murmur of voices?

There was no place on all Old North Australia where voices murmured. People sat around and spieked to each other and heard the answers without the clatter of vocal cords. Telepathy made for brilliant and quick conversation, the participants darting their thoughts this way and that, soaring with their shields so as to produce the effect of a confidential whisper.

But here there were voices. Voices. Many voices. Not possible.

And the smell was wrong. The air was wet—luxuriously, extravagantly wet, like a miser trying to catch a rainstorm in his cabin!

It was almost, like the van of the Garden of Death.

Just as he woke, he recognized Lavinia singing an odd little song. It was one which Rod knew, because it had a sharp catchy, poignant little melody to it which sounded like nothing on this world. She was singing, and it sounded like one of the weird sadnesses which his people had brought from their horrible group experience on the abandoned planet of Paradise VII:

*Is there anybody here or is everybody dead  
at the grey green blue black lake?*

*The sky was blue and now it is red  
over old tall green brown trees.*

*The house was big but now it looks small  
at the grey green blue black lake.*

*And the girl that I know isn't there any more  
at the old flat dark torn place.*

His eyes opened and it was indeed Lavinia whom he saw at the edge of vision. This was no house. It was a box, a hospital, a prison, a ship, a cave or a fort. The furnishings were machined and luxurious. The light was artificial and almost the color of peaches. A strange hum in the background sounded like alien engines

dispensing power for purposes which Norstrilian law never permitted to private persons. The Lord Redlady leaned over Rod; the fantastic man broke into song himself, chanting—

*Light a lantern-  
Light a lantern-  
Light a lantern,  
Here we come!*

When he saw the obvious signs of Rod's perplexity, he burst into a laugh,

"That's the oldest song you ever heard, my boy. It's prespace and it used to be called 'general quarters' when ships like big iron houses floated on the waters of Earth and fought each other. We've been waiting for you to wake up."

"Water," said Rod, "please give me water. Why are you talking?"

"Water!" cried the Lord Redlady to someone behind him. His sharp thin face was alight with excitement as he turned back to Rod, "And were talking because I have my buzzer on. If people want to talk to each other, they jolly well better use their voices on this ship."

"Ship?" said Rod, reaching for the mug of cold, cold water which a hand had reached out to him.

"This is my ship, Mister and Owner Rod McBan to the hundred and fifty-first! An Earth ship. I pulled it out of orbit and grounded it with the permission of the Commonwealth. They don't know you're on it, yet. They can't find out right now because my Humanoid-robot Brainwave Dephasing Device is on.. Nobody can think in or out through that, and anybody who tries telepathy on this boat is going to get himself a headache here."

"Why you?" said Rod. "What for?"

"In due time," said the Lord Redlady. "Let me introduce you first. You know these people." He waved at a group.

Lavinia sat with his hands, Bill and Hopper, with its workwoman Eleanor, with his Aunt Doris. They looked odd, sitting on the low, soft, luxurious Earth furniture. They were all sipping some Earth drink of a color which Rod had never seen before. Their expressions were diverse: Bill looked truculent, Hopper looked greedy, Aunt Doris looked utterly embarrassed and Lavinia looked as though she were enjoying herself.

"And then here..." said the Lord Redlady.

The man he pointed to might not have been a man. He was the Norstrilian type all right, but he was a giant, of the kind which were always killed in the Garden of Death.

"At your service," said the giant, who was almost three meters tall and who had to watch his head, lest it hit the ceiling, "I am Donald Dumfrie Hordern

Anthony Garwood Gaines Wentworth to the fourteenth generation, Mister and Owner McBan. A military surgeon, at your service, sir!"

"But this is private. Surgeons aren't allowed to work for anybody but government."

"I am on loan to the Earth Government," said Wentworth, the giant, his face in a broad grin.

"And I," said the Lord Redlady, "am both the Instrumentality and the Earth Government for diplomatic purposes. I borrowed him. He's under Earth rules. You will be well in two or three hours."

The doctor, Wentworth, looked at his hand as though he saw a chronograph there:

"Two hours and seventeen minutes more."

"Let it be," said the Lord Redlady, "here's our last guest."

A short, angry man stood up and came over. He glared out at Rod and held forth an angry hand.

"John Fisher to the hundredth. You know me."

"Do I?" said Rod, not impolitely. He was just dazed.

"Station of the Good Fresh Joey," said Fisher.

"I haven't been there," said Rod, "but I've heard of it."

"You needn't have," snapped the angry Fisher. "I met you at your grandfather's."

"Oh, yes, Mister and Owner Fisher," said Rod, not really remembering anything at all, but wondering why the short, red-faced man was so angry with him.

"You don't know who I am?" said Fisher. "I handle the books and the credits for the government."

"Wonderful work," said Rod. "I'm sure it's complicated. Could I have something to eat?"

The Lord Redlady interrupted: "Would you like French pheasant with Chinesian sauce steeped in the thieves' wine from Viola Siderea? It would only cost you six thousand tons of refined gold, orbited near Earth, if I ordered it sent to you by special courier."

For some inexplicable reason the entire room howled with laughter. The men put their glasses down so as not to spill them. Hopper seized the opportunity to refill his own glass. Aunt Doris looked hilarious and secretly proud, as though she herself had laid a diamond egg or done some equal marvel. Only Lavinia, though laughing, managed to look sympathetically at Rod to make sure that he did not feel mocked. The Lord Redlady laughed as loudly as the rest and even the short, angry John Fisher allowed himself a wan smile, while holding out his hand for a refill on his

drink. An animal, a little one which looked very much like an extremely small person, lifted up the bottle and filled his glass for him; Rod suspected that it was a "monkey" from Old Old Earth, from the stories he had heard.

Rod didn't even say, "What's the joke?" though he realized plainly that he was himself in the middle of it. He just smiled weakly back at them, feeling the hunger grow within him.

"My robot is cooking you an Earth dish. French toast with maple syrup. You could live ten thousand years on this planet and never get it. Rod, don't you know why we're laughing? Don't you know what you've done?"

"The Onseck tried to kill me, I think," said Rod. Lavinia clapped her hand to her mouth, but it was too late.

"So that's who it was," said the doctor, Wentworth, with a voice as gigantic as himself.

"But you wouldn't laugh at me for that—" Rod started to say. Then he stopped himself. An awful thought had come to him. "You mean, it really worked? That stuff with my family's old computer."

The laughter broke out again. It was kind laughter, but it was always the laughter of a peasant people, driven by boredom, who greet the unfamiliar with attack or with laughter.

"You did it," said Hopper. "You've brought a billion worlds."

John Fisher snapped at him, "Let's not exaggerate. He's gotten about one point six stroon years. You couldn't buy any billion worlds for that. In the first place, there aren't a billion settled worlds, not even a million. In the second place, there aren't many worlds for sale. I doubt that he could buy thirty or forty." The little animal, prompted by some imperceptible sign from the Lord Redlady, went out of the room and returned with a tray. The odor from the tray made all the people in the room sniff appreciatively.. The food was unfamiliar, but it combined pungency and sweetness. The monkey fitted the tray into an artfully concealed slot at the head of Rod's couch, took off an imaginary monkey cap, saluted, and went back to his own basket behind the Lord Redlady's chair.

The Lord Redlady nodded, "Go ahead and eat, boy. It's on me."

Rod sat up. His shirt was still blood-caked and he realized that it was almost worn out.

"That's an odd sight, I must say," said the huge doctor Wentworth. "There's the richest man in many worlds, and he hasn't the price of a new pair of overalls."

"What's odd about that? We've always charged an import fee of twenty million percent of the orbit price of goods," snapped angry John Fisher. "Have you ever realized what other people have swung into orbit around our sun, just waiting for us to change our minds so they could sell us half the rubbish in the universe. This

planet would be knee-deep in junk if we ever dropped our tariff. I'm surprised at you, doctor, forgetting the fundamental rules of Old North Australia!"

"He's not complaining," said Aunt Doris, whom the drink had made loquacious. "He's just thinking. We all think."

"Of course we all think. Or daydream. Some of us leave and go off-planet to be rich people on other worlds. A few of us even manage to get back here on severe probation when we realize what the offworlds are like. I'm just saying," said the doctor, "that Rod's situation would be very funny to everybody except us Norstrilians. We're all rich with the stroon imports, but we've kept ourselves poor in order to survive."

"Who's poor?" snapped the fieldhand Hopper, apparently touched at a sensitive point. "I can match you with megacredits, doc, any time you care to gamble. Or I'll meet you with throwing knives, if you want them better. I'm as good as the next man!"

"That's exactly what I mean," said John Fisher. "Hopper here can argue with anybody on the planet. We're still equals, we're still free, we're not the victims of our own wealth—that's Norstrilia for you!"

Rod looked up from his food and said, "Mister and Owner Secretary Fisher, you talk awfully well for somebody who is not a freak like me. How do you do it?"

Fisher started looking angry again, though he was not really angry: "Do you think that financial records can be dictated telepathically? I'm spending centuries out of my life, just dictating into my blasted microphone. Yesterday I spent most of the day dictating the mess which you have made of the Commonwealth's money for the next eight years. And you know what I'm going to do at the next meeting of the Commonwealth Council?"

"What," said Rod.

"I'm going to move the condemnation of that computer of yours. It's too good to be in private hands."

"You can't do that!" shrieked Aunt Doris, somewhat mellowed by the Earth beverages she was drinking, "it's MacArthur and McBan family property."

"You can keep the temple," said Fisher with a snort, "but no bloody family is going to outguess the whole planet again. Do you know that boy sitting there has four megacredits on Earth at this moment?"

Bill hiccupped, "I got more than that myself."

Fisher snarled at him, "On Earth? FOE money?"

A silence hit the room.

"FOE money. Four megacredits? He can buy Old Australia and ship it out here to us?" Bill sobered fast.



Said Lavinia mildly, "What's for money?"

"Do you know, Mister and Owner McBan?" said Fisher, in a peremptory tone.. "You had better know, because you have more of it than any man has ever had before."

"I don't want to talk about money," said Rod. "I want to find out what the Onseck is up to."

"Don't worry about him!" laughed the Lord Redlady, prancing to his feet and pointing at himself with a dramatic forefinger. "As the representative of Earth, I filed six hundred and eighty-five lawsuits against him simultaneously, in the name of your Earth debtors, who fear that some harm might befall you..."

"Do they really?" said Rod. "Already?"

"Of course not. All they know is your name and the fact that you bought them out. But they would worry if they did know, so as your agent I tied up the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme with more law cases than this planet has ever seen before."

The big doctor chuckled, "Dashed clever of you, my Lord and Mister! You know us Norstrilians pretty well, I must say. If we charge a man with murder, we're so freedom-minded that he has time to commit a few more before being tried for the first one. But civil suits! Hot sheep! He'll never get out of those, as long as he lives."

"Is he onsecking any more?" said Rod.

"What do you mean?" asked Fisher.

"Does he still have his job—Onseck."

"Oh, yes," said Fisher, "but we put him on two hundred years' leave and he has only about a hundred and twenty years to live, poor fellow. Most of that time he will be defending himself in civil suits."

Rod finally exhaled. He had finished the food. The small polished room with its machined elegance, the wet air, the bray of voices all over the place—these made him feel dreamlike. Here grown men were standing, talking as though he really did own Old Earth. They were concerned with his affairs, not because he was Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred-and-fifty-first, but because he was Rod, a boy among them who had stumbled upon danger and fortune. He looked around the room. The conversations had accidentally stopped. They were looking at him, and he saw in their faces something which he had seen before. What was it? It was not love. It was a rapt attentiveness, combined with a sort of pleasurable and indulgent interest. He then realized what the looks signified. They were giving him the adoration which they usually reserved only for cricket players, tennis players, and great track performers—like that fabulous Hopkins Harvey fellow who had gone offworld and had won a wrestling match with a "heavy man" from Wereld Schemering. He was not just Rod any more. He was their boy.

As their boy, he smiled at them vaguely and felt like crying.

The breathlessness broke when the large doctor, Mister and Owner Wentworth, threw in the stark comment, "Time to tell him, Mister and Owner Fisher. He won't have his property long if we don't get moving. No, nor his life either."

Lavinia jumped up and cried out, "You can't kill Rod—"

Doctor Wentworth stopped her, "Sit down. We're not going to kill him. And you there, stop acting foolish! We're his friends here."

Rod followed the line of the doctor's glance and saw that Hopper had snaked his hand back to the big knife he wore in his belt. He was getting ready to fight anyone who attacked Rod.

"Sit, sit down, all of you, please!" said the Lord Redlady, speaking somewhat fussily with his singsong Earth accent. "I'm host here. Sit down. Nobody's killing Rod tonight. Doctor, you take my table. Sit down yourself. You will stop threatening my ceiling or your head. You, Ma'am and Owner," said he to Aunt Doris, "move over there to that other chair. Now we can all see the doctor."

"Can't we wait?" asked Rod. "I need to sleep. Are you going to ask me to make decisions now? I'm not up to decisions, not after what I've just been through. All night with the computer. The long walk. The bird from the Onseck—"

"You'll have no decisions to make if you don't make them tonight," said the doctor firmly and pleasantly. "You'll be a dead man."

"Who's going to kill me?" asked Rod.

"Anybody who wants money. Or wants power. Or who would like unlimited life. Or who needs these things to get something else. Revenge. A woman. An obsession. A drug. You're not just a person now, Rod. You're Norstrilia incarnate. You're Mr. Money himself! Don't ask who'd kill you! Ask who wouldn't! We wouldn't... I think. But don't tempt us."

"How much money have I got?" said Rod.

Angry John Fisher cut in: "So much that the computers are clotted up, just counting it. About one and a half stroon years. Perhaps three hundred years of Old Earth's total income. You sent more Instant Messages last night than the Commonwealth government itself has sent in the last twelve years. These messages are expensive. One kilocredit in FOE money."

"I asked a long time ago what this foe money was," said Lavinia, "and nobody has got around to telling me."

The Lord Redlady took the middle of the floor. He stood there with a stance which none of the Old North Australians had ever seen before. It was actually the posture of a master of ceremonies opening the evening at a large night club, but to people who had never seen those particular gestures, his movements were eerie, self-explanatory and queerly beautiful.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, using a phrase which most of them had only heard in books. "I will serve drinks while the others speak. I will ask each in turn. Doctor, will you be good enough to wait while the Financial Secretary speaks?"

"I should think," said the doctor irritably, "that the lad would be wanting to think over his choice. Does he want me to cut him in two, here, tonight, or doesn't he? I should think that would take priority, wouldn't you?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Lord Redlady, "the Mister and Doctor Wentworth has a very good point indeed. But there is no sense in asking Rod about being cut in two unless he knows why. Mister Financial Secretary, will you tell us all what happened last night?"

John Fisher stood up. He was so chubby that it did not matter.. His brown, suspicious, intelligent eyes looked over the lot of them.

"There are as many kinds of money as there are worlds with people on them. We here on Norstrilia don't carry the tokens around, but in some places they have bits of paper or metal which they use to keep count. We talk our money into the central computers which even out all our transactions for us. Now what would happen if I wanted a pair of shoes?"

Nobody answered. He didn't expect them to.

"I would," he went on, "go to a shop, look in the screen at the shoes which the offworld merchants keep in orbit, would pick out the shoes I wanted.. What's a good price for a pair of shoes in orbit?"

Hopper was getting tired of these rhetorical questions so he answered promptly,

"Six bob."

"That's right. Six minicredits."

"But that's orbit money. You're leaving out the tariff," said Hopper.

"Exactly. And what's the tariff?" asked John Fisher, snapping.

Hopper snapped back, "Two hundred thousand times, what you bloody fools always make it in the Commonwealth Council."

"Hopper, can you buy shoes?" said Fisher.

"Of course I can!" The station hand looked belligerent again but the Lord Redlady was filling his glass. He sniffed the aroma, calmed down and said, "All right, what's your point?"

"The point is that the money in orbit is SAD money—s for secure, A, for and, D, for delivered. That's any kind of good money with backing behind it. Stroon is the best backing there is, but gold is all right, rare metals, fine manufacturers, and so on. That's just the money off the planet, in the hands of the recipient. Now how many times would a ship have to hop to get to Old Earth itself?"

"Fifty or sixty," said Aunt Doris unexpectedly. "Even I know that."

"And how many ships get through?"

"They all do," said she.

"Oh, no," cried several of the men in unison.

"About one ship is lost every sixty or eighty trips, depending on the solar weather, on the skills of the pinlighters and the go-captains, on the landing accidents. Did any of you ever see a really old captain?"

"Yes," said Hopper with gloomy humor, "a dead one in his coffin."

"So if you have something you want to get to Earth, you have to pay your share of the costly ships, your share of the go-captain's wages and the fees of his staff, your share of the insurance for their families. Do you know what it could cost to get this chair back to Earth?" said Fisher.

"Three hundred times the cost of the chair," said Doctor Wentworth.

"Mighty close. It's two hundred and eighty seven times."

"How do you know so much mucking much?" said Bill, speaking up. "And why waste our time with all this crutting glubb?"

"Watch your language, man," said John Fisher. "There are some mucking ladies present. I'm telling you this because we have to get Rod off to Earth tonight, if he wants to be alive and rich—"

"That's what you say!" cried Bill. "Let him go to his house. We can load up on little bombs and hold up against anybody who could get through the Norstrilian defenses. What are we paying these mucking taxes for, if it's not for the likes of you to make sure we're safe? Shut up, man, and let's take the boy home. Come along, Hopper."

The Lord Redlady leaped to the middle of his own floor. He was no prancing Earthman putting on a show. He was the old Instrumentality itself, surviving with raw weapons and raw brains. In his hand he held a something which none of them could see clearly.

"Murder," he said, "will be done this moment if anybody moves. I will commit it. I will, people. Move, and try me. And if I do commit murder, I will arrest myself, hold a trial, and acquit myself. I have strange powers, people. Don't make me use them. Don't even make me show them." The shimmering thing in his hand disappeared. "Mister and Doctor Wentworth, you are under my command, by loan. Other people, you are my guests. Be warned. Don't touch the boy.. This is Earth territory, this cabin we're in." He stood a little to one side and looked at them brightly out of his strange Earth eyes.

Hopper deliberately spat on the floor. "I suppose I would be a puddle of mucking glue if I helped old Bill?"

"Something like it," said the Lord Redlady. "Want to try?" The things that were hard to see were now in each of his hands. His eyes darted between Bill and Hopper.

"Shut up, Hopper. We'll take Rod if he tell us to go. But if he doesn't—it crudding well doesn't matter. Eh, Mister and Owner McBan?"

Rod looked around for his grandfather, dead long ago: then he knew they were looking at him instead. Torn between sleepiness and anxiety he answered,

"I don't want to go now, fellows. Thank you for standing by. Go on, Mister Secretary, with the foe money and the sad money."

The weapons disappeared from the Lord Redlady's hands.

"I don't like Earth weapons," said Hopper, speaking very loudly and plainly to no one at all, "and I don't like Earth people. They're duty. There's nothing in them that's good honest crook."

"Have a drink, lads," said the Lord Redlady with a democratic heartiness which was so false that the workwoman Eleanor, silent all the evening, let out one wild caw of a laugh, like a kookaburra beginning to whoop in a tree. He looked at her sharply, picked up his serving jug, and nodded to the Financial Secretary, John Fisher, that he should resume speaking.

Fisher was flustered. He obviously did not like this Earth practice of quick threats and weapons indoors, but the Lord Redlady—disgraced and remote from Old Earth as he was—was nevertheless the accredited diplomat of the Instrumentality, and even Old North Australia did not push the Instrumentality too far. There were things supposed about worlds which had done so.

Soberly and huffily he went on, "There's not much to it. If the money is discounted thirty-three and one third percent per trip and if it takes fifty-five trips to get to Old Earth, it takes a heap of money to pay up in orbit right here before you have a minicredit on Earth. Sometimes the odds are better. Your Commonwealth government waits for months and years to get a really favorable rate of exchange and of course we send our freight by armed sail-ships, which don't go below the surface of space at all. They just take hundreds of thousands of years to get there, while our cruisers dart in and out around them, just to make sure that nobody robs them in transit. There are things about Norstrilian robots which none of you know, and which not even the Instrumentality knows—" He darted a quick look at the Lord Redlady, who said nothing to this, and went on, "Which makes it well worth while not to muck around with one of our perishing ships. We don't get robbed much. And we have other things that are even worse than Mother Hitton and her littul Mttons. But the money and the stroon which finally reaches Old Earth itself is FOE money. F,O,E. F is for free, o is for on, E is for Earth. F,O,E—free on Earth. That's the best land of money there is, right on Old Earth itself. And Earth has the final exchange computer. Or had it."

"Had it?" said the Lord Redlady.

"It broke down last night. Rod broke it. Overload."

"Impossible!" cried Redlady. "I'll check." He went to the wall, pulled down a desk. A console, incredibly miniature, gleamed out at them. In less than three seconds it glowed. Redlady spoke into it, his voice as clear and cold as the ice they had all heard about:

"Priority. Instrumentality. Short of War. Instant. Instant. Redlady calling. Earthport."

"Confirmed," said a Norstrilian voice, "confirmed and charged."

"Earthport," said the console in a whistling whisper which filled the room.

"Redlady—instrumentality—official—centputer—all-right—question—cargo—approved—question—out."

"Centputer—all—right—cargo—approved—out," said the whisper and fell silent.

The people in the room had seen an immense fortune squandered. Even by Norstrilian standards, the faster-than-light messages were things which a family might not use twice in a thousand years. They looked at Redlady as though he were an evil-worker with strange powers. Earth's prompt answer to the skinny man made them all remember that though Old North Australia produced the wealth, Earth still distributed much of it and that the supergovernment of the Instrumentality reached into far places where no Norstrilian would even wish to venture.

The Lord Redlady spoke mildly, "The central computer seems to be going again, if your government wishes to consult it. The 'cargo' is this boy here.."

"You've told Earth about me?" said Rod.

"Why not? We want to get you there alive."

"But message security—?" said the doctor.

"I have references which no outside mind will know," said the Lord Redlady. "Finish up, Mister Financial Secretary. Tell the young man what he has on Earth."

"Your computer outcomputed the government," said John Fisher to the hundredth, "and it mortgaged all your lands, all your sheep, all your trading rights, all your family treasures, the right to the MacArthur name, the right to the McBan name, and itself. Then it bought futures. Of course, it didn't do it. You did, Rod McBan."

Startled into full awakeness, Rod found his right hand up at his mouth, so surprised was he. "I did?"

"Then you bought futures in stroon, but you offered them for sale. You held back, the sales, shifting titles and changing prices, so that not even the central computer knew what you were doing. You bought almost all of the eighth year from now, most of the seventh year from now, and some of the sixth. You mortgaged

each purchase as you went along, in order to buy more. Then you suddenly tore the market wide open by offering fantastic bargains, trading the six-year rights for seventh-year and eighth-year. Your computer made such lavish use of Instant Messages to Earth that the Commonwealth defense office had people buzzing around in the middle of the night. By the time they figured out what might happen, it had happened. You registered a monopoly of two year's export, far beyond the predicted amount. The government rushed for a weather recomputation, but while they were doing that you were registering your holdings on Earth and remortgaging them in FOE money. With the FOE money you began to buy up all the imports around Old North Australia, and when the government finally declared an emergency, you had secured final title to one and a half stroon years and to more megacredits, FOE money megacredits, than the Earth computers could handle. You're the richest man that ever was. Or ever will be. We changed all the rules this morning and I myself signed a new treaty with the Earth authorities, ratified by the Instrumentality. Meanwhile, you're the richest of the rich men who ever lived on this world and you're also rich enough to buy all of Old Earth. In fact, you have put in a reservation to buy it, unless the Instrumentality outbids you."

"Why should we?" said the Lord Redlady. "Let him have it. We'll watch what he does with the Earth after he buys it, and if it is something bad, we will kill him."

"You'd kill me, Lord Redlady?" said Rod. "I thought you were saving me?"

"Both," said the doctor, standing up. "The Commonwealth government has not tried to take your property away from you, though they have their doubts as to what you will do with Earth if you do buy it. They are not going to let you stay on this planet and endanger it by being the richest kidnap victim who ever lived. Tomorrow they will strip you of your property, unless you want to take a chance of running for it. Earth government is the same way. If you can figure out your own defenses you can come on in. Of course the police will protect you, but would that be enough? I'm a doctor, and I'm here to ship you out if you want to go."

"And I'm an officer of government, and I will arrest you if you do not go," said John Fisher.

"And I represent the Instrumentality, which does not declare its policy to anyone, least of all to outsiders. But it is my personal policy," said the Lord Redlady, holding out his hands and twisting his thumbs in a meaningless, grotesque, but somehow very threatening way, "to see that this boy gets a safe trip to Earth and a fair deal when he comes back here!"

"You'll protect him all the way!" cried Lavinia, looking very happy.

"All the way. As far as I can. As long as I live."

"That's pretty long," muttered Hopper, "conceited little pommy cockahoop!"

"Watch your language, Hopper," said the Lord Redlady. "Rod?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Your answer?" The Lord Redlady was peremptory.

"I'm going," said Rod.

"What on Earth do you want?" said the Lord Redlady ceremoniously.

"A genuine Cape triangle."

"A what?" cried the Lord Redlady.

"A Cape triangle. A postage stamp."

"What's postage?" said the Lord Redlady, really puzzled.

"Payments on messages."

"But you do that with thumbprints or eyeprints!"

"No," said Rod, "I mean paper ones."

"Paper messages?" said the Lord Redlady, looking as though someone had mentioned grass battleships, hairless sheep, solid cast-iron women, or something else equally improbable. "Paper messages?" he repeated, and then he laughed quite charmingly. "Oh!" he said, with a tone of secret discovery, "You mean antiquities...?"

"Of course," said Rod. "Even before Space itself."

"Earth has a lot of antiquities, and I am sure you will be welcome to study them or to collect them. That will be perfectly all right. Just don't do any of the wrong things, or you will be in real trouble."

"What are the wrong things?" said Rod.

"Buying real people, or trying to. Shipping religion from one planet to another. Smuggling underpeople."

"What's religion?" said Rod.

"Later, later," said the Lord Redlady. "You'll learn everything later. Doctor, you take over."

Wentworth stood very carefully so that his head did not touch the ceiling. He had to bend his neck a little. "We have two boxes, Rod."

When he spoke, the door whirled in its tracks and showed them a small room beyond. There was a large box like a coffin and a very small box, like the kind that women have around the house to keep a single party-going bonnet in.

"There will be criminals, and wild governments, and conspirators, and adventurers, and just plain good people gone wrong at the thought of your wealth—there will be all these waiting for you to kidnap you or rob or even kill you—"

"Why kill me-?"

"To impersonate you and try to get your money," said the doctor. "Now look. This is your big choice. If you take the big box, we can put you in a sail-ship



convoy and you will get there in several hundred or thousand years. But you will get there, ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent. Or we can send the big box on the regular planforming ships, and somebody will steal you. Or we scun you down and put you in the little box."

"That little box?" cried Rod.

"Scunned. You've scunned sheep, haven't you?"

"I've heard of it. But a man, no. Dehydrate my body, pickle my head, and freeze the whole mucking mess?" cried Rod.

"That's it. Too bloody right!" cried the doctor cheerfully. "That'll give you a real chance of getting there alive."

"But who'll put me together. I'd need my own doctor—?" His voice quavered at the unnaturalness of the risk, not at the mere chanciness and danger of it.

"Here," said the Lord Redlady, "is your doctor, already trained."

"I am at your service," said the little Earth-animal, the "monkey," with a small bow to the assembled company. "My name is A'gentur and I have been conditioned as a physician, a surgeon and a barber."

The women had gasped. Hopper and Bill stared at the little animal in horror.

"You're an underperson!" yelled Hopper. "We've never let the crutting things loose on Norstrilia."

"I'm not an underperson. I'm an annual. Conditioned to—" The monkey jumped. Hopper's heavy knife twanged like a musical instrument as it clung to the softer steel of the wall. Hopper's other hand held a long thin knife, ready to reach Redlady's heart.

The left hand of the Lord Redlady flashed straight forward. Something in his hand glowed silently, terribly. There was a hiss in the air.

Where Hopper had been, a cloud of oily thick smoke, stinking of burning meat, coiled slowly toward the, ventilators. Hopper's clothing and personal belongings, including one false tooth, lay on the chair in which he had been sitting. They were undamaged. His drink stood on the floor beside the chair, forever to remain unfinished.

The doctor's eyes gleamed as he stared strangely at Redlady:

"Noted and reported to the Old North Australian Navy."

"I'll report it too," said the Lord Redlady, "... as the use of weapons on diplomatic grounds."

"Never mind," said John Fisher to the hundredth, not angry at all, but just pale and looking a little ill. Violence did not frighten him, but decision did. "Let's get on with it. Which box, big or little, boy?"

The workwoman Eleanor stood up. She had said nothing but now she dominated the scene. "Take him in there, girls," she said, "and wash him like you would for the Garden of Death. I'll wash myself in there. You see," she added, "I've always wanted to see the blue skies on Earth, and wanted to swim in a house that ran around on the big big waters. I'll take your big box, Rod, and if I get through alive, you will owe me some treats on Earth. You take the little box, Roddy, take the little box. And that little tiny doctor with the fur on him. Rod, I trust him."

Rod stood up.

Everybody was looking at him and at Eleanor.

"You agree?" said the Lord Redlady.

He nodded.

"You agree to be scunned and put in the little box for instant shipment to Earth?"

He nodded again.

"You will pay all the extra expenses?"

He nodded again.

The doctor said,

"You authorize me to cut you up and reduce you down, in the hope that you may be reconstituted on Earth?"

Rod nodded to him, too.

"Shaking your head isn't enough," said the doctor. "You have to agree for the record."

"I agree," said Rod quietly.

Aunt Doris and Lavinia came forward to lead him into the dressing room and shower room. Just as they reached for his arms, the doctor patted Rod on the back with a quick strange motion. Rod jumped a little.

"Deep hypnotic," said the doctor. "You can manage his body all right, but the next words he utters will be said, luck willing, on Old Earth itself."

The women were wide-eyed but they led Rod forward to be cleaned for the operations and the voyage.

The doctor turned to the Lord Redlady and to John Fisher, the financial secretary.

"A good night's work," he said. "Pity about that man, though."

Bill sat still, frozen with grief in his chair, staring at Hopper's empty clothing in the chair next to him.

The console tinkled, "Twelve hours, Greenwich mean time. No adverse weather reports from the channel coast or from Meeya Meefla or Earthport building. All's well!"

The Lord Redlady served drinks to the misters. He did not even offer one to Bill. It would have been no use, at this point.

From beyond the door, where they were cleaning the body, clothes and hair of the deeply hypnotized Rod, Lavinia and Aunt Doris unconsciously reverted to the ceremony of the Garden of Death and lifted their voices in a sort of plainsong chant:

Out in the Garden of Death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.

The three men listened for a few moments, attentively. From the other washroom there came the sounds of the workwoman Eleanor, washing herself, alone and unattended, for a long voyage and a possible death.

The Lord Redlady heaved a sigh, "Have a drink, Bill. Hopper brought it on himself."

Bill refused to speak to them but he held forth his glass.

The Lord Redlady filled that and the others. He turned to John Fisher to the hundredth and said:

"You're shipping him?"

"Who?"

"The boy."

"I thought so."

"Better not," said the Lord Redlady.

"You mean—danger?"

"That's only half the word for it," said the Lord Redlady. "You can't possibly plan to offload him at Earthport. Put him into a good medical station. There's an old one, still good, on Mars, if they haven't closed it down. I know Earth. Half the people of Earth will be waiting to greet him and the other half will be waiting to rob him."

"You represent the Earth government, Sir and Commissioner," said John Fisher, "that's a rum way to talk about your own people."

"They are not that way all the time," laughed Redlady. "Just when they're in heat. Sex hasn't a chance to compare with money when it comes to the human race on Earth. They all think that they want power and freedom and six other impossible things. I'm not speaking for the Earth government when I say this. Just for myself."

"If we don't ship him, who will?" demanded Fisher.

"The Instrumentality."

"The Instrumentality? You don't conduct commerce. How can you?"

"We don't conduct commerce, but we do meet emergencies. I can flag down a long-jump cruiser and he'll be there months before anybody expects him."

"Those are warships. You can't use one for passengers!"

"Can't I?" said the Lord Redlady, with a smile.

"The Instrumentality would—?" said Fisher, with a puzzled smile. "The cost would be tremendous. How will you pay for it? It'd be hard to justify."

"He will pay for it. Special donation from him for special service. One megacredit for the trip."

The financial secretary whistled. "That's a fearful price for a single trip. You'd want SAD money and not surface money, I suppose?"

"No. FOE money."

"Hot buttered moonbeams, man! That's a thousand times the most expensive trip that any person has ever had."

The big doctor had been listening to the two of them. "Mister and Owner Fisher," he said, "I recommend it."

"You?" cried John Fisher angrily. "You're a Norstrilian and you want to rob this poor boy?"

"Poor boy?" snorted the doctor. "It's not that. The trip's no good if he's not alive. Our friend here is extravagant but his ideas are sound. I suggest one amendment."

"What's that?" said the Lord Redlady quickly.

"One and a half megacredits for the round trip. If he is well and alive and with the same personality, apart from natural causes. But note this. One kilocredit only if you deliver him on Earth dead."

John Fisher rubbed his chin. His suspicious eyes looked down at Redlady, who had taken a seat and looked up at the doctor, whose head was still bumping the ceiling.

A voice behind him spoke.

"Take it, Mister Financial Secretary. The boy won't use money if he's dead. You can't fight the Instrumentality, you can't be reasonable with the Instrumentality, and you can't buy the Instrumentality. With what they've been taking off us all these thousands of years, they've got more stroon than we do. Hidden away somewhere. You, there!" said Bill rudely to the Lord Redlady, "do you have any idea what the Instrumentality is worth?"

The Lord Redlady creased his brow. "Never thought of it. I suppose it must have a limit. But I never thought of it. We do have accountants, though."

"See," said Bill. "Even the Instrumentality would hate to lose money. Take the doctor's bid, Redlady. Take him up on it, Fisher." His use of their surnames was an extreme incivility, but the two men were convinced.

"I'll do it," said Redlady. "It's awfully close to writing insurance, which we are not chartered to do. I'll write it in as his emergency clause."

"I'll take it," said John Fisher. "It's got to be a thousand years until another Norstrilian Financial Secretary pays money for a ticket like this, but it's worth it. To him. I'll square it in his accounts. To our planet."

"I'll witness it," said the doctor.

"No, you won't," said Bill savagely. "The boy has one friend here. That's me. Let me do it" They stared at him, all three. He stared back.

He broke. "Sirs and Misterys, please let me be the witness."

The Lord Redlady nodded and opened the console. He and John Fisher spoke the contract into it. At the end Bill shouted his full name as witness.

The two women brought Rod McBane, mother-naked, into the room. He was immaculately clean and he stared ahead as though he were in an endless dream.

"That's the operating room," said the Lord Redlady. "I'll spray us all with antiseptic, if you don't mind."

"Of course," said the doctor. "You must."

"You're going to cut him up and boil him down-here and now?" cried Aunt Doris.

"Here and now," said the Lord Redlady, "if the doctor approves. The sooner he goes the better chance he has of coming through the whole thing alive."

"I consent," said the doctor. "I approve." He started to take Rod by the hand, leading him toward the room with the long coffin and the small box. At some sign from Redlady, the walls had opened up to show a complete surgical theater.

"Wait a moment," said the Lord Redlady. "Take your colleague."

"Of course," said the doctor.

The monkey had jumped out of his basket when he heard his name mentioned..

Together, the giant and the monkey led Rod into the little gleaming room.. They closed the door behind them.

The ones who were left behind sat down nervously.

"Mister and Owner Redlady," said Bill, "since I'm staying, could I have some more of that drink?"

"Of course, Sir and Mister," said the Lord Redlady, not having any idea of what Bill's title might be.

There were no screams from Rod, no thuds, no protest. There was the cloying sweet horror of unknown medicines creeping through the airvents. The two women said nothing as the group of people sat around. Eleanor, wrapped in an enormous towel, came and sat with them. In the second hour of the operations on Rod, Lavinia began sobbing.

She couldn't help it.

## *TRAPS, FORTUNES AND WATCHERS*

We all know that no communications systems are leak-proof. Even inside the far-reaching communications patterns of the Instrumentality, there were soft spots, rotten points, garrulous men. The MacArthur-McBan computer, sheltered in the Palace of the Governor of Night, had had time to work out abstract economics and weather patterns, but the computer had not tasted human love or human wickedness. All the messages concerning Rod's speculation in the forward santaclara crop and stroon export had been sent in the clear. It was no wonder that on many worlds, people saw Rod as a chance, an opportunity, a victim, a benefactor, or an enemy. For all know the old poem:

*Luck is hot and people funny.  
Everybody's fond of money.  
Lose a chance and sell your mother.  
Win the pot and buy another.  
Other people fall and crash:  
You may get the ton of cash!*

It applied in this case too. People ran hot and cold with the news.

## **ON EARTH, SAME DAY, WITHIN EARTHPORT ITSELF**

Commissioner Teadrinker tapped his teeth with a pencil.

Four megacredits FOE money already and more, much more to come.

Teadrinker lived in a fever of perpetual humiliation. He had chosen it. It was called "the honorable disgrace" and it applied to ex-Lords of the Instrumentality who choose long life instead of service and honor. He was a thousandmorer, meaning that he had traded his career, his reputation, and his authority for a long life of one thousand or more years. (The Instrumentality had learned, long ago, that the best way to protect its members from temptation was to tempt them itself. By offering "honorable disgrace" and low, secure jobs within the Instrumentality to

those Lords who might be tempted to trade long life for their secrets, it kept its own potential defectors. Teadrinker was one of these.)

He saw the news and he was a skilled wise man. He could not do anything to the Instrumentality with money, but money worked wonders on Earth. He could buy a modicum of honor. Perhaps he could even have the records falsified and get married again. He flushed slightly, even after hundreds of years, when he remembered his first wife blazing at him when she saw his petition for long life and honorable disgrace: "Go ahead and live, you fool. Live and watch me die without you, inside the decent four hundred years which everybody else has if they work for it and want it. Watch your children die, watch your friends die, watch all your hobbies and ideas get out of date. Go along, you horrible little man, and let me die like a human being!"

A few megacredits could help that.

Teadrinker was in charge of incoming visitors. His underman, the cattle-derived B'dank, was custodian of the scavenger spiders,—half-tame one-ton insects which stood by for emergency work if the services of the tower failed. He wouldn't need to have this Norstrilian merchant very long. Just long enough for a recorded order and a short murder.

Perhaps not. If the Instrumentality caught him, it would be dream-punishments, things worse than Shayol itself.

Perhaps yes. If he succeeded, he would escape a near immortality of boredom and could have a few decades of juicy fun instead.

He tapped his teeth again.

"Do nothing, Teadrinker," he said to himself, "but think, think, think. Those spiders look as though they might have possibilities."

## **ON VIOLA SIDEREA, AT THE COUNCIL OF THE GUILD OF THIEVES**

"Put two converted police cruisers in orbit around the Sun. Mark them for charter or sale, so that we won't run into the police."

"Put an agent into every liner which is Earthbound within the time stated."

"Remember, we don't want the man. Just his luggage. He's sure to be carrying a half-ton or so of stroon. With that kind of fortune, he could pay off all the debts we gathered with that Bozart business. Funny we never heard from Bozart. Nothing."

"Put three senior tlifrvs in Earthport itself. Make sure that they have fake stroon, diluted down to about one-thousandth, so that they can work the luggage switch if they have the chance."

"I know all this costs money, but you have to spend money to get it. Agreed, gentlemen of the larcenical arts?"

There was a chorus of agreement around the table, except for one old, wise thief who said,

"You know my views."

"Yes," said the chairman, with toneless polite hatred, "we know your views. Rob corpses. Clean out wrecks. Become human hyenas instead of human wolves."

With unexpected humor the old man said, "Crudely put. But correct. And safer."

"Do we need to vote?" said the chairman, looking around the table.

There was a chorus of noes.

"Carried, then," said the presiding chief. "Hit hard, and hit for the small target, not the big one."

## **TEN KILOMETERS BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH**

"He is coming, father! He is coming."

"Who is coming?" said the voice, like a great drum resounding.

E'lamelanie said it as though it were a prayer: "The blessed one, the appointed one, the guarantor of our people, the new messenger on whom the robot, rat and Copt agreed. With money he is coming, to help us, to save us, to open to us the light of day and the vaults of heaven."

"You are blasphemous," said the Ee'telekeli.

The girl fell into a hush. She not only respected her father. She worshiped him as her personal religious leader. His great eyes blazed as though they could see through thousands of meters of dirt and rock and still see beyond into the deep of space. Perhaps he could see that far... Even his own people were never sure of the limits of his power. His white face and white feathers gave his penetrating eyes a miraculously piercing capacity.

Calmly, rather kindly, he added, "My darling, you are wrong. We simply do not know who this man McBan really is."

"Couldn't it be written?" she pleaded. "Couldn't it be written?" she pleaded. "Couldn't it be promised? That's the direction of space from which the robot, the rat and the Copt sent back our very special message, 'From the uttermost deeps one shall come, bringing uncountable treasure and a sure delivery.' So it might be now! Mightn't it?"



"My dear," he responded, "you still have a crude idea of real treasure if you think it is measured in megacredits. Go read *The Scrap of the Book*, then think, and then tell me what you have thought. But meanwhile—no more chatter. We must not excite our poor oppressed people."

## **RUTH, ON THE BEACH NEAR MEEYA MEEFLA**

On this day Ruth thought nothing at all of Norstrilia or treasures. She was trying to do watercolors of the breakers and they came out very badly indeed. The real ones kept on being too beautiful and the water colors looked like watercolors.

## **THE TEMPORARY COUNCIL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF OLD NORTH AUSTRALIA**

"All the riffraff of all the worlds. They're all going to make a run for that silly boy of ours." "Right."

"If he stays here, they'll come here."

"Right"

"Let's let him go to Earth. I have a feeling that little rascal Redlady will smuggle him out tonight and save us the trouble."

"Right."

"After a while it will be all right for him to come back. He won't spoil our hereditary defense of looking stupid. I'm afraid he's bright but by Earth standards he's just a yokel."

"Right."

"Should we send along twenty or thirty more Rod McBans and get the attackers really loused up?"

"No."

"Why not, Sir and Owner?"

"Because it would look clever. We rely on never looking clever. I have the next best answer."

"What's that?"

"Suggest to all the really rum worlds we know that a good impersonator could put his hands on the McBan money. Make the suggestion so that they would not know that we had originated it. The starlanes will be full of Rod McBans, complete with phony Norstrilian accents, for the next couple of hundred years. And no one will suspect that we set them up to it. Stupid's the word, mate, stupid. If they ever think we're clever, we're for it!" The speaker sighed: "How do the bloody fools

suppose our forefathers got off Paradise VII if they weren't clever? How can they think we'd hold this sharp little monopoly for thousands of years? They're stupid not to think about it, but let's not make them think. Right?"

"Right."

## THE NEARBY EXILE

Rod woke with a strange feeling of well-being. In a corner of his mind there were memories of pandemonium—knives, blood, medicine, a monkey working as surgeon. Rum dreams! He glanced around and immediately tried to jump out of bed.

The whole world was on fire!

Bright blazing intolerable fire, like a blowtorch.

But the bed held him. He realized that a loose comfortable jacket ended in tapes and that the tapes were anchored in some way to the bed.

"Eleanor!" he shouted, "Come here."

He remembered the mad bird attacking him, Lavinia transporting him to the cabin of the sharp Earthman, Lord Redlady. He remembered medicines and fuss. But this—what was this?

When the door opened, more of the intolerable light poured in. It was as though every cloud had been stripped from the sky of Old North Australia, leaving only the blazing heavens and the fiery sun. There were people who had seen that happen, when the weather machines occasionally broke down and let a hurricane cut a hole in the clouds, but it had certainly not happened in his time, or in his grandfather's time.

The man who entered was pleasant, but he was no Norstrilian. His shoulders were slight, he did not look as though he could hit a cow, and his face had been washed so long and so steadily that it looked like a baby's face. He had an odd medical-looking suit on, all white, and his face combined the smile and the ready professional sympathy of a good physician.

"We're feeling better, I see," said he.

"Where on Earth am I?" asked Rod. "In a satellite? It feels odd."

"You're not on Earth, man."

"I know I'm not. I've never been there. Where's this place?"

"Mars. The Old Star Station. I'm Jean-Jacques Vomact."

Rod mumbled the name so badly the other man had to spell it out for him. When that was straightened out, Rod came back to the subject.

"Where's Mars? Can you untie me? When's that light going to go off?"

"I'll untie you right now," said Doctor Vomact, "but stay in bed and take it easy until we've given you some food and taken some tests. The light—that's sunshine. I'd say it's about seven hours, local time, before it goes off. This is late morning. Don't you know what Mars is? It's a planet."

"New Mars, you mean," said Rod proudly, "the one with the enormous shops and the zoological gardens."

"The only shops we have here are the cafeteria and the PX. New Mars? I've heard of that place somewhere. It does have big shops and some kind of an animal show. Elephants you can hold in your hand. They've got those too. This isn't that place at all. Wait a sec, I'll roll your bed to the window."

Rod looked eagerly out of the window. It was frightening. A naked, dark sky did not have a cloud in sight. A few holes showed in it here and there. They almost looked like the "stars" which people saw when they were in spaceship transit from one cloudy planet to another. Dominating everything was a single explosive horrible light, which hung high and steady in the sky without ever going off. He found himself cringing for the explosion, but he could tell, from the posture of the doctor next to him, that the doctor was not in the least afraid of that chronic hydrogen bomb, whatever it might turn out to be. Keeping his voice level and trying not to sound like a boy he said,

"What's that?"

"The Sun."

"Don't cook my book, mate. Give me the straight truth. Everybody calls his star a sun. What's this one?"

"The Sun. The original Sun. The Sun of Old Earth itself. Just as this is plain Mars. Not even Old Mars. Certainly not New Mars. This Earth's neighbor."

"That thing never goes off, goes up-boom!-or goes down?"

"The Sun, you mean," said Doctor Vomact. "No, I should think not. I suppose it looked that way to your ancestors and mine half a million years ago, when we were all running around naked on Earth." The doctor busied himself as he talked. He chopped the air with a strange-looking little key, and the tapes fell loose. The mittens dropped off Rod's hands. Rod looked at his own hands in the intense light and saw that they seemed strange. They looked smooth and naked and clean, like the doctor's own hands. Weird memories began to come back to him, but his handicap about spieking and hiering telepathically had made him cautious and sensitive, so he did not give himself away.

"If this is old, old Mars, what are you doing, talking the Old North Australian language to me? I thought my people were the only ones in the universe who still spoke Ancient English." He shifted proudly but clumsily over to the Old Common Tongue: "You see, the Appointed Ones of my family taught me this language as well. I've never been offworld before."

"I speak your language," said the doctor, "because I learned it. I learned it because you paid me, very generously, to learn it. In the months that we have been reassembling you, it's come in handy. We just let down the portal of memory and identity today, but I've talked to you for hundreds of hours already."

Rod tried to speak.

He could not utter a word. His throat was dry and he was afraid that he might throw up his food—if he had eaten any.

The doctor put a friendly hand on his arm. "Easy, Mister and Owner McBan, easy now. We all do that when we come out."

Rod croaked, "I've been dead? Dead? Me?"

"Not exactly dead," said the doctor, "but close to it."

"The box—that little box!" cried Rod.

"What little box?"

"Please, doctor—the one I came in?"

"That box wasn't so little," said Doctor Vomact. He squared his hands in the air and made a shape about the size of the little ladies' bonnet-box which Rod had seen in the Lord Redlady's private operating room. "It was this big. Your head was full natural size. That's why it's been so easy and so successful to bring you back to normality in such a hurry."

"And Eleanor?"

"Your companion? She made it, too. Nobody intercepted the ship."

"You mean the rest is true, too. I'm still the richest man in the universe? And I'm gone, gone from home?" Rod would have liked to beat the bedspread, but did not.

"I am glad," said Doctor Vomact, "to see you express so much feeling about your situation. You showed a great deal when you were under the sedatives and hypnotics, but I was beginning to wonder how we could help you realize your true position when you came back, as you have, to normal life. Forgive me for talking this way. I sound like a medical journal. It's hard to be friends with a patient, even when one really likes him..."

Vomact was a small man, a full head shorter than Rod himself, but so gracefully proportioned that he did not look stunted or little. His face was thin, with a mop of ungovernable black hair which fell in all directions. Among Norstrilians, this fashion would have been deemed eccentric; to judge by the fact that other Earthmen let their hair grow wild and long, it must have been an Earth fashion. Rod found it foolish but not repulsive.

It was not Vomact's appearance which caused the impression. It was the personality which tingled out of every pore. Vomact could become calm when he

knew, from his medical wisdom, that kindness and tranquility were in order, but these qualities were not usual to him. He was vivacious, moody, lively, talkative to an extreme, but he was sensitive enough to the person to whom he was talking: he never became a bore. Even among Norstrilian women, Rod had never seen a person who expressed so much, so fluently. When Vomact talked, his hands were in constant motion—outlining, describing, clarifying the points which he described. When he talked he smiled, scowled, raised his eyebrows in questioning, stared with amazement, looked aside in wonder. Rod was used to the sight of two Norstrilians having a long telepathic conversation, spieking and hiering one another as their bodies reposed, comfortable and immobile, while their minds worked directly on one another. To do all this with the speaking voice,—that, to a Norstrilian, was a marvel to hear and behold. There was something graceful and pleasant about the animation of this Earth doctor which stood in complete contrast to the quick dangerous decisiveness of the Lord Redlady. Rod began to think that if Earth were full of people, all of them like Vomact, it must be a delightful but confusing place. Vomact once hinted that his family was unusual, so that even in the long weary years of perfection, when everyone else had numbers, they kept their family name secret but remembered.

One afternoon Vomact suggested that they walk across the Martian plain a few kilometers to the ruins of the first human settlement on Mars. "We have to talk," said he, "but it is easy enough to talk through these soft helmets. The exercise will do you good. You're young and you will take a lot of conditioning."

Rod agreed.

Friends they became in the ensuing days.

Rod found that the doctor was by no means as young as he looked, just ten years or so older than himself. The doctor was a hundred and ten years old, and had gone through his first rejuvenation just ten years before. He had two more and then death, at the age of four hundred, if the present schedule were kept for Mars.

"You may think, Mister McBan, that you are an upset, wild type yourself. I can promise you, young bucko, that Old Earth is such a happy mess these days that they will never notice you. Haven't you heard about the Rediscovery of Man?"

Rod hesitated. He had paid no attention to the news himself, but he did not want to discredit his home planet by making it seem more ignorant than it really was. "Something about language, wasn't it? And length of life, too? I never paid much attention to off-planet news, unless it was technical inventions or big battles. I think some people in Old North Australia have a keen interest in Old Earth itself. What was it, anyhow?"

"The Instrumentality finally took on a big plan. Earth had no dangers, no hopes, no rewards, no future except endlessness. Everybody stood a thousand-to-one chance of living the four hundred years which was allotted for persons who earned the full period by keeping busy—"

"Why didn't everybody do it?" interrupted Rod. "The Instrumentality took care of the shorties in a very fair way. If offered them wonderfully delicious and exciting vices when they got to be about seventy. Things that combined electronics, drugs and sex in the subjective mind. Anybody who didn't have a lot of work to do ended up getting 'the blissfuls' and eventually died of sheer fun. Who wants to take time for mere hundred-years renewals when they can have five or six thousand years of orgies and adventures every single night?"

"Sounds horrible to me," said Rod. "We have our Giggle Rooms, but people die in them right away. They don't mess around, dying among their neighbors. Think of the awful interaction you must get with the normals."

Doctor Vomact's face clouded over with anger and grief. He turned away and looked over the endless Martian plains. Dear blue Earth hung friendlily in the sky. He looked up at the star of Earth as though he hated it and he said to Rod, his face still turned away,

"You may have a point there, Mister McBan. My mother was a shortie and after she gave up, my father went too. And I'm a normal. I don't suppose I'll get over what it did to me. They weren't my real parents, of course—there was nothing that dirty in my family—but they were my final adopters. I've always thought that you Old North Australians were crazy, rich barbarians for killing off your teen-agers if they didn't jump enough or something crude like that, but I'll admit that you're clean barbarians. You don't make yourselves live with the sweet sick stink of death inside your own apartments..."

"What's an apartment?"

"What we live in."

"You mean a house," said Rod.

"No, an apartment is part of a house. Two hundred thousand of them sometimes make up one big house."

"You mean," said Rod, "there are two hundred thousand families all in one enormous living room? The room must be kilometers long."

"No, no, no!" said the doctor, laughing a little. "Each apartment has a separate living room with sleep sections that come out of the walls, an eating section, a washroom for yourself and your visitors that might come to have a bath with you, a garden room, a study room, and a personality room."

"What's a personality room?"

"That," said the doctor, "is a little room where we do things that we don't want our own families to watch."

"We call that a bathroom," said Rod. The doctor stopped in their walk. "That's what makes it so hard to explain to you what Earth is doing. You're fossils, that's what you are. You've had the old language of English, you keep your family system and your names, you've had unlimited life—"

"Not unlimited," said Rod, "just long. We have to work for it and pay for it with tests."

The doctor looked sorry. "I didn't mean to criticize you. You're different. Very different from what Earth has been. You would have found Earth inhuman. Those apartments we were talking about, for example. Two-thirds of them empty. Underpeople moving into the basements. Records lost; jobs forgotten. If we didn't make such good robots, everything would have fallen to pieces at the same time." He looked at Rod's face. "I can see you don't understand me. Let's take a practical case. Can you imagine killing me?"

"No," said Rod, "I like you."

"I don't mean that. Not the real us. Suppose you didn't know who I was and you found me intruding on your sheep or stealing your stroon."

"You couldn't steal my stroon. My government processes it for me and you couldn't get near it."

"All right, all right, not stroon. Just suppose I came from off your planet without a permit. How would you kill me?"

"I wouldn't kill you. I'd report it to the police."

"Suppose I drew a weapon on you?"

"Then," said Rod, "you'd get your neck broken. Or a knife in your heart. Or a minibomb somewhere near you."

"There!" said the doctor, with a broad grin.

"There what?" said Rod.

"You know how to kill people, should the need arise."

"All citizens know how," said Rod, "but that doesn't mean they do it. We're not bushwhacking each other all the time, the way I heard some Earth people thought we did."

"Precisely," said Vomact. "And that's what the Instrumentality is trying to do for all mankind today. To make life dangerous enough and interesting enough to be real again. We have diseases, dangers, fights, chances. It's been wonderful."

Rod looked back at the group of sheds they had left. "I don't see any signs of it here on Mars."

"This is a military establishment. It's been left out of the Rediscovery of Man until the effects have been studied better. We're still living perfect lives of four hundred years here on Mars. No danger, no change, no risk.."

"How do you have a name, then?"

"My father gave it to me. He was an official Hero of the Frontier Worlds who came home and died a shortie. The Instrumentality let people like that have names before they gave the privilege to everybody."

"What are you doing here?"

"Working." The doctor started to resume their walk. Rod did not feel much awe of him. He was such a shamelessly talkative person, the way most Earth men seemed to be, that it was hard not to be at ease with him.

Rod took Vomact's arm, gently. "There's more to it—"

"You know it," said Vomact. "You have good perceptions. Should I tell you?"

"Why not?" said Rod.

"You're my patient. It might not be fair to you."

"Go ahead," said Rod, "you ought to know I'm tough."

"I'm a criminal," said the doctor.

"But you're alive," said Rod. "In my world we kill criminals or we send them off planet."

"I'm off planet," said Vomact. "This isn't my world. For most of us here on Mars, this is a prison, not a home."

"What did you do?"

"It's too awful..." said the doctor. "I'm ashamed of it myself. They have sentenced me to conditional conditional."

Rod looked at him quickly. Momentarily he wondered whether he might be the victim of some outrageous bewilderment and grief

"I revolted," said the doctor, "without knowing it. People can say anything they want on Earth, and they can print up to twenty copies of anything they need to print, but beyond that it's mass communications. Against the law. When the Rediscovery of Man came, they gave me the Spanish language to work on. I used a lot of research to get out La Prensa. Jokes, dialogues, imaginary advertisements, reports of what had happened in the ancient world. But then I got a bright idea. I went down to Earthport and got the news from incoming ships. What was happening here. What was happening there. You have no idea, Rod, how interesting mankind is! And the things we do... so strange, so comical, so pitiable. The news even comes in on machines, all marked 'official use only.' I disregarded that and I printed up one issue with nothing but truth in it—a real issue, all facts."

"I printed real news."

"Rod, the roof fell in. All persons who had been reconditioned for Spanish were given stability tests. I was asked, did I know the law? Certainly, said I, I knew the law. No mass communications except within government. News is the mother of opinion, opinion the cause of mass delusion, delusion the source, of war. The law was plain and I thought it did not matter. I thought it was just an old law."

"I was wrong, Rod, wrong. They did not charge me with violating the news laws. They charged me with revolt,—against the Instrumentality. They sentenced



me to death, immediately. Then they made it conditional, conditional on my going off planet and behaving well. When I got here, they made it double conditional. If my act has no bad results. But I can't find out. I can go back to Earth any time. That part is no trouble. If they think my misdeed still has effect, they will give me the dream punishments or send me off to that awful planet somewhere. If they think it doesn't matter, they will restore my citizenship with a laugh. But they don't know the worst of it. My underman learned Spanish and the underpeople are keeping the newspaper going very secretly. I can't even imagine what they will do to me if they ever find out what has gone wrong and know that it was me who started it all. Do you think I'm wrong, Rod?"

Rod stared at him. He was not used to judging adults, particularly not at their own request. In Old North Australia, people kept their distance. There were fitting ways for doing everything, and one of the most fitting things was to deal only with people of your own age group.

He tried to be fair, to think in an adult way, and he said, "Of course I think you're wrong, Mister and Doctor Vomact. But you're not very wrong. None of us should trifle with war."

Vomact seized Rod's arm. The gesture was hysterical, almost ugly. "Rod," he whispered, very urgently, "you're rich. You come from an important family. Could you get me into Old North Australia?"

"Why not?" said Rod. "I can pay for all the visitors I want."

"No, Rod, I don't mean that. As an immigrant."

It was Rod's turn to become tense. "Immigrant?" he said. "The penalty for immigration is death. We're killing our own people right now, just to keep the population down. How do you think we could let outsiders settle with us? And the stroon. What about that?"

"Never mind, Rod," said Vomact. "I won't bother you again. I won't mention it again. It's a weary thing, to live many years with death ready to open the next door, ring the next bell, be on the next page of the message file. I haven't married. How could I?" With a whimsical turn of his vivacious mind and face, he was off on a cheerful track. "I have a medicine, Rod, a medicine for doctors, even for rebels. Do you know what it is?"

"A tranquilizer?" Rod was still shocked at the indecency of anyone mentioning immigration to a Norstrilian. He could not think straight.

"Work," said the little doctor, "that's my medicine."

"Work is always good," said Rod, feeling pompous at the generalization. The magic had gone out of the afternoon.

The doctor felt it too. He sighed. "I'll show you the old sheds which men from Earth first built. And then I'll go to work. Do you know what my main work is?"

"No," said Rod, politely.

"You," said Doctor Vomact, with one of his sad gay misclifrvous smiles. "You're well but I've got to make you more than well. I've got to make you kill-proof."

They had reached the sheds.

The ruins might be old but they were not very impressive. They looked something like the homes on the more modest stations back on Norstrilia.

On their way back Rod said, very casually,

"What are you going to do to me, Sir and Doctor?"

"Anything you want," said Vomact lightly.

"Really, now. What?"

"Well," said Vomact, "the Lord Redlady sent along a whole cube of suggestions. Keep your personality. Keep your retinal and brain images. Change your appearance. Change your workwoman into a young man who looks just like your description."

"You can't do that to Eleanor. She's a citizen."

"Not here, not on Mars, she isn't. She's your baggage."

"But her legal rights!"

"This is Mars, Rod, but it's Earth territory. Under Earth law. Under the direct control of the Instrumentality. We can do these things all right. The hard thing is this. Would you consent to passing for a underman?"

"I never saw one. How would I know?" said Rod.

"Could you stand the shame of it?"

Rod laughed, by way of an answer.

Vomact sighed. "You're funny people, you Norstrilians. I'd rather die than be mistaken for an underman. The disgrace of it, the contempt! But the Lord Redlady said that you could walk into Earth as free as a breeze if we made you pass for a cat-man. I might as well tell you, Rod. Your wife is already here."

Rod stopped walking. "My wife? I have no wife."

"Your cat-wife," said the doctor. "Of course it isn't real marriage. Underpeople aren't allowed to have it. But they have a companionship which looks something like marriage and we sometimes slip and call them husband and wife. The Instrumentality has already sent a cat-girl out to be your 'wife.' She'll travel back to Earth with you from Mars. You'll just be a pair of lucky cats who's been doing dances and acrobatics for the bored station personnel here."

"And Eleanor?"

"I suppose somebody will kill her, thinking it's you. That's what you brought her for, isn't it? Aren't you rich enough?"

"No, no, no" said Rod, "nobody is that rich. We have to think of something else."

They spent the entire walk making new plans which would protect Eleanor and Rod both.

As they entered the shedport and took off their helmets, Rod said,

"This wife of mine, when can I see her?"

"You won't overlook her," said Vomact. "She's as wild as fire and twice as beautiful."

"Does she have a name?"

"Of course she does," said the doctor. "They all do."

"What is it, then?"

"C'mell."

## *HOSPITALITY AND ENTRAPMENT*

People waited, here and there. If there had been worldwide news coverage, the population would have converged on Earthport with curiosity, passion, or greed. But news had been forbidden long before; people could know only the things which concerned them personally; the centers of Earth remained undisturbed. Here and there, as Rod made his trip from Mars to Earth, there were anticipations of the event. Overall, the world of Old Old Earth remained quiet, except for the perennial bubble of its inward problems.

### **ON EARTH, THE DAY OF ROD'S FLIGHT, WITHIN EARTHPORT ITSELF**

"They shut me out of the meeting this morning, when I'm in charge of visitors. That means that something is in the air," said Commissioner Teadrinker to his underman, B'dank.

B'dank, expecting a dull day, had been chewing his cud while sitting on his stool in the corner. He knew far more about the case than did his master, and he had learned his additional information from the secret sources of the underpeople, but he was resolved to betray nothing, to express nothing.. Hastily he swallowed his cud and said, in his reassuring, calm bull voice:

"There might be some other reason, Sir and Master. If they were considering a promotion for you, they would leave you out of the meeting. You certainly deserve a promotion, Sir and Master."

"Are the spiders ready?" asked Teadrinker crossly.

"Who can tell the mind of a giant spider?" said B'dank calmly. "I talked to the foreman-spider for three hours yesterday with sign language. He wants twelve cases of beer. I told him I would give him more—he could have ten. The poor devil can't count, though he thinks he can, so he was pleased at having outbargained me. They will take the person you designate to the steeple of Earthport and they will hide that person so that the human being cannot be found for many hours. When I appear with the cases of beer, they will give me the person. I will then jump out of a window, holding the person in my arms. There are so few people who go down the outside of Earthport that they may not notice me at all. I will take the person to the ruined palace directly under Alpha Ralpa Boulevard, the one which you showed me, Sir and Master, and there I will keep the person in good order until you come and do the things which you have to do."

Teadrinker looked across the room. The big, florid, handsome face was so exasperatingly calm that it annoyed. Teadrinker had heard that bull-men, because of their cattle origin, were sometimes subject to fits of uncontrollable frantic rage, but he had never seen the least sign of any such phenomenon in B'dank. He snapped,

"Aren't you worried?"

"Why should I worry, Sir and Master? You are doing the worrying for both of us."

"Go fry yourself!"

"That is not an operational instruction," said B'dank. "I suggest that the master eat something. That will calm his nerves. Nothing at all will happen today, and it is very hard for true men to wait for nothing at all. I have seen many of them get upset."

Teadrinker gritted his teeth at this extreme reasonableness. Nevertheless, he took a dehydrated banana out of his desk drawer and began chewing on it.

He looked sharply across at B'dank. "Do you want one of these things?"

B'dank slid off his chair with surprisingly smooth agility; he was at the desk, his enormous ham-sized hand held out, before he said,

"Yes, indeed, sir. I love bananas."

Teadrinker gave him one and then said, fretfully,

"Are you sure of the fact you never met the Lord Redlady?"

"Sure as any underman can be," said B'dank, munching the banana. "We never really know what has been put into our original conditioning, or who put it there. We're inferior and we're not supposed to know. It is forbidden even to inquire."

"So you admit that you might be a spy or agent of the Lord Redlady?"

"I might be, sir, but I do not feel like it."

"Do you know who Redlady is?"

"You have told me, sir, that he is the most dangerous human being in the whole galaxy."

"That's right," said Teadrinker, "and if I am running into something which the Lord Redlady has set up, I might as well cut up my throat before I start."

"It would be simpler, sir," said B'dank, "not to kidnap this Rod McBane at all. That is the only element of danger. If you did nothing, things would go on as they always have gone on quietly, calmly."

"That's the horror and anxiety of it! They do always go on. Don't you think I want to get out of here, to taste power and freedom again?"

"You say so, sir," said B'dank, hoping that Teadrinker would offer him one more of those delicious dried bananas.

Teadrinker, distracted, did not.

He just walked up and down his room, desperate with the torment of hope, danger and delay.

## **ANTECHAMBER OF THE BELL AND BANK**

The Lady Johanna Gnade was there first. She was clean, well dressed, alert. The Lord Jestocost, who followed her in, wondered if she had any personal life at all. It was bad manners, among the Chiefs of the Instrumentality, to inquire into another Chiefs personal affairs, even though the complete personal histories of each of them, kept up to the day and minute, was recorded in the computer cabinet in the corner. Jestocost knew, because he had peeped his own record, using another Chiefs name, just so that he could see whether several minor illegalities of his had been recorded; they had been, all except for the biggest one—his deal with the cat girl C'mell—which he had successfully kept off the recording screens. (The record simply showed him having a nap at the time.) If the Lady Johanna had any secrets, she kept them well.

"My sir and colleague," said she, "I suspect you of sheer inquisitiveness—a vice most commonly attributed to women."

"When we get as old as this, my lady, the differences in character between men and women become imperceptible. If, indeed, they ever existed in the first place. You and I are bright people and we each have a good nose for danger or disturbance. Isn't it likely we would both look up somebody with the impossible name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBane to the hundred-and-fifty-first generation? See—I memorized all of it! Don't you think that was rather clever of me?"

"Rather," said she, in a tone which implied she didn't.

"I'm expecting him this morning."

"You are?" she asked, on a rising note which implied that there was something improper about his knowledge. "There's nothing about it in the messages."

"That's it," said the Lord Jestocost, smiling, "I arranged for Mars solar radiation to be carried two extra decimals until he left. This morning it's back down to three decimals. That means he's coming. Clever of me, wasn't it?"

"Too clever," she said. "Why ask me? I never thought you valued my opinion. Anyhow, why are you taking all these pains with the case? Why don't you just ship him out so far that it would take him a long lifetime, even with stroon, to get back here again?"

He looked at her evenly until she flushed. He said nothing.

"My—my comment was improper, I suppose." She stammered. "You and your sense of justice. You're always putting the rest of us in the wrong."

"I didn't mean to," he said mildly, "because I am just thinking of Earth.. Did you know he owns this tower?"

"Earthport?" she cried. "Impossible."

"Not at all," said Jestocost. "I myself sold it to his agent ten days ago. For forty megacredits FOE money. That's more than we happen to have on Earth right now. When he deposited it, we began paying him three percent a year interest. And that wasn't all he bought from me. I sold him that ocean too, right there, the one the ancients called Atlantic. And I sold him three hundred thousand attractive underwomen trained in various tasks, together with the dower rights of seven hundred human women of appropriate ages."

"You mean you did all this to save the Earth treasury three megacredits a year?"

"Wouldn't you? Remember this is FOE money."

She pursed her lips. Then she burst into a smile. "I never saw anyone else like you, my Lord Jestocost. You're the fairest man I ever knew and yet you never forget a little bit more in the way of earnings!"

"That's not the end of it," said he with a very crafty, pleased smile. "Did you read Amended (Reversionary) Schedule 711-19-13P which you yourself voted for eleven days ago?"

"I looked at it," she said defensively. "We all did. It was something to do with Earth funds and Instrumentality funds. The Earth representative didn't complain. We all passed it because we trusted you."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Frankly, not at all. Does it have anything to do with this rich old man, McBan?"

"Don't be sure," said the Lord Jestocost, "that he's old. He might be young. Anyhow, the tax schedule raises taxes on kilocredits very slightly. Megacredit taxes are divided evenly between Earth and the Instrumentality, provided that the owner is not personally operating the property. It comes to one per cent a month. That's the very small type in the footnote at the bottom of the seventh page of rates."

"You—you mean—" she gasped with laughter, "that by selling the poor man the Earth you are not only cutting him out of three percent interest a year, but you're charging him twelve percent taxes. Blessed rockets, man, you're weird. I love you. You're the cleverest, most ridiculous person we ever had as a Chief of the Instrumentality!" From the Lady Johanna Gnade, this was lurid language indeed. Jestocost did not know whether to be offended or pleased.

Since she was in a rare good humor, he dared to mention his half-secret project to her.

"Do you think, my lady, that if we have all this unexpected credit, we could waste a little of our stroom imports?"

Her laugh stopped. "On what?" she said sharply.

"On the underpeople. For the best of them."

"Oh, no. Oh, no! Not for the animals, while there are still people who suffer. You're mad to think of it, my Lord."

"I'm mad," he said. "I'm mad all right. Mad for justice. And this strikes me as simple justice. I'm not asking for equal rights. Merely for a little more justice for them."

"They're underpeople," she said blankly. "They're animals." As though this comment settled the matter altogether.

"You never heard, did you, my lady, of the dog named Joan?" His question held a wealth of allusion.

She saw no depth in it, said flatly, "No," and went back to studying the agency for the day.

## **TEN KILOMETERS BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH**

The old engines turned like tides. The smell of hot oil was on them. Down here there were no luxuries. Life and flesh were cheaper than transistors; besides, they had much less radiation to be detected. In the groaning depths, the hidden and forgotten underpeople lived. They thought their chief, the Ee'telekeli, to be magical. Sometimes he thought so himself.

His white handsome face staring like a marble bust of immortality, his crumpled wings hugged closely to him in fatigue, he called to his first-egg child, the girl E'lamelanie,

"He comes, my darling."

"That one, father? The promised one."

"The rich one."

Her eyes widened. She was his daughter but she did not always understand his powers. "How do you know, father?"

"I'll tell you the truth, will you agree to let me erase it from your mind right away, so there will be no danger of betrayal?"

"Of course, father."

"No," said the marble-faced bird-man, "you must say the right words..."

"I promise, father, that if you fill my heart with the truth, and if my joy at the truth is full, that I will yield to you my mind, my whole mind without fear, hope, or reservation, and that I will ask you to take from my mind whatever truth or parts of the truth might hurt our kind of people, in the name of the First Forgotten One, in the Name of the Second Forgotten One, in the Name of the Third Forgotten One, and for the sake of D'joan whom we all love and remember!"

He stood. He was a tall man, His legs ended in the enormous feet of a bird, with white talons shimmering like mother of pearl. His humanoid hands stood forth from the joint of his wings; with them he extended the prehistoric gesture of blessing over her head, while he chanted the truth in a ringing hypnotic voice.

"Let the truth be yours, my daughter, that you may be whole and happy with the truth. Knowing the truth, my daughter, know freedom and the right to forget!"

"The child, my child, who was your brother, the little boy you loved..."

"Yeekasoose!" she said, her voice trance-like and childish.

"E'ikusus, whom you remember, was changed by me, his father, into the form of a small ape-man, so that the true people mistook him for an animal, not an underperson. They trained him as a surgeon and sent him to the Lord Redlady. He came with this young man McBan to Mars, where he met G'mell, whom I recommended to the Lord Jestocost for confidential errands. They are coming back with this man today. He has already bought the Earth, or most of it. Perhaps he will do us good. Do you know what you should know, my daughter?"

"Tell me, father, tell me. How do you know?"

"Remember the truth, girl, and then lose it! The messages come from Mars.. We cannot touch the Big Blink or the message-coding machines, but each recorder has his own style. By a shift in the pace of his work, a friend can relay moods, emotions, ideas, and sometimes names. They have sent me words like riches, monkey, small, cat, girl, everything, good by the pitch and speed of their recording. The human messages carry ours and no cryptographer in world can find them."

"Now you know, and you will now now now now forget!"



He raised his hands again.

E'lamelanie looked at him normally with a happy smile, "It's so sweet and funny, daddy, but I know I've just forgotten something good and wonderful!" Ceremonially he added, "Do not forget Joan." Formally she responded, "I shall never forget Joan."

## *THE HIGH SKY FLYING*

Rod walked to the edge of the little park. This was utterly unlike any ship he had ever seen or heard about in Norstrilia. There was no noise, no cramping, no sign of weapons—just a pretty little cabin which housed the controls, the Go-Captain, the Pinlighters, and the Stop-Captain, and then a stretch of incredible green grass. He had walked on this grass from the dusty ground of Mars. There was a purr and a whisper. A false blue sky, very beautiful, covered himlike a canopy.

He felt strange. He had whiskers like a cat, forty centimeters long, growing out of his upper lip, about twelve whiskers to each side. The doctor had colored his eyes with bright green irises. His ears reached up to a point. He looked like a cat-man and he wore the professional clothing of an acrobat; C'mell did too.

He had not gotten over C'mell.

She made every woman in Old North Australia look like a sack of lard. She was lean, Umber, smooth, menancing and beautiful; she was soft to the touch, hard in her motions, quick, alert, and cuddlesome. Her red hair blazed with the silkiness of animal fire. She spoke with a soprano which tinkled like wild bells. Her ancestors and ancestresses had been bred to produce the most seductive girl on Earth. The task had succeeded. Even in repose, she was voluptuous. Her wide hips and sharp eyes invited the masculine passions.. Her catlike dangerousness challenged every man whom she met. The true men who looked at her knew that she was a cat, and still could not keep their eyes off her. Human women treated her as though she were something disgraceful. She traveled as an acrobat, but she had already told Rod McBan confidentially that she was by profession a "girlygirl," a female animal, shaped and trained like a person to serve as hostess to offworld visitors, required by law and custom to invite their love, while promised the penalty of death if she accepted it.

Rod liked her, though he had been painfully shy with her at first. There was no side to her, no posh, no swank. Once she got down to business, her incredible body faded part way into the background, though with the sides of his eyes he could never quite forget it. It was her mind, her intelligence, her humor and good humor, which carried them across the hours and days they spent together. He found himself trying to impress her that he was a grown man, only to discover that in the spontaneous, sincere affections of her quick cat heart she did not care in the least what his status was. He was simply her partner and they had work to do together. It was his job to stay alive and it was her job to keep him alive.

Doctor Vomact had told him not to speak to the other passengers, not to say anything to each other, and to call for silence if any of them spoke.

There were ten other passengers who stared at one another in uncomfortable amazement.

Ten in number, they were.

All ten of them were Rod McBan.

Ten identified Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans to the one hundred and fifty-first, all exactly alike. Apart from C'mell herself and the little monkey-doctor, A'gentur, the only person on the ship who was not Rod McBan was Rod McBan himself. He had become the cat-man. The others seemed, each by himself, to be persuaded that he alone was Rod McBan and that the other nine were parodies. They watched each other with a mixture of gloom and suspicion mixed with amusement, just as the real Rod McBan would have done, had he been in their place.

"One of them," said Doctor Vomact in parting, "is your companion Eleanor from Norstrilia. The other nine are mouse-powered robots. They're all copied from you. Good, eh?" He could not conceal his professional satisfaction.

And now they were all about to see Earth together.

C'mell took Rod to the edge of the little world and said gently, "I want to sing 'The Tower Song' to you just before we shut down on the top of Earthport." And in her wonderful voice she sang the strange little old song,

*And oh! my love, for you.  
High birds crying, and a  
High sky flying, and a  
High wind driving, and a  
High heart striving, and a  
High brave place for you!*

Rod felt a little funny, standing there, looking at nothing, but he also felt pleasant with the girl's head against his shoulder and his arm enfolding her. She seemed not only to need him, but to trust him very deeply. She did not feel adult—not self-important and full of unexplained business. She was merely a girl, and for the time his girl. It was pleasant and it gave him a strange foretaste of the future.

The day might come when he would have a permanent girl of his own, facing not a day, but life, not a danger, but destiny. He hoped that he could be as relaxed and fond with that future girl as he was with C'mell.

C'mell squeezed his hand, as though in warning.

He turned to look at her but she stared ahead and nodded with her chin,

"Keep watching," she said, "straight ahead. Earth."

He looked back at the blank artificial sky of the ship's force-field. It was a monotonous but pleasant blue, covering depths which were not really there.

The change was so fast that he wondered whether he had really seen it.

In one moment the clear flat blue.

Then the false sky splashed apart as though it had literally been slashed into enormous ribbons, ribbons in their turn becoming blue spots and disappearing.

Another blue sky was there—Earth's.

Manhome.

Rod breathed deeply. It was hard to believe. The sky itself was not so different from the false sky which had surrounded the ship on its trip from Mars, but there was an aliveness and wetness to it, unlike any other sky he had ever heard about.

It was not the sight of the Earth which surprised him—it was the smell. He suddenly realized that Old North Australia must smell dull, flat, dusty to Earthmen. This Earth air smelled alive. There were the odors of plants, of water, of things which he could not even guess. The air was coded with a million years of memory. In this air his people had swum to manhood, before they conquered the stars. The wetness was not the cherished damp of one of his covered canals. It was wild free moisture which came laden with the indications of things living, dying, sprawling, squirming, loving with an abundance of Earth had always seemed fierce and exaggerated! What was strange that men would pay water for it—water, the giver and carrier of life. This was his home, no matter how many generations his people had lived in the twisted hells of Paradise VII or the dry treasures of Old North Australia. He took a deep breath, feeling the plasma of Earth pour into him, the quick effluvium which had made man. He smelled Earth again—it would take a long lifetime, even with time, before a man could understand all these odors which came all the way up to the ship, which hovered, as planeforming ships usually did not, twenty-odd kilometers above the surface of the planet.

There was something strange in this air, something sweet-clear to the nostrils, refreshing to the spirit. One great beautiful odor overrode all the others. What could it be? He sniffed and then said, very clearly, to himself,

"Salt!"

C'mell reminded him that he was beside her,

"Do you like it, C'rod?"

"Yes, yes, it's better than—" Words failed him. He looked at her. Her eager, pretty, comradely smile made him feel that she was sharing every milligram of his delight. "But why," he asked, "do you waste salt on the air? What good does it do?"

"Salt?"

"Yes—in the air. So rich, so wet, so salty. Is it to clean the ship some way that I do not understand?"

"Ship? We're not on the ship, C'rod. This is the landing roof of Earthport."

He gasped.

No ship? There was not a mountain on Old North Australia more than six kilometers above MGL—mean ground level,—and those mountains were all smooth, worn, old, folded by immense eons of wind into a gentle blanketing that covered his whole home world.

He looked around.

The platform was about two hundred meters long by one hundred wide.

The ten "Rod McBans" were talking to some men in uniform. Far at the other side a steeple rose into eye-catching height—perhaps a whole half-kilometer. He looked down.

There it was—Old Old Earth.

The treasure of water reached before his very eyes—water by the millions of tons, enough to feed a galaxy of sheep, to wash an infinity of men. The water was broken by a few islands on the far horizon to the right.

"Hesperides," said 'C'mell, following the direction of his gaze. "They came up from the sea when the Daimoni built this for us. For people, I mean. I shouldn't say 'us.'"

He did not notice the correction. He stared at the sea. Little specks were moving in it, very slowly. He pointed at one of them with his finger and asked C'mell,

"Are those wethouses?"

"What did you call them?"

"House which are wet. Houses which sit on water. Are those some of them?"

"Ships," she said, not spoiling his fun with a direct contradiction. "Yes, those are ships."

"Ships?" he cried. "You'd never get one of those into space. Why call them ships then?"

Very gently C'mell explained, "People had ships for water before they had ships for space. I think the Old Common Tongue takes the word for space vessel from the things you are looking at."

"I want to see a city," said Rod, "Show me a city."

"It won't look like much from here. We're too high up. Nothing looks like much from the top of Earthport. But I can show you, anyhow. Come over here, dear."

When they walked away from the edge, Rod realized that the little monkey was still with them. "What are you doing here with us?" asked Rod, not unkindly.

The monkey's preposterous little face wrinkled into a knowing smile. The face was the same as it had been before, but the expression was different—more assured, more clear, more purposive than ever before. There was even humor and cordiality in the monkey's voice.

"We animals are waiting for the people to finish their entrance."

We animals? thought Rod. He remembered his furry head, his pointed ears, his cat-whiskers. No wonder he felt at ease with this girl and she with him.

The ten Rod McBans were walking down a ramp, so that the floor seemed to be swallowing them slowly from the feet up. They were walking in single file, so that the head of the leading one seemed to sit bodiless on the floor, while the last one in line had lost nothing more than his feet. It was odd indeed.

Rod looked at C'mell and A'gentur and asked them frankly, "When people have such a wide, wet, beautiful world, all full of life, why should they kill me?"

A'gentur shook his monkey head sadly, as though he knew full well, but found the telling of it inexpressibly wearisome and sad.

C'mell answered, "You are who you are. You hold immense power. Do you know that this tower is yours?"

"Mine!" he cried.

"You've bought it, or somebody bought it for you. Most of that water is yours, too. When you have things that big, people ask you for things. Or they take them from you. Earth is a beautiful place but I think it is a dangerous place, too, for offworlders like you who are used to just one way of life. You have not caused all the crime and meanness in the world, but it's been sleeping and now wakes up for you."

"Why for me?"

"Because," said A'gentur, "you're the richest person who has ever touched this planet. You own most of it already. Millions of human lives depend on your thoughts and your decisions."

They had reached the opposite side of the top platform. Here, on the land side, the rivers were all leaking badly. Most of the land was covered with steam-clouds, such as they saw on Norstrilia when a covered canal burst out of its covering. These clouds represented incalculable treasures of rain.. He saw that they parted at the foot of the tower.

"Weather machines," said C'mell. "The cities are all covered with weather machines. Don't you have weather machines in Old North Australia?"

"Of course we do," said Rod, "but we don't waste water by letting it float around in the open air like that. It's pretty, though. I guess the extravagance of it makes me feel critical. Don't you Earth people have anything better to do with your water than to leave it lying on the ground or having it float over open land?"

"We're not Earth people," said C'mell. "We're underpeople. I'm a cat-person and he's made from apes. Don't call us people. It's not decent."

"Fudge!" said Rod. "I was just asking a question about Earth, not pestering your feelings when—"

He stopped short.

They all three spun around.

Out of the ramp there came something like a mowing machine. A human voice, a man's voice screamed from within it, expressing rage and fear.

Rod started to move forward.

C'mell started to move forward.

C'mell held his arm, dragging back with all her weight.

"No! Rod, no! No!"

A'gentur slowed him down better by jumping into his face, so that Rod suddenly saw nothing but a Universe of brown belly-fur and felt tiny hands gripping his hair and pulling it. He stopped and reached for the monkey. A'gentur anticipated him and dropped to the ground before Rod could hit him.

The machine was racing up the outside of the steeple and almost disappearing into the sky above. The voice had become thin.

Rod looked at C'mell, "All right. What was it? What's happening?"

"That's a spider, a giant spider. It's kidnapping or killing Rod McBan."

"Me?" keened Rod. "It'd better not touch me. I'll tear it apart."

"Sh-h-h!" said C'mell.

"Quiet!" said the monkey.

"Don't 'sh-sh-sh' me and don't 'quiet' me," said Rod. "I'm not going to let that poor blighter suffer on my account. Tell that thing to come down. What is it, anyhow, this spider? A robot?"

"No," said C'mell, "an insect."

Rod was narrowing his eyes, watching the mowing machine which hung on the outside of the tower. He could barely see the man within its grip. When C'mell said "insect," it triggered something in his mind. Hate. Revulsion. Resistance to dirt. Insects on Old North Australia were small, serially numbered and licensed. Even at that, he felt them to be his hereditary enemies. (Somebody had told him that Earth insects had done terrible things to the Norstrilians when they lived on Paradise VII.) Rod yelled at the spider, making his voice as loud as possible,

"You—come—down!"

The filthy thing on the tower quivered with sheer smugness and seemed to bring its machine-like legs closer together, settling down to be comfortable.

Rod forgot he was supposed to be a cat.

He gasped for air. Earth air was wet but thin. He closed his eyes for a moment or two. He thought hate, hate, hate for the insect. Then he shrieked telepathically, louder than he had ever shrieked at home:

hate-spit-spit-vomit!

dirt, dirt, dirt,

explode!

crush:

ruin:

stink, collapse, putrefy, disappear!

hate-hate-hate!

The fierce red roar of his inarticulate snicking hurt even him. He saw the little monkey fall to the ground in a dead faint. C'mell was pale and looked as though she might throw up her food.

He looked away from them and up at the "spider." Had he reached it?

He had.

Slowly, slowly, the long legs moved out in spasm, releasing the man, whose body flashed downward. Rod's eyes followed the movement of "Rod McBan" and he cringed when a wet crunch let him know that the duplicate of his own body had been splashed all over the hard deck of the tower, a hundred meters away. He glanced back up at the "spider." It scrabbled for purchase of the tower and then cartwheeled downward. It too hit the deck hard and lay there dying, its legs twitching as its personality slipped into its private, everlasting night.

Rod gasped. "Eleanor. Oh, maybe that's Eleanor!" His voice wailed. He started to run to the facsimile of his human body, forgetting that he was a cat-man.

C'mell's voice was as sharp as a howl, though low in tone. "Shut up! Shut up! Stand still! Close your mind! Shut up! We're dead if you don't shut up!"

He stopped, stared at her stupidly. Then he saw she was in mortal earnest. He complied. He stopped moving. He did not try to talk. He capped his mind, closing himself against telepathy until his brainbox began to ache. The little monkey, A'gentur, was crawling up off the floor, looking shaken and sick. C'mell was still pale.

Men came running up the ramp, saw them and headed toward them.

There was the beat of wings in the air.

An enormous bird—no, it was an ornithopter,—landed with its claws scratching the deck. A uniformed man jumped out and cried,

"Where is he?"

"He jumped over!" C'mell shouted.

The man started to follow the direction of her gesture and then cut sharply back to her.

"Fool!" he said. "People can't jump off here. The barrier would hold ships in place. What did you see?"

C'mell was a good actress. She pretended to be getting over shock and gasping for words. The uniformed man looked at her haughtily,

"Cats," he said, "and a monkey. What are you doing here? Who are you?"

"Name C'mell, profession, girlygirl, Earthport staff, commanded by Commissioner Treadrinker. This— boyfriend, no status, name C'roderick, caslifr in night bank down below. Him?" She nodded at A'gentur. "I don't know much about him."

"Name A'gentur. Profession, supplementary surgeon. Status, animal. I'm not an underperson. Just an animal. I came in on the ship from Mars with the dead man there and some other true men who looked like him, and they went down first—"

"Shut up," said the uniformed man. He turned to the approaching men and said, "Honored subchief, Sergeant 387 reporting. The user of the telepathic weapon has disappeared. The only things here are these two cat people, not very bright, and a small monkey. They can talk. The girl says she saw somebody get off the tower."

The subchief was a tall redhead with a uniform even handsomer than the sergeant's. He snapped at C'mell, "How did he do it?"

Rod knew C'mell well enough by now to recognize the artfulness of her becoming confused, feminine and incoherent—in appearance. Actually, she was in full control of the situation. Said she, babbling:

"He jumped, I think. I don't know how."

"That's impossible," said the subchief. "Did you see where he went?" he barked at Rod McBan.

Rod gasped at the suddenness of the question: besides, C'mell had told him to keep quiet. Between these two peremptories, he said, "Er—ah—oh—you see—"

The little monkey-surgeon interrupted drily, "Sir and Master Subchief, that cat-man is not very bright. I do not think you will get much out of him.. Handsome but stupid. Strictly breeding stock—"

Rod gagged and turned a little red at these remarks, but he could tell from the hooded quick glare which C'mell shot him that she wanted him to go on being quiet.

She cut in. "I did notice one thing, Master. It might matter."

"By the Bell and Bank, animal! Tell me," cried the subchief. "Stop deciding what I ought to know!"

"The strange man's skin was lightly tinged with blue."



The subchief took a step back. His soldiers and the sergeant stared at him. In a serious, direct way he said to C'mell, "Are you sure?"

"No, my Master. I just thought so."

"You saw just one?" barked the subchief.

Rod, overacting the stupidity, held up four fingers.

"That idiot," cried the subchief, "thinks he saw four of them. Can he count?" he asked C'mell.

C'mell looked at Rod as though he were a handsome beast with not a brain in his head. Rod looked back at her, deliberately letting himself feel stupid. This was something which he did very well, since by neither hieing nor spieking at home, he had had to sit through interminable hours of other people's conversation when he was little, never getting the faintest idea of what it was all about. He had discovered very early that if he sat still and looked stupid, people did not bother him by trying to bring him into the conversation, turning their voices on and braying at him as though he were deaf. He tried to simulate the familiar old posture and was rather pleased that he could make such a good showing with C'mell watching him. Even when she was seriously fighting for their freedom and playing girl all at once, her corona of blazing hair made her shine forth like the sun of Earth itself; among all these people on the platform, her beauty and her intelligence made her stand out, cat though she was. Rod was not at all surprised that he was overlooked, with such a vivid personality next to him; he just wished that he could be overlooked a little more, so that he could wander over idly and see whether the body was Eleanor's or one of the robots'. If Eleanor had already died for him, in her first few minutes of the big treat of seeing Earth, he felt that he would never forgive himself as long as he lived..

The talk about the blue men amused him deeply. They existed in Norstrilian folklore, as a race of faraway magicians who, through science or hypnotism, could render themselves invisible to other men whenever they wished. Rod had never talked with an Old North Australian security officer about the problem of guarding the stroon treasure from attacks by invisible men, but he gathered, from the way people told stories of blue men, that they had either failed to show up in Norstrilia or that the Norstrilian authorities did not take them very seriously. He was amazed that the Earth people did not bring in a couple of first-class telepaths and have them sweep the deck of the tower for every living thing, but to judge by the chatter of voices that was going on, and the peering with eyes which occurred, Earth people had fairly weak senses and did not get things done promptly and efficiently.

The question about Eleanor was answered for him.

One of the soldiers joined the group, waited after saluting, and was finally allowed to interrupt C'mell's and A'gentur's endless guessing as to how many blue men there might have been on the tower, Ifthere had been any at all.

The subchief nodded at the soldier, who said,

"Beg to report, Sir and Subchief, the body is not a body. It is just a robot which looks like a person."

The day brightened immeasurably within Rod's heart. Eleanor was safe, somewhere further down in this immense tower.

The comment seemed to decide the young officer. "Get a sweeping machine and a looking dog," he commanded the sergeant, "and see to it that this whole area is swept and looked down to the last square millimeter."

"It is done," said the soldier.

Rod thought this an odd remark, because nothing at all had been done yet..

The subchief issued another command: "Turn on the kill-spotters before we go down the ramp. Any identity which is not perfectly clear must be killed automatically by the scanning device. Including us," he added to his men. "We don't want any blue men walking right down into the tower among us."

C'mell suddenly and rather boldly stepped up to, the officer and whispered in his ear. His eyes rolled as he listened, he blushed a little, and then changed his orders: "Cancel the kill-spotters. I want this whole squad to stand body-to-body. I'm sorry, men, but you're going to have to touch these underpeople for several minutes. I want them to stand so close to us that we can be sure there is nobody extra sneaking into our group."

(C'mell later told Rod that she had confessed to the young officer that she might be a mixed type, part human and part animal, and that she was the special girlygirl of two off-Earth magnates of the Instrumentality. She said she thought that she had a definite identity but was not sure, and that the kill-spotters might destroy her if she did not yield a correct unage as she went past them. They would, she told Rod later, have caught any underman passing as a man, or any man passing as an underman, and would have killed the victim by intensifying the magnetic layout of his own organic body. These machines were dangerous things to pass, since they occasionally killed normal, legitimate people and underpeople who merely failed to provide a clear focus.) The officer took the left forward corner of the living rectangle of people and underpeople. They formed tight ranks. Rod felt the two soldiers next to him shudder as they came into contact with his "cat" body. They kept their faces averted from him as though he smelled bad for them. Rod said nothing; he just looked forward and kept his expression pleasantly stupid.

What followed next was surprising. The men walked in a strange way, all of them moving their left legs in unison, and then their right legs. A'gentur could not possibly do this, so with a nod of the sergeant's approval, C'mell picked him up and carried him close to her bosom. Suddenly, weapons flared.

These, thought Rod, must be cousins of the weapons which the Lord Redlady carried a few weeks ago, when he landed his ship on my property. (He remembered Hopper, his knife quivering like the head of a snake, threatening the life of the Lord Redlady; and he remembered the sudden silent burst, the black

oily smoke, and the gloomy Bill looking at the chair where his pal had existed a moment before.)

These weapons showed a little light, just a little, but their force was betrayed by the buzzing of the floor and the agitation of the dust.

"Close in, men! Right up to your own feet! Don't let a blue man through!" shouted the subchief. The men complied.

The air began to smell funny and burned.

The ramp was clear of life except for their own. When the ramp swung around a corner, Rod gasped.

This was the most enormous room he had ever seen. It covered the entire top of Earthport. He could not even begin to guess how many hectares it was, but a small farm could have been accommodated on it. There were few people there. The men broke ranks at a command of the subchief. The officer glared at the cat-man Rod, the cat-girl C'mell and the ape A'gentur:

"You stand right where you are till I come back!" They stood, saying nothing. C'mell and A'gentur took the place for granted. Rod started as though he would drink up the world with his eyes. In this one enormous room, there was more antiquity and wealth than all Old North Australia possessed. Curtains of an incredibly rich material shimmered down from the thirty-meter ceiling; some of them seemed to be dirty and in bad repair, but any one of them, after paying the twenty million percent import duty, would cost more than any Old North Australian could afford to pay. There were chairs and tables here and there, some of them good enough to deserve a place in the Musuem of Man on New Mars. Here they were merely used. The people did not seem any the happier for having all this wealth around them. For the first time, Rod got a glimpse of what the spartan self-imposed poverty had done to make life worthwhile at home. His people did not have much, when they could have chartered endless argosies of treasure, inbound from all worlds to their own planet, in exchange for the life-prolonging stroon. But if they had been heaped with treasure they would have appreciated nothing and would have ended up possessing nothing. He thought of his own little collection of hidden antiquities. Here on Earth it would not have filled a dustbin, but in the Station of Doom it would afford him commissonership as long as he lived.

The thought of his home made him wonder what Old Hot and Simple, the Hon.. Sec., might be doing with his adversary on Earth. "It's a long, long way to reach here!" he thought to himself.

C'mell drew his attention by plucking at his arm. "Hold me," commanded she, "because I am afraid I might fall down and E'ikasus is not strong enough to hold me."

Rod wondered who Yeekasoose might be, when only the little monkey A'gentur was with them; he also wondered why C'mell should need to be held.

Norstrilian discipline had taught him not to question orders in an emergency. He held her.

She suddenly slumped as though she had fainted or had gone to sleep. He held her with one arm and with his free hand he tipped her head against his shoulder so that she would look as though she were weary and affectionate, not unconscious. It was pleasant to hold her little female body, which felt fragile and delicate beyond belief. Her hair, disarrayed and windblown, still carried the smell of the salty sea air which had so surprised him an hour ago. She herself, he thought, was the greatest treasure of Earth which he had yet seen. But suppose he did have her? What could he do with her in Old North Australia? Underpeople were completely forbidden, except for military uses under the exclusive control of the Commonwealth government. He could not imagine C'mell directing a mowing machine as she walked across a giant sheep, shearing it. The idea of her sitting up all night with a lonely or frightened sheep-monster was itself ridiculous. She was a playgirl, an ornament in human form; for such as her, there was no place under the comfortable grey skies of home. Her beauty would fade in the dry air; her intricate mind would turn sour with the weary endlessness of a farm culture: property, responsibility, defense, self-reliance, sobriety. New Melbourne would look like a collection of rude shacks to her.

He realized that his feet were getting cold. Up on the deck they had had sunlight to keep them warm, even though the chill salty wet air of Earth's marvelous "seas" was blowing against them. Here, inside, it was merely high and cold, while still wet; he had never encountered wet cold before, and it was a strangely uncomfortable experience.

C'mell came to and shook herself to wakefulness just as they saw the officer walking toward them from the other end of the immense room.

Later, she told Rod what she had experienced when she lapsed into unconsciousness.

First, she had had a call which she could not explain. This had made her warn Rod. "Yeekasoose" was, of course E'ikasuk, the real name of the "monkey" which he called A'gentur.

Then, as she felt herself swimming away into half-sleep with Rod's strong arm around her, she had heard trumpets playing, just two or three of them, playing different parts to the same intricate, lovely piece of music, sometimes in solos, sometimes together. If a human or robot telepath had peeped her mind while she listened to the music, the impression would have been that of a perceptive c'girl who had linked herself with one of the many telepathic entertainment channels which filled the space of Earth itself.

Last, there came the messages. They were not encoded in the music in any way whatever. The music caused the images to form in her mind because she was C'mell, herself, unique, individual. Particular fugues or even individual notes

reached into her memory and emotions, causing her mind to bring up old, half-forgotten associations. First she thought of "High birds flying..." as in the song which she had sung to Rod. Then she saw eyes, piercing eyes which blazed with knowledge while they stayed moist with humility. Then she smelled the strange odors of Downdeep-downdeep, the work-city where the under-people maintained the civilization on the surface and where some illegal underpeople lurked, overlooked by the authority of Man. Finally she saw Rod himself, striding off the deck with his loping Norstrilian walk. It added up simply. She was to bring Rod to the forgotten, forlorn, forbidden chambers of the Nameless One, and to do so promptly. The music in her head stopped, and she woke up.

The officer arrived.

He looked at them inquisitively and angrily. "This whole business is funny. The Acting Commissioner does not believe that there are any blue men. We've all heard of them. And yet we know somebody set off a telepathic emotion-bomb. That rage! Half the people in this room fell down when it went off.. Those weapons are completely prohibited for use inside the Earth's atmosphere."

He cocked his head at them.

C'mell remained prudently silent, Rod practiced looking thoroughly stupid, and A'gentur looked like a bright, helpless little monkey.

"Funnier still," said the officer. "The Acting Commissioner got orders to let you go. He got them while he was chewing me out. How does anybody know that you underpeople are here? Who are you, anyhow?"

He looked at them with curiosity for a minute, but then the curiosity faded with the pressure of his lifelong habits.

He snapped, "Who cares? Get along. Get out. You're underpeople and you're not allowed to stand in this room, anyhow."

He turned his back on them and walked away.

"Where are we going?" whispered Rod, hoping C'mell would say that he could go down to the surface and see Old Earth itself.

"Down to the bottom of the world, and then—" she bit her lip "... and then, much further down. I have instructions."

"Can't I take an hour and look at Earth?" asked Rod. "You stay with me, of course."

"When death is jumping around us like wild sparks? Of course not. Come along, Rod. You'll get your freedom some time soon, if somebody doesn't kill you first. Yeekasoose, you lead the way!"

They walked toward a dropshaft.

When Rod looked down it, the sight made him dizzy. Only the sight of people floating up and down in it made him realize that this was some Earth device which his people did not have in Old North Australia.

"Take a belt," said C'mell quietly. "Do it as though you were used to it.."

He looked around. Only after she had taken a canvas belt, about fifteen centimeters wide, and was cinching it to her waist, did he see what she meant. He took one too and put it on. They waited while A'gentur ran up and down the racks of belts, looking for one small enough to fit him. C'mell finally helped him by taking one of normal size and looping it around his waist twice before she hooked it.

"Magnetic," she murmured. "For the dropshafts."

They did not take the main dropshaft.

"That's for people only," said C'mell.

The underpeople dropshaft was the same, except that it did not have the bright lights, the pumping of fresh air, the labelling of the levels, and the entertaining pictures to divert the passengers as they went up and down. This dropshaft, moreover, seemed to have more cargo than people in it. Huge boxes, bales, bits of machines, furniture and inexplicable bundles, each tied with magnetic belts and each guided by an underperson, floated up and down in the mysterious ever busy traffic of Old Earth.

## *DISCOURSES AND RECOURSES*

Rod McBan, disguised as a cat, floated down the dropshaft to the strangest encounter which could have befallen any man of his epoch. C'mell floated down beside him. She clenched her skirt between her knees, so that it would not commit immodesties. A'gentur, his monkey hand lightly on C'mell's shoulder, loved her soft red hair as it stood and moved with the up-draft which they themselves created; he looked forward to becoming E'ikasuk again and he admired C'mell deeply, but love between the different strains of underpeople was necessarily platonic. Physiologically they could not breed outside their own stock and emotionally they found it hard to mesh deeply with the empathic needs of another form of life, however related it might be. E'ikasuk therefore very truly and deeply wanted C'mell for his friend, and nothing more. While they moved downward in relative peace, other people were concerned about them on various worlds.

## **OLD NORTH AUSTRALIA, ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES OF THE COMMONWEALTH, THE SAME DAY**

"You, former Hon. Sec. of this government, are charged with going outside the limits of your onseckish duties and of attempting to commit mayhem or murder upon the person of one of Her Absent Majesty's subjects, the said subject being Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one-hundred-and-fifty-first generation; and you are further charged with the abuse of an official instrument of this Commonwealth government in designing and encompassing the said unlawful purpose, to wit, one mutated sparrow, serial number 0919487, specialty number 2328525, weighing forty-one kilograms and having a monetary value of 685 minicredits. What say you?"

Houghton Syme CXLIX buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

## **THE CABIN OF THE STATION OF DOOM, AT THE SAME TIME**

"Aunt Doris, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead. I feel it."

"Nonsense, Lavinia. He may be in trouble and we might not know. But with all that money, the government or the Instrumentality would use the Big Blink to send word of the change in status of this property. I don't mean to sound cold-hearted, girl, but when there is this much property at stake, people act rapidly."

"He is so dead."

Doris was not one to discount the telepathic arts. She remembered how the Australians had gotten off the incarnate fury of Paradise VII. She went over to the cupboard and took from it a strangely tinted jar. "Do you know what this is?" said she to Lavinia.

The girl forced a smile past her desperate inward feelings. "Yes," she said. "Ever since I was no bigger than a mini-elephant, people have told me that jar was 'do not touch.'"

"Good girl, then, if you haven't touched it!" said Aunt Doris drily. "It's a mixture of stroon and Paradise VII honey."

"Honey," cried Lavinia. "I thought no one ever went back to that horrible place."

"Some do," said Lavinia. "It seems that some Earth forms have taken over and are still living there. Including bees. The honey has powers on the human mind. It is a strong hypnotic. We mix it with stroon to make sure it is safe."

Aunt Doris put a small spoon into the jar, lifted, spun the spoon to pick up the threads of heavy honey, and handed the spoon to Lavinia. "Here," said she, "take this and lick it off. Swallow it all down."

Lavinia hesitated and then obeyed. When the spoon was clean she licked her lips and handed the clean spoon back to Aunt Doris, who put it aside for washing up.

Aunt Doris ceremoniously put the jar back on the high shelf of the cupboard, locked the cupboard, and put the key in the pocket of her apron.

"Let's sit outside," said she to Lavinia.

"When's it going to happen?"

"The trance—the visions—whatever this stuff brings on?"

Doris laughed her weary rational laugh. "Oh, that! Sometimes nothing at all happens. In any event, it won't hurt you, girl. Let's sit on the bench. I'll tell you if you start looking strange to me."

They sat on the bench, doing nothing. Two police ornithopters, flying just under the forever grey clouds, quietly watched the station of Doom. They had been doing this ever since Rod's computer showed him how to win all that money: the fortune was still piling up, almost faster than it could be computed. The bird-engines were lazy and beautiful as they flew. The operators had synchronized the flapping of the two sets of wings, so that they looked like rukhs doing a ballet. The effect caught the eyes of both Lavinia and Aunt Doris.

Lavinia suddenly spoke in a clear, sharp, demanding voice, quite unlike her usual tone: "It's all mine, isn't it?"

Doris breathed softly, "What, my dear?"

"The Station of Doom. I'm one of the heiresses, anyhow, aren't I?" Lavinia pursed her lips in a proud prim smug smile which would have humiliated her if she had been in her right mind.

Aunt Doris said nothing. She nodded silently.

"If I marry Rod I'll be Missus and Owner McBan, the richest woman who ever lived. But if I do marry him, he'll hate me, because he'll think it's for his money and his power. But I've loved Rod, loved him specially because he couldn't heire or spiek. I've always known that he would need me someday, not like my Daddy, singing his crazy sad proud songs forever and ever! But how can I marry him now...?"

Whispered Doris, very gently, very insinuatingly: "Look for Rod, my dear.. Look for Rod in that part of your mind which thought he was dead. Look for Rod, Lavinia, look for Rod."

Lavinia laughed happily, and it was the laugh of a small child.

She stared at her feet, at the sky, at Doris—looking right through her.

Her eyes seemed to clear. When she spoke, it was in her normal adult voice:

"I see Rod, Someone has changed him into a cat man, just like the pictures we've seen of underpeople. And there's a girl with him—a girl, Doris—and I can't be jealous of him being with her. She is the most beautiful thing that ever lived on any world. You ought to see her hair, Doris. You ought to see her hair. It is like a



bushel of beautiful fire. Is that Rod? I don't know. I can't tell. I can't see." She sat on the bench, looking straight at Doris and seeing nothing, but weeping copiously.

Aunt Doris started to get up; it was about time for the poor thing to be led to her bed, so that she could sleep off the hypnotic of Paradise VII.

But Lavinia spoke again, "I see them too."

"Who?" said Aunt Doris, not much interested, now that they had found their information about Rod. Doris never mentioned the matter to any masculine person, but she was a deeply superstitious person who found great satisfaction in tampering with the preternatural, but even in these ventures she kept the turn of mind, essentially practical, which had characterized her whole life. Thus, when Lavinia, stumbled on the greatest secret of the contemporary universe, she made no note of it. She told no one about it, then or later.

Lavinia insisted, "I see the proud pale people with strong hands and white eyes. The ones who built the palace of the Governor of Night."

"That's nice," said Aunt Doris, "but it is time for your nap..."

"Goodbye, dear people..." said Lavinia, a little drunkenly.

She had glimpsed the Daimoni in her home world.

Aunt Doris, unheeding, stood up and took Lavinia's arm, leading her away to rest. Nothing remained of the Daimoni, except for a little song which Lavinia found herself making up a few weeks later, not knowing whether she had dreamed some such thing or had read it in a book:

*Oh, you will see, you will see  
Them striding fair, oh fair and free!  
Down garden paths of silver grass  
Past flowing rivers,  
Their hair pushed back By fingers of the wind.*

*And you will know them  
By their blank white faces,  
Expressionless, removed,  
All lines smoothed,  
And only the pearl eyes glowing  
As they stride on in the night  
Toward their unimaginable goals...*

Thus came news of Rod, unreported, unrepeatable; thus passed the glimpse of the Daimoni in their star-hidden home.

## **AT THE BEACH OF MEEYA MEEFLA, THE SAME DAY**

"Father, you can't be here. You never come here!"

"But I have," said Lord William Not-from-here. "And it's important." .

"Important?" laughed Ruth. "Then it's not me. I'm not important. Your work up there is." She looked toward the rim of the Earthport, which floated, distinct and circular, beyond the crests of some faraway clouds.

The overdressed lord squatted incongruously on the Sand.

"Listen, girl," said he slowly and emphatically, "I've never asked much of you but I am asking now."

"Yes, father," she said, a little frightened by this totally unaccustomed air: her father was usually playfully casual with her, and equally forgot her ten seconds after he got through talking to her.

"Ruth, you know we are Old North Australians?"

"We're rich, if that's what you mean. Not that it matters, the way things go."

"I'm not talking about riches now, I'm talking about home, and I mean it!"

"Home? We never had a home, father."

"Norstrilia!" he snarled at her.

"I never saw it, father. Nor did you. Nor your father. Nor great-grandpa.. What are you talking about?"

"We can go home again!"

"Father, what's happened? Have you lost your mind? You've always told me that our family bought out and could never go back. What's happened now? Have they changed the rules? I'm not even sure I want to go there, anyhow. No water, no beaches, no cities. Just a dry dull planet with sick sheep and a lot of immortal farmers who go around armed to the teeth!"

"Ruth, you can take us back!"

She jumped to her feet and slapped the sand off her bottom. She was a little taller than her father; though he was an extremely handsome, aristocratic-looking man, she was an even more distinctive person. It would be obvious to anyone that she would never lack for suitors or pursuers.

"All right, father. You always have schemes. Usually it's antique money. This time I'm mixed up with it somehow, or you wouldn't be here. Father, just what do you want me to do?"

"To marry. To marry the richest man who has ever been known in the universe."

"Is that all?" she laughed. "Of course I'll marry him. I've never married an offworlder before. Have you made a date with him?"

"You don't understand, Ruth. This isn't Earth marriage. In Norstrilian law and custom you marry only one man, you marry only once, and you stay married to him for as long as you live."

A cloud passed over the sun. The beach became cooler. She looked at her father with a funny mixture of sympathy, contempt, and curiosity.

"That," she said, "is a cat of another breed. I'll have to see him first..."

**THE ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE,  
TOP OF EARTHPORT,  
FOUR HOURS LATER**

"Don't tell me there's nothing Or make up stories about blue men. You go back to that top deck and take it apart, molecule by molecule, until you find out where that brainbomb went off!"

"But, sir-"

"Don't but me! I've been in battle and you haven't. I know a bomb when I feel one. The blasted thing still gives me a headache. Now you take your men back up to that top deck and find out where that bomb went off."

"Yes, sir," said the young subchief gloomily, never thinking for a moment that he would have the least success in his mission. He saluted dispiritedly.

When he met his men at the door, he gave them an almost imperceptible shake of his head. In consequence, he and his men were the sorriest collection of slouching scarecrows ever seen at Earthport as they trudged their weary way up the ramp to the top deck of Earthport.

**ANTECHAMBER OF THE BELL AND BANK,  
THE SAME TIME**

"We got the bull-man, B'dank, but somehow he escaped. Probably he is down in the sewers, hiding out. I haven't got the heart to send the police after him. He won't last long, down there. And it would make a fuss if I pardoned him. You might agree with me, but the rest of the Council wouldn't."

"And Commissioner Teadrinker, my lord? What are you going to do about him? That's sticky wicket, my lord. He's a former Lord of the Instrumentality.. We can't have people like that committing crimes." The Lady Johanna Gnade was emphatic.

"I have the punishment for him," said Jestocost, with a bland smile.

"Oblivion and reconditioning?" said the Lady Johanna. "He's basically talented material."

"Nothing that simple."

"What, my lord?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, 'nothing,' Jestocost? It does not make sense." The Lady Johanna let a rare note of petulance come into her voice.

"I meant what I said, my lady. Nothing. He knows that I know something. The spider is dead. The robot is demolished. Nine other Rod McBans are causing a bit of chaos in the lower city. But Teadrinker doesn't know that I know everything. I have my own sources."

"We know you pride yourself on that," said the Lady Johanna, with a charming wry smile. "We also know that you like to keep individual secrets from the rest of us. We put up with it, my lord, because we love you and trust you, but it could be a very dangerous practice if it were carried out by other persons, less judicious than you, or less skilful. And it could even be dangerous if—" She hesitated, looked at him appraisingly, and then went on, "—if, my lord, you lost your shrewdness, or died suddenly."

"I haven't," said he crisply, dismissing the subject.

"You haven't told me what you are going to do with Teadrinker."

"Nothing, I said," said Jestocost a little crossly. "I'm going to do nothing at all and let him wait for me to bring destruction down on him. If he begins to think that I have forgotten, I will find some little way of reminding him that somebody or something is on his trail. Teadrinker is going to be a very unhappy man before I get through with him."

"That sounds inhumane, my lord. He might appeal."

"And be tried for murder?"

She gave up. "Your ways are new, my lord. You have seen your way into the Rediscovery of Man. Letting people suffer. Letting things go wrong. I was brought up on the old philosophy—if you see wrong, right it."

"And I saw," said Jestocost, "that we were dying of perfection."

"I suppose you're right," said she wearily. "You have this rich man covered, I suppose?"

"As well as I can manage," said Jestocost.

"That's perfect, then," said she with an air of finality. "I just hope you haven't gotten him mixed up with that queer hobby of yours."

"Queer hobby?" said Jestocost in a courtly fashion, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Underpeople," she said with a tone of disgust. "Underpeople. I like you, Jestocost, but your fussing about those animals sometimes makes me sick."

He did not argue. He stood very still and looked at her. She knew he was avoiding a provocation. He was her senior, so she offered him a very slight curtsy and left the room.

## **ANTECHAMBER OF THE BELL AND BANK, TEN MINUTES LATER**

A bear-woman, complete with starched cap and nurse's uniform, pushed the wheelchair of the Lord Crudelta into the room. Jestocost looked up from the situation shows which he had been watching. When he saw who it was, he offered Crudelta a deep bow indeed. The bear-woman, flustered by this famous place and all the great dignitaries whom she was meeting, spoke up in a singularly high voice,

"My lord and master Crudelta, may I leave you here?"

"Yes. Go. I will call for you later. Go to the bathroom on your way out. It's on the right."

"My lord—!" she gasped with embarrassment.

"You wouldnt have dared if I hadn't told you. I've been watching your mind for the last half-hour. Now go along."

The bear-woman fled with a rustle of her starched skirts.

When Crudelta looked directly at him, Jestocost gave him a very deep bow.. In lif ting his eyes he looked directly into the face of the old, old man and said, with something near pride in his voice,

"Still up to your old tricks, my lord and colleague Crudelta!"

"And you to yours, Jestocost. How are you going to get that boy out of the sewers?"

"What boy? What sewers?"

"Our sewers. The boy you sold this tower to."

For once, Jestocost was flabbergasted. His jaw dropped. Then he collected himself and said, "You're a knowledgeable man, my lord Crudelta."

"That I am," said Crudelta, "and a thousand years older than you, to boot. That was my reward for coming back from the Nothing-at-all."

"I know that, sir." Jestocost's full, pleasant face did not show worry, but he studied the old man across from him with extreme care. In his prime, the Lord Crudelta had been the greatest of the Lords of the Instrumentality, a telepath of whom the other lords were always a little afraid, because he picked minds so deftly and quickly that he was the best mental pickpocket who had ever lived. A strong conservative, he had never opposed a specific policy because it ran counter to his general appetites. He had, for example, carried the vote for the Rediscovery of Man by coming put of retirement and tongue-lashing the whole Council into a corner with his vehement support for reform. Jestocost had never liked him—who could like a rapier tongue, a mind of unfathomable brilliance, a cold old ego which neither offered nor asked companionship? Jestocost knew that if the old man had caught on to the Rod McBAn adventure, he might be on the trail of Jestocost's earlier deal with —no, no, no! don't think it here, not with those eyes watching.

"I know about that, too," said the old old man.

"What?"

"The secret you are trying most of all to hide."

Jestocost stood submissive, waiting for the blow to fall.

The old man laughed. Most people would have expected a cackle from that handsome fresh young face with the withered spidery body. They would have been fooled. The laugh was full-bodied, genuine and warm.

"Redlady's a fool," said Crudelta.

"I think so too," said Jestocost, "but what are your reasons, my lord and master?"

"Sending that young man off his own planet when he has so much wealth and so little experience."

Jestocost nodded, not wanting to say anything until the old man had made his line of attack plain.

"I like your idea, however," said the Lord Crudelta. "Sell him the Earth and then tax him for it. But what is your ultimate aim? Making him Emperor of the Planet Earth, in the old style? Murdering him? Driving him mad? Having the cat-girl of yours seduce him and then send him home a bankrupt? I admit I have thought of all these too, but I didn't see how any of them would fit in with your passion for justice. But there's one thing you can't do, Jestocost. You can't sell him the planet Earth and then have him stay here and manage it. He might want to use this tower for his residence. That would be too much. I am too old to move out. And he mustn't roll up that ocean out there and take it home for a souvenir. You've all been very clever, my lord—clever enough to be fools. You have created an unnecessary crisis. What are you going to get out of it?"

Jestocost plunged. The old man must have picked his own mind. Nowhere else could he have put all the threads of the case together. Jestocost decided on the truth and the whole truth. He started with the day that the Big Blink rang in the enormous transactions in stroon futures, financial gambles which soon reached out of the commodity markets of Old North Australia and began to unbalance the economy of all the civilized worlds. He started to explain who Redlady was—

"Don't tell me that," cried the Lord Crudelta. "It was I who caught him, sentenced him to death, and then argued to have the sentence set aside. He's not a bad man, but he's a sly one, that he is. He's smart enough to be an utter and complete fool when he gets wound up in his logical plots. I'll wager you a minicredit to a credit that he has already murdered somebody by now. He always does. He has a taste for theatrical violence. But go back to your story. Tell me what you plan to do. If I like it, I will help you. If I don't like it, I will have the whole story before a plenum of the council this very morning, and you know that they will tear your bright idea to shreds. They will probably seize the boy's property, send

him to a hospital, and have him come out speaking Basque as a flamenco player. You know as well as I do that the Instrumentality is very generous with other people's property, but pretty ruthless when it comes to any threat directed against itself. After all, I was one of the men who wiped out Raumsog."

Jestocost began to talk very quietly, very calmly. He spoke with the assurance of an accountant who, books in order, is explaining an intricate point to his manager. Old himself, he was a child compared to the antiquity and wisdom of the Lord Crudelta. He went into details, including the ultimate disposition of Rod McBan. He even shared with the Lord Crudelta his sympathies for the underpeople and his own very secret, very quiet struggle to improve their position. The only thing which he did not mention was the Ee'telekeli and the counter-brain which the underpeople had set up in Downdeep-downdeep. If the old man knew it, he knew it, and Jestocost couldn't stop him, but if he did not know it, there was no point in telling him.

The Lord Crudelta did not respond with senile enthusiasm or childish laughter. He reverted, not to his childhood but to his maturity; with great dignity and force he said:

"I approve. I understand. You have my proxy if you need it. Call that nurse to come and get me. I thought you were a clever fool, Jestocost. You sometimes are. This time you are showing that you have a heart as well as a head. One thing more. Bring that doctor Vomact back from Mars soon, and don't torment Teadrinker too long, just for the sake of being clever. I might take it into my mind to torment you."

"And the ex-Lord Redlady?" asked Jestocost deferentially.

"Him, nothing. Nothing. Let him live his life. The Old North Australians might as well cut their political teeth on him."

The bear-woman rustled back into the room. The lord Crudelta waved his hand. Jestocost bowed almost to the floor, and the wheelchair, heavy as a tank, creaked its way across the doorsill.

"That," said Jestocost, "could have been trouble!" He wiped his brow.

## *THE ROAD TO THE CATMASTER*

Rod, C'mell and A'gentur had had to hold the sides of the shaft several times as the traffic became heavy and large loads, going up or down, had to pass each other and them too. In one of these waits C'mell caught her breath and said something very swiftly to the little monkey. Rod, not heeding them, caught nothing but the sudden enthusiasm and happiness in her voice. The monkey's murmured answer made her plaintive and she insisted,

"But Yeekasoose, you must! Rod's whole life could depend on it. Not just saving his life now, but having a better life for hundreds and hundreds of years."

The monkey was cross: "Don't ask me to think when I am hungry. This fast metabolism and small body just isn't enough to support real thinking."

"If it's food you want, have some raisins." She took a square of compressed seedless raisins out of one of her matching bags.

A'gentur ate them greedily but gloomily.

Rod's attention drifted away from them as he saw magnificent golden furniture, elaborately carved and inlaid with a pearlescent material, being piloted up the shaft by a whole troop of talkative dog men. He asked them where the furniture was going. When they did not answer him, he repeated his question in a more peremptory tone of voice, as befitted the richest Old North Australian in the universe. The tone of demand brought answers, but they were not the ones he was expecting. "Meow," said one dog-man, "shut up, cat, or I'll chase you up a tree."

"Not to your house, buster. Exactly what do you think you are—people?"

"Cats are always nosy. Look at that one." The dog-foreman rose into sight; with dignity and kindness he said to Rod, "Cat fellow, if you feel like talking, you may get marked surplus. Better keep quiet in the public dropshaft!" Rod realized that to these beings he was one of them, a cat made into a man, and that the underpeople workmen who served Old Earth had been trained not to chatter while working on the business of Man.

He caught the tail of C'mell's urgent whisper to A'gentur: "... and don't ask him. Tell Him. We'll risk the people zone for a visit to the Catmaster! Tell Him."

A'gentur was panting with a rapid, shallow breath. His eyes seemed to protrude from their sockets and yet he was looking at nothing. He groaned as though with some inward effort. At last he lost his grip on the wall and would have floated slowly downward if C'mell had not caught him and cuddled him like a baby. C'mell whispered, eagerly,

"You reached Him?"

"Him," gasped the little monkey.

"Who?" asked Rod.

"Aitch Eye," said C'mell. "I'll tell you later." Of A'gentur she asked, "If you got Him, what did He say?"

"He said, 'E'ikusus, I do not say no. You are my son. Take the risk if you think it wise.' And don't ask me now, C'mell. Let me think a little. I have been all the way to Norstrilia and back. I'm still cramped in this little body. Do we have to do it now? Right now? Why can't we go to Him—" and A'gentur nodded toward the depths below,— "and find out what we want Rod for, anyhow? Rod is a means, not an end. Who really knows what to do with him?"



"What are you talking about?" said Rod.

Simultaneously C'mell snapped, "I know what we are going to do with him."

"What?" said the little monkey, very tired again.

"We're going to let this boy go free, and let him find happiness, and if he wants to give us his help, we will take it and be grateful. But we are not going to rob him. Not going to hurt him. That would be a mean, dirty way to start being better creatures than we are. If he knows who he is before he meets Him, they can make sense." She turned to Rod and said with mysterious urgency,

"Don't you want to know who you are?"

"I'm Rod McBan to the hundred and fifty-first," said he promptly.

"Sh-h-h," said she, "no names here. I'm not talking about names. I'm talking about the deep insides of you. Life itself, as it flows through you. Do you have any idea who you are?"

"You're playing games," he said. "I know perfectly well who I am, and where I live, and what I have. I even know that right now I am supposed to be a cat-man named C'roderick. What else is there to know?"

"You men!" she sobbed at him, "You men! Even when you're people, you're so dense that you can't understand a simple question. I'm not asking you your name or your address or your label or your greatgrandfather's property. I'm asking about you, Rod, the only one that will ever live, no matter how many numbers your grandsons may put after their names. You're not in the world just to own a piece of property or to handle a surname with a number after it. You're you. There's never been another you. There will never be another one, after you. What does this 'you' want?"

Rod glanced down at the walls of the tunnel, which seemed to turn—oh, so far below—very gently to the North. He looked up at the little rhomboids of light cast on the tunnel walls by the landing doors into the various levels of Earthport. He felt his own weight tugging gently at his hand as he held to the rough surface of the vertical shaft, supported by his belt. The belt itself felt uncomfortable about his middle; after all, it was supporting most of his weight, and it squeezed him. What do I want? thought he. Who am I that I should have a right to want anything? I am Rod McBan CLI, the Mister and Owner of the Station of Doom. But I'm also a poor freak with bad telepathy who can't even spiek or heire rightly.

C'mell was watching him as clinically as a surgeon, but he could tell from her expression that she was not trying to peep his mind.

He found himself speaking almost as wearily as had A'gentur, who was also called something like "Yeekasoose," and who had strange powers for a little monkey:

"I don't suppose I want anything much, C'mell, except that I should like to spiek and heire correctly, like other people on my native world."

She looked at him, her expression showing intense sympathy and the effort to make a decision.

A'gentur interrupted with his high clear monkey voice, "Say that to me, Sir and Master."

Rod repeated: "I don't really want anything. I would like to spiek and heire because other people are fussing at me about it. And I would like to get a Cape of Good Hope twopenny triangular blue stamp while I am still on Earth. But that's about all. I guess there's nothing I really want."

The monkey closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep again: Rod suspected it was some kind of telepathic trance.

C'mell hooked A'gentur on an old rod which protruded from the surface of the shaft. Since he weighed only a few grams, there was no noticeable pull on the belt. She seized Rod's shoulder and pulled him over to her.

"Rod, listen! Do you want to know who you are?"

"I don't know," said he. "I might be miserable."

"Not if you know who you are!" she insisted.

"I might not like me," said Rod. "Other people don't and my parents died together when their ship went milky out in space. I'm not normal."

"For God's sake, Rod!" she cried.

"Who?" said he.

"Forgive me, father," said she, speaking to no one in sight.

"I've heard that name, before, somewhere," said Rod. "But let's get going. I want to get to this mysterious place you are taking me and then I want to find out about Eleanor."

"Who's that?"

"My servant. She's disguised as me, taking risks for me, along with eight robots. It's up to me to do what I can for her. Always."

"But she's your servant," said C'mell. "She serves you. Almost like being an underperson, like me."

"She's a person," said Rod, stubbornly. "We have no underpeople in Norstrilia, except for a few in government jobs. But she's my friend."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"Great sick sheep, girl! Are you barmy? No!"

"Do you want to marry anybody?"

"At sixteen?" he cried. "Anyhow, my family will arrange it." The thought of plain honest devoted Lavinia crossed his mind, and he could not help comparing her to this wild voluptuous creature who floated beside him in the tunnel as the traffic

passed them going up and down. With near weightlessness, C'mell's hair floated like a magic flower around her head. She had been brushing it out of her eyes from time to time. He snorted, "Not Eleanor."

When he said this, another idea crossed the mind of the beautiful cat-girl.

"You know what I am, Rod," said she, very seriously.

"A cat-girl from the planet Earth. You're supposed to be my wife."

"That's right," she said, with an odd intonation in her voice. "Be it, then!"

"What?" said Rod.

"My husband," she said, her voice catching slightly. "Be my husband, if it will help you to find you."

She stole a quick glance up and down the shaft. There was nobody near.

"Look, Rod, look!" She spread the opening of her dress down and aside. Even with the poor light, to which his eyes had become accustomed, he could see the fine tracery of veins in her delicate chest and her young, pear-shaped breasts. The aureoles around the nipples were a clear, sweet, innocent pink; the nipples themselves were as pretty as two pieces of candy.. For a moment there was pleasure and then a terrible embarrassment came over him. He turned his face away and felt horribly self-conscious. What she had done was interesting but it wasn't nice.

When he dared to glance at her, she was still studying his face.

"I'm a girlygirl, Rod. This is my business. And you're a cat, with all the rights of a tomcat. Nobody can tell the difference, here in this tunnel. Rod, do you want to do anything?"

Rod gulped and said nothing.

She swept her clothing back into place. The strange urgency left her voice. "I guess," she said, "that that left me a little breathless. I find you pretty attractive, Rod. I find myself thinking, 'what a pity he is not a cat.' I'm over it now."

Rod said nothing.

A bubble of laughter came into her voice, along with something mothering and tender, which tugged at his heartstrings. "Best of all, Rod, I didn't mean it. Or maybe I did. I had to give you a chance before I felt that I really knew you. Rod, I'm one of the most beautiful girls on Old Earth itself.. The Instrumentality uses me for that very reason. We've turned you into a cat and offered you me, and you won't have me. Doesn't that suggest that you don't know who you are?"

"Are you back on that?" said Rod. "I guess I just don't understand girls.."

"You'd better, before you're through with Earth," she said. "Your agents have bought a million of them for you, out of all that stroon money."

"People or underpeople?"

"Both!"

"Let them bug sheep!" he cried. "I had no part in ordering them. Come on, girl. This is no place for a boudoir conversation!"

"Where on Earth did you learn that word?" she laughed.

"I read books. Lots of books. I may look like a peasant to you Earth people, but I know a lot of things."

"Do you trust me, Rod?"

He thought of her immodesty, which still left him a little breathless. The Old North Australian humor reasserted itself in him, as a cultural characteristic and not just as an individual one: "I've seen a lot of you, C'mell," said he with a grin. "I suppose you don't have many surprises left. All right, I trust you. Then what?"

She studied him closely.

"I'll tell you what E'ikasuk and I were discussing."

"Who?"

"Him." She nodded at the little monkey.

"I thought his name was A'gentur."

"Like yours is C'rod!" she said.

"He's not a monkey?" asked Rod.

She looked around and lowered her voice. "He's a bird," she said solemnly, "and he's the second most important bird on Earth."

"So what?" said Rod.

"He's in charge of your destiny, Rod. Your life or your death. Right now.."

"I thought," he whispered back, "that that was up to the Lord Redlady and somebody named Jestocost on Earth."

"You're dealing with other powers, Rod—powers which keep themselves secret. They want to be friends with you. And I think," she added in a complete non sequitur, "that we'd better take the risk and go."

He looked blank and she added,

"To the Catmaster."

"They'll do something to me there."

"Yes," she said. Her face was calm, friendly, and even. "You will die, maybe—but not much chance. Or you might go mad—there's always the possibility. Or you will find all the things you want—that's the likeliest of all. I have been there, Rod. I myself have been there. Don't you think that I look like a happy, busy girl, when you consider that I'm really just an animal with a rather low-down job?"

Rod studied her, "How old are you?"

"Thirty next year," she said, inflexibly.

"For the first time?"

"For us animal-people there is no second time, Rod. I thought you knew that."

He returned her gaze. "If you can take it," said he, "I can too. Let's go."

She lifted A'gentur or E'ikasuk, depending on which he really was, off the wall, where he had been sleeping like a marionette between plays. He opened his exhausted little eyes and blinked at her.

"You have given us our orders," said C'mell. "We are going to the Department Store."

"I have," he said, crossly, coming much more awake. "I don't remember it!"

She laughed, "Just through me, E'ikasuk!"

"That name!" he hissed. "Don't get foolhardy. Not in a public shaft."

"All right, A'gentur," she responded, "but do you approve?"

"Of the decision?"

She nodded.

The little monkey looked at both of them. He spoke to Rod, "If she gambles her life and yours, not to mention mine—if she takes chances to make you much, much happier, are you willing to come along?"

Rod nodded in silent agreement.

"Let's go, then," said the monkey-surgeon.

"Where are we going?" asked Rod.

"Down into Earthport City. Among all the people. Swarms and swarms of them," said C'mell, "and you will get to see the everyday life of Earth, just the way that you asked at the top of the tower, an hour ago."

"A year ago, you mean," said Rod. "So much has happened!" He thought of her young naked breasts and the impulse which had made her show them to him, but the thought did not make him excited or guilty; he felt friendly, because he sensed in their whole relationship a friendliness much more fervent than sex itself.

"We are going to a store," said the sleepy monkey.

"A commissary. For things? What for?"

"It has a nice name," said C'mell, "and it is run by a wonderful person. The Catmaster himself. Five hundred some years old, and still allowed to live by virtue of the legacy of the Lady Coroke."

"Never heard of her," said Rod. "What's the name?"

"The Department Store of Heart's Desires," said C'mell and E'ikasuk simultaneously.

The trip was a vivid, quick dream. They had only a few hundred meters to fall before they reached ground level.

They came out on the people-street. A robot-policeman watched them from a corner.

Human beings in the costumes of a hundred historical periods were walking around in the warm, wet air of Earth. Rod could not smell as much salt in the air as he had smelled at the top of the tower, but down here in the city it smelled of more people than he had ever even imagined in one place. Thousands of individuals? hundreds, and thousands of different kinds of foods, the odors of robots, of underpeople and of other things which seemed to be unmodified animals.

"This is the most interesting-smelling place I have ever been," said he to C'mell.

She glanced at him idly. "That's nice. You can smell like a dog-man. Most of the real people I have known couldn't smell their own feet. Come on though, C'roderick—remember who you are! If we're not tagged and licensed for the surface, we'll get stopped by that policeman in one minute or less."

She carried E'ikasuk and steered Rod with a pressure on his elbow. They came to a ramp which led to an underground passage, well illuminated. Machines, robots and underpeople were hurrying back and forth along it, busy with the commerce of Earth.

Rod would have been completely lost if he had been without C'mell. Though his miraculous broadband hiering, which had so often surprised him at home, had not returned during his few hours on Old Earth, his other senses gave him a suffocating awareness of the huge number of people around him and above him. (He never realized that there were times, long gone, when the cities of Earth had populations which reached the tens of millions; to him, several hundred thousand people, and a comparable number of underpeople, was a crowd almost beyond all measure.) The sounds and smells of underpeople were subtly different from those of people; some of the machines of Earth were bigger and older than anything which he had previously imagined; and above all, the circulation of water in immense volumes, millions upon millions of gallons, for the multiple purposes of Earthport—sanitation, cooling, drinking, industrial purposes—made him feel that he was not among a few buildings, which he would have called a city in Old North Australia, but that he himself had become a blood-cell thrusting through the circulatory system of some enormous composite animal, the nature of which he imperfectly understood. This city was alive with a sticky, wet, complicated aliveness which he had hitherto not even imagined to be possible. Movement characterized it. He suspected that the movement went on by night and day, that there was no real cessation to it, that the great pumps thrust water through feeder pipes and drains whether people were awake or not, that the brains of this organization could be no one place, but had to comprise many sub-brains, each committed and responsible for its particular tasks. No wonder underpeople were needed! It would be boredom

and pain, even with perfected automation, to have enough human supervisors to reconnect the various systems if they had breakdowns inside themselves or at their interconnections. Old North Australia had vitality, but it was the vitality of open fields, few people, immense wealth, and perpetual military danger; this was the vitality of the cesspool of the compost heap, but the rotting, blooming, growing components were not waste material but human beings and near-human beings. No wonder that his forefathers had fled the cities as they had been. They must have been solid plague to free men. And even Old Original Australia, somewhere here on Earth, had lost its openness and freedom in order to become the single giant city-complex of Aojou Nambien. It must, Rod thought with horror, have been a thousand times the size of this city of Earthport, (He was wrong, because it was one hundred fifty thousand times the size of Earthport before it died. Earthport had only about two hundred thousand permanent residents when Rod visited it, with an additional number walking in from the nearer suburbs, the outer suburbs still being ruined and abandoned, but Australia—under the name of Aojou Nambien—had reached a population of thirty billion before it died, and before the Wild Ones and the Menschenjager had set to work killing off the survivors.)

Rod was bewildered, but C'mell was not.

She had put A'gentur down, over his whined monkey-like protest. He trotted unwillingly beside them.

With the impudent knowledgeability of a true city girl, she had led them to a cross-walk from which a continuous whistling roar came forth. By writing, by picture, and by loudspeaker, the warning system repeated: KEEP OFF, FREIGHT ONLY, DANGER, KEEP OFF. She had snatched up A'gentur-E'ikasus, grabbed Rod by the arm, and jumped with them on a series of rapidly moving airborne platforms. Rod, startled by the suddenness in which they had found the trackway, shouted to ask what it was:

"Freight? What's that?"

"Things. Boxes. Foods. This is the Central Trackway. No sense in walking six kilometers when we can get this. Be ready to jump off with me when I give you the sign!"

"It feels dangerous," he said.

"It isn't," she said, "not if you're a cat."

With this somewhat equivocal reassurance, she let them ride. A'gentur could not care less. He cuddled his head against her shoulder, wrapped his long, gibbon-like arms around her upper arm and went soundly to sleep.

C'mell nodded at Rod.

"Soon now!" she called, judging then: distance by landmarks which he found meaningless. The landing points had flat, concrete-lined area where the individual flat cars, rushing along on then: river of air, could be shunted suddenly to the side

for loading or unloading. Each of these landing areas had a number, but Rod had not even noticed at what point they had gotten on. The smells of the underground city changed so much as they moved from one district to another that he was more interested in odors than in the numbers on the platforms.

She pinched his upper arm very sharply as a sign that he should get ready.

They jumped.

He staggered across the platform until he caught himself up against a large vertical crate marked Algonquin Paper Works—Credit Slips, Miniature—2mm. C'mell landed as gracefully as if she had been acting a rehearsed piece of acrobatics. The little monkey on her shoulder stared with wide bright eyes.

"This," said the monkey A'gentur-E'ikasuk firmly and contemptuously, "is where all the people play at working. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and my body sugar is low." He curled himself tight against C'mell's shoulder, closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

"He has a point," said Rod. "Could we eat?"

C'mell started to nod and then caught herself short—

"You're a cat."

He nodded. Then he grinned. "I'm hungry, anyhow. And I need a sandbox."

"Sandbox?" she asked puzzled.

"An awef," he said very clearly, using the Old North Australian term.

"Awef?"

It was his turn to get embarrassed. He said it in full: "An animal waste evacuation facility."

"You mean a johnny," she cried. She thought a minute and then said, "Fooey."

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Each kind of underpeople has to use its own. It's death if you don't use one and it's death if you use the wrong one. The cat one is four stations back on this underground trackway. Or we can walk back on the surface. It would only be a half hour."

He said something rude to Earth. She wrinkled her brow.

"All I said was, 'Earth is a large healthy sheep.' That's not so dirty." Her good humor returned.

Before she could ask him another question he held up a firm hand. "I am not going to waste a half hour. You wait here." He had seen the universal sign for "men's room" at the upper level of the platform. Before she could stop him he had gone into it. She caught her hand up to her mouth, knowing that the robot police



would kill him on sight if they found him in the wrong place. It would be such a ghastly joke if the man who owned the Earth were to die in the wrong toilet.

As quick as thought she followed him, stopping just outside the door to the men's room. She dared not go in; she trusted that the place was empty when Rod entered it, because she had heard no boom of a slow, heavy bullet, none of the crisp buzzing of a burner. Robots did not use toilets, so they went in only when they were investigating something. She was prepared to distract any man living if he tried to enter that toilet, by offering him the combination of an immediate seduction or a complimentary and unwanted monkey.

A'gentur had waked up.

"Don't bother," he said. "I called my father. Anything approaching that door will fall asleep."

An ordinary man, rather tired and worried-looking, headed for the men's room. C'mell was prepared to stop him at any cost, but she remembered what A'gentur-E'ikasuk had told her, so she waited. The man reeled as he neared them. He stared at them, saw that they were underpeople, looked on through them as though they were not there. He took two more steps toward the door and suddenly reached out his hands as if he were going blind. He walked into the wall two meters from the door, touched it firmly and blindly with his hands, and crumpled gently to the floor, where he lay snoring.

"My dad's good," said A'gentur-E'ikasuk. "He usually leaves real people alone, but when he must get them, he gets them. He even gave that man the distinct memory that he mistakenly took a sleeping pill when he was reaching for a pain-killer. When the human wakes up, he will feel foolish and will tell no one of his experience."

Rod came out of the ever-so-dangerous doorway. He grinned at them boyishly and did not notice the crumpled man lying beside the wall. "That was easier than turning back, and nobody noticed me at all. See, I saved you a lot of trouble, C'mell!"

He was so proud of his foolhardy adventure that she did not have the heart to blame him. He smiled widely, his cat-whiskers tipping as he did so. For a moment, just a moment, she forgot that he was an important person and a real man to boot: he was a boy, and mighty like a cat, but all boy in his satisfaction, his wanton bravery, his passing happiness with vainglory. For a second or two she loved him. Then she thought of the terrible hours ahead, and of how he would go home, rich and scornful, to his all-people planet. The moment of love passed but she still liked him very much.

"Come along, young fellow. You can eat. You are going to eat cat food since you are C'roderick, but it's not so bad."

He frowned. "What is it? Do you have fish here? I tasted fish one time. A neighbor bought one. He traded two horses for it. It was delicious."

"He wants fish," she cried to E'ikasuk.

"Give him a whole tuna for himself," grumbled the monkey. "My blood sugar is still low. I need some pineapple."

C'mell did not argue. She stayed underground and led them into a hall which had a picture of dogs, cats, cattle, pigs, bears, and snakes above the door; that indicated the kinds of people who would be served there. Eikasuk scowled at the sign but he rode C'mell's shoulder in.

"This gentleman," said C'mell, speaking pleasantly to an old bear-man who was scratching his belly and smoking a pipe, all at the same time, "has forgotten his credits."

"No food," said the bear-man. "Rules. He can drink water, though."

"I'll pay for him," said C'mell.

The bear-man yawned, "Are you sure that he won't pay you back? If he does, that is private trading and it is punished by death."

"I know the rules," said C'mell. "I've never been disciplined yet."

The bear looked her over critically. He took his pipe out of his mouth and whistled, "No," said he, "and I can see that you won't be. What are you, anyhow? A model?"

"A girlygirl," said C'mell.

The bear-man leapt from his stool with astonishing speed. "Cat-madame!" he cried, "A thousand pardons. You can have anything in the place. You come from the top of Earthport? You know the Lords of the Instrumentality personally? You would like a table roped off with curtains? Or should I just throw everybody else out of here and report to my Man that we have a famous, beautiful slave from the high places?"

"Nothing that drastic," said C'mell. "Just food."

"Wait a bit," said A'gentur-E'ikasuk, "if you're offering specials, I'll have two fresh pineapples, a quarter-kilo of ground fresh coconut, and a tenth of a kilo of live insect grubs."

The bear-man hesitated. "I was offering things to the cat-lady, who serves the mighty ones, not to you, monkey. But if the lady desires it, I will send for those things." He waited for C'mell's nod, got it, and pushed a button for a low-grade robot to come. He turned to Rod McBan, "And you, cat-gentleman, what would you like?"

Before Rod could speak, C'mell said, "He wants two sailfish steaks, fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, an order of ice cream and a large glass of orange juice."

The bear-man shuddered visibly. "I've been here for years and that is the most horrible lunch I ever ordered for a cat. I think I'll try it myself."

C'mell smiled the smile which had graced a thousand welcomes.

"I'll just help myself from the things you have on the counters. I'm not fussy."

He started to protest but she cut him short with a graceful but unmistakable wave of the hand. He gave up.

They sat at a table.

A'gentur-E'ikassus waited for his combination monkey and bird lunch. Rod saw an old robot, dressed in a prehistoric tuxedo jacket, ask a question of the bear-man, leave one tray at the door, and bring another tray to him. The robot whipped off a freshly starched napkin. There was the most beautiful lunch Rod McBan had ever seen. Even at a state banquet, the Old North Australians did not feed their guests like that.

Just as they were finishing, the bear-casliffr came to the table and asked,

"Your name, cat-madame? I will charge these lunches to the government."

"C'mell, servant to Teadrinker, subject to the Lord Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality."

The bear's face had been epilated, so that they could see him pale.

"C'mell," he whispered. "C'mell! Forgive me, my lady. I have never seen you before. You have blessed this place. You have blessed my life. You are the friend of all underpeople. Go in peace."

C'mell gave him the bow and smile which a reigning empress might give to an active Lord of the Instrumentality. She started to pick up the monkey but he scampered on ahead of her. Rod was puzzled. As the bear-man bowed him out, he asked, "C'mell. You are famous?"

"In a way," she said. "But only among the underpeople." She hurried them both toward a ramp. They reached daylight at last, but even before they came to the surface, Rod's nose was assaulted by a riot of smells,—foods frying, cakes baking, liquor spilling its pungency on the air, perfumes fighting with each other for attention, and, above all, the smell of old things: dusty treasures, old leathers, tapestries, the echo-smells of people who had died a long time ago.

C'mell stopped and watched him. "You're smelling things again? I must say, you have a better nose than any human being I ever met before. How does it smell to you?"

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Wonderful. Like all the treasures and temptations of the universe spilled out into one little place."

"It's just the Theives'Market of Paris."

"There are thieves on Earth? Open ones, like on Viola Siderea?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "They would die in a few days. The Instrumentality would catch them. These are just people, playing. The Rediscovery of Man found

some old institutions, and an old market was one of them. They make the robots and underpeople find things for them and then they pretend to be ancient, and make bargains with each other. Or they cook food. Not many real people ever cook food these days. It's so funny that it tastes good to them. They all pick up money on their way in. They have barrels of it at the gate. In the evening, or when they leave, they usually throw the money in the gutter, even though they should really put it back in the barrel. It's not money we underpeople could use. We go by numbers and computer cards," she sighed. "I could certainly use some of that extra money."

"And underpeople like you—like us—" said Rod, "what do we do in the market?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Absolutely nothing. We can walk through if we are not too big and not too small and not too dirty and not too smelly. And even if we are all right, we must walk right through without looking directly at the real people and without touching anything in the market?"

"Suppose we do?" asked Rod defiantly.

"The robot police are there, with orders to kill on sight when they observe an infraction. Don't you realize C'rod," she sobbed at him, "that there are millions of us in tanks, way below in Downdeep-downdeep, ready to be born, to be trained, to be sent up here to serve Man? We're not scarce at all, C'rod, we're not scarce at all!"

"Why are we going through the market then?"

"It's the only way to the Catmaster's store. We'll be tagged. Come along.."

Where the ramp reached the surface, four bright-eyed robots, their blue enamel bodies shining and their milky eyes glowing, stood at the ready. Their weapons had an ugly buzz to them and were obviously already off the "safety" mark. C'mell talked to them quietly and submissively. When the robot-sergeant led her to a desk, she stared into an instrument like binoculars and blinked when she took her eyes away. She put her palm on a desk. The identification was completed. The robot sergeant handed her three bright disks, like saucers, each with a chain attached. Wordlessly she hung them around her own neck, Rod's neck, and A'gentur's. The robots let them pass. They walked in demure single file through the place of beautiful sights and smells.. Rod felt that his eyes were wet with tears of rage. "I'll buy this place," he thought to himself, "if it's the only thing I'll ever buy." C'mell had stopped walking. Rod looked up, very carefully. There was the sign: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRE. A door opened. A wise old cat-person face looked out, stared at them, snapped, "No underpeople!" and slammed the door. C'mell rang the doorbell a second time. The face reappeared, more puzzled than angry.

"Business," she whispered, "of the Aitch Eye."

The face nodded and said, "In, then. Quick!"

## *THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES*

Once inside, Rod realized that the store was as rich as the market. There were no other customers. After the outside sounds of music, laughter, frying, boiling, things falling, dishes clattering, people arguing, and the low undertone of the ever ready robot weapons buzzing, the quietness of the room was itself a luxury like old heavy velvet. The smells were no less variegated than those on the outside but, they were different, more complicated, and many more of them were completely unidentifiable.

One smell he was sure of: fear, human fear. It had been in this room not long before.

"Quick," said the old cat-man. "I'm in trouble if you don't get out soon.. What is your business?"

"I'm C'mell."

He nodded pleasantly, but showed no sign of recognition. "I forget people," he said.

"This is A'gentur." She indicated the monkey.

The old cat-man did not even look at the animal.

C'mell persisted, a note of triumph coming into her voice: "You may have heard of him under his real name, E'ikasmus."

The old man, stood there, blinking, as though he were taking it in. "Yeekasoose? With the letter E?"

"Transformed," said C'mell inexorably, "for a trip all the way to Old North Australia and back."

"Is this true?" said the old man to the monkey.

E'ikasmus said calmly, "I am the son of Him, of whom you think."

The c'man dropped to his knees, but did so with dignity:

"I salute you, E'ikasmus. When you next think with your father, give him my greetings and ask from him his blessing. I am C'william, the Catmaster."

"You are famous," said E'ikasmus tranquilly.

"But you are still in danger, merely being here. I have no license for underpeople!"

C'mell produced her trump. "Catmaster, your next guest. This is no c'man.. He is a true man, an offworlder, and he has just bought most of the planet Earth."

C'william looked at Rod with more than ordinary shrewdness. There was a touch of kindness in his attitude. He was tall for a cat-man; few animal features

were left to him, because of old age, which reduces racial and sexual contrasts to mere memories, had wrinkled him into a uniform beige. His hair was not white, but beige too; his few cat-whiskers looked old and worn. He was garbed in a fantastic costume which—Rod later learned—consisted of the court robes of one of the Original Emperors, a dynasty which had prevailed more many centuries among the further stars. Age was upon him, but wisdom was too; the habits of life, in his case, had been cleverness and kindness, themselves unusual in combination. Now very old, he was reaping the harvest of his years. He had done well with the thousands upon thousands of days behind him, with the result that age had brought a curious joy into his manner, as though each experience meant one more treat before the long bleak dark closed in. Rod felt himself attracted to this strange creature, who looked at him with such penetrating and very personal curiosity, and who managed to do so without giving offense.

The Catmaster spoke in very passable Norstrilian:

"I know what you are thinking, Mister and Owner McBan."

"You can hear me?" cried Rod.

"Not your thoughts. Your face. It reads easily. I am sure that I can help you."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"All things need help," said the old c'man briskly, "but we must get rid of our other guests first. Where do you want to go, excellent one? And you, cat-madame?"

"Home," said E'ikasuk. He was tired and cross again. After speaking brusquely, he felt the need to make his tone more civil, "This body suits me badly, Catmaster."

"Are you good at falling?" said the Catmaster. "Free fall?"

The monkey grinned. "With this body? Of course. Excellent. I'm tired of it."

"Fine," said the Catmaster, "you can drop down my waste chute. It falls next to the forgotten palace where the great wings beat against time."

The Catmaster stepped to one side of the room. With only a nod at C'mell and Rod, followed by a brief "See you later," the monkey watched as the Catmaster opened a manhole cover. The monkey then leaped trustingly into the complete black depth which appeared, and was gone. The Catmaster replaced the cover carefully.

He turned to C'mell.

She faced him truculently, the defiance of her posture oddly at variance with the innocent voluptuousness of her young female body. "I'm going nowhere."

"You'll die," said the Catmaster. "Can't you hear then- weapons buzzing just outside the door? You know what they do to us underpeople. Especially to us cats. They use us, but do they trust us?"

"I know one who does..." she said. "The Lord Jestocost could protect me, even here, just as he protects you, far beyond your limit of years."

"Don't argue it. You will make trouble for him with the other real people. Here, girl, I will give you a tray to carry with a dummy package on it. Go back to the underground and rest in the commissary of the bear-man. I will send Rod to you when we are through."

"Yes," she said hotly, "but will you send him alive or dead?"

The Catmaster rolled his yellow eyes over Rod. "Alive," he said. "This one—alive. I have predicted. Did you ever know me to be wrong? Come on, girl, out the door with you."

C'mell let herself be handed a tray and a package, taken seemingly at random. As she left Rod thought of her with quick desperate affection. She was his closest link with Earth. He thought of her excitement and of how she had bared her young breasts to him, but now the memory, instead of exciting him, filled him with tender fondness instead. He blurted out, "C'mell, will you be all right?"

She turned around at the door itself, looking all woman and all cat. Her red wild hair gleamed like a hearth-fire against the open light from the doorway. She stood erect, as though she were a citizen of Earth and not a mere underperson or girlygirl. She held out her right hand clearly and commandingly while balancing the tray on her left hand. When he shook hands with her, Rod realized that her hand felt utterly human but very strong. With scarcely a break in her voice she said,

"Rod, goodbye. I'm taking a chance with you, but it's the best chance I've ever taken. You can trust the Catmaster, here in the Department Store of Hearts' Desires. He does strange things, Rod, but they're good strange things."

He released her hand and she left. C'william closed the door behind her. The room became hushed.

"Sit down for a minute while I get things ready. Or look around the room if you prefer."

"Sir Catmaster-" said Rod.

"No title, please. I am an underperson, made out cats. You may call me C'william."

"C'william, please tell me first. I miss C'mell. I'm worried about her. Am I falling in love with her? Is that what falling in love means?"

"She's your wife," said the Catmaster. "Just temporarily and just in pretense, but she's still your wife. It's Earthlike to worry about one's mate. She's all right."

The old c'man disappeared behind a door which had an odd sign on it: HATE HALL.

Rod looked around.

The first thing, the very first thing, which he saw was a display cabinet full of postage stamps. It was made of glass, but he could see the soft blues and the inimitable warm brick reds of his Cape of Good Hope triangular postage stamps. He

had come to Earth and there they were! He peered through the glass at them. They were even better than the illustrations which he had seen back on Norstrilia. They had the temper of great age upon them and yet, somehow, they seemed to freight with them the love which men, living men now dead, had given them for thousands and thousands of years. He looked around, and saw that the whole room was full of odd riches. There were ancient toys of all periods, flying toys, copies of machines, things which he suspected were trains. There was a two-story closet of clothing, shimmering with embroidery and gleaming with gold. There was a bin of weapons, clean and tidy—models so ancient that he could not possibly guess what they had been used for, or by whom. Everywhere, there were buckets of coins, usually gold ones. He picked up a handful. They had languages he could not even guess at and they showed the proud imperious faces of the ancient dead. Another cabinet was one which he glanced at and then turned away from, shocked and yet inquisitive: it was filled with indecent souvenirs and pictures from a hundred periods of men's history, images, sketches, photographs, dolls and models, all of them portraying grisly, comical, sweet, friendly, impressive or horrible versions of the many acts of love. The next section made him pause utterly. Who would have ever wanted these things? Whips, knives, hoods, leather corsets. He passed on, very puzzled. The next section stopped him breathless. It was full of old books, genuine old books. There were a few framed poems, written very ornately. One had a scrap of paper attached to it, reading simply, "My favorite." Rod looked down to see if he could make it out. It was ancient English and the odd name was "E. Z. C. Judson, Ancient American, A.D. 1823-1866" Rod understood the words of the poem but he did not think that he really got the sense of it. As he read it, he had the impression that a very old man, like the Catmaster, must find in it a poignancy which a younger person would miss:

*Drifting in the ebbing tide  
Slow but sure I onward glide-  
Dim the vista seen before,  
Useless now to look behind-  
Drifting on before the wind  
Toward the unknown shore.*

*Counting time by ticking clock,  
Waiting for the final shock-  
Waiting for the dark forever—  
Oh, how slow the moments go!  
None but I, meseems, can know  
How close the tideless river!*

Rod shook his head as if to get away from the cobwebs of an irrecoverable tragedy. "Maybe," he thought to himself, "that's the way people felt about death when they did not die on schedule, the way most worlds have it, or if they do not meet death a few times ahead of time, the way we do in Norstrilia. They must have felt pretty sticky and uncertain." Another thought crossed his mind and he gasped at the utter cruelty of it. "They did not even have Unselfing rounds that far back! Not



that we need them any more, but imagine just sliding into death, helpless, useless, hopeless. Thank the Queen we don't do that!" He thought of the Queen, who may have been dead for more than fifteen thousand years, or who might be lost in space, the way many Old North Australians believed, and sure enough! there was her picture, with the words "Queen Elizabeth II." It was just a bust, but she was a pretty and intelligent-looking woman, with something of a Norstrilian look to her.. She looked smart enough to know what to do if one of her sheep caught fire or if her own child came, blank and giggling, out of the traveling vans of the Garden of Death.

Next there were two glass frames, neatly wiped free of dust They had matched poems by someone who was listed as "Anthony Bearden, Ancient American, A.D. 1913-1949." The first one seemed very appropriate to this particular place, because it was all about the ancient desires which people had in those days. It read:

TELL ME, LOVE!

Time is burning and the world on fire.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Tell me what your heart has hidden,  
Is it open or—forbidden?

If forbidden, think of days  
Racing past in a roaring haze,  
Shocked and shaken by the blast of fire...  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.

Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Dainty foods and soft attire?  
Ancient books?  
Fantastic chess?  
Wine-lit nights? Love—more, or less?

Now is the only now of our age.  
Tomorrow tomorrow will hold the stage.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire!  
Time is burning and the world on fire.

The other one might almost have been written about his arrival on Earth, his not knowing what could happen or what should happen to him now.

### *NIGHT, AND THE SKY UNFAMILIAR*

The stars of experience have led me astray.  
A pattern of purpose was lost on my way.  
Where was I going?  
How can I say?  
The stars of experience have led me astray.  
There was a slight sound.

Rod turned around to face the Catmaster.

The old man was unchanged. He still wore the lunatic robes of grandeur, but his dignity survived even this outer effect.

"You like my poems? You like my things? I like them myself. Many men come in here to take things from me, but they find that title is vested in the Lord Jestocpst, and they must do strange things to obtain my trifles."

"Are all these things genuine?" asked Rod, thinking that even Old North Australia could not buy out this shop if they were.

"Certainly not," said the old man. "Most of them are forgeries—wonderful forgeries. The Instrumentality lets me go to the robot-pits where insane or worn-out robots are destroyed. I can have my pick of them if they are not dangerous. I put them to work making copies of anything which I find in the museums."

"Those Cape triangles?" said Rod. "Are they real?"

"Cape triangles? You mean the letter stickers. They are genuine, all right, but they are not mine. Those are on loan from the Earth Museum until I can get them copied."

"I will buy them," said Rod.

"You will not," said the Catmaster. "They are not for sale."

"Then I will buy Earth and you and them too," said Rod.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one hundred and fifty-first, you willnot."

"Who are you to tell me?"

"I have looked at one person and I have talked to two others."

"All right," said Rod. "Who?"

"I looked at the other Rod McBan, your workwoman Eleanor. She is a little mixed up about having a young man's body, because she is very drunk in the home of the Lord William Not-from-here and a beautiful young woman named Ruth Not-from-here is trying to make Eleanor marry her. She has no idea that she is dealing with another woman and Eleanor, in her copy of your proper body, is finding the experience exciting but terribly confusing. No harm will come of it, and your Eleanor is perfectly safe. Half the rascals of Earth have converged on the Lord William's house, but he has a whole battalion from the Defense Fleet on loan around the place, so nothing is going to happen, except that Eleanor will have a headache and Ruth will have a disappointment."

Rod smiled, "You couldn't have told me anything better. Who else did you talk to?"

"The Lord Jestocost and John Fisher to the hundredth."

"Mister and Owner Fisher? He's here."

"He's at his home. Station of the Good Fresh Joey. I asked him if you could have your heart's desire. After a little while, he and somebody named Doctor Wentworth said that the Commonwealth of Old North Australia would approve it." .

"How did you ever pay for such a call?" cried Rod. "Those things are frightfully expensive."

"I didn't pay for it, Mister and Owner. You did. I charged it to your account, by the authority of your trustee, the Lord Jestocost. He and his forefathers have been my patrons for four hundred and twenty-six years."

"You've got your nerve!" said Rod. "Spending my money when I was right here and not even asking me!"

"You are an adult for some purposes and a minor for other purposes. I am offering you the skills which keep me alive. Do you think any ordinary cat-man would be allowed to live as long as this?"

"No," said Rod. "Give me those stamps and let me go."

The Catmaster looked at him levelly. Once again there was the personal look on his face, which in Norstrilia would have been taken as an unpardonable affront; but along with the nosiness, there was an air of confidence and kindness which put Rod a little in awe of the man, underperson though he was. "Do you think that you could love these stamps when you get back home? Could they talk to you? Could they make you like yourself? Those pieces of paper are not your heart's desire. Something else is."

"What?" said Rod, truculently.

"In a bit, I'll explain. First, you cannot kill me. Second, you cannot hurt me. Third, if I kill you, it will be all for your own good. Fourth, if you get out of here, you will be a very happy man."

"Are you barmy, Mister?" cried Rod. "I can knock you flat and walk out that door. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Try it," said the Catmaster levelly.

Rod looked at the tall withered old man with the bright eyes. He looked at the door, a mere seven or eight meters away. He did not want to try it.

"All right," he conceded, "play your pitch."

"I am a clinical psychologist. The only one on Earth and probably the only one on any planet. I got my knowledge from some ancient books when I was a kitten, being changed into a young man. I change people just, a little, little bit. You know that the Instrumentality has surgeons and brains experts and all sorts of doctors. They can do almost anything with personality— anything but the light stuff... That, I do."

"I don't get it," said Rod.

"Would you go to a brain surgeon to get a haircut? Would you need a dermatologist to give you a bath? Of course not. I don't do heavy work. I just change people a little bit. It makes them happy. If I can't do anything with them, I give them souvenirs from this junkpile out here. The real work is in there. That's where you're going, pretty soon." He nodded his head at the door marked HATE HALL.

Rod cried out, "I've been taking orders from one stranger after another, all these long weeks since my computers and I made that money! Can't I ever do anything myself?"

The Catmaster looked at him with sympathy. "None of us can. We may think that we are free. Our lives are made for us by the people we happen to know, the places we happen to be, the jobs or hobbies which we happen to run across. Will I be dead a year from now? I don't know. Will you be back in Old North Australia a year from now, still only seventeen, but rich and wise and on your way to happiness? I don't know. You've had a run of good luck. Look at it that way. It's luck. And I'm part of the luck. If you get killed here, it will not be my doing but just the over-strain of your body against the devices which the Lady Goroke approved a long time ago—devices which the Lord Jestocost reports to the Instrumentality. He keeps them legal that way. I'm the only underman in the universe who is entitled to process real people in any way whatever without having direct human supervision. All I do is to develop people, like an Ancient Man developing a photograph from a piece of paper exposed to different grades of light. I'm not a hidden jungle, like your men in the Garden of Death. It's going to be you against you, with me just helping, and when you come out you're going to be a different you—the same you, but a little better there, a little more flexible here. As a matter of fact, that cat-type body you're wearing is going to make your contest with yourself a little harder for me to manage. Well do it, Rod. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"For title tests and changes there." The Catmaster nodded at the door marked HATE HALL.

"I suppose so," said Rod. "I don't have much choice."

"No," said the Catmaster, sympathetically and almost sadly, "not at this point, you don't. If you walk out that door, you're an illegal cat-man, in immediate danger of being buzzed down by the robot police."

"Please," said Rod, "win or fail, can I have one of these Cape triangles?"

The Catmaster smiled. "I promise you—if you want one, you shall have it." He waved at the door: "Go on in."

Rod was not a coward, but it was with feet and legs of lead that he walked to the door. It opened by itself. He walked in, steady but afraid.

The room was dark with a darkness deeper than mere black. It was the dark of blindness, the expanse of cheek where no eye has ever been.

The door closed behind him and he swam in the dark, so tangible had the darkness become.

He felt blind. He felt as if he had never seen.

But he could hear.

He heard his own blood pulsing through his head.

He could smell—indeed, he was good at smelling. And this air—this air—this air smelled of the open night on the dry plains of Old North Australia.

The smell made him feel little and afraid. It reminded him of his repeated childhoods, of the artificial drownings in the laboratories where he had gone to be reborn from one childhood to another.

He reached out his hands.

Nothing. He jumped gently. No ceiling.

Using a feldman's trick familiar from times of dust-storms, he dropped lightly to his hands and feet. He scuttled crabwise on two feet and one hand, using the other hand as a shield to protect his face. In a very few meters he found the wall. He followed the wall around.

Circular

This was the door.

Follow again.

With more confidence, he moved fast. Around, around, around. He could not tell whether the floor was asphalt or some kind of rough worn tile.

Door again.

A voice spieked to him.

Spieked! And he heard it.

He looked upward into the nothing which was bleaker than blindness, almost expecting to see the words in letters of fire, so clear had they been.

The voice was Norstrilian and it said,

Rod McBan is a man, man, man.

But what is man?

(Immediate percussion of crazy, sad laughter.)

Rod never noticed that he reverted to the habits of babyhood. He sat flat on his rump, legs spread out in front of him at a ninety-degree angle. He put his hands a little behind him and leaned back, letting the weight of his body push his shoulders

a little bit upward. He knew the ideas that would follow the words, but he never knew why he so readily expected them.

Light formed in the room, as he had been sure it would.

The images were little, but they looked real.

Men and women and children, children and women and men marched into his vision and out again.

They were not freaks; they were not beasts; they were not alien monstrosities begotten in some outside universe; they were not robots; they were not underpeople; they were all hominids like himself, kinsmen in the Earthborn races of men.

First came people like Old North Australians and Earth people, very much alike, and both similar to the ancient types, except that Norstrilians were pale beneath their tanned skins, bigger, and more robust.

Then came Daimoni, white-eyed pale giants with a magical assurance, whose very babies walked as if they had already been given ballet lessons.

Then heavy men, fathers, mothers, infants swimming on the solid ground from which they would never arise.

Then rainmen from Amazonas Triste, their skins hanging in enormous folds around them, so that they looked like bundles of wet rags wrapped around monkeys.

Blind men from Olympia, staring fiercely at the world through the radars mounted on their foreheads.

Bloated monster-men from abandoned planets—people as bad off as his own race had been after escaping from Paradise VII.

And still more races.

People he had never heard of.

Men with shells.

Men and women so thin that they looked like insects.

A race of smiling, foolish giants, lost in the irreparable hebephrenia of their world. (Rod had the feeling that they were shepherded by a race of devoted dogs, more intelligent than themselves, who cajoled them into breeding, begged them to eat, led them to sleep. He saw no dogs, only the smiling unfocused fools, but the feeling dog, good dog! was somehow very near.)

A funny little people who pranced with an indefinable deformity of gait.

Water-people, the clean water of some unidentified world pulsing through their gills.

And then-More people, still, but hostile ones. Lipsticked hermaphrodites with enormous beards and fluting voices. Carcinomas which had taken over men. Giants rooted in the Earth. Human bodies crawling, and weeping as they crawled through

wet grass, somehow contaminated themselves and looking for more people to infect.

Rod did not know it, but he growled.

He jumped into a squatting position and swept his hands across the rough floor, looking for a weapon.

These were not men—they were enemies!

Still they came. People who had lost eyes, or who had grown fire-resistant, the wrecks and residues of abandoned settlements and forgotten colonies.. The waste and spoilage of the human race.

And then—

Him.

Himself.

The child Rod McBan.

And voices, Norstrilian voices calling: "He can't hear. He can't spiek. He's a freak. He's a freak. He can't hear. He can't spiek."

And another voice: "His poor parents!"

The child Rod disappeared and there were his parents again. Twelve times smaller than life, so high that he had to peer up into the black absorptive ceiling to see the underside of their faces.

The mother wept.

The father sounded stern.

The father was saying, "It's no use. Doris can watch him while we're gone, but if he isn't any better, we'll turn him in."

The calm, loving, horrible voice of the man, "Darling, spiek to him yourself. He'll never hear. Can that be a Rod McBan?"

Then the woman's voice, sweet-poisonous and worse than death, sobbing agreement with her man against her son.

"I don't know, Rod. I don't know. Just don't tell me about it."

He had heard them, in one of his moments of wild penetrating hiering when everything telepathic came in with startling clarity. He had heard them when he was a baby.

The real Rod in the dark room, let out a roar of fear, desolation, loneliness, rage, hate. This was the telepathic bomb with which he had so often startled or alarmed the neighbors, the mind-shock with which he had killed the giant spider in the tower of Earthport far above him.

But this time, the room was closed.

His mind roared back at itself. Rage, loudness, hate, raw noise poured into him from the floor, the circular wall, the high ceiling.

He cringed beneath it and as he cringed, the sizes of the images changed.. His parents sat in chairs, chairs. They were little, little. He was an almighty baby, so enormous that he could scoop them up with his right hand.

He reached to crush the tiny loathsome parents who had said, "Let him die."

To crush them, but they faded first

Their faces turned frightened. They looked wildly around. Their chairs dissolved, the fabric falling to a floor which in turn looked like storm-eroded cloth. They turned for a last kiss and had no lips. They reached to hug each other and their arms fell off. Their spaceship had gone milky in mid-trip, dissolving into traceless nothing. And he, he, he himself had seen it!

The rage was followed by tears, by a guilt too deep for regret, by a self-accusation so raw and wet that it lived like one more organ inside his living body.

He wanted nothing.

No money, no stroon, no Station of Doom. He wanted no friends, no companionship, no welcome, no house, no food. He wanted no walks, no solitary discoveries in the field, no friendly sheep, no treasures in the gap, no computer, no day, no night, no life.

He wanted nothing, and he could not understand death.

The enormous room lost all light, all sound, and he did not notice it. His own naked life lay before him like a freshly dissected cadaver. It lay there and it made no sense. There had been many Rodrick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans, one hundred and fifty of them in a row, but he,—151! 151! 151! was not one of them, not a giant who had wrestled treasure from the sick Earth and hidden sunshine of the Norstrilian plains. It wasn't his telepathic deformity, his spieklessness, his brain deafness to hiering. It was himself, the "Me-subtile" inside him, which was wrong, all wrong. He was the baby worth killing, who had killed instead. He had hated mama and papa for their pride and their hate: when he hated them, they crumpled and died out in the mystery of space, so that they did not even leave bodies to bury.

Rod stood to his feet. His hands were wet. He touched his face and he realized that he had been weeping with his face cupped in his hands.

Wait.

There was something.

There was one thing he wanted. He wanted Houghton Syme not to hate him. Houghton Syme could liffr and spiek, but he was a shortie, living with the sickness of death lying between himself and every girl, every friend, every job he had met. And he, Rod, had mocked that man, calling him Old Hot and Simple. Rod might be



worthless but he was not as bad off as Houghton Syme, the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was at least trying to be a man, to live his miserable scrap of life, and all Rod had ever done was to flaunt his wealth and near-immortality before the poor cripple who had just one hundred and sixty years to live. Rod wanted only one thing,—to get back to North Australia in time to help Houghton Syme, to let Houghton Syme know that the guilt was his, Rod's, and not Syme's. The Onseck had a bit of life and he deserved the best of it.

Rod stood there, expecting nothing.

He had forgiven his last enemy.

He had forgiven himself.

The door opened very matter-of-factly and there stood the Catmaster, a quiet wise smile upon his face.

"You can come out now, Mister and Owner McBan; and if there is anything in this outer room which you want, you may certainly have it."

Rod walked out slowly. He had no idea how long he had been in HATE HALL.

When he emerged, the door closed behind him.

"No, thanks, cobber. It's mighty friendly of you, but I don't need anything much, and I'd better be getting back to my own planet"

"Nothing?" said the Catmaster, still smiling very attentively and very quietly.

"I'd like to hear and spiek, but it's not very important."

"This is for you," said the Catmaster. "You put it in your ear and leave it there. If it itches or gets dirty, you take it out, wash it, and put it back in. It's not a rare device, but apparently you don't have them on your planet." He held out an object no larger than the kernel of a groundnut.

Rod took it absently and was ready to put it into his pocket, not into his ear, when he saw that the smiling attentive face was watching, very gently but very alertly. He put the device into his ear. It felt a little cold.

"I will now," said the Catmaster, "take you to C'mell, who will lead you to your friends in Downdeep-downdeep. You had better take this blue twopenny Cape of Good Hope postage stamp with you. I will report to Jestocost that it was lost while I attempted to copy it. That is slightly true, isn't it?" Rod started to thank him absent-mindedly and then—Then, with a thrill which sent gooseflesh all over his neck, back and arms, he realized that the Catmaster had not moved his lips in the slightest, had not pushed air through his throat, had not disturbed the air with the pressure or noise. The Catmaster had spieked to Rod, and Rod had heard him.

Thinking very carefully and very clearly, but closing his lips and making no sound whatever, Rod thought, "Worthy and gracious Catmaster, I thank you for the ancient treasure of the old Earth stamp. I thank you even more for the hiering-

spieking device which I am now testing. Will you please extend your right hand to shake hands with me, if you can actually hear me now?" The Catmaster stepped forward and extended his hand. Man and underman, they faced each other with a kindness and gratitude which was so poignant as to be very close to grief.

Neither of them wept. Neither.

They shook hands without speaking or spieking.

## *EVERYBODY'S FOND OF MONEY*

While Rod McBan was going through his private ordeal at the Department Store of Hearts' Desires, other people continued to be concerned with him and his fate.

### **A CRIME OF PUBLIC OPINION**

A middle-aged woman, with a dress which did not suit her, sat uninvited at the table of Paul, a real man once acquainted with C'mell.

Paul paid no attention to her. Eccentricities were multiplying among people these days. Being middle-aged was a matter of taste, and many human beings, after the Rediscovery of Man, found that if they let themselves become imperfect, it was a more comfortable way to live than the old way—the old way consisting of aging minds swelling in bodies condemned to the perpetual perfection of youth.

"I had flu," said the woman. "Have you ever had flu?"

"No," said Paul, not very much, interested.

"Are you reading a newspaper?" She looked at his newspaper, which had everything except news in it.

Paul, with the paper in front of him, admitted that he was reading it.

"Do you like coffee?" said the woman, looking at Paul's cup of fresh coffee in front of him.

"Why would I order it if I didn't?" said Paul brusquely, wondering how the woman had ever managed to find so unattractive a material for her dress. It was yellow sunflowers on an off-red background.

The woman was baffled, but only for a moment.

"I'm wearing a girdle," she said. "They just came on sale last week. They're very, very ancient, and very authentic. Now that people can be fat if they want to, girdles are the rage. They have spats for men, too. Have you bought your spats yet?"

"No," said Paul, flatly wondering if he should leave his coffee and newspaper.

"What are you going to do about that man?"

"What man?" said Paul, politely and wearily.

"The man who's bought the Earth."

"Did he?" said Paul.

"Of course," said the woman. "Now he has more power than the Instrumentality. He could do anything he wants. He can give us anything we want. If he wanted to, he could give me a thousand-year trip around the universe."

"Are you an official?" said Paul sharply.

"No," said the woman, taken a little aback.

"Then how do you know these things?"

"Everybody knows them. Everybody." She spoke firmly and pursed her mouth at the end of the sentence.

"What are you going to do about this man? Rob him? Seduce him?" Paul was sardonic. He had had an unhappy love affair which he still remembered, a climb to the Abbadingo over Alpha Ralpa Boulevard which he would never repeat, and very little patience with fools who had never dared and never suffered anything.

The woman flushed with anger. "We're all going to his hostel at twelve today. We're going to shout and shout until he comes out. Then we're going to form a line and make him listen to what each one of us wants."

Paul spoke sharply: "Who organized this?"

"I don't know. Somebody."

Paul spoke solemnly. "You're a human being. You have been trained. What is the Twelfth Rule?"

The woman turned a little pale but she chanted, as if by rote: " 'Any man or woman who finds that he or she forms and shares an unauthorized opinion with a large number of other people shall report immediately for therapy to the nearest subchief.' But that doesn't mean me... ?"

"You'll be dead or scrubbed by tonight, madam. Now go away and let me read my paper."

The woman glared at him, between anger and tears. Gradually fear came over her features. "Do you really think what I was saying is unlawful?"

"Completely," said Paul.

She put her pudgy hands over her face and sobbed. "Sir, sir, can you—can you please help me find a sub-chief? I'm afraid I do need help.. But I've dreamed so much, I've hoped so much. A man from the stars. But you're right, sir. I don't want to die or get blanked out. Sir, please help me!"

Moved by both impatience and compassion, Paul left his paper and his coffee. The robot waiter hurried up to remind him that he had not paid. Paul walked over to the sidewalk where there were two barrels full of money for people who wished to play the games of ancient civilization. He selected the biggest bill he could see,

gave it to the waiter, waited for his change, gave the waiter a tip, received thanks, and threw the change, which was all coins into the barrel full of metal money. The woman had waited for him patiently, her blotched face sad.

When he offered her his arm, in the old-French manner, she took it. They walked a hundred meters, more or less, to a public visiphone. She half-cried, half-mumbled as she walked along beside him, with her uncomfortable, ancient spiked-heel feminine shoes:

"I used to have four hundred years. I used to be slim and beautiful. I liked to make love and I didn't think very much about things, because I wasn't very bright. I had had a lot of husbands. Then this change came along, and I felt useless, and I decided to be what I felt like—fat, and sloppy, and middle-aged, and bored. And I have succeeded too much, just the way two of my husbands said. And that man from the stars, he has all power. He can change things."

Paul did not answer her, except to nod sympathetically.

At the visiphone he stood until a robot appeared. "A subchief," he said. "Any subchief."

The image blurred and the face of a very young man appeared. He stared earnestly and intently while Paul recited his number, grade, neonational assignment, quarters number and business. He had to state the business twice, "Criminal public opinion."

The subchief snapped, not unpleasantly, "Come on in, then, and we'll fix you up."

Paul was so annoyed at the idea that he would be suspected of criminal public opinion, "any opinion shared with a large number of other people, other than material released and approved by the Instrumentality and the Earth government," that he began to speak his protest into the machine.

"Vocalize, man and citizen! These machines don't carry telepathy."

When Paul got through explaining, the youngster in uniform looked at him critically but pleasantly, saying,

"Citizen, you've forgotten something yourself."

"Me?" gasped Paul. "I've done nothing. This woman just sat down beside me and—"

"Citizen," said the subchief, "What is the last half of the Fifth Rule for All Men?"

Paul thought a moment and then answered, "The services of every person shall be available, without delay and without charge, to any other true human being who encounters danger or distress." Then his own eyes widened and he said, "You want me to do this myself?"

"What do you think?" said the subchief.

"I can," said Paul.

"Of course," said the subchief. "You are normal. You remember the braingrips."

Paul nodded.

The subchief waved at him and the image faded from the screen.

The woman had seen it all. She, too, was prepared. When Paul lifted his hands for the traditional hypnotic gestures, she locked her eyes upon his hands. She made the responses as they were needed. When he had brainscrubbed her right there in the open street, she shambled off down the walkway, not knowing why tears poured down her cheeks. She did not remember Paul at all..

For a moment of crazy whimsy, Paul thought of going across the city and having a look at the wonderful man from the stars. He stared around absently, thinking. His eye caught the high threat of Alpha Ralpa Boulevard, soaring unsupported across the heavens from faraway ground to the mid-height of Earthport: he remembered himself and his own personal troubles. He went back to his newspaper and a fresh cup of coffee, helping himself to money from the barrel, this time, before he entered the restaurant.

## **ON A YACHT OFF MEEYA MEEFLA**

Ruth yawned as she sat up and looked at the ocean. She had done her best with the rich young man.

The false Rod McBan, actually a reconstructed Eleanor, said to her:

"This is right nice."

Ruth smiled languidly and seductively. She did not know why Eleanor laughed out loud.

The Lord William Not-from-here came up from below the deck. He carried two silver mugs in his hands. They were frosted.

"I am glad," said he unctuously, "that you young people are happy. These are mint juleps, a very ancient drink indeed."

He watched as Eleanor sipped hers and then smiled.

He smiled too: "You like it?"

Eleanor smiled right back at him, "Beats washing dishes, it does!" said "Rod McBan" enigmatically.

The Lord William began to think that the rich young man was odd indeed.

## **ANTECHAMBER OF THE BELL AND BANK**

The Lord Crudelta commanded, "Send Jestocost here!"

The Lord Jestocost was already entering the room.

"What's happened on that case of the young man?"

"Nothing, Sir and Senior."

"Tush. Bosh. Nonsense. Rot." The old man snorted. "Nothing is something that doesn't happen at all. He has to be somewhere."

"The original is with the Catmaster, at the Department Store."

"Is that safe?" said the Lord Crudelta. "He might get to be too smart for us to manage. You're working some scheme again, Jestocost"

"Nothing but what I told you, Sir and Senior."

The old man frowned. "That's right. You did tell me. Proceed. But the others?"

"Who?"

"The decoys?"

The Lord Jestocost laughed aloud. "Our colleague, and Lord William, has almost betrothed his daughter to Mister McBan's workwoman, who is temporarily a 'Rod McBan' herself. All parties are having fun with no harm done. The robots, the eight survivors, are going around Earthport city. They are enjoying themselves as much as robots ever do. Crowds are gathering and asking for miracles. Pretty harmless."

"And the Earth economy? Is it getting out of balance?"

"I've set the computers to work," said the Lord Jestocost, "finding every tax penalty that we ever imposed on anybody. We're several megacredits ahead."

"FOE money."

"FOE money, Sir."

"You're not going to ruin him?" said Cradelta.

"Not at all, Sir and Senior," cried the Lord Jestocost. "I am a kind man.."

The old man gave him a low duty smile. "I've seen your kindness before, Jestocost, and I would rather have a thousand worlds for an enemy than have you be my friend! You're devious, you're dangerous, and you are tricky."

Jestocost, much flattered by this comment, said formally, "You do an honest official a great injustice, Sir and Senior."

The two men just smiled at each other: they knew each other well.

## TEN KILOMETERS BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH

The Ee'telekeli stood from the lectern at which he had been praying.

His daughter was watching him immovably from the doorway.

He spieked to her, "What's wrong, my girl?"

"I saw his mind, father, I saw it for just a moment as he left the Catmaster's place. He's a rich young man from the stars, he's a nice young man, he has bought Earth, but he is not the man of the Promise."

"You expected too much, E'lamelanie," spieked her father.

"I expeced hope," she spieked to him. "Is hope a crime among us underpeople? What Joan foresaw, what the Copt promised—where are they, father? Shall we never see daylight or know freedom?"

"True men are not free either," spieked the Ee'telekeli. "They too have grief, fear, birth, old age, love, death, suffering and the tools of their own ruin. Freedom is not something which is going to be given us by a wonderful man beyond the stars. Freedom is what you do, my dear, and what I do. Death is a very private affair, my daughter, and life—when you get to it—is almost as private."

"I know, father," she spieked. "I know. I know. I know." (But she didn't)

"You may not know it, my darling," spieked the great bird-man, "but long before these people build cities, there were others in the Earth—the ones who came after the Ancient World fell. They went far beyond the limitations of the human form. They conquered death. They did not have sickness. They did not need love. They sought to be abstractions lying outside of time. And they died, E'lamelanie—they died terribly. Some became monsters, preying on the remnants of true men for reasons which ordinary men could not even begin to understand. Others were like oysters, wrapped up in their own sainthood. They had all forgotten that humanness is itself imperfection and corruption, that what is perfect is no longer understandable. We have the fragments of the Word, and we are truer to the deep traditions of people than people themselves are, but we must never be foolish enough to look for perfection in this life or to count on our own powers to make us really different from what we are. You and I are animals, darling, not even real people, but people do not understand the teaching of Joan, that whatever seemshuman *is* human. It is the word which quickens, not the shape or the blood or the texture of flesh or hair or feathers. And there is that power which you and I do not name, but which we love and cherish because we need it more than do the people on the surface. Great beliefs always come out of the sewers of cities, not out of the towers of the ziggurats. Furthermore, we are discarded animals, not used ones. All of us down here are the rubbish which mankind has thrown away and has forgotten. We have a great advantage in this because we know from the very beginning of our lives that we are worthless. And why are we worthless? Because a higher standard and a higher truth says that we are—the conventional law and the unwritten customs of mankind. But I feel love for you, my daughter, and you have

love for me. We know that everything which loves has a value in itself, and that therefore this worthlessness of underpeople is wrong. We are forced to look beyond the minute and the hour to the place where no clocks work and no day dawns. There is a world outside of time, and it is to that which we appeal. I know that you have a love for the devotional life, my child, and I commend you for it, but it would be a sorry faith which waited for passing travelers or which believed that a miracle or two could set the nature of things right and whole. The people on the surface think they have gone beyond the old problems, because they do not have buildings which they call churches or temples, and they do not have professional religious men within their communities. But the higher power and the large problems still wait for all men, whether men like it or not. Today, Believing among mankind is a ridiculous hobby, tolerated by the Instrumentality because the Believers are unimportant and weak, but mankind has moments of enormous passion which will come again and in which we will share. So don't you wait for your hero beyond the stars. If you have a good devotional life within you, it is already here, waiting to be watered by your tears and ploughed up by your hard, clear thoughts. And if you don't have a devotional life, there are good lives outside."

"Look at your brother, E'ikarus, who is now resuming his normal shape. He let me put him in animal form and send him out among the stars. He took risks without committing the impudence of enjoying risk. It is not necessary to do your duty joyfully,—just to do it. Now he has homed to the old lair and I know he brings us good luck in many little things, perhaps in big things. Do you understand, my daughter?"

She said that she did, but there was still a wild blank disappointed look in her eyes as she said it.

## **A POLICE-POST ON THE SURFACE, NEAR EARTHPORT**

"The robot sergeant says he can do no more without violating the rule against hurting human beings." The subchief looked at his chief, licking his chops for a chance to get out of the office and to wander among the vexations of the city. He was tired of view-screens, computers, buttons, cards, and routines. He wanted raw life and high adventure.

"Which offworlder is this?"

"Tostig Amaral, from the planet of Amazonas Triste. He has to stay wet all the time. He is just a licensed trader, not an honored guest of the Instrumentality. He was assigned a girlygirl and now he thinks she belongs to him."

"Send the girlygirl to him. What is she, mouse-derived?"

"No, a c'girl. Her name is C'mell and she has been requisitioned by the Lord Jestocost."



"I know all about that," said the chief, wishing that he really did. "She's now assigned to that Old North Australian who has bought most of this planet, Earth."

"But this hominid wants her, just the same!" the subchief was urgent.

"He can't have her, not if a Lord of the Instrumentality interrupts his services."

"He is threatening to fight. He says he will kill people."

"Hmm. Is he in a room?"

"Yes, Sir and Chief."

"With standard outlets?"

"I'll look, sir." The subchief twisted a knob and an electronic design appeared on the left-hand screen in front of him. "Yes, sir, that's it."

"Let's have a look at him."

"He got permission, sir, to run the fire sprinkler system all the time. It seems he comes from a rain-world."

"Try, anyhow."

"Yes, sir." The subchief whistled a call to the board.

The picture dissolved, whirled and resolved itself into the image of a dark room. There seemed to be a bundle of wet rags in one corner, out of which a well-shaped human hand protruded.

"Nasty type," said the chief, "and probably poisonous. Knock him out for exactly one hour. We'll be getting orders meanwhile."

## ON AN EARTH-LEVEL STREET UNDER EARTHPORT

Two girls talking.

"... and I will tell you the biggest secret in the whole world, if you will never, never tell anyone."

"I'll bet it's not much of a secret. You don't have to tell me."

"I'll never tell you then. Never."

"Suit yourself."

"Really, if you even suspected it, you would be mad with curiosity."

"If you want to tell me, you can tell me."

"But it's a secret."

"All right, I'll never tell anybody."

"That man from the stars. He's going to marry me."

"You? That's ridiculous."

"Why is it so ridiculous? He's bought my dower right already."

"I know it's ridiculous. There's something wrong."

"I don't see why you should think he doesn't like me if he has already bought my dower rights."

"Fool! I know it's ridiculous, because he has bought mine."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"Both of us?"

"What for?"

"Search me."

"Maybe he is going to put us both in the same harem. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"They don't have harems in Old North Australia. All they do is live like prudish old farmers and raise stroon and murder anybody at all that even gets near them."

"That sounds bad."

"Let's go to the police."

"You know, he's hurt our feelings. Maybe we can make him pay extra for buying our dower rights if he doesn't mean to use them."

### *IN FRONT OF A CAFÉ*

A man, drunk.

— "I will get drunk every night and I will have musicians to play me to sleep and I will have all the money I need and it won't be that play money out of a barrel but it will be real money registered in the computer and I will make everybody do what I say and I know he will do it for me because my mother was named MacArthur in her genetic code before everybody got numbers and you have no call to laugh at me because his name really is MacArthur McBan the eleventh and I am probably the closest friend and relative he has on Earth..."

### *TOSTIG AMARAL*

Rod McBan left the Department Store of Hearts' Desires simply, humbly; he carried a package of books, wrapped in dustproofing paper, and he looked like any other first-class cat-man messenger. The human beings in the market were still making their uproar, their smells of food, spices, and odd objects, but he walked so

calmly and so straightforwardly through their scattered groups that even the robot police, weapons on the buzz, paid no attention to him.

When he had come across the Thieves' Market going the other way with C'mell and A'gentur he had been ill at ease. As a Mister and Owner from Old North Australia, he had been compelled to keep his external dignity, but he had not felt ease within his bean. These people were strange, his destination had been unfamiliar, and the problems of wealth and survival lay heavy upon him.

Now, it was all different. Catman he might still be on the outside, but on the inside he once again felt his proper pride of home and planet.

And more.

He felt calm, down to the very tips of his nerve endings.

The hiering-spieking device should have alerted him, excited him: it did not. As he walked through the market, he noticed that very few of the Earth people were communicating with one another telepathically. They preferred to babble in their loud airborne language, of which they had not one but many kinds, with the Old Common Tongue serving as a referent to those who had been endowed with different kinds of ancient language by the processes of the Rediscovery of Man. He even heard Ancient English, the Queen's Own Language, sounding remarkably close to his own spoken language of Norstrilian. These things caused neither stimulation nor excitement, not even pity. He had his own problems, but they were no longer the problems of wealth or of survival. Somehow he had a confidence that a hidden, friendly power in the universe would take care of him, if he took care of others. He wanted to get Eleanor out of trouble, to disembarass the Hon. Sec., to see Lavinia, to reassure Doris, to say a good goodbye to C'mell, to get back to his sheep, to protect his computer, and to keep the Lord Redlady away from his bad habit of killing other people lawfully on too slight an occasion for manslaughter.

One of the robot police, a little more perceptive than the others, watched this catman who walked with preternatural assurance through the crowds of men, but "C'roderick" did nothing but enter the market from one side, thread his way through it, and leave at the other side, still carrying his package; the robot turned away: his dreadful, milky eyes, always ready for disorder and death, scanned the marketplace again and again with fatigue-free vigilance.

Rod went down the ramp and turned right.

There was the underpeople commissary with the bear-man caslifrr. The caslifrr remembered him.

"It's been a long day, cat-sir, since I saw you. Would you like another special order of fish?"

"Where's my girl?" said Rod bluntly.

"C'mell?" said the bear-caslifr. "She waited here a long time but then she went on and she left this message, Tell my man C'rod that he should eat before following me, but that when he has eaten he can either follow me by going to Upshaft Four, Ground Level, Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine, where I am taking care of an offworld visitor, or he can send a robot to me and I will come to him.' Don't you think, cat-sir, that I've done well, remembering so complicated a message?" The bear-man flushed a little and the edge went off his pride as he confessed, for the sake of some abstract honesty, "Of course, that address part, I wrote that down. It would be very bad and very confusing if I sent you to the wrong address in people's country. Somebody might burn you down if you came into an unauthorized corridor."

"Fish, then," said Rod. "A fish dinner, please."

He wondered why C'mell, with his life in the balance, would go off to another visitor. Even as he thought this, he detected the mean jealousy behind it, and he confessed to himself that he had no idea of the terms, conditions, or hours of work required in the girgygirl business.

He sat dully on the bench, waiting for his food.

The uproar of HATE HALL was still in his mind, the pathos of his parents, those dying dissolving manikins, was bright within his heart, and his body throbbed with the fatigue of the ordeal. Idly he asked the bear-cashier,

"How long has it been since I was here?"

The bear-cashier looked at the clock on the wall, "About fourteen hours, worthy cat."

"How long is that in real time?" Rod was trying to compare Norstrilian hours with Earth hours. He thought that Earth hours were one-seventh shorter, but he was not sure.

The bear-man was completely baffled. "If you mean galactic navigation time, dear guest, we never use that down here anyhow. Are there any other kinds of time?"

Rod realized his mistake and tried to correct it. "It doesn't matter. I am thirsty. What is lawful for underpeople to drink? I am tired and thirsty, both, but I have no desire to become the least bit drunk."

"Since you are a c'man," said the bear-cashier, "I recommend strong black coffee mixed with sweet whipped cream."

"I have no money," said Rod.

"The famous cat-madame, C'mell your consort, has guaranteed payment for anything at all that you order."

"Go ahead, then."

The bear-man called a robot over and gave him the orders.

Rod stared at the wall, wondering what he was going to do with this Earth he had bought. He wasn't thinking very hard, just musing idly. A voice cut directly into his mind. He realized that the bear-man was spieking to him and that he could hear it.

"You are not an underman, Sir and Master."

"What?" spieked Rod.

"You heard me," said the telepathic voice. "I am not going to repeat it. If you come in the sign of the Fish, may blessings be upon you,"

"I don't know that sign," said Rod.

"Then," spieked the bear-man, "no matter who you are, may you eat and drink in peace because you are a friend of C'mell and you are under the protection of the One Who Lives in Downdeep."

"I don't know," spieked Rod, "I just don't know, but I thank you for your welcome, friend."

"I do not give such welcome lightly," said the bear-man, "and ordinarily I would be ready to run away from anything as strange and dangerous and unexplained as yourself, but you bring with you the quality of peace, which made me think that you might travel in the fellowship of the sign of the Fish. I have heard that in that sign, people and underpeople remember the blessed Joan and mingle in complete comradeship."

"No," said Rod, "no. I travel alone."

His food and drink came. He consumed them quietly. The bear-cashier had given him a table and bench far from the serving tables and away from the other underpeople who dropped in, interrupting their talks, eating in a hurry so that they could get back in a hurry. He saw one wolf-man, wearing the insignia of Auxiliary Police, who came to the wall, forced his identity-card into a slot, opened his mouth, bolted down five large chunks of red, raw meat and left the commissary, all in less than one and one-half minutes. Rod was amazed but not impressed. He had too much on his mind.

At the desk he confirmed the address which C'mell had left, offered the bear-man a handshake, and went along to Upshaft Four. He still looked like a c'man and he carried his package alertly and humbly, as he had seen other underpeople behave in the presence of real persons.

He almost met death on the way. Upshaft Four was one-directional and was plainly marked, "People Only." Rod did not like the looks of it, as long as he moved in a cat-man body, but he did not think that C'mell would give him directions wrongly or lightly. (Later, he found that she had forgotten the phrase, "Special business under the protection of Jestocost, a chief of the Instrumentality," if he were to be challenged; but he did not know the phrase.)

An arrogant human man, wearing a billowing red cloak, looked at him sharply as he took a belt, hooked it and stepped into the shaft. When Rod stepped free, he and the man were on a level.

Rod tried to look like a humble, modest messenger, but the strange voice grated his ears:

"Just what do you think you are doing? This is a human shaft."

Rod pretended that he did not know it was himself whom the red-cloaked man was addressing. He continued to float quietly upward, his magnet-belt tugging uncomfortably at his waist.

A pain in the ribs made him turn suddenly, almost losing his balance in the belt.

"Animal!" cried the man, "Speak up or die."

Still holding his package of books, Rod said mildly, "I'm on an errand and I was told to go this way."

The man's senseless hostility gave caliber to his voice: "And who told you?"

"C'mell," said Rod absently.

The man and his companions laughed at that, and for some reason their laughter had no humor in it, just savagery, cruelty, and—way down underneath—something of fear. "Listen to that," said the man in a red cloak, "one animal says another animal told it to do something." He whipped out a knife.

"What are you doing?" cried Rod.

"Just cutting your belt," said the man. "There's nobody at all below us and you will make a nice red-blob at the bottom of the shaft, cat-man. That ought to teach you which shaft to use."

The man actually reached over and seized Rod's belt.

He lifted the knife to slash.

Rod became frightened and angry. His brain ran red.

He spat thoughts at them—

pommy!

shortie!

Earthier

red duly blue stinking little man,

die, puke, burst, blaze, die!

It all came out in a single Sash, faster than he could control it. The red-cloaked man twisted oddly, as if in spasm. His two companions threshed in their belts.. They turned slowly.

High above them, two women began screaming.

Further up a man was shouting, both with his voice and with his mind, "Police! Help! Police! Police! Brainbomb! Brainbomb! Help!"

The effort of his telepathic explosion left Rod feeling disoriented and weak. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. He started to wipe his face, only to hit himself on the jaw with the package of books, which he still carried. This aroused him a little. He looked at the three men. Redcloak was dead, his head at an odd angle. The other two seemed to be dead. One was floating upside down, his rump pointing upmost and the two limp legs swinging out at odd angles; the other was rightside up but had sagged in his belt. All three of them kept moving a steady ten meters a minute, right along with Rod.

There were strange sounds from above.

An enormous voice, filling the shaft with its volume, roared down: "Stay where you are! Police. Police. Police."

Rod glanced at the bodies floating upward. A corridor came by. He reached for the grip-bar, made it, and swung himself into the horizontal passage. He sat down immediately, not getting away from the Up-shaft. He thought sharply with his new hiering. Excited, frantic minds beat all around him, looking for enemies, lunatics, crimes, aliens, anything strange.

Softly he began spieking to the empty corridor and to himself, "I am a dumb cat. I am the messenger C'rod. I must take the books to the gentleman from the stars. I am a dumb cat. I do not know much."

A robot, gleaming with the ornamental body-armor of Old Earth, landed as his cross-corridor, looked at Rod and called up the shaft.

"Master, here's one. A c'man with a package."

A young subchief came into view, feet first as he managed to ride down the shaft instead of going up it. He seized the ceiling of the transverse corridor, gave himself a push and (once free of the shaft's magnetism) dropped heavily on his feet beside Rod. Rod lifired him thinking, "I'm good at this. I'm a good telepath. I clean things up fast. Look at this dumb cat."

Rod went on concentrating, "I'm a dumb cat. I have a package to deliver. I'm a dumb cat."

The subchief looked down at him scornfully. Rod felt the other's mind slide over his own in the rough equivalent of a search. He remained relaxed and tried to feel stupid while the other heard him. Rod said nothing. The subchief flashed his baton over the package, eyeing the crystal knob at the end,

"Books," he snorted.

Rod nodded.

"You," said the bright young subchief, "you see bodies?" He spoke in a painfully clear, almost childish version of the Old Common Tongue.

Rod held up three fingers and then pointed upward.

"You, cat-man, you feel the brainbomb!"

Rod, beginning to enjoy the game, threw his head backward and let out a cattish yowl expressing pain. The subchief could not help clapping his hands over his ears. He started to turn away, "I can see what you think of it, cat-fellow. You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Still thinking low dull thoughts as evenly as he could, Rod said promptly and modestly, "Me smart cat. Very handsome too."

"Come along," said the subchief to his robot, disregarding Rod altogether.

Rod plucked at his sleeve.

The subchief turned back.

Very humbly Rod said, "Sir and Master, which way, Hostel of Singing Birds, Room Nine?"

"Mother of poodles!" cried the subchief. "I'm on a murder case and this dumb cat asks me for directions." He was a decent young man and he thought for a minute. "This way—" said he, pointing up the Upshaft—"it's twenty more meters and then the third street over. But that's 'people only.' It's about a kilometer over to the steps for animals." He stood, frowning, and then swung on one of his robots: "Wush', you see this cat!"

"Yes, master, a cat-man, very handsome."

"So you think he's handsome, too. He already thinks so, so that makes it unanimous. He may be handsome, but he's dumb. Wush', take this cat-man to the address he tells you. Use the upshaft by my authority. Don't put a belt on him, just hug him."

Rod was immeasurably grateful that he had slipped his shaftbelt off and left it negligently on the rack just before the robot arrived.

The robot seized him around the waist with what was literally a grip of iron. They did not wait for the slow upward magnetic drive of the shaft to lift them. The robot had some kind of a jet in his bedpack and lifted Rod with sickening speed to the next level. He pushed Rod into the corridor and followed him.

"Where do you go?" said the robot, very plainly.

Rod concentrating on feeling stupid just in case someone might still be trying to liffr his mind, said slowly and stumblingly,

"Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine."

The robot stopped still, as though he were communicating telepathically, but Rod's mind, though alert, could catch not the faintest whisper of telepathic



communication. "Hot buttered sheep!" thought Rod, "he's using radio to check the address with his headquarters right from here!"

Wush' appeared to be doing just that. He came to in a moment. They emerged under the sky, filled with Earth's own moon, the loveliest thing that Rod had ever seen. He did not dare to stop and enjoy the scenery, but he trotted lithely beside the robot-policeman.

They came down a road with heavy, scented flowers. The wet warm air of Earth spread the sweetness everywhere.

On their right there was a courtyard with copies of ancient fountains, a dining space now completely empty of diners, a robot waiter in the corner, and many individual rooms opening on the plaza. The robot-policeman called to the robot-waiter,

"Where's number nine?"

The waiter answered him with a lifting of the hand and an odd twist of the wrist, twice repeated, which the robot-policeman seemed to understand perfectly well.

"Come along," he said to Rod, leading the way to an outside stairway which reached up to an outside balcony serving the second story of rooms. One of the rooms had a plain number nine on it.

Rod was about to tell the robot-policeman that he could see the number nine, when Wush', with officious kindness, took the doorknob and flung it open with a gesture of welcome to Rod.

There was the great cough of a heavy gun and Wush', his head blown almost completely off, clanked metallically to the iron floor of the balcony. Rod instinctively jumped for cover and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

A handsome man, wearing what seemed to be a black suit, came into the doorway, a heavy-caliber police pistol in his hand.

"Oh, there you are," said he to Rod, evenly enough. "Come on in."

Rod felt his legs working, felt himself walking into the room despite the effort of his mind to resist. He stopped pretending to be a dumb cat. He dropped the books on the ground and went back to thinking like his normal Old North Australian self, despite the cat body. It did no good. He kept on walking involuntarily, and entered the room.

As he passed the man himself, he was conscious of a sticky sweet rotten smell, like nothing he had ever smelled before. He also saw that the man, though fully clothed, was sopping wet.

He entered the room.

It was raining inside.

Somebody had jammed the fire-sprinkler system so that a steady rain fell from the ceiling to the floor.

C'mell stood in the middle of the room, her glorious red hair a wet stringy mop hanging down her shoulders. There was a look of concentration and alarm on her face.

"I," said the man, "am Tostig Amaral. This girl said that her husband would come with a policeman. I did not think she was right. But she was right. With a cat-husband there comes a policeman. I shoot the policeman. He is a robot and I can pay the Earth government for as many robots as I like. You are a cat. I can kill you also, and pay the charges on you. But I am a nice man, and I want to make love with your little red cat over there, so I will be generous and pay you something so that you can tell her she is mine and not yours. Do you understand that, cat-man?"

Rod found himself released from the unexplained muscular bonds which had hampered his freedom.

"My lord, my master from afar," he said, "C'mell is an underperson. It is the law here that if an underperson and a person become involved in love, the underperson dies and the human people gets brain-scrubbed. I am sure, my master, that you would not want to be brainscrubbed by the Earth authorities. Let the girl go. I agree that you can pay for the robot."

Amaral glided across the room. His face was pale, petulant, human, but Rod saw that the black clothes were not clothes at all.

The "clothes" were mucous membranes, an extension of Amaral's living skin.

The pale face turned even more pale with rage.

"You're a bold cat-man to talk like that. My body is bigger than yours, and it is poisonous as well. We have had to live hard in the rain of Amazonas Triste, and we have mental and physical powers which you had better not disturb. If you will not take payment go away anyhow. The girl is mine. What happens to her is my business. If I violate Earth regulations, I will destroy the girl and pay for her. Go away, or you die."

Rod spoke with deliberate calm and with calculated risk. "Citizen, I play no game. I am not a cat-man but a subject of Her Absent Majesty the Queen, from Old North Australia. I give you warning that it is a man you face, and no mere animal. Let that girl go."

C'mell struggled as though she were trying to speak, but could not.

Amaral laughed, "That's a lie, animal, and a bold one! I admire you for trying to save your mate. But she is mine. She is a girlygirl and the Instrumentality gave her to me. She is my pleasure. Go, bold cat! You are a good liar."

Rod took his last chance, "Scan me if you will."

He stood his ground.

Amaral's mind ran over his personality like filthy hands pawing naked flesh. Rod recoiled at the dirtiness and intimacy of being felt by such a person's thoughts, because he could sense the kinds of pleasure and cruelty which Amaral had experienced. He stood firm, calm, sure, just. He was not going to leave C'mell with this—this monster from the stars, man though he might be, of the old true human stock.

Amaral laughed. "You're a man, all right. A boy. A farmer. And you cannot hear or spiek except for the button in your ear. Get out, child, before I box your ears!"

Rod spoke: "Amaral, I herewith put you in danger."

Amaral did not reply with words.

His peaked sharp face grew paler and the folds of his skin dilated. They quivered, like the edges of wet, torn balloons. The room began to fill with a sickening sweet stench, as though it were a candy shop in which all the unburied bodies had died weeks before. There was a smell of vanilla, of sugar, of fresh hot cookies, of baked bread, of chocolate boiling in the pot; there was even a whiff of stroon. But as Amaral tensed and shook out his auxiliary skins each smell turned wrong, into a caricature and abomination of itself. The composite was hypnotic. Rod glanced at C'mell. She had turned completely white. That decided him.

The calm which he had found with the Catmaster might be good, but there were moments for calm and other moments for anger. Rod deliberately chose anger. He felt fury rising in him as hot and quick and greedy as if it had been love. He felt his heart go faster, his muscles become stronger, his mind clearer. Amaral apparently had total confidence in his own poisonous and hypnotic powers, because he was staring straight forward as his skins swelled and waved in the air like wet leaves under water. The steady drizzle from the sprinkler kept everything penetratingly wet.

Rod disregarded this. He welcomed fury. With his new hiering device, he focused on Amaral's mind, and only on Amaral's.

Amaral saw the movement of his eyes and whipped a knife into view.

"Man or cat, you're dying!" said Amaral, himself hot with the excitement of hate and collision. Rod then spoke, in his worst scream-beast, filth, offal-spot, dirt, vileness, wet nasty-die, die, die!

He was sure it was the loudest cry he had ever given. There was no echo, no effect. Amaral stared at him, the evil knife-point flickering in his hand like the flame atop a candle.

Rod's anger reached a new height.

He felt pain in his mind when he walked forward, cramps in his muscles as he used them. He felt a real fear of the offworld poison which this man-creature might

exude, but the thought of C'mell—cat or no cat—alone with Amaral was enough to give him the rage of a beast and the strength of a machine.

Only at the very last moment did Amaral realize Rod had broken loose.

Rod never could tell whether the telepathic scream had really hurt the wetworlder or not, because he did something very simple.

He reached with all the speed of a Norstrilian farmer, snatched the knife from Amaral's hand, ripping folds of soft, sticky skin with it, and then slashed the other man from clavicle to clavicle.

He jumped back in time to avoid the spurt of blood.

The "wet black suit" collapsed as Amaral died on the floor.

Rod took the dazed C'mell by the arm and led her out of the room. The air on the balcony was fresh, but the murder-smell of Amazonas Triste was still upon him. He knew that he would hate himself for weeks, just from the memory of that smell.

There were whole armies of robots and police outside. The body of Wush had been taken away.

There was silence as they emerged.

Then a clear, civilized, commanding voice spoke from the plaza below,

"Is he dead?"

Rod nodded.

"Forgive me for not coming closer. I am the Lord Jestocost. I know you, Croderick, and I know who you really are. These people are all under my orders. You and the girl can wash in the rooms below. Then you can run a certain errand. Tomorrow, at the second hour, I will see you."

Robots came close to them—apparently robots with no sense of smell, because the fulsome stench did not bother them in the least. People stepped out of their way as they passed.

Rod was able to murmur, "C'mell, are you all right?"

She nodded and she gave him a wan smile. Then she forced herself to speak. "You are brave, Mister McBan. You are even braver than a cat."

## *BIRDS, FAR UNDERGROUND*

The robots separated the two of them.

Within moments Rod found little white medical robots taking his clothing off him gently, deftly, and quickly. A hot shower, with a smell of medication to it, was already hissing in the bath-stall. Rod was tired of wetness, tired of all this water everywhere, tired of wet things and complicated people, but he stumbled into the shower with gratitude and hope. He was still alive. He had unknown friends.

And C'mell. C'mell was safe.

"Is this," thought Rod, "what people call love?"

The clean stinging astringency of the shower drove all thoughts from his mind. Two of the little white robots had followed him in. He sat on a hot, wet wooden bench and they scrubbed him with brushes which felt as if they would remove his very skin.

Bit by bit, the terrible odor faded.

Rod McBan was too weary to protest when the little white robots wrapped him in an enormous towel and led him into what looked like an operating room.

A large man, with a red-brown spade beard, very uncommon on Earth at this time, said,

"I am Doctor Vomact, the cousin of the other Doctor Vomact you met on Mars. I know that you are not a cat, Mister and Owner McBan, and it is only my business to check up on you. May I?"

"C'mell-" began Rod.

"She is perfectly all right. We have given her a sedative and for the time being she is being treated as though she were a human woman. Jestocost told me to suspend the rules in her case, and I did so, but I think we will both have trouble about the matter from some of our colleagues later on."

"Trouble?" said Rod. "I'll pay-"

"No, no, it's not payment. It's just the rule that damaged underpeople should be destroyed and not put in hospitals. Mind you, I treat them myself now and then, if I can do it on the sly. But now let's have a look at you."

"Why are we talking?" spieked Rod. "Didn't you know that I can hear now?"

Instead of getting a physical examination, Rod had a wonderful visit with the doctor, in which they drank enormous glasses of a sweet Earth beverage called chai by the ancient Parosski ones. Rod realized that between Redlady, the other Doctor Vomact on Mars, and the Lord Jestocost on Earth, he had been watched and guarded all the way through. He found that this Doctor Vomact was a candidate for a Chiefship of the Instrumentality, and he learned something of the strange tests required for that office. He even found that the doctor knew more than he himself did about his own financial position, and that the actuarial balances of Earth were sagging with the weight of his wealth, since the increase in the price of stroon might lead to shorter lives. The doctor and he ended by discussing the underpeople; he found that the doctor had just as vivid an admiration for C'mell as he himself did. The evening ended when Rod said,

"I'm young, Doctor and Sir, and I sleep well, but I'm never going to sleep again if you don't get that smell away from me, I can smell it inside my nose."

The doctor became professional. He said,

"Open your mouth and breathe right into my face!"

Rod hesitated and then obeyed.

"Great crooked stars!" said the doctor. "I can smell it too. There's a little bit in your upper respiratory system, perhaps a little even in your lungs. Do you need your sense of smell for the next few days?"

Rod said he did not.

"Fine," said the doctor. "We can numb that section of the brain and do it very gently. There'll be no residual damage. You won't smell anything for eight to ten days, and by that time the smell of Amaral will be gone. Incidentally, you were charged with first-degree murder, tried, and acquitted. On the matter of Tostig Amaral."

"How could I be?" said Rod. "I wasn't even arrested."

"The Instrumentality computered it. They had the whole scene on tape, since Amaral's room has been under steady surveillance since yesterday. When he warned you that whether cat or man, you were dying, he finished the case against himself. That was a death threat and your acquittal was for self-defense."

Rod hesitated and then blurted out the truth, "And the men in the shaft?"

"The Lord Jestocost and Crudelta and I talked it over. We decided to let the matter drop. It keeps the police lively if they have a few unsolved crimes here and there. Now lie down, so I can kill off that smell."

Rod lay down. The doctor put his head in a clamp and called in robot assistants. The smell-killing process knocked him out, and when he awakened, it was in a different building. He sat up in bed and saw the sea itself. C'mell was standing at the edge of the water. He sniffed. He smelled no salt, no wet, no water, no Amaral. It was worth the change.

C'mell came to him. "My dear, my very dear, my Sir and Master but my very dear! You chanced your life for me last night."

"I'm a cat myself," laughed Rod.

He leaped from the bed and ran out to the water margin. The immensity of blue water was incredible. The white waves were separate, definable miracles, each one of them. He had seen the enclosed lakes of Norstrilia, but none of them did things like this.

C'mell had the tact to stay silent till he had seen his fill.

Then she broke the news.

"You own Earth. You have work to do. Either you stay here and begin studying how to manage your property. Or you go somewhere else. Either way, something a little bit sad is going to happen. Today."

He looked at her seriously, his pajamas flapping in the wet wind which he could no longer smell.

"I'm ready," he said. "What is it?"

"You lose me."

"Is that all?" he laughed.

C'mell looked very hurt. She stretched her fingers as though she were a nervous cat looking for something to claw.

"I thought—" said she, and stopped. She started again, "I thought—" She stopped again. She turned to look at him, staring fully, trustingly into his face. "You're such a young man, but you can do anything. Even among men you are fierce and decided. Tell me, Sir and Master, what—what do you wish?"

"Nothing much," he smiled at her, "except that I am buying you and taking you home. We can't go to Norstrilia unless the law changes, but we can go to New Mars. They don't have any rules there, none which a few tons of stroon won't get changed. C'mell, I'll stay cat. Will you marry me?"

She started laughing but the laughter turned into weeping. She hugged him and buried her face against his chest. At last she wiped her tears off on her arm and looked up at him:

"Poor silly me! Poor silly you! Don't you see it, Mister, I am a cat. If I had children, they would be cat-kittens, every one of them, unless I went every single week to get the genetic code recycled so that they would turn out underpeople. Don't you know that you and I can never marry—not with any real hope? Besides, Rod, there is the other rule. You and I cannot even see each other again from this sunset onward. How do you think the Lord Jestocost saved my life yesterday? How did he get me into a hospital to be flushed out of all those Amoral poisons? How did he break almost all the rules of the book?"

The brightness had gone out of Rod's day. "I don't know," he said dully.

"By promising them I would die promptly and obediently if there were any more irregularities. By saying I was a nice animal. A biddable one. My death is hostage for what you and I must do. It's not a law. It's something worse than a law—it's an agreement between the Lords of the Instrumentality."

"I see," said he, understanding the logic of it, but hating the cruel Earth customs which put C'mell and himself together, only to tear them apart.

"Let's walk down the beach, Rod," she said. "Unless you want your breakfast first of all..."

"Oh, no," he said. Breakfast! A flutty crupp for all the breakfasts on Earth!

She walked as though she had not a care in the world, but there was an undertone of meaning to her walk which warned Rod that she was up to something.

It happened.

First, she kissed him, with a kiss he remembered the rest of his life.

Then, before he could say a word, she spieked. But her spieking was not words or ideas at all. It was singing of a high wild kind. It was the music which went along with her very own poem, which she had sung to him atop Earthport:

*And oh! my love, for you.  
High birds crying, and a  
High sky flying, and a  
High wind driving, and a  
High heart striving, and a  
High brave place for you!*

But it was not those words, not those ideas, even though they seemed subtly different this time. She was doing something which the best telepaths of Old North Australia had tried in vain for thousands of years to accomplish—she was transmitting the mathematical and proportional essence of music right out of her mind, and she was doing it with a clarity and force which would have been worthy of a great orchestra. The "high wind driving" fugue kept recurring.

He turned his eyes away from her to see the astonishing thing which was happening all around them. The air, the ground, the sea were all becoming thick with life. Fish flashed out of blue waves. Birds circled by the multitude around them. The beach was thick with little running birds. Dogs and running animals which he had never seen before stood restlessly around C'mell—hectares of them. Abruptly she stopped her song. With very high volume and clarity, she spat commands in all directions: "Think of people.."

"Think of this cat and me running away somewhere."

"Think of ships."

"Look for strangers."

"Think of things in the sky."

Rod was glad he did not have his broad-band hiering come on, as it sometimes had done at home. He was sure he would have gone dizzy with the pictures and the contradictions of it all.

She had grabbed his shoulders and was whispering fiercely into his ear:

"Rod, they'll cover us. Please make a trip with me, Rod. One last dangerous trip. Not for you. Not for me. Not even for mankind. For life, Rod. The Aitch Eye wants to see you."

"Who's the Aitch Eye?"

"He'll tell you the secret if you see him," she hissed. "Do it for me, then, if you don't trust my ideas."



He smiled. "For you, C'mell, yes."

"Don't even think, then, till you get there. Don't even ask questions. Just come along. Millions of lives depend on you, Rod."

She stood up and sang again, but the new song had no grief in it, no anguish, no weird keening from species to species. It was as cool and pretty as a music box, as simple as an assured and happy goodbye.

The animals vanished so rapidly that it was hard to believe that legions of them had so recently been there.

"That," said C'mell, "should rattle the telepathic monitors for a while. They are not very imaginative anyhow, and when they get something like this they write up reports about it. Then they can't understand their reports and sooner or later one of them asks me what I did. I tell them the truth. It's simple."

"What are you going to tell them this time?" he asked, as they walked back to the house.

"That I had something which I did not want them to hear."

"They won't take that."

"Of course not, but they will suspect me of trying to beg stroon for you to give to the underpeople."

"Do you want some, C'mell?"

"Of course not! It's illegal and it would just make me live longer than my natural life. The Catmaster is the only underperson who gets stroon, and he gets it by a special vote of the Lords."

They had reached the house. C'mell paused: "Remember, we are the servants of the Lady Frances Oh. She promised Jestocost that she would order us to do anything that I asked her to. So she's going to order us to have a good, hearty breakfast. Then she is going to order us to look for something far under the surface of Earthport."

"She is? But why-"

"No questions, Rod." The smile she gave him would have melted a monument.. He felt well. He was amused and pleased by the physical delight of hiering and spieking with the occasional true people who passed by. (Some underpeople could hear and spiek but they tried to conceal it, for fear that they would be resented.) He felt strong. Losing C'mell was a sad thing to do, but it was a whole day off; he began dreaming of things that he could do for her when they parted. Buying her the services of thousands of people for the rest of her life? Giving her jewelry which would be the envy of Earthmankind? Leasing her a private planoform yacht? He suspected these might not be legal, but they were pleasant to think about.

Three hours later, he had no time for pleasant thoughts. He was bone-weary again. They had flown into Earthport city "on the orders of" their hostess, the Lady Oh, and they had started going down. Forty-five minutes of dropping had made his stomach very queasy. He felt the air go warm and stale and he wished desperately that he had not given up his sense of smell.

Where the dropshafts ended, the tunnels and the elevators began.

Down they went, where incredibly old machinery spun slowly in a spray of oil performing tasks which only the wildest mind could guess at.

In one room, C'mell had stopped and had shouted at him over the noise of engines:

"That's a pump."

It did not look obvious. Huge turbines moved wearily. They seemed to be hooked up to an enormous steam engine powered by nuclear fuel. Five or six brightly polished robots eyed them suspiciously as they walked around the machine, which was at least eighty meters long by forty-five high.

"And come here..." shouted C'mell.

They went into another room, empty and clean and quiet except for a rigid column of moving water which shot from floor to ceiling with no evidence of machinery at all. An underman, sloppily formed from a rat body, got up from his rocking chair when they entered. He bowed to C'mell as though she were a great lady but she waved him back to his chair.

She took Rod near the column of water and pointed to a shiny ring on the floor.

"That's the other pump. They do the same amount of work."

"What is it?" he shouted.

"Force-field, I guess. I'm not an engineer." They went on.

In a quieter corridor she explained that the pumps were both of them for the service of weather control. The old one had been running six or seven thousand years, and showed very little wear. When people had needed a supplementary one, they had simply printed it on plastic, set it in the floor, and turned it on with a few amps. The underman was there just to make sure that nothing broke down or went critical.

"Can't real people design things any more?" asked Rod.

"Only if they want to. Making them want to do things is the hard part now."

"You mean, they don't want to do anything?"

"Not exactly," said C'mell, "but they find that we are better than they are at almost anything. Real work, that is, not statesmanship like running the Instrumentality and the Earth government. Here and there a real human being gets

to work, and there are always offworlders like you to stimulate them and challenge them with new problems. But they used to have secure lives of four hundred years, a common language, and a standard conditioning. They were dying off, just by being too perfect. One way to get better would have been to kill off us underpeople, but they couldn't do that all the way. There was too much messy work to be done that you couldn't count on robots for. Even the best robot, if he's a computer linked to the mind of a mouse, will do fine routine, but unless he has a very complete human education, he's going to make some wild judgments which won't suit what people want. So they need underpeople. I'm still cat underneath it all, but even the cats which are unchanged are pretty close relatives of human beings. They make the same basic choices between power and beauty, between survival and self-sacrifice, between common sense and high courage. So the Lady Alice More worked out this plan for the Rediscovery of Man. Set up Ancient Nations, give everybody an extra culture besides the old one based on the Old Common Tongue, let them get mad at each other, restore some disease, some danger, some accidents, but average it out so that nothing is really changed."

They had come to a storeroom, the sheer size of which made Rod blink. The great reception hall at the top of Earthport had astounded him; this room was twice the size. The room was filled with extremely ancient cargoes which had not even been unpacked from their containers. Rod could see that some were marked outbound for worlds which no longer existed, or which had changed their names; others were inbound, but no one had unpacked them for five thousand years and more.

"What's all this stuff?"

"Shipping. Technological change. Somebody wrote it all off the computers, so they didn't have to think of it any more. This is the thing which underpeople and robots are searching, to supply the ancient artifacts for the Rediscovery of Man. One of our boys-rat stock, with a human I.Q. of 300,—found something marked Muse National. It was the whole National Museum of the Republic of Mali, which had been put inside a mountain when the ancient wars became severe. Mali apparently was not a very important 'nation,' as they called those groupings, but it had the same language as France, and we were able to supply the real material with almost everything they needed to restore some kind of a French civilization. China has been hard. The Chinesians survived longer than any other nation, and they did their own grave robbing, so that we have found it impossible to reconstruct China before the age of space. We can't modify people into being Ancient Chinese."

Rod stopped, thunderstruck. "Can I talk to you here?"

C'mell listened with a faraway look on her face. "Not here. I feel the very weak sweep of a monitor across my mind now and then. In a couple of minutes you can. Let's hurry along."

"I just thought," cried Rod, "of the most important question in all the worlds!"

"Stop thinking it, then," said C'mell, "until we come to a safe place." ..

Instead of going straight on through the big aisle between the forgotten crates and packages, she squeezed between two crates and made her way to the edge of the big underground storeroom.

"That package," she said, "is stroon. They lost it. We could help ourselves to it if we wanted to, but we're afraid of it."

Rod looked at the names on the package. It had been shipped by Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan XXVI to Adaminaby Port and reconsigned to Earthport. "That's one hundred and twenty-five generations ago, shipped from the Station of Doom. My farm. I think it turns poison if you leave it for more than two hundred years. Our own military people have some horrible uses for it, when invaders show up, but ordinary Norstrilians, when they find old stroon, always turn it in to the Commonwealth. We're afraid of it. Not that we often lose it. It's too valuable and we're too greedy, with a twenty million percent import duty on everything..."

C'mell led on. They unexpectedly passed a tiny robot, a lamp fixed to his head, who was seated between two enormous piles of books. He was apparently reading them one by one, because he had beside him a pile of notes larger in bulk than he was. He did not look up, nor did they interrupt him.

At the wall, C'mell said, "Now do exactly what you're told. See the dust along the base of this crate?"

"I see it," said Rod.

"That must be left undisturbed. Now watch. I'm going to jump from the top of this crate to the top of that one, without disturbing the dust. Then I want you to jump the same way and go exactly where I point, without even thinking about it, if you can manage. I'll follow. Don't try to be polite or chivalrous, or you'll mess up the whole arrangement."

Rod nodded.

She jumped to a case against the wall. Her red hair did not fly behind her, because she had tied it up in a turban before they started out, when she had obtained coveralls for each of them from the robot-servants of the Lady Frances Oh. They had looked like an ordinary couple of working people.

Either she was very strong or the case was very light. Standing on the case, she tipped it very delicately, so that the pattern of dust around its base would be unchanged, save for microscopic examination. A blue glow came from beyond the case. With an odd, practiced turn of the wrist she indicated that Rod should jump from his case to the tipped one, and from there into the area—whatever it might be—beyond the case. It seemed easy for him, but he wondered if she could support both his weight and hers on the case. He remembered her order not to talk or think. He tried to think of the salmon steak he had eaten the day before. That should certainly

be a good cat-thought, if a monitor should catch his mind at that moment! He jumped, teetered on the slanting top of the second packing case, and scrambled into a tiny doorway just big enough for him to crawl through. It was apparently designed for cables, pipes and maintenance, not for habitual human use: it was too low to stand in. He scrambled forward.

There was a slam.

C'mell had jumped in after him, letting the case fall back into its old and apparently undisturbed position.

She crawled up to him. "Keep going," she said.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course! Do you want to? It's not a very sociable place."

"That question, that big question," said Rod. "I've got to ask you. You underpeople are taking charge of people, if you're fixing up their new cultures for them, you're getting to be the masters of men!"

"Yes," said C'mell, and let the explosive affirmative hang in the air between them.

He couldn't think of anything to say; it was his big bright idea for the day, and the fact that she already knew underpeople were becoming secret masters— that was too much!

She looked at his friendly face and said, more gently, "We underpeople have seen it coming for a long time. Some of the human people do, too. Especially the Lord Jestocost. He's no fool. And, Rod, you fit in."

"I?"

"Not as a person. As an economic change. As a source of unallocated power."

"You mean, C'mell, you're after me, too? I can't believe it. I can recognize a pest or a nuisance or a robber. You don't seem like any of these. You're good, all the way through." His Voice faltered. "I meant it this morning, C'mell, when I asked you to marry me."

The delicacy of cat and the tenderness of woman combined in her voice as she answered, "I know you meant it." She stroked a lock of hair away from his forehead, in a caress as restrained as any touch could be. "But it's not for us. And I'm not using you myself, Rod. I want nothing for myself, but I want a good world for underpeople. And for people too. For people too. We cats have loved you people long before we had brains. We've been your cats longer than anyone can remember. Do you think our loyalty to the human race would stop just because you changed our shapes and added a lot of thinking power? I love you, Rod, but I love people too. That's why I'm taking you to the Aitch Eye!"

"Can you tell me what that is—now?"

She laughed. "This place is safe. It's the Holy Insurgency. The secret government or the underpeople. This is a silly place to talk about it, Rod. You're going beneath the ground. E'ikusus is one of His sons."

"All of them?" Rod was thinking of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality.

"It's not a them, it's a him. The E'telekali. The bird meet the head of it, right now."

"If there's only one, how did you choose him? Is he like the British Queen, whom we lost so long ago?"

C'mell laughed. "We did not choose Him. He grew and now He leads us. You people took an eagle's egg and tried to make it into a Daimoni man. When the experiment failed, you threw the fetus out. It lived. It's He. It'll be the strongest mind you've ever met. Come on. This is no place to talk, and we're still talking."

She started crawling down the horizontal shaft, waving at Rod to follow her.

He followed.

As they crawled, he called to her,

"C'mell, stop a minute."

She stopped until he caught up with her. She thought he might ask for a kiss, so worried and lonely did he look. She was ready to be kissed. He surprised her by saying, instead,

"I can't smell, C'mell. Please, I'm so used to smelling that I miss it. What does this place smell like?"

Her eyes widened and then she laughed: "It smells like underground. Electricity burning the air. Animals somewhere far away, a lot of different smells of them. The old, old smell of man, almost gone. Engine oil and bad exhaust. It smells like a headache. It smells like silence, like things untouched. There, is that it?"

He nodded and they went on.

At the end of the horizontal C'mell turned and said:

"All men die here. Come on!"

Rod started to follow and then stopped, "C'mell, are you discoordinated? Why should I die? There's no reason to."

Her laughter was pure happiness. "Silly C'rod! You are a cat, cat enough to come where no man has passed for centuries. Come on. Watch out for those skeletons. They're a lot of them around here. We hate to kill real people, but there are some that we can't warn off in time."

They emerged on a balcony, overlooking an even more enormous storeroom than the one before. This had thousands more boxes in it. C'mell paid no attention to it. She went to the end of the balcony and raced down a slender steel ladder.

"More junk from the past!" she said, anticipating Rod's comment. "People have forgotten it up above; we mess around in it."

Though he could not smell the air, at this depth it felt thick, heavy, immobile.

C'mell did not slow down. She threaded her way through the junk and treasures on the floor as though she were an acrobat. On the far side of the old room she stopped. "Take one of these," she commanded.

They looked like enormous umbrellas. He had seen umbrellas in the pictures which his computer had showed him. These seemed oddly large, compared to the ones in the pictures. He looked around for rain. After his memories of Tostig Amaral, he wanted no more indoor rain. C'mell did not understand his suspicions.

"The shaft," she said, "has no magnetic controls, no updraft of air. It's just a shaft twelve meters in diameter. These are parachutes. We jump into the shaft with them and then we float down. Straight down. Four kilometers. It's close to the Moho."

Since he did not pick up one of the big umbrellas, she handed him one. It was surprisingly light.

He blinked at her. "How will we ever get out?"

"One of the bird-men will fly up the shaft. It's hard work but they can do it. Be sure to hook that thing to your belt. It's a long slow time falling, and we won't be able to talk. And it's terribly dark, too."

He complied.

She opened a big door, beyond which there was the feel of nothing. She gave him a wave, partially opened her "umbrella," stepped over the edge of the door and vanished. He looked over the edge himself. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing of C'mell, no sound except for the slippage of air and an occasional mechanical whisper of metal against metal. He supposed that must be the rib-tips of the umbrella touching the edge of the shaft as she fell.

He sighed. Norstrilia was safe and quiet compared to this.

He opened his umbrella too.

Acting on an odd premonition, he took his little hiering-spieking shell out of his ear and put it carefully in his coverall pocket.

That act saved his life.

## *HIS OWN STRANGE ALTAR*

Rod McBan remembered falling and falling. He shouted into the wet adhesive darkness, but there was no reply. He thought of cutting himself loose from his big umbrella and letting himself drop to the death below him, but then he thought of

C'mell and he knew that his body would drop upon her like a bomb. He wondered about his desperation, but could not understand it (Only later did he find out that he was passing telepathic suicide screens which the underpeople had set up, screens fitted to the human mind, designed to dredge filth and despair from the paleocortex, the smell-bite-mate sequence of the nose-guided animals who first walked Earth; but Rod was cat enough, just barely cat enough, and he was also telepathically subnormal, so that the screens did not do to him what they would have done to any normal man of Earth—delivered a twisted dead body at the bottom. No man had ever gotten that far, but the underpeople resolved that none ever should.) Rod twisted in his harness and at last he fainted.

He awakened in a relatively small room, enormous by Earth standards but still much smaller than the storerooms which he had passed through on the way down.

The lights were bright.

He suspected that the room stank but he could not prove it with his smell gone.

A man was speaking, "The Forbidden Word is never given unless the man who does not know it plainly asks for it."

There was a chorus of voices singing, "We remember. We remember. We remember what we remember."

The speaker was almost a giant, thin and pale. His face was the face of a dead saint, pale, white as alabaster, with glowing eyes. His body was that of man and bird both, man from the hips up, except that human hands grew out of the elbows of enormous clean white wings. From the hips down his legs were bird-legs, ending in horny, almost translucent bird-feet which stood steadily on the ground.

"I am sorry, Mister and Owner McBane, that you took that risk. I was misinformed. You are a good cat on the outside but still completely a human man on the inside. Our safety devices bruised your mind and they might have killed you."

Rod stared at the man as he stumbled to his feet. He saw that C'mell was one of the people helping him. When he was erect, someone handed him a beaker of very cold water. He drank it thirstily. It was hot down here—hot, stuffy, and with the feel of big engines nearby.

"I," said the great bird-man, "am Ee'telekeli." He pronounced it Ee-telly-kelly. "You are the first human being to see me in the flesh."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed, fourfold blessed is the name of our leader, our father, our brother, our son the Ee'telekeli" chorused the underpeople.

Rod looked around. There was every kind of underperson imaginable here, including several that he had never even thought of. One was a head on a shelf, with no apparent body. When he looked, somewhat shocked, directly at the head, its face smiled and one eye closed in a deliberate wink. The Ee'telekeli followed his glance. "Do not let us shock you."



"Some of us are normal, but many of us down here are the discards of men's laboratories. You know my son."

A tall, very pale young man with no features stood up at this point. He was stark naked and completely unembarrassed. He held out a friendly hand to Rod. Rod was sure he had never seen the young man before. The young man sensed Rod's hesitation.

"You knew me as A'gentur. I am the E'ikasuk."

"Blessed, blessed, threefold blessed is the name of our leader-to-be, the Yeekasoose!" chanted the under-people.

Something about the scene caught Rod's rough Norstrilian humor. He spoke to the great underman as he would have spoken to another Mister and Owner back home, friendly but bluntly.

"Glad you welcome me, Sir!"

"Glad, glad, glad is the stranger from beyond the stars!" sang the chorus.

"Can't you make them shut up?" asked Rod.

" 'Shut up, shut up, shut up,' says the stranger from the stars!" chorused the group.

The Ee'telekeli did not exactly laugh, but his smile was not pure benevolence.

"We can disregard them and talk, or I can blank out your mind every time they repeat what we say. This is a sort of court ceremony."

Rod glanced around. "I'm in your power already," said he, "so it won't matter if you mess around a little with my mind. Blank them out."

The Ee'telekeli stirred the air in front of him as though he were writing a mathematical equation with his finger; Rod's eyes followed the finger and he suddenly felt the room hush.

"Come over here and sit down," said the Ee'telekeli.

Rod followed.

"What do you want?" he asked as he followed.

The Ee'telekeli did not even turn around to answer. He merely spoke while walking ahead,

"Your money, Mister and Owner McBan. Almost all of your money."

Rod stopped walking. He heard himself laughing wildly. "Money? You? Here? What could you possibly do with it?"

"That," said the Ee'telekeli, "is why you should sit down."

"Do sit," said C'mell, who had followed.

Rod sat down.

"We are afraid that Man himself will die, and leave us alone in the universe. We need Man, and there is still an immensity of time before we all pour into a common destiny. People have always assumed that the end of things is around the corner, and we have the promise of the First Forbidden One that this will be soon. But it could be hundreds of thousands of years, maybe millions. People are scattered, Mister McBan, so that no weapon will ever kill them all on all planets, but no matter how scattered they are, they are still haunted by themselves. They reach a point of development and then they stop."

"Yes," said Rod, reaching for a carafe of water and helping himself to another drink, "but it's a long way from the philosophy of the universe down to my money. We have plenty of barmy swarmy talk in Old North Australia, but I never heard of anybody asking for another citizen's money, right off the bat."

The eyes of the Ee'telekeli glowed like cold fire but Rod knew that this was no hypnosis, no trick being played upon himself. It was the sheer force of the personality burning outward from the bird-man.

"Listen carefully, Mister McBan. We are the creatures of Man. You are gods to us. You have made us into people who talk, who worry, who think, who love, who die. Most of our races were the friends of man before we became underpeople. Like C'mell. How many cats have served and loved man, and for how long? How many cattle have worked for man, been eaten by man, been milked by men across the ages, and have still followed where men went, even to the stars? And dogs. I do not have to tell you about the love of dogs for men. We call ourselves the Holy Insurgency because we are rebels. We are a government. We are a power almost as big as the Instrumentality. Why do you think Teadrinker did not catch you when you arrived?"

"Who is Teadrinker?"

"An official who wanted to kidnap you. He failed because his underman reported to me, because my son E'ikarus, who joined us in Norstrilia suggested the remedies to the Doctor Vomact who is on Mars. We love you, Rod, not because you are a rich Norstrilian, but because it is our faith to love the Mankind which created us."

"This is a long slow wicket for my money," said Rod. "Come to the point, sir."

The Ee'telekeli smiled with sweetness and sadness. Rod immediately knew that it was his own denseness which made the bird-man sad and patient. For the very first time he began to accept the feeling that this person might actually be the superior of any human being he had ever met.

"I'm sorry," said Rod. "I haven't had a minute to enjoy my money since I got it. People have been telling me that everybody is after it. I'm beginning to think that I shall do nothing but run the rest of my life..."

The Ee'telekeli smiled happily, the way a teacher smiles when a student has suddenly turned in a spectacular performance. "Correct. You have learned a lot

from the Catmaster, and from your own self. I am offering you something more—the chance to do enormous good. Have you ever heard of Foundations?"

Rod frowned. "The bottoms of buildings?"

"No. Institutions. From the very ancient past."

Rod shook his head. He hadn't.

"If a gift was big enough, it endured and kept on giving, until the culture in which it was set had fallen. If you took most of your money and gave it to some good, wise men, it could be spent over and over again to improve the race of man. We need that. Better men will give us better lives. Do you think that we don't know how pilots and pinlighters have sometimes died, saving their cats in space?"

"Or how people kill underpeople without a thought?" countered Rod. "Or humiliate them without notice that they do it. It seems to me that you must have some self-interest, sir."

"I do. Some. But not as much as you think. Men are evil when they are frightened or bored. They are good when they are happy and busy. I want you to give your money to provide games, sports, competitions, shows, music, and a chance for honest hatred."

"Hatred?" said Rod. "I was beginning to think that I had found a Believer bird... somebody who mouthed old magic."

"We're not ending time," said the great man-bird. "We are just altering the material conditions of Man's situation for the present historical period. We want to steer mankind away from tragedy and self-defeat. Though the cliffs crumble, we want Man to remain. Do you know Swinburne?"

"Where is it?" said Rod.

"It's not a place. It's a poet, before the age of space. He wrote this. Listen."

*Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble  
Till the terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,  
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides crumble.  
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,  
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,  
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,  
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,  
Death lies dead.*

"Do you agree with that?"

"It sounds nice, but I don't understand it," said Rod. "Please sir, I'm tired than I thought. And I have only this one day with C'mell. Can I finish the business with you and have a little time with her?"

The great underman lifted his arm. His wings spread like a canopy over Rod.

"So be it!" he said, and the words rang out like a great song.

Rod could see the lips of the underpeople chorusing, but he did not notice the sound.

"I offer you a tangible bargain. Tell me if you find I read your mind correctly."

Rod nodded, somewhat in awe.

"You want your money, but you don't want it. You will keep five hundred thousand credits, FOE money, which will leave you the richest man in Old North Australia for the rest of a very long life. The rest you will give to a foundation which will teach men to hate easily and lightly, as in a game, not sickly and wearily, as in habit. The trustees will be Lords of the Instrumentality whom I know, such as Jestocost, Crudelta, the Lady Johanna Gnade."

"And what do I get?"

"Your heart's desire." The beautiful wise pale face stared down at Rod like a father seeking to fathom the puzzlement of his own child. Rod was a little afraid of the face, but he confided in it, too.

"I want too much. I can't have it all."

"I'll tell you what you want."

"You want to be home right now, and all the trouble done with. I can set you down at the Station of Doom in a single long jump. Look at the floor—I have your books and your postage stamp which you left in Amaral's room. They go too."

"But I want to see Earth!"

"Come back, when you are older and wiser. Some day. See what your money has done."

"Well-" said Rod.

"You want C'mell." The bland wise white face showed no embarrassment, no anger, no condescension. "You shall have her, in a linked dream, her mind to yours, for a happy subjective time of about a thousand years. You will live through all the happy things that you might have done together if you had stayed here and become a c'man. You will see your kitten-children flourish, grow old, and die. That will take about one half-hour."

"It's just a dreamy," said Rod. "You want to take megacredits from me and give me a dreamy!"

"With two minds? Two living, accelerated minds, thinking into each other? Have you ever heard of that?"

"No," said Rod.

"Do you trust me?" said the Ee'telekeli.

Rod stared at the man-bird inquisitively and a great weight fell from him. He did trust this creature more than he had ever trusted the father who did not want him, the mother who gave him up, the neighbors who looked at him and were kind. He sighed, "I trust you."

"I also," added the Ee'telekeli, "will take care of all the little incidentals through my own network and I will leave the memory of them in your mind. If you trust me that should be enough. You get home, safe. You are protected, off Norstrilia, into which I rarely reach, for as long as you live. You have a separate life right now with C'mell and you will remember most of it. In return, you go to the wall and transfer your fortune, minus one-half FOE megacredit, to the Foundation of Rod McBan."

Rod did not see that the underpeople thronged around him like worshippers. He had to stop when a very pale, tall girl took his hand and held it to her cheek. "You may not be the Promised One, but you are a great and good man. We can take nothing from you. We can only ask. That is the teaching of Joan. And you have given."

"Who are you?" said Rod in a frightened voice, thinking that she might be some lost human girl whom the underpeople had abducted to the guts of the Earth.

"E'lamelanie, daughter of the Ee'telekeli."

Rod stared at her and went to the wall. He pushed a routine sort of button. What a place to find it! "The Lord Jestocost," he called. "McBan speaking. No, you fool, I own this system."

A handsome, polished plumpish man appeared on the screen. "If I guess right," said the strange man, "you are the first human being ever to get into the depths. Can I serve you, Mister and Owner McBan?"

"Take a note—" said the Ee'telekeli, out of sight of the machine, beside Rod.

Rod repeated it.

The Lord Jestocost called witnesses at his end.

It was a long dictation, but at last the conveyance was finished. Only at one point did Rod balk. When they tried to call it the McBan Foundation, he said, "Just call it the One Hundred and Fifty Fund."

"One Hundred and Fifty?" asked Jestocost.

"For my father. It's his number in our family. I'm to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first. He was before me. Don't explain the number. Just use it."

"All clear," said Jestocost. "Now we have to get notaries and official witnesses to veridicate our imprints of your eyes, hands and brain. Ask the Person with you to give you a mask, so that the cat-man face will not upset the witnesses. Where is this machine you are using supposed to be located? I know perfectly well where I think it is."

"At the foot of Alpha Ralpa Boulevard, in a forgotten market," said the Ee'telekeli. "Your servicemen will find it there tomorrow when they come to check the authenticity of the machine." He still stood out of line of sight of the machine, so that Jestocost could hear him but not see him.

"I know the voice," said Jestocost. "It comes to me as in a great dream. But I shall not ask to see the face."

"Your friend down here has gone where only underpeople go," said the Ee'telekeli, "and we are disposing of his fate in more ways than one, my Lord, subject to your gracious approval."

"My approval does not seem to have been needed much," snorted Jestocost, with a little laugh.

"I would like to talk to you. Do you have any intelligent underperson near you?"

"I can call C'mell. She's always somewhere around."

"This time, my lord, you cannot. She's here."

"There, with you? I never knew she went there." The amazement showed on the face of the Lord Jestocost.

"She is here, nevertheless. Do you have some other underperson?"

Rod felt like a dummy, standing in the visiphone while the two voices, unseen by one another, talked past him. But he felt, very truly, that they both wished him well. He was almost nervous in anticipation of the strange happiness which had been offered to him and C'mell, but he was a respectful enough young man to wait until the great ones got through their business.

"Wait a moment," said Jestocost.

On the screen, in the depths, Rod could see the Lord of the Instrumentality work the controls of other, secondary screens. A moment later Jestocost answered:

"B'dank is here. He will enter the room in a few minutes."

"Twenty minutes from now, my Sir and Lord, will you hold hands with your servant B'dank as you once did with C'mell? I have the problem of this young man and his return. There are things which you do not know, and I would rather not put them on the wires."

Jestocost hesitated only for the slightest of moments. "Good, then," he laughed. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The Ee'telekeli stood aside. Someone handed Rod a mask which hid his cat-man features and still left his eyes and hands exposed. The brain print was gotten through the eyes.

The recordings were made.

Rod went back to the bench and table. He helped himself to another drink of water from the carafe. Someone threw a wreath of fresh flowers around his shoulders. Fresh flowers! In such a place... He wondered. Three rather pretty undergirls, two of them of cat origin and one of them derived from dogs, were loading a freshly dressed C'mell toward him. She wore the simplest and most modest of all possible white dresses. Her waist was cinched by a broad golden belt. She laughed, stopped laughing and then blushed as they led her to Rod.

Two seats were arranged on the bench. Cushions were disposed so that both of them would be comfortable. Silky metallic caps, like the pleasure caps used in surgeries, were fitted on their heads. Rod felt his sense of smell explode within his brain; it came alive richly and suddenly. He took C'mell by the hand and began walking through an immemorial Earth forest, with a temple older than time shining in the clear soft light cast by Earth's old moon. He knew that he was already dreaming. C'mell caught his thought and said,

"Rod, my master and lover, this is a dream. But I am in it with you..."

"Who can measure a thousand years of happy dreaming—the travels, the hunts, the picnics, the visits to forgotten and empty cities, the discovery of beautiful views and strange places? And the love, and the sharing, and the re-reflection of everything wonderful and strange by two separate, distinct and utterly harmonious personalities. C'mell the c"girl and C'roderick the c'man: they seemed happily doomed to be with one another. Who can live whole centuries of real bliss and then report it in minutes? Who can tell the full tale of such real lives—happiness, quarrels, reconciliations, problems, solutions and always sharing, happiness, and more sharing... ?

When they awakened Rod very gently, they let C'mell sleep on. He looked down at himself and expected to find himself old. But he was a young man still, in the deep forgotten underground of the Ee'telekeli, and he could not even smell. He reached for the thousand wonderful years as he watched C'mell, young again, lying on the bench, but the dream-years had started fading even as he reached for them.

Rod stumbled on his feet. They led him to a chair. The Ee'telekeli sat in adjacent chair, at the same table. He seemed weary.

"My Mister and Owner McBan, I monitored your dreamsharing, just to make sure it stayed in the right general direction. I hope you are satisfied."

Rod nodded, very slowly, and reached for the carafe of water, which someone had refilled while he slept.

"While you slept, Mister McBan," said the great E'man, "I had a telepathic conference with the Lord Jestocost, who has been your friend, even though you do not know him. You have heard of the new automatic planoform ships."

"They are experimental," said Rod.

"So they are," said the Ee'telekeli, "but perfectly safe. And the best 'automatic' ones are not automatic at all. They have snake-men pilots. My pilots. They can outperform any pilots of the Instrumentality."

"Of course," said Rod, "because they are dead."

"No more dead than I" laughed the white calm bird of the underground. "I put them in cataleptic trances, with the help of my son the doctor E'ikarus, whom you first knew as the monkey-doctor A'gentur. On the ships they wake up. One of them can take you to Norstrilia in a single long fast jump. And my son can work on you right here. We have a good medical workshop in one of those rooms. After all, it was he who restored you under the supervision of Doctor Vomact on Mars. It will seem like a single night to you, though it will be several days in objective time. If you say goodbye to me now, and if you are ready to go, you will wake up in orbit just outside the Old North Australian subspace net. I have no wish for one of my underpeople to tear himself to pieces if he meets Mother Hilton's dreadful little kittens, whatever they may be. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't," said Rod quickly, "and if I did, I couldn't tell you. It's the Queen's secret."

"The Queen?"

"The Absent Queen. We use it to mean the Commonwealth government. Anyhow, Mister bird, I can't go now. I've got to go back up to the surface of Earth. I want to say goodbye to the Catmaster. And I'm not going to leave this planet and abandon Eleanor. And I want my stamp that the Catmaster gave me.. And the books. And maybe I should report about the death of Tostig Amaral.."

"Do you trust me, Mister and Owner McBane?" The white giant rose to his feet; his eyes shone like fire.

The underpeople spontaneously chorused, "Put your trust in the joyful lawful, put your trust in the loyal-awful bright blank power of the under-bird!"

"I've trusted you with my life and my fortune, so far," said Rod, a little sullenly, "but you're not going to make me leave Eleanor. No matter how much I want to get home. And I have an old enemy at home that I want to help. Houghton Syme the Hon. Sec. There might be something on Old Earth which I could take back to him."

"I think you can trust me a little further," said the Ee'telekeli. "Would it solve the problem of the Hon. Sec. if you gave him a dreamshare with someone he loved, to make up his having a short life?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I can," said the master of the underpeople, "have his prescription made up. It will have to be mixed with plasma from his blood before he takes it.. It would be good for about three thousand years of subjective Ere. We have never let this out of our own undercity before, but you are the Friend of Earth, and you shall have it."



Rod tried to stammer his thanks, but he mumbled something about Eleanor instead: he just couldn't leave her.

The white giant took Rod by the arm and led him back to the visiphone, still oddly out of place in this forgotten room, so far underground.

"You know," said the white giant, "that I will not trick you with false messages or anything like that?"

One look at the strong, calm, relaxed face,—face so purposeful that it had no fretful or immediate purpose,—convinced Rod that there was nothing to fear.

"Tune it, then," said the Ee'telekeli. "If Eleanor wants to go home we will arrange with the Instrumentality for her passage. As for you, my son E'ikarus will change you back as he changed you over. There is only one detail.. Do you want the face you originally had or do you want it to reject the wisdom and experience I have seen you gain?"

"I'm not posh," said Rod. "The same old face will do. If I am any wiser, my people will find it out soon enough."

"Good. He will get ready. Meanwhile, turn on the visiphone. It is already set to search for your fellow-citizen."

Rod flicked it on. There was a bewildering series of flashes and a kaleidoscopic dazzlement of scenes before the machine seemed to race along the beach at Meeya Meefla and searched out Eleanor. This was a very strange screen indeed: it had no visiphone at the other end. He could see Eleanor, looking exactly like his Norstrilian self, but she could not observe that she was being seen.

The machine focused on Eleanor/Rod McBan's face. She/he was talking to a very pretty woman, oddly mixed Norstrilian and Earthlike in appearance.

"Ruth Not-from-here," murmured the Ee'telekeli, "the daughter of the Lord William Not-from-here, a Chief of the Instrumentality. He wanted his daughter to marry 'you' so that they could return to Norstrilia. Look at the daughter. She is annoyed at 'you' right now."

Ruth was sitting on the bench, twisting away at her fingers in nervousness and worry, but her fingers and face showed more anger than despair. She was speaking to Eleanor, the 'Rod McBan.'

"My father just told me!" Ruth cried out "Why, oh why did you give all your money for a Foundation of some kind? The Instrumentality just told him. I just don't understand. There's no point in us getting married now—"

"Suits me," said Eleanor/Rod McBan.

"Suits you, does it!" shrieked Ruth. "After the advantages you've taken of me!"

The false Rod McBan merely smiled at her friendlily and knowledgeably. The real Rod, watching the picture ten kilometers below, thought that Eleanor seemed to have learned a great deal about how to be a young rich man on Earth.

Ruth's face changed suddenly. She broke from anger to laughter. She snowed her bewilderment. "I must admit," she said honestly, "that I didn't really want to go back to the old family home in Old North Australia. The simple, honest life, a little on the stupid side. No oceans. No cities. Just sick, giant sheep and worlds full of money with nothing to spend it on. I like Earth and I suppose I'm decadent..."

Rod/Eleanor smiled right back at her. "Maybe I'm decadent too. I'm not poor. I can't help liking you. I don't want to marry anybody. But I have big credits here, and I enjoy being a young man,—"

"I should say you do!" said Ruth. "What an odd thing for you to say!"

The false 'Rod McBan' gave no sign that he/she noted the interruption. "I've just about decided to stay here and enjoy things. Everybody's rich in Norstrilia, but what good does it do? It had gotten pretty dull for me, I can tell you, or I wouldn't have taken the risk of coming here. Yes. I think I'll stay. I know that Rod,—"  
He/she gasped. "Rod MacArthur, I mean, a sort of relative of mine. Rod can get the tax taken off my personal fortune so that I can stay right here."

("I will, too," said the real Rod McBan, far below the surface of the Earth.)

"You're welcome here, my dear," said the Ruth Not-from-here to the false Rod McBan.

Down below, the Ee'telekeli gestured at the screen. "Seen enough?" he said to Rod.

"Enough," said Rod, "but make sure that she knows I am all right and that I am trying to take care of her. Can you get in touch with the Lord Jestocost or somebody and arrange for Eleanor to stay here and keep her fortune? Tell her to use the name of Roderick Henry McBan the first. I can't let her have the name of the Owners of the Station of Doom, but I don't think Earthpeople will notice the difference anyhow. She'll know it's all right with me, and that's all that matters. If she really likes it here in a copy of my body, may the great sheep sit on her!"

"An odd blessing," said the Ee'telekeli, "but it can all be arranged."

Rod made no move to leave. He had turned off the screen but he just stood there.

"Something else?" said the Ee'telekeli.

"C'mell," said Rod.

"She's all right," said the lord of the underworld. "She expects nothing from you. She's a good under-person."

"I want to do something for her."

"There is nothing she wants. She is happy. You do not need to meddle."

"She won't be a girlygirl forever," Rod insisted. "You underpeople get old. I don't know how you manage without stroon."

"Neither do I," said the Ee'telekeli. "I just happen to have long life. But you're right about her. She will age soon enough, by your kind of time."

"I'd like to buy the restaurant for her, the one the bear-man has, and let it become a sort of meeting place open to people and underpeople. She could give it the romantic and interesting touch so that it could be a success."

"A wonderful idea. A perfect project for your Foundation," smiled the Ee'telekeli. "It shall be done."

"And the Catmaster?" asked Rod. "Is there anything I can do for him?"

"No, do not concern yourself with C'william," said the Ee'telekeli. "He is under the protection of the Instrumentality and he knows the sign of the Fish." The great underman paused to give Rod a chance to inquire what that sign might be, but Rod did not note the significance of the pause, so the birdlike giant went on. "C'william has already received his reward in the good change which he has made in your life. Now, if you are ready, we will put you to sleep, my son E'ikarus will change you out of your cat-body and you will wake in orbit around your home."

"C'mell? Can you wake her up so I can say goodbye after that thousand years?"

The master of the underworld took Rod gently by the arm and walked him across the huge underground room, talking as they went. "Would you want to have another goodbye, after that thousand years she remembers with you, if you were she? Let her be. It is kinder this way. You are human. You can afford to be rich with kindness. It is one of the best traits which you human people have."

Rod stopped. "Do you have a recorder of some kind, then? She welcomed me to Earth with a wonderful little song about 'high birds crying' and I want to leave one of our Norstrilian songs for her."

"Sing anything," said the Ee'telekeli, "and the chorus of my attendants will remember it as long as they live. The others would appreciate it too."

Rod looked around at the underpeople who had followed them. For a moment he was embarrassed at singing to all of them, but when he saw their warm, adoring smiles, he was at ease with them. "Remember this, then, and be sure to sing it to C'mell for me, when she awakens." He lifted his voice a little and sang.

*Run where the ram is dancing, prancing!  
Listen where the ewe is greeting, bleating.  
Rush where the lambs are running, funning.  
Watch where the stroon is growing, flowing.  
See how the men are reaping, heaping  
Wealth for their world!*

*Look, where the hills are dipping, ripping.  
Sit where the air is drying, frying.  
Go where the clouds are pacing, racing.*

*Stand where the wealth is gleaming, teeming.  
Shout to the top of the dinging, ringing  
Norstrilian power and pride.*

The chorus sang it back at him with a wealth and richness which he had never heard in the little song before.

"And now," said the Ee'telekeli, "the blessing of the First Forbidden One be upon you." The giant bowed a little and kissed Rod McBan on the forehead. Rod thought it strange and started to speak, but the eyes were upon him.

Eyes,—like twin fires.

Fire,—like friendship, like warmth, like a welcome and a farewell.

Eyes,—which became a single fire.

He awakened only when he was in orbit around Old North Australia.

The descent was easy. The ship had a viewer. The snake-pilot said very little. He put Rod down in the Station of Doom, a few hundred meters from his own door. He left two heavy packages. An Old North Australian patrol ship hovered overhead and the air hummed with danger while Norstrilian police floated to the ground and made sure that no one besides Rod McBan got off. The Earth ship whispered and was gone.

"I'll give you a hand, Mister," said one of the police. He clutched Rod with one mechanical claw of his ornithopter, caught the two packages in the other, and flung his machine into the air with a single beat of the giant wings. They coasted into the yard, the wings tipped up, Rod and his packages were deposited deftly and the machine flapped away in silence.

There was nobody there. He knew that Aunt Doris would come soon. And Lavinia. Lavinia! Here, now, on this dear poor dry Earth, he knew how much Lavinia suited him. Now he could spiek, he could hear!

It was strange. Yesterday,—or was it yesterday? (for it felt like yesterday),—he had felt very young indeed. And now, since his visit to the Catmaster, he felt somehow grown up, as if he had discovered all his personal ingrown problems and had left them behind on Old Earth. He seemed to know in his deepest mind that C'mell had never been more than nine-tenths his, and that the other tenth,—the most valuable and beautiful and most secret tenth of her life,—was forever given to some other man or underman whom he would never know. He felt that C'mell would never give her heart again. And yet he kept for her a special kind of tenderness, which would never recur. It was not marriage which they had had, but it was pure romance.

But here, here waited home itself, and love.

Lavinia was in it, dear Lavinia with her mad lost father and her kindness to a Rod who had not let much kindness into his life.

Suddenly, the words of an old poem rose unbidden to his mind:

*Ever. Never. Forever.  
Three worlds. The lever  
Of life upon times.  
Never, forever, ever....!*

He spieked. He spieked very loud, "Lavinia!" Beyond the hill the cry came back, right into his mind, "Rod, Rod! Oh, Rod! Rod?"

"Yes," he spieked. "Don't run. I'm home." He felt her mind coming near, though she must have been beyond one of the nearby hills. When he touched minds with Lavinia, he knew that this was her ground, and his too. Not for them the wet wonders of Earth, the golden-haired beauties of C'mell and Earth people! He knew without doubt that Lavinia would love and recognize the new Rod as she had loved the old.

He waited very quietly and then he laughed to himself under the grey nearby friendly sky of Norstrilia. He had momentarily had the childish impulse to rush across the hills and to kiss his own computer. He waited for Lavinia instead.

## *COUNSELS, COUNCILS, CONSOLES AND CONSULS*

### **TEN YEARS LATER, TWO EARTH MEN TALKING**

"You don't believe all the malarkey, do you?"

"What's 'malarkey'?"

"Isn't that a beautiful word? It's ancient. A robot dug it up. It means rubbish, hooey, nonsense, gibberish, phlutt, idle talk or hallucinations,—in other words, just what you've been saying."

"You mean about a boy buying the planet Earth?"

"Sure. He couldn't do it, not even with Norstrilian money. There are too many regulations. It was just an economic adjustment."

"What's an 'economic adjustment?' "

"That's another ancient word I found. It's almost as good as malarkey. It does have some meaning, though, it means that the masters rearrange things by changing the volume of the flow or the title to property. The Instrumentality wanted to shake down the Earth government and get some more free credits to play around with, so between them they invented an imaginary character named Rod McBane. Then, they had him buy the Earth. Then he goes away. It doesn't make sense. No normal boy

would have done that. They say he had one million women. What do you think a normal boy would do if somebody gave him one million women?"

"You're not proving anything. Anyhow, I saw Rod McBan myself, two years ago."

"That's the other one, not the one who is supposed to have bought Earth. That's just a rich immigrant who Jives down near Meeya Meefla. I could tell you some things about him, too."

"But why shouldn't somebody buy Earth if he corners the Norstrilian stroon market?"

"Who ever cornered it in the first place? I tell you, Rod McBan is just an invention. Have you ever seen a picturebox of him?"

"No."

"Did you ever know anybody who met him?"

"I heard that the Lord Jestocost was mixed up in it, and that expensive girlygirl What's-her-name,—you know,—the redhead,—C'mell."

"That's what you heard. Malarkey, pure genuine ancient malarkey.. There was no such boy, ever. It's all propaganda."

"You're always that way. Grumbling. Doubting. I'm glad I'm not you."

"Pal, that's real, real reciprocal. 'Better dead than gullible,' that's my motto."

## **ON A PLANOFORMING SHIP, OUTBOUND FROM EARTH, ALSO TEN YEARS LATER**

The Stop-captain, talking to a passenger, female:

"I'm glad to see, ma'am, that you didn't buy any of those Earth fashions.. Back home, the air would take them off you in half minute."

"I'm old-fashioned," she smiled. Then a thought crossed her mind, and she added a question: "You're in the space business, Sir and Stop-captain. Did you ever hear the story of Rod McBan? I think it's thrilling."

"You mean, the boy who bought Earth?"

"Yes," she gasped. "Is it true?"

"Completely true," he said, "except for one little detail. This 'Rod McBan' wasn't named that at all. He wasn't a Norstrilian. He was a hominid from some other world, and he was buying the Earth with pirate money. They wanted to get his credits away from him, but he may have been a Wet Stinker from Amazonas Triste or he may have been one of those little tiny men, about the size of a walnut, from the Solid Planet That's why he bought Earth and left it so suddenly. You see, Ma'am and Dame, no Old North Australian ever thinks about anything except his money."

They even have one of the ancient forms of government still left on that planet, and they would never get one of their own boys buy Earth. They'd all sit around and talk him into putting in a savings account, instead. They're clannish people. That's why I don't think it was a Norstrilian at all."

The woman's eyes widened. "You're spoiling a lovely story for me, Mister and Stop-captain."

"Don't call me 'mister,' ma'am. That's a Norstrilian title. I'm just a plain 'Sir.'"

They both stared at the little imaginary waterfall, on the wall.

Before the Stop-captain went back to his work, he added, "For my money, it must have been one of those little tiny men from the Solid Planet. Only a fool like that would buy the dower rights to a million women. We're both grown up, Ma'am. I ask you, what would an itty-bitty man from the Solid Planet do with one Earth woman, let along a million of them?"

She giggled and blushed as the Stop-captain stamped triumphantly away, having gotten in his last masculine word.

## **E'LAMELANIE, TWO YEARS AFTER ROD'S DEPARTURE FROM EARTH**

"Father, give me hope."

The Ee'telekeli was gentle. "I can give you almost anything from this world, but you are talking about the world of the sign of the Fish, which none of us controls. You had better go back into the everyday life of our cavern and not spend so much time on your devotional exercises, if they make you unhappy."

She stared at him. "It's not that. It's not that at all. It's just that I know that the robot, the rat and the Copt all agreed that the Promised One would come here to Earth." A desperate note entered her voice. "Father, could it have been Rod McBan?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could he have been the Promised One, without my knowing it? Could he have come and gone just to test my faith?"

The bird-giant rarely laughed; he had never laughed at his own daughter before. But this was too absurd: he laughed at her, but a wise part of his mind told him that the laughter, though cruel now, would be good for her later on.

"Rod? A promised speaker of the truth? Oh, no. Ho—ho—ho. Rod McBan is one of the nicest human beings I ever met. A good young man, almost like a bird. But he's no messenger from eternity."

The daughter bowed and turned away.

She had already composed a tragedy about herself, the mistaken one, who had met "the prince of the word," whom the worlds awaited, and had failed to know him

because her faith was too weak. The strain of waiting for something that might happen now or a million years from now was too much. It was easier to accept failure and self-reproach than to endure the timeless torment of undated hope.

She had a little nook in the wall where she spent many of her eating hours. She took but a little stringed instrument which her father had made for her. It emitted ancient, weeping sounds, and she sang her own little song to it, the song of E'lamelanie who was trying to give up waiting for Rod McBan.

She looked out into the room.

A little girl, wearing nothing but panties, stared at her with fixed eyes. E'lamelanie looked back at the child. It had no expression; it just stared at her. She wondered if it might be one of the turtle-children whom her father had rescued several years earlier.

She looked away from the child and sang her song anyhow:

*Once again, across the years,  
I wept for you.  
I could not stop the bitter tears  
I kept for you.  
The hearthstone of my early life  
was swept for you.  
A different, modulated time  
awaits me now.  
Yet there are moments when the past  
asks why and how.  
The future marches much too fast.  
Allow, allow-  
But no. That's all. Across the years  
I wept for you.*

When she finished, the turtle-child was still watching. Almost angrily, E'lamelanie put away her little violin.

## **WHAT THE TURTLE-CHILD THOUGHT, AT THE SAME MOMENT**

I know a lot even if I don't feel like talking about it and I know that the most wonderful real man in all the planets came right down here into this big room and talked to these people because he is the man that the long silly girl is singing about because she does not have him but why should she anyhow and I am really the one who is going to get him because I am a turtle child and I will be right here waiting when all these people are dead and pushed down into the dissolution vats and someday he will come back to Earth and I will be all grown up and I will be a turtle



woman, more beautiful than any human woman ever was, and he is going to marry me and take me off to his planet and I will always be happy with him because I will not argue all the time, the way that bird-people and cat-people and dog-people do, so that when Rod McBan is my husband and I push dinner out of the wall for him, if he tries to argue with me I will just be shy and sweet and I won't say anything, nothing at all, to him for one hundred years and for two hundred years, and nobody could get mad at a beautiful turtle woman who never talked back...

## **THE COUNCIL OF THE GUILD OF THIEVES, UNDER VIOLA SIDEREA**

The herald called,

"His audacity, the Chief of Thieves, is pleased to report to the Council of Thieves!"

An old man stood, very ceremoniously, "You bring us wealth, Sir and Chief, we trust,—from the gullible,—from the weak,—from the heartless among mankind?"

The Chief of Thieves proclaimed,

"It is the matter of Rod McBan."

A visible stir went through the Council.

The Chief of Thieves went on, with equal formality: "We never did intercept him in space, though we monitored every vehicle which came out of the sticky, sparky space around Norstrilia. Naturally, we did not send anyone down to meet Mother Hilton's Littul Kittens, may the mild-men find them! whatever those 'kittens' may be. There was a coffin with a woman in it and a small box with a head. Never mind. He got past us. But when he got to Earth, we caught four of him."

"Four?" gasped one old Councillor.

"Yes," said the Chief of Thieves. "Four Rod McBans. There was a human one too, but we could tell that one was a decoy. It had originally been a woman and was enjoying itself hugely after having been transformed into a young man. So we got four Rod McBans. All four of them were Earth-robots, very well made."

"You stole them?" said a Councillor.

"Of course," said the Chief of Thieves, grinning like a human wolf. "And the Earth government made no objection at all. The Earth government simply sent us a bill for them when we tried to leave,—something like one-fourth megacredit 'for the use of custom-designed robots.'"

"That's a low honest trick!" cried the Chairman of the Guild of Thieves. "What did you do?" His eyes stared wide open and his voice dropped. "You didn't turn

honest and charge the bill to us, did you? We're already in debt to those honest rogues!"

The Chief of Thieves squirmed a little. "Not quite that bad, your tricky highnesses! I cheated the Earth some, though I fear it may have bordered on honesty, the way I did it."

"What did you do? Tell us quick, man!"

"Since I did not get the real Rod McBan, I took the robots apart and taught them how to be tlifrvs. They stole enough money to pay all the penalties and recoup the expense of the voyage."

"You show a profit?" cried a Councillor.

"Forty minicredits," said the Chief of Thieves. "But the worst is yet to come. You know what Earth does to real tlifrvs."

A shudder went through the room. They all knew about Earth reconditioners which had changed bold tlifrvs into dull honest rogues.

"But, you see, Sirs and Honored Ones," the Chief of Thieves went on, apologetically, "the Earth authorities caught us at that, too. They liked the thief-robots. They made wonderful pickpockets and they kept the people stirred up. The robots also gave everything back. So," said the Chief of Thieves, blushing, "we have a contract to turn two thousand humanoid robots into pickpockets and sneaktlifrvs. Just to make life on Earth more fun. The robots are out in orbit, right now."

"You mean," shrilled the chairman, "you signed an honest contract? You, the Chief of Thieves!"

The Chief really blushed and choked. "What could I do? Besides, they had me. I got good terms, though. Two hundred and twenty credits for processing each robot into a master thief. We can live well on that for a while."

For a long time there was dead silence.

At last one of the oldest Thieves on the Council began to sob: "I'm old. I can't stand it. The horror of it! Us,—us doing honest work!"

"We're at least teaching the robots how to be tlifrvs," said the Chief of Thieves, starkly.

No one commented on that.

Even the herald had to step aside and blow his nose.

## AT MEEYA-MEEFLA, TWENTY YEARS AFTER ROD'S TRIP HOME

Roderick Henry McBan, the former Eleanor, had become only imperceptibly older with the years. He had sent away his favorite, the little dancer, and he

wondered why the Instrumentality, not even the Earth government, had sent him official warning to stay peaceably in the dwelling of the said stated person, there to await an empowered envoy of this Instrumentality and to comply with orders subsequently to be issued by the envoy herein before indicated.

Roderick Henry McBan remembered the long years of virtue, independence and drudgery on Norstrilia with unconcealed loathing. He liked being a rich, wild young man on Earth ever so much better than being a respectable spinster under the grey skies of Old North Australia. When he dreamed, he was sometimes Eleanor again, and he sometimes had long morbid periods in which he was neither Eleanor nor Rod, but a nameless being cast out from some world or time of irrecoverable enchantments. In these gloomy periods, which were few but very intense, and usually cured by getting drunk and staying drunk for a few days, he found himself wondering who he was. What could he be? Was he Eleanor, the honest workwoman from the Station of Doom? Was he an adoptive cousin of Rod McBan, the man who had bought Old Earth itself? What was this self—this Roderick Henry McBan? He maundered about it so much to one of his girlfriends, a calypso singer, that she set his own words, better arranged, to an ancient tune and sang them back to him:

*To be me, is it right, is it good?  
To go on, when the others have stood—  
To the gate, through the door past the wall,  
Between this and the nothing-at-all,*

*It is cold, it is me, in the out.  
I am true, I am me, in the lone.  
Such silence leaves room for no doubt.  
It is brightness unbroken by tone.*

*To be me, it is strange, it is true.  
Shall I lie? To be them, to have peace?  
Will I know, can I tell, when I'm through?  
Do I stop when my troubles must cease?*

*If the wall isn't glass, isn't there,  
If its real but compounded of air,  
Am I lost if I go where I go  
( Where I'm me? am yes. Am I no?*

*To be me, is it right, is it so?  
Can I count on my brain, on my eye?  
Will I be you or be her by and bye?  
Are they true, all these things that I know?*

*You are mad, in the watt.  
On the out, I'm alone and as sane as the grave.  
Do I fail, do I lose what I save?  
Am I me, if I echo your shout?*

*I have gone to a season of time...  
Out of thought, out of life, out of rhyme.  
If I come to be you, do I lose  
The chance to be me if I choose?*

Rod/Eleanor had moments of desperation, and sometimes wondered if the Earth authorities or the Instrumentality would take him/her away from reconditioning.

The warning today was formal, fierce, serene in its implacable self-assurance.

Against his/her better judgment, Roderick Henry McBan poured out a stiff drink and waited for the inevitable.

Destiny came as three men, all of them strangers, but one wearing the uniform of an Old North Australia consul. When they got close, she recognized the consul as Lord William Not-from-here, with whose daughter Ruth he/she had disported on these very sands many years before.

The greetings were wearisomely long, but Rod/ Eleanor had learned, both on Old North Australia and here on Manhome Earth, never to discount ceremony as the salvager of difficult or painful occasions. It was the Lord William Not-from-here who spoke.

"Hear now, Lord Roderick Eleanor, the message of a plenum of the Instrumentality, lawfully and formally assembled, to wit" —

"That you, the Lord Roderick Eleanor be known to be and be indeed a Chief of the Instrumentality until the day of your death" —

"That you have earned this status by survival capacity, and that the strange and difficult lives which you have already led with no thought of suicide have earned you a place in our terrible and dutiful ranks" —

"That in being and becoming the Lord Roderick Eleanor, you shall be man or woman, young or old, as the Instrumentality may order" —

"That you take power to serve, that you serve to take power, that you come with us, that you look not backward, that you remember to forget, that you forget old remembering, that within the Instrumentality you are not a person but a part of a person" —

"That you be made welcome to the oldest servant of mankind, the Instrumentality itself."

Roderick Eleanor had not a word to say.

Newly appointed Lords of the Instrumentality rarely had anything to say. It was the custom of the Instrumentality to take new appointees by surprise, after minute examination of their records for intelligence, will, vitality, and again, vitality.

The Lord William was smiling as he held out his hand and speaking in offworldly honest Norstrilian talk:

"Welcome, cousin from the grey rich clouds. Not many of our people have ever been chosen. Let me welcome you."

Roderick/Eleanor took his hand. There was still nothing to say.

## **THE PALACE OF THE GOVERNOR OF NIGHT, TWENTY YEARS AFTER ROD'S RETURN.**

"I turned off the human voice hours ago, Lavinia. Turned it off. We always get a sharper reading with the numbers. It doesn't have a clue on our boys. I've been across this console a hundred times. Come along, old girl. It's no use predicting the future. The future is already here. Our boys will be out of the van, one way or the other, by the time we walk over the hill and down to them." He spoke with his voice, as a little sign of tenderness between them.

Lavinia asked nervously, "Shouldn't we take an ornithopter and fly?"

"No, girl," said Rod tenderly. "What would our neighbors and kinsmen think if they saw the parents flying in like wild offworlders or a pair of crimson pommies who can't keep a steady head when there's a bit of blow-up? After all, our big girl Casheba made it two years ago, and her eyes weren't so good."

"She's a howler, that one," said Lavinia warmly. "She could fight off a space pirate even better than you could before you could spiek."

They walked slowly up the hill.

When they crossed the top of the hill, they got the ominous melody coming right at them.

*Out in the Garden of Death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.*

In one form or another, all Old North Australians knew that tune. It was what the old people hummed when the young ones had to go into the vans to be selected out for survival or non-survival.

They saw the judges out of the van. The Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was there, his face bland and his cares erased by the special dreamlives which Rod's medicine had brought from the secret underground of Earth. The Lord Redlady was there. And Doctor Wentworth.

Lavinia started to run downhill toward the people, but Rod grabbed her arm and said with rough affection,

"Steady on, old girl. McBans never run from nothing, and to nothing!"

She gulped but she joined pace with him.

People began looking up at them as they approached.

Nothing was to be told from the expressions.

It was title Lord Redlady, unconventional to the end, who broke the sign to them.

He held up one finger.

Only one.

Immediately thereafter Rod and Lavinia saw their twins. Ted, the fairer one, sat on a chair while Old Bill tried to give him a drink. Ted wouldn't take it He looked across the land as though he could not believe what he saw. Rich, the darker twin, stood all alone.

All alone, and laughing.

Laughing.

Rod McBan and his missus walked across the land of Doom to be civil to their neighbors. This was indeed what inexorable custom commanded. She squeezed his hand a little tighter; he held her arm a little more firmly.

After a long time they had done their formal courtesies. Rod pulled Ted to his feet. "Hullo boy. You know who you are?"

Mechanically the boy recited, "Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the hundred-and-fifty-second, Sir and Father!"

Then the boy broke, for just a moment. He pointed at Rich, who was still laughing, off by himself, and then plunged for his father's hug:

"Oh, dad Why me? Why me?"

### *About the Author*

Cordwainer Smith was the pseudonym of Dr. Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-1966).

A member of the Foreign Policy Association and professor of Asiatic Politics at Johns Hopkins University, Dr. Linebarger was one of America's most competent specialists on the Far East and on psychological warfare.

The son of a retired judge who helped finance the Chinese revolution of 1911, he grew up in China, Japan, France and Germany, learning six languages by his late teens. Sun Yat-sen himself was Linebarger's godfather.

Already involved in diplomatic negotiations at the age of seventeen, Linebarger spent the 1930s assisting his father as legal advisor to Chiang Kai-shek and writing his own authoritative texts on Chinese affairs.

Despite having been blinded in one eye as a child, Linebarger contrived to have himself commissioned in the U.S. Army as an intelligence operative in China during World War II. First named to the Office of War Planning, he drew up such stringent specifications for the job that only he could qualify!

As Lt, Col. Linebarger, he again saw service in the Korean War. One of his coups was persuading Chinese soldiers to give themselves up while saving face by shouting words which sounded like "honor" and "duty," but which meant, when spoken in the right order, "I surrender."

His Korean experience led to his writing *Psychological Warfare*, still regarded as the textbook in the field. But he passed up Vietnam, feeling our involvement there was a mistake.

"Scanners Live in Vain," his first science-fiction story as Cordwainer Smith, appeared in 1950. But "War No. 81-Q" had been published in 1928 under the same Anthony Bearden by-line used for poetry quoted in *Norstrilia*; unfortunately, no one can remember where it appeared.

That story, and others that began appearing in 1955, formed parts of a strange history of the future that was a mixture of Oriental and Occidental influence and literary techniques and of scientific and religious philosophy. A High-Church Episcopalian, Linebarger seems to have been striving—perhaps by coincidence—for a synthesis similar to that of Teilhard de Chardin. Smith's shorter stories (A number of which will be published in *The Best of Cordwainer Smith*, later this year by Ballantine Books) trace humanity's rise from the destruction of the Ancient Wars through the adventurous age of space sailors to the decadence of a perfect Utopia—all under the ruthless benevolence of the Instrumentality of Mankind.

*Norstrilia*, Smith's only sf novel, was intended to be the centerpiece of a mosaic of shorter works about the Rediscovery of Man and the Holy Insurgency. These shorter works shed more light on events casually referred to in the novel—previous activities of C'mell and Lord Jestocost, the martyrdom of D'joan and others.





# **The Planet Buyer**

**by Cordwainer Smith**

**(First part of Norstrilia Original)**

THE PLANET BUYER

a science-fiction novel by

CORDWAINER SMITH

For Ted,

my own true wife, with love

THE PLANET BUYER

A PYRAMID BOOK-Published... October 1964

A shorter version of this book appeared in Galaxy Science fiction for April, 1964, under the title: "The Boy Who Bought Old Earth"

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Table of Contents

THEME AND PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE: At the Gate of the Garden of Death

CHAPTER TWO: The Trial

CHAPTER THREE: Anger of the Onseck

CHAPTER FOUR: The Old Broken Treasures in the Gap

CHAPTER FIVE: The Quarrel at the Dinner Table

CHAPTER SIX: The Palace of the Governor of Night

CHAPTER SEVEN: The Eye Upon the Sparrow

CHAPTER EIGHT: FOE Money, SAD Money

CHAPTER NINE: Traps, Fortunes and Watchers

CHAPTER TEN: The Nearby Exile

CHAPTER ELEVEN: Hospitality and Entrapment

## CHAPTER TWELVE: The High Sky Flying

### EPILOGUE AND CODA

#### Theme and Prologue

Story, place and time—these are the essentials.

1

The story is simple. There was a boy who bought the planet Earth. We know that, to our cost. It only happened once, and we have taken pains that it will never happen again. He came to Earth, got what he wanted, and got away alive, in a series of very remarkable adventures. That's the story.

2

The place? That's Old North Australia. What other place could it be? Where else do the farmers pay ten million credits for a handkerchief, five for a bottle of beer? Where else do people lead peaceful lives, untouched by militarism, on a world which is booby-trapped with death and things worse than death? Old North Australia has stroon—the santaclara drug—and more than a thousand other planets clamor for it. But you can get stroon only from Norstrilia—that's what they call it, for short—because it is a virus which grows on enormous, misshapen sheep. The sheep were taken from Earth to start a pastoral system; they ended up as the greatest of imaginable treasures. The simple farmers became simple billionaires, but they kept their farming ways. They started tough and they got tougher. People get pretty mean if you rob them and hurt them for almost three thousand years. They get obstinate. They avoid strangers, except for sending out spies and a very occasional tourist. They don't mess with other people, and they're death, death inside out and turned over twice, if you mess with them.

Then one of their kids showed up on Earth and bought it. The whole place, lock, stock and underpeople.

That was a real embarrassment for Earth.

And for Norstrilia, too.

If it had been the two governments, Norstrilia would have collected all the eye-teeth on earth and sold them back at compound interest. That's the way Norstrilians do business. Or they might have said, "Skip it, cobber. You can keep your wet old ball. We've got a nice dry world of our own." That's the temper they have. Unpredictable.

But a kid had bought Earth, and it was his.

Legally he had the right to pump up the Sunset Ocean, shoot it into space, and sell water all over the inhabited galaxy.

He didn't.

He wanted something else.

The Earth authorities thought it was girls, so they tried to throw girls at him of all shapes, sizes, smells and ages— all the way from young ladies of good family down to dog-derived undergirls who smelled of romance all the time, except for the first five minutes after they had had hot antiseptic showers. But he didn't want girls. He wanted postage stamps.

That baffled both Earth and Norstrilia. The Norstrilians are a hard people from a harsh planet, and they think highly of property. (Why shouldn't they? They have most of it.) A story like this could only have started in Norstrilia.

3

What's Norstrilia like?

Somebody once singsonged it up, like this:

"Gray lay the land, oh. Gray grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high—only hills and gray gray. Watch the dappled dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar.

"That is Norstrilia.

"All the muddy glubbery is gone—all the poverty, the waiting and the pain. People fought their way away, their way away from monstrous forms. People fought for hands and noses, eyes and feet, man and woman. They got it all back again. Back they came from daylight nightmares, centuries when monstrous men, sucking the water around the pools, dreamed of being men again. They found it. Men they were again, again, far away from a horrid when.

"The sheep, poor beasties, did not make it. Out of their sickness they distilled immortality for man. Who says research could do it? Research, besmirch! It was a pure accident. Smack up an accident, man, and you've got it made.

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-gray grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceiling the world.

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of life-forever. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and trolls like you live, it's too right here.

"That's the book, boy.

"If you haven't seen it, you haven't seen Norstrilia. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it. If you got there, you wouldn't get off alive.

"Mother Hilton's littul kittons wait for you down there. Little pets they are, little little little pets. Cute little things, they say. Don't you believe it. No man ever saw them and walked away alive. You won't either. That's the final dash, flash. That's the utter clobber, cobber.

"Charts call the place Old North Australia."

We can suppose that that is what it is like.

4

Time: first century of the Rediscovery of Man.

When C'mell lived.

About the time they polished off Shayol, like wiping an apple on the sleeve.

Long deep into our own time. Fifteen thousand years after the bombs went up and the boom came down on Old, Old Earth.

Recent, see?

5

What happens in the story?

Read it.

Who's there?

It starts with Rod McBan—who had the real name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan. But you can't tell a story if you call the main person by a name as long as Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan. You have to do what his neighbors did—call him Rod McBan. The old ladies always said, "Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-first..." and then sighed. Flurp a squirt at them, friends. We don't need numbers. We know his family was distinguished. We know the poor kid was born to troubles.

Why shouldn't he have troubles?

He was born to inherit the Station of Doom.

He almost failed the Garden of Death.

The Onseck was after him.

His father had died out in the dirty part of space, where people never find nice clean deaths.

When he got in trouble, he trusted his computer.

The computer gambled, and it won Earth.

He went to Earth.

That was history itself—that and C'mell beside him.

At long, long last he got his rights and he came home.

That's the story. Except for the details.

They follow.

CHAPTER ONE: At the Gate of the Garden of Death

Rod McBan faced the day of days. He knew what it was all about, but he could not really feel it. He wondered if they had tranquilized him with half-refined stroon, a product so rare and precious that it was never, never sold off-planet.

He knew that by nightfall he would be laughing and giggling and drooling in one of the Dying Rooms, where the unfit were put away to thin out the human breed, or else he would stand forth as the oldest landholder on the planet, Chief Heir to the Station of Doom. The farm had been salvaged by his great32-grandfather who had bought an ice-asteroid, crashed it into the farm over the violent objections of his neighbors, and learned clever tricks with artesian wells which kept his grass growing while the neighbors' fields turned from gray-green to blowing dust. The McBans had kept the sarcastic old name for their farming station, the Station of Doom.

By night, Rod knew, the station would be his.

Or he would be dying, giggling his way to death in the killing place where people laughed and grinned and rollicked about while they died.

He found himself humming a bit of a rhyme that had always been a part of the tradition of Old North Australia:

We kill to live, and die to grow—

That's the way the world must go!

He'd been taught, bone-deep, that his own world was a very special world—envied, loved, hated and dreaded across the galaxy. He knew that he was part of a very special people. Other races and kinds of men farmed crops, or raised food, or designed machines, and manufactured weapons. Norstrilians did none of these things. From their dry fields, their sparse wells, their enormous sick sheep, they refined immortality itself.

And sold it for a high, high price.

Rod McBan walked a little way into the yard. His home lay behind him. It was a log cabin built out of Daimoni beams—beams uncuttable, unchangeable, solid beyond all expectations of solidity. They had been purchased as a matched set thirty-odd planet-hops away and brought to Old North Australia by photosails. The cabin was a fort which could withstand even major weapons, but it was still a cabin, simple inside and with a front yard of scuffed dust. The last red bit of dawn was whitening into day. Rod knew that he could not go far.

He could hear the women out behind the house, the kinswomen who had come to barber and groom him for the triumph—or the other.

They never knew how much he knew. Because of his affliction, they had thought around him for years, counting on his telepathic deafness to be constant. Trouble was, it wasn't; lots of times he heard things which nobody intended him to hear. He even remembered the sad little poem they had about the young people who failed to pass the test for one reason or another and had to go to the Dying House instead of coming forth as Norstrilian citizens and fully recognized subjects of Her-Majesty-the-Queen. (Norstrilians had not had a real queen for some fifteen thousand years, but they were strong on tradition and did not let mere facts boggle them.) How did the little poem run, "This is the house of the long ago..."? In its own gloomy way it was cheerful.

He erased his own footprint from the dust and suddenly he remembered the whole thing. He chanted it softly to himself:

This is the house of the long ago,  
Where the old ones murmur an endless woe,  
Where the pain of time is an actual pain,  
At the Gate of the Garden of Death  
And things once known always come again.  
Out in the garden of death, our young  
Have tasted the valiant taste of fear,  
With muscular arm and reckless tongue,  
They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.  
This is the house of the long ago.  
Those who die young do not enter here,  
Those living on know that hell is near,  
The old ones who suffer have willed it so.  
Out in the garden of death, the old  
Look with awe on the young and bold.

It was all right to say that they looked with awe at the young and bold, but he hadn't met a person yet who did not prefer life to death. He'd heard about people who chose death—of course he had—who hadn't? But the experience was third-hand, fourth-hand, fifth-hand.

He knew that some people had said of him that he would be better off dead, just because he had never learned to communicate telepathically and had to use old spoken words like outworlders or barbarians.

Rod himself certainly didn't think he would be better dead.

Indeed, he sometimes looked at normal people and wondered how they managed to go through life with the constant silly chatter of other people's thoughts running through their minds. In the times that his mind lifted, so that he could "hier" for a while, he knew that hundreds or thousands of minds rattled in on him with unbearable clarity; he could even "hier" the minds that thought they had their telepathic shields up. Then, in a little while, the merciful cloud of his handicap came down on his mind again and he had a deep unique privacy which everybody on Old North Australia should have envied.

His computer had said to him once, "The words hier and spiek are corruptions of the words hear and speak. They are always pronounced in the second rising tone of voice, as though you were asking a question under the pressure of amusement and alarm, if you say the words with your voice.

They refer only to telepathic communications between persons or between persons and underpeople."

"What are underpeople?" he had asked.

"Animals modified to speak, to understand, and usually to look like men. They differ from cerebrocentered robots in that the robots are built around an actual animal mind, but are mechanical and electronic relays, while underpeople are composed entirely of Earth-derived living tissue."

"Why haven't I ever seen one?"

"They are not allowed on Norstrilia at all, unless they are in the service of the defense establishments of the Commonwealth."

"Why are we called a Commonwealth, when all the other places are called worlds or planets?"

"Because you people are subjects of the Queen of England."

"Who is the Queen of England?"

"She was an Earth ruler in the Most Ancient Days, more than fifteen thousand years ago."

"Where is she now?"

"I said," said the computer, "that it was fifteen thousand years ago."

"I know it," Rod had insisted, "but if there hasn't been any Queen of England for fifteen thousand years, how can we be her subjects?"

"I know the answer in human words," the reply had been from the friendly red machine, "but since it makes no sense to me, I shall have to quote it to you as people told it to me. 'She bloody well might turn up one of these days. Who knows? This is Old North Australia out here among the stars and we can dashed well wait for our own Queen.' She might have been off on a trip when Old Earth went sour." The computer had clucked a few times in its odd ancient voice and had then said hopefully, in its toneless voice, "Could you restate that so that I could program it as part of my memory-assembly?"

"It doesn't mean much to me. Next time I can hier other minds thinking I'll try to pick it out of somebody else's head."

That had been about a year ago, and Rod had never run across the answer.

Last night he had asked the computer a more urgent question:

"Will I die tomorrow?"

"Question irrelevant. No answer available."

"Computer!" he had shouted, "you know I love you."

"You say so."

"I started your historical assembly up after repairing you, when that part had been thinkless for hundreds of years."

"Correct."

"I crawled down into this cave and found the personal controls, where great14-grandfather had left them when they became obsolete."

"Correct."

"I'm going to die tomorrow and you won't even be sorry."

"I did not say that," said the computer.

"Don't you care?"

"I was not programmed for emotion. Since you yourself repaired me, Rod, you ought to know that I am the only all-mechanical computer functioning in this part of the galaxy. I am sure that if I had emotions I would be very sorry indeed. It is an extreme probability, since you are my only companion. But I do not have emotions. I have numbers, facts, language, and memory—that is all."

"What is the probability, then, that I will die tomorrow in the Giggle Room?"

"That is not the right name. It is the Dying House."

"All right, then, the Dying House."

"The judgment on you will be a contemporary human judgment based upon emotions. Since I do not know the individuals concerned, I cannot make a prediction of any value at all."

"What do you think is going to happen to me, computer?"

"I do not really think, I respond. I have no input on that topic."

"Do you know anything at all about my life and death tomorrow? I know I can't speak with my mind, but I have to make sounds with my mouth instead. Why should they kill me for that?"

"I do not know the people concerned and therefore I do not know the reasons," the computer had replied, "but I know the history of Old North Australia down to your great14-grandfather's time."

"Tell me that, then," Rod had said. He had squatted in the cave which he had discovered, listening to the forgotten set of computer controls which he had repaired, and had heard again the story of Old North Australia as his great14-grandfather had understood it. Stripped of personal names and actual dates, it was a simple story.

This morning his life hung on it.

Norstrilia had to thin out its people if it were going to keep its Old Old Earth character and be another Australia, out among the stars. Otherwise the fields would fill up, the deserts turn into apartment houses, the sheep die in cellars under endless kennels for crowded and useless people. No Old North Australian wanted that to happen, when he could keep character, immortality, and wealth—in that particular order of importance. It would be contrary to the temperament of Norstrilia.

The simple character of Norstrilia was immutable—as immutable as anything out among the stars. This ancient Commonwealth was the only human institution older than the Instrumentality.

The story was simple, the way the computer's clear long-circuited brain had sorted it out.

Take a farmer culture straight off Old Old Earth—Manhome itself.

Put the culture on a remote planet.

Touch it with prosperity and blight it with drought.

Teach it sickness, deformity, hardihood. Make it learn poverty so bad that men sold one child to buy another child the drink of water which would give it an extra day of life while the drills whirled deep into the dry rock, looking for wetness.

Teach that culture thrift, medicine, scholarship, pain, survival.

Give those people the lessons of poverty, war, grief, greed, magnanimity, piety, hope and despair by turn.

Let the culture survive.

Survive disease, deformity, despair, desolation, abandonment.

Then give it the happiest accident in the history of time.

Out of sheep-sickness came infinite riches, the santaclara drug or "stroon" which prolonged human life indefinitely.

Prolonged it—but with queer side-effects, so that most Norstrilians preferred to die in a thousand years or so.

Norstrilia was convulsed by the discovery.

So was every other inhabited world.

But the drug could not be synthesized, paralleled, duplicated. It was something which could be obtained only from the sick sheep on the Old North Australian plains.

Robbers and governments tried to steal the drug. Now and then they succeeded, long ago, but they hadn't made it since the time of Rod's great19-grandfather.

They had tried to steal the sick sheep.

Several had been taken off the planet. (The Fourth Battle of New Alice, in which half the menfolk of Norstrilia had died beating off the Bright Empire, had led to the loss of two of the sick sheep—one female and one male. The Bright Empire thought it had won. It hadn't. The sheep got well, produced healthy lambs, exuded no more stroon, and died. The Bright Empire had paid four battle fleets for a coldbox full of mutton.) The monopoly remained in Norstrilia.

The Norstrilians exported the santaclara drug, and they put the export on a systematic basis.

They achieved almost infinite riches.

The poorest man on Norstrilia was always richer than the richest man anywhere else, emperors and conquerors included. Every farm hand earned at least a hundred Earth megacredits a day—measured in real money on Old Earth, not in paper which had to travel at a steep arbitrage.

But the Norstrilians made their choice: the choice—

To remain themselves.

They taxed themselves back into simplicity.

Luxury goods got a tax of 20,000,000%. For the price of fifty palaces on Olympia, you could import a handkerchief into Norstrilia. A pair of shoes, landed, cost the price of a hundred yachts in orbit. All machines were prohibited, except for defense and the drug-gathering. Underpeople were never made on Norstrilia, and imported only by the defense authority for top secret reasons. Old North Australia remained simple, pioneer, fierce, open.

Many families emigrated to enjoy their wealth; they could not return.

But the population problem remained, even with the taxation and simplicity and hard work.

Cutback, then—cut back people if you must.

But how, whom, where? Birth control—bestly. Sterilization—inhuman, unmanly, unBritish. (This last was an ancient word meaning "very bad indeed.")

By families, then. Let the families have the children. Let the Commonwealth test them at sixteen. If they ran under the standards, send them to a happy, happy death.

But what about the families? You can't wipe a family out, not in a conservative farmer society, when the neighbors are folk who have fought and died beside you for a hundred generations. The Rule of Exceptions came. Any family which reached the end of its line could have the last surviving heir reprocessed—up to four times. If he failed, it was the Dying House, and a designated adopted heir from another family took over the name and the estate.

Otherwise their survivors would have gone on, in this century a dozen, in that century twenty. Soon Norstrilia would have been divided into two classes, the sound ones and a privileged class of



hereditary freaks. This they could not stand, not while the space around them stank of danger, not when men a hundred worlds away dreamed and died while thinking of how to rob the stroon. They had to be fighters and chose not to be soldiers or emperors. Therefore they had to be fit, alert, healthy, clever, simple and moral. They had to be better than any possible enemy or any possible combination of enemies.

They made it.

Old North Australia became the toughest, brightest, simplest world in the galaxy. One by one, without weapons, Norstrilians could tour the other world and kill almost anything which attacked them. Governments feared them. Ordinary people hated them or worshipped them. Off-world men eyed their women queerly. The Instrumentality left them alone, or defended them without letting the Norstrilians know they had been defended. (As in the case of Raumsog, who brought his whole world to a death of cancer and volcanoes, because the Golden Ship struck once.)

Norstrilian mothers learned to stand by with dry eyes when their children, unexpectedly drugged if they failed the tests, drooled with pleasure and went giggling away to their deaths.

The space and subspace around Norstrilia became sticky, sparky with the multiplicity of their defenses. Big outdoorsy men sailed tiny fighting craft around the approaches to Old North Australia. When people met them in outports, they always thought that Norstrilians looked simple; the looks were a snare and a delusion. The Norstrilians had been conditioned by thousands of years of unprovoked attack. They looked as simple as sheep but their minds were as subtle as serpents.

And now—Rod McBan.

The last heir, the very last heir, of their proudest old family had been found a half-freak. He was normal enough by Earth standards, but by Norstrilian measure he was inadequate. He was a bad, bad telepath. He could not be counted on to hier. Most of the time other people could not transmit into his mind at all; they could not even read it. All they got was a fiery bubble and a dull fuzz of meaningless sub-sememes, fractions of thought which added up to less than nothing. And on spieking, he was worse. He could not talk with his mind at all. Now and then he transmitted. When he did, the neighbors ran for cover. If it was anger, a bloody screaming roar almost blotted out their consciousnesses with a rage as solid and red as meat hanging in a slaughterhouse. If he was happy, it was worse. His happiness, which he transmitted without knowing it, had the distractiveness of a speed-saw cutting into diamond-grained rock. His happiness drilled into people with an initial sense of pleasure, followed rapidly by acute discomfort and the sudden wish that all their own teeth would fall out: the teeth had turned into spuming whirls of raw, unqualified discomfort.

They did not know his biggest personal secret. They suspected that he could hier now and then without being able to control it. They did not know that when he did hier, he could hier everything for miles around with microscopic detail and telescopic range. His telepathic intake, when it did work, went right through other people's mind-shields as though they did not exist. (If some of the women in the farms around the Station of Doom knew what he had accidentally peeped out of their minds, they would have blushed the rest of their lives.) As a result, Rod McBan had a frightful amount of unsorted knowledge which did not quite fit together.

Previous committees had neither awarded him the Station of Doom nor sent him off to the giggle death. They had appreciated his intelligence, his quick wit, his enormous physical strength. But they remained worried about his telepathic handicap. Three times before he had been judged. Three times.

And three times judgment had been suspended. They had chosen the lesser cruelty and had sent him not to death, but to a new babyhood and a fresh upbringing, hoping that the telepathic capacity of his mind would naturally soar up to the Norstrilian normal. They had underestimated him.

He knew it.

Thanks to the eavesdropping which he could not control, he understood bits and pieces of what was happening, even though nobody had ever told him the rational whys and hows of the process.

It was a gloomy but composed big boy who gave the dust of his own front yard one last useless kick, who turned back into the cabin, walking right through to the main room to the rear door and the back yard, and who greeted his kinswomen politely enough as they, hiding their aching hearts, prepared to dress him up for his trial. They did not want the child to be upset, even though he was as big as a man and showed more composure than did most adult men. They wanted to hide the fearful truth from him. How could they help it?

He already knew.

But he pretended he didn't.

Cordially enough, just scared enough but not too much, he said:

"What ho, auntie! Hello, cousin. Morning, Maribel. Here's your sheep. Curry him up and trim him for the livestock competition. Do I get a ring in my nose or a bow ribbon around my neck?"

One or two of the young ones laughed, but his oldest "aunt"—actually a fourth cousin, married into another family—pointed seriously and calmly at a chair in the yard and said: "Do sit down, Roderick. This is a serious occasion and we usually do not talk while preparations are going on."

She bit her lower lip and then she added, not as though she wanted to frighten him but because she wanted to impress him:

"The Vice-chairman will be here today."

"The Vice-chairman" was the head of the government; there had been no Chairman of the Temporary Commonwealth Government for some thousands of years. Norstrilians did not like posh and they thought that "vice-chairman" was high enough for any one man to go. Besides, it kept the offworlders guessing.

(Rod was not impressed. He had seen the man. It was in one of his rare moments of broad hieing, and he found that the mind of the Vice-chairman was full of numbers and horses, the results of every horse race for three hundred and twenty years, and the projection forward of six probable horse races in the next two years.)

"Yes, auntie," he said.

"Don't bray all the time today. You don't have to use your voice for little things like saying yes. Just nod your head. It will make a much better impression."

He started to answer, but gulped and nodded instead.

She sank the comb into his thick yellow hair.

Another one of the women, almost a girl, brought up a small table and a basin. He could tell from her expression that she was spieking to him, but this was one of the times in which he could not hier at all.

The aunt gave his hair a particularly fierce tug just as the girl took his hand. He did not know what she meant to do. He yanked his hand back.

The basin fell off the small table. Only then did he realize that it was merely soapy water for a manicure.

"I am sorry," he said; even to him, his voice sounded like a bray. For a moment he felt the fierce rush of humiliation and self-hate.

They should kill me, he thought... By the time the sun goes down I'll be in the Giggle Room, laughing and laughing before the medicine makes my brains boil away.

He had reproached himself.

The two women had said nothing. The aunt had walked away to get some shampoo, and the girl was returning with a pitcher, to refill the basin.

He looked directly into her eyes, and she into his.

"I want you," she said, very clearly, very quietly, and with a smile which seemed inexplicable to him.

"What for?" said he, equally quietly.

"Just you," she said. "I want you for myself. You're going to live."

"You're Lavinia, my cousin," said he, as though discovering it for the first time.

"Sh-h-h," said the girl. "She's coming back."

When the girl had settled down to getting his fingernails really clean, and the aunt had rubbed something like sheep-dip into his hair, Rod began to feel happy. His mood changed from the indifference which he had been pretending to himself. It became a real indifference to his fate, an easy acceptance of the gray sky above him, the dull rolling earth below. He had a fear—a little tiny fear, so small that it might have seemed to be a midget pet in a miniature cage—running around the inside of his thinking. It was not the fear that he would die: somehow he suddenly accepted his chances and remembered how many other people had had to take the same play with fortune. This little fear was something else, the dread that he might not behave himself properly if they did tell him to die.

But then, he thought, I don't have to worry. Negative is never a word—just a hypodermic, so that the first bad news the victim has is his own excited, happy laugh.

With this funny peace of mind, his hiering suddenly lifted.

He could not see the Garden of Death, but he could look into the minds tending it; it was a huge van hidden just beyond the next roll of hills, where they used to keep Old Billy, the 1,800-ton ram. He could hear the clatter of voices in the little town eighteen kilometers away. And he could look right into Lavinia's mind.

It was a picture of himself. But what a picture! So grown, so handsome, so brave-looking. He had schooled himself not to move when he could hier, so that other people would not realize that his rare telepathic gift had come back to him.

Auntie was speaking to Lavinia without noisy words, "We'll see this pretty boy in his coffin tonight."

Lavinia thought right back, without apology, "No, we won't."

Rod sat impassive in his chair. The two women, their faces grave and silent, went on spieking the argument at each other with their minds.

"How would you know—you're not very old?" spieked auntie.

"He has the oldest station in all of Old North Australia. He has one of the very oldest names. He is—" and even in spieking her thoughts cluttered up, like a stammer—"he is a very nice boy and he is going to be a wonderful man."

"Mark my thought," spieked the auntie again, "I'm telling you that we'll see him in his coffin tonight and that by midnight he'll be in his coffin-ride to the Long Way Out."

Lavinia jumped to her feet. She almost knocked over the basin of water a second time. She moved her throat and mouth to speak words but she just croaked,

"Sorry, Rod. Sorry."

Rod McBan, his face guarded, gave a pleasant, stupid little nod, as though he had no idea of what they had been spieking to each other.

She turned and ran, shout-spieking the loud thought at auntie, "Get somebody else to do his hands. You're heartless, hopeless. Get somebody else to do your corpse-washing for you. Not me. Not me."

"What's the matter with her?" said Rod to the auntie, just as though he did not know.

"She's just difficult, that's all. Just difficult. Nerves, I suppose," she added in her croaking spoken words. She could not talk very well, since all her family and friends could spiek and hier with privacy and grace. "We were spieking with each other about what you would be doing tomorrow."

"Where's a priest, auntie?" said Rod.

"A what?"

"A priest, like the old poem has, in the rough, rough days before our people found this planet and got our sheep settled down. Everybody knows it:

Here is the place where the priest went mad,  
Over there my mother burned,  
I cannot show you the house we had,  
We lost that slope where the mountain turned.

There's more to it, but that's the part I remember. Isn't a priest a specialist in how to die? Do we have any around here?"

He watched her mind as she lied to him. As he had spoken, he had a perfectly clear picture of one of their more distant neighbors, a man named Tolliver, who had a very gentle manner; but her words were not about Tolliver at all.

"Some things are men's business," she said, cawing her words. "Anyhow, that song isn't about Norstrilia at all. It's about Paradise VII and why we left it. I didn't know you knew it."

In her mind he read, "That boy knows too much."

"Thanks, auntie," said he meekly.

"Come along for the rinse," said she. "We're using an awful lot of real water on you today."

He followed her and he felt more kindly toward her when he saw her think, Lavinia had the right feelings but she drew the wrong conclusion. He's going to be dead tonight.

That was too much.

Rod hesitated for a moment, tempering the chords of his oddly-attuned mind. Then he let out a tremendous howl of telepathic joy, just to bother the lot of them. It did. They all stopped still. Then they stared at him.

In words the auntie said, "What was that?"

"What?" said he, innocently.

"That noise you spieked. It wasn't meaning."

"Just sort of a sneeze, I suppose. I didn't know I did it." Deep down inside himself he chuckled. He might be on his way to the Hoohoo Garden, but he would fritter their friskies for them while he did it.

It was a dashed silly way to die, he thought all to himself.

And then a strange, crazy, happy idea came to him:

Perhaps they can't kill me. Perhaps I have powers. Powers of my own. Well, we'll soon enough find out.

## CHAPTER TWO: The Trial

Rod walked across the dusty lot, took three steps up the folding staircase which had been let down from the side of the trailer van, knocked on the door once as he had been instructed to do, had a green light flash in his face, opened the door, and entered.

It was a garden.

The moist, sweet, scent-laden air was like a narcotic. There were bright green plants in profusion. The lights were clear but not bright; their ceiling gave the effect of a penetrating blue, blue sky. He looked around. It was a copy of Old Old Earth. The growths on the green plants were roses; he remembered pictures which his computer had showed him. The pictures had not gotten across the idea that they smelled nice at the same time that they looked nice. He wondered if they did that all the time, and then remembered the wet air: wet air always holds smells better than dry air does. At last, almost shyly, he looked up at the three judges.

With real startlement, he saw that one of them was not a Norstrilian at all, but the local commissioner of the Instrumentality, the Lord Redlady—a thin man with a sharp, inquiring face. The other two were Old Taggart and John Beasley. He knew them, but not well.

"Welcome," said the Lord Redlady, speaking in the funning singsong of a man from Manhome.

"Thank you," said Rod.

"You are Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan, the one hundred and fifty-first?" said Taggart, knowing perfectly well that Rod was that person.

Lord love-a-duck and lucky me! thought Rod, I've got my hiering, even in this place!

"Yes," said the Lord Redlady.

There was silence.

The other two judges looked at the Manhome man; the stranger looked at Rod; Rod stared, and then began to feel sick at the bottom of his stomach.

For the first time in his life, he had met somebody who could penetrate his peculiar perceptual abilities.

At last he thought, "I understand."

The Lord Redlady looked sharply and impatiently at him, as though waiting for a response to that single word "yes."

Rod had already answered—telepathically.

At last Old Taggart broke the silence: "Aren't you going to talk? I asked you your name."

The Lord Redlady held up his hand in a gesture for patience; it was not a gesture which Rod had ever seen before, but he understood it immediately.

He thought telepathically at Rod, "You are watching my thoughts."

"Indeed I am," thought Rod, back at him.

The Lord Redlady clapped a hand to his forehead. "You are hurting me. Did you think you said something?"

With his voice Rod said, "I told you that I was reading your mind."

The Lord Redlady turned to the other two men and spieked to them: "Did either of you hier what he tried to spiek?"

"No."

"No." They both thought back at him. "Just noise, loud noise."

"He is a broadbander like myself. And I have been disgraced for it. You know that I am the only Lord of the Instrumentality who has been degraded from the status of Lord to that of Commissioner—"

"Yes," they spieked.

"You know that they could not cure me of shouting and suggested I die?"

"No," they answered.

"You know that the Instrumentality thought I could not bother you here and sent me to your planet on this miserable job, just to get me out of the way?"

"Yes," they answered.

"Then, what do you want to do about him? Don't try to fool him. He knows all about this place already." The Lord Redlady glanced quickly, sympathetically up at Rod, giving him a little phantom smile of encouragement. "Do you want to kill him? To exile him? To turn him loose?"

The other two men fussed around in their minds. Rod could see that they were troubled at the idea he could watch them thinking, when they had thought him a telepathic deaf-mute; they also resisted the Lord Redlady's unmannerly precipitation of the decision. Rod almost felt that he was swimming in the thick wet air, with the smell of roses cloying his nostrils so much that he would never smell anything but roses again, when he became aware of a massive consciousness very near him—a fifth person in the room, whom he had not noticed at all before.

It was an earth soldier, complete with uniform. The soldier was handsome, erect, tall, formal with a rigid military decorum. He was, furthermore, not human and he had a strange weapon in his left hand.

"What is that?" spieked Rod to the Earthman. The man saw his face, not the thought.

"An underman. A snakeman. The only one on this planet. He will carry you out of here if the decision goes against you."

Beasley cut in, almost angrily. "Here, cut it out. This is a hearing, not a blossoming tea-party. Don't clutter all that futt into the air. Keep it formal."

"You want a formal hearing?" said the Lord Redlady. "A formal hearing for a man who knows everything that all of us are thinking? It's foolish."

"In Old North Australia, we always have formal hearing," said Old Taggart. With an acuteness of insight born of his own personal danger, Rod saw Taggart all over again for the first time—a careworn poor old man, who had worked a poor farm hard for a thousand years; a farmer, like his ancestors before him; a man rich only in the millions of megacredits which he would never take time to spend; a man of the soil, honorable, careful, formal, righteous, and very just. Such men did not yield to innovation, ever. They fought change.

"Have the hearing then," said the Lord Redlady, "have the hearing if it is your custom, my mister and owner Taggart, my mister and owner Beasley."

The Norstrilians, appeased, bowed their heads briefly.

Almost shyly, Beasley looked over at the Lord Redlady. "Sir and Commissioner, will you say the words? The good old words. The ones that will help us to find our duty and to do it."

Rod saw a quick flare of red anger go through the Lord Redlady's mind as the Earth commissioner thought fiercely to himself, "Why all this fuss about killing one poor boy? Let him go, you dull clutts, or kill him." But the Earthman had not directed the thoughts outward and the two Norstrilians were unaware of his private view of them.

On the outside, the Lord Redlady remained calm. He used his voice, as Norstrilians did on occasion of great ceremony:

"We are here to hear a man."

"We are here to hear him," they responded.

"We are not to judge or to kill, though this may follow," said he.

"Though this may follow," they responded.

"And where, on Old Old Earth, does man come from?"

They knew the answer by rote and said it heavily together: "This is the way it was on Old Old Earth, and this is the way it shall be among the stars, no matter how far we men may wander:

"The seed of wheat is planted in dark, moist earth; the seed of man in dark, moist flesh. The seed of wheat fights upward to air, sun and space; the stalk, leaves, blossom and grain flourish under the open glare of heaven. The seed of man grows in the salty private ocean of the womb, the sea-darkness remembered by the bodies of his race. The harvest of wheat is collected by the hands of men; the harvest of men is collected by the tenderness of eternity."

"And what does this mean?" chanted the Lord Redlady.

"To look with mercy, to decide with mercy, to kill with mercy, but to make the harvest of man strong and true and good, the way that the harvest of wheat stood high and proud on Old Old Earth."

"And who is here?" he asked.

They both recited Rod's full name.

When they had finished, the Lord Redlady turned to Rod and said, "I am about to utter the ceremonial words, but I promise you that you will not be surprised, no matter what happens. Take it easy, therefore; easy, easy." Rod was watching the Earthman's mind and the mind of the two Norstrilians. He could see that Beasley and Taggart were befuddled with the ritual of the words, the wetness and scent of the air, and the false blue sky in the top of the van; they did not know what they were going to do. But Rod could also see a sharp, keen triumphant thought forming in the bottom of the Lord Redlady's mind, I'll get this boy off! He almost smiled, despite the presence of the snake man with the rigid smile and the immovable glaring eyes standing just three paces beside him and a little to his rear, so that Rod could only look at him through the corner of his eye.

"Misters and owners!" said the Lord Redlady.

"Mister chairman!" they answered.

"Shall I inform the man who is being heard?"

"Inform him!" they chanted.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one hundred and fifty-first."

"Yes sir," said Rod.

"Heir-in-trust of the Station of Doom!"

"That's me," said Rod.

"Hear him!" said the other two.

"You have not come here, child and citizen Roderick, for us to judge you or to punish you. If these things are to be done, they must be done in another place or time, and they must be done by men other than ourselves. The only concern before this board is the following: should you or should you not be allowed to leave this room safe and free and well, taking into no account your innocence or guilt of matters which might be decided elsewhere, but having regard only for the survival and the safety and the welfare of this given planet? We are not punishing and we are not judging, but we are deciding, and what we are deciding is your life. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Rod nodded mutely, drinking in the wet-rose-scented air and stilling his sudden thirst with the dampness of the atmosphere. If things went wrong now, they did not have very far to go. Not far to go, not with the motionless snake-man standing just beyond his reach. He tried to look at the snake-brain but got nothing out of it except for an unexpected glitter of recognition and defiance.

The Lord Redlady went on, Taggart and Beasley hanging on his words as though they had never heard them before.

"Child and citizen, you know the rules. We are not to find you wrong or right. No crime is judged here, no offense. Neither is innocence. We are only judging the single question. Should you live or should you not? Do you understand? Do you agree?"

Said Rod, "Yes, sir."

"And how stand you, child and citizen?"

"What do you mean?"

"This board is asking you. What is your opinion? Should you live or should you not?"

"I'd like to," said Rod, "but I'm tired of all these childhoods."

"That is not what the board is asking you, child and citizen," said the Lord Redlady. "We are asking you, what do you think? Should you live or should you not live?"

"You want me to judge myself?"

"That's it, boy," said Beasley, "you know the rules. Tell them, boy. I said we could count on you."

The sharp friendly neighborly face unexpectedly took on great importance for Rod. He looked at Beasley as though he had never seen the man before. This man was trying to judge him, Rod; and he, Rod, had to help decide on what was to be done with himself. The medicine from the snake-man and the giggle-giggle death—or a walk out into freedom. Rod started to speak and checked himself; he was to speak for Old North Australia. Old North Australia was a tough world, proud of its tough men. No wonder the board gave him a tough decision. Rod made up his mind and he spoke clearly and deliberately:

"I'd say no. Do not let me live. I don't fit. I can't spiek and hier. Nobody knows what my children would be like, but the odds are against them. Except for one thing..."

"And what, child and citizen, is that?" asked the Lord Redlady, while Beasley and Taggart watched as though they were staring at the last five meters of a horse race.

"Look at me carefully, citizens and members of the board," said Rod, finding that in this milieu it was easy to fall into a ceremonious way of talking. "Look at me carefully and do not consider my own happiness, because you are not allowed, by law, to judge that anyhow. Look at my talent—the way I can hier, the big thunderstorm way I can spiek." Rod gathered his mind for a final gamble and as his lips got through talking, he spat his whole mind at them: —anger-anger, rage-red,

—blood-red,

—fire-fury,



—noise, stench, glare, roughness, sourness and hate hate hate,  
—all the anxiety of a bitter day,  
—crutts, whelps, pups!

It all poured out at once. The Lord Redlady turned pale and compressed his lips, Old Taggart put his hands over his face, Beasley looked bewildered and nauseated. Beasley then started to belch as calm descended on the room.

In a slightly shaky voice, the Lord Redlady asked:

"And what was that supposed to show, child and citizen?"

"In grown-up form, sir, could it be a useful weapon?"

The Lord Redlady looked at the other two. They talked with the tiny expressions on their faces; if they were spieking, Rod could not read it. This last effort had cost him all telepathic input.

"Let's go on," said Taggart.

"Are you ready?" said the Lord Redlady to Rod.

"Yes, sir," said Rod.

"I continue," said the Lord Redlady. "If you understand your own case as we see it, we shall proceed to make a decision and, upon making the decision, to kill you immediately or to set you free no less immediately. Should the latter prove the case, we shall also present you with a small but precious gift, so as to reward you for the courtesy which you will have shown this board, for without courtesy there could be no proper hearing, without the hearing no appropriate decision, and without an appropriate decision there could be neither justice nor safety in the years to come. Do you understand? Do you agree?"

"I suppose so," said Rod.

"Do you really understand? Do you really agree? It is your life which we are talking about," said the Lord Redlady.

"Cover us," said the Lord Redlady.

Rod started to ask how when he understood that the command was not directed at him in the least.

The snake-man had come to life and was breathing heavily. He spoke in clear old words, with an odd dropping cadence in each syllable:

"High, my lord, or utter maximum?"

For answer, the Lord Redlady pointed his right arm straight up with the index finger straight at the ceiling. The snake-man hissed and gathered his emotions for an attack. Rod felt his skin go goose-pimpling all over, then he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, finally he felt nothing but an unbearable alertness. If these were the thoughts which the snake-man was sending out of the trailer van, no passerby could possibly eavesdrop on the decision. The startling pressure of raw menace would take care of that instead.

The three members of the board held hands and seemed to be asleep.

The Lord Redlady opened his eyes and shook his head, almost imperceptibly, at the snake-soldier.

The feeling of snake-threat went off. The soldier returned to his immobile position, eyes forward. The members of the board slumped over their table. They did not seem to be able or ready to speak. They looked out of breath. At last Taggart dragged himself to his feet, gasping his message to Rod:

"There's the door, boy. Go. You're a citizen. Free."

Rod started to thank him but the old man held up his right hand:

"Don't thank me. Duty. But remember—not one word, ever. Not one word, ever, about this hearing. Go along."

Rod plunged for the door, lurched through, and was in his own yard. Free.

For a moment he stood in the yard, stunned.

The dear gray sky of Old North Australia rolled low overhead; this was no longer the eerie light of Old Earth, where the heavens were supposed to shine perpetually blue. He sneezed as the dry air caught the tissue of his nostrils. He felt his clothing chill as the moisture evaporated out of it; he did not think whether it was the wetness of the trailer-van or his own sweat which had made his shirt so wet. There were a lot of people there, and a lot of light. And the smell of roses was as far away as another life might be.

Lavinia stood near him, weeping.

He started to turn to her, when a collective gasp from the crowd caused him to turn around.

The snake-man had come out of the van. (It was just an old theater-van, he realized at last, the kind which he himself had entered a hundred times.) His earth uniform looked like the acme of wealth and decadence among the dusty coveralls of the men and the poplin dresses of the women. His green complexion looked bright among the tanned faces of the Norstrilians. He saluted Rod.

Rod did not return the salute. He just stared.

Perhaps they had changed their minds and had sent the giggle of death after him.

The soldier held out his hand. There was a wallet of what seemed to be leather, finely chased, of offworld manufacture.

Rod stammered, "It's not mine."

"It— is— not— yours," said the snake-man, "but— it— is— the— gift— which— the— people— promised— you— inside.—Take— it— because— I— am—too— dry— out— here."

Rod took it and stuffed it in his pocket. What did a present matter when they had given him life, eyes, daylight, the wind itself?

The snake-soldier watched with flickering eyes. He made no comment, but he saluted and went stiffly back to the van. At the door he turned and looked over the crowd as though he were appraising the easiest way to kill them all. He said nothing, threatened nothing. He opened the door and put himself into the van. There was no sign of who the human inhabitants of the van might be. There must be, thought Rod, some way of getting them in and out of the Garden of Death very secretly and very quietly, because he had lived around the neighborhood a long time and had never had the faintest idea that his own neighbors might sit on a board.

The people were funny. They stood quietly in the yard, waiting for him to make the first move.

He turned stiffly and looked around more deliberately.

Why, it was his neighbors and kinfolk, all of them—McBans, MacArthurs, Passarellis, Schmidts, even the Sanders!

He lifted his hand in greeting to all of them.

Pandemonium broke loose.

They rushed toward him. The women kissed him, the men patted him on the back and shook his hand, the small children began a piping little song about the Station of Doom. He had become the center of a mob which led him to his own kitchen.

Many of the people had begun to cry.

He wondered why. Almost immediately, he understood—

They liked him.

For unfathomable people reasons, mixed-up non-logical human reasons they had wished him well. Even the auntie who had predicted a coffin for him was sniveling without shame, using a corner of her apron to wipe her eyes and nose.

He had gotten tired of people, being a freak himself, but in this moment of trial their goodness, though capricious, flowed over him like a great wave. He let them sit him down in his own kitchen. Among the babble, the weeps, the laughter, the hearty and falsely cheerful relief, he heard a single fugue being repeated again and again: they liked him. He had come back from death: he was their Rod McBan.

Without liquor, it made him drunk. "I can't stand it," he shouted, "I like you all so dashed bloomed crutting much that I could beat the sentimental brains out of the whole crook lot of you..."

"Isn't that a sweet speech?" murmured an old farm wife nearby.

A policeman, in full uniform, agreed.

The party had started. It lasted three full days, and when it was over there was not a dry eye or a full bottle on the whole Station of Doom.

From time to time he cleared up enough to enjoy his miraculous gift of hiering. He looked through all their minds while they chatted and sang and drank and ate and were as happy as Larry; there was not one of them who had come along vainly. They were truly rejoicing. They loved him. They wished him well. He had his doubts about how long that kind of love would last, but he enjoyed it while it lasted.

Lavinia stayed out of his way the first day; on the second and third days she was gone. They gave him real Norstrilian beer to drink, which they had brought up to 108 proof by the simple addition of raw spirits. With this, he forgot the Garden of Death, the sweet wet smells, the precise off-world voice of the Lord Redlady, the pretentious blue sky in the ceiling.

He looked in their minds and over and over again he saw the same thing,

"You're our boy. You made it. You're alive. Good luck, Rod, good luck to you, fellow. We didn't have to see you stagger off, giggling and happy, to the house that you would die in."

Had he made it, thought Rod, or was it chance which had done it for him?

### CHAPTER THREE: Anger of the Onseck

By the end of the week, the celebration was over. The assorted aunts and cousins had gone back to their farms. The Station of Doom was quiet, and Rod spent the morning making sure that the fieldhands had not neglected the sheep too much during the prolonged party. He found that Daisy, a young 300-ton ewe, had not been turned for two days and had to be relanolinized on her ground side before earth canker set in; then, he discovered that the nutrient tubes for Tanner, his 1000-ton ram, had become jammed and that the poor sheep was getting a bad case of edema in his gigantic legs. Otherwise things were quiet. Even when he saw Beasley's red pony tethered in his own yard, he had no premonition of trouble.

He went cheerfully into the house, greeting Beasley with an irreverent "Have a drink on me, Mister and Owner Beasley! Oh, you have one already! Have the next one then, sir!"

"Thanks for the drink, lad, but I came to see you. On business."

"Yes sir," said Rod, "you're one of my trustees, aren't you?"

"That I am," said Beasley, "but you're in trouble, lad. Real trouble."

Rod smiled at him evenly and calmly. He knew that the older man had to make a big effort to talk with his voice instead of just spieking with his mind; he appreciated the fact that Beasley had come to him personally, instead of talking to the other trustees about him. It was a sign that he, Rod had passed his ordeal. With genuine composure, Rod declared:

"I've been thinking, sir, this week, that I'd gotten out of trouble."

"What do you mean, Owner McBan?"

"You remember..." Rod did not dare mention the Garden of Death, nor his memory that Beasley had been one of the secret board who had passed him as being fit to live.

Beasley took the cue. "Some things we don't mention, lad, and I see that you have been well taught."

He stopped there and stared at Rod with the expression of a man looking at an unfamiliar corpse before turning it over to identify it. Rod became uneasy with the stare.

"Sit, lad, sit down," said Beasley, commanding Rod in his own house.

Rod sat down on the bench, since Beasley occupied the only chair—Rod's grandfather's huge carved off-world throne. He sat. He did not like being ordered about, but he was sure that Beasley meant him well and was probably strained by the unfamiliar effort of talking with his throat and mouth.

Beasley looked at him again with that peculiar expression, a mixture of sympathy and distaste.

"Get up again, lad, and look round your house to see if there's anybody about."

"There isn't," said Rod. "My aunt Doris left after I was cleared, the workwoman Eleanor borrowed a cart and went off to market, and I have only two station hands. They're both out reinfesting Baby. She ran low on her santaclara count."

Normally, the wealth-producing sicknesses of their gigantic half-paralyzed sheep would have engrossed the full attention of any two Norstrilian farmers, without respect to differences in age and grade.

This time, no.

Beasley had something serious and unpleasant on his mind. He looked so prune and unquiet that Rod felt a real sympathy for the man.

Beasley repeated, "Go have a look, anyhow."

Rod did not argue. Dutifully he went out the back door, looked around the south side of the house, saw no one, walked around the house on the north side, saw no one there either, and re-entered the house from the front door. Beasley had not stirred, except to pour a little more bitter ale from his bottle to his glass. Rod met his eyes. Without another word, Rod sat down. If the man was seriously concerned about him (which Rod thought he was), and if the man was reasonably intelligent (which Rod knew he was), the communication was worth waiting for and listening to. Rod was still sustained by the pleasant feeling that his neighbors liked him, a feeling which had come plainly to the surface of their honest Norstrilian faces when he walked back into his own back yard from the van of the Garden of Death.

Beasley said, as though he were speaking of an unfamiliar food or a rare drink. "Boy, this talking has some advantages. If a man doesn't put his ear into it, he can't just pick it up with his mind, can he, now?"

Rod thought for a moment. Candidly he spoke, "I'm too young to know for sure, but I never heard of somebody picking up spoken words by hiering them with his mind. It seems to be one or the other. You never talk while you are spieking, do you?"

Beasley nodded. "That's it, then. I have something to tell you which I shouldn't tell you, and yet I have got to tell you, so if I keep my voice blooming low, nobody else will pick it up, will they?"

Rod nodded. "What is it, sir? Is there something wrong with the title to my property?"

Beasley took a drink but kept staring at Rod over the top of the mug while he drank, "You've got trouble there too, lad, but even though it's bad, it's something I can talk over with you and with the other trustees. This is more personal, in a way. And worse."

"Please, sir! What is it?" cried Rod, almost exasperated by all this mystification.

"The Onseck is after you."

"What's an Onseck?" said Rod, "I have never heard of it."

"It's not an it," said Beasley gloomily, "it's a him. Onseck, you know, the chap in the Commonwealth government. The man who keeps the books for the Vice-chairman. It was Hon. Sec., meaning Honorary Secretary or something else prehistoric, when we first came to this planet, but by now everybody just says Onseck and writes it just the way it sounds. He knows that he can't reverse your hearing in the Garden of Death."

"Nobody could," cried Rod, "it's never been done; everybody knows that."

"They may know it, but there's civil trial."

"How can they give me a civil trial when I haven't had time to change? You yourself know —"

"Never, laddie, never say what Beasley knows or doesn't know. Just say what you think." Even in private, between just the two of them, Beasley did not want to violate the fundamental secrecy of the hearing in the Garden of Death.

"I'm just going to say, Mister and Owner Beasley," said Rod very heatedly, "that a civil trial for general incompetence is something which is applied to an owner only after the neighbors have been complaining for a long time about him. They haven't had the time or the right to complain about me, have they now?"

Beasley kept his hand on the handle of his mug. The use of spoken words tired him. A crown of sweat began to show around the top of his forehead.

"Suppose, lad," said he very solemnly, "that I knew through proper channels something about how you were judged in that van—there! I've said it, me that shouldn't have—and suppose that I knew the Onseck hated a foreign gentleman that might have been in a van like that—"

"The Lord Redlady?" whispered Rod, shocked at last by the fact that Beasley forced himself to talk about the unmentionable.

"Aye," nodded Beasley, his honest face close to breaking into tears, "and suppose that I knew that the Onseck knew you and felt the rule was wrong, all wrong, that you were a freak who would hurt all Norstrilia, what would I do?"

"I don't know," said Rod. "Tell me, perhaps?"

"Never," said Beasley. "I'm an honest man. Get me another drink."

Rod walked over to the cupboard, brought out another bottle of bitter ale, wondering where or when He might have known the Onseck. He had never had much of anything to do with government; his family—first his grandfather, while he lived, and then his aunts and cousins—had taken care of all the official papers and permits and things.

Beasley drank deeply of the ale. "Good ale, this. Hard work, talking, even though it's a fine way to keep a secret, if you're pretty sure nobody can peep our minds."

"I don't know him," said Rod.

"Who?" asked Beasley, momentarily off his trail of thought.

"The Onseck. I don't know any Onseck. I've never been to New Canberra. I've never seen an official, no, nor an offworlder neither, not until I met that foreign gentleman we were talking about. How can the Onseck know me if I don't know him?"

"But you did, laddie. He wasn't Onseck then."

"For sheep's sake, sir," said Rod, "tell me who it is!"

"Never use the Lord's name unless you are talking to the Lord," said Beasley glumly.

"I'm sorry, sir. I apologize. Who was it?"

"Hougaton Syme to the-hundred-and-forty-ninth," said Beasley.

"We have no neighbor of that name, sir."

"No, we don't," said Beasley hoarsely, as though he had come to the end of his road in imparting secrets.

Rod stared at him, still puzzled.

In the far, far distance, way beyond Pillow Hills, his giant sheep baa'd. That probably meant that Hopper was hoisting her into a new position on her platform, so that she could reach fresh grass.

Beasley brought his face close to Rod's. He whispered, and it was funny to see the hash a normal man made out of whispering when he hadn't even talked with his voice for half a year.

His words had a low, dirty tone to them, as though he were going to tell Rod an extremely filthy story or ask him some personal and most improper question.

"Your life, laddie," he gasped, "I know you've had a rum one. I hate to ask you, but I must. How much do you know of your own life?"

"Oh, that," said Rod easily, "that. I don't mind being asked that, even if it is a little wrong-o. I have had four childhoods, zero to sixteen each time. My family kept hoping that I would grow up to spiek and hier like everybody else, but I just stayed me. Of course, I wasn't a real baby on the three times they started me over, just sort of an educated idiot the size of a boy sixteen."

"That's it, lad. But can you remember them, those other lives?"

"Bits and pieces, sir, Pieces and bits. It didn't hold together—" He checked himself and gasped, "Houghton Syme! Houghton Syme! Old Hot and Simple. Of course I know him. The one-shot boy. I knew him in my first prepper, in my first childhood. We were pretty good friends, but we hated each other anyhow. I was a freak and he was too. I couldn't spiek or hier, and he couldn't take stroon. That meant that I would never get through the Garden of Death— just the giggle room and fine owner's coffin for me. And him—he was worse. He would just get an Old Earth lifetime—a hundred and sixty years or so and then blotto. He must be an oldish man now. Poor chap! How did he get to be Onseck? What power does an Onseck have?"

"Now you have it, laddie. He says he's your friend and that he hates to do it, but he's got to see to it that you are killed. For the good of Norstrilia. He says it's his duty. He got to be Onseck

because he was always jawing about his duty and people were a little sorry for him because he was going to die so soon, just one Old Earth lifetime with all the stroon in the universe produced around his feet and him unable to take it—"

"They never cured him, then?"

"Never," said Beasley. "He's an old man now, and bitter. And he's sworn to see you die."

"Can he do it? Being Onseck, I mean."

"He might. He hates that foreign gentleman we were talking about because that offworlder told him he was a provincial fool. He hates you because you will live and he will not. What was it you called him in school?"

"Old Hot and Simple. A boy's joke on his name."

"He's not hot and he's not simple. He's cold and complicated and cruel and unhappy. If we didn't all of us think that he was going to die in a little while, ten or a hundred years or so, we might vote him into a giggle room ourselves. For misery and incompetence. But he is Onseck and he's after you. I've said it now. I shouldn't have. But when I saw that sly cold face talking about you and trying to declare your board incompetent right while you, laddie, were having an honest binge with your family and neighbors at having gotten through at last—when I saw that white sly face creeping around where you couldn't even see him for a fair fight—then I said to myself, Rod McBan may not be a man officially, but the poor clodding crutt has paid the full price for being a man, so I've told you. I may have taken a chance, and I may have hurt my honor." Beasley sighed. His honest red face was troubled indeed. "I may have hurt my honor, and that's a sore thing here in Norstrilia where a man can live as long as he wants. But I'm glad I did. Besides, my throat is sore with all this talking. Get me another bottle of bitter ale, lad, before I go and get my horse."

Wordlessly Rod got him the ale, and poured it for him with a pleasant nod.

Beasley, uninclined to do any more talking, sipped at the ale. Perhaps, thought Rod, he is hiering around carefully to see if there have been any human minds nearby which might have picked up the telepathic leakage from the conversation.

As Beasley handed back the mug and started to leave with a wordless neighborly nod, Rod could not restrain himself from asking one last question, which he spoke in a hissed whisper. Beasley had gotten his mind so far off the subject of sound talk that he merely stared at Rod. Perhaps, Rod thought, he is asking me to spiek plainly because he has forgotten that I cannot spiek at all. That was the case, because Beasley croaked in a very hoarse voice:

"What is it, lad? Don't make me talk much. My voice is scratching me and my honor is sore within me."

"What should I do, sir? What should I do?"

"Mister and Owner McBan, that's your problem. I'm not you. I wouldn't know."

"But what would you do, sir? Suppose you were me."

Beasley's blue eyes looked over at Pillow Hill for a moment, abstractedly. "Get offplanet. Get off. Go away. For a hundred years or so. Then that man—him—he'll be dead in due time and you can come back, fresh as a new-blossomed twinkle."

"But how, sir? How can I do it?"

Beasley patted him on his shoulder, gave him a broad wordless smile, put his foot in his stirrup, sprang into his saddle, and looked down at Rod.

"I wouldn't know, neighbor. But good luck to you, just the same. I've done more than I should. Good-bye."

He slapped his horse gently with his open hand trotted out of the yard. At the edge of the yard the changed to a canter.

Rod stood in his own doorway, utterly alone.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: The Old Broken Treasures in the Gap

After Beasley left, Rod loped miserably around his farm. He missed his grandfather, who had been living during his first three childhoods but who had died while Rod was going through a fourth simulated infancy in an attempt to cure his telepathic handicap. He even missed his Aunt Margot, who had voluntarily gone into Withdrawal at the age of nine hundred and two. There were plenty of cousins and kinsmen from whom he could ask advice; there were the two hands on the farm; there was even the chance that he could go see Mother Hitton herself, because she had once been, married to one of his great11-uncles. But this time he did not want companionship. There was nothing he could do with people. The Onseck was people too—imagine "old hot and simple" becoming a power in the hand! Rod knew that this was his own fight.

His own.

What had ever been his own before?

Not even his life. He could remember bits about the different boyhoods he'd had. He even had vague uncomfortable glimpses of seasons of pain—the times they had sent him back to babyhood while leaving him large. That hadn't been his choice. The old man had ordered it or the Vice-chairman had approved it or Aunt Margot had begged for it. Nobody had asked him much, except to say, "You will agree..."

He had agreed.

He had been good—so good that he hated them all at times and wondered if they knew he hated them. The hate never lasted, because the real people involved were too well-meaning, too kind, too ambitious for his own sake. He had to love them back.

Trying to think these things over, he loped around his estate on foot.

The big sheep lay on their platforms, forever sick, forever gigantic. Perhaps some of them remembered when they had been lambs, free to run through the sparse grass, free to push their heads through the pliofilm covers of the canals and to help themselves to water when they wanted to drink. Now they weighed hundreds of tons and were fed by feeding machines, watched by guard machines, checked by automatic doctors. They were fed and watered a little through the mouth only because pastoral experience showed that they stayed fatter and lived longer if a semblance of normality was left to them.

His aunt Doris, who kept house for him, was still away.

His workwoman Eleanor, whom he paid an annual sum larger than many planets paid for their entire armed forces, had delayed her time at market.

The two sheephands, Bill and Hopper, were still out.

And he did not want to talk to them, anyhow.

He wished that he could see the Lord Redlady, that strange offworld man whom he had met in the Garden of Death. The Lord Redlady just looked as though he knew more things than Norstrilians did, as though he came from sharper, crueller, wiser societies than most people in Old North Australia had ever seen.

But you can't ask for a Lord. Particularly not when you have met him only in a secret hearing.

Rod had gotten to the final limits of his own land.



Humphrey's Lawsuit lay beyond— a broad strip of poor land, completely untended, the building-high ribs of long-dead sheep-skeletons making weird shadows as the sun began to set. The Humphrey family had been lawing over that land for hundreds of years. Meanwhile it lay waste except for the few authorized public animals which the Commonwealth was allowed to put on any land, public or private.

Rod knew that freedom was only two steps away.

All he had to do was to step over the line and shout with his mind for people. He could do that even though he could not really spiek. A telepathic garble of alarm would bring the orbiting guards down to him in seven or eight minutes. Then he would need only to say:

"I swear off title. I give up mistership and ownership. I demand my living from the Commonwealth. Watch me, people, while I repeat."

Three repetitions of this would make him an Official Pauper, with not a care left—no meetings, no land to tend, no accounting to do, nothing but to wander around Old North Australia picking up any job he wanted and quitting it whenever he wanted. It was a good life, a free life, the best the Commonwealth could offer to squatters and owners who otherwise lived long centuries of care, responsibility, and honor. It was a fine life—

But no McBane had ever taken it, not even a cousin. Nor could he.

He went back to the house, miserable. He listened to Eleanor talking with Bill and Hopper while dinner was served—a huge plate of boiled mutton, potatoes, hard-boiled eggs, Station-brewed beer out of the keg. (There were planets, he knew, where people never tasted such food from birth to death. There they lived on impregnated pasteboard which was salvaged from the latrines, reimpregnated with nutrients and vitamins, deodorized and sterilized, and issued again the next day.) He knew it was a fine dinner, but he did not care. How could he talk about the Onseck to these people? Their faces still glowed with pleasure at his having come out the right side of the Garden of Death. They thought he was lucky to be alive, even more lucky to be the most honored heir on the whole planet. Doom was a good place, even if it wasn't the biggest.

Right in the middle of dinner he remembered the gift the snake-soldier had given him. He had put it on the top shelf of his bedroom wall and with the party and Beasley's visit, he had never opened it.

He bolted down his food and muttered, "I'll be back." The wallet was there, in his bedroom. The case was beautiful. He took it, opened it.

Inside there was a flat metal disc.

A ticket?

Where to?

He turned it this way and that. It had been telepathically engraved and was probably shouting its entire itinerary into his mind, but he could not hear it.

He held it close to the oil lamp. Sometimes discs like this had old-writing on them, which at least showed the general limits. It would be a private ornithopter up to Menzies Lake at the best, or an airbus fare to New Melbourne and return. He caught the sheen of old writing. One more tilt, angled to the light, and he had it. "Manhome and return."

Manhome!

Lord have mercy, that was Old Earth itself!

"But then," thought Rod, "I'd be running away from the Onseck, and I'd live the rest of my life with all my friends knowing I had run away from Old Hot and Simple. I can't. Somehow I've got to beat Houghton Syme. In his own way. And my own way."

He went back to the table, dropped the rest of the dinner into his stomach as though it were sheep-food pellets, and went to his bedroom early.

For the first time in his life, he slept badly.

And out of the bad sleep, the answer came: "Ask Hamlet."

Hamlet was not even a man. He was just a talking picture in a cave, but he was wise, he was from Old Earth Itself, and he had no friends to whom to give Rod's secrets.

With this idea, Rod turned on his sleeping shelf and went into a deep sleep.

In the morning his aunt Doris was still not back, so he told the workwoman Eleanor, "I'll be gone all day. Don't look for me or worry about me."

"What about your lunch, mister and owner? You can't run around the station with no tucker."

"Wrap some up, then."

"Where're you going, mister and owner, sir, if you can tell me?" There was an unpleasant searching edge in her voice, as though—being the only adult woman present—she had to check on him as though he were still a child. He didn't like it, but he replied with a frank enough air:

"I'm not leaving the station. Just rambling around. I need to think."

More kindly she said, "You think, then, Rod. Just go right ahead and think. If you ask me, you ought to go live with a family—"

"I know what you've said," he interrupted her. "I'm not making any big decisions today, Eleanor. Just rambling and thinking."

"All right then, mister and owner. Ramble around and worry about the ground you're walking on. It's you that get the worries for it. I'm glad my daddy took the official pauper words. We used to be rich." Unexpectedly she brightened and laughed at herself, "Now that, you've heard that too, Rod. Here's your food. Do you have your water?"

"I'll steal from the sheep," he said irreverently. She knew he was joking and she waved him a friendly good-bye.

The old, old gap was to the rear of the house, so he left by the front. He wanted to go the long wrong way around, so that neither human eyes nor human minds would stumble on the secret he had found fifty-six years before, the first time he was eight years old. Through all the pain and the troubles he had remembered this one vivid bright secret—the deep cave full of ruined and prohibited treasures. To these he must go.

The sun was high in the sky, spreading its patch of brighter gray above the gray clouds, when he slid into what looked like a dry irrigation ditch.

He walked a few steps along the ditch. Then he stopped and listened carefully, very carefully.

There was no sound except for the snoring of a young hundred-ton ram a mile or so away.

Rod then stared around.

In the far distance, a police ornithopter soared as lazy as a sated hawk.

Rod tried desperately much to hier.

He hiered nothing with his mind, but with his ears he heard the slow heavy pulsing of his own blood pounding through his head.

He took a chance.

The trap door was there, just inside the edge of the culvert.

He lifted it and, leaving it open, dove in confidently as a swimmer knifing his way into a familiar pool.

He knew his way.

His clothes ripped a little, but the weight of his body dragged him past the narrowness of the doorframe.

His hands reached out and like the hands of an acrobat they caught the inner bar. The door behind snapped shut.

How frightening this had been when he was little and tried the trip for the first time! He had let himself down with a rope and a torch, never realizing the importance of the trap door at the edge of the culvert!

Now it was easy.

With a thud, he landed on his feet. The bright old illegal lights went on. The dehumidifier began to purr, lest the wetness of his breath spoil the treasures in the room.

There were drama-cubes by the score, with two different sizes of projectors. There were heaps of clothing, for both men and women, left over from forgotten ages. In a chest, in the corner, there was even a small machine from before the Age of Space, a crude but beautiful mechanical chronograph, completely without resonance compensation, and the ancient name "Jaeger Le Coultre" written across its face. It still kept earth time after fifteen thousand years.

Rod sat down in an utterly impermissible chair—one which seemed to be a complex of pillows built on an interlocking frame. The touch enough was a medicine for his worries. One chair leg was broken, but that was the way his grandfather to-the-nineteenth had violated the Clean Sweep.

The Clean Sweep had been Old North Australia's last political crisis, many centuries before, when the last under-people were hunted down and driven off the planet and when all damaging luxuries had to be turned in to the Commonwealth authorities, to be repurchased by their owners only at a revaluation twenty thousand times higher than their assessed worth. It was the final effort to keep Norstrilians simple, healthy and well. Every citizen had to swear that he had turned in every single item, and the oath had been taken with thousands of telepaths watching. It was a testimony to the high mental power and adept deceitfulness of grandfather to-the-nineteenth that Rod McBan CXXX had inflicted only symbolic breakage on his favorite treasures, some of which were not even in the categories allowed for repurchase, like offworld drama-cubes, and had been able to hide his things in an unimportant corner of his fields—hide them so well that neither robbers nor police had thought of them for the hundreds of years that followed.

Rod picked up his favorite: Hamlet, by William Shakespeare. Without a viewer, the cube was designed to act when touched by a true human being. The top of the cube became a little stage, the actors appeared as bright miniatures speaking Ancient Inglish, a language very close to Old North Australian, and the telepathic commentary, cued to the Old Common Tongue, rounded out the story. Since Rod was not dependably telepathic, he had learned a great deal of the Ancient Inglish by trying to understand the drama without commentary. He did not like what he first saw and he shook the cube until the play approached its end. At last he heard the dear high familiar voice speaking in Hamlet's last scene:

I am dead, Horatio. Wretched queen, adieu!

You that look pale and tremble at this chance.

That are but mutes or audience to this act.

Had I but time— as this fell sergeant, death,

Is strict in his arrest— O! I could tell you—

But let it be, Horatio, I am dead.

Rod shook the cube very gently and the scene sped down a few lines. Hamlet was still talking:

... what a wounded name,

Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me.

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,

Absent thee from felicity a while,

And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain

To tell my story.

Rod put down the cube very gently.

The bright little figures disappeared.

The room was silent.

But he had the answer and it was wisdom. And wisdom, coeval with man, comes unannounced, unbidden, and unwelcome into every life; Rod found that he had discovered the answer to a basic problem.

But not his own problem. The answer was Houghton Syme, old Hot and Simple. It was the Hon. Sec. who was already dying of a wounded name. Hence the persecution. It was the Onseck who had the "fell sergeant, death" acting strictly in his arrest, even if the arrest were only a few decades off instead of a few minutes. He, Rod McBan, was to live; his old acquaintance was to die; and the dying—oh, the dying, always, always!—could not help resenting the survivors, even if they were loved ones, at least for a little bit.

Hence the Onseck.

But what of himself?

Rod brushed a pile of priceless, illegal manuscripts out of the way and picked up a small book marked Reconstituted Late English Language Verse. At each page, as it was opened, a young man or woman seven centimeters high stood up brightly on the page and recited the text. Rod ruffled the pages of the old book so that the little figures appeared and trembled and fled like weak flames seen on a bright day. One caught his eye and he stopped the page at mid-poem. The figure was saying:

The challenge holds, I cannot now retract

The boast I made to that relentless court,

The hostile justice of my self-contempt.

If now the ordeal is prepared, my act

Must soon be shown. I pray that it is short,

And never dream that I shall be exempt.

He glanced at the foot of the page and saw the name, Casimir Colegrove. Of course, he had seen that name before. An old poet—a good one. But what did the words mean to him, Rod McBan, sitting in a hidden hole within the limits of his own land? He was a Mister and Owner, in all except final title, and he was running from an enemy he could not define.

"The hostile justice of my self-contempt..."

That was the key of it! He had not run from the Onseck. He had run from himself. He took justice itself as hostile because it corresponded with his sixty-odd years of boyhood, his endless disappointment, his compliance with things which would never, till all worlds burned, be complied

with. How could he hier and spiek like other people if somewhere a dominant feature had turned recessive? Hadn't real justice already vindicated him and cleared him?

It was himself who was cruel.

Other people were kind. (Shrewdness made him add "sometimes.")

He had taken his own inner sense of trouble and had made it fit the outside world, like the morbid little poem he had read a long time ago. It was somewhere right in this room, and when he had first read it, he felt that the long-dead writer had put it down for himself alone. But it wasn't really so. Other people had had their troubles too and the poem had expressed something older than Rod McBan. It went:

The wheels of fate are spinning around.

Between them the souls of men are ground

The Old Broken Treasures in the Gap

Who strive for throats to make some sound

Of protest out of the mad profound

Trap of the godmachine!

"Godmachine," thought Rod, "now that's a clue. I've got the only all-mechanical computer on this planet. I'll play it on the stroon crop, win all or lose all."

The boy stood up in the forbidden room.

"Fight it is," he said to the cubes on the floor, "and a good thanks to you, grandfather-to-the-nineteenth. You met the law and did not lose. And now it is my turn to be Rod McBan."

He turned and shouted to himself, "To earth!"

The call embarrassed him. He felt unseen eyes staring at him. He almost blushed and would have hated himself if he had.

He stood on the top of a treasure chest turned on its side. Two more gold coins, worthless as money but priceless as curios, fell noiselessly on the thick old rugs. He thought a good-bye again to his secret room and he jumped upward for the bar. He caught it, chinned himself, raised himself higher, swung a leg on it but not over it, got his other foot on the bar, and then, very carefully but with the power of all his muscles, pushed himself into the black opening above. The lights suddenly went off, the dehumidifier hummed louder, and the daylight dazzled him as the trap door, touched, flung itself open.

He thrust his head into the culvert. The daylight seemed deep gray after the brilliance of the treasure room.

All silent, All clear. He rolled into the ditch.

The door, with silence and power, closed itself behind him. He was never to know it, but it had been cued to the genetic code of the descendants of Rod McBan. Had any other person touched it, it would have withstood them for a long time—almost forever.

You see, it was not really his door. He was its boy.

"This land has made me," said Rod aloud, as he clambered out of the ditch and looked around. The young ram had apparently wakened; his snoring had stopped and over the quiet hill there came the sound of his panting. Thirsty again! The Station of Doom was not so rich that it could afford unlimited water to its giant sheep. They lived all right. He would have asked the trustees to sell even the sheep for water, if a real drought set in. But never the land.

Never the land.

No land for sale.

It didn't even really belong to him: he belonged to it—the rolling dry fields, the covered rivers and canals, the sly catchments which caught every drop which might otherwise have gone to his neighbors. That was the pastoral business—its product immortality and its price water. The Commonwealth could have flooded the planet and could have created small oceans, with the financial resources it had at command, but the planet and the people were regarded as one ecological entity. Old Australia—that fabulous continent of old Earth now covered by the ruins of the abandoned Chinesian city-world of Nanbien—had in its prime been broad, dry, open, beautiful; the planet of Old North Australia, by the dead weight of its own tradition, had to remain the same.

Imagine trees. Imagine leaves—vegetation dropping uneaten to the ground. Imagine water pouring by the thousands of tons, no one greeting it with tears of relief or happy laughter! Imagine Earth. Old Earth. Manhome itself. Rod had tried to think of a whole planet inhabited by Hamlets, drenched with music and poetry, knee-deep in blood and drama. It was unimaginable, really, though he had tried to think it through.

Like a chill, a drill, a thrill cutting into his very nerves he thought:

Imagine Earth women!

What terrifying beautiful things they must be! Dedicated to ancient and corruptive arts, surrounded by the objects which Norstrilia had forbidden long ago, stimulated by experiences which the very law of his own world had expunged from the books! He would meet them; he couldn't help it; what, what would he do when he met a genuine Earth woman?

He would have to ask his computer, even though the neighbors laughed at him for having the only pure computer left on the planet.

They didn't know what grandfather to-the-nineteenth had done. He had taught the computer to lie. It stored all the forbidden things which the Law of the Clean Sweep had brushed out of Norstrilian experience. It could lie like a trooper. Rod wondered whether "a trooper" might be some archaic Earth official who did nothing but tell the untruth, day in and day out, for his living. But the computer usually did not lie to him.

If grandfather<sup>19</sup> had behaved as saucily and unconventionally with the computer as he had with everything else, that particular computer would know all about women. Even things which they did not themselves know—or wish to know.

Good computer! thought Rod as he trotted around the long, long fields to his house. Eleanor would have the tucker on. Doris might be back. Bill and Hopper would be angry if they had to wait for the mister before they ate. To speed up his trip, he headed straight for the little cliff behind the house, hoping no one would see him jump down it. He was much stronger than most of the men he knew, but he was anxious, for some private inexpressible reason, for them not to know it.

The route was clear.

He found the cliff.

No observers.

He dropped over it, feet first, his heels kicking up the scree as he tobogganed through loose rock to the foot of the slope.

And aunt Doris was there.

"Where have you been?" said she.

"Walking, mum," said he.

She gave him a quizzical look, but knew better than to ask more. Talking always fussed her, anyhow. She hated the sound of her own voice, which she considered much too high. The matter passed.

Inside the house, they ate. Beyond the door and the oil lamp, a gray world became moonless, starless, black. This was night, his own night.

#### CHAPTER FIVE: The Quarrel at the Dinner Table

At the end of the meal he waited for Doris to say grace to the Queen. She did, but under her thick eyebrows her eyes expressed something, other than thanks.

"You're going out," she said right after the prayer. It was an accusation, not a question.

The two hired men looked at him with quiet doubt. A week ago he had been a boy. Now he was the same person, but legally a man.

Workwoman Eleanor looked at him too. She smiled unobtrusively to herself. She was on his side whenever any other person came into the picture; when they were alone, she nagged him as much as she dared. She had known his parents before they went off world for a long-overdue honeymoon and were chewed into molecules by a battle between raiders and police. That gave her a proprietary feeling about him.

He tried to spiek to Doris with his mind, just to see if it would work.

It didn't. The two men bounded from their seats and ran for the yard, Eleanor sat in her chair holding tight to the table but saying nothing, and aunt Doris screeched so loud that he could not make out the words.

He knew she meant "Stop it!" so he did, and looked at her friendlily.

That started a fight.

Quarrels were common in Norstrilian life, because the Fathers had taught that they were therapeutic. Children could quarrel until adults told them to stop, freemen could quarrel as long as misters were not involved, misters could quarrel as long as an owner was not present, and owners could quarrel if, at the very end, they were willing to fight it out. No one could quarrel in the presence of an offworlder, nor during an alert, nor with a member of the defense or police on active duty.

Rod McBan was a mister and owner, but he was under trusteeship; he was a man, but he had not been given clear papers; he was a handicapped person. The rules got all mixed up.

When Hopper came back to the table he muttered, "Do that again, laddie, and I'll clout you one that you won't forget!" Considering how rarely he used his voice, it was a beautiful man's voice—resonant, baritone, full-bodied, hearty and sincere in the way the individual words came out.

Bill didn't say a word, but from the contortions of his face Rod gathered that he was spiekling to the others at a great rate and working off his grievance that way.

"If you're spiekling about me, Bill," said Rod with a touch of arrogance which he did not really feel, "you'll do me the pleasure of using words or you'll get off my land!"

When Bill spoke, his voice was as rusty as an old machine. "I'll have you know, you clutty little pommy, that I have more money in my name on Sidney 'Change than you and your whole glubby land are worth. Don't you tell me twice to get off the land, you silly half of a mister, or I will get. So shut up!"

Rod felt his stomach knot with anger. His anger became fiercer when he felt Eleanor's restraining hand on his arm. He didn't want another person, not one more damned useless normal person, to tell him what to do about spiekling and hiering. Aunt Doris' face was still hidden in her apron; she had escaped, as she always did, into weeping.

Just as he was about to speak again, perhaps to lose Bill from the farm forever, his mind lifted in the mysterious way that it did sometimes; he could hier for miles. The people around him did not notice the difference. He saw the proud rage of Bill, with his money in the Sidney Exchange, bigger than many station owners had, waiting his time to buy back on the land which his father had left; he saw the honest annoyance of Hopper and was a little abashed to see that Hopper was watching him proudly and with amused affection; in Eleanor he saw nothing but wordless worry, a fear that she might lose him as she had lost so many homes for hnnnhnnn-hnn dzzmmmmm, a queer meaningless reference which had a shape in her mind, but took no form in his; and in aunt Doris he caught her inner voice calling, "Rod, Rod, Rod, come back! This may be your boy and I'm a McBAn to the death, but I'll never know what to do with a cripple like him."

Bill was still waiting for him to answer when another thought came into his mind:

"You fool—go to your computer!"

"Who said that?" he thought, not trying to spiek again, but just thinking it with his mind.

"Your computer," said the faraway thinkvoice.

"You can't spiek," said Rod, "you're a pure machine with not an animal brain in you."

"When you call me, Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBAn to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first, I can spiek across space itself. I'm cued to you and you shouted just now with your spiekmind. I can feel you hiering me."

"But—" said Rod in words.

"Take it easy, lad," said Bill, right in the room with him. "Take it easy. I didn't mean it."

"You're having one of your spells," said Aunt Doris, emerging red-nosed from behind her apron.

Rod stood up.

Said he to all of them, "I'm sorry. I'm going out for a bit. Out into the night."

"You're going to that bloody computer," said Bill.

"Don't go, Mister McBAn," said Hopper, "don't let us anger you into going. It's bad enough being around that computer in daylight, but at night it must be horrible."

"How would you know?" retorted Rod, "You've never been there at night. And I have. Lots of times..."

"There are dead people in it," said Hopper. "It's an old war computer. Your family should never have bought it in the first place. It doesn't belong on a farm. A thing like that should be hung out in space and orbited."

"All right, Eleanor," said Rod, "you tell me what to do. Everybody else has," he added with the last bit of his remaining anger, as his hiering closed down and he saw the usual opaque faces around him.

"It's no use, Rod. Go along to your computer. You've got a strange life and you're the one who will live it, Mister McBAn, and not these other people around here." Her words made sense.

He stood up. "I'm sorry," said he, again, in lieu of goodbye.

He stood in the doorway, hesitant. He would have liked to say good-bye in a better way, but he did not know how to express it. Anyhow, he couldn't spiek, not so they could hier it with their minds; speaking with a voice was so crude, so flat for the fine little things that needed expression in life. They looked at him, and he at them.

"Ngahh!" said he, in a raw cry of self-derision and fond disgust.



Their expression showed that they had gotten his meaning, though the word carried nothing with it. Bill nodded, Hopper looked friendly and a little worried, Aunt Doris stopped sniveling and began to stretch out one hand, only to stop it in mid-gesture, and Eleanor sat immobile at the table, upset by wordless troubles of her own. He turned.

The cube of lamplight, the cabin room, was behind him; ahead the darkness of all Norstrilian nights, except for the weird rare times that they were cut up by tracers of lightness. He started off for a house which only a few but he could see, and which none but he could enter. It was a forgotten, invisible temple; it housed the MacArthur family computer, to which the older McBane computer was linked; and it was called the Palace of the Governor of Night.

## CHAPTER SIX: The Palace of the Governor of Night

Rod loped across the rolling land, his land.

Other Norstrilians, telepathically normal, would have taken fixes by hiering the words in nearby houses. Rod could not walk by telepathy, so he whistled to himself in an odd off-key, with lots of flats. The echoes came back to his unconscious mind through the overdeveloped ear-hearing which he had worked out to compensate for not being able to hier with his mind. He sensed a slope ahead of him, and jogged up it; he avoided a clump of brush; he heard his youngest ram, Sweet William, snoring the gigantic snore of a santaclara-infected sheep two hills over.

Soon he would see it.

The Palace of the Governor of Night.

The most useless building in all Old North Australia.

Solider than steel and yet invisible to normal eyes except for its ghostly outline traced in the dust which had fallen lightly on it.

The Palace had really been a palace once, on Khufu II, which rotated with one pole always facing its star. The people there had made fortunes which at one time were compared with the wealth of Old North Australia. They had discovered the Furry Mountains, range after range of alpine configurations on which a tenacious non-Earth lichen had grown. The lichen was silky, shimmering, warm, strong, and beautiful beyond belief. The people gained their wealth by cutting it carefully from the mountains so that it would regrow and selling it to the richer worlds, where a luxury fabric could be sold at fabulous prices. They had even had two governments on Khufu II, one of the day-dwelling people who did most of the trading and brokering, since the hot sunlight made their crop of lichen poor, and the other for the night-dwellers, who ranged deep into the frigid areas in search of stunted lichen—fine, tenacious and delicately beautiful.

The Daimoni had come to Khufu II, just as they came to many other planets, including Old Earth, Manhome itself. They had come out of nowhere and they went back to the same place. Some people thought that they were human beings who had acclimated themselves to live in the subspace which planoforming involved; others thought that they had an artificial planet on the inside of which they lived; still others thought that they had solved the jump out of our galaxy; a few insisted that there were no such things as Daimoni. This last position was hard to maintain, because the Daimoni paid in architecture of a very spectacular kind —buildings which resisted corrosion, erosion, age, heat, cold, stress and weapons. On Earth itself, Earthport was their biggest wonder—a sort of wine-glass twenty-five kilometers high, with an enormous rocket-field built into the top of it. On Norstrilia they had left nothing; perhaps they had not even wanted to meet the Old North Australians, who had a reputation for being rough and gruff with strangers who came to their own home planet. It was evident that the Daimoni had solved the problem of immortality on their own terms and in their own way; they were bigger than most of the races of mankind, uniform in size, height and beauty; they bore no sign of youth or age; they showed no vulnerability to sickness; they spoke with mellifluous gravity; and they purchased treasures for their own immediate collective use, not for retrade or profit. They had never tried to get stroon or the raw santaclara virus from which it

was refined, even though the Daimoni trading ships had passed the tracks of armed and convoyed Old North Australian freight fleets. There was even one picture which showed the two races meeting each other in the chief port of Olympia, the planet of the blind receivers: Norstrilians tall, outspoken, lively, crude and immensely rich; Daimoni equally rich, reserved, beautiful, polished and pale. There was awe (and with awe, resentment) on the part of the Norstrilians toward the Daimoni; there was elegance and condescension on the part of the Daimoni toward everyone else, including the Norstrilians. The meeting had been no success at all. The Norstrilians were not used to meeting people who did not care about immortality, even at a penny a bushel; the Daimoni were disdainful toward a race which not only did not appreciate architecture, but which tried to keep architects off its planet, except for defense purposes, and which desired to lead a rough, simple, pastoral life to the end of time. Thus it was not until the Daimoni had left, never to return, that the Norstrilians realized that they had passed up some of the greatest bargains of all time—the wonderful buildings which the Daimoni so generously scattered over the planets which they had visited for trade or for visits. On Khufu II, the Governor of Night had brought out an ancient book and had said: "I want that."

The Daimoni, who had a neat eye for proportions and figures, said, "We have that picture on our world too. It is an Ancient Earth building. It was once called the great temple of Diana of the Ephesians, but it fell even before the age of space began."

"That's what I want," said the Governor of Night. "Easy enough," said one of the Daimoni, all of whom looked like princes. "We'll run it up for you by tomorrow night."

"Hold on," said the Governor of Night. "I don't want the whole thing. Just the front—to decorate my palace. I have a perfectly good palace all right, and my defenses are built right into it."

"If you let us build you a house," said one of the Daimoni gently, "you would never need defenses, ever. Just a robot to close the windows against megaton bombs."

"You're good architects, gentlemen," said the Governor of Night, smacking his lips over the model city they had shown him, "but I'll stick with the defenses I know. So I just want your front. Like that picture. Furthermore, I want it invisible."

The Daimoni lapsed back into their language, which sounded as though it were of Earth origin, but which has never been deciphered from the few recordings of their visits which survived.

"All right," said one of them, "invisible it is. You still want the great temple of Diana at Ephesus on Old Earth?"

"Yes," said the Governor of Night.

"Why—if you can't see it?" said the Daimoni.

"That's the third specification, gentlemen. I want it so that I can see it, and my heirs, but nobody else."

"If it's solid but invisible, everybody is going to see it when your fine snow hits it."

"I'll take care of that," said the Governor of Night. "I'll pay what we were talking about—forty thousand select pieces of Furry Mountain Fur. But you make that palace invisible to everybody except me, and my heirs."

"We're architects, not magicians!" said the Daimoni with the longest cloak, who might have been the leader.

"That's what I want."

The Daimoni gabbled among themselves, discussing some technical problem. Finally one of them came over to the Governor of Night and said:

"I'm the ship's surgeon. May I examine you?"

"Why?" said the Governor of Night.

"To see if we can possibly fit the building to you. Otherwise we can't even guess at the specifications we need."

"Go ahead," said the Governor. "Examine me."

"Here? Now?" said the Daimoni doctor. "Wouldn't you prefer a quiet place or a private room? Or you can come aboard our ship? That would be very convenient."

"For you," said the Governor of Night. "Not for me. Here my men have guns trained on you. You would never get back to your ship alive if you tried to rob me of my Furry Mountain Furs or kidnap me so that you could trade me back for my treasures. You examine me here and now or not at all."

"You are a rough, tough man, Governor," said another one of the elegant Daimoni. "Perhaps you had better tell your guards that you are asking us to examine you. Otherwise they might get excited with us and persons might become damaged," said the Daimoni with a faint condescending smile.

"Go ahead, foreigners," said the Governor of Night. "My men have been listening to everything through the microphone in my top button."

He regretted his words two seconds later, but it was already too late. Four Daimoni had picked him up and spun him so deftly that the guards never understood how their Governor lost all his clothes in a trice. One of the Daimoni must have stunned him or hypnotized him; he could not cry out. Indeed, afterward, he could not even remember much of what they did.

The guards themselves had gasped when they saw the Daimoni pull endless needles out of their boss's eyeballs without having noticed the needles go in. They had lifted their weapons when the Governor of Night turned a violent fluorescent green in color, only to gape, writhe and vomit when the Daimoni poured enormous bottles of medicine into him. In less than half an hour they stood back.

The Governor, naked and blotched, sat on the ground and vomited.

One of the Daimoni said quietly to the guards, "He's not hurt, but he and his heirs will see part of the ultraviolet band for many generations to come. Put him to bed for the night. He will feel all right by morning. And, by the way, keep everybody away from the front of the palace tonight. We're putting in the building which he asked for. The great temple of Diana of the Ephesians."

The senior guard officer spoke up, "We can't take the guards off the palace. That's our defense headquarters and no one, not even the Governor of Night, has the right to strip it bare of sentries. The Day People might attack us again."

The Daimoni spokesman smiled gently: "Make a good note of their names, then, and ask them for their last words. We shall not fight them, officer, but if they are in the way of our work tonight, we shall build them right into the new palace. Their widows and children can admire them as statues tomorrow."

The guards officer looked down at his chief, who now lay flat on the ground with his head in his hands, coughing out the words, "Leave—me—alone!" The officer looked back at the cool, aloof Daimoni spokesman. He said, "I'll do what I can, sir."

The temple of Ephesus was there in the morning.

The columns were the Doric columns of ancient earth; the frieze was a master of gods, votaries and horses; the building was exquisite in its proportions.

The Governor of Night could see it.

His followers could not.

The forty thousand lengths of Furry Mountain Fur were paid.

The Daimoni left.

The Governor died, and he had heirs who could see the building too. It was visible only in the ultraviolet and ordinary men beheld it on Khufu II only when the powdery hard snow outlined it in a particularly harsh storm.

But now it belonged to Rod McBan and it was on Old North Australia, not on Khufu II any more.

How had that happened?

Who would want to buy an invisible temple, anyhow?

William the Wild would, that's who. Wild William MacArthur, who delighted, annoyed, disgraced and amused whole generations of Norstrilians with his fantastic pranks, his gigantic whims, his world-girdling caprices.

William MacArthur was a grandfather to-the-twenty-second in a matrilineal line to Rod McBan. He had been a man in his time, a real man. Happy as Larry, drunk with wit when dead sober, sober with charm when dead drunk. He could talk the legs off a sheep when he put his mind on it; he could talk the laws off the Commonwealth. He did.

He had.

The Commonwealth had been purchasing all the Daimoni houses it could find, using them as defense outposts. Pretty little Victorian cottages were sent into orbit as far-range forts. Theaters were bought on other worlds and dragged through space to Old North Australia, where they became bomb shelters or veterinary centers for the forever-sick, wealth-producing sheep. Nobody could take a Daimoni building apart, once it had been built, so the only thing to do was to cut the building loose from its non-Daimoni foundation, lift it by rockets or planoform, and then warp it through space to the new location. The Norstrilians did not have to worry about landing them; they just dropped them. It didn't hurt the buildings any. Sometimes simple Daimoni buildings came apart, because the Daimoni had been asked to make them demountable, but when they were solid, they stayed solid.

Wild William heard about the temple. Khufu II was a ruin. The lichen had gotten a plant infection and had died off. The few Khufuans who were left were beggars, asking the Instrumentality for refugee status and emigration. The Commonwealth had bought their little buildings, but even the Commonwealth of Old North Australia did not know what to do with an invisible and surpassingly beautiful Greek temple.

Wild William visited it. He soberly inspected it, in complete visibility, by using sniper eyes set into the ultraviolet. He persuaded the government to let him spend half of his immense fortune putting it into a valley just next to the Station of Doom. Then, having enjoyed it a little while, he fell and broke his neck while gloriously drunk and his inconsolable daughter had married a handsome and practical McBan.

And now it belonged to Rod McBan. And housed his computer. His own computer.

He could speak to it at the extension which reached into the gap of hidden treasures. He talked to it, other times, at the talkpoint in the field, where the polished red-and-black metal of the old computer was reproduced in exquisite miniature. Or he could come to this strange building, the Palace of the Governor of Night, and stand as the worshipers of Diana had once stood, crying, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" When he came in this way, he had the full console in front of him, automatically unlocked by his presence, just as his grandfather had showed him, three childhoods before, when the old McBan still had high hopes that Rod would turn into a normal Old North Australian boy. The grandfather, using his personal code in turn, had unlocked the access controls and had invited the computer to make its own foolproof recording of Rod, so that Roderick

Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan CLI would be forever known to the machine, no matter what age he attained, no matter how maimed or disguised he might be, no matter how sick or forlorn he might return to the machine of his forefathers. The old man did not even ask the machine how the identification was obtained. He trusted the computer.

Rod climbed the steps of the Palace. The columns stood with their ancient carving, bright in his second sight; he never quite knew how he could see with the ultraviolet, since he noticed no difference between himself and other people in the matter of eyesight except that he more often got headaches from sustained open runs on clean-cloudy days. At a time like this, the effect was spectacular. It was his time, his temple, his own place. He could see, in the reflected light from the Palace, that many of his cousins must have been out to see the Palace during the nights. They too could see it, as it was a family inheritance to be able to watch the invisible temple which one's friends could not see; but they did not have access.

He alone had that.

"Computer," he cried, "admit me."

"Message unnecessary," said the computer. "You are always clear to enter." The voice was a male Norstrilian voice, with a touch of the theatrical in it. Rod was never quite sure that it was the voice of his own ancestor; when challenged directly as to whose voice it was using, the machine had told him, "Input on that topic has been erased in me. I do not know. Historical evidence suggests that it was male, contemporary with my installation here, and past middle age when coded by me."

Rod would have felt lively and smart except for the feelings of awe which the Palace of the Governor of Night, standing bright and visible under the dark clouds of Norstrilia, had upon him. He wanted to say something light-hearted but at first he could only mutter, "Here I am."

"Observed and respected," stated the computer-voice. "If I were a person I would say 'congratulations, since you are alive.' As a computer I have no opinion on the subject. I note the fact."

"What do I do now?" said Rod.

"Question too general," said the computer. "Do you want a drink of water or a rest-room? I can tell you where those are. Do you wish to play chess with me? I shall win just as many games as you tell me to."

"Shut up, you fool!" cried Rod. "That's not what I mean."

"Computers are fools only if they malfunction. I am not malfunctioning. The reference to me as a fool is therefore nonreferential and I shall expunge it from my memory system. Repeat the question, please."

"What do I do with my life?"

"You will work, you will marry, you will be the father of Rod McBan the hundred and fifty-second and several other children, you will die, your body will be sent into the endless orbit with great honor. You will do this well."

"Suppose I break my neck this very night?" argued Rod. "Then you would be wrong, wouldn't you?"

"I would be wrong, but I still have the probabilities with me."

"What do I do about the Onseck?"

"Repeat."

Rod had to tell the story several times before the computer understood it.

"I do not," said the computer, "find myself equipped with data concerning this one man whom you so confusingly allude to as Houghton Syme sometimes and as 'Old Hot and Simple' at other times. His personal history is unknown to me. The odds against your killing him undetected are 11,713 to one against effectiveness, because too many people know you and know what you look like. I must let you solve your own problem concerning the Hon. Sec."

"Don't you have any ideas?"

"I have answers, not ideas."

"Give me a piece of fruit cake and a glass of fresh milk then."

"It will cost you twelve credits and by walking to your cabin you can get these things free. Otherwise I will have to buy them from Emergency Central."

"I said get them," said Rod.

The machine whirled. Extra lights appeared on the console. "Emergency Central has authorized my own use of sheltered supplies. You will pay for the replacement tomorrow." A door opened. A tray slid out, with a luscious piece of fruitcake and a glass of foaming fresh milk.

Rod sat on the steps of his own palace and ate.

Con conversationally, he said to the computer, "You must know what to do about Old Hot and Simple. It's a terrible thing for me to go through the Garden of Death and then have a dull tool like that pester the life out of me."

"He cannot pester the life out of you. You are too strong."

"Recognize an idiom, you silly ass!" said Rod.

The machine paused. "Idiom identified. Correction made. Apologies are herewith given to you, Child McBan."

"Another mistake. I'm not Child McBan any more. I'm Mister and Owner McBan."

"I will check central," said the computer. There was another long pause as the lights danced. Finally the computer answered. "Your status is mixed. You are both. In an emergency you are already the Mister and Owner of the Station of Doom, including me. Without an emergency, you are still Child McBan until your trustees release the papers to do it."

"When will they do that?"

"Voluntary action. Human. Timing uncertain. In four or five days, it would seem. When they release you, the Hon. Sec. will have the legal right to move for your arrest as an incompetent and dangerous owner. From your point of view, it will be very sad."

"And what do you think?" said Rod.

"I shall think that it is a disturbing factor. I speak the truth to you."

"And that is all?"

"All," said the computer.

"You can't stop the Hon. Sec.?"

"Not without stopping everybody else."

"What do you think people are, anyhow? Look here, computer, you have been talking to people for hundreds and hundreds of years. You know our names. You know my family. Don't you know anything about us? Can't you help me? What do you think I am?"

"Which question first?" said the computer.

Rod angrily threw the empty plate and glass on the floor of the temple. Robot arms flicked out and pulled them into the trash bin. He stared at the old polished metal of the computer. It ought to be polished. He had spent hundreds of hours polishing its case, all sixty-six panels of it, just because the machine was something which he could love.

"Don't you know me? Don't you know what I am?"

"You are Rod McBan the-hundred-and-fifty-first. Specifically, you are a spinal column with a small bone box at one end, the head, and with reproductive equipment at the other end. Inside the bone box you have a small portion of material which resembles stiff, bloody lard. With that you think—you think better than I do, even though I have over five hundred million synaptic connections. You are a wonderful object, Rod McBan. I can understand what you are made of. I cannot share your human, animal side of life."

"But you know I'm in danger."

"I know it."

"What did you say, a while back, about not being able to stop Old Hot and Simple without stopping everybody else too? Could you stop everybody else?"

"Permission requested to correct error. I could not stop everyone. If I tried to use violence, the war computers at Commonwealth Defense would destroy me before I even started programming my own actions."

"You're partly a war computer."

"Admittedly," said the unwearied unhurried voice of the computer, "but the Commonwealth made me safe before they let your forefathers have me."

"What can you do?"

"Rod McBan the-hundred-and-fortieth told me to tell no one, ever."

"I override. Overridden."

"It's not enough to do that. Your great8-grandfather has a warning to which you must listen."

"Go ahead," said Rod.

There was a silence, and Rod thought that the machine was searching through ancient archives for a drama-cube. He stood on the peristyle of the Palace of the Governor of Night and tried to see the Norstrilian clouds crawling across the sky near overhead; it felt like that kind of night. But it was very dark away from the illuminated temple porch and he could see nothing.

"Do you still command?" asked the computer.

"I didn't hear any warning," said Rod.

"He spieked it from a memory cube."

"Did you hier it?"

"I was not coded to it. It was human-to-human, McBan family only."

"Then," said Rod, "I override it."

"Overridden," said the computer.

"What can I do to stop everybody!"

"You can bankrupt Norstrilia temporarily, buy Old Earth Itself, and then negotiate on human terms for anything you want."

"Oh, lord!" said Rod, "you've gone logical again, computer! This is one of your as-if situations."

The computer voice did not change its tone. It could not. The sequence of the words held a reproach, however. "This is not an imaginary situation. I am a war computer, and I was designed to include economic warfare. If you did exactly what I told you to do, you could take over all Old North Australia by legal means."

"How long would we need? Two hundred years? Old Hot and Simple would have me in my grave by then."

The computer could not laugh, but it could pause. It paused. "I have just checked the time on the New Melbourne Exchange. The 'Change signal says they will open in seventeen minutes. I will need four hours for your voice to say what it must. That means you will need four hours and seventeen minutes, give or take five minutes."

"What makes you think you can do it?"

"I am a pure computer, obsolete model. All the others have animal brains built into them, to allow for error. I do not. Furthermore, your great12-grandfather hooked me into the defense net."

"Didn't the Commonwealth cut you out?"

"I am the only computer which was built to tell lies, except to the families of MacArthur and McBan. I lied to the Commonwealth when they checked on what I was getting. I am obliged to tell the truth only to you and to your designated descendants."

"I know that, but what does it have to do with it?"

"I predict my own space weather, ahead of the Commonwealth." The accent was not in the pleasant, even-toned voice; Rod himself began to believe it.

"You've tried this out?"

"I have war-gamed it more than a hundred million times. I had nothing else to do while I waited for you."

"You never failed?"

"I failed most of the time, when I first began. But I have not failed a war-game from real data for the last thousand years."

"What would happen if you failed now?"

"You would be disgraced and bankrupt. I would be sold and disassembled."

"Is that all?" said Rod cheerfully.

"Yes," said the computer.

"I could stop Old Hot and Simple if I owned Old Earth Itself. Let's go."

"I do not go anywhere," said the computer.

"I mean, let's start."

"You mean, to buy Earth, as we discussed?"

"What else?" yelled Rod. "What else have we been talking about?"

"You must have some soup, hot soup and a tranquilizer first. I cannot work at optimum if I have a human being who gets excited."

"All right," said Rod.

"You must authorize me to buy them."

"I authorize you."

"That will be three credits."



"In the name of the seven healthy sheep, what does it matter? How much will Earth cost?"

"Seven thousand million million megacredits."

"Deduct three credits for the soup and the pill then," shouted Rod, "if it won't spoil your calculations."

"Deducted," said the computer. The tray with the soup appeared, a white pill beside it.

"Now let's buy Earth," said Rod.

"Drink your soup and take your pill first," said the computer.

Rod gulped down his soup, washing the pill down with it.

"Now, let's go, cobber."

"Repeat after me," said the computer, "I herewith mortgage the whole body of the said sheep Sweet William for the sum of five hundred thousand credits to the New Melbourne Exchange on the open board..."

Rod repeated it.

And repeated it.

The hours became a nightmare of repetition.

The computer lowered his voice to a low murmur, almost a whisper. When Rod stumbled in the messages, the computer prompted him and corrected him.

Forward purchase... sell short... option to buy... pre-emptive margin... offer to sell... offer temporarily reserved... first collateral... second collateral... deposit to drawing account... convert to FOE credits . . hold in SAD credits... twelve thousand tons of stroon... mortgage forward... promise to buy... promise to sell... hold... margin... collateral guaranteed by previous deposit... promise to pay against the pledged land... guarantor... McBan land... MacArthur land... this computer itself... conditional legality... buy... sell... guarantee... pledge... withhold... offer confirmed... offer canceled... four thousand million megacredits... rate accepted... rate refused... forward purchase... deposit against interest... collateral previously pledged... conditional appreciation... guarantee... accept title... refuse delivery... solar weather... buy... sell... pledge... withdraw from market... withdraw from sale... not available...no collections now... dependent on radiation... corner market... buy... buy... buy... buy... buy... firm title... reconfirm title... transactions completed... reopen... register... reregister... confirm at Earth central... message fees... fifteen thousand megacredits....

Rod's voice became a whisper, but the computer was stire, the computer was untiring, the computer answered all questions from the outside.

Many times Rod and the computer both had to listen to telepathic warnings built into the markets communications net. The computer was cut out and Rod could not hier them. The warnings went unheard.

... buy... sell... hold... confirm... deposit... convert... guarantee... arbitrage... message... Commonwealth tax... commission... buy... sell... buy... buy...buy... buy... deposit title! deposit title! deposit title!

The process of buying Earth had begun.

By the time that the first pretty parts of silver-gray dawn had begun, it was done. Rod was dizzy with fatigue and confusion.

"Go home and sleep," said the computer. "When people find out what you have done with me, many of them will probably be excited and will wish to talk to you at great length. I suggest you say nothing."

## CHAPTER SEVEN: The Eye Upon the Sparrow

Drunk with fatigue, Rod stumbled across his own land back to his cabin.

He could not believe that anything had happened.

If the Palace of the Governor of Night—

If the Palace —

If the computer spoke the truth, he was already the wealthiest human being who had ever lived. He had gambled and won, not for a few tons of stroon or a planet or two, but credits enough to shake the Commonwealth to its foundation. He owned the Earth, on the system that any overdeposit could be called due at a certain very high margin. He owned planets, countries, mines, palaces, prisons, police-systems, fleets, border-guards, restaurants, pharmaceuticals, textiles, night clubs, treasures, royalties, licenses, sheep, land, stroon, more sheep, more land, more stroon. He had won.

Only in Old North Australia could a man have done this without being besieged by soldiers, reporters, guards, police, investigators, tax-collectors, fortune-seekers, doctors, publicity hounds, the sick, the inquisitive, the compassionate, the angry,

Old North Australia kept calm.

Privacy, simplicity, frugality — these virtues had carried them through the hell-world of Paradise VII, where the mountains ate people, the volcanoes poisoned sheep, the delirious oxygen made men rave with bliss as they pranced into their own deaths. The Norstrilians had survived many things, including sickness and deformity. If Rod McBan had caused a financial crisis, there were no newspapers to print it, no viewboxes to report it, nothing to excite the people. The Commonwealth authorities would pick the crisis out of their "in" baskets sometime after tucker and tea the next morning, and by afternoon he, his crisis and the computer would be in the "out" baskets. If the deal had worked, the whole thing would be paid off honestly and literally. If the deal had not worked out the way that computer had said, his lands would be up for auction and he himself would be led gently away.

But that's what the Onseck was going to do to him anyway—Old Hot and Simple, a tiring dwarf-lifed man, driven by the boyhood hatred of many long years ago!

Rod stopped for a minute. Around him stretched the rolling plains of his own land. Far ahead, to his left, there gleamed the glassy worm of a river-cover, the humped long barrel-like line which kept the precious water from evaporating—that too was his.

Maybe. After the night now passed.

He thought of flinging himself to the ground and sleeping right there. He had done it before.

But not this morning.

Not when he might be the person he might be—the man who made the worlds reel with his wealth.

The computer had started easy. He could not take control of his property except for an emergency. The computer had made him create the emergency by selling his next three years' production of santaclara at the market price. That was a serious enough emergency from any pastoralist to be in deep sure trouble.

From that the rest had followed.

Rod sat down.

He was not trying to remember. The remembering was crowding into his mind. He wanted just to get his breath, to get on home, to sleep.

A tree was near him, with a thermostatically controlled cover which domed it in whenever the winds were too strong or too dry, and an underground sprinkler which kept it alive when surface moisture was not sufficient. It was one of the old MacArthur extravagances which his McBan ancestor had inherited and had added to the Station of Doom. It was a modified Earth oak, very big, a full thirteen meters high. Rod was proud of it although he did not like it much, but he had relatives who were obsessed by it and would make a three-hour ride just to sit in the shade—dim and diffuse as it was—of a genuine tree from Earth.

When he looked at the tree, a violent noise assailed him.

Mad frantic laughter.

Laughter beyond all jokes.

Laughter sick wild drunk dizzy.

He started to be angry and was then puzzled. Who could be laughing at him already? As a matter of nearer fact, who could be trespassing on his land? Anyhow, what was there to laugh about?

(All Norstrilians know that humor was "pleasurable corrigible malfunction." It was in the Book of Rhetoric which their Appointed Relatives had to get them through if they were even to qualify for the tests of the Garden of Death. There were no schools, no classes, no teachers, no libraries except for private ones. There were just the seven liberal arts, the six practical sciences, and the five collections of police and defense studies. Specialists were trained off-world, but they were trained only from among the survivors of the Garden, and nobody could get as far as the Garden unless the sponsors—who staked their lives along with that of the student, so far as the question of aptness was concerned—guaranteed that the entrant knew the eighteen kinds of Norstrilian knowledge. The Book of Rhetoric came second, right after the Book of Sheep and Numbers, so that all Norstrilians knew why they laughed and what there was to laugh about.)

But this laughter!

Aagh, who could it be?

A sick man? Impossible. Hostile hallucinations brought on by the Hon. Sec. in his own Onseckish way with unusual telepathic powers? Scarcely.

Rod began to laugh himself.

It was somewhat rare and beautiful, a kookaburra bird, the same kind of bird which had laughed in Original Australia on Old Old Earth. A very few had reached this new planet and they had not multiplied well, even though the Norstrilians respected them and loved them and wished them health.

Good luck came with their wild birdish laughter. A man could feel he had a fine day ahead. Lucky in love, thumb in an enemy's eye, new ale in the fridge, or a ruddy good chance on the market.

Laugh, bird, laugh! thought Rod.

Perhaps the bird understood him. The laughter increased and reached manic, hilarious proportions. The bird sounded as though it was watching the most comical bird-comedy which any bird-audience had ever been invited to, as though the bird-jokes were side-splitting, convulsive, gutpopping, unbelievable, racy, daring, and overwhelming. The bird-laughter became hysterical and a note of fear, of warning crept in.

Rod stepped toward the tree.

In all this time he had not seen the kookaburra.

He squinted into the tree, peering against the brighter side of the sky which showed that morning had arrived well.

To him, the tree was blindingly green, since it kept most of its earth color, not turning beige or gray as the earth grasses had done when they had been adapted and planted in Norstrilian soil.

To be sure, the bird was there, a tiny slender laughing impudent shape.

Suddenly the bird cawed: this was no laugh.

Startled, Rod stepped back and started to look around for danger.

The step saved his life.

The sky whistled at him, the wind hit him, a dark shape shot past him with the speed of a projectile and was gone. As it leveled out just above the ground, Rod saw what it was.

A mad sparrow.

Sparrows had reached twenty kilos' weight, with straight sword-like beaks almost a meter in length. Most of the time the Commonwealth left them alone, because they preyed on the giant lice, the size of footballs, which had grown with the sick sheep. Now and then one went mad and attacked people.

Rod turned, watching the sparrow as it walked around, about a hundred meters away.

Some mad sparrows, it was rumored, were not mad at all, but were tame sparrows sent on evil missions of revenge or death by Norstrilian men whose minds had been twisted into crime. This was rare, this was crime, but this was possible.

Could the Onseck already be attacking?

Rod slapped his belt for weapons as the sparrow took to the air again, flapping upward with the pretense of innocence. He had nothing except his belt-light and a canister. This would not hold out long unless somebody came along. What could a tired man do, using bare hands, against a sword which burst through the air with a monomaniac bird-brain behind it?

Rod braced himself for the bird's next power-dive, holding the canister like a shield.

The canister was not much of a shield.

Down came the bird, preceded by the whistle of air against its head and beak. Rod watched for the eyes and when he saw them, he jumped.

The dust roared up as the giant sparrow twisted its spear-like beak out of the line of the ground, opened its wings, beat the air against gravity, caught itself centimeters from the surface and flapped away with powerful strokes; Rod stood and watched quietly, glad that he had escaped.

His left arm was wet.

Rain was so rare in the Norstrilian plains that he did not see how he could have gotten wet. He glanced down idly.

Blood it was, and his own.

The kill-bird had missed him with its beak but had touched him with the razor-like wing-feathers, which had mutated into weapons; both the rachis and the vane in the large feathers were tremendously reinforced, with the development of a bitterly sharp hyporachis in the case of the wing-tips. The bird had cut him so fast he had not felt it or noticed it.

Like any good Norstrilian, he thought in terms of first aid.

The flow of blood was not very rapid. Should he try to tie up his arm first or to hide from the next diving attack?

The bird answered his question for him.

The ominous whistle sounded again.

Rod flung himself along the ground, trying to get to the base of the tree trunk, where the bird could not dive on him.

The bird, making a serious mental mistake, thought it had disabled him. With a flutter of wings it landed calmly, stood on its feet, and cocked its head to look him over. When the bird moved its head, the sword-beak gleamed evilly in the weak sunshine.

Rod reached the tree and started to lift himself up by seizing the trunk.

Doing this, he almost lost his life.

He had forgotten how fast the sparrows could run on the ground.

In one second, the bird was standing, comical and evil, studying him with its sharp, bright eyes; the next second, the knife-beak was into him, just below the bony part of the shoulder.

He felt the eerie wet pull of the beak being drawn out of his body, the ache in his surprised flesh which would precede the gripping pain. He hit at the bird with his belt-light. He missed.

By now he was weakened from his two wounds. The arm was still dripping blood steadily and he felt his shirt get wet as blood poured out of his shoulder.

The bird, backing off, was again studying him by cocking its head. Rod tried to guess his chances. One square blow from his hand, and the bird was dead. The bird had thought him disabled, but now he really was partially disabled.

If his blow did not land... score one Mister for the bird, mark a credit for the Hon. Sec., give Old Hot and Simple the victory!

By now Rod had not the least doubt that Houghton Syme was behind the attack.

The bird rushed.

Rod forgot to fight the way he had planned.

He kicked instead and caught the bird right in its heavy, coarse body.

It felt like a very big football filled with sand.

The kick hurt his foot but the bird was flung a good six or seven meters away. Rod rushed behind the tree and looked back at the bird.

The blood was pulsing fast out of his shoulder at this point

The kill-bird had gotten to his feet and was walking firmly and securely around the tree. One of the wings trailed a little; the kick seemed to have hurt a wing, but not the legs or that horribly strong neck.

Once again the bird cocked its comical head. It was his own blood which dripped from the long beak, now red, which had gleamed silver gray at the beginning of the fight. Rod wished he had studied more about these birds. He had never been this close to a mutated sparrow before and he had no idea of how to fight one. All he had known was that they attacked people on very rare occasions and that sometimes the people died in the encounters.

He tried to spiek, to let out a scream which would bring the neighborhood and the police flying and running toward him. He found he had no telepathy at all, not when he had to concentrate his whole mind and attention on the bird, knowing that its very next move could bring him irretrievable death. This was no temporary death with the rescue squads nearby. There was no one in the neighborhood, no one at all, except for the excited and sympathetic kookaburras haha-ing madly in the tree above.

He shouted at the bird, hoping to frighten it.

The kill-bird paid him no more attention than if it had been a deaf reptile.

The foolish head tipped this way and that. The little bright eyes watched him. The red sword-beak, rapidly turning brown in the dry air, probed abstract dimensions for a way to his brain or heart. Rod even wondered how the bird solved its problems in solid geometry—the angle of approach, the line of thrust, the movement of the beak, the weight and direction of the fleeing object—himself.

He jumped back a few centimeters, intending to look at the bird from the other side of the tree-trunk.

There was a hiss in the air, like the helpless hiss of a gentle little snake.

The bird, when he saw it, looked odd—suddenly it seemed to have two beaks.

Rod marveled.

He did not really understand what was happening until the bird leaned over suddenly, fell on its side, and lay—plainly dead—on the dry cool ground. The eyes were still open but they looked blank; the bird's body twitched a little. The wings opened out in a dying spasm. One of the wings almost struck the trunk of the tree, but the tree-guarding-device raised a plastic shaft to ward off the blow; a pity the device had not been designed as a people-guard as well.

Only then did Rod see that the second "beak" was no beak at all, but a javelin, its point biting cleanly and tightly right through the bird's skull into its brain.

No wonder the bird had dropped dead quickly!

As Rod looked around to see who his rescuer might be, the ground rose up and struck him.

He had fallen.

The loss of blood was faster than he had allowed for.

He looked around, almost like a child in his bewilderment and dizziness.

There was a shimmer of turquoise and the girl Lavinia was standing over him. She had a medical pack open and was spraying his wounds with cryptoderm—the living bandage which was so expensive that only on Norstrilia, the exporter of Stroon, could it be carried around in emergency cans.

"Keep quiet," she said with her voice, "keep quiet, Rod. We've got to stop the blood first of all. Lands of mercy, but you're a crashing mess!"

"Who...?" said Rod weakly.

"The Hon. Sec.," said she immediately.

"You know?" he asked, amazed that she should understand everything so very quickly indeed.

"Don't talk, and I'll tell you." She had taken her field-knife and was cutting the sticky shirt off him, so that she could tilt the bottle and spray right into the wound. "I just suspected you were in trouble, when Bill rode by the house and said something crazy, that you had bought half the galaxy by gambling all night with a crazy machine which paid off. I did not know where you were, but I thought that you might be in that old temple of yours that the rest of them can't see. I didn't know what kind of danger to look for, so I brought this." She slapped her hip. Rod's eyes widened. She had stolen her father's one-kiloton grenade, which was to be removed from its rack only in the event of an off-world attack. She answered his question before he asked her. "It's all right. I made a dummy to take its place before I touched it. Then, as I took it out, the Defense monitor came on and I just explained that I had hit it with my new broom, which was longer than usual. Do you think I

would let Old Hot and Simple kill you, Rod, without a fight from me? I'm your cousin, your kith and kin. As a matter of fact, I'm number twelve after you when it comes to inheriting Doom and all the wonderful things there are on this station."

Rod said, "Give me water." He suspected she was chattering to keep his attention off what she was doing to his shoulder and arm. The arm glowed once when she sprayed the cryptoderm on it; then it settled down to mere aching. The shoulder had exploded from time to time as she probed it. She thrust a diagnostic needle into it and was reading the tiny bright picture on the end of the needle. He knew it had both analgesics and antiseptics as well as an ultraminiatured X ray, but he did not think that anyone would be willing to use it unaided in the field.

She answered this question, too before he asked it. She was a very perceptive girl.

"We don't know what the Onseck is going to do next. He may have corrupted people as well as animals. I don't dare call for help, not until you have your friends around you. Certainly not, if you have bought half the worlds."

Rod dragged out the words. He seemed short of breath. "How did you know it was him?"

"I saw his face—I hiered it when I looked in the bird's own brain. I could see Houghton Syme, talking to the bird in some kind of an odd way, and I could see your dead body through the bird's eyes, and I could feel a big wave of love and approval, happiness and reward, going through the bird when the job was to have been finished. I think that man is evil, evil!"

"You know him, yourself?"

"What girl around here doesn't? He's a nasty man. He had a boyhood that was all rotten from the time that he realized he was a short-lifer. He has never gotten over it. Some people are sorry for him and don't mind his getting the job of Hon. Sec. If I'd my way, I'd have sent him to the Giggle Room long ago!" Lavinia's face was set in prudish hate, an expression so unlike herself, who usually was bright and gay, that Rod wondered what deep bitterness might have been stirred within her.

"Why do you hate him?"

"For what he did."

"What did he do?"

"He looked at me," she said, "he looked at me in a way that no girl can like. Then he crawled all over my mind, trying to show me all the silly, dirty, useless things he wanted to do."

"But he didn't do anything—?" said Rod.

"Yes, he did," she snapped. "Not with his hands. I could have reported him. I would have. It's what he did with his mind, the things he spieked to me."

"You can report those, too," said Rod, very tired of talking, but nevertheless mysteriously elated to discover that he was not the only enemy which the Onseck had made. "Not what he did, I couldn't," said Lavinia, her face set in anger, but dissolving into grief. Grief was tenderer, softer, but deeper and more real than anger. For the first time Rod sensed a feeling of concern about Lavinia. What might be wrong with her?

She looked past him and spoke to the open fields and the big dead bird. "Houghton Syme was the worst man I've ever known. I hope he dies. He never got over that rotten boyhood of his. The old sick boy is the enemy of the man. We'll never know what he might have been. And if you hadn't been so wrapped up in your own troubles, Mister Rod to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first, you'd have remembered who I am."

"Who are you?" said Rod, naturally.

"I'm the Father's Daughter."

"So what?" said Rod. "All girls are."

"Then you never have found out about me. I'm the Father's Daughter from 'The Father's Daughter's Song.' "

"Never heard it."

She looked at him and her eyes were close to tears. "Listen, then, and I'll sing it to you now. And it's true, true, true:

You do not know what the world is like,

And I hope that you never will.

My heart was once much full of hope,

But now it is very still.

My wife went mad.

She was my love and wore my ring

When both of us were young.

She bore my babes, but then, but then...

And now there isn't anything.

My wife went mad.

Now she lives in another place,

Half sick, half well, and never young.

I am her dread, who was her love,

Each of us has another face.

My wife went mad.

You do not know what the world is like,

War is never the worst of it.

The stars within your eyes can drop,

The lightning in your brain can strike.

My wife went mad.

"And I see you have heard it, too," she sighed. "Just as my father wrote it. About my mother. My own mother."

"Oh, Lavinia," said Rod, "I'm sorry. I never thought it was you. And you my own cousin only three or four times removed. But Lavinia, there's something wrong. How can your mother be mad if she was looking fine at my house last week?"

"She was never mad," said Lavinia. "My father was. He made up that cruel song about my mother so that the neighbors complained. He had his choice of the Giggle Room to die in, or the sick place, to be immortal and insane. He's there now. And the Onseck, the Onseck threatened to bring him back to our own neighborhood if I didn't do what he asked. Do you think I could forgive that? Ever? After people have sung that hateful song at me ever since I was a baby? Do you wonder that I know it myself?"

Rod nodded.

Lavinia's troubles impressed him, but he had troubles of his own.



The sun was never hot on Norstrilia, but he suddenly felt thirsty and hot. He wanted to sleep, but he wondered about the dangers which surrounded him.

She knelt beside him.

"Close your eyes a bit, Rod. I will spiek very quietly and maybe nobody will notice it except your station hands, Bill and Hopper. When they come we'll hide out for the day and tonight we can go back to your computer and hide. I'll tell them to bring food."

She hesitated, "And Rod?"

"Yes?" he said.

"Forgive me."

"For what?"

"For my troubles," she said contritely.

"Now you have more troubles. Me," he said. "Let's not blame ourselves, but for sheep's sake, girl, let me sleep."

He drifted off to sleep as she sat beside him, whistling a loud clear tune with long, long notes which never added up. He knew some people, usually women, did that when they tried to concentrate on their telepathic spieking.

Once he glanced up at her before he finally slept. He noticed that her eyes were a deep, strange blue. Like the mad wild faraway skies of Old Earth Itself.

He slept, and in his sleep he knew that he was being carried...

The hands which carried him felt friendly, though, and he curled himself back into deep, deeper dreamless sleep.

#### CHAPTER EIGHT: FOE Money, SAD Money

When Rod finally awakened, it was to feel his shoulder tightly bound and his arm throbbing. He had fought waking up because the pain had increased as his mind moved toward consciousness, but the pain and the murmur of voices caused him to come all the way to the hard bright surface of consciousness.

The murmur of voices?

There was no place on all Old North Australia where voices murmured. People sat around and spieked to each other and hiered the answers without the clatter of vocal cords. Telepathy made for brilliant and quick conversation, the participants darting their thoughts this way and that, soaring with their shields so as to produce the effect of a confidential whisper.

But here there were voices. Voices. Many voices. Not possible.

And the smell was wrong. The air was wet—luxuriously, extravagantly wet, like a miser trying to catch a rainstorm in his cabin!

It was almost like the van of the Garden of Death.

Just as he woke, he recognized Lavinia singing an odd little song. It was one which Rod knew, because it had a sharp catchy, poignant little melody to it which sounded like nothing on this world. She was singing, and it sounded like one of the weird sadnesses which his people had brought from their horrible group-experience on the abandoned planet of Paradise VII:

Is there anybody here or is everybody dead

at the gray green blue black lake?

The sky was blue and now it is red

over old tall green brown trees.

The house was big but now it looks small

at the gray green blue black lake

And the girl that I knew isn't there any more

at the old flat dark torn place.

His eyes opened and it was indeed Lavinia whom he saw at the edge of vision. This was no house. It was a box, a hospital, a prison, a ship, a cave or a fort. The furnishings were machined and luxurious. The light was artificial and almost the color of peaches. A strange hum in the background sounded like alien engines dispensing power for purposes which Norstrilian law never permitted to private persons. The Lord Redlady leaned over Rod; the fantastic man broke into song himself, chanting:

Light a lantern—

Light a lantern—

Light a lantern,

Here we come!

When he saw the obvious signs of Rod's perplexity, he burst into a laugh.

"That's the oldest song you ever heard, my boy. It's pre-Space and it used to be called 'general quarters' when ships like big iron houses floated on the waters of earth and fought each other. We've been waiting for you to wake up."

"Water," said Rod, "please give me water. Why are you talking?"

"Water!" cried the Lord Redlady to someone behind him. His sharp thin face was alight with excitement as he turned back to Rod. "And we're talking because I have my buzzer on. If people want to talk to each other, they jolly well better use their voices in this ship."

"Ship?" said Rod, reaching for the mug of cold, cold water which a hand had reached out to him.

"This is my ship, Mister and Owner Rod McBan to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first! An earth ship. I pulled it out of orbit and grounded it with the permission of the Commonwealth. They don't know you're on it, yet. They can't find out right now because my Humanoid-robot Brainwave Dephasing Device is on. Nobody can think in or out through that, and anybody who tries telepathy on this boat is going to get himself a headache here."

"Why you?" said Rod. "What for?"

"In due time," said the Lord Redlady. "Let me introduce you first. You know these people." He waved at a group. Lavinia sat with his hands, Bill and Hopper, with his workwoman Eleanor, with his aunt Doris. They looked odd, sitting on the low, soft, luxurious earth furniture. They were all sipping some earth drink of a color which Rod had never seen before. Their expressions were diverse: Bill looked truculent, Hopper looked greedy, Aunt Doris looked utterly embarrassed and Lavinia looked as though she were enjoying herself.

"And then here..." said the Lord Redlady. The man he pointed to might not have been a man. He was the Norstrilian type all right, but he was a giant, of the kind which were always killed in the Garden of Death.

"At your service," said the giant, who was almost three meters tall and who had to watch his head, lest it hit the ceiling. "I am Donald Dumfrie Hordern Anthony Garwood Gaines Wentworth to the fourteenth generation, Mister and Owner McBan. A military surgeon, at your service, sir!"

"But this is private. Surgeons aren't allowed to work for anybody but government."

"I am on loan to the Earth Government," said Wentworth, the giant, his face in a broad grin.

"And I," said the Lord Redlady, "am both the Instrumentality and the Earth Government for diplomatic purposes. I borrowed him. He's under Earth rules. You will be well in two or three hours."

The doctor, Wentworth, looked at his hand as though he saw a chronograph there: "Two hours and seventeen minutes more."

"Let it be," said the Lord Redlady, "here's our last guest."

A short angry man stood up and came over. He glared out at Rod and held forth an angry hand: "John Fisher to-the-hundredth. You know me."

"Do I?" said Rod, not impolitely. He was just dazed.

"Station of the Good Fresh Joey," said Fisher.

"I haven't been there," said Rod, "but I've heard of it."

"You needn't have," snapped the angry Fisher. "I met you at your grandfather's."

"Oh, yes, Mister and Owner Fisher," said Rod, not really remembering anything at all, but wondering why the short red-faced man was so angry with him.

"You don't know who I am?" said Fisher. "I handle the books and the credits for the government."

"Wonderful work," said Rod. "I'm sure it's complicated. Could I have something to eat?"

The Lord Redlady interrupted: "Would you like French pheasant with Chinesian sauce steeped in the thieves' wine from Viola Siderea? It would only cost you six thousand tons of refined gold, orbited near earth, if I ordered it sent to you by special courier."

For some inexplicable reason the entire room howled with laughter. The men put their glasses down so as not to spill them. Hopper seized the opportunity to refill his own glass. Aunt Doris looked hilarious and secretly proud, as though she herself had laid a diamond egg or done some equal marvel. Only Lavinia, though laughing, managed to look sympathetically at Rod to make sure that he did not feel mocked. The Lord Redlady laughed as loudly as the rest and even the short, angry John Fisher allowed himself a wan smile, while holding out his hand for a refill on his drink. An animal, a little one which looked very much like an extremely small person, lifted up the bottle and filled the glass for him; Rod suspected that it was a "monkey" from Old Old Earth, from the stories he had heard.

Rod didn't even say, "What's the joke?" though he realized plainly that he was himself in the middle of it. He just smiled weakly back at them, feeling the hunger grow within him.

"My robot is cooking you an Earth dish. French toast with maple syrup. You could live ten thousand years on this planet and never get it. Rod, don't you know why we're laughing? Don't you know what you've done?"

"The Onseck tried to kill me, I think," said Rod.

Lavinia clapped her hand to her mouth, but it was too late.

"So that's who it was," said the doctor, Wentworth, with a voice as gigantic as himself.

"But you wouldn't laugh at me for that—" Rod started to say. Then he stopped himself.

An awful thought had come to him.

"You mean, it really worked—that stuff with my family's old computer?"

The laughter broke out again. It was kind laughter, but it was always the laughter of a peasant people, driven by boredom, who greet the unfamiliar with attack or with laughter.

"You did it," said Hopper. "You've bought a billion worlds."

John Fisher snapped at him, "Let's not exaggerate. He's gotten about one point six stroon years. You couldn't buy any billion worlds for that. In the first place, there aren't a billion settled worlds, not even a million. In the second place there aren't many worlds for sale. I doubt that he could buy thirty or forty."

The little animal, prompted by some imperceptible sign from the Lord Redlady, went out of the room and returned with a tray. The odor from the tray made all the people in the room sniff appreciatively. The food was unfamiliar, but it combined pungency and sweetness. The monkey fitted the tray into an artfully concealed slot at the head of Rod's couch, took off an imaginary monkey cap, saluted, and went back to his own basket behind the Lord Redlady's chair.

The Lord Redlady nodded, "Go ahead and eat, boy. It's on me."

"That's an odd sight, I must say," said the huge doctor Wentworth. "There's the richest man in many worlds, and he hasn't the price of a new pair of overalls."

"What's odd about that? We've always charged an import fee of twenty million per cent of the orbit price of goods," snapped angry John Fisher. "Have you ever realized what other people have swung into orbit around our sun, just waiting for us to change our minds so they could sell us half the rubbish in the universe? This would be knee-deep in junk if we ever dropped our tariff. I'm surprised at you, Doctor, forgetting the fundamental rules of Old North Australia."

"He's not complaining," said aunt Doris, whom the drink had made loquacious. "He's just thinking. We all think."

"Of course we all think. Or daydream. Some of us leave and go offplanet to be rich people on other worlds. A few of us even manage to get back here on severe probation when we realize what the offworlds are like. I'm just saying," said the doctor, "that Rod's situation would be very funny to everybody except us Norstrilians. We're all rich with the stroon imports, but we kept ourselves poor in order to survive."

"Who's poor?" snapped the fieldhand Hopper, apparently touched at a sensitive point. "I can match you with mega-credits, Doc, any time you care to gamble. Or I'll meet you with throwing knives, if you want them better. I'm as good as the next man!"

"That's exactly what I mean," said John Fisher. "Hopper here can argue with anybody on the planet. We're still equals, we're still free, we're not the victims of our own wealth— that's Norstrilia for you!"

Rod looked up from his food and said, "Mister and Owner Secretary Fisher, you talk awfully well for somebody who is not a freak like me. How do you do it?"

Fisher started looking angry again, though he was not really angry: "Do you think that financial records can be dictated telepathically? I'm spending centuries out of my life, just dictating into my blasted microphone. Yesterday I spent most of the day dictating the mess which you have made of the Commonwealth's money for the next eight years. And you know what I'm going to do at the next meeting of the Commonwealth Council?"

"What?" said Rod.

"I'm going to move the condemnation of that computer of yours. It's too good to be in private hands."

"You can't do that!" shrieked aunt Doris, somewhat mellowed by the earth beverage she was drinking, "it's MacArthur and McBan family property."

"You can keep the temple," said Fisher with a snort, "but no bloody family is going to outguess the whole planet again. Do you know that boy sitting there has four mega-credits on Earth at this moment?"

Bill hiccupped, "I got more than that myself."

Fisher snarled at him, "On earth? FOE money?"

A silence hit the room.

"FOE money. Four megacredits? He can buy Old Australia and ship it out here to us!" Bill sobered fast.

Said Lavinia mildly, "What's Foe money?"

"Do you know, Mister and Owner McBan?" said Fisher, in a peremptory tone. "You had better know, because you have more of it than any man has ever had before."

"I don't want to talk about money," said Rod. "I want to find out what the Onseck is up to."

"Don't worry about him!" laughed the Lord Redlady, prancing to his feet and pointing at himself with a dramatic forefinger. "As the representative of Earth, I filed six hundred and eighty-five lawsuits against him simultaneously, in the name of your Earth debtors, who fear that some harm might befall you..."

"Do they really?" said Rod. "Already?"

"Of course not. All they know is your name and the fact that you bought them out. But they would worry if they did know, so as your agent I tied up the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme with more law cases than this planet has ever seen before."

The big doctor chuckled. "Dashed clever of you, my lord and mister. You know us Norstrilians pretty well, I must say. If we charge a man with murder, we're so freedom-minded that he has time to commit a few more before being tried for the first one. But civil suits! Hot sheep! He'll never get out of those, as long as he lives."

"Is he Onsecking any more?" said Rod.

"What do you mean?" asked Fisher.

"Does he still have his job—Onseck?"

"Oh, yes," said Fisher, "but we put him on two hundred years' leave and he has only about a hundred and twenty years to live, poor fellow. Most of that time he will be defending himself in civil suits."

Rod finally exhaled. He had finished the food. The small polished room with its machined elegance, the wet air, the bray of voices all over the place—these made him feel dreamlike. Here grown men were standing, talking as though he really did own Old Earth. They were concerned with his affairs, not because he was Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred-and-fifty-first, but because he was Rod, a boy among them who had stumbled upon danger and fortune. He looked around the room. The conversations had accidentally stopped. They were looking at him, and he saw in their faces something which he had seen before. What was it? It was not love. It was a rapt attentiveness, combined with a sort of pleasurable and indulgent interest. He then realized what the looks signified.

They were giving him the adoration which they usually reserved only for cricket players, tennis players, and great track performers—like that fabulous Hopkins Harvey fellow who had gone offworld and had won a wrestling match with a "heavy man" from Wereld Schemering. He was not just Rod any more. He was their boy.

As their boy, he smiled at them vaguely and felt like crying.

The breathlessness broke when the large doctor, Mister and Owner Wentworth, threw in the stark comment: "Time to tell him, Mister and Owner Fisher. He won't have his property long if we don't get moving. No, nor his life, either."

Lavinia jumped up and cried out, "You can't kill Rod—"

Doctor Wentworth stopped her: "Sit down. We're not going to kill him. And you there, stop acting foolish! We're his friends here."

Rod followed the line of the doctor's glance and saw that Hopper had snaked his hand back to the big knife he wore in his belt. He was getting ready to fight anyone who attacked Rod.

"Sit, sit down, all of you, please," said the Lord Redlady, speaking somewhat fussily with his singsong Earth accent. "I'm host here. Sit down. Nobody's killing Rod tonight. Doctor, you take my table. Sit down yourself. You will stop threatening my ceiling or your head. You, ma'am and owner," said he to aunt Doris, "move over there to that other chair. Now we can all see the doctor."

"Can't we wait?" asked Rod. "I need to sleep. Are you going to ask me to make decisions now? I'm not up to decisions, not after what I've just been through. All night with the computer. The long walk. The bird from the Onseck—"

"You'll have no decisions to make if you don't make them tonight," said the doctor firmly and pleasantly. "You'll be a dead man."

"Who's going to kill me?" asked Rod.

"Anybody who wants money. Or wants power. Or who would like unlimited life. Or who needs these things to get something else. Revenge. A woman. An obsession. A drug. You're not just a person now, Rod. You're Norstrilia incarnate. You're Mister Money himself! Don't ask who'd kill you! Ask who wouldn't? We wouldn't... I think. But don't tempt us."

"How much money have I got?" said Rod.

Angry John Fisher cut in: "So much that the computers are clotted up, just counting it. About one and a half stroon years. Perhaps three hundred years of Old Earth's total income. You sent more Instant Messages last night than the Commonwealth government itself has sent in the last twelve years. These messages are expensive. One kilocredit in FOE money."

"I asked a long time ago what this 'foe money' was," said Lavinia, "and nobody has got around to telling me."

The Lord Redlady took the middle of the floor. He stood there with a stance which none of the Old North Australians had ever seen before. It was actually the posture of a master of ceremonies opening the evening at a large night club, but to people who had never seen those particular gestures his movements were eerie, self-explanatory and queerly beautiful.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, using a phrase which most of them had only read in books, "I will serve drinks while the others speak. I will ask each in turn. Doctor, will you be good enough to wait while the financial secretary speaks?"

"I should think," said the doctor irritably, "that the lad would be wanting to think over his choice. Does he want me to cut him in two, here, tonight, or doesn't he? I should think that would take priority, wouldn't you?"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the Lord Redlady, "the Mister and Doctor Wentworth has a very good point indeed. But there is no sense in asking Rod about being cut in two unless he knows why. Mister Financial Secretary, will you tell us all what happened last night?"

John Fisher stood up. He was so chubby that it did not matter. His brown, suspicious, intelligent eyes looked over the lot of them.

"There are as many kinds of money as there are worlds with people on them. We here on Norstrilia don't carry the tokens around, but in some places they have bits of paper or metal which they use to keep count. We talk our money into the central computers which even out all our transactions for us. Now what would happen if I wanted a pair of shoes?"

Nobody answered. He didn't expect them to. "I would," he went on, "go to a shop, look in the screen at the shoes which the offworld merchants keep in orbit. I would pick out the shoes I wanted. What's a good price for a pair of shoes in orbit?"

Hopper was getting tired of these theoretical questions so he answered promptly,

"Six bob."

"That's right. Six minicredits."

"But that's orbit money. You're leaving out the tariff," said Hopper.

"Exactly. And what's the tariff?" asked John Fisher, snapping.

Hopper snapped back, "Two hundred thousand times, what you bloody fools always make it in the Commonwealth council."

"Hopper, can you buy shoes?" said Fisher.

"Of course I can!" The station hand looked belligerent again but the Lord Redlady was filling his glass. He sniffed the aroma, calmed down and said, "All right, what's your point?"

"The point is that the money in orbit is SAD money—S for secure, A for and, D for delivered. That's any kind of good money with backing behind it. Stroon is the best backing there is, but gold is all right, rare metals, fine manufactures, and so on. That's just the money off the planet, in the hands of the recipient. Now how many times would a ship have to hop to get to Old Old Earth Itself?"

"Fifty or sixty," said aunt Doris unexpectedly. "Even I know that."

"And how many ships get through?"

"They all do," said she.

"Oh, no," cried several of the men in unison.

"About one ship is lost every sixty or eighty trips, depending on the solar weather, on the skills of the pinlighters, and go-captains, on the landing accidents. Did any of you ever see a really old captain?"

"Yes," said Hopper with gloomy humor, "a dead one in his coffin."

"So if you have something you want to get to Earth, you have to pay your share of the costly ships, your share of the go-captain's wages and the fees of his staff, your share of the insurance for their families. Do you know what it could cost to get this chair back to earth?" said Fisher.

"Three hundred times the cost of the chair," said Doctor Wentworth.

"Mighty close. It's two hundred and eighty-seven times."

"How do you know so mucking much?" said Bill, speaking up. "And why waste our time with all this crutting glubb?"

"Watch your language, man," said John Fisher. "There are some mucking ladies present. I'm telling you this because we have to get Rod off to Earth tonight, if he wants to be alive and rich—"

"That's what you say!" cried Bill. "Let him go to his house. We can load up on little bombs and hold up against anybody who could get through the Norstrilian defenses. What are we paying these mucking taxes for, if it's not for the likes of you to make sure we're safe? Shut up, man, and let's take the boy home. Come along, Hopper."

The Lord Redlady leaped to the middle of his own floor. He was no prancing Earthman putting on a show. He was the old Instrumentality itself, surviving with raw weapons and raw brains. In his hand he held something which none of them could see clearly.

"Murder," he said, "will be done this moment if anybody moves. I will commit it. I will, people. Move, and try me. And if I do commit murder, I will arrest myself, hold a trial, and acquit myself. I have strange powers, people. Don't make me use them. Don't even make me show them." The shimmering thing in his hand disappeared. "Mister and Doctor Wentworth, you are under my command, by loan. Other people, you are my guests. Be warned. Don't touch that boy. This is Earth territory, this cabin we're in." He stood a little to one side and looked at them brightly out of his strange Earth eyes.

Hopper deliberately spat on the floor. "I suppose I would be a puddle of mucking glue if I helped old Bill?"

"Something like it," said the Lord Redlady. "Want to try?" The things that were hard to see were now in each of his hands. His eyes darted between Bill and Hopper.

"Shut up, Hopper. Well take Rod if he tells us to go. But if he doesn't—it crudding well doesn't matter. Eh, Mister and Owner McBan?"

Rod looked around for his grandfather, dead long ago: then he knew they were looking at him instead.

Torn between sleepiness and anxiety he answered, "I don't want to go now, fellows. Thank you for standing by. Go on, Mister Secretary, with the Foe money and the Sad money."

The weapons disappeared from the Lord Redlady's hands.

"I don't like Earth weapons," said Hopper, speaking very loudly and plainly to no one at all, "and I don't like Earth people. They're duty. There's nothing in them that's good honest crook."

"Have a drink, lads," said the Lord Redlady with a democratic heartiness which was so false that the workwoman Eleanor, silent all the evening, let out one wild caw of a laugh, like a kookaburra beginning to whoop in a tree. He looked at her sharply, picked up his serving jug, and nodded to the financial secretary, John Fisher, that he should resume speaking.

Fisher was flustered. He obviously did not like this Earth practice of quick threats and weapons indoors, but the Lord Redlady—disgraced and remote from Old Earth as he was—was nevertheless the accredited diplomat of the Instrumentality, and even Old North Australia did not push the Instrumentality too far. There were things supposed about worlds which had done so.

Soberly and huffily he went on,

"There's not much to it. If the money is discounted thirty-three and one third per cent per trip and if it is fifty-five trips to get to Old Earth, it takes a heap of money to pay up in orbit right here before you have a minicredit on earth. Sometimes the odds are better. Your Commonwealth government waits for months and years to get a really favorable rate of exchange and of course we send our freight by armed sailships, which don't go below the surface of space at all. They just take hundreds or thousands of years to get there, while our cruisers dart in and out around them, just to make sure that nobody robs them in transit. There are things about Norstrilian robots which none of you know, and which not even the Instrumentality knows"—he darted a quick look at the Lord Redlady, who said nothing to this, and went on—"which make it well worth while not to muck around with one of our perishing ships. We don't get robbed much. And we have other things that are even worse than Mother Hitton and her littul kittons. But the money and the stroon which finally reaches Old Earth is FOE money. F, O, E. F is for Free, O is for On, E is for Earth." F,O,E—free on Earth. That's the best kind of money there is, right on Old Old Earth Itself. And Earth has the final exchange computer. Or had it."

"Had it?" said the Lord Redlady.

"It broke down last night. Rod broke it. Overload."

"Impossible!" cried Redlady. "I'll check."



He went to the wall, pulled down a desk. A console, incredibly miniature, gleamed out at them. In less than three seconds it glowed. Redlady spoke into it, his voice as clear and cold as the ice they had all heard about:

"Priority. Instrumentality. Short of War. Instant. Instant Redlady calling. Earthport."

"Confirmed," said a Norstrilian voice, "confirmed and charged."

"Earthport," said the console in a whistling whisper which filled the room.

"Redlady - instrumentality - official - centputer - all - right-question - cargo - approved - question - out."

"Centputer - all - right - cargo - approved - out," said the whisper and fell silent.

The people in the room had seen an immense fortune squandered. Even by Norstrilian standards, the faster-than-light messages were things which a family might not use twice in a thousand years. They looked at Redlady as though he were an evil-worker with strange powers. Earth's prompt answer to the skinny man made them all remember that though Old North Australia produced the wealth, Earth still distributed much of it and that the supergovernment of the Instrumentality reached into far places where no Norstrilian would even wish to venture.

The Lord Redlady spoke mildly, "The central computer seems to be going again, if your government wishes to consult it. The 'cargo' is this boy here."

"You've told Earth about me?" said Rod.

"Why not? We want to get you there alive."

"But message security—?" said the doctor.

"I have references which no outside mind will know," said the Lord Redlady. "Finish up, Mister Financial Secretary. Tell the young man what he has on Earth."

"Your computer outcomputed the government," said John Fisher to-the-hundredth, "and it mortgaged all your lands, all your sheep, all your trading rights, all your family treasures, the right to the MacArthur name, the right to the McBan name, and itself. Then it bought futures. Of course, it didn't do it. You did, Rod McBan."

Startled into full awakeness, Rod found his right hand up at his mouth, so surprised was he. "I did?"

"Then you bought futures in stroon, but you offered them for sale. You held back the sales, shifting titles and changing prices, so that not even the central computer knew what you were doing. You bought almost all of the eighth year from now, most of the seventh year from now, and some of the sixth. You mortgaged each purchase as you went along, in order to buy more. Then you suddenly tore the market wide open by offering fantastic bargains, trading the six-year rights for seventh-year and eighth-year. Your computer made such lavish use of Instant Messages that the Commonwealth defense office had people buzzing around in the middle of the night. By the time they figured out what might happen, it had happened. You registered a monopoly of two year's export, far beyond the predicted amount. The government rushed for a weather recomputation, but while they were doing that you were registering your holdings on Earth and remortgaging them in FOE money. With the FOE money you began to buy up all the imports around Old North Australia, and when the government finally declared an emergency, you had secured final title to one and a half stroon years and to more megacredits, FOE money megacredits, than the Earth computers could handle. You're the richest man that ever was. Or ever will be. We changed all the rules this morning and I myself signed a new treaty with the Earth authorities, ratified by the Instrumentality. Meanwhile, you're the richest of the rich men who ever lived on this world and you're also rich enough to buy all of Old Earth. In fact, you have put in a reservation to buy it, unless the Instrumentality outbids you."

"Why should we?" said the Lord Redlady. "Let him have it. We'll watch what he does with the Earth after he buys it, and if it is something bad, we will kill him."

"You'd kill me, Lord Redlady?" said Rod. "I thought you were saving me?"

"Both," said the doctor, standing up. "The Commonwealth government has not tried to take your property away from you, though they have their doubts as to what you will do with Earth if you do buy it. They are not going to let you stay on this planet and endanger it by being the richest kidnap victim who ever lived. Tomorrow they will strip you of your property, unless you want to take a chance on running for it. Earth government is the same way. If you can figure out your own defenses, you can come on in. Of course the police will protect you, but would that be enough? I'm a doctor, and I'm here to ship you out if you want to go."

"And I'm an officer of government, and I will arrest you if you do not go," said John Fisher.

"And I represent the Instrumentality, which does not declare its policy to anyone, least of all to outsiders. But it is my personal policy," said the Lord Redlady, holding out his hands and twisting his thumbs in a meaningless, grotesque, but somehow very threatening way, "to see that this boy gets a safe trip to Earth and a fair deal when he comes back here!"

"You'll protect him all the way!" cried Lavinia, looking very happy.

"All the way. As far as I can. As long as I live."

"That's pretty long," muttered Hopper, "conceited little pommy cockahoop."

"Watch your language, Hopper," said the Lord Redlady. "Rod?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Your answer?" The Lord Redlady was peremptory.

"I'm going," said Rod.

"What on Earth do you want?" said the Lord Redlady ceremoniously.

"A genuine Cape triangle."

"A what?" cried the Lord Redlady.

"A Cape triangle. A postage stamp."

"What's postage?" said the Lord Redlady, really puzzled.

"Payments on messages."

"But you do that with thumbprints or eyeprints!"

"No," said Rod, "I mean paper ones."

"Paper messages?" said the Lord Redlady, looking as though someone had mentioned grass battleships, hairless sheep, solid cast-iron women, or something else equally improbable. "Paper messages?" he repeated, and then he laughed, quite charmingly. "Oh!" he said, with a tone of secret discovery. "You mean antiquities...?"

"Of course," said Rod. "Even before Space itself."

"Earth has a lot of antiquities, and I am sure you will be welcome to study them or to collect them. That will be perfectly all right. Just don't do any of the wrong things, or you will be in real trouble."

"What are the wrong things?" said Rod.

"Buying real people, or trying to. Shipping religion from one planet to another. Smuggling underpeople."

"What's religion?" said Rod.

"Later, later," said the Lord Redlady. "You'll learn everything later. Doctor, you take over."

Wentworth stood very carefully so that his head did not touch the ceiling. He had to bend his neck a little. "We have two boxes, Rod."

When he spoke, the door whirled in its tracks and showed them a small room beyond. There was a large box like a coffin and a very small box, like the kind that women have around the house to keep a single party-going bonnet in.

"There will be criminals, and wild governments, and conspirators, and adventurers, and just plain good people gone wrong at the thought of your wealth—there will be all these waiting for you to kidnap you or rob or even kill you—"

"Why kill me?"

"To impersonate you and to try to get your money," said the doctor. "Now look. This is your big choice. If you take the big box, we can put you in a sailship convoy and you will get there in several hundred or thousand years. But you will get there, ninety-nine point ninety-nine percent. Or we can send the big box on the regular planoforming ships, and somebody will steal you. Or we scun you down and put you in the little box."

"That little box?" cried Rod.

"Scunned. You've scunned sheep, haven't you?"

"I've heard of it. But a man, no. Dehydrate my body, pickle my head, and freeze the whole mucking mess?" cried Rod.

"That's it. Too bloody right!" cried the doctor cheerfully. "That'll give you a real chance of getting there alive."

"But who'll put me together? I'd need my own doctor—?" His voice quavered at the unnaturalness of the risk, not at the mere chanciness and danger of it.

"Here," said the Lord Redlady, "is your doctor, already trained."

"I am at your service," said the little Earth-animal, the 'monkey,' with a small bow to the assembled company. "My name is A'gentur and I have been conditioned as a physician, a surgeon and a barber."

The women had gasped. Hopper and Bill stared at the little animal in horror.

"You're an underperson!" yelled Hopper. "We've never let the crutting things loose on Norstrilia."

"I'm not an underperson. I'm an animal. Conditioned to—" The monkey jumped. Hopper's heavy knife twanged like a musical instrument as it clung to the softer steel of the wall. Hopper's other hand held a long thin knife, ready to reach Redlady's heart.

The left hand of the Lord Redlady flashed straight forward. Something in his hand glowed silently, terribly. There was a hiss in the air.

Where Hopper had been, a cloud of oily thick smoke, stinking of burning meat, coiled slowly toward the ventilators. Hopper's clothing and personal belongings, including one false tooth, lay on the chair in which he had been sitting. They were undamaged. His drink stood on the floor beside the chair, forever to remain unfinished.

The doctor's eyes gleamed as he stared strangely at Redlady.

"Noted and reported to the Old North Australian Navy."

"I'll report it too," said the Lord Redlady, "as the use of weapons on diplomatic grounds."

"Never mind," said John Fisher to-the-hundredth, not angry at all, but just pale and looking a little ill. Violence did not frighten him, but decision did. "Let's get on with it. Which box, big or little, boy?"

The workwoman Eleanor stood up. She had said nothing, but now she dominated the scene. "Take him in there, girls," she said, "and wash him like you would for the Garden of Death. I'll wash myself in there. You see," she added, "I've always wanted to see the blue skies on earth, and wanted to swim in a house that ran around on the big, big waters. I'll take your big box, Rod, and if I get through alive, you will owe me some treats on Earth. You take the little box, Roddy, take the little box. And that little tiny doctor with the fur on him. Rod, I trust him." Rod stood up.

Everybody was looking at him and at Eleanor. "You agree?" said the Lord Redlady.

He nodded.

"You agree to be scunned and put in the little box for instant shipment to Earth?"

He nodded again.

"You will pay all the extra expenses?"

He nodded again.

The doctor said, "You authorize me to cut you up and reduce you down, in the hope that you may be reconstituted on Earth?"

Rod nodded to him, too.

"Shaking your head isn't enough," said the doctor. "You have to agree for the record."

"I agree," said Rod quietly.

Aunt Doris and Lavinia came forward to lead him into the dressing room and shower room. Just as they reached for his arms, the doctor patted Rod on the back with a quick strange motion. Rod jumped a little.

"Deep hypnotic," said the doctor. "You can manage his body all right, but the next words he utters will be said, luck willing, on Old Old Earth Itself."

The women were wide-eyed but they led Rod forward to be cleaned for the operations and the voyage.

The doctor turned to the Lord Redlady and to John Fisher, the financial secretary.

"A good night's work," he said. "Pity about that man, though."

Bill sat still, frozen with grief in his chair, staring at Hopper's empty clothing in the chair next to him.

The console tinkled, "Twelve hours, Greenwich Mean Time. No adverse weather reports from the channel coast or from Meeya Meefla or Earthport building. All's well!"

The Lord Redlady served drinks to the misters. He did not even offer one to Bill. It would have been of no use, at this point.

From beyond the door, where they were cleaning the body, clothes and hair of the deeply hypnotized Rod, Lavinia and aunt Doris unconsciously reverted to the ceremony of the Garden of Death and lifted their voices in a sort of plainsong chant:

Out in the Garden of Death, our young

Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.

With muscular arm and reckless tongue,

They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.

The three men listened for a few moments, attentively. From the other washroom there came the sounds of the workwoman Eleanor, washing herself, alone and unattended, for a long voyage and a possible death.

The Lord Redlady heaved a sigh, "Have a drink, Bill. Hopper brought it on himself."

Bill refused to speak to them but he held forth his glass.

The Lord Redlady filled that and the others. He turned to John Fisher-to-the-hundredth and said, "You're shipping him?"

"Who?"

"The boy."

"I thought so."

"Better not," said the Lord Redlady.

"You mean—danger?"

"That's only half the word for it," said the Lord Redlady. "You can't possibly plan to offload him at Earthport. Put him into a good medical station. There's an old one, still good, on Mars, if they haven't closed it down. I know Earth. Half the people of Earth will be waiting to greet him and the other half will be waiting to rob him."

"You represent the Earth government, Sir and Commissioner," said John Fisher, "that's a rum way to talk about your own people."

"They are not that way all the time," laughed Redlady. "Just when they're in heat. Sex hasn't a chance to compare with money when it comes to the human race on Earth. They all think that they want power and freedom and six other impossible things. I'm not speaking for the Earth government when I say this. Just for myself."

"If we don't ship him, who will?" demanded Fisher.

"The Instrumentality."

"The Instrumentality? You don't conduct commerce. How can you?"

"We don't conduct commerce, but we do meet emergencies. I can flag down a long-jump cruiser and he'll be there months before anybody expects him."

"Those are warships. You can't use one for passengers!"

"Can't I?" said the Lord Redlady, with a smile.

"The Instrumentality would?" said Fisher, with a puzzled smile. "The cost would be tremendous. How will you pay for it? It'd be hard to justify."

"He will pay for it. Special donation from him for special service. One megacredit for the trip."

The financial secretary whistled. "That's a fearful price for a single trip. You'd want SAD money and not surface money, I suppose?"

"No. FOE money."

"Hot buttered moonbeams, man! That's a thousand times the most expensive trip that any person has ever had."

The big doctor had been listening to the two of them. "Mister and Owner Fisher," he said, "I recommend it."

"You?" cried John Fisher angrily. "You're a Norstrilian and you want to rob this poor boy?"

"Poor boy?" snorted the doctor. "It's not that. The trip's no good if he's not alive. Our friend here is extravagant, but his ideas are sound. I suggest one amendment."

"What's that?" said the Lord Redlady quickly.

"One and a half megacredits for the round trip—if he is well and alive and with the same personality, apart from natural causes. But note this. One kilocredit only if you deliver him on Earth dead."

John Fisher rubbed his chin. His suspicious eyes looked down at Redlady, who had taken a seat, and up at the doctor, whose head was still bumping the ceiling.

A voice behind him spoke: "Take it, Mister Financial Secretary. The boy won't use money if he's dead. You can't fight the Instrumentality, you can't be reasonable with the Instrumentality, and you can't buy the Instrumentality. With what they've been taking off us all these thousands of years, they've got more stroon than we do. Hidden away somewhere. You, there!" said Bill rudely to the Lord Redlady, "do you have any idea what the Instrumentality is worth?"

The Lord Redlady creased his brow. "Never thought of it. I suppose it must have a limit. But I never thought of it. We do have accountants, though."

"See," said Bill. "Even the Instrumentality would hate to lose money. Take the doctor's bid, Redlady. Take him up on it, Fisher." His use of their surnames was an extreme incivility, but the two men were convinced.

"I'll do it," said Redlady. "It's awfully close to writing insurance, which we are not chartered to do. I'll write it in as his emergency clause."

"I'll take it," said John Fisher. "It's to be thousands of years until another Norstrilian financial secretary pays money for a ticket like this, but it's worth it—to him. I'll square it in his accounts. To our planet."

"I'll witness it," said the doctor.

"No, you won't," said Bill savagely. "The boy has one friend here. That's me. Let me do it"

They stared at him, all three.

He stared back.

He broke. "Sirs and Misters, please let me be the witness."

The Lord Redlady nodded and opened the console. He and John Fisher spoke the contract into it. At the end Bill shouted his full name as witness.

The two women brought Rod McBan, mother-naked, into the room. He was immaculately clean and he stared ahead as though he were in an endless dream.

"That's the operating room," said the Lord Redlady. "I'll spray us all with antiseptic, if you don't mind."

"Of course," said the doctor. "You must."

"You're going to cut him up and boil him down—here and now?" cried aunt Doris.

"Here and now," said the Lord Redlady, "if the doctor approves. The sooner he goes the better chance he has of coming through the whole thing alive."

"I consent," said the doctor. "I approve."

He started to take Rod by the hand, leading him toward the room with the long coffin and the small box. At some sign from Redlady, the walls had opened up to show a complete surgical theater.

"Wait a moment," said the Lord Redlady. "Take your colleague."

"Of course," said the doctor.

The monkey had jumped out of his basket when he heard his name mentioned.

Together, the giant and the monkey led Ron into the little gleaming room. They closed the door behind them.

The ones who were left behind sat down nervously.

"Mister and Owner Redlady," said Bill, "since I'm staying, could I have some more of that drink?"

"Of course, Sir and Mister," said the Lord Redlady, not having any idea of what Bill's title might be.

There were no screams from Rod, no thuds, no protest. There was the cloying sweet horror of unknown medicines creeping through the airvents. The two women said nothing as the group of people sat around. Eleanor, wrapped in an enormous towel, came and sat with them. In the second hour of the operations on Rod, Lavinia began sobbing. She couldn't help it.

#### CHAPTER NINE: Traps, Fortunes and Watchers

We all know that no communications systems are leak-proof. Even inside the far-reaching communications patterns of the Instrumentality, there were soft spots, rotten points, garrulous men. The MacArthur-McBan computer, sheltered in the Palace of the Governor of Night, had had time to work out abstract economics and weather patterns, but the computer had not tasted human love or human wickedness. All the messages concerning Rod's speculation in the forward santaclara crop and stroon export had been sent in the clear. It was no wonder that on many worlds, people saw Rod as a chance, an opportunity, a victim, a benefactor, or an enemy. For we all know the old poem:

Luck is hot and people funny,

Everybody's fond of money.

Lose a chance and sell your mother,

Win the pot and buy another.

Other people fall and crash:

You may get the ton of cash!

It applied in this case too. People ran hot and cold with the news.

On Earth, same day, within Earthport Itself

Commissioner Teadrinker tapped his teeth with a pencil. Four megacredits FOE money already and more, much more to come.

Teadrinker lived in a fever of perpetual humiliation. He had chosen it. It was called "the honorable disgrace" and it applied to ex-Lords of the Instrumentality who chose long life instead of service and honor. He was a thousandmorer, meaning that he had traded his career, his reputation, and his authority for a long life of one thousand or more years. (The Instrumentality had learned, long ago, that the best way to protect its members from temptation was to tempt them itself. By offering "honorable disgrace" and low, secure jobs within the Instrumentality to those Lords who might be tempted to trade long life for their secrets, it kept its own potential defectors. Teadrinker was one of these.)

He saw the news and he was a skilled wise man. He could not do anything to the Instrumentality with money, but money worked wonders on Earth. He could buy a modicum of honor. Perhaps he could even have the records falsified and get married again. He flushed slightly, even after hundreds of years, when he remembered his first wife blazing at him when she saw his petition for long life and honorable disgrace: "Go ahead and live, you fool. Live and watch me die

without you, inside the decent four hundred years which everybody has, if they work for it and want it. Watch your children die, watch your friends die, watch all your hobbies and ideas get out of date. Go along, you horrible little man, and let me die like a human being!"

A few megacredits could help that.

Teadrinker was in charge of incoming visitors. His underman, the cattle-derived B'dank, was custodian of the scavenger spiders—half-tame one-ton insects which stood by for emergency work if the services of the tower failed. He wouldn't need to have this Norstrilian merchant very long—just long enough for a recorded order and a short murder.

Perhaps not. If the Instrumentality caught him, it would be dream-punishments, things worse than Shayol itself.

Perhaps yes. If he succeeded, he would escape a near immortality of boredom and could have a few decades of juicy fun instead.

He tapped his teeth again.

"Do nothing, Teadrinker," he said to himself, "but think, think, think. Those spiders look as though they might have possibilities."

On Viola Siderea, at the Council of the Guild of Thieves

"Put two converted police cruisers in orbit around the sun. Mark them for charter or sale, so that we won't run into the police.

"Put an agent into every liner which is Earthbound within the time stated.

"Remember, we don't want the man. Just his luggage. He's sure to be carrying a half-ton or so of stroon. With that kind of fortune, he could pay off all the debts we gathered with that Bozart business. Funny we never heard from Bozart. Nothing.

"Put three senior thieves in Earthport itself. Make sure that they have fake stroon, diluted down to about one-thousandth, so that they can work the luggage switch if they have the chance...

"I know all this costs money, but you have to spend money to get it. Agreed, gentlemen of the larcenical arts?"

There was a chorus of agreement around the table, except for one old, wise thief who said, "You know my views."

"Yes," said the chairman, with toneless polite hatred, "we know your views. Rob corpses. Clean out wrecks. Become human hyenas instead of human wolves."

With unexpected humor the old man said, "Crudely put but correct—and safer."

"Do we need to vote?" said the chairman, looking around the table.

There was a chorus of noes.

"Carried, then," said the presiding chief. "Hit hard, and hit for the small target, not the big one."

Ten kilometers below the surface of the Earth

"He is coming, father! He is coming."

"Who is coming?" said the voice, like a great drum resounding.

E'lamelanie said it as though it were a prayer: "The blessed one, the appointed one, the guarantor of our people, the new messenger on whom the robot, rat and Copt agreed. With money he is coming, to help us, to save us, to open to us the light of day and the vaults of heaven."

"You are blasphemous," said the E-telekeli.



The girl fell into a hush. She not only respected her father. She worshiped him as her personal religious leader. His great eyes blazed as though they could see through thousands of meters of dirt and rock and still see beyond into the deep of space. Perhaps he could see that far... Even his own people were never sure of the limits of his power. His white face and white feathers gave his penetrating eyes a miraculously piercing capacity.

Calmly, rather kindly, he added, "My darling, you are wrong. We simply do not know who this man McBan really is."

"Couldn't it be written?" she pleaded. "Couldn't it be promised? That's the direction of Space from which the robot, the rat and the Copt sent back our very special message, 'From the uttermost deeps one shall come, bringing uncountable treasure and a sure delivery.' So it might be now! Mightn't it?"

"My dear," he responded, "you still have a crude idea of real treasure if you think it is measured in megacredits. Go read *The Scrap of the Book*, then think, and then tell me what you have thought. But meanwhile—no more chatter. We must not excite our poor oppressed people."

The temporary Council of the Commonwealth of Old North Australia

"All the riffraff of all the worlds. They're all going to make a run for that silly boy of ours."

"Right."

"If he stays here, they'll come here."

"Right."

"Let's let him go to Earth. I have a feeling that little rascal Redlady will smuggle him out tonight and save us the trouble."

"Right."

"After a while it will be all right for him to come back. He won't spoil our hereditary defense of looking stupid. I'm afraid he's bright but by Earth standards he's just a yokel."

"Right."

"Should we send along twenty or thirty more Rod McBans and get the attackers really loused up?"

"No."

"Why not, Sir and Owner?"

"Because it would look clever. We rely on never looking clever. I have the next best answer."

"What's that?"

"Suggest to all the really rum worlds we know that a good impersonator could put his hands on the McBan money. Make the suggestion so that they would not know that we had originated it. The starlanes will be full of Rod McBans, complete with phony Norstrilian accents, for the next couple of hundred years. And no one will suspect that we will set them up to it. Stupid's the word, mate, stupid. If they ever think we're clever, we're in for it!" The speaker sighed: "How do the bloody fools suppose our forefathers got off Paradise VII if they weren't clever? How can they think we'd hold this sharp little monopoly for thousands of years? They're stupid not to think about it, but let's not make them think. Right?"

"Right."

CHAPTER TEN: The Nearby Exile

Rod awoke with a strange feeling of well-being. In a corner of his mind there were memories of pandemonium—knives, blood, medicine, a monkey working as surgeon. Rum dreams! He glanced around and immediately tried to jump out of bed.

The whole world was on fire!

Bright blazing intolerable fire, like a blowtorch.

But the bed held him. He realized that a loose comfortable jacket ended in tapes and that the tapes were anchored in some way to the bed.

"Eleanor!" he shouted, "Come here."

He remembered the mad bird attacking him, Lavinia transporting him to the cabin of the sharp Earthman, Lord Redlady. He remembered medicines and fuss. But this— what was this?

When the door opened, more of the intolerable light poured in. It was as though every cloud had been stripped from the sky of Old North Australia, leaving only the blazing heavens and the fiery sun. There were people who had seen that happen, when the weather machines occasionally broke down and let a hurricane cut a hole in the clouds, but it had certainly not happened in his time, or in his grandfather's time.

The man who entered was pleasant, but he was no Norstrilian. His shoulders were slight, he did not look as though he could lift a cow, and his face had been washed so long and so steadily that it looked like a baby's face. He had an odd medical-looking suit on, all white, and his face combined the smile and the ready professional sympathy of a good physician.

"We're feeling better, I see," said he.

"Where on earth am I?" asked Rod. "In a satellite. It feels odd."

"You're not on Earth, man."

"I know I'm not. I've never been there. Where's this place?"

"Mars. The Old Star Station. I'm Jeanjacques Vomact." Rod mumbled the name so badly that the other man had to spell it out for him. When that was straightened out, Rod came back to the subject.

"Where's Mars? Can you untie me? When's that light going to go off?"

"I'll untie you right now," said Doctor Vomact, "but stay in bed and take it easy until we've given you some food and taken some tests. The light—that's sunshine. I'd say it's about seven hours, local time, before it goes off. This is late morning. Don't you know what Mars is? It's a planet."

"New Mars, you mean," said Rod proudly, "the one with the enormous shops and the zoological gardens."

"The only shops we have here are the cafeteria and the PX. New Mars? I've heard of that place somewhere. It does have big shops and some kind of an animal show. Elephants you can hold in your hand. They've got those too. This isn't that place at all. Wait a sec, I'll roll your bed to the window."

Rod looked eagerly out of the window. It was frightening. A naked, dark sky did not have a cloud in sight. A few holes showed in it here and there. They almost looked like the "stars" which people saw when they were in spaceship transit from one cloudy planet to another. Dominating everything was a single explosive horrible light, which hung high and steady in the sky without ever going off. He found himself cringing for the explosion, but he could tell, from the posture of the doctor next to him, that the doctor was not in the least afraid of that chronic hydrogen bomb, whatever it might turn out to be.

Keeping his voice level and trying not to sound like a boy he said, "What's that?"

"The sun."

"Don't cook my book, mate. Give me the straight truth. Everybody calls his star a sun. What's this one?"

"The sun. The original sun. The sun of Old Earth Itself.

Just as this is plain Mars. Not even Old Mars. Certainly not New Mars. This Earth's neighbor."

"That thing never goes off, goes up—boom!—or goes down?"

"The sun, you mean?" said doctor Vomact. "No, I should think not. I suppose it looked that way to your ancestors and mine half a million years ago, when we were all running around naked on Earth." The doctor busied himself as he talked. He chopped the air with a strange-looking little key, and the tapes fell loose. The mittens dropped off Rod's hands. Rod looked at his own hands in the intense light and saw that they seemed strange. They looked smooth and naked and clean, like the doctor's own hands. Weird memories began to come back to him, but his handicap about spieking and hiering telepathically had made him cautious and sensitive, so he did not give himself away.

"If this is Old Mars, what are you doing, talking the Old North Australian language to me? I thought my people were the only ones in the universe who still spoke Ancient English." He shifted proudly but clumsily over to the Old Common Tongue: "You see, the Appointed Ones of my family taught me this language as well. I've never been offworld before."

"I speak your language," said the doctor, "because I learned it. I learned it because you paid me, very generously, to learn it. In the months that we have been reassembling you, it's come in handy. We just let down the portal of memory and identity today, but I've talked to you for hundreds of hours already."

Rod tried to speak.

He could not utter a word. His throat was dry and he was afraid that he might throw up his food—if he had eaten any.

The doctor put a friendly hand on his arm. "Easy, Mister and Owner McBan, easy now. We all do that when we come out."

Rod croaked, "I've been dead? Dead. Me?"

"Not exactly dead," said the doctor, "but close to it."

"The box—that little box!" cried Rod.

"What little box?"

"Please, Doctor—the one I came in?"

"That box wasn't so little," said Doctor Vomact. He squared his hands in the air and made a shape about the size of the little ladies' bonnet-box which Rod had seen in the Lord Redlady's private operating room. "It was this big. Your head was full natural size. That's why it's been so easy and so successful to bring you back to normality in such a hurry."

"And Eleanor?"

"Your companion? She made it, too. Nobody intercepted the ship."

"You mean the rest is true, too. I'm still the richest man in the universe? And I'm gone, gone from home?" Rod would have liked to beat the bedspread, but did not.

"I am glad," said Doctor Vomact, "to see you express so much feeling about your situation. You showed a great deal when you were under the sedatives and hypnotics, but I was beginning to wonder how we could help you realize your true position when you came back, as you have, to

normal life. Forgive me for talking this way. I sound like a medical journal. It's hard to be friends with a patient, even when one really likes him..."

Vomact was a small man, a full head shorter than Rod himself, but so gracefully proportioned that he did not look stunted or little. His face was thin, with a mop of ungovernable black hair which fell in all directions. Among Norstrilians, this fashion would have been deemed eccentric; to judge by the fact that other Earthmen let their hair grow wild and long, it must have been an Earth fashion. Rod found it foolish but not repulsive.

It was not Vomact's appearance which caused the impression. It was the personality which tingled out of every pore. Vomact could become calm when he knew, from his medical wisdom, that kindness and tranquility were in order, but these qualities were not usual to him. He was vivacious, moody, lively, talkative to an extreme, but he was sensitive enough to the person to whom he was talking: he never became a bore. Even among Norstrilian women, Rod had never seen a person who expressed so much so fluently. When Vomact talked, his hands were in constant motion—outlining, describing, clarifying the points which he described. When he talked he smiled, scowled, raised his eyebrows in questioning, stared with amazement, looked aside in wonder. Rod was used to the sight of two Norstrilians having a long telepathic conversation, spieking and hiering one another as their bodies reposed, comfortable and immobile, while their minds worked directly on one another. To do all this with the speaking voice—that, to a Norstrilian, was a marvel to hear and behold. There was something graceful and pleasant about the animation of this Earth doctor which stood in complete contrast to the quick dangerous decisiveness of the Lord Redlady. Rod began to think that if Earth were full of people, all of them like Vomact, it must be a delightful but confusing place. Vomact once hinted that his family was unusual, so that even in the long weary years of perfection, when everyone else had numbers, they kept their family name secret but remembered.

One afternoon Vomact suggested that they walk across the Martian plain a few kilometers to the ruins of the first human settlement on Mars. "We have to talk," said he, "but it is easy enough to talk through these soft helmets. The exercise will do you good. You're young and you will take a lot of conditioning."

Rod agreed.

Friends they became in the ensuing days.

Rod found that the doctor was by no means as young as he looked, just ten years or so older than himself. The doctor was a hundred and ten years old, and had gone through his first rejuvenation just ten years before. He had two more and then death, at the age of four hundred, if the present schedule were kept for Mars.

"You may think, Mister McBane, that you are an upset, wild type yourself. I can promise you, young bucko, that Old Earth is such a happy mess these days that they will never notice you. Haven't you heard about the Rediscovery of Man?"

Rod hesitated. He had paid no attention to the news himself, but he did not want to discredit his home planet by making it seem more ignorant than it really was. "Something about language, wasn't it? And length of life, too? I never paid much attention to offplanet news, unless it was technical inventions or big battles. I think some people in Old North Australia have a keen interest in Old Earth Itself. What was it, anyhow?"

"The Instrumentality finally took on a big plan. Earth had no dangers, no hopes, no rewards, no future except endlessness. Everybody stood a thousand-to-one chance of living the four hundred years which was allotted for persons who earned the full period by keeping busy—"

"Why didn't everybody do it?" interrupted Rod. "The Instrumentality took care of the shorties in a very fair way. It offered them wonderfully delicious and exciting vices when they got to be about seventy. Things that combined electronics, drugs and sex in the subjective mind. Anybody

who didn't have a lot of work to do ended up getting 'the blissfuls' and eventually died of sheer fun. Who wants to take time for mere hundred-years' renewals when they can have five or six thousand years of orgies and adventures every single night?"

"Sounds horrible to me," said Rod. "We have our Giggle Rooms, but people die in them right away. They don't mess around, dying among their neighbors. Think of the awful interaction you must get with the normals."

Doctor Vomact's face clouded over with anger and grief. He turned away and looked over the endless Martian plains. Dear blue Earth hung friendlily in the sky. He looked up at the star of Earth as though he hated it and he said to Rod, his face still turned away:

"You may have a point there, Mister McBan. My mother was a shortie and after she gave up, my father went too. And I'm a normal. I don't suppose I'll get over what it did to me. They weren't my real parents, of course—there was nothing that dirty in my family—but they were my final adopters. I've always thought that you Old North Australians were crazy, rich barbarians for killing off your teenagers if they didn't jump enough or something crude like that, but I'll admit that you're clean barbarians. You don't make yourselves live with the sweet sick stink of death inside your own apartments..."

"What's an apartment?"

"What we live in."

"You mean a house," said Rod.

"No, an apartment is a part of a house. Two hundred thousand of them sometimes make up one big house."

"You mean," said Rod, "there are two hundred thousand families all in one enormous living room? The room must be kilometers long!"

"No, no, no!" said the doctor, laughing a little. "Each apartment has a separate living room with sleep sections that come out of the walls, an eating section, a washroom for yourself and your visitors that might come to have a bath with you, a garden room, a study room, and a personality room."

"What's a personality room?"

"That," said the doctor, "is a little room where we do things that we don't want our own families to watch."

"We call that a bathroom," said Rod.

The doctor stopped in their walk. "That's what makes it so hard to explain to you what Earth is doing. You're fossils, that's what you are. You've had the old language of English, you keep your family system and your names, you've had unlimited life—"

"Not unlimited," said Rod, "just long. We have to work for it and pay for it with tests."

The doctor looked sorry. "I didn't mean to criticize you. You're different. Very different from what Earth has been. You would have found Earth inhuman. Those apartments we were talking about, for example. Two-thirds of them empty. Underpeople moving into the basements. Records lost; jobs forgotten. If we didn't make such good robots, everything would have fallen to pieces at the same time." He looked at Rod's face. "I can see you don't understand me. Let's take a practical case. Can you imagine killing me?"

"No," said Rod, "I like you."

"I don't mean that. Not the real us. Suppose you didn't know who I was and you found me intruding on your sheep or stealing your stroon."

"You couldn't steal my stroon. My government processes it for me and you couldn't get near it."

"All right, all right, not stroon. Just suppose I came from off your planet without a permit. How would you kill me?"

"I wouldn't kill you. I'd report it to the police."

"Suppose I drew a weapon on you?"

"Then," said Rod, "you'd get your neck broken. Or a knife in your heart. Or a minibomb somewhere near you."

"There!" said the doctor, with a broad grin.

"There what?" said Rod.

"You know how to kill people, should the need arise."

"All citizens know how," said Rod, "but that doesn't mean they do it. We're not bushwhacking each other all the time, the way I heard some Earthpeople thought we did."

"Precisely," said Vomact. "And that's what the Instrumentality is trying to do for all mankind today. To make life dangerous enough and interesting enough to be real again. We have diseases, dangers, fights, chances. It's been wonderful."

Rod looked back at the group of sheds they had left. "I don't see any signs of it here on Mars."

"This is a military establishment. It's been left out of the Rediscovery of Man until the effects have been studied better. We're still living perfect lives of four hundred years here on Mars. No danger, no change, no risk."

"How do you have a name, then?"

"My father gave it to me. He was an official Hero of the Frontier Worlds who came home and died a shortie. The Instrumentality let people like that have names before they gave the privilege to everybody."

"What are you doing here?"

"Working." The doctor started to resume their walk. Rod did not feel much awe of him. He was such a shamelessly talkative person, the way most Earthmen seemed to be, that it was hard not to be at ease with him. Rod took Vomact's arm, gently. "There's more to it—"

"You know it," said Vomact. "You have good perceptions. Should I tell you?"

"Why not?" said Rod.

"You're my patient. It might not be fair to you."

"Go ahead," said Rod, "you ought to know I'm tough."

"I'm a criminal," said the doctor.

"But you're alive," said Rod. "In my world we kill criminals or we send them offplanet."

"I'm offplanet," said Vomact. "This isn't my world. For most of us here on Mars, this is a prison, not a home."

"What did you do?"

"It's too awful..." said the Doctor. "I'm ashamed of it myself. They have sentenced me to conditional conditional."

Rod looked at him quickly. Momentarily he wondered whether he might be the victim of some outrageous deadpan joke. The doctor was serious; his face expressed bewilderment and grief.

"I revolted," said the doctor, "without knowing it. People can say anything they want on earth, and they can print up to twenty copies of anything they need to print, but beyond that it's mass communications. Against the law. When the Rediscovery of Man came, they gave me the Spanish language to work on. I used a lot of research to get out La Prensa, Jokes, dialogues, imaginary advertisements, reports of what had happened in the ancient world. But then I got a bright idea. I went down to Earthport and got the news from incoming ships. What was happening here. What was happening there. You have no idea, Rod, how interesting mankind is! And the things we do... so strange, so comical, so pitiable. The news even comes in on machines, all marked 'official use only.' I disregarded that and I printed up one issue with nothing but truth in it—a real issue, all facts.

"I printed real news.

"Rod, the roof fell in. All persons who had been reconditioned for Spanish were given stability tests. I was asked, did I know the law? Certainly, said I, I knew the law. No mass communications except within government. News is the mother of opinion, opinion the cause of mass delusion, delusion the source of war. The law was plain and I thought it did not matter. I thought it was just an old law.

"I was wrong, Rod, wrong. They did not charge me with violating the news laws. They charged me with revolt—against the Instrumentality. They sentenced me to death, immediately. Then they made it conditional, conditional on my going off-planet and behaving well. When I got here, they made it double conditional. If my act has no bad results. But I can't find out. I can go back to Earth any time. That part is no trouble. If they think my misdeed still has effect, they will give me the dream punishments or send me off to that awful planet somewhere. If they think it doesn't matter, they will restore my citizenship with a laugh. But they don't know the worst of it. My underman learned Spanish and the underpeople are keeping the newspaper going very secretly. I can't even imagine what they will do to me if they ever find out what has gone wrong and know that it was me who started it all. Do you think I'm wrong, Rod?"

Rod stared at him. He was not used to judging adults, particularly not at their own request. In Old North Australia, people kept their distance. There were fitting ways for doing everything, and one of the most fitting things was to deal only with people of your own age group.

He tried to be fair, to think in an adult way, and he said, "Of course I think you're wrong, Mister and Doctor Vomact. But you're not very wrong. None of us should trifle with war."

Vomact seized Rod's arm. The gesture was hysterical, almost ugly. "Rod," he whispered, very urgently, "you're rich. You come from an important family. Could you get me into Old North Australia?"

"Why not?" said Rod. "I can pay for all the visitors I want."

"No, Rod, I don't mean that. As an immigrant." It was Rod's turn to become tense. "Immigrant?" he said. "The penalty for immigration is death. We're killing our own people right now, just to keep the population down. How do you think we could let outsiders settle with us? And the stroon. What about that?"

"Never mind, Rod," said Vomact. "I won't bother you again. I won't mention it again. It's a weary thing, to live many years with death ready to open the next door, ring the next bell, be on the next page of the message file. I haven't married. How could I?" With a whimsical turn of his vivacious mind and face, he was oft on a cheerful track. "I have a medicine, Rod, a medicine for doctors, even for rebels. Do you know what it is?"

"A tranquilizer?" Rod was still shocked at the indecency of anyone mentioning immigration to a Norstrilian. He could not think straight.

"Work," said the little doctor, "that's my medicine."

"Work is always good," said Rod, feeling pompous at the generalization. The magic had gone out of the afternoon.

The doctor felt it too. He sighed. "I'll show you the old sheds which men from Earth first built. And then I'll go to work. Do you know what my main work is?"

"No," said Rod, politely.

"You," said doctor Vomact, with one of his sad-gay mischievous smiles. "You're well, but I've got to make you more than well. I've got to make you kill-proof."

They had reached the sheds.

The ruins might be old, but they were not very impressive. They looked something like the homes on the more modest stations back on Norstrilia.

On their way back Rod said, very casually, "What are you going to do to me, sir and doctor?"

"Anything you want," said Vomact lightly.

"Really, now. What?"

"Well," said Vomact, "the Lord Redlady sent along a whole cube of suggestions. Keep your personality. Keep your retinal and brain images. Change your appearance. Change your workwoman into a young man who looks just like your description."

"You can't do that to Eleanor. She's a citizen."

"Not here, not on Mars, she isn't. She's your baggage."

"But her legal rights!"

"This is Mars, Rod, but it's Earth territory. Under Earth law. Under the direct control of the Instrumentality. We can do these things all right. The hard thing is this. Would you consent to passing for an underman?"

"I never saw one. How would I know?" said Rod.

"Could you stand the shame of it?"

Rod laughed, by way of an answer.

Vomact sighed. "You're funny people, you Norstrilians. I'd rather die than be mistaken for an underman. The disgrace of it, the contempt! But the Lord Redlady said that you could walk into Earth as free as a breeze if we made you pass for a cat-man. I might as well tell you, Rod. Your wife is already here."

Rod stopped walking. "My wife? I have no wife."

"Your cat-wife," said the doctor. "Of course it isn't real marriage. Underpeople aren't allowed to have it. But they have a companion which looks something like marriage and we sometimes slip and call them husband and wife. The Instrumentality has already sent a cat-girl out to be your 'wife.' She'll travel back to Earth with you from Mars, You'll just be a pair of lucky cats who've been doing dances and acrobatics for the bored station personnel here."

"And Eleanor?"

"I suppose somebody will kill her, thinking it's you. That's what you brought her for, isn't it? Aren't you rich enough?"

"No, no, no," said Rod, "nobody is that rich. We have to think of something else."

They spent the entire walk back making new plans which would protect Eleanor and Rod both.



As they entered the shedport and took off their helmets, Rod said, "This wife of mine, when can I see her?"

"You won't overlook her," said Vomact. "She's as wild as fire and twice as beautiful."

"Does she have a name?"

"Of course she does," said the doctor. "They all do."

"What is it, then?"

"C'mell."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: Hospitality and Entrapment

People waited, here and there. If there had been world-wide news coverage, the population would have converged on Earthport with curiosity, passion, or greed. But news had been forbidden long before", people could know only know the things which concerned them personally; the centers of Earth remained undisturbed. Here and there, as Rod made his trip from Mars to Earth, there were anticipations of the event. Over-all, the world of Old Old Earth remained quiet, except for the perennial bubble of its inward problems.

On Earth, the day of Rod's flight, within Earthport itself

"They shut me out of the meeting this morning, when I'm in charge of visitors. That means that something is in the air," said Commissioner Teadrinker to his underman, B'dank.

B'dank, expecting a dull day, had been chewing his cud while sitting on his stool in the corner. He knew far more about the case than did his master, and he had learned his additional information from the secret sources of the under-people, but he was resolved to betray nothing, to express nothing. Hastily he swallowed his cud and said, in his reassuring, calm bull voice:

"There might be some other reason, sir and master. If they were considering a promotion for you, they would leave you out of the meeting. You certainly deserve a promotion, sir and master."

"Are the spiders ready?" asked Teadrinker crossly.

"Who can tell the mind of a giant spider?" said B'dank calmly. "I talked to the foreman-spider for three hours yesterday with sign language. He wants twelve cases of beer. I told him I would give him more—he could have ten. The poor devil can't count, though he thinks he can, so he was pleased at having out-bargained me. They will take the person you designate to the steeple of Earthport and they will hide that person so that the human being cannot be found for many hours. When I appear with the cases of beer, they will give me the person. I will then jump out of a window, holding the person in my arms. There are so few people who go down the outside of Earthport that they may not notice me at all. I will take the person to the ruined palace directly under Alpha Ralpa Boulevard, the one which you showed me, sir and master, and there I will keep the person in good order until you come and do the things which you have to do."

Teadrinker looked across the room. The big, florid, handsome face was so exasperatingly calm that it annoyed him. Teadrinker had heard that bull-men, because of their cattle origin, were sometimes subject to fits of uncontrollable frantic rage, but he had never seen the least sign of any such phenomenon in B'dank.

He snapped, "Aren't you worried?"

"Why should I worry, sir and master? You are doing the worrying for both of us."

"Go fry yourself!"

"That is not an operational instruction," said B'dank. "I suggest that the master eat something. That will calm his nerves. Nothing at all may happen today, and it is very hard for true men to wait for nothing at all. I have seen many of them get upset."

Teadrinker gritted his teeth at this extreme reasonableness. Nevertheless, he took a dehydrated banana out of his desk drawer and began chewing on it.

He looked sharply across at B'dank. "Do you want one of these things?"

B'dank slid off his chair with surprisingly smooth agility; he was at the desk, his enormous ham-sized hand held out, before he said, "Yes, indeed, sir. I love bananas."

Teadrinker gave him one and then said, fretfully, "Are you sure of the fact you never met the Lord Redlady?"

"Sure as any underman can be," said B'dank, munching the banana. "We never really know what has been put into our original conditioning, or who put it there. We're inferior and we're not supposed to know. It is forbidden even to inquire."

"So you admit that you might be a spy or agent of the Lord Redlady?"

"I might be, sir, but I do not feel like it."

"Do you know who Redlady is?"

"You have told me, sir, that he is the most dangerous human being in the whole galaxy."

"That's right," said Teadrinker, "and if I am running into something which the Lord Redlady has set up, I might as well cut up my throat before I start."

"It would be simpler, sir," said B'dank, "not to kidnap this Rod McBan at all. That is the only element of danger. If you did nothing, things would go on as they always have gone on—quietly, calmly."

"That's the horror and anxiety of it! They do always go on. Don't you think I want to get out of here, to taste power and freedom again?"

"You may so, sir," said B'dank, hoping that Teadrinker would offer him one more of those delicious dried bananas.

Teadrinker, distracted, did not.

He just walked up and down his room, desperate with the torment of hope, danger and delay.

Antechamber of the Bell and Bank

The Lady Johanna Gnade was there first. She was clean, well-dressed, alert. The Lord Jestocost, who followed her in, wondered if she had any personal life at all. It was bad manners, among the Chiefs of the Instrumentality, to inquire into another Chiefs personal affairs, even though the complete personal histories of each of them, kept up to the day and minute, was recorded in the computer cabinet in the corner. Jestocost knew, because he had peeped at his own record, using another Chiefs name, just so that he could see whether several minor illegalities of his had been recorded; they had been, all except for the biggest one—his deal with the cat-girl C'mell—which he had successfully kept off the recording screens. (The record simply showed him having a nap at the time.) If the Lady Johanna had any secrets, she kept them well.

"My sir and colleague," said she, "I suspect you of sheer inquisitiveness—a vice most commonly attributed to women."

"When we get as old as this, my lady, the differences in character between men and women become imperceptible. If, indeed, they ever existed in the first place. You and I are bright people and we each have a good nose for danger or disturbance. Isn't it likely we would both look up somebody with the impossible name of Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the hundred-and-fifty-first generation. See—I memorized all of it! Don't you think that was rather clever of me?"

"Rather," said she, in a tone which implied she didn't.

"I'm expecting him this morning."

"You are?" she asked, on a rising note which implied that there was something improper about his knowledge. "There's nothing about it in the messages."

"That's it," said the Lord Jestocost, smiling, "I arranged for Mars solar radiation to be carried two extra decimals until he left. This morning it's back down to three decimals. That means he's coming. Clever of me, isn't it?"

"Too clever," she said. "Why ask me?" I never thought you valued my opinion. Anyhow, why are you taking all these pains with the case? Why don't you just ship him out so far that it would take him a long lifetime, even with stroon, to get back here again?"

He looked at her evenly until she flushed. He said nothing.

"My—my comment was improper, I suppose," she stammered. "You and your sense of justice. You're always putting the rest of us in the wrong."

"I didn't mean to," he said mildly, "because I am just thinking of Earth. Did you know he owns this tower?"

"Earthport?" she cried. "Impossible."

"Not at all," said Jestocost. "I myself sold it to his agent ten days ago. For forty megacredits FOE money. That's more than we happen to have on Earth right now. When he deposited it, we began paying him 3-percent-a-year interest. And that wasn't all he bought from me. I sold him that ocean too, right there, the one the ancients called Atlantic. And I sold him three hundred thousand attractive under-women trained in various tasks, together with the dower rights of seven hundred human women of appropriate ages."

"You mean you did all this to save the Earth treasury three megacredits a year?"

"Wouldn't you? Remember, this is FOE money." She pursed her lips. Then she burst into a smile. "I never saw anyone else like you, my Lord Jestocost. You're the fairest man I ever knew and yet you never forget a little bit more in the way of earnings!"

"That's not the end of it," said he with a very crafty, pleased smile. "Did you read Amended (Reversionary) Schedule seven hundred and eleven—nineteen—thirteen P which you yourself voted for eleven days ago?"

"I looked at it," she said defensively. "We all did. It was something to do with Earth funds and Instrumentality funds. The Earth representative didn't complain. We all passed it because we trusted you."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Frankly, not at all. Does it have anything to do with this rich old man, McBan?"

"Don't be sure," said the Lord Jestocost, "that he's old. He might be young. Anyhow, the tax schedule raises taxes on kilocredits very slightly. Megacredit taxes are divided evenly between Earth and the Instrumentality, provided that the owner is not personally operating the property. It comes to one per cent a month. That's the very small type in the footnote at the bottom of the seventh page of rates."

"You—you mean—" she gasped with laughter, "that by selling the poor man the Earth you are not only cutting him out of three percent interest a year, but you're charging him twelve percent taxes. Blessed rockets, man, you're weird. I love you. You're the cleverest, most ridiculous person we ever had as a Chief of the Instrumentality!" From the Lady Johanna Gnade, this was lurid language indeed. Jestocost did not know whether to be offended or pleased.

Since she was in a rare good humor, he dared to mention his half-secret project to her:

"Do you think, my lady, that if we have all this unexpected credit, we could waste a little of our stroom imports?"

Her laugh stopped. "On what?" she said sharply.

"On the underpeople. For the best of them."

"Oh, no. Oh, no! Not for the animals, while there are still people who suffer. You're mad to think of it, my lord."

"I'm mad," he said. "I'm mad all right. Mad—for justice."

And this strikes me as simple justice. I'm not asking for equal rights. Merely for a little more justice for them."

"They're underpeople," she said blankly. "They're animals"—as though this comment settled the matter altogether.

"You never heard, did you, my Lady, of the dog named Joan?" His question held a wealth of allusion.

She saw no depth to it, said flatly "No," and went back to studying the agenda for the day.

Ten kilometers below the surface of the Earth

The old engines turned like tides. The smell of hot oil was on them. Down here there were no luxuries. Life and flesh were cheaper than transistors; besides, they had much less radiation to be detected. In the groaning depths, the hidden and forgotten underpeople lived. They thought their chief, the E-telekeli, to be magical. Sometimes he thought so himself.

His white handsome face staring like a marble bust of immortality, his crumpled wings hugged close to him in fatigue, he called to his first-egg child, the girl E-lamelanie:

"He comes, my darling."

"That one, father? The promised one."

"The rich one."

Her eyes widened. She was his daughter, but she did not always understand his powers. "How do you know, father?"

"If I tell you the truth, will you agree to let me erase it from your mind right away, so there will be no danger of betrayal?"

"Of course, father."

"No," said the marble-faced bird-man, "you must say the right words..."

"I promise, father, that if you fill my heart with the truth, and if my joy at the truth is full, that I will yield to you my mind, my whole mind without fear, hope, or reservation, and that I will ask you to take from my mind whatever truth or parts of the truth might hurt our kind of people, in the name of the First Forgotten One, in the Name of the Second Forgotten One, in the Name of the Third Forgotten One, and for the sake of D'joan whom we all love and remember!"

He stood. He was a tall man. His legs ended in the enormous feet of a bird, with white talons shimmering like mother of pearl. His humanoid hands stood forth from the joints of his wings; with them he extended the prehistoric gesture of blessing over her head, while he chanted the truth in a ringing hypnotic voice:

"Let the truth be yours, my daughter, that you may be whole and happy with the truth. Knowing the truth, my daughter, know freedom and the right to forget!"

"The child, my child, who was your brother, the little boy you loved..."

"Yeekasoose!" she said, her voice trance-like and childish.

"E'ikarus, whom you remember, was changed by me, his father, into the form of a small ape-man, so that the true people mistook him for an animal, not an underperson. They trained him as a surgeon and sent him to the Lord Redlady. He came with this young man McBan to Mars, where he met C'mell, whom I recommended to the Lord Jestocost for confidential errands. They are coming back with this man today. He has already bought the Earth, or most of it. Perhaps he will do us good. Do you know what you should know, my daughter?"

"Tell me, father, tell me. How do you know?"

"Remember the truth, girl, and then lose it! The messages come from Mars. We cannot touch the Big Blink or the message-coding machines, but each recorder has his own style. By a shift in the pace of his work, a friend can relay moods, emotions, ideas, and sometimes names. They have sent me words like 'riches, monkey, small, cat, girl, everything, good' by the pitch and speed of their recording. The human messages carry ours and no cryptographer in world can find them.

"Now you know, and you will now now now now forget!"

He raised his hands again.

E-lamelanie looked at him normally with a happy smile: "It's so sweet and funny, daddy, but I know I've just forgotten something good and wonderful!"

Ceremonially he said, "Do not forget Joan."

Formally she responded, "I shall never forget Joan."

## CHAPTER TWELVE: The High Sky Flying

Rod walked to the edge of the little park. This was utterly unlike any ship he had ever seen or heard about in Norstrilia. There was no noise, no cramping, no sign of weapons —just a pretty little cabin which housed the controls, the Go-Captain, the Pinlighters, and the Stop-Captain, and then a stretch of incredible green grass. He had walked on this grass from the dusty ground of Mars. There was a purr and a whisper. A false blue sky, very beautiful, covered him like a canopy.

He felt strange. He had whiskers like a cat, forty centimeters long, growing out of his upper lip, about twelve whiskers to each side. The doctor had colored his eyes with bright green irises. His ears reached up to a point. He looked like a cat-man and he wore the professional clothing of an acrobat; C'mell did too.

He had not gotten over C'mell.

She made every woman in Old North Australia look like a sack of lard. She was lean, limber, smooth, menacing and beautiful; she was soft to the touch, hard in her motions, quick, alert, and cuddlesome. Her red hair blazed with the silkiness of animal fire. She spoke with a soprano which tinkled like wild bells. Her ancestors and ancestresses had been bred to produce the most seductive girl on Earth. The task had succeeded. Even in repose, she was voluptuous. Her wide hips and sharp eyes invited the masculine passions. Her cat-like dangerousness challenged every man whom she met. The true men who looked at her knew that she was a cat, and still could not keep their eyes off her. Human women treated her as though she were something disgraceful. She traveled as an acrobat, but she had already told Rod McBan confidentially that she was by profession a "girlygirl," a female animal, shaped and trained like a person to serve as hostess to off-world visitors, required by law and custom to invite their love, while promised the penalty of death if she accepted it.

Rod liked her, though he had been painfully shy with her at first. There was no side to her, no posh, no swank. Once she got down to business, her incredible body faded partway into the background, though with the sides of his eyes he could never quite forget it, and it was her mind, her intelligence, her humor and good humor, which carried them across the hours and days they spent together. He found himself trying to impress her that he was a grown man, only to discover

that in the spontaneous, sincere affections of her quick cat-heart, she did not care in the least what his status was. He was simply her partner and they had work to do together. It was his job to stay alive and it was her job to keep him alive.

The doctor Vomact had told him not to speak to the other passengers, not to say anything to each other, and to call for silence if any of them spoke.

There were ten other passengers who stared at one another in uncomfortable amazement. Ten in number, they were. All ten of them were Rod McBans.

Ten identified Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans to-the-one-hundred-and-fifty-first, all exactly alike. Apart from C'mell herself and the little monkey-doctor, A'gentur, the only person on the ship who was not Rod McBans was Rod McBans himself. He had become the cat-man. The others seemed, each by himself, to be persuaded that he alone was Rod McBans and that the other nine were parodies. They watched each other with a mixture of gloom and suspicion mixed with amusement, just as the real Rod McBans would have done, had he been in their place. "One of them," said Doctor Vomact in parting, "is your companion Eleanor from Norstrilia. The other nine are mouse-powered robots. They're all copied from you. Good, eh?" He could not conceal his professional satisfaction.

And now they were all about to see Earth together.

C'mell took Rod to the edge of the little world and said gently, "I want to sing The Tower Song' to you, just before we shut down on the top of Earthport." And in her wonderful voice she sang the little old song:

And oh! my love, for you.

High birds crying, and a

High sky flying, and a

High wind driving, and a

High heart striving, and a

High brave place for you!

Rod felt a little funny, standing there, looking at nothing, but he also felt pleasant with the girl's head against his shoulder and his arm enfolding her. She seemed not only to need him, but to trust him very deeply. She did not feel adult—not self-important and full of unexplained business. She was merely a girl, and for the time his girl. It was pleasant and it gave him a strange foretaste of the future.

The day might come when he would have a permanent girl of his own, facing not a day, but life, not a danger, but destiny. He hoped that he could be as relaxed and fond with that future girl as he was with C'mell.

C'mell squeezed his hand, as though in warning.

He turned to look at her, but she stared ahead and nodded with her chin.

"Keep watching," she said, "straight ahead. Earth."

He looked back at the blank artificial sky of the ship's force-field. It was a monotonous but pleasant blue, conveying depths which were not really there.

The change was so fast that he wondered whether he had really seen it.

In one moment the clear flat blue.

Then the false sky splashed apart as though it had literally been slashed into enormous ribbons, ribbons in their turn becoming blue spots and disappearing.

Another blue sky was there—Earth's.

Manhome.

Rod breathed deeply. It was hard to believe. The sky itself was not so different from the false "sky" which had surrounded the ship on its trip from Mars, but there was an aliveness and wetness to it, unlike any other sky he had ever heard about.

It was not the sight of the Earth which surprised him—it was the smell. He suddenly realized that Old North Australia must smell dull, flat, dusty to Earthmen. This Earth air smelled alive. There were the odors of plants, of water, of things which he could not even guess. The air was coded with a million years of memory. In this air his people had swum to manhood, before they conquered the stars. The wetness was not the cherished damp of one of his covered canals. It was wild free moisture which came laden with the indications of things living, dying, sprawling, squirming, loving with an abundance which no Norstrilian could understand. No wonder the descriptions of Earth had always seemed fierce and exaggerated! What was stoon that men would pay water for it—water, the giver and carrier of life. This was his home, no matter how many generations his people had lived in the twisted hells of Paradise VII or among the dry treasures of Old North Australia. He took a deep breath, feeling the plasma of earth pour into him, the quick effluvium which had made man. He smelled Earth again—it would take a long lifetime, even with stoon, before a man could understand all these odors which came all the way up to the ship, which hovered, as planofforming ships usually did not, twenty-odd kilometers above the surface of the planet.

There was something strange in this air, something sweet-clear to the nostrils, refreshing to the spirit. One great beautiful odor overrode all the others. What could it be?

He sniffed and then said, very clearly, to himself, "Salt!"

C'mell reminded him that he was beside her.

"Do you like it, C'rod?"

"Yes, yes, it's better than—" Words failed him. He looked at her. Her eager, pretty, comradely smile made him feel that she was sharing every milligram of his delight. "But why," he asked, "do you waste salt on the air? What good does it do?"

"Salt?"

"Yes—in the air. So rich, so wet, so salty. Is it to clean the ship some way that I do not understand?"

"Ship? We're not on the ship, C'rod. This is the landing roof of Earthport."

He gasped.

No ship? There was not a mountain on Old North Australia more than six kilometers above MGL—mean ground level—and these mountains were all smooth, worn, old, folded by immense eons of wind into a gentle blanketing that covered his whole home world.

He looked around.

The platform was about two hundred meters long by one hundred wide.

The ten "Rod McBans" were talking to some men in uniform. Far at the other side a steeple rose into eye-catching height—perhaps a whole half-kilometer. He looked down.

There it was—Old Old Earth.

The treasure of water reached before his very eyes—water by the millions of tons, enough to feed a galaxy of sheep, to wash an infinity of men. The water was broken by a few islands on the far horizon to the right.

"Hesperides," said C'mell, following the direction of his gaze. "They came up from the sea when the Daimoni built this for us. For people, I mean. I shouldn't say 'us'."

He did not notice the correction. He stared at the sea. Little specks were moving in it, very slowly.

He pointed at one of them with his finger and asked C'mell, "Are those wethouses?"

"What did you call them?"

"Houses which are wet. Houses which sit on water. Are those some of them?"

"Ships," she said, not spoiling his fun with a direct contradiction. "Yes, those are ships."

"Ships?" he cried. "You'd never get one of those into space. Why call them ships then?"

Very gently C'mell explained, "People had ships for water before they had ships for space. I think the Old Common Tongue takes the word for space vessel from the things you are looking at."

"I want to see a city," said Rod, "Show me a city."

"It won't look like much from here. We're too high up. Nothing looks like much from the top of Earthport. But I can show you, anyhow. Come over here, dear." When they walked away from the edge, Rod realized that the little monkey was still with them. "What are you doing here with us?" asked Rod, not unkindly.

The monkey's preposterous little face wrinkled into a knowing smile. The face was the same as it had been before, but the expression was different—more assured, more clear, more purposive than ever before. There was even humor and cordiality in the monkey's voice.

"We animals are waiting for the people to finish their entrance."

We animals? thought Rod. He remembered his furry head, his pointed ears, his cat-whiskers. No wonder he felt at ease with this girl and she with him.

The ten Rod McBans were walking down a ramp, so that the floor seemed to be swallowing them slowly from the feet up. They were walking in single file, so that the head of the leading one seemed to sit bodiless on the floor, while the last one in line had lost nothing more than his feet. It was odd indeed.

Rod looked at C'mell and A'gentur and asked them frankly, "When people have such a wide, wet, beautiful world, all full of life, why should they kill me?"

A'gentur shook his monkey head sadly, as though he knew full well, but found the telling of it inexpressibly wearisome and sad.

C'mell answered, "You are who you are. You hold immense power. Do you know that this tower is yours?"

"Mine!" he cried.

"You've bought it, or somebody bought it for you. Most of that water is yours, too. When you have things that big, people ask you for things. Or they take them from you. Earth is a beautiful place, but I think it is a dangerous place, too, for offworlders like you who are used to just one way of life. You have not caused all the crime and meanness in the world, but it's been sleeping and now wakes up for you."

"Why for me?"

"Because," said A'gentur, "you're the richest person who has ever touched this planet. You own most of it already. Millions of human lives depend on your thoughts and your decisions."

They had reached the opposite side of the top platform. Here, on the land side, the rivers were all leaking badly. Most of the land was covered with steam-clouds, such as they saw on Norstrilia



when a covered canal burst out of its covering. These clouds represented incalculable treasures of rain. He saw that they parted at the foot of the tower.

"Weather machines," said C'mell. "The cities are all covered with weather machines. Don't you have weather machines in Old North Australia?"

"Of course we do," said Rod, "but we don't waste water by letting it float around in the open air like that. It's pretty, though. I guess the extravagance of it makes me feel critical. Don't you earth people have anything better to do with your water than to leave it lying on the ground or having it float over open land?"

"We're not Earth people," said C'mell. "We're under-people. I'm a cat-person and he's made from apes. Don't call us people. It's not decent."

"Fudge!" said Rod. "I was just asking a question about Earth, not pestering your feelings when—"

He stopped short.

They all three spun around.

Out of the ramp there came something like a mowing machine. A human voice, a man's voice, screamed from within it, expressing rage and fear.

Rod started to move forward.

C'mell started to move forward.

C'mell held his arm, dragging back with all her weight.

"No! Rod, no! No!"

A'gentur slowed him down better by jumping into his face, so that Rod suddenly saw nothing but a universe of brown belly-fur and felt tiny hands gripping his hair and pulling it. He stopped and reached for the monkey. A'gentur anticipated him and dropped to the ground before Rod could hit him.

The machine was racing up the outside of the steeple and almost disappearing into the sky above. The voice had become thin.

Rod looked at C'mell, "All right. What was it? What's happening?"

"That's a spider, a giant spider. It's kidnaping or killing Rod McBan."

"Me?" keened Rod. "It'd better not touch me. I'll tear it apart."

"Sh-h-h!" said C'mell.

"Quiet!" said the monkey.

"Don't 'sh-h-h' me and don't 'quiet' me," said Rod. "I'm not going to let that poor blighter suffer on my account. Tell that thing to come down. What is it, anyhow, this spider? A robot?"

"No," said C'mell, "an insect."

Rod was narrowing his eyes, watching the mowing machine which hung on the outside of the tower. He could barely see the man within its grip. When C'mell said "insect," it triggered something in his mind. Hate. Revulsion. Resistance to dirt. Insects on Old North Australia were small, serially numbered and licensed. Even at that, he felt them to be his hereditary enemies. (Somebody had told him that Earth insects had done terrible things to the Norstrilians when they lived on Paradise VII.)

Rod yelled at the spider, making his voice as loud as possible, "You—come—down!"

The filthy thing on the tower quivered with sheer smugness and seemed to bring its machine-like legs closer together, settling down to be comfortable.

Rod forgot he was supposed to be a cat. He gasped for air. Earth air was wet, but thin. He closed his eyes for a moment or two. He thought hate, hate, hate for the insect. Then he shrieked telepathically, louder than he had ever shrieked at home:

hate-spit-spit-vomit!

dirt, dirt, dirt,

explode!

crush:

ruin:

stink, collapse, putrefy, disappear!

hate-hate-hate!

The fierce red roar of his inarticulate spieking hurt even him. He saw the little monkey fall to the ground in a dead faint. C'mell was pale and looked as though she might throw up her food.

He looked away from them and up at the "spider." Had he reached it? He had.

Slowly, slowly, the long legs moved out in spasm, releasing the man, whose body flashed downward. Rod's eyes followed the movement of "Rod McBan" and he cringed when a wet crunch let him know that the duplicate of his own body had been splashed all over the hard deck of the tower, a hundred meters away. He glanced back up at the "spider." It scrambled for purchase on the tower and then cartwheeled downward. It too hit the deck hard and lay there dying, its legs twitching as its personality slipped into its private, everlasting night.

Rod gasped. "Eleanor. Oh, maybe that's Eleanor!" His voice wailed. He started to run to the facsimile of his human body, forgetting that he was a cat-man.

C'mell's voice was as sharp as a howl, though low in tone. "Shut up! Shut up! Stand still! Close your mind! Shut up! We're dead if you don't shut up!"

He stopped, stared at her stupidly. Then he saw she was in mortal earnest. He complied. He stopped moving. He did not try to talk. He capped his mind, closing himself against telepathy until his brainbox began to ache. The little monkey, A'gentur, was crawling up off the floor, looking shaken and sick. C'mell was still pale.

Men came running up the ramp, saw them and headed toward them.

There was the beat of wings in the air.

An enormous bird—no, it was an ornithopter—landed with its claws scratching the deck. A uniformed man jumped out and cried, "Where is he?"

"He jumped over!" C'mell shouted.

The man started to follow the direction of her gesture and then cut sharply back to her,

"Fool!" he said. "People can't jump off here. The barrier would hold ships in place. What did you see?"

C'mell was a good actress. She pretended to be getting over shock and gasping for words. The uniformed man looked at her haughtily.

"Cats," he said, "and a monkey. What are you doing here? Who are you?"

"Name C'mell, profession, girlygirl, Earthport staff, commanded by Commissioner Teadrinker. This—boyfriend, no status, name C'roderick, cashier in night bank down below. Him?" She nodded at A'gentur. "I don't know much about him."

"Name A'gentur. Profession, supplementary surgeon. Status, animal. I'm not an underperson. Just an animal. I came in on the ship from Mars with the dead man there and some other true men who looked like him, and they went down first—"

"Shut up," said the uniformed man. He turned to the approaching men and said, "Honored subchief, Sergeant 587 reporting. The user of the telepathic weapon has disappeared. The only things here are these two cat-people, not very bright, and a small monkey. They can talk. The girl says she saw somebody get off the tower."

The subchief was a tall redhead with a uniform even handsomer than the sergeant's. He snapped at C'mell, "How did he do it?"

Rod knew C'mell well enough by now to recognize the artfulness of her becoming confused, feminine and incoherent—in appearance. Actually, she was in full control of the situation. Said she, babbling:

"He jumped, I think. I don't know how."

"That's impossible," said the subchief. "Did you see where he went?" he barked at Rod McBan.

Rod gasped at the suddenness of the question—besides, C'mell had told him to keep quiet. Between these two peremptories, he said, "Er—ah—oh—you see—"

The little monkey-surgeon interrupted drily, "Sir and master subchief, that cat-man is not very bright. I do not think you will get much out of him. Handsome, but stupid. Strictly breeding stock \_\_\_\_"

Rod gagged and turned a little red at these remarks, but he could tell from the hooded quick glare which C'mell shot him that she wanted him to go on being quiet.

She cut in. "I did notice one thing, master. It might matter."

"By the Bell and Bank, animal! Tell me," cried the sub-chief. "Stop deciding what I ought to know!"

"The strange man's skin was lightly tinged with blue."

The subchief took a step back. His soldiers and the sergeant stared at him. In a serious, direct way he said to C'mell, "Are you sure?"

"No, my master. I just thought so."

"You saw just one?" barked the subchief.

Rod, overacting the stupidity, held up four fingers.

"That idiot," cried the subchief, "thinks he saw four of them. Can he count?" he asked C'mell.

C'mell looked at Rod as though he were a handsome beast with not a brain in his head. Rod looked back at her, deliberately letting himself feel stupid. This was something which he did very well, since by neither hiering nor spieking at home, he had had to sit through interminable hours of other people's conversation when he was little, never getting the faintest idea of what it was all about. He had discovered very early that if he sat still and looked stupid, people did not bother him by trying to bring him into the conversation, turning their voices on and braying at him as though he were deaf. He tried to simulate the familiar old posture and was rather pleased that he could make such a good showing with C'mell watching him. Even when she was serious, fighting for their freedom and playing girl all at once, her corona of blazing hair made her shine forth like the sun of

Earth itself; among all these people on the platform, her beauty and her intelligence made her stand out—cat though she was. Rod was not at all surprised that he was overlooked, with such a vivid personality next to him; he just wished that he could be overlooked a little more, so that he could wander over idly and see whether the body was Eleanor's or one of the robot's. If Eleanor had already died for him, in her first few minutes of the big treat of seeing Earth, he felt that he would never forgive himself as long as he lived.

The talk about the blue men amused him deeply. They existed in Norstrilian folklore, as a race of faraway magicians who, through science or hypnotism, could render themselves invisible to other men whenever they wished. Rod had never talked with an Old North Australian security officer about the problem of guarding the stroom treasure from attacks by invisible men, but he gathered, from the way people told stories of blue men, that they had either failed to show up in Norstrilia or that the Norstrilian authorities did not take them very seriously. He was amazed that the earth people did not bring in a couple of first-class telepaths and have them sweep the deck of the tower for every living thing, but to judge by the chatter of voices that was going on, and the peering with eyes which occurred, Earth people had fairly weak senses and did not get things done promptly and efficiently.

The question about Eleanor was answered for him. One of the soldiers joined the group, waited after saluting, and was finally allowed to interrupt C'mell's and A'gentur's endless guessing as to how many blue men there might have been on the tower, if there had been any at all. The subchief nodded at the soldier, who said, "Beg to report, sir and subchief, the body is not a body. It is just a robot which looks like a person."

The day brightened immeasurably within Rod's heart. Eleanor was safe, somewhere further down in this immense tower.

The comment seemed to decide the young officer. "Get a sweeping machine and a looking dog," he commanded the sergeant, "and see to it that this whole area is swept and looked down to the last square millimeter."

"It is done," said the soldier.

Rod thought this an odd remark, because nothing at all had been done yet.

The subchief issued another command: "Turn on the kill-spotters before we go down the ramp. Any identity which is not perfectly clear must be killed automatically by the scanning device. Including us," he added to his men. "We don't want any blue men walking right down into the tower among us."

C'mell suddenly and rather boldly stepped up to the officer and whispered in his ear. His eyes rolled as he listened, he blushed a little, and then he changed his orders: "Cancel the kill-spotters. I want this whole squad to stand body-to-body. I'm sorry, men, but you're going to have to touch these underpeople for several minutes. I want them to stand so close to us that we can be sure there is nobody extra sneaking into our group."

(C'mell later told Rod that she had confessed to the young officer that she might be a mixed type, part human and part animal, and that she was the special girlygirl of two Off-earth magnates of the Instrumentality. She said she thought that she had a definite identity but was not sure, and that the kill-spotters might destroy her if she did not yield a correct image as she went past them. They would, she told Rod later, have caught any underman passing as a man, or any man passing as an underman, and would have killed the victim by intensifying the magnetic lay-out of his own organic body. These machines were dangerous things to pass, since they occasionally killed normal, legitimate people and underpeople who merely failed to provide a clear focus.)

The officer took the left forward corner of the living rectangle of people and underpeople. They formed tight ranks. Rod felt the two soldiers next to him shudder as they came into contact

with his "cat" body. They kept their faces averted from him as though he smelled bad for them. Rod said nothing; he just looked forward and kept his impression pleasantly stupid.

What followed next was surprising. The men walked in a strange way, all of them moving their left legs in unison, and then their right legs. A'gentur could not possibly do this, so with a nod of the sergeant's approval, C'mell picked him up and carried him close to her bosom. Suddenly, weapons flared.

These, thought Rod, must be cousins of the weapons which the Lord Redlady carried a few weeks ago, when he landed his ship on my property. (He remembered Hopper, his knife quivering like the head of a snake, threatening the life of the Lord Redlady; and he remembered the sudden silent burst, the black oily smoke, and the gloomy Bill looking at the chair where his pal had existed a moment ago.)

These weapons showed a little light, just a little, but their force was betrayed by the buzzing of the floor and the agitation of the dust.

"Close in, men! Right up to your own feet! Don't let a blue man through!" shouted the subchief.

The men complied.

The air began to smell funny and burned.

The ramp was clear of life except for their own.

When the ramp swung around a corner, Rod gasped.

This was the most enormous room he had ever seen. It covered the entire top of Earthport. He could not even begin to guess how many hectares it was, but a small farm could have been accommodated on it. There were few people there. The men broke ranks at a command of the subchief. The officer glared at the cat-man Rod, the cat-girl C'mell and the ape A'gentur:

"You stand right where you are till I come back!"

They stood, saying nothing.

C'mell and A'gentur took the place for granted.

Rod stared as though he would drink up the world with his eyes. In this one enormous room, there was more antiquity and wealth than all Old North Australia possessed. Curtains of an incredibly rich material shimmered down from the thirty-meter ceiling; some of them seemed to be dirty and in bad repair, but a single one of them, after paying the 20,000,000% import duty, would cost more than any Old North Australian could afford to pay. There were chairs and tables here and there, some of them good enough to deserve a place in the Museum of Man on New Mars. Here they were merely used. The people did not seem any the happier for having all this wealth around them. For the first time, Rod got a glimpse of what spartan self-imposed poverty had done to make life worthwhile at home. His people did not have much, when they could have chartered endless argosies of treasure, inbound from all worlds to their own planet, in exchange for the life-prolonging stroon. But if they had been heaped with treasure they would have appreciated nothing and would have ended up possessing nothing. He thought of his own little collection of hidden antiquities. Here on Earth it would not have filled a dustbin, but in the Station of Doom it could afford him connoisseurship as long as he lived.

The thought of his home made him wonder what Old Hot and Simple, the Hon. Sec., might be doing with his adversary on Earth. "It's a long, long way to reach here!" he thought to himself.

C'mell drew his attention by plucking at his arm.

"Hold me," commanded she, "because I am afraid I might fall down and Yeekasoose is not strong enough to hold me."

Rod wondered who Yeekasoose might be, when only the little monkey A'gentur was with them; he also wondered why C'mell should need to be held. Norstrilian discipline had taught him not to question orders in an emergency. He held her.

She suddenly slumped as though she had fainted or had gone to sleep. He held her with one arm and with his free hand he tipped her head against his shoulder so that she would look as though she were weary and affectionate, not unconscious. It was pleasant to hold her little female body, which felt fragile and delicate beyond belief. Her hair, disarrayed and wind-blown, still carried the smell of the salty sea air which had so surprised him an hour ago. She herself, he thought, was the greatest treasure of Earth which he had yet seen. But suppose he did have her? What could he do with her in Old North Australia? Underpeople were completely forbidden, except for military uses under the exclusive control of the Commonwealth government. He could not imagine C'mell directing a mowing machine as she walked across a giant sheep, shearing it. The idea of her sitting up all night with a lonely or frightened sheep-monster was itself ridiculous. She was a playgirl, an ornament in human form; for such as her, there was no place under the comfortable gray skies of home. Her beauty would fade in the dry air; her intricate mind would turn sour with the weary endlessness of a farm culture: property, responsibility, defense, self-reliance, sobriety. New Melbourne would look like a collection of rude shacks to her.

He realized that his feet were getting cold. Up on the deck they had had sunlight to keep them warm, even though the chill salty wet air of Earth's marvelous "seas" was blowing against them. Here, inside, it was merely high and cold, while still wet; he had never encountered wet cold before, and it was a strangely uncomfortable experience.

C'mell came to and shook herself to wakefulness just as they saw the officer walking toward them from the other end of the immense room.

(Later, she told him what she had experienced when she lapsed into unconsciousness.

First, she had had a call which she could not explain. This had made her warn Rod. "Yeekasoose" was, of course E-ikusus, the real name of the "monkey" which he called A'gentur.

Then, as she felt herself swimming away into half-sleep with Rod's strong arm around her, she had heard trumpets playing, just two or three of them, playing different parts to the same intricate, lovely piece of music, sometimes in solos, sometimes together. If a human or robot telepath had peeped her mind while she listened to the music, the impression would have been that of a perceptive c'girl who had linked herself with one of the many telepathic entertainment channels which filled the space of Earth Itself.

Last, there came the messages. They were not encoded in the music in any way whatever. The music caused the images to form in her mind because she was C'mell, herself, unique, individual. Particular fugues, or even individual notes reached into her memory and emotions, causing her mind to bring up old, half-forgotten associations. First she thought of "High birds flying..." as in the song which she had sung to Rod. Then she saw eyes, piercing eyes which blazed with knowledge while they stayed moist with humility. Then she smelled the strange odors of Downdeep-downdeep, the work-city where the underpeople maintained the civilization on the surface and where some illegal underpeople lurked, overlooked by the authority of man. Finally she saw Rod himself, striding off the deck with his loping Norstrilian walk. It added up simply. She was to bring Rod to the forgotten, forlorn, forbidden chambers of the Nameless One, and to do so promptly. The music in her head stopped, and she woke up.) The officer arrived.

He looked at them inquisitively and angrily. "This whole business is funny. The acting Commissioner does not believe that there are any blue men. We've all heard of them. And yet we know somebody set off a telepathic emotion-bomb. That rage! Half the people in this room fell down when it went off. Those weapons are completely prohibited for use inside the Earth's atmosphere."

He cocked his head at them.

C'mell remained prudently silent, Rod practiced looking thoroughly stupid, and A'gentur looked like a bright, helpless little monkey.

"Funnier still," said the officer. "The Acting Commissioner got orders to let you go. He got them while he was chewing me out. How does anybody know that you underpeople are here? Who are you, anyhow?"

He looked at them with curiosity for a minute, but then the curiosity faded with the pressure of his lifelong habits.

He snapped, "Who cares? Get along. Get out. You're underpeople and you're not allowed to stand in this room, anyhow."

He turned his back on them and walked away.

"Where are we going?" whispered Rod, hoping C'mell would say that he could go down to the surface and see Old Earth Itself.

"Down to the bottom of the world, and then—" She bit her lip. "... and then, much further down. I have instructions."

"Can't I take an hour and look at Earth?" asked Rod. "You stay with me, of course."

"When death is jumping around us like wild sparks? Of course not. Come along, Rod. You'll get your freedom some time soon, if somebody doesn't kill you first. Yeekasoose, you lead the way!"

They walked only a few steps, then stopped short.

He stopped short.

They all three spun around.

A man faced them—a tall man, clad in formal garments, his face gleaming with intelligence, courage, wisdom and a very special kind of elegance.

"I am projecting," said he.

"You know me," he said to C'mell.

"My lord Jestocost!"

"You will sleep," he commanded A'gentur, and the little monkey crumpled into a heap of fur on the deck of the tower.

"I am the Lord Jestocost, one of the Instrumentality," said the strange man, "and I am going to speak to you at very high speed. It will seem like many minutes, but it will only take seconds. It is necessary for you to know your fate."

"You mean my future?" said Rod McBan. "I thought that you, or somebody else, had it all arranged."

"We can dispose, but we cannot arrange. I have talked to the Lord Redlady. I have plans for you. Perhaps they will work out."

A slight frowning smile crossed the face of the distinguished man. With his left hand he warned C'mell to do nothing. The beautiful cat-girl started to step forward and then obeyed the imperious gesture, stopped, and merely watched.

The Lord Jestocost dropped to one knee. He bowed proudly and freely, with his head held high and his face tilted upward while he stared directly at Rod McBan.

Still kneeling, he said ceremoniously, "Some day, young man, you will understand what you are now seeing. The Lord Jestocost, which is myself, has bowed to no man or woman since the day of his initiation. That was more time ago than I like to remember. But I bow freely to the man who has bought Earth. I offer you my friendship and my help. I offer both of these without mental reservation. Now I stand up and I greet you as my younger comrade."

He stood erect and reached for Rod's hand. Rod shook hands with him, still bewildered.

"You have seen the work of some of the people who want you dead. I have had a hand in getting you through that (and I might tell you that the man who sent the spider will regret very deeply and very long that he did it). Other people will try to hunt you down for what you have done or for what you are. I am willing for you to save some of your property and all of your life. You will have experiences which you will treasure—if you live through them.

"You have no chance at all without me. I'll correct that. You have one chance in ten thousand of coming out alive.

"With me, if you obey me through C'mell, your chances are very good indeed. More than one thousand to one in your favor. You will live—"

"But my money!" Rod spieked wildly without knowing that he did it.

"Your money is on Earth. It is Earth," smiled the wise, powerful old official. "It is being taxed at enormous rates. This is your fate, young man. Remember it, and be ready to obey it. When I lift my hand, repeat after me. Do you understand?"

Rod nodded. He was not afraid, exactly, but some unknown core within him had begun to radiate animal terror. He was not afraid of what might happen to himself; he was afraid of the strange, wild fierceness of it all. He had never known that man or boy could be so utterly alone.

The loneliness of the open outback at home was physical. This loneliness had millions of people around him. He felt the past crowding up as though it were alive in its own right. The cat-girl beside him comforted him a little; he had met her through Doctor Vomact; to Vomact he had been sent by Redlady; and Redlady knew his own dear home. The linkage was there, though it was remote.

In front of him there was no linkage at all.

He stood, in his own mind, on a precipice of the present, staring down at the complex inexplicable immensity of Earth's past. This was the place that all people were from. In those oceans they had crawled in the slime; from those salt, rich seas they had climbed to that land far below him; on that land they had changed from animals into men before they had seized the stars. This was home itself, the home of all men, and it could swallow him up.

The word-thoughts came fast out of the Lord Jestocost's mind, directly into his own. It was as though Jestocost had found some way around his impediment and had then disregarded it.

"This is Old Earth Itself, from which you were bred and to which all men return in their thoughts if not in their bodies. This is still the richest of the worlds, though its wealth is measured in treasures and memories, not in stroon.

"Many men have tried to rule this world. A very few have done it for a little while."

Unexpectedly, the Lord Jestocost lifted his right hand. Without knowing why he did it, Rod repeated the last sentence.

"A very few men have governed the world for a little while."

"The Instrumentality has made that impossible."

The right hand was still in the commanding "up" position, so Rod repeated, "The Instrumentality has made that impossible."



"And now you, Rod McBan of Old North Australia, are the first to own it."

The hand was still raised.

"And now I, Rod McBan, of Old North Australia, am the first to own it."

The hand dropped, but the Lord spieked on.

"Go forward, then, with death around you.

"Go forward, then, to your heart's desire.

"Go forward, with the love you will win and lose.

"Go forward, to the world, and to that other world under the world.

"Go forward, to wild adventures and a safe return.

"Be watchful of C'mell. She will be my eyes upon you, my arm around your shoulders, my authority upon your person; but go.

"Go." Up went the hand.

"Go..." said Rod.

The Lord vanished.

C'mell plucked at his sleeve. "Your trip is over, my husband. Now we take Earth itself."

Softly and quickly they ran to the steps which went to unimaginable Earth below them.

Rod McBan had come to the fulfilment of his chance and his inheritance.

#### EPILOGUE AND CODA

How Rod McBan CLI took his chance and enjoyed his inheritance is, of course, implicit in all that he had done and had been done to him up to his meeting with the Lord Jestocost. The details of how it all worked out are doubtless fascinating (and will doubtless be told later), but the reason for this chronicle ends now that the players have made the moves that will determine the outcome.

One piece remains to be removed from the board first, though.

Old North Australia, Adm. Offices of the Commonwealth

"You, former Hon. Sec. of this government, are charged with going outside the limits of your Onseckish duties and of attempting to commit mayhem or murder upon the person of one of Her Absent Majesty's subjects, the said subject being Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to the one-hundred-and-fifty-first generation; and you are further charged with the abuse of an official instrument of this Commonwealth government in designing and encompassing the said unlawful purpose, to wit, one mutated sparrow, serial number 0919487, specialty number 2328525, weighing forty-one kilograms and having a monetary value of 685 minicredits. What say you?"

Houghton Syme CXLIX buried his face in his hands and sobbed.

The Prediction Machine at the Abba Dingo

Jestocost was the only Lord of the Instrumentality who had bothered to put through a direct line to the prediction machine at the Abba Dingo, halfway up the immense column which supported Earthport. Most of the time the machine did not work at all; much of the rest was unintelligible, but Jestocost liked trying it anyhow.

The night of Rod's arrival he asked, "What is happening in the world?"

Said the machine, "What? What? Be clear."

"Has anything started happening in the world today?" shouted Jestocost.

There was a long delay. Jestocost thought of disconnecting, but finally the machine spoke, in the accents of ages past, "This-machine is cold, cold. This-machine is old, old. It is hard to tell. It is hard to know. But something has begun to happen. Something strange, like the first few drops of an immense rainstorm, like the tiny glow of an approaching comet. Change is coming to this world. It is not change which weapons can stop. This change whispers in like a forgotten dream. Maybe it will be good. Change, change... at the center of it all, there is a boy. One boy. This-machine cannot see him..."

There was a long silence. Jestocost finally knew that the machine had nothing more to say. He cut the connection. And then, very deeply, he sighed.

## **The Underpeople**

**by Cordwainer Smith**

**(Second part of Norstrilia Original)**

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## CHAPTER ONE: LOST MUSIC IN AN OLD WORLD

YOU MAY HAVE SEEN the musical play which was written about the confrontation of Rod McBan, the boy who had bought Earth, and the Lady Johanna Gnade, proudest and most self-willed of all the Lords of the Instrumentality. It was not a very long play. Indeed, among the many plays and ballads that were composed about Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first, this short drama was characterized by economy of form, understatement of the dramatic elements and the generous use of music. People remembered the music even when they forgot which play it came from. (Then the Instrumentality stepped in and ordered that the play be withdrawn, gradually and imperceptibly, on the ground that the music was licentious. Unfortunately, it was. Old music from the First Space Age has a real tendency to corrupt people of our own time. You can't pick something out of a half-mythical place like ancient "New York" and turn it loose without people getting very queer ideas indeed.)

This is the way it happened.

Hansgeorg Wagner was one of the first musicians to be imprinted with the Doych language, sometimes called German or Teut, when the Rediscovery of Man began bringing the pre-Ruin cultures back into the world.

Hansgeorg Wagner had a neat eye for the dramatic. When the story of Rod McBan began to leak out, soon after McBan went back to his home planet of Old North Australia, Wagner refused to consider the obvious scenes: the boy gambling for Earth on his dry, faraway planet, and winning most of the available money in the universe; the boy walking on Mars; the boy meeting his "wife," C'mell, most beautiful of the cat-women who served as the girlygirl hostesses for Earth; the boy fighting Amaral for the life of one of them; the mystery of the Department Store of Hearts' Desires and what befell Rod there; or even the terrifying terminal scene with the E-telekeli. Wagner did not even want the dramatic scene in which Rod's companion, his workwoman Eleanor, parted from him on Earthport tower soon after C'mell had sung her own famous little tower song to Rod:

And oh! my love, for you.

High birds crying, and a

High sky flying, and a

High wind driving, and a

High heart striving, and a

High brave place for you!

Wagner, with the instinct of a real artist, took the meeting in the music room instead.

## In the Music Room: A Meeting with the Past

The passenger dropshaft from Earthport was like an ancient elevator shaft, except for the fact that if an actual ancient had seen it, he would have been surprised. It was ten miles deep, or more (it's hard to figure out exactly what miles were, but they were much longer than kilometers), and it had no elevators. The shaft was ornamentally illuminated. There were signs for information, frequent stops for refreshment, and curious sights to be seen. This was for people only. People put on magnetic belts, stepped into the shaft, and were carried up or down at the rate of about twenty meters a minute, depending on which shaft they had gotten into; shafts always came in pairs, an up shaft and a down shaft.

By contrast, the freight shaft had no signs, no refreshments, and no amenities. The down speed was considerably faster. Freight rose or fell, tied to magnetic belts; underpeople and robots wore the belts, unless they forgot them and swiftly became bloody pulp or mashed machinery far below. The freight shaft, like the passenger shaft, did have warning in both the up and the down shaft, because if people got loose from their belts, they whistled downward to their deaths. Each set of shafts had interceptor nets, both for saving falling persons or objects, and to protect the other passengers below, but the nets did not work too well.

Wagner's drama has an initial scene showing Rod McBan and C'mell pausing at the top of the freight dropshaft. She is carrying the small monkey-surgeon A'gentur, who has gone to sleep, bone-weary after the trip. Rod McBan, standing a full head taller than most cat-men, is expostulating with gestures more coarse and more real than any c'man ever used. His big bush of yellow hair had been made cat-like before he landed on earth and the long sparse whiskers of his cat-moustache twitched oddly indeed as he explained his emphatic desires with forthright Old North Australian gestures.

After a short development of the scene, Wagner has both of them singing the lyric refrain, "Earth is mine, but what good does it do me?" from Rod, and "Earth is yours but be patient, my love" from C'mell. A touch of comedy is provided by C'mell's trying to get a magnetic harness on Rod while he squirms. The scene ends with the two of them stepping over the edge of the drop-shaft (which looks bottomless) on their long, long drop down to the surface of the Earth.

We know that the two of them dropped easily. The only difficulty was caused by Rod's tendency to talk too much when he, the richest man in the world, was supposed to be travelling in the disguise of a poor, simple cat-man. Torn between irritation and love, C'mell switched between humoring him and shushing him.

Crisis came (and Hansgeorg Wagner catches it in his play) when Rod heard the sound of unbelievable music.

It was like no music he had ever heard before.

"What's that?" he cried to C'mell.

"Music," said she, soothingly.

He did not call her a fool, but he growled in annoyance and reached over to seize a rung of the endless emergency ladder which followed the dropshaft down. He climbed a dozen rungs upward and peered into a pitch-black lateral corridor which led, apparently, to nowhere but from which strange fierce beautiful music was certainly coming. He had climbed against the gentle throbbing pull of the magnetic belt and he breathed heavily with the double exertion. C'mell had dropped another ten meters before she saw what he was doing. Wearily, but with no

word of complaint, she climbed up the ladder to him, carrying her own weight, that of the sleeping monkey-surgeon whom she had tossed over her shoulder, and the pull of her own belt as well. When her head reached the level of Rod's feet, he stepped carefully off the ladder and took two very gingerly steps into the dark lateral corridor.

The music was clear to both of them.

Throbbing, beaten strings made the lovely sounds.

She sensed his inquiry though she could not see his face in the dark.

"That instrument - it's a piano. They've started making them again."

Rod put his hand on her arm to quiet her. "Listen, I think he's singing."

Full-bodied and full-noted the music of the piano and a man's tenor voice came clearly and fully at them from the corridor, hidden by the darkness but not sounding too far away:

Ignoraba yo.

I didn't used to know it.

Ignoraba yo.

I didn't used to show it

that I loved you, loved you so.

I love you and I love you,

Hoy y mañana.

There's nothing else in life for me,

Hoy y mañana.

You love me wild and use me up,

Hoy y mañana.

Was I happier or sadder when I didn't even know you?

Ignoraba yo,

I couldn't even show you.

The voice trailed away. There were a few flourishes of beaten strings, as though the player were trying to get the arrangement just right.

"Part of that is Ancient English," said Rod, "but I never heard the other language before. And I certainly never heard that kind of a melody, anywhere."

"I know most of the music which is played on Earth," whispered C'mell, "and I never heard anything like that before. Come on, Rod. Let's go on down the shaft. When we get to a safe place, I will send messengers back to find out what is going on in this part of Earthport tower."

"No," said Rod, "I'm going in."

"You can't, Rod. You can't. It might ruin everything. The disguise, Lord Jestocost's plans, your safety."

"I bought this world," said Rod, "and I'm a ruddy fool if I can't even ask for a piece of music. I'm going in."

"Rod," she cried.

"Stop me," he said, crudely, and walked boldly down the corridor into the dark, just as though there might be no trap doors or electric screens. C'mell followed him, carefully and reluctantly.

The corridor blazed red with letters of warning:

KEEP OUT

NO PEOPLE ALLOWED

INSTRUMENTALITY WORK - SECRET

A recorded voice shouted at them, "Go away! Go away! No robots. No underpeople. No real persons. Lords of the Instrumentality, get individual clearance before you enter here. Secret work. Go away! Go away! No robots. No underpeople," and so on, in a sustained irritating shout.

Rod ignored the voice even though C'mell was plucking at his sleeve.

The red warning lights had revealed the outline of a door with a doorknob.

He took the doorknob, twisted it. It was locked. The door itself did not seem to be of steel or Daimoni material. Perhaps it was even wood, which was much too precious on Old North Australia to be used for anything as cheap as a common door: the Norstrilians used plastics derived from sheep-bones.

Rod shouted, "Open up, inside. Open up."

"Go away," said a mild, pleasant voice from beyond the door, so near that it startled them.

The voice was so near and the door so fragile that Rod was tempted.

He stepped back until he was next to C'mell. He was sorry when he heard her sigh with relief - apparently at the thought that he had heeded the warning and was going to go back to the dropshaft.

Instead, he used a fighting trick which he had learned at home. He jumped with the full force of his body at the door, striking the door just above the knob with both his feet and putting his hands below him so as to cushion the fall of his body against the floor.

Results were startling:

The door yielded so easily that Rod plunged on through into a bright sun-lit room, landed on a carpet and slid with the carpet until his feet, firmly but gently, were stopped by a large beautiful upright wooden box, elegantly polished, which seemed to have a rudimentary console. A middle-aged gentleman, showing great surprise, jumped out of his way. Blinking against the brightness of the light, C'mell and A'gentur followed Rod into the room.

Their startled host spoke:

"You're underpeople! Do you want to die? Somebody will kill you for this. Not I, of course. What do you want here?"

Rod brought himself to his feet with all the dignity which he could command.

"My name is Rod McBan," said he, "and I take full responsibility for what has happened. I am the new owner of this planet Earth, and I want to hear some more of that music you were making."

"Ignoraba yo. That Spanish bop? What business is it of yours, cat-man? That is secret work for the Instrumentality. And all you are going to do is to die when the robot police arrive."

C'mell spoke up. Her voice had a calm urgency to it, which could not be ignored by anyone. Said she, "You have a connection with the Central Computer?"

"Of course," said the man, "all protected offices do."

"You are not a person?"

"Of course not, cat-woman. I am the dog-man D'igo and I am the musical historian assigned to work in this office."

"I am C'mell," said she flatly.

The dog-man was startled but when he spoke, his voice was very agreeable: "I know who you are. Anything here is at your service, C'mell."

"Your connection?" she demanded.

He nodded his head at one side of the room. She saw the speaker in the wall. A'gentur sat sleepily on the floor, while Rod had produced one single clear note by pushing one of the keys of the beautiful big upright box.

C'mell called, "Rod, come here."

"Right ho," he said, coming over to the speaker.

"Listen. Your life may be in danger, Rod. I'll call Central Computer and I want you to assert your authority over this room and this work. Demand to hear the music that you want. Tell the Central Computer the truth. That may keep the robot police from coming in and killing you before they find that you are not really a cat-man."

"He isn't a cat-man...." murmured D'igo in wonderment from the side.

"Sh-h," said C'mell to Digo. To Rod she said, "Speak now. Establish your rights."

"Centputer," said Rod, "take this name down. Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan the hundred and fifty-first from Old North Australia. Got it?"

"Affirmative."

"Do I own you, Centputer?"

"Repeat. Repeat."

"Centputer, have I bought you?"

"Apparently impossible, but this-machine will check. No, you have not bought this- machine."

"Can you tell where I am, Centputer?"

"Restricted workroom of the Instrumentality."

"Do I own Earthport?"

"Affirmative."

"Do I own this room too?"

"Affirmative."



"I am in it."

"Re-state the instruction. This-machine cannot make your statement operational."

"I have taken this room from the Instrumentality and I will return it to the Lords of the Instrumentality when I see fit."

"That is not possible. The room belongs to the Instrumentality."

"And I," said Rod, "override the Instrumentality. Tell them to keep out till I am through."

"The instruction is impossible. This-machine has records that you own Earthport, and that the Instrumentality sold you all of it, including the room you are in. Therefore the room is yours. This-machine also has a basic programmed command that the Instrumentality cannot be overridden. This-machine must appeal to higher authority. The robot police will be warned away from your person until this-machine has been re-coded or reaffirmed by higher authority." Click went the speaker, and the Central Computer itself broke the connection.

"You're in for it," said C'mell. Her green eyes, which could look fierce at times, scanned him with soft indulgence: Rod could see that she was very proud of him, and he was not altogether sure of the reason. Her warning was ominous, but her expression betrayed no fear, only a new-found Confidence that he would see them through.

A'gentur spoke from the floor to D'igo: "Do you have any cocoanut, raisins, shelled nuts, or pineapple, dog-man?"

"Forgive him, colleague D'igo, if he's rude, but he's very tired and very hungry."

"It's all right," said D'igo. "I have none of those things, though I have some excellent raw liver and an assortment of bones in my cold-box. My master, a Lord, has left a pot of cocoa which I could warm up for you, animal. Would you like that?"

"Anything, anything," said A'gentur cheerfully.

"Now I've seen everything," declared D'igo with a species of desperate composure as he put the cocoa on to warm it up. "My secret room is attacked, the famous C'mell herself pays me a visit, a cat-man gives orders to the Central Computer, and I have to feed an animal in my workshop. It's not often that this sort of thing happens, is it, madame C'mell?"

"We came in here," said C'mell gracefully and quickly, "because this friend of mine insisted on hearing your music."

"You like it," smiled D'igo. "I like it myself. It's secret music and I'm not sure that it will ever be cleared for use. My master, the Lord Ingintau, wanted me to find the last song ever sung in New York."

"That was a city, wasn't it?"

"The biggest city on this continent. When New York was destroyed, there were various primitive electronic stations transmitting, some sending pictures and others relaying just words and music. The search-robots out in space have been recording all the salvageable messages from in that period of the First Doom, and I think that I have narrowed the choice down to three songs. You heard Ignoraba Yo - that was English and Spanish mixed, in the style called bop. I'm not sure of the next one, because I have most of the melody, but for the words, only the refrain has come through. I got my helper, a dog-girl, to sing the part while I played the piano, and I spooled it just last week. Would you like to hear it?"

"That's what I burst in for," said Rod cheerfully.

The musician D'igo rested his hand against a blank part of the wall and said, "Forty-seven, please."

The room was immediately filled with the wild catchy music of the "piano," expertly played. The particularly musical melody was quick, startling, amusing and witty in its use of a tune. By Norstrilian standards, that song would be condemned as lascivious, thought Rod - but then, that wasn't Old North Australia. It was what Ancient Earth sang as Earth died the first of a hundred deaths.

After a preliminary la-la-la la-a-a-la a woman's voice came on and sang the catchy refrain three times in a row in perfectly accented Ancient English, just as Rod had heard it spoken by the talking books in his family's storeroom of hidden treasures:

Only God can make a tree,

But you can make a girl like me!

"It's amusing, but there's not much to it," said Rod. "What's the third one?"

"That's a period piece, antedating the fall of New York. I think it may have had something to do with a collective entertainment which they called a square dance or a country dance. I can't imagine why. Or it may have been something translated from another language and another culture into the usage of the Murkins."

"They're the ones who had New York?" asked Rod.

"The same," said D'igo.

"The same ones who built those spectacular surface roads that people see everytime they look down on Earth from nearby space?"

"That's right," smiled D'igo. "They were a wild, gifted, wanton people. Do you want to hear the third song?"

"I'll play that and sing it for you myself. I just finished arranging it myself."

He sat at the piano, played a few bars, and then sang:

Ring a bell

and clap! clap!

Sing pell mell

and tap! tap!

The wishing well

will miss, miss.

Hug and tell

and kiss, kiss.

Rod sighed, "I still like the one I heard outside your door."

D'igo smiled his full-faced, clean-shaven smile. Rod wondered that a dog could be made into so perfect a copy of a man. Except for his indoor pallor, D'igo looked as well-shaped and as well-spoken as any man that Rod had ever seen.

"What you heard out there," said D'igo, "was a spool of my own voice. Would you like to hear my assistant sing it? She is a very talented girl. She can sing either contralto or soprano."

"Soprano," said A'gentur promptly and unexpectedly. D'igo stared at him with astonishment and reproach, but since the others did not object, he said,

"Soprano it is, then," and he muttered under his breath, "For a talking animal, you've got a fantastic education."

D'igo called to the wall, "Thirty one, third version," and then said to his guests, "Do sit down...."

Ignoraba Yo began to pour from the speakers with its full, hypnotic volume, carried by a woman's splendid voice.

#### Confrontation and a Half Challenge

This is the climax of Hansgeorg Wagner's musical drama. The four of them sat listening to the music: A'gentur on the floor, drifting off to sleep again; the two cat-people, C'mell red-haired and Rod yellow-haired, staring at nothing and giving their full attention to the music; the host, D'igo, sitting with a half-smile on his face and watching his guests. Wagner combines the thrill of illegal ancient music with some deft composition of his own.

His woodwinds represent the soft rustling in the corridor.

A quick light flurry of drums indicates the new arrivals:

A tall, pitiless intelligent woman with a vividly dramatic black and white dress of the most conservative cut imaginable, accompanied by two high-ranking robot soldiers, both of them with their bodies washed in silver and gold, their swimming eyes taking in all corners of the room at once, their heavy wirepoints already buzzing with potential death.

"I," said she, "am the Lady Johanna Gnade. You are Digo, the musical historian. I have heard your work -"

Rod stood up and interrupted her. Though she was tall, he was several centimeters taller. "I," said he, in a perfectly composed copy of her own manner, "am Rod McBan, the owner of this room. You can sit down, ma'am and lady, if you wish. Your robots can sit down too, if they enjoy it."

For a memorable moment the two confronted another: the tall, black-haired woman and the tall yellow-haired youth in cat disguise. This was no meeting of individuals - it was a confrontation of systems, the trained power of the Instrumentality against the disciplined in-bred force of the Old North Australians.

The woman yielded, a little.

"You're a quick young man. Your name is Rod McBan and you have bought Earth. Why did you do it?"

"Do sit down," said Rod firmly and hospitably. "It's a long story and I would not want to tire a lady -"

Johanna Gnade snapped, "Don't worry about my being a lady. I'm one of the Lords of the Instrumentality. And make your story short."

"Please sit, ma'am and lady. And make your robots comfortable." There was a little more command than courtesy in his voice, but there was nothing at which she could take open offense.

"I've never had an underperson make me sit down before," she grumbled, taking a hassock and sitting bolt upright on it. "Lieutenant, captain, both of you, go in the hall. As a matter of fact, cut all outside connections with this room, but record the scene yourselves, so that I will have my own record of it."

The two robots turned off their wirepoints. They walked deftly around the room, touching the walls lightly here and there. The better-ornamented one said,

"Clear and secure, my lady."

She did not thank them. She just nodded at the broken door. They walked out into the dark corridor.

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked at C'mell, "And you are C'mell. I've seen you before. As a matter of fact, I have seen you several times, almost always when there was trouble. Are you one of our confidential agents? You always come out innocent, no matter what happens."

"No, ma'am. I'm just a girlygirl. I work at Earthport, welcoming offworld visitors and keeping them happy."

"I'm not sure I trust that word 'just,' " said the Lady Johanna Gnade. "Who put you on the job this time?"

"The Lord Jestocost," said C'mell, a little worried.

"Jestocost?" repeated the Lady Johanna Gnade. "If that's the case, it's really none of my business. Don't break into things any more, mister McBane, without asking the Lord Jestocost to arrange it first. Old Earth is no citizen-commonwealth like Old North Australia. Often we kill first and ask later. I'd like to hear your side of your story before I leave, now that I am here. How old are you?"

"Chronologically, I am about sixty-five years old. But I have gone back through a sixteen year cycle four times, so that biologically I am sixteen."

"Are you a man?"

"Certainly. This cat stuff is just a disguise."

"No, I mean are you a grown man, according to the horrible customs of your home planet?"

"Citizen. Citizen, we call it. Yes, I passed the Garden of Death."

"Why did you buy Earth?"

"To escape, ma'am and lady."

"Escape what? I thought that Norstrilia protected every single one of her people, once they passed that awful survival test."

"Usually, yes. It just happened that I had only one enemy, and he was Onseck of the whole Commonwealth administration."

"Onseck? We don't have that word."

"Honorary Secretary. The man who runs the routine admin. for Her Absent Majesty the Queen."

"I've heard of that custom of yours. Why did he hate you?"

"We were both detectives, a long time ago. I was - am - telepathically deaf and dumb. Mostly. Can't spiek or hier, have to rely on the old spoken words, like outlanders or barbarians. He was a short-lifer, who could not take stroon, the drug which -"

"I know all about stroon," said she, "the immortality drug. As a matter of fact, my veins are full of it right now. I am near my six hundredth birthday."

"Congratulations, ma'am and lady."

"Never mind. What happened?"

"When I knew he was after me, I went to my family's computer. It's all mechanical, not a single animal brain or animal relay in it."

"I didn't know there was one left."

"I myself repaired it," said Rod.

In this part of Hansgeorg Wagner's musical drama about Rod, the music wears a little thin because he lets Rod and the Lady Johanna Gnade speak in normal voices, using his music only as an accompaniment. Now and then he lets the spotlight drift across the calm face and strong torso of D'igo the musicologist; when that happens, he brings in a fugue or two from Ignoraba Yo. Otherwise the music for this part of the show is rather dull.

"If you weren't so rich," said the Lady Johanna Gnade, "I'd like to buy that machine of yours for our Earthport museum."

"It's not for sale, ma'am and lady, not at any price."

"I can imagine that. What did it do?"

"It outcomputed the Commonwealth and I became the richest man in the universe."

"So you ran away again. First you ran because you were persecuted. Then you ran because you were rich. When did you get here?"

"Today."

"Where have you been between the time you left Norstrilia and today?"

"Mars, ma'am and lady."

"Do you have to keep using that double title on me?"

"Yes, ma'am and lady. It's our custom. We don't change our customs much."

The Lady Johanna Gnade burst into a friendly laugh - her first since their encounter: "All right. What's yours?"

"What's my what?"

"Your double title. You have one, don't you?"

It was Rod's turn to look uncomfortable. "It's 'mister and owner,' ma'am and lady, but you don't have to use it all the time. After all, this is Earth."

"But you own it."

"All right, you win, ma'am."

"How are your parents, mister and owner McBan?"

His face clouded over. "Dead."

"How?"

"Their ship went milky while planoforming through space-two."

"Do you love anyone?"

"Yes, ma'am, my servant Eleanor."

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere in this tower, ma'am."

"What's she doing?"

"Pretending to be me, ma'am, while I pretend to be a cat-man. They changed her into a young man when they scunned me down and then made me look like an underperson."

"Scunned? You were scunned. Frozen, dehydrated, cut up, boxed. You? Who did it?"

"That monkey-doctor there," said Rod, gesturing at A'gentur on the floor.

The Lady Johanna Gnade called directly to A'gentur, "You, there, monkey, wake up! He, talks, doesn't he?"

A'gentur let one eye quiver open for a quick glance at the Lady Johanna Gnade. Within seconds he was snoring in deep sleep.

The Lady Johanna Gnade stared at A'gentur. She brushed the air with the right hand to keep the others silent. She even made a motion over A'gentur with both hands. The monkey did not stir or waken.

"I don't like this," she said. "I don't like this one bit. That being looks like an animal, but I can't tell whether it is an underperson or a human being. It went to sleep at me. I just threw the whole telepathic force of the Instrumentality at it, and it stayed asleep. That's never happened to me before."

C'mell said, very softly, "He was sent out to Norstrilia at the request of the Lord Redlady."

"Redlady? Redlady?" said the Lady Johanna Gnade. "He's still working?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Rod.

"Redlady at one end and Jestocost at the other! You couldn't find two more weirdos - more personalities, I mean - in the whole Instrumentality to match that pair. You're in good hands, young man. And what do you want out of all this?"

"A look at Earth, a bit of adventure, my life, and most of my fortune, ma'am and lady."

She almost looked as though she would lose her dignity and whistle in astonishment. "You're not asking much, are you? Not much by half!"

"I'll win," said Rod, "I'll win all right. The Norstrilian way."

"What's that?"

He turned serious. "Never plan too far ahead. Go from one immediate situation to the other. Never make a decision if you can put the decision on somebody else and still win for yourself. And most of all -"

"Most of all?" asked the Lady Johanna Gnade softly.

"Most of all, never get caught winning. Just win, but don't let it show."

"You're all right," she laughed, standing up. "You don't need my protection. And you aren't going to get my punishment. I'd hate to tackle you, young as you are. With those companions you have, you're practically an army. That girl of yours, C'mell -"

"Yes, ma'am," said C'mell.

"She never gets caught. At anything." The Lady smiled. She went on: "And that thing on the floor, that so-called monkey. I can't make it talk. I can't even tell what it is. You're in good company, young man. I'll speak to the Lord Jestocost sometime. Do you shake hands?"

Rod politely held out his right hand.

She stopped him with a wave. "I was being friendly. Is handshaking a custom on Norstrilia, mister and owner McBane - a custom even between men and women?"

"Indeed it is, ma'am and lady."

They shook hands cordially.

"Don't take too much of Earth home with you when you leave," she called to him as she entered the dark corridor, summoned her robots and dropped down the shaft.

D'igo said, "Come back if you wish, mister and owner McBane. Call on me to come out any time, madam C'mell. Goodbye, monkey."

"Thanks," said A'gentur, wide-awake. "Let's go eat."

## CHAPTER TWO: DISCOURSES AND RECOURSES

ROD MCBAN, DISGUISED as a cat, floated down the dropshaft to the strangest encounter which could have befallen any man of his epoch. C'mell floated down beside him. She clenched her skirt between her knees, so that it would not commit immodesties. A'gentur, his monkey hand lightly on C'mell's shoulder, loved her soft red hair as it stood and moved with the updraft which they themselves created; he looked forward to becoming E-ikasus again and he admired C'mell deeply, but love between the different strains of underpeople was necessarily platonic. Physiologically they could not breed outside their own stock and emotionally they found it hard to mesh deeply with the emphatic needs of another form of life, however related it might be. E-ikasus therefore very truly and deeply wanted C'mell for his friend, and nothing more.

While they moved downward in relative peace, other people were concerned about them on various worlds.

The Cabin of the Station of Doom, the same day

"Aunt Doris, he's dead, he's dead, he's dead. I feel it."

"Nonsense, Lavinia. He may be in trouble and we might not know. But with all that money, the government or the Instrumentality would use the Big Blink to send word of the change in status of this property. I don't mean to sound cold-hearted, girl, but when there is this much property at stake, people act rapidly."

"He is so dead."

Doris was not one to discount the telepathic arts. She remembered how the Australians had gotten off the incarnate fury of Paradise VII. She went over to the cupboard and took from it a strangely tinted jar. "Do you know what this is?" said she to Lavinia.

The girl forced a smile past her desperate inward feelings. "Yes," she said. "Ever since I was no bigger than a mini-elephant, people, have told me, that jar was 'do not touch.' "

"Good girl, then, if you haven't touched it!" said Aunt Doris drily. "It's a mixture of stroon and Paradise VII honey."

"Honey?" cried Lavinia. "I thought no one ever went back to that horrible place."

"Some do," said Lavinia. "It seems, that some Earth forms have taken over and are still living there. Including bees. The honey has powers on the human mind. It is a strong hypnotic. We mix it with stroon to make sure it is safe."



Aunt Doris put a small spoon into the jar, lifted, spun the spoon to pick up the threads of heavy honey, and handed the spoon to Lavinia. "Here," said she, "take this and lick it off. Swallow it all down."

Lavinia hesitated and then obeyed. When the spoon was clean she licked her lips and handed the clean spoon back to Aunt Doris, who put it aside for washing up.

Aunt Doris very ceremonially put the jar back on the high shelf of the cupboard, locked the cupboard, and put the key in the pocket of her apron.

"Let's sit outside," said she to Lavinia.

"When's it going to happen?"

"When's what going to happen?"

"The trance - the visions - whatever this stuff brings on?"

Doris laughed her weary rational laugh. "Oh, that! Sometimes nothing at all happens. In any event, it won't hurt you, girl. Let's sit on the bench. I'll tell you if you start looking strange to me."

They sat on the bench, doing nothing. Two police ornithopters, flying just under the forever-gray clouds, quietly watched the Station of Doom. They had been doing this ever since Rod's computer showed him how to win all that money - the fortune was still piling up, almost faster than it could be computed. The bird-engines were lazy and beautiful as they flew. The operators had synchronized the flapping of the two sets of wings, so that they looked like rukhs doing a ballet. The effect caught the eyes of both Lavinia and Aunt Doris.

Lavinia suddenly spoke in a clear, sharp, demanding voice, quite unlike her usual tone: "It's all mine, isn't it?"

Doris breathed softly, "What, my dear?"

"The Station of Doom. I'm one of the heiresses, anyhow, aren't I?" Lavinia pursed her lips in a proud prim smug smile which would have humiliated her if she had been in her right mind.

Aunt Doris said nothing. She nodded silently.

"If I marry Rod I'll be missus and owner McBan, the richest woman who ever lived. But if I do marry him, he'll hate me, because he'll think it's for his money and his power. But I've loved Rod, loved him specially because he couldn't hier or spiek. I've always known that he would need me someday, not like my Daddy singing his crazy sad proud songs forever and ever! But how can I marry him now ... ?"

Whispered Doris, very gently, very insinuatingly: "Look for Rod, my dear. Look for Rod in that part of your mind which thought he was dead. Look for Rod, Lavinia, look for Rod."

Lavinia laughed happily, and it was the laugh of a small child.

She stared at her feet, at the sky, at Doris - looking right through her.

Her eyes seemed to clear. When she spoke, it was in her normal adult voice:

"I see Rod. Someone has changed him into a cat-man, just like the pictures we've seen of underpeople. And there's a girl with him - a girl, Doris - and I can't be jealous of him being with her. She is the most beautiful thing that ever lived on any world. You ought to see her hair, Doris. You ought to see her hair. It is like a bushel of beautiful fire. Is that Rod? I don't

know. I can't tell. I can't see." She sat on the bench, looking straight at Doris and seeing nothing, but weeping copiously.

At the beach of Meeva Meefla, Earth, the same day

"Father, you can't be here. You never come here!"

"But I have," said Lord William Not-from-here. "And it's important."

"Important?" laughed Ruth. "Then it's not me. I'm not important. Your work up there is." She looked toward the rim of the Earthport, which floated, distinct and circular, beyond the crests of some faraway clouds.

The over-dressed lord squatted incongruously on the sand.

"Listen, girl," said he slowly and emphatically, "I've never asked much of you but I am asking now."

"Yes, father," she said, a little frightened by this totally unaccustomed air - her father was usually playfully casual with her, and equally usually forgot her ten seconds after he got through talking to her.

"Ruth, you know we are Old North Australians?"

"We're rich, if that's what you mean. Not that it matters, the way things go."

"I'm not talking about riches now, I'm talking about home, and I mean it!"

"Home? We never had a home, father."

"Norstrilia!" he snarled at her.

"I never saw it, father. Nor did you. Nor your father. Nor great-grandpa. What are you talking about?"

"We can go home again!"

"Father, what's happened? Have you lost your mind? You've always told me that our family bought out and could never go back. What's happened now? Have they changed the rules? I'm not even sure I want to go there, anyhow. No water, no beaches, no cities. Just a dry dull planet with sick sheep and a lot of immortal farmers who go around armed to the teeth!"

"Ruth, you can take us back!"

She jumped to her feet and slapped the sand off her bottom. She was a little taller than her father; though he was an extremely handsome, aristocratic-looking man, she was an even more distinctive person. It would be obvious to anyone that she would never lack for suitors or pursuers.

"All right, father. You always have schemes. Usually it's antique money. This time I'm mixed up with it somehow, or you wouldn't be here. Father, just what do you want me to do?"

"To marry. To marry the richest man who has ever been known in the universe."

"Is that all?" she laughed. "Of course I'll marry him. I've never married an off-worlder before. Have you made a date with him?"

"You don't understand, Ruth. This isn't Earth marriage. In Norstrilian law and custom you marry only one man, you marry only once, and you stay married to him for as long as you live."

A cloud passed over the sun. The beach became cooler. She looked at her father with a funny mixture of sympathy, contempt, and curiosity.

"That," she said, "is a cat of another breed. I'll have to see him first..."

Antechamber of the Bell and Bank, Earthport, the same day

A bear-woman, complete with starched cap and nurse's uniform, pushed the wheel chair of the Lord Crudelta into the room. Jestocost looked up from the situation shows which he had been watching. When he saw who it was, he offered Crudelta a deep bow indeed. The bear-woman, flustered by this famous place and all the great dignitaries whom she was meeting, spoke up in a singularly high voice, begging:

"My lord and master Crudelta, may I leave you here?"

"Yes. Go. I will call for you later. Go to the bathroom on your way out. It's on the right."

"My lord -!" she gasped with embarrassment.

"You wouldn't have dared if I hadn't told you. I've been watching your mind for the last half-hour. Now go along."

The bear-woman fled with a rustle of her starched skirts.

When Crudelta looked directly at him, Jestocost gave him a very deep bow. In lifting his eyes he looked directly into the face of the old, old man and said, with something near pride in his voice:

"Still up to your old tricks, my Lord and colleague Crudelta!"

"And you to yours, Jestocost. How are you going to get that boy out of the sewers?"

"What boy? What sewers?"

"Our sewers. The boy you sold this tower to."

For once, Jestocost was flabbergasted. His jaw dropped. Then he collected himself and said, "You're a knowledgeable man, my Lord Crudelta."

"That I am," said Crudelta, "and a thousand years older than you, to boot. That was my reward for coming back from the Nothing-at-all."

"I know that, sir," Jestocost's full, pleasant face did not show worry, but he studied the old man across from him with extreme care. In his prime, the Lord Crudelta had been the greatest of the Lords of the Instrumentality, a telepath of whom the other lords were always a little afraid, because he picked minds so deftly and quickly that he was the best mental pickpocket who had ever lived. A strong conservative, he had never opposed a specific policy because it ran counter to his general appetites. He had, for example, carried the vote for the Rediscovery of Man by coming out of retirement and tongue-lashing the whole Council into a corner with his vehement support for reform. Jestocost had never liked him - who could like a rapier tongue, a mind of unfathomable brilliance, a cold old ego which neither offered nor asked companionship? Jestocost knew that if the old man had caught on to the Rod McBan adventure, he might be on the trail of Jestocost's earlier deal with - no, no, no! don't think it here, not with those eyes watching.

"I know about that, too," said the old, old man.

"What?"

"The secret you are trying most of all to hide."

Jestocost stood submissive, waiting for the blow to fall.

The old man laughed. Most people would have expected a cackle from that handsome fresh young face with the withered spidery body. They would have been fooled. The laugh was full-bodied, genuine and warm.

"Redlady's a fool," said Crudelta.

"I think so too," said Jestocost, " but what are your reasons, my lord and master?"

"Sending that young man off his own planet when he has so much wealth and so little experience."

Jestocost nodded, not wanting to say anything until the old man had made his line of attack plain.

"I like your idea, however," said the Lord Crudelta. "Sell him the Earth and then tax him for it. But what is your ultimate aim? Making him Emperor of the Planet Earth, in the old style? Murdering him? Driving him mad? Having the cat-girl of yours seduce him and then send him home a bankrupt? I admit I have thought of all these too but I didn't see how any of them would fit in with your passion for justice. But there's one thing you can't do, Jestocost. You can't sell him the Planet Earth and then have him stay here and manage it. He might want to use this tower for his residence. That would be too much. I am too old to move out. And he mustn't roll up that ocean out there and take it home for a souvenir. You've all been very clever, my lord - clever enough to be fools. You have created an unnecessary crisis. What are you going to get out of it?"

Jestocost plunged. The old man must have picked his own mind. Nowhere else could he have put all the threads of the case together. Jestocost decided on the truth and the whole truth. He started with the day that Big Blink rang in the enormous transactions in stroon futures, financial gambles which soon reached out of the commodity markets of Old North Australia and began to unbalance the economy of all the civilized worlds. Directed and calculated by the ancient McBan family computer which, when asked by its new mister and owner how he could escape the sick enmity of Norstrilia's Onseck, had answered that the only way was to become the richest man in the Universe - and, in four hours, had brought it about. He unrolled as much as was necessary of the thread of Rod McBan's swift yet complex dispatch to Old Earth, overseen by the disgraced Lord Redlady - the disguise as a cat-man, and the nine Rod-doubles, the servant Eleanor and eight robots, to confuse thieves, kidnappers, and anyone else who might feel an unwholesome interest in the wealthiest man of all time...

"Tell me what you plan to do," said the Lord Crudelta. "If I like it, I will help you. If I don't like it, I will have the whole story before a plenum of the council this very morning, and you know that they will tear your bright idea to shreds. They will probably seize the boy's property, send him to a hospital, and have him come out speaking Basque as a flamenco player. You know as well as I do that the Instrumentality is very generous with other people's property, but pretty ruthless when it comes to any threat directed against itself. After all, I was one of the men who wiped out Raumsog."

Jestocost began to talk very quietly, very calmly. He spoke with the assurance of an accountant who, books in order, is explaining an intricate point to his manager. Old himself, he was a child compared to the antiquity and wisdom of the Lord Crudelta. He went into details, including the ultimate disposition of Rod McBan. He even shared with the Lord Crudelta his sympathies for the underpeople and his own very secret, very quiet struggle to improve their

position. The only thing which he did not mention was the E-telekeli and the counterbrain which the underpeople had set up in Downdeep-downdeep. If the old man knew it, he knew it and Jestocost couldn't stop him, but if he did not know it, there was no point in telling him.

The Lord Crudelta did not respond with senile enthusiasm or childish laughter. He reverted, not to his childhood but to his maturity; with great dignity and force he said:

"I approve. I understand. You have my proxy if you need it. Call that nurse to come and get me. I thought you were a clever fool, Jestocost. You sometimes are. This time you are showing that you have a heart as well as a head."

"And the ex-lord Redlady?" asked Jestocost deferentially.

"Him? Nothing. Nothing. Let him live his life. The Old North Australians might as well cut their political teeth on him."

The bear-woman rustled back into the room. The Lord Crudelta waved his hand. Jestocost bowed almost to the floor, and the wheelchair, heavy as a tank, creaked its way across the doorsill.

"That," said Jestocost, "could have been trouble!" He wiped his brow.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE ROAD TO THE CATMASTER

ROD, C'MELL AND A'GENTUR had had to hold the sides of the shaft several times as the traffic became heavy and large loads, going up or down, had to pass each other and them too. In one of these waits C'mell caught her breath and said something very swiftly to the little monkey. Rod, not heeding them, caught nothing but the sudden enthusiasm and happiness in her voice. The monkey's murmured answer made her plaintive and she insisted:

"But, Yeekasoose, you must! Rod's whole life could depend on it. Not just saving his life now, but having a better life for hundreds and hundreds of years."

The monkey was cross. "Don't ask me to think when I am hungry. This fast metabolism and small body just isn't enough to support real thinking."

"If it's food you want, have some raisins." She took a square of compressed seedless raisins out of one of her matching bags.

A'gentur ate them greedily, but gloomily.

Rod's attention drifted away from them as he saw magnificent golden furniture, elaborately carved and inlaid with a pearlescent material, being piloted up the shaft by a whole troop of talkative dog-men. He asked them where the furniture was going. When they did not answer him, he repeated his question in a more peremptory tone of voice, as befitted the richest Old North Australian in the universe. The tone of demand brought answers, but they were not the ones he was expecting. "Meow," said one dog-man. "Shut up, cat, or I'll chase you up a tree." "Not to your house, buster. Exactly what do you think you are, people?" "Cats are always nosy. Look at that one." The dog-foreman rose into sight; with dignity and kindness he said to Rod, "Cat-fellow, if you feel like talking, you may get marked surplus. Better keep quiet in the public dropshaft!" Rod realized that to these beings he was one of them, a cat made into a man, and that the underpeople workmen who served Old Earth had been trained not to chatter while working on the business of Man.

He caught the tail of C'mell's urgent whisper to A'gentur: "... and don't ask him. Tell him. We'll risk the people zone for a visit to the Catmaster! Tell him."

A'gentur was panting with a rapid shallow breath. His eyes seemed to protrude from their sockets and yet he was looking at nothing. He groaned as though with some inward effort. At last he lost his grip on the wall and would have floated slowly downward if C'mell had not caught him and cuddled him like a baby. C'mell whispered, eagerly:

"You reached him?"

"Him," gasped the little monkey.

"Who?" asked Rod.

"Aitch eye," said C'mell. "I'll tell you later." Of A'gentur she asked, "If you got him, what did he say?"

"He said, 'E-ikasuk, I do not say no. You are my son. Take the risk if you think it wise.' And don't ask me now, C'mell. Let me think a little. I have been all the way to Norstrilia and back. I'm still cramped in this little body. Do we have to do it now? Right now? Why can't we go to him" - and M'gentur nodded toward the depths below - "and find out what we want Rod for, anyhow? Rod is a means, not an end. Who really knows what to do with him?"

"What are you talking about?" said Rod.

Simultaneously C'mell snapped, "I know what we are going to do with him."

"What?" said the little monkey, very tired again.

"We're going to let this boy go free, and let him find happiness, and if he wants to give us his help, we will take it and be grateful. But we are not going to rob him. Not going to hurt him. That would be a mean, dirty way to start being better creatures than we are. If he knows who he is before he meets him, they can make sense." She turned to Rod and said with mysterious urgency:

"Don't you want to know who you are?"

"I'm Rod McBAn to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first," said he promptly.

"She-h-h," said she, "no names here. I'm not talking about names. I'm talking about the deep insides of you. Life itself as it flows through you. Do you have any idea who you are?"

"You're playing games," he said. "I know perfectly well who I am, and where I live, and what I have. I even know that right now I am supposed to be a cat-man named C'roderick. What else is there to know?"

"You men!" she sobbed at him, "You men! Even when you're people, you're so dense that you can't understand a simple question. I'm not asking you your name or your address or your label or your great-grandfather's property. I'm asking about you, Rod, the only you that will ever live, no matter how many numbers your grandsons may put after their names. You're not in the world just to own a piece of property or to handle a surname with a number after it. You're you. There's never been another you. There will never be another one, after you. What does this 'you' want?"

Rod glanced down at the walls of the tunnel, which seemed to turn - oh, so far below - very gently to the North. He looked up at the little rhomboids of light cast on the tunnel walls by the landing doors into the various levels of Earthport. He felt his own weight, a half-kilo or so, tagging gently at his hand as he held to the rough surface of the vertical shaft, supported by his belt. The belt itself felt uncomfortable about his middle; after all, it was supporting most of his weight, and it squeezed him. What do I want? thought he. Who am I that I should have a right to want anything? I am Rod McBAn CLI, the mister and owner of the Station of Doom. But I'm also a poor freak with bad telepathy who can't even spiek or hier rightly.

C'mell was watching him as clinically as a surgeon, but he could tell from her expression that she was not trying to peep his mind.

He found himself speaking almost as wearily as had A'gentur, who was also called something like "Yeekasoose," and who had strange powers for a little monkey,

"I don't suppose I want anything much, C'mell, except that I should like to spiek and hier correctly, like other people on my native world."

She looked at him, her expression showing intense sympathy and the effort to make a decision.

A'gentur interrupted with his high clear monkey voice, "Say that to me, sir and master."

Rod repeated, "I don't really want anything. I would like to spiek and hier because other people are fussing at me about it. And I would like to get a Cape of Good Hope twopenny triangular blue stamp while I am still on Earth. But that's about all. I guess there's nothing I really want."

The monkey closed his eyes and seemed to fall asleep again: Rod suspected it was some kind of telepathic trance.

C'mell hooked A'gentur on an old rod which protruded from the surface of the shaft. Since he weighed only a few grams, there was no pull on the belt. She seized Rod's shoulder and pulled him over to her.

"Rod, listen! Do you want to know who you are?"

"I don't know," said he. "I might be miserable."

"Not if you know who you are!" she insisted.

"I might not like me," said Rod. "Other people don't and my parents died together when their ship went milky out in space. I'm not normal."

"For God's sake, Rod!" she cried.

"Who?" said he.

"Forgive me, father," said she, speaking to no one in sight.

"I've heard that name before, somewhere," said Rod. "But let's get going. I want to get to this mysterious place you are taking me and then I want to find out about Eleanor. She's disguised as me, taking risks for me, along with eight robots. It's up to me to do what I can for her. Always."

"But she's your servant," said C'mell. "She serves you. Almost like being an underperson, like me."

"She's a person," said Rod, stubbornly. "We have no underpeople in Norstrilia, except for a few in government jobs. But she's my friend."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"Great sick sheep, girl! Are you barmy? No!"

"Do you want to marry anybody?"

"At sixteen?" he cried. "Anyhow, my family will arrange it." The thought of plain honest devoted Lavinia crossed his mind, and he could not help comparing her to this wild voluptuous creature who floated beside him in the tunnel as the traffic passed them going up and down. With near weightlessness, C'mell's hair floated like a magic flower around her head. She had been brushing it out of her eyes from time to time. He snorted, "Not Eleanor."

When he said this, another idea crossed the mind of the beautiful cat-girl.

"You know what I am, Rod," said she, very seriously.

"A cat-girl from the planet Earth. You're supposed to be my wife."

"That's right," she said, with an odd intonation in her voice. "Be it, then!"



"What?" said Rod.

"My husband," she said, her voice catching slightly. "Be my husband, if it will help you to find you."

She stole a quick glance up and down the shaft, there was nobody near.

"Look, Rod, look!" She spread the opening of her dress down and aside. Even with the poor light, to which his eyes had become accustomed, he could see the fine tracery of veins in her delicate chest and her young, pear-shaped breasts. The aureoles around the nipples were a clear, sweet, innocent pink; the nipples themselves were as pretty as two pieces of candy. For a moment there was pleasure and then a terrible embarrassment came over him. He turned his face away and felt horribly self-conscious. What she had done was interesting, but it wasn't nice.

When he dared to glance at her, she was still studying his face.

"I'm a girlygirl, Rod. This is my business. And you're a cat, with all the rights of a tomcat. Nobody can tell the difference, here in this tunnel. Rod, do you want to do anything?"

Rod gulped and said nothing.

She swept her clothing back into place. The strange urgency left her voice. "I guess," she said, "that that left me a little breathless. I find you pretty attractive, Rod. I find myself thinking, 'what a pity he is not a cat.' I'm over it now."

Rod said nothing.

A bubble of laughter came into her voice, along with something mothering and tender, which tugged at his heartstrings. "Best of all, Rod, I didn't mean it. Or maybe I did. I had to give you a chance before I felt that I really knew you. Rod, I'm one of the most beautiful girls on Old Old Earth Itself. The Instrumentality uses me for that very reason. We've turned you into a cat and offered you me, and you won't have me. Doesn't that suggest that you don't know who you are?"

"Are you back on that?" said Rod. "I guess I just don't understand girls."

"You'd better, before you're through with Earth," she said. "Your agents have bought a million of them for you, out of all that stroon money."

"People or underpeople?"

"Both!"

"Let them bug sheep!" he cried. "I had no part in ordering them. Come on, girl. This is no place for a boudoir conversation!"

"Where on earth did you learn that word?" she laughed.

"I read books. Lots of books. I may look like a peasant to you Earth people, but I know a lot of things."

"Do you trust me, Rod?"

He thought of her immodesty, which still left him a little breathless. The Old North Australian humor reasserted itself in him, as a cultural characteristic and not just as an individual one: "I've seen a lot of you, C'mell," said he with a grin. "I suppose you don't have many surprises left. All right, I trust you. Then what?"

She studied him closely.

"I'll tell you what E-ikarus and I were discussing."

"Who?"

"Him." She nodded at the little monkey.

"I thought his name was A'gentur."

"Like yours is C'rod!" she said.

"He's not a monkey?" asked Rod.

She looked around and lowered her voice. "He's a bird," she said solemnly, "and he's the second most important bird on Earth."

"So what?" said Rod.

"He's in charge of your destiny, Rod. Your life or your death. Right now."

"I thought," he whispered back, "that that was up to the Lord Redlady and somebody named Jestocost on Earth."

"You're dealing with other powers, Rod - powers which keep themselves secret. They want to be friends with you. And I think," she added with a complete non sequitur, "that we'd better take the risk and go."

He looked blank and she added, "To the Catmaster."

"They'll do something to me there."

"Yes," she said. Her face was calm, friendly, and even. "You will die, maybe - but not much chance. Or you might go mad - there's always the possibility. Or you will find all the things you want - that's the likeliest of all. I have been there, Rod. I myself have been there. Don't you think that I look like a happy, busy girl, when you consider that I'm really just an animal with a rather low-down job?"

Rod studied her, "How old are you?"

"Thirty next year," she said, inflexibly.

"For the first time?"

"For us animal-people there is no second time, Rod. I thought you knew that."

He returned her gaze. "If you can take it," said he, "I can too. Let's go."

She lifted A'gentur or E-ikarus, depending on which he really was, off the wall, where he had been sleeping like a marionette between plays. He opened his exhausted little eyes and blinked at her.

"You have given us our orders," said C'mell. "We are going to the Department Store."

"I have," he said, crossly, coming much more awake. "I don't remember it!"

She laughed, "Just through me, E-ikarus!"

"That name!" he hissed. "Don't get foolhardy. Not in a public shaft."

"All right, A'gentur," she responded, "but do you approve?"

"Of the decision?"

She nodded.

The little monkey looked at both of them. He spoke to Rod. "If she gambles her life and yours, not to mention mine - if she takes chances to make you much, much happier, are you willing to come along?"

Rod nodded in silent agreement.

"Let's go, then," said the monkey-surgeon.

"Where are we going?" asked Rod.

"Down into Earthport City. Among all the people. Swarms and swarms of them," said C'mell, "and you will get to see the everyday life of Earth, just the way that you asked at the top of the tower, an hour ago."

"A year ago, you mean," said Rod. "So much has happened!" He thought of her young naked breasts and the impulse which had made her show them to him, but the thought did not make him excited or guilty; he felt friendly, because he sensed in their whole relationship a friendliness much more fervent than sex itself.

"We are going to a store," said the sleepy monkey.

"A commissary. For things? What for?"

"It has a nice name," said C'mell, "and it is run by a wonderful person. The Catmaster himself. Five hundred some years old, and still allowed to live by virtue of the legacy of the Lady Goroke."

"Never heard of her," said Rod. "What's the name?"

"The Department Store of Hearts' Desires," said C'mell and E-ikarus simultaneously.

The trip was a vivid, quick dream. They had only a few hundred meters to fall before they reached ground level.

They came out on the people-street. A robot-policeman watched them from a corner.

Human beings in the costumes of a hundred historical periods were walking around in the warm, wet air of Earth. Rod could not smell as much salt in the air as he had smelled at the top of the tower, but down here in the city it smelled of more people than he had ever even imagined in one place. Thousands of individuals, hundreds and thousands of different kinds of foods, the odors of robots, of underpeople and of other things which seemed to be unmodified animals.

"This is the most interesting smelling place I have ever been," said he to C'mell.

She glanced at him idly. "That's nice. You can smell like a dog-man. Most of the real people I have known couldn't smell their own feet. Come on though, C'roderick - remember who you are! If we're not tagged and licensed for the surface, we'll get stopped by that policeman in one minute or less."

She carried E-ikarus and steered Rod with a pressure on his elbow. They came to a ramp which led to an underground passage, well illuminated. Machines, robots and underpeople were hurrying back and forth along it, busy with the commerce of Earth.

Rod would have been completely lost if he had been without C'mell. Though his miraculous broad-band hearing, which had so often surprised him at home, had not returned during his few hours on Old Earth, his other senses gave him a suffocating awareness of the huge number of

people around him and above him. (He never realized that there were times, long gone, when the cities of Earth had population which reached the tens of millions; to him, several hundred thousand people, and a comparable number of underpeople, was a crowd almost beyond all measure.) The sounds and smells of underpeople were subtly different from those of people; some of the machines of Earth were bigger and older than anything which he had previously imagined; and above all, the circulation of water in immense volumes, millions upon millions of gallons, for the multiple purposes of Earthport - sanitation, cooling, drinking, industrial purposes - made him feel that he was not among a few buildings, which he would have called a city in Old North Australia, but that he himself had become a blood-cell thrusting through the circulatory system of some enormous composite animal, the nature of which he imperfectly understood. This city was alive with a sticky, wet, complicated aliveness which he had hitherto not even imagined to be possible. Movement characterized it. He suspected that the movement went on by night and day, that there was no real cessation to it, that the great pumps thrust water through feeder pipes and drains whether people were awake or not, that the brains of this organization could be no one place, but had to comprise many sub-brains, each committed and responsible for its particular tasks. No wonder underpeople were needed! It would be boredom and pain, even with perfected automation, to have enough human supervisors to reconnect the various systems if they had breakdowns inside themselves, or at their interconnections. Old North Australia had vitality, but it was the vitality of open fields, few people, immense wealth, and perpetual military danger; this was the vitality of the cesspool, of the compost heap, but the rotting, blooming, growing components were not waste material but human beings and near-human beings. No wonder that his forefathers had fled the cities as they had been. They must have been solid plague to free men. Even Old Original Australia, somewhere here on Earth, had lost its openness and freedom in order to become the single giant city-complex of Nanbien. It must, Rod thought with horror, have been a thousand times the size of this city of Earthport. (He was wrong, because it was 150,000 times the size of Earthport before it died. Earthport had only about two hundred thousand permanent residents when Rod visited it, with an additional number walking in from the nearer suburbs, the outer suburbs still being ruined and abandoned, but Australia - under the name of Aojou Nanbien - had reached a population of thirty billion before it died, and before the Wild Ones and the Menschenjäger had set to work killing off the survivors.)

Rod was bewildered, but C'mell was not.

She had put A'gentur down, over his whined monkey-like protest. He trotted unwillingly beside them.

With the impudent knowledgeability of a true city girl, she had led them to a cross-walk from which a continuous whistling roar came forth. By writing, by picture, and by loudspeaker, the warning system repeated KEEP OFF. FREIGHT ONLY, DANGER. KEEP OFF. She had snatched up E-ikasuk/A'gentur, grabbed Rod by the arm, and jumped with them on a series of rapidly moving airborne platforms. Rod, startled by the suddenness in which they had found the trackway, shouted to ask what it was:

"Freight? What's that?"

"Things. Boxes. Foods. This is the Central trackway. No sense in walking six kilometers when we can get this. Be ready to jump off with me when I give you the sign!"

"It feels dangerous," he said.

"It isn't," said she, "not if you're a cat."

With this somewhat equivocal reassurance, she let them ride. A'gentur could not care less. He cuddled his head against her shoulder, wrapped his long gibbonlike arms around her upper arm and went soundly to sleep.

C'mell nodded at Rod,

"Soon now!" she called, judging their distance by landmarks which he found meaningless. The landing points had flat, concrete-lined areas where the individual flat cars rushing along on their river of air, could be shunted suddenly to the side for loading or unloading. Each of these loading areas had a number, but Rod had not even noticed at what point they had gotten on. The smells of the underground city changed so much as they moved from one district to another that he was more interested in odors than in the numbers on the platforms.

She pinched his upper arm very sharply as a sign that he should get ready.

They jumped.

He staggered across the platform until he caught himself up against a large vertical crate marked "Algonquin Paper Works - Credit Slips, Miniature - 2 m." C'mell landed as gracefully as if she had been acting a rehearsed piece of acrobatics. The little monkey on her shoulder stared with wide bright eyes.

"This," said the monkey A'gentur/E-ikusus, fancy and contemptuously, "is where all the people play at working. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and my body sugar is low." He curbed himself tight against C'mell's shoulder, closed his eyes, and went back to sleep.

"He has a point," said Rod. "Could we eat?"

C'mell started to nod and then caught herself short - "You're a cat."

He nodded. Then he grinned. "I'm hungry, anyhow. And I need a sandbox."

"Sandbox?" she asked puzzled.

"An awef," he said very clearly, using the Old North Australian term.

"Awef?"

It was his turn to get embarrassed. He said it in full: "An animal waste evacuation facility."

"You mean a johnny," she cried. She thought a minute and then said, "Fooey."

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Each kind of underpeople has to use its own. It's death if you don't use one and it's death if you use the wrong one. The cat one is four stations back on this underground trackway. Or we can walk back on the surface. It would only be a half hour."

He said something rude to Earth. She wrinkled her brow.

"All I said was, 'Earth is a large healthy sheep.' That's not so dirty." Her good humor returned.

Before she could ask him another question he held up a firm hand. "I am not going to waste a half-hour. You wait here." He had seen the universal sign for "Men's room" at the upper level of the platform. Before she could stop him he had gone into it. She caught her hand up to her mouth, knowing that the robot police would kill him on sight if they found him in the wrong place. It would be such a ghastly joke if the man who owned the earth were to die in the wrong toilet..

As quick as thought she followed him, stopping just outside the door to the "men's room." She dared not go in; she trusted that the place was empty when Rod entered it, because she had heard no boom of a slow, heavy bullet, none of the crisp buzzing of a burner. Robots did not use toilets, so they went in only when they were investigating something. She was prepared to distract any man living if he tried to enter that toilet, by offering him the combination of an immediate seduction or a complimentary and unwanted monkey.

A'gentur had awakened.

"Don't bother," he said. "I called my father. Anything approaching that door will fall asleep."

An ordinary man, rather tired and worried-looking, headed for the men's room. C'mell was prepared to stop him at any cost, but she remembered what A'gentur/E-ikasus had told her, so she waited. The man reeled as he neared them. He stared at them, saw that they were underpeople, looked on through them as though they were not there. He took two more steps toward the door and suddenly reached out his hands as if he were going blind. He walked into the wall two meters from the door, touched it firmly and blindly with his hands, and crumpled gently to the floor, where he lay snoring.

"My dad's good," said A'gentur/E-ikasus. "He usually leaves real people alone, but when he must get them, he gets them. He even gave that man the distinct memory that he mistakenly took a sleeping pill when he was reaching for a pain-killer. When the human wakes up, he will feel foolish and will tell no one of his experience."

Rod came out of the ever-so-dangerous doorway. He grinned at them boyishly and did not notice the crumpled man lying beside the wall. "That's easier than turning back, and nobody noticed me at all. See, I saved you a lot of trouble, C'mell!"

He was so proud of his foolhardy adventure that she did not have the heart to blame him. He smiled widely, his cat-whispers tipping as he did so. For a moment, just a moment, she forgot that he was an important person and a real man to boot: he was a boy, and mighty like a cat, but all boy in his satisfaction, his wanton bravery, his passing happiness with vainglory. For a second or two she loved him. Then she thought of the terrible hours ahead, and of how he would go home, rich and scornful, to his all-people planet. The moment of love passed, but she still liked him very much.

"Come along, young fellow. You can eat. You are going to eat cat food since you are C'roderick, but it's not so bad."

He frowned. "What is it? Do you have fish here? I tasted fish one time. A neighbor bought one. He traded two horses for it. It was delicious."

"He wants fish," she cried to E-ikasus.

"Give him a whole tuna for himself," grumbled the monkey. "My blood sugar is still low. I need some pineapple."

C'mell did not argue. She stayed underground and led them into a hall which had a picture of dogs, cats, cattle, pigs, bears, and snakes above the door; that indicated the kinds of people who would be served there. E-ikasus scowled at the sign, but he rode C'mell's shoulder in.

"This gentleman," said C'mell, speaking pleasantly to an old bear-man who was scratching his belly and smoking a pipe, all at the same time, "has forgotten his credits."

"No food," said the bear-man. "Rules. He can drink water, though."

"I'll pay for him," said C'mell.

The bear-man yawned, "Are you sure that he won't pay you back? If he does, that is private trading and it is punished by death."

"I know the rules," said C'mell. "I've never been disciplined yet."

The bear looked over critically. He took his pipe out of his mouth and whistled, "No," said he, "and I can see that you won't be. What are you, anyhow? A model?"

"A girlygirl," said C'mell.

The bear-man leapt from his stool with astonishing speed. "Cat-madame!" he cried, "A thousand pardons. You can have anything in the place. You come from the top of Earthport? You know the Lords of the Instrumentality personally? You would like a table roped off with curtains? Or should I just throw everybody else out of here and report to my Man that we have a famous, beautiful slave from the high places?"

"Nothing that drastic," said C'mell. "Just food."

"Wait a bit," said A'gentar-E-ikasuk, "if you're offering specials, I'll have two fresh pineapples, a quarter-kilo of ground fresh coconut, and a tenth of a kilo of live insect grubs."

The bear-man hesitated. "I was offering things to the cat-lady, who serves the mighty ones, not to you, monkey. But if the lady desires it, I will send for those things." He waited for C'mell's nod, got it, and pushed a button for a low-grade robot to come. He turned to Rod McBan, "And you, cat-gentleman, what would you like?"

Before Rod could speak, C'mell said, "He wants two sailfish steaks, french fried potatoes, Waldorf salad, an order of ice cream and a large glass of orange juice."

The bear-man shuddered visibly. "I've been here for years and that is the most horrible lunch I ever ordered for a cat. I think I'll try it myself."

C'mell smiled the smile which had graced a thousand welcomes. "I'll just help myself from the things you have on the counters. I'm not fussy."

He started to protest, but she cut him short with a graceful but unmistakable wave of the hand. He gave up.

They sat at a table.

A'gentur/E-ikasuk waited for his combination monkey and bird lunch. Rod saw an old robot dressed in a prehistoric tuxedo jacket, ask a question of the bear-man, leave one tray at the door, and bring another tray to him. The robot whipped off a freshly starched napkin. There was the most beautiful lunch which Rod McBan had ever seen. Even at a state banquet, the Old North Australians did not feed their guests like that.

Just as they were finishing, the bear-cashier came to the table and asked, "Your name, Cat-madame? I will charge these lunches to the government."

"C'mell, subject to the Lord Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality."

The bear's face had been epilated, so that they could see him pale.

"C'mell," he whispered. "C'mell! Forgive me, my lady. I have never seen you before. You have blessed this place. You have blessed my life. You are the friend of all underpeople. Go in peace."

C'mell gave him the bow and smile which a reigning empress might give to an active Lord of the Instrumentality. She started to pick up the monkey but he scampered on ahead of her. Rod was puzzled. As the bear-man bowed him out, he asked:

"C'mell. You are famous?"

"In a way," she said. "Only among the underpeople." She hurried them both toward a ramp. They reached daylight at last, but even before they came to the surface, Rod's nose was assaulted by a riot of smells - foods frying, cakes baking, liquor spilling its pungency on the air, perfumes fighting with each other for attention, and, above all, the smell of old things: dusty treasures, old leathers, tapestries, the echo-smells of people who had died a long time ago.

C'mell stopped and watched him, "You're smelling things again? I must say, you have a better nose than any human being I ever met before. How does it smell to you?"

"Wonderful," he gasped. "Wonderful. Like all the treasures and temptations of the universe spilled out into one little place."

"It's just the Thieves' Market of Paris."

"There are thieves on Earth? Open ones, like Viola Siderea?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "They would die in a few days. The Instrumentality would catch them. These are just people, playing. The Rediscovery of Man found some old institutions, and an open market was one of them. They make the robots and underpeople find things for them and then they pretend to be ancient, and make bargains with each other. Or they cook food. Not many real people ever cook food these days. It's so funny that it tastes good to them. They all pick up money on their way in. They have barrels of it at the gate. In the evening, or when they leave, they usually throw the money in the gutter, even though they should really put it back in the barrel. It's not money we underpeople could use. We go by numbers and computer cards," she sighed. "I could certainly use some of that extra money."

"And underpeople like you - like us -" said Rod, "what do we do in the market?"

"Nothing," she whispered. "Absolutely nothing. We can walk through if we are not too big and not too small and not too dirty and not too smelly. And even if we are all right, we must walk right through without looking directly at the real people and without touching anything in the market?"

"Suppose we do?" asked Rod defiantly.

"The robot police are there, with orders to kill on sight when they observe an infraction. Don't you realize, C'rod," she sobbed at him, "that there are millions of us in tanks, way below in Downdeep-downdeep, ready to be born, to be trained, to be sent up here to serve Man? We're not scarce at all, C'rod, we're not scarce at all!"

"Why are we going through the market then?"

"It's the only way to the Catmaster's store. We'll be tagged. Come along."

Where the ramp reached the surface, four bright-eyed robots, the blue enamel bodies shining and their milky eyes glowing, stood at the ready. Their weapons had an ugly buzz to them and were obviously already off the "safety" mark. C'mell talked to them quietly and submissively. When the robot-sergeant led her to a desk, she stared into an instrument like binoculars and blinked when she took her eyes away. She put her palm on a desk. The identification was completed. The robot sergeant handed her three bright disks, like saucers, each with a chain attached. Wordlessly she hung them around her own neck, Rod's neck, and A'gentur's. The



robots let them pass. They walked in demure single file through the place of beautiful sights and smells. Rod felt that his eyes were wet with tears of rage. "I'll buy this place," he thought to himself, "if it's the only thing I'll ever buy."

C'mell had stopped walking.

He looked up, very carefully.

There was the sign: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES.

A door opened. A wise old cat-person's face looked out, stared at them, snapped, "No underpeople!" and slammed the door. C'mell rang the doorbell a second time. The face reappeared, more puzzled than angry.

"Business," she whispered, "of the Aitch Eye."

The face, nodded and said, "In, then. Quick!"

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE DEPARTMENT STORE OF HEARTS' DESIRES

ONCE INSIDE, ROD REALIZED that the store was as rich as the market. There were no other customers. After the outside sounds of music, laughter, frying, boiling, things falling, dishes clattering, people arguing, and the low undertone of the ever-ready robot weapons buzzing, the quietness of the room was itself a luxury, like old, heavy velvet. The smells were no less variegated than those of the outside, but they were different, more complicated, and many more of them were completely unidentifiable.

One smell he was sure of: fear, human fear. It had been in this room not long before.

"Quick," said the old cat-man. "I'm in trouble if you don't get out soon. What is your business?"

"I'm C'mell," said C'mell.

He nodded pleasantly, but showed no sign of recognition. "I forget people," he said.

"This is A'gentur." She indicated the monkey.

The old cat-man did not even look at the animal.

C'mell persisted, a note of triumph coming into her voice: "You may have heard of him under his real name, E-ikasuk." "

The old man stood there, blinking, as though he were, taking it in. "Yeekasoose? With the letter E?"

"Transformed," said C'mell inexorably, "for a trip all the way to Old North Australia and back."

"Is this true?" said the old man to the monkey.

E-ikasuk said calmly, "I am the son of Him, of whom you think."

The old man dropped to his knees, but did so with dignity:

"I salute you, E-ikasuk. When you next think-with your father, give him my greetings and ask from him his blessing. I am C'william, the Catmaster."

"You are famous," said E-ikasuk tranquilly.

"But you are still in danger, merely being here. I have no license for underpeople!"

C'mell produced her trump. "Catmaster, your next guest. This is no c'man. He is a true man, an off-worlder, and he has just bought most of the planet Earth."

C'william looked at Rod with more than ordinary shrewdness. There was a touch of kindness in his attitude. He was tall for a cat-man; few animal features were left to him,

because old age, which reduces racial and sexual contrasts to mere memories, had wrinkled him into a uniform beige. His hair was not white, but beige too; his few cat-whiskers looked old and worn. He was garbed in a fantastic costume which - Rod later learned - consisted of the court robes of one of the Original Emperors, a dynasty which had prevailed more many centuries among the farther stars. Age was upon him, but wisdom was too; the habits of life, in his case, had been cleverness and kindness, themselves unusual in combination. Now very old, he was reaping the harvest of his years. He had done well with the thousands upon thousands of days behind him, with the result that age had brought a curious joy into his manner, as though each experience meant one more treat before the long bleak dark closed in. Rod felt himself attracted to this strange creature, who looked at him with such penetrating and very personal curiosity, and who managed to do so without giving offense.

The Catmaster spoke in very passable Nostrilian: "I know what you are thinking, mister and owner McBan."

"You can hier me?" cried Rod.

"Not your thoughts. Your face. It reads easily. I am sure that I can help you."

"What makes you think I need help?"

"All things need help," said the old c'man briskly, "but we must get rid of our other guests first. Where do you want to go, excellent one? And you, Cat-madame?"

"Home," said E-ikasus. He was tired and cross again. After speaking brusquely, he felt the need to make his tone more civil, "This body suits me badly, catmaster."

"Are you good at falling?" said the Catmaster. "Free fall?"

The monkey grinned. "With this body? Of course. Excellent. I'm tired of it."

"Fine," said the Catmaster, "You can drop down my waste chute. It falls next to the forgotten palace where the great wings beat against time."

The Catmaster stopped to one side of the room. With only a nod at C'Mell and Rod, followed by a brief "See you later," the monkey watched as the Catmaster opened a manhole cover, leaped thrustingly into the complete black depth which appeared, and was gone. The Catmaster replaced the cover carefully.

He turned to C'mell.

She faced him truculently, the defiance of her posture oddly at variance with the innocent voluptuousness of her young female body. "I'm going nowhere."

"You'll die," said the Catmaster. "Can't you hear their weapons buzzing just outside the door? You know what they do to us underpeople. Especially to us cats. They use us, but do they trust us?"

"I know one who does...." she said. "The Lord Jestocost could protect me, even here, just as he protects you, far beyond your limit of years."

"Don't argue it. You will make trouble for him with the other real people. Here, girl, I will give you a tray to carry with a dummy package on it. Go back to the underground and rest in the commissary of the bear-man. I will send Rod to you when we are through."

"Yes," she said hotly, "but will you send him alive or dead?"

The Catmaster rolled his yellow eyes over Rod. "Alive," he said. "This one - alive. I have predicted. Did you ever know me to be wrong? Come on, girl, out the door with you."

C'mell let herself be handed a tray and a package, taken seemingly at random. As she left Rod thought of her with quick desperate affection. She was his closest link with earth. He thought of her excitement and of how she had bared her young breasts to him, but now the memory, instead of exciting him, filled him with tender fondness instead. He blurted out, "C'mell, will you be all right?"

She turned around at the door itself, looking all woman and all cat. Her red wild hair gleamed like a hearth-fire against the open light from the doorway. She stood erect, as though she were a citizen of Earth and not a mere underperson or girlygirl. She held out her right hand clearly and commandingly while balancing the tray on her left hand. When he shook hands with her, Rod realized that her hand felt utterly human, but very strong.

With scarcely a break in her voice she said, "Rod, good-bye. I'm taking a chance with you, but it's the best chance I've ever taken. You can trust the Catmaster, here in the department store of hearts' desires. He does strange things, Rod, but they're good strange things."

He released her hand and she left. C'william closed the door behind her. The room became hushed.

"Sit down for a minute while I get things ready. Or look around the room if you prefer."

"Sir Catmaster -" said Rod.

"No title, please. I am an underperson, made out of cats. You may call me C'william."

"C'william, please tell me first. I miss C'mell. I'm worried about her. Am I falling in love with her? Is that what falling in love means?"

"She's your wife," said the Catmaster. "Just temporarily and just in pretense, but she's still your wife. It's Earthlike to worry about one's mate. She's all right."

The old c'man disappeared behind a door which had an odd sign on it: HATE HALL.

Rod looked around.

The first thing, the very first thing, which he was aware of was a display cabinet full of postage stamps. It was made of glass, but he could see the soft blues and the inimitable warm brick reds of his Cape of Good Hope triangular postage stamps. He had come to earth and there they were! He peered through the glass at them. They were even better than the illustrations which he had sent back on Norstrilia. They had the temper of great age upon them and yet, somehow, they seemed to freight with them the love which men, living men now dead, had given them for thousands and thousands of years. He looked around, and saw that the whole room was full of odd riches. There were ancient toys of all periods, flying toys, copies of machines, things which he suspected were trains. There was a two-story closet of clothing, shimmering with embroidery and gleaming with gold. There was a bin of weapons, clean and tidy-models so ancient that he could not possibly guess what they had been used for, or by whom. Everywhere, there were buckets of coins, usually gold ones. He picked up a handful. They had languages he could not even guess at and they showed the proud imperious faces of the ancient dead. Another cabinet was one which he glanced at and then turned away from, shocked and yet inquisitive: it was filled with indecent souvenirs and pictures from a hundred periods of men's history, images, sketches, photographs, dolls and models, all of them portraying grisly, comical, sweet, friendly, impressive or horrible versions of the many acts of love. The next section made him pause utterly. Who would have ever wanted these things - Whips, knives, hoods, leather corsets? He passed on, very puzzled.

The next section stopped him breathless. It was full of old books, genuine old books. There were a few framed poems, written very ornately. One had a scrap of paper attached to it, reading simply, "my favorite." Rod looked down to see if he could make it out. It was ancient English and the odd name was "E.Z.C. Judson, Ancient American, A.D. 1823-1866." Rod understood the words of the poem, but he did not think that he really got the sense of it. As he read it, he had the impression that a very old man, like the Catmaster, must find in it a poignancy which a younger person would miss:

Drifting on the ebbing tide.  
Slow but sure I onward glide -  
Dim the vista seen before.  
Useless now to look behind -  
Drifting on before the wind  
Toward the unknown shore.  
Counting time by ticking clock,  
Waiting for the final shock -  
Waiting for the dark forever -  
Oh, how slow the moments go!  
None but I, meseems, can know  
How close the tideless river!

Red shook his head as if to get away from the cobwebs of an irrecoverable tragedy. "Maybe," he thought to himself, "that's the way people felt about death when they did not die on schedule, the way most worlds have it, or if they do not meet death a few times ahead of time, the way we do in Norstrilia. They must have felt pretty sticky and uncertain." Another thought crossed his mind and he gasped at the utter cruelty of it. "They did not even have Unselfing Grounds that far back! Not that we need them any more, but imagine just sliding into death, helpless, useless, hopeless. Thank the Queen we don't do that!"

He thought of the Queen, who may have been dead for more than ten thousand years, or who might be lost in space, the way many Old North Australians believed, and sure enough! there was her picture, with the words "Queen Elizabeth II." It was just a bust, but she was a pretty and intelligent-looking woman, with something of a Norstrilian look to her. She looked smart enough to know what to do if one of her sheep caught fire or if her own child came, blank and giggling, out of the traveling vans of the Garden of Death, as he himself would have done had he not passed the survival test.

Next there were two glass frames, neatly wiped free of dust. They had matched poems by someone who was listed as "Anthony Bearden, Ancient American A.D. 1913-1949." The first one seemed very appropriate to this particular place, because it was all about the ancient desires which people had in those days. It read:

TELL ME, LOVE!  
Time is burning and the world on fire.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Tell me what your heart has hidden.

Is it open or - forbidden?  
If forbidden, think of days  
Racing past in a roaring haze,  
Shocked and shaken by the blast of fire....  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire.  
Dainty foods and soft attire?  
Ancient books? Fantastic chess?  
Wine-lit nights? Love - more, or less?  
Now is the only now of our age.  
Tomorrow tomorrow will hold the stage.  
Tell me, love, what you most desire!  
Time is burning and the world on fire.

The other one might almost have been written about his arrival on Earth, his not knowing what could happen or what should happen to him now.

#### NIGHT, AND THE SKY UNFAMILIAR

The stars of experience have led me astray.  
A pattern of purpose was lost on my way.  
Where was I going? How can I say?  
The stars of experience have led me astray.  
There was a slight sound.  
Rod turned around to face the Catmaster.

The old man was unchanged. He still wore the lunatic robes of grandeur, but his dignity survived even this outré effect.

"You like my poems? You like my things? I like them myself. Many men come in here, to take things from me, but they find that title is vested in the Lord Jestocost, and they must do strange things to obtain my trifles."

"Are all these things genuine?" asked Rod, thinking that even Old North Australia could not buy out this shop if they were.

"Certainly not," said the old man. "Most of them are forgeries - wonderful forgeries. The Instrumentality lets me go to the robot-pits where insane or worn-out robots are destroyed. I can have my pick of them if they are not dangerous. I put them to work making copies of anything which I find in the museums."

"Those Cape triangles?" said Rod. "Are they real?"

"Cape triangles? You mean the letter stickers. They are genuine, all right, but they are not mine. Those are on loan from the Earth Museum until I can get them copied."

"I will buy them," said Rod.

"You will not," said the Catmaster. "They are not for sale."

"Then I will buy Earth and you and them too," said Rod.

"Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to-the-one-hundred-and- fifty-first, you will not."

"Who are you to tell me?"

"I have looked at one person and I have talked to two others."

"All right," said Rod. "Who?"

"I looked at the other Rod McBan, your workwoman Eleanor. She is a little mixed up about having a young man's body, because she is very drunk in the home of the Lord William Not- from-here and a beautiful young woman named Ruth Not-from-here is trying to make Eleanor marry her. She has no idea that she is dealing with another woman and Eleanor, in her copy of your proper body, is finding the experience exciting, but terribly confusing. No harm will come of it, and your Eleanor is perfectly safe. Half the rascals of Earth have converged on the Lord William's house, but he has a whole battalion from the Defense Fleet on loan around the place, so nothing is going to happen, except that Eleanor will have a headache and Ruth will have a disappointment."

Rod smiled, "You couldn't have told me anything better. Who else did you talk to?"

"The Lord Jestocost and John Fisher to-the-hundredth."

"Mister and owner Fisher? He's here?"

"He's at his home. Station of the Good Fresh Joey. I asked him if you could have your heart's desire. After a little while, he and somebody named doctor Wentworth said that the Commonwealth of Old North Australia would approve it."

"How did you ever pay for such a call?" cried Rod. "Those things are frightfully expensive."

"I didn't pay for it, mister and owner. You did. I charged it to your account, by the authority of your trustee, the Lord Jestocost. He and his forefathers have been my patrons for four hundred and twenty-six years."

"You've got your nerve," said Rod, "spending my money when I was right here and not even asking me!"

"You are an adult for some purposes and a minor for other purposes. I am offering you the skills which keep me alive. Do you think any ordinary cat-man would be allowed to live as long as this?"

"No," said Rod. "Give me those stamps and let me go."

The Catmaster looked at him levelly. Once again there was the personal look on his face, which in Norstrilia would have been taken as an unpardonable affront; but along with the nosiness, there was an air of confidence and kindness which put Rod a little in awe of the man, underperson though he was. "Do you think that you could love these stamps when you get back home? Could they talk to you? Could they make you like yourself? Those pieces of paper are not your heart's desire. Something else is."

"What?" said Rod, truculently.

"In a bit, I'll explain. First, you cannot kill me. Second, you cannot hurt me. Third, if I kill you, it will be all for your own good. Fourth, if you get out of here, you will be a very happy man."

"Are you barmy, mister?", cried Rod. "I can knock you flat and walk out that door. I don't know what you are talking about."

"Try it," said the Catmaster levelly.

Rod looked at the tall withered old man with the bright eyes. He looked at the door, a mere seven or eight meters away. He did not want to try it.

"All right," he conceded, "play your pitch."

"I am a clinical psychologist. The only one on Earth and probably the only one on any planet. I got my knowledge from some ancient books when I was a kitten, being changed into a young man. I change people just a little, little bit. You know that the Instrumentality has surgeons and brain experts and all sorts of doctors. They can do almost anything with personality - anything but the light stuff.... That, I do."

"I don't get it," said Rod.

"Would you go to a brain surgeon to get a haircut? Would you need a dermatologist to give you a bath? Of course not. I don't do heavy work. I just change people a little bit. It makes them happy. If I can't do anything with them, I give souvenirs from this junkpile out here. The real work is in there. That's where you're going, pretty soon." He nodded his head at the door marked, HATE HALL.

Rod cried out, "I've been taking orders from one stranger after another, all these long weeks since my computers and I made that money! Can't I ever do anything myself?"

The Catmaster looked at him with sympathy. "None of us can. We may think that we are free. Our lives are made for us by the people we happen to know, the places we happen to be, the jobs or hobbies which we happen to run across. Will I be dead a year from now? I don't know. Will you be back in Old North Australia a year from now, still only seventeen, but rich and wise and on your way to happiness? I don't know. You've had a ran of good luck. Look at it that way. It's luck. And I'm part of the luck. If you get killed here, it will not be my doing but just the overstrain of your body against the devices which the Lady Goroke approved a long time ago - devices which the Lord Jestocost reports to the underman in the universe who is entitled to process real people in any way whatever without having direct human supervision. All I do is to develop people, like an Ancient Man developing a photograph from a piece of paper exposed to different grades of light. I'm not a hidden judge, like your men in the Garden of Death. It's going to be you against you, with me just helping, and when you come out you're going to be a different you - the same you, but a little better there, a little more flexible here. As a matter of fact, that cat-type body you're wearing is going to make your contest with yourself a little harder for me to manage. We'll do it, Rod. Are you ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"For the tests and changes there." The Catmaster nodded at the door marked HATE HALL.

"I suppose so," said Rod. "I don't have much choice."

"No," said the Catinaster, sympathetically and almost sadly, "not at this point, you don't. If you walk out that door, you're an illegal cat-man, in immediate danger of being buzzed down by the robot police."



"Please," said Rod, "win or fail, can I have one of these Cape triangles?"

The Catmaster smiled. "I promise you - if you want one, you shall have it." He waved at the door: "Go on in."

Rod was not a coward, but it was with feet and legs of lead that he walked to the door. It opened by itself. He walked in, steady but afraid.

The room was dark with a darkness deeper than mere black. It was the dark of blindness, the expanse of cheek where no eye has ever been.

The door closed behind him and he swam in the dark, so tangible had the darkness become.

He felt blind. He felt as though he had never seen.

But he could hear.

He heard his own blood pulsing through his head.

He could smell - indeed, he was good at smelling. And this air - this air - this air smelled of the open night on the dry plains of Old North Australia.

The smell made him feel little and afraid. It reminded him of his repeated childhoods, of the artificial drownings in the laboratories where he had gone to be reborn from one childhood to another.

He reached out his hands.

Nothing.

He jumped gently. No ceiling.

Using a fieldsman's trick familiar for times of dust storms, he dropped lightly to his hands and feet. He scuttled crabwise on two feet and one hand, using the other hand as a shield to protect his face. In a very few meters he found the wall. He followed the wall around.

Circular.

This was the door.

Follow again.

With more confidence, he moved fast - around, around, around. He could not tell whether the floor was asphalt or some kind of rough worn tile.

Door again.

A voice spieked to him.

Spieked! And he heard it.

He looked upward into the nothing which was bleaker than blindness, almost expecting to see the words in letters of fire, so clear had they been.

The voice was Nostrilian and it said.

Rod McBan is a man, man, man.

But what is man?

(Immediate percussion of crazy, sad laughter.)

Rod never noticed that he reverted to the habits of babyhood. He sat flat on his rump, legs spread out in front of him at a 90' angle. He put his hands a little behind him and leaned back, letting the weight of his body push his shoulders a little bit upward. He knew the ideas that would follow the words, but he never knew why he so readily expected them.

Light formed in the room, as he had been sure it would.

The images were little, but they looked real.

Men and women and children, children and women and men marched into his vision and out again.

They were not freaks; they were not beasts; they were not alien monstrosities begotten in some outside universe; they were not robots; they were not underpeople - they were all hominoids like himself, kinsmen in the Earthborn races of men.

First came people like Old North Australians and Earth people, very much alike, and both similar to the ancient types, except that Norstrilians were pale beneath their tanned skins, bigger, and more robust.

Then came Daimoni, white-eyed pale giants with a magical assurance, whose very babies walked as though they had already been given ballet lessons.

Then heavy men, fathers, mothers, infants swimming on the solid ground from which they would never arise.

Then rainmen from Amazonas Triste, their skins hanging in enormous folds around them, so that they looked like bundles of wet rags wrapped around monkeys.

Blind men from Olympia, staring fiercely at the world through the radars mounted on their foreheads.

Bloated monster-men from abandoned planets - people as bad off as his own race had been after escaping from Paradise VII.

And still more races.

People he had never heard of.

Men with shells.

Men and women so thin that they looked like insects.

A race of smiling, foolish giants, lost in the irreparable hebephrenia of their world. (Rod had the feeling that they were shepherded by a race of devoted dogs, more intelligent than themselves, who cajoled them into breeding, begged them to eat, led them to sleep. He saw no dogs, only the smiling unfocused fools, but the feeling dog, good dog! was somehow very near.)

A funny little people who pranced with an indefinable deformity of gait.

Water-people, the clean water of some unidentified world pulsing through their gills.

And then -

More people, still, but hostile ones. Lipsticked hermaphrodites with enormous beards and fluting voices. Carcinomas which had taken over men. Giants rooted in the earth. Human bodies crawling and weeping as they crawled through wet grass - contaminated somehow and looking for more people to infect.

Rod did not know it, but he growled.

He jumped into a squatting position and swept his hands across the rough floor, looking for a weapon.

These were not men - they were enemies!

Still they came. People who had lost eyes, or who had grown fire-resistant, the wrecks and residues of abandoned settlements and forgotten colonies. The waste and spoilage of the human race.

And then -

Him.

Himself.

The child Rod McBan.

And voices, Norstrilian voices calling: "He can't hier. He can't spiek. He's a freak. He's a freak. He can't hier. He can't spiek."

And another voice: "His poor parents!"

The child Rod disappeared and there were his parents again. Twelve times taller than life, so high that he had to peer up into the black absorptive ceiling to see the underside of their faces.

The mother wept.

The father sounded stern.

The father was saying, "It's no use. Doris can watch him while we're gone, but if he isn't any better we'll turn him in."

The calm, loving, horrible voice of the man, "Darling, spiek to him yourself. He'll never hier. Can that be a Rod McBan?"

Then the woman's voice, sweet-poisonous and worse than death, sobbing agreement with her man against her son.

"I don't know, Rod. I don't know. Just don't tell me about it."

He had hiered them, in one of his moments of wild penetrating hiering when everything telepathic came in with startling clarity. He had hiered them when he was a baby.

The real Rod in the dark room, let out a roar of fear, desolation, loneliness, rage, hate. This was the telepathic bomb with which he had so often startled or alarmed the neighbors, the mind-shock with which he had killed the giant spider in the tower of Earthport far above him.

But this time, the room was closed.

His mind roared back at itself.

Rage, loudness, hate, raw noise poured into him from the floor, the circular wall, the high ceiling.

He cringed beneath it and as he cringed, the sizes of the images changed. His parents sat in chairs, chairs. They were little, little. He was an almighty baby, so enormous that he could scoop them up with his right hand.

He reached to crush the tiny loathsome parents who had said, "Let him die."

He reached to crush them, but they faded first.

Their faces turned frightened. They looked wildly around. Their chairs dissolved, the fabric falling to the floor which in turn looked like storm-eroded cloth. They turned for a last kiss and had no lips. They reached to hug each other and their arms fell off. Their space-ship had gone milky in mid-trip, dissolving into traceless nothing. And he, he, he himself had seen it!

The rage was followed by tears, by a guilt too deep for regret, by a self-accusation so raw and wet that it lived like one more organ inside his living body.

He wanted nothing.

No money, no stroon, no Station of Doom. He wanted no friends, no companionship, no welcome, no house, no food. He wanted no walks, no solitary discoveries in the field, no friendly sheep, no treasures in the gap, no computer, no day, no night, no life.

He wanted nothing, and he could not understand death.

The enormous room lost all light, all sound, and he did not notice it. His own naked life lay before him like a freshly dissected cadaver. It lay there and it made no sense. There had been many Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBans, one hundred and fifty of them in a row, but he - 151! 151! 151! - was not one of them, not a giant who had wrestled treasure from the sick earth and hidden sunshine of the Norstrilian plains. It wasn't his telepathic deformity, his spieklessness, his brain deafness to hiering. It was himself, the "Me- subtile" inside him, which was wrong, all wrong. He was the baby worth killing, who had killed instead. He had hated mama and papa for their pride and their hate: when he hated them, they crumpled and died out in the mystery of space, so that they did not even leave bodies to bury.

Rod stood to his feet. His hands were wet. He touched his face and he realized that he had been weeping with his face cupped in his hands.

Wait.

There was something.

There was one thing he wanted. He wanted Houghton Syme - the Onseck, the man who had tried to get him condemned to the Garden of Death, who had tried to kill him outright, who had, in a way, driven him to riches and to Old Earth - not to hate him. Houghton Syme could hier and spiek, but he was a shortie, living with the sickness of death lying between himself and every girl, every friend, every job he had met. And he, Rod, had mocked that man, calling him Old Hot and Simple. Rod might be worthless but he was not as bad off as Houghton Syme, the Hon. Sec. Houghton Syme was at least trying to be a man, to live his miserable scrap of life, and all Rod had ever done was to flaunt his wealth and near-immortality before the poor cripple who had just one hundred and sixty years to live. Rod wanted only one thing - to get back to North Australia in time to help Houghton Syme, to let Houghton Syme know that the guilt was his, Rod's, and not Syme's. The Onseck had a bit of a life and he deserved the best of it.

Rod stood there, expecting nothing.

He had forgiven his last enemy.

He had forgiven himself.

The door opened very matter-of-factly and there stood the Catmaster, a quiet wise smile upon his face.

"You can come out now, Mister and Owner McBan, and if there is anything in this outer room which you want, you may certainly have it."

Rod walked out slowly. He had no idea how long he had been in HATE HALL.

When he emerged, the door closed behind him.

"No, thanks, cobber. It's mighty friendly of you, but I don't need anything much, and I'd better be getting back to my own planet."

"Nothing?" said the Catmaster, still smiling very attentively and very quietly.

"I'd like to hier and spiek, but it's not very important."

"This is for you," said the Catmaster. "You put it in your ear and leave it there. If it itches or gets dirty, you take it out, wash it, and put it back in. It's not a rare device, but apparently you don't have them on your planet." He held out an object no larger than the kernel of a ground- nut.

Rod took it absently and was ready to put it into his pocket, not into his ear, when he saw that the smiling attentive face was watching, very gently but very alertly. He put the device into his ear. It felt a little cold.

"I will now," said the Catmaster, "take you to C'mell, who will lead you to your friends in Downdeep-downdeep. You had better take this blue two-penny Cape of Good Hope postage stamp with you. I will report to Jestocost that it was lost while I attempted to copy it. That is slightly true, isn't it?"

Rod started to thank him absent-mindedly and then -

Then, with a thrill which sent gooseflesh all over his neck, back and arms, he realized that the Catmaster had not moved his lips in the slightest, had not pushed air through his throat, had not disturbed the air with the pressure of noise. The Catmaster had spieked to Rod and Rod had hiered him.

Thinking very carefully and very clearly, but closing his lips and making no sound whatever, Rod thought, Worthy and gracious Catmaster, I thank you for the ancient treasure of the old Earth stamp. I thank you even more for the hiering-spieking device which I am now testing. Will you please extend your right hand to shake hands with me, if you can actually hier me now?

The Catmaster stepped forward and extended his hand.

Man and underman, they faced each other with a kindness and gratitude which was so poignant as to be very close to grief.

Neither of them wept. Neither.

They shook hands without speaking or spiekings.

## CHAPTER FIVE: EVERYBODY'S FOND OF MONEY

WHILE ROD MCBAN WAS going through his private ordeal at the Department Store of Hearts' Desires, other people continued to be concerned with him and his fate.

### A Crime of Public Opinion

A middle-aged woman, with a dress which did not suit her, sat uninvited at the table of Paul, a real man once acquainted with C'mell.

Paul paid no attention to her. Eccentricities were multiplying among people these days. Being middle-aged was a matter of taste, and many human beings, after the Rediscovery of Man, found that if they let themselves become imperfect, it was a more comfortable way to live than the old way - the old way consisting of aging minds dwelling in bodies condemned to the perpetual perfection of youth.

"I had flu," said the woman. "Have you ever had flu?"

"No," said Paul, not very much interested.

"Are you reading a newspaper?" She looked at his newspaper, which had everything except news in it.

Paul, with the paper in front of him, admitted that he was reading it.

"Do you like coffee?" said the woman, looking at Paul's cup of fresh coffee in front of him.

"Why would I order it if I didn't?" said Paul brusquely, wondering how the woman had ever managed to find so unattractive a material for her dress. It was yellow sun-flowers on an off- red background.

The woman was baffled, but only for a moment.

"I'm wearing a girdle," she said. "They just came on sale last week. They're very, very ancient, and very authentic. Now that people can be fat if they want to, girdles are the rage. They have spats for men, too, have you bought your spats yet?"

"No," said Paul, flatly, wondering if he should leave his coffee and newspaper.

"What are you going to do about that man?"

"What man?" said Paul, politely and wearily.

"The man who's bought the Earth."

"Did he?" said Paul.

"Of course," said the woman. "Now he has more power than the Instrumentality. He could do anything he wants. He can give us anything we want. If he wanted to, he could give me a thousand-year trip around the universe."

"Are you an official?" said Paul sharply.

"No," said the woman, taken a little aback.

"Then how do you know these things?"

"Everybody knows them. Everybody." She spoke firmly and pursed her mouth at the end of the sentence.

"What are you going to do about this man? Rob him? Seduce him?" Paul was sardonic. He had an unhappy love affair which he still remembered, a climb to the Abba-dingo over Alpha Ralpa Boulevard which he would never repeat, and very little patience with fools who had never dared and never suffered anything.

The woman flushed with anger. "We're all going to his hostel at twelve today. We're going to shout and shout until he comes out. Then we're going to form a line and make him listen to what each one of us wants."

Paul spoke sharply: "Who organized this?"

"I don't know. Somebody."

Paul spoke solemnly. "You're a human being. You have been trained. What is the Twelfth Rule?"

The woman turned a little pale but she chanted, as if by rote: "Any man or woman who finds that he or she forms and shares an unauthorized opinion with a large number of other people shall report immediately for therapy to the nearest subchief.' But that doesn't mean me?..."

"You'll be dead or scrubbed by tonight, madam. Now go away and let me read my paper."

The woman glared at him, between anger and tears. Gradually fear came over her features. "Do you really think what I was saying is unlawful?"

"Completely," said Paul.

She put her pudgy hands over her face and sobbed. "Sir, sir, can you - can you please help me find a subchief? I'm afraid I do need help. But I've dreamed so much, I've hoped so much - a man from the stars. But you're right, sir. I don't want to die or get blanked out. Sir, please help me!"

Moved by both impatience and compassion, Paul left his paper and his coffee. The robot waiter hurried up to remind him that he had not paid. Paul walked over to the sidewalk where there were two barrels full of money for people who wished to play the games of ancient civilization. He selected the biggest bill he could see, gave it to the waiter, waited for his change, gave the waiter a tip, received thanks, and threw the change, which was all coins, into the barrel full of metal money. The woman had waited for him patiently, her blotched face sad.

When he offered her his arm, in the old-French manner, she took it. They walked a hundred meters, more or less, to a public visiphone. She half-cried, half-mumbled as she walked along beside him, with her uncomfortable, ancient spiked-heel feminine shoes:

"I used to have four hundred years. I used to be slim and beautiful. I liked to make love and I didn't think very much about things, because I wasn't very bright. I had had a lot of husbands. Then this change came along, and I felt useless, and I decided to be what I felt like - fat, and

sloppy and middle-aged and bored. And I have succeeded too much, just the way two of my husbands said. And that man from the stars, he has all power. He can change things."

Paul did not answer her, except to nod sympathetically.

He stood at the visiphone until a robot appeared. "A subchief," he said. "Any subchief."

The image blurred and the face of a very young man appeared. He stared earnestly and intently while Paul recited his number, grade, neonational assignment, quarters number and business. He had to state the business twice, "Criminal public opinion."

The subchief snapped, not unpleasantly, "Come on in, then, and we'll fix you up."

Paul was so annoyed at the idea that he would be suspected of criminal public opinion, "any opinion shared with a large number of other people, other than material released and approved by the Instrumentality and the Earth government," that he began to spiek his protest into the machine.

"Vocalize, man and citizen! These machines don't carry telepathy."

When Paul got through explaining, the youngster in uniform looked at him critically but pleasantly, saying, "Citizen, you've forgotten something yourself."

"He?" gasped Paul. "I've done nothing. This woman just sat down beside me and -"

"Citizen," said the subchief, "what is the last half of the Fifth Rule for All Men?"

Paul thought a moment and then answered, "The services of every person shall be available, without delay and without charge, to any other true human being who encounters danger or distress." Then his own eyes widened and he said, "You want me to do this myself?"

"What do you think?" said the subchief.

"I can," said Paul.

"Of course," said the subchief. "You are normal. You remember the braingrips."

Paul nodded.

The subchief waved at him and the image faded from the screen.

The woman had seen it all. She, too, was prepared. When Paul lifted his hands for the traditional hypnotic gestures, she locked her eyes upon his hands. She made the responses as they were needed. When he had brainscrubbed her right there in the open street, she shambled off down the walkway, not knowing why tears poured down her cheeks. She did not remember Paul at all.

For a moment of crazy whimsy, Paul thought of going across the city and having a look at the wonderful man from the stars. He stared around absently, thinking. His eye caught the high thread of Alpha Ralpa Boulevard, soaring unsupported across the heavens from faraway ground to the mid-height of Earthport: he remembered himself and his own personal troubles. He went back to his newspaper and a fresh cup of coffee, helping himself to money from the barrel, this time, before he entered the restaurant.

On a yacht off Meeva Meefia

Ruth yawned as she sat up and looked at the ocean. She had done her best with the rich young man.



The false Rod McBan, actually a reconstructed Eleanor, said to her, "This is right nice."

Ruth smiled languidly and seductively. She did not know why Eleanor laughed out loud.

The Lord William Not-from-here came up from below the deck. He carried two silver mugs in his hands. They were frosted.

"I am glad," said he unctuously, "that you young people are happy. These are mint juleps, a very ancient drink indeed."

He watched as Eleanor sipped hers and then smiled.

He smiled too. "You like it?"

Eleanor smiled right back at him. "Beats washing dishes, it does?" said "Rod McBan" enigmatically.

The Lord William began to think that the rich young man was odd indeed.

Antechamber of the Bell and Bank

The Lord Crudelta commanded, "Send Jestocost here!"

The Lord Jestocost was already entering the room.

"What's happened on that case of the young man?"

"Nothing, Sir and Senior."

"Tush. Bosh. Nonsense. Rot." The old man snorted. "Nothing is something that doesn't happen at all. He has to be somewhere."

"The original is with the Catmaster, at the Department Store."

"Is that safe?" said the Lord Crudelta. "He might get to be too smart for us to manage. You're working some scheme again, Jestocost."

"Nothing but what I told you, Sir and Senior."

The old man frowned. "That's right. You did tell me. Proceed. But the others?"

"Who?"

"The decoys?"

The Lord Jestocost laughed aloud. "Our colleague, the Lord William, has almost betrothed his daughter to Mister McBan's workman, who is temporarily a 'Rod McBan' herself. All parties are having fun with no harm done. The robots, the eight survivors, are going around Earthport city. They are enjoying themselves as much as robots ever do. Crowds are gathering and asking for miracles. Pretty harmless."

"And the Earth economy? Is it getting out of balance?"

"I've set the computers to work," said the Lord Jestocost, "finding every tax penalty that we ever imposed on anybody. We're several megacredits ahead."

"You're not going to ruin him?" said Crudelta.

"Not at all, Sir and Senior," cried the Lord Jestocost. "I am a kind man."

The old man gave him a low dirty smile. "I've seen your kindness before, Jestocost, and I would rather have a thousand worlds for an enemy than have you be my friend! You're devious, you're dangerous, and you are tricky."

Jestocost, much flattered by this comment, said formally, "You do an honest official a great injustice, sir and senior."

The two men just smiled at each other: they knew each other well.

Ten kilometers below the surface of the Earth

The E-telekeli stood from the lectern at which he had been praying.

Its daughter was watching him immovably from the doorway.

He spieked to her, What's wrong, my girl?

I saw his mind, father, I saw it for just a moment as he left the Catmaster's place. He's a rich young man from the stars, he's a nice young man, he has bought Earth, but he is not the man of the Promise.

You expected too much, E-lamelanie, said her father.

I expected hope, she spieked to him. Is hope a crime among us underpeople? What Joan foresaw, what the Copt promised - where are they, father? Shall we never see daylight or know freedom?

True men are not free either, spieked the E-telekeli. They too have grief, fear, birth, old age, love, death, suffering and the tools of their own ruin. Freedom is not something which is going to be given us by a wonderful man beyond the stars. Freedom is what you do, my dear, and what I do. Death is a very private affair, my daughter, and life - when you get to it - is almost as private.

I know father, she spieked. I know. I know. I know. (But he didn't.)

You may not know it, my darling, spieked the great bird-man, but long before these new people built cities, there were others in the Earth - the ones who came after the Ancient World fell. They went far beyond the limitations of the human form. They conquered death. They did not have sickness. They did not need love. They sought to be abstractions lying outside of time. And they died, E-lamelanie - they died terribly. Some became monsters, preying on the remnants of true men for reasons which ordinary men could not even begin to understand. Others were like oysters, wrapped up in their own sainthood. They had all forgotten that humanness is itself imperfection and corruption, that what is perfect is no longer understandable. We have the Fragments of the Word, and we are truer to the deep traditions of people than people themselves are, but we must never be foolish enough to look for perfection in this life or to count on our own powers to make us really different from what we are. You and I are animals, darling, not even real people, but people do not understand the teaching of Joan, that whatever seems human is human. It is the word which quickens, not the shape of the blood or the texture of flesh or hair or feathers. And there is that power which you and I do not name, but which we love and cherish because we need it more than do the people on the surface. Great beliefs always come out of the sewers of cities, not off the rooftops or the ziggurats. Furthermore, we are discarded animals, not used ones. All of us down here are the rubbish which mankind has thrown away and has forgotten. We have a great advantage in this, because we know from the very beginning of our lives that we are worthless. And why are we

worthless? Because a higher standard and a higher truth says that we are - the conventional law and the unwritten customs of mankind. But I feel love for you, my daughter, and you have love for me. We know that everything which loves has a value in itself, and that therefore this worthlessness of underpeople is wrong. We are forced to look beyond the minute and the hour to the place where no clocks work and no day dawns. There is a world outside of time, and it is to that which we appeal. I know that you have a love for the devotional life, my child, and I commend you for it, but it would be a sorry faith which waited for passing travelers or which believed that a miracle or two could set the nature of things right and whole. The people on the surface think they have gone beyond the old problems, because they do not have buildings which they call churches or temples, and they do not have professional religious men within their communities. But the higher power and the large problems still wait for all men, whether men like it or not. Today, the Believers among mankind are a ridiculous hobby, tolerated by the Instrumentality because they are unimportant and weak, but mankind has moments of enormous passion which will come again and in which we will share. So don't you wait for your hero beyond the stars. If you have a good devotional life within you, it is already here, waiting to be watered by your tears and ploughed up by your hard, clear thoughts. And if you don't have a devotional life, there are good lives outside.

Look at your brother, E-ikasus, who is now resuming his normal shape. He let me put him in animal form and send him out among the stars. He took risks without committing the impudence of enjoying risk. It is not necessary to do your duty joyfully - just to do it. Now he has homed to the old lair and I know he brings us good luck in many little things, perhaps in big things. Do you understand, my daughter?

She said that she did, but there was still a wild blank disappointed look in her eyes as she said it.

A Police-post on the surface, near Earthport

"The robot sergeant says he can do no more without violating the rule against hurting human beings." The subchief looked at his chief, licking his chops for a chance to get out of the office and to wander among the vexations of the city. He was tired of viewscreens, computers, buttons, cards, and routines. He wanted raw life and high adventure.

"Which off-worlder is this?"

"Tostig Amaral, from the planet of Amazonas Triste. He has to stay wet all the time. He is just a licensed trader, not an honored guest of the Instrumentality. He was assigned a girlygirl and now he thinks she belongs to him."

"Send the girlygirl to him. What is she, mouse-derived?"

"No, a c'girl. Her name is C'mell and she has been requisitioned by the Lord Jestocost."

"I know all about that," said the chief, wishing that he really did. "She's now assigned to that Old North Australian who has bought most of this planet, Earth."

"But this hominoid wants her, just the same!" The subchief was urgent.

"He can't have her, not if a Lord of the Instrumentality interrupts his services."

"He is threatening to fight. He says he will kill people."

"Hmm. Is he in a room?"

"Yes, sir and chief."

"With standard outlets?"

"I'll look, sir." The subchief twisted a knob and an electronic design appeared on the left-hand screen in front of him. "Yes, sir, that's it."

"Let's have a look at him."

"He got permission, sir, to run the fire sprinkler system all the time. It seems he comes from a rainworld."

"Try, anyhow."

"Yes, sir." The subchief whistled a call to the board. The picture dissolved, whirled and resolved itself into the image of a dark room. There seemed to be a bundle of wet rags in one corner, out of which a well-shaped human hand protruded.

"Nasty type," said the chief, "and probably poisonous. Knock him out for exactly one hour. We'll be getting orders meanwhile."

On an Earth-level street under Earthport

Two girls talking:

"... and I will tell you the biggest secret in the whole world, if you will never, never tell anyone."

"I'll bet it's not much of a secret. You don't have to tell me."

"I'll never tell you, then. Never."

"Suit yourself."

"Really, if you even suspected it, you would be mad with curiosity."

"If you want to tell me, you can tell me."

"But it's a secret."

"All right, I'll never tell anybody."

"That man from the stars. He's going to marry me."

"You? That's ridiculous."

"Why is it so ridiculous? He's bought my dower right already."

"I know it's ridiculous. There's something wrong."

"I don't see why you should think he doesn't like me if he has already bought my dower rights."

"Fool! I know it's ridiculous, because he has bought mine."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"Both of us?"

"What for?"

"Search me."

"Maybe he is going to put us both in the same harem. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"They don't have harems in Old North Australia. All they do is live like prudish old farmers and raise stroon and murder anybody at all that even gets near them."

"That sounds bad."

"Let's go to the police."

"You know, he's hurt our feelings. Maybe we can make him pay extra for buying our dower rights if he doesn't mean to use them."

In front of a café

A man, drunk:

"I will get drunk every night and I will have musicians to play me to sleep and I will have all the money I need and it won't be that play money out of a barrel, but it will be real money registered in the computer and I will make everybody do what I say and I know he will do it for me because my mother was named MacArthur in her genetic code before everybody got numbers and you have no call to laugh at me because his name really is MacArthur McBan the eleventh and I am probably the closest friend and relative he has on earth...."

## CHAPTER SIX: TOSTIG AMARAL

ROD MCBAN LEFT THE Department Store of Hearts' Desires simply, humbly; he carried a package of books, wrapped in dustproofing paper, and he looked like any other first-class cat-man messenger. The human beings in the market were still making their uproar, their smells of foods, spices, and odd objects, but he walked so calmly and so straightforwardly through their scattered groups that even the robot police, weapons on the buzz, paid no attention to him.

When he had come across the Thieves' Market, going the other way with C'mell and A'gentur, he had been ill-at-ease. As a Mister-and-Owner from Old North Australia, he had been compelled to keep his external dignity, but he had not felt ease within his heart. These people were strange, his destination had been unfamiliar, and the problems and wealth and survival lay heavy upon him.

Now, it was all different. Cat-man he might still be on the outside, but on the inside he once again felt his proper pride of home and planet.

And more.

He felt calm, down to the very tips of his nerve endings.

The hiering-spieking device should have alerted him, excited him: it did not. As he walked through the market, he noticed that very few of the Earth people were communicating with one another telepathically. They preferred to babble in their loud airborne language, of which they had not one but many kinds, with the Old Common Tongue serving as a referent for those who had been endued with different kinds of ancient language by the processes of the Rediscovery of Man. He even heard Ancient English, the Queen's Own Language, sounding remarkably close to his own spoken language of Norstrilian. These things caused neither stimulation nor excitement, not even pity. He had his own problems, but they were no longer the problems of wealth or of survival. Somehow he had confidence that a hidden, friendly power in the universe would take care of him, if he took care of others. He wanted to get Eleanor out of trouble, to disembarass the Hon.Sec., to see Lavinia, to reassure Doris, to say a good good-bye to C'mell, to get back to his sheep, to protect his computer, and to keep the Lord Redlady away from his bad habit of killing other people lawfully on too slight an occasion for manslaughter.

One of the robot police, a little more perceptive than the others, watched this cat-man who walked with extra-natural assurance through the crowds of men, but "C'roderick" did nothing but enter the market from one side, thread his way through it, and leave at the other side, still carrying his package; the robot turned away: his dreadful, milky eyes, always ready for disorder and death, scanned the market-place again and again with fatigue-free vigilance.

Rod went down the ramp and turned right.

There was the underpeople's commissary with the bear-man cashier. The cashier remembered him.

"It's been a long day, cat-sir, since I saw you. Would you like another special order of fish?"

"Where's my girl?" said Rod bluntly.

"C'mell?" said the bear-cashier. "She waited here a long time, but then she went on and she left this message, 'Tell my man C'rod that he should eat before following me, but that when he has eaten he can either follow me by going to Upshaft Four, Ground Level, Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine, where I am taking care of an off-world visitor, or he can send a robot to me and I will come to him.' Don't you think, cat-sir, that I've done well, remembering so complicated a message?" The bear-man flushed a little and the edge went off his pride as he confessed, for the sake of some abstract honesty, "Of course, that address part, I wrote that down. It would be very bad and very confusing if I sent you to the wrong address in people's country. Somebody might burn you down if you came into an unauthorized corridor."

"Fish, then," said Rod. "A fish dinner, please."

He wondered why C'mell, with his life in the balance, would go off to another visitor. Even as he thought this, he detected the mean jealousy behind it, and he confessed to himself that he had no idea of the terms, conditions, or hours or work required in the girlygirl business.

He sat dully on the bench, waiting for his food.

The uproar Of HATE HALL was still in his mind, the pathos of his parents, those dying dissolving manikins, was brought within his heart, and his body throbbed with the fatigue of the ordeal.

Idly he asked the bear-cashier, "How long has it been since I was here?"

The bear-cashier looked at the clock on the wall, "About fourteen hours, worthy cat."

"How long is that in real time?" Rod was trying to compare Norstrilian hours with Earth hours. He thought that Earth hours were one-seventh shorter, but he was not sure.

The bear-man was completely baffled, "If you mean galactic navigation time, dear guest, we never use that down here anyhow. Are there any other kinds of time?"

Rod realized his mistake and tried to correct it. "It doesn't matter. I am thirsty. What is lawful for underpeople to drink? I am tired and thirsty, both, but I have no desire to become the least bit drunk."

"Since you are a c'man," said the bear-cashier, "I recommend strong black coffee mixed with sweet whipped cream."

"I have no money," said Rod.

"The famous cat-madame, C'mell your consort, has guaranteed payment for anything at all that you order."

"Go ahead, then."

The bear-man called a robot over and gave him the orders.

Rod stared at the wall, wondering what he was going to do with this Earth he had bought. He wasn't thinking very hard, just musing idly. A voice cut directly into his mind. He realized that the bear-man was spiekling to him and that he could hier it.

"You are not an underman, sir and master."

"What?" spieked Rod.

"You heard me," said the telepathic voice. "I am not going to repeat it. If you come in the sign of the Fish, may blessings be upon you."

"I don't know that sign," said Rod.

"Then," spieked the bear-man, "no matter who you are, may you eat and drink in peace because you are a friend of C'mell and you are under the protection of the One Who Lives in Downdeep."

"I don't know," spieked Rod, "I just don't know, but I thank you for your welcome, friend."

"I do not give such welcomes lightly," said the bear-man, "and ordinarily I would be ready to run away from anything as strange and dangerous and unexplained as yourself, but you bring with you the quality of peace, which made me think that you might travel in the fellowship of the sign of the Fish. I have heard that in that sign, people and underpeople remember the blessed Joan and mingle in complete comradeship."

"No," said Rod, "no. I travel alone."

His food and drink came. He consumed them quietly. The bear-cashier had given him a table and bench far from the serving tables and away from the other underpeople who dropped in, interrupting their talks, eating in a hurry so that they could get back in a hurry. He saw one wolf-man, wearing the insigne of Auxiliary Police, who came to the wall, forced his identity-card into a slot, opened his mouth, bolted down five large chunks of red, raw meat and left the commissary, all in less than one and one-half minutes. Rod was amazed, but not impressed. He had too much on his mind.

At the desk he confirmed the address which C'mell had left, offered the bear-man a handshake, and went along to Upshaft Four. He still looked like a c'man and he carried his package alertly and humbly, as he had seen other underpeople behave in the presence of real persons.

He almost met death on the way. Upshaft Four was one-directional and was plainly marked, "People Only." Rod did not like the looks of it, as long as he moved in a cat-man body, but he did not think that C'mell would give him directions wrongly or lightly. (Later, he found that she had forgotten the phrase, "Special business under the protection of Jestocost, a Chief of the Instrumentality," if he were to be challenged; but he did not know the phrase.)

An arrogant human man, wearing a billowing red cloak, looked at him sharply as he took a belt, hooked it and stepped into the shaft. When Rod stepped free, he and the man were on a level.

Rod tried to look like a humble, modest messenger, but the strange voice grated his ears:

"Just what do you think you are doing? This is a human shaft."

Rod pretended that he did not know it was himself whom the red-cloaked man was addressing. He continued to float quietly upward, his magnet-belt tugging uncomfortably at his waist.

A pain in the ribs made him turn suddenly, almost losing his balance in the belt.

"Animal!" cried the man, "Speak up or die."



Still holding his package of books, Rod said mildly, "I'm on an errand and I was told to go this way."

The man's senseless hostility gave caliber to his voice: "And who told you?"

"C'mell," said Rod absently.

The man and his companions laughed at that, and for some reason their laughter had no humor in it, just savagery, cruelty, and - way down underneath - something of fear. "Listen to that," said the man in a red cloak, "one animal says another animal told it to do something." He whipped out a knife.

"What are you doing?" cried Rod.

"Just cutting your belt," said the man. "There's nobody at all below us and you will make a nice red blob at the bottom of the shaft, cat-man. That ought to teach you which shaft to use."

The man actually reached over and seized Rod's belt.

He lifted the knife to slash.

Rod became frightened and angry. His brain ran red.

He spat thoughts at them -

pommy!

shortie!

Earthie

red dirty blue stinking little man,

die, puke, burst, blaze, die!

It all came out in a single flash, faster than he could control it. The red-cloaked man twisted oddly, as if in spasm. His two companions threshed in their belts. They turned slowly.

High above them, two women began screaming.

Further up a man was shouting, both with his voice and with his mind, "Police! Help! Police! Police! Brainbomb! Brainbomb! Help!"

The effort of his telepathic explosion left Rod feeling disoriented and weak. He shook his head and blinked his eyes. He started to wipe his face, only to hit himself on the jaw with the package of books, which he still carried. This aroused him a little. He looked at the three men. Red-cloak was dead, his head at an odd angle. The other two seemed to be dead. One was floating upside down, his rump pointing upmost and the two limp legs swinging out at odd angles; the other was right-side up but had sagged in his belt. All three of them kept moving a steady ten meters a minute, right along with Rod.

There were strange sounds from above.

An enormous voice, filling the shaft with its volume, roared down: "Stay where you are. Police. Police. Police."

Rod glanced at the bodies floating upward. A corridor came by. He reached for the grip-bar, made it, and swung himself into the horizontal passage. He sat down immediately, not getting away from the upshaft. He thought sharply with his new hieing. Excited, frantic minds beat all around him, looking for enemies, lunatics, crimes, aliens, anything strange.

Softly he began spieking to the empty corridor and to himself, "I am a dumb cat. I am the messenger C'rod. I must take the books to the gentleman from the stars. I am a dumb cat. I do not know much."

A robot, gleaming with the ornamental body-armor of old Earth, landed at his cross-corridor, looked at Rod and called up the shaft, "Master, here's one. A c'man with a package."

A young subchief came into view, feet first as he managed to ride down the shaft instead of going up it. He seized the ceiling of the transverse corridor, gave himself a push and (once free of the shaft's magnetism) dropped heavily on his feet beside Rod. Rod hiered him thinking, "I'm good at this. I'm a good telepath. I clean things up fast. Look at this dumb cat."

Rod went on concentrating, "I'm a dumb cat. I have a package to deliver. I'm a dumb cat."

The subchief looked down at him scornfully. Rod felt the other's mind slide over his own in the rough equivalent of a search. He remained relaxed and tried to feel stupid while the other hiered him. Rod said nothing. The subchief flashed his baton over the package, eyeing the crystal knob at the end.

"Books," he snorted.

Ron nodded.

"You," said the bright young subchief, "you see bodies?"

He spoke in a painfully clear, almost childish version of the Old Common Tongue.

Rod held up three fingers and then pointed upward.

"You, cat-man, you feel the brainbomb!"

Rod, beginning to enjoy the game, threw his head backward and let out a cattish yowl expressing pain. The subchief could not help clapping his hands over his ears. He started to turn away, "I can see what you think of it, cat-fellow. You're pretty stupid, aren't you?"

Still thinking low dull thoughts as evenly as he could, Rod said promptly and modestly, "Me smart cat. Very handsome too."

"Come along," said the subchief to his robot, disregarding Rod altogether.

Rod plucked at his sleeve.

The subchief turned back.

Very humbly Rod said, "Sir and master, which way, Hostel of Singing Birds, Room Nine?"

"Mother of poodles!" cried the subchief. "I'm on a murder case and this dumb cat asks me for directions." He was a decent young man and he thought for a minute. "This way -" said he, pointing up the upshaft - "it's twenty more meters and then the third street over. But that's 'people only.' It's about a kilometer over to the steps for animals." He stood, frowning, and then swung on one of his robots: "Wush', you see this cat!"

"Yes, master, a cat-man, very handsome."

"So you think he's handsome, too. He already thinks so, so that makes it unanimous. He may be handsome, but he's dumb. Wush', take this cat-man to the address he tells you. Use the upshaft by my authority. Don't put a belt on him, just hug him."

Rod was immeasurably grateful that he had slipped his shaftbelt off and left it negligently on the rack just before the robot arrived.

The robot seized him around the waist with what was literally a grip of iron. They did not wait for the slow upward magnetic drive of the shaft to lift them. The robot had some kind of a jet in his backpack and lifted Rod with sickening speed to the next level. He pushed Rod into the corridor and followed him.

"Where do you go?" said the robot, very plainly.

Rod concentrating on feeling stupid just in case someone might still be trying to hier his mind, said slowly and stumblingly, "Hostel of the Singing Birds, Room Nine."

The robot stopped still, as though he were communicating telepathically, but Rod's mind, though alert, could catch not the faintest whisper of telepathic communication. "Hot buttered sheep!" thought Rod, "he's using radio to check the address with his headquarters right from here!"

Wush' appeared to be doing just that. He came to in a moment. They emerged under the sky, filled with Earth's own moon, the loveliest thing that Rod had ever seen. He did not dare to stop and enjoy the scenery, but he trotted lithely beside the robot policeman.

They came down a road with heavy, scented flowers. The wet warm air of Earth spread the sweetness everywhere.

On their right there was a courtyard with copies of ancient fountains, a dining space now completely empty of diners, a robot waiter in the corner, and many individual rooms opening on the plaza.

The robot policeman called to the robot waiter, "Where's number nine?"

The waiter answered him with a lifting of the hand and an odd twist of the wrist, twice repeated, which the robot-policeman seemed to understand perfectly well.

"Come along," he said to Rod, leading the way to an outside stairway which reached up to an outside balcony serving the second story of rooms. One of the rooms had a plain number nine on it.

Rod was about to tell the robot policeman that he could see the number nine, when Wush', with officious kindness, took the doorknob and flung it open with a gesture of welcome to Rod.

There was the great cough of a heavy gun and Wush', his head blown almost completely off, clanked metallically to the iron floor of the balcony. Rod instinctively jumped for cover and flattened himself against the wall of the building.

A handsome man, wearing what seemed to be a black suit, came into the doorway, a heavy-caliber police pistol in his hand.

"Oh, there you are," said he to Rod, evenly enough. "Come on in."

Rod felt his legs working, felt himself walking into the room despite the effort of his mind to resist. He stopped pretending to be a dumb cat. He dropped the books on the ground and went back to thinking like his normal Old North Australian self, despite the cat body. It did no good. He kept on walking involuntarily, and entered the room.

As he passed the man himself, he was conscious of a sticky sweet rotten smell, like nothing he had ever smelled before. He also saw that the man, though fully clothed, was sopping wet.

He entered the room.

It was raining inside.

Somebody had jammed the fire-sprinkler system so that a steady rain fell from the ceiling to the floor.

C'mell stood in the middle of the room, her glorious red hair a wet stringy mop hanging down her shoulders. There was a look of concentration and alarm on her face.

"I" said the man, "am Tostig Amaral. This girl said that her husband would come with a policeman. I did not think she was right. But she was right. With the cat-husband there comes a policeman. I shoot the policeman. He is a robot and I can pay the Earth government for as many robots as I like. You are a cat. I can kill you also, and pay the charges on you. But I am a nice man, and I want to make love with your little red cat over there, so I will be generous and pay you something so that you can tell her she is mine and not yours. Do you understand that, cat-man?"

Rod found himself released from the unexplained muscular bonds which had hampered his freedom.

"My lord, my master from afar," he said, "C'mell is an underperson. It is the law here that if an underperson and a person become involved in love, the underperson dies and the human person gets brainscrubbed. I am sure, my master, that you would not want to be brainscrubbed by the Earth authorities. Let the girl go. I agree that you can pay for the robot."

Amaral glided across the room. His face was pale, petulant, human, but Rod saw that the black clothes were not clothes at all.

The "clothing" was mucous membranes, an extension of Amaral's living skin.

The pale face turned even more pale with rage.

"You're a bold cat-man to talk like that. My body is bigger than yours, and it is poisonous as well. We have had to live hard in the rain of Amazonas Triste, and we have mental and physical powers which you had better not disturb. If you will not take payment, go away anyhow. The girl is mine. What happens to her is my business. If I violate Earth regulations, I will destroy the c'girl and pay for her. Go away, or you die."

Rod spoke with deliberate calm and with calculated risk. "Citizen, I play no game. I am not a cat-man but a subject of Her Absent Majesty the Queen, from Old North Australia. I give you warning that it is a man you face, and no mere animal. Let that girl go."

C'mell struggled as though she were trying to speak, but could not.

Amaral laughed, "That's a lie, animal, and a bold one! I admire you for trying to save your mate. But she is mine. She is a girlygirl and the Instrumentality gave her to me. She is my pleasure. Go, bold cat! You are a good liar."

Rod took his last chance. "Scan me if you will."

He stood his ground.

Amaral's mind ran over his personality like filthy hands pawing naked flesh. Rod recoiled at the dirtiness and intimacy of being felt by such a person's thoughts, because he could sense the kinds of pleasure and cruelty which Amaral had experienced. He stood firm, calm, sure, just. He was not going to leave C'mell with this - this monster from the stars, man though he might be, of the old true human stock.

Amaral laughed. "You're a man, all right. A boy. A farmer. And you cannot hier or spiek except for the button in your ear. Get out, child, before I box your ears!"

Rod spoke: "Amaral, I herewith put you in danger."

Amaral did not reply with words.

His peaked sharp face grew paler and the folds of his skin dilated. They quivered, like the edges of wet torn balloons. The room began to fill with a sickening sweet stench, as though it were a candy shop in which unburied bodies had died weeks before. There was a smell of vanilla, of sugar, of fresh hot cookies, of baked bread, of chocolate boiling in the pot; there was even a whiff of stroon. But as Amaral tensed and shook out his auxiliary skins each smell turned wrong, into a caricature and abomination of itself. The composite was hypnotic. Rod glanced at C'mell. She had turned completely white.

That decided him.

The calm which he had found with the Catmaster, might be good, but there were moments for calm and other moments for anger.

Rod deliberately chose anger.

He felt fury rising in him as hot and quick and greedy as if it had been love. He felt his heart go faster, his muscles become stronger, his mind clearer. Amaral apparently had total confidence in his own poisonous and hypnotic powers, because he was staring straightforward as his skins swelled and waved in the air like wet leaves under water. The steady drizzle from the sprinkler kept everything penetratingly wet.

Rod disregarded this. He welcomed fury.

With his new hiering device, he focused on Amaral's mind, and only on Amaral's.

Amaral saw the movement of his eyes and whipped a knife into view.

"Man or cat, you're dying!" said Amaral, himself hot with the excitement of hate and collision.

Rod then spoke, in his worst scream -

beast, filth, offal -

spot, dirt, vileness,

wet, nasty

die, die, die!

He was sure it was the loudest cry he had ever given. There was no echo, no effect. Amaral stared at him, the evil knife-point flickering in his hand like the flame atop a candle.

Rod's anger reached a new height.

He felt pain in his mind when he walked forward, cramps in his muscles as he used them. He felt a real fear of the off-world poison which this man-creature might exude, but the thought of C'mell - cat or no cat - alone with Amaral was enough to give him the rage of a beast and the strength of a machine.

Only at the very last moment did Amaral realize Rod had broken loose.

Rod never could tell whether the telepathic scream had really hurt the wet-worlder or not, because he did something very simple.

He reached with all the speed of a Norstrilian farmer, snatched the knife from Amaral's hand, ripping folds of soft, sticky skin with it, and then slashed the other man from clavicle to clavicle.

He jumped back in time to avoid the spurt of blood.

The "wet black suit" collapsed as Amaral died on the floor.

Rod took the dazed C'mell by the arm and led her out of the room. The air on the balcony was fresh, but the murder-smell of Amazonas Triste was still upon him. He knew that he would hate himself for weeks, just from the memory of that smell.

There were whole armies of robots and police outside. The body of Wush' had been taken away.

There was silence as they emerged.

Then a clear, civilized, commanding voice spoke from the plaza below, "Is he dead?"

Rod nodded.

"Forgive me for not coming closer. I am the Lord Jestocost. I know you, C'roderick, and I know who you really are. These people are all under my orders. You and the girl can wash and reclothe yourselves in the rooms below. Then you can run a certain errand. Tomorrow, at the second hour, I will see you."

Robots came close to them - apparently robots with no sense of smell, because the fulsome stench did not bother them in the least. People stepped out of their way as they passed.

Rod was able to murmur, "C'mell, are you all right?"

She nodded and she gave him a wan smile. Then she forced herself to speak. "You are brave, mister McBan. You are even braver than a cat."

The robots separated the two of them. Within moments Rod found little white medical robots taking his clothing off him gently, deftly, and quickly. A hot shower, with a smell of medication to it, was already hissing in the bath-stall. Rod was tired of wetness, tired of all this water everywhere, tired of wet things and complicated people, but he stumbled into the shower with gratitude and hope. He was still alive. He had unknown friends.

And C'mell. C'mell was safe.

"Is this," thought Rod, "what people call love?"

The clean, stinging astringency of the shower drove all thoughts from his mind. Two of the little white robots had followed him in. He sat on a hot, wet wooden bench and they scrubbed him with brushes which felt as though they would remove his very skin.

Bit by bit, the terrible odor faded.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: BIRDS, FAR UNDERGROUND

ROD MCBAN WAS TOO weary to protest when the little white robots wrapped him in an enormous towel and led him into what looked like an operating room.

A large man, with a red-brown spade beard, very uncommon on Earth at this time, said, "I am Doctor Vomact, the cousin of the other Doctor Vomact you met on Mars. I know that you are not a cat, mister and owner McBAn, and it is only my business to check up on you. May I?"

"C'mell -" began Rod.

"She is perfectly all right. We have given her a sedative and for the time being she is being treated as though she were a human woman. Jestocost told me to suspend the rules in her case, and I did so, but I think we will both have trouble about the matter from some of our colleagues later on."

"Trouble?" said Rod. "I'll pay -"

"No, no, it's not payment. It's just the rule that damaged underpeople should be destroyed and not put in hospitals. Mind you, I treat them myself now and then, if I can do it on the sly. But now lets have a look at you."

"Why are we talking?" spieked Rod. "Didn't you know that I can hier now?"

Instead of getting a physical examination, Rod had a wonderful visit with the doctor, in which they drank enormous glasses of a sweet Earth beverage called chai by the ancient Parosski ones. Rod realized that between Redlady, the other doctor Vomact on Mars, and the Lord Jestocost on Earth, he had been watched and guarded all the way through. He found that this doctor Vomact was a candidate for a Chiefship of the Instrumentality, and he learned something of the strange tests required for that office. He even found that the doctor knew more than he did himself about his own financial position, and that the actuarial balances of Earth were sagging with the weight of his wealth, since the increase in the price of stroon might lead to shorter lives. The doctor and he ended by discussing the underpeople; he found that the doctor had just as vivid an admiration for C'mell as he himself did.

The evening ended when Rod said, "I'm young, doctor and sir, and I sleep well, but I'm never going to sleep again if you don't get that smell away from me, I can smell it inside my nose."

The doctor became professional. He said, "Open your mouth and breathe right into my face!"

Rod hesitated and then obeyed.

"Great crooked stars!" said the doctor. "I can smell it too. There's a little bit in your upper respiratory system, perhaps a little even in your lungs. Do you need your sense of smell for the next few days?"

Rod said he did not.

"Fine," said the doctor. "We can numb that section of the brain and do it very gently. There'll be no residual damage. You won't smell anything for eight to ten days, and by that time the smell of Amaral will be gone. Incidentally, you were charged with first degree murder, tried, and acquitted - on the matter of Tostig Amaral."

"How could I be?" said Rod. "I wasn't even arrested."

"The Instrumentality computered it. They had the whole scene on tape, since Amaral's room has been under steady surveillance since yesterday. When he warned you that whether cat or man, you were dying, he finished the case against himself. That was a death threat and your acquittal was for self-defense."

Rod hesitated and then blurted out the truth, "And the men in the shaft?"

"The Lords Jestocost and Crudelta and I talked it over. We decided to let the matter drop. It keeps the police lively if they have a few unsolved crimes here and there. Now lie down, so I can kill off that smell."

Rod lay down. The doctor put his head in a clamp and called in robot assistants. The smell-killing process knocked him out, and when he awakened, it was in a different building. He sat up in bed and saw the sea itself. C'mell was standing at the edge of the water. He sniffed. He smelled no salt, no wet, no water, no Amaral. It was worth the change.

C'mell came to him. "My dear, my very dear, my sir and master, but my very dear! You chanced your life for me last night."

"I'm a cat myself," laughed Rod.

He leaped from the bed and ran out to the water margin. The immensity of blue water was incredible. The white waves were separate, definable miracles, each one of them. He had seen the enclosed lakes of Australia, but none of them did things like this.

C'mell had the tact to stay silent till he had seen his fill.

Then she broke the news.

"You own Earth. You have work to do. Either you stay here - and begin studying how to manage your property, or you go somewhere else. Either way, something a little bit sad is going to happen. Today."

He looked at her seriously, his pajamas flapping in the wet wind which he could no longer smell.

"I'm ready," he said. "What is it?"

"You lose me."

"Is that all?" he laughed.

C'mell looked very hurt. She stretched her fingers as though she were a nervous cat looking for something to claw.

"I thought -" said she, and stopped. She started again, "I thought -" She stopped again. She turned to look at him, staring fully, trustingly into his face. "You're such a young man, but you can do anything. Even among men you are fierce and decided. Tell me, sir and master, what - what do you wish?"



"Nothing much," he smiled at her, "except that I am buying you and taking you home. We can't go to Norstrilia unless the law changes, but we can go to New Mars. They don't have any rules there, none which a few tons of stroon won't get changed. C'mell, I'll stay cat. Will you marry me?"

She started laughing but the laughter turned into weeping. She hugged him and buried her face against his chest. At last she wiped her tears off on her arm and looked up at him:

"Poor silly me! Poor silly you! Don't you see it, mister, I am a cat. If I had children, they would be cat-kittens, every one of them, unless I went every single week to get the genetic code recycled so that they would turn out underpeople. Don't you know that you and I can never marry - not with any real hope? Besides, Rod, there is the other rule. You and I cannot even see each other again from this sunset onward. How do you think the Lord Jestocost saved my life yesterday? How did he get me into a hospital to be flushed out of all those Amaral poisons? How did he break almost all the rules of the book?"

The brightness had gone out of Rod's day. "I don't know," he said dully.

"By promising them I would die promptly and obediently if there were any more irregularities. By saying I was a nice animal. A biddable one. My death is hostage for what you and I must do. It's not a law. It's something worse than a law - it's an agreement between the Lords of the Instrumentality."

"I see," said he, understanding the logic of it, but hating the cruel Earth customs which put C'mell and himself together, only to tear them apart.

"Let's walk down the beach, Rod," she said. "Unless you want your breakfast first of all...."

"Oh, no," he said. Breakfast! a flutty crupp for all the breakfasts on Earth!

She walked as though she had not a care in the world, but there was an undertone of meaning to her walk which warned Rod that she was up to something.

It happened.

First, she kissed him, with a kiss he remembered the rest of his life.

Then, before he could say a word, she spieked. But her spieked was not words or ideas at all. It was singing of a high wild kind. It was the music which went along with her very own poem, which she had sung to him atop Earthport:

And oh! my love, for you.

High birds crying, and a

High sky flying, and a

High wind driving, and a

High heart striving, and a

High brave place for you!

But it was not those words, not those ideas, even though they seemed subtly different this time. She was doing something which the best telepaths of Old North Australia had tried in vain for thousands of years to accomplish - she was transmitting the mathematical and proportional essence of music right out of her mind, and she was doing it with a clarity and force which would have been worthy of a great orchestra. The "high wind driving" fugue kept recurring.

He turned his eyes away from her to see the astonishing thing which was happening all around them. The air, the ground, the sea were all becoming thick with life. Fish flashed out of blue waves. Birds circled by the multitude around them. The beach was thick with little running birds. Dogs and running animals which he had never seen before stood restlessly around C'mell - hectares of them.

Abruptly she stopped her song.

With very high volume and clarity, she spat commands in all directions:

"Think of people."

"Think of this cat and me running away somewhere."

"Think of ships."

"Look for strangers."

"Think of things in the sky."

Rod was glad he did not have his broad-band hiering come on, as it sometimes had done at home. He was sure he would have gone dizzy with the pictures and the contradictions of it all.

She had grabbed his shoulders and was whispering fiercely into his ear:

"Rod, they'll cover us. Please make a trip with me, Rod. One last dangerous trip. Not for you. Not for me. Not even for mankind. For life, Rod. The Aitch Eye wants to see you."

"Who's the Aitch Eye?"

"He'll tell you the secret if you see him," she hissed. "Do it for me, then, if you don't trust my ideas."

He smiled. "For you, C'mell, yes."

"Don't even think then, till you get there. Don't even ask questions. Just come along. Millions of lives depend on you, Rod."

She stood up and sang again, but the new song had no grief in it, no anguish, no weird keening from species to species. It was as cool and pretty as a music box, as simple as an assured and happy good-bye.

The animals vanished so rapidly that it was hard to believe that legions of them had so recently been there.

"That," said C'mell, "should rattle the telepathic monitors for a while. They are not very imaginative anyhow, and when they get something like this they write up reports about it. Then they can't understand their reports and sooner or later one of them asks me what I did. I tell them the truth. It's simple."

"What are you going to tell them this time?" he asked, as they walked back to the house.

"That I had something which I did not want them to hear."

"They won't take that."

"Of course not, but they will suspect me of trying to beg stroon from you to give to the underpeople."

"Do you want some, C'mell?"

"Of course not! It's illegal and it would just make me live longer than my natural life. The Catmaster is the only underperson who gets stroon, and he gets it by a special vote of the Lords."

They had reached the house. C'mell paused:

"Remember, we are the servants of the Lady Frances Oh. She promised Jestocost that she would order us to do anything that I asked her to do. So she's going to order us to have a good, hearty breakfast. Then she is going to order us to look for something far under the surface of Earthport."

"She is? But why -"

"No questions, Rod." The smile she gave him would have melted a monument. He felt well. He was amused and pleased by the physical delight of hiering and spieking with the occasional true people who passed by. (Some underpeople could hier and spiek but they tried to conceal it, for fear that they would be resented.) He felt strong. Losing C'mell was a sad thing to do, but it was a whole day off; he began dreaming of things that he could do for her when they parted. Buying her the services of thousands of people for the rest of her life? Giving her jewelry which would be the envy of Earth mankind? Leasing her a private planoform yacht? He suspected these might not be legal, but they were pleasant to think about.

Three hours later, he had no time for pleasant thoughts. He was bone-weary again. They had flown into Earthport city "on the orders of" their hostess, the lady Oh, and they had started going down. Forty-five minutes of dropping had made his stomach very queasy. He felt the air go warm and stale and he wished desperately that he had not given up his sense of smell.

Where the dropshafts ended, the tunnels and the elevators began.

Down they went, where incredibly old machinery spun slowly in a spray of oil performing tasks which only the wildest mind could guess at.

In one room, C'mell had stopped and had shouted at him over the noise of engines, "That's a pump."

It did look obvious. Huge turbines moved wearily. They seemed to be hooked up to an enormous steam engine powered by nuclear fuel. Five or six brightly polished robots eyed them suspiciously as they walked around the machine, which was at least eighty meters long by forty-five high.

"And come here...." shouted C'mell.

They went into another room, empty and clean and quiet except for a rigid column of moving water which shot from floor to ceiling with no evidence of machinery at all. An underman, sloppily formed from a rat body, got up from his rocking chair when they entered. He bowed to C'mell as though she were a great lady but she waved him back to his chair.

She took Rod near the column of water and pointed to a shiny ring on the floor.

"That's the other pump. They do the same amount of work."

"What is it?" he shouted

"Force-field, I guess. I'm not an engineer." They went on.

In a quieter corridor she explained that the pumps were both of them for the service of weather control. The old one had been running six or seven thousand years, and showed very

little wear. When people needed a supplementary one, they had simply printed it on plastic, set it in the floor, and turned it on with a few amps. The underman was there just to make sure that nothing broke down or went critical. "Can't real people design things any more?" asked Red. "Only if they want to. Making them want to do things is the hard part now." "You mean, they don't want to do anything?" "Not exactly," said C'mell, "but they find that we are better than they are at almost anything. Real work, that is, not statesmanship like running the Instrumentality and the Earth government. Here and there a real human being gets to work, and there are always offworlders like you to stimulate them and challenge them with new problems. But they used to have secure lives of four hundred years, a common language, and a standard conditioning. They were dying off, just by being too perfect. One way to get better would have been to kill off us underpeople, but they couldn't do that all the way. There was too much messy work to be done that you couldn't count on robots for. Even the best robot, if he's a computer linked to the mind of a mouse, will do fine routine, but unless he has a very complete human education, he's going to make some wild judgments which won't suit what people want. So they need underpeople. I'm still cat underneath it all, but even the cats which are unchanged are pretty close relatives of human beings. They make the same basic choices between power and beauty, between survival and self-sacrifice, between common sense and high courage. So the Lady Alice More worked out this plan for the Rediscovery of Man. Set up the Ancient Nations, give everybody an extra culture besides the old one based on the Old Common Tongue, let them get mad at each other, restore some disease, some danger, some accidents, but average it out so that nothing is really changed." They had come to a storeroom, the sheer size of which made Rod blink. The great reception hall at the top of Earthport had astounded him; this room was twice the size. The room was filled with extremely ancient cargoes which had not even been unpacked from their containers. Rod could see that some were marked outbound for worlds which no longer existed, or which had changed their names; others were inbound, but no one had unpacked them for five thousand years and more. "What's all this stuff?" "Shipping. Technological change. Somebody wrote it all off the computers, so they didn't have to think of it any more. This is the thing which underpeople and robots are searching, to supply the ancient artifacts for the Rediscovery of Man. One of our boys - rat stock, with a human IQ of three hundred - found something marked Musée Nationale. It was the whole national Museum of the Republic of Mali, which had been put inside a mountain when the ancient wars became severe. Mali apparently was not a very important 'nation,' as they called those groupings, but it had the same language as France, and we were able to supply the real material with almost everything they needed to restore some kind of a French civilization. China has been hard. The Chinesians survived longer than any other nation, and they did their own grave-robbing, so that we have found it impossible to reconstruct China before the age of space. We can't modify people into being Ancient Chinese." Rod stopped, thunderstruck. "Can I talk to you here?" C'mell listened with a faraway look on her face. "Not here. I feel the very weak sweep of a monitor across my mind now and then. In a couple of minutes you can. Let's hurry along." "I just thought," cried Rod, "of the most important question in all the worlds!"

"Stop thinking it, then," said C'mell, "until we come to a safe place."

Instead of going straight on through the big aisle between the forgotten crates and packages, she squeezed between two crates and made her way to the edge of the big underground storeroom.

"That package," she said, "is stroon. They lost it. We could help ourselves to it if we wanted to, but we're afraid of it."

Rod looked at the names on the package. It had been shipped by Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan XXVI to Adaminaby Port and reconsigned to Earthport.

"That's one hundred and twenty-five generations ago, shipped from the Station of Doom. My farm. I think it turns poison if you leave it for more than two hundred years. Our own military people have some horrible uses for it, when invaders show up, but ordinary Norstrilians, when they find old stroon, always turn it in to the Commonwealth. We're afraid of it. Not that we often lose it. It's too valuable and we're too greedy, with a twenty million per cent import duty on everything...."

C'mell led on. They unexpectedly passed a tiny robot, a lamp fixed to his head, who was seated between two enormous piles of books. He was apparently reading them one by one, because he had beside him a pile of notes larger in bulk than he was. He did not look up, nor did they interrupt him.

At the wall, C'mell said, "Now do exactly what you're told. See the dust along the base of this crate?"

"I see it," said Rod.

"That must be left undisturbed. Now watch. I'm going to jump from the top of this crate to the top of that one, without disturbing the dust. Then I want you to jump the same way and go exactly where I point, without even thinking about it, if you can manage. I'll follow. Don't try to be polite or chivalrous, or you'll mess up the whole arrangement."

Rod nodded.

She jumped to a case against the wall. Her red hair did not fly behind her, because she had tied it up in a turban before they started out, when she had obtained coveralls for each of them from the robot servants of the Lady Frances Oh. They had looked like an ordinary couple of working c'people.

Either she was very strong or the case was very light. Standing on the case, she tipped it very delicately, so that the pattern of dust around its base would be unchanged, save for microscopic examination. A blue glow came from beyond the case. With an odd, practiced turn of the wrist she indicated that Rod should jump from his case to the tipped one, and from there into the area - whatever it might be - beyond the case. It seemed easy for him, but he wondered if she could support both his weight and hers on the case. He remembered her order not to talk or think. He tried to think of the salmon steak he had eaten the day before. That should certainly be a good cat-thought, if a monitor should catch his mind at that moment! He jumped, teetered on the slanting top of the second packing case, and scrambled into a tiny doorway just big enough for him to crawl through. It was apparently designed for cables, pipes and maintenance, not for habitual human use: it was too low to stand in. He scrambled forward.

There was a slam.

C'mell had jumped in after him, letting the case fall back into its old and apparently undisturbed position.

She crawled up to him. "Keep going," she said.

"Can we talk here?"

"Of course! Do you want to? It's not a very sociable place."

"That question, that big question," said Rod. "I've got to ask you. You underpeople are taking charge of people, if you're fixing up their new cultures for them, you're getting to be the master of men!"

"Yes," said C'mell, and let the explosive affirmative hang in the air between them.

He couldn't think of anything to say; it was his big bright idea for the day, and the fact that she already knew underpeople were becoming secret masters - that was too much!

She looked at his friendly face and said, more gently, "We underpeople have seen it coming for a long time. Some of the human people do, too. Especially the Lord Jestocost. He's no fool. And, Rod, you fit in."

"I?"

"Not as a person. As an economic change. As a source of unallocated power."

"You mean, C'mell, you're after me, too? I can't believe it. I can recognize a pest or a nuisance or a robber. You don't seem like any of these. You're good, all the way through." His voice faltered. "I meant it this morning, C'mell, when I asked you to marry me."

The delicacy of cat and the tenderness of woman combined in her voice as she answered, "I know you meant it." She stroked a lock of hair away from his forehead, in a caress as restrained as any touch could be. "But it's not for us. And I'm not using you myself, Rod. I want nothing for myself, but I want a good world for underpeople. And for people too. For people too. We cats have loved you people long before we had brains. We've been your cats longer than anyone can remember. Do you think our loyalty to the human race would stop just because you changed our shapes and added a lot of thinking power? I love you, Rod, but I love people, too. That's why I'm taking you to the Aitch Eye."

"Can you tell me what that is - now?"

She laughed. "This place is safe. It's the Holy Insurgency. The secret government of the underpeople. This is a silly place to talk about it, Rod. You're going to meet the head of it, right now."

"All of them?" Rod was thinking of the Chiefs of the Instrumentality.

"It's not a them, it's a him. The E-telekali. The bird beneath the ground. E-ikarus is one of his sons."

"If there's only one, how did you choose him? Is he like the British Queen, whom we lost so long ago?"

C'mell laughed. "We did not choose him. He grew and now he leads us. You people took an eagle's egg and tried to make it into a Daimoni man. When the experiment failed, you threw the fetus out. It lived. It's he. It'll be the strongest mind you've ever met. Come on. This is no place to talk, and we're still talking."

She started crawling down the horizontal shaft, waving at Rod to follow her.

He followed.

As they crawled, he called to her, "C'mell, stop a minute."

She stopped until he caught up with her. She thought he might ask for a kiss, so worried and lonely did he look. She was ready to be kissed. He surprised her by saying, instead.

"I can't smell, C'mell. Please, I'm so used to smelling that I miss it. What does this place smell like?"

Her eyes widened and then she laughed: "It smells like underground. Electricity burning the air. Animals somewhere far away, a lot of different smells of them. The old, old smell of man, almost gone. Engine oil and bad exhaust. It smells like a headache. It smells like silence, like things untouched. There, is that it?"

He nodded and they went on.

At the end of the horizontal C'mell turned and said, "All men die here. Come on!"

Rod started to follow and then stopped, "C'mell, are you discoordinated? Why should I die? There's no reason to."

Her laughter was pure happiness. "Silly C'rod! You are a cat, cat enough to come where no man has passed for centuries. Come on. Watch out for those skeletons. They're a lot of them around here. We hate to kill real people, but there are some, that we can't warn off in time."

They emerged on a balcony, overlooking an even more enormous storeroom than the one before. This had thousands more boxes in it. C'mell paid no attention to it. She went to the end of the balcony and raced down a slender steel ladder.

"More junk from the past!" she said, anticipating Rod's comment. "People have forgotten it up above; we mess around in it."

Though he could not smell the air, at this depth it felt thick, heavy, immobile.

C'mell did not slow down. She threaded her way through the junk and treasures on the floor as though she were an acrobat. On the far side of the old room she stopped. "Take one of these," she commanded.

They looked like enormous umbrellas. He had seen umbrellas in the pictures which his computer had showed him. These seemed oddly large, compared to the ones in the pictures. He looked around for rain. After his memories of Tostig Amarat he wanted no more indoor rain. C'mell did not understand his suspicions.

"The shaft," she said, "has no magnetic controls, no updraft of air. It's just a shaft twelve meters in diameter. These are parachutes. We jump into the shaft with them and then we float down. Straight down. Four kilometers. It's close to the Moho."

Since he did not pick up one of the big umbrellas, she handed him one. It was surprisingly light.

He blinked at her. "How will we ever get out?"

"One of the bird-men will fly us up the shaft. It's hard work, but they can do it. Be sure to hook that thing to your belt. It's a long slow time falling, and we won't be able to talk. And it's terribly dark, too."

He complied.

She opened a big door, beyond which there was the feel of nothing. She gave him a wave, partially opened her "umbrella" stepped over the edge of the door and vanished. He looked over the edge himself. There was nothing to be seen. Nothing of C'mell, no sound except for the slippage of air and an occasional mechanical whisper of metal against metal. He supposed that must be the rib-tips of the umbrella touching the edge of the shaft as she fell.

He sighed. Norstrilia was safe and quiet compared to this.

He opened his umbrella too.

Acting on an odd premonition, he took his little hiering-spieking shell out of his ear and put it carefully in his coverall pocket.

That act saved his life.



## CHAPTER EIGHT: HIS OWN STRANGE ALTAR

ROD MCBAN REMEMBERED falling and falling. He shouted into the wet adhesive darkness, but there was no reply. He thought of cutting himself loose from his big umbrella and letting himself drop to his death below him, but then he thought of C'mell and he knew that his body would fall upon her like a bomb. He wondered about his desperation, but could not understand it. (Only later did he find out that he was passing telepathic suicide screens which the underpeople had set up, screens fitted to the human mind, designed to dredge filth and despair from the paleocortex, the smell-bite-mate sequence of the nose-guided animals who first walked Earth; but Rod was cat enough, just barely cat enough, and he was also telepathically subnormal, so that the screens did not do to him what they would have done to any normal man of Earth - delivered a twisted dead body at the bottom. No man had ever gotten that far, but the underpeople resolved that none ever should.) Rod twisted in his harness and at last he fainted.

He awakened in a relatively small room, enormous by Earth standards, but still much smaller than the storerooms which he had passed through on the way down.

The lights were bright.

He suspected that the room stank, but he could not prove it with his smell gone.

A man was speaking: "The Forbidden Word is never given unless the man who does not know it plainly asks for it."

There was a chorus of voices sighing, "We remember. We remember. We remember what we remember."

The speaker was almost a giant, thin and pale. His face was the face of a dead saint, pale, white as alabaster, with glowing eyes. His body was that of man and bird both, man from the hips up, except that human hands grew out of the elbows of enormous clean white wings. From the hips down his legs were bird-legs, ending in a horny, almost translucent bird-feet which stood steadily on the ground.

"I am sorry, mister and owner McBan, that you took that risk. I was misinformed. You are a good cat on the outside, but still completely a human man on the inside. Our safety devices bruised your mind and they might have killed you."

Rod stared at the man as he stumbled to his feet. He saw that C'mell was one of the people helping him. When he was erect, someone handed him a beaker of very cold water. He drank it thirstily. It was hot down here - hot, stuffy, and with the feel of big engines nearby.

"I," said the great bird-man, "am the E-telekeli." He pronounced it Ee-telly-kelly. "You are the first human being to see me in the flesh."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed, fourfold blessed is the name of our leader, our father, our brother, our son the E-telekeli," chorused the underpeople.

Rod looked around. There was every kind of underperson imaginable here, including several that he had never even thought of. One was a head on a shelf, with no apparent body. When he looked, somewhat shocked, directly at the head, its face smiled and one eye closed in a deliberate wink. The E-telekeh followed his glance. "Do not let us shock you. Some of us are normal, but many of us down here are the discards of men's laboratories. You know my son."

A tall, very pale young man with no feathers stood up at this point. He was stark naked and completely unembarrassed. He held out a friendly hand to Rod. Rod was sure he had never seen the young man before. The young man sensed Rod's hesitation:

"You new me as A'gentur. I am the E-ikasuk."

"Blessed, blessed, threefold blessed is the name of our leader-to-be, the Yeekasoose!" chanted the underpeople.

Something about the scene caught Rod's rough Norstrilian humor. He spoke to the great underman as he would have spoken to another mister-and-owner back home, friendly but bluntly.

"Glad you welcome me, sir!"

"Glad, glad, glad is the stranger from beyond the stars!" sang the chorus.

"Can't you make them shut up?" asked Rod.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up," says the stranger from the stars!" chorused the group.

The E-telekeli did not exactly laugh, but his smile was not pure benevolence.

"We can disregard them and talk, or I can blank out your mind every time they repeat what we say. This is a sort of court ceremony."

Rod glanced around. "I'm in your power already," said he, "so it won't matter if you mess around a little with my mind. Blank them out."

The E-telekeli stirred the air in front of him as though he were writing a mathematical equation with his finger; Rod's eyes followed the finger and he suddenly felt the room hush.

"Come over here and sit down," said the E-telekeli.

Rod followed.

"What do you want?" he asked as he followed.

The E-telekeli did not even turn around to answer. He merely spoke while walking ahead:

"Your money, mister and owner McBan. Almost all of your money."

Rod stopped walking. He heard himself laughing wildly. "Money? You? Here? What could you possibly do with it?"

"That," said the E-telekeli, "is why you should sit down."

"Do sit," said C'mell, who had followed.

Rod sat down.

"We are afraid that Man himself will die and leave us alone in the universe. We need Man, and there is still an immensity of time before we all pour into a common destiny. People have

always assumed that the end of things is around the corner, and we have the promise of the second Forbidden One that this will be soon. But it could be hundreds of thousands of years, maybe millions. People are scattered, mister McBan, so that no weapon will ever kill them all on all planets, but no matter how scattered they are, they still are haunted by themselves. They reach a point of development and then they stop."

"Yes," said Rod, reaching for a carafe of water and helping himself to another drink, "But it's a long way from the philosophy of the universe down to my money. We have plenty of barmy swarmy talk in Old North Australia, but I never heard of anybody asking for another citizen's money, right off the bat."

The eyes of the E-telekeli glowed like cold fire but Rod knew that this was no hypnosis, no trick being played upon himself. It was the sheer force of the personality burning outward from the bird-man.

"Listen carefully, mister McBan. We are the creatures of man. You are gods to us. You have made us into people who talk, who worry, who think, who love, who die. Most of our races were the friends of man before we became underpeople - like C'mell. How many cats have served and loved man, and for how long? How many cattle have worked for men, been eaten by men, been milked by men across the ages, and have still followed where men went, even to the stars? And dogs. I do not have to tell you about the love of dogs for men. We call ourselves the Holy Insurgency because we are rebels. We are a government. We are a power almost as big as the Instrumentality. We love you, Rod, not because you are a rich Norstrilian, but because it is our faith to love the mankind which created us."

"This is a long slow wicket for my money," said Rod. "Come to the point, sir."

The E-telekeli smiled with sweetness and sadness. Rod immediately knew that it was his own denseness which made the bird-man sad and patient. For the very first time he began to accept the feeling that this person might actually be the superior of any human being he had ever met.

"I'm sorry," said Rod. "I haven't had a minute to enjoy my money since I got it. People have been telling me that everybody is after it. I'm beginning to think that I shall do nothing but run the rest of my life..."

The E-telekeli smiled happily, the way a teacher smiles when a student has suddenly turned in a spectacular performance. "Correct. You have learned a lot from the Catmaster, and from your own self. I am offering you something more - the chance to do enormous good. Have you ever heard of Foundations?"

Rod frowned. "The bottoms of buildings?"

"No. Institutions. From the very ancient past."

Rod shook his head. He hadn't.

"If a gift was big enough, it endured and kept on giving, until the culture in which it was set had fallen. If you took most of your money and gave it to some good, wise men, it could be spent over and over again to improve the race of man. We need that. Better men will give us better lives. Do you think that we don't know how pilots and pinlighters have sometimes died, saving their cats in space?"

"Or how people kill underpeople without a thought?" countered Rod. "Or humiliate them without noticing that they do it? It seems to me that you must have some self-interest, sir."

"I do. Some - but not as much as you think. Men are evil when they are frightened or bored. They are good when they are happy and busy. I want you to give your money to provide games, sports, competitions, shows, music, and a chance for honest hatred."

"Hatred?" said Rod. "I was beginning to think that I had found a Believer bird ... somebody who mouthed old magic."

"We're not ending time," said the great man-bird. "We are just altering the material conditions of man's situation for the present historical period. We want to steer mankind away from tragedy and self-defeat. Though the cliffs crumble, we want man to remain. Do you know Swinburne?"

"Where is it?" said Rod.

"It's not a place. It's a poet, before the age of space. He wrote this. Listen:

Till the slow sea rise and the sheer cliff crumble,  
Till terrace and meadow the deep gulfs drink,  
Till the strength of the waves of the high tides crumble,  
The fields that lessen, the rocks that shrink,  
Here now in his triumph where all things falter,  
Stretched out on the spoils that his own hand spread,  
As a god self-slain on his own strange altar,  
Death lies dead.

Do you agree with that?"

"It sounds nice, but I don't understand it," said Rod. "Please, sir, I'm tired than I thought. And I have only this one day with C'mell. Can I finish the business with you and have a little time with her?"

The great underman lifted his arms. His wings spread like a canopy over Rod.

"So be it!" he said, and the words rang out like a great song.

Rod could see the lips of the underpeople chorusing, but he did not notice the sound.

"I offer you a tangible bargain. Tell me if you find I read your mind correctly."

Rod nodded, somewhat in awe.

"You want your money, but you do not want it. You will keep one hundred thousand credits, which will leave you the richest man in Old North Australia for the rest of a very long life. The rest you will give to a foundation which will teach men to hate easily and lightly, as in a game not sickly and wearily, as in habit. The trustees will be Lords of the Instrumentality whom I know, such as Jestocost, Crudelta, and Lady Johanna Gnade."

"And what do I get?"

"Your heart's desire." The beautiful wise pale face stared down at Rod like a father seeking to fathom the puzzlement of his own child. Rod was a little afraid of the face, but he confided in it, too.

"I want too much. I can't have it all."

"I'll tell you what you want.

"You want to be home right now, and all the trouble done with. I can set you down at the Station of Doom in a single long jump. Look at the floor - I have your books and your postage stamp which you left in Amaral's room. They go too."

"But I want to see Earth."

"Come back, when you are older and wiser. Some day. See what your money has done."

"Well -" said Rod.

"You want C'mell." The bland wise white face showed no embarrassment, no anger, no condescension. "You shall have her, in a linked dream, her mind to yours, for a happy subjective time of about a thousand years. You will live through all the happy things that you might have done together if you had stayed here and become a c'man. You will see your kitten- children flourish, grow old, and die. That will take about one half-hour."

"It's just a dreamy," said Rod. "You want to take megacredits from me and give me a dreamy!"

"With two minds? Two living, accelerated minds, thinking into each other? Have you ever heard of that?"

"No," said Rod.

"Do you trust me?" said the E-telekeli.

Rod stared at the man-bird inquisitively and a great weight fell from him. He did trust this creature more than he had ever trusted the father who did not want him, the mother who gave him up, the neighbors who looked at him and were kind. He sighed, "I trust you."

"I also," added the E-telekeli, "will take care of all the little incidentals through my own network and I will leave the memory of them in your mind. If you trust me that should be enough. You get home, safe. You are protected, off Norstritia, into which I rarely reach, for as long as you live. You have a separate life right now with C'mell and you will remember most of it. In return, you go to the wall and transfer your fortune, minus one-half megac, to the Foundation of Rod McBan."

Rod did not see that the underpeople thronged around him like worshipers. He had to stop when a very pale, tall girl took his hand and held it to her cheek. "You may not be the Promised One, but you are a great and good man. We can take nothing from you. We can only ask. That is the teaching of Joan. And you have given."

"Who are you?" said Rod in a frightened voice, thinking that she might be some lost human girl whom the underpeople had abducted to the guts of the Earth.

"E-lamelanie, daughter of the E-telekeli."

Rod stared at her and went to the wall. He pushed a routine sort of button. What a place to find it! "The Lord Jestocost," he called. "McBan speaking. No, you fool, I own this system."

A handsome, polished plumpish man appeared on the screen. "If I guess right," said the strange man, "You are the first human being ever to get into the depths. Can I serve you, mister and owner McBan?"

"Take a note" said the E-telekeli, out of sight of the machine, beside Rod.

Rod repeated it.

The Lord Jestocost called witnesses at his end.

It was a long dictation, but at last the conveyance was finished. Only at one point did Rod balk. When they tried to call it the McBan Foundation, he, said, "Just call it the One Hundred and Fifty Fund."

"One Hundred and Fifty?" asked Jestocost.

"For my father. It's his number in our family. I'm to-the-hundred-and-fifty-first. He was before me. Don't explain the number. Just use it."

"All clear," said Jestocost. "Now we have to get notaries and official witnesses to veridicate our imprints of your eyes, hands and brain. Ask the Person with you to give you a mask, so that the cat-man face will not upset the witnesses. Where is this machine you are using supposed to be located? I know perfectly well where I think it is."

"At the foot of Alpha Ralpa, in a forgotten market," said the E-telekeli. "Your servicemen will find it there tomorrow when they come to check the authenticity of the machine." He still stood out of line of sight of the machine, so that Jestocost could hear him but not see him.

"I know the voice," said Jestocost. "It comes to me as in a great dream. But I shall not ask to see the face."

"Your friend down here has gone where only underpeople go," said the E-telekeli, "and we are disposing of his fate in more ways than one, my Lord, subject to your gracious approval."

"My approval does not seem to have been needed much," snorted Jestocost, with a little laugh.

"I would like to talk to you. Do you have any intelligent underperson near you?"

"I can call C'mell. She's always somewhere around."

"This time, my Lord, you cannot. She's here."

"There, with you? I never knew she went there." The amazement showed on the face of the Lord Jestocost.

"She is here, nevertheless. Do you have some other underperson?"

Rod felt like a dummy, standing in the visiphone while the two voices, unseen by one another, talked past him. But he felt, very truly, that they both wished him well. He was almost nervous in anticipation of the strange happiness which had been offered to him and C'mell, but he was a respectful enough young man to wait until the great ones got through their business.

"Wait a moment," said Jestocost.

On the screen, in the depths, Rod could see the Lord of the Instrumentality work the controls of other, secondary screens. A moment later Jestocost answered:

"B'dank is here. He will enter the room in a few minutes."

"Twenty minutes from now, my sir and Lord, will you hold hands with your servant B'dank as you once did with C'mell? I have the problem of this young man and his return. There are things which you do not know, and I would rather not put them on the wires."

Jestocost hesitated only for the slightest of moments. "Good, then," he laughed. "I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The E-telekeli stood aside. Someone handed Rod a mask which hid his cat-man features and still left his eyes and hands exposed. The brain print was gotten through the eyes.

The recordings were made.

Rod went back to the bench and table. He helped himself to another drink of water from the carafe. Someone threw a wreath of fresh flowers around his shoulders. Fresh flowers! In such a place.... He wondered. Three rather pretty undergirls, two of them of cat origin and one of them derived from dogs, were leading a freshly dressed C'mell toward him. She wore the simplest and most modest of all possible white dresses. Her waist was cinched by a broad golden belt. She laughed, stopped laughing and then blushed as they led her to Rod.

Two seats were arranged on the bench. Cushions were disposed so that both of them would be comfortable. Silky metallic caps, like the pleasure caps used in surgeries, were fitted on their heads. Rod felt his sense of smell explode within his brain; it came alive richly and suddenly. He took C'mell by the hand and began walking through an immemorial Earth forest, with a temple older than time shining in the clear soft light cast by Earth's old moon. He knew that he was already dreaming. C'mell caught his thought and said,

"Rod, my master and lover, this is a dream. But I am in it with you...."

Who can measure a thousand years of happy dreaming - the travels, the hunts, the picnics, the visits to forgotten and empty cities, the discovery of beautiful views and strange places? And the love, and the sharing, and the re-reflection of everything wonderful and strange by two separate, distinct and utterly harmonious personalities. C'mell the c'girl and C'roderick the c'man: they seemed happily doomed to be with one another. Who can live whole centuries of real bliss and then report it in minutes? Who can tell the full tale of such real lives - happiness, quarrels, reconciliations, problems, solutions and always sharing, happiness, and more sharing?...

When they awakened Rod very gently, they let C'mell sleep on. He looked down at himself and expected to find himself old. But he was a young man still, in the deep forgotten underground of the E-telekeli, and he could not even smell. He reached for the thousand wonderful years as he watched C'mell, young again, lying on the bench, but the dream-years had started fading even as he reached for them.

Rod stumbled on his feet. They led him to a chair. The E-telekeli sat in adjacent chair, at the same table. He seemed weary.

"My mister and owner McBAn, I monitored your dreamsharing, just to make sure it stayed in the right general direction. I hope you are satisfied."

Rod nodded, very slowly, and reached for the carafe of water, which someone had refilled while he slept.

"While you slept, mister McBAn," said the great E-Man, "I had a telepathic conference, with the Lord Jestocost, who has been your friend, even though you do not know him. You have heard of the new automatic planoform ships?"

"They are experimental," said Rod.

"So they are," said the E-telekeli, "but perfectly safe. And the best 'automatic' ones are not automatic at all. They have snakemen pilots. My pilots. They can outperform any pilots of the Instrumentality."

"Of course," said Rod, "because they are dead."

"No more dead than I," laughed the white calm bird of the underground. "I put them in cataleptic trances, with the help of my son the doctor E-ikusus, whom you first knew as the monkey-doctor A'gentur. On the ships they wake up. One of them can take you to Norstrilia in a single long fast jump. And my son can work on your right here. We have a good medical workshop in one of those rooms. After all, it was he who restored you under the supervision of Doctor Vomact on Mars. It will seem like a single night to you, though it will be several days in objective time. If you say good-bye to me now, and if you are ready to go, you will wake up in orbit just outside the Old North Australian subspace net. I have no wish for one of my underpeople to tear himself to pieces if he meets Mother Hitton's dreadful little kittens, whatever they may be. Do you happen to know?"

"I don't," said Rod quickly, "and if I did, I couldn't tell you. It's the Queen's secret."

"The Queen?"

"The Absent Queen. We use it to mean the Commonwealth government. Anyhow, mister bird, I can't go now. I've got to go back up to the surface of Earth. I want to say good-bye to the Catmaster. And I'm not going to leave this planet and abandon Eleanor. And I want my stamp that the Catmaster gave me. And the books. And maybe I should report about the death of Tostig Amaral."

"Do you trust me, mister and owner McBan?" The white giant rose to his feet; his eyes shone like fire.

The underpeople spontaneously chorused, "Put your trust in the joyful lawful, put your trust in the awful bright blank power of the underbird!"

"I've trusted you with my life and my fortune, so far," said Rod, a little sullenly, "but you're not going to make me leave Eleanor - no matter how much I want to get home. And I have an old enemy at home that I want to help. Houghton Syme, the Hon.Sec. There might be something on Old Earth which I could take back to him."

"I think you can trust me a little further," said the E-telekeli. "Would it solve the problem of the Hon.Sec. if you gave him a dreamshare with someone he loved, to make up his having a short life?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I can," said the master of the underpeople, "have his prescription made up. It will have to be mixed with plasma from his blood before he takes it. It would be good for about three thousand years of subjective life. We have never let this out of our own undercity before, but you are the Friend of Earth, and you shall have it."

Rod tried to stammer his thanks, but he mumbled something about Eleanor instead: he just couldn't leave her.

The white giant took Rod by the arm and led him back to the visiphone, still oddly out of place in this forgotten room, so far underground.

"You know," said the white giant, "that I will not trick you with false messages or anything like that?"

One look at the strong, calm, relaxed face - a face so purposeful that it had no fretful or immediate purpose - convinced Rod that there was nothing to fear.

"Tune it, then," said the E-telekeli. "If Eleanor wants to go home we will arrange with the Instrumentality for her passage. As for you, my son E-ikusus will change you back as he



changed you over. There is only one detail. Do you want the face you originally had or do you want it to reflect the wisdom and experience I have seen you gain?"

"I'm not posh," said Rod. "The same old face will do. If I am any wiser, my people will find it out soon enough."

"Good. He will get ready. Meanwhile, turn on the visiphone. It is already set to search for your fellow-citizen."

Rod flicked it on. There was a bewildering series of flashes and a kaleidoscopic dazzlement of scenes before the machine seemed to race along the beach at Meeya Meefia and searched out Eleanor. This was a very strange screen indeed: it had no visiphone at the other end. He could see Eleanor, looking exactly like his Norstrilian self, but she could not observe that she was being seen.

The machine focused on Eleanor/Rod McBan's face. She/he was talking to a very pretty woman, oddly mixed Norstrilian and Earth-like in appearance.

"Ruth Not-from-here," murmured the E-telekeli, "the daughter of the Lord William Not- from-here, a Chief of the Instrumentality. He wanted his daughter to marry 'you' so that they could return to Norstrilia. Look at the daughter. She is annoyed at 'you' right now."

Ruth was sitting on the beach, twisting away at her fingers in nervousness and worry, but her fingers and face showed more anger than despair. She was speaking to Eleanor, the 'Rod McBan.'

"My father just told me!" Ruth cried out. "Why, oh why did you give all your money for a Foundation of some kind? The Instrumentality just told him. I just don't understand. There's no point in us getting one of those Australian marriages now -"

"Suits me," said Eleanor/Rod McBan.

"Suits you, does it!" shrieked Ruth. "After the advantages you've taken of me!"

The false Rod McBan merely smiled at her friendly and knowledgeably. The real Rod, watching the picture ten kilometers below, thought that Eleanor seemed to have learned a great deal about how to be a young rich man on Earth.

Ruth's face changed suddenly. She broke from anger to laughter. She showed her bewilderment. "I must admit," she said honestly, "That I didn't really want to go back to the old family home in Old North Australia. The simple, honest life, a little on the stupid side. No oceans. No cities. Just sick, giant sheep and worlds full of money with nothing to spend it on. I like Earth and I suppose I'm decadent...."

Rod/Eleanor smiled right back at her. "Maybe I'm decadent too. I'm not poor. I can't help liking you. I don't want to marry anybody. But I have big credits here, and I enjoy being a young man -"

"I should say you do!" said Ruth. "What an odd thing for you to say!"

The false "Rod McBan" gave no sign that he/she noted the interruption. "I've just about decided to stay here and enjoy things. Everybody's rich in Norstrilia, but what good does it do? It had gotten pretty dull for me, I can tell you, or I wouldn't have taken the risk of coming here. Yes. I think I'll stay. I know that Rod -" He/she gasped, "Rod MacArthur, I mean, a sort of relative of mine - Rod can get the tax taken off my personal fortune so that I can stay right here."

("I will, too," said the real Rod McBan, far below the surface of the Earth.)

"You're welcome here, my dear," said Ruth Not-from-here to the false Rod McBan.

Down below, the E-telekeli gestured at the screen. "Seen enough?" he said to Rod.

"Enough," said Rod, "but make sure that she knows I am all right and that I am trying to take care of her. Can you get in touch with the Lord Jestocost or somebody and arrange for Eleanor to stay here and keep her fortune? Tell her to use the name of the owners of the Station of Doom, but I don't think Earthpeople will notice the difference anyhow. She'll know it's all right with me, and that's all that matters. If she really likes it here in a copy of my body, may the great sheep sit on her!"

"An odd blessing," said the E-telekeli, "but it can all be arranged."

Rod made no move to leave. He had turned off the screen, but he just stood there.

"Something else?" said the E-telekeli.

"C'Mell," said Rod.

"She's all right," said the lord of the underworld. "She expects nothing from you. She's a good underperson."

"I want to do something for her."

"There is nothing she wants. She is happy. You do not need to meddle."

"She won't be a girlygirl forever," Rod insisted. "You underpeople get old. I don't know how you manage without stroon."

"Neither do I," said the E-telekeli. "I just happen to have long life. But you're right about her. She will age soon enough, by your kind of time."

"I'd like to buy the restaurant for her, the one the bear-man has, and let it become a sort of meeting place open to people and underpeople. She could give it the romantic and interesting touch so that it could be a success."

"A wonderful idea. A perfect project for your Foundation," smiled the E-telekeli. "It shall be done."

"And the Catmaster?" asked Rod. "Is there anything I can do for him?"

"No, do not concern yourself with C'william," said the E-telekeli. "He is under the protection of the Instrumentality and he knows the sign of the Fish." The great underman paused to give Rod a chance to inquire what that sign might be, but Rod did not note the significance of the pause, so the bird-like giant went on. "C'william has already received his reward in the good change which he has made in your life. Now, if you are ready, we will put you to sleep, my son E-ikasus will change you out of your cat-body and you will wake in orbit around your home."

"C'mell? Can you wake her up so I can say goodbye after that thousand years?"

The master of the underworld took Rod gently by the arm and walked him across the huge underground room, talking as they went. "Would you want to have another good-bye, after that thousand years she remembers with you, if you were she? Let her be. It is kinder this way. You are human. You can afford to be rich with kindness. It is one of the best traits which you human people have."

Rod stopped. "Do you have a recorder of some kind, then? She welcomed me to Earth with a wonderful little song about 'high birds crying' and I want to leave one of our Norstrilian songs for her."

"Sing anything," said the E-telekeli, "and the chorus of my attendants will remember it as long as they live. The others would appreciate it, too."

Rod looked around at the underpeople who had followed them. For a moment he was embarrassed at singing to all of them, but when he saw their warm, adoring smiles, he was at ease with them. "Remember this, then, and be sure to sing it to C'mell for me, when she awakens." He lifted his voice a little and sang:

Run where the ram is dancing, prancing!

Listen where the ewe is greeting, bleating.

Rush where the lambs are running, funning.

Watch where the stroon is growing, flowing.

See how the men are reaping, heaping

Wealth for their world!

Look, where the hills are dipping, ripping.

Sit where the air is drying, frying.

Go where the clouds are pacing, racing,

Stand where the wealth is gleaming, teeming.

Shout to the top of the singing, ringing

Norstrilian power and pride.

The chorus sang it back at him with a wealth and richness which he had never heard in the little song before.

"And now," said the E-telekeli, "the blessing of the First Forbidden One be upon you." The giant bowed a little and kissed Rod McBan on the forehead. Rod thought it strange and started to speak, but the eyes were upon him.

Eyes - like twin fires.

Fire - like friendship, like warmth, like a welcome and a farewell.

Eyes - which became a single fire.

He awakened only when he was in orbit around Old North Australia.

The descent was easy. The ship had a viewer. The snake-pilot said very little. He put Rod down in the Station of Doom, a few hundred meters from his own door. He left two heavy packages. An Old North Australian patrol ship hovered overhead and the air hummed with danger while Norstrilian police floated to the ground and made sure that no one besides Rod McBan got off. The Earth ship whispered and was gone.

"I'll give you a hand, mister," said one of the police. He clutched Rod with one, mechanical claw of his ornithopter, caught the two packages in the other, and flung his machine into the air with a single beat of the giant wings. They coasted into the yard, the wings tipped up, Red and his packages were deposited deftly and the machine flapped away in silence.

There was nobody there. He knew that Aunt Doris would come soon. And Lavinia. Lavinia! Here, now, on this dear poor dry earth, he knew how much Lavinia suited him. Now he could spiek, he could hier!

It was strange. Yesterday - or was it yesterday (for it felt like yesterday)? - he had felt very young indeed. And now, since his visit to the Catmaster, he felt somehow grown up, as if he had discovered all his personal ingrown problems and had left them behind on Old Earth. He seemed to know in his deepest mind that C'mell had never been more than nine-tenths his, and that the other tenth - the most valuable and beautiful and most secret tenth of her life - was forever given to some other man or underman whom he would never know. He felt that C'mell would never give her heart again. And yet he kept for her a special kind of tenderness, which would never recur. It was not marriage which they had had, but it was pure romance.

But here, here waited home itself, and love. Lavinia was in it, dear Lavinia with her mad lost father and her kindness to a Rod who had not let much kindness into his life.

Suddenly, the words of an old poem rose unbidden to his mind:

Ever. Never. Forever.

Three worlds. The lever

Of life upon time.

Ever. Never. Forever.

He spieked. He spieked very loud, "Lavinia!"

Beyond the hill the cry came back, right into his mind, "Rod, Rod! Oh, Rod! Rod?"

"Yes," he spieked. "Don't run. I'm home."

He felt her mind coming near, though she must have been beyond one of the nearby hills. When he touched minds with Lavinia, he knew that this was her ground, and his too. Not for them the wet wonders of Earth, the golden-haired beauties of C'mell and Earth people! He knew without doubt that Lavinia would love and recognize the new Rod as she had loved the old.

He waited very quietly and then he laughed to himself under the gray nearby friendly sky of Norstrilia. He had momentarily had the childish impulse to rush across the hills and to kiss his own computer.

He waited for Lavinia instead.

## CHAPTER NINE: COUNSELS, COUNCILS, CONSOLES AND CONSULS

Ten years later, two earth-men talking

"You don't believe all the malarkey, do you?"

"What's 'marlarkey'?"

"Isn't that a beautiful word? It's ancient. A robot dug it up. It means rubbish, hooey, nonsense, gibberish, phlutt, idle talk or hallucinations - in other words, just what you've been saying."

"You mean, about a boy buying the planet Earth?"

"Sure. He couldn't do it, not even with Norstrilian money. There are too many regulations. It was just an economic adjustment."

"What's an 'economic adjustment'?"

"That's another ancient word I found. It's almost as good as malarkey. It does have some meaning, though. It means that the masters rearrange things by changing the volume or the flow or the title to property. The Instrumentality wanted to shake down the Earth government and get some more free credits to play around with, so between them they invented an imaginary character named Rod McBan. Then, they had him buy the Earth. Then he goes away. It doesn't make sense. No normal boy would have done that. They say he had one million women. What do you think a normal boy would do if somebody gave him one million women?"

"You're not proving anything. Anyhow, I saw Rod McBan myself, two years ago."

"That's the other one, not the one who is supposed to have bought Earth. That's just a rich immigrant who lives down near Meeya Meefia. I could tell you some things about him, too."

"But why shouldn't somebody buy Earth if he corners the Norstrilian stroon market?"

"Who ever cornered it in the first place? I tell you, Rod McBan is just an invention. Have you ever seen a picturebox of him?"

"No."

"Did you ever know anybody who met him?"

"I heard that the Lord Jestocost was mixed up in it, and that expensive girlygirl What's-her-name - you know - the redhead - C'mell, was too."

"That's what you heard. Malarkey, pure genuine ancient malarkey. There was no such boy, ever. It's all propaganda."

"You're always that way. Grumbling. Doubting. I'm glad I'm not you."

"Pal, that's real, real reciprocal. 'Better dead than gullible,' that's my motto."

On a planofforming ship, outbound from Earth, also ten years later.

The Stop-captain, talking to a passenger, female:

"I'm glad to see, ma'am, that you didn't buy any of those Earth fashions. Back home, the air would take them off you in half minute."

"I'm old-fashioned," she smiled. Then a thought crossed her mind, and she added a question: "You're in the space business, sir and Stop-captain. Did you ever hear the story of Rod McBAn? I think it's thrilling."

"You mean, the boy who bought Earth?"

"Yes," she gasped. "Is it true?"

"Completely true," he said, "except for one little detail. This 'Rod McBAn' wasn't named that at all. He wasn't a Norstrilian. He was a hominoid from some other world, and he was buying the Earth with pirate money. They wanted to get his credits away from him, but he may have been a Wet Stinker from Amazonas Triste or he may have been one of those little tiny men, about the size of a walnut, from the Solid Planet. That's why he bought Earth and left it so suddenly. You see, ma'am and dame, no Old North Australian ever thinks about anything except his money. They even have one of the ancient forms of government still left on that planet, and they would never let one of their own boys buy Earth. They'd all sit around and talk him into putting it in a savings account, instead. They're clannish people. That's why I don't think it was a Norstrilian at all."

The woman's eyes widened. "You're spoiling a lovely story for me, mister and Stop- captain."

"Don't call me 'mister,' ma'am. That's a Norstrilian title. I'm just a plain 'sir.' "

They both stared at the little imaginary waterfall on the wall.

Before the Stop-captain went back to his work, he added, "For my money, it must have been one of those little tiny men from the Solid Planet. Only a fool like that would buy the dower rights to a million women. We're both grown up, ma'am. I ask you, what would an itty-bitty man from the Solid Planet do with one Earth woman, let alone a million of them?"

She giggled and blushed as the Stop-captain stamped triumphantly away, having gotten in his last masculine word.

E'lamelanie, two years after Earth

"Father, give me hope."

The E-telekeli was gentle. "I can give you almost anything from this world, but you are talking about the world of the sign of the Fish, which none of us controls. You had better go back into the everyday life of our cavern and not spend so much time on your devotional exercises, if they make you unhappy."

She stared at him. "It's not that. It's not that at all. It's just that I know that the robot, the rat and the Copt all agreed that the Promised One would come here to Earth." A desperate note entered her voice. "Father, could it have been Rod McBAn?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could he have been the Promised One, without my knowing it? Could he have come and gone just to test my faith?"

The bird-giant rarely laughed; he had never laughed at his own daughter before. But this was too absurd: he laughed at her, but a wise part of his mind told him that the laughter, though cruel now, would be good for her later on.

"Rod? A promised speaker of the truth? Oh, no. Ho - ho - ho. Rod McBan is one of the nicest human beings I ever met. A good young man, almost like a bird. But he's no messenger from eternity."

The daughter bowed and turned away.

She had already composed a tragedy about herself, the mistaken one, who had met "the prince of the word," whom the worlds awaited, and had failed to know him because her faith was too weak. The strain of waiting for something that might happen now or a million years from now was too much. It was easier to accept failure and self-reproach than to endure the timeless torment of undated hope.

She had a little nook in the wall where she spent many of her waiting hours. She took out a little stringed instrument which her father had made for her. It emitted ancient, weeping sounds, and she sang her own little song to it, the song of E-lamelanie who was trying to give up waiting for Rod McBan.

She looked out into the room.

A little girl, wearing nothing but panties, stared at her with fixed eyes. E-lamelanie looked back at the child. It had no expression; it just stared at her. She wondered if it might be one of the turtle-children whom her father had rescued several years earlier.

She looked away from the child and sang her song anyhow:

Once again, across the years,

I wept for you.

I could not stop the bitter tears

I kept for you.

The hearthstone of my early life

Was swept for you.

A different, modulated time

awaits me now.

Yet there are moments when the past

asks why and how.

The future marches much too fast.

Allow, allow -

But no. That's all. Across the years

I wept for you.

When she finished, the turtle-child was still watching. Almost angrily, E-lamelanie put away her little violin.

What the turtle-child thought, at the same moment

I know a lot even if I don't feel like talking about it and I know that the most wonderful real man in all the planets came right down here into this big room and talked to these people because he is the man that the long silly girl is singing about because she does not have him but why should she anyhow and I am really the one who is going to get him because I am a turtle- child and I will be right here waiting when all these people are dead and pushed down into the dissolution vats and someday he will come back to earth and I will be all grown up and I will be a turtle-woman, more beautiful than any human woman ever was, and he is going to marry me and take me off to his planet and I will always be happy with him because I will not argue all the time, the way that bird-people and cat-people and dog-people do, so that when Rod McBan is my husband and I rush dinner out of the wall for him, if he tries to argue with me I will just be shy and sweet and I won't say anything, nothing at all, to him for one hundred years and for two hundred years, and nobody could get mad at a beautiful turtle-woman who never talked back....

The Council of the Guild of Thieves, under Viola Siderea

The herald called, "His audacity, the Chief of thieves, is pleased to report to the Council of Thieves!"

An old man stood, very ceremoniously: "You bring us wealth, sir and chief, we trust - from the gullible - from the weak - from the heartless among mankind?"

The Chief of Thieves proclaimed,

"It is the matter of Rod McBan."

A visible stir went through the Council.

The Chief of Thieves went on, with equal formality: "We never did intercept him in space, though we monitored every vehicle which came out of the sticky, sparky space around Norstrilia. Naturally, we did not send anyone down to meet Mother Hitton's Littul Kittons - may the mildew-men find them! whatever those 'kittons' may be. There was a coffin with a woman in it and a small box with a head. Never mind. He got past us. But when he got to Earth, we caught four of him."

"Four?" gasped one old Councilor.

"Yes," said the Chief Of Thieves. "Four Rod McBans. There was a human one, too, but we could tell that one was a decoy. It had originally been a woman and was enjoying itself hugely after having been transformed into a young man. So we got four Rod McBans. All four of them were Earth robots, very well made."

"You stole them?" said a Councilor.

"Of course," said the Chief of Thieves, thinkg like a human wolf. "And the Earth government made no objection at all. The Earth government simply sent us a bill for them when we tried to leave - something like one-fourth megacredit 'for the use of custom designed robots.' "

"That's a low honest trick!" cried the Chairman of the Guild of Thieves. "What did you do?" His eyes stared wide open and his voice dropped. "You didn't turn honest and charge the bill to us, did you? We're already in debt to those honest rogues!"



The Chief of Thieves squirmed a little. "Not quite that bad, your tricky highnesses! I cheated the Earth some, though I fear it may have bordered on honesty, the way I did it."

"What did you do? Tell us quick, man!"

"Since I did not get the real Rod McBan, I took the robots apart and taught them how to be thieves. They stole enough money to pay all the penalties and recoup the expense of the voyage."

"You show a profit?" cried a Councilor.

"Forty minicredits," said the Chief of Thieves. "But the worst is yet to come. You know what Earth does to real thieves."

A shudder went through the room. They all knew about Earth reconditioners which had changed bold thieves into dull honest rogues.

"But, you see, sirs and honored ones," the Chief of Thieves went on, apologetically, "the Earth authorities caught us at that, too. They liked the thief robots. They made wonderful pickpockets and they kept the people stirred up. The robots also gave everything back. So," said the Chief of Thieves, blushing, "we have a contract to turn two thousand humanoid robots into pickpockets and sneak-thieves. Just to make life on Earth more fun. The robots are out in orbit, right now."

"You mean," shrilled the Chairman, "you signed an honest contract? You, the Chief of Thieves!"

The Chief really blushed and choked. "What could I do? Besides, they had me. I got good terms, though. Two hundred and twenty credits for processing each robot into a master thief. We can live well on that for a while."

For a long time there was dead silence.

At last one of the oldest Thieves on the Council began to sob: "I'm old. I can't stand it. The horror of it! Us - us doing honest work!"

"We're at least teaching the robots how to be thieves," said the Chief of Thieves, starkly.

No one commented on that.

Even the herald had to step aside and blow his nose.

At Meeva Meefia, twenty years after Rod's trip home

Roderick Henry McBan, the former Eleanor, had become only imperceptibly older with the years. He had sent away his favorite, the little dancer, and he wondered why the Instrumentality, not even the Earth government, had sent him official warning to "stay peaceably in the dwelling of the said stated person, there to await an empowered envoy of this Instrument" and to comply with orders subsequently to be issued by the envoy hereinbefore indicated."

Roderick Henry McBan remembered the long years of virtue, independence and drudgery on Norstrilia with unconcealed loathing. He liked being a rich, wild young man on Earth ever so much better than being a respectable spinster under the gray skies of Old North Australia. When he dreamed, he was sometimes Eleanor again, and he sometimes had long morbid periods in which he was neither Eleanor nor Rod, but a nameless being cast out from some world or time of irrecoverable enchantments. In those gloomy periods, which were few but

very intense, and usually cured by getting drunk and staying drunk for a few days, he found himself wondering who he was. What could he be? Was he Eleanor, the honest workwoman from the Station of Doom? Was he an adoptive cousin of Rod McBan, the man who had bought Old Earth Itself? What was this self - this Roderick Henry McBan? He maundered about it so much to one of his girlfriends, a calypso singer, that she set his own words, better arranged, to an ancient tune and sang them back to him:

To be me, is it right, is it good?  
To go on, when the others have stood -  
To the gate, through the door, past the wall,  
Between this and the nothing-at-all.  
It is cold, it is me, in the out.  
I am true, I am me, in the lone.  
Such silence leaves room for no doubt.  
It is brightness unbroken by tone.  
To be me, it is strange, it is true.  
Shall I lie? To be them, to have peace?  
Will I know, can I tell, when I'm through?  
Do I stop when my troubles must cease?  
If the wall isn't glass, isn't there  
If it's real but compounded of air,  
Am I lost if I go where I go  
Where I'm me? I am yes. Am I no?  
To be me, is it right, is it so?  
Can I count on my brain, on my eye?  
Will I be you or be her by and bye?  
Are they true, all these things that I know?  
You are mad, in the wall. On the out,  
I'm alone and as sane as the grave.  
Do I fall, do I lose what I save?  
Am I me, if I echo your shout?  
I have gone to a season of time....  
Out of thought, out of life, out of rhyme.  
If I come to be you, do I lose  
The chance to be me if I choose?

Rod/Eleanor had moments of desperation, and sometimes wondered if the Earth authorities or the Instrumentality would take him/her away from reconditioning.

The warning today was formal, fierce, serene in its implacable self-assurance.

Against his/her better judgment, Roderick Henry McBan poured out a stiff drink and waited for the inevitable.

Destiny came as three men, all of them strangers, but one wearing the uniform of an Old North Australia consul. When they got close, she recognized the consul as Lord William Not-from-here, with whose daughter Ruth he/she had disported on these very sands many years before.

The greetings were wearisomely long, but Rod/Eleanor had learned, both on Old North Australia and here on Manhome Earth, never to discount ceremony as the salvager of difficult or painful occasions. It was the Lord William Not-from-here who spoke.

"Hear now, Lord Roderick Eleanor, the message of a plenum of the Instrumentality, lawfully and formally assembled, to wit -

"That you, the Lord Roderick Eleanor be known to be and be indeed a Chief of the Instrumentality until the day of your death -

"That you have earned this status by survival capacity, and that the strange and difficult lives which you have already led with no thought of suicide have earned you a place in our terrible and dutiful ranks -

"That in being and becoming the Lord Roderick Eleanor, you shall be man or woman, young or old, as the Instrumentality may order -

"That you take power to serve, that you serve to take power, that you come with us, that you look not backward, that you remember to forget, that you forget old remembering, that within the Instrumentality you are not a person, but a part of a person -

"That you be made welcome to the oldest servant of mankind, the Instrumentality Itself."

Roderick Eleanor had not a word to say.

Newly appointed Lords of the Instrumentality rarely had anything to say. It was the custom of the Instrumentality to take new appointees by surprise, after minute examination of their records for intelligence, will, vitality, and again, vitality.

The Lord William was smiling as he held out his hand and speaking in off-worldly honest Norstrilian talk, "Welcome, cousin from the gray rich clouds. Not many of our people have ever been chosen. Let me welcome you."

Roderick Eleanor took his hand. There was still nothing to say.

The Palace of the Governor of Night, twenty years after Rod's return

"I turned off the human voice hours ago, Lavinia. Turned it off. We always get a sharper reading with the numbers. It doesn't have a clue on our boys. I've been across this console a hundred times. Come along, old girl. It's no use predicting the future. The future is already here. Our boys will be out of the van, one way or the other, by the time we walk over the hill and down to them." He spoke with his voice, as a little sign of tenderness between them.

Lavinia asked nervously, "Shouldn't we take an ornithopter and fly?"

"No, girl," said Rod tenderly. "What would our neighbors and kinsmen think if they saw the parents flying in like wild off-worlders or a pair of crimson pommies who can't keep a steady head when there's a bit of blow-up. After all, our big girl Casheba made it two years ago, and her eyes weren't so good."

"She's a howler, that one," said Lavinia warmly. "She could fight off a space pirate even better than you could before you could spiek."

They walked slowly up the hill.

When they crossed the top of the hill, they got the ominous melody coming right at them:

Out in the garden of death, our young

Have tasted the valiant taste of fear.

With muscular arm and reckless tongue,

They have won, and lost, and escaped us here.

In one form or another, all Old North Australians knew that tune. It was what the old people hummed when the young ones had to go into the vans to be selected out for survival or nonsurvival.

They saw the judges come out of the van. The Hon.Sec. Houghton Syme was there, his face bland and his cares erased by the special dreamlives which Rod's medicine had brought from the secret underground of Earth. The Lord Redlady was there, and Doctor Wentworth.

Lavinia started to run downhill toward the people, but Rod grabbed her arm and said with rough affection,

"Steady on, old girl. McBans never run - from nothing, and to nothing!"

She gulped but she joined pace with him.

People began looking up at them as they approached.

Nothing was to be told from the expressions.

It was the Lord Redlady, unconventional to the end, who broke the sign to them.

He held up one finger.

Only one.

Immediately thereafter Rod and Lavinia saw their twins. Ted, the fairer one, sat on a chair while Old Bill tried to give him a drink. Ted wouldn't take it. He looked across the land as though he could not believe what he saw. Rich, the darker twin, stood all alone.

All alone, and laughing.

Laughing.

Rod McBan and his missus walked across the land of Doom to be civil to their neighbors. This was indeed what inexorable custom commanded. She squeezed his hand a little tighter; he held her arm a little more firmly.

After a long time they had done their formal courtesies. Rod pulled Ted to his feet. "Hullo, boy. You made it. You know who you are?"

Mechanically the boy recited, "Roderick Frederick Ronald Arnold William MacArthur McBan to-the-hundred-and-fifty-second, sir and father!"

Then the boy broke, for just a moment. He pointed at Rich, who was still laughing, off by himself, and then plunged for his father's hug:

"O, dad! Why me? Why me?"

## **CORDWAINER SMITH: THE SHAPER OF MYTHS**

### **(Introduction to "The Best of Cordwainer Smith")**

In an obscure and short-lived magazine called *Fantasy Book*, there appeared in 1950 a story called

"Scanners Live in Vain."

No one had ever heard of the author, Cordwainer Smith. And it appeared for a time that he would

never be heard from again in the world of science fiction.

But "Scanners Live in Vain" was a story that refused to die, and its republication in two anthologies

encouraged the elusive Smith to begin submitting to other SF markets.

Today, he is recognized as one of the most creative SF writers of modern times. But, paradoxically,

he is one of the least known or understood. Until shortly before his death, his very identity was a closely

guarded secret.

Not that Dr. Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-66) was ashamed of science fiction. He was

proud of the field, and had even boasted once to the *Baltimore Sun* that SF had attracted more Ph.D.'s

than any other branch of fiction.

But he was a sensitive, emotional writer—and reluctant to become involved with his readers—to be

forced to "explain" himself in a way that might destroy the spontaneity of his work.

Beyond that, he probably enjoyed being a man of mystery, as elusive as some of the allusions in his

stories. Smith was a mythmaker in science fiction, and perhaps it takes a somewhat mythical figure to

create true myths.

A new acquaintance unsure of the number of syllables in Dr. Linebarger's name would be answered

by a significant gesture to the three Chinese characters on his tie. Only later would he learn the characters

stood for Lin Bah Loh, or "Forest of Incandescent Bliss"—the name given him as godson to Sun Yat

Sen, founder of the Chinese Republic.

Dr. Linebarger's life was certainly several cuts above the ordinary.

At the age of seventeen, he negotiated a silver loan for China on behalf of his father—Sun's legal

advisor and one of the financiers of the Revolution of 1911. He later became a colonel in U.S. Army

Intelligence, despite partial blindness and general ill health—he once shocked guests at a dinner party by

downing a "cocktail" of hydrochloric acid to aid his digestion.

Although born in Milwaukee—his father wanted to be sure that as a natural-born citizen his son would be eligible for the presidency—Linebarger spent his formative years in Japan, China, France and Germany. By the time he grew up, he knew six languages and had become intimate with several cultures, both Oriental and Occidental.

He was only twenty-three when he earned his Ph.D. in political science at Johns Hopkins University, where he was later Professor of Asiatic politics for many years. Shortly thereafter, he graduated from editing his father's books to publishing his own highly regarded works on Far Eastern affairs.

When World War II broke out, he used his position on the Operations Planning and Intelligence Board to draft a set of qualifications for an intelligence operative in China that only he could meet—so off he went to Chungking as an Army lieutenant. By war's end, he was a major.

Dr. Linebarger turned his wartime experiences into Psychological Warfare, still regarded as the most authoritative text in the field. As a colonel, he was advisor to the British forces in Malaya and to the U. S. Eighth Army in Korea. But this self-styled "visitor to small wars" passed up Vietnam, feeling American involvement there was a mistake.

Travels around the world took him to Australia, Greece, Egypt and many other countries; and his expertise was sufficiently valued that he became a leading member of the Foreign Policy Association and an advisor to President Kennedy.

But even in childhood, his thoughts had turned to fiction—including science fiction. Like many budding SF writers, he discovered the genre at an early age. Since he was living in Germany at the time, he added to the familiar classics of Verne, Wells, Doyle and others such works as Alfred Döblin's *Giganten* to his list of favorites.

He was only fifteen when his first SF story, "War No. 8i-Q," was published. But unfortunately, no one seems to remember where. According to his widow, Genevieve, the story was bylined Anthony Bearden—a pseudonym later used for poetry published in little magazines. Two examples of this poetry appear in *Norstrilia*, also published by Ballantine.

During the 1930s, Dr. Linebarger began keeping a secret notebook—part personal diary, part story ideas. Then in 1937, he began writing serious stories, mostly set in ancient or modern China, or in contemporary locales elsewhere. None were ever published, but their range—some use the same Chinese narrative techniques that later turn up in SF works like "The Dead Lady of Clown Town"—is remarkable.

While back in China, he took on the name Felix C. Forrest—a pun on his Chinese name—for two psychological novels mailed home in installments and published after the war. Ria and Carola were remarkable novels for their feminine viewpoint and for the subtle interplay of cultural influences behind the interplay of character. Under the name Carmichael Smith, Dr. Linebarger wrote *Atomsk*, a spy thriller set in the Soviet Union.

But his career in science fiction came about almost by accident. He may have submitted some stories to *Amazing* while still in China during the war; but if so, nothing ever came of them. It was during idle hours at the Pentagon after his return that he turned an idea that had been bothering him into "Scanners Live in Vain."

The story was almost written in vain, for it was rejected by every major publication in the field. *Fantasy Book*, to which it was submitted five years later as a last resort, did not even pay for it. Although he had written another Cordwainer Smith story, "Himself in Anachron" (recently adapted by his widow for Harlan Ellison's anthology *Last Dangerous Visions*) in 1946, he may well have despaired of any recognition in the genre.

But there were readers who took notice. Never mind that *Fantasy Book* had never before published a worthwhile story, never mind that the author was a total unknown. "Scanners Live in Vain" got to them.

"Martel was angry. He did not even adjust his blood away from anger ... "

It was more than just the bizarre situation that attracted attention—it was the way it was treated. From the opening lines, readers became part of Martel's universe—a universe as real as our own, for all its strangeness. They were intrigued, and no doubt mystified.

What was this Instrumentality of Mankind, which even the scanners held in awe? What were the Beasts and the manshonyaggers and the Unforgiven? One could sense their importance to the hero, hut beyond that-only wonder.

Smith clearly knew more about this universe than he let on—more, in fact, than he ever would let on.

His universe had been forming in his mind at least since the time he wrote his first published story in 1928, and it took further shape in his secret notebook during the 1930s and 1940s.

Already in "War No. 8i-Q," his widow recalls, he had made reference to the Instrumentality—that all-powerful elite hierarchy that was to become central to the Cordwainer Smith stories twenty years and more later. Even the word may have had far more significance than it would appear at first.

Linebarger had been raised in a High Church Episcopalian family—his grandfather was a minister—and was devoutly religious. The word "instrumentality" has a distinct religious connotation, for in Roman Catholic and Episcopalian theology the priest performing the sacraments is the "instrumentality"

of God Himself.

At the time he wrote "War No. 8i-Q," young Linebarger was also having a fling with Communism—a tendency his father eventually cured by sending him on a trip to the Soviet Union for his

eighteenth birthday. But he remained struck by the sense of vocation and conviction of historical destiny

to which Communism appealed.

In Cordwainer Smith's epic of the future, the Instrumentality of Mankind has the hallmarks of both a

political elite and a priesthood. Its hegemony is that, not of the galactic empire so typical of less

imaginative SF, but of something far more subtle and pervasive—at once political and spiritual. Its lords

see themselves not as mere governors or bureaucrats or politicians, but as instruments of human destiny

itself.

Linebarger's sense of religion infused his work in other ways, and not merely in references to the Old

Strong Religion and the Holy Insurgency of Norstrilia and other late works.

There is, for example, the emphasis on quasi-religious ritual—compare, for instance, the Code of the

Scanners to the Saying of the Law in H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Furthermore, there is the

strong sense of vocation expressed by the scanners, sailors, pinlighters, Go-captains and the lords

themselves—something very spiritual, even if not expressed in religious terms.

But Linebarger was no mere Christian apologist who used SF as a vehicle for orthodox religious

messages like those of, say, C. S. Lewis.

He was also a social and psychological thinker, whose experience with diverse cultures gave him

peculiar and seemingly contradictory ideas about human nature and morality.

He could, for example, admire the samurai values of fantasy, courage and honor, and he showed his

appreciation of Oriental art and literature in the furnishing of his home and his fiction. Yet he was so

horrified by the tradition-bound fatalism and indifference to human life he found in the Orient that he

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Under the ruthless benevolence of the Instrumentality, a bland Utopia takes shape. Men are freed of

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underpeople, created to do the labor of mankind, are more human than their creators. The gift of vitality,

seemingly, has been lost, and history come to a stop.

In these stories, it is the underpeople—and the more enlightened lords of the Instrumentality who

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by the experiences in "Under Old Earth" into the Lady Alice More. Together, they become the architects

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Paralleling these events are glimpses of other parts of the universe of the Instrumentality. In "Mother

Hitton's Littul Kittons," we learn why Old North Australia is the most heavily defended planet in the

galaxy; but Viola Siderea is just as strange. And where else in science fiction is there a world like "A

Planet Named Shayol," where a daring conception in biological engineering is wedded to a classic vision

of Hell?

Oriental narrative techniques, especially in "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" and "The Ballad of Lost C'mell" are prominent in the later stories. So is the sense of myth, whereby the just-mentioned stories are supposedly explanations of popular legends. But just how much of what is told "Under Old Earth" ever really took place? Smith creates a sense of immense time having passed. To Paul and Virginia, newly freed by the Rediscovery of Man in "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard," our own age is lost in the dim past and is seen only through layer upon layer of half-forgotten history. Smith's effect has rarely been duplicated—the first half of Robert Silverberg's *Nightwings* is (perhaps) the most successful approximation. Smith's universe remains infinitely greater than our knowledge of it—we shall never know what empire once conquered Earth and brought tribute up that fabulous boulevard; nor the identity of the Robot, the Rat and the Copt, whose visions are referred to in *Norstrilia* and elsewhere; nor what ultimately becomes of the cat-people created in "The Crime and Glory of Commander Suzdal." Then there is that unfulfilled sense of anticipation—where was Smith leading us? What comes after the Rediscovery of Man and the liberation of the underpeople by C'mell? Linebarger gives hints of a common destiny for men and underpeople—some religious fulfillment of history, perhaps. But they remain hints. The work of Cordwainer Smith will always retain its enigmas. But that is part of its appeal. In reading his stories, we are caught up in experiences as real as life itself—and just as mysterious. —John J. Pierce  
Berkeley Heights, New Jersey January, 1975

## **The Best of Cordwainer Smith**

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Cordwainer Smith

Edited, with Introduction and Notes , By J. J. Pierce

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CORDWAINER SMITH: THE SHAPER OF MYTHS

In an obscure and short-lived magazine called *Fantasy Book*, there appeared in 1950 a story called "Scanners Live in Vain."

No one had ever heard of the author, Cordwainer Smith. And it appeared for a time that he would never be heard from again in the world of science fiction.

But "Scanners Live in Vain" was a story that refused to die, and its republication in two anthologies encouraged the elusive Smith to begin submitting to other SF markets.

Today, he is recognized as one of the most creative SF writers of modern times. But, paradoxically, he is one of the least known or understood. Until shortly before his death, his very identity was a closely guarded secret.

Not that Dr. Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger (1913-66) was ashamed of science fiction. He was proud of the field, and had even boasted once to the Baltimore Sun that SF had attracted more Ph.D.'s than any other branch of fiction.

But he was a sensitive, emotional writer—and reluctant to become involved with his readers—to be forced to "explain" himself in a way that might destroy the spontaneity of his work.

Beyond that, he probably enjoyed being a man of mystery, as elusive as some of the allusions in his stories. Smith was a mythmaker in science fiction, and perhaps it takes a somewhat mythical figure to create true myths.

A new acquaintance unsure of the number of syllables in Dr. Linebarger's name would be answered by a significant gesture to the three Chinese characters on his tie. Only later would he learn the characters stood for Lin Bah Loh, or "Forest of Incandescent Bliss"—the name given him as godson to Sun Yat Sen, founder of the Chinese Republic.

Dr. Linebarger's life was certainly several cuts above the ordinary.

At the age of seventeen, he negotiated a silver loan for China on behalf of his father—Sun's legal advisor and one of the financiers of the Revolution of 1911. He later became a colonel in U.S. Army Intelligence, despite partial blindness and general ill health—he once shocked guests at a dinner party by downing a "cocktail" of hydrochloric acid to aid his digestion.

Although born in Milwaukee—his father wanted to be sure that as a natural-born citizen his son would be eligible for the presidency—Linebarger spent his formative years in Japan, China, France and Germany. By the time he grew up, he knew six languages and had become intimate with several cultures, both Oriental and Occidental.

He was only twenty-three when he earned his Ph.D. in political science at Johns Hopkins University, where he was later Professor of Asiatic politics for many years. Shortly thereafter, he graduated from editing his father's books to publishing his own highly regarded works on Far Eastern affairs.

When World War II broke out, he used his position on the Operations Planning and Intelligence Board to draft a set of qualifications for an intelligence operative in China that only he could meet—so off he went to Chungking as an Army lieutenant. By war's end, he was a major.

Dr. Linebarger turned his wartime experiences into Psychological Warfare, still regarded as the most authoritative text in the field. As a colonel, he was advisor to the British forces in Malaya and to the U. S. Eighth Army in Korea. But this self-styled "visitor to small wars" passed up Vietnam, feeling American involvement there was a mistake.

Travels around the world took him to Australia, Greece, Egypt and many other countries; and his expertise was sufficiently valued that he became a leading member of the Foreign Policy Association and an advisor to President Kennedy.

But even in childhood, his thoughts had turned to fiction—including science fiction. Like many budding SF writers, he discovered the genre at an early age. Since he was living in Germany at the time, he added to the familiar classics of Verne, Wells, Doyle and others such works as Alfred Doblin's *Giganten* to his list of favorites.

He was only fifteen when his first SF story, "War No. 8i-Q," was published. But unfortunately, no one seems to remember where. According to his widow, Genevieve, the story was bylined Anthony Bearden—a pseudonym later used for poetry published in little magazines. Two examples of this poetry appear in *Norstrilia*, also published by Ballantine.

During the 1930s, Dr. Linebarger began keeping a secret notebook—part personal diary, part story ideas. Then in 1937, he began writing serious stories, mostly set in ancient or modern China, or in contemporary locales elsewhere. None were ever published, but their range—some use the same Chinese narrative techniques that later turn up in SF works like "The Dead Lady of Clown

Town"—is remarkable.

While back in China, he took on the name Felix C. Forrest—a pun on his Chinese name—for two psychological novels mailed home in installments and published after the war. *Ria* and *Carola* were remarkable novels for their feminine viewpoint and for the subtle interplay of cultural influences behind the interplay of character. Under the name Carmichael Smith, Dr. Linebarger wrote *Atomsk*, a spy thriller set in the Soviet Union.

But his career in science fiction came about almost by accident. He may have submitted some stories to *Amazing* while still in China during the war; but if so, nothing ever came of them. It was during idle hours at the Pentagon after his return that he turned an idea that had been bothering him into "Scanners Live in Vain."

The story was almost written in vain, for it was rejected by every major publication in the field. *Fantasy Book*, to which it was submitted five years later as a last resort, did not even pay for it. Although he had written another Cordwainer Smith story, "Himself in Anachron" (recently adapted by his widow for Harlan Ellison's anthology *Last Dangerous Visions*) in 1946, he may well have despaired of any recognition in the genre.

But there were readers who took notice. Never mind that *Fantasy Book* had never before published a worthwhile story, never mind that the author was a total unknown. "Scanners Live in Vain" got to them.

"Martel was angry. He did not even adjust his blood away from anger ... "

It was more than just the bizarre situation that attracted attention—it was the way it was treated. From the opening lines, readers became part of Martel's universe—a universe as real as our own, for all its strangeness. They were intrigued, and no doubt mystified.

What was this Instrumentality of Mankind, which even the scanners held in awe? What were the Beasts and the manshonyaggers and the Unforgiven? One could sense their importance to the hero, but beyond that—only wonder.

Smith clearly knew more about this universe than he let on—more, in fact, than he ever would let on. His universe had been forming in his mind at least since the time he wrote his first published story in 1928, and it took further shape in his secret notebook during the 1930s and 1940s.

Already in "War No. 8i-Q," his widow recalls, he had made reference to the Instrumentality—that all-powerful elite hierarchy that was to become central to the Cordwainer Smith stories twenty years and more later. Even the word may have had far more significance than it would appear at first.

Linebarger had been raised in a High Church Episcopalian family—his grandfather was a minister—and was devoutly religious. The word "instrumentality" has a distinct religious connotation, for in Roman Catholic and Episcopalian theology the priest performing the sacraments is the "instrumentality" of God Himself.

At the time he wrote "War No. 8i-Q," young Linebarger was also having a fling with Communism—a tendency his father eventually cured by sending him on a trip to the Soviet Union for his eighteenth birthday. But he remained struck by the sense of vocation and conviction of historical destiny to which Communism appealed.

In Cordwainer Smith's epic of the future, the Instrumentality of Mankind has the hallmarks of both a political elite and a priesthood. Its hegemony is that, not of the galactic empire so typical of less imaginative SF, but of something far more subtle and pervasive—at once political and spiritual. Its lords see themselves not as mere governors or bureaucrats or politicians, but as instruments of human destiny itself.

Linebarger's sense of religion infused his work in other ways, and not merely in references to the Old Strong Religion and the Holy Insurgency of Norstrilia and other late works.

There is, for example, the emphasis on quasi-religious ritual—compare, for instance, the Code of the Scanners to the Saying of the Law in H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Furthermore, there is the strong sense of vocation expressed by the scanners, sailors, pinlighters, Go-captains and the lords themselves—something very spiritual, even if not expressed in religious terms.

But Linebarger was no mere Christian apologist who used SF as a vehicle for orthodox religious

messages like those of, say, C. S. Lewis.

He was also a social and psychological thinker, whose experience with diverse cultures gave him peculiar and seemingly contradictory ideas about human nature and morality.

He could, for example, admire the samurai values of fantasy, courage and honor, and he showed his appreciation of Oriental art and literature in the furnishing of his home and his fiction. Yet he was so horrified by the tradition-bound fatalism and indifference to human life he found in the Orient that he became obsessed with the sanctity of life on any terms, as something too precious to sacrifice to any concept of honor or morality—Oriental or Occidental.

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—John J. Pierce

Berkeley Heights, New Jersey January, 1975

## SCANNERS LIVE IN VAIN

Here, humanity is still emerging from the Dark Age that is more fully described in the stories

"Queen of the Afternoon" and "Mark Elf" and which reveal the "Beasts" to be mutated intelligent animals and the "manshonyaggers" to be old German killing machines—taken from Menschenj tiger, or "hunter of men." At the time Smith wrote the story in 1945, there was an abandoned shop in his neighborhood called The Little Cranch—what "cranch" meant, he had no idea—but he used the word anyway. The "ancient lady" ancestress of Vomact was one of the VomAcht sisters mentioned in Dark Age stories—which one, we don't know.

Mantel was angry. He did not even adjust his blood away from anger. He stamped across the room by judgment, not by sight. When he saw the table hit the floor, and could tell by the expression on Luci's face that the table must have made a loud crash, he looked down to see if his leg was broken. It was not. Scanner to the core, he had to scan himself. The action was reflex and automatic. The inventory included his legs, abdomen, chestbox of instruments, hands, arms, face and back with the mirror. Only then did Martel go back to being angry. He talked with his voice, even though he knew that his wife hated its blare and preferred to have him write.

"I tell you, I must cranch. I have to cranch. It's my worry, isn't it?" When Luci answered, he saw only a part of her words as he read her lips: "Darling ... you're my husband ... right to love you ... dangerous ... do it ... dangerous ... wait ... "

He faced her, but put sound in his voice, letting the blare hurt her again: "I tell you, I'm going to cranch."

Catching her expression, he became rueful and a little tender: "Can't you understand what it means to me? To get out of this horrible prison in my own head? To be a man again—hearing your voice, smelling smoke? To feel again—to feel my feet on the ground, to feel the air move against my face? Don't you know what it means?"

Her wide-eyed worrisome concern thrust him back into pure annoyance. He read only a few words as her lips moved: " ... love you ... your own good ... don't you think I want you to be human? ... your own good ... too much ... he said ... they said ... "

When he roared at her, he realized that his voice must be particularly bad. He knew that the sound hurt her no less than did the words: "Do you think I wanted you to marry a scanner? Didn't I tell you we're almost as low as the habermans? We're dead, I tell you. We've got to be dead to do our work. How can anybody go to the up-and-out? Can you dream what raw space is? I warned you. But you married me. All right, you married a man. Please, darling, let me be a man. Let me hear your voice, let me feel the warmth of being alive, of being human. Let me!"

He saw by her look of stricken assent that he had won the argument. He did not use his voice again. Instead, he pulled his tablet up from where it hung against his chest. He wrote on it, using the pointed fingernail of his right forefinger—the talking nail of a scanner—in quick cleancut script: Pls, drlng, whrs crnching wire?

She pulled the long gold-sheathed wire out of the pocket of her apron. She let its field sphere fall to the carpeted floor. Swiftly, dutifully, with the deft obedience of a scanner's wife, she wound the cranching wire around his head, spirally around his neck and chest. She avoided the instruments set in his chest. She even avoided the radiating scars around the instruments, the stigmata of men who had gone up and into the out. Mechanically he lifted a foot as she slipped the wire between his feet. She drew the wire taut. She snapped the small plug into the high-burden control next to his heart-reader. She helped him to sit down, arranging his hands for him, pushing his head back into the cup at the top of the chair. She turned then, full-face toward him, so that he could read her lips easily. Her expression was composed.

She knelt, scooped up the sphere at the other end of the wire, stood erect calmly, her back to him. He scanned her, and saw nothing in her posture but grief which would have escaped the eye of anyone but a scanner. She spoke: he could see her chest-muscles moving. She realized that she was not facing him, and turned so that he could see her lips.

"Ready at last?"

He smiled a yes.

She turned her back to him again. (Luci could never bear to watch him go under the wire.) She



tossed the wire-sphere into the air. It caught in the force-field, and hung there. Suddenly it glowed. That was all. All—except for the sudden red stinking roar of coming back to his senses. Coming back, across the wild threshold of pain.

When he awakened, under the wire, he did not feel as though he had just crunched. Even though it was the second crunching within the week, he felt fit. He lay in the chair. His ears drank in the sound of air touching things in the room. He heard Luci breathing in the next room, where she was hanging up the wire to cool. He smelt the thousand and one smells that are in anybody's room: the crisp freshness of the germ-burner, the sour-sweet tang of the humidifier, the odor of the dinner they had just eaten, the smells of clothes, furniture, of people themselves. All these were pure delight. He sang a phrase or two of his favorite song:

"Here's to the haberman, Up-and-out!

"Up-oh!-and out-oh!-up-and-out! ..

He heard Luci chuckle in the next room. He gloated over the sounds of her dress as she swished to the doorway.

She gave him her crooked little smile. "You sound all right. Are you all right, really?"

Even with this luxury of senses, he scanned. He took the flash-quick inventory which constituted his professional skill. His eyes swept in the news of the instruments. Nothing showed off scale, beyond the nerve compression hanging in the edge of Danger. But he could not worry about the nerve-box. That always came through crunching. You couldn't get under the wire without having it show on the nerve-box. Some day the box would go to Overload and drop back down to Dead. That was the way a haberman ended. But you couldn't have everything. People who went to the up-and-out had to pay the price for space.

Anyhow, he should worry! He was a scanner. A good one, and he knew it. If he couldn't scan himself, who could? This crunching wasn't too dangerous. Dangerous, but not too dangerous.

Luci put out her hand and ruffled his hair as if she had been reading his thoughts, instead of just following them: "But you know you shouldn't have! You shouldn't!"

"But I did!" He grinned at her.

Her gaiety still forced, she said: "Come on, darling, let's have a good time. I have almost everything there is in the icebox—all your favorite tastes. And I have two new records just full of smells. I tried them out myself, and even I liked them. And you know me—"

"Which?"

"Which what, you old darling?"

He slipped his hand over her shoulders as he limped out of the room. (He could never go back to feeling the floor beneath his feet, feeling the air against his face, without being bewildered and clumsy. As if crunching was real, and being a haberman was a bad dream. But he was a haberman, and a scanner. "You know what I meant, Luci. The smells, which you have. Which one did you like, on the record?"

"Well-I-I," said she, judiciously, "there were some lamb chops that were the strangest things—"

He interrupted: "What are lambtchots?"

"Wait till you smell them. Then guess. I'll tell you this much. It's a smell hundreds and hundreds of years old. They found out about it in the old books."

"Is a lambtchot a beast?"

"I won't tell you. You've got to wait," she laughed, as she helped him sit down and spread his tasting dishes before him. He wanted to go back over the dinner first, sampling all the pretty things he had eaten, and savoring them this time with his now—living lips and tongue.

When Luci had found the music wire and had thrown its sphere up into the force-field, he reminded her of the new smells. She took out the long glass records and set the first one into a transmitter.

"Now sniff!"

A queer, frightening, exciting smell came over the room. It seemed like nothing in this world, nor like anything from the up-and-out. Yet it was familiar. His mouth watered. His pulse beat a little faster; he scanned his heartbox. (Faster, sure enough.) But that smell, what was it? In mock

perplexity, he grabbed her hands, looked into her eyes, and growled:

"Tell me, darling! Tell me, or I'll eat you up!"

"That's just right!"

"What?"

"You're right. It should make you want to eat me. It's meat."

"Meat. Who?"

"Not a person," said she, knowledgeably, "a Beast. A Beast which people used to eat. A lamb was a small sheep—you've seen sheep out in the Wild, haven't you?—and a chop is part of its middle—here!" She pointed at her chest.

Martel did not hear her. All his boxes had swung over toward Alarm, some to Danger. He fought against the roar of his own mind, forcing his body into excess excitement. How easy it was to be a scanner when you really stood outside your own body, haberman-fashion, and looked back into it with your eyes alone. Then you could manage the body, rule it coldly even in the enduring agony of space. But to realize that you were a body, that this thing was ruling you, that the mind could kick the flesh and send it roaring off into panic! That was bad.

He tried to remember the days before he had gone into the haberman device, before he had been cut apart for the up-and-out. Had he always been subject to the rush of his emotions from his mind to his body, from his body back to his mind, confounding him so that he couldn't scan? But he hadn't been a scanner then.

He knew what had hit him. Amid the roar of his own pulse, he knew. In the nightmare of the up-and-out, that smell had forced its way through to him, while their ship burned off Venus and the habermans fought the collapsing metal with their bare hands. He had scanned then: all were in Danger. Chestboxes went up to Overload and dropped to Dead all around him as he had moved from man to man, shoving the drifting corpses out of his way as he fought to scan each man in turn, to clamp vises on unnoticed broken legs, to snap the sleeping valve on men whose instruments showed they were hopelessly near Overload. With men trying to work and cursing him for a scanner while he, professional zeal aroused, fought to do his job and keep them alive in the great pain of space, he had smelled that smell. It had fought its way along his rebuilt nerves, past the haberman cuts, past all the safeguards of physical and mental discipline. In the wildest hour of tragedy, he had smelled aloud. He remembered it was like a bad cranching, connected with the fury and nightmare all around him. He had even stopped his work to scan himself, fearful that the first effect might come, breaking past all haberman cuts and ruining him with the pain of space. But he had come through. His own instruments stayed and stayed at Danger, without nearing Overload. He had done his job, and won a commendation for it. He had even forgotten the burning ship.

All except the smell.

And here the smell was all over again—the smell of meat-with-fire.

Luci looked at him with wifely concern. She obviously thought he had crunched too much, and was about to haberman back. She tried to be cheerful: "You'd better rest, honey."

He whispered to her: "Cut-off-that-smell."

She did not question his word. She cut the transmitter. She even crossed the room and stepped up the room controls until a small breeze flitted across the floor and drove the smells up to the ceiling.

He rose, tired and stiff. (His instruments were normal, except that heart was fast and nerves still hanging on the edge of Danger.) He spoke sadly:

"Forgive me, Luci. I suppose I shouldn't have crunched. Not so soon again. But darling, I have to get out from being a haberman. How can I ever be near you? How can I be a man—not hearing my own voice, not even feeling my own life as it goes through my veins? I love you, darling. Can't I ever be near you?"

Her pride was disciplined and automatic: "But you're a scanner!"

"I know I'm a scanner. But so what?"

She went over the words, like a tale told a thousand times to reassure herself: "You are the bravest of the brave, the most skillful of the skilled. All mankind owes most honor to the scanner, who unites the Earths of mankind. Scanners are the protectors of the habermans. They are the

judges in the up-and-out. They make men live in the place where men need desperately to die. They are the most honored of mankind, and even the chiefs of the Instrumentality are delighted to pay them homage!"

With obstinate sorrow he demurred: "Luci, we've heard that all before. But does it pay us back —"

" 'Scanners work for more than pay. They are the strong guards of mankind.' Don't you remember that?"

"But our lives, Luci. What can you get out of being the wife of a scanner? Why did you marry me? I'm human only when I cranch. The rest of the time—you know what I am. A machine. A man turned into a machine. A man who has been killed and kept alive for duty. Don't you realize what I miss?"

"Of course, darling, of course—"

He went on: "Don't you think I remember my childhood? Don't you think I remember what it is to be a man and not a haberman? To walk and feel my feet on the ground? To feel a decent clean pain instead of watching my body every minute to see if I'm alive? How will I know if I'm dead? Did you ever think of that, Luci? How will I know if I'm dead?"

She ignored the unreasonableness of his outburst. Pacifyingly, she said: "Sit down, darling. Let me make you some kind of a drink. You're overwrought."

Automatically, he scanned. "No I'm not! Listen to me. How do you think it feels to be in the up-and-out with the crew tied-for-space all around you? How do you think it feels to watch them sleep? How do you think I like scanning, scanning, scanning month after month, when I can feel the pain of space beating against every part of my body, trying to get past my haberman blocks? How do you think I like to wake the men when I have to, and have them hate me for it? Have you ever seen habermans fight—strong men fighting, and neither knowing pain, fighting until one touches Overload? Do you think about that, Luci?" Triumphant he added: "Can you blame me if I cranch, and come back to being a man, just two days a month?"

"I'm not blaming you, darling. Let's enjoy your cranch. Sit down now, and have a drink."

He was sitting down, resting his face in his hands, while she fixed the drink, using natural fruits out of bottles in addition to the secure alkaloids. He watched her restlessly and pitied her for marrying a scanner; and then, though it was unjust, resented having to pity her.

Just as she turned to hand him the drink, they both jumped a little as the phone rang. It should not have rung. They had turned it off. It rang again, obviously on the emergency circuit. Stepping ahead of Luci, Martel strode over to the phone and looked into it. Vomact was looking at him.

The custom of scanners entitled him to be brusque, even with a senior scanner, on certain given occasions. This was one.

Before Vomact could speak, Martel spoke two words into the plate, not caring whether the old man could read lips or not:

"Cranching. Busy."

He cut the switch and went back to Luci.

The phone rang again.

Luci said, gently, "I can find out what it is, darling. Here, take your drink and sit down."

"Leave it alone," said her husband. "No one has a right to call when I'm cranching. He knows that. He ought to know that."

The phone rang again. In a fury, Martel rose and went to the plate. He cut it back on. Vomact was on the screen. Before Martel could speak, Vomact held up his talking nail in line with his heartbox. Martel reverted to discipline:

"Scanner Martel present and waiting, sir."

The lips moved solemnly: "Top emergency."

"Sir, I am under the wire."

"Top emergency."

"Sir, don't you understand?" Martel mouthed his words, so he could be sure that Vomact followed. "I ... am ... under ... the ... wire. Unfit ... for ... Space!"

Vomact repeated: "Top emergency. Report to Central Tie-in."

"But, sir, no emergency like this—"

"Right, Martel. No emergency like this, ever before. Report to Tiein." With a faint glint of kindness, Vomact added: "No need to decranch. Report as you are."

This time it was Martel whose phone was cut out. The screen went gray.

He turned to Luci. The temper had gone out of his voice. She came to him. She kissed him, and rumbled his hair. All she could say was,

"I'm sorry."

She kissed him again, knowing his disappointment. "Take good care of yourself, darling. I'll wait."

He scanned, and slipped into his transparent aircoat. At the window he paused, and waved. She called, "Good luck!"

As the air flowed past him he said to himself, "This is the first time I've felt flight in—eleven years. Lord, but it's easy to fly if you can feel yourself live!"

Central Tie-in glowed white and austere far ahead. Martel peered. He saw no glare of incoming ships from the up-and-out, no shuddering flare of space-fire out of control. Everything was quiet, as it should be on an off-duty night.

And yet Vomact had called. He had called an emergency higher than space. There was no such thing. But Vomact had called it.

When Martel got there, he found about half the scanners present, two dozen or so of them. He lifted the talking finger. Most of the scanners were standing face to face, talking in pairs as they read lips. A few of the old, impatient ones were scribbling on their tablets and then thrusting the tablets into other people's faces. All the faces wore the dull dead relaxed look of a haberman. When Martel entered the room, he knew that most of the others laughed in the deep isolated privacy of their own minds, each thinking things it would be useless to express in formal words. It had been a long time since a scanner showed up at a meeting crunched.

Vomact was not there: probably, thought Martel, he was still on the phone calling others. The light of the phone flashed on and off; the bell rang. Martel felt odd when he realized that of all those present, he was the only one to hear that loud bell. It made him realize why ordinary people did not like to be around groups of habermans or scanners. Martel looked around for company.

His friend Chang was there, busy explaining to some old and testy scanner that he did not know why Vomact had called. Martel looked farther and saw Parizianski. He walked over, threading his way past the others with a dexterity that showed he could feel his feet from the inside, and did not have to watch them. Several of the others stared at him with their dead faces, and tried to smile. But they lacked full muscular control and their faces twisted into horrid masks. (Scanners usually knew better than to show expression on faces which they could no longer govern. Martel added to himself, I swear I'll never smile again unless I'm crunched.)

Parizianski gave him the sign of the talking finger. Looking face to face, he spoke:

"You come here crunched?"

Parizianski could not hear his own voice, so the words roared like the words on a broken and screeching phone; Martel was startled, but knew that the inquiry was well meant. No one could be better-natured than the burly Pole.

"Vomact called. Top emergency."

"You told him you were crunched?"

"Yes."

"He still made you come?"

"Then all this—it is not for Space? You could not go up-and-out? You are like ordinary men?"

"That's right."

"Then why did he call us?" Some pre-haberman habit made Parizianski wave his arms in inquiry. The hand struck the back of the old man behind them. The slap could be heard throughout the room, but only Martel heard it. Instinctively, he scanned Parizianski and the old scanner, and they scanned

him back. Only then did the old man ask why Martel had scanned him. When Martel explained that he was under the wire, the old man moved swiftly away to pass on the news that there was a crunched scanner present at the tie-in.

Even this minor sensation could not keep the attention of most of the scanners from the worry about the top emergency. One young man, who had scanned his first transit just the year before, dramatically interposed himself between Parizianski and Martel. He dramatically flashed his tablet at them:

Is Vmct mad?

The older men shook their heads. Martel, remembering that it had not been too long that the young man had been haberman, mitigated the dead solemnity of the denial with a friendly smile. He spoke in a normal voice, saying:

"Vomact is the senior of scanners. I am sure that he could not go mad. Would he not see it on his boxes first?"

Martel had to repeat the question, speaking slowly and mouthing his words before the young scanner could understand the comment. The young man tried to make his face smile, and twisted it into a comic mask. But he took up his tablet and scribbled:

Yr rght.

Chang broke away from his friend and came over, his half-Chinese face gleaming in the warm evening. (It's strange, thought Martel, that more Chinese don't become scanners. Or not so strange perhaps, if you think that they never fill their quota of habermans. Chinese love good living too much. The ones who do scan are all good ones.) Chang saw that Martel was crunched, and spoke with voice:

"You break precedents. Luci must be angry to lose you?"

"She took it well. Chang, that's strange."

"I'm crunched, and I can hear. Your voice sounds all right. How did you learn to talk like—like an ordinary person?"

"I practiced with soundtracks. Funny you noticed it. I think I am the only scanner in or between the Earths who can pass for an ordinary man. Mirrors and soundtracks. I found out how to act."

"But you don't ... "

"No. I don't feel, or taste, or hear, or smell things, any more than you do. Talking doesn't do me much good. But I notice that it cheers up the people around me."

"It would make a difference in the life of Luci."

Chang nodded sagely. "My father insisted on it. He said, 'You may be proud of being a scanner. I am sorry you are not a man. Conceal your defects.' So I tried. I wanted to tell the old boy about the up-and-out, and what we did there, but it did not matter. He said, 'Airplanes were good enough for Confucius, and they are for me too.' The old humbug! He tries so hard to be a Chinese when he can't even read Old Chinese. But he's got wonderful good sense, and for somebody going on two hundred he certainly gets around."

Martel smiled at the thought: "In his airplane?"

Chang smiled back. This discipline of his facial muscles was amazing; a bystander would not think that Chang was a haberman, controlling his eyes, cheeks, and lips by cold intellectual control. The expression had the spontaneity of life. Martel felt a flash of envy for Chang when he looked at the dead cold faces of Parizianski and the others. He knew that he himself looked fine: but why shouldn't he? He was crunched. Turning to Parizianski he said,

"Did you see what Chang said about his father? The old boy uses an airplane."

Parizianski made motions with his mouth, but the sounds meant nothing. He took up his tablet and showed it to Martel and Chang.

Bzz bzz, Ha ha. Gd ol' boy.

At that moment, Martel heard steps out in the corridor. He could not help looking toward the door. Other eyes followed the direction of his glance.

Vomact came in.

The group shuffled to attention in four parallel lines. They scanned one another. Numerous hands

reached across to adjust the electrochemical controls on chestboxes which had begun to load up. One scanner held out a broken finger which his counter-scanner had discovered, and submitted it for treatment and splinting.

Vomact had taken out his staff of office. The cube at the top flashed red light through the room, the lines reformed, and all scanners gave the sign meaning, Present and ready!

Vomact countered with the stance signifying, I am the senior and take command.

Talking fingers rose in the counter-gesture, We concur and commit ourselves.

Vomact raised his right arm, dropped the wrist as though it were broken, in a queer searching gesture, meaning: Any men around? Any habermans not tied? All clear for the scanners?

Alone of all those present, the crunched Martel heard the queer rustle of feet as they all turned completely around without leaving position, looking sharply at one another and flashing their beltlights into the dark corners of the great room. When again they faced Vomact, he made a further sign:

All clear. Follow my words.

Martel noticed that he alone relaxed. The others could not know the meaning of relaxation with the minds blocked off up there in their skulls, connected only with the eyes, and the rest of the body connected with the mind only by controlling non-sensory nerves and the instrument boxes on their chests. Martel realized that, crunched as he was, he had expected to hear Vomact's voice: the senior had been talking for some time. No sound escaped his lips. (Vomact never bothered with sound.)

"... and when the first men to go up-and-out went to the moon, what did they find?"

"Nothing," responded the silent chorus of lips.

"Therefore they went farther, to Mars and to Venus. The ships went out year by year, but they did not come back until the Year One of Space. Then did a ship come back with the first effect.

Scanners, I ask you, what is the first effect?"

"No one knows. No one knows."

"No one will ever know. Too many are the variables. By what do we know the first effect?"

"By the great pain of space," came the chorus.

"And by what further sign?"

"By the need, oh the need for death."

Vomact again: "And who stopped the need for death?"

"Henry Haberman conquered the first effect, in the Year Eighty-three of Space."

"And, Scanners, I ask you, what did he do?"

"He made the habermans."

"How, O Scanners, are habermans made?"

"They are made with the cuts. The brain is cut from the heart, the lungs. The brain is cut from the ears, the nose. The brain is cut from the mouth, the belly. The brain is cut from desire, and pain. The brain is cut from the world. Save for the eyes. Save for the control of the living flesh."

"And how, O Scanners, is flesh controlled?"

"By the boxes set in the flesh, the controls set in the chest, the signs made to rule the living body, the signs by which the body lives."

"How does a haberman live and live?"

"The haberman lives by control of the boxes."

"Whence come the habermans?"

Martel felt in the coming response a great roar of broken voices echoing through the room as the scanners, habermans themselves, put sound behind their mouthings:

"Habermans are the scum of mankind. Habermans are the weak, the cruel, the credulous, and the unfit. Habermans are the sentenced-to-more-than-death. Habermans live in the mind alone. They are killed for space but they live for space. They master the ships that connect the Earths. They live in the great pain while ordinary men sleep in the cold, cold sleep of the transit."

"Brothers and Scanners, I ask you now: are we habermans or are we not?"

"We are habermans in the flesh. We are cut apart, brain and flesh. We are ready to go to the up-and-out. All of us have gone through the haberman device."

"We are habermans then?" Vomact's eyes flashed and glittered as he asked the ritual question.

Again the chorused answer was accompanied by a roar of voices heard only by Martel:

"Habermans we are, and more, and more. We are the chosen who are habermans by our own free will. We are the agents of the Instrumentality of Mankind."

"What must the others say to us?"

"They must say to us, 'You are the bravest of the brave, the most skillful of the skilled. All mankind owes most honor to the scanner, who unites the Earths of mankind. Scanners are the protectors of the habermans. They are the judges in the up-and-out. They make men live in the place where men need desperately to die. They are the most honored of mankind, and even the chiefs of the Instrumentality are delighted to pay them homage!'"

Vomact stood more erect: "What is the secret duty of the scanner?"

"To keep secret our law, and to destroy the acquirers thereof."

"How to destroy?"

"Twice to the Overload, back and Dead."

"If habermans die, what the duty then?"

The scanners all compressed their lips for answer. (Silence was the code.) Martel, who-long familiar with the code—was a little bored with the proceedings, noticed that Chang was breathing too heavily; he reached over and adjusted Chang's lung-control and received the thanks of Chang's eyes. Vomact observed the interruption and glared at them both. Martel relaxed, trying to imitate the dead cold stillness of the others. It was so hard to do, when you were crunched.

"If others die, what the duty then?" asked Vomact.

"Scanners together inform the Instrumentality. Scanners together accept the punishment.

Scanners together settle the case."

"And if the punishment be severe?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if scanners be not honored?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if a scanner goes unpaid?"

"Then no ships go."

"And if the Others and the Instrumentality are not in all ways at all times mindful of their proper obligation to the scanners?"

"Then no ships go."

"And what, O Scanners, if no ships go?"

"The Earths fall apart. The Wild comes back in. The Old Machines and the Beasts return."

"What is the first known duty of a scanner?"

"Not to sleep in the up-and-out."

"What is the second duty of a scanner?"

"To keep forgotten the name of fear."

"What is the third duty of a scanner?"

"To use the wire of Eustace Cranch only with care, only with moderation." Several pair of eyes looked quickly at Martel before the mouthed chorus went on. "To cranch only at home, only among friends, only for the purpose of remembering, of relaxing, or of begetting."

"What is the word of the scanner?"

"Faithful though surrounded by death."

"What is the motto of the scanner?"

"Awake though surrounded by silence."

"What is the work of the scanner?"

"Labor even in the heights of the up-and-out, loyalty even in the depths of the Earths."

"How do you know a scanner?"

"We know ourselves. We are dead though we live. And we talk with the tablet and the nail."

"What is this code?"

"This code is the friendly ancient wisdom of scanners, briefly put that we may be mindful and be

cheered by our loyalty to one another."

At this point the formula should have run: "We complete the code. Is there work or word for the scanners?" But Vomact said, and he repeated:

"Top emergency. Top emergency."

They gave him the sign, Present and ready!

He said, with every eye straining to follow his lips:

"Some of you know the work of Adam Stone?"

Martel saw lips move, saying: "The Red Asteroid. The Other who lives at the edge of Space."

"Adam Stone has gone to the Instrumentality, claiming success for his work. He says that he has found how to screen out the pain of space. He says that the up-and-out can be made safe for ordinary men to work in, to stay awake in. He says that there need be no more scanners."

Beltlights flashed on all over the room as scanners sought the right to speak. Vomact nodded to one of the older men. "Scanner Smith will speak."

Smith stepped slowly up into the light, watching his own feet. He turned so that they could see his face. He spoke: "I say that this is a lie. I say that Stone is a liar. I say that the Instrumentality must not be deceived."

He paused. Then, in answer to some question from the audience which most of the others did not see, he said:

"I invoke the secret duty of the scanners."

Smith raised his right hand for emergency attention:

"I say that Stone must die."

Martel, still crunched, shuddered as he heard the boos, groans, shouts, squeaks, grunts and moans which came from the scanners who forgot noise in their excitement and strove to make their dead bodies talk to one another's deaf ears. Beltlights flashed wildly all over the room. There was a rush for the rostrum and scanners milled around at the top, vying for attention until Parizianski—by sheer bulk—shoved the others aside and down, and turned to mouth at the group.

"Brother Scanners, I want your eyes."

The people on the floor kept moving, with their numb bodies jostling one another. Finally Vomact stepped up in front of Parizianski, faced the others, and said:

"Scanners, be scanners! Give him your eyes."

Parizianski was not good at public speaking. His lips moved too fast. He waved his hands, which took the eyes of the others away from his lips. Nevertheless, Martel was able to follow most of the message:

We can't do this. Stone may have succeeded. If he has succeeded, it means the end of the scanners. It means the end of the habermans, too. None of us will have to fight in the up-and-out. We won't have anybody else going under the wire for a few hours or days of being human. Everybody will be Other. Nobody will have to crunch, never again. Men can be men. The habermans can be killed decently and properly, the way men were killed in the old days, without anybody keeping them alive. They won't have to work in the up-and-out! There will be no more great pain—think of it! No ... more ... great ... pain! How do we know that Stone is a liar— Lights began flashing directly into his eyes. (The rudest insult of scanner to scanner was this.)

Vomact again exercised authority. He stepped in front of Parizianski and said something which the others could not see. Parizianski stepped down from the rostrum. Vomact again spoke:

"I think that some of the scanners disagree with our brother Parizianski. I say that the use of the rostrum be suspended till we have had a chance for private discussion. In fifteen minutes I will call the meeting back to order."

Martel looked around for Vomact when the senior had rejoined the group on the floor. Finding the senior, Martel wrote swift script on his tablet, waiting for a chance to thrust the tablet before the senior's eyes. He had written:

Am crnchd. Rspctfly request prmissn lv now, stnd by fr orders.

Being crunched did strange things to Martel. Most meetings that he attended seemed formal, hearteningly ceremonial, lighting up the dark inward eternities of habermanhood. When he was not



crunched, he noticed his body no more than a marble bust notices its marble pedestal. He had stood with them before. He had stood with them effortless hours, while the long-winded ritual broke through the terrible loneliness behind his eyes, and made him feel that the scanners, though a confraternity of the damned, were none the less forever honored by the professional requirements of their mutilation.

This time, it was different. Coming crunched, and in full possession of smell-sound-taste-feeling, he reacted more or less as a normal man would. He saw his friends and colleagues as a lot of cruelly driven ghosts, posturing out the meaningless ritual of their indefeasible damnation. What difference did anything make, once you were a haberman? Why all this talk about habermans and scanners? Habermans were criminals or heretics, and scanners were gentlemen—volunteers, but they were all in the same fix—except that scanners were deemed worthy of the short-time return of the cranching wire, while habermans were simply disconnected while the ships lay in port and were left suspended until they should be awakened, in some hour of emergency or trouble, to work out another spell of their danmation. It was a rare haberman that you saw on the street—someone of special merit or bravery, allowed to look at mankind from the terrible prison of his own mechanifled body. And yet, what scanner ever pitied a haberman? What scanner ever honored a haberman except perfunctorily in the line of duty? What had the scanners as a guild and a class ever done for the habermans, except to murder them with a twist of the wrist whenever a haberman, too long beside a scanner, picked up the tricks of the scanning trade and learned how to live at his own will, not the will the scanners imposed? What could the Others, the ordinary men, know of what went on inside the ships? The Others slept in their cylinders, mercifully unconscious until they woke up on whatever other Earth they had consigned themselves to. What could the Others know of the men who had to stay alive within the ship?

What could any Other know of the up-and-out? What Other could look at the biting acid beauty of the stars in open space? What could they tell of the great pain, which started quietly in the marrow, like an ache, and proceeded by the fatigue and nausea of each separate nerve cell, brain cell, touchpoint in the body, until life itself became a terrible aching hunger for silence and for death?

He was a scanner. All right, he was a scanner. He had been a scanner from the moment when, wholly normal, he had stood in the sunlight before a subchief of the Instrumentality, and had sworn:

"I pledge my honor and my life to mankind. I sacrificed myself willingly for the welfare of mankind. In accepting the perilous austere honor, I yield all my rights without exception to the honorable chiefs of the Instrumentality and to the honored Confraternity of Scanners."

He had pledged.

He had gone into the haberman device.

He remembered his hell. He had not had such a bad one, even though it had seemed to last a hundred-million years, all of them without sleep. He had learned to feel with his eyes. He had learned to see despite the heavy eyeplates set back of his eyeballs to insulate his eyes from the rest of him. He had learned to watch his skin. He still remembered the time he had noticed dampness on his shirt, and had pulled out his scanning mirror only to discover that he had worn a hole in his side by leaning against a vibrating machine. (A thing like that could not happen to him now; he was too adept at reading his own instruments.) He remembered the way that he had gone up-and-out, and the way that the great pain beat into him, despite the fact that his touch, smell, feeling, and hearing were gone for all ordinary purposes. He remembered killing habermans, and keeping others alive, and standing for months beside the honorable scanner-pilot while neither of them slept. He remembered going ashore on Earth Four, and remembered that he had not enjoyed it, and had realized on that day that there was no reward.

Martel stood among the other scanners. He hated their awkwardness when they moved, their immobility when they stood still. He hated the queer assortment of smells which their bodies yielded unnoticed. He hated the grunts and groans and squawks which they emitted from their deafness. He hated them, and himself.

How could Luci stand him? He had kept his chestbox reading Danger for weeks while he courted

her, carrying the cranch wire about with him most illegally, and going direct from one cranch to the other without worrying about the fact his indicators all crept up to the edge of Overload. He had wooed her without thinking of what would happen if she did say, "Yes." She had.

"And they lived happily ever after." In old books they did, but how could they, in life? He had had eighteen days under the wire in the whole of the past year! Yet she had loved him. She still loved him. He knew it. She fretted about him through the long months that he was in the up-and-out. She tried to make home mean something to him even when he was haberman, make food pretty when it could not be tasted, make herself lovable when she could not be kissed-or might as well not, since a haberman body meant no more than furniture. Luci was patient.

And now, Adam Stone! (He let his tablet fade: how could he leave, now?)

God bless Adam Stone?

Martel could not help feeling a little sorry for himself. No longer would the high keen call of duty carry him through two hundred or so years of the Others' time, two million private eternities of his own. He could slouch and relax. He could forget high space, and let the up-and-out be tended by Others. He could cranch as much as he dared. He could be almost normal—almost—for one year or five years or no years. But at least he could stay with Luci. He could go with her into the Wild, where there were Beasts and Old Machines still roving the dark places. Perhaps he would die in the excitement of the hunt, throwing spears at an ancient manshonyagger as it leapt from its lair, or tossing hot spheres at the tribesmen of the Unforgiven who still roamed the Wild. There was still life to live, still a good normal death to die, not the moving of a needle out in the silence and agony of space!

He had been walking about restlessly. His ears were attuned to the sounds of normal speech, so that he did not feel like watching the mouthings of his brethren. Now they seemed to have come to a decision. Vomact was moving to the rostrum. Martel looked about for Chang, and went to stand beside him. Chang whispered.

"You're as restless as water in mid-air! What's the matter? Decranching?"

They both scanned Martel, but the instruments held steady and showed no sign of the cranch giving out.

The great light flared in its call to attention. Again they formed ranks. Vomact thrust his lean old face into the glare, and spoke:

"Scanners and Brothers, I call for a vote." He held himself in the stance which meant: I am the senior and take command.

A beltlight flashed in protest.

It was old Henderson. He moved to the rostrum, spoke to Vomact, and—with Vomact's nod of approval—turned full-face to repeat his question:

"Who speaks for the scanners out in space?"

No beltlight or hand answered.

Henderson and Vomact, face to face, conferred for a few moments. Then Henderson faced them again:

"I yield to the senior in command. But I do not yield to a meeting of the Confraternity. There are sixty-eight scanners, and only forty-seven present, of whom one is crunched and U.D. I have therefore proposed that the senior in command assume authority only over an emergency committee of the Confraternity, not over a meeting. Is that agreed and understood by the honorable scanners?"

Hands rose in assent.

Chang murmured in Martel's ear, "Lot of difference that makes! Who can tell the difference between a meeting and a committee?" Martel agreed with the words, but was even more impressed with the way that Chang, while haberman, could control his own voice.

Vomact resumed chairmanship: "We now vote on the question of Adam Stone."

"First, we can assume that he has not succeeded, and that his claims are lies. We know that from our practical experience as scanners. The pain of space is only part of scanning," (But the essential part, the basis of it all, thought Martel.) "and we can rest assured that Stone cannot solve the problem of space discipline."

"That tripe again," whispered Chang, unheard save by Martel.

"The space discipline of our confraternity has kept high space clean of war and dispute. Sixty-eight disciplined men control all high space. We are removed by our oath and our haberman status from all Earthly passions.

"Therefore, if Adam Stone has conquered the pain of space, so that Others can wreck our confraternity and bring to space the trouble and ruin which afflicts Earths, I say that Adam Stone is wrong. If Adam Stone succeeds, scanners live in vain!

"Secondly, if Adam Stone has not conquered the pain of space, he will cause great trouble in all the Earths. The Instrumentality and the subchiefs may not give us as many habermans as we need to operate the ships of mankind. There will be wild stories, and fewer recruits, and, worst of all, the discipline of the Confraternity may relax if this kind of nonsensical heresy is spread around.

"Therefore, if Adam Stone has succeeded, he threatens the ruin of the Confraternity and should die."

"I move the death of Adam Stone."

And Vomact made the sign, The honorable scanners are pleased to vote.

Martel grabbed wildly for his beltlight. Chang, guessing ahead, had his light out and ready; its bright beam, voting No, shone straight up at the ceiling. Martel got his light out and threw its beam upward in dissent. Then he looked around. Out of the forty-seven present, he could see only five or six glittering.

Two more lights went on. Vomact stood as erect as a frozen corpse. Vomact's eyes flashed as he stared back and forth over the group, looking for lights. Several more went on. Finally Vomact took the closing stance:

May it please the scanners to count the vote.

Three of the older men went up on the rostrum with Vomact. They looked over the room. (Martel thought: These damned ghosts are voting on the life of a real man, a live man! They have no right to do it. I'll tell the Instrumentality! But he knew that he would not. He thought of Luci and what she might gain by the triumph of Adam Stone: the heart-breaking folly of the vote was then almost too much for Martel to bear.)

All three of the tellers held up their hands in unanimous agreement on the sign of the number: Fifteen against.

Vomact dismissed them with a bow of courtesy. He turned and again took the stance: I am the senior and take command.

Marveling at his own daring, Martel flashed his beltlight on. He knew that any one of the bystanders might reach over and twist his heartbox to Overload for such an act. He felt Chang's hand reaching to catch him by the aircoat. But he eluded Chang's grasp and ran, faster than a scanner should, to the platform. As he ran, he wondered what appeal to make. It was no use talking common sense. Not now. It had to be law.

He jumped up on the rostrum beside Vomact, and took the stance:

Scanners, an Illegality!

He violated good custom while speaking, still in the stance: "A committee has no right to vote death by a majority vote. It takes two-thirds of a full meeting."

He felt Vomact's body lunge behind him, felt himself falling from the rostrum, hitting the floor, hurting his knees and his touch-aware hands. He was helped to his feet. He was scanned. Some scanner he scarcely knew took his instruments and toned him down.

Immediately Martel felt more calm, more detached, and hated himself for feeling so.

He looked up at the rostrum. Vomact maintained the stance signifying: Order!

The scanners adjusted their ranks. The two scanners next to Martel took his arms. He shouted at them, but they looked away, and cut themselves off from communication altogether.

Vomact spoke again when he saw the room was quiet: "A scanner came here crunched. Honorable Scanners, I apologize for this. It is not the fault of our great and worthy scanner and friend, Martel. He came here under orders. I told him not to de-crunch. I hoped to spare him an unnecessary haberman. We all know how happily Martel is married, and we wish his brave

experiment well. I like Martel. I respect his judgment. I wanted him here. I knew you wanted him here. But he is crunched. He is in no mood to share in the lofty business of the scanners. I therefore propose a solution which will meet all the requirements of fairness. I propose that we rule Scanner Martel out of order for his violation of rules. This violation would be inexcusable if Martel were not crunched.

"But at the same time, in all fairness to Martel, I further propose that we deal with the points raised so improperly by our worthy but disqualified brother."

Vomact gave the sign, The honorable scanners are pleased to vote. Martel tried to reach his own beltlight; the dead strong hands held him tightly and he struggled in vain. One lone light shone high: Chang's, no doubt.

Vomact thrust his face into the light again: "Having the approval of our worthy scanners and present company for the general proposal, I now move that this committee declare itself to have the full authority of a meeting, and that this committee further make me responsible for all misdeeds which this committee may enact, to be held answerable before the next full meeting, but not before any other authority beyond the closed and secret ranks of scanners."

Flamboyantly this time, his triumph evident, Vomact assumed the vote stance.

Only a few lights shone: far less, patently, than a minority of one-fourth.

Vomact spoke again. The light shone on his high calm forehead, on his dead relaxed cheekbones. His lean cheeks and chin were half-shadowed, save where the lower light picked up and spotlighted his mouth, cruel even in repose. (Vomact was said to be a descendant of some ancient lady who had traversed, in an illegitimate and inexplicable fashion, some hundreds of years of time in a single night. Her name, the Lady Vomact, had passed into legend; but her blood and her archaic lust for mastery lived on in the mute masterful body of her descendant. Martel could believe the old tales as he stared at the rostrum, wondering what untraceable mutation had left the Vomact kin as predators among mankind.) Calling loudly with the movement of his lips, but still without sound, Vomact appealed:

"The honorable committee is now pleased to reaffirm the sentence of death issued against the heretic and enemy, Adam Stone." Again the vote stance.

Again Chang's light shone lonely in its isolated protest.

Vomact then made his final move:

"I call for the designation of the senior scanner present as the manager of the sentence. I call for authorization to him to appoint executioners, one or many, who shall make evident the will and majesty of scanners. I ask that I be accountable for the deed, and not for the means. The deed is a noble deed, for the protection of mankind and for the honor of the scanners; but of the means it must be said that they are to be the best at hand, and no more. Who knows the true way to kill an Other, here on a crowded and watchful Earth? This is no mere matter of discharging a cylindered sleeper, no mere question of upgrading the needle of a haberman. When people die down here, it is not like the up-and-out. They die reluctantly. Killing within the Earth is not our usual business, O Brothers and Scanners, as you know well. You must choose me to choose my agent as I see fit. Otherwise the common knowledge will become the common betrayal whereas if I alone know the responsibility, I alone could betray us, and you will not have far to look in case the Instrumentality comes searching." (What about the killer you choose? thought Martel. He too will know unless—unless you silence him forever.)

Vomact went into the stance: The honorable scanners are pleased to vote.

One light of protest shone; Chang's, again.

Martel imagined that he could see a cruel joyful smile on Vomact's dead face—the smile of a man who knew himself righteous and who found his righteousness upheld and affirmed by militant authority.

Martel tried one last time to come free.

The dead hands held. They were locked like vises until their owners' eyes unlocked them: how else could they hold the piloting month by month?

Martel then shouted: "Honorable Scanners, this is judicial murder."

No ear heard him. He was crunched, and alone.

Nonetheless, he shouted again: "You endanger the Confraternity."

Nothing happened.

The echo of his voice sounded from one end of the room to the other. No head turned. No eyes met his.

Martel realized that as they paired for talk, the eyes of the scanners avoided him. He saw that no one desired to watch his speech. He knew that behind the cold faces of his friends there lay compassion or amusement. He knew that they knew him to be crunched—absurd, normal, manlike, temporarily no scanner. But he knew that in this matter the wisdom of scanners was nothing. He knew that only a crunched scanner could feel with his very blood the outrage and anger which deliberate murder would provoke among the Others. He knew that the Confraternity endangered itself, and knew that the most ancient prerogative of law was the monopoly of death. Even the ancient nations, in the times of the Wars, before the Beasts, before men went into the up-and-out—even the ancients had known this. How did they say it? Only the state shall kill. The states were gone but the Instrumentality remained, and the Instrumentality could not pardon things which occurred within the Earths but beyond its authority. Death in space was the business, the right of the scanners: how could the Instrumentality enforce its laws in a place where all men who wakened, wakened only to die in the great pain? Wisely did the Instrumentality leave space to the scanners, wisely had the Confraternity not meddled inside the Earths. And now the Confraternity itself was going to step forth as an outlaw band, as a gang of rogues as stupid and reckless as the tribes of the Unforgiven!

Martel knew this because he was crunched. Had he been haberman, he would have thought only with his mind, not with his heart and guts and blood. How could the other scanners know?

Vomact returned for the last time to the rostrum: The committee has met and its will shall be done. Verbally he added: "Senior among you, I ask your loyalty and your silence."

At that point, the two scanners let his arms go. Martel rubbed his numb hands, shaking his fingers to get the circulation back into the cold fingertips. With real freedom, he began to think of what he might still do. He scanned himself: the crunching held. He might have a day. Well, he could go on even if haberman, but it would be inconvenient, having to talk with finger and tablet. He looked about for Chang. He saw his friend standing patient and immobile in a quiet corner. Martel moved slowly, so as not to attract any more attention to himself than could be helped. He faced Chang, moved until his face was in the light, and then articulated:

"What are we going to do? You're not going to let them kill Adam Stone, are you? Don't you realize what Stone's work will mean to us, if it succeeds? No more scanners. No more habermans. No more pain in the up-and-out. I tell you, if the others were all crunched, as I am, they would see it in a human way, not with the narrow crazy logic which they used in the meeting. We've got to stop them. How can we do it? What are we going to do? What does Parizianski think? Who has been chosen?"

"Which question do you want me to answer?"

Martel laughed. (It felt good to laugh, even then; it felt like being a man.) "Will you help me?"

Chang's eyes flashed across Martel's face as Chang answered: "No. No. No."

"You won't help?"

"Why not, Chang? Why not?"

"I am a scanner. The vote has been taken. You would do the same if you were not in this unusual condition."

"I'm not in an unusual condition. I'm crunched. That merely means that I see things the way that the Others would. I see the stupidity. The recklessness. The selfishness. It is murder."

"What is murder? Have you not killed? You are not one of the Others. You are a scanner. You will be sorry for what you are about to do, if you do not watch out."

"But why did you vote against Vomact then? Didn't you too see what Adam Stone means to all of us? Scanners will live in vain. Thank God for that! Can't you see it?"

"No."

"But you talk to me, Chang. You are my friend?"

"I talk to you. I am your friend. Why not?"

"But what are you going to do?"

"Nothing, Martel. Nothing."

"Will you help me?"

"Not even to save Stone?"

"Then I will go to Parizianski for help."

"It will do you no good."

"Why not? He's more human than you, right now."

"He will not help you, because he has the job. Vomact designated him to kill Adam Stone."

Martel stopped speaking in mid-movement. He suddenly took the stance: I thank you, Brother, and I depart.

At the window he turned and faced the room. He saw that Vomact's eyes were upon him. He gave the stance, I thank you, Brother, and I depart, and added the flourish of respect which is shown when seniors are present. Vomact caught the sign, and Martel could see the cruel lips move. He thought he saw the words "... take good care of yourself ..." but did not wait to inquire. He stepped backward and dropped out the window.

Once below the window and out of sight, he adjusted his aircoat to a maximum speed. He swam lazily in the air, scanning himself thoroughly, and adjusting his adrenal intake down. He then made the movement of release, and felt the cold air rush past his face like run-fling water.

Adam Stone had to be at Chief Downport.

Adam Stone had to be there.

Wouldn't Adam Stone be surprised in the night? Surprised to meet the strangest of beings, the first renegade among scanners. (Martel suddenly appreciated that it was of himself he was thinking. Martel the Traitor to Scanners! That sounded strange and bad. But what of Martel, the Loyal to Mankind? Was that not compensation? And if he won, he won Luci. If he lost, he lost nothing—an unconsidered and expendable haberman. It happened to be himself. But in contrast to the immense reward, to mankind, to the Confraternity, to Luci, what did that matter?)

Martel thought to himself: "Adam Stone will have two visitors tonight. Two scanners, who are the friends of one another." He hoped that Parizianski was still his friend.

"And the world," he added, "depends on which of us gets there first." Multifaceted in their brightness, the lights of Chief Downport began to shine through the mist ahead. Martel could see the outer towers of the city and glimpsed the phosphorescent periphery which kept back the Wild, whether Beasts, Machines, or the Unforgiven.

Once more Martel invoked the lords of his chance: "Help me to pass for an Other!"

Within the Downport, Martel had less trouble than he thought. He draped his aircoat over his shoulder so that it concealed the instruments. He took up his scanning mirror, and made up his face from the inside, by adding tone and animation to his blood and nerves until the muscles of his face glowed and the skin gave out a healthy sweat. That way he looked like an ordinary man who had just completed a long night flight.

After straightening out his clothing, and hiding his tablet within his jacket, he faced the problem of what to do about the talking finger. If he kept the nail, it would show him to be a scanner. He would be respected, but he would be identified. He might be stopped by the guards whom the Instrumentality had undoubtedly set around the person of Adam Stone. If he broke the nail—But he couldn't! No scanner in the history of the Confraternity had ever willingly broken his nail. That would be resignation, and there was no such thing. The only way out, was in the up-and-out! Martel put his finger to his mouth and bit off the nail. He looked at the now-queer finger, and sighed to himself.

He stepped toward the city gate, slipping his hand into his jacket and running up his muscular strength to four times normal. He started to scan, and then realized that his instruments were masked. Might as well take all the chances at once, he thought.

The watcher stopped him with a searching wire. The sphere thumped suddenly against Martel's chest.

"Are you a man?" said the unseen voice. (Martel knew that as a scanner in haberman condition, his own field-charge would have illuminated the sphere.)

"I am a man." Martel knew that the timbre of his voice had been good; he hoped that it would not be taken for that of a manshonyagger or a Beast or an Unforgiven one, who with mimicry sought to enter the cities and ports of mankind.

"Name, number, rank, purpose, function, time departed."

"Martel." He had to remember his old number, not Scanner 34. "Sunward 4234, 782nd Year of Space. Rank, rising subchief." That was no lie, but his substantive rank. "Purpose, personal and lawful within the limits of this city. No function of the Instrumentality. Departed Chief Outport 2019 hours." Everything now depended on whether he was believed, or would be checked against Chief Outport.

The voice was fiat and routine: "Time desired within the city." Martel used the standard phrase: "Your honorable sufferance is requested."

He stood in the cool night air, waiting. Far above him, through a gap in the mist, he could see the poisonous glittering in the sky of scanners. The stars are my enemies, he thought: I have mastered the stars but they hate me. Ho, that sounds ancient! Like a book. Too much cranching.

The voice returned: "Sunward 4234 dash 782 rising subchief Martel, enter the lawful gates of the city. Welcome. Do you desire food, raiment, money, or companionship?" The voice had no hospitality in it, just business. This was certainly different from entering a city in a scanner's role! Then the petty officers came out, and threw their belt-lights on their fretful faces, and mouthed their words with preposterous deference, shouting against the stone deafness of scanner's ears. So that was the way that a subchief was treated: matter of fact, but not bad. Not bad.

Martel replied: "I have that which I need, but beg of the city a favor. My friend Adam Stone is here. I desire to see him, on urgent and personal lawful affairs."

The voice replied: "Did you have an appointment with Adam Stone?"

"The city will find him. What is his number?"

"I have forgotten it."

"You have forgotten it? Is not Adam Stone a magnate of the Instrumentality? Are you truly his friend?"

"Truly." Martel let a little annoyance creep into his voice. "Watcher, doubt me and call your subchief."

"No doubt implied. Why do you not know the number? This must go into the record," added the voice.

"We were friends in childhood. He has crossed the—" Martel started to say "the up-and-out" and remembered that the phrase was current only among scanners. "He has leapt from Earth to Earth, and has just now returned. I knew him well and I seek him out. I have word of his kith. May the Instrumentality protect us!"

"Heard and believed. Adam Stone will be searched."

At a risk, though a slight one, of having the sphere sound an alarm for non-human, Martel cut in on his scanner speaker within his jacket. He saw the trembling needle of light await his words and he started to write on it with his blunt finger. That won't work, he thought, and had a moment's panic until he found his comb, which had a sharp enough tooth to write. He wrote: "Emergency none. Martel Scanner calling Parizianski Scanner."

The needle quivered and the reply glowed and faded out: "Parizianski Scanner on duty and D.C. Calls taken by Scanner Relay."

Martel cut off his speaker.

Parizianski was somewhere around. Could he have crossed the direct way, right over the city wall, setting off the alert, and invoking official business when the petty officers overtook him in mid-air? Scarcely. That meant that a number of other scanners must have come in with Panzianski, all of them pretending to be in search of a few of the tenuous pleasures which could be enjoyed by a

haberman, such as the sight of the newspictures or the viewing of beautiful women in the Pleasure Gallery. Parizianski was around, but he could not have moved privately, because Scanner Central registered him on duty and recorded his movements city by city.

The voice returned. Puzzlement was expressed in it. "Adam Stone is found and awakened. He has asked pardon of the Honorable, and says he knows no Martel. Will you see Adam Stone in the morning? The city will bid you welcome."

Mantel ran out of resources. It was hard enough mimicking a man without having to tell lies in the guise of one. Martel could only repeat:

"Tell him I am Martel. The husband of Luci."

"It will be done."

Again the silence, and the hostile stars, and the sense that Parizianski was somewhere near and getting nearer; Martel felt his heart beating faster. He stole a glimpse at his chestbox and set his heart down a point. He felt calmer, even though he had not been able to scan with care.

The voice this time was cheerful, as though an annoyance had been settled: "Adam Stone consents to see you. Enter Chief Downport, and welcome."

The little sphere dropped noiselessly to the ground and the wire whispered away into the darkness. A bright arc of narrow light rose from the ground in front of Martel and swept through the city to one of the higher towers-apparently a hostel, which Martel had never entered. Martel plucked his aircoat to his chest for ballast, stepped heel-and-toe on the beam, and felt himself whistle through the air to an entrance window which sprang up before him as suddenly as a devouring mouth.

A tower guard stood in the doorway. "You are awaited, sir. Do you bear weapons, sir?"

"None," said Mantel, grateful that he was relying on his own strength.

The guard led him past the check-screen. Mantel noticed the quick flight of a warning across the screen as his instruments registered and identified him as a scanner. But the guard had not noticed it.

The guard stopped at a door. "Adam Stone is armed. He is lawfully armed by authority of the Instrumentality and by the liberty of this city. All those who enter are given warning."

Mantel nodded in understanding at the man and went in.

Adam Stone was a short man, stout and benign. His gray hair rose stiffly from a low forehead. His whole face was red and merry-looking. He looked like a jolly guide from the Pleasure Gallery, not like a man who had been at the edge of the up-and-out, fighting the great pain without haberman protection.

He stared at Martel. His look was puzzled, perhaps a little annoyed, but not hostile.

Martel came to the point. "You do not know me. I lied. My name is Martel, and I mean you no harm. But I lied. I beg the honorable gift of your hospitality. Remain armed. Direct your weapon against me—"

Stone smiled: "I am doing so," and Mantel noticed the small wire-point in Stone's capable, plump hand.

"Good. Keep on guard against me. It will give you confidence in what I shall say. But do, I beg you, give us a screen of privacy. I want no casual lookers. This is a matter of life and death."

"First: whose life and death?" Stone's face remained calm, his voice even.

"Yours, and mine, and the worlds'."

"You are cryptic but I agree." Stone called through the doorway:

"Privacy please." There was a sudden hum, and all the little noises of the night quickly vanished from the air of the room.

Said Adam Stone: "Sir, who are you? What brings you here?"

"I am Scanner 34."

"You a scanner? I don't believe it."

For answer, Mantel pulled his jacket open, showing his chestbox. Stone looked up at him, amazed. Martel explained:

"I am crunched. Have you never seen it before?"



"Not with men. On animals. Amazing! But—what do you want?"

"The truth. Do you fear me?"

"Not with this," said Stone, grasping the wirepoint. "But I shall tell you the truth."

"Is it true that you have conquered the great pain?"

Stone hesitated, seeking words for an answer.

"Quick, can you tell me how you have done it, so that I may believe you?"

"I have loaded the ships with life."

"Life?"

"Life. I don't know what the great pain is, but I did find that in the experiments, when I sent out masses of animals or plants, the life in the center of the mass lived longest. I built ships—small ones, of course—and sent them out with rabbits, with monkeys—"

"Those are Beasts?"

"Yes. With small Beasts. And the Beasts came back unhurt. They came back because the walls of the ships were filled with life. I tried many kinds, and finally found a sort of life which lives in the waters. Oysters. Oyster-beds. The outermost oysters died in the great pain. The inner ones lived. The passengers were unhurt."

"But they were Beasts?"

"Not only Beasts. Myself."

"You!"

"I came through space alone. Through what you call the up-and-out, alone. Awake and sleeping. I am unhurt. If you do not believe me, ask your brother scanners. Come and see my ship in the morning. I will be glad to see you then, along with your brother scanners. I am going to demonstrate before the chiefs of the Instrumentality."

Mantel repeated his question: "You came here alone?"

Adam Stone grew testy: "Yes, alone. Go back and check your scanner's register if you do not believe me. You never put me in a bottle to cross Space."

Mantel's face was radiant. "I believe you now. It is true. No more scanners. No more habermans. No more cranching."

Stone looked significantly toward the door.

Martel did not take the hint. "I must tell you that—"

"Sir, tell me in the morning. Go enjoy your cranch. Isn't it supposed to be pleasure? Medically I know it well. But not in practice."

"It is pleasure. It's normality—for a while. But listen. The scanners have sworn to destroy you, and your work."

"What!"

"They have met and have voted and sworn. You will make scanners unnecessary, they say. You will bring the ancient wars back to the world, if scanning is lost and the scanners live in vain!"

Adam Stone was nervous but kept his wits about him: "You're a scanner. Are you going to kill me—or try?"

"No, you fool. I have betrayed the Confraternity. Call guards the moment I escape. Keep guards around you. I will try to intercept the killer."

Mantel saw a blur in the window. Before Stone could turn, the wirepoint was whipped out of his hand. The blur solidified and took form as Parizianski.

Martel recognized what Parizianski was doing: High speed. Without thinking of his cranch, he thrust his hand to his chest, set himself up to High speed too. Waves of fire, like the great pain, but hotter, flooded over him. He fought to keep his face readable as he stepped in front of Parizianski and gave the sign,

Top emergency.

Parizianski spoke, while the normally moving body of Stone stepped away from them as slowly as a drifting cloud: "Get out of my way. I am on a mission."

"I know it. I stop you here and now. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stone is right."

Parizianski's lips were barely readable in the haze of pain which flooded Martel. (He thought:

God, God, God of the ancients! Let me hold on! Let me live under Overload just long enough!) Parizianski was saying: "Get out of my way. By order of the Confraternity, get out of my way!" And Parizianski gave the sign, Help I demand in the name of my duty!

Martel choked for breath in the syruplike air. He tried one last time: "Parizianski, friend, friend, my friend. Stop. Stop." (No scanner had ever murdered scanner before.)

Parizianski made the sign: You are unfit for duty, and I will take over.

Mantel thought, For the first time in the world! as he reached over and twisted Parizianski's brainbox up to Overload. Parizianski's eyes glittered in terror and understanding. His body began to drift down toward the floor.

Mantel had just strength to reach his own chestbox. As he faded into haberman or death, he knew not which, he felt his fingers turning on the control of speed, turning down. He tried to speak, to say, "Get a scanner, I need help, get a scanner ... "

But the darkness rose about him, and the numb silence clasped him.

Martel awakened to see the face of Luci near his own.

He opened his eyes wider, and found that he was hearing—hearing the sound of her happy weeping, the sound of her chest as she caught the air back into her throat.

He spoke weakly: "Still crunched? Alive?"

Another face swam into the blur beside Luci's. It was Adam Stone. His deep voice rang across immensities of space before coming to Mantel's hearing. Martel tried to read Stone's lips, but could not make them out. He went back to listening to the voice: "—not crunched. Do you understand me? Not crunched!"

Mantel tried to say: "But I can hear! I can feel!" The others got his sense if not his words.

Adam Stone spoke again:

"You have gone back through the haberman. I put you back first. I didn't know how it would work in practice, but I had the theory all worked out. You don't think the Instrumentality would waste the scanners, do you? You go back to normality. We are letting the habermans die as fast as the ships come in. They don't need to live any more. But we are restoring the scanners. You are the first. Do you understand? You are the first. Take it easy, now."

Adam Stone smiled. Dimly behind Stone, Mantel thought that he saw the face of one of the chiefs of the Instrumentality. That face, too, smiled at him, and then both faces disappeared upward and away.

Mantel tried to lift his head, to scan himself. He could not. Luci stared at him, calming herself, but with an expression of loving perplexity. She said,

"My darling husband! You're back again, to stay!"

Still, Mantel tried to see his box. Finally he swept his hand across his chest with a clumsy motion. There was nothing there. The instruments were gone. He was back to normality but still alive.

In the deep weak peacefulness of his mind, another troubling thought took shape. He tried to write with his finger, the way that Luci wanted him to, but he had neither pointed fingernail nor scanner's tablet. He had to use his voice. He summoned up his strength and whispered:

"Scanners?"

"Yes, darling? What is it?"

"Scanners?"

"Scanners. Oh, yes, darling, they're all right. They had to arrest some of them for going into High speed and running away. But the Instrumentality caught them all—all those on the ground—and they're happy now. Do you know, darling," she laughed, "some of them didn't want to be restored to normality. But Stone and the chiefs persuaded them."

"Vomact?"

"He's fine, too. He's staying crunched until he can be restored. Do you know, he has arranged for scanners to take new jobs. You're all to be deputy chiefs for Space. Isn't that nice? But he got himself made chief for Space. You're all going to be pilots, so that your fraternity and guild can go

on. And Chang's getting changed right now. You'll see him soon."

Her face turned sad. She looked at him earnestly and said: "I might as well tell you now. You'll worry otherwise. There has been one accident. Only one. When you and your friend called on Adam Stone, your friend was so happy that he forgot to scan, and he let himself die of Overload."

"Called on Stone?"

"Yes. Don't you remember? Your friend."

He still looked surprised, so she said:

"Parizianski."

## THE LADY WHO SAILED THE SOUL

This story was written in collaboration with Genevieve Linebarger (the manuscript is even inscribed "by Genevieve Linebarger and P.M.A."), who has completed one unfinished Smith story since her husband's death and is currently working on another. "Spieltier" is simply German for "play animal." By the time of this story, the Wild has been tamed and the Beasts and manshonyaggers are gone. Even luxury has returned—perhaps too much so!

1

The story ran—how did the story run? Everyone knew the reference to Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more, but no one knew exactly how it happened. Their names were welded to the glittering timeless jewelry of romance. Sometimes they were compared to Heloise and Abelard, whose story had been found among books in a long-buried library. Other ages were to compare their life with the weird, ugly-lovely story of the Go-Captain Taliano and the Lady Dolores Oh.

Out of it all, two things stood forth—their love and the image of the great sails, tissue-metal wings with which the bodies of people finally fluttered out among the stars.

Mention him, and others knew her. Mention her, and they knew him. He was the first of the inbound sailors, and she was the lady who sailed The Soul.

It was lucky that people lost their pictures. The romantic hero was a very young-looking man, prematurely old and still quite sick when the romance came. And Helen America, she was a freak, but a nice one: a grim, solemn, sad, little brunette who had been born amid the laughter of humanity. She was not the tall, confident heroine of the actresses who later played her.

She was, however, a wonderful sailor. That much was true. And with her body and mind she loved Mr. Grey-no-more, showing a devotion which the ages can neither surpass nor forget. History may scrape off the patina of their names and appearances, but even history can do no more than brighten the love of Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more. Both of them, one must remember, were sailors.

2

The child was playing with a spieltier. She got tired of letting it be a chicken, so she reversed it into the fur-bearing position. When she extended the ears to the optimum development, the little animal looked odd indeed. A light breeze blew the animal-toy on its side, but the spieltier good-naturedly righted itself and munched contentedly on the carpet.

The little girl suddenly clapped her hands and broke forth with the question,

"Mamma, what's a sailor?"

"There used to be sailors, darling, a long time ago. They were brave men who took the ships out to the stars, the very first ships that took people away from our sun. And they had big sails. I don't know how it worked, but somehow, the light pushed them, and it took them a quarter of a life to make a single one-way trip. People only lived a hundred and sixty years at that time, darling, and it was forty years each way, but we don't need sailors any more."

"Of course not," said the child, "we can go right away. You've taken me to Mars and you've taken me to New Earth as well, haven't you, Mamma? And we can go anywhere else soon, but that only takes one afternoon."

"That's planofforming, honey. But it was a long time before the people knew how to planofform. And they could not travel the way we could, so they made great big sails. They made sails so big that they could not build them on Earth. They had to hang them out, halfway between Earth and Mars. And you know, a funny thing happened ... Did you ever hear about the time the world froze?"

"No, Mamma, what was that?"

"Well, a long time ago, one of these sails drifted and people tried to save it because it took a lot of work to build it. But the sail was so large that it got between the Earth and the sun. And there was no more sunshine, just night all the time. And it got very cold on Earth. All the atomic power plants were busy, and all the air began to smell funny. And the people were worried and in a few days they pulled the sail hack out of the way. And the sunshine came again."

"Mamma, were there ever any girl sailors?"

A curious expression crossed over the mother's face. "There was one. You'll hear about her later on when you are older. Her name was Helen America and she sailed The Soul out to the stars. She was the only woman that ever did it. And that is a wonderful story."

The mother dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief.

The child said: "Mamma, tell me now. What's the story all about?"

At this point the mother became very firm and she said: "Honey, there are some things that you are not old enough, to hear yet. But when you are a big girl, I'll tell you all about them."

The mother was an honest woman. She reflected a moment, and then she added, " ... unless you read about it yourself first."

### 3

Helen America was to make her place in the history of mankind, but she started badly. The name itself was a misfortune.

No one ever knew who her father was. The officials agreed to keep the matter quiet.

Her mother was not in doubt. Her mother was the celebrated she-man Mona Muggeridge, a woman who had campaigned a hundred times for the lost cause of complete identity of the two genders. She had been a feminist beyond all limits, and when Mona Muggeridge, the one and only Miss Muggeridge, announced to the press that she was going to have a baby, that was first-class news.

Mona Muggeridge went further. She announced her firm conviction that fathers should not be identified. She proclaimed that no woman should have consecutive children with the same man, that women should be advised to pick different fathers for their children, so as to diversify and beautify the race. She capped it all by announcing that she, Miss Muggeridge, had selected the perfect father and would inevitably produce the only perfect child.

Miss Muggeridge, a bony, pompous blonde, stated that she would avoid the nonsense of marriage and family names, and that therefore the child, if a boy, would be called John America, and if a girl, Helen America.

Thus it happened that little Helen America was born with the correspondents in the press services waiting outside the delivery room. News-screens flashed the picture of a pretty three-kilogram baby.

"It's a girl."

"The perfect child."

"Who's the dad?"

That was just the beginning. Mona Muggeridge was belligerent. She insisted, even after the baby had been photographed for the thousandth time, that this was the finest child ever born. She pointed to the child's perfections. She demonstrated all the foolish fondness of a doting mother, but felt that she, the great crusader, had discovered this fondness for the first time.

To say that this background was difficult for the child would be an understatement.

Helen America was a wonderful example of raw human material triumphing over its tormentors. By the time she was four years old, she spoke six languages, and was beginning to decipher some of the old Martian texts. At the age of five she was sent to school. Her fellow schoolchildren

immediately developed a rhyme:

Helen, Helen  
Fat and dumb  
Doesn't know where  
Her daddy's from!

Helen took all this and perhaps it was an accident of genetics that she grew to become a compact little person—a deadly serious little brunette. Challenged by lessons, haunted by publicity, she became careful and reserved about friendships and desperately lonely in an inner world.

When Helen America was sixteen her mother came to a bad end. Mona Muggeridge eloped with a man she announced to be the perfect husband for the perfect marriage hitherto overlooked by mankind. The perfect husband was a skilled machine polisher. He already had a wife and four children. He drank beer and his interest in Miss Muggeridge seems to have been a mixture of good-natured comradeship and a sensible awareness of her motherly bankroll. The planetary yacht on which they eloped broke the regulations with an off-schedule flight. The bridegroom's wife and children had alerted the police. The result was a collision with a robotic barge which left both bodies identifiable.

At sixteen Helen was already famous, and at seventeen already forgotten, and very much alone.

4

This was the age of sailors. The thousands of photo-reconnaissance and measuring missiles had begun to come back with their harvest from the stars. Planet after planet swam into the ken of mankind. The new worlds became known as the interstellar search missiles brought back photographs, samples of atmosphere, measurements of gravity, cloud coverage, chemical make-up and the like. Of the very numerous missiles which returned from their two- or three-hundred-year voyages, three brought back reports of New Earth, an earth so much like Terra itself that it could be settled.

The first sailors had gone out almost a hundred years before. They had started with small sails not over two thousand miles square. Gradually the size of the sails increased. The technique of adiabatic packing and the carrying of passengers in individual pods reduced the damage done to the human cargo. It was great news when a sailor returned to Earth, a man born and reared under the light of another star. He was a man who had spent a month of agony and pain, bringing a few sleep-frozen settlers, guiding the immense light-pushed sailing craft which had managed the trip through the great interstellar deeps in an objective time-period of forty years.

Mankind got to know the look of a sailor. There was a plantigrade walk to the way he put his body on the ground. There was a sharp, stiff, mechanical swing to his neck. The man was neither young nor old. He had been awake and conscious for forty years, thanks to the drug which made possible a kind of limited awareness. By the time the psychologists interrogated him, first for the proper authorities of the Instrumentality and later for the news releases, it was plain enough that he thought the forty years were about a month. He never volunteered to sail back, because he had actually aged forty years. He was a young man, a young man in his hopes and wishes, but a man who had burnt up a quarter of a human lifetime in a single agonizing experience.

At this time Helen America went to Cambridge. Lady Joan's College was the finest woman's college in the Atlantic world. Cambridge had reconstructed its protohistoric traditions and the neo-British had recaptured that fine edge of engineering which reconnected their traditions with the earliest antiquity.

Naturally enough the language was cosmopolite Earth and not archaic English, but the students were proud to live at a reconstructed university very much like the archaeological evidence showed it to have been before the period of darkness and troubles came upon the Earth. Helen shone a little in this renaissance.

The news-release services watched Helen in the cruelest possible fashion. They revived her name and the story of her mother. Then they forgot her again. She had put in for six professions, and her last choice was "sailor." It happened that she was the first woman to make the application—first

because she was the only woman young enough to qualify who had also passed the scientific requirements.

Her picture was beside his on the screens before they ever met each other.

Actually, she was not anything like that at all. She had suffered so much in her childhood from Helen, Helen, fat and dumb, that she was competitive only on a coldly professional basis. She hated and loved and missed the tremendous mother whom she had lost, and she resolved so fiercely not to be like her mother that she became an embodied antithesis of Mona.

The mother had been horsy, blonde, big—the kind of woman who is a feminist because she is not very feminine. Helen never thought about her own femininity. She just worried about herself. Her face would have been round if it had been plump, but she was not plump. Black-haired, dark-eyed, broad-bodied but thin, she was a genetic demonstration of her unknown father. Her teachers often feared her. She was a pale, quiet girl, and she always knew her subject.

Her fellow students had joked about her for a few weeks and then most of them had banded together against the indecency of the press. When a news-frame came out with something ridiculous about the long-dead Mona, the whisper went through Lady Joan's:

"Keep Helen away ... those people are at it again."

"Don't let Helen look at the frames now. She's the best person we have in the non-collateral sciences and we can't have her upset just before the tripos ... "

They protected her, and it was only by chance that she saw her own face in a news-frame. There was the face of a man beside her. He looked like a little old monkey, she thought. Then she read,

"PERFECT GIRL WANTS TO BE SAILOR.

SHOULD SAILOR HIMSELF DATE PERFECT GIRL?"

Her cheeks burned with helpless, unavoidable embarrassment and rage, but she had grown too expert at being herself to do what she might have done in her teens—hate the man. She knew it wasn't his fault either. It wasn't even the fault of the silly pushing men and women from the news services. It was time, it was custom, it was man himself. But she had only to be herself, if she could ever find out what that really meant.

5

Their dates, when they came, had the properties of nightmares.

A news service sent a woman to tell her she had been awarded a week's holiday in New Madrid.

With the sailor from the stars.

Helen refused.

Then he refused too, and he was a little too prompt for her liking. She became curious about him.

Two weeks passed, and in the office of the news service a treasurer brought two slips of paper to the director. They were the vouchers for Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more to obtain the utmost in preferential luxury at New Madrid. The treasurer said, "These have been issued and registered as gifts with the Instrumentality, sir. Should they be cancelled?" The executive had his fill of stories that day, and he felt humane. On an impulse he commanded the treasurer, "Tell you what. Give those tickets to the young people. No publicity. We'll keep out of it. If they don't want us, they don't have to have us. Push it along. That's all. Go."

The ticket went back out to Helen. She had made the highest record ever reported at the university, and she needed a rest. When the newsservice woman gave her the ticket, she said,

"Is this a trick?"

Assured that it was not, she then asked,

"Is that man coming?"

She couldn't say "the sailor"—it sounded too much like the way people had always talked about herself—and she honestly didn't remember his other name at the moment.

The woman did not know.

"Do I have to see him?" said Helen.

"Of course not," said the woman. The gift was unconditional.

Helen laughed, almost grimly. "All right, I'll take it and say thanks. But one picturemaker, mind

you, just one, and I walk out. Or I may walk out for no reason at all. Is that all right?"

It was.

Four days later Helen was in the pleasure world of New Madrid, and a master of the dances was presenting her to an odd, intense old man whose hair was black.

"Junior scientist Helen America—Sailor of the stars Mr. Grey-no-more."

He looked at them shrewdly and smiled a kindly, experienced smile. He added the empty phrase of his profession, "I have had the honor and I withdraw."

They were alone together on the edge of the dining room. The sailor looked at her very sharply indeed, and then said:

"Who are you? Are you somebody I have already met? Should I remember you? There are too many people here on Earth. What do we do next? What are we supposed to do? Would you like to sit down?"

Helen said one "Yes" to all those questions and never dreamed that the single yes would be articulated by hundreds of great actresses, each one in the actress's own special way, across the centuries to come.

They did sit down.

How the rest of it happened, neither one was ever quite sure.

She had had to quiet him almost as though he were a hurt person in the House of Recovery. She explained the dishes to him and when he still could not choose, she gave the robot selections for him. She warned him, kindly enough, about manners when he forgot the simple ceremonies of eating which everyone knew, such as standing up to unfold the napkin or putting the scraps into the solvent tray and the silverware into the transfer.

At last he relaxed and did not look so old.

Momentarily forgetting the thousand times she had been asked silly questions herself, she asked him,

"Why did you become a sailor?"

He stared at her in open-eyed inquiry as though she had spoken to him in an unknown language and expected a reply. Finally he mumbled the answer,

"Are you—you, too—saying that—that I shouldn't have done it?"

Her hand went to her mouth in instinctive apology.

"No, no, no. You see, I myself have put in to be a sailor."

He merely looked at her, his young-old eyes open with observative-ness. He did not stare, but merely seemed to be trying to understand words, each one of which he could comprehend individually but which in sum amounted to sheer madness. She did not turn away from his look, odd though it was. Once again, she had the chance to note the indescribable peculiarity of this man who had managed enormous sails out in the blind empty black between untwinkling stars. He was young as a boy. The hair which gave him his name was glossy black. His beard must have been removed permanently, because his skin was that of a middle-aged woman—well-kept, pleasant, but showing the unmistakable wrinkles of age and betraying no sign of the normal stubble which the males in her culture preferred to leave on their faces. The skin had age without experience. The muscles had grown older, but they did not show how the person had grown.

Helen had learned to be an acute observer of people as her mother took up with one fanatic after another; she knew full well that people carry their secret biographies written in the muscles of their faces, and that a stranger passing on the street tells us (whether he wishes to or not) all his inmost intimacies. If we but look sharply enough, and in the right light, we know whether fear or hope or amusement has tallied the hours of his days, we divine the sources and outcome of his most secret sensuous pleasures, we catch the dim but persistent reflections of those other people who have left the imprints of their personalities on him in turn.

All this was absent from Mr. Grey-no-more: he had age but not the stigmata of age; he had growth without the normal markings of growth; he had lived without living, in a time and world in which most people stayed young while living too much.

He was the uttermost opposite of her mother that Helen had ever seen, and with a pang of undirected apprehension Helen realized that this man meant a great deal to her future life, whether she wished him to or not. She saw in him a young bachelor, prematurely old, a man whose love had been given to emptiness and horror, not to the tangible rewards and disappointments of human life. He had had all space for his mistress, and space had used him harshly. Still young, he was old; already old, he was young.

The mixture was one which she knew that she had never seen before, and which she suspected that no one else had ever seen, either. He had in the beginning of life the sorrow, compassion, and wisdom which most people find only at the end.

It was he who broke the silence. "You did say, didn't you, that you yourself had put in to be a sailor?"

Even to herself, her answer sounded silly and girlish. "I'm the first woman ever to qualify with the necessary scientific subjects while still young enough to pass the physical ... "

"You must be an unusual girl," said he mildly. Helen realized, with a thrill, a sweet and bitterly real hope that this young-old man from the stars had never heard of the "perfect child" who had been laughed at in the moments of being born, the girl who had all America for a father, who was famous and unusual and alone so terribly much so that she could not even imagine being ordinary, happy, decent, or simple.

She thought to herself, It would take a wise freak who sails in from the stars to overlook who I am, but to him she simply said, "It's no use talking about being 'unusual.' I'm tired of this Earth, and since I don't have to die to leave it, I think I would like to sail to the stars. I've got less to lose than you may think ... " She started to tell him about Mona Muggeridge but she stopped in time.

The compassionate gray eyes were upon her, and at this point it was he, not she, who was in control of the situation. She looked at the eyes themselves. They had stayed open for forty years, in the blackness near to pitch-darkness of the tiny cabin. The dim dials had shone like blazing suns upon his tired retinas before he was able to turn his eyes away. From time to time he had looked out at the black nothing to see the silhouettes of his dials, almost-blackness against total blackness, as the miles of their sweep sucked up the push of light itself and accelerated him and his frozen cargo at almost immeasurable speeds across an ocean of unfathomable silence. Yet, what he had done, she had asked to do.

The stare of his gray eyes yielded to a smile of his lips. In that young-old face, masculine in structure and feminine in texture, the smile had a connotation of tremendous kindness. She felt singularly much like weeping when she saw him smile in that particular way at her. Was that what people learned between the stars? To care for other people very much indeed and to spring upon them only to reveal love and not devouring to their prey? In a measured voice he said, "I believe you. You're the first one that I have believed. All these people have said that they wanted to be sailors too, even when they looked at me. They could not know what it means, but they said it anyhow, and I hated them for saying it. You, though—you're different. Perhaps you will sail among the stars, but I hope that you will not."

As though waking from a dream, he looked around the luxurious room, with the gilt-and-enamel robot-waiters standing aside with negligent elegance. They were designed to be always present and never obtrusive: this was a difficult esthetic effect to achieve, but their designer had achieved it.

The rest of the evening moved with the inevitability of good music. He went with her to the forever-lonely beach which the architects of New Madrid had built beside the hotel. They talked a little, they looked at each other, and they made love with an affirmative certainty which seemed outside themselves. He was very tender, and he did not realize that in a genitally sophisticated society, he was the first lover she had ever wanted or had ever had. (How could the daughter of Mona Muggeridge want a lover or a mate or a child?)

On the next afternoon, she exercised the freedom of her times and asked him to marry her. They had gone back to their private beach, which, through miracles of ultra-fine mini-weather adjustments, brought a Polynesian afternoon to the high chilly plateau of central Spain.

She asked him, she did, to marry her, and he refused, as tenderly and as kindly as a man of sixty-



five can refuse a girl of eighteen. She did not press him; they continued the bittersweet love affair.

They sat on the artificial sand of the artificial beach and dabbled their toes in the man-warmed water of the ocean. Then they lay down against an artificial sand dune which hid New Madrid from view.

"Tell me," Helen said, "can I ask again, why did you become a sailor?"

"Not so easily answered," he said. "Adventure, maybe. That, at least in part. And I wanted to see Earth. Couldn't afford to come in a pod. Now—well, I've enough to keep me the rest of my life. I can go back to New Earth as a passenger in a month instead of forty years—be frozen in no more time than the wink of an eye, put in my adiabatic pod, linked in to the next sailing ship, and wake up home again while some other fool does the sailing."

Helen nodded. She did not bother to tell him that she knew all this. She had been investigating sailing ships since meeting the sailor.

"Out where you sail among the stars," she said, "can you tell me—can you possibly tell me anything of what it's like out there?"

His face looked inward on his soul and afterward his voice came as from an immense distance.

"There are moments—or is it weeks—you can't really tell in the sail ship—when it seems—worthwhile. You feel ... your nerve endings reach out until they touch the stars. You feel enormous, somehow." Gradually he came back to her. "It's trite to say, of course, but you're never the same afterward. I don't mean just the obvious physical thing, but—you find yourself—or maybe you lose yourself. That's why," he continued, gesturing toward New Madrid out of sight behind the sand dune, "I can't stand this. New Earth, well, it's like Earth must have been in the old days, I guess. There's something fresh about it. Here ... "

"I know," said Helen America, and she did. The slightly decadent, slightly corrupt, too comfortable air of Earth must have had a stifling effect on the man from beyond the stars.

"There," he said, "you won't believe this, but sometimes the ocean's too cold to swim in. We have music that doesn't come from machines, and pleasures that come from inside our own bodies without being put there. I have to get back to New Earth."

Helen said nothing for a little while, concentrating on stilling the pain in her heart.

"I ... I ... " she began.

"I know," he said fiercely, almost savagely turning on her. "But I can't take you. I can't! You're too young, you've got a life to live and I've thrown away a quarter of mine. No, that's not right. I didn't throw it away. I wouldn't trade it back because it's given me something inside I never had before. And it's given me you."

"But if—" she started again to argue.

"No. Don't spoil it. I'm going next week to be frozen in my pod to wait for the next sail ship. I can't stand much more of this, and I might weaken. That would be a terrible mistake. But we have this time together now, and we have our separate lifetimes to remember in. Don't think of anything else. There's nothing, nothing we can do."

Helen did not tell him—then or ever—of the child she had started to hope for, the child they would now never have. Oh, she could have used the child. She could have tied him to her, for he was an honorable man and would have married her had she told him. But Helen's love, even then in her youth, was such that she could not use this means. She wanted him to come to her of his own free will, marrying her because he could not live without her. To that marriage their child would have been an additional blessing.

There was the other alternative, of course. She could have borne the child without naming the father. But she was no Mona Muggeridge. She knew too well the terrors and insecurity and loneliness of being Helen America ever to be responsible for the creation of another. And for the course she had laid out there was no place for a child. So she did the only thing she could. At the end of their time in New Madrid, she let him say a real goodbye. Wordless and without tears, she left. Then she went up to an arctic city, a pleasure city where such things are well-known and amidst shame, worry and a driving sense of regret she appealed to a confidential medical service which eliminated the unborn child. Then she went back to Cambridge and confirmed her place as

the first woman to sail a ship to the stars.

6

The presiding lord of the Instrumentality at that time was a man named Wait. Wait was not cruel but he was never noted for tenderness of spirit or for a high regard for the adventuresome proclivities of young people. His aide said to him, "This girl wants to sail a ship to New Earth. Are you going to let her?"

"Why not?" said Wait. "A person is a person. She is well-bred, well-educated. If she fails, we will find out something eighty years from now when the ship comes back. If she succeeds, it will shut up some of these women who have been complaining." The lord leaned over his desk: "If she qualifies, and if she goes, though, don't give her any convicts. Convicts are too good and too valuable as settlers to be sent along on a fool trip like that. You can send her on something of a gamble. Give her all religious fanatics. We have more than enough. Don't you have twenty or thirty thousand who are waiting?"

He said, "Yes, sir, twenty-six thousand two hundred. Not counting recent additions."

"Very well," said the lord of the Instrumentality. "Give her the whole lot of them and give her that new ship. Have we named it?"

"No, sir," said the aide.

"Name it then."

The aide looked blank.

A contemptuous wise smile crossed the face of the senior bureaucrat. He said, "Take that ship now and name it. Name it The Soul and let The Soul fly to the stars. And let Helen America be an angel if she wants to. Poor thing, she has not got much of a life to live on this Earth, not the way she was born, and the way she was brought up. And it's no use to try and reform her, to transform her personality, when it's a lively, rich personality. It does not do any good. We don't have to punish her for being herself. Let her go. Let her have it."

Wait sat up and stared at his aide and then repeated very firmly:

"Let her have it, only if she qualifies."

7

Helen America did qualify.

The doctors and the experts tried to warn her against it.

One technician said: "Don't you realize what this is going to mean? Forty years will pour out of your life in a single month. You leave here a girl. You will get there a woman of sixty. Well, you will probably still have a hundred years to live after that. And it's painful. You will have all these people, thousands and thousands of them. You will have some Earth cargo. There will be about thirty thousand pods strung on sixteen lines behind you. Then you will have the control cabin to live in. We will give you as many robots as you need, probably a dozen. You will have a mainsail and a foresail and you will have to keep the two of them."

"I know. I have read the book," said Helen America. "And I sail the ship with light, and if the infrared touches that sail—I go. If I get radio interference, I pull the sails in. And if the sails fail, I wait as long as I live."

The technician looked a little cross. "There is no call for you to get tragic about it. Tragedy is easy enough to contrive. And if you want to be tragic, you can be tragic without destroying thirty thousand other people or without wasting a large amount of Earth property. You can drown in water right here, or jump into a volcano like the Japanese in the old books. Tragedy is not the hard part. The hard part is when you don't quite succeed and you have to keep on fighting. When you must keep going on and on and on in the face of really hopeless odds, of real temptations to despair.

"Now this is the way that the foresail works. That sail will be twenty thousand miles at the wide part. It tapers down and the total length will be just under eighty thousand miles. It will be retracted or extended by small servo-robots. The servo-robots are radio-controlled. You had better use your radio sparingly, because after all these batteries, even though they are atomic, have to last forty

years. They have got to keep you alive."

"Yes, sir," said Helen America very contritely.

"You've got to remember what your job is. You're going because you are cheap. You are going because a sailor takes a lot less weight than a machine. There is no all-purpose computer built that weighs as little as a hundred and fifty pounds. You do. You go simply because you are expendable. Anyone that goes out to the stars takes one chance in three of never getting there. But you are not going because you are a leader, you are going because you are young. You have a life to give and a life to spare. Because your nerves are good. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir, I knew that."

"Furthermore, you are going because you'll make the trip in forty years. If we sent automatic devices and have them manage the sails, they would get there—possibly. But it would take them from a hundred years to a hundred and twenty or more, and by that time the adiabatic pods would have spoiled, most of the human cargo would not be fit for revival and the leakage of heat, no matter how we face it, would be enough to ruin the entire expedition. So remember that the tragedy and the trouble you face is mostly work. Work, and that's all it is. That is your big job."

Helen smiled. She was a short girl with rich dark hair, brown eyes, and very pronounced eyebrows, but when Helen smiled she was almost a child again, and a rather charming one. She said: "My job is work. I understand that, sir."

8

In the preparation area, the make-ready was fast but not hurried. Twice the technicians urged her to take a holiday before she reported for final training. She did not accept their advice. She wanted to go forth; she knew that they knew she wanted to leave Earth forever, and she also knew they knew she was not merely her mother's daughter. She was trying, somehow, to be herself. She knew the world did not believe, but the world did not matter.

The third time they suggested a vacation, the suggestion was mandatory. She had a gloomy two months which she ended up enjoying a little bit on the wonderful islands of the Hesperides, islands which were raised when the weight of the Earthports caused a new group of small archipelagos to form below Bermuda. She reported back, fit, healthy, and ready to go. The senior medical officer was very blunt.

"Do you really know what we are going to do to you? We are going to make you live forty years out of your life in one month."

She nodded, white of face, and he went on, "Now to give you those forty years we've got to slow down your bodily processes. After all the sheer biological task of breathing forty years' worth of air in one month involves a factor of about five hundred to one. No lungs could stand it. Your body must circulate water. It must take in food. Most of this is going to be protein. There will be some kind of a hydrate. You'll need vitamins.

"Now, what we are going to do is to slow the brain down, very much indeed, so that the brain will be working at about that five-hundred-to-one ratio. We don't want you incapable of working. Somebody has got to manage the sails.

"Therefore, if you hesitate or you start to think, a thought or two is going to take several weeks. Meanwhile your body can be slowed down some. But the different parts can't be slowed down at the same rate. Water, for example, we brought down to about eighty to one. Food, to about three hundred to one.

"You won't have time to drink forty years' worth of water. We circulate it, get it through, purify it, and get it back in your system, unless you break your link-up.

"So what you face is a month of being absolutely wide awake, on an operating table and being operated on—without anesthetic, while doing some of the hardest work that mankind has ever found.

"You'll have to take observations, you'll have to watch your lines with the pods of people and cargo behind you, you'll have to adjust the sails. If there is anybody surviving at destination point, they will come out and meet you."

"At least that happens most of the times."

"I am not going to assure you you will get the ship in. If they don't meet you, take an orbit beyond the farthest planet and either let yourself die or try to save yourself. You can't get thirty thousand people down on a planet singlehandedly.

"Meanwhile, though, you've got a real job. We are going to have to build these controls right into your body. We'll start by putting valves in your chest arteries. Then we go on, catheterizing your water. We are going to make an artificial colostomy that will go forward here just in front of your hip joint. Your water intake has a certain psychological value so that about one five-hundredth of your water we are going to leave you to drink out of a cup. The rest of it is going to go directly into your bloodstream. Again about a tenth of your food will go that way. You understand that?"

"You mean," said Helen, "I eat one-tenth, and the rest goes in intravenously?"

"That's right," said the medical technician. "We will pump it into you. The concentrates are there. The reconstitutor is there. Now these lines have a double connection. One set of connections runs into the maintenance machine. That will become the logistic support for your body. And these lines are the umbilical cord for a human being alone among the stars. They are your life.

"And now if they should break or if you should fall, you might faint for a year or two. If that happens, your local system takes over: that's the pack on your back.

"On Earth, it weighs as much as you do. You have already been drilled with the model pack. You know how easy it is to handle in space. That'll keep you going for a subjective period of about two hours. No one has ever worked out a clock yet that would match the human mind, so instead of giving you a clock we are giving you an odometer attached to your own pulse and we mark it off in grades. If you watch it in term of tens of thousands of pulse beats, you may get some information out of it.

"I don't know what kind of information, but you may find it helpful somehow." He looked at her sharply and then turned back to his tools, picking up a shining needle with a disk on the end.

"Now, let's get back to this. We are going to have to get right into your mind. That's chemical too."

Helen interrupted. "You said you were not going to operate on my head."

"Only the needle. That's the only way we can get to the mind. Slow it down enough so that you will have this subjective mind operating at a rate that will make the forty years pass in a month." He smiled grimly, but the grimness changed to momentary tenderness as he took in her brave obstinate stance, her girlish, admirable, pitiable determination.

"I won't argue it," she said. "This is as bad as a marriage and the stars are my bridegroom." The image of the sailor went across her mind, but she said nothing of him.

The technician went on. "Now, we have already built in psychotic elements. You can't even expect to remain sane. So you'd better not worry about it. You'll have to be insane to manage the sails and to survive utterly alone and be out there even a month. And the trouble is in that month you are going to know it's really forty years. There is not a mirror in the place but you'll probably find shiny surfaces to look at yourself.

"You won't look so good. You will see yourself aging, every time you slow down to look. I don't know what the problem is going to be on that score. It's been bad enough on men.

"Your hair problem is going to be easier than men's. The sailors we sent out, we simply had to kill all the hair roots. Otherwise the men would have been swamped in their own beards. And a tremendous amount of the nutrient would be wasted if it went into raising of hair on the face which no machine in the world could cut off fast enough to keep a man working. I think what we will do is inhibit hair on the top of your head. Whether it comes out in the same color or not is something you will find for yourself later. Did you ever meet the sailor that came in?"

The doctor knew she had met him. He did not know that it was the sailor from beyond the stars who called her. Helen managed to remain composed as she smiled at him to say: "Yes, you gave him new hair. Your technician planted a new scalp on his head, remember. Somebody on your staff did. The hair came out black and he got the nickname of Mr. Grey-no-more."

"If you are ready next Tuesday, we'll be ready too. Do you think you can make it by then, my

lady?"

Helen felt odd seeing this old, serious man refer to her as "lady," but he knew he was paying respect to a profession and not just to an individual.

"Tuesday is time enough." She felt complimented that he was an old-fashioned enough person to know the ancient names of the days of the week and to use them. That was a sign that he had not only learned the essentials at the University but that he had picked up the elegant inconsequentialities as well.

9

Two weeks later was twenty-one years later by the chronometers in the cabin. Helen turned for the ten-thousand-times-ten-thousandth time to scan the sails.

Her back ached with a violent throb.

She could feel the steady roar of her heart like a fast vibrator as it ticked against the time-span of her awareness. She could look down at the meter on her wrist and see the hands on the watchlike dials indicate tens of thousands of pulses very slowly.

She heard the steady whistle of air in her throat as her lungs seemed shuddering with sheer speed.

And she felt the throbbing pain of a large tube feeding an immense quantity of mushy water directly into the artery of her neck.

On her abdomen, she felt as if someone had built a fire. The evacuation tube operated automatically but it burnt as if a coal had been held to her skin and a catheter, which connected her bladder to another tube, stung as savagely as the prod of a scalding-hot needle. Her head ached and her vision blurred.

But she could still see the instruments and she still could watch the sails. Now and then she could glimpse, faint as a tracery of dust, the immense skein of people and cargo that lay behind them.

She could not sit down. It hurt too much.

The only way that she could be comfortable for resting was to lean against the instrument panel, her lower ribs against the panel, her tired forehead against the meters.

Once she rested that way and realized that it was two and a half months before she got up. She knew that rest had no meaning and she could see her face moving, a distorted image of her own face growing old in the reflections from the glass face of the "apparent weight" dial.

She could look at her arms with blurring vision, note the skin tightening, loosening and tightening again, as changes in temperatures affected it.

She looked out one more time at the sails and decided to take in the foresail. Wearily she dragged herself over the control panel with a servo-robot. She selected the right control and opened it for a week or so. She waited there, her heart buzzing, her throat whistling air, her fingernails breaking off gently as they grew. Finally she checked to see if it really had been the right one, pushed again, and nothing happened. She pushed a third time. There was no response. Now she went back to the master panel, re-read, checked the light direction, found a certain amount of infrared pressure which she should have been picking up. The sails had very gradually risen to something not far from the speed of light itself because they moved fast with the one side dulled; the pods behind, sealed against time and eternity, swam obediently in an almost perfect weightlessness. She scanned; her reading had been correct. The sail was wrong.

She went back to the emergency panel and pressed. Nothing happened.

She broke out a repair robot and sent it out to effect repairs, punching the papers as rapidly as she could to give instructions. The robot went out and an instant (three days) later it replied. The panel on the repair robot rang forth, "Does not conform."

She sent a second repair robot. That had no effect either. She sent a third, the last. Three bright lights, "Does not conform," stared at her. She moved the servo-robots to the other side of the sails and pulled hard.

The sail was still not at the right angle.

She stood there wearied and lost in space, and she prayed: "Not for me, God, I am running away from a life that I did not want. But for this ship's souls and for the poor foolish people that I am

taking who are brave enough to want to worship their own way and need the light of another star, I ask you, God, help me now." She thought she had prayed very fervently and she hoped that she would get an answer to her prayer.

It did not work out that way. She was bewildered, alone. There was no sun. There was nothing, except the tiny cabin and herself more alone than any woman had ever been before. She sensed the thrill and ripple of her muscles as they went through days of adjustment while her mind noticed only the matter of minutes. She leaned forward, forced herself not to relax and finally she remembered that one of the official busybodies had included a weapon.

What she would use a weapon for she did not know.

It pointed. It had a range of two hundred thousand miles. The target could be selected automatically.

She got down on her knees trailing the abdominal tube and the feeding tube and the catheter tubes and the helmet wires, each one running back to the panel. She crawled underneath the panel for the servo-robots and she pulled out a written manual. She finally found the right frequency for the weapon's controls. She set the weapon up and went to the window.

At the last moment she thought, "Perhaps the fools are going to make me shoot the window out. It ought to have been designed to shoot through the window without hurting it. That's the way they should have done it."

She wondered about the matter for a week or two.

Just before she fired it she turned and there, next to her, stood her sailor, the sailor from the stars, Mr. Grey-no-more. He said: "It won't work that way."

He stood clear and handsome, the way she had seen him in New Madrid. He had no tubes, he did not tremble, she could see the normal rise and fall of his chest as he took one breath every hour or so. One part of her mind knew that he was a hallucination. Another part of her mind believed that he was real. She was mad and she was very happy to be mad at this time and she let the hallucination give her advice. She reset the gun so that it would fire through the cabin wall and it fired a low charge at the repair mechanism out beyond the distorted and immovable sail.

The low charge did the trick. The interference had been something beyond all technical anticipation. The weapon had cleaned out the forever-unidentifiable obstruction, leaving the servo-robots free to attack their tasks like a tribe of maddened ants. They worked again. They had had defenses built in against the minor impediments of space. All of them scurried and skipped about.

With a sense of bewilderment close to religion, she perceived the wind of starlight blowing against the immense sails. The sails snapped into position. She got a momentary touch of gravity as she sensed a little weight. The Soul was back on her course.

10

"It's a girl," they said to him on New Earth. "It's a girl. She must have been eighteen herself."

Mr. Grey-no-more did not believe it.

But he went to the hospital and there in the hospital he saw Helen America.

"Here I am, sailor," said she. "I sailed too." Her face was white as chalk, her expression was that of a girl of about twenty. Her body was that of a well-preserved woman of sixty.

As for him, he had not changed again, since he had returned home inside a pod.

He looked at her. His eyes narrowed and then in a sudden reversal of roles, it was he who was kneeling beside her bed and covering her hands with his tears.

Half-coherently, he babbled at her: "I ran away from you because I loved you so. I came back here where you would never follow, or if you did follow, you'd still be a young woman, and I'd still be too old. But you have sailed The Soul in here and you wanted me."

The nurse of New Earth did not know about the rules which should be applied to the sailors from the stars. Very quietly she went out of the room, smiling in tenderness and human pity at the love which she had seen. But she was a practical woman and she had a sense of her own advancement. She called a friend of hers at the news service and said: "I think I have got the biggest romance in history. If you get here soon enough you can get the first telling of the story of Helen America and

Mr. Grey-no-more. They just met like that. I guess they'd seen each other somewhere. They just met like that and fell in love."

The nurse did not know that they had forsworn a love on Earth. The nurse did not know that Helen America had made a lonely trip with an icy purpose and the nurse did not know that the crazy image of Mr. Grey-no-more, the sailor himself, had stood beside Helen twenty years out from nothing-at-all in the depth and blackness of space between the stars.

11

The little girl had grown up, had married, and now had a little girl of her own. The mother was unchanged, but the spieltier was very, very old. It had outlived all its marvelous tricks of adaptability, and for some years had stayed frozen in the role of a yellow-haired, blue-eyed girl doll. Out of sentimental sense of the fitness of things, she had dressed the spieltier in a bright blue jumper with matching panties. The little animal crept softly across the floor on its tiny human hands, using its knees for hind feet. The mock-human face looked up kindly and squeaked for milk.

The young mother said, "Mom, you ought to get rid of that thing. It's all used up and it looks horrible with your nice period furniture."

"I thought you loved it," said the older woman.

"Of course," said the daughter. "It was cute, when I was a child. But I'm not a child any more, and it doesn't even work."

The spieltier had struggled to its feet and clutched its mistress's ankle. The older woman took it away gently, and put down a saucer of milk and a cup the size of a thimble. The spieltier tried to curtsy, as it had been motivated to do at the beginning, slipped, fell, and whimpered. The mother righted it and the little old animal-toy began dipping milk with its thimble and sucking the milk into its tiny toothless old mouth.

"You remember, Mom—" said the younger woman and stopped.

"Remember what, dear?"

"You told me about Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more when that was brand new."

"Yes, darling, maybe I did."

"You didn't tell me everything," said the younger woman accusingly,

"Of course not. You were a child."

"But it was awful. Those messy people, and the horrible way sailors live. I don't see how you idealized it and called it a romance—"

"But it was. It is," insisted the other.

"Romance, my foot," said the daughter. "It's as bad as you and the worn-out spieltier." She pointed at the tiny, living, aged doll who had fallen asleep beside its milk. "I think it's horrible. You ought to get rid of it. And the world ought to get rid of sailors."

"Don't be harsh, darling," said the mother.

"Don't be a sentimental old slob," said the daughter.

"Perhaps we are," said the mother with a loving sort of laugh. Unobtrusively she put the sleeping spieltier on a padded chair—where it would not be stepped on or hurt.

12

Outsiders never knew the real end of the story.

More than a century after their wedding, Helen lay dying: she was dying happily, because her beloved sailor was beside her. She believed that if they could conquer space, they might conquer death as well.

Her loving, happy, weary dying mind blurred over and she picked up an argument they hadn't touched upon for decades.

"You did so come to The Soul," she said. "You did so stand beside me when I was lost and did not know how to handle the weapon."

"If I came then, darling, I'll come again, wherever you are. You're my darling, my heart, my own true love. You're my bravest of ladies, my boldest of people. You're my own. You sailed for me.

You're my lady who sailed The Soul."

His voice broke, but his features stayed calm. He had never before seen anyone die so confident and so happy.

## THE GAME OF RAT AND DRAGON

Captain Wow and the other feline characters were inspired by cats living in the Linebarger home when this story was written—at a single sitting one afternoon in 1954. The discovery of planoforming, which forces men to brave the terrors of space, was described in an unpublished story written the next year ... a story which may never appear now, since its theme was later reworked in "Drunkboat"

### 1. THE TABLE

Pinlighting is a hell of a way to earn a living. Underbill was furious as he closed the door behind himself. It didn't make much sense to wear a uniform and look like a soldier if people didn't appreciate what you did.

He sat down in his chair, laid his head back in the headrest, and pulled the helmet down over his forehead.

As he waited for the pin-set to warm up, he remembered the girl in the outer corridor. She had looked at it, then looked at him scornfully.

"Meow." That was all she had said. Yet it had cut him like a knife.

What did she think he was—a fool, a loafer, a uniformed nonentity? Didn't she know that for every half-hour of pinlighting, he got a minimum of two months' recuperation in the hospital?

By now the set was warm. He felt the squares of space around him, sensed himself at the middle of an immense grid, a cubic grid, full of nothing. Out in that nothingness, he could sense the hollow aching horror of space itself and could feel the terrible anxiety which his mind encountered whenever it met the faintest trace of inert dust.

As he relaxed, the comforting solidity of the Sun, the clockwork of the familiar planets and the moon rang in on him. Our own solar system was as charming and as simple as an ancient cuckoo clock filled with familiar ticking and with reassuring noises. The odd little moons of Mars swung around their planet like frantic mice, yet their regularity was itself an assurance that all was well. Far above the plane of the ecliptic, he could feel half a ton of dust more or less drifting outside the lanes of human travel.

Here there was nothing to fight, nothing to challenge the mind, to tear the living soul out of a body with its roots dripping in effluvium as tangible as blood.

Nothing ever moved in on the solar system. He could wear the pin-set forever and be nothing more than a sort of telepathic astronomer, a man who could feel the hot, warm protection of the sun throbbing and burning against his living mind.

Woodley came in.

"Same old ticking world," said Underbill. "Nothing to report. No wonder they didn't develop the pin-set until they began to planoform. Down here with the hot sun around us, it feels so good and so quiet. You can feel everything spinning and turning. It's nice and sharp and compact. It's sort of like sitting around home."

Woodley grunted. He was not much given to flights of fantasy.

Undeterred, Underbill went on, "It must have been pretty good to have been an ancient man. I wonder why they burned up their world with war. They didn't have to planoform. They didn't have to go out to earn their livings among the stars. They didn't have to dodge the rats or play the game. They couldn't have invented pinlighting because they didn't have any need of it, did they, Woodley?"

Woodley grunted, "Uh-huh." Woodley was twenty-six years old and due to retire in one more year. He already had a farm picked out. He had gotten through ten years of hard work pinlighting with the best of them. He had kept his sanity by not thinking very much about his job, meeting the



strains of the task whenever he had to meet them and thinking nothing more about his duties until the next emergency arose.

Woodley never made a point of getting popular among the partners. None of the partners liked him very much. Some of them even resented him. He was suspected of thinking ugly thoughts of the partners on occasion, but since none of the partners ever thought a complaint in articulate form, the other pinlighters and the chiefs of the Instrumentality left him alone.

Underbill was still full of the wonder of their job. Happily he babbled on, "What does happen to us when we planoform? Do you think it's sort of like dying? Did you ever see anybody who had his soul pulled out?"

"Pulling souls is just a way of talking about it," said Woodley. "After all these years, nobody knows whether we have souls or not."

"But I saw one once. I saw what Dogwood looked like when he came apart. There was something funny. It looked wet and sort of sticky as if it were bleeding and it went out of him—and you know what they did to Dogwood? They took him away, up in that part of the hospital where you and I never go—way up at the top part where the others are, where the others always have to go if they are alive after the rats of the up-and-out have gotten them."

Woodley sat down and lit an ancient pipe. He was burning something called tobacco in it. It was a dirty sort of habit, but it made him look very dashing and adventurous.

"Look here, youngster. You don't have to worry about that stuff. Pinlighting is getting better all the time. The partners are getting better. I've seen them pinlight two rats forty-six million miles apart in one and a half milliseconds. As long as people had to try to work the pin-sets themselves, there was always the chance that with a minimum of four-hundred milliseconds for the human mind to set a pinlight, we wouldn't light the rats up fast enough to protect our planoforming ships. The partners have changed all that. Once they get going, they're faster than rats. And they always will be. I know it's not easy, letting a partner share your mind—"

"It's not easy for them, either," said Underbill. "Don't worry about them. They're not human. Let them take care of themselves. I've seen more pinlighters go crazy from monkeying around with partners than I have ever seen caught by the rats. How many of them do you actually know of that got grabbed by rats?"

Underbill looked down at his fingers, which shone green and purple in the vivid light thrown by the tuned-in pin-set, and counted ships. The thumb for the Andromeda, lost with crew and passengers, the index finger and the middle finger for Release Ships 43 and 56, found with their pin-sets burned out and every man, woman, and child on board dead or insane. The ring finger, the little finger, and the thumb of the other hand were the first three battleships to be lost to the rats—lost as people realized that there was something out there underneath space itself which was alive, capricious, and malevolent. Planoforming was sort of funny. It felt like—like nothing much. Like the twinge of a mild electric shock.

Like the ache of a sore tooth bitten on for the first time.

Like a slightly painful flash of light against the eyes.

Yet in that time, a forty-thousand-ton ship lifting free above Earth disappeared somehow or other into two dimensions and appeared half a light-year or fifty light-years off.

At one moment, he would be sitting in the Fighting Room, the pin-set ready and the familiar solar system ticking around inside his head. For a second or a year (he could never tell how long it really was, subjectively), the funny little flash went through him and then he was loose in the up-and-out, the terrible open spaces between the stars, where the stars themselves felt like pimples on his telepathic mind and the planets were too far away to be sensed or read.

Somewhere in this outer space, a gruesome death awaited, death and horror of a kind which man had never encountered until he reached out for interstellar space itself. Apparently the light of the suns kept the dragons away.

Dragons. That was what people called them. To ordinary people, there was nothing, nothing except the shiver of planoforming and the hammer blow of sudden death or the dark spastic note of lunacy descending into their minds.

But to the telepaths, they were dragons.

In the fraction of a second between the telepaths' awareness of a hostile something. Out in the black, hollow nothingness of space and the impact of a ferocious, ruinous psychic blow against all living things within the ship, the telepaths had sensed entities something like the dragons of ancient human lore, beasts more clever than beasts, demons more tangible than demons, hungry vortices of aliveness and hate compounded by unknown means out of the thin, tenuous matter between the stars.

It took a surviving ship to bring back the news—a ship in which, by sheer chance, a telepath had a light-beam ready, turning it out at the innocent dust so that, within the panorama of his mind, the dragon dissolved into nothing at all and the other passengers, themselves non-telepathic, went about their way not realizing that their own immediate deaths had been averted.

From then on, it was easy—almost.

Planofforming ships always carried telepaths. Telepaths had their sensitiveness enlarged to an immense range by the pin-sets, which were telepathic amplifiers adapted to the mammal mind. The pin-sets in turn were electronically geared into small dirigible light bombs. Light did it.

Light broke up the dragons, allowed the ships to reform three-dimensionally, skip, skip, skip, as they moved from star to star.

The odds suddenly moved down from a hundred to one against mankind to sixty to forty in mankind's favor.

This was not enough. The telepaths were trained to become ultrasensitive, trained to become aware of the dragons in less than a millisecond.

But it was found that the dragons could move a million miles in just under two milliseconds and that this was not enough for the human mind to activate the light beams.

Attempts had been made to sheath the ships in light at all times.

This defense wore out.

As mankind learned about the dragons, so too, apparently, the dragons learned about mankind. Somehow they flattened their own bulk and came in on extremely flat trajectories very quickly.

Intense light was needed, light of sunlike intensity. This could be provided only by light bombs. Pinlighting came into existence.

Pinlighting consisted of the detonation of ultra-vivid miniature photonuclear bombs, which converted a few ounces of a magnesium isotope into pure visible radiance.

The odds kept coming down in mankind's favor, yet ships were being lost.

It became so bad that people didn't even want to find the ships because the rescuers knew what they would see. It was sad to bring back to Earth three hundred bodies ready for burial and two hundred or three hundred lunatics, damaged beyond repair, to be wakened, and fed, and cleaned, and put to sleep, wakened and fed again until their lives were ended.

Telepaths tried to reach into the minds of the psychotics who had been damaged by the dragons, but they found nothing there beyond vivid spouting columns of fiery terror bursting from the primordial id itself, the volcanic source of life.

Then came the partners.

Man and partner could do together what man could not do alone. Men had the intellect. Partners had the speed.

The partners rode their tiny craft, no larger than footballs, outside the spaceships. They planofformed with the ships. They rode beside them in their six-pound craft ready to attack.

The tiny ships of the partners were swift. Each carried a dozen pin-lights, bombs no bigger than thimbles.

The pinlighters threw the partners—quite literally threw—by means of mind-to-firing relays directly at the dragons.

What seemed to be dragons to the human mind appeared in the form of gigantic rats in the minds of the partners.

Out in the pitiless nothingness of space, the partners' minds responded to an instinct as old as life. The partners attacked, striking with a speed faster than man's, going from attack to attack until the

rats or themselves were destroyed. Almost all the time it was the partners who won.

With the safety of the interstellar skip, skip, skip of the ships, commerce increased immensely, the population of all the colonies went up, and the demand for trained partners increased.

Underbill and Woodley were a part of the third generation of pin-lighters and yet, to them, it seemed as though their craft had endured forever.

Gearing space into minds by means of the pin-set, adding the partners to those minds, keying up the minds for the tension of a fight on which all depended—this was more than human synapses could stand for long. Underbill needed his two months' rest after half an hour of fighting. Woodley needed his retirement after ten years of service. They were young. They were good. But they had limitations.

So much depended on the choice of partners, so much on the sheer luck of who drew whom.

## 2. THE SHUFFLE

Father Moontree and the little girl named West entered the room. They were the other two pinlighters. The human complement of the Fighting Room was now complete.

Father Moontree was a red-faced man of forty-five who had lived the peaceful life of a farmer until he reached his fortieth year. Only then, belatedly, did the authorities find he was telepathic and agree to let him late in life enter upon the career of pinlighter. He did well at it, but he was fantastically old for this kind of business.

Father Moontree looked at the glum Woodley and the musing Underbill. "How're the youngsters today? Ready for a good fight?"

"Father always wants a fight," giggled the little girl named West. She was such a little little girl. Her giggle was high and childish. She looked like the last person in the world one would expect to find in the rough, sharp dueling of pinlighting.

Underbill had been amused one time when he found one of the most sluggish of the partners coming away happy from contact with the mind of the girl named West.

Usually the partners didn't care much about the human minds with which they were paired for the journey. The partners seemed to take the attitude that human minds were complex and fouled up beyond belief, anyhow. No partner ever questioned the superiority of the human mind, though very few of the partners were much impressed by that superiority.

The partners liked people. They were willing to fight with them. They were even willing to die for them. But when a partner liked an individual the way, for example, that Captain Wow or the Lady May liked Underbill, the liking had nothing to do with intellect. It was a matter of temperament, of feel.

Underbill knew perfectly well that Captain Wow regarded his, Underbill's, brains as silly. What Captain Wow liked was Underbill's friendly emotional structure, the cheerfulness and glint of wicked amusement that shot through Underbill's unconscious thought patterns, and the gaiety with which Underbill faced danger. The words, the history books, the ideas, the science—Underbill could sense all that in his own mind, reflected back from Captain Wow's mind, as so much rubbish.

Miss West looked at Underbill. "I bet you've put stickum on the stones."

"I did not!"

Underbill felt his ears grow red with embarrassment. During his novitiate, he had tried to cheat in the lottery because he got particularly fond of a special partner, a lovely young mother named Murr. It was so much easier to operate with Murr and she was so affectionate toward him that he forgot pinlighting was hard work and that he was not instructed to have a good time with his partner. They were both designed and prepared to go into deadly battle together.

One cheating had been enough. They had found him out and he had been laughed at for years.

Father Moontree picked up the imitation—leather cup and shook the stone dice which assigned them their partners for the trip. By senior rights he took first draw.

He grimaced. He had drawn a greedy old character, a tough old male whose mind was full of slobbering thoughts of food, veritable oceans full of half-spoiled fish. Father Moontree had once said that he burped cod liver oil for weeks after drawing that particular glutton, so strongly had the

telepathic image of fish impressed itself upon his mind. Yet the glutton was a glutton for danger as well as for fish. He had killed sixty-three dragons, more than any other partner in the service, and was quite literally worth his weight in gold.

The little girl West came next. She drew Captain Wow. When she saw who it was, she smiled.

"I like him," she said. "He's such fun to fight with. He feels so nice and cuddly in my mind."

"Cuddly, hell," said Woodley. "I've been in his mind, too. It's the most leering mind in this ship, bar none."

"Nasty man," said the little girl. She said it declaratively, without reproach.

Underbill, looking at her, shivered.

He didn't see how she could take Captain Wow so calmly. Captain Wow's mind did leer. When Captain Wow got excited in the middle of a battle, confused images of dragons, deadly rats, luscious beds, the smell of fish, and the shock of space all scrambled together in his mind as he and Captain Wow, their consciousnesses linked together through the pin-set, became a fantastic composite of human being and Persian cat.

That's the trouble with working with cats, thought Underbill. It's a pity that nothing else anywhere will serve as partner. Cats were all right once you got in touch with them telepathically. They were smart enough to meet the needs of the fight, but their motives and desires were certainly different from those of humans.

They were companionable enough as long as you thought tangible images at them, but their minds just closed up and went to sleep when you recited Shakespeare or Colegrove, or if you tried to tell them what space was.

It was sort of funny realizing that the partners who were so grim and mature out here in space were the same cute little animals that people had used as pets for thousands of years back on Earth. He had embarrassed himself more than once while on the ground saluting perfectly ordinary non-telepathic cats because he had forgotten for the moment that they were not partners.

He picked up the cup and shook out his stone dice.

He was lucky—he drew the Lady May.

The Lady May was the most thoughtful partner he had ever met. In her, the finely bred pedigree mind of a Persian cat had reached one of its highest peaks of development. She was more complex than any human woman, but the complexity was all one of emotions, memory, hope, and discriminated experience—experience sorted through without benefit of words.

When he had first come into contact with her mind, he was astonished at its clarity. With her he remembered her kittenhood. He remembered every mating experience she had ever had. He saw in a half-recognizable gallery all the other pinlighters with whom she had been paired for the fight. And he saw himself radiant, cheerful, and desirable.

He even thought he caught the edge of a longing—

A very flattering and yearning thought: What a pity he is not a cat.

Woodley picked up the last stone. He drew what he deserved—a sullen, scarred old tomcat with none of the verve of Captain Wow. Woodley's partner was the most animal of all the cats on the ship, a low, brutish type with a dull mind. Even telepathy had not refined his character. His ears were half chewed off from the first fights in which he had engaged. He was a serviceable fighter, nothing more.

Woodley grunted.

Underbill glanced at him oddly. Didn't Woodley ever do anything but grunt?

Father Moontree looked at the other three. "You might as well get your partners now. I'll let the scanner know we're ready to go into the up-and-out."

### 3. THE DEAL

Underbill spun the combination lock on the Lady May's cage. He woke her gently and took her into his arms. She humped her back luxuriously, stretched her claws, started to purr, thought better of it, and licked him on the wrist instead. He did not have the pin-set on, so their minds were closed to each other, but in the angle of her mustache and in the movement of her ears, he caught some

sense of the gratification she experienced in finding him as her partner.

He talked to her in human speech, even though speech meant nothing to a cat when the pin-set was not on.

"It's a damn shame, sending a sweet little thing like you whirling around in the coldness of nothing to hunt for rats that are bigger and deadlier than all of us put together. You didn't ask for this kind of fight, did you?"

For answer, she licked his hand, purred, tickled his cheek with her long fluffy tail, turned around and faced him, golden eyes shining.

For a moment, they stared at each other, man squatting, cat standing erect on her hind legs, front claws digging into his knee. Human eyes and cat eyes looked across an immensity which no words could meet, but which affection spanned in a single glance.

"Time to get in," he said.

She walked docilely to her spheroid carrier. She climbed in. He saw to it that her miniature pin-set rested firmly and comfortably against the base of her brain. He made sure that her claws were padded so that she could not tear herself in the excitement of battle.

Softly he said to her, "Ready?"

For answer, she preened her back as much as her harness would permit and purred softly within the confines of the frame that held her.

He slapped down the lid and watched the sealant ooze around the seam. For a few hours, she was welded into her projectile until a workman with a short cutting arc would remove her after she had done her duty.

He picked up the entire projectile and slipped it into the ejection tube. He closed the door of the tube, spun the lock, seated himself in his chair, and put his own pin-set on.

Once again he flung the switch.

He sat in a small room, small, small, warm, warm, the bodies of the other three people moving close around him, the tangible lights in the ceiling bright and heavy against his closed eyelids.

As the pin-set warmed, the room fell away. The other people ceased to be people and became small glowing heaps of fire, embers, dark red fire, with the consciousness of life burning like old red coals in a country fireplace.

As the pin-set warmed a little more, he felt Earth just below him, felt the ship slipping away, felt the turning Moon as it swung on the far side of the world, felt the planets and the hot, clear goodness of the sun which kept the dragons so far from mankind's native ground.

Finally, he reached complete awareness.

He was telepathically alive to a range of millions of miles. He felt the dust which he had noticed earlier high above the ecliptic. With a thrill of warmth and tenderness, he felt the consciousness of the Lady May pouring over into his own. Her consciousness was as gentle and dear and yet sharp to the taste of his mind as if it were scented oil. It felt relaxing and reassuring. He could sense her welcome of him. It was scarcely a thought, just a raw emotion of greeting.

At last they were one again.

In a tiny remote corner of his mind, as tiny as the smallest toy he had ever seen in his childhood, he was still aware of the room and the ship, and of Father Moontree picking up a telephone and speaking to a Go-captain in charge of the ship.

His telepathic mind caught the idea long before his ears could frame the words. The actual sound followed the idea the way that thunder on an ocean beach follows the lightning inward from far out over the seas.

"The Fighting Room is ready. Clear to planoform, sir."

#### 4. THE PLAY

Underbill was always a little exasperated the way that Lady May experienced things before he did.

He was braced for the quick vinegar thrill of planoforming, but he caught her report of it before his own nerves could register what happened.

Earth had fallen so far away that he groped for several milliseconds before he found the Sun in the upper rear right-hand corner of his telepathic mind.

That was a good jump, he thought. This way we'll get there in four or five skips.

A few hundred miles outside the ship, the Lady May thought back at him, "O warm, O generous, O gigantic man! O brave, O friendly, O tender and huge partner! O wonderful with you, with you so good, good, good, warm, warm, now to fight, now to go, good with you ... "

He knew that she was not thinking words, that his mind took the dear amiable babble of her cat intellect and translated it into images which his own thinking could record and understand.

Neither one of them was absorbed in the game of mutual greetings. He reached out far beyond her range of perception to see if there was anything near the ship. It was funny how it was possible to do two things at once. He could scan space with his pin-set mind and yet at the same time catch a vagrant thought of hers, a lovely, affectionate thought about a son who had had a golden face and a chest covered with soft, incredibly downy white fur.

While he was still searching, he caught the warning from her.

We jump again!

And so they had. The ship had moved to a second planoform. The stars were different. The sun was immeasurably far behind. Even the nearest stars were barely in contact. This was good dragon country, this open, nasty, hollow kind of space. He reached farther, faster, sensing and looking for danger, ready to fling the Lady May at danger wherever he found it.

Terror blazed up in his mind, so sharp, so clear, that it came through as a physical wrench.

The little girl named West had found something—something immense, long, black, sharp, greedy, horrific. She flung Captain Wow at it.

Underhill tried to keep his own mind clear. "Watch out!" he shouted telepathically at the others, trying to move the Lady May around.

At one corner of the battle, he felt the lustful rage of Captain Wow as the big Persian tomcat detonated lights while he approached the streak of dust which threatened the ship and the people within.

The lights scored near misses.

The dust flattened itself, changing from the shape of a sting ray into the shape of a spear.

Not three milliseconds had elapsed.

Father Moontree was talking human words and was saying in a voice that moved like cold molasses out of a heavy jar, "C-a-p-t-a-i-n." Underhill knew that the sentence was going to be "Captain, move fast!"

The battle would be fought and finished before Father Moontree got through talking.

Now, fractions of a millisecond later, the Lady May was directly in line.

Here was where the skill and speed of the partners came in. She could react faster than he. She could see the threat as an immense rat coming directly at her.

She could fire the light-bombs with a discrimination which he might miss.

He was connected with her mind, but he could not follow it.

His consciousness absorbed the tearing wound inflicted by the alien enemy. It was like no wound on Earth—raw, crazy pain which started like a burn at his navel. He began to writhe in his chair.

Actually he had not yet had time to move a muscle when the Lady May struck back at their enemy.

Five evenly spaced photonuclear bombs blazed out across a hundred-thousand miles.

The pain in his mind and body vanished.

He felt a moment of fierce, terrible, feral elation running through the mind of the Lady May as she finished her kill. It was always disappointing to the cats to find out that their enemies disappeared at the moment of destruction.

Then he felt her hurt, the pain and the fear that swept over both of them as the battle, quicker than the movement of an eyelid, had come and gone. In the same instant there came the sharp and acid twinge of planoform.

Once more the ship went skip.

He could hear Woodley thinking at him. "You don't have to bother much. This old son-of-a-gun and I will take over for a while."

Twice again the twinge, the skip.

He had no idea where he was until the lights of the Caledonia space port shone below.

With a weariness that lay almost beyond the limits of thought, he threw his mind back into rapport with the pin-set, fixing the Lady May's projectile gently and neatly in its launching tube.

She was half dead with fatigue, but he could feel the beat of her heart, could listen to her panting, and he grasped the grateful edge of a "Thanks" reaching from her mind to his.

## 5. THE SCORE

They put him in the hospital at Caledonia.

The doctor was friendly but firm. "You actually got touched by that dragon. That's as close a shave as I've ever seen. It's all so quick that it'll be a long time before we know what happened scientifically, but I suppose you'd be ready for the insane asylum now if the contact had lasted several tenths of a millisecond longer. What kind of cat did you have out in front of you?"

Underbill felt the words coming out of him slowly. Words were such a lot of trouble compared with the speed and the joy of thinking, fast and sharp and clear, mind to mind! But words were all that could reach ordinary people like this doctor.

His mouth moved heavily as he articulated words. "Don't call our partners cats. The right thing to call them is partners. They fight for us in a team. You ought to know we call them partners, not cats. How is mine?"

"I don't know," said the doctor contritely. "We'll find out for you. Meanwhile, old man, you take it easy. There's nothing but rest that can help you. Can you make yourself sleep, or would you like us to give you some kind of sedative?"

"I can sleep," said Underbill. "I just want to know about the Lady May."

The nurse joined in. She was a little antagonistic. "Don't you want to know about the other people?"

"They're okay," said Underbill. "I knew that before I came in here."

He stretched his arms and sighed and grinned at them. He could see they were relaxing and were beginning to treat him as a person instead of a patient.

"I'm all right," he said. "Just let me know when I can go see my partner."

A new thought struck him. He looked wildly at the doctor. "They didn't send her off with the ship, did they?"

"I'll find out right away," said the doctor. He gave Underbill a reassuring squeeze of the shoulder and left the room.

The nurse took a napkin off a goblet of chilled fruit juice.

Underbill tried to smile at her. There seemed to be something wrong with the girl. He wished she would go away. First she had started to be friendly and now she was distant again. It's a nuisance being telepathic, he thought. You keep trying to reach even when you are not making contact.

Suddenly she swung around on him.

"You pinlighters! You and your damn cats!"

Just as she stamped out, he burst into her mind. He saw himself a radiant hero, clad in his smooth suede uniform, the pin-set crown shining like ancient royal jewels around his head. He saw his own face, handsome and masculine, shining out of her mind. He saw himself very far away and he saw himself as she hated him.

She hated him in the secrecy of her own mind. She hated him because he was—she thought—proud and strange and rich, better and more beautiful than people like her.

He cut off the sight of her mind and, as he buried his face in the pillow, he caught an image of the Lady May.

"She is a cat," he thought. "That's all she is—a cat!"

But that was not how his mind saw her—quick beyond all dreams of speed, sharp, clever, unbelievably graceful, beautiful, wordless and undemanding.

Where would he ever find a woman who could compare with her?

## THE BURNING OF THE BRAIN

Rejuvenation, implied in parts of "The Lady Who Sailed The Soul" and mentioned more explicitly here, is made possible by the santaclara drug (stroon) found only on Old North Australia (Norstrilia)-although it was some years after publication of this story (written in 1955), that the planet was mentioned by name in Smith's fiction. Even at this period, we see the growing luxury and decadence of Instrumentality culture.

### 1. DOLORES OH

I tell you, it is sad, it is more than sad, it is fearful—for it is a dreadful thing to go into the up-and-out, to fly without flying, to move between the stars as a moth may drift among the leaves on a summer night.

Of all the men who took the great ships into planiform none was braver, none stronger, than Captain Magno Taliano.

Scanners had been gone for centuries and the jonasoidal effect had become so simple, so manageable, that the traversing of light-years was no more difficult to most of the passengers of the great ships than to go from one room to the other.

Passengers moved easily.

Not the crew.

Least of all the captain.

The captain of a jonasoidal ship which had embarked on an interstellar journey was a man subject to rare and overwhelming strains. The art of getting past all the complications of space was far more like the piloting of turbulent waters in ancient days than like the smooth seas which legendary men once traversed with sails alone.

Go-captain on the Wu-Feinstein, finest ship of its class, was Magno Taliano.

Of him it was said, "He could sail through hell with the muscles of his left eye alone. He could plow space with his living brain if the instruments failed ... "

Wife to the Go-captain was Dolores Oh. The name was Japonical, from some nation of the ancient days. Dolores Oh had been once beautiful, so beautiful that she took men's breath away, made wise men into fools, made young men into nightmares of lust and yearning. Wherever she went men had quarreled and fought over her.

But Dolores Oh was proud beyond all common limits of pride. She refused to go through the ordinary rejuvenescence. A terrible yearning a hundred or so years back must have come over her. Perhaps she said to herself, before that hope and terror which a mirror in a quiet room becomes to anyone:

"Surely I am me. There must be a me more than the beauty of my face, there must be a something other than the delicacy of skin and the accidental lines of my jaw and my cheekbone.

"What have men loved if it wasn't me? Can I ever find out who I am or what I am if I don't let beauty perish and live on in whatever flesh age gives me?"

She had met the Go-captain and had married him in a romance that left forty planets talking and half the ship lines stunned.

Magno Taliano was at the very beginning of his genius. Space, we can tell you, is rough—rough like the wildest of storm-driven waters, filled with perils which only the most sensitive, the quickest, the most daring of men can surmount.

Best of them all, class for class, age for age, out of class, beating the best of his seniors, was Magno Taliano.

For him to marry the most beautiful beauty of forty worlds was a wedding like Heloise and Abelard's or like the unforgettable romance of Helen America and Mr. Grey-no-more.

The ships of the Go-Captain Magno Taliano became more beautiful year by year, century by century.



As ships became better he always obtained the best. He maintained his lead over the other Go-captains so overwhelmingly that it was unthinkable for the finest ship of mankind to sail out amid the roughnesses and uncertainties of two-dimensional space without himself at the helm.

Stop-captains were proud to sail space beside him. (Though the Stop-captains had nothing more to do than to check the maintenance of the ship, its loading and unloading when it was in normal space, they were still more than ordinary men in their own kind of world, a world far below the more majestic and adventurous universe of the Go-captains.)

Magno Taliano had a niece who in the modern style used a place instead of a name: she was called "Dita from the Great South House."

When Dita came aboard the Wu-Feinstein she had heard much of Dolores Oh, her aunt by marriage who had once captivated the men in many worlds. Dita was wholly unprepared for what she found.

Dolores greeted her civilly enough, but the civility was a sucking pump of hideous anxiety, the friendliness was the driest of mockeries, the greeting itself an attack.

What's the matter with the woman? thought Dita.

As if to answer her thought, Dolores said aloud and in words: "It's nice to meet a woman who's not trying to take Taliano from me. I love him. Can you believe that? Can you?"

"Of course," said Dita. She looked at the ruined face of Dolores Oh, at the dreaming terror in Dolores's eyes, and she realized that Dolores had passed all limits of nightmare and had become a veritable demon of regret, a possessive ghost who sucked the vitality from her husband, who dreaded companionship, hated friendship, rejected even the most casual of acquaintances, because she feared forever and without limit that there was really nothing to herself, and feared that without Magno Taliano she would be more lost than the blackest of whirlpools in the nothing between the stars.

Magno Taliano came in.

He saw his wife and niece together.

He must have been used to Dolores Oh. In Dita's eyes Dolores was more frightening than a mud-caked reptile raising its wounded and venomous head with blind hunger and blind rage. To Magno Taliano the ghastly woman who stood like a witch beside him was somehow the beautiful girl he had wooed and had married one hundred sixty-four years before.

He kissed the withered cheek, he stroked the dried and stringy hair, he looked into the greedy, terror-haunted eyes as though they were the eyes of a child he loved. He said, lightly and gently, "Be good to Dita, my dear."

He went on through the lobby of the ship to the inner sanctum of the planoforming room.

The Stop-captain waited for him. Outside on the world of Sherman the scented breezes of that pleasant planet blew in through the open windows of the ship. The Wu-Feinstein, finest ship of its class, had no need for metal walls.

It was built to resemble an ancient, prehistoric estate named Mount Vernon, and when it sailed between the stars it was encased in its own rigid and self-renewing field of force.

The passengers went through a few pleasant hours of strolling on the grass, enjoying the spacious rooms, chatting beneath a marvelous simulacrum of an atmosphere-filled sky.

Only in the planoforming room did the Go-captain know what happened. The Go-captain, his pinlighters sitting beside him, took the ship from one compression to another, leaping body and frantically through space, sometimes one light-year, sometimes a hundred light-years, jump, jump, jump, jump until the ship, the light touches of the captain's mind guiding it, passed the perils of millions upon millions of worlds, came out at its appointed destination and settled as lightly as one feather resting upon others, settled into an embroidered and decorated countryside where the passengers could move as easily away from their journey as if they had done nothing more than to pass an afternoon in a pleasant old house by the side of a river.

## 2. THE LOST LOCKSHEET

Magno Taliano nodded to his pinlighters. The Stop-captain bowed obsequiously from the

doorway of the planoforming room. Taliano looked at him sternly, but with robust friendliness. With formal and austere courtesy he asked,

"Sir and Colleague, is everything ready for the jonasoidal effect?"

The Stop-captain bowed even more formally. "Truly ready, Sir and Master."

"The locksheets in place?"

"Truly in place, Sir and Master."

"The passengers secure?"

"The passengers are secure, numbered, happy and ready, Sir and Master."

Then came the last and the most serious of questions. "Are my pin-lighters warmed with their pin-sets and ready for combat?"

"Ready for combat, Sir and Master." With these words the Stop-captain withdrew. Magno Taliano smiled to his pinlighters. Through the minds of all of them there passed the same thought.

How could a man that pleasant stay married all those years to a hag like Dolores Oh? How could that witch, that horror, have ever "been a beauty? How could that beast have ever been a woman, particularly the divine and glamorous Dolores Oh whose image we still see in four-di every now and then?

Yet pleasant he was, though long he may have been married to Dolores Oh. Her loneliness and greed might suck at him like a nightmare, but his strength was more than enough strength for two.

Was he not the captain of the greatest ship to sail between the stars?

Even as the pinlighters smiled their greetings back to him, his right hand depressed the golden ceremonial lever of the ship. This instrument alone was mechanical. All other controls in the ship had long since been formed telepathically or electronically.

Within the planoforming room the black skies became visible and the tissue of space shot up around them like boiling water at the base of a waterfall. Outside that one room the passengers still walked sedately on scented lawns.

From the wall facing him, as he sat rigid in his Go-captain's chair, Magno Taliano sensed the forming of a pattern which in three or four hundred milliseconds would tell him where he was and would give him the next clue as to how to move.

He moved the ship with the impulses of his own brain, to which the wall was a superlative complement.

The wall was a living brickwork of locksheets, laminated charts, one hundred thousand charts to the inch, the wall preselected and preassembled for all imaginable contingencies of the journey which, each time afresh, took the ship across half-unknown immensities of time and space. The ship leapt, as it had before.

The new star focused.

Magno Taliano waited for the wall to show him where he was, expecting (in partnership with the wall) to flick the ship back into the pattern of stellar space, moving it by immense skips from source to destination.

This time nothing happened.

Nothing?

For the first time in a hundred years his mind knew panic.

It couldn't be nothing. Not nothing. Something had to focus. The locksheets always focused.

His mind reached into the locksheets and he realized with a devastation beyond all limits of ordinary human grief that they were lost as no ship had ever been lost before. By some error never before committed in the history of mankind, the entire wall was made of duplicates of the same locksheets.

Worst of all, the emergency return sheet was lost. They were amid stars none of them had ever seen before, perhaps as near as five hundred million miles, perhaps as far as forty parsecs.

And the locksheets were lost.

And they would die.

As the ship's power failed coldness and blackness and death would crush in on them in a few hours at the most. That then would be all, all of the Wu-Feinstein, all of Dolores Oh.

### 3. THE SECRET OF THE OLD DARK BRAIN

Outside of the planofforming room of the Wu-Feinstein the passengers had no reason to understand that they were marooned in the nothing-at-all.

Dolores Oh rocked back and forth in an ancient rocking chair. Her haggard face looked without pleasure at the imaginary river that ran past the edge of the lawn. Dita from the Great South House sat on a hassock by her aunt's knees.

Dolores was talking about a trip she had made when she was young and vibrant with beauty, a beauty which brought trouble and hate wherever it went.

"... so the guardsman killed the captain and then came to my cabin and said to me, 'You've got to marry me now. I've given up everything for your sake,' and I said to him, 'I never said that I loved you. It was sweet of you to get into a fight, and in a way I suppose it is a compliment to my beauty, but it doesn't mean that I belong to you the rest of my life. What do you think I am, anyhow?' "

Dolores Oh sighed a dry, ugly sigh, like the crackling of sub-zero winds through frozen twigs. "So you see, Dita, being beautiful the way you are is no answer to anything. A woman has got to be herself before she finds out what she is. I know that my lord and husband, the Go-captain, loves me because my beauty is gone, and with my beauty gone there is nothing but me to love, is there?"

An odd figure came out on the verandah. It was a pinlighter in full fighting costume. Pinlighters were never supposed to leave the planofforming room, and it was most extraordinary for one of them to appear among the passengers.

He bowed to the two ladies and said with the utmost courtesy, "Ladies, will you please come into the planofforming room? We have need that you should see the Go-captain now."

Dolores's hand leapt to her mouth. Her gesture of grief was as automatic as the striking of a snake. Dita sensed that her aunt had been waiting a hundred years and more for disaster, that her aunt had craved ruin for her husband the way that some people crave love and others crave death.

Dita said nothing. Neither did Dolores, apparently at second thought, utter a word.

They followed the pinlighter silently into the planofforming room. The heavy door closed behind them. Magno Taliano was still rigid in his captain's chair. He spoke very slowly, his voice sounding like a record played too slowly on an ancient parlophone.

"We are lost in space, my deaf," said the frigid, ghostly, voice of the captain, still in his Go-captain's trance. "We are lost in space and I thought that perhaps if your mind aided mine we might think of a way lack."

Dita started to speak.

A pinlighter told her: "Go ahead and speak, my dear. Do you have any suggestion?"

"Why don't we just go back? It would be humiliating, wouldn't it? Still it would be better than dying. Let's use the emergency return locksheet and go on right back. The world will forgive Magno Taliano for a single failure after thousands of brilliant and successful trips."

The pinlighter, a pleasant enough young man, was as friendly and calm as a doctor informing someone of a death or of a mutilation. "The impossible has happened, Dita from the Great South House. All the locksheets are wrong. They are all the same one. And not one of them is good for emergency return."

With that the two women knew where they were. They knew that space would tear into them like threads being pulled out of a fiber so that they would either die bit by bit as the hours passed and as the material of their bodies faded away a few molecules here and a few there. Or, alternatively, they could die all at once in a flash if the Go-captain chose to kill himself and the ship rather than to wait for a slow death. Or, if they believed in religion, they could pray.

The pinlighter said to the rigid Go-captain, "We think we see a familiar pattern at the edge of your own brain. May we look in?" Taliano nodded very slowly, very gravely. The pinlighter stood still.

The two women watched. Nothing visible happened, but they knew that beyond the limits of vision and yet before their eyes a great drama was being played out. The minds of the pinlighters probed deep into the mind of the frozen Go-captain, searching amid the synapses for the secret of

the faintest clue to their possible rescue. Minutes passed. They seemed like hours.

At last the pinlighter spoke. "We can see into your midbrain, Captain. At the edge of your paleocortex there is a star pattern which resembles the upper left rear of our present location."

The pinlighter laughed nervously. "We want to know, can you fly the ship home on your brain?"

Magno Taliano looked with deep tragic eyes at the inquirer. His slow voice came out at them once again since he dared not leave the half-trance which held the entire ship in stasis. "Do you mean can I fly the ship on a brain alone? It would burn out my brain and the ship would be lost anyhow ... "

"But we're lost, lost, lost," screamed Dolores Oh. Her face was alive with hideous hope, with a hunger for ruin, with a greedy welcome of disaster. She screamed at her husband, "Wake up, my darling, and let us die together. At least we can belong to each other that much, that long, forever!"

"Why die?" said the pinlighter softly. "You tell him, Dita."

Said Dita, "Why not try, Sir and Uncle?"

Slowly Magno Taliano turned his face toward his niece. Again his hollow voice sounded. "If I do this I shall be a fool or a child or a dead man, but I will do it for you."

Dita had studied the work of the Go-captains and she knew well enough that if the paleocortex was lost the personality became intellectually sane, but emotionally crazed. With the most ancient part of the brain gone the fundamental controls of hostility, hunger and sex disappeared. The most ferocious of animals and the most brilliant of men were reduced to a common level—a level of infantile friendliness in which lust and playfulness and gentle, unappeasable hunger became the eternity of their days.

Magno Taliano did not wait.

He reached out a slow hand and squeezed the hand of Dolores Oh. "As I die you shall at last be sure I love you."

Once again the women saw nothing. They realized they had been called in simply to give Magno Taliano a last glimpse of his own life.

A quiet pinlighter thrust a beam-electrode so that it reached square into the paleocortex of Captain Magno Taliano.

The planoforming room came to life. Strange heavens swirled about them like milk being churned in a bowl.

Dita realized that her partial capacity of telepathy was functioning even without the aid of a machine. With her mind she could feel the dead wall of the locksheets. She was aware of the rocking of the Wu-Feinstein as it leapt from space to space, as uncertain as a man crossing a river by leaping from one ice-covered rock to the other.

In a strange way she even knew that the paleocortical part of her uncle's brain was burning out at last and forever, that the star patterns which had been frozen in the locksheets lived on in the infinitely complex pattern of his own memories, and that with the help of his own telepathic pinlighters he was burning out his brain cell by cell in order for them to find a way to the ship's destination. This indeed was his last trip.

Dolores Oh watched her husband with a hungry greed surpassing all expression.

Little by little his face became relaxed and stupid.

Dita could see the midbrain being burned blank, as the ship's controls with the help of the pinlighters searched through the most magnificent intellect of its time for a last course into harbor.

Suddenly Dolores Oh was on her knees, sobbing by the hand of her husband.

A pinlighter took Dita by the arm.

"We have reached destination," he said.

"And my uncle?"

The pinlighter looked at her strangely.

She realized he was speaking to her without moving his lips—speaking mind-to-mind with pure telepathy.

"Can't you see it?"

She shook her head dazedly.

The pinlighter thought his emphatic statement at her once again.

"As your uncle hurned out his brain, you picked up his skills. Can't you sense it? You are a Go-captain yourself and one of the greatest of us."

"And he?"

The pinlighter thought a merciful comment at her.

Magno Taliano had risen from his chair and was being led from the room by his wife and consort, Dolores Oh. He had the amiable smile of an idiot, and his face for the first time in more than a hundred years trembled with shy and silly love.

## GOLDEN THE SHIP WAS—OH! OH! OH!

The "cat scandal" might refer to an incident involving the pinlighters' partners, the underpeople, or even the intelligent cats created by Commander Suzdal—Smith never made this reference clear. Nor is the connection, if any, between Raumsog's empire and the Bright Empire referred to passingly in the later stories "The Dead Lady of Clown Town" and "A Planet Named Shayol" ever made clear. In any case, Tedesco's period is that of Instrumentality before the Rediscovery of Man, when Earth was at its most decadent. This story was another collaboration with Genevieve Linebarger, by the way.

Aggression started very far away.

War with Raumsog came about twenty years after the great cat scandal which, for a while, threatened to cut the entire planet Earth from the desperately essential santaclara drug. It was a short war and a bitter one.

Corrupt, wise, weary old Earth fought with masked weapons, since only hidden weapons could maintain so ancient a sovereignty—sovereignty which had long since lapsed into a titular paramountcy among the communities of mankind. Earth won and the others lost, because the leaders of Earth never put other considerations ahead of survival. And this time, they thought, they were finally and really threatened.

The Raumsog war was never known to the general public except for the revival of wild old legends about golden ships.

1

On Earth the lords of the Instrumentality met. The presiding chairman looked about and said, "Well, gentlemen, all of us have been bribed by Raumsog. We have all been paid off individually. I myself received six ounces of stroon in pure form. Will the rest of you show better bargains?"

Around the room, the councilors announced the amounts of their bribes.

The chairman turned to the secretary. "Enter the bribes in the record and then mark the record off-the-record."

The others nodded gravely.

"Now we must fight. Bribery is not enough. Raumsog has been threatening to attack Earth. It's been cheap enough to let him threaten, but obviously we don't mean to let him do it."

"How are you going to stop him, Lord Chairman?" growled a gloomy old member. "Get out the golden ships?"

"Exactly that." The chairman looked deadly serious.

There was a murmurous sigh around the room. The golden ships had been used against an inhuman life-form many centuries before. They were hidden somewhere in nonspace and only a few officials of Earth knew how much reality there was to them. Even at the level of the lords of the Instrumentality the council did not know precisely what they were.

"One ship," said the chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality, "will be enough."

It was.

2

The dictator Lord Raumsog on his planet knew the difference some weeks later.

"You can't mean that," he said. "You can't mean it. There is no such ship that size. The golden ships are just a story. No one ever saw a picture of one."

"Here is a picture, my Lord," said the subordinate.

Raumsog looked at it. "It's a trick. Some piece of trick photography. They distorted the size. The dimensions are wrong. Nobody has a ship that size. You could not build it, or if you did build it, you could not operate it. There just is not any such thing—" He babbled on for a few more sentences before he realized that his men were looking at the picture and not at him.

He calmed down.

The boldest of the officers resumed speaking. "That one ship is ninety million miles long, Your Highness. It shimmers like fire, but moves so fast that we cannot approach it. But it came into the center of our fleet almost touching our ships, stayed there twenty or thirty thousandths of a second. There it was, we thought. We saw the evidence of life on board: light beams waved; they examined us and then, of course, it lapsed back into nonspace. Ninety million miles, Your Highness. Old Earth has some stings yet and we do not know what the ship is doing."

The officers stared with anxious confidence at their overlord.

Raumsog sighed. "If we must fight, we'll fight. We can destroy that too. After all, what is size in the spaces between the stars? What difference does it make whether it is nine miles or nine million or ninety million?" He sighed again. "Yet I must say ninety million miles is an awful big size for a ship. I don't know what they are going to do with it."

He did not.

3

It is strange—strange and even fearful—what the love of Earth can do to men. Tedesco, for example.

Tedesco's reputation was far-flung. Even among the Go-captains, whose thoughts were rarely on such matters, Tedesco was known for his raiment, the foppish arrangement of his mantle of office and his be-jeweled badges of authority. Tedesco was known too for his languid manner and his luxurious sybaritic living. When the message came, it found Tedesco in his usual character.

He was lying on the air-draft with his brain pleasure centers plugged into the triggering current. So deeply lost in pleasure was he that the food, the women, the clothing, the books of his apartments were completely neglected and forgotten. All pleasure save the pleasure of electricity acting on the brain was forgotten.

So great was the pleasure that Tedesco had been plugged into the current for twenty hours without interruption—a manifest disobedience of the rule which set six hours as maximum pleasure.

And yet, when the message came—relayed to Tedesco's brain by the infinitesimal crystal set there for the transmittal of messages so secret that even thought was too vulnerable to interception—when the message came Tedesco struggled through layer after layer of bliss and unconsciousness.

The ships of gold—the golden ships—for Earth is in danger. Tedesco struggled. Earth is in danger. With a sigh of bliss he made the effort to press the button which turned off the current. And with a sigh of cold reality he took a look at the world about him and turned to the job at hand. Quickly he prepared to wait upon the lords of the Instrumentality.

The chairman of the lords of the Instrumentality sent out the Lord Admiral Tedesco to command the golden ship. The ship itself, larger than most stars, was an incredible monstrosity. Centuries before it had frightened away non-human aggressors from a forgotten corner of the galaxies.

The lord admiral walked back and forth on his bridge. The cabin was small, twenty feet by thirty. The control area of the ship measured nothing over a hundred feet. All the rest was a golden bubble of the feinting ship, nothing more than thin and incredibly rigid foam with tiny wires cast across it so as to give the illusion of a hard metal and strong defenses.

The ninety million miles of length were right. Nothing else was.

The ship was a gigantic dummy, the largest scarecrow ever conceived by the human mind.

Century after century it had rested in nonspace between the stars, waiting for use. Now it

proceeded helpless and defenseless against a militant and crazy dictator Raumsog and his horde of hard-fighting and very real ships.

Raumsog had broken the disciplines of space. He had killed the pin-lighters. He had emprisoned the Go-captains. He had used renegades and apprentices to pillage the immense interstellar ships and had armed the captive vessels to the teeth. In a system which had not known real war, and least of all war against Earth, he had planned well.

He had bribed, he had swindled, he had propagandized. He expected Earth to fall before the threat itself. Then he launched his attack.

With the launching of the attack, Earth itself changed. Corrupt rascals became what they were in title: the leaders and the defenders of mankind.

Tedesco himself had been an elegant fop. War changed him into an aggressive captain, swinging the largest vessel of all time as though it were a tennis bat.

He cut in on the Raumsog fleet hard and fast.

Tedesco shifted his ship right, north, up, over.

He appeared before the enemy and eluded them—down, forward, right, over.

He appeared before the enemy again. One successful shot from them could destroy an illusion on which the safety of mankind itself depended. It was his business not to allow them that shot.

Tedesco was not a fool. He was fighting his own strange kind of war, but he could not help wondering where the real war was proceeding.

4

Prince Lovaduck had obtained his odd name because he had had a Chinesian ancestor who did love ducks, ducks in their Peking form—succulent duck skins brought forth to him ancestral dreams of culinary ecstasy.

His ancestress, an English lady, had said, "Lord Lovaduck, that fits you!"—and the name had been proudly taken as a family name. Lord Lovaduck had a small ship. The ship was tiny and had a very simple and threatening name: Anybody.

The ship was not listed in the space register and he himself was not in the Ministry of Space Defense. The craft was attached only to the Office of Statistics and Investigation—under the listing, "vehicle"—for the Earth treasury. He had very elementary defenses. With him on the ship went one chronopathic idiot essential to his final and vital maneuvers.

With him also went a monitor. The monitor, as always, sat rigid, catatonic, unthinking, unaware—except for the tape recorder of his living mind which unconsciously noted every imminent mechanical movement of the ship and was prepared to destroy Lovaduck, the chronopathic idiot, and the ship itself should they attempt to escape the authority of Earth or should they turn against Earth. The life of a monitor was a difficult one but was far better than execution for crime, its usual alternative. The monitor made no trouble. Lovaduck also had a very small collection of weapons, weapons selected with exquisite care for the atmosphere, the climate and the precise conditions of Raumsog's planet.

He also had a psionic talent, a poor crazy little girl who wept, and whom the lords of the Instrumentality had cruelly refused to heal, because her talents were better in unshielded form than they would have been had she been brought into the full community of mankind. She was a class-three etiological interference.

5

Lovaduck brought his tiny ship near the atmosphere of Raumsog's planet. He had paid good money for his captaincy to this ship and he meant to recover it. Recover it he would, and handsomely, if he succeeded in his adventurous mission.

The lords of the Instrumentality were the corrupt rulers of a corrupt world, but they had learned to make corruption serve their civil and military ends, and they were in no mind to put up with failures. If Lovaduck failed he might as well not come back at all. No bribery could save him from this condition. No monitor could let him escape. If he succeeded, he might be almost as rich as an

Old North Australian or a stroon merchant.

Lovaduck materialized his ship just long enough to hit the planet by radio. He walked across the cabin and slapped the girl. The girl became frantically excited. At the height of her excitement he slapped a helmet on her head, plugged in the ship's communication system, and flung her own peculiar emotional psionic radiations over the entire planet.

She was a luck-changer. She succeeded: for a few moments, at every place on that planet, under the water and on it, in the sky and in the air, luck went wrong just a little. Quarrels did occur, accidents did happen, mischances moved just within the limits of sheer probability. They all occurred within the same minute. The uproar was reported just as Lovaduck moved his ship to another position. This was the most critical time of all. He dropped down into the atmosphere. He was immediately detected. Ravening weapons reached for him, weapons sharp enough to scorch the very air and to bring every living being on the planet into a condition of screaming alert.

No weapons possessed by Earth could defend against such an attack.

Lovaduck did not defend. He seized the shoulders of his chronopathic idiot. He pinched the poor defective; the idiot fled taking the ship with him. The ship moved back three, four seconds in time to a period slightly earlier than the first detection. All the instruments on Raumsog's planet went off. There was nothing on which they could act.

Lovaduck was ready. He discharged the weapons. The weapons were not noble.

The lords of the Instrumentality played at being chivalrous and did love money, but when life and death were at stake, they no longer cared much about money, or credit, or even about honor. They fought like the animals of Earth's ancient past—they fought to kill. Lovaduck had discharged a combination of organic and inorganic poisons with a high dispersion rate. Seventeen million people; nine hundred and fifty thousandths of the entire population, were to die within that night.

He slapped the chronopathic idiot again. The poor freak whimpered. The ship moved back two more seconds in time.

As he unloaded more poison, he could feel the mechanical relays reach for him.

He moved to the other side of the planet, moving backward one last time, dropped a final discharge of virulent carcinogens and snapped his ship in to nonspace, into the outer reaches of nothing. Here he was far beyond the reach of Raumsog.

6

Tedesco's golden ship moved serenely toward the dying planet, Raumsog's fighters closing on it. They fired—it evaded, surprisingly agile for so immense a craft, a ship larger than any sun seen in the heavens of that part of space. But while the ships closed in their radios reported:

"The capital has blanked out."

"Raumsog himself is dead."

"There is no response from the north."

"People are dying in the relay stations."

The fleet moved, intercommunicated, and began to surrender. The golden ship appeared once more and then it disappeared, apparently forever.

7

The Lord Tedesco returned to his apartments and to the current for plugging into the centers of pleasure in his brain. But as he arranged himself on the air-jet his hand stopped on its mission to press the button which would start the current. He realized, suddenly, that he had pleasure. The contemplation of the golden ship and of what he had accomplished—alone, deceptive, without the praise of all the worlds for his solitary daring—gave even greater pleasure than that of the electric current. And he sank back on the jet of air and thought of the golden ship, and his pleasure was greater than any he had ever experienced before.

8

On Earth, the lords of the Instrumentality gracefully acknowledged that the golden ship had



destroyed all life on Raumsog's planet. Homage was paid to them by the many worlds of mankind. Lovaduck, his idiot, his little girl, and the monitor were taken to hospitals. Their minds were erased of all recollection of their accomplishments.

Lovaduck himself appeared before the lords of the Instrumentality. He felt that he had served on the golden ship and he did not remember what he had done. He knew nothing of a chronopathic idiot. And he remembered nothing of his little "vehicle." Tears poured down his face when the lords of the Instrumentality gave him their highest decorations and paid him an immense sum of money. They said: "You have served well and you are discharged. The blessings and the thanks of mankind will forever rest upon you ... "

Lovaduck went back to his estates wondering that his service should have been so great. He wondered, too, in the centuries of the rest of his life, how any man—such as himself—could be so tremendous a hero and never quite remember how it was accomplished.

9

On a very remote planet, the survivors of a Raumsog cruiser were released from internment. By special orders, direct from Earth, their memories had been disco-ordinated so that they would not reveal the pattern of defeat. An obstinate reporter kept after one spaceman. After many hours of hard drinking the survivor's answer was still the same.

"Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh! Golden the ship was—oh! oh! oh!"

## THE CRIME AND THE GLORY OF COMMANDER SUZDAL

One of the few Smith stories to touch directly on the manner in which many of the stranger worlds in the universe of the Instrumentality were settled—and the price that could often be paid thereby. This story is one of his more explicit expositions of the Instrumentality's methods of operation—at once brilliant, enlightened and totally ruthless and amoral—in its never-ending mission to safeguard mankind and extend and preserve its own power. Suzdal's name is taken from that of a Russian city.

Do not read this story; turn the page quickly. The story may upset you. Anyhow, you probably know it already. It is a very disturbing story. Everyone knows it. The glory and the crime of Commander Suzdal have been told in a thousand different ways. Don't let yourself realize that the story really is the truth.

It isn't. Not at all. There's not a bit of truth to it. There is no such planet as Arachosia, no such people as klopts, no such world as Catland. These are all just imaginary, they didn't happen, forget about it, go away and read something else.

### The Beginning

Commander Suzdal was sent forth in a shell-ship to explore the outermost reaches of our galaxy. His ship was called a cruiser, but he was the only man in it. He was equipped with hypnotics and cubes to provide him the semblance of company, a large crowd of friendly people who could be convoked out of his own hallucinations.

The Instrumentality even offered him some choice in his imaginary companions, each of whom was embodied in a small ceramic cube containing the brain of a small animal but imprinted with the personality of an actual human being.

Suzdal, a short, stocky man with a jolly smile, was blunt about his needs:

"Give me two good security officers. I can manage the ship, but if I'm going into the unknown, I'll need help in meeting the strange problems which might show up."

The loading official smiled at him, "I never heard of a cruiser commander who asked for security officers. Most people regard them as an utter nuisance."

"That's all right," said Suzdal. "I don't."

"Don't you want some chess players?"

"I can play chess," said Suzdal, "all I want to, using the spare computers. All I have to do is set

the power down and they start losing. On full power, they always beat me."

The official then gave Suzdal an odd look. He did not exactly leer, but his expression became both intimate and a little unpleasant. "What about other companions?" he asked, with a funny little edge to his voice.

"I've got books," said Suzdal, "a couple of thousand. I'm going to be gone only a couple of years Earth time."

"Local-subjective, it might be several thousand years," said the official, "though the time will wind back up again as you re-approach Earth. And I wasn't talking about books," he repeated, with the same funny, prying lilt to his voice.

Suzdal shook his head with momentary worry, ran his hand through his sandy hair. His blue eyes were forthright and he looked straightforwardly into the official's eyes. "What do you mean, then, if not books? Navigators? I've got them, not to mention the turtle-men. They're good company, if you just talk to them slowly enough and then give them plenty of time to answer. Don't forget, I've been out before ... "

The official spat out his offer: "Dancing girls. WOMEN. Concubines. Don't you want any of those? We could even cube your own wife for you and print her mind on a cube for you. That way she could be with you every week that you were awake."

Suzdal looked as though he would spit on the floor in sheer disgust. "Alice? You mean, you want me to travel around with a ghost of her? How would the real Alice feel when I came back? Don't tell me that you're going to put my wife on a mousebrain. You're just offering me delirium. I've got to keep my wits out there with space and time rolling in big waves around me. I'm going to be crazy enough, just as it is. Don't forget, I've been out there before. Getting back to a real Alice is going to be one of my biggest reality factors. It will help me to get home." At this point, Suzdal's own voice took on the note of intimate inquiry, as he added, "Don't tell me that a lot of cruiser commanders ask to go flying around with imaginary wives. That would be pretty nasty, in my opinion. Do many of them do it?"

"We're here to get you loaded on board ship, not to discuss what other officers do or do not do. Sometimes we think it good to have a female companion on the ship with the commander, even if she is imaginary. If you ever found anything among the stars which took on female form, you'd be mighty vulnerable to it."

"Females, among the stars? Bosh!" said Suzdal.

"Strange things have happened," said the official.

"Not that," said Suzdal. "Pain, craziness, distortion, panic without end, a craze for food—yes, those I can look for and face. They will be there. But females, no. There aren't any. I love my wife. I won't make females up out of my own mind. After all, I'll have the turtle-people aboard, and they will be bringing up their young. I'll have plenty of family life to watch and to take part in. I can even give Christmas parties for the young ones."

"What kind of parties are those?" asked the official.

"Just a funny little ancient ritual that I heard about from an outer pilot. You give all the young things presents, once every local-subjective year."

"It sounds nice," said the official, his voice growing tired and final. "You still refuse to have a cube-woman on board. You wouldn't have to activate her unless you really needed her."

"You haven't flown, yourself, have you?" asked Suzdal.

It was the official's turn to flush. "No," he said, flatly.

"Anything that's in that ship, I'm going to think about. I'm a cheerful sort of man, and very friendly. Let me just get along with my turtle-people. They're not lively, but they are considerate and restful. Two thousand or more years, local-subjective, is a lot of time. Don't give me additional decisions to make. It's work enough, running the ship. Just leave me alone with my turtle-people. I've gotten along with them before."

"You, Suzdal, are the commander," said the loading official. "We'll do as you say."

"Fine," smiled Suzdal. "You may get a lot of queer types on this run, but I'm not one of them."

The two men smiled agreement at one another and the loading of the ship was completed.

The ship itself was managed by turtle-men, who aged very slowly, so that while Suzdal coursed the outer rim of the galaxy and let the thousands of years—local count—go past while he slept in his frozen bed, the turtle-men rose generation by generation, trained their young to work the ship, taught the stories of the Earth that they would never see again, and read the computers correctly, to awaken Suzdal only when there was a need for human intervention and for human intelligence. Suzdal awakened from time to time, did his work and then went back. He felt that he had been gone from Earth only a few months.

Months indeed! He had been gone more than a subjective ten thousand years, when he met the siren capsule.

It looked like an ordinary distress capsule. The kind of thing that was often shot through space to indicate some complication of the destiny of man among the stars. This capsule had apparently been flung across an immense distance, and from the capsule Suzdal got the story of Arachosia.

The story was false. The brains of a whole planet—the wild genius of a malevolent, unhappy race—had been dedicated to the problem of ensnaring and attracting a normal pilot from Old Earth. The story which the capsule sang conveyed the rich personality of a wonderful woman with a contralto voice. The story was true, in part. The appeals were real, in part. Suzdal listened to the story and it sank, like a wonderfully orchestrated piece of grand opera, right into the fibers of his brain. It would have been different if he had known the real story.

Everybody now knows the real story of Arachosia, the bitter terrible story of the planet which was a paradise, which turned into a hell. The story of how people got to be something different from people. The story of what happened way out there in the most dreadful place among the stars.

He would have fled if he knew the real story. He couldn't understand what we now know:

Mankind could not meet the terrible people of Arachosia without the people of Arachosia following them home and bringing to mankind a grief greater than grief, a craziness worse than mere insanity, a plague surpassing all imaginable plagues. The Arachosians had become nonpeople, and yet, in their innermost imprinting of their personalities, they remained people. They sang songs which exalted their own deformity and which praised themselves for what they had so horribly become, and yet, in their own songs, in their own ballads, the organ tones of the refrain rang out,

And I mourn man!

They knew what they were and they hated themselves. Hating themselves they pursued mankind. Perhaps they are still pursuing mankind.

The Instrumentality has by now taken good pains that the Arachosians will never find us again, has flung networks of deception out along the edge of the galaxy to make sure that those lost ruined people cannot find us. The Instrumentality knows and guards our world and all the other worlds of mankind against the deformity which has become Arachosia. We want nothing to do with Arachosia. Let them hunt for us. They won't find us.

How could Suzdal know that?

This was the first time someone had met the Arachosians, and he met them only with a message in which an elfin voice sang the elfin song of ruin, using perfectly clear words in the old common tongue to tell a story so sad, so abominable, that mankind has not forgotten it yet. In its essence the story was very simple. This is what Suzdal heard, and what people have learned ever since then.

The Arachosians were settlers. Settlers could go out by sail-ship, trailing behind them the pods. That was the first way.

Or they could go out by planiform ship, ships piloted by skillful men, who went into space and came out again and found man.

Or for very long distances indeed, they could go out in the new combination. Individual pods packed into an enormous shell-ship, a gigantic version of Suzdal's own ship. The sleepers frozen, the machines waking, the ship fired to and beyond the speed of light, flung below space, coming out at random and homing on a suitable target. It was a gamble, but brave men took it. If no target was found, their machines might course space forever, while the bodies, protected by freezing as they were, spoiled bit by bit, and while the dim light of life went out in the individual frozen brains.

The shell-ships were the answers of mankind to an overpopulation, which neither the old planet

Earth nor its daughter planets could quite respond to. The shell-ships took the bold, the reckless, the romantic, the willful, sometimes the criminals out among the stars. Mankind lost track of these ships, over and over again. The advance explorers, the organized Instrumentality, would stumble upon human beings, cities and cultures, high or low, tribes or families, where the shell-ships had gone on, far, far beyond the outermost limits of mankind, where the instruments of search had found an earthlike planet, and the shell-ship, like some great dying insect, had dropped to the planet, awakened its people, broken open, and destroyed itself with its delivery of newly re-born men and women, to settle a world.

Arachosia looked like a good world to the men and women who came to it. Beautiful beaches, with cliffs like endless rivieras rising above. Two bright big moons in the sky, a sun not too far away. The machines had pretested the atmosphere and sampled the water, had already scattered the forms of Old Earth life into the atmosphere and in the seas so that as the people awakened they heard the singing of Earth birds and they knew that Earth fish had already been adapted to the oceans and flung in, there to multiply. It seemed a good life, a rich life. Things went well.

Things went very, very well for the Arachosians.

This is the truth.

This was, thus far, the story told by the capsule.

But here they diverged.

The capsule did not tell the dreadful, pitiable truth about Arachosia. It invented a set of plausible lies. The voice which came telepathically out of the capsule was that of a mature, warm happy female—some woman of early middle age with a superb speaking contralto.

Suzdal almost fancied that he talked to it, so real was the personality. How could he know that he was being beguiled, trapped?

It sounded right, really right.

"And then," said the voice, "the Arachosian sickness has been hitting us. Do not land. Stand off. Talk to us. Tell us about medicine. Our young die, without reason. Our farms are rich, and the wheat here is more golden than it was on Earth, the plums more purple, the flowers whiter. Everything does well—except people.

"Our young die ... " said the womanly voice, ending in a sob.

"Are there any symptoms?" thought Suzdal, and almost as though it had heard his question, the capsule went on.

"They die of nothing. Nothing which our medicine can test, nothing which our science can show. They die. Our population is dropping. People, do not forget us! Man, whoever you are, come quickly, come now, bring help! But for your own sake, do not land. Stand off-planet and view us through screens so that you can take word back to the home of man about the lost children of mankind among the strange and outermost stars!" Strange, indeed!

The truth was far stranger, and very ugly indeed. Suzdal was convinced of the truth of the message. He had been selected for the trip because he was good-natured, intelligent, and brave; this appeal touched all three of his qualities.

Later, much later, when he was arrested, Suzdal was asked, "Suzdal, you fool, why didn't you test the message? You've risked the safety of all the mankind for a foolish appeal!"

"It wasn't foolish!" snapped Suzdal. "That distress capsule had a sad, wonderful womanly voice and the story checked out true."

"With whom?" said the investigator, flatly and dully.

Suzdal sounded weary and sad when he replied to the point. "It checked out with my books. With my knowledge."

Reluctantly he added, "And with my own judgment ... "

"Was your judgment good?" said the investigator.

"No," said Suzdal, and let the single word hang on the air as though it might be the last word he would ever speak.

But it was Suzdal himself who broke the silence when he added, "Before I set course and went to sleep, I activated my security officers in cubes and had them check the story. They got the real story

of Arachosia, all right. They cross-ciphered it out of patterns in the distress capsule and they told me the whole real story very quickly, just as I was waking up."

"And what did you do?"

"I did what I did. I did that for which I expect to be punished. The Arachosians were already walking around the outside of my hull by then. They had caught my ship. They had caught me. How was I to know that the wonderful, sad story was true only for the first twenty full years that the woman told about. And she wasn't even a woman. Just a klopt. Only the first twenty years ... "

Things had gone well for the Arachosians for the first twenty years.

Then came disaster, but it was not the tale told in the distress capsule.

They couldn't understand it. They didn't know why it had to happen to them. They didn't know why it waited twenty years, three months and four days. But their time came.

We think it must have been something in the radiation of their sun. Or perhaps a combination of that particular sun's radiation and the chemistry, which even the wise machines in the shell-ship had not fully analyzed, which reached out and was spread from within. The disaster hit. It was a simple one and utterly unstoppable.

They had doctors. They had hospitals. They even had a limited capacity for research.

But they could not research fast enough. Not enough to meet this disaster. It was simple, monstrous, enormous.

Femininity became carcinogenetic.

Every woman on the planet began developing cancer at the same time, on her lips, in her breasts, in her groin, sometimes along the edge of her jaw, the edge of her lip, the tender portions of her body. The cancer had many forms, and yet it was always the same. There was something about the radiation which reached through, which reached into the human body, and which made a particular form of desoxycorticosterone turn into a subform—unknown on Earth—of pregnandiol, which infallibly caused cancer. The advance was rapid.

The little baby girls began to die first. The women clung weeping to their fathers, their husbands. The mothers tried to say goodbye to their sons.

One of the doctors, herself, was a woman, a strong woman.

Remorselessly, she cut live tissue from her living body, put it under the microscope, took samples of her own urine, her blood, her spit, and she came up with the answer: There is no answer. And yet there was something better and worse than an answer.

If the sun of Arachosia killed everything which was female, if the female fish floated upside down on the surface of the sea, if the female birds sang a shriller, wilder song as they died above the eggs which would never hatch, if the female animals grunted and growled in the lairs where they hid away with pain, female human beings did not have to accept death so tamely. The doctor's name was Astarte Kraus.

### The Magic of the Klopts

The human female could do what the animal female could not. She could turn male. With the help of equipment from the ship, tremendous quantities of testosterone were manufactured, and every single girl and woman still surviving was turned into a man. Massive injections were administered to all of them. Their faces grew heavy, they all returned to growing a little bit, their chests flattened out, their muscles grew stronger, and in less than three months they were indeed men.

Some lower forms of life had survived because they were not polarized dearly enough to the forms of male and female, which depended on that particular organic chemistry for survival. With the fish gone, plants dotted the oceans, the birds were gone but the insects survived; dragonflies, butterflies, mutated versions of grasshoppers, beetles, and other insects swarmed over the planet. The men who had lost women worked side by side with the men who had been made out of the bodies of women.

When they knew each other, it was unutterably sad for them to meet. Husband and wife, both bearded, strong, quarrelsome, desperate and busy. The little boys somehow realizing that they

would never grow up to have sweethearts, to have wives, to get married, to have daughters. But what was a mere world to stop the driving brain and the burning intellect of Dr. Astarte Kraus? She became the leader of her people, the men and the men-women. She drove them forward, she made them survive, she used cold brains on all of them.

(Perhaps, if she had been a sympathetic person, she would have let them die. But it was the nature of Dr. Kraus not to be sympathetic—just brilliant, remorseless, implacable against the universe which had tried to destroy her.)

Before she died, Dr. Kraus had worked out a carefully programed genetic system. Little bits of the men's tissues could be implanted by a surgical routine in the abdomens, just inside the peritoneal wall, crowding a little bit against the intestines, an artificial womb and artificial chemistry and artificial insemination by radiation, by heat made it possible for men to bear boy children.

What was the use of having girl children if they all died? The people of Arachosia went on. The first generation lived through the tragedy, half insane with the grief and disappointment. They sent out message capsules and they knew that their messages would reach earth in six million years.

As new explorers, they had gambled on going further than other ships went. They had found a good world, but they were not quite sure where they were. Were they still within the familiar galaxy, or had they jumped beyond to one of the nearby galaxies? They couldn't quite tell.

It was a part of the policy of Old Earth not to over-equip the exploring parties for fear that some of them, taking violent cultural change or becoming aggressive empires, might turn back on Earth and destroy it. Earth always made sure that it had the advantages.

The third and fourth and fifth generations of Arachosians were still people. All of them were male. They had the human memory, they had human books, they knew the words "mama," "sister," "sweetheart," but they no longer really understood what these terms referred to.

The human body, which had taken four million years on earth to grow, has immense resources within it, resources greater than the brain, or the personality, or the hopes of the individual. And the bodies of the Arachosians decided things for them. Since the chemistry of femininity meant instant death, and since an occasional girl baby was born dead and buried casually, the bodies made the adjustment. The men of Arachosia became both men and women. They gave themselves the ugly nickname, "klopt." Since they did not have the rewards of family life, they became strutting cockerels, who mixed their love with murder, who blended their songs with duels, who sharpened their weapons and who earned the right to reproduce within a strange family system which no decent Earth-man would find comprehensible.

But they did survive.

And the method of their survival was so sharp, so fierce, that it was indeed a difficult thing to understand.

In less than four hundred years the Arachosians had civilized into groups of fighting clans. They still had just one planet, around just one sun. They lived in just one place. They had a few spacecraft they had built themselves. Their science, their art and their music moved forward with strange lurches of inspired neurotic genius, because they lacked the fundamentals in the human personality itself, the balance of male and female, the family, the operations of love, of hope, of reproduction. They survived, but they themselves had become monsters and did not know it.

Out of their memory of old mankind they created a legend of Old Earth. Women in that memory were deformities, who should be killed. Misshapen beings, who should be erased. The family, as they recalled it, was filth and abomination which they were resolved to wipe out if they should ever meet it.

They, themselves, were bearded homosexuals, with rouged lips, ornate earrings, fine heads of hair, and very few old men among them.

They killed off their men before they became old; the things they could not get from love or relaxation or comfort, they purchased with battle and death. They made up songs proclaiming themselves to be the last of the old men and the first of the new, and they sang their hate to mankind when they should meet, and they sang "Woe is Earth that we should find it," and yet something inside them made them add to almost every song a refrain which troubled even them,

And I mourn man!

They mourned mankind and yet they plotted to attack all of humanity.

### The Trap

Suzdal had been deceived by the message capsule. He put himself back in the sleeping compartment and he directed the turtle-men to take the cruiser to Arachosia, wherever it might be. He did not do this crazily or wantonly. He did it as a matter of deliberate judgment. A judgment for which he was later heard, tried, judged fairly and then put to something worse than death.

He deserved it.

He sought for Arachosia without stopping to think of the most fundamental rule: How could he keep the Arachosians, singing monsters that they were, from following him home to the eventual ruin of Earth? Might not their condition be a disease which could be contagious, or might not their fierce society destroy the other societies of men and leave Earth and all of other men's worlds in ruin? He did not think of this, so he was heard, and tried and punished much later. We will come to that.

### The Arrival

Suzdal awakened in orbit off Arachosia. And he awakened knowing he had made a mistake. Strange ships clung to his shell-ship like evil barnacles from an unknown ocean, attached to a familiar water craft.

He called to his turtle-men to press the controls and the controls did not work.

The outsiders, whoever they were, man or woman or beast or god, had enough technology to immobilize his ship. Suzdal immediately realized his mistake. Naturally, he thought of destroying himself and the ship, but he was afraid that if he destroyed himself and missed destroying the ship completely there was a chance that his cruiser, a late model with recent weapons, would fall into the hands of whoever it was walking on the outer dome of his own cruiser. He could not afford the risk of mere individual suicide. He had to take a more drastic step. This was not time for obeying Earth rules.

His security officer—a cube ghost wakened to human form—whispered the whole story to him in quick intelligent gasps:

"They are people, sir."

"More people than I am."

"I'm a ghost, an echo working out of a dead brain."

"These are real people, Commander Suzdal, but they are the worst people ever to get loose among the stars. You must destroy them, sir!"

"I can't," said Suzdal, still trying to come fully awake. "They're people."

"Then you've got to beat them off. By any means, sir. By any means whatever. Save Earth. Stop them. Warn Earth."

"And I?" asked Suzdal, and was immediately sorry that he had asked the selfish, personal question.

"You will die or you will be punished," said the security officer sympathetically, "and I do not know which one will be worse."

"Now?"

"Right now. There is no time left for you. No time at all."

"But the rules ... ?"

"You have already strayed far outside of rules."

There were rules, but Suzdal left them all behind.

Rules, rules for ordinary times, for ordinary places, for understandable dangers.

This was a nightmare cooked up by the flesh of man, motivated by the brains of man. Already his monitors were bringing him news of who these people were, these seeming maniacs, these men who had never known women, these boys who had grown to lust and battle, who had a family structure which the normal human brain could not accept, could not believe, could not tolerate. The things on

the outside were people, and they weren't. The things on the outside had the human brain, the human imagination, and the human capacity for revenge, and yet Suzdal, a brave officer, was so frightened by the mere nature of them that he did not respond to their efforts to communicate.

He could feel the turtle-women among his crew aching with fright itself, as they realized who was pounding on their ship and who it was that sang through loud announcing machines that they wanted in, in, in.

Suzdal committed a crime. It is the pride of the Instrumentality that the Instrumentality allows its officers to commit crimes or mistakes or suicide. The Instrumentality does the things for mankind that a computer cannot do. The Instrumentality leaves the human brain, the human choice in action.

The Instrumentality passes dark knowledge to its staff, things not usually understood in the inhabited world, things prohibited to ordinary men and women because the officers of the Instrumentality, the captains and the subchiefs and the chiefs, must know their jobs. If they do not, all mankind might perish.

Suzdal reached into his arsenal. He knew what he was doing. The larger moon of Arachosia was habitable. He could see that there were Earth plants already on it, and Earth insects. His monitors showed him that the Arachosian men-women had not bothered to settle on the planet. He threw an agonized inquiry at his computers and cried out:

"Read me the age it's in!"

The machine sang back, "More than thirty million years."

Suzdal had strange resources. He had twins or quadruplets of almost every Earth animal. The Earth animals were carried in tiny capsules no larger than a medicine capsule and they consisted of the sperm and the ovum of the higher animals, ready to be matched for sowing, ready to be imprinted; he also had small life-bombs which could surround any form of life with at least a chance of survival.

He went to the bank and he got cats, eight pairs, sixteen Earth cats, *Fells domesticus*, the kind of cat that you and I know, the kind of cat which is bred, sometimes for telepathic uses, sometimes to go along on the ships and serve as auxiliary weapons when the minds of the pin-lighters direct the cats to fight off dangers.

He coded these cats. He coded them with messages just as monstrous as the messages which had made the men-women of Arachosia into monsters. This is what he coded:

Do not breed true.

Invent new chemistry.

You will serve man.

Become civilized.

Learn speech.

You will serve man.

When man calls you will serve man.

Go back, and come forth.

Serve man.

These instructions were no mere verbal instructions. They were imprints on the actual molecular structure of the animals. They were charges in the genetic and biological coding which went with these cats. And then Suzdal committed his offense against the laws of mankind. He had a chronopathic device on board the ship. A time distorter, usually to be used for a moment or a second or two to bring the ship away from utter destruction.

The men-women of Arachosia were already cutting through the hull.

He could hear their high, hooting voices screaming delirious pleasure at one another as they regarded him as the first of their promised enemies that they had ever met, the first of the monsters from Old Earth who had finally overtaken them. The true, evil people on whom they, the men-women of Arachosia would be revenged.

Suzdal remained calm. He coded the genetic cats. He loaded them into life-bombs. He adjusted the controls of his chronopathic machine illegally, so that instead of reaching one second for a ship of eighty thousand tons, they reached two million years for a load of less than four kilos. He flung



the cats into the nameless moon of Arachosia.

And he flung them back in time.

And he knew he did not have to wait.

He didn't.

### The Gotland Suzdal Made

The cats came. Their ships glittered in the naked sky above Arachosia. Their little combat craft attacked. The cats who had not existed a moment before, but who had then had two million years in which to follow a destiny printed right into their brains, printed down their spinal cords, etched into the chemistry of their bodies and personalities. The cats had turned into people of a kind, with speech, intelligence, hope, and a mission. Their mission was to attach Suzdal, to rescue him, to obey him, and to damage Arachosia.

The cat ships screamed their battle warnings.

"This is the day of the year of the promised age. And now come cats!"

The Arachosians had waited for battle for four thousand years and now they got it. The cats attacked them. Two of the cat craft recognized Suzdal, and the cats reported,

"Oh Lord, oh God, oh Maker of all things, oh Commander of Time, oh Beginner of Life, we have waited since Everything began to serve You, to serve Your Name, to obey Your Glory! May we live for You, may we die for You. We are Your people."

Suzdal cried and threw his message to all the cats.

"Harry the klopts but don't kill them all!"

He repeated, "Harry them and stop them until I escape." He flung his cruiser into nonspace and escaped.

Neither cat nor Arachosian followed him.

And that's the story, but the tragedy is that Suzdal got back. And the Arachosians are still there and the cats are still there. Perhaps the Instrumentality knows where they are, perhaps the Instrumentality does not. Mankind does not really want to find out. It is against all law to bring up a form of life superior to man. Perhaps the cats are. Perhaps somebody knows whether the Arachosians won and killed the cats and added the cat science to their own and are now looking for us somewhere, probing like blind men through the stars for us true human beings to meet, to hate, to kill. Or perhaps the cats won.

Perhaps the cats are imprinted by a strange mission, by weird hopes of serving men they don't recognize. Perhaps they think we are all Arachosians and should be saved only for some particular cruiser commander, whom they will never see again. They won't see Suzdal, because we know what happened to him.

### The Trial of Suzdal

Suzdal was brought to trial on a great stage in the open world. His trial was recorded. He had gone in when he should not have gone in. He had searched for the Arachosians without waiting and asking for advice and reinforcements. What business was it of his to relieve a distress ages old? What business indeed?

And then the cats. We had the records of the ship to show that something came out of that moon. Spacecraft, things with voices, things that could communicate with the human brain. We're not even sure, since they transmitted directly into the receiver computers, that they spoke an Earth language. Perhaps they did it with some sort of direct telepathy. But the crime was, Suzdal had succeeded.

By throwing the cats back two million years, by coding them to survive, coding them to develop civilization, coding them to come to his rescue, he had created a whole new world in less than one second of objective time.

His chronopathic device had flung the little life-bombs back to the wet Earth of the big moon over Arachosia and in less time than it takes to record this, the bombs came back in the form of a fleet built by a race, an Earth race, though of cat origin, two million years old.

The court stripped Suzdal of his name and said, "You will not be named Suzdal any longer."

The court stripped Suzdal of his rank.

"You will not be a commander of this or of any other navy, neither imperial nor of the Instrumentality."

The court stripped Suzdal of his life. "You will not live longer, former commander, and former Suzdal."

And then the court stripped Suzdal of death.

"You will go to the planet Shayol, the place of uttermost shame from which no one ever returns. You will go there with the contempt and hatred of mankind. We will not punish you. We do not wish to know about you any more. You will live on, but for us you will have ceased to exist."

That's the story. It's a sad, wonderful story. The Instrumentality tries to cheer up all the different kinds of mankind by telling them it isn't true, it's just a ballad.

Perhaps the records do exist. Perhaps somewhere the crazy klopts of Arachosia breed their boyish young, deliver their babies, always by Caesarean, feed them always by bottle, generations of men who have known fathers and who have no idea of what the word mother might be. And perhaps the Arachosians spend their crazy lives in endless battle with intelligent cats who are serving a mankind that may never come back.

That's the story.

Furthermore, it isn't true.

## THE DEAD LADY OF CLOWN TOWN

Based on the seven generations of Jestocost, this story could have taken place two thousand years or more before the Rediscovery of Man, which it foreshadows. Parallels with the Joan of Arc legend are obvious, as are the allusions to the Old Strong Religion; not so some of the proper names. "An-fang" is literally "beginning" in German, while "Pane Ashash" is Hindi for "five-six." The style of the story is a Chinese-derived one Smith adopted for SF late in his career—yet he had used it in some unpublished historical stories as early as 1939.

1

You already know the end—the immense drama of the Lord Jestocost, seventh of his line, and how the cat-girl C'mell initiated the vast conspiracy. But you do not know the beginning, how the first Lord Jestocost got his name, because of the terror and inspiration which his mother, the Lady Goroke, obtained from the famous real-life drama of the dog-girl D'joan. It is even less likely that you know the other story—the one behind D'joan. This story is sometimes mentioned as the matter of the "nameless witch," which is absurd, because she really had a name. The name was "Elaine," an ancient and forbidden one.

Elaine was a mistake. Her birth, her life, her career were all mistakes. The ruby was wrong. How could that have happened?

Go back to An-fang, the Peace Square at An-fang, the Beginning Place at An-fang, where all things start. Bright it was. Red square, dead square, clear square, under a yellow sun.

This was Earth Original, Manhome itself, where Earthport thrusts its way up through hurricane clouds that are higher than the mountains.

An-fang was near a city, the only living city with a pre-atomic name. The lovely meaningless name was Meeya Meeffa, where the lines of ancient roadways, untouched by a wheel for thousands of years, forever paralleled the warm, bright, clear beaches of the Old South East.

The headquarters of the People Programmer was at An-fang, and there the mistake happened.

A ruby trembled. Two tourmaline nets failed to rectify the laser beam. A diamond noted the error. Both the error and the correction went into the general computer.

The error assigned, on the general account of births for Fomalhaut III, the profession of "lay therapist, female, intuitive capacity for correction of human physiology with local resources." On some of the early ships they used to call these people witch-women, because they worked unaccountable cures. For pioneer parties, these lay therapists were invaluable; in settled post-Riesmannian societies, they became an awful nuisance. Sickness disappeared with good conditions,

accidents dwindled down to nothing, medical work became institutional.

Who wants a witch, even a good witch, when a thousand-bed hospital is waiting with its staff eager for clinical experience ... and only seven out of its thousand beds filled with real people? (The remaining beds were filled with lifelike robots on which the staff could practice, lest they lose their morale. They could, of course, have worked on under-people—animals in the shape of human beings, who did the heavy and the weary work which remained as the caput mortuum of a really perfected economy—but it was against the law for animals, even when they were underpeople, to go to a human hospital. When underpeople got sick, the Instrumentality took care of them—in slaughterhouses. It was easier to breed new underpeople for the jobs than it was to repair sick ones. Furthermore, the tender, loving care of a hospital might give them ideas. Such as the idea that they were people. This would have been bad, from the prevailing point of view. Therefore the human hospitals remained almost empty while an underperson who sneezed four times or who vomited once was taken away, never to be ill again. The empty beds kept on with the robot patients, who went through endless repetitions of the human patterns of injury or disease.) This left no work for witches, bred and trained.

Yet the ruby had trembled; the program had indeed made a mistake; the birth-number for a "lay therapist, general, female, immediate use" had been ordered for Fomalhaut III.

Much later, when the story was all done down to its last historic detail, there was an investigation into the origins of Elaine. When the laser had trembled, both the original order and the correction were fed simultaneously into the machine. The machine recognized the contradiction and promptly referred both papers to the human supervisor, an actual man who had been working on the job for seven years.

He was studying music, and he was bored. He was so close to the end of his term that he was already counting the days to his own release. Meanwhile he was rearranging two popular songs. One was The Big Bamboo, a primitive piece which tried to evoke the original magic of man. The other was about a girl, Elaine, Elaine, whom the song asked, to refrain from giving pain to her loving swain. Neither of the songs was important; but between them they influenced history, first a little bit and then very much.

The musician had plenty of time to practice. He had not had to meet a real emergency in all his seven years. From time to time the machine made reports to him, but the musician just told the machine to correct its own errors, and it infallibly did so.

On the day that the accident of Elaine happened, he was trying to perfect his finger work on the guitar, a very old instrument believed to date from the pre-space period. He was playing The Big Bamboo for the hundredth time.

The machine announced its mistake with an initial musical chime. The supervisor had long since forgotten all the instructions which he had so worrisomely memorized seven long years ago. The alert did not really and truly matter, because the machine invariably corrected its own mistakes whether the supervisor was on duty or not.

The machine, not having its chime answered, moved into a second-stage alarm. From a loudspeaker set in the wall of the room, it shrieked in a high, clear human voice, the voice of some employee who had died thousands of years earlier:

"Alert, alert! Emergency. Correction needed. Correction needed!"

The answer was one which the machine had never heard before, old though it was. The musician's fingers ran madly, gladly over the guitar strings and he sang clearly, wildly back to the machine a message strange beyond any machine's belief:

Beat, beat the Big Bamboo!

Beat, beat, beat the Big Bamboo for me!

Hastily the machine set its memory banks and computers to work, looking for the code reference to "bamboo," trying to make that word fit the present context. There was no reference at all. The machine pestered the man some more.

"Instructions unclear. Instructions unclear. Please correct."

"Shut up," said the man.

"Cannot comply," stated the machine. "Please state and repeat, please state and repeat, please state and repeat."

"Do shut up," said the man, but he knew the machine would not obey this. Without thinking, he turned to his other tune and sang the first two lines twice over:

Elaine, Elaine,  
go cure the pain!  
Elaine, Elaine,  
go cure the pain!

Repetition had been inserted as a safeguard into the machine, on the assumption that no real man would repeat an error. The name "Elaine" was not correct number code, but the fourfold emphasis seemed to confirm the need for a "lay therapist, female." The machine itself noted that a genuine man had corrected the situation card presented as a matter of emergency.

"Accepted," said the machine.

This word, too late, jolted the supervisor away from his music.

"Accepted what?" he asked.

There was no answering voice. There was no sound at all except for the whisper of slightly-moistened warm air through the ventilators.

The supervisor looked out the window. He could see a little of the blood-black red color of the Peace Square of An-fang; beyond lay the ocean, endlessly beautiful and endlessly tedious.

The supervisor sighed hopefully. He was young. "Guess it doesn't matter," he thought, picking up his guitar.

(Thirty-seven years later, he found out that it did matter. The Lady Goroke herself, one of the chiefs of the Instrumentality, sent a subchief of the Instrumentality to find out who had caused D'joan. When the man found that the witch Elaine was the source of the trouble she sent him on to find out how Elaine had gotten into a well-ordered universe. The supervisor was found. He was still a musician. He remembered nothing of the story. He was hypnotized. He still remembered nothing. The subchief invoked an emergency and Police Drug Four ("clear memory") was administered to the musician. He immediately remembered the whole silly scene, but insisted that it did not matter. The case was referred to Lady Goroke, who instructed the authorities that the musician be told the whole horrible, beautiful story of D'joan at Fomalhaut—the very story which you are now being told—and he wept. He was not punished otherwise, but the Lady Goroke commanded that those memories be left in his mind for so long as he might live.)

The man picked up his guitar, but the machine went on about its work.

It selected a fertilized human embryo, tagged it with the freakish name "Elaine," irradiated the genetic code with strong aptitudes for witchcraft and then marked the person's card for training in medicine, transportation by sail-ship to Fomalhaut III and release for service on the planet.

Elaine was born without being needed, without being wanted, without having a skill which could help or hurt any existing human being. She went into life doomed and useless.

It is not remarkable that she was misbegotten. Errors do happen. Remarkable was the fact that she managed to survive without being altered, corrected or killed by the safety devices which mankind has installed in society for its own protection.

Unwanted, unused, she wandered through the tedious months and useless years of her own existence. She was well fed, richly clothed, variously housed. She had machines and robots to serve her, underpeople to obey her, people to protect her against others or against herself, should the need arise. But she could never find work; without work, she had no time for love; without work or love, she had no hope at all.

If she had only stumbled into the right experts or the right authorities, they would have altered or re-trained her. This would have made her into an acceptable woman; but she did not find the police, nor did they find her. She was helpless to correct her own programming, utterly helpless. It had been imposed on her at An-fang, way back at An-fang, where all things begin.

The ruby had trembled, the tourmaline failed, the diamond passed unsupported. Thus, a woman was born doomed.

Much later, when people made songs about the strange case of the dog-girl D'joan, the minstrels and singers had tried to imagine what Elaine felt like, and they had made up The Song of Elaine for her. It is not authentic, but it shows how Elaine looked at her own life before the strange case of D'joan began to flow from Elaine's own actions:

Other women hate me.  
Men never touch me.  
I am too much me.  
I'll be a witch!

Mama never towelled me,  
Daddy never growled me.  
Little kiddies grate me.  
I'll be a witch!

People never named me.  
Dogs never shamed me.  
Oh, I am a such me!  
I'll be a witch!

I'll make them shun me.  
They'll never run me.  
Could they even stun me?  
I'll be a witch!

Let them all attack me.  
They can only rack me.  
Me—I can hack me.  
I'll be a witch!

Other women hate me.  
Men never touch me.  
I am too much me.  
I'll be a witch!

The song overstates the case. Women did not hate Elaine; they did not look at her. Men did not shun Elaine; they did not notice her either.

There were no places on Fomalhaut III where she could have met human children, for the nurseries were far underground because of chancy radiation and fierce weather. The song pretends that Elaine began with the thought that she was not human, but underpeople, and had herself been born a dog. This did not happen at the beginning of the case, but only at the very end, when the story of D'joan was already being carried between the stars and developing with all the new twists of folklore and legend. She never went mad.

("Madness" is a rare condition, consisting of a human mind which does not engage its environment correctly. Elaine approached it before she met D'joan. Elaine was not the only case, but she was a rare and genuine one. Her life, thrust back from all attempts at growth, had turned back on itself and her mind had spiraled inward to the only safety she could really know, psychosis. Madness is always better than X, and X to each patient is individual, personal, secret and overwhelmingly important. Elaine had gone normally mad; her imprinted and destined career was the wrong one. "Lay therapists, female" were coded to work decisively, autonomously, on their own authority and with great rapidity. These working conditions were needed on new planets. They were

not coded to consult other people; most places, there would be no one to consult. Elaine did what was set for her at An-fang, all the way down to the individual chemical conditions of her spinal fluid. She was herself the wrong and she never knew it. Madness was much kinder than the realization that she was not herself, should not have lived, and amounted at the most to a mistake committed between a trembling ruby and a young, careless man with a guitar.)

She found D'joan and the worlds reeled.

Their meeting occurred at a place nicknamed "the edge of the world," where the undercity met daylight. This was itself unusual; but Fomalhaut III was an unusual and uncomfortable planet, where wild weather and men's caprice drove architects to furious design and grotesque execution.

Elaine walked through the city, secretly mad, looking for sick people whom she could help. She had been stamped, imprinted, designed, born, bred and trained for this task. There was no task.

She was an intelligent woman. Bright brains serve madness as well as they serve sanity—namely, very well indeed. It never occurred to her to give up her mission.

The people of Fomalhaut III, like the people of Manhome Earth itself, are almost uniformly handsome; it is only in the far-out, half-unreachable worlds that the human stock, strained by the sheer effort to survive, becomes ugly, weary or varied. She did not look much different from the other intelligent, handsome people who flocked the streets. Her hair was black, and she was tall. Her arms and legs were long, the trunk of her body short. She wore her hair brushed straight back from a high, narrow, square forehead. Her eyes were an odd, deep blue. Her mouth might have been pretty, but it never smiled, so that no one could really tell whether it was beautiful or not. She stood erect and proud: but so did everyone else. Her mouth was strange in its very lack of communicativeness and her eyes swept back and forth, back and forth like ancient radar, looking for the sick, the needy, and stricken, whom she had a passion to serve.

How could she be unhappy? She had never had time to be happy. It was easy for her to think that happiness was something which disappeared at the end of childhood. Now and then, here and there, perhaps when a fountain murmured in sunlight or when leaves exploded in the startling Fomalhautian spring, she wondered that other people—people as responsible as herself by the doom of age, grade, sex, training and career number—should be happy when she alone seemed to have no time for happiness. But she always dismissed the thought and walked the ramps and streets until her arches ached, looking for work which did not yet exist.

Human flesh, older than history, more dogged than culture, has its own wisdom. The bodies of people are marked with the archaic ruses of survival, so that on Fomalhaut III, Elaine herself preserved the skills of ancestors she never even thought about—those ancestors who, in the incredible and remote past, had mastered terrible Earth itself. Elaine was mad. But there was a part of her which suspected that she was mad.

Perhaps this wisdom seized her as she walked from Waterrocky Road toward the bright esplanades of the Shopping Bar. She saw a forgotten door. The robots could clean near it but, because of the old, odd architectural shape, they could not sweep and polish right at the bottom line of the door. A thin hard line of old dust and caked polish lay like a sealant at the base of the doorline. It was obvious that no one had gone through for a long, long time.

The civilized rule was that prohibited areas were marked both telepathically and with symbols. The most dangerous of all had robot or underpeople guards. But everything which was not prohibited, was permitted. Thus Elaine had no right to open the door, but she had no obligation not to do so. She opened it—

By sheer caprice.

Or so she thought.

This was a far cry from the "I'll be a witch" motif attributed to her in the later ballad. She was not yet frantic, not yet desperate, she was not yet even noble.

That opening of a door changed her own world and changed life on thousands of planets for generations to come, but the opening was not itself strange. It was the tired caprice of a thoroughly frustrated and mildly unhappy woman. Nothing more. All the other descriptions of it have been improvements, embellishments, falsifications.

She did get a shock when she opened the door, but not for the reasons attributed backwards to her by balladists and historians.

She was shocked because the door opened on steps and the steps led down to landscape and sunlight—truly an unexpected sight on any world. She was looking from the New City to the Old City. The New City rose on its shell out over the old city, and when she looked "indoors" she saw the sunset in the city below. She gasped at the beauty and the unexpectedness of it.

There, the open door—with another world beyond it. Here, the old familiar street, clean, handsome, quiet, useless, where her own useless self had walked a thousand times.

There—something. Here, the world she knew. She did not know the words "fairyland" or "magic place," but if she had known them, she would have used them.

She glanced to the right, to the left.

The passersby noticed neither her nor the door. The sunset was just beginning to show in the upper city. In the lower city it was already blood-red with streamers of gold like enormous frozen flame. Elaine did not know that she sniffed the air; she did not know that she trembled on the edge of tears; she did not know that a tender smile, the first smile in years, relaxed her mouth and turned her tired tense face into a passing loveliness. She was too intent on looking around.

People walked about their business. Down the road, an underpeople type—female, possibly cat—detoured far around a true human who was walking at a slower pace. Far away, a police ornithopter flapped slowly around one of the towers; unless the robots used a telescope on her or unless they had one of the rare hawk-undermen who wore sometimes used as police, they could not see her.

She stepped through the doorway and pulled the door itself back into the closed position.

She did not know it, but therewith unborn futures reeled out of existence, rebellion flamed into coming centuries, people and underpeople died in strange causes, mothers changed the names of unborn lords and starships whispered back from places which men had not even imagined before. Spaces which had always been there, waiting for men's notice, would come the sooner—because of her, because of the door, because of her next few steps, what she would say and the child she would meet. (The ballad-writers told the whole story later on, but they told it backwards, from their own knowledge of D'joan and what Elaine had done to set the worlds afire. The simple truth is the fact that a lonely woman went through a mysterious door. That is all. Everything else happened later.)

At the top of the steps she stood; door closed behind her, the sunset gold of the unknown city streaming out in front of her. She could see where the great shell of the New City of Kalma arched out toward the sky; she could see that the buildings here were older, less harmonious than the ones she had left. She did not know the concept "picturesque," or she would have called it that. She knew no concept to describe the scene which lay peacefully at her feet.

There was not a person in sight.

Far in the distance, a fire-detector throbbed back and forth on top of an old tower. Outside of that there was nothing but the yellow-gold city beneath her, and a bird—was it a bird, or a large storm-swept leaf?—in the middle distance.

Filled with fear, hope, expectation and the surmised of strange appetites, she walked downward with quiet, unknown purpose.

3

At the foot of the stairs, nine flights of them there had been, a child waited—a girl, about five. The child had a bright blue smock, wavy red-brown hair, and the daintiest hands which Elaine had ever seen.

Elaine's heart went out to her. The child looked up at her and shrank away. Elaine knew the meaning of those handsome brown eyes, of that muscular supplication of trust, that recoil from people. It was not a child at all—just some animal in the shape of a person, a dog perhaps, which would later be taught to speak, to work, to perform useful services.

The little girl rose, standing as though she were about to run. Elaine had the feeling that the little dog-girl had not decided whether to run toward her or from her. She did not wish to get involved with an underperson—what woman would?—but neither did she wish to frighten the little thing.

After all, it was small, very young.

The two confronted each other for a moment, the little thing uncertain, Elaine relaxed. Then the little animal-girl spoke.

"Ask her," she said, and it was a command.

Elaine was surprised. Since when did animals command?

"Ask her!" repeated the little thing. She pointed at a window which had the words TRAVELERS' AID above it. Then the girl ran. A flash of blue from her dress, a twinkle of white from her running sandals, and she was gone.

Elaine stood quiet and puzzled in the forlorn and empty city.

The window spoke to her, "You might as well come on over. You will, you know."

It was the wise mature voice of an experienced woman—a voice with a bubble of laughter underneath its phonic edge, with a hint of sympathy and enthusiasm in its tone. The command was not merely a command. It was, even at its beginning, a happy private joke between two wise women.

Elaine was not surprised when a machine spoke to her. Recordings had been telling her things all her life. She was not sure of this situation, however.

"Is there somebody there?" she said.

"Yes and no," said the voice. "I'm Travelers' Aid' and I help everybody who comes through this way. You're lost or you wouldn't be here. Put your hand in my window."

"What I mean is," said Elaine, "are you a person or are you a machine?"

"Depends," said the voice. "I'm a machine, but I used to be a person, long, long ago. A lady, in fact, and one of the Instrumentality. But my time came and they said to me, 'Would you mind if we made a machine print of your whole personality? It would be very helpful for the information booths.' So of course I said yes, and they made this copy, and I died, and they shot my body into space with all the usual honors, but here I was. It felt pretty odd inside this contraption, me looking at things and talking to people and giving good advice and staying busy, until they built the new city. So what do you say? Am I me or aren't I?"

"I don't know, ma'am." Elaine stood back.

The warm voice lost its humor and became commanding. "Give me your hand, then, so I can identify you and tell you what to do."

"I think," said Elaine, "that I'll just go back upstairs and go through the door into the upper city."

"And cheat me," said the voice in the window, "out of my first conversation with a real person in four years?" There was demand in the voice, but there was still the warmth and the humor; there was loneliness too. The loneliness decided Elaine. She stepped up to the window and put her hand flat on the ledge.

"You're Elaine," cried the window. "You're Elaine! The worlds wait for you. You're from An-fang, where all things begin, the Peace Square at An-fang, on Old Earth itself!"

"Yes," said Elaine.

The voice bubbled over with enthusiasm. "He is waiting for you. Oh, he has waited for you a long, long time. And the little girl you met. That was D'joan herself. The story has begun. The world's great age begins anew.' And I can die when it is over. So sorry, my dear. I don't mean to confuse you. I am the Lady Pane Ashash. You're Elaine. Your number originally ended 783 and you shouldn't even be on this planet. All the important people here end with the number 5 and 6. You're a lay therapist and you're in the wrong place, but your lover is already on his way, and you've never been in love yet, and it's all too exciting."

Elaine looked quickly around her. The old lower town was turning more red and less gold as the sunset progressed. The steps behind her seemed terribly high as she looked back, the door at the top very small. Perhaps it had locked on her when she closed it. Maybe she wouldn't ever be able to leave the old lower city.

The window must have been watching her in some way, because the voice of the Lady Pane Ashash became tender,

"Sit down my dear," said the voice from the window. "When I was me, I used to be much more



polite. I haven't been me for a long, long time. I'm a machine, and still I feel like myself. Do sit down, and do forgive me."

Elaine looked around. There was the roadside marble bench behind her. She sat on it obediently. The happiness which had been in her at the top of the steps bubbled forth anew. If this wise old machine knew so much about her, perhaps it could tell her what to do. What did the voice mean by "wrong planet"? By "lover"? By "he is coming for you now," or was that what the voice had actually said?

"Take a breath, my dear," said the voice of the Lady Pane Ashash. She might have been dead for hundreds or thousands of years, but she still spoke with the authority and kindness of a great lady.

Elaine breathed deep. She saw a huge red cloud, like a pregnant whale, getting ready to butt the rim of the upper city, far above her and far out over the sea. She wondered if clouds could possibly have feelings.

The voice was speaking again. What had it said?

Apparently the question was repeated. "Did you know you were coming?" said the voice from the window.

"Of course not." Elaine shrugged. "There was just this door, and I didn't have anything special to do, so I opened it. And here was a whole new world inside a house. It looked strange and rather pretty, so I came down. Wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

"I don't know," said the voice candidly. "I'm really a machine. I haven't been me for a long, long time. Perhaps I would have, when I was alive. I don't know that, but I know about things. Maybe I can see the future, or perhaps the machine part of me computes such good probabilities that it just seems like it. I know who you are and what is going to happen to you. You had better brush your hair."

"Whatever for?" said Elaine.

"He is coming," said the happy old voice of the Lady Pane Ashash.

"Who is coming?" said Elaine, almost irritably.

"Do you have a mirror? I wish you would look at your hair. It could be prettier, not that it isn't pretty right now. You want to look your best. Your lover, that's who is coming, of course."

"I haven't got a lover," said Elaine. "I haven't been authorized one, not till I've done some of my lifework, and I haven't even found my lifework yet. I'm not the kind of girl who would go ask a subchief for the dreamies, not when I'm not entitled to the real thing. I may not be much of a person, but I have some self-respect." Elaine got so mad that she shifted her position on the bench and sat with her face turned away from the all-watching window.

The next words gave her gooseflesh down her arms, they were uttered with such real earnestness, such driving sincerity. "Elaine, Elaine, do you really have no idea of who you are?"

Elaine pivoted back on the bench so that she looked toward the window. Her face was caught redly by the rays of the setting sun. She could only gasp.

"I don't know what you mean ... "

The inexorable voice went on. "Think, Elaine, think. Does the name 'D'joan' mean nothing to you?"

"I suppose it's an underperson, a dog. That's what the D is for, isn't it?"

"That was the little girl you met," said the Lady Pane Ashash, as though the statement were something tremendous.

"Yes," said Elaine dutifully. She was a courteous woman, and never quarreled with strangers.

"Wait a minute," said the Lady Pane Ashash, "I'm going to get my body out. God knows when I wore it last, but it'll make you feel more at easy terms with me. Forgive the clothes. They're old stuff, but I think the body will work all right. This is the beginning of the story of D'joan, and I want that hair of yours brushed even if I have to brush it myself. Just wait right there, girl, wait right there. I'll just take a minute."

The clouds were turning from dark red to liver-black. What could Elaine do? She stayed on the bench. She kicked her shoe against the wall. She jumped a little when the old-fashioned street lights of the lower city went on with sharp geometrical suddenness; they did not have the subtle

shading of the newer lights in the other city upstairs, where day phased into the bright clear night with no sudden shift in color.

The door beside the little window creaked open. Ancient plastic crumbled to the walk.

Elaine was astonished.

Elaine knew she must have been unconsciously expecting a monster, but this was a charming woman of about her own height, wearing weird, old-fashioned clothes. The strange woman had glossy black hair, no evidence of recent or current illness, no signs of severe lesions in the past, no impairment evident of sight, gait, reach or eyesight. (There was no way she could check on smell or taste right off, but this was the medical check-up she had had built into her from birth on—the checklist which she had run through with every adult person she had ever met. She had been designed as a "lay therapist, female" and she was a good one, even when there was no one at all to treat.)

Truly, the body was a rich one. It must have cost the landing charges of forty or fifty planetfalls. The human shape was perfectly rendered. The mouth moved over genuine teeth; the words were formed by throat, palate, tongue, teeth and lips, and not just by a microphone mounted in the head. The body was really a museum piece. It was probably a copy of the Lady Pane Ashash herself in time of life. When the face smiled, the effect was undescribably winning. The lady wore the costume of a bygone age—a stately frontal dress of heavy blue material, embroidered with a square pattern of gold at hem, waist and bodice. She had a matching cloak of dark, faded gold, embroidered in blue with the same pattern of squares. Her hair was upswept and set with jeweled combs. It seemed perfectly natural, but there was dust on one side of it.

The robot smiled, "I'm out of date. It's been a long time since I was me. But I thought, my dear, that you would find this old body easier to talk to than the window over there ... "

Elaine nodded mutely.

"You know this is not me?" said the body, sharply.

Elaine shook her head. She didn't know; she felt that she didn't know anything at all.

The Lady Pane Ashash looked at her earnestly. "This is not me. It's a robot body. You looked at it as though it were a real person. And I'm not me, either. It hurts sometimes. Did you know a machine could hurt? I can. But—I'm not me."

"Who are you?" said Elaine to the pretty old woman.

"Before I died, I was the Lady Pane Ashash. Just as I told you. Now I am a machine, and a part of your destiny. We will help each other to change the destiny of worlds, perhaps even to bring mankind back to humanity."

Elaine stared at her in bewilderment. This was no common robot. It seemed like a real person and spoke with such warm authority. And this thing, whatever it was, this thing seemed to know so much about her. Nobody else had ever cared. The nurse-mothers at the Childhouse on earth had said, "Another witch-child, and pretty too, they're not much trouble," and had let her life go by.

At last Elaine could face the face which was not really a face. The charm, the humor, the expressiveness were still there.

"What—what," stammered Elaine, "do I do now?"

"Nothing," said the long-dead Lady Pane Ashash, "except to meet your destiny."

"You mean my lover?"

"So impatient!" laughed the dead woman's record in a very human way. "Such a hurry. Lover first and destiny later. I was like that myself when I was a girl."

"But what do I do?" persisted Elaine.

The night was now complete above them. The street lights glared on the empty and unswept streets. A few doorways, not one of them less than a full street-crossing away, were illuminated with rectangles of light or shadow-light if they were far from the street lights, so that their own interior lights shone brightly, shadow if they were so close under the big lights that they cut off the glare from overhead.

"Go through this door," said the old nice woman.

But she pointed at the undistinguished white of an uninterrupted wall. There was no door at all in

that place.

"But there's no door there," said Elaine.

"If there were a door," said the Lady Pane Ashash, "you wouldn't need me to tell you to go through it. And you do need me."

"Why?" said Elaine.

"Because I've waited for you hundreds of years, that's why."

"That's no answer!" snapped Elaine.

"It is so an answer," smiled the woman, and her lack of hostility was not robotlike at all. It was the kindness and composure of a mature human being. She looked up into Elaine's eyes and spoke emphatically and softly. "I know because I do know. Not because I'm a dead person—that doesn't matter any more—but because I am now a very old machine. You will go into the Brown and Yellow Corridor and you will think of your lover, and you will do your work, and men will hunt you. But you will come out happily in the end. Do you understand this?"

"No," said Elaine, "no, I don't." But she reached out her hand to the sweet old woman. The lady took her hand. The touch was warm and very human.

"You don't have to understand it. Just do it. And I know you will. So since you are going, go."

Elaine tried to smile at her, but she was troubled, more consciously worried than ever before in her life. Something real was happening to her, to her own individual self, at a very long last. "How will I get through the door?"

"I'll open it," smiled the lady, releasing Elaine's hand, "and you'll know your lover when he sings you the poem."

"Which poem?" said Elaine, stalling for time and frightened by a door which did not even exist.

"It starts, 'I knew you and loved you, and won you, in Kalma ... ' You'll know it. Go on in. It'll be bothersome at first, but when you meet the Hunter, it will all seem different."

"Have you ever been in there, yourself?"

"Of course not," said the dear old lady. "I'm a machine. That whole place is thoughtproof. Nobody can see, hear, think or talk in or out of it. It's a shelter left over from the ancient wars, when the slightest sign of a thought would have brought destruction on the whole place. That's why the Lord Englok built it, long before my time. But you can go in. And you will. Here's the door."

The old robot lady waited no longer. She gave Elaine a strange friendly crooked smile, half proud and half apologetic. She took Elaine with firm fingertips holding Elaine's left elbow. They walked a few steps down toward the wall.

"Here, now," said the Lady Pane Ashash, and pushed. Elaine flinched as she was thrust toward the wall. Before she knew it, she was through. Smells hit her like a roar of battle. The air was hot. The light was dim. It looked like a picture of the Pain Planet, hidden somewhere in space. Poets later tried to describe Elaine at the door with a verse which begins,

There were brown ones and blue ones

And white ones and whiter,

In the hidden and forbidden

Downtown of Clown Town.

There were horrid ones and horridier,

In the brown and yellow corridor.

The truth was much simpler.

Trained witch, born witch that she was, she perceived the truth immediately. All these people, all she could see, at least, were sick. They needed help. They needed herself.

But the joke was on her, for she could not help a single one of them. Not one of them was a real person. They were just animals, things in the shape of man. Underpeople. Dirt.

And she was conditioned to the bone never to help them.

She did not know why the muscles of her legs made her walk forward, but they did.

There are many pictures of that scene.

The Lady Pane Ashash, only a few moments in her past, seemed very remote. And the city of Kalma itself, the new city, ten stories above her, almost seemed as though it had never existed at all.

This, this was real.

She stared at the underpeople.

And this time, for the first time in her life, they stared right back at her. She had never seen anything like this before.

They did not frighten her; they surprised her. The fright, Elaine felt, was to come later. Soon, perhaps, but not here, not now.

4

Something which looked like a middle-aged woman walked right up to her and snapped at her.

"Are you death?"

Elaine stared. "Death? What do you mean? I'm Elaine."

"Be damned to that!" said the woman-thing. "Are you death?"

Elaine did not know the word "damned" but she was pretty sure that "death," even to these things, meant simply "termination of life."

"Of course not," said Elaine. "I'm just a person. A witch woman, ordinary people would call me. We don't have anything to do with you underpeople. Nothing at all." Elaine could see that the woman-thing had an enormous coiffure of soft brown sloppy hair, a sweat-reddened face and crooked teeth which showed when she grinned.

"They all say that. They never know that they're death. How do you think we die, if you people don't send contaminated robots in with diseases? We all die off when you do that, and then some more underpeople find this place again later on and make a shelter of it and live in it for a few generations until the death machines, things like you, come sweeping through the city and kill us off again. This is Clown Town, the underpeople place. Haven't you heard of it?"

Elaine tried to walk past the woman-thing, but she found her arm grabbed. This couldn't have happened before, not in the history of the world—an underperson seizing a real person!

"Let go!" she yelled.

The woman-thing let her arm go and faced toward the others. Her voice had changed. It was no longer shrill and excited, but low and puzzled instead. "I can't tell. Maybe it is a real person. Isn't that a joke? Lost, in here with us. Or maybe she is death. I can't tell. What do you think, Charley-is-my-darling?"

The man she spoke to stepped forward. Elaine thought, in another time, in some other place, that underperson might pass for an attractive human being. His face was illuminated by intelligence and alertness. He looked directly at Elaine as though he had never seen her before, which indeed he had not, but he continued looking with so sharp, so strange a stare that she became uneasy. His voice, when he spoke, was brisk, high, clear, friendly; set in this tragic place, it was the caricature of a voice, as though the animal had been programmed for speech from the habits of a human, persuader by profession, whom one saw in the storyboxes telling people messages which were neither good nor important, but merely clever. The handsomeness was itself deformity. Elaine wondered if he had come from goat stock.

"Welcome, young lady," said Charley-is-my-darling. "Now that you are here, how are you going to get out? If we turned her head around, Mabel," said he to the underwoman who had first greeted Elaine, "turned it around eight or ten times, it would come off. Then we could live a few weeks or months longer before our lords and creators found us and put us all to death. What do you say, young lady? Should we kill you?"

"Kill? You mean, terminate life? You cannot. It is against the law. Even the Instrumentality does not have the right to do that without trial. You can't. You're just underpeople."

"But we will die," said Charley-is-my-darling, flashing his quick intelligent smile, "if you go back out of that door. The police will read about the Brown and Yellow Corridor in your mind and they will flush us out with poison or they will spray disease in here so that we and our children will die."

Elaine stared at him.

The passionate anger did not disturb his smile or his persuasive tones, but the muscles of his eye-

sockets and forehead showed the terrible strain. The result was an expression which Elaine had never seen before, a sort of self-control reaching out beyond the limits of insanity.

He stared back at her.

She was not really afraid of him. Underpeople could not twist the heads of real persons; it was contrary to all regulations.

A thought struck her. Perhaps regulations did not apply in a place like this, where illegal animals waited perpetually for sudden death. The being which faced her was strong enough to turn her head around ten times clockwise or counterclockwise. From her anatomy lessons, she was pretty sure that the head would come off somewhere during that process. She looked at him with interest. Animal-type fear had been conditioned out of her, but she had, she found, an extreme distaste for the termination of life under random circumstances. Perhaps her "witch" training would help. She tried to pretend that he was in fact a man. The diagnosis "hypertension: chronic aggression, now frustrated, leading to overstimulation and neurosis: poor nutritional record: hormone disorder probable" leapt into her mind.

She tried to speak in a new voice.

"I am smaller than you," she said, "and you can kill me just as well later as now. We might as well get acquainted. I'm Elaine, assigned here from Manhome Earth."

The effect was spectacular.

Charley-is-my-darling stepped back. Mabel's mouth dropped open. The others gaped at her. One or two, more quick-witted than the rest, began whispering to their neighbors.

At last Charley-is-my-darling spoke to her. "Welcome, my Lady. Can I call you my Lady? I guess not. Welcome, Elaine. We are your people. We will do whatever you say. Of course you got in. The Lady Pane Ashash sent you. She has been telling us for a hundred years that somebody would come from Earth, a real person with an animal name, not a number, and that we should have a child named D'joan ready to take up the threads of destiny. Please, please sit down. Will you have a drink of water? We have no clean vessel here. We are all underpeople here and we have used everything in the place, so that it is contaminated for a real person." A thought struck him. "Baby-baby, do you have a new cup in the kiln?" Apparently he saw someone nod, because he went right on talking. "Get it out then, for our guest, with tongs. New tongs. Do not touch it. Fill it with water from the top of the little waterfall. That way our guest can have an uncontaminated drink. A clean drink." He beamed with a hospitality which was as ridiculous as it was genuine.

Elaine did not have the heart to say she did not want a drink of water.

She waited. They waited.

By now, her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness. She could see that the main corridor was painted a yellow, faded and stained, and a contrasting light brown. She wondered what possible human mind could have selected so ugly a combination. Cross-corridors seemed to open into it; at any rate, she saw illuminated archways further down and people walking out of them briskly. No one can walk briskly and naturally out of a shallow alcove, so she was pretty sure that the archways led to something.

The underpeople, too, she could see. They looked very much like people. Here and there, individuals reverted to the animal type—a horseman whose muzzle had regrown to its ancestral size, a rat-woman with normal human features except for nylon-like white whiskers, twelve or fourteen on each side of her face, reaching twenty centimeters to either side. One looked very much like a person indeed—a beautiful young woman seated on a bench some eight or ten meters down the corridor, and paying no attention to the crowd, to Mabel, to Charley-is-my-darling or to herself.

"Who is that?" said Elaine, pointing with a nod at the beautiful young woman.

Mabel, relieved from the tension which had seized her when she had asked if Elaine were "death," babbled with a sociability which was outré in this environment. "That's Crawlle."

"What does she do?" asked Elaine.

"She has her pride," said Mabel, her grotesque red face now jolly and eager, her slack mouth spraying spittle as she spoke.

"But doesn't she do anything?" said Elaine.

Charley-is-my-darling intervened. "Nobody has to do anything here, Lady Elaine—"

"It's illegal to call me 'Lady,' " said Elaine.

"I'm sorry, human being Elaine. Nobody has to do anything at all here. The whole bunch of us are completely illegal. This corridor is a thought-shelter, so that no thoughts can escape or enter it. Wait a bit! Watch the ceiling ... Now!"

A red glow moved across the ceiling and was gone. "The ceiling glows," said Charley-is-my-darling, "whenever anything thinks against it. The whole tunnel registers 'sewage tank: organic waste' to the outside, so that dim perceptions of life which may escape here are not considered too unaccountable. People built it for their own use, a million years ago."

"They weren't here on Fomalhaut III a million years ago," snapped Elaine. Why, she wondered, did she snap at him? He wasn't a person, just a talking animal who had missed being dropped down the nearest incinerator.

"I'm sorry, Elaine," said Charley-is-my-darling. "I should have said, a long time ago. We underpeople don't get much chance to study real history. But we use this corridor. Somebody with a morbid sense of humor named this place Clown Town. We live along for ten or twenty or a hundred years, and then people or robots find us and kill us all. That's why Mabel was upset. She thought you were death for this time. But you're not. You're Elaine. That's wonderful, wonderful." His sly, too-clever face beamed with transparent sincerity. It must have been quite a shock to him to be honest.

"You were going to tell me what the undergirl is for," said Elaine.

"That's Crawlle," said he. "She doesn't do anything. None of us really have to. We're all doomed anyhow. She's a little more honest than the rest of us. She has her pride. She scorns the rest of us. She puts us in our place. She makes everybody feel inferior. We think she is a valuable member of the group. We all have our pride, which is hopeless anyway, but Crawlle has her pride all by herself, without doing anything whatever about it. She sort of reminds us. If we leave her alone, she leaves us alone."

Elaine thought, You're funny things, so much like people, but so inexpert about it, as though you all had to "die" before you really learned what it is to be alive. Aloud, she could only say, "I never met anybody like that."

Crawlle must have sensed that they were talking about her, because she looked at Elaine with a short quick stare of blazing hatred. Crawlle's pretty face locked itself into a glare of concentrated hostility and scorn; then her eyes wandered and Elaine felt that she, Elaine, no longer existed in the thing's mind, except as a rebuke which had been administered and forgotten. She had never seen privacy as impenetrable as Crawlle's. And yet the being, whatever she might have been made from, was very lovely in human terms.

A fierce old hag, covered with mouse-gray fur, rushed up to Elaine. The mouse-woman was the Baby-baby who had been sent on the errand. She held a ceramic cup in a pair of long tongs. Water was in it.

Elaine took the cup.

Sixty to seventy underpeople, including the little girl in the blue dress whom she had seen outside, watched her as she sipped. The water was good. She drank it all. There was a universal exhalation, as though everyone in the corridor had waited for this moment Elaine started to put the cup down but the old mouse-woman was too quick for her. She took the cup from Elaine, stopping her in mid-gesture and using the tongs, so that the cup would not be contaminated by the touch of an underperson.

"That's right, Baby-baby," said Charley-is-my-darling, "we can talk. It is our custom not to talk with a newcomer until we have offered our hospitality. Let me be frank. We may have to kill you, if this whole business turns out to be a mistake, but let me assure you that if I do kill you, I will do it nicely and without the least bit of malice. Right?"

Elaine did not know what was so right about it, and said so. She visualized her head being twisted off. Apart from the pain and the degradation, it seemed so terribly messy—to terminate life in a sewer with things which did not even have a right to exist.

He gave her no chance to argue, but went on explaining, "Suppose things turn out just right. Suppose that you are the Esther-Elaine-or-Eleanor that we have all been waiting for—the person who will do something to D'joan and bring us all help and deliverance—give us life, in short, real life—then what do we do?"

"I don't know where you get all these ideas about me. Why am I Esther-Elaine-or-Eleanor? What do I do to D'joan? Why me?"

Charley-is-my-darling stared at her as though he could not believe her question. Mabel frowned as though she could not think of the right words to put forth her opinions. Baby-baby, who had glided back to the group with swift mouselike suddenness, looked around as though she expected someone from the rear to speak. She was right. Crawlle turned her face toward Elaine and said, with infinite condescension:

"I did not know that real people were ill-informed or stupid. You seem to be both. We have all our information from the Lady Pane Ashash. Since she is dead, she has no prejudices against us underpeople. Since she has not had much of anything to do, she has run through billions and billions of probabilities for us. All of us know what most probabilities come to—sudden death by disease or gas, or maybe being hauled off to the slaughterhouses in big police ornithopters. But Lady Pane Ashash found that perhaps a person with a name like yours would come, a human being with an old name and not a number name, that that person would meet the Hunter, that she and the Hunter would teach the underchild D'joan a message and that the message would change the worlds. We have kept one child after another named D'joan, waiting for a hundred years. Now you show up. Maybe you are the one. You don't look very competent to me. What are you good for?"

"I'm a witch," said Elaine.

Crawlle could not keep the surprise from showing in her face. "A witch? Really?"

"Yes," said Elaine, rather humbly.

"I wouldn't be one," said Crawlle. "I have my pride." She turned her face away and locked her features in their expression of perennial hurt and disdain.

Charley-is-my-darling whispered to the group nearby, not caring whether Elaine heard his words or not, "That's wonderful, wonderful. She is a witch. A human witch. Perhaps the great day is here! Elaine," said he humbly, "will you please look at us?"

Elaine looked. When she stopped to think about where she was, it was incredible that the empty old lower city of Kalma should be just outside, just beyond the wall, and the busy new city a mere thirty-five meters higher. This corridor was a world to itself. It felt like a world, with the ugly yellows and browns, the dim old lights, the stench of man and animal mixed under intolerably bad ventilation. Baby-baby, Crawlle, Mabel and Charley-is-my-darling were part of this world. They were real; but they were outside, outside, so far as Elaine herself was concerned.

"Let me go," she said. "I'll come back some day."

Charley-is-my-darling, who was so plainly the leader, spoke as if in a trance: "You don't understand, Elaine. The only 'going' you are going to go is death. There is no other direction. We can't let the old you go out of this door, not when the Lady Pane Ashash has thrust you in to us. Either you go forward to your destiny, to our destiny too, either you do that, and all works out all right, so that you love us, and we love you," he added dreamily, "or else I kill you with my own hands. Right here. Right now. I could give you another clean drink of water first. But that is all. There isn't much choice for you, human being Elaine. What do you think would happen if you went outside?"

"Nothing, I hope," said Elaine.

"Nothing!" snorted Mabel, her face regaining its original indignation. "The police would come flapping by in their ornithopter—"

"And they'd pick your brains," said Baby-baby.

"And they'd know about us," said a tall pale man who had not spoken before.

"And we," said Crawlle from her chair, "would all of us die within an hour or two at the longest. Would that matter to you, Ma'am and Elaine?"

"And," added Charley-is-my-darling, "they would disconnect the Lady Pane Ashash, so that even

the recording of that dear dead lady would be gone at last, and there would be no mercy at all left upon this world."

"What is 'mercy'?" asked Elaine.

"It's obvious you never heard of it," said Crawlle.

The old mouse-hag Baby-baby came close to Elaine. She looked up at her and whispered through yellow teeth. "Don't let them frighten you, girl. Death doesn't matter all that much, not even to you true humans with your four hundred years or to us animals with the slaughterhouse around the corner. Death is a—when, not a what. It's the same for all of us. Don't be scared. Go straight ahead and you may find mercy and love. They're much richer than death, if you can only find them. Once you do find them, death won't be very important."

"I still don't know mercy" said Elaine, "but I thought I knew what love was, and I don't expect to find my lover in a dirty old corridor full of underpeople."

"I don't mean that kind of love," laughed Baby-baby, brushing aside Mabel's attempted interruption with a wave of her hand-paw. The old mouse face was on fire with sheer expressiveness. Elaine could suddenly imagine what Baby-baby had looked like to a mouse-underman when she was young and sleek and gray. Enthusiasm flushed the old features with youth as Baby-baby went on, "I don't mean love for a lover, girl. I mean love for yourself. Love for life. Love for all things living. Love even for me. Your love for me. Can you imagine that?"

Elaine swam through fatigue but she tried to answer the question. She looked in the dim light at the wrinkled old mouse-hag with her filthy clothes and her little red eyes. The fleeting image of the beautiful young mouse-woman had faded away; there was only this cheap, useless old thing, with her inhuman demands and her senseless pleading. People never loved underpeople. They used them, like chairs or doorhandles. Since when did a doorhandle demand the Charter of Ancient Rights?

"No," said Elaine calmly and evenly, "I can't imagine ever loving you."

"I knew it," said Crawlle from her chair. There was triumph in the voice.

Charley-is-my-darling shook his head as if to clear his sight. "Don't you even know who controls Fomalhaut III?"

"The Instrumentality," said Elaine. "But do we have to go on talking? Let me go or kill me or something. This doesn't make sense. I was tired when I got here, and I'm a million years tired now."

Mabel said, "Take her along."

"All right," said Charley-is-my-darling. "Is the Hunter there?"

The child D'joan spoke. She had stood at the back of the group. "He came in the other way when she came in the front."

Elaine said to Charley-is my-darling, "You lied to me. You said there was only one way."

"I did not lie," said he. "There is only one way for you or me or for the friends of the Lady Pane Ashash. The way you came. The other way is death."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he said, "that it leads straight into the slaughterhouses of the men you do not know. The lords of the Instrumentality who are here on Fomalhaut III. There is the Lord Femtiosex, who is just and without pity. There is the Lord Limaono, who thinks that underpeople are a potential danger and should not have been started in the first place. There is the Lady Goroke, who does not know how to pray, but who tries to ponder the mystery of life and who has shown kindnesses to underpeople, as long as the kindnesses were lawful ones. And there is the Lady Arabella Underwood, whose justice no man can understand. Nor underpeople either," he added with a chuckle.

"Who is she? I mean, where did she get the funny name? It doesn't have a number in it. It's as bad as your names. Or my own," said Elaine.

"She's from Old North Australia, the stroon world, on loan to the Instrumentality, and she follows the laws she was born to. The Hunter can go through the rooms and the slaughterhouses of the Instrumentality, but could you? Could I?"

"No," said Elaine.



"Then forward," said Charley-is-my-darling, "to your death or to great wonders. May I lead the way, Elaine?"

Elaine nodded wordlessly.

The mouse-hag Baby-baby patted Elaine's sleeve, her eyes alive with strange hope. As Elaine passed Crawlie's chair, the proud, beautiful girl looked straight at her, expressionless, deady and severe. The dog-girl D'joan followed the little procession as if she had been invited.

They walked down and down and down. Actually, it could not have been a full half-kilometer. But with the endless browns and yellows, the strange shapes of the lawless and untended underpeople, the stench and the thick heavy air, Elaine felt as if she were leaving all known worlds behind.

In fact, she was doing precisely that, but it did not occur to her that her own suspicion might be true.

5

At the end of the corridor there was a round gate with a door of gold or brass.

Charley-is-my-darling stopped.

"I can't go further," he said. "You and D'joan will have to go on. This is the forgotten antechamber between the tunnel and the upper palace. The Hunter is there. Go on. You're a person. It is safe. Underpeople usually die in there. Go on." He nudged her elbow and pulled the sliding door apart.

"But the little girl," said Elaine.

"She's not a girl," said Charley-is-my-darling. "She's just a dog—as I'm not a man, just a goat brightened and cut and trimmed to look like a man. If you come back, Elaine, I will love you like god or I will kill you. It depends."

"Depends on what?" asked Elaine. "And what is 'god'?"

Charley-is-my-darling smiled the quick tricky smile which was wholly insincere and completely friendly, both at the same time. It was probably the trademark of his personality in ordinary times. "You'll find out about god somewhere else, if you do. Not from us. And the depending is something you'll know for yourself. You won't have to wait for me to tell you. Go along now. The whole thing will be over in the next few minutes."

"But D'joan?" persisted Elaine.

"If it doesn't work," said Charley-is-my-darling, "we can always raise another D'joan and wait for another you. The Lady Pane Ashash had promised us that. Go on in!"

He pushed her roughly, so that she stumbled through. Bright light dazzled her and the clean air tasted as good as fresh water on her first day out of the space-ship pod.

The little dog-girl had trotted in beside her.

The door, gold or brass, clanged to behind them.

Elaine and D'joan stood still, side by side, looking forward and upward.

There are many famous paintings of that scene. Most of the paintings show Elaine in rags with the distorted, suffering face of a witch. This is strictly unhistorical. She was wearing her everyday culottes, blouse and twin over-the-shoulder purses when she went in the other end of Clown Town. This was the usual dress on Fomalhaut III at that time. She had done nothing at all to spoil her clothes, so she must have looked the same when she came out. And D'joan—well, everyone knows what D'joan looked like.

The Hunter met them.

The Hunter met them, and new worlds began.

He was a shortish man, with black curly hair, black eyes that danced with laughter, broad shoulders and long legs. He walked with a quick sure step. He kept his hands quiet at his side, but the hands did not look tough and calloused, as though they had been terminating lives, even the lives of animals.

"Come up and sit down," he greeted them. "I've been waiting for you both."

Elaine stumbled upward and forward. "Waiting?" she gasped.

"Nothing mysterious," he said. "I had the viewscreen on. The one into the tunnel. Its connections are shielded, so the police could not have peeped it."

Elaine stopped dead still. The little dog-girl, one step behind her, stopped too. She tried to draw herself up to her full height. She was about the same tallness that he was. It was difficult, since he stood four or five steps above them. She managed to keep her voice even when she said:

"You know, then?"

"What?"

"All those things they said."

"Sure I know them," he smiled. "Why not?"

"But," stammered Elaine, "about you and me being lovers? That too?"

"That too," he smiled again. "I've been hearing it half my life. Come on up, sit down and have something to eat. We have a lot of things to do tonight, if history is to be fulfilled through us. What do you eat, little girl?" said he kindly to D'joan. "Raw meat or people food?"

"I'm a finished girl," said D'joan, "so I prefer chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream."

"That you shall have," said the Hunter. "Come, both of you, and sit down."

They had topped the steps. A luxurious table, already set, was waiting for them. There were three couches around it. Elaine looked for the third person who would join them. Only as she sat down did she realize that he meant to invite the dog-child.

He saw her surprise, but did not comment on it directly.

Instead, he spoke to D'joan.

"You know me, girl, don't you?"

The child smiled and relaxed for the first time since Elaine had seen her. The dog-girl was really strikingly beautiful when the tension went out of her. The wariness, the quietness, the potential disquiet—these were dog qualities. Now the child seemed wholly human and mature far beyond her years. Her white face had dark, dark brown eyes.

"I've seen you lots of times, Hunter. And you've told me what would happen if I turned out to be the D'joan. How I would spread the word and meet great trials. How I might die and might not, but people and underpeople would remember my name for thousands of years. You've told me almost everything I know—except the things that I can't talk to you about. You know them too, but you won't talk, will you?" said the little girl imploringly.

"I know you've been to Earth," said the Hunter.

"Don't say it! Please don't say it!" pleaded the girl.

"Earth! Manhome itself?" cried Elaine. "How, by the stars, did you get there?"

The Hunter intervened. "Don't press her, Elaine. It's a big secret, and she wants to keep it. You'll find out more tonight than mortal woman was ever told before."

"What does 'mortal' mean?" asked Elaine, who disliked antique words.

"It just means having a termination of life."

"That's foolish," said Elaine. "Everything terminates. Look at those poor messy people who went on beyond the legal four hundred years."

She looked around. Rich black-and-red curtains hung from ceiling to floor. On one side of the room there was a piece of furniture she had never seen before. It was like a table, but it had little broad flat doors on the front, reaching from side to side; it was richly ornamented with unfamiliar woods and metals. Nevertheless, she had more important things to talk about than furniture.

She looked directly at the Hunter (no organic disease; wounded in left arm at an earlier period; somewhat excessive exposure to sunlight; might need correction for near vision) and demanded of him:

"Am I captured by you, too?"

"Captured?"

"You're a Hunter. You hunt things. To kill them, I suppose. That un-derman back there, the goat who calls himself Charley-is-my-darling—"

"He never does!" cried the dog-girl, D'joan, interrupting.

"Never does what?" said Elaine, cross at being interrupted.

"He never calls himself that. Other people, underpeople I mean, call him that. His name is Balthasar, but nobody uses it."

"What does it matter, little girl?" said Elaine. "I'm talking about my life. Your friend said he would take my life from me if something did not happen."

Neither D'joan nor the Hunter said anything.

Elaine heard a frantic edge go into her voice, "You heard it!" She turned to the Hunter, "You saw it on the viewscreen."

The Hunter's voice was serenity and assurance: "We three have things to do before this night is out. We won't get them done if you are frightened or worried. I know the underpeople, but I know the lords of the Instrumentality as well—all four of them, right here. The Lords Limaono and Femtiosex and the Lady Goroke. And the Norstrilian, too. They will protect you. Charley-is-my-darling might want to take your life from you because he is worried, afraid that the tunnel of Englok, where you just were, will be discovered. I have ways of protecting him and yourself as well. Have confidence in me for a while. That's not so hard, is it?"

"But," protested Elaine, "the man—or the goat—or whatever he was, Charley-is-my-darling, he said it would all happen right away, as soon as I came up here with you."

"How can anything happen," said little D'joan, "if you keep talking all the time?"

The Hunter smiled.

"That's right," he said. "We've talked enough. Now we must become lovers."

Elaine jumped to her feet, "Not with me, you don't. Not with her here. Not when I haven't found my work to do. I'm a witch. I'm supposed to do something, but I've never really found out what it was."

"Look at this," said the Hunter calmly, walking over to the wall, and pointing with his finger at an intricate circular design.

Elaine and D'joan both looked at it.

The Hunter spoke again, his voice urgent. "Do you see it, D'joan? Do you really see it? The ages turn, waiting for this moment, little child. Do you see it? Do you see yourself in it?"

Elaine looked at the little dog-girl. D'joan had almost stopped breathing. She stared at the curious symmetrical pattern as though it were a window into enchanting worlds.

The Hunter roared, at the top of his voice, "D'joan! Joan! Joanie!"

The child made no response.

The Hunter stepped over to the child, slapped her gently on the cheek, shouted again. D'joan continued to stare at the intricate design.

"Now," said the Hunter, "you and I make love. The child is absent in a world of happy dreams. That design is a mandala, something left over from the unimaginable past. It locks the human consciousness in place. D'joan will not see us or hear us. We cannot help her go toward her destiny unless you and I make love first."

Elaine, her hands to her mouth, tried to inventory symptoms as a means of keeping her familiar thoughts in balance. It did not work. A relaxation spread over her, a happiness and quiet that she had not once felt since her childhood.

"Did you think," said the Hunter, "that I hunted with my body and killed with my hands? Didn't anyone ever tell you that the game comes to me rejoicing, that the animals die while they scream with pleasure? I'm a telepath, and I work under license. And I have my license now from the dead Lady Pane Ashash."

Elaine knew that they had come to the end of the talking. Trembling, happy, frightened, she fell into his arms and let him lead her over to the couch at the side of the black-and-gold room.

A thousand years later, she was kissing his ear and murmuring loving words at him, words that she did not even realize she knew. She must, she thought, have picked up more from the storyboxes than she ever realized.

"You're my love," she said, "my only one, my darling. Never, never leave me; never throw me away. Oh, Hunter, I love you so!"

"We part," he said, "before tomorrow is gone, but shall meet again. Do you realize that all this

has only been a little more than an hour?"

Elaine blushed. "And I," she stammered, "I—I'm hungry."

"Natural enough," said Hunter. "Pretty soon we can waken the little girl and eat together. And then history will happen, unless somebody walks in and stops us."

"But, darling," said Elaine, "can't we go on—at least for a while? A year? A month? A day? Put the little girl back in the tunnel for a while."

"Not really," said the Hunter, "but I'll sing you the song that came into my mind about you and me. I've been thinking bits of it for a long time, but now it has really happened. Listen."

He held her two hands in his two hands, looked easily and frankly into her eyes. There was no hint in him of telepathic power.

He sang to her the song which we know as I Loved You and Lost You.

I knew you, and loved you,  
and won you, in Kalma. I loved you, and won you,  
and lost you, my darling! The dark skies of Waterrock  
swept down against us. Lightning-lit only  
Toy our own love, my lovely!

Our time was a short time,  
a sharp hour of glory—We tasted delight  
and we suffer denial. The tale of us two  
is a bittersweet story, Short as a shot  
But as long as death.

We met and we loved,  
and vainly we plotted To rescue beauty  
from a smothering war. Time had no time for us,  
the minutes, no mercy. We have loved and lost,  
and the world goes on.

We have lost and have kissed,  
and have parted, my darling! All that we have,  
we must save in our hearts, love. The memory of beauty  
and the beauty of memory ... I've loved you and won you  
and lost you, in Kalma.

His fingers, moving in the air, produced a soft organ-like music in the room. She had noticed music-beams before, but she had never had one played for herself.

By the time he was through singing, she was sobbing. It was all so true, so wonderful, so heartbreaking.

He had kept her right hand in his left hand. Now he released her suddenly. He stood up.

"Let's work first. Eat later. Someone is near us."

He walked briskly over to the little dog-girl, who was still seated on the chair looking at the mandala with open, sleeping eyes. He took her head firmly and gently between his two hands and turned her eyes away from the design. She struggled momentarily against his hands and then seemed to wake up fully.

She smiled. "That was nice. I rested. How long was it—five minutes?"

"More than that," said the Hunter gently. "I want you to take Elaine's hand."

A few hours ago, and Elaine would have protested at the grotesquerie of holding hands with an underperson. This time, she said nothing, but obeyed: she looked with much love toward the Hunter.

"You two don't have to know much," said the Hunter. "You, D'joan, are going to get everything that is in our minds and in our memories. You will become us, both of us. Forevermore. You will

meet your glorious fate."

The little girl shivered. "Is this really the day?"

"It is," said the Hunter. "Future ages will remember this night."

"And you, Elaine," said he to her, "have nothing to do but to love me and to stand very still. Do you understand? You will see tremendous things, some of them frightening. But they won't be real. Just stand still."

Elaine nodded wordlessly.

"In the name," said the Hunter, "of the First Forgotten One, in the name of the Second Forgotten One, in the name of the Third Forgotten One. For the love of people, that will give them life. For the love that will give them a clean death and true ... " His words were clear but Elaine could not understand them. The day of days was here. She knew it.

She did not know how she knew it, but she did. The Lady Pane Ashash crawled up through the solid floor, wearing her friendly robot body. She came near to Elaine and murmured: "Have no fear, no fear."

Fear? thought Elaine. This no time for fear. It is much too interesting. As if to answer Elaine, a clear, strong, masculine voice spoke out of nowhere:

This is the time for the daring sharing.

When these words were spoken, it was as if a bubble had been pricked. Elaine felt her personality and D'joan mingling. With ordinary telepathy, it would have been frightening. But this was not communication. It was being.

She had become Joan. She felt the clean little body in its tidy clothes. She became aware of the girl-shape again. It was oddly pleasant and familiar, in terribly faraway kinds of feeling, to remember that she had had that shape once—the smooth, innocent flat chest; the uncomplicated groin; the fingers which still felt as though they were separate and alive in extending from the palm of the hand. But the mind—that child's mind! It was like an enormous museum illuminated by rich stained-glass windows, cluttered with variegated heaps of beauty and treasure, scented by strange incense which moved slowly in unpropelled air.

D'joan had a mind which reached all the way back to the color and glory of man's antiquity. D'joan had been a lord of the Instrumentality, a monkey-man riding the ships of space, a friend of the dear dead Lady Pane Ashash, and Pane Ashash herself.

No wonder the child was rich and strange: she had been made the heir of all the ages.

This is the time for the glaring top of the truth at the wearing/sharing, said the nameless, clear, loud voice in her mind. This is the time for you and him.

Elaine realized that she was responding to hypnotic suggestions which the Lady Pane Ashash had put into the mind of the little dog-girl—suggestions which were triggered into full potency the moment that the three of them came into telepathic contact.

For a fraction of a second, she perceived nothing but astonishment within herself. She saw nothing but herself—every detail, every secrecy, every thought and feeling and contour of flesh. She was curiously aware of how her breasts hung from her chest, the tension of her belly-muscles holding her female backbone straight and erect—Female backbone?

Why had she thought that she had a female backbone?

And then she knew.

She was following the Hunter's mind as his awareness rushed through her body, drank it up, enjoyed it, loved it all over again, this time from the inside out.

She knew somehow that the little dog-girl watched everything quietly, wordlessly, drinking in from them both the full nuance of being truly human.

Even with the delirium, she sensed embarrassment. It might be a dream, but it was still too much. She began to close her mind and the thought had come to her that she should take her hands away from the hands of Hunter and the dog-child.

But then fire came ...

Fire came up from the floor, burning about them intangibly. Elaine felt nothing ... but she could sense the touch of the little girl's hand.

Flames around the dames, games, said an idiot voice from nowhere. Fire around the pyre, sire, said another. Hot is what we got, tot, said a third.

Suddenly Elaine remembered Earth, but it was not the Earth she knew. She was herself D'joan, and not D'joan. She was a tall, strong monkey-man, indistinguishable from a true human being. She/he had tremendous alertness in her/his heart as she/he walked across the Peace Square at An-fang, the Old Square at An-fang, where all things begin. She/he noticed a discrepancy. Some of the buildings were not there.

The real Elaine thought to herself, "So that's what they did with the child—printed her with the memories of other underpeople. Other ones, who dared things and went places." The fire stopped.

Elaine saw the black-and-gold room clean and untroubled for a moment before the green white-topped ocean rushed in. The water poured over the three of them without getting them wet in the least. The greenness washed around them without pressure, without suffocation.

Elaine was the Hunter. Enormous dragons floated in the sky above Fomalhaut III. She felt herself wandering across a hill, singing with love and yearning. She had the Hunter's own mind, his own memory. The dragon sensed him, and flew down. The enormous reptilian wings were more beautiful than a sunset, more delicate than orchids. Their beat in the air was as gentle as the breath of a baby. She was not only Hunter but dragon too; she felt the minds meeting and the dragon dying in bliss, in joy.

Somehow the water was gone. So too were D'joan and the Hunter. She was not in the room. She was taut, tired, worried Elaine, looking down a nameless street for hopeless destinations. She had to do things which could never be done. The wrong me, the wrong time, the wrong place—and I'm alone, I'm alone, I'm alone, her mind screamed. The room was back again; so too were the hands of the Hunter and the little girl—Mist began rising—

Another dream? thought Elaine. Aren't we done? But there was another voice somewhere, a voice which grated like the rasp of a saw cutting through bone, like the grind of a broken machine still working at ruinous top speed. It was an evil voice, a terror-filling voice.

Perhaps this really was the "death" which the tunnel underpeople had mistaken her for.

The Hunter's hand released hers. She let go of D'joan.

There was a strange woman in the room. She wore the baldric of authority and the leotards of a traveler.

Elaine stared at her.

"You'll be punished," said the terrible voice, which now was coming out of the woman.

"Wh—wh—what?" stammered Elaine.

"You're conditioning an underperson without authority. I don't know who you are, but the Hunter should know better. The animal will have to die, of course," said the woman, looking at little D'joan.

Hunter muttered, half in greeting to the stranger, half in explanation to Elaine, as though he did not know what else to say:

"Lady Arabella Underwood."

Elaine could not bow to her, though she wanted to.

The surprise came from the little dog-girl.

I am your sister Joan, she said, and no animal to you.

The Lady Arabella seemed to have trouble hearing. (Elaine herself could not tell whether she was hearing spoken words or taking the message with her mind.)

I am Joan and I love you.

The Lady Arabella shook herself as though water had splashed on her. "Of course you're Joan. You love me. And I love you."

People and underpeople meet on the terms of love.

"Love. Love, of course. You're a good little girl. And so right." You will forget me, said Joan, until we meet and love again.

"Yes, darling. Good-by for now."

At last D'joan did use words. She spoke to the Hunter and Elaine, saying, "It is finished. I know who I am and what I must do. Elaine had better come with me. We will see you soon, Hunter—if we live."

Elaine looked at the Lady Arabella who stood stock still, staring like a blind woman. The Hunter nodded at Elaine with his wise, kind, rueful smile.

The little girl led Elaine down, down, down to the door which led back to the tunnel of Englok. Just as they went through the brass door, Elaine heard the voice of the Lady Arabella say to the Hunter:

"What are you doing here all by yourself? The room smells funny. Have you had animals here? Have you killed something?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said the Hunter as D'joan and Elaine stepped through the door.

"What?" cried the Lady Arabella.

Hunter must have raised his voice to a point of penetrating emphasis because he wanted the other two to hear him, too:

"I have killed, Ma'am," he said, "as always—with love. This time it was a system."

They slipped through the door while the Lady Arabella's protesting voice, heavy with authority and inquiry, was still sweeping against the Hunter.

Joan led. Her body was the body of a pretty child, but her personality was the full awakening of all the underpeople who had been imprinted on her. Elaine could not understand it, because Joan was still the little dog-girl, but Joan was now also Elaine, also Hunter. There was no doubt, about their movement; the child, no longer an undergirl, led the way and Elaine, human or not, followed.

The door closed behind them. They were back in the Brown and Yellow Corridor. Most of the underpeople were awaiting them. Dozens stared at them. The heavy animal-human smells of the old tunnel rolled against them like thick, slow waves. Elaine felt the beginning of a headache at her temples, but she was much too alert to care.

For a moment, D'joan and Elaine confronted the underpeople.

Most of you have seen paintings or theatricals based upon this scene. The most famous of all is, beyond doubt, the fantastic "one-line drawing" of San Shigonanda—the board of the background almost uniformly gray, with a hint of brown and yellow on the left, a hint of black and red on the right, and in the center the strange white line, almost a smear of paint, which somehow suggests the bewildered girl Elaine and the doom-blessed child Joan.

Charley-is-my-darling was, of course, the first to find his voice. (Elaine did not notice him as a goat-man any more. He seemed an earnest, friendly man of middle age, fighting poor health and an uncertain life with great courage. She now found his smile persuasive and charming. Why, thought Elaine, didn't I see him that way before? Have I changed?)

Charley-is-my-darling had spoken before Elaine found her wits. "He did it. Are you D'joan?"

"Am I D'joan?" said the child, asking the crowd of deformed, weird people in the tunnel. "Do you think I am D'joan?"

"No! No! You are the lady who was promised—you are the bridge—to man," cried a tall yellow-haired old woman, whom Elaine could not remember seeing before. The woman flung herself to her knees in front of the child, and tried to get D'joan's hand. The child held her hands away, quietly, but firmly, so the woman buried her face in the child's skirt and wept.

"I am Joan," said the child, "and I am dog no more. You are people now, people, and if you die with me, you will die men. Isn't that better than it has ever been before? And you, Ruthie," said she to the woman at her feet, "stand up and stop crying. Be glad. These are the days that I shall be with you. I know your children were all taken away and killed, Ruthie, and I am sorry. I cannot bring them back. But I give you womanhood. I have even made a person out of Elaine."

"Who are you?" said Charley-is-my-darling. "Who are you?"

"I'm the little girl you put out to live or die an hour ago. But now I am Joan, not D'joan, and I bring you a weapon. You are women. You are men. You are people. You can use the weapon."

"What weapon?" The voice was Crawlle's, from about the third row of spectators.

"Life and life-with," said the child Joan.

"Don't be a fool," said Crawlle. "What's the weapon? Don't give us words. We've had words and death ever since the world of underpeople began. That's what people give us—good words, fine principles and cold murder, year after year, generation after generation. Don't tell me I'm a person—I'm not. I'm a bison and I know it. An animal fixed up to look like a person. Give me a something to kill with. Let me die fighting."

Little Joan looked incongruous in her young body and short stature, still wearing the little blue smock in which Elaine had first seen her. She commanded the room. She lifted her hand and the buzz of low voices, which had started while Crawlle was yelling, dropped off to silence again.

"Crawlle," she said, in a voice that carried all the way down the hall, "peace be with you in the everlasting now."

Crawlle scowled. She did have the grace to look puzzled at Joan's message to her, but she did not speak.

"Don't talk to me, dear people," said little Joan. "Get used to me first. I bring you life-with. It's more than love. Love's a hard, sad, dirty word, a cold word, an old word. It says too much and it promises too little. I bring you something much bigger than love. If you're alive, you're alive.

If you're alive-with, then you know the other life is there too—both of you, any of you, all of you. Don't do anything. Don't grab, don't clench, don't possess. Just be. That's the weapon. There's not a flame or a gun or a poison that can stop it."

"I want to believe you," said Mabel, "but I don't know how to."

"Don't believe me," said little Joan. "Just wait and let things happen. Let me through, good people. I have to sleep for a while. Elaine will watch me while I sleep and when I get up, I will tell you why you are underpeople no longer."

Joan started to move forward—

A wild ululating screech split the corridor.

Everyone looked around to see where it came from.

It was almost like the shriek of a fighting bird, but the sound came from among them.

Elaine saw it first.

Crawlle had a knife and just as the cry ended, she flung herself on Joan.

Child and woman fell on the floor, their dresses a tangle. The large hand rose up twice with the knife, and the second time it came up red.

From the hot shocking burn in her side, Elaine knew that she must herself have taken one of the stabs. She could not tell whether Joan was still living.

The undermen pulled Crawlle off the child.

Crawlle was white with rage, "Words, words, words. She'll kill us all with her words."

A large, fat man with the muzzle of a bear on the front of an otherwise human-looking head and body, stepped around the man who held Crawlle. He gave her one tremendous slap. She dropped to the floor unconscious. The knife, stained with blood, fell on the old worn carpet. (Elaine thought automatically: restorative for her later; check neck vertebrae; no problem of bleeding.)

For the first time in her life, Elaine functioned as a wholly efficient witch. She helped the people pull the clothing from little Joan. The tiny body, with the heavy purple-dark blood pumping out from just below the rib-cage, looked hurt and fragile. Elaine reached in her left handbag. She had a surgical radar pen. She held it to her eye and looked through the flesh, up and down the wound. The peritoneum was punctured, the liver cut, the upper folds of the large intestine were perforated in two places. When she saw this, she knew what to do. She brushed the bystanders aside and got to work.

First she glued up the cuts from the inside out, starting with the damage to the liver. Each touch of the organic adhesive was preceded by a tiny spray of re-coding powder, designed to reinforce the capacity of the injured organ to restore itself. The probing, pressing, squeezing, took eleven minutes. Before it was finished, Joan had awakened, and was murmuring:

"Am I dying?"

"Not at all," said Elaine, "unless these human medicines poison your dog blood."

"Who did it?"



"Crawlie."

"Why?" said the child. "Why? Is she hurt too? Where is she?"

"Not as hurt as she is going to be," said the goat-man, Charley-is-my-darling. "If she lives, we'll fix her up and try her and put her to death."

"No, you won't," said Joan. "You're going to love her. You must."

The goat-man looked bewildered.

He turned in his perplexity to Elaine. "Better have a look at Crawlie," said he. "Maybe Orson killed her with that slap. He's a bear, you know."

"So I saw," said Elaine, drily. What did the man think that thing looked like, a hummingbird?

She walked over to the body of Crawlie. As soon as she touched the shoulders, she knew that she was in for trouble. The outer appearances were human, but the musculature beneath was not. She suspected that the laboratories had left Crawlie terribly strong, keeping the buffalo strength and obstinacy for some remote industrial reason of their own. She took out a brainlink, a close-range telepathic hookup which worked only briefly and slightly, to see if the mind still functioned. As she reached for Crawlie's head to attach it, the unconscious girl sprang suddenly to life, jumped to her feet and said:

"No, you don't! you don't peep me, you dirty human!"

"Crawlie, stand still."

"Don't boss me, you monster!"

"Crawlie, that's a bad thing to say." It was eerie to hear such a commanding voice coming from the throat and mouth of a small child. Small she might have been, but Joan commanded the scene.

"I don't care what I say. You all hate me."

"That's not true, Crawlie."

"You're a dog and now you're a person. You're born a traitor. Dogs have always sided with people. You hated me even before you went into that room and changed into something else. Now you are going to kill us all."

"We may die, Crawlie, but I won't do it."

"Well, you hate me, anyhow. You've always hated me."

"You may not believe it," said Joan, "but I've always loved you. You were the prettiest woman in our whole corridor."

Crawlie laughed. The sound gave Elaine gooseflesh. "Suppose I believed it: How could I live if I thought that people loved me? If I believed you, I would have to tear myself to pieces, to break my brains on the wall, to do—" The laughter changed to sobs, but Crawlie managed to resume talking: "You things are so stupid that you don't even know that you're monsters. You're not people. You never will be people. I'm one of you myself. I'm honest enough to admit what I am. We're dirt, we're nothing, we're things that are less than machines. We hide in the earth like dirt and when people kill us they do not weep. At least we were hiding. Now you come along, you and your tame human woman—" Crawlie glared briefly at Elaine—"and you try to change even that. I'll kill you again if I can, you dirt, you slut, you dog! What are you doing with that child's body? We don't even know who you are now. Can you tell us?"

The bear-man had moved up close to Crawlie, unnoticed by her, and was ready to slap her down again if she moved against little Joan.

Joan looked straight at him and with a mere movement of her eyes she commanded him not to strike.

"I'm tired," she said, "I'm tired, Crawlie. I'm a thousand years old when I am not even five. And I am Elaine now, and I am Hunter too, and I am the Lady Pane Ashash, and I know a great many more things than I thought I would ever know. I have work to do, Crawlie, because I love you, and I think I will die soon. But please, good people, first let me rest."

The bear-man was on Crawlie's right. On her left, there had moved up a snake-woman. The face was pretty and human, except for the thin forked tongue which ran in and out of the mouth like a dying flame. She had good shoulders and hips but no breasts at all. She wore empty golden brassiere cups which swung against her chest. Her hands looked as though they might be stronger

than steel. Crawlle started to move toward Joan, and the snake-woman hissed.

It was the snake hiss of Old Earth.

For a second, every animal-person in the corridor stopped breathing. They all stared at the snake-woman. She hissed again, looking straight at Crawlle. The sound was an abomination in that narrow space. Elaine saw that Joan tightened up like a little dog, Charley-is-my-darling looked as though he was ready to leap twenty meters in one jump, and Elaine herself felt an impulse to strike, to kill, to destroy. The hiss was a challenge to them all.

The snake-woman looked around calmly, fully aware of the attention she had obtained.

"Don't worry, dear people. See, I'm using Joan's name for all of us. I'm not going to hurt Crawlle, not unless she hurts Joan. But if she hurts Joan, if anybody hurts Joan, they will have me to deal with. You have a good idea who I am. We S-people have great strength, high intelligence and no fear at all. You know we cannot breed. People have to make us one by one, out of ordinary snakes. Do not cross me, dear people. I want to learn about this new love which Joan is bringing, and nobody is going to hurt Joan while I am here. Do you hear me, people? Nobody. Try it, and you die. I think I could kill almost all of you before I died, even if you all attacked me at once. Do you hear me, people? Leave Joan alone. That goes for you, too, you soft human woman. I am not afraid of you either. You there," said she to the bear-man, "pick little Joan up and carry her to a quiet bed. She must rest. She must be quiet for a while. You be quiet too, all you people, or you will meet me. Me." Her black eyes roved across their faces. The snake-woman moved forward and they parted in front of her, as though she were the only solid being in a throng of ghosts.

Her eyes rested a moment on Elaine. Elaine met the gaze, but it was an uncomfortable thing to do. The black eyes with neither eyebrows nor lashes seemed full of intelligence and devoid of emotion. Orson, the bear-man, followed obediently behind. He carried little Joan.

As the child passed Elaine she tried to stay awake. She murmured, "Make me bigger. Please make me bigger. Right away."

"I don't know how ... " said Elaine.

The child struggled to full awakening. "I'll have work to do. Work ... and maybe my death to die. It will all be wasted if I am this little. Make me bigger."

"But—" protested Elaine again.

"If you don't know, ask the lady."

"What lady?"

The S-woman had paused, listening to the conversation. She cut in.

"The Lady Pane Ashash, of course. The dead one. Do you think that a living lady of the Instrumentality would do anything but kill us all?"

As the snake-woman and Orson carried Joan away, Charley-is-my-darling came up to Elaine and said, "Do you want to go?"

"Where?"

"To the Lady Pane Ashash, of course."

"Me?" said Elaine. "Now?" said Elaine, even more emphatically. "Of course not," said Elaine, pronouncing each word as though it were a law. "What do you think I am? A few hours ago I did not even know that you existed. I wasn't sure about the word 'death.' I just assumed that everything terminated at four hundred years, the way it should. It's been hours of danger, and everybody has been threatening everybody else for all that time. I'm tired and I'm sleepy and I'm dirty, and I've got to take care of myself, and besides—"

She stopped suddenly and bit her lip. She had started to say, and besides, my body is all worn out with that dreamlike love-making which the Hunter and I had together. That was not the business of Charley-is-my-darling: he was goat enough as he was. His mind was goatish and would not see the dignity of it all.

The goat-man said, very gently, "You are making history, Elaine, and when you make history you cannot always take care of all the little things too. Are you happier and more important than you ever were before? Yes? Aren't you a different you from the person who met Balthasar just a few hours ago?"

Elaine was taken aback by the seriousness. She nodded.

"Stay hungry and tired. Stay dirty. Just a little longer. Time must not be wasted. You can talk to the Lady Pane Ashash. Find out what we must do about little Joan. When you come back with further instructions, I will take care of you myself. This tunnel is not as bad a town as it looks. We will have everything you could need, in the Room of Englok. Englok himself built it, long ago. Work just a little longer, and then you can eat and rest. We have everything here. 'I am the citizen of no mean city.' But first you must help Joan. You love Joan, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, I do," she said.

"Then help us just a little bit more."

With death? she thought. With murder? With violation of law? But—but it was all for Joan.

It was thus that Elaine went to the camouflaged door, went out under the open sky again, saw the great saucer of Upper Kalma reaching out over the Old Lower City. She talked to the voice of the Lady Pane Ashash, and obtained certain instructions, together with other messages. Later, she was able to repeat them, but she was too tired to make out their real sense.

She staggered back to the place in the wall where she thought the door to be, leaned against it, and nothing happened.

"Further down, Elaine, further down. Hurry! When I used to be me, I too got tired," came the strong whisper of the Lady Pane Ashash, "but do hurry!"

Elaine stepped away from the wall, looking at it.

A beam of light struck her.

The Instrumentality had found her.

She rushed wildly at the wall.

The door gaped briefly. The strong welcome hand of Charley-is-my-darling helped her in.

"The light! The light!" cried Elaine. "I've killed us all. They saw me."

"Not yet," smiled the goat-man, with his quick crooked intelligent smile. "I may not be educated, but I am pretty smart."

He reached toward the inner gate, glanced back at Elaine appraisingly, and then shoved a man-sized robot through the door.

"There it goes, a sweeper about your size. No memory bank. A worn-out brain. Just simple motivations. If they come down to see what they thought they saw, they will see this instead. We keep a bunch of these at the door. We don't go out much, but when we do, it's handy to have these to cover up with."

He took her by the arm. "While you eat, you can tell me. Can we make her bigger ... ?"

"Who?"

"Joan, of course. Our Joan. That's what you went to find out for us."

Elaine had to inventory her own mind to see what the Lady Pane Ashash had said on that subject. In a moment she remembered.

"You need a pod. And a jelly bath. And narcotics, because it will hurt. Four hours."

"Wonderful," said Charley-is-my-darling, leading her deeper and deeper into the tunnel.

"But what's the use of it," said Elaine, "if I've ruined us all? The Instrumentality saw me coming in. They will follow. They will kill all of you, even Joan. Where is the Hunter? Shouldn't I sleep first?" She felt her lips go thick with fatigue; she had not rested or eaten since she took that chance on the strange little door between Waterrocky Road and the Shopping Bar.

"You're safe, Elaine, you're safe," said Charley-is-my-darling, his sly smile very warm and his smooth voice carrying the ring of sincere conviction. For himself, he did not believe a word of it. He thought they were all in danger, but there was no point in terrifying Elaine. Elaine was the only real person on their side, except for the Hunter, who was a strange one, almost like an animal himself, and for the Lady Pane Ashash, who was very benign, but who was, after all, a dead person. He was frightened himself, but he was afraid of fear. Perhaps they were all doomed.

In a way, he was right.

The Lady Arabella Underwood had called the Lady Goroke.

"Something has tampered with my mind."

The Lady Goroke felt very shocked. She threw back the inquiry. Put a probe on it.

"I did. Nothing."

Nothing?

More shock for the Lady Goroke. Sound the alert, then.

"Oh, no. Oh, no, no. It was a friendly, nice tampering." The Lady Arabella Underwood, being an Old North Australian, was rather formal: she always thought full words at her friends, even in telepathic contact. She never sent mere raw ideas.

But that's utterly unlawful. You're part of the Instrumentality. It's a crime! thought the Lady Goroke.

She got a giggle for reply.

You laugh ... ? she inquired.

"I just thought a new lord might be here. From the Instrumentality. Having a look at me."

The Lady Goroke was very proper and easily shocked. We wouldn't do that!

The Lady Arabella thought to herself but did not transmit, "Not to you, my dear. You're a blooming prude." To the other she transmitted, "Forget it then."

Puzzled and worried, the Lady Goroke thought: Well, all right. Break?

"Right-ho. Break."

The Lady Goroke frowned to herself. She slapped her wall. Planet Central, she thought at it.

A mere man sat at a desk.

"I am the Lady Goroke," she said.

"Of course, my Lady," he replied.

"Police fever, one degree. One degree only. Till rescinded. Clear?"

"Clear, my lady. The entire planet?"

"Yes," she said.

"Do you wish to give a reason?" his voice was respectful and routine.

"Must I?"

"Of course not, my Lady."

"None given, then. Close."

He saluted and his image faded from the wall.

She raised her mind to the level of a light clear call. Instrumentality Only—Instrumentality Only. I have raised the police fever level one degree by command. Reason, personal disquiet. You know my voice. You know me. Goroke.

Far across the city—a police ornithopter flapped slowly down the street.

The police robot was photographing a sweeper, the most elaborately malfunctioning sweeper he had ever seen.

The sweeper raced down the road at unlawful speeds, approaching three hundred kilometers an hour, stopped with a sizzle of plastic on stone, and began picking dust-motes off the pavement.

When the ornithopter reached it, the sweeper took off again, rounded two or three corners at tremendous speed and then settled down to its idiot job.

The third time this happened, the robot in the ornithopter put a disabling slug through it, flew down and picked it up with the claws of his machine.

He saw it in close view.

"Birdbrain. Old model. Birdbrain. Good they don't use those any more. The thing could have hurt a Man. Now, I'm printed from a mouse, a real mouse with lots and lots of brains."

He flew toward the central junkyard with the worn-out sweeper. The sweeper, crippled but still conscious, was trying to pick dust off the iron claws which held it.

Below them, the Old City twisted out of sight with its odd geometrical lights. The New City, bathed in its soft perpetual glow, shone out against the night of Fomalhaut III. Beyond them, the everlasting ocean boiled in its private storms.

On the actual stage the actors cannot do much with the scene of the interlude, where Joan was cooked in a single night from the size of a child five years old to the tallness of a miss fifteen or sixteen. The biological machine did work well, though at the risk of her life. It made her into a vital, robust young person, without changing her mind at all. This is hard for any actress to portray. The storyboxes have the advantage. They can show the machine with all sorts of improvements—flashing lights, bits of lightning, mysterious rays. Actually, it looked like a bathtub full of boiling brown jelly, completely covering Joan.

Elaine, meanwhile, ate hungrily in the palatial room of Englok himself. The food was very, very old, and she had doubts, as a witch, about its nutritional value, but it stilled her hunger. The denizens of Clown Town had declared this room "off limits" to themselves, for reasons which Charley-is-my-darling could not make plain. He stood in the doorway and told her what to do to find food, to activate the bed out of the floor, to open the bathroom. Everything was very old-fashioned and nothing responded to a simple thought or to a mere slap.

A curious thing happened.

Elaine had washed her hands, had eaten and was preparing for her bath. She had taken most of her clothes off, thinking only that Charley-is-my-darling was an animal, not a man, so that it did not matter.

Suddenly she knew it did matter.

He might be an underperson but he was a man to her. Blushing deeply all the way down to her neck, she ran into the bathroom and called back to him:

"Go away. I will bathe and then sleep. Wake me when you have to, not before."

"Yes, Elaine."

"And—and—"

"Yes?"

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you very much. Do you know, I never said 'thank you' to an underperson before."

"That's all right," said Charley-is-my-darling with a smile. "Most real people don't. Sleep well, my dear Elaine. When you awaken, be ready for great things. We shall take a star out of the skies and shall set thousands of worlds on fire ... "

"What's that?" she said, putting her head around the corner of the bathroom.

"Just a figure of speech," he smiled. "Just meaning that you won't have much time. Rest well. Don't forget to put your clothes in the ladys-maid machine. The ones in Clown Town are all worn out. But since we haven't used this room, yours ought to work."

"Which is it?" she said.

"The red lid with the gold handle. Just lift it." On that domestic note he left her to rest, while he went off and plotted the destiny of a hundred billion lives.

They told her it was mid-morning when she came out of the room of Englok. How could she have known it? The brown-and-yellow corridor, with its gloomy old yellow lights, was just as dim and stench-ridden as ever.

The people all seemed to have changed.

Baby-baby was no longer a mouse-hag, but a woman of considerable force and much tenderness. Crawlle was as dangerous as a human enemy, staring at Elaine, her beautiful face gone bland with hidden hate. Charley-is-my-darling was gay, friendly and persuasive. She thought she could read expressions on the faces of Orson and the S-woman, odd though their features were.

After she had gotten through some singularly polite greetings, she demanded, "What's happening now?"

A new voice spoke up—a voice she knew and did not know.

Elaine glanced over at a niche in the wall.

The Lady Pane Ashash! And who was that with her?

Even as she asked herself the question, Elaine knew the answer. It was Joan, grown, only half a head less tall than the Lady Pane Ashash or herself. It was a new Joan, powerful, happy, and quiet;

but it was all—the dear little old D'Joan too.

"Welcome," said the Lady Pane Ashash, "to our revolution."

"What's a revolution?" asked Elaine. "And I thought you couldn't come in here with all the thought shielding?"

The Lady Pane Ashash lifted a wire which trailed back from her robot body, "I rigged this up so that I could use the body. Precautions are no use any more. It's the other side which will need the precautions now. A revolution is a way of changing systems and people. This is one. You go first, Elaine. This way."

"To die? Is that what you mean?"

The Lady Pane Ashash laughed warmly. "You know me by now. You know my friends here. You know what your own life has been down to now, a useless witch in a world which did not want you. We may die, but it's what we do before we die that counts. This is Joan going to meet her destiny. You lead as far as the Upper City. Then Joan will lead. And then we shall see."

"You mean, all these people are going too?" Elaine looked at the ranks of the underpeople, who were beginning to form into two queues down the corridor. The queues bulged wherever mothers led their children by the hand or carried small ones in their arms. Here and there the line was punctuated by a giant underperson.

They have been nothing, thought Elaine, and I was nothing too. Now we are all going to do something, even though we may be terminated for it. "May be" thought she: "shall be" is the word. But it is worth it if Joan can change the worlds, even a little bit, even for other people.

Joan spoke up. Her voice had grown with her body, but it was the same dear voice which the little dog-girl had had sixteen hours (they seem sixteen years, thought Elaine) ago, when Elaine first met her at the door to the tunnel of Englok.

Joan said, "Love is not something special, reserved for men alone."

"Love is not proud. Love has no real name. Love is for life itself, and we have life."

"We cannot win by fighting. People outnumber us, outgun us, outrun us, outfight us. But people did not create us. Whatever made people, made us too. You all know that, but will we say the name?"

There was a murmur of no and never from the crowd.

"You have waited for me. I have waited too. It is time to die, perhaps, but we will die the way people did in the beginning, before things became easy and cruel for them. They live in a stupor and they die in a dream. It is not a good dream and if they awaken, they will know that we are people too. Are you with me?" They murmured yes. "Do you love me?" Again they murmured agreement. "Shall we go out and meet the day?" They shouted their acclaim.

Joan turned to the Lady Pane Ashash. "Is everything as you wished and ordered?"

"Yes," said the dear dead woman in the robot body. "Joan first, to lead you. Elaine preceding her, to drive away robots or ordinary underpeople. When you meet real people, you will love them. That is all. You will love them. If they kill you, you will love them. Joan will show you how. Pay no further attention to me. Ready?"

Joan lifted her right hand and said words to herself. The people bowed their heads before her, faces and muzzles and snouts of all sizes and colors. A baby of some kind mewed in a tiny falsetto to the rear.

Just before she turned to lead the procession, Joan turned back to the people and said, "Crawlie, where are you?"

"Here, in the middle," said a clear, calm voice far back.

"Do you love me now, Crawlie?"

"No, D'Joan. I like you less than when you were a little dog. But these are my people too, as well as yours. I am brave. I can walk. I won't make trouble."

"Crawlie," said Joan, "will you love people if we meet them?"

All faces turned toward the beautiful bison-girl. Elaine could just see her, way down the murky corridor. Elaine could see that the girl's face had turned utter, dead white with emotion. Whether rage or fear, she could not tell.

At last Crawlle spoke, "No, I won't love people. And I won't love you. I have my pride."

Softly, softly, like death itself at a quiet bedside, Joan spoke. "You can stay behind, Crawlle. You can stay here. It isn't much of a chance, but it's a chance."

Crawlle looked at her, "Bad luck to you, dog-woman, and bad luck to the rotten human being up there beside you."

Elaine stood on tiptoe to see what would happen. Crawlle's face suddenly disappeared, dropping downward.

The snake woman elbowed her way to the front, stood close to Joan where the others could see her, and sang out in a voice as clear as metal itself:

"Sing 'poor, poor, Crawlle,' dear people. Sing 'I love Crawlle,' dear people. She is dead. I just killed her so that we would all be full of love. I love you too," said the S-woman, on whose reptilian features no sign of love or hate could be seen.

Joan spoke up, apparently prompted by the Lady Pane Ashash. "We do love Crawlle, dear people. Think of her and then let us move forward."

Charley-is-my-darling gave Elaine a little shove. "Here, you lead."

In a dream, in a bewilderment, Elaine led.

She felt warm, happy, brave when she passed close to the strange Joan, so tall and yet so familiar. Joan gave her a full smile and whispered, "Tell me I'm doing well, human woman. I'm a dog and dogs have lived a million years for the praise of man."

"You're right, Joan, you're completely right! I'm with you. Shall I go now?" responded Elaine.

Joan nodded, her eyes brimming with tears.

Elaine led.

Joan and the Lady Pane Ashash followed, dog and dead woman championing the procession.

The rest of the underpeople followed them in turn, in a double line.

When they made the secret door open, daylight flooded the corridor. Elaine could almost feel the stale odor-ridden air pouring out with them. When she glanced back into the tunnel for the last time, she saw the body of Crawlle lying all alone on the floor.

Elaine herself turned to the steps and began going up them.

No one had yet noticed the procession.

Elaine could hear the wire of the Lady Pane Ashash dragging on the stone and metal of the steps as they climbed.

When she reached the top door, Elaine had a moment of indecision and panic. "This is my life, my life," she thought. "I have no other. What have I done? Oh, Hunter, Hunter, where are you? Have you betrayed me?"

Said Joan softly behind her, "Go on! Go on. This is a war of love. Keep going."

Elaine opened the door to the upper street. The roadway was full of people. Three police ornithopters flapped slowly overhead. This was an unusual number. Elaine stopped again.

"Keep walking," said Joan, "and warn the robots off."

Elaine advanced and the revolution began.

8

The revolution lasted six minutes and covered one hundred and twelve meters.

The police flew over as soon as the underpeople began pouring out of the doorway.

The first one glided in like a big bird, his voice asking, "Identify! Who are you?"

Elaine said, "Go away. That is a command."

"Identify yourself," said the bird-like machine, banking steeply with the lens-eyed robot peering at Elaine out of its middle.

"Go away," said Elaine. "I am a true human and I command."

The first police ornithopter apparently called to the others by radio. Together they flapped their way down the corridor between the big buildings.

A lot of people had stopped. Most of their faces were blank, a few showing animation or amusement or horror at the sight of so many underpeople all crowded in one place.

Joan's voice sang out, in the clearest possible enunciation of the Old Common Tongue:

"Dear people, we are people. We love you. We love you."

The underpeople began to chant love, love, love in a weird plainsong full of sharps and halftones. The true humans shrank back. Joan herself set the example by embracing a young woman of about her own height. Charley-is-my-darling took a human man by the shoulders and shouted at him:

"I love you, my dear fellow! Believe me, I do love you. It's wonderful meeting you." The human man was startled by the contact and even more startled by the glowing warmth of the goat-man's voice. He stood mouth slack and body relaxed with sheer, utter and accepted surprise.

Somewhere to the rear a person screamed.

A police ornithopter came flapping back. Elaine could not tell if it was one of the three she had sent away, or a new one altogether. She waited for it to get close enough to hail, so that she could tell it to go away. For the first time, she wondered about the actual physical character of danger. Could the police machine put a slug through her? Or shoot flame at her? Or lift her screaming, carrying her away with its iron claws to some place where she would be pretty and clean and never herself again?"

"Oh, Hunter, Hunter, where are you now? Have you forgotten me? Have you betrayed me?"

The underpeople were still surging forward and mingling with the real people, clutching them by their hands or their garments and repeating in the queer medley of voices:

"I love you. Oh, please, I love you! We are people. We are your sisters and brothers ... "

The snake-woman wasn't making much progress. She had seized a human man with her more-than-iron hand. Elaine hadn't seen her saying anything, but the man had fainted dead away. The snake-woman had him draped over her arm like an empty overcoat and was looking for somebody else to love.

Behind Elaine a low voice said, "He's coming soon."

"Who?" said Elaine to the Lady Pane Ashash, knowing perfectly well whom she meant, but not wanting to admit it, and busy with watching the circling ornithopter at the same time.

"The Hunter, of course," said the robot with the dear dead lady's voice. "He'll come for you. You'll be all right. I'm at the end of my wire. Look away, my dear. They are about to kill me again and I am afraid that the sight would distress you."

Fourteen robots, foot models, marched with military decision into the crowd. The true humans took heart from this and some of them began to slip away into doorways. Most of the real people were still so surprised that they stood around with the underpeople pawing at them, babbling the accents of love over and over again, the animal origin of their voices showing plainly.

The robot sergeant took no note of this. He approached the Lady Pane Ashash only to find Elaine standing in his way.

"I command you," she said, with all the passion of a working witch, "I command you to leave this place."

His eye-lenses were like dark-blue marbles floating in milk. They seemed swimmy and poorly focused as he looked her over. He did not reply but stepped around her, faster than her own body could intercept him. He made for the dear, dead Lady Pane Ashash.

Elaine, bewildered, realized that the lady's robot body seemed more human than ever. The robot-sergeant confronted her.

This is the scene which we all remember, the first authentic picture tape of the entire incident:

The gold and black sergeant, his milky eyes staring at the Lady Pane Ashash.

The lady herself, in the pleasant old robot body, lifting a commanding hand.

Elaine, distraught, half-turning as though she would grab the robot by his right arm. Her head is moving so rapidly that her black hair swings as she turns.

Charley-is-my-darling shouting, "I love, love, love!" at a small handsome man with mouse-colored hair. The man is gulping and saying nothing.

All this we know.

Then comes the unbelievable, which we now believe, the event for which the stars and worlds were unprepared.



Mutiny.

Robot mutiny.

Disobedience in open daylight.

The words are hard to hear on the tape, but we can still make them out. The recording device on the police ornithopter had gotten a square fix on the face of the Lady Pane Ashash. Lip-readers can see the words plainly; non-lip-readers can hear the words the third or fourth time the tape is run through the eyebox.

Said the lady, "Overridden."

Said the sergeant, "No, you're a robot."

"See for yourself. Read my brain. I am a robot. I am also a woman. You cannot disobey people. I am people. I love you. Furthermore, you are people. You think. We love each other. Try. Try to attack."

"I—I cannot," said the robot sergeant, his milky eyes seeming to spin with excitement. "You love me? You mean I'm alive? I exist?"

"With love, you do," said the Lady Pane Ashash. "Look at her," said the lady, pointing to Joan, "because she has brought you love."

The robot looked and disobeyed the law. His squad looked with him.

He turned back to the lady and bowed to her: "Then you know what we must do, if we cannot obey you and cannot disobey the others."

"Do it," she said sadly, "but know what you are doing. You are not really escaping two human commands. You are making a choice. You. That makes you men."

The sergeant turned to his squad of man-sized robots: "You hear that? She says we are men. I believe her. Do you believe her?"

"We do," they cried almost unanimously.

This is where the picture-tape ends, but we can imagine how the scene was concluded. Elaine had stopped short, just behind the sergeant-robot. The other robots had come up behind her. Charley-is-my-darling had stopped talking. Joan was in the act of lifting her hands in blessing, her warm brown dog eyes gone wide with pity and understanding.

People wrote down the things that we cannot see.

Apparently the robot-sergeant said, "Our love, dear people, and good-by. We disobey and die." He waved his hand to Joan. It is not certain whether he did or did not say, "Good-by, our lady and our liberator." Maybe some poet made up the second saying; the first one, we are sure about. And we are sure about the next word, the one which historians and poets all agree on. He turned to his men and said,

"Destruct."

Fourteen robots, the black-and-gold sergeant and his thirteen silver-blue foot soldiers, suddenly spurted white fire in the street of Kalma. They detonated their suicide buttons, thermite caps in their own heads. They had done something with no human command at all, on an order from another robot, the body of the Lady Pane Ashash, and she in turn had no human authority, but merely the word of the little dog-girl Joan, who had been made an adult in a single night.

Fourteen white flames made people and underpeople turn their eyes aside. Into the light there dropped a special police ornithopter. Out of it came the two ladies, Arabella Underwood and Goroke. They lifted their forearms to shield their eyes from the blazing dying robots. They did not see the Hunter, who had moved mysteriously into an open window above the street and who watched the scene by putting his hands over his eyes and peeking through the slits between his fingers. While the people still stood blinded, they felt the fierce telepathic shock of the mind of the Lady Goroke taking command of the situation. That was her right, as a chief of the Instrumentality. Some of the people, but not all of them, felt the outré countershock of Joan's mind reaching out to meet the Lady Goroke.

"I command," thought the Lady Goroke, her mind kept open to all beings.

"Indeed you do, but I love, I love you," thought Joan.

The first-order forces met.

They engaged.

The revolution was over. Nothing had really happened, but Joan had forced people to meet her. This was nothing like the poem about people and underpeople getting all mixed up. The mixup came much later, even after the time of C'mell. The poem is pretty, but it is dead wrong, as you can see for yourself:

You should ask me,

Me, me, me, Because I know—I used to live

On the Eastern Shore.

Men aren't men, And women aren't women,

And people aren't people any more.

There is no Eastern Shore on Fomalhaut III anyhow; the people/underpeople crisis came much later than this. The revolution had failed, but history had reached its new turning-point, the quarrel of the two ladies. They left their minds open out of sheer surprise. Suicidal robots and world-loving dogs were unheard-of. It was bad enough to have illegal underpeople on the prowl, but these new things—ah!

Destroy them all, said the Lady Goroke.

"Why?" thought the Lady Arabella Underwood.

Malfunction, replied Goroke.

"But they're not machines!"

Then they're animals—underpeople. Destroy! Destroy!

Then came the answer which has created our own time. It came from the Lady Arabella Underwood, and all Kalma heard it:

Perhaps they are people. They must have a trial.

The dog-girl Joan dropped to her knees. "I have succeeded, I have succeeded, I have succeeded! You can kill me, dear people, but I love, love, love you!"

The Lady Pane Ashash said quietly to Elaine, "I thought I would be dead by now. Really dead, at last. But I am not I have seen the worlds turn, Elaine, and you have seen them turn with me."

The underpeople had fallen quiet as they heard the high-volume telepathic exchange between the two great ladies.

The real soldiers dropped out of the sky, their ornithopters whistling as they hawked down to the ground. They ran up to the underpeople and began binding them with cord.

One soldier took a single look at the robot body of the Lady Pane Ashash. He touched it with his staff, and the staff turned cherry-red with heat. The robot-body, its heat suddenly drained, fell to the ground in a heap of icy crystals.

Elaine walked between the frigid rubbish and the red-hot staff. She had seen Hunter.

She missed seeing the soldier who came up to Joan, started to bind her and then fell back weeping, babbling, "She loves me! She loves me!"

The Lord Femtiosex, who commanded the inflying soldiers, bound Joan with cord despite her talking.

Grimly he answered her: "Of course you love me. You're a good dog. You'll die soon, doggy, but till then, you'll obey."

"I'm obeying," said Joan, "but I'm a dog and a person. Open your mind, man, and you'll feel it."

Apparently he did open his mind and felt the ocean of love rip-tiding into him. It shocked him. His arm swung up and back, the edge of the hand striking at Joan's neck for the ancient kill.

"No, you don't," thought the Lady Arabella Underwood. "That child is going to get a proper trial."

He looked at her and glared, chief doesn't strike chief, my lady. Let go my arm.

Thought the Lady Arabella at him, openly and in public: "A trial, then."

In his anger he nodded at her. He would not think or speak to her in the presence of all the other people.

A soldier brought Elaine and Hunter before him.

"Sir and master, these are people, not underpeople. But they have dog-thoughts, cat-thoughts,

goat-thoughts and robot-ideas in their heads. Do you wish to look?"

"Why look?" said the Lord Femtiosex, who was as blond as the ancient pictures of Baldur, and often-times that arrogant as well. "The Lord Limaono is arriving. That's all of us. We can have the trial here and now."

Elaine felt cords bite into her wrists; she heard the Hunter murmur comforting words to her, words which she did not quite understand.

"They will not kill us," he murmured, "though we will wish they had, before this day is out. Everything is happening as she said it would, and—"

"Who is that she?" interrupted Elaine.

"She? The lady, of course. The dear dead Lady Pane Ashash, who has worked wonders after her own death, merely with the print of her personality on the machine. Who do you think told me what to do? Why did we wait for you to condition Joan to greatness? Why did the people way down in Clown Town keep on raising one D'joan after another, hoping that hope and a great wonder would occur?"

"You knew?" said Elaine. "You knew ... before it happened?"

"Of course," said the Hunter, "not exactly, but more or less. She had had hundreds of years after death inside that computer. She had time for billions of thoughts. She saw how it would be if it had to be, and I—"

"Shut up, you people!" roared the Lord Femtiosex. "You are making the animals restless with your babble. Shut up, or I will stun you!"

Elaine fell silent

The Lord Femtiosex glanced around at her, ashamed at having made his anger naked before another person. He added quietly:

"The trial is about to begin. The one that the tall lady ordered."

9

You all know about the trial, so there is no need to linger over it. There is another picture of San Shigonanda, the one from his conventional period, which shows it very plainly.

The street had filled full of real people, crowding together to see something which would ease the boredom of perfection and time. They all had numbers or number-codes instead of names. They were handsome, Well, dully happy. They even looked a great deal alike, similar in their handsomeness, their health and their underlying boredom. Each of them had a total of four hundred years to live. None of them knew real war, even though the extreme readiness of the soldiers showed vain practice of hundreds of years. The people were beautiful, but they felt themselves useless, and they were quietly desperate without knowing it themselves. This is all clear from the painting, and from the wonderful way that San Shigonanda has of forming them in informal ranks and letting the calm blue light of day shine down on their handsome, hopeless features.

With the underpeople, the artist performs real wonders.

Joan herself is bathed in light. Her light brown hair and her doggy brown eyes express softness and tenderness. He even conveys the idea that her new body is terribly new and strong, that she is virginal and ready to die, that she is a mere girl and yet completely fearless. The posture of love shows in her legs: she stands lightly. Love shows in her hands: they are turned outward toward the judges. Love shows in her smile: it is confident.

And the judges!

The artist has them, too. The Lord Femtiosex, calm again, his narrow sharp lips expressing perpetual rage against a universe which has grown too small for him. The Lord Limaono, wise, twice-reborn, sluggardly, but alert as a snake behind the sleepy eyes and the slow smile. The Lady Arabella Underwood, the tallest true-human present, with her Norstrilian pride and the arrogance of great wealth, along with the capricious tenderness of great wealth, showing in the way that she sat, judging her fellow-judges instead of the prisoners. The Lady Gorokey, bewildered at last, frowning at a play of fortune which she does not understand. The artist has it all.

And you have the real view-tapes, too, if you want to go to a museum. The reality is not as

dramatic as the famous painting, but it has value of its own. The voice of Joan, dead these many centuries, is still strangely moving. It is the voice of a dog-carved-into-man, but it is also the voice of a great lady. The image of the Lady Pane Ashash must have taught her that, along with what she had learned from Elaine and Hunter in the antechamber above the Brown and Yellow Corridor of Englok.

The words of the trial, they too have survived. Many of them have become famous, all across the worlds.

Joan said, during inquiry, "But it is the duty of life to find more than life, and to exchange itself for that higher goodness."

Joan commented, upon sentence. "My body is your property, but my love is not. My love is my own, and I shall love you fiercely while you kill me."

When the soldiers had killed Charley-is-my-darling and were trying to hack off the head of the S-woman until one of them thought to freeze her into crystals, Joan said:

"Should we be strange to you, we animals of Earth that you have brought to the stars? We shared the same sun, the same oceans, the same sky. We are all from Manhome. How do you know that we would not have caught up with you if we had all stayed at home together? My people were dogs. They loved you before you made a woman-shaped thing out of my mother. Should I not love you still? The miracle is not that you have made people out of us. The miracle is that it took us so long to understand it. We are people now, and so are you. You will be sorry for what you are going to do to me, but remember that I shall love your sorrow, too, because great and good things will come out of it."

The Lord Limaono slyly asked, "What is a 'miracle'?"

And her words were, "There is knowledge from Earth which you have not yet found again. There is the name of the Nameless One. There are secrets hidden in time from you. Only the dead and the unborn can know them right now: I am both."

The scene is familiar, and yet we will never understand it.

We know what the Lords Femtiosex and Limaono thought they were doing. They were maintaining established order and they were putting it on tape. The minds of men can live together only if the basic ideas are communicated. Nobody has, even now, found out a way of recording telepathy directly into an instrument. We get pieces and snatches and wild jumbles, but we never get a satisfactory record of what one of the great ones was transmitting to another. The two male chiefs were trying to put on record all those things about the episode which would teach careless people not to play with the lives of the underpeople. They were even trying to make underpeople understand the rules and designs by virtue of which they had been transformed from animals into the highest servants of man. This would have been hard to do, given the bewildering events of the last few hours, even from one chief of the Instrumentality to another; for the general public, it was almost impossible. The outpouring from the Brown and Yellow Corridor was wholly unexpected, even though the Lady Goroke had surprised D'Joan; the mutiny of the robot police posed problems which would have to be discussed halfway across the galaxy. Furthermore, the dog-girl was making points which had some verbal validity. If they were left in the form of mere words without proper context, they might affect heedless or impressionable minds. A bad idea can spread like a mutated germ. If it is at all interesting, it can leap from one mind to another halfway across the universe before it has a stop put to it. Look at the ruinous fads and foolish fashions which have nuisanced mankind even in the ages of the highest orderliness. We today know that variety, flexibility, danger and the seasoning of a little hate can make love and life bloom as they never bloomed before; we know it is better to live with the complications of thirteen thousand old languages resurrected from the dead ancient past than it is to live with the cold blind-alley perfection of the Old Common Tongue. We know a lot of things which the Lords Femtiosex and Limaono did not, and before we consider them stupid or cruel, we must remember that centuries passed before mankind finally came to grips with the problem of the under-people and decided what "life" was within the limits of the human community.

Finally, we have the testimony of the two lords themselves. They both lived to very advanced

ages, and toward the end of their lives they were worried and annoyed to find that the episode of D'Joan overshadowed all the bad things which had not happened during their long careers—bad things which they had labored to forestall for the protection of the planet Fomalhaut III—and they were distressed to see themselves portrayed as casual, cruel men when in fact they were nothing of the sort. If they had seen that the story of Joan on Fomalhaut III would get to be what it is today—one of the great romances of mankind, along with the story of C'mell or the romance of the lady who sailed The Soul—they would not only have been disappointed, but they would have been justifiably angry at the fickleness of mankind as well. Their roles are clear, because they made them clear. The Lord Femtiosex accepts the responsibility for the notion of fire; the Lord Limaono agrees that he concurred in the decision. Both of them, many years later, reviewed the tapes of the scene and agreed that something which the Lady Arabella Underwood had said or thought—Something had made them do it.

But even with the tapes to refresh and clarify their memories, they could not say what.

We have even put computers on the job of cataloguing every word and every inflection of the whole trial, but they have not pinpointed the critical point either.

And the Lady Arabella—nobody ever questioned her. They didn't dare. She went back to her own planet of Old North Australia, surrounded by the immense treasure of the santaclara drug, and no planet is going to pay at the rate of two thousand million credits a day for the privilege of sending an investigator to talk to a lot of obstinate, simple, wealthy Norstrilian peasants who will not talk to offworlders anyhow.

The Norstrilians charge that sum for the admission of any guest not selected by their own invitation; so we will never know what the Lady Arabella Underwood said or did after she went home. The Norstrilians said they did not wish to discuss the matter, and if we do not wish to go back to living a mere seventy years we had better not anger the only planet which produces stroon.

And the Lady Goroke—she, poor thing, went mad.

Mad, for a period of years.

People did not know it till later, but there was no word to be gotten out of her. She performed the odd actions which we now know to be a part of the dynasty of Lords Jestocost, who forced themselves by diligence and merit upon the Instrumentality for two hundred and more years. But on the case of Joan she had nothing to say.

The trial is therefore a scene about which we know everything—and nothing.

We think that we know the physical facts of the life of D'Joan who became Joan. We know about the Lady Pane Ashash who whispered endlessly to the underpeople about a justice yet to come. We know the whole life of the unfortunate Elaine and of her involvement with the case. We know that there were in those centuries, when underpeople first developed, many warrens in which illegal underpeople used their near-human wits, their animal cunning and their gift of speech to survive even when mankind had declared them surplus. The Brown and Yellow Corridor was not by any means the only one of its kind. We even know what happened to the Hunter.

For the other underpeople—Charley-is-my-darling, Baby-baby, Mabel, the S-woman, Orson and all the others—we have the tapes of the trial itself. They were not tried by anybody. They were put to death by the soldiers on the spot, as soon as it was plain that their testimony would not be needed. As witnesses, they could live a few minutes or an hour; as animals, they were already outside the regulations.

Ah, we know all about that now, and yet know nothing. Dying is simple, though we tend to hide it away. The how of dying is a minor scientific matter; the when of dying is a problem to each of us, whether he lives on the old-fashioned 400-year-life planets or on the radical new ones where the freedoms of disease and accident have been reintroduced; the why of it is still as shocking to us as it was to pre-atomic man, who used to cover farmland with the boxed bodies of his dead. These underpeople died as no animals had ever died before. Joyfully.

One mother held her children up for the soldier to kill them all.

She must have been of rat origin, because she had septuplets in closely matching form.

The tape shows us the picture of the soldier getting ready.

The rat-woman greets him with a smile and holds up her seven babies. Little blondes they are, wearing pink or blue bonnets, all of them with glowing cheeks and bright little blue eyes.

"Put them on the ground," said the soldier. "I'm going to kill you and them too." On the tape, we can hear the nervous peremptory edge of his voice. He added one word, as though he had already begun to think that he had to justify himself to these underpeople. "Orders," he added.

"It doesn't matter if I hold them, soldier. I'm their mother. They'll feel better if they die easily with their mother near. I love you, soldier. I love all people. You are my brother, even though my blood is rat blood and yours is human. Go ahead and kill them, soldier. I can't even hurt you. Can't you understand it? I love you, soldier. We share a common speech, common hopes, common fears, and a common death. That is what Joan has taught us all. Death is not bad, soldier. It just comes badly, sometimes, but you will remember me after you have killed me and my babies. You will remember that I love you now—"

The soldier, we see on the tape, can stand it no longer. He clubs his weapon, knocks the woman down; the babies scatter on the ground. We see his booted heel rise up and crush down against their heads. We hear the wet popping sound of the little heads breaking, the sharp cutoff of the baby wails as they die. We get one last view of the rat-woman herself. She has stood up again by the time the seventh baby is killed. She offers her hand to the soldier to shake. Her face is dirty and bruised, a trickle of blood running down her left cheek. Even now, we know she is a rat, an underperson, a modified animal, a nothing. And yet we, even we across the centuries, feel that she has somehow become more of a person than we are—that she dies human and fulfilled. We know that she has triumphed over death: we have not.

We see the soldier looking straight at her with eerie horror, as though her simple love were some unfathomable device from an alien source.

We hear her next words on the tape:

"Soldier, I love all of you—"

His weapon could have killed her in a fraction of a second, if he had used it properly. But he didn't. He clubbed it and hit her, as though his heat-remover had been a wooden club and himself a wild man instead of part of the elite guard of Kalma.

We know what happens then.

She falls under his blows. She points. Points straight at Joan, wrapped in fire and smoke.

The rat-woman screams one last time, screams into the lens of the robot camera as though she were talking not to the soldier but to all mankind:

"You can't kill her. You can't kill love. I love you, soldier, love you. You can't kill that. Remember—"

His last blow catches her in the face.

She falls back on the pavement. He thrusts his foot, as we can see by the tape, directly on her throat. He leaps forward in an odd little jig, bringing his full weight down on her fragile neck. He swings while stamping downward, and we then see his face, full on in the camera.

It is the face of a weeping child, bewildered by hurt and shocked by the prospect of more hurt to come.

He had started to do his duty, and duty had gone wrong, all wrong.

Poor man. He must have been one of the first men in the new worlds who tried to use weapons against love. Love is a sour and powerful ingredient to meet in the excitement of battle.

All the underpeople died that way. Most of them died smiling, saying the word "love" or the name "Joan."

The bear-man Orson had been kept to the very end.

He died very oddly. He died laughing.

The soldier lifted his pellet-thrower and aimed it straight at Orson's forehead. The pellets were 22 millimeters in diameter and had a muzzle velocity of only 125 meters per second. In that manner, they could stop recalcitrant robots or evil underpeople, without any risk of penetrating buildings and hurting the true people who might be inside, out of sight.

Orson looks, on the tape the robots made, as though he knows perfectly well what the weapon is.

(He probably did. Underpeople used to live with the danger of a violent death hanging over them from birth until removal.) He shows no fear of it, in the pictures we have; he begins to laugh. His laughter is warm, generous, relaxed—like the friendly laughter of a happy foster—father who has found a guilty and embarrassed child, knowing full well that the child expects punishment but will not get it.

"Shoot, man. You can't kill me, man. I'm in your mind. I love you. Joan taught us. Listen, man. There is no death. Not for love. Ho, ho, ho, poor fellow, don't be afraid of me. Shoot! You're the unlucky one. You're going to live. And remember. And remember. And remember. I've made you human, fellow." The soldier croaks, "What did you say?"

"I'm saving you, man. I'm turning you into a real human being. With the power of Joan. The power of love. Poor guy! Go ahead and shoot me if it makes you uncomfortable to wait. You'll do it anyhow."

This time we do not see the soldier's face, but the tightness of his back and neck betray his own internal stress.

We see the big broad bear face blossom forth in an immense splash of red as the soft heavy pellets plow into it. Then the camera turns to something else.

A little boy, probably a fox, but very finished in his human shape. He was bigger than a baby, but not big enough, like the larger underchildren, to have understood the deathless importance of Joan's teaching.

He was the only one of the group who behaved like an ordinary underperson. He broke and ran.

He was clever: He ran among the spectators, so that the soldier could not use pellets or heat-reducers on him without hurting an actual human being. He ran and jumped and dodged, fighting passively but desperately for his life.

At last one of the spectators—a tall man with a silver hat—tripped him up. The fox-boy fell to the pavement, skinning his palms and knees. Just as he looked up to see who might be coming at him, a bullet caught him neatly in the head. He fell a little way forward, dead.

People die. We know how they die. We have seen them die shy and quiet in the Dying Houses. We have seen others go into the 400-year-rooms, which have no doorknobs and no cameras on the inside. We have seen pictures of many dying in natural disasters, where the robot crews took picture-tapes for the record and the investigation later on. Death is not uncommon, and it is very unpleasant

But this time, death itself was different. All the fear of death—except for the one little fox-boy, too young to understand and too old to wait for death in his mother's arms—had gone out of the underpeople. They met death willingly, with love and calmness in their bodies, their voices, their demeanor. It did not matter whether they lived long enough to know what happened to Joan herself: they had perfect confidence in her, anyway.

This indeed was the new weapon, love and the good death.

Crawlle, with her pride, had missed it all.

The investigators later found the body of Crawlle in the corridor. It was possible to reconstruct who she had been and what had happened to her. The computer in which the bodiless image of the Lady Pane Ash-ash survived for a few days after the trial was, of course, found and disassembled. Nobody thought at the time to get her opinions and last words. A lot of historians have gnashed their teeth over that.

The details are therefore clear. The archives even preserve the long interrogation and responses concerning Elaine, when she was processed and made clear after the trial. But we do not know how the idea of "fire" came in.

Somewhere, beyond sight of the tape-scanner, the word must have been passed between the four chiefs of the Instrumentality who were conducting the trial. There is the protest of the chief of birds (robot), or police chief of Kalma, a subchief named Fisi.

The records show his appearance. He comes in at the right side of the scene, bows respectfully to the four chiefs and lifts his right hand in the traditional sign for "beg to interrupt," an odd twist of the elevated hand which the actors had found it very difficult to copy when they tried to put the

whole story of Joan and Elaine into a single drama. (In fact, he had no more idea that future ages would be studying his casual appearance than did the others. The whole episode was characterized by haste and precipitateness, in the light of what we now know.) The Lord Limaono says:

"Interruption refused. We are making a decision."

The chief of birds spoke up anyhow.

"My words are for your decision, my Lords and my Ladies."

"Say it, then," commanded the Lady Goroke, "but be brief."

"Shut down the viewers. Destroy that animal. Brainwash the spectators. Get amnesia yourselves, for this one hour. This whole scene is dangerous. I am nothing but a supervisor of ornithopters, keeping perfect order, but I—"

"We have heard enough," said the Lord Femtiosex. "You manage your birds and we'll run the worlds. How do you dare to think like a chief? We have responsibilities which you can't even guess at. Stand back."

Fisi, in the pictures, stands back, his face sullen. In that particular frame of scenes, one can see some of the spectators going away. It was time for lunch and they had become hungry; they had no idea that they were going to miss the greatest atrocity in history, about which a thousand and more grand operas would be written.

Femtiosex then moved to the climax. "More knowledge, not less, is the answer to this problem. I have heard about something which is not as bad as the Planet Shayol, but which can do just as well for an exhibit on a civilized world. You there," said he to Fisi, the chief of birds, "bring oil and a spray. Immediately."

Joan looked at him with compassion and longing, but she said nothing. She suspected what he was going to do. As a girl, as a dog, she hated it; as a revolutionary, she welcomed it as the consummation of her mission.

The Lord Femtiosex lifted his right hand. He curled the ring finger and the little finger, putting his thumb over them. That left the first two fingers extended straight out. At that time, the sign from one chief to another, meaning, "private channels, telepathic, immediate." It has since been adopted by underpeople as their emblem for political unity.

The four chiefs went into a trancelike state and shared the judgment.

Joan began to sing in a soft, protesting, doglike wail, using the off-key plainsong which the underpeople had sung just before their hour of decision when they left the Brown and Yellow Corridor. Her words were nothing special, repetitions of the "people, dear people, I love you" which she had been communicating ever since she came to the surface of Kalma. But the way she did it has defied imitation across the centuries. There are thousands of lyrics and melodies which call themselves, one way and another, The Song of Joan, but none of them come near to the heart-wrenching pathos of the original tapes. The singing, like her own personality, was unique.

The appeal was deep. Even the real people tried to listen, shifting their eyes from the four immobile chiefs of the Instrumentality to the brown-eyed singing girl. Some of them just could not stand it. In true human fashion, they forgot why they were there and went absent-mindedly home to lunch.

Suddenly Joan stopped.

Her voice ringing clearly across the crowd, she cried out:

"The end is near, dear people. The end is near."

Eyes all shifted to the two lords and the two ladies of the Instrumentality. The Lady Arabella Underwood looked grim after the telepathic conference. The Lady Goroke was haggard with wordless grief. The two lords looked severe and resolved.

It was the Lord Femtiosex who spoke.

"We have tried you, animal. Your offense is great. You have lived illegally. For that the penalty is death. You have interfered with robots in some manner which we do not understand. For that brand-new crime, the penalty should be more than death; and I have recommended a punishment which was applied on a planet of the Violet Star. You have also said many unlawful and improper things, detracting from the happiness and security of mankind. For that the penalty is reeducation,



but since you have two death sentences already, this does not matter. Do you have anything to say before I pronounce sentence?"

"If you light a fire today, my Lord, it will never be put out in the hearts of men. You can destroy me. You can reject my love. You cannot destroy the goodness in yourselves, no matter how much goodness may anger you—"

"Shut up!" he roared. "I asked for a plea, not a speech. You will die by fire, here and now. What do you say to that?"

"I love you, dear people."

Femtiosex nodded to the men of the chief of birds, who had dragged a barrel and a spray into the street in front of Joan.

"Tie her to that post," he commanded. "Spray her. Light her. Are the tape-makers in focus? We want this to be recorded and known. If the underpeople try this again, they will see that mankind controls the worlds." He looked at Joan and his eyes seemed to go out of focus. In an unaccustomed voice he said, "I am not a bad man, little dog-girl, but you are a bad animal and we must make an example of you. Do you understand that?"

"Femtiosex," she cried, leaving out his title, "I am very sorry for you. I love you too."

With these words of hers, his face became clouded and angry again. He brought his right hand down in a chopping gesture.

Fisi copied the gesture and the men operating the barrel and spray began to squirt a hissing stream of oil on Joan. Two guards had already chained her to the lamp post, using an improvised chain of handcuffs to make sure that she stood upright and remained in plain sight of the crowd.

"Fire," said Femtiosex.

Elaine felt the Hunter's body, beside her, cramp sharply. He seemed to strain intensely. For herself, she felt the way she had felt when she was defrozen and taken out of the adiabatic pod in which she had made the trip from Earth—sick to her stomach, confused in her mind, emotions rocking back and forth inside her.

Hunter whispered to her, "I tried to reach her mind so that she would die easy. Somebody else got there first. I ... don't know who it is."

Elaine stared.

The fire was being brought. Suddenly it touched the oil and Joan flamed up like a human torch.

10

The burning of D'joan at Fomalhaut took very little time, but the ages will not forget it.

Femtiosex had taken the crudest step of all.

By telepathic invasion he had suppressed her human mind, so that only the primitive canine remained.

Joan did not stand still like a martyred queen.

She struggled against the flames which licked her and climbed her. She howled and shrieked like a dog in pain, like an animal whose brain—good though it is—cannot comprehend the senselessness of human cruelty.

The result was directly contrary to what the Lord Femtiosex had planned.

The crowd of people stirred forward, not with curiosity but because of compassion. They had avoided the broad areas of the street on which the dead underpeople lay as they had been killed, some pooled in their own blood, some broken by the hands of robots, some reduced to piles of frozen crystal. They walked over the dead to watch the dying, but their watching was not the witless boredom of people who never see a spectacle; it was the movement of living things, instinctive and deep, toward the sight of another living thing in a position of danger and ruin.

Even the guard who had held Elaine and Hunter by gripping Hunter's arm—even he moved forward a few unthinking steps. Elaine found herself in the first row of the spectators, the acrid, unfamiliar smell of burning oil making her nose twitch, the howls of the dying dog-girl tearing through her eardrums into her brain. Joan was turning and twisting in the fire now, trying to avoid the flames which wrapped her tighter than clothing. The odor of something sickening and strange

reached the crowd. Few of them had ever smelled the stink of burning meat before.

Joan gasped.

In the ensuing seconds of silence, Elaine heard something she had never expected to hear before—the weeping of grown human beings. Men and women stood there sobbing and not knowing why they sobbed.

Femtiosex loomed over the crowd, obsessed by the failure of his demonstration. He did not know that the Hunter, with a thousand kills behind him, was committing the legal outrage of peeping the mind of a chief of the Instrumentality.

The Hunter whispered to Elaine, "In a minute I'll try it. She deserves something better than that ..."

Elaine did not ask what. She too was weeping.

The whole crowd became aware that a soldier was calling. It took them several seconds to look away from the burning, dying Joan.

The soldier was an ordinary one. Perhaps he was the one who had been unable to tie Joan with bonds a few minutes ago, when the lords decreed that she be taken into custody.

He was shouting now, shouting frantically and wildly, shaking his fist at the Lord Femtiosex.

"You're a liar, you're a coward, you're a fool, and I challenge you—"

The Lord Femtiosex became aware of the man and of what he was yelling. He came out of his deep concentration and said, mildly for so wild a time:

"What do you mean?"

"This is a crazy show. There is no girl here. No fire. Nothing. You are hallucinating the whole lot of us for some horrible reason of your own, and I'm challenging you for it, you animal, you fool, you coward."

In normal times even a lord had to accept a challenge or adjust the matter with clear talk.

This was no normal time.

The Lord Femtiosex said, "All this is real. I deceive no one."

"If it's real, Joan, I'm with you!" shrieked the young soldier. He jumped in front of the jet of oil before the other soldiers could turn it off and then he leapt into the fire beside Joan.

Her hair had burned away but her features were still clear. She had stopped the doglike whining shriek. Femtiosex had been interrupted. She gave the soldier, who had begun to burn as he stood voluntarily beside her the gentlest and most feminine of smiles. Then she frowned, as though there were something which she should remember to do, despite the pain and terror which surrounded her.

"Now!" whispered the Hunter. He began to hunt the Lord Femtiosex as sharply as he had ever sought the alien, native minds of Fomalhaut III.

The crowd could not tell what had happened to the Lord Femtiosex. Had he turned coward? Had he gone mad? (Actually, the Hunter, by using every gram of the power of his mind, had momentarily taken Femtiosex courting in the skies; he and Femtiosex were both male bird-like beasts, singing wildly for the beautiful female who lay hidden in the landscape far, far below.)

Joan was free, and she knew she was free.

She sent out her message. It knocked both Hunter and Femtiosex out of thinking; it flooded Elaine; it made even Fisi, the chief of birds, breathe quietly. She called so loudly that within the hour messages were pouring in from the other cities to Kalma, asking what had happened. She thought a single message, not words. But in words it came to this:

"Loved ones, you kill me. This is my fate. I bring love, and love must die to live on. Love asks nothing, does nothing. Love thinks nothing. Love is knowing yourself and knowing all other people and things. Know—and rejoice. I die for all of you now, dear ones—"

She opened her eyes for a last time, opened her mouth, sucked in the raw flame and slumped forward. The soldier, who had kept his nerve while his clothing and body burned, ran out of the fire, afire himself, toward his squad. A shot stopped him and he pitched flat forward.

The weeping of the people was audible throughout the streets. Underpeople, tame and licensed ones, stood shamelessly among them and wept too.

The Lord Femtiosex turned warily back to his colleagues.

The face of Lady Goroke was a sculptured, frozen caricature of sorrow.

He turned to the Lady Arabella Underwood. "I seem to have done something wrong, my Lady. Take over, please."

The Lady Arabella stood up. She called to Fisi, "Put out that fire."

She looked out over the crowd. Her hard, honest Norstrilian features were unreadable. Elaine, watching her, shivered at the thought of a whole planet full of people as tough, obstinate and clever as these.

"It's over," said the Lady Arabella. "People, go away. Robots, clean up. Underpeople, to your jobs."

She looked at Elaine and the Hunter. "I know who you are and I suspect what you have been doing. Soldiers, take them away."

The body of Joan was fire-blackened. The face did not look particularly human any more; the last burst of fire had caught her in the nose and eyes. Her young, girlish breasts showed with heart-wrenching immodesty that she had been young and female once. Now she was dead, just dead.

The soldiers would have shoveled her into a box if she had been an underperson. Instead, they paid her the honors of war that they would have given to one of their own comrades or to an important civilian in time of disaster. They unslung a litter, put the little blackened body on it and covered the body with their own flag. No one had told them to do so.

As their own soldier led them up the road toward the Waterrock, where the houses and offices of the military were located, Elaine saw that he too had been crying.

She started to ask him what he thought of it, but Hunter stopped her with a shake of the head. He later told her that the soldier might be punished for talking with them.

When they got to the office they found the Lady Goroke already there.

The Lady Goroke already there ... It became a nightmare in the weeks that followed. She had gotten over her grief and was conducting an inquiry into the case of Elaine and D'Joan.

The Lady Goroke already there ... She was waiting when they slept. Her image, or perhaps herself, sat in on all the endless interrogations. She was particularly interested in the chance meeting of the dead Lady Pane Ashash, the misplaced witch Elaine, and the non-adjusted man, the Hunter.

The Lady Goroke already there ... She asked them everything, but she told them nothing. Except for once.

Once she burst out, violently personal after endless hours of formal, official work, "Your minds will be cleansed when we get through, so it wouldn't matter how much else you know. Do you know that this has hurt me—me!—all the way to the depths of everything I believe in?"

They shook their heads.

"I'm going to have a child, and I'm going back to Manhome to have it. And I'm going to do the genetic coding myself. I'm going to call him Jestocost. That's one of the Ancient Tongues, the Paroskii one, for 'cruelty,' to remind him where he comes from, and why. And he, or his son, or his son will bring justice back into the world and solve the puzzle of the underpeople. What do you think of that? On second thought, don't think. It's none of your business, and I am going to do it anyway."

They stared at her sympathetically, but they were too wound up in the problems of their own survival to extend her much sympathy or advice. The body of Joan had been pulverized and blown into the air, because the Lady Goroke was afraid that the underpeople would make a goodplace out of it; she felt that way herself, and she knew that if she herself were tempted, the underpeople would be even more tempted.

Elaine never knew what happened to the bodies of all the other people who had turned themselves, under Joan's leadership, from animals into mankind, and who had followed the wild, foolish march out of the Tunnel of Englok into the Upper City of Kalma. Was it really wild? Was it really foolish? If they had stayed where they were, they might have had a few days or months or years of life, but sooner or later the robots would have found them and they would have been exterminated like the vermin which they were. Perhaps the death they had chosen was better. Joan

did say, "It's the mission of life always to look for something better than itself, and then to try to trade life itself for meaning."

At last, the Lady Goroke called them in and said, "Goodbye, you two. It's foolish, saying goodbye, when an hour from now you will remember neither me nor Joan. You've finished your work here. I've set up a lovely job for you. You won't have to live in a city. You will be weather-watchers, roaming the hills and watching for all the little changes which the machines can't interpret fast enough. You will have whole lifetimes of marching and picnicking and camping together. I've told the technicians to be very careful, because you two are very much in love with each other. When they re-route your synapses, I want that love to be there with you."

They each knelt and kissed her hand. They never wittingly saw her again. In later years they sometimes saw a fashionable ornithopter soaring gently over their camp, with an elegant woman peering out of the side of it; they had no memories to know that it was the Lady Goroke, recovered from madness, watching over them.

Their new life was their final life.

Of Joan and the Brown and Yellow Corridor, nothing remained.

They were both very sympathetic toward animals, but they might have been this way even if they had never shared in the wild political gamble of the dear dead Lady Pane Ashash.

One time a strange thing happened. An underman from an elephant was working in a small valley, creating an exquisite rock garden for some important official of the Instrumentality who might later glimpse the garden once or twice a year. Elaine was busy watching the weather, and the Hunter had forgotten that he had ever hunted, so that neither of them tried to peep the underman's mind. He was a huge fellow, right at the maximum permissible size—five times the gross stature of a man. He had smiled at them friendly in the past.

One evening he brought them fruit. Such fruit! Rare offworld items which a year of requests would not have obtained for ordinary people like them. He smiled his big, shy, elephant smile, put the fruit down and prepared to lumber off.

"Wait a minute," cried Elaine, "why are you giving us this? Why us?"

"For the sake of Joan," said the elephant-man.

"Who's Joan?" said the Hunter.

The elephant-man looked sympathetically at them. "That's all right. You don't remember her, but I do."

"But what did Joan do?" said Elaine.

"She loved you. She loved us all," said the elephant-man. He turned quickly, so as to say no more. With incredible deftness for so heavy a person, he climbed speedily into the fierce lovely rocks above them and was gone.

"I wish we had known her," said Elaine. "She sounds very nice."

In that year there was born the man who was to be the first Lord Jestocost

## UNDER OLD EARTH

This was the last story Smith wrote, and perhaps the strangest. No reference is made to the Douglas-Ouyang planets elsewhere in the Smith canon, and it is hard to judge which events are "real" and which "legendary" in this tale that explores one of the roots of the Rediscovery of Man. Sto Odin, by the way, is Russian for "One Hundred One."

I need a temporary dog  
For a temporary jog  
On a temporary place  
Like Earth.

-Song from The Merchant of Menace

There were the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which circled their sun in a single cluster, riding around

and around the same orbit unlike any other planets known. There were the gentlemen-suicides back on Earth, who gambled their lives—even more horribly, gambled sometimes for things worse than their lives—against different kinds of geophysics which real men had never experienced. There were girls who fell in love with such men, however stark and dreadful their personal fates might be. There was the Instrumentality, with its unceasing labor to keep man man. And there were the citizens who walked in the boulevards before the Rediscovery of Man. The citizens were happy. They had to be happy. If they were found sad, they were calmed and drugged and changed until they were happy again.

This story concerns three of them: the gambler who took the name Sun-boy, who dared to go down to the Gebiet, who confronted himself before he died; the girl Santuna, who was fulfilled in a thousand ways before she died; and the Lord Sto Odin, a most ancient of days, who knew it all and never dreamed of preventing any of it.

Music runs through this story. The soft sweet music of the Earth Government and the Instrumentality, bland as honey and sickening in the end. The wild illegal pulsations of the Gebiet, where most men were forbidden to enter. Worst of all, the crazy fugues and improper melodies of the Bezirk, closed to men for fifty-seven centuries—opened by accident, found, trespassed in! And with it our story begins.

## 2

The Lady Ru had said, a few centuries before: "Scraps of knowledge have been found. In the ultimate beginning of man, even before there were aircraft, the wise man Laodz declared, Water does nothing but it penetrates everything. Inaction finds the road.' Later an ancient lord said this: 'There is a music which underlies all things. We dance to the tunes all our lives, though our living ears never hear the music which guides us and moves us. Happiness can kill people as softly as shadows seen in dreams.' We must be people first and happy later, lest we live and die in vain."

The Lord Sto Odin was more direct. He declared the truth to a few private friends: "Our population is dropping on most worlds, including the Earth. People have children, but they don't want them very much. I myself have been a three-father to twelve children, a two-father to four, and a one-father, I suppose, to many others. I have had zeal for work and I have mistaken it for zeal in living. They are not the same.

"Most people want happiness. Good: we have given them happiness.

"Dreary useless centuries of happiness, in which all the unhappy were corrected or adjusted or killed. Unbearable desolate happiness without the sting of grief, the wine of rage, the hot fumes of fear. How many of us have ever tasted the acid, icy taste of old resentment? That's what people really lived for in the Ancient Days, when they pretended to be happy and were actually alive with grief, rage, fury, hate, malice and hope! Those people bred like mad. They populated the stars while they dreamed of killing each other, secretly or openly. Their plays concerned murder or betrayal or illegal love. Now we have no murder. We cannot imagine any land of love which is illegal. Can you imagine the Murkins with their highway net? Who can fly anywhere today without seeing that net of enormous highways? Those roads are ruined, but they're still here. You can see the abominable things quite clearly from the moon. Don't think about the roads. Think of the millions of vehicles that ran on those roads, the people filled with greed and rage and hate, rushing past each other with their engines on fire. They say that fifty thousand a year were killed on the roads alone. We would call that a war. What people they must have been, to rush day and night and to build things which would help other people to rush even more! They were different from us. They must have been wild, dirty, free. Lusting for life, perhaps, in a way that we do not. We can easily go a thousand times faster than they ever went, but who, nowadays, bothers to go? Why go? It's the same there as here, except for a few fighters or technicians." He smiled at his friends and added, " ... and lords of the Instrumentality, like ourselves. We go for the reasons of the Instrumentality. Not ordinary people reasons. Ordinary people don't have much reason to do anything. They work at the jobs which we think up for them, to keep them happy while the robots and the underpeople do the real work. They walk. They make love. But they are never unhappy.

"They can't be!"

The Lady Mmona disagreed, "Life can't be as bad as you say. We don't just think they are happy. We know they are happy. We look right into their brains with telepathy. We monitor their emotional patterns with robots and scanners. It's not as though we didn't have samples. People are always turning unhappy. We're correcting them all the time. And now and then there are bad accidents, which even we cannot correct. When people are very unhappy, they scream and weep. Sometimes they even stop talking and just die, despite everything we can do for them. You can't say that isn't real!"

"But I do," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"You do what?" cried Mmona.

"I do say this happiness is not real," he insisted.

"How can you," she shouted at him, "in the face of the evidence? Our evidence, which we of the Instrumentality decided on a long time ago. We collect it ourselves. Can we, the Instrumentality, be wrong?"

"Yes," said the Lord Sto Odin.

This time it was the entire circle who went silent.

Sto Odin pleaded with them. "Look at my evidence. People don't care whether they are one—fathers or one—mothers or not. They don't know which children are theirs, anyhow. Nobody dares to commit suicide. We keep them too happy. But do we spend any time keeping the talking animals, the underpeople, as happy as men? And do underpeople commit suicide?"

"Certainly," said Mmona. "They are preconditioned to commit suicide if they are hurt too badly for easy repair or if they fail in their appointed work."

"I don't mean that. Do they ever commit suicide for their reasons, not ours?"

"No," said the Lord Nuru-or, a wise young lord of the Instrumentality. "They are too desperately busy doing their jobs and staying alive."

"How long does an underperson live?" said Sto Odin, with deceptive mildness.

"Who knows?" said Nuru-or. "Half a year, a hundred years, maybe several hundred years."

"What happens if he does not work?" said the Lord Sto Odin, with a friendly-crafty smile.

"We kill him," said Mmona, "or our robot-police do."

"And does the animal know it?"

"Know he will be killed if he does not work?" said Mmona. "Of course. We tell all of them the same thing. Work or die. What's that got to do with people?"

The Lord Nuru-or had fallen silent and a wise, sad smile had begun to show on his face. He had begun to suspect the shrewd, dreadful conclusion toward which the Lord Sto Odin was driving.

But Mmona did not see it and she pressed the point. "My Lord," said she, "you are insisting that people are happy. You admit they do not like to be unhappy. You seem to want to bring up a problem which has no solution. Why complain of happiness? Isn't it the best which the Instrumentality can do for mankind? That's our mission. Are you saying that we are failing in it?"

"Yes. We are failing." The Lord Sto Odin looked blindly at the room as though alone.

He was the oldest and wisest, so they waited for him to talk.

He breathed lightly and smiled at them again. "You know when I am going to die?"

"Of course," said Mmona, thinking for half a second. "Seventy-seven days from now. But you posted the time yourself. And it is not our custom, my Lord, as you well know, to bring intimate things into meetings of the Instrumentality."

"Sorry," said Sto Odin, "but I'm not violating a law. I'm making a point. We are sworn to uphold the dignity of man. Yet we are killing mankind with a bland hopeless happiness which has prohibited news, which has suppressed religion, which has made all history an official secret. I say that the evidence is that we are failing and that mankind, whom we've sworn to cherish, is failing too. Failing in vitality, strength, numbers, energy. I have a little while to live. I am going to try to find out."

The Lord Nuru-or asked with sorrowful wisdom, as though he guessed the answer: "And where will you go to find out?"

"I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin, "down into the Gebiet."

"The Gebiet—oh, no!" cried several. And one voice added, "You're immune."

"I shall waive immunity and I shall go," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Who can do anything to a man who is already almost a thousand years old and who has chosen only seventy-seven more days to live?"

"But you can't!" said Mmona. "Some criminal might capture you and duplicate you, and then we would all of us be in peril."

"When did you last hear of a criminal among mankind?" said Sto Odin.

"There are plenty of them, here and there in the off-worlds."

"But on Old Earth itself?" asked Sto Odin.

She stammered. "I don't know. There must have been a criminal once." She looked around the room. "Don't any of the rest of you know?"

There was silence.

The Lord Sto Odin stared at them all. In his eyes was the brightness and fierceness which had made whole generations of lords plead with him to live just a few more years, so that he could help them with their work. He had agreed, but within the last quarter-year he had overridden them all and had picked his day of death. He had lost none of his powers in doing this. They shrank from his stare while they waited with respect for his decision.

The Lord Sto Odin looked at the Lord Nuru-or and said, "I think you have guessed what I am going to do in the Gebiet and why I have to go there."

"The Gebiet is a preserve where no rules apply and no punishments are inflicted. Ordinary people can do what they want down there, not what we think they should want. From all I hear, it is pretty nasty and pointless, the things that they find out. But you, perhaps, may sense the inwardness of these things. You may find a cure for the weary happiness of mankind."

"That is right," said Sto Odin. "And that is why I am going, after I make the appropriate official preparations."

3

Go he did. He used one of the most peculiar conveyances ever seen on Earth, since his own legs were too weak to carry him far. With only two-ninths' of a year to live, he did not want to waste time getting his legs re-grafted.

He rode in an open sedan-chair carried by two Roman legionaries.

The legionaries were actually robots, without a trace of blood or living tissue in them. They were the most compact and difficult kind to create, since their brains had to be located in their chests—several million sheets of incredibly fine laminations, imprinted with the whole life experience of an important, useful and long-dead person. They were clothed as legionaries, down to cuirasses, swords, kilts, greaves, sandals and shields, merely because it was the whim of the Lord Sto Odin to go behind the rim of history for his companions. Their bodies, all metal, were very strong. They could batter walls, jump chasms, crush any man or underperson with their mere fingers, or throw their swords with the accuracy of guided projectiles.

The forward legionary, Flavius, had been head of Fourteen-B in the Instrumentality—an espionage division so secret that even among lords, few knew exactly of its location or its function. He was (or had been, till he was imprinted on a robot-mind as he lay dying) the director of historical research for the whole human race. Now he was a dull, pleasant machine carrying two poles until his master chose to bring his powerful mind into bright, furious alert by speaking the simple Latin phrase, understood by no other person living, *Summa nulla est*.

The rear legionary, Livius, had been a psychiatrist who turned into a general. He had won many battles until he chose to die, somewhat before his time, because he perceived that battle itself was a struggle for the defeat of himself.

Together, and added to the immense brainpower of the Lord Sto Odin himself, they represented an unsurpassable team.

"The Gebiet," commanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"The Gebiet," said both of them heavily, picking up the chair with its supporting poles.

"And then the Bezirk," he added.

"The Bezirk," they chimed in toneless voices.

Sto Odin felt his chair tilt back as Livius put his two ends of the poles carefully on the ground, came up beside Sto Odin and saluted with open palm.

"May I awaken?" said Livius in an even, mechanical voice.

"Summa nulla est," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Livius' face sprang into full animation. "You must not go there, my Lord! You would have to waive immunity and meet all dangers. There is nothing there yet. Not yet. Some day they will come pouring out of that underground Hades and give you men a real fight. Now, no. They are just miserable beings, cooking away in their weird unhappiness, making love in manners which you never thought of—"

"Never mind what you think I've thought. What's your objection in real terms?"

"It's pointless, my Lord! You have only bits of a year to live. Do something noble and great for man before you die. They may turn us off. We would like to share your work before you go away."

"Is that all?" said Sto Odin.

"My Lord," said Flavius, "you have awakened me too. I say, go forward. History is being respun down there. Things are loose which you great ones of the Instrumentality have never even suspected. Go now and look, before you die. You may do nothing, but I disagree with my companion. It is as dangerous as spaces might be, if we ever were to find it, but it is interesting. And in this world where all things have been done, where all thoughts have been thought, it is hard to find things which still prompt the human mind with raw curiosity. I'm dead, as you perfectly well know, but even I, inside this machine brain, feel the tug of adventure, the pull of danger, the magnetism of the unknown. For one thing, they are committing crimes down there. And you lords are overlooking them."

"We chose to overlook them. We are not stupid. We wanted to see what might happen," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and we have to give those people time before we find out just how far they might go if they are cut off from controls."

"They are having babies!" said Flavius excitedly.

"I know that"

"They have hooked in two illegal instant-message machines," shouted Flavius.

Sto Odin was calm. "So that's why the Earth's credit structure has appeared to be leaking in its balance of trade."

"They have a piece of the congohelium!" shouted Flavius.

"The congohelium!" shouted the Lord Sto Odin. "Impossible! It's unstable. They could kill themselves. They could hurt Earth! What are they doing with it?"

"Making music," said Flavius, more quietly.

"Making what?"

"Music. Songs. Nice noise to dance to."

The Lord Sto Odin sputtered, "Take me there right now. This is ridiculous. Having a piece of the congohelium down there is as bad as wiping out inhabited planets to play checkers."

"My Lord," said Livius.

"Yes?" said Sto Odin.

"I withdraw my objections," said Livius.

Sto Odin said, very drily, "Thank you."

"They have something else down there. When I did not want you to go, I did not mention it. It might have aroused your curiosity. They have a god."

The Lord Sto Odin said, "If this is going to be a historical lecture, save it for another time. Go back to sleep and carry me down."

Livius did not move. "I mean what I said."

"A god? What do you call a god?"

"A person or an idea capable of starting wholly new cultural patterns in motion."



The Lord Sto Odin leaned forward, "You know this?"

"We both do," said Flavius and Livius.

"We saw him," said Livius. "You told us, a tenth-year ago to walk around freely for thirty hours, so we put on ordinary robot bodies and happened to get into the Gebiet. When we sensed the congohelium operating, we had to go on down to find out what it was doing. Usually, it is employed to keep the stars in their place—"

"Don't tell me that I know it. Was it a man?"

"A man," said Flavius, "who is re-living the life of Akhnaton."

"Who's that?" said the Lord Sto Odin, who knew history, but wanted to see how much his robots knew.

"A king, tall, long-faced, thick lipped, who ruled the human world of Egypt long, long before atomic power. Akhnaton invented the best of the early gods. This man is re-enacting Akhnaton's life step by step. He has already made a religion out of the sun. He mocks at happiness. People listen to him. They joke about the Instrumentality."

Livius added, "We saw the girl who loves him. She herself was young, but beautiful. And I think she has powers which will make the Instrumentality promote her or destroy her some day in the future."

"They both made music," said Flavius, "with that piece of the congohelium. And this man or god—this new kind of Akhnaton, whatever you may want to call him, my Lord—he was dancing a strange kind of dance. It was like a corpse being tied with rope and dancing like a marionette. The effect on the people around him was as good as the best hypnotism you ever saw. I'm a robot now, but it bothered even me."

"Did the dance have a name?" said Sto Odin.

"I don't know the name," said Flavius, "but I memorized the song, since I have total recall. Do you wish to hear it?"

"Certainly," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius stood on one leg, threw his arms out at weird, improbable angles and began to sing in a high, insulting tenor voice which was both fascinating and repugnant:

Jump, dear people, and I'll howl for you.

Jump and howl and I'll weep for you.

I weep because I'm a weeping man.

I'm a weeping man because I weep.

I weep because the day is done,

Sun is gone,

Home is lost,

Time killed dad.

I killed time.

World is round.

Day is run,

Clouds are shot,

Stars are out,

Mountain's fire,

Rain is hot,

Hot is blue.

I am done.

So are you.

Jump, dear people, for the howling man.

Leap, dear people, for the weeping man.

I'm a weeping man because I weep for you!

"Enough," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius saluted. His face went back to amiable stolidity. Just before he took the front ends of the shaft he glanced back and brought forth one last comment:

"The verse is skeltonic."

"Tell me nothing more of your history. Take me there." The robots obeyed. Soon the chair was jogging comfortably down the ramps of the ancient left-over city which sprawled beneath Earth-port, that miraculous tower which seemed to touch the stratocumulus clouds in the blue, clear nothingness above mankind. Sto Odin went to sleep in his strange vehicle and did not notice that the human passers-by often stared at him.

The Lord Sto Odin woke fitfully in strange places as the legionaries carried him further and further into the depths below the city, where sweet pressures and warm, sick smells made the air itself feel dirty to his nose.

"Stop!" whispered the Lord Sto Odin, and the robots stopped. "Whom am I?" he said to them.

"You have announced your will to die, my Lord," said Flavius, "seventy-seven days from now, but so far your name is still the Lord Sto Odin."

"I am alive?" the lord asked. "Yes," said both the robots. "You are dead?"

"We are not dead. We are machines, printed with the minds of men who once lived. Do you wish to turn back, my Lord?"

"No. No. Now I remember. You are the robots. Livius, the psychiatrist and general. Flavius, the secret historian. You have the minds of men, and are not men?"

"That is right, my Lord," said Flavius. "Then how can I be alive—I, Sto Odin?"

"You should feel it yourself, sir," said Livius, "though the mind of the old is sometimes very strange."

"How can I be alive?" asked Sto Odin, staring around the city. "How can I be alive when the people who knew me are dead? They have whipped through the corridors like wraiths of smoke, like traces of cloud; they were here, and they loved me, and they knew me, and now they are dead. Take my wife, Eileen. She was a pretty thing, a brown-eyed child who came out of her learning chamber all perfect and all young. Time touched her and she danced to the cadence of time. Her body grew full, grew old. We repaired it. But at last she cramped in death and she went to that place to which I am going. If you are dead, you ought to be able to tell me what death is like, where the bodies and minds and voices and music of men and women whip past these enormous corridors, these hardy pavements, and are then gone. How can passing ghosts like me and my kind, each with just a few dozen or a few hundred years to go before the great blind winds of time whip us away—how can phantoms like me have built this solid city, these wonderful engines, these brilliant lights which never go dim? How did we do it, when we pass so swiftly, each of us, all of us? Do you know?" The robots did not answer. Pity had not been programmed into their systems. The Lord Sto Odin harangued them nonetheless:

"You are taking me to a wild place, a free place, an evil place, perhaps. They are dying there too, as all men die, as I shall die, so soon, so brightly and simply. I should have died a long time ago. I was the people who knew me, I was the brothers and comrades who trusted me, I was the women who comforted me, I was the children whom I loved so bitterly and so sweetly many ages ago. Now they are gone. Time touched them, and they were not. I can see everyone that I ever knew racing through these corridors, see them young as toddlers, see them proud and wise and full with business and maturity, see them old and contorted as time reached out for them and they passed hastily away. Why did they do it? How can I live on? When I am dead, will I know that I once lived? I know that some of my friends have cheated and lie in the icy sleep, hoping for something which they do not know. I've had life, and I know it. What is life? A bit of play, a bit of learning, some words well-chosen, some love, a trace of pain, more work, memories, and then dirt rushing up to meet sunlight. That's all we've made of it—we, who have conquered the stars! Where are my friends? Where is my me that I once was so sure of, when the people who knew me were time-swept like storm-driven

rag toward darkness and oblivion? You tell me. You ought to know! You are machines and you were given the minds of men. You ought to know what we amount to, from the outside in."

"We were built," said Livius, "by men and we have whatever men put into us, nothing more. How can we answer talk like yours? It is rejected by our minds, good though our minds may be. We have no grief, no fear, no fury. We know the names of these feelings but not the feelings themselves. We hear your words but we do not know what you are talking about. Are you trying to tell us what life feels like? If so, we already know. Not much. Nothing special. Birds have life too, and so do fishes. It is you people who can talk and who can knot life into spasms and puzzles. You muss things up. Screaming never made the truth truthful, at least, not to us-."

"Take me down," said Sto Odin. "Take me down to the Gebiet, where no well-mannered man has gone in many years. I am going to judge that place before I die."

They lifted the sedan-chair and resumed their gentle dog-trot down the immense ramps down toward the warm steaming secrets of the Earth itself. The human pedestrians became more scarce, but undermen—most often of gorilla or ape origin—passed them, toiling their way upward while dragging shrouded treasures which they had filched from the uncatalogued storehouses of Man's most ancient past. At other times there was a wild whirr of metal wheels on stone roadway; the undermen, having offloaded their treasures at some intermediate point high above, sat on their wagons and rolled back downhill, like grotesque enlargements of the ancient human children who were once reported to have played with wagons in this way.

A command, scarcely a whisper, stopped the two legionaries again. Flavius turned. Sto Odin was indeed calling both of them. They stepped out of the shafts and came around to him, one on each side.

"I may be dying right now," he whispered, "and that would be most inconvenient at this time. Get out my manikin meee!"

"My Lord," said Flavius, "it is strictly forbidden for us robots to touch any human manikin, and if we do touch one, we are commanded to destroy ourselves immediately thereafter! Do you wish us to try, nevertheless? If so, which one of us? You have the command, my Lord?"

4

He waited so long that even the robots began to wonder if he died amid the thick wet air and the nearby stench of steam and oil.

The Lord Sto Odin finally roused himself and said:

"I need no help. Just put the bag with my manikin meee on my lap."

"This one?" asked Flavius, lifting a small brown suitcase and handling it with a very gingerly touch indeed.

The Lord Sto Odin gave a barely perceptible nod and whispered, "Open it carefully for me. But do not touch the manikin, if those are your orders."

Flavius twisted at the catch of the bag. It was hard to manage. Robots did not feel fear, but they were intellectually attuned to the avoidance of danger; Flavius found his mind racing with wild choices as he tried to get the bag open. Sto Odin tried to help him, but the ancient hand, palsied and weak, could not even reach the top of the case. Flavius labored on, thinking that the Gebiet and Bezirk had their dangers, but that this meddling with manikins was the riskiest thing which he had ever encountered while in robot form, though in his human life he had handled many of them, including his own. They were "manikin, electro-encephalographic and endocrine" in model form, and they showed in miniaturized replica the entire diagnostic position of the patient for whom they were fashioned.

Sto Odin whispered to them. "There's no helping it. Turn me up. If I die, take my body back and tell the people that I misjudged my time."

Just as he spoke, the case sprang open. Inside it there lay a little naked human man, a direct copy of Sto Odin himself.

"We have it, my Lord," cried Livius, from the other side. "Let me guide your hand to it, so that you can see what to do."

Though it was forbidden for robots to touch manikins meee, it was legal for them to touch a human person with the person's consent. Livius's strong cupro-plastic fingers, with a reserve of many tons of gripping power in their human-like design, pulled the hands of the Lord Sto Odin forward until they rested on the manikin meee. Flavius, quick, smooth, agile, held the lord's head upright on his weary old neck, so that the ancient lord could see what the hands were doing.

"Is any part dead?" said the old lord to the manikin, his voice clearer for the moment

The manikin shimmered and two spots of solid black showed along the outside upper right thigh and the right buttock.

"Organic reserve?" said the lord to his own manikin meee, and again the machine responded to his command. The whole miniature body shimmered to a violent purple and then subsided to an even pink.

"I still have some all-around strength left in this body, prosthetics and all," said Sto Odin to the two robots. "Set me up, I tell you! Set me up."

"Are you sure, my Lord," said Livius, "that we should do a thing like that here where the three of us are alone in a deep tunnel? In less than half an hour we could take you to a real hospital, where actual doctors could examine you."

"I said," repeated the Lord Sto Odin, "set me up. I'll watch the manikin while you do it."

"Your control is in the usual place, my Lord?" asked Livius.

"How much of a turn?" asked Flavius.

"Nape of my neck, of course. The skin over it is artificial and self-sealing. One twelfth of a turn will be enough. Do you have a knife with you?"

Flavius nodded. He took a small sharp knife from his belt, probed gently around the old lord's neck and then brought the knife down with a quick, sure turn.

"That did it!" said Sto Odin, in a voice so hearty that both of them stepped back a little. Flavius put the knife back in his belt. Sto Odin, who had almost been comatose a moment before, now held the manikin meee in his unaided hands. "See, gentlemen!" he cried. "You may be robots, but you can still see the truth and report it."

They both looked at the manikin meee, which Sto Odin now held in front of himself, his thumb and fingertip in the armpits of the medical doll.

"Watch what it reads," he said to them with a clear, ringing voice.

"Prosthetics!" he shouted at the manikin.

The tiny body changed from its pink color to a mixture. Both legs turned the color of a deep bruised blue. The legs, the left arm, one eye, one ear and the skullcap stayed blue, showing the prostheses in place.

"Felt pain!" shouted Sto Odin at the manikin. The little doll returned to its light pink color. All the details were there, even to genitals, toe-nails and eyelashes. There was no trace of the black color of pain in any part of the little body.

"Potential pain!" shouted Sto Odin. The doll shimmered. Most of it settled to the color of dark walnut wood, with some areas of intense brown showing more clearly than the rest.

"Potential breakdown—one day!" shouted Sto Odin. The little body went back to its normal color of pink. Small lightnings showed at the base of the brain, but nowhere else.

"I'm all right," said Sto Odin. "I can continue as I have done for the last several hundred years. Leave me set up on this high life-output. I can stand it for a few hours, and if I cannot, there's little lost." He put the manikin back in its bag, hung the bag on the doorhandle of the sedan-chair and commanded the legionaries, "Proceed!"

The legionaries stared at him as if they could not see him.

He followed the lines of glance and saw that they were gazing rigidly at his manikin meee. It had turned black.

"Are you dead?" asked Livius, speaking as hoarsely as a robot could.

"Not dead at all!" cried Sto Odin. "I have been death in fractions of a moment, but for the time I am still life. That was just the pain-sum of my living body which showed on the manikin meee. The fire of life still burns within me. Watch as I put the manikin away ... " The doll flared into a swirl of

pastel orange as the Lord Sto Odin pulled the cover down.

They looked away as though they had seen an evil or an explosion.

"Down men, down," he cried, calling them wrong names as they stepped back between their carrying shafts to take him deeper under the vitals of the earth.

5

He dreamed brown dreams while they trotted down endless ramps. He woke a little to see the yellow walls passing. He looked at his dry old hand and it seemed to him that in this atmosphere, he had himself become more reptilian than human.

"I am caught by the dry, drab enturtlement of old, old age," he murmured, but the voice was weak and the robots did not hear him. They were running downward on a long meaningless concrete ramp which had become filmed by a leak of ancient oil, and they were taking care that they did not stumble and drop their precious master.

At a deep, hidden point the downward ramp divided, the left into a broad arena of steps which could have seated thousands of spectators for some never-to-occur event, and right into a narrow ramp which bore upward and then curved, yellow lights and all.

"Stop!" called Sto Odin. "Do you see her? Do you hear it?"

"Hear what?" said Flavius.

"The beat and the cadence of the congohelium rising out of the Gebiet. The whirl and the skirl of impossible music coming at us through miles of solid rock? That girl whom I can already see, waiting at a door which should never have been opened? The sound of the star-borne music, not designed for the proper human ear?" He shouted, "Can't you hear it? That cadence. The unlawful metal of congohelium so terrible far underground? Dah, dab. Dah, dah. Dah. Music which nobody has ever understood before?"

Said Flavius, "I hear nothing, saving the pulse of air in this corridor, and your own heartbeat, my Lord. And something else, a little like machinery, very far away."

"There, that!" cried Sto Odin, "which you call 'a little like machinery,' does it come in a beat of five separate sounds, each one distinct?"

"No. No, sir. Not five."

"And you, Livius, when you were a man, you were very telepathic? Is there any of that left in the robot which is you?"

"No, my Lord, nothing. I have good senses, and I am also cut into the subsurface radio of the Instrumentality. Nothing unusual."

"No five-beat? Each note separate, short of prolonged, given meaning and shape by the terrible music of the congohelium, imprisoned with us inside this much-too-solid rock? You hear nothing?"

The two robots, shaped like Roman legionaries shook their heads.

"But I can see her, through this stone. She has breasts like ripe pears and dark brown eyes that are like the stones of fresh-cut peaches. And I can hear what they are singing, their weird silly words of a pentapaul, made into something majestic by the awful music of the congohelium. Listen to the words. When I repeat them, they sound just silly, because the dread-inspiring music does not come with them. Her name is Santuna and she stares at him. No wonder she stares. He is much more tall than most men, yet he makes this foolish song into something frightening and strange.

Slim Jim.

Dim him.

Grim.

And his name is Yebayee, but now he is Sun-boy. He has the long face and the thick lips of the first man to talk about one god and one only. Akhnaton."

"Akhnaton the pharaoh," said Flavius. "That name was known in my office when I was a man. It was a secret. One of the first and greatest of the more-than-ancient kings. You see him, my Lord?"

"Through this rock I see him. Through this rock I hear the delirium engendered by the congohelium. I go to him." The Lord Sto Odin stepped out of the sedan-chair and beat softly and weakly against the solid stone wall of the corridor. The yellow lamps gleamed. The legionaries

were helpless. Here was something which their sharp swords could not pierce. Their once-human personalities, engraved on their microminiaturized brains, could not make sense out of the all-too-human situation of an old, old man dreaming wild dreams in a remote tunnel.

Sto Odin leaned against the wall, breathing heavily, and said to them with a sibilant rasp:

"These are no whispers which can be missed. Can't you hear the five-beat of the congohelium, making its crazy music again? Listen to the words of this one. It's another pentapaul. Silly, bony words given flesh and blood and entrails by the music which carries them. Here, listen.

Try. Vie.

Cry. Die.

Bye.

This one you did not hear either?"

"May I use my radio to ask the surface of Earth for advice?" said one of the robots.

"Advice! Advice! What advice do we need? This is the Gebiet and one more hour of running and you will be in the heart of the Bezirk."

"He climbed back into the sedan-chair and commanded, "Run, men, run! It can't be more than three or four kilometers somewhere in this warren of stone. I will guide you. If I stop guiding you, you may take my body back to the surface, so that I can be given a wonderful funeral and be shot with a rocket-coffin into space with an orbit of no return. You have nothing to worry about. You are machines, nothing more, are you not? Are you not?" His voice shrilled at the end.

Said Flavius, "Nothing more."

Said Livius, "Nothing more. And yet—"

"And yet what?" demanded the Lord Sto Odin.

"And yet," said Livius, "I know I am a machine, and I know that I have known feelings only when I was once a living man. I sometimes wonder if you people might go too far. Too far, with us robots. Too far, perhaps, with the underpeople too. Things were once simple, when everything that talked was a human being and everything which did not talk was not. You may be coming to an ending of the ways."

"If you had said that on the surface," said the Lord Sto Odin grimly, "your head might have been burned off by its automatic magnesium flare. You know that there you are monitored against having illegal thoughts."

"Too well do I know it," said Livius, "and I know that I must have died once as a man, if I exist here in robot form. Dying didn't seem to hurt me then and it probably won't hurt next time. But nothing really matters much when we get down this far into the Earth. When we get this far down, everything changes. I never really understood that the inside of the world was this big and this sick."

"It's not how far down we are," said the lord crossly, "it's where we are. This is the Gebiet, where all laws have been lifted, and down below and over yonder is the Bezirk, where laws have never been. Carry me rapidly now. I want to look on this strange musician with the face of Akhnaton and I want to talk to the girl who worships him, Santuna. Run carefully now. Up a little, to the left a little. If I sleep, do not worry. Keep going. I will waken myself when we come anywhere near that music of the congohelium. If I can hear it now, so far away, think of what it will be like when you yourselves approach it!"

He leaned back in his seat. They picked up the shafts of the sedan-chair and ran in the direction which they had been told.

6

They had run for more than an hour, with occasional delays when they had tricky footwork over leaking pipes or damaged walkways, when the light became so bright that they had to reach in their pouches and put on sun-glasses, which looked very odd indeed underneath the Roman helmets of two fully armed legionaries. (It was even more odd, of course, that the eyes were not eyes at all; robot eyes were like white marbles swimming in little bowls of glittering ink, producing a grimly milky stare.) They looked at their master and he had not yet stirred, so they took a corner of his robe

and twisted it firmly into a bandage to protect his eyes against the bright light.

The new light made the yellow bulbs of the corridor fade out of notice. The light was like a whole aurora borealis compressed and projected through the basement corridor of a hotel left over from long ago. Neither of the robots knew the nature of the light, but it pulsed in beats of five.

The music and the lights became obtrusive even to the two robots as they walked or trotted downward toward the center of the world. The air-forcing system must have been very strong, because the inner heat of the earth had not reached them, even at this great depth. Flavius had no idea of how many kilometers below the surface they had come. He knew that it was not much in planetary distance, but it was very far indeed for an ordinary walk.

The Lord Sto Odin sat up in the litter quite suddenly. When the two robots slowed, he said crossly at them:

"Keep going. Keep going. I am going to set myself up. I'm strong enough to do it."

He took out his manikin meee and studied it in the light of the minor aurora borealis which repeated itself in the corridor. The manikin ran through its changes of diagnoses and colors. The lord was satisfied. With firm old fingers he put the knifetip to the back of his neck and set his output of vital energies at an even higher level.

The robots did what they had been told.

The lights had been bewildering. Sometimes they made walking itself difficult. It was hard to believe that dozens or hundreds, perhaps thousands, of human beings had found their way through these uncharted corridors in order to discover the inmost precincts of Bezirk, where all things were allowed. Yet the robots had to believe it. They themselves had been here before and they scarcely remembered how they had found their way the other time.

And the music! It beat at them harder than ever before. It came in beats of five, ringing out the tones of the pentapaul, the five-word verse which the mad cat-minstrel C'paul had developed while playing his c'lute some centuries before. The form itself confirmed and reinforced the poignancy of cats combined with the heartbreaking intelligence of the human being. No wonder people had found their way down here.

In all the history of man, there was no act which could not be produced by any one of the three bitterest forces in the human spirit—religious faith, vengeful vainglory or sheer vice. Here, for the sake of vice, men had found the undiscoverable deep and had put it to wild, filthy uses. The music called them on.

This was very special music. It came at Sto Odin and his legionaries in two utterly different ways by now, reverberating at them through solid rock and echoing, re-echoing through the maze of corridors, carried by the dark heavy air. The corridor lights were still yellow, but the electromagnetic illuminations, which kept time to the music, made the ordinary lighting seem wan. The music controlled all things, paced all time, called all life to itself. It was song of a kind which the two robots had not noticed with such intensity on their previous visit.

Even the Lord Sto Odin, for all his travels and experiences, had never heard it before.

It was all of this:

The beat and the heat and the neat repeat of the notes which poured from the congohelium-metal never made for music, matter and antimatter locked in a fine magnetic grid to ward off the outermost perils of space. Now a piece of it was deep in the body of Old Earth, counting out strange cadences. The churn and the burn and the hot return of music riding the living rock, accompanying itself in an air-carried echo. The surge and the urge of an erotic dirge which moaned, groaned through the heavy stone.

Sto Odin woke and stared sharply forward, seeing nothing but experiencing everything.

"Soon we shall see the gate and the girl," said he.

"You know this, man? You who have never been here before?" Livius had spoken.

"I know it," said the Lord Sto Odin, "because I know it"

"You wear the feathers of immunity."

"I wear the feathers of immunity."

"Does that mean that we, your robots, are free too, down in this Bezirk?"

"Free as you like," said the Lord Sto Odin, "provided that you do my wishes. Otherwise I shall kill you."

"If we keep going," said Flavius, "may we sing the underpeople song? It might keep some of that terrible music out of our brains. The music has all feelings and we have none. Nevertheless it disturbs us. I do not know why."

"My radio contact with the surface has lapsed," said Livius irrelevantly. "I need to sing too."

"Go ahead, both of you," said the Lord Sto Odin. "But keep on going, or you die."

The robots lifted their voice in song:

I eat my rage.

I swallow my grief.

There's no relief

From pain or age.

Our time comes.

I work my life.

I breathe my breath.

I face my death

Without a wife.

Our time comes.

We undermen

Shove, crush and crash.

There'll be a clash

And thunder when

Our time comes.

Though the song had the barbarous, ancient thrill of bagpipes in it, the melody could not counter or cancel the sane, wild rhythm of the congohelium beating at them, now, from all directions at once.

"Nice piece of sedition, that," said the Lord Sto Odin drily, "but I like it better as music than I do this noise which is tearing its way through the depths of the world. Keep going. Keep going. I must meet this mystery before I die."

"We find it hard to endure that music coming at us through the rock," said Livius.

"It seems to us that it is much stronger than it was when we came here some months ago. Could it have changed?" asked Flavius.

"That is the mystery. We let them have the Gebiet, beyond our own jurisdiction. We gave them the Bezirk, to do with as they please. But these ordinary people have created or encountered some extraordinary power. They have brought new things into the Earth. It may be necessary for all three of us to die before we settle the matter."

"We can't die the way you do," said Livius. "We're already robots, and the people from whom we were imprinted have been dead a long time. Do you mean you would turn us off?"

"I would, perhaps, or else some other force. Would you mind?"

"Mind? You mean, have emotions about it? I don't know," said Flavius. "I used to think that I had real, full experience when you used the phrase *summa nulla est* and brought us up to full capacity, but that music which we have been hearing has the effect of a thousand passwords all said at once. I am beginning to care about my life and I think that I am becoming what your reference explained by the word 'afraid'."

"I too feel it," said Livius. "This is not a power which we knew to exist on Earth before. When I was a strategist someone told me about the really indescribable dangers connected with the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and it seems to me now that a danger of that kind is already with us, here inside the tunnel. Something which Earth never made. Something which man never developed. Something which no robot could out-compute. Something wild and very strong brought into being



by the use of the congohelium. Look around us."

He did not need to say that. The corridor itself had become a living, pulsing rainbow.

They turned one last loop in the corridor and they were there—

The very last limit of the realm of distress.

The source of evil music.

The end of the Bezirk.

They knew it because the music blinded them, the lights deafened them, their senses ran into one another and became confused. This was the immediate presence of the congohelium.

There was a door, immensely large, carved with elaborate Gothic ornament. It was much too big for any human man to have had need of it. In the door a single figure stood, her breasts accented into vivid brights and darks by the brilliant light which poured from one side of the door only, the right.

They could see through the door, into an immense hall wherein the floor was covered by hundreds of limp bundles of ragged clothing. These were the people, unconscious. Above them and between them there danced the high figure of a male, holding a glittering something in his hands. He prowled and leaped and twisted and turned to the pulsation of the music which he himself produced.

"Summa nulla est," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I want you two robots to be keyed to maximum. Are you now to top alert?"

"We are, sir," chorused Livius and Flavius.

"You have your weapons?"

"We cannot use them," said Livius, "since it is contrary to our programming, but you can use them, sir."

"I'm not sure," said Flavius. "I'm not at all sure. We are equipped with surface weapons. This music, these hypnotics, these lights—who knows what they may have done to us and to our weapons, which were never designed to operate this far underground?"

"No fear," said Sto Odin, "I'll take care of all of it."

He took out a small knife.

When the knife gleamed under the dancing lights, the girl in the doorway finally took notice of the Lord Sto Odin and his strange companions.

She spoke to him, and her voice rode through the heavy air with the accents of clarity and death.

7

"Who are you," she said, "that you should bring weapons to the last uttermost limits of the Bezirk?"

"This is just a small knife, lady," said the Lord Sto Odin, "and with this I can do no harm to anyone. I am an old man and I am setting my own vitality button higher."

She watched incuriously as he brought the point of the knife to the nape of his own neck and then gave it three full, deliberate turns.

Then she stared and said, "You are strange, my Lord. Perhaps you are dangerous to my friends and me."

"I am dangerous to no one." The robots looked at him, surprised, because of the fullness and the richness of his voice. He had set his vitality very high indeed, giving himself, at that rate, perhaps no more than an hour or two of life, but he had regained the physical power and the emotional force of his own prime years. They looked at the girl. She had taken Sto Odin's statement at full face value, almost as though it were an incontrovertible canon of faith.

"I wear," Sto Odin went on, "these feathers. Do you know what they signify?"

"I can see," she said, "that you are a lord of the Instrumentality, but I do not know what the feathers mean ..."

"Waiver of immunity. Anyone who can manage it is allowed to kill me or to hurt me without danger of punishment." He smiled, a little grimly. "Of course, I have the right to fight back, and I do know how to fight. My name is the Lord Sto Odin. Why are you here, girl?"

"I love that man in there—if he is a man any more."

She stopped and pursed her lips in bewilderment. It was strange to see those girlish lips compressed in a momentary stammer of the soul. She stood there, more nude than a newborn infant, her face covered with provocative, off-beat cosmetics. She lived for a mission of love in the depths of the nothing and nowhere: yet she remained a girl, a person, a human being capable, as she was now, of an immediate relationship to another human being.

"He was a man, my Lord, even when he came back from the surface with that piece of congohelium. Only a few weeks ago, those people were dancing too. Now they just lie on the ground. They do not even die. I myself held the congohelium too, and I made music with it. Now the power of the music is eating him up and he dances without resting. He won't come out to me and I do not dare go into that place with him. Perhaps I too would end up as one more heap on the floor."

A crescendo of the intolerable music made speech intolerable for her. She waited for it to pass while the room beyond blazed a pulsing violet at them.

When the music of the congohelium subsided a little, Sto Odin spoke: "How long has it been that he has danced alone with this strange power coursing through him?"

"One year. Two years. Who can tell? I came down here and lost time when I arrived. You lords don't even let us have clocks and calendars up on the surface."

"We ourselves saw you dancing just a tenth-year ago," said Livius, interrupting.

She glanced at them, quickly, incuriously. "Are you the same two robots who were here a while back? You look very different now. You look like ancient soldiers. I can't imagine why ... All right, maybe it was a week, maybe it was a year."

"What were you doing down here?" asked Sto Odin, gently.

"What do you think?" she said. "Why do all the other people come down here? I was running away from the timeless time, the lifeless life, the hopeless hope that you lords apply to all mankind on the surface. You let the robots and the underpeople work, but you freeze the real people in a happiness which has no hope and no escape."

"I'm right," cried Sto Odin. "I'm right, though I die for it!"

"I don't understand you," said the girl. "Do you mean that you too, a lord, have come down here to escape from the useless hope that wraps up all of us?"

"No, no, no," he said, as the shifting lights of the congohelium music made improbable tracteries across his features. "I just meant that I told the other lords that something like this was happening to you ordinary people on the surface. Now you are telling me exactly what I told them. Who were you, anyhow?"

The girl glanced down at her unclothed body as though she were aware, for the first time, of her nakedness. Sto Odin could see the blush pour from her face down across her neck and chest. She said, very quietly:

"Don't you know? We never answer that question down here."

"You have rules?" he said. "You people have rules, even here in the Bezirk?"

She brightened up when she realized that he had not meant the indecent question as an impropriety. Eagerly she explained. "There aren't any rules. They are just understandings. Somebody told me when I left the ordinary world and crossed the line of Gebiet. I suppose they did not tell you because you were a lord, or because they hid from your strange war-robots."

"I met no one, coming down."

"Then they were hiding from you, my Lord."

Sto Odin looked around at his legionaries to see if they would confirm that statement but neither Flavius nor Livius said anything at all. He turned back to the girl. "I didn't mean to pry. Can you tell me what kind of person you are? I don't need the particulars."

"When I was alive, I was a once-born," she said. "I did not live long enough to be renewed. The robots and a subcommissioner of the Instrumentality took a look at me to see if I could be trained for the Instrumentality. More than enough brains, they said, but no character at all. I thought about that a long time. 'No character at all.' I knew I couldn't kill my self, and I didn't want to live, so I

looked happy every time I thought a monitor might be scanning me and I found my way to the Gebiet. It wasn't death, and it wasn't life, but it was an escape from endless fun. I hadn't been down here long—" she pointed at the Gebiet above them—"before I met him. We loved each other very soon and he said that the Gebiet was not much improvement on the surface. He said he had already been down here, in the Bezirk looking for a fun-death."

"A what?" said Sto Odin, as if he could not believe the words. "A fun-death. Those were his words and his idea. I followed him around and we loved each other. I waited for him when he went to the surface to get the congohelium. I thought that his love for me would put the fun-death out of his mind."

"Are you telling me the whole truth?" said Sto Odin. "Or is this just your part of the story?"

She stammered protests but he did not ask again. The Lord Sto Odin said nothing but he looked heavily at her. She winced, bit her lip, and finally said, through all the music and the lights, very clearly indeed, "Stop it. You are hurting me."

The Lord Sto Odin stared at her, said innocently, "I am doing nothing," and stared on. There was much to stare at. She was a girl the color of honey. Even through these lights and shadows he could see that she had no clothing at all. Nor did she have a single hair left on her body—no head of hair, no eyebrows, probably no eyelashes, though he could not tell at that distance. She had traced golden eyebrows far up on her forehead, giving her the look of endless mocking inquiry. She had painted her mouth gold, so that when she spoke, her words cascaded from a golden source. She had painted her upper eyelids golden too, but the lower were black as carbon itself. The total effect was alien to all the previous experiences of mankind: it was lascivious grief to the thousandth power, dry wantonness perpetually unfulfilled, femaleness in the service of remote purposes, humanity enraptured by strange planets.

He stood and stared. If she were still human at all, this would sooner or later force her to take the initiative. It did.

She spoke again, "Who are you? You are living too fast, too fiercely. Why don't you go in and dance, like all the others?" She gestured past the open door, where the ragged unconscious shapes of all the people lay strewn about the floor.

"You call that dancing?" said the Lord Sto Odin. "I do not. There is one man who dances. Those others lie on the floor. Let me ask you the same question. Why don't you dance yourself?"

"I want him, not the dance. I am Santuna and he seized me once in human, mortal, ordinary love. But he becomes Sun-boy, more so every day, and he dances with those people who lie on the floor —"

"You call that dancing?" snapped the Lord Sto Odin. He shook his head and added grimly, "I see no dance."

"You don't see it? You really don't see it?" she cried.

He shook his head obstinately and grimly.

She turned so that she looked into the room beyond her and she brought her high, clear penetrating wail which even cut through the five-beat pulse of the congohelium. She cried:

"Sun-boy, Sun-boy, hear me!"

There was no break in the quick escape of the feet which pattered in the figure eight, no slowing down the fingers which beat against the shimmering non-focus of the metal which was carried in the dancer's arms.

"My lover, my beloved, my man!" she cried again, her voice even more shrill and demanding than before.

There was a break in the cadence of the music and the dance. The dancer sheered toward them with a perceptible slowing down of his cadence. The lights of the inner room, the great door and the outer hall all became more steady. Sto Odin could see the girl more clearly; she really didn't have a single hair on her body. He could see the dancer too; the young man was tall, thin beyond the ordinary suffering of man, and the metal which he carried shimmered like water reflecting a thousand lights. The dancer spoke, quickly and angrily:

"You called me. You have called me thousands of times. Come on in, if you wish. But don't call

me."

As he spoke, the music faded out completely, the bundles on the floor began to stir and to groan and to awaken.

Santuna stammered hastily, "This time it wasn't me. It was these people. One of them is very strong. He cannot see the dancers."

The Sun-boy turned to the Lord Sto Odin. "Come in and dance then, if you wish. You are already here. You might as well. Those machines of yours—" he nodded at the robot-legionaries—"they couldn't dance anyhow. Turn them off." The dancer started to turn away.

"I shall not dance, but I would like to see it," said Sto Odin, with enforced mildness. He did not like this young man at all—not the phosphorescence of his skin, the dangerous metal cradled in his arm, the suicidal recklessness of his prancing walk. Anyhow, there was too much light this far underground and too few explanations of what was being done.

"Man, you're a peeper. That's real nasty, for an old man like you. Or do you just want to be a man?"

The Lord Sto Odin felt his temper flare up. "Who are you, man, that you should call man man in such a tone? Aren't you still human, yourself?"

"Who knows? Who cares? I have tapped the music of the universe. I have piped all imaginable happiness into this room. I am generous. I share it with these friends of mine." Sun-boy gestured at the ragged heaps on the floor, who had begun to squirm in their misery without the music. As Sto Odin saw into the room more clearly, he could see that the bundles on the floor were young people, mostly young men, though there were a few girls among them. They all of them looked sick and weak and pale.

Sto Odin retorted. "I don't like the looks of this. I have half a mind to seize you and to take that metal."

The dancer spun on the ball of his right foot, as though to leap away in a wild prance.

The Lord Sto Odin stepped into the room after Sun-boy.

Sun-boy turned full circle, so that he faced Sto Odin once again. He pushed the lord out of the door, marching him firmly but irresistibly three steps backward.

"Flavius, seize the metal. Livius, take the man," spat Sto Odin.

Neither robot moved.

Sto Odin, his senses and his strength set high by the severe twist upward which he had given his vitality button, stepped forward to seize the congohelium himself. Made one step and no more: he froze in the doorway, immobile.

He had not felt like that since the last time the doctors put him in a surgery machine, when they found that part of his skull had developed bone-cancer from old, old radiation in space and from the subsequent effects of sheer age. They had given him a prosthetic half-skull and for the time of the operation he had been immobilized by straps and drugs. This time there were no straps, no drugs, but the forces which Sun-boy had invoked were equally strong.

The dancer danced in an enormous figure-eight among the clothed bodies lying on the floor. He had been singing the song which the robot Flavius had repeated far up above, on the surface of the Earth—the song about the weeping man.

But Sun-boy did not weep.

His ascetic, thin face was twisted in a broad grin of mockery. When he sang about sorrow it was not sorrow which he really expressed, but derision, laughter, contempt for ordinary human sorrow. The congohelium shimmered and the aurora borealis almost blinded Sto Odin. There were two other drums in the middle of the room, one with high notes and the other with even higher ones.

The congohelium resonated: boom—Taoom-doom-doom—room!

The large ordinary drum rattled out, when Sun-boy passed at and reached out his fingers: ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan, ritiplin!

The small, strange drum emitted only two notes, and it almost croaked them: kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!

As Sun-boy danced back the Lord Sto Odin thought that he could hear the voice of the girl

Santuna, calling to Sun-boy, but he could not turn his head to see if she were speaking.

Sun-boy stood in front of Sto Odin, his feet still weaving as he danced, his thumbs and his palms torturing hypnotic dissonances from the gleaming congohelium.

"Old man, you tried to trick me. You failed."

The Lord Sto Odin tried to speak, but the muscles of his mouth and throat would not respond. He wondered what force this was, which could stop all unusual effort but still leave his heart free to beat, his lungs to breathe, his brain (both natural and prosthetic) to think.

The boy danced on. He danced away a few steps, turned and danced back to Sto Odin.

"You wear the feathers of immunity. I am free to kill you. If I did the Lady Mmona and the Lord Nuru-or and your other friends would never know what happened."

If Sto Odin could have moved his eyelids that much, he would have opened his eyes in astonishment at the discovery that a superstitious dancer, far underground, knew the secret business of the Instrumentality.

"You can't believe what you are looking at, even though you see it plainly," said Sun-boy more seriously. "You think that a lunatic has found a way to work wonders with a piece of the congohelium taken far underground. Foolish old man! No ordinary lunatic would have carried this metal down here without blowing up the fragment and himself with it. No man could have done what I have done. You are thinking, If the gambler who took the name Sun-boy is not a man, what is he? What brings the power and music of the Sun so far down underground? Who makes the wretched ones of the world dream in a crazy, happy sleep while their life spills and leaks into a thousand kinds of times, a thousand kinds of worlds? Who does it, if it is not mere me? You don't have to ask. I can tell perfectly well what you are thinking. I'll dance it for you. I am a very kind man, even though you do not like me."

The dancer's feet had been moving in the same place while he spoke.

Suddenly he whirled away, leaping and vaulting over the wretched human figures on the floor.

He passed the big drum and touched it: ritiplin, rataplan!

Left hand brushed the little drum: kid-nork, kid-nork!

Both hands seized the congohelium, as though the strong wrists were going to tear it apart.

The whole room blazed with music, gleamed with thunder as the human senses interpenetrated each other. The Lord Sto Odin felt the air pass his skin like cool, wet oil. Sun-boy the dancer became transparent and through him the Lord Sto Odin could see a landscape which was not earth and never would be.

"Fluminescent, luminescent, incandescent, fluorescent," sang the dancer. "Those are the worlds of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, seven planets in a close group, all travelling together around a single sun. Worlds of wild magnetism and perpetual dustfall, where the surfaces of the planets are changed by the forever-shifting magnetism of their erratic orbits! Strange worlds, where stars dance dances wilder than any dance ever conceived by man-planets which have a consciousness in common, but perhaps not intelligence—planets which called across all space and all time for companionship until I, me the gambler, came down to this cavern and found them. Where you had left them, my Lord Sto Odin, when you said to a robot:

" 'I do not like the looks of those planets,' said you, Sto Odin, speaking to a robot a long time ago. 'People might get sick or crazy, just looking at them,' said you, Sto Odin, long, long ago. 'Hide the knowledge in some out of the way computer,' you commanded, Sto Odin, before I was born. But the computer was that one, that one in the corner behind you, which you cannot turn to see. I came down to this room, looking for a fun-suicide, something really unusual which would bang the noddies when they found I had gotten away. I danced here in the darkness, almost the way I am dancing now, and I had taken about twelve different kinds of drugs, so that I was wild and free and very very receptive. That computer spoke to me, Sto Odin. Your computer, not mine. It spoke to me, and you know what it said?

"You might as well know, Sto Odin, because you are dying. You set your vitality high in order to fight me. I have made you stand still. Could I do that if I were a mere man? Look. I will turn solid again."

With a rainbow-like scream of chords and sounds, Sun-boy twisted the congohelium again until both the inner chamber and the outer bloomed with lights of a thousand colors and the deep underground air became drenched with music which seemed psychotic, because no human mind had ever invented it. The Lord Sto Odin, imprisoned in his own body with his two legionary-robots frozen half a pace behind him, wondered if he really were dying in vain and tried to guess whether he would be blinded and deafened by this dancer before he died. The congohelium twisted and shone before him.

Sun-boy danced backward over the bodies on the floor, danced backward with an odd cadenced run which looked as though he were plunging forward in a wild, competitive foot-race when the music and his own footsteps carried him back, toward the center of the inner room. The figure jumped in an odd stance, face looking so far downward that Sun-boy might have been studying his own steps on the floor, the congohelium held above and behind his neck, legs lifting high in the cruel high-kneed prance.

The Lord Sto Odin thought he could hear the girl calling again, but he could not distinguish words.

The drums spoke again: ritiplin, ritiplin, rataplan! and then kid-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork!

The dancer spoke as the pandemonium subsided. He spoke, as his voice was high, strange, like a bad recording played on the wrong machine:

"The something is talking to you. You can talk."

The Lord Sto Odin found that his throat and lips moved. Quietly, secretly, like an old soldier, he tried his feet and fingers: these did not move. Only his voice could be used. He spoke, and he said the obvious:

"Who are you, something?"

Sun-boy looked across at Sto Odin. He stood erect and calm. Only his feet moved, and they did a wild, agile little jig which did not affect the rest of his body. Apparently some kind of dance was necessary to keep the connection going between the unexplained reach of the Douglas-Ouyang planets, the piece of the congohelium, the more than human dancer and the tortured blissful figures on the floor. The face, the face itself was quite composed and almost sad.

"I have been told," said Sun-boy, "to show you who I am."

He danced around the drums: rataplan, rataplan! kid-nork-nork, kid-nork, kid-nork-nork!

He held the congohelium high and wrenched it so that a great moan came out. Sto Odin felt sure that a sound as wild and forlorn as that would be sure to reach the surface of the Earth many kilometers above, but his prudent judgment assured him that this was a fanciful thought gestated by his personal situation, and that any real sound strong enough to reach all the way to the surface would also be strong enough to bring the bruised and shattered rock of the ceiling pouring down upon their heads.

The congohelium ran down the colors of the spectrum until it stopped at a dark, wet liver-red, very close to black.

The Lord Sto Odin, in that momentary near silence, found that the entire story had been thrust into his mind without being strung out and articulated with words. The true history of this chamber had entered his memory sidewise, as it were. In one moment he knew nothing of it; in the next instance it was as if he had remembered the whole narrative for most of his life.

He also felt himself set free.

He stumbled backward three or four steps.

To his immense relief, his robots turned around, themselves free, and accompanied him. He let them put their hands in his armpits.

His face was suddenly covered with kisses.

His plastic cheek felt, thinly and dimly, the imprint, real and living, of female human lips. It was the odd girl—beautiful, bald, naked and golden-lipped—who had waited and shouted from the door.

Despite physical fatigue and the sudden shock of intruded knowledge, the Lord Sto Odin knew what he had to say.

"Girl, you shouted for me."

"Yes, my Lord."

"You have had the strength to watch the congohelium and not to give in to it?"

She nodded but said nothing.

"You have been strong-willed enough not to go into that room?"

"Not strong-willed, my Lord. I just love him, my man in there."

"You have waited, girl, for many months?"

"Not all the time. I go up the corridor when I have to eat or drink or sleep or do my personals. I even have mirrors and combs and tweezers and paint there, to make myself beautiful, the way that Sun-boy might want me."

The Lord Sto Odin looked over his shoulder. The music was low and keening with some emotions other than grief. The dancer was doing a long, slow dance, full of creeping and reaches, as he passed the congohelium from one hand to the other. "Do you hear me, dancer?" called the Lord Sto Odin, the Instrumentality once more coursing through his veins.

The dancer did not speak nor seem to change his course. But kid-nork, kid-nork said the little drum, quite unexpectedly.

"He, and the face behind him—they will let the girl leave if she really forgets him and this place in the act of leaving. Won't you?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

Ritiplin, rataplan said the big drum, which had not sounded since Sto Odin was let free.

"But I don't want to go," said the girl.

"I know you don't want to go. You will go to please me. You can come back as soon as I have done my work." She stood mute so he continued,

"One of my robots, Livius, the one imprinted by a psychiatrist general, will run with you, but I command him to forget this place and all things connected with it. Summa nulla est. Have you heard me, Livius? You will run with this girl and you will forget. You will run and forget. You too will run and forget, Santuna my dear, but two Earth-nychtherons from now you will remember just enough to come back here, should you wish to, should you need to. Otherwise you will go to the Lady Mmona and learn from her what you should do for the rest of your life."

"You are promising, my Lord, that in two days and nights I can come back if I even feel like it."

"Now run, my girl, run. Run to the surface. Livius, carry her if you must. But run! run! run! More than she depends upon it."

Santuna looked at him very earnestly. Her nakedness was innocence. The gold upper eyelids met the black lower eyelids as she blinked and then brushed away wet tears.

"Kiss me," she said, "and I will run."

He leaned down and kissed her.

She turned, looked back one last time at her dancer-lover, and then ran long-legged into the corridor. Livius ran after her, gracefully, untiringly. In twenty minutes they would be reaching the upper limits of the Gebiet.

"You know what I am doing?" said Sto Odin to the dancer.

This time the dancer and the force behind him did not deign to answer.

Said Sto Odin, "Water. There is water in a jug in my litter. Take me there, Flavius."

The robot-legionary took the aged and trembling Sto Odin to the litter.

8

The Lord Sto Odin then performed the trick which changed human history for many centuries to come and, in so doing, exploded an enormous cavern in the vitals of the Earth.

He used one of the most secret ruses of the Instrumentality.

He triple-thought.

Only a few very adept persons could triple-think, when they were given every possible chance of training. Fortunately for mankind, the Lord Sto Odin had been one of the successful ones.

He set three systems of thought into action. At the top level he behaved rationally as he explored the old room; at a lower level of his mind he planned a wild surprise for the dancer with the congohelium. But at the third, lowest level, he decided what he must do in the time of a single blink

and trusted his autonomic nervous system to carry out the rest.

These are the commands he gave:

Flavius should be set on the wild-alert and readied for attack.

The computer should be reached and told to record the whole episode, everything which Sto Odin had learned, and should be shown how to take counter-measures while Sto Odin gave the matter no further conscious thought. The gestalt of action—the general frame of retaliation—was clear for thousandths of a second in Sto Odin's mind and then it dropped from sight.

The music rose to a roar.

White light covered Sto Odin.

"You meant me harm!" called Sun-boy from beyond the Gothic door.

"I meant you harm," Sto Odin acknowledged, "but it was a passing thought. I did nothing. You are watching me."

"I am watching you," said the dancer grimly. Kid-nork, kid-nork went the little drum. "Do not go out of my sight. When you are ready to come through my door, call me or just think of it. I will meet you and help you in."

"Good enough," said the Lord Sto Odin.

Flavius still held him. Sto Odin concentrated on the melody which Sun-boy was creating, a wild new song never before suspected in the history of the world. He wondered if he could surprise the dancer by throwing his own song back at him. At the same instant, his fingers were performing a third set of actions which Sto Odin's mind no longer had to heed. Sto Odin's hand opened a lid in the robot's chest, right into the laminated controls of the brain. The hand itself changed certain adjustments, commanding that the robot should within the quarter-hour, kill all forms of life within reach other than the command-transmitter. Flavius did not know what had been done to him; Sto Odin did not even notice what his own hand had done.

"Take me over to the old computer," said Sto Odin to the robot Flavius. "I want to discover how the strange story which I have just learned may be true." Sto Odin kept thinking of music which would even startle the user of the congohelium.

He stood at the computer.

His hand, responding to the triple-think command which it had been given, turned the computer up and pressed the button, Record this scene. The computer's old relays almost grunted as they came to the alert and complied.

"Let me see the map," said Sto Odin to the computer.

Far behind him, the dancer had changed his pace into a fast jog-trot of hot suspicion.

The map appeared on the computer.

"Beautiful," said Sto Odin.

The entire labyrinth had become plain. Just above them was one of the ancient, sealed-off anti-seismic shafts—a straight, empty tubular shaft, two hundred meters wide, kilometers high. At the top, it had a lid which kept out the mud and water of the ocean floor. At the bottom, since there was no pressure other than air to worry about, it had been covered with a plastic which looked like rock, so that neither people nor robots which might be passing would try to climb into it.

"Watch what I am doing!" cried Sto Odin to the dancer.

"I am watching," said Sun-boy and there was almost a growl of perplexity in his sung-forth response.

Sto Odin shook the computer and ran the fingers of his right hand over it and coded a very specific request. His left hand—preconditioned by the triple-think—coded the emergency panel at the side of the computer with two simple, clear engineering instructions.

Sun-boy's laughter rang out behind him. "You are asking that a piece of the congohelium be sent down to you. Stop! Stop, before you sign it with your name and your authority as a lord of the Instrumentality. Your unsigned request will do no harm. The central computer up top will just think that it is some of the crazy people in the Bezirk making senseless demands." The voice rose to a note of urgency, "Why did the machine signal 'received and complied with' to you just now?"

The Lord Sto Odin lied blandly, "I don't know. Maybe they will send me a piece of the



congohelium to match the one that you have there."

"You're lying," cried the dancer. "Come over here to the door."

Flavius led the Lord Sto Odin to the ridiculous-beautiful Gothic archway.

The dancer was leaping from foot to foot. The congohelium shone a dull alert red. The music wept as though all the anger and suspicion of mankind had been incorporated into a new unforgettable fugue, like a delirious atonal counterpoint to Johann Sebastian Bach's Third Brandenburg Concerto.

"I am here." The Lord Sto Odin spoke easily.

"You are dying!" cried the dancer.

"I was dying before you first noticed me. I set my vitality control to maximum after I entered the Bezirk."

"Come on in, then," said Sun-boy, "and you will never die."

Sto Odin took the edge of the door and let himself down to the stone floor. Only when he was comfortably seated did he speak:

"I am dying, that is true. But I would rather not come in. I will just watch you dance as I die."

"What are you doing? What have you done?" cried Sun-boy. He stopped dancing and walked over to the door.

"Search me if you wish," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I am searching you," said the dancer, "but I see nothing but your desire to get a piece of the congohelium for yourself and to out-dance me."

At this point Flavius went berserk. He ran back to the litter, leaned over, and ran toward the door. In each hand he carried an enormous solid-steel bearing.

"What's that robot doing?" cried the dancer. "I can see your mind but you are not telling him anything! He uses those steel balls to break obstructions—"

He gasped as the attack came.

Quicker than the eye could follow the movement, Flavius' sixty-ton-capacity arm whistled through the air as he flung the first steel missile directly at Sun-boy. Sun-boy, or the power within him, leapt aside with insect speed. The ball plowed through two of the rag-clothed human bodies on the floor. One body said whoof! as it died, but the other body let out no sound at all: the head had been torn off in first impact. Before the dancer could speak, Flavius flung the second ball.

This time the doorway caught it. The powers which had immobilized Sto Odin and his robots were back in operation. The ball sang as it plunged into the doorway, stopped in mid-air, sang again as the door flung it back at Flavius.

The returning ball missed Flavius' head but crushed his chest utterly. That was where his real brain was. There was a flicker of light as the robot went out, but even in dying Flavius seized the ball one last time and flung it at Sun-boy. The robot terminated operation and the heavy ball, flung wild, caught the Lord Sto Odin in the right shoulder. The Lord Sto Odin felt pain until he dragged over his manikin meee and turned all pain off. Then he looked at the shoulder. It was almost totally demolished. Blood from his organic body and hydraulic fluid from his prosthetics joined in a slow, heavy stream as the liquids met, merged and poured down his side.

The dancer almost forgot to dance.

Sto Odin wondered how far the girl had gone.

The air pressure changed.

"What is happening to the air? Why did you think about the girl? What is happening?"

"Read me," said the Lord Sto Odin.

"I will dance and get my powers first," said Sun-boy.

For a few brief minutes it seemed that the dancer with the congohelium would cause a rock-fall.

The Lord Sto Odin, dying, closed his eyes and found that it was restful to die. The blaze and noise of the world around him remained interesting, but had become unimportant.

The congohelium with a thousand shifting rainbows and the dancer had attained near-transparency when Sun-boy came back to read Sto Odin's mind.

"I see nothing," said Sun-boy worriedly. "Your vitality button is too high and you will die soon."

Where is all that air coming from? I seem to hear a faraway roar. But you are not causing it. Your robot went wild. All you do is to look at me contentedly and die. That is very strange. You want to die your way when you could live unimaginable lives in here with us!"

"That is right," said the Lord Sto Odin. "I am dying my way. But dance for me, do dance for me with the congohelium, while I tell you your own story as you told it to me. It would be a pleasure to get the story straight before I die."

The dancer looked irresolute, started to dance, and then turned back to the Lord Sto Odin.

"Are you sure you want to die right away? With the power of what you call the Douglas-Ouyang planets, which I receive right here with the help of the congohelium, you could be comfortable enough while I danced and you could still die whenever you wished. Vitality buttons are much weaker than the powers which I command. I could even help to lift you across the threshold of my door ... "

"No," said the Lord Sto Odin. "Just dance for me while I die. My way."

9

Thus the world turned. Millions of tons of water were rushing toward them.

Within minutes the Gebiet and the Bezirk would drown as the air whistled upward. Sto Odin noted contentedly that there was an air-shaft at the top of the dancer's room. He did not allow himself to third-think of what would happen when the matter and anti-matter of the congohelium were immersed in rushing salt water. Something like forty megatons, he supposed, with the tired feeling of a man who has thought a problem through long, long ago and remembers it briefly only after the situation has long passed.

Sun-boy was acting out religion before the age of space. He chorused hymns, he lifted his eyes and his hands and his piece of the congohelium to the sun; he played the rattle of whirling dervishes, the temple bells of the Man on the Two Pieces of Wood and the other temple bells of that saint who had escaped time simply by seeing it and stepping out of it. Buddha, was that his name? And he went on to the severe profanities which afflicted mankind after the Old World fell.

The music kept measure.

And the lights, too.

Whole processions of ghostly shadows followed Sun-boy as he showed how old mankind had found the gods, and the Sun, and then other gods. He pantomimed man's most ancient mystery—that man pretended to be afraid of death, when it was life that never understood it.

And as he danced, the Lord Sto Odin repeated his own story to him:

"You fled the surface, Sun-boy, because the people were stupid clods, happy and dull in their miserable happiness. You fled because you could not stand being a chicken in a poultry house, antiseptically bred, safely housed and frozen when dead. You joined the other miserable, bright restless people who sought freedom in the Gebiet. You learned about their drugs and their liquors and their smokes. You knew their women, and their parties, and their games. It wasn't enough. You became a gentleman-suicide, a hero seeking a fun-death which would stamp you with your individuality. You came on down to the Bezirk, the most forgotten and loathsome place of all. You found nothing. Just the old machines and the empty corridors. Here and there a few mummies or bones. Just the silent lights and the faint murmur of air through the corridors."

"I hear water now," said the dancer, still dancing, "rushing water. Don't you hear it, my dying Lord?"

"If I did hear it, I wouldn't care. Let's get on with your story. You came to this room. The weird door made it look like a good place for a fun-death, such as you poor castaways liked to seek, except that there was not much sport in dying unless other people know that you did it intentionally, and know how you did it. Anyway, it was a long climb back up into the Gebiet, where your friends were, so you slept by this computer.

"In the night, while you slept, as you dreamed, the computer sang to you:

I need a temporary dog  
For a temporary job

On a temporary place  
Like Earth!

When you woke up you were surprised to find that you had dreamed an entire new kind of music. Really wild music which made people shudder with its delicious evil. And with the music, you had a job. To steal a piece of the congohelium.

"You were a clever man, Sun-boy, before the trip down here. The Douglas-Ouyang planets caught you and made you a thousand times cleverer. You and your friends, this is what you told me—or what the presence behind you told me, just a half hour ago—you and your friends stole a subspace communicator console, got a fix on the Douglas-Ouyang planets, and got drunk at the sight. Iridescent, luminescent. Waterfalls uphill. All that kind of thing.

"And you did get the congohelium. The congohelium is made of matter and antimatter laminated apart by a dual magnetic grid. With that the presence of the Douglas-Ouyang planets made you independent of organic processes. You did not need food or rest or even air or drink any more. The Douglas-Ouyang planets are very old. They kept you as a link. I have no idea of what they intended to do with Earth and with mankind. If this story gets out, future generations will call you the merchant of menace, because you used the normal human appetitiousness for danger to trap other people with hypnotics and with music."

"I hear water," interrupted Sun-boy. "I do hear water!"

"Never mind," said the Lord Sto Odin, "your story is more important. Anyhow, what could you and I do about it? I am dying, sitting in a pool of blood and effluvium. You can't leave this room with the congohelium. Let me go on. Or perhaps the Douglas-Ouyang entity, whatever it was—"

"Is," said Sun-boy.

"—whatever it is, may just have been longing for sensuous companionship. Dance on, man, dance on."

Sun-boy danced and the drums talked with him, rataplan, rataplan! kid-nork, kid-nork, nark! while the congohelium made music scream through the solid rock. The other sound persisted. Sun-boy stopped and stared. "It is water. It is."

"Who knows?" said the Lord Sto Odin.

"Look," screamed Sun-boy, holding the congohelium high. "Look!" The Lord Sto Odin did not need to look. He knew full well that the first few tons of water, mud-laden and heavy, had come frothing down the corridor and into their rooms.

"But what do I do?" screamed the voice of Sun-boy. Sto Odin felt that it was not Sun-boy speaking, but some relay speaking from the power of the Douglas-Ouyang planets. A power which had tried to find friendship with man, but had found the wrong man and the wrong friendship.

Sun-boy took control of himself. His feet splashed in the water as he danced. The colors shone on the water as it rose. Ritiplin, tiplin! said the big drum. Kid-nork, kid-nork, said the little drum. Boom, boom, doom, doom, room, said the congohelium.

The Lord Sto Odin felt his old eyes blur but he could still see the blazing image of the wild dancer.

"This is a good way to die," thought he, as he died.

10

Far above, on the surface of the planet, Santuna felt the continent itself heave beneath her feet and saw the eastern horizon grow dark as a volcano of muddy steam shot up from the calm blue sunlit ocean,

"This must not, must not happen again!" she said, thinking of Sun-boy and the congohelium and the death of the Lord Sto Odin.

"Something must be done about it," she added to herself.

And she did it.

In later centuries she brought disease, risk and misery back to increase the happiness of man. She was one of the principal architects of the Rediscovery of Man, and at her most famous she was known as the Lady Alice More.

## MOTHER HITTON'S LITTUL KITTONS

A rather oblique look at Old North Australia, source of the stroon by which men live four hundred years or more—a fabulously wealthy, and therefore well-defended world. The plot is taken partly from "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," and the action apparently occurs about a generation before that of Norstrilia—wherein Viola Siderea is still trying to recover from Bozart's escapade.

Poor communications deter theft;  
good communications promote theft;  
perfect communications stop theft.

—Van Broom

1

The moon spun. The woman watched. Twenty-one facets had been polished at the moon's equator. Her function was to arm it. She was Mother Hitton, the weapons mistress of Old North Australia.

She was a ruddy-faced, cheerful blonde of indeterminate age. Her eyes were blue, her bosom heavy, her arms strong. She looked like a mother, but the only child she had ever had died many generations ago. Now she acted as mother to a planet, not to a person; the Norstrilians slept well because they knew she was watching. The weapons slept their long, sick sleep.

This night she glanced for the two-hundredth time at the warning bank. The bank was quiet. No danger lights shone. Yet she felt an enemy out somewhere in the universe—an enemy waiting to strike at her and her world, to snatch at the immeasurable wealth of the Norstrilians—and she snorted with impatience. Come along, little man, she thought. Come along, little man, and die. Don't keep me waiting.

She smiled when she recognized the absurdity of her own thought

She waited for him.

And he did not know it.

He, the robber, was relaxed enough. He was Benjacomin Bozart, and was highly trained in the arts of relaxation.

No one at Sunvale, here on Ttiole, could suspect that he was a senior warden of the Guild of Thieves, reared under the light of the starry violet star. No one could smell the odor of Viola Siderea upon him. "Viola Siderea," the Lady Ru had said, "was once the most beautiful of worlds and it is now the most rotten. Its people were once models for mankind, and now they are thieves, liars and killers. You can smell their souls in the open day." The Lady Ru had died a long time ago. She was much respected, but she was wrong. The robber did not smell to others at all. He knew it. He was no more "wrong" than a shark approaching a school of cod. Life's nature is to live, and he had been nurtured to live as he had to live—by seeking prey.

How else could he live? Viola Siderea had gone bankrupt a long time ago, when the photonic sails had disappeared from space and the planoforming ships began to whisper their way between the stars. His ancestors had been left to die on an off-trail planet. They refused to die. Their ecology shifted and they became predators upon man, adapted by time and genetics to their deadly tasks. And he, the robber, was champion of all his people—the best of their best.

He was Benjacomin Bozart.

He had sworn to rob Old North Australia or to die in the attempt, and he had no intention of dying.

The beach at Sunvale was warm and lovely. Ttiolé was a free and casual transit planet. His weapons were luck and himself: he planned to play both well.

The Norstrilians could kill.

So could he.

At this moment, in this place, he was a happy tourist at a lovely beach. Elsewhere, elsewhere, he could become a ferret among conies, a hawk among doves.

Benjacomin Bozart, thief and warden. He did not know that someone was waiting for him. Someone who did not know his name was prepared to waken death, just for him. He was still serene.

Mother Hitton was not serene. She sensed him dimly but could not yet spot him.

One of her weapons snored. She turned it over.

A thousand stars away, Benjacomin Bozart smiled as he walked toward the beach.

2

Benjacomin felt like a tourist. His tanned face was tranquil. His proud, hooded eyes were calm. His handsome mouth, even without its charming smile, kept a suggestion of pleasantness at its corners. He looked attractive without seeming odd in the least. He looked much younger than he actually was. He walked with springy, happy steps along the beach of Sunvale.

The waves rolled in, white-crested, like the breakers of Mother Earth. The Sunvale people were proud of the way their world resembled Manhome itself. Few of them had ever seen Manhome, but they had all heard a bit of history and most of them had a passing anxiety when they thought of the ancient government still wielding political power across the depth of space. They did not like the old Instrumentality of Earth, but they respected and feared it. The waves might remind them of the pretty side of Earth; they did not want to remember the not-so-pretty side.

This man was like the pretty side of Old Earth. They could not sense the power within him. The Sunvale people smiled absently at him as he walked past them along the shoreline.

The atmosphere was quiet and everything around him serene. He turned his face to the sun. He closed his eyes. He let the warm sunlight beat through his eyelids, illuminating him with its comfort and its reassuring touch.

Benjacomin dreamed of the greatest theft that any man had ever planned. He dreamed of stealing a huge load of the wealth from the richest world that mankind had ever built. He thought of what would happen when he would finally bring riches back to the planet of Viola Siderea where he had been reared. Benjacomin turned his face away from the sun and languidly looked over the other people on the beach.

There were no Norstrilians in sight yet. They were easy enough to recognize. Big people with red complexions; superb athletes and yet, in their own way, innocent, young and very tough. He had trained for this theft for two hundred years, his life prolonged for the purpose by the Guild of Thieves on Viola Siderea. He himself embodied the dreams of his own planet, a poor planet once a crossroads of commerce, now sunken to being a minor outpost for spoliation and pilferage.

He saw a Norstrilian woman come out from the hotel and go down to the beach. He waited, and he looked, and he dreamed. He had a question to ask and no adult Australian would answer it.

"Funny," thought he, "that I call them 'Australians' even now. That's the old, old Earth name for them—rich, brave, tough people. Fighting children standing on half the world ... and now they are the tyrants of all mankind. They hold the wealth. They have the santaclara, and other people live or die depending upon the commerce they have with the Norstrilians. But I won't. And my people won't. We're men who are wolves to man."

Benjacomin waited gracefully. Tanned by the light of many suns, he looked forty though he was two hundred. He dressed casually, by the standards of a vacationer. He might have been an intercultural salesman, a senior gambler, an assistant starport manager. He might even have been a detective working along the commerce lanes. He wasn't. He was a thief. And he was so good a thief that people turned to him and put their property in his hands because he was reassuring, calm, gray-eyed, blond-haired. Benjacomin waited. The woman glanced at him, a quick glance full of open suspicion.

What she saw must have calmed her. She went on past. She called back over the dune, "Come on, Johnny, we can swim out here." A little boy, who looked eight or ten years old, came over the dune top, running toward his mother.

Benjacomin tensed like a cobra. His eyes became sharp, his eyelids narrowed.

This was the prey. Not too young, not too old. If the victim had been too young he wouldn't know

the answer; if the victim were too old it was no use taking him on. Norstrilians were famed in combat, adults were mentally and physically too strong to warrant attack.

Benjacomin knew that every thief who had approached the planet of the Norstrilians—who had tried to raid the dream world of Old North Australia—had gotten out of contact with his people and had died. There was no word of any of them.

And yet he knew that hundreds of thousands of Norstrilians must know the secret. They now and then made jokes about it. He had heard these jokes when he was a young man, and now he was more than an old man without once coming near the answer. Life was expensive.

He was well into his third lifetime and the lifetimes had been purchased honestly by his people. Good thieves all of them, paying out hard-stolen money to obtain the medicine to let their greatest thief remain living. Benjacomin didn't like violence. But when violence prepared the way to the greatest theft of all time, he was willing to use it.

The woman looked at him again. The mask of evil which had flashed across his face faded into benignity; he calmed. She caught him in that moment of relaxation. She liked him.

She smiled and, with that awkward hesitation so characteristic of the Norstrilians, she said, "Could you mind my boy a bit while I go in the water? I think we've seen each other here at the hotel."

"I don't mind," said he. "I'd be glad to. Come here, son."

Johnny walked across the sunlight dunes to his own death. He came within reach of his mother's enemy.

But the mother had already turned.

The trained hand of Benjacomin Bozart reached out. He seized the child by the shoulder. He turned the boy toward him, forcing him down. Before the child could cry out, Benjacomin had the needle into him with the truth drug.

All Johnny reacted to was pain, and then a hammerblow inside his own skull as the powerful drug took force.

Benjacomin looked out over the water. The mother was swimming. She seemed to be looking back at them. She was obviously unworried. To her, the child seemed to be looking at something the stranger was showing him in a relaxed, easy way.

"Now, sonny," said Benjacomin, "tell me, what's the outside defense?"

The boy didn't answer.

"What is the outer defense, sonny? What is the outer defense?" repeated Benjacomin. The boy still didn't answer.

Something close to horror ran over the skin of Benjacomin Bozart as he realized that he had gambled his safety on this planet, gambled the plans themselves for a chance to break the secret of the Norstrilians.

He had been stopped by simple, easy devices. The child had already been conditioned against attack. Any attempt to force knowledge out of the child brought on a conditioned reflex of total muteness. The boy was literally unable to talk.

Sunlight gleaming on her wet hair, the mother turned around and called back, "Are you all right, Johnny?"

Benjacomin waved to her instead. "I'm showing him my pictures, ma'am. He likes 'em. Take your time." The mother hesitated and then turned back to the water and swam slowly away.

Johnny, taken by the drug, sat lightly, like an invalid, on Benjacomin's lap.

Benjacomin said, "Johnny, you're going to die now and you will hurt terribly if you don't tell me what I want to know." The boy struggled weakly against his grasp. Benjacomin repeated. "I'm going to hurt you if you don't tell me what I want to know. What are the outer defenses? What are the outer defenses?"

The child struggled and Benjacomin realized that the boy was putting up a fight to comply with the orders, not a fight to get away. He let the child slip through his hands and the boy put out a finger and began writing on the wet sand. The letters stood out.

A man's shadow loomed behind them.

Benjacomin, alert, ready to spin, kill or run, slipped to the ground beside the child and said, "That's a jolly puzzle. That is a good one. Show me some more." He smiled up at the passing adult. The man was a stranger. The stranger gave him a very curious glance which became casual when he saw the pleasant face of Benjacomin, so tenderly and so agreeably playing with the child.

The fingers were still making the letters in the sand.

There stood the riddle in letters: MOTHER HITTON'S LITTUL KITTONS.

The woman was coming back from the sea, the mother with questions. Benjacomin stroked the sleeve of his coat and brought out his second needle, a shallow poison which it would take days or weeks of laboratory work to detect. He thrust it directly into the boy's brain, slipping the needle up behind the skin at the edge of the hairline. The hair shadowed the tiny prick. The incredibly hard needle slipped under the edge of the skull. The child was dead.

Murder was accomplished. Benjacomin casually erased the secret from the sand. The woman came nearer. He called to her, his voice full of pleasant concern, "Ma'am, you'd better come here, I think your son has fainted from the heat."

He gave the mother the body of her son. Her face changed to alarm. She looked frightened and alert. She didn't know how to meet this.

For a dreadful moment she looked into his eyes.

Two hundred years of training took effect ... She saw nothing. The murderer did not shine with murder. The hawk was hidden beneath the dove. The heart was masked by the trained face.

Benjacomin relaxed in professional assurance. He had been prepared to kill her too, although he was not sure that he could kill an adult, female Norstrilian. Very helpfully said he, "You stay here with him. I'll run to the hotel and get help. I'll hurry."

He turned and ran. A beach attendant saw him and ran toward him. "The child's sick," he shouted. He came to the mother in time to see blunt, puzzled tragedy on her face and with it, something more than tragedy: doubt.

"He's not sick," said she. "He's dead."

"He can't be." Benjacomin looked attentive. He felt attentive. He forced the sympathy to pour out of his posture, out of all the little muscles of his face. "He can't be. I was talking to him just a minute ago. We were doing little puzzles in the sand."

The mother spoke with a hollow, broken voice that sounded as though it would never find the right chords for human speech again, but would go on forever with the ill-attuned flats of unexpected grief. "He's dead," she said. "You saw him die and I guess I saw him die, too. I can't tell what's happened. The child was full of santaclara. He had a thousand years to live but now he's dead. What's your name?"

Benjacomin said, "Eldon. Eldon the salesman, ma'am. I live here lots of times."

3

"Mother Hitton's littul kittons. Mother Hitton's littul kittons."

The silly phrase ran in his mind. Who was Mother Hitton? Who was she the mother of? What were kittons? Were they a misspelling for "kittens?" Little cats? Or were they something else?

Had he killed a fool to get a fool's answer?

How many more days did he have to stay there with the doubtful, staggered woman? How many days did he have to watch and wait? He wanted to get back to Viola Siderea; to take the secret, bad as it was, for his people to study. Who was Mother Hitton?

He forced himself out of his room and went downstairs.

The pleasant monotony of a big hotel was such that the other guests looked interestedly at him. He was the man who had watched while the child died on the beach.

Some lobby-living scandalmongers that stayed there had made up fantastic stories that he had killed the child. Others attacked the stories, saying they knew perfectly well who Eldon was. He was Eldon the salesman. It was ridiculous.

People hadn't changed much, even though the ships with the Go-captains sitting at their hearts whispered between the stars, even though people shuffled between worlds—when they had the

money to pay their passage back and forth-like leaves falling in soft, playful winds. Benjacomin faced a tragic dilemma. He knew very well that any attempt to decode the answer would run directly into the protective devices set up by the Norstrilians.

Old North Australia was immensely wealthy. It was known the length and breadth of all the stars that they had hired mercenaries, defensive spies, hidden agents and alerting devices.

Even Manhome—Mother Earth herself, whom no money could buy—was bribed by the drug of life. An ounce of the santaclara drug, reduced, crystallized and called "stroon," could give forty to sixty years of life. Stroon entered the rest of the Earth by ounces and pounds, but it was refined back on North Australia by the ton. With treasure like this, the Norstrilians owned an unimaginable world whose resources overreached all conceivable limits of money. They could buy anything. They could pay with other peoples' lives.

For hundreds of years they had given secret funds to buying foreigners' services to safeguard their own security.

Benjacomin stood there in the lobby: "Mother Hitton's littul kittons."

He had all the wisdom and wealth of a thousand worlds stuck in his mind but he didn't dare ask anywhere as to what it meant.

Suddenly he brightened.

He looked like a man who had thought of a good game to play, a pleasant diversion to be welcomed, a companion to be remembered, a new food to be tasted. He had had a very happy thought.

There was one source that wouldn't talk. The library. He could at least check the obvious, simple things, and find out what there was already in the realm of public knowledge concerning the secret he had taken from the dying boy.

His own safety had not been wasted, Johnny's life had not been thrown away, if he could find any one of the four words as a key. Mother or Hitton or Littul, in its special meaning, or Kitton. He might yet break through to the loot of Norstrilia.

He swung jubilantly, turning on the ball of his right foot. He moved lightly and pleasantly toward the billiard room, beyond which lay the library. He went in.

This was a very expensive hotel and very old-fashioned. It even had books made out of paper, with genuine bindings. Benjacomin crossed the room. He saw that they had the Galactic Encyclopedia in two hundred volumes. He took down the volume headed "Hi-Hi." He opened it from the rear, looking for the name "Hitton" and there it was. "Hitton, Benjamin-pioneer of Old North Australia. Said to be originator of part of the defense system. Lived A.D. 10719-17213." That was all. Benjacomin moved among the books. The word "kittons" in that peculiar spelling did not occur anywhere, neither in the encyclopedia nor in any other list maintained by the library. He walked out and upstairs, back to his room.

"Littul" had not appeared at all. It was probably the boy's own childish mistake.

He took a chance. The mother, half blind with bewilderment and worry, sat in a stiff-backed chair on the edge of the porch. The other women talked to her. They knew her husband was coming. Benjacomin went up to her and tried to pay his respects. She didn't see him.

"I'm leaving now, ma'am. I'm going on to the next planet, but I'll be back in two or three subjective weeks. And if you need me for urgent questions, I'll leave my addresses with the police here."

Benjacomin left the weeping mother.

Benjacomin left the quiet hotel. He obtained a priority passage.

The easy-going Sunvale Police made no resistance to his demand for a sudden departure visa. After all, he had an identity, he had his own funds, and it was not the custom of Sunvale to contradict its guests. Benjacomin went on the ship and as he moved toward the cabin in which he could rest for a few hours, a man stepped up beside him. A youngish man, hair parted in the middle, short of stature, gray of eyes.

This man was the local agent of the Norstrilian secret police.

Benjacomin, trained thief that he was, did not recognize the policeman. It never occurred to him



that the library itself had been attuned and that the word "kittons" in the peculiar Norstrilian spelling was itself an alert. Looking for that spelling had set off a minor alarm. He had touched the trip-wire.

The stranger nodded. Benjacomin nodded back. "I'm a traveling man, waiting over between assignments. I haven't been doing very well. How are you making out?"

"Doesn't matter to me. I don't earn money; I'm a technician. Liverant is the name."

Benjacomin sized him up. The man was a technician all right. They shook hands perfunctorily. Liverant said, "I'll join you in the bar a little later. I think I'll rest a bit first."

They both lay down then and said very little while the momentary flash of planoform went through the ship. The flash passed. From books and lessons they knew that the ship was leaping forward in two dimensions while, somehow or other, the fury of space itself was fed into the computers—and that these in turn were managed by the Go-captain who controlled the ship.

They knew these things but they could not feel them. All they felt was the sting of a slight pain.

The sedative was in the air itself, sprayed in the ventilating system. They both expected to become a little drunk.

The thief Benjacomin Bozart was trained to resist intoxication and bewilderment. Any sign whatever that a telepath had tried to read his mind would have been met with fierce animal resistance, implanted in his unconscious during early years of training. Bozart was not trained against deception by a technician; it never occurred to the Thieves' Guild back on Viola Siderea that it would be necessary for their own people to resist deceivers. Liverant had already been in touch with Norstrilia—Norstrilia whose money reached across the stars, Norstrilia who had alerted a hundred thousand worlds against the mere thought of trespass.

Liverant began to chatter. "I wish I could go further than this trip. I wish that I could go to Olympia. You can buy anything in Olympia."

"I've heard of it," said Bozart. "It's sort of a funny trading planet with not much chance for businessmen, isn't it?"

Liverant laughed and his laughter was merry and genuine. "Trading? They don't trade. They swap. They take all the stolen loot of a thousand worlds and sell it over again and they change and they paint it and they mark it. That's their business there. The people are blind. It's a strange world, and all you have to do is to go in there and you can have anything you want. Man," said Liverant, "what I could do in a year in that place! Everybody is blind except me and a couple of tourists. And there's all the wealth that everybody thought he's mislaid, half the wrecked ships, the forgotten colonies (they've all been cleaned out), and bang! it all goes to Olympia."

Olympia wasn't really that good and Liverant didn't know why it was his business to guide the killer there. All he knew was that he had a duty and the duty was to direct the trespasser.

Many years before either man was born the code word had been planted in directories, in books, in packing cases and invoices: Kittons misspelled. This was the cover name for the outermoon of Norstrilian defense. The use of the cover name brought a raging alert ready into action, with systemic nerves as hot and quick as incandescent tungsten wire.

By the time that they were ready to go to the bar and have refreshments, Benjacomin had half forgotten that it was his new acquaintance who had suggested Olympia rather than another place. He had to go to Viola Siderea to get the credits to make the flight to take the wealth, to win the world of Olympia.

4

At home on his native planet Bozart was a subject of a gentle but very sincere celebration.

The elders of the Guild of Thieves welcomed him. They congratulated him. "Who else could have done what you've done, boy? You've made the opening move in a brand new game of chess. There has never been a gambit like this before. We have a name; we have an animal. We'll try it right here." The Thieves' Council turned to their own encyclopedia. They turned through the name "Hitton" and then found the reference "kitton." None of them knew that a false lead had been planted there—by an agent in their world.

The agent, in his turn, had been seduced years before, debauched in the middle of his career,

forced into temporary honesty, blackmailed and sent home. In all the years that he had waited for a dreaded countersign—a countersign which he himself never knew to be an extension of Norstrilian intelligence—he never dreamed that he could pay his debt to the outside world so simply. All they had done was to send him one page to add to the encyclopedia. He added it and then went home, weak with exhaustion. The years of fear and waiting were almost too much for the thief. He drank heavily for fear that he might otherwise kill himself. Meanwhile, the pages remained in order, including the new one, slightly altered for his colleagues. The encyclopedia indicated the change like any normal revision, though the whole-entry was new and falsified:

Beneath this passage one revision ready. Dated 24th year of second issue.

The reported "Kittons" of Norstrilia are nothing more than the use of organic means to induce the disease in Earth-mutated sheep which produces a virus in its turn, refinable as the santaclara drug. The term "Kittons" enjoyed a temporary vogue as a reference term both to the disease and to the destructibility of the disease in the event of external attack. This is believed to have been connected with the career of Benjamin Hitton, one of the original pioneers of Norstrilia.

The Council of Thieves read it and the Chairman of the Council said, "I've got your papers ready. You can go try them now. Where do you want to go? Through Neuhamburg?"

"No," said Benjacomin. "I thought I'd try Olympia."

"Olympia's all right," said the chairman. "Go easy. There's only one chance in a thousand you'll fail. But if you do, we might have to pay for it."

He smiled wryly and handed Benjacomin a blank mortgage against all the labor and all the property of Viola Siderea.

The Chairman laughed with a sort of snort. "It'd be pretty rough on us if you had to borrow enough on the trading planet to force us to become honest—and then lost out anyhow."

"No fear," said Benjacomin. "I can cover that."

There are some worlds where all dreams die, but square-clouded Olympia is not one of them. The eyes of men and women are bright on Olympia, for they see nothing.

"Brightness was the color of pain," said Nachtigall, "when we could see. If thine eye offend thee, pluck thyself out, for the fault lies not in the eye but in the soul."

Such talk was common in Olympia, where the settlers went blind a long time ago and now think themselves superior to sighted people. Radar wires tickle their living brains; they can perceive radiation as well as can an animal-type man with little aquariums hung in the middle of his face. Their pictures are sharp, and they demand sharpness. Their buildings soar at impossible angles. Their blind children sing songs as the tailored climate proceeds according to the numbers, geometrical as a kaleidoscope.

There went the man, Bozart himself. Among the blind his dreams soared, and he paid money for information which no living person had ever seen.

Sharp-clouded and aqua-skied, Olympia swam past him like another man's dream. He did not mean to tarry there, because he had a rendezvous with death in the sticky, sparky space around Norstrilia.

Once in Olympia, Benjacomin went about his arrangements for the attack on Old North Australia. On his second day on the planet he had been very lucky. He met a man named Lavender and he was sure he had heard the name before. Not a member of his own Guild of Thieves, but a daring rascal with a bad reputation among the stars.

It was no wonder that he had found Lavender. His pillow had told him Lavender's story fifteen times during his sleep in the past week. And, whenever he dreamed, he dreamed dreams which had been planted in his mind by the Norstrilian counterintelligence. They had beaten him in getting to Olympia first and they were prepared to let him have only that which he deserved. The Norstrilian Police were not cruel, but they were out to defend their world. And they were also out to avenge the murder of a child.

The last interview which Benjacomin had with Lavender in striking a bargain before Lavender agreed was a dramatic one.

Lavender refused to move forward.

"I'm not going to jump off anywhere. I'm not going to raid anything. I'm not going to steal anything. I've been rough, of course I have. But I don't get myself killed and that's what you're bloody well asking for."

"Think of what we'll have. The wealth. I tell you, there's more money here than anything else anybody's ever tried."

Lavender laughed. "You think I haven't heard that before? You're a crook and I'm a crook. I don't do anything that's speculation. I want my hard cash down. I'm a fighting man and you're a thief and I'm not going to ask you what you're up to ... but I want my money first."

"I haven't got it," said Benjacomin.

Lavender stood up.

"Then you shouldn't have talked to me. Because it's going to cost you money to keep me quiet whether you hire me or not."

The bargaining process started.

Lavender looked ugly indeed. He was a soft, ordinary man who had gone to a lot of trouble to become evil. Sin is a lot of work. The sheer effort it requires often shows in the human face.

Bozart stared him down, smiling easily, not even contemptuously.

"Cover me while I get something from my pocket," said Bozart.

Lavender did not even acknowledge the comment. He did not show a weapon. His left thumb moved slowly across the outer edge of his hand. Benjacomin recognized the sign, but did not flinch.

"See," he said. "A planetary credit."

Lavender, laughed. "I've heard that, too."

"Take it," said Bozart.

The adventurer took the laminated card. His eyes widened. "It's real," he breathed. "It is real." He looked up, incalculably more friendly. "I never even saw one of these before. What are your terms?"

Meanwhile the bright, vivid Olympians walked back and forth past them, their clothing all white and black in dramatic contrast. Unbelievable geometric designs shone on their cloaks and their hats. The two bargainers ignored the natives. They concentrated on their own negotiations.

Benjacomin felt fairly safe. He placed a pledge of one year's service of the entire planet of Viola Siderea in exchange for the full and unqualified services of Captain Lavender, once of the Imperial Marines Internal Space Patrol. He handed over the mortgage. The year's guarantee was written in. Even on Olympia there were accounting machines which relayed the bargain back to Earth itself, making the mortgage a valid and binding commitment against the whole planet of thieves.

"This," thought Lavender, "was the first step of revenge." After the killer had disappeared his people would have to pay with sheer honesty. Lavender looked at Benjacomin with a clinical sort of concern.

Benjacomin mistook his look for friendliness and Benjacomin smiled his slow, charming, easy smile. Momentarily happy, he reached out his right hand to give Lavender a brotherly solemnification of the bargain. The men shook hands, and Bozart never knew with what he shook hands.

5

"Gray lay the land oh. Gray grass from sky to sky. Not near the weir, dear. Not a mountain, low or high-only hills and gray gray. Watch the dappled, dimpled twinkles blooming on the star bar.

"That is Norstrilia.

"All the muddy gubbery is gone—all the work and the waiting and the pain.

"Beige-brown sheep lie on blue-gray grass while the clouds rush past, low overhead, like iron pipes ceiling the world.

"Take your pick of sick sheep, man, it's the sick that pays. Sneeze me, a planet, man, or cough me up a spot of immortality. If it's barmy there, where the noddies and the trolls like you live, it's too right here.

"That's the book, boy.

"If you haven't seen Norstrilia, you haven't seen it. If you did see it, you wouldn't believe it.

"Charts call it Old North Australia."

Here in the heart of the world was the farm which guarded the world. This was the Hitton place.

Towers surrounded it, and wires hung between the towers, some of them drooping crazily and some gleaming with the sheen not shown by any other metal made by men from Earth. Within the towers there was open land. And within the open land there were twelve thousand hectares of concrete. Radar reached down to within millimeter smoothness of the surface of the concrete and the other radar threw patterns back and forth, down through molecular thinness. The farm went on. In its center there was a group of buildings. That was where Katherine Hitton worked on the task which her family had accepted for the defense of her world.

No germ came in, no germ went out. All the food came in by space transmitter. Within this, there lived animals. The animals depended on her alone. Were she to die suddenly, by mischance or as a result of an attack by one of the animals, the authorities of her world had complete facsimiles of herself with which to train new animal tenders under hypnosis.

This was a place where the gray wind leapt forward released from the hills, where it raced across the gray concrete, where it blew past the radar towers. The polished, faceted, captive moon always hung due overhead. The wind hit the buildings, themselves gray, with the impact of a blow, before it raced over the open concrete beyond and whistled away into the hills.

Outside the buildings, the valley had not needed much camouflage. It looked like the rest of Norstrilia. The concrete itself was tinted very slightly to give the impression of poor, starved, natural soil. This was the farm, and this the woman. Together they were the outer defense of the richest world mankind had ever built.

Katherine Hitton looked out the window and thought to herself, "Forty-two days before I go to market and it's a welcome day that I get there and hear the jig of a music. Oh, to walk on market day, And see my people proud and gay!"

She breathed deeply of the air. She loved the gray hills-though in her youth she had seen many other worlds. And then she turned back into the building to the animals and the duties which awaited her. She was the only Mother Hitton and these were her littul kittons.

She moved among them. She and her father had bred them from Earth mink, from the fiercest, smallest, craziest little minks that had ever been shipped out from Manhome. Out of these minks they had made their lives to keep away other predators who might bother the sheep, on whom the stroon grew. But these minks were born mad.

Generations of them had been bred psychotic to the bone. They lived only to die and they died so that they could stay alive. These were the kittons of Norstrilia. Animals in whom fear, rage, hunger and sex were utterly intermixed; who could eat themselves or each other; who could eat their young, or people, or anything organic; animals who screamed with murder-lust when they felt love; animals born to loathe themselves with a fierce and livid hate and who survived only because their waking moments were spent on couches, strapped tight, claw by claw, so that they could not hurt each other or themselves. Mother Hitton let them waken only a few moments in each lifetime. They bred and killed. She wakened them only two at a time.

All that afternoon she moved from cage to cage. The sleeping animals slept well. The nourishment ran into their blood streams; they lived sometimes for years without awaking. She bred them when the males were only partly awakened and the females aroused only enough to accept her veterinary treatments. She herself had to pluck the young away from their mothers as the sleeping mothers begot them. Then she nourished the young through a few happy weeks of kittonhood, until their adult natures began to take, their eyes ran red with madness and heat and their emotions sounded in the sharp, hideous, little cries they uttered through the building; and the twisting of their neat, furry faces, the rolling of their crazy, bright eyes and the tightening of their sharp, sharp claws.

She woke none of them this time. Instead, she tightened them in their straps. She removed the nutrients. She gave them delayed stimulus medicine which would, when they were awakened, bring them suddenly full waking with no lulled stupor first.

Finally, she gave herself a heavy sedative, leaned back in a chair and waited for the call which

would come.

When the shock came and the call came through, she would have to do what she had done thousands of times before.

She would ring an intolerable noise through the whole laboratory.

Hundreds of the mutated minks would awaken. In awakening, they would plunge into life with hunger, with hate, with rage and with sex; plunge against their straps; strive to kill each other, their young, themselves, her. They would fight everything and everywhere, and do everything they could to keep going.

She knew this.

In the middle of the room there was a tuner. The tuner was a direct, empathic relay, capable of picking up the simpler range of telepathic communications. Into this tuner went the concentrated emotions of Mother Hitton's littul kittons.

The rage, the hate, the hunger, the sex were all carried far beyond the limits of the tolerable, and then all were thereupon amplified. And then the waveband on which this telepathic control went out was amplified, right there beyond the studio, on the high towers that swept the mountain ridge, up and beyond the valley in which the laboratory lay. And Mother Hitton's moon, spinning geometrically, bounced the relay into a hollow englobement.

From the faceted moon, it went to the satellites—sixteen of them, apparently part of the weather control system. These blanketed not only space, but nearby subspace. The Norstrilians had thought of everything.

The short shocks of an alert came from Mother Hitton's transmitter bank.

A call came. Her thumb went numb.

The noise shrieked.

The mink wakened.

Immediately, the room was full of chattering, scraping, hissing, growling and howling.

Under the sound of the animal voices, there was the other sound: a scratchy, snapping sound like hail falling on a frozen lake. It was the individual claws of hundreds of mink trying to tear their way through metal panels.

Mother Hitton heard a gurgle. One of the minks had succeeded in tearing its paw loose and had obviously started to work on its own throat. She recognized the tearing of fur, the ripping of veins.

She listened for the cessation of that individual voice, but she couldn't be sure. The others were making too much noise. One mink less.

Where she sat, she was partly shielded from the telepathic relay, but not altogether. She herself, old as she was, felt queer wild dreams go through her. She thrilled with hate as she thought of beings suffering out beyond her—suffering terribly, since they were not masked by the built-in defenses of the Norstrilian communications system.

She felt the wild throb of long-forgotten lust.

She hungered for things she had not known she remembered. She went through the spasms of fear that the hundreds of animals expressed.

Underneath this, her sane mind kept asking, "How much longer can I take it? How much longer must I take it? Lord God, be good to your people here on this world! Be good to poor old me."

The green light went on.

She pressed a button on the other side of her chair. The gas hissed in. As she passed into unconsciousness, she knew that her kittons passed into instant unconsciousness too.

She would waken before they did and then her duties would begin: checking the living ones, taking out the one that had clawed out its own throat, taking out those who had died of heart attacks, rearranging them, dressing their wounds, treating them alive and asleep—asleep and happy—breeding, living in their sleep—until the next call should come to waken them for the defense of the treasures which blessed and cursed her native world.

inconsequential accomplishment, since planoform ships were very strictly licensed and obtaining an illegal one was a chore on which a planet full of crooks could easily have worked a lifetime.

Lavender had been lavished with money—Benjacomin's money.

The honest wealth of the thieves' planet had gone in and had paid the falsifications and great debts, imaginary transactions that were fed to the computers for ships and cargoes and passengers that would be almost untraceably commingled in the commerce of ten thousand worlds.

"Let him pay for it," said Lavender, to one of his confederates, an apparent criminal who was also a Norstrilian agent. "This is paying good money for bad. You better spend a lot of it."

Just before Benjacomin took off Lavender sent on an additional message.

He sent it directly through the Go-captain, who usually did not carry messages. The Go-captain was a relay commander of the Norstrilian fleet, but he had been carefully ordered not to look like it.

The message concerned the planoform license—another twenty-odd tablets of stroon which could mortgage Viola Siderea for hundreds upon hundred of years. The captain said: "I don't have to send that through. The answer is yes."

Benjacomin came into the control room. This was contrary to regulations, but he had hired the ship to violate regulations.

The captain looked at him sharply. "You're a passenger, get out."

Benjacomin said: "You have my little yacht on board. I am the only man here outside of your people."

"Get out. There's a fine if you're caught here."

"It does not matter," Benjacomin said. "I'll pay it."

"You will, will you?" said the captain. "You would not be paying twenty tablets of stroon. That's ridiculous. Nobody could get that much stroon."

Benjacomin laughed, thinking of the thousands of tablets he would soon have. All he had to do was to leave the planoform ship behind, strike once, go past the kittons and come back.

His power and his wealth came from the fact that he knew he could now reach it. The mortgage of twenty tablets of stroon against this planet was a low price to pay if it would pay off at thousands to one. The captain replied: "It's not worth it, it just is not worth risking twenty tablets for your being here. But I can tell you how to get inside the Norstrilian communications net if that is worth twenty-seven tablets."

Benjacomin went tense.

For a moment he thought he might die. All this work, all this training—the dead boy on the beach, the gamble with the credit, and now this unsuspected antagonist!

He decided to face it out. "What do you know?" said Benjacomin.

"Nothing," said the captain.

"You said 'Norstrilia.' "

"That I did," said the captain.

"If you said Norstrilia, you must have guessed it. Who told you?"

"Where else would a man go if you look for infinite riches? If you get away with it. Twenty tablets is nothing to a man like you."

"It's two hundred years' worth of work from three hundred thousand people," said Benjacomin grimly.

"When you get away with it, you will have more than twenty tablets, and so will your people."

And Benjacomin thought of the thousands and thousands of tablets. "Yes, that I know."

"If you don't get away with it, you've got the card."

"That's right. All right. Get me inside the net. I'll pay the twenty-seven tablets."

"Give me the card."

Benjacomin refused. He was a trained thief, and he was alert to thievery. Then he thought again. This was the crisis of his life. He had to gamble a little on somebody.

He had to wager the card. "I'll mark it and then I'll give it back to you." Such was his excitement that Benjacomin did not notice that the card went into a duplicator, that the transaction was recorded, that the message went back to Olympic Center, that the loss and the mortgage against the

planet of Viola Siderea should be credited to certain commercial agencies in Earth for three hundred years to come.

Benjacomin got the card back. He felt like an honest thief.

If he did die, the card would be lost and his people would not have to pay. If he won, he could pay that little bit out of his own pocket.

Benjacomin sat down. The Go-captain signalled to his pinlighters. The ship lurched.

For half a subjective hour they moved, the captain wearing a helmet of space upon his head, sensing and grasping and guessing his way, stepping stone to stepping stone, right back to his home. He had to fumble the passage, or else Benjacomin might guess that he was in the hands of double agents.

But the captain was well trained. Just as well trained as Benjacomin.

Agents and thieves, they rode together.

They planoformed inside the communications net. Benjacomin shook hands with them. "You are allowed to materialize as soon as I call."

"Good luck, Sir," said the captain.

"Good luck to me," said Benjacomin.

He climbed into his space yacht. For less than a second in real space, the gray expanse of Norstrilia loomed up. The ship which looked like a simple warehouse disappeared into planoform, and the yacht was on its own.

The yacht dropped.

As it dropped, Benjacomin had a hideous moment of confusion and terror.

He never knew the woman down below but she sensed him plainly as he received the wrath of the much-amplified kittons. His conscious mind quivered under the blow. With a prolongation of subjective experience which made one or two seconds seem like months of hurt drunken bewilderment, Benjacomin Bozart swept beneath the tide of his own personality. The moon relay threw minkish minds against him. The synapses of his brain re-formed to conjure up might-have-beens, terrible things that never happened to any man. Then his knowing mind whited out in an overload of stress.

His subcortical personality lived on a little longer.

His body fought for several minutes. Mad with lust and hunger, the body arched in the pilot's seat, the mouth bit deep into his own arm. Driven by lust, the left hand tore at his face, ripping out his left eyeball. He screeched with animal lust as he tried to devour himself ... not entirely without success.

The overwhelming telepathic message of Mother Hitton's littul kittons ground into his brain.

The mutated minks were fully awake.

The relay satellites had poisoned all the space around him with the craziness to which the minks were bred.

Bozart's body did not live long. After a few minutes, the arteries were open, the head slumped forward and the yacht was dropping helplessly toward the warehouses which it had meant to raid. Norstrilian police picked it up.

The police themselves were ill. All of them were ill. All of them were white-faced. Some of them had vomited. They had gone through the edge of the mink defense. They had passed through the telepathic band at its thinnest and weakest point. This was enough to hurt them badly.

They did not want to know.

They wanted to forget.

One of the younger policemen looked at the body and said, "What on earth could do that to a man?" "

"He picked the wrong job," said the police captain.

The young policeman said: "What's the wrong job?"

"The wrong job is trying to rob us, boy. We are defended, and we don't want to know how."

The young policeman, humiliated and on the verge of anger, looked almost as if he would defy his superior, while keeping his eyes away from the body of Benjacomin Bozart.

The older man said: "It's all right. He did not take long to die and this is the man who killed the boy Johnny, not very long ago."

"Oh, him? So soon?"

"We brought him." The old police officer nodded. "We let him find his death. That's how we live. Tough, isn't it?"

The ventilators whispered softly, gently. The animals slept again. A jet of air poured down on Mother Hitton. The telepathic relay was still on. She could feel herself, the sheds, the faceted moon, the little satellites. Of the robber there was no sign.

She stumbled to her feet. Her raiment was moist with perspiration. She needed a shower and fresh clothes ...

Back at Manhome, the Commercial Credit Circuit called shrilly for human attention. A junior subchief of the Instrumentality walked over to the machine and held out his hand.

The machine dropped a card neatly into his fingers.

He looked at the card.

"Debit Viola Siderea—credit Earth Contingency—subcredit Norstrilian account—four hundred million man megayears."

Though all alone, he whistled to himself in the empty room. "We'll all be dead, stroon or no stroon, before they finish paying that!" He went off to tell his friends the odd news.

The machine, not getting its card back, made another one.

## ALPHA RALPHA BOULEVARD

Here we see the very beginning of the Rediscovery of Man—the great undertaking of Lord Jestocost and Lady Alice—to restore man's right to freedom: to risk, to uncertainty and even to death. The Storm, a painting by Pierre-Auguste Cot, inspired the scene on Alpha Ralpa Boulevard. Macht is, perhaps, one of the evil Vomacts—but perhaps not. And the Abba Dingo, perplexingly, may be a bastardized Semitic-cum-Aussie slang for "Father of Lies ... "

We were drunk with happiness in those early years. Everybody was, especially the young people. These were the first years of the Rediscovery of Man, when the Instrumentality dug deep in the treasury, reconstructing the old cultures, the old languages, and even the old troubles. The nightmare of perfection had taken our forefathers to the edge of suicide. Now under the leadership of the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More, the ancient civilizations were rising like great land masses out of the sea of the past.

I myself was the first man to put a postage stamp on a letter, after fourteen thousand years. I took Virginia to hear the first piano recital. We watched at the eye-machine when cholera was released in Tasmania, and we saw the Tasmanians dancing in the streets, now that they did not have to be protected any more. Everywhere, things became exciting. Everywhere, men and women worked with a wild will to build a more imperfect world.

I myself went into a hospital and came out French. Of course I remembered my early life; I remembered it, but it did not matter. Virginia was French, too, and we had the years of our future lying ahead of us like ripe fruit hanging in an orchard of perpetual summers. We had no idea when we would die. Formerly, I would be able to go to bed and think, "The government has given me four hundred years. Three hundred and seventy-four years from now, they will stop the stroon injections and I will then die." Now I knew anything could happen. The safety devices had been turned off. The diseases ran free. With luck, and hope, and love, I might live a thousand years. Or I might die tomorrow. I was free.

We revelled in every moment of the day.

Virginia and I brought the first French newspaper to appear since the Most Ancient World fell. We found delight in the news, even in the advertisements. Some parts of the culture were hard to reconstruct. It was difficult to talk about foods of which only the names survived, but the homunculi



and the machines, working tirelessly in Downdeep-downdeep, kept the surface of the world filled with enough novelties to fill anyone's heart with hope. We knew that all of this was make-believe, and yet it was not. We knew that when the diseases had killed the statistically correct number of people, they would be turned off; when the accident rate rose too high, it would stop without our knowing why. We knew that over us all, the Instrumentality watched. We had confidence that the Lord Jestocost and the Lady Alice More would play with us as friends and not use us as victims of a game.

Take, for example, Virginia. She had been called Menerima, which represented the coded sounds of her birth number. She was small, verging on chubby; she was compact; her head was covered with tight brown curls; her eyes were a brown so deep and so rich that it took sunlight, with her squinting against it, to bring forth the treasures of her irises. I had known her well, but never known her. I had seen her often, but never seen her with my heart, until we met just outside the hospital, after becoming French.

I was pleased to see an old friend and started to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but the words jammed, and as I tried to speak it was not Menerima any longer, but someone of ancient beauty, rare and strange—someone who had wandered into these latter days from the treasure worlds of time past. All I could do was to stammer:

"What do you call yourself now?" And I said it in ancient French.

She answered in the same language, "Je m'appelle Virginie."

Looking at her and falling in love was a single process. There was something strong, something wild in her, wrapped and hidden by the tenderness and youth of her girlish body. It was as though destiny spoke to me out of the certain brown eyes, eyes which questioned me surely and wonderingly, just as we both questioned the fresh new world which lay about us.

"May I?" said I, offering her my arm, as I had learned in the hours of hypnopedia. She took my arm and we walked away from the hospital.

I hummed a tune which had come into my mind, along with the ancient French language.

She tugged gently on my arm, and smiled up at me.

"What is it," she asked, "or don't you know?"

The words came soft and unbidden to my lips and I sang it very quietly, muting my voice in her curly hair, half-singing half-whispering the popular song which had poured into my mind with all the other things which the Rediscovery of Man had given me:

She wasn't the woman I went to seek. I met her by the merest chance. She did not speak the French of France, But the surded French of Martinique.

She wasn't rich. She wasn't chic. She had a most entrancing glance, And that was all ...

Suddenly I ran out of words, "I seem to have forgotten the rest of it. It's called 'Macouba' and it has something to do with a wonderful island which the ancient French called Martinique."

"I know where that is," she cried. She had been given the same memories that I had. "You can see it from Earthport!"

This was a sudden return to the world we had known. Earthport stood on its single pedestal, twelve miles high, at the eastern edge of the small continent. At the top of it, the lords worked amid machines which had no meaning any more. There the ships whispered their way in from the stars. I had seen pictures of it, but I had never been there. As a matter of fact, I had never known anyone who had actually been up Earthport. Why should we have gone? We might not have been welcome, and we could always see it just as well through the pictures on the eye-machine. For Menerima—familiar, dully pleasant, dear little Menerima—to have gone there was uncanny. It made me think that in the Old Perfect World things had not been as plain or forthright as they seemed.

Virginia, the new Menerima, tried to speak in the Old Common Tongue, but she gave up and used French instead:

"My aunt," she said, meaning a kindred lady, since no one had had aunts for thousands of years, "was a Believer. She took me to the Abba-dingo. To get holiness and luck."

The old me was a little shocked; the French me was disquieted by the fact that this girl had done something unusual even before mankind itself turned to the unusual. The Abba-dingo was a long-

obsolete computer set part way up the column of Earthport. The homunculi treated it as a god, and occasionally people went to it. To do so was tedious and vulgar.

Or had been. Till all things became new again.

Keeping the annoyance out of my voice, I asked her:

"What was it like?"

She laughed lightly, yet there was a trill to her laughter which gave me a shiver. If the old Menerima had had secrets, what might the new Virginia do? I almost hated the fate which made me love her, which made me feel that the touch of her hand on my arm was a link between me and time-forever.

She smiled at me instead of answering my question. The surfaceway was under repair; we followed a ramp down to the level of the top underground, where it was legal for true persons and hominids and homunculi to walk.

I did not like the feeling; I had never gone more than twenty minutes' trip from my birthplace. This ramp looked safe enough. There were few hominids around these days, men from the stars who (though of true human stock) had been changed to fit the conditions of a thousand worlds. The homunculi were morally repulsive, though many of them looked like very handsome people; bred from animals into the shape of men, they took over the tedious chores of working with machines where no real man would wish to go. It was whispered that some of them had even bred with actual people, and I would not want my Virginia to be exposed to the presence of such a creature.

She had been holding my arm. When we walked down the ramp to the busy passage, I slipped my arm free and put it over her shoulders, drawing her closer to me. It was light enough, bright enough to be clearer than the daylight which we had left behind, but it was strange and full of danger. In the old days, I would have turned around and gone home rather than to expose myself to the presence of such dreadful beings. At this time, in this moment, I could not bear to part from my new-found love, and I was afraid that if I went back to my own apartment in the tower, she might go to hers. Anyhow, being French gave a spice to danger.

Actually, the people in the traffic looked commonplace enough. There were many busy machines, some in human form and some not I did not see a single hominid. Other people, whom I knew to be homunculi because they yielded the right of way to us, looked no different from the real human beings on the surface. A brilliantly beautiful girl gave me a look which I did not like—saucy, intelligent, provocative beyond all limits of flirtation. I suspected her of being a dog by origin. Among the homunculi, d'persons are the ones most apt to take liberties. They even have a dog-man philosopher who once produced a tape arguing that since dogs are the most ancient of men's allies, they have the right to be closer to man than any other form of life. When I saw the tape, I thought it amusing that a dog should be bred into the form of a Socrates; here, in the top underground, I was not so sure at all. What would I do if one of them became insolent? Kill him? That meant a brush with the law and a talk with the subcommissioners of the Instrumentality.

Virginia noticed none of this.

She had not answered my question, but was asking me questions about the top underground instead. I had been there only once before, when I was small, but it was flattering to have her wondering, husky voice murmuring in my ear.

Then it happened.

At first I thought he was a man, foreshortened by some trick of the underground light. When he came closer, I saw that it was not. He must have been five feet across the shoulders. Ugly red scars on his forehead showed where the horns had been dug out of his skull. He was a homunculus, obviously derived from cattle stock. Frankly, I had never known that they left them that ill-formed.

And he was drunk.

As he came closer I could pick up the buzz of his mind ... they're not people, they're not hominids, and they're not Us—what are they doing here? The words they think confuse me. He had never telepathed French before.

This was bad. For him to talk was common enough, but only a few of the homunculi were telepathic—those with special jobs, such as in the Downdeep-downdeep, where only telepathy

could relay instructions.

Virginia clung to me.

Thought I, in dear Common Tongue: True men are we. You must let us pass.

There was no answer but a roar. I do not know where he got drunk, or on what, but he did not get my message.

I could see his thoughts forming up into panic, helplessness, hate. Then he charged, almost dancing toward us, as though he could crush our bodies.

My mind focused and I threw the stop order at him.

It did not work.

Horror-stricken, I realized that I had thought French at him.

Virginia screamed.

The bull-man was upon us.

At the last moment he swerved, passed us blindly, and let out a roar which filled the enormous passage. He had raced beyond us.

Still holding Virginia, I turned around to see what had made him pass us.

What I beheld was odd in the extreme.

Our figures ran down the corridor away from us—my black-purple cloak flying in the still air as my image ran, Virginia's golden dress swimming out behind her as she ran with me. The images were perfect and the bull-man pursued them.

I stared around in bewilderment. We had been told that the safeguards no longer protected us.

A girl stood quietly next to the wall. I had almost mistaken her for a statue. Then she spoke,

"Come no closer. I am a cat. It was easy enough to fool him. You had better get back to the surface."

"Thank you," I said, "thank you. What is your name?"

"Does it matter?" said the girl. "I'm not a person."

A little offended, I insisted, "I just wanted to thank you." As I spoke to her I saw that she was as beautiful and as bright as a flame. Her skin was clear, the color of cream, and her hair—finer than any human hair could possibly be—was the wild golden orange of a Persian cat.

"I'm C'mell," said the girl, "and I work at Earthport."

That stopped both Virginia and me. Cat-people were below us, and should be shunned, but Earthport was above us, and had to be respected. Which was C'mell?

She smiled, and her smile was better suited for my eyes than for Virginia's. It spoke a whole world of voluptuous knowledge. I knew she wasn't trying to do anything to me; the rest of her manner showed that. Perhaps it was the only smile she knew.

"Don't worry," she said, "about the formalities. You'd better take these steps here. I hear him coming back."

I spun around, looking for the drunken bull-man. He was not to be seen.

"Go up here," urged C'mell. "They are emergency steps and you will be back on the surface. I can keep him from following. Was that French you were speaking?"

"Yes," said I. "How did you—?"

"Get along," she said. "Sorry I asked. Hurry!"

I entered the small door. A spiral staircase went to the surface. It was below our dignity as true people to use steps, but with C'mell urging me, there was nothing else I could do. I nodded goodbye to C'mell and drew Virginia after me up the stairs.

At the surface we stopped.

Virginia gasped, "Wasn't it horrible?"

"We're safe now," said I.

"It's not safety," she said. "It's the dirtiness of it. Imagine having to talk to her!"

Virginia meant that C'mell was worse than the drunken bull-man. She sensed my reserve because she said, "The sad thing is, you'll see her again ... "

"What! How do you know that?"

"I don't know it," said Virginia. "I guess it. But I guess good, very good. After all, I went to the

Abba-dingo."

"I asked you, darling, to tell me what happened there."

She shook her head mutely and began walking down the streetway. I had no choice but to follow her. It made me a little irritable.

I asked again, more crossly, "What was it like?"

With hurt girlish dignity she said, "Nothing, nothing. It was a long climb. The old woman made me go with her. It turned out that the machine was not talking that day, anyhow, so we got permission to drop down a shaft and to come back on the rolling road. It was just a wasted day."

She had been talking straight ahead, not to me, as though the memory were a little ugly.

Then she turned her face to me. The brown eyes looked into my eyes as though she were searching for my soul. (Soul. There's a word we have in French, and there is nothing quite like it in the Old Common Tongue.) She brightened and pleaded with me:

"Let's not be dull on the new day. Let's be good to the new us, Paul. Let's do something really French, if that's what we are to be."

"A café," I cried. "We need a café. And I know where one is."

"Where?"

"Two undergrounds over. Where the machines come out and where they permit the homunculi to peer in the window." The thought of homunculi peering at us struck the new me as amusing, though the old me had taken them as much for granted as windows or tables. The old me never met any, but knew that they weren't exactly people, since they were, bred from animals, but they looked just about like people, and they could talk. It took a Frenchman like the new me to realize that they could be ugly, or beautiful, or picturesque. More than picturesque: romantic.

Evidently Virginia now thought the same, for she said, "But they're nette, just adorable. What is the café called?"

"The Greasy Cat," said I.

The Greasy Cat. How was I to know that this led to a nightmare between high waters, and to the winds which cried? How was I to suppose that this had anything to do with Alpha Ralpha Boulevard?

No force in the world could have taken me there, if I had known.

Other new-French people had gotten to the café before us.

A waiter with a big brown moustache took our order. I looked closely at him to see if he might be a licensed homunculus, allowed to work among people because his services were indispensable; but he was not. He was pure machine, though his voice rang out with old-Parisian heartiness, and the designers had even built into him the nervous habit of mopping the back of his hand against his big moustache, and had fixed him so that little beads of sweat showed high up on his brow, just below the hairline.

"Mamselle? M'sieu? Beer? Coffee? Red wine next month. The sun will shine in the quarter after the hour and after the half-hour. At twenty minutes to the hour it will rain for five minutes so that you can enjoy these umbrellas. I am a native of Alsace. You may speak French or German to me."

"Anything," said Virginia. "You decide, Paul."

"Beer, please," said I. "Blonde beer for both of us."

"But certainly, M'sieu," said the waiter.

He left, waving his cloth wildly over his arm.

Virginia puckered up her eyes against the sun and said, "I wish it would rain now. I've never seen real rain."

"Be patient, honey."

She turned earnestly to me. "What is 'German,' Paul?"

"Another language, another culture. I read they will bring it to life next year. But don't you like being French?"

"I like it fine," she said. "Much better than being a number. But Paul—" And then she stopped, her eyes blurred with perplexity.

"Yes, darling?"

"Paul," she said, and the statement of my name was a cry of hope from some depth of her mind beyond new me, beyond old me, beyond even the contrivances of the lords who moulded us. I reached for her hand.

Said I, "You can tell me, darling."

"Paul," she said, and it was almost weeping, "Paul, why does it all happen so fast? This is our first day, and we both feel that we may spend the rest of our lives together. There's something about marriage, whatever that is, and we're supposed to find a priest, and I don't understand that, either. Paul, Paul, Paul, why does it happen so fast? I want to love you. I do love you. But I don't want to be made to love you. I want it to be the real me," and as she spoke, tears poured from her eyes though her voice remained steady enough.

Then it was that I said the wrong thing.

"You don't have to worry, honey. I'm sure that the lords of the Instrumentality have programmed everything well."

At that, she burst into tears, loudly and uncontrollably. I had never seen an adult weep before. It was strange and frightening.

A man from the next table came over and stood beside me, but I did not so much as glance at him.

"Darling," said I, reasonably, "darling, we can work it out—"

"Paul, let me leave you, so that I may be yours. Let me go away for a few days or a few weeks or a few years. Then, if-if-if I do come back, you'll know it's me and not some program ordered by a machine. For God's sake, Paul—for God's sake!" In a different voice she said, "What is God, Paul? They gave us the words to speak, but I do not know what they mean."

The man beside me spoke. "I can take you to God," he said.

"Who are you?" said I. "And who asked you to interfere?" This was not the kind of language that we had ever used when speaking the Old Common Tongue—when they had given us a new language they had built in temperament as well.

The stranger kept his politeness—he was as French as we but he kept his temper well.

"My name," he said, "is Maximilien Macht, and I used to be a Believer."

Virginia's eyes lit up. She wiped her face absent-mindedly while staring at the man. He was tall, lean, sunburned. (How could he have gotten sunburned so soon?) He had reddish hair and a moustache almost like that of the robot waiter.

"You asked about God, Mamselle," said the stranger. "God is where he has always been—around us, near us, in us."

This was strange talk from a man who looked worldly. I rose to my feet to bid him goodbye. Virginia guessed what I was doing and she said: "That's nice of you, Paul. Give him a chair."

There was warmth in her voice.

The machine waiter came back with two conical beakers made of glass. They had a golden fluid in them with a cap of foam on top. I had never seen or heard of beer before, but I knew exactly how it would taste. I put imaginary money on the tray, received imaginary change, paid the waiter an imaginary tip. The Instrumentality had not yet figured out how to have separate kinds of money for all the new cultures, and of course you could not use real money to pay for food or drink. Food and drink are free.

The machine wiped his moustache, used his serviette (checked red and white) to dab the sweat off his brow, and then looked inquiringly at Monsieur Macht.

"M'sieu, you will sit here?"

"Indeed," said Macht.

"Shall I serve you here?"

"But why not?" said Macht. "If these good people permit."

"Very well," said the machine, wiping his moustache with the back of his hand. He fled to the dark recesses of the bar.

All this time Virginia had not taken her eyes off Macht.

"You are a Believer?" she asked. "You are still a Believer, when you have been made French like

us? How do you know you're you? Why do I love Paul? Are the lords and their machines controlling everything in us? I want to be me. Do you know how to be me?"

"Not you, Mamselle," said Macht, "that would be too great an honor. But I am learning how to be myself. You see," he added, turning to me, "I have been French for two weeks now, and I know how much of me is myself, and how much has been added by this new process of giving us language and danger again."

The waiter came back with a small beaker. It stood on a stem, so that it looked like an evil little miniature of Earthport. The fluid it contained was milky white.

Macht lifted his glass to us. "Your health!"

Virginia stared at him as if she were going to cry again. When he and I sipped, she blew her nose and put her handkerchief away. It was the first time I had ever seen a person perform that act of blowing the nose, but it seemed to go well with our new culture.

Macht smiled at both of us, as if he were going to begin a speech. The sun came out, right on time. It gave him a halo, and made him look like a devil or a saint.

But it was Virginia who spoke first

"You have been there?"

Macht raised his eyebrows a little, frowned, and said, "Yes," very quietly.

"Did you get a word?" she persisted.

"Yes." He looked glum, and a little troubled.

"What did it say?"

For answer, he shook his head at her, as if there were things which should never be mentioned in public.

I wanted to break in, to find out what this was all about.

Virginia went on, heeding me not at all: "But it did say something!"

"Yes," said Macht.

"Was it important?"

"Mamselle, let us not talk about it."

"We must," she cried. "It's life or death." Her hands were clenched so tightly together that her knuckles showed white. Her beer stood in front of her, untouched, growing warm in the sunlight.

"Very well," said Macht, "you may ask ... I cannot guarantee to answer."

I controlled myself no longer. "What's all this about?"

Virginia looked at me with scorn, but even her scorn was the scorn of a lover, not the cold remoteness of the past. "Please, Paul, you wouldn't know. Wait a while. What did it say to you, M'sieu Macht?"

"That I, Maximilien Macht, would live or die with a brown-haired girl who was already betrothed." He smiled wryly, "And I do not even quite know what 'betrothed' means."

"We'll find out," said Virginia. "When did it say this?"

"Who is 'It'?" I shouted at them. "For God's sake, what is this all about?"

Macht looked at me and dropped his voice when he spoke: "The Abba-dingo." To her he said, "Last week."

Virginia turned white. "So it does work, it does, it does. Paul darling, it said nothing to me. But it said to my aunt something which I can't ever forget!"

I held her arm firmly and tenderly and tried to look into her eyes, but she looked away. Said I, "What did it say?"

"Paul and Virginia."

"So what?" said I.

I scarcely knew her. Her lips were tense and compressed. She was not angry. It was something different, worse. She was in the grip of tension. I suppose we had not seen that for thousands of years, either. "Paul, seize this simple fact, if you can grasp it. The machine gave that woman our names—but it gave them to her twelve years ago."

Macht stood up so suddenly that his chair fell over, and the waiter began running toward us.

"That settles it," he said. "We're all going back."

"Going where?" I said.

"To the Abba-dingo."

"But why now?" said I; and, "Will it work?" said Virginia, both at the same time.

"It always works," said Macht, "if you go on the northern side."

"How do you get there?" said Virginia.

Macht frowned sadly, "There's only one way. By Alpha Ralpa Boulevard." Virginia stood up. And so did I.

Then, as I rose, I remembered. Alpha Ralpa Boulevard. It was a ruined street hanging in the sky, faint as a vapor trail. It had been a processional highway once, where conquerors came down and tribute went up. But it was ruined, lost in the clouds, closed to mankind for a hundred centuries.

"I know it," said I. "It's ruined."

Macht said nothing, but he stared at me as if I were an outsider ...

Virginia, very quiet and white of countenance, said, "Come along."

"But why?" said I. "Why?"

"You fool," she said, "if we don't have a God, at least we have a machine. This is the only thing left on or off the world which the Instrumentality doesn't understand. Maybe it tells the future. Maybe it's an un-machine. It certainly comes from a different time. Can't you use it; darling? If it says we're us, we're us."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we're not." Her face was sullen with grief.

"What do you mean?"

"If we're not us," she said, "we're just toys, dolls, puppets that the lords have written on. You're not you and I'm not me. But if the Abba-dingo, which knew the names Paul and Virginia twelve years before it happened—if the Abba-dingo says that we are us, I don't care if it's a predicting machine or a god or a devil or a what. I don't care, but I'll have the truth."

What could I have answered to that? Macht led, she followed, and I walked third in single file. We left the sunlight of The Greasy Cat; just as we left, a light rain began to fall. The waiter, looking momentarily like the machine that he was, stared straight ahead. We crossed the lip of the underground and went down to the fast expressway.

When we came out, we were in a region of fine homes. All were in ruins. The trees had thrust their way into the buildings. Flowers rioted across the lawn, through the open doors, and blazed in the roofless rooms. Who needed a house in the open, when the population of Earth had dropped so that the cities were commodious and empty?

Once I thought I saw a family of homunculi, including little ones, peering at me as we trudged along the soft gravel road. Maybe the faces I had seen at the edge of the house were fantasies.

Macht said nothing.

Virginia and I held hands as we walked beside him. I could have been happy at this odd excursion, but her hand was tightly clenched in mine. She bit her lower lip from time to time. I knew it mattered to her—she was on a pilgrimage. (A pilgrimage was an ancient walk to some powerful place, very good for body and soul.) I didn't mind going along. In fact, they could not have kept me from coming, once she and Macht decided to leave the café. But I didn't have to take it seriously. Did I?

What did Macht want?

Who was Macht? What thoughts had that mind learned in two short weeks? How had he preceded us into a new world of danger and adventure? I did not trust him. For the first time in my life I felt alone. Always, always, up to now, I had only to think about the Instrumentality and some protector leaped fully armed into my mind. Telepathy guarded against all dangers, healed all hurts, carried each of us forward to the one hundred and forty-six thousand and ninety-seven days which had been allotted us. Now it was different. I did not know this man, and it was on him that I relied, not on the powers which had shielded and protected us.

We turned from the ruined road into an immense boulevard. The pavement was so smooth and unbroken that nothing grew on it, save where the wind and dust had deposited random little pockets

of earth.

Macht stopped.

"This is it," he said. "Alpha Ralpa Boulevard."

We fell silent and looked at the causeway of forgotten empires.

To our left the boulevard disappeared in a gentle curve. It led far north of the city in which I had been reared. I knew that there was another city to the north, but I had forgotten its name. Why should I have remembered it? It was sure to be just like my own.

But to the right—To the right the boulevard rose sharply, like a ramp. It disappeared into the clouds. Just at the edge of the cloud-line there was a hint of disaster. I could not see for sure, but it looked to me as though the whole boulevard had been sheared off by unimaginable forces. Somewhere beyond the clouds there stood the Abba-dingo, the place where all questions were answered ...

Or so they thought.

Virginia cuddled close to me.

"Let's turn back," said I. "We are city people. We don't know anything about ruins."

"You can if you want to," said Macht. "I was just trying to do you a favor."

We both looked at Virginia.

She looked up at me with those brown eyes. From the eyes there came a plea older than woman or man, older than the human race. I knew what she was going to say before she said it. She was going to say that she had to know.

Macht was idly crushing some soft rocks near his foot.

At last Virginia spoke up: "Paul, I don't want danger for its own sake. But I meant what I said back there. Isn't there a chance that we were told to love each other? What sort of a life would it be if our happiness, our own selves, depended on a thread in a machine or on a mechanical voice which spoke to us when we were asleep and learning French? It may be fun to go back to the old world. I guess it is. I know that you give me a kind of happiness which I never even suspected before this day. If it's really us, we have something wonderful, and we ought to know it. But if it isn't—" She burst into sobs.

I wanted to say, "If it isn't, it will seem just the same," but the ominous sulky face of Macht looked at me over Virginia's shoulder as I drew her to me. There was nothing to say.

I held her close.

From beneath Macht's foot there flowed a trickle of blood. The dust drank it up.

"Macht," said I, "are you hurt?"

Virginia turned around, too.

Macht raised his eyebrows at me and said with unconcern, "No. Why?"

"The blood. At your feet."

He glanced down. "Oh, those," he said, "they're nothing. Just the eggs of some kind of an un-bird which does not even fly."

"Stop it!" I shouted telepathically, using the Old Common Tongue. I did not even try to think in our new-learned French.

He stepped back a pace in surprise.

Out of nothing there came to me a message: thankyou thankyou goodgreat gohomeplease thankyou goodgreat goaway manbad manbad manbad. Somewhere an animal or bird was warning me against Macht. I thought a casual thanks to it and turned my attention to Macht.

He and I stared at each other. Was this what culture was? Were we now men? Did freedom always include the freedom to mistrust, to fear, to hate?

I liked him not at all. The words of forgotten crimes came into my mind: assassination, murder, abduction, insanity, rape, robbery ...

We had known none of these things and yet I felt them all.

He spoke evenly to me. We had both been careful to guard our minds against being read telepathically, so that our only means of communication were empathy and French. "It's your idea," he said, most untruthfully, "or at least your lady's ... "



"Has lying already come into the world," said I, "so that we walk into the clouds for no reason at all?"

"There is a reason," said Macht.

I pushed Virginia gently aside and capped my mind so tightly that the anti-telepathy felt like a headache.

"Macht," said I, and I myself could hear the snarl of an animal in my own voice, "tell me why you have brought us here or I will kill you."

He did not retreat. He faced me, ready for a fight. He said, "Kill? You mean, to make me dead?" but his words did not carry conviction. Neither one of us knew how to fight, but he readied for defense and I for attack.

Underneath my thought shield an animal thought crept in: good-man good-man take him by the neck no-air he-aaah no-air he-aaah like broken egg ...

I took the advice without worrying where it came from. It was simple. I walked over to Macht, reached my hands around his throat and squeezed. He tried to push my hands away. Then he tried to kick me. All I did was hang on to his throat. If I had been a lord or a Go-captain, I might have known about fighting. But I did not, and neither did he.

It ended when a sudden weight dragged at my hands.

Out of surprise, I let go.

Macht had become unconscious. Was that dead?

It could not have been, because he sat up. Virginia ran to him. He rubbed his throat and said with a rough voice:

"You should not have done that."

This gave me courage. "Tell me," I spat at him, "tell me why you wanted us to come, or I will do it again."

Macht grinned weakly. He leaned his head against Virginia's arm. "It's fear," he said. "Fear."

"Fear?" I knew the word—peur—but not the meaning. Was it some kind of disquiet or animal alarm?

I had been thinking with my mind open; he thought back yes.

"But why do you like it?" I asked.

It is delicious, he thought. It makes me sick and thrilly and alive. It is like strong medicine, almost as good as stroon. I went there before. High up, I had much fear. It was wonderful and bad and good, all at the same time. I lived a thousand years in a single hour. I wanted more of it, but I thought it would be even more exciting with other people.

"Now I will kill you," said I in French. "You are very—very ... " I had to look for the word. "You are very evil."

"No," said Virginia, "let him talk."

He thought at me, not bothering with words. This is what the lords of the Instrumentality never let us have. Fear. Reality. We were born in a stupor and we died in a dream. Even the underpeople, the animals had more life than we did. The machines did not have fear. That's what we were. Machines who thought they were men. And now we are free.

He saw the edge of raw, red anger in my mind, and he changed the subject. I did not lie to you. This is the way to the Abba-dingo. I have been there. It works. On this side, it always works.

"It works," cried Virginia. "You see he says so. It works! He is telling the truth. Oh, Paul, do let's go on!"

"All right," said I, "we'll go."

I helped him rise. He looked embarrassed, like a man who has shown something of which he is ashamed.

We walked onto the surface of the indestructible boulevard. It was comfortable to the feet.

At the bottom of my mind the little unseen bird or animal babbled its thoughts at me: goodman goodman make him dead take water take water ...

I paid no attention as I walked forward with her and him, Virginia between us. I paid no attention.

I wish I had.

We walked for a long time.

The process was new to us. There was something exhilarating in knowing that no one guarded us, that the air was free air, moving without benefit of weather machines. We saw many birds, and when I thought at them I found their minds startled and opaque; they were natural birds, the like of which I had never seen before. Virginia asked me their names, and I outrageously applied all the bird-names which we had learned in French without knowing whether they were historically right or not.

Maximilien Macht cheered up, too, and he even sang us a song, rather off key, to the effect that we would take the high road and he the low one, but that he would be in Scotland before us. It did not make sense, but the lilt was pleasant. Whenever he got a certain distance ahead of Virginia and me, I made up variations on "Macouba" and sang-whispered the phrases into her pretty ear:

She wasn't the woman I went to seek. I met her by the merest chance. She did not speak the French of France, But the surded French of Martinique.

We were happy in adventure and freedom, until we became hungry. Then our troubles began.

Virginia stepped up to a lamp-post, struck it lightly with her fist and said, "Feed me." The post should either have opened, serving us a dinner, or else told us where, within the next few hundred yards, food was to be had. It did neither. It did nothing. It must have been broken.

With that, we began to make a game of hitting every single post.

Alpha Ralpa Boulevard had risen about half a kilometer above the surrounding countryside. The wild birds wheeled below us. There was less dust on the pavement, and fewer patches of weeds. The immense road, with no pylons below it, curved like an unsupported ribbon into the clouds.

We wearied of beating posts and there was neither food nor water.

Virginia became fretful: "It won't do any good to go back now. Food is even farther the other way. I do wish you'd brought something."

How should I have thought to carry food? Who ever carries food? Why would they carry it, when it is everywhere? My darling was unreasonable, but she was my darling and I loved her all the more for the sweet imperfections of her temper.

Macht kept tapping pillars, partly to keep out of our fight, and obtained an unexpected result.

At one moment I saw him leaning over to give the pillar of a large lamp the usual hearty but guarded whop—in the next instant he yelped like a dog and was sliding uphill at a high rate of speed. I heard him shout something, but could not make out the words, before he disappeared into the clouds ahead.

Virginia looked at me. "Do you want to go back now? Macht is gone. We can say that I got tired."

"Are you serious?"

"Of course, darling."

I laughed, a little angrily. She had insisted that we come, and now she was ready to turn around and give it up, just to please me.

"Never mind," said I. "It can't be far now. Let's go on."

"Paul ... " She stood close to me. Her brown eyes were troubled, as though she were trying to see all the way into my mind through my eyes. I thought to her, Do you want to talk this way?

"No," said she, in French. "I want to say things one at a time. Paul; I do want to go to the Abba-dingo. I need to go. It's the biggest need in my life. But at the same time I don't want to go. There is something wrong up there. I would rather have you on the wrong terms than not have you at all. Something could happen."

Edgily, I demanded, "Are you getting this 'fear' that Macht was talking about?"

"Oh, no, Paul, not at all. This feeling isn't exciting. It feels like something broken in a machine —"

"Listen!" I interrupted her.

From far ahead, from within the clouds, there came a sound like an animal wailing. There were words in it. It must have been Macht. I thought I heard "take care." When I sought him with my

mind, the distance made circles and I got dizzy.

"Let's follow, darling," said I.

"Yes, Paul," said she, and in her voice there was an unfathomable mixture of happiness, resignation, and despair ...

Before we moved on, I looked carefully at her. She was my girl. The sky had turned yellow and the lights were not yet on. In the yellow rich sky her brown curls were tinted with gold, her brown eyes approached the black in their irises, her young and fate-haunted face seemed more meaningful than any other human face I had ever seen.

"You are mine," I said.

"Yes, Paul," she answered me and then smiled brightly. "You said it! That is doubly nice."

A bird on the railing looked sharply at us and then left. Perhaps he did not approve of human nonsense, so flung himself downward into dark air. I saw him catch himself, far below, and ride lazily on his wings.

"We're not as free as birds, darling," I told Virginia, "but we are freer than people have been for a hundred centuries."

For answer she hugged my arm and smiled at me.

"And now," I added, "to follow Macht. Put your arms around me and hold me tight. I'll try hitting that post. If we don't get dinner we may get a ride."

I felt her take hold tightly and then I struck the post.

Which post? An instant later the posts were sailing by us in a blur. The ground beneath our feet seemed steady, but we were moving at a fast rate. Even in the service underground I had never seen a roadway as fast as this. Virginia's dress was blowing so hard that it made snapping sounds like the snap of fingers. In no time at all we were in the cloud and out of it again.

A new world surrounded us. The clouds lay below and above. Here and there blue sky shone through. We were steady. The ancient engineers must have devised the walkway cleverly. We rode up, up, up without getting dizzy.

Another cloud.

Then things happened so fast that the telling of them takes longer than the event.

Something dark rushed at me from up ahead. A violent blow hit me in the chest. Only much later did I realize that this was Macht's arm trying to grab me before we went over the edge. Then we went into another cloud. Before I could even speak to Virginia a second blow struck me. The pain was terrible. I had never felt anything like that in all my life. For some reason, Virginia had fallen over me and beyond me. She was pulling at my hands.

I tried to tell her to stop pulling me, because it hurt, but I had no breath. Rather than argue, I tried to do what she wanted. I struggled toward her. Only then did I realize that there was nothing below my feet—no bridge, no jetway, nothing.

I was on the edge of the boulevard, the broken edge of the upper side. There was nothing below me except for some looped cables, and, far underneath them, a tiny ribbon which was either a river or a road.

We had jumped blindly across the great gap and I had fallen just far enough to catch the upper edge of the roadway on my chest

It did not matter, the pain.

In a moment the doctor-robot would be there to repair me.

A look at Virginia's face reminded me there was no doctor-robot, no world, no Instrumentality, nothing but wind and pain. She was crying. It took a moment for me to hear what she was saying, "I did it, I did it, darling, are you dead?"

Neither one of us was sure what "dead" meant, because people always went away at their appointed time, but we knew that it meant a cessation of life. I tried to tell her that I was living, but she fluttered over me and kept dragging me farther from the edge of the drop.

I used my hands to push myself into a sitting position.

She knelt beside me and covered my face with kisses.

At last I was able to gasp, "Where's Macht?"

She looked back. "I don't see him."

I tried to look too. Rather than have me struggle, she said, "You stay quiet. I'll look again."

Bravely she walked to the edge of the sheared-off boulevard. She looked over toward the lower side of the gap, peering through the clouds which drifted past us as rapidly as smoke sucked by a ventilator. Then she cried out:

"I see him. He looks so funny. Like an insect in the museum. He is crawling across on the cables."

Struggling to my hands and knees, I neared her and looked too. There he was, a dot moving along a thread, with the birds soaring by beneath him. It looked very unsafe. Perhaps he was getting all the "fear" that he needed to keep himself happy. I did not want that "fear," whatever it was. I wanted food, water, and a doctor-robot.

None of these were here.

I struggled to my feet. Virginia tried to help me but I was standing before she could do more than touch my sleeve.

"Let's go on."

"On?" she said.

"On to the Abba-dingo. There may be friendly machines up there. Here there is nothing but cold and wind, and the lights have not yet gone on."

She frowned. "But Macht ... ?"

"It will be hours before he gets here. We can come back."

She obeyed.

Once again we went to the left of the boulevard. I told her to squeeze my waist while I struck the pillars, one by one. Surely there must have been a reactivating device for the passengers on the road.

The fourth time, it worked.

Once again the wind whipped our clothing as we raced upward on Alpha Ralpa Boulevard.

We almost fell as the road veered to the left. I caught my balance, only to have it veer the other way.

And then we stopped.

This was the Abba-dingo.

A walkway littered with white objects—knobs and rods and imperfectly formed balls about the size of my head.

Virginia stood beside me, silent.

About the size of my head? I kicked one of the objects aside and then knew, knew for sure, what it was. It was people. The inside parts. I had never seen such things before. And that, that on the ground, must once have been a hand. There were hundreds of such things along the wall.

"Come, Virginia," said I, keeping my voice even, and my thoughts hidden.

She followed without saying a word. She was curious about the things on the ground, but she did not seem to recognize them.

For my part, I was watching the wall.

At last I found them—the little doors of Abba-dingo.

One said METEOROLOGICAL. It was not Old Common Tongue, nor was it French, but it was so close that I knew it had something to do with the behavior of air. I put my hand against the panel of the door. The panel became translucent and ancient writing showed through. There were numbers which meant nothing, words which meant nothing, and then:

Typhoon coming.

My French had not taught me what a "coming" was, but "typhoon" was plainly typhon, a major air disturbance. Thought I, let the weather machines take care of the matter. It had nothing to do with us.

"That's no help," said I.

"What does it mean?" she said.

"The air will be disturbed."

"Oh," said she. "That couldn't matter to us, could it?"

"Of course not."

I tried the next panel, which said FOOD. When my hand touched the little door, there was an aching creak inside the wall, as though the whole tower retched. The door opened a little bit and a horrible odor came out of it. Then the door closed again.

The third door said HELP and when I touched it nothing happened. Perhaps it was some kind of tax-collecting device from the ancient days.

It yielded nothing to my touch. The fourth door was larger and already partly open at the bottom. At the top, the name of the door was PREDICTIONS. Plain enough, that one was, to anyone who knew Old French. The name at the bottom was more mysterious: PUT PAPER HERE it said, and I could not guess what it meant.

I tried telepathy. Nothing happened. The wind whistled past us. Some of the calcium balls and knobs rolled on the pavement. I tried again, trying my utmost for the imprint of long-departed thoughts. A scream entered my mind, a thin long scream which did not sound much like people. That was all.

Perhaps it did upset me. I did not feel "fear," but I was worried about Virginia.

She was staring at the ground.

"Paul," she said, "isn't that a man's coat on the ground among those funny things?"

Once I had seen an ancient X-ray in the museum, so I knew that the coat still surrounded the material which had provided the inner structure of the man. There was no ball there, so that I was quite sure he was dead. How could that have happened in the old days? Why did the Instrumentality let it happen? But then, the Instrumentality had always forbidden this side of the tower. Perhaps the violators had met their own punishment in some way I could not fathom.

"Look, Paul," said Virginia, "I can put my hand in."

Before I could stop her, she had thrust her hand into the flat open slot which said PUT PAPER HERE.

She screamed.

Her hand was caught.

I tried to pull at her arm, but it did not move. She began gasping with pain. Suddenly her hand came free.

Clear words were cut into the living skin. I tore my cloak off and wrapped her hand.

As she sobbed beside me I unbandaged her hand. As I did so she saw the words on her skin.

The words said, in clear French: You will love Paul all your life.

Virginia let me bandage her hand with my cloak and then she lifted her face to be kissed. "It was worth it," she said; "it was worth all the trouble, Paul. Let's see if we can get down. Now I know."

I kissed her again and said, reassuringly, "You do know, don't you?"

"Of course," she smiled through her tears. "The Instrumentality could not have contrived this. What a clever old machine! Is it a god or a devil, Paul?"

I had not studied those words at that time, so I patted her instead of answering. We turned to leave.

At the last minute I realized that I had not tried PREDICTIONS myself.

"Just a moment, darling. Let me tear a little piece off the bandage."

She waited patiently. I tore a piece the size of my hand, and then I picked up one of the ex-person units on the ground. It may have been the front of an arm. I returned to push the cloth into the slot, but when I turned to the door, an enormous bird was sitting there.

I used my hand to push the bird aside, and he cawed at me. He even seemed to threaten me with his cries and his sharp beak. I could not dislodge him.

Then I tried telepathy. I am a true man. Go away! The bird's dim mind flashed back at me nothing but no-no-no-no-no! With that I struck him so hard with my fist that he fluttered to the ground. He righted himself amid the white litter on the pavement and then, opening his wings, he let the wind carry him away.

I pushed in the scrap of cloth, counted to twenty in my mind, and pulled the scrap out.

The words were plain, but they meant nothing: You will love Virginia twenty-one more minutes. Her happy voice, reassured by the prediction but still unsteady from the pain in her written-on hand, came to me as though it were far away. "What does it say, darling?"

Accidentally on purpose, I let the wind take the scrap. It fluttered away like a bird. Virginia saw it go.

"Oh," she cried disappointedly. "We've lost it! What did it say?"

"Just what yours did."

"But what words, Paul? How did it say it?"

With love and heartbreak and perhaps a little "fear," I lied to her and whispered gently,

"It said, "Paul will always love Virginia."

She smiled at me radiantly. Her stocky, full figure stood firmly and happily against the wind. Once again she was the chubby, pretty Menerima whom I had noticed in our block when we both were children. And she was more than that. She was my new-found love in our new-found world. She was my mademoiselle from Martinique. The message was foolish. We had seen from the food-slot that the machine was broken.

"There's no food or water here," said I. Actually, there was a puddle of water near the railing, but it had been blown over the human structural elements on the ground, and I had no heart to drink it.

Virginia was so happy that, despite her wounded hand, her lack of water and her lack of food, she walked vigorously and cheerfully.

Thought I to myself, Twenty-one minutes. About six hours have passed. If we stay here we face unknown dangers.

Vigorously we walked downward, down Alpha Ralpa Boulevard. We had met the Abba-dingo and were still "alive." I did not think that I was "dead," but the words have been meaningless so long that it was hard to think them.

The ramp was so steep going down that we pranced like horses. The wind blew into our faces with incredible force. That's what it was, wind, but I looked up the word vent only after it was all over.

We never did see the whole tower—just the wall at which the ancient jetway had deposited us. The rest of the tower was hidden by clouds which fluttered like torn rags as they raced past the heavy material.

The sky was red on one side and a dirty yellow on the other.

Big drops of water began to strike at us.

"The weather machines are broken," I shouted to Virginia.

She tried to shout back to me but the wind carried her words away. I repeated what I had said about the weather machines. She nodded happily and warmly, though the wind was by now whipping her hair past her face and the pieces of water which fell from up above were spotting her flame-golden gown. It did not matter. She clung to my arm. Her happy face smiled at me as we stamped downward, bracing ourselves against the decline in the ramp. Her brown eyes were full of confidence and life. She saw me looking at her and she kissed me on the upper arm without losing step. She was my own girl forever, and she knew it.

The water-from-above, which I later knew was actual "rain," came in increasing volume. Suddenly it included birds. A large bird flapped his way vigorously against the whistling air and managed to stand still in front of my face, though his air speed was many leagues per hour. He cawed in my face and then was carried away by the wind. No sooner had that one gone than another bird struck me in the body. I looked down at it but it too was carried away by the racing current of air. All I got was a telepathic echo from its bright blank mind: no-no-no-no!

Now what? thought I. A bird's advice is not much to go upon.

Virginia grabbed my arm and stopped.

I too stopped.

The broken edge of Alpha Ralpa Boulevard was just ahead. Ugly yellow clouds swam through the break like poisonous fish hastening on an inexplicable errand.

Virginia was shouting.

I could not hear her, so I leaned down. That way her mouth could almost touch my ear.

"Where is Macht?" she shouted.

Carefully I took her to the left side of the road, where the railing gave us some protection against the heavy racing air, and against the water commingled with it. By now neither of us could see very far. I made her drop to her knees. I got down beside her. The falling water pelted our backs. The light around us had turned to a dark dirty yellow.

We could still see, but we could not see much.

I was willing to sit in the shelter of the railing, but she nudged me. She wanted us to do something about Macht. What anyone could do, that was beyond me. If he had found shelter, he was safe, but if he was out on those cables, the wild pushing air would soon carry him off and then there would be no more Maximilien Macht. He would be "dead" and his interior parts would bleach somewhere on the open ground.

Virginia insisted.

We crept to the edge.

A bird swept in, true as a bullet, aiming for my face. I flinched. A wing touched me. It stung against my cheek like fire. I did not know that feathers were so tough. The birds must all have damaged mental mechanisms, thought I, if they hit people on Alpha Ralpa. That is not the right way to behave toward true people.

At last we reached the edge, crawling on our bellies. I tried to dig the fingernails of my left hand into the stonelike material of the railing, but it was flat, and there was nothing much to hold to, save for the ornamental fluting. My right arm was around Virginia. It hurt me badly to crawl forward that way, because my body was still damaged from the blow against the edge of the road, on the way coming up. When I hesitated, Virginia thrust herself forward. We saw nothing.

The gloom was around us.

The wind and the water beat at us like fists.

Her gown pulled at her like a dog worrying its master. I wanted to get her back into the shelter of the railing, where we could wait for the air-disturbance to end.

Abruptly, the light shone all around us. It was wild electricity, which the ancients called lightning. Later I found that it occurs quite frequently in the areas beyond the reach of the weather machines.

The bright quick light showed us a white face staring at us. He hung on the cables below us. His mouth was open, so he must have been shouting. I shall never know whether the expression on his face showed "fear" or great happiness. It was full of excitement. The bright light went out and I thought that I heard the echo of a call. I reached for his mind telepathically and there was nothing there. Just some dim, obstinate bird thinking at me, no-no-no-no-no!

Virginia tightened in my arms. She squirmed around. I shouted at her in French. She could not hear.

Then I called with my mind.

Someone else was there.

Virginia's mind blazed at me, full of revulsion, The cat-girl. She is going to touch me!

She twisted. My right arm was suddenly empty. I saw the gleam of a golden gown flash over the edge, even in the dim light. I reached with my mind, and I caught her cry:

"Paul, Paul, I love you. Paul ... help me!"

The thoughts faded as her body dropped.

The someone else was C'mell, whom we had first met in the corridor.

I came to get you both, she thought at me; not that the birds cared about her.

What have the birds got to do with it?

You saved them. You saved their young, when the red-topped man was killing them all. All of us have been worried about what you true people would do to us when you were free. We found out. Some of you are bad and kill other kinds of life. Others of you are good and protect life.

Thought I, is that all there is to good and bad?

Perhaps I should not have left myself off guard. People did not have to understand fighting, but

the homunculi did. They were bred amidst battle and they served through troubles. C'mell, cat-girl that she was, caught me on the chin with a pistonlike fist. She had no anesthesia, and the only way—cat or no cat—that she could carry me across the cables in the "typhoon" was to have me unconscious and relaxed.

I awakened in my own room. I felt very well indeed. The robot-doctor was there. Said he:

"You've had a shock. I've already reached the subcommissioner of the Instrumentality, and I can erase the memories of the last full day, if you want me to."

His expression was pleasant.

Where was the racing wind? The air falling like stone around us? The water driving where no weather machines controlled it? Where was the golden gown and the wild fear-hungry face of Maximilien Macht?

I thought these things, but the robot-doctor, not being telepathic, caught none of it. I stared hard at him.

"Where," I cried, "is my own true love?"

Robots cannot sneer, but this one attempted to do so. "The naked cat-girl with the blazing hair? She left to get some clothing."

I stared at him.

His fuddy-duddy little machine mind cooked up its own nasty little thoughts, "I must say, sir, you 'free people' change very fast indeed ... "

Who argues with a machine? It wasn't worth answering him.

But that other machine? Twenty-one minutes. How could that work out? How could it have known? I did not want to argue with that other machine either. It must have been a very powerful left-over machine—perhaps something used in ancient wars. I had no intention of finding out. Some people might call it a god. I call it nothing. I do not need "fear" and I do not propose to go back to Alpha Ralpa Boulevard again.

But hear, oh heart of mine!—how can you ever visit the café again?

C'mell came in and the robot-doctor left.

## THE BALLAD OF LOST C'MELL

"Rather loosely inspired by some of the magical and conspiratorial scenes of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*," a 14th-century work by Lo Kuan-chung, according to Smith himself. C'mell herself was inspired by Cat Melanie, one of the felines in Smith's household. She and Lord Jestocost, of course, both figure later in the events of his novel *Norstrilia* ...

She got the which of the what-she-did,

Hid the bell with a blot, she did,

But she fell in love with a hominid.

Where is the which of the what-she-did?

—from THE BALLAD OF LOST C'MELL

She was a girly girl and they were true men, the lords of creation, but she pitted her wits against them and she won. It had never happened before, and it is sure never to happen again, but she did win. She was not even of human extraction. She was cat-derived, though human in outward shape, which explains the C in front of her name. Her father's name was C'mackintosh and her name C'mell. She won her tricks against the lawful and assembled Lords of the Instrumentality.

It all happened at Earthport, greatest of buildings, smallest of cities, standing twenty-five kilometers high at the western edge of the Smaller Sea of Earth.

Jestocost had an office outside the fourth valve.



Jestocost liked the morning sunshine, while most of the other Lords of Instrumentality did not, so that he had no trouble in keeping the office and the apartments which he had selected. His main office was ninety meters deep, twenty meters high, twenty meters broad. Behind it was the "fourth valve," almost a thousand hectares in extent. It was shaped helically, like an enormous snail. Jestocost's apartment, big as it was, was merely one of the pigeonholes in the muffler on the rim of Earthport. Earthport stood like an enormous wineglass, reaching from the magma to the high atmosphere.

Earthport had been built during mankind's biggest mechanical splurge. Though men had had nuclear rockets since the beginning of consecutive history, they had used chemical rockets to load the interplanetary ion-drive and nuclear-drive vehicles or to assemble the photonic sail-ships for interstellar cruises. Impatient with the troubles of taking things bit by bit into the sky, they had worked out a billion-ton rocket, only to find that it ruined whatever countryside it touched in landing. The Daimoni—people of Earth extraction, who came back from somewhere beyond the stars—had helped men build it of weatherproof, rustproof, timeproof, stressproof material. Then they had gone away and had never come back.

Jestocost often looked around his apartment and wondered what it might have been like when white-hot gas, muted to a whisper, surged out of the valve into his own chamber and the sixty-three other chambers like it. Now he had a back wall of heavy timber, and the valve itself was a great hollow cave where a few wild things lived. Nobody needed that much space any more. The chambers were useful, but the valve did nothing. Planofforming ships whispered in from the stars; they landed at Earthport as a matter of legal convenience, but they made no noise and they certainly had no hot gases.

Jestocost looked at the high clouds far below him and talked to himself,

"Nice day. Good air. No trouble. Better eat."

Jestocost often talked like that to himself. He was an individual, almost an eccentric. One of the top council of mankind, he had problems, but they were not personal problems. He had a Rembrandt hanging above his bed—the only Rembrandt known in the world, just as he was possibly the only person who could appreciate a Rembrandt. He had the tapestries of a forgotten empire hanging from his back wall. Every morning the sun played a grand opera for him, muting and lighting and shifting the colors so that he could almost imagine that the old days of quarrel, murder and high drama had come back to Earth again. He had a copy of Shakespeare, a copy of Colegrove and two pages of the Book of Ecclesiastes in a locked box beside his bed. Only forty-two people in the universe could read Ancient English, and he was one of them. He drank wine, which he had made by his own robots in his own vineyards on the Sunset coast. He was a man, in short, who had arranged his own life to live comfortably, selfishly and well on the personal side, so that he could give generously and impartially of his talents on the official side.

When he awoke on this particular morning, he had no idea that a beautiful girl was about to fall hopelessly in love with him—that he would find, after a hundred years and more of experience in government, another government on earth just as strong and almost as ancient as his own—that he would willingly fling himself into conspiracy and danger for a cause which he only half understood. All these things were mercifully hidden from him by time, so that his only question on arising was, should he or should he not have a small cup of white wine with his breakfast. On the 173rd day of each year, he always made a point of eating eggs. They were a rare treat, and he did not want to spoil himself by having too many, nor to deprive himself and forget a treat by having none at all. He pattered around the room, muttering, "White wine? White wine?"

C'mell was coming into his life, but he did not know it. She was fated to win; that part, she herself did not know.

Ever since mankind had gone through the Rediscovery of Man, bringing back governments, money, newspapers, national languages, sickness and occasional death, there had been the problem of the underpeople—people who were not human, but merely humanly shaped from the stock of Earth animals. They could speak, sing, read, write, work, love and die; but they were not covered by human law, which simply defined them as "homunculi" and gave them a legal status close to

animals or robots. Real people from off-world were always called "hominids."

Most of the underpeople did their jobs and accepted their half-slave status without question. Some became famous—C'mackintosh had been the first earth-being to manage a fifty-meter broad-jump under normal gravity. His picture was seen in a thousand worlds. His daughter, C'mell, was a girly girl, earning her living by welcoming human beings and hominids from the outworlds and making them feel at home when they reached Earth. She had the privilege of working at Earthport, but she had the duty of working very hard for a living which did not pay well. Human beings and hominids had lived so long in an affluent society that they did not know what it meant to be poor. But the Lords of the Instrumentality had decreed that underpeople—derived from animal stock—should live under the economics of the Ancient World; they had to have their own kind of money to pay for their rooms, their food, their possessions and the education of their children. If they became bankrupt, they went to the Poorhouse, where they were killed painlessly by means of gas.

It was evident that humanity, having settled all of its own basic problems, was not quite ready to let Earth animals, no matter how much they might be changed, assume a full equality with man.

The Lord Jestocost, seventh of that name, opposed the policy. He was a man who had little love, no fear, freedom from ambition and a dedication to his job: but there are passions of government as deep and challenging as the emotions of love. Two hundred years of thinking himself right and of being outvoted had instilled in Jestocost a furious desire to get things done his own way.

Jestocost was one of the few true men who believed in the rights of the underpeople. He did not think that mankind would ever get around to correcting ancient wrongs unless the underpeople themselves had some of the tools of power—weapons, conspiracy, wealth and (above all) organization with which to challenge man. He was not afraid of revolt, but he thirsted for justice with an obsessive yearning which overrode all other considerations.

When the Lords of the Instrumentality heard that there was the rumor of a conspiracy among the underpeople, they left it to the robot police to ferret out.

Jestocost did not.

He set up his own police, using underpeople themselves for the purpose, hoping to recruit enemies who would realize that he was a friendly enemy and who would in course of time bring him into touch with the leaders of the underpeople.

If those leaders existed, they were clever. What sign did a girly girl like C'mell ever give that she was the spearhead of a crisscross of agents who had penetrated Earthport itself? They must, if they existed, be very, very careful. The telepathic monitors, both robotic and human, kept every thought-band under surveillance by random sampling. Even the computers showed nothing more significant than improbable amounts of happiness in minds which had no objective reason for being happy.

The death of her father, the most famous cat-athlete which the underpeople had ever produced, gave Jestocost his first definite clue.

He went to the funeral himself, where the body was packed in an ice-rocket to be shot into space. The mourners were thoroughly mixed with the curiosity-seekers. Sport is international, inter-race, interworld, inter-species. Hominids were there: true men, 100% human, they looked weird and horrible because they or their ancestors had undergone bodily modifications to meet the life conditions of a thousand worlds.

Underpeople, the animal-derived "homunculi," were there, most of them in their work clothes, and they looked more human than did the human beings from the outer worlds. None were allowed to grow up if they were less than half the size of man, or more than six times the size of man. They all had to have human features and acceptable human voices. The punishment for failure in their elementary schools was death. Jestocost looked over the crowd and wondered to himself, "We have set up the standards of the toughest kind of survival for these people and we give them the most terrible incentive, life itself, as the condition of absolute progress. What fools we are to think that they will not overtake us!" The true people in the group did not seem to think as he did. They tapped the underpeople peremptorily with their canes, even though this was an underperson's funeral, and the bear-men, bull-men, cat-men and others yielded immediately and with a babble of apology.

C'mell was close to her father's icy coffin.

Jestocost not only watched her; she was pretty to watch. He committed an act which was an indecency in an ordinary citizen but lawful for a Lord of the Instrumentality: he peeped into her mind.

And then he found something which he did not expect.

As the coffin left, she cried, "Ee-telly-kelly, help me! help me!"

She had thought phonetically, not in script, and he had only the raw sound on which to base a search.

Jestocost had not become a Lord of the Instrumentality without applying daring. His mind was quick, too quick to be deeply intelligent. He thought by gestalt, not by logic. He determined to force his friendship on the girl.

He decided to await a propitious occasion, and then changed his mind about the time.

As she went home from the funeral, he intruded upon the circle of her grimfaced friends, underpeople who were trying to shield her from the condolences of ill-mannered but well-meaning sports enthusiasts.

She recognized him, and showed him the proper respect.

"My Lord, I did not expect you here. You knew my father?"

He nodded gravely and addressed sonorous words of consolation and sorrow, words which brought a murmur of approval from humans and underpeople alike.

But with his left hand hanging slack at his side, he made the perpetual signal of alarm! alarm! used within the Earthport staff—a repeated tapping of the thumb against the third finger—when they had to set one another on guard without alerting the offworld transients.

She was so upset that she almost spoiled it all. While he was still doing his pious doubletalk, she cried in a loud clear voice:

"You mean me?"

And he went on with his condolences: " ... and I do mean you, C'mell, to be the worthiest carrier of your father's name. You are the one to whom we turn in this time of common sorrow. Who could I mean but you if I say that C'mackintosh never did things by halves, and died young as a result of his own zealous conscience? Good-by, C'mell, I go back to my office."

She arrived forty minutes after he did.

2

He faced her straight away, studying her face.

"This is an important day in your life."

"Yes, my Lord, a sad one."

"I do not," he said, "mean your father's death and burial. I speak of the future to which we all must turn. Right now, it's you and me."

Her eyes widened. She had not thought that he was that kind of man at all. He was an official who moved freely around Earthport, often greeting important offworld visitors and keeping an eye on the bureau of ceremonies. She was a part of the reception team, when a girly girl was needed to calm down a frustrated arrival or to postpone a quarrel. Like the geisha of ancient Japan, she had an honorable profession; she was not a bad girl but a professionally flirtatious hostess. She stared at the Lord Jestocost. He did not look as though he meant anything improperly personal. But, thought she, you can never tell about men.

"You know men," he said, passing the initiative to her.

"I guess so," she said. Her face looked odd. She started to give him smile No. 3 (extremely adhesive) which she had learned in the girly-girl school. Realizing it was wrong, she tried to give him an ordinary smile. She felt she had made a face at him.

"Look at me," he said, "and see if you can trust me. I am going to take both our lives in my hands."

She looked at him. What imaginable subject could involve him, a Lord of the Instrumentality, with herself, an undergirl? They never had anything in common. They never would.

But she stared at him.

"I want to help the underpeople."

He made her blink. That was a crude approach, usually followed by a very raw kind of pass indeed. But his face was illuminated by seriousness. She waited.

"Your people do not have enough political power even to talk to us. I will not commit treason to the true-human race, but I am willing to give your side an advantage. If you bargain better with us, it will make all forms of life safer in the long run."

C'mell stared at the floor, her red hair soft as the fur of a Persian cat. It made her head seem bathed in flames. Her eyes looked human, except that they had the capacity of reflecting when light struck them; the irises were the rich green of the ancient cat. When she looked right at him, looking up from the floor, her glance had the impact of a blow. "What do you want from me?"

He stared right back. "Watch me. Look at my face. Are you sure, sure that I want nothing from you personally?"

She looked bewildered. "What else is there to want from me except personal things? I am a girly girl. I'm not a person of any importance at all, and I do not have much of an education. You know more, sir, than I will ever know."

"Possibly," he said, watching her.

She stopped feeling like a girly girl and felt like a citizen. It made her uncomfortable.

"Who," he said, in a voice of great solemnity, "is your own leader?"

"Commissioner Teadrinker, sir. He's in charge of all outworld visitors." She watched Jestocost carefully; he still did not look as if he were playing tricks.

He looked a little cross. "I don't mean him. He's part of my own staff. Who's your leader among the underpeople?"

"My father was, but he died."

Jestocost said, "Forgive me. Please have a seat. But I don't mean that."

She was so tired that she sat down into the chair with an innocent voluptuousness which would have disorganized any ordinary man's day. She wore girly-girl clothes, which were close enough to the everyday fashion to seem agreeably modish when she stood up. In line with her profession, her clothes were designed to be unexpectedly and provocatively revealing when she sat down—not revealing enough to shock the man with their brazenness, but so slit, tripped and cut that he got far more visual stimulation than he expected.

"I must ask you to pull your clothing together a little," said Jestocost in a clinical tone of voice. "I am a man, even if I am an official, and this interview is more important to you and to me than any distraction would be."

She was a little frightened by his tone. She had meant no challenge. With the funeral that day, she meant nothing at all; these clothes were the only kind she had.

He read all this in her face.

Relentlessly, he pursued the subject.

"Young lady, I asked about your leader. You name your boss and you name your father. I want your leader."

"I don't understand," she said, on the edge of a sob, "I don't understand."

Then, he thought to himself, I've got to take a gamble. He thrust the mental dagger home, almost drove his words like steel straight into her face. "Who .." he said slowly and icily, "is ... Ee ... telly ... kelly?"

The girl's face had been cream-colored, pale with sorrow. Now she went white. She twisted away from him. Her eyes glowed like twin fires.

Her eyes ... like twin fires.

(No undergirl, thought Jestocost as he reeled, could hypnotize me.)

Her eyes ... were like cold fires.

The room faded around him. The girl disappeared. Her eyes became a single white, cold fire.

Within this fire stood the figure of a man. His arms were wings, but he had human hands growing at the elbows of his wings. His face was clear, white, cold as the marble of an ancient statue; his

eyes were opaque white. "I am the E-telekeli. You will believe in me. You may speak to my daughter C'mell."

The image faded.

Jestocost saw the girl staring as she sat awkwardly on the chair, looking blindly through him. He was on the edge of making a joke about her hypnotic capacity when he saw that she was still deeply hypnotized, even after he had been released. She had stiffened and again her clothing had fallen into its planned disarray. The effect was not stimulating; it was pathetic beyond words, as though an accident had happened to a pretty child. He spoke to her.

He spoke to her, not really expecting an answer.

"Who are you?" he said to her, testing her hypnosis.

"I am he whose name is never said aloud," said the girl in a sharp whisper, "I am he whose secret you have penetrated. I have printed my image and my name in your mind."

Jestocost did not quarrel with ghosts like this. He snapped out a decision. "If I open my mind, will you search it while I watch you? Are you good enough to do that?"

"I am very good," hissed the voice in the girl's mouth.

C'mell arose and put her two hands on his shoulders. She looked into his eyes. He looked back. A strong telepath himself, Jestocost was not prepared for the enormous thought-voltage which poured out of her.

Look in my mind, he commanded, for the subject of underpeople only.

I see it, thought the mind behind C'mell.

Do you see what I mean to do for the underpeople?

Jestocost heard the girl breathing hard as her mind served as a relay to his. He tried to remain calm so that he could see which part of his mind was being searched. Very good so far, he thought to himself. An intelligence like that on Earth itself, he thought—and we of the Lords not knowing it!

The girl hacked out a dry little laugh.

Jestocost thought at the mind, Sorry. Go ahead.

This plan of yours—thought the strange mind—may I see more of it?

That's all there is.

Oh, said the strange mind, you want me to think for you. Can you give me the keys in the Bank and Bell which pertain to destroying underpeople?

You can have the information keys if I can ever get them, thought Jestocost, but not the control keys and not the master switch of the Bell.

Fair enough, thought the other mind, and what do I pay for them?

You support me in my policies before the Instrumentality. You keep the underpeople reasonable, if you can, when the time comes to negotiate. You maintain honor and good faith in all subsequent agreements. But how can I get the keys? It would take me a year to figure them out myself.

Let the girl look once, thought the strange mind, and I will be behind her. Fair?

Fair, thought Jestocost.

Break? thought the mind.

How do we re-connect? thought Jestocost back.

As before. Through the girl. Never say my name. Don't think it if you can help it. Break?

Break! thought Jestocost.

The girl, who had been holding his shoulders, drew his face down and kissed him firmly and warmly. He had never touched an under-person before, and it never had occurred to him that he might kiss one. It was pleasant, but he took her arms away from his neck, half-turned her around, and let her lean against him.

"Daddy!" she sighed happily.

Suddenly she stiffened, looked at his face, and sprang for the door. "Jestocost!" she cried. "Lord Jestocost! What am I doing here?"

"Your duty is done, my girl. You may go."

She staggered back into the room. "I'm going to be sick," she said. She vomited on his floor.

He pushed a button for a cleaning robot and slapped his desk-top for coffee.

She relaxed and talked about his hopes for the underpeople. She stayed an hour. By the time she left they had a plan. Neither of them had mentioned E-telekeli, neither had put purposes in the open. If the monitors had been listening, they would have found no single sentence or paragraph which was suspicious.

When she had gone, Jestocost looked out of his window. He saw the clouds far below and he knew the world below him was in twilight. He had planned to help the underpeople, and he had met powers of which organized mankind had no conception or perception. He was righter than he had thought. He had to go on through.

But as partner—C'mell herself!

Was there ever an odder diplomat in the history of worlds?

3

In less than a week they had decided what to do. It was the council of the Lords of the Instrumentality at which they would work—the brain center itself. The risk was high, but the entire job could be done in a few minutes if it were done at the Bell itself.

This is the sort of thing which interested Jestocost.

He did not know that C'mell watched him with two different facets of her mind. One side of her was alertly and wholeheartedly his fellow-conspirator, utterly in sympathy with the revolutionary aims to which they were both committed. The other side of her—was feminine.

She had a womanliness which was truer than that of any hominid woman. She knew the value of her trained smile, her splendidly kept red hair with its unimaginably soft texture, her lithe young figure with firm breasts and persuasive hips. She knew down to the last millimeter the effect which her legs had on hominid men. True humans kept few secrets from her. The men betrayed themselves by their unfulfillable desires, the women by their irrepressible jealousies. But she knew people best of all by not being one herself. She had to learn by imitation, and imitation is conscious. A thousand little things which ordinary women took for granted, or thought about just once in a whole lifetime, were subjects of acute and intelligent study to her. She was a girl by profession; she was a human by assimilation: she was an inquisitive cat in her genetic nature. Now she was falling in love with Jestocost, and she knew it.

Even she did not realize that the romance would sometime leak out into rumor, be magnified into legend, distilled into romance. She had no idea of the ballad about herself that would open with the lines which became famous much later:

She got the which of the what-she-did,

Hid the bell with a blot, she did,

But she fell in love with a hominid.

Where is the which of the what-she-did?

All this lay in the future, and she did not know it.

She knew her own past.

She remembered the off-Earth prince who had rested his head in her lap and had said, sipping his glass of moti by way of farewell:

"Funny, C'mell, you're not even a person and you're the most intelligent human being I've met in this place. Do you know it made my planet poor to send me here? And what did I get out of them? Nothing, nothing, and a thousand times nothing. But you, now. If you'd been running the government of Earth, I'd have gotten what my people need, and this world would be richer too. Manhome, they call it. Manhome, my eye! The only smart person on it is a female cat."

He ran his fingers around her ankle. She did not stir. That was part of hospitality, and she had her own ways of making sure that hospitality did not go too far. Earth police were watching her; to them, she was a convenience maintained for outworld people, something like a soft chair in the Earthport lobbies or a drinking fountain with acid-tasting water for strangers who could not tolerate the insipid water of Earth. She was not expected to have feelings or to get involved. If she had ever caused an incident, they would have punished her fiercely, as they often punished animals or

underpeople, or else (after a short formal hearing with no appeal) they would have destroyed her, as the law allowed and custom encouraged.

She had kissed a thousand men, maybe fifteen hundred. She had made them feel welcome and she had gotten their complaints or their secrets out of them as they left. It was a living, emotionally tiring but intellectually very stimulating. Sometimes it made her laugh to look at human women with their pointed-up noses and their proud airs, and to realize that she knew more about the men who belonged to the human women than the human women themselves ever did.

Once a policewoman had had to read over the record of two pioneers from New Mars. C'mell had been given the job of keeping in very close touch with them. When the policewoman got through reading the report she looked at C'mell and her face was distorted with jealousy and prudish rage.

"Cat, you call yourself. Cat! You're a pig, you're a dog, you're an animal. You may be working for Earth but don't ever get the idea that you're as good as a person. I think it's a crime that the Instrumentality lets monsters like you greet real human beings from outside! I can't stop it. But may the Bell help you, girl, if you ever touch a real Earth man! If you ever get near one! If you ever try tricks here! Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," C'mell had said. To herself she thought, "That poor thing doesn't know how to select her own clothes or how to do her own hair. No wonder she resents somebody who manages to be pretty."

Perhaps the policewoman thought that raw hatred would be shocking to C'mell. It wasn't. Underpeople were used to hatred, and it was not any worse raw than it was when cooked with politeness and served like poison. They had to live with it.

But now, it was all changed.

She had fallen in love with Jestocost.

Did he love her?

Impossible. No, not impossible. Unlawful, unlikely, indecent—yes, all these, but not impossible. Surely he felt something of her love.

If he did, he gave no sign of it.

People and underpeople had fallen in love many times before. The underpeople were always destroyed and the real people brainwashed. There were laws against that kind of thing. The scientists among people had created the underpeople, had given them capacities which real people did not have (the fifty-meter jump, the telepath two miles underground, the turtle-man waiting a thousand years next to an emergency door, the cow-man guarding a gate without reward), and the scientists had also given many of the underpeople the human shape. It was handier that way. The human eye, the five-fingered hand, the human size—these were convenient for engineering reasons. By making underpeople the same size and shape as people, more or less, the scientists eliminated the need for two or three or a dozen different sets of furniture. The human form was good enough for all of them.

But they had forgotten the human heart.

And now she, C'mell had fallen in love with a man, a true man old enough to have been her own father's grandfather.

But she didn't feel daughterly about him at all. She remembered that with her own father there was an easy comradeship, an innocent and forthcoming affection, which masked the fact that he was considerably more cat-like than she was. Between them there was an aching void of forever-unspoken words-things that couldn't quite be said by either of them, perhaps things that couldn't be said at all. They were so close to each other that they could get no closer. This created enormous distance, which was heartbreaking but unutterable. Her father had died, and now this true man was here, with all the kindness—"That's it," she whispered to herself, "with all the kindness that none of these passing men have ever really shown. With all the depth which my poor underpeople can never get. Not that it's not in them. But they're born like dirt, treated like dirt, put away like dirt when they die. How can any of my own men develop real kindness? There's a special sort of majesty to kindness. It's the best part there is to being people. And he has whole oceans of it in him. And it's strange, strange, strange that he's never given his real love to any human woman."

She stopped, cold.

Then she consoled herself and whispered on, "Or if he did, it's so long ago that it doesn't matter now. He's got me. Does he know it?"

4

The Lord Jestocost did know, and yet he didn't. He was used to getting loyalty from people, because he offered loyalty and honor in his daily work. He was even familiar with loyalty becoming obsessive and seeking physical form, particularly from women, children and underpeople. He had always coped with it before. He was gambling on the fact that C'mell was a wonderfully intelligent person, and that as a girly girl, working on the hospitality staff of the Earthport police, she must have learned to control her personal feelings.

"We're born in the wrong age," he thought, "when I meet the most intelligent and beautiful female I've ever met, and then have to put business first. But this stuff about people and underpeople is sticky. Sticky. We've got to keep personalities out of it."

So he thought. Perhaps he was right.

If the nameless one, whom he did not dare to remember, commanded an attack on the Bell itself, that was worth their lives. Their emotions could not come into it. The Bell mattered: justice mattered: the perpetual return of mankind to progress mattered. He did not matter, because he had already done most of his work. C'mell did not matter, because their failure would leave her with mere underpeople forever. The Bell did count.

The price of what he proposed to do was high, but the entire job could be done in a few minutes if it were done at the Bell itself.

The Bell, of course, was not a Bell. It was a three-dimensional situation table, three times the height of a man. It was set one story below the meeting room, and shaped roughly like an ancient bell. The meeting table of the Lords of the Instrumentality had a circle cut out of it, so that the Lords could look down into the Bell at whatever situation one of them called up either manually or telepathically. The Bank below it, hidden by the floor, was the key memory-bank of the entire system. Duplicates existed at thirty-odd other places on Earth. Two duplicates lay hidden in interstellar space, one of them beside the ninety-million-mile gold-colored ship left over from the War against Raumsog and the other masked as an asteroid.

Most of the Lords were offworld on the business of the Instrumentality.

Only three besides Jestocost were present—the Lady Johanna Gnade, the Lord Issan Olascoaga and the Lord William Not-from-here. (The Not-from-heres were a great Norstrilian family which had migrated back to Earth many generations before.)

The E-telekeli told Jestocost the rudiments of a plan.

He was to bring C'mell into the chambers on a summons.

The summons was to be serious.

They should avoid her summary death by automatic justice, if the relays began to trip.

C'mell would go into partial trance in the chamber.

He was then to call the items in the Bell which E-telekeli wanted traced. A single call would be enough. E-telekeli would take the responsibility for tracing them. The other Lords would be distracted by him, E-telekeli.

It was simple in appearance.

The complication came in action.

The plan seemed flimsy, but there was nothing which Jestocost could do at this time. He began to curse himself for letting his passion for policy involve him in the intrigue. It was too late to back out with honor; besides, he had given his word; besides, he liked C'mell—as a being, not as a girly girl—and he would hate to see her marked with disappointment for life. He knew how the underpeople cherished their identities and their status.

With heavy heart but quick mind he went to the council chamber. A dog-girl, one of the routine messengers whom he had seen many months outside the door, gave him the minutes.

He wondered how C'mell or E-telekeli would reach him, once he was inside the chamber with its



tight net of telepathic intercepts.

He sat wearily at the table. And almost jumped out of his chair.

The conspirators had forged the minutes themselves, and the top item was: "C'mell daughter to C'mackintosh, cat-stock (pure) lot 1138, confession of. Subject: conspiracy to export homuncular material. Reference: planet De Prinsensmacht."

The Lady Johanna Gnade had already pushed the buttons for the planet concerned. The people there, Earth by origin, were enormously strong but they had gone to great pains to maintain the original Earth appearance. One of their first-men was at the moment on Earth. He bore the title of the Twilight Prince (Prins van de Schemering) and he was on a mixed diplomatic and trading mission.

Since Jestocost was a little late, C'mell was being brought into the room as he glanced over the minutes.

The Lord Not-from-here asked Jestocost if he would preside.

"I beg you, sir and scholar," he said, "to join me in asking the Lord Issan to preside this time."

The presidency was a formality. Jestocost could watch the Bell and Bank better if he did not have to chair the meeting too.

C'mell wore the clothing of a prisoner. On her it looked good. He had never seen her wearing anything but girly-girl clothes before. The pale-blue prison tunic made her look very young, very human, very tender and very frightened. The cat family showed only in the fiery cascade of her hair and the lithe power of her body as she sat, demure and erect.

Lord Issan asked her: "You have confessed. Confess again."

"This man," and she pointed at a picture of the Twilight Prince, "wanted to go to the place where they torment human children for a show."

"What!" cried three of the Lords together.

"What place?" said the Lady Johanna, who was bitterly in favor of kindness.

"It's run by a man who looks like this gentleman here," said C'mell, pointing at Jestocost. Quickly, so that nobody could stop her, but modestly, so that none of them thought to doubt her, she circled the room and touched Jestocost's shoulder. He felt a thrill of contact-telepathy and heard bird-cackle in her brain. Then he knew that the E-telekeli was in touch with her.

"The man who has the place," said C'mell, "is five pounds lighter than this gentleman, two inches shorter, and he has red hair. His place is at the Cold Sunset corner of Earthport, down the boulevard and under the boulevard. Underpeople, some of them with bad reputations, live in that neighborhood."

The Bell went milky, flashing through hundreds of combinations of bad underpeople in that part of the city. Jestocost felt himself staring at the casual milkiness with unwanted concentration.

The Bell cleared.

It showed the vague image of a room in which children were playing Halloween tricks.

The Lady Johanna laughed, "Those aren't people. They're robots. It's just a dull old play."

"Then," added C'mell, "he wanted a dollar and a shilling to take home. Real ones. There was a robot who had found some."

"What are those?" said Lord Issan.

"Ancient money—the real money of old America and old Australia," cried Lord William. "I have copies, but there are no originals outside the state museum." He was an ardent, passionate collector of coins.

"The robot found them in an old hiding place right under Earth-port."

Lord Wiffiam almost shouted at the Bell. "Run through every hiding place and get me that money."

The Bell clouded. In finding the bad neighborhoods it had flashed every police point in the Northwest sector of the tower. Now it scanned all the police points under the tower, and ran dizzily through thousands of combinations before it settled on an old toolroom. A robot was polishing circular pieces of metal.

When Lord William saw the polishing, he was furious. "Get that here," he shouted. "I want to

buy those myself!"

"All right," said Lord Issan. "It's a little irregular, but all right."

The machine showed the key search devices and brought the robot to the escalator.

The Lord Issan said, "This isn't much of a case."

C'mell sniveled. She was a good actress. "Then he wanted me to get a homunculus egg. One of the E-type, derived from birds, for him to take home."

Issan put on the search device.

"Maybe," said C'mell, "somebody has already put it in the disposal series."

The Bell and the Bank ran through all the disposal devices at high speed. Jestocost felt his nerves go on edge. No human being could have memorized these thousands of patterns as they flashed across the Bell too fast for human eyes, but the brain reading the Bell through his eyes was not human. It might even be locked into a computer of its own. It was, thought Jestocost, an indignity for a Lord of the Instrumentality to be used as a human spy-glass.

The machine blotted up.

"You're a fraud," cried the Lord Issan. "There's no evidence."

"Maybe the offworlder tried," said the Lady Johanna.

"Shadow him," said Lord William. "If he would steal ancient coins he would steal anything."

The Lady Johanna turned to C'mell. "You're a silly thing. You have wasted our time and you have kept us from serious inter-world business."

"It is inter-world business," wept C'mell. She let her hand slip from Jestocost's shoulder, where it had rested all the time. The body-to-body relay broke and the telepathic link broke with it.

"We should judge that," said Lord Issan.

"You might have been punished," said Lady Johanna.

The Lord Jestocost had said nothing, but there was a glow of happiness in him. If the E-telekeli was half as good as he seemed, the underpeople had a list of checkpoints and escape routes which would make it easier to hide from the capricious sentence of painless death which human authorities meted out.

5

There was singing in the corridors that night.

Underpeople burst into happiness for no visible reason.

C'mell danced a wild cat dance for the next customer who came in from outworld stations, that very evening. When she got home to bed, she knelt before the picture of her father C'mackintosh and thanked the E-telekeli for what Jestocost had done.

But the story became known a few generations later, when the Lord Jestocost had won acclaim for being the champion of the underpeople and when the authorities, still unaware of E-telekeli, accepted the elected representatives of the underpeople as negotiators for better terms of life; and C'mell had died long since.

She had first had along, good life.

She became a female chef when she was too old to be a girly girl. Her food was famous. Jestocost once visited her. At the end of the meal he had asked, "There's a silly rhyme among the underpeople. No human beings know it except me."

"I don't care about rhymes," she said.

"This is called 'The what-she-did.' "

C'mell blushed all the way down to the neckline of her capacious blouse. She had filled out a lot in middle age. Running the restaurant had helped.

"Oh, that rhyme!" she said. "It's silly."

"It says you were in love with a hominid."

"No," she said. "I wasn't." Her green eyes, as beautiful as ever, stared deeply into his. Jestocost felt uncomfortable. This was getting personal. He liked political relationships; personal things made him uncomfortable.

The light in the room shifted and her cat eyes blazed at him, she looked like the magical fire-

haired girl he had known.

"I wasn't in love. You couldn't call it that ... "

Her heart cried out, It was you, it was you, it was you.

"But the rhyme," insisted Jestocost, "says it was a hominid. It wasn't that Prins van de Schemering?"

"Who was he?" C'mell asked the question quietly, but her emotions cried out, Darling, will you never, never know?

"The strong man."

"Oh, him. I've forgotten him."

Jestocost rose from the table. "You've had a good life, C'mell. You've been a citizen, a committeewoman, a leader. And do you even know how many children you have had?"

"Seventy-three," she snapped at him. "Just because they're multiple doesn't mean we don't know them."

His playfulness left him. His face was grave, his voice kindly. "I meant no harm, C'mell."

He never knew that when he left she went back to the kitchen and cried for a while. It was Jestocost whom she had vainly loved ever since they had been comrades, many long years ago.

Even after she died, at the full age of five-score and three, he kept seeing her about the corridors and shafts of Earthport. Many of her great-granddaughters looked just like her and several of them practiced the girly-girl business with huge success.

They were not half-slaves. They were citizens (reserved grade) and they had photopasses which protected their property, their identity and their rights. Jestocost was the godfather to them all; he was often embarrassed when the most voluptuous creatures in the universe threw playful kisses at him. All he asked was fulfillment of his political passions, not his personal ones. He had always been in love, madly in love—With justice itself.

At last, his own time came, and he knew that he was dying, and he was not sorry. He had had a wife, hundreds of years ago, and had loved her well; their children had passed into the generations of man.

In the ending, he wanted to know something, and he called to a nameless one (or to his successor) far beneath the ground. He called with his mind till it was a scream.

I have helped your people.

"Yes," came back the faintest of faraway whispers, inside his head.

I am dying. I must know. Did she love me?

"She went on without you, so much did she love you. She let you go, for your sake, not for hers. She really loved you. More than death. More than life. More than time. You will never be apart."

Never apart?

"No, not in the memory of man," said the voice, and was then still.

Jestocost lay back on his pillow and waited for the day to end.

## A PLANET NAMED SHAYOL

Smith acknowledged his debt to Dante in this story, which retells parts of the Inferno in science-fiction form—but with a twist distinctly Smith's own. The action apparently takes place even after that of Norstrilia, for banishment to Shayol is still used as a threat in the novel. At the end of this collection, as at the beginning, a member of the Vomact family appears—and we even meet Suzdal again. But Smith never shed any more light on the origin of the Go-Captain Alvarez ...

1

There was a tremendous difference between the liner and the ferry in Mercer's treatment. On the liner, the attendants made gibes when they brought him his food.

"Scream good and loud," said one rat-faced steward, "and then we'll know it's you when they broadcast the sounds of punishment on the Emperor's birthday."

The other, fat steward ran the tip of his wet, red tongue over his thick, purple-red lips one time

and said, "Stands to reason, man. If you hurt all the time, the whole lot of you would die. Something pretty good must happen, along with the—whatchamacallit. Maybe you turn into a woman. Maybe you turn into two people. Listen, cousin, if it's real crazy fun, let me know ... " Mercer said nothing. Mercer had enough troubles of his own not to wonder about the daydreams of nasty men.

At the ferry it was different. The biopharmaceutical staff was deft, impersonal, quick in removing his shackles. They took off all his prison clothes and left them on the liner. When he boarded the ferry, naked, they looked him over as if he were a rare plant or a body on the operating table. They were almost kind in the clinical deftness of their touch. They did not treat him as a criminal, but as a specimen.

Men and women, clad in their medical smocks, they looked at him as though he were already dead.

He tried to speak. A man, older and more authoritative than the others, said firmly and clearly, "Do not worry about talking. I will talk to you myself in a very little time. What we are having now are the preliminaries, to determine your physical condition. Turn around, please." Mercer turned around. An orderly rubbed his back with a very strong antiseptic.

"This is going to sting," said one of the technicians, "but it is nothing serious or painful. We are determining the toughness of the different layers of your skin."

Mercer, annoyed by this impersonal approach, spoke up just as a sharp little sting burned him above the sixth lumbar vertebra. "Don't you know who I am?"

"Of course we know who you are," said a woman's voice. "We have it all in a file in the corner. The chief doctor will talk about your crime later, if you want to talk about it. Keep quiet now. We are making a skin test, and you will feel much better if you do not make us prolong it."

Honesty forced her to add another sentence: "And we will get better results as well."

They had lost no time at all in getting to work.

He peered at them sidewise to look at them. There was nothing about them to indicate that they were human devils in the antechambers of hell itself. Nothing was there to indicate that this was the satellite of Shayol, the final and uttermost place of chastisement and shame. They looked like medical people from his life before he committed the crime without a name.

They changed from one routine to another. A woman, wearing a surgical mask, waved her hand at a white table.

"Climb up on that, please."

No one had said "please" to Mercer since the guards had seized him at the edge of the palace. He started to obey her and then he saw that there were padded handcuffs at the head of the table. He stopped.

"Get along, please," she demanded. Two or three of the others turned around to look at both of them.

The second "please" shook him. He had to speak. These were people, and he was a person again. He felt his voice rising, almost cracking into shrillness as he asked her, "Please, Ma'am, is the punishment going to begin?"

"There's no punishment here," said the woman. "This is the satellite. Get on the table. We're going to give you your first skin-toughening before you talk to the head doctor. Then you can tell him all about your crime—"

"You know my crime?" he said, greeting it almost like a neighbor.

"Of course not," said she, "but all the people who come through here are believed to have committed crimes. Somebody thinks so or they wouldn't be here. Most of them want to talk about their personal crimes. But don't slow me down. I'm a skin technician, and down on the surface of Shayol you're going to need the very best work that any of us can do for you. Now get on that table. And when you are ready to talk to the chief you'll have something to talk about besides your crime."

He complied.

Another masked person, probably a girl, took his hands in cool, gentle fingers and fitted them to the padded cuffs in a way he had never sensed before. By now he thought he knew every interrogation machine in the whole empire, but this was nothing like any of them.

The orderly stepped back. "All clear, Sir and Doctor."

"Which do you prefer?" said the skin technician. "A great deal of pain or a couple of hours' unconsciousness?"

"Why should I want pain?" said Mercer.

"Some specimens do," said the technician, "by the time they arrive here. I suppose it depends on what people have done to them before they got here. I take it you did not get any of the dream-punishments."

"No," said Mercer. "I missed those." He thought to himself, I didn't know that I missed anything at all.

He remembered his last trial, himself wired and plugged in to the witness stand. The room had been high and dark. Bright blue light shone on the panel of judges, their judicial caps a fantastic parody of the episcopal mitres of long, long ago. The judges were talking, but he could not hear them. Momentarily the insulation slipped and he heard one of them say, "Look at that white, devilish face. A man like that is guilty of everything. I vote for Pain Terminal."

"Not Planet Shayol?" said a second voice.

"The dromozoa place," said a third voice.

"That should suit him," said the first voice. One of the judicial engineers must then have noticed that the prisoner was listening illegally. He was cut off. Mercer then thought that he had gone through everything which the cruelty and intelligence of mankind could devise.

But this woman said he had missed the dream-punishments. Could there be people in the universe even worse off than himself? There must be a lot of people down on Shayol. They never came back.

He was going to be one of them; would they boast to him of what they had done, before they were made to come to this place?

"You asked for it," said the woman technician. "It is just an ordinary anesthetic. Don't panic when you awaken. Your skin is going to be thickened and strengthened chemically and biologically."

"Does it hurt?"

"Of course," said she. "But get this out of your head. We're not punishing you. The pain here is just ordinary medical pain. Anybody might get it if they needed a lot of surgery. The punishment, if that's what you want to call it, is down on Shayol. Our only job is to make sure that you are fit to survive after you are landed. In a way, we are saving your life ahead of time. You can be grateful for that if you want to be. Meanwhile, you will save yourself a lot of trouble if you realize that your nerve endings will respond to the change in the skin. You had better expect to be very uncomfortable when you recover. But then, we can help that, too." She brought down an enormous lever and Mercer blacked out.

When he came to, he was in an ordinary hospital room, but he did not notice it. He seemed bedded in fire. He lifted his hand to see if there were flames on it. It looked the way it always had, except that it was a little red and a little swollen. He tried to turn in the bed. The fire became a scorching blast which stopped him in mid-turn. Uncontrollably, he moaned.

A voice spoke, "You are ready for some pain-killer."

It was a girl nurse. "Hold your head still," she said, "and I will give you half an amp of pleasure. Your skin won't bother you then."

She slipped a soft cap on his head. It looked like metal but it felt like silk.

He had to dig his fingernails into his palms to keep from threshing about on the bed.

"Scream if you want to," she said. "A lot of them do. It will just be a minute or two before the cap finds the right lobe in your brain."

She stepped to the corner and did something which he could not see.

There was the flick of a switch.

The fire did not vanish from his skin. He still felt it; but suddenly it did not matter. His mind was full of delicious pleasure which throbbed outward from his head and seemed to pulse down through his nerves.

He had visited the pleasure palaces, but he had never felt anything like this before.

He wanted to thank the girl, and he twisted around in the bed to see her. He could feel his whole

body flash with pain as he did so, but the pain was far away. And the pulsating pleasure which coursed out of his head, down his spinal cord and into his nerves was so intense that the pain got through only as a remote, unimportant signal.

She was standing very still in the corner.

"Thank you, nurse," said he.

She said nothing.

He looked more closely, though it was hard to look while enormous pleasure pulsed through his body like a symphony written in nerve-messages. He focused his eyes on her and saw that she too wore a soft metallic cap.

He pointed at it.

She blushed all the way down to her throat.

She spoke dreamily, "You looked like a nice man to me. I didn't think you'd tell on me ... "

He gave her what he thought was a friendly smile, but with the pain in his skin and the pleasure bursting out of his head, he really had no idea of what his actual expression might be. "It's against the law," he said. "It's terribly against the law. But it is nice."

"How do you think we stand it here?" said the nurse. "You specimens come in here talking like ordinary people and then you go down to Shayol. Terrible things happen to you on Shayol. Then the surface station sends up parts of you, over and over again. I may see your head ten times, quick-frozen and ready for cutting up, before my two years are up. You prisoners ought to know how we suffer," she crooned, the pleasure-charge still keeping her relaxed and happy, "you ought to die as soon as you get down there and not pester us with your torments. We can hear you screaming, you know. You keep on sounding like people even after Shayol begins to work on you. Why do you do it, Mr. Specimen?" She giggled sillily. "You hurt our feelings so. No wonder a girl like me has to have a little jolt now and then. It's real, real dreamy and I don't mind getting you ready to go down on Shayol." She staggered over to his bed. "Pull this cap off me, will you? I haven't got enough will power left to raise my hands."

Mercer saw his hand tremble as he reached for the cap.

His fingers touched the girl's soft hair through the cap. As he tried to get his thumb under the edge of the cap, in order to pull it off, he realized that this was the loveliest girl he had ever touched. He felt that he had always loved her, that he always would. Her cap came off. She stood erect, staggering a little before she found a chair to hold to. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"Just a minute," she said in her normal voice. "I'll be with you in just a minute. The only time I can get a jolt of this is when one of you visitors gets a dose to get over the skin trouble."

She turned to the room mirror to adjust her hair. Speaking with her back to him, she said, "I hope I didn't say anything about downstairs."

Mercer still had the cap on. He loved this beautiful girl who had put it on him. He was ready to weep at the thought that she had had the same kind of pleasure which he still enjoyed. Not for the world would he say anything which could hurt her feelings. He was sure she wanted to be told that she had not said anything about "downstairs"—probably shop talk for the surface of Shayol—so he assured her warmly, "You said nothing. Nothing at all." .

She came over to the bed, leaned, kissed him on the lips. The kiss was as far away as the pain; he felt nothing; the Niagara of throbbing pleasure which poured through his head left no room for more sensation. But he liked the friendliness of it. A grim, sane corner of his mind whispered to him that this was probably the last time he would ever kiss a woman, but it did not seem to matter.

With skilled fingers she adjusted the cap on his head. "There, now. You're a sweet guy. I'm going to pretend-forget and leave the cap on you till the doctor comes."

With a bright smile she squeezed his shoulder.

She hastened out of the room.

The white of her skirt flashed prettily as she went out the door. He saw that she had very shapely legs indeed.

She was nice, but the cap ... ah, it was the cap that mattered! He closed his eyes and let the cap go on stimulating the pleasure centers of his brain. The pain in his skin was still there, but it did not

matter any more than did the chair standing in the corner. The pain was just something that happened to be in the room.

A firm touch on his arm made him open his eyes.

The older, authoritative-looking man was standing beside the bed, looking down at him with a quizzical smile.

"She did it again," said the old man.

Mercer shook his head, trying to indicate that the young nurse had done nothing wrong.

"I'm Doctor Vomact," said the older man, "and I am going to take this cap off you. You will then experience the pain again, but I think it will not be so bad. You can have the cap several more times before you leave here."

With a swift, firm gesture he snatched the cap off Mercer's head.

Mercer promptly doubled up with the inrush of fire from his skin. He started to scream and then saw that Doctor Vomact was watching him calmly.

Mercer gasped, "It is—easier now."

"I knew it would be," said the doctor. "I had to take the cap off to talk to you. You have a few choices to make."

"Yes, Doctor," gasped Mercer.

"You have committed a serious crime and you are going down to the surface of Shayol."

"Yes," said Mercer.

"Do you want to tell me your crime?"

Mercer thought of the white palace walls in perpetual sunlight, and the soft mewing of the little things when he reached them. He tightened his arms, legs, back and jaw. "No," he said, "I don't want to talk about it. It's the crime without a name. Against the Imperial family ... "

"Fine," said the doctor, "that's a healthy attitude. The crime is past. Your future is ahead. Now, I can destroy your mind before you go down—if you want me to."

"That's against the law," said Mercer.

Doctor Vomact smiled warmly and confidently. "Of course it is. A lot of things are against human law. But there are laws of science, too. Your body, down on Shayol, is going to serve science. It doesn't matter to me whether that body has Mercer's mind or the mind of a low-grade shellfish. I have to leave enough mind in you to keep the body going, but I can wipe out the historic you and give your body a better chance of being happy. It's your choice, Mercer. Do you want to be you or not?"

Mercer shook his head back and forth, "I don't know."

"I'm taking a chance," said Doctor Vomact, "in giving you this much leeway. I'd have it done if I were in your position. It's pretty bad down there."

Mercer looked at the full, broad face. He did not trust the comfortable smile. Perhaps this was a trick to increase his punishment. The cruelty of the Emperor was proverbial. Look at what he had done to the widow of his predecessor, the Dowager Lady Da. She was younger than the Emperor himself, and he had sent her to a place worse than death. If he had been sentenced to Shayol, why was this doctor trying to interfere with the rules? Maybe the doctor himself had been conditioned, and did not know what he was offering.

Doctor Vomact read Mercer's face. "All right. You refuse. You want to take your mind down with you. It's all right with me. I don't have you on my conscience. I suppose you'll refuse the next offer too. Do you want me to take your eyes out before you go down? You'll be much more comfortable without vision. I know that, from the voices that we record for the warning broadcasts. I can sear the optic nerves so that there will be no chance of your getting vision again."

Mercer rocked back and forth. The fiery pain had become a universal itch, but the soreness of his spirit was greater than the discomfort of his skin.

"You refuse that, too?" said the doctor. "I suppose so," said Mercer.

"Then all I have to do is to get ready. You can have the cap for a while, if you want."

Mercer said, "Before I put the cap on, can you tell me what happens down there?"

"Some of it," said the doctor. "There is an attendant. He is a man, but not a human being. He is a

homunculus fashioned out of cattle material. He is intelligent and very conscientious. You specimens are turned loose on the surface of Shayol. The dromozoa are a special life-form there. When they settle in your body, B'dikkat—that's the attendant—carves them out with an anesthetic and sends them up here. We freeze the tissue cultures, and they are compatible with almost any kind of oxygen-based life. Half the surgical repair you see in the whole universe comes out of buds that we ship from here. Shayol is a very healthy place, so far as survival is concerned. You won't die."

"You mean," said Mercer, "that I am getting perpetual punishment."

"I didn't say that," said Doctor Vomact. "Or if I did, I was wrong. You won't die soon. I don't know how long you will live down there. Remember, no matter how uncomfortable you get, the samples which B'dikkat sends up will help thousands of people in all the inhabited worlds. Now take the cap."

"I'd rather talk," said Mercer. "It may be my last chance."

The doctor looked at him strangely. "If you can stand that pain, go ahead and talk."

"Can I commit suicide down there?"

"I don't know," said the doctor. "It's never happened. And to judge by the voices, you'd think they wanted to."

"Has anybody ever come back from Shayol?"

"Not since it was put off limits about four hundred years ago."

"Can I talk to other people down there?"

"Yes," said the doctor.

"Who punishes me down there?"

"Nobody does, you fool," cried Doctor Vomact. "It's not punishment. People don't like it down on Shayol, and it's better, I guess, to get convicts instead of volunteers. But there isn't anybody against you at all."

"No jailers?" asked Mercer, with a whine in his voice.

"No jailers, no rules, no prohibitions. Just Shayol, and B'dikkat to take care of you. Do you still want your mind and your eyes?"

"I'll keep them," said Mercer. "I've gone this far and I might as well go the rest of the way."

"Then let me put the cap on you for your second dose," said Doctor Vomact.

The doctor adjusted the cap just as lightly and delicately as had the nurse; he was quicker about it. There was no sign of his picking out another cap for himself.

The inrush of pleasure was like a wild intoxication. His burning skin receded into distance. The doctor was near in space, but even the doctor did not matter. Mercer was not afraid of Shayol. The pulsation of happiness out of his brain was too great to leave room for fear or pain.

Doctor Vomact was holding out his hand.

Mercer wondered why, and then realized that the wonderful, kindly cap-giving man was offering to shake hands. He lifted his own. It was heavy, but his arm was happy, too.

They shook hands. It was curious, thought Mercer, to feel the handshake beyond the double level of cerebral pleasure and dermal pain.

"Goodbye, Mr. Mercer," said the doctor. "Goodbye and a good goodnight ... "

## 2

The ferry satellite was a hospitable place. The hundreds of hours that followed were like a long, weird dream.

Twice again the young nurse sneaked into his bedroom with him when he was being given the cap and had a cap with him. There were baths which calloused his whole body. Under strong local anesthetics, his teeth were taken out and stainless steel took their place. There were irradiations under blazing lights which took away the pain of his skin. There were special treatments for his fingernails and toenails. Gradually they changed into formidable claws; he found himself stopping them on the aluminum bed one night and saw that they left deep marks.

His mind never became completely clear.

Sometimes he thought that he was home with his mother, that he was little again, and in pain.



Other times, under the cap, he laughed in his bed to think that people were sent to this place for punishment when it was all so terribly much fun. There were no trials, no questions, no judges. Food was good, but he did not think about it much; the cap was better. Even when he was awake, he was drowsy.

At last, with the cap on him, they put him into an adiabatic pod—a one-body missile which could be dropped from the ferry to the planet below. He was all closed in, except for his face.

Doctor Vomact seemed to swim into the room. "You are strong, Mercer," the doctor shouted, "you are very strong! Can you hear me?"

Mercer nodded.

"We wish you well, Mercer. No matter what happens, remember you are helping other people up here."

"Can I take the cap with me?" said Mercer.

For an answer, Doctor Vomact removed the cap himself. Two men closed the lid of the pod, leaving Mercer in total darkness. His mind started to clear, and he panicked against his wrappings.

There was the roar of thunder and the taste of blood.

The next thing that Mercer knew, he was in a cool, cool room, much chillier than the bedrooms and operating rooms of the satellite. Someone was lifting him gently onto a table.

He opened his eyes.

An enormous face, four times the size of any human face Mercer had ever seen, was looking down at him. Huge brown eyes, cowlike in their gentle inoffensiveness, moved back and forth as the big face examined Mercer's wrappings. The face was that of a handsome man of middle years, clean-shaven, hair chestnut-brown, with sensual, full lips and gigantic but healthy yellow teeth exposed in a half-smile. The face saw Mercer's eyes open, and spoke with a deep friendly roar.

"I'm your best friend. My name is B'dikkat, but you don't have to use that here. Just call me Friend, and I will always help you."

"I hurt," said Mercer.

"Of course you do. You hurt all over. That's a big drop," said B'dikkat.

"Can I have a cap, please," begged Mercer. It was not a question; it was a demand; Mercer felt that his private inward eternity depended on it.

B'dikkat laughed. "I haven't any caps down here. I might use them myself. Or so they think. I have other things, much better. No fear, fellow, I'll fix you up."

Mercer looked doubtful. If the cap had brought him happiness on the ferry, it would take at least electrical stimulation of the brain to undo whatever torments the surface of Shayol had to offer.

B'dikkat's laughter filled the room like a bursting pillow.

"Have you ever heard of condamine?"

"No," said Mercer.

"It's a narcotic so powerful that the pharmacopoeias are not allowed to mention it."

"You have that?" said Mercer hopefully.

"Something better. I have super-condamine. It's named after the New French town where they developed it. The chemists hooked in one more hydrogen molecule. That gave it a real jolt. If you took it in your present shape, you'd be dead in three minutes, but those three minutes would seem like ten thousand years of happiness to the inside of your mind." B'dikkat rolled his brown cow eyes expressively and smacked his rich red lips with a tongue of enormous extent.

"What's the use of it, then?"

"You can take it," said B'dikkat. "You can take it after you have been exposed to the dromozoa outside this cabin. You get all the good effects and none of the bad. You want to see something?"

What answer is there except yes, thought Mercer grimly; does he think I have an urgent invitation to a tea party?

"Look out the window," said B'dikkat, "and tell me what you see."

The atmosphere was clear. The surface was like a desert, ginger-yellow with streaks of green where lichen and low shrubs grew, obviously stunted and tormented by high, dry winds. The landscape was monotonous. Two or three hundred yards away there was a herd of bright pink

objects which seemed alive, but Mercer could not see them well enough to describe them clearly. Further away, on the extreme right of his frame of vision, there was the statue of an enormous human foot, the height of a six-story building. Mercer could not see what the foot was connected to. "I see a big foot," said he, "but—"

"But what?" said B'dikkat, like an enormous child hiding the denouement of a hugely private joke. Large as he was, he could have been dwarfed by any one of the toes on that tremendous foot.

"But it can't be a real foot," said Mercer.

"It is," said B'dikkat. "That's Go-Captain Alvarez, the man who found this planet. After six hundred years he's still in fine shape. Of course, he's mostly dromozootic by now, but I think there is some human consciousness inside him. You know what I do?"

"What?" said Mercer.

"I give him six cubic centimeters of super-condamine and he snorts for me. Real happy little snorts. A stranger might think it was a volcano. That's what super-condamine can do. And you're going to get plenty of it. You're a lucky, lucky man, Mercer. You have me for a friend, and you have my needle for a treat. I do all the work and you get all the fun. Isn't that a nice surprise?"

Mercer thought, You're lying! Lying! Where do the screams come from that we have all heard broadcast as a warning on Punishment Day? Why did the doctor offer to cancel my brain or to take out my eyes?

The cow-man watched him sadly, a hurt expression on his face. "You don't believe me," he said, very sadly.

"It's not quite that," said Mercer, with an attempt at heartiness, "but I think you're leaving something out."

"Nothing much," said B'dikkat. "You jump when the dromozoa hit you. You'll be upset when you start growing new parts—heads, kidneys, hands. I had one fellow in here who grew thirty-eight hands in a single session outside. I took them all off, froze them and sent them upstairs. I take good care of everybody. You'll probably yell for a while. But remember, just call me Friend, and I have the nicest treat in the universe waiting for you. Now, would you like some fried eggs? I don't eat eggs myself, but most true men like them."

"Eggs?" said Mercer. "What have eggs got to do with it?"

"Nothing much. It's just a treat for you people. Get something in your stomach before you go outside. You'll get through the first day better."

Mercer, unbelieving, watched as the big man took two precious eggs from a cold chest, expertly broke them into a little pan and put the pan in the heat-field at the center of the table Mercer had awakened on.

"Friend, eh?" B'dikkat grinned. "You'll see I'm a good friend. When you go outside, remember that."

An hour later, Mercer did go outside.

Strangely at peace with himself, he stood at the door. B'dikkat pushed him in a brotherly way, giving him a shove which was gentle enough to be an encouragement.

"Don't make me put on my lead suit, fellow." Mercer had seen a suit, fully the size of an ordinary space-ship cabin, hanging on the wall of an adjacent room. "When I close this door, the outer one will open. Just walk on out."

"But what will happen?" said Mercer, the fear turning around in his stomach and making little grabs at his throat from the inside.

"Don't start that again," said B'dikkat. For an hour he had fended off Mercer's questions about the outside. A map? B'dikkat had laughed at the thought. Food? He said not to worry. Other people? They'd be there. Weapons? What for, B'dikkat had replied. Over and over again, B'dikkat had insisted that he was Mercer's friend. What would happen to Mercer? The same that happened to everybody else.

Mercer stepped out.

Nothing happened. The day was cool. The wind moved gently against his toughened skin.

Mercer looked around apprehensively.

The mountainous body of Captain Alvarez occupied a good part of the landscape to the right. Mercer had no wish to get mixed up with that. He glanced back at the cabin. B'dikkat was not looking out the window.

Mercer walked slowly, straight ahead.

There was a flash on the ground, no brighter than the glitter of sunlight on a fragment of glass. Mercer felt a sting in the thigh, as though a sharp instrument had touched him lightly. He brushed the place with his hand.

It was as though the sky fell in.

A pain—it was more than a pain; it was a living throb—ran from his hip to his foot on the right side. The throb reached up to his chest, robbing him of breath. He fell, and the ground hurt him. Nothing in the hospital-satellite had been like this. He lay in the open air, trying not to breathe, but he did breathe anyhow. Each time he breathed, the throb moved with his thorax. He lay on his back, looking at the sun. At last he noticed that the sun was violet-white.

It was no use even thinking of calling. He had no voice. Tendrils of discomfort twisted within him. Since he could not stop breathing, he concentrated on taking air in the way that hurt him least. Gasps were too much work. Little tiny sips of air hurt him least.

The desert around him was empty. He could not turn his head to look at the cabin. Is this it? he thought. Is an eternity of this the punishment of Shayol?

There were voices near him.

Two faces, grotesquely pink, looked down at him. They might have been human. The man looked normal enough, except for having two noses side by side. The woman was a caricature beyond belief. She had grown a breast on each cheek and a cluster of naked baby-like fingers hung limp from her forehead.

"It's a beauty," said the woman, "a new one."

"Come along," said the man.

They lifted him to his feet. He did not have strength enough to resist. When he tried to speak to them a harsh cawing sound, like the cry of an ugly bird, came from his mouth.

They moved with him efficiently. He saw that he was being dragged to the herd of pink things.

As they approached, he saw that they were people. Better, he saw that they had once been people. A man with the beak of a flamingo was picking at his own body. A woman lay on the ground; she had a single head, but beside what seemed to be her original body, she had a boy's naked body growing sidewise from her neck. The boy-body, clean, new, paralytically helpless, made no movement other than shallow breathing. Mercer looked around. The only one of the group who was wearing clothing was a man with his overcoat on sidewise. Mercer stared at him, finally realizing that the man had two—or was it three?—stomachs growing on the outside of his abdomen. The coat held them in place. The transparent peritoneal wall looked fragile.

"New one," said his female captor. She and the two-nosed man put him down.

The group lay scattered on the ground.

Mercer lay in a state of stupor among them.

An old man's voice said, "I'm afraid they're going to feed us pretty soon."

"Oh, no!"

"It's too early!"

"Not again!"

Protests echoed from the group.

The old man's voice went on, "Look, near the big toe of the mountain!"

The desolate murmur in the group attested their confirmation of what he had seen.

Mercer tried to ask what it was all about, but produced only a caw.

A woman—was it a woman?—crawled over to him on her hands and knees. Beside her ordinary hands, she was covered with hands all over her trunk and halfway down her thighs. Some of the hands looked old and withered. Others were as fresh and pink as the baby-fingers on his captress' face. The woman shouted at him, though it was not necessary to shout.

"The dromozoa are coming. This time it hurts. When you get used to the place, you can dig in—"

She waved at a group of mounds which surrounded the herd of people.

"They're dug in," she said.

Mercer cawed again.

"Don't you worry," said the hand-covered woman, and gasped as a flash of light touched her.

The lights reached Mercer too. The pain was like the first contact but more probing. Mercer felt his eyes widen as odd sensations within his body led to an inescapable conclusion: these lights, these things, these whatever they were, were feeding him and building him up.

Their intelligence, if they had it, was not human, but their motives were clear. In between the stabs of pain he felt them fill his stomach, put water in his blood, draw water from his kidneys and bladder, massage his heart, move his lungs for him.

Every single thing they did was well meant and beneficent in intent.

And every single action hurt.

Abruptly, like the lifting of a cloud of insects, they were gone. Mercer was aware of a noise somewhere outside—a brainless, bawling cascade of ugly noise. He started to look around. And the noise stopped.

It had been himself, screaming. Screaming the ugly screams of a psychotic, a terrified drunk, an animal driven out of understanding or reason.

When he stopped, he found he had his speaking voice again.

A man came to him, naked like the others. There was a spike sticking through his head. The skin had healed around it on both sides. "Hello, fellow," said the man with the spike.

"Hello," said Mercer. It was a foolishly commonplace thing to say in a place like this.

"You can't kill yourself," said the man with the spike through his head.

"Yes, you can," said the woman covered with hands.

Mercer found that his first pain had disappeared. "What's happening to me?"

"You got a part," said the man with the spike. "They're always putting parts on us. After a while B'dikkat comes and cuts most of them off, except for the ones that ought to grow a little more. Like her," he added, nodding at the woman who lay with the boy-body growing from her neck.

"And that's all?" said Mercer. "The stabs for the new parts and the stinging for the feeding?"

"No," said the man. "Sometimes they think we're too cold and they fill our insides with fire. Or they think we're too hot and they freeze us, nerve by nerve."

The woman with the boy-body called over, "And sometimes they think we're unhappy, so they try to force us to be happy. I think that's the worst of all."

Mercer stammered, "Are you people—I mean—are you the only herd?"

The man with the spike coughed instead of laughing. "Herd! That's funny. The land is full of people. Most of them dig in. We're the ones who can still talk. We stay together for company. We get more turns with B'dikkat that way."

Mercer started to ask another question, but he felt the strength run out of him. The day had been too much.

The ground rocked like a ship on water. The sky turned black. He felt someone catch him as he fell. He felt himself being stretched out on the ground. And then, mercifully and magically, he slept.

3

Within a week, he came to know the group well. They were an absent-minded bunch of people. Not one of them ever knew when a dromozoan might flash by and add another part. Mercer was not stung again, but the incision he had obtained just outside the cabin was hardening. Spike-head looked at it when Mercer modestly undid his belt and lowered the edge of his trouser-top so they could see the wound.

"You've got a head," he said. "A whole baby head. They'll be glad to get that one upstairs when B'dikkat cuts it off you."

The group even tried to arrange his social life. They introduced him to the girl of the herd. She had grown one body after another, pelvis turning into shoulders and the pelvis below that turning into shoulders again until she was five people long. Her face was unmarred. She tried to be friendly

to Mercer.

He was so shocked by her that he dug himself into the soft dry crumbly earth and stayed there for what seemed like a hundred years. He found later that it was less than a full day. When he came out, the long many-bodied girl was waiting for him.

"You didn't have to come out just for me," said she.

Mercer shook the dirt off himself.

He looked around. The violet sun was going down, and the sky was streaked with blues, deeper blues and trails of orange sunset.

He looked back at her. "I didn't get up for you. It's no use lying there, waiting for the next time."

"I want to show you something," she said. She pointed to a low hummock. "Dig that up."

Mercer looked at her. She seemed friendly. He shrugged and attacked the soil with his powerful claws. With tough skin and heavy digging-nails on the ends of his fingers, he found it was easy to dig like a dog. The earth cascaded beneath his busy hands. Something pink appeared down in the hole he had dug. He proceeded more carefully.

He knew what it would be.

It was. It was a man, sleeping. Extra arms grew down one side of his body in an orderly series. The other side looked normal.

Mercer turned back to the many-bodied girl, who had writhed closer.

"That's what I think it is, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "Doctor Vomact burned his brain out for him. And took his eyes out, too."

Mercer sat back on the ground and looked at the girl. "You told me to do it. Now tell me what for."

"To let you see. To let you know. To let you think."

"That's all?" said Mercer.

The girl twisted with startling suddenness. All the way down her series of bodies, her chests heaved. Mercer wondered how the air got into all of them. He did not feel sorry for her; he did not feel sorry for anyone except himself. When the spasm passed the girl smiled at him apologetically.

"They just gave me a new plant."

Mercer nodded grimly.

"What now, a hand? It seems you have enough."

"Oh, those," she said, looking back at her many torsos. "I promised B'dikkat that I'd let them grow. He's good. But that man, stranger. Look at that man you dug up. Who's better off, he or we?"

Mercer stared at her. "Is that what you had me dig him up for?"

"Yes," said the girl.

"Do you expect me to answer?"

"No," said the girl, "not now."

"Who are you?" said Mercer.

"We never ask that here. It doesn't matter. But since you're new, I'll tell you. I used to be the Lady Da—the Emperor's stepmother."

"You!" he exclaimed.

She smiled, ruefully. "You're still so fresh you think it matters! But I have something more important to tell you." She stopped and bit her lip.

"What?" he urged. "Better tell me before I get another bite. I won't be able to think or talk then, not for a long time. Tell me now."

She brought her face close to his. It was still a lovely face, even in the dying orange of this violet-sunned sunset. "People never live forever."

"Yes," said Mercer. "I knew that."

"Believe it," ordered the Lady Da.

Lights flashed across the dark plain, still in the distance. Said she, "Dig in, dig in for the night. They may miss you."

Mercer started digging. He glanced over at the man he had dug up.

The brainless body, with motions as soft as those of a starfish under water, was pushing its way

back into the earth.

Five or seven days later, there was a shouting through the herd.

Mercer had come to know a half-man, the lower part of whose body was gone and whose viscera were kept in place with what resembled a translucent plastic bandage. The half-man had shown him how to lie still when the dromozoa came with their inescapable errands of doing good.

Said the half-man, "You can't fight them. They made Alvarez as big as a mountain, so that he never stirs. Now they're trying to make us happy. They feed us and clean us and sweeten us up. Lie still. Don't worry about screaming. We all do."

"When do we get the drug?" said Mercer.

"When B'dikkat comes."

B'dikkat came that day, pushing a sort of wheeled sled ahead of him. The runners carried it over the hillocks; the wheels worked on the surface.

Even before he arrived, the herd sprang into furious action. Everywhere, people were digging up the sleepers. By the time B'dikkat reached their waiting place, the herd must have uncovered twice their own number of sleeping pink bodies—men and women, young and old. The sleepers looked no better and no worse than the waking ones.

"Hurry!" said the Lady Da. "He never gives any of us a shot until we're all ready."

B'dikkat wore his heavy lead suit.

He lifted an arm in friendly greeting, like a father returning home with treats for his children. The herd clustered around him but did not crowd him.

He reached into the sled. There was a harnessed bottle which he threw over his shoulders. He snapped the locks on the straps. From the bottle there hung a tube. Midway down the tube there was a small pressure-pump. At the end of the tube there was a glistening hypodermic needle.

When ready, B'dikkat gestured for them to come closer. They approached him with radiant happiness. He stepped through their ranks and past them, to the girl who had the boy growing from her neck. His mechanical voice boomed through the loudspeaker set in the top of his suit.

"Good girl. Good, good girl. You get a big, big present." He thrust

the hypodermic into her so long that Mercer could see an air bubble travel from the pump up to the bottle.

Then he moved back to the others, booming a word now and then, moving with improbable grace and speed amid the people. His needle flashed as he gave them hypodermics under pressure. The people dropped to sitting positions or lay down on the ground as though half-asleep.

He knew Mercer. "Hello, fellow. Now you can have the fun. It would have killed you in the cabin. Do you have anything for me?"

Mercer stammered, not knowing what B'dikkat meant, and the two-nosed man answered for him, "I think he has a nice baby head, but it isn't big enough for you to take yet."

Mercer never noticed the needle touch his arm.

B'dikkat had turned to the next knot of people when the super-condamine hit Mercer.

He tried to run after B'dikkat, to hug the lead space suit, to tell B'dikkat that he loved him. He stumbled and fell, but it did not hurt.

The many-bodied girl lay near him. Mercer spoke to her.

"Isn't it wonderful? You're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful. I'm so happy to be here."

The woman covered with growing hands came and sat beside them. She radiated warmth and good fellowship. Mercer thought that she looked very distinguished and charming. He struggled out of his clothes. It was foolish and snobbish to wear clothing when none of these nice people did.

The two women babbled and crooned at him.

With one corner of his mind he knew that they were saying nothing, just expressing the euphoria of a drug so powerful that the known universe had forbidden it. With most of his mind he was happy. He wondered how anyone could have the good luck to visit a planet as nice as this. He tried to tell the Lady Da, but the words weren't quite straight.

A painful stab hit him in the abdomen. The drug went after the pain and swallowed it. It was like the cap in the hospital, only a thousand times better. The pain was gone, though it had been

crippling the first time.

He forced himself to be deliberate. He rammed his mind into focus and said to the two ladies who lay pinkly nude beside him in the desert, "That was a good bite. Maybe I will grow another head. That would make B'dikkat happy!"

The Lady Da forced the foremost of her bodies in an upright position. Said she, "I'm strong, too. I can talk. Remember, man, remember. People never live forever. We can die, too, we can die like real people. I do so believe in death!"

Mercer smiled at her through his happiness.

"Of course you can. But isn't this nice ... "

With this he felt his lips thicken and his mind go slack. He was wide awake, but he did not feel like doing anything. In that beautiful place, among all those companionable and attractive people, he sat and smiled.

B'dikkat was sterilizing his knives.

Mercer wondered how long the super-condamine had lasted him. He endured the ministrations of the dromozoa without screams or movement. The agonies of nerves and itching of skin were phenomena which happened somewhere near him, but meant nothing. He watched his own body with remote, casual interest. The Lady Da and the hand-covered woman stayed near him. After a long time the half-man dragged himself over to the group with his powerful arms. Having arrived he blinked sleepily and friendlily at them, and lapsed back into the restful stupor from which he had emerged. Mercer saw the sun rise on occasion, closed his eyes briefly, and opened them to see stars shining. Time had no meaning. The dromozoa fed him in their mysterious way: the drug canceled out his needs for cycles of the body.

At last he noticed a return of the inwardness of pain.

The pains themselves had not changed; he had.

He knew all the events which could take place on Shayol. He remembered them well from his happy period. Formerly he had noticed them—now he felt them.

He tried to ask the Lady Da how long they had had the drug, and how much longer they would have to wait before they had it again. She smiled at him with benign, remote happiness; apparently her many torsos, stretched out along the ground, had a greater capacity for retaining the drug than did his body. She meant him well, but was in no condition for articulate speech.

The half-man lay on the ground, arteries pulsating prettily behind the half-transparent film which protected his abdominal cavity. Mercer squeezed the man's shoulder.

The half-man woke, recognized Mercer and gave him a healthily sleepy grin.

" 'A good morrow to you, my boy.' That's out of a play. Did you ever see a play?"

"You mean a game with cards?"

"No," said the half-man, "a sort of eye-machine with real people doing the figures."

"I never saw that," said Mercer, "but I—"

"But you want to ask me when B'dikkat is going to come back with the needle."

"Yes," said Mercer, a little ashamed of his obviousness.

"Soon," said the half-man. "That's why I think of plays. We all know what is going to happen. We all know when it is going to happen. We all know what the dummies will do—" he gestured at the hummocks in which the decorticated men were cradled—" and we all know what the new people will ask. But we never know how long a scene is going to take."

"What's a 'scene'?" asked Mercer. "Is that the name for the needle?"

The half-man laughed with something close to real humor. "No, no, no. You've got the lovelies on the brain. A scene is just part of a play. I mean we know the order in which things happen, but we have no clocks and nobody cares enough to count days or to make calendars and there's not much climate here, so none of us know how long anything takes. The pain seems short and the pleasure seems long. I'm inclined to think that they are about two Earth-weeks each."

Mercer did not know what an "Earth-week" was, since he had not been a well-read man before his conviction, but he got nothing more from the half-man at that time. The half-man received a dromozootic implant, turned red in the face, shouted senselessly at Mercer, "Take it out, you fool!"

Take it out of me!"

While Mercer looked on helplessly, the half-man twisted over on his side, his pink dusty back turned to Mercer, and wept hoarsely and quietly to himself.

Mercer himself could not tell how long it was before B'dikkat came back. It might have been several days. It might have been several months.

Once again B'dikkat moved among them like a father; once again they clustered like children. This time B'dikkat smiled pleasantly at the little head which had grown out of Mercer's thigh—a sleeping child's head, covered with light hair on top and with dainty eyebrows over the resting eyes. Mercer got the blissful needle.

When B'dikkat cut the head from Mercer's thigh, he felt the knife grinding against the cartilage which held the head to his own body. He saw the child-face grimace as the head was cut; he felt the far, cool flash of unimportant pain, as B'dikkat dabbed the wound with a corrosive antiseptic which stopped all bleeding immediately.

The next time it was two legs growing from his chest.

Then there had been another head beside his own.

Or was that after the torso and legs, waist to toe-tips, of the little girl which had grown from his side?

He forgot the order.

He did not count time.

Lady Da smiled at him often, but there was no love in this place. She had lost the extra torsos. In between teratologies, she was a pretty and shapely woman; but the nicest thing about their relationship was her whisper to him, repeated some thousands of times, repeated with smiles and hope, "People never live forever."

She found this immensely comforting, even though Mercer did not make much sense out of it.

Thus events occurred, and victims changed in appearance, and new ones arrived. Sometimes B'dikkat took the new ones, resting in the everlasting sleep of their burned-out brains, in a ground-truck to be added to other herds. The bodies in the truck threshed and bawled without human speech when the dromozoa struck them.

Finally, Mercer did manage to follow B'dikkat to the door of the cabin. He had to fight the bliss of super-condamine to do it. Only the memory of previous hurt, bewilderment and perplexity made him sure that if he did not ask B'dikkat when he, Mercer, was happy, the answer would no longer be available when he needed it. Fighting pleasure itself, he begged B'dikkat to check the records and to tell him how long he had been there.

B'dikkat grudgingly agreed, but he did not come out of the doorway. He spoke through the public address box built into the cabin, and his gigantic voice roared out over the empty plain, so that the pink herd of talking people stirred gently in their happiness and wondered what their friend B'dikkat might be wanting to tell them. When he said it, they thought it exceedingly profound, though none of them understood it, since it was simply the amount of time that Mercer had been on Shayol:

"Standard years—eighty-four years, seven months, three days, two hours, eleven and one half minutes. Good luck, fellow."

Mercer turned away.

The secret little corner of his mind, which stayed sane through happiness and pain, made him wonder about B'dikkat. What persuaded the cow-man to remain on Shayol? What kept him happy without super-condamine? Was B'dikkat a crazy slave to his own duty or was he a man who had hopes of going back to his own planet some day, surrounded by a family of little cow-people resembling himself? Mercer, despite his happiness, wept a little at the strange fate of B'dikkat. His own fate he accepted.

He remembered the last time he had eaten—actual eggs from an actual pan. The dromozoa kept him alive, but he did not know how they did it.

He staggered back to the group. The Lady Da, naked in the dusty plain, waved a hospitable hand and showed that there was a place for him to sit beside her. There were unclaimed square miles of seating space around them, but he appreciated the kindness of her gesture none the less.



The years, if they were years, went by. The land of Shayol did not change.

Sometimes the bubbling sound of geysers came faintly across the plain to the herd of men; those who could talk declared it to be the breathing of Captain Alvarez. There was night and day, but no setting of crops, no change of season, no generations of men. Time stood still for these people, and their load of pleasure was so commingled with the shocks and pains of the dromozoa that the words of the Lady Da took on very remote meaning.

"People never live forever."

Her statement was a hope, not a truth in which they could believe. They did not have the wit to follow the stars in their courses, to exchange names with each other, to harvest the experience of each for the wisdom of all. There was no dream of escape for these people. Though they saw the old-style chemical rockets lift up from the field beyond B'dikkat's cabin, they did not make plans to hide among the frozen crop of transmuted flesh.

Far long ago, some other prisoner than one of these had tried to write a letter. His handwriting was on a rock. Mercer read it, and so had a few of the others, but they could not tell which man had done it. Nor did they care.

The letter, scraped on stone, had been a message home. They could still read the opening: "Once, I was like you, stepping out of my window at the end of day, and letting the winds blow me gently toward the place I lived in. Once, like you, I had one head, two hands, ten fingers on my hands. The front part of my head was called a face, and I could talk with it. Now I can only write, and that only when I get out of pain. Once, like you, I ate foods, drank liquid, had a name. I cannot remember the name I had. You can stand up, you who get this letter. I cannot even stand up. I just wait for the lights to put my food in me molecule by molecule, and to take it out again. Don't think that I am punished any more. This place is not a punishment. It is something else."

Among the pink herd, none of them ever decided what was "something else."

Curiosity had died among them long ago.

Then came the day of the little people.

It was a time—not an hour, not a year: a duration somewhere between them—when the Lady Da and Mercer sat wordless with happiness and filled with the joy of super-condamine. They had nothing to say to one another; the drug said all things for them.

A disagreeable roar from B'dikkat's cabin made them stir mildly.

Those two, and one or two others, looked toward the speaker of the public address system.

The Lady Da brought herself to speak, though the matter was unimportant beyond words. "I do believe," said she, "that we used to call that the War Alarm."

They drowsed back into their happiness.

A man with two rudimentary heads growing beside his own crawled over to them. All three heads looked very happy, and Mercer thought it delightful of him to appear in such a whimsical shape. Under the pulsing glow of super-condamine, Mercer regretted that he had not used times when his mind was clear to ask him who he had once been. He answered it for them. Forcing his eyelids open by sheer will power, he gave the Lady Da and Mercer the lazy ghost of a military salute and said, "Suzdal, Ma'am and Sir, former cruiser commander. They are sounding the alert. Wish to report that I am ... I am ... I am not quite ready for battle."

He dropped off to sleep.

The gentle peremptorinesses of the Lady Da brought his eyes open again.

"Commander, why are they sounding it here? Why did you come to us?"

"You, Ma'am, and the gentleman with the ears seem to think best of our group. I thought you might have orders."

Mercer looked around for the gentleman with the ears. It was himself. In that time his face was almost wholly obscured with a crop of fresh little ears, but he paid no attention to them, other than expecting that B'dikkat would cut them all off in due course and that the dromozoa would give him

something else.

The noise from the cabin rose to a higher, ear-splitting intensity.

Among the herd, many people stirred.

Some opened their eyes, looked around, murmured. "It's a noise," and went back to the happy drowsing with super-condamine.

The cabin door opened.

B'dikkat rushed out, without his suit. They had never seen him on the outside without his protective metal suit.

He rushed up to them, looked wildly around, recognized the Lady Da and Mercer, picked them up, one under each arm, and raced with them back to the cabin. He flung them into the double door. They landed with bone-splitting crashes, and found it amusing to hit the ground so hard. The floor tilted them into the room. Moments later, B'dikkat followed.

He roared at them, "You're people, or you were. You understand people; I only obey them. But this I will not obey. Look at that!"

Four beautiful human children lay on the floor. The two smallest seemed to be twins, about two years of age. There was a girl of five and a boy of seven or so. All of them had slack eyelids. All of them had thin red lines around their temples and their hair, shaved away, showed how their brains had been removed.

B'dikkat, heedless of danger from dromozoa, stood beside the Lady Da and Mercer, shouting.

"You're real people. I'm just a cow. I do my duty. My duty does not include this. These are children."

The wise, surviving recess of Mercer's mind registered shock and disbelief. It was hard to sustain the emotion, because the super-condamine washed at his consciousness like a great tide, making everything seem lovely. The forefront of his mind, rich with the drug, told him, "Won't it be nice to have some children with us!" But the undestroyed interior of his mind, keeping the honor he knew before he came to Shayol, whispered, "This is a crime worse than any crime we have committed! And the Empire has done it."

"What have you done?" said the Lady Da. "What can we do?"

"I tried to call the satellite. When they knew what I was talking about, they cut me off. After all, I'm not people. The head doctor told me to do my work."

"Was it Doctor Vomact?" Mercer asked.

"Vomact?" said B'dikkat. "He died a hundred years ago, of old age. No, a new doctor cut me off. I don't have people-feeling, but I am Earth-born, of Earth blood. I have emotions myself. Pure cattle emotions! This I cannot permit."

"What have you done?"

B'dikkat lifted his eyes to the window. His face was illuminated by a determination which, even beyond the edges of the drug which made them love him, made him seem like the father of this world-responsible, honorable, unselfish.

He smiled. "They will kill me for it, I think. But I have put in the Galactic Alert—all ships here."

The Lady Da, sitting back on the floor, declared, "But that's only for new invaders! It is a false alarm." She pulled herself together and rose to her feet. "Can you cut these things off me, right now, in case people come? And get me a dress. And do you have anything which will counteract the effect of the super-condamine?"

"That's what I wanted!" cried B'dikkat. "I will not take these children. You give me leadership."

There and then, on the floor of the cabin, he trimmed her down to the normal proportions of mankind.

The corrosive antiseptic rose like smoke in the air of the cabin. Mercer thought it all very dramatic and pleasant, and dropped off in catnaps part of the time. Then he felt B'dikkat trimming him too. B'dikkat opened a long, long drawer and put the specimens in; from the cold in the room it must have been a refrigerated locker.

He sat them both up against the wall.

"I've been thinking," he said. "There is no antidote for super-condamine. Who would want one?"

But I can give you the hypos from my rescue boat. They are supposed to bring a person back, no matter what has happened to that person out in space."

There was a whining over the cabin roof. B'dikkat knocked a window out with his fist, stuck his head out of the window and looked up.

"Come on in," he shouted.

There was the thud of a landing craft touching ground quickly. Doors whirled. Mercer wondered, mildly, why people dared to land on Shayol. When they came in he saw that they were not people; they were Customs Robots, who could travel at velocities which people could never match. One wore the insigne of an inspector.

"Where are the invaders?"

"There are no—" began B'dikkat.

The Lady Da, imperial in her posture though she was completely nude, said in a voice of complete clarity, "I am a former Empress, the Lady Da. Do you know me?"

"No, Ma'am," said the robot inspector. He looked as uncomfortable as a robot could look. The drug made Mercer think that it would be nice to have robots for company, out on the surface of Shayol.

"I declare this Top Emergency, in the ancient words. Do you understand? Connect me with the Instrumentality."

"We can't—" said the inspector.

"You can ask," said the Lady Da.

The inspector complied.

The Lady Da turned to B'dikkat. "Give Mercer and me those shots now. Then put us outside the door so the dromozoa can repair these scars. Bring us in as soon as a connection is made. Wrap us in cloth if you do not have clothes for us. Mercer can stand the pain."

"Yes," said B'dikkat, keeping his eyes away from the four soft children and their collapsed eyes.

The injection burned like no fire ever had. It must have been capable of fighting the super-condamine, because B'dikkat put them through the open window, so as to save time going through the door. The dromozoa, sensing that they needed repair, flashed upon them. This time the super-condamine had something else fighting it

Mercer did not scream but he lay against the wall and wept for ten thousand years; in objective time, it must have been several hours.

The Customs robots were taking pictures. The dromozoa were flashing against them too, sometimes in whole swarms, but nothing happened.

Mercer heard the voice of the communicator inside the cabin calling loudly for B'dikkat.

"Surgery Satellite calling Shayol. B'dikkat, get on the line!"

He obviously was not replying.

There were soft cries coming from the other communicator, the one which the customs officials had brought into the room. Mercer was sure that the eye-machine was on and that people in other worlds were looking at Shayol for the first time.

B'dikkat came through the door. He had torn navigation charts out of his lifeboat. With these he cloaked them.

Mercer noted that the Lady Da changed the arrangement of the cloak in a few minor ways and suddenly looked like a person of great importance.

They re-entered the cabin door.

B'dikkat whispered, as if filled with awe, "The Instrumentality has been reached, and a lord of the Instrumentality is about to talk to you."

There was nothing for Mercer to do, so he sat back in a corner of the room and watched. The Lady Da, her skin healed, stood pale and nervous in the middle of the floor.

The room filled with an odorless intangible smoke. The smoke clouded. The full communicator was on.

A human figure appeared.

A woman, dressed in a uniform of radically conservative cut, faced the Lady Da.

"This is Shayol. You are the Lady Da. You called me."

The Lady Da pointed to the children on the floor. "This must not happen," she said. This is a place of punishments, agreed upon between the Instrumentality and the Empire. No one said anything about children."

The woman on the screen looked down at the children.

"This is the work of insane people!" she cried.

She looked accusingly at the Lady Da, "Are you imperial?"

"I was an Empress, madam," said the Lady Da.

"And you permit this!"

"Permit it?" cried the Lady Da. "I had nothing to do with it." Her eyes widened. "I am a prisoner here myself. Don't you understand?"

The image-woman snapped, "No, I don't."

"I," said the Lady Da, "am a specimen. Look at the herd out there. I came from them a few hours ago."

"Adjust me," said the image-woman to B'dikkat. "Let me see that herd."

Her body, standing upright, soared through the wall in a flashing arc and was placed in the very center of the herd.

The Lady Da and Mercer watched her. They saw even the image lose its stiffness and dignity. The image-woman waved an arm to show that she should be brought back into the cabin. B'dikkat tuned her back into the room.

"I owe you an apology," said the image. "I am the Lady Johanna Gnade, one of the lords of the Instrumentality."

Mercer bowed, lost his balance and had to scramble up from the floor. The Lady Da acknowledged the introduction with a royal nod.

The two women looked at each other.

"You will investigate," said the Lady Da, "and when you have investigated, please put us all to death. You know about the drug?"

"Don't mention it," said B'dikkat, "don't even say the name into a communicator. It is a secret of the Instrumentality!"

"I am the Instrumentality," said the Lady Johanna. "Are you in pain? I did not think that any of you were alive. I had heard of the surgery banks on your off-limits planet, but I thought that robots tended parts of people and sent up the new grafts by rocket. Are there any people with you? Who is in charge? Who did this to the children?"

B'dikkat stepped in front of the image. He did not bow. "I'm in charge."

"You're underpeople!" cried the Lady Johanna. "You're a cow!"

"A bull, Ma'am. My family is frozen back on Earth itself, and with a thousand years' service I am earning their freedom and my own. Your other questions, Ma'am. I do all the work. The dromozoa do not affect me much, though I have to cut a part off myself now and then. I throw those away. They don't go into the bank. Do you know the secret rules of this place?"

The Lady Johanna talked to someone behind her on another world. Then she looked at B'dikkat and commanded, "Just don't name the drug or talk too much about it. Tell me the rest."

"We have," said B'dikkat very formally, "thirteen hundred and twenty-one people here who can still be counted on to supply parts when the dromozoa implant them. There are about seven hundred more, including Go-Captain Alvarez, who have been so thoroughly absorbed by the planet that it is no use trimming them. The Empire set up this place as a point of uttermost punishment. But the Instrumentality gave secret orders for medicine—" he accented the word strangely, meaning super-condamine—"to be issued so that the punishment would be counteracted. The Empire supplies our convicts. The Instrumentality distributes the surgical material."

The Lady Johanna lifted her right hand in a gesture of silence and compassion. She looked around the room. Her eyes came back to the Lady Da. Perhaps she guessed what effort the Lady Da had made in order to remain standing erect while the two drugs, the super-condamine and the lifeboat drug, fought within her veins.

"You people can rest. I will tell you now that all things possible will be done for you. The Empire is finished. The Fundamental Agreement, by which the Instrumentality surrendered the Empire a thousand years ago, has been set aside. We did not know that you people existed. We would have found out in time, but I am sorry we did not find out sooner. Is there anything we can do for you right away?"

"Time is what we all have," said the Lady Da. "Perhaps we cannot ever leave Shayol, because of the dromozoa and the medicine. The one could be dangerous. The other must never be permitted to be known."

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked around the room. When her glance reached him, B'dikkat fell to his knees and lifted his enormous hands in complete supplication.

"What do you want?" said she.

"These," said B'dikkat, pointing to the mutilated children. "Order a stop on children. Stop it now!" He commanded her with the last cry, and she accepted his command. "And Lady—" he stopped as if shy.

"Yes? Go on."

"Lady, I am unable to kill. It is not in my nature. To work, to help, but not to kill. What do I do with these?" He gestured at the four motionless children on the floor.

"Keep them," she said. "Just keep them."

"I can't," he said. "There's no way to get off this planet alive. I do not have food for them in the cabin. They will die in a few hours. And governments," he added wisely, "take a long, long time to do things."

"Can you give them the medicine?"

"No, it would kill them if I give them that stuff first before the dromozoa have fortified their bodily processes."

The Lady Johanna Gnade filled the room with tinkling laughter that was very close to weeping. "Fools, poor fools, and the more fool I! If super-condamine works only after the dromozoa, what is the purpose of the secret?"

B'dikkat rose to his feet, offended. He frowned, but he could not get the words with which to defend himself.

The Lady Da, ex-empress of a fallen empire, addressed the other lady with ceremony and force: "Put them outside, so they will be touched. They will hurt. Have B'dikkat give them the drug as soon as he thinks it safe. I beg your leave, my Lady ... "

Mercer had to catch her before she fell.

"You've all had enough," said the Lady Johanna. "A storm ship with heavily armed troops is on its way to your ferry satellite. They will seize the medical personnel and find out who committed this crime against children."

Mercer dared to speak. "Will you punish the guilty doctor?"

"You speak of punishment," she cried. "You!"

"It's fair. I was punished for doing wrong. Why shouldn't he be?"

"Punish—punish!" she said to him. "We will cure that doctor. And we will cure you too, if we can."

Mercer began to weep. He thought of the oceans of happiness which super-condamine had brought him, forgetting the hideous pain and the deformities on Shayol. Would there be no next needle? He could not guess what life would be like off Shayol. Was there to be no more tender, fatherly B'dikkat coming with his knives?

He lifted his tear-stained face to the Lady Johanna Gnade and choked out the words, "Lady, we are all insane in this place. I do not think we want to leave."

She turned her face away, moved by enormous compassion. Her next words were to B'dikkat. "You are wise and good, even if you are not a human being. Give them all of the drug they can take. The Instrumentality will decide what to do with all of you. I will survey your planet with robot soldiers. Will the robots be safe, cow-man?"

B'dikkat did not like the thoughtless name she called him, but he held no offense. "The robots

will be all right, Ma'am, but the dromozoa will be excited if they cannot feed them and heal them. Send as few as you can. We do not know how the dromozoa live or die."

"As few as I can," she murmured. She lifted her hand in command to some technician unimaginable distances away. The odorless smoke rose about her and the image was gone.

A shrill cheerful voice spoke up. "I fixed your window," said the customs robot. B'dikkat thanked him absentmindedly. He helped Mercer and the Lady Da into the doorway. When they had gotten outside, they were promptly stung by the dromozoa. It did not matter.

B'dikkat himself emerged, carrying the four children in his two gigantic, tender hands. He lay the slack bodies on the ground near the cabin. He watched as the bodies went into spasm with the onset of the dromozoa. Mercer and the Lady Da saw that his brown cow eyes were rimmed with red and that his huge cheeks were dampened by tears.

Hours or centuries.

Who could tell them apart?

The herd went back to its usual life, except that the intervals between needles were much shorter. The once-commander, Suzdal, refused the needle when he heard the news. Whenever he could walk, he followed the customs robots around as they photographed, took soil samples, and made a count of the bodies. They were particularly interested in the mountain of the Go-Captain Alvarez and professed themselves uncertain as to whether there was organic life there or not. The mountain did appear to react to super-condamine, but they could find no blood, no heart-beat. Moisture, moved by the dromozoa, seemed to have replaced the once-human bodily processes.

5

And then, early one morning, the sky opened.

Ship after ship landed. People emerged, wearing clothes.

The dromozoa ignored the newcomers. Mercer, who was in a state of bliss, confusedly tried to think this through until he realized that the ships were loaded to their skins with communications machines; the "people" were either robots or images of persons in other places.

The robots swiftly gathered together the herd. Using wheelbarrows, they brought the hundreds of mindless people to the landing area.

Mercer heard a voice he knew. It was the Lady Johanna Gnade. "Set me high," she commanded.

Her form rose until she seemed one-fourth the size of Alvarez. Her voice took on more volume.

"Wake them all," she commanded.

Robots moved among them, spraying them with a gas which was both sickening and sweet. Mercer felt his mind go clear. The super-condamine still operated in his nerves and veins, but his cortical area was free of it. He thought clearly.

"I bring you," cried the compassionate feminine voice of the gigantic Lady Johanna, "the judgment of the Instrumentality on the planet Shayol.

"Item: the surgical supplies will be maintained and the dromozoa will not be molested. Portions of human bodies will be left here to grow, and the grafts will be collected by robots. Neither man nor homunculus will live here again. "

"Item: the underman B'dikkat, of cattle extraction, will be rewarded by an immediate return to Earth. He will be paid twice his expected thousand years of earnings."

The voice of B'dikkat, without amplification, was almost as loud as hers through the amplifier. He shouted his protest, "Lady, Lady!"

She looked down at him, his enormous body reaching to ankle height on her swirling gown, and said in a very informal tone, "What do you want?"

"Let me finish my work first," he cried, so that all could hear. "Let me finish taking care of these people."

The specimens who had minds all listened attentively. The brainless ones were trying to dig themselves back into the soft earth of Shayol, using their powerful claws for the purpose. Whenever one began to disappear, a robot seized him by a limb and pulled him out again.

"Item: cephalotomies will be performed on all persons with irrecoverable minds. Their bodies will be left here. Their heads will be taken away and killed as pleasantly as we can manage, probably by an overdosage of super-condamine."

"The last big jolt," murmured Commander Suzdal, who stood near Mercer. "That's fair enough."

"Item: the children have been found to be the last heirs of the Empire. An over-zealous official sent them here to prevent their committing treason when they grew up. The doctor obeyed orders without questioning them. Both the official and the doctor have been cured and their memories of this have been erased, so that they need have no shame or grief for what they have done."

"It's unfair," cried the half-man. "They should be punished as we were!"

The Lady Johanna Gnade looked down at him. "Punishment is ended. We will give you anything you wish, but not the pain of another. I shall continue."

"Item: since none of you wish to resume the lives which you led previously, we are moving you to another planet nearby. It is similar to Shayol, but much more beautiful. There are no dromozoa."

At this an uproar seized the herd. They shouted, wept, cursed, appealed. They all wanted the needle, and if they had to stay on Shayol to get it, they would stay.

"Item," said the gigantic image of the lady, overriding their babble with her great but feminine voice, "you will not have super-condamine on the new planet, since without dromozoa it would kill you. But there will be caps. Remember the caps. We will try to cure you and to make people of you again. But if you give up, we will not force you. Caps are very powerful; with medical help you can live under them many years."

A hush fell on the group. In their various ways, they were trying to compare the electrical caps which had stimulated their pleasure-lobes with the drug which had drowned them a thousand times in pleasure. Their murmur sounded like assent.

"Do you have any questions?" said the Lady Johanna.

"When do we get the caps?" said several. They were human enough that they laughed at their own impatience.

"Soon," said she reassuringly, "very soon."

"Very soon," echoed B'dikkat, reassuring his charges even though he was no longer in control.

"Question," cried the Lady Da.

"My Lady ... ?" said the Lady Johanna, giving the ex-empress her due courtesy.

"Will we be permitted marriage?"

The Lady Johanna looked astonished. "I don't know." She smiled. "I don't know any reason why not—"

"I claim this man Mercer," said the Lady Da. "When the drugs were deepest, and the pain was greatest, he was the one who always tried to think. May I have him?"

Mercer thought the procedure arbitrary but he was so happy that he said nothing. The Lady Johanna scrutinized him and then she nodded. She lifted her arms in a gesture of blessing and farewell.

The robots began to gather the pink herd into two groups. One group was to whisper in a ship over to a new world, new problems and new lives. The other group, no matter how much its members tried to scuttle into the dirt, was gathered for the last honor which humanity could pay their manhood.

B'dikkat, leaving everyone else, jogged with his bottle across the plain to give the mountain-man Alvarez an especially large gift of delight.

[Note: In Mother Hitton's Littul Kittuls, it is unknown whether the author of the quote was Van Broom or Van Braam. .]

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