

DEANR.KOONTZ

SOFT

COME

THE

DRAGONS

ACE BOOKS

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SOFT COME THE DRAGONS

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DEDICATION:

Fordon wollheim, who has been there at the
start of so many careers ...

DARK OF THE WOODS

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INTRODUCTION

A Hotplate, a Chair, and a Bed ...

Only a few months past twenty-one, I received my college diploma and rushed forth to conquer the

world. The world turned out to be larger, more complex and sillier than I had imagined; I decided to settle for conquering just a little section of it all for myself. At that tender age, I had worked as a stock boy, a grocery store clerk, a state park forest ranger, a drummer in a rock band, a guitarist in a rock band, and in the politics of the civil rights move-ment. I had somehow managed to win three creative writing awards, two from the *Atlantic Monthly*, and had sold a few of my paintings to people who obviously had no con-ception of good art. The only problem was that I was broke, busted, flat, penniless.

Of course I got married immediately. Dear Reader, she was intelligent, creative, warm, sexy, had quiet, darting dark eyes that took everything in like universal magnets. What else could I do?

I had been trained as a teacher of English, and my first job was in a small Pennsylvania coal mining town which fell into the fabled Appalachian Poverty Belt (because all the coal was gone, but the miners were not). I worked under the Federal Poverty Program for damned little money. The only house available to rent in this metropolis of a thousand citizens was a seven room monstrosity which con-sumed a week's pay in rent and another week's pay in fuel oil. We moved in with just a bed (which was a used studio couch, really), a chair for each of us (second hand kitchen chairs), and a hotplate. Hugh Hefner wouldn't have called it luxurious, but it was home to us.

For nearly three months, those items sat in our seven rooms. Thanks to repeated "wedding gifts" from my par-ents who could ill afford to give them, we began to buy used furniture. And thanks to my discovery that I could do some carpentry and a good deal of upholstering (which amazed everyone who knew me as a clumsy muddle-fin-gers), and thanks to Gerda's nimble sewing fingers, we had a semblance of civilization in four of the seven rooms by the fourth month we lived there.

But there were always bills, and there was hardly ever money to meet them. I had been mailing stories to Ed Ferman at *Fantasy and Science Fiction* for some months, hoping to pick up more fuel oil money (I wonder if Hem-ingway ever wrote for fuel oil money?). One day a check arrived for \$120.00 for a short story.

My life has never been the same since then.

There is nothing in this world which can hook you like creative writing. To see the words appear out of the type-writer which has sucked them from your brain via your fingertips is close to tripping on Owlsley Purple. No mat-ter how hard you work on a story, the check you receive always seems like a gift, for writing the story was so much fun it was almost pay enough in itself. And then there is the ego-blast of seeing your name and story in print . . . and hearing from fans who like it (and even hearing from those who hate it, because that shows they at least *care*) . . . and that Big Dream in the background of your mind that someday it is also going to pay you well. . . .

So they should have narcs who go around checking on creative writers to see if they are getting hooked on their fantasy worlds, because fashioning a science fiction story-future can be like flying on any plastic fantastic chem-ical. . . .

At the time of this writing, three years have passed since that first story. I taught a year and a half in a suburban school in the meantime, was accused of teaching dirty books when my class read Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Heller's *Catch-22*, and Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. None of these were dirty books, of course, but the accusing ad-ministrators did not seem to have time to read what they were putting down. They preferred to judge by cover paint-ings and a local fanatic's opinion. Because of this (and the migraine headaches it was causing me) I quit and began writing full time. And now, after twenty-eight stories and fourteen books, the Big Dream is coming true.

And here, if I were accepting an Oscar, I would name all those without whom I would not be where I am, as happy as I am in a world where happiness is fast becoming a scarce commodity. I will not depart from tradition. Those Without Whom I Could Not are: my mother, from whom I learned gentleness; my father, whose genes gave me my traits of a dreamer; my high school English teacher, Miss Garbrick, who was that rarest of all things—a good teacher; Jeff, whose own sharp intellect made me first question the world around me; Harry, who was a companion through dark hours; Andy, who stayed up nights and was all together and married well; Jack, for the Night of the Empty Bottles and for looking for the world's fulcrum; Bob, for being Bob and therefore unique; Don Wollheim for buying the first three books and having faith; Ed Ferman for things mentioned later; Bob Hoskins for teaching me much; and especially to Gerda for the aforementioned intellect, warmth, and creativity—and for growing sexier every year....

Harrisburg, Penna.

February, 1970

SOFT COME THE DRAGONS

This was my first published story in the field of science fiction, the one that changed my life. Ed Ferman had rejected several stories with encouraging notes instead of form rejection slips. When I mailed "Soft Come the Dragons" to *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, I told Ed that I had a Druid friend who was going to cast a spell upon him and the entire staff of the magazine so that they would start buying my work. With the check for the story, Ed enclosed a note beginning "I had thought Druid spells were long ago impotent, but. . ."

This is a story of myths and science and how one is nothing without the other. If we live by myth alone, we do not advance. But if we should ever live by only science, disregarding our fantasies, we will be less than machines in the skins of animals. This opinion must be universal, for I have received letters on this story from England and Australia. It will soon be published in Spanish. And Samuel R. Delany once told me it was a beautiful story. I consider that a compliment from highest sources. ...

"and what will you do when the soft breezes come and the dragons drift in to spread death?"

Marshall wriggled in his seat, reached for another sugar packet to empty into his mug of coffee.

"I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll get up when the alarms sound and dress in your uniform and go down in the cellar complex like a red-eyed mole in flight from his own fear. You'll get up when the alarms sound and monitor everything as usual, hiding until the dragons float out and are gone."

"What am I supposed to do?" Marshall asked. "Maybe I should pet them and pour out milk?"

"You wouldn't pet, you'd club. The milk would have cyanide in it"

Marshall slammed his fist into the table. "You forget, Dante, that I am commander here and you are only third line officer."

Mario Alexander Dante snorted, picked up his folio, and walked out of the rec room. Mounting the twisting stairs, he climbed two floors, stepped out into a dark, narrow hallway, and ambled to the glass observation lounge that hung like a third story patio over the beach.

It was low tide. The sea stretched away across the horizon like poured glass, glittering like a queen's jewels or like a shattered church window. Only small waves lapped at the shore, depositing minute quantities of sand, etching out microscopic gullies in the orange beach as they dragged away a corresponding amount of other grains.

It seemed to Mario Dante that the ocean was the same on any world. It was the womb, the all-encompassing mother where men migrated at least once in their lives—like lemmings. He had walked to the edge of it on some nights, hoping to see a face. . . .

Just above the horizon floated the twin moons; their reflections stretched long across the ocean, cresting every wavelet with a tint of golden dew.

The trouble with Marshall, Dante reflected, was that he lacked imagination. He accepted everything at face value—tempered only by what his instruments told him. Being truthful with himself, he understood that he saw the old Mario Dante in the commander, and that this was why he disliked the man. The old Mario Dante, before the car crash that took Ellen and broke her body and tossed it into the ocean, before he lay in a hospital piecing together his shattered mind for seven months, the old Mario Dante had been lacking in sensitivity, in imagination. In unlocking his mental block so that he could accept the death of Ellen, the psychiatrist removed other things in passing, and opened a whole new portion of his mind.

But still, he disliked Marshall. And he was certain that the commander's Achilles' heel would be struck by an arrow from the quiver of the dragons. The dragons that came daily with the tidal winds.

The dragons of emerald and vermilion and yellow and white of virgin bridal gown and devil black and jack-of-lantern orange.

The butterfly dragons that were twenty yards wide and seventy yards long—but weighed only two or three hundred pounds. The flimsy, gossamer dragons.

The dragons of beauty.

The dragons that killed with their eyes.

He sighed, turned from the window, and sat down in one of the black leather easy chairs, snapping on the small, high-intensity reading lamp in the arm. Lighting a cigarette, he looked over his newer poems.

The first three he tossed in the wastebasket without re-viewing. The fourth he read, reread, then read aloud for full effect.

"Discovery Upon Death"

"dear mankind:
am writing you from purgatory
to say that i
have made a discovery
that i wish you
would spread around up there,
god, now listen mankind,
god is a computer
and someone misprogrammed him.. ."

"Not bad," said a voice from the darkness. Abner stepped into the small circle of light around the chair. "But don't tell me the Pioneer Poet has doubts about life?"

"Please, the name is Mare."

Pioneer Poet. It was a name *Life* had coined when his first volume had been published and had won critical ac-claim. He admitted it all seemed romantic: a space force surveyor drafted for three years, writing poetry on some alien world in some alien star system. But, Pioneer Poet?

"Heard about your fight with Marshall."

"It wasn't a fight."

"It was the way I heard it. What bothers you about him, Mare?"

"He doesn't understand things."

"Neither do any of us."

"Suffice it to say he might be a mirror in which I can see myself. And the reflection isn't a nice one."

They sat in silence a moment.

"You plan to sit up all night?" Abner asked.

"No, Pioneer Physician, I do not."

Abner grinned. "Dragon warnings should go up in six hours. You'll need your rest."

He folded his poems and rose, flicked off the light, and said: "Fine, but let us just look at the ocean a

minute, huh?"

The snakes growing from her scalp hissed and bared fangs.

His hand burned with the dribbling of his own blood where their sharp teeth raked him.

Slowly, she turned, and the beauty was there in the face—and the horror was there.

In the eyes.

And his muscles, slowly but doubtlessly and without pause, began turning to granite.

"No!" he screamed. "I think I'm just beginning to see—"

His hair became individual strands of rock. Each cell of his face froze into eternity and became a part of something that could never die—that could only be eroded by wind and rain.

And finally his eyes, staring into hers, slipped into cata-ract, then to stone.

And he woke to the sound of screams in his ears.

Before opening his eyes, he could see her, pinned behind the wheel, mouth twisted in agony.

The flames licking at her face as he was tossed free, the tumbling, burning car, plunging over the cliff and away.

But when the waking dream was over, he still heard the screams. He fumbled for his bed light, and the flood of yellow fire made him squint. He looked at the clock. Five o'clock in the morning Translated Earth Time.

The dragon warning was in effect. They were not screams, but the wails of mechanical voices. "Beware and Run," they seemed to say.

Bewareandrun, bewareandrun, bewareandrun ...

He had been sleeping in his duty suit, a uniform of shimmering purple synthe-fabric. The United Earth emblem graced his right arm: a dove sitting on a green globe. That was one symbol that always repulsed him. He pictured the dove loosening its bowels.

Stumbling across the room, he palmed open the door and stepped into the corridor, blinking away the remain-ders of sleep from his eyes.

Holden Twain was running down the 'hall, strapping his nylon belt around his waist. "I have some poetry for you to look at while we're in the shelter," he said breathlessly, coming to a halt at Dante's side.

Mario liked the kid. He was five years the poet's junior, but his innocence seemed to add to his immaturity—and charm. He had not met Hemingway's Discovery of Evil. He never understood "The Killers" when he read it. Dante made him plunge through it every few weeks, searching for that glint of understanding that would mean he saw it all.

"Fine," Mario said. "That'll help pass the hours in that dreadful hole."

They set out at a steady trot down the hall, past the large windows that peered out upon the alien landscape.

At the stairwell, Mario ushered the younger man down and waited at the head for the others from that corridor. He was captain of the block and was to be the last into the shelter from that particular accessway.

He glanced out of the nearest window. There was sure to be wind. The spindly pine-palms were swaying erratically, some bent nearly to the snapping point in the gale. This was only the front of the tidal winds, he knew, and the soft breezes and the dragons would follow.

The dragons that looked so beautiful in pictures but which killed any man who looked directly into their eyes.

The dragons that seemed to live constantly in the air— without eating.

The dragons that killed with their eyes . . . '

He had a vision of the first victims, their eyes crystal-lized, shrunken within the blackened sockets, the brain wilted within the skull. He shuddered.

Still, it did not seem right to hide when they came.

Though the specially designed lenses failed, though dozens of scientists died trying to prove that they wouldn't, that men's eyes could be protected from the deadly dragons, it did not seem right to hide.

Though gunnery officers could not shoot them down (because only a shot in the eye seemed to kill the beasts, and aiming at those misty, pupilless orbs was impossible), it did not seem right to squirrel away in the earth.

The last man in the corridor pounded down the stairs. Dante swung the door shut, sealed it, then flicked the shut-ters that would partially protect the windows.

The shelter was filled with men. The city's compliment numbered sixty-eight. They were sixty-eight prepared to wait out another three hours of dragons and silence in the cellar.

Dante decided the entire affair got more ridiculous each time. It hardly seemed as if the planet were worth all the trouble. But then he knew it was. There were the Bakium deposits, and the planet itself was central to this galaxy. Someday, it would be built nearly as heavily as Earth. A grand population.

Certainly more than sixty-eight.

Sixty-seven.

"Sixty-seven!" the Secretary shripped.

"Impossible!" Marshall shouted.

"Menchen. Menchen isn't here."

"Who has that corridor?"

"I, sir."

"Anamaxender. Why the hell didn't you notice he was missing?"

"Sorry, sir."

"You'll be damned sorry before this is over." Marshall turned to the other faces. "Who saw him last."

"I believe just about everyone was asleep, commander," Dante said quietly. Marshall opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. He turned to Twain. "You know corridor F?"

"Yes, sir."

Every man was required to have a memorized floor plan of the installation buried deep in the emergency vaults of his mind. It was a ridiculous question.

"Go after Menchen. Go to his room and see if he needs help. At any cost, get back here."

"But the dragons," someone said.

"They won't be out yet, and it will be another half hour before they gain access to the upper floors."

Twain was strapping on a radio set, fastening a blaster to his belt. He crossed to Dante and handed him a sheaf of eight papers. He smiled and was gone.

At the head of the stairs, there was a sucking of a door unsealing, then a second whine as it sealed again—behind Holden Twain.

Mare Dante had nothing to do. He could have sat and worried, but the commander had been right. Dragons would not break into the upper corridors for a while yet. Until things really started getting bad above, there was no rea-son to worry.

He sat down and opened the folded sheets of yellow papers.

Hath a man not eyes?

Can he feel not pain?

Does the grass grow greener?

Is Gods blood rain?

And so it goes,

And so it is.

Is there a soul?

And if there is,

Where is it?

M.A. Dante was jealous. *Jealousy?* When he translated that and deducted the source, he realized that Twain's poetry had taken a change for the better. It was no longer what Dante called "tree and flower poetry." There was something of a philosophical note in those last three lines. At least, there was pessimism.

Pessimism, he strongly believed, was merely realism.

Suddenly, he was very worried about the boy—the man —upstairs.

He stood and approached Marshall. "Commander, I—"

Marshall turned, his eyes gleaming, immediately on the defensive. Between clenched teeth: "Dante. What is it now? Would you like to take over command of the operation? Would you like to—"

"Oh, shut up!" He turned up the volume on the receiver that would carry Twain's words back to them. "I am not an enemy of yours. I disagree with your methods and procedure. I do not lower myself to personal vendetta."

"Listen—"

The radio crackled, interrupting the building rage with-in Marshall. "Twain here. Menchen is in his room. Ill. I'm going to trundle him back."

"What about the dragons?" Marshall snapped into the mike.

"I can hear them bumping softly against the window shields, trying to get in. Like big moths. Creepy."

"None in the halls?"

"No, Starting back. Out."

The dragons that killed with their eyes. Beautiful drag-ons so the automatic cameras showed. But dragons that no man could look upon.

Somehow, men must be able to see, he thought. *The photos*— Dante's mind seemed dangling on the ravine of inspiration.

When Twain returned, he was quite relieved, forgot about Marshall, and lived the moments of good

poetry the younger man had composed, commenting and discussing.

"Why do you write?"

Twain thought a moment. "To detail Truth."

"With a capital T?"

"Yes."

"There isn't such a thing. Don't interrupt. There is no such thing as Truth, no purity with a tag. It is a shade of gray somewhere between black and white. It is one thing to a slave, another to a monarch, and yet another to the monk who kneels alone in cloistered walls of towering granite, fingering beads. It is for no man to delineate, and for no man to criticize another's understanding of it. Truth, old son, is relative. And more than relative, it is nonexist-ent as a pure entity."

"But in the literature classes in college, they said we were to search for the truth. The textbooks on poetry say we should write to discover truth."

The sixty plus men muttered among themselves. Mar-shall followed his scopes, his dials, his unfailing measur-ing devices that justified the way of things to man.

"That's what they tell you, Mr. Twain. That is also what *I* will tell you. Write to delineate truth. Yet I warn you there is no such thing. Yet I tell you never to stop look-ing, never to forsake the search. Yet do I tell ye that ye shall never end the quest. Do you have guts enough to keep looking, Holden Twain?"

Twain looked at him, and silently without needing to explain, he walked off and sat in a corner, staring intently at the wall where it joined the ceiling.

The rest of the day he spent tramping in and out of Abner's clinic, checking on Menchen's progress.

The blue walls of the med room made him feel as if he were hanging, dangling precariously from the center of the sky. The thin silver instruments on the table, the stark functional furniture, the university degrees on the walls, the anatomical chart above the operating table as if the surgeon followed a paint-by-number method in removing an appendix—all seemed like flotsam and jetsam swirling around in the crystal sky, remnants of mankind's achieve-ments hurled into the stratosphere after a violent swipe of a disgusted God's powerful hand.

"What does he have?"

Abner stared at the diagnostic machine's readings. "Could be a tumor."

"Could be?"

"Could be half a dozen other things. It's hidden in the maze of tissues in his bowels. Maybe I found it. Maybenot.

"What can you do?"

"Nothing."

"He'll die?"

"We don't have the most modern hospital devised by mankind at our disposal."

"I'm not blaming you, Abe."

"I am."

"He *will* die, then?"

"Yes. And because I don't understand. I don't understand."

At night, while Dante slept, Menchen died. But the poet didn't know. No one would know until the morning. And it would disturb no one's sleep. A thousand sparrows could fall at once . . .

A thousand sparrows, a million sparrows fell from the sky, between the snowflakes. They crashed silently into the pavement. They tangled in the telephone wires—looking like notes in a staff of copper, separated by pole-bars into eco-nomical musical measures. But there was no music.

After they fell, he stood, the collar of his coat turned up to ward off the cold, and looked at their bodies, broken and bleeding. And he did not understand.

Looking up into the gray sky from whence came the snow swirling like a thousand dandelion puffs blown on by children, he searched hopefully for the source of the coldness.

Far away, tires screeching ...

Metal shredding ...

Ghostly screams in the night, a woman in agony...

Perhaps, he thought, if I could look with a mirror, I could see and know. Perhaps, seeing everything backwards, the world makes sense. Maybe, if we change our perspective . . .

"Yes," said a voice.

He turned and looked at the snakes in her head, and he could not keep his eyes from dropping to hers. And slowly, forever and for always, he turned to stone, crying: "From another perspective you might be love and not hatred."

"Yes," she said, smiling.

Waking, sweating, he knew the answer. It was just crazy enough to work. But he could not say anything. Marshall would see his effort as an attempt to gain power. It would, of necessity, be a secret project.

He turned on the bed lamp, forced himself totally awake, and set to dismantling his dressing mirror.

He was the last down the stairway at the dragon warn-ing.

"Did you hear?" Twain asked.

"Hear what?"

"Menchen died during the night."

"Now there might be your only truth. Death."

"What?"

"It is indisputable, inevitable, and impossible of misinterpretation."

He walked away from Twain and secreted himself in a corner hoping to blend into oblivion. It was a corner near a stairwell. Roll was called, and all were found to be present. An hour into the warning, he rose, meandered through a clot of men to the edge of the stairs. Suddenly, like a tired apparition, he was gone.

At the head of the stairs, he unsealed the door, stepped into the corridor, closed the portal behind. Carefully, he removed the delicate, makeshift spectacles from his pocket. They were diamond-like, circus-prop spectacles of glittering looking glass and golden wire. They worked roughly like a periscope so that the wearer saw a mirror reflection of what was in front of him.

Sucking in his breath, he swung open the outside door and stepped onto the black soil.

The humming of giant wings sung above him.

Slowly, he turned his head to the skies.

The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unlooked dreams, he thought.

They were spirits and fairies above him. They were orange and magenta and coffee brown and crayon brown and pecan brown. They were white and chrome yellow and peach yellow and pear yellow.

They were thin, and in spots, through their silken wings, he glimpsed the sun. "Daedalus, your labyrinth was no more mystifying than a single wing of these creatures. And Icarus, turn from beside the sun, beauty is not up there. Look down and see."

They were dragons of the wind.

And with his lenses, their eyes did not burn him.

He walked forth, his mouth gaping. Other lines from Whitman's "Passage to India" entered his mind.

I mark from on deck the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level sand in the distance...

Truly, there was something about the alien landscape that seemed fresh. In the sunlight filtered through gossamer wings, he seemed to see more detail. The strange way the chlorophyll was formed as a crystalline substance within the yellow-green leaves; the patterns in the sand that he had once considered only chance happenings. He looked around. There were patterns to everything. The sky was delicately shaded in a soft-hued, artistic effect. There was a tasteful blending of all nature—something he had never

seen before.

He could almost see the rays of sun like individual golden rivers, beaming into everything, showering back when reflected, soaking in and disappearing when refracted. The world was more real. . .

The gigantic dredging machines...

He saw the mining shafts and cranes, recognizing them as dredgers that sucked the scum of a planet, sent the base ores in gross tanker ships to run large, smoky factories on an over-populated Earth where some lived in poverty and some in plenty. And they were no longer just mining fools ...

I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scen-ery in the world . . .

From the air, vibrating the molecules of his body so that he heard with his eyes and ears and mouth and nose. So that he tasted the notes, 'the pitched wailings of melancholy and joy. So that joy was sweet and melancholy bitter-sweet. The dragons flocked above him and sang.

The music was soundless and all sound. It was the trum-pets of the marching dead and the flutes of the living angels. They were strange songs.

Crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold the enchanting mirages of waters and meadows . .

He stumbled over the sand, heedless of destination. Ev-erything was new to him. A thousand times before had he looked at it. Never had he seen it.

The dragons sang of it, the why of it. The why.

Careening drunkenly to the mirages, he dipped his hands in cool water and there was no mirage. The meadows smelled fresh and grassy. They were real.

A spark within his mind was relighted; his search had ended.

Stumbling, laughing, seeing and hearing the gossamer butterfly-formed dragons, he reached the complex, went inside, and started for the shelter door.

They were all standing there looking when he came down the stairs. He threw the glasses at their feet and laughed loudly.

"He's insane," someone said.

"No!" Mare Dante shouted. "You're insane. All of you. Crackier than a box of saltines. You hide while all of life waits for you out there with the Gods."

"The dragons?"

"The dragons, the Gods. I'm not sure yet."

"Someone grab him," Marshall shouted, working his way up front.

"And you," Mare said. "You are phony to the bottom of your being. You don't even want to be captain. You're afraid of the position. But you have to prove yourself; you're impotent—"

"Shut up!" Marshall screamed, his face white.

"Impotent because once when you were eight, your aunt—"

"Shut up!"

"I can't. It's in your eyes. God, can't the rest of you see it in his eyes?"

"How did you look at the dragons?" someone asked.

"Through a mirror."

"But other men had their eyes burned out."

"Because they could not face what they saw in the liquid eyes of the dragons. They were not killed by strange, burning rays. They simply folded and lost their souls. But it's beautiful. If you have always searched for it, you will find it in their eyes."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Abe asked.

"The dragons are not constituted of matter."

Abe stepped closer. "Talk sense, Mare. For God's sake, you'll be committed."

"When Menchen died, Abe, you told me you couldn't understand. You can understand if you will only let your-self. Your weight estimates on the dragons are incorrect. The dragons are weightless, for they are not formed of matter. The life forms on this planet are composed of what we call abstract ideas. The dragons are truth— Truth. Truth personified. Through them, you can understand *why*."

"He's insane."

"And there are other life forms here we haven't seen. The dragons were the only ones trying to contact us, to break down our shelter. There is an opposite life form living in the ground. We thought those desert holes were caves, but they are not. There are worms that burrow miles beneath us and fester. The worms are Hate. Hate personified."

Someone reached forward to grab him. He struggled and fell.

Miles below the sands, a long, caterpillar thing glowed momentarily and turned over.

The floor shook. Almost gleefully, the mob descended and covered Mario Dante until black swallowed and consumed him as he muttered lastly—"Ellen."

Upstairs, the pair of discarded spectacles clamped to his head, Holden Twain stepped forward into the outside world, a blaster on his hip, determined to seek out every cave, every wormhole. ...

A THIRD HAND

There seem to be two factions within the science fiction firmament these days, one which argues that the "tradi-tional" sf story is the best that a writer can produce, the other saying the "traditional" form is a waste and that we must all advance into the avante-garde areas which "main-stream" fiction adopted years ago. It is an interesting battle to watch among science fiction fans, but for someone who sits on the fence post (like me) it is exasperating. Those who would condemn all advancement of style in the field are unrealistic—as are those who refuse to acknowledge the very fine *storytelling* qualities of "traditional" sf. Most often, I attempt to mix the two, and I think "A Third Hand" is a prime example of this. The hero, Ti, is a "new wave" hero as far as we can type a "new wave" hero. He is not a strong, brave, galaxy-cruising, square-jawed WASP, but a crippled, hung-up little guy with problems outside of his plot. But the story follows traditional patterns, a linear form. Except, perhaps, for the very end. Read the last sentence twice. Think about Timothy, and see what the story becomes for you. ...

timothy was not human. Not wholly. If one included arms and legs in a definition of the human body, then Timothy did not pass the criteria necessary for admission to the club. If one counted two eyes in that definition, Timothy was also ruled out, for he had but one eye, after all, and even that was placed in an unusual position: some-what closer to his left ear than a human eye should be and definitely an inch lower in his overlarge skull than was the norm. Then there was his nose. It totally lacked cartilage. The only evidence of its presence was two holes, the ragged nostrils, punctuating the relative center of his bony, misshapen head. There was his skin: waxy yellow like some artificial fruit and coarse with large, irregular pores that showed like dark pinpricks bottomed with dried blood. There were his ears: very flat against his head and somewhat pointed like the ears of a wolf. There were other things that would show up on a closer, more intimate examination, things like his hair (which was of an alto-gether different texture than any racial variant among the normal human strains), his nipples (which were ever so slightly concave instead of convex), and his genitals (which were male, but which were contained in a pouch just below his navel and not between his truncated limbs). There was only one way in which Timothy was remotely human, and that was his brain. But even here, he was not entirely normal, for his IQ was slightly above 250.

He had been a product of the Artificial Wombs, a strictly military project which intended to produce beings usable as weapons of war, beings with psionic abilities that could bring the Chinese to their knees. But when such gnarled results as Timothy rolled from the Wombs, the scientists and generals connected with the project threw up their hands and resigned themselves to more public condemna-tion.

Timothy was placed in a special home for subhuman productions of the Wombs where he was expected to die within five years. But it was in his third year there that they came to realize that Timothy (he was the "T" birth in the fifth alphabetical series, thus his name) was more than a mindless vegetable. Much more. It happened at feeding time. The nurse had been dutifully spooning predigested pablum into his mouth, cleaning his lips and chin as he dribbled, when one of the other "children" in the ward entered its death throes. She hurried off to assist the doctor who was injecting some sedative into the mutant hulk, leaving Timothy hungry. Due to the training of a new staff nurse that afternoon, he had inadvertently been skipped in the previous feeding. As a result, he was ravenous. But the nurse did not return in response to his caterwauling. He tossed and pitched on his foam mattress, but legless and armless as he was, there was nothing he could do to reach the bowl of food that rested on the table next to his crib, painfully within sight of his one, misplaced eye. He blinked that eye, squinted it, and lifted the spoon without touching it! He levitated the instrument to his mouth, licked the pablum from it, and sent it back to the bowl for more. It was during his sixth spoonful that the nurse returned, saw what was happening and fainted dead away.

The same night, Timothy was moved from the ward.

Quietly.

He did not know where they were taking him. Indeed, having lacked most of the sensory stimulation afforded normal three-year-olds, he did not even care. Without proper stimulation, he had never developed rational, logical thought processes. He understood nothing beyond his own basic desires, the desires of his body: hunger, air, water, excretion. It never occurred to him to wonder where he was going—if he even knew he was going anywhere.

But he wasn't ignorant for long. The military was hungry for another success (they had had only two others) and hurried his development along. They tested his IQ as best they could and found it was slightly above normal. That was a good sign. There had been fears that they would have to work with a psionically gifted moron. Next, the computers devised an educational program suited to his unique history. The program was initiated.

He was expected to be talking in seven months.

He was talking in five weeks.

He was expected to be able to read in a year and a half.

He was reading on a college level in three months.

Not surprisingly, they found his IQ was rising. An IQ is based on what an individual has learned as well as what he innately knows. When Timothy had first been tested, he had learned absolutely nothing. His slightly above normal score had been garnered solely on what he innately knew. Excitement at the project grew until Timothy had reached an IQ of 250 plus. It was now eighteen months since he had lifted his spoon without hands. He devoured books. But he switched from topic to topic, from two weeks of advanced physics texts to a month of 19th Century British Literature. But the military didn't care. They did not expect him to be a specialist. They only wanted him to be educated and conversant. At the end of eighteen months, they felt he was both these things. So they turned to other plans . . .

They coached his psionic abilities, trying to develop them. There were many dreams in military minds. There were dreams of Timothy destroying the entire Chinese Army with one burst of psionic power. But

dreams are only dreams. The sad fact was soon evident that Timothy's psi powers were severely limited. The heaviest thing he could lift was a spoon full of applesauce. And his radius of ability was only one hundred feet. As a superweapon, it was some-thing of a washout.

The reaction among the generals was more than disap-pointment. After the immediate paralysis wore off, there was a strong desire for revenge. They opted to dissect him to discover what they could of his ability.

Luckily for him, the war ended that week.

The Bio-Chem people had come up with the weapon that had ended it. At last turn, the Artificial Wombs had proved useless. The final weapon was a virus released on the Chinese mainland at roughly the same time the gen-erals were discovering Timothy's limitations. Before they could dissect him, the speedy killer had wiped out approxi-mately one half the Chinese male population—as it was structured to affect only certain chromosome combinations in only the Mongoloid race—and had induced the enemy into a reluctant surrender.

Plans for dissection went astray. The Wombs were put under the administration of the Bio-Chem people, and they dissolved the project. The Bio-Chems were fascinated by Timothy. For three weeks, he was exhaustively tested and retested. He gave so many spoon-lifting demonstrations that he saw floating spoons in his sleep. And he heard their discussions about "what his brain might look like." It was a rugged three weeks.

But in the end they didn't saw him up to satisfy their curiosity. Somewhere along the line, a leak had reached the press, and the story of the horribly crippled mutant who could lift spoons without touching them was a Three Day Sensation. During the excitement of those three days, the largest bureau of the now peace-oriented government, the Veteran's Bureau, stepped in and took control of him. Senator Kilroy announced that the Veteran's Bureau was going to rehabilitate the young man, provide him with grav plate servo-hands and a grav plate system for mo-bility. He was a Three Day Sensation again. And so was the politically wise senator who took credit for the proj-ect. ..

Timothy (or "Ti" as he went by now, having never as-sumed a surname after gaining his freedom) stood on the patio that jutted beyond the cliff and watched the birds settling noisily into the big green pines that spread thickly down the mountainside. Behind him was the house that had been built from the money acquired from his book advances—*Autobiography of a Reject* and *A Case For Artificial Birth*—a proud monument of a structure erected over the ruins of a Revolutionary War pro-British secret supplies cellar. He cherished the house and what it contained, for it was ninety percent of his world. The other ten percent was his business. He was shrewd, and his business paid off. He used the receipts chiefly to maintain the house and to buy his books and the films for his private projection room. He had organized and launched, with his writing monies, the first stat newspaper designed solely for enter-tainment. No news. Just eossip and gossip and more gossip. It was a ten-page scandal sheet that stated out of the wall printers in eleven million homes promptly at eight in the morning and four thirty in the afternoon. But now his business was not with him in his thoughts, and he focused his attention on the birds that fluttered below. He directed his left servo-hand to pull apart the branches obscuring his view of a particularly fine specimen. The six-fingered prostho swept away from him on the grav plates that cored its palm, shot forty feet down the embankment to the offending branch and gently pulled it aside so as not to disturb the birds.

But the birds were too aware: they flew. Using his limited psi power, Ti reached into the two hundred

miniature switches of the control module buried in the globe of the grav plate system that capped his truncated legs. The switches, operated by his psi power, in turn maneuvered his hands and moved him about on his grav plate sphere as he wished. He recalled his left servo-hand now that the bird had gone. It rushed back to him and floated at his left side, directly out from his shoulder, just as the right hand floated on the other side.

He looked at his watch and was surprised to find it was past time for his usual morning chat with Taguster. He flipped the mini-switches, floated around and through the patio doors into the plush living room. He moved across the fur carpet and glided into the special cup-chair of his Mindlink set. He raised a servo-hand and pulled down the glittering helmet, fitting it securely to his bony cranium (it too had been specially crafted), reached out with the other servo and threw the proper toggles to shift his mind into the receiver in Taguster's living room. There was a moment of blurring when intense blacks and grays swarmed formlessly about him. His mind flashed on the Mindlink Company beam past thousands of other minds going to other receivers, covered the forty miles to the city and Taguster's house. The blacks and grays swirled dizzily, then cleared and turned into colors. The first thing he saw through the receiver camera was Taguster lying dead against the wall

No. Not dead. There was blood, surely, pooling about the concert guitarist's head, but that same head was also moving, nodding in near unconsciousness, but nodding nonetheless. Ti settled his mind into the comfortable interior of the receiver and operated the voice box. "Lenny!"

It was almost impossible for him to believe the musician was hurt—maybe mortally hurt. A good friend never dies. Never! The shock of the situation echoed back his trace pathway on the Mindlink beam and jolted through his body, trying to make that dumb hulk of flesh understand the horror of the situation.

"Lenny, what happened?"

Taguster raised his head a little, enough for Ti to see the thin dart buried half in his throat. Taguster tried to say something, but he could manage only a thick gurgle, like syrup splattering against the bottom of a galvanized bucket.

Darts? Who would want to kill Leonard Taguster? And why hadn't they finished the job?

The musician was gurgling frantically as if he desperately needed to communicate something. Ti's mind swam inside the receiver, as if it were trying to break free and dissipate its charge. He was fighting off panic, and he knew it. Taguster wanted to say something. But how could that be accomplished with his pale throat violated? He could not talk. And from the looks of it, the dart had been tipped with something that made it impossible for him to walk, something that had partially paralyzed him. He scabbled a limp hand against the wall as if writing without implement, and Ti got the idea. He turned the head of the receiver around so that the cameras showed him most of the room. There was a desk with various writing tools lying on it, and it was only twenty feet away, against the far wall. But a receiver was not mobile—and Taguster could not move. Ti thought of retreating from the receiver and returning to his body, calling the police from his house. But from the looks of him, Taguster could not last that much longer, and the man's desire to communicate was too intense to ignore.

Ti had never thought to experiment to see if his psi power traveled with his mind when he entered a receiver, but this was as good a time as any to find out! He squinted eyes that he didn't have (the cameras could not rightfully be called eyes, and his own orb was at home, lying lopsided in his irregular head) and forced his psi energies to coalesce in the vicinity of the desk. He reached out and toyed with

the pencil. It flipped over and almost rolled onto the floor! He doubled his effort, lifted it, and floated it across the room to where Taguster lay dying. He imagined he was sweating.

Taguster picked the instrument up and held it as if he were not exactly sure what to do with it. He coughed up blood and stared at that a moment.

"Lenny," the mutant urged. "Write it. Write . . . it."

Taguster looked blearily up at the receiver screen, seemed to nod. He raised his hand and wrote on the wall: MARGLE. The letters were shaky and uneven, but they were readable,

"What does that mean?"

Taguster seemed to sigh, dropped the pencil.

"Lenny!"

Taguster looked at the screen again, fumbled with the pencil, lifted it and scribbled under the word "Margle": NAME.

So Margie was a name. And now that the connection had been made for him, Ti seemed to have remembered hearing it somewhere, though he could not place the source or context. Well, anyway, the musician had named his would-be killer, and the mutant felt justified in leaving the scene long enough to notify the police. But then, someone screamed.

It was a woman's scream, high and piercing. It started full strength, turned to a gurgle much like Taguster's, and trailed away. It had come from the direction of the bed-room. There was another receiver in there, an extension of the living room box, and Ti vacated his present perch for the bedroom set.

It was a woman. She had been trying to get out of the window, but her flimsy nightdress had caught on the win-dow latch, delaying her just a moment too long. There were three darts in her back, and the yellow negligee was running with red, red blood. Ti looked to the right, hunt-ing the killer. He had assumed the man had left, but he had only disabled Taguster, then had gone quickly on to the woman to kill her before she could escape. The blood had now soaked her negligee and was dripping onto the floor from the frilly lace edging. He shifted the camera to the left, and he saw his killer. And it wasn't a man . . .

It was a Police Hound. Its dark metal body floated to-ward the doorway, its two servo-hands flying ahead of it, their fingers tensed as if they were ready to latch onto something and strangle it to death. The dart tube on its burnished belly was protruding, prepared for action. This was the killer, thirty-odd pounds of ball-shaped computer that could track a man by smell, sight, touch, and sound. And only the police should have one!

But why would the police want to kill Leonard Taguster? And why should they use such a roundabout method of obtaining his destruction? Why not simply haul him in on some phony charge replete with carefully prepared evi-dence and do away with him legally?

The Hound disappeared through the doorway into the hall, and Ti suddenly remembered Taguster lying back there in the living room. The Hound was going back to finish the job! The darts were evidently tipped with poi-son, though Police Hounds should carry only defense-and-capture narcotics. Now that Taguster's lover had been kept from spreading the news, it was time to take care of the guitarist in proper

fashion.

Ti retreated from the bedroom connection and shifted his mind back to the main receiver. Taguster was still lying against the wall in the same position, still not un-conscious, still gurgling, trying to tell Ti who Margie was. But the Hound was on its way! Ti searched the room frantically for a weapon.

The Hound came through the doorway and drifted to-ward Taguster.

Ti found a curio, a small brass peasant leading a small brass mule, a hand-crafted trinket Taguster had brought back from his tour of Mexico. He lifted it with his psi power and threw it at the Hound. The toy bounced off the dully gleaming hide of the machine, fell harmlessly to the floor. The Hound drifted at Taguster, its dart tube thrusting farther out of its underside, its servos spreading to either side to give it a clear line of fire.

Ti found an ashtray, tried lifting it, could not.

Panic threatened to tip him into irrationality. But that, he cautioned himself, would do the musician no good at all. He was the man's only hope! There were only seconds left. Then he remembered the gun on the desktop. It had been lying at the opposite end from the pencils, heavy and ugly, a deterrent to burglars. He touched the pistol psionically, but he could not nudge it. He pressed harder, eventually moved it slightly until the barrel was pointing toward the Hound. Pulling the light wire of the automatic trigger was easy. The gun spat a narco-needle that bounced off the beast. That was no good!

And then the Hound shot Taguster. Four times in the chest:*thud, thud, thud, thud!* The guitarist gurgled thickly, sighed, and dropped his head, quite dead now. Ti felt as if all the energy he had possessed had been sucked out of him by an electric vampire, yet he could not let the Hound escape. He sent his cameras swiveling about, looking for things small enough to be handled by his limited talents. He found various trinkets and figurines and rained them uselessly upon the killer machine. It surveyed the room, perplexed, firing darts in the direction from which the souvenir hail came, unable to discover its assailant. Then it turned a spatter of darts on the receiver head and floated out of the room—out of the house and away ...

For a time, Ti remained in the living room receiver, look-ing at Taguster's corpse. He was too weakened to do any-thing else. His mind filled with remembrances of their friendship, scene after scene flicking after one another like dried leaves blown by a cold autumn wind. Finally, when there were no more memories, there was nothing to do but return to his own set, to his own house. He broke with Taguster's receiver and allowed his mind to flow back into the Mindlink beam, mixing with the blacks and the grays and the almost subaudible murmuring of the thousands of other Mindlink customers. Colors appeared, and he was abruptly back in his own body. He sat for a moment, re-gaining lost energy, then used a servo to lift the helmet from his head and shut off the machine.

What now?

Ordinarily, he would not have had to consider that ques-tion, for he would have wasted no time in summoning the police. But it had been a Police Hound that had killed Leonard Taguster! If the legal authorities had conspired to take the musician's life, as unlikely as that seemed, then it was madness to contact them about investigating the crime! No, he had to know more before he took any ac-tion. But what did he have to go on? Margle! He had the name. He lifted out of the cup-chair and crossed the liv-ing room, moved through a painting-lined corridor, and came into the library. He stopped at the wall where the direct com-screen to *Enterstat*, his newspaper, lay like a cataracted eyeball. He punched a button, the third yellow one in an alternating series of green and yellow. A panel slid away beside the

screen, revealing a computer keyboard, the direct line to the *Enterstat* computer. He punched out the letters m-a-r-g-l-e and depressed the bar marked full data report.

Thirty seconds later, a printed stat sheet popped out of the info receival slot and into the plastic tray, glistening wetly. He waited a moment for it to dry, then reached with a servo and picked it up. He held it up to his eye, read it, blinking. Klaus Margie was connected with the Dark Brethren, the underworld organization that had been encroaching on the territory once sacrosanct to the Mafia, and it was rumored that he was the number one man, though this information could not be checked for authenticity. He was six feet tall and weighed two hundred and one pounds. His hair was dark, but his eyes were "baby blue. He had a three-inch scar along his right jaw line. He was missing a thumb on his right hand. He believed in taking a hand in the common dangerous chores of the mob. He would not send one of his boys to do something he had never done himself. He was a man of action, not a desk-chained gangster executive. He dated Polly London, the rising young starlet. That was why *Enterstat* had his biography. End of information.

Ti dropped the paper back into the receival tray and stared thoughtfully at the computer keyboard. That explained the Police Hound. The underworld could lay hands on anything it wanted by bribing the proper officials. And somewhere it had secured a Hound. Well, he could just go and dial the police now, report the murder, for they were not involved. Or could he? His intuition (a thing he had long ago learned to respect) told him he should know more about Klaus Margle before he put his nonexistent foot into a nasty patch of briars. He punched out the *Enterstat* main phone number on the com-screen and waited while the two-dimension media (almost entirely a business service now that three-dimensional Mindlink had taken over in the private communications area) rang the number. The blank screen suddenly popped into light, and the face of *Enterstat's* editor, George Creol, swam into view, settled, held still, staring out at him with large, melancholy eyes. "Oh, hello, Chief. What is it?"

"I want some information on a story prospect."

"You writing again, Chief? You always did do great articles."

"Uh, well, just something that interested me. I thought it might make a good feature."

"Who is it?"

"Klaus Margle. He may be the top boy of the Dark Brethren. He dates Polly London. Missing a thumb on his right hand, scarred on his face. That's about all I know, and I got that from our computer. Think you could put a re-searcher on it?"

"Sure thing, Chief. When do you want the Stuff? To-morrow?"

"I want it in an hour."

"But, Chief—"

"It doesn't have to be complex. I don't need a psycho-logical profile or anything like that. Just the basics. Put a dozen researchers on it if you have to, but have it in an hour!"

"Sounds big."

"It is"

"I'll get on it right away. Call you back in an hour."

Creol signed off, and the screen went blank again.

Ti mixed himself a strong whiskey sour and waited.

An hour later, the com-screen bleeped. He flipped it to reception and watched Creol's face fade in. "Got it, Chief," Creol said. "Hey, he's quite a fellow!"

"Stat it."

"Sure thing."

Creol placed the documents under his recorder scope, one sheet at a time, then punched the transmit button. Moments later, the wet copies dropped into the tray in Ti's wall. He didn't rush to pick them up, though his nerves screamed for action. Creol was already too interested. He didn't want to blow any of this until he knew what he was doing. When all the papers had dropped, he thanked the editor and rang off. He sent a servo to retrieve the data and carried it back into the living room. He slid into a cup-chair beneath a reading globe and shut off the grav plates.

When he had finished reading everything the researchers had found on Klaus Margle, he knew, beyond doubt, that the man was head of the Dark Brethren. The list of other gangsters liquidated under his auspices was awesome. By studying the killings tentatively credited to Klaus Margle, Ti could see the story of an industrious criminal assassinating his way up the ranks and right into the top roost. The information told him one other thing: he had been wise not to contact the police. Klaus Margle had been arrested nine different times. And he had beaten every rap. Whether he had clever lawyers or whether he spread money around where it would do him the most good was of little consequence. What counted was that if the police investigated this, Margle would eventually go free as he had before. Then he would come hunting for a reject named Timothy. No, this was not something he could turn over to the police. Not until he had conclusive evidence against Margle, evidence the crook could not buy his way out of. He was going to have to handle this thing himself. . .

Ti slid into his Mindlink cup-chair, cut his grav plates, and breathed deeply. As he lowered the helmet and fitted it, his mind raced through the alleyways of the situation. Why should Klaus Margle want to kill a concert guitarist? And how had Taguster come to know the gangster in the first place? It was not his usual type of acquaintance. They were questions that would need answering if he wanted to sew up this case before reporting it to the authorities. But Taguster was dead, and Margle would certainly not talk, so where did that leave Ti? Nowhere. He flipped the toggles, leaped into the beam, and settled into the receiver in Taguster's living room. The body was still there, of course, twisted grotesquely in its death agonies.

Ti swung the cameras from left to right and found the closet door he wanted. He hoped the thing was where Taguster usually kept it. He palmed open the closet door with his power. Multicolored warning lights flashed amber and crimson and green. He shut off the alarm and looked at the simulacrum. It was a perfect likeness of the musician— except that it wasn't now full of poisoned pins.

Taguster had had the simulacrum made to help him avoid the adulation of his fans. When he was on tour, it was always the android that entered the hotels through the front door, while Taguster sneaked in a service entrance. The simulacrum could walk, talk, think, do almost every-thing Taguster could do. Its

complex, brain was cored with his memory tapes and his psychological reaction patterns, so that it could pass for him even in the company of casual friends, though someone as close to him as Ti could not really be fooled.

Ti reached psionically under the flowered sports coat the machine wore, brought it to active status, its eyes opened, cloudy at first, then clearing until its gaze was penetrating. "You," Ti said. "Sim, come here."

It walked out of the closet and stopped before the re-ceiver. For a moment, Ti had the eerie sensation that Taguster had returned from the dead. It was suddenly dis-tasteful to, be ordering this image of his friend about like a peasant before a monarch—but it was also essential to the half-conceived plan still taking shape in his mind.

"Sim," he said again.

It raised its eyes and stared directly at the cameras.

"Sim, there is a young woman at the window in the bedroom. She is—dead. I want you to bring her into the utility room. Be careful and don't spill her blood on the carpet. Go."

"Right," the Sim said, turning toward the bedroom. A moment later, he returned, the body cradled in his arms. The blood had ceased to flow and was drying on her lacy garment. The simulacrum stalked across the living room and out of sight.

Ti shifted into the kitchen receiver, watched the android march through and into the utility area. He could only see part of that room through the door, for there was no re-ceiver in it. "Empty the freezer," he directed the android. It complied, piling the hams and roasts and vegetables on the floor.

"Now put her body in it."

It did this thing too.

He ordered it to retrieve Taguster's corpse and do the same with it. If it took a day or so for this plan to be worked out and put into operation, if it required a couple of days to trap Margle, he wanted to be certain the bodies were well preserved for a future autopsy. This was gruesome, but it was the only thing he could do. When both bodies were in the freezer and the food that had been there was dumped into the incinerator chute, he sent the android about cleaning up all traces of the murder, scrubbing the blood from the floor and carpet, wash-ing the wall down where the musician had scribbled upon it. When the machine-man had finished, the house looked perfectly normal, completely serene.

"Sit down and wait for me," he directed it.

It complied.

He dropped into the Mindlink beam and returned home. He went into the library, sat down at his typer, and used his nimble servos to compose a new headline story for the four thirty edition. Polly London would surely read *Enterstat* to see if she were mentioned, and it was quite possible that she would pass along the story to Klaus Mar-ple. If Margle didn't subscribe to *Enterstat* himself . . . When he had finished the eight hundred words to the piece, he rang Creol. The man's melancholy eyes resolved first, then the rest of his face. "Chief. Wasn't the info complete enough?"

"Fine, George, fine. Look, I have another story that goes in the four thirty edition. I want you to tear out

the lead story, no matter what it is, and put this one in with two-inch caps."

"Bu—"

"I know you have the paper ready, but this is what I want."

"Stat it, Chief."

He did. Seconds later, he saw it drop into Creol's desk tray. The editor picked it up, read over it. "What's the headline?" he asked, picking up a pencil.

"Ah - CONCERT GUITARIST VICTIM OF WOULD-BE KILLER."

"But he wasn't killed?"

"Right."

"Then this doesn't make such a sensational headline, Chief. The one we have is—"

"I know. But I want this as the lead anyhow."

"It means resetting page one—"

"Do it."

"You're the boss."

"Right you are."

He rang off. His heart was beating unreasonably fast. He could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck. He moved back to the Mindlink set and shifted into Taguster's house again. The simulacrum waited, hands folded on its lap. He thought a moment, then gave it orders. "I want you to phone Harvard Detective Agency, Incorporated, and contract an investigator—one of their best. Tell him an attempt was made on your life and you want to find who it was. Tell him you want to see him tomorrow after you have compiled what information you can on your own. Tell him—four o'clock tomorrow."

The android stood, found the number of the agency and dialed it on the com-screen system. He made the transaction, even bargaining over the going rate per diem for a Class I agent, hung up, and returned to his chair. "It's all fixed," he said in the very tones Leonard Taguster would have used. "Anything else?"

"Not yet. You might as well go inactive." He sent his psi power under the sportscoat again, flipped off the android. It seemed to sag in its chair. Its eyes clouded again, then slipped shut as if it were sleeping.

Ti settled in the Mindlink receiver to wait. At four thirty, *Enterstat* would report that an unsuccessful attempt had been made on Taguster's life. It would also report that he had hired Harvard Detective Agency to investigate the attempt for him. If Margle read or heard of the article, he would call Harvard—perhaps offering to pay for Taguster's use of the firm, saying he was a close and concerned friend. The firm would agree, for they really would believe they were representing the musician. And Margle would think his man was still alive. What he would do then was a toss up. It was unlikely, however, that he would send the Hound to try again at a job it had bungled. Margle was too thorough a man for that. And given his propensity for personal involvement, he might just show up himself. That's

what Ti was counting on. But there was nothing to do but wait...

He had everything ready. The movie camera was positioned back in his own house, right next to the Mindlink set, ready to be jacked in and record on film whatever transpired in the house of Leonard Tagaster. If only Margle would show . . .

At six ten, the com-screen burred.

Quickly, he activated the android. Its eyes blinked, un-clouded, and it stood erect, striding off to the com-screen just as naturally as if it had been awakened from a sound nap. It punched to receive the call, and the screen lighted, although no image appeared on it. The android, though, was transmitting, and Klaus Margle—for who else would not want his face seen on the com-screen?—was getting a full-face view of the man he had ordered destroyed. "Who is this?" the android asked.

There was no reply.

"Who is this?"

The com screen went dead. The other party had run off without saying a single word.

The android returned to his chair and looked at the Mindlink receiver. "Did I act correctly under the circumstances?"

"Yes. Yes, you did."

"Then perhaps you could tell me just what those circumstances are. I should know more about the situation."

Ti filled the machine-man in on the death of its owner and all that Ti had learned about the prospective killer. When he had finished talking, he was worn out, and he fancied the receiver talkbox was smoking. They sat, wait-ing. Darkness came, and they turned on the low lights that flushed the room with a soft orange-red glow. At ten o'clock, Ti realized that he had not eaten anything all day—and that he was thirsty as well. But he dared not leave the receiver lest his suspect arrive while he was gone. At a quarter after eleven, then, they heard the first noise of an intruder . . .

There was a splintering of wood and a sharp thudding, the sound a door or window sill might make as it was wrenched out of its frame. The simulacrum came to its feet and stood looking about the room. "The kitchen," he said.

Ti shifted into the kitchen. The door was indeed bowed out of its frame, shivering as something struck it heavily again. A shoulder? Klaus Margle's shoulder, battering a way into the house? The door gave, the latch ripped loose, and the portal swung inward. Beyond floated the Hound. But that didn't fit Margle at all! If they thought the Hound had failed— Then he understood. If the Hound had failed, Margle would send it again to try to determine why. There would be men waiting outside in the event the Hound was again unsuccessful. And the confrontation between Hound and android was near. The simulacrum came into the kitchen. The Hound detected him, lurched, whined almost like a real dog. It surged through into the gloomy kitchen and fired half a dozen darts. The pins stuck in the pseudo-flesh of the android, but the poison could do nothing to his unhuman system of wires and tubes—and he did not even bleed. The Hound swung to the left, shot six more darts up the simulacrum's side. Again, the weapon failed to kill.

The android advanced on the Hound.

The Hound ordered its servos ahead and latched one of them around the android's neck, thinking to strangle it. The other servo came up and battered at the artificial face. The machine-man's nose bent into an odd angle, but it didn't break. The android reached up and grabbed the servos, ripped them off himself. He turned, rammed the ends of the metal hands against the wall, snapping some of the fingers. Again. And again, until they were all broken. The hands floated where he left them, grav plates still operational, but unable to heed the commands of their master, the Hound.

"Capture it and destroy it," Ti ordered.

The simulacrum moved forward and grabbed the ball. It strained to move away from him, but could not. It shot darts into his chest, uselessly. He dragged it across the room, thrust it against the wall. It struck with a sharp crack, struggled, but was no match for the superhuman electronic and metal muscles of the simulacrum. He smashed it again and again, just as he had the hands, until the housing on the grav plates buckled and the plates loosened. He ripped the housing off, pulled the plates out of their connections and tossed them across the room where they floated above the sink.

"Now toss it back outside," Ti ordered.

The android did so, walking onto the platform of the rear patio and heaving the beast over the edge to fall on the driveway below. It struck with a resounding crash and shattered into a dozen or more large pieces. The android came back inside and crossed to the receiver. It was time for more waiting . . .

Minutes passed. A half an hour. Ti began to worry that they had been too drastic with the Hound and had scared off their killer. But just when he was ready to speak to the machine-man, he heard the squeak of shoes on the patio stairs leading from the rear lawn. "They're coming," he whispered fiercely.

The simulacrum nodded.

He dropped into Mindlink beam and returned home, set a servo hand to connect the camera to the impulses registering on this connection, and began filming the kitchen. When he returned, the gangsters had not yet arrived.

They came two seconds later, preceded by tear gas grenades. The kitchen filled with thick, acrid, blue-green fumes that roiled farther into the house, blanketing every room. Moments later, three dark figures came through the doorway wearing breathers and waving pin guns around like small boys with toys. Ti focused the camera on them, was elated when he discovered Margle's face—blue eyes, black hair, and a scarred cheek. He got a good, clear shot of him. Then he filmed the two accomplices, determined to convict them all. He did not take the camera off their faces. The intruders were oblivious to him, however. They spotted the android and decided it was Taguster in a breather of his own and that they had better fire while they still had a chance. Their dart guns burst with staccato tapping that echoed about the gas-filled kitchen.

The darts sank in but had no effect. The simulacrum advanced on the trio. One of them found the light switch, palmed it. In the ensuing brilliance, they saw all the darts puncturing the pseudo-flesh and knew the simulacrum for what it was. They holstered their weapons and moved in on it. It started backing away from them, but they cornered it, pinned the machine's arms, and reached under its flow-ered coat, deactivating it. It blinked its eyes, clouded them, closed them, and slumped against the wall, sliding to the floor like a drunk finally reaching his limit.

"Spread out and search the place," Margle ordered.

The two men moved through the rest of the house. Margle checked the utility room (though not the freezer) and the kitchen closet. A minute or two after he had finished, the others returned. "Nothing anywhere," one of them said, shaking his head. Then he seemed to become aware of the soft light of the Mindlink receiver cameras. "Boss!"

They came at the receiver like madmen, leering, enraged, snorting, faces flushed and lips twisted. One of the men raised a gun butt to smash in the lens, but Margle grabbed his arm. "No!"

"But, Boss—"

"You!" Margle snapped, directing his leer straight into the camera. "We're going to find you. We're going to trace you from the call records." He grinned, pressed his fingertips against the lens. Then he drew his pistol, moved his fingers, swung the butt, and smashed in the glass . . .

He settled into the Mindlink receiver in his own house, shaken, raised the helmet, and flipped off the machine. Margle had broken the lens—but not soon enough. The camera had been grinding away the entire time. It was only now, after the confrontation had come and passed, that he realized how tense he was. He tried to relax, recalling some relaxing yoga contemplation patterns that he had picked up somewhere. It worked a little. Yes, Margle could trace the call if he brought in a Mindlink expert, and there was no doubt the mob could have access to such a person, for the mob had access to everything. But even with an expert, that would take several hours. And Margle just didn't have that much time left.

Ti disconnected the movie camera from the set and took it into the library, to the film corner. He slipped the loaded spool into the automatic processor, waited eight minutes, removed it completely developed. He stretched out a length of the film and held it between himself and the ceiling light. There was the face of Klaus Margle, as ugly as in real life, scar and all. Ti had won.

He moved to the corn-screen and punched the number One. A moment later, the screen brightened, and a desk sergeant's face popped into view. "Police," he said, a pencil in his hands, ready to record any pertinent information, even though the call—like all calls to the police—was being recorded.

"I would like to report a murder," he said, then abruptly wished he had been more circumspect.

The desk officer's face slipped away and was replaced by another hung above shoulders that were covered in plain brown business suit. "Homicide, here," the new face said. "Go on."

"I—have a murder to report."

"Go on."

"I—"

"Well?"

"I want to report it in person. I have evidence."

"The com-screen is fine. We handle all our homicides over the com—"

"In person," Ti persisted. He knew the sort of run-around he could get by phone. His own editor, Creol, gave the run-around to almost everyone who called *Enterstat* to speak to Ti.

"Look, Mr.— You haven't reported your name. The in-former's name should always be the first statement. What's your name?"

"Timothy of *Enterstat*."

The detectives eyebrows went up. "And you won't report over the com-screen?"

"No."

"We'll send a man around. Your address is in central files?"

"Yes."

"Be there in fifteen minutes."

When the police dealt with the wealthy, the treatment was somewhat different than when they dealt with the comfortable or the poor. Ti knew it, did not like it, but was nevertheless glad of it now. If he wanted to be sure this case got solved, he was convinced that he must launch it himself. And since it was easier for them to come to him, he had had to make them do just that.

Fifteen minutes later, almost to the second, the doorbell rang. He sent a servo to turn the latch knob and pull the portal wide. A thin man with a pencil mustache stepped through into the living room. The servo closed the door behind him. He looked at Ti a moment, tried to conceal his shock—shock though he was certain to know the mutant's nature—and took off his fur hat. "Detective Modigliani," he said in tight, compressed words, each syllable like the quick crack of a rifle shot.

"Glad to meet you, Detective. Come in. Sit down."

The thin man crossed the room and took a seat while Ti drifted into one of his own special cup-chairs and shut down his grav plates. "This is most unusual," Modigliani said.

"It's an unusual case."

"Perhaps you could explain it?"

Ti hesitated only a moment, then launched into his story. When he had finished, the detective sat with his hands folded in his lap and twisted his mouth as if trying to get at his mustache and nibble on it. "Quite extraordinary. And you say you have film?"

"Yes."

The detective scowled. "You have invaded privacy, you know"

"What?"

Modigliani stood and paced to the wall, turned dramatically. "Privacy, sir. It's an invasion of privacy to

photo-graph someone through the Mindlink impressions."

"But I was corralling evidence!"

"That's the job of the police, don't you think?"

"I happen to know," Ti said, flipping on his systems and rising from his chair, "that Klaus Margle was arrested nine times and yet never served a prison sentence."

"What are you suggesting?"

He almost spat out the accusations that were most as-suredly true, but he held his tongue just long enough to calm himself. "Nothing. Nothing. But—well, have a look at the films, why don't you?"

"Yes. I would like to see those,"

Ti led the way into the library where he set up the pro-jector and pulled down the wall screen. "Hit the lights, will you?"

Modigliani hit the lights. There was darkness.

The projector hummed, and suddenly the screen was filled with images. Roiling smoke clouds, to begin with. Then, coming through these were three men with breath-ers' clamped in their teeth, with plugs in their nostrils. The picture zoomed in on the lead man, and there was Klaus Margle, larger than life!

But just his face. As the picture progressed, Ti discov-ered his error: he had been so anxious to get good shots of Margie's face that he had missed most of the other ac-tion. He had trained the cameras on the heads of the in-vaders, missing nearly everything else that they did. There was no sound, either. The threatening face of Klaus Margle leaning into the camera at the end lacked force when his words were nonexistent.

The film stuttered, slipped, and was gone.

"It's not much," Modigliani said.

Ti started to protest.

The detective interrupted. "It's not really much. Faces. You could have filmed Klaus Margie almost anywhere."

"But the tear gas—"

"And I didn't see him killing anyone. It still looks to me like we should chiefly be concerned with an invasion-of-privacy charge against you, sir, not with some charge against Mr. Margle."

Ti must have seen the futility of argument, but he wouldn't allow himself to give in that easily. He argued, pleaded, lost his temper and called names. All names, of course, be-ing sucked up by the detective's personal recorder for fu-ture use. In the end, he could only suggest calling Taguster's home. Either the receivers would all be broken, or they would meet Klaus Margle and his henchmen.

"Or," Modigliani pointed out, "there may be no answer, which isn't enough to warrant an investigation

either."

But there was an answer. Taguster's face popped onto the corn-screen, smiling. "Yes?"

Modigliani turned and gave Ti an I-told-you-so look.

"The android," Ti hissed.

Modigliani identified himself to Taguster's simulacrum. "We've had a report," he said, "that you've been murdered."

Taguster laughed. It was very hard to believe he was an android. "As you can see—" he didn't bother to finish.

"Would you mind," Modigliani asked, "if I moved into Mindlink and inspected your rooms at close range?"

"Go ahead," Taguster's android said confidently.

"Thank you," Modigliani flipped off the corn-screen and returned to the living room and the Mindlink set there. He popped into Mindlink beam and entered the living room receiver at Taguster's. He flipped to the bedrooms, game-rooms, library, theater, and finally the kitchen. He thanked Taguster for the permission to investigate and expressed his apologies at the intrusion. He returned to Ti's set and re-moved the helmet that didn't quite properly fit his head. "Nothing," he said.

"The kitchen receiver—"

"Was in fine working order. I don't know what you were trying to prove, sir, but—"

"They could have used a mob expert to restore the re-ceiver."

"And Taguster?"

"That was his android!"

"Androids, you must know, don't generally do anything that is detrimental to their owners. If the real Leonard Taguster were murdered, his android would not willingly assist the murderers."

"They could have tinkered with him."

"That takes *areal* expert."

"You know as well as I that Klaus Margle can afford such experts and keeps them on hand!"

Modigliani's seeming stupidity was beginning to annoy Timothy to the point where he wasn't able to suppress his rage. His twisted face flushed, and he could not make his servos stay still. They flitted back and forth like frightened animals looking for a place to hide. But then Modigliani gave away the name of his game: "Sir," he said, "I must caution you to refrain from slander. Mr. Klaus Margle, the Klaus Margle to which you refer, is nothing more than the owner of a large number of restaurants and garages. He is a respectable businessman, and he should not be open to such slanderous comment—"

"Detective Modigliani," Ti said, his voice level, but threatening to escalate into hilarity, "you know damned well—"

"This is being recorded. I must inform you of that." He parted the halves of his round-necked coat to reveal the chest-strapped mini-recorder.

Ti stopped. It was obvious now why he had had such a hard time with Modigliani. The man was bought. When he had learned the accused was Klaus Margle, he had seen where his duty lay—and it wasn't with the Truth. He wasn't interested in investigating the crime. He was only concerned with making a case against Ti as an unreliable witness. He was doing a good job. And Ti realized his own rage would be interpreted as inane prattling if he didn't manage to control himself. "Perhaps you had better go," he said, clamping imaginary hands on his boiling fury.

"The film," Modigliani said, returning to the library.

Ti floated quickly after him, but was too late. When he came through the library doors, the detective had removed the film from the projector and was returning. "You can't have that!" Ti snapped.

"On the contrary. We'll have to study it to see if it was faked. I don't know what you have against Mr. Margle that would lead you to the construction of such a plan to discredit him, but if falsification of film intended as evi-dence has taken place, we will be in contact with you."

And he was gone. Ti stood at the window watching him go, knowing full well that the film would be destroyed be-tween here and the police headquarters and that Detec-tive Modigliani would get a bonus from the Dark Brethren this month.

He returned to Mindlink and called Taguster's house. The android was there, reading a book, apparently. It spoke to him as if he didn't know it was the android, asked him how he had been getting along. He didn't bother to answer. He went from room to room, but he could find nothing. He slipped out of the Taguster house and into his own set, removing the helmet.

It was two o'clock in the morning. And Margle was on his way...

There were preparations to be made. The police were not going to be any good. There was no hope that they would help. He knew without need of further corroboration, that any further calls he made to the police would be automatically routed to Modigliani, who would see that he was given the brush-off. So he had to defend himself. He had a collection of pin and dart weapons with which he amused himself in the basement shooting range. He collected three of these and brought them upstairs. He carried books into the kitchen and braced one of the weap-ons between them so that it covered the door at waist height. *That* he could trigger with his psionic talents if necessary. He took the other two and grasped one firmly in each servo. There was nothing more but waiting ...

He heard them in the courtyard behind the house. They were not attempting to be quiet. Their aide Modigliani had probably assured them that the police would stay out of it and that Ti was helpless. He stood at the doorway be-tween kitchen and dining area, both gun-laden servos aimed at the door, his psi ready to trigger the book-propped weapon too. The door rattled. Then something struck it hard. It crashed inward, the lock ripped lose, and a Hound floated into the room.

But the Hound was smashed, broken back at Taguster's!

Which meant they had more than one Hound. With con-tacts like Modigliani, that was not surprising.

But his guns were no good! The pins would bounce harmlessly off the Hound's "hide," and the beast would sweep in for a swift and sure kill. Ti turned into the dining area, dropping the guns and calling his servos after him. He had expected men, not machines. Now what? He heard the Hound in the kitchen, but it didn't remain there for long. When he reached the living room, it was humming into the dining area, following him.

He felt panic welling in him as he remembered the pin-punctured throat of the musician, the bloody body of his lover as she had tried to crawl out of the window to avoid the alloy demon. The same alloy demon that now stalked him. But he fought the panic, knowing only death lay with it.

The Hound entered the living room and sensed his pres-ence, swept him with its tiny cameras and radar grids, ascertaining if he were the quarry. . .

His mind raced to find an escape. The house, the great house that was almost a womb for him was highly equipped to contain him in complete luxury, but it wasn't equipped to afford him escape from death. The house would be sur-rounded by Margle and his men; therefore, the doors were useless. Then he remembered the cellars upon which the house had been built, the dozen rooms that had served as a Revolutionary War Tory supplies depot. If he could get into those, there were any number of outlets onto other places on the mountain.

The Hound fired a series of three pins.

Ti slammed down on his speed controls imbedded in the floating ball and streaked into the hallway, found the cellar door, and swept down the stairs without even touch-ing them, stairs there for the convenience of guests. He crossed the Tri-D room with its three wall-sized white screens and moved into the shooting range, slamming the door behind. It was a heavy door, an antique resurrected from the Tory cellars before the house had been con-structed over them. It would take the Hound a few mo-ments to break it down.

He floated along the left wall where he knew the cellars lay. They stretched back into the mountain, a rough series of fortified caves, after you passed through the first four or five of them. From those caves, there were a number of exits on the mountainside. He reached the end of the room and used his servos to rip loose the half-round that filled in the corner of the plasti-wood paneling. Then, gripping metal fingers around the paneling, he carefully pried the last section away from the wall beams and was looking through into cool darkness: the Tory cellars.

Behind, the Hound struck the door, hard.

Ti could not crouch to squeeze through the cross-beams, but he shifted the grav plates so that he was turned onto his side, then moved ball first through the gap and into the cellar. Once inside, he shifted the grav plates back to normal position and righted himself. He sent his servos back to pull the wood paneling back into place from the inside. It might confuse the demon machine for a few min-utes, but it could not be a completely successful ruse. It would be after him, no question there.

Through the partition, he heard the door to the shoot-ing range give, crash inward to admit the Hound.

He drifted off slowly through the old cellar, letting his eye adjust to the intense dark. After a few minutes, he could distinguish the vague outlines of fallen beams and broken tables, rotted, shattered chairs, and a

few stretches of shelving that had once held ammunition but were now bowed and warped away from the walls, covered with ugly lumps of fungus. He moved from the first cellar into the second.

The panel he had removed was wrenched away from the wall in the first cellar, and light from the shooting range flooded in to dispel the gloom. The Hound came quickly after.

He turned toward the third cellar and moved as fast as he could. He slammed his stump shoulder into a half fallen beam but kept on moving.

The Hound came faster.

When he got to the entranceway of the fifth cellar, he found that there had been a cave-in, and the beams and rock of the ceiling had collapsed to effectively bar his escape. If he had a half an hour, maybe an hour, he could move enough of the rubble to get through. But the Hound was literally breathing down his neck—though the breath was the warmth of laboring machinery.

He turned on his pursuer. It was coming in from the third cellar, moving around a pile of ruin there. It fired three pins. *Fita-fita-fita ...*

He moved aside when he saw its intent. The darts studded the rubble wall behind him. He sent his servo-hands to a beam lying in the Hound's pathway, had them worry its tenuous connections with the ceiling. Just as the Hound passed beneath, the beam snapped loose and crashed onto the ball of the hunter. But it only deflected the demon machine's advance. The Hound swerved, bobbed, but re-covered and swept closer, firing three pins.

All three missed.

Ti was surprised, for he had not had time to take evasive action, and Hounds were not known to be sloppy marksmen.

The Hound fired three more.

All three missed.

And Ti realized why. He was turning them aside with his psi power! The second time, he had been more conscious of it. He stood, back to the closed door to chamber five, and waited for the Hound to fire again. It did. And, again, the darts shot to either side, deflected suddenly from their target. Over the next several minutes, he deflected another two dozen of the slender spines, until the Hound was convinced that its nasty little weapons system was of no use in the situation. It stopped, bobbling gently a dozen feet away, and regarded him with all its measuring devices. A moment later, it sent its two servos toward his neck . . .

He reacted quickly, or he might have been strangled. He called his own servos to him. Four feet from his face, the enemy hands and his own met and locked, metal fingers laced metal fingers. He flushed full power into the hands and set them the task of breaking the Hound's fingers.

But the Hound seemed to have similar ideas. Its own servos wrenched at Ti's so that the four members swayed back and forth in the air, now gaining an inch or two for their master, now losing the same amount of distance. Finally, with both sets at full power and firmly clenched, they did not move at all but merely strained in frozen tableau against one another. When the grav plates and their connections erupted in sparks and smoke, they did so on all four hands. The servos dropped to the floor as if they were a

single creature, a metal bird with shot pellets in its wings. Now both hunter and hunted were handless.

Hunter and hunted. Ti suddenly realized the nomenclature was no longer adequate. Both deprived of hands and Ti able to stop the Hound's pins, neither was the hunter. He moved by the Hound toward the shooting range. He had discovered another application of his power this night. He mused that necessity always brought out his abilities. It had been necessary to feed himself that day long ago, and he had lifted the spoon. And now it had been a necessity to control the pins. Now he knew he could influence small objects even in high-velocity transit, just as he could lift the spoon.

He moved into the shooting range. The Hound had ceased to follow but bumped purposelessly against the cross-beams as if its mind had been in its hands and as if a loss of ability had led to a loss of purpose. Ti floated up the stairs and into the hallway of the house again. He could hear footsteps in the kitchen: Margle and his men coming to see what had taken the robot so long. Well, he was ready for them. Or he thought he was. He concentrated on his psi until his mind was alive with the power of it. He drifted into the living room just as the Dark Brethren moved in with guns drawn.

"Your Hound is finished," he said, drawing their attention.

The man on Margle's left swung and fired. Ti deflected the pins, all but one. That one he redirected to the man who had shot. The pin sunk in his chest, its poison shooting through him. He gagged, doubled over, and dropped.

"Turn yourself in, Margle," Ti said wearily. "I won't kill you if you'll turn yourself in."

But Margle and the remaining man were crouched behind the sofa. They were not ready to give up just because their target had gotten in a lucky shot. In the dark it had appeared to be a lucky shot and nothing more. They couldn't see that his hands were gone.

"You're crazy," Margle said. "You were crazy for getting into this in the first place."

"Why did you kill Taguster?"

"Why should I tell you?"

Apparently, they could not see him in the dark. Only the dead man had spotted him, and now the others were waiting to zero in on his voice, or waiting for him to move and give himself away,

"You're going to kill me, aren't you—or I will kill you. Either way, telling me won't make a difference, will it?"

"He was on PBT."

"Drugs?"

"We supplied."

"What excuse is that to kill him?"

Margle chuckled as if he were going lax and unwatchful. But Ti knew, if he moved, Margle would fire a murderous barrage—all of which would miss, of course. "It was getting too expensive for him. So he decided to gather information on us. He hoped to turn the information over to the government in return

for licensing as a legal addict. Then he could get his drugs free. But he got too nosy, and our boy became suspicious. We ransacked his house when he was out, and we found his file on us. Almost complete enough to turn over to the proper Federal authorities."

"That shouldn't have bothered you. You bribe authorities."

"Local, not Federal. Did you ever try to bribe a U.N. delegate officer? The kind they have with the narcotic bureau? Can't be done."

"So you killed him."

"So I did. Or, rather, a Hound killed him. You were pretty clever about that, by the way. Had us worried for a while. But calling the local constabulary—now that was a stroke of pure idiocy. It made finding you a great deal easier."

He knew enough now. He knew why Taguster, the man with the gentle, lightning fingers that teased the strings of an ancient instrument, had died. It was "the last piece to the puzzle that had begun in the morning and ended, now, not even twenty-four hours later.

"Why didn't the Hound get you?" Margle asked, anxious to satisfy his own curiosity now.

"I had more hands than it," he answered. "I had an extra hand."

"Huh?"

It was time. He moved toward the couch.

They saw him and fired.

He deflected all the pins.

Then he was behind the couch, almost on top of them. They leaped erect, both firing. He deflected all pins save two which he turned back on them. Margle took his in the right cheek. The other man was struck in the neck. Both gagged as the first Brethren had, clutched their chests as their hearts abruptly ceased action, and folded up in neat piles on the carpet.

He turned from them, not wanting to look at the corpses he had made. He floated through the dark room into the library. There he found a pencil and spent some time lifting it and carrying it to the com-screen with his psi power. He punched out the number of Creol's home.

A few minutes passed before the screen lighted and showed Creol's sleep-drawn features. "Chief!"

"I have a story, George."

Creol consulted his watch. "At three thirty in the morning?"

"Yeah. I want you to get a crew over here, photographer and three reporters who will work different slants on it."

"Your placer

"My place."

"Now."

"Yes."

"What's the story, Chief?"

"You can headline it: ENTERSTAT CHIEF VICTIM OF WOULD-BE KILLER."

"Don't you think you ought to call the police first?"

"They can wait, George, boy. I guess I ought to get a story out of this, anyway." He hung up and returned to the Mindlink set. He went to Taguster's home and turned off the android. It was reading a book when he deactivated it. Leonard Taguster was dead.

A DARKNESS IN MY SOUL

Religion has always fascinated science fiction writers, whether for the physical structure of the church and its ceremonies, or for the more basic reason of beliefs and moral codes. My own religious development was from non-Catholic to Catholic, and swiftly to agnosticism in which I rejected most all established codes and beat out, through a torturous process in my own head, what seemed like common sense codes. Fortunately, Gerda has gone through the agonizing steps of this process at the same times as myself. And though many might consider us immoral, we have easily spent a hundred times more thought and hours in establishing our own codes as anyone who accepts one established for him. But through this long, aching time of working out our society-taught hang-ups, there were very black moments inside my head, moments when I almost went beyond agnosticism toward atheism (though now I think only an uneducated man could truly be an atheist). I have a clear picture now of my god (you may have yours), and he or it or them is a sort of easy-going power/ person/force that doesn't care what we do down here—*as long as we don't hurt each other*. But in those bad days, there were some odd thoughts in my head. This was one, and the title speaks for itself. . . .

I wonder if Dragonfly is still in the heavens and whether the Spheres of Plague still float in airlessness, blind eyes watching. There is no way to find out, for I live in Hell.

Men have asked questions about Time and Space, and some have found answers. But there are questions which should/remain unanswered, riddles without tag lines . . .

I am a digger into minds. I esp. I find secrets, know lies, answer questions. I esp. Some questions should go unanswered, but they do not always. And now there is a dark-ness in my soul ...

It started with a nerve-jangling ring of the telephone.

I put down the book I was reading and answered the strident mechanical scream. "Hello?"

"Simeon?" He said it correctly (Sim-ee-on).

It was Harry Kirshire. I esped out and saw him standing in a room that was strange to me, nervously drumming his fingers on a simu-wood desk.

"What is it, Harry?"

"Sim, I have another job for you."

He had long ago given up his legal practice to act as my agent.

"Why so nervous? What kind of a job?"

"A mountain of money. That's all I can say."

"More than the mint?"

"More than Midas."

"Say no more."

"We'll expect you here at the Artificial Creation build-ing in twenty minutes."

"I'm on my way." My stomach fluttered. The Artificial Creation Building. The womb.

I slipped into overshoes and a heavy coat. Without Har-ry Kirshire, I would most likely be imprisoned at the mo-ment—or in what amounts to a prison. When the staff of Artificial Creation discovered my wild talents, the FBI at-tempted to impound me and use me as a "natural re-source" under federal control. It had been Harry Kirshire who had fought the legal battle all the way to the Su-preme Court. I was nine when we won the case—twelve long years ago.

It was snowing outside. I had to scrape the windscreen of the hovercar. One would imagine that, in 2004, Science could have dreamed up something to make ice scrapers obsolete.

I arrived at the AC building and floated the car in for a Marine attendant to park. Inside, I was ushered through a door into a cream-colored room with hex signs painted on the walls, a small, ugly child sitting in a leather chair, and four men standing behind him, staring at me as if I were expected to say something of monumental importance.

The child looked up, and his eyes and lips were hidden by the wrinkles of a century, by gray and gravelike flesh.

His voice crackled like papyrus being unrolled in an ancient tomb. "You're the one," he said in dust whispers. "You're the one."

"That's the situation," Harry said nervously.

The child-ancient's eyes squinted out at me like burning coals sparkling beneath rotten vegetation. I could feel the hate consuming there, hate not just for me, but for every-one, everything. He, more so than I, was a freak of the Experimental Wombs. The doctors and supporting congress-men could gloat again: "Artificial Creation Is a Benefit to the Nation." It had produced me, and twenty years later, this warped super-genius. Two successes in a quarter of a century.

"I don't know if I can," I said at last.

"Why not?" asked the uniformed hulk known as General Morsfagen.

"I don't know what to expect. He obviously has a very different mind. Sure, I've espied army staff, the people work-ing here at AC, FBI agents, and I have unfailingly sorted out the traitors. But this isn't the same thing at all."

"You don't have to sort," Morsfagen said. "I thought this had been made clear. He can formulate earth-shak-ing theories, but each time he fails to give us something vital in it. We've threatened and bribed," Morsfagen al-most said tortured, but didn't finish. "You simply go in his head and make sure he doesn't hold anything important back."

"How much did you say?" I asked.

"Five hundred thousand pos-creds an hour."

"Double that figure."

"What? That's absurd!" He was breathing heavily, but the other generals didn't flinch. I espied them and knew the child had half-discovered a means of star travel. For the rest of that theory alone, a million an hour was not ridiculous. They gave it to me with an option to demand more if the work proved more demanding than anticipated.

The lights had been dimmed; the machines had been moved in.

"The hex signs are part of the predrug hypnosis which the physicians must administer. After he is placed in a trancelike state, Cinnamide is hypoed to him."

Across from me sat the child, and his eyes were dead—the sparkling, vibrant glistening gone from them. I had become accustomed to his face, and the dried, decaying look of it did not bother me as much as before. Still, within me was a fear. "What is his name?" I asked Morsfagen.

"Funny, but we never thought to give him one."

I looked back to the freak. And within my soul (some churches deny me one) I knew that in all the far reaches of the galaxy, to the ends of the larger universe, in the billion inhabited worlds that might be out there, no name existed for the child. Simply, Child.

A team of doctors administered the drug.

"Within the next five minutes," Morsfagen said.

I nodded, looked over at Harry who had demanded to be there for this initial meeting. He was still nervous over the 'confrontation of the monsters. I turned back to Child.

Stepping easily over the threshold, *I fell through the blackness of his mind, flailing . . .*

I woke up to white faces with blurred, black holes where the eyes should have been. When my vision cleared, I could see it was Harry Morsfagen, and a strange physician who was taking my pulse and clucking his tongue against his cheek.

"You all right, Sim?" Harry asked.

Morsfagen pushed Harry out of the way, thrusting his face down at mine, "What happened? What's wrong? You don't get paid without results."

"I wasn't prepared for what I found. Simple as that No need for hysterics."

"But you were yelling and screaming—" Harry started.

"Don't worry, Harry."

"What did you find there you didn't expect?" Morsfagen asked, skeptical.

"He has no conscious mind. It's like a pit, and I fell into it expecting solid ground. Evidently, all his thoughts, or the great majority of them—at least those under drugs—come from what we 'consider the subconscious."

"Then you can't reach him?"

"I didn't say that. Now that I know what's there and what isn't, I'll be all right."

I pushed to a sitting position, readied out and stopped the room from swaying. Looking at my watch, I said, "That will be roughly seven hundred and fifty thousand pos-creds. Put it on my earnings sheet."

He sputtered. He fumed. He roared. He glowered. He quoted the Government Rates for Employees. He quoted Employer's Rights Act of 1986, paragraph two, subtitle three. He fumed a bit more. He pranced. He danced. He raved. He ranted. He demanded to know what I had done to earn pay. I didn't answer. He finished ranting. Started fuming again. But he put it down in the book and stormed out with a warning to be on time the following day.

"Don't push your luck," Harry advised me later.

"Not my luck, just my weight."

When I left, they were wheeling Child out of the room, his empty eyes staring at the ceiling.

The snow was still falling. Fairy gowns. Crystallized tears. I slid into the hovercar, lifted, and floated out toward the highway. The book was lying at my side, the jacket face down because it had her picture on it. Honey hair. Smooth lips. A picture that disgusted and intrigued.

I turned on the radio and listened to the dull voice of the newscaster. "PEKING ANNOUNCED LATE TODAY THAT IT HAS DEVELOPED A WEAPON EQUAL TO THE SPHERES OF PLAGUE LAUNCHED YESTERDAY BY WESTERN ALLIANCE AND WILL USE IT IF PRO-VOKED. ACCORDING TO ASIAN SOURCES, THE CHI-NESE WEAPON IS A SERIES OF PLATFORMS ORBIT-ING ABOVE THE EARTH'S ATMOSPHERE. THESE PLATFORMS ARE CAPABLE OF LAUNCHING LEPRO-SY-CONTAINING ROCKETS WITH ANTIRADAR GEAR. MEMBERS OF THE NEW MAOISM SAID TODAY THAT—"

I turned it off. No news is good news. Or, as the general populace of that glorious year was wont to say, "All news is bad news." It seemed like that. The threat of war was so heavy on the world that Atlas must certainly have been experiencing backache. Then there was the super-nuclear accident in Arizona, claiming thirty-seven thousand lives, a number too large to carry any emotions with it. Then the horrible things Artificial Creation labs developed (their failures) and sent to the freak homes to rot away in unlighted rooms. Anyway, I turned it off.

III

At home, in the warmth of the den, with my books and paintings to protect me, I took the dust jacket off the book so that I might not accidentally chance upon the picture, and I began reading *Lily*. It was a mystery novel in a way. And it was a mystery *of a* novel: the prose wasn't that spectacular—actually designed for the average mind. Still, I was fascinated. And through the chapters, between the lines of prose, a face seen at a party weeks before kept drifting through my mind. A face I fought to forget...

"See her. Over there?"

"Yeah?"

"Marcus Aurelius. Honest. Writes those pornographic nov-els—or nearly pornographic. You *know*, Lily, Bodies in Darkness, *those*."

And she had sweet golden silk hair.

And she was blessed with a sculptured face.

And she had deep eyes of blue.

She.

"How would you like to—"

I ignored him, what he was saying about her. I had to ignore!

"Those legs—"

Honey hair.

Smooth lips.

When I had finished, I picked up the phone, clutching the dust jacket in my other hand, my mind remote, as if my body were overpowering my brain. I punched out Informa-tion. The operator refused to give me Miss Aurelius' real name and number, but I esped out and saw it as she looked at the book in front of her. MARCUS AURELIUS or ME-LINDATHAUSER/22-223-296787/UNLISTED.

It had only recently been announced by her publishing company that Marcus Aurelius was a woman. And a wom-an with a pretty name of her own.

"Hello?"

Summer humming tunes in willows.

"Miss Tauser?"

"Yes?"

"This is Simeon Marflin. You've heard of me, I ima-gine?" My words seemed not my own but tumbled forth from the mist of my mouth, which I seemed not to know.

She seemed uncertain, but the whisper of her voice said she knew me.

"I have been reading *Lily*. You know, of course, that I have always refused to have my biography written. How-ever, having read your books, I would be honored if we could discuss a volume by you—on me."

There was a bit more said, and it ended with me and this: "Fine. Then I will expect you here for dinner

to-morrow night at seven."

My mouth was dry, and my lips seemed about to crack. I was sweating. I had suggested escorting her to dinner somewhere. She had said dinner was not necessary. I had insisted. She had said restaurants were too noisy to discuss business. I said I had a cook. And now she was coming to my place. I couldn't sleep worrying about it.

Getting heavily out of bed, I walked into the den. The machine stood in the corner, silent.

The headrest was ominous.

But my nerves demanded soothing.

The chair that folded into the machine was like the tongue of a monster.

I could see the hollow compartment that would swallow me. But my nerves demanded soothing. I reminded myself that other generations never had the advantage of a Me-chanical Psychiatrist. They could never have afforded one even if their technology would have made the thing pos-sible. I forgot the emptiness that would fill me later. For the moment, I needed comforting. I needed a few things explained . . .

Proteus' Mother taking a thousand shapes.

But never to be caught and held to tell the future ...

The life spark flickering, then holding a steady flame. And a very vague awareness even in the womb where plastic walls were soft and warm and giving—but somehow unre-sponding . . .

He looked up into the lights overhead and sensed a man named Edison. He sensed filaments even as his own fila-ment was disconnected from the womb . . .

And there were metal hands to comfort him ...

And . . . and . . .*there* . . . *and* . . .

SAY IT WITHOUT HESITATION! The voice was ev-erywhere.

And there were simu-flesh breasts to feed him ...

And ... and

OUT WITH IT! The computerized psychiatrist had a voice like thunderstorms.

And there were wire-cored arms to rock him...

And he looked tip out of swaddling clothes ...

GO ON!

. . .into a face with no nose and blank crystal eyes that reflected his reddened face. Unmoving black lips crooned, "Rock-a-biiiii bay-beeeee in thee treeeee (thriddle-thriddle) tops . . ." The

thriddle-thriddle, he found, was tapes changing somewhere inside mother's head. He searched his own head for tapes. There were none.

GO ON, GO ON!

And he looked up out of swaddling clothes when he espied an understanding, and . . . and . . .

DON'T HESITATE! YOU'LL BE LOST.

Idon't remember.

YOU DO.

No!

YES. YESYESYES. The machine touched part of his mind with electronic fingers. I CAN MAKE THE MEM-ORY EVEN SHARPER.

No! I'll tell.

TELL.

And he looked up out of swaddling clothes when he espied an understanding, and his first. . . *words . . . were . . .*

GOON!

Hisfirst words were these: "My God, my God, I am not human!"

FINE. NOW RELAX AND LISTEN. YOU KNOW THAT THE "HE" IS REALLY YOU. YOU ARE SIMEON MAR-FLIN. HE—THE HE OF YOUR ILLUSION—IS SIMEON MARFLIN. YOUR PROBLEM IS THIS: YOU ARE OF THE ARTIFICIAL WOMB. YOU WERE CONDITIONED FROM CONCEPTION TO HAVE HUMAN MORES AND VALUES. BUT YOU CANNOT HOLD YOUR MANNER OF CREATION UP TO THE LIGHT ALONGSIDE YOUR MORES AND ACCEPT BOTH.

YOU ARE HUMAN, BUT YOUR MORES TEACH YOU TO FEEL THAT YOU ARE STRANGELY LACKING IN HUMAN QUALITIES.

Thank you, I am cured now. I have to leave.

NO. The machine was firm. THIS IS THE THIRTY-THIRD TIME YOU HAVE HAD THIS SAME ILLUSION-NIGHTMARE-DREAM. YOU ARE NOT HEALED. AND THIS TIME I FEEL MORE BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE DREAM. TELL ME.

There is no more.

TELL ME. The bonds on the chair were tight around arms and legs.

Nothing.

AWOMAN. THERE IS A WOMAN. WHO?

An author I have read.

ANDMET. TELL ME.

Blonde. Cat's eyes. Ruby lips. I—

SOMETHING MORE.

Ruby lips.

NO. SOMETHING ELSE.

Let me the hell alone!

TELL ME. It was the voice of a king.

Breasts. No, I—

I KNOW. I SEE IT NOW. YOU LOVE HER.

No. Disgusting.

YES, LOVE. YOU LOVE HER, BUT YOU HAVE THIS COMPLEX . . . SIMEON, DO YOU REMEMBER THE SIMU-FLESH BREASTS?

I remember.

THIS HAS COME TO SYMBOLIZE YOUR INHUMAN-NESS TO YOU. YOU WERE NOT SUCKLED LIKE A MANCHILD. THIS MAKES YOU AFRAID OF WOMEN. OF—

No. I'm not afraid. She was just . . . just . . . *disgusting.*

NO. NOT DISGUSTED. YOU ARE AFRAID, NOT DISGUSTED. YOU BACK AWAY FROM ALL YOU DONT UNDERSTAND IN LIFE. THIS IS JUST ONE PART. YOU BACK AWAY BECAUSE YOU CANNOT SEE WHERE YOUR PLACE COULD LIE IN IT ALL. YOU SEE NO MEANING IN LIFE AND YOU ARE AFRAID TO SEARCH FOR ONE, FEARING YOU WILL EVENTU-ALLY DISCOVER THERE IS NO MEANING.

May I go?

YES. GO AND DREAM NO MORE OF PROTEUS' MOTHER. YOU WILL DREAM NO MORE, NO MORE.

After every session with the machine, I was drained, lifeless. I made my way to the bedroom and collapsed onto the mattress without undressing. I tried to encourage pleas-ant dreams of Marcus Aurelius, about soft arms and dia-mond eyes. But somewhere, a voice far away said, "You're the one." Chains dragged across a stone floor, ancient pa-per crackling ...

IV

The next morning there were rumors of military disturbances along the Russian-Chinese border, and news dispatches from the scene said that Western Alliance troops had met in brushfire contact with the Orientals.

The new Chinese horror weapon circling the planet had been named Dragonfly by the press.

I paid no attention. Thus it had been since I could remember. And if it is still thus (I would not know), leave it alone and do not question the validity, the reason of it . . . There is darkness for an answer.

Outside, the city crews had finished cleaning up the snow. The streets were bare, but the buildings and trees were smothered with whiteness. Fences were delicate laces. Trees and shrubs were icicle candies. It was as if Nature, via a snowstorm, had tried to reclaim what had once been hers but was now lost to her forever.

Clouds, heavy and gray, betrayed the advent of yet another storm. I passed by the smoldering ruins of a church that had burned overnight.

At AC the hex signs were on the walls, the lights were dim, and Child was tranced. "You're late," Morsfagen said.

"You don't have to pay me for the first five minutes," I snapped. I slipped into the chair opposite Child.

"You're sure you want to continue this, Sim?" Harry asked.

"Quite," I answered and was immediately ashamed at having cut Harry short. It was the atmosphere of the place. So damned military. And Morsfagen. Like Herod—trying to destroy the Child. And I was on edge for another reason; there was a certain dinner guest. . .

This time, *Iparachuted* through the emptiness of his consciousness, not flailing . . .

Labyrinth.

The walls were hung with cobwebs, the floor with dirt and bones. Far down there, somewhere in the novalike center of the mind was the Id. It gave out the same, nearly unbearable whine that all Ids do. And somewhere above, in the blackness, was the area where the conscious mind should have been. It was clear that this mind of the super-genius was strangely unhuman. Most minds think in disconnected pictures, but Child's created an entire world of its own, a realism within his mind.

There was a clacking of hooves, and from the source of light at the end of the tunnel, came the outline, then the form of the Minotaur, nut-brown skin and all textures of black hair, eyes gleaming.

"Get out!"

I mean no harm.

"Get out, Simeon."

There was a blue field of sparks crackling above his head, and psychic energies shot thin, sporadic flames from his nostrils.

"Leave a monster his only privacy!"

I too am a monster.

"Look at your face, monster. It is not wrinkled like a dried fig; it is not old beyond its years; it is not caked with the dust of centuries. You pass for human. You pass, at least you pass."

Child, listen, I—

He charged and grasped at me with hoof-hands. I fashioned a sword from my own fields of thought and smashed him broadside on the head.

And he was gone, a vapor in the darkness, a phantom.

Holding the green glow of the weapon, I advanced slowly down the twisting corridors, toward the inner part of him where his theories would bubble, where thoughts would run rampant. I came out finally on an earthen shelf above a yawning pit. Far below, eternities away, drifting and glowing, was a circular mass, and the heat in my face was great.

I reached out and grasped for anything, a sub-current, a cracked image, the shell of a daydream, and I caught a

Hate River, ebbing and flowing. HATE, HATE, HATE HATEHATEHATEHATE - HA - TE - HATEHATE. *Some-where in the middle of it, a two-headed thing swam. I caught the "T" in HATE and traced it along the currents, searching. To Thumb and a sucking . . . and The suck-ing suddenly To brown nipple and and moTher's breast . . . and again The Tdominated . . . and I allowed the river to carry me inevitably on toward Theorem.*

Theory ThoughtTs . . . Through Thousand Times Tedious Tiring . . . Ten Times one Times Two to Sub-oughT-seven in drepshler Tubes now being used . . .

The flood was too fast. I could see the theory, but I could not direct it fast enough toward the ocean in the distance where a waterspout whirled (taking the thoughts to the little bit of conscious mind he possessed). The thoughts that were now being spoken in dust whispers in a room far away—the thoughts being recorded while serious men with serious faces listened, seriously.

Then the drug must have finally taken hold, or I would have been swallowed alive. The two-headed beast had swum near without my noticing, and it caught my eye as it moved swiftly, its mouth gaping, a giant cave that drooled . . .

I lifted my sword as it raised its huge head above me to strike. Then there was a sudden, jerky slip like an old movie reel that had been spliced, and everything went into slow motion. It was like an underwater ballet. It would have taken the beast's jaws an hour to reach me, and I slew him as his red eyes glistened,

and as a strange THRID-DLE-THRIDDLE came from his throat. Or hers.

Turning back toward the river, I directed thoughts toward the slow-moving waterspout until so much time had passed that I thought I had better get out before I lost my own character identity.

There were steps up...

V

The candlelight gleamed in her green eyes, glinted from the hair that fell over her bare shoulders, sparkled on the sequins of her high-collared, sleeveless Oriental sheath.

"I would want nothing held back."

"Nothing," I assured her for the tenth time.

We sipped the wine, but I felt giddy without it.

"All your feelings toward Artificial Creation, toward the FBI, toward all those who have used you."

"That could be a blunt book."

"Anything watered down would be a flop. Believe me, sensationalism sells a book."

I remembered some passages from *Bodies in Darkness* and smiled.

She stood and walked to the plexi-glass view deck that looked out over the Atlantic. The moon was high. She was quite beautiful, flushed with its light.

I walked over, forcing myself to be calm, and stood beside her. . .

"I keep thinking of *Dragonfly*," she said, her eyes on the stars.

I looked up into the black velvet and watched one lone-ly cloud drift toward the horizon, gray against the purity of the Stygian sky.

"Why do people like the ugly?" she asked suddenly. "There is all that beauty, and they try to make it ugly. They like ugly movies and ugly books."

"Perhaps, in reading about the worst parts of life, the darknesses, the grays, the dirt, the terrible things in reality seem more tame, more easily lived with,"

Her lips were like cherries ...

"What do you think of my books—truthfully?" she asked, turning to face me.

I was thrown off balance. "I—"

"Truthfully."

"You mean . . . the ugliness in them?"

"Yes. Exactly." She turned back to the ocean. "I tried writing beautiful books about sex. I gave that up. It's the ugliness that sells." She shrugged those heavenly shoulders. "One must eat."

I was overly aware of the tightness of her bodice.

With the soft glow light melting over her face, I felt the urge to clutch at her, to hold on, to kiss. But I had to fight that! Kiss. No! And I began pacing the room, looking for some solid object to grasp.

She turned and looked at me curiously for a moment. Then she crossed the room, placed a soft, dove hand upon my lips. "It's getting late," she said, suddenly withdrawing the slim hand with the red nails. "Starting tomorrow we tape all interviews." And she was gone in a whirlwind of efficiency that left me standing with my drink in my hand and my "goodbye" in my mouth like a lump of used lard. I went to bed to dream.

I woke up needing comfort, a strange comfort I could find but one place.

IT IS FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, the metal headshrinker said.

I know.

RELAX AND TALK.

What should I say? Tell me what it is that I should say to you.

START WITH A DREAM IF YOU'VE HAD ONE.

I always have one.

THEN START.

There are storm clouds in the sky, dark, thick, mysterious. There is no place where the sun shows. Below all this gray-ness, there is a hill, a large, rounded hill formed by nature into a grotesque, gnarled lump, a blemish upon the face of the earth. There are people ...

GOON.

There are people ...

... and there is a cross ...

FOCUS ON THE CROSS. WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Me.

YES?

Nailed. Blood. White, festering wounds dribbling rusty blood around the edges of little holes, neat little holes like the cavities left when you rip the buttons from the faces of rag dolls. Rusty blood.

WHO IS IN THE CROWD?

Harry is weeping.

WHO ELSE?

I'm thirsty.

THEY WILL GIVE YOU WATER SOON. NOW WHO ELSE IS IN THE CROWD?

Morsfagen is casting dice for my cloak. And over there is a pregnant woman who . . .

GO ON, PLEASE.

I look at her belly . . . and . . . there . . . is Child. He's weeping too. And I'm weeping. Child wants up where I am. He wants out of her womb and up there before it is too late . . .

DO YOU SEE ANYONE ELSE?

Oh, not Oh, my God, my Cod.

WHAT IS IT?

No! You'll spoil it/me! I cannot! Don't you see my station, my purpose? It must be my purpose! I have no other! Get away! No!

WHAT IS IT!

Melinda. Floating, naked. Floating toward the cross. Not Stay away! Stay away! My purpose!

STOP IT.

Help! Help me! Don't you touch me, not you. You're naked, naked, naked! Stop her!

SNAP OUT OF IT! STOP DREAMING!

I—

QUIET. COMPOSE YOURSELF. I WILL INTERPRET YOUR DREAM. THOUGH I MUST SAY THAT THIS THROWS A NEW LIGHT ON YOUR PSYCHE.

DO YOU SEE WHY YOU ARE THE ONE ON THE CROSS? NO NEED TO ANSWER. YOU SEE YOURSELF AS CHRIST—WHAT A NEW ANGLE!—MORE PRECISE-LY, AS THE SECOND COMING. THERE ARE PARALLELS, OF COURSE. YOUR VIRGIN BIRTH, FOR

EX-AMPLE. AND YOUR SUPERHUMAN POWERS. YOU WERE NOT ABLE TO SEE A PURPOSE TO YOUR LIFE, SO YOU CHOSE TO CAST YOURSELF IN THE ROLE OF A SAVIOR. IT SERVES A DOUBLE PURPOSE: FIRST, IT REINFORCES ALL YOUR CHRISTIAN MORES AND VALUES THAT YOU WERE TAUGHT AT AC FROM BIRTH; SECONDLY, IT GIVES PURPOSE AND MEANING NOT ONLY TO YOUR LIFE BUT TO THE WHOLE UNIVERSE WHICH SOMETIMES SEEMS CHA-OTIC TO YOU-THE WARS AND ALL.

I am thirsty.

IN A MOMENT. YOU SEE MORSEFAGEN CASTING DICE, FOR HE DESPISES AND ONLY USES YOU FOR HIS OWN BENEFIT. THE CLOAK SYMBOLIZES YOUR LIFE. THERE SEEMS TO BE A HINT OF THE FUTURE IN YOUR DREAM HERE, AND YOU SHOULD BEWARE THE MAN.

Go on.

YOU SEE CHILD AS A THREAT TO YOUR NEATLY BUILT THEORY. HE IS ANOTHER VIRGIN BIRTH. YOU REALIZE THAT HE HAS BUILT THE SAME SECOND COMING THEORY TO EXPLAIN HIS OWN LIFE PURPOSE. YOU UNDERSTAND THAT SINCE HE HAS MET YOU, HIS LIFE PURPOSE HAS BEEN SHATTERED AND HE IS HUNTING FOR ANOTHER ANSWER. YOU DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DO THAT. YOU DON'T WANT TO HUNT.

THE WOMAN, MELINDA, IS ALSO A THREAT TO YOUR PURPOSE (OR RATHER THE FANTASY PUR-POSE YOU HAVE CREATED FOR YOURSELF). CHRIST COULD NOT FALL PHYSICALLY IN LOVE WITH A WOMAN. BUT YOU HAVE. ADMIT IT. THIS IS YOUR PURPOSE IN LIFE. LISTEN AND KNOW THAT YOUR PURPOSE IS TO LOVE AND COMFORT—AND BE LOVED.

Could that be a purpose?

IT IS THE OLDEST PURPOSE. WASH YOURSELF CLEAN OF FALSE PURPOSES. THE REASON YOU LIVE IS TO LOVE. DON'T SEARCH FOR LARGER MEANINGS, FOR THE WHY OF THE WORLD OR THE REASON IN HATE AND WAR. BE SATISFIED THAT YOU NOW KNOW YOURSELF. IT IS A WISE MAN WHO KNOWS HIMSELF.

VI

I slept well, waking refreshed at about ten o'clock. My insides felt warm and free—as if a large, cold chunk of fro-zen emotions had been melted within. It was freedom for the first time in a lifetime. The machine was much more than the name Mechanical Psychiatrist implied. It was David with his harp, talking of dreams.

I went to AC only for money this time, not to demon-strate my superhumanness, my wild talents. With a

few more paychecks in my pocket, my Melinda and I could be vagabonds for an eternity—escaping the ugliness, the filth.

I parachuted from the hex room down into the labyrinth, not trusting to stairs that might have been there yesterday and not today...

There was a clacking of hooves on rock.

There was an outline like a child's scrawl, not so defi-nite, not so real as the day before.

An indefinite form with a vague odor of musk and all textures of dark hair that fell like night mists.

"Get out!"

I mean you no harm at all.

"And I wish not to harm you. Get out."

Yesterday I fashioned a mighty sword from the very air itself. Do not forget that.

"I beg of you to leave. You are in danger."

From what?

"I cannot say. It is in the knowing that the danger lies."

I swung the sword, and he dissipated into an eerie blue vapor that clung to the walls until the wind whistled in to blow it away.

Two hours into the session, as I was sprawled on the dirt shelf above the pit, grasping at thoughts and diverting, them toward the waterspout, a "G" drifted out, and with another level of my mind, I grasped at it and traced it. G to Grass . . . which is dark Green and bendinG over the hills . . . toppinG the hills to see GGGGG... G ... G ... *God God God God God God God like a whirlwind moan-inG and babblinG over the Glens, cominG, cominG, twistinG relentlessly onward toward me ... G ... G ...*

Ireached out to take a stronger hold on the thought plunging me downward toward the flaming pit below.

Wind lifted me toward the river.

I flew as if I were a kite.

The river swept me toward the ocean.

The water there was choppy and hot, and at places steam rose in spirals like smoke snakes.

At places, ice floated, dying.

I fought for the surface, trying to stay on top of the current, giving up thought direction, fighting only, fighting desperately for my own mind. Then I was suddenly up and splashing through the pillar of water that roared into the black, heavy sky; like a bullet out of a rifle, was I. Splash-ing, spinning, sputtering, I

showered out of the mind of Child.

The room was dark. The hex signs glowed on the walls, partially illuminating the serious faces set in strange gri-maces.

"He threw me out," I said in the quiet.

Everyone turned to stare at me.

"He just threw me out of his mind."

VII

Rumors of war.

The Chinese had slaughtered the skeleton staff manning the last two embassies in Asia. Pictures smuggled out showed headless bodies.

Headless bodies on the Tri-D screen.

The Pentagon announced the discovery of the Bensor Beam, which shorted out all synapses in the human body, leaving the brain imprisoned in a mindless hulk. Named after Dr. Harold Bensor, the beam was already being re-ferred to (by Pentagon officials) as "the turning point in the cold war." I knew the idea had come from Child; I recognized it—the way one recognizes a bad dream that is made into a movie. But the censors had learned from mis-takes they had made with me; the public would never hear of Child.

I wondered for a moment what kind of man this Bensor could be to want his name attached to such a device.

Pictures on the screen showed two Chinese prisoners on whom the weapon had been used.

I pushed breakfast away from me, unfinished, and got my coat from the closet. I was to meet Melinda at her apartment for another day's session. She had a ton of equipment there and preferred not to move it. That eve-ning, we were going to the theater—and that was no busi-ness meeting! I was heeding the Mechanical Psychiatrist's advice, trying to persuade myself that it had been correct.

The sky was now gray again and whispered *snow*. It was a regular old-time winter, a Christmas card sort of win-ter, sparkling and white. Somewhere, far above, floated Dragonfly.

"Did the FBI mistreat you at any other time?" she asked.

The black microphone dangled above us like a bloated spider.

"It was not the FBI so often as the doctors who treated me not as a human being, but as something to be pricked, punched, and jabbed at. I remember once—"

"Keep remembering," she said. "That's enough for one day. Besides, you said you had to leave by three o'clock. Sounded very important."

I remembered Child. "Yes. Yes, it is."

She was wearing a peasant blouse with a scalloped neck-line, and I found myself staring and thinking. And that in itself was a shock. It did not seem as disgusting as before. In fact, the fullness, the roundness seemed quite attractive. Perhaps my Mechanical Psy had been correct.

"I must hurry now," I said. "I'll be late."

"Then seven this evening," she said, her eyes picking up the overhead light and glittering like two blue gems.

"Yes. Certainly, yes."

She kissed me when I left! She put two small hands around my neck and put her lips on my lips. I lost memory of the sixty seconds or so following that.

I stood in the driveway a time before I managed to think enough to get in the car. And I sat in the car a time before I managed to think enough to start it. My mouth burned where hers had touched it.

It burned all the way to AC.

I was in love. No question about it. I hadn't even espied her since we'd met, and that in itself was unusual. I imagine I had been afraid at first that she would love me—and later, that she would not.

"That's Marcus Aurelius. She writes all those pornographic novels, or nearly pornographic. Lily, Bodies in Darkness, *those*."

Honey hair.

"How would you like to ..."

I ignored what he was saying about her.

Soft lips.

"And those legs..."

Blue, blue eyes.

"Hey, she's looking this way."

Smooth, lovely shoulders, a graceful curved neck.

"Hey, she's looking at you. That girl's looking at you. . ."

Honey hair smooth lips smooth hips blue eyes blue eyes blue eyes ...

"Hey, where you going, Sim? You can't leave yet. What's the rush. Hey. Hey!"

How foolish I had been at that party. But that was long ago now. I was so much younger then—and I'm older than that now.

By the time I reached the government building, I had made the decision. I loved Melinda. I feared Child. He could throw me out—perhaps he could swallow me up. There was something to his warnings to leave his thoughts alone. Something to do with the G association I had chanced upon—something to do with God. I loved Melinda. I would never again risk my mind; I would always save it to con-temple her beauty. I would tell them first thing. The job is ended; go in peace.

But it didn't run that smoothly.

They were waiting when I got there. Harry fidgeted nervously with his hands. I thought that I had never seen him as he had been the last few days—and especially as he was now. There were bags under his eyes; the old tic had reappeared in his left cheek; his hair was uncombed.

I espied to see what was troubling him.

It was floating on the surface of his mind, and the thought symbol his psyche had given it was a bloated body floating in a pool of blood. Beneath the image, I read it: WAR. The rumors were not just rumors anymore. Brushfire stuff had gotten hotter. Some Asian pilots had tried dropping a few plague bombs off England, covered by one of their newer inventions, a low altitude radar dis-torter that Harry did not understand. WAR. A bloated black body floating . . .

Extremely shaken, I sat down at the table and looked across the shiny surface at Morsfagen. There were tiny beads of perspiration on his chin and forehead. Damn them! Damn them all! Trying to kill Melinda!

"What have you come up with overnight?"

"Nothing more than yesterday," I said. "He threw me out because I was reading some thought stream he did not want me to see. It was easy for him because I never expected it. No one else could ever do it, and it was a new sensation. Rest assured that it will not happen again."

Damn them all! *I had* to go in now, to save my Melinda.

"You're sure?"

"I'm certain. But some steps must be taken before I can go in again. He must be told that I refuse to continue the experiment, and that you must continue without me. After he is drugged, I'll go in and delve into him secretly. He won't even know I'm there."

A black, bloated body (Melinda) floating ...

Damn them to Hell!

"Are you sure, Sim?" I thought Harry sounded as if he wanted me to quit. But now that I knew the world and my Melinda teetered on the brink of a chasm much darker than Child's mind (as I then understood it), I realized the only person who could develop the ultimate weapon (the weapon that would make war obsolete) was Child. He could invent the weapon that would nullify all weapons. I had to go in until he formulated it—possibly urge him into formulating it.

The world was heavy on my shoulders, and Death was walking with me ...

VIII

Like a cat with cotton feet, I went quietly ...

Like a ghost in an old house, I went without form ...

Like the breezes of spring, I walked softly ...

There was no echo of my steps, and the labyrinth was warmer than usual. I rounded a bend and saw the Mino-taur. He was sitting on his haunches, unaware of my presence. He was reading a leather-bound Bible.

Slowly, to disturb nothing, I passed. He never looked up.

Pasiphae, here is your unholy child.

Minos, your labyrinth is ugly.

Theseus, keep your weapons girdled to your hip, for there will be no killing of a sad Minotaur.

The pit was a tangerine orange, pulsating warmth flowing out of it. The center was a white hot dot.

I reached out and grabbed the nearest thought. A weapon. Nothing that could serve my purpose, not the ultimate weapon that would make war impossible.

A formula to cause ratlike mutations in unborn babies

A beam that could dehydrate living tissue ...

Many of the G association thoughts, several different progressions that led toward one distant point...

... An inordinately large number of them.

Then I found it. A stray thought. An ultimate weapon.

F . . . Field . . . Force Field capable of stopping all entry by anything, including air, permitting neither bombs nor bacteria passage . . . Field . . .

I latched onto it and gently nudged it toward the main stream, toward the waterspout. The ultimate weapon—the weapon to make weapons obsolete.

I thought I was being subtle, but I was underestimating Child.

There was a clacking of hooves behind me.

"Get out!"

No. *You don't understand.*

"*You* don't understand!"

He pounced. I stepped quickly aside, struck at him, and sent him falling over the brink into the pit. . .

Far out at sea, the Force Field Theory was being shot up the waterspout. Soon, it would be spoken in a dark room.

Sighing, I turned to go. But, with a low, animal grumble, the walls of the labyrinth began to sway, the floor shook, bucked.

From somewhere down in the pit, there was a scream, a deafening scream that spread throughout the caverns, echo-ing and reechoing. Clutching the edge of the pit, the Minotaur was pulling himself onto the earthen ledge. I could see it was not he screaming.

"What is it!" I yelled above the noise.

His eyes were wild. He opened his mouth, and I watched horrified as snakes came slithering out.

I kicked him. He fell back into the pit, all the way to the churning bottom this time.

When I turned back to the caverns, the ceiling caved-in in front of me. Dirt and stones spilled over my shoes. And there was no longer an exit. I wasn't going to get out! I turned to the sea, and I saw the waterspout dying, wither-ing. There was no hope in that direction either. No hope! And the situation was so ironic; like Jesus finally sealed in his tomb. But I had given up that delusion!

"What for crissakes is going on?" I yelled above the con-stant screaming from the pit. Then I thought of catching a stray thought. I reached out into the turbulent river, and I found them all starting the same way:

*G ... G ... GGGGGGGGG . . . leadinG to Grass roll-inG over the hills ... to G ... G ... GGGGod
God God like a tornado whirlinG across the Glen, relentlessly . . . GGG GGod GGODGODGOD .
. . . randomly what purpose . . . trap him like the wind to find a purpose . . . GGG . . .*

I realized it. Child's purpose in life had been shattered when he met me—just as mine had been shattered when I encountered him. He could no longer be the Final Coming, the virgin birth. But he had no Mechanical Psy to treat him and could find no woman to love. He had to search for an answer.

GODDGOD GOD GOD . . . trapped in a cavern to tell answers ...GGG . . .

Ifollowed the thoughts to their end; I was swept along with them. I never should have listened. It

was the ultimate theory, and he had proven it. Proven it beyond a doubt . . .

He had tried to contact God.

He asked what meaning there could be to life, to the world.

And he was answered; he solved his problem.

He asked what was at the center of creation.

And he found out... (oh, Melinda . . .)

And now I'm *trapped down here*.

There are three of us.

Child, Simeon, and God.

And we are all three quite insane.

THE TWELFTH BED

"The Twelfth Bed" has a strange history—and one which was maddening as it was unfolding. I sat down to write a grimly realistic story about death and old people—but with an upbeat ending. When I was finished, I thought I had something that might possibly sell to a major circulation magazine. I mailed the story to *Playboy*. A week later, I received a two page letter from an assistant editor there. They were rejecting the story, but thought it "brilliant." Why, then, you may well ask, were they rejecting it? Be-cause, the editor went on to say, "it was too grim." Next, the piece went to *Esquire*. I was told, when they rejected it, that it was a miserably depressing story, and it was in-ferred I had a warped mind (that rejection was half a page letter). *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* (then publishing) all returned it. Not one of them sent a form rejection, but came through with letters about the story—and all of them said it was depressing and antihuman and even "so horrid as to be obscene." Depressed, I decided to try the lower paying markets, though by now I was certain the story was an utter catas-trophe. Ed Ferman, at F&SF, bought the story immediately with a note that said: ". . . yet it is so powerfully charged with Hope . . ." Hope? Could this be the same story that was "grim" and "obscene" and "miserably depressing"? Yes, of course. Because the editors of those slick magazines had taken the plot of the story and judged it only on that. They had failed to consider the lead character and his attitude at the end of the story. What our narrator says in that last paragraph is a testament to man's ability to come back from the worst possible blows to his psyche, to come back and make a go of it

again, even if he believes that, this time, the twelfth bed is the one in which *he* sleeps. . . .

Now in the dark and the silence with the metal nurses whirring and smiling and rolling around, now with every-one gone and everything lonely, now with Death hovering near me and now that I have to face him alone, I have de-cided to record the whole marvelous affair. I have crayons, pastels, and the art paper they gave each of us. Maybe they will find the art paper, like my voice echoing out of the past and whispering tales to them. Maybe.

I'll have to hide the finished document; the supplies closet would make a fine depository, for there is already a great deal of paper in it, and this will be mistaken for unused stock. The metal nurses can't read, but they always burn all your papers when you die. This would not be safe in my desk. That is part of what makes this place a breathing, snorting Hell—not being able to communicate with the out-side world. A man should be able to reach through and see progress and pretty women and children and dogs—and oh so many things. A man should not be bottled like a speci-men and shoved away in some forgotten file. Batting my fragile wings against the bottle of my imprisonment, I write.

In the beginning, there were eleven of us. The ward can hold twelve. We knew that several of our number were very close to death and that new vacancies would open up. It was nice knowing there would be new faces. There were four of us who lived through eight years or more in the place, and we valued new faces, for they were all that made life interesting (crayons, pastels, and checkers being limited in their attractiveness after a number of long, empty months).

Once a real Englishman with fine manners came into the ward. He had been to Africa twice, and he had quite a number of safari experiences to talk about. Many a good hour was passed listening to the tales of cats, lean, well-muscled cats that lurked in the brush with glistening claws and yellow teeth to slash and rip and tear at the unwary. There were stories of strange birds. There were tales of strange temples, exotic rituals, narratives about smooth, dark native women.

But then the Englishman died, spitting blood from his mouth and nostrils.

So it was that new faces brought new ideas, making one feel that life still had something in its dried-out carcass to make you want to live. And like I said, there were always fresh countenances. Libby (his real name was Bertrand Lib-berhad), Mike, Kyu, and I were the only regulars. Old-timers of the first order, veterans. Libby topped me by being a patient for eleven years; my own term was nine years long. Kyu and Mike were the juniors, having put in only eight years each. And the others in the ward were temporary, here for a week, a month, two months, then gone, carted away to be thrust into the raging fires of the Flue and burned into ash. It was good for us veterans that so many of them died; new faces, you know.

Yet it is because of one of these new faces that I am now alone, sitting here in the dark, listening for heavy wings of blackness—alone.

The new face was Gabe Detrick. That wasn't odd, for every face has a name just like Libby and Kyu and Mike. But he was so *young!* He seemed to be no older than thirty. We went to sleep with the twelfth bed empty; when we woke, there was Gabe, a great, naked man not long ago a boy. Some eyeless

moment of the night had seen him wheeled in and dumped on the bed like so much fresh meat.

Much speculation ensued as to why a young man should be brought to the Old Folks Without Supporting Children Home. One had to be fifty-five before they came in the night, those lumbering crimson-eyed androids without mouths and with gleaming wire sensor grids for ears, and shot you with drug guns and carted you away. But this man on the bed was young—nearly a boy.

When he finally shook off the drugs and came to, silence fell upon the room like the quiet after a giant tree has crashed upon the breast of the earth and now lies solemn and dead.

Every eye fell upon him, even Kyu's blind one.

"Where—"

No one allowed him to finish; everyone scrambled toward him to explain his present predicament. When he finally forced his groggy senses to an understanding, he ranted almost as a mad man would. "I'm only twenty-seven! What the Hell is going on here?" He jumped out of bed, swayed slightly on his feet, and began to pace around the room, searching for an exit. We followed, him—the few of us who could walk—like sheep preparing to watch the shepherd kill the wolf.

Eventually, he noticed the dim lines of the flush door and streaked toward it, mouthing everything foul he knew. He pounded on the blue paneling even though word was gotten to him that it would do no good. He pounded and pounded and swore and pounded until the decibels of his uproar reached sufficient quantity to stimulate the "ears" of a passing robot. The automaton rolled through the door and asked if anything were wrong.

"You're damn right something is wrong!" Gabe shouted.

The robot leered at him. Robots actually have no facial expressions comparable to a human being, but they had been assigned expressions by the patients. This one—who we called Doctor Domo—always seemed to be leering. Perhaps it was because his left eye glowed a dimmer red than his right.

"My name is Gabe Detrick. I'm an accountant. Address: 23234545, Lower Level, Mordecai Street, Ambridge."

There was a familiar crackling that always preceded everything Dr. Domo said, then: "Do you want a bed pan?"

We thought that Gabe was going to smash a fist right in to the leering devil's alloy face. Kyu screamed as if it had already happened, and his terror seemed to dissuade Gabe from the act.

"Dinner will be served in—click, clack—two hours," Domo squeaked. "Is that the trouble?"

"I want out!"

"Are you dying?" crackled the metal man.

"I'm only twenty-seven!" He said it like anyone older must be ancient papyrus cracking and flaking and ready to crumble to dust. I think we all disliked him a bit for his tone.

"Do you want a bed pan?" the robot asked again, obviously bewildered. It was programmed to answer

seven hundred different questions: *May I have a bed pan, may I have more paper, what's for dinner, I have a pain.* But nothing in its tape banks was designed to cope with this particular problem.

Then Gabe did it. He pulled back one powerful hand and let go. Of course the blow never connected. One thing the metal nurse was programmed to do was fend off insane and angry patients. With one jolt from its swiftly extended, double-pronged shocker, the machine knocked him flat on the floor, colder than yesterday's pancakes. And believe me, in here, yesterday's pancakes were cold enough yesterday.

We helped him into bed, Libby and I, and put cold compresses composed of worn out undershirts on his fore-head.

"Where—"

Kyu started to explain all over again, but he was hushed.

"Never argue with a robotnurse. You can't win," Libby said. He knew from experience, from his early years in the ward.

Gabe forced himself to a sitting position. His chin was bruised where he had fallen on it, and it was beginning to blue his face like a dull beard. It certainly wasn't pretty.

"You okay?" Kyu asked.

I kept quiet, for I never have been one to say much about anything at any time. Which reminds me of something Libby always used to say when I wrote my short stories (which the robots burned methodically). He would pucker up his scarred lips, open his wrinkled mouth very, very wide, and say, "Boys, old Sam doesn't say much, but he's going to be our Boswell. And he'll do a better job with our collective biographies than that old-time runt ever did for Johnson's!"

Well, maybe Libby was right. Maybe I will chronicle it all. Maybe I have enough time left that I can go back from this last chapter and write all the ones that come before. That is all that is left for me now with everyone gone and the ward cold. Silence prevails, and I cannot stand the silence.

Anyway, for weeks after that, Gabe seemed older than the rest of us, almost like one of the walking dead. He explained to us all about the old man who lived next door to him who had been due to go that night, and how the robots must have gotten the wrong address. We explained there was no grievance board of human beings to take the problem to, that we had never seen a human other than patients since we came into the ward. He pounded on the door, took more pokes at more robots and learned the hard way. With the truth creeping in on him, that he would never go free being a thought constantly in his mind, his spirit faded. He was more depressed than we were. Yet he tried not to let it show, he turned outward with his misfortune and directed his vigor at us, trying to cheer and pep. He was always sympathetic, more so the longer he lived with us. I remember once:

"Goddamn it you took them! I know you took them! You mamza pig! Thief!"

Hanlin, a new face, was so red that his nose was a mighty volcano preparing to burst, his lips already sputtering white lava. "Brookman, you're a liar. What do you want me to say? What would I want with them, hah? What for would I want your silly toys?"

"I'll carve you up when they bring the knives with to eat! Little mother pieces. Blood all over your lousy face!"

Everyone had turned from his bed to watch the drama unfold. But the fact that Brookman and Hanlin were sup-posed to be friends kept the significance of the scene from weighing on us immediately.

Gabe was quicker. He vaulted a bed—actually leaped right over it—which proved a great pleasure to the bedridden among us who had too long been confined with doddering old men and had forgotten the agility of youth. He vaulted the damn bed and picked Hanlin and Brookman complete-ly off the floor, one wrinkled old skeleton in each hand. "Shut up, you two! You want some robot comin' in here and shocking you both to death?"

"That lousy kike called me a thief!" Hanlin bellowed. He fought to get away from Gabe, but he couldn't twist enough strength out of his old lemon peel body.

"What's the matter?" Gabe asked, trying to bring some measure of calm to the affair.

"He stole my straws. The Goddamn mamza pig stole—"

"Hold it, Brookie. What straws?"

Brookman got a strange look on his face then, somewhat like a child caught at a dirty game. He was no longer the fighter, every inch the old man. "Man's gotta have somethin'. Somethin' his own, God."

"What straws?" Gabe asked again, uncomprehendingly.

"Been savin' my milk straws. You can make all kinds of things with them. I made a doll. Just sorta a doll like the one Adele and me gave to our Sarah when she was a baby." There were little crystal droplets at the edges of his dark eyes. Several of us turned away not wanting to see; but the words still came. "Just like little Sarah had. Move its legs and everything, make it jump and swim and everything. And if you pretend, God if you pretend, those paper pipes is anything. They can be people that you talk to and move around; they can be money, each straw a five, a ten, even a thousand dollar bill. They're anything. They're most of all being free and having Adele and Sarah and—"

I had to look back at him, because what he said made me feel funny inside. He had his old, brown-spotted hands drawn up in front of his face, the veins standing out in bas-relief. He was shaking.

"You take his straws?" Gabe demanded of Hanlin.

"I—"

"You take them!" That was a scream; Gabe's face was twisted up something awful, his lips drawn back and his teeth bared. He looked like some frantic, wild, hungry ani-mal.

"He hoarded them!" Hanlin barked.

"You took them?"

"Damn kike just hoarding and hoarding—"

Gabe dropped him to the floor, but not easily like he did Brookman. Then he picked him up and dropped him again. "You give them back, you hear?"

"He should share—"

"You give them back or I'll peel your skin off and give him your bones!"

Hanlin gave them back. Gabe spent the better part of that week with Brookman. He saved all his straws for the old man and played games with him. Hanlin died that week; Gabe never even joined in the prayer we said as they carted him out. Not many of the rest of us had our hearts in it, I suspect.

But lest anyone think it was all sad times with Gabe here, let me set the record straight. I said he was unhappy. He was. But he had this special way about him, this special talent to make other people laugh. He always had some trick planned, always something to pull on the robots.

When the clanking, whirring nurses came in to serve breakfast, Gabe would always be up and around. He would follow the humming metal nannies, and when he saw the chance, he would stick a leg out and let them trip over it when they turned around.

They were those robots that roll on one leg, and they were easily upset. He would tumble one, then dash away from the scene so fast that a lightning bolt couldn't have caught him. Then the other robots would come skittering to the aid of their fallen comrade, pick him up, and cluck (every damn time, mind you) what they had been pro-programmed to cluck in such a case: "Nasty, nasty fall. Poor Bruce, poor Bruce."

Then everyone would roar. Gabe had done it again.

We never did know why they called the robots "Bruce"—all of them. But it could have been the quirk of some ego-tistical design engineer of the same name. Anyhow we would roar.

"Good one, Gabe!"

"You're great, boy!"

"That'll show em, Gabie!"

And he would grin that silly grin of his, and everything was all right, and the ward was not a ward for a while.

But the ward was always a ward for him.

He was never happy, not even when he clowned for us.

We did our best to attempt to cheer him, inviting him to participate in our words games; nothing worked.

Gabe was not an old man, and he did not belong. Worst of all, there seemed to be no way out for him.

Then, quite by accident, as the by-product of one long and terrible and ugly night, it seemed a way had been found to fight back at the robots.

It was like this:

It was the middle of the night, dark as bat wings, most of us asleep. We might have remained asleep too, if Libby's pillow had not fallen to the floor. He was muffling his sobs in it, and when it fell, he did not have the strength or the sense of balance to reach over the edge of the high bed and pick it up.

We were shaken from our sleep by sound of his weep-ing. I don't think I have ever heard a sound like that. Libby wasn't supposed to weep. He had been in for too many years; he was a veteran of it all; frustration should have been flushed from him long ago. Not only that. He had had a rough life too, rough enough to rule out crying. He came from Harlem. White parents in Harlem are one thing you can be sure: poor. He was raised in every degenerated part of New York City. He learned young where to kick to hurt the strange men who tried to tempt or drag him into alleys. He knew first hand about sex when he was thirteen—under a stairway in a tenement with a woman thirty-five. Later, he turned to the sea, worked as a dock hand, shipped the hardest runs, and always seemed to lose his money in a fight or on a dame. He had been and seen and felt too much to cry.

But that night it was Libby, heaving his guts out on the bed.

I too must have cried a bit, for Libby.

It was Gabe who put a first hand on his shoulder. We could see him there in the half-darkness of the ward, sitting on the edge of Libby's bed, a hand on the old man's shoulder. He moved it up and ran it through Libby's hair. "What is it, Lib?"

Libby just cried. In the dark and the closeness and the shadows like birds, we thought he would make his throat bleed if he didn't soon stop.

Gabe just sat there running gray hairs through his fingers and massaged Libby's shoulder and said things to soothe him.

"Gabe, oh God, Gabe," Libby said between gasps for air.

"What is it, Lib? Tell me."

"I'm dying, Gabe. Me. It wasn't ever going to happen to me."

I shuddered. When Libby went, could I be far behind? Did I want to be far behind? We were inseparable. It seemed that if he went, I must die too—shoved into the ovens where they cremated us—side-by-side. God, don't take Lib alone. Please, please, no.

"You're as healthy as a rat, and you'll live to be a hundred and fifty."

"No I won't—" He choked trying to stop tears that moved out of his eyes anyway.

"What's the matter, pain?"

"No. Not yet."

"Then why did you think you're going to die, Lib?"

"I can't piss. Goddamn, Gabe, I can't even—"

We could see him then, lifting the thin, wrinkled body we called Libby, Bertrand Libberhad, lifting it

against his young chest and holding it. He was quiet in the darkness for a time, and then he said, "How long?"

"Two days. God, I'm bursting. I tried not to drink, but—"

He seemed to crush Libby to him, as if the old man could gain some strength from the flower of his youth. Then he began a rocking motion like a mother with a babe in her arms. Libby cried softly to him.

"Did you ever have a special girl, Lib?" he asked finally.

We 'could see the head rising off the young chest—just an inch. "What?"

"A girl. A special girl. One who walked just so and talked like wind scented with strawberries and flooded with warmth. A girl with smooth arms and nice legs."

"Sure," Lib said with not so many tears in his voice. "Sure, I had a girl like that. Boston. She was Italian. Real dark hair and eyes like polished coal. She was gonna marry me once."

"She loved you?"

"Yeah. What a fool I was. I loved her and was too dumb to know. Mistake, huh?"

"We all make them. I had a girl too. Bernadette. Sounds like a fake name, but that was hers. Green eyes."

"Was she pretty, Gabe?"

"Pretty as the first day in spring when you know the snow is gone for good and maybe a robin will build a nest outside your window soon. Real pretty."

"Sony for you, Gabe."

"And did you ever tie on one helluva drunk, Lib?"

"Yeah." There were tears in his voice again. "Yeah, a few. Once in New York for three days. High as a kite, not knowin' where I was at."

"So did I," Gabe said. "New York too. You could have picked me up and set me down in the middle of a cattle stampede without me ever the wiser."

I think Libby might have laughed then. A funny little laugh that threatened tears and didn't really announce joy.

"And Lib, did you see much of the world, you're be-ing a seaman?"

"Tokyo, London, Australia for two weeks. I been in ev-ery one of the fifty-six states."

"More than I saw."

Then in the wings of the shielding darkness, you could hear it—like phlegm bubbling in his old throat. "But, Gabe, I can't piss."

"You've been in love and been loved, Lib. That's more than a lot of people can say. You've seen almost every corner of the world, and some places in it, you've drunk your-self silly. Don't forget all that."

Then I realized that he was not trying to con the old man into forgetting his sickness. He was trying, instead, to show him that there was a dignity in Death, that he could hold up his withered head and say that life had not been an empty cup, the dry bed of a river.

Libby saw a little of that too, I think.

He said: "But Gabe, I don't want to die."

"No one ever does, Lib. I don't; Sam doesn't."

"It *does* hurt!"

"You said it didn't."

"I never would admit pain."

"How hard have you tried to relieve yourself?"

"I think blood came a little the last time. Oh, Gabe, *blood*. I'm an old man, and I've rotted to pieces here for years and saw no sky and no girls and no newspaper, and now my vitals are bleeding on me and my gut feels like it's gonna up and explode with the pressure."

Gabe pulled out the bed pan potty and sat it on the floor. "Try once more, Lib."

"I don't want to. I might bleed."

"Just for me, Lib. Come on. Maybe you can."

He helped him out of bed, set him on the degrading little chair, knelt besides him. "Try, Lib."

"Oh, Mother of God, Gabe, it hurts!"

"Try. Take it easy. Nice and easy."

The darkness was horrible.

"Gabe, I'm—I can't!" Libby was crying and choking. We heard the potty chair go skidding across the room. The next thing, Gabe was crooning, holding the old man to him there on the hard floor.

"Lib, Lib, Lib."

And Libby only moaned.

"You'll be all right."

"I'll sleep. It'll be just like sleeping."

"That's right. That's all it is—just a sleep, a nap."

Libby shook, his old crumbling paper lungs wheezing. "The robots sleep at night, Gabe. Only they wake up."

There was a sudden change in Gabe's tone. "What do you mean, Lib?"

"They sleep. They charge up, plug themselves in. Ain't that hell, Gabe. They sleep too."

Gabe put the old man back in the bed and waddled around the baseboard looking for the nearest outlet. "Damn-it, Libby, you won't die. I promise you. There's a way out. If we can blow the fuses, catch all the metal people plugged into useless outlets—"

Several breaths were drawn in.

"Lib, you hear me?" Gabe was crying then. "Lib?"

Libby could never have answered. He was dead, lying life-less in the heap of old gray linen that covered his sagging mattress. But that seemed to give Gabe more determination than ever. "Anyone have a piece of metal? Any metal?"

We were packrats by habit. Kyu had a fork he had held back one day when they had given him two by accident. I had a length of copper wire I had saved for years. It had held the shipping tag on the bottom of my bed. One day, musty years earlier, I had found it while crawling under the bed to see if a dip in the mattress could be corrected.

He almost got electrocuted doing it, but he managed to blow the fuses, all the current being soaked up by the old bed no one was using—no one living, anyhow—the bed wired to the fork that was stuck in the socket. The night light winked out when the fuses blew.

We all worked together to break down the door. The healthy ones put their backs to it, the invalids cheered them on.

We never counted on the replacement robots who stood essential duties while the main crew recharged. Maybe, in the deepest parts of our minds, we knew it. But there was Libby on the bed and strong Gabe to follow. We easily brushed any such thoughts aside.

Gabe died quickly, I think. At least, that is what I like to think. He went down under the flames from a robo-pistol, charred, smoking. The rest fought madly. I broke my leg and was out of most of the action. Now there are eleven beds vacant, and I am in the twelfth. The darkness is close around and there is nothing to say and no one to say it to.

I think now only to write. I think about Gabe tumbling the clumsy robots; I think about Libby, about Gabe holding him there on the bed as a mother with her babe. And I write. Gabe once told me that someone as old as I forgets most recent events first. I must not forget.

The vacant beds will be filled again, and my story is a good one, better even than those of the Englishman.

A SEASON FOR FREEDOM

Of all the editors I have worked with, Frederik Pohl had the oddest way of buying my stories. When he was editor at *Galaxy* and *Worlds of SF*, he bought some 40,000 words of my stories over a two-year period, all of which I was forced to rewrite to please him. The rewriting didn't bother me, for I had found that editors were usually correct and I was usually mistaken at that early point in my career when I was learning from each page written. But Fred would never come out and plainly ask for a rewrite. He would send the story back with a pleasant note pointing out what was wrong with the piece. Then he would end the note with ". . . the story would probably please some editor in this new form." Or from another rejection: "... would shape it up well enough, perhaps, to please John Campbell for *Analog*." Each time, I rewrote using his suggestions and sent the story back to him, and each time he bought it. It almost seemed as if he considered asking for a rewrite like offering to sell you French postcards, and we always had to whisper the arrangements. But, finally, Fred bought this story straight off for *Galaxy*. No re-writes! It is the only story from those magazines in this collection, for all the others have seen print in book form elsewhere—thus easily repaying me for the rewriting. Thanks, Fred. One other thing. Now and again, a reader will accuse me of using too much violence in some of my stories. Rest assured, I am no violence junkie. Only an immature nation makes war, and only an immature man has to "prove" his worth with a fist or a gun. When you read "A Season for Freedom," don't look only at the violence and wrinkle your nose; violence is a way of life with our nation, and what I wanted to say was: "If we don't do something about it soon, look what war is going to do to all of our minds. . . ."

thetheater was a thunder-lizard's maw gorged with people, the seats jutting in rows of imitation teeth, casting black shadows in the flush of yellow half-light. The screen pulsed with colors, its rectangular orb awash with delusions. The two-dimensional inhabitants of that false, flat reality moved into view before a pounding blue-white surf behind the black and yellow and crimson credits that crawled like well-trained insects up the broad screen, always in perfect time with the tinny music.

And, abruptly, the air was filled with deadly steel bees.

Jacobs slipped from his seat, dragging Anne with him to crouch in the sheltered trough between the rows as darts rang against the metal backing of the chairs. He had his gun out, searching.

Carefully, he raised his head and looked about the theater, open to attack, and spotted the blonde. She was fifteen rows back. She had stripped down the top of her organdy dress to free her breasts, marred by the thin, red surgical lines. Below each scar were six pinholes: dartgun barrels that punctured the skin like gigantic pores. Jacobs knew the breasts were hollow of flesh and contained, instead, dart clips and firing mechanisms packed in a silicone shell. The war had just begun and already he knew the basic mechanisms.

He aimed.

The blonde whirled—not out of malice, but in her pre-programmed fire-pattern—twelve barrels swinging in his direction. Jacobs depressed the trigger. The automatic burped out three fragmentation slugs. They tumbled the blonde backward in the dark, a final sputter of darts ringing from the backs of the seats in front of her ...

Ringling...

Ringling. . . He woke to gloom.

For several seconds, he was not certain whether reality was: A—the bed and the peaceful room clothed in gray light, or B—the half-darkened theater and the killerbot spewing thin death across the rows of patrons. He blinked his eyes, yawned, felt his ears pop. The ringling was the phone, not thousands of metal thorns ricocheting off theater seats. He reached out, answered it. "Lo?"

"Phil?"

"Hmmm?"

It was Cullen. Reedy voice, whined words. He was second in command—first in command on this, Jacobs' one night off—on the Northside Sector antikillerbot force and was capable enough to keep things purring. Or should be....

"Seems like a bad one, Phil."

"Where?" He fought to maintain drowsiness in hopes he might yet return to dream-filled unconsciousness. All sleep was dream-filled now days.

"Medarts Building. Tenth floor. He's extremely well-armed. Darts and bullets."

"Both?" That sent a shiver through him. It was difficult enough to implant a single weapon system into a human body. Even with the new neutral synthetic fibers that composed most of the mechanisms, the body fought the rejection of alien tissues. Supposedly, it would never be economically feasible to build more than one weapon into a killerbot. Recovery and healing time required for two systems was six times as long. Half a dozen single-system kill-erbots could be prepared and dispatched in the same time needed to finish one double-systems bot. But if Euro had come up with a way to make it pay off, a

method of re-duc-ing healing time. . . .

"Both," Cullen confirmed.

"Maybe you have two of them trapped up there."

"Could be. But I don't think so. Even assuming there are two up there, the battle pattern is unusual. They don't fire in a preprogrammed grid; they only fire when there is a target."

"Impossible!" It had to be! If that killerbot were firing at targets instead of on a pattern, it meant the damn thing had some control of its finer reasoning powers. But if you gave a killerbot reasoning powers, it would soon reason that it had once been a human being, that it had been stripped of its humanity, that its mind had been bleached, its stomach or chest or thigh contaminated with a deadly weapons system. It would revolt, surely.

"Just the same," Cullen said, anxiety riding his voice with keen spurs, "I think you had better come down here."

He gave up trying to keep his mind clouded and his body next to sleep. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He placed the phone in its cradle and pushed himself to the edge of the bed. For the thousandth time, he reminded himself that the captain of an antikillerbot sector team had no real life of his own.

He dressed, struggled into his raincoat, and swallowed a cup of hot coffee in three large gulps. Then he went into the bedroom to tell Anne he was leaving before he remem-bered that Anne was dead.

Then he went and strapped on his gun.

Outside, it was raining. Cold rain. It sliced the hairlike fog that wrapped the trees and spit-curl-ed the dark-ness. It crawled his skin with aching dampness, chilled his bones to the marrow. There was no lightening. The black-ness was impenetrable.

He found the car in front of the house after first looking in the garage. The door swung open to the touch of his thumb as the lock recognized his print. Climbing in, he started the engine, swung across the narrow secondary road to the ramp of the autoway. Punching coordinates for the Medical Arts Building he leaned back, closing his eyes as the car maneuvered into the high-speed lane of the twelve lane autoway.

He took control of the car at the bottom of the ramp and drove onto Sycamore Avenue. A hundred yards ahead, a barricade slashed the road, ringed with portable yellow lights that bathed the slick pavement in ugly amber flush. The reflection of the bulbs in the ice-slushed puddles, curl-ing and wiggling, reminded him of a carnival midway after closing time on a damp Saturday night near the end of the season. Aching with the realization that carnivals were but another thing necessarily outlawed as protection against killerbot mass-murders, he pulled the car into the shadow of the portable barricade wall. Bursts of bullets rang across the roof and down the trunk until he was shielded by the metal partition.

"Mr. Cullen said to send you right to the front," the offi-cer said, opening the door for Jacobs. "You're going to have to dress for it, though."

"How many dead?"

"Fourteen civilians. Nine of us."

"Nine!"

The officer winced at the implied criticism. "Nothing could be done, Captain. It opened fire before rush hour. Senseless, that. The first part of the staggered rush would have been coming down this street fifteen minutes later. If it had waited, it could have killed five times fourteen. So we went in with dart-proofs, 'cause it was using darts. How could we guess it would have two weapon systems? A dart-proof suit is structured to stop needlepoint pressure. A bullet is something else again."

Jacobs accepted a bullet-proof jacket from a second man, laced the front tightly shut and hung a heavy bib over the lacing. The officers helped him into a pair of bulky slacks of thick, cross-hatched nylon pressure resistants. "Tell Cullen I'm coming through," he said, shuffling uncomfortably toward the edge of the barricade, slipping the bulky nylon-steel mesh hood over his head.

A hundred yards of bare street stretched between this barricade and the next. The second emplacement was a portable metal well behind which Cullen and four officers crouched, watching the tenth floor of the Medarts Build-ing through tiny lenses imbedded in a portable barrier. Cul-len, radio to ear, looked back at the first barricade as he learned of Jacobs' arrival. A moment later, he and the other four men opened fire on the tenth floor window, providing Jacobs with a sort of cover.

Jacobs shuffled around the barrier and began a labored progress across the no-man's land.

Yellow light danced over his shoulders and shivered in the puddles, shattering like glass when he slopped the icy water with his feet.

He was thirty yards along before the killerbot saw him and turned its attention from the men at the barricade to him. There was a tinkling of darts against the rough fiber of the suit. But they fell away like wind-driven dandelion puffs suddenly deprived of propulsion. Quickly sensing the uselessness of the dart weapon, the killerbot opened fire with its frag slugs.

But that was impossible! Killerbots couldn't reason like that! If they could, they certainly would revolt at having been used for disposal weapon carriers. Take a man; bleach his brain; throw away his memory, crumpled and useless; program him with basic human habits and an automatic, unsensing minor vocabulary; program him with a destruc-tion mission; turn him loose. That is a killerbot. It can't reason in the heat of battle. Or never had been able to before. ...

The bullets weren't penetrating the heavy armor, but they rained down too fast to let him walk a straight line to the front barricade. It was like walking in a raging wind, a spurting progress, unsteady and unsure.

For a short moment, the bullets stopped—Jacobs doubled his efforts and shuffled faster, passing the halfway mark.

Kack-ack-ack! A fantastic barrage of shells tore against his chest, toppling him. The suit still held, but he had had the wind knocked from him. He lay very still, choking on the stale air that penetrated the thin eye slits of the hood, his stomach throbbing with protest, his lungs afire with the need for oxygen. Slowly, he forced the pain from his chest and regained a normal—if somewhat speeded—breath-ing pattern. Then he concentrated on appearing dead.

Bullets skipped over the pavement, ricocheted from his suit. The ice water shimmered with the rippled wakes of the shells. Finally, the killerbot stopped firing. Jacobs lay still, thankful that the bulk of the suit concealed the rise and fall of the rib cage. Several minutes passed. The killerbot opened up again for thirty seconds, then stopped again. Time crawled by unbearably slow. Five minutes. Ten. Fif-teen. Jacobs thought it might be safe now. He licked his lips of the sweat that had trickled down his face, tasted the salty fluid on his tongue. It would take him the best part of a minute to gain his feet, considering the weight of the bullet-proof garments. He would just have to hope that the killerbot would not be watching him, would not see him until he had gained at least ten yards. Sucking in breath, he pushed up with his hands. . . .

He was lucky. Apparently, the killerbot had shifted its at-tention back to the men at the front barricade. He found his feet, wiggled on weak, shaky legs. That was not good. He would have to will away any weakness until he had reached the comparative safety of the walls ahead. Labori-ously, he dragged himself along. He had gone another thirty yards before the killerbot caught the movement and opened with heavy frag slug fire.

The slight downward trend in the street had helped him. He rolled, bullets pinging from the pavement on all sides.

Abruptly, the thudding of shells against his fibrous armor ceased. Hands groped for him, pulled off his hood. He blinked his eyes, looked up into Cullen's thin, young face, and smiled. "Thanks."

"I thought you were dead!"

"So did it," he stopped grinning. "What's the situation?" "I think it's going to be a front-on attack. Any normal killerbot would have exposed itself to our fire by now. It is cunning. And I think it must have some sort of shield."

"They wouldn't waste a shield on a killerbot!" Jacobs said, mentally tabulating the high cost of manufacturing and maintaining a shield projector. They were even too expen-sive for normal police work.

"Just the same—"

"Well, if we have to initiate a frontal, we might as well start," Jacobs said, taking command of his suit. Cullen sighed audibly with the realization that the hot potato had just changed hands for the last time that night. Anything went wrong after this, Jacobs would carry the blame.

"What first, Phil?"

Jacobs put his eye to one of the tiny lenses, surveyed the wide panorama it gave him. "We can't wheel the shield up to the front door. When we get directly under him, he could just shoot down and pick us off. The door is closed. I suspect it may also be locked. We might all get cut down trying to blow it."

"Now what?"

Jacobs kept his eye to the lens. The illusion of a rain-soaked, empty midway still clung to him. The yellow light gleamed starkly on the black street. For a moment, he thought he could see the carousel with its garishly painted horses. Perched on the shoulders of the grinning beast was a small, dark-haired boy. Kenny, he whispered. And the illusion shattered, melted back into the light-rimmed puddles. "Call back to the first barricade for a demolition packet. Well move this barrier along to the side of the building.

There is bound to be another doorway. We'll blast our way in and go up and take him."

Cullen looked dubious. But having no plan to offer, he called the barricade officer and requested a demolition packet. Ten minutes later, the suitcase came spinning across the street in their direction. It slid behind the front barrier, right into Cullen's hands.

Jacobs unlatched it, checked out the contents. Everything was there. "Okay," he said, biting his lip for a second as if to convince himself that he was in a real situation and not a dream. "Let's start rolling the wall. Over there. Bring it around flush with that corner, then beat it into the alley-way and find a door. We can't waste time. If we do, it may be waiting on the other side of the door when we open it."

When the detonator blew, the door was ripped from its hinges and propelled across the alley, clattering against the opposite wall, bouncing back and forth finally settling to the pavement, like a spinning penny eventually teeters to the top of the game table.

Jacobs led the others into the building, holding his breath through the thick, acrid smoke, careful not to touch the steaming metal of the door frame. Inside, he ordered Officer Talmadge and Officer Cork to carry their flashlamps on half beam. When Cork finally fumbled his lamp on and Talmadge augmented it with his, they found they were indeed in a storage room. Moments later, they found the doorway into the rest of the building. It was locked; but flimsy. There was no need for explosives. Jacobs braced himself against the frame, smashed a foot into it. Twice. Again. Four times. The wood splintered around the hinges. He kicked it again. The door tore free, swung aside.

"Tenth floor," Cullen said.

"My brother-in-law works here," Talmadge said. "I've been here a few times."

"Lead then," Jacobs said.

Holding his lamp up to shoulder level like a trembling child investigating a haunted house, he moved forward, the rest strung out behind him, guns drawn.

"Not the elevator," Jacobs hissed as they threaded their way down a dark hall. "That will tell it where we are."

"The stairs are this way," Talmadge said, turning right into a side corridor and stopping. "Maybe we should put lights at quarter power, Captain."

"Quarter power, then," he snapped.

The light receded. Darkness drifted closer.

Quietly, quietly, they ascended the stairs. They must make no sound now. If this killerbot could reason and act in logical, strategic form, it was a newer, more dangerous killerbot. It would know they had broken in. It would not be blindly firing at an empty street. It would be hunting for them.

He shivered.*It would be hunting for them.*

Although they expected to meet it at every landing, around every corner in the staircase, they climbed

the twen-ty flights without incident. At the tenth floor, Talmadge pushed open the double glass doors into the main hall-way . . .

. . . and was torn up the middle by fifty or more darts.

He didn't even have time to scream.

Swallowing hard, Jacobs blasted the door, rolled through the gaping hole where the door had been, gun out and firing to the left. Frag slugs whined off the walls, shat-tered windows at the far end of the corridor. But they didn't bring down the killerbot, for the killerbot had dis-appeared.

Jacobs was so tense that it seemed his scalp would split open, his skull crack to let out the pressure his whirling mind was accumulating. And he knew that if he was that tense the rest of them were even closer to blowing their tops. They had never had any experience with a killerbot that tried to protect itself. From the first day that Euro had turned killerbots loose on Nortamer, they had been stupid, suicidal units that stood and fired until cut down themselves. Or until their weapons systems ran out of ammunition. They were not detectable, even by X-ray, for what metal they did contain in their flesh was shielded in silicone, plastic, nylon mesh that effectively rendered X-ray useless, They had many advantages as weapons of war, but they didn't have real intelligence. It had always been a matter of standing out of the programmed fire pat-tern and cutting the human-machine to pieces. This one was different, and this one seemed the turning point of the war.

They had searched all rooms in this wing, their fingers aching with the weight of their guns, their eyes weary with squinting, blurred with trying to sort out the shadows ahead and make them resolve into a human form, something, any-thing to shoot at. They turned the corner into another cor-ridor, stepping into the killerbot's line of fire. . . .

Officer Cork screamed a gurgling scream, pitched for-ward, his head prickled with thorns as if he had just fought his way through a garden of live and vicious roses. Officer Drennings did not have a chance to scream; the darts tore out his throat first.

"Fall back!" Jacobs shouted.

He slipped into the safe corridor. If the killerbot tried to come around, he would blast it open in a second. Cullen and Minter were beside him, panting. "God," Minter was saying over and over. Over and over, low and soft and mean-ingly.

It is hunting for us, Jacobs thought.

Their lamps had been smashed by darts. There was only darkness now, thick and all pervading. Their eyes were used to the gloom, somewhat, but everywhere there were dense shadows that seemed to move.

The hall was quiet.

To hell with this pessimism! They were three, well-trained police officers. That killerbot, no matter how ad-vanced, was only one. Numerically, they had it cornered. They just had to move with more caution, stop blundering around as if it were a normal killerbot. "Come on," he whis-pered to Cullen and Minter. "And be careful."

They edged around into the corridor. The two bodies were there, lying in black pools of blood.

But the killerbot was gone.

"Well never find him," Cullen said. "It will take more men."

Jacobs hushed him, surveyed the corridor. For a moment, he couldn't understand what his eyes were trying to tell him. Then it registered. "No. We have him cornered."

"What—"

"There aren't any stairs or elevators in this corridor," Jacobs said, pointing to the four doors on each side. "Just those eight rooms. He has to be in one of them."

Cautiously, quietly, they moved down the hall, checking the rooms on both sides. Jacobs stood to the side, flung the portal wide, and jerked his arm back as Minter fired a burst of frag slugs into the darkened room. Then, just as cautiously, they would flip on the light and scan it. When Jacobs threw open the fifth door, Minter fired another burst—and was answered with a round that smashed his chest apart.

Two to one. The odds were still in their favor.

Jacobs wished he had not left the suitcase of explosives in the storage room. A ball of contact jelly would be just the thing now. But they didn't have it, so no use wishing. He looked across the doorway to where Cullen waited on the other side, face drawn and white. He pantomimed his intentions, shook off Cullen's gestured disapproval. Gun clutched firm in his right hand, he bent down, leaned to his side, and rolled through the doorway into the dark-ened room.

Frag shells splintered the doorway behind him.

He had come to rest against a heavy desk, his shoulder stinging with the impact. From the flash of the killerbot's frag pistol, he knew it was on the other side of the desk. Holding his breath so that his panting would not give away his position, he placed the barrel of the pistol against the front of the desk, depressed the trigger and held it down until the clip had emptied itself, more than two dozen frag slugs shredding through the desk, ripping out and into the killerbot crouched on the other side.

There were screams.

That didn't fit either. Killerbots never screamed.

Cullen hit the lights.

The room seemed to flare as if the walls had been set afire. There was little left of the desk. The center had been chewed away by the bullets, and both halves had caved inward, the broken top now forming a vee whose point rested on the floor. Carefully, Jacobs got to his feet, his empty pistol clamped in his hand, only a talisman now that its ammunition had been expended. He walked around the desk, kicked away some larger chunks of wood.

The killerbot was approximately forty years old. Black hair. Fair-skinned. And . . . And what?

Something was wrong, but Jacobs could not decide quite what. He inspected the wounds. A dozen scraps of metal had punctured the corpse. The holes they made welled thick blood. Splinters of wood prickled the body. To one side of the head lay a dartgun.

A dartgun.

He stared at the thing for long, long seconds, unwilling to believe it—to even comprehend it.

"Phil, look at this," Cullen said, shoving a frag slug clip and a pistol into the captain's hands.

"Help me strip him," Jacobs said suddenly, laying the pistol and clip on the floor.

"Huh?"

"Come on."

Jacobs bent to the corpse, hands trembling as he and Cullen peeled away the bloody garments. As he had suspected, the body bore no scars from weapon implantation. There were only the gashes of the frag slugs from Jacobs' own gun—and the wounds of wood splinters from the shattered desk.

"He wasn't a killerbot," Cullen said, his eyes too wide, his mouth hanging too far open.

"He was just a man," Jacobs agreed.

"But why?"

"I—I think maybe I see it. The psych boys may be more detailed—"

"What?" Cullen shifted his weight from one foot to the other, coughed.

Jacobs couldn't take his eyes from the hands of the corpse, the hands that had held the throbbing guns. "We were in war with Euro. A normal war—if any wars are normal. Then Euro command changed the character of armed conflict. They came up with the killerbots. The enemy could be living next door now, waiting. Life took on a fluid, un-stable quality." He looked to the hands, could not take his eyes from the trigger fingers.

Cullen coughed.

"Our government played the game too. Nortamer took its criminals, political prisoners, and outcasts, made them into our own killerbots. Both sides admitted that human life was unimportant compared to the robo-factories and towering cities. The inanimate must be preserved while the flesh died. It became a war of attrition. Women and children—

"Women and children were not spared by either side," Jacobs continued. "The family could dissolve in an instant. We became frustrated with the high degree of instability of society. As we lost our loved ones and were powerless to stop the loss, we were frustrated because there was no one to be angry with. The enemy was amongst us; the enemy was us. Sooner or later—psychosis."

"And the man here pretended to be a killerbot because he could shirk his responsibilities and strike

back, dump his frustration. But if this catches on—"

Jacobs shuddered. "Exactly."

He stood, left Cullen with the body, and left the Medarts Building.

Outside, the rain was still falling, the fog thicker than ever. At the first barricade, he sent the psych boys up to the tenth floor. As he was crawling into his car, Burtrum, Captain of the Westside Sector, pulled his car alongside. "It's over," Jacobs said.

"Strangest thing tonight," Burtrum said, leaning out of the window, his hair plastered to his head. "We brought down two killerbots over near the sports arena, but they—"

"Weren't really killerbots, Jacobs finished.

"How'd you hear?"

"We just had the same thing."

"Gives me the shivers. Wonder what the psych boys will find out?"

Jacobs shrugged, started the car, and pulled out, sweep-ing in a U-turn and heading down Sycamore Avenue to-ward the ramp of the autoway. His mind boiled. When frustrations reached an unbearable limit, when family could be dissolved in a hail of bullets at any moment, the hu-man mind rebelled against responsibility. Men took a holi-day, indulged in a season for freedom—freedom from *every-thing*, freedom to do *anything*. And now it had begun. He didn't want to think about where and when it might end.

The autoway lay ahead. He punched the key for an ex-tended drive without chosen exit, and took his hands from the wheel. The car moved into the high-speed lane.

Again, the gray rain was peppered with sleet.

Jacobs rolled down the window. He took out his frag slug gun, rested the barrel on the sill. A car came spinning along the black roadway, going the other direction.

He pumped four slugs into it.

The vehicle whined. The autodrive mechanism had been shattered in its dashboard. The wheels locked. It kicked upward, rolled end over end along the autoway. Fire gushed out of it in crimson and amber waves. The flames on the wet pavement reminded him of a carnival midway on a damp Saturday. He had a glimpse of a carousel. Painted horses. Ken/child, grinning. . . .

The flames behind died and were gone as the night rushed him headlong.

The carnival vision was blistered away by the onrushing headlamps of another car.

THE PSYCHEDELIC CHILDREN

Whether or not one believes the scientific "evidence" that LSD-25 causes damage to the chromosomes, one has to admit that the idea of a child mutated by LSD use is an intriguing one. It must be intriguing, for I received about a dozen letters from readers about this story, and it has been published in French and will be included in a book of stories and author interviews to be published later this year in Spain. What interests readers, I think and hope, is not so much the plot, but the style (ah, now the traditionalists leap down my throat!). I have attempted to write a story whose style (typography and scene-switching, and mood counterpointing) would convey to the reader a sense of the psychedelic, of a mild acid trip. The end of the story fits into this attempt, for it is much like a drug delusion, suddenly turning the tables on you and making you realize how thin is the fabric of what you thought was reality....

He woke even before she and lay listening to the rasping of her breath: seafoam whispering over jagged rocks. It would get worse before she woke. He reached to the night-stand and took a cigarette from the nearly empty pack, lighted it, and sat up. He tried not to think of the energies raging within her mind, of the deadly and painful powers roaring there. In the darkness, he tried to turn his mind to other things.

The view from the window was pleasant, for snow had been falling since supertime, embracing everything. The clouds parted now and then to let the moon through. It lighted the night, washing onto the white blanket and splashing back. Beyond the hoary willow tree lay the high-way, a black slash in the calcimined wonderland. It was obvious that the heater coils in the roadbed had broken down again, for the drifts were edging back onto the hard surface unchecked. Old-fashioned plows were working on things now.

"Ashen dreams fluttering flaked

float peacefully downward

while lightning men with swords

stroke the brain harshly

and draw fingernails

over the ice..."

He was not certain whether that was completely senseless or not. It was a mood piece, no doubt. He repeated it softly again. He would have to remember it, polish it—perhaps—for inclusion in his next volume.

Minutes later, he looked back to Laurie. Her face was pale, her eyes closed and edged with wrinkles. He ran his hand through the billows of raven hair that cascaded down her pillow. She moaned in answer, the air rushing in and out of her chest. Harder, harder she breathed. Deciding to get a head start this time, he stood and pulled on his trousers, slipped into a banlon shirt.

"Frank?" she said.

"I know."

She slipped out of bed, naked, and dressed in a sheath— a red and black one that he liked.

"I'll pull the car out of the garage," he said.

"The snow—"

"They seem to have it under control. Don't worry. I'll pick you up at the front door in five minutes."

"I love you," she said as he went through the doorway into the shadow-filled living room. That always sent shivers through him: that face, that voice, those words.

He took a flashlight and the gun that lay beside it from the kitchen catchall drawer. Stepping into the glittering night, he stuffed the gun in a jacket pocket and sniffed the cold air. It hurt all the way down into his lungs and woke him all the way up. The path between house and garage was unshoveled; the snow lay a good twelve or fourteen inches deep. He plodded through it, listening to the easy sweep of the wind, the distant moan of heavy ma-chinery battling Nature. The garage door hummed open when it recognized his thumbprint on the lock disc. He crawled into the car, started it, backed out, pushing snow with the rear bumper. He flipped on the front and rear heating bars. With Laurie's problem, he had to be ready to move at any hour, in any weather. The melting bars had been a costly extra, but a necessary one. When he pulled up to the front door, she was waiting. She climbed in, hud-dled next to him.

"Where to?"

"The country somewhere," she whispered in her tiny voice. "Hurry, please. It's going to be real bad this time."

Melting snow in advance, he drove across the highway into the lane leading away from the city and suburbs. The robo-grid drove for him then while he stroked her forehead and kissed her cheeks, her ears, her neck . . .

Ten minutes later, they were cruising down a ramp, and the red eye winked at him as if to say he must now caress the controls. Somewhere in the bowels of the car a buzzer *bleeped* for the same reason. He turned left along a sec-ondary route that was not nearly so well cleaned as the superhighway. Drifts were clawing at the macadam, chok-ing it to half its normal width in many places. He held the accelerator down and kept the Champion moving.

She was moaning . . .

This looked bad. She was rapidly reaching the critical point: the moment when the psychic powers reached maxi-mal point of tolerance and exploded violently and deadly. Laurie was an Esper, but it did her no good, for she could not control the power. She could not siphon it off until it reached the critical point, and once it had reached the critical point, there were only moments left to get rid of it.

He was glad he had had the melting bars installed. Some-day all cars, he thought, would have them. Then the snow plows and heating coils would both be obsolete. The bars burned away the crystals, evaporating some, melting some and leaving them behind to freeze into ice as the night wind roared in and covered the road in their wake.

"A little further yet," he said.

She whimpered something . . .

He risked a glance away from the road, was shocked—as always—by the white fish-belly color of her beautiful face. It always reminded him of the dead. It always frightened him. "Hold on."

The car skidded sideways without warning. He grabbed desperately at the wheel, then remembered to let the car follow the direction of the slide. They lodged in a drift, and it took the melting bars a few minutes to free them. He went another mile without seeing any houses and—there-fore—turned abruptly across what appeared to be a wheat field, flat and snow covered. The bars were burning at full capacity. He took it slow, melting his way toward the edge of the forest which began where the field sloped up-ward and continued over the rise and into the distance. When they reached the forest's perimeter, he braked, stopped, shut off the lights. They would not be seen from the highway against the black backdrop of trees.

He sat with her at the side of a tree, sat on the snow with her. She had reached the critical point.

"Okay," he said. "There is no one here."

She whimpered again . . .

Her breath rushed out. . .

The snow began to melt around them ... In two minutes there was a four-foot circle of bare earth. Then there was mud. Then boiling mud . . .

"I remember watt papered parlors

With a grandfather clock that chimed

Like a voice saying I'll give you

A dollar for a dime.

"I recall sun-bleached kitchens

On a then late afternoon,

A hundred thousand fragrances,

My mother's tasting spoon ..."

He flipped off the recording machine, rewound the tape, removed and packaged it. That was Saturday's show—aired on one hundred and two FM radio stations. Fifteen min-utes of poetry and commentary, recital and rebuttal. He was a little bitter about it. He wondered how many really listened and how many only laughed. He suspected that many of the gentler arts were not designed for the mass media. But then, it brought pennies for bread, pennies for lard.

"Frank—" Laurie came into the den, all sweet-smiling in a dress covered with large red apples on a straw background, a red band dipping in and out of her dark hair. "Have you seen this morning's paper?"

He couldn't have missed the headline: HALLUCINO-CHILD BELIEVED TO BE IN AREA. And below that: POLICE BEGIN SEARCH. It told all about the field near Crockerton where the snow had been vaporized, the earth boiled and glazed, the trees splintered and charred. It told how there was only one thing that could have done all that. And they were searching for the hallucino-child.

"Don't worry," he said.

"But they say the police are searching outward on a ten mile radius."

He pulled her down on his lap and kissed her. "And what can they find? I'm a poet who contributes well to the party in power; the party in power is very anti-Esper. We live normal lives. We have never once voiced disap-proval over punishment of captured hallucino-children."

"Just the same," she said, "I'll worry."

So would he.

Until noon. That is when the police came.

They stood watching through the porthole in the front door as the police approached the house. "It's just a ques-tion party. Only routine investigators following routine pro-cedures," he said.

She was trembling just the same. She retreated to the kitchen.

He waited for two knocks before he opened the door. He did not want to appear too anxious, and he needed those extra few seconds to paint a false smile on his face. "Yes?"

"Police Inspector Jameson and android assistant T," the dark-eyed detective said, motioning to the parody of a man beside him.

"Oh, this must be about the hallucino-child in the pa-pers. Come in, inspector."

He led them into the den. The inspector and he sat, but T remained standing. The snowflakes that had

fallen on his metal hide were melting and dropping onto the carpet after cutting wet swaths across the "skin" of his face to the preci-pice of his chin.

"Nice place you have here, Mr. Cauvell"

"Thank you."

"This where you write poems?"

Cauvell looked to the desk, nodded.

"I'm a fan of yours. Though I must say I don't often like those unrhymed ones."

He breathed more easily. The man was certainly not a forceful, probing, hard policeman. He seemed rather meek, in fact. *Why, Cauvell thought, he can't even meet my eyes directly. ...*

"Is your wife—Mrs. Cauvell—at home?"

His heart jumped a little, but he did not hesitate. "Yes, she is. Laurie!" he shouted, perhaps a bit too loud. "Laurie!"

She came in from the kitchen and stood next to his chair, eyeing the android suspiciously. Too suspiciously, Cauvell was afraid. Would T notice and become suspicious of her suspicion?

"Please sit down, Mrs. Cauvell," Jameson said. He ad-dressed both of them then. "We are running a survey of the neighborhood and would like to ask you both a few questions."

They both nodded.

"T," Jameson said.

The android's throat seemed to hum for a moment; then a deep, hoarse voice groaned from a plate in the low-er portion of his neck. *this interview is being recorded. are you aware of this, mr. and mrs. frank cauvell?*

"Yes," they answered ceremoniously.

all information recorded may be used in a court of law. are you aware of this, mr. and mrs. cauvell?

"Yes."

this is android t of city division cooperating with inspector harold jameson. mr. cauvell, a hallucino-child is a person born of parents whose genes were altered by their use of lsd-25. these children become either physical freaks or mental freaks. do you un-derstand the use of the term hallucino-child?

"Yes."

and you, mrs. cauvell?

"I do."

the physical freaks are cared for by the government. the hallucino-children who are born with the congenital defect of esp sensitivity are a danger to the state and cannot be afforded full citizenship. because of the nature of their power—which can only be studied at the critical point and which is too dangerous at the critical point to study—many of these mutants must be put to sleep, humanely. do you understand this, mr. and mrs. cauvell?

They said that they did. The formalities were over.

we have reason to believe there is a hallucino-child in this vicinity. have either of you knowledge of said person?

They said no.

did either of you leave the house last night?

"No."

The question suddenly became very pointed. then

how did the driveway and entrance to the super-highway become cleared?

"We noticed as we came in," Jameson said, "that your driveway seems to have been cleared by melting bars."

"I went out this morning for a few groceries," Cauvell answered a bit too quickly.

"You do your own shopping?" Jameson asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes." Cauvell was suddenly glad that he had never gone completely modem. Less than a fifth of the population did their own grocery shopping in person anymore. The banks of robot clerks that took the orders by phone had more-or-less depersonalized food purchasing. Cauvell, however, had always liked to see the steak before he bought it. Perhaps it was his picky appetite.

mrs. cauvell's father was a college professor, t said gratingly. the college instructors of the sixties

and seventies were often quite liberal and as anxious as their students to experiment. mrs. cauvell, did your father take lsd-25?

They had prepared themselves, long ago, for the possibility of questions like these. And they had agreed that a little bit of the truth would be better than a complete lie. "I believe he tried it twice with bad experiences both times," Laurie said.

Cauvell was proud of her firm, unshaken answers.

he was not a regular user?

"No."

"How can you be so certain, my dear?" Jameson asked kindly.

Cauvell realized that Jameson was anything but stupid, anything but meek. He was T's straight man, but

some of his own lines hit the mark close to center.

"My mother told me," Laurie said. "My father died when I was seven. My mother spent the rest of her life telling me about everything he did. I heard all the stories a thousand times. I couldn't forget them. He took LSD twice and had bad trips both times."

which party do you belong to? t asked.

"The party in power for the last thirteen years. The Con-stitutional Tolerant Party." Cauvell tried to force pride into his voice while he forced his gorge down.

and why did you join the party?

"Because we feared the Communist countries and real-ized the subversive trends within our own society must stop."

and you have seen nor heard nothing of the hal-lucino-child?

"Nothing."

was this interview recorded with your knowledge, mr. and mrs. cauvell?

They said it was.

The android's voice clicked off, its throat humming for a moment before going tomb silent. Inspector Jameson got to his feet. "Sorry to inconvenience you. It has been, a pleas-sure. Thank you for cooperating."

"Only too happy," Frank said.

"Hope you find the mutant," Laurie said.

They watched through the porthole as the inspector and the android stepped into the police car and pulled onto the highway, growing smaller, smaller, and disappear-ing in the distance.

From the looks of the sky, it was going to snow again.

Somewhere a mutated boy hid, shivering.

Some unbearable moment, his nerves split; he ran.

He ran right into the arms of the android. The eyes of the metal man were jewels, even as the tears on his own cheeks frosted into diamonds. He backed away, but there were others behind him. There was no place to go.

He unleashed the psychic forces at them, watched them go up in flames, watched their faces melt, watched their insides smoke.

But there were more of them. And they would not wait. Nozzles opened on their hips. Fire sprayed;

flames engulfed him, swallowed, digested him.

All the while the snow fell... little white bullets...

"They got some poor devil," Laurie said, handing him the paper.

He looked at it, grimaced. HALLUCINO-CHILD FIGHTS IT OUT WITH POLICE. Not "fights it out with robots," for that was too crude. That would make the entire thing seem prominent. Cauvell wagered a live cop had not come within a hundred yards of the boy.

"It's my fault," Laurie said.

"That's absurd! How could it possibly be your fault?"

"We were too open. We left a trail or clues, at least, that made them search."

"And it was an emergency," he argued. "You'd have blasted the both of us to kingdom come if you had tried to hold back that force any longer."

"Just the same, they might not have flushed the boy out if we—"

"Forget it. What's for supper?"

"Spaghetti."

The next night it was pork chops. The next night, meat loaf. The night after that, he woke up to her heavy breathing.

"Laurie?"

Her eyes were open. "Yes?"

"Why didn't you wake me?" He got out of bed, began to dress.

"Frank?"

"What? Hurry and get your clothes on."

"Frank, maybe it would be a lot better if I just let it kill me."

He stopped tucking his shirt in and turned around to face her. He could see only the vague outline of her small but womanly body outlined by the sheet, her hair like spun silk . . . He crossed to her and lifted her head up. "What is that supposed to mean?"

She was crying.

"Don't you love me?" he asked.

She tried to answer, but the words were sobs.

"Then get the hell dressed," he said gently.

And he left. In the kitchen, he took the gun from the drawer. Outside, the sky was clear; the wind was stiff, whipping the snow into a frenzy. When he brought the car to the front door, she was waiting.

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"Farther out than before. And we will cover well."

Christmas was coming.

He thought about that as he drove. He thought about parties and eggnog, church services, candles on altars, candles in windows. He thought about Christ climbing down from his bare tree and wondered what Ferlinghetti would have written had he lived in the present and been married to a hallucino-child.

Far out in the country, he angled the Champion onto a side road, cruised along it for a time, broke off the road into a wide trench that petered out into woods at a clearing in the center of the forest. They were three miles from a road, sheltered on all sides by trees, exposed only directly overhead where the clearing allowed the stars to look down. When they got out, they heard the helicopter whining somewhere above them.

Then the sun came on. The copter settled into the clearing, its headlamps like the eyes of some tremendous moth, its rotors like wings.

"Frank!"

He grabbed her, pulled her back into the car, scrambled behind the wheel.

please do not attempt to escape. It Was the Voice of T.

He would have to reverse out of there, which would be a disastrous undertaking in this rugged terrain. Or he would have to push through them. Jameson, T, and another android labeled JJK were crossing the hoary field, legs frosted with snow, weapons drawn. He rolled down the window. "What do you want?"

"If you bought groceries that morning, Mr. Cauvell," Jameson said between breaths, "why did no grocer within fifty miles have a record of your personal purchase?"

T was twenty feet away, directly in front of the car.

He slammed down on the accelerator, flipped the melting bars to full power, felt the jolt when T went under the wheels, as the second android was struck a glancing blow that tore its arm off. The engine was whining. He could not make a swift escape through the drifts, for the melting bars would not be able to work fast enough. He wrenched the wheel to the left, spun the Champion around, and shot back along the trail he had burned into the clearing in the first place. He passed Jameson who leaped out of his way. The two androids were lifeless.

"We're free!" he shouted excitedly.

The vibra-beam sliced a neat hole through the rear window and struck Laurie on the temple. She slumped across him, dribbling blood from one ear . . .

He could personify the moon: *the moon peered down patronizingly*. He could make a girl into a rose: *she was a rose, soft and gentle*. He could forge metaphors, hammer out similes; he could allocate so much alliteration to just so many lines. But he could not stop the bleeding from her ear.

He could rise up in the morning like a dragon from the sea.

With the sun over his shoulder, he could warp words to say his thoughts.

He could lie down at night, satisfied as a god must be.

But stopping the blood was beyond his powers.

She was stretched across the back seat, face up, pale and ghostly in what little moonlight filtered through the tinted windows. Cauvell lashed himself into the bucket seat, gripped the wheel viciously. Where to? How long would he have until all roads were blocked? The forest clearing was fifteen miles behind, but the world had shrunk to the size of an orange in recent years, and fifteen miles was hardly the length of one seed. The thing, perhaps, was to find a small town and—with the gun—force a doctor to care for her. Hide the Champion in the doctor's garage. He turned the engine over, wheeled into the twisting lane, and spun his wheels over the snow.

Thin rust trickled from her ear—liquid.

Caldwell twenty-six miles . . .

Caldwell nineteen miles . . .

He was ten miles from Caldwell when the helicopter flut-tered over the tree tops that sheltered much of the road. The car was bathed in sickly yellow light. He swerved left, right, darting out of the beam. But they broadened the shaft and covered both lanes with it. Bullets cut up the pavement in front of him. One *pinged* off the hood. A few vibra-beams sent little sections of the pavement boiling. Then, abruptly, there was darkness and no helicopter.

Slowing, he rolled down the window, listened. *Nowhupa-whupa* of fiercely beating blades. It was gone. It vanished; it did not simply drift away. Perhaps it had crashed. Yet there was no explosion, no crashing sound. He rolled the window up and drove on. They had spotted him near Caldwell, and he must bypass that town now. Forty miles away lay Steepleton.

He looked over the seat, felt his stomach flop at the sight of her, comatose and pale-dark. He pressed down on the accelerator.

Steepleton thirty-two miles . . .

Steepleton twenty-four miles . . .

At the boundaries of Steepleton there was a roadblock. Seven men, seven androids. And they knew damn well whose car was coming; they had their weapons raised . . .

Death is not something that creeps about in black robes, slaving. Death cannot be seen . . .

It can't!

And yet his world was a graveyard. The moon rode high above clouds like pieces of torn shrouds flapping madly to the tune of the winds in the dead trees. He struggled up the hill in the cold air, the wind-born explosions of snow forcing him to squint.

"Good evening," said the mortician.

He said good evening...

"Dust to dust," the embalmer said from his perch atop a monument steeple.

"Ashes to ashes," said the sexton.

He ignored all of them. He pushed onward, toward the summit of the hill where the sepulcher bit at the sky, a broken tooth. Somewhere a muffled drum. Somewhere a passing bell. . .

He pushed his shoulder against the stone door, felt the rusted hinges move a bit, heard them squeak, heard the rats run inside. Stepping in, the moonlight flooding in behind him, he advanced to the sarcophagus. They had buried her in a limestone coffin, for that facilitated the rotting of the corpse. Somehow, that filled him with rage. He thrust the immensely heavy lid free, looked down at her pale face. Gently—oh! so gently—he lifted her out, placed her upon the marble slab where no coffin yet lay.

Somewhere a tolling—in reverse; somewhere a dirge is sung backwards.

And he would sing the oration; he would make with panegyrics...

"For the Moon never beams without bringing me dreams

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,

In her sepulcher there by the sea—

In her tomb by . . ."

He was three miles past Steepleton. And there were no guards ...

He pulled the car off the road and sat thinking for a time. Was his mind leaving him? There had been

guards and a roadblock back there, had there not? Which was real, the police or the graveyard world? The police, certainly. He was no E.A. Poe who slept with his dead mistress. Besides, his mistress was not dead. He turned to look at her. Her face had become wrinkled as if she were in pain. He called her name. For a brief second, he thought she answered. But her lips had not moved. He turned back and faced front. It was ten miles to Kingsmir. What would happen there? Would the graveyard delusion come back? Would there be further oddities? He suddenly remembered the disappearance of the helicopter and shuddered. Pulling back onto the road ...

... He woke and kissed her on the neck.

Her black-black hair spilled down her bare shoulders, over her bare breasts, curled under her pink ears

...

She kissed him back...

And then she was lying in a limestone casket . . . Then warm and alive . . . then cold and rotting... A helicopter fluttered again ... A helicopter blinked out of exist-ence in a world where men had suddenly never learned to fly . . . Then it was back again, chasing after quarry that had gone long ago when the world had been different for a few moments ...

Tombstones...

Blink!

A warm bed, warm bodies ...

Blink!

Blink! Blink!

He woke up two miles closer to Kingsmir. And he knew! He pulled the Champion onto the berm and crawled be-tween the bucket seats to where she lay. He ran his fin-gers over her face, trailed them under her chin, felt the blood pulsing in her neck. Laurie was changing reality! Somehow, comatose as she was, the psychic powers were siphoning themselves off instead of exploding violently. They were under control! And they were not merely pow-ers of teleportation and mind reading; they were powers that could change the basic fiber of the universe. He had thought he imagined her answering him a while back; now he knew she*had* answered. There had been no need of lips.

"Laurie, can you hear me?"

There was the distant answer that he had to strain to hear.

"Laurie, you heard the helicopter, sensed the guards and the roadblock. And you changed reality for a while until the car—moving independent of*both* worlds—had passed the trouble spot. Isn't that what you did, Laurie?"

A distant yes.

"Listen, Laurie. The graveyard is all wrong. Poetic as hell, but wrong. The other one. The one where we are in bed, Laurie." He stroked her chin. He kissed her lips and urged her to concentrate. He heard the sirens on the road and talked faster . . .

He talked of a world where there had never been hallu-cino-children. He spoke of a world where all were nor-mal ...

He woke before she did and lay listening to the rasping of her breath: seafoam whispering over jagged rocks. It would get worse before she woke.

The view from the window was pleasant. It had been snowing since suppertime. Beyond the hoary willow tree lay the highway, a black slash in the calcimined won-derland. They were plowing the road, for the heating coils had broken down again. Somehow, he felt that he had seen it all before. Everything was like an echo being re-lived.

"Glittering dreams fluttering flaked

float softly downward

while snow priests prepare

for fairy cotillions ..."

He was not sure whether that was senseless or not. And even the poem seemed nagging familiar. He repeated it softly.

"Frank?" she said.

"I know."

"Soon."

"I'll pull the car out of the garage."

"The snow—"

"They seem to have it under control," he said, feeling as if he had said the same thing once before.

"I love you," she said as he went through the doorway into the shadow-filled living room. That always sent shivers through him—that face, that voice, those words. The shiver continued, however, rippling over his spine, quaking across his forehead, spreading to nearly every nerve in his body. What was he frightened of? And what was this feeling of familiarity all about? He was more than normally afraid for Laurie. After all, she was only pregnant. Suddenly, he hoped to hell it would be a girl. And then the shivers were gone as he rushed for the car. He was warm, the world was wonderful, and there was no

longer a sense of familiarity. Suddenly things were very much different and very new indeed.

DRAGON IN THE LAND

There has been a great deal of talk about McLuhanism, Marshall McLuhan's philosophies on our electric world of superfast communications. McLuhan says we are all draw-ing the world tighter and tighter together into a Global Village, and that when mankind is that close, war will gradually disappear. "Dragon in the Land," directly ex-trapolates from that thesis. Herein is the final war. And when enemies meet—one in defeat, the other in triumph—and find, perhaps grudgingly, that the Global Village concept and the war have made them brothers, they find that car-ing for someone not of your fatherland requires no more effort than loving your own father. I think there is a dragon in the land of our own time, of the here and now. It seems to be the dragon of peace, a good beast, and it is winning friends and influencing more people every day. This story brought me over thirty letters from fans so far, and it is good to know there are people willing to take the time to sit down and write and say, "Peace." Another story of mine called "Muse" has garnered forty-five letters to date, and it concerns the same idea, namely that all men—indeed, all living creatures—are linked in the scheme of things and are, in a sense, brothers. And people are banning together to protest industrial plants being built in places where there was once natural beauty . . . And left-wingers and right-wingers are fighting pollution with a growing vehemence . . . And a former Commandant of the Marines goes on speaking tours against the Vietnamese war where we kill each other without knowing why . . . Sometimes I think it pays to be an optimist...

weinvaded Mother China and no one tried to stop us. The government had collapsed six days before, and the Chief of Staff of what remained of the hungry, ragtag Chi-nese People's Army had requested our immediate assistance. Still, when the destroyer *Barbara Dee* wallowed to a full stop off the coast of Luichow Peninsula in the South China Sea, every gun was trained on the shore. And every man in those

first landing craft unsnapped his holster. After all, we were landing in China! We had been asked to bail them out. And, indirectly, to bail ourselves out too. . . .

Since the foolproof Nuclear Shields, conventional war-fare had evaporated. This did not mean an end to war—just an end to War-as-We-Knew-It. After the pacification of the angry atom: germ warfare. In the forty-one years since the end of the atom-age war threat, both ideological camps had made great advances in this new form of com-bat. The game went on ...

The game of killing. As the landing craft surged toward the shore, I thought of my father—my dead father.

The Chinese were more skilled at virus development, as even the Freeworld Propaganda Bureau reluctantly admitted. Fortunately we led the field in Analysis and Immuniza-tion. IBM and Rand had designed the equipment my A&I team used. It was every bit as incredible as the Chinese production capabilities.

We hoped it wouldn't fail us now.

What little we knew of the chaos on the Chinese main-land didn't help our spirits any. Dr. Lin Chi's pet secret project had gotten out of hand at Yangchun Laboratories. The staff had perished, even as it fled. Dr. Lin Chi had lived long enough to reach a destruct lever, blasting the labs to rubble. But the disease spread, now claiming victims as far west as Homalin, Burma, and as far east as Shanghai. The Chinese philosophy on A&I had always been: *Don't waste money on cures; spend it on weapons. We can afford to lose some people.* That was backfiring now.

In one week, the death toll spiraled toward five million. The Chinese A&I couldn't handle it. On the morning of the twelfth day, eleven million dead, the government fell. On the afternoon of the fifteenth day, the Chief of Staff formally surrendered, then asked for help.

Open hands. No guns.

I was the first American to touch foot on conquered China. How to tell what it was like? Not patriotic fervor, cer-tainly. More relief. Relief that, if this disease didn't loll us all, the world was finally united under Russo-American control. War was dead. As dead as Lin Chi. As dead as my father. Disease in China. a dragon in the land of drag-ons, as *The New York Times* had uncharacteristically blurbed it. If we could just get the dragon to eat its own tail . . . Anyway, I stepped onto the slushy sand, my holster still open, and marched up the beach toward the rickety docks of Chankiang.

The mayor of Chankiang was waiting with a squad of raggedy, mismatched police who were trying desperately to hold a huge crowd at bay. "I am Pin Shukon," he said. He spoke perfect' British English. He was portly, Buddha-like, a little man with a Mandarin moustache greased to single-hair points.

"I am honored to make your acquaintance," I said, try-ing to maintain the best possible Chinese tonal form I could.

"Perhaps we should speak in English," he said.

"My Chinese—"

"Is atrocious. However, it is a difficult language." There was an indescribable quality of hatred in his voice. Hatred with a note of resignation so Oriental in nature that the hate seemed a thing ceremonial and

of no real significance.

The other thirty technicians of the A&I team and Orga-tany, my assistant, had come up behind.

"I see you come well supported," Shukon said thinly.

I saw that his white frock-shirt was stained with sweat, dirty. For the first time, I saw the fatigue in his eyes, the sharp wrinkles of exhaustion around them. He had been awake—but for short naps—since the disease had struck his village.

"This is my A&I team. No soldiers. We took General Soro at his word."

"There will be soldiers." He looked to the destroyer and the dropping troop transports.

"I suppose." I refused to follow his gaze. "But I'm a medical man."

"The gun?"

His eyes shifted to my unsnapped holster. I opened my mouth to protest, closed it. I snapped the holster shut.

"This way, gentlemen. The train is waiting."

I turned to my men. There was a good deal of shoving and grunting and unnice exclamation until the air cushions beneath the nine computer units could be adjusted to move the heavy things up the slatted ramp and across the gaping holes of the dock toward the train that would take us the 120 miles to Yangchun.

"You have a recent victim?" I asked Shukon, as we squeezed between the police and the mob that lined the dock.

"About four hundred and thirty have died within the last twenty-four hours. You may have your choice."

Somehow, he made me feel like a butcher at a whole-sale meat auction. "Just the most recent," I said.

An old woman broke through the police, threw herself in front of us, babbling swiftly in Chinese. I hoped the rest of the crowd didn't realize how little control the police really had over them. I looked protectively back to our Duo-component analyzer, confirmed its safety. Shukon gently lifted the old woman and led her behind the police. "Her son," he said when he returned. "She wants you to cure him. She thinks you can work miracles."

"We just about can." I felt I had to be defensive with him.

"Not miracles as large as that. He died yesterday."

Mentally, I repeated the Hippocratic oath.

At the end of the dock, steps led down to a concrete loading zone, crammed with more people. The train lay a hundred yards away, a black snake. The crowds surged, straining the police barricade. I wished the president had sent the troops first and to hell with the goodwill bit.

Shukon moved first, snapping orders to police and civilians. The people, wild, seemed not to realize that

we could not cure them until we had reached Yangchun, searched the ruins, come up with some clues. A boy, perhaps fifteen, crawled between policemen's legs, grabbed my ankles. Shukon—gentle Shukon—whirled and drove a foot into the boy's side. Drowned by the roar, there was a faint crunch of breaking ribs. The mayor brought the same foot down on fingers that convulsed like frightened worms.

The boy screamed, blood black under his fingernails, red on his hands.

"The women," Shukon hissed, "are understood. You are a man!" Then he hurried ahead, leaving me no course but to follow. We boarded the train without further incident, though I was beginning to be impressed with the stoical little mayor.

Two of Shukon's henchmen brought a body aboard, dropped it in the first seat of the first car. After a few strong words about sanitary precautions, we sprayed the adjoining floor, wall, window, unbolted the seat and tossed it out. The victim, we encased in blown plastic.

"Antiseptics hardly seem to work," Shukon said. "We've tried."

The sample tray of the specimen analyzer swallowed the corpse, plastic coating and all ...

Fifty miles along the track, Orgatany wobbled back through the aisle, black face gleaming with perspiration, looking almost as young as he had when I saved his life during the South African rebellion against U.N. control. He had been a brilliant but uneducated boy then. Now he was a doctor, and a good one. "Walt, we got the final analysis report."

"And?"

He slumped into the opposite seat. "You won't like it"

"Try me."

"The Duo says he didn't die of any disease."

I turned angrily to Shukon.

Sincere face, surprised look ... "I assure you—"

"What did he die of, Bill?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

The lowlands of China flashed by the window.

"The Duo says: 'no discernible affliction of any nature whatsoever.' That means nothing."

"Something is wrong with the Duo."

Fear of fears, our God has died . . .

Orgatany shifted his weight. "We checked that first thing, Walt. We used one unit to check its mate, then

reversed it. Then, unlikely as it may be, we thought maybe both halves were out. We used one of the other units to check the Duo. Everything is tiptop, great, fine, perfect. And maddening."

"We too found this a stumbling block," Shukon said. "We have not your advanced facilities, but we found no symptoms before the disease struck, no traces afterward. The victim is healthy one minute, dead the next. I would say this is Dr. Lin Chi's greatest discovery."

"Fine!" I snapped. "It just might be so damned perfect that it kills us all!"

"If we could get another victim," Orgatany said, "we could find a pattern, no matter how minute."

"You tried multiple analysis?" I asked Shukon.

He nodded.

"We'll try it anyway. When we reach Yangchun, well secure two more specimens."

But we got two more specimens before we were half-way there.

Eight miles farther, the train was halted by a large weighted drum lying on the tracks. And by fifty horsemen with carbines. There were sixty-five horsemen in all—fifteen dead, strapped across their saddles. Even roaming barbarians felt the needle plunge of the plague's hypodermic. The fifty horsemen fanned out in an arc in front of the loco-motive, guns trained on windows and roofs.

I had thirty-two untrained fighters, medical men. Shukon refused to have his henchmen fire on their countrymen. We could only negotiate. With a number of vicious indictments, I forced Shukon into the locomotive where we crouched behind a metal baffle, watching the horsemen, only our heads visible.

"What do you want?" I called in Chinese. I hoped they had not wandered down from the northern provinces and did not understand the only dialect I spoke.

"You are the Americans," the chief of the horsemen said. It was not a question.

"Yes."

"We want you."

"Political conservatives, opposed to surrender," Shukon said, eyes on the horseman.

"Tell them to move on."

"You tell them. You are in charge."

"Off the train!" the horseman shouted.

"Dammit, Shukon, tell them!"

"Am I to understand you are unable to cope—"

I swung, connected a fist with his mouth. He wobbled, surprised. He lost balance, fell from haunches to behind. Blood trickled down his chin. Vomit tingled the back of my throat. *Physician what have you*

done? Father, father, there was a need . . . "Tell them," I choked. "Make a deal. Do something, for God's sake!"

"If I offend your sensibilities, I will take my men and leave, claiming we were held prisoner." He refused, damn him, to wipe the blood from his face. It trickled down his neck now.

"Look, Shukon, your people asked for our help. Now, if you don't really want it, I'm prepared to send these men back and to recommend to the president that we concentrate on bolstering the West against the disease and stop our efforts here. Before you answer, think of the old woman on the dock. For that matter, think of the boy."

For a long moment, our eyes met. He tested the ire boiling in my eyes, I tried to investigate his. His were inscrutable. Mine must have been too, for he didn't see the physician's heart that couldn't walk away from sickness. Finally, he pushed up, very dignified and faced the bearded horse-man. They spoke so fluently that my limited Chinese was useless.

A moment later, the barbarian chieftain directed two of his men to unstrap and hand over two bodies. We sprayed them with plastic. I was determined to keep the bacteria contained—even if there were no bacteria.

"I told them," Shukon said, "that you would bring their men back to life if they showed their intention of letting us pass."

"But I can't do that!"

"They don't know that."

"They damn soon will!"

"Be calm. They are moving the barrel."

The chief horseman, a fierce-looking man, dropped off his mount and, clutching the rifle, reached for the railing to push himself onto the first step. The barrel rolled away, clattering. . .

Abruptly, a gun slipped magically from Shukon's sleeve. It spat a firetooth that lodged in the horseman's chest. Blood spread across the man's jacket, spotted the tea-colored vest. He hung there, looking surprised. Shukon shot again. Blood spewed out of the horseman's mouth, and he fell backward onto the dry, dry earth.

"Move quickly!" Shukon snapped at the engineer.

The train lurched, shot forward. The other horsemen, delayed by confusion and surprise, took too much time mounting their shield horses. The train left them behind without revenge.

"You have your two samples," Shukon said. "Shall we go inside?"

I'm a medical man. Sure, A&I is part of the war effort, our defense system. But chiefly, I want to cure. I kept telling myself this as we moved deeper into Mother China. I get it from my father, I guess. He developed the BTRR technique that won him the Nobel Prize. I remember when the story was blurred

on *Time's* cover. brain tissue replacement and repair technique: bronson wins nobel the banner read, breaking the familiar red border of the cover. The old man didn't get around to reading it until five months later. He was too busy working on something to "help those poor damn cancer patients." He never lived to prove that cancer was a malfunction of a segment of the midbrain and directly connected to psychosomatic origins. But someone else did, working from his notes. Like him, I'm a medical man. Sometimes, I think I put myself in great danger just to prove I'm like him. Back then, however, I didn't yet understand the guilt that drives me.

Nervously, I flicked through the Duo's two-page summaries. Nothing on either horseman. They died of nothing.

"What next?" Orgatany asked. "The men are nervous."

There was only one thing I could think of, a phrase I tried never to use: "Tell them we've been in trouble before and lived through it."

"But we were always able to isolate the bacteria before. We were always quickly immunized. Now we can't even find the goddamned germ!"

"You sound as scared as I am," I said, rubbing the pain throbbing behind my ears.

He grinned, in resignation more than amusement. "Hell." He stood and plunged back toward the cars where the team worked. He would hold up, I knew. He was a damn good boy . . .

"Yangchun," Shukon said, pointing through the window.

All along the tracks, crowds pressed to the edge of the ramp, straining at the rails almost as if—simply by touching—they could be healed.

"Is there any way we can keep from detraining here?" I asked Shukon, not wishing to fight another crowd who would crush us with love. "There should have been a spur line to an installation as large as Lin Chi's."

"I believe there was."

"Would you inform the engineer that we would like to be taken directly to the labs then?"

"It will take what you call—string-pulling."

"Just don't tangle any."

Fighting the lurching train, he made his way to the locomotive.

Fifteen minutes later, we were stopped a thousand yards from the ruins of the Lin Chi's laboratories. Here it was that the good doctor had invented the disease that gobbled him up. Always a danger in germ warfare. A careless move. A vial is broken. Contamination spreads. In this case, it was something that spread too fast. Apparently, Lin Chi had not found an antitoxin yet. There was nothing left but to fuse the buildings in a nuclear blast before the wind could ...

But the wind had . . .

"Dr. Bronson," Orgatany said, tapping me on the shoulder.

I looked up.

"It's Jenners. The Duo mechanic's assistant. He's dead."

The cover of *Time* ...

Of *Time* ...

Of time ...

Jenners was most assuredly dead. Dead of nothing. And it certainly wasn't old age at thirty-one. Organs don't wear out that fast. Unless you're a Lord Byron. Jenners wasn't. Lin Chi's disease had gotten him, and it might get the rest of us at any time.

"Get me a suit, Bill," I said. "I'm going into the labs."

"You're the captain of this team. Send someone else. I'll go."

"Like hell."

"A captain—"

"This isn't a nineteenth-century sailing vessel, Bill. I'm a figurehead captain. You could do my job as well. You know that. Now, can the corn and get me a suit."

He hurried away, biting his lower lip. Too servile yet. Too many memories of South Africa before liberation. Then I felt rather idiotic for indulging in character analysis when Death lurked in every dark corner.

Then: "I'm going with you," Shukon said.

Then: "Mayor, I—"

And: "It is not a matter of curiosity. This is a diplomatic condition."

Me: "There are troops on the way—"

Him: "You are a medical man, remember? Besides, it will take some time for troops to reach here. I know you wish not to delay."

With a sigh: "I won't desecrate any shrines or—"

Staunchly: "With me or not at all." His eyes were cool. Very cool. Too damned cool.

I sighed again. There was my duty as a physician. Shu-kon, untrained for this sort of search, would hinder me. Hippocratic oath riding my nostrils with stirrups of sanctity, I should have told him to ram it and then gone alone. However, I was also a diplomat here. Diplomacy, one hears, is a science. But it

does not have that volume of knowledge upon which to build a base. I felt uneasy with it.

"With me?" he asked again.

"With you."

See me: doctor, diplomat—dramatic actor . . .

Fifteen minutes later, insulated against Lin Chi's bugs, we stepped onto the tarmac that ringed the ruined com-plex, stepped over rubble and around turned-over, crushed vehicles. The blast had smashed things like the first of an angry god but had not stopped the bacteria. We checked for radioactivity, found it tolerable, and moved on.

We stood expectant at the edge of the pit. Rubble lay packed from wall to wall, torn with channels that were some-times deadends, other times seemed to go down and down and down for eternity. "You had better wait here," I said.

"With me," he said. His voice was a bit metallic through the suitphone.

We stepped onto the once-molten slag of the ruins, worm-ing toward a particularly large hole fifty feet out. When we reached it, I shined my flashlight into it. There were many angles, but part of the main drop was always in sight. I thought I detected some glittering blue tile about eighty feet down, but I could not be certain in the confusing webs of shadows and semi-darks. "Follow," I said, "but not so close you could break my neck too if you fell."

Using arms, legs, shoulders, and buttocks to brace our-selves, we moved down. Now and again, a recognizable piece of rubble jutted from the bubbled, rugged wall. A broken beam, the back of what had once been a lounge chair, a specimen freezer door, an oddly perfect piece of windowglass . . . But for the most part, the blast had fused everything into an amalgam of sameness, relieved only by the varying juxtaposition of slag layer to slag layer.

Fifty feet down, the way widened to four times its previous expanse, and we had to go to traditional mountain-climbing procedures. I clung to the right wall, working precariously down the rubble, fingers and toes gripped in impossibly small crevices. So, hanging like a nervous spider, I heard the crunch of breakage, and watched as Shukon plunged past, kicking wildly, pulling twenty pounds of slag with him . . .

Time...

Time was a frozen corpse, mouth open . . .

There was a scream from below. It was the first sign Shukon had given that he was human. In fear of Death, all mouths form the same.

I clung to the rocks, desperate as they shivered, jelly-like, with the resettling of the slag. When the earth quieted, there was nothing but silence that clung to the walls like an oil film.

"Shukon?"

Silence.

"Shukon?"

Walls, walls, darkness . . .

"Shukon!"

I felt the blast of my own words, realized I was screaming. No time to get hysterical. And why hysteria over a ratty little mayor? Why over him? Because he was something like my ... I clamped my teeth together, found more handholds, started down.

Thirty feet farther down, I found him on a ledge, one arm tucked under him, the hand reappearing at an unnatural angle. The Life Systems box on his chest showed him to be in good condition, though unconscious. Still, beneath that heavy, cushioning, germ-impregnable suit, there might be broken bones I couldn't feel. I prepared a hypodermic of stimulants, punched it through the rubberized, self-sealing skin of the suit, straight into (I hoped) a vein that (hopefully) would be directly beneath the thin blue line marking it on the exterior of the suit. (Luckily) it was. A few moments later, he opened his eyes.

"You're okay—if nothing is broken."

He struggled, sat up, his eyes bloodshot behind the faceplate.

"Is anything broken?" I insisted.

"Fingers,"

"How many?"

"Two."

"Well take you up."

"No." Even bloodshot, the eyes were cool.

"You can't climb with broken fingers. I'll radio for help."

"I go," he snapped.

"Shukon—"

His good hand had gone for his gun. "I'll kill you if you try to send me back."

"That's insanity."

He waved the barrel, stared me down. "You decide."

I stepped back, swung onto the wall, shaking. "Come on then, you determined fool. We haven't time to argue."

As I moved, I heard grunting and what seemed to be the beginnings of moans. But he choked the moans off short, held them between his teeth and bit them to death. When I slowed the pace for him, he pushed me hard to move faster. So I did. And, somehow, he kept up.

Eighty-seven feet down, we came upon the glittering blue tile. It was irradiated, sparkling silver at the edges. Still, this was more like it. Suddenly the rubble was not unidentifiable slag, but recognizable objects crushed and pressure-welded. Fifteen feet later, we came through the ceiling of a low corridor that was still pretty much intact.

I dropped to the floor. Shukon followed, cradling his wounded hand in the other. I pretended not to notice. I set out down the corridor, searching for significant door labels, for a room that might contain records. We had been searching less than ten minutes when my suitphone buzzed with a call from the train. I flipped the toggle on my chest pack. "Bill?"

"Walt, where are you?"

"We're through. We may have luck soon."

"You better. We have seven dead now."

"Seven?"

"It's catching on with a vengeance. Thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah. Yeah, thanks, Bill."

The voice was gone.

Eleven agonizing minutes later, we found the records room. Had we been gnomes, we would have danced. Rather, I would have. Shukon would have made a very depressing gnome. Too stoic. So much like ... I hurried through the file drawers, searching. There was no project name to look for, no date when the research might have started. But I did know that the disease gave no symptoms, and I flipped through the folders, looking for pages of symptoms. And I found it. In Chinese characters in folder 2323222. symptoms: none.

I was ready to dance, gnome or no gnome, when the ceiling cracked and dumped rocks on us with a thick dusty growl. . .

There was dirt on my faceplate. I wiped it off. There was also a pain in my side, dull, that would not wipe away. A broken rib? Only cracked? I tried to move, found I was pinned by rocks. Carefully, I tensed, pain lashing sharply through my chest, and shoved out from beneath it.

There was absolutely no light. I could hear something. What? A hissing. It was Shukon trying not to moan. "Where are you?" I called.

"Never ... mind."

"I'll dig you out."

"My arm ... is broken. My ... left leg ... also."

"I'll carry you"

"You ... have no ... time."

I fumbled with my headlamp, found it had been knocked off but not broken. I screwed it tight in the socket, flipped it on. There was a glint of plastiglass faceplate in the swirling dust cloud. Overhead, the ruins screeched, groaned. Screeched like a gull My father had taken me to the sea once, had sat with me on the moss-edged rocks, had shown me the gulls . . .

"Leave me," Shukon croaked.

I struggled over the rubble, began tossing stones off him, adrenaline almost pumping out my ears. He was right: broken leg. Smashed would have been a better word. The suit was ruptured above the knee, the bones splaying out of it, blood mingling with the dust and forming a thick black glue. The self-sealing rubber had formed a tourniquet to stop the worst of the flow. Bracing a foot against his good leg, grabbing his arm, I started to hoist him onto my shoulders.

Then he struck me. Some impossible way, he swung his broken arm. It smashed against my faceplate, smearing blood over it. I staggered back, dropping his arm. I wiped the blood off my helmet, saw that he held a gun on me.

"You . . . can't possibly get me . . . out of here. Let us have no ... histrionics. Take the papers and . . . leave."

I started to answer, was interrupted by the buzz of the phone My head was swirling toward hysteria. I couldn't leave him there to die. Not again. Not fail again . . . The phone buzzed. "What is it, Orgatany?"

"This is Evret. Orgatany is dead."

Son, son, son,*must there be darkness now?*

"Dammit, let me talk to Bill!"

"He's dead, doctor. He died ten minutes ago."

An untruth, I thought. Must be an untruth, I thought. In truth, I did not think. "Evret, cut the bullshit! I have to talk with Bill. Let me talk to Bill. Bill. Bill, damn you to hell!"

"Shut up!" Shukon shouted with more energy than he could possibly have had.

I turned. There was still Shukon. Bill was gone, but there was still Shukon. There was still ...

"Grow up, doctor!" Shukon snapped. "Give him the information!"

My head spun madly merry-go-round in the light-flash of memories. I fumbled the papers out, laid them on the rubble. I fought to steady the world in its dance. The world was so damnably big! The records said things about the brain. But I wanted a general synopsis. There would have to be a general synopsis, something Lin Chi could show to visiting party dignitaries . . . *Time* covers, yellowed and cracking with age, swirled like leaves down the canyons of recollection . . . Then I had it! "Evret?"

"I'm here."

"The virus settles in the mid-brain through the blood-stream. It only takes a single virus. One organism, Evret. Once settled, it releases minute quantities of toxin. But the toxin is not poisonous, for that would be traceable. It is merely a sedative. It puts the brain-stem to sleep. It simply paralyzes that area of the brain

that controls circulatory, digestive, respiratory systems. It wears off in minutes, but by then the victim is dead."

"Is there a toxin formula?" Evret asked, excited.

I read it to him. "Tell Bill," I said. Up-down-up-down the old, old, old, old merry-go-round.

"But Bill is—"

"Tell him!" I roared.

"Yes, sir." He signed off.

"Now will you come with me?" I asked Shukon.

He holstered the gun. "You . . . won't leave without me. I see that."

I got him onto my shoulders, and started for the door." The rubble was like marbles beneath my feet. Past and present fled through my mind in cat-dog chase, tail-for-tail and teeth-for-teeth and foam about the edges of my thoughts . . .

The hallway was now blocked in the direction we had come. I turned the other way. There had to be more exits. In time, we came across a fissure in the wall that slanted up. Dimly, far away, there was a white haze. I started up the slight incline, Sukon hissing his teeth, still refusing to groan.

Forty feet into the wall, the pathway broke and swept vertical. My head pounded. There was blood all over me— Shukon's blood. "Hold on," I said. "I'll need both hands for climbing." I started up.

My chest was afire, and the flames leaked up through my neck to play tag behind my eyes, incidentally setting fire to my brain too.

On the merry-go-round of recollection, one horse/memory after another fled past the ticket taker, sliding up and down on brass poles. There was my father, lying on a white bed in a white room, his face and hands snow carvings. For a moment, he faded and became a spunky little Ori-ental mayor who cared desperately for the lives and pride of his people. Then he was my father again, dying from the new Chinese variation of smallpox. White, he was, white . . . Horse up, horse down . . . Then there was myself, telling my father that my A&I team would find the anti-toxin for the pox. Then I was telling the same thing to a mayor in another time about another disease. Then again it was my father, and I was telling him not to worry. Telling him, telling him . . . Horse up, horse down. . . My father lay in the white bed, *face too* white. My father, dead nine minutes before the Duo had come up with the answer. White room, white bed, white father-corpse, and a view of stark and total whiteness from the hospital window to the lawn . . .

My head spun with the old scenes. The wall before me flashed between them. My lungs ached, and breath was a stone in my chest. My fingers slipped, and I clutched, bal-ancing on my toes.

Shukon's arm struck my side. I howled in pain. "What is it?" he croaked.

"Nothing." I caught the rock, shoved upward.

"You are hurt."

"A rib. Nothing—"

My fingers scraped across rock, tore suit and flesh. Pain stabbed up my arms, but I clutched and held on.

A third of the way up, I pulled onto a ledge that gave step to a shelf slashing seventy feet into the rubble. I stretched Shukon out, sat rubbing muscles and sucking in air. "We'll rest here. We're going to make it easily." It was someone else talking, or—perhaps—some liberated fragment of myself.

"You'll make it," he said. "Not. . . me."

I turned. The gun was pointed right between my eyes. "Put that down, for chrissakes!"

"You won't make it with me. Well both die anyway. My people need you."

"Don't be silly. Give me that."

The rubble whined, settled. I took a step toward him. He shot me.

I stumbled back, clutching my side. It was the barest possible of wounds, a sear, really. The bullet had done no damage. What little pain it had caused was directly over my broken rib. I had not suspected he was an expert shot.

"I am happy," he said. "Death can be viewed as a blessing. You should think more—you Westerners—like we Orientals. Acceptance, Dr. Bronson. Acceptance is the key to existence. You have, I know, not learned that yet. It will take you some time. But you must, Dr. Bronson, learn that."

Then he did something I shall never forget, something that has hung with me burning starlike forever. He turned the barrel of the gun on his own chest and blew his heart out. Blood fountained up. Flesh tore and flung itself free from his body. *Acceptance ...*

"Father!" I shouted, clenching his lifeless shoulders. Horses blended together on the carousel . . . He was ashen, his face very white behind the faceplate.

"You can't leave me. It isn't far. It was so close! Father, damn you, father!"

My mind merry-go-rounded madly, madly. My mind gave key to my heart, brimmed my eyes. I smashed my hands on the rocks, smashed and smashed to change what could not be changed. I stuffed my hands (*white-white*) into the gaping wound (*white-white*) in his chest, as if the blood could restore me, could reverse my life and take me back in time and make me whole again. I wanted to cure, father. Really. I'm in the military, but the individual still matters! Really, father! I didn't want to be late, father! Really (*white-white*) !

But much later, when the blood had coagulated and dried upon my hands, I started climbing again—for Time—rigid Time—is but a one-way street.

TO BEHOLD THE SUN

I am probably the only living writer who can say he collaborated with the justly famed Isaac Asimov on the second story I ever sold. Admittedly, I am stretching things a bit, but it was this way: I sent "To Behold the Sun" to Ed Ferman at F&SF, and received it back with a note saying the story needed some scientific rationalization for the trip to the sun which is the center of the plot. This is the only time Mr. Ferman ever asked me to rewrite, and even then he enclosed two paragraphs of scientific rationalization which he had garnered from Isaac who was giving them to me to use in the story. The rationalization amounted to perhaps a hundred words, and I slipped it all in without disrupting more than two pages of the original draft. Ed bought the story and published it. When I met Isaac at the Philcon (a science fiction fan convention in Philadelphia) this past November, I reminded him of the fact we had collaborated and, jokingly, offered him a quarter for his share of the work. He smiled that Slavic yet somehow gnomish smile and said, "If you don't mind, I'd rather just kiss your wife." Whereupon he took Gerda in the famous Asimov arms and kissed her with the famous Asimov lips. Isaac, that is the last time I will ever collaborate with you—and you can forget the quarter, because I have already spent it!

what would it be like

to step quickly

into the roaring

of the sun

and walk down its streets

of golden apples

and shapeless streetlamps . . .

Amishi, Star Dreams

"because it's there," I said.

There was an appreciative murmur of laughter from the press. The twinkling lens of NBTri-D seemed like jeweled eyes of mythical dragons.

Bacon of the *Times* raised his hand and waved.

I suppressed an urge to wave back. "Mr. Bacon?"

"Exactly how many days will the trip require?"

"I believe the answer to that can be found on the data sheet that Space Cent handed out a half an hour ago." Twenty-four going and twenty-four coming home—x-plus days there. What we found would dictate the length of our fiery visit.

There was a waving of hands. Again the silly urge. I fought another urge to scream. Instead, I said, "Time," rising and moving away from behind the small desk.

Unasked questions burst forth from a dozen lips as if they had suddenly acquired a life of their own and refused to be restrained by lips and teeth and gum. "Sorry, sorry," I shook my head, exiting from the conference chamber via a small door at the rear of the stage.

Krison was waiting in the hallway.

"Fine," he said.

Krison always said, "Fine—but—"

"But," he said on schedule, "perhaps you shouldn't have been so abrupt, so—well, antisocial."

"I can afford to be," I snapped.

"But the project can't. We at Space Cent get our funds from Congress, and Congress, in turn, gets its funds from the public. Tell them what they want to know. Straight off the proverbial shoulder, tell them that unmanned probes have discovered as much as possible. Tell them that men must now go in a heavily armored ship to study surface turbulence at close quarters. Tell them about solar flares and solar wind and about how we must know these things before safe space travel is made cheap and easy. But for God's sake, don't brush off the people!"

"My job isn't public relations. I promised to cybernet the ship to and from—not to answer a lot of foolish questions."

"If you didn't want to be the center of public interest," he said with a moronic grin, "you shouldn't have had an affair with Mandy Morain."

"It isn't an *affair*," I snorted and walked even faster to-ward the door at the end of the hall, beyond which rested my hovercar.

He paced me. "Remember, tomorrow starts a four week period of training, exhaustive runs. Mandy. Morain will be out of the schedule for awhile."

"Yes, coach. I know the rules." I slammed the door as quickly as I opened it. But it only hummed shut softly, and I could feel his grin on my back. Bruce Krison was the ultimate pest—a perfectionist.

It was raining a misty, cold sort of rain. It nibbled at my bone marrow. The temperature inside the hovercar, a Cham-pion, was a comfortable seventy-four, so I took off my coat, loosened my tie, and

settled back in the seat. There was a stiff pain in my neck. I needed relaxation, but there was no place in particular I cared to relax *at*. The bars would be crowded since the offices closed within the hour, and crowds weren't much to my liking. I thumbed the city-oriented group of maps into the car's "brain" and punched several random coordinates. Closing my heavy eyes, I set-tled back to rest with the soft moan of rushing wind blow-ing under the rising craft. . .

"No" she said. "God, God,no."

He coughed blood and stared at it lying in a black pool.

His leg seemed pinned beneath the rubble, but when he looked, it wasn't. It was simply turning slightly blue, stream-ing blood where he could see the skin through torn trouser leg. Slowly, he became aware of her soft moaning, mixed now and then with a thick, gurgling noise.

Explosion!

There were other sounds around him. Now and then a chunk of plaster fell with a crash. The whine of white metal cooling to red was the screeching of wild animals in his brain. Steam hissed. There were other moans in the distance, and the sounds of sirens seeped through the watts of flames.

"Marie," he whispered, for he was afraid to speak aloud.

There was an indistinct mumble, a thick gurgle. He forced himself to his knees, and his leg felt better. Only a slight cut, the blue color proving to be concrete dust. The entire scene was out of Dante. The fire watts were high, and the wreck-age of the theater was mixed with parts of what he recog-nized as a cybership. Some Sensitive had been used to his limits and had not been able to center the ship into the landing cushions of the Port two blocks away. He had set her down, rather had crashed her into the theater.

"Marie," he whispered again, feeling the throb of his heart race almost out of control. Then, dragging himself through the dust-choked ruins, he topped a pile of rubble and saw her....

Her eyes were gone.

Her face was blistered and blackened.

And the black sockets of her eyes bled rust water...

"My God. Kill me. Kill me," she screeched at him.

"Marie," he whispered.

"Mercy. Kill me!"

His stomach fluttered, tumbled. He couldn't! Not kill her! God please strike them both dead!

He staggered away. He broke into a run. But to the far limit of the fire walls, he could hear her. "Kill me! Jessie, Jessie, please!"

And the worst of it was, he felt no pain. She suffered, and sitting next to her, he escaped.

The fire walls danced.

JESSIE! The scream shook the world, and hands from outside putted him through the fire watts ...

I woke to the crash of raindrops against the windscreen, and it was the sound of rocks smashing down a mountain-side. I threw up my psychic defenses and dulled my cyber-netic tendencies.

It was an old dream. Five years old. I wiped the sweat from my brow and looked at the unwinding map. It was an old dream, but nevertheless disconcerting.

Sector three, segment two-ought-two. And while that registered, the car drifted to a halt, was scanned by a private robogate man, and swung again into a tree-lined drive.

In the right mood, I might have laughed. It was Freudian. Positively Freudian that when I wanted to punch a random set of coordinates, I would select those that brought me here. I didn't laugh, however, my mood bordering on morose.

She said, "Jessie, come in."

She was wearing a black mini-suit, and her honey hair spilled like wild, sparkling rivers down her slender shoulders. Her eyes were blue, skylike pieces of crystal.

"Fine," I said. "I'd like to."

"Should I send the servants away?" She was wealthy enough to afford human rather than robo servants.

"No. Training begins tomorrow, and I must just as well begin denying myself tonight."

She curled up on the couch, tucking her legs under her. "You're set on going then?"

"Yes."

She was everything the newspapers and magazines and Tri-D tanks said she was. Her breasts were high and firm, her belly flat, her legs long. Goddess legs. And her face fairy tale princess', sugar, and naughty spice. Mandy Mo-rain had been the rage of Modern Hollywood until a year earlier when she startled the filmworld with "I wish soli-tude to find the man I love."

She had received four thousand offers overnight.

She could easily have had many more attractive lovers than Jessie Poul, cybernetist. Much more responding lovers too, lovers without my periodic "trouble."

I had met her on the set of *Languish Queen*. They had hired me to cybernet a cave to tell them just when to expect a cave-in. I was to scream a warning three minutes ahead so they could remove MM and the other stars to safe ground. We hit it off immediately. We seemed—almost—to fit like two pieces of a puzzle in our own snug corner of the total picture.

She leaned over and kissed me. I felt myself, like fire-flies, melting into the darkness of her sheltering night "No," I said.

"No?"

"Tomorrow is training."

My eyes seemed to rivet to the leaping flames in the simu-fireplaoe.

"Tomorrow has not yet come." Her voice was a like a soft summer breeze.

The flames were orange and red and yellow and tinted with green.

"Tonight is the threshold to tomorrow." I'm not sure whether I ran out of the house or walked, but when I got home, I let the videophone ring, knowing it was she. With malice aforethought, I drank myself into a fitful sleep. Dreams filled my head, and a face without eyes asked me *why do you want to go to the sun? Why to the sun, the sun?*

The following weeks were what Krison had promised—work that would break a bull's back. We ran and reran emergency situations. We tested the ship. I familiarized my-self with it, with the feeling of the intricate wiring, the platings, the cyberpickups, the shields. In all the lanes of space, there was no ship so heavily shielded as ours. She would have to withstand more raw radiation than we really had a right to ask of her. Other ships had become death traps in radiation storms of less intensity than the ones we would face. If it had been economically feasible to build all ships as well insulated as she, then our trip would be unnecessary. But the cost was—to make a pun—astronomical. The only other alternative was to study the origin of the solar winds in hopes that we could eventually predict radi-ation storms in space and detour ships around them. Ours was a history-making ship. She was a good ship. There are good ships and good women.

"There are good ships and good women," said Malherbe, the captain.

"I only knew one," I said.

"One? Why, I've captained a half dozen good ones in the last twenty years."

"I meant women," I said, putting down the coffee and moving to the window to watch the sunset. It was diffi-cult to imagine soaring toward that lantern, toward the gaseous, nebulous, semiliving creature in the sky. But in a few weeks . . . There were pinks and yellows and soft blues, and a man could lose his thoughts, could hypnotize himself almost like watching a painted spiral on a wheel-spinning and spinning and spinning and . . .

It happened the next morning at eleven o'clock. Malherbe, First Officer Blanksman, and ship's doctor Amishi were coping with a series of fake emergencies that a group of security men had thought up—most of which could not possi-bly occur aboard a saucer. A fire had been started in a mock-up of the ship, and the three were to stop it before irreparable damage could be done. Of course it was ridicu-lous, for the plasterboard of the mock-up burned very much more rapidly than would the special alloy of the real sau-cer. I stopped a moment to watch the fun and games.

But Fate was in rare form that morning. The heat—some-thing the security experts had not connected

with fire—ig-nited a stack of boxes behind the "stage." There was a sudden explosion that rocked the mock-up, and the wall of crates came tumbling down over the wooden saucer, burying the crew.

They said I screamed. I only remember running, tearing at boxes, heaving them out of the way with a furiousness I never knew I possessed. I dragged Amishi out onto the safe floor. He was unconscious but unburned. I remember seeing Malherbe and Blanksman too—all three safe. And the fire crew waving hoses and fog dispensers.

I don't know why I rushed back in. But they had to drag me out in the end. Whimpering, Malherbe said. Whim-pering.

Schedules were reworked, and the launch date was moved back ten days. Everyone was given a thorough psychic probe. The big shots wanted to be sure no traumas from the incident would render us incapable of acting when we reached our target—Old Sol. But they didn't check back any farther than *that* fire.

The day after the near disaster, I came across Amishi sitting in the coffee shop. He was composing one of his poems.

"Let's go

down foggy paths

in twisted moonlight

in purple moon-night

in some overwhelming

sort of madness

taken through open-souled osmosis

from hatter-mad flowers

And let's go

holding hands and laughing

I feel your arteries throbbing

Let's go

in the cool ice of evening

through haunted forests

.where trees bend

to the white world's end
craggy and awful
to snatch away unsuspecting souls
who think Nature
is a mother and not a liquidator
Let's go
strangers in a strange land
orphans of the heart
strangers in a strange land
now cinders drift apart..."

"I think it fits," Alexander said. He was the young opera-tor of the robomechs that would take care of any repair job I might sense during the flight.

I nodded agreement.

"I mean, it *is* a strange land indeed!"

Amishi looked at me, half-embarrassed. "I want to thank you for yesterday." His yellow skin seemed to redden slightly.

"No need for thanks, just part of the job."

"By the way," Alexander interrupted, "how's the ship feel?"

"Fine. Fine as a ship could feel. Your robomechs may be useless extra baggage."

He winced at that, and I was glad I had said it. I didn't like Gingos Alexander.

"Glad to hear optimism," a booming voice said behind me. I turned to see Bruce Krison smiling like an idiot.

"You're smiling like an idiot," I told him.

"Thank you," he smiled. "That's one of the nicer things you've ever said to me."

"Everything running smoothly?"

"Yes," I said curtly.

"What about the incident of the fire."

It was blunt. Too blunt not to catch me off balance. "Close," I finally said.

"Too close. And unnecessary."

"I thought the others were still in the fire."

He looked at me steadily, and I returned his gaze, afraid to, but afraid not to. He sighed. "Well, there's a phone call for you."

"A phone call?"

He winked. "A Miss Morain."

"Tell her I'm not allowed to talk while in training," I said, straightening my tie and turning to leave.

She called for the seventh time on Launch Day. But conquest was in my blood, and the great eye of the sun lay ahead.

I died in less than a fragment of a millisecond.

I looked out and saw my body strapped in a chair, needles puncturing it, glucose bottles dangling delicately above it like transparent fruit on a metal tree. There were dark circles under my eyes. I looked dead—gray and all. And it always seemed, that flash of an instant when I left my body, that Death had freed me.

Behind my body sat Amishi, in charge of regulating my slowed metabolism—in charge of my life. The lights on his scopes pulsed green and yellow. In the shadows stood the captain, without duties, trying to look like his job really mattered. We all knew that it didn't; he was an ornament, a leftover from the days when men sailed the seas and lower skies.

I left that scene, slipped into a heavy cable and shot like light wriggling over every coil, around every twist, faster than the biggest roller coaster ever, laughing. Everything proved to be intact, and disengaging myself from the system, I fled back to the contrasting quiet and dark-ness of the cyberbase in the dome of the saucer where I was to rest and survey with only a skim setup to warn of impending crisis.

It was the second day out. Six hundred thousand miles gone. It was the second *night* out in reality. In the dark-ness of the cyberbase, in the coolness of its crystal body, retiring my mind within my mind, the strange sleep of cybernetic unawareness crept over me, and the time for Daily Rest was at hand.

"Because it's there," I said. (Man's desire to conquer Nature drives him to all heights and depths, proving his sovereignty, I lied to myself.)

There was an appreciative ROAR of La-ha-ugh-ha-ter from the press.

Bacon (of the Times!) *waved his hand.*

"Mr. (pig: unspoken") Bacon?"

"Exactly (I) how many (#) *days will the trip require????*"

A lady reporter called from the rear: "Why do you want to go to the sun? Why to the sun, the sun?"

"Because it's there" I said/lied into her empty eyes . . .

Upon waking, I ran routine checks and found everything up to par. I peeked from a well-placed rivet and saw Amishi talking to Malherbe. They appeared to be arguing, but before I could esp out and hear them, they separated. The conversation was over.

Plasma bottles dangled over my head. A million miles went by,

The fourth day I slept.

And Alexander dreamed. I heard about it the next morning. They had a sign placed in front of my body. JESSIE, CONTACT US. WE MUST TALK. SOMETHING HAS COME UP.

I trickled out of the shielding, through the wires, back into my own head. They put the ship on automatic, taking a risk they never should have—machines being so unreliable—and revived me.

"Dreams," Malherbe said.

"So?"

"We've all had them. Ever since we left earth. Last night, Alexander woke up, and his dream continued. It was stand-ing in his room!"

I looked at Alexander. "What dream?"

"It was horrible," he said. Although I figured he had probably been delirious at the time, I could see the way he quivered when he thought of it.

"That tells me nothing."

"A—thing, actually. It was gray, large, and spoke with a strange, feminine voice."

"It spoke?"

"Yes."

"What did it say?"

He squirmed. "Not to the sun, my boy. Not to the sun."

"That's ridiculous."

"That's what it said."

"Have you checked the ship?" I asked.

"The first thing," Malherbe said. "There's nothing on her that isn't meant to be."

"The jitters," I said. "Simply a case of the jitters. Why did you call me out of cybernet?"

"We wanted to see if you had been dreaming too," Mal-herbe said.

I looked around and saw the slightest traces of fear on their faces. Fear of the Unknown. You could not fear a star whose heart you were going to approach; it was too vast a thing to fear, so you made up something more hu-man—but not quite—to center your animals passions on. It was that and nothing more. "I have to get back," I snapped. "We have a long way to go, dreams or no dreams."

In the cyberbase, out of my body again, I thought about it. There *was* something to it. Of course it had to be psydiological—all of them having the same dream—something basic, something buried in every soul, a racial fear. In-teresting.

On the eighth day, I slept, the world having been created some time earlier.

The following morning, the eye of the sun was nearly sky-filling, a monster streaking to gobble us up along with Venus and Mercury which lay ahead.

Venus passed by dreamlike. Gases and clouds and some-how erotic.

On the eleventh day, I slept, thinking of the sun. Visions of fire balloons danced in my head.

The next morning, they had a sign in front of my body. Red felt letters on a black background: JESSIE. CONFER-ENCE. MOST URGENT.

It was the same as before.

"Dreams?" I asked.

"They went too far this time," Malherbe said nervously, and I noticed that he had personified the dreams. "They attacked Alexander. They cornered me, but my screams drove them away."

"Them?" I asked.

"Well—IT," Gingos said. His arm was bandaged, and Amishi confirmed the statement that there were eleven stitches required to close the wound.

"Let's hear it," I said. My body felt weak even though Amishi had been exercising it every day.

"I woke up, and it was crooning to me. 'Not to the sun, my boy. Not to the sun, the sun.' I told it to get the hell out. It kept coming closer. Big as a robomech, ponderous. It kept chanting too. Then I saw its face—as much as the shadows would permit me to see. Thank God for shadows. There were two gaping craters instead of eyes—no other fa-cial features that I could see. I screamed, and it trundled out before anyone could come—but not before it grabbed me and whispered the chant to my face," He held

up his bandaged arm as if that were legal evidence.

I looked to Malherbe who was nodding his head in agreement.

"And *your* story?" I asked.

"I woke up to Gingos' screams. As I was getting to the doorway, the thing came upon me from the corridor. In the semidarkness, I could make out its shape only as a hulk. It moved toward me, but I started screaming, and it was gone down the companionway. We didn't see it again all night."

I sighed.

"Jess," Amishi said, "don't take this too lightly. Other things have been happening. I am missing nearly all of my Simu-Life Grafting Flesh. If we have any serious wounds, I will be powerless to patch any of them."

"We've discovered that we're missing a hand torch too." Malherbe chimed in, his chimes sounding like death knolls. "A cylinder of fuel for it too."

"Okay," I said. "Don't panic." They looked to me for guidance. A cybernet is supposed to know all that happens in his ship—or at least to be able to account for it, explain it away, rationalize. Somewhere inside, the explanation did indeed stir through my vitals, but I couldn't completely grasp it. "Let's conduct a search with an impartial point of view—mine."

We searched every deck. In the bottom deck, fifty robo-mechs were lined up, bent at the flexible waist as if doing toe-touches, their heads at their feet, waiting to be activated. But no monsters.

We covered the supply chamber inch by inch, opening crates, unsealing canisters. Nothing. We checked drive chambers. We investigated crew rooms. We searched the airless outer chamber. Nowhere was there a creature of horror, nowhere a warning soothsayer sent by the sun.

They were a little more cheerful when I departed into cybernet, for we had a plan. I was to watch Malherbe's room from the walls, waiting for the approach of the beast. They were sure I would see it too. Upon sighting it, they expected me to turn the ship around and make for home. I knew I wouldn't. I wanted the sun, for some reason.

The room was washed in shadows. It was like a crypt, one lonely bed, cold walls. Malherbe was restless. That was the last I remembered.

The thirteenth day, the sun was like a god.

The temperature was way up on the outer hull, and I checked the decks of refrigerating units that would help regulate our internal atmosphere. I examined the shells of force between each deck—shells that would repel heat to a certain degree. Everything was functioning perfectly.

The sun was like a god, all-commanding.

The fourteenth day, temperature on the outer shell rose two hundred and fourteen degrees.

I watched it through filtered hull cameras. The sun was now like the sea. A womb. A mother of life into which we were crawling, the beginning and the end. It was all and everything, and its great comforting

eye stared unblinkingly.

The sixteenth day I slept.

The seventeenth I did nothing but watch the sun.

The eighteenth day I slept.

And the nineteenth.

The twentieth day, the hull was cherry red, streaking white in spots, and I flipped the frig units to full capacity.

The sun glowed: it covered the sky; it simply *was*.

On day twenty-two, they had a sign up. I saw it accidental-ly. I was drawn to look at my body. As we neared the sun, the desire to see if my body was scorched. . . .

But there was a sign. JESSIE, GOING CRAZY. THE THING WONT LET US ALONE AT NIGHT. HAVE TAKEN TO SLEEPING IN GUARDED SHIFTS. WHY HAVEN'T YOU BEEN CHECKING IN? WE WANT TO GO HOME. WE'VE BEEN PUTTING UP SIGNS FOR DAYS. IT HAS TAKEN TO DESTROYING OUR FOOD. CONSTANT TERROR HERE. WE WANT TO GO HOME AGAIN.

I had forgotten to check in. For how many days? The idea struck me terribly hard. I had never missed a check-in in ten years of cybernating. I zipped through the decks to make a final check of all systems before slipping into my body.

And I gasped at the sight of the sun. It was the universe. Arms reached out from its living surface and stretched like the arms of a lazy man waking. There were dark clouds on the surface, shifting and changing. It hurt my shielded eyes.

An hour passed, and I could not look away.

It was a shifting mass of liquid fire. It was all the fires of all time. It was Nero in Rome. It was Chicago. It was San Francisco after the earthquake. It was the great Moon Fire—a thousand domes filled with burning atmosphere. It was all fires of all times. And it screamed. It tortured its lungs. It was all the fires of all the times and all the victims of all those fires of all those times. It was Alpha and Omega. It was Hell living. It was Heaven dying. The fires roared. The victims screamed.

I fled in fear, through the refrigeration units, tripping the shut-off switches. I slipped through cables, through walk, madly searching for a way out—but really wanting none. Looking to see if my body had yet blackened, I looked onto control deck. Amishi's body was draped over a chair, his neck broken. Malherbe was literally shredded, and Alex-ander was lying in a red-black pool, his hand clenched into a fist. The temperature was seventy-nine. The sun had not murdered them.

A sign said: JESSIE. STOP IT FOR GOD'S SAKE. ITS YOU. AMISHI SAYS IT'S YOU. THE MONSTER IS A ROBOMECH YOU'RE DIRECTING, AND WE CANT STOP IT. WHY, JESSIE? THE FACE YOU PUT ON IT WITH PLASTIC FLESH—NO EYES, JESSIE. AND BLIS-TERS AND SCARS. HORRIBLE. COME TO YOUR SENSES, JESSIE. MY GOD, JESSIE . . . JESSIE, LISTEN. LOOK, TURN THE SHIP AROUND. NOT TO THE SUN, JESSIE. THAT'S

WHAT YOU WANT, ISN'T IT? NOT TO THE SUN? STOP THE ROBOMECH. STOP HIM NOW, JESSIE! NOW! NOWNOWNOW! NOW—

I wept. I wanted to turn around. I didn't want to turn around. Both and neither.

I soared, spinning through the decks of the ship, up-ward toward the outer shell, the refrigeration units off. The heat more and more intense. Whimpering.

Whimpering.

The sun is one great god-eye. The sun taketh away, and only the sun can returneth.

The heat is strong on my mind. My body is forty decks below, and the temperature there is a hundred and four. The heat is stronger on my mind in the outer shell. It hurts me, it hurts. The walls of flame sting and are Hellish.

Please Mandy ...

Please Mandy . . .

Help me to come home again. . . .

The sun offers no consolation, but stares with two black and empty eyes ...