

Fred Saberhagen

Earth Descended

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YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALF DOOR

That first night there was a police vehicle, what I think they call a K9 unit, in the little employees' lot behind the Institute. I parked my car beside it and got out. The summer moon was dull above the city's air, but floodlights glared at a small door set in the granite flank of the great building. I carried my toolbox there, pushed a button, and stood waiting.

Within half a minute, a uniformed guard appeared inside the reinforced glass of the door. Before he had finished unlocking, two uniformed policemen were standing beside him, and beside them a powerful leashed dog whose ears were aimed my way.

The door opened. "Electronic Watch," I said, holding out my identification. The dog inspected me, while the three uniformed men peered at my symbols and were satisfied.

With a few words and nods the police admitted me to fellowship. In the next moment they were saying goodbye to the guard. "It's clean here, Dan, we're gonna shove off."

The guard agreed they might as well. He gave them a jovial farewell and locked them out, and then turned back to me, still smiling, an old and heavy man, now adopting a fatherly attitude. He squinted with the effort of remembering what he had read on my identification card. "Your name Joe?"

"Joe Ricci."

"Well, Joe, our system's acting up." He pointed. "The control room's up this way."

"I know, I helped install it." I walked beside the guard named Dan through silent passages and silent marble galleries, all carved by nightlights into one third brilliance and two thirds shadow. We passed through new glass doors that were opened for us by photocells. Maintenance men in green uniforms were cleaning the glass; the white men among them were calling back and forth in Polish.

Dan whistled cheerfully as we went up the wide four branched central stair, passing under a great skylight holding out the night. From the top landing of the stair, a plain door, little noticed in the daytime,

opens through classical marble into a science fiction room of fluorescent lights and electronic consoles. In that room are three large wall panels, marked Security, Fire, and Interior Climate. As we entered, another guard was alone in the room, seated before the huge security panel.

“Gallery two fifteen showed again,” the seated guard said in a faintly triumphant voice, turning to us and pointing to one of the indicator lights on the panel. The little panel lights were laid out within an outline of the building’s floor plan. “You’d swear it was someone in there.”

I set down my kit and stood looking at the panel, mentally reviewing the general layout of the security circuitry. Electronic Watch has not for a long time used anything as primitive as photo-cells, which are relegated to such prosaic jobs as opening doors. After closing hours in the Institute, when the security system is switched on, invisible electric fields permeate the space of every room where there is anything of value. A cat cannot prowl the building without leaving a track of dis-turbance across the Security panel.

At the moment all its indicators were dim and quiet. I opened my kit, took out a multimeter and a set of probes, and began a preliminary check of the panel itself.

“You’d swear someone’s in two fifteen when it happens,” said the guard named Dan. Standing close and watching me, he gave a little laugh. “And then a man starts over to investigate, and before he can get there it stops.”

Of course there was nothing nice and obvious wrong with the panel. I had not expected there would be; neat simple troubles are too much to expect from the complexities of modern electronic gear. I tapped the indicator marked 215 but its glow remained dim and steady. “You get the signal from just the one gallery?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said the guard in the chair. “Flashing a couple times, real quick, on and off. Then it stays on steady for a while, like someone’s just standing in the middle of the room over there. Then like he said, it goes off while a man’s trying to get over there. We called the officers and then we called you.”

I put the things back in my kit and closed it up and lifted it. “I’ll walk over there and look around.”

“You know where two fifteen is?” Dan had just unwrapped a sandwich. “I can walk over with you.”

“That’s all right, I can find it.” I delayed on my way out of the room, smiling back at the two guards. “I’ve been here in the daytime, looking at the pictures.”

“Oh. You bring your girl here, hey?” The guards laughed, a little relieved that I had broken my air of grim intentness. I know I often struck people that way.

Walking alone through the halflit halls, I found it pleasant to think of myself as a man who came there in two such different capacities. Electronics and art were both in my grasp. I had a good start at knowing everything of importance. Renaissance Man, I thought, of the New Renaissance of the Space Age.

Finding the gallery I wanted was no problem, for all of them are numbered plainly, more or less in sequence. Through rising numbers I traversed the Thirteenth Century, the Fourteenth, the Fifteenth. A multitude of Christs and virgins, saints and noblemen, watched my passage from their walls of glare and shadow.

From several rooms away I saw the girl, through a real doorway framing the painted one she stands in.

My steps slowed as I entered gallery two fifteen. About twenty other paintings hang there, but for me it was empty of any presence but hers.

That night I had not thought of her until I saw her, which struck me then as odd, because on my occasional daytime visits I had always stopped before her door. I had no girl of the kind to take to an art gallery, whatever guards might surmise.

The painter's light is full only on her face, and on her left hand, which rests on the closed bottom panel of a divided door. She is leaning very slightly out through the half-open doorway, her head of auburn curls turned just an inch to her left but her eyes looking the other way. She watches and listens, that much is certain. To me it has always seemed that she is expecting someone. Her full vital body is chaste in a plain dark dress. Consider her attitude, her face, and wonder that so much is made of the smile of Mona Lisa.

The card on the wall beside the painting reads:

REMBRANDT VAN RUN

DUTCH 16061669 dated 1645

YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALFDOOR

She might have been seventeen when Rem-brandt saw her, and seventeen she has remained, while the faces passing her doorway have grown up and grown old and disappeared, wave after wave of them.

She waits.

I broke out of my reverie, at last, with an effort. My eye was caught by the next painting, Saftleven's Witches' Sabbath, which once in the daylight had struck me as amusing. When I had freed my eyes from that I looked into the adjoining galleries, trying to put down the sudden feeling of being watched. I squinted up at the skylight ceiling of gallery two fifteen, through which a single glaring spotlight shone.

Holding firmly to thoughts of electronics, I peered in corners and under benches, where a for-gotten transistor radio might lurk to interfere, conceivably, with the electric field of the alarm. There was none.

From my kit I took a small field strength meter, and like a priest swinging a censer I moved it gently through the air around me. The needle swayed, as it should have, with the invisible presence of the field.

There was a light gasp, as of surprise. A sighing momentary movement in the air, something nearby come and gone in a moment, and in that moment the meter needle jumped over violently, pegging so that with a technician's reflex my hand flew to switch it to a less sensitive scale.

I waited there alone for ten more minutes, but nothing further happened.

"It's working now, I could follow you every-where you moved," said the guard in the chair, turning with assurance to speak to me just as I reentered the science fiction room. Dan and his sandwich were gone.

"Something's causing interference," I said, in my voice the false authority of the expert at a loss. "So. You never have any trouble with any other gallery, hey?"

“No, least I’ve never seen any—well, look at that now. Make a liar out of me.” The guard chuckled without humor. “Something showing in two twenty-seven now. That’s Modern Art.”

Half an hour later I was creeping on a catwalk through a clean crawl space above gallery two twenty-seven, tracing a perfectly healthy micro-wave system. The reflected glare of nightlights below filtered up into the crawl space, through a million holes in acoustical ceiling panels.

A small bright auburn movement, almost directly below me, caught my eye. I crouched lower on the catwalk, putting my eyes close to the holes in one thin panel, bringing into my view almost the whole of the enormous room under the false ceiling.

The auburn was in a girl’s hair. It came near matching the hair of the girl in the painting, but that could only have been coincidence, if such a thing exists. The girl below me was alive in the same sense I was, solid and fleshly and three-dimensional. She wore a kind of stretch suit, of a green shade that set off her hair, and she held a shiny object raised like a camera in her hands.

From my position almost directly above her I could not see her face, only the curved grace of her body as she took a step forward, holding the shiny thing high. Then she began another step, and half-way through it she was gone, vanished in an instant from the center of an open floor.

Some time passed before I eased up from the strain of my bent position. All the world was silent and ordinary, so that alarm and astonishment would have seemed out of place. I inched back through the crawl space to my borrowed ladder, climbed down, walked along a corridor and turned a corner into the vast shadow-and-glare of gallery two two seven.

Standing in the brightlit spot where I had seen the girl, I realized she had been raising her camera at a sculpture—a huge, flowing mass of bronze blobs and curved holes, on the topmost blob a face that looked like something scratched there by a child. I went up to it and thumped my knuckles on the nearest bulge of bronze, and the great thing sounded hollowly. Looking at the card on its marble base I had begun to read—

RECLINING FIGURE, 1957

—when a sound behind me made me spin round.

Dan asked benignly: “Was that you raising a ruckus in here about five minutes ago? Looked like a whole mob of people was running around.”

I nodded, feeling the beginning of a strange contentment.

Next day I awoke at the usual time, to afternoon sunlight pushing at the closed yellow shades of my furnished apartment, to the endless street noises coming in. I had slept well and felt alert at once, and began thinking about the girl.

Even if I had not seen her vanish, it would have been obvious that her comings and goings at the Institute were accomplished by no ordinary prowlers’ or burglars’ methods. Nor was she there on any ordinary purpose; if she had stolen or vandalized, I would most certainly have been awakened early.

I ate an ordinary breakfast, not noticing much or being noticed, sitting at the counter in the restaurant on

the ground floor of the converted hotel where I rented my apartment. The waitress wore green, although her hair was black. Once I had tried halfheartedly to talk to her, to know her, to make out, but she had kept on working and loafing, talking to me and everyone else alike.

When the sun was near going down I started for work as usual. I bought the usual newspaper to take along, but did not read it when I saw the headline PEACE TALKS FAILING. That evening I felt the way I supposed a lover should feel, going to his beloved.

Dan and two other guards greeted me with smiles of the kind that people wear when things that are clearly not their fault are going wrong for their employer. They told me that the pseudoprowler had once more visited the gallery two fifteen, had vanished as usual from the panel just as a guard approached that room, and then had several times appeared on the indicators for gallery two twenty-seven. I went to two twenty-seven, making a show of carrying in tools and equipment, and settled myself on a bench in a dim corner, to wait.

The contentment I had known for twenty-four hours became impatience, and with slow passing time the tension of impatience made me uncon-trollably restless. I felt sure that she could some-how watch me waiting; she must know I was waiting for her, she must be able to see that I meant her no harm. Beyond meeting her, I had no plan at all.

Not even a guard came to disturb me. Around me, in paint and bronze and stone and welded steel, crowded the tortured visions of the twentieth century. I got up at last in desperation and found that not everything was torture. There on the wall were Monet's water lilies; at first nothing but vague flat shapes of paint, then the surface of a pond and a deep curve of reflected sky. I grew dizzy staring into the water, a dizziness of relief that made me laugh. When I looked away at last the walls and ceiling were shimmering as if the glare of the nightlights was reflected from Monet's pond.

I understood then that something was awry, something was being done to me, but I could not care. Giggling at the world, I stood there breathing air that seemed to sparkle in my lungs. The auburn haired girl came to my side and took my arm and guided me to the bench where my unused equipment lay.

Her voice had the beauty I had expected, though with a strange strong accent. "Oh, I am sorry to make you weak and sick. But you insist to stay here and span much time, the time in which I must do my work."

For the moment I could say nothing. She made me sit on the bench, and bent over me with concern, turning her head with something of the same questioning look as the girl in the Rembrandt painting. Again she said: "Oh, I am sorry."

"S'all right." My tongue was heavy, and I still wanted to laugh.

She smiled and hurried away, flowed away. Again she was dressed in a green stretch suit, setting off the color of her hair. This time she vanished from my sight in normal fashion, going around one of the gallery's low partitions. Coming from behind that partition were flashes of light.

I got unsteadily to my feet and went after her. Rounding the corner, I saw three devices set up on tripods, the tripods spaced evenly around the Reclining Figure. From the three devices, which I could not begin to identify, little lances of light flicked like stings or brushes at the sculpture. And whirling around it like dancers, on silent rubbery feet, moved another pair of machine shapes, busy with some purpose that was totally beyond me.

The girl reached to support me as I swayed. Her hands were strong, her eyes were darkly blue, and she was tall in slender curves. Smiling, she said: "It is all right, I do no harm."

"I don't care about that," I said. "I want only—not to tangle things with you."

"What?" She smiled, as if at someone raving. She had drugged me, with subtle gasses in the air that sparkled in my lungs. I knew that but I did not care.

"I always hold back," I said, "and tangle things with people. Not this time. I want to love you without any of that. This is a simple miracle and I just want it to go on. Now tell me your name."

She was so silent and solemn for a moment, watching me, that I feared that I had angered her. But then she shook her head and smiled again. "My name is Dayell. Now don't fall down!" and she took her supporting arm away.

For the moment I was content without her touching me. I leaned against the partition and looked at her busy machines. "Will you steal our Reclining Figure?" I asked, giggling again as I wondered who would want it.

"Steal?" she was thoughtful. "The two greatest works of this house I must save. I will replace them with copies so well made that no one will ever know, before—" She broke off. After a moment she added: "Only you will know." And then she turned away to give closer attention to her silent and ragingly busy machines. When she made an adjustment on a tiny thing she held in her hand, there were suddenly two Reclining Figures visible, one of them smaller and transparent but growing larger, moving toward us from some dark and distant space that was temporarily within the gallery.

I was thinking over and over what Dayell had said. Addled and joyful, I plotted what seemed to me a clever compliment, and announced: "I know what the two greatest works in this house are."

"Oh?" The word in her voice was a soft bell. But she was still busy.

"One is Rembrandt's girl."

"You are right!" Dayell, pleased, turned to me. "Last night I took that one to safety. Where I take them, the originals, they will be safe forever."

"But the best—is you." I pushed away from the partition. "I make you my girl. My love. Forever, if it can be. But how long doesn't matter."

Her face changed and her eyes went wide, as if she truly understood how marvelous were such words, from anyone, from grim Joe Ricci in particular. She took a step toward me.

"If you could mean that," she whispered, "then I would stay with you, in spite of everything."

My arms went round her and I could feel forever passing. "Stay, of course I mean it, stay with me."

"Come, Dayell, come," intoned a voice, soft, but still having metal in its timbre. Looking over her shoulder I saw the machine shapes waiting, balancing motionless now on their silent feet. There was again only one Reclining Figure.

My thoughts were clearing and I said to her: "You're leaving copies, you said, and no one will know the

difference, before. Before what? What's going to happen?"

When my girl did not answer I held her at arms' length. She was shaking her head slowly, and tears had come into her eyes. She said: "It does not matter what happens, since I have found here a man of life who will love me. In my world there is no one like that. If you will hold me I can stay."

My hands holding her began to shake. I said: "I won't keep you here, to die in some disaster. I'll go with you instead."

"Come, Dayell, come." It was a terrible steel whisper.

And she stepped back, compelled by the machine voice now that I had let her go. She said to me: "You must not come. My world is safe for paint, safe for bronze, not safe for men who love. Why do you think that we must steal—"

She was gone, the machines and lights gone with her.

The Reclining Figure stands massive and immobile as ever, bronze blobs and curved holes, with a face like something scratched on by a child. Thump it with a knuckle, and it sounds hollowly. Maybe three hundred years' perspective is needed to see it as one of the two greatest in this house. Maybe eyes are needed, accustomed to more dimensions than ours; eyes of those who sent Dayell diving down through time to save choice fragments from the murky wreckage of the New Renaissance, plunged in the mud of the ignorant and boastful twentieth century.

Not that her world is better. I could not live there now.

The painting looks unchanged. A girl of seven-teen still waits, frozen warmly in Rembrandt's light, three hundred years and more on the verge of smiling, secure that long from age and death and disappointment. But will a war incinerate her next week, or an earthquake swallow her next month? Or will our city convulse and die in mass rioting madness, a Witches' Sabbath come true? What warning can I give? When they found me alone and weeping in the empty gallery they talked about a nervous breakdown. The indicators on the Security Panel are always quiet now and I have let myself be argued out of the little of my story that I told. No world is safe for those who love.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE METAL MURDERER

It had the shape of a man, the brain of an electronic devil.

It and the machines like it were the best imitations of men and women that the berserkers, murderous machines themselves, were able to devise and build. Still, they could be seen as obvious frauds when closely inspected by any humans.

"Only twenty-nine accounted for?" the supervisor of Defense demanded sharply. Strapped into his combat chair, he was gazing intently through the semitransparent information screen before him, into space. The nearby bulk of Earth was armored in the dun-brown of defensive force fields, the normal colors of land and water and air invisible.

“Only twenty-nine.” The answer arrived on the flagship’s bridge and a sharp sputtering of electrical noise. The tortured voice continued. “And it’s quite certain now that there were thirty to begin with.”

“Then where’s the other one?”

There was no reply.

All of Earth’s defensive forces were still on full alert, though the attack had been tiny no more than an attempt at infiltration, and seemed to have been thoroughly repelled. Berserkers, remnants of an ancient interstellar war, were mortal enemies of everything that lived and the greatest danger of humanity that the universe had yet revealed.

A small blur leaped over Earth’s dun-brown limb, hurtling along on a course that would bring it within a few hundred kilometers of the supervisor’s craft. This was Power Station One, a tamed black hole. In time of peace the power-hungry billions on the planet drew from it half their needed energy. Station One was visible to the eye only as a slight, flowing distortion of the stars beyond.

Another report was coming in. “We are searching space for the missing berserker android, Supervisor.”

“You had damned well better be.”

“The infiltrating enemy craft had padded containers for thirty androids, as shown by computer analysis of its debris. We must assume that all containers were filled.”

Life and death were in the supervisor’s tones. “Is there any possibility that the missing unit got past you to the surface?”

“Negative, Supervisor.” There was a slight pause. “At least we know it did not reach the surface in our time.”

“Our time? What does that mean, babbler? How could...ah.”

The black hole flashed by. Not really tamed, though that was a reassuring word, and humans applied it frequently. Just harnessed, more or less.

Suppose—and, given the location of the skirmish, the supposition was not unlikely—that berserker android number thirty had been propelled, by some accident of combat, directly at Station One. It could easily have entered the black hole. According to the latest theories, it might conceivably have survived to reemerge intact into the universe, projected out of the hole as its own tangible image in a burst of virtual-particle radiation.

Theory dictated that in such a case the reemergence must take place before the falling in. The supervisor crisply issued orders. At once his computers on the world below, the Earth Defense Conglomerate, took up the problem, giving it highest priority. What could one berserker android do to Earth? Probably not much. But to the supervisor, and to those who worked for him, defense was a sacred task. The temple of Earth’s safety had been horribly profaned.

To produce the first answers took the machines eleven minutes.

“Number thirty did go into the black hole sir. Neither we nor the enemy could very well have foreseen such a result, but—“

“What is the probability that the android emerged intact?”

“Because of the peculiar angle at which it entered, approximately sixty-nine percent.”

“That high!”

“And there is a forty-nine percent chance that it will reach the surface of the earth in functional condition, at some point in our past. However, the computers offer reassurance. As the enemy device must have been programmed for some subtle attack upon our present society, it is not likely to be able to do much damage at the time and place where it—“

“Your skull contains a vacuum of a truly intergalactic order. I will tell you and the computers when it has become possible for us to feel even the slightest degree of reassurance. Meanwhile, get me more figures.”

The next word from the ground came twenty minutes later.

“There is a ninety-two percent chance that the landing of the android on the surface, if that occurred, was within one hundred kilometers of fifty-one degrees, eleven minutes north latitude; zero degrees, seven minutes west longitude.”

“And the time?”

“Ninety-eight percent probability of January 1, 1880 Christian Era, plus or minus ten standard years.”

A landmass, a great clouded island, was presented to the supervisor on his screen.

“Recommended course of action?”

It took the ED Conglomerate an hour and a half to answer that.

The first two volunteers perished in attempted launchings before the method could be improved enough to offer a reasonable chance of survival. When the third man was ready, he was called in, just before launching, for a last private meeting with the supervisor.

The supervisor looked him up and down, taking in his outlandish dress, strange hairstyle, and all the rest. He did not ask whether the volunteer was ready but began bluntly: “It has now been confirmed that whether you win or lose back there, you will never be able to return to your own “Yes, sir. I had assumed that would be the case.”

“Very well.” The supervisor consulted data spread before him. “We are still uncertain as to just how the enemy is armed. Something subtle, doubtless, suitable for a saboteur on the earth of our own time—in addition, of course, to the superhuman physical strength and speed you must expect to face. There are the scrambling or the switching mindbeams to be considered; either could damage any human society. There are the pattern bombs, designed to disable our defense computers by seeding them with random information. There are always possibilities of biological warfare. You have your disguised medical kit? Yes, I see. And of course there is always the chance of something new.”

“Yes, sir.” The volunteer looked as ready as anyone could. The supervisor went to him, opening his arms for a ritual farewell embrace.

He blinked away some London rain, pulled out his heavy ticking timepiece as if he were checking the hour, and stood on the pavement before the theater as if he were waiting for a friend. The instrument in his hand throbbed with a silent, extra vibration in addition to its ticking, and this special signal had now taken on a character that meant the enemy machine was very near to him. It was probably within a radius of fifty meters.

A poster on the front of the theater read:

THE IMPROVED AUTOMATON CHESS PLAYER

MARVEL OF THE AGE UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

“The real problem, sir,” proclaimed one top-hatted man nearby, in conversation with another, chess, but whether it may possibly be made to play at all.”

No, that is not the real problem, sir, the agent from the future thought. But count yourself fortunate that you can still believe it is.

He bought a ticket and went in, taking a seat. When a sizable audience had gathered, there was a short lecture by a short man in evening dress, who had something predatory about him and also something frightened, despite he glibness and the rehearsed humor of his talk.

At length the chess player itself appeared. It was a desklike box with a figure seated behind it, the whole assembly wheeled out on stage by assistants. The figure was that of a huge man in Turkish garb. Quite obviously a mannequin or a dummy of some kind, it bobbed slightly with the motion of the rolling desk, to which its chair was fixed. Now the agent could feel the excited vibration of his watch without even putting a hand into his pocket.

The predatory man cracked another joke, displayed a hideous smile, then, from among several chess players in the audience who raised their hands—the agent was not among them—he selected one to challenge the automaton. The challenger ascended to the stage, where the pieces were being set out on a board fastened to the rolling desk, and the doors in the front of the desk were being opened to show that there was nothing but machinery inside.

The agent noted that, there were no candles on this desk, as there had been on that of Maelzel’s chess player a few decades earlier. Maelzel’s automaton had been a earlier fraud, of course. Candles had been placed on its box to mask the odor of burning wax from the candle needed by the man who was so cunningly hidden inside amid the dummy gears. The year in which the agent had arrived was still too early, he knew, for electric lights, at least the kind that would be handy for such a hidden human to use. Add the fact that this chess player’s opponent was allowed to sit much closer than Maelzel’s had ever been, and it became a pretty safe deduction that no human being was concealed inside the box and figure on this stage.

Therefore...

The agent might, if he stood up in the audience, get a clear shot at it right now. But should he aim at the figure or the box? And he could not be sure how it was armed. And who would stop it if he tried and failed? Already it had learned enough to survive in nineteenth century London. Probably it had already killed, to further its designs—“under new management” indeed.

No, now that he had located his enemy, he must plan thoroughly and work patiently. Deep in thought, he

left the theater amid the crowd at the conclusion of the performance and started on foot back to the rooms that he had just begun to share on Baker Street. A minor difficulty at his launching into the black hole had cost him some equipment, including most of his counterfeit money. There had not been time as yet for his adopted profession to bring him much income; so he was for the time being in straitened financial circumstances.

He must plan. Suppose, now, that he were to approach the frightened little man in evening dress. By now that one ought to have begun to understand what kind of a tiger he was riding. The agent might approach him in the guise of—

A sudden taptapping began in the agent's watch pocket. It was a signal quite distinct from any previously generated by his fake watch. It meant that the enemy had managed to detect his detector; it was in fact locked onto it and tracking.

Sweat mingled with the drizzle on the agent's face as he began to run. It must have discovered him in the theater, though probably it could not then single him out in the crowd. Avoiding horse-drawn cabs, four wheelers, and an omnibus, he turned out of Oxford Street to Baker Street and slowed to a fast walk for the short distance remaining. He could not throw away the telltale watch, for he would be unable to track the enemy without it. But neither did he dare retain it on his person.

As the agent burst into the sitting room, his roommate looked up, with his usual, somewhat shallow, smile, from a leisurely job of taking books out of a crate and putting them on shelves.

"I say," the agent began, in mingled relief and urgency, "something rather important has come up, and I find there are two errands I must under-take at once. Might I impose one of them on you?"

The agent's own brisk errand took him no farther than just across the street. There, in the doorway of Camden House, he shrank back, trying to breathe silently. He had not moved when, three minutes later, there approached from the direction of Oxford Street a tall figure that the agent suspected was not human, its hat was pulled down, and the lower portion of its face was muffled in bandages. Across the street it paused, seemed to consult a pocket watch of its own, then turned to ring the bell. Had the agent been absolutely sure it was his quarry, he would have shot it in the back. But without his watch, he would have to get closer to be absolutely sure.

After a moment's questioning from the landlady, the figure was admitted. The agent waited for two minutes. Then he drew a deep breath, gathered up his courage, and went after it.

The thing standing alone at a window turned to face him as he entered the sitting room, and now he was sure of what it was. The eyes above the bandaged lower face were not the Turk's eyes, but they were not human, either.

The white swathing muffled its gruff voice. "You are the doctor?"

"Ah, it is my fellow lodger that you want." The agent threw a careless glance toward the desk where he had locked up the watch, the desk on which some papers bearing his roommate's name were scattered. "He is out at the moment, as you see, but we can expect him presently. I take it you are a patient."

The thing said, in its wrong voice, "I have been referred to him. It seems the doctor and I share a certain common background. Therefore the good landlady has let me wait in here. I trust my presence is no inconvenience."

“Not in the least. Pray take a seat, Mr.—?”

What name the berserker might have given, the agent never learned. The bell sounded below, suspending conversation. He heard the servant girl answering the door, and a moment later his roommate’s brisk feet on the stairs. The death machine took a small object from its pocket and sidestepped a little to get a clear view past the agent toward the door.

Turning his back upon the enemy, as if with the casual purpose of greeting the man about to enter, the agent casually drew from his own pocket a quite functional briar pipe, which was designed to serve another function, too. Then he turned his head and fired the pipe at the berserker from under his own left armpit.

For a human being he was uncannily fast, and for a berserker the android was meanly slow and clumsy, being designed primarily for imitation, not dueling. Their weapons triggered at the same instant.

Explosions racked and destroyed the enemy, blasts shatteringly powerful but compactly limited in space, self-damping and almost silent.

The agent was hit, too. Staggering, he knew with his last clear thought just what weapon the enemy had carried—the switching mindbeam. Then for a moment he could no longer think at all. He was dimly aware of being down on one knee and of his fellow lodger, who had just entered, standing stunned a step inside the door.

At last the agent could move again, and he shakily pocketed his pipe. The ruined body of the enemy was almost vaporized already. It must have been built to self-destruct when damaged badly, so that humanity might never learn its secrets. Already it was no more than a puddle of heavy mist, warping in slow tendrils out the slightly open window to mingle with the fog.

The man still standing near the door had put out a hand to steady himself against the wall. “The jeweler...did not have your watch,” he muttered dazedly.

I have won, thought the agent dully. It was a joyless thought because with it came slow realization of the price of his success. Three quarters of his intellect, at least, was gone, the superior pattern of his braincell connections scattered. No. Not scattered. The switching mindbeam would have re-imposed the pattern of his neurons somewhere farther down its pathway...there, behind those gray eyes with their newly penetrating gaze.

“Obviously, sending me out for your watch was a ruse.” His roommate’s voice was suddenly crisper, more assured than it had been. “Also, I perceive that your desk has just been broken into, by someone who thought it mine.” The tone softened somewhat. “Come, man, I bear you no ill will. Your secret, if honorable, shall be safe. But it is plain that you are not what you have represented yourself to be.”

The agent got to his feet, pulling at his sandy hair, trying desperately to think. “How—how do you know?”

“Elementary!” the tall man snapped.

EARTHSHADE

Editor's Note:

"Earthshade" was originally commissioned for the anthology, *The Magic May Return*, edited by Larry Niven, all stories of which share a common fictional reality with his "Warlock" fantasy series. The major assumption of Niven's version of history is that once upon a time magic really worked, but that it was based on a nonrenewable resource: manna. Magical creatures and magicians (and before them the gods themselves) used up manna at a frightful rate—until finally the magic goes away. All else follows from that one assumption....

When Zalazar saw the lenticular cloud decapitate the mountain, he knew that the old magic in the world was not yet dead. The conviction struck him all in an instant, and with overwhelming force, even as the cloud itself had struck the rock. Dazed by the psychic impact, he turned round shakily on the steep hillside to gaze at the countenance of the youth who was standing beside him. For a long moment then, even as the Shockwave of the crash came through the earth beneath their feet and then blasted the air about their ears, Zalazar seemed truly stunned. His old eyes and mind were vacant alike, as if he might never before have seen this young man's face.

"Grandfather." The voice of the youth was hushed, and filled with awe. His gaze went past Zalazar's shoulder, and on up the mountain. "What was that?"

"You saw," said Zalazar shortly. With a hobbling motion on the incline, he turned his attention back to the miracle. "How it came down from the sky. You heard and felt it when it hit. You know as much about it as I do."

Zalazar himself had not particularly noticed one small round cloud, among other clouds of various shape disposed around what was in general an ordinary summer sky. Not until a comparatively rapid relative movement, of something small, un-naturally round, and very white against the high deep blue had happened to catch the corner of his eye. He had looked up directly at the cloud then, and the moment he did that he felt the magic. The distant diskshape, trailing small patches of ivory fur, had come down in an angled, silent glide that somehow gave the impression of heaviness, of being on the verge of a complete loss of buoyancy and control. The cloud slid, or fell, with a deceptive speed, a speed that became fully apparent to Zalazar only when the long path of its descent at last intersected age-old rock.

"Grandfather, I can feel the magic."

"I'm sure you can. Not that you've ever had the chance to feel anything like it before. But it's something everyone is able to recognize at once." The old man took a step higher on the slope, staring at the mountain fiercely. "You were born to live with magic. We all were, the whole human race. We're never more than half alive unless we have it." He paused for a moment, savoring his own sensations. "Well, I've felt many a great spell in my time. There's no harm in this one, not for us, at least. In fact I think it may possibly bring us some great good."

With that Zalazar paused again, experiencing something new, or maybe something long-forgotten. Was it only that the perceived aura of great spells near at hand brought back memories of his youth? It was more than that, probably. Old wellsprings of divination, caked over by the years, were proving to be still capable of stir and bubble. "All right. Whatever that cloud is, it took the whole top of the mountain with it over into the next valley. I think we should climb up there and take a look." All above was silent now, and apparently tranquil. Except that a large, vague plume of gray dust had become visible above the truncated mountain, where it drifted fitfully in an uncertain wind.

The youth was eager, and they began at once. With his hand upon a strong young arm for support when needed, Zalazar felt confident that his old limbs and heart would serve him through the climb.

They stopped at the foot of an old rock slide to rest, and to drink from a high spring there that the old man knew about. The midsummer grass grew lush around the water source, and with a sudden concern for the mundane Zalazar pointed this out to the boy as a good place to bring the flocks. Then, after they had rested in the shade of a rock for a little longer, the real climb began. It went more easily for Zalazar than he had expected, because he had help at the harder places. They spoke rarely. He was saving his breath, and any-way he did not want to talk or even think much about what they were going to discover. This re-luctance was born not of fear, but of an almost childish and still growing anticipation. Whatever else, there was going to be magic in his life again, a vast new store of magic, ebullient and over-flowing. And feeding the magic, of course, a small ocean at least of mana. Maybe with a supply like that, there would be enough left over to let an old man use some for himself...unless it were all used up, maintaining that altered cloud, before they got to it ..

Zalazar walked and climbed a little faster. Mana from somewhere was around him already in the air. Tantalizingly faint, like the first warm wind from the south before the snow has melted, but there indubitably, like spring.

It was obvious to the old man that his companion, even encumbered as he was by bow and quiver on his back and the small lyre at his belt, could have clambered on ahead to get a quick look at the wonders. But the youth stayed patiently at the old man's side. The bright young eyes, though, were for the most part fixed on ahead. Maybe, Zalazar thought, looking at the other speculatively, maybe he's a little more frightened than he wants to admit.

Maybe I am too, he added to himself. But I am certainly going on up there, nevertheless.

At about midday they reached what was now the mountaintop. It was a bright new tableland, about half a kilometer across, and as flat now as a certain parade ground that the old man could remember. The sight also made Zalazar think imaginatively of the stump of some giant's neck or limb; it was rimmed with soil and growth resembling scurfy skin, it was boned and veined with white rocks and red toward the middle, and it bubbled here and there with pure new springs, the blood of Earth.

From a little distance the raw new surface looked preternaturally smooth. But when you were really near, close enough to bend down and touch the faint new warmth of it, you could see that the surface left by the mighty plane was not that smooth; no more level, perhaps, than it might have been made by a small army of men with hand tools, provided they had been well supervised and induced to try.

The foot trail had brought them up the west side of what was left of the mountain. The strange cloud in its long, killing glide had come down also from the west, and had carried the whole mass of the mountaintop off with it to the east. Not far, though. For now, from his newly gained advantage upon the western rim of the new tabletop, Zalazar could see the cloud again.

It was no more than a kilometer or so away. Looking like some giant, snow white, not quite rigid dish. It was tilted almost on edge, and it was half sunken into the valley on the mountain's far side, so that the place where Zalazar stood was just about on a horizontal level with the enormous dish's center.

"Come," he said to his young companion, and immediately led the way forward across the smoothed-off rock. The cloud ahead of them was stirring continually, like a sail in a faint breeze, and Zalazar realized that the bulk of it must be still partially airborne. Probably the lower curve of its circular rim was resting or dragging on the floor of the valley below, like the basket of a balloon ready to take off. In his youth, Zalazar had seen balloons, as well as magic and parade grounds. In his youth he had seen much.

As he walked, the raw mana rose all around him from the rawly opened earth. It was a madden-ingly subtle emanation, like ancient perfume, like warm air from an oven used yesterday to bake the finest bread. Zalazar inhaled it like a starving man, with mind and memory as well as lungs. It wasn't enough, he told himself, to really do any-thing with. But it was quite enough to make him remember what the world had once been like, and what his own role in the world had been.

At another time, under different conditions, such a fragrance of mana might have been enough to make the old man weep. But not now, with the wonder of the cloud visible just ahead. It seemed to be waiting for him. Zalazar felt no inclination to dawdle, sniffing the air nostalgically.

There was movement on the planed ground just before his feet. Looking down without breaking stride, Zalazar beheld small creatures that had once been living, then petrified into the mountain's fabric by the slow failure of the world's mana, now stirring with gropings back toward life. Under his sandalled foot he felt the purl of a new spring, almost alive. The sensation was gone in an instant, but it jarred him into noticing how quick his own strides had suddenly become, as if he too were already on the way to rejuvenation.

When they reached the eastern edge of the tabletop, Zalazar found he could look almost straight down to where a newly created slope of talus began far below. From the fringes of this great mass of rubble that had been a mountaintop, giant trees, freshly slain or crippled by the landslide, jutted out here and there at deathly angles. The dust of the enormous crash was still persisting faintly in the breeze, and Zalazar thought he could still hear the last withdrawing echoes of its roar...

"Grandfather, look!"

Zalazar raised his head quickly, to see the tilted lens-shape of the gigantic cloud bestirring itself with new apparent purpose. Half rolling on its circular rim, which dragged new scars into the valley's grassy skin below, and half lurching side-ways, it was slowly, ponderously making its way back toward the mountain and the two who watched it.

The cloud also appeared to be shrinking slightly. Mass in the form of vapor was fuming and boiling away from the vast gentle convexities of its sides. There were also sidewise gouts of rain or spray, that woke in Zalazar the memory of ocean waterspouts. Thunder grumbled. Or was it only the cloud's weight, scraping at the ground? The extremity of the round, mountain-chopping rim looked hard and deadly as a scimitar. Then from the rim inwards the appearance of the enchanted cloudstuff altered gradually, until at the hub of the great wheel a dullard might have thought it only natural.

Another wheel turn of a few degrees. Another thunderous lurch. And suddenly the cloud was a hundred meters closer than before. Someone or something was maneuvering it.

“Grandfather?”

Zalazar spoke in answer to the anxious tone. “It won’t do us a bit of good to try to run away.” His own voice was cheerful, not fatalistic. The good feeling that he had about the cloud had grown stronger, if anything, the nearer he got to it. Maybe his prescient sense, long dormant, had been awakened into something like acuity by the faint accession of mana from the newly opened earth. He could tell that the mana in the cloud itself was vastly stronger. “We don’t have to be afraid, lad. They don’t mean us any harm.”

“They?”

“There’s—someone—inside that cloud. If you can still call it a cloud, as much as it’s been changed.”

“Inside it? Who could that be?”

Zalazar gestured his ignorance. He felt sure of the fact of the cloud’s being inhabited, without being able to say how he knew, or even beginning to understand how such a thing could be. Wizards had been known to ride on clouds, of course, with a minimum of alteration in the material. But to alter one to this extent...

The cloud meanwhile continued to work its way closer. Turn, slide, ponderous hop, gigantic bump and scrape. It was now only about a hundred meters beyond the edge of the cliff. And now it appeared that something new was going to happen.

The tilted, slowly oscillating wall that was the cloudside closest to the cliff had developed a rolling boil quite near its center. Zalazar judged that this hub of white disturbance was only slightly bigger than a man. After a few moments of development, during which time the whole cloudmass slid majestically still closer to the cliff, the hub blew out in a hard but silent puff of vapor. Where it had been was now an opening, an arched doorway into the pale interior of the cloud.

A figure in human shape, that of a woman nobly dressed, appeared an instant later in this doorway. Zalazar, in the first moment that he looked directly at her, was struck with awe. In that moment all the day’s earlier marvels shrank down, for him, to dimensions hardly greater than the ordinary; they had been but fitting prologue. This was the great true wonder.

He went down at once upon one knee, averting his gaze from the personage before him. And without raising his eyes he put out a hand, and tugged fiercely at his grandson’s sleeve until the boy had knelt down too.

Then the woman who was standing in the door-way called to them. Her voice was very clear, and it seemed to the old man that he had been waiting all his years to hear the call. Still the words in themselves were certainly prosaic enough. “You men!” she cried. “I ask your help.”

Probably ask was not the most accurate word she could have chosen. Zalazar heard himself babbling some reply immediately, some extravagant promise whose exact wording he could not recall a moment later. Not that it mattered, probably. Commitment had been demanded and given.

His pledge once made, he found that he could raise his eyes again. Still the huge cloud was easing closer to the cliff, in little bumps and starts. Its lower flange was continually bending and flowing, making slow thunder against the talus far below, a roaring rearrangement of the fallen rock.

“I am Je,” the dazzlingly beautiful woman called to them in an imperious voice. Her robes were rich blue, brown, and an ermine that made the cloud itself look gray. “It is written that you two are the men I need to find. Who are you?”

The terrible beauty of her face was no more than a score of meters distant now. Again Zalazar had to look away from its full glory. “I am Zalazar, mighty Je,” he answered, in a breaking voice. “I am only a poor man. And this is my innocent grand-son—Bormanus.” For a moment he had had to search to find the name. “Take pity on us!”

“I mean to take pity on the world, instead, and use you as may be necessary for the world’s good,” the goddess answered. “But what worthier fate can mortals hope for? Look at me, both of you.”

Zalazar raised his eyes again. The woman’s countenance was once more bearable. Even as he looked, she turned her head as if to speak or otherwise communicate with someone else behind her in the cloud. Zalazar could see in there part of a corridor, and also a portion of some kind of room, all limned in brightness. The white interior walls and overhead were all shifting slightly and continually in their outlines, in a way that suggested unaltered cloudstuff. But the changes were never more than slight, the large-scale shapes remaining as stable as those of a wooden house. And the lady stood always upright upon a perfectly level deck, despite the vast oscillations of the cloud, and its turning as it shifted ever closer to the cliff.

Her piercing gaze returned to Zalazar. “You are an old man, mortal, at first glance not good for much. But I see that there is hidden value in you. You may stand up.”

He got slowly to his feet. “My lady Je, it is true that once my hands knew power. But the long death of the world has crippled me.”

The goddess’ anger flared at him like a flame. “Speak not to me of death! I am no mere mortal subject to Thanatos’.” Her figure, as terrible as that of any warrior, as female as any succubus of love, was now no more than five meters from Zalazar’s half-closed eyes. Her voice rang as clearly and commandingly as before. Yet, mixed with its power was a tone of doomed helplessness, and this tone frightened Zalazar on a deeper level even than did her implied threat.

“Lady,” he murmured, “I can but try. Whatever help you need, I will attempt to give it.”

“Certainly you will. And willingly. If in the old times your hands knew power, as you say, then you will try hard and risk much to bring the old times back again. You will be glad to hazard what little of good your life may have left in it now. Is it not so?”

Zalazar could only sign agreement, wordlessly.

“And the lad with you, your grandson. Is he your apprentice too? Have you given him any training?”

“In tending flocks, no more. In magic?” The old man gestured helplessness with gnarled hands. “In magic, great lady Je? How could I have? Everywhere that we have lived, the world is dead. Or so close to utter deadness that—“

“I have said that you must not speak to me of death! I will not warn you again. Now, it is written that...both of you must come aboard. Yes, both, there will be use for both.” And, as if the goddess were piloting and powering the cloud with her will alone, the whole mass of it now tilted gently, bringing her spotless doorway within easy stepping distance of the lip of rock.

Now Zalazar and Bormanus with him were surrounded by whiteness, sealed into it as if by mounds of glowing cotton. White cushioned firmness served their feet as floor or deck, as level always for them as for their divine guide who walked ahead. Whiteness opened itself ahead of her, and sealed itself again when Bormanus had passed, walking close on Zalazar's heels.

The grinding of tormented rock and earth below could no longer be heard as the Lady Je, her robes of ermine and ultramarine and brown swirling with her long strides, led them through the cloud. Almost there was no sound at all. Maybe a little wind, Zalazar decided, very faint and sounding far away. He had the feeling that the cloud, its power and purpose somehow regained, had risen quickly from the scarred valley and was once more swiftly airborne.

Je came to a sudden halt in the soft pearly silence, and stretched forth her arms. Around her an open space, a room, swiftly began to define itself. In moments there had grown an intricately formed chamber, as high as a large temple, in which she stood like a statue with her two puny mortal figures in attendance.

Then Zalazar saw that there was one other in the room with them. He muttered something, and heard Bormanus at his side give a quick intake of breath.

The bier or altar at the room's far end supported a figure that might almost have been a gray statue of a tormented man, done on a heroic scale. The figure was youthful, powerful, naked. With limbs contorted it lay twisted on one side. The head was turned in a god's agony so that the short beard jutted vertically.

But it was not a statue. And Zalazar could tell, within a moment of first seeing it, that the sleep that held it was not quite—or not yet—the sleep of death. He had been forbidden to mention death to Je again, and he would not do so.

With a double gesture she beckoned both mortals to cross the room with her to stand beside the figure. While Zalazar was wondering what he ought to say or do, his own right hand moved out, without his willing it, as if to touch the statueman. Je, he saw, observed this, but she said nothing; and with a great effort of his will Zalazar forced his own arm back to his side. Meanwhile Bormanus at his side was standing still, staring, as if unable to move or speak at all.

Je spoke now as if angry and disappointed. "So, what buried value have you, old man? If you can be of no help in freeing my ally, then why has it been ordained for you to be here?"

"Lady, how should I know?" Zalazar burst out. "I am sorry to disappoint you. I knew something, once, of magic. But..." As for even understanding the forces that could bind a god like this, let alone trying to undo them...Zalazar could only gesture helplessly. At last he found words. "Great lady Je, I do not even know who this is."

"Call him Phaethon."

"Ah, great gods," Zalazar muttered, shocked and near despair.

"Yes, mortal, indeed we are. As well as you knew when you first saw us."

"Yes, I knew...indeed." In fact he had thought that all the gods were long dead, or departed from the world of humankind. "And why is he—like this?"

"He has fallen in battle, mortal. I and he and others have laid siege to Cloudholm, and it has been a long

and bitter fight. We seek to free his father, Helios, who lies trapped in the same kind of enchantment there. Through Helios' entrapment, the world of old is dying. Have you heard of Cloudholm, old mortal? Among men it is not often named."

"Ah. I have heard something. Long ago..."

"It stifles the manarain that Helios cast ever on the Earth. With a fleet of cloudships like this one, we hurled ourselves upon its battlements—and were defeated. Most of the old gods lie now in tormented slumber, far above. A few have switched sides willingly. And all our ships save this one were destroyed."

"How could they dare?" The words burst from Bormanus, the first he had uttered since boarding the cloudvessel. Then he stuttered, as Je's eyes burned at him: "I mean, who would dare try to destroy such ships? And who would have the power to do it?"

The goddess looked at the boy a moment longer, then reached out and took him by the hand. "Lend me your mortal fingers here. Let us see if they will serve to drain enchantment off." Bormanus appeared to be trying to draw back, but his hand, like a baby's, was brought out forcibly to touch the statue figure's arm. And Zalazar's hand went out on its own once more; this time he could not keep it back, or perhaps he did not dare to try. His fingers spread on rounded arm muscle, thicker by far than his own thigh. The touch of the figure made him think more of frozen snake than flesh of god. And now, Zalazar felt faint with sudden terror. Something, some great power, was urging the freezing near death to desert its present captive and be content with Zalazar and Bormanus instead. But that mighty urging was mightily opposed, and came to nothing. At last, far above Zalazar's head, as if between proud kings disputing across some infant's cradle, a truce was reached. For the moment. He was able to withdraw his hand unharmed, and watched as Bormanus did the same.

The goddess Je sighed. It was a world-weary sound, close to defeat yet still infinitely stubborn. "And yet I am sure that there is something in you, old man...or possibly in your young companion here. Something that in the end will be of very great importance. Something that must be found...though I see, now, that you yourselves can hardly be expected to be aware of what it is."

He clasped his hands. "Oh great lady Je, we are only poor humans...mortals..."

"Never mind. In time I will discover the key. What is written anywhere, I can eventually read."

Zalazar was aware now of a strong motion underneath his feet. Even to weak human senses it was evident that the whole cloud was now in purposeful and very rapid flight.

"Where are we going?" Bormanus muttered, as if he were asking the air itself. He was a very handsome youth, with dark and curly hair.

"We return to the attack, young mortal. If most of our fleet has been destroyed, well, so too are the defenses of Cloudholm nearly worn away. One more assault can bring it into my hands, and set its prisoners free."

Zalazar had been about to ask some question, but now a distracting realization made him forget what it was. He had suddenly become aware that there was some guardian presence, sprite or demon he thought, melded with the cloud, driving and controlling it on Je's commands. It drew for energy on some vast internal store of mana, a treasure trove that Zalazar could only dimly sense.

Now, in obedience to Je's unspoken orders, the light inside the room or temple where they stood was

taking on a reddish tinge. And now the cloud carvings were disappearing from what Zalazar took to be the forward wall. As Je faced in that direction, pictures began to appear there magically. These were of a cloudscape first, then of an earthy plain seen from a height greater than any mountain's. Both were passing at fantastic speed.

Je nodded as if satisfied. "Come," she said, "and we will try your usefulness in a new way." With a quick gesture she opened the whiteness to one side, and overhead. A stair took form even as she began to climb it. "We will see if your value lies in reconnoitering the enemy."

Clinging to Bormanus' shoulder for support, Zalazar found that the stairs were not as hard to negotiate as he had feared, even when they shifted form from one step to the next. Then there was a sudden gaping purple openness above their heads. "Fear not," said Je. "My protection is upon you both, to let you breathe and live."

Zalazar and Bormanus mounted higher. Wind shrieked thinly now, not in their faces but round them at some little distance, as if warded by some invisible shield. Then abruptly the climbing stair had no more steps. Zalazar thought that they stood on an open deck of cloud, under a bright sun in a dark sky, in some strange realm of neither day nor night. The prow of the cloudship that he rode upon was just before him; he stood as if on the bridge of some proud ocean vessel, looking out over deck and rounded bow, and a wild vastness of the elements beyond.

Not that the ship was borne by anything as small and simple as an earthy sea. The whole globe of Earth was already so far below that Zalazar could now begin to see its roundness, and still the cloudship climbed. All natural clouds were far below, clinging near the great curve of Earth, though rising here and there in strong relief. At first Zalazar thought that the star-pierced black-ness through which they flew was empty of every-thing but passing light. But presently—with, as he sensed, Je's unspoken aid—he began to be able to perceive structure in the thinness of space about him.

"What do you see now, my sage old man? And you, my clever youth?" Je's voice pleaded even as it mocked and commanded. Her fear and puzzle-ment frightened Zalazar again. For the first time now he knew true regret that he had followed his first impulse and climbed a chopped off mountain. Where now was the good result that prescience had seemed to promise?

"I see only the night ahead of us," responded Bormanus. His voice sounded remote, as if he were half asleep.

"I...see," said Zalazar, and paused with that. Much was coming clear to him, but it was going to be hard to describe. The cloud structures far below, so heavy with their contained water and their own mundane laws, blended almost imperceptibly into the base of something much vaster, finer, and more subtle. Something that filled the space around the Earth, from the level of those low clouds up to the vastly greater altitude at which Zalazar now stood. And higher still...his eyes, as if ensnared now by those fiery lines and arches, followed them upward and outward and ever higher still. The lines girdled the whole round Earth, and rose...

And rose...

Zalazar clutched out for support. Obliging, a stanchion of cloudstuff grew up and hardened into place to meet his grasp. He did not even look at it. His eyes were fixed up and ahead, looking at Cloudholm.

Imagine the greatest castle of legend. And then go beyond that, and beyond, till imagination knows itself inadequate. Two aspects dominate: first, an almost invisible delicacy, with the appearance of a fragility to

match. Secondly, almost omnipotent power—or, again, its seeming. Size was certainly a component of that power. Zalazar had never tried to, or been able to, imagine anything as high as this. So high that it grew near only slowly, though the cloudship was racing toward it at a speed that Zalazar would have described as almost as fast as thought.

Then Zalazar saw how, beyond Cloudholm, a thin crescent of Moon rose wonderfully higher still; and again, beyond that, burned the blaze of Sun, a jewel in black. These sights threw him into a sudden terror of the depths of space. No longer did he marvel so greatly that Je and her allied powers could have been defeated.

“Great lady,” he asked humbly, “what realm, whose dominion is this?”

“What I need from you, mortal, are answers, not questions of a kind that I can pose myself.” Je’s broad white hand swung out gently to touch him on the eyes. Her touch felt surprisingly warm. Her voice commanded: “Say what you see.”

The touch at once allowed him to see more clearly. But he stuttered, groping for words. What he was suddenly able to perceive was that the Sun lived at the core of a magnificent, perpetual explosion, the expanding waves of which were as faint as Cloudholm itself, but none the less glorious for that. These waves moved in some medium far finer than the air, more tenuous than even the thinning air that had almost ceased to whistle with the cloudship’s passage. And the waves of the continual slow sun explosion bore with them a myriad of almost infinitesimal particles, particles that were heavy with mana, though they were almost too small to be called solid.

And there were the lines, as of pure force, in space. In obedience to some elegant system of laws they bore the gossamer outer robes of the Sun itself, to wrap the Earth with delicate energy...and the mana that flowed outward from the Sun, great Zeus but there was such a flood of it!

The Earth was bathed in warmth and energy—but not in mana, Zalazar suddenly perceived. That flow had been cut off by Cloudholm and its spreading wings. (Yes, Zalazar could see the pinions of enchantment now, raptor wings extending curved on two sides from the castle itself, as if to embrace the whole Earth—or smother it.) Through them the common sunlight flowed on unimpeded, to make the surface of the world flash blue and ermine white. But all the inner energies of magic were cut off...

Zalazar realized with a start that he was, or just had been, entranced and muttering, that someone with a mighty grip had just shaken his arm, that a voice of divine power was urging him to speak up, to make sense in what he reported of his vision.

“Tell clearly what you see, old man. The wings, you say, spread out from Cloudholm to enfold the Earth. That much I knew already. Now say what their weakness is. How are they to be torn aside?”

“I...I...the wings are very strong. They draw sustaining power from the very flow of mana that they deny the Earth. Some of the particles that hail on them go through—but those are without mana. Many of the particles and waves remain, are trapped by the great wings and drained of mana and of other energies. Then eventually they are let go.”

“Old fool, what use are you? You tell me nothing I do not already know. Say, where is the weakness of the wings? How can our Earth be fed?”

“Just at the poles...there is a weakness, some-times, a drooping of the wings, and there a little more mana than elsewhere can reach the Earth.”

Suddenly faint, Zalazar felt himself begin to topple. He was grabbed, and upheld, and shaken again. "Tell more, mortal. What power has created Cloudholm?"

"What do I know? How can I see? What can I say?"

He was shaken more violently than before, until in his desperate fear of Je he cried: "Great Apollo himself could not learn more!"

He was released abruptly, and there was a precipitous silence, as if even Je had been shocked by Zalazar's free use of that name, the presence of whose owner only his mother Leto and his father Zeus could readily endure. Then Zalazar's eyes were brushed again by Je's warm hand, and he came fully to himself.

Cloudholm was bearing down on them. "And Helios is trapped up there?" Zalazar wondered aloud. "But why, and how?"

"Why?" The bitterness and soft rage in Je's voice were worthy of a goddess. "Why, I myself helped first to bind him. Was I made to do that, after opposing him and bringing on a bitter quarrel? I do not know. Are even we deities the playthings of some overriding fate? What was Helios' sin, for such a punishment? And what was mine?"

Again Zalazar had to avert his gaze, for Je's beauty glowed even more terribly than before. And at the same time he had to strive to master himself, hold firm his will against the hubris that rose up in him and urged him to reach for the role of god himself. Such an opportunity existed, would exist, foreknowledge told him, and it was somewhere near at hand. If he only...

His internal struggle was interrupted by the realization that the cloudship no longer moved. Looking carefully, Zalazar could see that it had come to rest upon an almost insubstantial plain.

Straight ahead of him now, the bases of the walls of Cloudholm rose. And there was a towering gate.

Je was addressing him almost calmly again. "If your latent power, old mortal, is neither of healing nor of seeing, then perhaps it lies in the realm of war. That is the way we now must pass. Kneel down."

Zalazar knelt. The right hand of the goddess closed on his and drew him to his feet again. He arose on lithely muscular legs, and saw that the old clothing in which he had walked the high pasturelands had been transformed. He was clad now in silver cloth, a fabric worked with a fine brocade. His garments hung on him as solidly as chain mail yet felt as soft and light as silk. They were at once the clothing and the armor of a god. In Zalazar's right hand, grown young and muscular, a short sword had appeared. The weapon was of some metal vastly different from that of his garments, and yet he could feel that its power was at least their equal. On his left arm now hung a shield of dazzling brightness, but seemingly of no more than a bracelet's weight.

The front of the cloudship divided and opened a way for the man who had been the old herdsman Zalazar. The thin cloudstuff of the magic plain swirled and rippled round his boots of silver-gray. His feet were firmly planted, and though he could plainly see the sunlit Earth below, he knew no fear that he might fall.

He glanced behind him once, and saw the cloudship altering, disintegrating, and knew that the nameless demon who had sustained it had come out now at Je's command, to serve her in some other way.

Then Zalazar faced ahead. He could see, now, how much damage the great walls of Cloudholm had sustained, and what had caused the damage. Other cloudships, their insubstantial wreckage mixed with that of the walls they had assailed, lay scattered across the plain and piled at the feet of those enduring, fragile looking towers. Nor were the wrecked ships empty. With vision somehow granted him by Je, Zalazar could see that each of them held at least one sleep bound figure of the stature of a god or demigod. They were male or female, old looking or young, of diverse attributes. All were caught and held, like Phaethon, by some powerful magic that imposed a quiet if not always a peaceful slumber.

Now, where was Je herself? Zalazar realized suddenly that he could see neither the goddess nor her attendant demon. He called her name aloud.

Do not seek me, her voice replied, whispering just at his ear. Make your way across the plain, and force the castle gates. With my help you can do it, and I shall be with you when my help is needed.

Zalazar shrugged his shoulders. With part of his mind he knew that his present feelings of power and confidence were unnatural, given him by the goddess for her own purposes. But at the same time he could not deny those feelings—nor did he really want to. Feeling enormously capable, driven by an urge to prove what this divine weapon in his new right hand could do, he shrugged his shoulders again, loosening tight new muscles for action. Beside him, Bormanus, who had not been changed, was looking about in all directions alertly. With one hand the lad gripped tightly the small lyre at his belt, but he gave no other sign of fear. Then suddenly he raised his other hand and pointed.

Coming from the gates of Cloudholm, which now stood open, already halfway across the wide plain between, a challenger was treading thin white cloud in great white boots.

Zalazar, watching, raised his sword a little. Still the goddess was letting him know no fear. He who approached was a red-bearded man, wearing what looked like a winged Nordik helm, and other equipment to match. He was of no remarkable height for a hero, but as he drew near Zalazar saw that his arms and shoulders under a tight battle harness were of enormous thickness. He balanced a monstrous warhammer like a feather in one hand.

I should know who this is, Zalazar thought. But then the thought was gone, as quickly as it had come. Je manages her tools too well, he thought again, and then that idea too was swept from his mind.

The one approaching came to a halt, no more than three quick strides away. "Return to Earth, old Zalazar," he called out, jovially enough. "My bones already ache with a full age of combat. I yearn to let little brother Hypnos whisper in my ear, so I can lie down and rest. I don't know why Je bothered to bring you here; the proper time for humans to visit Cloudholm is long gone, and again, is not yet come."

"Save your riddles," Zalazar advised him fearlessly. This, he thought, in a moment of great glory and pride, this is what it is like to be a god. And in his heart he thanked Je for this moment, and cared not what might happen in the next.

"Oho," Redbeard remarked good-humoredly. "Well then, it seems we must." And the sword and hammer leapt together of themselves, with a blare as of all war trumpets in the world, and a clash as of all arms. It lasted endlessly, and at the same time it seemed to take no time at all. Zalazar thought that he saw Redbeard fall, but when he bent with some intention of dealing a finishing stroke, the figure of his opponent had vanished. Save for Bormanus, who had prudently stepped back from the clash, he was apparently alone.

Well fought! Je's voice, from invisible lips, whispered beside his ear. There was new excitement in the words, an undertone of savage triumph.

Zalazar, triumphant too—and at the same time knowing an undercurrent of dissatisfaction, for these deeds were not his of his own right—moved on toward the open gate. He had gone a dozen strides when something—he thought not Je—urged him to look back. When he did, he could now see Redbeard, hammer still in hand, stretched out upon the cloud. There was no sign of blood or injury. At Redbeard's ear a winged head was hovering, whispering a compulsion from divine lips. And on the face of the fallen warrior there was peace.

Why do you pause? Je demanded in her hidden voice. She required no answer, but Zalazar must go on. All Je's attention, and Zalazar's too, was bent now upon the open castle gate. It slammed shut of itself when he was still a hundred strides away. Now he could see that what he had taken for carved dragon heads on either side of the portal were alive, turning fanged jaws toward him.

Zalazar glanced at the lad who was walking so trustingly at his side, and for the first time since landing on the cloudplain he knew anxiety. "Lady Je," he prayed in a whisper, "I crave your protection for my grandson as well as for myself."

I give what protection I can, to those I need. And I foresee now that I will need him, later on...

The dragons guarding the gate stretched out their necks when Zalazar came near; fangs like bunched knives drove at him. The shield raised upon his left arm took the blows. The sword flashed left, lashed right.

Zalazar stepped back, gasping; he looked to see that Bormanus, who had kept clear, was safe. Then Zalazar willed the swordblade at the great cruciform timbers of the gate itself. They splintered, shuddered, and swung back.

Je's triumph was a shrill scream, almost sound-less, inarticulate.

Zalazar knew that he must still go forward, now into Cloudholm itself. He balanced the shield upon his left arm, hefted the sword again in his right hand. He drew a deep breath, of ample-seeming air, and entered the palace proper.

He came to door after door, each taller and more magnificent than the last, and each swung open of itself to let him in. Around him on every hand there towered shapes that should have been terrible, though he could see them only indistinctly. Something told him which way he must go. And he pressed on, through one royal hall and chamber after another...

...until he had entered that which he knew must be the greatest hall of all. At the far end of it, very distant from where he stood, Zalazar saw the Throne of the World. It was guarded by a wall of flame, and it was standing vacant.

As Zalazar's feet brought him closer to the fire, he saw that it was centered on a plinth of cloud, that supported another manlike figure, like that of tortured Phaethon but larger still.

It is Helios, said Je's disembodied whisper. Pull him from the flames, restore him to his throne, and mana will rain upon the Earth again.

The flame felt very hot. When Zalazar probed it with his sword, it pushed the swordblade back. "But

what power is this that imprisons him? Je?"

Do not ask questions, mortal. Act.

Zalazar stalked right and left, seeking a way around the flames or through them. The figure inside them did not seem to be burned or tormented by the terrible heat, but only bound. But Zalazar as he approached the tongues of fire had to raise first one hand, and then his shield, to try to protect himself from radiance and glare. The only way to reach the bound god seemed to be to leap directly into the flames, or through them.

Zalazar tried. Unbearable pain seared at him, and the tongues of flame seized him like hands and threw him back. The instant he was clear of the flames, their burning stopped; he was unharmed.

Je shrieked words of compulsion in his ear. Zalazar wrapped himself in his silvery cloak, raised his shield, brandished his sword, and tried again. And was thrown back. And yet again, but all to no avail. And still Je made him try. She stood near now in her full imaged presence.

And yet again the tongues of fire gripped Zalazar, and hurled him flying, sprawling. When Zalazar saw that the metal of his shield was running now in molten drops, he cried aloud his agony: "Spare me, great Je! What will you have from me? Only so much can you make of me, so much and no more."

"I will make whatever I wish of you, mortal. We are so near, so very near to victory!" Her gaze turned to Bormanus, and she went on: "There is a way in which we can augment our power, as I fore-saw. Murder will feed great magic."

Zalazar came crawling along the floor, toward the goddess's feet. He made his hand let go the sword. Only now he realized that no scabbard for it had ever been given him. "Goddess, do not demand of me that I kill my own flesh and blood. It will not bring you victory. I was never a great wizard, even in my youth. No Alhazred, no Vulcan the Shaper. Though even before I met you I had convinced myself of that. A warrior? Conqueror? No, I am not Trillion Mu either, though I have killed; and yours and your demon's power sustain me in combat for a time even against Thor Redbeard himself. But I cannot do more. Even murder will not give me power enough. And if it could, I will not—"

In fishwife rage, Je lost her self-control. "What are you, thing of clay, to argue with me?" She grabbed Bormanus and forced him forward, bent down so that his neck was exposed for a swordstroke. "Earth is mine to deal with as I will, and you are no more than a clod of earth. Kill him!"

"Destroy me if you will, goddess. If you can. I will not kill him."

Je's eyes glowed, orange fire from a volcano. "I see that I have maddened you with my assistance, until you think you are a demigod at least. You are not worth destruction. If I only withdraw my sustaining power, you will both fall back to earth and be no more than birddung when you land. Where will you turn for help if I abandon you?"

Zalazar, on his feet again, turned physically, looking for help. The half melted shield now felt impossibly heavy, weighing his left arm down. The brocade of his god garments hung on him now like lead. The last time the flames had thrown him, some of their pain had remained in his bones. At a thought from Je, the cloud floor of the palace would open beneath his feet. He would have a long fall in which to think things over.

The Throne of the World was empty, waiting. No help there. But still he was not going to murder.

Je's voice surprised him in its altered tone. It was less threatening now. "Zalazar, I see that I must tell you the truth. It need not be Helios that you place on the Throne when you have gained the power. It could be me."

"You?"

"The truth is that it could even be yourself."

"I?" Zalazar turned slowly. Looked at the Throne again, and thought, and shook his head. "I am only a poor man, I tell you, goddess. Alone and almost lost. If it is true that I can choose the Ruler of the World, well, it must be some cruel joke, such as you say that even gods are subject to. But if the choice is truly mine to make, I will not give it you. As for taking it myself, I, I should not. I have no fitness, or powers, or wealth, or even family."

Silence fell in Cloudholm. It was an abrupt change; a stillness that was something more than silence had descended. Zalazar waited, eyes down-cast, holding his breath, trying to understand.

Then he began to understand, for the last three words that he himself had spoken seemed to be echoing and reechoing in the air. All his life he had been a poor nomad, with no family at all.

Even the flames of Helios' prison seemed to have cooled somewhat, though Zalazar did not immediately raise his head to look at them. When it seemed to him that the silence might have gone on for half an hour, he did at last look up.

He who had walked with Zalazar as his companion had at last taken the lyre from his belt, and the others were allowed to recognize him now.

Je had recoiled, cringing, herself for once down on one knee, with averted gaze. But Zalazar, for now, could look.

White teeth, inhumanly beautiful and even, smiled at him. "Old man, you have decided well. One comes to claim the Throne in time, and Thanatos will be overcome, and your many-times-great-grandsons will have to choose again; but that is not your problem now. I send you back to Earth. Retain the youth that Je has given you—it is fitting, for a new age of the world has been ordained, though not by me. And memories, if you can, retain them too. Magic must sleep."

Bright, half melted shield and silver garments fell softly to the floor of cloud, beside the sword. Zalazar was gone.

The bright eyes under the dark curls swept around. The god belted his lyre and unslung his bow. There was a great recessional howling as Je's demon servant fled, and fell, and fled and fell again.

Je raised her eyes, in a last moment of defiance. The winged head of Hypnos, already hovering beside her ear, silently awaited a command.

"Sleep now, sister Je. As our father Zeus and our brothers and sisters sleep. I join you presently," Apollo said.

THE WHITE BULL

He was up on the high ridge, watching the gulls ride in from over the bright sea on their motionless wings, to be borne upward as if by magic, effortlessly, when the sundazzled landscape began to rise beneath them. Thus he was probably one of the first to sight the black sailed ship coming in to port.

Standing, he raised a calloused hand to brush aside his grizzled hair and shade his eyes. The vessel had the look of the craft that usually came from Athens. But those sails...

He picked up and threw over his shoulder the cloak with which he had padded rock into a comfortable chair. It was time he came down from the high ridge anyway. King Minos and some of Minos' servitors were shrewd, and perhaps it would be wiser not to watch the birds too openly or too long.

When he had picked his way down, the harbor surrounded him with its noise and activity, its usual busy mixture of naval ships and cargo vessels, unloading and being worked on and taking on new cargo. On Execution Dock the sundried carcasses of pirates, looking like poor statues, shriveled atop tall poles in the bright sun.

On the wharf where the blacksailed ship now moored, a small crowd had gathered and a dispute of some kind was going on. A bright painted wagon, pulled by two white horses, had come down as scheduled from the House of the Double Axe to meet the Athenian ship, but none of the wagon's intended riders were getting into it as yet.

They stood on the wharf, fourteen youths and maids in a more or less compact group, wearing good clothes that seemed to have been deliberate-ly torn and dirtied. Their faces were smeared with soot and ashes as if for mourning, and most of them looked somewhat the worse for wine. They were arguing with a couple of minor officials of the House, who had come down with the wagon and a small honor guard of soldiery. It was not the argument that drew the man from the high ridge ever closer, however, but the sight of one who stood in the front of the Athenian group, half a head taller than anyone around him...

He pushed his way in through the little crowd, a gray middle-aged man with the heavy hands of an artisan and wearing heavy gold and silver ornaments on his fine white loincloth. A soldier looked round resentfully as a hard hand pushed on his shoulder, then closed his mouth and stepped aside.

"Prince Theseus." The old workman's hands went out in a gesture of deferential greeting. "I rejoice that the gods have brought you safe again before my eyes. How goes it with your royal father?"

The tall young man swung his eyes around and brought them rather slowly into focus. Some of the sullen anger left his begrimed face.

"Daedalus." A nod gave back unforced respect, became almost a bow as the strong body threatened to overbalance. "King Aegeus does well enough."

"I saw the black sails, Prince, and feared they might bear news of tragedy."

“All m’family in Athens are healthy as war horses, Daedalus. Or were when we sailed. The mourning is for ourselves. For our approaching...” Theseus groped hopelessly for a word.

“Immolation,” cheerfully supplied one of the other young men in ashes.

“That’s it.” The Prince smiled faintly. “So you may tell these officers that we wear what we please to our own welcome.” His dulled black eyes roamed up the stairsteps of the harbor town’s white houses and warehouses and whorehouses, to an outlying flank of the House of the Double Axe which was just visible amid a grove of cedars at the top of the first ridge. “Where is the school?”

“Not far beyond the portion of the House you see. Say an hour’s walk.” Daedalus observed the younger man with sympathy. “So, you find the prospect of a student’s life in Crete not much to your liking.” Around them the other branches of the argument between Cretan officials and new-comers had ceased; all were attending to the dialogue.

“Four years, Daedalus.” The princely cheeks, one whitened with an old swordscar, puffed out in a winey belch. “Four godblasted years.”

“I know.” Daedalus’ face wrinkled briefly with shared pain. He almost put out a hand to take the other’s arm; a little too familiar, here in public.

“Prince Theseus, will you walk with me? King Minos will want to see you promptly, I expect.”

“I bear him greetings from m’father.”

“Of course. Meanwhile the officers here will help your shipmates on their way to find their quarters.”

Thus the ascent from the harbor turned into an informal procession, with Theseus and Daedalus walking ahead, and the small honor guard following a few paces back, irregularly accompanied by the remaining thirteen Athenians, who looked about them and perhaps wondered a little at the unceremoniousness of it all. The girls whispered a little at the freedom of the Cretan women, who, though obviously respectable as shown by their dress and attitudes, strode about so boldly in the streets. The gaily decorated wagon in which the new arrivals might have ridden, rumbled uphill empty behind a pair of grateful horses. The wagon’s bright paint and streamers jarred with the mock mourning of the newcomers.

When they had climbed partway through the town, Daedalus suggested gently to his companion that the imitation mourning would be in especially bad taste at Court today, for a real funeral was going to take place in the afternoon.

“Someone in Minos’ family?”

“No. One who would have been your fellow student had he lived; in his third year at school. A Lapith. But still.”

“Oh.” Theseus slowed his long if slightly wobbling strides and rubbed a hand across his forehead, looking at the fingers afterward. “Now, what do I do?”

“Let us not, after all, take you to Minos right away.” Daedalus turned and with a gesture called one of the Court officials forward, saying to him: “Arrange some better quarters for Prince Theseus than those customarily given the new students. And he and his shipmates will need some time to make themselves presentable before they go before the King. Meanwhile, I will seek out Minos myself and offer

explanations.”

The officer’s face and his quick salute showed his relief.

“DAEDALUS.” King Minos’ manner was pleasant but businesslike as he welcomed his engineer into a pleasant, white walled room where at the moment his chief tax gatherers were arguing over innumerable scrolls spread out upon stone tables. Open colonnades gave a view of blue ocean in one direction, Mount Ida in another. “What can I do to help you out today? How goes the rockthrower machine?” The King’s once raven hair was graying, and his bare paunch stood honestly and comfortably over the waistband of his linen loincloth. But his arms within their circlets of heavy gold looked muscular as ever, and his eyes were still keen and penetrating.

“The machine goes well enough, sire. I wait for the cattlehides from Thrace, that are to be twisted into the sling, and I improve my waiting time by overseeing construction of the bronze shields.” Actually by now the smiths and smelters were all well trained and needed little supervision; so there was time for thought whilst looking into the forge and furnace flames, time to see again the gull’s effortless flight as captured by the mind and eye... “Today, King Minos, I come before you with another matter, one that I am afraid will not wait.” He began to relate to Minos the circumstances of the Prince’s arrival, leaving out neither the black sails nor the drunkenness, though they were mere details compared with the great fact of Theseus’ coming to be enrolled in the school.

Minos during this recital led him into another room, out of earshot of the tax gatherers. There the King, frowning, walked restlessly, pausing to look out of a window to where preparations for the afternoon’s funeral games were under way. “How is Aegeus?” he asked, without turning.

“Prince Theseus reports his esteemed father in excellent health.”

“Daedalus, it will not do for King Aegeus’ son to leave Crete with his brains addled, any more than they may be already.” The King turned. “As has happened to a few—Cretans and Athenians and others—since the school was opened. Or to leap from a tower, like this young man we’re burying today. Not that I think the Prince would ever choose that exit.”

“Yours are words of wisdom, Sire. And no more will it be desirable for Theseus to fail publicly at an assigned task, even if it be only obtaining a certificate of achievement from a school.”

Minos walked again. “Your turn to speak wisely, counselor. Frankly, what do you think the Prince’s chances are, of pursuing his studies here success-fully?”

Daedalus’ head bobbed in a light bow. “I share your own seeming misgivings on the subject, great King.”

“Yes. Um. We both know Theseus, and we both know also what the school is like. You better than I, I suppose. I can have Phaedra keep an eye on him, of course. She will be starting this semester too—not that she has her older sister’s brains, but it may do her some good. It may. He is as stalwart and handsome as ever, I suppose? Yes, then no doubt she will have an eye on him in any case.”

Continuing to think aloud, arms folded and a frown on his face, Minos came closer, until an observer might have thought that he was threatening the other man. “I had no thought that Aegeus was about to send his own son. But I suppose he did not want his nobles’ children displaying any honors that could not be matched in his own house. Oh, if he’d had a scholarly boy, one given to hanging around with graybeard sages, then I would have issued a specific invitation. I would’ve thought it expected. But given

the Prince's nature..."

Minos unfolded his arms but kept his eyes fixed firmly on his waiting subject. "Daedalus. You are Theseus' friend, from your sojourn at the Athenian court. And you were enrolled briefly in the school yourself...I sometimes marvel that you did not throw yourself into it more whole-heartedly."

"Perhaps we sages are not immune to professional jealousy, Sire."

"Perhaps." Minos' gaze twinkled keenly. "However that may be, I now expect you to do two things."

Daedalus bowed.

"First, stand ready to offer Theseus your tutorial services, as they may be required."

"Of course, Sire."

"Secondly—will you go today to see the Bull and talk to him? I think in this case you have greater competence than any of my usual ambassadors. Do what you can toward explaining the situation. Report back to me when you have seen the Bull."

Daedalus bowed.

On his way toward the Labyrinth, at whose center the Bull dwelt, he stopped to peer in un-noticed at the elementary school, which like most other governmental departments had its own corner of the vast sprawling House. On a three-legged stool surrounded by a gaggle of other boys and girls sat ten-year old Icarus, stylus in hand, bent over wax tablets on a table before him. Chanting grammar, an earnest young woman paced among her pupils. Daedalus knew her for one of the more recent graduates of the school where Theseus was bound. For a moment the King's engineer had the mad vision of Theseus in this classroom, teaching; hardly madder than that of the Prince sitting down to study, he supposed. After a last glance at his own fidgeting son—Icarus was bright enough, but didn't seem to want to apply himself to learning yet—Daedalus walked on.

As he passed along the flank of the vast House, he glanced in the direction of the field of rockhewn tombs nearby, and saw the small procession returning across the bridge that spanned the Kairatos, coming back to the House for the games, the bulldancing and the wrestling that should please the gods.

Pausing in a cloistered walk to watch, he pondered briefly the fact that Minos himself was not coming to the funeral. Of course the King was always busy. There was Queen Pasiphae, though, taking her seat of honor in the stands, rouged and wigged as usual these days to belie her age, tight girdle thrusting her full bare breasts up in a passable imitation of youth. And there came Princess Ariadne to the royal bench, taking the position of Master of the Games, as befitted her statue of eldest surviving child. And there was Phaedra—how old now? sixteen?—and quite the prettiest girl in sight.

He had thought that Theseus might be sleeping it off by now, but evidently the recuperative powers of youth, at least in the royal family of Athens, were even stronger than Daedalus remembered them to be. The Prince, cleansed by what must have been a complete bath and scraping, and suitably tagged for a modest degree of real mourning by a black band around his massive biceps, was just now vaulting into the ring for a wrestling turn. Stripped naked for the contest, Theseus was an impressive figure. Daedalus stayed long enough to watch him earn a quick victory over his squat, powerful adversary, some Cretan champion, and then claim a wreath from Ariadne's hand.

Then Daedalus walked on. There was, on this side of the House, no sharp line of architectural demarcation where ordinary living space ended and the Labyrinth began. Roofed space became less common, and at the same time walls grew unscalably high and smooth and passages narrowed. Stairs took the walker up and down for no good reason, and up and down again, until he was no longer sure whether he walked above the true ground level or below it. Windows were no more.

Now Daedalus was in the precincts of the real school, which Theseus would attend. Behind closed wooden doors taut silence reigned, or else came out the drone of reciting voices. A dozen times a stranger would have been confused, and like as not turned back to where he started, before Daedalus reached a sign, warning in three languages that the true Labyrinth lay just ahead. He passed beneath the sign with quick, sure steps.

He had gone scarcely fifty paces farther, turning half a dozen corners in that distance, before he became aware that someone was following him. A pause to glance back got him a brief glimpse of a longhaired girl's head, peering round a corner in his direction. The girl ducked out of sight at once. All was silent until his own feet began to move again, whereupon the shuffle of those pursuing him resumed.

With a sigh, he stopped again. Turned and called softly, "Stay." Then he walked back. As he had expected, it was a student, a slender Athenian girl of about eighteen, leaning against the stone wall in an exhausted but defensive pose. Daedalus vaguely remembered seeing her around for the last year or two. Now her eyes had gone blank and desperate with the endless corners and walls and angles and stairs and tantalizing glimpses of sky beyond the bronze grillwork high above. Failing some kind of test, obviously, she stared at him in silent hopelessness.

It was not for him to interfere. "Follow me," he whispered to her, "and you will come out in the apartments of the Bull himself. Is that what you want?"

The girl responded with a negative gesture, weak but quick. There was a great fear in her eyes. It was not the fear of a soldier entering a losing battle, or a captive going to execution, but great all the same. Though not as raw and immediate as those particular kinds of terror, it was on a level just as deep. Not death, only failure was in prospect, but that could be bad enough, especially for the young.

He turned from her and went on, and heard no more of feet behind. Soon he came to where a waterpipe crossed the passageway, concealed under a kind of stile. He had overseen most of the Labyrinth's construction, and was its chief designer. This wall here on his left was as thick as four men's bodies lying head to toe. Just outside, though you would never guess it from in here, it was a free sunny slope, and the last creaking shaddoof in the chain of lifting devices that brought seawater here by stages from the salt pools and reservoirs below.

Choosing unthinkingly the correct branchings of the twisted way, he came out abruptly into the central open space. Beyond the broad, raised, sundazzled stone dais in its center yawned the dark mouths of the Bull's own rooms. In the middle of the dais, like the gnomon of a sundial, stood a big chair on whose humped seat no human could com-fortably have perched. On it the White Bull sat waiting, as if expecting him.

"Learn from me, Daedalus." This was what the Bull always said to him in place of any more conventional greeting. It had chronic trouble in sliding its inhumanly deep, slow voice from one syllable to another without a complete stop in between, though when necessary the sounds came chopping out at a fast rate.

The Bull stood up like a man from its chair, on the dais surrounded by the gently flowing moat of

seawater that it did not need, but loved. It was hairy and muscular, and larger than any but the biggest men. Though wild tales about its bullhood flew through the House, Daedalus, who had talked to it perhaps as much as any other man, was not even sure that it was truly male. The silver tipped hair of fur grew even thicker about the loins than on the rest of the body, which was practically covered. Its feet—Daedalus sometimes thought of them as its hind feet, though it invariably walked on only two—ended in hooves, or at least in soles so thick and hard as to come very near that definition. Its upper limbs beneath their generous fur were quite manlike in the number and position of their joints, and their muscular development put Daedalus in mind of Theseus' arms.

Any illusion that this might be a costumed man died quickly with inspection of the hands. The fingernails were so enlarged as to be almost tiny hooves, and each hand bore two opposable thumbs. The head, at first glance, was certainly a bull's, with its fine short snowy hair and the two blunt horns; but one saw quickly that the lips were far too mobile, the eyes too human and intelligent.

"Learn from me, Daedalus."

"We have tried that." The conflict between them was now too old, and still too sharp, to leave much room for formal courtesy.

"Learn." The deep and bulllike voice as stubborn as a wall. "The secrets of the atom and the star are mine to give."

"Then what need have you for one more student, one worn old man like me? There must be younger minds, all keen and eager to be taught. Even today a fresh contingent has come from Athens for your instruction."

"You are not truly old as yet; there are decades of strong life ahead. And if you truly learn, you may extend your life."

Daedalus curtly signed refusal, confronting the other across the moat's reflected sky. The King had had him raise the water up here for the Bull's pleasure, evidently as some reminder of a home-land too remote for human understanding. Some ten years ago the Bull had appeared on the island, speaking passable Greek and asking to see the King, offering gifts of knowledge. Some said it had come out of the sea, but the homeland it occasionally alluded to was much more wonderful than that.

Daedalus said: "For the past few years I have watched the young men and women going in here to be taught, and I have seen and talked to them again when they came out. I do not know whether I want to be taught what they are learning. Not one has whispered to me the stars' or atoms' secrets."

"All fragile vessels, Daedalus. Of limited capacity. And once cracked, good only to be studied to find out how the pot is made." The Bull took a step toward him on its shaggy, goat shaped legs. "For such a mind as yours, I bring fulfillment, never bursting."

It was always the same plea: learn from me. And always the same arguments, with variations, shot back and forth between them. "Are there no sturdy, capacious vessels among the students?"

"Not one in a thousand will have your mind. Not one in ten thousand."

"We have tried, remember? It was not good for me."

"Try again."

Daedalus looked, around him almost involuntarily, then lowered his voice. "I told you what I wanted. Teach me to fly. Show me how the wings should be constructed, rather."

"It is not that simple, Daedalus." The White Bull's inhumanly deep voice stretched out in something like a yawn, and it resumed its chair. It ate only vegetables and fruits, and scattered about it on the dais was a light litter of husks and shriveled leaves. "But if you study in my school four years, you will be able to build wings for yourself after that time. I promise you."

The man clenched his calloused hands. "How can it take me four years to learn to build a wing? If I can learn a thing at all, the idea of it should take root within my mind inside four days, and any skill required should come into my fingers in four months. The knowledge might take longer to perfect, of course—but I do not ask to build a flock of birds complete with beaks and claws, and breathe life into them, and set them catching fish and laying eggs. No, all I want are a few feathers for myself."

When he had enrolled, a year or so ago, he soon found out that he was to learn to build wings not by trying to build them, but by first studying "the knowledge of numbers" as the White Bull put it, and then the strengths and other properties of the various materials that might be used, and theories of the air and of birds, and a distracting list of other matters having even less apparent relevance. Some of this, the materials, Daedalus knew pretty well already, and about the rest he did not care. His enrollment had not lasted long.

"Try again, Daedalus." The voice maintained its solemn, stubborn roar. "You will become a truly educated man. New horizons will open for you."

"You mean you will teach me not what I want to learn, but rather to forget wanting it. To learn instead to make my life depend and pivot on your teaching." Here he was again, getting bogged down in the same old unwinnable dispute. Why keep at it? Because there were moments when he seemed to himself insane for rejecting the un-doubted wealth of knowledge that the Bull could give him. And yet he knew that he was right to do so.

"Bull, what good will it do you if I come to sit at your feet and learn? There has to be something that you want out of it."

"My reason for being is to teach." It nodded down solemnly at him from its high chair, and crossed its hind legs like some goat god. "For this I crossed oceans unimaginable between the stars. When I convey my teachings to minds able to hold them, then I too will be fulfilled and can know peace. Shall I tell Minos that you still re-fuse? There are weapons much greater than catapults that you could make for him."

"I doubt you will tell Minos anything. I doubt that he will speak to you any more."

"Why not? You mean I have displeased him?"

He meant, but was not going to say, that Minos seemed to be getting increasingly afraid of his pet monster. It was not, Daedalus thought, that the King suspected the Bull of plotting to seize power, or anything along that line. Minos' fear seemed to lie on a deeper, more personal level. The King perhaps had not admitted this fear to himself, and anyway the White Bull brought him too much prestige, not to speak of useful knowledge, for him to want to get rid of it.

Daedalus said: "The King sent me today, when he could have come himself, or else had you brought

before him.”

“On what errand?”

“Not to renew old arguments.” Daedalus spat into the White Bull’s moat and watched critically as the spittle was borne along toward the splash gutter at the side. He was proud of this water-works and liked to see them operating properly. “Among today’s Athenians is one whose coming poses problems for us all.” He identified Theseus, and outlined Minos’ concern for his alliance with Aegeus. “The young man is probably here at least in part because his father wants him kept out of possible intrigues at home. Minos said nothing of the kind to me, but I heard it between the words of what he said.”

“I think I understand, Daedalus. Yet I can but try to impart knowledge to this young man. If he cannot or will not learn, I cannot certify that he has. Else what I have certified of other students becomes suspect.”

“In this case, surely, an exception might be made.”

They argued this point for a while, Daedalus getting nowhere. Until the White Bull suddenly offered that something might be done to make Theseus’ way easier, if Daedalus himself were to enroll as a student again.

Daedalus was angry. “Minos will really be dis-pleased with you if I bear back the message that you want me to spend my next four years studying rather than working for my King.”

“Even studying half time, one with a mind like yours may learn in three years what a merely excellent student learns in four.”

The man was silent, holding in, like an old soldier at attention.

“Why do you resist me, Daedalus? Not really because you fear your mind will crack beneath the burden of my treasures. Few even of the poor students have this happen.”

Daedalus relaxed suddenly. He sat down on the fine stone pavement and was able to smile and even chuckle. “Oh great White Bull, whenever I see man or god approaching to do me a favor, a free good turn, I do a good turn for myself and flee the other way. Through experience I have acquired this habit, and it lies near the roots of whatever modest stock of wisdom I possess.”

There was at first no answer from the creature on the high inhuman chair, and Daedalus pressed on. “Because I can learn something, does that mean I must? Should I not count the price?”

“There is no price, for you.”

“Bah.”

“What is the price for a man who stumbles up-on great treasure, if he simply bend and pick it up?”

“A good question. I will think upon it.”

“But the cost to him is all the treasure, if he re-fuse even to bend.”

He knew he had no particular skill in intrigue, and was afraid to do anything but carry the whole truth back to Minos. The King of course gave him no way out, and next Daedalus was forced to enroll. He

had no black sail to hoist, but simply walked to the White Bull's apartments again and said, "Well, here I am."

"Good." He could not tell if the Bull was gloating. "First, a refresher course." And shortly Daedalus was walking into a classroom where Theseus and Phaedra sat side by side among other young folk. Daedalus took his place on a bench, endured some curious glances, and waited, gnarled and incongruous, until the Bull entered and began to teach.

This was not instruction in the human way. Daedalus knew that he and his fellow students still sat rooted to their benches, with the tall shaggy figure of the Bull before them. But there came with the sudden clarity of lightning a vision in which he seemed to have sprung upward from the ground, flying at more than arrow speed into the blue. The Labyrinth and the House of the Double Axe dropped clear away, and his view carried over the whole fair isle of Crete. Its mountains dwindled and flattened, soon became almost at one with the fields and orchards, and very quickly the sea was visible on every side. Other islands popped into view, and then the jagged mainland of Greece. Then the whole Mediterranean, with a sunspot of glare on it bigger than lost Crete itself, then Europe and much of Africa, and then a hemisphere—the shared experience was too much for some of the students and there were outcries and faintings around Daedalus. He was a little shaken himself, though he had seen this much during his previous enrollment.

Eventually the first day of his renewed schooling was over, and in due time the second and third had passed. Lessons came in a more or less fixed plan. Seldom were they as dramatically presented as that early one that indicated the size and complexity of the world. Mostly the students studied from books, hand-copied for them by students more advanced, who also did much of the teaching. And there were tests.

QUESTION: THE WORLD ON WHICH MEN LIVE IS:

- A. Bigger than the island of Crete.
- B. Approximately a sphere in shape.
- C. In need of cultivation and care, that can be accomplished only through education, if it is to support properly an eventual population of billions of human beings.
- D. All of the above.

"Are these the secrets of the stars and atoms, Bull?"

"Patience, Daedalus. One step at a time. Tradition hallows the mode of teaching."

"Bah."

"Now you are a student. Disrespect lowers your grades and slows your progress."

Theoretically his attendance was to be for half a day, every day except the rare holidays. But it was tacitly understood between the Bull and Minos—at least Daedalus hoped it was—that Daedalus in fact kept to a flexible schedule, spending whatever time was necessary on 'the King's projects, the catapults, the lifelike statues, to keep them progressing. His days were more than full, though he could have done all

the schoolwork required so far with half a brain.

Meanwhile the White Bull seemed to be keeping his part of the bargain. One of his chief acolytes, Stomargos, an earnest mainland youth, frail and clumsy at the same time, explained to Daedalus how Theseus was being shunted into a special program.

“The Prince will be allowed to choose both his Greater and Lesser Branches of learning from courses that have not previously been given for credit,” said the young man, whose own Greater Branch was, as he had proudly informed Daedalus, the Transmission of Learning itself. “Since Prince Theseus seems fated to spend most of his life as a warrior, the Bull is preparing for him courses in Strategic Decision, Command Presence, and Tactical Leadership—these in addition, of course, to those in Language, Number, and the World of Men that are required of all first year students.”

“I wish the royal student well.” Daedalus paused for thought. “It may be foolish of me to ask, but I cannot forbear. Where and how is the course on Tactical Leadership to be conducted?”

“All courses are conducted within the student’s mind, Daedalus.” The answer sounded somewhat condescending. Nonetheless Daedalus pursued the matter, out of concerned curiosity, and found out that the Labyrinth itself, or some part of it, was to be the training ground. Beyond that Stomargos knew little.

Back at his workshop that afternoon, Daedalus found a message from Icarus’ teacher awaiting him—the boy had run off somewhere, playing truant. It was the second or third time that this had happened within a month. And scarcely had he grumbled at this message and then put it aside to take up his real work, when Icarus himself came dawdling in, an elbow scraped raw, arm messy with dried blood from some mishap during the day. Daedalus waved the note and growled and lectured, but in the son’s face he could see the mother, and he could not be harsh. He ordered a servant to take Icarus home, see to his injury, and keep him confined to quarters for the remainder of the day.

Then there was a little time at last to part the curtains at the workshop’s rear, and move through the secret door there that slid out of the way as if by magic, carrying with it neatly what had looked like an awkward, obstructing pile of dirty trash. Time to crank open a secret skylight above a secret room, and look at the great manwings spread out on a bench.

Long ago he had given up trying to use real feathers; now he worked with canvas and leather and light cotton padding to add shape. But work was lagging lately; he felt in his bones that more thought, more cunning was needed. When he strapped on one wing and beat it downward through the air, the effect was not much different from that of waving a fan. He was not impelled noticeably toward the sky. There were secrets still to be discovered...

When he got back to quarters himself, it was late at night. He grabbed a mouthful of fruit and cheese, drank half a cup of wine, shooed a bored and sleepy concubine out of his way, and dropped on his own soft but simple bed to rest.... It seemed that hardly had his eyes closed, however, before he heard the voices of soldiers, bullying a servant at his door: “...orders to bring Daedalus at once before the King.”

This was not Minos’ usual way of summoning one of his most trusted and respected advisors, and Daedalus knew fear as, shivering, he went with them out under the late, cold stars. The lieutenant took pity on him. “It concerns Prince Theseus, sir. The King is...” The soldier shook his head, and let his words trail off with a puffed sigh of awe.

It was the formal audience chamber to which the soldiers brought him—a bad sign, Daedalus thought. At the King’s nod they saluted and backed out, leaving the engineer standing before the throne. Theseus

moved over a little on the carpet to make room for him. No one else was now present except Minos, who, seated on his tall chair between the painted griffins, continued a merciless chewing out of the young Prince. The flames of the oil lamps trembled now and then as if in awe. The tone of the King's voice was settled, almost weary, suggesting that this tongue-lashing had been going on for some time.

Sneaking glances at Theseus, Daedalus judged he had been drunk recently, but was no longer. Scratches on the sullen, handsome face, and a bruise on one bare shoulder—Theseus was attired in the Cretan gentleman's elegant loincloth now—suggested recent strenuous activity, and the King's words filled in the story.

Icarus had not been the day's only truant, and Theseus would have been wiser to bruise himself in some activity so innocuous as seeking birds eggs on the crags. Instead he had led some of his restive classmates on an escapade in town. Tactical Leadership, thought Daedalus, even while he kept his face impeccably grave and his eyes suitably downcast in the face of the Minoan wrath.

Violence against citizens and their valuable slaves. Destruction of property. Shameful public drunkenness, bring disrepute on House and School alike. All topped off by the outrage of the daughters of some merchant families who were too important to be so treated with impunity.

Theseus held his hands behind him, sometimes tightening them into fists, sometimes playing like an idiot with his own massive fingers. His heavy features were set in disciplined silence now. This was probably like being home again and listening to his father.

"...classmates involved will be expelled and sent home in disgrace," the King was saying. He paused now, for the first time since the soldiers left. "To do the same to you would of course be an insult to your father and a danger to our alliance. Daedalus, did I not set you in charge of this young blockhead's schooling?"

In the face of this inaccuracy, Daedalus merely bowed his head a little lower. Now was not the moment for any philosopher's insistence on precise Truth; rather, the great fact that Minos was in a rage easily took precedence over Truth in any of its lesser forms.

"His schooling is not proceeding satisfactorily, Daedalus."

The engineer bowed somewhat lower yet.

"And as for you, Prince—now you may speak. What have you to say?"

Theseus shifted weight on his big feet, and spoke up calmly enough. "Sire, that school is driving me to drink and madness."

Now Minos too was calm. The royal rage had been used up, or perhaps it could be turned on and off like one of Daedalus' water valves. "Prince Theseus, you are under house arrest until further notice. Except for school attendance. I will put six strong soldiers at your door, and you may assault them, or try to, should you feel the need for further recreation."

"I am sorry, King Minos." And it seemed he was. "But I can take no more of that school."

"You will take more of it. You must." Then the King's eye swung back again. "Daedalus, what are we to do? I and the Queen leave in three days for the state visits, in Macedonia and elsewhere. We may be gone for months."

“I fear I have been neglectful regarding the Prince’s problems, sire. Let me now make them my prime concern.”

Shortly after dawn a few hours later, Daedalus came visiting the White Bull’s quarters once again. This time he found the dais uninhabited, and he sloshed through the moat and stood beside the odd chair. There was never any need to call. Shortly the silver-and-snow figure emerged from a darkened doorway, to splash gratefully in the salt moat and then climb onto the dais to bid him welcome.

“Learn from me, Daedalus! How are you learn-ing?”

“White Bull, I come not on my own affairs today, but on Prince Theseus’ behalf. He is having trouble—well, he informs me that this testing in the Labyrinth, in particular, is like to drive him to violent madness. Knowing him, I do not think he is exaggerating. Must this Tactical course be continued in its present form?”

“The course of study of tactics is prescribed. In part, as follows; The teacher shall evoke from the students facts as to their determination of spatial location—“

He couldn’t stand it. “Oh great teacher! Master of the Transmission of Learning—“

“Not Master. My rank is that of Adept, a high-er rank.”

“Master or adept or divinity or what you will. I suppose it means nothing that the Prince’s fate in battle, even insofar as he may escape all the sheer chance stupidities of war, is not at all likely to depend on his ability to grope his way out of a maze?”

“He has been allowed to choose his course of study, Daedalus. Beyond that, special treatment cannot be accorded any student.”

“Well, I have never fought anyone with a sword, White Bull. I have never bullied and challenged men and cheered them on to get them into combat. Once, on the mainland, watching from the highest and safest place that I could reach, I saw Prince Theseus do these things. Some vassal’s uprising against Aegeus. Theseus put it down, almost single-handedly, you might say. I think he would not be likely to learn much from me in the way of military science, were I to lecture on the subject. No doubt you, however, have great skill and knowledge in this field to impart?”

“My qualifications as teacher are beyond your ability to comprehend, much less to question. Your own progress should be your concern.”

“If Theseus fails, I may not be on hand to make any progress through your school. Minos will be angry at me. And not at me alone.”

But argue as he might he still could not get his ward excused from Tactical training and testing in the Labyrinth. For the next couple of days the Prince at least stayed in school and worked, and Daedalus’ hopes rose; then, emerging one afternoon from his own classroom, he saw a page from the Inner House coming to meet him, and knew a sinking feeling. The Princess Ariadne required his presence in the audience chamber at once.

He found Ariadne perched regally on the throne; but as soon as she had waved her attendants out and the two of them were alone she came down from the chair and spoke to him informally.

“Daedalus, before my father’s departure he informed me that Prince Theseus was having—difficulties—in school. The King impressed upon me the importance of this problem. Also I have—have talked with the Prince myself, and find that the situation does not seem to be improving.” Ariadne sounded nervous, vaguely distracted.

“I fear that you are right, Princess.” Then before he had to say anything more, another page was announcing Theseus himself. There was no escort of soldiers with the Prince; evidently the house arrest instituted by Minos had already been set aside.

The exchange of greetings between the two young people sounded somewhat too stiffly formal to Daedalus, and he noted that Ariadne scarcely looked directly at Theseus for a moment. Certainly she had not so avoided watching him during the wrestling match. And when the Prince looked at her now, his face was wooden.

For a few moments Daedalus thought perhaps that they were quarreling, but he soon decided that the absolute opposite was more likely: an affair, and they were trying to hide it.

In response to an awkward-sounding request from Ariadne, Theseus’ related his day’s continued difficulties in school. Now she turned, almost pleading, to the older man. “Daedalus, he will fail his Labyrinth tests again. What are we to do? We must find some means of helping him.” And a glance flicked between the two young people that was very brief, but still enough to assure Daedalus of what was going on.

“Ah.” He relaxed, looked at them both with something like a smile. He only hoped infatuation would not bring Ariadne to any too-great foolishness. Meanwhile, Theseus’ problem might be easier to solve while Minos, with his awe of the Bull, was not around.

Conferring with the Prince, while Ariadne hovered near and listened greedily, he made sure that the maze itself was indeed the key to the young man’s difficulties. In courses other than Tactics the Prince might, probably could, do well enough to just scrape by.

With a charred stick Daedalus drew, from memory, a plan of the key portion of the Labyrinth right on the floor near the foot of the throne. The griffins glared down balefully at the three of them squatting there like children at some game.

Theseus stared gloomily at the patterns while Daedalus talked. Ariadne’s hand came over once, forgetfully, to touch her lover’s, and then flew back, while her eyes jumped up to Daedalus’ face. He affirmed that he had noticed nothing, by holding his own scowling concentration on the floor.

“Now try it this way, Prince. The secret...let’s see. Yes. If you are finding your way in the secret is to let your right hand touch the wall at the start. Hey?”

“Yes, I can always tell my right hand from my left. Out here anyway.” Theseus was trying grimly. “Right always holds the sword.”

“Yes. So if you want to go inward, as I say, first let your right hand glide continuously along the walls, in imagination if not in fact. Then, whenever you must climb a stair, switch at its top to gliding your left hand along the wall; in other words, when there’s a choice, turn always to the left. Whenever a stair leads you downward, switch again at its bottom to going right. Now, if you are seeking your way out, simply reverse—“

“Daedalus.” The Prince’s voice stopped him in midsentence. “Thanks for what you are trying to do. But I tell you, when I am put in there I cannot help myself.” Theseus got to his feet, as if unconscious of the movement, his eyes fixed now on distance, “in there I forget all your lefts and rights, and all else, except I know the walls are crushing in on me, the doors all sealing themselves off—“ Ariadne put out a hand again, and drew it back. Now she was standing too. “—so there is nothing left but the stone walls, all coming closer... I wish you had never told me that some of them are four men’s bodies thick.”

The look in his eyes was one that Daedalus had seen there only rarely in the past, and now Daedalus too got to his feet, moving with deliberate care.

“If that godblasted cow dares lecture me on courage and perseverance in my studies one more time, I swear by all the gods I’ll break its neck.” “Very well, my friend.” He laid a hard hand gently and briefly on the Prince’s shoulder. “There are other ways that we can help.”

Mid-afternoon of the day following, and in his own classroom Daedalus had fallen into a day-dream of numbers that his stubborn mind kept trying to fit to flying gulls. He was roused from this state by a hand shaking his own shoulder.

Stomargos stood at his side, looking down at him in obscure triumph. “Daedalus, the White Bull wants to see you, at once.”

He would not ask what for, but got to his feet and followed the educator in a silence of outward calm. Daedalus had expected that when they reached the Bull’s private quarters Stomargos would be sent out. But the Bull, waiting for them on its tall chair, made no sign of dismissal, and the young man, with the smug look on his face, remained standing at Daedalus’ side.

Today for once the Bull did not say learn from me. “We have discovered the Prince’s cheating, Daedalus.”

“Cheating? What do you mean?” He had never been any good with lies.

“The thread tied on his right hand. The tiny metal balls to bounce and roll and sleek always the downward slope of floor, however gentile. How did you make a metal ball so smooth and He had dropped them molten from a tall tower, in-to water. He wondered if the Bull would be impress-ed to hear his method. “I see,” he said aloud, trying to be noncommittal, admitting nothing. “What to you mean to do?”

“Leave us, Stomargos,” the White Bull said at last. And when they were alone, it said: “Now learn from me, Daedalus. As you have sought to learn.”

...and he reeled and almost fell into the moat before he could sit down, as the pictures came into his mind, this time with painful power. There were the wings, not much different in their gross structure from those he had in his workshop, but these were pierced through at many points with tiny, peculiarly curved channels. Soft, sculptured cavities that widened just slightly and quickly closed again as in his vision the wings beat and the air flowed through and around them. With each beat, the air below the wings, encountering the channels, changed pressure wildly, a thin layer of it turning momentarily almost as hard as wood. Somehow in the vision he could feel as well as see the fluid alterations...and just so the pinions’ width and length must be, in relation to the flyer’s length and weight, and so the variation in the channels that went through the different regions of the wing...

It all burned into the brain. There would be no forgetting this, even if forgetfulness were one day willed. But the intruding vision was soon ended, and he climbed shakily up to a standing pose.

“Bull...why did you never before give me such teaching?”

“It will not make of you an educated man Daedalus.”

“I thank you for it...but why, then, do you give it now?”

The Bull’s voice was almost soft, and it did not seem to be looking directly at him. “I think this teaching will remove you from my presence. One way or another stop your disruption of my school.”

“I see.” In his mind the plan for the new wings burned, urgent as a fire in the workshop. “You will not tell Minos, then, that you accuse me of helping Theseus to cheat?”

“Your value to the King is great, Daedalus. If he is forced to choose between us I may possibly be sacrificed. Or my school closed. Therefore I take this step to remove you as my rival. I see now you are not worthy of fine education.”

The wings still burning before his eyes, he had let himself be led off through the Labyrinth for a hundred paces or so (Stomargos, triumph fading into puzzlement, his escort once again) before it came to him. “And Theseus? What of him?”

“I am a witness to the Prince’s attempt at cheating,” said Stomargos, firmly and primly. “And the Bull has decided that he now must be expelled.”

“That cannot be!” Daedalus was so aghast that the other was shaken for a moment.

But for a moment only. “Oh, the Bull and I are quite agreed on that. The Prince is probably receiving his formal notification at this moment.”

And Daedalus spun around and ran, back toward the inner Labyrinth.

“Stay! Stay!” Stomargos shouted, trotting in pursuit. “You are to leave the precincts of the school at once...” But just then the roaring and the struggling sounded from within.

Theseus and the Bull were grappling on the central dais, arms locked on each other’s necks, Daedalus saw as he burst on the scene. The tall chair was overturned, fruit scattered underfoot. In Theseus’ broad back the great bronze cables stood like structural arches glowing from the forge.

The end came even as Daedalus’ feet splashed in the moat. He heard the sickening bony crack and the Bull’s hoarse warbling cry at the same instant. The Prince staggered back to stand there staring down at what his hands had done. The gray-white mound of fur, suddenly no more manlike than a dying bear, dropped at his feet.

Stomargos came in, and splashed over quickly to join the others on the dais. He pointed, goggled, opened his mouth and began an almost wordless call for help. He turned and ran, and it was Daedalus who had to stop him with a desperate watery tackle in the moat.

“Theseus! Help me! Keep this one quiet.” And in a moment the Prince of Athens had taken charge. Stomargos’ head was clamped down under water, and soon the bubbles ceased to rise and make their

way to the splash gutter at his side.

The two men still alive climbed out onto the dais. Theseus, still panting with his exertions against the Bull, seemed with every working of his lungs to grow a little taller and straighter, like some young tree just freed of a deforming burden, resuming its natural form. "Does he still breathe, Daedalus?" A nod toward the fallen Bull.

Daedalus was crouching down, prodding into gray fur, trying to find out. "I am not sure."

"Well, let him, if he can. It matters to me no longer. My ship and men can be got ready in an hour or two and I am going home. Or somewhere else, if my father will not have me in Athens now. But better a pirate's life, even, than..." His eyes flashed once at the convoluted walls surrounding.

Daedalus started to ask why he thought he would be allowed to leave, but then understanding came. "And myself?" he asked.

"Ariadne will come with me, I expect."

"Gods of sea and sky!"

"And her sister Phaedra. And you are welcome, friend, though I can promise you no safe workshop, nor slaves, nor high place at a court."

"I want no place as high as a sundried pirate's, which I fear Minos might make for me here, when he comes home. Now we had better move swiftly, before this violence is discovered."

"Daedalus." The unexpected voice was a mere thread of sound, stretched and about to break.

He bent down closer beside its head. "White Bull, how is it with you?"

"As with a man whose neck is broken, Daedalus. After today I teach no more."

"Would I had learned from you before today, White Bull. And would you had learned from me."

They walked out together, looking a little shaken no doubt, as was only natural for two students who had probably just been expelled. Theseus muttered to passing teachers that the Bull and Stomargos were talking together and did not wish to be disturbed. They walked without hurrying to Ariadne, and then one trusted servant was sent to gather Theseus' crew. And another to help Daedalus look for his son, when he discovered that Icarus was truant yet again today, not to be found in school.

The wild lands where boys looked for birds and dreams swept up mile after mile behind and above the House of the Double Axe.

"We can wait no longer for him, Daedalus. My men's lives are all in danger, and the Princesses' too. As soon as the bodies are found, some military man or sea captain will take it upon himself to stop my sailing, or try to do so."

And Ariadne: "Theseus must get away. My father will not deal too grievously with you, Daedalus; he depends on you too much."

Phaedra was silent, biting her full lips. Her fingers as if moving on their own caressed Theseus' arm, but

Ariadne did not see.

Daedalus saw in his mind's eye the sundried pirates on the dock; and his workshop with the hidden, unfinished wings, and he saw how the small trusting shadow would cross the threshold when Icarus came running home...

Long, helmed shadows came first, the black triangles of shadow spearheads thrust ahead of them. This time they held their weapons ready as they marched him deeper into the House, and Icarus, returning wearily from some adventure, was only just in time to see his father arrested, and he swept up like a dropped crumb by tidy soldiery.

A month must pass before Minos came home again, and the de facto military government, taking over after the Princesses' desertion, did not want to assume responsibility for judging Daedalus. He and his son were confined under strict house arrest in his workshop and quarters, and allotted also a small area of Labyrinth that lay between.

All entrances and exits to their small domain were walled up—the masonry was rough and temporary-looking, if there was any comfort to be derived from that. The guard was heavy all around. Food was slid in through a tiny door, and garbage dragged out, and water continued to flow through the Daedalian plumbing. And that was all.

What material to use, to sculpt the thousand channels? It must be soft...

When he had a hundred cunning perforations built through a wing he tested it. Strapped it on and gave a strong, quick push down and it felt as if his arm had for a moment rested on something solid and ready to be climbed.

One clouded night when there were a thousand channels and he had decided the wings were ready, the father mounted into the sky. Ascending awkwardly and breathlessly at first, he soon learned to relax like a good swimmer. When some height had been attained, a long, gliding, coasting rest let the arm muscles recover before more work was necessary. In an hour, in air that was almost calm, he flew the length of the whole cloud-shrouded island, and was not winded or wearied. Then back toward the pinpoints of the House's lamps, which served to guide him home.

When he landed, the wings were warm, almost hot, with heat that had been gathered into their channels out of the air itself, and somehow turned to pushing force. Daedalus still had not the words or thoughts to make clear, even in his own mind, just how the wings worked. In daylight a strong push down with one completed wing, and you could see a vaporpuff big as a pumpkin appear in the beaten air and fly off rearward, spinning violently. Icarus extending a hand into the puff said he could feel the chill...

Food and water and gold, in small quantities, they would carry at their belts. In daylight, across the sea to Sicily; a few hours should be enough. And they could turn northward to the mainland, if they flew into difficulty. "In the morning, son. Now sleep."

...He had not yet paid the price, but he knew that it would come. Squinting into the hot, rising sun, he absently marked its dull sheen on Icarus' wings, and waited for the breath of wind to help them rise among the gulls.

“I have decided to die,” Matthew Pandareus announced to his wife on their first evening together after their long vacation trip to Mars. Actually they had been back on Earth for a week, but Iris had begun an evening class in the history of paperweights and they had not had a real chance to talk since their return. Tonight they had just finished dinner tête-à-tête in their condominium apartment and he had strolled from the dining alcove to look out through the living room’s glass wall at the fantastic complexities of city lights extending below, around and above their middleclass, middle level dwelling.

“Dear, you had a similar idea once before, thirty years ago.” Iris’s clinging gown swished faintly about her shapely legs as she followed to stand slightly behind him at the window. “Here, you forgot your brandy.”

“Thank you. Closer on forty,” he amended, turning to accept the glass from her hand. She turned away busily again as soon as she had passed it on and Pandareus had no very clear look at her face.

Iris switched on the fireplace with a wave of her hand and adjusted the mood of the background music to something a little more capricious. “Thirty,” she said firmly, coming back to face him. The communication screen chimed then and she was off to answer it. Maintaining his stance in the living room Pandareus heard the short conversation—just some friends calling to welcome them back and ask how their voyage had been. Iris invited them over a week from Tuesday but they were busy that night. They would call again tomorrow or the next day and some date for a get-together would be worked out.

Now she was back in the living room again, wearing an expression he knew well, that of being firmly in the right though without animosity for those who weren’t. “Thirty,” she said firmly. “It was right after you won the golf tournament.” If it was time to argue, Iris was ready. Even studying her familiar face at close range, he could neither see nor remember which parts of it were synthetic skin and which her own, rejuvenated. There were no actual wrinkles on it anywhere, only the ghost of a line or two at the corners of the eyes. Even under close inspection she could be taken for a youthful twenty-eight. Her face and body were changing no more over the decades than were his golf or bowling score. He and Iris took long vacations from each other sometimes, but stayed married. He had found no one with whom he would rather live.

“It’s nearly a hundred years since we were married,” he recalled aloud and tasted his brandy. “Will you miss me very much?”

“I shall miss you, of course. Our relationship has been—very nearly perfect. But if it will make you happy, Matthew, go ahead and die. What is it? Boredom?”

“Not really.” He indicated with the most minimal inclination of his head, which Iris instantly interpreted correctly, that they might go and seat themselves near the fire. Stretching out his legs there in front of his chair, Pandareus continued: “I think you know me well enough to believe that I am not trying to appear altruistic when I say that the time has come for me to move on and make room for someone else.”

“Of course, dearest.”

“There are—what?—maybe eleven billion people on the planet now, and I think the number has hardly changed in the last few centuries. Fortunately starvation and disease are no longer problems. But it is a mixed blessing that practically no one dies unintentionally any more—how can new lives be lived if the old will not make way? When was the last time you saw a child? If every—“

“Speaking of children,” Iris interrupted. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but speaking of children, I hope you’re not planning to have yourself terminated before the nineteenth.”

“Of what? This month?” Automatically he looked for a calendar but could not see one. “Why?”

“Janet called.” His previous wife. “I mean, she left a message while we were on vacation. Things have been so hectic I forgot to tell you. Your five great grandson is making his bar mitzvah on that date, you’re to be sure to attend.”

“Bar mitzvah?” He rehearsed in his mind the names and generations comprising the straight unbranching line of his descendants. “I didn’t think Liang was Jewish.”

“Perhaps what Janet meant was his confirmation. At any rate—“

“—be sure to be there. Yes. Well, I had hoped to get away soon, having decided that it was the right move to make. But Janet would really feel hurt—if I know her. Is there any way we could get together with her, maybe this week or next week, and discuss it face to face? Let’s see, when—“

The communications screen chimed. Another set of friends, these just back from their own vacation.

The next day in his office on the upper floor of the duplex apartment he consulted his business calendar as soon as he could find the time. He discovered there was no use after all in trying to get in touch with Janet and see her, because even if the nineteenth were clear he had made commitments for important business meetings on the twenty-first and twenty-second. The firm in which he was a partner—dealers in antiques and folk art—was a small one and no great wealth hung on his decisions, but still an obligation was an obligation.

He switched his calendar to the following month. Studying the new pattern of appointments and memoranda displayed electronically on the glowing glass screen he at first found nothing in it that could not in good conscience be entrusted to his heirs and assigns. But wait, there was the antique furniture auction in Minneapolis. Of course, he and Iris had gone to a great deal of trouble to plan their vacation so he would be sure to be back in time for that. The auction would be an ideal chance for him to train one or two of the younger people in the firm as buyers and he supposed he owed it to his partners to carry on that far.

Now, the month after that...of course, he was supposed to be in Europe for the round of trade shows. Again, the feeling that he would be letting others down if he bowed out. His wife might have a chance to go along. She also wanted to take part of the history study group that she was heading—all adults, of course—to Europe.

The next month, now, was all clear, except for trivia that he could disregard if he put his mind to it. He did put his mind to it. Then with his electronic stylus he wrote. TERMINATION across that month on the calendar screen.

That evening, however, after helping Iris grade papers from her drama group before some friends came over, he paused suddenly with a food bar halfway to his mouth, staring after his wife who had just vanished into the kitchen to start preparing the drinks and smokes and slices and dip. He had just been struck by the realization that the month he had tentatively chosen for his demise was the month of their hundredth anniversary. He had been deliberately keeping his calendar for that month clear of other major events, never dreaming that he could forget the big one.

Of course, they could have some worthy celebration (was it on the , fifteenth or the sixteenth?) and then he could terminate a few days later—but no. The scene would be very awkward. He could hear the questions now: And what are you and your husband doing to celebrate, my dear? And the good wishes: May the next hundred years be as happy as the first. No, any time that month would definitely be too close.

He would have to ask Iris how she felt about it. But there was the door and the bridge club was starting to arrive.

The next day Pandareus had his lawyer on the screen—they were locked in a time-consuming squabble with another art dealer over the correct attribution of an early American painting—and he took the opportunity to discuss the legal aspects of dying.

The lawyer shook his head. “Haven’t time to go into the whole thing right now. But it’s not advisable for you to terminate at present. You’d do much better to wait until after the first of the year. The tax structure...” Pandareus had to cut the call short a minute later and hurry out to meet a potential big customer for lunch—so he managed to gain no very clear understanding of the tax structure. But he had become convinced that dying before the first of the year was financially inadvisable.

His first feeling was actually one of relief. This enforced delay would give him a breathing space in which to plan calmly for an exit that would have some dignity and perhaps even a touch of ceremony about it. But in his heart he knew that if you let projects slide long enough it was difficult to get back to them. Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would try to set up a termination date as soon after the first of the year as possible.

When he came down from the office that night—later than he had planned—he found Iris sprawled on the sofa, her shoes off.

She greeted him with a faint welcoming cry. “Ahh! Come rub my feet. I have had a day. Matthew, the story of which you will hardly be inclined to believe.”

“That conference on endangered virus species?”

“That was yesterday. No, I went shopping this morning and this afternoon I had to go see that place where we were planning to store our boat next winter—remember, you were too busy to go?”

“Oh, yes.” He sat on the sofa, and began to rub a foot, squeezing the arch and instep with an expert touch. “Join me in a drink?”

“Gladly. And that was only the start. From the boat storage establishment I had to go—“

The communicator screen chimed. The caller was the computer service company, reminding them that their home terminals were to be dis-connected for a day’s maintenance tomorrow.

After dinner—and after Iris had gone wearily to bed—he dragged himself with proud determination up the stairs to his office again. Jaw outthrust, he set himself to decide firmly once and for all—insofar as such decision might be possible for one man aided by computer—the year, month and day upon which his life would end. He dropped into the chair before his desk with a sigh, brushed aside the printouts, accumulated during dinner, of *Antique Dealer’s Bulletin* and five other periodicals he never had time to read. He punched for a combined full printout, on microtape, of his business and social calendars for the

next twelve months. Next year's vacation, for example, had been arranged that far in advance. He and Iris were planning to go back to Indonesia, where they had not visited for sixty years. He took his tired mind firmly in hand. Forget about seeing Indonesia again.

While riding the tubeliner to Boston to attend a class reunion he finished other tasks in time to put the calendar microtape into a projector and begin work on the problem. Scanning back over the printout—chronologically from the scheduled vacation—setting his mind in as ruthless a frame as possible, he mentally pruned out an under-brush of minor appointments, celebrations and entertainments planned from a sense of social duty. With his finger gliding on the projected image of the microtape he drew the surcease of eternity closer and even closer to the hurtling moment of the present in which he dwelt.

“Would you care for a cocktail, sir?”

“No, thank you.” He could have used one, but, nagged by the urgency of finishing before they got to Boston or probably not at all in the immediate future, he stuck with his work. Four months nearer to his present, moving anti-clockward from next year's vacation, his finger stopped, having run into the notable barrier of the annual banquet of the Old Marrieds' Club, for which he and Iris had standing reservations. Yes. That would set a time. Attend the banquet, dropping to a few old friends broad hints that he would not be back next year, delay a decent month and then bow out.

He straightened in his seat, turned off the projector and slid it back into its travel case. Settled, and they were just pulling into Boston. Once in a while things worked out just right.

On the day he got home from the reunion he began trying to get in touch with his physician. It was a few days before the doctor, repeatedly trying to return his call, did so at a moment when Pandareus was available. Communication established, Pandareus promptly asked for and was given the name of another doctor, who had done terminations for several other people.

“There aren't any real specialists,” his own doctor assured Pandareus. “Not in the field you want. Not enough people are having it done. How about a round of golf on Wednesday?”

“Can't,” said Pandareus automatically and then consulted his calendar to make sure of why. “My father's coming into town that day. Maybe next week?”

The doctor looked off screen, evidently checking his own calendar, and frowned. “I'll try to call you back on it. You'll like Dr. James. One of the best men in the city.”

“Thanks.”

“Right.”

Pandareus broke the connection and punched for Dr. James. A busy signal. Well, he would try calling in the afternoon, before the time came to leave for the matinee.

Eventually he got through. “Dr. James's office,” a receptionist of timeless prettiness told him.

“How do you do. I'd like to make an appointment to talk to the doctor, or talk to him right now if that's feasible. It's regarding my contemplated termination.”

“I see, sir.” Even before taking his name she asked, “And when is your preferred date for termination?”

He told her.

The receptionist was gently, exquisitely concerned. "I'm sorry, sir, but Dr. James will be on vacation that month."

But he persevered. Iris helped a lot. Seated with her in an aircab on his way at last to Dr. James's office to be terminated, he looked back on the months since his first firm decision to die and found the time, as viewed from his present angle, to be almost disconcertingly short.

Iris, riding beside him, was tired. She held an envelope containing some of the necessary papers, which they had only just managed to have signed in time, this very morning. "Oh, God, I'm dead," she murmured without thinking, and then looked over at him with alarm. "That was thoughtless of me, wasn't it?"

"Not at all, my dear. I won't be easily upset today. I feel happy. Completed. Fulfilled. A successful race run, a well-earned rest ahead, as it were. I want you to share my joy."

"I do, Matthew." But a little movement about the lips and throat, a tiny lift of the head, counter-balanced all the happy intonations she was putting into her voice. She was trying her best to act as if nothing were wrong, but after a little more than a hundred years he could infallibly tell when something out of the ordinary was bothering her.

"Iris, what are your plans for the immediate future? I really haven't had time to discuss it with you."

"I'd like to get away for a while, Matthew. But I don't see how I can. My desensitization training group begins to meet next week. And there will be any number of loose ends to tidy up regarding your departure."

"Something more is bothering you. I can tell. Are you going to miss me too much, after all?"

"No, dear. If your absence affects me unduly I will just think of you as being on a long trip some-where. And keep busy."

He pressed her hand. "But there is something. I insist on hearing what it is. It is most unfair to conceal things from me at this juncture."

"Matthew, I am not going to interfere with your happy departure. You have put so much time and effort into arranging it. Into making an achievement of your whole life. To—to close it properly, like a good poem."

"Something is definitely wrong and you are going to tell me what it is. Or I will stop the cab until you do."

Iris put down the bulky envelope and looked for a tissue. "You have nothing to regret. You have certainly been a good husband to me. You have kept almost every promise you ever made."

Aha. "What promise or promises have I failed to keep?"

"I have really nothing to complain of, Matthew."

The airborne cab glided to a soft waiting halt on the roof of the building housing Dr. James's office, but neither of the passengers got out at once. Pandareus had to spar through another verbal round or two with his wife before the reason for her unhappiness was clear.

"It was more than ninety years ago, Matthew, and I am sure you have forgotten it. But early in our marriage you did promise me that one day we would have a child."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Recollection of the promise had been coming back hazily, subconsciously, for some indeterminate time.

Perhaps she had been dropping hints, trying to remind him. Anyway, there was no real surprise in hearing about the promise now and he could not honestly deny that it had been made. An obligation was an obligation and he had several times already put off dying for lesser ones than this. This was rather more important than a five great grandson's confirmation, he supposed.

"Iris, do you really think we have the right to bring a new life into the world?"

"Oh, Matthew, the world can certainly support one more, with hydrogen-fusion power and reclamation and all the rest. An equilibrium has been reached. It's not as if everyone were reproducing; I was reading just the other day how remarkable it is that so few exercise their legal rights to do so. The author was wondering why. And even if you did father a child once before—I've never had one. I don't think people are going to comment."

"I suppose not." He gave his wife the ghost of a smile, let his hand hang in the air for a moment and then signaled decisively for the cab to open its door. "Just let me step into James's office and let them know there's been a change of plan."

"Oh, Matthew! How loving of you to do this for me." She gripped his fingers and looked into his eyes intently. "You must understand, having a child will mean that your presence as a father is required for an indefinite period. The child will need you psychologically. It will mean years added to your life."

"I've been through it all before, remember?" He kissed her on the cheek. "The decision is made. I'll be right back."

But he was gone quite a long time, and she began to worry. Suppose he had—but no, there he was, looking a little happier than when he left, reaching briskly for the cab's door.

"James was pretty good about it all," Pandareus said, getting in. "But my change of mind meant there were more forms to be filled out and we'll have to check back with city hall, the crematorium and the lawyers and—" He broke off to snap his fingers with irritation. "I meant to ask James if he could put us in touch with a good—what d'you call 'em?—obstetrician. Doctor who oversees gestation. And also one of those hospitals where they have an artificial womb. Those're supposed to be much improved these days."

Iris was relaxed now, content and comfortable. "Oh, no, Matthew. It was on television just the other day that artificial wombs are being discontinued once again. Even the new models had too many drawbacks."

Pandareus gave the cab its new orders and leaned back beside his wife as it took off and promptly became stuck in a traffic jam at the five hundred meter aerial level. "Then you'll just have to go through the whole nine months of inconvenience and the big disabling trauma at the end. I went through it all with

Janet.” He shook his head and smiled a little. “It’s going to take some planning. Well, if it will make you happy, dear. When do you want to have the baby? Get it started, I mean?”

“Let’s see.” Then Iris’s forehead almost creased with a pretty frown of light vexation. “Oh, dear. If we got baby started right now he’d be born just when our vacation trip is on. Let’s see—“

WILDERNESS

The young woman had her blond hair in long braids, and the little girl, five or six years old, had her hair done in shorter versions of the same. The woman and girl were in the creek with a cake of soap when they first heard the crashing noise. It sounded from the direction of the distant road, like the noise that a clumsy man or a big startled animal would make moving in the brush. The woman immediately got out of the water with her child, the two of them wearing flecks of soap and goosebumps. Even now in summer the stream was icy, this close to its mountain source.

As the sound grew steadily louder the woman turned an anxious look toward the fine thread of white smoke rising from one of the two teepees in the adjacent clearing. Alders and young ever-greens formed a heavy screen around the clearing, but if it were a man who made that crashing he could not fail to see the smoke and wonder who had made the fire. No other human work would be visible to him in any direction, except the fine contrail of a jet moving close above the lowering sun.

Bold and methodical, the sounds in the brush came nearer. The woman kept looking at the wall of brush across the creek, in the direction of the sounds, meanwhile dressing herself rapidly in a single garment, that might once have been a man’s military surplus coverall. It was shapeless and faded but not noticeably dirty. From time to time she made shushing sounds and gestures at her little girl, and as soon as she had covered herself she quickly dressed the child in jeans and faded sweatshirt. The girl’s short, light braids came snapping through when the shirt was pulled over her head. Then on the opposite bank of the stream, near the crossing of rough stones, the sounds at last produced their maker.

He had a square tanned face not shaved for a day, with close cut graying brown hair above it, and he looked to be in his early forties. The strong body swayed, drunk or stoned on something fierce, but then that face looked entirely too straight, too pillar of the community, to sway with anything but alcohol. He was well enough dressed, in slacks and sport shirt and light jacket that had no doubt been clean at the beginning of the day. Stuffed inside his half zipped jacket, and in its pockets, there rode a lumpy cargo dully jangling with his movements. It must be beer cans he was carrying so, for in each big hand he held one more of them, empty, the golden circles of their ends marked with dark keyholes where their pulltabs had been taken.

There was nothing in his face to frighten the woman. He was startled and pleased to discover the woman and child and looked intently at them, but then his eyes moved quickly on, joyfully taking in the teepees and the planted field—fenced against deer with posts and string and fluttering rags—and the well-worn paths that made crossings of the clearing and loops around it but nowhere went out to the world.

In a slurred bass-baritone he cried out: "People! It's beautiful, there's people! In th' middle of th' bloody wilderness!"

The young woman turned away from him, as if looking for support. It was on the way. Several more people were approaching, gathering together as they progressed from the farther reaches of the large clearing. There were two more brown and barefoot children, another young woman, with her black hair loose and very long, wearing a man's old shirt and jeans; a black man, with uncut hair bushing under a wide brimmed hat, wearing tattered suitcoat over blue work shirt, nondescript trousers, brogans. The remaining man looked anglo and his long hair fell straight. He had a brown beard, bare feet, tight shrunken jeans. Under a shawl patterned in zig-zags his upper body was bare. Symbols popular five years earlier, wrought in bright metal, hung from a chain against his chest. The men were both dusty and sweating as if they had just been working in the field.

Approaching and gathering in silence, the people of the clearing looked at their visitor with various shadings of distaste.

He, on the higher bank across the narrow water, was glad to see them all. "Lovely people. I'd offer all you folks a beer, several beers. But y'see all my tanks are empties." He belched gently and laughed gently, and gently shook his jangling jacket.

The man with the shawl turned his back on the sight. But after pulling at his beard in silence for a moment he turned once more to face it.

Not perturbed by unhappy silence, the visitor announced: "My intentions was, t' distribute these beer cans throughout the length and breath of this pristine wilderness. But as its already occupied, by such a sturdy outpost of humanity, I see no need...hey, what you've got here is one of those communal things, I bet. I guess, you're hippies or grokkies or whatever. I'm not very up t' date on what th' word is now. No offense."

His only answer was in the way that they all looked at him, as if at a disaster already happened and nothing to be done about it.

He said: "I first read about places like this, God it must be twenty years ago, back in the sixties. I was a Boy Scout leader then, I thought tents were a lot of fun." He swayed and dropped a can by accident, and had to catch a branch to save his balance. "Well, tents aren't the worst thing there is, but cities are better. Walls and roofs and more walls and roofs, I like 'em all in neat rows. Noise and garbage. I've come to like noise and garbage."

"If that's your track," the black man said, "it could be you should've stayed on it."

"I had t' visit th' frontier," the visitor said vaguely. Squinting past the people of the clearing, past their canvas teepees, his face for the first time showed unhappiness. "Now there's your fields. Corn, tomatoes..." He let go his branch and came across the creek, surprisingly quick and surefooted when he concentrated on the uneven steppingstones. He studied the fields again. "All right. But how d'you work it? No real machines. You just play you're friends with nature, and break your backs. Listen, I grew up on a farm. You need to rent or buy some good machinery, knock down half these goddamn trees to make some room, and raise some real crops. And put up houses! Act as if you meant t' stay on and inhabit the planet for a while. But wait a minute." He tried to clear his head with shaking. "Sorry. You're way out here so you can squat on some free land, right?" You'll do things right when you get some money in, isn't that it?"

“We’re just not doing things right,” the shawled man said, in a remote monotone. “We should all get stoned on alcohol and run across the country leaving a trail of...garbage. Wait a minute.” His eyes sharpened, staring at the visitor, at whom he now leveled a bony forefinger. “I’ve seen you someplace, when I was on a trip to town. I saw you on television, right? Now are you a reporter?”

The blond girl, in a tiny voice that might have belonged to her daughter, put in softly: “I was thinking that I’d seen him, too.”

The man did not seem to care whether they had ever seen him or not. “I’m no reporter. I’m just saying—” And with that he abruptly fell silent, looking past the others to the west as if at some-thing deeply disturbing. But when the others turned there was nothing to be noted in the west except the going of the sun. The shadow of a distant mountain was reaching out across the clearing where they stood.

Now the stranger’s voice contained a hint of panic. “I’ll never make it back before dark.” He took a staggering step and almost slid into the creek. “Must be two miles t’ where I left my car. Listen, good people, I call for sanctuary for the night. I’ll pay you for a place to bunk, inside a tent.”

The people of the clearing exchanged troubled glances among themselves. The shawled man told the visitor: “Just wait right where you are, one minute.” While the visitor waited the others went to stand in a little knot between the teepees. There the adults conferred.

The black man said: “Can’t let him go back right now.”

“Why?” the dark girl asked.

“As drunk as he is. Suppose he falls down a ravine, or just gets lost and dies?”

Others nodded with reluctant concern. The shawled man said: “Another point, if he’s lost and his car is found near here, then we’ll be found too. Swarmed over, investigated. At best we’d have to move.”

They all looked at the visitor again. Leaning against a tree where they had left him, he seemed to be yearning after the setting sun.

“Then he can stay the night,” the black man said. No one evinced any objection, and together they walked back to their visitor. The black man made the offer: “If you make no trouble you can stay until morning. Leave your garbage in the trashpit, down that way.”

The square faced man pushed away from his tree with obvious relief. “Thank you, many thanks!” And, a minute later when he had come back from the garbage pit without his beer cans: “I said I’d pay my way. How’s forty bucks? That’s what a real motel would cost.”

The others felt a common impulse to refuse. But there were always things that needed buying, on the quick trips to town; there was always too little money in the common fund.

“No luggage, so I’ll pay in advance. Who’m I paying?”

“Doesn’t matter,” said the shawled man. Then he reached to take the bills.

Inside the larger teepee everyone sat on canvas groundcloths around the little central fire, which kept out the chill of mountain nightfall, and steamed and bubbled the pots the women hung above it. The stranger had unzipped his jacket. They handed him coffee in a can. The alcohol seemed to be metabolizing out of

him, and his hands were shaking just a bit. "Coming home, he said to himself. "Coming home t' find people who want to live like this."

The black man made no pretence of not hearing. "Like I said, go back to the city if that's your track. You going back, first thing in the morning. You ever come to bother us again, and we'll tell your friends you lived with us three days."

The visitor paid no attention. He had his own speech to make. "Listen, you people, don't live like this. None of this crap about loving nature, you have no idea what she is. Oh sure, the green trees are nice, and the little squirrels. But you let them grow, not the other way round. Keep your nature, your wilderness, in a cage, an' make damn well sure the bars are thick." He filled his lungs with mountain air and woodsmoke tang. "That's fine, good air t' breathe. No one knows better'n me how fine that is. But can we trust nature to give us air? If we were smart we'd put all the good air in a big jar, and let out just a little at a time, as it was needed."

"What are you so fearful of?" the blond young woman asked. She seemed really worried for him. "There are only a few bits of wilderness, of real nature, left in the world. Are they going to destroy you?"

The man stared at her intently, but did not seem able to comprehend what she had said. "Yeah, keep a few bits of nature in cages," he replied at last. "Keep trees behind big fences, t'show we're strong enough to do so. Otherwise drive the wilderness out, this is our place here, our place."

"Our place? You think your forty bucks bought you a share?" The shawled man was getting angry fast. "You didn't put down that much money, mister, to become a partner here. You don't have that much."

"Listen, it is our place!" The visitor started a fist pounding gesture that midway lost itself in weariness. He thought things over briefly, then started up again. "I do have money. Fair amount. I'll finance some things for you. Not that I want to move in, I'll go and never come back. But I want you t' do right with this land."

The shawled man said now: "We didn't ask you in to give a lecture. If you weren't so drunk I'd throw you out."

"Well I'm not drunk, grokkie, not that drunk. I could've found my car. Jus' because it's dark outside doesn't mean I can't...be outside. I could go outside right now. The real reason I stayed was to get you people straightened out, make you see where your lives are all wrong." From the square face the words came loudly and righteously; the profaning of the teepee promised to go on and on.

From somewhere the shawled man pulled out the forty dollars in now crumpled bills, and threw them. "Get the hell out of my sight. Go over to the other tent and sleep it off."

The visitor's voice stopped, and his square certainly failed. He started slowly to pick up the money, and then he let it lie. He looked around at all the faces, and then jumped up and put his hands to his head and ran out side. The others followed in a rapid straggle, calling out confusedly to him and to one another.

After the firelight, darkness struck the eyes like a blow. Full night, clear and moonless, had come to swallow up the land. The stranger had run out under the stars, then stopped after a few strides, looking up. The others gathered around him, talking at cross-purposes while he paid no heed. Eyes quickly began to become accustomed to the dark.

The black man took the visitor by the arm, and pointed forcefully. "Look there, that's the lights of

Oakland in the sky, that glow you see. Now I'm gonna walk you to your car, and then you drive—“

“To hell with Oakland.” It was a changed voice, harder and soberer but somehow more remote. His arms that had been half lifted were going down slowly to his sides. His face was still turned up. “I didn't want to be out at night, in the open...but it's all right. There's the Dipper, tipped to spill...follow the handle south, there's Arcturus. There's Boohteez, Libra, Virgo, Sirius, that blue-white spike, I thought once that it was coming after me, it's on the other side of the sun this season. Canopus, that we like to lock our sensors on, it's somewhere underfoot, you never see it this far north. Yeah, Mars, there's the pock marked bastard now, coming on to opposition. I really don't mind looking any more. You can't see much from our little place under all the air.”

In her little voice the blond girl said: “I know now who you are...”

He was standing straight, his head thrown back. “The starclouds, God, in Sagittarius. Stars like snowflakes in a blizzard. They look like they're frozen stiff, not moving. Flying around at hundreds of miles a second, and so far apart, so far away from us, that you can't see them move. From our place here or Mars, you see them from the exact same angle. So far away. They were there for me to look at, the whole time out and back.”

“...the astronaut. The one who was alone for two years after the accident. Alone all the way to Mars and back.”

His straightness was that of a statue, standing for a billion years and keeping on even terms of stubbornness, so far, with stars.

“Nature,” he said. “Wilderness. My God, all wilderness.”

PATRON OF THE ARTS

After some hours work, Herron found himself hungry and willing to pause for food. Looking over what he had just done, he could easily imagine one of the sycophantic critics praising it: A huge canvas, of discordant and brutal line! Aflame with a sense of engulfing menace! And for once, Herron thought, the critic might be praising something good.

Turning away from his view of easel and blank bulkhead, Herron found that his captor had moved up silently to stand only an arm's length behind him, for all the world like some human kibitzer.

He had to chuckle. “I suppose you've some idiotic suggestion to make?”

The roughly man shaped machine said nothing, though it had what might be a speaker mounted on what might be a face. Herron shrugged and walked around it, going forward in search of the galley. This ship had been only a few hours out from Earth on Cplus drive when the berserker machine had run it down and captured it; and Piers Herron, the only passenger, had not yet had time to learn his way around.

It was more than a galley, he saw when he reached it—it was meant to be a place where arty colonial ladies could sit and twitter over tea when they grew weary of staring at pictures. The Frans Hals had been built as a traveling museum; then the war of life against berserker machines had grown hot around

Sol, and BuCulture had wrongly decided that Earth's art treasures would be safer if shipped away to Tau Epsilon. The Frans was ideally suited for such a mission, and for almost nothing else.

Looking further forward from the entrance to the galley, Herron could see that the door to the crew compartment had been battered down, but he did not go to look inside. Not that it would bother him to look, he told himself; he was as in-different to horror as he was to almost all other human things. The Frans's crew of two were in there, or what was left of them after they had tried to fight off the berserker's boarding machines. Doubtless they had preferred death to capture.

Herron preferred nothing. Now he was probably the only living being—apart from a few bacteria—within half a light year; and he was pleased to discover that his situation did not terrify him; that his long growing weariness of life was not just a pose to fool himself.

His metal captor followed him into the galley, watching while he set the kitchen devices to work.

"Still no suggestions?" Herron asked it. "Maybe you're smarter than I thought."

"I am what men call a berserker," the man shaped thing squeaked at him suddenly, in an in-effectual sounding voice. "I have captured your ship, and I will talk with you through this small machine you see. Do you grasp my meaning?"

"I understand as well as I need to." Herron had not yet seen the berserker itself, but he knew it was probably drifting a few miles away, or a few hundred or thousand miles, from the ship it had captured. Captain Hanus had tried desperately to escape it, diving the Frans into a cloud of dark nebula where no ship or machine could move faster than light, and where the advantage in speed lay with the smaller hull.

The chase had been at speeds up to a thousand miles a second. Forced to remain in normal space, the berserker could not steer its bulk among the meteoroids and gas wisps as well as the Frans's radar-computer system could maneuver the fleeing ship. But the berserker had sent an armed launch of its own to take up the chase, and the weaponless Frans had had no chance.

Now, dishes of food, hot and cold, popped out on a galley table, and Herron bowed to the machine. "Will you join me?"

"I need no organic food."

Herron sat down with a sigh. "In the end," he told the machine, "you'll find that lack of humor is as pointless as laughter. Wait and see if I'm not right." He began to eat, and found himself not so hungry as he had thought. Evidently his body still feared death—this surprised him a little.

"Do you normally function in the operation of this ship?" the machine asked.

"No," he said, making himself chew and swallow. "I'm not much good at pushing buttons." A peculiar thing that had happened was nagging at Herron. When capture was only minutes away, Captain Hanus had come dashing aft from the control room, grabbing Herron and dragging him along in a tearing hurry, aft past all the stored art treasures.

"Herron, listen—if we don't make it, see here?" Tooling open a double hatch in the stern compartment, the captain had pointed into what looked like a short padded tunnel, the diameter of a large drainpipe. "The regular lifeboat won't get away, but this might."

“Are you waiting for the Second Officer, Captain, or leaving us now?”

“There’s room for only one, you fool, and I’m not the one who’s going.”

“You mean to save me? Captain, I’m touched!” Herron laughed, easily and naturally. “But don’t put yourself out.”

“You idiot. Can I trust you?” Hanus lunged into the boat, his hands flying over its controls. Then he backed out, glaring like a madman. “Listen. Look here. This button is the activator; now I’ve set things up so the boat should come out in the main shipping lanes and start sending a distress signal. Chances are she’ll be picked up safely then. Now the controls are set, only this activator button needs to be pushed down—“

The berserker’s launch had attacked at that moment, with a roar like mountains falling on the hull of the ship. The lights and artificial gravity had failed and then come abruptly back. Piers Herron had been thrown on his side, his wind knocked out. He had watched while the captain, regaining his feet and moving like a man in a daze, had closed the hatch on the mysterious little boat again and staggered forward to his control room.

“Why are you here?” the machine asked Herron.

He dropped the forkful of food he had been staring at. He didn’t have to hesitate before answering the question. “Do you know what BuCulture is? They’re the fools in charge of art, on Earth. Some of them, like a lot of other fools, think I’m a great painter. They worship me. When I said I wanted to leave Earth on this ship, they made it possible.

“I wanted to leave because almost everything that is worthwhile in any true sense is being removed from Earth. A good part of it is on this ship. What’s left behind on the planet is only a swarm of animals, breeding and dying, fighting—“

“Why did you not try to fight or hide when my machines boarded this ship?”

“Because it would have done no good.”

When the berserker’s prize crew had forced their way in through an airlock, Herron had been setting up his easel in what was to have been a small exhibition hall, and he had paused to watch the uninvited visitors file past. One of the man shaped metal things, the one through which he was being questioned now, had stayed to stare at him through its lenses while the others had moved on forward to the crew compartment.

“Herron!” The intercom had shouted. “Try, Herron, please! You know what to do!” Clanging noises followed, and gunshots and curses.

What to do, Captain? Why, yes. The shock of events and the promise of imminent death had stirred up some kind of life in Piers Herron. He looked with interest at the alien shapes and lines of his inanimate captor, the inhuman cold of deep space frosting over its metal here in the warm cabin. Then he turned away from it and began to paint the berserker, trying to catch not the outward shape he had never seen, but what he felt of its inwardness. He felt the emotionless deadlines of its watching lenses, boring into his back. The sensation was faintly pleasurable, like cold spring sunshine.

“What is good?” the machine asked Herron, standing over him in the galley while he tried to eat.

He snorted. "You tell me."

It took him literally. "To serve the cause of what men call death is good. To destroy life is good."

Herron pushed his nearly full plate into a disposal slot and stood up. "You're almost right about life being worthless—but even if you were entirely right, why so enthusiastic? What is there praiseworthy about death?" Now his thoughts surprised him as his lack of appetite had.

"I am entirely right," said the machine.

For long seconds Herron stood still, as if thinking, though his mind was almost completely blank. "No," he said finally, and waited for a bolt to strike him.

"In what do you think I am wrong?" it asked.

"I'll show you." He led it out of the galley, his hands sweating and his mouth dry. Why wouldn't the damned thing kill him and have done?

The paintings were racked now on row and tier on tier; there was no room in the ship for more than a few to be displayed in a conventional way. Herron found the drawer he wanted and pulled it open so the portrait inside swung into full view, lights springing on around it to bring out the rich colors beneath the twentieth century statglass coating.

"This is where you're wrong," Herron said.

The man shaped thing's scanner studied the portrait for perhaps fifteen seconds. "Explain what you are showing me," it said.

"I bow to you!" Herron did so. "You admit ignorance! You even ask an intelligible question, if one that is somewhat too broad. First, tell me what you see here."

"I see the image of a lifeunit, its third spatial dimension of negligible size as compared to the other two. The image is sealed inside a protective jacket transparent to the wavelengths used by the human eye. The lifeunit imaged is, or was, an adult male apparently in good functional condition, garmented in a manner I have not seen before. What I take to be one garment is held before him—"

"You see a man with a glove," Herron cut in, wearying of his bitter game. "That is the title, Man with a Glove. Now what do you say about it?"

There was a pause of twenty seconds. "Is it an attempt to praise life, to say that life is good?"

Looking now at Titian's thousand year old more than masterpiece, Herron hardly heard the machine's answer, he was thinking helplessly and hopelessly of his own most recent work.

"Now you will tell me what it means," said the machine without emphasis.

Herron walked away without answering, leaving the drawer open.

The berserker's mouthpiece walked at his side. "Tell me what it means or you will be punished."

“If you can pause to think, so can I.” But Herron’s stomach had knotted up at the threat of punishment, seeming to feel that pain mattered even more than death. Herron had great contempt for his stomach.

His feet took him back to his easel. Looking at the discordant and brutal line that a few minutes ago had pleased him, he now found it as disgusting as everything else he had tried to do in the past year.

The berserker asked: “What have you made here?”

Herron picked up a brush he had forgotten to clean, and wiped at it irritably. “It is my attempt to get at your essence, to capture you with paint and canvas as you have seen those humans captured.” He waved at the storage racks. “My attempt has failed, as most do.”

There was another pause, which Herron did not try to time.

“An attempt to praise me?”

Herron broke the spoiled brush and threw it down. “Call it what you like.”

This time the pause was short, and at its end the machine did not speak, but turned away and walked in the direction of the airlock. Some of its fellows clanked past to join it. From the direction of the airlock there began to come sounds like those of heavy metal being worked and hammered. The interrogation seemed to be over for the time being.

Herron’s thoughts wanted to be anywhere but on his work or on his fate, and they returned to what Hanus had shown him, or tried to show him. Not a regular lifeboat, but she might get away, the captain had said. All it needs now is to press the button.

Herron started walking, smiling faintly as he realized that if the berserker was as careless as it seemed, he might possibly escape it.

Escape to what? He couldn’t paint any more, if he ever could. All that really mattered to him now was here, and on other ships leaving Earth.

Back at the storage rack, Herron swung the Man with the Glove out so its case came free from the rack and became a handy cart. He wheeled the portrait aft. There might be yet one worthwhile thing he could do with his life.

The picture was massive in its statglass shielding, but he thought he could fit it into the boat.

As an itch might nag a dying man, the question of what the captain had been intending with the boat nagged Herron. Hanus hadn’t seemed worried about Herron’s fate, but instead had spoken of trusting Herron....

Nearing the stern, out of sight of the machines, Herron passed a strapped down stack of crated statuary, and heard a noise, a rapid feeble pounding.

It took several minutes to find and open the proper case. When he lifted the lid with its padded lining, a girl wearing a coverall sat up, her hair all wild as if standing in terror.

“Are they gone?” She had bitten at her fingers and nails until they were bleeding. When he didn’t answer at once, she repeated her question again and again, in a rising whine.

“The machines are still here,” he said at last.

Literally shaking in her fear, she climbed out of the case. “Where’s Gus? Have they taken him?”

“Gus?” But he thought he was beginning to understand.

“Gus Hanus, the captain. He and I are—he was trying to save me, to get me away from Earth.”

“I’m quite sure he’s dead,” said Herron. “He fought the machines.”

Her bleeding fingers clutched at her lower face. “They’ll kill us, too! Or worse! What can we do?”

“Don’t mourn your lover so deeply,” he said. But the girl seemed not to hear him; her wild eyes looked this way and that, expecting the machines. “Help me with this picture,” he told her calmly. “Hold the door there for me.”

She obeyed as if half hypnotized, not questioning what he was doing.

“Gus said there’d be a boat,” she muttered to herself. “If he had to smuggle me down to Tau Epsilon he was going to use a special little boat—” She broke off, staring at Herron, afraid that he had heard her and was going to steal her boat. As indeed he was.

When he had the painting in the stern compartment, he stopped. He looked long at the Man with a Glove, but in the end all he could seem to see was that the fingertips of the ungloved hand were not bitten bloody.

Herron took the shivering girl by the arm and pushed her into the tiny boat. She huddled there in dazed terror; she was not good-looking. He wondered what Hanus had seen in her.

“There’s room for only one,” he said, and she shrank and bared her teeth as if afraid he meant to drag her out again. “After I close the hatch, push that button there, the activator. Understand?”

That she understood at once. He dogged the double hatch shut and waited. Only about three seconds passed before there came a scraping sound that he supposed meant the boat had gone.

Nearby was a tiny observation blister, and Herron put his head into it and watched the stars turn beyond the dark blizzard of the nebula. After a while he saw the berserker through the blizzard, turning with the stars, black and rounded and bigger than any mountain. It gave no sign that it had detected the tiny boat slipping away. Its launch was very near the Frans but none of its commensal machines were in sight.

Looking the Man with a Glove in the eye, Herron pushed him forward again, to a spot near his easel. The discordant lines of Herron’s own work were now worse than disgusting, but Herron made himself work on them.

He hadn’t time to do much before the man shaped machine came walking back to him; the uproar of metalworking had ceased. Wiping his brush carefully, Herron put it down, and nodded at his berserker portrait. “When you destroy all the rest, save this painting. Carry it back to those who built you, they deserve it.”

The machine voice squeaked back at him: “Why do you think I will destroy paintings? Even if they are

attempts to praise life, they are dead things in themselves, and so in themselves they are good.”

Herron was suddenly too frightened and weary to speak. Looking dully into the machine’s lenses he saw there tiny flickerings, keeping time with his own pulse and breathing, like the indications of a lie detector.

“Your mind is divided,” said the machine. “But with its much greater part you have praised me. I have repaired your ship, and set its course. I now release you, so other lifeunits can learn from you to praise what is good.”

Herron could only stand there staring straight ahead of him, while a trampling of metal feet went past, and there was a final scraping on the hull.

After some time he realized he was alive and free.

At first he shrank from the dead men, but after once touching them he soon got them into a freezer. He had no particular reason to think either of them Believers, but he found a book and read Islamic, Ethical, Christian and Jewish burial services.

Then he found an undamaged handgun on the deck, and went prowling the ship, taken suddenly with the wild notion that a machine might have stayed behind. Pausing only to tear down the abomination from his easel, he went on to the very stern. There he had to stop, facing the direction in which he supposed the berserker now was.

“Damn you, I can change!” he shouted at the stern bulkhead. His voice broke. “I can paint again. I’ll show you...I can change. I am alive.”

TO MARK THE YEAR ON AZLAROC

They had been quarreling in the ship, and were still at it when they disembarked and left its sprawling metal complexities behind them. Ailanna snapped at Hagen: “So what if I misplaced your camera! What does it matter if you have one more picture of the stars? You can take a dozen when we depart.” And when it turned out that they had missed the ground transport machine that was taking the other passengers across the smooth undulations of the golden plain toward the city, Hagen was almost expecting her to physically attack him.

“Son of a nobody!” Ailanna hissed. “Where are we to stay if you have made no reservations?” A kilometer away was the only real city on the star, and Hagen realized that to one coming to Azlaroc for the first time, the city must look quite small. On the surface there appeared only a few fairy-land towers, and little evidence of the many chambers and passageways dug out beneath the plain.

“I haven’t made up my mind where to stay.” He turned away from her and began to walk after the transport machine.

She followed. “You can never make up your mind about anything.” It was an old intermittent quarrel. If the reservations had been in perfect order, there would have been something else to quarrel about.

She nagged him for a hundred meters across the plain, and then the scenery began to come through to

her. The enormous golden-yellow land was humped here and there by paraboloid hills and studded with balanced spheres of matter. The surface looked more like something manmade than like soil, and it stretched in places up to the low, yellowish, sunless sky, in asymptotic spires that broke off in radiant glory at an altitude of a few hundred meters, at the upper edge of the region of gravity inversion.

“What’s that?” Her voice was no longer angry. She was looking toward the top of a golden sphere which loomed over the distanceless horizon, at right angles to the way they were walking. The sphere reminded Hagen of a large planet rising, as seen from some closein satellite, but this sphere was entirely beneath the low, peculiar sky.

“Only part of the topography.” He remained calm, as usual, taking her bickering in stride.

When they had gotten undersurface in the city, and arranged for lodgings, and were on their way to them through one of the smaller side passage-ways, Hagen saw some man or woman of a long past year approaching through the passage from the other direction. Had there been three or four people of the present year or of recent years in the same part of the corridor just then, the passage of such an old one would have been almost unnoticeable. The old one did not appear as a plain solid human figure. Only a disturbance in the air and along the wall, a mound of shadows and moire patterns that throbbed with the beat of the pulsar somewhere beneath their feet. The disturbance occupied hardly any space in this year’s corridor, and Ailanna at first was not aware of it at all.

Hagen reached out a hand and took her by the upper arm and forced her, strong woman that she was, into three almost-dancing steps that left her facing in the proper way to see. “Look. One of the early settlers.”

With a small intake of breath Ailanna fixed her eyes on the figure. She watched it out of sight around a corner, then turned her elfin face to Hagen. Her eyes had been enlarged, and her naturally small chin further diminished, in accordance with the fashion dictates of the time, even as Hagen’s dark eyebrows had been grown into a ring of hair that crossed above his nose and went down by its sides to meld with his mustache. She said: “Perhaps one of the very first? An explorer?”

“No.” He looked about at the ordinary overhead lights, the smooth walls of the yellowish rocklike substance of the star. “I remember that this corridor was not cut by the explorers, not perhaps until ‘120 or ‘130. So no settler in it can be older than that, of course.”

“I don’t understand, Hagen. Why didn’t you tell me more about this place before you brought me here?”

“This way it will all come as a wonderful surprise.” Exactly how much irony was in his answer was hard to tell.

They met others in the corridor as they proceeded. Here came a couple of evidently ten or fifteen local years ago, walking in the nudity that had been acceptable as fashion then, draped with ten or fifteen of the sealing veils of Azlaroc so that their bodies shimmered slightly as they moved, giving off small diamond sparkles of light. The veils of only ten or fifteen years were not enough to warp a settler out of phase with this year’s visitors, so the four people meeting in the passage had to give way a little on both sides, as if they were in a full sense contemporaries, and like con-temporaries they excused themselves with vacant little social smiles.

Numbers, glowing softly from the corridor walls, guided Hagen and Ailanna to their rooms. “Hagen, what is this other sign that one sees on the walls?” It was a red hollow circle with a small piecut wedge of its interior filled with red also.

“The amount of red inside shows the estimated fraction of a year remaining until the next veil falls.”

“Then there is not much of the year left, for sightseeing. Here, this must be our door. I would say we have come at a poor time.”

Opening the door, he did not reply. Their baggage had already been deposited inside.

“I wouldn’t want to be trapped here, Hagen. Well, the apartment’s not bad...now what’s the matter? What have I said?” She had learned to know at once when something really bothered him, which her inconsequential bickering rarely seemed to do.

“Nothing. Ample warning is always given so the tourists can get away, you needn’t worry.

She was in the bedroom unpacking when something came in through the illusory window that seemed to give upon the golden plain. Where a sawtooth range of diminishing pyramids marched in from the horizon there came a shimmer and a sliding distortion that was in the room with her before she knew it, that passed on harmless through her own flesh, and went its way. She gave a yelp of fear.

Hagen was in the doorway, smiling faintly. “Didn’t I mention that we might be sharing our apartment here?”

“Sharing—of course not. Oh. You mean with settlers, folk of other years. That’s what it was, then. But—through the wall?”

“That wall was evidently an open passage in their time. Ignore them, as they will us. Looking up through their veils they can see us—differently, too. While diving I have asked them to describe how we look to them, but their answers are hard to understand.”

“Tell me about diving,” she said, when they had finished settling in and were coming out of doors again.

“Better than that, I’ll show you. But I’ll tell you first, of course.” As they walked out onto the plain, Hagen could hear the pulsar component of the triple system beating as sound, the sound coming now from overhead, thick and soft and at one third the speed of a calm human heart. It came through all the strangeness of space that lay between him and the invisible pulsar that locked its orbit intricately with those of a small black hole and of the world called Azlaroc.

He said: “What is called diving, on Azlaroc, is a means of approaching the people and things that lie under the veils of the years. Nothing can pierce the veils, of course. But diving stretches them, lets one get near enough to the people of the past to see them more clearly and make photographs.” And more than that, more than that, oh Gods of Space, thought Hagen but he said no more.

On the plain other tourists were also walking, in this year’s fashion of scanty garments each of a hundred colors. In the mild, calm air, under the vague yellowish sky that was not really a sky, and bathed in sunless light, Hagen had almost the feeling of being still indoors. He was heading for a divers’ shop that he remembered. He meant to waste no time in beginning his private search in earnest.

Ailanna walked beside him, no longer quarrel-some, and increasingly interested in the world around them. “You say nothing at all can pierce the veils, once they have fallen in and wrapped themselves about this planet?”

“No matter can pierce them. And this is not a planet. I suppose ‘star’ is the best term for a lay-person to use, though the scientists might wince at it. There’s the divers’ shop ahead, see that sign beside the cave?” The cave was in the side of a sharp-angled rhombic hill.

Inside the shop they were greeted by the pro-prietor, a settler swathed in more than a hundred veils, who needed electronic amplifiers to converse with customers. After brief negotiation he began to take their measurements.

“Ailanna, when we dive, what would you like to see?”

Now she was cheerful. “Things of beauty. Also I would like to meet one of those first, stranded explorers.”

“The beauty will be all about. There are signals and machines to guide the tourist to exceptional sights, as for the explorer, we can try. When I was last here it was still possible to dive near enough to them to see their faces and converse. Maybe now, when a hundred and thirty more veils have been added, it is possible no longer.”

They were fitted with diving gear, each a cara-pace and helm of glass and metal that flowed like water over their upper bodies.

“Hagen, if nothing can pierce the fallen veils of the years, how are these underground rooms dug out?”

Now his diver’s suit had firmed into place. Where Hagen’s face had been she saw now only a distorting mirror, that gave an eerie semblance of her own face back to her. But his voice was familiar and reassuring. “Digging is possible because there are two kinds of matter, of physical reality, here coexisting. The stuff of the landscape, all those mathematical shapes and the plain they rise from, is comparatively common matter. Its atoms are docile and workable, at least here in this region of mild gravity and pressure. The explorers realized from the start that this mild region needed only air and water and food, to provide men with more habitable surface than a planet...there, your diver’s gear is stabilized about you. Let’s walk to Old Town, where we may find an explorer.”

Sometimes above ground and sometimes below, they walked, armored in the strange suits and connected to the year of their own visit by um-bilical cables as fine and flexible and unbreakable as artists’ lines on paper. Adjusting his gear for maximum admittance, Hagen nervously scanned the faces of all passing settlers. Now some features were discernable in even the oldest of them.

“And the other kind of matter, Hagen, the other physical reality. What about the veils?”

“Ah, yes. The material between the stars, gathered up as this triple system advances through space. What is not sucked into the black hole is sieved through nets of the pulsar’s radiation, squeezed by the black hole’s hundred billion gravities, shattered and transformed in all its particles as it falls toward Azlaroc through the belts of space that starships must avoid. Once every systemic year conditions are right and a veil falls. What falls is no longer matter that men can work with, any more than they can work in the heart of a black hole. Ailanna, are you tuned to maximum? Look just ahead.”

They were out on the surface again. A human figure that even with the help of diver’s gear appeared no more than a wavy half image had just separated itself from an equally insubstantial dwelling. A hundred and thirty years before, someone had pointed out a similar half visible structure to Hagen as an explorer’s house. He had never spoken to an explorer, but he was ready now to try. He began to run. The gear he wore was only a slight hindrance.

Close ahead now was the horizon, with just beyond it the golden globe they had earlier observed. No telling how far away it was, a thousand meters or perhaps ten times that distance. Amid glowing dunes—here the color of the land was changing, from yellow to a pink so subtle that it was effectively a new color—Hagen thought that he had lost the explorer, but then suddenly the wavery stick figure was in his path. Almost, he ran through or collided with it. He regained his balance and tried to speak casually.

“Honorable person, we do not wish to be dis-courteous, and we will leave you if our inquiries are bothersome, but we would like to know if you are one of the original explorers.”

Eyes that one moment looked like skeletal sockets, and the next as large and human as Ailanna’s own, regarded Hagen. Or were they eyes at all? Working with the controls of his sensory input he gained for one instant a glimpse of a face, human but doubtfully either male or female, squinting and intense, hair blown about it as if in a terrible wind. It faced Hagen and tried to speak, but whatever words came seemed to be blown away. A moment later the figure was gone, only walking somewhere nearby, but so out of focus that it might as well have flown behind the golden sphere somewhere.

Question or answer, Hagen? Which had it offered you?

Ailanna’s hands clamped on his arm. “Hagen, I saw—it was terrible.”

“No, it wasn’t. Only a man or a woman. What lies between us and them, that can be terrible sometimes.”

Ailanna was dialing her admittance down, going out of focus in a different way. Hagen adjusted his controls to return fully with her to their own year. Very little of the land around them seemed to change as they did so. A chain of small pink hills, hyperbolic paraboloid saddles precisely separating members, seemed to grow up out of nothing in the middle distance. That was all.

“Hagen, that was an explorer, that must have been. I wish he had talked to us, even though he frightened me. Are they still sane?”

He looked around, out over the uninhabited region toward which they had been walking, then back toward the city. In the city was where he would have to search.

He said: “The first veil that men ever saw falling here caught them totally by surprise. They described it as looking like a fine net settling toward them from an exploding sky. It settled over the first explorers and bound itself to the atoms of their bodies. They are all here yet, as you know. Soon it was realized that the trapped people were continuing to lead reasonable human lives, and that they were now protected against aging far better than we on the outside. There’s nothing so terrible about life here. Why shouldn’t they be sane? Many others have come here voluntarily to settle.”

“Nothing I have seen so far would lead me to do that.” Her voice was growing petulant again.

“Ailanna, maybe it will be better if we separate for a time. This world is as safe as any. Wander and surprise yourself.”

“And you, Hagen?”

“I will wander too.”

He had been separated from Ailanna for a quarter of a day, and searching steadily all the time, before he finally found her.

Mira.

He came upon her in a place that he knew she frequented, or had frequented a hundred and thirty years before. It was one of the lower sub-terranean corridors, leading to a huge pool in which real water diving, swimming, and other splashy sports were practiced. He was approaching her from the rear in the corridor when she suddenly stopped walking and turned her head, as if she knew he was there even before she saw him.

"I knew you would be back, Hagen," she said as he came up.

"Mira," he said, and then was silent for a time. Then he said: "You are still as beautiful as ever."

"Of course." They both smiled, knowing that here she could not age, and that change from any sort of accident was most unlikely.

He said: "I knew that, but now I see it for myself." Even without his diving gear he could have seen enough through one hundred and thirty veils to reassure himself of that. But with his gear on it was almost as if he were really in her world. The two of them might hold hands, or kiss, or embrace in the old way that men and women still used as in the time when the race was born of women's bodies. But at the same time it was im-possible to forget that the silken and impermeable veils of a hundred and thirty years would always lie between them, and that never again in this world or any other would they touch.

"I knew you would come back. But why did you stay away so long?"

"A few years make but little difference in how close I can come to you."

She put out her hands and held him by the upper arms, and stroked his arms. He could feel her touch as if through layers of the finest ancient silk. "But each year made a difference to me. I thought you had forgotten me. Remember the vows about eternity that we once made?"

"I thought I might forget, but I did not. I found I couldn't."

A hundred and thirty years ago he and Mira had quarreled, while visiting Azlaroc as tourists. Angry, Hagen had gone offstar without telling her; when an alarm sounded that the yearly veil was falling early, she had been sure that he was still somewhere on the surface, and had remained on it herself, searching for him, and of course not finding him. By the time he came back, meaning to patch up the quarrel, the veil had already fallen.

She had not changed, and yet seeing her again was not the same, not all that he had expected it to be.

The reaction to his coming back was growing in her. "Hagen, Hagen, it is you. Really you."

He felt embarrassed. "Can you forgive me for what happened?"

"Of course I can, darling. Come, walk with me. Tell me of yourself and what you've done."

"I...later I will try to tell you." How could he relate in a moment or two the history of a hundred and thirty years? "What have you done here, Mira? How is it with you?"

“How would it be?” She gestured in an old, remembered way, with a little sensuous, un-conscious movement of her shoulder. “You lived here with me; you know how it is.”

“I lived here only a very little time.”

“But there are no physical changes worth mentioning. The air my year group breathes and the food we eat are recycled forever, more ours than the rooms we live in are. But still we change and grow, though not in body. We explore the infinite possibilities of each other and of our world. There are only eleven hundred and six in my year group, and we have as much room here as do the billions on a planet.”

“I feared that perhaps you had forgotten me.”

“Can I forget where I am, and how I came to be here?” Her eyes grew very wide and luminous—not enlarged eyes like Ailanna’s, Mira like most other settlers had kept to the fashions of her year of veiling—and there was a compressed fierceness in her lips. “There was a time when I raged at you—but no longer. There is no point.”

He said: “You are going to have to teach me how to be a settler here. How to put up with gawking tourists, and with the physical restrictions on which rooms and passages I may enter, when more of them are dug out in the future. Do you never want to burrow into the rooms and halls of later years, and make them your own?”

“That would just cause destruction and dis-ruption, for the people of later years to try to mend. They could probably retaliate by diving against us, and somehow disarranging our lives. Though I suppose a war between us would be im-possible.”

“Do I disarrange your life seriously, Mira, by diving to you now?”

“Hagen!” She shook her head reprovingly. “Of course you do. How can you ask?” She looked at him more closely. “Is it really you who has come back, or someone else, with outlandish eyebrows?” Then the wild and daring look he knew and loved came over her, and suddenly the hundred and thirty years were gone. “Come to the pool and the beach, and we will soon see who you really are!”

He ran laughing in pursuit of her. She led him to the vast underground grotto of blackness and fire, where she threw off her garments and plunged into the pool. He followed, lightly burdened with his diver’s gear.

It was an old running, diving, swimming game between them, and he had not forgotten how to play. With the gear on, Hagen of course did not need to come to the surface of the pool to breathe, nor was he bothered by the water’s cold. But still she beat him, flashing and gliding and sliding away. He was both outmaneuvered and outsped.

Laughing, she swam back to where he had collapsed in gasps and laughter on the black-and-golden beach. “Hagen, have you aged that much? Even wearing the drag and weight of diver’s gear myself I could beat you today.”

Was he really that much older? Lungs and heart should not wear out so fast, nor had they, he believed. But something else in him had aged and changed. “You have practiced much more than I,” he grumbled.

“But you were always the better diver,” she told him softly, swimming near, then coming out of the water. Some of the droplets that wet her emerging body were water of her own year, under the silken

veils of time that gauzed her skin; other drops, the water of Hagen's time, clung on outside the veils.
"And the stronger swimmer. You will soon be beating me again, if you come back."

"I am back already, Mira. You are three times as beautiful as I remembered you."

Mira came to him and he pulled her down on the beach to embrace her with great joy. Why, he thought, oh why did I ever leave?

Why indeed?

He became aware that Ailanna was swimming in the water nearby in her own diver's gear, watching, had perhaps been watching and listening for some time. He turned to speak to her, to offer some explanation and introduction, but she submerged and was gone. Mira gave no sign of having noticed the other woman's presence.

"Do you miss the world outside, Mira?"

"I suppose I drove you away to it, the last time, with my lamenting for it. But no, I do not really miss it now. This world is large enough, and grows no smaller for me, as your world out there grows smaller as you age, for all its galaxies and space. Is it only the fear of time and age and death that has brought you back to me, Hagen?"

"No." He thought his answer was perfectly honest, and the contrast between this perfectly honest statement and some of his earlier ones showed up the earlier ones for what they were. Who had he been trying to fool? Who was it that men always tried to fool?

"And was it," she asked, "my lamenting that drove you off? I lament no longer for my life."

"Nor for the veil that fell between us?"

The true answer was there in her grave eyes, if he could read it through the stretching, subtle, impenetrable veils.

The red circles held narrow daggerblades of urgent warning on all the walls, and warning voices boomed like thunder across the golden, convoluted plain. The evacuation ship lay like a thick pool of bright and melted-looking metal in the field, with its hundred doors open for quick access, and a hundred machines carrying tourists and their baggage aboard. The veil was falling early again this year. Stretching in a row across the gravity-inversion sky, near one side of the directionless horizon, explosions already raged like an advancing line of silent summer thunder-storms.

Hagen, hurrying out onto the field, stopped a hurrying machine. "My companion, the woman Ailanna, is she aboard the ship?"

"No list of names of those aboard has been completed, Man." The timbre of the metal voice was meant to be masterly, and reassuring even when the words were not.

Hagen looked around him at the surface of the city, the few spare towers and the multitudinous burrowed entrances. Over the whole nearby land-scape more machines were racing to reach the ship with goods or perhaps even tourists who had somehow not gotten the warning in comfortable time, or who were at the last moment changing their minds about becoming settlers. Was not Ailanna frantically looking amid the burrows for Hagen, looking in vain as the last moments fell? It was against logic and

sense that she should be, but he could not escape the feeling that she was.

Nevertheless the doors on the ship were closed or closing now. "Take me aboard," he barked at the machine.

"At once, Man." And they were already flying across the plain.

Aboard ship, Hagen looked out of a port as they were hurled into the sky, then warped through the sideward modes of space, twisted out from under the falling veil before it could clamp its immovable knots about the atoms of the ship and passengers and hold them down forever. There was a last glimpse of the yellow plain, and then only strange flickers of light from the abnormal space they were traversing briefly, like a cloud.

"That was exciting!" Out of nowhere Ailanna threw herself against him with a hug. "I was worried there, for a moment, that you'd been left behind." She was ready now to forgive him a flirtation with a girl of a hundred and thirty years ago. It was nice that he was forgiven, and Hagen patted her shoulder; but his eyes were still looking upward and outward, waiting for the stars.

VICTORY

Along with everyone else on the Shearwater interplanetary ship, Nicholas Shenyang had a bad five minutes or so of waiting to die, not knowing whether the Condamine patrol craft had decided to blast them or board them. Not until they heard and felt the clunk of hull against hull were the would-be blockade runners reasonably certain that the enemy had chosen to capture them and let them live.

Hands behind his head, face to the bulkhead along with the Shearwater crew, Shenyang got through the next five minutes in silence, even when something that must have been a gun barrel was rammed into his back hard enough to leave a bruise. That was after the first quick personal search and was meant to emphasize an order that he should get the hell over there with the others who had been searched and sit down. The voice issuing the order sounded strangely accented to him, but the message was quite understandable. Condamine, Shearwater, and the multitude of other states making up the so-called civilized galaxy shared at least one common language, in-herited from old parent Earth, which fact tended to make events like this boarding a little less difficult for all concerned.

More minutes passed before Shenyang got the chance to show his diplomatic card when a junior officer of the boarding party came around checking identification. After the officer had glowered at him in suspicious fury for half a minute—only a born troublemaker would be carrying such a card, to upset the officer's smooth routine—Shenyang was quickly transferred to the boarding party's launch. His brief passage through the flexible tunnel connecting the two craft allowed him a glimpse of space through its transparent windows. There was Shearwater, the planet he had left yesterday, a full bright dot looking like Jupiter as seen from Earth—except that Shearwater appeared against a backdrop of pearly, soft, faint clouds of whitish nebula, the nebula whose slow drift had cut this solar system off from the galactic world for almost fifty standard years. And somewhere in the dazzle sun-ward must be the crescent of

Lorenzoni, the war torn world that was his goal, but he had no time to try to pick it out.

He was calmly unresisting as burly marines aboard the launch shoved him into a space that must have been meant as a closet and locked the door on him. Capture meant nothing essential to Shenyang, as far as the success of his mission was concerned. He had been going to visit both sides of Lorenzoni anyway, and if fate insisted that he drop in on the aggressors first, so be it.

He had just been beginning to know and like the Shearwater crew, a half dozen experienced blockade runners whose swaggers still had some-thing self-conscious about it, and he hoped they would manage to come through this in good shape. Likely they would remain as prisoners aboard their own ship, while a Condamine prize crew brought her in. From what Shenyang had heard of the war so far, there was some hope that they might get home later in a prisoner exchange....

At last he heard the sounds of separation, as the launch departed from the captured smuggler. A minute later came the solid chunk of her arrival at her berth in what must be a sizable war vessel.

When Shenyang was brought off the launch, the Condaminer captain was there to introduce himself, in stiffly correct style, and treat him to another penetrating glare. A minute or two later, in a room or cell almost big enough to be called a cabin, the captain—naturally enough wondering just what sort of diplomat he had bagged so accidentally and what the effect was going to be upon his own career—came to talk with him a little more.

“Your government does know I’m coming, Captain, though they’ll no doubt be surprised when I show up in your custody. By the way, I hope the crew of the ship you just captured are being cared for properly?”

“Better than they deserve, in my opinion.”

“What did they really have aboard as cargo? They told me it was only medical supplies, and I’d like to know if you found anything else.”

The captain frowned, and his heavy jaw twitched, as if he might be having a hard time trying to reprogram “himself for diplomacy. “From the little bit I’ve seen so far,” he admitted finally, “it looks as if that might be so. On this particular ship.”

“Nobody denies that Shearwater ships bring in military cargo too. At least once in a while.”

“Once in a while, huh?” And that ended the con-versation for the present.

Faster-than-light travel being impossible this deep inside the gravitational well of a solar system, the approach to Lorenzoni took the patrol ship two more days. Free to spend a good deal of his time out of his tiny cabin, Shenyang during this time got a good look at the nearing planet. It was an Earthtype ball circling a Sol-type sun, and it had been colonized, directly from Earth, a good many centuries ago.

With the slight magnification available from a viewport, he studied the land mass of Condamine when it was on nightside and drew the immediate conclusion that the Condaminers feared no attack from space. The glow of a thousand cities and towns shone forth with open cheerfulness.

Some ten hours later he took another look, at considerably closer range, and caught Ungava, the other sizable continent, in darkness. The blackness enfolding it was eerie—it was not a cloud cover, for there was the ghostly reflected sparkle of the nebula off the great poisoned lakes, and the coastline showed

distinctly. But there was not a sign of human civilization, under conditions where the light sparks of every town of twenty thousand or more should have been visible. Shen-yang was a traveled man, and this reminded him of Stone Age worlds and worlds where mindless creatures ruled supreme.

Even as he meditated upon the meaning of this darkness, there came a sudden pinpoint dazzle right in the middle of it. The flash was over in a moment, but he knew it had been there. Yet another nuclear strike from Condamine, he thought, as if they still feared the very space where their enemies' cities had once stood—feared that in that deep night one building stone might still be raised upon another.

The captain later confirmed his thoughts about the flash. “Yeah, we still hit ‘em that way from time to time, when recon confirms some kind of buildup that would make a worthwhile target.”

The captain drank some coffee and seemed not about to say more; so Shenyang prodded him: “But isn't it obvious that the war is really over? I mean you hit them, as you put it, forty-six years ago, with everything you had. That's the way I've heard it.” The captain's eyes flicked over at him, but not denying anything, and Shenyang went on: “Their cities are all wiped out—right? Your cities are untouched. Their casualties in the first strike were more than one hundred million—isn't that so? God knows what they've been since or how many people are still alive inside Ungava.”

A little snort. “Too bloody many.”

“Your casualties in the whole war are nowhere near that figure. Condamine has a population of between two and three hundred million people. Your industry is intact—“

“There's the terrorists.” The captain's voice was milder than his looks. “Every week something is blown up.”

“So? Maybe there's more of that than I've heard about. Look, I'm here trying to learn, to understand. When I say something you know is wrong, please straighten me out. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now isn't your industry essentially intact?”

“Well, yes.” The captain looked at him, and amplified: “But theirs is too, more than you'd think. They're dug in like you wouldn't believe now, and dispersed. Nothing centralized any more.”

“You've seen how it is over there?”

A shrug. “Common knowledge.”

“Ungava's not going to blast you, are they? And they're not going to invade you. I mean, if your three invasion tries on their continent couldn't settle the war—?”

“By God, I wish they'd try that.”

“But they won't. So, they're not really all that dangerous to Condamine, not now at least. Hasn't the war really been over, Captain, for the last forty-six years?”

The other stood up, outraged though not surprised. His face had been grim before, but now it was beginning to look dangerous. “Tell that to my buddy, who was killed last month. He'll have a good

laugh.”

At the military spaceport on Condamine, Shen-yang walked down the ramp from the great sphere of the patrol ship, under a sunny sky tinged green near the horizon. A sprightly wind made banners snap; a good day, he thought, for a parade.

Three harried-looking civilians stood at the foot of the ramp, looking up it anxiously. At first glance Shenyang knew they had come for him. Hurling with them in a buried tubecar toward the capital city, Vellore, and the foreign minister who waited there to see him, Shenyang chatted with the three and lamented the fact that this mode of travel kept him from appreciating the beauties of the countryside. Aboard ship he had been told this was the best season to see the blooms.

They assured him that he would have a chance, tomorrow or the next day. They were relieved that he accepted his capture in space so equably and had no real maltreatment to complain of. His own thought was that he who chooses to ride with smugglers must take some chances. He had not come for a sterile protocol tour but to find out what was going on.

“Have you read Orwell?” his boss at the foundation, a hundred light-years distant, had asked him just before he left.

“Orwell. Yes, a little anyway.”

“Remember the bit in 1984, where a man is asked to envision the future as a boot, stamping on a human face, forever? That bit’s always stuck in my mind.”

“I can well imagine.” Now that it was mention-ed, he did recall it.

“I think the world I’m sending you to look at may furnish an example, Nick—what’s the most terrible conclusion you can imagine for a war?”

“I don’t know. Everybody killed on both Sides.”

“That’s bad, all right. But what we’re looking at on Lorenzoni may be something more Orwellian and therefore—I think—even worse. What about no conclusion at all? The winner knocks out the loser with the first punch and then goes on beating until his victim dies—and then goes on beating some more.”

“Ungava’s certainly not completely dead.”

“That’s what the Condaminers say. I think they’re keeping the so-called conflict going, to distract their own people from other matters. Just what, I don’t know.”

“That ploy is common enough in history. What did you think of the Ungavan envoy?” The first ship out of the Lorenzoni-Shearwater system when the nebula parted had brought such a per-sonage, pleading the cause of his tormented peo-ple to the galaxy.

Dr. Nicobar considered, brushing back long gray hair from her eyes. “He’s a very good talker. He tells how, somehow, dug in against the hail of missiles, working wonders of medical research against radiation poisoning—all good achievements due to the High Leader, of course— Ungavan life and heroic resistance go on. He understates, or gives the impression that he’s understating. He—I don’t know, I wanted to like him and I couldn’t, quite. For a man who represents an absolute dictatorship, he’s perhaps just a little too good, too gentlesaintish, to be taken at face value.”

“And what about the man from Condamine?” He had come out on the second ship.

“In the brief exchange I had with him, he didn’t seem to want to talk about the war at all, just about Condamine’s rejoining the League of Galactic Nations. I’m going to talk to him again, of course. But, meanwhile, there’s a ship leaving tomorrow to go in, and I want us to have a representative on it. Here’s your diplomatic card. Go there and see for yourself, and think for yourself, and report personally to me when you come out.”

In the streets of Vellore the war— if it was a real war—seemed as remote as something on another planet. In every block electronic posters burned energy from street level up to twenty stories high or higher, urging the people to smash Ungava, not to waste, not to talk loosely of military secrets, not to grumble about the rules. But all these exhortations seemed to Shenyang to be largely set at naught by the stores, full of good things to buy; the theaters and houses of entertainment, varied enough to suit any taste and any credit balance, doing a mass business; and by the people themselves.

The streets were full of folk who obviously enjoyed a wide choice of clothing and personal decoration and of vehicles in which to travel. They were busy, and they looked basically healthy and certainly well-fed. Just a touch glassy eyed, perhaps—but Shenyang saw that often enough at home, in the larger cities at any rate.

The people from the foreign ministry had a hotel room ready for him in one of the bigger and fancier inns on a main street of the capital. With the small bag of personal effects he had so far retained through thick and thin, he moved in, announcing a tiredness which certainly seemed likely enough under the circumstances, and was left alone. Five minutes later he moved right out again. In the first place, he was morally certain— although he had no technical means of proving it —that they had bugged his room. In the second place, he wanted to see just how his hosts would react. And in the third place, he wanted to make what free and unofficial contact he could manage with the citizens.

He left word at the desk of his departure and mentioned that he would call back, saying where he could be reached when he had picked himself another hotel. Reason for leaving, he gave none.

Apparently free of all restraints and even observation, he walked the crowded thoroughfares briefly, then settled himself in another hotel, chosen at whim from half a dozen that looked inviting. The men from the ministry had thoughtfully established electronic credit for him, and there was no problem about paying. The room he got this time was a lot smaller but looked just as comfortable. He left his bag in it and walked out again, to try a little mingling with the people.

Across the street, in the public bar of yet a third hotel, a young woman with a startlingly beautiful face gave him the eye so insistently that he decided to accept Fate again. Shortly she was walking with him back to his room.

When the door had closed behind them, he cleared his throat and said, “You may have heard this before.”

“You’re not a stickman,” she opined, raising an eyebrow.

“If that means am I with the police, no, I’m not. I just meant that all I really want to do is talk.”

In her fact amusement began to struggle with other things and eventually prevailed. “As a matter of fact,” she said at last, “that’s all I really wanted to do myself.”

He started to offer money, but she pantomimed it away, at which point he began to watch her very alertly.

She said, "Mr. Shenyang ..." and paused there to let him appreciate the fact that she already knew his name. "I am sorry your trip was interrupted so unpleasantly but glad that you got to Lorenzoni in one piece. I represent what the rulers of Condamine call the underground. Dirty Ungavan sympathizers."

"Ah. Are there many of you in Vellere?"

She waved aside the question, preferring to speak of something she considered more important. "If you go out again in the next hour—walk clear of Middle Street. It would be your most direct route from here to the foreign ministry, should you be going that way. But do not take it."

He nodded. "All right. But why?"

"Now I must go. They will soon be here to keep a watch on you again."

He nodded again.

When the door had closed behind the girl, it would have been easy to imagine that she had never been here.

He looked at his timepiece and laughed. His appointment at the foreign ministry was in just half an hour.

A quarter of an hour later, he was given the chance to show his diplomatic card again. When the Condamine police had looked at it and had talked quietly on their radios to some invisible authority, they saluted and let him go on his way at once, brushing the dust of the recent spin bomb blast from his new clothing and shaking his head in an effort to dispel the ringing ache that the explosion had installed immediately inboard from his right ear.

He assumed the thing had been a spin bomb because other kinds of explosives were now too easy to detect. He calculated that he must have been leaving his new hotel just about the time the nameless terrorist was setting down the bomb on Middle Street and quietly pulling its axis pin and walking on, colorless and invisible in the crowd. Shenyang had just bypassed Middle Street and gone on around a corner when someone brushed the bomb in its no doubt innocent-looking container, or traffic shook the walk enough to make it wobble, and its tiny flywheels, counter-rotating inside their vacuum bottle with a rim speed equal to a substantial proportion of the velocity of light, disintegrated. If it had been a small nuke instead of a tiny spinner, Shenyang supposed, the ministry three blocks away might have gone up with a sizable surrounding chunk of city, instead of a mere storefront or two. But certainly the police would have detected a nuke before it had been carried into the middle of the city.

The blast seemed to have made no great impression on the vast majority of the folk hurrying busily through the streets. No one who was not bleeding seemed to take it all that hard. It was evidently something that happened from time to time, like rain, and the business of getting and spending had to go on.

The foreign ministry was no bigger than a large house and tastefully ornate, set apart from the city around it only by a simple-looking fence and a narrow belt of lawn. There were uniformed guards at the door, keen looking though they did not seem to be actually doing much. They gave Shenyang and his card a simple looking over and courteously directed him on his way; if he underwent any other inspection, the

means by which it was accomplished were imperceptible.

The elevator went down instead of up, down for almost twenty levels. Maybe, after all, a small nuke three blocks away would not have taken out the ministry's most important parts.

Only a little late, Shenyang reached the proper office, where he had to wait about thirty seconds before being passed on it. His appointment was with Minister Hondurman himself, who came around his desk with hand outstretched to offer greetings. He was a large, dark man, very correctly dressed, with a handsome face beginning to go puffy.

One of the first things Shenyang said was: "I bring you personal greetings from Director Nicobar—she regrets that urgent business kept her from coming herself."

"Yes...we did know each other once, in school. How long ago that was...but how is Dr. Nicobar?"

"In good health. Extremely busy. It sometimes seems that the whole galaxy is bringing the Peace Foundation jobs these days. We arbitrate, we investigate, we publish a great deal."

"I am well aware that great advantages can accrue from your endorsement. That was true even before we were cut off here."

"It is more true now, Minister Hondurman. We have more real power in the galaxy than do the governments of some small worlds. If, when we make our formal investigation of this war on Lorenzoni, we can report a reasonable settlement, it will in fact go a long way to help your government rejoin galactic society—which I understand you are eager to do." Hondurman was waiting silently, and Shenyang went on: "Frankly, while the war continues, I don't see how any favorable report can be made."

The minister, unsurprised, nodded and took thought. Then he asked, "What did they tell you on Shearwater about the war?"

"Next to nothing. They expected I would be going directly from there to Ungava, and I suppose they thought the High Leader would prefer to present his own case."

"We can make travel arrangements with Ungava, if you still wish to go on and see him."

"Of course I do."

Hondurman nodded again and made a note to himself on the surface of his desk, which seemed constantly awash with electronic projections of one kind or another. "Believe me, Mr. Shenyang." He coughed. "My government would like to end the war, when it can be done honorably and decently. We have not yet found a way."

Shenyang gestured disagreement. "Why not simply end the bombardment and the raids?"

"We have in fact several times suspended such activities. But Ungavan operations against us are out of our control, and while they persist, the war goes on. Did you hear the blast in the street not half an hour ago?"

"Very well; in fact I am still hearing it." He explained just how close he had been.

The other rose and came around the desk, concerned. "But you should have said something. Do you need medical attention?"

"I don't think so."

"My own physician is not far away. I wish you would allow me to call her."

"If you like, but later, Now, do these terrorists attacks really amount to a war waged against you? Do they compare to what your forces have done and are still doing to" Ungava?"

Hondurman shrugged. "I'll show you some things. See if you think they add up to a war or not."

The charts and figures began to appear, like some conjurer's props, projected on walls, spewed in printape from the desk. They detailed Ungavan attacks on fishing vessels, on shipping, on mining and drilling operations in all the oceans of the world. Terrorist bombs in Condamine cities. Condamine aircraft (unarmed recon ships and transports, Hondurman claimed them to be) shot down. Hit-and-run raids by small forces against the Condamine coast. Ungavan atrocities in the planet's ministates, small societies trying to cling to independence and neutrality. More atrocities against any of the people dwelling in Ungava who cooperated in the least degree with Condamine. All in all, if it were true, it certainly added up to a lot of killing and a lot of damage. Not a hundred million dead, of course. Not the destruction of a great industrial society.

At last Shenyang broke into the flow of data with a question. "How do you suppose they can keep going, making such a war effort as you describe? After attacks like those you have made and are still making?"

"Mr. Shenyang, have you studied the history of strategic bombardment? It has never broken the will of any people to fight."

"Of course it has never before been applied quite so—thoroughly—has it? Minister Hondurman, I'd like to pass on for your comment some figures recently given the Peace Foundation by the first Ungavan envoy to the galaxy. They concern that first missile strike of yours."

The man across the desk nodded, pokerfaced, and Shenyang began to produce the data he had been carrying in his memory. How many missiles Condamine had delivered, without warning, in that first awesome blow. How many cities were roasted, how much land and water poisoned, how many tens of millions of the Ungavan people had died in the first ten minutes—and how many more in the next hour, the next day, the next year....

"Let us suppose," Hondurman interrupted coldly, "for the sake of argument, that all this is substantially correct. What is the point you wish to make from it?"

"Simply this. The war is effectively over. You won it a long time ago. How can that poor battered remnant of a people pose any real threat to you? Sure, as long as Shearwater supports them with material, they can burrow under the mountains, cling to life, to some kind of military organization. They can even carry on harassing operations against you. But what do you want of them before you will make peace?"

"It is not what we want of them, sir, but what they want of us. Peace talks have been convened many times—I really forget how many. Talks are presently suspended, as long as our present government remains in office. That is the latest Ungavan condition for resuming peace talks, sir, that we replace our

government!”

“All right.” Shenyang could picture the fanatic Ungavan leaders—utter, bitter fanatics they must be by now, and one could hardly blame them—making such demands, in sheer all-out defiance. “But why do you really need a peace conference at all? Why not simply stop?”

“We could stop. But they would not. They continue, a bombing here, and raid there. Sooner or later we would strike at them again.” Hondurman made a curiously helpless gesture.

“Excuse me, sir, but I find that hard to believe. If you really let them know it was all over. Ceased building ICBMs or long-range cruise missiles. Offered them some reparations, which it would seem you can afford.”

Hondurman was silent, listening attentively, and Shenyang pressed on: “According to the Ungavan’s figures, which I notice you don’t deny, they can have very little left in the way of heavy industry and not a lot in the way of natural resources. I repeat, don’t you think the war is really over?”

“They keep a war machine going,” the minister answered stolidly. “They have great help from Shearwater, whose government is bitterly opposed to ours, for historical reasons which you may or may not—“

“I’ve read some of the history of your system.”

“Good. However, an all-out interplanetary war remains unthinkable, in this system or elsewhere. There is simply too much—“

“I’ve read the theories on that, too. What I have never read anywhere is any reason for the Ungavans’ fighting on if you stopped.”

“Well—you will have to ask them about that, I suppose.”

“I intend to.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Shenyang, you said a moment ago that you did not see what real threat they pose to us. Are you aware that they still have their own strategic missiles?”

A silence began to grow. Shenyang fingered his aching right ear, wondering if it might have played him false. Then he understood, or thought he did. “You mean they are starting now to build some? Or to import some from Shearwater?”

“No. I mean that the Ungavans still have more than a thousand of their own ICBMs emplaced, mostly in hardened sites—have had them since before the war. Some have been knocked out by our missiles, of course. I am not at liberty to quote you our best intelligence estimates of how many remain—but a thousand would be a good, fair, round figure.”

There was silence again. Shenyang noticed that his chair squeaked if he rocked in it.

His ears were evidently working fine. Either something in his brain was badly askew, though, or something in this world. “Let me see if I understand. Your official claim is that Ungava still possesses a sizable strategic strike force, intact after more than forty years of pounding by nuclear missiles—“

“Excuse me.” The minister leaned forward. “It is important that you understand, there has not been forty years of continuous pounding, as you call it. If we had built missiles and fired them as fast as we could for forty years, both we and the Ungavans would long since have perished from radiation poisoning, and there would be no world of Lorenzoni to fight about—no world that anyone could live on.”

“I understand that,” said Shenyang stiffly. “I have some military experience.”

“Ah? Very good. Proceed.”

“You say they have a sizable strategic strike force, still intact. But in more than forty years of war, in which you have hit them again and again with similar weapons, they have never fired even one of these missiles at you.”

“That is correct.”

“Can you explain why?”

“They fear to tip the environmental balance. You see, it can be shown mathematically—or so my experts tell me—that the long-term effects of another mass launching of missiles will be worse for Ungava than for us, regardless of where the missiles land.” Was there, in the minister’s almost immobile face, a glint of some brand of humor? “Of course for a firsthand answer, you will have to ask the Ungavans themselves.”

His trip began next day with a flight from Vellore to an advanced military base, set amid the chalky cliffs of the southern coast. The next leg of his journey passed aboard a fast courier recon plane, which deposited him upon a barren ocean islet, then took off in a hurry, headed back the way it had come, and vanished in a moment.

Surf pounded tranquilizing, but then some wild sea creature screamed as if in torment. Waiting on the flat, lichen-spotted rock, Shenyang studied the horizon and tried to use the time for thought. He still could not believe in the existence of the Ungavan strategic missiles—those utter, bitter fanatics would have used them, sometime in the past forty years. Themselves held on the rack of war, year after year, by a merciless enemy—they would have struck back as hard as possible. No claim had ever been made that they were superhumanly forgiving, and it was un-reasonable that they should be so reluctant to add some pollution to the atmosphere.

He could hear the Ungavan aircraft coming before he spotted it; it was moving somewhat more slowly than the Condamine courier. Shen-yang waved as the smooth metal shape made one leisurely pass overhead. He felt a little foolish for his wave when the aircraft had landed and he had walked to it and found it was unmanned.

A glassy canopy had retracted, above an empty, spartan seat and a small space for luggage. Shen-yang climbed in, and as his weight came down into the seat, the glass slid closed again above his head. A moment later he was airborne. The plane flew at a good speed, close above the waves. It turned smoothly a couple of times, avoiding a line of squalls.

In time a coastline grew, ahead. He thought his vehicle slowed somewhat as the land drew nearer—to give him a good look?

There, just inland among rocky hills, was ground zero of some horrendous blast, a decade or more old. Glassy and sterile hectares were surrounded by the stumps of crags and recent, tender life in the form of scattered, stunted looking greenery.

Farther from the central scar, the stumps of buildings, half buried now in drifted sand, made a larger ring. This, then, had been a city, and probably a harbor. There were no signs that humans had ever tried to reoccupy the place.

He rode on. His homework reading had informed him that the whole Ungavan continent was hardly more than one great, wide range of mountains. Between the barren peaks and crests, long valleys, some still fertile, twisted or ran nearly straight, marked here and there by narrow lakes. Now he could see people and machines working in some of the sheltered lowlands, tending or gathering crops. As his aircraft bore him through one valley at low altitude, he could see how some of the farmers looked up at his roaring passage, while others kept their attention on the earth. A few times he passed small buildings, never large enough to house the numbers of people he beheld.

The landing strip, he saw upon approaching it, looked like a plowed field too—no, it was a plowed field. Whatever his craft put down in the way of landing gear engaged the shallow furrows neatly, and the landing felt pleasantly slow and safe, if not exactly smooth.

His canopy slid back. People in drab, ill-fitting uniforms were all around him, smiling, most of them talking at the same time in accents newly strange to Shenyang's ears. His ride had come to a stop under cover of a great tree. He was being helped out, and in a moment he was standing within a chest high revetment between great rocks decorated with twin portraits of the High Leader. Leafy branches made a visually impenetrable cover overhead and hung on all sides in a shaggy veil. Welcome clamored on all sides, and there was no counting the hands held out for him to shake. The general impression was of youth, eagerness, and energy.

When a girl handed him a hot drink and some simple food, Shenyang noticed what he thought were radiation keloids on her arm and side. He thought the scars were not boldly enough undraped to be meant for intentional display. He supposed the whole countryside must be chronically hot. Well, before leaving home he had taken what medical steps he could in the way of radiation prophylaxis for himself.

They led him to a car, a mass of twenty or more people all enthusing at the same time about the rare privilege that he was being granted. The privilege was a talk with the High Leader himself; the young folk dropped their envious voices to a whisper whenever they mentioned that old man by his title or his name.

Four or five got into the car with him, and they were off. The road twisted and turned, seemed to be inside a tunnel as often as not, but still gave him a good chance to see the countryside. Not that there was anything much different from what he had already seen. Blastmarks, crops, workers, rocky hills. Here and there the entrance to some other tunnel, enigmatically unmarked. Once an organized gaggle of children pelted the speeding car with flowers and waved more pictures of the leader at it. The pictures and the flowers and some of the growing crops possessed the only bright colors to be seen below the sky. Everyone wore drab, and everyone looked busy.

He was taken to the High Leader at once, and, despite all the awed foreshadowing, with practically no ceremony. He found that old man waiting for him in a simply furnished cave, a great chamber beneath an immensely beetling brow of limestone and about one third open to the air.

Two simple chairs and one small table in the cave, and a cluster of cables passing crudely through it at the back. Shenyang found himself left alone there with a toughly stout and greatly aged man, whose long white sideburns, a personal trademark, looked exactly as they did in all the pictures. What the pictures could not show was in the eyes.

They were seated, Shenyang at a little distance from the old man and his table, upon which he seemed to like to rest his calloused, age-grooved hands, as if it were a lectern.

“And did you have a pleasant journey across the ocean?”

“Pleasant enough. I marvel at how well your air service runs. It must be difficult to keep it going.”

The old man appeared pleased. “Mr. Shenyang, there is really no secret to how we keep things going. We rely not upon our machines but upon our people. That is why we shall win this war in the end.”

Shenyang thought to himself that had his air-craft failed in mid-flight, no mass of a hundred or a million peasants rushing out to catch him in their arms would have helped in the least. So, on a surface level, what the old man had just said was nonsense. But Shenyang thought that there were other levels in the statement, and in those other levels somewhere there was truth.

Still, he was not going to let it pass unchallenged. “You do have machines, though, and to some extent you do depend upon them.”

“We use complex machinery when it is available and when it suits our plans. We do not use it when it is not suitable; therefore we do not need it, and our victory does not depend upon it.”

If this old man, thought Shenyang, tells me that this mountain we are under will turn to jelly in the next minute, my mouth will fall open with surprise when it does not. Dare I—can I—say to this man that the war is over?

The leader, after a courteous pause, was going on. “The enemy, on the contrary, has all along relied upon machines to crush us. That is why he must fail in the end.”

“Your losses no doubt have been terrible.”

“They have been great. I myself have walked for a kilometer on the dead bodies of my people, because there was no space between dead bodies to put down one’s feet. That was after the blast and firestorm at Kinjanchunga. But it is not huge losses that sap a people’s will.” Whatever words the old man said seemed to come out of his mouth engraved upon eternal slabs of granite. “What saps their will is a too-great concern with things that do not matter.”

Shenyang hitched his hard chair a little closer. “What matters—“ he began and had a thought in mind that he could never afterwards recall because it was melted in a vast disruption of the world. A blue-white welder’s torch came on to seal the sky, with one electric flick, across the entrance to the cave, and Shenyang had a mad and trivial thought I didn’t mean it about the jelly, and then the whole mountain made a fist and struck him in the mouth.

His chin was bleeding. Both of his ears now rang numbly. What sound had just come and gone was already as far beyond memory as it had been beyond hearing in its passage. He got up from where he found himself on hands and knees on the smooth cave floor and saw the High Leader, a fussy housekeeper, setting up his small table and his own old chair again. If the leader had been in the least damaged, or even excited by the blast, he did not show it.

With commotion, there were suddenly a dozen, a score, of frightened men’s and women’s faces looking in around one rocky corner and another. Not one looked for a moment at Shenyang, but he was free to study them—the faces of people who had briefly felt their souls’ in peril but who were once more

convinced of their salvation when they saw their God was still alive, unhurt, and with His people.

The old man had a sharp, practical-sounding question or two for them, in the local tongue, which Shenyang could not follow. Answers were received and orders issued. The people as they turned away now looked elated by his new challenge.

Turning back to his guest, the old man addressed him once more in their common tongue. "More missiles may be on their way. It seems the Condaminers have tagged you with a tracer of some kind for them to home on, something our own search devices failed to detect, planted on you, your clothing, or perhaps your luggage. Doubtless they calculated that you would be having a talk with me shortly after your arrival here. To kill me, they will spare no effort." He turned toward the rear of the cave, gesturing Shenyang to follow. "Their superior technology, you see. And you see that again it avails them nothing."

Around a fold of rock, an aide was standing by an open door. A moment later the three of them were descending in an elevator, which looked as neat as anything in Hondurman's foreign ministry.

"Here we will be safe." After the old man had said that, no missile in the world would dare to touch them.

When they got out of the elevator at its lowest level, Shenyang looked about him, at the size and shape of the place in which he found himself, at the instruments ranked below the clock and the leader's portrait, at the texture of the walls that spoke to an expert eye of super toughness.

The leader looked at him, started to say some-thing, and then waited, bright eyes probing.

"This is what we used to call a technicians' bay," Shenyang announced in a slow voice. "And—through that door—there will be an inter-continental ballistic missile waiting in its silo."

His host made a grave gesture of assent.

"You have them, then," said Shenyang. "Do you really have a thousand?"

Again, the confirmation.

"Then, all this time...why didn't you fire them when you could?"

"When I could, Mr. Shenyang?" The leader's face shivered into a thousand wrinkles, because that of a smiling, wise old demon. And he raised, on a chain that hung around his neck, the carved symbol of his party and his faith. Shenyang could see the tiny studs projecting from it, coded secretly no doubt, so that one man alone possessed the power, day or night, to....

"When I could? There is nothing to prevent my firing them now—more than eleven hundred strategic missiles. But I chose, not to fire, forty-six years ago. And as of this moment, that is still my choice."

Shenyang felt more dazed by those absent blasts than by the real ones he had endured. "To—to save the atmosphere—?"

The old man smiled. "No, we can survive that, too, if need be. Our people's medicine is working on the problems and will solve them. Besides, already only the resistant ones of us are left. No, we have another reason for not launching.

“Our greatness is born of great adversity and nurtured on it. When we have blown away the Condaminers’ cities and more than half their lives, what is left of them will be stronger and harder to defeat than they are now. Why, Mr. Shenyang, should I go strengthen my foe? Their leaders, in their hearts, would be delighted if I did.”

Shenyang thought of Vellore, indefensibly open to the sky, to cruise missile and MIRV, to laser reflecting warheads. He thought of the buried, hardened nerve centers and wondered if Hondurman himself ever came up above the ground.

I want to go home, thought Shenyang, with a physical revulsion for this place so strong he almost started for the elevator. Away from this world of madmen.

The aide was approaching, a bright red wireless communicator of some kind in his hand. The old man took it with a nod and said into it at once: “Do you call now to see if I am still alive?” Even as he spoke, there came another godlike blast far above; the living rock around them shook and trickled powder. “Of course, I am alive. How can you slay a man, who is an idea first of all, with a machine?”

A few more words were exchanged. Then the fleshy old arm held out the device to Shenyang. “There is someone who wishes a few words with you.”

When he held the thing for his own use, Hondurman’s face was visible in its little screen, and Hondurman’s voice came through. “My government’s deepest apologies, Mr. Shenyang, if any military action of ours has in fact endangered you. Of course you knew that you were entering a combat zone—“

“I’m still alive,” he interrupted. “By the way, you were right about the missiles here.”

A slight bow was visible. “It appears that you were right, all along. Our Council of Ministers has just been reorganized, and it now agrees to the Ungavan conditions for peace talks to resume. Our new government deplores the latest launchings, disclaims responsibility for them, and will take disciplinary action against the officers responsible. Our official position is that the war is essentially over and the situation must be normalized before our world rejoins the galaxy.”

“I was right about its being over, yes. But wrong about one other thing.” Shenyang paused. “So, you’re changing leaders to get the peace talks going? That’s what losers do, you know.”

The eyes in the small screen were haunted. “And just what else, sir, did you suppose we were?”

BIRTHDAYS

One

Looking back, Bart could never clearly remember any part of his life before the day when the Ship first woke him from a long, artificially induced sleep, and guided him to the nursery to see the babies. That day and the first few that followed were very confusing to live through.

The Ship’s machines, working with paint and glass and light, had made the nursery spacious looking and cheerful. Bart counted twenty-four cribs. To count babies would have been harder, because only those

who happened to be napping were in their beds. The rest crawled or sat or toddled on the soft-tiled deck, sending up a racket and getting underfoot of their attending machines and images. The babies were all the same age, just about a year old the day Bart first saw them. They wore white diapers, and some had on green hospital gowns like Bart's only of course smaller.

Bart was not tall for almost fourteen but he could easily lift one bare leg after the other over the low barrier the machines had placed to keep the little kids from tottering or crawling out of the nursery into the corridor. The corridor led in one direction to Bart's small private room and in the other—so his memory, working in a new, selective way, informed him—to the rest of the habitable Ship.

The babies squalled, gurgled, blubbered, or took time out to stare in silence at the world. They made nothing much of Bart's coming in among them. The images that the machines kept project-ing and moving around the infants were of solid looking adult humans, speaking and smiling; they evidently took Bart to be just one more image. The babies reacted more strongly to the machines because of the physical contact they had with them.

"Pick one up, if you wish," the Ship said in his ear. It was able to project its conversation so there was no way of telling just what direction the words came from. The Ship's voice sounded human, but not quite male or female, not quite young or old.

Like a good obedient boy Bart bent to have a try at picking up a baby. The chubby belly felt cool against his hands above the papery diaper and the head of dark, scanty curls turned so that the liquid brown eyes could stare at him uncertainly.

"See how the machines hold them," counseled the Ship. "Their arms are of basically the same form as yours."

He shifted his grip.

"The prime directives under which I operate are very clear. One human parent, adoptive or real, is necessary to the successful maturation of children; images and machines are psychological-ly inadequate for optimum results. Therefore, after receiving some elementary preparation for the role, you will serve as adoptive parent for the first generation of colonists."

Colonists. The word evoked in Bart the abstract knowledge that the Ship had started from an orbit around Earth, and was outward bound to seed humanity somewhere among the stars. How long ago the voyage had begun, and whether he himself had witnessed that beginning, were questions that his memory could not answer. Nor did he feel any urgency attached to them. Somewhere in Bart's lost past he had learned that the Ship was to be trusted utterly and now he could wait patiently for a better understanding of what it meant by its announcement that he was to be a parent. Meanwhile he watched the infants, played a little with them, and tried to comfort and distract those who cried. It seemed to be the thing to do.

The machines labored ceaselessly, patting, changing, feeding, washing, wiping up. Twice they dispensed cups of souplike stuff for Bart to drink. There were no clocks to watch but he was certain that he had been in the nursery for hours. At last, one of the machines took him lightly by the arm and pointed back down the corridor whence he had come.

When he had closed himself into his little plastic walled bedroom the Ship's voice said: "You will be given a substantial breakfast when you wake again. That will be one standard year from now."

Two

He awoke as on the first day, as if from a sound night's sleep, and at once sat up to look over the rim of his bed, which curved around him like a padded bathtub, warm and dry and clean. Just how he was being put to sleep or awakened he didn't know, but certainly there was more to it than he could see or feel; somehow his gown had been taken off him while he slept and he was naked.

There was a new gown laid out on the room's single small chair, or the same one, washed clean of baby shit and pablum, and he put it on after using the toilet and washing his hands and face. From a panel in the wall he got his promised breakfast, consisting of a warm, milky drink in a plastic cup, and a tray holding chunks of bread, the bread crust hot and crunchy and with pieces of fruit and cheese inside.

One standard year, the Ship had said...but his hands looked no bigger, nor did the muscles in his thin arms. His face looked no different in the wall mirror, and the fine tawny hair on his head had maintained its crew cut length. There were still no more than a couple of dozen brown pubic hairs curling at the bottom of his belly and he was sure he was no taller.

When he got to the nursery, though, he could well believe a year had passed: it certainly had if these were the same kids. A few were in their beds as before, but now those lying stretched out almost filled the little cribs. The majority were running about, keeping their balance reasonably skillfully for the most part, and busy with a multitude of toys. They wore shirts now, and shorts or pants over their diapers.

This time the babies were aware that Bart was more than just another image and some of them took fright at first and clung to the machines. But he kept walking around and talking to them, as the Ship instructed him to, and soon they started to warm up to him.

Again he spent the day in socializing, and this time shared the little kids' food when it was dispensed by the machines. Meaty tasting, mildly chewy chunks of stuff, and harder, biscuitlike objects that came in both sweet and sour flavors, it tasted good enough to be adult fare. Last year—yesterday—the babies had been drinking from nipples bottles, but today they got water and colored drinks in little cups.

Though he hadn't questioned the Ship on it, Bart was still thinking over the announcement that he was to be a parent. He could imagine himself at the head of an enormous dining table, all these kids, grown a little older, sitting round it, but beyond that his imagination was soon lost. He told himself to be patient; the Ship would provide explanations and instructions as they became necessary.

The continual racket was wearying. By the time the babies were all bedded down for what must be their regular night's sleep, with the lights dimmed, he was ready to go to sleep himself. At a word from the Ship, he walked back yawning to his room.

Three

Again he seemed to be experiencing nothing more than an ordinary night of restful slumber, and again when he awoke he hadn't grown or gotten older. This time he found a pair of shorts and a pullover shirt laid out for him.

After dressing and breakfast he walked to the nursery. Before he got there he could hear a year's worth

of change in the children's voices, forming clear words now as they called to one another.

When the new glass doors of the nursery opened to let Bart in, he saw that bigger beds had been installed, and the walls moved back to make more space for play. The kids looked different—and bigger again, of course. After an initial shyness, not so intense as yesterday's, they all came crowding around Bart so that he walked through a little sea of waist high heads. Here and there a bulge of diaper still peeped out of someone's shorts.

"What's your name?" one tiny voice cried out, insistent above the babble of the others.

"Bartley. Everyone calls me Bart." Who had called him that? Family? Friends? There were still no specific memories available. "What's yours?"

"Armin." Or maybe Ermin was what the child answered. Bart wasn't sure if the speaker was a girl or a boy. The group seemed about evenly divided as to sex.

Again he ate and played with them through the day. This time all accepted his presence unquestioningly before an hour had passed—though he didn't get the feeling that any of them recalled his earlier visits. Today, he noticed, there were fewer projected images of adults about.

A little girl who said her name was Deirdre brought him a wheeled plastic toy whose axle had come loose from its containing grooves. He forced it back into place, so the wheels could turn again, and Deirdre carried it off, after a machine had made her stand still until she said "Thank you, Bart."

Counting as well as he could in the continuing melee, Bart decided that there were twelve girls and twelve boys in the group.

After dinner, when the machines had begun to pack the kids off to their beds, the Ship said to Bart: "You may remain awake for a few more hours if you wish."

He felt tired out, but not ready to sleep. "Maybe I'll read a book."

"I will provide some in your room."

Stretched out on his bed, he stared at a book for awhile without reading, then put it down and asked the air: "How long have I been here, in the Ship?"

"I have edited your memories of your past life for good reason. Your past contains tragic and violent things. Nothing can be done about the past. We must work for the future and achieve a successful revised mission."

"Are there any other people on board beside me and the little kids?"

"None. Much depends on you."

He lay there looking at the cover of *The Young Detectives Visit Earth*. Although his bed was comfortable and he was tired he didn't think he was going to be able to sleep.

But he really had no choice.

Four

Again, either his shorts and shirt were washed for him as he slept or it was a clean new outfit that he found on the chair. Breakfast as before, and he was on his way. The books had been removed and there was nothing else to do.

Two boys and two girls, grown bigger since he saw them last, were playing just inside the children's compound; Bart decided it couldn't be thought of as a nursery any more. As he approached the four caught sight of him and jumped with excitement, calling out to others, their voices coming to Bart faintly through the heavy glass doors.

As he entered it, Bart saw that their compound had been enlarged again. There were no more adult images in sight. Children came, hesitantly at first, from everywhere, some pedaling vehicles, others emerging from toy houses of multicolored blocks.

"In, I'm Bart," he said to those who gathered close around. "Anybody remember me?"

"The Ship told us you were coming to see us today," a bold little girl spoke as she pushed forward. "Look, look, see the picture I drew?" It was a row of a dozen or so little circlefaces, each the same size, with lines for hair and nose and eyes, and one large face above. "That's you." In a corner the artist's name stood in big shaky letters: SHARON.

As the day went on Bart heard the names of all the other kids, though he remembered only a few. He spent his time in play with one group and another, and then read them all stories from a book about old Earth as they sat around him on the floor. When the Ship directed, he saw them off to bed.

"Am I being a good enough parent, Ship?"

"The revised mission plan is proceeding satisfactorily."

Five

All twenty-four of them were waiting for him excitedly just inside the heavy glass doors. This time they all remembered him.

"We're five now, Bart!"

"Ship, says we can have a birthday party if we want—"

"—like Billy and Lynn—"

It took him a while to figure out that Billy and Lynn were characters in some children's story the Ship showed them from time to time. Lynn and Billy were twins, back on Earth somewhere, and in one episode they had evidently enjoyed an elaborate birthday celebration, complete with cake, candy, and ice cream.

"How old are you, Bart?"

“Will you have a birthday with us?”

“Sure. If the Ship will give us cake and things. Maybe we can have some real candles.”

“Yayy!”

So they had the party, the Ship providing real candles and entrusting Bart with a lighter for them. The machines even brought forth small paper wrapped toys as presents for all the five-year olds.

“Din’choo get a present, Bart?”

“No, it’s not my birthday.”

“When is?”

“In about a couple of months.” The precise, date was something else still sitting undisturbed in his memory, with blank holes knocked all around it. “This was fun. Listen, maybe we can have another birthday party when I come back tomorrow.

You’ll all be six, if the Ship keeps me on the same schedule.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Well—next year. See, you and I are running on different schedules; I’m only awake one day every year. I expect the Ship’ll put us on the same time schedule soon.”

“Next year?”

Bart sighed, seeing that for them the difference between tomorrow and next year was not too clear. Especially the way he was talking.

Six

This year the difference in time schedules was much easier for them to grasp. So were a lot of other things.

Again the compound in which the children lived have been transformed. Part of it had become what Bart recognized as a school, and everybody was busy at teaching machine consoles when he arrived.

The Ship’s voice then declared a holiday for them all.

“Let’s have our birthday party!” a boy cried out.

And after Bart had talked with them all, and read them a new story as the Ship directed, and had been shown through the school by his small friends, machines wheeled out a big cake. This time there were balloons as well as little gifts of toys and candy.

“Isn’t it your birthday too, Bart?”

“Well, no. Mine’s coming in about a couple of months...in two months and two days.”

“How old will you be?”

“Fourteen.”

After the cake and ice cream was finished they had a good time playing games. The kids were awed by Bart’s strength and speed and dexterity, and he taught them some of the skills he knew for games with balls and ropes and sticks. Now and then someone who got bumped hard in a game took time out to cry. Bart thought he could tell quicker and better than the machines just how serious the damage was.

Seven

Before the seventh birthday party got started, Bart went through a period of rather intense questioning by a few of the kids; Fuad and Ranjan and Ora wanted to know what he was doing all the time they didn’t see him, where and how he spent the year between birthdays.

“I’m sleeping. The Ship can fix it so a person just sleeps all the time.”

“Huh,” said Ranjan, doubtfully.

“Why does it want you to sleep all the time?” asked Ora. Today she had a loose front tooth she kept wiggling with her tongue.

“I don’t know,” Bart admitted, feeling foolish.

“Don’t you get hungry?” Fuad wanted to know.

“No. I guess it’s not like regular sleep.” Some vague knowledge of the process was available in his impersonal memory. “It’s something like being frozen, only you never feel cold.”

This year the games were rougher. When two or three of the boys grabbed Bart by the legs at once, they could tip him over.

Back in his room alone after dinner, he asked:

“Ship, am I really helping much, being a parent, if I just come out once a year? How long will I be on this schedule?”

“You will not be on this schedule for any substantial portion of your lifetime. A definite time limit cannot be set now, but all computation on the matter is proceeding properly.”

He tried again a little later, before going to sleep, but got essentially the same answer.

Eight

When Bart walked into the schoolroom some-thing like boy-girl war was going on, the place in disarray,

the weaker or more timid children in tears, the more aggressive screaming insults at one another and hurling toys and writing materials back and forth as missiles, over book-shelves and teaching machines turned into parapets. Adult images had been brought out by the Ship and were calling sternly and uselessly for order, and outnumbered machines were shaking some of the worst offenders by the arm and lecturing.

“Ship, can I help?” Bart cried.

“Yes. Two boys have got to a lower deck and should be brought back up.” Ship’s voice was calm and methodical as always, though somewhat louder than usual to be heard plainly above the screaming. “My machines are busy, and it would be helpful if you went after the boys and got them to come up again. Go down the stairs at the end of the corridor to your right.”

It was a passageway he hadn’t been in before, evidently one recently opened by the ongoing enlargement of the living quarters. He found the two truants, Tang and Mai, without much trouble; there wasn’t much of the lower level open to their exploration, only a loop of corridor sealed off by heavy glass doors at all other points where other passages intersected. The stair also was sealed where it went on down to still lower regions of the Ship.

The boys were glad to see Bart and willing to go back with him; they had seen enough of the sights down here, interesting though they were. Through the various sets of glass doors you could see other corridors stretching away for hundreds of meters at least. Many other doors were visible, some of which stood open to reveal static glimpses of rooms furnished for human life, but unused and empty of movement. The lights were dim in that large world outside the glass, and there was not a footstep on the dustless, polished looking floors.

“I wonder if anybody lives there,” Mal had asked, nose against the glass.

“Nobody does,” said Tang. “Let’s go back up.”

“Maybe we will someday,” Mal said in a small thoughtful voice.

Nine

The war between the sexes was not raging today, but it still smoldered, as Bart could tell readily enough from the grimacing and hair pulling and name-calling that flared sporadically during the day. The cake and ice cream lunch was a success, as usual, and the games were fun, though now he had to exert himself somewhat to outdo some of the other players.

A girl and boy had a brief argument about what mathematical formula should be used to calculate the volume of the basketball they were playing with, and with a start Bart realized that now some of these kids knew things, maybe important things, that he had never learned. And he was supposed to be their parent! Or was it possible he had misunderstood what the Ship was saying?

These things still bothered him when the day was over and he had undressed and climbed back into his isolated bed. “Ship.”

“Yes.”

“...nothing.” He decided to let well enough alone. Ship rarely gave him a helpful answer anyway. And he wasn’t really all that anxious to be a father, at least not until he was older.

Ten

Eating his usual breakfast, Bart felt for the first time a little anxious about meeting the people he was going to find waiting for him in the compound. If they were all another year older, they wouldn’t be so much like kids any more, but people with whom he would have to interact almost as an equal. He shook off his misgivings and walked out.

The kids weren’t enormously bigger today, but it was certainly time to celebrate their collective tenth birthday, and they reminded Bart of this right after their first whoops of welcome. They had a big calendar drawn on the wall now, and had been crossing off days, and there was no doubt that another year had passed.

Today when several of the boys ganged up on Bart in a rough game they easily pushed him around. Not that there had been any plan on their part to gang up on him, or that they were not still impressed by his strength.

And this year there were certain moments, talking to the girls, when, oddly, Bart felt almost bashful.

Eleven

Suddenly some of the boys, Baruch and Olen in particular, were almost as tall as Bart himself. And Deirdre and Sigrid were starting to round out into the shapes of women; only just starting, but you could tell the process had begun.

Right in the middle of the cake eating, the birthday party turned solemn, and there was a long sober discussion of early memories and hopes for the future.

All of them except Bart shared as some of their major lifetime memories the things that he had seen during the last eleven days—the old nursery, the parental images and the guardian machines, the toys and teaching devices. Of course he had missed the greater part of their history, but he had a sampling of it.

They sat there soberly sipping their sweet party drinks and talking. When it came Bart’s turn to recount his early memories, he explained that the Ship must have scrambled them for him in some way, erasing large sections. “I don’t even know if I was raised out of the machines like you, or if my biological parents were on board, or if I was born on Earth.”

No one could give him any help with those questions. The talk went on for a long, moody time before they got around to playing games.

Twelve

Bart found himself looking up at Baruch, and level eyed at a number of the other kids. The Ship was

allowing them more freedom now, and everyone except Trac, who had a stomachache, had come to meet Bart right outside his room, the doors of which could only be opened by the Ship. Even Tang was there, though hobbling on a broken leg he said he had got by falling two decks down a stairwell. Ship's medical machines had neatly fixed the bones and told him he was healing.

Today the kids' collective attitude was at first so grownup and businesslike that Bart was almost intimidated. They explained to him that they had just formed themselves into a society, modeled on old societies of Earth that they had studied through the teaching machines. Baruch had been elected president, and others chosen to fill at least half a dozen additional offices.

Even the birthday party began in an atmosphere of formality, but things soon loosened up. Bart was still stronger than Baruch, and could outwrestle him with an effort. But stocky Kichiro was now slightly stronger than he.

Thirteen

Chao, this month's president, announced early in the morning that this year's party was going to be a thirteenth birthday celebration for Bart as well as all the others. All the others chorused agreement, and Bart went along without protest, though he knew full well he had passed his real thirteenth birthday many months ago. He had not the slightest idea whether there had been any party to mark the event, so he enjoyed this one as his due.

All through the day the girls paid him a great deal of attention, to which he reacted confusedly, enjoying it all one moment and feeling tongue-tied and awkward the next. He could tell some of the boys were getting jealous.

Every night recently he had been saying goodnight with the feeling of saying farewell, knowing that never again would he meet the same people he was leaving. Tonight he tried to stay with them, but one of the machines came and took him gently by the arm and led him from the group toward his room. He looked round at the other children's faces, and saw sympathy but no help, and knew he had to go.

Fourteen

Every morning now he went to greet some strangers, boys and girls he had heard about indirectly but had never seen before. They resembled other kids he had met yesterday, and had their names, but that was all. Their bodies were melting and altering almost while Bart watched, flesh inflating and stretching over elongating bones; boys' faces sprouting elementary whiskers while their voices deepened, girls' breasts growing, girl's legs curving and rounding to spell out disturbing secret messages in visual code.

And today they could literally talk over his head. Bart was small for his age. That's what—who was it?—always used to say.

During the party, right in the middle of the ice cream and cake, a fistfight broke out between Fritz and Kichiro. They slugged away at each other so hard that Bart saw he wouldn't be able to stand up to either of them for ten seconds.

The machines just stood around like dummies and made no move to halt the fight. Fay, the current

president, had to yell repeatedly to get other kids to step in and break it up.

As soon as things had settled down a little, some of the kids began drifting out of the room in pairs, a boy and a girl together kissing and maybe pawing at each other as they left. Bart felt strange and almost frightened. The kids that remained in the dining hall talked and giggled and talked, talked, talked. The conversation was about nothing important, but still it seemed important that it be going on.

Edris came to sit near Bart and talk talk talk with him. A red ribbon tied up her brown hair, but a few strands fell loose down as far as the halter that covered her breasts. Solon got jealous and came over and started an argument. Soon he and Bart were trying to think up insults to call each other.

Bart shoved Solon, who was not too big for him to think of fighting, and Solon punched Bart on the cheek, so his mouth started to bleed inside. Bart hit back, and then they grabbed each other and wrestled in deadly earnest to see who could get the other down. With furniture in the way they couldn't come to any clean conclusion. Bart saw that a couple of machines were hovering near, and Edris was watching with enjoyment. Pretty soon some of the big kids grabbed the combatants and broke up the fight.

The social atmosphere was a little strained for the rest of the day, and Bart went back to his room earlier than usual, before the machines came to urge him along.

He sat on his room's one chair, arms folded. "Ship, I'm not being a parent. What am I really supposed to be doing?"

"Further instructions will be given you as required."

"Are you still going to wake me up only once a year?"

"The mission is proceeding according to its revised schedule."

He got up and tried to walk out of the room again, but found the door immovable.

He wondered if something vital could be wrong with the Ship. Might not its planning computers have broken down like so many common machines and be making hideously wrong decisions? Though his bland, smoothed out memory suggested this was impossible, Bart went worriedly to bed. Sleep was still mechanically fast in coming.

Fifteen

Solon had grown alarmingly large and it was with relief that Bart saw him smile in a friendly if distracted way. The inside of Bart's mouth was still sore from yesterday but Solon said hello as if he didn't recall their fight at all.

Bart's former opponent had other matters on his mind, and returned quickly to a conversation he was conducting in fierce whispers with Fritz and Himyar and one or two other boys. It was shortly concluded, and the bunch of them took off, running grimly and purposefully down a corridor.

Bart looked around and realized there was no one left in the common room with him but half a dozen girls, most of whom looked worried.

Galina and Vivian came over to Bart and started trying to explain. It seemed that the boys were now divided into two gangs, of six members each, and between the gangs existed something like open war.

“They’ve been fighting this way off and on for months now,” Galina told him. “Always getting black eyes and bloody noses. Today looks like it might be one of the worst. It started today over whether we should have another birthday party or not.” Galina, who was rather plain, was solemn most of the time, usually giving the impression she favored sobriety and order. “And the trouble is that now half the girls have gotten involved too.”

Helsa and Lotis also came over, and the girls debated whether there was anything they could do to stop impending hostilities. All around them the Ship was quiet, ominously so, Bart felt. He stood by, feeling dangerously out of it all. He didn’t even know the layout of the passages the girls talked about as they tried to guess where their male friends might be planning fights or ambushes.

While the other girls kept on talking to one another, Lotis came to Bart and with a gesture got him to follow her off into the Ship.

“Where’re we going?” he asked, supposing some plan for peacekeeping or hiding out was being put into effect.

“Something I want to show you.” She was just barely taller than he, with straight black hair and Chinese eyes. Shortly they came out in a wide, open space, a meeting of corridors where, Bart saw, the kids had improvised a swimming pool. Decking had been taken up, and a room in the lower level flooded. Lotis pointed out how water-proof patching had been stuck in where necessary, and a water pipe tapped to fill the pool. The water looked deeper than a man’s head.

Bart was impressed, but somehow disturbed, too, that they had done this much on their own. “Didn’t the machines do anything to stop you?”

A flirt of her head dismissed the powers of the machines. “I’m going in. Do you know anything about swimming? People on Earth used to do it all the time. The records show them doing it in the oceans even.”

Lotis pulled off her scanty clothing and slid naked down into the water. She turned over on her back and paddled, smiling knowingly up at Bart while he stared down in helpless fascination. Female nudity was not among the things on which his memory could give him reassurance. His mind lurched in turmoil this way and that.

Suddenly he heard running feet quite near at hand and turned to see a figure dash out of a side corridor. Fritz was bigger and stronger even than a year ago, but his eyes were wide and frightened; he scarcely looked at either Bart or Lotis, but came running around the pool as if pursued.

He was. Kichiro and Basil and Mai came pounding after him, carrying bludgeons made of the unscrewed legs of chairs, their faces trans-formed in the fury of the hunt. Bart started to run too; he realized almost at once this was a mistake but it was too late—someone, responding to his flight with instinctive pursuit, had grabbed him from behind and he was flattened on the deck beneath his captor.

Kichiro had tackled Bart, while Basil and Mal closed in on Fritz. It sounded like all of them were yelling.

Fritz broke away and fled for another corridor, but Basil was too fast and blocked his path. Fritz lunged at him in desperation and before Basil could swing his club he was slammed up against the bulkhead in a

choking grip. The club dropped from Basil's hand, and Bart, pinned on the deck under Kichiro's kneeling weight, could see the whites of his eyes seeming to expand.

Mal stepped close to the struggling pair and earnestly swung his plastic chair leg. The impact made an ugly sound and Fritz let go of his enemy, staggered back and fell.

Kichiro had started to get up, and Bart squirmed out from beneath him, tore free of a grasping hand, and ran. His one thought was to reach the safety of his own room. He had to pass between the group of boys and the pool, where Lotis, openmouthed, clung to the side and watched.

Mal, turning wild-eyed, saw Bart coming and raised his club for another swing—

None of them had seen the machine approach, but now it was on hand as if it had popped out of the many paneled wall. It took the swinging club from Mai's hand as if it were a feather and in the same instant shoved him violently back, so that he stumbled over Fritz's unmoving legs and fell.

"You hurt me," Mal croaked stupidly from the floor. His hand was scraped raw, oozing blood, where it had collided with the gripper of the machine.

The Ship said loudly to them all: "I have authority to sacrifice individuals, if I judge it necessary for the good of the mission."

No one moved or spoke as the machine walked through their shocked silence to bend over Fritz. As it picked him up, Bart saw that his eyes were half open but unseeing, and his mouth was slack.

It walked off down a corridor, carrying Fritz in its arms. His limbs hung down, utterly limp. The other boys stirred and followed, their weapons left behind. Bart heard a slosh and trickle behind him: Lotis getting out of the pool. He did not turn to look. The machine went on for a few score meters, then stopped, facing a panel in the wall.

"Ship," Kichiro said, "that's a disposal chute." But Fritz was already gone.

Ignored by the others, Bart ran back to his room and sat there, shivering and staring at the wall. The Ship served him his dinner without comment. He ate a little, and then soon turned to his bed, where sleep and forgetfulness never failed to come.

Sixteen

All twentythree of the kids were waiting for him in the corridor when he stuck his head out of his room to see what might be going on. But it was all right.

"No one's going to try to kill you this time," was one of the first things said, by a strong young man with thickening patches of dark beard on cheek and chin. With just a minor effort Bart could recognize the speaker as Kichiro, who, as Bart soon found out, was this year's president. They were having elections only once a year now, he was soon informed.

Fights were evidently much less frequent also, Bart discovered to his great relief. He overheard part of an argument as to who had tried to kill him last year; that was the closest thing to a fight that happened on this birthday.

He also soon found out that birthdays, like gang wars, were now considered kid stuff, and today there was no party. Instead there was a good, elaborate lunch, with ice cream produced unpretentiously for dessert.

Talk turned to Bart, and his purpose in the world. He repeated to the kids everything that the Ship had ever told him about that purpose, which wasn't much.

"I wonder," Basil said to him, "what the Ship'll do with you now? I mean we obviously don't need you any more as a father or model or whatever to help us grow."

"I dunno," said Bart, taking a little more ice cream. The kids' eyes were all sympathetic, but still their silent gaze made him uncomfortable. "Whenever I ask Ship about it, it just says the mission is proceeding as per revised schedule, or something like that."

Sigrid nodded knowingly. "Ship's that way. If it doesn't want to answer something for you, it just won't."

Seventeen

This morning it was a relief to meet a group of stable, sane looking people, not too much different from their namesakes he had said good-bye to the night before.

Bart soon noticed that Basil was missing from the group. "Oh, he's all right," said Ora reassuringly. "He'll be along for lunch. He goes studying the stars."

"The stars?"

"We've found a way to reach the outer hull. In one place there's a glass port where you can see the outside of the Ship, and the stars too, of course."

Bart could call up a plain picture of what stars were; sometime, somehow, he had seen them.

"What do you think about the stars, Bart?" Tang asked him patronizingly.

He didn't have a quick answer, and Armin said: "Look, we've been working on this problem of the Ship and where it's going for seventeen years now. And Bart's put in how much time? About seventeen days."

And there was laughter, not unkind.

Eighteen

When Bart mentioned that he thought it would be fun to learn to swim, they took him to the newly remodeled and enlarged pool. Everyone was matter-of-fact about undressing and after clothes had been off for a minute or two it all seemed practically normal to Bart.

Resting on the pool's edge after some strenuous splashing, they took up again last year's discussion about the Ship and its purposes. Bart got the idea that now they talked a lot on this subject. Today he remarked that maybe soon they would be having children, so eventually people would fill up the empty rooms still waiting on the other levels.

Fuad shook his head. "The Ship's told us we're all sterile—know what that means?"

"You can't make any babies."

"That's right. Girls and men both. We can do all the sex we want, but nothing can ever happen from it."

Later alone, Bart asked the Ship: "Am I sterile too? I mean, am I going to be, when..."

"No."

That was a definite answer at last, but to his old questions he still got only the old answers.

Nineteen

Bart's chronic worry that his life was going fundamentally wrong was lightened when he met his shipmates today. They were now so obviously adults that he could produce an inner sigh of relief and decide to leave the worrying to them.

Most of the teaching machines had been removed. At the few remaining, people were abstractedly at work, printouts and papers stacked around them.

As soon as the word spread that Bart had joined them for the day, most of the adults abandoned other activities and came towering around him, smiling and calling greetings, squeezing his shoulders and ruffling his hair. A number of people wanted to show him things.

Basil took him to see the stars. They went drifting, swimming through a part of the Ship where gravity was turned off, and though there was air Basil made him wear a breathing device just in case. Through the glass Bart looked along the curves of the hull, unreal in their great size and distances, and at the stars that looked even more unreal, like a vast bright scattering of powdered paint.

After lunch he asked to go swimming again. Lotis, in the pool with him and others, now had a peculiar slightly mottled look at her thighs that Bart eventually decided must be caused by fat under the skin. And on her left thigh was the threadlike red tracery of an enlarged vein.

After dinner Baruch and Tang took him aside "Bart—do you really like this one-day-a-year-life?"

"I dunno. It's all right, I guess. The Ship must have some reason. It's taking care of us all, right?" He might have said something else, but Ship heard everything.

The men exchanged glances over his head. With several of the girls they walked him back to his room, when Ship called for him, and almost tucked him into bed.

Twenty

He learned soon after rejoining the others that Tang and Ora had been killed, some months ago, trying to work their way into a part of the Ship from which humans were ordinarily sealed out.

“Were they trying...I mean, did it have anything to do with me? With waking me up more often, or...”

“No.” Fay shook her head definitely. “Oh no, Bart, don’t worry about that.”

The thought hadn’t really worried him. Actually it had generated some hope.

“They were trying to get to the far end of the Ship,” Ranjan explained, “You know, the aft, as the old records call it. Have you seen any of the old records? The part of the Ship where the drive controls and so many other things seem to be located.”

They explained to Bart such elementary knowledge of the Ship as they had been able to piece together, and his understanding of it grew a little. He found out also that they meant to keep on trying to get through to the other parts of the Ship, and eventually to take over its control. That was a strange thought, and Bart wasn’t at all sure how much he liked it.

Twentyone

It had been many days since his shipmates paid him as little attention as they did today. He was greeted cheerfully enough, but no crowd gathered around. A couple of people went with him to swim, in a pool that had again been remodeled and made safer and more pleasant.

He learned that some of the people were working hard to raise plants from seeds the Ship had long ago provided for their school biology program. They showed him the new garden. It held nothing ready to eat yet, but maybe next time he came.

He saw Kichiro limping by and heard that his knee had been lamed in some contest with another man, but whether it was a fight or a game Bart did not learn.

Twentytwo

There were no beds in the old common room any more, and Bart found that most of the people had paired off two-by-two, sleeping in more or less stable partnerships.

More noticeably, most of the people he talked to today had runny noses. Sharon told him that an experiment in the new biology lab had gone wrong and some viruses had escaped. Nothing to worry about, they assured him. He wasn’t worried, really, not about viruses anyway.

All in all, it was a casual, low-pressure sort of day.

Twentythree

Lotis, working in the garden, wore shorts today, and he noticed that her legs and bottom were getting quite lumpy with fat. The red vein on her thigh had extended itself into a little tracery of defective blood vessels in the skin.

All the runny noses had dried up. Some medicine the people had made for themselves was ready for Bart in case he caught the infection too. He didn't.

"Maybe the Ship's still taking good care of you," Chao commented.

Twentyfour

No one came down the corridor toward his room to meet him, but as soon as Bart had entered the general living area they all jumped out of hiding with cries of "Surprise!" and "Happy birthday!" It wasn't his birthday yet, but he soon understood that a sort of general birthday had been declared in which he was being invited to share.

"It's been ten years since we've had one, Bart," said Himyar. "A party, I mean. So we just thought it was time."

"We could make you an honorary fifteen," Fay put in. "Or how about an honorary twenty-four?"

"Have a glass of wine, Bart," said someone else.

"Wine?"

"Told you our garden was going to be a success."

"—oh, give him only a small one! He's too young—"

"—one glass won't hurt him—"

He realized after a while that some of the people were passing around another kind of drug, something they sniffed up into their nostrils. But he stayed with his one glass of wine, which made him feel just dizzy and high enough to be wary of asking for any more.

The party went on practically all day, with games and jokes and songs. Bart no longer minded when people paired off and vanished for a while, their arms about each other. Their behavior was grownups' doings now, not something in which he might possibly become involved. He went along with all the partying and had a good time. Still, now and then he caught himself wishing they would get down to business. Though he didn't know just what their business was.

Twentyfive

This year his wish seemed to have been granted, for he got the impression of a lot of serious business going on. People were punching at computers and crouched over teaching machines, and in some rooms devices Bart couldn't identify had been set up.

He noticed that Olen's hairline was receding sharply, and wondered if the man had some kind of scalp disease. But he didn't ask.

In a large room away from the usual living area, Bart found Himyar working to form a towering metal sculpture, using a torch that showered and streamed electric flames. With this homemade device Himyar brushed the glowing metal into the shapes he wanted. Parts of the sculpture reminded Bart of flowers in the garden, or, again, of the curves of splashed water that lived momentarily when someone dived into the pool.

They talked for a time, and Himyar showed Bart some paintings Vivian had done. Himyar and Vivian spent most of their time working here or scrounging materials from every part of the Ship that they could reach; they had become known as the Artists.

"And Armin's an artist too, I suppose," said Himyar. "He's made himself a camera and goes around using it. Well, the Ship made some of the component systems for him, and the film."

"I'd like to see that."

Twentysix

Nobody was working quite so hard today. Bart found an elaborate game in progress, a contest involving both physical and mental effort, with complicated rules. It had to do with dividing up the regularly occupied territory of the Ship between two contending factions or teams who struggled to gain more territory from each other. People sometimes were allowed or compelled to switch sides in the game. The dividing line between the territories was marked with bright tapes stuck on the decks and bulkheads, and moved back and forth as people won or lost at events like Indian wrestling—men were matched against men, girls against girls for the physical struggles—or asking each other difficult questions.

"Bart, be referee. Wasn't his foot off the deck just then?"

"Yep."

Powerful Kichiro, still limping on his trick knee, smiled and moved the tape into his opponents' territory by a distance of two wall panels.

"Hey, Bart!" It was Armin, approaching with something in his hand. "You never had a chance to see this. Here's a picture I took of you at the last birthday party. We'll have to have another one of those sometime."

Bart looked. "You hadn't even started with the camera when we had the party. It must have been yesterday when you took this. I mean last year, for you guys."

"Hm. I guess you're right."

Twentyseven

He found some of the marker tapes still stuck up in place, but the game wasn't being played today and everyone seemed to have forgotten it. He met Fuad and Trac and was a little surprised to see how fat they both looked, with rolls of flesh above their shorts.

He thought of going down the passageway that led to the stars again, but there was no breathing equipment in the locker where Basil had kept it earlier.

Baruch and Solon came along and asked what he was doing. They soon explained that the breathing equipment was being used in "engineering studies" to find out how to reach the more distant parts of the Ship.

Bart wanted to know more. They told him of the solid walls and sealed doors that cut off access to those regions, and how the Ship refused to discuss letting anyone go there. It had not tried to stop their engineering studies, though; whether it would interfere when they began to break through a wall remained to be seen.

Using explosives aboard a spaceship was intrinsically dangerous; something important and irreplaceable might be damaged, or a compartment's air might explode into vacuum.

"That's how Ora and Tang were killed. And then I was getting some acid ready to eat through a wall, and it disappeared. I suspect some machine found it and took it away." Baruch shrugged, fatalistic but still determined. "But we'll see, we'll see." He did not sound or look at all discouraged.

Twentyeight

This year Bart got more attention from his shipmates than had been usual his last few days. Edris and Helsa looked at his teeth and wondered out loud if the Ship shouldn't be straightening some of them for him.

"Oh, they're not terribly crooked. But it did as much for some of us when we were kids."

After lunch there was a general discussion of his future, carried on at times as if he were not there. Ranjan said: "I still think the Ship plans to provide him with a bride one of these days, one of these years. Maybe it's already tried to hatch other people from the artificial wombs and something's gone wrong, so it's got poor Bart just marking time."

Another adult asked: "You still think there's a good supply of human genetic material on board?"

"Bound to be. Else the Ship wouldn't have sterilized us, right?"

There was general agreement on that point, but on little else. One body of opinion held that the Ship really wanted the people to take over, now that its own computers had grown crotchety and unreliable with breakdowns and damage. But some kind of glitch prevented it from simply saying what it wanted. Schizophrenic, it fended off their attempts to gain control with one hand, while feeding and caring for them with the other.

The discussion soon got over Bart's head, but he listened intently, trying to weigh everything they said. He listened for something that might give him confidence, but heard it not.

Twentynine

“I know you’ve seen our biology lab before,” Galina told him. “But I think you ought to take a real interest. All our futures may lie in this room.”

He ceased scratching his back against the door-frame. “How so?”

“Sit down, Bart.” When they were seated, she looked at him with concern. “Bart, if the machines never provide you with any people your own age—with a fertile female specifically—then it’s going to be up to us to find some way to eventually produce more people, so that the human race can go on. I’m not sure that there are any people left alive on Earth.”

“I see.” He nodded seriously.

Galina spoke slowly and kept studying him for his reactions. “We know that when the Ship was launched there was a large supply of human sperm and ova stored on board, all coded to genetic types, so that people could be conceived and raised by machines when the end of the voyage drew near.”

“Uhhuh.”

She sighed. “I myself suspect that most and perhaps nearly all of this genetic material was lost in some kind of accident that evidently disrupted the voyage in other ways as well. The Ship speaks always of a revised schedule for the mission, a revised plan.”

“I know.”

“There’s further evidence.” She paused. “I said all the human seeds and eggs were coded as to type and potential? There’s some indication in the available records that all of us now alive—except you, we don’t know where you came from—were conceived from materials not considered of the highest quality. Not that we have any grave genetic defects, of course, no seriously defective material would have been placed aboard. But—not the best. This suggests to me that all the best material was somehow destroyed, and also that there may not be much material left.”

Bart nodded, not knowing what else to say or do.

“Except you, Bart, as I said. There may have been a human crew aboard before the accident—whatever the accident was. You may be its only survivor. But I suppose your origins make little difference. Here you are and here we are, and there’s the future to be faced. A future to be created—perhaps for the whole human race—out of whatever we have on hand. Would you like to learn something about biology?”

“I guess I’d better,” said Bart.

They had a pretty good first lesson, distinguishing plants and animals, marking the first great branches of the tree of life.

“What are those marks on your face?” Bart asked on impulse a few hours later, as they were leaving the lab to go to dinner. He felt he knew Galina pretty well now and wasn’t shy about getting a little more personal.

“What marks?” She raised tentative fingers to her cheek.

“Those little lines in the skin, going out from the corners of your eyes.”

Thirty

Today marked a standard month since the Ship had roused Bart from his first period of suspended animation. When he awoke, a machine equipped with measuring devices was waiting at his bedside. It quickly got busy to check his height and weight, looked into his eyes and mouth, listened to his chest.

“How much taller am I than a month ago, Ship?”

“Approximately seventy millimeters,” said the expressionless voice.

“And how much heavier?”

“Approximately ninety-five grams.”

“Is that good?”

It wouldn't say. But it did adjust his diet, adding a delicious, creamy drink to that very breakfast, served in his room.

When he joined the other people he found Olen half bald, and learned that Basil had gone back to communing with the stars.

Galina gave him another biology lesson, more technical and duller than the first.

Thirtyone

Today Bart heard that Dierdre was in her bed, too sick to get up.

“She always liked you, Bart,” said Chao sadly. “Go in and talk to her a little.”

He went into Deirdre's room, and found her looking much sicker than any human being he had ever seen before. She also seemed too dazed to talk very much.

“Galina's been giving her drugs,” Chao explained when he came out. “Otherwise the pain gets too bad.”

“Pain? From what?”

“They think it's cancer.” Chao and others tried to explain.

Only later did they get around to telling him that Baruch had been killed in some kind of an explosion, trying to force a passage to the for-bidden areas of the Ship.

“Remember this photograph, Bart?” said Armin, cheering him up. “I took it of you at our last birthday party. We’re going to have another one soon.”

“You took it the year after the birthday party, Armin.”

“Oh? Maybe you’re right.”

Galina was busy with her other work today and never got around to teaching him biology.

Thirtytwo

Deirdre had died, which came as no surprise to Bart but still left him with a hollow feeling. Thinking over matters of life and death, he stood at the edge of the garden, a high domed region full of bright lights, vastly enlarged from the first little plot of synthetic soil. People were jogging for exercise around the walk that circled the perimeter of the garden, while others were working casually inside.

It was strange to see gray in the hair of some of them, but Bart guessed that was just one more thing that happened naturally with age. His own hair, crew cut when his shipmates were babies, was starting to fall over his forehead now.

He went to look up Basil, and asked to go out and see the stars again. Basil was willing. When they got to the observation port, he pointed out to Bart the prow of the Ship, and the aft, or the stern as they sometimes called it, where the engines and their controls were supposed to be.

“And when some people finally get back there,” Bart asked, “they’ll really be able to take over the whole thing?”

Basil shrugged. He was looking mainly outward, at the stars.

Thirtythree

Trac was the first person to meet Bart as he came down the corridor from his room, and as soon as she smiled in greeting he noticed that several teeth were missing from her lower jaw.

“Had a jaw cyst, Bart. At least that’s what Galina and Solon say. They took it out. Spoils my famous beauty, but they think eventually they’ll be able to do something about giving me artificial teeth.”

“Couldn’t the Ship—??”

“It wouldn’t help, whether it could or not. It’s giving us less and less help these days. But never mind about that, come along, we’ve got something to show you.”

He followed along. And then they were all jumping out at him, yelling Surprise! Birthday party! The common dining room was decorated with streamers and balloons, and the table set for a feast.

“We were going to have one next year, Bart, you know, ten years from the last, but then we decided why not have it now?”

“You can be whatever age you like, Bart. Be an honorary thirty-three with us, if you like.”

“That’s a third of a century, Mai,” a woman cried. “Who wants to be that old?”

They were all good to him, as they usually were these days, petting and hugging him and fussing around, making it his party although it was supposed to be their birthday and he never said what honorary age he wanted. Actually he didn’t want any, his own real age was good enough.

Later he found unnoticed in a corner something that he supposed had been dragged out of storage accidentally with the decorations. It was a wheeled plastic toy that he remembered fixing for Deirdre a month ago.

Thirtyfour

The marking tapes were up on the bulkheads again, and a few people were playing at the question-and-wrestle game. Meanwhile some had evidently been spending a lot of time working in the garden. It was now huge, and looked like the earthly gardens pictured in the Ship’s records, which none of them had ever seen in actuality.

“And now, Bart, we’re going to have some prayers. Come along.”

“Some what?”

“You’ll see. It’s another old idea that Basil’s been putting into practice lately.”

They had wanted to hold the prayer meetings out by the observation port, Bart learned, but there wasn’t room enough for everyone, and all had wanted to attend the first meetings at least, to see what they were going to be like. That was a month or two ago and by now attendance was dropping slightly.

Bart didn’t understand the theory of prayer too well, but at the meeting Basil and the others who got up to talk seemed to be speaking not only to the Ship but to the world outside it, and to some force or power that had made them both.

Thirtyfive

When Bart emerged from his room most of his shipmates were there in the hall waiting for him, something that hadn’t happened since they were sixteen, a day he could remember well. Today they were going to bring him to a meeting, they said, and at first Bart expected more prayers, but this meeting turned out to be more businesslike than that.

It was governmental council, held all day or most of the day around the big table with lunch coming as an interruption. Lunch included fruits and vegetables brought fresh from the garden, as well as the usual rations issued by the Ship.

The proceedings got rather boring for Bart, though his friends made an effort to bring him into it all. They showed him their new system of recordkeeping, of recording all the discoveries of their research for easy

access by Bart and future generations.

He looked the question at them.

“It’s true, Bart,” said Fay. A deep, gentle happiness glowed through her eyes at the thought. “The Ship has recently promised us, there will be future generations.”

“Provided the mission is completed,” someone put in.

“Yes. Well.” That was enough for Fay, and for the people as a group.

Bart himself thought it sounded fine, but he would still like to know more. He asked the Ship for details later but got nowhere, as usual.

Thirtysix

There had been important changes made around him. He knew this the moment he started to come out of sleep. Opening his eyes a groggy second or two later, he realized that he was in a new bedroom, much like his old one but different in detail and bigger.

“Ship...Ship, where am I? What’s happened?” “You have been moved during your sleep into a new accommodation, Bart. There is no cause for alarm.”

He got up and dressed and ate and eliminated as usual. The walls of this room were metal, and its door was thicker, as he saw when it opened for him to go out.

“Why did you move me, Ship?”

“Some of the people were attempting to reach you, to rouse you from sleep at the wrong time. They meant well but it was necessary to prevent their interference.”

His door opened into a corridor he had never seen before, leading off in one direction only. It bent sharply several times and was interrupted by two sets of heavy doors that opened as Bart drew near and closed immediately after he had passed.

He found himself coming back into the peopled area of the Ship from a new direction near the biology lab. The first folk to see him dropped what they were doing and ran to give him a glad welcome.

“I told you he’d be here on schedule!” cried Mal, pounding Bart joyfully on the back. No club in Mai’s hand this time.

“Ship was just taking good care of him, that’s all!” Sigrid pulled him in for a big hug against her heavy bosom.

Later her learned that an intensive effort had been made to “rescue” him from the machines, set him free from his long sleeps. The attempt had collapsed, foolishly, and no one wanted to talk about it. Then everyone had grown a little worried about Bart and all were glad to see him still coming back, if only for a day each year.

Gray was spreading in the hair of the happy crew around him, and several of the male heads were nearly bald. Many of the people looked a little fatter and squintier than when he had seen them last. They gave him a big lunch that was almost a birthday party.

Thirtyseven

Galina and Solon took him on a tour of their biology lab, which was much enlarged and changed since he had seen it last, with cages holding white rats and hamsters, raised from genetic material obtained from the Ship's stores.

"Do you think the long sleeps are harming me?" Bart asked when he had a chance.

"Harming you physically? No, I doubt it." Galina looked at him thoughtfully. "It takes an enormous amount of energy and a great deal of control equipment to keep a human being in such a sleep; even a Ship like this couldn't do it for very many people at a time. It's not just freezing in the ordinary sense, you know. Even the orbital electrons within your body's atoms are kept from moving...but don't worry about the physical danger of it, that's extremely small."

She was anxious to resume the biology lessons, and they went on a thorough tour of the lab.

"We haven't been able to get any human genetic material from the Ship to work with. Still, in theory it should be possible for us to produce a new human generation here, starting with just ordinary cells from our own bodies. Did I ever tell you anything about cloning cells?"

"No."

"I will. Anyway, it hasn't worked out yet. We're not sure if the Ship is interfering in some subtle way, or if there are simply problems we're not aware of."

They showed Bart masses of tissue growing in glass jars. But they had never been able to get the tissue to differentiate properly into all the organs that had to grow in concert to make a person. It looked to Bart as if they hadn't yet even come close to achieving that.

Here and there old colored tapes were stuck to the walls and overhead, but the game they represented seemed to have been utterly abandoned.

The only competition Bart heard about today was in raising the best food plants and flowers.

Thirtyeight

It was depressing to see Helsa now dragging herself around like an invalid, her arms grown thin and her ankles puffy. Others told Bart that Galina suspected some slow, incurable disease. Then they turned the talk to brighter things.

"There's a lot of card playing going on now, Bart," Sharon informed him.

"Card playing?"

“Poker, whist, bridge,” said Ranjan. “We’ll show you. They’re old games we dug out of the Ship’s records. Then we’ve also tried two new ways to get through the barriers to reach the control regions of the Ship, but neither has worked.”

“We haven’t really tried them yet,” Fuad objected.

“Well, we’ve run them on the computer,” Lotis put in.

“Bah, I tell you, the Ship is still using that computer against us—“

“No, I keep telling you,” argued Ranjan “we’ve got it blocked off now against any possibility of the Ship’s gaining access—“

“So you think! I don’t agree.” The argument was heated, but still showed no sign of coming to blows.

Thirtynine

Today there was a prayer meeting, more elaborate in ceremony but less intense in feeling than the last one Bart had attended. He noted that people’s clothing, which they now made largely for themselves, was growing more elaborate too, and more voluminous; it covered more of their sagging bodies, and distracted attention from them.

Bart also noticed that a softer, more comfort-able type of chair had been manufactured some-how and was now in general use. The legs didn’t look as if they could be unscrewed.

Forty

It was birthday party time again. Only four candles adored the big cake; each standing for ten years, as someone explained to Bart. The party was opened with a rather perfunctory prayer.

“Bet you don’t remember when I took this picture of you, Bart.”

“Yes I do.”

Several speeches were made, tracing the recent history of progress in science—mainly astro-nomical observations and biological research— and in the arts, mainly sculpture, painting, and drawing. Not much had been done lately in an en-gineering way, a speaker said, which Bart sup-posed meant they weren’t getting anywhere with plans to take over the Ship.

A new president, Olen, had just been elected for a twoyear term, and he pledged in a vague way to get things moving.

All around the table the faces were puffy or lined, continuing to puddle or sag. There was more gray hair than any other color.

Fortyone

Bart found a number of people playing chess, a game they said they would teach him before the day was over.

About dinner time Basil told him something else, more confidentially. "I'm not going to give you any details, kid, nothing the Ship doesn't already know. Information you don't have can't be pumped out of you. I'll just say that this time we really know what we're doing, and we're not likely to be stopped. We've been a long time getting ready."

Fortytwo

He soon learned that Basil, Mal, and Olen had set out, shortly after Bart's last waking day, on a major effort to force their way into the Ship's control areas. They were not back yet, and by now it was doubtful, to say the least, that they ever would return.

Himyar, the sculptor, proudly showed Bart a tall pair of steel doors on which he was carving the history of their little society in a series of panels. He claimed that he had devised a method of grinding stainless steel that worked beautifully.

Helsa was now much better, Bart saw with some surprise. But Sigrid looked unhealthy and was complaining of vague pains. "We're going to try something new," Bart heard Galina tell her cheer-fully. Evidently the Ship was again not helping, or could not.

The garden had once more been enlarged, the entire new area being used for additional food plants.

Fortythree

Basil was back, had been back for several months, but Bart saw that there was still some-thing new and wild and strange in his eyes and he was still emaciated. The other men weren't coming back, Basil said, and that was about all he had to tell about his great adventure.

The way Basil looked made Bart timid about pressing him with any further questions. Later he heard more of Basil's story from someone else. The three men had tried going out into space, outside the Ship, to reach the aft where they intended to get back in. Something had gone wrong with their equipment; maybe the Ship had sabotaged it. They did get back into the Ship, luckily in a region where they could find air and water and stored food enough to keep them alive for a time, but the controls had been as much out of reach as ever. Eventually Basil had made his way back, somehow, through a maze of inner decks and passageways. He had never made it completely clear just how the other two had died, and Bart got the impression that it might be wise not to press too closely on the question.

Himyar had completed his doors and was working with Vivian on a giant mural of Earth, composed of scenes reconstructed imaginatively from old records.

Sigrid's condition was not much changed from last year.

Fay, having recently been named president in a special election, told Bart it had been decided that he should attend school every waking day. The people were getting ready a course of study for him. "The machines insisted on our attending school, I mean in a formal way, and I don't know why they don't with you, but never mind." She brushed back her graying hair and looked at him as if at a challenge. "It's time and past time that you formed good habits to carry you through the rest of your life."

Fortyfour

Bart heard right away that Sigrid had died, only a few days ago.

Maybe this latest death was still on everyone's mind, and that was why his first day of school didn't go too well. Lotis was teaching, and sort of skipped from subject to subject, and technique to technique. She knew it wasn't going well, and once she sighed: "Someone else will take a turn at teaching next year, I mean tomorrow. Are you able to learn anything from me, Bart?"

"Oh yes."

His day was almost over before he heard some-thing exciting: it was no longer quite certain that Olen and Mal were dead. At least some garbled message had come in, along disused intercom channels that were thought to connect with control territory. Some almost indecipherable words about surviving. Maybe it was only garbage belched out by the vast intraship communications delay lines or memory drums, maybe not produced by any of this generation's people at all. But maybe...

Fortyfive

Himyar had put his clever hands to work, toiling in his improved shop, to outfit several people with eyeglasses. Studies on artificial teeth were now well under way, with Solon doing most of the re-search. The Ship refused to do anything along prosthetic lines for anyone, though it still treated routine minor injuries.

Bart heard Edris and Trac and Kichiro praying, but no longer to the Ship. He saw Basil, who now stared at walls instead of stars, and still said very little.

School was better today. Fuad as teacher talked with him easily and amused him with stories of old Earth.

Fortysix

School again, his teacher Chao, who was grimly determined that he should learn to appreciate the beauties of geometry.

He heard that the garden was just getting over an epidemic of plant disease, caused by no one knew what.

Ranjan had just been elected president, for an indeterminate term, and had pledged to get things moving.

The work on artificial teeth was progressing again after several setbacks. Solon and others looked into Bart's mouth again to judge whether he needed braces, but to his relief decided to let well enough, or almost well enough, alone.

Fortyseven

Bart got to see Vivian's and Himyar's finished mural, and part of a championship chess game between Armin and Basil.

He tasted a new hybrid fruit from the restored garden.

He heard vague mention of a Golden Birthday celebration that might last for a year and should begin fairly soon.

He saw some artificial teeth in operation.

He heard with blunted shock that Fay, who had been working on and off in the biology lab, had killed herself with quick painless poison. If any-one knew the reasons, they never made them plain to Bart.

In school Himyar taught him, spiritedly but unintelligibly, about the various traditions of Earthly art.

Fortyeight

The gardeners and biologists had reported success in rejuvenating plants, and there was hope of applying their discoveries to people. Some were saying excitedly that now they understood why the Ship in its wisdom had refused them any help along this line, while letting them work freely at it for themselves. It was beyond the very limited creative capabilities of computers; only humans could do it.

Not everyone agreed.

Bart's school went on with a whole group of teachers. They were trying music appreciation today, and no one on the Ship seemed to have a real bent in this direction.

Fortynine

Bart noticed today that some of the people who had seemed happily and permanently paired off as sex-and-life partners were now paired off in different pairings, and evidently just as happy.

Today in school there was some confusion about just what Bart had been taught in previous sessions, and what he might now be fairly tested on. He did well on the tests when they were finally given, and the arguing teachers were all relieved.

Fifty

Again the whole group—the fifteen still alive—was on hand to greet Bart when he came through the last heavy door that set aside his private territory. They greeted him with cheers and songs, told him today was a holiday from school, and pulled him away for what they promised would be the biggest and best birthday party yet.

Sharon had just been elected president, and at the party table made a brief speech about how, with the help of all of them, she meant to get things moving again. As she said, she certainly wasn't going to be able to do it all by herself.

There were several games of volleyball. Playing with these old people who had the names of kids he had once briefly met, Bart found himself for a little while one of the gang. He lost himself in the game, jumped nimbly among the jiggling paunches and creaking joints, got knocked down when someone's hundred kilo mass accidentally crashed into him.

But it was only for a little while that he belonged.

Fiftyone

He came into their living area with the feeling that they would have forgotten about keeping him in school, but no, the lessons were on as promised. Today, with Helsa teaching, Bart got a basic course in the Ship, what little the old records actually said about it and its mission, and some-thing of what the people had been able to find out for themselves. After lunch, somewhat to Bart's surprise, Basil came in and took over for a while, describing how the hull looked from outside, and what some of the remoter portions of the Ship were like. He spoke impersonally, and rarely as if he himself had been there.

Fiftytwo

The whole company was in a state of extreme excitement. About a month ago the world of the Ship had been rocked by an explosion, thought to have taken place a kilometer or two away along the hull, probably toward the aft. Whether a hurling meteoric body had struck the hull, or there was some internal cause, was unknown.

The rumor flew by that Mai and Olen were perhaps still alive, and somehow responsible for the blast.

There was a sudden renewal of religious fervor. School was conducted in an atmosphere of tension.

Fiftythree

There had been no more explosions, nor any further hints that the lost men had survived. The crisis atmosphere was gone, and talk was again centered on the hopedfor rejuvenation treat-ments.

Bart saw a proud display of implanted artificial teeth. The method didn't work well in all cases yet but Solon was optimistic about improvements.

School went on. Today a team of instructors tried to teach him a little about human language and its near infinite variations, some of which they spoke, or at least could read.

Fiftyfour

Timber harvested from the enormous garden was being used to build a sort of pavilion, a roof-less, high walled structure which Bart was told would be used as a kind of social center. He thought they built it just to be building something.

Himyar was seeking treatment for arthritis, which had stiffened his fingers and interfered considerably with his work.

Fiftyfive

Fuad lay on a bed inside the finished pavilion, recuperating from what he said had been a heart attack. Galina said the ECG showed that the worst was over. Bart sat and talked for a while with Fuad, who was fatter even than last year and didn't look good.

People were swinging woven racquets, worn with use, in a game they called squash, played where the volleyball net had been three days ago.

Fiftysix

"What I preach to you, Bart," said Basil, taking a turn at being schoolmaster, "what we have evolved here in our little world, is a complete synthesis of all mankind's old creeds and philosophies. I am really certain of this."

"How can you have a complete watchamacallit if they were always contradicting each other, like you say?"

Basil had a long answer, but Bart found it not very satisfying.

A large part of the garden was now taken up by plants grown solely for use in the rejuvenation experiments.

Bart heard at dinner that Chao was now suffering repeated bouts of mental illness, and Galina had to keep her tranquilized and some-times confined to her own room.

Fiftyseven

Politics had heated up suddenly. Edris, who had been acting president, had been removed from office and, as some kind of compromise Trac was in. Bart couldn't figure out what the dispute was about,

except some of the people felt themselves insulted by others.

At lunch Trac made a little speech about how she meant to get things moving again, both on exploration of the Ship and the rejuvenation work, which evidently had been allowed to lapse. She said also that expanded medical facilities were needed, and the hospital should be enlarged.

Bart remembered the hospital as the pavilion or social center, but there were two chronic invalids, Fuad and Chao, living in it now.

Fiftyeight

Kichiro and Himyar were pointed out to Bart as rejuvenation patients, perhaps already on their way to growing younger, though Galina and Solon didn't want to make any definite claims just yet.

"It's helped me a great deal, too," Trac said. Bart thought to himself how much her face had wrinkled and bagged in the last few days.

Himyar had started working in a new electronic medium, less demanding on the knuckles.

Basil was living apart now, giving much time to fasting and prayer.

Most of the women had taken to dyeing their hair, yellow and red being favorite colors.

Fiftynine

Great interest in chess had revived, and a huge birthday party was being planned for next year.

Hair colors were still used, but had been toned down.

School went on, Bart arguing with his teachers that they should show him more about the structure of the Ship than about things of old Earth that didn't seem to him to have any bearing on his present situation. Galina still pushed biology, but Bart could see that you'd have to study that for years to really get anywhere. He didn't know how much time he had to study any-thing.

A couple of small riding carts had been built, powered by electric motors, and Bart had some fun riding them about. His elders got angry and yelled at him when he drove too wildly.

The most popular physical game consisted of sliding plastic discs over a pattern of numbered squares on the floor.

Sixty

When he woke up in his room a machine was standing beside him, waiting to give him his monthly physical. His gains in weight and height were both greater than at any time during the previous month. He counted a few more pubic hairs. This morning the creamy drink was dropped from his solitary breakfast.

The birthday party had more and fancier decorations than before, but little else was different, except that most of the people were content to just sit around and eat and drink and talk. Fuad didn't eat or drink much—he'd lost a lot of weight. But Chao, as the others said, was having a good day, and joined in merrily.

All in all, the old people had a good time. They fussed over Bart quite a bit, but he felt pretty much out of it. Not sad, really, but detached. School had been recessed for the day, though he would have liked to learn more about the Ship.

Sixtyone

Ranjan had suffered a stroke, and was lying paralyzed in the hospital, unable to move anything on his right side. Everyone seemed angry at the Ship, for what they described as cutting back more on its medical programs just as their needs were rising. Part of the space it had formerly used to give them such niggardly medical treatments as it provided had now been walled off. Something else was going on in there, they said, and nodded angrily, though they didn't know what was going on.

They questioned Bart, something like envy now mixed on their faces with the tenderness they usually accorded him these days. But he had not a scrap of information to provide.

At the moment the office of president was empty, and the question of reorganizing the government was being somewhat crankily debated.

Sixtytwo

Vivian, who had been getting fat, was wasting and suffering internal pains. Ranjan was still unable to help himself at all. Bart was told these ills and a catalogue of lesser ones as if he should be just bursting with eagerness to hear them.

He was more interested in pingpong, which was now a favorite game.

The burning social question was whether there should be an attempt at tinkering with the basic food machines to try to get a more easily chewable output from them.

Kichiro, Solon, and Armin, the only really healthy men, were undertaking an ambitious program to get themselves in shape. Edris, Galina, Sharon, Helsa, and Lotis were laughing a lot at the men and pondering a reducing program for them-selves. Trac was thin already, maybe because she had trouble eating.

Sixtythree

He learned that Vivian was dead, to nobody's surprise.

His school today was conducted by Lotis, who about seven weeks ago had started to seduce him in the

swimming pool. Meeting the eyes of the old gray-haired woman now, Bart thought she didn't remember that at all, which was only right; that hadn't been her in the pool at all, only someone with whom she shared a name. Today she taught him gardening.

The garden was being expanded again. A lot of the rejuvenation plants were still there, taking up space, and not so much living room was needed for people any more, Bart supposed. There were fourteen of them alive now instead of twenty-four, and the survivors didn't move around as much as they used to.

"Remember when I took this picture of you, Bart?"

"Yes, I do, but you don't." And he went rudely on his way, leaving Armin standing still behind him. It wasn't really Armin that bothered Bart, it was the whole situation. The future wasn't coming for these old people, but it was sure enough coming for him.

Sixtyfour

Fuad had just died, of another heart attack, and Bart was solemnly conducted to see the still body being stored in a refrigeration room before they said words over it and gave it back to the Ship through a disposal chute.

"Death is a part of life, Bart," Basil explained. They hadn't given him that reasonable an explanation a couple of months ago when they murdered Fritz before his eyes. Never mind, he told himself.

The more energetic people were playing squash today, and Bart joined in for a little while. He was fussed over as usual, and after school people pressed cake and cookies on him.

Sixtyfive

He had noticed for some time that his sessions in the school room (not far from the hospital, from which came now and then a querulous groaning) tended to fall into two types. In the first type a teacher tried very earnestly to cram knowledge into his head; in a lesson of the second type (some-times conducted by the same man or woman) there were long pauses, and an air of futility hung over the proceedings.

Today's session, starting right after lunch, was of the second type. After about an hour Sharon, his instructor, left him alone with a teaching machine, from which he abstracted information on the layout of the Ship, until that got boring. He played with the machine trivially then until they came to get him for dinner.

Sixtysix

He asked to be allowed to study on his own again, and when the request was granted he day-dreamed and played with the machine for a while. The vision of young Lotis in the pool came to him, and he got up and went to see if the pool was still there.

Gray-haired Lotis, his teacher again today, discovered his unexplained desertion and came after him

angrily. They quarreled, and she tried to take him by the hair and drag him back to school.

She was still a sturdy old girl, but in getting free he pushed her hard enough to knock her down. Alarmed by the way she yelled, he ran away.

Soon Kichiro came limping after him. Bart might have run some more and evaded capture, or sought the safety of his room, but he thrust out his lip and stood his ground. Kichiro slapped him and overawed him and made him come back to school, the hardest grip that Bart could remember clamped on his arm.

Sixtyseven

He heard that Ranjan had died, to everyone's relief, after six years of paralysis.

Bart went sullenly into school, under Kichiro's watchful eye.

The regular lesson hadn't gone far before Kichiro interrupted it to make a small impulsive speech. "Bart, you're about all that we old people have to live for. You and the hope that you represent, that one day there will be more people on the Ship, people who will get out from under the yoke of the machines, something we've never been able to manage. 'We have done those things we ought not to have done, and left undone those things we should have done.' "

Bart didn't know what to say.

"But all our lives make too much of a burden to be put on you, don't they?" Kichiro added with a sigh. He seemed to be pleading.

"No, it's all right with me if you feel that way."

And his teacher was happy and gave him a manly hug. But Kichiro had missed the point. Bart no longer cared how any of them felt about any-thing.

Sixtyeight

The first person he met was Armin, who told him that Chao and Basil had both died, separately and rather suddenly, in the past year.

Bart went to school and found that they had a test programmed into the teaching machine, ready for him to take. Left alone to work, he answered a couple of the questions, and then, feeling that he had something more important to do on this day, he got up and left the school. He looked back once and then walked on. Kichiro looked older and less vigorous than he had two years before, and Bart didn't think any of the others would try to get rough with him. Not any more.

He went to the commissary and punched orders for a small birthday cake into the machine, as he had done for some of those early parties, so long ago. It seemed long to him, now.

Soon he had his cake, and the fourteen small candles he had ordered, and a lighter too. He carried the cake to a refectory table and sat down alone to eat some of it himself. He made a little ceremony of

lighting the candles, but would have felt too silly singing himself any songs.

He had ordered the sweet fizzy drink he usually had at parties but soon got up and went to where the wine was already kept and poured himself a cup of that.

Kichiro came in and stared at him a few moments before speaking. "You're supposed to be in school." The old man's voice was half startled and half angry. "What do you think you're doing?"

"It's my fourteenth birthday today. I'm having my cake."

Kichiro stared a little longer through his puffy, old man's eyes. "Well—I'm sorry if we forgot about your birthday, but that doesn't excuse your running out in the middle of a test." He had left a door open somewhere behind him and all the time he was talking, fretful moaning complaints kept drifting from the direction of the hospital.

Armin and Helsa came into the room. "What's the matter?"

Kichiro told them, and they started arguing, Helsa for taking a different approach with the boy, as she put it, and Armin in favor of declaring another holiday. This last suggestion angered Kichiro. They were still arguing with one another when Bart finished the little piece of cake on his plate and got up and left, practically unnoticed. This time he located the pool but found it had long been dry and empty.

Sixtynine

Bart woke up and left his room as usual, and was surprised when the first set of heavy doors that interrupted his private corridor remained closed when he approached. Then he saw that a new doorway, leading to a new, or newly revealed, passageway had been made in the wall at right angles to the doors.

After a moment, Bart took the new way.

"The prime directives under which I operate are very clear," the Ship said in his ear. "At least one human parent is necessary for children to mature to their full potential.

"We will arrive in less than twenty standard years within a system of planets probably suitable for colonization. From now on you will be awakened increasingly often. You will serve the first generation of colonists as parent. Like them, you have first-rate genetic potential, and perhaps you will remain in some position of leadership when they mature. Today begins your apprenticeship in this role; your elementary preparation for it, a course in the basics of human psychology, was completed yesterday."

With gradual comprehension Bart walked on, guided toward the new nursery by the polyphonic squalling from its full cribs.

RECESSIONAL

From the window of his high hotel room, sixty dollars a day at convention rates, he could look between other buildings to see a small piece of the ocean. Within the mirror where he looked when shaving there was another window with another square of sea, and an hourly newscast came on that morning just as he was starting to shave. Razor in hand he listened while the voice of the woman announcer went through a few details of what she called the grisly discovery. The thing somehow got to him, enough to keep him from concentrating properly either on shaving or on what he ought to say when he appeared on the panel in a couple of hours. Not only that, it stayed with him after he finished getting ready and left the room.

The radio really hadn't given many facts. The body of a woman of indeterminate age had been washed up on a beach somewhere down in the Keys, which put it, he supposed, almost a hundred miles to the southwest of Miami Beach. An unnamed authority was quoted to the effect that the body might have been in the water as long as several years. He thought at first that the news-caster had probably got that garbled somehow, but then mention was made of pockets of cold, uncirculating water to be found in certain depths, in which unusual preservation action could be expected.

One reason for the grisly discovery remaining with him all morning, he supposed, was that his panel topic was "Science in Science Fiction," and he hoped to be able to work that "unusual pre-servation action" into what he had to say. He felt a little uncomfortable about this panel, as he really was no scientist, though he read the professional journals fairly often and popularizations a lot, and his stories tended to be thick with scientific jargon. He thought some of the readers liked the jargon better than the stories, and he loved it himself, really, which was why long ago he had begun to use so much of it. For him it had always made a kind of poetry.

Some of the other people on the panel were not only real scientists, but were writers as well. They talked quantum mechanics. They talked epistemology. He wasn't sure at first that he remembered what that meant. He wondered for a little while if he was going to have to sit there like a dummy for long minutes at a time. So as soon as the chance came, he got in a few words that shifted the subject to alternate universes. Anybody could talk about that.

Suppose, he thought to himself, looking out over the heads of the audience in the far last row while some argument between two other panelists droned on, just suppose that body could have been five years in the sea. How far could a body drift in five years? Well, certainly not through the Panama Canal. When, in the early afternoon, he got back to his room, he looked out at what little he could see of the one great ocean that went all the way around the world, and thought about that body again. They hadn't said what, if anything, the woman had been wearing. He couldn't quite shake the subject, it seemed to have set up a resonance of some kind inside his head. Time passed, what seemed like a lot of time as he sat waiting in his room, but the phone call from another hotel room that he was expecting failed to come.

So he left the convention earlier than he had planned, left it that very afternoon, driving north through summer Florida. Going to the convention, he told himself, had been more trouble than it was worth. In the old days, the cons ran three days, no more, and were relaxed and friendly. Now each one he went to seemed like some damned big business in itself. Just getting away on his own was something of a relief.

A day and a half later, waking up early in his motel room in Atlanta, he put in a call to his agent in New York. The agent would be back in the office in half an hour, the girl thought, and would call him back then. Waiting for the agent to call back, he took a shower, and when he came out of the shower, dripping, turned on the radio.

Listening, he experienced an inward chill.

“...thought to have been in her early twenties, recovered from the Cattahoochie some twenty miles north of Atlanta. The condition of the body made it impossible to determine immediately if there were any marks of violence. Sheriff’s officers said that the body might have been in the water for as long as several months. Attempts at identification...”

The phone rang. It was the agent, for once communicating even earlier than expected. And with good news: money was coming through, even more money than they had been looking for, and he could afford a trip, a wander across the country, if he felt like one. He’ hadn’t really felt like one for several years, not since he had been living alone, but he felt like one now, before he went home and got back to work. Not that New York or any place else was really home. He had reached the stage of being tied down to mailing addresses.

The Interstate impelled him west. He liked driving his car, he usually liked machines. Quantum mechanics. Epistemology. That was what they talked about on panels nowadays. In the old days they had talked about relativity sometimes, but then you could figure that almost no one knew what they were talking about. He should have taken the time, before coming to the convention, to read up a little more on current work. That way he could have at least sounded a little more intelligent. He would settle in for a day or two of reading when he got home.

A feeling was growing in him that the convention he had just left had marked some kind of turning point, a new departure in his life. Something had changed. Whether it was for better or worse had yet to be discovered. For richer, for poorer. He was never going to get married again, that much he felt pretty sure about, not even when his status as a widower became finally and fully legal and official, as one of these years it would. Was it two years now, or three? Conventions were still good for providing a little fun in bed, and that was all he needed. Then next day he waited in his room and the phone refused to ring as scheduled. Well, maybe it was just as well.

He didn’t really know where he was driving now, he just wanted to get off for a few days. On a new course. Alternate universe. When he had brought up that hoary old science fiction concept on the panel, one of the real scientists, almost con-descending though he was trying not to sound that way, had admitted aloud that some experiments in particle physics carried out within the last ten years even suggest that physical reality may depend in some sense, to some extent, on human consciousness. If that was true, the writer had thought, listening, if that could be true, how was it possible for everybody to remain so calm about it? But thus spake a real life quantum mechanic. The Bell inequality, whatever the hell that was. The spin of elementary particles...

The car radio assured him that gas supplies were good everywhere across the country, though prices showed no sign of coming down. Tourist business was suffering. He was going to have no trouble finding a motel room, wherever he went.

At Birmingham he decided to head on west for a while, and stayed with Interstate 20 going south-west to Jackson. Hell of a country to be driving through in the summer in search of fun or relaxation. But the car was nicely air conditioned, a space capsule whose interior guarded its own sounds and atmosphere, keeping noise and dust and rain and heat all nicely sealed outside. What showed on the windows could almost be no more than pictures from outside, computer pre-sentations.

In Vicksburg he located a bottle of bourbon and took it to bed with him. A lot less trouble than a woman. But then to his own surprise he discover-ed that he didn’t feel like drinking much, even after the long drive. He took a couple of sips, then let the bottle sit. He turned on the television, got some local

talk show. Talk shows were usually his favorite, they provided humanity at just about the right distance. They proved that the human race was still around somewhere, alive, not too terribly far away. But when you wanted, you could turn them off.

“...for your research at the battlefield cemeteries?” the host was asking.

“Well, the opportunity came about because of some new road construction in the park.” The speaker was a well dressed man in the prime of life, mustached, relaxed, superior. He enjoyed talking like this. He was reminiscent of some of the people on the convention panel. “In the process of excavation for the road, some previously unknown 1863 military burials came to light, and we applied for permission to use some of the skulls in our tests, the same kind of tests we had been developing for the archaeological work on Indian sites. There were twenty-seven of the Civil War skulls altogether, all completely unidentified. We think they were divided about evenly between Union and Confederate.”

“And you got the same results with these, as with the older subjects, that had been in the ground for maybe thousands of years?”

“Better, in many cases. The bone frequently was much better preserved than in the older specimens. We were able to get some very interesting results indeed. The trace elements in the bone that resonate with the NMR...”

Jargon, of any scientific field, could still soothe him like poetry. Better than poetry. He sipped at his bottle and set it back on the table and got ready to drift toward sleep.

“...beauty of the whole thing, you see, is that the visual cortex of the brain need not be intact, or even present.”

“That’s the real discovery, then.”

“That’s part of it. Apparently what no one had suspected all along was that the hard bone of the skull itself has another purpose besides that of mere protection.”

They had him drifting toward wakefulness again. Why hadn’t he heard anything about any of this before? It sounded revolutionary. He wanted to hear it now.

“...bone perhaps serves as a kind of backup memory storage system, at least in human skulls. We don’t know yet if it works the same way in other mammals.”

“Then there should be applications of this outside the field of archaeology, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, yes, definitely. Police work, for instance. Medicine. X-rays will still have their place, of course. But in medicine the NMR is soon going to replace the X-ray for most purposes, because it doesn’t involve ionizing radiation; X-ray always presents some element of risk. Anyway, a police laboratory, say, can set up an unidentified skull and obtain from its images of scenes that the person actually saw when alive.”

“That’s spooky. Would you get, maybe, the last thing they saw before they died? Wasn’t there some nineteenth century theory that by photo-graphing a dead person’s eyes the image of the last thing they saw in life could be recovered?”

“Yes. There’s a Kappling short story about it. But that’s all sheer superstition. This is something entirely different.”

“Not Kappling, you numbskull, you mean Kipling. But the word had been so clear and deliberate. Some affected pronunciation? Some in-joke? No one was laughing.

“...a thing like this to be acceptable as legal evidence, I wonder.”

“I’m no lawyer, but I do know that police all over the country are already trying it out. I think that sooner or later it’s bound to be accepted fully. The weight of accumulated evidence is going to silence the objections.”

“What objections are there? If you can obtain a good picture, as you say you can, doesn’t that prove you’re right?”

“Well, a few pretty bright people were worried, at first, when they realized what we were doing. There were arguments that what we were doing could start to unravel the whole fabric of physical reality. There’s a kind of resonance factor operating, and the more people you have doing similar experiments—especially on similar subjects—the more likely it seems to be that there will be a concentration, a focusing of the effects of many separate experiments upon one subject.”

“How can that be?”

“We don’t know. But if reality can depend in some sense upon human consciousness, then maybe the existence, the form, of an individual human consciousness depends also upon the reality surrounding it. Or the realities, if you prefer.”

“You said there was no harmful radiation, though.”

“Right. All the physical objections have now been pretty well taken care of. The main objection now is to the fact that our best pictures are partially subjective. That is, we obtain the best readings from a human skull when we use another skull, the observer’s own, as a kind of resonator.”

“The observer’s own skull? Give me that again, will you?”

“All right.” But there ensued a thoughtful pause. The scientist chewed his mustache.

The host, avoiding dead air time if nothing else, interjected: “With NMR you do project waves of some kind into the body, into whatever’s being examined—?”

“Yes. NMR scans are a proven means of probing inside matter. They’ve been used now for thirty years.”

“And, tell me again, NMR stands for—?”

“Nuclear magnetic resonance. All that we actually project into the body, the specimen, or whatever, is a strong magnetic field. This causes the nuclei of certain atoms inside the specimen to line up in certain ways. Then, when the imposed field is removed, the nuclei flip back again. When a nucleus flips back it emits a trace of radiation that registers on our detectors, and from all these traces our computer can form a picture.”

“No harmful radiation, though.”

The scientist smiled. "Do you have a sort of a thing about radiation?"

"Most people do, these days."

"Well, no, it's not harmful. Now what we've discovered is that when the observer's own skull is used as a kind of magnetic resonator, then pictures, images, are actually induced in the observer's own visual cortex. He sees a finer, sharper version of what the computer can other-wise extract from the specimen and put up a stage in the form of a holographic projection. But we can't yet repeat the results as consistently as we'd like. When you scan a specimen skull more than once, you're likely to get a different picture every time. So the question is, is what the human experimenter claims to see really the same as the blurry picture that the computer puts up on the hologram stage?"

"I wish you could have brought some pictures along to show our audience."

"By the time I photographed the hologram, and then you ran it through your cameras and so on here, onto their sets at home, they would be seeing a picture of a picture of a not very good picture."

"Maybe next time?"

"Maybe next time. But as I say, it's not really all that informative when the first image is blurry."

"And you can't get the same picture twice?"

"The structure of the skull, the specimen, is changed minutely by the very act of reading it. There are various interpretations of why and how this whole thing works at all. It surprised the hell out of a lot of us when we first began to realize what was happening. And even worried a few people, as I say: can time and space become un-raveled? Do we tend to get different readings each time because we are reaching for similar atoms, similar skulls, in adjoining universes? The theoretical physicists think it has to do with coupling through electron spin resonance, that's ESR. The ligand field of each particle expands in-definitely, they say now, which is going to open up a whole new field of research."

"Super hyperfine splitting," commented the host, nodding sagely, and got a laugh in the studio. He was obviously harking back to something that had earlier snowed him and the audience as well.

The scientist shook his head and smiled tolerantly. He murmured something that was lost in the subsiding laughter.

"I see," added the host. He continued to nod in a way that meant he had given up on trying to see, especially after that ligand field. "But do you think you'd be able to help the police discover, for instance, who this young woman is whose body came down the Mississippi today? They say she might have been in the water for several weeks. Wearing a yellow bikini and—"

His jerking hand at last found the right switch on the unfamiliar set. The picture died, in an erratically shrinking white dot-spark, that lashed about for a moment as if trying to escape its glassy prison.

The departure of the voices left a hollowness in the air of the dark motel room. Other murmurings came in from other rooms not far away. The carpet under his knees felt rough and dusty. He might have just got up calmly and walked over to the set to turn it off, if he wanted it off. But there had been a bad moment there, bad enough to make him lunge and crawl.

He stood up, stiffly. On the bedside table the bottle waited, hardly started. No. He was all right. No, just

a moment of panic there, such as some-times came when he was drifting off to sleep. He had thought that at last, after months of learning to sleep alone again, he was all through with mid-night panics. Just one small sip now, and even without that he was tired enough to sleep. Then, tomorrow, he would drive again. He could drive anywhere he wanted to. Things were all right...

In the morning he knew that he was not going to follow the great river north, up to the great lakes. Yesterday the plan in the back of his mind, as well as he could remember it, had been to do something along that line. But enough of water, and watery places. He would go on west, and put the big rivers and the lakes behind him.

In Shreveport he sat in a plastic booth, eating plastic tasting food, and abruptly realizing that in the booth next to him sat two state police officers. Whether it was more nearly impossible that they had already been there, unseen by him, when he sat down, or that they had walked in past him without his knowing it, he couldn't estimate.

"...she mighta been from any upstream somewheres. The Doc, he says days in the water. White gal. Just a lil ol bathing suit on. No wounds, nothing like that."

"Well, the Red can be worse'n the Mississippi even, when it rains enough. It's been like pourin' piss out'n a boot up there in Oklahoma."

Back in his car, moving on the highway, he realized that somehow he must have paid the restaurant cashier. Otherwise the two state troopers would already be in hot pursuit.

Fifty-five was the law, and maybe in some places they cared about that. But once he got to Texas he felt sure that nobody was going to give a damn. He opened her up.

Greenery and rivers dried up and blew away in the hot wind of his passage. Signs indicated where to turn to get to Midland, Odessa, Corsicana. Nazareth. If a name existed in the universe, if a name was even conceivable, and maybe some-times if it was not, it could be found somewhere in the vastness of Texas, applied to a small town.

He slept in a motel somewhere, in a room where he turned on no radio or television. And sometime after that he crossed a border that lay invisibly athwart the unfamiliar lunar landscape found that he was in New Mexico. Maybe he had never come exactly this way before. He couldn't remember things being quite this barren even here.

Signs told him he was nearing Carlsbad. The highway topped a stark rise to disclose an un-expected wall of greenery waiting for him, not far ahead. Pecos River, a small sign added. He drove across a highway bridge over the river, which was for this part of the country so wide and full that he was astonished by it until he saw the dam.

If he tried to go any farther tonight he was going to drive right off the road somewhere in exhaustion. And yet, once settled in the Carlsbad Motel, he couldn't sleep. He had to know first what was happening. No, not quite right. He had to know if he was going to have to admit to himself that something was happening. Maybe he was just going a little crazy from being alone too much in summer heat. If that was all, he should just stay in one cool room for a day and a night and sleep.

He forced himself to turn on the ten pm television news, and he listened to the whole half hour attentively, and there was not a word about drowned bodies anywhere. He started to relax, to feel that whatever had started to happen to him was over. When the news was over, he found a talk show, on

another channel that came in by cable from the west coast. Show biz people and famous lawyers sat around a table. During the first commercial he roused himself and went out to get half a pint of good bourbon. To hell with being so careful, you could probably drive yourself crazy that way. Tonight he was going to drink. He had the feeling that things were going to be all right after all.

He thought he had turned off the television set, but the voices were busy when he came back with the whisky. The same host, but evidently a new segment of the show, for the guests were different.

The scientist had no mustache, but he was certainly a scientist, and he even looked a little like that one on the other show. Well entrenched in the world and imperturbable.

“...from Cal Tech, going to talk with us a little about nuclear physics, quantum mechanics, the nature of reality, all kinds of good stuff like that there.” Laughter in the studio followed, febrile and feeble at the same time, predictable as the out-come of a lab demonstration.

“The nature of reality,” said another panelist. “You left that out.” But it hadn’t been left out. Didn’t they even listen to each other’s words?

Someone else on the panel said something else, and they all laughed again.

“Speaking of reality, we’ll be right back, after this.”

The cable brought in a good many channels. Here was Atlanta. Who knew where they all came from? But he knew that he would have to switch back.

“...pretty well accepted now by everyone in the field that it can’t have any effect on the general perception of reality, what people generally experience as reality, no matter how many of these experiments you have going on around the world at the same time, or how many of them are concentrated on the same type of subject. The concentration effect, if there is one, sort of goes off somewhere; we can’t even trace where it goes.”

“You’re saying that in effect you fire a volley off over the fields...”

“...and it could possibly hit someone, but the chance is very small.”

“Endor, did you say a moment ago?”

“The Witch of Endor?” another guest put in, archly, oh they were sharp out there on the coast, and there was more reflexive laughter, from people who recognized their cue, even if they didn’t know what they were laughing about.

“ENDOR is an acronym,” the scientist with no mustache was explaining, “for Electronuclear double resonance. You see, it seems now that resonance is set up not only in the real atoms but in virtual atomic particles in nearby timeframes. The implications are enormous. Someday, theo-retically, we could each have our own personal universe to carry around with us, tuned to our own skulls, our own perceptions. The original idea was only to measure the hyperfine...”

Flying a little high on bourbon now, and getting doses of jargon like that one, he needed only a few more sips from the bottle before he drifted off. To wake up, as it seemed, almost at once, with day-light coming in around the motel drapes. The air conditioner was humming already, the television had somehow been turned off. He lay there feeling better than he had dared to expect. Jargon is the thing, he

thought. Jargon is definitely in. Where the hell have I been the last few days, anyway? But it seemed to be over now, whatever it had been.

He thought: I'm going to have to try to get on some talk show myself.

Taking his time in the warm morning, he listened without much apprehension of what scraps of news the radio was willing to give up. No drowned bodies anywhere. He went out and breakfasted. As far as he could tell from looking out across the landscape away from town, he might still have been in Texas. But in town there were trees, and lawns, though the grass when he looked at it closely was of an unfamiliar variety.

Driving away from the motel, he was still un-sure about whether to head north, east, or west.. South—Mexico—he didn't want. On impulse he drove a couple of blocks toward the massed trees, the river. Above the dam it looked like an eastern river, wide and full and slowmoving, and there for some distance the banks were lined with expensive looking houses. There was the sound of a motorboat, and in a moment a crack in the green wall showed a skier passing on the brown water. Nearby was a city park; he entered and drove through it slowly. There was a small sand beach, already in use in the day's heat.

There was also a police car, and a small but steadily growing crowd, fed by running children who were not interested just now in swimming. Between the standing bodies he caught a single glimpse of brown hair, yellow cloth. Bare, tanned arms being worked up and down by arms in blue policeman's sleeves.

He remembered to gas up the car and have the oil checked before heading on west. He was worried. But somehow he didn't seem to be as worried as he ought to be. He had the feeling that he was forgetting, putting behind him, a log, an awful lot of recent happenings. Nothing essential, though. Excess baggage. Part of the feeling of strangeness was no doubt due to the fact that he was just coming out of a bad time. Even if he hadn't been on good terms with her lately, it was . only to be expected that such a loss would leave him in a shocked condition for several weeks. But he was starting to come out of it now.

Later that day, he was almost at Tucson where he realized where he was going.

At home in San Diego, he watched the sun go down into the one great ocean, just as once, long ago, he had watched it rise. On the Atlantic horizon, he could remember, there had been pink-gray nothingness, and then, instantly out of no-where, a spark. Now at the last instant of sunset the shrinking sun became what looked like that identical same, long-remembered spark. And then, then night.

This house was his, this house right on the beach, only a hundred feet from water at high tide. Decades ago his parents had first rented then bought it, and he had hung onto it as an in-vestment. This afternoon as soon as he got into town he had driven past the place on an impulse. It had looked unoccupied, though he had been sure that it was rented. He was going to have to talk to the agent about that in the morning.

The place had looked completely deserted from the outside, but when he had let himself in with the key he always kept, it was hard to be sure whether it was currently being lived in or not. There were furnishings, not all of them unfamiliar. Pictures on the walls, some of which he could remember.

He turned on a couple of lights after watching the sunset. A little food in the kitchen cabinets, a little in the refrigerator. As if some people might just have moved out, not bothering to take everything or use it up.

He went out again, through the French windows, to sit in a lawn chair on the patio over-looking the sea. The ocean, never quite silent, was now almost invisible in the gathering darkness. The smell of it brought back to him no memories that were peculiar to this place. He had looked at and smelled the sea in too many other, different places for that. The one great ocean that went on and on.

Through low clouds there came suddenly the half-familiar, half-surprising sound of a slow Navy plane from the air station not far away. One of the search and rescue craft, and it sounded like it was heading out. Would they commence a search at night? That seemed unlikely, but there were always new devices, new techniques. Anyway, they wouldn't be using a plane to look for her, she hadn't gone out in a boat. And if they hadn't started to look for her last night, when she walked out, they wouldn't be starting now.

He paused, trying to clear his thoughts. How could they have started any search last night? He still, up to this minute, hadn't told anyone how she had gone. Not yet...

If you can't stand your own life, he had said to her, then I suggest you put an end to it. I have an interesting life of my own that's going to take all my time. The room seemed still to echo with the words.

The waves were getting a little louder now, rolling invisibilities up the invisible beach.

He went into the house and turned up the volume of the television slightly; he could not really remember having turned it on. The voices from the talk show came with him as he went outside again, onto the seaward patio. The hyperfine and super hyperfine splittings could now be measured accurately, but that was only the start. Police forces all over the country were using the technique on unidentified bodies every day, with great success. Nobody worried anymore that the technique might offer any danger to the fabric of the world. The implications were really vast. The ligand fields expanded without limit. The voices continued to follow as he opened the gate in the low wall and walked down a slope of sand to meet the still invisible burden of the waves.

WHERE THY TREASURE IS

It was a small private hospital, so Benedict Cunningham and his doctor had a small private elevator to themselves.

Call me at any time if you think any problems are developing," said the doctor. He was youngish and intense, and was earring Cunningham's valise himself. "Any sort of problems."

Cunningham smiled. He had just turned fifty, and looked quite healthy and vigorous. A sun lamp, installed in his hospital room at his in-sistence, had maintained his golf tan during his stay. His new wig was so well made that only the very few who knew him well were likely to spot it. He said: "We went into all the possibilities pretty thoroughly ahead of time, as you'll recall. And everything has gone well. I don't anticipate problems."

“Nor do I. But, since you’re the first—“

“Of course.”

“Don’t look so grim, doctor. You’re going to do quite well out of this.” Cunningham’s smile was faintly amused; if the man hadn’t needed money desperately, he wouldn’t have done this....

A faraway look came into Cunningham’s eyes. “Wait,” he said softly. “I’m making contact with what must be another company. Oh. Giant...I think...it’s got to be AT&T. Whole networks of metal...networks of finance...I can’t describe it, any more than I could the others. But it’s there, yes, it’s definitely there. The whole structure ...you know, there’s one detail in all this it’s just occurred to me to wonder about.”

At that point the elevator door opened onto the ground floor lobby. Cunningham grabbed his valise from the doctor’s hand and stepped out briskly, determined to impress the small group of waiting reporters with his smiling health.

“I’m fine,” he assured them. “Just elective surgery to have a wen removed. Then I stayed over for my annual checkup and a little rest.”

The doctor, in turn, issued a short somewhat vague statement that revealed nothing about the unheard-of thing that he had really done. Then he walked with Cunningham to where Cunningham’s chauffeur stood holding open the door of a waiting limousine.

Motioning the doctor to follow, Cunningham got into the car and greeted his wife with a hurried kiss. Shirley was a quiet, attractive woman with a dread of the press intense enough to have kept her waiting in the car today. She looked worried; as the doctor shook her hand hastily he wondered how much her husband had really told her.

One reporter was still watching, and Cunningham touched the intercom and told the chauffeur to drive away.

“What’s the detail that’s just occurred to you?” the doctor asked, as soon as the auto was in motion.

Cunningham raised his fingers to touch the deceptive fabric of his wig, where it covered the healed incision behind his right ear. New hair growth had made a start, and in a month or so the wig could probably be discarded. “Huss tells me the transmitting device is concealed exactly where we wanted it at the Exchange; it should put me in contact with every corporation traded on the Big Board. But in fact the only ones I’ve been able to feel are those in which I own some stock.”

The doctor relaxed slightly. “And about which you are naturally more concerned. There’ll be all kinds of psychological interaction with the device.”

“About which you may someday be able to publish.”

“But nothing else bothers you.”

“There’s a...” Cunningham hesitated for just a moment. “There’s a certain feeling, hard to describe. Like being spread out, diffused, that’s the best way I can find to put it.”

“You didn’t mention that before.” The doctor’s voice was sharp and resigned at the same time.

“It’s nothing, I just notice it a little more today. If it should be permanent, I can get used to it. Shirley, you should see that chimp in the lab. The device in his skull is just like mine, and it connects him electronically with a machine that delivers food. And he knows infallibly just when and where that next banana is going to fall, and he’s there to grab it every time. Believe me, I’ve got my eye on some ripe bananas already.”

The last signature had just been inked into the document that transferred twenty thousand hectares of Idaho timberland to Benedict Cunningham, and the transaction electronically recorded for the central data banks as the law required, when he pushed his chair back from the table and uttered a low exclamation.

“All right, Ben?” asked the man who had just sold him the timber.

“Yes, fine.” Cunningham straightened his business collar. As far as he knew, he was all right; it was just that a new sensation had surprised him.

As soon as the timberdealer had departed, Cunningham phoned the president of the newly formed Macrotron Engineering Company.

“Huss, I’d like you to come over to my office right away.”

“Oh?” Carl Huss’s voice was guarded. “Some-thing important?”

“I’m calling you, am I not? Get over here.” He switched off without waiting for a reply.

Cunningham knew that his order would be obeyed. He had in effect given Macrotron to Huss in payment for the two cybernetic devices and the secret installation of one of them at the Exchange; but, as Huss well knew, Cunningham still held the financial fate of Macrotron in his own masterly hands.

“Have you added anything to the device at the Exchange?” Cunningham demanded, as soon as he was alone with the engineer.

Huss was an electronic genius and a rapid talker, even more nervous and younger than the doctor. “Of course not. Nothing needs to be added. And if I did want to try out some improvement, I’d certainly tell you about it first.”

“I should hope so.” Cunningham frowned. “I don’t suppose anyone or anything else could be causing interference?”

“The chance of that is so small—” Huss made a gesture of dismissal. “The technicians at the Exchange don’t open up the Board once in six months now, the equipment has become so reliable. And when they do open it, they’ll notice nothing to make them suspicious. I did a good job.”

“All right, then. I just wanted to make sure nothing had changed.”

“What’s gone wrong?”

“Probably nothing.” Cunningham shook his head. “It’s just that I’ve begun feeling things, identifying with things, that aren’t on the Board. Things that have nothing to do with the Stock Exchange.”

Huss, unconsciously scowling, thought it over. "That's not electronically possible."

"It happens. I bought some timberland today, and the instant I owned it, it was as if a part of myself went there. That's the only way I can describe it. I can tell that there's copper under the soil there, a great deal of copper."

"I don't understand." Huss for once spoke slowly. "How can you know a thing like that?"

"I was hoping that you could tell me." Cunningham shrugged. "It's the same substance that I see in copper wires, but mixed with rock and dirt and buried. I just feel it there. How do you know that your toenails are hard and nerveless?"

That afternoon Cunningham sounded out a couple of mining companies, making preliminary arrangements.

But his dream that night had nothing to do with copper, or, as far as he could tell, with wealth of any kind. He was standing in darkness, paralyzed, attacked by some kind of tiny vermin that gnawed their way through his skin and then scuttled in and out through the holes they had made. He tried to move, but could only sway stiffly, his joints creaking. He could only endure, well past the point where any ordinary nightmare should have ended. Managing at last to get a clear mental image of one of his tiny tormentors, he saw that it had the face of a cartoon comedy rat, a discovery that for some reason added a sharp stab of horror. Cunningham woke up, in a cold sweat.

Shirley was standing beside his bed. "Ben, you were...calling. Are you all right?"

"I was dreaming. Yes, I'm all right." He wiped his face. Looking for his cigarettes, he switched on the bedside light, and became abstractedly aware of the worried expression on his wife's face. "Don't be upset about the car, Shirley. Those things happen."

Surprise registered in Shirley's eyes, then guilt. "No one was hurt. Ben, I, I wanted to tell you about the accident, but you've had so much else on your mind."

"It's all right," he said. The damage to the prized sports car was not severe; it amounted to some banged up sheet metal, and a slight hidden strain on the frame, that not even the mechanic had yet detected...

But how did he, Ben Cunningham, know that?

The answer, of course, was that he felt it, in the same way he would know if his ankle had been wrenched slightly. The discomfort he felt now was not in his ankle, not anywhere in his body, but he felt it. While he slept, a part of himself had been pulled into the car.

There had been a bad dream too, a dream now fading rapidly, a dream that had nothing to do with cars...

Shirley, her voice hesitant, was speaking again. "Ben, I've never interfered in anything regarding business."

He grunted something.

"This time I would have, if I'd known when you went into the hospital what you really meant to do."

“Go back to bed, Shirley,” he told her, crushing out his cigarette. “Everything’s all right.”

“Are you sure, Ben?”

“I’m just tired now; let me rest.” He smiled at his wife, the smile that always reassured her, and then lay back and closed his eyes. She put out the light, and a few moments later he heard the door between their rooms close softly. A great woman. He would tire himself out, use himself up, go through nightmares, for her and the two boys who were away at school. Even if he never got to see much of them...

Tired, but he wasn’t going to be able to go right back to sleep. He lay in his bed alone—he would never have been able to get the rest he needed, had he given up half his bed to another body’s weight and movements and breath—staring up into dark-ness. He was now able to feel the twenty pairs of shoes racked in his bedroom closets (nothing like dressing right to make exactly the right impression) and with a little effort he could even tell which pairs needed polishing. Lying there motionless, he could feel himself being drawn, slowly, inescapably, into all the things that were in and about and of his house. The fireplace down-stairs with its fading warmth, the Picasso print on the wall, the garbage in the undersink disposal. The concrete of the outdoor pool, drained for winter. The growing grass and trees.

One by one, all the things he owned were coming forward, each demanding its own portion of his being. He had the feeling that there was not going to be enough of himself to go around. His things were absorbing him into their own substances. He had told the doctor he would get used to feeling diffused, but the sensation was only getting worse.

He put his hands over his face in the darkness. He fiercely willed his own coherence and survival. What was attacking him was illusion; he still functioned. To build for his sons and his sons’ sons he would find a way to come to terms with his new power. He had to. At last he dozed.

In his office next day Ben Cunningham began to feel burning and amputation and scarring; the sensations were not localizable to any part of his human body, nor were they generalized throughout it. He felt them, though, and they were real, physically real. He traced them to their origin in a part of his newly extended identity, and he knew before the phone message came that his new Idaho timberland was ablaze. The first copper hunting expedition sent by the mining company had managed to start a forest fire.

That night he again stood wooden and swaying, infested by rat faced mites. (Also moving about inside him were other, much larger creatures, but these were doing no damage at the moment and he could ignore them.) It was the tiny beasts with their tiny gnawings that were terrible. This time the image of the vermin stayed with him after he awakened, and he understood that they were rats, real rats. When one hungry rat found food in the form of one of the larger living things, Cunningham’s nerves did not feel the bitten baby’s pain, for the baby was not his property. He felt only baby’s scream, reverberating in the shaky wood of the tenement.

“Hullo? Whatsamatter?”

“This is Benedict Cunningham. I want you to get busy and sell any building I own that could be called a slum. I know it’s four in the morning. I don’t want arguments and I don’t want any delay. Start on it right now.”

“What’s...Mr. Cunningham? Sell buildings, you say?”

“And don’t haggle about prices. Get rid of them.”

The hurried sale of the slum buildings relieved him of pain; but it did not free him. He was still gripped by the money from the sale, as by all the other money that was his. Parts of him stretched out, and then tied down, confined, in cage boxes made of bars like the ruled lines in an old-fashioned ledger.

For another day or so he continued forcing himself grimly on along the road to greater profits. More cage compartments and more bars.

Making money had always been something he could do, and it was almost no trick at all now that he was wired into the Board. The connection was everything that he had hoped it would be, and more.

And more.

For Shirley and the boys, he clung to his determination to endure and adapt. But with every passing day, with every hour, he could feel himself going. Losing what tenuous contact he had ever had with people and music and food and sunsets. He inexorably diffused, becoming machinery and oil wells and expensive shoes.

The forest fire was out now and he had got out of the reach of the rats' teeth. But he could feel himself dying of diffusion. His body walked on, planning daily tasks, smiling when required, keeping socially active and presentable. But soon his shrinking core of self might be altogether gone, and against that fate his ego at last rebelled.

The first step was to try saving himself without really giving up any of his wealth, by putting vast properties in his wife's name. But the pen marks and electronic transfer of symbols that had got the rats out of gnawing range proved in this case ineffective. The things of his wealth maintained their grip on him this time, as if they understood that they were in every real sense still his.

"I believe I understand, sir. You want the books physically spread out on the table, opened?"

"Yes. And the discs from the computer." The symbols of wealth were concentrated even more intensely there. "And then move the table over to the windows, let the sunlight fall on it." He no longer cared a great deal if subordinates thought him eccentric or even insane.

He could feel the sunlight falling upon the rigid records of his wealth. But even the sun could not thaw him loose from them.

These days he never worked late at the office. And when he came home, Shirley was always waiting for him, peering at him anxiously. Today she said: "Ben, if you don't make an appointment with a doctor right away, I'm going to make one for you."

"Don't bother, I've just made one."

"You couldn't remove it," was almost the first thing that Cunningham said on coming out of the anesthetic.

"Oh, I removed the device." The doctor's voice was weary, his face grim. "There was some involvement of brain tissue that I hadn't expected. How do you feel?"

"You might as well have left it in. I'm still being pulled apart."

By next morning, the doctor had a theory ready: some of the nine tenths of Cunningham's brain that he

had never used, that no one ever uses, had been stimulated to new activity by the cybernetic device. The components of the device were very small and subtle and new, and no one yet understood them very well.

"I'm not going to try to do anything more to your brain," he told Cunningham flatly. "What's going on may right itself in time. It probably will. That's all I can say."

The surgery hadn't been the doctor's idea in the first place. Cunningham didn't really want the doctor to say anything more now. He put on his wig again and left the hospital again, knowing that he had only a little time left. Whatever elastic might be left in his tough soul was failing now. There were moments, with his wealth stretching him in every direction, when a black cavity appeared in the center of his being. The cavity was nothingness, and that was his future.

Since surgery had failed, he could think of only one more course open to him that was (a little, at least) less desperate than suicide. As soon as Cunningham got home he called his lawyers and with their help began to give things away. At first they worked at the job enthusiastically, eager to learn what the trick was going to turn out to be. Putting things in Shirley's name hadn't worked, and now Cunningham stayed clear of her and other relatives and chose charities.

At last, success. He could tell that this time he had found a method that was going to work for him. Each gift eased the strain, allowing a bit of humanity to return. The trouble was that partial relief was no longer enough, he had been too badly stretched. A tug on even one finger or toe is unendurable to a man who has been for days on the rack.

When his lawyers, puzzled by the continued absence of any tricks, pressed for explanations, and he told them that he planned to give it all away, down to the last penny, they called his doctor. For a while Cunningham feared there would be an effort to have him committed. But the last thing the doctor wanted was fuss, possible investigations. He backed up his patient as sane and competent, and the lawyers eventually, went along.

Not before they had spoken to Shirley, enough to give her some idea of what was going on.

Naturally, when Cunningham confirmed that he was giving everything away, she was stunned.

"Of course," he reassured her, "you're not going to have to worry personally. You'll come out of it with a fine settlement."

"A what?"

"Understand, this is business," said Cunningham, using the magic word that would always forestall any more questions from his wife. "You have to divorce me if you want to keep any-thing at all for yourself or for the boys. I can't bear to own the least thing any longer." And even as he spoke, in the back of Cunningham's mind was the faint, terribly fragile hope that Shirley might elect to stay with him, even existing as he saw himself about to do on the charity of some distant relatives. He could still own a bite of food and put it into his mouth and not feel real pain; that was about the feasible extent of his net worth right now. But it would be unthinkable to come right out and ask Shirley or his sons to exist like that.

"Divorce you, keep anything," she repeated vacantly, in extreme horror. "But Ben, I'll never leave you. I don't care that much about money."

He hadn't really dared to hope...with shaking, tearful tenderness he reached for Shirley's hand.

“Think carefully, dear,” Cunningham murmured honorably. “Everything I’ve done has been for you and the boys.”

“For us?” Astoundingly, her love exploded into wrath. He could not have been more surprised if she had shattered like a bomb. “For me? Don’t tell me that. In the beginning, maybe, but not when you had a hole drilled in your brain to make more money. Not then! Go on, kill yourself, or give it all away to ease yourself, but never say again that it’s for me!”

“I...” Just then the phone began to ring. Cunningham answered it mechanically, and the voice of one of his lawyers said: “Ben, the last things are ready for your signature. But I still can’t see a man like you going through with this.”

“I’ll call you back,” said Cunningham slowly, and hung up. Meeting Shirley’s angry, wondering eyes, he felt a touch of new terror. The power of self-extension was still his, in a form he had not thought of until now.

It came to him that there were treasures he had yet dreamed of knowing.

It came to him also that the cagebars of the ledgers, the prison domains of the magnetic discs, had just this moment eased their strain.

“Mr. Cunningham? You said two hours ago you’d call us back. You didn’t, so I took the liberty of calling...the papers are ready as you requested. We’re all waiting.”

“The papers.” Cunningham’s voice on the phone was impatient and happy at the same time, that of a man being disturbed while at some joyful occupation. “Oh, the rest of the giveaway papers, yes. I think you might as well tear those up.”