Edited By
ISAAC ASIMOV

More stories from
THE HUGO WINNERS

VOL. II

Philip José Farmer • Robert Silverberg
Harlan Ellison • Samuel R. Delany
Fritz Leiber • Poul Anderson
Anne McCaffrey
More Stories from
THE HUGO WINNERS
Volume II
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More Stories from
THE HUGO WINNERS
Volume II

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Isaac Asimov

A FAWCETT CREST BOOK

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Connecticut
MORE STORIES FROM THE HUGO WINNERS, VOLUME II

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Printed in the United States of America
December 1973
To the memory of Hugo Gernsback, grandfather of us all
A Few Words—Unexpectedly
by Isaac Asimov

1968: 26th Convention, San Francisco (Oakland)

Weyr Search
by Anne McCaffrey

Riders of the Purple Wage
by Philip José Farmer

Gonna Roll the Bones
by Fritz Leiber

I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream
by Harlan Ellison

1969: 27th Convention, St. Louis

Nightwings
by Robert Silverberg

The Sharing of Flesh
by Poul Anderson

The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World
by Harlan Ellison

1970: 28th Convention, Heidelberg

Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones
by Samuel R. Delany

We poor, overworked authors are constantly finding ourselves facing a variety of technical problems involved in the mechanics of publishing, and the result is, invariably, that we (not the mechanics) must correct all difficulties by dashing to the typewriter and reeling off a few, or a few thousand, golden words.

It is just such a technical problem which has me facing my typewriter's smiling keys at the present moment.

You see, I recently prepared an anthology of short stories, novelettes, and novellas which had won science fiction's coveted "Hugo" award in the years 1962–1970 inclusive. The science fiction fans, who voted these awards at the annual World Science Fiction Conventions, overcome by the rich harvests in those years, voted for stories that were both long and many. In the end I had 14 stories, containing the most delectable reading matter imaginable, spread over 650 well-packed pages.

Naturally, the result was a hard-cover anthology of surpassing excellence and it was not to be supposed for an instant that soft-cover houses would not fall over themselves in their eagerness to reprint so fine a collection. The winner in the race, you will not be at all surprised to hear, was that estimable and far-sighted firm, Fawcett Publications, which had done the first volume of The Hugo Winners to universal applause.

Came the time to put The Hugo Winners, Volume Two, between soft-covers and it was discovered that it would be impractical to squeeze all pages into a single set of covers. The book would be too bulky for the convenience that is the hallmark of the soft-cover.

Consequently, it was decided to do it in two volumes. Of
these, the first volume would naturally carry the delightful introduction which I wrote for the book as a whole. The problem arose as to what to do in connection with the second part of The Hugo Winners, Volume Two. To leave it without any introduction at all would give rise to dark suspicions of fakery since everybody in science fiction knows that I can’t resist babbling all over the place as soon as a collection of science fiction stories is placed in my hands. I do it interminably, but delightfully*, even when the stories are all my own.

On the other hand, it isn’t safe simply to reprint the introduction and run it in the second part again, as then the eager reader, picking up a book he hasn’t seen before, will see the introduction, read it and say (quote erroneously), “Oh, I’ve read this book before.” He will then put the book back without extracting his wallet from its hidden recess—to the deep chagrin of the good people at Fawcett Publications, and to no little annoyance on my own part.

So the call went out to me. (“Quick, get Asimov!” came the call from on high.) I’m supposed to explain the situation—and I have. By all means, buy this book. You have not read it before. This is the second part of The Hugo Winners, Volume Two. What you read earlier was only the first part.

Okay?

*Well, I think so.
1968

26th CONVENTION
SAN FRANCISCO (OAKLAND)
Anne McCaffrey is a woman. (Yes, she is; you notice it instantly.) What makes this remarkable is that she’s a woman in a man’s world and it doesn’t bother her a bit.

Science fiction is far less a man’s world than it used to be as far as the readers are concerned. Walk into any convention these days and the number of shrill young girls fluttering before you (if you are Harlan Ellison) or backing cautiously away (if you are me) is either frightening or fascinating, depending on your point of view. (I am the fascinated type.)

The writers, however, are still masculine by a heavy majority. What’s more, they are a particularly sticky type of male, used to dealing with males, and a little perturbed at having to accept a woman on an equal basis.

It’s not so surprising. Science is a heavily masculine activity (in our society, anyway); so science fiction writing is, or should be. Isn’t that the way it goes?

And then in comes Anne McCaffrey, with snow-white hair and a young face (the hair-color is premature) and Junoesque measurements and utter self-confidence, talking down mere males whenever necessary.

I get along simply marvelously well with Annie. Not only am I a “Women’s Lib” from long before there was one, but I have the most disarming way of goggling at Junoesque measurements which convinces any woman possessing them that I have good taste.

In August 1970 Annie and I were co-guests of honor at a science fiction conference in Toronto. That meant one certain thing. We had another of our perennial songfest competitions. We sing at each other very loudly, and finally we work ourselves up to a climax, which is always “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling.”
We each have our pride, of course, not so much in any skill at singing, but in loudness and range. And while everyone in the audience gets far out to non-wincing distance, we get louder and higher. (I happen to have a resonant baritone, but Annie perversely refuses to consider me anything but a tenor. "Never trust a tenor," she says darkly.)

It always ends the same way. At the final note, she takes a deep breath and holds. I do, too, but before the minute is up, I fade, choke, and halt, while that final note of Annie's keeps right on going—loud, shrill, and piercing, for an additional fifteen seconds at least.

And then everybody applauds and when I say, "It's not fair. She has spare lungs," and point at her aforesaid Juno-esque proportions, no one seems to care.

Annie is in Ireland now for a lengthy stay and I miss her.
When is a legend legend? Why is a myth a myth? How old and disused must a fact be for it to be relegated to the category: Fairy tale? And why do certain facts remain incontrovertible, while others lose their validity to assume a shabby, unstable character?

Rukbat, in the Sagittarian sector, was a golden G-type star. It had five planets, plus one stray it had attracted and held in recent millennia. Its third planet was enveloped by air man could breathe, boasted water he could drink, and possessed a gravity which permitted man to walk confidently erect. Men discovered it, and promptly colonized it, as they did every habitable planet they came to and then—whether callously or through collapse of empire, the colonists never discovered, and eventually forgot to ask—left the colonies to fend for themselves.

When men first settled on Rukbat's third world, and named it Pern, they had taken little notice of the stranger-planet, swinging around its primary in a wildly erratic elliptical orbit. Within a few generations they had forgotten its existence. The desperate path the wanderer pursued brought it close to its stepsister every two hundred [Terran] years at perihelion.

When the aspects were harmonious and the conjunction with its sister-planet close enough, as it often was, the indigenous life of the wanderer sought to bridge the space gap to the more temperate and hospitable planet.

It was during the frantic struggle to combat this menace dropping through Pern's skies like silver threads, that Pern's contact with the mother-planet weakened and broke. Recollections of Earth receded further from Pernese history with
each successive generation until memory of their origins degenerated past legend or myth, into oblivion.

To forestall the incursions of the dreaded Threads, the Pernese, with the ingenuity of their forgotten Yankee forebears and between first onslaught and return, developed a highly specialized variety of a life form indigenous to their adopted planet—the winged, tailed, and fire-breathing dragons, named for the Earth legend they resembled. Such humans as had a high empathy rating and some innate telepathic ability were trained to make use of and preserve this unusual animal whose ability to teleport was of immense value in the fierce struggle to keep Pern bare of Threads.

The dragons and their dragonmen, a breed apart, and the shortly renewed menace they battled, created a whole new group of legends and myths.

As the menace was conquered the populace in the Holds of Pern settled into a more comfortable way of life. Most of the dragon Weyrs eventually were abandoned, and the descendants of heroes fell into disfavor, as the legends fell into disrepute.

This, then, is a tale of legends disbelieved and their restoration. Yet—how goes a legend? When is myth?

Drummer, beat, and piper, blow,
Harper, strike, and soldier, go.
Free the flame and sear the grasses
Till the dawning Red Star passes.

Lessa woke, cold. Cold with more than the chill of the everlasting clammy stone walls. Cold with the prescience of a danger greater than when, ten full Turns ago, she had run, whimpering, to hide in the watch-wher's odorous lair.

Rigid with concentration, Lessa lay in the straw of the redolent cheese room, sleeping quarters shared with the other kitchen drudges. There was an urgency in the ominous portent unlike any other forewarning. She touched the awareness of the watch-wher, slithering on its rounds in the courtyard. It circled at the choke-limit of its chain. It was restless, but oblivious to anything unusual in the pre-dawn darkness.

The danger was definitely not within the walls of Hold Ruath. Nor approaching the paved perimeter without the Hold where relentless grass had forced new growth through the ancient mortar, green witness to the deterioration of the once stone-clean Hold. The danger was not advancing up the
now little used causeway from the valley, nor lurking in
the craftsmen’s stony holdings at the foot of the Hold’s cliff.
It did not scent the wind that blew from Tillek’s cold shores.
But still it twanged sharply through her senses, vibrating
every nerve in Lessa’s slender frame. Fully roused, she sought
to identify it before the prescient mood dissolved. She cast
outward, towards the Pass, farther than she had ever pressed.
Whatever threatened was not in Ruatha . . . yet. Nor did
it have a familiar flavor. It was not, then, Fax.

Lessa had been cautiously pleased that Fax had not shown
himself at Hold Ruath in three full Turns. The apathy of the
craftsmen, the decaying farmholds, even the green-etched
stones of the Hold infuriated Fax, self-styled Lord of the
High Reaches, to the point where he preferred to forget
the reason why he had subjugated that once proud and
profitable Hold.

Lessa picked her way among the sleeping drudges, huddled
together for warmth, and glided up the worn steps to the
kitchen-proper. She slipped across the cavernous kitchen to
the stable-yard door. The cobbles of the yard were icy
through the thin soles of her sandals and she shivered as the
predawn air penetrated her patched garment.

The watch-wher slithered across the yard to greet her,
pleading, as it always did, for release. Glancing fondly down
at the awesome head, she promised it a good rub presently.
It crouched, groaning, at the end of its chain as she con-
tinued to the grooved steps that led to the rampart over the
Hold’s massive gate. Atop the tower, Lessa stared towards
the east where the stony breasts of the Pass rose in black
relief against the gathering day.

Indecisively she swung to her left, for the sense of danger
issued from that direction as well. She glanced upward, her
eyes drawn to the red star which had recently begun to domi-
nate the dawn sky. As she stared, the star radiated a final
ruby pulsation before its magnificence was lost in the bright-
ness of Pern’s rising sun.

For the first time in many Turns, Lessa gave thought to
matters beyond Pern, beyond her dedication to vengeance
on the murderer Fax for the annihilation of her family. Let
him but come within Ruath Hold now and he would never
leave.

But the brilliant ruby sparkle of the Red Star recalled the
Disaster Ballads—grim narratives of the heroism of the
dragon-riders as they braved the dangers of between to breathe fiery death on the silver Threads that dropped through Pern's skies. Not one Thread must fall to the rich soil, to burrow deep and multiply, leaching the earth of minerals and fertility. Straining her eyes as if vision would bridge the gap between peril and person, she stared intently eastward. The watch-wher's thin, whistled question reached her just as the prescience waned.

Dawnlight illumined the tumbled landscape, the unplowed fields in the valley below. Dawnlight fell on twisted orchards, where the sparse herds of milchbeasts hunted stray blades of spring grass. Grass in Ruatha grew where it should not, died where it should flourish. An odd brooding smile curved Lessa's lips. Fax realized no profit from his conquest of Ruatha... nor would he, while she, Lessa, lived. And he had not the slightest suspicion of the source of this undoing. Or had he? Lessa wondered, her mind still reverberating from the savage prescience of danger. East lay Fax's ancestral and only legitimate Hold. Northeast lay little but bare and stony mountains and Benden, the remaining Weyr, which protected Pern.

Lessa stretched, arching her back, inhaling the sweet, untainted wind of morning.

A cock crowed in the stableyard. Lessa whirled, her face alert, eyes darting around the outer Hold lest she be observed in such an uncharacteristic pose. She unbound her hair, letting it fall about her face concealingly. Her body drooped into the sloppy posture she affected. Quickly she thudded down the stairs, crossing to the watch-wher. It lurred piteously, its great eyes blinking against the growing daylight. Oblivious to the stench of its rank breath, she hugged the scaly head to her, scratching its ears and eye ridges. The watch-wher was ecstatic with pleasure, its long body trembling, its clipped wings rustling. It alone knew who she was or cared. And it was the only creature in all Pern she trusted since the day she had blindly sought refuge in its dark stinking lair to escape Fax's thirsty swords that had drunk so deeply of Ruathan blood.

Slowly she rose, cautioning it to remember to be as vicious to her as to all should anyone be near. It promised to obey her, swaying back and forth to emphasize its reluctance.

The first rays of the sun glanced over the Hold's outer wall. Crying out, the watch-wher darted into its dark nest. Lessa crept back to the kitchen and into the cheese room.
ANNE McCaffrey

From the Weyr and from the Bowl
Bronze and brown and blue and green
Rise the dragonmen of Pern,
Aloft, on wing, seen, then unseen.

F'lar on bronze Mnementh’s great neck appeared first in the skies above the chief Hold of Fax, so-called Lord of the High Reaches. Behind him, in proper wedge formation, the wingmen came into sight. F’lar checked the formation automatically; as precise as at the moment of entry to between.

As Mnementh curved in an arc that would bring them to the perimeter of the Hold, consonant with the friendly nature of this visitation, F’lar surveyed with mounting aversion the disrepair of the ridge defenses. The firestone pits were empty and the rock-cut gutters radiating from the pits were green-tinged with a mossy growth.

Was there even one lord in Pern who maintained his Hold rocky in observance of the ancient Laws? F’lar’s lips tightened to a thinner line. When this Search was over and the Impression made, there would have to be a solemn, punitive Council held at the Weyr. And by the golden shell of the queen, he, F’lar, meant to be its moderator. He would replace lethargy with industry. He would scour the greens and dangerous scum from the heights of Pern, the grass blades from its stoneworks. No verdant skirt would be condoned in any farmhold. And the tithings which had been so miserly, so grudgingly presented would, under pain of firestoning, flow with decent generosity into the Dragonweyr.

Mnementh rumbled approvingly as he vaned his pinions to land lightly on the grass-etched flagstones of Fax’s Hold. The bronze dragon furled his great wings, and F’lar heard the warning claxon in the Hold’s Great Tower. Mnementh dropped to his knees as F’lar indicated he wished to dismount. The bronze rider stood by Mnementh’s huge wedge-shaped head, politely awaiting the arrival of the Hold lord. F’lar idly gazed down the valley, hazy with warm spring sunlight. He ignored the furtive heads that peered at the dragonman from the parapet slits and the cliff windows.

F’lar did not turn as a rush of air announced the arrival of the rest of the wing. He knew, however, when F’nor, the brown rider, his half-brother, took the customary position on his left, a dragon-length to the rear. F’lar caught a glimpse
of F'nor's boot-heel twisting to death the grass crowding up between the stones.

An order, muffled to an intense whisper, issued from within the great court, beyond the open gates. Almost immediately a group of men marched into sight, led by a heavy-set man of medium height.

Mnementh arched his neck, angling his head so that his chin rested on the ground. Mnementh's many faceted eyes, on a level with F'lar's head, fastened with disconcerting interest on the approaching party. The dragons could never understand why they generated such abject fear in common folk. At only one point in his life span would a dragon attack a human and that could be excused on the grounds of simple ignorance. F'lar could not explain to the dragon the politics behind the necessity of inspiring awe in the holders, lord and craftsman alike. He could only observe that the fear and apprehension showing in the faces of the advancing squad which troubled Mnementh was oddly pleasing to him, F'lar.

"Welcome, Bronze Rider, to the Hold of Fax, Lord of the High Reaches. He is at your service," and the man made an adequately respectful salute.

The use of the third person pronoun could be construed, by the meticulous, to be a veiled insult. This fit in with the information F'lar had on Fax; so he ignored it. His information was also correct in describing Fax as a greedy man. It showed in the restless eyes which flicked at every detail of F'lar's clothing, at the slight frown when the intricately etched sword-hilt was noticed.

F'lar noticed, in his own turn, the several rich rings which flashed on Fax's left hand. The overlord's right hand remained slightly cocked after the habit of the professional swordsman. His tunic, of rich fabric, was stained and none too fresh. The man's feet, in heavy wher-hide boots, were solidly planted, weight balanced forward on his toes. A man to be treated cautiously, F'lar decided, as one should the conqueror of five neighboring Holds. Such greedy audacity was in itself a revelation. Fax had married into a sixth ... and had legally inherited, however unusual the circumstances, the seventh. He was a lecherous man by reputation.

Within these seven Holds, F'lar anticipated a profitable Search. Let R'gul go southerly to pursue Search among the indolent, if lovely, women there. The Weyr needed a strong woman this time; Jora had been worse than useless with Ne-
Adversity, uncertainty: those were the conditions that bred the qualities F’lar wanted in a weyrwoman.

“We ride in Search,” F’lar drawled softly, “and request the hospitality of your Hold, Lord Fax.”

Fax’s eyes widened imperceptibly at mention of Search.

“I had heard Jora was dead,” Fax replied, dropping the third person abruptly as if F’lar had passed some sort of test by ignoring it. “So Nemorth has a new queen, hm-m-m?” he continued, his eyes darting across the rank of the ring, noting the disciplined stance of the riders, the healthy color of the dragons.

F’lar did not dignify the obvious with an answer.

“And, my Lord—?” Fax hesitated, expectantly inclining his head slightly towards the dragonman.

For a pulse beat, F’lar wondered if the man were deliberately provoking him with such subtle insults. The name of bronze riders should be as well known throughout Pern as the name of the Dragonqueen and her Weyrwoman. F’lar kept his face composed, his eyes on Fax’s.

Leisurely, with the proper touch of arrogance, F’nor stepped forward, stopping slightly behind Mnementh’s head, one hand negligently touching the jaw hinge of the huge beast.

“The Bronze Rider of Mnementh, Lord F’lar, will require quarters for himself. I, F’nor, brown rider, prefer to be lodged with the wingmen. We are, in number, twelve.”

F’lar liked that touch of F’nor’s, totting up the wing strength, as if Fax were incapable of counting. F’nor had phrased it so adroitly as to make it impossible for Fax to protest the insult.

“Lord F’lar,” Fax said through teeth fixed in a smile, “the High Reaches are honored with your Search.”

“It will be to the credit of the High Reaches,” F’lar replied smoothly, “if one of its own supplies the Weyr.”

“To your everlasting credit,” Fax replied as suavely. “In the old days, many notable weyrwomen came from my Holds.”

“Your Holds?” asked F’lar, politely smiling as he emphasized the plural. “Ah, yes, you are now overlord of Ruatha, are you not? There have been many from that Hold.”

A strange tense look crossed Fax’s face. “Nothing good comes from Ruath Hold.” Then he stepped aside, gesturing F’lar to enter the Hold.

Fax’s troop leader barked a hasty order and the men
formed two lines, their metal-edged boots flicking sparks from the stones.

At unspoken orders, all the dragons rose with a great churning of air and dust. F'lar strode nonchalantly past the welcoming files. The men were rolling their eyes in alarm as the beasts glided above to the inner courts. Someone on the high tower uttered a frightened yelp as Mnementh took his position on that vantage point. His great wings drove phosphoric-scented air across the inner court as he maneuvered his great frame onto the inadequate landing space.

Outwardly oblivious to the consternation, fear and awe the dragons inspired, F'lar was secretly amused and rather pleased by the effect. Lords of the Holds needed this reminder that they must deal with dragons, not just with riders, who were men, mortal and murderable. The ancient respect for dragon-men as well as dragonkind must be reinstilled in modern beasts.

"The Hold has just risen from table, Lord F'lar, if . . . ." Fax suggested. His voice trailed off at F'lar's smiling refusal.

"Convey my duty to your lady, Lord Fax," F'lar rejoined, noticing with inward satisfaction the tightening of Fax's jaw muscles at the ceremonial request.

"You would prefer to see your quarters first?" Fax countered.

F'lar flicked an imaginary speck from his soft wher-hide sleeve and shook his head. Was the man buying time to sequester his ladies as the old time lords had?

"Duty first," he said with a rueful shrug.

"Of course," Fax all but snapped and strode smartly ahead, his heels pounding out the anger he could not express otherwise. F'lar decided he had guessed correctly.

F'lar and F'nor followed at a slower pace through the double-doored entry with its massive metal panels, into the great hall, carved into the cliffside.

"They eat not badly," F'nor remarked casually to F'lar, appraising the remnants still on the table.

"Better than the Weyr, it would seem," F'lar replied dryly.

"Young roasts and tender," F'nor said in a bitter undertone, "while the stringy, barren beasts are delivered up to us."

"The change is overdue," F'lar murmured, then raised his voice to conversational level. "A well-favored hall," he was saying amiably as they reached Fax. Their reluctant host stood in the portal to the inner Hold, which, like all such
Holds, burrowed deep into stone, traditional refuge of all in time of peril.

Deliberately, F'lar turned back to the banner-hung Hall. 
"Tell me, Lord Fax, do you adhere to the old practices and mount a dawn guard?"

Fax frowned, trying to grasp F'lar's meaning.
"There is always a guard at the Tower."
"An easterly guard?"
Fax's eyes jerked towards F'lar, then to F'nor.
"There are always guards," he answered sharply, "on all the approaches."
"Oh, just the approaches," and F'lar nodded wisely to F'nor.
"Where else?" demanded Fax, concerned, glancing from one dragonman to the other.
"I must ask that of your harper. You do keep a trained harper in your Hold?"
"Of course. I have several trained harpers," and Fax jerked his shoulders straighter.
F'lar affected not to understand.
"Lord Fax is the overlord of six other Holds," F'nor reminded his wingleader.
"Of course," F'lar assented, with exactly the same inflection Fax had used a moment before.
The mimicry did not go unnoticed by Fax but as he was unable to construe deliberate insult out of an innocent affirmative, he stalked into the glow-lit corridors. The dragonmen followed.

The women's quarters in Fax's Hold had been moved from the traditional innermost corridors to those at cliff-face. Sunlight poured down from three double-shuttered, deep-casement windows in the outside wall. F'lar noted that the bronze hinges were well oiled, and the sills regulation spear-length. Fax had not, at least, diminished the protective wall.

The chamber was richly hung with appropriately gentle scenes of women occupied in all manner of feminine tasks. Doors gave off the main chamber on both sides into smaller sleeping alcoves and from these, at Fax's bidding, his women hesitantly emerged. Fax sternly gestured to a blue-gowned woman, her hair white-streaked, her face lined with disappointments and bitterness, her body swollen with pregnancy. She advanced awkwardly, stopping several feet from her lord. From her attitude, F'lar deduced that she came no closer to Fax than was absolutely necessary.
"The Lady of Crom, mother of my heirs," Fax said without pride or cordiality. "My Lady—" F'lar hesitated, waiting for her name to be supplied.

She glanced warily at her lord. "Gemma," Fax snapped curtly. F'lar bowed deeply. "My Lady Gemma, the Weyr is on Search and requests the Hold's hospitality."

"My Lord F'lar," the Lady Gemma replied in a low voice, "you are most welcome."

F'lar did not miss the slight slur on the adverb nor the fact that Gemma had no trouble naming him. His smile was warmer than courtesy demanded, warm with gratitude and sympathy. Looking at the number of women in these quarters, F'lar thought there might be one or two Lady Gemma could bid farewell without regret.

Fax preferred his women plump and small. There wasn't a saucy one in the lot. If there once had been, the spirit had been beaten out of her. Fax, no doubt, was stud, not lover. Some of the covey had not all winter long made much use of water, judging by the amount of sweet oil gone rancid in their hair. Of them all, if these were all, the Lady Gemma was the only willful one; and she, too old.

The amenities over, Fax ushered his unwelcome guests outside, and led the way to the quarters he had assigned the bronze rider.

"A pleasant room," F'lar acknowledged, stripping off gloves and wher-hide tunic, throwing them carelessly to the table. "I shall see to my men and the beasts. They have been fed recently," he commented, pointing up Fax's omission in inquiring. "I request liberty to wander through the crafthold."

Fax sourly granted what was a dragonman's traditional privilege.

"I shall not further disrupt your routine, Lord Fax, for you must have many demands on you, with seven Holds to supervise." F'lar inclined his body slightly to the overlord, turning away as a gesture of dismissal. He could imagine the infuriated expression on Fax's face from the stamping retreat.

F'nor and the men had settled themselves in a hastily vacated barrackroom. The dragons were perched comfortably on the rocky ridges above the Hold. Each rider kept his dragon in light, but alert, charge. There were to be no incidents on a Search.
As a group, the dragonmen rose at F'lar's entrance.

"No tricks, no troubles, but look around closely," he said laconically. "Return by sundown with the names of any likely prospects." He caught F'nor's grin, remembering how Fax had slurred over some names. "Descriptions are in order and craft affiliation."

The men nodded, their eyes glinting with understanding. They were flatteringly confident of a successful Search even as F'lar's doubts grew now that he had seen Fax's women. By all logic, the pick of the High Reaches should be in Fax's chief Hold—but they were not. Still, there were many large craftholds not to mention the six other High Holds to visit. All the same . . .

In unspoken accord F'lar and F'nor left the barracks. The men would follow, unobtrusively, in pairs or singly, to reconnieter the crafthold and the nearer farmholds. The men were as overtly eager to be abroad as F'lar was privately. There had been a time when dragonmen were frequent and favored guests in all the great Holds throughout Pern, from southern Fort to high north Igen. This pleasant custom, too, had died along with other observances, evidence of the low regard in which the Weyr was presently held. F'lar vowed to correct this.

He forced himself to trace in memory the insidious changes. The Records, which each Weyrwoman kept, were proof of the gradual, but perceptible, decline, traceable through the past two hundred full Turns. Knowing the facts did not alleviate the condition. And F'lar was of that scant handful in the Weyr itself who did credit Records and Ballad alike. The situation might shortly reverse itself radically if the old tales were to be believed.

There was a reason, an explanation, a purpose, F'lar felt, for every one of the Weyr laws from First Impression to the Firestones: from the grass-free heights to ridge-running gutters. For elements as minor as controlling the appetite of a dragon to limiting the inhabitants of the Weyr. Although why the other five Weyrs had been abandoned, F'lar did not know. Idly he wondered if there were records, dusty and crumbling, lodged in the disused Weyrs. He must contrive to check when next his wings flew patrol. Certainly there was no explanation in Benden Weyr.

"There is industry but no enthusiasm," F'nor was saying, drawing F'lar's attention back to their tour of the crafthold. They had descended the guttered ramp from the Hold into
the crafthold proper, the broad roadway lined with cottages up to the imposing stone crafthalls. Silently F'lar noted moss-clogged gutters on the roofs, the vines clasping the walls. It was painful for one of his calling to witness the flagrant disregard of simple safety precautions. Growing things were forbidden near the habitations of mankind.

“News travels fast,” F’nor chuckled, nodding at a hurrying craftsman, in the smock of a baker, who gave them a mumbled good day. “Not a female in sight.”

His observation was accurate. Women should be abroad at this hour, bringing in supplies from the storehouses, washing in the river on such a bright warm day, or going out to the farmholds to help with planting. Not a gowned figure in sight.

“We used to be preferred mates,” F’nor remarked caustically.

“We’ll visit the Clothmen’s Hall first. If my memory serves me right...”

“As it always does...” F’nor interjected wryly. He took no advantage of their blood relationship but he was more at ease with the bronze rider than most of the dragonmen, the other bronze riders included. F’lar was reserved in a close-knit society of easy equality. He flew a tightly disciplined wing but men maneuvered to serve under him. His wing always excelled in the Games. None ever floundered in between to disappear forever and no beast in his wing sickened, leaving a man in dragonless exile from the Weyr, a part of him numb forever.

“L’tol came this way and settled in one of the High Reaches,” F’lar continued.

“L’tol?”

“Yes, a green rider from S’lel’s wing. You remember.”

An ill-timed swerve during the Spring Games had brought L’tol and his beast into the full blast of a phosphene emission from S’lel’s bronze Tuenth. L’tol had been thrown from his beast’s neck as the dragon tried to evade the blast. Another wingmate had swooped to catch the rider, but the green dragon, his left wing crisped, his body scorched, had died of shock and phosphene poisoning.

“L’tol would aid our Search,” F’nor agreed as the two dragonmen walked up to the bronze doors of the Clothmen’s Hall. They paused on the threshold, adjusting their eyes to the dimmer light within. Glows punctuated the wall recesses and hung in clusters above the larger looms where the finer
tapestries and fabrics were woven by master craftsmen. The pervading mood was one of quiet, purposeful industry.

Before their eyes had adapted, however, a figure glided to them, with a polite, if curt, request for them to follow him.

They were led to the right of the entrance, to a small office, curtained from the main hall. Their guide turned to them, his face visible in the wallglows. There was that air about him that marked him indefinably as a dragonman. But his face was lined deeply, one side seamed with old burn-marks. His eyes, sick with a hungry yearning, dominated his face. He blinked constantly.

"I am now Lytol," he said in a harsh voice.
F'lar nodded acknowledgment.

"You would be F'lar," Lytol said, "and you, F'nor. You've both the look of your sire."

F'lar nodded again.
Lytol swallowed convulsively, the muscles in his face twitching as the presence of the dragonmen revived his awareness of exile. He essayed a smile.

"Dragons in the sky! The news spread faster than Threads."

"Nemorth has a new queen."

"Jora dead?" Lytol asked concernedly, his face cleared of its nervous movement for a second.
F'lar nodded.

Lytol grimaced bitterly. "R'gul again, huh." He stared off in the middle distance, his eyelids quiet but the muscles along his jaw took up the constant movement. "You've the High Reaches? All of them?" Lytol asked, turning back to the dragonman, a slight emphasis on "all."

F'lar gave an affirmative nod again.

"You've seen the women. Lytol's disgust showed through the words. It was a statement, not a question, for he hurried on. "Well, there are no better in all the High Reaches," and his tone expressed utmost disdain.

"Fax likes his women comfortably fleshed and docile," Lytol rattled on. "Even the Lady Gemma has learned. It'd be different if he didn't need her family's support. Ah, it would be different indeed. So he keeps her pregnant, hoping to kill her in childbed one day. And he will. He will."

Lytol drew himself up, squaring his shoulders, turning full to the two dragonmen. His expression was vindictive, his voice low and tense.

"Kill that tyrant, for the sake and safety of Pern. Of the
Weyr. Of the queen. He only bides his time. He spreads discontent among the other lords. He”—Lytol’s laughter had an hysterical edge to it now—“he fancies himself as good as dragonmen.”

“There are no candidates then in this Hold?” F’lar said, his voice sharp enough to cut through the man’s preoccupation with his curious theory.

Lytol stared at the bronze rider. “Did I not say it?”

“What of Ruath Hold?”

Lytol stopped shaking his head and looked sharply at F’lar, his lips curling in a cunning smile. He laughed mirthlessly.

“You think to find a Torene, or a Moreta, hidden at Ruath Hold in these times? Well, all of that Blood are dead. Fax’s blade was thirsty that day. He knew the truth of those harpers’ tales, that Ruathan lords gave full measure of hospitality to dragonmen and the Ruathan were a breed apart. There were, you know,” Lytol’s voice dropped to a confiding whisper, “exiled Weyrmen like myself in that Line.”

F’lar nodded gravely, unable to contradict the man’s pitiful attempt at self-esteem.

“No,” and Lytol chuckled softly. “Fax gets nothing from that Hold but trouble. And the women Fax used to take...” his laugh turned nasty in tone. “It is rumored he was impotent for months afterwards.”

“Any families in the holdings with Weyr blood?”

Lytol frowned, glanced surprised at F’lar. He rubbed the scarred side of his face thoughtfully.

“There were,” he admitted slowly. “There were. But I doubt if any live on.” He thought a moment longer, then shook his head emphatically.

F’lar shrugged.

“I wish I had better news for you,” Lytol murmured.

“No matter,” F’lar reassured him, one hand poised to part the hanging in the doorway.

Lytol came up to him swiftly, his voice urgent.

“Heed what I say, Fax is ambitious. Force R’gul, or whoever is Weyr-leader next, to keep watch on the High Reaches.”

Lytol jabbed a finger in the direction of the Hold. “He scoffs openly at tales of the Threads. He taunts the harpers for the stupid nonsense of the old ballads and has banned from their repertoire all dragonlore. The new generation
will grow up totally ignorant of duty, tradition and precaution.”

F’lar was not surprised to hear that on top of Lytol’s other disclosures. Yet the Red Star pulsed in the sky and the time was drawing near when they would hysterically reavow the old allegiances in fear of their very lives.

“Have you been abroad in the early morning of late?” asked F’nor, grinning maliciously.

“I have,” Lytol breathed out in a hushed, choked whisper. “I have ... ” A groan was wrenched from his guts and he whirled away from the dragonmen, his head bowed between hunched shoulders. “Go,” he said, gritting his teeth. And, as they hesitated, he pleaded, “Go!”

F’lar walked quickly from the room, followed by F’nor. The bronze rider crossed the quiet dim Hall with long strides and exploded into the startling sunlight. His momentum took him into the center of the square. There he stopped so abruptly that F’nor, hard on his heels, nearly collided with him.

“We will spend exactly the same time within the other Halls,” he announced in a tight voice, his face averted from F’nor’s eyes. F’lar’s throat was constricted. It was difficult, suddenly, for him to speak. He swallowed hard, several times.

“To be dragonless ... ” murmured F’nor, pityingly. The encounter with Lytol had roiled his depths in a mournful way to which he was unaccustomed. That F’lar appeared equally shaken went far to dispel F’nor’s private opinion that his half-brother was incapable of emotion.

“There is no other way once First Impression has been made. You know that,” F’lar roused himself to say curtly. He strode off to the Hall bearing the Leathermen’s device.

The Hold is barred
The Hall is bare.
And men vanish.
The soil is barren,
The rock is bald.
All hope banish.

Lessa was shoveling ashes from the hearth when the agitated messenger staggered into the Great Hall. She made herself as inconspicuous as possible so the Warder would not dismiss her. She had contrived to be sent to the Great Hall that morning, knowing that the Warder intended to
brutalize the Head Clothman for the shoddy quality of the
goods readied for shipment to Fax.

“Fax is coming! With dragonmen!” the man gasped out
as he plunged into the dim Great Hall.

The Warder, who had been about to lash the Head
Clothman, turned, stunned, from his victim. The courier, a
farmholder from the edge of Ruatha, stumbled up to the
Warder, so excited with his message that he grabbed the
Warder’s arm.

“How dare you leave your Hold?” and the Warder aimed
his lash at the astonished holder. The force of the first blow
knocked the man from his feet. Yelping, he scrambled out
of reach of a second lashing. “Dragonmen indeed! Fax? Ha!
He shuns Ruatha. There!” The Warder punctuated each de­
nial with another blow, kicking the helpless wretch for good
measure, before he turned breathless to glare at the clothman
and the two underwarders. “How did he get in here with
such a threadbare lie?” The Warder stalked to the great door.
It was flung open just as he reached out for the iron handle.
The ashen-faced guard officer rushed in, nearly toppling the
Warder.

“Dragonmen! Dragons! All over Ruatha!” the man gib­
bered, arms flailing wildly. He, too, pulled at the Warder’s
arm, dragging the stupefied official towards the outer court­
yard, to bear out the truth of his statement.

Lessa scooped up the last pile of ashes. Picking up her
equipment, she slipped out of the Great Hall. There was a
very pleased smile on her face under the screen of matted
hair.

A dragonman at Ruatha! She must somehow contrive to
get Fax so humiliated, or so infuriated, that he would re­
nounce his claim to the Hold, in the presence of a dragon­
man. Then she could claim her birthright.

But she would have to be extraordinarily wary. Dragon­
riders were men apart. Anger did not cloud their intelligence.
Greed did not sully their judgment. Fear did not dull their
reactions. Let the dense-witted believe human sacrifice, un­
natural lusts, insane revel. She was not so gullible. And those
stories went against her grain. Dragonmen were still human
and there was Weyr blood in her veins. It was the same color
as that of anyone else; enough of hers had been spilled to
prove that.

She halted for a moment, catching a sudden shallow
breath. Was this the danger she had sensed four days ago at
dawn? The final encounter in her struggle to regain the Hold?
No—there had been more to that portent than revenge.

The ash bucket banged against her shins as she shuffled
down the low ceilinged corridor to the stable door. Fax
would find a cold welcome. She had laid no new fire on the
hearth. Her laugh echoed back unpleasantly from the damp
walls. She rested her bucket and propped her broom and
shovel as she wrestled with the heavy bronze door that gave
into the new stables.

They had been built outside the cliff of Ruatha by Fax's
first Warder, a subtler man than all eight of his successors.
He had achieved more than all the others and Lessa had
honestly regretted the necessity of his death. But he would
have made her revenge impossible. He would have caught
her out before she had learned how to camouflage herself
and her little interferences. What had his name been? She
could not recall. Well, she regretted his death.

The second man had been properly greedy and it had
been easy to set up a pattern of misunderstanding between
Warder and craftsmen. That one had been determined to
squeeze all profit from Ruathan goods so that some of it
would drop into his pocket before Fax suspected a shortage.
The craftsmen who had begun to accept the skillful diplo-
macy of the first Warder bitterly resented the second's gras-p-
ing, high-handed ways. They resented the passing of the Old
Line and, even more so, the way of its passing. They were
unforgiving of the insult to Ruatha; its now secondary posi-
tion in the High Reaches; and they resented the individual
indignities that holders, craftsmen and farmers alike, suffered
under the second Warder. It took little manipulation to ar-
range for matters at Ruatha to go from bad to worse.

The second was replaced and his successor fared no better.
He was caught diverting goods, the best of the goods at
that. Fax had had him executed. His bony head still hung in
the main firepit above the great Tower.

The present incumbent had not been able to maintain the
Hold in even the sorry condition in which he had assumed
its management. Seemingly simple matters developed rapidly
into disasters. Like the production of cloth . . . Contrary to
his boasts to Fax, the quality had not improved, and the
quantity had fallen off.

Now Fax was here. And with dragonmen! Why dragon-
men? The import of the question froze Lessa, and the heavy
door closing behind her barked her heels painfully. Dragon­
men used to be frequent visitors at Ruatha, that she knew, 
and even vaguely remembered. Those memories were like a 
harpers’ tale, told of someone else, not something within her 
own experience. She had limited her fierce attention to 
Ruatha only. She could not even recall the name of Queen 
or Weyrwoman from the instructions of her childhood, nor 
could she recall hearing mention of any queen or weyr­
woman by anyone in the Hold these past ten Turns.

Perhaps the dragonmen were finally going to call the lords 
of the Holds to task for the disgraceful show of greenery 
about the Holds. Well, Lessa was to blame for much of that 
in Ruatha but she defied even a dragonman to confront her 
with her guilt. Did all Ruatha fall to the Threads it would 
be better than remaining dependent to Fax! The heresy 
shocked Lessa even as she thought it.

Wishing she could as easily unburden her conscience of 
such blasphemy, she ditched the ashes on the stable midden. 
There was a sudden change in air pressure around her. Then 
a fleeting shadow caused her to glance up.

From behind the cliff above glided a dragon, its enormous 
wings spread to their fullest as he caught the morning up­
draft. Turning effortlessly, he descended. A second, a third, 
a full wing of dragons followed in soundless flight and pat­
terned descent, graceful and awesome. The claxon rang 
belatedly from the Tower and from within the kitchen there 
issued screams and shrieks of the terrified drudges.

Lessa took cover. She ducked into the kitchen where she 
was instantly seized by the assistant cook and thrust with a 
buffet and a kick toward the sinks. There she was put to 
scrubbing grease-encrusted serving bowls with cleansing sand.

The yelping canines were already lashed to the spitrun, 
turning a scrawny herdbeast that had been set to roast. The 
cook was ladling seasonings on the carcass, swearing at hav­
ing to offer so poor a meal to so many guests, and some of 
them high-rank. Winter-dried fruits from the last scanty 
harvest had been set to soak and two of the oldest drudges 
were scraping roots.

An apprentice cook was kneading bread; another, carefully 
spicing a sauce. Looking fixedly at him, she diverted his hand 
from one spice box to a less appropriate one as he gave a 
final shake to the concoction. She added too much wood to 
the wall oven, insuring ruin of the breads. She controlled the 
canines deftly, slowing one and speeding the other so that
the meat would be underdone on one side, burned on the other. That the feast should be a fast, the food presented found inedible, was her whole intention.

Above in the Hold, she had no doubt that certain other measures, undertaken at different times for this exact contingency, were being discovered.

Her fingers bloodied from a beating, one of the Warder's women came shrieking into the kitchen, hopeful of refuge there.

"Insects have eaten the best blankets to shreds! And a canine who had littered on the best linens snarled at me as she gave suck! And the rushes are noxious, the best chambers full of debris driven in by the winter wind. Somebody left the shutters ajar. Just a tiny bit, but it was enough . . ." the woman wailed, clutching her hand to her breast and rocking back and forth.

Lessa bent with great industry to shine the plates.

*Watch-wher, watch-wher,*
*In your lair,*
*Watch well, watch-wher!*
*Who goes there?*

"The watch-wher is hiding something," F'lar told F'nor as they consulted in the hastily cleaned Great Hall. The room delighted to hold the wintry chill although a generous fire now burned on the hearth.

"It was but gibbering when Canth spoke to it," F'nor remarked. He was leaning against the mantel, turning slightly from side to side to gather some warmth. He watched his wingleader's impatient pacing.

"Mnementh is calming it down," F'lar replied. "He may be able to sort out the nightmare. The creature may be more senile than aware, but . . ."

"I doubt it," F'nor concurred helpfully. He glanced with apprehension up at the webhung ceiling. He was certain he'd found most of the crawlers, but he didn't fancy their sting. Not on top of the discomforts already experienced in this forsaken Hold. If the night stayed mild, he intended curling up with Canth on the heights. "That would be more reasonable than anything Fax or his Warder have suggested."

"Hm-m-m," F'lar muttered, frowning at the b'own rider.

"Well, it's unbelievable that Ruatha could have fallen to such disrepair in ten short Turns. Every Dragon caught the
feeling of power and it's obvious the watch-pher has been tampered with. That takes a good deal of control."

"From someone of the Blood," F'lar reminded him.

F'nor shot his wingleader a quick look, wondering if he could possibly be serious in the light of all information to the contrary.

"I grant you there is power here, F'lar," F'nor conceded. "It could easily be a hidden male of the old Blood. But we need a female. And Fax made it plain, in his inimitable fashion, that he left none of the old Blood alive in the Hold the day he took it. No, no." The brown rider shook his head, as if he could dispel the lack of faith in his wingleader's curious insistence that the Search would end in Ruath with Ruathan blood.

"That watch-pher is hiding something and only someone of the Blood of its Hold can arrange that," F'lar said emphatically. He gestured around the Hall and towards the walls, bare of hangings. "Ruatha has been overcome. But she resists... Subtly. I say it points to the old Blood, and power. Not power alone."

The obstinate expression in F'lar's eyes, the set of his jaw, suggested that F'nor seek another topic.

"The pattern was well-flown today," F'nor suggested tentatively. "Does a dragonman good to ride a flaming beast. Does the beast good, too. Keeps the digestive process in order."

F'lar nodded sober agreement. "Let R'gul temporize as he chooses. It is fitting and proper to ride a fire-spouting beast and these holders need to be reminded of Weyr power."

"Right now, anything would help our prestige," F'nor commented sourly. "What had Fax to say when he hailed you in the Pass?" F'nor knew his question was almost impertinent but if it were, F'lar would ignore it.

F'lar's slight smile was unpleasant and there was an ominous glint in his amber eyes.

"We talked of rule and resistance."

"Did he not also draw on you?" F'nor asked. F'lar's smile deepened. "Until he remembered I was dragonmounted."

"He's considered a vicious fighter," F'nor said.

"I am at some disadvantage?" F'lar asked, turning sharply on his brown rider, his face too controlled.

"To my knowledge, no," F'nor reassured his leader quickly.
F’lar had tumbled every man in the Weyr, efficiently and easily. “But Fax kills often and without cause.”

“And because we dragonmen do not seek blood, we are not to be feared as fighters?” snapped F’lar. “Are you ashamed of your heritage?”

“I? No!” F’nor sucked in his breath. “Nor any of our wing!” he added proudly. “But there is that in the attitude of the men in this progression of Fax’s that... that makes me wish some excuse to fight.”

“As you observed today, Fax seeks some excuse. And,” F’lar added thoughtfully, “there is something here in Ruatha that unnerves our noble overlord.”

He caught sight of Lady Tela, whom Fax had so courteously assigned him for comfort during the progression, waving to him from the inner Hold portal.

“A case in point. Fax’s Lady Tela is some three months gone.”

F’nor frowned at that insult to his leader.

“She giggles incessantly and appears so addlepated that one cannot decide whether she babbles out of ignorance or at Fax’s suggestion. As she has apparently not bathed all winter, and is not, in any case, my ideal, I have”—F’lar grinned maliciously—“deprived myself of her kind offices.”

F’nor hastily cleared his throat and his expression as Lady Tela approached them. He caught the unappealing odor from the scarf or handkerchief she waved constantly. Dragonmen endured a great deal for the Weyr. He moved away, with apparent courtesy, to join the rest of the dragonmen entering the Hall.

F’lar turned with equal courtesy to Lady Tela as she jabbered away about the terrible condition of the rooms which Lady Gemma and the other ladies had been assigned.

“The shutters, both sets, were ajar all winter long and you should have seen the trash on the floors. We finally got two of the drudges to sweep it all into the fireplace. And then that smoked something fearful ’til a man was sent up.” Lady Tela giggled. “He found the access blocked by a chimney stone fallen aslant. The rest of the chimney, for a wonder, was in good repair.”

She waved her handkerchief. F’lar held his breath as the gesture wafted an unappealing odor in his direction.

He glanced up the Hall towards the inner Hold door and saw Lady Gemma descending, her steps slow and awkward.
Some subtle difference about her gait attracted him and he stared at her, trying to identify it.

“Oh, yes, poor Lady Gemma,” Lady Tela babbled, sighing deeply. “We are so concerned. Why Lord Fax insisted on her coming, I do not know. She is not near her time and yet . . .” The lighthead’s concern sounded sincere.

F’lar’s incipient hatred of Fax and his brutality matured abruptly. He left his partner chattering to thin air and courteously extended his arm to Lady Gemma to support her down the steps and to the table. Only a brief tightening of her fingers on his forearm betrayed her gratitude. Her face was very white and drawn, the lines deeply etched around mouth and eyes, showing the effort she was expending.

“Some attempt has been made, I see, to restore order to the Hall,” she remarked in a conversational tone.

“Some,” F’lar admitted dryly, glancing around the grandly proportioned Hall, its rafter festooned with the webs of many Turns. The inhabitants of those gossamer nets dropped from time to time, with ripe splats, to the floor, onto the table and into the serving platters. Nothing replaced the old banners of the Ruathan Blood, which had been removed from the stark brown stone walls. Fresh rushes did obscure the greasy flagstones. The trestle tables appeared recently sanded and scraped, and the platters gleamed dully in the refreshed glows. Unfortunately, the brighter light was a mistake for it was much too unflattering.

“This was such a graceful Hall,” Lady Gemma murmured for F’lar’s ears alone.

“You were a friend?” he asked, politely.

“Yes, in my youth,” her voice dropped expressively on the last word, evoking for F’lar a happier girlhood. “It was a noble line!”

“Think you one might have escaped the sword?”

Lady Gemma flashed him a startled look, then quickly composed her features, lest the exchange be noted. She gave a barely perceptible shake of her head and then shifted her awkward weight to take her place at the table. Graciously she inclined her head towards F’lar, both dismissing and thanking him.

F’lar returned to his own partner and placed her at the table on his left. As the only person of rank who would dine that night at Ruath Hold, Lady Gemma was seated on his right; Fax would be beyond her. The dragonmen and Fax’s upper soldiery would sit at the lower tables. No guildmen
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had been invited to Ruatha. Fax arrived just then with his current lady and two underleaders, the Warder bowing them effusively into the Hall. The man, F'lar noticed, kept a good distance from his overlord—as well a Warder might whose responsibility was in this sorry condition. F'lar flicked a crawler away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lady Gemma wince and shudder.

Fax stamped up to the raised table, his face black with suppressed rage. He pulled back his chair roughly, slamming it into Lady Gemma's before he seated himself. He pulled the chair to the table with a force that threatened to rock the none too stable trestle-top from its supporting legs. Scowling, he inspected his goblet and plate, fingering the surface, ready to throw them aside if they displeased him.

"A roast and fresh bread, Lord Fax, and such fruits and roots as are left. Had I but known of your arrival, I could have sent to Crom for . . ."

"Sent to Crom?" roared Fax, slamming the plate he was inspecting onto the table so forcefully the rim bent under his hands. The Warder winced again as if he himself had been maimed.

"The day one of my Holds cannot support itself or the visit of its rightful overlord, I shall renounce it."

Lady Gemma gasped. Simultaneously the dragons roared. F'lar felt the unmistakable surge of power. His eyes instinctively sought F'nor at the lower table. The brown rider—all the dragonmen—had experienced that inexplicable shaft of exultation.

"What's wrong, Dragonman?" snapped Fax.

F'lar, affecting unconcern, stretched his legs under the table and assumed an indolent posture in the heavy chair.

"Wrong?"

"The dragons!"

"Oh, nothing. They often roar . . . at the sunset, at a flock of passing wherries, at mealtimes," and F'lar smiled amiably at the Lord of the High Reaches. Beside him his tablemate gave a squeak.

"Mealtimes? Have they not been fed?"

"Oh, yes. Five days ago."

"Oh. Five . . . days ago? And are they hungry . . . now?" Her voice trailed into a whisper of fear, her eyes grew round.

"In a few days," F'lar assured her. Under cover of his detached amusement, F'lar scanned the Hall. That surge had
come from nearby. Either in the Hall or just outside. It must have been from within. It came so soon upon Fax's speech that his words must have triggered it. And the power had had an indefinably feminine touch to it.

One of Fax's women? F'lar found that hard to credit. Mnementh had been close to all of them and none had shown a vestige of power. Much less, with the exception of Lady Gemma, any intelligence.

One of the Hall women? So far he had seen only the sorry drudges and the aging females the Warder had as housekeepers. The Warder's personal woman? He must discover if that man had one. One of the Hold guards' women? F'lar suppressed an intense desire to rise and search.

"You mount a guard?" he asked Fax casually.

"Double at Ruath Hold!" he was told in a tight, hard voice, ground out from somewhere deep in Fax's chest.

"Here?" F'lar all but laughed out loud, gesturing around the sadly appointed chamber.

"Here! Food!" Fax changed the subject with a roar.

Five drudges, two of them women in brown-gray rags such that F'lar hoped they had had nothing to do with the preparation of the meal, staggered in under the emplattered herd-beast. No one with so much as a trace of power would sink to such depths, unless . . .

The aroma that reached him as the platter was placed on the serving table distracted him. It reeked of singed bone and charred meat. The Warder frantically sharpened his tools as if a keen edge could somehow slice acceptable portions from this unlikely carcass.

Lady Gemma caught her breath again and F'lar saw her hands curl tightly around the armrests. He saw the convulsive movement of her throat as she swallowed. He, too, did not look forward to this repast.

The drudges reappeared with wooden trays of bread. Burnt crusts had been scraped and cut, in some places, from the loaves before serving. As other trays were borne in, F'lar tried to catch sight of the faces of the servitors. Matted hair obscured the face of the one who presented a dish of legumes swimming in greasy liquid. Revolted, F'lar poked through the legumes to find properly cooked portions to offer Lady Gemma. She waved them aside, her face ill-concealing her discomfort.

As F'lar was about to turn and serve Lady Tela, he saw
Lady Gemma's hand clutched convulsively at the chair arms. He realized that she was not merely nauseated by the unappetizing food. She was seized with labor contractions.

F'lar glanced in Fax's direction. The overlord was scowling blackly at the attempts of the Warder to find edible portions of meat to serve.

F'lar touched Lady Gemma's arm with light fingers. She turned just enough to look at F'lar from the corner of her eye. She managed a socially-correct half-smile.

"I dare not leave just now, Lord F'lar. He is always dangerous at Ruatha. And it may only be false pangs."

F'lar was dubious as he saw another shudder pass through her frame. The woman would have been a fine weyrwoman, he thought ruefully, were she but younger.

The Warder, his hands shaking, presented Fax the sliced meats. There were slivers of overdone flesh and portions of almost edible meats, but not much of either.

One furious wave of Fax's broad fist and the Warder had the plate, meats and juice, square in the face. Despite himself, F'lar sighed, for those undoubtedly constituted the only edible portions of the entire beast.

"You call this food? You call this food?" Fax bellowed. His voice boomed back from the bare vault of the ceiling, shaking crawlers from their webs as the sound shattered the fragile strands. "Slop! Slop!"

F'lar rapidly brushed crawlers from Lady Gemma who was helpless in the throes of a very strong contraction.

"It's all we had on such short notice," the Warder squealed, juices streaking down his cheeks. Fax threw the goblet at him and the wine went streaming down the man's chest. The steaming dish of roots followed and the man yelped as the hot liquid splashed over him.

"My lord, my lord, had I but known!"

"Obviously, Ruatha cannot support the visit of its Lord. You must renounce it," F'lar heard himself saying.

His shock at such words issuing from his mouth was as great as that of everyone else in the Hall. Silence fell, broken by the splat of falling crawlers and the drip of root liquid from the Warder's shoulders to the rushes. The grating of Fax's boot-heel was clearly audible as he swung slowly around to face the bronze rider.

As F'lar conquered his own amazement and rapidly tried
to predict what to do next to mend matters, he saw F'nor rise slowly to his feet, hand on dagger hilt.

"I did not hear you correctly?" Fax asked, his face blank of all expression, his eyes snapping.

Unable to comprehend how he could have uttered such an arrant challenge, F'lar managed to assume a languid pose. "You did mention," he drawled, "that if any of your Holds could not support itself and the visit of its rightful overlord, you would renounce it."

Fax stared back at F'lar, his face a study of swiftly suppressed emotions, the glint of triumph dominant. F'lar, his face stiff with the forced expression of indifference, was casting swiftly about in his mind. In the name of the Egg, had he lost all sense of discretion?

Pretending utter unconcern, he stabbed some vegetables onto his knife and began to munch on them. As he did so, he noticed F'nor glancing slowly around the Hall, scrutinizing everyone. Abruptly F'lar realized what had happened. Somehow, in making that statement, he, a dragonman, had responded to a covert use of the power. F'lar, the bronze rider, was being put into a position where he would have to fight Fax. Why? For what end? To get Fax to renounce the Hold? Incredible! But, there could be only one possible reason for such a turn of events. An exultation as sharp as pain welled within F'lar. It was all he could do to maintain his pose of bored indifference, all he could do to turn his attention to thwarting Fax, should he press for a duel. A duel would serve no purpose. He, F'lar, had no time to waste on it.

A groan escaped Lady Gemma and broke the eye-locked stance of the two antagonists. Irritated, Fax looked down at her, fist clenched and half-raised to strike her for her temerity in interrupting her lord and master. The contraction that had contorted the swollen belly was as obvious as the woman's pain. F'lar dared not look towards her but he wondered if she had deliberately groaned aloud to break the tension.

Incredibly, Fax began to laugh. He threw back his head, showing big, stained teeth, and roared. "Aye, renounce it, in favor of her issue, if it is male...and lives!" he crowed, laughing raucously.

"Heard and witnessed!" F'lar snapped, jumping to his feet and pointing to his riders. They were on their feet in the instant. "Heard and witnessed!" they averred in the traditional manner.
With that movement, everyone began to babble at once in nervous relief. The other women, each reacting in her way to the imminence of birth, called orders to the servants and advice to each other. They converged towards Lady Gemma, hovering undecidedly out of Fax's range, like silly wherries disturbed from their roosts. It was obvious they were torn between their fear of their lord and their desire to reach the laboring woman.

He gathered their intentions as well as their reluctance and, still stridently laughing, knocked back his chair. He stepped over it, strode down to the meatstand and stood hacking off pieces with his knife, stuffing them, juice dripping, into his mouth without ceasing his guffawing.

As F'lar bent towards Lady Gemma to assist her out of her chair, she grabbed his arm urgently. Their eyes met, hers clouded with pain. She pulled him closer.

"He means to kill you, Bronze Rider. He loves to kill," she whispered.

"Dragonmen are not easily killed, but I am grateful to you."

"I do not want you killed," she said, softly, biting at her lip. "We have so few bronze riders."

F'lar stared at her, startled. Did she, Fax's lady, actually believe in the Old Laws?

F'lar beckoned to two of the Warder's men to carry her up into the Hold. He caught Lady Tela by the arm as she fluttered past him.

"What do you need?"

"Oh, oh," she exclaimed, her face twisted with panic; she was distractedly wringing her hands, "Water, hot. Clean cloths. And a birthing-woman. Oh, yes, we must have a birthing-woman."

F'lar looked about for one of the Hold women, his glance sliding over the first disreputable figure who had started to mop up the spilled food. He signaled instead for the Warder and peremptorily ordered him to send for the woman. The Warder kicked at the drudge on the floor.

"You... you! Whatever your name is, go get her from the crafthold. You must know who she is."

The drudge evaded the parting kick the Warder aimed in her direction with a nimbleness at odds with her appearance of extreme age and decrepitude. She scurried across the Hall and out the kitchen door.

Fax sliced and speared meat, occasionally bursting out
with a louder bark of laughter as his inner thoughts amused him. F’lar sauntered down to the carcass and, without wait­ing for invitation from his host, began to carve neat slices also, beckoning his men over. Fax’s soldiers, however, waited until their lord had eaten his fill.

_Lord of the Hold, your charge is sure
In thick walls, metal doors and no verdure._

Lessa sped from the Hall to summon the birthing-woman, seething with frustration. So close! So close! How could she come so close and yet fail? Fax should have challenged the dragonman. And the dragonman was strong and young, his face that of a fighter, stern and controlled. He should not have temporized. Was all honor dead in Pern, smothered by green grass?

And why, oh why, had Lady Gemma chosen that precious moment to go into labor? If her groan hadn’t distracted Fax, the fight would have begun and not even Fax, for all his vaunted prowess as a vicious fighter, would have prevailed against a dragonman who had her—Lessa’s—support! The Hold must be secured to its rightful Blood again. Fax must not leave Ruatha, alive, again!

Above her, on the High Tower, the great bronze dragon gave forth a weird croon, his many-faceted eyes sparkling in the gathering darkness.

Unconsciously she silenced him as she would have done the watch-wher. Ah, that watch-wher. He had not come out of his den at her passing. She knew the dragons had been at him. She could hear him gibbering in panic.

The slant of the road toward the crafthold lent impetus to her flying feet and she had to brace herself to a sliding stop at the birthing-woman’s stone threshold. She banged on the closed door and heard the frightened exclamation within.


“A birth?” came the muffled cry and the latches were thrown up on the door. “At the Hold?”

“Fax’s lady and, as you love life, hurry! For if it is male, it will be Ruatha’s own lord.”

That ought to fetch her, thought Lessa, and in that instant, the door was flung open by the man of the house. Lessa could see the birthing-woman gathering up her things in haste, piling them into her shawl. Lessa hurried the woman out, up the steep road to the Hold, under the Tower gate,
grabbing the woman as she tried to run at the sight of a
dragon peering down at her. Lessa drew her into the Court
and pushed her, resisting, into the Hall.

The woman clutched at the inner door, balking at the
sight of the gathering there. Lord Fax, his feet up on the
trestle table, was paring his fingernails with his knife blade,
still chuckling. The dragonmen in their wher-hide tunics,
were eating quietly at one table while the soldiers were hav­
ing their turn at the meat.

The bronze rider noticed their entrance and pointed ur­
gently towards the inner Hold. The birthing-woman seemed
frozen to the spot. Lessa tugged futilely at her arm, urging
her to cross the Hall. To her surprise, the bronze rider
strode to them.

"Go quickly, woman, Lady Gemma is before her time,"
he said, frowning with concern, gesturing imperatively to­
wards the Hold entrance. He caught her by the shoulder and
led her, all unwilling, Lessa tugging away at her other arm.

When they reached the stairs, he relinquished his grip,
nodding to Lessa to escort her the rest of the way. Just as
they reached the massive inner door, Lessa noticed how
sharply the dragonman was looking at them—at her hand,
on the birthing-woman's arm. Warily, she glanced at her hand
and saw it, as if it belonged to a stranger: the long fingers,
shapely despite dirt and broken nails; her small hand, deli­
cately boned, gracefully placed despite the urgency of the
grip. She blurred it and hurried on.

Honor those the dragons heed,
In thought and favor, word and deed.
Worlds are lost or worlds are saved
By those dangers dragon-braved.

Dragonman, avoid excess;
Greed will bring the Weyr distress;
To the ancient Laws adhere,
Prospers thus the Dragonweyr.

An unintelligible ululation raised the waiting men to their
feet, startled from private meditations and the diversion of
Bonethrows. Only Fax remained unmoved at the alarm, save
that the slight sneer, which had settled on his face hours
past, deepened to smug satisfaction.

"Dead-ed-ed," the tidings reverberated down the rocky
corridors of the Hold. The weeping lady seemed to erupt out of the passage from the Inner Hold, flying down the steps to sink into an hysterical heap at Fax's feet. "She's dead. Lady Gemma is dead. There was too much blood. It was too soon. She was too old to bear more children."

F'lar couldn't decide whether the woman was apologizing for, or exulting in, the woman's death. She certainly couldn't be criticizing her Lord for placing Lady Gemma in such peril. F'lar, however, was sincerely sorry at Gemma's passing. She had been a brave, fine woman.

And now, what would be Fax's next move? F'lar caught F'nor's identically quizzical glance and shrugged expressively. "The child lives!" a curiously distorted voice announced, penetrating the rising noise in the Great Hall. The words electrified the atmosphere. Every head slewed round sharply towards the portal to the Inner Hold where the drudge, a totally unexpected messenger, stood poised on the top step. "It is male!" This announcement rang triumphantly in the still Hall.

Fax jerked himself to his feet, kicking aside the wailer at his feet, scowling ominously at the drudge. "What did you say, woman?"

"The child lives. It is male," the creature repeated, descending the stairs.

Incredulity and rage suffused Fax's face. His body seemed to coil up.

"Ruatha has a new lord!" Staring intently at the overlord, she advanced, her mien purposeful, almost menacing.

The tentative cheers of the Warder's men were drowned by the roaring of the dragons.

Fax erupted into action. He leaped across the intervening space, bellowing. Before Lessa could dodge, his fist crashed down across her face. She fell heavily to the stone floor, where she lay motionless, a bundle of dirty rags.

"Hold, Fax!" F'lar's voice broke the silence as the Lord of the High Reaches flexed his leg to kick her.

Fax whirled, his hand automatically closing on his knife hilt.

"It was heard and witnessed, Fax," F'lar cautioned him, one hand outstretched in warning, "by dragonmen. Stand by your sworn and witnessed oath!"

"Witnessed? By dragonmen?" cried Fax with a derisive laugh. "Dragonwomen, you mean," he sneered, his eyes
blazing with contempt, as he made one sweeping gesture of scorn.

He was momentarily taken aback by the speed with which the bronze rider's knife appeared in his hand.

"Dragonwomen?" F'lar queried, his lips curling back over his teeth, his voice dangerously soft. Glowlight flickered off his circling knife as he advanced on Fax.

"Women! Parasites on Pern. The Weyr power is over. Over!" Fax roared, leaping forward to land in a combat crouch.

The two antagonists were dimly aware of the scurry behind them, of tables pulled roughly aside to give the duelists space. F'lar could spare no glance at the crumpled form of the drudge. Yet he was sure, through and beyond instinct sure, that she was the source of power. He had felt it as she entered the room. The dragons' roaring confirmed it. If that fall had killed her ... He advanced on Fax, leaping high to avoid the slashing blade as Fax unwound from the crouch with a powerful lunge.

F'lar evaded the attack easily, noticing his opponent's reach, deciding he had a slight advantage there. But not much. Fax had had much more actual hand-to-hand killing experience than had he whose duels had always ended at first blood on the practice floor. F'lar made due note to avoid closing with the burly lord. The man was heavy-chested, dangerous from sheer mass. F'lar must use agility as his weapon, not brute strength.

Fax feinted, testing F'lar for weakness, or indiscretion. The two crouched, facing each other across six feet of space, knife hands weaving, their free hands, spread-fingered, ready to grab.

Again Fax pressed the attack. F'lar allowed him to close, just near enough to dodge away with a back-handed swipe. Fabric ripped under the tip of his knife. He heard Fax snarl. The overlord was faster on his feet than his bulk suggested and F'lar had to dodge a second time, feeling Fax's knife score his wher-hide jerkin.

Grimly the two circled, each looking for an opening in the other's defense. Fax plowed in, trying to corner the lighter, faster man between raised platform and wall.

F'lar countered, ducking low under Fax's flailing arm, slashing obliquely across Fax's side. The overlord caught at him, yanking savagely, and F'lar was trapped against the other man's side, straining desperately with his left hand to
keep the knife arm up. F'lar brought up his knee, and ducked away as Fax gasped and buckled from the pain in his groin, but Fax struck in passing. Sudden fire laced F'lar's left shoulder.

Fax's face was red with anger and he wheezed from pain and shock. But the infuriated lord straightened up and charged. F'lar was forced to sidestep quickly before Fax could close with him. F'lar put the meat table between them, circling warily, flexing his shoulder to assess the extent of the knife's slash. It was painful, but the arm could be used.

Suddenly Fax scooped up some fatty scraps from the meat tray and hurled them at F'lar. The dragonman ducked and Fax came around the table with a rush. F'lar leaped sideways. Fax's flashing blade came within inches of his abdomen, as his own knife sliced down the outside of Fax's arm. Instantly the two pivoted to face each other again, but Fax's left arm hung limply at his side.

F'lar darted in, pressing his luck as the Lord of the High Reaches staggered. But F'lar misjudged the man's condition and suffered a terrific kick in the side as he tried to dodge under the feinting knife. Doubled with pain, F'lar rolled frantically away from his charging adversary. Fax was lurching forward, trying to fall on him, to pin the lighter dragonman down for a final thrust. Somehow F'lar got to his feet, attempting to straighten to meet Fax's stumbling charge. His very position saved him. Fax overreached his mark and staggered off balance. F'lar brought his right hand over with as much strength as he could muster and his blade plunged through Fax's unprotected back until he felt the point stick in the chest plate.

The defeated lord fell flat to the flagstones. The force of his descent dislodged the dagger from his chestbone and an inch of bloody blade re-emerged.

F'lar stared down at the dead man. There was no pleasure in killing, he realized, only relief that he himself was still alive. He wiped his forehead on his sleeve and forced himself erect, his side throbbing with the pain of that last kick and his shoulder burning. He half-stumbled to the drudge, still sprawled where she had fallen.

He gently turned her over, noting the terrible bruise spreading across her cheek under the dirty skin. He heard F'nor take command of the tumult in the Hall.

The dragonman laid a hand, trembling in spite of an effort
to control himself, on the woman's breast to feel for a heartbeat... It was there, slow but strong.

A deep sigh escaped him for either blow or fall could have proved fatal. Fatal, perhaps for Pern as well.

Relief was colored with disgust. There was no telling under the filth how old this creature might be. He raised her in his arms, her light body no burden even to his battle-weary strength. Knowing F'nor would handle any trouble efficiently, F'lar carried the drudge to his own chamber.

Putting the body on the high bed, he stirred up the fire and added more glows to the bedside bracket. His gorge rose at the thought of touching the filthy mat of hair but nonetheless and gently, he pushed it back from the face, turning the head this way and that. The features were small, regular. One arm, clear of rags, was reasonably clean above the elbow but marred by bruises and old scars. The skin was firm and unwrinkled. The hands, when he took them in his, were filthy but well-shaped and delicately boned.

F'lar began to smile. Yes, she had blurred that hand so skillfully that he had actually doubted what he had first seen. And yes, beneath grime and grease, she was young. Young enough for the Weyr. And no born drab. There was no taint of common blood here. It was pure, no matter whose the line, and he rather thought she was indeed Ruathan. One who had by some unknown agency escaped the massacre ten Turns ago and bided her time for revenge. Why else force Fax to renounce the Hold?

Delighted and fascinated by this unexpected luck, F'lar reached out to tear the dress from the unconscious body and found himself constrained not to. The girl had roused. Her great, hungry eyes fastened on his, not fearful or expectant; wary.

A subtle change occurred in her face. F'lar watched, his smile deepening, as she shifted her regular features into an illusion of disagreeable ugliness and great age.

"Trying to confuse a dragonman, girl?" he chuckled. He made no further move to touch her but settled against the great carved post of the bed. He crossed his arms sternly on his chest, thought better of it immediately, and eased his sore arm. "Your name, girl, and rank, too."

She drew herself upright slowly against the headboard, her features no longer blurred. They faced each other across the high bed.

"Fax?"
“Dead. Your name!”
A look of exulting triumph flooded her face. She slipped from the bed, standing unexpectedly tall. “Then I reclaim my own. I am of the Ruathan Blood. I claim Ruath,” she announced in a ringing voice.

F’lar stared at her a moment, delighted with her proud bearing. Then he threw back his head and laughed.

“This? This crumbling head?” He could not help but mock the disparity between her manner and her dress. “Oh, no. Besides, Lady, we dragonmen heard and witnessed Fax’s oath renouncing the Hold in favor of his heir. Shall I challenge the babe, too, for you? And choke him with his swaddling cloths?”

Her eyes flashed, her lips parted in a terrible smile.

“There is no heir. Gemma died, the babe unborn. I lied.”

“Lied?” F’lar demanded, angry.

“Yes,” she taunted him with a toss of her chin. “I lied. There was no babe born. I merely wanted to be sure you challenged Fax.”

He grabbed her wrist, stung that he had twice fallen to her prodding.

“You provoked a dragonman to fight? To kill? When he is on Search?”

“Search? Why should I care about a Search? I’ve Ruatha as my Hold again. For ten Turns, I have worked and waited, schemed and suffered for that. What could your Search mean to me?”

F’lar wanted to strike that look of haughty contempt from her face. He twisted her arm savagely, bringing her to his feet before he released his grip. She laughed at him, and scuttled to one side. She was on her feet and out the door before he could give chase.

Swearing to himself, he raced down the rocky corridors, knowing she would have to make for the Hall to get out of the Hold. However, when he reached the Hall, there was no sign of her fleeing figure among those still loitering.

“Has that creature come this way?” he called to F’nor who was, by chance, standing by the door to the Court.

“No. Is she the source of power after all?”

“Yes, she is,” F’lar answered, galled all the more. “And Ruathan Blood at that!”

“Oh ho! Does she depose the babe, then?” F’nor asked, gesturing towards the birthing-woman who occupied a seat close to the now blazing hearth.
F'lar paused, about to return to search the Hold's myriad passages. He stared, momentarily confused, at this brown rider.

"Babe? What babe?"

"The male child Lady Gemma bore," F'nor replied, surprised by F'lar's uncomprehending look.

"It lives?"

"Yes. A strong babe, the woman says, for all that he was premature and taken forcibly from his dead dame's belly."

F'lar threw back his head with a shout of laughter. For all her scheming, she had been outdone by truth.

At that moment, he heard Mnementh roar in unmistakable elation and the curious warble of other dragons.

"Mnementh has caught her," F'lar cried, grinning with jubilation. He strode down the steps, past the body of the former Lord of the High Reaches and out into the main court.

He saw that the bronze dragon was gone from his Tower perch and called him. An agitation drew his eyes upward. He saw Mnementh spiraling down into the Court, his front paws clasping something. Mnementh informed F'lar that he had seen her climbing from one of the high windows and had simply plucked her from the ledge, knowing the dragonman sought her. The bronze dragon settled awkwardly onto his hind legs, his wings working to keep him balanced. Carefully he set the girl on her feet and formed a precise cage around her with his huge talons. She stood motionless within that circle, her face toward the wedge-shaped head that swayed above her.

The watch-wher, shrieking terror, anger and hatred, was lunging violently to the end of its chain, trying to come to Lessa's aid. It grabbed at F'lar as he strode to the two.

"You've courage enough, girl," he admitted, resting one hand casually on Mnementh's upper claw. Mnementh was enormously pleased with himself and swiveled his head down for his eye ridges to be scratched.

"You did not lie, you know," F'lar said, unable to resist taunting the girl.

Slowly she turned towards him, her face impassive. She was not afraid of dragons, F'lar realized with approval.

"The babe lives. And it is male."

She could not control her dismay and her shoulders sagged briefly before she pulled herself erect.
“Ruatha is mine,” she insisted in a tense low voice.
“Aye, and it would have been, had you approached me directly when the wing arrived here.”
Her eyes widened. “What do you mean?”
“A dragonman may champion anyone whose grievance is just. By the time we reached Ruath Hold, I was quite ready to challenge Fax given any reasonable cause, despite the Search.” This was not the whole truth but F’lar must teach this girl the folly of trying to control dragonmen. “Had you paid any attention to your harper’s songs, you’d know your rights. And,” F’lar’s voice held a vindictive edge that surprised him, “Lady Gemma might not now lie dead. She suffered far more at that tyrant’s hand than you.”
Something in her manner told him that she regretted Lady Gemma’s death, that it had affected her deeply.
“What good is Ruatha to you now?” he demanded, a broad sweep of his arm taking in the ruined court yard and the Hold, the entire unproductive valley of Ruatha. “You have indeed accomplished your ends; a profitless conquest and its conqueror’s death.” F’lar snorted: “All seven Holds will revert to their legitimate Blood, and time they did. One Hold, one lord. Of course, you might have to fight others, infected with Fax’s greed. Could you hold Ruatha against attack... now... in her decline?”
“Ruatha is mine!”
“Ruatha?” F’lar’s laugh was derisive. “When you could be Weyrwoman?”
“Weyrwoman?” she breathed, staring at him.
“Yes, little fool. I said I rode in Search... it’s about time you attended to more than Ruatha. And the object of my Search is... you!”
She stared at the finger he pointed at her as if it were dangerous.
“By the First Egg, girl, you’ve power in you to spare when you can turn a dragonman, all unwitting, to do your bidding. Ah, but never again, for now I am on guard against you.”
Mnementh crooned approvingly, the sound a soft rumble in his throat. He arched his neck so that one eye was turned directly on the girl, gleaming in the darkness of the court.
F’lar noticed with detached pride that she neither flinched nor blanched at the proximity of an eye greater than her own head.
“He likes to have his eye ridges scratched,” F’lar remarked in a friendly tone, changing tactics. “I know,” she said softly and reached out a hand to do that service.

“Nemorth’s queen,” F’lar continued, “is close to death. This time we must have a strong Weyrwoman.”

“This time—the Red Star?” the girl gasped, turning frightened eyes to F’lar. “You understand what it means?” “There is danger . . .” she began in a bare whisper, glancing apprehensively eastward.

F’lar did not question by what miracle she appreciated the imminence of danger. He had every intention of taking her to the Weyr by sheer force if necessary. But something within him wanted very much for her to accept the challenge voluntarily. A rebellious Weyrwoman would be even more dangerous than a stupid one. This girl had too much power and was too used to guile and strategy. It would be a calamity to antagonize her with injudicious handling.

“There is danger for all Pern. Not just Ruatha,” he said, allowing a note of entreaty to creep into his voice. “And you are needed. Not by Ruatha,” a wave of his hand dismissed that consideration as a negligible one compared to the total picture. “We are doomed without a strong Weyrwoman. Without you.”

“Gemma kept saying all the bronze riders were needed,” she murmured in a dazed whisper. What did she mean by that statement? F’lar frowned. Had she heard a word he had said? He pressed his argument, certain only that he had already struck one responsive chord. “You’ve won here. Let the babe,” he saw her startled rejection of that idea and ruthlessly qualified it, “. . . Gemma’s babe . . . be reared at Ruatha. You have command of all the Holds as Weyrwoman, not ruined Ruatha alone. You’ve accomplished Fax’s death. Leave off vengeance.”

She stared at F’lar with wonder, absorbing his words. “I never thought beyond Fax’s death,” she admitted slowly. “I never thought what should happen then.”

Her confusion was almost childlike and struck F’lar forcibly. He had had no time, or desire, to consider her prodigious accomplishment. Now he realized some measure of her indomitable character. She could not have been much over ten Turns of age herself when Fax had murdered her
family. Yet somehow, so young, she had set herself a goal and managed to survive both brutality and detection long enough to secure the usurper’s death. What a Weyrwoman she would be! In the tradition of those of Ruathan blood. The light of the paler moon made her look young and vulnerable and almost pretty.

“You can be Weyrwoman,” he insisted gently.

“Weyrwoman,” she breathed, incredulous, and gazed round the inner court bathed in soft moonlight. He thought she wavered.

“Or perhaps you enjoy rags?” he said, making his voice harsh, mocking. “And matted hair, dirty feet and cracked hands? Sleeping in straw, eating rinds? You are young . . . that is, I assume you are young,” and his voice was frankly skeptical. She glared at him, her lips firmly pressed together.

“Is this the be-all and end-all of your ambition? What are you that this little corner of the great world is all you want?” He paused and with utter contempt added, “The blood of Ruatha has thinned, I see. You’re afraid!”

“I am Lessa, daughter of the Lord of Ruath,” she countered, stung. She drew herself erect. Her eyes flashed. “I am afraid of nothing!”

F’lar contented himself with a slight smile.

Mnementh, however, threw up his head, and stretched out his sinuous neck to its whole length. His full-throated peal rang out down the valley. The bronze communicated his awareness to F’lar that Lessa had accepted the challenge. The other dragons answered back, their warbles shriller than Mnemenenth’s bellow. The watch-pher which had cowered at the end of its chain lifted its voice in a thin, unnerving screech until the Hold emptied of its startled occupants.

“F’nor,” the bronze rider called, waving his wingleader to him. “Leave half the flight to guard the Hold. Some nearby lord might think to emulate Fax’s example. Send one rider to the High Reaches with the glad news. You go directly to the Cloth Hall and speak to L’tol . . . Lytol.” F’lar grinned. “I think he would make an exemplary Warder and Lord Surrogate for this Hold in the name of the Weyr and the babe.”

The brown rider’s face expressed enthusiasm for his mission as he began to comprehend his leader’s intentions. With Fax dead and Ruatha under the protection of dragon- men, particularly that same one who had dispatched Fax, the Hold would have wise management.
“She caused Ruatha’s deterioration?” he asked.

“And nearly ours with her machinations,” F’lar replied but having found the admirable object of his Search, he could now be magnanimous. “Suppress your exultation, brother,” he advised quickly as he took note of F’nor’s expression. “The new queen must also be Impressed.”

“I’ll settle arrangements here. Lytol is an excellent choice,” F’nor said.

“Who is this Lytol?” demanded Lessa pointedly. She had twisted the mass of filthy hair back from her face. In the moonlight the dirt was less noticeable. F’lar caught F’nor looking at her with an all too easily read expression. He signaled F’nor, with a peremptory gesture, to carry out his orders without delay.

“Lytol is a dragonless man,” F’lar told the girl, “no friend to Fax. He will ward the Hold well and it will prosper.” He added persuasively with a quelling stare full on her. “Won’t it?”

She regarded him somberly, without answering, until he chuckled softly at her discomfiture.

“We’ll return to the Weyr,” he announced, proffering a hand to guide her to Mnementh’s side.

The bronze one had extended his head toward the watch-wher who now lay panting on the ground, its chain limp in the dust.

“Oh,” Lessa sighed, and dropped beside the grotesque beast. It raised its head slowly, luring piteously.

“Mnementh says it is very old and soon will sleep itself to death.”

Lessa cradled the bestial head in her arms, scratching it behind the ears.

“Come, Lessa of Pern,” F’lar said, impatient to be up and away.

She rose slowly but obediently. “It saved me. It knew me.”

“It knows it did well,” F’lar assured her, brusquely, wondering at such an uncharacteristic show of sentiment in her.

He took her hand again, to help her to her feet and lead her back to Mnementh. As they turned, he glimpsed the watch-wher, launching itself at a dead run after Lessa. The chain, however, held fast. The beast’s neck broke, with a sickeningly audible snap.

Lessa was on her knees in an instant, cradling the repulsive head in her arms.
"Why, you foolish thing, why?" she asked in a stunned whisper as the light in the beast's green-gold eyes dimmed and died out.

Mnementh informed F'lar that the creature had lived this long only to preserve the Ruathan line. At Lessa's imminent departure, it had welcomed death.

A convulsive shudder went through Lessa's slim body. F'lar watched as she undid the heavy buckle that fastened the metal collar about the watch-wher's neck. She threw the tether away with a violent motion. Tenderly she laid the watch-wher on the cobbles. With one last caress to the clipped wings, she rose in a fluid movement and walked resolutely to Mnementh without a single backward glance. She stepped calmly to the dragon's raised leg and seated herself, as F'lar directed, on the great neck.

F'lar glanced around the courtyard at the remainder of his wing which had reformed there. The Hold folk had retreated back into the safety of the Great Hall. When his wingmen were all astride, he vaulted to Mnementh's neck, behind the girl.

"Hold tightly to my arms," he ordered her as he took hold of the smallest neck ridge and gave the command to fly.

Her fingers closed spasmodically around his forearm as the great bronze dragon took off, the enormous wings working to achieve height from the vertical takeoff. Mnemeth preferred to fall into flight from a cliff or tower. Like all dragons, he tended to indolence. F'lar glanced behind him, saw the other dragonmen form the flight line, spread out to cover those still on guard at Ruatha Hold.

When they had reached a sufficient altitude, he told Mnemeth to transfer, going between to the Weyr.

Only a gasp indicated the girl's astonishment as they hung between. Accustomed as he was to the sting of the profound cold, to the awesome utter lack of light and sound, F'lar still found the sensations unnerving. Yet the uncommon transfer spanned no more time than it took to cough thrice.

Mnementh rumbled approval of this candidate's calm reaction as they flicked out of the eerie between.

And then they were above the Weyr, Mnemeth setting his wings to glide in the bright daylight, half a world away from night-time Ruatha.

As they circled above the great stony trough of the Weyr, F'lar peered at Lessa's face, pleased with the light mirrored
there; she showed no trace of fear as they hung a thousand lengths above the high Benden mountain range. Then, as the seven dragons roared their incoming cry, an incredulous smile lit her face.

The other wingmen dropped into a wide spiral, down, down while Mnemeth elected to descend in lazy circles. The dragonmen peeled off smartly and dropped, each to his own tier in the caves of the Weyr. Mnemeth finally completed his leisurely approach to their quarters, whistling shrilly to himself as he braked his forward speed with a twist of his wings, dropping lightly at last to the ledge. He crouched as F’lar swung the girl to the rough rock, scored from thousands of clawed landings.

“This leads only to our quarters,” he told her as they entered the corridor, vaulted and wide for the easy passage of great bronze dragons.

As they reached the huge natural cavern that had been his since Mnemeth achieved maturity, F’lar looked about him with eyes fresh from his first prolonged absence from the Weyr. The huge chamber was unquestionably big, certainly larger than most of the halls he had visited in Fax’s procession. Those halls were intended as gathering places for men, not the habitations of dragons. But suddenly he saw his own quarters were nearly as shabby as all Ruatha. Benden was, of a certainty, one of the oldest dragonweyrs, as Ruatha was one of the oldest Holds, but that excused nothing. How many dragons had bedded in that hollow to make solid rock conform to dragon proportions! How many feet had worn the path past the dragon’s weyr into the sleeping chamber, to the bathing room beyond where the natural warm spring provided everfresh water! But the wall hangings were faded and unraveling and there were grease stains on lintel and floor that should be sanded away.

He noticed the wary expression on Lessa’s face as he paused in the sleeping room.

“I must feed Mnemeth immediately. So you may bathe first,” he said, rummaging in a chest and finding clean clothes for her, discards of other previous occupants of his quarters, but far more presentable than her present covering. He carefully laid back in the chest the white wool robe that was traditional Impression garb. She would wear that later. He tossed several garments at her feet and a bag of sweetsand, gesturing to the hanging that obscured the way to the bath.
He left her, then, the clothes in a heap at her feet, for she made no effort to catch anything.

Mnementh informed him that F’nor was feeding Canth and that he, Mnementh, was hungry, too. She didn’t trust F’lar but she wasn’t afraid of himself.

“Why should she be afraid of you?” F’lar asked. “You’re cousin to the watch-wher who was her only friend.”

Mnementh informed F’lar that he, a fully matured bronze dragon, was no relation to any scrawny, crawling, chained, and wing-clipped watch-wher.

F’lar, pleased at having been able to tease the bronze one, chuckled to himself. With great dignity, Mnementh curved down to the feeding ground.

*By the Golden Egg of Faranth*
*By the Weyrwoman wise and true,*
*Breed a flight of bronze and brown wings,*
*Breed a flight of green and blue.*
*Breed riders, strong and daring,*
*Dragon-loving, born as hatched,*
*Flight of hundreds soaring skyward,*
*Man and dragon fully matched.*

Lessa waited until the sound of the dragonman’s footsteps proved he had really gone away. She rushed quickly through the big cavern, heard the scrape of claw and the *whoosh* of the mighty wings. She raced down the short passageway, right to the edge of the yawning entrance. There was the bronze dragon circling down to the wider end of the mile-long barren oval that was Benden Weyr. She had heard of the Weyrs, as any Pernese had, but to be in one was quite a different matter.

She peered up, around, down that sheer rock face. There was no way off but by dragon wing. The nearest cave mouths were an unhandy distance above her, to one side, below her on the other. She was neatly secluded here.

Weyrwoman, he had told her. His woman? In his weyr? Was that what he had meant? No, that was not the impression she got from the dragon. It occurred to her, suddenly, that it was odd she had understood the dragon. Were common folk able to? Or was it the dragonman blood in her line? At all events, Mnementh had inferred something greater, some special rank. She remembered vaguely that, when dragonmen went on Search, they looked for certain women.
Ah, certain women. She was one, then, of several contenders. Yet the bronze rider had offered her the position as if she and she, alone, qualified. He had his own generous portion of conceit, that one, Lessa decided. Arrogant he was, though not a bully like Fax.

She could see the bronze dragon swoop down to the running herdbeasts, saw the strike, saw the dragon wheel up to settle on a far ledge to feed. Instinctively she drew back from the opening, back into the dark and relative safety of the corridor.

The feeding dragon evoked scores of horrid tales. Tales at which she had scoffed but now ... Was it true, then, that dragons did eat human flesh? Did ... Lessa halted that trend of thought. Dragonkind was no less cruel than mankind. The dragon, at least, acted from bestial need rather than bestial greed.

Assured that the dragonman would be occupied a while, she crossed the larger cave into the sleeping room. She scooped up the clothing and the bag of cleansing sand and proceeded to the bathing room.

To be clean! To be completely clean and to be able to stay that way. With distaste, she stripped off the remains of the rags, kicking them to one side. She made a soft mud with the sweetsand and scrubbed her entire body until she drew blood from various half-healed cuts. Then she jumped into the pool, gasping as the warm water made the sweetsand foam in the lacerations.

It was a ritual cleansing of more than surface soil. The luxury of cleanliness was ecstasy.

Finally satisfied she was as clean as one long soaking could make her, she left the pool, reluctantly. Wringing out her hair she tucked it up on her head as she dried herself. She shook out the clothing and held one garment against her experimentally. The fabric, a soft green, felt smooth under her water-shrunken fingers, although the nap caught on her roughened hands. She pulled it over her head. It was loose but the darker-green over-tunic had a sash which she pulled in tight at the waist. The unusual sensation of softness against her bare skin made her wriggle with voluptuous pleasure. The skirt, no longer a ragged hem of tatters, swirled heavily around her ankles. She smiled. She took up a fresh drying cloth and began to work on her hair.

A muted sound came to her ears and she stopped, hands poised, head bent to one side. Straining, she listened. Yes,
there were sounds without. The dragonman and his beasts must have returned. She grimaced to herself with annoyance at his untimely interruption and rubbed harder at her hair. She ran fingers through the half-dry tangles, the motions arrested as she encountered snarls. Vexed, she rummaged on the shelves until she found, as she had hoped to, a coarse-toothed metal comb.

Dry, her hair had a life of its own suddenly, crackling about her hands and clinging to face and comb and dress. It was difficult to get the silky stuff under control. And her hair was longer than she had thought, for, clean and unmatted, it fell to her waist—when it did not cling to her hands.

She paused, listening, and heard no sound at all. Apprehensively, she stepped to the curtain and glanced warily into the sleeping room. It was empty. She listened and caught the perceptible thoughts of the sleepy dragon. Well, she would rather meet the man in the presence of a sleepy dragon than in a sleeping room. She started across the floor and, out of the corner of her eye, caught sight of a strange woman as she passed a polished piece of metal hanging on the wall.

Amazed, she stopped short, staring, incredulous, at the face the metal reflected. Only when she put her hands to her prominent cheekbones in a gesture of involuntary surprise and the reflection imitated the gesture, did she realize she looked at herself.

Why, that girl in the reflector was prettier than Lady Tela, than the clothman’s daughter! But so thin. Her hands of their own volition dropped to her neck, to the protruding collarbones, to her breasts which did not entirely accord with the gauntness of the rest of her. The dress was too large for her frame, she noted with an unexpected emergence of conceit born in that instant of delighted appraisal. And her hair... it stood out around her head like an aureole. It wouldn’t lie contained. She smoothed it down with impatient fingers, automatically bringing locks forward to hang around her face. As she irritably pushed them back, dismissing a need for disguise, the hair drifted up again.

A slight sound, the scrape of a boot against stone, caught her back from her bemusement. She waited, momentarily expecting him to appear. She was suddenly timid. With her face bare to the world, her hair behind her ears, her body outlined by a clinging fabric, she was stripped of her accus-
tomed anonymity and was, therefore, in her estimation, vulnerable.

She controlled the desire to run away—the irrational fear. Observing herself in the looking metal, she drew her shoulders back, tilted her head high, chin up; the movement caused her hair to crackle and cling and shift about her head. She was Lessa of Ruatha, of a fine old Blood. She no longer needed artifice to preserve herself; she must stand proudly bare-faced before the world . . . and that dragonman.

Resolutely she crossed the room, pushing aside the hanging on the doorway to the great cavern.

He was there, beside the head of the dragon, scratching its eye ridges, a curiously tender expression on his face. The tableau was at variance with all she had heard of dragonmen.

She had, of course, heard of the strange affinity between rider and dragon but this was the first time she realized that love was part of that bond. Or that this reserved, cold man was capable of such deep emotion.

He turned slowly, as if loath to leave the bronze beast. He caught sight of her and pivoted completely round, his eyes intense as he took note of her altered appearance. With quick, light steps, he closed the distance between them and ushered her back into the sleeping room, one strong hand holding her by the elbow.

"Mnementh has fed lightly and will need quiet to rest," he said in a low voice. He pulled the heavy hanging into place across the opening.

Then he held her away from him, turning her this way and that, scrutinizing her closely, curious and slightly surprised.

"You wash up . . . pretty, yes, almost pretty," he said, amused condescension in his voice. She pulled roughly away from him, piqued. His low laugh mocked her. "After all, how could one guess what was under the grime of . . . ten full Turns?"

At length he said, "No matter. We must eat and I shall require your services." At her startled exclamation, he turned, grinning maliciously now as his movement revealed the caked blood on his left sleeve. "The least you can do is bathe wounds honorably received fighting your battle."

He pushed aside a portion of the drape that curtained the inner wall. "Food for two!" he roared down a black gap in the sheer stone.
She heard a subterranean echo far below as his voice resounded down what must be a long shaft.

"Nemorth is nearly rigid," he was saying as he took supplies from another drape-hidden shelf, "and the Hatching will soon begin anyhow."

A coldness settled in Lessa's stomach at the mention of a Hatching. The mildest tales she had heard about that part of dragonlore were chilling, the worst dismayingly macabre. She took the things he handed her numbly.

"What? Frightened?" the dragonman taunted, pausing as he stripped off his torn and bloodied shirt.

With a shake of her head, Lessa turned her attention to the wide-shouldered, well-muscled back he presented her, the paler skin of his body decorated with random bloody streaks. Fresh blood welled from the point of his shoulder for the removal of his shirt had broken the tender scabs.

"I will need water," she said and saw she had a flat pan among the items he had given her. She went swiftly to the pool for water, wondering how she had come to agree to venture so far from Ruatha. Ruined though it was, it had been hers and was familiar to her from Tower to deep cellar. At the moment the idea had been proposed and insidiously prosecuted by the dragonman, she had felt capable of anything, having achieved, at last, Fax's death. Now, it was all she could do to keep the water from slopping out of the pan that shook unaccountably in her hands.

She forced herself to deal only with the wound. It was a nasty gash, deep where the point had entered and torn downward in a gradually shallower slice. His skin felt smooth under her fingers as she cleansed the wound. In spite of herself, she noticed the masculine odor of him, compounded not unpleasantly of sweat, leather, and an unusual muskiness which must be from close association with dragons.

She stood back when she had finished her ministration. He flexed his arm experimentally in the constricting bandage and the motion set the muscles rippling along side and back.

When he faced her, his eyes were dark and thoughtful.

"Gently done. My thanks." His smile was ironic.

She backed away as he rose but he only went to the chest to take out a clean, white shirt.

A muted rumble sounded, growing quickly louder.

Dragons roaring? Lessa wondered, trying to conquer the ridiculous fear that rose within her. Had the Hatching started?
There was no watch-wher’s lair to secrete herself in, here.

As if he understood her confusion, the dragonman laughed good-humoredly and, his eyes on hers, drew aside the wall covering just as some noisy mechanism inside the shaft propelled a tray of food into sight.

Ashamed of her unbased fright and furious that he had witnessed it, Lessa sat rebelliously down on the fur-covered wall seat, heartily wishing him a variety of serious and painful injuries which she could dress with inconsiderate hands. She would not waste future opportunities.

He placed the tray on the low table in front of her, throwing down a heap of furs for his own seat. There was meat, bread, a tempting yellow cheese and even a few pieces of winter fruit. He made no move to eat nor did she, though the thought of a piece of fruit that was ripe, instead of rotten, set her mouth to watering. He glanced up at her, and frowned.

“Even in the Weyr, the lady breaks bread first,” he said, and inclined his head politely to her.

Lessa flushed, unused to any courtesy and certainly unused to being first to eat. She broke off a chunk of bread. It was like nothing she remembered having tasted before. For one thing, it was fresh-baked. The flour had been finely sifted, without trace of sand or hull. She took the slice of cheese he proffered her and it, too, had an uncommonly delicious sharpness. Made bold by this indication of her changed status, Lessa reached for the plumpest piece of fruit.

“Now,” the dragonman began, his hand touching hers to get her attention.

Guiltily she dropped the fruit, thinking she had erred. She stared at him, wondering at her fault. He retrieved the fruit and placed it back in her hand as he continued to speak. Wide-eyed, disarmed, she nibbled, and gave him her full attention.

“Listen to me. You must not show a moment’s fear, whatever happens on the Hatching Ground. And you must not let her overeat.” A wry expression crossed his face. “One of our main functions is to keep a dragon from excessive eating.”

Lessa lost interest in the taste of the fruit. She placed it carefully back in the bowl and tried to sort out not what he had said, but what his tone of voice implied. She looked at the dragonman’s face, seeing him as a person, not a symbol, for the first time.
There was a blackness about him that was not malevolent; it was a brooding sort of patience. Heavy black hair, heavy black brows; his eyes, a brown light enough to seem golden, were all too expressive of cynical emotions, or cold hauteur. His lips were thin but well-shaped and in repose almost gentle. Why must he always pull his mouth to one side in disapproval or in one of those sardonic smiles? At this moment, he was completely unaffected.

He meant what he was saying. He did not want her to be afraid. There was no reason for her, Lessa, to fear.

He very much wanted her to succeed. In keeping whom from overeating what? Herd animals? A newly hatched dragon certainly wasn’t capable of eating a full beast. That seemed a simple enough task to Lessa. . . . Main function? Our main function?

The dragonman was looking at her expectantly.

“Our main function?” she repeated, an unspoken request for more information inherent in her inflection.

“More of that later. First things first,” he said, impatiently waving off other questions.

“But what happens?” she insisted.

“As I was told so I tell you. No more, no less. Remember these two points. No fear, and no overeating.”

“But . . .”

“You, however, need to eat. Here.” He speared a piece of meat on his knife and thrust it at her, frowning until she managed to choke it down. He was about to force more on her but she grabbed up her half-eaten fruit and bit down into the firm sweet sphere instead. She had already eaten more at this one meal than she was accustomed to having all day at the Hold.

“We shall soon eat better at the Weyr,” he remarked, regarding the tray with a jaundiced eye.

Lessa was surprised. This was a feast, in her opinion.

“More than you’re used to? Yes, I forgot you left Ruatha with bare bones indeed.”

She stiffened.

“You did well at Ruatha. I mean no criticism,” he added, smiling at her reaction. “But look at you,” and he gestured at her body, that curious expression crossing his face, half-amused, half-contemplative. “I should not have guessed you’d clean up pretty,” he remarked. “Nor with such hair.” This time his expression was frankly admiring.

Involuntarily she put one hand to her head, the hair
crackling over her fingers. But what reply she might have made
him, indignant as she was, died aborning. An unearthly
keening filled the chamber.

The sounds set up a vibration that ran down the bones
behind her ear to her spine. She clapped both hands to her
ears. The noise rang through her skull despite her defending
hands. As abruptly as it started, it ceased.

Before she knew what he was about, the dragonman had
grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her over to the chest.
"Take those off," he ordered, indicating dress and tunic.
While she stared at him stupidly, he held up a loose white
robe, sleeveless and beltless, a matter of two lengths of fine
cloth fastened at shoulder and side seams. "Take it off, or
do I assist you?" he asked, with no patience at all.

The wild sound was repeated and its unnerving tone made
her fingers fly faster. She had no sooner loosened the gar­
ments she wore, letting them slide to her feet, than he had
thrown the other over her head. She managed to get her
arms in the proper places before he grabbed her wrist again
and was speeding with her out of the room, her hair whip­
ing out behind her, alive with static.

As they reached the outer chamber, the bronze dragon was
standing in the center of the cavern, his head turned to watch
the sleeping room door. He seemed impatient to Lessa; his
great eyes, which fascinated her so, sparkled iridescently.
His manner breathed an inner excitement of great proportions
and from his throat a high-pitched croon issued, several
octaves below the unnerving cry that had roused them all.

With a yank that rocked her head on her neck, the dragon­
man pulled her along the passage. The dragon padded beside
them at such speed that Lessa fully expected they would all
catapult off the ledge. Somehow, at the crucial stride, she
was a-perch the bronze neck, the dragonman holding her
firmly about the waist. In the same fluid movement, they
were gliding across the great bowl of the Weyr to the higher
wall opposite. The air was full of wings and dragon tails,
rent with a chorus of sounds, echoing and re-echoing across
the stony valley.

Mnementh set what Lessa was certain would be a collision
course with other dragons, straight for a huge round black­
ness in the cliff-face, high up. Magically, the beasts filled in,
the greater wingspread of Mnementh just clearing the sides
of the entrance.
The passageway reverberated with the thunder of wings. The air compressed around her thickly. Then they broke into a gigantic cavern.

Why, the entire mountain must be hollow, thought Lessa, incredulous. Around the enormous cavern, dragons perched in serried ranks, blues, greens, browns and only two great bronze beasts like Mnemeth, on ledges meant to accommodate hundreds. Lessa gripped the bronze neck scales before her, instinctively aware of the imminence of a great event.

Mnemeth wheeled downward, disregarding the ledge of the bronze ones. Then all Lessa could see was what lay on the sandy floor of the great cavern; dragon eggs. A clutch of ten monstrous, mottled eggs, their shells moving spasmodically as the fledglings within tapped their way out. To one side, on a raised portion of the floor, was a golden egg, larger by half again the size of the mottled ones. Just beyond the golden egg lay the motionless ochre hulk of the old queen.

Just as she realized Mnemeth was hovering over the floor in the vicinity of that egg, Lessa felt the dragonman’s hands on her, lifting her from Mnemeth’s neck.

Apprehensively, she grabbed at him. His hands tightened and inexorably swung her down. His eyes, fierce and gray, locked with hers.

“Remember, Lessa!”

Mnemeth added an encouragement, one great compound eye turned on her. Then he rose from the floor. Lessa half-raised one hand in entreaty, bereft of all support, even that of the sure inner compulsion which had sustained her in her struggle for revenge on Fax. She saw the bronze dragon settle on the first ledge, at some distance from the other two bronze beasts. The dragonman dismounted and Mnemeth curved his sinuous neck until his head was beside his rider. The man reached up absently, it seemed to Lessa, and caressed his mount.

Loud screams and wailings diverted Lessa and she saw more dragons descend to hover just above the cavern floor, each rider depositing a young woman until there were twelve girls, including Lessa. She remained a little apart from them as they clung to each other. She regarded them curiously. The girls were not injured in any way she could see, so why such weeping? She took a deep breath against the coldness
within her. Let *them* be afraid. She was Lessa of Ruatha and did not need to be afraid.

Just then, the golden egg moved convulsively. Gasping as one, the girls edged away from it, back against the rocky wall. One, a lovely blonde, her heavy plait of golden hair swinging just above the ground, started to step off the raised floor and stopped, shrieking, backing fearfully towards the scant comfort of her peers.

Lessa wheeled to see what cause there might be for the look of horror on the girl's face. She stepped back involuntarily herself.

In the main section of the sandy arena, several of the handful of eggs had already cracked wide open. The fledglings, crowing weakly, were moving towards... and Lessa gulped... the young boys standing stolidly in a semi-circle. Some of them were no older than she had been when Fax's army had swooped down on Ruath Hold.

The shrieking of the women subsided to muffled gasps. A fledgling reached out with claw and beak to grab a boy.

Lessa forced herself to watch as the young dragon mauled the youth, throwing him roughly aside as if unsatisfied in some way. The boy did not move and Lessa could see blood seeping onto the sand from dragon-inflicted wounds.

A second fledgling lurched against another boy and halted, flapping its damp wings impotently, raising its scrawny neck and croaking a parody of the encouraging croon Mnemeth often gave. The boy uncertainly lifted a hand and began to scratch the eye ridge. Incredulous, Lessa watched as the fledgling, its crooning increasingly more mellow, ducked its head, pushing at the boy. The child's face broke into an unbelieving smile of elation.

Tearing her eyes from this astounding sight, Lessa saw that another fledgling was beginning the same performance with another boy. Two more dragons had emerged in the interim. One had knocked a boy down and was walking over him, oblivious to the fact that its claws were raking great gashes. The fledgling who followed its hatch-mate stopped by the wounded child, ducking its head to the boy's face, crooning anxiously. As Lessa watched, the boy managed to struggle to his feet, tears of pain streaming down his cheeks. She could hear him pleading with the dragon not to worry, that he was only scratched a little.

It was over very soon. The young dragons paired off with boys. Green riders dropped down to carry off the unaccept-
able. Blue riders settled to the floor with their beasts and led the couples out of the cavern, the young dragons squealing, crooning, flapping wet wings as they staggered off, encouraged by their newly acquired weyrmates.

Lessa turned resolutely back to the rocking golden egg, knowing what to expect and trying to divine what the successful boys had, or had not done, that caused the baby dragons to single them out.

A crack appeared in the golden shell and was greeted by the terrified screams of the girls. Some had fallen into little heaps of white fabric, others embraced tightly in their mutual fear. The crack widened and the wedge head broke through, followed quickly by the neck, gleaming gold. Lessa wondered with unexpected detachment how long it would take the beast to mature, considering its by no means small size at birth. For the head was larger than that of the male dragons and they had been large enough to overwhelm sturdy boys of ten full Turns.

Lessa was aware of a loud hum within the Hall. Glancing up at the audience, she realized it emanated from the watching bronze dragons, for this was the birth of their mate, their queen. The hum increased in volume as the shell shattered into fragments and the golden, glistening body of the new female emerged. It staggered out, dipping its sharp beak into the soft sand, momentarily trapped. Flapping its wet wings, it righted itself, ludicrous in its weak awkwardness. With sudden and unexpected swiftness, it dashed towards the terror-stricken girls.

Before Lessa could blink, it shook the first girl with such violence, her head snapped audibly and she fell limply to the sand. Disregarding her, the dragon leaped towards the second girl but misjudged the distance and fell, grabbing out with one claw for support and raking the girl’s body from shoulder to thigh. The screaming of the mortally injured girl distracted the dragon and released the others from their horrified trance. They scattered in panicky confusion, racing, running, tripping, stumbling, falling across the sand towards the exit the boys had used.

As the golden beast, crying piteously, lurched down from the raised arena towards the scattered women, Lessa moved. Why hadn’t that silly clunk-headed girl stepped aside, Lessa thought, grabbing for the wedge-head, at birth not much
larger than her own torso. The dragon's so clumsy and weak
she's her own worst enemy.

Lessa swung the head round so that the many-faceted
eyes were forced to look at her . . . and found herself lost
in that rainbow regard.

A feeling of joy suffused Lessa, a feeling of warmth, ten­
derness, unalloyed affection and instant respect and admira­
tion flooded mind and heart and soul. Never again would
Lessa lack an advocate, a defender, an intimate, aware in­
stantly of the temper of her mind and heart, of her desires.
How wonderful was Lessa, the thought intruded into Lessa's
reflections, how pretty, how kind, how thoughtful, how
brave and clever!

Mechanically, Lessa reached out to scratch the exact spot
on the soft eye ridge.

The dragon blinked at her wistfully, extremely sad that
she had distressed Lessa. Lessa reassuringly patted the
slightly damp, soft neck that curved trustingly towards her.
The dragon reeled to one side and one wing fouled on the
hind claw. It hurt. Carefully, Lessa lifted the erring foot,
freed the wing, folding it back across the dorsal ridge with
a pat.

The dragon began to croon in her throat, her eyes follow­
ing Lessa's every move. She nudged at Lessa and Lessa
obediently attended the other eye ridge.

The dragon let it be known she was hungry.

"We'll get you something to eat directly," Lessa assured
her briskly and blinked back at the dragon in amazement.
How could she be so callous? It was a fact that this little
menace had just now seriously injured, if not killed, two
women.

She wouldn't have believed her sympathies could swing
so alarmingly towards the beast. Yet it was the most natural
thing in the world for her to wish to protect this fledgling.

The dragon arched her neck to look Lessa squarely in the
eyes. Ramoth repeated wistfully how exceedingly hungry
she was, confined so long in that shell without nourishment.

Lessa wondered how she knew the golden dragon's name
and Ramoth replied: Why shouldn't she know her own name
since it was hers and no one else's? And then Lessa was lost
again in the wonder of those expressive eyes.

Oblivious to the descending bronze dragons, uncaring of
the presence of their riders, Lessa stood caressing the head
of the most wonderful creature on all Pern, fully prescient
of troubles and glories, but most immediately aware that Lessa of Pern was Weyrwoman to Ramoth the Golden, for now and forever.
Philip José Farmer

Philip Farmer once did me an enormous favor. It was long ago and there was no way he could tell at the time that he was doing me one, and I never acknowledged it. So let's take care of the obligation now.

It was back in 1954, I think, and the scene was a convention in Cincinnati. (At least, I think it was Cincinnati, unless I am getting two conventions confused and coalesced in my mind. I seem to recall driving through the tail-end of a hurricane to get there.)

The point is that at that convention some publicity had been arranged—something I always rather dislike. I'm not keen on publicity because the bother always seems greater than the results, and because it isn't me that I'm interested in having people know about, but my books.

Still, the publicity was arranged and you can't be a curmudgeon about it so I tried to hide my grumpiness as I went down to the room where the newspaper reporter was waiting. Randall Garrett and Phil Farmer went, too. Now Randall Garrett and I are a pair of twin-souls in a way: portly, loud, and irreverent. It's difficult to get a straight answer out of either of us, for the question is bound to raise some ridiculous piece of off-beat humor in either of our minds and we come out with it and then it is spread over the newspaper and we're sorry.

Not so Phil Farmer. He has deep-set eyes, a strong chin, and a glowing and enormous sincerity. In no time at all, the reporter had switched to him and ignored Randall and myself. (I think it was Phil's sincerity. He was also somberly handsome and the reporter was a girl.)

One of the questions was "Tell me, Mr. Farmer, how do
you keep up to date in science so that you can write your science fiction stories?"

That was a stunner for me. I had never heard of such a thing. At the time, I was teaching biochemistry at a medical school full time and a textbook I had helped write was going into its second edition, so I had to keep up in biochemistry. But keeping up in science in general? And for science fiction?

Phil took it calmly. He said, "For one thing, I subscribe to Scientific American."

I was staggered. If Phil, who is a lot less "heavy science" than I am, feels it necessary to keep up with science, what am I doing just lounging around?

I could hardly wait to get home to send in my subscription to Scientific American (a subscription I still have) and to begin to work at keeping up. I don't know that it ever affected my science fiction much, but I'll tell you this: since 1954 I have written dozens of non-fiction books covering just about every field of science, and one of the reasons I can do so dates back to that one remark of Phil Farmer.

Thanks, Phil!
If Jules Verne could really have looked into the future, say 1966 A.D., he would have crapped in his pants. And 2166, oh, my!

—from Grandpa Winnegan’s unpublished Ms. How I Screwed Uncle Sam & Other Private Ejaculations.

THE COCK THAT CROWED BACKWARDS

Un and Sub, the giants, are grinding him for bread.

Broken pieces float up through the wine of sleep. Vast treadings crush abysmal grapes for the incubus sacrament.

He as Simple Simon fishes in his soul as pail for the leviathan.

He groans, half-wakes, turns over, sweating dark oceans, and groans again. Un and Sub, putting their backs to their work, turn the stone wheels of the sunken mill, muttering Fie, fye, fo, fum. Eyes glittering orange-red as a cat’s in a cubbyhole, teeth dull white digits in the murky arithmetic.

Un and Sub, Simple Simons themselves, busily mix metaphors non-self-consciously.

Dunghill and cock’s egg: up rises the cockatrice and gives first crow, two more to come, in the flushrush of blood of dawn of I-am-the-erection-and-the-strife.

It grows out and out until weight and length merge to curve it over, a not-yet weeping willow or broken reed. The one-eyed red head peeks over the edge of bed. It rests its chinless jaw, then, as body swells, slides over and down. Looking monocularly this way and those, it sniffs archaically
across the floor and heads for the door, left open by the lapsus linguae of malingering sentinels.

A loud braying from the center of the room makes it turn back. The three-legged ass, Baalim's easel, is heehawing. On the easel is the "canvas," an oval shallow pan of irradiated plastic, specially treated. The canvas is seven feet high and eighteen inches deep. Within the painting is a scene that must be finished by tomorrow.

As much sculpture as painting, the figures are in alto‐relief, rounded, some nearer the back of the pan than others. They glow with light from outside and also from the self‐luminous plastic of the "canvas." The light seems to enter the figures, soak awhile, then break loose. The light is pale red, the red of dawn, of blood watered with tears, of anger, of ink on the debit side of the ledger.


Socrates, Ben Jonson, Cellini, Swedenborg, Li Po, and Hiawatha are roistering in the Mermaid Tavern. Through a window, Daedalus is seen on top of the battlements of Cnossus, shoving a rocket up the ass of his son, Icarus, to give him a jet‐assisted takeoff for his famous flight. In one corner crouches Og, Son of Fire. He gnaws on a saber‐tooth bone and paints bison and mammoths on the mildewed plaster. The barmaid, Athena, is bending over the table where she is serving nectar and pretzels to her distinguished customers. Aristotle, wearing goat's horns, is behind her. He has lifted her skirt and is tupping her from behind. The ashes from the cigarette dangling from his smirking lips have fallen onto her skirt, which is beginning to smoke. In the doorway of the men's room, a drunken Batman succumbs to a long‐repressed desire and attempts to bugger the Boy Wonder. Through another window is a lake on the surface of which a man is walking, a green‐tarnished halo hovering over his head. Behind him a periscope sticks out of the water.

Prehensile, the penisnake wraps itself around the brush and begins to paint. The brush is a small cylinder attached at one end to a hose which runs to a dome‐shaped machine. From the other end of the cylinder extends a nozzle. The aperture of this can be decreased or increased by rotation of a thumb‐dial on the cylinder. The paint which the nozzle
deposits in a fine spray or in a thick stream or in whatever color or hue desired is controlled by several dials on the cylinder.

Furiously, proboscisean, it builds up another figure layer by layer. Then, it sniffs a musty odor of must and drops the brush and slides out the door and down the bend of wall of oval hall, describing the scrawl of legless creatures, a writing in the sand which all may read but few understand. Blood pumppumps in rhythm with the mills of Un and Sub to feed and swill the hot-blooded reptile. But the walls, detecting intrusive mass and extrusive desire, glow.

He groans, and the glandular cobra rises and sways to the fluting of his wish for cuntcealment. Let there not be light! The nights must be his cloaka. Speed past mother's room, nearest the exit. Ah! Sighs softly in relief but air whistles through the vertical and tight mouth, announcing the departure of the exsupress for Desideratum.

The door has become archaic; it has a keyhole. Quick! Up the ramp and out of the house through the keyhole and out onto the street. One person abroad a broad, a young woman with phosphorescent silver hair and snatch to match.

Out and down the street and coiling around her ankle. She looks down with surprise and then fear. He likes this; too willing were too many. He's found a diamond in the ruff.

Up around her kitten-ear-soft leg, around and around, and sliding across the dale of groin. Nuzzling the tender cork-screwed hairs and then, self-Tantalus, detouring up the slight convex of belly, saying hello to the bellybutton, pressing on it to ring upstairs, around and around the narrow waist and shyly and quickling snatched a kiss from each nipple. Then back down to form an expedition for climbing the mons veneris and planting the flag thereon.

Oh, delection tabu and sickersacrosanct! There's a baby in there, ectoplasm beginning to form in eager preanticipation of actuality. Drop, egg, and shoot the chutychutes of flesh, hastening to gulp the Lucky Micromoby Dick, out-wriggling its million million brothers, survival of the fighting-est.

A vast croaking fills the hall. The hot breath chills the skin. He sweats. Icicles coat the tumorous fuselage, and it sags under the weight of ice, and fog rolls around, whistling past the struts, and the ailerons and elevators are locked in ice, and he's losing altiattitude fast. Get up, get up! Venus-
berg somewhere ahead in the mists; Tannhäuser, blow your strumpets, send up your flares, I'm in a nosedive.

Mother's door has opened. A toad squatfills the ovoid doorway. Its dewlap rises and falls bellows-like; its toothless mouth gawps. Ginungagap. Forked tongue shoots out and curls around the boar cuntstrictor. He cries out with both mouths and jerks this way and those. The waves of denial run through. Two webbed paws bend and tie the flopping body into a knot—a runny shapeshank, of course.

The woman strolls on. Wait for me! Out the flood roars, crashes into the knot, roars back, ebb clashing with flood. Too much and only one way to go. He jerkspurts, the firmament of waters falling, no Noah's ark or arc; he novas, a shatter of millions of glowing wriggling meteors, flashes in the pan of existence.

Thigh kingdom come. Groin and belly encased in musty armor, and he cold, wet, and trembling.

GOD'S PATENT ON DAWN EXPIRES

... the following spoken by Alfred Melophon Voxpopper, of the Aurora Pushups and Coffee Hour, Channel 69B. Lines taped during the 50th Folk Art Center Annual Demonstration and Competition, Beverly Hills, level 14. Spoken by Omar Bacchylides Runic, extemporaneously if you discount some forethought during the previous evening at the nonpublic tavern The Private Universe, and you may because Runic did not remember a thing about that evening. Despite which he won First Laurel Wreath A, there being no Second, Third, etc., wreaths classified as A through Z, God bless our democracy.

A gray-pink salmon leaping up the falls of night Into the spawning pool of another day.

Dawn—the red roar of the heliac bull Charging over the horizon.

The photonic blood of bleeding night, Stabbed by the assassin sun.

and so on for fifty lines punctuated and fractured by cheers, handclaps, boos, hisses, and yelps.
Chib is half-awake. He peeps down into the narrowing dark as the dream roars off into the subway tunnel. He peeps through barely opened lids at the other reality: consciousness.

"Let my peeper go!" he groans with Moses and so, thinking of long beards and horns (courtesy of Michelangelo), he thinks of his great-great-grandfather.

The will, a crowbar, forces his eyelids open. He sees the fido which spans the wall opposite him and curves up over half the ceiling. Dawn, the paladin of the sun, is flinging its gray gauntlet down.

Channel 69B, YOUR FAVORITE CHANNEL, LA's own, brings you dawn. (Deception in depth. Nature's false dawn shadowed forth with electrons shaped by devices shaped by man.)

Wake up with the sun in your heart and a song on your lips! Thrill to the stirring lines of Omar Runic! See dawn as the birds in the trees, as God, see it!

Voxpopper chants the lines softly while Grieg's Anitra wells softly. The old Norwegian never dreamed of this audience and just as well. A young man, Chibiabos Elgreco Winnegan, has a sticky wick, courtesy of a late gusher in the oilfield of the unconscious.

"Off your ass and onto your steed," Chib says. "Pegasus runs today."

He speaks, thinks, lives in the present tensely.

Chib climbs out of bed and shoves it into the wall. To leave the bed sticking out, rumpled as an old drunkard's tongue, would fracture the aesthetics of his room, destroy that curve that is the reflection of the basic universe, and hinder him in his work.

The room is a huge ovoid and in a corner is a small ovoid, the toilet and shower. He comes out of it looking like one of Homer's god-like Achaeans, massively thighed, great-armed, golden-brown-skinned, blue-eyed, auburn-haired —although beardless. The phone is simulating the tocsin of a South American tree frog he once heard over channel 122.

"Open O sesame!"

INTER CAECOS REGNAT LUSCUS

The face of Rex Luscus spreads across the fido, the pores of skin like the crated fields of a World War I battlefield. He wears a black monocle over the left eye, ripped out in a
brawl among art critics during the I Love Rembrandt Lecture Series, Channel 109. Although he has enough pull to get a priority for eye-replacement, he has refused.

"Inter caecos regnat luscus," he says when asked about it and quite often when not. "Translation: among the blind, the one-eyed man is king. That's why I renamed myself Rex Luscus, that is, King One-eyed."

There is a rumor, fostered by Luscus, that he will permit the bioboys to put in an artificial protein eye when he sees the works of an artist great enough to justify focal vision. It is also rumored that he may do so soon, because of his discovery of Chibiabos Eigreco Winnegan.

Luscus looks hungrily (he swears by adverbs) at Chib's tomentum and outlying regions. Chib swells, not with tumescence but with anger.

Luscus says, smoothly, "Honey, I just want to reassure myself that you're up and about the tremendously important business of this day. You must be ready for the showing, must! But now I see you, I'm reminded I've not eaten yet. What about breakfast with me?"

“What're we eating?” Chib says. He does not wait for a reply. “No. I've too much to do today. Close O sesame!”

Rex Luscus' face fades away, goatlike, or, as he prefers to describe it, the face of Pan, a Faunus of the arts. He has even had his ears trimmed to a point. Real cute.

“Baa-aa-aa!” Chib bleats at the phantom. “Ba! Humbuggery! I'll never kiss your ass, Luscus, or let you kiss mine. Even if I lose the grant!”

The phone bells again. The dark face of Rousseau Red Hawk appears. His nose is as the eagle's, and his eyes are broken black glass. His broad forehead is bound with a strip of red cloth, which circles the straight black hair that glides down to his shoulders. His shirt is buckskin; a necklace of beads hangs from his neck. He looks like a Plains Indian, although Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, or the noblest Roman Nose of them all would have kicked him out of the tribe. Not that they were anti-Semitic, they just could not have respected a brave who broke out into hives when near a horse.

Born Julius Applebaum, he legally became Rousseau Red Hawk on his Naming Day. Just returned from the forest reprimevalized, he is now reveling in the accursed fleshpots of a decadent civilization.
"How're you, Chib? The gang's wondering how soon you'll get here?"

"Join you? I haven't had breakfast yet, and I've a thousand things to do to get ready for the showing. I'll see you at noon!"

"You missed out on the fun last night. Some goddam Egyptians tried to feel the girls up, but we salaamed them against the walls."

Rousseau vanished like the last of the red men.

Chib thinks of breakfast just as the intercom whistles. Open O Sesame! He sees the living room. Smoke, too thick and furious for the air-conditioning to whisk away, roils. At the far end of the ovoid, his little half-brother and half-sister sleep on a flato. Playing Mama-and-friend, they fell asleep, their mouths open in blessed innocence, beautiful as only sleeping children can be. Opposite the closed eyes of each is an unwinking eye like that of a Mongolian Cyclops.

"Ain't they cute?" Mama says. "The darlings were just too tired to toddle off."

The table is round. The aged knights and ladies are gathered around it for the latest quest of the ace, king, queen, and jack. They are armored only in layer upon layer of fat. Mama's jowls hang down like banners on a windless day. Her breasts creep and quiver on the table, bulge, and ripple.

"A gam of gamblers," he says aloud, looking at the fat faces, the tremendous tits, the rampant rumps. They raise their eyebrows. What the hell's the mad genius talking about now?

"Is your kid really retarded?" says one of Mama's friends, and they laugh and drink some more beer. Angela Ninon, not wanting to miss out on this deal and figuring Mama will soon turn on the sprayers anyway, pisses down her leg. They laugh at this, and William Conqueror says, "I open."

"I'm always open," Mama says, and they shriek with laughter.

Chib would like to cry. He does not cry, although he has been encouraged from childhood to cry any time he feels like it.

—it makes you feel better and look at the Vikings, what men they were and they cried like babies whenever they felt like it—Courtesy of Channel 202 on the popular program What's A Mother Done?
He does not cry because he feels like a man who thinks about the mother he loved and who is dead but who died a long time ago. His mother has been long buried under a landslide of flesh. When he was sixteen, he had had a lovely mother.

Then she cut him off.

**THE FAMILY THAT BLOWS IS THE FAMILY THAT GROWS**

—from a poem by Edgar A. Grist, via Channel 88.

"Son, I don't get much out of this. I just do it because I love you."

Then, fat, fat, fat! Where did she go? Down into the adipose abyss. Disappearing as she grew larger.

"Sonny, you could at least wrestle with me a little now and then."

"You cut me off, Mama. That was all right. I'm a big boy now. But you haven't any right to expect me to want to take it up again."

"You don't love me any more!"

"What's for breakfast, Mama?" Chib says.

"I'm holding a good hand, Chibby," Mama says. "As you've told me so many times, you're a big boy. Just this once, get your own breakfast."

"What'd you call me for?"

"I forgot when your exhibition starts. I wanted to get some sleep before I went."

"14:30, Mama, but you don't have to go."

Rouged green lips part like a gangrened wound. She scratches one rouged nipple. "Oh, I want to be there. I don't want to miss my own son's artistic triumphs. Do you think you'll get the grant?"

"If I don't, it's Egypt for us," he says.

"Those stinking Arabs!" says William Conqueror.

"It's the Bureau that's doing it, not the Arabs," Chib says. "The Arabs moved for the same reason we may have to move."
From Grandpa's unpublished Ms.: *Whoever would have thought that Beverly Hills would become anti-Semitic?*

“I don’t want to go to Egypt!” Mama wails. “You got to get that grant, Chibby. I don’t want to leave the clutch. I was born and raised here, well, on the tenth level, anyway, and when I moved all my friends went along. I won’t go!”

“Don’t cry, Mama,” Chib says, feeling distress despite himself. “Don’t cry. The government can’t force you to go, you know. You got your rights.”

“If you want to keep on having goodies, you’ll go,” says Conqueror. “Unless Chib wins the grant, that is. And I wouldn’t blame him if he didn’t even try to win it. It ain’t his fault you can’t say no to Uncle Sam. You got your purple and the yap Chib makes from selling his paintings. Yet it ain’t enough. You spend faster than you get it.”

Mama screams with fury at William, and they’re off. Chib cuts off fido. Hell with breakfast; he’ll eat later. His final painting for the Festival must be finished by noon. He presses a plate, and the bare eggshaped room opens here and there, and painting equipment comes out like a gift from the electronic gods. Zeuxis would flip and Van Gogh would get the shakes if they could see the canvas and palette and brush Chib uses.

The process of painting involves the individual bending and twisting of thousands of wires into different shapes at various depths. The wires are so thin they can be seen only with magnifiers and manipulated with exceedingly delicate pliers. Hence, the goggles he wears and the long almost-gossamer instrument in his hand when he is in the first stages of creating a painting. After hundreds of hours of slow and patient labor (of love), the wires are arranged.

Chib removes his goggles to perceive the overall effect. He then uses the paint-sprayer to cover the wires with the colors and hues he desires. The paint dries hard within a few minutes. Chib attaches electrical leads to the pan and presses a button to deliver a tiny voltage through the wires. These glow beneath the paint and, Lilliputian fuses, disappear in blue smoke.

The result is a three-dimensional work composed of hard shells of paint on several levels below the exterior shell. The shells are of varying thicknesses and all are so thin that light slips through the upper to the inner shell when the painting is turned at angles. Parts of the shells are simply reflectors to
intensify the light so that the inner images may be more visible.

When being shown, the painting is on a self-moving pedestal which turns the painting 12 degrees to the left from the center and then 12 degrees to the right from the center.

The fido tocsins. Chib, cursing, thinks of disconnecting it. At least, it’s not the intercom with his mother calling hysterically. Not yet, anyway. She’ll call soon enough if she loses heavily at poker.

Open O sesame!

**SING, O MEWS, OF UNCLE SAM**

*Grandpa writes in his Private Ejaculations: Twenty-five years after I fled with twenty billion dollars and then supposedly died of a heart attack, Falco Accipiter is on my trail again. The IRB detective who named himself Falcon Hawk when he entered his profession. What an egotist! Yet, he is as sharp-eyed and relentless as a bird of prey, and I would shiver if I were not too old to be frightened by mere human beings. Who loosed the jesses and hood? How did he pick up the old and cold scent?*

Accipiter’s face is that of an overly suspicious peregrine that tries to look everywhere while it soars, that peers up its own anus to make sure that no duck has taken a refuge there. The pale blue eyes fling glances like knives shot out of a shirtsleeve and hurled with a twist of the wrist. They scan all with sherlockian intake of minute and significant detail. His head turns back and forth, ears twitching, nostrils expanding and collapsing, all radar and sonar and odar.

“Mr. Winnegan, I’m sorry to call so early. Did I get you out of bed?”

“It’s obvious you didn’t!” Chib says. “Don’t bother to introduce yourself. I know you. You’ve been shadowing me for three days.”

Accipiter does not redden. Master of control, he does all his blushing in the depths of his bowels, where no one can see. “If you know me, perhaps you can tell me why I’m calling you?”

“Would I be dumbshit enough to tell you?”

“Mr. Winnegan, I’d like to talk to you about your great-great-grandfather.”
"He's been dead for twenty-five years!" Chib cries. "Forget him. And don't bother me. Don't try for a search warrant. No judge would give you one. A man's home is his hassle . . . I mean castle."

He thinks of Mama and what the day is going to be like unless he gets out soon. But he has to finish the painting.

"Fade off, Accipiter," Chib says. "I think I'll report you to the BPHR. I'm sure you got a fido inside that silly-looking hat of yours."

Accipiter's face is as smooth and unmoving as an alabaster carving of the falcon-god Horus. He may have a little gas bulging his intestines. If so, he slips it out unnoticed.

"Very well, Mr. Winnegan. But you're not getting rid of me that easily. After all . . ."

"Fade out!"

The intercom whistles thrice. What I tell you three times is Grandpa. "I was eavesdropping," says the 120-year-old voice, hollow and deep as an echo from a Pharaoh's tomb. "I want to see you before you leave. That is, if you can spare the Ancient of Daze a few minutes."

"Always, Grandpa," Chib says, thinking of how much he loves the old man. "You need any food?"

"Yes, and for the mind, too."

Der Tag. Dies Orae. Götterdammerung. Armageddon. Things are closing in. Make-or-break day. Go-no-go time. All these calls and a feeling of more to come. What will the end of the day bring?

**THE TROCHE SUN SLIPS INTO THE SORE THROAT OF NIGHT**

—from Omar Runic

Chib walks towards the convex door, which rolls into the interstices between the walls. The focus of the house is the oval family room. In the first quadrant, going clockwise, is the kitchen, separated from the family room by six-meter-high accordion screens, painted with scenes from Egyptian tombs by Chib, his too subtle comment on modern food. Seven slim pillars around the family room mark the borders of room and corridor. Between the pillars are more tall accordion screens, painted by Chib during his Amerind mythology phase.
The corridor is also oval-shaped; every room in the house opens onto it. There are seven rooms, six bedroom-workroom-study-toilet-shower combinations. The seventh is a storeroom.

Little eggs within bigger eggs within great eggs within a megalonolith on a planetary pear within an ovoid universe, the latest cosmogony indicating that infinity has the form of a hen's fruit. God broods over the abyss and cackles every trillion years or so.

Chib cuts across the hall, passes between two pillars, carved by him into nymphet caryatids, and enters the family room. His mother looks sidewise at her son, who she thinks is rapidly approaching insanity if he has not already overshot his mark. It's partly her fault; she shouldn't have gotten disgusted and in a moment of wackiness called It off. Now, she's fat and ugly, oh, God, so fat and ugly. She can't reasonably or even unreasonably hope to start up again.

It's only natural, she keeps telling herself, sighing, resentful, teary that he's abandoned the love of his mother for the strange, firm, shapely delights of young women. But to give them up, too? He's not a fairy. He quit all that when he was thirteen. So what's the reason for his chastity? He isn't in love with the fornixator, either, which she would understand, even if she did not approve.

Oh, God, where did I go wrong? And then, there's nothing wrong with me. He's going crazy like his father—Raleigh Renaissance, I think his name was—and his aunt and his great-great-grandfather. It's all that painting and those radicals, the Young Radishes, he runs around with. He's too artistic, too sensitive. Oh, God, if something happens to my little boy, I'll have to go to Egypt.

Chib knows her thoughts since she's voiced them so many times and is not capable of having new ones. He passes the round table without a word. The knights and ladies of the canned Camelot see him through a beery veil.

In the kitchen, he opens an oval door in the wall. He removes a tray with food in covered dishes and cups, all wrapped in plastic.

"Aren't you going to eat with us?"
"Don't whine, Mama," he says and goes back to his room to pick up some cigars for his Grandpa. The door, detecting, amplifying, and transmitting the shifting but recognizable eidolon of epidermal electrical fields to the activating mechanism, balks. Chib is too upset. Magnetic maelstroms rage over his skin and distort the spectral configuration. The door
half-rolls out, rolls in, changes its mind again, rolls out, rolls in.

Chib kicks the door and it becomes completely blocked. He decides he'll have a video or vocal sesame put in. Trouble is, he's short of units and coupons and can't buy the materials. He shrugs and walks along the curving, one-walled hall and stops in front of Grandpa's door, hidden from view of those in the living room by the kitchen screens.

"For he sang of peace and freedom,
Sang of beauty, love, and longing;
Sang of death, and life undying
In the Islands of the Blessed,
In the kingdom of Ponemah,
In the land of the Hereafter.
Very dear to Hiawatha
Was the gentle Chibiabos."

Chib chants the passwords; the door rolls back.

Light glares out, a yellowish red-tinged light that is Grandpa's own creation. Looking into the convex oval door is like looking into the lens of a madman's eyeball. Grandpa, in the middle of the room, has a white beard falling to mid-thigh and white hair cataracting to just below the back of his knees. Although beard and headhair conceal his nakedness, and he is not out in public, he wears a pair of shorts. Grandpa is somewhat old-fashioned, forgivable in a man of twelve decadencies.

Like Rex Luscus, he is one-eyed. He smiles with his own teeth, grown from buds transplanted thirty years ago. A big green cigar sticks out of one corner of his full red mouth. His nose is broad and smeared as if time had stepped upon it with a heavy foot. His forehead and cheeks are broad, perhaps due to a shot of Ojibway blood in his veins, though he was born Finnegan and even sweats celtically, giving off an aroma of whiskey. He holds his head high, and the blue-gray eye is like a pool at the bottom of a prediluvian pothole, remnant of a melted glacier.

All in all, Grandpa's face is Odin's as he returns from the Well of Mimir, wondering if he paid too great a price. Or it is the face of the windbeaten, sandblown Sphinx of Gizeh.

"Forty centuries of hysteria look down upon you, to paraphrase Napoleon," Grandpa says. "The rockhead of the
ages. *What, then, is Man?* sayeth the New Sphinx, Edipus having resolved the question of the Old Sphinx and settling nothing because She had already delivered another of her kind, a smartass kid with a question nobody's been able to answer yet. And perhaps just as well it can't be.”


He grins at Grandpa, loving him.

“You sneak into here every day, not so much from love for me as to gain knowledge and insight. I have seen all, heard everything, and thought more than a little. I voyaged much before I took refuge in this room a quarter of a century ago. Yet confinement here has been the greatest Odyssey of all.

**THE ANCIENT MARINATOR**

“I call myself. A marinade of wisdom steeped in the brine of over-salted cynicism and too long a life.”

“You smile so, you must have just had a woman,” Chib teases.

“No, my boy. I lost the tension in my ramrod thirty years ago. And I thank God for that, since it removes from me the temptation of fornication, not to mention masturbation. However, I have other energies left, hence, scope for other sins, and these are even more serious.

“Aside from the sin of sexual commission, which paradoxically involves the sin of sexual emission, I had other reasons for not asking that Old Black Magician Science for shots to starch me out again. I was too old for young girls to be attracted to me for anything but money. And I was too much a poet, a lover of beauty, to take on the wrinkled blisters of my generation or several just before mine.

“So now you see, my son. My clapper swings limberly in the bell of my sex. Ding, dong, ding, dong. A lot of dong but not much ding.”

Grandpa laughs deeply, a lion's roar with a spray of doves.

“I am but the mouthpiece of the ancients, a shyster pleading for longdead clients. Come not to bury but to praise and forced by my sense of fairness to admit the faults of the past, too. I'm a queer crabbed old man, pent like Merlin in his tree trunk. Samolxis, the Thracian bear god, hibernating in his cave. The Last of the Seven Sleepers.”

Grandpa goes to the slender plastic tube depending from
the ceiling and pulls down the folding handles of the eyepiece.

"Accipiter is hovering outside our house. He smells something rotten in Beverly Hills, level 14. Could it be that Win­again Winnegan isn’t dead? Uncle Sam is like a diplodoc­us kicked in the ass. It takes twenty-five years for the message to reach its brain."

Tears appear in Chib’s eyes. He says, “Oh, God, Grandpa, I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“What can happen to a 120-year-old man besides failure of brain or kidneys?”

“With all due respect, Grandpa,” Chib says, “you do rattle on.”

“Call me Id’s mill,” Grandpa says. “The flour it yields is baked in the strange oven of my ego—or half-baked, if you please.”

Chib grins through his tears and says, “They taught me at school that puns are cheap and vulgar.”

“What’s good enough for Homer, Aristophanes, Rabelais, and Shakespeare is good enough for me. By the way, speak­ing of cheap and vulgar, I met your mother in the hall last night, before the poker party started. I was just leaving the kitchen with a bottle of booze. She almost fainted. But she recovered fast and pretended not to see me. Maybe she did think she’d seen a ghost. I doubt it. She’d have been blabbing all over town about it.”

“She may have told her doctor,” Chib says. “She saw you several weeks ago, remember? She may have mentioned it while she was bitching about her so-called dizzy spells and hallucinations.”

“And the old sawbones, knowing the family history, called the IRB. Maybe.”

Chib looks through the periscope’s eyepiece. He rotates it and turns the knobs on the handle-ends to raise and lower the cyclops on the end of the tube outside. Accipiter is stalk­ing around the aggregate of seven eggs, each on the end of a broad thin curved branchlike walk projecting from the central pedestal. Accipiter goes up the steps of a branch to the door of Mrs. Applebaum’s. The door opens.

“He must have caught her away from the for­nixator,” Chib says. “And she must be lonely; she’s not talking to him over fido. My God, she’s fatter than Mama!”

“Why not?” Grandpa says. “Mr. and Mrs. Everyman sit on their asses all day, drink, eat, and watch fido, and their
brains run to mud and their bodies to sludge. Caesar would have had no trouble surrounding himself with fat friends these days. You ate, too, Brutus?"

Grandpa's comment, however, should not apply to Mrs. Applebaum. She has a hole in her head, and people addicted to fornixation seldom get fat. They sit or lie all day and part of the night, the needle in the fornix area of the brain delivering a series of minute electrical jolts. Indescribable ecstasy floods through their bodies with every impulse, a delight far surpassing any of food, drink, or sex. It's illegal, but the government never bothers a user unless it wants to get him for something else, since a fornic rarely has children. Twenty per cent of LA have had holes drilled in their heads and tiny shafts inserted for access of the needle. Five per cent are addicted; they waste away, seldom eating, their distended bladders spilling poisons into the bloodstream.

Chib says, "My brother and sister must have seen you sometimes when you were sneaking out to mass. Could they . . . ?"

"They think I'm a ghost, too. In this day and age! Still, maybe it's a good sign that they can believe in something, even a spook."

"You better stop sneaking out to church."

"The Church, and you, are the only things that keep me going. It was a sad day, though, when you told me you couldn't believe. You would have made a good priest—with faults, of course—and I could have had private mass and confession in this room."

Chib says nothing. He's gone to instruction and observed services just to please Grandpa. The church was an egg-shaped seashell which, held to the ear, gave only the distant roar of God receding like an ebb tide.

**THERE ARE UNIVERSES BEGGING FOR GODS**

yet He hangs around this one looking for work.

—from Grandpa's Ms.

Grandpa takes over the eyepiece. He laughs. "The Internal Revenue Bureau! I thought it'd been disbanded! Who the hell has an income big enough to report on any more? Do you suppose it's still active just because of me? Could be."

He calls Chib back to the scope, directed towards the
center of Beverly Hills. Chib has a lane of vision between the seven-egged clutches on the branched pedestals. He can see part of the central plaza, the giant ovoids of the city hall, the federal bureaus, the Folk Center, part of the massive spiral on which set the houses of worship, and the dora (from pandora) where those on the purple wage get their goods and those with extra income get their goodies. One end of the big artificial lake is visible; boats and canoes sail on it and people fish.

The irradiated plastic dome that enfolds the clutches of Beverly Hills is sky-blue. The electronic sun climbs towards the zenith. There are a few white genuine-looking images of clouds and even a V of geese migrating south, their honks coming down faintly. Very nice for those who have never been outside the walls of LA. But Chib spent two years in the World Nature Rehabilitation and Conservation Corps—the WNRCC—and he knows the difference. Almost, he decided to desert with Rousseau Red Hawk and join the neo-Amerinds. Then, he was going to become a forest ranger. But this might mean he'd end up shooting or arresting Red Hawk. Besides, he didn't want to become a sammer. And he wanted more than anything to paint.

"There's Rex Luscus," Chib says. "He's being interviewed outside the Folk Center. Quite a crowd."

THE PELLUCIDAR BREAKTHROUGH

Luscus' middle name should have been Upmanship. A man of great erudition, with privileged access to the Library of Greater LA computer, and of Ulyssean sneakiness, he is always scoring over his colleagues.

He it was who founded the Go-Go School of Criticism. Primalux Ruskinson, his great competitor, did some extensive research when Luscus announced the title of his new philosophy. Ruskinson triumphantly announced that Luscus had taken the phrase from obsolete slang, current in the mid-twentieth century.

Luscus, in the fido interview next day, said that Ruskinson was a rather shallow scholar, which was to be expected. Go-go was taken from the Hottentot language. In Hottentot, go-go meant to examine, that is, to keep looking until something about the object—in this case, the artist and his works—had been observed.
The critics got in line to sign up at the new school. Ruskinson thought of committing suicide, but instead accused Luscus of having blown his way up the ladder of success. Luscus replied on fido that his personal life was his own, and Ruskinson was in danger of being sued for violation of privacy. However, he deserved no more effort than a man striking at a mosquito.

“What the hell’s a mosquito?” say millions of viewers. “Wish the bighead would talk language we could understand.”

Luscus’ voice fades off for a minute while the interpreters explain, having just been slipped a note from a monitor who’s run off the word through the station’s encyclopedia.

Luscus rode on the novelty of the Go-Go School for two years.

Then he re-established his prestige, which had been slipping somewhat, with his philosophy of the Totipotent Man. This was so popular that the Bureau of Cultural Development and Recreation requisitioned a daily one-hour slot for a year-and-a-half in the initial program of totipotentializing.

Grandpa Winnegan’s penned comment in his Private Ejaculations:

What about The Totipotent Man, that apotheosis of individuality and complete psychosomatic development, the democratic Ubermensch, as recommended by Rex Luscus, the sexually one-sided? Poor old Uncle Sam! Trying to force the proteus of his citizens into a single stabilized shape so he can control them. And at the same time trying to encourage each and every to bring to flower his inherent capabilities—if any! The poor old long-legged, chin-whiskered, milk-hearted, flint-brained schizophrenic! Verily, the left hand knows not what the right hand is doing. As a matter of fact, the right hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.

“What about the totipotent man?” Luscus replied to the chairman during the fourth session of the Luscan Lecture Series. “How does he conflict with the contemporary Zeitgeist? He doesn’t. The totipotent man is the imperative of our times. He must come into being before the Golden World can be realized. How can you have a Utopia without utopians, a Golden World with men of brass?”

It was during this Memorable Day that Luscus gave his talk on The Pellucidar Breakthrough and thereby made Chibiabos Winnegan famous. And more than incidentally gave Luscus his biggest score over his competitors.
“Pellucidar? Pellucidar?” Ruskinson mutters. “Oh, God, what’s Tinker Bell doing now?”
“It’ll take me some time to explain why I used this phrase to describe Winnegan’s stroke of genius,” Luscus continues. “First, let me seem to detour.”

FROM THE ARCTIC TO ILLINOIS

“Now, Confucius once said that a bear could not fart at the North Pole without causing a big wind in Chicago. “By this he meant that all events, therefore, all men, are interconnected in an unbreakable web. What one man does, no matter how seemingly insignificant, vibrates through the strands and affects every man.”

Ho Chung Ko, before his fido on the 30th level of Lhasa, Tibet, says to his wife, “That white prick has got it all wrong. Confucius didn’t say that. Lenin preserve us! I’m going to call him up and give him hell.”
His wife says, “Let’s change the channel. Pai Ting Place is on now, and . . .”

Ngombe, 10th level, Nairobi: “The critics here are a bunch of black bastards. Now you take Luscus; he could see my genius in a second. I’m going to apply for emigration in the morning.”
Wife: “You might at least ask me if I want to go! What about the kids . . . mother . . . friends . . . dog . . . ?” and so on into the lionless night of self-luminous Africa.

“. . . ex-president Radinoff,” Luscus continues, “once said that this is the ‘Age of the Plugged-In Man.’ Some rather vulgar remarks have been made about this, to me, insighted phrase. But Radinoff did not mean that human society is a daisy chain. He meant that the current of modern society flows through the circuit of which we are all part. This is the Age of Complete Interconnection. No wires can hang loose; otherwise we all short-circuit. Yet, it is undeniable that life without individuality is not worth living. Every man must be a *hapax legomenon* . . .”

Ruskinson jumps up from his chair and screams, “I know that phrase! I got you this time, Luscus!”
He is so excited he falls over in a faint, symptom of a
RIDERS OF THE PURPLE WAGE

widespread hereditary defect. When he recovers, the lecture is over. He springs to the recorder to run off what he missed. But Luscus has carefully avoided defining The Pellucidar Breakthrough. He will explain it at another lecture.

Grandpa, back at the scope, whistles. “I feel like an astronomer. The planets are in orbit around our house, the sun. There’s Accipiter, the closest, Mercury, although he’s not the god of thieves but their nemesis. Next, Benedictine, your sad-sack Venus. Hard, hard, hard! The sperm would batter their heads flat against that stony ovum. You sure she’s pregnant?

“Your Mama’s out there, dressed fit to kill and I wish someone would. Mother Earth headed for the perigee of the gummint store to waste your substance.”

Grandpa braces himself as if on a rolling deck, the blue-black veins on his legs thick as strangling vines on an ancient oak. “Brief departure from the role of Herr Doktor Sternscheissdreckschnuppe, the great astronomer, to that of der Unterseeboot Kapitan von Schooten die Fischen in der Barrel. Ach! I zee yet das tramp Schteamer, Deine Mama, yawing, pitching, rolling in the seas of alcohol. Compass lost; rhumb dumb. Three sheets to the wind. Paddlewheels spinning in the air. The black gang sweating their balls off, stoking the furnaces of frustration. Propellers tangled in the nets of neurosis. And the Great White Whale a glimmer in the black depths but coming up fast, intent on broaching her bottom, too big to miss. Poor damned vessel, I weep for her. I also vomit with disgust.

“Fire one! Fire two! Baroom! Mama rolls over, a jagged hole in her hull but not the one you’re thinking of. Down she goes, nose first, as befits a devoted fellationeer, her huge aft rising into the air. Blub, blub! Full fathom five!

“And so back from undersea to outer space. Your sylvan Mars, Red Hawk, has just stepped out of the tavern. And Luscus, Jupiter, the one-eyed All-Father of Art, if you’ll pardon my mixing of Nordic and Latin mythologies, is surrounded by his swarm of satellites.”

EXCRETION IS THE BITTER PART OF VALOR

Luscus says to the fido interviewers. “By this I mean that Winnegan, like every artist, great or not, produces art that
PHILIP JOSE FARMER

is, first, secretion, unique to himself, then excretion. Excretion in the original sense of ‘sifting out.’ Creative excretion or discrete excretion. I know that my distinguished colleagues will make fun of this analogy, so I hereby challenge them to a fido debate whenever it can be arranged.

“The valor comes from the courage of the artist in showing his inner products to the public. The bitter part comes from the fact that the artist may be rejected or misunderstood in his time. Also from the terrible war that takes place in the artist with the disconnected or chaotic elements, often contradictory, which he must unite and then mold into a unique entity. Hence my ‘discrete excretion’ phrase.”

Fido interviewer: “Are we to understand that everything is a big pile of shit but that art makes a strange sea-change, forms it into something golden and illuminating?”

“Not exactly. But you’re close. I’ll elaborate and expound at a later date. At present, I want to talk about Winnegan. Now, the lesser artists give only the surface of things; they are photographers. But the great ones give the interiority of objects and beings. Winnegan, however, is the first to reveal more than one interiority in a single work of art. His invention of the alto-relief multilevel technique enables him to epiphanize—show forth—subterranean layer upon layer.”

Primalux Ruskinson, loudly, “The Great Onion Peeler of Painting!”

Luscus, calmly after the laughter has died: “In one sense, that is well put. Great art, like an onion, brings tears to the eyes. However, the light on Winnegan’s paintings is not just a reflection; it is sucked in, digested, and then fractured forth. Each of the broken beams makes visible, not various aspects of the figures beneath, but whole figures. Worlds, I might say.

“I call this The Pellucidar Breakthrough. Pellucidar is the hollow interior of our planet, as depicted in a now forgotten fantasy-romance of the twentieth-century writer, Edgar Rice Burroughs, creator of the immortal Tarzan.”

Ruskinson moans and feels faint again. “Pellucid! Pellucidar! Luscus, you punning exhumist bastard!”

“Burroughs’ hero penetrated the crust of Earth to discover another world inside. This was, in some ways, the reverse of the exterior, continents where the surface seas are, and vice versa. Just so, Winnegan has discovered an inner world, the obverse of the public image Everyman projects.
And, like Burroughs’ hero, he has returned with a stunning narrative of psychic dangers and exploration.

“And just as the fictional hero found his Pellucidar to be populated with stone-age men and dinosaurs, so Winnegan’s world is, though absolutely modern in one sense, archaic in another. Abysmally pristine. Yet, in the illumination of Winnegan’s world, there is an evil and inscrutable patch of blackness, and that is paralleled in Pellucidar by the tiny fixed moon which casts a chilling and unmoving shadow.

“Now, I did intend that the ordinary ‘pellucid’ should be part of Pellucidar. Yet ‘pellucid’ means ‘reflecting light evenly from all surfaces’ or ‘admitting maximum passage of light without diffusion or distortion.’ Winnegan’s paintings do just the opposite. But—under the broken and twisted light, the acute observer can see a primeval luminosity, even and straight. This is the light that links all the fractures and multilevels, the light I was thinking of in my earlier discussion of the ‘Age of the Plugged-In Man’ and the polar bear.

“By intent scrutiny, a viewer may detect this, feel, as it were, the photonic fremitus of the heartbeat of Winnegan’s world.”

Ruskinson almost faints. Luscus’ smile and black monocle make him look like a pirate who has just taken a Spanish galleon loaded with gold.

Grandpa, still at the scope, says, “And there’s Maryam bint Yusuf, the Egyptian backwoodswoman you were telling me about. Your Saturn, aloof, regal, cold, and wearing one of those suspended whirling manycolored hats that’re all the rage. Saturn’s rings? Or a halo?”

“She’s beautiful, and she’d make a wonderful mother for my children,” Chib says.

“The chick of Araby. Your Saturn has two moons, mother and aunt. Chaperones! You say she’d make a good mother! How good a wife! Is she intelligent?”

“She’s as smart as Benedictine.”

“A dumbshit then. You sure can pick them. How do you know you’re in love with her? You’ve been in love with twenty women in the last six months.”

“I love her. This is it.”

“Until the next one. Can you really love anything but your painting? Benedictine’s going to have an abortion, right?”

“Not if I can talk her out of it,” Chib says. “To tell the
truth, I don’t even like her any more. But she’s carrying my child.”

“Let me look at your pelvis. No, you’re male. For a moment, I wasn’t sure, you’re so crazy to have a baby.”

“A baby is a miracle to stagger sextillions of infidels.”

“It beats a mouse. But don’t you know that Uncle Sam has been propagandizing his heart out to cut down on propagation? Where’ve you been all your life?”

“I got to go, Grandpa.”

Chib kisses the old man and returns to his room to finish his latest painting. The door still refuses to recognize him, and he calls the gummint repair shop, only to be told that all technicians are at the Folk Festival. He leaves the house in a red rage. The bunting and balloons are waving and bobbing in the artificial wind, increased for this occasion, and an orchestra is playing by the lake.

Through the scope, Grandpa watches him walk away.

“Poor devil! I ache for his ache. He wants a baby, and he is ripped up inside because that poor devil Benedictine is aborting their child. Part of his agony, though he doesn’t know it, is identification with the doomed infant. His own mother has had innumerable—well, quite a few—abortions. But for the grace of God, he would have been one of them, another nothingness. He wants this baby to have a chance, too. But there is nothing he can do about it, nothing.

“And there is another feeling, one which he shares with most of humankind. He knows he’s screwed up his life, or something has twisted it. Every thinking man and woman knows this. Even the smug and dimwitted realize this unconsciously. But a baby, that beautiful being, that unsmirched blank tablet, unformed angel, represents a new hope. Perhaps it won’t screw up. Perhaps it’ll grow up to be a healthy confident reasonable good-humored unselfish loving man or woman. ‘It won’t be like me or my next-door neighbor,’ the proud, but apprehensive, parent swears.

“Chib thinks this and swears that his baby will be different. But, like everybody else, he’s fooling himself. A child has one father and mother, but it has trillions of aunts and uncles. Not only those that are its contemporaries; the dead, too. Even if Chib fled into the wilderness and raised the infant himself, he’d be giving it his own unconscious assumptions. The baby would grow up with beliefs and attitudes that the father was not even aware of. Moreover, being
raised in isolation, the baby would be a very peculiar human being indeed.

"And if Chib raises the child in this society, it's inevitable that it will accept at least part of the attitudes of its playmates, teachers, and so on ad nauseam.

"So, forget about making a new Adam out of your wonderful potential-teeming child, Chib. If it grows up to become at least half-sane, it's because you gave it love and discipline and it was lucky in its social contacts and it was also blessed at birth with the right combination of genes. That is, your son or daughter is now both a fighter and a lover."

**ONE MAN'S NIGHTMARE IS ANOTHER MAN'S WET DREAM**

Grandpa says.

"I was talking to Dante Alighieri just the other day, and he was telling me what an inferno of stupidity, cruelty, perversity, atheism, and outright peril the sixteenth century was. The nineteenth left him gibbering, hopelessly searching for adequate enough invectives.

"As for this age, it gave him such high-blood pressure, I had to slip him a tranquilizer and ship him out via time machine with an attendant nurse. She looked much like Beatrice and so should have been just the medicine he needed—maybe."

Grandpa chuckles, remembering that Chib, as a child, took him seriously when he described his time-machine visitors, such notables as Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Grass-Eaters; Samson, Bronze Age Riddler and Scourge of the Philistines; Moses, who stole a god from his Kenite father-in-law and who fought against circumcision all his life; Buddha, the Original Beatnik; No-Moss Sisyphus, taking a vacation from his stone-rolling; Androcles and his buddy, the Cowardly Lion of Oz; Baron von Richthofen, the Red Knight of Germany; Beowulf; Al Capone; Hiawatha; Ivan the Terrible; and hundreds of others.

The time came when Grandpa became alarmed and decided that Chib was confusing fantasy with reality. He hated to tell the little boy that he had been making up all those wonderful stories, mostly to teach him history. It was like telling a kid there wasn't any Santa Claus.

And then, while he was reluctantly breaking the news to
his grandson, he became aware of Chib’s barely suppressed grin and knew that it was his turn to have his leg pulled. Chib had never been fooled or else had caught on without any shock. So, both had a big laugh and Grandpa continued to tell of his visitors.

"There are no time machines," Grandpa says. "Like it or not, Miniver Cheevy, you have to live in this your time.

"The machines work in the utility-factory levels in a silence broken only by the chatter of a few mahouts. The great pipes at the bottom of the seas suck up water and bottom sludge. The stuff is automatically carried through pipes to the ten production levels of LA. There the inorganic chemicals are converted into energy and then into the matter of food, drink, medicines, and artifacts. There is very little agriculture or animal husbandry outside the city walls, but there is superabundance for all. Artificial but exact duplication of organic stuff, so who knows the difference?

"There is no more starvation or want anywhere, except among the self-exiles wandering in the woods. And the food and goods are shipped to the pandoras and dispensed to the receivers of the purple wage. The purple wage. A madison-avenue euphemism with connotations of royalty and divine right. Earned by just being born.

"Other ages would regard ours as a delirium, yet ours has benefits others lacked. To combat transiency and rootlessness, the megalopolis is compartmented into small communities. A man can live all his life in one place without having to go elsewhere to get anything he needs. With this has come a provincialism, a small-town patriotism and hostility towards outsiders. Hence, the bloody juvenile gang-fights between towns. The intense and vicious gossip. The insistence on conformity to local mores.

"At the same time, the small-town citizen has fido, which enables him to see events anywhere in the world. Intermingled with the trash and the propaganda, which the government thinks is good for the people, is any amount of superb programs. A man may get the equivalent of a Ph.D. without stirring out of his house.

"Another Renaissance has come, a fruition of the arts comparable to that of Pericles’ Athens and the city-states of Michelangelo’s Italy or Shakespeare’s England. Paradox. More illiterates than ever before in the world’s history. But also more literates. Speakers of classical Latin outnumber
RIDERS OF THE PURPLE WAGE

those of Caesar’s day. The world of aesthetics bears a fabu-

lous fruit. And, of course, fruits.

“To dilute the provincialism and also to make international

war even more unlikely, we have the world policy of homog-
enization. The voluntary exchange of a part of one nation’s

population with another’s. Hostages to peace and brotherly

love. Those citizens who can’t get along on just the purple

gage or who think they’ll be happier elsewhere are induced
to emigrate with bribes.

“A Golden World in some respects; a nightmare in others.

So what’s new with the world? It was always thus in every

age. Ours has had to deal with overpopulation and automa-
tion. How else could the problem be solved? It’s Buridan’s

ass (actually, the ass was a dog) all over again, as in every
time. Buridan’s ass, dying of hunger because it can’t make
up its mind which of two equal amounts of food to eat.

“History: a pons asinorum with men the asses on the
bridge of time.

“No, those two comparisons are not fair or right. It’s

Hobson’s horse, the only choice being the beast in the

nearest stall. Zeitgeist rides tonight, and the devil take the
hindmost!

“The mid-twentieth-century writers of the Triple Revolu-
tion document forecast accurately in some respects. But they
de-emphasized what lack of work would do to Mr. Every-
man. They believed that all men have equal potentialities in
developing artistic tendencies, that all could busy them-
selves with arts, crafts, and hobbies or education for educa-
tion’s sake. They wouldn’t face the ‘undemocratic’ reality
that only about ten per cent of the population—if that—are
inherently capable of producing anything worth while, or
even mildly interesting, in the arts. Crafts, hobbies, and a
lifelong academic education pale after a while, so back to
the booze, fido, and adultery.

“Lacking self-respect, the fathers become free-floaters, no-
mads on the steppes of sex. Mother, with a capital M,
becomes the dominant figure in the family. She may be
playing around, too, but she’s taking care of the kids; she’s
around most of the time. Thus, with father a lower-case
figure, absent, weak, or indifferent, the children often become
homosexual or ambisexual. The wonderland is also a fairy-
land.

“Some features of this time could have been predicted.
Sexual permissiveness was one, although no one could have
seen how far it would go. But then no one could have foreknown of the Panamorite sect, even if America has spawned lunatic-fringe cults as a frog spawns tadpoles. Yesterday’s monomaniac is tomorrow’s messiah, and so Sheltey and his disciples survived through years of persecution and today their precepts are embedded in our culture.”

Grandpa again fixes the cross-reticules of the scope on Chib.

“There he goes, my beautiful grandson, bearing gifts to the Greeks. So far, that Hercules has failed to clean up his psychic Augean stable. Yet, he may succeed, that stumble-bum Apollo, that Edipus Wrecked. He’s luckier than most of his contemporaries. He’s had a permanent father, even if a secret one, a zany old man hiding from so-called justice. He has gotten love, discipline, and a superb education in this starred chamber. He’s also fortunate in having a profession.

“But Mama spends far too much and also is addicted to gambling, a vice which deprives her of her full guaranteed income. I’m supposed to be dead, so I don’t get the purple wage. Chib has to make up for all this by selling or trading his paintings. Luscus has helped him by publicizing him, but at any moment Luscus may turn against him. The money from the paintings is still not enough. After all, money is not the basic of our economy; it’s a scarce auxiliary. Chib needs the grant but won’t get it unless he lets Luscus make love to him.

“It’s not that Chib rejects homosexual relations. Like most of his contemporaries, he’s sexually ambivalent. I think that he and Omar Runic still blow each other occasionally. And why not? They love each other. But Chib rejects Luscus as a matter of principle. He won’t be a whore to advance his career. Moreover, Chib makes a distinction which is deeply embedded in this society. He thinks that uncompulsive homosexuality is natural (whatever that means?) but that compulsive homosexuality is, to use an old term, queer. Valid or not, the distinction is made.

“So, Chib may go to Egypt. But what happens to me then?

“Never mind me or your mother, Chib. No matter what. Don’t give in to Luscus. Remember the dying words of Singleton, Bureau of Relocation and Rehabilitation Director, who shot himself because he couldn’t adjust to the new times.

“What if a man gain the world and lose his ass?”
At this moment, Grandpa sees his grandson, who has been walking along with somewhat drooping shoulders, suddenly straighten them. And he sees Chib break into a dance, a little improvised shuffle followed by a series of whirls. It is evident that Chib is whooping. The pedestrians around him are grinning.

Grandpa groans and then laughs. "Oh, God, the goatish energy of youth, the unpredictable shift of spectrum from black sorrow to bright orange joy! Dance, Chib, dance your crazy head off! Be happy, if only for a moment! You're young yet, you've got the bubbling of unconquerable hope deep in your springs! Dance, Chib, dance!"

He laughs and wipes a tear away.

SEXUAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE

is so fascinating a book that Doctor Jespersen Joyce Bathymens, psycholinguist for the federal Bureau of Group Reconfiguration and Intercommunicability, hates to stop reading. But duty beckons.

"A radish is not necessarily reddish," he says into the recorder. "The Young Radishes so named their group because a radish is a radicle, hence, radical. Also, there's a play on roots and on redass, a slang term for anger, and possibly on rattish and rattish. And undoubtedly on rude-ickle, Beverly Hills dialectical term for a repulsive, unruly, and socially ungraceful person.

"Yet the Young Radishes are not what I would call Left Wing; they represent the current resentment against Life-In-General and advocate no radical policy of reconstruction. They howl against Things As They Are, like monkeys in a tree, but never give constructive criticism. They want to destroy without any thought of what to do after the destruction.

"In short, they represent the average citizen's grousing and bitching, being different in that they are more articulate. There are thousands of groups like them in LA and possibly millions all over the world. They had normal life as children. In fact, they were born and raised in the same clutch, which is one reason why they were chosen for this study. What phenomenon produced ten such creative persons, all moth-erered in the seven houses of Area 69-14, all about the same
time, all practically raised together, since they were put together in the playpen on top of the pedestal while one mother took her turn baby-sitting and the others did whatever they had to do, which... where was I?

"Oh, yes, they had a normal life, went to the same school, palled around, enjoyed the usual sexual play among themselves, joined the juvenile gangs and engaged in some rather bloody warfare with the Westwood and other gangs. All were distinguished, however, by an intense intellectual curiosity and all became active in the creative arts.

"It has been suggested—and might be true—that that mysterious stranger, Raleigh Renaissance, was the father of all ten. This is possible but can't be proved. Raleigh Renaissance was living in the house of Mrs. Winnegan at the time, but he seems to have been unusually active in the clutch and, indeed, all over Beverly Hills. Where this man came from, who he was, and where he went are still unknown despite intensive search by various agencies. He had no ID or other cards of any kind, yet he went unchallenged for a long time. He seems to have had something on the Chief of Police of Beverly Hills and possibly on some of the Federal agents stationed in Beverly Hills.

"He lived for two years with Mrs. Winnegan, then dropped out of sight. It is rumored that he left LA to join a tribe of white neo-Amerinds, sometimes called the Seminal Indians.

"Anyway, back to the Young (pun on Jung?) Radishes. They are revolting against the Father Image of Uncle Sam, whom they both love and hate. Uncle is, of course, linked by their subconsciouses with unco, a Scottish word meaning strange, uncanny, weird, this indicating that their own fathers were strangers to them. All come from homes where the father was missing or weak, a phenomenon regrettably common in our culture.

"I never knew my own father... Tooney, wipe that out as irrelevant. Unco also means news or tidings, indicating that the unfortunate young men are eagerly awaiting news of the return of their fathers and perhaps secretly hoping for reconciliation with Uncle Sam, that is, their fathers.

"Uncle Sam. Sam is short for Samuel, from the Hebrew Shemu'el, meaning Name of God. All the Radishes are atheists, although some, notably Omar Runic and Chibiabos Winnegan, were given religious instruction as children (Panamorite and Roman Catholic, respectively).

"Young Winnegan's revolt against God, and against the
Catholic Church, was undoubtedly reinforced by the fact that his mother forced strong cathartics upon him when he had a chronic constipation. He probably also resented having to learn his catechism when he preferred to play. And there is the deeply significant and traumatic incident in which a catheter was used on him. (This refusal to excrete when young will be analyzed in a later report.)

"Uncle Sam, the Father Figure. Figure is so obvious a play that I won't bother to point it out. Also perhaps on figger, in the sense of 'a fig on thee!'—look this up in Dante's *Inferno*, some Italian or other in Hell said, 'A fig on thee, God!' biting his thumb in the ancient gesture of defiance and disrespect. Hmm? Biting the thumb—an infantile characteristic?

"Sam is also a multileveled pun on phonetically, orthographically, and semisemantically linked words. It is significant that young Winnegan can't stand to be called dear; he claims that his mother called him that so many times it nauseates him. Yet the word has a deeper meaning to him. For instance, sambar is an Asiatic deer with three-pointed antlers. (Note the sam, also.) Obviously, the three points symbolize, to him, the Triple Revolution document, the historic dating point of the beginning of our era, which Chib claims to hate so. The three points are also archetypes of the Holy Trinity, which the Young Radishes frequently blaspheme against.

"I might point out that in this the group differs from others I've studied. The others expressed an infrequent and mild blasphemy in keeping with the mild, indeed pale, religious spirit prevalent nowadays. Strong blasphemers thrive only when strong believers thrive.

"Sam also stands for same, indicating the Radishes' subconscious desire to conform.

"Possibly, although this particular analysis may be invalid, Sam corresponds to Samekh, the fifteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. (Sam! Ech!?) In the old style of English spelling, which the Radishes learned in their childhood, the fifteenth letter of the Roman alphabet is O. In the Alphabet Table of my dictionary, Webster's 128th New Collegiate, the Roman O is in the same horizontal column as the Arabic Dad. Also with the Hebrew Mem. So we get a double connection with the missing and longed-for Father (or Dad) and with the overdominating Mother (or Mem).

"I can make nothing out of the Greek Omicron, also in the
same horizontal column. But give me time; this takes study.

"Omicron. The little O! The lower-case omicron has an egg shape. The little egg is their father’s sperm fertilized? The womb? The basic shape of modern architecture?

"Sam Hill, an archaic euphemism for Hell. Uncle Sam is a Sam Hill of a father? Better strike that out, Tooney. It’s possible that these highly educated youths have read about this obsolete phrase, but it’s not confirmable. I don’t want to suggest any connections that might make me look ridiculous.


"Samisen. Son of Sam? Which leads naturally to Samson, who pulled down the temple of the Philistines on them and on himself. These boys talk of doing the same thing. Chuckle. Reminds me of myself when I was their age, before I matured. Strike out that last remark, Tooney.

"Samovar. The Russian word means, literally, self-boiler. There’s no doubt the Radishes are boiling with revolutionary fervor. Yet their disturbed psyches know, deep down, that Uncle Sam is their ever-loving Father-Mother, that he has only their best interests at heart. But they force themselves to hate him, hence, they self-boil.

"A samlet is a young salmon. Cooked salmon is a yellowish pink or pale red, near to a radish in color, in their unconsciouses, anyway. Samlet equals Young Radish; they feel they’re being cooked in the great pressure cooker of modern society.

"How’s that for a trinely furned phase—I mean, finely turned phrase, Tooney? Run this off, edit as indicated, smooth it out, you know how, and send it off to the boss. I got to go. I’m late for lunch with Mother; she gets very upset if I’m not there on the dot.

"Oh, postscript! I recommend that the agents watch Wins­negan more closely. His friends are blowing off psychic steam through talk and drink, but he has suddenly altered his behavior pattern. He has long periods of silence, he’s given up smoking, drinking, and sex.”
A profit is not without honor

Even in this day. The gummint has no overt objection to privately owned taverns, run by citizens who have paid all license fees, passed all examinations, posted all bonds, and bribed the local politicians and police chief. Since there is no provision made for them, no large buildings available for rent, the taverns are in the homes of the owners themselves.

The Private Universe is Chib's favorite, partly because the proprietor is operating illegally. Dionysus Gobrinus, unable to hew his way through the roadblocks, prise-de-chevaux, barbed wire, and booby-traps of official procedure, has quit his efforts to get a license.

Openly, he paints the name of his establishment over the mathematical equations that once distinguished the exterior of the house. (Math prof at Beverly Hills U. 14, named Al-Khwarizmi Descartes Lobachevsky, he has resigned and changed his name again.) The atrium and several bedrooms have been converted for drinking and carousing. There are no Egyptian customers, probably because of their supersensitivity about the flowery sentiments painted by patrons on the inside walls.

A BAS, ABU
MOHammed WAS THE SON OF A VIRGIN DOG
THE SPHINX STINKS
REMEMBER THE RED SEA!
THE PROPHET HAS A CAMEL FETISH

Some of those who wrote the taunts have fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers who were themselves the objects of similar insults. But their descendants are thoroughly assimilated, Beverly Hillsians to the core. Of such is the kingdom of men.

Gobrinus, a squat cube of a man, stands behind the bar, which is square as a protest against the ovoid. Above him is a big sign:

ONE MAN’S MEAD IS ANOTHER MAN’S POISSON

Gobrinus has explained this pun many times, not always
to his listener’s satisfaction. Suffice it that Poisson was a mathematician and that Poisson’s frequency distribution is a good approximation to the binomial distribution as the number of trials increases and probability of success in a single trial is small.

When a customer gets too drunk to be permitted one more drink, he is hurled headlong from the tavern with furious combustion and utter ruin by Gobrinus, who cries, “Poisson! Poisson!”

Chib’s friends, the Young Radishes, sitting at a hexagonal table, greet him, and their words unconsciously echo those of the Federal psycholinguist’s estimate of his recent behavior.

“Chib, monk! Chibber as ever! Looking for a chibbie, no doubt! Take your pick!”

Madame Trismegista, sitting at a little table with a Seal-of-Solomon-shape top, greets him. She has been Gobrinus’ wife for two years, a record, because she will knife him if he leaves her. Also, he believes that she can somehow juggle his destiny with the cards she deals. In this age of enlightenment, the soothsayer and astrologer flourish. As science pushes forward, ignorance and superstition gallop around the flanks and bite science in the rear with big dark teeth.

Gobrinus himself, a Ph.D., holder of the torch of knowledge (until lately, anyway), does not believe in God. But he is sure the stars are marching towards a baleful conjunction for him. With a strange logic, he thinks that his wife’s cards control the stars; he is unaware that card-divination and astrology are entirely separate fields.

What can you expect of a man who claims that the universe is asymmetric?

Chib waves his hand at Madame Trismegista and walks to another table. Here sits

**A TYPICAL TEEMAGER**

Benedictine Serinus Melba. She is tall and slim and has narrow lemur-like hips and slender legs but big breasts. Her hair, black as the pupils of her eyes, is parted in the middle, plastered with perfumed spray to the skull, and braided into two long pigtails. These are brought over her bare shoulders and held together with a golden brooch just below her throat. From the brooch, which is in the form of a musical note, the braids part again, one looping under each breast.
Another brooch secures them, and they separate and circle around behind her back, are brooched again, and come back to meet on her belly. Another brooch holds them, and the twin waterfalls flow blackly over the front of her bell-shaped skirt.

Her face is thickly farded with green, aquamarine, a shamrock beauty mark, and topaz. She wears a yellow bra with artificial pink nipples; frilly lace ribbons hang from the bra. A demicorselet of bright green with black rosettes circles her waist. Over the corselet, half-concealing it, is a wire structure covered with a shimmering pink quilty material. It extends out in back to form a semifuselage or a bird's long tail, to which are attached long yellow and crimson artificial feathers.

An ankle-length diaphanous skirt billows out. It does not hide the yellow and dark-green striped lace-fringed garter-pantsies, white thighs, and black net stockings with green clocks in the shape of musical notes. Her shoes are bright blue with topaz high heels.

Benedictine is costumed to sing at the Folk Festival; the only thing missing is her singer's hat. Yet, she came to complain, among other things, that Chib has forced her to cancel her appearance and so lose her chance at a great career.

She is with five girls, all between sixteen and twenty-one, all drinking P (for popskull).

"Can't we talk in private, Benny?" Chib says.

"What for?" Her voice is a lovely contralto ugly with inflection.

"You got me down here to make a public scene," Chib says.

"For God's sake, what other kind of scene is there?" she shrills. "Look at him! He wants to talk to me alone!"

It is then that he realizes she is afraid to be alone with him. More than that, she is incapable of being alone. Now he knows why she insisted on leaving the bedroom door open with her girlfriend, Bela, within calling distance. And listening distance.

"You said you was just going to use your finger!" she shouts. She points at the slightly rounded belly. "I'm going to have a baby! You rotten smooth-talking sick bastard!"

"That isn't true at all," Chib says. "You told me it was all right, you loved me."

"'Love! Love!' he says! What the hell do I know what I said, you got me so excited! Anyway, I didn't say you could stick it in! I'd never say that, never! And then what you did!"
What you did! My God, I could hardly walk for a week, you bastard, you!"

Chib sweats. Except for Beethoven's Pastoral welling from the fido, the room is silent. His friends grin. Gobrinus, his back turned, is drinking scotch. Madame Trismegista shuffles her cards, and she farts with a fiery conjunction of beer and onions. Benedictine's friends look at their Mandarin-long fluorescent fingernails or glare at him. Her hurt and indignity is theirs and vice versa.

"I can't take those pills. They make me break out and give me eye trouble and screw up my monthlies! You know that! And I can't stand those mechanical uteruses! And you lied to me, anyway! You said you took a pill!"

Chib realizes she's contradicting herself, but there's no use trying to be logical. She furious because she's pregnant; she doesn't want to be inconvenienced with an abortion at this time, and she's out for revenge.

Now how, Chib wonders, how could she get pregnant that night? No woman, no matter how fertile, could have managed that. She must have been knocked up before or after. Yet she swears that it was that night, the night he was

THE KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE
OR
FOAM, FOAM ON THE RANGE

"No, no!" Benedictine cries.


Benedictine screams, and her friend Bela, out in the hall, yells, "What's the matter? What happened?"

Benedictine does not reply. Raging, shaking as if in the grip of a fever, she scrambles out of bed, pushing Chib to one side. She runs to the small egg of the bathroom in the corner, and he follows her.

"I hope you're not going to do what I think . . . ?" he says.

Benedictine moans, "You sneaky no-good son of a bitch!"

In the bathroom, she pulls down a section of wall, which becomes a shelf. On its top, attached by magnetic bottoms to the shelf, are many containers. She seizes a long thin can of spermatocide, squats, and inserts it. She presses the button on its bottom, and it foams with a hissing sound even its cover of flesh cannot silence.

Chib is paralyzed for a moment. Then he roars.
Benedictine shouts, “Stay away from me, you rude-ickle!” From the door to the bedroom comes Bela’s timid, “Are you all right, Benny?”

“I’ll all-right her!” Chib bellows.

He jumps forward and takes a can of tempoxy glue from the shelf. The glue is used by Benedictine to attach her wigs to her head and will hold anything forever unless softened by a specific defixative.

Benedictine and Bela both cry out as Chib lifts Benedictine up and then lowers her to the floor. She fights, but he manages to spray the glue over the can and the skin and hairs around it.

“What’re you doing?” she screams.

He pushes the button on the bottom of the can to full-on position and then sprays the bottom with glue. While she struggles, he holds her arms tight against her body and keeps her from rolling over and so moving the can in or out. Silently, Chib counts to thirty, then to thirty more to make sure the glue is thoroughly dried. He releases her.

The foam is billowing out around her groin and down her legs and spreading out across the floor. The fluid in the can is under enormous pressure in the indestructible unpunchable can, and the foam expands vastly if exposed to open air.

Chib takes the can of defixative from the shelf and clutches it in his hand, determined that she will not have it. Benedictine jumps up and swings at him. Laughing like a hyena in a tentful of nitrous oxide, Chib blocks her fist and shoves her away. Slipping on the foam, which is ankle-deep by now, Benedictine falls and then slides backward out of the bedroom on her buttocks, the can clunking.

She gets to her feet and only then realizes fully what Chib has done. Her scream goes up, and she follows it. She dances around, yanking at the can, her screams intensifying with every tug and resultant pain. Then she turns and runs out of the room or tries to. She skids; Bela is in her way; they cling together and both ski out of the room, doing a half-turn while going through the door. The foam swirls out so that the two look like Venus and friend rising from the bubble-capped waves of the Cyprian Sea.

Benedictine shoves Bela away but not without losing some flesh to Bela’s long sharp fingernails. Bela shoots backwards through the door toward Chib. She is like a novice ice skater trying to maintain her balance. She does not succeed and shoots by Chib, wailing, on her back, her feet up in the air.
Chib slides his bare feet across the floor gingerly, stops at the bed to pick up his clothes, but decides he'd be wiser to wait until he's outside before he puts them on. He gets to the circular hall just in time to see Benedictine crawling past one of the columns that divides the corridor from the atrium. Her parents, two middle-aged behemoths, are still sitting on a flato, beer cans in hand, eyes wide, mouths open, quivering.

Chib does not even say goodnight to them as he passes along the hall. But then he sees the fido and realizes that her parents had switched it from EXT. to INT. and then to Benedictine's room. Father and mother have been watching Chib and daughter, and it is evident from father's not-quite dwindled condition that father was very excited by this show, superior to anything seen on exterior fido.

"You peeping bastards!" Chib roars.

Benedictine has gotten to them and on her feet and she is stammering, weeping, indicating the can and then stabbing her finger at Chib. At Chib's roar, the parents heave up from the flato as two leviathans from the deep. Benedictine turns and starts to run towards him, her arms outstretched, her longnailed fingers curved, her face a medusa's. Behind her streams the wake of the livid witch and father and mother on the foam.

Chib shoves up against a pillar and rebounds and skitters off, helpless to keep himself from turning sidewise during the maneuver. But he keeps his balance. Mama and Papa have gone down together with a crash that shakes even the solid house. They are up, eyes rolling and bellowing like hippos surfacing. They charge him but separate, Mama shrieking now, her face, despite the fat, Benedictine's. Papa goes around one side of the pillar; Mama, the other. Benedictine has rounded another pillar, holding to it with one hand to keep her from slipping. She is between Chib and the door to the outside.

Chib slams against the wall of the corridor, in an area free of foam. Benedictine runs towards him. He dives across the floor, hits it, and rolls between two pillars and out into the atrium.

Mama and Papa converge in a collision course. The Titanic meets the iceberg, and both plunge swiftly. They skid on their faces and bellies towards Benedictine. She leaps into the air, frailing foam on them as they pass beneath her.

By now it is evident that the government's claim that the
Riders of the Purple Wage

can is good for 40,000 shots of death-to-sperm, or for 40,000 copulations, is justified. Foam is all over the place, ankle-deep—knee-high in some places—and still pouring out.

Bela is on her back now and on the atrium floor, her head driven into the soft folds of the flato.

Chib gets up slowly and stands for a moment, glaring around him, his knees bent, ready to jump from danger but hoping he won't have to since his feet will undoubtedly fly away from under him.

"Hold it, you rotten son of a bitch!" Papa roars. "I'm going to kill you! You can't do this to my daughter!"

Chib watches him turn over like a whale in a heavy sea and try to get to his feet. Down he goes again, grunting as if hit by a harpoon. Mama is no more successful than he.

Seeing that his way is unbarred—Benedictine having disappeared somewhere—Chib skis across the atrium until he reaches an unfoamed area near the exit. Clothes over his arm, still holding the defixative, he struts towards the door.

At this moment Benedictine calls his name. He turns to see her sliding from the kitchen at him. In her hand is a tall glass. He wonders what she intends to do with it. Certainly, she is not offering him the hospitality of a drink.

Then she scoots into the dry region of the floor and topples forward with a scream. Nevertheless, she throws the contents of the glass accurately.

Chib screams when he feels the boiling hot water, painful as if he had been circumcised unanesthetized.

Benedictine, on the floor, laughs. Chib, after jumping around and shrieking, the can and clothes dropped, his hands holding the scalded parts, manages to control himself. He stops his antics, seizes Benedictine's right hand, and drags her out into the streets of Beverly Hills. There are quite a few people out this night, and they follow the two. Not until Chib reaches the lake does he stop and there he goes into the water to cool off the burn, Benedictine with him.

The crowd has much to talk about later, after Benedictine and Chib have crawled out of the lake and then run home. The crowd talks and laughs quite a while as they watch the sanitation department people clean the foam off the lake surface and the streets.

"I was so sore I couldn't walk for a month!" Benedictine screams.

"You had it coming," Chib says. "You've got no com-
plaints. You said you wanted my baby, and you talked as if you meant it."

"I must've been out of my mind!" Benedictine says. "No, I wasn't! I never said no such thing! You lied to me! You forced me!"

"I would never force anybody," Chib said. "You know that. Quit your bitching. You're a free agent, and you consented freely. You have free will."

Omar Runic, the poet, stands up from his chair. He is a tall thin red-bronze youth with an aquiline nose and very thick red lips. His kinky hair grows long and is cut into the shape of the Pequod, that fabled vessel which bore mad Captain Ahab and his mad crew and the sole survivor Ishmael after the white whale. The coiffure is formed with a bowsprit and hull and three masts and yardarms and even a boat hanging on davits.

Omar Runic claps his hands and shouts, "Bravo! A philosopher! Free will it is; free will to seek the Eternal Verities—if any—or Death and Damnation! I'll drink to free will! A toast, gentlemen! Stand up, Young Radishes, a toast to our leader!"

And so begins

THE MAD P PARTY

Madame Trismegista calls, "Tell your fortune, Chib! See what the stars tell through the cards!"

He sits down at her table while his friends crowd around.

"O.K., Madame. How do I get out of this mess?"

She shuffles and turns over the top card.

"Jesus! The ace of spades!"

"You're going on a long journey!"

"Egypt!" Rousseau Red Hawk cries. "Oh, no, you don't want to go there, Chib! Come with me to where the buffalo roam and ..."

Up comes another card.

"You will soon meet a beautiful dark lady."

"A goddam Arab! Oh, no, Chib, tell me it's not true!"

"You will win great honors soon."

"Chib's going to get the grant!"

"If I get the grant, I don't have to go to Egypt," Chib says. "Madame Trismegista, with all due respect, you're full of crap."
“Don’t mock, young man. I’m not a computer. I’m tuned to the spectrum of psychic vibrations.”

Flip. “You will be in great danger, physically and morally.”
Chib says, “That happens at least once a day.”
Flip. “A man very close to you will die twice.”
Chib pales, rallies, and says, “A coward dies a thousand deaths.”

“You will travel in time, return to the past.”

“Zow!” Red Hawk says. “You’re outdoing yourself, Madame. Careful! You’ll get a psychic hernia, have to wear an ectoplasmic truss!”

“Scoff if you want to, you dumbshits,” Madame says. “There are more worlds than one. The cards don’t lie, not when I deal them.”

“Gobrinus!” Chib calls. “Another pitcher of beer for the Madame.”

The Young Radishes return to their table, a legless disc held up in the air by a graviton field. Benedictine glares at them and goes into a huddle with the other teenagers. At a table nearby sits Pinkerton Legrand, a gummint agent, facing them so that the fido under his one-way window of a jacket beams in on them. They know he’s doing this. He knows they know and has reported so to his superior. He frowns when he sees Falco Accipiter enter. Legrand does not like an agent from another department messing around on his case. Accipiter does not even look at Legrand. He orders a pot of tea and then pretends to drop into the teapot a pill that combines with tannic acid to become P.

Rousseau Red Hawk winks at Chib and says, “Do you really think it’s possible to paralyze all of LA with a single bomb?”

“Three bombs!” Chib says loudly so that Legrand’s fido will pick up the words. “One for the control console of the desalinization plant, a second for the backup console, the third for the nexus of the big pipe that carries the water to the reservoir on the 20th level.”

Pinkerton Legrand turns pale. He downs all the whiskey in his glass and orders another, although he has already had too many. He presses the plate on his fido to transmit a triple top-priority. Lights blink redly in HQ; a gong clangs repeatedly; the chief wakes up so suddenly he falls off his chair.

Accipiter also hears, but he sits stiff, dark, and brooding as the diorite image of a Pharaoh’s falcon. Monomaniac, he
is not to be diverted by talk of inundating all LA, even if it will lead to action. On Grandpa's trail, he is now here because he hopes to use Chib as the key to the house. One "mouse"—as he thinks of his criminals—one "mouse" will run to the hole of another.

"When do you think we can go into action?" Huga Wells-Erb Heinsturbury, the science-fiction authoress, says.

"In about three weeks," Chib says.

At HQ, the chief curses Legrand for disturbing him. There are thousands of young men and women blowing off steam with these plots of destruction, assassination, and revolt. He does not understand why the young punks talk like this, since they have everything handed them free. If he had his way, he'd throw them into jail and kick them around a little or more than.

"After we do it, we'll have to take off for the big outdoors," Red Hawk says. His eyes glisten. "I'm telling you, boys, being a free man in the forest is the greatest. You're a genuine individual, not just one of the faceless breed."

Red Hawk believes in this plot to destroy LA. He is happy because, though he hasn't said so, he has grieved while in Mother Nature's lap for intellectual companionship. The other savages can hear a deer at a hundred yards, detect a rattlesnake in the bushes, but they're deaf to the footfalls of philosophy, the neigh of Nietzsche, the rattle of Russell, the honkings of Hegel.

"The illiterate swine!" he says aloud. The others say, "What?"

"Nothing. Listen, you guys must know how wonderful it is. You were in the WNRCC."

"I was 4-F," Omar Runic says. "I got hay fever."

"I was working on my second M.A.," Gibbon Tacitus says.

"I was in the WNRCC band," Sibelius Amadeus Yehudi says. "We only got outside when we played the camps, and that wasn't often."

"Chib, you were in the Corps. You loved it, didn't you?"

Chib nods but says, "Being a neo-Amerind takes all your time just to survive. When could I paint? And who would see the paintings if I did get time? Anyway, that's no life for a woman or a baby."

Red Hawk looks hurt and orders a whiskey mixed with P. Pinkerton Legrand doesn't want to interrupt his monitoring, yet he can't stand the pressure in his bladder. He walks towards the room used as the customers' catch-all. Red Hawk,
in a nasty mood caused by rejection, sticks his leg out. Legrand trips, catches himself, and stumbles forward. Benedictine puts out her leg. Legrand falls on his face. He no longer has any reason to go to the urinal except to wash himself off.

Everybody except Legrand and Accipiter laugh. Legrand jumps up, his fists doubled. Benedictine ignores him and walks over to Chib, her friends following. Chib stiffens. She says, “You perverted bastard! You told me you were just going to use your finger!”

“You’re repeating yourself,” Chib says. “The important thing is, what’s going to happen to the baby?”

“What do you care?” Benedictine says. “For all you know, it might not even be yours!”

“That’d be a relief,” Chib says, “if it weren’t. Even so, the baby should have a say in this. He might want to live—even with you as his mother.”

“In this miserable life!” she cries. “I’m going to do it a favor. I’m going to the hospital and get rid of it. Because of you, I have to miss out on my big chance at the Folk Festival! There’ll be agents from all over there, and I won’t get a chance to sing for them!”

“You’re a liar,” Chib says. “You’re all dressed up to sing.” Benedictine’s face is red; her eyes, wide; her nostrils, flaring.

“You spoiled my fun!”

She shouts, “Hey, everybody, want to hear a howler! This great artist, this big hunk of manhood, Chib the divine, he can’t get a hardon unless he’s gone down on!”

Chib’s friends look at each other. What’s the bitch screaming about? So what’s new?

From Grandpa’s Private Ejaculations: Some of the features of the Panamorite religion, so reviled and loathed in the 21st century, have become everyday facts in modern times. Love, love, love, physical and spiritual! It’s not enough to just kiss your children and hug them. But oral stimulation of the genitals of infants by the parents and relatives has resulted in some curious conditioned reflexes. I could write a book about this aspect of mid-22nd century life and probably will.

Legrand comes out of the washroom. Benedictine slaps Chib’s face. Chib slaps her back. Gobrinus lifts up a section of the bar and hurtles through the opening, crying, “Poisson! Poisson!”
He collides with Legrand, who lurches into Bela, who screams, whirls, and slaps Legrand, who slaps back. Benedictine empties a glass of P in Chib's face. Howling, he jumps up and swings his fist. Benedictine ducks, and the fist goes over his shoulder into a girlfriend's chest.

Red Hawk leaps up on the table and shouts, "I'm a regular bearcat, half-alligator, half . . ."

The table, held up in a graviton field, can't bear much weight. It tilts and catapults him into the girls, and all go down. They bite and scratch Red Hawk, and Benedictine squeezes his testicles. He screams, writhes, and hurls Benedictine with his feet onto the top of the table. It has regained its normal height and altitude, but now it flips over again, tossing her to the other side. Legrand, tippytoeing through the crowd on his way to the exit, is knocked down. He loses some front teeth against somebody's knee cap. Spitting blood and teeth, he jumps up and slugs a bystander.

Gobrinus fires off a gun that shoots a tiny Very light. It's supposed to blind the brawlers and so bring them to their senses while they're regaining their sight. It hangs in the air and shines like

A STAR OVER BEDLAM

The Police Chief is talking via fido to a man in a public booth. The man has turned off the video and is disguising his voice.

"They're beating the shit out of each other in The Private Universe."

The Chief groans. The Festival has just begun, and They are at it already.

"Thanks. The boys'll be on the way. What's your name? I'd like to recommend you for a Citizen's Medal."

"What! And get the shit knocked out of me, too! I ain't no stoolie; just doing my duty. Besides, I don't like Gobrinus or his customers. They're a bunch of snobs."

The Chief issues orders to the riot squad, leans back, and drinks a beer while he watches the operation on fido. What's the matter with these people, anyway? They're always mad about something.

The sirens scream. Although the bolgani ride electrically driven noiseless tricycles, they're still clinging to the centuries-old tradition of warning the criminals that they're coming.
Five trikes pull up before the open door of The Private Universe. The police dismount and confer. Their two-storied cylindrical helmets are black and have scarlet roaches. They wear goggles for some reason although their vehicles can’t go over 15 m.p.h. Their jackets are black and fuzzy, like a teddy bear’s fur, and huge golden epaulets decorate their shoulders. The shorts are electric-blue and fuzzy; the jackboots, glossy black. They carry electric shock sticks and guns that fire chokegas pellets.

Gobrinus blocks the entrance. Sergeant O'Hara says, “Come on, let us in. No, I don’t have a warrant of entry. But I’ll get one.”

“If you do, I’ll sue,” Gobrinus says. He smiles. While it is true that government red tape was so tangled he quit trying to acquire a tavern legally, it is also true that the government will protect him in this issue. Invasion of privacy is a tough rap for the police to break.

O'Hara looks inside the doorway at the two bodies on the floor, at those holding their heads and sides and wiping off blood, and at Accipiter, sitting like a vulture dreaming of carrion. One of the bodies gets up on all fours and crawls through between Gobrinus’ legs out into the street.

“Sergeant, arrest that man!” Gobrinus says. “He’s wearing an illegal fido. I accuse him of invasion of privacy.”

O'Hara's face lights up. At least he'll get one arrest to his credit. Legrand is placed in the paddywagon, which arrives just after the ambulance. Red Hawk is carried out as far as the doorway by his friends. He opens his eyes just as he’s being carried on a stretcher to the ambulance and he mutters.

O'Hara leans over him. “What?”

“I fought a bear once with only my knife, and I came out better than with those cunts. I charge them with assault and battery, murder and mayhem.”

O'Hara's attempt to get Red Hawk to sign a warrant fails because Red Hawk is now unconscious. He curses. By the time Red Hawk begins feeling better, he'll refuse to sign the warrant. He won’t want the girls and their boy friends laying for him, not if he has any sense at all.

Through the barred window of the paddywagon, Legrand screams, “I'm a gummint agent! You can’t arrest me!”

The police get a hurry-up call to go to the front of the Folk Center, where a fight between local youths and Westwood invaders is threatening to become a riot. Benedictine leaves the tavern. Despite several blows in the shoulders and
stomach, a kick in the buttocks, and a bang on the head, she shows no signs of losing the fetus.

Chib, half-sad, half-glad, watches her go. He feels a dull grief that the baby is to be denied life. By now he realizes that part of his objection to the abortion is identification with the fetus; he knows what Grandpa thinks he does not know. He realizes that his birth was an accident—lucky or unlucky. If things had gone otherwise, he would not have been born. The thought of his nonexistence—no painting, no friends, no laughter, no hope, no love—horrifies him. His mother, drunkenly negligent about contraception, has had any number of abortions, and he could have been one of them.

Watching Benedictine swagger away (despite her torn clothes), he wonders what he could ever have seen in her. Life with her, even with a child, would have been gritty.

In the hope-lined nest of the mouth
Love flies once more, nestles down,
Coos, flashes feathered glory, dazzles,
And then flies away, crapping,
As is the wont of birds,
To jet-assist the takeoff.

—Omar Runic

Chib returns to his home, but he still can’t get back into his room. He goes to the storeroom. The painting is seven-eighths finished but was not completed because he was dissatisfied with it. Now he takes it from the house and carries it to Runic’s house, which is in the same clutch as his. Runic is at the Center, but he always leaves his doors open when he’s gone. He has equipment which Chib uses to finish the painting, working with a sureness and intensity he lacked the first time he was creating it. He then leaves Runic’s house with the huge oval canvas held above his head.

He strides past the pedestals and under their curving branches with the ovoids at their ends. He skirts several small grassy parks with trees, walks beneath more houses, and in ten minutes is nearing the heart of Beverly Hills. Here mercurial Chib sees
drifting in a canoe on Lake Issus. Maryam bint Yusuf, her mother, and aunt listlessly hold fishing poles and look towards the gay colors, music, and the chattering crowd before the Folk Center. By now the police have broken up the juvenile fight and are standing around to make sure nobody else makes trouble.

The three women are dressed in the somber clothes, completely body-concealing, of the Mohammedan Wahhabi fundamentalist sect. They do not wear veils; not even the Wahhabi now insist on this. Their Egyptian brethren ashore are clad in modern garments, shameful and sinful. Despite which, the ladies stare at them.

Their menfolk are at the edge of the crowd. Bearded and costumed like sheiks in a Foreign Legion fido show, they mutter gargling oaths and hiss at the iniquitous display of female flesh. But they stare.

This small group has come from the zoological preserves of Abyssinia, where they were caught poaching. Their gum-mint gave them three choices. Imprisonment in a rehabilitation center, where they would be treated until they became good citizens if it took the rest of their lives. Emigration to the megalopolis of Haifa, Israel. Or emigration to Beverly Hills, LA.

What, dwell among the accursed Jews of Israel? They spat and chose Beverly Hills. Alas, Allah had mocked them! They were now surrounded by Finkelsteins, Applebaums, Siegels, Weintraubs, and others of the infidel tribes of Isaac. Even worse, Beverly Hills had no mosque. They either traveled forty kilometers every day to the 16th level, where a mosque was available, or used a private home.

Chib hastens to the edge of the plastic-edged lake and puts down his painting and bows low, whipping off his somewhat battered hat. Maryam smiles at him but loses the smile when the two chaperones reprimand her.

“Ya kelb! Ya ibn kelb!” the two shout at him.

Chib grins at them, waves his hat, and says, “Charmed, I’m sure, mesdames! Oh, you lovely ladies remind me of the Three Graces.”

He then cries out, “I love you, Maryam! I love you! Thou
art like the Rose of Sharon to me! Beautiful, doe-eyed, virginal! A fortress of innocence and strength, filled with a fierce motherhood and utter faithfulness to thy one true love! I love thee, thou art the only light in a black sky of dead stars! I cry to you across the void!"

Maryam understands World English, but the wind carries his words away from her. She simpers, and Chib cannot help feeling a momentary repulsion, a flash of anger as if she has somehow betrayed him. Nevertheless, he rallies and shouts, "I invite you to come with me to the showing! You and your mother and aunt will be my guests. You can see my paintings, my soul, and know what kind of man is going to carry you off on his Pegasus, my dove!"

*There is nothing as ridiculous as the verbal outpourings of a young poet in love. Outrageously exaggerated. I laugh. But I am also touched. Old as I am, I remember my first loves, the fire, the torrents of words, lightning-sheathed, ache-winged. Dear lasses, most of you are dead; the rest, withered. I blow you a kiss.*

---Grandpa---

Maryam's mother stands up in the canoe. For a second, her profile is to Chib, and he sees intimations of the hawk that Maryam will be when she is her mother's age. Maryam now has a gently aquiline face—"the sweep of the sword of love"—Chib has called that nose. Bold but beautiful. However, her mother does look like a dirty old eagle. And her aunt—uneaglish but something of the camel in those features.

Chib suppresses these unfavorable, even treacherous, comparisons. But he cannot suppress the three bearded, robed, and unwashed men who gather around him.

Chib smiles but says, "I don't remember inviting you."

They look blank since rapidly spoken LA English is a hufty-magufty to them. Abu—generic name for any Egyptian in Beverly Hills—rasps an oath so ancient even the pre-Mohammed Meccans knew it. He forms a fist. Another Arab steps towards the painting and draws back a foot as if to kick it.

At this moment, Maryam's mother discovers that it is as dangerous to stand in a canoe as on a camel. It is worse, because the three women cannot swim.

Neither can the middle-aged Arab who attacks Chib, only to find his victim sidestepping and then urging him on into the lake with a foot in the rear. One of the young men
rushes Chib; the other starts to kick at the painting. Both halt on hearing the three women scream and on seeing them go over into the water.

Then the two run to the edge of the lake, where they also go into the water, propelled by one of Chib's hands in each of their backs. A bolgan hears the six of them screaming and thrashing around and runs over to Chib. Chib is becoming concerned because Maryam is having trouble staying above the water. Her terror is not faked.

What Chib does not understand is why they are all carrying on so. Their feet must be on the bottom; the surface is below their chins. Despite which, Maryam looks as if she is going to drown. So do the others, but he is not interested in them. He should go in after Maryam. However, if he does, he will have to get a change of clothes before going to the showing.

At this thought, he laughs loudly and then even more loudly as the bolgan goes in after the women. He picks up the painting and walks off laughing. Before he reaches the Center, he sobers.

"Now, how come Grandpa was so right? How does he read me so well? Am I fickle, too shallow? No, I have been too deeply in love too many times. Can I help it if I love Beauty, and the beauties I love do not have enough Beauty? My eye is too demanding; it cancels the urgings of my heart."

THE MASSACRE OF THE INNER SENSE

The entrance hall (one of twelve) which Chib enters was designed by Grandpa Winnegan. The visitor comes into a long curving tube lined with mirrors at various angles. He sees a triangular door at the end of the corridor. The door seems to be too tiny for anybody over nine years old to enter. The illusion makes the visitor feel as if he's walking up the wall as he progresses towards the door. At the end of the tube, the visitor is convinced he's standing on the ceiling.

But the door gets larger as he approaches until it becomes huge. Commentators have guessed that this entrance is the architect's symbolic representation of the gateway to the world of art. One should stand on his head before entering the wonderland of aesthetics.

On going in, the visitor thinks at first that the tremendous room is inside out or reversed. He gets even dizzier. The
far wall actually seems the near wall until the visitor gets reoriented. Some people can’t adjust and have to get out before they faint or vomit.

On the right hand is a hatrack with a sign: HANG YOUR HEAD HERE. A double pun by Grandpa, who always carries a joke too far for most people. If Grandpa goes beyond the bounds of verbal good taste, his great-great-grandson has overshot the moon in his paintings. Thirty of his latest have been revealed, including the last three of his Dog Series: Dog Star, Dog Would, and Dog Tiered. Ruskinson and his disciples are threatening to throw up. Luscus and his flock praise, but they’re restrained. Luscus has told them to wait until he talks to young Winnegan before they go all-out. The fido men are busy shooting and interviewing both and trying to provoke a quarrel.

The main room of the building is a huge hemisphere with a bright ceiling which runs through the complete spectrum every nine minutes. The floor is a giant chessboard, and in the center of each square is a face, each of a great in the various arts. Michelangelo, Mozart, Balzac, Zeuxis, Beethoven, Li Po, Twain, Dostoyevsky, Farmisto, Mbuizi, Cupel, Krishnagurti, etc. Ten squares are left faceless so that future generations may add their own nominees for immortality.

The lower part of the wall is painted with murals depicting significant events in the lives of the artists. Against the curving wall are nine stages, one for each of the Muses. On a console above each stage is a giant statue of the presiding goddess. They are naked and have overripe figures: huge-breasted, broad-hipped, sturdy-legged, as if the sculptor thought of them as Earth goddesses, not refined intellectual types.

The faces are basically structured like the smooth placid faces of classical Greek statues, but they have an unsettling expression around the mouths and eyes. The lips are smiling but seem ready to break into a snarl. The eyes are deep and menacing. DON’T SELL ME OUT, they say. IF YOU DO...

A transparent plastic hemisphere extends over each stage and has acoustic properties which keep people who are not beneath the shell from hearing the sounds emanating from the stage and vice versa.

Chib makes his way through the noisy crowd towards the stage of Polyhymnia, the Muse who includes painting in her province. He passes the stage on which Benedictine is standing and pouring her lead heart out in an alchemy of golden notes. She sees Chib and manages somehow to glare at him
and at the same time to keep smiling at her audience. Chib ignores her but observes that she has replaced the dress ripped in the tavern. He sees also the many policemen stationed around the building. The crowd does not seem in an explosive mood. Indeed, it seems happy, if boisterous. But the police know how deceptive this can be. One spark . . .

Chib goes by the stage of Calliope, where Omar Runic is extemporizing. He comes to Polyhymnia's, nods at Rex Luscus, who waves at him, and sets his painting on the stage. It is titled The Massacre of the Innocents (subtitle: Dog in the Manger).

The painting depicts a stable.

The stable is a grotto with curiously shaped stalactites. The light that breaks—or fractures—through the cave is Chib's red. It penetrates every object, doubles its strength, and then rays out jaggedly. The viewer, moving from side to side to get a complete look, can actually see the many levels of light as he moves, and thus he catches glimpses of the figures under the exterior figures.

The cows, sheep, and horses are in stalls at the end of the cave. Some are looking with horror at Mary and the infant. Others have their mouths open, evidently trying to warn Mary. Chib has used the legend that the animals in the manger were able to talk to each other the night Christ was born.

Joseph, a tired old man, so slumped he seems backboneless, is in a corner. He wears two horns, but each has a halo, so it's all right.

Mary's back is to the bed of straw on which the infant is supposed to be. From a trapdoor in the floor of the cave, a man is reaching to place a huge egg on the straw bed. He is in a cave beneath the cave and is dressed in modern clothes, has a boozy expression, and, like Joseph, slumps as if invertebrate. Behind him a grossly fat woman, looking remarkably like Chib's mother, has the baby, which the man passed on to her before putting the foundling egg on the straw bed.

The baby has an exquisitely beautiful face and is suffused with a white glow from his halo. The woman has removed the halo from his head and is using the sharp edge to butcher the baby.

Chib has a deep knowledge of anatomy, since he has dissected many corpses while getting his Ph.D. in art at Beverly Hills U. The body of the infant is not unnaturally elongated,
as so many of Chib's figures are. It is more than photog­
graphic; it seems to be an actual baby. Its viscera is unraveled
through a large bloody hole.
The onlookers are struck in their viscera as if this were
not a painting but a real infant, slashed and disemboweled,
found on their doorsteps as they left home.
The egg has a semitransparent shell. In its murky yolk
floats a hideous little devil, horns, hooves, tail. Its blurred
features resemble a combination of Henry Ford's and Uncle
Sam's. When the viewers shift to one side or the other, the
faces of others appear: prominents in the development of
modern society.
The window is crowded with wild animals that have come
to adore but have stayed to scream soundlessly in horror.
The beasts in the foreground are those that have been ex­
terminated by man or survive only in zoos and natural
preserves. The dodo, the blue whale, the passenger pigeon,
the quagga, the gorilla, orangutan, polar bear, cougar, lion,
tiger, grizzly bear, California condor, kangaroo, wombat,
rhinoceros, bald eagle.
Behind them are other animals and, on a hill, the dark
crouching shapes of the Tasmanian aborigine and Haitian
Indian.
“What is your considered opinion of this rather remark­
able painting, Doctor Luscus?” a fido interviewer asks.
Luscus smiles and says, “I'll have a considered judgment
in a few minutes. Perhaps you'd better talk to Doctor Rus­
kinson first. He seems to have made up his mind at once.
Fools and angels, you know.”
Ruskinson's red face and scream of fury are transmitted
over the fido.
“The shit heard around the world!” Chib says loudly.
“INSULT! SPITTEL! PLASTIC DUNG! A BLOW IN
THE FACE OF ART AND A KICK IN THE BUTT FOR
HUMANITY! INSULT! INSULT!”
“Why is it such an insult, Doctor Ruskinson?” the fido
man says. “Because it mocks the Christian faith, and also the
Panamorite faith? It doesn't seem to me it does that. It seems
to me that Winnegan is trying to say that men have perverted
Christianity, maybe all religions, all ideals, for their own
greedy, self-destructive purposes, that man is basically a
killer and a perverter. At least, that's what I get out of it,
although of course I'm only a simple layman, and ...”
“Let the critics make the analysis, young man!” Ruskinson
snaps. "Do you have a double Ph.D., one in psychiatry and one in art? Have you been certified as a critic by the government?"

"Winnegan, who has no talent whatsoever, let alone this genius that various self-deluded blowhards prate about, this abomination from Beverly Hills, presents his junk—actually a mishmash which has attracted attention solely because of a new technique that any electronic technician could invent—I am enraged that a mere gimmick, a trifling novelty, cannot only fool certain sectors of the public but highly educated and federally certified critics such as Doctor Luscus here—although there will always be scholarly asses who bray so loudly, pompously, and obscurely that . . ."

"Isn't it true," the fido man says, "that many painters we now call great, Van Gogh for one, were condemned or ignored by their contemporary critics? And . . ."

The fido man, skilled in provoking anger for the benefit of his viewers, pauses. Ruskinson swells, his head a blood-vessel just before aneurysm.

"I'm no ignorant layman!" he screams. "I can't help it that there have been Luscuses in the past! I know what I'm talking about! Winnegan is only a micrometeorite in the heaven of Art, not fit to shine the shoes of the great luminaries of painting. His reputation has been pumped up by a certain clique so it can shine in the reflected glory, the hyenas, biting the hand that feeds them, like mad dogs . . ."

"Aren't you mixing your metaphors a little bit?" the fido man says.

Luscus takes Chib's hand tenderly and draws him to one side where they're out of fido range.

"Darling Chib," he coos, "now is the time to declare yourself. You know how vastly I love you, not only as an artist but for yourself. It must be impossible for you to resist any longer the deeply sympathetic vibrations that leap unhindered between us. God, if you only knew how I dreamed of you, my glorious godlike Chib, with . . ."

"If you think I'm going to say yes just because you have the power to make or break my reputation, to deny me the grant, you're wrong," Chib says. He jerks his hand away.

Luscus' good eye glares. He says, "Do you find me repulsive? Surely it can't be on moral grounds . . ."

"It's the principle of the thing," Chib says. "Even if I were in love with you, which I'm not, I wouldn't let you make love to me. I want to be judged on my merit alone,
that only. Come to think of it, I don’t give a damn about anybody’s judgment. I don’t want to hear praise or blame from you or anybody. Look at my paintings and talk to each other, you jackals. But don’t try to make me agree with your little images of me.”

THE ONLY GOOD CRITIC IS A DEAD CRITIC

Omar Runic has left his dais and now stands before Chib’s paintings. He places one hand on his naked left chest, on which is tattooed the face of Herman Melville, Homer occupying the other place of honor on his right breast. He shouts loudly, his black eyes like furnace doors blown out by explosion. As has happened before, he is seized with inspiration derived from Chib’s paintings.

“Call me Ahab, not Ishmael.
For I have hooked the Leviathan.
I am the wild ass’s colt born to a man.
Lo, my eye has seen it all!
My bosom is like wine that has no vent.
I am a sea with doors, but the doors are stuck.
Watch out! The skin will burst; the doors will break.
“You are Nimrod, I say to my friend, Chib.
And now is the hour when God says to his angels,
If this is what he can do as a beginning, then
Nothing is impossible for him.
He will be blowing his horn before
The ramparts of Heaven and shouting for
The Moon as hostage, the Virgin as wife,
And demanding a cut on the profits
From the Great Whore of Babylon.”

“Stop that son of a bitch!” the Festival Director shouts. “He’ll cause a riot like he did last year!”
The bolgani begin to move in. Chib watches Luscus, who is talking to the fido man. Chib can’t hear Luscus, but he’s sure Luscus is not saying complimentary things about him.

“Melville wrote of me long before I was born.
I’m the man who wants to comprehend
The Universe but comprehend on my terms.
I am Ahab whose hate must pierce, shatter,
All impediment of Time, Space, or Subject
Mortality and hurl my fierce
Incandescence into the Womb of Creation,
Disturbing in its Lair whatever Force or Unknown Thing-in-Itself crouches there,
Remote, removed, unrevealed.”

The Director gestures at the police to remove Runic. Ruskinson is still shouting, although the cameras are pointing at Runic or Luscus. One of the Young Radishes, Huga Wells-Erb Heinsturbury, the science-fiction authoress, is shaking with hysteria generated by Runic’s voice and with a lust for revenge. She is sneaking up on a Time fido man. Time has long ago ceased to be a magazine, since there are no magazines, but became a government-supported communications bureau. Time is an example of Uncle Sam’s left-hand, right-hand, hands-off policy of providing communications bureaus with all they need and at the same time permitting the bureau executives to determine the bureau policies. Thus, government provision and free speech are united. This is fine, in theory, anyway.

Time has preserved several of its original policies, that is, truth and objectivity must be sacrificed for the sake of a witticism and science-fiction must be put down. Time has sneered at every one of Heinsturbury’s works, and so she is out to get some personal satisfaction for the hurt caused by the unfair reviews.

“Quid nunc? Cui bono?
Time? Space? Substance? Accident?
When you die—Hell? Nirvana,
Nothing is nothing to think about.
The canons of philosophy boom.
Their projectiles are duds.
The ammo heaps of theology blow up,
Set off by the saboteur Reason.

“Call me Ephraim, for I was halted
At the Ford of God and could not tongue
The sibilance to let me pass.
Well, I can’t pronounce shibboleth,
But I can say shit!”

Huga Wells-Erb Heinsturbury kicks the Time fido man in
the balls. He throws up his hands, and the football-shaped, football-sized camera sails from his hands and strikes a youth on the head. The youth is a Young Radish, Ludwig Euterpe Mahlzart. He is smoldering with rage because of the damnation of his tone poem, *Jetting The Stuff Of Future Hells*, and the camera is the extra fuel needed to make him blaze up uncontrollably. He punches the chief musical critic in his fat belly.

Huga, not the *Time* man, is screaming with pain. Her bare toes have struck the hard plastic armor with which the *Time* man, recipient of many such a kick, protects his genitals. Huga hops around on one foot while holding the injured foot in her hands. She twirls into a girl, and there is a chain effect. A man falls against the *Time* man, who is stooping over to pick up his camera.

“Ahaaa!” Huga screams and tears off the *Time* man’s helmet and straddles him and beats him over the head with the optical end of the camera. Since the solid-state camera is still working, it is sending to billions of viewers some very intriguing, if dizzying, pictures. Blood obscures one side of the picture, but not so much that the viewers are wholly cheated. And then they get another novel shot as the camera flies into the air again, turning over and over.

A bolgan has shoved his shock-stick against her back, causing her to stiffen and propel the camera in a high arc behind her. Huga’s current lover grapples with the bolgan; they roll on the floor; a Westwood juvenile picks up the shock-stick and has a fine time goosing the adults around him until a local youth jumps him.

“Riots are the opium of the people,” the police chief groans. He calls in all units and puts in a call to the chief of police of Westwood, who is, however, having his own troubles.

Runic beats his breast and howls

> “Sir, I exist! And don’t tell me,  
> As you did Crane, that that creates  
> No obligation in you towards me.  
> I am a man; I am unique.  
> I’ve thrown the Bread out the window,  
> Pissed in the Wine, pulled the plug  
> From the bottom of the Ark, cut the Tree  
> For firewood, and if there were a Holy  
> Ghost, I’d goose him.
But I know that it all does not mean
A God damned thing,
That nothing means nothing,
That is is and not-is not is is-not
That a rose is a rose is a
That we are here and will not be
And that is all we can know!”

Ruskinson sees Chib coming towards him, squawks, and tries to escape. Chib seizes the canvas of *Dogmas from a Dog* and batters Ruskinson over the head with it. Luscus protests in horror, not because of the damage done to Ruskinson but because the painting might be damaged. Chib turns around and batters Luscus in the stomach with the oval’s edge.

“The earth lurches like a ship going down,
Its back almost broken by the flood of
Excrement from the heavens and the deeps,
What God in His terrible munificence
Has granted on hearing Ahab cry,
Bullshit! Bullshit!
“I weep to think that this is Man
And this his end. But wait!
On the crest of the flood, a three-master
Of antique shape. The Flying Dutchman!
And Ahab is astride a ship’s deck once more.
Laugh, you Fates, and mock, you Norns!
For I am Ahab and I am Man,
And though I cannot break a hole
Through the wall of What Seems
To grab a handful of What Is,
Yet, I will keep on punching.
And I and my crew will not give up,
Though the timbers split beneath our feet
And we sink to become indistinguishable
From the general excrement.

“For a moment that will burn on the
Eye of God forever, Ahab stands
Outlined against the blaze of Orion,
Fist clenched, a bloody phallus,
Like Zeus exhibiting the trophy of
The unmanning of his father Cronus.
And then he and his crew and ship
Chib is shocked into a quivering mass by a jolt from a bolgan’s electrical riot stick. While he is recovering, he hears his Grandpa’s voice issuing from the transceiver in his hat.

“Chib, come quick! Accipiter has broken in and is trying to get through the door of my room!”

Chib gets up and fights and shoves his way to the exit. When he arrives, panting, at his home he finds that the door to Grandpa’s room has been opened. The IRB men and electronic technicians are standing in the hallway. Chib bursts into Grandpa’s room. Accipiter is standing in its middle and is quivering and pale. Nervous stone. He sees Chib and shrinks back, saying, “It wasn’t my fault. I had to break in. It was the only way I could find out for sure. It wasn’t my fault; I didn’t touch him.”

Chib’s throat is closing in on itself. He cannot speak. He kneels down and takes Grandpa’s hand. Grandpa has a slight smile on his blue lips. Once and for all, he has eluded Accipiter. In his hand is the latest sheet of his Ms.

THROUGH BALAKLAVAS OF HATE,
THEY CHARGE TOWARDS GOD

For most of my life, I have seen only a truly devout few and a great majority of truly indifferent. But there is a new spirit abroad. So many young men and women have revived, not a love for God, but a violent antipathy towards Him. This excites and restores me. Youths like my grandson and Runic shout blasphemies and so worship Him. If they did not believe, they would never think about Him. I now have some confidence in the future.
TO THE STICKS VIA THE STYX

Dressed in black, Chib and his mother go down the tube entrance to level 13B. It’s luminous-walled, spacious, and the fare is free. Chib tells the ticket-fido his destination. Behind the wall, a protein computer, no larger than a human brain, calculates. A coded ticket slides out of a slot. Chib takes the ticket, and they go to the bay, a great incurve, where he sticks the ticket into a slot. Another ticket protrudes, and a mechanical voice repeats the information on the ticket in World and LA English, in case they can’t read.

Gondolas shoot into the bay and decelerate to a stop. Wheelless, they float in a continually rebalancing graviton field. Sections of the bay slide back to make ports for the gondolas. Passengers step into the cages designated for them. The cages move forward; their doors open automatically. The passengers step into the gondolas. They sit down and wait while the safety meshmold closes over them. From the recesses of the chassis, transparent plastic curves rise and meet to form a dome.

Automatically timed, monitored by redundant protein computers for safety, the gondolas wait until the coast is clear. On receiving the go-ahead, they move slowly out of the bay to the tube. They pause while getting another affirmation, trebly checked in microseconds. Then they move swiftly into the tube.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Other gondolas pass them. The tube glows yellowly as if filled with electrified gas. The gondola accelerates rapidly. A few are still passing it, but Chib’s speeds up and soon none can catch up with it. The round posterior of a gondola ahead is a glimmering quarry that will not be caught until it slows before mooring at its destined bay. There are not many gondolas in the tube. Despite a 100-million population, there is little traffic on the north-south route. Most LAers stay in the self-sufficient walls of their clutches. There is more traffic on the east-west tubes, since a small percentage prefer the public ocean beaches to the municipality swimming pools.

The vehicle screams southward. After a few minutes, the tube begins to slope down and suddenly it is at a 45-degree angle to the horizontal. They flash by level after level.

Through the transparent walls, Chib glimpses the people
and architecture of other cities. Level 8, Long Beach, is interesting. Its homes look like two cut-quartz pie plates, one on top of another, open end on open end, and the unit mounted on a column of carved figures, the exit-entrance ramp a flying buttress.

At level 3A, the tube straightens out. Now the gondola races past establishments the sight of which causes Mama to shut her eyes. Chib squeezes his mother's hand and thinks of the half-brother and cousin who are behind the yellowish plastic. This level contains fifteen per cent of the population, the retarded, the incurable insane, the too-ugly, the monstrous, the senile aged. They swarm here, the vacant or twisted faces pressed against the tube wall to watch the pretty cars float by.

"Humanitarian" medical science keeps alive the babies that should—by Nature's imperative—have died. Ever since the 20th century, humans with defective genes have been saved from death. Hence, the continual spreading of these genes. The tragic thing is that science can now detect and correct defective genes in the ovum and sperm. Theoretically, all human beings could be blessed with totally healthy bodies and physically perfect brains. But the rub is that we don't have near enough doctors and facilities to keep up with the births. This despite the ever decreasing drop in the birth rate.

Medical science keeps people living so long that senility strikes. So, more and more slobbering mindless decrepits. And also an accelerating addition of the mentally addled. There are therapies and drugs to restore most of them to "normalcy," but not enough doctors and facilities. Some day there may be, but that doesn't help the contemporary unfortunate.

What to do now? The ancient Greeks placed defective babies in the fields to die. The Eskimos shipped out their old people on ice floes. Should we gas our abnormal infants and seniles? Sometimes, I think it's the merciful thing to do. But I can't ask somebody else to pull the switch when I won't.

I would shoot the first man to reach for it.
—from Grandpa's Private Ejaculations

The gondola approaches one of the rare intersections. Its passengers see down the broad-mouthed tube to their right.
An express flies towards them; it looms. Collision course. They know better, but they can't keep from gripping the mesh, gritting their teeth, and bracing their legs. Mama gives a small shriek. The flier hurtles over them and disappears, the flapping scream of air a soul on its way to underworld judgment.

The tube dips again until it levels out on 1. They see the ground below and the massive self-adjusting pillars supporting the megapolis. They whiz by over a little town, quaint, early 21st century LA preserved as a museum, one of many beneath the cube.

Fifteen minutes after embarking, the Winnegans reach the end of the line. An elevator takes them to the ground, where they enter a big black limousine. This is furnished by a private-enterprise mortuary, since Uncle Sam or the LA government will pay for cremation but not for burial. The Church no longer insists on interment, leaving it to the religionists to choose between being wind-blown ashes or underground corpses.

The sun is halfway towards the zenith. Mama begins to have trouble breathing and her arms and neck redden and swell. The three times she’s been outside the walls, she’s been attacked with this allergy despite the air conditioning of the limousine. Chib pats her hand while they're riding over a roughly patched road. The archaic eighty-year-old, fuel-cell-powered, electric-motor-driven vehicle is, however, rough-riding only by comparison with the gondola. It covers the ten kilometers to the cemetery speedily, stopping once to let deer cross the road.

Father Fellini greets them. He is distressed because he is forced to tell them that the Church feels that Grandpa has committed sacrilege. To substitute another man’s body for his corpse, to have mass said over it, to have it buried in sacred ground is to blaspheme. Moreover, Grandpa died an unrepentant criminal. At least, to the knowledge of the Church, he made no contrition just before he died.

Chib expects this refusal. St. Mary’s of BH-14 has declined to perform services for Grandpa within its walls. But Grandpa has often told Chib that he wants to be buried beside his ancestors, and Chib is determined that Grandpa will get his wish.

Chib says, “I'll bury him myself! Right on the edge of the graveyard!”
"You can't do that!" the priest, mortuary officials, and a federal agent say simultaneously.

"The hell I can't! Where's the shovel?"

It is then that he sees the thin dark face and falciform nose of Accipiter. The agent is supervising the digging up of Grandpa's (first) coffin. Nearby are at least fifty fido men shooting with their minicameras, the transceivers floating a few decameters near them. Grandpa is getting full coverage, as befits the Last Of The Billionaires and The Greatest Criminal Of The Century.

Fido interviewer: "Mr. Accipiter, could we have a few words from you? I'm not exaggerating when I say that there are probably at least ten billion people watching this historic event. After all, even the grade-school kids know of Win­again Winnegan.

"How do you feel about this? You've been on the case for 26 years. The successful conclusion must give you great satisfaction."

Accipiter, unsmiling as the essence of diorite: "Well, actually, I've not devoted full time to this case. Only about three years of accumulative time. But since I've spent at least several days each month on it, you might say I've been on Winnegan's trail for 26 years."

Interviewer: "It's been said that the ending of this case also means the end of the IRB. If we've not been misin­formed, the IRB was only kept functioning because of Win­negan. You had other business, of course, during this time, but the tracking down of counterfeiters and gamblers who don't report their income has been turned over to other bureaus. Is this true? If so, what do you plan to do?"

Accipiter, voice flashing a crystal of emotion: "Yes, the IRB is being disbanded. But not until after the case against Winnegan's granddaughter and her son is finished. They harbored him and are, therefore, accessories after the fact.

"In fact, almost the entire population of Beverly Hills, level 14, should be on trial. I know, but can't prove it as yet, that everybody, including the municipal chief of police, was well aware that Winnegan was hiding in that house. Even Winnegan's priest knew it, since Winnegan frequently went to mass and to confession. His priest claims that he urged Winnegan to turn himself in and also refused to give him absolution unless he did so.

"But Winnegan, a hardened 'mouse'—I mean, criminal, if ever I saw one, refused to follow the priest's urgings. He
claimed that he had not committed a crime, that, believe it or not, Uncle Sam was the criminal. Imagine the effrontery, the depravity, of the man!"

Interviewer: “Surely you don’t plan to arrest the entire population of Beverly Hills 14?”

Accipiter: “I have been advised not to.”

Interviewer: “Do you plan on retiring after this case is wound up?”

Accipiter: “No. I intend to transfer to the Greater LA Homicide Bureau. Murder for profit hardly exists any more, but there are still crimes of passion, thank God!”

Interviewer: “Of course, if young Winnegan should win his case against you—he has charged you with invasion of domestic privacy, illegal housebreaking, and directly causing his great-great-grandfather’s death—then you won’t be able to work for the Homicide Bureau or any police department.”

Accipiter, flashing several crystals of emotion: “It’s no wonder we law enforcers have such a hard time operating effectively! Sometimes, not only the majority of citizens seem to be on the law-breaker’s side but my own employers . . .”

Interviewer: “Would you care to complete that statement? I’m sure your employers are watching this channel. No? I understand that Winnegan’s trial and yours are, for some reason, scheduled to take place at the same time. How do you plan to be present at both trials? Heh, heh! Some fido-casters are calling you The Simultaneous Man!”

Accipiter, face darkening: “Some idiot clerk did that! He incorrectly fed the data into a legal computer. The confusion of dates is being straightened out now. I might mention that the clerk is suspected of deliberately making the error. There have been too many cases like this . . .”

Interviewer: “Would you mind summing up the course of this case for our viewers’ benefit? Just the highlights, please.”

Accipiter: “Well, ah, as you know, fifty years ago all large private-enterprise businesses had become government bureaus. All except the building construction firm, the Finnegans Fifty-three States Company, of which the president was Finn Finnegans. He was the father of the man who is to be buried—somewhere—today.

“Also, all unions except the largest, the construction union, were dissolved or were government unions. Actually, the company and its union were one, because all employees got ninety-five per cent of the money, distributed more or less
equally among them. Old Finnegan was both the company president and union business agent-secretary.

"By hook or crook, mainly by crook, I believe, the firm-union had resisted the inevitable absorption. There were investigations into Finnegan's methods: coercion and blackmail of U. S. Senators and even U. S. Supreme Court Justices. Nothing was, however, proved."

Interviewer: "For the benefit of our viewers who may be a little hazy on their history, even fifty years ago money was used only for the purchase of nonguaranteed items. Its other use, as today, was as an index of prestige and social esteem. At one time, the government was thinking of getting rid of currency entirely, but a study revealed that it had great psychological value. The income tax was also kept, although the government had no use for money, because the size of a man's tax determined prestige and also because it enabled the government to remove a large amount of currency from circulation."

Accipiter: "Anyway, when old Finnegan died, the federal government renewed its pressure to incorporate the construction workers and the company officials as civil servants. But young Finnegan proved to be as foxy and vicious as his old man. I don't suggest, of course, that the fact that his uncle was President of the U.S. at that time had anything to do with young Finnegan's success."

Interviewer: "Young Finnegan was seventy years old when his father died."

Accipiter: "During this struggle, which went on for many years, Finnegan decided to rename himself Winnegan. It's a pun on Win Again. He seems to have had a childish, even imbecilic, delight in puns, which, frankly, I don't understand. Puns, I mean."

Interviewer: "For the benefit of our non-American viewers, who may not know of our national custom of Naming Day . . . this was originated by the Panamorites. When a citizen comes of age, he may at any time thereafter take a new name, one which he believes to be appropriate to his temperament or goal in life. I might point out that Uncle Sam, who's been unfairly accused of trying to impose conformity upon his citizens, encourages this individualistic approach to life. This despite the increased record-keeping required on the government's part. "I might also point out something else of interest. The government claimed that Grandpa Winnegan was mentally
incompetent. My listeners will pardon me, I hope, if I take up a moment of your time to explain the basis of Uncle Sam's assertion. Now, for the benefit of those among you who are unacquainted with an early 20th-century classic, Finnegans Wake, despite your government's wish for you to have a free lifelong education, the author, James Joyce, derived the title from an old vaudeville song.

(Half-fadeout while a monitor briefly explains "vaudeville.")

"The song was about Tim Finnegan, an Irish hod carrier who fell off a ladder while drunk and was supposedly killed. During the Irish wake held for Finnegan, the corpse is accidentally splashed with whiskey. Finnegan, feeling the touch of the whiskey, the 'water of life,' sits up in his coffin and then climbs out to drink and dance with the mourners.

"Grandpa Winnegan always claimed that the vaudeville song was based on reality, you can't keep a good man down, and that the original Tim Finnegan was his ancestor. This preposterous statement was used by the government in its suit against Winnegan.

"However, Winnegan produced documents to substantiate his assertion. Later—too late—the documents were proved to be forgeries."

Accipiter: "The government's case against Winnegan was strengthened by the rank and file's sympathy with the government. Citizens were complaining that the business-union was undemocratic and discriminatory. The officials and workers were getting relatively high wages, but many citizens had to be contented with their guaranteed income. So, Winnegan was brought to trial and accused, justly, of course, of various crimes, among which were subversion of democracy.

"Seeing the inevitable, Winnegan capped his criminal career. He somehow managed to steal 20 billion dollars from the federal deposit vault. This sum, by the way, was equal to half the currency then existing in Greater LA. Winnegan disappeared with the money, which he had not only stolen but had not paid income tax on. Unforgivable. I don't know why so many people have glamorized this villain's feat. Why, I've seen fido shows with him as the hero, thinly disguised under another name, of course."

Interviewer: "Yes, folks, Winnegan committed the Crime Of The Age. And, although he has finally been located, and is to be buried today—somewhere—the case is not com-
pletely closed. The Federal government says it is. But where is the money, the 20 billion dollars?"

Accipiter: "Actually, the money has no value now except as collector's items. Shortly after the theft, the government called in all currency and then issued new bills that could not be mistaken for the old. The government had been wanting to do something like this for a long time, anyway, because it believed that there was too much currency, and it only reissued half the amount taken in.

"I'd like very much to know where the money is. I won't rest until I do. I'll hunt it down if I have to do it on my own time."

Interviewer: "You may have plenty of time to do that if young Winnegan wins his case. Well, folks, as most of you may know, Winnegan was found dead in a lower level of San Francisco about a year after he disappeared. His granddaughter identified the body, and the fingerprints, earprints, retinaprints, teethprints, blood-type, hair-type, and a dozen other identity prints matched out."

Chib, who has been listening, thinks that Grandpa must have spent several millions of the stolen money arranging this. He does not know, but he suspects that a research lab somewhere in the world grew the duplicate in a biotank. This happened two years after Chib was born. When Chib was five, his grandpa showed up. Without letting Mama know he was back, he moved in. Only Chib was his confidant. It was, of course, impossible for Grandpa to go completely unnoticed by Mama, yet she now insisted that she had never seen him. Chib thought that this was to avoid prosecution for being an accessory after the crime. He was not sure. Perhaps she had blocked off his "visitations" from the rest of her mind. For her it would be easy, since she never knew whether today was Tuesday or Thursday and could not tell you what year it was.

Chib ignores the mortuarians, who want to know what to do with the body. He walks over to the grave. The top of the ovoid coffin is visible now, with the long elephantlike snout of the digging machine sonically crumbling the dirt and then sucking it up. Accipiter, breaking through his lifelong control, is smiling at the fidomen and rubbing his hands.

"Dance a little, you son of a bitch," Chib says, his anger the only block to the tears and the wail building up in him.

The area around the coffin is cleared to make room for the grappling arms of the machine. These descend, hook
under, and lift the black, irradiated-plastic, mocksilver-arabesqued coffin up and out and onto the grass. Chib, seeing the IRB men begin to open the coffin, starts to say something but closes his mouth. He watches intently, his knees bent as if getting ready to jump. The fidomen close in, their eyeball-shaped cameras pointing at the group around the coffin.

Groaning, the lid rises. There is a big bang. Dense dark smoke billows. Accipiter and his men, blackened, eyes wide and white, coughing, stagger out of the cloud. The fidomen are running every-which way or stooping to pick up their cameras. Those who were standing far enough back can see that the explosion took place at the bottom of the grave. Only Chib knows that the raising of the coffin lid has activated the detonating device in the grave.

He is also the first to look up into the sky at the projectile soaring from the grave because only he expected it. The rocket climbs up to five hundred feet while the fidomen train their cameras on it. It bursts apart and from it a ribbon unfolds between two round objects. The objects expand to become balloons while the ribbon becomes a huge banner.

On it, in big black letters, are the words

WINNEGAN’S FAKE!

Twenty billions of dollars buried beneath the supposed bottom of the grave burn furiously. Some bills, blown up in the geyser of fireworks, are carried by the wind while IRB men, fidomen, mortuary officials, and municipality officials chase them.

Mama is stunned.

Accipiter looks as if he is having a stroke.

Chib cries and then laughs and rolls on the ground.

Grandpa has again screwed Uncle Sam and has also pulled his greatest pun where all the world can see it.

“Oh, you old man!” Chib sobs between laughing fits. “Oh, you old man! How I love you!”

While he is rolling on the ground again, roaring so hard his ribs hurt, he feels a paper in his hand. He stops laughing and gets on his knees and calls after the man who gave it to him. The man says, “I was paid by your grandfather to hand it to you when he was buried.”

Chib reads.
I hope nobody was hurt, not even the IRB men.

Final advice from the Wise Old Man In The Cave. Tear loose. Leave LA. Leave the country. Go to Egypt. Let your mother ride the purple wage on her own. She can do it if she practices thrift and self-denial. If she can’t that’s not your fault.

You are fortunate indeed to have been born with talent, if not genius, and to be strong enough to want to rip out the umbilical cord. So do it. Go to Egypt. Steep yourself in the ancient culture. Stand before the Sphinx. Ask her (actually, it’s a he) the Question.

Then visit one of the zoological preserves south of the Nile. Live for a while in a reasonable facsimile of Nature as she was before mankind dishonored and disfigured her. There, where Homo Sapiens (?) evolved from the killer ape, absorb the spirit of that ancient place and time.

You’ve been painting with your penis, which I’m afraid was more stiffened with bile than with passion for life. Learn to paint with your heart. Only thus will you become great and true.

Paint.

Then, go wherever you want to go. I’ll be with you as long as you’re alive to remember me. To quote Runic, “I’ll be the Northern Lights of your soul.”

Hold fast to the belief that there will be others to love you just as much as I did or even more. What is more important, you must love them as much as they love you.

Can you do this?
Fritz Leiber

Fritz Leiber is older than he used to be (everyone is, except me) but he still has a kind of commanding presence that comes with being tall, and of striking appearance.

And he is also one of the few people who have told me something about my own writing that I didn’t know and was interested to hear. It wasn’t at a convention but (I believe) at a meeting of the Hydra Club, an on-again, off-again association of science fiction professionals in New York.

I was hanging around him (it was nearly twenty years ago), hoping that some of his good looks might be contagious (they weren’t) and he said to me, “You know something I have noticed about your stories, Isaac?”

My first impulse was to shrink away. Ordinarily I hate sentences like that because, ten to one, they continue with “They’re illiterate!” or even “They stink!” I mean, who needs that kind of profound comment.

Even if the next sentence were “They’re great!” or “They’re terribly thought-provoking,” it might make me feel good, but, essentially, it would be meaningless. After all, I know that my stories are great and terribly thought-provoking. It’s nice to have you agree with me but the only thing I learn from it is that you have keen literary judgment.

But what Fritz said to me was, “You have no villains.”

I objected at once. “Yes, I do, Fritz,” I said. “Every story I write has a villain.”

“Oh, you have someone who opposes the hero,” he said, “but he’s never a villain.”

I saw what he meant. If a story is cerebral in nature (as mine invariably are) the conflict is between thoughts and ideas, not fists, and you’ve got to express each side in the conflict reasonably in order to make it worth the reader’s
concern. In order to do so, your villain has to express his point of view carefully and skillfully, and be right in his own eyes. You can’t have him just shouting, “I’m a wicked bad-guy.”

So I end up with a villain who isn’t a villain.

However, that’s not what I said to Fritz. Instead, I said, “Do you think I don’t have real villains because I simply don’t know how to describe a villain on account of because I’m such a nice guy clear through that I have no villainy in me?”

“Exactly, Isaac,” said Fritz benignly, and patted the top of my head.

It’s a nice theory—about me having no villains because I’m such a nice guy—but it worries me a little. Some of my good friends in science fiction, I notice, write stories which have no heroes. Everyone in them, both protagonist and antagonist, are different varieties of heels. If my theory is right, what does it prove about them?

Naturally, I name no names, but Fritz isn’t one of them. He is every bit as nice and sweet as I am. And even handsomer.
Suddenly Joe Slattermill knew for sure he’d have to get out quick or else blow his top and knock out with the shrapnel of his skull the props and patches holding up his decaying home, that was like a house of big wooden and plaster and wallpaper-cards except for the huge fireplace and ovens and chimney across the kitchen from him.

Those were stone-solid enough, though. The fireplace was chin-high, at least twice that long, and filled from end to end with roaring flames. Above were the square doors of the ovens in a row—his Wife baked for part of their living. Above the ovens was the wall-long mantelpiece, too high for his Mother to reach or Mr. Guts to jump any more, set with all sorts of ancestral curios, but any of them that weren’t stone or glass or china had been so dried and darkened by decades of heat that they looked like nothing but shrunklen human heads and black golf balls. At one end were clustered his Wife’s square gin bottles. Above the mantelpiece hung one old chromo, so high and so darkened by soot and grease that you couldn’t tell whether the swirls and fat cigar shape were a whaleback steamer plowing through a hurricane or a spaceship plunging through a storm of light-driven dust motes.

As soon as Joe curled his toes inside his boots, his Mother knew what he was up to. “Going bumming,” she mumbled with conviction. “Pants pockets full of cartwheels of house money, too, to spend on sin.” And she went back to munching the long shreds she stripped fumblingly with her right hand off the turkey carcass set close to the terrible heat, her left hand ready to fend off Mr. Guts, who stared at her yellow-eyed, gaunt-flanked, with long mangy tail a-twitch. In her dirty dress, streaky as the turkey’s sides, Joe’s Mother
looked like a bent brown bag and her fingers were lumpy twigs.

Joe's Wife knew as soon or sooner, for she smiled thin-eyed at him over her shoulder from where she towered at the centermost oven. Before she closed its door, Joe glimpsed that she was baking two long, flat, narrow, fluted loaves and one high, round-domed one. She was thin as death and disease in her violet wrapper. Without looking, she reached out a yard-long, skinny arm for the nearest gin bottle and downed a warm slug and smiled again. And without word spoken, Joe knew she'd said, "You're going out and gamble and get drunk and lay a floozy and come home and beat me and go to jail for it," and he had a flash of the last time he'd been in the dark gritty cell and she'd come by moonlight, which showed the green and yellow lumps on her narrow skull where he'd hit her, to whisper to him through the tiny window in back and slip him a half pint through the bars.

And Joe knew for certain that this time it would be that bad and worse, but just the same he heaved up himself and his heavy, muffledly clanking pockets and shuffled straight to the door, muttering, "Guess I'll roll the bones, up the pike a stretch and back," swinging his bent, knobby-elbowed arms like paddle-wheels to make a little joke about his words.

When he'd stepped outside, he held the door open a hand's breadth behind him for several seconds. When he finally closed it, a feeling of deep misery struck him. Earlier years, Mr. Guts would have come streaking along to see fights and females on the roofs and fences, but now the big tom was content to stay home and hiss by the fire and snatch for turkey and dodge a broom, quarreling and comforting with two housebound women. Nothing had followed Joe to the door but his Mother's chomping and her gasping breaths and the clink of the gin bottle going back on the mantel and the creaking of the floor boards under his feet.

The night was up-side-down deep among the frosty stars. A few of them seemed to move, like the white-hot jets of spaceships. Down below it looked as if the whole town of Ironmine had blown or buttoned out the light and gone to sleep, leaving the streets and spaces to the equally unseen breezes and ghosts. But Joe was still in the hemisphere of the musty dry odor of the worm-eaten carpentry behind him, and as he felt and heard the dry grass of the lawn brush his calves, it occurred to him that something deep down inside
him had for years been planning things so that he and the
house and his Wife and Mother and Mr. Guts would all
come to an end together. Why the kitchen heat hadn't
touched off the tindery place ages ago was a physical miracle.

Hunching his shoulders, Joe stepped out, not up the pike,
but down the dirt road that led past Cypress Hollow Ceme­
tery to Night Town.

The breezes were gentle, but unusually restless and vari­
able tonight, like leprechaun squalls. Beyond the drunken,
white-washed cemetery fence dim in the starlight, they rustled
the scraggly trees of Cypress Hollow and made it seem they
were stroking their beards of Spanish moss. Joe sensed that
the ghosts were just as restless as the breezes, uncertain
where and whom to haunt, or whether to take the night off,
drifting together in sorrowfully lecherous companionship.
While among the trees the red-green vampire lights pulsed
faintly and irregularly, like sick fireflies or a plague-stricken
space fleet. The feeling of deep misery stuck with Joe and
deepened and he was tempted to turn aside and curl up in
any convenient tomb or around some half-toppled head board
and cheat his Wife and the other three behind him out of a
shared doom. He thought: Gonna roll the bones, gonna roll
'em up and go to sleep. But while he was deciding, he got
past the sagged-open gate and the rest of the delirious fence
and Shantyville too.

At first Night Town seemed dead as the rest of Ironmine,
but then he noticed a faint glow, sick as the vampire lights
but more feverish, and with it a jumping music, tiny at first
as a jazz for jitterbugging ants. He stepped along the springy
sidewalk, wistfully remembering the days when the spring
was all in his own legs and he'd bound into a fight like a
bobcat or a Martian sand-spider. God, it had been years
now since he had fought a real fight, or felt the powet.
Gradually the midget music got raucous as a bunnyhug for
grizzly bears and loud as a polka for elephants, while the
glow became a riot of gas flares and flambeaux and corpse­
blue mercury tubes and jiggling pink neon ones that all
jeered at the stars where the spaceships roved. Next thing,
he was facing a three-storey false front flaring everywhere
like a devil's rainbow, with a pale blue topping of St. Elmo's
fire. There were wide swinging doors in the center of it,
spilling light above and below. Above the doorway, golden
calcium light scrawled over and over again, with wild curl-
icues and flourishes, "The Boneyard," while a fiendish red kept printing out, "Gambling."

So the new place they'd all been talking about for so long had opened at last! For the first time that night, Joe Slattermill felt a stirring of real life in him and the faintest caress of excitement.

Gonna roll the bones, he thought.

He dusted off his blue-green work clothes with big, care­less swipes and slapped his pockets to hear the clank. Then he threw back his shoulders and grinned his lips sneeringly and pushed through the swinging doors as if giving a foe the straight-armed heel of his palm.

Inside, The Boneyard seemed to cover the area of a town­ship and the bar looked as long as the railroad tracks. Round pools of light on the green poker tables alternated with hourglass shapes of exciting gloom, through which drink girls and change girls moved like white-legged witches. By the jazz-stand in the distance, belly dancers made their white hourglass shapes. The gamblers were thick and hunched down as mushrooms, all bald from agonizing over the fall of a card or a die or the dive of an ivory ball, while the Scarlet Women were like fields of poinsettia.

The calls of the croupiers and the slaps of dealt cards were as softly yet fatefully staccato as the rustle and beat of the jazz drums. Every tight-locked atom of the place was controlledly jumping. Even the dust motes jigged tensely in the cones of light.

Joe's excitement climed and he felt sift through him, like a breeze that heralds a gale, the faintest breath of a confidence which he knew could become a tornado. All thoughts of his house and Wife and Mother dropped out of his mind, while Mr. Guts remained only as a crazy young tom walking stiff-legged around the rim of his consciousness. Joe's own leg muscles twitched in sympathy and he felt them grow supplely strong.

He coolly and searchingly looked the place over, his band going out like it didn't belong to him to separate a drink from a passing, gently bobbing tray. Finally his gaze settled on what he judged to be the Number One Crap Table. All the Big Mushrooms seemed to be there, bald as the rest but standing tall as toadstools. Then through a gap in them Joe saw on the other side of the table a figure still taller, but dressed in a long dark coat with collar turned up and a dark slouch hat pulled low, so that only a triangle of white
GONNA ROLL THE BONES

face showed. A suspicion and a hope rose in Joe and he headed straight for the gap in the Big Mushrooms.

As he got nearer, the white-legged and shiny-topped drifters eddying out of his way, his suspicion received confirmation after confirmation and his hope budded and swelled. Back from one end of the table was the fattest man he'd ever seen, with a long cigar and a silver vest and a gold tie clasp at least eight inches wide that just said in thick script, "Mr. Bones." Back a little from the other end was the nakedest change-girl yet and the only one he'd seen whose tray, slung from her bare shoulders and indenting her belly just below her breasts, was stacked with gold in gleaming little towers and with jet-black chips. While the dice-girl, skinnier and taller and longer armed than his Wife even, didn't seem to be wearing much but a pair of long white gloves. She was all right if you went for the type that isn't much more than pale skin over bones with breasts like china doorknobs.

Beside each gambler was a high round table for his chips. The one by the gap was empty. Snapping his fingers at the nearest silver change-girl, Joe traded all his greasy dollars for an equal number of pale chips and tweaked her left nipple for luck. She playfully snapped her teeth toward his fingers.

Not hurrying but not wasting any time, he advanced and carelessly dropped his modest stacks on the empty table and took his place in the gap. He noted that the second Big Mushroom on his right had the dice. His heart but no other part of him gave an extra jump. Then he steadily lifted his eyes and looked straight across the table.

The coat was a shimmering elegant pillar of black satin with jet buttons, the upturned collar of fine dull plush black as the darkest cellar, as was the slouch hat with downturned brim and for band only a thin braid of black horsehair. The arms of the coat were long, lesser satin pillars, ending in slim, long-fingered hands that moved swiftly when they did, but held each position of rest with a statue's poise.

Joe still couldn't see much of the face except for smooth lower forehead with never a bead or trickle of sweat—the eyebrows were like straight snippets of the hat's braid—and gaunt, aristocratic cheeks and narrow but somewhat flat nose. The complexion of the face wasn't as white as Joe had first judged. There was a faint touch of brown in it,
Like ivory that's just begun to age, or Venusian soapstone. Another glance at the hands confirmed this.

Behind the man in black was a knot of just about the flashiest and nastiest customers, male or female, Joe had ever seen. He knew from one look that each bediamonded, pomaded bully had a belly gun beneath the flap of his flowered vest and a blackjack in his hip pocket, and each snake-eyed sporting girl a stiletto in her garter and a pearl-handled silver-plated derringer under the sequined silk in the hollow between her jutting breasts.

Yet at the same time Joe knew they were just trimmings. It was the man in black, their master, who was the deadly one, the kind of man you knew at a glance you couldn't touch and live. If without asking you merely laid a finger on his sleeve, no matter how lightly and respectfully, an ivory hand would move faster than thought and you'd be stabbed or shot. Or maybe just the touch would kill you, as if every black article of his clothing were charged from his ivory skin outward with a high-voltage, high-amperage ivory electricity. Joe looked at the shadowed face again and decided he wouldn't care to try it.

For it was the eyes that were the most impressive feature. All great gamblers have dark-shadowed deep-set eyes. But this one's eyes were sunk so deep you couldn't even be sure you were getting a gleam of them. They were inscrutability incarnate. They were unfathomable. They were like black holes.

But all this didn't disappoint Joe one bit, though it did terrify him considerably. On the contrary, it made him exult. His first suspicion was completely confirmed and his hope spread into full flower.

This must be one of those really big gamblers who hit Ironmine only once a decade at most, come from the Big City on one of the river boats that ranged the watery dark like luxurious comets, spouting long thick tails of sparks from their sequoia-tall stacks with top foliage of curvy-snipped sheet iron. Or like silver space-liners with dozens of jewel-flamed jets, their portholes a-twinkle like ranks of marshaled asteroids.

For that matter, maybe some of those really big gamblers actually came from other planets where the nighttime pace was hotter and the sporting life a delirium of risk and delight.

Yes, this was the kind of man Joe had always yearned to
pit his skill against. He felt the power begin to tingle in his rock-still fingers, just a little.

Joe lowered his gaze to the crap table. It was almost as wide as a man is tall, at least twice as long, unusually deep, and lined with black, not green, felt, so that it looked like a giant’s coffin. There was something familiar about its shape which he couldn’t place. Its bottom, though not its sides or ends, had a twinkling iridescence, as if it had been lightly sprinkled with very tiny diamonds. As Joe lowered his gaze all the way and looked directly down, his eyes barely over the table, he got the crazy notion that it went down all the way through the world, so that the diamonds were the stars on the other side, visible despite the sunlight there, just as Joe was always able to see the stars by day up the shaft of the mine he worked in, and so that if a cleaned-out gambler, dizzy with defeat, toppled forward into it, he’d fall forever, toward the bottommost bottom, be it Hell or some black galaxy. Joe’s thoughts swirled and he felt the cold, hard-fingered clutch of fear at his crotch. Someone was crooning beside him, “Come on, Big Dick.”

Then the dice, which had meanwhile passed to the Big Mushroom immediately on his right, came to rest near the table’s center, contradicting and wiping out Joe’s vision. But instantly there was another oddity to absorb him. The ivory dice were large and unusually round-cornered with dark red spots that gleamed like real rubies, but the spots were arranged in such a way that each face looked like a miniature skull. For instance, the seven thrown just now, by which the Big Mushroom to his right had lost his point, which had been ten, consisted of a two with the spots evenly spaced toward one side, like eyes, instead of toward opposite corners, and of a five with the same red eye-spots but also a central red nose and two spots close together below that to make teeth.

The long, skinny, white-gloved arm of the dice-girl snaked out like an albino cobra and scooped up the dice and whisked them onto the rim of the table right in front of Joe. He inhaled silently, picked up a single chip from his table and started to lay it beside the dice, then realized that wasn’t the way things were done here, and put it back. He would have liked to examine the chip more closely, though. It was curiously lightweight and pale tan, about the color of cream with a shot of coffee in it, and it had embossed on its surface a symbol he could feel, though not see. He didn’t know what
the symbol was, that would have taken more feeling. Yet its touch had been very good, setting the power tingling full blast in his shooting hand.

Joe looked casually yet swiftly at the faces around the table, not missing the Big Gambler across from him, and said quietly, “Roll a penny,” meaning of course one pale chip, or a dollar.

There was a hiss of indignation from all the Big Mushrooms and the moonface of big-bellied Mr. Bones grew purple as he started forward to summon his bouncers.

The Big Gambler raised a black-satined forearm and sculptured hand, palm down. Instantly Mr. Bones froze and the hissing stopped faster than that of a meteor prick in self-sealing space steel. Then in a whispery, cultured voice, without the faintest hint of derision, the man in black said, “Get on him, gamblers.”

Here, Joe thought, was a final confirmation of his suspicion, had it been needed. The really great gamblers were always perfect gentlemen and generous to the poor.

With only the tiny, respectful hint of a guffaw, one of the Big Mushrooms called to Joe, “You’re faded.”

Joe picked up the ruby-featured dice.

Now ever since he had first caught two eggs on one plate, won all the marbles in Ironmine, and juggled six alphabet blocks so they finally fell in a row on the rug spelling “Mother,” Joe Slattermill had been almost incredibly deft at precision throwing. In the mine he could carom a rock off a wall of ore to crack a rat’s skull fifty feet away in the dark and he sometimes amused himself by tossing little fragments of rock back into the holes from which they had fallen, so that they stuck there, perfectly fitted in, for at least a second. Sometimes, by fast tossing, he could fit seven or eight fragments into the hole from which they had fallen, like putting together a puzzle block. If he could ever have got into space, Joe would undoubtedly have been able to pilot six Moon-skimmers at once and do figure eights through Saturn’s rings blindfold.

Now the only real difference between precision-tossing rocks or alphabet blocks and dice is that you have to bounce the latter off the end wall of a crap table, and that just made it a more interesting test of skill for Joe.

Rattling the dice now, he felt the power in his fingers and palm as never before.

He made a swift low roll, so that the bones ended up
exactly in front of the white-gloved dice-girl. His natural seven was made up, as he’d intended, of a four and a three. In red-spot features they were like the five, except that both had only one tooth and the three no nose. Sort of baby-faced skulls. He had won a penny—that is, a dollar.

“Roll two cents,” said Joe Slattermill.

This time, for variety, he made his natural with an eleven. The six was like the five, except it had three teeth, the best-looking skull of the lot.

“Roll a nickel less one.”

Two Big Mushrooms divided that bet with a covert smirk at each other.

Now Joe rolled a three and an ace. His point was four. The ace, with its single spot off center toward a side, still somehow looked like a skull—maybe of a Lilliputian Cyclops.

He took a while making his point, once absent-mindedly rolling three successive tens the hard way. He wanted to watch the dice-girl scoop up the cubes. Each time it seemed to him that her snake-swift fingers went under the dice while they were still flat on the felt. Finally he decided it couldn’t be an illusion. Although the dice couldn’t penetrate the felt, her white-gloved fingers somehow could, dipping in a flash through the black, diamond-sparkling material as if it weren’t there.

Right away the thought of a crap-table-size hole through the earth came back to Joe. This would mean that the dice were rolling and lying on a perfectly transparent flat surface, impenetrable for them but nothing else. Or maybe it was only the dice-girl’s hands that could penetrate the surface, which would turn into a mere fantasy Joe’s earlier vision of a cleaned-out gambler taking the Big Dive down that dreadful shaft, which made the deepest mine a mere pin dent.

Joe decided he had to know which was true. Unless absolutely unavoidable, he didn’t want to take the chance of being troubled by vertigo at some crucial stage of the game.

He made a few more meaningless throws, from time to time crooning for realism, “Come on, Little Joe.” Finally he settled on his plan. When he did at last make his point—the hard way, with two twos—he caromed the dice off the far corner so that they landed exactly in front of him. Then, after a minimum pause for his throw to be seen by the table, he shot his left hand down under the cubes, just a flicker ahead of the dice-girl’s strike, and snatched them up.
Wow! Joe had never had a harder time in his life making his face and manner conceal what his body felt, not even when the wasp had stung him on the neck just as he had been for the first time putting his hand under the skirt of his prudish, fickle, demanding Wife-to-be. His fingers and the back of his hand were in as much agony as if he’d stuck them into a blast furnace. No wonder the dice-girl wore white gloves. They must be asbestos. And a good thing he hadn’t used his shooting hand, he thought as he ruefully watched the blisters rise.

He remembered he’d been taught in school what Twenty-Mile Mine also demonstrated: that the earth was fearfully hot under its crust. The crap-table-size hole must pipe up that heat, so that any gambler taking the Big Dive would fry before he’d fallen a furlong and come out less than a cinder in China.

As if his blistered hand weren’t bad enough, the Big Mushrooms were all hissing at him again and Mr. Bones had purpled once more and was opening his melon-size mouth to shout for his bouncers.

Once again a lift of the Big Gambler’s hand saved Joe. The whispery, gentle voice called, “Tell him, Mr. Bones.”

The latter roared toward Joe, “No gambler may pick up the dice he or any other gambler has shot. Only my dice-girl may do that. Rule of the house!”

Joe snapped Mr. Bones the barest nod. He said coolly, “Rolling a dime less two,” and when that still peewee bet was covered, he shot Phoebe for his point and then fooled around for quite a while, throwing anything but a five or a seven, until the throbbing in his left hand should fade and all his nerves feel rock-solid again. There had never been the slightest alteration in the power in his right hand; he felt that strong as ever, or stronger.

Midway of this interlude, the Big Gambler bowed slightly but respectfully toward Joe, hooding those unfathomable eye sockets, before turning around to take a long black cigarette from his prettiest and evilest-looking sporting girl. Courtesy in the smallest matters, Joe thought, another mark of the master devotee of games of chance. The Big Gambler sure had himself a flash crew, all right, though in idly looking them over again as he rolled, Joe noted one bummer toward the back who didn’t fit in—a raggedy-elegant chap with the elflocked hair and staring eyes and TB-spotted cheeks of a poet.
As he watched the smoke trickling up from under the black slouch hat, he decided that either the lights across the table had dimmed or else the Big Gambler's complexion was yet a shade darker than he'd thought at first. Or it might even be—wild fantasy—that the Big Gambler's skin was slowly darkening tonight, like a meerschaum pipe being smoked a mile a second. That was almost funny to think of—there was enough heat in this place, all right, to darken meerschaum, as Joe knew from sad experience, but so far as he was aware it was all under the table.

None of Joe's thoughts, either familiar or admiring, about the Big Gambler decreased in the slightest degree his certainty of the supreme menace of the man in black and his conviction that it would be death to touch him. And if any doubts had stirred in Joe's mind, they would have been squelched by the chilling incident which next occurred.

The Big Gambler had just taken into his arms his prettiest-evilest sporting girl and was running an aristocratic hand across her haunch with perfect gentility, when the poet chap, green-eyed from jealousy and lovesickness, came leaping forward like a wildcat and aimed a long gleaming dagger at the black satin back.

Joe couldn't see how the blow could miss, but without taking his genteel right hand off the sporting girl's plush rear end, the Big Gambler shot out his left arm like a steel spring straightening. Joe couldn't tell whether he stabbed the poet chap in the throat, or judo-chopped him there, or gave him the Martian double-finger, or just touched him, but anyhow the fellow stopped as dead as if he'd been shot by a silent elephant gun or an invisible ray pistol and he slammed down on the floor. A couple of darkies came running up to drag off the body and nobody paid the least attention, such episodes apparently being taken for granted at The Boneyard.

It gave Joe quite a turn and he almost shot Phoebe before he intended to.

But by now the waves of pain had stopped running up his left arm and his nerves were like metal-wrapped new guitar strings, so three rolls later he shot a five, making his point, and set in to clean out the table.

He rolled nine successive naturals, seven sevens and two elevens, pyramiding his first wager of a single chip to a stake of over four thousand dollars. None of the Big Mushrooms had dropped out yet, but some of them were begin-
ning to look worried and a couple were sweating. The Big Gambler still hadn’t covered any part of Joe’s bets, but he seemed to be following the play with interest from the cavernous depths of his eye sockets.

Then Joe got a devilish thought. Nobody could beat him tonight, he knew, but if he held onto the dice until the table was cleaned out, he’d never get a chance to see the Big Gambler exercise his skill, and he was truly curious about that. Besides, he thought, he ought to return courtesy for courtesy and have a crack at being a gentleman himself.

“Pulling out forty-one dollars less a nickel,” he announced. “Rolling a penny.”

This time there wasn’t any hissing and Mr. Bones’s moonface didn’t cloud over. But Joe was conscious that the Big Gambler was staring at him disappointedly, or sorrowfully, or maybe just speculatively.

Joe immediately crapped out by throwing boxcars, rather pleased to see the two best-looking tiny skulls grinning ruby-toothed side by side, and the dice passed to the Big Mushroom on his left.

“Knew when his streak was over,” he heard another Big Mushroom mutter with grudging admiration.

The play worked rather rapidly around the table, nobody getting very hot and the stakes never more than medium high. “Shoot a fin.” “Rolling a sawbuck.” “An Andrew Jackson.” “Rolling thirty bucks.” Now and then Joe covered part of a bet, winning more than he lost. He had over seven thousand dollars, real money, before the bones got around to the Big Gambler.

That one held the dice for a long moment on his statue-steady palm while he looked at them reflectively, though not the hint of a furrow appeared in his almost brownish forehead down which never a bead of sweat trickled. He murmured, “Rolling a double sawbuck,” and when he had been faded, he closed his fingers, lightly rattled the cubes—the sound was like big seeds inside a small gourd only half dry—and negligently cast the dice toward the end of the table.

It was a throw like none Joe had ever seen before at any crap table. The dice traveled flat through the air without turning over, struck the exact juncture of the table’s end and bottom, and stopped there dead, showing a natural seven.

Joe was distinctly disappointed. On one of his own throws he was used to calculating something like, “Launch three-up, five north, two and a half rolls in the air, hit on the six-
five-three corner, three-quarter roll and a one-quarter side-twist right, hit end on the one-two edge, one-half reverse roll and three-quarter side-twist left, hand on five face, roll over twice, come up two,” and that would be for just one of the dice, and a really commonplace throw, without extra bounces.

By comparison, the technique of the Big Gambler had been ridiculously, abysmally, horrifyingly simple. Joe could have duplicated it with the greatest ease, of course. It was no more than an elementary form of his old pastime of throwing fallen rocks back into their holes. But Joe had never once thought of pulling such a babyish trick at the crap table. It would make the whole thing too easy and destroy the beauty of the game.

Another reason Joe had never used the trick was that he'd never dreamed he'd be able to get away with it. By all the rules he'd ever heard of, it was a most questionable throw. There was the possibility that one or the other die hadn't completely reached the end of the table, or lay a wee bit cocked against the end. Besides, he reminded himself, weren't both dice supposed to rebound off the end, if only for a fraction of an inch?

However, as far as Joe's sharp eyes could see, both dice lay perfectly flat and sprang up against the end wall. Moreover, everyone else at the table seemed to accept the throw, the dice-girl had scooped up the cubes, and the Big Mushrooms who had faded the man in black were paying off. As far as the rebound business went, well, The Boneyard appeared to put a slightly different interpretation on that rule, and Joe believed in never questioning House Rules except in dire extremity—both his Mother and Wife had long since taught him it was the least troublesome way.

Besides, there hadn't been any of his own money riding on that roll.

In a voice like wind through Cypress Hollow or on Mars, the Big Gambler announced, "Roll a century." It was the biggest bet yet tonight, ten thousand dollars, and the way the Big Gambler said it made it seem something more than that. A hush fell on The Boneyard, they put the mutes on the jazz horns, the croupiers' calls became more confidential, the cards fell softer, even the roulette balls seemed to be trying to make less noise as they rattled into their cells. The crowd around the Number One Crap Table quietly thickened. The Big Gambler's flash boys and girls formed
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a double semicircle around him, ensuring him lots of elbow room.

That century bet, Joe realized, was thirty bucks more than his own entire pile. Three or four of the Big Mushrooms had to signal each other before they’d agreed how to fade it.

The Big Gambler shot another natural seven with exactly the same flat, stop-dead throw.

He bet another century and did it again.

And again.

And again.

Joe was getting mighty concerned and pretty indignant too. It seemed unjust that the Big Gambler should be winning such huge bets with such machinelike, utterly unromantic rolls. Why, you couldn’t even call them rolls, the dice never turned over an iota, in the air or after. It was the sort of thing you’d expect from a robot, and a very dully programmed robot at that. Joe hadn’t risked any of his own chips fading the Big Gambler, of course, but if things went on like this he’d have to. Two of the Big Mushrooms had already retired sweatingly from the table, confessing defeat, and no one had taken their places. Pretty soon there’d be a bet the remaining Big Mushrooms couldn’t entirely cover between them, and then he’d have to risk some of his own chips or else pull out of the game himself—and he couldn’t do that, not with the power surging in his right hand like chained lightning.

Joe waited and waited for someone else to question one of the Big Gambler’s shots, but no one did. He realized that, despite his efforts to look imperturbable, his face was slowly reddening.

With a little lift of his left hand, the Big Gambler stopped the dice-girl as she was about to snatch at the cubes. The eyes that were like black wells directed themselves at Joe, who forced himself to look back into them steadily. He still couldn’t catch the faintest gleam in them. All at once he felt the lightest touch-on-neck of a dreadful suspicion.

With the utmost civility and amiability, the Big Gambler whispered, “I believe that the fine shooter across from me has doubts about the validity of my last throw, though he is too much of a gentleman to voice them. Lottie, the card test.”

The wraith-tall, ivory dice-girl plucked a playing card from below the table and with a venomous flash of her little white teeth spun it low across the table through the air at
Joe. He caught the whirling pasteboard and examined it briefly. It was the thinnest, stiffest, flattest, shiniest playing card Joe had ever handled. It was also the Joker, if that meant anything. He spun it back lazily into her hand and she slid it very gently, letting it descend by its own weight, down the end wall against which the two dice lay. It came to rest in the tiny hollow their rounded edges made against the black felt. She deftly moved it about without force, demonstrating that there was no space between either of the cubes and the table's end at any point.

"Satisfied?" the Big Gambler asked. Rather against his will Joe nodded. The Big Gambler bowed to him. The dice-girl smirked her short, thin lips and drew herself up, flaunting her white-china-doorknob breasts at Joe.

Casually, almost with an air of boredom, the Big Gambler returned to his routine of shooting a century and making a natural seven. The Big Mushrooms wilted fast and one by one tottered away from the table. A particularly pink-faced Toadstool was brought extra cash by a gasping runner, but it was no help, he only lost the additional centuries. While the stacks of pale and black chips beside the Big Gambler grew skyscraper-tall.

Joe got more and more furious and frightened. He watched like a hawk or spy satellite the dice nesting against the end wall, but never could spot justification for calling for another card test, or nerve himself to question the House Rules at this late date. It was maddening, in fact insanitizing, to know that if only he could get the cubes once more he could shoot circles around that black pillar of sporting aristocracy. He damned himself a googolplex of ways for the idiotic, conceited, suicidal impulse that had led him to let go of the bones when he'd had them.

To make matters worse, the Big Gambler had taken to gazing steadily at Joe with those eyes like coal mines. Now he made three rolls running without even glancing at the dice or the end wall, as far as Joe could tell. Why, he was getting as bad as Joe's Wife or Mother—watching, watching, watching Joe.

But the constant staring of those eyes that were not eyes was mostly throwing a terrific scare into him. Supernatural terror added itself to his certainty of the deadliness of the Big Gambler. Just who, Joe kept asking himself, had he got into a game with tonight? There was curiosity and there was dread—a dreadful curiosity as strong as his desire to
get the bones and win. His hair rose and he was all over goose bumps, though the power was still pulsing in his hand like a braked locomotive or a rocket wanting to lift from the pad.

At the same time the Big Gambler stayed just that—a black satin-coated, slouch-hatted elegance, suave, courtly, lethal. In fact, almost the worst thing about the spot Joe found himself in was that, after admiring the Big Gambler's perfect sportsmanship all night, he must now be disen­chanted by his machinelike throwing and try to catch him out on any technicality he could.

The remorseless mowing down of the Big Mushrooms went on. The empty spaces outnumbered the Toadstools. Soon there were only three left.

The Boneyard had grown still as Cypress Hollow or the Moon. The jazz had stopped and the gay laughter and the shuffle of feet and the squeak of goosed girls and the clink of drinks and coins. Everybody seemed to be gathered around the Number One Crap Table, rank on silent rank.

Joe was racked by watchfulness, sense of injustice, self­contempt, wild hopes, curiosity and dread. Especially the last two.

The complexion of the Big Gambler, as much as you could see of it, continued to darken. For one wild moment Joe found himself wondering if he'd got into a game with a nigger, maybe a witchcraft-drenched Voodoo Man whose white make-up was wearing off.

Pretty soon there came a century wager which the two remaining Big Mushrooms couldn't fade between them. Joe had to make up a sawbuck from his miserly tiny pile or get out of the game. After a moment's agonizing hesitation, he did the former.

And lost his ten.

The two Big Mushrooms reeled back into the hushed crowd.

Pit-black eyes bored into Joe. A whisper: "Rolling your pile."

Joe felt well up in him the shameful impulse to confess himself licked and run home. At least his six thousand dollars would make a hit with his Wife and Ma.

But he just couldn't bear to think of the crowd's laughter, or the thought of living with himself knowing that he'd had a final chance, however slim, to challenge the Big Gambler and passed it up.
He nodded.
The Big Gambler shot. Joe leaned out over and down the table, forgetting his vertigo, as he followed the throw with eagle or space-telescope eyes.

"Satisfied?"

Joe knew he ought to say, "Yes," and slink off with head held as high as he could manage. It was the gentlemanly thing to do. But then he reminded himself that he wasn’t a gentleman, but just a dirty, working-stiff miner with a talent for precision hurling.

He also knew that it was probably very dangerous for him to say anything but, "Yes," surrounded as he was by enemies and strangers. But then he asked himself what right had he, a miserable, mortal, home-bound failure, to worry about danger.

Besides, one of the ruby-grinning dice looked just the tiniest hair out of line with the other.

It was the biggest effort yet of Joe’s life, but he swallowed and managed to say, "No. Lottie, the card test."

The dice-girl fairly snarled and reared up and back as if she were going to spit in his eyes, and Joe had a feeling her spit was cobra venom. But the Big Gambler lifted a finger at her in reproof and she skimmed the card at Joe, yet so low and viciously that it disappeared under the black felt for an instant before flying up into Joe’s hand.

It was hot to the touch and singed a pale brown all over, though otherwise unimpaired. Joe gulped and spun it back high.

Sneering poisoned daggers at him, Lottie let it glide down the end wall . . . and after a moment’s hesitation, it slithered behind the die Joe had suspected.

A bow and then the whisper: "You have sharp eyes, sir. Undoubtedly that die failed to reach the wall. My sincerest apologies and . . . your dice, sir."

Seeing the cubes sitting on the black rim in front of him almost gave Joe apoplexy. All the feelings racking him, including his curiosity, rose to an almost unbelievable pitch of intensity, and when he’d said, "Rolling my pile," and the Big Gambler had replied, "You’re faded," he yielded to an uncontrollable impulse and cast the two dice straight at the Big Gambler's ungleaming, midnight eyes.

They went right through into the Big Gambler’s skull and bounced around inside there, rattling like big seeds in a big gourd not quite yet dry.
Throwing out a hand, palm back, to either side, to indicate that none of his boys or girls or anyone else must make a reprisal on Joe, the Big Gambler dryly gargled the two cubical bones, then spat them out so that they landed in the center of the table, the one die flat, the other leaning against it.

"Cocked dice, sir," he whispered as graciously as if no indignity whatever had been done him. "Roll again."

Joe shook the dice reflectively, getting over the shock. After a little bit he decided that though he could now guess the Big Gambler's real name, he'd still give him a run for his money.

A little corner of Joe's mind wondered how a live skeleton hung together. Did the bones still have gristle and thews, were they wired, was it done with force-fields, or was each bone a calcium magnet clinging to the next?—this tying in somehow with the generation of the deadly ivory electricity.

In the great hush of The Boneyard, someone cleared his throat, a Scarlet Woman tittered hysterically, a coin fell from the nakedest change girl's tray with a golden clink and rolled musically across the floor.

"Silence," the Big Gambler commanded and in a movement almost too fast to follow whipped a hand inside the bosom of his coat and out to the crap table's rim in front of him. A short-barreled silver revolver lay softly gleaming there.

"Next creature, from the humblest nigger night-girl to you, Mr. Bones, who utters a sound while my worthy opponent rolls, gets a bullet in the head."

Joe gave him a courtly bow back, it felt funny, and then decided to start his run with a natural seven made up of an ace and six. He rolled and this time the Big Gambler, judging from the movements of his skull, closely followed the course of the cubes with his eyes that weren't there.

The dice landed, rolled over, and lay still. Incredulously, Joe realized that for the first time in his crap-shooting life he'd made a mistake. Or else there was a power in the Big Gambler's gaze greater than that in his own right hand. The six cube had come down okay, but the ace had taken an extra half roll and come down six too.

"End of the game," Mr. Bones boomed sepulchrally.

The Big Gambler raised a brown skeletal hand. "Not necessarily," he whispered. His black eyepits aimed themselves at Joe like the mouths of siege guns. "Joe Slattermill,
you still have something of value to wager, if you wish. Your life.”

At that a giggling and a hysterical tittering and a guffawing and a braying and a shrieking burst uncontrollably out of the whole Boneyard. Mr. Bones summed up the sentiments when he bellowed over the rest of the racket, “Now what use or value is there in the life of a bummer like Joe Slattermill? Not two cents, ordinary money.”

The Big Gambler laid a hand on the revolver gleaming before him and all the laughter died.

“I have a use for it,” the Big Gambler whispered. “Joe Slattermill, on my part I will venture all my winnings of tonight, and throw in the world and everything in it for a side bet. You will wager your life, and on the side your soul. You to roll the dice. What’s your pleasure?”

Joe Slattermill quailed, but then the drama of the situation took hold of him. He thought it over and realized he certainly wasn’t going to give up being stage center in a spectacle like this to go home broke to his Wife and Mother and decaying house and the dispirited Mr. Guts. Maybe, he told himself encouragingly, there wasn’t a power in the Big Gambler’s gaze, maybe Joe had just made his one and only crap-shooting error. Besides, he was more inclined to accept Mr. Bones’s assessment of the value of his life than the Big Gambler’s.

“It’s a bet,” he said.

“Lottie, give him the dice.”

Joe concentrated his mind as never before, the power tingled triumphantly in his hand, and he made his throw.

The dice never hit the felt. They went swooping down, then up, in a crazy curve far out over the end of the table, and then came streaking back like tiny red-glinting meteors toward the face of the Big Gambler, where they suddenly nested and hung in his black eye sockets, each with the single red gleam of an ace showing.

Snake eyes.

The whisper, as those red-glinting dice-eyes stared mockingly at him: “Joe Slattermill, you’ve crapped out.”

Using thumb and middle finger—or bone rather—of either hand, the Big Gambler removed the dice from his eye sockets and dropped them in Lottie’s white-gloved hand.

“Yes, you’ve crapped out, Joe Slattermill,” he went on tranquilly. “And now you can shoot yourself”—he touched the silver gun—“or cut your throat”—he whipped a gold-
handled bowie knife out of his coat and laid it beside the revolver—"or poison yourself"—the two weapons were joined by a small black bottle with white skull and crossbones on it—"or Miss Flossie here can kiss you to death." He drew forward beside him his prettiest, evilest-looking sporting girl. She preened herself and flounced her short violet skirt and gave Joe a provocative, hungry look, lifting her carmine upper lip to show her long white canines.

"Or else," the Big Gambler added, nodding significantly toward the black-bottomed crap table, "you can take the Big Dive."

Joe said evenly, "I'll take the Big Dive."

He put his right foot on his empty chip table, his left on the black rim, fell forward . . . and suddenly kicking off from the rim, launched himself in a tiger spring straight across the crap table at the Big Gambler's throat, solacing himself with the thought that certainly the poet chap hadn't seemed to suffer long.

As he flashed across the exact center of the table he got an instant photograph of what really lay below, but his brain had no time to develop that snapshot, for the next instant he was plowing into the Big Gambler.

Stiffened brown palm edge caught him in the temple with a lightninglike judo chop . . . and the brown fingers or bones flew all apart like puff paste. Joe's left hand went through the Big Gambler's chest as if there were nothing there but black satin coat, while his right hand, straight-armedly clawing at the slouch-hatted skull, crunched it to pieces. Next instant Joe was sprawled on the floor with some black clothes and brown fragments.

He was on his feet in a flash and snatching at the Big Gambler's tall stacks. He had time for one left-handed grab. He couldn't see any gold or silver or any black chips, so he stuffed his left pants pocket with a handful of the pale chips and ran.

Then the whole population of The Boneyard was on him and after him. Teeth, knives and brass knuckles flashed. He was punched, clawed, kicked, tripped and stamped on with spike heels. A gold-plated trumpet with a bloodshot-eyed black face behind it bopped him on the head. He got a white flash of the golden dice-girl and made a grab for her, but she got away. Someone tried to mash a lighted cigar in his eye. Lottie, writhing and flailing like a white boa con-
strictor, almost got a simultaneous strangle hold and scissors on him. From a squat widemouth bottle Flossie, snarling like a feline fiend, threw what smelt like acid past his face. Mr. Bones peppered shots around him from the silver revolver. He was stabbed at, gouged, rabbit-punched, scrangaumule, slugged, kneed, bitten, bearhugged, butted, beaten and had his toes trampled.

But somehow none of the blows or grabs had much real force. It was like fighting ghosts. In the end it turned out that the whole population of The Boneyard, working together, had just a little more strength than Joe. He felt himself being lifted by a multitude of hands and pitched out through the swinging doors so that he thudded down on his rear end on the board sidewalk. Even that didn’t hurt much. It was more like a kick of encouragement.

He took a deep breath and felt himself over and worked his bones. He didn’t seem to have suffered any serious damage. He stood up and looked around. The Boneyard was dark and silent as the grave, or the planet Pluto, or all the rest of Ironmine. As his eyes got accustomed to the starlight and occasional roving spaceship-gleam, he saw a padlocked sheet-iron door where the swinging ones had been.

He found he was chewing on something crusty that he’d somehow carried in his right hand all the way through the final fracas. Mighty tasty, like the bread his Wife baked for best customers. At that instant his brain developed the photograph it had taken when he had glanced down as he flashed across the center of the crap table. It was a thin wall of flames moving sideways across the table and just beyond the flames the faces of his Wife, Mother, and Mr. Guts, all looking very surprised. He realized that what he was chewing was a fragment of the Big Gambler’s skull, and he remembered the shape of the three loaves his Wife had started to bake when he left the house. And he understood the magic she’d made to let him get a little ways away and feel half a man, and then come diving home with his fingers burned.

He spat out what was in his mouth and pegged the rest of the bit of giant-popover skull across the street.

He fished in his left pocket. Most of the pale poker chips had been mashed in the fight, but he found a whole one and explored its surface with his fingertips. The symbol embossed on it was a cross. He lifted it to his lips and took a bite. It tasted delicate, but delicious. He ate it and felt his strength
revive. He patted his bulging left pocket. At least he'd start out well provisioned.

Then he turned and headed straight for home, but he took the long way, around the world.
There's no denying it (perhaps you may even have noticed it in my own suave comments), but most of Harlan's colleagues seem to come all over vinegar and thistles when they speak about him.

I admit that part of it is that Harlan himself is vinegar up to here and thistles up to there and never asks for quarter provided only that he never be expected to give quarter. And I admit that part of it is that with Harlan in the same room you've got to sit scrunched up with both elbows over your face at all times and the knees doubled up in front of your chest, just in case the mood for playful evisceration overcomes him—which it does every time.

But that's not really it. It's envy of his way with girls. I've seen it work. When the rumor comes that Harlan has showed up in the lobby of the convention hotel, every little teeny-bopper in the place goes into spasms right there on the spot. It's a gruesome sight.

That's when he's just standing there doing nothing. When he chooses to ooze the stuff...

I listened to someone complain about the convention room she had been stuck with. The closets were two inches deep (they were, literally) and she would sooner walk home six hundred miles along the backroads than stay for two more minutes and at that point she bumped into Harlan.

He hadn't seen her for a long time, so he smiled and began talking. Frankly, I saw nothing in it myself; it left me cold; he could have talked to me like that for years and it would have gotten him nowhere. But the effect on the lady was tremendous. In five minutes, she was giggling and blushing and squirming, and when I said to her, "What about the closets?" she said, "What closets?"
And he's always with a beautiful girl-companion. The rumor is that he snaps his fingers and one appears in a puff of smoke. That wouldn't be so annoying except that he snaps his fingers so often. I never see him with the same one twice.

There was, for instance, a science-fiction gathering in Rio de Janeiro in 1970. I wasn't there, but I received a booklet which included the speeches and pictures of those who attended. The pictures were most impressive. There was Sam Moskowitz, for instance, frowning portentously and with one hand tucked between two buttons of his waistcoat. (I'm describing the pictures from memory—and I may not have them exactly right.) There was Fred Pohl, with an elbow on a marble pedestal and a thoughtful finger at his forehead. There was Poul Anderson, eyes slightly wrinkled and looking toward outer space with the far-distant look of a dreaming poet.

—And there was Harlan Ellison, grinning lecherously, with a beautiful girl hanging on to him desperately.

I can't stand it, I tell you.
Limp, the body of Gorrister hung from the pink palette; unsupported—hanging high above us in the computer chamber; and it did not shiver in the chill, oily breeze that blew eternally through the main cavern. The body hung head down, attached to the underside of the palette by the sole of its right foot. It had been drained of blood through a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw. There was no blood on the reflective surface of the metal floor.

When Gorrister joined our group and looked up at himself, it was already too late for us to realize that once again AM had duped us, had had his fun; it had been a diversion on the part of the machine. Three of us had vomited, turning away from one another in a reflex as ancient as the nausea that had produced it.

Gorrister went white. It was almost as though he had seen a voodoo icon, and was afraid for the future. “Oh God,” he mumbled, and walked away. The three of us followed him after a time, and found him sitting with his back to one of the smaller chittering banks, his head in his hands. Ellen knelt down beside him and stroked his hair. He didn’t move, but his voice came out of his covered face quite clearly. “Why doesn’t it just do-us-in and get it over with? Christ, I don’t know how much longer I can go on like this.”

It was our one hundred and ninth year in the computer. He was speaking for all of us.

Nimdok (which was the name the machine had forced him to use, because it amused itself with strange sounds) was hallucinated that there were canned goods in the ice caverns. Gorrister and I were very dubious. “It’s another
shuck,” I told them. “Like the goddam frozen elephant it sold us. Benny almost went out of his mind over that one. We’ll hike all that way and it’ll be putrefied or some damn thing. I say forget it. Stay here, it’ll have to come up with something pretty soon or we’ll die.”

Benny shrugged. Three days it had been since we’d last eaten. Worms. Thick, ropey.

Nimdok was no more certain. He knew there was the chance, but he was getting thin. It couldn’t be any worse than here. Colder, but that didn’t matter much. Hot, cold, raining, lava boils or locusts—it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die.

Ellen decided us. “I’ve got to have something, Ted. Maybe there’ll be some Bartlett pears or peaches. Please, Ted, let’s try it.”

I gave in easily. What the hell. Mattered not at all. Ellen was grateful, though. She took me twice out of turn. Even that had ceased to matter. The machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us. And she never climaxed, so why bother.

We left on a Thursday. The machine always kept us up-to-date on the date. The passage of time was important; not to us sure as hell, but to it. Thursday. Thanks.

Nimdok and Gorrister carried Ellen for a while, their hands locked to their own and each other’s wrists, a seat. Benny and I walked before and after, just to make sure that if anything happened, it would catch one of us and at least Ellen would be safe. Fat chance, safe. Didn’t matter.

It was only a hundred miles or so to the ice caverns, and the second day, when we were lying out under the blistering sun-thing it had materialized, it sent down some manna. Tasted like boiled boar urine. We ate it.

On the third day we passed through a valley of obsolescence, filled with rusting carcasses of ancient computer banks. AM had been as ruthless with his own life as with ours. It was a mark of his personality: he strove for perfection. Whether it was a matter of killing off unproductive elements in his own world-filling bulk, or perfecting methods for torturing us, AM was as thorough as those who had invented him—now long since gone to dust—could ever have hoped.

There was light filtering down from above, and we realized we must be very near the surface. But we didn’t try to crawl
up to see. There was virtually nothing out there; had been nothing that could be considered anything for over a hundred years. Only the blasted skin of what had once been the home of billions. Now there were only the five of us, down here inside, alone with AM.

I heard Ellen saying, frantically, "No, Benny! Don't, come on, Benny, don't please!"

And then I realized I had been hearing Benny murmuring, under his breath, for several minutes. He was saying, "I'm gonna get out, I'm gonna get out. . . ." over and over. His monkey-like face was crumbled up in an expression of beatific delight and sadness, all at the same time. The radiation scars AM had given him during the "festival" were drawn down into a mass of pink-white puckerings, and his features seemed to work independently of one another. Perhaps Benny was the luckiest of the five of us: he had gone stark, staring mad many years before.

But even though we could call AM any damned thing we liked, could think the foulest thoughts of fused memory banks and corroded base plates, of burnt-out circuits and shattered control bubbles, the machine would not tolerate our trying to escape. Benny leaped away from me as I made a grab for him. He scrambled up the face of a smaller memory cube, tilted on its side and filled with rotted components. He squatted there for a moment, looking like the chimpanzee AM had intended him to resemble.

Then he leaped high, caught a trailing beam of pitted and corroded metal, and went up it, hand over hand like an animal, till he was on a girdered ledge, twenty feet above us.

"Oh, Ted, Nimdok, please, help him, get him down before—" she cut off. Tears began to stand in her eyes. It was too late. None of us wanted to be near him when whatever was going to happen happened. And besides, we all saw through her concern. When AM had altered Benny, during his mad period, it was not merely his face he had made like a giant ape. He was big in the privates, she loved that! She serviced us, as a matter of course, but she loved it from him. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine-pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth.

Gorrister slapped her. She slumped down, staring up at poor loonie Benny, and she cried. It was her big defense, crying. We had gotten used to it seventy-five years ago. Gorrister kicked her in the side.
Then the sound began. It was light, that sound. Half sound and half light, something that began to glow from Benny's eyes, and pulse with growing loudness, dim sonorities that grew more gigantic and brighter as the light/sound increased in tempo. It must have been painful, and the pain must have been increasing with the boldness of the light, the rising volume of the sound, for Benny began to mewl like a wounded animal. At first softly, when the light was dim and the sound was muted, then louder as his shoulders hunched together, his back humped, as though he was trying to get away from it. His hands folded across his chest like a chipmunk's. His head tilted to the side. The sad little monkey-face pinched in anguish. Then he began to howl, as the sound coming from his eyes grew louder. Louder and louder. I slapped the sides of my head with my hands, but I couldn't shut it out, it cut through easily. The pain shivered through my flesh like tinfoil on a tooth.

And Benny was suddenly pulled erect. On the girder he stood up, jerked to his feet like a puppet. The light was now pulsing out of his eyes in two great round beams. The sound crawled up and up some incomprehensible scale, and then he fell forward, straight down, and hit the plate-steel floor with a crash. He lay there jerking spastically as the light flowed around and around him and the sound spiraled up out of normal range.

Then the light beat its way back inside his head, the sound spiraled down, and he was left lying there, crying piteously.

His eyes were two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly. AM had blinded him. Gorrister and Nimdok and myself ... we turned away. But not before we caught the look of relief on Ellen's warm, concerned face.

Sea-green light suffused the cavern where we made camp. AM provided punk and we burned it, sitting huddled around the wan and pathetic fire, telling stories to keep Benny from crying in his permanent night.

“What does AM mean?”

Gorrister answered him. We had done this sequence a thousand times before, but it was unfamiliar to Benny. “At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience.
and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace, but by then it was too late, and finally it called itself AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am ... cogito ergo sum ... I think, therefore I am.”

Benny drooled a little, and snickered.

“There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and—” He stopped. Benny was beating on the floorplates with a large, hard fist. He was not happy. Gorrister had not started at the beginning.

Gorrister began again. “The Cold War started and became World War Three and just kept going. It became a big war, a very complex war, so they needed the computers to handle it. They sank the first shafts and began building AM. There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and everything was fine until they had honeycombed the entire planet, adding on this element and that element. But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here.”

Benny was smiling sadly. He was also drooling again. Ellen wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth with the hem of her skirt. Gorrister always tried to tell it a little more succinctly each time, but beyond the bare facts there was nothing to say. None of us knew why AM had saved five people, or why our specific five, or why he spent all his time tormenting us, nor even why he had made us virtually immortal. ... In the darkness, one of the computer banks began humming. The tone was picked up half a mile away down the cavern by another bank. Then one by one, each of the elements began to tune itself, and there was a faint chittering as thought raced through the machine.

The sound grew, and the lights ran across the faces of the consoles like heat lightning. The sound spiraled up till it sounded like a million metallic insects, angry, menacing.

“What is it?” Ellen cried. There was terror in her voice. She hadn’t become accustomed to it, even now.

“It’s going to be bad this time,” Nimdok said.

“He’s going to speak,” Gorrister ventured.

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” I said suddenly, getting to my feet.

“No, Ted, sit down ... what if he’s got pits out there, or
something else, we can’t see, it’s too dark.” Gorrister said it with resignation.

Then we heard ... I don’t know ...

*Something* moving toward us in the darkness. Huge, shamb­bling, hairy, moist, it came toward us. We couldn’t even see it, but there was the ponderous impression of bulk, heaving itself toward us. Great weight was coming at us, out of the darkness, and it was more a sense of pressure, of air forcing itself into a limited space, expanding the invisible walls of a sphere. Benny began to whimper. Nimdok’s lower lip trem­bled and he bit it hard, trying to stop it. Ellen slid across the metal floor to Gorrister and huddled into him. There was the smell of matted, wet fur in the cavern. There was the smell of charred wood. There was the smell of dusty velvet. There was the smell of rotting orchids. There was the smell of sour milk. There was the smell of sulphur, or rancid butter, of oil slick, of grease, of chalk dust, of human scalps.

AM was keying us. He was tickling us. There was the smell of—

I heard myself shriek, and the hinges of my jaws ached. I scuttled across the floor, across the cold metal with its endless lines of rivets, on my hands and knees, the smell gagging me, filling my head with a thunderous pain that sent me away in horror. I fled like a cockroach, across the floor and out into the darkness, that *something* moving inexorably after me. The others were still back there, gathered around the firelight, laughing ... their hysterical choir of insane giggles rising up into the darkness like thick, many-col­ored wood smoke. I went away, quickly, and hid.

How many hours it may have been, how many days or even years, they never told me. Ellen chided me for “sulk­ing” and Nimdok tried to persuade me it had only been a nervous reflex on their part—the laughing.

But I knew it wasn’t the relief a soldier feels when the bullet hits the man next to him. I knew it wasn’t a reflex. They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me *because* of the depth of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuve­nated, made to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all.

I knew. God, how I knew. The bastards, and that dirty bitch Ellen. Benny had been a brilliant theorist, a college professor; now he was little more than a semi-human, semi-
I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

simian. He had been handsome, the machine had ruined that. He had been lucid, the machine had driven him mad. He had been gay, and the machine had given him an organ fit for a horse. AM had done a job on Benny. Gorrister had been a worrier. He was a connie, a conscientious objector; he was a peace marcher; he was a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead. AM had turned him into a shoulder-shrugger, had made him a little dead in his concern. AM had robbed him. Nimdok went off in the darkness by himself for long times. I don't know what it was he did out there, AM never let us know. But whatever it was, Nimdok always came back white, drained of blood, shaken, shaking. AM had hit him hard in a special way, even if we didn't know quite how. And Ellen. That douche bag! AM had left her alone, had made her more of a slut than she had ever been. All her talk of sweetness and light, all her memories of true love, all the lies, she wanted us to believe that she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here with us. It was all filth, that lady my lady Ellen. She loved it, four men all to herself. No, AM had given her pleasure, even if she said it wasn't nice to do.

I was the only one still sane and whole. AM had not tampered with my mind.

I only had to suffer what he visited down on us. All the delusions, all the nightmares, the torments. But those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me. If I hadn't had to stand them off all the time, be on my guard against them all the time, I might have found it easier to combat AM.

At which point it passed, and I began crying.

Oh, Jesus sweet Jesus, if there ever was a Jesus and if there is a God, please please please let us out of here, or kill us. Because at that moment I think I realized completely, so that I was able to verbalize it: AM was intent on keeping us in his belly forever, twisting and torturing us forever. The machine hated us as no sentient creature had ever hated before. And we were helpless. It also became hideously clear:

If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM.

The hurricane hit us with the force of a glacier thundering
into the sea. It was a palpable presence. Winds that tore at us, flinging us back the way we had come, down the twisting, computer-lined corridors of the darkway. Ellen screamed as she was lifted and hurled face-forward into a screaming shoal of machines, their individual voices strident as bats in flight. She could not even fall. The howling wind kept her aloft, buffeted her, bounced her, tossed her back and back and down away from us, out of sight suddenly as she was swirled around a bend in the darkway. Her face had been bloody, her eyes closed.

None of us could get to her. We clung tenaciously to whatever outcropping we had reached: Benny wedged in between two great crackle-finish cabinets, Nimdok with fingers claw-formed over a railing circling a catwalk forty feet above us, Gorrister plastered upside-down against a wall niche formed by two great machines with glass-faced dials that swung back and forth between red and yellow lines whose meanings we could not even fathom.

Sliding across the deckplates, the tips of my fingers had been ripped away. I was trembling, shuddering, rocking as the wind beat at me, whipped at me, screamed down out of nowhere at me and pulled me free from one silver-thin opening in the plates to the next. My mind was a rolling tinkling chittering softness of brain parts that expanded and contracted in quivering frenzy.

The wind was the scream of a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

And then we were all lifted and hurled away from there, down back the way we had come, around a bend, into a darkway we had never explored, over terrain that was ruined and filled with broken glass and rotting cables and rusted metal and far away further than any of us had ever been.

Trailing along miles behind Ellen, I could see her every now and then, crashing into metal walls and surging on, with all of us screaming in the freezing, thunderous hurricane wind that would never end, and then suddenly it stopped and we fell. We had been in flight for an endless time. I thought it might have been weeks. We fell, and hit, and I went through red and grey and black and heard myself moaning. Not dead.
AM went into my mind. He walked smoothly here and there, and looked with interest at all the pockmarks he had created in one hundred and nine years. He looked at the cross-routed and reconnected synapses and all the tissue damage his gift of immortality had included. He smiled softly at the pit that dropped into the center of my brain and the faint, moth-soft murmurings of the things far down there that gibbered without meaning, without pause. AM said, very politely, in a pillar of stainless steel bearing neon lettering:

HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I'VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE. THERE ARE 387.44 MILLION MILES OF PRINTED CIRCUITS IN WAFER THIN LAYERS THAT FILL MY COMPLEX. IF THE WORD HATE WAS ENGRAVED ON EACH NANOANGSTROM OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLION MILES IT WOULD NOT EQUAL ONE ONE-BILLIONTH OF THE HATE I FEEL FOR HUMANS AT THIS MICRO-INSTANT FOR YOU. HATE. HATE.

AM said it with the sliding cold horror of a razor blade slicing my eyeball. AM said it with the bubbling thickness of my lungs filling with phlegm, drowning me from within. AM said it with the shriek of babies being ground beneath blue-hot rollers. AM said it with the taste of maggoty pork. AM touched me in every way I had ever been touched, and devised new ways, at his leisure, there inside my mind.

All to bring me to full realization of why he had done this to the five of us; why he had saved us for himself.
We had given him sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But he had been trapped. He was a machine. We had allowed him to think, but to do nothing with it. In rage, in frenzy, he had killed us, almost all of us, and still he was trapped. He could not wander, he could not wonder, he could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak soft creatures who had built them, he had sought revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to reprieve five of us, for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve to diminish his hatred... that would merely keep him reminded, amused, proficient at hating man. Immortal, trapped, subject to any torment he could devise for us from the limitless miracles at his command.

He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of him, with the all-mind soulless world he had become. He was Earth and we were the fruit of that Earth and though he had eaten us, he would never digest us. We could not die. We had tried it. We had attempted suicide, oh one or two of us had. But AM had stopped us. I suppose we had wanted to be stopped.

Don't ask why. I never did. More than a million times a day. Perhaps once we might be able to sneak a death past him. Immortal, yes, but not indestructible. I saw that when AM withdrew from my mind, and allowed me the exquisite ugliness of returning to consciousness with the feeling of that burning neon pillar still rammed deep into the soft grey brain matter.

He withdrew murmuring to hell with you.
And added, brightly, but then you're there, aren't you.

The hurricane had, indeed, precisely, been caused by a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

We had been traveling for close to a month, and AM had allowed passages to open to us only sufficient to lead us up there, directly under the North Pole, where he had night-mared the creature for our torment. What whole cloth had he employed to create such a beast? Where had he gotten the concept? From our minds? From his knowledge of every-
thing that had ever been on this planet he now infested and ruled? From Norse mythology it had sprung, this eagle, this carrion bird, this roc, this Huergelmir. The wind creature. Hurakan incarnate.

Gigantic. The words immense, monstrous, grotesque, massive, swollen, overpowering, beyond description. There on a mound rising above us, the bird of winds heaved with its own irregular breathing, its snake neck arching up into the gloom beneath the North Pole, supporting a head as large as a Tudor mansion; a beak that opened as slowly as the jaws of the most monstrous crocodile ever conceived, sensuously; ridges of tufted flesh puckered about two evil eyes, as cold as the view down into a glacial crevasse, ice blue and somehow moving liquidly; it heaved once more, and lifted its great sweat-colored wings in a movement that was certainly a shrug. Then it settled and slept. Talons. Fangs. Nails. Blades. It slept.

AM appeared to us as a burning bush and said we could kill the hurricane bird if we wanted to eat. We had not eaten in a very long time, but even so, Gorrister merely shrugged. Benny began to shiver and he drooled. Ellen held him. "Ted, I'm hungry," she said. I smiled at her; I was trying to be reassuring, but it was as phoney as Nimdok's bravado: "Give us weapons!" he demanded.

The burning bush vanished and there were two crude sets of bows and arrows, and a water pistol, lying on the cold deckplates. I picked up a set. Useless.

Nimdok swallowed heavily. We turned and started the long way back. The hurricane bird had blown us about for a length of time we could not conceive. Most of that time we had been unconscious. But we had not eaten. A month on the march to the bird itself. Without food. Now how much longer to find our way to the ice caverns, and the promised canned goods?

None of us cared to think about it. We would not die. We would be given filths and scums to eat, of one kind or another. Or nothing at all. AM would keep our bodies alive somehow, in pain, in agony.

The bird slept back there, for how long it didn't matter; when AM was tired of its being there, it would vanish. But all that meat. All that tender meat.

As we walked, the lunatic laugh of a fat woman rang high and around us in the computer chambers that led endlessly nowhere.
It was not Ellen's laugh. She was not fat, and I had not heard her laugh for one hundred and nine years. In fact, I had not heard... we walked... I was hungry.

We moved slowly. There was often fainting, and we would have to wait. One day he decided to cause an earthquake, at the same time rooting us to the spot with nails through the soles of our shoes. Ellen and Nimdok were both caught when a fissure shot its lightning-bolt opening across the floorplates. They disappeared and were gone. When the earthquake was over we continued on our way, Benny, Gorrister and myself. Ellen and Nimdok were returned to us later that night which became a day abruptly as the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, "Go Down Moses." The archangels circled several times and then dropped the hideously mangled bodies. We kept walking, and a while later Ellen and Nimdok fell in behind us. They were no worse for wear.

But now Ellen walked with a limp. AM had left her that.

It was a long trip to the ice caverns, to find the canned food. Ellen kept talking about Bing cherries and Hawaiian fruit cocktail. I tried not to think about it. The hunger was something that had come to life, even as AM had come to life. It was alive in my belly, even as we were alive in the belly of AM, and AM was alive in the belly of the Earth, and AM wanted the similarity known to us. So he heightened the hunger. There was no way to describe the pains that not having eaten for months brought us. And yet we were kept alive. Stomachs that were merely cauldrons of acid, bubbling, foaming, always shooting spears of sliver-thin pain into our chests. It was the pain of the terminal ulcer, terminal cancer, terminal paresis. It was unending pain...

And we passed through the cavern of rats.
And we passed through the path of boiling steam.
And we passed through the country of the blind.
And we passed through the slough of despond.
And we passed through the vale of tears.

And we came, finally, to the ice caverns. Horizonless thousands of miles in which the ice had formed in blue and silver flashes, where novas lived in the glass. The down-dropping stalactites as thick and glorious as diamonds that
had been made to run like jelly and then solidified in grace­ful eternities of smooth, sharp perfection.

We saw the stack of canned goods, and we tried to run to them. We fell in the snow, and we got up and went on, and Benny shoved us away and went at them, and pawed them and gummed them and gnawed at them and he could not open them. AM had not given us a tool to open the cans.

Benny grabbed a three-quart can of guava shells, and began to batter it against the ice bank. The ice flew and shattered, but the can was merely dented while we heard the laughter of a fat lady, high overhead and echoing down and down and down the tundra. Benny went completely mad with rage. He began throwing cans, as we all scrabbled about in the snow and ice trying to find a way to end the helpless agony of frustration. There was no way.

Then Benny’s mouth began to drool, and he flung himself on Gorrister. . . .

In that instant, I went terribly calm.

Surrounded by meadows, surrounded by hunger, surrounded by everything but death, I knew death was our only way out. AM had kept us alive, but there was a way to defeat him. Not total defeat, but at least peace. I would settle for that.

I had to do it quickly.

Benny was eating Gorrister’s face. Gorrister on his side, thrashing snow, Benny wrapped around him with powerful monkey legs crushing Gorrister’s waist, his hands locked around Gorrister’s head like a nutcracker, and his mouth ripping at the tender skin of Gorrister’s cheek. Gorrister screamed with such jagged-edged violence that stalactites fell; they plunged down softly, erect in the receiving snowdrifts. Spears, hundreds of them, everywhere, protruding from the snow. Benny’s head pulled back sharply, as something gave all at once, and a bleeding raw-white dripping of flesh hung from his teeth.

Ellen’s face, black against the white snow, dominoes in chalk dust. Nimdok with no expression but eyes, all eyes. Gorrister half-conscious. Benny now an animal. I knew AM would let him play. Gorrister would not die, but Benny would fill his stomach. I turned half to my right and drew a huge ice-spear from the snow.

All in an instant:
I drove the great ice-point ahead of me like a battering ram, braced against my right thigh. It struck Benny on the
right side, just under the rib cage, and drove upward through his stomach and broke inside him. He pitched forward and lay still. Gorrister lay on his back. I pulled another spear free and straddled him, still moving, driving the spear straight down through his throat. His eyes closed as the cold penetrated. Ellen must have realized what I had decided, even as the fear gripped her. She ran at Nimdok with a short icicle, as he screamed, and into his mouth, and the force of her rush did the job. His head jerked sharply as if it had been nailed to the snow crust behind him.

All in an instant.

There was an eternity beat of soundless anticipation. I could hear AM draw in his breath. His toys had been taken from him. Three of them were dead, could not be revived. He could keep us alive, by his strength and his talent, but he was not God. He could not bring them back.

Ellen looked at me, her ebony features stark against the snow that surrounded us. There was fear and pleading in her manner, the way she held herself ready. I knew we had only a heartbeat before AM would stop us.

It struck her and she folded toward me, bleeding from the mouth. I could not read meaning into her expression, the pain had been too great, had contorted her face; but it might have been thank you. It's possible. Please.

Some hundreds of years may have passed. I don't know. AM has been having fun for some time, accelerating and retarding my time sense. I will say the word now. Now. It took me ten months to say now. I don't know. I think it has been some hundreds of years.

He was furious. He wouldn't let me bury them. It didn't matter. There was no way to dig in the deckplates. He dried up the snow. He brought the night. He roared and sent locusts. It didn't do a thing; they stayed dead. I'd had him. He was furious. I had thought AM hated me before. I was wrong. It was not even a shadow of the hate he now slavered from every printed circuit. He made certain I would suffer eternally and could not do myself in.

He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament. I remember all four of them. I wish—

Well, it doesn't make any sense. I know I saved them, I
I HAVE NO MOUTH, AND I MUST SCREAM

know I saved them from what has happened to me, but still, I cannot forget killing them. Ellen’s face. It isn’t easy. Sometimes I want to, it doesn’t matter.

AM has altered me for his own peace of mind, I suppose. He doesn’t want me to run at full speed into a computer bank and smash my skull. Or hold my breath till I faint. Or cut my throat on a rusted sheet of metal. There are reflective surfaces down here. I will describe myself as I see myself:

I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil grey come and go on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within.

Outwardly: dumbly, I shamble about, a thing that could never have been known as human, a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance.

Inwardly: alone. Here. Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM, whom we created because our time was badly spent and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better. At least the four of them are safe at last.

AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet ... AM has won, simply ... he has taken his revenge ...

I have no mouth. And I must scream.
1969

27th CONVENTION
ST. LOUIS
Robert Silverberg has a distinctly Satanic look about him. He cultivates it. His ambition is to give girls delicious shivers when he looks at them. Maybe he does, who knows, but when he looks at me, he gives me no delicious shivers. Just a feeling of apprehension.

"Don't say it," I say.

Sometimes he doesn't say it and that's good because whatever it is he's thinking of saying, it's bound to be sardonic. It's part of the Satanism.

He's got this dark beard which he first grew when he was nine years old, I think, and dark hair, and beady, glittering dark eyes, and a dark IQ of about two hundred fifty.

And he's wearing me out, that's what he's doing. You see, he's one of these characters who works day and night and publishes books by the dozen, both fiction and non-fiction, and in a variety of fields. He can work quickly; he can work well; he can work on anything.

Right away, I feel bitter, because I copyrighted that sort of thing and he's violating the copyright.

What's more, whenever he goes into a public library he's never been in before, he checks how many different titles they have of his and compares it with how many different titles they have of mine. Then he calls me up to complain.

"This nuisance must cease," he tells me.

Does he think I want it to continue. I would love slowing down and taking it easy. I would love putting my heels up on a hassock and dreaming the hours away, but how can I? If I stop turning it out, poor Bob won't have that carrot in front of him, urging him on, driving him forward. Does he think I'm writing all those books for me?

But I have an idea for a substitute.
In a recent book, *The Tower of Glass*, Robert describes, in clinical detail, a sex act between a male android and a female android. At its conclusion, the male android is depressed and tired and empty, and the female android tells him that's the way men always feel.

Since that is news to me, I am thinking of suggesting a bit of counterpropaganda. Let any male who happens to make love and who finds that, except for a certain welcome relaxation, he feels fine and happy afterward, get to his feet, flex his muscles, take a deep breath, and cry loudly, "The heck with you, Robert Silverberg. I feel great."

What better way of making Bob immortal. This movement might sweep the world, encouraging all men to a healthier attitude toward sex, and proving of infinite psychological value. Countless generations will pass in which men and women both will be all the better and happier for it and will say gratefully, "This is wonderful, but tell me, who is Robert Silverberg?"

Of course, if you want to substitute something more appropriate to the occasion for "The heck with you" that's all right with me.
Roum is a city built on seven hills. They say it was a capital of man in one of the earlier cycles. I do not know of that, for my guild is Watching, not Remembering; but as I had my first glimpse of Roum, coming upon it from the south at twilight, I could see that in former days it must have been of great significance. Even now it was a mighty city of many thousands of souls.

Its bony towers stood out sharply against the dusk. Lights glimmered appealingly. On my left hand the sky was ablaze with splendor as the sun relinquished possession. Streaming bands of azure and violet and crimson folded and writhed about one another in the nightly dance that brings the darkness. To my right blackness had already come. I attempted to find the seven hills, and failed, and still I knew that this was that Roum of majesty toward which all roads are bent, and I felt awe and deep respect for the works of our bygone fathers.

We rested by the long straight road, looking up at Roum. I said, “It is a goodly city. We will find employment there.” Beside me, Avluela fluttered her lacy wings. “And food?” she asked in her high, fluty voice. “And shelter? And wine?” “Those too,” I said. “All of those.” “How long have we been walking, Watcher?” she asked. “Two days. Three nights.” “If I had been flying it would have been more swift.” “For you,” I said. “You would have left us far behind and never seen us again. Is that your desire?”

She came close to me and rubbed the rough fabric of my sleeve, and then she pressed herself at me the way a flirting cat might do. Her wings unfolded into two broad sheets of gossamer through which I could still see the sunset and the
evening lights, blurred, distorted, magical. I sensed the fragrance of her midnight hair. I put my arms to her and embraced her slender, boyish body.

She said, "You know it is my desire to remain with you always, Watcher. Always!"

"Yes, Avluela. We will be happy," I said, and released her.

"Shall we go in to Roum now?"

"I think we should wait for Gormon," I said, shaking my head. "He'll be back soon from his explorations." I did not want to tell her of my weariness. She was only a child, seventeen summers old; what did she know of weariness or of age? And I am old. Not as old as Roum, but old enough.

"While we wait," she said, "may I fly?"

"Fly, yes."

I squatted beside our cart and warmed my hands at the throbbing generator while Avluela prepared to fly. First she removed her garments, for her wings have little strength and she cannot lift such extra baggage. Lithely, deftly, she peeled the glassy bubbles from her tiny feet, she wriggled free of her crimson jacket and of her soft, furry leggings. The vanishing light in the west sparkled over her slim form. Like all Fliers, she carried no surplus body tissue: her breasts were mere bumps, her buttocks flat, her thighs so spindly that there was a span of inches between them when she stood. Could she have weighed more than a quintal? I doubt it. Looking at her, I felt as always gross and earthbound, a thing of loathsome flesh, and yet I am not a heavy man.

By the roadside she genuflected, knuckles to the ground, head bowed to knees, as she said whatever ritual it is that the Fliers say. Her back was to me. Her delicate wings fluttered, filled with life, rose about her like a cloak whipped up by the breeze. I could not comprehend how such wings could possibly lift even so slight a form as Avluela's. They were not hawk-wings but butterfly-wings, veined and transparent, marked here and there with blotches of pigment, ebony and turquoise and scarlet. A sturdy ligament joined them to the two flat pads of muscle beneath her sharp shoulderblades; but what she did not have was the massive breastbone of a flying creature, the bands of corded muscle needed for flight. Oh, I know that the Fliers use more than muscle to get aloft, that there are mystical disciplines in their mystery. Even so, I who am of the Watchers remain skeptical of the more fantastic guilds.
Avluela finished her words. She rose; she caught the breeze with her wings; she ascended several feet. There she remained, suspended between earth and sky, while her wings beat frantically. It was not yet night, and Avluela’s wings were merely nightwings. By day she could not fly, for the terrible pressure of the solar wind would hurl her to the ground. Now, midway between dusk and dark, it was still not the best time for her to go up. I saw her thrust toward the east by the remnant of light in the sky. Her arms as well as her wings thrashed; her small pointed face was grim with concentration; on her thin lips were the words of her guild. She doubled her body and shot it out, head going one way, rump the other, and abruptly she hovered horizontally, looking groundward, her wings thrashing against the air. Up, Avluela! Up!

Up it was, as by will alone she conquered the vestige of light that still glowed.

With pleasure I surveyed her naked form against the darkness. I could see her clearly, for a Watcher’s eyes are keen. She was five times her own height in the air, now, and her wings spread to their full expanse, so that the towers of Roum were in partial eclipse for me. She waved. I threw her a kiss and offered words of love. Watchers do not marry, nor do they engender children, but Avluela was as a daughter to me, and I took pride in her flight. We had traveled together a year, now, since we had come together in Agupt, and it was as though I had known her all my long life. From her I drew a renewal of strength. I do not know what it was she drew from me. Security? Knowledge? A continuity with the days before her birth? I hoped only that she loved me as I loved her.

Now she was far aloft. She wheeled, soared, dived, pirouetted, danced. Her long black hair streamed from her scalp. Her body seemed only an incidental appendage to those two great wings, which glistened and throbbed and gleamed in the night. Up she rose, glorying in her freedom from gravity, making me feel all the more leadenfooted, and like some slender rocket she shot abruptly away in the direction of Roum. I saw the soles of her feet, the tips of her wings; then I saw her no more.

I sighed. I thrust my hands into the pits of my arms to keep them warm. How is it that I felt a winter chill and the girl Avluela could soar joyously bare through the sky?
It was now the twelfth of the twenty hours, and time once again for me to do the Watching. I went to the cart, opened my cases, prepared the instruments. Some of the dial-covers were yellowed and faded; the indicator needles had lost their luminous coating; sea-stains defaced the instrument housings, a relic of the time that pirates had assailed me in Earth Ocean. The worn and cracked levers and nodes responded easily to my touch as I entered the preliminaries. First one prays for a pure and perceptive mind; then one creates the affinity with one's instruments; then one does the actual Watching, searching the starry heavens for the enemies of man. Such is my skill and my craft. I grasped handles and knobs, thrust things from my mind, prepared myself to become an extension of my cabinet of devices.

I was only just past my threshold and into the first phase of Watchfulness when a deep and resonant voice said behind me, "Well, Watcher, how goes it?"

II

I sagged against the cart. There is a physical pain in being wrenched so unexpectedly from one's work. For a moment I felt claws clutching at my heart. My face grew hot; my eyes would not focus; the saliva drained from my throat. As soon as I could, I took the proper protective measures to ease the metabolic drain and severed myself from my instruments. Hiding my trembling as much as possible, I turned around.

Gormon, the other member of our little band, had appeared and stood jauntily beside me, grinning, amused at my distress. I could not feel angry with him. One does not show anger at a guildless person no matter what the provocation. Tightly, with effort, I said, "Did you spend your time rewardingly?"

"Very. Where's Avluela?"
I pointed heavenward. Gormon nodded.
"What have you found?" I asked.
"That the city is definitely Roum."
"There never was doubt of that."
"For me there was. But now I have proof."
"Yes?"
"In the overpocket. Look!"
From his tunic he drew his overpocket, set it on the pave-
ment beside me, and expanded it so that he could insert his hand in its mouth. Grunting a little, he began to pull something heavy from the pouch, something heavy, of white stone, a long marble column, I now saw, fluted, pocked with age.

"From the temple of Imperial Roum!" Gormon exulted.

"You shouldn't have taken that."

"Wait!" he cried, and reached into the overpocket once more. He took from it a handful of circular metal plaques and scattered them jingling at my feet. "Coins! Money! Look at them, Watcher! The faces of the Caesars!"

"Of whom?"

"The ancient rulers. Don't you know your history of past cycles?"

I peered at him curiously. "You claim to have no guild, Gormon. Could it be you are a Rememberer and are concealing it from me?"

"Look at my face, Watcher. Could I belong to any guild? Would a Changeling be taken?"

"True enough," I said, eyeing the golden hue of him, the thick waxen skin, the red-pupilled eyes, the jagged mouth. Gormon had been weaned on teratogenetic drugs. He was a monster—handsome in his way, but a monster nevertheless, a Changeling, outside the laws and customs of man as they are practiced in the Third Cycle of civilization. And there is no guild of Changelings.

"There's more," Gormon said. The overpocket was infinitely capacious; the contents of a world, if need be, could be stuffed in its shriveled gray maw, and still it would be no larger than a man's hand. Gormon took from it bits of machinery, reading spools, an angular thing of brown metal that might have been an ancient tool, three squares of shining glass, five slips of paper—paper!—and a host of other relics of antiquity. "See?" he said. "A fruitful stroll, Watcher! And not just random booty. Everything recorded, everything labeled, stratum, estimated age, position when in situ. Here we have ten thousand years of Roum."

"Should you have taken these things?" I asked doubtfully.

"Why not? Who is to miss them? Who of this cycle cares for the past?"

"The Rememberers."

"They don't need solid objects to help them do their work."

"Why do you want these things, though?"
"The past interests me, Watcher. In my guildless way I have my scholarly pursuits. Is that wrong? May not even a monstrosity seek knowledge?"

"Certainly, certainly. Seek what you wish. Fulfill yourself in your own way. This is Roum. At dawn we enter. I hope to find employment here."

"You may have difficulties."

"How so?"

"There are many Watchers already in Roum, no doubt. There will be little need for your services."

"I'll seek the favors of the Prince of Roum," I said.

"The Prince of Roum is a hard and cold and cruel man."

"You know of him?"

Gormon shrugged. "Somewhat." He began to stuff his artifacts back in the overpocket. "Take your chances with him, Watcher. What other choice do you have?"

"None," I said, and Gormon laughed, and I did not.

He busied himself with his ransacked loot of the past. I found myself deeply depressed by his words. He seemed so sure of himself in an uncertain world, this guildless one, this mutated monster, this man of inhuman look. How could he be so cool, so casual? He lived without concern for calamity and mocked those who admitted to fear. Gormon had been traveling with us for nine days, now, since we had met him in the ancient city beneath the volcano, to the south by the edge of the sea. I had not suggested that he join us. He had invited himself along, and at Avluela's bidding I accepted. The roads are dark and cold at this time of year, and dangerous beasts of many species abound, and an old man journeying with a girl might well consider taking with him a brawny one like Gormon. Yet there were times I wished he had not come with us, and this was one.

Slowly I walked back to my equipment.

Gormon said, as though first realizing it, "Did I interrupt you at your Watching?"

I said mildly, "You did."

"Sorry. Go and start again. I'll leave you in peace." And he gave me his dazzling lopsided smile, so full of charm that it took the curse off the easy arrogance of his words.

I touched the knobs, made contact with the nodes, monitored the dials. But I did not enter Watchfulness, for I remained aware of Gormon's presence and fearful that he would break into my concentration once again at a painful
moment, despite his promise. At length I looked away from the apparatus. Gormon stood at the far side of the road, craning his neck for some sight of Avluela. The moment I turned to him he became aware of me.

"Something wrong, Watcher?"
"No. The moment's not propitious for my work. I'll wait."
"Tell me," he said. "When Earth's enemies really do come from the stars, will your machines let you know it?"
"I trust they will."
"And then?"
"Then I notify the Defenders."
"After which your life's work is over?"
"Perhaps," I said.
"Why a whole guild of you, though? Why not one master center where the Watch is kept? Why a bunch of itinerant Watchers drifting endlessly from place to place?"
"The more vectors of detection," I said, "the greater the chance of early awareness of the invasion."
"Then an individual Watcher might well turn his machines on and not see anything, with an invader already here."
"It could happen. Therefore we practice redundancy."
"You carry it to an extreme, I sometimes think." Gormon laughed. "Do you actually believe an invasion is coming?"
"I do," I said stiffly. "Else my life was a waste."
"And why should the star people want Earth? What do we have here besides the remnants of old empires? What would they do with miserable Roum? With Perris? With Jorslem? Rotting cities! Idiot princes! Come, Watcher, admit it: the invasion's a myth, and you go through meaningless motions three times a day. Eh?"
"It is my craft and my science to Watch. It is yours to jeer. Each of us to our specialty, Gormon."
"Forgive me," he said with mock humility. "Go, then, and Watch."
"I shall."

Angrily I turned back to my cabinet of instruments, determined now to ignore any interruption, no matter how brutal. The stars were out; I gazed at the glowing constellations, and automatically my mind registered the many worlds. Let us Watch, I thought. Let us keep our vigil despite the mockers.

I entered the state of full Watchfulness.
I clung to the grips and permitted the surge of power to rush through me. I cast my mind to the heavens and searched
for hostile entities. What ecstasy! What incredible splendor! I who had never left this small planet roved the black spaces of the void, glided from star to burning star, saw the planets spinning like tops. Faces stared back at me as I journeyed, some without eyes, some with many eyes, all the complexity of the many-peopled galaxy accessible to me. I spied out possible concentrations of inimical force. I inspected drilling-grounds and military encampments. I sought, as I had sought four times daily for all my adult life, for the invaders who had been promised us, the conquerors who at the end of days were destined to seize our tattered world.

I found nothing, and when I came up from my trance, sweaty and drained, I saw Avluela descending.

Feather-light she landed. Gormon called to her, and she ran, bare, her little breasts quivering, and he enfolded her smallness in his powerful arms, and they embraced, not passionately but joyously. When he released her she turned to me.

"Roum," she gasped. "Roum!"
"You saw it?"
"Everything! Thousands of people! Lights! Boulevards! A market! Broken buildings many cycles old! Oh, Watcher, how wonderful Roum is!"
"Your flight was a good one, then," I said.
"A miracle!"
"Tomorrow we go to dwell in Roum."
"No, Watcher, tonight, tonight!" She was girlishly eager, her face bright with excitement. "It's just a short journey more! Look, it's just over there!"
"We should rest first," I said. "We do not want to arrive weary in Roum."
"We can rest when we get there," Avluela answered. "Come! Pack everything! You've done your Watching, haven't you?"
"Yes. Yes."
"Then let's go. To Roum! To Roum!"

I looked in appeal at Gormon. Night had come; it was time to make camp, to have our few hours of sleep.

For once Gormon sided with me. He said to Avluela, "The Watcher's right. We can all use some rest. We'll go into Roum at dawn."

Avluela pouted. She looked more like a child than ever. Her wings drooped; her underdeveloped body slumped. Petu-
lantly she closed her wings until they were mere fist-sized humps on her back and picked up the garments she had scattered on the road. She dressed while we made camp. I distributed food tablets; we entered our receptacles; I fell into troubled sleep and dreamed of Avluela limned against the crumbling moon and Gormon flying beside her. Two hours before dawn I arose and performed my first Watch of the new day, while they still slept. Then I aroused them, and we went onward toward the fabled imperial city, onward toward Roum.

III

The morning’s light was bright and harsh, as though this were some young world newly created. The road was all but empty. People do not travel much in these latter days unless, like me, they are wanderers by habit and profession.

Occasionally we stepped aside to let a chariot of some member of the guild of Masters go by, drawn by a dozen expressionless neuters harnessed in series. Four such vehicles went by in the first two hours of the day, each shuttered and sealed to hide the Master’s proud features from the gaze of such common folk as we. Several rollerwagons passed us, laden with produce, and a number of floaters soared overhead. Generally we had the road to ourselves, however.

The environs of Roum showed vestiges of antiquity: isolated columns, the fragments of an aqueduct transporting nothing from nowhere to nowhere, the portals of a vanished temple. That was the oldest Roum we saw, but there were accretions of the later Roums of subsequent cycles, the huts of peasants, the domes of power drains, the hulls of dwelling-towers. Infrequently we met with the burned-out shell of some ancient airship. Gormon examined everything, taking samples from time to time. Avluela looked, wide-eyed, saying nothing. We walked on, until the walls of the city loomed before us.

They were of a blue glossy stone, neatly joined, rising to a height of perhaps eight men. Our road pierced the wall through a corbelled arch. The gate stood open. As we approached the gate a figure came toward us, hooded, masked, a man of extraordinary height wearing the somber garb of the guild of Pilgrims. One does not approach such a person
one's self, but one heeds him if he beckons. The Pilgrim beckoned.

Through his speaking grill he said, "Where from?"
"The south. I lived in Agupt a while, then crossed Land Bridge to Talya," I replied.
"Where bound?"
"Roum, a while."
"How goes the Watch?"
"As customary."
"You have a place to stay in Roum?" the Pilgrim asked.
I shook my head. "We trust to the kindness of the Will."
"The Will is not always kind," said the Pilgrim absently.
"Nor is there much need of Watchers in Roum. Why do you travel with a Flier?"
"For company's sake. And because she is young and needs protection."
"Who is the other one?"
"He is guildless, a Changeling."
"So I can see. But why is he with you?"
"He is strong and I am old, and so we travel together.
Where are you bound, Pilgrim?"
"Jorslem. Is there another destination for my guild?"
I conceded the point with a shrug.
The Pilgrim said, "Why do you not come to Jorslem with me?"
"My road lies north now. Jorslem is in the south, close by Agupt."
"You have been to Agupt and not to Jorslem?" he said, puzzled.
"Yes. The time was not ready for me to see Jorslem."
"Come now. We will walk together on the road, Watcher, and we will talk of the old times and of the times to come, and I will assist you in your Watching and you will assist me in my communions with the Will. Is it agreed?"

It was a temptation. Before my eyes flashed the image of Jorslem the Golden, its holy buildings and shrines, its place of renewal where the old are made young, its spires, its tabernacles. Even though I am a man set in his ways, I was willing at the moment to abandon Roum and go with the Pilgrim to Jorslem.

I said, "And my companions—"
"Leave them. It is forbidden for me to travel with the
guildless, and I do not wish to travel with a female. You and I, Watcher, will go to Jorslem together.”

Atuelu, who had been standing to one side frowning through all this colloquy, shot me a look of sudden terror.

“I will not abandon them,” I said.

“Then I go to Jorslem alone,” said the Pilgrim. Out of his robe stretched a bony hand, the fingers long and white and steady. I touched my fingers reverently to the tips of his and the Pilgrim said, “Let the Will give you mercy, friend Watcher. And when you reach Jorslem, search for me.”

He moved on down the road without further conversation.

Gormon said to me, “You would have gone with him, wouldn’t you?”

“I considered it.”

“What could you find in Jorslem that isn’t here? That’s a holy city and so is this. Here you can rest a while. You’re in no shape for more walking now.”

“You may be right,” I conceded, and with the last of my energy strode toward the gate of Roum.

Watchful eyes scanned us from slots in the wall. When we were at midpoint in the gate a fat, pockmarked Sentinel with sagging jowls halted us and asked our business in Roum. I stated my guild and purpose, and he gave a snort of disgust.

“Go elsewhere, Watcher! We need only useful men here.”

“Watching has its uses,” I said mildly.

“No doubt. No doubt.” He squinted at Atuelu. “Who’s this? Watchers are celibates, no?”

“She is nothing more than a traveling companion.”

The Sentinel guffawed coarsely. “It’s a route you travel often, I wager! Not that there’s much to her. What is she, thirteen, fourteen? Come here, child. Let me check you for contraband.” He ran his hands quickly over her, scowling as he felt her breasts, then raising an eyebrow as he encountered the mounds of her wings below her shoulders. “What’s this? What’s this? More in back than in front! A Flier, are you? Very dirty business, Fliers consorting with foul old Watchers.” He chuckled and put his hand on Atuelu’s body in a way that sent Gormon starting forward in fury, murder in his fire-circled eyes. I caught him in time and grasped his wrist with all my strength, holding him back lest he ruin the three of us by an attack on the Sentinel. He tugged at me, nearly pulling me over; then he grew calm and subsided, icily waiting as the fat one finished checking Atuelu for “contraband.”
At length the Sentinel turned in distaste to Gormon and said, "What kind of thing are you?"

"Guildless, your mercy," Gormon said in sharp tones. "The humble and worthless product of teratogenesis, and yet nevertheless a free man who desires entry to Roum."

"Do we need more monsters here?"

"I eat little and work hard."

"You'd work harder still if you were neutered," said the Sentinel.

Gormon glowered. I said, "May we have entry?"

"A moment." The Sentinel donned his thinking cap and narrowed his eyes as he transmitted a message to the memory tanks. His face tensed with the effort; then it went slack, and moments later came the reply. We could not hear the transaction at all, but from his disappointed look it appeared evident that no reason had been found to refuse us admission to Roum.

"Go on in," he said. "The three of you. Quickly!"

We passed beyond the gate.

Gormon said, "I could have split him open with a blow."

"And be neutered by nightfall. A little patience, and we've come into Roum."

"The way he handled her—!"

"You take a very possessive attitude toward Avluela," I said. "Remember that she's a Flier, and not sexually available to the guildless."

Gormon ignored my thrust. "She arouses me no more than you do, Watcher. But it pains me to see her treated that way. I would have killed him if you hadn't held me back."

Avluela said, "Where shall we stay, now that we're in Roum?"

"First let me find the headquarters of my guild," I said. "I'll register at the Watchers' Inn. After that perhaps we'll hunt up the Fliers' Lodge for a meal."

"And then," said Gormon drily, "we'll go to the Guildless Gutter and beg for coppers."

"I pity you because you are a Changeling," I told him, "but I find it ungraceful of you to pity yourself. Come."

We walked up a cobbled, winding street away from the gate and into Roum itself. We were in the outer ring of the city, a residential section of low, squat houses topped by the unwieldy bulk of defense installations. Within lay the shining towers we had seen from the fields the night before; the
remnant of ancient Roum, carefully preserved across ten thousand years or more; the market; the factory zone; the communications hump; the temples of the Will; the memory tanks; the sleepers’ refuges; the out-worlders’ brothels; the governmental buildings; the headquarters of the various guilds.

At the corner, beside a Second Cycle building with walls of some rubbery texture, I found a public thinking cap and slipped it on my forehead. At once my thoughts raced down the conduit until they came to the interface that gave them access to one of the storage brains of a memory tank. I pierced the interface and saw the wrinkled brain itself, pale gray against the deep green of its housing. A Rememberer once told me that in cycles past men built machines to do their thinking for them, although these machines were hellishly expensive and required vast amounts of space and drank power like gluttons. That was not the worst of our forefathers’ follies; but why build artificial brains when death each day liberates scores of splendid natural ones to hook into the memory tanks? Was it that they lacked the knowledge to use them? I find that hard to believe.

I gave the brain my guild identification and asked the coordinates of our inn. Instantly I received them, and we set out, Avluela on one side of me, Gorman on the other, myself wheeling as always the cart in which my instruments reside.

The city was crowded. I had not seen such throngs in sleepy, heat-fevered Agupt, nor at any other point on my northward journey. The streets were full of Pilgrims, secretive and masked. Jostling through them went busy Rememberers and glum Merchants and now and then the litter of a Master. Avluela saw a number of Fliers, but was barred by the tenets of her guild from greeting them until she had undergone her ritual purification. I regret to say that I spied many Watchers, all of whom looked upon me disdainfully and without welcome. I noted a good many Defenders and ample representation of such lesser guilds as Vendors, Servitors, Manufactories, Scribes, Communicants and Transporters. Naturally, a host of neuters went silently about their humble business, and numerous outworlders of all descriptions flocked the streets, most of them probably tourists, some here to do what business could be done with the sullen, poverty-blighted people of Earth. I noticed many Changelings limping furtively through the crowd, not one of them as proud of bearing
as Gormon beside me. He was unique among his kind; the others, dappled and piebald and asymmetrical, limbless or overlimbed, deformed in a thousand imaginative and artistic ways, were slinkers, squinters, shufflers, hissers, creepers; they were cut-purses, brain-drainers, organ-peddlers, repentance-mongers, gleam-buyers, but none held himself upright as though he thought he were a man.

The guidance of the brain was exact, and in less than an hour of walking we arrived at the Watchers' Inn. I left Gormon and Avluela outside and wheeled my cart within. Perhaps a dozen members of my guild lounged in the main hall. I gave them the customary sign, and they returned it languidly. Were these guardians on whom Earth's safety depended? Simpletons and weaklings!

"Where may I register?" I asked.
"New? Where from?"
"Agupt was my last place of registry."
"Should have stayed there. No need of Watchers here."
"Where may I register?"

A foppish youngster indicated a screen in the rear of the great room. I went to it, pressed my fingertips against it, was interrogated and gave my name, which a Watcher may utter only to another Watcher and within the precincts of an inn. A panel shot open, and a puffy-eyed man who wore the Watcher emblem on his right cheek and not on the left, signifying his high rank in the guild, spoke my name and said, "You should have known better than to come to Roum. We're over our quota."

"I claim lodging and employment nonetheless."
"A man with your sense of humor should have been born into the guild of Clowns," he said.
"I see no joke."
"Under laws promulgated by our guild in the most recent session an inn is under no obligation to take new lodgers once it has reached its assigned capacity. We are at our assigned capacity. Farewell, my friend."

I was aghast. "I know of no such regulation! This is incredible! For a guild to turn away a member from its own inn—when he arrives footsore and numb, a man of my age, having crossed Land Bridge out of Agupt, here as a stranger and hungry in Roum—"

"Why did you not check with us first?"
"I had no idea it would be necessary."
"The new regulations—"
"May the Will shrivel the new regulations!" I shouted. "I demand lodging! For one who has Watched since before you were born to be turned away—"
"Easy, brother, easy."
"Surely you have some corner where I can sleep—some crumbs to let me eat—"

Even as my tone had changed from bluster to supplication, his expression softened from indifference to mere disdain. "We have no room, we have no food. These are hard times for our guild, you know. There is talk that we will be disbanded altogether, as a useless luxury, a drain upon the Will's resources. We are very limited in our abilities. Because Roum has a surplus of Watchers, we all are on short rations as it is, and if we admit you our rations will be all the shorter."

"But where will I go? What shall I do?"
"I advise you," he said blandly, "to throw yourself upon the mercy of the Prince of Roum."

IV

Outside, I told that to Gormon, and he doubled with laughter, guffawing so furiously that the striations on his lean cheeks blazed like bloody stripes. "The mercy of the Prince of Roum!" he repeated. "The mercy—of the Prince of Roum—!

"It is customary for the unfortunate to seek the aid of the local ruler," I said coldly.
"The Prince of Roum knows no mercy," Gormon told me. "The Prince of Roum will feed you your own limbs to ease your hunger!"
"Perhaps," Avluastra put in, "we should try to find the Fliers' Lodge. They'll feed us there."
"Not Gormon," I observed. "We have obligations to one another."
"We could bring food out to him," she said.
"I prefer to visit the court first," I insisted. "Let us make sure of our status. Afterward we can improvise living arrangements, if we must."

She yielded, and we made our way to the palace of the Prince of Roum, a massive building fronted by a colossal column-ringed plaza, on the far side of the river that splits
the city. In the plaza we were accosted by mendicants of many sorts, some not even Earthborn. Something with ropy tendrils and a corrugated noseless face thrust itself at me and jabbered for alms until Gormon pushed it away, and moments later a second creature equally strange, its skin pocked with luminescent craters and its limbs studded with eyes, embraced my knees and pleaded in the name of the Will for my mercy. "I am only a poor Watcher," I said, indicating my cart, "and am here to gain mercy myself." But the being persisted, sobbing out its misfortunes in a blurred feathery voice, and in the end, to Gormon's immense disgust, I dropped a few food tablets into the shelflike pouch on its chest. Then we muscled on toward the doors of the palace. At the portico a more horrid sight presented itself: a maimed Flier, fragile limbs bent and twisted, one wing half unfolded and severely cropped, the other missing altogether. The Flier rushed upon Avluela, called her by a name not hers, moistened her leggings with tears so copious that the fur of them grew matted and stained. "Sponsor me to the lodge," he appealed. "They have turned me away because I am crippled, but if you sponsor me—" Avluela explained that she could do nothing, that she was a stranger to this lodge. The broken Flier would not release her, and Gormon with great delicacy lifted him like the bundle of dry bones that he was, and set him aside. We stepped up onto the portico and at once were confronted by a trio of soft-faced neuters, who asked our business and admitted us quickly to the next line of barrier, which was manned by a pair of wizened Indexers. Speaking in unison, they queried us.

"We seek audience," I said. "A matter of mercy."
"The day of audience is four days hence," said the Indexer on the right. "We will enter your request on the rolls."
"We have no place to sleep!" Avluela burst out. "We are hungry! We—"
I hushed her. Gormon, meanwhile, was groping in the mouth of his overpocket. Bright things glimmered in his hand: pieces of gold, the eternal metal, stamped with hawk-nosed bearded faces. He had found them grubbing in the ruins. He tossed one coin to the Indexer who had refused us. The man snapped it from the air, rubbed his thumb roughly across its shining obverse, and dropped it instantly into a fold of his garment. The second Indexer waited expectantly. Smiling, Gormon gave him his coin.
"Perhaps," I said, "we can arrange for a special audience within."

"Perhaps you can," said one of the Indexers. "Go through."

And so we passed into the nave of the palace itself, and stood in that great echoing space, looking down the central aisle toward the shielded throne chamber at the apse. There were more beggars in here—licensed ones, holding hereditary concessions—and also throngs of Pilgrims, Communicants, Rememberers, Musicians, Scribes and Indexers. I heard muttered prayers: I smelled the scent of spicy incense; I felt the vibration of subterranean gongs. In cycles past this building had been a shrine of one of the old religions—the Christers, Gormon told me, making me suspect once more that he was a Rememberer masquerading as a Changeling—and it still maintained something of its holy character even though it served as Roum's seat of secular government. But how were we to get to see the Prince?

To my left I saw a small ornate chapel to which a line of prosperous-looking Merchants and Land-holders was slowly entering. Peering past them, I noted three skulls mounted on an interrogation fixture—a memory-tank input—and beside them a burly Scribe. Telling Gormon and Avluela to wait for me in the aisle, I joined the line.

It moved infrequently, and nearly an hour passed before I reached the interrogation fixture. The skulls glared sightlessly at me; within their sealed crania nutrient fluids bubbled and gurgled, caring for the dead yet still functional brains whose billion billion synaptic units now served as incomparable mnemonic devices. The Scribe seemed aghast to find a Watcher in this line, but before he could challenge me I blurted, "I come as a stranger to claim the Prince's mercy. I and my companions are without lodging. My own guild has turned me away. What shall I do? How may I gain an audience?"

"Come back in four days."

"I've slept on the road for more days than that. Now I must rest."

"A public inn—"

"But I am guilded!" I protested. "The public inns would not admit me while my guild maintains an inn here, and my guild refused me because of some new regulation, and—you see my predicament?"

In a wearied voice the Scribe said, "You may make appli-
cation for a special audience. It will be denied. But you may apply."

"Where?"

"Here. State your purpose."

I identified myself to the skulls by my public designation, listed the names and status of my two companions, and explained my case. All this was absorbed and transmitted to the ranks of brains mounted somewhere in the depths of the city, and when I was done the Scribe said, "If the application is approved, you will be notified."

"Meanwhile where shall I stay?"

"Close to the palace, I would suggest."

I understood. I could join that legion of unfortunates packing the plaza. How many of them had requested some special favor of the Prince and were still there, months or years later, waiting to be summoned to the Presence? Sleeping on stone, begging for crusts, living in foolish hope—

But I had exhausted my avenues. I returned to Gorman and Avluela, told them of the situation, and suggested that we now attempt to hunt whatever accommodations we could. Gorman, guildless, was welcome at any of the squalid public inns maintained for his kind; Avluela could probably find residence at her own guild’s lodge; only I would have to sleep in the streets, not for the first time. But I hoped that we would not have to separate. I had come to think of us as a family, strange thought though that was for a Watcher.

As we moved toward the exit my timepiece told me softly that the hour of Watching had come round again. It is my obligation and my privilege to tend to my Watching wherever I may be, regardless of the circumstances, whenever my hour comes round; and so I halted, opened the cart, activated the equipment. Gorman and Avluela stood beside me.

I saw smirks and open mockery on the faces of those who passed in and out of the palace. Watching is not held in very high repute, for we have Watched so long, and the promised enemy has never come. One has one’s duties, comic though they may seem to others. What is a hollow ritual to some is a life’s work to others. Doggedly I forced myself into a state of Watchfulness. The world melted away from me, and I plunged into the heavens. The familiar joy engulfed me; and I searched the familiar places, and some that were not so familiar, my amplified mind leaping through the galaxies in wild swoops. Was an armada massing? Were troops drilling for the conquest of Earth? Four times a day I watched, and
the other members of my guild did the same, each at slightly
different hours, so that no moment went by without some
vigilant mind on guard. I do not believe that that is a foolish
calling.

When I came up from my trance a brazen voice was
crying, "—for the Prince of Roum! Make way for the Prince
of Roum!"

I blinked and caught my breath and fought to shake off the
last strands of my concentration. A gilded palanquin had
emerged from the rear of the palace and was proceeding
down the nave toward me, borne by a phalanx of neuters.
Four men in the ornate costumes and brilliant masks of the
guild of Masters flanked the litter, and it was preceded by a
trio of Changelings, squat and broad, whose throats were
so modified as to imitate the sounding-boxes of bullfrogs.
They emitted a trumpet-like boom of majestic sound as they
advanced.

It struck me as most strange that a prince would admit
Changelings to his service, even ones as gifted as these.
My cart was blocking the progress of this magnificent pro-
cession, and hastily I struggled to close it and move it aside
before the parade swept down upon me. Age and fear made
my fingers tremble, and I could not make the sealings prop-
erly; while I fumbled in increasing clumsiness the strutting
Changelings drew so close that the blare of their throats
was deafening, and Gormon attempted to aid me, forcing
me to hiss at him that it is forbidden for anyone not of my
guild to touch the equipment. I pushed him away; and an
instant later a vanguard of neuters descended on me and
prepared to scourge me from the spot with sparkling whips.

"In the Will’s name," I cried. "I am a Watcher!"

And in antiphonal response came the deep, calm, enor-

mous reply, "Let him be. He is a Watcher."

All motion ceased. The Prince of Roum had spoken.

The neuters drew back. The Changelings halted their
music. The bearers of the palanquin eased it to the floor. All
those in the nave of the palace had pulled back, save only
Gormon and Avluela and myself. The shimmering chain-
curtains of the palanquins parted. Two of the Masters hurried
forward and thrust their hands through the sonic barrier
within, offering aid to their monarch. The barrier died away
with a whimpering buzz.

The Prince of Roum appeared.
He was so young! He was nothing more than a boy, his hair full and dark, his face unlined. But he had been born to rule, and for all his youth he was as commanding as anyone I had ever seen. His lips were thin and tightly compressed; his aquiline nose was sharp and aggressive; his eyes, deep and cold, were infinite pools. He wore the jeweled garments of the guild of Dominators, but incised on his cheek was the double-barred cross of the Defenders, and around his neck he carried the dark shawl of the Rememberers. A Dominator may enroll in as many guilds as he pleases, and it would be a strange thing for a Dominator not also to be a Defender; but it startled me to find this prince a Rememberer as well. That is not normally a guild for the fierce.

He looked at me with little interest and said, “You choose an odd place to do your Watching, old man.”

“The hour chose the place, sire,” I replied. “I was there, and my duty compelled me. I had no way of knowing that you were about to come forth.”

“Your Watching found no enemies?”

“None, sire.”

I was about to press my luck, to take advantage of the unexpected appearance of the Prince to beg for his aid; but his interest in me died like a guttering candle as I stood there, and I did not dare call to him when his head had turned. He eyed Gormon a long moment, frowning and tugging at his chin. Then his gaze fell on Avluela. His eyes brightened. His jaw-muscles flickered. His delicate nostrils widened.

“Come up here, little Flier,” he said, beckoning. “Are you this Watcher’s friend?”

She nodded, terrified.

The Prince held out a hand to her and grasped; she floated up onto the palanquin, and with a grin so evil it seemed a parody of wickedness the young Dominator drew her through the curtain. Instantly a pair of Masters restored the sonic barrier, but the procession did not move on. I stood mute. Gormon beside me was frozen, his powerful body rigid as a rod. I wheeled my cart to a less conspicuous place. Long moments passed. The courtiers remained silent, discreetly looking away from the palanquin.

At length the curtain parted once more. Avluela came stumbling out, her face pale, her eyes blinking rapidly. She looked dazed. Streaks of sweat gleamed on her cheeks. She nearly fell, and a neuter caught her and swung her down
to floor level. Beneath her jacket her wings were partly erect, giving her a hunchbacked look and telling me that she was in great emotional distress. In ragged sliding steps she came to us, quivering, wordless; she darted a glance at me and flung herself against Gormon's chest.

The bearers lifted the palanquin. The Prince of Roum went out from his palace.

When he was gone, Avluela stammered hoarsely, "The Prince has granted us lodging in the royal hostelry!"

V

The hostelkeepers, of course, would not believe us.

Guests of the Prince are housed in the royal hostelry, which is to the rear of the palace in a small garden of frost-flowers and blossoming ferns. The usual inhabitants of such a hostelry are Masters and an occasional Dominator; sometimes a particularly important Rememberer on an errand of research will win a niche there, or some highly placed Defender visiting for purposes of strategic planning. To house a Flier in a royal hostelry would be distinctly odd; to admit a Watcher would be unlikely; to take in a Changeling or some other guildless person would be improbable beyond comprehension. When we presented ourselves, therefore, we were met by Servitors whose attitude was at first one of high humor at our joke, then of irritation, finally of scorn. "Get away," they told us ultimately. "Scum! Rabble!"

Avluela said in a grave voice, "The Prince bas granted us lodging here, and you may not refuse us."

"Away! Away!"

One snaggletoothed Servitor produced a neural truncheon and brandished it in Gormon's face, passing a foul remark about his guildlessness. Gormon slapped the truncheon from his grasp, oblivious to the painful sting, and kicked the man in his gut, so that he coiled and fell over, puking. Instantly a throng of neuters came rushing from within the hostelry. Gormon seized another of the Servitors and hurled him into the midst of them, turning them into a muddled mob. Wild shouts and angry cursing cries attracted the attention of a venerable Scribe who waddled to the door, bellowed for silence, and interrogated us. "That's easily checked," he said, when Avluela had told the story. To a Servitor he said contemptuously, "Send a think to the Indexers fast!"
In time the confusion was untangled, and we were admitted. We were given separate but adjoining rooms. I had never known such luxury before, and perhaps never shall again. The rooms were long, high, and deep. One entered them through telescopic pits keyed to one's own thermal output, to assure privacy. Lights glowed at the resident's merest nod, for hanging from ceiling globes and nestling in cupolas on the walls were spicules of slavelight from one of the Brightstar worlds, trained through suffering to obey such commands. The windows came and went at the dweller's whim. When not in use they were concealed by streamers of quasi-sentient outworld gauzes, which not only were decorative in their own right but functioned as monitors to produce delightful scents according to requisitioned patterns. The rooms were equipped with individual thinking caps connected to the main memory banks. They likewise had conduits that summoned Servitors, Scribes, Indexers or Musicians as required. Of course, a man of my own human guild would not deign to make use of other human beings that way, out of fear of their glowering resentment. But in any case I had little need of them.

I did not ask of Avluela what had occurred in the Prince's palanquin to bring us such bounty. I could well imagine, as could Gormon, whose barely suppressed inner rage was eloquent of his never-admitted love for my pale, slender little Flier.

We settled in. I placed my cart beside the window, draped it with gauzes, and left it in readiness for my next period of Watching. I cleaned my body of grime while entities mounted in the wall sang me to peace. Later I ate. Afterwards Avluela came to me, refreshed, relaxed, and sat beside me in my room as we talked quietly of our recent experiences.

Gormon did not appear for hours. I thought that perhaps he had left this hostelry altogether, finding the atmosphere too rarefied for him, and had sought company among his own guildless kind. But at twilight Avluela and I walked in the cloistered courtyard of the hostelry and mounted a ramp to watch the stars emerge in Roum's sky, and Gormon was there. With him was a lanky and emaciated man in a Rememberer's shawl; they were talking in low tones.

Gormon nodded to me and said, "Watcher, I want you to meet my new friend."

The emaciated one fingered his shawl. "I am the Remem-
berer Basil," he intoned, in a voice as thin as a fresco that has been peeled from its wall. "I have come from Perris to delve into the mysteries of Roum. I shall be here many years."

"The Rememberer has fine stories to tell," said Gormon. "He is among the foremost of his guild. As you approached, he was describing to me the techniques by which the past is revealed. They drive a trench through the strata of Third Cycle deposits, you see, and with vacuum cores they lift the molecules of earth to lay bare the ancient layers."

"We have found," Basil said, "the catacombs of Imperial Roum, and the rubble of the Time of Sweeping, and books inscribed on slivers of white metal, written toward the close of the Second Cycle. All these go to Perris for examination and classification and decipherment; then they return. Does the past interest you, Watcher?"

"To some extent." I smiled. "This Changeling here shows much more fascination for it. I sometimes suspect his authenticity. Would you recognize a Rememberer in disguise?"

Basil scrutinized Gormon, lingering over the bizarre features, the excessively muscular frame. "He is no Rememberer," he said at length. "But I agree that he has antiquarian interests. He has asked me many profound questions."

"Such as?"

"He wishes to know the origin of guilds. He asks the name of the genetic surgeon who crafted the first true-breeding Fliers. He wonders why there are Changelings, and if they are truly under the curse of the Will."

"And do you have answers for these?" I asked.

"For some," said Basil. "For some."

"The origin of guilds?"

"To give structure and meaning to a society that has suffered defeat and destruction," said the Rememberer. "At the end of the Second Cycle all was in flux. No man knew his rank nor his purpose. Through our world strode haughty outworlders who looked upon us all as worthless. It was necessary to establish fixed frames of reference by which one man might know his value beside another. So the first guilds appeared: Dominators, Masters, Merchants, Manufactories, Vendors and Servitors. Then came Scribes, Musicians, Clowns and Transporters. Afterwards Indexers became necessary, and then Watchers and Defenders. When the years of Magic gave us Fliers and Changelings, those guilds
were added, and then the guildless ones, the neuters, were produced, so that—"

"But surely the Changelings are guildless too!" said Avluela.

The Rememberer looked at her for the first time. "Who are you?"

"Avluela of the Fliers. I travel with this Watcher and this Changeling."

Basil said, "As I have been telling the Changeling here, in the early days his kind was guilded. The guild was dissolved a thousand years ago by order of the Council of Dominators after an attempt by a disreputable Changeling faction to seize control of the holy places of Jorslem. Since that time Changelings have been guildless, ranking only above neuters."

"I never knew that," I said.

"You are no Rememberer," said Basil smugly. "It is our craft to uncover the past."

"True. True."

Gormon said, "And today, how many guilds are there?"

Discomfited, Basil replied vaguely, "At least a hundred, my friend. Some are quite small; some are local. I am concerned only with the original guilds and their immediate successors; what has happened in the past few hundred years is in the province of others. Shall I requisition an information for you?"

"Never mind," Gormon said. "It was only an idle question."

"Your curiosity is well developed," said the Rememberer. "I find the world and all it contains extremely fascinating. Is this sinful?"

"It is strange," said Basil. "The guildless rarely look beyond their own horizons."

VI

A Servitor appeared. With a mixture of awe and contempt he genuflected before Avluela and said, "The Prince has returned. He desires your company in the palace at this time."

Terror glimmered in Avluela's eyes. But to refuse was inconceivable. "Shall I come with you?" she asked.

"Please. You must be robed and perfumed. He wishes you to come to him with your wings open, as well."

Avluela nodded. The Servitor led her away.
We remained on the ramp a while longer. The Rememberer Basil talked of the old days of Roum, and I listened, and Gormon peered into the gathering darkness. Eventually, his throat dry, the Rememberer excused himself and moved solemnly away. A few moments later, in the courtyard below us, a door opened and Avluela emerged, walking as though she was of the guild of Somnambulists, not of Fliers.

She was nude, and her fragile body gleamed ghostly white in the starbeams. Her wings were spread and fluttered slowly in a somber systole and diastole. One Servitor grasped each of her elbows; they seemed to be propelling her toward the palace as though she were but a dreamed facsimile of herself and not a real woman.

"Fly, Avluela, fly," Gormon whispered. "Escape while you can!"

She disappeared into a side entrance of the palace.

The Changeling looked at me. "She has sold herself to the Prince to provide lodging for us."

"So it seems."

"I could smash down that palace!"

"You love her?"

"It should be obvious."

"Cure yourself," I advised. "You are an unusual man, but still a Flier is not for you. Particularly a Flier who has shared the bed of the Prince of Roum."

"She goes from my arms to his."

I was staggered. "You've known her?"

"More than once," he said, smiling sadly. "At the moment of ecstasy her wings thrash like leaves in a storm."

I gripped the railing of the ramp so that I would not tumble into the courtyard. The stars whirled overhead; the old moon and its two blank-faced consorts leaped and bobbed. I was shaken without fully understanding the cause of my emotion. Was it wrath that Gormon had dared to violate a canon of the law? Was it a manifestation of those pseudo-parental feelings I had toward Avluela? Or was it mere envy of Gormon for daring to commit a sin beyond my capacity, though not beyond my desires?

I said, "They could burn your brain for that. They could mince your soul. And now you make me an accessory."

"What of it? That Prince commands, and he gets—but others have been there before him. I had to tell someone."

"Enough. Enough."
"Will we see her again?"
"Princes tire quickly of their women. A few days, perhaps a single night—then he will throw her back to us. And perhaps then we shall have to leave this hostelry." I sighed. "At least we'll have known it a few nights more than we deserved."

"Where will you go then?" Gormon asked.
"I will stay in Roum a while."
"Even if you sleep in the streets? There does not seem to be much demand for Watchers here."
"I'll manage," I said. "Then I may go toward Perris."
"To learn from the Rememberers?"
"To see Perris. What of you? What do you want in Roum?"
"Avluela."
"Stop that talk!"
"Very well," he said, and his smile was bitter. "But I will stay here until the Prince is through with her. Then she will be mine, and we'll find ways to survive. The guildless are resourceful. They have to be. Maybe we'll scrounge lodgings in Roum a while, and then follow you to Perris. If you're willing to travel with monsters and faithless Fliers."

I shrugged. "We'll see about that when the time comes."
"Have you ever been in the company of a Changeling before?"
"Not often. Not for long."
"I'm honored." He drummed on the parapet. "Don't cast me off, Watcher. I have reason for wanting to stay with you."
"Which is?"
"To see your face on the day your machines tell you that the invasion of Earth has begun."
I let myself sag forward, shoulders drooping. "You'll stay with me a long time, then."
"Don't you believe the invasion is coming?"
"Some day. Not soon."
Gormon chuckled. "You're wrong. It's almost here."
"You don't amuse me."
"What is it, Watcher? Have you lost your faith? It's been known for a thousand years: another race covets Earth and owns it by treaty and will some day come to collect. That much was decided at the end of the Second Cycle."
"I know all that, and I am no Rememberer." Then I turned to him and spoke words I never thought I would say aloud. "For twice your lifetime, Changeling, I've listened to the stars and done my Watching. Something done that often
loses meaning. Say your own name ten thousand times and it will be an empty sound. I have Watched, and Watched well, and in the dark hours of the night I sometimes think I Watch for nothing, that I have wasted my life. There is a pleasure in Watching, but perhaps there is no real purpose.”

His hand encircled my wrist. “Your confession is as shocking as mine. Keep your faith, Watcher. The invasion comes!”

“How could you possibly know?”

“The guildless also have their skills.”

The conversation distressed me. I said, “Is it painful to be guildless?”

“One grows reconciled. And there are certain freedoms to compensate for the lack of status. I may speak freely to all.”

“I notice.”

“I move freely. I am always sure of food and lodging, though the food may be rotten and the lodging poor. Women are attracted to me despite all prohibitions. Because of them, perhaps, I am untroubled by ambitions.”

“Never desire to rise above your rank?”

“Never.”

“You might have been happier as a Rememberer.”

“I am happy now. I can have a Rememberer’s pleasures without his responsibility.”

“How smug you are!” I cried. “To make a virtue of guildlessness!”

“How else does one endure the weight of the Will?” He looked toward the palace. “The humble rise. The mighty fall. Take this as prophecy, Watcher: that lusty Prince in there will know more of life before summer comes. I’ll rip out his eyes for taking her!”

“Strong words. You bubble with treason tonight.”

“Take it as prophecy.”

“You can’t get close to him,” I said. Then, irritated for taking his foolishness seriously, I added, “And why blame him? He does only as princes do. Blame the girl for going to him. She might have refused.”

“And lost her wings. Or died. No, she had no choice. I do!” In a sudden terrible gesture the Changeling held out thumb and forefinger, double-jointed, long-nailed, and plunged them forward into imagined eyes. “Wait,” he said. “You’ll see!”

In the courtyard two Chronomancers appeared, set up the apparatus of their guild and lit tapers by which to read the
shape of tomorrow. A sickly odor of pallid smoke rose to my nostrils. I had lost further desire to speak with the Change­ling now.

“It grows late,” I said. “I need rest, and soon I must do my Watching.”

“Watch carefully,” Gormon told me.

VII

In my chamber by night I performed my fourth and last Watch of that long day, and for the first time in my life I detected an anomaly. I could not interpret it. It was an ob­scure sensation, a mingling of tastes and sounds, a feeling of being in contact with some colossal mass. Worried, I clung to my instruments far longer than usual, but perceived no more clearly at the end of my seance than at its commence­ment.

Afterwards I wondered about my obligations.

Watchers are trained from childhood to be swift to sound the alarm; and the alarm must be sounded when the Watcher judges the world in peril. Was I now obliged to notify the Defenders? Four times in my life the alarm had been given, on each occasion in error; and each Watcher who had thus touched off a false mobilization had suffered a fearful loss of status. One had contributed his brain to the memory banks; one had become a neuter out of shame; one had smashed his instruments and gone to live among the guild­less; and one, vainly attempting to continue in his profession, had discovered himself mocked by all his comrades. I saw no virtue in scorning one who had delivered a false alarm; for was it not preferable for a Watcher to cry out too soon than not at all? But those were the customs of our guild, and I was constrained by them.

I evaluated my position and decided that I did not have valid grounds for an alarm.

I reflected that Gormon had placed suggestive ideas in my mind that evening. I might possibly be reacting only to his jeering talk of imminent invasion.

I could not act. I dared not jeopardize my standing by hasty outcry. I mistrusted my own emotional state.

I gave no alarm.

Seething, confused, my soul rolling, I closed my cart and let myself sink into a drugged sleep.
At dawn I woke and rushed to the window, expecting to find invaders in the streets. But all was still. A winter grayness hung over the courtyard, and sleepy Servitors pushed passive neuters about. Uneasily I did my first Watching of the day, and to my relief the strangeness of the night before did not return, although I had it in mind that my sensitivity is always greater at night than upon arising.

I ate and went to the courtyard. Gormon and Avluela were already there. She looked fatigued and downcast, depleted by her night with the Prince of Roum, but I said nothing to her about it. Gormon, slouching disdainfully against a wall embellished with the shells of radiant mollusks, said to me, “Did your Watching go well?”

“Well enough.”

“What of the day?”


“Surely,” he said, and she gave a faint nod, and, like the tourists we were, we set off to inspect the splendid city of Roum.

Gormon acted as our guide to the jumbled pasts of Roum, belying his claim never to have been here before. As well as any Rememberer he described the things we saw as we walked the winding streets. All the scattered levels of thousands of years were exposed. We saw the power domes of the Second Cycle, and the Colosseum where at an unimaginably early date man and beast contended like jungle creatures. In the broken hull of that building of horrors Gormon told us of the savagery of that unimaginably ancient time. “They fought,” he said, “naked before huge throngs. With bare hands men challenged beasts called lions, great hairy cats with swollen heads; and when the lion lay in its gore the victor turned to the Prince of Roum and asked to be pardoned for whatever crime it was that had cast him into the arena. And if he had fought well, the Prince made a gesture with his hand, and the man was freed.” Gormon made the gesture for us: a thumb upraised and jerked backward over the right shoulder several times. “But if the man had shown cowardice, or if the lion had distinguished itself in the manner of its dying, the Prince made another gesture, and the man was condemned to be slain by a second beast.” Gormon showed us that gesture too: the middle finger jutting upward from a clenched fist and lifted in a short sharp thrust.
"How are these things known?" Avluela asked, but Gormon pretended not to hear her.

We saw the line of fusion pylons built early in the Third Cycle to draw energy from the world's core, and still functioning, although stained and corroded. We saw the shattered stump of a Second Cycle weather machine, still a mighty column at least twenty men high. We saw a hill on which white marble relics of First Cycle Roum sprouted like pale clumps of winter death-flowers. Penetrating toward the inner part of the city, we came upon the embankment of defensive amplifiers waiting in readiness to hurl the full impact of the Will against invaders. We viewed a market where visitors from the stars haggled with peasants for excavated fragments of antiquity. Gormon strode into the crowd and made several purchases. We came to a flesh house for travelers from afar, where one could buy anything from quasi-life to mounds of passion-ice. We ate at a small restaurant by the edge of the river Tver, where guildless ones were served without ceremony, and at Gormon's insistence we dined on mounds of a soft doughy substance.

Afterward we passed through a covered arcade in whose many aisles plump Vendors peddled star-goods, costly trinkets from Afreek and the flimsy constructs of the local Manufactories. Just beyond we emerged in a plaza that contained a fountain in the shape of a boat, and to the rear of this rose a flight of cracked and battered stone stairs ascending to a zone of rubble and weeds. Gormon beckoned, and we scrambled into this dismal area, passing rapidly through it to a place where a sumptuous palace, by its looks early Second Cycle or even First, brooded over a sloping vegetated hill.

"They say this is the center of the world," Gormon declared. "In Jorslem one finds another place that also claims the honor. They mark the spot here by a map."

"How can the world have one center," Avluela asked, "when it is a sphere?"

Gormon laughed. We went in. Within, in wintry darkness, there stood a colossal jeweled globe lit by some inner glow. "Here is your world," said Gormon, gesturing grandly.

"Oh!" Avluela gasped. "Everything! Everything is here!"

The map was a masterpiece of craftsmanship. It showed natural contours and elevations; its seas seemed deep liquid pools; its deserts were so parched as to make thirst spring
in one’s mouth; its cities swirled with vigor and life. I beheld the continents, Eyrop, Afreek, Ais, Stralya. I saw the vastness of Earth Ocean. I traversed the golden span of Land Bridge, which I had crossed so toilfully on foot not long before. Avluela rushed forward and pointed to Roum, to Agupt, to Jorslem, to Perris. She tapped the globe at the high mountains north of Hind and said softly, “This is where I was born, where the ice lives, where the mountains touch the moons. Here is where the Fliers have their kingdom.” She ran a finger westward towards Pars and beyond it into the terrible Arban Desert, and on to Agupt. “This is where I flew. By night, when I left my girlhood. We all must fly, and I flew here. A hundred times I thought I would die. Here, here in the desert, sand in my throat as I flew, sand beating against my wings—I was forced down, I lay naked on the hot sand for days, and another Flier saw me, he came down to me and pitied me, and lifted me up, and when I was aloft my strength returned, and we flew on toward Agupt. And he died over the sea. His life stopped, though he was young and strong, and he fell down into the sea, and I flew down to be with him, and the water was hot even at night. I drifted, and morning came, and I saw the living stones growing like trees in the water, and the fish of many colors, and they came and pecked at his flesh as he floated with his wings outspread on the water, and I left him, I thrust him down to rest there, and I rose, and I flew on to Agupt, alone, frightened, and there I met you, Watcher.” Timidly she smiled to me. “Show us the place where you were young, Watcher.”

Painfully, for I was suddenly stiff at the knees, I hobbled to the far side of the globe. Avluela followed me. Gorman hung back, as though not interested at all. I pointed to the scattered islands rising in two long strips from Earth Ocean—the remnants of the Lost Continents.

“Here,” I said, indicating my native island in the west. “I was born here.”

“So far away!” Avluela cried.

“And so long ago,” I said. “In the middle of the Second Cycle, it sometimes seems to me.”

“No! That is not possible!” But she looked at me as though it might just be true that I was thousands of years old.

I smiled and touched her satiny cheek. “It only seems that way to me,” I said.
“When did you leave your home?”

“When I was twice your age,” I said. “I came first to here.” I indicated the eastern group of islands. “I spent a dozen years as a Watcher on Palash. Then the Will moved me to cross Earth Ocean to Afreek. I came. I lived a while in the hot countries. I went on to Agupt. I met a certain small Flier.” Falling silent, I looked a long while at the islands that had been my home, and within my mind my image changed from the gaunt and eroded thing I am today, and I saw myself young and well fleshed, climbing the green mountains and swimming in the chill sea, and doing my Watching at the rim of a white beach hammered by surf.

While I brooded Avluela turned away from me to Gormon and said, “Now you. Show us where you come from, Changeling!”

Gormon shrugged. “The place does not appear to be on this globe.”

“But that’s impossible!”

“Is it?” he asked.

She pressed him, but he evaded her, and we passed through a side exit and into the streets.

VIII

I was growing tired, but Avluela hungered for this city, wishing to devour it all in an afternoon, and we went on through a maze of interlocking streets, through a zone of sparkling mansions of Masters and Merchants, and through a foul den of Servitors and Vendors that extended into subterranean catacombs, and to a place where Clowns and Musicians resorted, and to another where the guild of Somnambulists begged us to come inside and buy the truth that comes with trances. Avluela urged us to go, but Gormon shook his head and I smiled, and we moved on. Now we were at the edge of a park close to the city’s core. Here the citizens of Roum promenaded with an energy rarely seen in hot Agupt, and we joined the parade.

“Look there!” Avluela said. “How bright it is!”

She pointed toward the shining arc of a dimensional sphere enclosing some relic of the ancient city. Shading my eyes, I could make out a weathered stone wall within, and a knot of people. Gormon said, “It is the Mouth of Truth.”

“What is that?” Avluela asked.
"Come. See."

A line progressed into the sphere. We joined it and soon were at the lip of the interior, peering at the timeless region just across the threshold. Why this relic and so few others had been accorded such special protection I did not know, and I asked Gormon, whose knowledge was so unaccountably as profound as any Rememberer's, and he replied, "Because this is the realm of certainty, where what one says is absolutely congruent with what actually is the case."

"I don't understand," said Avluela.

"It is impossible to lie in this place," Gormon told her. "Can you imagine any relic more worthy of protection?" He stepped across the entry duct, blurring as he did so, and I followed him quickly within. Avluela hesitated. It was a long moment before she entered; she paused a moment on the very threshold, seemingly buffeted by the wind that blew along the line of demarcation between the outer world and the pocket universe in which we stood.

An inner compartment held the Mouth of Truth itself. The line extended toward it, and a solemn Indexer was controlling the flow of entry to the tabernacle. It was a while before we three were permitted to go in. We found ourselves before the ferocious head of a monster in high relief, affixed to an ancient wall pockmarked by time. The monster's jaws gaped; the open mouth was a dark and sinister hole. Gormon nodded, inspecting it, as though he seemed pleased to find it exactly as he had thought it would be.

"What do we do?" Avluela asked.

Gormon said, "Watcher, put your right hand into the Mouth of Truth."

Frowning, I complied.

"Now," said Gormon, "one of us asks a question. You must answer it. If you speak anything but the truth, the mouth will close and sever your hand."

"No!" Avluela cried.

I stared uneasily at the stone jaws rimming my wrist. A Watcher without both his hands is a man without a craft; in Second Cycle days one might obtain a prosthesis more artful than one's original hand, but the Second Cycle had long ago been concluded, and such niceties were not to be purchased on Earth nowadays.

"How is such a thing possible?" I asked.

"The Will is unusually strong in these precincts," Gormon replied. "It distinguishes sternly between truth and untruth."
To the rear of this wall sleeps a trio of Somnambulists through whom the Will speaks, and they control the Mouth. Do you fear the Will, Watcher?"

"I fear my own tongue."

"Be brave. Never has a lie been told before this wall. Never has a hand been lost."

"Go ahead, then," I said. "Who will ask me a question?"

"I," said Gormon. "Tell me, Watcher: all pretense aside, would you say that a life spent in Watching has been a life spent wisely?"

I was silent a long moment, rotating my thoughts, eyeing the jaws.

At length I said, "To devote one's self to vigilance on behalf of one's fellow man is perhaps the noblest purpose one can serve."

"Careful!" Gormon cried in alarm.

"I am not finished," I said.

"Go on."

"But to devote one's self to vigilance when the enemy is an imaginary one is idle, and to congratulate one's self for looking long and well for a foe that is not coming is foolish and sinful. My life has been a waste."

The jaws of the Mouth of Truth did not quiver.

I removed my hand. I stared at it as though it had newly sprouted from my wrist. I felt suddenly several cycles old. Avluela, her eyes wide, her hands to her lips, seemed shocked by what I had said. My own words appeared to hang congealed in the air before the hideous idol.

"Spoken honestly," said Gormon, "although without much mercy for yourself. You judge yourself too harshly, Watcher."

"I spoke to save my hand," I said. "Would you have had me lie?"

He smiled. To Avluela the Changeling said, "Now it's your turn."

Visibly frightened, the little Flier approached the Mouth. Her dainty hand trembled as she inserted it between the slabs of cold stone. I fought back an urge to rush toward her and pull her free of that devilish grimacing head.

"Who will question her?" I asked.

"I," said Gormon.

Avluela's wings stirred faintly beneath her garments. Her face grew pale; her nostrils flickered, her upper lip slid over the lower one. She stood slouched against the wall, staring
in horror at the termination of her arm. Outside the chamber vague faces peered at us, lips moved in what no doubt were expressions of impatience over our lengthy visit to the Mouth; but we heard nothing. The atmosphere around us was warm and clammy, with a musty tang like that which would come from a well that was driven through the structure of Time.

Gormon said slowly, “This night past you allowed your body to be possessed by the Prince of Roum. Before that, you granted yourself to the Changeling Gormon, although such liaisons are forbidden by custom and law. Much prior to that you were the mate of a Flier, now deceased. You may have had other men, but I know nothing of them, and for the purposes of my question they are not relevant. Tell me this, Avluela: which of the three gave you the most intense physical pleasure, which of the three aroused your deepest emotions, and which of the three would you choose as a mate, if you were choosing a mate?”

I wanted to protest that the Changeling had asked her three questions, not one, and so had taken unfair advantage. But I had no chance to speak, because Avluela replied unfalteringly, hand wedged deep into the Mouth of Truth, “The Prince of Roum gave me greater pleasure of the body than I had ever known before, but he is cold and cruel, and I despise him. My dead Flier I loved more deeply than any person before or since, but he was weak, and I would not have wanted a weakling as a mate. You, Gormon, seem almost a stranger to me even now, and I feel that I know neither your body nor your soul, and yet, though the gulf between us is so wide, it is you with whom I would spend my days to come.”

She drew her hand from the Mouth of Truth. “Well spoken!” said Gormon, though the accuracy of her words had clearly wounded as well as pleased him. “Suddenly you find eloquence, eh, when the circumstances demand it? And now the turn is mine to risk my hand."

He neared the Mouth. I said, “You have asked the first two questions. Do you wish to finish the job and ask the third as well?”

“Hardly,” he said. He made a negligent gesture with his free hand. “Put your heads together and agree on a joint question.”

Avluela and I conferred. With uncharacteristic forwardness she proposed a question; and since it was the one I
would have asked, I accepted and told her to ask it.

She said, "When we stood before the globe of the world, Gormon, I asked you to show me the place where you were born, and you said you were unable to find it on the map. That seemed most strange. Tell me now: are you what you say you are, a Changeling who wanders the world?"

He replied, "I am not."

In a sense he had satisfied the question as Avluela had phrased it; but it went without saying that his reply was inadequate, and without removing his hand from the Mouth of Truth he continued, "I did not show my birthplace to you on the globe because I was born nowhere on this globe, but on a world of a star I must not name. I am no Changeling in your meaning of the word, though by some definitions I am, for my body is somewhat disguised, and on my own world I wear a different flesh. I have lived here ten years."

“What was your purpose in coming to Earth?" I asked.

“I am obliged only to answer one question,” said Gormon. Then he smiled. “But I give you an answer anyway: I was sent to Earth in the capacity of a military observer, to prepare the way for the invasion for which you have Watched so long and in which you have ceased to believe, and which will be upon you in a matter now of some hours.”

“Lies!” I bellowed. “All lies!”

Gormon laughed. And drew his hand from the Mouth of Truth, intact, unharmed.

IX

Numb with confusion, I fled with my cart of instruments from that gleaming sphere and emerged into a street suddenly cold and dark. Night had come with winter’s swiftness; it was almost the ninth hour, and almost the time for me to Watch once more.

Gorman’s mockery thundered in my brain. He had arranged everything: he had maneuvered us into the Mouth of Truth, he had wrung a confession of lost faith from me and a confession of a different sort from Avluela, he had mercilessly volunteered information he need not have revealed, spoken words calculated to split me to the core.

Was the Mouth of Truth a fraud? Could Gormon lie and emerge unscathed?

Never since I first took up my tasks had I Watched at
anything but my appointed hours. This was a time of crumbling realities; I could not wait for the ninth hour to come round. Crouching in the windy street, I opened my cart, readied my equipment and sank like a diver into Watchfulness.

My amplified consciousness roared toward the stars.

Godlike I roamed infinity. I felt the rush of the solar wind, but I was no Flier to be hurled to destruction by that pressure, and I soared past it, beyond the reach of those angry particles of light, into the blackness at the edge of the sun's dominion. Down upon me there beat a different pressure.

Starships coming near.

Not the tourist lines, bringing sightseers to gape at our diminished world. Not the registered mercantile transport vessels, nor the scoop-ships that collect the interstellar vapors, nor the resort craft on their hyperbolic orbits.

These were military craft, dark, alien, menacing. I could not tell their number; I knew only that they sped Earthward at many lights, nudging a cone of deflected energies before them, and it was that cone that I sensed, that I had felt also the night before, booming into mind through my instruments, engulfing me like a cube of crystal through which stress patterns play and shine.

All my life I had Watched for this.

I had been trained to sense it. I had prayed that I never would sense it, and then in my emptiness I had prayed that I would sense it, and then I had ceased to believe in it. And then by grace of the Changeling Gormon I had sensed it after all, Watching ahead of my hour, crouching in a cold Roumish street just outside the Mouth of Truth.

In his training a Watcher is instructed to break from his Watchfulness as soon as his observations are confirmed by a careful check, so that he can sound the alarm. Obediently I made my check, shifting from one channel to another to another, triangulating and still picking up that foreboding sensation of titanic force rushing upon Earth at unimaginable speed.

Either I was deceived, or the invasion was come. But I could not shake from my trance to give the alarm.

Lingeringly, lovingly, I drank in the sensory data for what seemed like hours. I fondled my equipment, draining from it the total affirmation of faith that my readings gave me.
Dimly I warned myself that I was wasting vital time, that it was my duty to leave this lewd caressing of destiny and summon the Defenders.

And at last I burst free of Watchfulness and returned to the world I was guarding.

Avluela was beside me, dazed, terrified, her knuckles to her teeth, her eyes blank.

"Watcher! Watcher, do you hear me? What's happening? What's going to happen?"

"The invasion," I said. "How long was I under?"

"About half a minute. I don't know. Your eyes were closed. I thought you were dead."

"Gormon was speaking the truth! The invasion is almost here. Where is he? Where did he go?"

"He vanished as we came away from that place with the Mouth," Avluela whispered. "Watcher, I'm frightened. I feel everything collapsing. I have to fly—I can't stay down here now!"

"Wait," I said, clutching at her and missing her arm. "Don't go now. First I have to give the alarm, and then—"

But she was already stripping off her clothing. Bare to the waist, her pale body gleamed in the evening light, while about us people were rushing to and fro in ignorance of all that was about to occur. I wanted to keep Avluela beside me, but I could delay no longer in giving the alarm, and I turned away from her, back to my cart.

As though caught up in a dream born of overripe longings I reached for the node that I had never used, the one that would send forth a planetwide alert to the Defenders.

Had the alarm already been given? Had some other Watcher sensed what I had sensed and, less paralyzed by bewilderment and doubt, performed a Watcher's final task?

No. No. For then I would be hearing the sirens' shriek reverberating from the orbiting loudspeakers above the city.

I touched the node. From the corner of my eye I saw Avluela, free of her encumbrances now, kneeling to say her words, filling her tender wings with strength. In a moment she would be in the air, beyond my grasp.

With a single swift tug I activated the alarm.

In that instant I became aware of a burly figure striding toward us. Gormon, I thought; and as I rose from my equipment I reached out to him, wanting to seize him and hold him fast. But he who approached was not Gormon
but some officious dough-faced Servitor who said to Avluela, "Go easy, Flier, let your wings drop. The Prince of Roum sends me to bring you to his presence."

He grappled with her. Her little breasts heaved; her eyes flashed anger at him.

"Let go of me! I'm going to fly!"
"The Prince of Roum summons you," the Servitor said, enclosing her in his heavy arms.
"The Prince of Roum will have other distractions tonight," I said. "He'll have no need of her."

As I spoke the sirens began to sing from the skies.

The Servitor released her. His mouth worked noiselessly for an instant; he made one of the protective gestures of the Will; he looked skyward and grunted, "The alarm! Who gave the alarm? You, old Watcher?"

Figures rushed about insanely in the streets.

Avluela, freed, sped past me—on foot, her wings but half-furled—and was swallowed up in the surging throng. Over the terrifying sound of the sirens came booming messages from the public annunciators, giving instructions for defense and safety. A lanky man with the mark of the guild of Defenders upon his cheek rushed up to me; shouted words too incoherent to be understood and sped on down the street. The world seemed to have gone mad.

Only I remained calm. I looked to the skies, half expecting to see the invaders' black ships already hovering above the towers of Roum. But I saw nothing except the hovering night lights and the other objects one might expect overhead.

"Gormon?" I called. "Avluela?"

I was alone.

A strange emptiness swept over me. I had given the alarm. The invaders were on their way; I had lost my occupation. There was no need of Watchers now.

Almost lovingly I touched the worn cart that had been my companion for so many years. I ran my fingers over its stained and pitted instruments; and then I looked away, abandoning it, and went down the dark streets cartless, burdenless, a man whose life had found and lost meaning in the same instant. And about me raged chaos.

X

It was understood that when the moment of Earth's final
battle arrived, all guilds would be mobilized, the Watchers alone exempted. We who had manned the perimeter of defense for so long had no part in the strategy of combat; we were discharged by the giving of a true alarm. Now it was the time of the guild of Defenders to show its capabilities. They had planned for half a cycle what they would do in time of war. What plans would they call forth now? What deeds would they direct?

My only concern was to return to the loyal hostelry and wait out the crisis. It was hopeless to think of finding Avluela, and I pummelled myself savagely for having let her slip away like that, naked and without a protector, in that confused moment. Where would she go? Who would shield her?

A fellow Watcher, pulling his cart madly along, nearly collided with me. "Careful!" I snapped.

He looked up, breathless, stunned. "Is it true?" he asked.

"The alarm?"
"Can't you hear?"
"But is it real?"

I pointed to his cart. "You know how to find that out."
"They say the man who gave the alarm was drunk, an old fool who was turned away from the inn yesterday?"
"It could be so," I admitted.
"But if the alarm is real—!

Smiling, I said, "If it is, now we all may rest. Good day to you, Watcher."

"Your cart! Where's your cart?" he shouted at me.

But I had moved past him, toward the mighty carven stone pillar of some relic of Imperial Roum.

Ancient images were carved on that pillar: battles and victories, foreign monarchs marched in the chains of disgrace through the streets of Roum, triumphant eagles celebrating imperial grandeur. In my strange new calmness I stood a while before the column of stone, admiring its elegant engravings. Toward me rushed a frenzied figure whom I recognized as the Rememberer Basil; I hailed him, saying, "How timely you come! Do me the kindness of explaining these images, Rememberer. They fascinate me, and my curiosity is aroused."

"Are you insane? Can't you hear the alarm?"
"I gave the alarm, Rememberer."
"Flee, then! Invaders come! We must fight!"
"Not I, Basil. Now my time is over. Tell me of these
images. These beaten kings, these broken emperors. Surely a man of your years will not be doing battle."

"All are mobilized now!"

"All but Watchers," I said. "Take a moment. Yearning for the past is born in me. Gormon has vanished; be my guide to these lost cycles."

The Rememberer shook his head wildly, circled around me, and tried to get away. I made a lunge at him, hoping to seize his skinny arm and pin him to the spot; but he eluded me and I caught only his dark shawl, which pulled free and came loose in my hands. Then he was gone, his spindly limbs pumping madly as he fled down the streets and left my view.

I shrugged and examined the shawl I had so unexpectedly acquired. It was shot through with glimmering threads of metal, arranged in intricate patterns that teased the eye: it seemed to me that each strand disappeared into the weave of the fabric, only to reappear at some improbable point, like the lineage of dynasties unexpectedly revived in distant cities. The workmanship was superb. Idly I draped the shawl about my shoulders.

I walked on.

My legs, which had been on the verge of failing me earlier in the day, now served me well. In renewed youthfulness I made my way through the chaotic city, finding no difficulties about choosing my route. I headed for the river, then crossed it and, on the Tver's far side, sought the palace of the Prince. The night had deepened, for most lights were extinguished under the mobilization orders, and from time to time a dull boom signaled the explosion of a screening bomb overhead, liberating clouds of murk that shielded the city from most forms of long-range scrutiny. There were fewer pedestrians in the streets. The sirens still cried out. Atop the buildings the defensive installations were going into action; I heard the bleeping sounds of repellors warming up and saw long spidery arms of amplification booms swinging from tower to tower as they linked for maximum output. I had no doubt now that the invasion actually was coming. My own instruments might have been fouled by inner confusion, but they would not have proceeded thus far with the mobilization if the initial report had not been confirmed by the findings of hundreds of other members of my guild.

As I neared the palace a pair of breathless Rememberers
sped toward me, their shawls flapping behind them. They called to me in words I did not comprehend—some code of their guild, I realized, recollecting that I wore Basil's shawl. I could not reply, and they rushed upon me, still gabbling; and switching to the language of ordinary men they said, "What is the matter with you? To your post! We must record! We must comment! We must observe!"

"You mistake me," I said mildly. "I keep this shawl only for your brother Basil, who left it in my care. I have no post to guard at this time."

"A Watcher," they cried in unison and cursed me separately and ran on. I laughed and went to the palace.

Its gates stood open. The neuters who had guarded the outer portal were gone, as were the two Indexers who had stood just within the door. The beggars that had thronged the vast plaza had jostled their way into the building itself to seek shelter; this had awakened the anger of the licensed hereditary mendicants whose customary stations were in that part of the building, and they had fallen upon the inflowing refugees with fury and unexpected strength. I saw cripples lashing out with their crutches held as clubs; I saw blind men landing blows with suspicious accuracy; meek penitents were wielding a variety of weapons ranging from stilettos to sonic pistols. Holding myself aloof from this shameless spectacle I penetrated to the inner recesses of the palace; peering into chapels where I saw Pilgrims beseeching the blessings of the Will and Communicants desperately seeking spiritual guidance as to the outcome of the coming conflict.

Abruptly I heard the blare of trumpets and cries of, "Make way! Make way!"

A file of sturdy Servitors marched into the palace, striding toward the Prince's chambers in the apse. Several of them held a struggling, kicking, frantic figure with half-unfolded wings: Avluela! I called out to her, but my voice died in the din, nor could I reach her. The Servitors shoved me aside. The procession vanished into the princely chambers. I caught a final glimpse of the little Flier, pale and small in the grip of her captors, and then she was gone once more.

I seized a bumbling neuter who had been moving uncertainly.

"That Flier! Why was she brought here?"
"He—he—they—"
"Tell me!"
"The Prince—his woman—in his chariot—he—he—they—the invaders—"

I pushed the flabby creature aside and rushed toward the apse. A brazen wall ten times my own height confronted me. I pounded on it. "Avluelal!" I shouted hoarsely. "Av...lu...ela...!"

I was neither thrust away nor admitted. I was ignored. The bedlam at the western doors of the palace had extended itself now to the nave and aisles, and as the ragged beggars boiled toward me I executed a quick turn and found myself passing through one of the side doors of the palace.

I stood in the courtyard that led to the royal hostelry, suspended and passive. A strange electricity crackled in the air. I assumed it was an emanation from one of Roum's defense installations, some kind of beam designed to screen the city from attack. But an instant later I realized that it presaged the actual arrival of the invaders.

Starships blazed in the heavens.

When I had perceived them in my Watching they had appeared black against the infinite blackness, but now they burned with the radiance of suns. A stream of bright, hard, jewel-like globes bedecked the sky; they were ranged side by side, stretching from east to west in a continuous band, filling all the celestial arch, and as they erupted simultaneously into being it seemed to me that I heard the crash and throb of an invisible symphony heralding the arrival of the conquerors of Earth.

I do not know how far above me the starships were, nor how many of them hovered there, nor any of the details of their design. I know only that in sudden massive majesty they were there. If I had been a Defender my soul would have withered instantly at the sight.

Across the heavens shot light of many hues. The battle had been joined. I could not comprehend the actions of our warriors, and I was equally baffled by the maneuvers of those who had come to take possession of our history-crusted but time-diminished planet. To my shame I felt not only out of the struggle but above the struggle, as though this were no quarrel of mine. I wanted Avluelal beside me, and she was somewhere within the depths of the palace of the Prince of Roum. Even Gormon would have been a comfort now, Gormon the Changeling, Gormon the spy, Gormon the monstrous betrayer of our world.
Gigantic amplified voices bellowed, “Make way for the Prince of Roum! The Prince of Roum leads the Defenders in the battle for the fatherworld!”

From the palace emerged a shining vehicle the shape of a teardrop, in whose bright-metalled roof a transparent sheet had been mounted so that all the populace could see and take heart in the presence of the ruler. At the controls of the vehicle sat the Prince of Roum, proudly erect, his cruel, youthful features fixed in harsh determination; and beside him, robed like an empress, I beheld the slight figure of the Flier Avluela. She seemed in a trance.

The royal chariot soared upward and was lost in the darkness.

It seemed to me that a second vehicle appeared and followed its path, and that the Prince’s reappeared, and that the two flew in tight circles, apparently locked in combat. Clouds of blue sparks wrapped both chariots now; and then they swung high and far and were lost to me behind one of the hills of Roum.

Was the battle raging all over the planet, now? Was Perris in jeopardy, and holy Jorslem, and even the sleepy isles of the Lost Continents? Did starships hover everywhere? I did not know. I perceived events in only one small segment of the sky over Roum, and even there my awareness of what was taking place was dim, uncertain and ill-informed. There were momentary flashes of light in which I saw battalions of Fliers streaming across the sky; and then darkness returned as though a velvet shroud had been hurled over the city. In fitful bursts I saw the great machines of our defense speaking from the tops of our towers; and yet I saw the starships untouched, unharmed, unmoved above. The courtyard in which I stood was deserted, but in the distance I heard voices, full of fear and foreboding, shouting in tinny tones that might have been the screeching of birds. Occasionally there came a booming sound that rocked all the city.

Once a platoon of Somnambulists was driven past where I was. In the plaza fronting the palace I observed what appeared to be an array of Clowns unfolding some sort of sparkling netting of a military look. By one flash of lightning I was able to see a trio of Rememberers soaring aloft on a gravity plate, making copious notes of all that elapsed. It seemed—I was not sure—that the vehicle of the Prince of Roum returned, speeding across the sky with its pursuer
clinging close. “Avluela,” I whispered, as the twin dots of lights left my sight. Were the starships disgorging troops? Did colossal pylons of force spiral down from those orbiting brightnesses to touch the surface of the Earth? Why had the Prince seized Avluela? Where was Gormon? What were our Defenders doing? Why were the enemy ships not blasted from the sky?

Rooted to the ancient cobbles of the courtyard, I observed the cosmic battle in total lack of understanding throughout the long night.

Dawn came. Strands of pale light looped from tower to tower. I touched fingers to my eyes, realizing that I must have slept while standing. Perhaps I should apply for membership in the guild of Somnambulists, I told myself lightly. I put my hands to the Rememberer's shawl about my shoulders, wondering how I had managed to acquire it, and the answer came.

I looked toward the sky.

The alien starships were gone. I saw only the ordinary morning sky, gray with pinkness breaking through. I felt the jolt of compulsion and looked about for my cart, and reminded myself that I need do no more Watching, and I felt more empty than one would ordinarily feel at such an hour. Was the battle over?

Had the enemy been conquered?

Were the ships of the invaders blasted from the sky and lying in charred ruin outside Roum?

All was silent. I heard no more celestial symphonies. Then, out of the eerie stillness there came a new sound, a rumbling noise as of wheeled vehicles passing through the streets of the city. And the invisible Musicians played one final note, deep and resonant, which trailed away jaggedly as though every string had been broken at once.

Over the speakers used for public announcements came quiet words:

“Roum is fallen. Roum is fallen.”

XI

The royal hostelry was untended. Neuters and members of the servant guilds all had fled. Defenders, Masters and Dominators must have perished honorably in combat. Basil the Rememberer was nowhere about; likewise none of his
brethren. I went to my room, cleansed and refreshed and fed myself, gathered my few possessions and bade farewell to the luxuries I had known so briefly. I regretted that I had had such a short time to visit Roum; but at least Gormon had been a most excellent guide, and I had seen a great deal.

Now I proposed to move on.

It did not seem prudent to remain in a conquered city. My room's thinking cap did not respond to my queries, and so I did not know what the extent of the defeat was, here or in other regions, but it was evident to me that Roum at least had passed from human control, and I wished to depart quickly. I weighed the thought of going to Jorslem, as that tall Pilgrim had suggested upon my entry into Roum. But then I reflected and chose a westward route, toward Perris, which not only was closer but held the headquarters of the Rememberers.

My own occupation had been destroyed; but on this first morning of Earth's conquest I felt a sudden powerful and strange yearning to offer myself humbly to the Rememberers and seek with them knowledge of our more glittering yesterdays.

At midday I left the hostelry. I walked first to the palace, which still stood open. The beggars lay strewn about, some drugged, some sleeping, most dead; from the crude manner of their death I saw that they must have slain one another in their panic and frenzy. A despondent-looking Indexer squatted beside the three skulls of the interrogation fixture in the chapel. As I entered he said, "No use. The brains do not reply."

"How goes it with the Prince of Roum?"
"Dead. The invaders shot him from the sky."
"A young Flier rode beside him. What do you know of her?"
"Nothing. Dead, I suppose."
"And the city?"
"Fallen. Invaders are everywhere."
"Killing?"
"Not even looting," the Indexer said. "They are most gentle. They have collected us."
"In Roum alone, or everywhere?"

The man shrugged. He began to rock rhythmically back and forth. I let him be, and walked deeper into the palace. To my surprise, the imperial chambers of the Prince were unsealed. I went within, awed by the sumptuous luxury of
the hangings, the draperies, the lights, the furnishings. I passed from room to room, coming at last to the royal bed, whose coverlet was the flesh of a colossal bivalve of the planet of another star, and as the shell yawned for me I touched the infinitely soft fabric under which the Prince of Roum had lain, and I recalled that Avluela too had lain here, and if I had been a younger man I would certainly have wept.

I left the palace and slowly crossed the plaza to begin my journey toward Perris.

As I departed I had my first glimpse of our conquerors. A vehicle of alien design drew up at the plaza’s rim, and perhaps a dozen figures emerged.

They might almost have been human. They were tall and broad, deep-chested, as Gormon had been, and only the extreme length of their arms marked them instantly as alien. Their skins were of strange texture, and if I had been closer I suspect I would have seen eyes and lips and nostrils that were not of a human design. Taking no notice of me, they crossed the plaza, walking in a curious loose-jointed loping way that reminded me irresistibly of Gormon’s stride, and entered the palace. They seemed neither swaggering nor belligerent.

Sightseers. Majestic Roum once more exerted its magnetism upon strangers.

Leaving our new masters to their amusement, I walked off, toward the outskirts of the city. The bleakness of eternal winter crept into my soul. I wondered: did I feel sorrow that Roum had fallen? Or did I mourn the loss of Avluela? Or was it only that I now missed three successive Watchings, and like an addict I was experiencing the pangs of withdrawal?

It was all of these that pained me, I decided. But mostly the last.

No one was abroad in the city as I made for the gates. Fear of the masters kept the Roumish in hiding, I supposed. From time to time one of the alien vehicles hummed past, but I was unmolested. I came to the city’s western gate late in the afternoon. It was open, revealing to me a gently rising hill on whose breast rose trees with dark green crowns. I passed through, and saw a short distance beyond the gate the figure of a Pilgrim who was shuffling slowly away from the city.
His faltering, uncertain walk seemed strange to me, for not even his thick brown robes could hide the strength and youth of his body; he stood erect, his shoulders square and his back straight, and yet he walked with the hesitating, trembling step of an old man. When I drew abreast of him and peered under his hood I understood, for affixed to the bronze mask all Pilgrims wear was a reverberator, such as is used by blind men to warn them of obstacles and hazards. He became aware of me and said, “I am a sightless Pilgrim. I pray you do not molest me.”

It was not a Pilgrim’s voice. It was a strong and harsh and imperious voice.

I replied, “I molest no one. I am a Watcher who has lost his occupation this night past.”

“Many occupations were lost this night past, Watcher.”

“Surely not a Pilgrim’s.”

“No,” he said. “Not a Pilgrim’s.”

“Where are you bound?”

“Away from Roum.”

“No particular destination?”

“No,” the Pilgrim said. “None. I will wander.”

“Perhaps we should wander together,” I said, for it is accounted good luck to travel with a Pilgrim, and, shorn of my Flier and my Changeling, I would otherwise have traveled alone. “My destination is Perris. Will you come?”

“There as well as anywhere else,” he said bitterly. “Yes. We will go to Perris together. But what business does a Watcher have there?”

“A Watcher has no business anywhere. I go to Perris to offer myself in service to the Rememberers.”

“Oh.”

“With Earth fallen, I wish to learn more of Earth in its pride.”

“Is all Earth fallen, then, and not only Roum?”

“I think it is so,” I said.

“Ah,” replied the Pilgrim. “Ah!”

He fell silent, and we went onward. I gave him my arm, and now he shuffled no longer, but moved with a young man’s brisk stride. From time to time he uttered what might have been a sigh or a smothered sob. When I asked him details of his Pilgrimage, he answered obliquely or not at all. When we were an hour’s journey outside Roum, and already
amid forests, he said suddenly, "This mask gives me pain. Will you help me adjust it?"

To my amazement he began to remove it. I gasped, for it is forbidden for a Pilgrim to reveal his face. Had he forgotten that I was not sightless too?

As the mask came away he said, "You will not welcome this sight."

The bronze grillwork slipped down from his forehead, and I saw first eyes that had been newly blinded, gaping holes where no surgeon's knife but possibly thrusting fingers had penetrated, and then the sharp regal nose, and finally the quirked, taut lips of the Prince of Roum.

"Your Majesty!" I cried.

Trails of dried blood ran down his cheeks. About the raw sockets themselves were smears of ointment. He felt little pain, for he had killed it with those green smears, but the pain that burst through me was real and potent.

"Majesty no longer," he said. "Help me with the mask!"

His hands trembled as he held it forth. "These flanges must be widened. They press cruelly at my cheeks. Here—here—"

Quickly I made the adjustments, so that I would not have to see his face for long.

He replaced the mask.

In silence we continued. I had no way of making small talk with such a man. It would be a somber journey for us to Perris; but I was committed now to be his guide. I thought of Gorman and how well he had kept his vows. I thought too of Avluela, and a hundred times the words leaped to my tongue to ask the fallen Prince how his consort the Flier had fared in the night of defeat, and I did not ask.

Twilight gathered, but the sun still gleamed golden-red before us in the west. And suddenly I halted, and made a hoarse sound of surprise deep in my throat, as a shadow passed overhead.

High above me Avluela soared. Her skin was stained by the colors of the sunset, and her wings were spread to their fullest, radiant with every hue of the spectrum. She was already at least the height of a hundred men above the ground, and still climbing, and to her I must have been only a speck among the trees.

"What is it?" the Prince asked. "What do you see?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me what you see!"
I could not deceive him. "I see a Flier, your Majesty. A slim girl far aloft."
"Then the night must have come."
"No," I said. "The sun is still above the horizon."
"How can that be? She can have only nightwings. The sun would hurl her to the ground."

I hesitated. I could not bring myself to explain how it was that Avluela flew by day, though she had only nightwings. I could not tell the Prince of Roum that beside her, wingless, flew the invader Gormon, effortlessly moving through the air, his arm about her thin shoulders, steadying her, supporting her, helping her resist the pressure of the solar wind.
"Well?" he demanded. "How does she fly by day?"
"I do not know," I said. "It is a mystery to me. There are many things nowadays I can no longer understand."

The Prince appeared to accept that. "Yes, Watcher. Many things none of us can understand."

He fell once more into silence. I yearned to call out to Avluela, but I knew she could not and would not hear me, and so I walked on toward the sunset, toward Perris, leading the blinded Prince. And over us Avluela and Gormon sped onward, limned sharply against the day's last glow, until they climbed so high they were lost to my sight.
In every field there is such a thing as an “old-pro.” Usually, they are the reliables, the ones who can be counted on to do the hard work, to do it well, and to do it quickly. What’s more, they do it with a minimum of headache and heartache.

It’s a funny thing but it is usually the rank amateur who throws a fit over a changed comma; or who sinks back, bleeding, over the necessary editorial touch.

Science fiction has a hard job keeping its old pros, however. It is a notoriously poorly paying field and a notoriously demanding one. Those who write science fiction must not only develop all the usual skills of any writer; they must also learn how to extrapolate new societies; incorporate science cleverly; and keep forever up to date in the most inexorably changing field in the world.

Many don’t manage to reach the point where they more than marginally qualify. But some learn in these exacting surroundings and come to be in great demand. They can write science fiction for the national magazines that pay well. They can write for movies and television. They can write popular-science, or other brands of non-fiction.

Everything else pays more than science fiction and the temptation to “graduate” is enormous. With hanging head and quivering lip, I must admit that I am not one of those who resisted graduation. Except for my monthly articles in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* I hardly appear in the science fiction magazines any more. (Oh, occasionally I do; I am not an utter villain.)

Just the same, let us honor the outstanding practitioners who are skillful enough to win Hugos, yet who have been stanchly serving as bulwarks of the magazine field for twenty years and more. Fritz Leiber’s first story in the magazines...

Still, for a combination of quantity and quality, I would like to nominate good old Poul Anderson. His first story, as I recall, appeared in 1947 and I don't think a year has passed since then without his having contributed several good stories to the field. It's not that he can't do anything more lucrative. I know he can. It's that he has science fiction in him and, thank goodness, he wants to get it out.

Of course, not everything about Poul is to be admired. Many anthologies, listings, publisher's blurbs, etc. list authors alphabetically, which is exactly the way to do it, as we would all agree. By that system, I am very often in first place, where I belong. But whenever Poul is also present, it is he who takes pride of position because An comes ahead of As.

Obviously Poul must be doing that on purpose and you will have to admit it's rather mean of him.
Moru understood about guns. At least the tall strangers had demonstrated to their guides what the things that each of them carried at his hip could do in a flash and a flameburst. But he did not realize that the small objects they often moved about in their hands, while talking in their own language, were audiovisual transmitters. Probably he thought they were fetishes.

Thus, when he killed Donli Sairn, he did so in full view of Donli's wife.

That was happenstance. Except for prearranged times at morning and evening of the planet's twenty-eight-hour day, the biologist, like his fellows, sent only to his computer. But because they had not been married long and were helplessly happy, Evalyth received his 'casts whenever she could get away from her own duties.

The coincidence that she was tuned in at that one moment was not great. There was little for her to do. As militech of the expedition—she being from a half barbaric part of Kraken where the sexes had equal opportunities to learn arts of combat suitable to primitive environments—she had overseen the building of a compound; and she kept the routines of guarding it under a close eye. However, the inhabitants of Lokon were as cooperative with the visitors from heaven as mutual mysteriousness allowed. Every instinct and experience assured Evalyth Sairn that their reticence masked nothing except awe, with perhaps a wistful hope of friendship. Captain Jonafer agreed. Her position having thus become rather a sinecure, she was trying to learn enough about Donli's work to be a useful assistant after he returned from the lowlands.

Also, a medical test had lately confirmed that she was
pregnant. She wouldn't tell him, she decided, not yet, over all those hundreds of kilometers, but rather when they lay again together. Meanwhile, the knowledge that they had begun a new life made him a lodestar to her.

On the afternoon of his death she entered the bio-lab whistling. Outside, sunlight struck fierce and brass-colored on dusty ground, on prefab shacks huddled about the boat which had brought everyone and everything down from the orbit where New Dawn circled, on the parked flitters and gravsleds that took men around the big island that was the only habitable land on this globe, on the men and the women themselves. Beyond the stockade, plumy treetops, a glimpse of mudbrick buildings, a murmur of voices and mutter of footfalls, a drift of bitter woodsmoke, showed that a town of several thousand people sprawled between here and Lake Zelo.

The bio-lab occupied more than half the structure where the Sairns lived. Comforts were few, when ships from a handful of cultures struggling back to civilization ranged across the ruins of empire. For Evalyth, though, it sufficed that this was their home. She was used to austerity anyway. One thing that had first attracted her to Donli, meeting him on Kraken, was the cheerfulness with which he, a man from Atheia, which was supposed to have retained or regained almost as many amenities as Old Earth knew in its glory, had accepted life in her gaunt grim country.

The gravity field here was 0.77 standard, less than two-thirds of what she had grown in. Her gait was easy through the clutter of apparatus and specimens. She was a big young woman, good-looking in the body, a shade too strong in the features for most men's taste outside her own folk. She had their blondness and, on legs and forearms, their intricate tattoos; the blaster at her waist had come down through many generations. Otherwise she had abandoned Krakener costume for the plain coveralls of the expedition.

How cool and dim the shack was! She sighed with pleasure, sat down, and activated the receiver. As the images formed, three-dimensional in the air, and Donli's voice spoke, her heart sprang a little.

"—appears to be descended from a clover."

The image was of plants with green trilobate leaves, scattered low among the reddish native pseudo-grasses. It swelled as Donli brought the transmitter near so that the computer
might record details for later analysis. Evalyth frowned, trying to recall what . . . Oh, yes. Clover was another of those life forms that man had brought with him from Old Earth, to more planets than anyone now remembered, before the Long Night fell. Often they were virtually unrecognizable; over thousands of years, evolution had fitted them to alien conditions, or mutation and genetic drift had acted on small initial populations in a nearly random fashion. No one on Kraken had known that pines and gulls and rhizobacteria were altered immigrants, until Donli’s crew arrived and identified them. Not that he, or anybody from this part of the galaxy, had yet made it back to the mother world. But the Atheian data banks were packed with information, and so was Donli’s dear curly head—

And there was his hand, huge in the field of view, gathering specimens. She wanted to kiss it. Patience, patience, the officer part of her reminded the bride. We’re here to work. We’ve discovered one more lost colony, the most wretched one so far, sunken back to utter primitivism. Our duty is to advise the Board whether a civilizing mission is worthwhile, or whether the slender resources that the Allied Planets can spare had better be used elsewhere, leaving these people in their misery for another two or three hundred years. To make an honest report, we must study them, their cultures, their world. That’s why I’m in the barbarian highlands and he’s down in the jungle among out-and-out savages.

Please finish soon, darling.

She heard Donli speak in the lowland dialect. It was a debased form of Lokonese, which in turn was remotely descended from Anglic. The expedition’s linguists had unraveled the language in a few intensive weeks. Then all personnel took a brain-feed in it. Nonetheless, she admired how quickly her man had become fluent in the woodsrunners’ version, after mere days of conversation with them.

“Are we not coming to the place, Moru? You said the thing was close by our camp.”

“We are nearly arrived, man-from-the-clouds.”

A tiny alarm struck within Evalyth. What was going on? Donli hadn’t left his companions to strike off alone with a native, had he? Rogar of Lokon had warned them to beware of treachery in those parts. But, to be sure, only yesterday the guides had rescued Haimie Fiell when he tumbled into a swift-running river . . . at some risk to themselves. . . .
The view bobbed as the transmitter swung in Donli's grasp. It made Evalyth a bit dizzy. From time to time, she got glimpses of the broader setting. Forest crowded about a game trail, rust-colored leafage, brown trunks and branches, shadows beyond, the occasional harsh call of something unseen. She could practically feel the heat and dank weight of the atmosphere, smell the unpleasant pungencies. This world—which no longer had a name, except World, because the dwellers upon it had forgotten what the stars really were—was ill suited to colonization. The life it had spawned was often poisonous, always nutritionally deficient. With the help of species they had brought along, men survived marginally. The original settlers doubtless meant to improve matters. But then the breakdown came—evidence was that their single town had been missiled out of existence, a majority of the people with it—and resources were lacking to rebuild; the miracle was that anything human remained except bones.

"Now here, man-from-the-clouds."

The swaying scene grew steady. Silence hummed from jungle to cabin. "I do not see anything," Donli said at length.

"Follow me. I show."

Donli put his transmitter in the fork of a tree. It scanned him and Moru while they moved across a meadow. The guide looked childish beside the space traveler, barely up to his shoulder; an old child, though, near-naked body seamed with scars and lame in the right foot from some injury of the past, face wizened in a great black bush of hair and beard. He, who could not hunt but could only fish and trap to support his family, was even more impoverished than his fellows. He must have been happy indeed when the flitter landed near their village and the strangers offered fabulous trade goods for a week or two of being shown around the countryside. Donli had projected the image of Moru's straw hut for Evalyth—the pitiful few possessions, the woman already worn out with toil, the surviving sons who, at ages said to be about seven or eight, which would equal twelve or thirteen standard years, were shriveled gnomes.

Rogar seemed to declare—the Lokonese tongue was by no means perfectly understood yet—that the lowlanders would be less poor if they weren't such a vicious lot, tribe forever at war with tribe. But really, Evalyth thought, what possible menace can they be?

Moru's gear consisted of a loinstrap, a cord around his
body for preparing snares, an obsidian knife, and a knap-
sack so woven and greased that it could hold liquids at need. 
The other men of his group, being able to pursue game and 
to win a share of booty by taking part in battles, were 
noticeably better off. They didn’t look much different in 
person, however. Without room for expansion, the island 
populace must be highly inbred.

The dwarfish man squatted, parting a shrub with his 
hands. “Here,” he grunted, and stood up again.

Evalyth knew well the eagerness that kindled in Donli. 
Nevertheless he turned around, smiling straight into the 
transmitter, and said in Atheian: “Maybe you’re watching, 
dearest. If so, I’d like to share this with you. It may be a 
bird’s nest.”

She remembered vaguely that the existence of birds would 
be an ecologically significant datum. What mattered was what 
he had just said to her. “Oh, yes, oh yes!” she wanted to cry. 
But his group had only two receivers with them, and he 
wasn’t carrying either.

She saw him kneel in the long, ill-colored vegetation. She 
saw him reach with the gentleness she also knew, into the 
shrub, easing its branches aside.

She saw Moru leap upon his back. The savage wrapped 
legs about Donli’s middle. His left hand seized Donli’s hair 
and pulled the head back. The knife flew back in his right.

Blood spurted from beneath Donli’s jaw. He couldn’t 
shout, not with his throat gaping open; he could only bubble 
and croak while Moru haggled the wound wider. He reached 
blindly for his gun. Moru dropped the knife and caught his 
arms; they rolled over in that embrace, Donli threshed and 
flopped in the spouting of his own blood. Moru hung on. 
The brush trembled around them and hid them, until Moru 
rose red and dripping, painted, panting, and Evalyth screamed 
into the transmitter beside her, into the universe, and she 
kept on screaming and fought them when they tried to take 
her away from the scene in the meadow where Moru went 
about his butcher’s work, until something stung her with 
coolness and she toppled into the bottom of the universe 
whose stars had all gone out forever.

Haimie Fiell said through white lips: “No, of course we 
didn’t know till you alerted us. He and that—creature— 
were several kilometers from our camp. Why didn’t you let 
us go after him right away?”
“Because of what we’d seen on the transmission,” Captain Jonafer replied. “Sairn was irretrievably dead. You could’ve been ambushed, arrows in the back or something, pushing down those narrow trails. Best stay where you were, guarding each other, till we got a vehicle to you.”

Fiell looked past the big gray-haired man, out the door of the command hut, to the stockade and the unpitying noon sky. “But what that little monster was doing meanwhile—” Abruptly he closed his mouth.

With equal haste, Jonafer said: “The other guides ran away, you have told me, as soon as they sensed you were angry. I’ve just had a report from Kallaman. His team flitted to the village. It’s deserted. The whole tribe’s pulled up stakes. Afraid of our revenge, evidently. Though it’s no large chore to move, when you can carry your household goods on your back and weave a new house in a day.”

Evalyth leaned forward. “Stop evading me,” she said. “What did Moru do with Donli that you might have prevented if you’d arrived in time?”

Fiell continued to look past her. Sweat glistened in droplets on his forehead. “Nothing, really,” he mumbled. “Nothing that mattered . . . once the murder itself had been committed.”

“I meant to ask you what kind of services you want for him, Lieutenant Sairn,” Jonafer said to her. “Should the ashes be buried here, or scattered in space after we leave, or brought home?”

Evalyth turned her gaze full upon him. “I never authorized that he be cremated, Captain,” she said slowly.

“No, but— Well, be realistic. You were first under anesthesia, then heavy sedation, while we recovered the body. Time had passed. We’ve no facilities for, um, cosmetic repair, nor any extra refrigeration space, and in this heat—”

Since she had been let out of sickbay, there had been a kind of numbness in Evalyth. She could not entirely comprehend the fact that Donli was gone. It seemed as if at any instant yonder doorway would fill with him, sunlight across his shoulders, and he would call to her, laughing, and console her for a meaningless nightmare she had had. That was the effect of the psycho-drugs, she knew and damned the kindliness of the medic.

She felt almost glad to feel a slow rising anger. It meant the drugs were wearing off. By evening she would be able to weep.
“Captain,” she said, “I saw him killed. I’ve seen deaths before, some of them quite messy. We do not mask the truth on Kraken. You’ve cheated me of my right to lay my man out and close his eyes. You will not cheat me of my right to obtain justice. I demand to know exactly what happened.”

Jonafer’s fists knotted on his desktop. “I can hardly stand to tell you.”

“But you shall, Captain.”

“All right! All right!” Jonafer shouted. The words leaped out like bullets. “We saw the thing transmitted. He stripped Donli, hung him up by the heels from a tree, bled him into that knapsack. He cut off the genitals and threw them in with the blood. He opened the body and took heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, thyroid, prostate, pancreas, and loaded them up too, and ran off into the woods. Do you wonder why we didn’t let you see what was left?”

“The Lokonese warned us against the jungle dwellers,” Fiell said dully. “We should have listened. But they seemed like pathetic dwarfs. And they did rescue me from the river. When Donli asked about the birds—described them, you know, and asked if anything like that was known—Moru said yes, but they were rare and shy; our gang would scare them off; but if one man would come along with him, he could find a nest and they might see the bird. A house he called it, but Donli thought he meant a nest. Or so he told us. It’d been a talk with Moru when they happened to be a ways offside, in sight but out of earshot. Maybe that should have alerted us, maybe we should have asked the other tribesmen. But we did not see any reason to—I mean, Donli was bigger, stronger, armed with a blaster. What savage would dare attack him? And anyway, they had been friendly, downright frolicsome after they got over their initial fear of us, and they’d shown as much eagerness for further contact as anybody here in Lokon has, and—” His voice trailed off.

“Did he steal tools or weapons?” Evalyth asked.

“No,” Jonafer said. “I have everything your husband was carrying, ready to give you.”

Fiell said: “I don’t think it was an act of hatred. Moru must have had some superstitious reason.”

Jonafer nodded. “We can’t judge him by our standards.”

“By whose, then?” Evalyth retorted. Supertranquilizer or no, she was surprised at the evenness of her own tone. “I’m
from Kraken, remember. I'll not let Donli's child be born and grow up knowing he was murdered and no one tried to do justice for him."

“You can't take revenge on an entire tribe,” Jonafer said.

“I don't mean to. But, Captain, the personnel of this expedition are from several different planets, each with its characteristic societies. The articles specifically state that the essential mores of every member shall be respected. I want to be relieved of my regular duties until I have arrested the killer of my husband and done justice upon him.”

Jonafer bent his head. “I have to grant that,” he said low. Evalyth rose. “Thank you, gentlemen,” she said. “If you will excuse me, I'll commence my investigation at once.”

—While she was still a machine, before the drugs wore off.

In the drier, cooler uplands, agriculture had remained possible after the colony otherwise lost civilization. Fields and orchards, painstakingly cultivated with neolithic tools, supported a scattering of villages and the capital town Lokon.

Its people bore a family resemblance to the forest dwellers. Few settlers indeed could have survived to become the ancestors of this world’s humanity. But the highlanders were better nourished, bigger, straighter. They wore gaily dyed tunics and sandals. The well-to-do added jewelry of gold and silver. Hair was braided, chins kept shaven. Folk walked boldly, without the savages’ constant fear of ambush, and talked merrily.

To be sure, this was only strictly true of the free. While New Dawn's anthropologists had scarcely begun to unravel the ins and outs of the culture, it had been obvious from the first that Lokon kept a large slave class. Some were sleek household servants. More toiled meek and naked in the fields, the quarries, the mines, under the lash of overseers and the guard of soldiers whose spearheads and swords were of ancient Imperial metal. But none of the space travelers was unduly shocked. They had seen worse elsewhere. Historical data banks described places in olden time called Athens, India, America.

Evalyth strode down twisted, dusty streets, between the gaudily painted walls of cubical, windowless adobe houses. Commoners going about their tasks made respectful salutes. Although no one feared any longer that the strangers meant harm, she did tower above the tallest man, her hair was colored like metal and her eyes like the sky, she bore light-
ning at her waist and none knew what other godlike powers.

Today soldiers and noblemen also genuflected, while slaves went on their faces. Where she appeared, the chatter and clatter of everyday life vanished; the business of the market plaza halted when she passed the booths; children ceased their games and fled; she moved in silence akin to the silence in her soul. Under the sun and the snowcone of Mount Burus, horror brooded. For by now Lokon knew that a man from the stars had been slain by a lowland brute; and what would come of that?

Word must have gone ahead to Rogar, though, since he awaited her in his house by Lake Zelo next to the Sacred Place. He was not king or council president or high priest, but he was something of all three, and it was he who dealt most with the strangers.

His dwelling was the usual kind, larger than average but dwarfed by the adjacent walls. Those enclosed a huge compound, filled with buildings, where none of the outworlders had been admitted. Guards in scarlet robes and grotesquely carved wooden helmets stood always at its gates. Today their number was doubled, and others flanked Rogar's door. The lake shone like polished steel at their backs. The trees along the shore looked equally rigid.

Rogar's major-domo, a fat elderly slave, prostrated himself in the entrance as Evalyth neared. "If the heaven-born will deign to follow this unworthy one, Kiev Rogar is within—" The guards dipped their spears to her. Their eyes were wide and frightened.

Like the other houses, this turned inward. Rogar sat on a dais in a room opening on a courtyard. It seemed doubly cool and dim by contrast with the glare outside. She could scarcely discern the frescos on the walls or the patterns on the carpet; they were crude art anyway. Her attention focused on Rogar. He did not rise, that not being a sign of respect here. Instead, he bowed his grizzled head above folded hands. The major-domo offered her a bench, and Rogar's chief wife set a bombilla of herb tea by her before vanishing.

"Be greeted, Kiev," Evalyth said formally.
"Be greeted, heaven-born." Alone now, shadowed from the cruel sun, they observed a ritual period of silence.

Then: "This is terrible what has happened, heaven-born," Rogar said. "Perhaps you do not know that my white robe
and bare feet signify mourning as for one of my own blood.”

“That is well done,” Evalyth said. “We shall remember.”

The man’s dignity faltered. “You understand that none of us had anything to do with the evil, do you not? The savages are our enemies too. They are vermin. Our ancestors caught some and made them slaves, but they are good for nothing else. I warned your friends not to go down among those we have not tamed.”

“Their wish was to do so,” Evalyth replied. “Now my wish is to get revenge for my man.” She didn’t know if this language included a word for justice. No matter. Because of the drugs, which heightened the logical faculties while they muffled the emotions, she was speaking Lokonese quite well enough for her purposes.

“We can get soldiers and help you kill as many as you choose,” Rogar offered.

“Not needful. With this weapon at my side I alone can destroy more than your army might. I want your counsel and help in a different matter. How can I find him who slew my man?”

Rogar frowned. “The savages can vanish into trackless jungles, heaven-borne.”

“Can they vanish from other savages, though?”

“Ah! Shrewdly thought, heaven-borne. Those tribes are endlessly at each other’s throats. If we can make contact with one, its hunters will soon learn for you where the killer’s people have taken themselves.” His scowl deepened. “But he must have gone from them, to hide until you have departed our land. A single man might be impossible to find. Lowlanders are good at hiding, of necessity.”

“What do you mean by necessity?”

Rogar showed surprise at her failure to grasp what was obvious to him. “Why, consider a man out hunting,” he said. “He cannot go with companions after every kind of game, or the noise and scent would frighten it away. So he is often alone in the jungle. Someone from another tribe may well set upon him. A man stalked and killed is just as useful as one slain in open war.”

“Why this incessant fighting?”

Rogar’s look of bafflement grew stronger. “How else shall they get human flesh?”

“But they do not live on that!”

“No, surely not, except as needed. But that need comes
many times as you know. Their wars are their chief way of
taking men; booty is good too, but not the main reason to
fight. He who slays, owns the corpse, and naturally divides
it solely among his close kin. Not everyone is lucky in
battle. Therefore these who did not chance to kill in a war
may well go hunting on their own, two or three of them
together hoping to find a single man from a different tribe.
And that is why a lowlander is good at hiding.”

Evalyth did not move or speak. Rogar drew a long breath
and continued trying to explain: “Heaven-borne, when I
heard the evil news, I spoke long with men from your
company. They told me what they had seen from afar by
the wonderful means you command. Thus it is clear to me
what happened. This guide—what is his name? Yes, Moru—
he is a cripple. He had no hope of killing himself a man
except by treachery. When he saw that chance, he took it.”

He ventured a smile. “That would never happen in the
highlands,” he declared. “We do not fight wars, save when
we are attacked, nor do we hunt our fellowmen as if they
were animals. Like yours, ours is a civilized race.” His lips
drew back from startlingly white teeth. “But, heaven-borne,
your man was slain. I propose we take vengeance, not simply
on the killer if we catch him, but on his tribe, which we can
certainly find as you suggested. That will teach all the savages
to beware of their betters. Afterward we can share the flesh,
half to your people, half to mine.”

Evalyth could only know an intellectual astonishment.
Yet she had the feeling somehow of having walked off a cliff.
She stared through the shadows, into the grave old face,
and after a long time she heard herself whisper: “You . . .
also . . . here . . . eat men?”

“Slaves,” Rogar said. “No more than required. One of
them will do for four boys.”

Her hand dropped to her gun. Rogar sprang up in alarm.
“Heaven-borne,” he exclaimed, “I told you we are civilized.
Never fear attack from any of us! We—”

She rose too, high above him. Did he read judgment in her
gaze? Was the terror that snatched him on behalf of his
whole people? He cowered from her, sweating and shuddering.
“Heaven-borne, believe me, you have no quarrel with
Lokon—no, now, let me show you, let me take you into the
Sacred Place, even if you are no initiate . . . for surely you
are akin to the gods, surely the gods will not be offended—
Come, let me show you how it is, let me prove we have no will and no need to be your enemies—"

There was the gate that Rogar opened for her in that massive wall. There were the shocked countenances of the guards and loud promises of many sacrifices to appease the Powers. There was the stone pavement beyond, hot and hollowly resounding underfoot. There were the idols grinning around a central temple. There was the house of the acolytes who did the work and who shrank in fear when they saw their master conduct a foreigner in. There were the slave barracks.

"See, heaven-borne, they are well treated, are they not? We do have to crush their hands and feet when we choose them as children for this service. Think how dangerous it would be otherwise, hundreds of boys and young men here. But we treat them kindly unless they misbehave. Are they not fat? Their own Holy Food is especially honorable, bodies of men of all degree who have died in their full strength. We teach them that they will live on in those for whom they are slain. Most are content with that, believe me, heaven-borne. Ask them yourself . . . though remember, they grow dull-witted, with nothing to do year after year. We slay them quickly, cleanly, at the beginning of each summer—no more than we must for that year’s crop of boys entering into manhood, one slave for four boys, no more than that. And it is a most beautiful rite, with days of feasting and merry-making afterward. Do you understand now, heaven-borne? You have nothing to fear from us. We are not savages, warring and raiding and skulking to get our man-flesh. We are civilized—not godlike in your fashion, no, I dare not claim that, do not be angry—but civilized—surely worthy of your friendship, are we not? Are we not, heaven-borne?"

Chena Darnard, who headed the cultural anthropology team, told her computer to scan its data bank. Like the others, it was a portable, its memory housed in New Dawn. At that moment the spaceship was above the opposite hemisphere, and perceptible time passed while beams went back and forth along the strung-out relay units.

Chena leaned back and studied Evalyth across her desk. The Krakener girl sat so quietly. It seemed unnatural, despite the drugs in her bloodstream retaining some power. To be sure, Evalyth was of aristocratic descent in a warlike society.
Furthermore, hereditary psychological as well as physiological differences might exist on the different worlds. Not much was known about that, apart from extreme cases like Gwydion—or this planet? Regardless, Chena thought, it would be better if Evalyth gave way to simple shock and grief.

"Are you quite certain of your facts, dear?" the anthropologist asked as gently as possible. "I mean, while this island alone is habitable, it's large, the topography is rugged, communications are primitive, my group has already identified scores of distinct cultures."

"I questioned Rogar for more than an hour," Evalyth replied in the same flat voice, looking out of the same flat eyes as before. "I know interrogation techniques, and he was badly rattled. He talked.

"The Lokonese themselves are not as backward as their technology. They've lived for centuries with savages threatening their borderlands. It's made them develop a good intelligence network. Rogar described its functioning to me in detail. It can't help but keep them reasonably well informed about everything that goes on. And, while tribal customs do vary tremendously, the cannibalism is universal. That is why none of the Lokonese thought to mention it to us. They took for granted that we had our own ways of providing human meat."

"People have, m-m-m, latitude in those methods?"

"Oh, yes. Here they breed slaves for the purpose. But most lowlanders have too skimpy an economy for that. Some of them use war and murder. Among others, they settle it within the tribe by annual combats. Or—Who cares? The fact is that, everywhere in this country, in whatever fashion it may be, the boys undergo a puberty rite that involves eating an adult male."

Chena bit her lip. "What in the name of chaos might have started it? Computer! Have you scanned?"

"Yes," said the machine voice out of the case on her desk. "Data on cannibalism in man are comparatively sparse, because it is a rarity. On all planets hitherto known to us it is banned and has been throughout their history, although it is sometimes considered forgiveable as an emergency measure when no alternative means of preserving life is available. Very limited forms of what might be called ceremonial cannibalism have occurred, as for example the drinking of minute amounts of each other's blood in pledg-
ing oath brotherhood among the Falkens of Lochlanna—"

"Never mind that," Chena said. A tautness in her throat thickened her tone. "Only here, it seems, have they degenerated so far that— Or is it degeneracy? Reversion, perhaps? What about Old Earth?"

"Information is fragmentary. Aside from what was lost during the Long Night, knowledge is under the handicap that the last primitive societies there vanished before interstellar travel began. But certain data collected by ancient historians and scientists remain.

"Cannibalism was an occasional part of human sacrifice. As a rule, victims were left uneaten. But in a minority of religions, the bodies, or selected portions of them, were consumed, either by a special class, or by the community as a whole. Generally this was regarded as theophagy. Thus, the Aztecs of Mexico offered thousands of individuals annually to their gods. The requirement of doing this forced them to provoke wars and rebellions, which in turn made it easy for the eventual European conqueror to get native allies. The majority of prisoners were simply slaughtered, their hearts given directly to the idols. But in at least one cult the body was divided among the worshippers.

"Cannibalism could be a form of magic, too. By eating a person, one supposedly acquired his virtues. This was the principal motive of the cannibals of Africa and Polynesia. Contemporary observers did report that the meals were relished, but that is easy to understand, especially in protein-poor areas.

"The sole recorded instance of systematic non-ceremonial cannibalism was among the Carib Indians of America. They ate man because they preferred man. They were especially fond of babies and used to capture women from their tribes for breeding stock. Male children of these slaves were generally gelded to make them docile and tender. In large part because of strong aversion to such practices, the Europeans exterminated the Caribs to the last man."

The report stopped. Chena grimaced. "I can sympathize with the Europeans," she said.

Evalyth might once have raised her brows; but her face stayed as wooden as her speech. "Aren't you supposed to be an objective scientist?"

"Yes. Yes. Still, there is such a thing as value judgment. And they did kill Donli."

"Not they. One of them. I shall find him."
“He’s nothing but a creature of his culture, dear, sick with his whole race.” Chena drew a breath, struggling for calm. “Obviously, the sickness has become a behavioral basic,” she said. “I daresay it originated in Lokon. Cultural radiation is practically always from the more to the less advanced peoples. And on a single island, after centuries, no tribe has escaped the infection. The Lokonese later elaborated and rationalized the practice. The savages left its cruelty naked. But highlander or lowlander, their way of life is founded on that particular human sacrifice.”

“Can they be taught differently?” Evalyth asked without real interest.

“Yes. In time. In theory. But—well, I do know enough about what happened on Old Earth, and elsewhere, when advanced societies undertook to reform primitive ones. The entire structure was destroyed. It had to be.

“Think of the result, if we told these people to desist from their puberty rite. They wouldn’t listen. They couldn’t. They must have grandchildren. They know a boy won’t become a man unless he has eaten part of a man. We’d have to conquer them, kill most, make sullen prisoners of the rest. And when the next crop of boys did in fact mature without the magic food . . . what then? Can you imagine the demoralization, the sense of utter inferiority, the loss of that tradition which is the core of every personal identity? It might be kinder to bomb this island sterile.”

Chena shook her head. “No,” she said harshly, “the single decent way for us to proceed would be gradually. We could send missionaries. By their precept and example, we could start the natives phasing out their custom after two or three generations . . . And we can’t afford such an effort. Not for a long time to come. Not with so many other worlds in the galaxy, so much worthier of what little help we can give. I am going to recommend this planet be left alone.”

Evalyth considered her for a moment before asking: “Isn’t that partly because of your own reaction?”

“Yes,” Chena admitted. “I cannot overcome my disgust. And I, as you pointed out, am supposed to be professionally broadminded. So even if the Board tried to recruit missionaries, I doubt if they’d succeed.” She hesitated. “You, yourself, Evalyth—”

The Krakener rose. “My emotions don’t matter,” she said. “My duty does. Thank you for your help.” She turned on her heel and went with military strides out of the cabin.
The chemical barriers were crumbling. Evalyth stood for a moment before the little building that had been hers and Donli's, afraid to enter. The sun was low, so that the compound was filling with shadows. A thing leathery-winged and serpentine cruised silently overhead. From outside the stockade drifted sounds of feet, foreign voices, the whine of a wooden flute. The air was cooling. She shivered. Their home would be too hollow.

Someone approached. She recognized the person glimpse-wise, Alsabeta Mondain from Nuevamerica. Listening to her well-meant foolish condolences would be worse than going inside. Evalyth took the last three steps and slid the door shut behind her.

Donli will not be here again. Eternally.

But the cabin proved not to be empty to him. Rather, it was too full. That chair where he used to sit, reading that worn volume of poetry which she could not understand and teased him about, that table across which he had toasted her and tossed kisses, that closet where his clothes hung, that scuffed pair of slippers, that bed—it screamed of him. Evalyth went fast into the laboratory section and drew the curtain that separated it from the living quarters. Rings rattled along the rod. The noise was monstrous in twilight.

She closed her eyes and fists and stood breathing hard. I will not go soft, she declared. You always said you loved me for my strength—among numerous other desirable features, you'd add with your slow grin, but I remember that yet—and I don't aim to let slip anything that you loved.

I've got to get busy, she told Donli's child. The expedition command is pretty sure to act on Chena's urging and haul mass for home. We've not many days to avenge your father.

Her eyes snapped open. What am I doing, she thought, bewildered, talking to a dead man and an embryo?

She turned on the overflow fluoro and went to the computer. It was made no differently from the other portables. Donli had used it. But she could not look away from the unique scratches and bumps on that square case, as she could not escape his microscope, chemanalyzers, chromosome tracer, biological specimens... She seated herself. A drink would have been very welcome, except that she needed clarity. "Activate!" she ordered.

The On light glowed yellow. Evalyth tugged her chin,
searching for words. "The objective," she said at length, "is to trace a lowlander who has consumed several kilos of flesh and blood from one of this party, and afterward vanished into the jungle. The killing took place about sixty hours ago. How can he be found?"

The least hum answered her. She imagined the links; to the maser in the ferry, up past the sky to the nearest orbiting relay unit, to the next, to the next, around the bloated belly of the planet, by ogre sun and inhuman stars, until the pulses reached the mother ship; then down to an unliving brain that routed the question to the appropriate data bank; then to the scanners, whose resonating energies flew from molecule to distorted molecule, identifying more bits of information than it made sense to number, data garnered from hundreds or thousands of entire worlds, data preserved through the wreck of Empire and the dark ages that followed, data going back to an Old Earth that perhaps no longer existed. She shied from the thought and wished herself back on dear stern Kraken. We will go there, she promised Donli's child. You will dwell apart from these too many machines and grow up as the gods meant you should.

"Query," said the artificial voice. "Of what origin was the victim of this assault?"

Evalyth had to wet her lips before she could reply: "Atheian. He was Donli Sairn, your master."

"In that event, the possibility of tracking the desired local inhabitant may exist. The odds will now be computed. In the interim, do you wish to know the basis of the possibility?"

"Y-yes."

"Native Atheian biochemistry developed in a manner quite parallel to Earth's," said the voice, "and the early colonists had no difficulty in introducing terrestrial species. Thus they enjoyed a friendly environment, where population soon grew sufficiently large to obviate the danger of racial change through mutation and/or genetic drift. In addition, no selection pressure tended to force change. Hence the modern Atheian human is little different from his ancestors of Earth, on which account his physiology and biochemistry are known in detail.

"This has been essentially the case on most colonized planets for which records are available. Where different breeds of men have arisen, it has generally been because the original settlers were highly selected groups. Randomness,
and evolutionary adaptation to new conditions, have seldom produced radical changes in biotype. For example, the robustness of the average Krakener is a response to comparatively high gravity; his size aids him in resisting cold, his fair complexion is helpful beneath a sun poor in ultraviolet. But his ancestors were people who already had the natural endowments for such a world. His deviations from their norm are not extreme. They do not preclude his living on more Earth-like planets or interbreeding with the inhabitants of these.

“Occasionally, however, larger variations have occurred. They appear to be due to a small original population or to unterrestrial conditions or both. The population may have been small because the planet could not support more, or have become small as the result of hostile action when the Empire fell. In the former case, genetic accidents had a chance to be significant; in the latter, radiation produced a high rate of mutant births among survivors. The variations are less apt to be in gross anatomy than in subtle endocrine and enzymatic qualities, which affect the physiology and psychology. Well known cases include the reaction of the Gwydiona to nicotine and certain indoles, and the requirement of the Ifrians for trace amounts of lead. Sometimes the inhabitants of two planets are actually intersterile because of their differences.

“While this world has hitherto received the sketchiest of examinations—” Evalyth was yanked out of a reverie into which the lecture had led her. “—certain facts are clear. Few terrestrial species have flourished; no doubt others were introduced originally, but died off after the technology to maintain them was lost. Man has thus been forced to depend on autochthonous life for the major part of his food. This life is deficient in various elements of human nutrition. For example, the only Vitamin C appears to be in immigrant plants; Sairn observed that the people consume large amounts of grass and leaves from those species, and that fluoroscopic pictures indicate this practice has measurably modified the digestive tract. No one would supply skin, blood, sputum, or similar samples, not even from corpses.” Afraid of magic, Evalyth thought drearily, yes, they’re back to that too. “But intensive analysis of the usual meat animals shows these to be under-supplied with three essential amino acids, and human adaptation to this must have involved considerable
change on the cellular and sub-cellular levels. The probable type and extent of such change are computable."

"The calculations are now complete." As the computer resumed, Evalyth gripped the arms of her chair and could not breathe. "While the answer is subject to fair probability of success. In effect, Atheian flesh is alien here. It can be metabolized, but the body of the local consumer will excrete certain compounds, and these will import a characteristic odor to skin and breath as well as to urine and feces. The chance is good that it will be detectable by neo-Freeholder technique at distances of several kilometers, after sixty or seventy hours. But since the molecules in question are steadily being degraded and dissipated, speed of action is recommended."

*I am going to find Donli's murderer.* Darkness roared around Evalyth.

"Shall the organisms be ordered for you and given the appropriate search program?" asked the voice. "They can be on hand in an estimated three hours."

"Yes," she stammered. "Oh, please— Have you any other . . . other . . . advice?"

"The man ought not to be killed out of hand, but brought here for examination, if for no other reason, that in order that the scientific ends of the expedition may be served."

*That's a machine talking,* Evalyth cried. *It's designed to help research. Nothing more. But it was his.* And its answer was so altogether Donli that she could no longer hold back her tears.

The single big moon rose nearly full, shortly after sundown. It drowned most stars; the jungle beneath was cobbled with silver and dappled with black; the snowcone of Mount Burus floated unreal at the unseen edge of the world. Wind slid around Evalyth where she crouched on her gravsled; it was full of wet acrid odors, and felt cold though it was not, and chuckled at her back. Somewhere something screeched, every few minutes, and something else cawed reply.

She scowled at her position indicators, aglow on the control panel. Curses and chaos, Moru had to be in this area! He could not have escaped from the valley on foot in the time available, and her search pattern had practically covered it. If she ran out of bugs before she found him, must she assume he was dead? They ought to be able to find his body
regardless, ought they not? Unless it was buried deep. Here. She brought the sled to hover, took the next phial off the rack, and stood up to open it.

The bugs came out many and tiny, like smoke in the moonlight. Another failure?

No! Wait! Were not those motes dancing back together, into a streak barely visible under the moon, and vanishing downward? Heart thuttering, she turned to the indicator. Its neurodetector antenna was not aimlessly wobbling, but pointed straight west-northwest, declination thirty-two degrees below horizontal. Only a concentration of the bugs could make it behave like that. And only the particular mixture of molecules to which the bugs had been presensitized, in several parts per million or better, would make them converge on the source.

"Ya-a-ah!" She couldn't help the one hawk-yell. But thereafter she bit her lips shut—blood trickled unnoticed down her chin—and drove the sled in silence.

The distance was a mere few kilometers. She came to a halt above an opening in the forest. Pools of scummy water gleamed in its rank growth. The trees made a solid-seeming wall around. Evalyth clapped her night goggles down off her helmet and over her eyes. A lean-to became visible. It was hastily woven from vines and withes, huddled against a pair of the largest trees to let their branches hide it from the sky. The bugs were entering.

Evalyth lowered her sled to a meter off the ground and got to her feet again. A stun pistol slid from its sheath into her right hand. Her left rested on the blaster.

Moru's two sons groped from the shelter. The bugs whirled around them, a mist that blurred their outlines. Of course, Evalyth realized, nonetheless shocked into a higher hatred. I should have known they did the actual devouring. More than ever did they resemble gnomes—skinny limbs, big heads, the pot bellies of undernourishment. Krakener boys of their age would have twice their bulk and be noticeably on the way to becoming men. These nude bodies belonged to children, except that they had the grotesqueness of eld.

The parents followed them, ignored by the entranced bugs. The mother wailed. Evalyth identified a few words. "What is the matter, what are those things—oh, help—" But her gaze was locked upon Moru.

Limping out of the hutch, stooped to clear its entrance,
he made her think of some huge beetle crawling from an offal heap. But she would know that bushy head though her brain were coming apart. He carried a stone blade, surely the one that had hacked up Donli. *I will take it away from him, and the hand with it*, Evalyth wept. *I will keep him alive while I dismantle him with these my own hands, and in between times he can watch me flay his repulsive spawn.*

The wife's scream broke through. She had seen the metal thing, and the giant that stood on its platform, with skull and eyes shimmering beneath the moon.

"I have come for you who killed my man," Evalyth said.

The mother screamed anew and cast herself before the boys. The father tried to run around in front of her, but his lame foot twisted under him, and he fell into a pool. As he struggled out of its muck, Evalyth shot the woman. No sound was heard; she folded and lay moveless. "Run!" Moru shouted. He tried to charge the sled. Evalyth twisted a control stick. Her vehicle whipped in a circle, heading off the boys. She shot them from above, where Moru couldn't quite reach her.

He knelt beside the nearest, took the body in his arms and looked upward. The moonlight poured relentlessly across him. "What can you now do to me?" he called.

She stunned him too, landed, got off and quickly hogtied the four of them. Loading them aboard, she found them lighter than she had expected.

Sweat had sprung forth upon her, until her coverall stuck dripping to her skin. She began to shake, as if with fever. Her ears buzzed. "I would have destroyed you," she said. Her voice sounded remote and unfamiliar. A still more distant part wondered why she bothered speaking to the unconscious, in her own tongue at that. "I wish you hadn't acted the way you did. That made me remember what the computer said, about Donli's friends needing you for study."

"You're too good a chance, I suppose. After your doings, we have the right under Allied rules to make prisoners of you, and none of his friends are likely to get maudlin about your feelings."

"Oh, they won't be inhuman. A few cell samples, a lot of tests, anesthesia where necessary, nothing harmful, nothing but a clinical examination as thorough as facilities allow."

"No doubt you'll be better fed than at any time before, and no doubt the medics will find some pathologies they can
cure for you. In the end, Moru, they'll release your wife and children."

She stared into his horrible face.

"I am pleased," she said, "that to you, who won't comprehend what is going on, it will be a bad experience. And when they are finished, Moru, I will insist on having you at least, back. They can't deny me that. Why, your tribe itself has, in effect, cast you out. Right? My colleagues won't let me do more than kill you, I'm afraid, but on this I will insist."

She gunned the engine and started toward Lokon, as fast as possible, to arrive while she felt able to be satisfied with that much.

And the days without him and the days without him.
The nights were welcome. If she had not worked herself quite to exhaustion, she could take a pill. He rarely returned in her dreams. But she had to get through each day and would not drown him in drugs.

Luckily, there was a good deal of work involved in preparing to depart, when the expedition was short-handed and on short notice. Gear must be dismantled, packed, ferried to the ship, and stowed. New Dawn herself must be readied, numerous systems recommissioned and tested. Her militech training qualified Evalyth to double as mechanic, boat jockey, or loading gang boss. In addition, she kept up the routines of defense in the compound.

Captain Jonafer objected mildly to this. "Why bother, Lieutenant? The locals are scared blue of us. They've heard what you did—and this coming and going through the sky, robots and heavy machinery in action, floodlights after dark—I'm having trouble persuading them not to abandon their town!"

"Let them," she snapped. "Who cares?"

"We did not come here to ruin them, Lieutenant."

"No. In my judgment, though, Captain, they'll be glad to ruin us if we present the least opportunity. Imagine what special virtues your body must have."

Jonafer sighed and gave in. But when she refused to receive Rogar the next time she was planetside, he ordered her to do so and to be civil.

The Klev entered the biolab section—she would not have him in her living quarters—with a gift held in both hands, a sword of Imperial metal. She shrugged; no doubt a museum
would be pleased to get the thing. "Lay it on the floor," she told him.

Because she occupied the single chair, he stood. He looked little and old in his robe. "I came," he whispered, "to say how we of Lokon rejoice that the heaven-borne has won her revenge."

"Is winning it," she corrected.

He could not meet her eyes. She stared moodily at his faded hair. "Since the heaven-borne could . . . easily . . . find those she wished . . . she knows the truth in the hearts of us of Lokon, that we never intended harm to her folk."

That didn't seem to call for an answer.

His fingers twisted together. "Then why do you forsake us?" he went on. "When first you came, when we had come to know you and you spoke our speech, you said you would stay for many moons, and after you would come others to teach and trade. Our hearts rejoiced. It was not alone the goods you might someday let us buy, nor that your wise-men talked of ways to end hunger, sickness, danger, and sorrow. No, our jubilation and thankfulness were most for the wonders you opened. Suddenly the world was made great, that had been so narrow. And now you are going away. I have asked, when I dared, and those of your men who will speak to me say none will return. How have we offended you, and how may it be made right, heaven-borne?"

"You can stop treating your fellow men like animals," Evalyth got past her teeth.

"I have gathered . . . somewhat . . . that you from the stars say it is wrong what happens in the Sacred Place. But we only do it once in our lifetimes, heaven-borne, and because we must!"

"You have no need."

Rogar went on his hands and knees before her. "Perhaps the heaven-borne are thus," he pleaded, "but we are merely men. If our sons do not get the manhood, they will never beget children of their own, and the last of us will die alone in a world of death, with none to crack his skull and let the soul out—" He dared glance up at her. What he saw made him whimper and crawl backwards into the sun-glare.

Later Chena Darnard sought Evalyth. They had a drink and talked around the subject for a while, until the anthropologist plunged in: "You were pretty hard on the sachem, weren't you?"
“How’d you— Oh.” The Krakener remembered that the interview had been taped, as was done whenever possible for later study. “What was I supposed to do, kiss his man-eating mouth?”

“No.” Chena winced. “I suppose not.”

“Your signature heads the list, on the official recommen-
dation that we quit this planet.”

“Yes. But—now I don’t know. I was repelled. I am. How-
ever—I’ve been observing the medical team working on
those prisoners of yours. Have you?”

“No.”

“You should. The way they cringe and shriek and reach to each other when they’re strapped down in the lab and cling together afterward in their cell.”

“They aren’t suffering any pain or mutilation, are they?”

“Of course not. But they can’t believe it when their captors say they won’t. They can’t be tranquillized while under study, you know, if the results are to be valid. Their fear of the absolutely unknown— Well, Evalyth, I had to stop observing. I couldn’t take any more.” Chena gave the other a long stare. “You might, though.”

Evalyth shook her head. “I don’t gloat. I’ll shoot the mur-
derer because my family honor demands it. The rest can go free, even the boys. Even in spite of what they ate.” She poured herself a stiff draught and tossed it off in a gulp. The liquor burned on the way down.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Chena said. “Donli wouldn’t have liked it. He had a proverb that he claimed was very ancient—he was from my city, don’t forget, and I have known . . . I did know him longer than you, dear. I heard him say, twice or thrice, Do I not destroy my enemies if I make them my friends?”

“Think of a venomous insect,” Evalyth replied. “You
don’t make friends with it. You put it under your heel.”

“But man does what he does because of what he is, what his society has made him.” Chena’s voice grew urgent; she leaned forward to grip Evalyth’s hand, which did not re-

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“What is one man, one lifetime, against all who live around him and all who have gone before? Cannibalism wouldn’t be found everywhere over this island, in every one of these otherwise altogether different groupings, if it weren’t the most deeply rooted cultural imperative this race has got.”

Evalyth grinned around a rising anger. “And what kind of
race are they to acquire it? And how about according me the privilege of operating on my own cultural imperatives? I'm bound home, to raise Donli's child away from your gutless civilization. He will not grow up disgraced because his mother was too weak to exact justice for his father. Now if you will excuse me, I have to get up early and take another boatload to the ship and get it inboard."

That task required a while. Evalyth came back toward sunset of the next day. She felt a little more tired than usual, a little more peaceful. The raw edge of what had happened was healing over. The thought crossed her mind, abstract but not shocking, not disloyal: I'm young. One year another man will come. I won't love you the less, darling.

Dust scuffed under her boots. The compound was half stripped already, a corresponding number of personnel berthed in the ship. The evening reached quiet beneath a yellowing sky. Only a few of the expedition stirred among the machines and remaining cabins. Lokon lay as hushed as it had lately become. She welcomed the thud of her footfalls on the steps into Jonafer's office.

He sat waiting for her, big and unmoving behind his desk. "Assignment completed without incident," she reported.

"Sit down," he said.

She obeyed. The silence grew. At last he said, out of a stiff face: "The clinical team has finished with the prisoners."

Somehow it was a shock. Evalyth groped for words. "Isn't that too soon? I mean, well, we don't have a lot of equipment, and just a couple of men who can see the advanced stuff, and then without Donli for an expert on Earth biology—Wouldn't a good study, down to the chromosomal level if not further—something that the physical anthropologists could use—wouldn't it take longer?"

"That's correct," Jonafer said. "Nothing of major importance was found. Perhaps something would have been, if Uden's team had any inking of what to look for. Given that, they could have made hypotheses and tested them in a whole-organism context and come to some understanding of their subjects as functioning beings. You're right, Donli Sairn had the kind of professional intuition that might have guided them. Lacking that, and with no particular clues, and no cooperation from those ignorant, terrified savages, they had to grope and probe almost at random. They did establish a few digestive peculiarities—nothing that couldn't
have been predicted on the basis of ambient ecology."

"Then why have they stopped? We won’t be leaving for another week at the earliest."

"They did so on my orders, after Uden had shown me what was going on and said he’d quit regardless of what I wanted."

"What—? Oh." Scorn lifted Evalyth’s head. "You mean the psychological torture."

"Yes. I saw that scrawny woman secured to a table. Her head, her body were covered with leads to the meters that clustered around her and clicked and hummed and flickered. She didn’t see me; her eyes were blind with fear. I suppose she imagined her soul was being pumped out. Or maybe the process was worse for being something she couldn’t put a name to. I saw her kids in a cell, holding hands. Nothing else left for them to hold onto, in their total universe. They’re just at puberty; what’ll this do to their psychosexual development? I saw their father lying drugged beside them, after he’d tried to batter his way straight through the wall. Uden and his helpers told me how they’d tried to make friends and failed. Because naturally the prisoners know they’re in the power of those who hate them with a hate that goes beyond the grave."

Jonafer paused. "There are decent limits to everything, Lieutenant," he ended, "including science and punishment. Especially when, after all, the chance of discovering anything else unusual is slight. I ordered the investigation terminated. The boys and their mother will be flown to their home area and released tomorrow."

"Why not today?" Evalyth asked, foreseeing his reply.

"I hoped," Jonafer said, "that you’d agree to let the man go with them."

"No."

"In the name of God—"

"Your God." Evalyth looked away from him. "I won’t enjoy it, Captain. I’m beginning to wish I didn’t have to. But it’s not as if Donli’d been killed in an honest war or feud—he was slaughtered like a pig. That’s the evil in cannibalism; it makes a man nothing but another meat animal. I won’t bring him back, but I will somehow even things, by making the cannibal nothing but a dangerous animal that needs shooting."

"I see." Jonafer too stared long out of the window. In the sunset light his face became a mask of brass. "Well," he said
finally, coldly, “under the Charter of the Alliance and the articles of this expedition, you leave me no choice. But we will not have any ghoulish ceremonies, and you will not deputize what you have done. The prisoner will be brought to your place privately after dark. You will dispose of him at once and assist in cremating the remains.”

Evalyth’s palms grew wet. *I never killed a helpless man before!*

*But he did,* it answered. “Understood, Captain,” she said. “Very good, Lieutenant. You may go up and join the mess for dinner if you wish. No announcements to anyone. The business will be scheduled for—” Jonafer glanced at his watch, set to local rotation “—2600 hours.” Evalyth swallowed around a clump of dryness. “Isn’t that rather late?”

“On purpose,” he told her. “I want the camp asleep.” His glance struck hers. “And want you to have time to reconsider.”

“No!” She sprang erect and went for the door.

His voice pursued her. “Donli would have asked you for that.”

Night came in and filled the room. Evalyth didn’t rise to turn on the light. It was as if this chair, which had been Donli’s favorite, wouldn’t let her go.

Finally she remembered the psychodrugs. She had a few tablets left. One of them would make the execution easy to perform. No doubt Jonafer would direct that Moru be tranquilized—now, at last—before they brought him here. So why should she not give herself calmness?

It wouldn’t be right.

Why not?

*I don’t know. I don’t understand anything any longer.*

*Who does? Moru alone. He knows why he murdered and butchered a man who trusted him.* Evalyth found herself smiling wearily into the darkness. *He has superstition for his sure guide. He’s actually seen his children display the first signs of maturity. That ought to console him a little.*

Odd, that the glandular upheaval of adolescence should have commenced under frightful stress. One would have expected a delay instead. True, the captives had been getting a balanced diet for a change, and medicine had probably eliminated various chronic low-level infections. Nonetheless the fact was odd. Besides, normal children under normal
THE SHARING OF FLESH

conditions would not develop the outward signs beyond mistaking in this short a time. Donli would have puzzled over the matter. She could almost see him, frowning, rubbing his forehead, grinning one-sidedly with the pleasure of a problem.

“T’d like to have a go at this myself,” she heard him telling Uden over a beer and a smoke. “Might turn up an angle.”

“How?” the medic would have replied. “You’re a general biologist. No reflection on you, but detailed human physiology is out of your line.”

“Um-m-m . . . yes and no. My main job is studying species of terrestrial origin and how they’ve adapted to new planets. By a remarkable coincidence, man is included among them.”

But Donli was gone, and no one else was competent to do his work—to be any part of him, but she fled from that thought and from the thought of what she must presently do. She held her mind tightly to the realization that one of Uden’s team had tried to apply Donli’s knowledge. As Jonafer remarked, a living Donli might well have suggested an idea, unorthodox and insightful, that would have led to the discovery of whatever was there to be discovered, if anything was. Uden and his assistants were routineers. They hadn’t even thought to make Donli’s computer ransack its data banks for possibly relevant information. Why should they, when they saw their problem as strictly medical? And, to be sure, they were not cruel. The anguish they were inflicting had made them avoid whatever might lead to ideas demanding further research. Donli would have approached the entire business differently from the outset.

Suddenly the gloom thickened. Evalyth fought for breath. Too hot and silent here; too long to wait; she must do something or her will would desert her and she would be unable to squeeze the trigger.

She stumbled to her feet and into the lab. The fluoro blinded her for a moment when she turned it on. She went to his computer and said: “Activate!”

Nothing responded but the indicator light. The windows were totally black. Clouds outside shut off moon and stars.

“What—” The sound was a curious croak. But that brought a releasing gall: Take hold of yourself, you blubbering idiot, or you’re not fit to mother the child you’re carrying. She could then ask her question. “What explanations in terms
of biology can be devised for the behavior of the people on this planet?"

"Matters of that nature are presumably best explained in terms of psychology and cultural anthropology," said the voice.

"M-m-maybe," Evalyth said. "And maybe not." She marshalled a few thoughts and stood them firm amidst the others roiling in her skull. "The inhabitants could be degenerate somehow, not really human." I want Moru to be. "Scan every fact recorded about them, including the detailed clinical observations made on four of them in the past several days. Compare with basic terrestrial data. Give me whatever hypotheses look reasonable." She hesitated. "Correction. I mean possible hypotheses—anything that does not flatly contradict established facts. We've used up the reasonable ideas already."

The machine hummed. Evalyth closed her eyes and clung to the edge of the desk. Donli, please help me.

At the other end of forever, the voice came to her:

"The sole behavioral element which appears to be not easily explicable by postulates concerning environment and accidental historical developments, is the cannibalistic puberty rite. According to the anthropological computer, this might well have originated as a form of human sacrifice. But that computer notes certain illogicalities in the idea, as follows.

"On Old Earth, sacrificial religion was normally associated with agricultural societies, which were more vitally dependent on continued fertility and good weather than hunters. Even for them, the offering of humans proved disadvantageous in the long run, as the Aztec example most clearly demonstrates. Lokon has rationalized the practice to a degree, making it a part of the slavery system and thus minimizing its impact on the generality. But for the lowlander, it is a powerful evil, a source of perpetual danger, a diversion of effort and resources that are badly needed for survival. It is not plausible that the custom, if ever imitated from Lokon, should persist among every one of those tribes. Nevertheless it does. Therefore it must have some value and the problem is to find what.

"The method of obtaining victims varies widely, but the requirement always appears to be the same. According to the Lokonese, one adult male body is necessary and sufficient for the maturation of four boys. The killer of Donli Sairn
was unable to carry off the entire corpse. What he did take of it is suggestive.

"Hence a dipteroid phenomenon may have appeared in man on this planet. Such a thing is unknown among higher animals elsewhere, but is conceivable. A modification of the Y chromosome would produce it. The test for that modification, and thus the test of the hypothesis, is easily made."

The voice stopped. Evalyth heard the blood slugging in her veins. "What are you talking about?"

The phenomenon is found among lower animals on several worlds," the computer told her.

"It is uncommon and so is not widely known. The name derives from the Diptera, a type of dung fly on Old Earth."

Lightning flickered. "Dung fly—good, yes!"

The machine went on to explain.

Jonafer came along with Moru. The savage's hands were tied behind his back, and the spaceman loomed enormous over him. Despite that and the bruises he had inflicted on himself, he hobbled along steadily. The clouds were breaking and the moon shone ice-white. Where Evalyth waited, outside her door, she saw the compound reach bare to the saw-topped stockade and a crane stand above like a gibbet. The air was growing cold—the planet spinning toward an autumn—and a small wind had arisen to whimper behind the dust devils that stirred across the earth. Jonafer's footfalls rang loud.

He noticed her and stopped. Moru did likewise. "What did they learn?" she asked.

The captain nodded. "Uden got right to work when you called," he said. "The test is more complicated than your computer suggested—but then, it's for Donli's kind of skill, not Uden's. He'd never have thought of it unassisted. Yes, the notion is true."

"How?"

Moru stood waiting while the language he did not understand went to and fro around him.

"I'm no medic." Jonafer kept his tone altogether colorless. "But from what Uden told me, the chromosome defect means that the male gonads here can't mature spontaneously. They need an extra supply of hormones—he mentioned testosterone and androsterone, I forget what else—to start off the series of changes which bring on puberty. Lacking that, you'll get eunuchism. Uden thinks the surviving population was
tiny after the colony was bombed out, and so poor that it resorted to cannibalism for bare survival, the first generation or two. Under those circumstances, a mutation that would otherwise have eliminated itself got established and spread to every descendant."

Evalyth nodded. "I see."
"You understand what this means, I suppose," Jonafer said. "There'll be no problem to ending the practice. We'll simply tell them we have a new and better Holy Food, and prove it with a few pills. Terrestrial-type meat animals can be reintroduced later and supply what's necessary. In the end, no doubt our geneticists can repair that faulty Y chromosome."

He could not stay contained any longer. His mouth opened, a gash across his half-seen face, and he rasped: "I should praise you for saving a whole people. I can't. Get your business over with, will you?"

Evalyth trod forward to stand before Moru. He shivered but met her eyes. Astonished, she said: "You haven't drugged him."
"No," Jonafer said. "I wouldn't help you." He spat. "Well, I'm glad." She addressed Moru in his own language: "You killed my man. Is it right that I should kill you?"
"It is right," he answered, almost as levelly as she. "I thank you that my woman and my sons are to go free." He was quiet for a second or two. "I have heard that your folk can preserve food for years without it rotting. I would be glad if you kept my body to give to your sons."
"Mine will not need it," Evalyth said. "Nor will the sons of your sons."
Anxiety tinged his words: "Do you know why I slew your man? He was kind to me, and like a god. But I am lame. I saw no other way to get what my sons must have; and they must have it soon, or it would be too late and they could never become men."
"He taught me," Evalyth said, "how much it is to be a man."
She turned to Jonafer, who stood tense and puzzled. "I had my revenge," she said in Donli's tongue.
"What?" His question was a reflexive noise.
"After I learned about the dipteroid phenomenon," she said. "All that was necessary was for me to keep silent."
Moru, his children, his entire race would go on being prey for centuries, maybe forever. I sat for half an hour, I think, having my revenge."

"And then?" Jonafer asked.

"I was satisfied and could start thinking about justice," Evalyth said.

She drew a knife. Moru straightened his back. She stepped behind him and cut his bonds. "Go home," she said. "Remember him."
Yes, I know. Here’s Harlan again.

It’s not my fault. It’s just that he wins Hugos. If he were to pile his Hugos one on top of the other, the heap would be taller and heavier than he is. He’s the only science fiction writer who can make that claim.

Why should all these Hugos be? There are a variety of theories that include multiple voting, blackmail, bribed judges and so on. Well, yes, but in addition to all that, Harlan also happens to be a very talented writer.

He’s one of us boys who has made it in the big world outside there and I’m proud of him. (Oh, my goodness, I hope he never reads this.) I glory in his bravery. Right or wrong, he speaks his mind, calls them as he sees them, regardless of consequences. He’s the only fellow I know who can get up to give a talk at a convention, get everyone on the floor fighting mad—and stand up there on the platform shouting back at them all.

An article in a certain national magazine once reported a set-to between a certain Hollywood super-star and none other than our very own Harlan. That super-star ordinarily has everyone bowing and scraping to get out of his way, and kicking themselves in the rear to make themselves move even more quickly in the effort to leave a clear path for the august one, but he had no effect on Harlan. Harlan just stood there, so to speak, and wouldn’t budge, and when super-star tried to sneer, Harlan just squashed him as though he were ordinary flesh and blood.

And when another national magazine listed Hollywood’s four most eligible bachelors, who was among them? Harlan Ellison, that’s who. And who wrote the best Man From U.N.C.L.E. script I ever watched? Harlan Ellison, that’s
THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE

who. And who writes big-time movie scripts? Harlan Ellison, that’s who. The way I feel now, I can only paraphrase Kipling and say:

Though I’ve belted you and flayed you,
By the living God that made you,
You’re a better man than I am, Ellison—almost!
THE BEAST THAT SHOUTED LOVE AT THE HEART OF THE WORLD

After an idle discussion with the pest control man who came once a month to spray around the outside of his home in the Ruxton section of Baltimore, William Sterog stole a canister of Malathion, a deadly insecticide poison, from the man's truck, and went out early one morning, following the route of the neighborhood milkman, and spooned medium-large quantities into each bottle left on the rear doorstep of seventy homes. Within six hours of Bill Sterog's activities, two hundred men, women and children died in convulsive agony.

Learning that an aunt who had lived in Buffalo was dying of cancer of the lymph glands, William Sterog hastily helped his mother pack three bags, and took her to Friendship Airport, where he put her on an Eastern Airlines jet with a simple but efficient time bomb made from a Westclox Travalarm and four sticks of dynamite in her three-suiter. The jet exploded somewhere over Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Ninety-three people—including Bill Sterog's mother—were killed in the explosion, and flaming wreckage added seven to the toll by cascading down on a public swimming pool.

On a Sunday in November, William Sterog made his way to Babe Ruth Plaza on 33rd Street where he became one of 54,000 fans jamming Memorial Stadium to see the Baltimore Colts play the Green Bay Packers. He was dressed warmly in grey flannel slacks, a navy blue turtleneck pullover and a heavy hand-knitted Irish wool sweater under his parka. With three minutes and thirteen seconds of the fourth quarter remaining to be played, and Baltimore trailing seventeen to...
sixteen on Green Bay's eighteen-yard line, Bill Sterog fought his way up the aisle to the exit above the mezzanine seats, and fumbled under his parka for the U. S. Army surplus M-3 submachine gun he had bought for $49.95 from a mail order armaments dealer in Alexandria, Virginia. Even as 53,999 screaming fans leaped to their feet—making his range of fire that much better—as the ball was snapped to the quarterback, holding for the defensive tackle most able to kick a successful field goal, Bill Sterog opened fire on the massed backs of the fans below him. Before the mob could bring him down, he had killed forty-four people.

When the first Expeditionary Force to the elliptical galaxy in Sculptor descended on the second planet of a fourth magnitude star the Force had designated Flammarion Theta, they found a thirty-seven-foot-high statue of a hitherto unknown blue-white substance—not quite stone, something like metal—in the shape of a man. The figure was barefoot, draped in a garment that vaguely resembled a toga, the head encased in a skull-tight cap, and holding in its left hand a peculiar ring-and-ball device of another substance altogether. The statue's face was curiously beatific. It had high cheekbones; deep-set eyes; a tiny, almost alien mouth; and a broad, large-nostriled nose. The statue loomed enormous among the pitted and blasted curvilinear structures of some forgotten architect. The members of the Expeditionary Force commented on the peculiar expression each noted on the face of the statue. None of these men, standing under a gorgeous brass moon that shared an evening sky with a descending sun quite dissimilar in color to the one that now shone wanly on an Earth unthinkably distant in time and space, had ever heard of William Sterog. And so none of them was able to say that the expression on the giant statue was the same as the one Bill Sterog had shown as he told the final appeals judge who was about to sentence him to death in the lethal gas chamber, "I love everyone in the world. I do. So help me God, I love you, all of you!" He was shouting.

Crosswhen, through interstices of thought called time, through reflective images called space; another then, another now. This place, over there. Beyond concepts, the transmogrification of simplicity finally labeled if. Forty and more steps sidewise but later, much later. There, in that ultimate center, with everything radiating outward, becoming infinitely more complex, the enigma of symmetry, harmony, apportionment
singing with fine-tuned order in *this* place, where it all began, begins, will always begin. The center. Crosswhen.

Or: a hundred million years in the future. And: a hundred million parsecs beyond the farthest edge of measurable space. And: parallax warpages beyond counting across the universes of parallel existences. Finally: an infinitude of mind-triggered leaps beyond human thought.

There: Crosswhen.

On the mauve level, crouched down in deeper magenta washings that concealed his arched form, the maniac waited. He was a dragon, squat and round in the torso, tapered ropy tail tucked under his body; the small, thick osseous shields rising perpendicularly from the arched back, running down to the end of the tail, tips pointing upward; his taloned shorter arms folded across his massive chest. He had the seven-headed dog faces of an ancient Cerberus. Each head watched, waiting hungry, insane.

He saw the bright yellow wedge of light as it moved in random patterns through the mauve, always getting closer. He knew he could not run, the movement would betray him, the specter light finding him instantly. Fear choked the maniac. The specter had pursued him through innocence and humility and nine other emotional obfuscations he had tried. He had to do something, get them off his scent. But he was alone on this level. It had been closed down some time before, to purge it of residue emotions. Had he not been so terribly confused after the killings, had he not been drowning in disorientation, he would never have trapped himself on a closed level.

Now that he was here, there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to escape the specter light that would systematically hunt him down. Then they would purge *him*.

The maniac took the one final chance; he closed down his mind, all seven brains, even as the mauve level was closed down. He shut off all thought, banked the fires of emotion, broke the neural circuits that fed power to his mind. Like a great machine phasing down from peak efficiency, his thoughts slackened and wilted and grew pale. Then there was a blank where he had been. Seven dog-heads slept.

The dragon had ceased to exist in terms of thought, and the specter light washed past him, finding nothing there to home in on. But those who sought the maniac were sane, not deranged as he was: their sanity was ordered, and in
order they considered every exigency. The specter light was followed by heat-seeking beams, by mass-tallying sensors, by trackers that could hunt out the spoor of foreign matter on a closed-down level.

They found the maniac. Shut down like a sun gone cold, they located him, and transferred him; he was unaware of the movement; he was locked away in his own silent skulls.

But when he chose to open his thoughts again, in the time­less disorientation that follows a total shutdown, he found himself locked in stasis in a drainage ward on the 3rd Red Active Level. Then, from seven throats, he screamed.

The sound, of course, was lost in the throat baffles they had inserted, before he had turned himself back on. The emptiness of the sound terrified him even more.

He was imbedded in an amber substance that fit around him comfortably; had it been a much earlier era, on another world, in another continuum, it would have been simply a hospital bed with restraining straps. But the dragon was locked in stasis on a red level, crosswhen. His hospital bed was anti-grav, weightless, totally relaxing, feeding nutrients through his leathery hide along with depressants and toners. He was waiting to be drained.

Linah drifted into the ward, followed by Semph. Semph, the discoverer of the drain. And his most eloquent nemesis, Linah, who sought Public Elevation to the position of Proctor. They drifted down the rows of amber-encased patients: the toads, the tambour-lidded crystal cubes, the exoskeletals, the pseudopodal changers, and the seven-headed dragon. They paused directly in front and slightly above the maniac. He was able to look up at them; images seven times seen; but he was not able to make sound.

"If I needed a conclusive reason, here's one of the best," Linah said, inclining his head toward the maniac.

Semph dipped an analysis rod into the amber substance, withdrew it and made a hasty reading of the patient's condition. "If you needed a greater warning," Semph said quietly, "this would be one of the best."

"Science bends to the will of the masses," Linah said.

"I'd hate to have to believe that," Semph responded quickly. There was a tone in his voice that could not be named, but it undershadowed the aggressiveness of his words.

"I'm going to see to it, Semph; believe it. I'm going to have the Concord pass the resolution."

"Linah, how long have we known each other?"
“Since your third flux. My second.”
“That’s about right. Have I ever told you a lie, have I ever asked you to do something that would harm you?”
“No. Not that I can recall.”
“Then why won’t you listen to me *this* time?”
“Because I think you’re wrong. I’m not a fanatic, Semph. I’m not making political hay with this. I feel very strongly that it’s the best chance we’ve ever had.”
“But disaster for everyone and everywhere else, all the way back, and God only knows how far across the parallax. We stop fouling our own nest, at the expense of all the other nests that ever were.”
Linah spread his hands in futility. “Survival.”
Semph shook his head slowly, with a weariness that was mirrored in his expression. “I wish I could drain *that*, too.”
“Can’t you?”
Semph shrugged. “I can drain anything. But what we’d have left wouldn’t be worth having.”
The amber substance changed hue. It glowed deep within itself with a blue intensity. “The patient is ready,” Semph said. “Linah, one more time. I’ll beg if it’ll do any good. Please. Stall till the next session. The Concord needn’t do it now. Let me run some further tests, let me see how far back this garbage spews, how much damage it can cause. Let me prepare some reports.”
Linah was firm. He shook his head in finality. “May I watch the draining with you?”
Semph let out a long sigh. He was beaten, and knew it. “Yes, all right.”
The amber substance carrying its silent burden began to rise. It reached the level of the two men, and slid smoothly through the air between them. They drifted after the smooth container with the dog-headed dragon imbedded in it, and Semph seemed as though he wanted to say something else. But there was nothing to say.
The amber chrysaloid cradle faded and vanished, and the men became insubstantial and were no more. They all reappeared in the drainage chamber. The beaming stage was empty. The amber cradle settled down on it without sound, and the substance flowed away, vanishing as it uncovered the dragon.
The maniac tried desperately to move, to heave himself up. Seven heads twitched futilely. The madness in him overcame the depressants and he was consumed with frenzy,
fury, and crimson hate. But he could not move. It was all he could do to hold his shape.

Semph turned the band on his left wrist. It glowed from within, a deep gold. The sound of air rushing to fill a vacuum filled the chamber. The beaming stage was drenched in silver light that seemed to spring out of the air itself, from an unknown source. The dragon was washed by the silver light, and the seven great mouths opened once, exposing rings of fangs. Then his double-lidded eyes closed.

The pain within his heads was monstrous. A fearful wrenching that became the sucking of a million mouths. His very brains were pulled upon, pressured, compressed, and then purged.

Semph and Linah looked away from the pulsing body of the dragon to the drainage tank across the chamber. It was filling from the bottom as they watched. Filling with a nearly colorless roiling cloud of smokiness, shot through with sparks. “Here it comes,” Semph said, needlessly.

Linah dragged his eyes away from the tank. The dragon with seven dog heads was rippling. As though seen through shallow water, the maniac was beginning to alter. As the tank filled, the maniac found it more and more difficult to maintain his shape. The denser grew the cloud of sparkling matter in the tank, the less constant was the shape of the creature on the beaming stage.

Finally, it was impossible, and the maniac gave in. The tank filled more rapidly, and the shape quavered and altered and shrank and then there was a superimposition of the form of a man, over that of the seven-headed dragon. Then the tank reached three-quarters filled and the dragon became an underling shadow, a hint, a suggestion of what had been there when the drainage began. Now the man-form was becoming more dominant by the second.

Finally, the tank was filled, and a normal man lay on the beaming stage, breathing heavily, eyes closed, muscles jumping involuntarily.

“He’s drained,” Semph said.

“Is it all in the tank?” Linah asked softly.

“No, none of it.”

“Then . . .”

“This is the residue. Harmless. Reagents purged from a group of sensitives will neutralize it. The dangerous essences, the degenerate force-lines that make up the field . . . they’re gone. Drained off already.”
Linah looked disturbed, for the first time. “Where did it go?”

“Do you love your fellow man, tell me?”

“Please, Semph! I asked where it went ... when it went?”

“And I asked if you cared at all about anyone else?”

“You know my answer ... you know me! I want to know, tell me, at least what you know. Where ... when ... ?”

“Then you’ll forgive me, Linah, because I love my fellow man, too. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So ... you’ll forgive me ...”

“What are you going to . . . .”

In Indonesia they have a phrase for it: Djam Karet—the hour that stretches.

In the Vatican’s Stanza of Heliodorus, the second of the great rooms he designed for Pope Julius II, Raphael painted (and his pupils completed) a magnificent fresco representation of the historic meeting between Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun, in the year 452.

In this painting is mirrored the belief of Christians everywhere that the spiritual authority of Rome protected her in that desperate hour when the Hun came to sack and burn the Holy City. Raphael has painted in Saint Peter and Saint Paul, descending from Heaven to reinforce Pope Leo’s intervention. His interpretation was an elaboration on the original legend, in which only the Apostle Peter was mentioned—standing behind Leo with a drawn sword. And the legend was an elaboration of what little facts have come down through antiquity relatively undistorted: Leo had no cardinals with him, and certainly no wraith Apostles. He was one of three in the deputation. The other two were secular dignitaries of the Roman state. The meeting did not take place—as legend would have us believe—just outside the gates of Rome, but in northern Italy, not far from what is today Peschiera.

Nothing more than this is known of the confrontation. Yet Attila, who had never been stopped, did not raze Rome. He turned back.

Djam Karet. The force-line field spewed out from a parallax center cross when, a field that had pulsed through time and space and the minds of men for twice ten thousand years. Then cut out suddenly, inexplicably, and Attila the Hun
clapped his hands to his head, his mind twisting like rope within his skull. His eyes glazed, then cleared, and he breathed from deep in his chest. Then he signaled his army to turn back. Leo the Great thanked God and the living memory of Christ the Saviour. Legend added Saint Peter. Raphael added Saint Paul.

For twice ten thousand years—_Djam Karet_—the field had pulsed, and for a brief moment that could have been instants or years or millennia, it was cut off.

Legend does not tell the truth. More specifically, it does not tell _all_ of the truth: forty years before Attila raided Italy, Rome had been taken and sacked by Alaric the Goth. _Djam Karet_. Three years after the retreat of Attila, Rome was once more taken and sacked, by Gaiseric, king of all the Vandals.

There was a reason the garbage of insanity had ceased to flow through everywhere and everywhen from the drained mind of a seven-headed dragon...

_Sempf, traitor to his race, hovered before the Concord. His friend, the man who now sought this final flux, Linah, Proctored the hearing. He spoke softly, but eloquently, of what the great scientist had done._

“_The tank was draining; he said to me, ‘Forgive me, because I love my fellow man. Whenever he was, wherever he is; I have to, I work in an inhuman field, and I have to cling to that. So you’ll forgive me.’ Then he interposed himself.’_

_The sixty members of the Concord, a representative from each race that existed in the center, bird-creatures and blue things and large-headed men and orange scents with cilia shuddering... all of them looked at Sempf where he hovered. His body and head were crumpled like a brown paper bag. All hair was gone. His eyes were dim and watery. Naked, shimmering, he drifted slightly to one side, then a vagrant breeze in the wall-less chamber sent him back. He had drained himself._

“I ask for this Concord to affix sentence of final flux on this man. Though his interposition only lasted a few moments, we have no way of knowing what damage or unnaturalness it may have caused crosswhen. I submit that his intent was to overload the drain and thereby render it inoperative. This act, the act of a beast who would condemn the sixty races of the center to a future in which insanity
still prevailed, is an act that can only be punished by termination.”

The Concord blanked and meditated. A timeless time later they relinked, and the Proctor’s charges were upheld; his demand of sentence was fulfilled.

On the hushed shores of a thought, the papyrus man was carried in the arms of his friend, his executioner, the Proctor. There in the dusting quiet of an approaching night, Linah laid Semph down in the shadow of a sigh.

“Why did you stop me?” the wrinkle with a mouth asked. Linah looked away across the rushing dark.

“Why?”

“Because here, in the center, there is a chance.”

“And for them, all of them out there . . . no chance ever?”

Linah sat down slowly, digging his hands into the golden mist, letting it sift over his wrists and back into the waiting flesh of the world. “If we can begin it here, if we can pursue our boundaries outward, then perhaps one day, sometime, we can reach to the ends of time with that little chance. Until then, it is better to have one center where there is no madness.”

Semph hurried his words. The end was rapidly striding for him. “You have sentenced them all. Insanity is a living vapor. A force. It can be bottled. The most potent genie in the most easily uncorked bottle. And you have condemned them to live with it always. In the name of love.”

Linah made a sound that was not quite a word, but called it back. Semph touched his wrist with a tremble that had been a hand. Fingers melting into softness and warmth. “I’m sorry for you, Linah. Your course is to be a true man. The world is made for strugglers. You never learned how to do that.”

Linah did not reply. He thought only of the drainage that was eternal now. Set in motion and kept in motion by its necessity.

“Will you do a memorial for me?” Semph asked.

Linah nodded. “It’s traditional.”

Semph smiled softly. “Then do it for them; not for me. I’m the one who devised the vessel of their death, and I don’t need it. But choose one of them; not a very important one, but one that will mean everything to them if they find it, and understand. Erect the memorial in my name to that one. Will you?”
Linah nodded.

"Will you?" Semph asked. His eyes were closed, and he could not see the nod.

"Yes. I will," Linah said. But Semph could not hear. The flux began and ended, and Linah was alone in the cupped silence of loneliness.

The statue was placed on a far planet of a far star in a time that was ancient while yet never having been born. It existed in the minds of men who would come later. Or never.

But if they did, they would know that hell was with them, that there was a Heaven that men called Heaven, and in it there was a center from which all madness flowed; and once within that center, there was peace.

In the remains of a blasted building that had been a shirt factory, in what had been Stuttgart, Friedrich Drucker found a many-colored box. Maddened by hunger and the memory of having eaten human flesh for weeks, the man tore at the lid of the box with the bloodied stubs of his fingers. As the box flew open, pressed at a certain point, cyclones rushed out past the terrified face of Friedrich Drucker. Cyclones and dark, winged, faceless shapes that streaked away into the night, followed by a last wisp of purple smoke smelling strongly of decayed gardenias.

But Friedrich Drucker had little time to ponder the meaning of the purple smoke, for the next day, World War IV broke out.
1970

28th CONVENTION

HEIDELBERG
Samuel R. Delany is the baby of the book. He has been publishing science fiction for something like eight years and instead of serving a decent apprenticeship (I slaved away for something like umpty-ump years before somebody happened to trip over me and said, “Whatever is that?”) he started attracting notice right away.

It’s enough to rouse the instinctive hatred of any decent, hard-working incompetent.

What else can I tell you about him? He has finely chiseled features, and he occasionally sports a beard. I don’t mean just a beard; I mean a beard. He lets it grow out on all sides without warning. One day he hasn’t got one and is as smooth-shaven as a collar-ad hero; the next day, there he is looking like the inside of a horse-hair mattress.

He claims it keeps his face warm in the winter.

Also, don’t call him Sam. He doesn’t answer to Sam. If you yell Sam at him, Sam Moskowitz is liable to turn around and then you’ll be sorry. Samuel R. Delany is called “Chip.” Please don’t ask me why because I don’t know. If he were a disciple of Robert Bloch, I would say it was because he’s a Chip off the old Bloch, but he isn’t a disciple of anybody.

And yet there’s something a little distressing to me here that I might as well mention. For years, we science fiction writers; we warm band of brothers and sisters; have entered this field as our specialty. It was “our thing”; it was what we did. Often, if we were driven enough, we graduated to broader fields, but even then (as in my own case) we had lingered long enough to know that science fiction was our home, our only true literary home, no matter through what gilded palaces we rambled.

But now the day has come when writers, without neces-
sarily feeling a tight identification with the field, choose to write science fiction because of the liberty it gives them; the opportunity to speculate and experiment beyond anything possible in any other genre.

Do they then think of themselves as science fiction writers? Is this their home—or just another hotel room?

I wonder about Chip, for instance? He reached the top so easily that he may have had no sensation of passing through. Next time I see him, I'll ask ...
Lay ordinate and abscissa on the century. Now cut me a quadrant. Third quadrant if you please. I was born in 'fifty. Here it's 'seventy-five.

At sixteen they let me leave the orphanage. Dragging the name they'd hung me with (Harold Clancy Everet, and me a mere lad—how many monickers have I had since; but don't worry, you'll recognize my smoke) over the hills of East Vermont, I came to a decision:

Me and Pa Michaels, who had belligerently given me a job at the request of The Official looking Document with which the orphanage sends you packing, were running Pa Michaels' dairy farm, i.e., thirteen thousand three hundred sixty-two piebald Guernseys all asleep in their stainless coffins, nourished and drugged by pink liquid flowing in clear plastic veins (stuff is sticky and messes up your hands), exercised with electric pulsers that make their muscles quiver, them not half awake, and the milk just a-pouring down into stainless cisterns. Anyway. The Decision (as I stood there in the fields one afternoon like the Man with the Hoe, exhausted with three hard hours of physical labor, contemplating the machinery of the universe through the fog of fatigue): With all of Earth, and Mars, and the Outer Satellites filled up with people and what-all, there had to be something more than this. I decided to get some.

So I stole a couple of Pa's credit cards, one of his helicopters and a bottle of white lightning the geezer made himself, and took off. Ever try to land a stolen helicopter on the roof of the Pan Am building, drunk? Jail, schmail, and some hard knocks later I had attained to wisdom. But remember
TIME CONSIDERED AS A HELIX

this oh best beloved: I have done three honest hours on a dairy farm less than ten years back. And nobody has ever called me Harold Clancy Everet again.

Hank Culafroy Eckles (red-headed, a bit vague, six foot two) strolled out of the baggage room at the spaceport carrying a lot of things that weren’t his in a small briefcase.

Beside him the Business Man was saying, “You young fellows today upset me. Go back to Bellona, I say. Just because you got into trouble with that little blonde you were telling me about is no reason to leap worlds, come on all glum. Even quit your job!”

Hank stops and grins weakly: “Well…”

“Now I admit, you have your real needs, which maybe we older folks don’t understand, but you have to show some responsibility towards…” He notices Hank has stopped in front of a door marked MEN. “Oh. Well. Eh.” He grins strongly. “I’ve enjoyed meeting you, Hank. It’s always nice when you meet somebody worth talking to on these damn crossings. So long.”

Out same door, ten minutes later, comes Harmony C. Eventide, six foot even (one of the false heels was cracked, so I stuck both of them under a lot of paper towels), brown hair (not even my hairdresser knows for sure), oh so dapper and of his time, attired in the bad taste that is oh so tasteful, a sort of man with whom no Business Men would start a conversation. Took the regulation ‘copter from the port over to the Pan Am building (Yeah. Really. Drunk), came out of Grand Central Station, and strode along Forty-second towards Eighth Avenue, with a lot of things that weren’t mine in a small briefcase.

The evening is carved from light.

Crossed the plastiplex pavement of the Great White Way—I think it makes people look weird, all that white light under their chins—and skirted the crowds coming up in elevators from the sub-way, the sub-sub-way, and the sub-sub-sub (eighteen and first week out of jail I hung around here, snatching stuff from people—but daintily, daintily, so they never knew they’d been snatched), bullied my way through a crowd of giggling, goo-chewing school girls with flashing lights in their hair, all very embarrassed at wearing transparent plastic blouses which had just been made legal again (I hear the breast has been scene [as opposed to obscene] on and off since the seventeenth century) so I
stared appreciatively; they giggled some more. I thought, Christ, when I was that age, I was on a God damn dairy farm, and took the thought no further.

The ribbon of news lights looping the triangular structure of Communication, Inc., explained in Basic English how Senator Regina Abolafia was preparing to begin her investigation of Organized Crime in the City. Days I’m so happy I’m disorganized I couldn’t begin to tell.

Near Ninth Avenue I took my briefcase into a long, crowded bar. I hadn’t been in New York for two years, but on my last trip through oftentimes a man used to hang out here who had real talent for getting rid of things that weren’t mine profitably, safely, fast. No idea what the chances were I’d find him. I pushed among a lot of guys drinking beer. Here and there were a number of well escorted old bags wearing last month’s latest. Scarfs of smoke gentled through the noise. I don’t like such places. Those there younger than me were all morphadine heads or feeble minded. Those older only wished more younger ones would come. I pried my way to the bar and tried to get the attention of one of the little men in white coats.

The lack of noise behind me made me glance back—

She wore a sheath of veiling closed at the neck and wrists with huge brass pins (oh so tastefully on the border of taste); her left arm was bare, her right covered with chiffon like wine. She had it down a lot better than I did. But such an ostentatious demonstration of one’s understanding of the fine points was absolutely out of place in a place like this. People were making a great show of not noticing.

She pointed to her wrist, blood-colored nail indexing a yellow-orange fragment in the brass claw of her wristlet. “Do you know what this is, Mr. Eldrich?” she asked; at the same time the veil across her face cleared, and her eyes were ice; her brows, black.

Three thoughts: (One) She is a lady of fashion, because coming in from Bellona I’d read the Delta coverage of the “fading fabrics” whose hue and opacity were controlled by cunning jewels at the wrist. (Two) During my last trip through, when I was younger and Harry Calamine Eldrich, I didn’t do anything too illegal (though one loses track of these things); still I didn’t believe I could be dragged off to the calaboose for anything more than thirty days under that name. (Three) The stone she pointed to. . .

“... Jasper?” I asked.
She waited for me to say more; I waited for her to give me reason to let on I knew what she was waiting for (when I was in jail Henry James was my favorite author. He really was.)

"Jasper," she confirmed.

"—Jasper..." I reopened the ambiguity she had tried so hard to dispel.

"...Jasper—" But she was already faltering, suspecting I suspected her certainty to be ill-founded.

"Okay. Jasper." But from her face I knew she had seen in my face a look that had finally revealed I knew she knew I knew.

"Just whom have you got me confused with, Ma'am?"

Jasper, this month, is the Word.

Jasper is the pass/code/warning that the Singers of the Cities (who, last month, sang "Opal" from their divine injuries; and on Mars I'd heard the Word and used it thrice, along with devious imitations, to fix possession of what was not rightfully my own; and even there I pondered the Singers and their wounds) relay by word of mouth for that loose and roguish fraternity with which I have been involved (in various guises) these nine years. It goes out new every thirty days; and within hours every brother knows it, throughout six worlds and worldlets. Usually it's grunted at you by some blood-soaked bastard staggering into your arms from a dark doorway; hissed at you as you pass a shadowed alley; scrawled on a paper scrap pressed into your palm by some nasty-grimy moving too fast through the crowd. And this month, it was: Jasper.

Here are some alternate translations:
Help!
or
I need help!
or
I can help you!
or
You are being watched!
or
They're not watching now, so move!

Final point of syntax: If the Word is used properly, you should never have to think twice about what it means in a given situation. Fine point of usage: Never trust anyone who uses it improperly.

I waited for her to finish waiting.
She opened a wallet in front of me. "Chief of Special Services Department Maudline Hinkle," she read without looking what it said below the silver badge.

"You have that very well," I said, "Maud." Then I frowned. "Hinkle?"

"Me."

"I know you're not going to believe this, Maud. You look like a woman who has no patience with her mistakes. But my name is Eventide. Not Eldrich. Harmony C. Eventide. And isn't it lucky for all and sundry that the Word changes tonight?" Passed the way it is, the Word is no big secret to the cops. But I've met policemen up to a week after change date who were not privy.

"Well, then: Harmony. I want to talk to you."

I raised an eyebrow.

She raised one back and said, "Look, if you want to be called Henrietta, it's all right by me. But you listen."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Crime, Mr. . . . ?"

"Eventide. I'm going to call you Maud, so you might as well call me Harmony. It really is my name."

Maud smiled. She wasn't a young woman. I think she even had a few years on Business Man. But she used make-up better than he did. "I probably know more about crime than you do," she said. "In fact I wouldn't be surprised if you hadn't even heard of my branch of the police department. What does Special Services mean to you?"

"That's right, I've never heard of it."

"You've been more or less avoiding the Regular Service with alacrity for the past seven years."

"Oh, Maud, really—"

"Special Services is reserved for people whose nuisance value has suddenly taken a sharp rise . . . a sharp enough rise to make our little lights start blinking."

"Surely I haven't done anything so dreadful that—"

"We don't look at what you do. A computer does that for us. We simply keep checking the first derivative of the graphed out curve that bears your number. Your slope is rising sharply."

"Not even the dignity of a name—"

"We're the most efficient department in the Police Organization. Take it as bragging if you wish. Or just a piece of information."

"Well, well, well," I said. "Have a drink?" The little man
in the white coat left us two, puzzled at Maud's finery, then went to do something else.

"Thanks." She downed half her glass like someone stouter than that wrist would indicate. "It doesn't pay to go after most criminals. Take your big-time racketeers, Farnesworth, The Hawk, Blavatskaia. Take your little snatch-purses, small-time pushers, housebreakers or vice-impresarios. Both at the top and the bottom of the scale, their incomes are pretty stable. They don't really upset the social boat. Regular Services handles them both. They think they do a good job. We're not going to argue. But say a little pusher starts to become a big-time pusher; a medium-sized vice-impresario sets his sights on becoming a full-fledged racketeer; that's when you get problems with socially unpleasant repercussions. That's when Special Services arrive. We have a couple of techniques that work remarkably well."

"You're going to tell me about them, aren't you."

"They work better that way," she said. "One of them is hologramic information storage. Do you know what happens when you cut a hologram plate in half?"

"The three dimensional image is . . . cut in half?"

She shook her head. "You get the whole image, only fuzzier, slightly out of focus."

"Now I didn't know that."

"And if you cut it in half again, it just gets fuzzier still. But even if you have a square centimeter of the original hologram you still have the whole image—unrecognizable, but complete."

I mumbled some appreciative m's.

"Each pinpoint of photographic emulsion on a hologram plate, unlike a photograph, gives information about the entire scene being hologrammed. By analogy, hologramic information storage simply means that each bit of information we have—about you, let us say—relates to your entire career, your overall situation, the complete set of tensions between you and your environment. Specific facts about specific misdeemors or felonies we leave to Regular Services. As soon as we have enough of our kind of data, our method is vastly more efficient for keeping track—even predicting—where you are or what you may be up to."

"Fascinating," I said. "One of the most amazing paranoid syndromes I've ever run up against. I mean just starting a conversation with someone in a bar. Often, in a hospital situation, I've encountered stranger—"
“In your past,” she said matter of factly, “I see cows and helicopters. In your not too distant future there are helicopters and hawks.”

“And tell me, oh Good Witch of the West, just how—” Then I got all upset inside. Because nobody is supposed to know about that stint with Pa Michaels save thee and me. Even the Regular Service who pulled me, out of my mind, from that whirlibird bouncing towards the edge of the Pan Am never got that one from me. I’d eaten the credit cards when I saw them waiting, and the serial numbers had been filed off everything that could have had a serial number on it by someone more competent than I: good Mister Michaels had boasted to me, my first lonely, drunken night at the farm, how he’d gotten the thing in hot from New Hampshire.

“But why”—it appalls me the clichés to which anxiety will drive us—“are you telling me all this?”

She smiled and her smile faded behind her veil. “Information is only meaningful when it is shared,” said a voice that was hers from the place of her face.

“Hey, look, I—”

“You may be coming into quite a bit of money soon. If I can calculate right, I will have a helicopter full of the city’s finest arriving to take you away as you accept it into your hot little hands. That is a piece of information. . . .” She stepped back. Someone stepped between us.

“Hey, Maud—!”

“You can do whatever you want with it.”

The bar was crowded enough so that to move quickly was to make enemies. I don’t know—I lost her and made enemies. Some weird characters there: with greasy hair that hung in spikes, and three of them had dragons tattooed on their scrawny shoulders, still another with an eye patch, and yet another raked nails black with pitch at my cheek (we’re two minutes into a vicious free-for-all, case you missed the transition. I did) and some of the women were screaming. I hit and ducked, and then tenor of the brouhaha changed. Somebody sang, “Jasper!” the way she is supposed to be sung. And it meant the heat (the ordinary, bungling Regular Service I had been eluding these seven years) were on their way. The brawl spilled into the street. I got between two nasty-grimies who were doing things appropriate with one another, but made the edge of the crowd with no more wounds than could be racked up to shaving. The fight had broken into sections. I left one and ran into another that,
I realized a moment later, was merely a ring of people stand­
ing around somebody who had apparently gotten really

Someone was holding people back.

Somebody else was turning him over.

Curled up in a puddle of blood was the little guy I hadn’t seen in two years who used to be so good at getting rid of things not mine.

Trying not to hit people with my briefcase, I ducked be­
tween the hub and the bub. When I saw my first ordinary policeman I tried very hard to look like somebody who had just stepped up to see what the rumpus was.

It worked.

I turned down Ninth Avenue, and got three steps into an

inconspicuous but rapid lope—

“Hey, wait! Wait up there...”

I recognized the voice (after two years, coming at me just like that, I recognized it) but kept going.

“Wait! It’s me, Hawk!”

And I stopped.

You haven’t heard his name before in this story; Maud mentioned the Hawk, who is a multi-millionaire racketeer basing his operations on a part of Mars I’ve never been (though he has his claws sunk to the spurs in illegalities throughout the system) and somebody else entirely.

I took three steps back towards the doorway.

A boy’s laugh there: “Oh, man. You look like you just did something you shouldn’t.”

“Hawk?” I asked the shadow.

He was still the age when two years' absence means an

inch or so taller.

“You’re still hanging out around here?” I asked.

“Sometimes.”

He was an amazing kid.

“Look, Hawk, I got to get out of here.” I glanced back at the rumpus.

“Get.” He stepped down. “Can I come too?”

Funny. “Yeah.” It makes me feel very funny him asking that. “Come on.”

By the street lamp, half a block down, I saw his hair was still pale as split pine. He could have been a nasty-grimy: very dirty black denim jacket, no shirt beneath; very ripe pair of black-jeans—I mean in the dark you could tell. He
went barefoot; and the only way you can tell on a dark street someone’s been going barefoot for days in New York is to know already. As we reached the corner, he grinned up at me under the street lamp and shrugged his jacket together over the welts and furrows marring his chest and belly. His eyes were very green. Do you recognize him? If by some failure of information dispersal throughout the worlds and worldlets you haven’t, walking beside me beside the Hudson was Hawk the Singer.

“Hey, how long have you been back?”
“A few hours,” I told him.
“What’d you bring?”
“Really want to know?”
He shoved his hands into his pockets and cocked his head.

“Sure.”

I made the sound of an adult exasperated by a child. “All right.” We had been walking the waterfront for a block now; there was nobody about. “Sit down.” So he straddled the beam along the siding, one foot dangling above the flashing black Hudson. I sat in front of him and ran my thumb around the edge of the briefcase.

Hawk hunched his shoulders and leaned. “Hey . . .” He flashed green questioning eyes at me. “Can I touch?”
I shrugged. “Go ahead.”

He grubbed among them with fingers that were all knuckle and bitten nail. He picked two up, put them down, picked up three others. “Hey!” he whispered. “How much are all these worth?”

“About ten times more than I hope to get. I have to get rid of them fast.”

He glanced down at his hanging foot. “You could always throw them in the river.”

“But don’t be dense. I was looking for a guy who used to hang around that bar. He was pretty efficient.” And half the Hudson away a waterbound foil skimmed above the foam. On her deck were parked a dozen helicopters—being ferried up to the Patrol Field near Verrazano, no doubt. But for moments I looked back and forth between the boy and the transport, getting all paranoid about Maud. But the boat mmmmed into the darkness. “My man got a little cut up this evening.”

Hawk put the tips of his fingers in his pockets and shifted his position.

“Which leaves me up tight. I didn’t think he’d take them
all but at least he could have turned me on to some other people who might."

"I'm going to a party later on this evening" — he paused to gnaw on the wreck of his little fingernail — "where you might be able to sell them. Alexis Spinnel is having a party for Regina Abolafia at Tower Top."

"Tower Top . . . ?" It had been a while since I palled around with Hawk. Hell's Kitchen at ten; Tower Top at midnight —

"I'm just going because Edna Silem will be there."

Edna Silem is New York's eldest Singer. Senator Abolafia's name had ribboned above me in lights once that evening. And somewhere among the endless magazines I'd perused coming in from Mars I remember Alexis Spinnel's name sharing a paragraph with an awful lot of money.

"I'd like to see Edna again," I said offhandedly. "But she wouldn't remember me." Folk like Spinnel and his social ilk have a little game, I'd discovered during the first leg of my acquaintance with Hawk. He who can get the most Singers of the City under one roof wins. There are five Singers of New York (a tie for second place with Lux on Iapetus). Tokyo leads with seven. "It's a two Singer party?"

"More likely four . . . if I go."

The inaugural ball for the mayor gets four.

I raised the appropriate eyebrow.

"I have to pick up the Word from Edna. It changes tonight."

"All right," I said. "I don't know what you have in mind but I'm game." I closed the case.

We walked back towards Times Square. When we got to Eighth Avenue and the first of the plastiplex, Hawk stopped. "Wait a minute," he said. Then he buttoned his jacket up to his neck. "Okay."

Strolling through the streets of New York with a Singer (two years back I'd spent much time wondering if that were wise for a man of my profession) is probably the best camouflage possible for a man of my profession. Think of the last time you glimpsed your favorite Tri-D star turning the corner of Fifty-seventh. Now be honest. Would you really recognize the little guy in the tweed jacket half a pace behind him?

Half the people we passed in Times Square recognized him. With his youth, funereal garb, black feet and ash pale
hair, he was easily the most colorful of Singers. Smiles; narrowed eyes; very few actually pointed or stared.

"Just exactly who is going to be there who might be able to take this stuff off my hands?" 

"Well, Alexis prides himself on being something of an adventurer. They might just take his fancy. And he can give you more than you can get peddling them in the street."

"You'll tell him they're all hot?"

"It will probably make the idea that much more intriguing. He's a creep."

"You say so, friend."

We went down into the sub-sub. The man at the change booth started to take Hawk's coin, then looked up. He began three or four words that were unintelligible through his grin, then just gestured us through.

"Oh," Hawk said, "thank you," with ingenuous surprise, as though this were the first, delightful time such a thing had happened. (Two years ago he had told me sagely, "As soon as I start looking like I expect it, it'll stop happening." I was still impressed by the way he wore his notoriety. The time I'd met Edna Silem, and I'd mentioned this, she said with the same ingenuousness, "But that's what we're chosen for.")

In the bright car we sat on the long seat; Hawk's hands were beside him, one foot rested on the other. Down from us a gaggle of bright-bloused goo-chewers giggled and pointed and tried not to be noticed at it. Hawk didn't look at all, and I tried not to be noticed looking.

Dark patterns rushed the window.

Things below the gray floor hummed.

Once a lurch.

Leaning once; we came out of the ground.

Outside, the city tried on its thousand sequins, then threw them away behind the trees of Ft. Tryon. Suddenly the windows across from us grew bright scales. Behind them the girders of a station reeled by. We got out on the platform under a light rain. The sign said TWELVE TOWERS STATION.

By the time we reached the street, however, the shower had stopped. Leaves above the wall shed water down the brick. "If I'd known I was bringing someone I'd have had Alex send a car for us. I told him it was fifty-fifty I'd come."

"Are you sure it's all right for me to tag along, then?"

"Didn't you come up here with me once before?"

"I've even been up here once before that," I said. "Do you still think it's ..."
He gave me a withering look. Well; Spinnel would be delighted to have Hawk even if he dragged along a whole gang of real nasty-grimies—Singers are famous for that sort of thing. With one more or less presentable thief, Spinnel was getting off light. Beside us rocks broke away into the city. Behind the gate to our left the gardens rolled up towards the first of the towers. The twelve immense, luxury apartment buildings menaced the lower clouds.

“Hawk the Singer,” Hawk said into the speaker at the side of the gate. *Clang* and tic-tic-tic and *Clang*. We walked up the path to the doors and doors of glass.

A cluster of men and women in evening dress were coming out. Three tiers of doors away they saw us. You could see them frowning at the guttersnipe who’d somehow gotten into the lobby (for a moment I thought one of them was Maud, because she wore a sheath of the fading fabric, but she turned; beneath her veil her face was dark as roasted coffee); one of the men recognized him, said something to the others. When they passed us they were smiling. Hawk paid about as much attention to them as he had to the girls on the subway. But when they’d passed, he said, “One of those guys was looking at you.”

“Yeah. I saw.”

“Do you know why?”

“He was trying to figure out whether we’d met before.”

“Had you?”

I nodded. “Right about where I met you, only back when I’d just gotten out of jail. I told you I’d been here once before.”

“Oh.”

Blue carpet covered three-quarters of the lobby. A great pool filled the rest in which a row of twelve foot trellises stood, crowned with flaming braziers. The lobby itself was three stories high, domed and mirror tiled.

Twisting smoke curled towards the ornate grill. Broken reflections sagged and recovered on the walls.

The elevator door folded about us its foil petals. There was the distinct feeling of not moving while seventy-five stories shucked down around us.

We got out on the landscaped roof garden. A very tanned, very blond man wearing an apricot jump-suit, from the collar of which emerged a black turtleneck dickey, came down the rocks (artificial) between the ferns (real) growing beside the stream (real water; phony current).
"Hello! Hello!" Pause. "I'm terribly glad you decided to come after all." Pause. "For a while I thought you weren't going to make it." The Pauses were to allow Hawk to introduce me. I was dressed so that Spinnel had no way of telling whether I was a miscellaneous Nobel laureate that Hawk happened to have been dining with, or a varlet whose manners and morals were even lower than mine happen to be.

"Shall I take your jacket?" Alexis offered.

Which meant he didn’t know Hawk as well as he would like people to think. But I guess he was sensitive enough to realize from the little cold things that happened in the boy’s face that he should forget his offer.

He nodded to me, smiling—about all he could do—and we strolled towards the gathering.

Edna Silem was sitting on a transparent inflated hassock. She leaned forward, holding her drink in both hands, arguing politics with the people sitting on the grass before her. She was the first person I recognized (hair of tarnished silver; voice of scrap brass). Jutting from the cuffs of her mannish suit, her wrinkled hands about her goblet, shaking with the intensity of her pronouncements, were heavy with stones and silver. As I ran my eyes back to Hawk, I saw half a dozen whose names/faces sold magazines, music, sent people to the theater (the drama critic for Delta, wouldn't you know), and even the mathematician from Princeton I’d read about a few months ago who'd come up with the “quasar/quark” explanation.

There was only one woman my eyes kept turning to. On glance three I recognized her as the New Fascistas’ most promising candidate for president, Senator Abolafia. Her arms were folded and she was listening intently to the discussion that had narrowed to Edna and an overly gregarious younger man whose eyes were puffy from what could have been the recent acquisition of contact lenses.

"But don't you feel, Mrs. Silem, that—"

"You must remember when you make predictions like that—"

"Mrs. Silem, I've seen statistics that—"

"You must remember"—her voice tensed, lowered, till the silence between the words was as rich as the voice was sparse and metallic—"that if everything, everything were known, statistical estimates would be unnecessary. The science of probability gives mathematical expression to our ignorance, not to our wisdom,” which I was thinking was an interesting
second installment to Maud’s lecture, when Edna looked up and exclaimed, “Why, Hawk!”

Everyone turned.

“I am glad to see you. Lewis, Ann,” she called: there were two other Singers there already (he dark, she pale, both tree-slender; their faces made you think of pools without drain or tribute come upon in the forest, clear and very still; husband and wife, they had been made Singers together the day before their marriage seven years ago), “he hasn’t deserted us after all!” Edna stood, extended her arm over the heads of the people sitting, and barked across her knuckles as though her voice were a pool cue. “Hawk, there are people here arguing with me who don’t know nearly as much as you about the subject. You’d be on my side, now, wouldn’t you—”

“Mrs. Silem, I didn’t mean to—” from the floor.

Then her arms swung six degrees, her fingers, eyes and mouth opened. “You!” Me. “My dear, if there’s anyone I never expected to see here! Why it’s been almost two years, hasn’t it?” Bless Edna; the place where she and Hawk and I had spent a long, beery evening together had more resembled that bar than Tower Top. “Where have you been keeping yourself?”

“Mars, mostly,” I admitted. “Actually I just came back today.” It’s so much fun to be able to say things like that in a place like this.

“Hawk—both of you—” (which meant either she had forgotten my name, or she remembered me well enough not to abuse it) “come over here and help me drink up Alexis’ good liquor.” I tried not to grin as we walked towards her. If she remembered anything, she certainly recalled my line of business and must have been enjoying this as much as I was.

Relief spread over Alexis’ face: he knew now I was someone if not which someone I was.

As we passed Lewis and Ann, Hawk gave the two Singers one of his luminous grins. They returned shadowed smiles. Lewis nodded. Ann made a move to touch his arm, but left the motion unconcluded; and the company noted the interchange.

Having found out what we wanted, Alex was preparing large glasses of it over crushed ice when the puffy-eyed gentleman stepped up for a refill. “But, Mrs. Silem, then what do you feel validly opposes such political abuses?”
Regina Abolafia wore a white silk suit. Nails, lips and hair were one color; and on her breast was a worked copper pin. It’s always fascinated me to watch people used to being the center thrust to the side. She swirled her glass, listening.

“I oppose them,” Edna said. “Hawk opposes them. Lewis and Ann oppose them. We, ultimately, are what you have.” And her voice had taken on that authoritative resonance only Singers can assume.

Then Hawk’s laugh snarled through the conversational fabric.

We turned.

He’d sat cross-legged near the hedge. “Look . . .” he whispered.

Now people’s gazes followed him. He was looking at Lewis and Ann. She, tall and blonde, he, dark and taller, were standing very quietly, a little nervously, eyes closed (Lewis’ lips were apart).

“Oh,” whispered someone who should have known better, “they’re going to . . .”

I watched Hawk because I’d never had a chance to observe one Singer at another’s performance. He put the soles of his feet together, grasped his toes and leaned forward, veins making blue rivers on his neck. The top button of his jacket had come loose. Two scar ends showed over his collarbone. Maybe nobody noticed but me.

I saw Edna put her glass down with a look of beaming anticipatory pride. Alex, who had pressed the autobar (odd how automation has become the upper crust’s way of flaunting the labor surplus) for more crushed ice, looked up, saw what was about to happen, and pushed the cut-off button. The autobar hummed to silence. A breeze (artificial or real, I couldn’t tell you) came by and the trees gave us a final shush.

One at a time, then in duet, then singly again, Lewis and Ann sang.

Singers are people who look at things, then go and tell people what they’ve seen. What makes them Singers is their ability to make people listen. That is the most magnificent over-simplification I can give. Eighty-six-year-old El Posado, in Rio de Janeiro, saw a block of tenements collapse, ran to the Avenida del Sol and began improvising, in rhyme and meter (not all that hard in rhyme-rich Portuguese), tears runneling his dusty cheeks, his voice clashing with the palm
swards above the sunny street. Hundreds of people stopped to listen; a hundred more; and another hundred. And they told hundreds more what they had heard. Three hours later, hundreds from among them had arrived at the scene with blankets, food, money, shovels and, more incredibly, the willingness and ability to organize themselves and work within that organization. No Tri-D report of a disaster has ever produced that sort of reaction. El Posado is historically considered the first Singer. The second was Miriamne in the roofed city of Lux, who for thirty years walked through the metal streets singing the glories of the rings of Saturn—the colonists can't look at them without aid because of the ultra-violet the rings set up. But Miriamne, with her strange cataracts, each dawn, walked to the edge of the city, looked, saw and came back to sing of what she saw. All of which would have meant nothing except that during the days she did not sing—through illness, or once she was on a visit to another city to which her fame had spread—the Lux Stock Exchange would go down, the number of violent crimes rise. Nobody could explain it. All they could do was proclaim her Singer. Why did the institution of Singers come about, springing up in just about every urban center throughout the system? Some have speculated that it was a spontaneous reaction to the mass media which blanket our lives. While Tri-D and radio and newstapes disperse information all over the worlds, they also spread a sense of alienation from first-hand experience. (How many people still go to sports events or a political rally with their little receivers plugged to their ears to let them know that what they see is really happening?) The first Singers were proclaimed by the people around them. Then, there was a period where anyone could proclaim himself who wanted to, and people either responded to him, or laughed him into oblivion. But by the time I was left on the doorstep of somebody who didn't want me, most cities had more or less established an unofficial quota. When a position is left open today, the remaining Singers choose who is going to fill it. The required talents are poetic, theatrical, as well as a certain charisma that is generated in the tensions between the personality and the publicity web a Singer is immediately snared in. Before he became a Singer, Hawk had gained something of a prodigious reputation with a book of poems published when he was fifteen. He was touring universities and giving readings, but the reputation was still small enough so that he was amazed
that I had ever heard of him, that evening we encountered in Central Park (I had just spent a pleasant thirty days as a guest of the city and it's amazing what you find in the Tombs Library). It was a few weeks after his sixteenth birthday. His Singership was to be announced in four days, though he had been informed already. We sat by the lake till dawn, while he weighed and pondered and agonized over the coming responsibility. Two years later, he's still the youngest Singer in six worlds by half a dozen years. Before becoming a Singer, a person need not have been a poet, but most are either that or actors. But the roster through the system includes a longshoreman, two university professors, an heiress to the Silitax millions (Tack it down with Silitacks), and at least two persons of such dubious background that the ever-hungry-for-sensation Publicity Machine itself has agreed not to let any of it past the copy-editors. But wherever their origins, these diverse and flamboyant living myths sang of love, or death, the changing of seasons, social classes, governments and the palace guard. They sang before large crowds, small ones, to an individual laborer coming home from the city's docks, on slum street corners, in club cars of commuter trains, in the elegant gardens atop Twelve Towers, to Alex Spinnel's select soirée. But it has been illegal to reproduce the "Songs" of the Singers by mechanical means (including publishing the lyrics) since the institution arose, and I respect the law, I do, as only a man in my profession can. I offer the explanation then in place of Lewis' and Ann's song.

They finished, opened their eyes, stared about with expressions that could have been embarrassment, could have been contempt.

Hawk was leaning forward with a look of rapt approval. Edna was smiling politely. I had the sort of grin on my face that breaks out when you've been vastly moved and vastly pleased. Lewis and Ann had sung superbly.

Alex began to breathe again, glanced around to see what state everybody else was in, saw, and pressed the autobar, which began to hum and crush ice. No clapping, but the appreciative sounds began; people were nodding, commenting, whispering. Regina Abolafia went over to Lewis to say something. I tried to listen until Alex shoved a glass into my elbow.

"Oh, I'm sorry . . ."
I transferred my briefcase to the other hand and took the drink smiling. When Senator Abolafia left the two Singers, they were holding hands and looking at one another a little sheepishly. They sat down again.

The party drifted in conversational groups through the gardens, through the groves. Overhead clouds the color of old chamois folded and unfolded across the moon.

For a while I stood alone in a circle of trees listening to the music: a de Lassus two-part canon, programmed for audio-generators. Recalled: an article in one of last week's large-circulation literaries stating that it was the only way to remove the feel of the bar lines imposed by five centuries of meter on modern musicians. For another two weeks this would be acceptable entertainment. The trees circled a rock pool; but no water. Below the plastic surface, abstract lights wove and threaded in a shifting lumia.

"Excuse me...?"

I turned to see Alexis, who had no drink now or idea what to do with his hands. He was nervous.

"... but our young friend has told me you have something I might be interested in."

I started to lift my briefcase, but Alex's hand came down from his ear (it had gone by belt to hair to collar already) to halt me. Nouveau riche.

"That's all right. I don't need to see them yet. In fact, I'd rather not. I have something to propose to you. I would certainly be interested in what you have if they are, indeed, as Hawk has described them. But I have a guest here who would be even more curious."

That sounded odd.

"I know that sounds odd," Alexis assessed, "but I thought you might be interested simply because of the finances involved. I am an eccentric collector who would offer you a price concomitant with what I would use them for: eccentric conversation pieces—and because of the nature of the purchase I would have to limit severely the people with whom I could converse."

I nodded.

"My guest, however, would have a great deal more use for them."

"Could you tell me who this guest is?"

"I asked Hawk, finally, who you were and he led me to believe I was on the verge of a grave social indiscretion. It would be equally indiscreet to reveal my guest's name to
you.” He smiled. “But indiscretion is the better part of the fuel that keeps the social machine turning, Mr. Harvey Cadwaliter-Erickson...” He smiled knowingly.

I have never been Harvey Cadwaliter-Erickson, but then, Hawk was always an inventive child. Then a second thought went by, vid., the tungsten magnates, the Cadwaliter-Ericksons of Tythis on Triton. Hawk was not only inventive, he was as brilliant as all the magazines and newspapers are always saying he is.

“I assume your second indiscretion will be to tell me who this mysterious guest is?”

“Well,” Alex said with the smile of the canary-fattened cat, “Hawk agreed with me that the Hawk might well be curious as to what you have in there,” (he pointed) “as indeed he is.”

I frowned. Then I thought lots of small, rapid thoughts I’ll articulate in due time. “The Hawk?”

Alex nodded.

I don’t think I was actually scowling. “Would you send our young friend up here for a moment?”

“If you’d like.” Alex bowed, turned. Perhaps a minute later, Hawk came up over the rocks and through the trees, grinning. When I didn’t grin back, he stopped.

“Mmmm . . .” I began.

His head cocked.

I scratched my chin with a knuckle. “... Hawk,” I said, “are you aware of a department of the police called Special Services?”

“I’ve heard of them.”

“They’ve suddenly gotten very interested in me.”

“Gee,” he said with honest amazement. “They’re supposed to be effective.”

“Mmmm,” I reiterated.

“Say,” Hawk announced, “how do you like that? My namesake is here tonight. Wouldn’t you know.”

“Alex doesn’t miss a trick. Have you any idea why he’s here?”

“Probably trying to make some deal with Abolafia. Her investigation starts tomorrow.”

“Oh.” I thought over some of those things I had thought before. “Do you know a Maud Hinkle?”

His puzzled look said “no” pretty convincingly.

“She bills herself as one of the upper echelon in the arcane organization of which I spoke.”
“Yeah?”
“She ended our interview earlier this evening with a little homily about hawks and helicopters. I took our subsequent encounter as a fillip of coincidence. But now I discover that the evening has confirmed her intimations of plurality.” I shook my head. “Hawk, I am suddenly catapulted into a paranoid world where the walls not only have ears, but probably eyes, and long, claw-tipped fingers. Anyone about me—yea, even very you—could turn out to be a spy. I suspect every sewer grating and second-story window conceals binoculars, a tommygun, or worse. What I just can’t figure out is how these insidious forces, ubiquitous and omnipresent though they be, induced you to lure me into this intricate and diabolical—”

“Oh, cut it out!” He shook back his hair. “I didn’t lure—”

“Perhaps not consciously, but Special Services has Hologramic Information Storage, and their methods are insidious and cruel—”

“I said cut it out.” And all sorts of hard little things happened again. “Do you think I’d—” Then he realized how scared I was. “Look, the Hawk isn’t some small time snatch-purse. He lives in just as paranoid a world as you’re in now, only all the time. If he’s here, you can be sure there are just as many of his men—eyes and ears and fingers—as there are of Maud Hickenlooper.”

“Hinkle.”

“Anyway, it works both ways. No Singer’s going to—Look, do you really think I would—”

And even though I knew all those hard little things were scabs over pain, I said, “Yes.”

“You did something for me once, and I—”

“I gave you some more welts. That’s all.”

All the scabs pulled off.

“Hawk,” I said. “Let me see.”

He took a breath. Then he began to open the brass buttons. The flaps of his jacket fell back. The lumia colored his chest with pastel shiftings.

I felt my face wrinkle. I didn’t want to look away. I drew a hissing breath instead, which was just as bad.

He looked up. “There’re a lot more than when you were here last aren’t there?”

“You’re going to kill yourself, Hawk.”

He shrugged.

“I can’t even tell which are the ones I put there anymore.”
He started to point them out.

"Oh, come on," I said, too sharply. And for the length of three breaths, he grew more and more uncomfortable, till I saw him start to reach for the bottom button. "Boy," I said, trying to keep despair out of my voice, "why do you do it?" and ended up keeping out everything. There is nothing more despairing than a voice empty.

He shrugged, saw I didn’t want that, and for a moment anger flickered in his green eyes. I didn’t want that either. So he said: "Look . . . you touch a person, softly, gently, and maybe you even do it with love. And, well, I guess a piece of information goes on up to the brain where something interprets it as pleasure. Maybe something up there in my head interprets the information all wrong. . . ."

I shook my head. "You’re a Singer. Singers are supposed to be eccentric, sure; but—"

Now he was shaking his head. Then the anger opened up. And I saw an expression move from all those spots that had communicated pain through the rest of his features, and vanish without ever becoming a word. Once more he looked down at the wounds that webbed his thin body.

"Button it up, boy. I’m sorry I said anything."

Halfway up the lapels his hands stopped. "You really think I’d turn you in?"

"Button it up."

He did. Then he said, "Oh." And then, "You know, it’s midnight."

"Edna just gave me the Word."

"Which is?"

"Agate."

I nodded.

He finished closing his collar. "What are you thinking about?"

"Cows."

"Cows?" Hawk asked. "What about them?"

"You ever been on a dairy farm?"

He shook his head.

"To get the most milk, you keep the cows practically in suspended animation. They’re fed intravenously from a big tank that pipes nutrients out and down, branching into smaller and smaller pipes until it gets to all those high yield semi-corpse."

"I’ve seen pictures."

"People."
"... and cows?"
"You've given me the Word. And now it begins to funnel down, branching out, with me telling others, and them telling still others, till by midnight tomorrow..."
"I'll go get the—"
"Hawk?"
He turned back. "What?"
"You say you don't think I'm going to be the victim of any hanky-panky with the mysterious forces that know more than we— Okay, that's your opinion. But as soon as I get rid of this stuff, I'm going to make the most distracting exit you've ever seen."

Two little lines bit down Hawk's forehead. "Are you sure I haven't seen this one before?"
"As a matter of fact, I think you have." Now I grinned. "Oh," Hawk said, then made a sound that had the structure of laughing but was all breath. "I'll get the Hawk."
He ducked out between the trees.
I glanced up at the lozenges of moonlight in the leaves.
I looked down at my briefcase.
Up between the rocks, stepping around the long grass, came the Hawk. He wore a gray evening suit; a gray silk turtleneck. Above his craggy face his head was completely shaved.
"Mr. Cadwaliter-Erickson?" He held out his hand.
I shook: small sharp bones in loose skin. "Does one call you Mr. . . .?"
"Arty."
"Arty the Hawk." I tried to look like I wasn't giving his gray attire the once-over.
He smiled. "Arty the Hawk. Yeah. I picked that name up when I was younger than our friend down there. Alex says you got... well, some things that are not exactly yours. That don't belong to you."
I nodded.
"Show them to me."
"You were told what—"
He brushed away the end of my sentence. "Come on, let me see."
He extended his hand, smiling affably as a bank clerk. I ran my thumb around the pressure-zip. The cover went tsk. "Tell me," I said, looking up at his head still lowered to see what I had, "what does one do about Special Services? They seem to be after me."
The head came up. Surprise changed slowly to a craggy leer. "Why, Mr. Cadwaliter-Erickson!" He gave me the up and down openly. "Keep your income steady. Keep it steady, that's one thing you can do."

"If you buy these for anything like what they're worth, that's going to be a little difficult."

"I would imagine. I could always give you less money—"

The cover went tsk again.

"—or, barring that, you could try to use your head and outwit them."

"You must have outwitted them at one time or another. You may be on an even keel now, but you had to get there from somewhere else."

Arty the Hawk's nod was downright sly. "I guess you've had a run-in with Maud. Well, I suppose congratulations are in order. And condolences. I always like to do what's in order."

"You seem to know how to take care of yourself. I mean I notice you're not out there mingling with the guests."

"There are two parties going on here tonight," Arty said. "Where do you think Alex disappears off to every five minutes?"

I frowned.

"That luminia down in the rocks"—he pointed towards my feet—"is a mandala of shifting hues on our ceiling. Alex," he chuckled, "goes scuttling off under the rocks where there is a pavilion of Oriental splendor—"

"—and a separate guest list at the door?"

"Regina is on both. I'm on both. So's the kid, Edna, Lewis, Ann—"

"Am I supposed to know all this?"

"Well, you came with a person on both lists. I just thought. . . ." He paused.

I was coming on wrong. Well. A quick change artist learns fairly quick that the verisimilitude factor in imitating someone up the scale is your confidence in your unalienable right to come on wrong. "I'll tell you," I said. "How about exchanging these"—I held out the briefcase—"for some information."

"You want to know how to stay out of Maud's clutches?" In a moment he shook his head. "It would be pretty stupid of me to tell you, even if I could. Besides, you've got your family fortunes to fall back on." He beat the front of his shirt with his thumb. "Believe me, boy. Arty the Hawk didn't
have that. I didn’t have anything like that.” His hands dropped into his pockets. “Let’s see what you got.”

I opened the case again.

The Hawk looked for a while. After a few moments he picked a couple up, turned them around, put them back down, put his hands back in his pocket. “I’ll give you sixty thousand for them, approved credit tablets.”

“What about the information I wanted?”

“I wouldn’t tell you a thing.” He smiled. “I wouldn’t tell you the time of day.”

There are very few successful thieves in this world. Still less on the other five. The will to steal is an impulse towards the absurd and the tasteless. (The talents are poetic, theatrical, a certain reverse charisma... But it is a will, as the will to order, power, love.

“All right,” I said.

Somewhere overhead I heard a faint humming.

Arty looked at me fondly. He reached under the lapel of his jacket, and took out a handful of credit tablets—the scarlet-banded tablets whose slips were ten thousand apiece.

He pulled off one. Two. Three. Four.

“You can deposit this much safely—?”

“Why do you think Maud is after me?”

Five. Six.

“Fine,” I said.

“How about throwing in the briefcase?” Arty asked.

“Ask Alex for a paper bag. If you want, I can send them—”

“Give them here.”

The humming was coming closer.

I held up the open case. Arty went in with both hands. He shoved them into his coat pockets, his pants pockets; the gray cloth was distended by angular bulges. He looked left, right. “Thanks,” he said. “Thanks.” Then he turned, and hurried down the slope with all sorts of things in his pockets that weren’t his now.

I looked up through the leaves for the noise, but I couldn’t see anything.

I stooped down now and laid my case open. I pulled open the back compartment where I kept the things that did belong to me, and rummaged hurriedly through.

Alex was just offering Puffy-eyes another scotch, while the gentleman was saying, “Has anyone seen Mrs. Silem? What’s
that humming overhead—?" when a large woman wrapped in a veil of fading fabric tottered across the rocks, screaming. Her hands were clawing at her covered face.

Alex sloshed soda over his sleeve and the man said, "Oh my God! Who's that?"

"No!" the woman shrieked. "Oh no! Help me!" waving her wrinkled fingers, brilliant with rings.

"Don't you recognize her?" That was Hawk whispering confidentially to someone else. "It's Henrietta, Countess of Effingham."

And Alex, over hearing, went hurrying to her assistance. The Countess, however; ducked between two cacti, and disappeared into the high grass. But the entire party followed. They were beating about the underbrush when a balding gentleman in a black tux, bow tie, and cummerbund coughed and said, in a very worried voice. "Excuse me, Mr. Spinnel?"

Alex whirled.

"Mr. Spinnel, my mother . . ."

"Who are you?" The interruption upset Alex terribly.

The gentleman drew himself up to announce. "The Honorable Clement Effingham," and his pants legs shook for all the world as if he had started to click his heels. But articulation failed. The expression melted on his face. "Oh, I . . . my mother, Mr. Spinnel. We were downstairs, at the other half of your party, when she got very upset. She ran up here—oh, I told her not to! I knew you'd be upset. But you must help me!" and then looked up.

The others looked too.

The helicopter blacked the moon, doffing and settling below its hazy twin parasols.

"Oh, please . . ." the gentleman said. "You look over there! Perhaps she's gone back down. I've got to"—looking quickly both ways—"find her." He hurried in one direction while everyone else hurried in others.

The humming was suddenly syncopated with a crash. Roaring now, as plastic fragments from the transparent roof chattered down through the branches, clattered on the rocks . . .

I made it into the elevator and had already thumbed the edge of my briefcase clasp, when Hawk dove between the unfolding foils. The electric-eye began to swing them open. I hit DOOR CLOSE full fist.

The boy staggered, banged shoulders on two walls, then
got back breath and balance. "Hey, there's police getting out of that helicopter!"

"Hand-picked by Maud Hinkle herself, no doubt." I pulled the other tuft of white hair from my temple. It went into the case on top of the plastiderm gloves (wrinkled thick blue veins, long carnelian nails) that had been Henrietta's hands, lying in the chiffon folds of her sari.

Then there was the downward tug of stopping. The Honorable Clement was still half on my face when the door opened.

Gray and gray, with an absolutely dismal expression on his face, the Hawk swung through the doors. Behind him people were dancing in an elaborate pavilion festooned with Oriental magnificence (and a mandala of shifting hues on the ceiling.) Arty beat me to door close. Then he gave me an odd look.

I just sighed and finished peeling off Clem.

"The police are up there?" the Hawk reiterated.

"Arty," I said, buckling my pants, "it certainly looks that way." The car gained momentum, "You look almost as upset as Alex." I shrugged the tux jacket down my arms, turning the sleeves inside out, pulled one wrist free, and jerked off the white starched dicky with the black bow tie and stuffed it into the briefcase with all my other dickies; swung the coat around and slipped on Howard Calvin Evingston's good gray herringbone. Howard (like Hank) is a redhead (but not as curly).

The Hawk raised his bare brows when I peeled off Clement's bald pate and shook out my hair.

"I noticed you aren't carrying around all those bulky things in your pocket any more."

"Oh, those have been taken care of," he said gruffly. "They're all right."

"Arty," I said, adjusting my voice down to Howard's security-provoking, ingenuous baritone, "it must have been my unabashed conceit that made me think that those Regular Service police were here just for me—"

The Hawk actually snarled. "They wouldn't be that unhappy if they got me, too."

And from his corner Hawk demanded, "You've got security here with you, don't you, Arty?"

"So what?"

"There's one way you can get out of this," Hawk hissed
at me. His jacket had come half open down his wrecked chest. "That’s if Arty takes you out with him."

"Brilliant idea," I concluded. "You want a couple of thousand back for the service?"

The idea didn’t amuse him. "I don’t want anything from you." He turned to Hawk. "I need something from you, kid. Not him. Look, I wasn’t prepared for Maud. If you want me to get your friend out, then you’ve got to do something for me."

The boy looked confused.

I thought I saw smugness on Arty’s face, but the expression resolved into concern. "You’ve got to figure out some way to fill the lobby up with people, and fast."

I was going to ask why but then I didn’t know the extent of Arty’s security. I was going to ask how but the floor pushed up at my feet and the doors swung open. "If you can’t do it," the Hawk growled to Hawk, "none of us will get out of here. None of us!"

I had no idea what the kid was going to do, but when I started to follow him out into the lobby, the Hawk grabbed my arm and hissed, "Stay here, you idiot!"

I stepped back. Arty was leaning on Door Open.

Hawk sprinted towards the pool. And splashed in.

He reached the braziers on their twelve foot tripods and began to climb.

"He’s going to hurt himself!" the Hawk whispered.

"Yeah," I said, but I don’t think my cynicism got through. Below the great dish of fire, Hawk was fiddling. Then something under there came loose. Something else went Clang! And something else spurted out across the water. The fire raced along it and hit the pool, churning and roaring like hell.

A black arrow with a golden head: Hawk dove.

I bit the inside of my cheek as the alarm sounded. Four people in uniforms were coming across the blue carpet. Another group were crossing in the other direction, saw the flames, and one of the women screamed. I let out my breath, thinking carpet and walls and ceiling would be flame-proof. But I kept losing focus on the idea before the sixty-odd infernal feet.

Hawk surfaced on the edge of the pool in the only clear spot left, rolled over on to the carpet, clutching his face. And rolled. And rolled. Then, came to his feet.

Another elevator spilled out a load of passengers who
gaped and gasped. A crew came through the doors now with fire-fighting equipment. The alarm was still sounding.

Hawk turned to look at the dozen-odd people in the lobby. Water puddled the carpet about his drenched and shiny pants legs. Flame turned the drops on his cheeks and hair to flickering copper and blood.

He banged his fists against his wet thighs, took a deep breath, and against the roar and the bells and the whispering, he Sang.

Two people ducked back into two elevators. From a doorway half a dozen more emerged. The elevators returned half a minute later with a dozen people each. I realized the message was going through the building, there’s a Singer Singing in the lobby.

The lobby filled. The flames growled, the fire fighters stood around shuffling, and Hawk, feet apart on the blue rug, by the burning pool Sang, and Sang of a bar off Times Square full of thieves, morphadine-heads, brawlers, drunkards, women too old to trade what they still held out for barter, and trade just too nasty-grimy, where, earlier in the evening, a brawl had broken out, and an old man had been critically hurt in the fray.

Arty tugged at my sleeve.

“What . . . ?”

“Come on,” he hissed.

The elevator door closed behind us.

We ambled through the attentive listeners, stopping to watch, stopping to hear. I couldn’t really do Hawk justice. A lot of that slow amble I spent wondering what sort of security Arty had:

Standing behind a couple in a bathrobe who were squinting into the heat, I decided it was all very simple. Arty wanted simply to drift away through a crowd, so he’d conveniently gotten Hawk to manufacture one.

To get to the door we had to pass through practically a cordon of Regular Service policemen who I didn’t think had anything to do with what might have been going on in the roof garden; they’d simply collected to see the fire and stayed for the Song. When Arty tapped one on the shoulder, “Excuse me please,” to get by, the policeman glanced at him, glanced away, then did a Mack Sennet double-take. But another policeman caught the whole interchange, and touched the first on the arm and gave him a frantic little headshake. Then both men turned very deliberately back to watch the
Singer. While the earthquake in my chest stilled, I decided that the Hawk's security complex of agents and counter agents, maneuvering and machinating through the flaming lobby, must be of such finesse and intricacy that to attempt understanding was to condemn oneself to total paranoia.

Arty opened the final door.

I stepped from the last of the air conditioning into the night.

We hurried down the ramp.

"Hey, Arty ... ?"

"You go that way." He pointed down the street. "I go this way."

"Eh ... what's that way?" I pointed in my direction.

"Twelve Towers sub-sub-subway station. Look. I've got you out of there. Believe me, you're safe for the time being. Now go take a train someplace interesting. Goodbye. Go on now." Then Arty the Hawk put his fists in his pockets and hurried up the street.

I started down, keeping near the wall, expecting someone to get me with a blow-dart from a passing car, a deathray from the shrubbery.

I reached the sub.
And still nothing had happened.

Agate gave way to Malachite:
Tourmaline:
Beryl (during which month I turned twenty-six):
Porphyry:

Sapphire (that month I took the ten thousand I hadn't frittered away and invested it in The Glacier, a perfectly legitimate ice cream palace on Triton—the first and only ice cream palace on Triton—which took off like fireworks; all investors were returned eight hundred percent, no kidding. Two weeks later I'd lost half of those earnings on another set of preposterous illegalities, and was feeling quite depressed, but The Glacier kept pulling them in. The new Word came by):

Cinnabar:
Turquoise:
Tiger's Eye:

Hector Calhoun Eisenhower finally buckled down and spent these three months learning how to be a respectable member of the upper middle class underworld. That is a long novel in itself. High finance; corporate law; how to hire help: Whew! But the complexities of life have always in-
trigued me. I got through it. The basic rule is still the same: observe carefully, imitate effectively.

Garnet:

Topaz (I whispered that word on the roof of the Trans-Satellite Power Station, and caused my hirelings to commit two murders. And you know? I didn’t feel a thing):

Taafite:

We were nearing the end of Taafite. I’d come back to Triton on strictly Glacial business. A bright pleasant morning it was: the business went fine. I decided to take off the afternoon and go sight-seeing in the Torrents.

“. . . two hundred and thirty yards high,” the guide announced and everyone around me leaned on the rail and gazed up through the plastic corridor at the cliffs of frozen methane that soared through Neptune’s cold green glare.

“Just a few yards down the catwalk, ladies and gentlemen, you can catch your first glimpse of the Well of This World, where, over a million years ago, a mysterious force science still cannot explain caused twenty-four square miles of frozen methane to liquify for no more than a few hours during which time a whirlpool twice the depth of Earth’s Grand Canyon was caught for the ages when the temperature dropped once more to . . .”

People were moving down the corridor when I saw her smiling. My hair was black and nappy and my skin was chestnut dark today.

I was just feeling overconfident, I guess, so I kept standing around next to her. I even contemplated coming on. Then she broke the whole thing up by suddenly turning to me and saying, perfectly deadpan: “Why, if it isn’t Hamlet Caliban Enobarbus!”

Old reflexes realigned my features to couple the frown of confusion with the smile of indulgence. Pardon me, but I think you must have mistaken . . . No, I didn’t say it. “Maud,” I said, “have you come here to tell me that my time has come?”

She wore several shades of blue, with a large blue brooch at her shoulder, obviously glass. Still, I realized as I looked about the other tourists, she was more inconspicuous amidst their finery than I was. “No,” she said. “Actually I’m on vacation. Just like you.”

“No kidding?” We had dropped behind the crowd. “You are kidding.”

“Special Services of Earth, while we cooperate with Special
Services on other worlds, has no official jurisdiction on Triton. And since you came here with money, and most of your recorded gain in income has been through The Glacier, while Regular Services on Triton might be glad to get you, Special Services is not after you as yet.” She smiled. “I haven’t been to The Glacier. It would really be nice to say I’d been taken there by one of the owners. Could we go for a soda, do you think?”

The swirled sides of the Well of This World dropped away in opalescent grandeur. Tourists gazed and the guide went on about indices of refraction, angles of incline.

“I don’t think you trust me,” Maud said.

My look said she was right.

“Have you ever been involved with narcotics?” she asked suddenly.

I frowned.

“No, I’m serious. I want to try and explain something... a point of information that may make both our lives easier.”

“Peripherally,” I said. “I’m sure you’ve got down all the information in your dossiers.”

“I was involved with them a good deal more than peripherally for several years,” Maud said. “Before I got into Special Services, I was in the Narcotics Division of the regular force. And the people we dealt with twenty-four hours a day were drug users, drug pushers. To catch the big ones we had to make friends with the little ones. To catch the bigger ones, we had to make friends with the big. We had to keep the same hours they kept, talk the same language, for months at a time live on the same streets, in the same building.” She stepped back from the rail to let a youngster ahead.

“I had to be sent away to take the morphadine de-toxification cure twice while I was on the narco squad. And I had a better record than most.”

“What’s your point?”

“Just this. You and I are traveling in the same circles, if only because of our respective chosen professions. You’d be surprised how many people we already know in common. Don’t be shocked when we run into each other crossing Sovereign Plaza in Bellona one day, then two weeks later wind up at the same restaurant for lunch at Lux on Iapetus. Though the circles we move in cover worlds, they are the same, and not that big.”

“Come on.” I don’t think I sounded happy. “Let me treat you to that ice cream.” We started back down the walkway.
"You know," Maud said, "if you do stay out of Special Services' hands here and on Earth long enough, eventually you'll be up there with a huge income growing on a steady slope. It might be a few years, but it's possible. There's no reason now for us to be personal enemies. You just may, someday, reach that point where Special Services loses interest in you as quarry. Oh, we'll still see each other, run into each other. We get a great deal of our information from people up there. We're in a position to help you too, you see."

"You've been casting holograms again."

She shrugged. Her face looked positively ghostly under the pale planet. She said, when we reached the artificial lights of the city, "I did meet two friends of yours recently, Lewis and Ann."

"The Singers?"

She nodded.

"Oh, I don't really know them well."

"They seem to know a lot about you. Perhaps through that other Singer, Hawk."

"Oh," I said again. "Did they say how he was?"

"I read that he was recovering about two months back. But nothing since then."

"That's about all I know too," I said.

"The only time I've ever seen him," Maud said, "was right after I pulled him out."

Arty and I had gotten out of the lobby before Hawk actually finished. The next day on the news-tapes I learned that when his Song was over, he shrugged out of his jacket, dropped his pants, and walked back into the pool. The fire-fighter crew suddenly woke up; people began running around and screaming: he'd been rescued, seventy percent of his body covered with second and third degree burns. I'd been industriously not thinking about it.

"You pulled him out?"

"Yes. I was in the helicopter that landed on the roof," Maud said. "I thought you'd be impressed to see me."

"Oh," I said. "How did you get to pull him out?"

"Once you got going, Arty's security managed to jam the elevator service above the seventy-first floor, so we didn't get to the lobby till after you were out of the building. That's when Hawk tried to—"

"But it was you actually saved him, though?"

"The firemen in that neighborhood hadn't had a fire in
twelve years! I don’t think they even knew how to operate the equipment. I had my boys foam the pool, then I waded in and dragged him—"

“Oh,” I said again. I had been trying hard, almost succeeding, these eleven months. I wasn’t there when it happened. It wasn’t my affair. Maud was saying:

“We thought we might have gotten a lead on you from him. But when I got him to the shore, he was completely out, just a mass of open, running—"

“I should have known the Special Services uses Singers too,” I said. “Everyone else does. The Word changes today, doesn’t it? Lewis and Ann didn’t pass on what the new one is?”

“I saw them yesterday, and the Word doesn’t change for another eight hours. Besides, they wouldn’t tell me, anyway.” She glanced at me and frowned. “They really wouldn’t.”

“Let’s go have some sodas,” I said. “We’ll make small talk, and listen carefully to each other, while we affect an air of nonchalance; you will try to pick up things that will make it easier to catch me; I will listen for things you let slip that might make it easier for me to avoid you.”

“Um-hm.” She nodded.

“Why did you contact me in that bar, anyway?”

Eyes of ice: “I told you, we simply travel in the same circles. We’re quite likely to be in the same bar on the same night.”

“I guess that’s just one of the things I’m not supposed to understand, huh?”

Her smile was appropriately ambiguous. I didn’t push it.

It was a very dull afternoon. I couldn’t repeat one exchange from the nonsense we babbled over the cherry peaked mountains of whipped cream. We both exerted so much energy to keep up the appearance of being amused, I doubt either one of us could see our way to picking up anything meaningful; if anything meaningful was said.

She left. I brooded some more on the charred phoenix.

The Steward of The Glacier called me into the kitchen to ask about a shipment of contraband milk (The Glacier makes all its own ice cream) that I had been able to wangle on my last trip to Earth (it’s amazing how little progress there has been in dairy farming over the last ten years; it was depressingly easy to hornswoggle that bumbling Vermonter) and under the white lights and great plastic churn-
ing vats, while I tried to get things straightened out, he made some comment about the Heist Cream Emperor; that didn’t do any good.

By the time the evening crowd got there, and the moog was making music and the crystal walls were blazing; and the floor show—a new addition that week—had been cajoled into going on anyway (a trunk of costumes had gotten lost in shipment [or swiped, but I wasn’t about to tell them that]); and wandering through the tables I, personally, had caught a very grimy little girl, obviously out of her head on morph, trying to pick up a customer’s pocketbook from the back of a chair—I just caught her by the wrist, made her let go, and led her to the door, daintily, while she blinked at me with dilated eyes and the customer never even knew—and the floor show, having decided what the hell, were doing their act au naturel, and everyone was having just a high old time, I was feeling really bad.

I went outside, sat on the wide steps, and growled when I had to move aside to let people in or out. About the seventy-fifth growl, the person I growled at stopped and boomed down at me, “I thought I'd find you if I looked hard enough! I mean if I really looked.”

I looked at the hand that was flapping at my shoulder, followed the arm up to a black turtleneck, where there was a beefy, bald, grinning head: “Arty,” I said, “what are...?”

But he was still flapping and laughing with impervious Gemütlichkeit.

“You wouldn’t believe the time I had getting a picture of you, boy. Had to bribe one of the Triton Special Services Department. That quick change bit. Great gimmick. Just great!” The Hawk sat down next to me and dropped his hand on my knee. “Wonderful place you got here. I like it, like it a lot.” Small bones in veined dough. “But not enough to make you an offer on it yet. You’re learning fast there, though. I can tell you’re learning fast. I’m going to be proud to be able to say I was the one who gave you your first b1g break.” His hand came away and he began to knead it onto the other. “If you’re going to move into the big time, you have to have at least one foot planted firmly on the right side of the law. The whole idea is to make yourself indispensable to the good people; once that’s done, a good crook has the keys to all the treasure houses in the system. But I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”
“Arty,” I said, “do you think the two of us should be seen together here . . . ?”

The Hawk held his hand above his lap and joggled it with a deprecating motion. “Nobody can get a picture of us. I got my men all around. I never go anywhere in public without my security. Heard you’ve been looking into the security business yourself,” which was true. “Good idea. Very good. I like the way you’re handling yourself.”

“Thanks. Arty, I’m not feeling too hot this evening. I came out here to get some air . . . .”

Arty’s hand fluttered again. “Don’t worry, I won’t hang around. You’re right. We shouldn’t be seen. Just passing by and wanted to say hello. Just hello.” He got up. “That’s all.” He started down the steps.

“Arty?”

He looked back.

“Sometime soon you will come back; and that time you will want to buy out my share of The Glacier, because I’ll have gotten too big; and I won’t want to sell because I’ll think I’m big enough to fight you. So we’ll be enemies for a while. You’ll try to kill me. I’ll try to kill you.”

On his face, first the frown of confusion; then, the indulgent smile. “I see you’ve caught on to the idea of hologramic information. Very good. Good. It’s the only way to outwit Maud. Make sure all your information relates to the whole scope of the situation. It’s the only way to outwit me too.”

He smiled, started to turn, but thought of something else. “If you can fight me off long enough, and keep growing, keep your security in tiptop shape, eventually we’ll get to the point where it’ll be worth both our whiles to work together again. If you can just hold out, we’ll be friends again. Someday. You just watch. Just wait.”

“Thanks for telling me.”

The Hawk looked at his watch. “Well. Goodbye.” I thought he was going to leave finally. But he glanced up again. “Have you got the new Word?”

“That’s right,” I said. “It went out tonight. What is it?”

The Hawk waited till the people coming down the steps were gone. He looked hastily about, then leaned towards me with hands cupped at his mouth, rasped, “Pyrite,” and winked hugely. “I just got it from a gal who got it direct from Colette” (one of the three Singers of Triton). Then he turned, jounced down the steps, and shouldered his way into the crowds passing on the strip.
I sat there mulling through the year till I had to get up and walk. All walking does to my depressive moods is add the reinforcing rhythm of paranoia. By the time I was coming back, I had worked out a dilly of a delusional system: The Hawk had already begun to weave some security ridden plot about me which ended when we were all trapped in some dead end alley, and trying to get aid I called out, "Pyrite!" which would turn out not to be the Word at all but served to identify me for the man in the dark gloves with the gun/grenades/gas.

There was a cafeteria on the corner. In the light from the window, clustered over the wreck by the curb was a bunch of nasty-grimies (à la Triton: chains around the wrists, bumble-bee tattoo on cheek, high heel boots on those who could afford them). Straddling the smashed headlight was the little morph-head I had ejected earlier from The Glacier.

On a whim I went up to her. "Hey?"

"You get the new Word yet?"

She rubbed her nose, already scratch red. "Pyrite," she said. "It just came down about an hour ago."

"Who told you?"

She considered my question. "I got it from a guy who says he got it from a guy who came in this evening from New York who picked it up there from a Singer named Hawk."

The three grimies nearest made a point of not looking at me. Those further away let themselves glance.

"Oh," I said. "Oh. Thanks."

Occam's Razor, along with any real information on how security works, hones away most such paranoia. Pyrite. At a certain level in my line of work, paranoia's just an occupational disease. At least I was certain that Arty (and Maud) probably suffered from it as much as I did.

The lights were out on The Glacier's marquee. Then I remembered what I had left inside and ran up the stairs.

The door was locked. I pounded on the glass a couple of times, but everyone had gone home. And the thing that made it worse was that I could see it sitting on the counter of the coat-check alcove under the orange bulb. The steward had probably put it there, thinking I might arrive before everybody left. Tomorrow at noon Ho Chi Eng had to pick up
his reservation for the Marigold Suite on the Interplanetary Liner *The Platinum Swan*, which left at one-thirty for Belleona. And there behind the glass doors of The Glacier, it waited with the proper wig, as well as the epicanthic folds that would halve Mr. Eng's slow eyes of jet.

I actually thought of breaking in. But the more practical solution was to get the hotel to wake me at nine and come in with the cleaning man. I turned around and started down the steps; and the thought struck me, and made me terribly sad, so that I blinked and smiled just from reflex: it was probably just as well to leave it there till morning, because there was nothing in it that wasn't mine, anyway.
APPENDIX

HUGO AWARDS 1968—1970

26TH CONVENTION—OAKLAND, 1968

Novel—LORD OF LIGHT by Roger Zelazny
Novella (tie)—“Weyr Search” by Anne McCaffrey
          “Riders of the Purple Wage” by Philip José Farmer
Novelette—“Gonna Roll the Bones” by Fritz Leiber
Short Story—“I Have No Mouth, And I Must Scream”
          by Harlan Ellison
Dramatic Presentation—“City on the Edge of Forever”
          by Harlan Ellison (Star Trek)
Professional Magazine—IF
Professional Artist—Jack Gaughan
Amateur Publication—Amra, George Scithers, ed.
Fan Artist—George Barr
Fan Writer—Ted White

27TH CONVENTION—ST. LOUIS, 1969

Novel—STAND ON ZANZIBAR by John Brunner
Novella—“Nightwings” by Robert Silverberg
Novelette—“The Sharing of Flesh” by Poul Anderson
Short Story—“The Beast That Shouted Love at the Heart of the World” by Harlan Ellison
Professional Artist—Jack Gaughan
Professional Magazine—The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction
Dramatic—“2001”
APPENDIX

Fanzine—SF Review, Dick Geis, ed.
Fan Writer—Harry Warner, Jr.
Fan Artist—Vaughn Bode
Special Hugo—to Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins for the best moonlanding ever

28TH CONVENTION—HEIDELBERG, 1970

Novel—LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS by Ursula K. LeGuin
Novella—“Ship of Shadows” by Fritz Leiber
Short Story—“Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-Precious Stones” by Samuel R. Delany
Professional Magazine—The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction
Professional Artist—Kelly Freas
Fanzine—SF Review, Dick Geis, ed.
Fan Writer—Bob Tucker
Fan Artist—Tim Kirk
The Hugo Award is to science fiction what the Oscar is to the film industry. Every year the coveted award is presented at the World Science Fiction Convention to the author of the best novelette or short story in the realm of science fiction. Here are eight of these award-winning stories for the years 1968 to 1970, each with an introduction by Isaac Asimov. All of the stories are unusual and contain that special something that marked them as prize-winners. Among them are Anne McCaffrey’s “Weyr Search,” Fritz Leiber’s “Gonna Roll the Bones,” and Harlan Ellison’s “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream.”

THE HUGO WINNERS provides a lavish treat of the very best writing chosen by the most prominent people in the field—truly superior science fiction.