CHRONOPOLIS
and Other Stories

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and Other Stories

by J. G. BALLARD

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The Voices of Time

One

Later Powers often thought of Whitby, and the strange grooves the biologist had cut, apparently at random, all over the floor of the empty swimming pool. An inch deep and twenty feet long, interlocking to form an elaborate ideogram like a Chinese character, they had taken him all summer to complete, and he had obviously thought about little else, working away tirelessly through the long desert afternoons. Powers had watched him from his office window at the far end of the neurology wing, carefully marking out his pegs and string, carrying away the cement chips in a small canvas bucket. After Whitby's suicide no one had bothered about the grooves, but Powers often borrowed the supervisor's key and let himself into the disused pool, and would look down at the labyrinth of moldering gullies, half-filled with water leaking in from the chlorinator, an enigma now past any solution.

Initially, however, Powers was too preoccupied with completing his work at the Clinic and planning his own final withdrawal. After the first frantic weeks of panic he had managed to accept an uneasy compromise that allowed him to view his predicament with the detached fatalism he had previously reserved for his patients. Fortunately he was moving down the physical and mental gradients simultaneously—lethargy and inertia blunted his anxieties, a slackening metabolism made it necessary to concentrate to produce a connected thought-train. In fact, the lengthening intervals of dreamless sleep were almost restful. He found himself beginning to look forward to them, and made no effort to wake earlier than essential.

* * *

1

At first he had kept an alarm clock by his bed, and tried to compress as much activity as he could into the narrowing hours of consciousness, sorting out his library, driving over to Whitby's laboratory every morning to examine the latest batch of X-ray plates, every minute and hour rationed like the last drops of water in a canteen.

Anderson, fortunately, had unwittingly made him realize the pointlessness of this course.

After Powers had resigned from the Clinic he still continued to drive in once a week for his check-up, now little more than a formality. On what turned out to be the last occasion Anderson had perfunctorily taken his blood count, noting Powers' slacker facial muscles, fading pupil reflexes, the unshaven cheeks.

He smiled sympathetically at Powers across the desk, wondering what to say to him. Once he had put on a show of encouragement with the more intelligent patients, even tried to provide some sort of explanation. But Powers was too difficult to reach—neurosurgeon extraordinary, a man always out on the periphery, only at ease working with unfamiliar materials. To himself he thought; *I'm sorry, Robert. What can I say—"Even the sun is growing cooler—"?* He watched Powers drum his fingers restlessly on the enamel desk top, his eyes glancing at the spinal level charts hung around the office. Despite his unkempt appearance—he had been wearing the same unironed shirt and dirty white sneakers a week ago—Powers looked composed and self-possessed, like a Conrad beachcomber more or less reconciled to his own weaknesses.

"What are you doing with yourself, Robert?" he asked. "Are you still going over to Whitby's lab?"

"As much as I can. It takes me half an hour to cross the lake, and I keep on sleeping through the alarm clock. I may leave my place and move in there permanently."

Anderson frowned. "Is there much point? As far as I could make out Whitby's work was pretty speculative—" He broke off, realizing the implied criticism of Powers's own disastrous work at the Clinic, but Powers seemed to ignore this, was examining the pattern of shadows on the ceiling. "Anyway, wouldn't it be better to stay where you are, among your own things, read through Toynbee and Spengler again?"

Powers laughed shortly. "That's the last thing I want to do. I want to *forget* Toynbee and Spengler, not try to remember them. In fact, Paul, I'd like to forget everything. I don't know whether

I've got enough time, though. How much can you forget in three months?"

"Everything, I suppose, if you want to. But don't try to race the clock."

Powers nodded quietly, repeating this last remark to himself. Racing the clock was exactly what he had been doing. As he stood up and said good-bye to Anderson he suddenly decided to throw away his alarm clock, escape from his futile obsession with time. To remind himself he unfastened his wristwatch and scrambled the setting, then slipped it into his pocket. Making his way out to the car park he reflected on the freedom this simple act gave him. He would explore the lateral byways now, the side doors, as it were, in the corridors of time. Three months could be an eternity.

He picked his car out of the line and strolled over to it, shielding his eyes from the heavy sunlight beating down across the parabolic sweep of the lecture theater roof. He was about to climb in when he saw that someone had traced with a finger across the dust caked over the windshield:

96,688,365,498,721

Looking over his shoulder, he recognized the white Packard parked next to him, peered inside and saw a lean-faced young man with blond sun-bleached hair and a high cerebrotonic forehead watching him behind dark glasses. Sitting beside him at the wheel was a raven-haired girl whom he had often seen around the psychology department. She had intelligent but somehow rather oblique eyes, and Powers remembered that the younger doctors called her "the girl from Mars."

"Hello, Kaldren," Powers said to the young man. "Still following me around?"

Kaldren nodded. "Most of the time, Doctor." He sized Powers up shrewdly. "We haven't seen very much of you recently, as a matter of fact. Anderson said you'd resigned, and we noticed your laboratory was closed."

Powers shrugged. "I felt I needed a rest. As you'll understand, there's a good deal that needs rethinking."

Kaldren frowned half-mockingly. "Sorry to hear that, Doctor. But don't let these temporary setbacks depress you." He noticed the girl watching Powers with interest. "Coma's a fan of yours. I gave her your papers from *American Journal of Psychiatry*, and she's read through the whole file."

The girl smiled pleasantly at Powers, for a moment dispelling the hostility between the two men. When Powers nodded to her

she leaned across Kaldren and said: "Actually I've just finished Noguchi's autobiography—the great Japanese doctor who discovered the spirochete. Somehow you remind me of him—there's so much of yourself in all the patients you worked on."

Powers smiled wanly at her, then his eyes turned and locked involuntarily on Kaldren's. They stared at each other somberly for a moment, and a small tic in Kaldren's right cheek began to flicker irritatingly. He flexed his facial muscles, after a few seconds mastered it with an effort, obviously annoyed that Powers should have witnessed this brief embarrassment.

"How did the clinic go today?" Powers asked. "Have you had any more . . . headaches?"

Kaldren's mouth snapped shut; he looked suddenly irritable. "Whose care am I in, Doctor? Yours or Anderson's? Is that the sort of question you should be asking now?"

Powers gestured deprecatingly. "Perhaps not." He cleared his throat; the heat was ebbing the blood from his head and he felt tired and eager to get away from them. He turned toward his car, then realized that Kaldren would probably follow, either try to crowd him into the ditch or block the road and make Powers sit in his dust all the way back to the lake. Kaldren was capable of any madness.

"Well, I've got to go and collect something," he said, adding in a firmer voice, "Get in touch with me, though, if you can't reach Anderson."

He waved and walked off behind the line of cars. Reflected in the windows he could see Kaldren looking back and watching him closely.

He entered the neurology wing and paused thankfully in the cool foyer, nodding to the two nurses and the armed guard at the reception desk. For some reason the terminals sleeping in the adjacent dormitory block attracted hordes of would-be sightseers, most of them cranks with some magical antinarcoma remedy, or merely the idly curious, but a good number of quite normal people, many of whom had traveled thousands of miles, impelled toward the clinic by some strange instinct, like animals migrating to a preview of their racial graveyards.

He walked along the corridor to the supervisor's office overlooking the recreation deck, borrowed the key and made his way out through the tennis courts and calisthenics rigs to the enclosed swimming pool at the far end. It had been disused for months, and only Powers's visits kept the lock free. Stepping through, he closed

it behind him and walked past the peeling wooden stands to the deep end.

Putting a foot up on the diving board, he looked down at Whitby's ideogram. Damp leaves and bits of paper obscured it, but the outlines were just distinguishable. It covered almost the entire floor of the pool and at first glance appeared to represent a huge solar disk, with four radiating diamond-shaped arms, a crude Jungian mandala.

Wondering what had prompted Whitby to carve the device before his death, Powers noticed something moving through the debris in the center of the disk. A black, horny-shelled animal about a foot long was nosing about in the slush, heaving itself on tired legs. Its shell was articulated, and vaguely resembled an armadillo's. Reaching the edge of the disk, it stopped and hesitated, then slowly backed away into the center again, apparently unwilling or unable to cross the narrow groove.

Powers looked around, then stepped into one of the changing booths and pulled a small wooden clothes locker off its rusty wall bracket. Carrying it under one arm, he climbed down the chromium ladder into the pool and walked carefully across the slithery floor toward the animal. As he approached, it sidled away from him, but he trapped it easily, using the lid to lever it into the box.

The animal was heavy, at least the weight of a brick. Powers tapped its massive olive-black carapace with his knuckle, noting the triangular warty head jutting out below its rim like a turtle's, the thickened pads beneath the first digits of the pentadactyl forelimbs.

He watched the three-lidded eyes blinking at him anxiously from the bottom of the box.

"Expecting some really hot weather?" he murmured. "That lead umbrella you're carrying around should keep you cool."

He closed the lid, climbed out of the pool and made his way back to the supervisor's office, then carried the box out to his car.

". . . Kaldren continues to reproach me (Powers wrote in his diary). For some reason he seems unwilling to accept his isolation, is elaborating a series of private rituals to replace the missing hours of sleep. Perhaps I should tell him of my own approaching zero, but he'd probably regard this as the final unbearable insult, that I should have in excess what he so desperately yearns for. God knows what might happen.

Fortunately the nightmarish visions appear to have receded for the time being . . ."

Pushing the diary away, Powers leaned forward across the desk and stared out through the window at the white floor of the lake bed stretching toward the hills along the horizon. Three miles away, on the far shore, he could see the circular bowl of the radio-telescope revolving slowly in the clear afternoon air, as Kaldren tirelessly trapped the sky, sluicing in millions of cubic parsecs of sterile ether, like the nomads who trapped the sea along the shores of the Persian Gulf.

Behind him the air-conditioner murmured quietly, cooling the pale blue walls half-hidden in the dim light. Outside the air was bright and oppressive, the heat waves rippling up from the clumps of gold-tinted cacti below the Clinic, blurring the sharp terraces of the twenty-story neurology block. There, in the silent dormitories behind the sealed shutters, the terminals slept their long dreamless sleep. There were now over five hundred of them in the Clinic, the vanguard of a vast somnambulist army massing for its last march. Only five years had elapsed since the first narcoma syndrome had been recognized, but already huge government hospitals in the east were being readied for intakes in the thousands, as more and more cases came to light.

Powers felt suddenly tired, and glanced at his wrist, wondering how long he had till eight o'clock, his bedtime for the next week or so. Already he missed the dusk, and he knew he would soon wake to his last dawn.

His watch was in his hip pocket. He remembered his decision not to use his timepieces, and sat back and stared at the bookshelves beside the desk. There were rows of green-covered AEC publications he had removed from Whitby's library, papers in which the biologist described his work out in the Pacific after the H-tests. Many of them Powers knew almost by heart; he had read them a hundred times in an effort to grasp Whitby's last conclusions. Toynbee would certainly be easier to forget.

His eyes dimmed momentarily, as the tall black wall in the rear of his mind cast its great shadow over his brain. He reached for the diary, thinking of the girl in Kaldren's car—Coma, he had called her, another of his insane jokes—and her reference to Noguchi. Actually the comparison should have been made with Whitby, not himself; the monsters in the lab were nothing more than fragmented mirrors of Whitby's mind, like the grotesque radio-

shielded frog he had found that morning in the swimming pool.

Thinking of the girl Coma, and the heartening smile she had given him, he wrote:

Woke 6:33 a.m. *Last session with Anderson. He made it plain he's seen enough of me, and from now on I'm better alone. To sleep* 8:00? (*These countdowns terrify me.*)

He paused, then added:

Good-bye, Eniwetok.

Two

He saw the girl again the next day at Whitby's laboratory. He had driven over after breakfast with the new specimen, eager to get it into a vivarium before it died. The only previous armored mutant he had come across had nearly broken his neck. Speeding along the lake road a month or so earlier he had struck it with the off-side front wheel, expecting the small creature to flatten instantly. Instead its hard lead-packed shell had remained rigid, even though the organism within it had been pulped, and the impact had flung the car heavily into the ditch. He had gone back for the shell, later weighed it at the laboratory, found it contained over six hundred grams of lead.

Quite a number of plants and animals were building up heavy metals as radiological shields. In the hills behind the beach house a couple of old-time prospectors were renovating the derelict gold-panning equipment abandoned over eighty years ago. They had noticed the bright yellow tints of the cacti, run an analysis and found that the plants were assimilating gold in extractable quantities, although the soil concentrations were unworkable. Oak Ridge was at last paying a dividend!

Waking that morning just after 6:45—ten minutes later than the previous day (he had switched on the radio, heard one of the regular morning programs as he climbed out of bed)—he had eaten a light unwanted breakfast, then spent an hour packing away some of the books in his library, crating them up and taping on address labels to his brother.

* * *

He reached Whitby's laboratory half an hour later. This was housed in a 100-foot-wide geodesic dome built beside his chalet on the west shore of the lake about a mile from Kaldren's summer house. The chalet had been closed after Whitby's suicide, and many of the experimental plants and animals had died before Powers had managed to receive permission to use the laboratory.

As he turned into the driveway he saw the girl standing on the apex of the yellow-ribbed dome, her slim figure silhouetted against the sky. She waved to him, then began to step down across the glass polyhedrons and jumped nimbly into the driveway beside the car.

"Hello," she said, giving him a welcoming smile. "I came over to see your zoo. Kaldren said you wouldn't let me in if he came so I made him stay behind."

She waited for Powers to say something while he searched for his keys, then volunteered, "If you like, I can wash your shirt."

Powers grinned at her, peered down ruefully at his dust-stained sleeves. "Not a bad idea. I thought I was beginning to look a little uncared-for." He unlocked the door, took Coma's arm. "I don't know why Kaldren told you that—he's welcome here any time he likes."

"What have you got in there?" Coma asked, pointing at the wooden box he was carrying as they walked between the gear-laden benches.

"A distant cousin of ours whom I found. Interesting little chap. I'll introduce you in a moment."

Sliding partitions divided the dome into four chambers. Two of them were storerooms, filled with spare tanks, apparatus, cartons of animal food and test rigs. They crossed the third section, almost filled by a powerful X-ray projector, a giant 250-amp G.E. Maxitron, angled onto a revolving table, concrete shielding blocks lying around ready for use like huge building bricks.

The fourth chamber contained Powers's zoo, the vivaria jammed together along the benches and in the sinks, with big colored cardboard charts and memos pinned onto the ventilator hoods above them. A tangle of rubber tubing and power leads trailed across the floor from the tanks. As they walked past the lines of tanks dim forms shifted behind the frosted glass, and at the far end of the aisle there was a sudden scurrying in a large-scale cage by Powers's desk.

Putting the box down on his chair, he picked a packet of peanuts off the desk and went over to the cage. A small black-haired

chimpanzee wearing a dented jet pilot's helmet swarmed deftly up the bars to him, chirped happily, and then jumped down to a miniature control panel against the rear wall of the cage. Rapidly it flicked a series of buttons and toggles, and a succession of colored lights lit up like a juke box and jangled out a two-second blast of music.

"Good boy," Powers said encouragingly, patting the chimp's back and shoveling the peanuts into its hands. "You're getting much too clever for that one, aren't you?"

The chimp tossed the peanuts into the back of its throat with the smooth easy motions of a conjurer, jabbering at Powers in a singsong voice.

Coma laughed and took some of the nuts from Powers. "He's sweet. I think he's talking to you."

Powers nodded. "Quite right, he is. Actually he's got a two-hundred-word vocabulary, but his voice box scrambles it all up." He opened a small refrigerator by the desk, took out half a packet of sliced bread and passed a couple of pieces to the chimp. It picked an electric toaster off the floor and placed it in the middle of a low wobbling table in the center of the cage, whipped the pieces into the slots. Powers pressed a tab on the switchboard beside the cage and the toaster began to crackle softly.

"He's one of the brightest we've had here, about as intelligent as a five-year-old child, though much more self-sufficient in a lot of ways." The two pieces of toast jumped out of their slots and the chimp caught them neatly, nonchalantly patting its helmet each time, then ambled off into a small ramshackle kennel and relaxed back with one arm out of a window, sliding the toast into its mouth.

"He built that house himself," Powers went on, switching off the toaster. "Not a bad effort, really." He pointed to a yellow polythene bucket by the front door of the kennel, from which a battered looking geranium protruded. "Tends that plant, cleans up the cage, pours out an endless stream of wisecracks. Pleasant fellow all around."

Coma was smiling broadly to herself. "Why the space helmet, though?"

Powers hesitated. "Oh, it—er—it's for his own protection. Sometimes he gets rather bad headaches. His predecessors all—" He broke off and turned away. "Let's have a look at some of the other inmates."

He moved down the line of tanks, beckoning Coma with him. "We'll start at the beginning." He lifted the glass lid off one of the

tanks, and Coma peered down into a shallow bath of water, where a small round organism with slender tendrils was nestling in a rockery of shells and pebbles.

"Sea anemone. Or was. Simple coelenterate with an open-ended body cavity." He pointed down to a thickened ridge of tissue around the base. "It's sealed up the cavity, converted the channel into a rudimentary notochord. It's the first plant ever to develop a nervous system. Later the tendrils will knot themselves into a ganglion, but already they're sensitive to color. Look." He borrowed the violet handkerchief in Coma's breast pocket and spread it across the tank. The tendrils flexed and stiffened and then began to weave slowly, as if they were trying to focus.

"The strange thing is that they're completely insensitive to white light. Normally the tendrils register shifting pressure gradients, like the tympanic diaphragms in your ears. Now it's almost as if they can *hear* primary colors. That suggests it's readapting itself for a nonaquatic existence in a static world of violent color contrasts."

Coma shook her head, puzzled. "Why, though?"

"Hold on a moment. Let me put you in the picture first." They moved along the bench to a series of drum-shaped cages made of wire mosquito netting. Above the first was a large white cardboard screen bearing a blown-up microphoto of a tall pagodalike chain, topped by the legend: "Drosophila: 15 roentgens/min."

Powers tapped a small perspex window in the drum. "Fruit fly. Its huge chromosomes make it a useful test vehicle." He bent down, pointed to a gray V-shaped honeycomb suspended from the roof. A few flies emerged from entrances, moving about busily. "Usually it's solitary, a nomadic scavenger. Now it forms itself into well-knit social groups, has begun to secrete a thin sweet lymph something like honey."

"What's this?" Coma asked, touching the screen.

"Diagram of a key gene in the operation." He traced a spray of arrows leading from a link in the chain. The arrows were labeled: *Lymph gland* and subdivided *sphincter muscles, epithelium, templates.*

"It's rather like the perforated sheet music of a player piano," Powers commented, "or a computer punch tape. Knock out one link with an X-ray beam, lose a characteristic, change the score."

Coma was peering through the window of the next cage and pulling an unpleasant face. Over her shoulder Powers saw she was watching an enormous spiderlike insect, as big as a hand, its dark

hairy legs as thick as fingers. The compound eyes had been built up so that they resembled giant rubies.

"He looks unfriendly," she said. "What's that sort of rope ladder he's spinning?" As she moved a finger to her mouth the spider came to life, retreated into the cage, and began spewing out a complex skein of interlinked gray thread which it slung in long loops from the roof of the cage.

"A web," Powers told her. "Except that it consists of nervous tissue. The ladders form an external neural plexus, an inflatable brain as it were, that he can pump up to whatever size the situation calls for. A sensible arrangement, really, far better than our own."

Coma backed away. "Gruesome. I wouldn't like to go into his parlor."

"Oh, he's not as frightening as he looks. Those huge eyes staring at you are blind. Or, rather, their optical sensitivity has shifted down the band; the retinas will only register gamma radiation. Your wristwatch has luminous hands. When you moved it across the window he started thinking. World War IV should really bring him into his element."

They strolled back to Powers's desk. He put a coffee pan over a Bunsen and pushed a chair across to Coma. Then he opened the box, lifted out the armored frog and put it down on a sheet of blotting paper.

"Recognize him? Your old childhood friend, the common frog. He's built himself quite a solid little air raid shelter." He carried the animal across to a sink, turned on the tap and let the water play softly over its shell. Wiping his hands on his shirt, he came back to the desk.

Coma brushed her long hair off her forehead, watched him curiously.

"Well, what's the secret?"

Powers lit a cigarette. "There's no secret. Teratologists have been breeding monsters for years. Have you ever heard of the 'silent pair'?"

She shook her head.

Powers stared moodily at the cigarette for a moment, riding the kick the first one of the day always gave him. "The so-called 'silent pair' is one of modern genetics' oldest problems, the apparently baffling mystery of the two inactive genes which occur in a small percentage of all living organisms, and appear to have no intelligible role in their structure or development. For a long while now biologists have been trying to activate them, but the difficulty

is partly in identifying the silent genes in the fertilized germ cells of parents known to contain them, and partly in focusing a narrow enough X-ray beam which will do no damage to the remainder of the chromosome. However, after about ten years' work Dr. Whitby successfully developed a whole-body irradiation technique based on his observation of radiobiological damage at Eniwetok."

Powers paused for a moment. "He had noticed that there appeared to be more biological damage after the tests—that is, a greater transport of energy—than could be accounted for by direct radiation. What was happening was that the protein lattices in the genes were building up energy in the way that any vibrating membrane accumulates energy when it resonates—you remember the analogy of the bridge collapsing under the soldiers marching in step—and it occurred to him that if he could first identify the critical resonance frequency of the lattices in any particular silent gene he could then radiate the entire living organism, and not simply its germ cells, with a low field that would act selectively on the silent gene and cause no damage to the remainder of the chromosomes, whose lattices would resonate critically only at other specific frequencies."

Powers gestured around the laboratory with his cigarette. "You see some of the fruits of this 'resonance transfer' technique around you."

Coma nodded. "They've had their silent genes activated?"

"Yes, all of them. These are only a few of the thousands of specimens who have passed through here, and as you've seen, the results are pretty dramatic."

He reached up and pulled across a section of the sun curtain. They were sitting just under the lip of the dome, and the mounting sunlight had begun to irritate him.

In the comparative darkness Coma noticed a stroboscope winking slowly in one of the tanks at the end of the bench behind her. She stood up and went over to it, examining a tall sunflower with a thickened stem and greatly enlarged receptacle. Packed around the flower, so that only its head protruded, was a chimney of gray-white stones, neatly cemented together and labeled:

Cretaceous Chalk: 60,000,000 years

Beside it on the bench were three other chimneys, these labeled "Devonian Sandstone: 290,000,000 years," "Asphalt: 20 years," "Polyvinylchloride: 6 months."

"Can you see those moist white disks on the sepals?" Powers pointed out. "In some way they regulate the plant's metabolism. It

literally *sees* time. The older the surrounding environment, the more sluggish its metabolism. With the asphalt chimney it will complete its annual cycle in a week, with the PVC one in a couple of hours."

"Sees time," Coma repeated, wonderingly. She looked up at Powers, chewing her lower lip reflectively. "It's fantastic. Are these the creatures of the future, Doctor?"

"I don't know," Powers admitted. "But if they are their world must be a monstrous and surrealist one."

Three

He went back to the desk, pulled two cups from a drawer and poured out the coffee, switching off the Bunsen. "Some people have speculated that organisms possessing the silent pair of genes are the forerunners of a massive move up the evolutionary slope, that the silent genes are a sort of code, a divine message that we inferior organisms are carrying for our more highly developed descendants. It may well be true—perhaps we've broken the code too soon."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, as Whitby's death indicates, the experiments in this laboratory have all come to a rather unhappy conclusion. Without exception the organisms we've irradiated have entered a final phase of totally disorganized growth, producing dozens of specialized sensory organs whose function we can't even guess. The results are catastrophic—the anemone will literally explode, the Drosophila cannibalize themselves, and so on. Whether the future implicit in these plants and animals is ever intended to take place, or whether we're merely extrapolating—I don't know. Sometimes I think, though, that the new sensory organs developed are parodies of their real intentions. The specimens you've seen today are all in an early stage of their secondary growth cycles. Later on they begin to look distinctly bizarre."

Coma nodded. "A zoo isn't complete without its keeper," she commented. "What about Man?"

Powers shrugged. "About one in every 100,000—the usual average—contain the silent pair. You might have them—or I. No one has volunteered yet to undergo whole-body irradiation. Apart from the fact that it would be classified as suicide, if the experi-

ments here are any guide the experience would be savage and violent."

He sipped at the thin coffee, feeling tired and somehow bored. Recapitulating the laboratory's work had exhausted him.

The girl leaned forward. "You look awfully pale," she said solicitously. "Don't you sleep well?"

Powers managed a brief smile. "Too well," he admitted. "It's no longer a problem with me."

"I wish I could say that about Kaldren. I don't think he sleeps anywhere near enough. I hear him pacing around all night." She added: "Still, I suppose it's better than being a terminal. Tell me, Doctor, wouldn't it be worth trying this radiation technique on the sleepers at the Clinic? It might wake them up before the end. A few of them must possess the silent genes."

"They *all* do," Powers told her. "The two phenomena are very closely linked, as a matter of fact." He stopped, fatigue dulling his brain, and wondered whether to ask the girl to leave. Then he climbed off the desk and reached behind it, picked up a tape recorder.

Switching it on, he zeroed the tape and adjusted the speaker volume.

"Whitby and I often talked this over. Toward the end I took it all down. He was a great biologist, so let's hear it in his own words. It's absolutely the heart of the matter."

He flipped the table on, adding: "I've played it over to myself a thousand times, so I'm afraid the quality is poor."

An older man's voice, sharp and slightly irritable, sounded out above a low buzz of distortion, but Coma could hear it clearly.

WHITBY: . . . for heaven's sake, Robert, look at those FAO statistics. Despite an annual increase of 5 percent in acreage sown over the past fifteen years, world wheat crops have continued to decline by a factor of about 2 percent. The same story repeats itself ad nauseam. Cereals and root crops, dairy yields, ruminant fertility—are all down. Couple these with a mass of parallel symptoms, anything you care to pick from altered migratory routes to longer hibernation periods, and the overall pattern is incontrovertible.

POWERS: Population figures for Europe and North America show no decline, though.

* * *

WHITBY: Of course not, as I keep pointing out. It will take a century for such a fractional drop in fertility to have any effect in areas where extensive birth control provides an artificial reservoir. One must look at the countries of the Far East, and particularly at those where infant mortality has remained at a steady level. The population of Sumatra, for example, has declined by over 15 percent in the last twenty years. A fabulous decline! Do you realize that only two or three decades ago the neo-Malthusians were talking about a "world population explosion?" In fact, it's an implosion. Another factor is—

Here the tape had been cut and edited, and Whitby's voice, less querulous this time, picked up again.

. . . just as a matter of interest, tell me something: how long do you sleep each night?

POWERS: I don't know exactly; about eight hours, I suppose.

WHITBY: The proverbial eight hours. Ask anyone and they say automatically "eight hours." As a matter of fact you sleep about ten and a half hours, like the majority of people. I've timed you on a number of occasions. I myself sleep eleven. Yet thirty years ago people did indeed sleep eight hours, and a century before that they slept six or seven. In Vasari's *Lives* one reads of Michelangelo sleeping for only four or five hours, painting all day at the age of eighty and then working through the night over his anatomy table with a candle strapped to his forehead. Now he's regarded as a prodigy, but it was unremarkable then. How do you think the ancients, from Plato to Shakespeare, Aristotle to Aquinas, were able to cram so much work into their lives? Simply because they had an extra six or seven hours every day. Of course, a second disadvantage under which we labor is a lowered basal metabolic rate—another factor no one will explain.

POWERS: I suppose you could take the view that the lengthened sleep interval is a compensation device, a sort of mass neurotic attempt to escape from the terrifying pressures of urban life in the late twentieth century.

* * *

WHITBY: You could, but you'd be wrong. It's simply a matter of biochemistry. The ribonucleic acid templates which unravel the protein chains in all living organisms are wearing out, the dies enscribing the protoplasmic signature have become blunted. After all, they've been running now for over a thousand million years. It's time to retool. Just as an individual organism's life span is finite, or the life of a yeast colony or a given species, so the life of an entire biological kingdom is of fixed duration. It's always been assumed that the evolutionary slope reaches forever upward, but in fact the peak has already been reached, and the pathway now leads downward to the common biological grave. It's a despairing and at present unacceptable vision of the future, but it's the only one. Five thousand centuries from now our descendants, instead of being multibrained starmen, will probably be naked prognathous idiots with hair on their foreheads, grunting their way through the remains of this Clinic like neolithic men caught in a macabre inversion of time. Believe me, I pity them, as I pity myself. My total failure, my absolute lack of any moral or biological right to existence, is implicit in every cell of my body . . .

The tape ended, the spool ran free and stopped. Powers closed the machine, then massaged his face. Coma sat quietly, watching him and listening to the chimp playing with a box of puzzle dice.

"As far as Whitby could tell," Powers said, "the silent genes represent a last desperate effort of the biological kingdom to keep its head above the rising waters. Its total life period is determined by the amount of radiation emitted by the sun, and once this reaches a certain point the sure-death line has been passed and extinction is inevitable. To compensate for this, alarms have been built in which alter the form of the organism and adapt it to living in a hotter radiological climate. Soft-skinned organisms develop hard shells, these contain heavy metals as radiation screens. New organs of perception are developed too. According to Whitby, though, it's all wasted effort in the long run—but sometimes I wonder."

He smiled at Coma and shrugged. "Well, let's talk about something else. How long have you known Kaldren?"

"About three weeks. Feels like ten thousand years."

"How do you find him now? We've been rather out of touch lately."

Coma grinned. "I don't seem to see very much of him either. He makes me sleep all the time. Kaldren has many strange talents, but he lives just for himself. You mean a lot to him, Doctor. In fact, you're my one serious rival."

"I thought he couldn't stand the sight of me."

"Oh, that's nothing but a surface symptom. He really thinks of you continuously. That's why we spend all our time following you around." She eyed Powers shrewdly. "I think he feels guilty about something."

"Guilty?" Powers exclaimed. "*He* does? I thought I was supposed to be the guilty one."

"Why?" she pressed. She hesitated, then said, "You carried out some experimental surgical technique on him, didn't you?"

"Yes," Powers admitted. "It wasn't altogether a success, like so much of what I seem to be involved with. If Kaldren feels guilty, I suppose it's because he feels he must take some of the responsibility."

He looked down at the girl, her intelligent eyes watching him closely. "For one or two reasons it may be necessary for you to know. You said Kaldren paced around all night and didn't get enough sleep. Actually he doesn't get any sleep at all."

The girl nodded. "You . . ." She made a snapping gesture with fingers.

". . . narcotomized him," Powers completed. "Surgically speaking, it was a great success. One might well share a Nobel for it. Normally the hypothalamus regulates the period of sleep, raising the threshold of consciousness in order to relax the venous capillaries in the brain and drain them of accumulating toxins. However, by sealing off some of the control loops the subject is unable to receive the sleep cue, and the capillaries drain while he remains conscious. All he feels is a temporary lethargy, but this passes within three or four hours. Physically speaking, Kaldren has had another twenty years added to his life. But the psyche seems to need sleep for its own private reasons, and consequently Kaldren has periodic storms that tear him apart. The whole thing was a tragic blunder."

Coma frowned pensively. "I guessed as much. Your papers in the neurosurgery journals referred to the patient as K. A touch of pure Kafka that came all too true."

"I may leave here for good, Coma," Powers said. "Make sure that Kaldren goes to his clinics. Some of the deep scar tissue will need to be cleaned away."

"I'll try. Sometimes I feel I'm just another of his insane terminal documents."

"What are those?"

"Haven't you heard? Kaldren's collection of final statements about *Homo sapiens*. The complete works of Freud, Beethoven's silent quartets, transcripts of the Nuremberg trials, an automatic novel, and so on." She broke off. "What's that you're drawing?"

"Where?"

She pointed to the desk blotter, and Powers looked down and realized he had been unconsciously sketching an elaborate doodle, Whitby's four-armed sun. "It's nothing," he said. Somehow, though, it had a strangely compelling force.

Coma stood up to leave. "You must come and see us, Doctor. Kaldren has so much he wants to show you. He's just got hold of an old copy of the last signals sent back by the Apollo Seven twenty years ago when they reached the moon, and can't think about anything else. You remember the strange messages they recorded before they died, full of poetic ramblings about the white gardens. Now that I think about it they behaved rather like the plants in your zoo here."

She put her hands in her pockets, then pulled something out. "By the way, Kaldren asked me to give you this."

It was an old index card from the observatory library. In the center had been typed the number:

96,688,365,498,720

"It's going to take a long time to reach zero at this rate," Powers remarked dryly. "I'll have quite a collection when we're finished."

After she had left he chucked the card into the waste bin and sat down at the desk, staring for an hour at the ideogram on the blotter.

Halfway back to his beach house the lake road forked to the left through a narrow saddle that ran between the hills to an abandoned Air Force weapons range on one of the remoter salt lakes. At the nearer end were a number of small bunkers and camera towers, one or two metal shacks and a low-roofed storage hangar. The white hills encircled the whole area, shutting it off from the world outside, and Powers liked to wander on foot down the gunnery aisles that had been marked down the two-mile length of the lake toward the concrete sight-screens at the far end. The abstract patterns made him feel like an ant on a bone-white chessboard,

the rectangular screens at one end and the towers and bunkers at the other like opposing pieces.

His session with Coma had made Powers feel suddenly dissatisfied with the way he was spending his last months. *Good-bye, Eniwetok,* he had written, but in fact systematically forgetting everything was exactly the same as remembering it, a cataloguing in reverse, sorting out all the books in the mental library and putting them back in their right places upside down.

Powers climbed one of the camera towers, leaned on the rail and looked out along the aisles toward the sight-screens. Ricocheting shells and rockets had chipped away large pieces of the circular concrete bands that ringed the target bulls, but the outlines of the huge 100-yard-wide disks, alternately painted blue and red, were still visible.

For half an hour he stared quietly at them, formless ideas shifting through his mind. Then without thinking, he abruptly left the rail and climbed down the companionway. The storage hangar was fifty yards away. He walked quickly across to it, stepped into the cool shadows and peered around the rusting electric trolleys and empty flare drums. At the far end, behind a pile of lumber and bales of wire, were a stack of unopened cement bags, a mound of dirty sand and an old mixer.

Half an hour later he had backed the Buick into the hangar and hooked the cement mixer, charged with sand, cement, and water scavenged from the drums lying around outside, onto the rear bumper, then loaded a dozen more bags into the car's trunk and rear seat. Finally he selected a few straight lengths of timber, jammed them through the window and set off across the lake toward the central target bull.

For the next two hours he worked away steadily in the center of the great blue disk, mixing up cement by hand, carrying it across to the crude wooden forms he had lashed together from the timber, smoothing it down so that it formed a six-inch-high wall around the perimeter of the bull. He worked without pause, stirring the cement with a tire lever, scooping it out with a hub cap prized off one of the wheels.

By the time he finished and drove off, leaving his equipment where it stood, he had completed a thirty-foot-long section of wall.

Four

June 7: Conscious, for the first time, of the brevity of each day. As long as I was awake for over twelve hours I still orientated my time around the meridian, morning and afternoon set their old rhythms. Now, with just over eleven hours of consciousness left, they form a continuous interval, like a length of tape measure. I can see exactly how much is left on the spool and can do little to affect the rate at which it unwinds. Spend the time slowly packing away the library; the crates are too heavy to move and lie where they are filled.
Cell count down to 400,000.
Woke 8:10. To sleep 7:15. (Appear to have lost my watch without realizing it, had to drive into town to buy another.)

June 14: 9½ hours. Time races, flashing past like an expressway. However, the last week of a holiday always goes faster than the first. At the present rate there should be about 4–5 weeks left. This morning I tried to visualize what the last week or so—the final, 3, 2, 1, out—would be like, had a sudden chilling attack of pure fear, unlike anything I've ever felt before. Took me half an hour to steady myself enough for an intravenous.
Kaldren pursues me like luminescent shadow. He has chalked up on the gateway "96,688,365,498,702." Should confuse the mail man.
Woke 9:05. To sleep 6:36.

June 19: 8¾ hours. Anderson rang up this morning. I nearly put the phone down on him, but managed to go through the pretense of making the final arrangements. He congratulated me on my stoicism, even used the word heroic. *Don't feel it. Despair erodes everything—courage, hope, self-discipline, all the better qualities. It's so damned difficult to sustain that impersonal attitude of passive acceptance implicit in the scientific tradition. I try to think of Galileo before the Inquisition, Freud surmounting the endless pain of his jaw cancer surgery.*
Met Kaldren downtown, had a long discussion about the Apollo Seven. He's convinced that they refused to leave the moon deliberately, after the "reception party" waiting for them had put them in the cosmic picture. They were told by the my-

sterious emissaries from Orion that the exploration of deep space was pointless, that they were too late as the life of the universe is now virtually over! According to K. there are Air Force generals who take this nonsense seriously, but I suspect it's simply an obscure attempt on K.'s part to console me.
Must have the phone disconnected. Some contractor keeps calling me up about payment for fifty bags of cement he claims I collected ten days ago. Says he helped me load them onto a truck himself. I did drive Whitby's pickup into town but only to get some lead screening. What does he think I'd do with all that cement? Just the sort of irritating thing you don't expect to hang over your final exit. (Moral: don't try too hard to forget Eniwetok.)
Woke 9:40. To sleep 4:15.

June 25: 7½ hours. Kaldren was snooping around the lab again today. Phoned me there. When I answered, a recorded voice he'd rigged up rambled out a long string of numbers, like an insane super-Tim. These practical jokes of his get rather wearing. Fairly soon I'll have to go over and come to terms with him, much as I hate the prospect. Anyway, Miss Mars is a pleasure to look at.
One meal is enough now, topped up with a glucose shot. Sleep is still "black," completely unrefreshing. Last night I took a 16 mm. film of the first three hours, screened it this morning at the lab. The first true horror movie. I looked like a half-animated corpse.
Woke 10:25. To sleep 3:45.

July 3: 5¾ hours. Little done today. Deepening lethargy, dragged myself over to the lab, nearly left the road twice. Concentrated enough to feed the zoo and get the log up to date. Read through the operating manuals Whitby left for the last time, decided on a delivery rate of 40 roentgens/min., target distance of 530 cm. Everything is ready now.
Woke 11:05. To sleep 3:15.

Powers stretched, shifted his head slowly across the pillow, focusing on the shadows cast onto the ceiling by the blind. Then he looked down at his feet, saw Kaldren sitting on the end of the bed, watching him quietly.

"Hello, Doctor," he said, putting out his cigarette. "Late night? You look tired."

Powers heaved himself onto one elbow, glanced at his watch. It was just after eleven. For a moment his brain blurred, and he swung his legs around and sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, massaging some life into his face.

He noticed that the room was full of smoke. "What are you doing here?" he asked Kaldren.

"I came over to invite you to lunch." He indicated the bedside phone. "Your line was dead so I drove around. Hope you don't mind me climbing in. Rang the bell for about half an hour. I'm surprised you didn't hear it."

Powers nodded, then stood up and tried to smooth the creases out of his cotton slacks. He had gone to sleep without changing for over a week, and they were damp and stale.

As he started for the bathroom door Kaldren pointed to the camera tripod on the other side of the bed. "What's this? Going into the blue movie business, Doctor?"

Powers surveyed him dimly for a moment, glanced at the tripod without replying and then noticed his open diary on the bedside table. Wondering whether Kaldren had read the last entries, he went back and picked it up, then stepped into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

From the mirror cabinet he took out a syringe and an ampule. After the shot he leaned against the door waiting for the stimulant to pick up.

Kaldren was in the lounge when he returned to him, reading the labels on the crates lying about in the center of the floor.

"O.K., then," Powers told him, "I'll join you for lunch." He examined Kaldren carefully. He looked more subdued than usual; there was an air almost of deference about him.

"Good," Kaldren said. "By the way, are you leaving?"

"Does it matter?" Powers asked curtly. "I thought you were in Anderson's care."

Kaldren shrugged. "Please yourself. Come around at about twelve," he suggested, adding pointedly, "That'll give you time to clean up and change. What's that all over your shirt? Looks like lime."

Powers peered down, brushed at the white streaks. After Kaldren had left he threw the clothes away, took a shower and unpacked a clean suit from one of the trunks.

* * *

Until this liaison with Coma, Kaldren had lived alone in the old abstract summer house on the north shore of the lake. This was a seven-story folly originally built by an eccentric millionaire mathematician in the form of a spiraling concrete ribbon that wound around itself like an insane serpent, serving walls, floors, and ceilings. Only Kaldren had solved the building, a geometric model of $\sqrt{-1}$, and consequently he had been able to take it off the agents' hands at a comparatively low rent. In the evenings Powers had often watched him from the laboratory, striding restlessly from one level to the next, swinging through the labyrinth of inclines and terraces to the rooftop, where his lean angular figure stood out like a gallows against the sky, his lonely eyes sifting out radio lanes for the next day's trapping.

Powers noticed him there when he drove up at noon, poised on a ledge 150 feet above, head raised theatrically to the sky.

"Kaldren!" he shouted up suddenly into the silent air, half-hoping he might be jolted into losing his footing.

Kaldren broke out of his reverie and glanced down into the court. Grinning obliquely, he waved his right arm in a slow semicircle.

"Come up," he called, then turned back to the sky.

Powers leaned against the car. Once, a few months previously, he had accepted the same invitation, stepped through the entrance and within three minutes lost himself helplessly in a second-floor cul-de-sac. Kaldren had taken half an hour to find him.

Powers waited while Kaldren swung down from his aerie, vaulting through the wells and stairways, then rode up in the elevator with him to the penthouse suite.

They carried their cocktails through into a wide glass-roofed studio, the huge white ribbon of concrete uncoiling around them like toothpaste squeezed from an enormous tube. On the staged levels running parallel and across them rested pieces of gray abstract furniture, giant photographs on angled screens, carefully labeled exhibits laid out on low tables, all dominated by twenty-foot-high black letters on the rear wall which spelled out the single vast word:

YOU

Kaldren pointed to it. "What you might call the supraliminal approach." He gestured Powers in conspiratorially, finishing his drink in a gulp. "This is *my* laboratory, Doctor," he said with a note of pride. "Much more significant than yours, believe me."

Powers smiled wryly to himself and examined the first exhibit, an old EEG tape traversed by a series of faded inky wriggles. It was labeled: "Einstein, A.; Alpha Waves, 1922."

He followed Kaldren around, sipping slowly at his drink, enjoying the brief feeling of alertness the amphetamine provided. Within two hours it would fade, leaving his brain feeling like a block of blotting paper.

Kaldren chattered away, explaining the significance of the so-called Terminal Documents. "They're end-prints, Powers, final statements, the products of total fragmentation. When I've got enough together I'll build a new world for myself out of them." He picked a thick paper-bound volume off one of the tables, riffled through its pages. "Association tests of the Nuremberg Twelve. I have to include these . . ."

Powers strolled on absently without listening. Over in the corner were what appeared to be three ticker-tape machines, lengths of tape hanging from their mouths. He wondered whether Kaldren was misguided enough to be playing the stock market, which had been declining slowly for twenty years.

"Powers," he heard Kaldren say. "I was telling you about the Apollo Seven." He pointed to a collection of typewritten sheets tacked to a screen. "These are transcripts of their final signals radioed back from the recording monitors."

Powers examined the sheets cursorily, read a line at random.

". . . BLUE . . . PEOPLE . . . RECYCLE . . . ORION . . . TELEMETERS . . ."

Powers nodded noncommittally. "Interesting. What are the ticker tapes for over there?"

Kaldren grinned. "I've been waiting for months for you to ask me that. Have a look."

Powers went over and picked up one of the tapes. The machine was labeled: "Auriga 225-G. Interval: 69 hours."

The tape read:

96,688,365,498,695
96,688,365,498,694
96,688,365,498,693
96,688,365,498,692

Powers dropped the tape. "Looks rather familiar. What does the sequence represent?"

Kaldren shrugged. "No one knows."

"What do you mean? It must replicate something."

"Yes, it does. A diminishing mathematical progression. A countdown, if you like."

Powers picked up the tape on the right, tabbed: "Aries 44R951. Interval: 49 days."

Here the sequence ran:

876,567,988,347,779,877,654,434
876,567,988,347,779,877,654,433
876,567,988,347,779,877,654,432

Powers looked round. "How long does it take each signal to come through?"

"Only a few seconds. They're tremendously compressed laterally, of course. A computer at the observatory breaks them down. They were first picked up at Jodrell Bank about twenty years ago. Nobody bothers to listen to them now."

Powers turned to the last tape.

6,554
6,553
6,552
6,551

"Nearing the end of its run," he commented. He glanced at the label on the hood, which read: "Unidentified radio source, Canes Venatici. Interval 97 weeks."

He showed the tape to Kaldren. "Soon be over."

Kaldren shook his head. He lifted a heavy directory-sized volume off a table, cradled it in his hands. His face had suddenly become somber and pallid. "I doubt it," he said. "Those are only the last four digits. The whole number contains over 50 million."

He handed the volume to Powers, who turned to the title page. "Master Sequence of Serial Signal received by Jodrell Bank Radio-Observatory, University of Manchester, England, 0012-59 hours, 21-5-72. Source: NGC 9743, Canes Venatici." He thumbed the thick stack of closely printed pages, millions of numerals, as Kaldren had said, running up and down across a thousand consecutive pages.

Powers shook his head, picked up the tape again and stared at it thoughtfully.

"The computer only breaks down the last four digits," Kaldren explained. "The whole series comes over in each 15-second-long package, but it took IBM more than two years to unscramble one of them."

"Amazing," Powers commented. "But what is it?"

"A countdown, as you can see. NGC 9743, somewhere in Canes

Venatici. The big spirals there are breaking up, and they're saying good-bye. God knows who they think we are but they're letting us know all the same, beaming it out on the hydrogen line for everyone in the universe to hear." He paused. "Some people have put other interpretations on them, but there's one piece of evidence that rules out everything else."

"Which is?"

Kaldren pointed to the last tape from Canes Venatici. "Simply that it's been estimated that by the time this series reaches zero the universe will have just ended."

Powers fingered the tape reflectively. "Thoughtful of them to let us know what the real time is," he remarked.

"I agree, it is," Kaldren said quietly. "Applying the inverse square law, that signal source is broadcasting at a strength of about three million megawatts raised to the hundredth power. About the size of the entire Local Group. Thoughtful is the word."

Suddenly he gripped Powers's arm, held it tightly, and peered into his eyes closely, his throat working with emotion.

"You're not alone, Powers, don't think you are. These are the voices of time, and they're all saying good-bye to you. Think of yourself in a wider context. Every particle in your body, every grain of sand, every galaxy carries the same signature. As you've just said, you know what the time is now, so what does the rest matter? There's no need to go on looking at the clock."

Powers took his hand, squeezed it firmly. "Thanks, Kaldren. I'm glad you understand." He walked over to the window, looked down across the white lake. The tension between himself and Kaldren had dissipated; he felt that all his obligations to him had at last been met. Now he wanted to leave as quickly as possible, forget him as he had forgotten the faces of the countless other patients whose exposed brains had passed between his fingers.

He went back to the ticker machines, tore the tapes from their slots and stuffed them into his pockets. "I'll take these along to remind myself. Say good-bye to Coma for me, will you?"

He moved toward the door. When he reached it he looked back to see Kaldren standing in the shadow of the three giant letters on the far wall, his eyes staring listlessly at his feet.

As Powers drove away he noticed that Kaldren had gone up onto the roof, watched him in the driving mirror waving slowly until the car disappeared around a bend.

Five

The outer circle was now almost complete. A narrow segment, an arc about ten feet long, was missing, but otherwise the low perimeter wall ran continuously six inches off the concrete floor around the outer lane of the target bull, enclosing the huge rebus within it. Three concentric circles, the largest a hundred yards in diameter, separated from each other by ten-foot intervals, formed the rim of the device, divided into four segments by the arms of an enormous cross radiating from its center, where a small round platform had been built a foot above the ground.

Powers worked swiftly, pouring sand and cement into the mixer, tipping in water until a rough paste formed, then carrying it across to the wooden forms and tamping the mixture down into the narrow channel.

Within ten minutes he had finished. He quickly dismantled the forms, before the cement had set, and slung the timbers into the back seat of the car. Dusting his hands on his trousers, he went over to the mixer and pushed it fifty yards away into the long shadow of the surrounding hills.

Without pausing to survey the gigantic cipher on which he had labored patiently for so many afternoons, he climbed into the car and drove off on a wake of bone-white dust, splitting the pools of indigo shadow.

He reached the laboratory at three o'clock, and jumped from the car as it lurched back on its brakes. Inside the entrance he first switched on the lights, then hurried around, pulling the sun curtains down and shackling them to the floor slots, effectively turning the dome into a steel tent.

In their tanks behind him the plants and animals stirred quietly, responding to the sudden flood of cold fluorescent light. Only the chimpanzee ignored him. It sat on the floor of its cage, neurotically jamming the puzzle dice into the polythene bucket, exploding in bursts of sudden rage when the pieces refused to fit.

Powers went over to it, noticing the shattered glass fiber reinforcing panels bursting from the dented helmet. Already the chimp's face and forehead were bleeding from self-inflicted blows. Powers picked up the remains of the geranium that had been hurled through the bars, attracted the chimp's attention with it,

then tossed a black pellet he had taken from a capsule in the desk drawer. The chimp caught it with a quick flick of the wrist, for a few seconds juggled the pellet with a couple of dice as it concentrated on the puzzle, then pulled it out of the air and swallowed it in a gulp.

Without waiting, Powers slipped off his jacket and stepped toward the X-ray theater. He pulled back the high sliding doors to reveal the long glassy metallic snout of the Maxitron, then started to stack the lead screening shields against the rear wall.

A few minutes later the generator hummed into life.

The anemone stirred. Basking in the warm subliminal sea of radiation rising around it, prompted by countless pelagic memories, it reached tentatively across the tank, groping blindly toward the dim uterine sun. Its tendrils flexed, the thousands of dormant neural cells in their tips regrouping and multiplying, each harnessing the unlocked energies of its nucleus. Chains forged themselves, lattices tiered upward into multifaceted lenses, focused slowly on the vivid spectral outlines of the sounds dancing like phosphorescent waves around the darkened chamber of the dome.

Gradually an image formed, revealing an enormous black fountain that poured an endless stream of brilliant light over the circle of benches and tanks. Beside it a figure moved, adjusting the flow through its mouth. As it stepped across the floor its feet threw off vivid bursts of color, its hands racing along the benches conjured up a dazzling chiaroscuro, balls of blue and violet light that exploded fleetingly in the darkness like miniature star-shells.

Photons murmured. Steadily, as it watched the glimmering screen of sounds around it, the anemone continued to expand. Its ganglia linked, heeding a new source of stimuli from the delicate diaphragms in the crown of its notochord. The silent outlines of the laboratory began to echo softly, waves of muted sound fell from the arc lights and echoed off the benches and furniture below. Etched in sound, their angular forms resonated with sharp persistent overtones. The plastic-ribbed chairs were a buzz of staccato discords, the square-sided desk a continuous double-featured tone.

Ignoring these sounds once they had been perceived, the anemone turned to the ceiling, which reverberated like a shield in the sounds pouring steadily from the fluorescent tubes. Streaming

through a narrow skylight, its voice clear and strong, interwoven by numberless overtones, the sun sang . . .

It was a few minutes before dawn when Powers left the laboratory and stepped into his car. Behind him the great dome lay silently in the darkness, the thin shadows of the white moonlit hills falling across its surface. Powers freewheeled the car down the long curving drive to the lake road below, listening to the tires cutting across the blue gravel, then let out the clutch and accelerated the engine.

As he drove along, the limestone hills half hidden in the darkness on his left, he gradually became aware that, although no longer looking at the hills, he was still in some oblique way conscious of their forms and outlines in the back of his mind. The sensation was undefined but nonetheless certain, a strange almost visual impression that emanated most strongly from the deep clefts and ravines dividing one cliff face from the next. For a few minutes Powers let it play upon him, without trying to identify it, a dozen strange images moving across his brain.

The road swung up around a group of chalets built onto the lake shore, taking the car right under the lee of the hills, and Powers suddenly felt the massive weight of the escarpment rising up into the dark sky like a cliff of luminous chalk, and realized the identity of the impression now registering powerfully within his mind. Not only could he see the escarpment, but he was aware of its enormous age, felt distinctly the countless millions of years since it had first reared out of the magma of the earth's crust. The ragged crests three hundred feet above him, the dark gullies and fissures, the smooth boulders by the roadside at the foot of the cliff, all carried a distinct image of themselves across to him, a thousand voices that together told of the total time that had elapsed in the life of the escarpment, a psychic picture as defined and clear as the visual image brought to him by his eyes.

Involuntarily, Powers had slowed the car, and turning his eyes away from the hill face he felt a second wave of time sweep across the first. The image was broader but of shorter perspectives, radiating from the wide disk of the salt lake, breaking over the ancient limestone cliffs like shallow rollers dashing against a towering headland.

Closing his eyes, Powers lay back and steered the car along the interval between the two time fronts, feeling the images deepen and strengthen within his mind. The vast age of the landscape,

the inaudible chorus of voices resonating from the lake and from the white hills, seemed to carry him back through time, down endless corridors to the first thresholds of the world.

He turned the car off the road along the track leading toward the target range. On either side of the culvert the cliff faces boomed and echoed with vast impenetrable time fields, like enormous opposed magnets. As he finally emerged between them onto the flat surface of the lake it seemed to Powers that he could feel the separate identity of each sand grain and salt crystal calling to him from the surrounding ring of hills.

He parked the car beside the mandala and walked slowly toward the outer concrete rim curving away into the shadows. Above him he could hear the stars, a million cosmic voices that crowded the sky from one horizon to the next, a true canopy of time. Like jostling radio beacons, their long aisles interlocking at countless angles, they plunged into the sky from the narrowest recesses of space. He saw the dim red disk of Sirius, heard its ancient voice, untold millions of years old, dwarfed by the huge spiral nebulae in Andromeda, a gigantic carousel of vanished universes, their voices almost as old as the cosmos itself. To Powers the sky seemed an endless babel, the time-song of a thousand galaxies overlaying each other in his mind. As he moved slowly toward the center of the mandala he craned up at the glittering traverse of the Milky Way, searching the confusion of clamoring nebulae and constellations.

Stepping into the inner circle of the mandala, a few yards from the platform at its center, he realized that the tumult was beginning to fade, and that a single stronger voice had emerged and was dominating the others. He climbed onto the platform and raised his eyes to the darkened sky, moving through the constellations to the island galaxies beyond them, hearing the thin archaic voices reaching to him across the millenia. In his pockets he felt the paper tapes, and turned to find the distant diadem of Canes Venatici, heard its great voice mounting in his mind.

Like an endless river, so broad that its banks were below the horizons, it flowed steadily toward him, a vast course of time that spread outward to fill the sky and the universe, enveloping everything within them. Moving slowly, the forward direction of its majestic current was imperceptible, and Powers knew that its source was the source of the cosmos itself. As it passed him, he felt its massive magnetic pull, let himself be drawn into it, borne gently on its powerful back. Quietly it carried him away, and he

rotated slowly, facing the direction of the tide. Around him the outlines of the hills and the lake had faded, but the image of the mandala, like a cosmic clock, remained fixed before his eyes, illuminating the broad surface of the stream. Watching it constantly, he felt his body gradually dissolving, its physical dimensions melting into the vast continuum of the current, which bore him out into the center of the great channel, sweeping him onward, beyond hope now but at last at rest, down the broadening reaches of the river of eternity.

As the shadows faded, retreating into the hill slopes, Kaldren stepped out of his car, walked hesitantly toward the concrete rim of the outer circle. Fifty yards away, at the center, Coma knelt beside Powers's body, her small hands pressed to his dead face. A gust of wind stirred the sand, dislodging a strip of tape that drifted toward Kaldren's feet. He bent down and picked it up, then rolled it carefully in his hands and slipped it into his pocket. The dawn air was cold, and he turned up the collar of his jacket, watching Coma impassively.

"It's six o'clock," he told her after a few minutes. "I'll go and get the police. You stay with him." He paused and then added, "Don't let them break the clock."

Coma turned and looked at him. "Aren't you coming back?"

"I don't know." Nodding to her, Kaldren swung on his heel and went over to the car.

He reached the lake road, five minutes later parked the car in the drive outside Whitby's laboratory.

The dome was in darkness, all its windows shuttered, but the generator still hummed in the X-ray theater. Kaldren stepped through the entrance and switched on the lights. In the theater he touched the grilles of the generator, felt the warm cylinder of the beryllium end-window. The circular target table was revolving slowly, its setting at 1 rpm, a steel restraining chair shackled to it hastily. Grouped in a semicircle a few feet away were most of the tanks and cages, piled on top of each other haphazardly. In one of them an enormous squidlike plant had almost managed to climb from its vivarium. Its long translucent tendrils clung to the edges of the tank, but its body had burst into a jellified pool of globular mucilage. In another an enormous spider had trapped itself in its own web and hung helplessly in the center of a huge three-dimensional maze of phosphorescing thread, twitching spasmodically.

All the experimental plants and animals had died. The chimp lay on its back among the remains of the hutch, the helmet forward over its eyes. Kaldren watched it for a moment, then sat down on the desk and picked up the phone.

While he dialed the number he noticed a film reel lying on the blotter. For a moment he stared at the label, then slid the reel into his pocket beside the tape.

After he had spoken to the police he turned off the lights, went out to the car, and drove off slowly down the drive.

When he reached the summer house the early sunlight was breaking across the ribbonlike balconies and terraces. He took the lift to the penthouse, made his way through into the museum. One by one he opened the shutters and let the sunlight play over the exhibits. Then he pulled a chair over to a side window, sat back, and stared up at the light pouring through into the room.

Two or three hours later he heard Coma outside, calling up to him. After half an hour she went away, but a little later a second voice appeared and shouted up at Kaldren. He left his chair and closed all the shutters overlooking the front courtyard, and eventually he was left undisturbed.

Kaldren returned to his seat and lay back quietly, his eyes gazing across the lines of exhibits. Half-asleep, periodically he leaned up and adjusted the flow of light through the shutter, thinking to himself, as he would do through the coming months, of Powers and his strange mandala, and of the Seven and their journey to the white gardens of the moon, and the blue people who had come from Orion and spoken in poetry to them of ancient beautiful worlds beneath golden suns in the island galaxies, vanished forever now in the myriad deaths of the cosmos.

The Drowned Giant

On the morning after the storm the body of a drowned giant was washed ashore on the beach five miles to the northwest of the city. The first news of its arrival was brought by a nearby farmer and subsequently confirmed by the local newspaper reporters and the police. Despite this the majority of people, myself among them, remained skeptical, but the return of more and more eyewitnesses attesting to the vast size of the giant was finally too much for our curiosity. The library where my colleagues and I were carrying out our research was almost deserted when we set off for the coast shortly after two o'clock, and throughout the day people continued to leave their offices and shops as accounts of the giant circulated around the city.

By the time we reached the dunes above the beach a substantial crowd had gathered, and we could see the body lying in the shallow water 200 yards away. At first the estimates of its size seemed greatly exaggerated. It was then at low tide, and almost all the giant's body was exposed, but he appeared to be a little larger than a basking shark. He lay on his back with his arms at his sides, in an attitude of repose, as if asleep on the mirror of wet sand, the reflection of his blanched skin fading as the water receded. In the clear sunlight his body glistened like the white plumage of a sea bird.

Puzzled by this spectacle, and dissatisfied with the matter-of-fact explanations of the crowd, my friends and I stepped down from the dunes onto the shingle. Everyone seemed reluctant to approach the giant, but half an hour later two fishermen in wading boots walked out across the sand. As their diminutive figures

neared the recumbent body a sudden hubbub of conversation broke out among the spectators. The two men were completely dwarfed by the giant. Although his heels were partly submerged in the sand, the feet rose to at least twice the fishermen's height, and we immediately realized that this drowned leviathan had the mass and dimensions of the largest sperm whale.

Three fishing smacks had arrived on the scene and with keels raised remained a quarter of a mile offshore, the crews watching from the bows. Their discretion deterred the spectators on the shore from wading out across the sand. Impatiently everyone stepped down from the dunes and waited on the shingle slopes, eager for a closer view. Around the margins of the figure the sand had been washed away, forming a hollow, as if the giant had fallen out of the sky. The two fishermen were standing between the immense plinths of the feet, waving to us like tourists among the columns of some water-lapped temple on the Nile. For a moment I feared that the giant was merely asleep and might suddenly stir and clap his heels together, but his glazed eyes stared skyward, unaware of the minuscule replicas of himself between his feet.

The fishermen then began a circuit of the corpse, strolling past the long white flanks of the legs. After a pause to examine the fingers of the supine hand, they disappeared from sight between the arm and chest, then re-emerged to survey the head, shielding their eyes as they gazed up at its Grecian profile. The shallow forehead, straight high-bridged nose, and curling lips reminded me of a Roman copy of Praxiteles, and the elegantly formed cartouches of the nostrils emphasized the resemblance to sculpture.

Abruptly there was a shout from the crowd, and a hundred arms pointed toward the sea. With a start I saw that one of the fishermen had climbed onto the giant's chest and was now strolling about and signaling to the shore. There was a roar of surprise and triumph from the crowd, lost in a rushing avalanche of shingle as everyone surged forward across the sand.

As we approached the recumbent figure, which was lying in a pool of water the size of a field, our excited chatter fell away again, subdued by the huge physical dimensions of this dead colossus. He was stretched out at a slight angle to the shore, his legs carried nearer the beach, and this foreshortening had disguised his true length. Despite the two fishermen standing on his abdomen, the crowd formed itself into a wide circle, groups of people tentatively advancing toward the hands and feet.

My companions and I walked around the seaward side of the

giant, whose hips and thorax towered above us like the hull of a stranded ship. His pearl-colored skin, distended by immersion in salt water, masked the contours of the enormous muscles and tendons. We passed below the left knee, which was flexed slightly, threads of damp seaweed clinging to its sides. Draped loosely across the midriff, and preserving a tenuous propriety, was a shawl of heavy open-weave material, bleached to a pale yellow by the water. A strong odor of brine came from the garment as it steamed in the sun, mingled with the sweet, potent scent of the giant's skin.

We stopped by his shoulder and gazed up at the motionless profile. The lips were parted slightly, the open eye cloudy and occluded, as if injected with some blue milky liquid, but the delicate arches of the nostrils and eyebrows invested the face with an ornate charm that belied the brutish power of the chest and shoulders.

The ear was suspended in mid-air over our heads like a sculptured doorway. As I raised my hand to touch the pendulous lobe, someone appeared over the edge of the forehead and shouted down at me. Startled by this apparition, I stepped back, and then saw that a group of youths had climbed up onto the face and were jostling each other in and out of the orbits.

People were now clambering all over the giant, whose reclining arms provided a double stairway. From the palms they walked along the forearms to the elbows and then crawled over the distended belly of the biceps to the flat promenade of the pectoral muscles which covered the upper half of the smooth hairless chest. From here they climbed up onto the face, hand over hand along the lips and nose, or forayed down the abdomen to meet others who had straddled the ankles and were patrolling the twin columns of the thighs.

We continued our circuit through the crowd, and stopped to examine the outstretched right hand. A small pool of water lay in the palm, like the residue of another world, now being kicked away by people ascending the arm. I tried to read the palmlines that grooved the skin, searching for some clue to the giant's character, but the distention of the tissues had almost obliterated them, carrying away all trace of the giant's identity and his last tragic predicament. The huge muscles and wristbones of the hand seemed to deny any sensitivity to their owner, but the delicate flection of the fingers and the well-tended nails, each cut symmetrically to within six inches of the quick, argued refinement of temperament, il-

lustrated in the Grecian features of the face, on which the townsfolk were now sitting like flies.

One youth was even standing, arms wavering at his side, on the very tip of the nose, shouting down at his companions, but the face of the giant still retained its massive composure.

Returning to the shore, we sat down on the shingle and watched the continuous stream of people arriving from the city. Some six or seven fishing boats had collected offshore, and their crews waded in through the shallow water for a closer look at this enormous storm catch. Later a party of police appeared and made a halfhearted attempt to cordon off the beach, but after walking up to the recumbent figure, any such thoughts left their minds, and they went off together with bemused backward glances.

An hour later there were a thousand people present on the beach, at least two hundred of them standing or sitting on the giant, crowded along the arms and legs or circulating in a ceaseless melee across his chest and stomach. A large gang of youths occupied the head, toppling each other off the cheeks and sliding down the smooth planes of the jaw. Two or three straddled the nose, and another crawled into one of the nostrils, from which he emitted barking noises like a demented dog.

That afternoon the police returned and cleared a way through the crowd for a party of scientific experts—authorities on gross anatomy and marine biology—from the university. The gang of youths and most of the people on the giant climbed down, leaving behind a few hardy spirits perched on the tips of the toes and on the forehead. The experts strode around the giant, heads nodding in vigorous consultation, preceded by the policemen who pushed back the press of spectators. When they reached the outstretched hand the senior officer offered to assist them up onto the palm, but the experts hastily demurred.

After they returned to the shore, the crowd once more climbed onto the giant, and was in full possession when we left at five o'clock, covering the arms and legs like a dense flock of gulls sitting on the corpse of a large fish.

I next visited the beach three days later. My friends at the library had returned to their work, and delegated to me the task of keeping the giant under observation and preparing a report. Perhaps they sensed my particular interest in the case, and it was certainly true that I was eager to return to the beach. There was nothing necrophilic about this, for to all intents the giant was still alive for

me, indeed more alive than many of the people watching him. What I found so fascinating was partly his immense scale, the huge volumes of space occupied by his arms and legs, which seemed to confirm the identity of my own miniature limbs, but above all, the mere categorical fact of his existence. Whatever else in our lives might be open to doubt, the giant, dead or alive, existed in an absolute sense, providing a glimpse into a world of similar absolutes of which we spectators on the beach were such imperfect and puny copies.

When I arrived at the beach the crowd was considerably smaller, and some two or three hundred people sat on the shingle, picnicking and watching the groups of visitors who walked out across the sand. The successive tides had carried the giant nearer the shore, swinging his head and shoulders toward the beach, so that he seemed doubly to gain in size, his huge body dwarfing the fishing boats beached beside his feet. The uneven contours of the beach had pushed his spine into a slight arch, expanding his chest and tilting back the head, forcing him into a more expressly heroic posture. The combined effects of sea water and the tumefaction of the tissues had given the face a sleeker and less youthful look. Although the vast proportions of the features made it impossible to assess the age and character of the giant, on my previous visit his classically modeled mouth and nose suggested that he had been a young man of discreet and modest temper. Now, however, he appeared to be at least in early middle age. The puffy cheeks, thicker nose and temples, and narrowing eyes gave him a look of well-fed maturity that even now hinted a growing corruption to come.

The accelerated post-mortem development of the giant's character, as if the latent elements of his personality had gained sufficient momentum during his life to discharge themselves in a brief final résumé, continued to fascinate me. It marked the beginning of the giant's surrender to that all-demanding system of time in which the rest of humanity finds itself, and of which, like the million twisted ripples of a fragmented whirlpool, our finite lives are the concluding products. I took up my position on the shingle directly opposite the giant's head, from where I could see the new arrivals and the children clambering over the legs and arms.

Among the morning's visitors were a number of men in leather jackets and cloth caps, who peered up critically at the giant with a professional eye, pacing out his dimensions and making rough calculations in the sand with spars of driftwood. I assumed them

to be from the public works department and other municipal bodies, no doubt wondering how to dispose of this monster.

Several rather more smartly attired individuals, circus proprietors and the like, also appeared on the scene, and strolled slowly around the giant, hands in pockets of their long overcoats, saying nothing to one another. Evidently its bulk was too great even for their matchless enterprise. After they had gone the children continued to run up and down the arms and legs, and the youths wrestled with each other over the supine face, the damp sand from their feet covering the white skin.

The following day I deliberately postponed my visit until the late afternoon, and when I arrived there were fewer than fifty or sixty people sitting on the shingle. The giant had been carried still closer to the shore, and was now little more than seventy-five yards away, his feet crushing the palisade of a rotting breakwater. The slope of the firmer sand tilted his body toward sea, the bruised swollen face averted in an almost conscious gesture. I sat down on a large metal winch which had been shackled to a concrete caisson above the shingle, and looked down at the recumbent figure.

His blanched skin had now lost its pearly translucence and was spattered with dirty sand which replaced that washed away by the night tide. Clumps of seaweed filled the intervals between the fingers and a collection of litter and cuttlebones lay in the crevices below the hips and knees. But despite this, and the continuous thickening of his features, the giant still retained his magnificent Homeric stature. The enormous breadth of the shoulders, and the huge columns of the arms and legs, still carried the figure into another dimension, and the giant seemed a more authentic image of one of the drowned Argonauts or heroes of the *Odyssey* than the conventional portrait previously in my mind.

I stepped down onto the sand, and walked between the pools of water toward the giant. Two small boys were sitting in the well of the ear, and at the far end a solitary youth stood perched high on one of the toes, surveying me as I approached. As I had hoped when delaying my visit, no one else paid any attention to me, and the people on the shore remained huddled beneath their coats.

The giant's supine right hand was covered with broken shells and sand, in which a score of footprints were visible. The rounded bulk of the hip towered above me, cutting off all sight of the sea. The sweetly acrid odor I had noticed before was now more

pungent, and through the opaque skin I could see the serpentine coils of congealed blood vessels. However repellent it seemed, this ceaseless metamorphosis, a macabre life-in-death, alone permitted me to set foot on the corpse.

Using the jutting thumb as a stair rail, I climbed up onto the palm and began my ascent. The skin was harder than I expected, barely yielding to my weight. Quickly I walked up the sloping forearm and the bulging balloon of the biceps. The face of the drowned giant loomed to my right, the cavernous nostrils and huge flanks of the cheeks like the cone of some freakish volcano.

Safely rounding the shoulder, I stepped out onto the broad promenade of the chest, across which the bony ridges of the rib cage lay like huge rafters. The white skin was dappled by the darkening bruises of countless footprints, in which the patterns of individual heel marks were clearly visible. Someone had built a small sand castle on the center of the sternum, and I climbed onto this partly demolished structure to get a better view of the face.

The two children had now scaled the ear and were pulling themselves into the right orbit, whose blue globe, completely occluded by some milk-colored fluid, gazed sightlessly past their miniature forms. Seen obliquely from below, the face was devoid of all grace and repose, the drawn mouth and raised chin propped up by gigantic slings of muscles resembling the torn prow of a colossal wreck. For the first time I became aware of the extremity of this last physical agony of the giant, no less painful for his unawareness of the collapsing musculature and tissues. The absolute isolation of the ruined figure, cast like an abandoned ship upon the empty shore, almost out of sound of the waves, transformed his face into a mask of exhaustion and helplessness.

As I stepped forward, my foot sank into a trough of soft tissue, and a gust of fetid gas blew through an aperture between the ribs. Retreating from the fouled air, which hung like a cloud over my head, I turned toward the sea to clear my lungs. To my surprise I saw the giant's left hand had been amputated.

I stared with shocked bewilderment at the blackening stump, while the solitary youth reclining on his aerial perch a hundred feet away surveyed me with a sanguinary eye.

This was only the first of a sequence of depredations. I spent the following two days in the library, for some reason reluctant to visit the shore, aware that I had probably witnessed the approach-

ing end of a magnificent illusion. When I next crossed the dunes and set foot on the shingle, the giant was little more than 20 yards away, and with this close proximity to the rough pebbles all traces had vanished of the magic which once surrounded his distant wave-washed form. Despite his immense size, the bruises and dirt that covered his body made him appear merely human in scale, his vast dimensions only increasing his vulnerability.

His right hand and foot had been removed, dragged up the slope, and trundled away by cart. After questioning the small group of people huddled by the breakwater, I gathered that a fertilizer company and a cattle-food manufacturer were responsible.

The giant's remaining foot rose into the air, a steel hawser fixed to the large toe, evidently in preparation for the following day. The surrounding beach had been disturbed by a score of workmen, and deep ruts marked the ground where the hands and foot had been hauled away. A dark brackish fluid leaked from the stumps, and stained the sand and the white cones of the cuttlefish. As I walked down the shingle I noticed that a number of jocular slogans, swastikas, and other signs had been cut into the gray skin, as if the mutilation of this motionless colossus had released a sudden flood of repressed spite. The lobe of one of the ears was pierced by a spear of timber, and a small fire had burned out in the center of the chest, blackening the surrounding skin. The fine wood ash was still being scattered by the wind.

A foul smell enveloped the cadaver, the undisguisable signature of putrefaction, which had at last driven away the usual gathering of youths. I returned to the shingle and climbed up onto the winch. The giant's swollen cheeks had now almost closed his eyes, drawing the lips back in a monumental gape. The once straight Grecian nose had been twisted and flattened, stamped into the ballooning face by countless heels.

When I visited the beach the following day I found, almost with relief, that the head had been removed.

Some weeks elapsed before I made my next journey to the beach, and by then the human likeness I had noticed earlier had vanished again. On close inspection the recumbent thorax and abdomen were unmistakably manlike, but as each of the limbs was chopped off, first at the knee and elbow, and then at shoulder and thigh, the carcass resembled that of any headless sea animal —whale or whale shark. With his loss of identity, and the few traces of personality that had clung tenuously to the figure, the

interest of the spectators expired, and the foreshore was deserted except for an elderly beachcomber and the watchman sitting in the doorway of the contractor's hut.

A loose wooden scaffolding had been erected around the carcass, from which a dozen ladders swung in the wind, and the surrounding sand was littered with coils of rope, long metal-handled knives, and grappling irons, the pebbles oily with blood and pieces of bone and skin.

I nodded to the watchman, who regarded me dourly over his brazier of burning coke. The whole area was pervaded by the pungent smell of huge squares of blubber being simmered in a vat behind the hut.

Both the thighbones had been removed, with the assistance of a small crane draped in the gauzelike fabric which had once covered the waist of the giant, and the open sockets gaped like barn doors. The upper arms, collarbones, and pudenda had likewise been dispatched. What remained of the skin over the thorax and abdomen had been marked out in parallel strips with a tarbrush, and the first five or six sections had been pared away from the midriff, revealing the great arch of the rib cage.

As I left, a flock of gulls wheeled down from the sky and alighted on the beach, picking at the stained sand with ferocious cries.

Several months later, when the news of his arrival had been generally forgotten, various pieces of the body of the dismembered giant began to reappear all over the city. Most of these were bones, which the fertilizer manufacturers had found too difficult to crush, and their massive size, and the huge tendons and disks of cartilage attached to their joints, immediately identified them. For some reason, these disembodied fragments seemed better to convey the essence of the giant's original magnificence than the bloated appendages that had been subsequently amputated. As I looked across the road at the premises of the largest wholesale merchants in the meat market, I recognized the two enormous thighbones on either side of the doorway. They towered over the porters' heads like the threatening megaliths of some primitive druidical religion, and I had a sudden vision of the giant climbing to his knees upon these bare bones and striding away through the streets of the city, picking up the scattered fragments of himself on his return journey to the sea.

A few days later I saw the left humerus lying in the entrance to

one of the shipyards. In the same week the mummified right hand was exhibited on a carnival float during the annual pageant of the guilds.

The lower jaw, typically, found its way to the museum of natural history. The remainder of the skull has disappeared, but is probably still lurking in the waste grounds or private gardens of the city—quite recently, while sailing down the river, I noticed two ribs of the giant forming a decorative arch in a waterside garden, possibly confused with the jawbones of a whale. A large square of tanned and tattooed skin, the size of an Indian blanket, forms a back cloth to the dolls and masks in a novelty shop near the amusement park, and I have no doubt that elsewhere in the city, in the hotels or golf clubs, the mummified nose or ears of the giant hang from the wall above a fireplace. As for the immense pizzle, this ends its days in the freak museum of a circus which travels up and down the northwest. This monumental apparatus, stunning in its proportions and sometime potency, occupies a complete booth to itself. The irony is that it is wrongly identified as that of a whale, and indeed most people, even those who first saw him cast up on the shore after the storm, now remember the giant, if at all, as a large sea beast.

The remainder of the skeleton, stripped of all flesh, still rests on the seashore, the clutter of bleached ribs like the timbers of a derelict ship. The contractor's hut, the crane, and scaffolding have been removed, and the sand being driven into the bay along the coast has buried the pelvis and backbone. In the winter the high curved bones are deserted, battered by the breaking waves, but in the summer they provide an excellent perch for the sea-wearying gulls.

The Terminal Beach

At night, as he lay asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker, Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, reminding him of the deep Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of waiting in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this long-forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and ran toward the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms, beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was only half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of some cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by one of the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. With one hand he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared, hoping that they might lead him toward the sea. He returned to the bunker shortly

before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

The Blocks

As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even the faintest breath of offshore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the center of the maze. His back resting against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles and at the line of doors facing him. Each afternoon he left his cell in the abandoned camera bunker and walked down into the blocks. For the first half hour he restricted himself to the perimeter aisle, now and then trying one of the doors with the rusty key in his pocket—he had found it among the litter of smashed bottles in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the airstrip—and then, inevitably, with a sort of drugged stride, he set off into the center of the blocks, breaking into a run and darting in and out of the corridors, as if trying to flush some invisible opponent from his hiding place. Soon he would be completely lost. Whatever his efforts to return to the perimeter, he found himself once more in the center.

Eventually he would abandon the task, and sit down in the dust, watching the shadows emerge from their crevices at the foot of the blocks. For some reason he always arranged to be trapped when the sun was at zenith—on Eniwetok, a thermonuclear noon.

* * *

One question in particular intrigued him: "What sort of people would inhabit this minimal concrete city?"

The Synthetic Landscape

"This island is a state of mind," Osborne, one of the biologists working in the old submarine pens, was later to remark to Traven. The truth of this became obvious to Traven within two or three weeks of his arrival. Despite the sand and the few anemic palms, the entire landscape of the island was synthetic, a manmade artifact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons, aisles, towers, and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. (There were also

stronger unconscious motives, Traven recognized, for leaving it as it was: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, twentieth-century man had reversed this process—by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least *existed*, in a sense true of few other places.)

But apart from a few scientific workers, no one yet felt any wish to visit the former testing ground, and the naval patrol boat anchored in the lagoon had been withdrawn five years before Traven's arrival. Its ruined appearance, and the associations of the island with the period of the Cold War—what Traven had christened the "Pre-Third"—were profoundly depressing, an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass graves of the still undead. With the Russo-American *détente* this nightmarish chapter of history had been gladly forgotten.

The Pre-Third

> *The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind. Nagazaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety.*
>
> —Glover: *War, Sadism and Pacifism.*

The Pre-Third: the period had been characterized in Traven's mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future—the two decades, 1945-65—suspended from the quivering volcano's lip of World War III. Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, and the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths were the advance causeways to the global armageddon.

Third Beach

He had come ashore at midnight, after a hazardous search for an opening in the reef. The small motorboat he had hired from an Australian pearl diver at Charlotte Island subsided into the shallows, its hull torn by the sharp coral. Exhausted, Traven walked

through the darkness among the dunes, where the dim outlines of bunkers and concrete towers loomed between the palms.

He woke the next morning into bright sunlight, lying halfway down the slope of a wide concrete beach. This ringed what appeared to be an empty reservoir or target basin, some two hundred feet in diameter, part of a system of artificial lakes built down the center of the atoll. Leaves and dust choked the waste grilles, and a pool of warm water two feet deep lay in the center, reflecting a distant line of palms.

Traven sat up and took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than his thin body in its frayed cotton garments. In the context of the surrounding terrain, however, even this collection of tatters seemed to possess a unique vitality. The emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna, were emphasized by the huge sculptural forms of the target basins let into its surface. Separated from each other by narrow isthmuses, the lakes stretched away along the curve of the atoll. On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional megalithic architecture as gray and minatory, and apparently as ancient (in its projection into, and from, time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon.

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudogeological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of the thermonuclear age. "The key to the past lies in the present." Typically the island inverted this geologist's maxim. Here the key to the present lay in the future. The island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life is one of armor and the exoskeleton.

Traven knelt in the warm pool and splashed his shirt and trousers. The reflection revealed the watery image of a thinly bearded face and gaunt shoulders. He had come to the island with no supplies other than a small bar of chocolate, expecting that in some way the island would provide its own sustenance. Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and envisioned that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of nontime, this need would be obviated. The privations of the previous six months, during his journey across the Pacific, had reduced his always thin body to that of a migrant beggar, held

together by little more than the preoccupied gaze in his eye. Yet this emaciation, by stripping away the superfluities of the flesh, seemed to reveal an inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement.

For several hours he wandered about, inspecting one bunker after another for a convenient place to sleep. He crossed the remains of a small landing strip, next to a dump where a dozen B-29's lay across one another like dead reptile birds.

The Corpses

Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms, and shower stalls. A wrecked juke-box lay half-buried in the sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack.

Further along, flung into a small target basin fifty yards from the shacks, were the bodies of what at first he thought were the inhabitants of this ghost town—a dozen life-size plastic models. Their half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, gazed up at him from the jumble of legs and torsos.

On either side of him, muffled by the dunes, came the sounds of waves, the great rollers on the seaward side breaking over the reefs, and onto the beaches within the lagoon. However, he avoided the sea, hesitating before any rise that might take him within its sight. Everywhere the camera towers offered him a convenient aerial view of the confused topography of the island, but he avoided their rusting ladders.

He soon realized that however confused and random the blockhouses and camera towers might seem, their common focus dominated the landscape and gave to it a unique perspective. As Traven noticed when he sat down to rest in the window slit of one of the blockhouses, all these observation posts occupied positions on a series of concentric perimeters, moving in tightening arcs toward the inmost sanctuary. This ultimate circle, below ground zero, remained hidden beyond a line of dunes a quarter of a mile to the west.

The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home—if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel—in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls,

tomblike though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallizing the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker's construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the east wall like cryptic ideograms. Variations of these ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers. In the morning, if Traven was awake, he would always find the sun divided into five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these to make a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of beriberi, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside it a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blond-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand painful memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished; his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implements, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling arms and legs with indifference.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards away to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing field and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectangular shadows would appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he sat, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the center of the atoll. Above him the five apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary deities of some futuristic myth.

The Lakes and the Specters

The lakes had been designed originally to reveal any radio-biological changes in a selected range of flora and fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the specters of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven would return to the bunker and lie on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife's cheeks, floated on the river of his memory.

The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realized he would never leave the island.

At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted the small cache of food, and the symptoms of beriberi had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the palliasse of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualizing them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off toward the light. Within fifty yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken Coca-Cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and block-

houses the heat lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters of the bunkers warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. The plain beyond was covered with target aisles and explosion breaks. On the gray walls of the recording towers, which rose into the air like obelisks, were the faint outlines of human forms in stylized postures, the flash-shadows of the target community burned into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung precariously in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic dummies. Most of them still lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral.

Traven advanced toward them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides. This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile. To one side the half-submerged hulks of a group of concrete shelters, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, lay like the husks of the abandoned wombs that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualize sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the center of this enormous labyrinth, which extended across the central table of the island. There were some two thousand of them, each a perfect cube fifteen feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of an enormous die-plate, designed to stamp out huge rectilinear volumes of air. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the direction of the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze, the rest obscured by the intervening blocks. As he walked from the perimeter into the center of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded, a world of closed exits concealed behind endless corners.

Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid, the walls of the remainder of varying thicknesses. From the outside they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt his step lighten; the sense of fatigue that had dogged him for so many months began to lift. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volume of space, imposing on him a mood of absolute calm and order. He walked on into the center of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon, and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back against one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. For the first time since his arrival at the island the sense of dissociation prompted by its fragmenting landscape began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realized that he had lost himself. However he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, he found himself back at his starting point. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to make his way out of the maze. That he was aware of his motives gave him little help. Only when hunger overcame the need to remain did he manage to escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses and pulled them across the island on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blond-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like his fragmenting image of himself. Each evening when he woke he would eat uneagerly and then go out into the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days.

Traven: In Parenthesis

Elements in a quantal world:

The terminal beach.

The terminal bunker.

The blocks.

The landscape is coded.

Entry points into the future=levels in a spinal landscape=zones of significant time.

The Submarine Pens

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a solitary tower, their faces watching him calmly. He realized that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. Once again he saw the beckoning light, and he decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants. A warning light winked at intervals from a metal tower. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the concrete pier outside. Greedily Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions stacked inside one of the metal shacks. With this change of diet the beriberi receded, and during the next days he returned to the camp. It appeared to be the site of a biological expedition. In a field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them. (Later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried jukebox, and tore the list of records from the selection panel, realizing that these were the most appropriate captions for the charts. Thus embroidered, they took on many layers of cryptic associations.)

Traven Lost Among the Blocks

August 5. Found the man Traven. A sad derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffer-

ing from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this, or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him. . . .

He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project—unstated—but I suspect that he understands his real motives and the unique role of the island. . . . In some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths. The attractions and dangers of such an architecture, as the past has shown, need no stressing.

August 6. He has the eyes of the possessed. I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island.

—Dr. C. Osborne: *Eniwetok Diary.*

With the exhaustion of his supplies, Traven remained within the perimeter of the blocks almost continuously, conserving what strength remained to him to walk slowly down their empty corridors. The infection in his right foot made it difficult for him to replenish his supplies from the stores left by the biologists, and as his strength ebbed he found progressively less incentive to make his way out of the blocks. The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space, his awareness kindled from levels above those of his present nervous system (if the autonomic system is dominated by the past, the cerebrospinal reaches toward the future). Without the blocks his sense of reality shrank to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.

On one of his last ventures into the maze, he spent all night and much of the following morning in a futile attempt to escape. Dragging himself from one rectangle of shadow to another, his leg as heavy as a club and apparently inflamed to the knee, he realized that he must soon find an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them, trapped within this self-constructed mausoleum as surely as the retinue of Pharaoh.

He was sitting exhausted somewhere within the center of the system, the faceless lines of the tomb booths receding from him, when the sky was slowly divided by the drone of a light aircraft. This passed overhead, and then, five minutes later, returned. Seizing his opportunity, Traven struggled to his feet and made his

exit from the blocks, his head raised to follow the glistening exhaust trail.

As he lay down in the bunker he dimly heard the aircraft return and carry out an inspection of the site.

A Belated Rescue

"Who are you?" A small sandy-haired man was peering down at him with a severe expression, then put away a syringe in his valise. "Do you realize you're on your last legs?"

"Traven . . . I've had some sort of accident. I'm glad you flew over."

"I'm sure you are. Why didn't you use our emergency radio? Anyway, we'll call the Navy and have you picked up."

"No. . . ." Traven sat up on one elbow and felt weakly in his hip pocket. "I have a pass somewhere. I'm carrying out research."

"Into what?" The question assumed a complete understanding of Traven's motives. Traven lay in the shade beside the bunker, and drank weakly from a canteen as Dr. Osborne dressed his foot. "You've also been stealing our stores."

Traven shook his head. Fifty yards away the blue and white Cessna stood on the concrete apron like a large dragonfly. "I didn't realize you were coming back."

"You must be in a trance."

The young woman at the controls of the aircraft climbed from the cockpit and walked over to them, glancing at the gray bunkers and blocks. She seemed unaware of or uninterested in the decrepit figure of Traven. Osborne spoke to her over his shoulder, and after a downward glance at Traven she went back to the aircraft. As she turned Traven rose involuntarily, recognizing the child in the photograph he had pinned to the wall. Then he remembered that the magazine could not have been more than four or five years old.

The engine of the aircraft started. It turned onto one of the roadways and took off into the wind.

The young woman drove over by jeep that afternoon with a small camp bed and a canvas awning. During the intervening hours Traven had slept, and woke refreshed when Osborne returned from his scrutiny of the surrounding dunes.

"What are you doing here?" the young woman asked as she secured one of the guy ropes to the bunker.

"I'm searching for my wife and son," Traven said.

"They're on this island?" Surprised, but taking the reply at face value, she looked around her. "Here?"

"In a manner of speaking."

After inspecting the bunker, Osborne joined them. "The child in the photograph. Is she your daughter?"

"No." Traven tried to explain. "She's adopted *me*."

Unable to make sense of his replies, but accepting his assurances that he would leave the island, Osborne and the young woman returned to their camp. Each day Osborne returned to change the dressing, driven by the young woman, who seemed to grasp the role cast for her by Traven in his private mythology. Osborne, when he learned of Traven's previous career as a military pilot, assumed that he was a latter-day martyr left high and dry by the moratorium on thermonuclear tests.

"A guilt complex isn't an indiscriminate supply of moral sanctions. I think you may be overstretching yours."

When he mentioned the name Eatherly, Traven shook his head.

Undeterred, Osborne pressed: "Are you sure you're not making similar use of the image of Eniwetok—waiting for your pentecostal wind?"

"Believe me, Doctor, no," Traven replied firmly. "For me the H-bomb is a symbol of absolute freedom. Unlike Eatherly I feel it's given me the right—the obligation, even—to do anything I choose."

"That seems strange logic," Osborne commented. "At least we are responsible for our physical selves."

Traven shrugged. "Not now, I think. After all, aren't we in effect men raised from the dead?"

Often, however, he thought of Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man, dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945, carrying a full load of cosmic guilt.

Shortly after Traven was strong enough to walk again he had to be rescued from the blocks for a second time. Osborne became less conciliatory.

"Our work is almost complete," he warned Traven. "You'll die here. Traven, what are you looking for?"

To himself Traven said: the tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo hydrogenensis,* Eniwetok Man. To Osborne he said: "Doctor, your laboratory is at the wrong end of this island."

"I'm aware of that, Traven. There are rarer fish swimming in your head than in any submarine pen."

On the day before they left, Traven and the young woman drove over to the lakes where he had first arrived. As a final present from Osborne, an ironic gesture unexpected from the elderly biologist, she had brought the correct list of legends for the chromosome charts. They stopped by the derelict jukebox and she pasted them on to the selection panel.

They wandered among the supine wrecks of the Superfortresses. Traven lost sight of her, and for the next ten minutes searched in and out of the dunes. He found her standing in a small amphitheater formed by the sloping mirrors of a solar energy device, built by one of the visiting expeditions. She smiled to him as he stepped through the scaffolding. A dozen fragmented images of herself were reflected in the broken panes. In some she was sans head, in others multiples of her raised arms circled her like those of a Hindu goddess. Exhausted, Traven turned away and walked back to the jeep.

As they drove away he described his glimpses of his wife and son. "Their faces are always calm. My son's particularly, although he was never really like that. The only time his face was grave was when he was being born—then he seemed millions of years old."

The young woman nodded. "I hope you find them." As an afterthought she added: "Dr. Osborne is going to tell the Navy you're here. Hide somewhere."

Traven thanked her. When she flew away from the island for the last time he waved to her from his seat beside the blocks.

The Naval Party

When the search party came for him Traven hid in the only logical place. Fortunately the search was perfunctory, and was called off after a few hours. The sailors had brought a supply of beer with them, and the search soon turned into a drunken ramble. On the walls of the recording towers Traven later found balloons of obscene dialogue chalked into the mouths of the shadow figures, giving their postures the priapic gaiety of the dancers in cave drawings.

The climax of the party was the ignition of a store of gasoline in an underground tank near the airstrip. As he listened, first to the megaphones shouting his name, the echoes receding among the dunes like the forlorn calls of dying birds, then to the boom of the explosion and the laughter as the landing craft left, Traven felt a premonition that these were the last sounds he would hear.

He had hidden in one of the target basins, lying down among

the bodies of the plastic dummies. In the hot sunlight their deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the soundlessly laughing dead. Their faces filled his mind as he climbed over the bodies and returned to the bunker.

As he walked toward the blocks he saw the figures of his wife and son standing in his path. They were less than ten yards from him, their white faces watching him with a look of almost overwhelming expectancy. Never had Traven seen them so close to the blocks. His wife's pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son's grave face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile as the girl in the photograph.

"Judith! David!" Startled, Traven ran forward to them. Then, in a sudden movement of light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out to them. As they vanished he fled into the safety and sanity of the blocks.

The Catechism of Good-bye

This time he found himself, as Osborne had predicted, unable to leave the blocks.

Somewhere in the shifting center of the maze, he sat with his back against one of the concrete flanks, his eyes raised to the sun. Around him the lines of cubes formed the horizons of his world. At times they would appear to advance toward him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm's length apart, a labyrinth of narrow corridors running between them. Then they would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon.

Time had become quantal. For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the motionless bulk of the blocks, the heat reverberating off the concrete floor. Abruptly he would find it was early afternoon or evening, the shadows everywhere like pointing fingers.

"Good-bye, Eniwetok," he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

"Good-bye, Los Alamos." Again a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere,

Traven was convinced, in the matrix superimposed on his mind, a small interval of neutral space had been punched.

Good-bye, Hiroshima.

Good-bye, Alamogordo.

Good-bye, Moscow, London, Paris, New York . . .

Shuttles flickered, a ripple of integers. Traven stopped, accepting the futility of this megathlon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to fix his signature on every one of the particles in the universe.

Total Noon: Eniwetok

The blocks now occupied positions on an endlessly revolving circus wheel. They carried him upward, to heights from which he could see the whole island and the sea, and then down again through the opaque disk of the floor. From here he looked up at the undersurface of the concrete cap, an inverted landscape of rectilinear hollows, the dome-shaped mounds of the lake system, the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks.

"Good-bye, Traven"

To his disappointment he found that this ultimate act of rejection gained him nothing.

In an interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaciated arms and legs propped loosely in front of him, the brittle wrists and hands covered with a lacework of ulcers. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the marks of slack heels.

In front of him lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yards away. Among these, where a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air.

During the next half hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung.

The outline of a dune.

Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and covered his eyes from all sight of the blocks.

Ten minutes later he emerged from the western perimeter. The dune whose shadow had guided him lay fifty yards away. Beyond it, bearing the shadow like a screen, was a ridge of limestone,

which ran away among the hillocks of a wasteland. The remains of old bulldozers, bales of barbed wire and fifty-gallon drums lay half-buried in the sand.

Traven approached the dune, reluctant to leave this anonymous swell of sand. He shuffled around its edges, and then sat down in the shade by a narrow crevice in the ridge.

Ten minutes later he noticed that someone was watching him.

The Marooned Japanese

This corpse, whose eyes stared up at Traven, lay to his left at the bottom of the crevice. That of a man of middle age and powerful build, it lay on its side with its head on a pillow of stone, as if surveying the window of the sky. The fabric of the clothes had rotted to a gray tattered vestment, but in the absence of any small animal predators on the island the skin and musculature had been preserved. Here and there, at the angle of knee or wrist, a bony point shone through the leathery integument of the yellow skin, but the facial mask was still intact, and revealed a male Japanese of the professional classes. Looking down at the strong nose, high forehead, and broad mouth, Traven guessed that the Japanese had been a doctor or lawyer.

Puzzled as to how the corpse had found itself here, Traven slid a few feet down the slope. There were no radiation burns on the skin, which indicated that the Japanese had been there for less than five years. Nor did he appear to be wearing a uniform, so had not been a member of a military or scientific mission.

To the left of the corpse, within reach of his hand, was a frayed leather case, the remains of a map wallet. To the right was the bleached husk of a haversack, open to reveal a canteen of water and a small can.

Greedily, the reflex of starvation making him for the moment ignore this discovery that the Japanese had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice, Traven slid down the slope until his feet touched the splitting soles of the corpse's shoes. He reached forward and seized the canteen. A cupful of flat water swilled around the rusting bottom. Traven gulped down the water, the dissolved metal salts cloaking his lips and tongue with a bitter film. He pried the lid off the can, which was empty but for a tacky coating of condensed syrup. He scraped at this with the lid and chewed at the tarry flakes. They filled his mouth with an almost intoxicating sweetness. After a few moments he felt light-headed and sat back

beside the corpse. Its sightless eyes regarded him with unmoving compassion.

The Fly

(*A small fly, which Traven presumes has followed him into the crevice, now buzzes about the corpse's face. Traven leans forward to kill it, then reflects that perhaps this minuscule sentry had been the corpse's faithful companion, in return fed on the rich liqueurs and distillations of its pores. Carefully, to avoid injuring the fly, he encourages it to alight on his wrist.*)

DR. YASUDA: Thank you, Traven. (*The voice is rough, as if unused to conversation.*) In my position, you understand.

TRAVEN: Of course, Doctor. I'm sorry I tried to kill it. These ingrained habits, you know, they're not easy to shrug off. Your sister's children in Osaka in '44, the exigencies of war, I hate to plead them, most known motives are so despicable one searches the unknown in the hope that . . .

YASUDA: Please, Traven, do not be embarrassed. The fly is lucky to retain its identity for so long. That son you mourn, not to mention my own two nieces and nephew, did they not die each day? Every parent in the world mourns the lost sons and daughters of their past childhoods.

TRAVEN: You're very tolerant, Doctor. I wouldn't dare—

YASUDA: Not at all, Traven. I make no apologies for you. After all, each one of us is little more than the meagre residue of the infinite unrealized possibilities of our lives. But your son and my nieces are fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.

TRAVEN (*not entirely convinced*): That may be so, Doctor, but it leads to a dangerous conclusion in the case of this island. For instance, the blocks . . .

YASUDA: They are precisely to what I refer. Here among the blocks, Traven, you at last find the image of yourself free of time and space. This island is an ontological Garden of Eden; why try to expel yourself into a quantal world?

TRAVEN: Excuse me. (*The fly has flown back to the corpse's face and sits in one of the orbits, giving the good doctor an expression of quizzical beadiness. Reaching forward, Traven entices it onto his palm.*) Well, yes, these bunkers may be ontological objects, but whether this is the ontological fly seems doubtful. It's true that on this island it's the only fly, which is the next best thing.

YASUDA: You can't accept the plurality of the universe, Traven. Ask yourself, why? Why should this obsess you. It seems to me that you are hunting for the white leviathan, zero. The beach is a dangerous zone; avoid it. Have a proper humility; pursue a philosophy of acceptance.

TRAVEN: Then may I ask why you came here, Doctor?

YASUDA: To feed this fly. "What greater love—?"

TRAVEN (*still puzzling*): It doesn't really solve my problem. The blocks, you see . . .

YASUDA: Very well, if you must have it that way . . .

TRAVEN: But, Doctor—

YASUDA (*peremptorily*): Kill that fly!

TRAVEN: That's not an end, or a beginning. (*Hopelessly he kills the fly. Exhausted, he falls asleep beside the corpse.*)

The Terminal Beach

Searching for a piece of rope in the refuse dump behind the dunes, Traven found a bale of rusty wire. He unwound it, then secured a harness around the corpse's chest and dragged it from the crevice. The lid of a wooden crate served as a sledge. Traven fastened the corpse into a sitting position, and set off along the perimeter of the blocks. Around him the island was silent. The lines of palms hung in the sunlight, only his own motion varying the shifting ciphers of their crisscrossing trunks. The square turrets of the camera towers jutted from the dunes like forgotten obelisks.

An hour later, when Traven reached his bunker, he untied the

wire cord he had fastened around his waist. He took the chair left for him by Dr. Osborne and carried it to a point midway between the bunker and the blocks. Then he tied the body of the Japanese to the chair, arranging the hands so that they rested on the wooden arms, giving the moribund figure a posture of calm repose.

This done to his satisfaction, Traven returned to the bunker and squatted under the awning.

As the next days passed into weeks, the dignified figure of the Japanese sat in his chair fifty yards from him, guarding Traven from the blocks. Their magic still filled Traven's reveries, but he now had sufficient strength to rouse himself and forage for food. In the hot sunlight the skin of the Japanese became more and more bleached, and sometimes Traven would wake at night to find the white sepulchral figure sitting there, arms resting at its sides, in the shadows that crossed the concrete floor. At these moments he would often see his wife and son watching him from the dunes. As time passed they came closer, and he would sometimes turn to find them only a few yards behind him.

Patiently Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams.

Manhole 69

For the first few days all went well.

"Keep away from windows and don't think about it," Dr. Neill told them. "As far as you're concerned it was just another compulsion. At eleven thirty or twelve go down to the gym and throw a ball around, play some table tennis. At two they're running a film for you in the neurology theater. Read the papers for a couple of hours, put on some records. I'll be down at six. By seven you'll be in a manic swing."

"Any chance of a sudden blackout, Doctor?" Avery asked.

"Absolutely none," Neill said. "If you get tired, rest, of course. That's the one thing you'll probably have a little difficulty getting used to. Remember, you're still using only 3,500 calories, so your kinetic level—and you'll notice this most by day—will be about a third lower. You'll have to take things easier, make allowances. Most of these have been programmed in for you, but start learning to play chess, focus that inner eye."

Gorrell leaned forward. "Doctor," he asked, "if we want to, can we look out of the windows?"

Dr. Neill smiled. "Don't worry," he said. "The wires are cut. You couldn't go to sleep now if you tried."

Neill waited until the three men had left the lecture room on their way back to the Recreation Wing and then stepped down from the dais and shut the door. He was a short, broad-shouldered man in his fifties, with a sharp, impatient mouth and small features. He swung a chair out of the front row and straddled it deftly.

"Well?" he asked.

Morley was sitting on one of the desks against the back wall, playing aimlessly with a pencil. At thirty he was the youngest member of the team working under Neill at the Clinic, but for some reason Neill liked to talk to him.

He saw Neill was waiting for an answer and shrugged.

"Everything seems to be all right," he said. "Surgical convalescence is over. Cardiac rhythms and EEG are normal. I saw the X rays this morning and everything has sealed beautifully."

Neill watched him quizzically. "You don't sound as if you approve."

Morley laughed and stood up. "Of course I do." He walked down the aisle between the desks, white coat unbuttoned, hands sunk deep in his pockets. "No, so far you've vindicated yourself on every point. The party's only just beginning, but the guests are in damn good shape. No doubt about it. I thought three weeks was a little early to bring them out of hypnosis, but you'll probably be right there as well. Tonight is the first one they take on their own. Let's see how they are tomorrow morning."

"What are you secretly expecting?" Neill asked wryly. "Massive feedback from the medulla?"

"No," Morley said. "There again the psychometric tests have shown absolutely nothing coming up at all. Not a single trauma." He stared at the blackboard and then looked round at Neill. "Yes, as a cautious estimate I'd say you've succeeded."

Neill leaned forward on his elbows. He flexed his jaw muscles. "I think I've more than succeeded. Blocking the medullary synapses has eliminated a lot of material I thought would still be there—the minor quirks and complexes, the petty aggressive phobias, the bad change in the psychic bank. Most of them have gone, or at least they don't show in the tests. However, they're the side targets, and thanks to you, John, and to everyone else in the team, we've hit a bull's-eye on the main one."

Morley murmured something, but Neill ran on in his clipped voice. "None of you realize it yet, but this is as big an advance as the step the first ichthyoid took out of the protozoic sea 300 million years ago. At last we've freed the mind, raised it out of that archaic sump called sleep, its nightly retreat into the medulla. With virtually one cut of the scalpel we've added twenty years to those men's lives."

"I only hope they know what to do with them," Morley commented.

"Come, John," Neill snapped back. "That's not an argument.

What they do with the time is their responsibility anyway. They'll make the most of it, just as we've always made the most, eventually, of any opportunity given us. It's too early to think about it yet, but visualize the universal application of our technique. For the first time Man will be living a full twenty-four-hour day, not spending a third of it as an invalid, snoring his way through an eight-hour peepshow of infantile erotica."

Tired, Neill broke off and rubbed his eyes. "What's worrying you?"

Morley made a small, helpless gesture with one hand. "I'm not sure, it's just that I . . ." He played with the plastic brain mounted on a stand next to the blackboard. Reflected in one of the frontal whorls was a distorted image of Neill, with a twisted chinless face and vast domed cranium. Sitting alone among the desks in the empty lecture room he looked like an insane genius patiently waiting to take an examination no one could set him.

Morley turned the model with his finger, watched the image blur and dissolve. Whatever his doubts, Neill was probably the last person to understand them.

"I know all you've done is close off a few of the loops in the hypothalamus, and I realize the results are going to be spectacular. You'll probably precipitate the greatest social and economic revolution since the Fall. But for some reason I can't get that story of Chekhov's out of my mind—the one about the man who accepts a million-ruble bet that he can't shut himself up alone for ten years. He tries to, nothing goes wrong, but one minute before the time is up he deliberately steps out of his room. Of course, he's insane."

"So?"

"I don't know. I've been thinking about it all week."

Neill let out a light snort. "I suppose you're trying to say that sleep is some sort of communal activity and that these three men are now isolated, exiled from the group unconscious, the dark oceanic dream. Is that it?"

"Maybe."

"Nonsense, John. The further we hold back the unconscious the better. We're reclaiming some of the marshland. Physiologically sleep is nothing more than an inconvenient symptom of cerebral anoxemia. It's not *that* you're afraid of missing, it's the dream. You want to hold on to your front-row seat at the peepshow."

"No," Morley said mildly. Sometimes Neill's aggressiveness surprised him; it was almost as if he regarded sleep itself as secretly discreditable, a concealed vice. "What I really mean is that for

better or worse Lang, Gorrell, and Avery are now stuck with themselves. They're never going to be able to get away, not even for a couple of minutes, let alone eight hours. How much of yourself can you stand? Maybe you need eight hours off a day just to get over the shock of being yourself. Remember, you and I aren't always going to be around, feeding them with tests and films. What will happen if they get fed up with themselves?"

"They won't," Neill said. He stood up, suddenly bored by Morley's questions. "The total tempo of their lives will be lower than ours, these stresses and tensions won't begin to crystallize. We'll soon seem like a lot of manic-depressives to them, running round like dervishes half the day, then collapsing into a stupor the other half."

He moved toward the door and reached out to the light switch. "Well, I'll see you at six o'clock."

They left the lecture room and started down the corridor together.

"What are you doing now?" Morley asked.

Neill laughed. "What do you think?" he said. "I'm going to get a good night's sleep."

A little after midnight Avery and Gorrell were playing table tennis in the floodlit gymnasium. They were competent players, and passed the ball backward and forward with a minimum of effort. Both felt strong and alert; Avery was sweating slightly, but this was due to the arc lights blazing down from the roof—maintaining, for safety's sake, an illusion of continuous day—rather than to any excessive exertion of his own. The oldest of the three volunteers, a tall and somewhat detached figure, with a lean, closed face, he made no attempt to talk to Gorrell and concentrated on adjusting himself to the period ahead. He knew he would find no trace of fatigue, but as he played he carefully checked his respiratory rhythms and muscle tonus, and kept one eye on the clock.

Gorrell, a jaunty, self-composed man, was also subdued. Between strokes he glanced cautiously around the gymnasium, noting the hangarlike walls, the broad, polished floor, the shuttered skylights in the roof. Now and then, without realizing it, he fingered the circular trepan scar at the back of his head.

Out in the center of the gymnasium a couple of armchairs and a sofa had been drawn up around a Gramophone, and here Lang was playing chess with Morley, doing his section of night duty. Lang hunched forward over the chessboard. Wiry-haired and ag-

gressive, with a sharp nose and mouth, he watched the pieces closely. He had played regularly against Morley since he arrived at the Clinic four months earlier, and the two were almost equally matched, with perhaps a slight edge to Morley. But tonight Lang had opened with a new attack and after ten moves had completed his development and begun to split Morley's defense. His mind felt clear and precise, focused sharply on the game in front of him, though only that morning had he finally left the cloudy limbo of posthypnosis through which he and the two others had drifted for three weeks like lobotomized phantoms.

Behind him, along one wall of the gymnasium, were the offices housing the control unit. Over his shoulder he saw a face peering at him through the circular observation window in one of the doors. Here, at constant alert, a group of orderlies and interns sat around waiting by their emergency trolleys. (The end door, into a small ward containing three cots, was kept carefully locked.) After a few moments the face withdrew. Lang smiled at the elaborate machinery watching over him. His transference onto Neill had been positive and he had absolute faith in the success of the experiment. Neill had assured him that, at worst, the sudden accumulation of metabolites in his bloodstream might induce a mild torpor, but his brain would be unimpaired.

"Nerve fiber, Robert," Neill had told him time and again, "never fatigues. The brain cannot tire."

While he waited for Morley to move he checked the time from the clock mounted against the wall. Twelve twenty. Morley yawned, his face drawn under the gray skin. He looked tired and drab. He slumped down into the armchair, face in one hand. Lang reflected how frail and primitive those who slept would soon seem, their minds sinking off each evening under the load of accumulating toxins, the edge of their awareness worn and frayed. Suddenly he realized that at that very moment Neill himself was asleep. A curiously disconcerting vision of Neill, huddled in a rumpled bed two floors above, his blood sugar low, his mind drifting, rose before him.

Lang laughed at his own conceit, and Morley retrieved the rook he had just moved.

"I must be going blind. What am I doing?"

"No," Lang said. He started to laugh again. "I've just discovered I'm awake."

Morley smiled. "We'll have to put that down as one of the sayings of the week." He replaced the rook, sat up, and looked across

at the table tennis pair. Gorrell had hit a fast backhand low over the net and Avery was running after the ball.

"They seem to be OK. How about you?"

"Right on top of myself," Lang said. His eyes flicked up and down the board and he moved before Morley caught his breath back.

Usually they went right through into the end game, but tonight Morley had to concede on the twentieth move.

"Good," he said encouragingly. "You'll be able to take on Neill soon. Like another?"

"No. Actually the game bores me. I can see that's going to be a problem."

"You'll face it. Give yourself time to find your legs."

Lang pulled one of the Bach albums out of its rack in the record cabinet. He put a Brandenburg Concerto on the turntable and lowered the sapphire. As the rich, contrapuntal patterns chimed out he sat back, listening intently to the music.

Morley thought: Absurd. How fast can you run? Three weeks ago you were strictly a hepcat.

The next few hours passed rapidly.

At one thirty they went up to the surgery, where Morley and one of the interns gave them a quick physical, checking their renal clearances, heart rate, and reflexes.

Dressed again, they went into the empty cafeteria for a snack and sat on the stools, arguing what to call this new fifth meal. Avery suggested "Midfood," Morley, "Munch."

At two they took their places in the neurology theater, and spent a couple of hours watching films of the hypnodrills of the past three weeks.

When the program ended they started down for the gymnasium, the night almost over. They were still relaxed and cheerful; Gorrell led the way, playfully teasing Lang over some of the episodes in the films, mimicking his trancelike walk.

"Eyes shut, mouth open," he demonstrated, swerving into Lang, who jumped nimbly out of his way. "Look at you; you're doing it even now. Believe me, Lang, you're not awake, you're somnambulating." He called back to Morley, "Agreed, Doctor?"

Morley swallowed a yawn. "Well, if he is, that makes two of us." He followed them along the corridor, doing his best to stay awake, feeling as if he, and not the three men in front of him, had been without sleep for the last three weeks.

Though the Clinic was quiet, at Neill's orders all lights along the

corridors and down the stairway had been left on. Ahead of them two orderlies checked that windows they passed were safely screened and doors were shut. Nowhere was there a single darkened alcove or shadow trap.

Neill had insisted on this, reluctantly acknowledging a possible reflex association between darkness and sleep: "Let's admit it. In all but a few organisms the association *is* strong enough to be a reflex. The higher mammals depend for their survival on a highly acute sensory apparatus, combined with a varying ability to store and classify information. Plunge them into darkness, cut off the flow of visual data to the cortex, and they're paralyzed. Sleep is a defense reflex. It lowers the metabolic rate, conserves energy, increases the organism's survival potential by merging it into its habitat . . ."

On the landing halfway down the staircase was a wide, shuttered window that by day opened out onto the parkscape behind the Clinic. As he passed it Gorrell stopped. He went over, released the blind, then unlatched the shutter.

Still holding it closed, he turned to Morley, watching from the flight above.

"Taboo, Doctor?" he asked.

Morley looked at each of the three men in turn. Gorrell was calm and unperturbed, apparently satisfying nothing more sinister than an idle whim. Lang sat on the rail, watching curiously with an expression of clinical disinterest. Only Avery seemed slightly anxious, his thin face wan and pinched. Morley had an irrelevant thought: 4 a.m. shadow—they'll need to shave twice a day. Then: why isn't Neill here? He knew they'd make for a window as soon as they got the chance.

He noticed Lang giving him an amused smile and shrugged, trying to disguise his uneasiness.

"Go ahead, if you want to. As Neill said, the wires are cut."

Gorrell threw back the shutter, and they clustered around the window and stared out into the night. Below, pewter-gray lawns stretched toward the pines and low hills in the distance. A couple of miles away on their left a neon sign winked and beckoned.

Neither Gorrell nor Lang noticed any reaction, and their interest began to flag within a few moments. Avery felt a sudden lift under the heart, then controlled himself. His eyes began to sift the darkness; the sky was clear and cloudless, and through the stars he picked out the narrow, milky traverse of the galactic rim. He

watched it silently, letting the wind cool the sweat on his face and neck.

Morley stepped over to the window and leaned his elbows on the sill next to Avery. Out of the corner of his eye he carefully waited for any motor tremor—a fluttering eyelid, accelerated breathing—that would signal a reflex discharging. He remembered Neill's warning: "In Man sleep is largely volitional, and the reflex is conditioned by habit. But just because we've cut out the hypothalamic loops regulating the flow of consciousness doesn't mean the reflex won't discharge down some other pathway. However, sooner or later we'll have to take the risk and give them a glimpse of the dark side of the sun."

Morley was musing on this when something nudged his shoulder.

"Doctor," he heard Lang say. "Doctor Morley."

He pulled himself together with a start. He was alone at the window. Gorrell and Avery were halfway down the next flight of stairs.

"What's up?" Morley asked quickly.

"Nothing," Lang assured him. "We're just going back to the gym." He looked closely at Morley. "Are you all right?"

Morley rubbed his face. "God, I must have been asleep." He glanced at his watch. Four twenty. They had been at the window for over fifteen minutes. All he could remember was leaning on the sill. "And I was worried about *you*."

Everybody was amused, Gorrell particularly. "Doctor," he drawled, "if you're interested I can recommend you to a good narcotomist."

After five o'clock they felt a gradual ebb of tonus from their arm and leg muscles. Renal clearances were falling and breakdown products were slowly clogging their tissues. Their palms felt damp and numb, the soles of their feet like pads of sponge rubber. The sensation was vaguely unsettling, allied to no feelings of mental fatigue.

The numbness spread. Avery noticed it stretching the skin over his cheekbones, pulling at his temples, and giving him a slight frontal migraine. He doggedly turned the pages of a magazine, his hands like lumps of putty.

Then Neill came down, and they began to revive. Neill looked fresh and spruce, bouncing on the tips of his toes.

"How's the night shift going?" he asked briskly, walking round

each one of them in turn, smiling as he sized them up. "Feel all right?"

"Not too bad, Doctor," Gorrell told him. "A slight case of insomnia."

Neill roared, slapped him on the shoulder and led the way up to the surgery laboratory.

At nine, shaved and in fresh clothes, they assembled in the lecture room. They felt cool and alert again. The peripheral numbness and slight head torpor had gone as soon as the detoxication drips had been plugged in, and Neill told them that within a week their kidneys would have enlarged sufficiently to cope on their own.

All morning and most of the afternoon they worked on a series of IQ, associative, and performance tests. Neill kept them hard at it, steering swerving blips of light around a cathode screen, juggling with intricate numerical and geometric sequences, elaborating word chains.

He seemed more than satisfied with the results.

"Shorter access times, deeper memory traces," he pointed out to Morley when the three men had gone off at five for the rest period. "Barrels of prime psychic marrow." He gestured at the test cards spread out across the desk in his office. "And you were worried about the Unconscious. Look at those Rorschachs of Lang's. Believe me, John, I'll soon have him reminiscing about his foetal experiences."

Morley nodded, his first doubts fading.

Over the next two weeks either he or Neill was with the men continuously, sitting out under the floodlights in the center of the gymnasium, assessing their assimilation of the eight extra hours, carefully watching for any symptoms of withdrawal. Neill carried everyone along, from one program phase to the next, through the test periods, across the long hours of the interminable nights, his powerful ego injecting enthusiasm into every member of the unit.

Privately, Morley worried about the increasing emotional overlay apparent in the relationship between Neill and the three men. He was afraid they were becoming conditioned to identify Neill with the experiment. (Ring the meal bell and the subject salivates; but suddenly stop ringing the bell after a long period of conditioning and it temporarily loses the ability to feed itself. The hiatus barely harms a dog, but it might trigger disaster in an already oversensitized psyche.)

Neill was fully alert to this. At the end of the first two weeks, when he caught a bad head cold after sitting up all night and decided to spend the next day in bed, he called Morley into his office.

"The transference is getting much too positive. It needs to be eased off a little."

"I agree," Morley said. "But how?"

"Tell them I'll be asleep for forty-eight hours," Neill said. He picked up a stack of reports, plates, and test cards and bundled them under one arm. "I've deliberately overdosed myself with sedative to get some rest. I'm worn to a shadow, full fatigue syndrome, load cells screaming. Lay it on."

"Couldn't that be rather drastic?" Morley asked. "They'll hate you for it."

But Neill only smiled and went off to requisition an office near his bedroom.

That night Morley was on duty in the gymnasium from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. As usual he first checked that the orderlies were ready with their emergency trolleys, read through the log left by the previous supervisor, one of the senior interns, and then went over to the circle of chairs. He sat back on the sofa next to Lang and leafed through a magazine, watching the three men carefully. In the glare of the arc lights their lean faces had a sallow, cyanosed look. The senior intern had warned him that Avery and Gorrell might overtire themselves at table tennis, but by 11 p.m. they stopped playing and settled down in the armchairs. They read desultorily and made two trips up to the cafeteria, escorted each time by one of the orderlies. Morley told them about Neill, but surprisingly none of them made any comment.

Midnight came slowly. Avery read, his long body hunched up in an armchair. Gorrell played chess against himself.

Morley dozed.

Lang felt restless. They gymnasium's silence and absence of movement oppressed him. He switched on the Gramophone and played through a Brandenburg, analyzing its theme trains. Then he ran a word-association test on himself, turning the pages of a book and using the top right-hand corner words as the control list.

Morley leaned over. "Anything come up?" he asked.

"A few interesting responses." Lang found a notepad and jotted something down. "I'll show them to Neill in the morning—or whenever he wakes up." He gazed up pensively at the arc lights. "I was

just speculating. What do you think the next step forward will be?"

"Forward where?" Morley asked.

Lang gestured expansively. "I mean up the evolutionary slope. Three hundred million years ago we became air-breathers and left the seas behind. Now we've taken the next logical step forward and eliminated sleep. What's next?"

Morley shook his head. "The two steps aren't analogous. Anyway, in point of fact you haven't left the primeval sea behind. You're still carrying a private replica of it around as your bloodstream. All you did was encapsulate a necessary piece of the physical environment in order to escape it."

Lang nodded. "I was thinking of something else. Tell me, has it ever occurred to you how completely death-orientated the psyche is?"

Morley smiled. "Now and then," he said, wondering where this led.

"It's curious," Lang went on reflectively. "The pleasure-pain principle, the whole survival-compulsion apparatus of sex, the superego's obsession with tomorrow—most of the time the psyche can't see farther than its own tombstone. Now why has it got this strange fixation? For one very obvious reason." He tapped the air with his forefinger. "Because every night it's given a pretty convincing reminder of the fate in store for it."

"You mean the black hole," Morley suggested wryly. "Sleep?"

"Exactly. It's simply a pseudodeath. Of course, you're not aware of it, but it must be terrifying." He frowned. "I don't think even Neill realizes that, far from being restful, sleep is a genuinely traumatic experience."

So that's it, Morley thought. The great father analyst has been caught napping on his own couch. He tried to decide which were worse—patients who knew a lot of psychiatry, or those who only knew a little.

"Eliminate sleep," Lang was saying, "and you also eliminate all the fear and defense mechanisms erected around it. Then, at last, the psyche has a chance to orientate toward something more valid."

"Such as . . . ?" Morley asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps . . . Self?"

"Interesting," Morley commented. It was 3:10 a.m. He decided to spend the next hour going through Lang's latest test cards.

He waited a discretionary five minutes, then stood up and walked over to the surgery office.

* * *

Lang hooked an arm across the back of the sofa and watched the orderly room door.

"What's Morley playing at?" he asked. "Have either of you seen him anywhere?"

Avery lowered his magazine. "Didn't he go off into the orderly room?"

"Ten minutes ago," Lang said. "He hasn't looked in since. There's supposed to be someone on duty with us continuously. Where is he?"

Gorrell, playing solitaire chess, looked up from his board. "Perhaps these late nights are getting him down. You'd better wake him before Neill finds out. He's probably fallen asleep over a batch of your test cards."

Lang laughed and settled down on the sofa. Gorrell reached out to the Gramophone, took a record out of the rack and slid it on to the turntable.

As the Gramophone began to hum Lang noticed how silent and deserted the gymnasium seemed. The Clinic was always quiet, but even at night a residual ebb and flow of sound—a chair dragging in the orderly room, a generator charging under one of the theaters—eddied through and kept it alive.

Now the air was flat and motionless. Lang listened carefully. The whole place had the dead, echoless feel of an abandoned building.

He stood up and strolled over to the orderly room. He knew Neill discouraged casual conversation with the control crew, but Morley's absence puzzled him.

He reached the door and peered through the window to see if Morley was inside.

The room was empty.

The light was on. Two emergency trolleys stood in their usual place against the wall near the door, a third was in the middle of the floor, a pack of playing cards strewn across its deck, but the group of three or four interns had gone.

Lang hesitated, reached down to open the door, and found it had been locked.

He tried the handle again, then called out over his shoulder: "Avery. There's nobody in here."

"Try next door. They're probably being briefed for tomorrow."

Lang stepped over to the surgery office. The light was off but he

could see the white enameled desk and the big program charts around the wall. There was no one inside.

Avery and Gorrell were watching him.

"Are they in there?" Avery asked.

"No." Lang turned the handle. "The door's locked."

Gorrell switched off the Gramophone and he and Avery came over. They tried the two doors again.

"They're here somewhere," Avery said. "There must be at least one person on duty." He pointed to the end door. "What about that one?"

"Locked," Lang said, "69 always has been. I think it leads down to the basement."

"Let's try Neill's office," Gorrell suggested. "If they aren't in there we'll stroll through to Reception and try to leave. This must be some trick of Neill's."

There was no window in the door to Neill's office. Gorrell knocked, waited, knocked again more loudly.

Lang tried the handle, then knelt down. "The light's off," he reported.

Avery turned and looked around at the two remaining doors out of the gymnasium, both in the far wall, one leading up to the cafeteria and the neurology wing, the other into the car park at the rear of the Clinic.

"Didn't Neill hint that he might try something like this on us?" he asked. "To see whether we can go through a night on our own."

"But Neill's asleep," Lang objected. "He'll be in bed for a couple of days. Unless . . ."

Gorrell jerked his head in the direction of the chairs. "Come on. He and Morley are probably watching us now."

They went back to their seats.

Gorrell dragged the chess stool over to the sofa and set up the pieces. Avery and Lang stretched out in armchairs and opened magazines, turning the pages deliberately. Above them the banks of arc lights threw their wide cones of light down into the silence.

The only noise was the slow left-right, left-right motion of the clock.

Three fifteen a.m.

The shift was imperceptible. At first a slight change of perspective, a fading and regrouping of outlines. Somewhere a focus slipped, a shadow swung slowly across a wall, its angles breaking

and lengthening. The motion was fluid, a procession of infinitesimals, but gradually its total direction emerged.

The gymnasium was shrinking. Inch by inch, the walls were moving inward, encroaching across the periphery of the floor. As they shrank toward each other their features altered: the rows of skylights below the ceiling blurred and faded, the power cable running along the base of the wall merged into the skirting board, the square baffles of the air vents vanished into the gray distemper.

Above, like the undersurface of an enormous lift, the ceiling sank toward the floor . . .

Gorrell leaned his elbows on the chessboard, face sunk in his hands. He had locked himself in a perpetual check, but he continued to shuttle the pieces in and out of one of the corner squares, now and then gazing into the air for inspiration, while his eyes roved up and down the walls around him.

Somewhere, he knew, Neill was watching him.

He moved, looked up, and followed the wall opposite him down to the far corner, alert for the telltale signs of a retractable panel. For some while he had been trying to discover Neill's spy hole, but without any success. The walls were blank and featureless; he had twice covered every square foot of the two facing him, and apart from the three doors there appeared to be no fault or aperture of even the most minute size anywhere on their surface.

After a while his left eye began to throb painfully, and he pushed away the chessboard and lay back. Above him a line of fluorescent tubes hung down from the ceiling, mounted in checkered plastic brackets that diffused the light. He was about to comment on his search for the spy hole to Avery and Lang when he realized that any one of them could conceal a microphone.

He decided to stretch his legs, stood up, and sauntered off across the floor. After sitting over the chessboard for half an hour he felt cramped and restless, and would have enjoyed tossing a ball up and down, or flexing his muscles on a rowing machine. But annoyingly no recreational facilities, apart from the three armchairs and the Gramophone, had been provided.

He reached the end wall and wandered around, listening for any sound from the adjacent rooms. He was beginning to resent Neill spying on him and the entire keyhole conspiracy, and he noted with relief that it was a quarter past three: in under three hours it would all be over.

* * *

The gymnasium closed in. Now less than half its original size, its walls bare and windowless, it was a vast, shrinking box. The sides slid into each other, merging along an abstract hairline, like planes severing in a multidimensional flux. Only the clock and a single door remained . . .

Lang had discovered where the microphone was hidden.

He sat forward in his chair, cracking his knuckles until Gorrell returned, then rose and offered him his seat. Avery was in the other armchair, feet up on the Gramophone.

"Sit down for a bit," Lang said. "I feel like a stroll."

Gorrell lowered himself into the chair. "I'll ask Neill if we can have a Ping-Pong table in here. It should help pass the time and give us some exercise."

"A good idea," Lang agreed. "If we can get the table through the door. I doubt if there's enough room in here, even if we moved the chairs right up against the wall."

He walked off across the floor, surreptitiously peering through the orderly room window. The light was on, but there was still no one inside.

He ambled over to the Gramophone and paced up and down near it for a few moments. Suddenly he swung around and caught his foot under the flex leading to the wall socket.

The plug fell out onto the floor. Lang left it where it lay, went over, and sat down on the arm of Gorrell's chair.

"I've just disconnected the microphone," he confided.

Gorrell looked around carefully. "Where was it?"

Lang pointed. "Inside the Gramophone." He laughed softly. "I thought I'd pull Neill's leg. He'll be wild when he realizes he can't hear us."

"Why do you think it was in the Gramophone?" Gorrell asked.

"What better place? Besides, it couldn't be anywhere else. Apart from in there." He gestured at the light bowl suspended from the center of the ceiling. "It's empty except for the two bulbs. The Gramophone is the obvious place. I had a feeling it was there, but I wasn't sure until I noticed we had a Gramophone, but no records."

Gorrell nodded sagely.

Lang moved away, chuckling to himself.

Above the door of Room 69 the clock ticked on at three fifteen.

* * *

The motion was accelerating. What had once been the gymnasium was now a small room, seven feet wide, a tight, almost perfect cube. The walls plunged inward, along colliding diagonals, only a few feet from their final focus . . .

Avery noticed Gorrell and Lang pacing around his chair. "Either of you want to sit down yet?" he asked.

They shook their heads. Avery rested for a few minutes and then climbed out of the chair and stretched himself.

"Quarter past three," he remarked, pressing his hands against the ceiling. "This is getting to be a long night."

He leaned back to let Gorrell pass him, and then started to follow the others around the narrow space between the armchair and the walls.

"I don't know how Neill expects us to stay awake in this hole for twenty-four hours a day," he went on. "Why haven't we got a television set in here? Even a radio would be something."

They sidled around the chair together, Gorrell, followed by Avery, with Lang completing the circle, their shoulders beginning to hunch, their heads down as they watched the floor, their feet falling into the slow, leaden rhythm of the clock.

This, then, was the manhole: a narrow, vertical cubicle, a few feet wide, six deep. Above, a solitary, dusty bulb gleamed down from a steel grille. As if crumbling under the impetus of their own momentum, the surface of the walls had coarsened, the texture was that of stone, streaked and pitted . . .

Gorrell bent down to loosen one of his shoelaces and Avery bumped into him sharply, knocking his shoulder against the wall.

"All right?" he asked, taking Gorrell's arm. "This place is a little overcrowded. I can't understand why Neill ever put us in here."

He leaned against the wall, head bowed to prevent it from touching the ceiling, and gazed about thoughtfully.

Lang stood squeezed into the corner next to him, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

Gorrell squatted down on his heels below them.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"I'd say about three fifteen," Lang offered. "More or less."

"Lang," Avery asked, "where's the ventilator here?"

Lang peered up and down the walls and across the small square

of ceiling. "There must be one somewhere." Gorrell stood up and they shuffled about, examining the floor between their feet.

"There may be a vent in the light grill," Gorrell suggested. He reached up and slipped his fingers through the cage, running them behind the bulb.

"Nothing there. Odd. I should have thought we'd use the air in here within half an hour."

"Easily," Avery said. "You know, there's something—"

Just then Lang broke in. He gripped Avery's elbow.

"Avery," he asked. "Tell me. How did we get here?"

"What do you mean, get here? We're on Neill's team."

Lang cut him off. "I know that." He pointed at the floor. "I mean, in here."

Gorrell shook his head. "Lang, relax. How do you think? Through the door."

Lang looked squarely at Gorrell, then at Avery.

"What door?" he asked calmly.

Gorrell and Avery hesitated, then swung around to look at each wall in turn, scanning it from floor to ceiling. Avery ran his hands over the heavy masonry, then knelt down and felt the floor, digging his fingers at the rough stone slabs. Gorrell crouched beside him, scrabbling at the thin seams of dirt.

Lang backed out of their way into a corner, and watched them impassively. His face was calm and motionless, but in his left temple a single vein fluttered insanely.

When they finally stood up, staring at each other unsteadily, he flung himself between them at the opposite wall.

"Neill! Neill!" he shouted. He pounded angrily on the wall with his fists. "Neill! Neill!"

Above him the light began to fade.

Morley closed the door of the surgery office behind him and went over to the desk. Though it was 3:15 a.m., Neill was probably awake, working on the latest material in the office next to his bedroom. Fortunately that afternoon's test cards, freshly marked by one of the interns, had only just reached his in-tray.

Morley picked out Lang's folder and started to sort through the cards. He suspected that Lang's responses to some of the key words and suggestion triggers lying disguised in the question forms might throw illuminating sidelights onto the real motives behind his equation of sleep and death.

The communicating door to the orderly room opened and an intern looked in.

"Do you want me to take over in the gym, Doctor?"

Morley waved him away. "Don't bother. I'm going back in a moment."

He selected the cards he wanted and began to initial his withdrawals. Glad to get away from the glare of the arc lights, he delayed his return as long as he could, and it was 3:25 a.m. when he finally left the office and stepped back into the gymnasium.

The men were sitting where he had left them. Lang watched him approach, head propped comfortably on a cushion. Avery was slouched down in his armchair, nose in a magazine, while Gorrell hunched over the chessboard, hidden behind the sofa.

"Anybody feel like coffee?" Morley called out, deciding they needed some exercise.

None of them looked up or answered. Morley felt a flicker of annoyance, particularly at Lang, who was staring past him at the clock.

Then he saw something that made him stop.

Lying on the polished floor ten feet from the sofa was a chess piece. He went over and picked it up. The piece was the black king. He wondered how Gorrell could be playing chess with one of the two essential pieces of the game missing when he noticed three more pieces lying on the floor nearby.

His eyes moved to where Gorrell was sitting.

Scattered over the floor below the chair and sofa was the rest of the set. Gorrell was slumped over the stool. One of his elbows had slipped and the arm dangled between his knees, knuckles resting on the floor. The other hand supported his face. Dead eyes peered down at his feet.

Morley ran over to him, shouting: "Lang! Avery! Get the orderlies!"

He reached Gorrell and pulled him back off the stool.

"Lang!" he called again.

Lang was still staring at the clock, his body in the stiff, unreal posture of a waxworks dummy.

Morley let Gorrell loll back onto the sofa, leaned over and glanced at Lang's face.

He crossed to Avery, stretched out behind the magazine, and jerked his shoulder. Avery's head bobbed stiffly. The magazine slipped and fell from his hands, leaving his fingers curled in front of his face.

Morley stepped over Avery's legs to the Gramophone. He switched it on, gripped the volume control, and swung it round to full amplitude.

Above the orderly room door an alarm bell shrilled out through the silence.

"Weren't you with them?" Neill asked sharply.

"No," Morley admitted. They were standing by the door of the emergency ward. Two orderlies had just dismantled the electrotherapy unit and were wheeling the console away on a trolley. Outside in the gymnasium a quiet, urgent traffic of nurses and interns moved past. All but a single bank of arc lights had been switched off, and the gymnasium seemed like a deserted stage at the end of a performance.

"I slipped into the office to pick up a few test cards," he explained. "I wasn't gone more than ten minutes."

"You were supposed to watch them continuously," Neill snapped. "Not wander off by yourself whenever you felt like it. What do you think we had the gym and this entire circus set up for?"

It was a little after 5:30 a.m. After working hopelessly on the three men for a couple of hours, he was close to exhaustion. He looked down at them, lying inertly in their cots, canvas sheets buckled up to their chins. They had barely changed, but their eyes were open and unblinking, and their faces had the empty, reflexless look of psychic zero.

An intern bent over Lang, thumbing a hypodermic. Morley stared at the floor. "I think they would have gone anyway."

"How can you say that?" Neill clamped his lips together. He felt frustrated and impotent. He knew Morley was probably right—the three men were in terminal withdrawal, unresponsive to either insulin or electrotherapy, and a vise-tight catatonic seizure didn't close in out of nowhere—but as always refused to admit anything without absolute proof.

He led the way into his office and shut the door.

"Sit down." He pulled a chair out for Morley and prowled off around the room, slamming a fist into his palm.

"All right, John. What is it?"

Morley picked up one of the test cards lying on the desk, balanced it on a corner and spun it between his fingers. Phrases swam through his mind, tentative and uncertain, like blind fish.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked. "Reactivation of the

infantile imago? A regression into the great, slumbering womb? Or to put it more simply still—just a fit of pique?"

"Go on."

Morley shrugged. "Continual consciousness is more than the brain can stand. Any signal repeated often enough eventually loses its meaning. Try saying the word *sleep* fifty times. After a point the brain's self-awareness dulls. It's no longer able to grasp who or why it is, and it rides adrift."

"What do we do then?"

"Nothing. Short of rescoring all the way down to Lumbar I. The central nervous system can't stand narcotomy."

Neill shook his head. "You're lost," he said curtly. "Juggling with generalities isn't going to bring those men back. First, we've got to find out what happened to them, what they actually felt and saw."

Morley frowned dubiously. "That jungle is marked *private.* Even if you do, is a psychotic's withdrawal drama going to make any sense?"

"Of course it will. However insane it seems to us, it was real enough to them. If we know the ceiling fell in or the whole gym filled with ice cream or turned into a maze, we've got something to work on." He sat down on the desk. "Do you remember that story of Chekhov's you told me about?"

"'The Bet'? Yes."

"I read it last night. Curious. It's a lot nearer what you're really trying to say than you know." He gazed around the office. "This room in which the man is penned for ten years symbolizes the mind driven to the furthest limits of self-awareness . . . Something very similar happened to Avery, Gorrell, and Lang. They must have reached a stage beyond which they could no longer contain the idea of their own identity. But far from being unable to grasp the idea, I'd say that they were conscious of nothing else. Like the man in the spherical mirror, who can only see a single gigantic eye staring back at him."

"So you think their withdrawal is a straightforward escape from the eye, the overwhelming ego?"

"Not escape," Neill corrected. "The psychotic never escapes from anything. He's much more sensible. He merely readjusts reality to suit himself. Quite a trick to learn, too. The room in Chekhov's story gives me an idea as to how they might have re-adjusted. Their particular equivalent of this room was the gym. I'm beginning to realize it was a mistake to put them in there—all

those lights blazing down, the huge floor, high walls. They merely exaggerate the sensation of overload. In fact the gym might easily have become an external projection of their own egos."

Neill drummed his fingers on the desk. "My guess is that at this moment they're either striding around in there the size of hundred-foot giants, or else they've cut it down to their own dimensions. More probably that. They've just pulled the gym in on themselves."

Morley grinned bleakly. "So all we've got to do now is pump them full of honey and apomorphine and coax them out. Suppose they refuse?"

"They won't," Neill said. "You'll see."

There was a rap on the door. An intern stuck his head through.

"Lang's coming out of it, Doctor. He's calling for you."

Neill bounded out.

Morley followed him into the ward.

Lang was lying in his cot, body motionless under the canvas sheet. His lips were parted slightly. No sound came from them, but Morley, bending over next to Neill, could see his hyoid bone vibrating in spasms.

"He's very faint," the intern warned.

Neill pulled up a chair and sat down next to the cot. He made a visible effort of concentration, flexing his shoulders. He bent his head close to Lang's and listened.

Five minutes later it came through again.

Lang's lips quivered. His body arched under the sheet, straining at the buckles, and then subsided.

"Neill . . . Neill," he whispered. The sounds, thin and strangled, seemed to be coming from the bottom of a well. "Neill . . . Neill . . . Neill . . ."

Neill stroked his forehead with a small, neat hand.

"Yes, Bobby," he said gently. His voice was feather-soft, caressing. "I'm here, Bobby. You can come out now."

Storm-Bird, Storm-Dreamer

At dawn the bodies of the dead birds shone in the damp light of the marsh, their gray plumage hanging in the still water like fallen clouds. Each morning when Crispin went out onto the deck of the picket ship he would see the birds lying in the creeks and waterways where they had died two months earlier, their wounds cleansed now by the slow current, and he would watch the white-haired woman who lived in the empty house below the cliff walking by the river. Along the narrow beach the huge birds, larger than condors, lay at her feet. As Crispin gazed at her from the bridge of the picket ship she moved among them, now and then stooping to pluck a feather from the outstretched wings. At the end of her walk, when she returned across the damp meadow to the empty house, her arms would be loaded with immense white plumes.

At first Crispin had felt an obscure sense of annoyance at the way this strange woman descended onto the beach and calmly plundered the plumage of the dead birds. Although many thousands of the creatures lay along the margins of the river and in the marshes around the inlet where the picket ship was moored, Crispin still maintained a proprietary attitude toward them. He himself, almost single-handedly, had been responsible for the slaughter of the birds in the last terrifying battles when they had come from their aeries along the North Sea and attacked the picket ship. Each of the immense white creatures—for the most part gulls and gannets, with a few fulmars and petrels—carried *his* bullet in its heart like a jewel.

As he watched the woman cross the overgrown lawn to her house Crispin remembered again the frantic hours before the birds'

final hopeless attack. Hopeless it seemed now, when their bodies lay in a wet quilt over the cold Norfolk marshes, but then, only two months earlier, when the sky above the ship had been dark with their massing forms, it was Crispin who had given up hope.

The birds had been larger than men, with wingspans of twenty feet or more that shut out the sun. Crispin had raced like a madman across the rusty metal decks, dragging the ammunition cans in his torn arms from the armory and loading them into the breeches of the machine guns, while Quimby, the idiot youth from the farm at Long Reach whom Crispin had persuaded to be his gun loader, gibbered to himself on the foredeck, hopping about on his clubfoot as he tried to escape from the huge shadows sweeping across him. When the birds began their first dive, and the sky turned into a white scythe, Crispin had barely enough time to buckle himself into the shoulder harness of the turret.

Yet he had won, shooting the first wave down into the marshes as they soared toward him like a white armada, then turning to fire at the second group swooping in low across the river behind his back. The hull of the picket ship was still dented with the impacts their bodies had made as they struck the sides above the waterline. At the height of the battle the birds had been everywhere, wings like screaming crosses against the sky, their corpses crashing through the rigging onto the decks around him as he swung the heavy guns, firing from rail to rail. A dozen times Crispin had given up hope, cursing the men who had left him alone on this rusty hulk to face the giant birds, and who made him pay for Quimby out of his own pocket.

But then, when the battle had seemed to last for ever, when the sky was still full of birds and his ammunition had nearly gone, he noticed Quimby dancing on the corpses heaped on the deck, pitching them into the water with his two-pronged fork as they thudded around him.

Then Crispin knew that he had won. When the firing slackened Quimby dragged up more ammunition, eager for killing, his face and deformed chest smeared with feathers and blood. Shouting himself now, with a fierce pride in his own courage and fear, Crispin had destroyed the remainder of the birds, shooting the stragglers, a few fledgling peregrines, as they fled toward the cliff. For an hour after the last of the birds had died, when the river and the creeks near the ship ran red with their blood, Crispin had sat in the turret, firing the guns at the sky that had dared attack him.

Later, when the excitement and pulse of the battle had passed,

he realized that the only witness of his stand against this aerial armageddon had been a clubfooted idiot to whom no one would ever listen. Of course, the white-haired woman had been there, hiding behind the shutters in her house, but Crispin had not noticed her until several hours had passed, when she began to walk among the corpses. To begin with, therefore, he had been glad to see the birds lying where they had fallen, their blurred forms eddying away in the cold water of the river and the marshes. He sent Quimby back to his farm, and watched the idiot dwarf punt his way down river among the swollen corpses. Then, crossed bandoliers of machine-gun cartridges around his chest, Crispin took command of his bridge.

The woman's appearance on the scene he welcomed, glad someone else was there to share his triumph, and well aware that she must have noticed him patrolling the captain's walk of the picket ship. But after a single glance the woman never again looked at him. She seemed intent only on searching the beach and the meadow below her house.

On the third day after the battle she had come out onto the lawn with Quimby, and the dwarf spent the morning and afternoon clearing away the bodies of the birds that had fallen there. He heaped them onto a heavy wooden tumbril, then harnessed himself between the shafts and dragged them away to a pit near the farm. The following day he appeared again in a wooden skiff and punted the woman, standing alone in the bows like an aloof wraith, among the bodies of the birds floating in the water. Now and then Quimby turned one of the huge corpses over with his pole, as if searching for something among them—there were apocryphal stories, which many townsfolk believed, that the beaks of the birds carried tusks of ivory, but Crispin knew this to be nonsense.

These movements of the woman puzzled Crispin, who felt that his conquest of the birds had also tamed the landscape around the picket ship and everything in it. Shortly afterwards, when the woman began to collect the wing feathers of the birds, he felt that she was in some way usurping a privilege reserved for him alone. Sooner or later the river voles, rats, and other predators of the marshes would destroy the birds, but until then he resented anyone else looting this drowned treasure, which he had won so hard. After the battle he had sent a short message in his crabbed handwriting to the district officer at the station twenty miles away, and until a reply came he preferred that the thousands of bodies

should lie where they had fallen. As a conscripted member of the picket service he was not eligible for a bounty, but Crispin dimly hoped he might receive a medal or some sort of commendation.

The knowledge that the woman was his only witness, apart from the idiot Quimby, deterred Crispin from doing anything that might antagonize her. Also, the woman's odd behavior made Crispin suspect that she too might be mad. He had never seen her at a shorter distance than the three hundred yards separating the picket ship from the bank below her house, but through the telescope mounted on the rail of the bridge he followed her along the beach, and saw more clearly the white hair and the ashen skin of her high face. Her arms were thin but strong, hands held at her waist as she moved about in a gray ankle-length robe. Her bedraggled appearance was that of someone unaware that she had lived alone for a long time.

For several hours Crispin watched her walking among the corpses. The tide cast a fresh freight onto the sand each day, but now that the bodies were decomposing, their appearance, except at a distance, was devoid of any sentiment. The shallow inlet in which the picket ship was moored—the vessel was one of the hundreds of old coastal freighters hastily converted to duty when the first flocks of giant birds had appeared two years earlier—faced the house across the river. Through the telescope Crispin could count the scores of pockmarks in the white stucco where spent bullets from his guns had lodged themselves.

At the end of her walk the woman had filled her arms with a garland of feathers. As Crispin watched, hands clasping the bandoliers across his chest, she went over to one of the birds, walking into the shallow water to peer into its half-submerged face. Then she plucked a single plume from its wing and added it to the collection in her arms.

Restlessly Crispin returned to the telescope. In the narrow eyepiece her swaying figure, almost hidden by the spray of white feathers, resembled that of some huge decorative bird, a white peacock. Perhaps in some bizarre way she imagined she was a bird?

In the wheelhouse Crispin fingered the signal pistol fastened to the wall. When she came out the next morning he could fire one of the flares over her head, warning her that the birds were his, subjects of his own transitory kingdom. The farmer, Hassell, who had come with Quimby for permission to burn some of the birds

for use as fertilizer, had plainly acknowledged Crispin's moral rights over them.

Usually Crispin made a thorough inspection of the ship each morning, counting the ammunition cases and checking the gunnery mountings. The metal caissons were splitting the rusty decks. The whole ship was settling into the mud below. At high tide Crispin would listen to the water pouring through a thousand cracks and rivet holes like an army of silver-tongued rats.

This morning, however, his inspection was brief. After testing the turret on the bridge—there was always the chance of a few stragglers appearing from the nesting grounds along the abandoned coast—he went back to his telescope. The woman was somewhere behind the house, cutting down the remains of a small rose pergola. Now and then she would look up at the sky and at the cliff above, scanning the dark line of the escarpment as if waiting for one of the birds.

This reminder that he had overcome his own fears of the giant birds made Crispin realize why he resented the woman plucking their feathers. As their bodies and plumage began to dissolve he felt a growing need to preserve them. Often he found himself thinking of their great tragic faces as they swooped down upon him, in many ways more to be pitied than feared, victims of what the district officer had called a "biological accident"—Crispin vaguely remembered him describing the new growth-promoters used on the crops in East Anglia and the extraordinary and unforeseen effects on the bird life.

Five years earlier Crispin had been working in the fields as a laborer, unable to find anything better after his wasted years of military service. He remembered the first of the new sprays being applied to the wheat and fruit crops, and the tacky phosphorescent residue that made them glimmer in the moonlight, transforming the placid agricultural backwater into a strange landscape where the forces of some unseen nature were forever gathering themselves in readiness. The fields had been covered with the dead bodies of gulls and magpies whose mouths were clogged with this silvering gum. Crispin himself had saved many of the half-conscious birds, cleaning their beaks and feathers, and sending them off to their sailing grounds along the coast.

Three years later the birds had returned. The first giant cormorants and black-headed gulls had wingspans of ten or twelve feet, strong bodies and beaks that could slash a dog apart. Soaring

low over the fields as Crispin drove his tractor under the empty skies, they seemed to be waiting for something.

The next autumn a second generation of even larger birds appeared, sparrows as fierce as eagles, gannets and gulls with the wingspans of condors. These immense creatures, with bodies as broad and powerful as a man's, flew out of the storms along the coast, killing the cattle in the fields and attacking the farmers and their families. Returning for some reason to the infected crops that had given them this wild spur to growth, they were the advance guard of an aerial armada of millions of birds that filled the skies over the country. Driven by hunger, they began to attack the human beings who were their only source of food.

Crispin had been too busy defending the farm where he lived to follow the course of the battle against the birds all over the world. The farm, only ten miles from the coast, had been besieged. After the dairy cattle had been slaughtered, the birds turned to the farm buildings. One night Crispin woke as a huge frigate bird, its shoulders wider than a door, had shattered the wooden shutters across his window and thrust itself into his room. Seizing his pitchfork, Crispin nailed it by the neck to the wall.

After the destruction of the farm, in which the owner, his family, and three of the laborers died, Crispin volunteered to join the picket service. The district officer who headed the motorized militia column at first refused Crispin's offer of help. Surveying the small, ferretlike man with his beaked nose and the birthmark like a star below his left eye, hobbling in little more than a blood-streaked singlet across the wreck of the farmhouse, as the last of the birds wheeled away like giant crosses, the district officer had shaken his head, seeing in Crispin's eyes only the blind hunt for revenge.

However, when they counted the dead birds around the brick kiln where Crispin had made his stand, armed only with a scythe a head taller than himself, the officer had taken him on. He was given a rifle, and for half an hour they moved through the shattered fields nearby, filled with the stripped skeletons of cattle and pigs, finishing off the wounded birds that lay there.

Finally, Crispin had come to the picket ship, a drab hulk rusting in a backwater of riverine creeks and marshes, where a dwarf punted his coracle among the dead birds and a mad woman bedecked herself on the beach with garlands of feathers.

* * *

For an hour Crispin paced around the ship, as the woman worked behind the house. At one point she appeared with a laundry basket filled with feathers and spread them out on a trestle table beside the rose pergola.

At the stern of the ship Crispin kicked open the galley door. He peered into the murky interior.

"Quimby! Are you there?"

This damp hovel was still maintained as a home from home by Quimby. The dwarf would pay sudden visits to Crispin, presumably in the hope of seeing further action against the birds.

When there was no reply Crispin shouldered his rifle and made for the gangway. Still eyeing the opposite shore, where a small fire was now sending a plume of gray smoke into the placid air, he tightened his bandoliers and stepped down the creaking gangway to the launch at the bottom.

The dead bodies of the birds were massed around the picket ship in a soggy raft. After trying to drive the launch through them Crispin stopped the outboard motor and seized the gaff. Many of the birds weighed as much as five hundred pounds, lying in the water with their wings interlocked, tangled up with the cables and rope tossed down from the decks. Crispin could barely push them apart with the gaff, and slowly forced the launch to the mouth of the inlet.

He remembered the district officer telling him that the birds were closely related to the reptiles—evidently this explained their blind ferocity and hatred of the mammals—but to Crispin their washed faces in the water looked more like those of drowned dolphins, almost manlike in their composed and individual expressions. As he made his way across the river past the drifting forms it seemed to him that he had been attacked by a race of winged men, driven on not by cruelty or blind instinct but by a sense of some unknown and irrevocable destiny. Along the opposite bank the silver forms of the birds lay among the trees and on the open patches of grass. As he sat in the launch on the water the landscape seemed to Crispin like the morning after some apocalyptic battle of the heavens, the corpses like those of fallen angels.

He moored the launch by the beach, pushing aside the dead birds lying in the shallows. For some reason a flock of pigeons, a few doves among them, had fallen at the water's edge. Their plump-breasted bodies, at least ten feet from head to tail, lay as if asleep on the damp sand, eyes closed in the warm sunlight. Holding his bandoliers to prevent them slipping off his shoulders,

Crispin climbed the bank. Ahead lay a small meadow filled with corpses. He walked through them toward the house, now and then treading on the wing tips.

A wooden bridge crossed a ditch into the grounds of the house. Beside it, like a heraldic symbol pointing his way, reared the upended wing of a white eagle. The immense plumes with their exquisite modeling reminded him of monumental sculpture, and in the slightly darker light as he approached the cliff the apparent preservation of the birds' plumage made the meadow resemble a vast avian mortuary garden.

As he rounded the house the woman was standing by the trestle table, laying out more feathers to dry. To her left, beside the frame of the gazebo, was what Crispin at first assumed to be a bonfire of white feathers, piled onto a crude wooden framework she had built from the remains of the pergola. An air of dilapidation hung over the house—most of the windows had been broken by the birds during their attacks over the past years, and the garden and yard were filled with litter.

The woman turned to face Crispin. To his surprise she gazed at him with a hard eye, unimpressed by the brigandlike appearance he presented with his cartridge bandoliers, rifle, and scarred face. Through the telescope he had guessed her to be elderly, but in fact she was barely more than thirty years old, her white hair as thick and well groomed as the plumage of the dead birds in the fields around them. The rest of her, however, despite the strong figure and firm hands, was as neglected as the house. Her handsome face, devoid of all makeup, seemed to have been deliberately exposed to the cutting winter winds, and the long woollen robe she wore was stained with oil, its frayed hem revealing a pair of worn sandals.

Crispin came to a halt in front of her, for a moment wondering why he was visiting her at all. The few bales of feathers heaped on the pyre and drying on the trestle table seemed no challenge to his authority over the birds—the walk across the meadow had more than reminded him of that. Yet he was aware that something, perhaps their shared experience of the birds, bonded him and the young woman. The empty killing sky, the freighted fields silent in the sun, and the pyre beside them imposed a sense of a common past.

Laying the last of the feathers on the trestle, the woman said, "They'll dry soon. The sun is warm today. Can you help me?"

Crispin moved forward uncertainly. "How do you mean? Of course."

The woman pointed to a section of the rose pergola that was still standing. A rusty saw was embedded in a small groove the woman had managed to cut in one of the uprights. "Can you cut that down for me?"

Crispin followed her over to the pergola, unslinging his rifle. He pointed to the remains of a pine fence that had collapsed to one side of the old kitchen garden. "You want wood? That'll burn better."

"No—I need this frame. It's got to be strong." She hesitated as Crispin continued to fiddle with his rifle, her voice more defensive. "Can you do it? The little dwarf couldn't come today. He usually helps me."

Crispin raised a hand to silence her. "I'll help you." He leaned his rifle against the pergola and took hold of the saw, after a few strokes freed it from its groove and made a clean start.

"Thank you." As he worked the woman stood beside him, looking down with a friendly smile as the cartridge bandoliers began to flap rhythmically to the motion of his arm and chest.

Crispin stopped, reluctant to shed the bandoliers of machine-gun bullets, the badge of his authority. He glanced in the direction of the picket ship, and the woman, taking her cue, said, "You're the captain? I've seen you on the bridge."

"Well . . ." Crispin had never heard himself described as the vessel's captain, but the title seemed to carry a certain status. He nodded modestly. "Crispin," he said by way of introduction. "Captain Crispin. Glad to help you."

"I'm Catherine York." Holding her white hair to her neck with one hand, the woman smiled again. She pointed to the rusting hulk. "It's a fine ship."

Crispin worked away at the saw, wondering whether she was missing the point. When he carried the frame over to the pyre and laid it at the base of the feathers he replaced his bandoliers with calculated effect. The woman appeared not to notice, but a moment later, when she glanced up at the sky, he raised his rifle and went up to her.

"Did you see one? Don't worry, I'll get it." He tried to follow her eyes as they swept across the sky after some invisible object that seemed to vanish beyond the cliff, but she turned away and began to adjust the feathers mechanically. Crispin gestured at the

fields around them, feeling his pulse beat again at the prospect and fear of battle. "I shot all these . . ."

"What? I'm sorry, what did you say?" The woman looked around. She appeared to have lost interest in Crispin and was vaguely waiting for him to leave.

"Do you want more wood?" Crispin asked. "I can get some."

"I have enough." She touched the feathers on the trestle, then thanked Crispin and walked off into the house, closing the hall door on its rusty hinges.

Crispin made his way across the lawn and through the meadow. The birds lay around him as before, but the memory, however fleeting, of the woman's sympathetic smile made him ignore them. He set off in the launch, pushing away the floating birds with brusque motions of the gaff. The picket ship sat at its moorings, the soggy raft of gray corpses around it. For once the rusting hulk depressed Crispin.

As he climbed the gangway he saw Quimby's small figure on the bridge, wild eyes roving about at the sky. Crispin had expressly forbidden the dwarf to be near the steering helm, though there was little likelihood of the picket ship going anywhere. Irritably he shouted at Quimby to get off the ship.

The dwarf leaped down the threadbare network of ratlines to the deck. He scurried over to Crispin.

"Crisp!" he shouted in his hoarse whisper. "They saw one! Coming in from the coast! Hassell told me to warn you."

Crispin stopped. Heart pounding, he scanned the sky out of the sides of his eyes, at the same time keeping a close watch on the dwarf. "When?"

"Yesterday." The dwarf wriggled one shoulder, as if trying to dislodge a stray memory. "Or was it this morning? Anyway, it's coming. Are you ready, Crisp?"

Crispin walked past, one hand firmly on the breech of his rifle. "I'm always ready," he rejoined. "What about you?" He jerked a finger at the house. "You should have been with the woman. Catherine York. I had to help her. She said she didn't want to see you again."

"What?" The dwarf scurried about, hands dancing along the rusty rail. He gave up with an elaborate shrug. "Ah, she's a strange one. Lost her man, you know, Crisp. And her baby."

Crispin paused at the foot of the bridge companionway. "Is that right? How did it happen?"

"A dove killed the man, pulled him to pieces on the roof, then

took the baby. A tame bird, mark you." He nodded when Crispin looked at him skeptically. "That's it. He was another strange one, that York. Kept this big dove on a chain."

Crispin climbed onto the bridge and stared across the river at the house. After musing to himself for five minutes he kicked Quimby off the ship, and then spent half an hour checking the gunnery installation. The reported sighting of one of the birds he discounted—no doubt a few strays were still flitting about, searching for their flocks—but the vulnerability of the woman across the river reminded him to take every precaution. Near the house she would be relatively safe, but in the open, during her walks along the beach, she would be an all too easy prey.

It was this undefined feeling of responsibility toward Catherine York that prompted him, later that afternoon, to take the launch out again. A quarter of a mile down river he moored the craft by a large open meadow, directly below the flight path of the birds as they had flown in to attack the picket ship. Here, on the cool green turf, the dying birds had fallen most thickly. A recent fall of rain concealed the odor of the immense gulls and fulmars lying across each other like angels. In the past Crispin had always moved with pride among this white harvest he had reaped from the sky, but now he hurried down the winding aisles between the birds, a wicker basket under his arm, intent only on his errand.

When he reached the higher ground in the center of the meadow he placed the basket on the carcass of a dead falcon and began to pluck the feathers from the wings and breasts of the birds lying about him. Despite the rain, the plumage was almost dry. Crispin worked steadily for half an hour, tearing out the feathers with his hands, then carried the basketfuls of plumes down to the launch. As he scurried about the meadow his bent head and shoulders were barely visible above the corpses of the birds.

By the time he set off in the launch the small craft was loaded from bow to stern with the bright plumes. Crispin stood in the steering well, peering over his cargo as he drove up river. He moored the boat on the beach below the woman's house. A thin trail of smoke rose from the fire, and he could hear Mrs. York chopping more kindling.

Crispin walked through the shallow water around the boat, selecting the choicest of the plumes and arranging them around the basket—a falcon's brilliant tail feathers, the mother-of-pearl plumes of a fulmar, the brown breast feathers of an eider. Shouldering the basket, he set off toward the house.

Catherine York was moving the trestle closer to the fire, straightening the plumes as the smoke drifted past them. More feathers had been added to the pyre built onto the frame of the pergola. The outer ones had been woven together to form a firm rim.

Crispin put the basket down in front of her, then stood back. "Mrs. York, I brought these. I thought you might use them."

The woman glanced obliquely at the sky, then shook her head as if puzzled. Crispin suddenly wondered if she recognized him. "What are they?"

"Feathers. For over there." Crispin pointed at the pyre. "They're the best I could find."

Catherine York knelt down, her skirt hiding the scuffed sandals. She touched the colored plumes as if recalling their original owners. "They are beautiful. Thank you, Captain." She stood up. "I'd like to keep them, but I need only this kind."

Crispin followed her hand as she pointed to the white feathers on the trestle. With a curse, he slapped the breech of the rifle.

"Doves! They're all doves! I should have noticed!" He picked up the basket. "I'll get you some."

"Crispin . . ." Catherine York took his arm. Her troubled eyes wandered about his face, as if hoping to find some kindly way of warning him off. "I have enough, thank you. It's nearly finished now."

Crispin hesitated, waiting for himself to say something to this beautiful white-haired woman whose hands and robe were covered with the soft down of the doves. Then he picked up the basket and made his way back to the launch.

As he sailed across the river to the ship he moved up and down the launch, casting the cargo of feathers onto the water. Behind him, the soft plumes formed a wake.

That night, as Crispin lay in his rusty bunk in the captain's cabin, his dreams of the giant birds who filled the moonlit skies of his sleep were broken by the faint ripple of the air in the rigging overhead, the muffled hoot of an aerial voice calling to itself. Waking, Crispin lay still with his head against the metal stanchion, listening to the faint whoop and swerve around the mast.

Crispin leaped from the bunk. He seized his rifle and raced barefoot up the companionway to the bridge. As he stepped onto the deck, sliding the barrel of the rifle into the air, he caught a

last glimpse against the moonlit night of a huge white bird flying away across the river.

Crispin rushed to the rail, trying to steady the rifle enough to get in a shot at the bird. He gave up as it passed beyond his range, its outline masked by the cliff. Once warned, the bird would never return to the ship. A stray, no doubt it was hoping to nest among the masts and rigging.

Shortly before dawn, after a ceaseless watch from the rail, Crispin set off across the river in the launch. Overexcited, he was convinced he had seen it circling above the house. Perhaps it had seen Catherine York asleep through one of the shattered windows. The muffled echo of the engine beat across the water, broken by the floating forms of the dead birds. Crispin crouched forward with the rifle and drove the launch onto the beach. He ran through the darkened meadow, where the corpses lay like silver shadows. He darted into the cobbled yard and knelt by the kitchen door, trying to catch the sounds of the sleeping woman in the room above.

For an hour, as the dawn lifted over the cliff, Crispin prowled around the house. There were no signs of the bird, but at last he came across the mound of feathers mounted on the pergola frame. Peering into the soft gray bowl, he realized that he had caught the dove in the very act of building a nest.

Careful not to waken the woman sleeping above him beyond the cracked panes, he destroyed the nest. With his rifle butt he stove in the sides, then knocked a hole through the woven bottom. Then, happy that he had saved Catherine York from the nightmare of walking from her house the next morning and seeing the bird waiting to attack her from its perch on this stolen nest, Crispin set off through the gathering light and returned to the ship.

For the next two days, despite his vigil on the bridge, Crispin saw no more of the dove. Catherine York remained within the house, unaware of her escape. At night, Crispin would patrol her house. The changing weather, and the first taste of the winter to come, had unsettled the landscape, and during the day Crispin spent more time upon the bridge, uneager to look out on the marshes that surrounded the ship.

On the night of the storm, Crispin saw the bird again. All afternoon the dark clouds had come in from the sea along the river basin, and by evening the cliff beyond the house was hidden by the rain. Crispin was in the bridgehouse, listening to the bulk-

heads groaning as the ship was driven farther into the mud by the wind.

Lightning flickered across the river, lighting the thousands of corpses in the meadows. Crispin leaned on the helm, gazing at the gaunt reflection of himself in the darkened glass, when a huge white face, beaked like his own, swam into his image. As he stared at this apparition, a pair of immense white wings seemed to unfurl themselves from his shoulders. Then this lost dove, illuminated in a flicker of lightning, rose into the gusting wind around the mast, its wings weaving themselves among the steel cables.

It was still hovering there, trying to find shelter from the rain, when Crispin stepped onto the deck and shot it through the heart.

At first light Crispin left the bridgehouse and climbed onto the roof. The dead bird hung, its wings outstretched, in a clutter of steel coils beside the lookout's nest. Its mournful face gaped down at Crispin, its expression barely changed since it loomed out of his own reflection at the height of the storm. Now, as the flat wind faded across the water, Crispin watched the house below the cliff. Against the dark vegetation of the meadows and marshes the bird hung like a white cross, and he waited for Catherine York to come to a window, afraid that a sudden gust might topple the dove to the deck.

When Quimby arrived in his coracle two hours later, eager to see the bird, Crispin sent him up the mast to secure the dove to the crosstree. Dancing about beneath the bird, the dwarf seemed mesmerized by Crispin, doing whatever the latter told him.

"Fire a shot at her, Crisp!" he exhorted Crispin, who stood disconsolately by the rail. "Over the house, that'll bring her out!"

"Do you think so?" Crispin raised the rifle, ejecting the cartridge whose bullet had destroyed the bird. He watched the bright shell tumble down into the feathery water below. "I don't know . . . it might frighten her. I'll go over there."

"That's the way, Crisp . . ." The dwarf scuttled about. "Bring her back here—I'll tidy it up for you."

"Maybe I will."

As he berthed the launch on the beach Crispin looked back at the picket ship, reassuring himself that the dead dove was clearly visible in the distance. In the morning sunlight the plumage shone like snow against the rusting masts.

When he neared the house he saw Catherine York standing in

the doorway, her windblown hair hiding her face, watching him approach with stern eyes.

He was ten yards from her when she stepped into the house and half-closed the door. Crispin began to run, and she leaned out and shouted angrily: "Go away! Go back to the ship and those dead birds you love so much!"

"Miss Catherine . . ." Crispin stammered to a halt by the door. "I saved you . . . Mrs. York!"

"Saved? Save the birds, Captain!"

Crispin tried to speak, but she slammed the door. He walked back through the meadow and punted across the river to the picket ship, unaware of Quimby's insane moon eyes staring down at him from the rail.

"Crisp . . . What's the matter?" For once the dwarf was gentle. "What happened?"

Crispin shook his head. He gazed up at the dead bird, struggling to find some solution to the woman's last retort. "Quimby," he said in a quiet voice to the dwarf, "Quimby, she thinks she's a bird."

During the next week this conviction grew in Crispin's bewildered mind, as did his obsession with the dead bird. Looming over him like an immense murdered angel, the dove's eyes seemed to follow him about the ship, reminding him of when it had first appeared, almost from within his own face, in the mirror glass of the bridgehouse.

It was this sense of identity with the bird that was to spur Crispin to his final stratagem.

Climbing the mast, he secured himself to the lookout's nest, and with a hacksaw cut away the steel cables tangled around the dove's body. In the gathering wind the great white form of the bird swayed and dipped, its fallen wings almost knocking Crispin from his perch. At intervals the rain beat across them, but the drops helped to wash away the blood on the bird's breast and the chips of rust from the hacksaw. At last Crispin lowered the bird to the deck, then lashed it to the hatch cover behind the funnel.

Exhausted, he slept until the next day. At dawn, armed with a machete, he began to eviscerate the bird.

Three days later, Crispin stood on the cliff above the house, the picket ship far below him across the river. The hollow carcass of the dove which he wore over his head and shoulders seemed

little heavier than a pillow. In the brief spell of warm sunlight he lifted the outstretched wings, feeling their buoyancy and the cutting flow of air through the feathers. A few stronger gusts moved across the crest of the ridge, almost lifting him into the wind, and he stepped closer to the small oak which hid him from the house below.

Against the trunk rested his rifle and bandoliers. Crispin lowered the wings and gazed up at the sky, making certain for the last time that no stray hawk or peregrine was about. The effectiveness of the disguise had exceeded all his hopes. Kneeling on the ground, the wings furled at his sides and the hollowed head of the bird lowered over his face, he felt he completely resembled the dove.

Below him the ground sloped toward the house. From the deck of the picket ship the cliff face had seemed almost vertical, but in fact the ground shelved downward at a steady but gentle gradient. With luck he might even manage to be airborne for a few steps. However, for most of the way to the house he intended simply to run downhill.

As he waited for Catherine York to appear he freed his right arm from the metal clamp he had fastened to the wing bone of the bird. He reached out to set the safety catch on his rifle. By divesting himself of the weapon and his bandoliers, and assuming the disguise of the bird, he had, as he understood, accepted the insane logic of the woman's mind. Yet the symbolic flight he was about to perform would free not only Catherine York, but himself as well, from the spell of the birds.

A door opened in the house, a broken pane of glass catching the sunlight. Crispin stood up behind the oak, his hands bracing themselves on the wings. Catherine York appeared, carrying something across the yard. She paused by the rebuilt nest, her white hair lifting in the breeze, and adjusted some of the feathers.

Stepping from behind the tree, Crispin walked forward down the slope. Ten yards ahead he reached a patch of worn turf. He began to run, the wings flapping unevenly at his sides. As he gained speed his feet raced across the ground. Suddenly the wings steadied as they gained their purchase on the updraught, and he found himself able to glide, the air rushing past his face.

He was a hundred yards from the house when the woman noticed him. A few moments later, when she had brought her shotgun from the kitchen, Crispin was too busy trying to control the speeding glider in which he had become a confused but jubilant passenger. His voice cried out as he soared across the falling

ground, feet leaping in ten-yard strides, the smell of the bird's blood and plumage filling his lungs.

He reached the perimeter of the meadow that ringed the house, crossing the hedge fifteen feet above the ground. He was holding with one hand to the soaring carcass of the dove, his head half-lost inside the skull, when the woman fired twice at him. The first charge went through the tail, but the second shot hit him in the chest, down into the soft grass of the meadow among the dead birds.

Half an hour later, when she saw that Crispin had died, Catherine York walked forward to the twisted carcass of the dove and began to pluck away the choicest plumes, carrying them back to the nest which she was building again for the great bird that would come one day and bring back her son.

The Sound-Sweep

One

By midnight Madame Gioconda's headache had become intense. All day the derelict walls and ceiling of the sound stage had reverberated with the endless din of traffic accelerating across the midtown flyover which arched fifty feet above the studio's roof, making the faded air feel leaden and angry.

Exhausting but at least impersonal, these sounds Madame Gioconda could bear. At dusk, however, when the flyover quieted, they were overlaid by the mysterious clapping of her phantoms, the sourceless applause that rustled down onto the stage from the darkness around her. At first a few scattered ripples from the front rows, it soon spread to the entire auditorium, mounting to a tumultuous ovation in which she suddenly detected a note of sarcasm, a single shout of derision that drove a spear of pain through her forehead, followed by an uproar of boos and catcalls that filled the tortured air. It always drove her away toward her couch, where she lay gasping helplessly until Mangon arrived at midnight, hurrying onto the stage with his sonovac.

Understanding her, he first concentrated on sweeping the walls and ceiling clean, draining away the heavy depressing underlayer of traffic noises. Carefully he ran the long snout of the sonovac over the ancient scenic flats (relics of her previous roles at the Metropolitan Opera House) which screened in Madame Gioconda's makeshift home—the great collapsing Byzantine bed (*Othello*) mounted against the microphone turret; the huge framed mirrors with their peeling silver screen (*Orpheus*) stacked in one corner by the bandstand; the stove (*Trovatore*) set up on the program director's podium, the gilt-trimmed dressing table and ward-

robe (*Figaro*) stuffed with newspaper and magazine clippings. He swept them methodically, moving the sonovac's nozzle in long strokes, drawing out the dead residues of sound that had accumulated during the day.

By the time he finished the air was clear again, the atmosphere lightened, its overtones of fatigue and irritation dissipated. Gradually Madame Gioconda recovered. Sitting up weakly, she smiled wanly at Mangon. Mangon grinned back encouragingly, slipped the kettle onto the stove for Russian tea—sweetened by the usual phenobarbitone chaser—switched off the sonovac and indicated to her that he was going outside to empty it.

Down in the alley behind the studio he clipped the sonovac onto the intake manifold of the sound truck. The vacuum drained in a few seconds, but he waited a discretionary two or three minutes before returning, keeping up the pretense that Madame Gioconda's phantom audience was real. Of course the cylinder was always empty, containing only the usual daily detritus—the sounds of a door slam, a partition collapsing somewhere or the kettle whistling, a grunt or two, and later, when the headaches began, Madame Gioconda's pitiful moanings. The riotous appause, that would have lifted the roof off the Met, let alone a small radio station, the jeers and hoots of derision were, he knew, quite imaginary, figments of Madame Gioconda's world of fantasy. They were phantoms from the past of a once great prima donna who had been dropped by her public and had retreated into her imagination, each evening conjuring up a blissful dream of being once again applauded by a full house at the Metropolitan. Guilt and resentment turned the dream sour by midnight, inverting it into a nightmare of fiasco and failure.

Why she should torment herself was difficult to understand, but at least the nightmare kept Madame Gioconda just this side of sanity. Mangon, who revered and loved her, would have been the last person in the world to disillusion her. Each evening, when he finished his calls for the day, he would drive his sound truck all the way over from the West Side to the abandoned radio station under the flyover at the deserted end of F Street. There he would go through the pretense of sweeping Madame Gioconda's apartment on the stage of studio 2 charging no fee; and he would make tea and listen to her reminiscences and plans for revenge, then see her asleep and tiptoe out, a wry but pleased smile on his youthful face.

He had been calling on Madame Gioconda for nearly a year,

but what his precise role was in relation to her he had not yet decided. Oddly enough, although he was more or less indispensable now to the effective operation of her fantasy world, she showed little personal interest or affection for Mangon. He assumed that this indifference was merely part of the autocratic personality of a world-famous prima donna, particularly one very conscious of the tradition—now, alas, meaningless—of Melba, Callas, Gioconda. To serve at all was the privilege. In time, perhaps, Madame Gioconda might accord him some sign of favor.

Without him, certainly, her prognosis would have been poor. Lately the headaches had become more menacing, as she insisted that the applause was growing stormier, the boos and catcalls more vicious. Whatever the psychic mechanism generating the fantasy system, Mangon realized that ultimately she would need him at the studio all day, holding back the enveloping tides of nightmare and insanity with dummy passes of the sonovac. Then, perhaps, when the dream crumbled, he would regret having helped her to delude herself. With luck, though, she might achieve her ambition of making a comeback. She had told him something of her scheme—a serpentine mixture of blackmail and bribery—and privately Mangon hoped to launch a plot of his own to return her to popularity. By now she had unfortunately reached the point where success alone could save her from disaster.

She was sitting up when he returned, propped back on an enormous gold lamé cushion, the single lamp at the foot of the couch throwing a semicircle of light onto the great flats which divided the sound stage from the auditorium. These were all from her last operatic role—*The Medium*—and represented a complete interior of the old spiritualist's seance chamber, the one coherent feature in Madame Gioconda's present existence. Surrounded by fragments from a dozen roles, even Madame Gioconda herself, Mangon reflected, seemed compounded of several separate identities. A tall figure, with full shapely shoulders and massive ribcage, she had a large handsome face topped by a magnificent coiffure of rich blue-black hair—the exact prototype of the classical diva. She must have been almost fifty, yet her soft creamy complexion and small features were those of a child. The eyes, however, belied her. Large and watchful, slashed with mascara, they regarded the world around her balefully, narrowing even as Mangon approached. Her teeth too were bad, stained by tobacco and cheap cocaine. When she was roused, and her full violet lips curled with rage, revealing

the blackened hulks of her dentures and the acid flickering tongue, her mouth looked like a very vent of hell. Altogether she was a formidable woman.

As Mangon brought her tea she heaved herself up and made room for him by her feet among the debris of beads, loose diary pages, horoscopes, and jeweled address books that littered the couch. Mangon sat down, surreptitiously noting the time (his first calls were at 9:30 the next morning and loss of sleep deadened his acute hearing), and prepared himself to listen to her for half an hour.

Suddenly she flinched, shrank back into the cushion and gestured agitatedly in the direction of the darkened bandstand.

"They're still clapping!" she shrieked. "For God's sake sweep them away, they're driving me insane. Ooooohh . . ." she rasped theatrically, "over there, quickly . . . !"

Mangon leapt to his feet. He hurried over to the bandstand and carefully focused his ears on the tiers of seats and plywood music stands. They were all immaculately clean, well below the threshold at which embedded sounds began to radiate detectable echoes. He turned to the corner walls and ceiling. Listening very carefully, he could just hear seven muted pads, the dull echoes of his footsteps across the floor. They faded and vanished, followed by a low threshing noise like blurred radio static—in fact Madame Gioconda's present tantrum. Mangon could almost distinguish the individual words, but repetition muffled them.

Madame Gioconda was still writhing about on the couch, evidently not to be easily placated, so Mangon climbed down off the stage and made his way through the auditorium to where he had left his sonovac by the door. The power lead was outside in the truck but he was sure Madame Gioconda would fail to notice.

For five minutes he worked away industriously, pretending to sweep the bandstand again, then put down the sonovac and returned to the couch.

Madame Gioconda emerged from the cushion, sounded the air carefully with two or three slow turns of the head, and smiled at him.

"Thank you, Mangon," she said silkily, her eyes watching him thoughtfully. "You've saved me again from my assassins. They've become so cunning recently they can even hide from you."

Mangon smiled ruefully to himself at this last remark. So he had been a little too perfunctory before; Madame Gioconda was keeping him up to the mark.

However, she seemed genuinely grateful. "Mangon, my dear," she reflected as she remade her face in the mirror of an enormous compact, painting on magnificent green eyes like a cobra's, "what would I do without you? How can I ever repay you for looking after me?"

The questions, whatever their sinister undertones (had he detected them, Mangon would have been deeply shocked) were purely rhetorical. All their conversations, for that matter, were entirely one-sided. For Mangon was a mute. From the age of three, when his mother had savagely punched him in the throat to stop his crying, he had been stone dumb, his vocal chords irreparably damaged. In all their endless exchanges of midnight confidences, Mangon had contributed not a single spoken word.

His muteness, naturally, was part of the attraction he felt for Madame Gioconda. Both of them in a sense had lost their voices, he to a cruel mother, she to a fickle and unfaithful public. This bound them together, gave them a shared sense of life's injustice, though Mangon, like all innocents, viewed his misfortune without rancor. Both, too, were social outcasts. Rescued from his degenerate parents when he was four, Mangon had been brought up in a succession of state institutions, a solitary wounded child. His one talent had been his remarkable auditory powers, and at fourteen he was apprenticed to the Metropolitan Sonic Disposal Service. Regarded as little better than garbage collectors, the sound-sweeps were an outcast group of illiterates. They were all mutes (the city authorities preferred these—their discretion could be relied upon) and social cripples who lived in a chain of isolated shacks on the edge of an old explosives plant in the sand dunes to the north of the city which served as the sonic dump.

Mangon had made no friends among the sound-sweeps, and Madame Gioconda was the first person in his life with whom he had been intimately involved. Apart from the pleasure of being able to help her, a considerable factor in Mangon's devotion was that until her decline she had represented (as to all mutes) the most painful possible reminder of his own voiceless condition, and that now he could at last come to terms with years of unconscious resentment.

This soon done, he devoted himself wholeheartedly to serving Madame Gioconda.

* * *

Inhaling moodily on a black cigarette clamped into a long jade holder, she was outlining her plans for a comeback. These had been maturing for several months and involved nothing less than persuading Hector LeGrande, chairman-in-chief of Video City, the huge corporation that transmitted a dozen TV and radio channels, into providing her with a complete series of television spectaculars. Built around Madame Gioconda and lavishly dressed and orchestrated, they would spearhead the international revival of classical opera that was her unfading dream.

"La Scala, Covent Garden, the Met—what are they now?" she demanded angrily. "Bowling alleys! Can you believe, Mangon, that in those immortal theaters where I created my Tosca, my Butterfly, my Brünnehilde, they now have—" she spat out a gust of smoke "—beer and skittles!"

Mangon shook his head sympathetically. He pulled a pencil from his breast pocket and on the wrist-pad stitched to his left sleeve wrote:

Mr. LeGrande?

Madame Gioconda read the note, let it fall to the floor.

"Hector? Those lawyers poison him. He's surrounded by them; I think they steal all my telegrams to him. Of course Hector had a complete breakdown on the spectaculars. Imagine, Mangon, what a scoop for him, a sensation! 'The great Gioconda will appear on television!' Not just some moronic bubblegum girl, but the Gioconda in person."

Exhausted by this vision, Madame Gioconda sank back into her cushion, blowing smoke limply through the holder.

Mangon wrote:

Contract?

Madame Gioconda frowned at the note, then pierced it with the flowing end of her cigarette.

"I am having a new contract drawn up. Not for the mere 300,000 I was prepared to take at first, nor even 500,000. For each show I shall now demand precisely *one million* dollars. Nothing less! Hector will have to pay for ignoring me. Anyway, think of the publicity value of such a figure. Only a star could think of such vulgar extravagance. If he's short of cash he can sack all those lawyers. Or devalue the dollar; I don't mind."

Madame Gioconda hooted with pleasure at the prospect. Mangon nodded, then scribbled another message.

Be practical

Madame Gioconda ground out her cigarette. "You think I'm

raving, don't you, Mangon? 'Fantastic dreams, million-dollar contract—poor old fool.' But let me assure you that Hector will be only too eager to sign the contract. And I don't intend to rely solely on his good judgment as an impresario." She smirked archly to herself.

What else?

Madame Gioconda peered round the darkened stage, then lowered her eyes.

"You see, Mangon, Hector and I are very old friends. You know what I mean, of course?" She waited for Mangon, who had swept out a thousand honeymoon hotel suites, to nod, and then continued: "How well I remember that first season at Bayreuth, when Hector and I . . ."

Mangon stared unhappily at his feet as Madame Gioconda outlined this latest venture into blackmail. Certainly she and LeGrande had been intimate friends—the clippings scattered around the stage testified frankly to this. In fact, were it not for the small monthly cheque which LeGrande sent Madame Gioconda she would long previously have disintegrated. To turn on him and threaten ancient scandal (LeGrande was shortly to enter politics) was not only grotesque but extremely dangerous, for LeGrande was ruthless and unsentimental. Years earlier he had used Madame Gioconda as a stepping stone, reaping all the publicity he could from their affair, then abruptly kicking her away.

Mangon fretted. A solution to her predicament was hard to find. Brought about through no fault of her own, Madame Gioconda's decline was all the harder to bear. Since the introduction a few years earlier of ultrasonic music, the human voice—indeed, audible music of any type—had gone completely out of fashion. Ultrasonic music, employing a vastly greater range of octaves, chords, and chromatic scales than perceptible to the human ear, provided a direct neural link between the sound stream and the auditory lobes, generating an apparently sourceless sensation of harmony, rhythm, cadence, and melody uncontaminated by the noise and vibration of audible music. The rescoring of the classical repertoire allowed the ultrasonic audience the best of both worlds. The majestic rhythms of Beethoven, the popular melodies of Tchaikovsky, the complex fugal elaborations of Bach, the abstract images of Schönberg—all these were raised in frequency above the threshold of conscious audibility. Not only did they become inaudible, but the original works were rescored for the much wider range of the ultrasonic orchestra, became richer in texture,

more profound in theme, more sensitive, tender, or lyrical as the ultrasonic arranger chose.

The first casualty in this change-over was the human voice. This alone of all instruments could not be rescored, because its sounds were produced by nonmechanical means which the neurophonic engineer could never hope, or bother, to duplicate.

The earliest ultrasonic recordings had met with resistance, even ridicule. Radio programs consisting of nothing but silence interrupted at half-hour intervals by commercial breaks seemed absurd. But gradually the public discovered that the silence was golden, that after leaving the radio switched to an ultrasonic channel for an hour or so a pleasant atmosphere of rhythm and melody seemed to generate itself spontaneously around them. When an announcer suddenly stated that an ultrasonic version of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony or Tchaikovsky's Pathétique had just been played the listener identified the real source.

A second advantage of ultrasonic music was that its frequencies were so high they left no resonating residues in solid structures, and consequently there was no need to call in the sound-sweep. After an audible performance of most symphonic music, walls and furniture throbbed for days with disintegrating residues that made the air seem leaden and tumid, made an entire room virtually uninhabitable.

An immediate result was the swift collapse of all but a few symphony orchestras and opera companies. Concert halls and opera houses closed overnight. In the age of noise the tranquilizing balms of silence began to be rediscovered.

But the final triumph of ultrasonic music had come with a second development—the shortplaying record, spinning at 900 rpm, which condensed the forty-five minutes of a Beethoven symphony to twenty seconds of playing time, the three hours of a Wagner opera to little more than two minutes. Compact and cheap, SP records sacrificed nothing to brevity. One thirty-second SP record delivered as much neurophonic pleasure as a natural length recording, but with deeper penetration, greater total impact.

Ultrasonic SP records swept all others off the market. Sonic LP records became museum pieces—only a crank would choose to listen to an audible full-length version of *Siegfried* or the *Barber of Seville* when he could have both wrapped up inaudibly inside the same five-minute package *and* appreciate their full musical value.

The heyday of Madame Gioconda was over. Unceremoniously

left on the shelf, she had managed to survive for a few months vocalizing on radio commercials. Soon these too went ultrasonic. In a despairing act of revenge she bought out the radio station which fired her and made her home on one of the sound stages. Over the years the station became derelict and forgotten, its windows smashed, its neon portico collapsing, its aerials rusting. The huge eight-lane flyover built across it sealed it conclusively into the past.

Now Madame Gioconda proposed to win her way back at stiletto point.

Mangon watched her impassively as she ranted on nastily in a cloud of purple cigarette smoke, a large seedy witch. The phenobarbitone was making her drowsy and her threats and ultimatums were becoming disjointed.

". . . memoirs too, don't forget, Hector. Frank exposure, no holds barred. I mean . . . damn, have to get a ghost. Hotel de Paris at Monte, lots of pictures. Oh yes, I kept the photographs." She grubbed about on the couch, came up with a crumpled soap coupon and a supermarket pay slip. "Wait till those lawyers see them. Hector—" Suddenly she broke off, stared glassily at Mangon and sagged back.

Mangon waited until she was finally asleep, then stood up and peered closely at her. She looked forlorn and desperate. He watched her reverently for a moment, then tiptoed to the rheostat mounted on the control panel behind the couch, damped down the lamp at Madame Gioconda's feet and left the stage.

He sealed the auditorium doors behind him, made his way down to the foyer and stepped out, sad but at the same time oddly exhilarated, into the cool midnight air. At last he accepted that he would have to act swiftly if he was to save Madame Gioconda.

Two

Driving his sound truck into the city shortly after nine the next morning, Mangon decided to postpone his first call—the weird Neo-Corbusier Episcopalian Oratory sandwiched among the office blocks in the downtown financial sector—and instead turned west on Mainway and across the park toward the white-faced apartment batteries which reared up above the trees and lakes along the north side.

The Oratory was a difficult and laborious job that would take

him three hours of concentrated effort. The Dean had recently imported some rare thirteenth-century pediments from the Church of St. Francis at Assisi, beautiful sonic matrices rich with seven centuries of Gregorian chant, overlaid by the timeless tolling of the angelus. Mounted into the altar, they emanated an atmosphere resonant with litany and devotion, a mellow, deeply textured hymn that silently evoked the most sublime images of prayer and meditation.

But at $50,000 each they also represented a terrifying hazard to the clumsy sound-sweep. Only two years earlier the entire north transept of Rheims Cathedral, rose window intact, purchased for a record $1,000,000 and re-erected in the new Cathedral of St. Joseph at San Diego, had been drained of its priceless heritage of tonal inlays by a squad of illiterate sound-sweeps who had misread their instructions and accidentally swept the wrong wall.

Even the most conscientious sound-sweep was limited by his skill, and Mangon, with his auditory supersensitivity, was greatly in demand for his ability to sweep selectively, draining from the walls of the Oratory all extraneous and discordant noises—coughing, crying, the clatter of coins and mumble of prayer—leaving behind the chorales and liturgical chants which enhanced their devotional overtones. His skill alone would lengthen the life of the Assisi pediments by twenty years; without him they would soon become contaminated by the miscellaneous traffic of the congregation. Consequently he had no fears that the Dean would complain if he failed to appear as usual that morning.

Halfway along the north side of the park he swung off into the forecourt of a huge forty-story apartment block, a glittering white cliff ribbed by jutting balconies. Most of the apartments were Superlux duplexes occupied by show business people. No one was about, but as Mangon entered the hallway, sonovac in one hand, the marble walls and columns buzzed softly with the echoing chatter of guests leaving parties four or five hours earlier.

In the elevator the residues were clearer—confident male tones, the sharp wheedling of querulous wives, the soft negatives of amatory blonds, punctuated by countless repetitions of "dahling." Mangon ignored the echoes, which were almost inaudible, a dim insect hum. He grinned to himself as he rode up to the penthouse apartment; if Madame Gioconda had known his destination she would have strangled him on the spot.

* * *

Ray Alto, doyen of the ultrasonic composers and the man more than any other responsible for Madame Gioconda's decline, was one of Mangon's regular calls. Usually Mangon swept his apartment once a week, calling at three in the afternoon. Today, however, he wanted to make sure of finding Alto before he left for Video City, where he was a director of program music.

The houseboy let him in. He crossed the hall and made his way down the black glass staircase into the sunken lounge. Wide studio windows revealed an elegant panorama of park and midtown skyscrapers.

A white-slacked young man sitting on one of the long slab sofas —Paul Merrill, Alto's arranger—waved him back.

"Mangon, hold onto your dive breaks. I'm really on reheat this morning." He twirled the ultrasonic trumpet he was playing, a tangle of stops and valves from which half a dozen leads trailed off across the cushions to a cathode tube and tone generator at the other end of the sofa.

Mangon sat down quietly and Merrill clamped the mouthpiece to his lips. Watching the ray tube intently, where he could check the shape of the ultrasonic notes, he launched into a brisk allegretto sequence, then quickened and flicked out a series of brilliant arpeggios, stripping off high P and Q notes that danced across the cathode screen like frantic eels, fantastic glissandos that raced up twenty octaves in as many seconds. Each note was distinct and symmetrically exact, tripping off the tone generator to turn so that escalators of electronic chords interweaved the original scale, a multichannel melodic stream that crowded the cathode screen with exquisite, flickering patterns. The whole thing was inaudible, but the air around Mangon felt vibrant and accelerated, charged with gaiety and sparkle, and he applauded generously when Merrill threw off a final dashing riff.

"*Flight of the Bumble Bee,*" Merrill told him. He tossed the trumpet aside and switched off the cathode tube. He lay back and savored the glistening air for a moment. "Well, how are things?"

Just then the door from one of the bedrooms opened and Ray Alto appeared, a tall, thoughtful man of about forty, with thinning blond hair, wearing pale blue sunglasses over cool eyes.

"Hello, Mangon," he said, running a hand over Mangon's head. "You're early today. Full program?" Mangon nodded. "Don't let it get you down." Alto picked a dictaphone off one of the end tables, carried it over to an armchair. "Noise, noise, noise—the greatest single disease vector of civilization. The whole world's

rotting with it, yet all they can afford is a few people like Mangon tooling around with sonovacs. It's hard to believe that only a few years ago people completely failed to realize that sound left any residues."

"Are we any better?" Merrill asked. "This month's *Transonics* claims that eventually unswept sonic resonances will build up to a critical point where they'll literally start shaking buildings apart. The entire city will come down like Jericho."

"Babel," Alto corrected. "Okay, now, let's shut up. We'll be gone soon, Mangon. Buy him a drink, would you, Paul?"

Merrill brought Mangon a coke from the bar, then wandered off. Alto flipped on the dictaphone, began to speak steadily into it. "Memo 7: Betty, when does the copyright on Stravinsky lapse? Memo 8: Betty, file melody for projected nocturne: L, L sharp, BB, Y flat, Q, VT, L, L sharp. Memo 9: Paul, the bottom three octaves of the ultratuba are within the audible spectrum of the canine ear—congrats on that SP of the *Anvil Chorus* last night; about three million dogs thought the roof had fallen in on them. Memo 10: Betty—" He broke off, put down the microphone. "Mangon, you look worried."

Mangon, who had been lost in reverie, pulled himself together and shook his head.

"Working too hard?" Alto pressed. He scrutinized Mangon suspiciously. "Are you still sitting up all night with that Gioconda woman?"

Embarrassed, Mangon lowered his eyes. His relationship with Alto was, obliquely, almost as close as that with Madame Gioconda. Although Alto was brusque and often irritable with Mangon, he took a sincere interest in his welfare. Possibly Mangon's muteness reminded him of the misanthropic motives behind his hatred of noise, made him feel indirectly responsible for the act of violence Mangon's mother had committed. Also, one artist to another, he respected Mangon's phenomenal auditory sensitivity.

"She'll exhaust you, Mangon, believe me." Alto knew how much the personal contact meant to Mangon and hesitated to be overcritical. "There's nothing you can do for her. Offering her sympathy merely fans her hopes for a comeback. She hasn't a chance."

Mangon frowned, wrote quickly on his wrist-pad:

She WILL sing again!

Alto read the note pensively. Then, in a harder voice, he said: "She's using you for her own purposes, Mangon. At present you

satisfy one whim of hers—the neurotic headaches and fantasy applause. God forbid what the next whim might be."

She is a great artist.

"She *was*," Alto pointed out. "No more, though, sad as it is. I'm afraid that the times change."

Annoyed by this, Mangon gritted his teeth and tore off another sheet.

Entertainment, perhaps. Art, No!

Alto accepted the rebuke silently; he reproved himself as much as Mangon did for selling out to Video City. In his four years there his output of original ultrasonic music consisted of little more than one nearly finished symphony—aptly titled *Opus Zero* —shortly to receive its first performance, a few nocturnes, and one quartet. Most of his energies went into program music, prestige numbers for spectaculars and a mass of straight transcriptions of the classical repertoire. The last he particularly despised. It was fit work for Paul Merrill, but not for a responsible composer.

He added the sheet to the two in his left hand and asked: "Have you ever heard Madame Gioconda sing?"

Mangon's answer came back scornfully:

No! But you have. Please describe.

Alto laughed shortly, tore up the sheets and walked across to the window.

"All right, Mangon, you've made your point. You're carrying a torch for art, doing your duty to one of the few perfect things the world has ever produced. I hope you're equal to the responsibility. La Gioconda might be quite a handful. Do you know that at one time the doors of Covent Garden, La Scala, *and* the Met were closed to her? They said Callas had temperament, but she was a girl scout compared with Gioconda. Tell me, how is she? Eating enough?"

Mangon held up his coke bottle.

"Snow? That's tough. But how does she afford it?" He glanced at his watch. "Dammit, I've got to leave. Clean this place out thoroughly, will you? It gives me a headache just listening to myself think."

He started to pick up the dictaphone but Mangon was scribbling rapidly on his pad.

Give Madame Gioconda a job

Alto read the note, then gave it back to Mangon, puzzled. "Where? In this apartment?" Mangon shook his head. "Do you mean at V.C.? *Singing?*" When Mangon began to nod vigorously

he looked up at the ceiling with a despairing groan. "For heaven's sake, Mangon, the last vocalist sang at Video City over ten years ago. No audience would stand for it. If I even suggested such an idea they'd tear my contract into a thousand pieces." He shuddered, only half-playfully. "I don't know about you, Mangon, but I've got my ulcer to support."

He made his way to the staircase, but Mangon intercepted him, pencil flashing across the wrist-pad.

Please. Madame Gioconda will start blackmail soon. She is desperate. Must sing again. Could arrange make-believe program in research studios. Closed circuit.

Alto folded the note carefully, left the dictaphone on the staircase and walked slowly back to the window.

"This blackmail. Are you absolutely sure? Who, though, do you know?" Mangon nodded, but looked away. "Okay, I won't press you. LeGrande, probably, eh?" Mangon turned round in surprise, then gave an elaborate parody of a shrug.

"Hector LeGrande. Obvious guess. But there are no secrets there; it's all public knowledge. I suppose she's just threatening to make enough of an exhibition of herself to block his governorship." Alto pursed his lips. He loathed LeGrande, not merely for having bribed him into a way of life he could never renounce, but also because, once having exploited his weakness, LeGrande never hesitated to remind Alto of it, treating him and his music with contempt. If Madame Gioconda's blackmail had the slightest hope of success he would have been only too happy, but he knew LeGrande would destroy her, would probably take Mangon too.

Suddenly he felt a paradoxical sense of loyalty for Madame Gioconda. He looked at Mangon, waiting patiently, big spaniel eyes wide with hope.

"The idea of a closed circuit program is insane. Even if we went to all the trouble of staging it she wouldn't be satisfied. She doesn't want to sing, she wants to be a *star*. It's the trappings of stardom she misses—the cheering galleries, the piles of bouquets, the backstage parties. I could arrange a half-hour session on closed circuit with some trainee technicians—a few straight selections from *Tosca* and *Butterfly,* say, with even a sonic piano accompaniment—I'd be glad to play it myself—but I can't provide the gossip columns and the theater reviews. What would happen when she found out?"

She wants to SING

Alto reached out and patted Mangon on the shoulder. "Good for you. All right, then, I'll think about it. God knows how we'd

arrange it. We'd have to tell her that she'll be making a surprise guest appearance on one of the big shows—that'll explain the absence of any program announcement and we'll be able to keep her in an isolated studio. Stress the importance of surprise, to prevent her from contacting the newspapers . . . Where are you going?"

Mangon reached the staircase, picked up the dictaphone and returned to Alto with it. He grinned happily, his jaw working wildly as he struggled to speak. Strangled sounds quavered in his throat.

Touched, Alto turned away from him and sat down. "Okay, Mangon," he snapped brusquely, "you can get on with your job. Remember, I haven't promised anything." He flicked on the dictaphone, then began: "Memo 11: Ray . . ."

Three

It was just after four o'clock when Mangon braked the sound truck in the alley behind the derelict station. Overhead the traffic hammered along the flyover, dinning down onto the cobbled walls. He had been trying to finish his rounds early enough to bring Madame Gioconda the big news before her headaches began. He had swept out the Oratory in an hour, whirled through a couple of movie theaters, the Museum of Abstract Art, and a dozen private calls in half his usual time, driven by his almost overwhelming joy at having won a promise of help from Ray Alto.

He ran through the foyer, already fumbling at his wrist-pad. For the first time in many years he really regretted his muteness, his inability to tell Madame Gioconda orally of his triumph that morning.

Studio 2 was in darkness, the rows of seats and litter of old programs and ice cream cartons reflected dimly in the single light masked by the tall flats. His feet slipped in some shattered plaster fallen from the ceiling and he was out of breath when he clambered up onto the stage and swung around the nearest flat.

Madame Gioconda had gone!

The stage was deserted, the couch a rumpled mess, a clutter of cold saucepans on the stove. The wardrobe door was open, dresses wrenched outward off their hangars.

For a moment Mangon panicked, unable to visualize why she should have left, immediately assuming that she had discovered his plot with Alto.

Then he realized that never before had he visited the studio

until midnight at the earliest, and that Madame Gioconda had merely gone out to the supermarket. He smiled at his own stupidity and sat down on the couch to wait for her, sighing with relief.

Suddenly the words struck him like the blows of a poleax!

As vivid as if they had been daubed in letters ten feet deep, they leapt out from the walls, nearly deafening him with their force.

"You grotesque old witch, you must be insane! You ever threaten me again and I'll have you destroyed! LISTEN, you pathetic—"

Mangon spun around helplessly, trying to screen his ears. The words must have been hurled out in a paroxysm of abuse. They were only an hour old, vicious sonic scars slashed across the immaculately swept walls.

His first thought was to rush out for the sonovac and sweep the walls clear before Madame Gioconda returned. Then it dawned on him that she had already heard the original of the echoes—in the background he could just detect the muffled rhythms and intonations of her voice.

All too exactly, he could identify the man's voice.

He had heard it many times before, raging in the same ruthless tirades, when, deputizing for one of the sound-sweeps, he had swept out the main board room at Video City.

Hector LeGrande! So Madame Gioconda had been more desperate than he thought.

The bottom drawer of the dressing table lay on the floor, its contents upended. Propped against the mirror was an old silver portrait frame, dull and verdigrised, some cotton wool and a tin of cleansing fluid next to it. The photograph was one of LeGrande, taken twenty years earlier. She must have known LeGrande was coming and had searched out the old portrait, probably regretting the threat of blackmail.

But the sentiment had not been shared.

Mangon walked around the stage, his heart knotting with rage, filling his ears with LeGrande's taunts. He picked up the portrait, pressed it between his palms, and suddenly smashed it across the edge of the dressing table.

"Mangon!"

The cry riveted him to the air. He dropped what was left of the frame, saw Madame Gioconda step quietly from behind one of the flats.

"Mangon, please," she protested gently. "You frighten me."

She sidled past him toward the bed, dismantling an enormous purple hat. "And do clean up all that glass, or I shall cut my feet."

She spoke drowsily and moved in a relaxed, sluggish way that Mangon first assumed indicated acute shock. Then she drew from her handbag six white vials and lined them up carefully on the bedside table. These were her favorite confectionary—so LeGrande had sweetened the pill with another check. Mangon began to scoop the glass together with his feet, at the same time trying to collect his wits. The sounds of LeGrande's abuse dinned the air, and he broke away and ran off to fetch the sonovac.

Madame Gioconda was sitting on the edge of the bed when he returned, dreamily dusting a small bottle of bourbon which had followed the cocaine vials out of the handbag. She hummed to herself melodically and stroked one of the feathers in her hat.

"Mangon," she called when he had almost finished. "Come here."

Mangon put down the sonovac and went across to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes suddenly very steady. "Mangon, why did you break Hector's picture?" She held up a piece of the frame. "Tell me."

Mangon hesitated, then scribbled on his pad:

I am sorry; I adore you very much. He said such foul things to you

Madame Gioconda glanced at the note, then gazed back thoughtfully at Mangon. "Were you hiding here when Hector came?"

Mangon shook his head categorically. He started to write on his pad but Madame Gioconda restrained him.

"That's all right, dear. I thought not." She looked around the stage for a moment, listening carefully. "Mangon, when you came in could you hear what Mr. LeGrande said?"

Mangon nodded. His eyes flickered to the obscene phrases on the walls and he began to frown. He still felt LeGrande's presence and his attempt to humiliate Madame Gioconda.

Madame Gioconda pointed around them. "And you can actually hear what he said even now? How remarkable. Mangon, you have a wondrous talent."

I am sorry you have to suffer so much

Madame Gioconda smiled at this. "We all have our crosses to bear. I have a feeling you may be able to lighten mine considerably." She patted the bed beside her. "Do sit down, you must be tired." When he was settled she went on. "I'm very interested,

Mangon. Do you mean you can distinguish entire phrases and sentences in the sounds you sweep? You can hear complete conversations hours after they have taken place?"

Something about Madame Gioconda's curiosity made Mangon hesitate. His talent, so far as he knew, was unique, and he was not so naïve as to fail to appreciate its potentialities. It had developed in his late adolescence and so far he had resisted any temptation to abuse it. He had never revealed the talent to anyone, knowing that if he did his days as a sound-sweep would be over.

Madame Gioconda was watching him, an expectant smile on her lips. Her thoughts, of course, were solely of revenge. Mangon listened again to the walls, focused on the abuse screaming out into the air.

Not complete conversations. Long fragments, up to twenty syllables. Depending on resonances and matrix. Tell no one. I will help you have revenge on LeGrande.

Madame Gioconda squeezed Mangon's hand. She was about to reach for the bourbon bottle when Mangon suddenly remembered the point of his visit. He leapt off the bed and started frantically scribbling on his wrist-pad.

He tore off the first sheet and pressed it into her startled hands, then filled three more, describing his encounter with the musical director at V.C., the latter's interest in Madame Gioconda and the conditional promise to arrange her guest appearance. In view of LeGrande's hostility he stressed the need for absolute secrecy.

He waited happily while Madame Gioconda read quickly through the notes, tracing out Mangon's childlike script with a long scarlet fingernail. When she finished he nodded his head rapidly and gestured triumphantly in the air.

Bemused, Madame Gioconda gazed uncomprehendingly at the notes. Then she reached out and pulled Mangon to her, taking his big faunlike head in her jeweled hands and pressing it to her lap.

"My dear child, how much I need you. You must never leave me now."

As she stroked Mangon's hair her eyes roved questingly around the walls.

The miracle happened shortly before eleven o'clock the next morning.

After breakfast, sprawled across Madame Gioconda's bed with her scrapbooks, an old Gramophone salvaged by Mangon from one of the studios playing operatic selections, they had decided to

drive out to the stockades—the sound-sweeps left for the city at nine and they would be able to examine the sonic dumps unmolested. Having spent so much time with Madame Gioconda and immersed himself so deeply in her world, Mangon was eager now to introduce Madame Gioconda to his. The stockades, bleak though they might be, were all he had to show her.

For Mangon, Madame Gioconda had now become the entire universe, a source of certainty and wonder as potent as the sun. Behind him his past life fell away like the discarded chrysalis of a brilliant butterfly, the gray years of his childhood at the orphanage dissolving into the magical kaleidoscope that revolved around him. As she talked and murmured affectionately to him, the drab flats and props in the studio seemed as brightly colored and meaningful as the landscape of a mescaline fantasy. The air tingled with a thousand vivid echoes of her voice.

They set off down F Street at ten, and soon left behind the dingy warehouses and abandoned tenements that had enclosed Madame Gioconda for so long. Squeezed together in the driving cab of the sound truck they were an incongruous pair—the gangling Mangon, in zip-fronted yellow plastic jacket and yellow peaked cap, at the wheel, dwarfed by the vast flamboyant Madame Gioconda, wearing a parrot-green cartwheel hat and veil, her huge creamy breast glittering with pearls, gold stars, and jeweled crescents, a small selection of the orders that had been showered upon her in her heyday.

She had breakfasted well, on one of the vials and a large glass of bourbon. As they left the city she gazed out amiably at the fields stretching away from the highway, and trilled out a light recitative from *Figaro*.

Mangon listened to her happily, glad to see her in such good spirits. Determined to spend every possible minute with Madame Gioconda, he had decided to abandon his calls for the day, if not for the next week and month. With her he at last felt completely secure. The pressure of her hand and the warm swell of her shoulder made him feel confident and invigorated, all the more proud that he was able to help her back to fame.

He tapped on the windshield as they swung off the highway onto the narrow dirt track that led toward the stockades. Here and there among the dunes they could see the low ruined outbuildings of the old explosives plant, and the white galvanized iron roof of one of the sound-sweeps' cabins. Desolate and unfrequented, the dunes ran on for miles. They passed the remains of a gateway that

had collapsed to one side of the road; originally a continuous fence had ringed the stockade, but no one had any reason for wanting to penetrate it. A place of strange echoes and festering silences, overhung by a gloomy miasma of a million compacted sounds, it remained remote and haunted, the graveyard of countless private babels.

The first of the sonic dumps appeared two or three hundred yards away on their right. This was reserved for aircraft sounds swept from the city's streets and municipal buildings, and was a tightly packed collection of sound-absorbent baffles covering several acres. The baffles were slightly larger than those in the other stockades; twenty feet high and fifteen wide, each supported by heavy wooden props, they faced each other in a random labyrinth of alleyways, like a stored lot of advertising billboards. Only the top two or three feet was visible above the dunes, but the changed air hit Mangon like a hammer, a pounding niagara of airlines blaring down the glideway, the piercing whistle of jets jockeying at takeoff, the ceaseless mind-sapping roar that hangs like a vast umbrella over any metropolitan complex.

All around, odd sounds shaken loose from the stockades were beginning to reach them. Over the entire area, fed from the dumps below, hung an unbroken phonic high, invisible but nonetheless as tangible and menacing as an enormous black thundercloud. Occasionally, when supersaturation was reached after one of the summer holiday periods, the sonic pressure fields would split and discharge, venting back into the stockades a nightmarish cataract of noise, raining onto the sound-sweeps not only the howling of cats and dogs, but the multilunged tumult of cars, express trains, fairgrounds, and aircraft, the cacophonic *musique concrète* of civilization.

To Mangon the sounds reaching them, though scaled higher in the register, were still distinct, but Madame Gioconda could hear nothing and felt only an overpowering sense of depression and irritation. The air seemed to grate and rasp. Mangon noticed her beginning to frown and hold her hand to her forehead. He wound up his window and indicated to her to do the same. He switched on the sonovac mounted under the dashboard and let it drain the discordancies out of the sealed cabin.

Madame Gioconda relaxed in the sudden blissful silence. A little further on, when they passed another stockade set closer to the road, she turned to Mangon and began to say something to him.

Suddenly she jerked violently in alarm, her hat toppling. Her voice had frozen! Her mouth and lips moved frantically, but no sounds emerged. For a moment she was paralyzed. Clutching her throat desperately, she filled her lungs and screamed.

A faint squeak piped out of her cavernous throat, and Mangon swung around in alarm to see her gibbering apoplectically, pointing helplessly to her throat.

He stared at her, bewildered, then doubled over the wheel in a convulsion of silent laughter, slapping his thigh and thumping the dashboard. He pointed to the sonovac, then reached down and turned up the volume.

". . . aaauuuoooh," Madame Gioconda heard herself groan. She grasped her hat and secured it. "Mangon, what a dirty trick! You should have warned me."

Mangon grinned. The discordant sounds coming from the stockades began to fill the cabin again, and he turned down the volume. Gleefully, he scribbled on his wrist-pad:

Now you know what it is like!

Madame Gioconda opened her mouth to reply, then stopped in time, hiccupped and took his arm affectionately.

Four

Mangon slowed down as they approached a side road. Two hundred yards away on their left a small pink-stuccoed cabin stood on a dune overlooking one of the stockades. They drove up to it, turned into a circular concrete apron below the cabin and backed up against one of the unloading bays, a battery of red-painted hydrants equipped with manifold gauges and release pipes running off into the stockade. This was only twenty feet away at its nearest point, a forest of door-shaped baffles facing each other in winding corridors, like a set from a surrealist film.

As she climbed down from the truck Madame Gioconda expected the same massive wave of depression and overload that she had felt from the stockade of aircraft noises, but instead the air seemed brittle and frenetic, darting with sudden flashes of tension and exhilaration.

As they walked up to the cabin Mangon explained:

Party noises—company for me

The twenty or thirty baffles nearest the cabin he reserved for these, screening himself from the miscellaneous chatter that filled

the rest of the stockade. When he woke in the mornings he would listen to the laughter and small talk, enjoy the gossip and wisecracks as much as if he had been at the parties himself.

The cabin was a single room with a large window overlooking the stockade, well insulated from the hubbub below. Madame Gioconda showed only a cursory interest in Mangon's meager belongings, and after a few general remarks came to the point and went over to the window. She opened it slightly, listened experimentally to the stream of atmospheric shifts that crowded past her.

She pointed to the cabin on the far side of the stockade. "Mangon, whose is that?"

Gallagher's. My partner. He sweeps City Hall, University, V.C., big mansions on 5th and A. Working now.

Madame Gioconda nodded, and surveyed the stockade with interest. "How fascinating. It's like a zoo. All that talk, talk, talk. And *you* can hear it all." She snapped back her bracelets with swift decisive flicks of the wrist.

Mangon sat down on the bed. The cabin seemed small and dingy, and he was saddened by Madame Gioconda's disinterest. Having brought her all the way out to the dumps he wondered how he was going to keep her amused. Fortunately the stockade intrigued her. When she suggested a stroll through it he was only too glad to oblige.

Down at the unloading bay he demonstrated how he emptied the tanker, clipping the exhaust leads to the hydrant, regulating the pressure through the manifold and then pumping the sound away into the stockade.

Most of the stockade was in a continuous state of uproar, sounding something like a crowd in a football stadium, and as he led her out among the baffles he picked their way carefully through the quieter aisles. Around them voices chattered and whined fretfully and fragments of conversation drifted aimlessly over the air. Somewhere a woman pleaded in thin nervous tones, a man grumbled to himself, another swore angrily, a baby bellowed. Behind it all was the steady background murmur of countless TV programs, the easy patter of announcers, the endless monotones of racetrack commentators, the shrieking audiences of quiz shows, all pitched an octave up the scale so that they sounded like an eerie parody of themselves.

A shot rang out in the next aisle, followed by screams and shout-

ing. Although she heard nothing, the pressure pulse made Madame Gioconda stop.

"Mangon, wait. Don't be in so much of a hurry. Tell me what they're saying."

Mangon selected a baffle and listened carefully. The sounds appeared to come from an apartment over a launderette. A battery of washing machines chuntered to themselves, a cash register slammed interminably, there was a dim, almost subthreshold echo of 60-cycle hum from an SP record player.

He shook his head, waved Madame Gioconda on.

"Mangon, what did they *say?*" she pestered him. He stopped again, sharpened his ears and waited. This time he was more lucky. An overemotional female voice was gasping ". . . but if he finds you here he'll kill you, he'll kill us both. What shall we do . . ." He started to scribble down this outpouring, Madame Gioconda craning breathlessly over his shoulder, then recognized its source and screwed up the note.

"Mangon, for heaven's sake, what was it? Don't throw it away! Tell me!" She tried to climb under the wooden superstructure of the baffle to recover the note, but Mangon restrained her and quickly scribbled another message.

Adam and Eve. Sorry.

"What, the film? Oh, how ridiculous! Well, come on, try again."

Eager to make amends, Mangon picked the next baffle, one of a group serving the staff married quarters of the University. Always a difficult job to keep clean, he struck pay dirt almost at once.

". . . my God, there's Bartok all over the place, that damned Steiner woman, I'll swear she's sleeping with her . . ."

Mangon took it all down, passing the sheets to Madame Gioconda as soon as he covered them. Squinting hard at his crabbed handwriting, she gobbled them eagerly, disappointed when, after half a dozen, he lost the thread and stopped.

"Go on, Mangon, what's the matter?" She let the notes fall to the ground. "Difficult, isn't it? We'll have to teach you shorthand."

They reached the baffles Mangon had just filled from the previous day's rounds. Listening carefully, he heard Paul Merrill's voice: ". . . month's *Transonics* claims that . . . the entire city will come down like Jericho."

He wondered if he could persuade Madame Gioconda to wait for fifteen minutes, when he would be able to repeat a few carefully edited fragments from Alto's promise to arrange her guest appearance, but she seemed eager to move deeper into the stockade.

"You said your friend Gallagher sweeps out Video City, Mangon. Where would that be?"

Hector LeGrande. Of course, Mangon realized. Why had he been so obtuse? This was the chance to pay the man back.

He pointed to an area a few aisles away. They climbed between the baffles, Mangon helping Madame Gioconda over the beams and props, steering her full skirt and wide hat brim away from splinters and rusted metal work.

The task of finding LeGrande was simple. Even before the baffles were in sight Mangon could hear the hard unyielding bite of the tycoon's voice, dominating every other sound from the Video City area. Gallagher in fact swept only the senior dozen or so executive suites at V.C., chiefly to relieve their occupants of the distasteful echoes of LeGrande's voice.

Mangon steered their way among these, searching for LeGrande's master suite, where anything of a really confidential nature took place.

There were about twenty baffles, throwing off an unending chorus of "Yes, H.L.," "Thanks, H.L.," "Brilliant, H.L." Two or three seemed strangely quiet, and he drew Madame Gioconda over to them.

This was LeGrande with his personal secretary and PA. He took out his pencil and focused carefully.

". . . of Third National Bank, transfer two million to private holding and threatened claim for stock depreciation . . . redraft escape clauses, including nonliability purchase benefits . . ."

Madame Gioconda tapped his arm but he gestured her away. Most of the baffle appeared to be taken up by dubious financial dealings, but nothing that would really hurt LeGrande if revealed.

Then he heard—

". . . Bermuda Hilton. Private Island, with anchorage, have the beach cleaned up, last time the water was full of fish . . . I don't care, poison them, hang some nets out . . . Imogene will fly in from Idlewild as Mrs. Edna Burgess, warn customs to stay away . . ."

". . . call Cartier's, something for the Comtessa, 17 carats say, ceiling of ten thousand. No, make it eight thousand . . ."

". . . hat-check girl at the Tropicabana. Usual dossier . . ."

Mangon scribbled furiously, but LeGrande was speaking at rapid dictation speed and he could get down only a few fragments. Madame Gioconda barely deciphered his handwriting, and became

more and more frustrated as her appetite was whetted. Finally she flung away the notes in a fury of exasperation.

"This is absurd, you're missing everything!" she cried. She pounded on one of the baffles, then broke down and began to sob angrily. "Oh, God, God, *God,* how ridiculous! Help me, I'm going insane . . ."

Mangon hurried across to her and put his arms around her shoulders to support her. She pushed him away irritably, railing at herself to discharge her impatience. "It's useless, Mangon, it's stupid of me, I was a fool—"

"STOP!"

The cry split the air like the blade of a guillotine.

They both straightened and stared at each other blankly. Mangon put his fingers slowly to his lips, then reached out tremulously and put his hands in Madame Gioconda's. Somewhere within him a tremendous tension had begun to dissolve.

"Stop," he said again in a rough but quiet voice. "Don't cry. I'll help you."

Madame Gioconda gaped at him with amazement. Then she let out a tremendous whoop of triumph.

"Mangon, you can talk! You've got your voice back! It's absolutely astounding! Say something, quickly, for heaven's sake!"

Mangon felt his mouth again, ran his fingers rapidly over his throat. He began to tremble with excitement, his face brightened, he jumped up and down like a child.

"I can talk," he repeated wonderingly. His voice was gruff, then seesawed into a treble. "I can talk," he said, louder, controlling the pitch. "I can talk, I can talk, *I can talk!*" He flung his head back, let out an ear-shattering shout. "I CAN TALK! HEAR ME!" He ripped the wrist-pad off his sleeve and hurled it away over the baffles.

Madame Gioconda backed away, laughing agreeably. "We can hear you, Mangon. Dear me, how sweet." She watched Mangon thoughtfully as he cavorted happily in the narrow space between the aisles. "Now don't tire yourself out or you'll lose it again."

Mangon danced over to her, seized her shoulders and squeezed them tightly. He suddenly realized that he knew no diminutive or Christian name for her.

"Madame Gioconda," he said earnestly, stumbling over the syllables, the words that were so simple yet so enormously complex to pronounce. "You gave me back my voice. Anything you want—" He broke off, stuttering happily, laughing through his tears.

Suddenly he buried his head in her shoulder, exhausted by his discovery, and cried gratefully, "It's a *wonderful* voice."

Madame Gioconda steadied him maternally. "Yes, Mangon," she said, her eyes on the discarded notes lying in the dust. "You've got a wonderful voice, all right." Sotto voce, she added: "But your hearing is even more wonderful."

Paul Merrill switched off the SP player, sat down on the arm of the sofa and watched Mangon quizzically.

"Strange. You know, my guess is that it was psychosomatic."

Mangon grinned. "Psychosemantic," he repeated, garbling the word half-deliberately. "Clever. You can do amazing things with words. They help to crystallize the truth."

Merrill groaned playfully, "God, you sit there, you drink your coke, you philosophize. Don't you realize you're supposed to stand quietly in a corner, positively dumb with gratitude? Now you're even ramming your puns down my throat. Never mind, tell me again how it happened."

"Once a pun a time—" Mangon ducked the magazine Merrill flung at him, let out a loud "Olee!"

For the last two weeks he had been *en fête*.

Every day he and Madame Gioconda followed the same routine; after breakfast at the studio they drove out to the stockade, spent two or three hours compiling their confidential file on LeGrande, lunched at the cabin and then drove back to the city, Mangon going off on his rounds while Madame Gioconda slept until he returned shortly before midnight. For Mangon their existence was idyllic; not only was he rediscovering himself in terms of the complex spectra and patterns of speech—a completely new category of existence—but at the same time his relationship with Madame Gioconda revealed areas of sympathy, affection, and understanding that he had never previously seen. If he sometimes felt that he was too preoccupied with his side of their relationship and the extraordinary benefits it had brought him, at least Madame Gioconda had been equally well served. Her headaches and mysterious phantoms had gone. She had cleaned up the studio and begun to salvage a little dignity and self-confidence, which made her single-minded sense of ambition seem less obsessive. Psychologically, she needed Mangon less now than he needed her, and he was careful to restrain his high spirits and give her plenty of attention. During the first week Mangon's incessant chatter had been rather wearing, and once, on their way to the stockade, she had switched

on the sonovac in the driving cab and left Mangon mouthing silently at the air like a stranded fish. He had taken the hint.

"What about the sound-sweeping?" Merrill asked. "Will you give it up?"

Mangon shrugged. "It's my talent, but living at the stockade, let in at back doors, cleaning up the verbal garbage—it's a degraded job. I want to help Madame Gioconda. She will need a secretary when she starts to go on tour."

Merrill shook his head warily. "You're awfully sure there's going to be a sonic revival, Mangon. But every sign is against it."

"They have not heard Madame Gioconda sing. Believe me, I know the power and wonder of the human voice. Ultrasonic music is great for atmosphere, but it has no content. It can't express ideas, only emotions."

"What happened to that closed circuit program you and Ray were going to put on for her?"

"It—fell through," Mangon lied. The circuits Madame Gioconda would perform on would be open to the world. He had told them nothing of the visits to the stockade, of his power to read the baffles, of the accumulating file on LeGrande. Soon Madame Gioconda would strike.

Above them in the hallway a door slammed. Someone stormed through into the apartment in a tempest, kicking a chair against a wall. It was Alto. He raced down the staircase into the lounge, jaw tense, fingers flexing angrily.

"Paul, don't interrupt me until I've finished," he snapped, racing past without looking at them. "You'll be out of a job, but I warn you, if you don't back me up one hundred percent I'll shoot you. That goes for you too, Mangon. I need you in on this." He whirled over to the window, bolted out the traffic noises below, then swung back and watched them steadily, feet planted firmly on the carpet. For the first time in the three years Mangon had known him he looked aggressive and confident.

"Headline," he announced. "The Gioconda is to sing again! Incredible and terrifying though the prospect may seem, exactly two weeks from now the live uncensored voice of the Gioconda will go out coast to coast on all three V.C. radio channels. Surprised, Mangon? It's no secret; they're printing the announcements right now. Eight-thirty to nine-thirty, right up on the peak, even if they have to give the time away."

Merrill sat forward. "Bully for her. If LeGrande wants to drive the whole ship into the ground, why worry?"

Alto punched the sofa viciously. "Because you and I are going to be on board! Didn't you hear me? Eight-thirty, two weeks from today! *We* have a program on then. Well, guess who our guest star is?"

Merrill struggled to make sense of this. "Wait a minute, Ray. You mean she's actually going to appear—she's going to *sing*—in the middle of *Opus Zero?*" Alto nodded grimly. Merrill threw up his hands and slumped back. "It's crazy. She can't. Who says she will?"

"Who do you think? The great LeGrande." Alto turned to Mangon. "She must have raked up some real dirt to frighten him into this. I can hardly believe it."

"But why on *Opus Zero?*" Merrill pressed. "Let's switch the premiere to the week after."

"Paul, you're missing the point. Let me fill you in. Sometime yesterday Madame Gioconda paid a private call on LeGrande. Something she told him persuaded him that it would be absolutely wonderful for her to have a whole hour to herself on one of the feature music programs, singing a few old-fashioned songs from the old-fashioned shows, with a full-scale ultrasonic backing. Eager to give her a completely free hand, he even asked her which of the regular programs she'd like. Well, as the last show she appeared on ten years ago was canceled to make way for Ray Alto's *Total Symphony,* you can guess which one she picked."

Merrill nodded. "It all fits together. We're broadcasting from the concert studio. A single ultrasonic symphony, no station breaks, not even a commentary. Your first world premiere in three years. There'll be a big invited audience. White tie, something like the old days. Revenge is sweet." He shook his head sadly. "Hell, all that work."

Alto snapped: "Don't worry, it won't be wasted. Why should we pay the bill for LeGrande? This symphony is the one piece of serious music I've written since I joined V.C., and it isn't going to be ruined." He went over to Mangon, sat down next to him. "This afternoon I went down to the rehearsal studios. They'd found an ancient sonic grand somewhere and one of the old-timers was accompanying her. Mangon, it's ten years since she sang last. If she'd practiced for two or three hours a day she might have preserved her voice, but you sweep her radio station, you know she hasn't sung a note. She's an old woman now. What time alone hasn't done to her, cocaine and self-pity have." He paused, watch-

ing Mangon searchingly. "I hate to say it, Mangon, but it sounded like a cat being strangled."

You lie, Mangon thought icily. *You are simply so ignorant, your taste in music is so debased, that you are unable to recognize real genius when you see it.* He looked at Alto with contempt, sorry for the man, with his absurd silent symphonies. He felt like shouting: *I know what silence is! The voice of the Gioconda is a stream of gold, molten and pure. She will find it again as I found mine.* However, something about Alto's manner warned him to wait.

He said: "I understand." Then: "What do you want me to do?"

Alto patted him on the shoulder. "Good boy. Believe me, you'll be helping her in the long run. What I propose will save all of us from looking foolish. We've got to stand up to LeGrande even if it means a one-way ticket out of V.C. Okay, Paul?" Merrill nodded firmly and he went on: "Orchestra will continue as scheduled. According to the program Madame Gioconda will be singing to an accompaniment by *Opus Zero,* but that means nothing and there'll be no connection at any point. In fact she won't turn up until the night itself. She'll stand well downstage on a special platform, and the only microphone will be an aerial about twenty feet diagonally above her. It will be live—*but her voice will never reach it.* Because you, Mangon, will be in the cue box directly in front of her, with the most powerful sonovac we can lay our hands on. As soon as she opens her mouth you'll let her have it. She'll be at least ten feet away from you so she'll hear herself and won't suspect what is happening."

"What about the audience?" Merrill asked.

"They'll be listening to my symphony, enjoying a neurophonic experience of sufficient beauty and power, I hope, to distract them from the sight of a blowzy prima donna gesturing to herself in a cocaine fog. They'll probably think she's conducting. Remember, they may be expecting her to sing, but how many people still know what the word really means? Most of them will assume its ultrasonic."

"And LeGrande?"

"He'll be in Bermuda. Business conference."

Five

Madame Gioconda was sitting before her dressing-table mirror, painting on a face like a Halloween mask. Beside her the Gramophone played scratchy sonic selections from *Traviata.* The stage was still a disorganized jumble, but there was now an air of purpose about it.

Making his way through the flats, Mangon walked up to her quietly and kissed her bare shoulder. She stood up with a flourish, an enormous monument of a woman in a magnificent black silk dress sparkling with thousands of sequins.

"Thank you, Mangon," she sang out when he complimented her. She swirled off to a hatbox on the bed, pulled out a huge peacock feather and stabbed it into her hair.

Mangon had come around at six, several hours earlier than usual; over the past two days he had felt increasingly uneasy. He was convinced that Alto was in error, and yet logic was firmly on his side. Could Madame Gioconda's voice have preserved itself? Her spoken voice, unless she was being particularly sweet, was harsh and uneven, recently even more so. He assumed that with only a week till her performance nervousness was making her irritable.

Again she was going out, as she had done almost every night. With whom, she never explained; probably to the theater restaurants, to renew contacts with agents and managers. He would have liked to go with her, but he felt out of place on the plane of Madame Gioconda's existence.

"Mangon, I won't be back until very late," she warned him. "You look rather tired and pasty. You'd better go home and get some sleep."

Mangon noticed he was still wearing his yellow peaked cap. Unconsciously he must already have known he would not be spending the night there.

"Do you want to go to the stockade tomorrow?" he asked.

"Hmmmh . . . I don't think so. It gives me rather a headache. Let's leave it for a day or two."

She turned on him with a tremendous smile, her eyes glittering with sudden affection.

"Goodbye, Mangon, it's been wonderful to see you." She bent down and pressed her cheek maternally to his, engulfing him in

a heady wave of powder and perfume. In an instant all his doubts and worries evaporated. He looked forward to seeing her the next day, certain that they would spend the future together.

For half an hour after she had gone he wandered around the deserted sound stage, going through his memories. Then he made his way out to the alley and drove back to the stockade.

As the day of Madame Gioconda's performance drew closer Mangon's anxieties mounted. Twice he had been down to the concert studio at Video City and had rehearsed with Alto his entry beneath the stage to the cue box, a small compartment off the corridor used by the electronics engineers. They had checked the power points, borrowed a sonovac from the services section—a heavy-duty model used for shielding VIP's and commentators at airports—and mounted its nozzle in the cue hood.

Alto stood on the platform erected for Madame Gioconda and shouted at the top of his voice at Merrill sitting in the third row of the orchestra section.

"Hear anything?" He called afterwards.

Merrill shook his head. "Nothing, no vibration at all."

Down below, Mangon flicked the release toggle, vented a long-drawn-out "Fiivvveeee! . . . Foouuurrr! . . . Thrreeeee! . . . Twoooo! . . . Onnneeee. . . !"

"Good enough," Alto decided. Chicago-style, they hid the sonovac in a triple-bass case and stored it in Alto's office.

"Do you want to hear her sing, Mangon?" Alto asked. "She should be rehearsing now."

Mangon hesitated, then declined.

"It's tragic that she's unable to realize the truth herself," Alto commented. "Her mind must be fixed fifteen or twenty years in the past, when she sang her greatest roles at La Scala. That's the voice she hears, the voice she'll probably always hear."

Mangon pondered this. Once he had tried to ask Madame Gioconda how her practice sessions were going, but she was moving into a different zone and answered with some grandiose remark. He was seeing less and less of her; whenever he visited the station she was either about to go out or else tired and eager to be rid of him. Their trips to the stockade had ceased. All this he accepted as inevitable; after the performance, he assured himself, after her triumph, she would come back to him.

He noticed, however, that he was beginning to stutter.

* * *

On the final afternoon, a few hours before the performance that evening, Mangon drove down to F Street for what was to be the last time. He had not seen Madame Gioconda the previous day and he wanted to be with her and give her any encouragement she needed.

As he turned into the alley he was surprised to see two large moving vans parked outside the station entrance. Four or five men were carrying out pieces of furniture and the great scenic flats from the sound stage.

Mangon ran over to them. One of the vans was full; he recognized all Madame Gioconda's possessions—the rococo wardrobe and dressing table, the couch, the huge Desdemona bed, up-ended and wrapped in corrugated paper. As he looked at it he felt that a section of himself had been torn from him and rammed away callously. In the bright daylight the peeling threadbare flats had lost all illusion of reality; with them Mangon's whole relationship with Madame Gioconda seemed to have been dismantled.

The last of the workmen came out with a gold cushion under his arm, tossed it into the second van. The foreman sealed the doors and waved on the driver.

"W . . wh . . where are you going?" Mangon asked him urgently.

Th foreman looked him up and down. "You're the sweeper, are you?" He jerked a thumb toward the station. "The old girl said there was a message for you in there. Couldn't see one myself."

Mangon left him and ran into the foyer and up the stairway toward studio 2. The removers had torn down the blinds and a gray light was flooding into the dusty auditorium. Without the flats the stage looked exposed and derelict.

He raced down the aisle, wondering why Madame Gioconda had decided to leave without telling him.

The stage had been stripped. The music stands had been kicked over, the stove lay on its side with two or three old pans around it. Underfoot there was a miscellaneous litter of paper, ash, and empty vials.

Mangon searched around for the message, probably pinned to one of the partitions.

Then he heard it screaming at him from the walls, violent and concise.

"GO AWAY, YOU UGLY CHILD! NEVER TRY TO SEE ME AGAIN!"

He shrank back, involuntarily trying to shout as the walls seemed to fall in on him, but his throat had frozen.

As he entered the corridor below the stage shortly before eight-twenty, Mangon could hear the sounds of the audience arriving and making their way to their seats. The studio was almost full, a hubbub of well-heeled chatter. Lights flashed on and off in the corridor, and oblique atmospheric shifts cut through the air as the players on the stage tuned their instruments.

Mangon slid past the technicians manning the neurophonic rigs which supplied the orchestra, trying to make the enormous triple-bass case as inconspicuous as possible. They were all busy checking the relays and circuits, and he reached the cue box and slipped through the door unnoticed.

The box was almost in darkness, a few rays of colored light filtering through the pink and white petals of the chrysanthemums stacked over the hood. He bolted the door, then opened the case, lifted out the sonovac, and clipped the snout into the cannister. Leaning forward, with his hands he pushed a small aperture among the flowers.

Directly in front of him he could see a velvet-lined platform, equipped with a white metal rail to the center of which a large floral ribbon had been tied. Beyond was the orchestra, disposed in a semicircle, each of the twenty members sitting at a small box-like desk on which rested his instrument, tone generator, and cathode tube. They were all present, and the light reflected from the ray screens threw a vivid phosphorescent glow onto the silver wall behind them.

Mangon propped the nozzle of the sonovac into the aperture, bent down, plugged in the lead, and switched on.

Just before eight twenty-five someone stepped across the platform and paused in front of the cue hood. Mangon crouched back, watching the patent leather shoes and black trousers move near the nozzle.

"Mangon!" he heard Alto snap. He craned forward, saw Alto eyeing him. Mangon waved to him and Alto nodded slowly, at the same time smiling to someone in the audience, then turned on his heel and took his place in the orchestra.

At eight-thirty a sequence of red and green lights signaled the start of the program. The audience quieted, waiting while an announcer in an offstage booth introduced the program.

A master of ceremonies appeared onstage, standing behind the

cue hood, and addressed the audience. Mangon sat quietly on the small wooden seat fastened to the wall, staring blankly at the cannister of the sonovac. There was a round of applause, and a steady green light shone downward through the flowers. The air in the cue box began to sweeten; a cool motionless breeze eddied vertically around him as a rhythmic ultrasonic pressure wave pulsed past. It relaxed the confined dimensions of the box, and had a strange mesmeric tug that held his attention. Somewhere in his mind he realized that the symphony had started, but he was too distracted to pull himself together and listen to it consciously.

Suddenly, through the gap between the flowers and the sonovac nozzle, he saw a large white mass shifting about on the platform. He slipped off the seat and peered up.

Madame Gioconda had taken her place on the platform. Seen from below she seemed enormous, a towering cataract of glistening white satin that swept down to her feet. Her arms were folded loosely in front of her, fingers flashing with blue and white stones. He could only just glimpse her face, the terrifying witchlike mask turned in profile as she waited for some offstage signal.

Mangon mobilized himself, slid his hand down to the trigger of the sonovac. He waited, feeling the steady subliminal music of Alto's symphony swell massively within him, its tempo accelerating. Presumably Madame Gioconda's arranger was waiting for a climax at which to introduce her first aria.

Abruptly Madame Gioconda looked forward at the audience and took a short step to the rail. Her hands parted and opened, palms upward, her head moved back, her bare shoulders swelled.

The wave front pulsing through the cue box stopped, then soared off in a continuous unbroken crescendo. At the same time Madame Gioconda thrust her head out and her throat muscles contracted powerfully.

As the sound burst from her throat Mangon's finger locked rigidly against the trigger guard. An instant later, before he could think, a shattering blast of sound ripped through his ears, followed by a slightly higher note that appeared to strike a hidden ridge halfway along its path, wavered slightly, then recovered and sped on, like an express train crossing lines.

Mangon listened to her numbly, hands gripping the barrel of the sonovac. The voice exploded in his brain, flooding every nexus of cells with its violence. It was grotesque, an insane parody of a classical soprano. Harmony, purity, cadence had gone. Rough and cracked, it jerked sharply from one high note to a lower, its breath

intervals uncontrolled, sudden precipices of gasping silence which plunged through the volcanic torrent, dividing it into a loosely connected sequence of bravura passages.

He barely recognized what she was singing: the Toreador song from *Carmen*. Why she had picked this he could not imagine. Unable to reach its higher notes, she fell back on the swinging rhythm of the refrain, hammering out the rolling phrases with tosses of her head. After a dozen bars her pace slackened and she slipped into an extempore humming, then broke out of this into a final climactic assault.

Appalled, Mangon watched as two or three members of the orchestra stood up and disappeared into the wings. The others had stopped playing, were switching off their instruments and conferring with each other. The audience was obviously restive; Mangon could hear individual voices in the intervals when Madame Gioconda refilled her lungs.

Behind him someone hammered on the door. Startled, Mangon nearly tripped across the sonovac. Then he bent down and wrenched the plug out of its socket. Snapping open the two catches beneath the chassis of the sonovac, he pulled off the cannister to reveal the valves, amplifier, and generator. He slipped his fingers carefully through the leads and coils, seized them as firmly as he could and ripped them out with a single motion. Tearing his nails, he stripped the printed circuit off the bottom of the chassis and crushed it between his hands. Satisfied, he dropped the sonovac to the floor, listened for a moment to the caterwauling above, which was now being drowned by the mounting vocal opposition of the audience, then unlatched the door.

Paul Merrill, his bow tie askew, burst in. He gaped blankly at Mangon, at the blood dripping from his fingers and the smashed sonovac on the floor.

He seized Mangon by the shoulders, shook him roughly. "Mangon, are you crazy? What are you trying to do?"

Mangon attempted to say something, but his voice had died. He pulled himself away from Merrill and pushed past into the corridor.

Merrill shouted after him, "Mangon, help me fix this! Where are you going?" He got down on his knees, started trying to piece the sonovac together.

From the wings Mangon briefly watched the scene on the stage.

Madame Gioconda was still singing, her voice completely inaudible in the uproar from the auditorium. Half the audience were

on their feet, shouting toward the stage and apparently remonstrating with the studio officials. All but a few members of the orchestra had left their instruments, and were sitting on their desks and watching Madame Gioconda in amazement.

The program director, Alto, and the master of ceremonies stood in front of her, banging on the rail and trying to attract her attention. But Madame Gioconda failed to notice them. Head back, eyes on the brilliant ceiling lights, hands gesturing majestically, she soared along the private causeways of sound that poured unrelentingly from her throat, a great white angel of discord on her homeward flight.

Mangon watched her sadly, then slipped away through the stagehands pressing around him. As he left the theater by the stage door a small crowd was gathering by the main entrance. He flicked away the blood from his fingers, then bound his handkerchief around them.

He walked down the side street to where the sound truck was parked, climbed into the cab and sat still for a few minutes, looking out at the bright evening lights in the bars and shop fronts.

Opening the dashboard locker, he hunted through it, pulled out an old wrist-pad, and clipped it into his sleeve.

In his ears the sounds of Madame Gioconda singing echoed like an insane banshee.

He switched on the sonovac under the dashboard, turned it full on, then started the engine and drove off into the night.

Billenium

All day long, and often into the early hours of the morning, the tramp of feet sounded up and down the stairs outside Ward's cubicle. Built into a narrow alcove in a bend of the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, its plywood walls flexed and creaked with every footstep like the timbers of a rotting windmill. Over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house, and sometimes Ward would lie awake on his narrow bunk until 2 or 3 a.m. mechanically counting the last residents returning from the all-night movies in the stadium half a mile away. Through the window he could hear giant fragments of the amplified dialogue booming among the rooftops. The stadium was never empty. During the day the huge four-sided screen was raised on its davit and athletics meetings or football matches ran continuously. For the people in the houses abutting the stadium the noise must have been unbearable.

Ward, at least, had a certain degree of privacy. Two months earlier, before he came to live on the staircase, he had shared a room with seven others on the ground floor of a house in 755th Street, and the ceaseless press of people jostling past the window had reduced him to a state of chronic exhaustion. The street was always full, an endless clamor of voices and shuffling feet. By six-thirty, when he woke, hurrying to take his place in the bathroom queue, the crowds already jammed it from sidewalk to sidewalk, the din punctuated every half minute by the roar of the elevated trains running over the shops on the opposite side of the road. As soon as he saw the advertisement describing the staircase cubicle (like everyone else, he spent most of his spare time scanning the

classifieds in the newspapers, moving his lodgings an average of once every two months) he had left despite the higher rental. A cubicle on a staircase would almost certainly be on its own.

However, this had its drawbacks. Most evenings his friends from the library would call in, eager to rest their elbows after the bruising crush of the public reading room. The cubicle was slightly more than four and a half square meters in floor area, half a square meter over the statutory maximum for a single person, the carpenters having taken advantage, illegally, of a recess beside a nearby chimney breast. Consequently Ward had been able to fit a small straight-backed chair into the interval between the bed and the door, so that only one person at a time need sit on the bed—in most single cubicles host and guest had to sit side by side on the bed, conversing over their shoulders and changing places periodically to avoid neck strain.

"You were lucky to find this place," Rossiter, the most regular visitor, never tired of telling him. He reclined back on the bed, gesturing at the cubicle. "It's enormous, the perspectives really zoom. I'd be surprised if you hadn't got at least five meters here, perhaps even six."

Ward shook his head categorically. Rossiter was his closest friend, but the quest for living space had forged powerful reflexes. "Just over four and a half, I've measured it carefully. There's no doubt about it."

Rossiter lifted one eyebrow. "I'm amazed. It must be the ceiling then."

Manipulating the ceiling was a favorite trick of unscrupulous landlords—most assessments of area were made upon the ceiling, out of convenience, and by tilting back the plywood partitions the rated area of a cubicle could be either increased, for the benefit of a prospective tenant (many married couples were thus bamboozled into taking a single cubicle), or decreased temporarily on the visit of the housing inspectors. Ceilings were crisscrossed with pencil marks staking out the rival claims of tenants on opposite sides of a party wall. Someone timid of his rights could be literally squeezed out of existence—in fact, the advertisement "quiet clientele" was usually a tacit invitation to this sort of piracy.

"The wall does tilt a little," Ward admitted. "Actually, it's about four degrees out—I used a plumb line. But there's still plenty of room on the stairs for people to get by."

Rossiter grinned. "Of course, John. I'm just envious, that's all. My room's driving me crazy." Like everyone, he used the term

"room" to describe his tiny cubicle, a hangover from the days fifty years earlier when people had indeed lived one to a room, sometimes, unbelievably, one to an apartment or house. The microfilms in the architecture catalogs at the library showed scenes of museums, concert halls, and other public buildings in what appeared to be everyday settings, often virtually empty, two or three people wandering down an enormous gallery or staircase. Traffic moved freely along the center of streets, and in the quieter districts sections of sidewalk would be deserted for fifty yards or more.

Now, of course, the older buildings had been torn down and replaced by housing batteries, or converted into apartment blocks. The great banqueting room in the former City Hall had been split horizontally into four decks, each of these cut up into hundreds of cubicles.

As for the streets, traffic had long since ceased to move about them. Apart from a few hours before dawn when only the sidewalks were crowded, every thoroughfare was always packed with a shuffling mob of pedestrians, perforce ignoring the countless "Keep Left" signs suspended over their heads, wrestling past each other on their way to home and office, their clothes dusty and shapeless. Often "locks" would occur when a huge crowd at a street junction became immovably jammed. Sometimes these locks would last for days. Two years earlier Ward had been caught in one outside the stadium; for over forty-eight hours he was trapped in a gigantic pedestrian jam containing over twenty thousand people, fed by the crowds leaving the stadium on one side and those approaching it on the other. An entire square mile of the local neighborhood had been paralyzed, and he vividly remembered the nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot. When the police had finally sealed off the stadium and dispersed the jam he had gone back to his cubicle and slept for a week, his body blue with bruises.

"I hear they may reduce the allocation to three and a half meters," Rossiter remarked.

Ward paused to allow a party of tenants from the sixth floor to pass down the staircase, holding the door to prevent it jumping off its latch. "So they're always saying," he commented. "I can remember that rumor ten years ago."

"It's no rumor," Rossiter warned him. "It may well be necessary soon. Thirty million people packed into this city now, a million

increase in just one year. There's been some pretty serious talk at the Housing Department."

Ward shook his head. "A drastic revaluation like that is almost impossible to carry out. Every single partition would have to be dismantled and nailed up again; the administrative job alone is so vast it's difficult to visualize. Millions of cubicles to be redesigned and certified, licenses to be issued, plus the complete resettlement of every tenant. Most of the buildings put up since the last revaluation are designed around a four-meter module—you can't simply take half a meter off the end of each cubicle and then say that makes so many new cubicles. They may be only six inches wide." He laughed. "Besides, how can you live in just three and a half meters?"

Rossiter smiled. "That's the ultimate argument, isn't it? They used it twenty-five years ago at the last revaluation, when the minimum was cut from five to four. It couldn't be done they all said, no one could stand living in only four square meters; it was enough room for a bed and suitcase, but you couldn't open the door to get in." Rossiter chuckled softly. "They were all wrong. It was merely decided that from then on all doors would open outward. Four square meters was here to stay."

Ward looked at his watch. It was seven-thirty. "Time to eat. Let's see if we can get into the food bar across the road."

Grumbling at the prospect, Rossiter pulled himself off the bed. They left the cubicle and made their way down the staircase. This was crammed with luggage and packing cases so that only a narrow interval remained around the bannister. On the floors below the congestion was worse. Corridors were wide enough to be chopped up into single cubicles, and the air was stale and dead, cardboard walls hung with damp laundry and makeshift larders. Each of the five rooms on the floors contained a dozen tenants, their voices reverberating through the partitions.

People were sitting on the steps above the second floor, using the staircase as an informal lounge, although this was against the fire regulations, women chatting with the men queueing in their shirtsleeves outside the washroom, children diving around them. By the time they reached the entrance Ward and Rossiter were having to force their way through the tenants packed together on every landing, loitering around the notice boards or pushing in from the street below.

Taking a breath at the top of the steps, Ward pointed to the food bar on the other side of the road. It was only thirty yards

away, but the throng moving down the street swept past like a river at full tide, crossing them from right to left. The first picture show at the stadium started at nine o'clock, and people were setting off already to make sure of getting in.

"Can't we go somewhere else?" Rossiter asked, screwing his face up at the prospect of the food bar. Not only would it be packed and take them half an hour to be served, but the food was flat and unappetizing. The journey from the library four blocks away had given him an appetite.

Ward shrugged. "There's a place on the corner, but I doubt if we can make it." This was two hundred yards upstream; they would be fighting the crowd all the way.

"Maybe you're right." Rossiter put his hand on Ward's shoulder. "You know, John, your trouble is that you never go anywhere, you're too disengaged, you just don't realize how bad everything is getting."

Ward nodded. Rossiter was right. In the morning, when he set off for the library, the pedestrian traffic was moving with him toward the downtown offices; in the evening, when he came back, it was flowing in the opposite direction. By and large he never altered his routine. Brought up from the age of ten in a municipal hostel, he had gradually lost touch with his father and mother, who lived on the east side of the city and had been unable, or unwilling, to make the journey to see him. Having surrendered his initiative to the dynamics of the city he was reluctant to try to win it back merely for a better cup of coffee. Fortunately his job at the library brought him into contact with a wide range of young people of similar interests. Sooner or later he would marry, find a double cubicle near the library, and settle down. If they had enough children (three was the required mimimum) they might even one day own a small room of their own.

They stepped out into the pedestrian stream, carried along by it for ten or twenty yards, then quickened their pace and sidestepped through the crowd, slowly tacking across to the other side of the road. There they found the shelter of the shop fronts, slowly worked their way back to the food bar, shoulders braced against the countless minor collisions.

"What are the latest population estimates?" Ward asked as they circled a cigarette kiosk, stepping forward whenever a gap presented itself.

Rossiter smiled. "Sorry, John, I'd like to tell you but you might start a stampede. Besides, you wouldn't believe me."

Rossiter worked in the Insurance Department at the City Hall, had informal access to the census statistics. For the last ten years these had been classified information, partly because they were felt to be inaccurate, but chiefly because it was feared they might set off a mass attack of claustrophobia. Minor outbreaks had taken place already, and the official line was that world population had reached a plateau, leveling off at twenty thousand million. No one believed this for a moment, and Ward assumed that the 3 percent annual increase maintained since the 1960s was continuing.

How long it could continue was impossible to estimate. Despite the gloomiest prophecies of the Neo-Malthusians, world agriculture had managed to keep pace with the population growth, although intensive cultivation meant that 95 percent of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations. The outward growth of cities had at last been checked; in fact, all over the world former suburban areas were being reclaimed for agriculture and population additions were confined within the existing urban ghettos. The countryside, as such, no longer existed. Every single square foot of ground sprouted a crop of one type or other. The one-time fields and meadows of the world were now, in effect, factory floors, as highly mechanized and closed to the public as any industrial area. Economic and ideological rivalries had long since faded before one overriding quest—the internal colonization of the city.

Reaching the food bar, they pushed themselves into the entrance and joined the scrum of customers pressing six deep against the counter.

"What is really wrong with the population problem," Ward confided to Rossiter, "is that no one has ever tried to tackle it. Fifty years ago shortsighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now the hidden incentive is to have a large family so that you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalized simply because there are more of them and they don't fit conveniently into double or triple cubicles. But it's the large family with its compact, space-saving logistic that is the real villain."

Rossiter nodded, edging nearer the counter, ready to shout his order. "Too true. We all look forward to getting married just so that we can have our six meters."

Directly in front of them, two girls turned around and smiled. "Six square meters," one of them, a dark-haired girl with a pretty

oval face, repeated. "You sound like the sort of young man I ought to get to know. Going into the real estate business, Henry?"

Rossiter grinned and squeezed her arm. "Hello, Judith. I'm thinking about it actively. Like to join me in a private venture?"

The girl leaned against him as they reached the counter. "Well, I might. It would have to be legal, though."

The other girl, Helen Waring, an assistant at the library, pulled Ward's sleeve. "Have you heard the latest, John? Judith and I have been kicked out of our room. We're on the street right at this minute."

"What?" Rossiter cried. They collected their soups and coffee and edged back to the rear of the bar. "What on earth happened?"

Helen explained. "You know that little broom cupboard outside our cubicle? Judith and I have been using it as a sort of study hole, going in there to read. It's quiet and restful, if you can get used to not breathing. Well, the old girl found out and kicked up a big fuss, said we were breaking the law and so on. In short, out." Helen paused. "Now we've heard she's going to let it as a single."

Rossiter pounded the counter ledge. "A broom cupboard? Someone's going to live there? But she'll never get a license."

Judith shook her head. "She's got it already. Her brother works in the Housing Department."

Ward laughed into his soup. "But how can she let it? No one will live in a broom cupboard."

Judith stared at him somberly. "You really believe that, John?"

Ward dropped his spoon. "No, I guess you're right. People will live anywhere. God, I don't know who I feel more sorry for—you two, or the poor devil who'll be living in that cupboard. What are you going to do?"

"A couple in a place two blocks west are subletting half their cubicle to us. They've hung a sheet down the middle and Helen and I'll take turns sleeping on a camp bed. I'm not joking, our room's about two feet wide. I said to Helen that we ought to split up again and sublet one half at twice our rent."

They had a good laugh over all this and Ward said goodnight to the others and went back to his rooming house.

There he found himself with similar problems.

The manager leaned against the flimsy door, a damp cigar butt revolving around his mouth, an expression of morose boredom on his unshaven face.

"You got four point seven two meters," he told Ward, who was

standing out on the staircase, unable to get into his room. Other tenants stepped past onto the landing, where two women in curlers and dressing gowns were arguing with each other, tugging angrily at the wall of trunks and cases. Occasionally the manager glanced at them irritably. "Four seven two. I worked it out twice." He said this as if it ended all possibility of argument.

"Ceiling or floor?" Ward asked.

"Ceiling, whaddya think? How can I measure the floor with all this junk?" He kicked at a crate of books protruding from under the bed.

Ward let this pass. "There's quite a tilt on the wall," he pointed out. "As much as three or four degrees."

The manager nodded vaguely. "You're definitely over the four. Way over." He turned to Ward, who had moved down several steps to allow a man and woman to get past. "I can rent this as a double."

"What, only four and a half?" Ward said incredulously. "How?"

The man who had just passed him leaned over the manager's shoulder and sniffed at the room, taking in every detail in a one-second glance. "You renting a double here, Louie?"

The manager waved him away and then beckoned Ward into the room, closing the door after him.

"It's a nominal five," he told Ward. "New regulation, just came out. Anything over four five is a double now." He eyed Ward shrewdly. "Well, whaddya want? It's a good room, there's a lot of space here, feels more like a triple. You got access to the staircase, window slit—" He broke off as Ward slumped down on the bed and started to laugh. "Whatsa matter? Look, if you want a big room like this you gotta pay for it. I want an extra half rental or you get out."

Ward wiped his eyes, then stood up wearily and reached for the shelves. "Relax, I'm on my way. I'm going to live in a broom cupboard. 'Access to the staircase'—that's really rich. Tell me, Louie, is there life on Uranus?"

Temporarily, he and Rossiter teamed up to rent a double cubicle in a semiderelict house a hundred yards from the library. The neighborhood was seedy and faded, the rooming houses crammed with tenants. Most of them were owned by absentee landlords or by the city corporation, and the managers employed were of the lowest type, mere rent collectors who cared nothing about the way their tenants divided up the living space, and never ventured

beyond the first floors. Bottles and empty cans littered the corridors, and the washrooms looked like sumps. Many of the tenants were old and infirm, sitting about listlessly in their narrow cubicles, wheedling at each other back to back through the thin partitions.

Their double cubicle was on the third floor, at the end of a corridor that ringed the building. Its architecture was impossible to follow, rooms letting off at all angles, and luckily the corridor was a cul-de-sac. The mounds of cases ended four feet from the end wall and a partition divided off the cubicle, just wide enough for two beds. A high window overlooked the areaways of the building opposite.

Possessions loaded onto the shelf above his head, Ward lay back on his bed and moodily surveyed the roof of the library through the afternoon haze.

"It's not bad here," Rossiter told him, unpacking his case. "I know there's no real privacy and we'll drive each other insane within a week, but at least we haven't got six other people breathing into our ears two feet away."

The nearest cubicle, a single, was built into the banks of cases half a dozen steps along the corridor, but the occupant, a man of seventy, was deaf and bedridden.

"It's not bad," Ward echoed reluctantly. "Now tell me what the latest growth figures are. They might console me."

Rossiter paused, lowering his voice. "Four percent. *Eight hundred million extra people in one year*—just less than half the Earth's total population in 1950."

Ward whistled slowly. "So they will revalue. What to? Three and a half?"

"Three. From the first of next year."

"Three square meters!" Ward sat up and looked around him. "It's unbelievable! The world's going insane, Rossiter. For God's sake, when are they going to do something about it? Do you realize there soon won't be room enough to sit down, let alone lie down?"

Exasperated, he punched the wall beside him, on the second blow knocked in one of the small wooden panels that had been lightly papered over.

"Hey!" Rossiter yelled. "You're breaking the place down." He dived across the bed to retrieve the panel, which hung downward supported by a strip of paper. Ward slipped his hand into the dark interval, carefully drew the panel back onto the bed.

"Who's on the other side?" Rossiter whispered. "Did they hear?"

Ward peered through the interval, eyes searching the dim light. Suddenly he dropped the panel and seized Rossiter's shoulder, pulled him down onto the bed.

"Henry! Look!"

Rossiter freed himself and pressed his face to the opening, focused slowly and then gasped.

Directly in front of them, faintly illuminated by a grimy skylight, was a medium-sized room, some fifteen feet square, empty except for the dust silted up against the skirting boards. The floor was bare, a few strips of frayed linoleum running across it, the walls covered with a drab floral design. Here and there patches of the paper had peeled off and segments of the picture rail had rotted away, but otherwise the room was in habitable condition.

Breathing slowly, Ward closed the open door of the cubicle with his foot, then turned to Rossiter.

"Henry, do you realize what we've found? Do you realize it, man?"

"Shut up. For Pete's sake keep your voice down." Rossiter examined the room carefully. "It's fantastic. I'm trying to see whether anyone's used it recently."

"Of course they haven't," Ward pointed out. "It's obvious. There's no door into the room. We're looking through it now. They must have paneled over this door years ago and forgotten about it. Look at that filth everywhere."

Rossiter was staring into the room, his mind staggered by its vastness.

"You're right," he murmured. "Now, when do we move in?"

Panel by panel, they pried away the lower half of the door, nailed it onto a wooden frame so that the dummy section could be replaced instantly.

Then, picking an afternoon when the house was half empty and the manager asleep in his basement office, they made their first foray into the room, Ward going in alone while Rossiter kept guard in the cubicle.

For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom. Although smaller than many of the subdivided rooms in which they had lived, this room seemed infinitely larger, its walls huge cliffs that soared upward to the skylight.

Finally, two or three days later, they moved in.

For the first week Rossiter slept alone in the room, Ward in the cubicle outside, both there together during the day. Gradually they smuggled in a few items of furniture: two armchairs, a table, a lamp fed from the socket in the cubicle. The furniture was heavy and Victorian; the cheapest available, its size emphasized the emptiness of the room. Pride of place was taken by an enormous mahogany wardrobe, fitted with carved angels and castellated mirrors, which they were forced to dismantle and carry into the house in their suitcases. Towering over them, it reminded Ward of the microfilms of Gothic cathedrals, with their massive organ lofts crossing vast naves.

After three weeks they both slept in the room, finding the cubicle unbearably cramped. An imitation Japanese screen divided the room adequately and did nothing to diminish its size. Sitting there in the evenings, surrounded by his books and albums, Ward steadily forgot the city outside. Luckily he reached the library by a back alley and avoided the crowded streets. Rossiter and himself began to seem the only real inhabitants of the world, everyone else a meaningless by-product of their own existence, a random replication of identity which had run out of control.

It was Rossiter who suggested that they ask the two girls to share the room with them.

"They've been kicked out again and may have to split up," he told Ward, obviously worried that Judith might fall into bad company. "There's always a rent freeze after revaluation, but all the landlords know about it so they're not reletting. It's getting damned difficult to find a room anywhere."

Ward nodded, relaxing back around the circular redwood table. He played with a tassel of the arsenic-green lampshade, for a moment felt like a Victorian man of letters, leading a spacious, leisurely life among overstuffed furnishings.

"I'm all for it," he agreed, indicating the empty corners. "There's plenty of room here. But we'll have to make damn sure they don't gossip about it."

After due precautions, they let the two girls into the secret, enjoying their astonishment at finding this private universe.

"We'll put a partition across the middle," Rossiter explained, "then take it down each morning. You'll be able to move in within a couple of days. How do you feel?"

"Wonderful!" They goggled at the wardrobe, squinting at the endless reflections in the mirrors.

There was no difficulty getting them in and out of the house. The turnover of tenants was continuous and bills were placed in the mail rack. No one cared who the girls were or noticed their regular calls at the cubicle.

However, half an hour after they arrived neither of them had unpacked her suitcase.

"What's up, Judith?" Ward asked, edging past the girls' beds into the narrow interval between the table and wardrobe.

Judith hesitated, looking from Ward to Rossiter, who sat on his bed, finishing off the plywood partition. "John, it's just that . . ."

Helen Waring, more matter of fact, took over, her fingers straightening the bedspread. "What Judith's trying to say is that our position here is a little embarrassing. The partition is—"

Rossiter stood up. "For heaven's sake, don't worry, Helen," he assured her, speaking in the loud whisper they had all involuntarily cultivated. "No funny business, you can trust us. This partition is as solid as a rock."

The two girls nodded. "It's not that," Helen explained, "but it isn't up all the time. We thought that if an older person were here, say Judith's aunt—she wouldn't take up much room and be no trouble, she's really awfully sweet—we wouldn't need to bother about the partition—except at night," she added quickly.

Ward glanced at Rossiter, who shrugged and began to scan the floor.

"Well, it's an idea," Rossiter said. "John and I know how you feel. Why not?"

"Sure," Ward agreed. He pointed to the space between the girls' beds and the table. "One more won't make any difference."

The girls broke into whoops. Judith went over to Rossiter and kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry to be a nuisance, Henry." She smiled at him. "That's a wonderful partition you've made. You couldn't do another one for Auntie—just a little one? She's very sweet but she is getting on."

"Of course," Rossiter said. "I understand. I've got plenty of wood left over."

Ward looked at his watch. "It's seven-thirty, Judith. You'd better get in touch with your aunt. She may not be able to make it tonight."

Judith buttoned her coat. "Oh, she will," she assured Ward. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

The aunt arrived within five minutes, three heavy suitcases soundly packed.

"It's amazing," Ward remarked to Rossiter three months later. "The size of this room still staggers me. It almost gets larger every day."

Rossiter agreed readily, averting his eyes from one of the girls changing behind the central partition. This they now left in place as dismantling it daily had become tiresome. Besides, the aunt's subsidiary partition was attached to it and she resented the continuous upsets. Ensuring she followed the entrance and exit drills through the camouflaged door and cubicle was difficult enough.

Despite this, detection seemed unlikely. The room had obviously been built as an afterthought into the central well of the house and any noise was masked by the luggage stacked in the surrounding corridor. Directly below was a small dormitory occupied by several elderly women, and Judith's aunt, who visited them socially, swore that no sounds came through the heavy ceiling. Above, the fanlight let out through a dormer window, its lights indistinguishable from the hundred other bulbs burning in the windows of the house.

Rossiter finished off the new partition he was building and held it upright, fitting it into the slots nailed to the wall between his bed and Ward's. They had agreed that this would provide a little extra privacy.

"No doubt I'll have to do one for Judith and Helen," he confided to Ward.

Ward adjusted his pillow. They had smuggled the two armchairs back to the furniture shop as they took up too much space. The bed, anyway, was more comfortable. He had never got completely used to the soft upholstery.

"Not a bad idea. What about some shelving around the wall? I've got nowhere to put anything."

The shelving tidied the room considerably, freeing large areas of the floor. Divided by their partitions, the five beds were in line along the rear wall, facing the mahogany wardrobe. In between was an open space of three or four feet, a further six feet on either side of the wardrobe.

The sight of so much space fascinated Ward. When Rossiter mentioned that Helen's mother was ill and badly needed personal

care he immediately knew where her cubicle could be placed—at the foot of his bed, between the wardrobe and the side wall.

Helen was overjoyed. "It's awfully good of you, John," she told him, "but would you mind if Mother slept beside me? There's enough space to fit an extra bed in."

So Rossiter dismantled the partitions and moved them closer together, six beds now in line along the wall. This gave each of them an interval of two and a half feet wide, just enough room to squeeze down the side of their beds. Lying back on the extreme right, the shelves two feet above his head, Ward could barely see the wardrobe, but the space in front of him, a clear six feet to the wall ahead, was uninterrupted.

Then Helen's father arrived.

Knocking on the door of the cubicle, Ward smiled at Judith's aunt as she let him in. He helped her swing out the made-up bed which guarded the entrance, then rapped on the wooden panel. A moment later Helen's father, a small gray-haired man in an undershirt, braces tied to his trousers with string, pulled back the panel.

Ward nodded to him and stepped over the luggage piled around the floor at the foot of the beds. Helen was in her mother's cubicle, helping the old woman to drink her evening broth. Rossiter, perspiring heavily, was on his knees by the mahogany wardrobe, wrenching apart the frame of the central mirror with a jimmy. Pieces of the wardrobe lay on his bed and across the floor.

"We'll have to start taking these out tomorrow," Rossiter told him. Ward waited for Helen's father to shuffle past and enter his cubicle. He had rigged up a small cardboard door, and locked it behind him with a crude hook of bent wire.

Rossiter watched him, frowning irritably. "Some people are happy. This wardrobe's a hell of a job. How did we ever decide to buy it?"

Ward sat down on his bed. The partition pressed against his knees and he could hardly move. He looked up when Rossiter was engaged and saw that the dividing line he had marked in pencil was hidden by the encroaching partition. Leaning against the wall, he tried to ease it back again, but Rossiter had apparently nailed the lower edge to the floor.

There was a sharp tap on the outside cubicle door—Judith returning from her office. Ward started to get up and then sat back. "Mr. Waring," he called softly. It was the old man's duty night.

Waring shuffled to the door of his cubicle and unlocked it fussily, clucking to himself.

"Up and down, up and down," he muttered. He stumbled over Rossiter's tool bag and swore loudly, then added meaningly over his shoulder: "If you ask me there's too many people in here. Down below they've only got six to our seven, and it's the same size room."

Ward nodded vaguely and stretched back on his narrow bed, trying not to bang his head on the shelving. Waring was not the first to hint that he move out. Judith's aunt had made a similar suggestion two days earlier. Since he left his job at the library (the small rental he charged the others paid for the little food he needed) he spent most of his time in the room, seeing rather more of the old man than he wanted to, but he had learned to tolerate him.

Settling himself, he noticed that the right-hand spire of the wardrobe, all he had been able to see for the past two months, was now dismantled.

It had been a beautiful piece of furniture, in a way symbolizing this whole private world, and the salesman at the store told him there were few like it left. For a moment Ward felt a sudden pang of regret, as he had done as a child when his father, in a mood of exasperation, had taken something away from him and he knew he would never see it again.

Then he pulled himself together. It was a beautiful wardrobe, without doubt, but when it was gone it would make the room seem even larger.

Chronopolis

His trial had been fixed for the next day. Exactly when, of course, neither Newman nor anyone else knew. Probably it would be during the afternoon, when the principals concerned—judge, jury, and prosecutor—managed to converge on the same courtroom at the same time. With luck his defense attorney might also appear at the right moment, though the case was such an open and shut one that Newman hardly expected him to bother—besides, transport to and from the old penal complex was notoriously difficult, involved endless waiting in the grimy depot below the prison walls.

Newman had passed the time usefully. Luckily, his cell faced south and sunlight traversed it for most of the day. He divided its arc into ten equal segments, the effective daylight hours, marking the intervals with a wedge of mortar prised from the window ledge. Each segment he further subdivided into twelve smaller units.

Immediately he had a working timepiece, accurate to within virtually a minute (the final subdivision into fifths he made mentally). The sweep of white notches, curving down one wall, across the floor and metal bedstead, and up the other wall, would have been recognizable to anyone who stood with his back to the window, but no one ever did. Anyway, the guards were too stupid to understand, and the sundial had given Newman a tremendous advantage over them. Most of the time, when he wasn't recalibrating the dial, he would press against the grille, keeping an eye on the orderly room.

"Brocken!" he would shout out at seven-fifteen as the shadow line hit the first interval. "Morning inspection! On you feet, man!"

The sergeant would come stumbling out of his bunk in a sweat, rising the other warders as the reveille bell split the air.

Later, Newman sang out the other events on the daily roster: roll call, cell fatigues, breakfast, exercise, and so on around to the evening roll just before dusk. Brocken regularly won the block merit for the best-run cell deck and he relied on Newman to program the day for him, anticipate the next item on the roster, and warn him if anything went on for too long—in some of the other blocks fatigues were usually over in three minutes while breakfast or exercise could go on for hours, none of the warders knowing when to stop, the prisoners insisting that they had only just begun.

Brocken never inquired how Newman organized everything so exactly; once or twice a week, when it rained or was overcast, Newman would be strangely silent, and the resulting confusion reminded the sergeant forcefully of the merits of cooperation. Newman was kept in cell privileges and all the cigarettes he needed. It was a shame that a date for the trial had finally been named.

Newman, too, was sorry. Most of his research so far had been inconclusive. Primarily his problem was that, given a northward-facing cell for the bulk of his sentence, the task of estimating the time might become impossible. The inclination of the shadows in the exercise yards or across the towers and walls provided too blunt a reading. Calibration would have to be visual; an optical instrument would soon be discovered.

What he needed was an internal timepiece, an unconsciously operating psychic mechanism regulated, say, by his pulse or respiratory rhythms. He had tried to train his time sense, running an elaborate series of tests to estimate its minimum in-built error, and this had been disappointingly large. The chances of conditioning an accurate reflex seemed slim.

However, unless he could tell the exact time at any given moment, he knew he would go mad.

His obsession, which now faced him with a charge of murder, had revealed itself innocently enough.

As a child, like all children, he had noticed the occasional ancient clock tower, bearing the same white circle with its twelve intervals. In the seedier areas of the city the round characteristic dials often hung over cheap jewelry stores, rusting and derelict.

"Just signs," his mother explained. "They don't mean anything, like stars or rings."

Pointless embellishment, he had thought.

Once, in an old furniture shop, they had seen a clock with hands, upside down in a box full of fire irons and miscellaneous rubbish.

"Eleven and twelve," he had pointed out. "What does it mean?"

His mother had hurried him away, reminding herself never to visit that street again. "Nothing," she told him sharply. "It's all finished." To herself she added experimentally: Five and twelve. Five *to* twelve. Yes.

Time unfolded at its usual sluggish, half-confused pace. They lived in a ramshackle house in one of the amorphous suburbs, a zone of endless afternoons. Sometimes he went to school, until he was ten spent most of his time with his mother queueing outside the closed food stores. In the evenings he would play with the neighborhood gang around the abandoned railway station, punting a homemade flatcar along the overgrown tracks, or break into one of the unoccupied houses and set up a temporary command post.

He was in no hurry to grow up; the adult world was unsynchronized and ambitionless. After his mother died he spent long days in the attic, going through her trunks and old clothes, playing with the bric-à-brac of hats and beads, trying to recover something of her personality.

In the bottom compartment of her jewelry case he came across a flat gold-cased object, equipped with a wrist strap. The dial had no hands but the twelve-numbered face intrigued him and he fastened it to his wrist.

His father choked over his soup when he saw it that evening.

"Conrad, my God! Where in heaven did you get that?"

"In Mamma's bead box. Can't I keep it?"

"No. Conrad, give it to me! Sorry, son." Thoughtfully: "Let's see, you're fourteen. Look, Conrad, I'll explain it all in a couple of years."

With the impetus provided by this new taboo there was no need to wait for his father's revelations. Full knowledge came soon. The older boys knew the whole story, but strangely enough it was disappointingly dull.

"Is that all?" he kept saying. "I don't get it. Why worry so much about clocks? We have calendars, don't we?"

Suspecting more, he scoured the streets, carefully inspecting every derelict clock for a clue to the real secret. Most of the faces had been mutilated, hands and numerals torn off, the circle of minute intervals stripped away, leaving a shadow of fading rust.

Distributed apparently at random all over the city, above stores, banks, and public buildings, their real purpose was hard to discover. Sure enough, they measured the progress of time through twelve arbitrary intervals, but this seemed barely adequate grounds for outlawing them. After all, a whole variety of timers were in general use: in kitchens, factories, hospitals, wherever a fixed period of time was needed. His father had one by his bed at night. Sealed into the standard small black box, and driven by miniature batteries, it emitted a high penetrating whistle shortly before breakfast the next morning, woke him if he overslept. A clock was no more than a calibrated timer, in many ways less useful, as it provided you with a steady stream of irrelevant information. What if it was half past three, as the old reckoning put it, if you weren't planning to start or finish anything then?

Making his questions sound as naive as possible, he conducted a long, careful poll. Under fifty no one appeared to know anything at all about the historical background, and even the older people were beginning to forget. He also noticed that the less educated they were the more they were willing to talk, indicating that manual and lower-class workers had played no part in the revolution and consequently had no guilt-charged memories to repress. Old Mr. Crichton, the plumber who lived in the basement apartment, reminisced without any prompting, but nothing he said threw any light on the problem.

"Sure, there were thousands of clocks then, millions of them, everybody had one. Watches we called them, strapped to the wrist, you had to screw them up every day."

"But what did you *do* with them, Mr. Crichton?" Conrad pressed.

"Well, you just—looked at them, and you knew what time it was. One o'clock, or two or half past seven—that was when I'd go off to work."

"But you go off to work now when you've had breakfast. And if you're late the timer rings."

Crichton shook his head. "I can't explain it to you, lad. You ask your father."

But Mr. Newman was hardly more helpful. The explanation promised for Conrad's sixteenth birthday never materialized. When his questions persisted Mr. Newman, tired of sidestepping, shut him up with an abrupt: "Just stop thinking about it, do you understand? You'll get yourself and the rest of us into a lot of trouble."

* * *

Stacey, the young English teacher, had a wry sense of humor, liked to shock the boys by taking up unorthodox positions on marriage or economics. Conrad wrote an essay describing an imaginary society completely preoccupied with elaborate rituals revolving around a minute-by-minute observance of the passage of time.

Stacey refused to play, however, and gave him a noncommittal beta plus, after class quietly asked Conrad what had prompted the fantasy. At first Conrad tried to back away, then finally came out with the question that contained the central riddle.

"Why is it against the law to have a clock?"

Stacey tossed a piece of chalk from one hand to the other.

"Is it against the law?"

Conrad nodded. "There's an old notice in the police station offering a bounty of one hundred pounds for every clock or wristwatch brought in. I saw it yesterday. The sergeant said it was still in force."

Stacey raised his eyebrows mockingly. "You'll make a million. Thinking of going into business?"

Conrad ignored this. "It's against the law to have a gun because you might shoot someone. But how can you hurt anybody with a clock?"

"Isn't it obvious? You can time him, know exactly how long it takes him to do something."

"Well?"

"Then you can make him do it faster."

At seventeen, on a sudden impulse, he built his first clock. Already his preoccupation with time was giving him a marked lead over his classmates. One or two were more intelligent, others more conscientious, but Conrad's ability to organize his leisure and homework periods allowed him to make the most of his talents. When the others were lounging around the railway yard on their way home Conrad had already completed half his prep, allocating his time according to its various demands.

As soon as he finished he would go up to the attic playroom, now his workshop. Here, in the old wardrobes and trunks, he made his first experimental constructions: calibrated candles, crude sundials, sandglasses, an elaborate clockwork contraption developing about half a horse power that drove its hands progressively faster and faster in an unintentional parody of Conrad's obsession.

His first serious clock was water-powered, a slowly leaking tank holding a wooden float that drove the hands as it sank downwards. Simple but accurate, it satisfied Conrad for several months while he carried out his ever-widening search for a real clock mechanism. He soon discovered that although there were innumerable table clocks, gold pocket watches, and timepieces of every variety rusting in junk shops and in the back drawers of most homes, none of them contained their mechanisms. These, together with the hands, and sometimes the digits, had always been removed. His own attempts to build an escapement that would regulate the motion of the ordinary clockwork motor met with no success; everything he had heard about clock movements confirmed that they were precision instruments of exact design and construction. To satisfy his secret ambition—a portable timepiece, if possible an actual wristwatch—he would have to find one, somewhere, in working order.

Finally, from an unexpected source, a watch came to him. One afternoon in a cinema, an elderly man sitting next to Conrad had a sudden heart attack. Conrad and two members of the audience carried him out to the manager's office. Holding one of his arms, Conrad noticed in the dim aisle light a glint of metal inside the sleeve. Quickly he felt the wrist with his fingers, identified the unmistakable lens-shaped disk of a wristwatch.

As he carried it home its tick seemed as loud as a death knell. He clamped his hand around it, expecting everyone in the street to point accusingly at him, the Time Police to swoop down and seize him.

In the attic he took it out and examined it breathlessly, smothering it in a cushion whenever he heard his father shift about in the bedroom below. Later he realized that its noise was almost inaudible. The watch was of the same pattern as his mother's, though with a yellow and not a red face. The gold case was scratched and peeling, but the movement seemed to be in perfect condition. He prized off the rear plate, watched the frenzied flickering world of miniature cogs and wheels for hours, spellbound. Frightened of breaking the main spring, he kept the watch only half wound, packed away carefully in cotton wool.

In taking the watch from its owner he had not, in fact, been motivated by theft; his first impulse had been to hide the watch before the doctor discovered it feeling for the man's pulse. But once the watch was in his possession he abandoned any thought of tracing the owner and returning it.

That others were still wearing watches hardly surprised him. The water clock had demonstrated that a calibrated timepiece added another dimension to life, organized its energies, gave the countless activities of everyday existence a yardstick of significance. Conrad spent hours in the attic gazing at the small yellow dial, watching its minute hand revolve slowly, its hour hand press on imperceptibly, a compass charting his passage through the future. Without it he felt rudderless, adrift in a gray purposeless limbo of timeless events. His father began to seem idle and stupid, sitting around vacantly with no idea when anything was going to happen.

Soon he was wearing the watch all day. He stitched together a slim cotton sleeve, fitted with a narrow flap below which he could see the face. He timed everything—the length of classes, football games, meal breaks, the hours of daylight and darkness, sleep and waking. He amused himself endlessly by baffling his friends with demonstrations of this private sixth sense, anticipating the frequency of their heart beats, the hourly newscasts on the radio, boiling a series of identically consistent eggs without the aid of a timer.

Then he gave himself away.

Stacey, shrewder than any of the others, discovered that he was wearing a watch. Conrad had noticed that Stacey's English classes lasted exactly forty-five minutes; he let himself slide into the habit of tidying his desk a minute before Stacey's timer pipped up. Once or twice he noticed Stacey looking at him curiously, but he could not resist the temptation to impress Stacey by always being the first one to make for the door.

One day he had stacked his books and clipped away his pen when Stacey pointedly asked him to read out a précis he had done. Conrad knew the timer would pip out in less than ten seconds, and decided to sit tight and wait for the usual stampede to save him the trouble.

Stacey stepped down from the dais, waiting patiently. One or two boys turned around and frowned at Conrad, who was counting away the closing seconds.

Then, amazed, he realized that the timer had failed to sound! Panicking, he first thought his watch had broken, just restrained himself in time from looking at it.

"In a hurry, Newman?" Stacey asked dryly. He sauntered down the aisle to Conrad. Baffled, his face reddening with embarrassment, Conrad fumbled open his exercise book, read out the précis.

A few minutes later, without waiting for the timer, Stacey dismissed the class.

"Newman," he called out. "Here a moment."

He rummaged behind the rostrum as Conrad approached. "What happened then?" he asked. "Forget to wind up your watch this morning?"

Conrad said nothing. Stacey took out the timer, switched off the silencer and listened to the pip that buzzed out.

"Where did you get it from? Your parents? Don't worry, the Time Police were disbanded years ago."

Conrad examined Stacey's face. "It was my mother's," he lied. "I found it among her things." Stacey held out his hand and Conrad nervously unstrapped the watch and handed it to him.

Stacey slipped it half out of its sleeve, glanced briefly at the yellow face. "Your mother, you say? Hmh."

"Are you going to report me?" Conrad asked.

"What, and waste some overworked psychiatrist's time even further?"

"Isn't it breaking the law to wear a watch?"

"Well, you're not exactly the greatest living menace to public security." Stacey started for the door, gesturing Conrad with him. He handed the watch back. "Cancel whatever you're doing on Saturday afternoon. You and I are taking a trip."

"Where?" Conrad asked.

"Back into the past," Stacey said lightly. "To Chronopolis, the Time City."

Stacey had hired a car, a huge battered mastodon of chromium and fins. He waved jauntily to Conrad as he picked him up outside the Public Library.

"Climb into the turret." He pointed to the bulging briefcase Conrad slung onto the seat between them. "Have you had a look at those yet?"

Conrad nodded. As they moved off around the deserted square he opened the briefcase and pulled out a thick bundle of road maps. "I've just worked out that the city covers over five hundred square miles. I'd never realized it was so big. Where is everybody?"

Stacey laughed. They crossed the main street, cut down into a long tree-lined avenue of semidetached houses. Half of them were empty, windows wrecked and roofs sagging. Even the inhabited houses had a makeshift appearance, crude water towers on home-

made scaffolding lashed to their chimneys, piles of logs dumped in overgrown front gardens.

"Thirty million people once lived in this city," Stacey remarked. "Now the population is little more than two, and still declining. Those of us left hang on in what were once the distal suburbs, so that the city today is effectively an enormous ring, five miles in width, encircling a vast dead center forty or fifty miles in diameter."

They wove in and out of various back roads, past a small factory still running although work was supposed to end at noon, finally picked up a long, straight boulevard that carried them steadily westward. Conrad traced their progress across successive maps. They were nearing the edge of the annulus Stacey had described. On the map it was overprinted in green so that the central interior appeared a flat, uncharted gray, a massive *terra incognita.*

They passed the last of the small shopping thoroughfares he remembered, a frontier post of mean terraced houses, dismal streets spanned by massive steel viaducts. Stacey pointed up at one as they drove below it. "Part of the elaborate railway system that once existed, an enormous network of stations and junctions that carried fifteen million people into a dozen great terminals every day."

For half an hour they drove on, Conrad hunched against the window, Stacey watching him in the driving mirror. Gradually, the landscape began to change. The houses were taller, with colored roofs, the sidewalks were railed off and fitted with pedestrian lights and turnstiles. They had entered the inner suburbs, completely deserted streets with multilevel supermarkets, towering cinemas, and department stores.

Chin in one hand, Conrad stared out silently. Lacking any means of transport he had never ventured into the uninhabited interior of the city, like the other children always headed in the opposite direction for the open country. Here the streets had died twenty or thirty years earlier; plateglass shopfronts had slipped and smashed into the roadway, old neon signs, window frames and overhead wires hung down from every cornice, trailing a ragged webwork of disintegrating metal across the pavements. Stacey drove slowly, avoiding the occasional bus or truck abandoned in the middle of the road, its tires peeling off their rims.

Conrad craned up at the empty windows, into the narrow alleys and side streets, but nowhere felt any sensation of fear or anticipation. These streets were merely derelict, as unhaunted as a half-empty dustbin.

One suburban center gave way to another, to long intervening stretches of congested ribbon developments. Mile by mile, the architecture altered its character; buildings were larger, ten- or fifteen-story blocks, clad in facing materials of green and blue tiles, glass or copper sheathing. They were moving forward in time rather than, as Conrad had expected, back into the past of a fossil city.

Stacey worked the car through a nexus of side streets toward a six-lane expressway that rose on concrete buttresses above the rooftops. They found a side road that circled up to it, leveled out, and then picked up speed sharply, spinning along one of the clear center lanes.

Conrad craned forward. In the distance, two or three miles away, the rectilinear outlines of enormous apartment blocks reared thirty or forty stories high, hundreds of them lined shoulder to shoulder in apparently endless ranks, like giant dominoes.

"We're entering the central dormitories here," Stacey told him. On either side buildings overtopped the motorway, the congestion mounting so that some of them had been built right up against the concrete palisades.

In a few minutes they passed between the first of the apartment batteries, the thousands of identical living units with their slanting balconies shearing up into the sky, the glass in-falls of the aluminum curtain walling speckling in the sunlight. The smaller houses and shops of the outer suburbs had vanished. There was no room on the ground level. In the narrow intervals between the blocks there were small concrete gardens, shopping complexes, ramps banking down into huge underground car parks.

And on all sides there were the clocks. Conrad noticed them immediately, at every street corner, over every archway, three quarters of the way up the sides of buildings, covering every conceivable angle of approach. Most of them were too high off the ground to be reached by anything less than a fireman's ladder and still retained their hands. All registered the same time: 12:01.

Conrad looked at his wristwatch, noted that it was just 2:45 p.m.

"They were driven by a master clock," Stacey told him. "When that stopped they all ceased at the same moment. One minute after midnight, thirty-seven years ago."

The afternoon had darkened, as the high cliffs cut off the sunlight, the sky a succession of narrow vertical intervals opening and closing around them. Down on the canyon floor it was dismal and oppressive, a wilderness of concrete and frosted glass. The ex-

pressway divided and pressed on westward. After a few more miles the apartment blocks gave way to the first office buildings in the central zone. These were even taller, sixty or seventy stories high, linked by spiraling ramps and causeways. The expressway was fifty feet off the ground yet the first floors of the office blocks were level with it, mounted on massive stilts that straddled the glass-enclosed entrance bays of lifts and escalators. The streets were wide but featureless. The sidewalks of parallel roadways merged below the buildings, forming a continuous concrete apron. Here and there were the remains of cigarette kiosks, rusting stairways up to restaurants and arcades built on platforms thirty feet in the air.

Conrad, however, was looking only at the clocks. Never had he visualized so many, in places so dense that they obscured each other. Their faces were multicolored: red, blue, yellow, green. Most of them carried four or five hands. Although the master hands had stopped at a minute past twelve, the subsidiary hands had halted at varying positions, apparently dictated by their color.

"What were the extra hands for?" he asked Stacey. "And the different colors?"

"Time zones. Depending on your professional category and the consumer-shifts allowed. Hold on, though, we're almost there."

They left the expressway and swung off down a ramp that fed them into the northeast corner of a wide open plaza, eight hundred yards long and half as wide, down the center of which had once been laid a continuous strip of lawn, now rank and overgrown. The plaza was empty, a sudden block of free space bounded by tall glass-faced cliffs that seemed to carry the sky.

Stacey parked, and he and Conrad climbed out and stretched themselves. Together they strolled across the wide pavement toward the strip of waist-high vegetation. Looking down the vistas receding from the plaza Conrad grasped fully for the first time the vast perspectives of the city, the massive geometric jungle of buildings.

Stacey put one foot up on the balustrade running around the lawn bed, pointed to the far end of the plaza, where Conrad saw a low-lying huddle of buildings of unusual architectural style, nineteenth-century perpendicular, stained by the atmosphere and badly holed by a number of explosions. Again, however, his attention was held by the clock face built into a tall concrete tower just behind the older buildings. This was the largest clock dial he

had ever seen, at least a hundred feet across, huge black hands halted at a minute past twelve. The dial was white, the first they had seen, but on wide semicircular shoulders built below the main face were a dozen smaller faces, no more than twenty feet in diameter, running the full spectrum of colors. Each had five hands, the inferior three halted at random.

"Fifty years ago," Stacey explained, gesturing at the ruins below the tower, "that collection of ancient buildings was one of the world's greatest legislative assemblies." He gazed at it quietly for a few moments, then turned to Conrad. "Enjoy the ride?"

Conrad nodded fervently. "It's impressive, all right. The people who lived here must have been giants. What's really remarkable is that it looks as if they left only yesterday. Why don't we go back?"

"Well, apart from the fact that there aren't enough of us now, even if there were we couldn't control it. In its heyday this city was a fantastically complex social organism. The communications problems are difficult to imagine merely by looking at these blank façades. It's the tragedy of this city that there appeared to be only one way to solve them."

"Did they solve them?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. But they left themselves out of the equation. Think of the problems, though. Transporting fifteen million office workers to and from the center every day; routing in an endless stream of cars, buses, trains, helicopters; linking every office, almost every desk, with a videophone, every apartment with television, radio, power, water; feeding and entertaining this enormous number of people; guarding them with ancillary services, police, fire squads, medical units—it all hinged on one factor."

Stacey threw a fist out at the great tower clock. "Time! Only by synchronizing every activity, every footstep forward or backward, every meal, bus halt, and telephone call, could the organism support itself. Like the cells in your body, which proliferate into mortal cancers if allowed to grow in freedom, every individual here had to serve the overriding needs of the city or fatal bottlenecks threw it into total chaos. You and I can turn on the tap any hour of the day or night, because we have our own private water cisterns, but what would happen here if everybody washed the breakfast dishes within the same ten minutes?"

They began to walk slowly down the plaza toward the clock tower. "Fifty years ago, when the population was only ten million, they could just provide for a potential peak capacity, but even then

a strike in one essential service paralyzed most of the others; it took workers two or three hours to reach their offices, as long again to queue for lunch and get home. As the population climbed the first serious attempts were made to stagger hours; workers in certain areas started the day an hour earlier or later than those in others. Their railway passes and car number plates were colored accordingly, and if they tried to travel outside the permitted periods they were turned back. Soon the practice spread; you could only switch on your washing machine at a given hour, post a letter or take a bath at a specific period."

"Sounds feasible," Conrad commented, his interest mounting. "But how did they enforce all this?"

"By a system of colored passes, colored money, an elaborate set of schedules published every day like TV or radio programs. And, of course, by all the thousands of clocks you can see around you here. The subsidiary hands marked out the number of minutes remaining in any activity period for people in the clock's color category."

Stacey stopped, pointed to a blue-faced clock mounted on one of the buildings overlooking the plaza. "Let's say, for example, that a lower-grade executive leaving his office at the allotted time, twelve o'clock, wants to have lunch, change a library book, buy some aspirin, and telephone his wife. Like all executives, his identity zone is blue. He takes out his schedule for the week, or looks down the blue-time columns in the newspaper, and notes that his lunch period for that day is twelve-fifteen to twelve-thirty. He has fifteen minutes to kill. Right, he then checks the library. Time code for today is given as three, that's the third hand on the clock. He looks at the nearest blue clock, the third hand says thirty-seven minutes past—he has twenty-three minutes, ample time, to reach the library. He starts down the street, but finds at the first intersection that the pedestrian lights are only shining red and green and he can't get across. The area's been temporarily zoned off for lower-grade women office workers—red, and manuals—green."

"What would happen if he ignored the lights?" Conrad asked.

"Nothing immediately, but all blue clocks in the zoned area would have returned to zero, and no shops or the library would serve him, unless he happened to have red or green currency and a forged set of library tickets. Anyway, the penalties were too high to make the risk worthwhile, and the whole system was evolved for his convenience, no one else's. So, unable to reach the library, he decides on the chemist. The time code for the chemist is five,

the fifth, smallest hand. It reads fifty-four minutes past: he has six minutes to find a chemist and make his purchase. This done, he still has five minutes before lunch, decides to phone his wife. Checking the phone code he sees that no period has been provided for private calls that day—or the next. He'll just have to wait until he sees her that evening."

"What if he did phone?"

"He wouldn't be able to get his money in the coin box, and even then, his wife, assuming she is a secretary, would be in a red time zone and no longer in her office for that day—hence the prohibition on phone calls. It all meshed perfectly. Your time program told you when you could switch on your TV set and when to switch off. All electric appliances were fused, and if you strayed outside the programmed periods you'd have a hefty fine and repair bill to meet. The viewer's economic status obviously determined the choice of program, and vice versa, so there was no question of coercion. Each day's program listed your permitted activities: you could go to the hairdresser's, cinema, bank, cocktail bar, at stated times, and if you went then you were sure of being served quickly and efficiently."

They had almost reached the far end of the plaza. Facing them on its tower was the enormous clock face, dominating its constellation of twelve motionless attendants.

"There were a dozen socioeconomic categories: blue for executives, gold for professional classes, yellow for military and government officials—incidentally, it's odd your parents ever got hold of that wristwatch, none of your family ever worked for the government—green for manual workers and so on. Naturally, subtle subdivisions were possible. The lower-grade executive I mentioned left his office at twelve, but a senior executive, with exactly the same time codes, would leave at eleven forty-five and have an extra fifteen minutes, would find the streets clear before the lunch-hour rush of clerical workers."

Stacey pointed up at the tower. "This was the Big Clock, the master from which all others were regulated. Central Time Control, a sort of Ministry of Time, gradually took over the old parliamentary buildings as their legislative functions diminished. The programmers were, effectively, the city's absolute rulers."

As Stacey continued Conrad gazed up at the battery of timepieces, poised helplessly at 12:01. Somehow time itself seemed to have been suspended, around him the great office buildings hung in a neutral interval between yesterday and tomorrow. If one could

only start the master clock the entire city would probably slide into gear and come to life, in an instant be repeopled with its dynamic jostling millions.

They began to walk back toward the car. Conrad looked over his shoulder at the clock face, its gigantic arms upright on the silent hour.

"Why did it stop?" he asked.

Stacey looked at him curiously. "Haven't I made it fairly plain?"

"What do you mean?" Conrad pulled his eyes off the scores of clocks lining the plaza, frowned at Stacey.

"Can you imagine what life was like for all but a few of the thirty million people here?"

Conrad shrugged. Blue and yellow clocks, he noticed, outnumbered all others; obviously the major governmental agencies had operated from the plaza area. "Highly organized but better than the sort of life we lead," he replied finally, more interested in the sights around him. "I'd rather have the telephone for one hour a day than not at all. Scarcities are always rationed, aren't they?"

"But this was a way of life in which everything was scarce. Don't you think there's a point beyond which human dignity is surrendered?"

Conrad snorted. "There seems to be plenty of dignity here. Look at these buildings, they'll stand for a thousand years. Try comparing them with my father. Anyway, think of the beauty of the system, engineered as precisely as a watch."

"That's all it was," Stacey commented dourly. "The old metaphor of the cog in the wheel was never more true than here. The full sum of your existence was printed for you in the newspaper columns, mailed to you once a month from the Ministry of Time."

Conrad was looking off in some other direction and Stacey pressed on in a slightly louder voice. "Eventually, of course, revolt came. It's interesting that in any industrial society there is usually one social revolution each century, and that successive revolutions receive their impetus from progressively higher social levels. In the eighteenth century it was the urban proletariat, in the nineteenth the artisan classes, in this revolt the white-collar office worker, living in his tiny so-called modern flat, supporting through credit pyramids an economic system that denied him all freedom of will or personality, chained him to a thousand clocks . . ." He broke off. "What's the matter?"

Conrad was staring down one of the side streets. He hesitated,

then asked in a casual voice: "How were these clocks driven? Electrically?"

"Most of them. A few mechanically. Why?"

"I just wondered . . . how they kept them all going." He dawdled at Stacey's heels, checking the time from his wristwatch and glancing to his left. There were twenty or thirty clocks hanging from the buildings along the side street, indistinguishable from those he had seen all afternoon.

Except for the fact that one of them was working!

It was mounted in the center of a black glass portico over an entranceway fifty yards down the right-hand side, about eighteen inches in diameter, with a faded blue face. Unlike the others its hands registered three-fifteen, the correct time. Conrad had nearly mentioned this apparent coincidence to Stacey when he had suddenly seen the minute hand move on an interval. Without doubt someone had restarted the clock; even if it had been running off an inexhaustible battery, after thirty-seven years it could never have displayed such accuracy.

He hung behind Stacey, who was saying: "Every revolution has its symbol of oppression . . ."

The clock was almost out of view. Conrad was about to bend down and tie his shoelace when he saw the minute hand jerk downward, tilt slightly from the horizontal.

He followed Stacey toward the car, no longer bothering to listen to him. Ten yards from it he turned and broke away, ran swiftly across the roadway toward the nearest building.

"Newman!" he heard Stacey shout. "Come back!" He reached the pavement, ran between the great concrete pillars carrying the building. He paused for a moment behind an elevator shaft, saw Stacey climbing hurriedly into the car. The engine coughed and roared out, and Conrad sprinted on below the building into a rear alley that led back to the side street. Behind him he heard the car accelerating, a door slam as it picked up speed.

When he entered the side street the car came swinging off the plaza thirty yards behind him. Stacey swerved off the roadway, bumped up onto the pavement and gunned the car toward Conrad, throwing on the brakes in savage lurches, blasting the horn in an attempt to frighten him. Conrad sidestepped out of its way, almost falling over the hood, hurled himself up a narrow stairway leading to the first floor, and raced up the steps to a short landing that ended in tall glass doors. Through them he could see a wide balcony that ringed the building. A fire escape crisscrossed upward

to the roof, giving way on the fifth floor to a cafeteria that spanned the street to the office building opposite.

Below he heard Stacey's feet running across the pavement. The glass doors were locked. He pulled a fire extinguisher from its bracket, tossed the heavy cylinder against the center of the plate. The glass slipped and crashed to the tiled floor in a sudden cascade, splashing down the steps. Conrad stepped through onto the balcony, began to climb the stairway. He had reached the third floor when he saw Stacey below, craning upward. Hand over hand, Conrad pulled himself up the next two flights, swung over a bolted metal turnstile into the open court of the cafeteria. Tables and chairs lay about on their sides, mixed up with the splintered remains of desks thrown down from the upper floors.

The doors into the covered restaurant were open, a large pool of water lying across the floor. Conrad splashed through it, went over to a window and peered down past an old plastic plant into the street. Stacey seemed to have given up. Conrad crossed the rear of the restaurant, straddled the counter, and climbed through a window onto the open terrace running across the street. Beyond the rail he could see into the plaza, the double line of tire marks curving into the street below.

He had almost crossed to the opposite balcony when a shot roared out into the air. There was a sharp tinkle of falling glass and the sound of the explosion boomed away among the empty canyons.

For a few seconds he panicked. He flinched back from the exposed rail, his eardrums numbed, looking up at the great rectangular masses towering above him on either side, the endless tiers of windows like the faceted eyes of gigantic insects. So Stacey had been armed, almost certainly was a member of the Time Police!

On his hands and knees Conrad scurried along the terrace, slid through the turnstiles and headed for a half-open window on the balcony.

Climbing through, he quickly lost himself in the building.

He finally took up a position in a corner office on the sixth floor, the cafeteria just below him to the right, the stairway up which he had escaped directly opposite.

All afternoon Stacey drove up and down the adjacent streets, sometimes freewheeling silently with the engine off, at others blazing through at speed. Twice he fired into the air, stopping the car afterward to call out, his words lost among the echoes rolling from one street to the next. Often he drove along the pavements,

swerved about below the buildings as if he expected to flush Conrad from behind one of the banks of escalators.

Finally he appeared to drive off for good, and Conrad turned his attention to the clock in the portico. It had moved on to six forty-five, almost exactly the time given by his own watch. Conrad reset this to what he assumed was the correct time, then sat back and waited for whoever had wound it to appear. Around him the thirty or forty other clocks he could see remained stationary at 12:01.

For five minutes he left his vigil, scooped some water off the pool in the cafeteria, suppressed his hunger, and shortly after midnight fell asleep in a corner behind the desk.

He woke the next morning to bright sunlight flooding into the office. Standing up, he dusted his clothes, turned around to find a small gray-haired man in a patched tweed suit surveying him with sharp eyes. Slung in the crook of his arm was a large black-barreled weapon, its hammers menacingly cocked.

The man put down a steel ruler he had evidently tapped against a cabinet, waited for Conrad to collect himself.

"What are you doing here?" he asked in a testy voice. Conrad noticed his pockets were bulging with angular objects that weighed down the sides of his jacket.

"I . . . er . . ." Conrad searched for something to say. Something about the old man convinced him that this was the clock winder. Suddenly he decided he had nothing to lose by being frank, and blurted out, "I saw the clock working. Down there on the left. I want to help wind them all up again."

The old man watched him shrewdly. He had an alert birdlike face, twin folds under his chin like a cockerel's.

"How do you propose to do that?" he asked.

Stuck by this one, Conrad said lamely, "I'd find a key somewhere."

The old man frowned. "One key? That wouldn't do much good." He seemed to be relaxing, and shook his pockets with a dull chink.

For a few moments neither of them said anything. Then Conrad had an inspiration, bared his wrist. "I have a watch," he said. "It's seven forty-five."

"Let me see." The old man stepped forward, briskly took Conrad's wrist and examined the yellow dial. "Movado Supermatic," he said to himself. "CTC issue." He stepped back, lowering the

shotgun, and seemed to be summing Conrad up. "Good," he remarked at last. "Let's see. You probably need some breakfast."

They made their way out of the building, and began to walk quickly down the street.

"People sometimes come here," the old man said. "Sightseers and police. I watched your escape yesterday, you were lucky not to be killed." They swerved left and right across the empty streets, the old man darting between the stairways and buttresses. As he walked he held his hands stiffly to his sides, preventing his pockets from swinging. Glancing into them, Conrad saw that they were full of keys, large and rusty, of every design and combination.

"I presume that was your father's watch," the old man remarked.

"Grandfather's," Conrad corrected. He remembered Stacey's lecture, and added, "He was killed in the plaza."

The old man frowned sympathetically, for a moment held Conrad's arm.

They stopped below a building, indistinguishable from the others nearby, at one time a bank. The old man looked carefully around him, eyeing the high cliff walls on all sides, then led the way up a stationary escalator.

His quarters were on the second floor, beyond a maze of steel grilles and strongdoors, a stove and a hammock slung in the center of a large workshop. Lying about on thirty or forty desks in what had once been a typing pool, was an enormous collection of clocks, all being simultaneously repaired. Tall cabinets surrounded them, loaded with thousands of spare parts in neatly labeled correspondence trays—escapements, ratchets, cogwheels, barely recognizable through the rust.

The old man led Conrad over to a wall chart, pointed to the total listed against a column of dates. "Look at this. There are now 278 running continuously. Believe me, I'm glad you've come. It takes me half my time to keep them wound."

He made breakfast for Conrad and told him something about himself. His name was Marshall. Once he had worked in Central Time Control as a programmer. He had survived the revolt and the Time Police, and ten years later returned to the city. At the beginning of each month he cycled out to one of the perimeter towns to cash his pension and collect supplies. The rest of the time he spent winding the steadily increasing number of functioning clocks and searching for others he could dismantle and repair.

"All these years in the rain hasn't done them any good," he

explained, "and there's nothing I can do with the electrical ones."

Conrad wandered off among the desks, gingerly feeling the dismembered timepieces that lay around like the nerve cells of some vast unimaginable robot. He felt exhilarated and yet at the same time curiously calm, like a man who has staked his whole life on the turn of a wheel and is waiting for it to spin.

"How can you make sure that they all tell the same time?" he asked Marshall, wondering why the question seemed so important.

Marshall gestured irritably. "I can't, but what does it matter? There is no such thing as a perfectly accurate clock. The nearest you can get is one that has stopped. Although you never know when, it *is* absolutely accurate twice a day."

Conrad went over to the window, pointed to the great clock visible in an interval between the rooftops. "If only we could start that, and run all the others off it."

"Impossible. The entire mechanism was dynamited. Only the chimer is intact. Anyway, the wiring of the electrically driven clocks perished years ago. It would take an army of engineers to recondition them."

Conrad looked at the scoreboard again. He noticed that Marshall appeared to have lost his way through the years—the completion dates he listed were seven and a half years out. Idly, Conrad reflected on the significance of this irony, but decided not to mention it to Marshall.

For three months Conrad lived with the old man, following him on foot as he cycled about on his rounds, carrying the ladder and the satchel full of keys with which Marshall wound up the clocks, helping him to dismantle recoverable ones and carry them back to the workshop. All day, and often through half the night, they worked together, repairing the movements, restarting the clocks, and returning them to their original positions.

All the while, however, Conrad's mind was fixed upon the great clock in its tower dominating the plaza. Once a day he managed to sneak off and make his way into the ruined Time buildings. As Marshall had said, neither the clock nor its twelve satellites would ever run again. The movement house looked like the engine room of a sunken ship, a rusting tangle of rotors and drive wheels exploded into contorted shapes. Every week he would climb the long stairway up to the topmost platform two hundred feet above, look out through the bell tower at the flat roofs of the office blocks stretching away to the horizon. The hammers rested against their

trips in long ranks just below him. Once he kicked one of the treble trips playfully, sent a dull chime out across the plaza.

The sound drove strange echoes into his mind.

Slowly he began to repair the chimer mechanism, rewiring the hammers and the pulley systems, trailing fresh wire up the great height of the tower, dismantling the winches in the movement room below and renovating their clutches.

He and Marshall never discussed their self-appointed tasks. Like animals obeying an instinct they worked tirelessly, barely aware of their own motives. When Conrad told him one day that he intended to leave and continue the work in another sector of the city, Marshall agreed immediately, gave Conrad as many tools as he could spare and bade him good-bye.

Six months later, almost to the day, the sounds of the great clock chimed out across the rooftops of the city, marking the hours, the half hours and the quarter hours, steadily tolling the progress of the day. Thirty miles away, in the towns forming the perimeter of the city, people stopped in the streets and in doorways, listening to the dim haunted echoes reflected through the long aisles of apartment blocks on the far horizon, involuntarily counting the slow final sequences that told the hour. Older people whispered to each other: "Four o'clock, or was it five? They have started the clock again. It seems strange after these years."

And all through the day they would pause as the quarter and half hours reached across the miles to them, a voice from their childhoods reminding them of the ordered world of the past. They began to reset their timers by the chimes, at night before they slept they would listen to the long count of midnight, wake to hear them again in the thin clear air of the morning.

Some went down to the police station and asked if they could have their watches and clocks back again.

After sentence, twenty years for the murder of Stacey, five for fourteen offenses under the Time Laws, to run concurrently, Newman was led away to the holding cells in the basement of the court. He had expected the sentence and made no comment when invited by the judge. After waiting trial for a year the afternoon in the courtroom was nothing more than a momentary intermission.

He made no attempt to defend himself against the charge of killing Stacey, partly to shield Marshall, who would be able to

continue their work unmolested, and partly because he felt indirectly responsible for the policeman's death. Stacey's body, skull fractured by a twenty- or thirty-story fall, had been discovered in the back seat of his car in a basement garage not far from the plaza. Presumably Marshall had discovered him prowling around. Newman recalled that one day Marshall had disappeared altogether and had been curiously irritable for the rest of the week.

The last time he had seen the old man had been during the three days before the police arrived. Each morning as the chimes boomed out across the plaza Newman had seen his tiny figure striding briskly down the plaza toward him, waving up energetically at the tower, bareheaded and unafraid.

Now Newman was faced with the problem of how to devise a clock that would chart his way through the coming twenty years. His fears increased when he was taken the next day to the cell block which housed the long-term prisoners—passing his cell on the way to meet the superintendent he noticed that his window looked out onto a small shaft. He pumped his brains desperately as he stood at attention during the superintendent's homilies, wondering how he could retain his sanity. Short of counting the seconds, each one of the 86,400 in every day, he saw no possible means of assessing the time.

Locked into his cell, he sat limply on the narrow bed, too tired to unpack his small bundle of possessions. A moment's inspection confirmed the uselessness of the shaft. A powerful light mounted halfway up masked the sunlight that slipped through a steel grille fifty feet above.

He stretched himself out on the bed and examined the ceiling. A lamp was recessed into its center, but a second, surprisingly, appeared to have been fitted to the cell. This was on the wall, a few feet above his head. He could see the curving bowl of the protective case, some ten inches in diameter.

He was wondering whether this could be a reading light when he realized that there was no switch.

Swinging around, he sat up and examined it, then leapt to his feet in astonishment.

It was a clock! He pressed his hands against the bowl, reading the circle of numerals, noting the inclination of the hands. 4:53, near enough the present time. Not simply a clock, but one in running order! Was this some sort of macabre joke, or a misguided attempt at rehabilitation?

His pounding on the door brought a warder.

"What's all the noise about? The clock? What's the matter with it?" He unlocked the door and barged in, pushing Newman back.

"Nothing. But why is it here? They're against the law."

"Is that what's worrying you." The warder shrugged. "Well, you see, the rules are a little different in here. You lads have got a lot of time ahead of you, it'd be cruel not to let you know where you stood. You know how to work it, do you? Good." He slammed the door and bolted it fast, then smiled at Newman through the cage. "It's a long day here, son, as you'll be finding out. That'll help you get through it."

Gleefully, Newman lay on the bed, his head on a rolled blanket at its foot, staring up at the clock. It appeared to be in perfect order, electrically driven, moving in rigid half-minute jerks. For an hour after the warder left he watched it without a break, then began to tidy up his cell, glancing over his shoulder every few minutes to reassure himself that it was still there, still running efficiently. The irony of the situation, the total inversion of justice, delighted him, even though it would cost him twenty years of his life.

He was still chuckling over the absurdity of it all two weeks later when for the first time he noticed the clock's insanely irritating tick . . .

Build-Up

Noon talk on Millionth Street:

"Sorry, these are the West millions. You want 9775335th East."

"Dollar five a cubic foot? Sell!"

"Take a westbound express to 495th Avenue, cross over to a Redline elevator and go up a thousand levels to Plaza Terminal. Carry on south from there and you'll find it between 568th Avenue and 422nd Street."

"There's a cave-in down at KEN county! Fifty blocks by twenty by thirty levels."

"Listen to this–'PYROS STAGE MASS BREAKOUT! FIRE POLICE CORDON BAY COUNTY!' "

"It's a beautiful counter. Detects up to .005 percent monoxide. Cost me $300."

"Have you seen those new intercity sleepers? Takes only ten minutes to go up three thousand levels!"

"Ninety cents a foot? Buy!"

"You say the idea came to you in a dream?" the voice jabbed out. "You're sure no one else gave it to you?"

"No," M. said flatly. A couple of feet away from him a spot lamp threw a cone of dirty yellow light into his face. He dropped his eyes from the glare and waited as the sergeant paced over to his desk, tapped his fingers on the edge and swung around on him again.

"You talked it over with your friends?"

"Only the first theory," M. explained quietly. "About the possibility of flight."

"But you told me the other theory was more important. Why keep it quiet from them?"

M. hesitated. Outside somewhere a trolley shunted and clanged along the elevated. "I was afraid they wouldn't understand what I meant."

The sergeant laughed sourly. "You mean they would have thought you really were crazy?"

M. shifted uncomfortably on the stool. Its seat was only six inches off the floor and his thighs and lumbar muscles felt like slabs of inflamed rubber. After three hours of crossquestioning, logic had faded and he groped helplessly. "The concept was a little abstract. There weren't any words for it."

The sergeant snorted. "I'm glad to hear you say it." He sat down on the desk, watched M. for a moment and then went over to him.

"Now look," he said confidentially. "It's getting late. Do you still think both theories are reasonable?"

M. looked up. "Aren't they?"

The sergeant turned angrily to the man watching in the shadows by the window.

"We're wasting our time," he snapped. "I'll hand him over to Psycho. You've seen enough, haven't you, Doc?"

The surgeon stared thoughtfully at his hands. He was a tall heavy-shouldered man, built like a wrestler, with thick coarsely-lined features.

He ambled forward, knocking back one of the chairs with his knee.

"There's something I want to check," he said curtly. "Leave me alone with him for half an hour."

The sergeant shrugged. "All right," he said, going over to the door. "But be careful with him."

When the sergeant had gone the surgeon sat down behind the desk and stared vacantly out of the window, listening to the dull hum of air through the huge ninety-foot ventilator shaft which rose out of the street below the station. A few roof-lights were still burning and two hundred yards away a single policeman slowly patrolled the iron catwalk running above the street, his boots ringing across the darkness.

M. sat on the stool, elbows between his knees, trying to edge a little life back into his legs.

Eventually the surgeon glanced down at the charge sheet.

Name .....Franz M.

Age .....20.

Occupation .....Student.
Address .....3599719 West 783rd Str., Level 549-7705-45 KNI (Local).
Charge .....Vagrancy.

"Tell me about this dream," he said slowly, idly flexing a steel rule between his hands as he looked across at M.

"I think you've heard everything, sir," M. said.

"In detail."

M. shifted uneasily. "There wasn't much to it, and what I do remember isn't too clear now."

The surgeon yawned. M. waited and then started to recite what he had already repeated twenty times.

"I was suspended in the air above a flat stretch of open ground, something like the floor of an enormous arena. My arms were out at my sides, and I was looking down, floating—"

"Hold on," the surgeon interrupted. "Are you sure you weren't swimming?"

"No," M. said. "I'm certain I wasn't. All around me there was free space. That was the most important part about it. There were no walls. Nothing but emptiness. That's all I remember."

The surgeon ran his finger along the edge of the rule.

"Go on."

"Well, the dream gave me the idea of building a flying machine. One of my friends helped me construct it."

The surgeon nodded. Almost absently he picked up the charge sheet, crushed it with a single motion of his hand and flicked it into the wastebasket.

"Don't be crazy, Franz!" Gregson remonstrated. They took their places in the chemistry cafeteria queue. "It's against the laws of hydrodynamics. Where would you get your buoyancy?"

"Suppose you had a rigid fabric vane," Franz explained as they shuffled past the hatchways. "Say ten feet across, like one of those composition wall sections, with handgrips on the ventral surface. And then you jump down from the gallery at the Coliseum Stadium. What would happen?"

"You'd make a hole in the floor. Why?"

"No, seriously."

"If it was large enough and held together you'd swoop down like a paper dart."

"Glide," Franz said. "Right." Thirty levels above them one of the intercity expresses roared over, rattling the tables and cutlery in the cafeteria. Franz waited until they reached a table and sat forward, his food forgotten.

"And say you attached a propulsive unit, such as a battery-driven ventilator fan, or one of those rockets they use on the Sleepers. With enough thrust to overcome your weight. What then?"

Gregson shrugged. "If you could control the thing, you'd . . ." He frowned at Franz. "What's the word? You're always using it."

"Fly."

"Basically, Mattheson, the machine is simple," Sanger, the physics lector, commented as they entered the Science Library. "An elementary application of the Venturi Principle. But what's the point of it? A trapeze would serve its purpose equally well, and be far less dangerous. In the first place consider the enormous clearances it would require. I hardly think the traffic authorities will look upon it with any favor."

"I know it wouldn't be practicable here," Franz admitted. "But in a large open area it should be."

"Allowed. I suggest you immediately negotiate with the Arena Garden on Level 347-25," the lector said whimsically. "I'm sure they'll be glad to hear about your scheme."

Franz smiled politely. "That wouldn't be large enough. I was really thinking of an area of totally free space. In three dimensions, as it were."

Sanger looked at Franz curiously. "Free space? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Space is a dollar a cubic foot." He scratched his nose. "Have you begun to construct this machine yet?"

"No," Franz said.

"In that event I should try to forget all about it. Remember, Mattheson, the task of science is to consolidate existing knowledge, to systematize and reinterpret the discoveries of the past, not to chase wild dreams into the future."

He nodded and disappeared among the dusty shelves.

Gregson was waiting on the steps.

"Well?" he asked.

"Let's try it out this afternoon," Franz said. "We'll cut Text 5 Pharmacology. I know those Fleming readings backwards. I'll ask Dr. McGhee for a couple of passes."

They left the library and walked down the narrow, dimly lit

alley which ran behind the huge new Civil Engineering laboratories. Over 75 percent of the student enrollment was in the architectural and engineering faculties, a meager 2 percent in pure sciences. Consequently the physics and chemistry libraries were housed in the oldest quarter of the University, in two virtually condemned galvanized hutments which once contained the now closed Philosophy School.

At the end of the alley they entered the university plaza and started to climb the iron stairway leading to the next level a hundred feet above. Halfway up a white-helmeted FP checked them cursorily with his detector and waved them past.

"What did Sanger think?" Gregson asked as they stepped up into 637th Street and walked across to the Suburban Elevator station.

"He's no use at all," Franz said. "He didn't even begin to understand what I was talking about."

Gregson laughed ruefully. "I don't know whether I do."

Franz took a ticket from the automat and mounted the Down platform. An elevator dropped slowly toward him, its bell jangling.

"Wait until this afternoon," he called back. "You're really going to see something."

The floor manager at the Coliseum initialed the two passes.

"Students, eh? All right." He jerked a thumb at the long package Franz and Gregson were carrying. "What have you got there?"

"It's a device for measuring air velocities," Franz told him.

The manager grunted and released the stile.

Out in the center of the empty arena Franz undid the package and they assembled the model. It had a broad fanlike wing of wire and paper, a narrow strutted fuselage and a high curving tail.

Franz picked it up and launched it into the air. The model glided for twenty feet and then slithered to a stop across the sawdust.

"Seems to be stable," Franz said. "We'll tow it first."

He pulled a reel of twine from his pocket and tied one end to the nose.

As they ran forward the model lifted gracefully into the air and followed them around the stadium, ten feet off the floor.

"Let's try the rockets now," Franz said.

He adjusted the wing and tail settings and fitted three firework display rockets into a wire bracket mounted above the wing.

The stadium was four hundred feet in diameter and had a roof

two hundred and fifty high. They carried the model over to one side and Franz lit the tapers.

There was a burst of flame and the model accelerated off across the floor, two feet in the air, a bright trail of colored smoke spitting out behind it. Its wings rocked gently from side to side. Suddenly the tail burst into flames. The model lifted steeply and looped up toward the roof, stalled just before it hit one of the pilot lights, and dived down into the sawdust.

They ran across to it and stamped out the glowing cinders.

"Franz!" Gregson shouted. "It's incredible! It actually works."

Franz kicked the shattered fuselage.

"Of course it works," he said impatiently, walking away. "But as Sanger said, what's the point of it?"

"The point? It flies! Isn't that enough?"

"No. I want one big enough to hold me."

"Franz, slow down. Be reasonable. Where could you fly it?"

"I don't know," Franz said fiercely. "But there must be somewhere. Somewhere!"

The floor manager and two assistants, carrying fire extinguishers, ran across the stadium to them.

"Did you hide that match?" Franz asked quickly. "They'll lynch us if they think we're pyros."

Three afternoons later Franz took the elevator up 150 levels to 677-98, where the Precinct Estate Office had its bureau.

"There's a big development between 493 and 554 in the next sector," one of the clerks told him. "I don't know whether that's any good to you. Sixty blocks by twenty by fifteen levels."

"Nothing bigger?" Franz queried.

The clerk looked up. "Bigger? No. What are you looking for? A slight case of agoraphobia?"

Franz straightened the maps spread across the counter.

"I wanted to find an area of more or less continuous development. Two or three hundred blocks long."

The clerk shook his head and went back to his ledger. "Didn't you go to Engineering School?" he asked scornfully. "The City won't take it. One hundred blocks is the maximum."

Franz thanked him and left.

A southbound express took him to the development in two hours. He left the car at the detour point and walked the three hundred yards to the end of the level.

The street, a seedy but busy thoroughfare of garment shops and small business premises running through the huge ten-mile-thick BIR Industrial Cube, ended abruptly in a tangle of ripped girders and concrete. A steel rail had been erected along the edge and Franz looked down over it into the cavity, three miles long, a mile wide, and twelve hundred feet deep, which thousands of engineers and demolition workers were tearing out of the matrix of the City.

Eight hundred feet below him unending lines of trucks and rail cars carried away the rubble and debris, and clouds of dust swirled up into the arc lights blazing down from the roof.

As he watched a chain of explosions ripped along the wall on his left and the whole face suddenly slipped and fell slowly toward the floor, revealing a perfect cross-section through fifteen levels of the City.

Franz had seen big developments before, and his own parents had died in the historic QUA County cave-in ten years earlier, when three master pillars had sheared and two hundred levels of the City had abruptly sunk ten thousand feet, squashing half a million people like flies in a concertina, but the enormous gulf of emptiness still made his imagination gape.

All around him, standing and sitting on the jutting terraces of girders, a silent throng stared down.

"They say they're going to build gardens and parks for us," an elderly man at Franz's elbow remarked in a slow patient voice. "I even heard they might be able to get a tree. It'll be the only tree in the whole county."

A man in a frayed sweat shirt spat over the rail. "That's what they always say. At a dollar a foot promises are all they can waste space on."

Below them a woman who had been looking out into the air started to simper nervously. Two bystanders took her by the arms and tried to lead her away. The woman began to thresh about and an FP came over and dragged her away roughly.

"Poor fool," the man in the sweat shirt commented. "She probably lived out there somewhere. They gave her ninety cents a foot when they took it away from her. She doesn't know yet she'll have to pay a dollar ten to get it back. Now they're going to start charging five cents an hour just to sit up here and watch."

* * *

Franz looked out over the railing for a couple of hours and then bought a postcard from one of the vendors and walked back thoughtfully to the elevator.

He called in to see Gregson before returning to the student dormitory.

The Gregsons lived up in the west million on 985th Avenue, in a top three-room flat right under the roof. Franz had known them since his parents' death, but Gregson's mother still regarded him with a mixture of sympathy and suspicion, and as she let him in with her customary smile of welcome he noticed her glancing quickly at the detector mounted in the hall.

Gregson was in his room, happily cutting out frames of paper and pasting them onto a great rickety construction that vaguely resembled Franz's model.

"Hullo, Franz. What was it like?"

Franz shrugged. "Just a development. Worth seeing."

Gregson pointed to his construction. "Do you think we can try it out there?"

"We could do." Franz sat down on the bed, picked up a paper dart lying beside him, and tossed it out of the window. It swam out into the street, lazed down in a wide spiral and vanished into the open mouth of a ventilator shaft.

"When are you going to build another model?" Gregson asked.

"I'm not."

Gregson swung round. "Why? You've proved your theory."

"That's not what I'm after."

"I don't get you, Franz. What are you after?"

"Free space."

"Free?" Gregson repeated.

Franz nodded. "In both senses."

Gregson shook his head sadly and snipped out another paper panel. "Franz, you're crazy."

Franz stood up. "Take this room," he said. "It's twenty feet by fifteen by ten. Extend its dimensions infinitely. What do you find?"

"A development."

"*Infinitely*!"

"Nonfunctional space."

"Well?" Franz asked patiently.

"The concept's absurd."

"Why?"

"Because it couldn't exist."

Franz pounded his forehead in despair. "*Why* couldn't it?"

Gregson gestured with the scissors. "It's self-contradictory. Like the statement 'I am lying.' Just a verbal freak. Interesting theoretically, but it's pointless to press it for meaning." He tossed the scissors onto the table. "And anyway, do you know how much free space would cost?"

Franz went over to the bookshelf and pulled out one of the volumes.

"Let's have a look at your street atlas."

He turned to the index. "This gives a thousand levels. KNI County, one hundred thousand cubic miles, population 30 million."

Gregson nodded.

Franz closed the atlas. "Two hundred fifty counties, including KNI, together form the 493rd Sector, and an association of fifteen hundred adjacent sectors comprise the 298th Local Union."

He broke off and looked at Gregson. "As a matter of interest, ever heard of it?"

Gregson shook his head. "No. How did—"

Franz slapped the atlas onto the table. "Roughly 4×10^{15} cubic Great-Miles." He leaned on the window ledge. "Now tell me: what lies beyond the 298th Local Union?"

"Other Unions, I suppose," Gregson said. "I don't see your difficulty."

"And beyond those?"

"Further ones. Why not?"

"Forever?" Franz pressed.

"Well, as far as forever is."

"The great street directory in the old Treasury Library on 247th Street is the largest in the County," Franz said. "I went down there this morning. It occupies three complete levels. Millions of volumes. But it doesn't extend beyond the 598th Local Union. No one there had any idea what lay further out. Why not?"

"Why should they?" Gregson asked. "Franz, what are you driving at?"

Franz walked across to the door. "Come down to the Bio-History Museum. I'll show you."

The birds perched on humps of rock or waddled about the sandy paths between the water pools.

"'Archaeopteryx,'" Franz read off one of the cage indicators. The bird, lean and mildewed, uttered a painful croak when he fed a handful of beans to it.

"Some of these birds have the remnants of a pectoral girdle," Franz said. "Minute fragments of bone embedded in the tissues around their rib cages."

"Wings?"

"Dr. McGhee thinks so."

They walked out between the lines of cages.

"When does he think they were flying?"

"Before the Foundation," Franz said. "Three hundred billion years ago."

When they got outside the Museum they started down 859th Avenue. Halfway down the street a dense crowd had gathered and people were packed into the windows and balconies above the Elevated, watching a squad of Fire Police break their way into a house.

The bulkheads at either end of the block had been closed and heavy steel traps sealed off the stairways from the levels above and below. The ventilator and exhaust shafts were silent and already the air was stale and soupy.

"Pyros," Gregson murmured. "We should have brought our masks."

"It's only a scare," Franz said. He pointed to the monoxide detectors which were out everywhere, their long snouts sucking at the air. The dial needles stood safely at zero.

"Let's wait in the restaurant opposite."

They edged their way over to the restaurant, sat down in the window, and ordered coffee. This, like everything else on the menu, was cold. All cooking appliances were thermostated to a maximum 95°F., and only in the more expensive restaurants and hotels was it possible to obtain food that was at most tepid.

Below them in the street a lot of shouting went up. The FP's seemed unable to penetrate beyond the ground floor of the house and had started to baton back the crowd. An electric winch was wheeled up and bolted to the girders running below the curb, and half a dozen heavy steel grabs were carried into the house and hooked around the walls.

Gregson laughed. "The owners are going to be surprised when they get home."

Franz was watching the house. It was a narrow shabby dwelling sandwiched between a large wholesale furniture store and a new supermarket. An old sign running across the front had been painted over and evidently the ownership had recently changed.

The present tenants had made a half-hearted attempt to convert the ground floor room into a cheap stand-up diner.

The FP's appeared to be doing their best to wreck everything and pies and smashed crockery were strewn all over the pavement.

"Crowd's pretty ugly," Franz said. "Do you want to move?"

"Hold on."

The noise died away and everyone waited as the winch began to revolve. Slowly the hawsers wound in and tautened, and the front wall of the house bulged and staggered outward in rigid jerky movements.

Suddenly there was a yell from the crowd.

Franz raised his arm.

"Up there! Look!"

On the fourth floor a man and woman had come to the window and were looking down frantically. The man helped the woman out onto the ledge and she crawled out and clung to one of the waste pipes.

The crowd roared, "Pyros! You bloody pyros!"

Bottles were lobbed up at them and bounced down among the police. A wide crack split the house from top to bottom and the floor on which the man was standing dropped and catapulted him backward out of sight.

Then one of the lintels in the first floor snapped and the entire house tipped over and collapsed.

Franz and Gregson stood up involuntarily, almost knocking over the table.

The crowd surged forward through the cordon. When the dust had settled there was nothing left but a heap of masonry and twisted beams. Embedded in this was the battered figure of the man. Almost smothered by the dust he moved slowly, painfully trying to free himself with one hand and the crowd started roaring again as one of the grabs wound in and dragged him down under the rubble.

The manager of the restaurant pushed past Franz and leaned out of the window, his eyes fixed on the dial of a portable detector.

Its needle, like all the others, pointed to zero.

A dozen hoses were playing on the remains of the house and after a couple of minutes the crowd shifted and began to thin out.

The manager switched off the detector and left the window, nodding to Franz.

"Damn pyros. You can relax now, boys."

Franz pointed at the detector.

"Your dial was dead. There wasn't a trace of monoxide anywhere here. How do you know they were pyros?"

"Don't worry, we knew." He smiled obliquely. "We don't want that sort of element in this neighborhood."

Franz shrugged and sat down. "I suppose that's one way of getting rid of them."

The manager eyed Franz unpleasantly. "That's right, boy. This is a good five-dollar neighborhood." He smirked to himself. "Maybe a six-dollar now everybody knows about our safety record."

"Careful, Franz," Gregson warned him when the manager had gone. "He may be right. Pyros do take over small cafés and food bars."

Franz stirred his coffee. "Dr. McGhee estimates that at least 15 percent of the City's population are submerged pyros. He's convinced the number's growing and that eventually the whole City will flame out."

He pushed away his coffee. "How much money have you got?"

"On me?"

"Altogether."

"About thirty dollars."

"I've saved up fifteen," Franz said thoughtfully. "Forty-five dollars; that should be enough for three or four weeks."

"Where?" Gregson asked.

"On a Supersleeper."

"Super—!" Gregson broke off, alarmed. "Three or four weeks! What do you mean?"

"There's only one way to find out," Franz explained calmly. "I can't just sit here thinking. Somewhere there's free space and I'll ride the Sleeper until I find it. Will you lend me your thirty dollars?"

"But Franz—"

"If I don't find anything within a couple of weeks I'll change tracks and come back."

"But the ticket will cost . . ." Gregson searched ". . . billions. Forty-five dollars won't even get you out of the Sector."

"That's just for coffee and sandwiches," Franz said. "The ticket will be free." He looked up from the table. "You know . . ."

Gregson shook his head doubtfully. "Can you try that on the Supersleepers?"

"Why not? If they query it I'll say I'm going back the long way around. Greg, will you?"

"I don't know if I should." Gregson played helplessly with his coffee. "Franz, how can there be free space? How?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," Franz said. "Think of it as my first physics practical."

Passenger distances on the transport system were measured point to point by the application of $a = \sqrt{b^2+c^2+d^2}$. The actual itinerary taken was the passenger's responsibility, and as long as he remained within the system he could choose any route he liked.

Tickets were checked only at the station exits, where necessary surcharges were collected by an inspector. If the passenger was unable to pay the surcharge—ten cents a mile—he was sent back to his original destination.

Franz and Gregson entered the station on 984th Street and went over to the large console where tickets were automatically dispensed.

Franz put in a penny and pressed the destination button marked 984. The machine rumbled, coughed out a ticket, and the change slot gave him back his coin.

"Well, Greg, good-bye," Franz said as they moved toward the barrier. "I'll see you in about two weeks. They're covering me down at the dormitory. Tell Sanger I'm on Fire Duty."

"What if you don't get back, Franz?" Gregson asked. "Suppose they take you off the Sleeper?"

"How can they? I've got my ticket."

"And if you do find free space? Will you come back then?"

"If I can."

Franz patted Gregson on the shoulder reassuringly, waved and disappeared among the commuters.

He took the local Suburban Green to the district junction in the next county. The Greenline train traveled at an interrupted 70 mph and the ride took two and a half hours.

At the Junction he changed to an express elevator which got him up out of the Sector in ninety minutes, at 400 mph.

Another fifty minutes in a Through-sector Special brought him to the Mainline Terminus which served the Union.

There he bought a coffee and gathered his determination together. Supersleepers ran east and west, halting at this and every tenth station. The next arrived in seventy-two hours' time, westbound.

The Mainline Terminus was the largest station Franz had seen, a vast mile-long cavern tiered up through thirty levels. Hundreds of elevator shafts sank into the station and the maze of platforms, escalators, restaurants, hotels, and theaters seemed like an exaggerated replica of the City itself.

Getting his bearings from one of the information booths Franz made his way up an escalator to Tier 15, where the Supersleepers berthed. Running the length of the station were two gigantic steel vacuum tunnels, each two hundred feet in diameter, supported at thirty-foot intervals by massive concrete buttresses.

Franz walked slowly along the platform and stopped by the telescopic gangway that plunged into one of the airlocks.

Two hundred and seventy degrees true, he thought, all the way, gazing up at the curving underbelly of the tunnel. It must come out somewhere. He had forty-five dollars in his pocket, sufficient coffee and sandwich money to last him three weeks, six if he needed it, time anyway to find the City's end.

He passed the next three days nursing coffees in any of the thirty cafeterias in the station, reading discarded newspapers and sleeping in the local Red trains, which ran four-hour journeys around the nearest sector.

When at last the Supersleeper came in he joined the small group of Fire Police and municipal officials waiting by the gangway, and followed them into the train. There were two cars; a sleeper which no one used, and a day coach.

Franz took an inconspicuous corner seat near one of the indicator panels in the day coach, pulled out his notebook and got ready to make his first entry.

1st Day: West 270°. Union 4,350.

"Coming out for a drink?" a Fire Captain across the aisle asked. "We have a ten-minute break here."

"No thanks," Franz said. "I'll hold your seat for you."

Dollar five a cubic foot. Free space, he knew, would bring the price down. There was no need to leave the train or make too many inquiries. All he had to do was borrow a paper and watch the market averages.

2nd Day: West 270°. Union 7,550.

"They're slowly cutting down on these Sleepers," someone told him. "Everyone sits in the day coach. Look at this one. Seats sixty,

and only four people in it. There's no need to move around. People are staying where they are. In a few years there'll be nothing left but the suburban services."

Ninety-seven cents.

At an average of a dollar a cubic foot, Franz calculated idly, it's so far worth about $\$4 \times 10^{27}$.

"Going on to the next stop, are you? Well, good-bye, young fellow."

Few of the passengers stayed on the Sleeper for more than three or four hours. By the end of the second day Franz's back and neck ached from the constant acceleration. He got a little exercise walking up and down the narrow corridor in the deserted sleeping coach, but had to spend most of his time strapped to his seat as the train began its long braking runs into the next station.

3rd Day: West 270°. Federation 657.

"Interesting, but how could you demonstrate it?"

"It's just an odd idea of mine," Franz said, screwing up the sketch and dropping it in the disposal chute. "Hasn't any real application."

"Curious, but it rings a bell somewhere."

Franz sat up. "Do you mean you've seen machines like this? In a newspaper or a book?"

"No, no. In a dream."

Every half-day's run the pilot signed the log, the crew handed over to their opposites on an eastbound sleeper, crossed the platform, and started back for home.

One hundred twenty-five cents.

$\$8 \times 10^{33}$

4th Day: West 270°. Federation 1,255.

"Dollar a cubic foot. You in the estate business?"

"Starting up," Franz said easily. "I'm hoping to open a new office of my own."

He played cards, bought coffee and rolls from the dispenser in the washroom, watched the indicator panel and listened to the talk around him.

"Believe me, a time will come when each union, each sector, almost I might say, each street and avenue will have achieved

complete local independence. Equipped with its own power services, aerators, reservoirs, farm laboratories . . .”

The car bore.

$6 x 10^{75}.

5th Day: West 270°. 17th Greater Federation.

At a kiosk on the station Franz bought a clip of razor blades and glanced at the brochure put out by the local chamber of commerce.

“Twelve thousand levels, 98 cents a foot, unique Elm Drive, fire safety records unequaled . . .”

He went back to the train, shaved and counted the thirty dollars left. He was now ninety-five million Great-Miles from the suburban station on 984th Street and he knew he couldn’t delay his return much longer. Next time he’d save up a couple of thousand.

$7 x 10^{127}.

7th Day: West 270°. 212th Metropolitan Empire.

Franz peered at the indicator.

“Aren’t we stopping here?” he asked a man three seats away. “I wanted to find out the market average.”

“Varies. Anything from fifty cents a—”

“Fifty!” Franz shot back, jumping up. “When’s the next stop? I’ve got to get off!”

“Not here, son.” He put out a restraining hand. “This is Night Town. You in real estate?”

Franz nodded, holding himself back. “I thought . . .”

“Relax.” He came and sat opposite Franz. “It’s just one big slum. Dead areas. In places it goes as low as five cents. There are no services, no power.”

It took them two days to pass through.

“City Authority are starting to seal it off,” the man told him. “Huge blocks. It’s the only thing they can do. What happens to the people inside I hate to think.”

He chewed on a sandwich. “Strange, but there are a lot of these black areas. You don’t hear about them, but they’re growing. Starts in a back street in some ordinary dollar neighborhood; a bottleneck in the sewage disposal system, not enough ash cans,

and before you know it—a million cubic miles have gone back to jungle. They try a relief scheme, pump in a little cyanide, and then—brick it up. Once they do that they're closed for good."

Franz nodded, listening to the dull humming air.

"Eventually there'll be nothing left but these black areas. The City will be one huge cemetery. What a thought?"

10th Day: East 90°. 755th Greater Metropolitan—

"Wait!" Franz leapt out of his seat and stared at the indicator panel.

"What's the matter?" someone opposite asked.

"East!" Franz shouted. He banged the panel sharply with his hand but the lights held. "Has the train changed direction?"

"No, it's eastbound," another of the passengers told him. "Are you on the wrong train?"

"It should be heading west," Franz insisted. "It has been for the last ten days."

"Ten days!" the man exclaimed. "Have you been on this Sleeper for ten days? Where the hell are you going?"

Franz went forward and grabbed the car attendant.

"Which way is this train going? West?"

The attendant shook his head. "East, sir. It's always been going east."

"You're crazy," Franz snapped. "I want to see the pilot's log."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. May I see your ticket, sir?"

"Listen," Franz said weakly, all the accumulated frustration of the last twenty years mounting inside him. "I've been on this . . ."

He stopped and went back to his seat.

The five other passengers watched him carefully.

"Ten days," one of them was still repeating in an awed voice.

Two minutes later someone came and asked Franz for his ticket.

"And of course it was completely in order," the police surgeon commented.

He walked over to M. and swung the spot out of his eyes. "Strangely enough there's no regulation to prevent anyone else doing the same thing. I used to go for free rides myself when I was younger, though I never tried anything like your journey."

He went back to the desk.

"We'll drop the charge," he said. "You're not a vagrant in any

indictable sense, and the Transport authorities can do nothing against you. How this curvature was built into the system they can't explain. Now about yourself. Are you going to continue this search?"

"I want to build a flying machine," M. said carefully. "There must be free space somewhere. I don't know . . . perhaps on the lower levels."

The surgeon stood up. "I'll see the sergeant and get him to hand you over to one of our psychiatrists. He'll be able to help you with that dream."

The surgeon hesitated before opening the door. "Look," he began to explain sympathetically, "you can't get out of time, can you? Subjectively it's a plastic dimension, but whatever you do to yourself you'll never be able to stop that clock"—he pointed to the one on the desk "—or make it run backward. In exactly the same way you can't get out of the City."

"The analogy doesn't hold," M. said. He gestured at the walls around them and the lights in the street outside. "All this was built by us. The question nobody can answer is: what was here before we built it?"

"It's always been here," the surgeon said. "Not these particular bricks and girders, but others before them. You accept that time has no beginning and no end. The City is as old as time and continuous with it."

"The first bricks were laid by someone," M. insisted. "There was the Foundation."

"A myth. Only the scientists believe in that, and even they don't try to make too much of it. Most of them privately admit that the Foundation Stone is nothing more than a superstition. We pay it lip service out of convenience, and because it gives us a sense of tradition. Obviously there can't have been a first brick. If there was, how can you explain who laid it, and even more difficult, where they came from?"

"There must be free space somewhere," M. said doggedly. "The City must have bounds."

"Why?" the surgeon asked. "It can't be floating in the middle of nowhere. Or is that what you're trying to believe?"

M. sank back limply. "No."

The surgeon watched M. silently for a few minutes and paced back to the desk. "This peculiar fixation of yours puzzles me. You're caught between what the psychiatrists call paradoxical

faces. I suppose you haven't misinterpreted something you've heard about the Wall?"

M. looked up. "Which wall?"

The surgeon nodded to himself. "Some advanced opinion maintains that there's a wall around the City, through which it's impossible to penetrate. I don't pretend to understand the theory myself. It's far too abstract and sophisticated. Anyway I suspect they've confused this Wall with the bricked-up black areas you passed through on the Sleeper. I prefer the accepted view that the City stretches out in all directions without limits."

He went over to the door. "Wait here, and I'll see about getting you a probationary release. Don't worry, the psychiatrists will straighten everything out for you."

When the surgeon had left, M. stared emptily at the floor, too exhausted to feel relieved. He stood up and stretched himself, walking unsteadily around the room.

Outside the last pilot lights were going out and the patrolman on the catwalk under the roof was using his torch. A police car roared down one of the avenues crossing the street, its rails screaming. Three lights snapped on along the street and then one by one went off again.

M. wondered why Gregson hadn't come down to the station. Then the calendar on the desk riveted his attention. The date exposed on the fly leaf was the 12th of August. That was the day he had started off on his journey.

Exactly three weeks ago.

Today!

Take a westbound Green to 298th Street, cross over at the intersection and get a Red elevator up to Level 237. Walk down to the station on Route 175, change to a 438 suburban and go down to 795th Street. Take a Blueline to the Plaza, get off at 4th and 275th, turn left at the roundabout and

You're back where you started from. $*HELL* x 10^n.

The Garden of Time

Toward evening, when the great shadow of the Palladian villa filled the terrace, Count Axel left his library and walked down the wide rococo steps among the time flowers. A tall, imperious figure in a black velvet jacket, a gold tiepin glinting below his George V beard, cane held stiffly in a white-gloved hand, he surveyed the exquisite crystal flowers without emotion, listening to the sounds of his wife's harpsichord, as she played a Mozart rondo in the music room, echo and vibrate through the translucent petals.

The garden of the villa extended for some two hundred yards below the terrace, sloping down to a miniature lake spanned by a white bridge, a slender pavilion on the opposite bank. Axel rarely ventured as far as the lake; most of the time flowers grew in a small grove just below the terrace, sheltered by the high wall which encircled the estate. From the terrace he could see over the wall to the plain beyond, a continuous expanse of open ground that rolled in great swells to the horizon, where it rose slightly before finally dipping from sight. The plain surrounded the house on all sides, its drab emptiness emphasizing the seclusion and mellowed magnificence of the villa. Here, in the garden, the air seemed brighter, the sun warmer, while the plain was always dull and remote.

As was his custom before beginning his evening stroll, Count Axel looked out across the plain to the final rise, where the horizon was illuminated like a distant stage by the fading sun. As the Mozart chimed delicately around him, flowing from his wife's graceful hands, he saw that the advance column of an enormous army was moving slowly over the horizon. At first glance, the long ranks

seemed to be progressing in orderly lines, but on closer inspection, it was apparent that, like the obscured detail of a Goya landscape, the army was composed of a vast throng of people, men and women, interspersed with a few soldiers in ragged uniforms, pressing forward in a disorganized tide. Some labored under heavy loads suspended from crude yokes around their necks, others struggled with cumbersome wooden carts, their hands wrenching at the wheel spokes, a few trudged on alone, but all moved on at the same pace, bowed backs illuminated in the fleeting sun.

The advancing throng was almost too far away to be visible, but even as Axel watched, his expression aloof yet observant, it came perceptibly nearer, the vanguard of an immense rabble appearing from below the horizon. At last, as the daylight began to fade, the front edge of the throng reached the crest of the first swell below the horizon, and Axel turned from the terrace and walked down among the time flowers.

The flowers grew to a height of about six feet, their slender stems, like rods of glass, bearing a dozen leaves, the once transparent fronds frosted by the fossilized veins. At the peak of each stem was the time flower, the size of a goblet, the opaque outer petals enclosing the crystal heart. Their diamond brilliance contained a thousand faces, the crystal seeming to drain the air of its light and motion. As the flowers swayed slightly in the evening air, they glowed like flame-tipped spears.

Many of the stems no longer bore flowers, and Axel examined them all carefully, a note of hope now and then crossing his eyes as he searched for any further buds. Finally he selected a large flower on the stem nearest the wall, removed his gloves, and with his strong fingers snapped it off.

As he carried the flower back onto the terrace, it began to sparkle and deliquesce, the light trapped within the core at last released. Gradually the crystal dissolved, only the outer petals remaining intact, and the air around Axel became bright and vivid, charged with slanting rays that flared away into the waning sunlight. Strange shifts momentarily transformed the evening, subtly altering its dimensions of time and space. The darkened portico of the house, its patina of age stripped away, loomed with a curious spectral whiteness as if suddenly remembered in a dream.

Raising his head, Axel peered over the wall again. Only the farthest rim of the horizon was lit by the sun, and the great throng, which before had stretched almost a quarter of the way across the plain, had now receded to the horizon, the entire concourse ab-

ruptly flung back in a reversal of time, and appeared to be stationary.

The flower in Axel's hand had shrunk to the size of a glass thimble, the petals contracting around the vanishing core. A faint sparkle flickered from the center and extinguished itself, and Axel felt the flower melt like an ice-cold bead of dew in his hand.

Dusk closed across the house, sweeping its long shadows over the plain, the horizon merging into the sky. The harpsichord was silent, and the time flowers, no longer reflecting its music, stood motionlessly, like an embalmed forest.

For a few minutes Axel looked down at them counting the flowers which remained, then greeted his wife as she crossed the terrace, her brocade evening dress rustling over the ornamental tiles.

"What a beautiful evening, Axel." She spoke feelingly, as if she were thanking her husband personally for the great ornate shadow across the lawn and the dark brilliant air. Her face was serene and intelligent, her hair, swept back behind her head into a jeweled clasp, touched with silver. She wore her dress low across her breast, revealing a long slender neck and high chin. Axel surveyed her with fond pride. He gave her his arm and together they walked down the steps into the garden.

"One of the longest evenings this summer," Axel confirmed, adding, "I picked a perfect flower, my dear, a jewel. With luck it should last us for several days." A frown touched his brow, and he glanced involuntarily at the wall. "Each time now they seem to come nearer."

His wife smiled at him encouragingly and held his arm more tightly.

Both of them knew that the time garden was dying.

Three evenings later, as he had estimated (though sooner than he secretly hoped), Count Axel plucked another flower from the time garden.

When he first looked over the wall the approaching rabble filled the distant half of the plain, stretching across the horizon in an unbroken mass. He thought he could hear the low, fragmentary sounds of voices carried across the empty air, a sullen murmur punctuated by cries and shouts, but quickly told himself that he had imagined them. Luckily, his wife was at the harpsichord, and the rich contrapuntal patterns of a Bach fugue cascaded lightly across the terrace, masking any other noises.

Between the house and the horizon the plain was divided into

four huge swells, the crest of each one clearly visible in the slanting light. Axel had promised himself that he would never count them, but the number was too small to remain unobserved, particularly when it so obviously marked the progress of the advancing army. By now the forward line had passed the first crest and was well on its way to the second; the main bulk of the throng pressed behind it, hiding the crest and the even vaster concourse spreading from the horizon. Looking to left and right of the central body, Axel could see the apparently limitless extent of the army. What had seemed at first to be the central mass was no more than a minor advance guard, one of many similar arms reaching across the plain. The true center had not yet emerged, but from the rate of extension Axel estimated that when it finally reached the plain it would completely cover every foot of ground.

Axel searched for any large vehicles or machines, but all was amorphous and uncoordinated as ever. There were no banners or flags, no mascots or pike bearers. Heads bowed, the multitude pressed on, unaware of the sky.

Suddenly, just before Axel turned away, the forward edge of the throng appeared on top of the second crest, and swarmed down across the plain. What astounded Axel was the incredible distance it had covered while out of sight. The figures were now twice the size, each one clearly within sight.

Quickly, Axel stepped from the terrace, selected a time flower from the garden and tore it from the stem. As it released its compacted light, he returned to the terrace. When the flower had shrunk to a frozen pearl in his palm he looked out at the plain, with relief saw that the army had retreated to the horizon again.

Then he realized that the horizon was much nearer than previously, and that what he assumed to be the horizon was the first crest.

When he joined the Countess on their evening walk he told her nothing of this, but she could see behind his casual unconcern and did what she could to dispel his worry.

Walking down the steps, she pointed to the time garden. "What a wonderful display, Axel. There are so many flowers still."

Axel nodded, smiling to himself at his wife's attempt to reassure him. Her use of *still* had revealed her own unconscious anticipation of the end. In fact a mere dozen flowers remained of the many hundred that had grown in the garden, and several of these were little more than buds—only three or four were fully grown. As they

walked down to the lake, the Countess's dress rustling across the cool turf, he tried to decide whether to pick the larger flowers first or leave them to the end. Strictly, it would be better to give the smaller flowers additional time to grow and mature, and this advantage would be lost if he retained the larger flowers to the end, as he wished to do, for the final repulse. However, he realized that it mattered little either way; the garden would soon die and the smaller flowers required far longer than he could give them to accumulate their compressed cores of time. During his entire lifetime he had failed to notice a single evidence of growth among the flowers. The larger blooms had always been mature, and none of the buds had shown the slightest development.

Crossing the lake, he and his wife looked down at their reflections in the still black water. Shielded by the pavilion on one side and the high garden wall on the other, the villa in the distance, Axel felt composed and secure, the plain with its encroaching multitude a nightmare from which he had safely awakened. He put one arm around his wife's smooth waist and pressed her affectionately to his shoulder, realizing that he had not embraced her for several years, though their lives together had been timeless and he could remember as if yesterday when he first brought her to live in the villa.

"Axel," his wife asked with sudden seriousness, "before the garden dies . . . may I pick the last flower?"

Understanding her request, he nodded slowly.

One by one over the succeeding evenings, he picked the remaining flowers, leaving a single small bud which grew just below the terrace for his wife. He took the flowers at random, refusing to count or ration them, plucking two or three of the smaller buds at the same time when necessary. The approaching horde had now reached the second and third crests, a vast concourse of laboring humanity that blotted out the horizon. From the terrace Axel could see clearly the shuffling, straining ranks moving down into the hollow toward the final crest, and occasionally the sounds of their voices carried across to him, interspersed with cries of anger and the cracking of whips. The wooden carts lurched from side to side on tilting wheels, their drivers struggling to control them. As far as Axel could tell, not a single member of the throng was aware of its overall direction. Rather, each one blindly moved forward across the ground directly below the heels of the person in front of him, and the only unity was that of the cumulative compass.

Pointlessly, Axel hoped that the true center, far below the horizon, might be moving in a different direction, and that gradually the multitude would alter course, swing away from the villa, and recede from the plain like a turning tide.

On the last evening but one, as he plucked the time flower, the forward edge of the rabble had reached the third crest, and was swarming past it. While he waited for the Countess, Axel looked at the two flowers left, both small buds which would carry them back through only a few minutes of the next evening. The glass stems of the dead flowers reared up stiffly into the air, but the whole garden had lost its bloom.

Axel passed the next morning quietly in his library, sealing the rarer of his manuscripts into the glass-topped cases between the galleries. He walked slowly down the portrait corridor, polishing each of the pictures carefully, then tidied his desk and locked the door behind him. During the afternoon he busied himself in the drawing rooms, unobtrusively assisting his wife as she cleaned their ornaments and straightened the vases and busts.

By evening, as the sun fell behind the house, they were both tired and dusty, and neither had spoken to the other all day. When his wife moved toward the music room, Axel called her back.

"Tonight we'll pick the flowers together, my dear," he said to her evenly. "One for each of us."

He peered only briefly over the wall. They could hear, less than half a mile away, the great dull roar of the ragged army, the ring of iron and lash, pressing on toward the house.

Quickly, Axel plucked his flower, a bud no bigger than a sapphire. As it flickered softly, the tumult outside momentarily receded, then began to gather again.

Shutting his ears to the clamor, Axel looked around at the villa, counting the six columns in the portico, then gazed out across the lawn at the silver disk of the lake, its bowl reflecting the last evening light, and at the shadows moving between the tall trees, lengthening across the crisp turf. He lingered over the bridge where he and his wife had stood arm in arm for so many summers—

"Axel!"

The tumult outside roared into the air, a thousand voices bellowed only twenty or thirty yards away. A stone flew over the wall and landed among the time flowers, snapping several of the brittle stems. The Countess ran toward him as a further barrage rattled

along the wall. Then a heavy tile whirled through the air over their heads and crashed into one of the conservatory windows.

"Axel!" He put his arms around her, straightening his silk cravat when her shoulder brushed it between his lapels.

"Quickly, my dear, the last flower!" He led her down the steps and through the garden. Taking the stem between her jeweled fingers, she snapped it cleanly, then cradled it within her palms.

For a moment the tumult lessened slightly and Axel collected himself. In the vivid light sparkling from the flower he saw his wife's white, frightened eyes. "Hold it as long as you can, my dear, until the last grain dies."

Together they stood on the terrace, the Countess clasping the brilliant dying jewel, the air closing in upon them as the voices outside mounted again. The mob was battering at the heavy iron gates, and the whole villa shook with the impact.

While the final glimmer of light sped away, the Countess raised her palms to the air, as if releasing an invisible bird, then in a final access of courage put her hands in her husband's, her smile as radiant as the vanished flower.

"Oh, Axel!" she cried.

Like a sword, the darkness swooped down across them.

Heaving and swearing, the outer edges of the mob reached the knee-high remains of the wall enclosing the ruined estate, hauled their carts over it and along the dry ruts of what once had been an ornate drive. The ruin, formerly a spacious villa, barely interrupted the ceaseless tide of humanity. The lake was empty, fallen trees rotting at its bottom, an old bridge rusting into it. Weeds flourished among the long grass in the lawn, overrunning the ornamental pathways and carved stone screens.

Much of the terrace had crumbled, and the main section of the mob cut straight across the lawn, by passing the gutted villa, but one or two of the more curious climbed up and searched among the shell. The doors had rotted from their hinges and the floors had fallen through. In the music room an ancient harpsichord had been chopped into firewood, but a few keys still lay among the dust. All the books had been toppled from the shelves in the library, the canvases had been slashed, and gilt frames littered the floor.

As the main body of the mob reached the house, it began to cross the wall at all points along its length. Jostled together, the people stumbled into the dry lake, swarmed over the terrace and

pressed through the house toward the open doors on the north side.

One area alone withstood the endless wave. Just below the terrace, between the wrecked balcony and the wall, was a dense, six-foot-high growth of heavy thorn bushes. The barbed foliage formed an impenetrable mass, and the people passing stepped around it carefully, noticing the belladonna entwined among the branches. Most of them were too busy finding their footing among the upturned flagstones to look up into the center of the thorn bushes, where two stone statues stood side by side, gazing out over the grounds from their protected vantage point. The larger of the figures was the effigy of a bearded man in a high-collared jacket, a cane under one arm. Beside him was a woman in an elaborate full-skirted dress, her slim, serene face unmarked by the wind and rain. In her left hand she lightly clasped a single rose, the delicately formed petals so thin as to be almost transparent.

As the sun died away behind the house a single ray of light glanced through a shattered cornice and struck the rose, reflected off the whorl of petals onto the statues, lighting up the gray stone so that for a fleeting moment it was indistinguishable from the long-vanished flesh of the statues' originals.

End Game

After his trial they gave Constantin a villa, an allowance, and an executioner. The villa was small and high-walled, and had obviously been used for the purpose before. The allowance was adequate to Constantin's needs—he was never permitted to go out and his meals were prepared for him by a police orderly. The executioner was his own. Most of the time they sat on the enclosed veranda overlooking the narrow stone garden, playing chess with a set of large well-worn pieces.

The executioner's name was Malek. Officially he was Constantin's supervisor, and responsible for maintaining the villa's tenuous contact with the outside world, now hidden from sight beyond the steep walls, and for taking the brief telephone call that came promptly at nine o'clock every morning. However, his real role was no secret between them. A powerful, doughy-faced man with an anonymous expression, Malek at first intensely irritated Constantin, who had been used to dealing with more subtle sets of responses. Malek impassively followed him around the villa, never interfering—unless Constantin tried to bribe the orderly for a prohibited newspaper, at whom Malek merely gestured with a slight turn of one of his large hands, face registering no disapproval, but cutting off the attempt as irrevocably as a bulkhead—nor making any suggestions as to how Constantin should spend his time. Like a large bear, he sat motionlessly in the lounge in one of the faded armchairs, watching Constantin.

After a week Constantin tired of reading the old novels in the bottom shelf of the bookcase—somewhere among the gray well-thumbed pages he had hoped to find a message from one of his

predecessors—and invited Malek to play chess. The set of chipped mahogany pieces reposed on one of the empty shelves of the bookcase, the only item of decoration or recreational equipment in the villa. Apart from the books and the chess set the small six-roomed house was completely devoid of ornament. There were no curtains or picture rails, bedside tables or standard lamps, and the only electrical fittings were the lights recessed behind thick opaque bowls into the ceilings. Obviously the chess set and the row of novels had been provided deliberately, each representing one of the alternative pastimes available to the temporary tenants of the villa. Men of a phlegmatic or philosophical temperament stoically resigned to the inevitability of their fate, would choose to read the novels, sinking backward into a self-anesthetized trance as they waded through the turgid prose of those nineteenth-century romances.

On the other hand, men of a more volatile and extrovert disposition would obviously prefer to play chess, unable to resist the opportunity to exercise their Machiavellian talents for positional maneuver to the last. The games of chess would help to maintain their unconscious optimism and, more subtly, sublimate or divert any attempts at escape.

When Constantin suggested that they play chess Malek promptly agreed, and so they spent the next long month as the late summer turned to autumn. Constantin was glad he had chosen chess; the game brought him into immediate personal involvement with Malek, and like all condemned men he had soon developed a powerful emotional transference onto what effectively was the only person left in his life.

At present it was neither negative nor positive, but a relationship of acute dependence—already Malek's notional personality was becoming overlayed by the associations of all the anonymous but nonetheless potent figures of authority whom Constantin could remember since his earliest childhood: his own father, the priest at the seminary he had seen hanged after the revolution, the first senior commissars, the party secretaries at the ministry of foreign affairs, and ultimately, the members of the central committee themselves. Here, where the anonymous faces had crystallized into those of closely observed colleagues and rivals, the process seemed to come full circle, so that he himself was identified with those shadowy personas who had authorized his death and were now represented by Malek.

* * *

Constantin had also, of course, become dominated by another obsession, the need to know: *when?* In the weeks after the trial and sentence he had remained in a curiously euphoric state, too stunned to realize that the dimension of time still existed for him; he had already died *a posteriori*. But gradually the will to live, and his old determination and ruthlessness, which had served him so well for thirty years, reasserted themselves, and he realized that a small hope still remained to him. How long exactly in terms of time he could only guess, but if he could master Malek his survival became a real possibility.

The question remained: when?

Fortunately he could be completely frank with Malek. The first point he established immediately.

"Malek," he asked on the tenth move one morning, when he had completed his development and was relaxing for a moment. "Tell me, do you know—when?"

Malek looked up from the board, his large almost bovine eyes gazing blandly at Constantin. "Yes, Mr. Constantin, I know when." His voice was deep and functional, as expressionless as a weighing machine's.

Constantin sat back reflectively. Outside the glass panes of the veranda the rain fell steadily on the solitary fir tree which had maintained a precarious purchase among the stones under the wall. A few miles to the southwest of the villa were the outskirts of the small port, one of the dismal so-called "coastal resorts" where junior ministry men and party hacks were sent for their biannual holidays. The weather, however, seemed peculiarly inclement, the sun never shining through the morose clouds, and for a moment, before he checked himself, Constantin felt glad to be within the comparative warmth of the villa.

"Let me get this straight," he said to Malek. "You don't merely know in a general sense—for example, after receiving an instruction from so-and-so—but you know *specifically* when?"

"Exactly." Malek moved his queen out of the game. His chess was sound but without flair or a personal style, suggesting that he had improved merely by practice—most of his opponents, Constantin realized with sardonic amusement, would have been players of a high class.

"You know the *day* and the *hour* and the *minute*," Constantin pressed. Malek nodded slowly, most of his attention upon the

game, and Constantin rested his smooth sharp chin in one hand, watching his opponent. "It could be within the next ten seconds, or again, it might not be for ten years?"

"As you say." Malek gestured at the board. "Your move."

Constantin waved this aside. "I know, but don't let's rush it. These games are played on many levels, Malek. People who talk about three-dimensional chess obviously know nothing about the present form." Occasionally he made these openings in the hope of loosening Malek's tongue, but conversation with him seemed to be impossible.

Abruptly he sat forward across the board, his eyes searching Malek's. "You alone know the date, Malek, and as you have said, it might not be for ten years—or twenty. Do you think you can keep such a secret to yourself for so long?"

Malek made no attempt to answer this, and waited for Constantin to resume play. Now and then his eyes inspected the corners of the veranda, or glanced at the stone garden outside. From the kitchen came the occasional sounds of the orderly's boots scraping the floor as he lounged by the telephone on the deal table.

As he scrutinized the board Constantin wondered how he could provoke any response whatever from Malek; the man had shown no reaction at the mention of ten years, although the period was ludicrously far ahead. In all probability their real game would be a short one. The indeterminate date of the execution, which imbued the procedure with such a bizarre flavor, was not intended to add an element of torture or suspense to the condemned's last days, but simply to obscure and confuse the very fact of his exit. If a definite date were known in advance there might be a last-minute rally of sympathy, an attempt to review the sentence and perhaps apportion the blame elsewhere, and the unconscious if not conscious sense of complicity in the condemned man's crimes might well provoke an agonized reappraisal and, after the execution of the sentence, a submerged sense of guilt upon which opportunists and intriguers could play to advantage.

By means of the present system, however, all these dangers and unpleasant side effects were obviated; the accused was removed from his place in the hierarchy when the opposition to him was at its zenith and conveniently handed over to the judiciary, and thence to one of the courts of star chamber whose proceedings

were always held in camera and whose verdicts were never announced.

As far as his former colleagues were concerned, he had disappeared into the endless corridor world of the bureaucratic purgatories, his case permanently on file but never irrevocably closed. Above all, the fact of his guilt was never established and confirmed. As Constantin was aware, he himself had been convicted upon a technicality in the margins of the main indictment against him, a mere procedural device, like a bad twist in the plot of a story, designed solely to bring the investigation to a close. Although he knew the real nature of his crime, Constantin had never been formally notified of his guilt; in fact the court had gone out of its way to avoid preferring any serious charges against him whatever.

This ironic inversion of the classical Kafkaesque situation, by which, instead of admitting his guilt to a nonexistent crime, he was forced to connive in a farce maintaining his innocence of offenses he knew full well he had committed, was preserved in his present situation at the execution villa.

The psychological basis was more obscure but in some way far more threatening, the executioner beckoning his victim toward him with a beguiling smile, reassuring him that all was forgiven. Here he played upon, not those unconscious feelings of anxiety and guilt, but that innate conviction of individual survival, that obsessive preoccupation with personal immortality which is merely a disguised form of the universal fear of the image of one's own death. It was this assurance that all was well, and the absence of any charges of guilt or responsibility, which had made so orderly the queues into the gas chambers.

At present the paradoxical face of this diabolical device was worn by Malek, his lumpy amorphous features and neutral but ambiguous attitude making him seem less a separate personality than the personification of the apparatus of the state. Perhaps the sardonic title of "supervisor" was nearer the truth than it had seemed at first sight, and that Malek's real role was simply to officiate, or at the most serve as moderator, at a trial by ordeal in which Constantin was his own accused, prosecutor, and judge.

However, he reflected as he examined the board, aware of Malek's bulky presence across the pieces, this would imply that they had completely misjudged his own personality, with its buoyancy and almost gallic verve and panache. He, of all people, would be the last to take his own life in an orgy of self-confessed guilt. Not for him the neurotic suicide so loved by the Slav. As long as

there were a way out he would cheerfully shoulder any burden of guilt, tolerant of his own weaknesses, ready to shrug them off with a quip. This insouciance had always been his strongest ally.

His eyes searched the board, roving down the open files of the queens and bishops, as if the answer to the pressing enigma were to be found in these polished corridors.

When? His own estimate was two months. Almost certainly (and he had no fear here that he was rationalizing), it would not be within the next two or three days, nor even the next fortnight. Haste was always unseemly, quite apart from violating the whole purpose of the exercise. Two months would see him safely into limbo, and be sufficiently long for the suspense to break him down and reveal any secret allies, sufficiently brief to fit his particular crime.

Two months? Not as long as he might have wished. As he translated his queen's bishop into play Constantin began to map out his strategy for defeating Malek. The first task, obviously, was to discover when Malek was to carry out the execution, partly to give him peace of mind, but also to allow him to adjust the context of his escape. A physical leap to freedom over the wall would be pointless. Contacts had to be established, pressure brought to bear at various sensitive points in the hierarchy, paving the way for a reconsideration of his case. All this would take time.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sharp movement of Malek's left hand across the board, followed by a gutteral grunt. Surprised by the speed and economy with which Malek had moved his piece, as much as by the fact that he himself was in check, Constantin sat forward and examined his position with more care. He glanced with grudging respect at Malek, who had sat back as impassively as ever, the knight he had deftly taken on the edge of the table in front of him. His eyes watched Constantin with their usual untroubled calm, like those of an immensely patient governess, his great shoulders hidden within the bulky suiting. But for a moment, when he had leaned across the board, Constantin had seen the powerful extension and flection of his shoulder musculature.

Don't look so smug, my dear Malek, Constantin said to himself with a wry smile. At least I know now that you are left-handed. Malek had taken the knight with one hand, hooking the piece between the thick knuckles of his ring and center fingers, and then

substituting his queen with a smart tap, a movement not easily performed in the center of the crowded board. Useful though the confirmation was—Constantin had noticed Malek apparently trying to conceal his left-handedness during their meals and when opening and closing the windows—he found this sinistral aspect of Malek's personality curiously disturbing, an indication that there would be nothing predictable about his opponent, or the ensuing struggle of wits between them. Even Malek's apparent lack of sharp intelligence was belied by the astuteness of his last move.

Constantin was playing white, and had chosen the queen's gambit, assuming that the fluid situation invariably resulting from the opening would be to his advantage and allow him to get on with the more serious task of planning his escape. But Malek had avoided any possible errors, steadily consolidating his position, and had even managed to launch a countergambit, offering a knight-to-bishop exchange which would soon undermine Constantin's position if he accepted.

"A good move, Malek," he commented. "But perhaps a little risky in the long run." Declining the exchange, he lamely blocked the checking queen with an interposed pawn.

Malek stared stolidly at the board, his heavy policeman's face, with its almost square frame from one jaw angle to the other, betraying no sign of thought. His approach, Constantin reflected as he watched his opponent, would be that of the pragmatist, judging always by immediate capability rather than by any concealed intentions. As if confirming this diagnosis, Malek simply returned his queen to her former square, unwilling or unable to exploit the advantage he had gained and satisfied by the captured piece.

Bored by the lower key to which the game had descended, and the prospect of similar games ahead, Constantin castled his king to safety. For some reason, obviously irrational, he assumed that Malek would not kill him in the middle of a game, particularly if he, Malek, were winning. He recognized that this was an unconscious reason for wanting to play chess in the first place, and had no doubt motivated the many others who had also sat with Malek on the veranda, listening to the late summer rain. Suppressing a sudden pang of fear, Constantin examined Malek's powerful hands protruding from his cuffs like two joints of meat. If Malek wanted to, he could probably kill Constantin with his bare hands.

That raised a second question, almost as fascinating as the first.

"Malek, another point." Constantin sat back, searching in his pockets for imaginary cigarettes (none were allowed him). "Forgive my curiosity, but I am an interested party, as it were—" He flashed Malek his brightest smile, a characteristically incisive thrust modulated by ironic self-deprecation which had been so successful with his secretaries and at ministry receptions, but the assay at humor failed to move Malek. "Tell me, do you know . . . how—?" Searching for some euphemism, he repeated: "Do you know how you are going to . . . ?" and then gave up the attempt, cursing Malek to himself for lacking the social grace to rescue him from his awkwardness.

Malek's chin rose slightly, a minimal nod. He showed no signs of being bored or irritated by Constantin's labored catechism, or of having noticed his embarrassment.

"What is it, then?" Constantin pressed, recovering himself. "Pistol, pill or—" with a harsh laugh he pointed through the window "—do you set up a guillotine in the rain? I'd like to know."

Malek looked down at the chessboard, his features more glutinous and doughlike than ever. Flatly, he said, "It has been decided."

Constantin snorted. "What on earth does *that* mean?" he snapped belligerently. "Is it painless?"

For once Malek smiled, a thin sneer of amusement hung fleetingly around his mouth. "Have you ever killed anything, Mr. Constantin?" he asked quietly. "Yourself, personally, I mean."

"Touché," Constantin granted. He laughed deliberately, trying to dispel the tension. "A perfect reply." To himself he said: I mustn't let curiosity get the upper hand, the man was laughing at me.

"Of course," he went on, "death is always painful. I merely wondered whether, in the legal sense of the term, it would be humane. But I can see that you are a professional, Malek, and the question answers itself. A great relief, believe me. There are so many sadists about, perverts and the like—" again he watched carefully to see if the implied sneer provoked Malek "—that one can't be too grateful for a clean curtain fall. It's good to know. I can devote these last days to putting my affairs in order and coming to terms with the world. If only I knew how long there was left I could make my preparations accordingly. One can't be forever saying one's last prayers. You see my point?"

Colorlessly, Malek said, "The Prosecutor-General advised you to make your final arrangements immediately after the trial."

"But what does that mean?" Constantin asked, pitching his voice a calculated octave higher. "I'm a human being, not a bookkeeper's ledger that can be totted up and left to await the auditor's pleasure. I wonder if you realize, Malek, the courage this situation demands from me? It's easy for you to sit there—"

Abruptly Malek stood up, sending a shiver of terror through Constantin. With a glance at the sealed windows, he moved around the chess table toward the lounge. "We will postpone the game," he said. Nodding to Constantin, he went off toward the kitchen where the orderly was preparing lunch.

Constantin listened to his shoes squeaking faintly across the unpolished floor, then irritably cleared the pieces off the board and sat back with the black king in his hand. At least he had provoked Malek into leaving him. Thinking this over, he wondered whether to throw caution to the winds and begin to make life intolerable for Malek—it would be easy to pursue him around the villa, arguing hysterically and badgering him with neurotic questions. Sooner or later Malek would snap back, and might give away something of his intentions. Alternatively, Constantin could try to freeze him out, treating him with contempt as the hired killer he was, refusing to share a room or his meals with him and insisting on his rights as a former member of the central committee. The method might well be successful. Almost certainly Malek was telling the truth when he said he knew the exact day and minute of Constantin's execution. The order would have been given to him and he would have no discretion to advance or delay the date to suit himself. Malek would be reluctant to report Constantin for difficult behavior—the reflection on himself was too obvious and his present post was not one from which he could graciously retire—and in addition not even the Police-President would be able to vary the execution date, now that it had been set, without convening several meetings. There was then the danger of reopening Constantin's case. He was not without his allies, or at least those who were prepared to use him for their own advantage.

But despite these considerations, the whole business of playacting lacked appeal for Constantin. His approach was more serpentine. Besides, if he provoked Malek, uncertainties were introduced, of which there were already far too many.

He noticed the supervisor enter the lounge and sit down quietly in one of the gray armchairs, his face, half-hidden in the shadows,

turned toward Constantin. He seemed indifferent to the normal pressures of boredom and fatigue (luckily for himself, Constantin reflected—an impatient man would have pulled the trigger on the morning of the second day), and content to sit about in the armchairs, watching Constantin as the gray rain fell outside and the damp leaves gathered against the walls. The difficulties of establishing a relationship with Malek—and some sort of relationship was essential before Constantin could begin to think of escape—seemed insuperable, only the games of chess offering an opportunity.

Placing the black king on his own king's square, Constantin called out, "Malek, I'm ready for another game, if you are."

Malek pushed himself out of the chair with his long arms, and then took his place across the board from Constantin. For a moment he scrutinized Constantin with a level glance, as if ascertaining that there would be no further outbursts of temper, and then began to set up the white pieces, apparently prepared to ignore the fact that Constantin had cleared the previous game before its completion.

He opened with a stolid Ruy Lopez, an overanalyzed and uninteresting attack, but a dozen moves later, when they broke off for lunch, he had already forced Constantin to castle on the queen's side and had established a powerful position in the center.

As they took their lunch together at the card table behind the sofa in the lounge, Constantin reflected upon this curious element which had been introduced into his relationship with Malek. While trying to check any tendency to magnify an insignificant triviality into a major symbol, he realized that Malek's proficiency at chess, and his ability to produce powerful combinations out of pedestrian openings, was symptomatic of his concealed power over Constantin.

The drab villa in the thin autumn rain, the faded furniture and unimaginative food they were now mechanically consuming, the whole gray limbo with its slender telephone connection with the outside world were, like his chess, exact extensions of Malek's personality, yet permeated with secret passages and doors. The unexpected thrived in such an ambience. At any moment, as he shaved, the mirror might retract to reveal the flaming muzzle of a machine pistol, or the slightly bitter flavor of the soup they were drinking might be other than that of lentils.

These thoughts preoccupied him as the afternoon light began to fade in the east, the white rectangle of the garden wall illuminated

against this dim backdrop like a huge *tabula rasa.* Excusing himself from the chess game, Constantin feigned a headache and retired to his room upstairs.

The door between his room and Malek's had been removed, and as he lay on the bed he was conscious of the supervisor sitting in his chair with his back to the window. Perhaps it was Malek's presence which prevented him from gaining any real rest, and when he rose several hours later and returned to the veranda he felt tired and possessed by a deepening sense of foreboding.

With an effort he rallied his spirits, and by concentrating his whole attention on the game was able to extract what appeared to be a drawn position. Although the game was adjourned without comment from either player, Malek seemed to concede by his manner that he had lost his advantage, lingering for a perceptible moment over the board when Constantin rose from the table.

The lesson of all this was not lost on Constantin the following day. He was fully aware that the games of chess were not only taxing his energies but providing Malek with a greater hold upon him than he upon Malek. Although the pieces stood where they had left them the previous evening, Constantin did not suggest that they resume play. Malek made no move toward the board, apparently indifferent to whether the game was finished or not. Most of the time he sat next to Constantin by the single radiator in the lounge, occasionally going off to confer with the orderly in the kitchen. As usual the telephone rang briefly each morning, but otherwise there were no callers or visitors to the villa. To all intents it remained suspended in a perfect vacuum.

It was this unvarying nature of their daily routines which Constantin found particularly depressing. Intermittently over the next few days, he played chess with Malek, invariably finding himself in a losing position, but the focus of his attention was elsewhere, upon the enigma cloaked by Malek's square, expressionless face. Around him a thousand invisible clocks raced onward toward their beckoning zeros, a soundless thunder like the drumming of apocalyptic hoof irons.

His mood of foreboding had given way to one of mounting fear, all the more terrifying because, despite Malek's real role, it seemed completely sourceless. He found himself unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes upon any task, left his meals unfinished and fidgeted helplessly by the veranda window. The slightest movement by Malek would make his nerves thrill with

anguish; if the supervisor left his customary seat in the lounge to speak to the orderly Constantin would find himself almost paralyzed by the tension, helplessly counting the seconds until Malek returned. Once, during one of their meals, Malek started to ask him for the salt and Constantin almost choked to death.

The ironic humor of this near-fatality reminded Constantin that almost half of his two-month sentence had elapsed. But his crude attempts to obtain a pencil from the orderly and later, failing this, to mark the letters in a page torn from one of the novels were intercepted by Malek, and he realized that short of defeating the two policemen in single-handed combat he had no means of escaping his ever more imminent fate.

Latterly he had noticed that Malek's movements and general activity around the villa seemed to have quickened. He still sat for long periods in the armchair, observing Constantin, but his formerly impassive presence was graced by gestures and inclinations of the head that seemed to reflect a heightened cerebral activity, as if he were preparing himself for some long-awaited denouement. Even the heavy musculature of his face seemed to have relaxed and grown sleeker, his sharp mobile eyes, like those of an experienced senior inspector of police, roving constantly about the rooms.

Despite his efforts, however, Constantin was unable to galvanize himself into any defensive action. He could see clearly that Malek and he had entered a new phase in their relationship, and that at any moment their outwardly formal and polite behavior would degenerate into a grasping ugly violence, but he was nonetheless immobilized by his own state of terror. The days passed in a blur of uneaten meals and abandoned chess games, their very identity blotting out any sense of time or progression, the watching figure of Malek always before him.

Every morning, when he woke after two or three hours of sleep to find his consciousness still intact, a discovery almost painful in its relief and poignancy, he would be immediately aware of Malek standing in the next room, then waiting discreetly in the hallway as Constantin shaved in the bathroom (also without its door), following him downstairs to breakfast, his careful reflective tread like that of a hangman descending from his gallows.

After breakfast Constantin would challenge Malek to a game of chess, but after a few moves would begin to play wildly, throwing

pieces forward to be decimated by Malek. At times the supervisor would glance curiously at Constantin, as if wondering whether his charge had lost his reason, and then continued to play his careful exact game, invariably winning or drawing. Dimly Constantin perceived that by losing to Malek he had also surrendered to him psychologically, but the games had now become simply a means of passing the unending days.

Six weeks after they had first begun to play chess, Constantin more by luck than skill succeeded in an extravagant pawn gambit and forced Malek to sacrifice both his center and any possibility of castling. Roused from his state of numb anxiety by this temporary victory, Constantin sat forward over the board, irritably waving away the orderly who announced from the door of the lounge that he would serve lunch.

"Tell him to wait, Malek. I mustn't lose my concentration at this point, I've very nearly won the game."

"Well . . ." Malek glanced at his watch, then over his shoulder at the orderly, who, however, had turned on his heel and returned to the kitchen. He started to stand up. "It can wait. He's bringing the—"

"No!" Constantin snapped. "Just give me five minutes, Malek. Damn it, one adjourns on a move, not halfway through it."

"Very well." Malek hesitated, after a further glance at his watch. He climbed to his feet. "I will tell him."

Constantin concentrated on the board, ignoring the supervisor's retreating figure, the scent of victory clearing his mind. But thirty seconds later he sat up with a start, his heart almost seizing inside his chest.

Malek had gone upstairs! Constantin distinctly remembered his saying he would tell the orderly to delay lunch, but instead he had walked straight up to his bedroom. Not only was it extremely unusual for Constantin to be left unobserved when the orderly was otherwise occupied, but the latter had still not brought in their first luncheon course.

Steadying the table, Constantin stood up, his eyes searching the open doorways in front of and behind him. Almost certainly the orderly's announcement of lunch was a signal, and Malek had found a convenient pretext for going upstairs to prepare his execution weapon.

Faced at last by the imminent nemesis he had so long dreaded,

Constantin listened for the sounds of Malek's feet descending the staircase. A profound silence enclosed the villa, broken only by the fall of one of the chess pieces to the tiled floor. Outside the sun shone intermittently in the garden, illuminating the broken flatstones of the ornamental pathway and the bare fifteen-foot-high face of the walls. A few stunted weeds flowered among the rubble, their pale colors blanched by the sunlight, and Constantin was suddenly filled by an overwhelming need to escape into the open air for the few last moments before he died. The east wall, lit by the sun's rays, was marked by a faint series of horizontal grooves, the remnants perhaps of a fire escape ladder, and the slender possibility of using these as handholds made the enclosed garden, a perfect killing ground, preferable to the frantic claustrophobic atmosphere of the villa.

Above him, Malek's measured tread moved across the ceiling to the head of the staircase. He paused there and then began to descend the stairs, his steps chosen with a precise and careful rhythm.

Helplessly, Constantin searched the veranda for something that would serve as a weapon. The French windows leading to the garden were locked, and a slotted pinion outside secured the left-hand member of the pair to the edge of the sill. If this were raised there was a chance that the windows could be forced outward.

Scattering the chess pieces onto the floor with a sweep of his hand, Constantin seized the board and folded it together, then stepped over to the window and drove the heavy wooden box through the bottom pane. The report of the bursting glass echoed like a gunshot through the villa. Kneeling down, he pushed his hand through the aperture and tried to lift the pinion, jerking it up and down in its rusty socket. When it failed to clear the sill he forced his head through the broken window and began to heave against it helplessly with his thin shoulders, the fragments of broken glass falling on his neck.

Behind him a chair was kicked back, and he felt two powerful hands seize his shoulders and pull him away from the window. He struck out hysterically with the chess box, and then was flung headfirst to the tiled floor.

His convalescence from this episode was to last most of the following week. For the first three days he remained in bed, recovering his physical identity, waiting for the sprained muscles of his

hands and shoulders to repair themselves. When he felt sufficiently strong to leave his bed he went down to the lounge and sat at one end of the sofa, his back to the windows and the thin autumn light.

Malek still remained in attendance, and the orderly prepared his meals as before. Neither of them made any comment upon Constantin's outburst of hysteria, or indeed betrayed any signs that it had taken place, but Constantin realized that he had crossed an important Rubicon. His whole relationship with Malek had experienced a profound change. The fear of his own imminent death, and the tantalizing mystery of its precise date which had so obsessed him, had been replaced by a calm acceptance that the judicial processes inaugurated by his trial would take their course and that Malek and the orderly were merely the local agents of this distant apparatus. In a sense his sentence and present tenuous existence at the villa were a microcosm of life itself, with its inherent but unfeared uncertainties, its inevitable quietus to be made on a date never known in advance. Seeing his role at the villa in this light, Constantin no longer felt afraid at the prospect of his own extinction, fully aware that a change in the political wind could win him a free pardon.

In addition, he realized that Malek, far from being his executioner, a purely formal role, was in fact an intermediary between himself and the hierarchy, and in an important sense a potential ally of Constantin's. As he reformed his defense against the indictment preferred against him at the trial—he knew he had been far too willing to accept the *fait accompli* of his own guilt—he calculated the various ways in which Malek would be able to assist him. There was no doubt in his mind that he had misjudged Malek. With his sharp intelligence and commanding presence, the supervisor was very far from being a hatchet-faced killer—this original impression had been the result of some cloudiness in Constantin's perceptions, an unfortunate myopia which had cost him two precious months in his task of arranging a retrial.

Comfortably swathed in his dressing gown, he sat at the card table in the lounge (they had abandoned the veranda with the colder weather, and only a patch of brown paper over the window reminded him of that first circle of purgatory) concentrating on the game of chess. Malek sat opposite him, hands clasped on one knee, his thumbs occasionally circling as he pondered a move. Although no less reticent than he had ever been, his manner seemed to indicate that he understood and confirmed Constantin's reap-

praisal of the situation. He still followed Constantin around the villa, but his attentions were noticeably more perfunctory, as if he realized that Constantin would not try again to escape.

From the start, Constantin was completely frank with Malek.

"I am convinced, Malek, that the Prosecutor-General was misdirected by the Justice Department, and that the whole basis of the trial was a false one. All but one of the indictments were never formally presented, so I had no opportunity to defend myself. You understand that, Malek? The selection of the capital penalty for one count was purely arbitrary."

Malek nodded, moving a piece. "So you have explained, Mr. Constantin. I am afraid I do not have a legalistic turn of mind."

"There's no need for you to," Constantin assured him. "The point is obvious. I hope it may be possible to appeal against the court's decision and ask for a retrial." Constantin gestured with a piece. "I criticize myself for accepting the indictments so readily. In effect I made no attempt to defend myself. If only I had done so I am convinced I should have been found innocent."

Malek murmured noncommittally, and gestured toward the board. Constantin resumed play. Most of the games he consistently lost to Malek, but this no longer troubled him, and if anything, only served to reinforce the bonds between them.

Constantin had decided not to ask the supervisor to inform the Justice Department of his request for a retrial until he had convinced Malek that his case left substantial room for doubt. A premature application would meet with an automatic negative from Malek, whatever his private sympathies. Conversely, once Malek was firmly on his side he would be prepared to risk his reputation with his seniors, and indeed his championing of Constantin's cause would be convincing proof in itself of the latter's innocence.

As Constantin soon found from his one-sided discussions with Malek, arguing over the legal technicalities of the trial, with their infinitely subtle nuances and implications, was an unprofitable method of enlisting Malek's support, and he realized that he would have to do so by sheer impress of personality, by his manner, bearing and general conduct, and above all by his confidence of his innocence in the face of the penalty which might at any moment be imposed upon him. Curiously, this latter pose was not as difficult to maintain as might have been expected; Constantin already felt a surge of conviction in his eventual escape from the villa.

Sooner or later Malek would recognize the authenticity of this inner confidence.

To begin with, however, the supervisor remained his usual phlegmatic self. Constantin talked away at him from morning to evening, every third word affirming the probability of his being found "innocent," but Malek merely nodded with a faint smile and continued to play his errorless chess.

"Malek, I don't want you to think that I challenge the competence of the court to try the charges against me, or that I hold it in disrespect," he said to the supervisor as they played their usual morning board some two weeks after the incident on the veranda. "Far from it. But the court must make its decisions within the context of the evidence presented by the prosecutor. And even then, the greatest imponderable remains—the role of the accused. In my case I was, to all intents, not present at the trial, so my innocence is established by *force majeure*. Don't you agree, Malek?"

Malek's eyes searched the pieces on the board, his lips pursing thinly. "I'm afraid this is above my head, Mr. Constantin. Naturally I accept the authority of the court without question."

"But so do I, Malek. I've made that plain. The real question is simply whether the verdict was justified in the light of the new circumstances I am describing."

Malek shrugged, apparently more interested in the end game before them. "I recommend you to accept the verdict, Mr. Constantin. For your peace of mind, you understand."

Constantin looked away with a gesture of impatience. "I don't agree, Malek. Besides, a great deal is at stake." He glanced up at the windows, which were drumming in the cold autumn wind. The casements were slightly loose, and the air lanced around them. The villa was poorly heated, only the single radiator in the lounge warming the three rooms downstairs. Already Constantin dreaded the winter. His hands and feet were perpetually cold and he could find no means of warming them.

"Malek, is there any chance of obtaining another heater?" he asked. "It's none too warm in here. I have a feeling it's going to be a particularly cold winter."

Malek looked up from the board, his bland gray eyes regarding Constantin with a flicker of curiosity, as if this last remark were one of the few he had heard from Constantin's lips which contained any overtones whatever.

"It is cold," he agreed at last. "I will see if I can borrow a heater. This villa is closed for most of the year."

Constantin pestered him for news of the heater during the following week—partly because the success of his request would have symbolized Malek's first concession to him—but it failed to materialize. After one palpably lame excuse Malek merely ignored his further reminders. Outside, in the garden, the leaves whirled about the stones in a vortex of chilling air, and overhead the low clouds raced seaward. The two men in the lounge hunched over their chessboard by the radiator, hands buried in their pockets between moves.

Perhaps it was this darkening weather which made Constantin impatient of Malek's slowness in seeing the point of his argument, and he made his first suggestions that Malek should transmit a formal request for a retrial to his superiors at the Department of Justice.

"You speak to someone on the telephone every morning, Malek," he pointed out when Malek demurred. "There's no difficulty involved. If you're afraid of compromising yourself—though I would have thought that a small price to pay in view of what is at stake—the orderly can pass on a message."

"It's not feasible, Mr. Constantin." Malek seemed at last to be tiring of the subject. "I suggest that you—"

"Malek!" Constantin stood up and paced around the lounge. "Don't you realize that you must? You're literally my only means of contact. If you refuse I'm absolutely powerless, there's no hope of getting a reprieve!"

"The trial has already taken place, Mr. Constantin," Malek pointed out patiently.

"It was a mistrial! Don't you understand, Malek, I accepted that I was guilty when in fact I was completely innocent!"

Malek looked up from the board, his eyebrows lifting. "*Completely* innocent, Mr. Constantin?"

Constantin snapped his fingers. "Well, virtually innocent. At least in terms of the indictment and trial."

"But that is merely a tactical difference, Mr. Constantin. The Department of Justice is concerned with absolutes."

"Quite right, Malek. I agree entirely." Constantin nodded approvingly at the supervisor and privately noted his quizzical expression, the first time Malek had displayed a taste for irony.

* * *

He was to notice this fresh leitmotiv recurringly during the next days; whenever he raised the subject of his request for a retrial Malek would counter with one of his deceptively naive queries, trying to establish some minor tangential point, almost as if he were leading Constantin on to a fuller admission. At first Constantin assumed that the supervisor was fishing for information about other members of the hierarchy which he wished to use for his own purposes, but the few tidbits he offered were ignored by Malek, and it dawned upon him that Malek was genuinely interested in establishing the sincerity of Constantin's conviction of his own innocence.

He showed no signs, however, of being prepared to contact his superiors at the Department of Justice, and Constantin's impatience continued to mount. He now used their morning and afternoon chess sessions as an opportunity to hold forth at length on the subject of the shortcomings of the judicial system, using his own case as an illustration, and hammered away at the theme of his innocence, even hinting that Malek might find himself held responsible if by any mischance he was not granted a reprieve.

"The position I find myself in is really most extraordinary," he told Malek almost exactly two months after his arrival at the villa. "Everyone else is satisfied with the court's verdict, and yet I alone know that I am innocent. I feel very like someone who is about to be buried alive."

Malek managed a thin smile across the chess pieces. "Of course, Mr. Constantin, it is possible to convince oneself of anything, given a sufficient incentive."

"But Malek, I assure you," Constantin insisted, ignoring the board and concentrating his whole attention upon the supervisor, "this is no death cell repentance. Belleve me, I know. I have examined the entire case from a thousand perspectives, questioned every possible motive. There is no doubt in my mind. I may once have been prepared to accept the possibility of my guilt, but I realize now that I was entirely mistaken—experience encourages us to take too great a responsibility for ourselves, when we fall short of our ideals we become critical of ourselves and ready to assume that we are at fault. How dangerous that can be, Malek, I now know. Only the truly innocent man can really understand the meaning of guilt."

Constantin stopped and sat back, a slight weariness overtaking him in the cold room. Malek was nodding slowly, a thin and not

altogether unsympathetic smile on his lips as if he understood everything Constantin had said. Then he moved a piece, and with a murmured "excuse me" left his seat and went out of the room.

Drawing the lapels of the dressing gown around his chest, Constantin studied the board with a desultory eye. He noticed that Malek's move appeared to be the first bad one he had made in all their games together, but he felt too tired to make the most of his opportunity. His brief speech to Malek, confirming all he believed, now left nothing more to be said. From now on whatever happened was up to Malek.

"Mr. Constantin."

He turned in his chair and, to his surprise, saw the supervisor standing in the doorway, wearing his long gray overcoat.

"Malek—?" For a moment Constantin felt his heart gallop, and then controlled himself. "Malek, you've agreed at last, you're going to take me to the Department?"

Malek shook his head, his eyes staring somberly at Constantin. "Not exactly. I thought we might look at the garden, Mr. Constantin. A breath of fresh air, it will do you good."

"Of course, Malek, it's kind of you." Constantin rose a little unsteadily to his feet, and tightened the cord of his dressing gown. "Pardon my wild hopes." He tried to smile to Malek, but the supervisor stood impassively by the door, hands in his overcoat pockets, his eyes lowered fractionally from Constantin's face.

They went out onto the veranda toward the French windows. Outside the cold morning air whirled in frantic circles around the small stone yard, the leaves spiraling upward into the dark sky. To Constantin there seemed little point in going out into the garden, but Malek stood behind him, one hand on the latch.

"Malek." Something made him turn and face the supervisor. "You do understand what I mean, when I say I am absolutely innocent. I *know* that."

"Of course, Mr. Constantin." The supervisor's face was relaxed and almost genial. "I understand. When you know you are innocent, then you are guilty."

His hand opened the veranda door onto the whirling leaves.

The Watchtowers

The next day, for some reason, there was a sudden increase of activity in the watchtowers. This began during the latter half of the morning, and by noon, when Renthall left the hotel on his way to see Mrs. Osmond, seemed to have reached its peak. People were standing at their windows and balconies along both sides of the street, whispering agitatedly to each other behind the curtains and pointing up into the sky.

Renthall usually tried to ignore the watchtowers, resenting even the smallest concession to the fact of their existence, but at the bottom of the street, where he was hidden in the shadow thrown by one of the houses, he stopped and craned his head up at the nearest tower.

A hundred feet away from him, it hung over the Public Library, its tip poised no more than twenty feet above the roof. The glass-enclosed cabin in the lowest tier appeared to be full of observers, opening and shutting the windows and shifting about what Renthall assumed were huge pieces of optical equipment. He looked around at the further towers, suspended from the sky at three hundred feet intervals in every direction, noticing an occasional flash of light as a window turned and caught the sun.

An elderly man wearing a shabby black suit and wing collar, who usually loitered outside the library, came across the street to Renthall and backed into the shadows beside him.

"They're up to something all right." He cupped his hands over his eyes and peered up anxiously at the watchtowers. "I've never seen them like this as long as I can remember."

Renthall studied his face. However alarmed, he was obviously relieved by the signs of activity. "I shouldn't worry unduly," Renthall told him. "It's a change to see something going on at all."

Before the other could reply he turned on his heel and strode away along the pavement. It took him ten minutes to reach the street in which Mrs. Osmond lived, and he fixed his eyes firmly on the ground, ignoring the few passers-by. Although dominated by the watchtowers—four of them hung in a line exactly down its center—the street was almost deserted. Half the houses were untenanted and falling into what would soon be an irreversible state of disrepair. Usually Renthall assessed each property carefully, trying to decide whether to leave his hotel and take one of them, but the movement in the watchtowers had caused him more anxiety than he was prepared to admit, and the terrace of houses passed unnoticed.

Mrs. Osmond's house stood halfway down the street, its gate swinging loosely on its rusty hinges. Renthall hesitated under the plane tree growing by the edge of the pavement, and then crossed the narrow garden and quickly let himself through the door.

Mrs. Osmond invariably spent the afternoon sitting out on the veranda in the sun, gazing at the weeds in the back garden, but today she had retreated to a corner of the sitting room. She was sorting a suitcase full of old papers when Renthall came in.

Renthall made no attempt to embrace her and wandered over to the window. Mrs. Osmond had half-drawn the curtains and he pulled them back. There was a watchtower ninety feet away, almost directly ahead, hanging over the parallel terrace of empty houses. The lines of towers receded diagonally from left to right toward the horizon, partly obscured by the bright haze.

"Do you think you should have come today?" Mrs. Osmond asked, shifting her plump hips nervously in the chair.

"Why not?" Renthall said, scanning the towers, hands loosely in his pockets.

"But if they're going to keep a closer watch on us now they'll notice you coming here."

"I shouldn't believe all the rumors you hear," Renthall told her calmly.

"What do you think it means then?"

"I've absolutely no idea. Their movements may be as random and meaningless as our own." Renthall shrugged. "Perhaps they

are going to keep a closer watch on us. What does it matter if all they do is stare?"

"Then you mustn't come here any more!" Mrs. Osmond protested.

"Why? I hardly believe they can see through walls."

"They're not that stupid," Mrs. Osmond said irritably. "They'll soon put two and two together, if they haven't already."

Renthall took his eyes off the tower and looked down at Mrs. Osmond patiently. "My dear, this house isn't tapped. For all they know we may be darning our prayer rugs or discussing the endocrine system of the tapeworm."

"Not you, Charles," Mrs. Osmond said with a short laugh. "Not if they know you." Evidently pleased by this sally, she relaxed and took a cigarette out of the box on the table.

"Perhaps they don't know me," Renthall said dryly. "In fact, I'm quite sure they don't. If they did I can't believe I should still be here."

He noticed himself stooping, a reliable sign that he was worrying, and went over to the sofa.

"Is the school going to start tomorrow?" Mrs. Osmond asked when he had disposed his long thin legs around the table.

"It should do," Renthall said. "Hanson went down to the Town Hall this morning, but as usual they had little idea of what was going on."

He opened his jacket and pulled out of the inner pocket an old but neatly folded copy of a woman's magazine.

"Charles!" Mrs. Osmond exclaimed. "Where did you get this?"

She took it from Renthall and started leafing through the soiled pages.

"One of my sources," Renthall said. From the sofa he could still see the watchtower over the houses opposite. "Georgina Simons. She has a library of them."

He rose, went over to the window and drew the curtains across.

"Charles, don't. I can't see."

"Read it later," Renthall told her. He lay back on the sofa again. "Are you coming to the recital this afternoon?"

"Hasn't it been canceled?" Mrs. Osmond asked, putting the magazine down reluctantly.

"No, of course not."

"Charles, I don't think I want to go." Mrs. Osmond frowned. "What records is Hanson going to play?"

"Some Tchaikovsky. And Grieg." He tried to make it sound interesting. "You must come. We can't just sit about subsiding into this state of boredom and uselessness."

"I know," Mrs. Osmond said fractiously. "But I don't feel like it. Not today. All those records bore me. I've heard them so often."

"They bore me too. But at least it's something to do." He put his arm around Mrs. Osmond's shoulders and began to play with the darker unbleached hair behind her ears, tapping the large nickel earrings she wore and listening to them tinkle.

When he put his hand onto her knee Mrs. Osmond stood up and prowled aimlessly around the room, straightening her skirt.

"Julia, what is the matter with you?" Renthall asked irritably. "Have you got a headache?"

Mrs. Osmond was by the window, gazing up at the watchtowers. "Do you think they're going to come down?"

"Of course not!" Renthall snapped. "Where on earth did you get that idea?"

Suddenly he felt unbearably exasperated. The confined dimensions of the dusty sitting room seemed to suffocate reason. He stood up and buttoned his jacket. "I'll see you this afternoon at the Institute, Julia. The recital starts at three."

Mrs. Osmond nodded vaguely, unfastened the French windows and ambled forward across the veranda into full view of the watchtowers, the glassy expression on her face like a supplicant nun's.

As Renthall had expected, the school did not open the next day. When they tired of hanging around the hotel after breakfast he and Hanson went down to the Town Hall. The building was almost empty and the only official they were able to find was unhelpful.

"We have no instructions at present," he told them, "but as soon as the term starts you will be notified. Though from what I hear the postponement is to be indefinite."

"Is that the committee's decision?" Renthall asked. "Or just another of the town clerk's brilliant extemporizings?"

"The school committee is no longer meeting," the official said. "I'm afraid the town clerk isn't here today." Before Renthall could speak he added, "You will, of course, continue to draw your salaries. Perhaps you would care to call in at the treasurer's department on your way out?"

* * *

Renthall and Hanson left and looked about for a café. Finally they found one that was open and sat under the awning, staring vacantly at the watchtowers hanging over the rooftops around them. Their activity had lessened considerably since the previous day. The nearest tower was only fifty feet away, immediately above a disused office building on the other side of the street. The windows in the observation tier remained shut, but every few minutes Renthall noticed a shadow moving behind the panes.

Eventually a waitress came out to them, and Renthall ordered coffee.

"I think I shall have to give a few lessons," Hanson remarked. "All this leisure is becoming too much of a good thing."

"It's an idea," Renthall agreed. "If you can find anyone interested. I'm sorry the recital yesterday was such a flop."

Hanson shrugged. "I'll see if I can get hold of some new records. By the way, I thought Julia looked very handsome yesterday."

Renthall acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow of his head. "I'd like to take her out more often."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Why on earth not?"

"Well, just at present, you know." Hanson inclined a finger at the watchtowers.

"I don't see that it matters particularly," Renthall said. He disliked personal confidences and was about to change the subject when Hanson leaned forward across the table.

"Perhaps not, but I gather there was some mention of you at the last Council meeting. One or two members were rather critical of your little *ménage à deux*." He smiled thinly at Renthall, who was frowning into his coffee. "Sheer spite, no doubt, but your behavior is a little idiosyncratic."

Controlling himself, Renthall pushed away the coffee cup. "Do you mind telling me what damned business it is of theirs?"

Hanson laughed. "None, really, except that they are the executive authority, and I suppose we should take our cue from them." Renthall snorted at this, and Hanson went on, "as a matter of interest, you may receive an official directive over the next few days."

"A *what?*" Renthall exploded. He sat back, shaking his head incredulously. "Are you serious?" When Hanson nodded he began to laugh harshly. "Those idiots! I don't know why we put up with them. Sometimes their stupidity positively staggers me."

"Steady on," Hanson demurred. "I do see their point. Bearing in mind the big commotion in the watchtowers yesterday the Council probably feel we shouldn't do anything that might antagonize them. You never know, they may even be acting on official instructions."

Renthall glanced contemptuously at Hanson. "Do you *really* believe that nonsense about the Council being in touch with the watchtowers? It may give a few simpletons a sense of security, but for heaven's sake don't try it on me. My patience is just about exhausted." He watched Hanson carefully, wondering which of the Council members had provided him with his information. The lack of subtlety depressed him painfully. "However, thanks for warning me. I suppose it means there'll be an overpowering air of embarrassment when Julia and I go to the cinema tomorrow."

Hanson shook his head. "No. Actually the performance has been canceled. In view of yesterday's disturbances."

"But why—?" Renthall slumped back. "Haven't they got the intelligence to realize that it's just at this sort of time that we need every social get-together we can organize? People are hiding away in their back bedrooms like a lot of frightened ghosts. We've got to bring them out, give them something that will pull them together."

He gazed up thoughtfully at the watchtower across the street. Shadows circulated behind the frosted panes of the observation windows. "Some sort of gala, say, or a garden fete. Who could organize it, though?"

Hanson pushed back his chair. "Careful, Charles. I don't know whether the Council would altogether approve."

"I'm sure they wouldn't." After Hanson had left he remained at the table and returned to his solitary contemplation of the watchtowers.

For half an hour Renthall sat at the table, playing absently with his empty coffee cup and watching the few people who passed along the street. No one else visited the café, and he was glad to be able to pursue his thoughts alone, in this miniature urban vacuum, with nothing to intervene between himself and the lines of watchtowers stretching into the haze beyond the rooftops.

With the exception of Mrs. Osmond, Renthall had virtually no close friends in whom to confide. With his sharp intelligence and impatience with trivialities, Renthall was one of those men with whom others find it difficult to relax. A certain innate condescen-

sion, a reserved but unmistakable attitude of superiority held them away from him, though few people regarded him as anything but a shabby pedagogue. At the hotel he kept to himself. There was little social contact between the guests; in the lounge and dining room they sat immersed in their old newspapers and magazines, occasionally murmuring quietly to each other. The only thing which could mobilize the simultaneous communion of the guests was some untoward activity in the watchtowers, and at such times Renthall always maintained an absolute silence.

Just before he stood up a square thickset figure approached down the street. Renthall recognized the man and was about to turn his seat to avoid having to greet him, but something about his expression made him lean forward. Fleshy and dark-jowled, the man walked with an easy rolling gait, his double-breasted check overcoat open to reveal a well-tended midriff. This was Victor Boardman, owner of the local flea-pit cinema, sometime bootlegger and procurer at large.

Renthall had never spoken to him, but he was aware that Boardman shared with him the distinction of bearing the stigma of the Council's disapproval. Hanson claimed that the Council had successfully stamped out Boardman's illicit activities, but the latter's permanent expression of smug contempt for the rest of the world seemed to belie this.

As he passed they exchanged glances, and Boardman's face broke momentarily into a knowing smirk. It was obviously directed at Renthall, and implied a prejudgment of some event about which Renthall as yet knew nothing, presumably his coming collision with the Council. Obviously Boardman expected him to capitualate to the Council without a murmur.

Annoyed, Renthall turned his back on Boardman, then watched him over his shoulder as he padded off down the street, his easy relaxed shoulders swaying from side to side.

The following day the activity in the watchtowers had subsided entirely. The blue haze from which they extended was brighter than it had been for several months, and the air in the streets seemed to sparkle with the light reflected off the observation windows. There was no sign of movement among them, and the sky had a rigid uniform appearance that indicated an indefinite lull.

For some reason, however, Renthall found himself more nervous than he had been for some time. The school had not yet

opened, but he felt strangely reluctant to visit Mrs. Osmond and remained indoors all morning, shunning the streets as if avoiding some invisible shadow of guilt.

The long lines of watchtowers stretching endlessly from one horizon to the other reminded him that he could soon expect to receive the Council's "directive"—Hanson would not have mentioned it by accident—and it was always during the lulls that the Council was most active in consolidating its position, issuing a stream of petty regulations and amendments.

Renthall would have liked to challenge the Council's authority on some formal matter unconnected with himself—the validity, for example, of one of the bylaws prohibiting public assemblies in the street—but the prospect of all the intrigue involved in canvasing the necessary support bored him utterly. Although none of them individually would challenge the Council, most people would have been glad to see it toppled, but there seemed to be no likely focus for their opposition. Apart from the fear that the Council was in touch with the watchtowers, no one would stand up for Renthall's right to carry on his affair with Mrs. Osmond.

Curiously enough, she seemed unaware of these crosscurrents when he went to see her that afternoon. She had cleaned the house and was in high humor, the windows wide open to the brilliant air.

"Charles, what's the matter with you?" she chided him when he slumped inertly into a chair. "You look like a broody hen."

"I felt rather tired this morning. It's probably the hot weather." When she sat down on the arm of the chair he put one hand listlessly on her hip, trying to summon together his energies. "Recently I've been developing an *idée fixe* about the Council, I must be going through a crisis of confidence. I need some method of reasserting myself."

Mrs. Osmond stroked his hair soothingly with her cool fingers, her eyes watching him silkily. "What *you* need, Charles, is a little mother love. You're so isolated at that hotel, among all those old people. Why don't you rent one of the houses in this road? I'd be able to look after you then."

Renthall glanced up at her sardonically. "Perhaps I could move in here?" he asked, but she tossed her head back with a derisive snort and went over to the window.

* * *

She gazed up at the nearest watchtower a hundred feet away, its windows closed and silent, the great shaft disappearing into the haze. "What do you suppose they're thinking about?"

Renthall snapped his fingers offhandedly. "They're probably not thinking about anything. Sometimes I wonder whether there's anyone there at all. The movements we see may be just optical illusions. Although the windows appear to open no one's ever actually *seen* any of them. For all we know this place may well be nothing more than an abandoned zoo."

Mrs. Osmond regarded him with rueful amusement. "Charles, you do pick some extraordinary metaphors. I often doubt if you're like the rest of us, I wouldn't dare say the sort of things you do in case—" She broke off, glancing up involuntarily at the watchtowers hanging from the sky.

Idly, Renthall asked, "In case what?"

"Well, in case—" Irritably, she said, "Don't be absurd, Charles, doesn't the thought of those towers hanging down over us frighten you at all?"

Renthall turned his head slowly and stared up at the watchtowers. Once he had tried to count them, but there seemed little point. "Yes, they frighten me," he said noncommittally. "In the same way that Hanson and the old people at the hotel and everyone else here does. But not in the sense that the boys at school are frightened of *me*."

Mrs. Osmond nodded, misinterpreting this last remark. "Children are very perceptive, Charles. They probably know you're not interested in them. Unfortunately they're not old enough yet to understand what the watchtowers mean."

She gave a slight shiver, and pulled her cardigan around her shoulders. "You know, on the days when they're busy behind their windows I can hardly move around, it's terrible. I feel so listless, all I want to do is sit and stare at the wall. Perhaps I'm more sensitive to their, er, radiations than most people."

Renthall smiled. "You must be. Don't let them depress you. Next time why don't you put on a paper hat and do a pirouette?"

"What? Oh, Charles, stop being cynical."

"I'm not. Seriously, Julia, do you think it would make any difference?"

Mrs. Osmond shook her head sadly. "You try, Charles, and then tell me. Where are you going?"

Renthall paused at the window. "Back to the hotel to rest. By the way, do you know Victor Boardman?"

"I used to, once. Why, what are you getting up to with him?"

"Does he own the garden next to the cinema car park?"

"I think so." Mrs. Osmond laughed. "Are you going to take up gardening?"

"In a sense." With a wave, Renthall left.

He began with Dr. Clifton, whose room was directly below his own. Clifton's duties at his surgery occupied him for little more than an hour a day—there were virtually no deaths or illnesses—but he still retained sufficient initiative to cultivate a hobby. He had turned one end of his room into a small aviary, containing a dozen canaries, and spent much of his time trying to teach them tricks. His acerbic, matter-of-fact manner always tired Renthall, but he respected the doctor for not sliding into total lethargy like everyone else.

Clifton considered his suggestion carefully. "I agree with you, something of the sort is probably necessary. A good idea, Renthall. Properly conducted, it might well provide just the lift people need."

"The main question, Doctor, is one of organization. The only suitable place is the Town Hall."

Clifton nodded. "Yes, there's your problem. I'm afraid I've no influence with the Council, if that's what you're suggesting. I don't know what you can do. You'll have to get their permission of course, and in the past they haven't shown themselves to be very radical or original. They prefer to maintain the status quo."

Renthall nodded, then added casually, "They're only interested in maintaining their own power. At times I become rather tired of our Council."

Clifton glanced at him and then turned back to his cages. "You're preaching revolution, Renthall," he said quietly, a forefinger stroking the beak of one of the canaries. Pointedly, he refrained from seeing Renthall to the door.

Writing the doctor off, Renthall rested for a few minutes in his room, pacing up and down the strip of faded carpet, then went down to the basement to see the manager, Mulvaney.

"I'm only making some initial inquiries. As yet I haven't applied for permission, but Dr. Clifton thinks the idea is excellent, and there's no doubt we'll get it. Are you up to looking after the catering?"

Mulvaney's sallow face watched Renthall skeptically. "Of course I'm up to it, but how serious are you?" He leaned against his roll-top desk. "You think you'll get permission? You're wrong, Mr. Renthall, the Council wouldn't stand for the idea. They even closed the cinema, so they're not likely to allow a public party. Before you know what, you'd have people dancing."

"I hardly think so, but does the idea appall you so much?"

Mulvaney shook his head, already bored with Renthall. "You get a permit, Mr. Renthall, and then we can talk seriously."

Tightening his voice, Renthall asked, "Is it necessary to get the Council's permission? Couldn't we go ahead without?"

Without looking up, Mulvaney sat down at his desk. "Keep trying, Mr. Renthall, it's a great idea."

During the next few days Renthall pursued his inquiries, in all approaching some half dozen people. In general he met with the same negative response, but as he intended he soon noticed a subtle but nonetheless distinct quickening of interest around him. The usual fragmentary murmur of conversation would fade away abruptly as he passed the tables in the dining room, and the service was fractionally more prompt. Hanson no longer took coffee with him in the mornings, and once Renthall saw him in guarded conversation with the town clerk's secretary, a young man called Barnes. This, he assumed, was Hanson's contact.

In the meantime the activity in the watchtowers remained at zero. The endless lines of towers hung down from the bright hazy sky, the observation windows closed, and the people in the streets below sank slowly into their usual mindless torpor, wandering from hotel to library to café. Determined on his course of action, Renthall felt his confidence return.

Allowing an interval of a week to elapse, he finally called upon Victor Boardman.

The bootlegger received him in his office above the cinema, greeting him with a wry smile.

"Well, Mr. Renthall, I hear you're going into the entertainment business. Drunken gambols and all that. I'm surprised at you."

"A fete," Renthall corrected. The seat Boardman had offered him faced toward the window—deliberately, he guessed—and provided an uninterrupted view of the watchtower over the roof of the adjacent furniture store. Only forty feet away, it blocked off half the sky. The metal plates which formed its rectangular sides were annealed together by some process Renthall was unable to

identify, neither welded nor riveted, almost as if the entire tower had been cast *in situ*. He moved to another chair so that his back was to the window.

"The school is still closed, so I thought I'd try to make myself useful. That's what I'm paid for. I've come to you because you've had a good deal of experience."

"Yes, I've had a lot of experience, Mr. Renthall. Very varied. As one of the Council's employees, I take it you have its permission?"

Renthall evaded this. "The Council is naturally a conservative body, Mr. Boardman. Obviously at this stage I'm acting on my own initiative. I shall consult the Council at the appropriate moment later, when I can offer them a practicable proposition."

Boardman nodded sagely. "That's sensible, Mr. Renthall. Now what exactly do you want me to do? Organize the whole thing for you?"

"No, but naturally I'd be very grateful if you would. For the present I merely want to ask permission to hold the fete on a piece of your property."

"The cinema? I'm not going to take all those seats out, if that's what you're after."

"Not the cinema. Though we could use the bar and cloakrooms," Renthall extemporized, hoping the scheme did not sound too grandiose. "Is the old beer garden next to the car park your property?"

For a moment Boardman was silent. He watched Renthall shrewdly, picking his nails with his cigar cutter, a faint suggestion of admiration in his eyes. "So you want to hold the fete in the open, Mr. Renthall? Is that it?"

Renthall nodded, smiling back at Boardman. "I'm glad to see you living up to your reputation for getting quickly to the point. Are you prepared to lend the garden? Of course, you'll have a big share of the profits. In fact, if it's any inducement, you can have all the profits."

Boardman put out his cigar. "Mr. Renthall, you're obviously a man of many parts. I underestimated you. I thought you merely had a grievance against the Council. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Mr. Boardman, will you lend the garden?" Renthall repeated.

There was an amused but thoughtful smile on Boardman's lips as he regarded the watchtower framed by the window. "There are two watchtowers directly over the beer garden, Mr. Renthall."

"I'm fully aware of that. It's obviously the chief attraction of the property. Now, can you give me an answer?"

The two men regarded each other silently, and then Boardman gave an almost imperceptible nod. Renthall realized that his scheme was being taken seriously by Boardman. He was obviously using Renthall for his own purposes, for once having flaunted the Council's authority he would be able to resume all his other, more profitable activities. Of course, the fete would never be held, but in answer to Boardman's questions he outlined a provisional program. They fixed the date of the fete at a month ahead, and arranged to meet again at the beginning of the next week.

Two days later, as he expected, the first emissaries of the Council came to see him.

He was waiting at his usual table on the café terrace, the silent watchtowers suspended from the air around him, when he saw Hanson hurrying along the street.

"Do join me." Renthall drew a chair back. "What's the news?"

"Nothing—though you should know, Charles." He gave Renthall a dry smile, as if admonishing a favorite pupil, then gazed about the empty terrace for the waitress. "Service is appallingly bad here. Tell me, Charles, what's all this talk about you and Victor Boardman, I could hardly believe my ears."

Renthall leaned back in his chair. "I don't know, you tell me."

"We—er, I was wondering if Boardman was taking advantage of some perfectly innocent remark he might have overheard. This business of a garden party you're supposed to be organizing with him—it sounds absolutely fantastic."

"Why?"

"But Charles." Hanson leaned forward to examine Renthall carefully, trying to make sense of his unruffled pose. "Surely you aren't serious?"

"But why not? If I want to, why shouldn't I organize a garden party—fete, to be more accurate?"

"It doesn't make an iota of difference," Hanson said tartly. "Apart from any other reason"—here he glanced skyward—"the fact remains that you are an employee of the Council."

Hands in his trouser pockets, Renthall tipped back his chair. "But that gives them no mandate to interfere in my private life. You seem to be forgetting, but the terms of my contract specifically exclude any such authority. I am not on the established grade,

as my salary differential shows. If the Council disapprove, the only sanction they can apply is to give me the sack."

"They will, Charles, don't sound so smug."

Renthall let this pass. "Fair enough, if they can find anyone else to take on the job. Frankly I doubt it. They've managed to swallow their moral scruples in the past."

"Charles, this is different. As long as you're discreet no one gives a hoot about your private affairs, but this garden party is a public matter, and well within the Council's province."

Renthall yawned. "I'm rather bored with the subject of the Council. Technically, the fete will be a private affair, by invitation only. They've no statutory right to be consulted at all. If a breach of the peace takes place the Chief Constable can take action. Why all the fuss, anyway? I'm merely trying to provide a little harmless festivity."

Hanson shook his head. "Charles, you're deliberately evading the point. According to Boardman this fete will take place out of doors—directly under two of the watchtowers. Have you realized what the repercussions would be?"

"Yes." Renthall formed the word carefully in his mouth. "Nothing. Absolutely nothing."

"Charles!" Hanson lowered his head at this apparent blasphemy, glanced up at the watchtowers over the street as if expecting instant retribution to descend from them. "Look, my dear fellow, take my advice. Drop the whole idea. You don't stand a chance anyway of ever holding this mad jape, so why deliberately court trouble with the Council? Who knows what their real power would be if they were provoked?"

Renthall rose from his seat. He looked up at the watchtower hanging from the air on the other side of the road, controlling himself when a slight pang of anxiety stirred his heart. "I'll send you an invitation," he called back, then walked away to his hotel.

The next afternoon the town clerk's secretary called upon him in his room. During the interval, no doubt intended as a salutary pause for reflection, Renthall had remained at the hotel, reading quietly in his armchair. He paid one brief visit to Mrs. Osmond, but she seemed nervous and irritable, evidently aware of the imminent clash. The strain of maintaining an appearance of unconcern had begun to tire Renthall, and he avoided the open streets whenever possible. Fortunately the school had still not opened.

Barnes, the dapper dark-haired secretary, came straight to the point. Refusing Renthall's offer of an armchair, he held a sheet of pink duplicated paper in his hand, apparently the minutes of the last Council meeting.

"Mr. Renthall, the Council has been informed of your intention to hold a garden fete in some three weeks' time. I have been asked by the chairman of the Watch Committee to express the committee's grave misgivings, and to request you accordingly to terminate all arrangements and cancel the fete immediately, pending an inquiry."

"I'm sorry, Barnes, but I'm afraid our preparations are too far advanced. We're about to issue invitations."

Barnes hesitated, casting his eye around Renthall's faded room and few shabby books as if hoping to find some ulterior motive for Renthall's behavior.

"Mr. Renthall, perhaps I could explain that this request is tantamount to a direct order from the Council."

"So I'm aware." Renthall sat down on his windowsill and gazed out at the watchtowers. "Hanson and I went over all this, as you probably know. The Council have no more right to order me to cancel this fete than they have to stop me walking down the street."

Barnes smiled his thin bureaucratic smirk. "Mr. Renthall, this is not a matter of the Council's statutory jurisdiction. This order is issued by virtue of the authority vested in it by its superiors. If you prefer, you can assume that the Council is merely passing on a direct instruction it has received." He inclined his head toward the watchtowers.

Renthall stood up. "Now we're at last getting down to business." He gathered himself together. "Perhaps you could tell the Council to convey to its superiors, as you call them, my polite but firm refusal. Do you get *my* point?"

Barnes retreated fractionally. He summed Renthall up carefully, then nodded. "I think so, Mr. Renthall. No doubt you understand what you're doing."

After he had gone Renthall drew the blinds over the window and lay down on his bed. For the next hour he made an effort to relax.

His final showdown with the Council was to take place the following day. Summoned to an emergency meeting of the Watch Committee, he accepted the invitation with alacrity, certain that with every member of the committee present the main council

chamber would be used. This would give him a perfect opportunity to humiliate the Council by publicly calling their bluff.

Both Hanson and Mrs. Osmond assumed that he would capitulate without argument.

"Well, Charles, you brought it upon yourself," Hanson told him. "Still, I expect they'll be lenient with you. It's a matter of face now."

"More than that, I hope," Renthall replied. "They claim they were passing on a direct instruction from the watchtowers."

"Well, yes . . ." Hanson gestured vaguely. "Of course. Obviously the towers wouldn't intervene in such a trivial matter. They rely on the Council to keep a watching brief for them, as long as the Council's authority is respected they're prepared to remain aloof."

"It sounds an ideally simple arrangement. How do you think the communication between the Council and the watchtowers takes place?" Renthall pointed to the watchtower across the street from the cabin. The shuttered observation tier hung emptily in the air like an out-of-season gondola. "By telephone? Or do they semaphor?"

But Hanson merely laughed and changed the subject.

Julia Osmond was equally vague, but equally convinced of the Council's infallibility.

"Of course they receive instructions from the towers, Charles. But don't worry, they obviously have a sense of proportion—they've been letting you come here all this time." She turned a monitory finger at Renthall, her broad-hipped bulk obscuring the towers from him. "That's your chief fault, Charles. You think you're more important than you are. Look at you now, sitting there all hunched up with your face like an old shoe. You think the Council and the watchtowers are going to give you some terrible punishment. But they won't, because you're not worth it."

Renthall picked uneagerly at his lunch at the hotel, conscious of the guests watching from the tables around him. Many had brought visitors with them, and he guessed that there would be a full attendance at the meeting that afternoon.

After lunch he retired to his room, made a desultory attempt to read until the meeting at half past two. Outside, the watchtowers hung in their long lines from the bright haze. There was no sign of movement in the observation windows, and Renthall studied them openly, hands in pockets, like a general surveying the dispositions

of his enemy's forces. The haze was lower than usual, filling the interstices between the towers, so that in the distance, where the free space below their tips was hidden by the intervening rooftops, the towers seemed to rise upward into the air like rectangular chimneys over an industrial landscape, wreathed in white smoke.

The nearest tower was about seventy-five feet away, diagonally to his left, over the eastern end of the open garden shared by the other hotels in the crescent. Just as Renthall turned away, one of the windows in the observation deck appeared to open, the opaque glass pane throwing a spear of sharp sunlight directly toward him. Renthall flinched back, heart suddenly surging, then leaned forward again. The activity in the tower had subsided as instantly as it had arisen. The windows were sealed, no signs of movement behind them. Renthall listened to the sounds from the rooms above and below him. So conspicuous a motion of the window, the first sign of activity for many days, and a certain indication of more to come, should have brought a concerted rush to the balconies. But the hotel was silent, and below he could hear Dr. Clifton at his cages by the window, humming absently to himself.

Renthall scanned the windows on the other side of the garden but the lines of craning faces he expected were absent. He examined the watchtower carefully, assuming that he had seen a window open in a hotel nearby. Yet the explanation dissatisfied him. The ray of sunlight had cleaved the air like a silver blade, with a curious luminous intensity that only the windows of the watchtowers seemed able to reflect, aimed unerringly at his head.

He broke off to glance at his watch, cursed when he saw that it was after quarter past two. The Town Hall was a good half mile away, and he would arrive disheveled and perspiring.

There was a knock on his door. He opened it to find Mulvaney.

"What is it? I'm busy now."

"Sorry, Mr. Renthall. A man called Barnes from the Council asked me to give you an urgent message. He said the meeting this afternoon has been postponed."

"Ha!" Leaving the door open, Renthall snapped his fingers contemptuously at the air. "So they've had second thoughts after all. Discretion is the better part of valor." Smiling broadly, he called Mulvaney back into his room. "Mr. Mulvaney! Just a moment!"

"Good news, Mr. Renthall?"

"Excellent. I've got them on the run." He added, "You wait and see, the next meeting of the Watch Committee will be held in private."

"You might be right, Mr. Renthall. Some people think they have overreached themselves a bit."

"Really? That's rather interesting. Good." Renthall noted this mentally, then gestured Mulvaney over to the window. "Tell me, Mr. Mulvaney, just now while you were coming up the stairs, did you notice any activity out there?"

He gestured briefly toward the tower, not wanting to draw attention to himself by pointing at it. Mulvaney gazed out over the garden, shaking his head slowly. "Can't say I did, not more than usual. What sort of activity?"

"You know, a window opening . . ." When Mulvaney continued to shake his head, Renthall said, "Good. Let me know if that fellow Barnes calls again."

When Mulvaney had gone he strode up and down the room, whistling a Mozart rondo.

Over the next three days, however, the mood of elation gradually faded. To Renthall's annoyance no further date was fixed for the canceled committee meeting. He had assumed that it would be held in camera, but the members must have realized that it would make little difference. Everyone would soon know that Renthall had successfully challenged their claim to be in communication with the watchtowers.

Renthall chafed at the possibility that the meeting had been postponed indefinitely. By avoiding a direct clash with Renthall the Council had cleverly sidestepped the danger before them.

Alternatively, Renthall speculated whether he had underestimated them. Perhaps they realized that the real target of his defiance was not the Council, but the watchtowers. The faint possibility—however hard he tried to dismiss it as childish fantasy the fear still persisted—that there *was* some mysterious collusion between the towers and the Council now began to grow in his mind. The fete had been cleverly conceived as an innocent gesture of defiance toward the towers, and it would be difficult to find something to take its place that would not be blatantly outrageous and stain him indelibly with the sin of hubris.

Besides, as he carefully reminded himself, he was not out to launch open rebellion. Originally he had reacted from a momentary feeling of pique, exasperated by the spectacle of the boredom and lethargy around him and the sullen fear with which everyone

viewed the towers. There was no question of challenging their absolute authority—at least, not at this stage. He merely wanted to define the existential margins of their world—if they *were* caught in a trap, let them at least eat the cheese. Also, he calculated that it would take an affront of truly heroic scale to provoke any reaction from the watchtowers, and that a certain freedom by default was theirs, a small but valuable credit to their account built into the system.

In practical, existential terms this might well be considerable, so that the effective boundary between black and white, between good and evil, was drawn some distance from the theoretical boundary. This watershed was the penumbral zone where the majority of the quickening pleasures of life were to be found, and where Renthall was most at home. Mrs. Osmond's villa lay well within its territory, and Renthall would have liked to move himself over its margins. First, though, he would have to assess the extent of this "blue" shift, or moral parallax, but by canceling the committee meeting the Council had effectively forestalled him.

As he waited for Barnes to call again a growing sense of frustration came over him. The watchtowers seemed to fill the sky, and he drew the blinds irritably. On the flat roof, two floors above, a continuous light hammering sounded all day, but he shunned the streets and no longer went to the café for his morning coffee.

Finally he climbed the stairs to the roof, through the doorway saw two carpenters working under Mulvaney's supervision. They were laying a rough board floor over the tarred cement. As he shielded his eyes from the bright glare a third man came up the stairs behind him, carrying two sections of wooden railing.

"Sorry about the noise, Mr. Renthall," Mulvaney apologized. "We should be finished by tomorrow."

"What's going on?" Renthall asked. "Surely you're not putting a sun garden here."

"That's the idea." Mulvaney pointed to the railings. "A few chairs and umbrellas, be pleasant for the old folk. Dr. Clifton suggested it." He peered down at Renthall, who was still hiding in the doorway. "You'll have to bring a chair up here yourself, you look as if you could use a little sunshine."

Renthall raised his eyes to the watchtower almost directly over their heads. A pebble tossed underhand would easily have re-

bounded off the corrugated metal underside. The roof was completely exposed to the score of watchtowers hanging in the air around them, and he wondered whether Mulvaney was out of his mind—none of the old people would sit there for more than a second.

Mulvaney pointed to a rooftop on the other side of the garden, where similar activity was taking place. A bright yellow awning was being unfurled, and two seats were already occupied.

Renthall hesitated, lowering his voice. "But what about the watchtowers?"

"The what—?" Distracted by one of the carpenters, Mulvaney turned away for a moment, then rejoined him. "Yes, you'll be able to watch everything going on from up here, Mr. Renthall."

Puzzled, Renthall made his way back to his room. Had Mulvaney misheard his question, or was this a fatuous attempt to provoke the towers? Renthall grimly visualized his responsibility if a whole series of petty acts of defiance took place. Perhaps he had accidentally tapped all the repressed resentment that had been accumulating for years?

To Renthall's amazement, a succession of creaking ascents of the staircase the next morning announced the first party of residents to use the sun deck. Just before lunch Renthall went up to the roof, found a group of at least a dozen of the older guests sitting out below the watchtower, placidly inhaling the cool air. None of them seemed in the least perturbed by the tower. At two or three points around the crescent sunbathers had emerged, as if answering some deep latent call. People sat on makeshift porches or leaned from the sills, calling to each other.

Equally surprising was the failure of this upsurge of activity to be followed by any reaction from the watchtowers. Half-hidden behind his blinds, Renthall scrutinized the towers carefully, once caught what seemed to be a distant flicker of movement from an observation window half a mile away, but otherwise the towers remained silent, their long ranks receding to the horizon in all directions, motionless and enigmatic. The haze had thinned slightly, and the long shafts protruded further from the sky, their outlines darker and more vibrant.

Shortly before lunch Hanson interrupted his scrutiny. "Hello, Charles. Great news! The school opens tomorrow. Thank heaven for that, I was getting so bored I could hardly stand up straight."

Renthall nodded. "Good. What's galvanized them into life so suddenly?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose they had to reopen sometime. Aren't you pleased?"

"Of course. Am I still on the staff?"

"Naturally. The Council doesn't bear childish grudges. They might have sacked you a week ago, but things are different now."

"What do you mean?"

Hanson scrutinized Renthall carefully. "I mean the school's opened. What is the matter, Charles?"

Renthall went over to the window, his eyes roving along the lines of sunbathers on the roofs. He waited a few seconds in case there was some sign of activity from the watchtowers. "When's the Watch Committee going to hear my case?"

Hanson shrugged. "They won't bother now. They know you're a tougher proposition than some of the people they've been pushing around. Forget the whole thing."

"But I don't want to forget it. I want the hearing to take place. Damn it, I deliberately invested the whole business of the fete to force them to show their hand. Now they're furiously backpeddling."

"Well, what of it? Relax, they have their difficulties too." He gave a laugh. "You never know, they'd probably be only too glad of an invitation now."

"They won't get one. You know, I almost feel they've outwitted me. When the fete doesn't take place everyone will assume I've given in to them."

"But it will take place. Haven't you seen Boardman recently? He's going great guns, obviously it'll be a tremendous show. Be careful he doesn't cut you out."

Puzzled, Renthall turned from the window. "Do you mean Boardman's going ahead with it?"

"Of course. It looks like it anyway. He's got a big marquee over the car park, dozens of stalls, bunting everywhere."

Renthall drove a fist into his palm. "The man's insane!" He turned to Hanson. "We've got to be careful, something's going on. I'm convinced the Council are just biding their time, they're deliberately letting the reins go so we'll overreach ourselves. Have you seen all these people on the rooftops? Sunbathing!"

"Good idea. Isn't that what you've wanted all along?"

"Not so blatantly as this." Renthall pointed to the nearest watch-

tower. The windows were sealed, but the light reflected off them was far brighter than usual. "Sooner or later there'll be a short, sharp reaction. That's what the Council are waiting for."

"It's nothing to do with the Council. If people want to sit on the roof whose business is it but their own? Are you coming to lunch?"

"In a moment." Renthall stood quietly by the window, watching Hanson closely. A possibility he had not previously envisaged crossed his mind. He searched for some method of testing it. "Has the gong gone yet? My watch has stopped."

Hanson glanced at his wristwatch. "It's twelve-thirty." He looked out through the window toward the clock tower in the distance over the Town Hall. One of Renthall's longstanding grievances against his room was that the tip of the nearby watchtower hung directly over the clock face, neatly obscuring it. Hanson nodded, resetting his watch. "Twelve thirty-one. I'll see you in a few minutes."

After Hanson had gone Renthall sat on the bed, his courage ebbing slowly, trying to rationalize this unforeseen development.

The next day he came across his second case.

Boardman surveyed the dingy room distastefully, puzzled by the spectacle of Renthall hunched up in his chair by the window.

"Mr. Renthall, there's absolutely no question of canceling it now. The fair's as good as started already. Anyway, what would be the point?"

"Our arrangement was that it should be a fete," Renthall pointed out. "You've turned it into a fun-fair, with a lot of stalls and hurdy-gurdys."

Unruffled by Renthall's schoolmasterly manner, Boardman scoffed. "Well, what's the difference? Anyway, my real idea is to roof it over and turn it into a permanent amusement park. The Council won't interfere. They're playing it quiet now."

"Are they? I doubt it." Renthall looked down into the garden. People sat about in their shirt sleeves, the women in floral dresses, evidently oblivious of the watchtowers filling the sky a hundred feet above their heads. The haze had receded still further, and at least two hundred yards of shaft were now visible. There were no signs of activity from the towers, but Renthall was convinced that this would soon begin.

"Tell me," he asked Boardman in a clear voice. "Aren't you frightened of the watchtowers?"

Boardman seemed puzzled. "The what towers?" He made a

spiral motion with his cigar. "You mean the big slide? Don't worry I'm not having one of those, nobody's got the energy to climb all those steps."

He stuck his cigar in his mouth and ambled to the door. "Well, so long, Mr. Renthall. I'll send you an invite."

Later that afternoon Renthall went to see Dr. Clifton in his room below.

"Excuse me, doctor," he apologized, "but would you mind seeing me on a professional matter?"

"Well, not here, Renthall, I'm supposed to be off duty." He turned from his canary cages by the window with a testy frown, then relented when he saw Renthall's intent expression. "All right, what's the trouble?"

While Clifton washed his hands Renthall explained. "Tell me, doctor, is there any mechanism known to you by which the simultaneous hypnosis of large groups of people could occur? We're all familiar with theatrical displays of the hypnotist's art, but I'm thinking of a situation in which the members of an entire small community—such as the residents of the hotels around this crescent—could be induced to accept a given proposition completely conflicting with reality."

Clifton stopped washing his hands. "I thought you wanted to see me professionally. I'm a doctor, not a witch doctor. What are you planning now, Renthall? Last week it was a fete, now you want to hypnotize an entire neighborhood, you'd better be careful."

Renthall shook his head. "It's not I who want to carry out the hypnosis, Doctor. In fact I'm afraid the operation has already taken place. I don't know whether you've noticed anything strange about your patients?"

"Nothing more than usual," Clifton remarked dryly. He watched Renthall with increased interest. "Who's responsible for this mass hypnosis?" When Renthall paused and then pointed a forefinger at the ceiling Clifton nodded sagely. "I see. How sinister."

"Exactly. I'm glad you understand, doctor." Renthall went over to the window, looking out at the sunshades below. He pointed to the watchtowers. "Just to clarify a small point, doctor. You do see the watchtowers?"

Clifton hesitated fractionally, moving imperceptibly toward his valise on the desk. Then he nodded, "Of course."

"Good. I'm relieved to hear it." Renthall laughed. "For a while I was beginning to think that I was the only one in step. Do you realize that both Hanson and Boardman can no longer see the towers? And I'm fairly certain that none of the people down there can or they wouldn't be sitting in the open. I'm convinced that this is the Council's doing, but it seems unlikely that they would have enough power—" He broke off, aware that Clifton was watching him fixedly. "What's the matter? *Doctor!*"

Clifton quickly took his prescription pad from his valise. "Renthall, caution is the essence of all strategy. It's important that we beware of overhastiness. I suggest that we both rest this afternoon. Now, these will give you some sleep—"

For the first time in several days he ventured out into the street. Head down, angry for being caught out by the doctor, he drove himself along the pavement toward Mrs. Osmond, determined to find at least one person who could still see the towers. The streets were more crowded than he could remember for a long time and he was forced to look upward as he swerved in and out of the ambling pedestrians. Overhead, like the assault craft from which some apocalyptic air raid would be launched, the watchtowers hung down from the sky, framed between the twin spires of the church, blocking off a vista down the principle boulevard, yet unperceived by the afternoon strollers.

Renthall passed the café, surprised to see the terrace packed with coffee drinkers, then saw Boardman's marquee in the cinema car park. Music was coming from a creaking Wurlitzer, and the gay ribbons of the bunting fluttered in the air.

Twenty yards from Mrs. Osmond's he saw her come through her front door, a large straw hat on her head.

"Charles! What are you doing here? I haven't seen you for days, I wondered what was the matter."

Renthall took the key from her fingers and pushed it back into the lock. Closing the door behind them, he paused in the darkened hall, regaining his breath.

"Charles, what on earth is going on? Is someone after you? You look terrible, my dear. Your face—"

"Never mind my face." Renthall collected himself, and led the way into the living room. "Come in here, quickly." He went over to the window and drew back the blinds, ascertained that the watchtower over the row of houses opposite was still there. "Sit down

and relax. I'm sorry to rush in like this but you'll understand in a minute." He waited until Mrs. Osmond settled herself reluctantly on the sofa, then rested his palms on the mantelpiece, organizing his thoughts.

"The last few days have been fantastic, you wouldn't believe it, and to cap everything I've just made myself look the biggest possible fool in front of Clifton. God, I could—"

"Charles—!"

"*Listen!* Don't start interrupting me before I've begun, I've got enough to contend with. Something absolutely insane is going on everywhere, by some freak I seem to be the only one who's still compos mentis. I know that sounds as if I'm completely mad, but in fact it's true. Why I don't know, though I'm frightened it may be some sort of reprisal directed at me. However." He went over to the window. "Julia, what can you see out of that window?"

Mrs. Osmond dismantled her hat and squinted at the panes. She fidgeted uncomfortably. "Charles, what is going on?—I'll have to get my glasses." She subsided helplessly.

"Julia! You've never needed your glasses before to see these. Now tell me, what can you see?"

"Well, the row of houses, and the gardens . . ."

"Yes, what else?"

"The windows, of course, and there's a tree . . ."

"What about the sky?"

She nodded. "Yes, I can see that, there's a sort of haze, isn't there? Or is that my eyes?"

"No." Wearily, Renthall turned away from the window. For the first time a feeling of unassuageable fatigue had come over him. "Julia," he asked quietly. "Don't you remember the watchtowers?"

She shook her head slowly. "No, I don't. Where were they?" A look of concern came over her face. She took his arm gently. "Dear, what is going on?"

Renthall forced himself to stand upright. "I don't know." He drummed his forehead with his free hand. "You can't remember the towers at all, or the observation windows?" He pointed to the watchtower hanging down the center of the window. "There—used to be one over those houses. We were always looking at it. Do you remember how we used to draw the curtains upstairs?"

"Charles! Be careful, people will hear. Where are you going?"

Numbly, Renthall pulled back the door. "Outside," he said in a flat voice. "There's little point now in staying indoors."

He let himself through the front door, fifty yards from the house heard her call after him, turned quickly into a side road and hurried toward the first intersection.

Above him he was conscious of the watchtowers hanging in the bright air, but he kept his eyes level with the gates and hedges, scanning the empty houses. Now and then he passed one that was occupied, the family sitting out on the lawn, and once someone called his name, reminding him that the school had started without him. The air was fresh and crisp, the light glimmering off the pavements with an unusual intensity.

Within ten minutes he realized that he had wandered into an unfamiliar part of the town and completely lost himself, with only the aerial lines of watchtowers to guide him, but he still refused to look up at them.

He had entered a poorer quarter of the town, where the narrow empty streets were separated by large waste dumps, and tilting wooden fences sagged between ruined houses. Many of the dwellings were only a single story high, and the sky seemed even wider and more open, the distant watchtowers along the horizon like a continuous palisade.

He twisted his foot on a ledge of stone, and hobbled painfully toward a strip of broken fencing that straddled a small rise in the center of the waste dump. He was perspiring heavily, and loosened his tie, then searched the surrounding straggle of houses for a way back into the streets through which he had come.

Overhead, something moved and caught his eye. Forcing himself to ignore it, Renthall regained his breath, trying to master the curious dizziness that touched his brain. An immense sudden silence hung over the waste ground, so absolute that it was as if some inaudible piercing music was being played at full volume.

To his right, at the edge of the waste ground, he heard feet shuffle slowly across the rubble, and saw the elderly man in the shabby black suit and wing collar who usually loitered outside the public library. He hobbled along, hands in pockets, an almost Chaplinesque figure, his weak eyes now and then feebly scanning the sky as if he were searching for something he had lost or forgotten.

Renthall watched him cross the waste ground, but before he could shout the decrepit figure tottered away behind a ruined wall.

Again something moved above him, followed by a third sharp angular motion, and then a succession of rapid shuttles. The stony rubbish at his feet flickered with the reflected light, and abruptly the whole sky sparkled as if the air was opening and shutting.

Then, as suddenly, everything was motionless again.

Composing himself, Renthall waited for a last moment. Then he raised his face to the nearest watchtower fifty feet above him, and gazed across at the hundreds of towers that hung from the clear sky like giant pillars. The haze had vanished and the shafts of the towers were defined with unprecedented clarity.

As far as he could see, all the observation windows were open. Silently, without moving, the watchers stared down at him.

Now Wakes the Sea

Again at night Mason heard the sounds of the approaching sea, the muffled thunder of long breakers rolling up the nearby streets. Roused from his sleep, he ran out into the moonlight, where the white-framed houses stood like sepulchers among the washed concrete courts. Two hundred yards away the waves plunged and boiled, sluicing in and out across the pavement. A million phosphorescent bubbles seethed through the picket fences, and the broken spray filled the air with the wine-sharp tang of brine.

Offshore the deeper swells of the open sea surged across the roofs of the submerged houses, the whitecaps cleft by the spurs of isolated chimneys. Leaping back as the cold foam stung his bare feet, Mason glanced uneasily at the house where his wife lay sleeping, estimating the sea's rate of progress. Each night it moved a few yards nearer, as the hissing black guillotine sliced across the empty lawns, riveting the fences with staccato bolts of spray.

For half an hour Mason watched the waves vault among the rooftops. The luminous surf cast a pale nimbus on the clouds racing overhead on the dark wind, and covered his hands with a vivid waxy sheen.

At last the waves began to recede, and the deep roaring bowl of illuminated water withdrew down the emptying streets, disgorging the lines of houses glistening in the moonlight. Mason ran forward across the expiring bubbles, but the sea shrank away from him into the fading light, disappearing around the corners of the houses, sliding below the garage doors. He sprinted to the end of the road as a last fleeting glow was carried away across the sky

beyond the spire of the church. Exhausted, Mason returned to his bed, the sound of the dying waves filling his head as he slept.

"I saw the sea again last night," he told his wife at breakfast.

Quietly, Miriam said, "Richard, the nearest sea is a thousand miles away." She watched her husband silently for a moment, her long pale fingers straying to the coil of black hair lying against her neck. "Go out into the drive and look. There's no sea."

"Darling, I *saw* it."

"Richard—!"

Mason stood up, with slow deliberation raised his palms. "Miriam, I felt the spray on my hands. The waves were breaking around my feet. I wasn't dreaming."

"You must have been." Miriam leaned against the door, as if trying to exclude the strange night world of her husband which haunted the shadows in the bedroom. With her long raven hair framing her oval face, and the scarlet dressing gown open to reveal her slender neck and white breast, she reminded Mason of a Pre-Raphaelite heroine in an Arthurian pose. "Richard, you must see Dr. Clifton. It's beginning to frighten me."

Mason smiled, his eyes searching the distant rooftops above the trees outside the window. "I shouldn't worry. What's happening is really very simple. At night I hear the sounds of a sea breaking down the streets, I go out and watch the waves in the moonlight, and then come back to bed." He paused, a faint flush of fatigue on his lean face. Tall and slimly built, Mason was still convalescing from the illness which had kept him at home for the previous six months. "It's curious, though," he resumed, "the water is remarkably luminous, and I should guess that its salinity is well above normal—"

"But Richard . . ." Miriam looked around helplessly, her husband's calmness exhausting her. "The sea isn't *there*, it's only in your mind. No one else can see it."

Mason nodded, hands lost in his pockets. "Perhaps no one else has heard it yet."

Leaving the breakfast room, he went into his study. The couch on which he had slept during his illness still stood against the corner, his bookcase beside it. Mason sat down, taking a large fossil mollusk from a shelf. During the winter, when he had been confined to bed, the smooth trumpet-shaped conch, with its endless associations of ancient seas and drowned strands, had provided him with unlimited pleasure, a bottomless cornucopia of

image and reverie. Cradling it reassuringly in his hands, as exquisite and ambiguous as a fragment of Greek sculpture found in a dry riverbed, he reflected that it seemed like a capsule of time, the condensation of another universe, and he could almost believe that the midnight sea which haunted his sleep had been released from the shell when he inadvertently scratched one of its helices.

Miriam followed him into the room and briskly drew the curtains, as if aware that Mason was returning to the twilight world of his sickbed and reading lamp. She took his shoulders in her hands.

"Richard, listen. Tonight, when you hear the waves, wake me and we'll go out together."

Gently, Mason disengaged himself. "Whether you see it or not is irrelevant, Miriam. The fact is that I see it."

Later, walking down the street, Mason reached the point where he had stood the previous night, watching the waves break and roll toward him. The sounds of placid domestic activity came from the houses he had seen submerged. The grass on the lawns was bleached by the July heat, and several sprays rotated in the bright sunlight, casting rainbows in the vivid air. Undisturbed since the rainstorms in the early spring, the long summer's dust lay between the palisades of the wooden fences and silted against the water hydrants.

The street, one of a dozen suburban boulevards on the perimeter of the town, ran northwest for some three hundred yards and then joined the open square of the neighborhood shopping center. Mason shielded his eyes and looked out at the clock tower of the library and the church spire, identifying the various protuberances which had projected from the steep swells of the open sea. All were in exactly the positions he remembered.

The road shelved slightly as it approached the shopping center, and by a curious coincidence marked the margins of the beach which would have existed if the area had in fact been flooded. A mile or so from the town, this shallow ridge, which formed part of the rim of a large natural basin enclosing the alluvial plain below, culminated in a small chalk outcropping. Although it was partly hidden by the intervening houses, Mason now recognized it clearly as the promontory which had reared like a citadel above the sea. The deep swells had rolled against its flanks, sending up immense plumes of spray that fell back with almost hypnotic slowness upon the receding water. At night the promontory seemed larger and more gaunt, a huge uneroded bastion against

the sea. One evening, Mason promised himself, he would go out to the promontory and let the waves wake him as he slept on the peak.

A car moved past slowly, the driver watching Mason curiously as he stood motionless in the middle of the pavement, head raised to the air. Not wishing to appear any more eccentric than he was already considered—the solitary, abstracted husband of the beautiful but childless Mrs. Mason (in addition he was honorary secretary of the local astronomical society, a notorious gathering of cranks and stargazers)—Mason turned into the avenue which ran along the ridge. As he approached the distant outcropping he glanced over the hedges for any signs of waterlogged gardens or stranded cars. The houses here had been almost completely inundated by the flood water.

The first visions of the sea had come to Mason only three weeks earlier, but he was already convinced of its absolute validity. He recognized that after its nightly withdrawal the water failed to leave any mark on the hundreds of houses it submerged, and he felt no alarm for the people who should have been drowned and who were presumably, as he watched the luminous waves break across the rooftops, sleeping undisturbed in the sea's immense liquid locker. Despite this paradox, it was his complete conviction of the sea's reality that had made him admit to Miriam that he had woken one night to the sound of waves outside the window and gone out to find the sea rolling across the neighborhood streets and houses. At first she had merely smiled at him, accepting this illustration of his strange private world. Then, three nights later, she had woken to the sounds of him latching the door on his return, bewildered by his pumping chest and tense perspiring face, his eyes lit by an uncanny light.

From then on she spent all day looking over her shoulder through the window for any signs of the sea. What worried her as much as the vision itself was Mason's complete calm in the face of this terrifying unconscious apocalypse.

Tired by his walk, Mason sat down on a low ornamental wall, screened from the surrounding houses by the rhododendron bushes. For a few minutes he played with the dust at his feet, stirring the hard white grains with a branch. Although formless and passive, the dust shared something of the same evocative qualities of the fossil mollusk, radiating a curious compacted light.

In front of him, the road curved and dipped, the incline carrying it away onto the fields below. The chalk shoulder, covered by a

mantle of green turf, rose into the clear sky. A metal shack had been erected on the slope, and a small group of figures moved about the entrance of a mine shaft, adjusting a wooden hoist. Wishing that he had brought his wife's car, Mason watched the diminutive figures disappear one by one into the shaft.

The image of this elusive pantomime remained with him all day in the library, overlaying his memories of the dark waves rolling across the midnight streets.

What sustained Mason in the face of this encroaching nightmare was his conviction that others would soon also become aware of the sea.

When he went to bed that night he found Miriam sitting fully dressed in the armchair by the window, her face composed into an expression of calm determination.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting."

"For what?"

"The sea. Don't worry, simply ignore me and go to sleep. I don't mind sitting here with the light out."

"Miriam . . ." Wearily, Mason took one of her slender hands and tried to draw her from the chair. "Darling, what on earth will this achieve?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

Mason sat down on the foot of the bed. For some reason, not wholly concerned with the wish to protect her, he wanted to keep his wife from the sea. "Miriam, don't you understand? I might not actually *see* it, in the literal sense. It might be . . ." he extemporized, ". . . a hallucination, or a dream."

Miriam shook her head, hands clasped on the arms of the chair. "I don't think it is. Anyway, I want to find out."

Mason lay back slowly on the bed. "I wonder whether you're approaching this the right way—"

Miriam sat forward. "Richard, you're taking it all so calmly, you accept this vision as if it were a strange headache. That's what frightens me. If you were really terrified by this sea I wouldn't worry, but . . ."

Half an hour later, after he had given up his attempt to dissuade Miriam from her vigil, he fell asleep in the darkened room, Miriam's slim face watching him from the shadows.

Waves murmured, outside the windows the distant swish of racing foam drew him from his sleep, the deep muffled thunder of

rollers and the sounds of deep water drummed at his ears. Mason climbed out of bed, and dressed quickly as the hiss of receding water sounded up the street. In the corner, under the glimmering light reflected from the distant foam, Miriam lay asleep in the armchair, a bar of moonlight across her throat.

His bare feet soundless on the pavement, Mason ran toward the waves, stumbled across the wet glistening tideline as one of the breakers struck with a deep guttural roar. On his knees, Mason felt the cold brilliant water, seething with animalcula, spurt across his chest and shoulders, slacken and then withdraw, sucked like an immense gleaming floor into the mouth of the next breaker. His wet suit clinging to him like a drowned animal, Mason stared out across the dark sea. In the fleeting moonlight the white houses advancing into the water loomed like the palazzos of a spectral Venice, mausoleums on the causeways of some huge island necropolis. Only the church spire was still visible. The water rode in to its high tide, a further twenty yards down the street, the spray carried almost to the Masons' house.

Mason waited for an interval between two waves and then waded through the shallows to the avenue which wound toward the distant headland. By now the water had crossed the roadway, swilling over the dark lawns and slapping at the doorsteps.

Half a mile from the headland he heard the great surge and sigh of the deeper water. Out of breath, he leaned against a fence as the cold foam cut across his legs, pulling him with its undertow. Suddenly, illuminated by the racing clouds, he saw the tall pale figure of a woman standing above the sea on a stone parapet at the cliff's edge, her black robe lifting behind her in the wind, her long hair white in the moonlight. Far below her feet, the luminous waves leapt and vaulted like acrobats.

Mason ran along the pavement, momentarily losing sight of her as the road curved and the houses intervened. The water slackened, and he caught a last glimpse of the woman's ice-white profile through the opalescent spray. Turning, the tide began to ebb and fade, and with a last bubbling spasm the great sea shrank away between the emerging houses, draining the night of its light and motion.

As the last bubbles flickered and dissolved on the damp pavement, Mason searched the headland, but the strange luminous figure had gone. His damp clothes dried themselves as he walked back through the empty streets, a last tang of brine carried away off the hedges on the midnight air.

* * *

The next morning he told Miriam: "It *was* a dream, after all. I think the sea has gone now. Anyway, I saw nothing last night."

"Thank heavens, Richard. Are you sure?"

"I'm fairly certain." Mason smiled encouragingly. "Thanks for keeping watch over me."

"I'll sit up tonight as well." She held up her hand to silence his protests. "I insist. I feel all right after last night, and I want to drive this thing away, once and for all." She frowned intently over the coffee cups. "It's strange, but once or twice I think I heard the sea too. It sounded very old and blind, like something waking again after millions of years."

On his way to the library, Mason made a detour toward the chalk outcropping, and parked the car where he had seen the moonlit figure of the white-haired woman watching the sea. The sunlight fell on the pale turf, illuminating the mouth of the mine shaft, around which the same desultory activity was taking place.

For the next fifteen minutes Mason drove slowly in and out of the tree-lined avenues, peering over the hedges at the kitchen windows. Almost certainly she would live in one of the nearby houses, probably still be wearing her black robe beneath a housecoat.

Later, at the library, he recognized a car he had seen on the headland. The driver, an elderly tweed-suited man of academic manner, was examining the display cases of local geological finds.

"Who was that?" he asked Fellowes, the keeper of antiquities, as the car drove off. "I've seen him on the chalk cliffs."

"Professor Goodhart, one of the party of paleontologists. Apparently they've uncovered an interesting bone bed." Fellowes gestured at the collection of femurs and jawbone fragments. "With luck we may get a few pieces from them."

Mason stared at the bones, aware of a sudden closing parallax within his mind.

Each night, as the sea emerged from the dark streets and the wave rolled further toward the Masons' home, he would wake beside his sleeping wife and go out into the surging air and wade through the deep water toward the headland. There he would see the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge, her high face raised above the roaring spray, a pale glimmering nimbus which rode

like the moon among the fleeing clouds. But always he failed to reach her before the tide turned, and would kneel exhausted on the wet pavements as the last bubbles foamed and the drowned streets rose from the sinking waves.

Once a police patrol car found him in its headlights slumped against a gate post in an open drive, and on another night he forgot to close the front door after himself when he returned. All through breakfast Miriam watched him with her old wariness, noticing the telltale shadows which encircled his eyes like monocles.

"Richard, I think you should stop going to the library. You look worn out. It isn't that sea dream again?"

Mason shook his head, forcing a tired smile from his face. "No, that's finished with. Perhaps I've been overworking."

Miriam held his hands. "Did you fall over yesterday?" She examined Mason's palm. "Darling, they're still *raw!* You must have grazed them only a few minutes ago. Can't you remember even?"

Abstracted, Mason invented some tale to satisfy her, then carried his coffee into the study and stared at the morning haze which lay across the rooftops, a soft lake of opacity that followed the same contours as the midnight sea. The mist dissolved in the sunlight, and for a moment the diminishing reality of the normal world reasserted itself, filling him with a poignant nostalgia.

Without thinking, he reached out to the fossil conch on the bookshelf, but involuntarily his hand withdrew before touching it.

Miriam stood beside him. "Hateful thing," she commented. "Tell me, Richard, what do you think caused your dream?"

Mason shrugged. "Perhaps it was a sort of memory . . ." His wife's cool, elegant face was watching him intently. He wondered whether to tell Miriam of the waves which he still heard in his sleep, and of the white-haired woman on the cliff's edge who seemed to beckon to him. But like all women Miriam believed that there was room for only one enigma in her husband's life. By an inversion of logic he felt that his dependence on his wife's private income, and the loss of self-respect, gave him the right to withhold something of himself from her.

"Richard, what's the matter?"

In his mind the spray opened like an immense diaphanous fan and the enchantress of the waves turned toward him with her burning eyes.

Waist high, the sea pounded across the lawns in a seething whirlpool. Mason pulled off his jacket and flung it away into the

water, and then waded out into the street. Higher than ever before, the waves had at last reached his house, breaking over the doorstep, but Mason had forgotten his wife. His whole attention was fixed upon the headland, which was lashed by a continuous storm of spray, almost obscuring the figure standing on its crest.

As Mason pressed on, sometimes sinking to his chin, shoals of luminous algae swarmed in the water around him, their brilliant phosphorescence stinging his legs, and his eyes smarted in the harsh saline air. He reached the lower slopes of the headland almost exhausted, and fell to his knees.

High above, he could hear the spray singing as it cut through the coigns of the cliff's edge, the deep base of the breakers overlayed by the high treble of the keening air, entwining itself through the long white strands of the woman's hair like the chords of a harp.

Carried by the music, Mason climbed the flank of the headland, a thousand reflections of the moon dancing in the breaking sea. As he reached the crest, the fluttering of the long black robe hid the woman's face, but he could see her tall erect carriage and slender hips. Suddenly, without any apparent motion of her limbs, she moved away along the parapet.

"Wait!"

His shout was lost on the surging air. Mason ran forward, and the figure turned and stared back at him. Her white hair swirled around her face like a spume of silver steam and then parted to reveal an angular skull-like face with empty eyes and notched mouth. A hand, like a bundle of white sticks, clawed toward him, and the figure loomed through the whirling darkness like a gigantic bird.

Unaware whether the scream came from his own mouth or from this specter, Mason stumbled back, before he could catch himself tripped over a wooden railing and in a cackle of chains and pulleys fell backward into the shaft, the sounds of the sea booming above him in its hurtling darkness.

After listening intently to the policeman's description, Professor Goodhart shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, sergeant. We've been working on the bed all week, no one's fallen down the shaft." One of the flimsy wooden rails was swinging loosely in the crisp air. "But thank you for warning me. I suppose we must build a heavier railing, if this fellow is wandering around in his sleep."

"I don't think he'll bother to come up here," the sergeant said. "It's quite a climb." As an afterthought he added, "Down at the library where he works they said you'd found a couple of skeletons in the shaft yesterday. I know it's only two days since he disappeared, but one of them couldn't possibly be his?" The sergeant shrugged. "If there was some natural acid, say . . ."

"Ingenious, sergeant, but I'm sorry to disappoint you." Professor Goodhart drove his heel into the chalky turf. "Pure calcium carbonate, about a mile thick, laid down during the Triassic Period 200 million years ago when there was a large inland sea here. The skeletons we found yesterday, a man's and a woman's, belong to two Cro-Magnon fisher people who lived on the shore just before it dried up. I wish I could oblige you with a *corpus delicti,* though it's quite a problem to understand how these Cro-Magnon relics found their way into the bone bed. This shaft wasn't sunk until about thirty years ago." He smiled at the policeman. "Still, that's my problem, not yours."

Returning to the police car, the sergeant shook his head. "Nothing." As they drove off he looked out at the endless stretch of placid suburban homes.

"Apparently there was an ancient sea here once. A million years ago. Who would believe it?" He picked a crumpled flannel jacket off the back seat. "That reminds me," he said, sniffing at the fabric. "I know what this coat of Mason's smells of—brine."

Zone of Terror

Larsen had been waiting all day for Bayliss, the psychologist who lived in the next chalet, to pay the call he had promised on the previous evening. Characteristically, Bayliss had made no precise arrangements as regards time; a tall, moody man with an offhand manner, he had merely gestured vaguely with his hypo and mumbled something about the following day: he would look in, probably. Larsen knew damned well he would look in, the case was too interesting to miss, in an oblique way it meant as much to Bayliss as it did to himself.

Except that it was Larsen who had to do the worrying—by three that afternoon Bayliss had still not materialized, and what was he doing except sitting in his white-walled, air-conditioned lounge, playing Bartok quartets on the stereogram. Meanwhile Larsen had nothing to do but roam around the chalet, slamming impatiently from one room to the next like a tiger with an anxiety neurosis, cook up a quick lunch (coffee and three amphetamines, from a private cache Bayliss as yet only dimly suspected—God, he needed the stimulants after those massive barbiturate shots Bayliss pumped into him after the attack) and try to settle down with Kretschmer's *An Analysis of Psychotic Time,* a heavy tome full of graphs and tabular material which Bayliss had insisted he read, asserting that it filled in necessary background to the case. Larsen had spent a couple of hours on it, but so far he had got no further than the preface to the fourth edition.

Periodically he went over to the window, peered through the plastic vanes of the blind for any signs of movement in the next chalet. Beyond, the desert lay in the sunlight like an enormous

bleached bone, against which the flaring, aztec-red tail fins of Bayliss's Pontiac glittered like a flamboyant phoenix. The remaining three chalets were empty; the complex was operated by the electronics company for which he and Bayliss worked as a sort of "recreational" center for senior executives and tired think-men. The desert site had been chosen for its hypotensive virtues, its supposed equivalent to psychic zero. Two or three days of leisurely reading, of thoughtfully watching the motionless horizons, and the neuronic grids realigned, tension and anxiety thresholds rose to more useful levels, creative and decisional activity heightened.

However, two days there, Larsen reflected, and he had very nearly gone mad. It was lucky Bayliss had been around, with his handy hypo. Though the man was certainly casual when it came to supervising his patients, left them to their own resources, in fact, looking back, he—Larsen—had been responsible for just about all the diagnosis. Bayliss had done little more than thumb his hypo, toss Kretschmer into his lap, and offer some cogitating asides.

Perhaps he was waiting for something?

Larsen tried to decide whether to phone Bayliss on some pretext; his number—zero, on the internal system—was almost too inviting. Then he heard a door clatter outside, leapt to the window and saw the tall, angular frame of the psychologist crossing the concrete apron between the chalets, head bowed pensively in the sharp sunlight, hands in pockets.

Where's his valise, Larsen thought, almost disappointed, don't tell me he's putting on the barbiturate brakes. Maybe he'll try hypnosis. Masses of posthypnotic suggestions, in the middle of shaving I'll suddenly stand on my head.

He let Bayliss in, fidgeting around him as they went into the lounge.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked. "Do you realize it's nearly four?"

Bayliss sat down at the miniature executive desk in the middle of the lounge and looked around critically, a ploy Larsen resented but never managed to anticipate.

"Of course I realize it. I'm fully wired for time." Letting this pass, he went on: "How have you felt today? No residues at all? Vision, memory, functional apparat okay?" He pointed to the straight-backed chair placed in the interviewee's position at the desk's left-hand corner. "Sit down and try to relax."

Larsen gestured irritably. "How can I relax? Just hanging

around here, waiting for the next bomb to go off." He began his analysis of the past twenty-four hours, a task he enjoyed, larding the case history with liberal doses of speculative commentary.

"Actually, last night was easier. I think I'm entering a new zone. Everything's beginning to stabilize, lose that edgy feel. I'm not looking over my shoulder all the time. I've left the inside doors open, and before I enter a room I deliberately anticipate it, try to extrapolate its depth and dimensions so that it doesn't *surprise* me–before I used to open a door and just dive through like a man stepping into an empty lift shaft."

Larsen paced up and down, cracking his knuckles. Eyes half closed, Bayliss watched him steadily. "I'm pretty sure there won't be another attack," Larsen continued. "In fact, the best thing is probably for me to get straight back to the plant, after all there's no point in sitting around here indefinitely. I feel more or less completely okay."

Bayliss nodded slowly. "In that case, then, why are you so jumpy?"

Exasperated, Larsen clenched his fists. He could almost hear the artery thudding angrily in his temple. "I'm *not* jumpy! For God's sake, Bayliss, I thought the advanced view was that psychiatrist and patient shared the illness together, forgot their own identities and took equal responsibility. You're trying to slide out—"

"I am not," Bayliss cut in firmly. "I accept complete responsibility for you. That's why I want you to stay here until you've come to terms with this thing."

Larsen snorted. "'Thing'! Now you're trying to make it sound like something out of a horror movie. All I had was a simple hallucination. And I'm not even completely convinced it was that." He pointed through the window. "Suddenly opening the garage door in that bright sunlight–it might have been just a shadow."

"You described it pretty exactly," Bayliss commented. "Color of the hair, moustache, the clothes he wore."

"Back projection. The detail in dreams is authentic too." Larsen moved the chair out of the way and leaned forward across the desk. "Another thing. I don't feel you're being entirely frank."

Their eyes leveled. Bayliss studied Larsen carefully for a moment, noticing his widely dilated pupils, then looked away.

"Well?" Larsen pressed.

Bayliss stood up, buttoned his jacket and walked across to the door. "I'll call in tomorrow. Meanwhile try to unwind yourself a

little. I'm not trying to alarm you, Larsen, but this problem may be rather more complicated than you imagine." He nodded, then slipped out before Larsen could reply.

Larsen stepped over to the window, through the blind watched the psychologist disappear into his chalet. Disturbed for a moment, the sunlight again settled itself heavily over everything. A few minutes later the sounds of one of the Bartok quartets whined fretfully across the apron.

Larsen went back to the desk and sat down, elbows thrust forward aggressively. Bayliss irritated him, with his neurotic music and inaccurate diagnoses, and he felt tempted to climb straight into his car and drive back to the plant. Strictly speaking, though, the psychologist outranked Larsen, and probably had executive authority over him while he was at the chalet, particularly as the five days he had spent there were on the company's time.

He gazed around the silent lounge, tracing the cool horizontal shadows that dappled the walls, listening to the low soothing hum of the air-conditioner. His argument with Bayliss had refreshed him and he felt composed and confident. Yet shallow residues of tension and uneasiness still existed, and he found it difficult to keep his eyes off the open doors to the bedroom and kitchen.

He had arrived at the chalet five days earlier, exhausted and overwrought, on the verge of a total neuronic collapse. For three months he had been working without a break on programming the complex circuitry of a huge brain simulator which the company's Advanced Designs Division were building for one of the big psychiatric foundations. This was a complete electronic replica of the central nervous system, each spinal level represented by a single computer, other computers holding massive memory banks in which sleep, tension, aggression and other psychic functions were coded and stored, building blocks that could be played into the CNS simulator to construct models of dissociation states and withdrawal syndromes, any psychic complex on demand.

The design teams working on the simulator had been watched vigilantly by Bayliss and his assistants, and the weekly tests had revealed the mounting load of fatigue and worry that Larsen was carrying. Finally Bayliss had pulled him off the switchback and sent him out to the desert for two or three days' recuperation.

Larsen had been glad to get away. For the first two days he had lounged aimlessly around the deserted chalets, pleasantly fuddled by the barbiturates Bayliss prescribed, gazing out across the white

deck of the desert floor, going to bed by eight and sleeping until noon. Every morning the caretaker had driven in from the town nearby to clean up and leave the groceries and menu slips, but Larsen never saw her, only too glad to be alone. Deliberately seeing no one, allowing the natural rhythms of his mind to re-establish themselves, he knew he would soon recover.

In fact, though, the first person he had seen had suddenly stepped up to him straight out of a nightmare.

Larsen still looked back on the encounter with a shudder.

After lunch on his third day at the chalet he had decided to drive out into the desert and examine an old quartz mine in one of the canyons. This was a two-hour trip and he had made up a thermos of iced martinis and stowed it in the back seat. The garage was adjacent to the chalet, set back from the kitchen side entrance, and fitted with a roll steel door that lifted vertically and curved up under the roof.

Larsen had locked the chalet behind him, then raised the garage door and driven his car out onto the apron. Going back for the thermos which he had left on the bench at the rear of the garage he had noticed a full can of gas in the shadows against one corner. For a moment he paused, adding up his mileage, and decided to take the can with him. He carried it over to the car, then turned around to close the garage door.

The roll had failed to retract completely when he had first raised it, and reached down to the level of his chin. Putting his weight on the handle, Larsen managed to move it down a few inches, the sunlight reflected in the steel panels dazzling his eyes, but the inertia was too much for him. Pressing his palms under the door, he jerked it upward slightly to gain more momentum on the downward swing.

The interval was small, no more than six inches, but it was just enough for him to see into the darkened garage.

Hiding in the shadows against the back wall near the bench, was the indistinct but nonetheless unmistakable figure of a man. He stood motionless, arms loosely at his sides, watching Larsen. He wore a light cream suit, covered by patches of shadow that gave him a curious fragmentary look, a neat blue sportshirt, and two-tone shoes. He was stockily built, with a thick brush moustache and plump face, eyes that stared steadily at Larsen but somehow seemed to be focused beyond him.

Still holding the door with both hands, Larsen gaped at the man blankly. Not only was there no means by which he could have

entered the garage—there were no windows or side doors—but there was something definitely menacing about his stance.

Larsen was about to call to him when the man suddenly moved forward and stepped straight out of the shadows toward him.

Aghast, Larsen backed away. The dark patches across the man's suit were not shadows at all, but the outline of the work bench directly behind him.

The man's body and clothes were transparent, he was a living zombie!

Galvanized into life, Larsen choked off his scream, seized the garage door and hurled it down. He dived at the lock, snapped the bolt in and jammed it closed with both hands, knees pressed against it desperately.

Half paralyzed by cramp and barely breathing, suit soaked in sweat, he was still holding the door down when Bayliss drove up thirty minutes later.

Larsen drummed his fingers irritably on the desk, stood up and went into the kitchen. Cut off from the barbiturates they had been intended to counteract, the three amphetamines had begun to make him feel restless and overstimulated. He switched the coffee percolator on and then off, prowled back to the lounge and sat down on the sofa with the copy of Kretschmer.

He read a few pages, increasingly impatient. What light Kretschmer threw on his problem was hard to see, most of the case histories described deep schizos and irreversible paranoids. His own problem was much more superficial, a momentary aberration due to overloading. Why wouldn't Bayliss see this? For some reason he seemed to be unconsciously wishing for a major crisis, probably because he, the psychologist, secretly wanted to become the patient.

Larsen tossed the book aside, looked out through the window at the desert. Suddenly the chalet seemed dark and cramped, a claustrophobic focus of suppressed aggressions. He stood up, strode over to the door and stepped out into the clear open air.

Grouped in a loose semicircle, the chalets seemed to shrink towards the ground as he strolled to the rim of the concrete apron a hundred yards away, the mountains behind looming up enormously. It was late afternoon, on the edge of dusk, and the sky was a vivid vibrant blue, highlighted by the deepening colors of the desert floor, overlayed by the huge lanes of shadow that reached from the mountains against the sun line. Larsen turned and looked back at the chalets. There was no sign of movement,

other than a faint discordant echo of the atonal music Bayliss was playing, and the whole scene seemed suddenly unreal.

Reflecting on this, Larsen felt something shift inside his mind. The sensation was undefined, like an expected cue that had failed to materialize, a forgotten intention. He tried to recall it, unable to remember whether he had switched on the coffee percolator.

He walked back to the chalets, noticing that he had left the kitchen door open. As he passed the lounge window on his way to close it he glanced in over his shoulder.

A man was sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, face hidden by the volume of Kretschmer. For a moment Larsen assumed that Bayliss had called in to see him, and walked on, deciding to make coffee for them both. Then he noticed that the stereogram was still playing in Bayliss's chalet.

Picking his steps carefully, he moved back to the lounge window and craned around it cautiously. The man's face was still hidden, but a single glance confirmed that the visitor was not Bayliss. He was wearing the same cream suit Larsen had seen two days earlier, the same two-tone shoes. But this time the man was no hallucination, his hands and clothes were solid and palpable. He shifted about on the sofa, denting one of the cushions, turned a page of the book, flexing the spine between his hands.

Pulse thickening, Larsen watched him carefully, bracing himself against the window ledge. Something about the man, his posture, the way he held his hands, convinced him that he had seen him before their fragmentary encounter in the garage.

Then the man lowered the book and threw it onto the seat beside him. He sat back and looked through the window, his focus only a few inches from Larsen's face.

Mesmerized, Larsen stared back at him. He recognized the man without doubt, the pudgy face, the nervous eyes, the too thick moustache. Now at last he could see him clearly and realized he knew him only too well, better than anyone else on Earth.

The man was himself!

Bayliss clipped the hypodermic into his valise, placed it on the lid of the stereogram.

"Hallucination is the wrong term altogether," he told Larsen, who was lying stretched out on Bayliss's sofa, sipping weakly at a glass of hot whiskey. "Stop using it. A psychoretinal image of remarkable strength and duration, but not a hallucination."

Larsen gestured feebly. He had stumbled into Bayliss's chalet

an hour earlier, literally beside himself with fright. Bayliss had calmed him down, then dragged him back across the apron to the lounge window, made him accept that his double had gone. Bayliss wasn't in the least surprised at the identity of the phantom, and this worried Larsen almost as much as the actual hallucination. What else was Bayliss hiding up his sleeve?

"I'm surprised you didn't realize it sooner yourself," Bayliss remarked. "Your description of the man in the garage was so obvious—the same cream suit, the same shoes and shirt, let alone the exact physical similarity, even down to your moustache."

Recovering a little, Larsen sat up. He smoothed down his cream gabardine suit, brushed the dust off his brown and white shoes. "Thanks for warning me. All you've got to do now is tell me who he is."

Bayliss sat down in one of the chairs. "What do you mean, who he is? He's you, of course."

"I know that, but why, where does he come from? God, I must be going insane."

Bayliss snapped his fingers. "No, you're not, pull yourself together. This is a purely functional disorder, like double vision or amnesia, nothing more serious. If it was I'd have pulled you out of here long ago. Perhaps I should have done anyway, but I think we can find a quick safe way out of the image maze you're in."

He took a notebook out of his breast pocket. "Let's have a look at what we've got. Now, two features stand out above all others. First, the phantom is yourself, there's no doubt about that, he's an exact replica of you. More important, though, he is you as you are now, your exact contemporary in time, unidealized, unmutilated, with no compensation devices working at all. He isn't the shining youthful hero of the superego, or the haggard graybeard of the death wish. He is simply a photographic double. Displace one eyeball gently with your finger and you'll see a double of me. Your double is no more unusual, with the exception that the displacement is not in space but in time. You see, the second thing I noticed about your garbled description of this phantom was that, not only was he a photographic double, but he was doing exactly what you yourself had been doing a few minutes previously. The man in the garage was standing by the workbench, just where you stood when you were wondering whether to take the can of gas. Again, the man reading in the armchair was merely repeating exactly what you had been doing, with the same book, five minutes earlier. He

* * *

even stared out of the window as you say you did before going out for a stroll."

Larsen nodded slowly, sipping a whiskey. "You're suggesting then, that the hallucination was nothing more than a sort of mental flashback?"

"Precisely. The stream of retinal images reaching the optic lobes is nothing more than a film strip. Every image is stored away, thousands of reels, a hundred thousand hours of running time. Usually flashbacks are deliberate, when we consciously select a few blurry stills from the film library, a childhood scene, the image of our neighborhood streets we carry around with us all day near the surface of consciousness. But upset the projector slightly—overstrain could do it—suddenly jolt it back a few hundred frames, and you'll superimpose a completely irrelevant strip of already exposed film, in your case a glimpse of yourself sitting on the sofa. It's the apparent irrelevancy that is so frightening."

Larsen gestured with his glass. "Wait a minute, though. When I was on the sofa reading Kretschmer I didn't actually see myself, any more than I can see myself now. So where did the superimposed images come from?"

Bayliss put away his notebook. "Don't take the analogy of the film strip too literally. You may not see yourself sitting on that sofa, but your awareness of being there is just as powerful as visual corroboration. It's the multichannel stream of tactile, positional, and psychic images that form the real data store. Very little extrapolation is needed to transpose the observer's eye a few yards to the other side of a room. Purely visual memories are never completely accurate anyway."

"How do you explain why the man I saw in the garage was transparent?"

"Quite simply. The process was only just beginning, the intensity of the image was weak. The one you saw this afternoon was much stronger. I cut you off barbiturates deliberately knowing full well that those stimulants you were taking on the sly would really trigger something if they were allowed to operate unopposed."

He went over to Larsen, took his glass and refilled it from the decanter. "But let's think of the future. The most interesting aspect of all this is the light it throws on one of the oldest archetypes in the human psyche—the ghost—and the whole supernatural army of phantoms, witches, demons, and so on. *Are they all, in fact, noth-*

ing more than psychoretinal flashbacks, transposed images of the observer himself, jolted onto the retinal screen by fear, bereavement, religious obsession? The most notable thing about the majority of ghosts is how prosaically equipped they are, compared with the elaborate literary productions of the great mystics and dreamers. The nebulous white sheet is probably the observer's own nightgown. It's an interesting field for speculation. For example, take the most famous ghost in literature and reflect how much more sense Hamlet makes if you realize that the ghost of his murdered father is really Hamlet himself."

"All right, all right," Larsen cut in irritably. "But how does this help me?"

Bayliss broke off his reflective up and down patrol of the floor, fixed an eye on Larsen. "I'm coming to that. There are two methods of dealing with this dysfunction of yours. The classical technique is to pump you full of tranquilizers and brick you into a bed for a year or so. Gradually your mind would knit together, and primary neural pathways reassemble themselves. Long job, boring for you and everybody else. The alternative method is frankly experimental, but I think it might work. I mentioned the phenomenon of the ghost because it's an interesting fact that although there have been tens of thousands of recorded cases of people being pursued by ghosts, and a few of the ghosts themselves being pursued, there have been no cases of ghost and observer actually meeting of their own volition. Tell me, what would have happened if, when you saw your double this afternoon, you had gone straight into the lounge and spoken to him?"

Larsen shuddered. "Obviously nothing, if your theory holds. I wouldn't like to test it."

"That's just what you're going to do. Don't panic. The next time you see a double sitting in a chair reading Kretschmer go up and speak to him. If he doesn't reply sit down in the chair yourself. That's all you have to do."

Larsen jumped up, gesticulating. "For heaven's sake, Bayliss, are you crazy? Do you know what it's like to suddenly see yourself? All you want to do is run."

"I realize that, but it's the worst thing you can do. Why, whenever anyone grapples with a ghost, does it always vanish instantly? Because forcibly occupying the same physical coordinates as the double jolts the psychic projector onto a single channel again, the two separate streams of retinal images coincide and fuse. You've

got to try, Larsen. It may be quite an effort, but you'll cure yourself once and for all, really blast those neuronic pathways clear again."

Larsen shook his head stubbornly. "The idea's insane." To himself he added: I'd rather shoot the thing. Then he remembered the .38 in his suitcase, and the presence of the weapon gave him a stronger sense of security than all Bayliss's drugs and advice. The revolver was a simple symbol of aggression, and even if the phantom was only an intruder in his own mind, it gave that portion which still remained intact greater confidence, enough possibly to dissipate the double's power.

Eyes half closed with fatigue, he listened vaguely to Bayliss, nodding agreement to the latter's injunctions. Half an hour later he went back to his chalet, found the revolver and hid it under a magazine in the letter box outside the lounge door. It was too conspicuous to carry, and anyway might fire accidentally and injure him. Outside the front door it would be safely hidden and yet easily accessible, ready to mete out a little old-fashioned punishment to any double dealer trying to play a fifth ace into the game.

Two days later, with unexpected vengeance, the opportunity came.

Bayliss had driven into town to buy a new stylus for the stereogram, leaving Larsen to prepare lunch for them while he was away. Larsen pretended to resent the chore, but secretly he was glad of something to do, tired of hanging around the chalets while Bayliss watched him as if he were an experimental animal, eagerly waiting for the next crisis. With luck this might never come, if only to spite Bayliss, who had been having everything too much his own way. Larsen had cut out the amphetamines altogether and felt nearer normality than he had done at any time over the last three months.

After laying the table in Bayliss's kitchenette and getting plenty of ice ready for the martinis (alcohol was just the thing, Larsen readily decided, a wonderful CNS depressant) he went back to his chalet and put on a clean shirt. On an impulse he decided to change his shoes and suit as well, and fished out the blue office serge and black oxfords he had worn on his way out to the desert. Not only were the associations of the cream suit and sports shoes unpleasant, but a complete change of costume might well forestall the double's reappearance, provide a fresh psychic image of himself powerful enough to suppress any wandering visions. Looking at himself in the mirror, he decided to carry the principle even

further, switched on his shaver and cut away his moustache. Then he thinned out his hair, plastered it back smoothly across his scalp.

The transformation was certainly effective. When Bayliss climbed out of his car and walked into the lounge he almost failed to recognize Larsen, flinched back involuntarily at the sight of the sleek-haired, dark-suited figure who stepped suddenly from behind the kitchen door.

"What the hell are you playing at?" he snapped at Larsen. "This is no time for practical jokes." He surveyed Larsen critically. "You look like a cheap detective."

Larsen guffawed. The incident put him in high spirits, and after several martinis he began to feel extremely buoyant, talking away rapidly through the meal, a fund of wisecracks and humorous asides. Strangely, though, Bayliss seemed eager to get rid of him; he realized why shortly after he returned to his chalet. His pulse had quickened, he found himself prowling around with rapid nervous movements, his brain felt overactive and accelerated. The martinis had only been partly responsible for his elation. Now that they were wearing off he began to see the real agent—some stimulant Bayliss had slipped him in the hope of precipitating another crisis.

Larsen stood by the window, staring out angrily at Bayliss's chalet. The psychologist's impudence and utter lack of scruple outraged him. His fingers fretted nervously across the blind, he suddenly felt like kicking the whole place down and speeding off. With its plywood-thin walls and matchbox furniture the chalet was nothing more than a cardboard asylum, everything that had happened there, the breakdowns and his nightmarish phantoms, had probably been schemed up by Bayliss deliberately.

Larsen noticed that the stimulant seemed to be extremely powerful. The takeoff was sustained and unbroken. He tried hopelessly to relax and level off, went into the bedroom and kicked his suitcase around, lit two cigarettes without realizing it.

Finally, unable to contain himself any longer, he slammed the front door back and stormed out across the apron, determined to have everything out with Bayliss and demand an immediate sedative.

Bayliss's lounge was empty. Larsen plunged through into the kitchen and bedroom, discovered to his annoyance that Bayliss was having a shower. He hung around helplessly in the lounge for a few moments, then decided to wait in his chalet.

Head down, he crossed the bright sunlight at a fast stride and was only a few steps from the darkened doorway when he noticed that a man in a blue suit was standing there watching him.

Heart seizing, Larsen shrank back, recognizing the double even before he had completely accepted the change of costume, the smooth-shaven face with its altered planes. The man hovered indecisively, flexing his fingers, and appeared to be on the verge of stepping down into the sunlight.

Larsen was about ten feet from him, directly in line with Bayliss's door. He backed away, at the same time swinging to his left to the lee of the garage. There he stopped and pulled himself together. The double was still hesitating in the doorway, longer, he was sure, than he himself had done. Larsen looked carefully at the face, repulsed and nauseated, not so much by the absolute accuracy of the image, but by a strange, almost luminous pastiness that gave the double's features the distinctive waxy sheen of a corpse. It was this unpleasant gloss that held Larsen back—the double was an arm's length from the letter box holding the .38, and nothing could have induced Larsen to approach it.

He decided to enter the chalet and watch the double from behind. Rather than use the kitchen door, which gave access to the lounge on the double's immediate right, he turned to circle the garage and climb in through the bedroom window on the far side.

He was picking his way through a dump of old mortar and barbed wire behind the garage when he heard a voice call out, "Larsen, you idiot, what do you think you're doing?"

It was Bayliss, leaning out of his bathroom window. Larsen stumbled, found his balance, and waved Bayliss back angrily. Bayliss merely shook his head, leaned further out, drying his neck with a towel.

Larsen retraced his steps, signaling to Bayliss to keep quiet. He was crossing the interval between the garage wall and the near corner of Bayliss's chalet when out of the side of his eye he noticed a dark-suited figure standing with its back to him a few yards from the garage door.

The double had moved! Larsen stopped and whirled around, Bayliss forgotten, and watched the double warily. He was poised on the balls of his feet, as Larsen had been only a minute or so earlier, elbows up, hands weaving defensively. His eyes were hidden, but he appeared to be looking at the front door of Larsen's chalet.

Automatically, Larsen's eyes also moved to the doorway.

The original blue-suited figure still stood there, staring out into the sunlight!

There was not one double now, but two!

For a moment Larsen goggled helplessly at the two figures, standing on either side of the apron like half-animated dummies in a waxworks tableau.

Suddenly the figure with its back to him swung sharply on one heel and began to stalk rapidly toward him. He stared sightlessly at Larsen, the sunlight exposing his face, and with a jolt of horror Larsen recognized for the first time the perfect similarity of the double—the same plump cheeks, the same mole by the right nostril, the white upper lip with the same small razor cut where the moustache had been shaved away. But above all he recognized the man's state of shock and anxiety, the nervous lips, the tension around the neck and facial muscles, the utter exhaustion just below the surface of the mask.

His voice strangled, Larsen turned and bolted.

He stopped running about two hundred yards out in the desert beyond the edge of the apron. Gasping for breath, he dropped to one knee behind a narrow sandstone outcropping and looked back at the chalets. The second double was making his way around the garage, climbing through the tangle of old wire. The other was crossing the interval between the chalets. Oblivious of them both, Bayliss was struggling with the bathroom window, forcing it back so that he could see out into the desert.

Trying to steady himself, Larsen wiped his face on his jacket sleeve. So Bayliss had been right, although he had never anticipated that more than one image could be seen during any single attack. But in fact Larsen had spawned two in close succession, each at a critical phase during the last five minutes. Somehow the psychic projector must have received two separate jolts, was now throwing two distinct streams of images onto the retinal screen.

Wondering whether to wait for the images to fade, Larsen remembered the revolver in the letter box. However irrational, it seemed his only hope. With it he would be able to test the ultimate validity of the doubles, drive them back out of his mind.

The outcropping ran diagonally to the right to the edge of the apron. Crouching forward, he scurried along it, pausing at intervals to follow the scene. The two doubles were still holding their positions, though Bayliss had closed his window and disappeared.

Larsen reached the edge of the apron, which was built on a shallow table about a foot off the desert floor, and moved along its rim to where an old fifty-gallon drum gave him a vantage point. To reach the revolver he decided to go around the far side of Bayliss's chalet, where he would find his own doorway unguarded except for the double watching by the garage.

He was about to step forward when something made him look over his shoulder.

Running straight toward him along the outcropping, head down, hands almost touching the ground, was an enormous ratlike creature, moving at tremendous speed. Every ten or fifteen yards it paused for a moment, and looked out at the chalets, and Larsen caught a glimpse of its face, insane and terrified, another replica of his own.

"Larsen! Larsen!"

Bayliss stood by the chalet, waving out at the desert.

Larsen glanced back at the phantom hurtling toward him, now only thirty feet away, then jumped up and lurched helplessly across to Bayliss.

Bayliss caught him firmly with his hands, pulled him together. "Larsen, what's the matter with you? Are you having an attack?"

Larsen gestured frantically at the figures around him. "Stop them, Bayliss, for God's sake," he gasped. "I can't get away from them."

Bayliss shook him roughly. "You can see *more* than one? Where are they, show me."

Larsen pointed at the two figures hovering luminously near the chalet, then waved limply in the direction of the desert. "By the garage, and over there along the wall. There's another hiding along that ridge."

Bayliss seized him by the arm. "Come on, man, you've got to face up to them, it's no use running." He tried to drag Larsen toward the garage, but Larsen pulled away and slipped down onto the concrete.

"I can't, Bayliss, believe me. There's a gun in my letter box. Get it for me, it's the only way."

Bayliss hesitated, looking down at Larsen, slumped inertly on his knees. "All right. Try to hold on."

Larsen stood up, pointed to the far corner of Bayliss's chalet. "I'll wait over there for you."

As Bayliss ran off swiftly he hobbled toward the corner. Half-

way there he tripped across the remains of an old ladder lying on the ground, twisted his right ankle savagely between two of the rungs.

Clasping his foot, he sat down just as Bayliss appeared between the chalets, the .38 in his hand. He looked around uncertainly for Larsen, who cleared his throat to call to him.

Before he could open his mouth he saw the double who had followed him along the ridge leap up from behind the drum and stumble up to Bayliss across the concrete floor. He was dishevelled and exhausted, jacket almost off his shoulders, collar open, the tie knot under one ear. So the image was still pursuing him, dogging his footsteps like an obsessed shadow.

Larsen tried to call to Bayliss again, but something he saw choked the voice in his throat.

Bayliss was looking at his double!

Larsen wrenched himself to his feet, feeling a sudden premonition of terror. He tried to wave to Bayliss, but the latter was watching the double intently as it pointed to the figures nearby, nodding to it in apparent agreement.

"Bayliss!"

The shot drowned his cry. Bayliss had fired somewhere between the garages, and the echo of the shot bounded among the chalets. The double was still beside him, pointing in all directions. Bayliss raised the revolver and fired again. The sound slammed violently at Larsen, making him feel stunned and sick.

Now Bayliss too was suffering the same psychotic attack, seeing two simultaneous images, but in his case not of himself, but of Larsen, on whom his mind had been focusing for the past weeks. A repetition of Larsen stumbling over to him and pointing at the phantoms was being played over onto Bayliss's retinal screens, diabolically at the exact moment when he had returned with the revolver and was searching for a target.

Larsen started to stumble away, trying to reach the corner wall. A third shot roared through the air and a vicious flash of fire was reflected in the bathroom window.

He had almost reached the corner when he heard Bayliss scream. Leaning one hand against the wall he looked back.

Mouth open, Bayliss was staring wildly at him, the revolver clenched like a bomb in his hand. Beside him the blue-suited figure stood quietly, straightening its tie.

At last Bayliss had realized he could see two images of Larsen, one beside him, the other twenty feet away against the chalet.

But how was he to know which was the real Larsen? Staring blankly at Larsen, he seemed unable to decide.

Then the double by his shoulder raised one arm and pointed at Larsen, toward the corner wall to which he himself had pointed a minute earlier.

Larsen tried to scream, then hurled himself at the wall and desperately pulled himself along it. Behind him Bayliss's feet came thudding across the concrete.

He heard only the first of the three shots.

The Cage of Sand

At sunset, when the vermilion glow reflected from the dunes along the horizon fitfully illuminated the white faces of the abandoned hotels, Bridgman stepped onto his balcony and looked out over the long stretches of cooling sand as the tides of purple shadow seeped across them. Slowly, extending their slender fingers through the shallow saddles and depressions, the shadows massed together like gigantic combs, a few phosphorescing spurs of obsidian isolated for a moment between the tines, and then finally coalesced and flooded in a solid wave across the half-submerged hotels. Behind the silent façades, in the tilting sand-filled streets which had once glittered with cocktail bars and restaurants, it was already night. Halos of moonlight beaded the lamp standards with silver dew, and draped the shuttered windows and slipping cornices like a frost of frozen gas.

As Bridgman watched, his lean bronzed arms propped against the rusting rail, the last whorls of light sank away into the cerise funnel withdrawing below the horizon, and the first wind stirred across the dead Martian sand. Here and there miniature cyclones whirled about a sand spur, drawing off swirling feathers of moon-washed spray, and a nimbus of white dust swept across the dunes and settled in the dips and hollows. Gradually the drifts accumulated, edging toward the former shoreline below the hotels. Already the first four floors had been inundated, and the sand now reached up to within two feet of Bridgman's balcony. After the next sandstorm he would be forced yet again to move to the floor above.

"Bridgman!"

The voice cleft the darkness like a spear. Fifty yards to his right, at the edge of the derelict sandbreak he had once attempted to build below the hotel, a square stocky figure wearing a pair of frayed cotton shorts waved up at him. The moonlight etched the broad sinewy muscles of his chest, the powerful bowed legs sinking almost to their calves in the soft Martian sand. He was about forty-five years old, his thinning hair close-cropped so that he seemed almost bald. In his right hand he carried a large canvas holdall.

Bridgman smiled to himself. Standing there patiently in the moonlight below the derelict hotel, Travis reminded him of some long-delayed tourist arriving at a ghost resort years after its extinction.

"Bridgman, are you coming?" When the latter still leaned on his balcony rail, Travis added, "The next conjunction is tomorrow."

Bridgman shook his head, a rictus of annoyance twisting his mouth. He hated the bimonthly conjunctions, when all seven of the derelict satellite capsules still orbiting the Earth crossed the sky together. Invariably on these nights he remained in his room, playing over the old memo-tapes he had salvaged from the submerged chalets and motels further along the beach (the hysterical "This is Mamie Goldberg, 62955 Cocoa Boulevard, I really wanna protest against this crazy evacuation . . ." or resigned "Sam Snade here, the Pontiac convertible in the back garage belongs to anyone who can dig it out.") Travis and Louise Woodward always came to the hotel on the conjunction nights—it was the highest building in the resort, with an unrestricted view from horizon to horizon—and would follow the seven converging stars as they pursued their endless courses around the globe. Both would be oblivious of everything else, which the wardens knew only too well, and they reserved their most careful searches of the sand sea for these bimonthly occasions. Invariably Bridgman found himself forced to act as lookout for the other two.

"I was out last night," he called down to Travis. "Keep away from the northeast perimeter fence by the Cape. They'll be busy repairing the track."

Most nights Bridgman divided his time between excavating the buried motels for caches of supplies (the former inhabitants of the resort area had assumed the government would soon rescind its evacuation order) and disconnecting the sections of metal roadway

laid across the desert for the wardens' jeeps. Each of the squares of wire mesh was about five yards wide and weighed over three hundred pounds. After he had snapped the lines of rivets, dragged the sections away, and buried them among the dunes he would be exhausted, and spend most of the next day nursing his strained hands and shoulders. Some sections of the track were now permanently anchored with heavy steel stakes, and he knew that sooner or later they would be unable to delay the wardens by sabotaging the roadway.

Travis hesitated, and with a noncommittal shrug disappeared among the dunes, the heavy tool-bag swinging easily from one powerful arm. Despite the meager diet which sustained him, his energy and determination seemed undiminished—in a single night Bridgman had watched him dismantle twenty sections of track and then loop together the adjacent limbs of a crossroad, sending an entire convoy of six vehicles off into the wastelands to the south.

Bridgman turned from the balcony, then stopped when a faint tang of brine touched the cool air. Ten miles away, hidden by the lines of dunes, was the sea, the long green rollers of the middle Atlantic breaking against the red Martian strand. When he had first come to the beach five years earlier there had never been the faintest scent of brine across the intervening miles of sand. Slowly, however, the Atlantic was driving the shore back to its former margins. The tireless shoulder of the Gulf Stream drummed against the soft Martian dust and piled the dunes into grotesque rococo reefs which the wind carried away into the sand sea. Gradually the ocean was returning, reclaiming its great smooth basin, sifting out the black quartz and Martian obsidian which would never be windborne and drawing these down into its deeps. More and more often the stain of brine would hang on the evening air, reminding Bridgman why he had first come to the beach and removing any inclination to leave.

Three years earlier he had attempted to measure the rate of approach, by driving a series of stakes into the sand at the water's edge, but the shifting contours of the dunes carried away the colored poles. Later, using the promontory at Cape Kennedy, where the old launching gantries and landing ramps reared up into the sky like derelict pieces of giant sculpture, he had calculated by triangulation that the advance was little more than thirty yards per year. At this rate—without wanting to, he had automatically made the calculation—it would be well over five hundred years before

the Atlantic reached its former littoral at Cocoa Beach. Though discouragingly slow, the movement was nonetheless in a forward direction, and Bridgman was happy to remain in his hotel ten miles away across the dunes, conceding toward its time of arrival the few years he had at his disposal.

Later, shortly after Louise Woodward's arrival, he had thought of dismantling one of the motel cabins and building himself a small chalet by the water's edge. But the shoreline had been too dismal and forbidding. The great red dunes rolled on for miles, cutting off half the sky, dissolving slowly under the impact of the slate-green water. There was no formal tideline, but only a steep shelf littered with nodes of quartz and rusting fragments of Mars rockets brought back with the ballast. He spent a few days in a cave below a towering sand reef, watching the long galleries of compacted red dust crumble and dissolve as the cold Atlantic stream sluiced through them, collapsing like the decorated colonnades of a baroque cathedral. In the summer the heat reverberated from the hot sand as from the slag of some molten sun, burning the rubber soles from his boots, and the light from the scattered flints of washed quartz flickered with diamond hardness. Bridgman had returned to the hotel grateful for his room overlooking the silent dunes.

Leaving the balcony, the sweet smell of brine still in his nostrils, he went over to the desk. A small cone of shielded light shone down over the tape recorder and rack of spools. The rumble of the wardens' unsilenced engines always gave him at least five minutes' warning of their arrival, and it would have been safe to install another lamp in the room—there were no roadways between the hotel and the sea, and from a distance any light reflected onto the balcony was indistinguishable from the corona of glimmering phosphors which hung over the sand like myriads of fireflies. However, Bridgman preferred to sit in the darkened suite, enclosed by the circle of books on the makeshift shelves, the shadow-filled air playing over his shoulders through the long night as he toyed with the memo-tapes, fragments of a vanished and unregretted past. By day he always drew the blinds, immolating himself in a world of perpetual twilight.

Bridgman had easily adapted himself to his self-isolation, soon evolved a system of daily routines that gave him the maximum of time to spend on his private reveries. Pinned to the walls around

him were a series of huge whiteprints and architectural drawings, depicting various elevations of a fantastic Martian city he had once designed, its glass spires and curtain walls rising like heliotropic jewels from the vermilion desert. In fact, the whole city was a vast piece of jewelry, each elevation brilliantly visualized but as symmetrical, and ultimately as lifeless, as a crown. Bridgman continuously retouched the drawings, inserting more and more details, so that they almost seemed to be photographs of an original.

Most of the hotels in the town—one of a dozen similar resorts buried by the sand which had once formed an unbroken strip of motels, chalets and five-star hotels thirty miles to the south of Cape Kennedy—were well stocked with supplies of canned food abandoned when the area was evacuated and wired off. There were ample reservoirs and cisterns filled with water, apart from a thousand intact cocktail bars six feet below the surface of the sand. Travis had excavated a dozen of these in search of his favorite vintage bourbon. Walking out across the desert behind the town one would suddenly find a short flight of steps cut into the annealed sand and crawl below an occluded sign announcing "The Satellite Bar" or "The Orbit Room" into the inner sanctum, where the jetting deck of a chromium bar had been cleared as far as the diamond-paned mirror freighted with its rows of bottles and figurines. Bridgman would have been glad to see them left undisturbed.

The whole trash of amusement arcades and cheap bars on the outskirts of the beach resorts were a depressing commentary on the original space flights, reducing them to the level of monster sideshows at a carnival.

Outside his room, steps sounded along the corridor, then slowly climbed the stairway, pausing for a few seconds at every landing. Bridgman lowered the memo-tape in his hand, listening to the familiar tired footsteps. This was Louise Woodward, making her invariable evening ascent to the roof ten stories above. Bridgman glanced to the timetable pinned to the wall. Only two of the satellites would be visible, between 12:25 and 12:35 a.m., at an elevation of 62 degrees in the southwest, passing through Cetus and Eridanus, neither of them containing her husband. Although the siting was two hours away, she was already taking up her position, and would remain there until dawn.

Bridgman listened wanly to the feet recede slowly up the stairwell. All through the night the slim pale-faced woman would sit out under the moonlit sky, as the soft Martian sand her husband

had given his life to reach sifted around her in the dark wind, stroking her faded hair like some mourning mariner's wife waiting for the sea to surrender her husband's body. Travis usually joined her later, and the two of them sat side by side against the elevator house, the frosted letters of the hotel's neon sign strewn around their feet like the fragments of a dismembered zodiac, then at dawn made their way down into the shadow-filled streets to their aeries in the nearby hotels.

Initially Bridgman often joined their nocturnal vigil, but after a few nights he began to feel something repellent, if not actually ghoulish, about their mindless contemplation of the stars. This was not so much because of the macabre spectacle of the dead astronauts orbiting the planet in their capsules, but because of the curious sense of unspoken communion between Travis and Louise Woodward, almost as if they were celebrating a private rite to which Bridgman could never be initiated. Whatever their original motives, Bridgman sometimes suspected that these had been overlayed by other, more personal ones.

Ostensibly, Louise Woodward was watching her husband's satellite in order to keep alive his memory, but Bridgman guessed that the memories she unconsciously wished to perpetuate were those of herself twenty years earlier, when her husband had been a celebrity and she herself courted by magazine columnists and TV reporters. For fifteen years after his death—Woodward had been killed testing a new lightweight launching platform—she had lived a nomadic existence, driving restlessly in her cheap car from motel to motel across the continent, following her husband's star as it disappeared into the eastern night, and had at last made her home at Cocoa Beach in sight of the rusting gantries across the bay.

Travis's real motives were probably more complex. To Bridgman, after they had known each other for a couple of years, he had confided that he felt himself bound by a debt of honor to maintain a watch over the dead astronauts for the example of courage and sacrifice they had set him as a child (although most of them had been piloting their wrecked capsules for fifty years before Travis's birth), and that now they were virtually forgotten he must single-handedly keep alive the fading flame of their memory. Bridgman was convinced of his sincerity.

Yet later, going through a pile of old news magazines in the trunk of a car he excavated from a motel port, he came across a

picture of Travis wearing an aluminum pressure suit and learned something more of his story. Apparently Travis had at one time been himself an astronaut—or rather, a would-be astronaut. A test pilot for one of the civilian agencies setting up orbital relay stations, his nerve had failed him a few seconds before the last "hold" of his countdown, a moment of pure unexpected funk that cost the company some five million dollars.

Obviously it was his inability to come to terms with this failure of character, unfortunately discovered lying flat on his back on a contour couch two hundred feet above the launching pad, which had brought Travis to Kennedy, the abandoned Mecca of the first heroes of astronautics.

Tactfully Bridgman had tried to explain that no one would blame him for this failure of nerve—less his responsibility than that of the selectors who had picked him for the flight, or at least the result of an unhappy concatenation of ambiguously worded multiple-choice questions (crosses in the wrong boxes, some heavier to bear and harder to open than others! Bridgman had joked sardonically to himself). But Travis seemed to have reached his own decision about himself. Night after night, he watched the brilliant funerary convoy weave its gilded pathway toward the dawn sun, salving his own failure by identifying it with the greater, but blameless, failure of the seven astronauts. Travis still wore his hair in the regulation "Mohican" cut of the spaceman, still kept himself in perfect physical trim by the vigorous routines he had practiced before his abortive flight. Sustained by the personal myth he had created, he was now more or less unreachable.

"Dear Harry, I've taken the car and deposit box. Sorry it should end like—"

Irritably, Bridgman switched off the memo-tape and its recapitulation of some thirty-year-old private triviality. For some reason he seemed unable to accept Travis and Louise Woodward for what they were. He disliked this failure of compassion, a nagging compulsion to expose other people's motives and strip away the insulating sheaths around their naked nerve strings, particularly as his own motives for being at Cape Kennedy were so suspect. Why was *he* there, what failure was *he* trying to expiate? And why choose Cocoa Beach as his penitential shore? For three years he had asked himself these questions so often that they had ceased to have any meaning, like a fossilized catechism or the blunted self-recrimination of a paranoic.

* * *

He had resigned his job as the chief architect of a big space development company after the large government contract on which the firm depended, for the design of the first Martian city-settlement, was awarded to a rival consortium. Secretly, however, he realized that his resignation had marked his unconscious acceptance that despite his great imaginative gifts he was unequal to the specialized and more prosaic tasks of designing the settlement. On the drawing board, as elsewhere, he would always remain earthbound.

His dreams of building a new Gothic architecture of launching ports and controls gantries, of being the Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier of the first city to be raised outside Earth, faded forever, but left him unable to accept the alternative of turning out endless plans for low-cost hospitals in Ecuador and housing estates in Tokyo. For a year he had drifted aimlessly, but a few color photographs of the vermilion sunsets at Cocoa Beach and a news story about the recluses living on in the submerged motels had provided a powerful compass.

He dropped the memo-tape into a drawer, making an effort to accept Louise Woodward and Travis on their own terms, a wife keeping watch over her dead husband and an old astronaut maintaining a solitary vigil over the memories of his lost comrades-in-arms.

The wind gusted against the balcony window, and a light spray of sand rained across the floor. At night duststorms churned along the beach. Thermal pools isolated by the cooling desert would suddenly accrete like beads of quicksilver and erupt across the fluffy sand in miniature tornadoes.

Only fifty yards away, the dying cough of a heavy diesel cut through the shadows. Quickly Bridgman turned off the small desk light, grateful for his meanness over the battery packs plugged into the circuit, then stepped to the window.

At the leftward edge of the sand break, half-hidden in the long shadows cast by the hotel, was a large tracked vehicle with a low camouflaged hull. A narrow observation bridge had been built over the bumpers directly in front of the squat snout of the engine housing, and two of the beach wardens were craning up through the plexiglass windows at the balconies of the hotel, shifting their binoculars from room to room. Behind them, under the glass dome of the extended driving cabin, were three more wardens, control-

ling an outboard spotlight. In the center of the bowl a thin mote of light pulsed with the rhythm of the engine, ready to throw its powerful beam into any of the open rooms.

Bridgman hid back behind the shutters as the binoculars focused upon the adjacent balcony, moved to his own, hesitated, and passed to the next. Exasperated by the sabotaging of the roadways, the wardens had evidently decided on a new type of vehicle. With their four broad tracks, the huge squat sand cars would be free of the mesh roadways and able to rove at will through the dunes and sand hills.

Bridgman watched the vehicle reverse slowly, its engine barely varying its deep base growl, then move off along the line of hotels, almost indistinguishable in profile among the shifting dunes and hillocks. A hundred yards away, at the first intersection, it turned toward the main boulevard, wisps of dust streaming from the metal cleats like thin spumes of steam. The men in the observation bridge were still watching the hotel. Bridgman was certain that they had seen a reflected glimmer of light, or perhaps some movement of Louise Woodward's on the roof. However reluctant to leave the car and be contaminated by the poisonous dust, the wardens would not hesitate if the capture of one of the beachcombers warranted it.

Racing up the staircase, Bridgman made his way to the roof, crouching below the windows that overlooked the boulevard. Like a huge crab, the sand car had parked under the jutting overhang of the big department store opposite. Once fifty feet from the ground, the concrete lip was now separated from it by little more than six or seven feet, and the sand car was hidden in the shadows below it, engine silent. A single movement in a window, or the unexpected return of Travis, and the wardens would spring from the hatchways, their long-handled nets and lassos pinioning them around the neck and ankles. Bridgman remembered one beachcomber he had seen flushed from his motel hideout and carried off like a huge twitching spider at the center of a black rubber web, the wardens with their averted faces and masked mouths like devils in an abstract ballet.

Reaching the roof, Bridgman stepped out into the opaque white moonlight. Louise Woodward was leaning on the balcony, looking out toward the distant, unseen sea. At the faint sound of the door creaking she turned and began to walk listlessly around the roof, her pale face floating like a nimbus. She wore a freshly ironed

print dress she had found in a rusty spin drier in one of the launderettes, and her streaked blond hair floated out lightly behind her on the wind.

"Louise!"

Involuntarily she started, tripping over a fragment of the neon sign, then moved backward toward the balcony overlooking the boulevard.

"Mrs. Woodward!" Bridgman held her by the elbow, raised a hand to her mouth before she could cry out. "The wardens are down below. They're watching the hotel. We must find Travis before he returns."

Louise hesitated, apparently recognizing Bridgman only by an effort, and her eyes turned up to the black marble sky. Bridgman looked at his watch; it was almost 12:35. He searched the stars in the southwest.

Louise murmured, "They're nearly here now, I must see them. Where is Travis, he should be here?"

Bridgman pulled at her arm. "Perhaps he saw the sand car. Mrs. Woodward, we should leave."

Suddenly she pointed up at the sky, then wrenched away from him and ran to the rail. "There they are!"

Fretting, Bridgman waited until she had filled her eyes with the two companion points of light speeding from the western horizon. These were Merril and Pokrovski—like every schoolboy he knew the sequences perfectly, a second system of constellations with a more complex but far more tangible periodicity and precession—the Castor and Pollux of the orbiting zodiac, whose appearance always heralded a full conjunction the following night.

Louise Woodward gazed up at them from the rail, the rising wind lifting her hair off her shoulders and entraining it horizontally behind her head. Around her feet the red Martian dust swirled and rustled, silting over the fragments of the old neon sign, a brilliant pink spume streaming from her long fingers as they moved along the balcony ledge. When the satellites finally disappeared among the stars along the horizon, she leaned forward, her face raised to the milk-blue moon as if to delay their departure, then turned back to Bridgman, a bright smile on her face.

His earlier suspicions vanishing, Bridgman smiled back at her encouragingly. "Roger will be here tomorrow night, Louise. We must be careful the wardens don't catch us before we see him."

He felt a sudden admiration for her, at the stoical way she had sustained herself during her long vigil. Perhaps she thought of Woodward as still alive, and in some way was patiently waiting for him to return? He remembered her saying once, "Roger was only a boy when he took off, you know, I feel more like his mother now," as if frightened how Woodward would react to her dry skin and fading hair, fearing that he might even have forgotten her. No doubt the death she visualized for him was of a different order than the mortal kind.

Hand in hand, they tiptoed carefully down the flaking steps, jumped down from a terrace window into the soft sand below the windbreak. Bridgman sank to his knees in the fine silver moon dust, then waded up to the firmer ground, pulling Louise after him. They climbed through a breach in the tilting palisades, then ran away from the line of dead hotels looming like skulls in the empty light.

"Paul, wait!" Her head still raised to the sky, Louise Woodward fell to her knees in a hollow between two dunes, with a laugh stumbled after Bridgman as he raced through the dips and saddles. The wind was now whipping the sand off the higher crests, flurries of dust spurting like excited wavelets. A hundred yards away, the town was a fading film set, projected by the camera obscura of the sinking moon. They were standing where the long Atlantic seas had once been ten fathoms deep, and Bridgman could scent again the tang of brine among the flickering whitecaps of dust, phosphorescing like shoals of animalcula. He waited for any sign of Travis.

"Louise, we'll have to go back to the town. The sandstorms are blowing up, we'll never see Travis here."

They moved back through the dunes, then worked their way among the narrow alleyways between the hotels to the northern gateway to the town. Bridgman found a vantage point in a small apartment block, and they lay down looking out below a window lintel into the sloping street, the warm sand forming a pleasant cushion. At the intersections the dust blew across the roadway in white clouds, obscuring the warden's beach car parked a hundred yards down the boulevard.

Half an hour later an engine surged, and Bridgman began to pile sand into the interval in front of them. "They're going. Thank God!"

Louise Woodward held his arm. "Look!"

Fifty feet away, his white vinyl suit half-hidden in the dust clouds, one of the wardens was advancing slowly toward them, his lasso twirling lightly in his hand. A few feet behind was a second warden, craning up at the windows of the apartment block with his binoculars.

Bridgman and Louise crawled back below the ceiling, then dug their way under a transom into the kitchen at the rear. A window opened onto a sand-filled yard, and they darted away through the lifting dust that whirled between the buildings.

Suddenly, around a corner, they saw the line of wardens moving down a side street, the sand car edging along behind them. Before Bridgman could steady himself a spasm of pain seized his right calf, contorting the gastrocnemius muscle, and he fell to one knee. Louise Woodward pulled him back against the wall, then pointed at a squat, bow-legged figure trudging toward them along the curving road into town.

"Travis—"

The tool bag swung from his right hand, and his feet rang faintly on the wire-mesh roadway. Head down, he seemed unaware of the wardens hidden by a bend in the road.

"Come on!" Disregarding the negligible margin of safety, Bridgman clambered to his feet and impetuously ran out into the center of the street. Louise tried to stop him, and they had covered only ten yards before the wardens saw them. There was a warning shout, and the spotlight flung its giant cone down the street. The sand car surged forward, like a massive dust-covered bull, its tracks clawing at the sand.

"Travis!" As Bridgman reached the bend, Louise Woodward ten yards behind, Travis looked up from his reverie, then flung the tool bag over one shoulder and raced ahead of them toward the clutter of motel roofs protruding from the other side of the street. Lagging behind the others, Bridgman again felt the cramp attack his leg, broke off into a painful shuffle. When Travis came back for him Bridgman tried to wave him away, but Travis pinioned his elbow and propelled him forward like an attendant straightarming a patient.

The dust swirling around them, they disappeared through the fading streets and out into the desert, the shouts of the beach wardens lost in the roar and clamor of the baying engine. Around them,

like the strange metallic flora of some extraterrestrial garden, the old neon signs jutted from the red Martian sand—"Satellite Motel," "Planet Bar," "Mercury Motel." Hiding behind them, they reached the scrub-covered dunes on the edge of the town, then picked up one of the trails that led away among the sand reefs. There, in the deep grottoes of compacted sand which hung like inverted palaces, they waited until the storm subsided. Shortly before dawn the wardens abandoned their search, unable to bring the heavy sand car onto the disintegrating reef.

Contemptuous of the wardens, Travis lit a small fire with his cigarette lighter, burning splinters of driftwood that had gathered in the gullies. Bridgman crouched beside it, warming his hands.

"This is the first time they've been prepared to leave the sand car," he remarked to Travis. "It means they're under orders to catch us."

Travis shrugged. "Maybe. They're extending the fence along the beach. They probably intend to seal us in forever."

"What?" Bridgman stood up with a sudden feeling of uneasiness. "Why should they? Are you sure? I mean, what would be the point?"

Travis looked up at him, a flicker of dry amusement on his bleached face. Wisps of smoke wreathed his head, curled up past the serpentine columns of the grotto to the winding interval of sky a hundred feet above. "Bridgman, forgive me saying so, but if you want to leave here, you should leave now. In a month's time you won't be able to."

Bridgman ignored this, and searched the cleft of dark sky overhead, which framed the constellation Scorpio, as if hoping to see a reflection of the distant sea. "They must be crazy. How much of this fence did you see?"

"About eight hundred yards. It won't take them long to complete. The sections are prefabricated, about forty feet high." He smiled ironically at Bridgman's discomfort. "Relax, Bridgman. If you do want to get out, you'll always be able to tunnel underneath it."

"I don't want to get out," Bridgman said coldly. "Damn them, Travis, they're turning the place into a zoo. You know it won't be the same with a fence all the way around it."

"A corner of Earth that is forever Mars." Under the high forehead, Travis's eyes were sharp and watchful. "I see their point. There hasn't been a fatal casualty now—" he glanced at Louise Woodward, who was strolling about in the colonades "—for nearly

twenty years, and passenger rockets are supposed to be as safe as commuters' trains. They're quietly sealing off the past, Louise and I and you with it. I suppose it's pretty considerate of them not to burn the place down with flame throwers. The virus would be a sufficient excuse. After all, we are probably the only reservoirs left on the planet." He picked up a handful of red dust and examined the fine crystals with a somber eye. "Well, Bridgman, what are you going to do?"

His thoughts discharging themselves through his mind like frantic signal flares, Bridgman walked away without answering.

Behind them, Louise Woodward wandered among the deep galleries of the grotto, crooning to herself in a low voice to the sighing rhythms of the whirling sand.

The next morning they returned to the town, wading through the deep drifts of sand that lay like a fresh fall of red snow between the hotels and stores, coruscating in the brilliant sunlight. Travis and Louise Woodward made their way toward their quarters in the motels further down the beach. Bridgman searched the still, crystal air for any signs of the wardens, but the sand car had gone, its tracks obliterated by the storm.

In his room he found their calling card.

A huge tide of dust had flowed through the French windows and submerged the desk and bed, three feet deep against the rear wall. Outside the sandbreak had been inundated, and the contours of the desert had completely altered, a few spires of obsidian marking its former perspectives like buoys on a shifting sea. Bridgman spent the morning digging out his books and equipment, dismantled the electrical system and its batteries and carried everything to the room above. He would have moved to the penthouse on the top floor, but his lights would have been visible for miles.

Settling into his new quarters, he switched on the tape recorder, heard a short clipped message in the brisk voice which had shouted orders at the wardens the previous evening. "Bridgman, this is Major Webster, deputy commandant of Cocoa Beach Reservation. On the instructions of the Anti-Viral Subcommittee of the UN General Assembly we are now building a continuous fence around the beach area. On completion no further egress will be allowed, and anyone escaping will be immediately returned to the reservation. Give yourself up now, Bridgman, before—"

Bridgman stopped the tape, then reversed the spool and erased the message, staring angrily at the instrument. Unable to settle down to the task of rewiring the room's circuits, he paced about,

fiddling with the architectural drawings propped against the wall. He felt restless and hyperexcited, perhaps because he had been trying to repress, not very successfully, precisely those doubts of which Webster had now reminded him.

He stepped onto the balcony and looked out over the desert, at the red dunes rolling to the windows directly below. For the fourth time he had moved up a floor, and the sequence of identical rooms he had occupied were like displaced images of himself seen through a prism. Their common focus, that elusive final definition of himself which he had sought for so long, still remained to be found. Timelessly the sand swept toward him, its shifting contours, approximating more closely than any other landscape he had found to complete psychic zero, enveloping his past failures and uncertainties, masking them in its enigmatic canopy.

Bridgman watched the red sand flicker and floresce in the steepening sunlight. He would never see Mars now, and redress the implicit failure of talent, but a workable replica of the planet was contained within the beach area.

Several million tons of the Martian top-soil had been ferried in as ballast some fifty years earlier, when it was feared that the continuous firing of planetary probes and space vehicles, and the transportation of bulk stores and equipment to Mars would fractionally lower the gravitational mass of the Earth and bring it into a tighter orbit around the Sun. Although the distance involved would be little more than a few millimeters, and barely raise the temperature of the atmosphere, its cumulative effects over an extended period might have resulted in a loss into space of the tenuous layers of the outer atmosphere, and of the radiological veil which alone made the biosphere habitable.

Over a twenty-year period a fleet of large freighters had shuttled to and from Mars, dumping the ballast into the sea near the landing grounds of Cape Kennedy. Simultaneously the Russians were filling in a small section of the Caspian Sea. The intention had been that the ballast should be swallowed by the Atlantic and Caspian waters, but all too soon it was found that the microbiological analysis of the sand had been inadequate.

At the Martian polar caps, where the original water vapor in the atmosphere had condensed, a residue of ancient organic matter formed the topsoil, a fine sandy loess containing the fossilized spores of the giant lichens and mosses which had been the last living organisms on the planet millions of years earlier. Embedded

in these spores were the crystal lattices of the viruses which had once preyed on the plants, and traces of these were carried back to Earth with the Kennedy and Caspian ballast.

A few years afterward a drastic increase in a wide range of plant diseases was noticed in the southern states of America and in the Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan republics of the Soviet Union. All over Florida there were outbreaks of blight and mosaic disease, orange plantations withered and died, stunted palms split by the roadside like dried banana skins, manila grass stiffened into paper spears in the summer heat. Within a few years the entire peninsula was transformed into a desert. The swampy jungles of the Everglades became bleached and dry, the rivers' cracked husks strewn with the gleaming skeletons of crocodiles and birds, the forests petrified.

The former launching ground at Kennedy was closed, and shortly afterward the Cocoa Beach resorts were sealed off and evacuated, billions of dollars of real estate were abandoned to the virus. Fortunately never virulent to animal hosts, its influence was confined to within a small radius of the original loess which had borne it, unless ingested by the human organism, when it symbioted with the bacteria in the gut flora, benign and unknown to the host, but devastating to vegetation thousands of miles from Kennedy if returned to the soil.

Unable to rest despite his sleepless night, Bridgman played irritably with the tape recorder. During their close escape from the wardens he had more than half-hoped they would catch him. The mysterious leg cramp was obviously psychogenic. Although unable to accept consciously the logic of Webster's argument, he would willingly have conceded to the *fait accompli* of physical capture, gratefully submitted to a year's quarantine at the Parasitological Cleansing Unit at Tampa, and then returned to his career as an architect, chastened but accepting his failure.

As yet, however, the opportunity for surrender had failed to offer itself. Travis appeared to be aware of his ambivalent motives; Bridgman noticed that he and Louise Woodward had made no arrangements to meet him that evening for the conjunction.

In the early afternoon he went down into the streets, ploughed through the drifts of red sand, following the footprints of Travis and Louise as they wound in and out of the side streets, finally saw them disappear into the coarser, flintlike dunes among the

submerged motels to the south of the town. Giving up, he returned through the empty, shadowless streets, now and then shouted up into the hot air, listening to the echoes boom away among the dunes.

Later that afternoon he walked out toward the northeast, picking his way carefully through the dips and hollows, crouching in the pools of shadow whenever the distant sounds of the construction gangs along the perimeter were carried across to him by the wind. Around him, in the great dust basins, the grains of red sand flittered like diamonds. Barbs of rusting metal protruded from the slopes, remnants of Mars satellites and launching stages which had fallen onto the Martian deserts and then been carried back again to Earth. One fragment which he passed, a complete section of hull plate like a concave shield, still carried part of an identification numeral, and stood upright in the dissolving sand like a door into nowhere.

Just before dusk he reached a tall spur of obsidian that reared up into the tinted cerise sky like the spire of a ruined church, climbed up among its jutting cornices and looked out across the intervening two or three miles of dunes to the perimeter. Illuminated by the last light, the metal grills shone with a roseate glow like fairy portcullises on the edge of an enchanted sea. At least half a mile of the fence had been completed, and as he watched, another of the giant prefabricated sections was cantilevered into the air and staked to the ground. Already the eastern horizon was cut off by the encroaching fence, the enclosed Martian sand like the gravel scattered at the bottom of a cage.

Perched on the spur, Bridgman felt a warning tremor of pain in his calf. He leapt down in a flurry of dust, without looking back made off among the dunes and reefs.

Later, as the last baroque whorls of the sunset faded below the horizon, he waited on the roof for Travis and Louise Woodward, peering impatiently into the empty moon-filled streets.

Shortly after midnight, at an elevation of 35 degrees in the southwest, between Aquila and Ophiuchus, the conjunction began. Bridgman continued to search the streets, and ignored the seven points of speeding light as they raced toward him from the horizon like an invasion from deep space. There was no indication of their convergent orbital pathways, which would soon scatter them thousands of miles apart, and the satellites moved as if they were always together, in the tight configuration Bridgman had known

since childhood, like a lost zodiacal emblem, a constellation detached from the celestial sphere and forever frantically searching to return to its place.

"Travis! Confound you!" With a snarl, Bridgman swung away from the balcony and moved along to the exposed section of rail behind the elevator head. To be avoided like a pariah by Travis and Louise Woodward forced him to accept that he was no longer a true resident of the beach and now existed in a no-man's-land between them and the wardens.

The seven satellites drew nearer, and Bridgman glanced up at them cursorily. They were disposed in a distinctive but unusual pattern resembling the Greek letter *chi,* a limp cross, a straight lateral member containing four capsules more or less in line ahead –Connolly, Tkachev, Merril, and Maiakovski–bisected by three others forming with Tkachev an elongated Z–Pokrovski, Woodward, and Brodisnek. The pattern had been variously identified as a hammer and sickle, an eagle, a swastika, and a dove, as well as a variety of religious and runic emblems, but all these were being defeated by the advancing tendency of the older capsules to vaporize.

It was this slow disintegration of the aluminum shells that made them visible–it had often been pointed out that the observer on the ground was looking, not at the actual capsule, but at a local field of vaporized aluminum and ionized hydrogen peroxide gas from the ruptured altitude jets now distributed within half a mile of each of the capsules. Woodward's, the most recently in orbit, was a barely perceptible point of light. The hulks of the capsules, with their perfectly preserved human cargoes, were continually dissolving, and a wide fan of silver spray opened out in a phantom wake behind Merril and Pokrovski (1998 and 1999), like a double star transforming itself into a nova in the center of a constellation. As the mass of the capsules diminished they sank into a closer orbit around the earth, would soon touch the denser layers of the atmosphere and plummet to the ground.

Bridgman watched the satellites as they moved toward him, his irritation with Travis forgotten. As always, he felt himself moved by the eerie but strangely serene spectacle of the ghostly convoy endlessly circling the dark sea of the midnight sky, the long-dead astronauts converging for the ten-thousandth time upon their brief rendezvous and then setting off upon their lonely flight paths

around the perimeter of the ionosphere, the tidal edge of the beachway into space which had reclaimed them.

How Louise Woodward could bear to look up at her husband he had never been able to understand. After her arrival he once invited her to the hotel, remarking that there was an excellent view of the beautiful sunsets, and she had snapped back bitterly: "Beautiful? Can you imagine what it's like looking up at a sunset when your husband's spinning around through it in his coffin?"

This reaction had been a common one when the first astronauts had died after failing to make contact with the launching platforms in fixed orbit. When these new stars rose in the west an attempt had been made to shoot them down--there was the unsettling prospect of the skies a thousand years hence, littered with orbiting refuse--but later they were left in this natural graveyard, forming their own monument.

Obscured by the clouds of dust carried up into the air by the sandstorm, the satellites shone with little more than the intensity of second-magnitude stars, winking as the reflected light was interrupted by the lanes of stratocirrus. The wake of diffusing light behind Merril and Pokrovski which usually screened the other capsules seemed to have diminished in size, and he could see both Maiakovski and Brodisnek clearly for the first time in several months. Wondering whether Merril or Pokrovski would be the first to fall from orbit, he looked toward the center of the cross as it passed overhead.

With a sharp intake of breath, he tilted his head back. In surprise he noticed that one of the familiar points of light was missing from the center of the group. What he had assumed to be an occlusion of the conjoint vapor trails by dust clouds was simply due to the fact that one of the capsules--Merril's, he decided, the third of the line ahead--had fallen from its orbit.

Head raised, he sidestepped slowly across the roof, avoiding the pieces of rusting neon sign, following the convoy as it passed overhead and moved toward the eastern horizon. No longer overlayed by the wake of Merril's capsule, Woodward's shone with far greater clarity, and almost appeared to have taken the former's place, although he was not due to fall from orbit for at least a century.

In the distance somewhere an engine growled. A moment later, from a different quarter, a woman's voice cried out faintly. Bridgman moved to the rail, over the intervening rooftops saw two

figures silhouetted against the sky on the elevator head of an apartment block, then heard Louise Woodward call out again. She was pointing up at the sky with both hands, her long hair blown about her face, Travis trying to restrain her. Bridgman realized that she had misconstrued Merril's descent, assuming that the fallen astronaut was her husband. He climbed onto the edge of the balcony, watching the pathetic tableau on the distant roof.

Again, somewhere among the dunes, an engine moaned. Before Bridgman could turn around, a brilliant blade of light cleaved the sky in the southwest. Like a speeding comet, an immense train of vaporizing particles stretching behind it to the horizon, it soared toward them, the downward curve of its pathway clearly visible. Detached from the rest of the capsules, which were now disappearing among the stars along the eastern horizon, it was little more than a few miles off the ground.

Bridgman watched it approach, apparently on a collision course with the hotel. The expanding corona of white light, like a gigantic signal flare, illuminated the rooftops, etching the letters of the neon signs over the submerged motels on the outskirts of the town. He ran for the doorway, as he raced down the stairs saw the glow of the descending capsule fill the somber streets like a hundred moons. When he reached his room, sheltered by the massive weight of the hotel, he watched the dunes in front of the hotel light up like a stage set. Three hundred yards away the low camouflaged hull of the wardens' beach car was revealed poised on a crest, its feeble spot light drowned by the glare.

With a deep metallic sigh, the burning catafalque of the dead astronaut soared overhead, a cascade of vaporizing metal pouring from its hull, filling the sky with incandescent light. Reflected below it, like an expressway illuminated by an aircraft's spotlights, a long lane of light several hundred yards in width raced out into the desert toward the sea. As Bridgman shielded his eyes, it suddenly erupted in a tremendous explosion of detonating sand. A huge curtain of white dust lifted into the air and fell slowly to the ground. The sounds of the impact rolled against the hotel, mounting in a sustained crescendo that drummed against the windows. A series of smaller explosions flared up like opalescent fountains. All over the desert fires flickered briefly where fragments of the capsule had been scattered. Then the noise subsided, and an immense glistening pall of phosphorescing gas hung in the air like a silver veil, particles within it beading and winking.

Two hundred yards away across the sand was the running figure of Louise Woodward, Travis twenty paces behind her. Bridgman watched them dart in and out of the dunes, then abruptly felt the cold spotlight of the beach car hit his face and flood the room behind him. The vehicle was moving straight toward him, two of the wardens, nets and lassos in hand, riding the outboard.

Quickly Bridgman straddled the balcony, jumped down into the sand and raced toward the crest of the first dune. He crouched and ran on through the darkness as the beam probed the air. Above, the glistening pall was slowly fading, the particles of vaporized metal sifting toward the dark Martian sand. In the distance the last echoes of the impact were still reverberating among the hotels of the beach colonies further down the coast.

Five minutes later he caught up with Louise Woodward and Travis. The capsule's impact had flattened a number of the dunes, forming a shallow basin some quarter of a mile in diameter, and the surrounding slopes were scattered with the still glowing particles, sparkling like fading eyes. The beach car growled somewhere four or five hundred yards behind him, and Bridgman broke off into an exhausted walk. He stopped beside Travis, who was kneeling on the ground, breath pumping into his lungs. Fifty yards away Louise Woodward was running up and down, distraughtly gazing at the fragments of smoldering metal. For a moment the spotlight of the approaching beach car illuminated her, and she ran away among the dunes. Bridgman caught a glimpse of the inconsolable anguish in her face.

Travis was still on his knees. He had picked up a piece of the oxidized metal and was pressing it together in his hands.

"Travis, for God's sake tell her! This was Merril's capsule, there's no doubt about it! Woodward's still up there."

Travis looked up at him silently, his eyes searching Bridgman's face. A spasm of pain tore his mouth, and Bridgman realized that the barb of steel he clasped reverently in his hands was still glowing with heat.

"Travis!" He tried to pull the man's hands apart, the pungent stench of burning flesh gusting into his face, but Travis wrenched away from him. "Leave her alone, Bridgman! Go back with the wardens!"

Bridgman retreated from the approaching beach car. Only thirty yards away, its spotlight filled the basin. Louise Woodward was still searching the dunes. Travis held his ground as the wardens

jumped down from the car and advanced toward him with their nets, his bloodied hands raised at his sides, the steel barb flashing like a dagger. At the head of the wardens, the only one unmasked, was a trim, neat-featured man with an intent, serious face. Bridgman guessed that this was Major Webster, and that the wardens had known of the impending impact and hoped to capture them, and Louise in particular, before it occurred.

Bridgman stumbled back toward the dunes at the edge of the basin. As he neared the crest he trapped his foot in a semicircular plate of metal, sat down, and freed his heel. Unmistakably it was part of a control panel, the circular instrument housings still intact.

Overhead the pall of glistening vapor had moved off to the northeast, and the reflected light was directly over the rusting gantries of the former launching site at Cape Kennedy. For a few fleeting seconds the gantries seemed to be enveloped in a sheen of silver, transfigured by the vaporized body of the dead astronaut, diffusing over them in a farewell gesture, his final return to the site from which he had set off to his death a century earlier. Then the gantries sank again into their craggy shadows, and the pall moved off like an immense wraith toward the sea, barely distinguishable from the star glow.

Down below Travis was sitting on the ground surrounded by the wardens. He scuttled about on his hands like a frantic crab, scooping handfuls of the virus-laden sand at them. Holding tight to their masks, the wardens maneuvered around him, their nets and lassos at the ready. Another group moved slowly toward Bridgman.

Bridgman picked up a handful of the dark Martian sand beside the instrument panel, felt the soft glowing crystals warm his palm. In his mind he could still see the silver-sheathed gantries of the launching site across the bay, by a curious illusion almost identical with the Martian city he had designed years earlier. He watched the pall disappear over the sea, then looked around at the other remnants of Merril's capsule scattered over the slopes. High in the western night, between Pegasus and Cygnus, shone the distant disk of the planet Mars, which for both himself and the dead astronaut had served for so long as a symbol of unattained ambition. The wind stirred softly through the sand, cooling this replica of the planet which lay passively around him, and at last he understood why he had come to the beach and been unable to leave it.

Twenty yards away Travis was being dragged off like a wild dog,

his thrashing body pinioned in the center of a web of lassos. Louise Woodward had run away among the dunes toward the sea, following the vanished gas cloud.

In a sudden excess of refound confidence, Bridgman drove his fist into the dark sand, buried his forearm like a foundation pillar. A flange of hot metal from Merril's capsule burned his wrist, bonding him to the spirit of the dead astronaut.

"Merril!" he cried exultantly as the wardens' lassos stung his neck and shoulders. "We made it!"

Deep End

They always slept during the day. By dawn the last of the townsfolk had gone indoors and the houses would be silent, heat curtains locked across the windows, as the sun rose over the deliquescing salt banks, filling the streets with opaque fire. Most of them were old people and fell asleep quickly in their darkened chalets, but Granger, with his restless mind and his one lung, often lay awake through the afternoons, while the metal outer walls of the cabin creaked and hummed, trying pointlessly to read through the old log books Holliday had salvaged for him from the crashed space platforms.

By six o'clock the thermal fronts would begin to recede southward across the kelp flats, and one by one the air-conditioners in the bedrooms switched themselves off. While the town slowly came to life, its windows opening to the cool dusk air, Granger strode down to breakfast at the Neptune Bar, gallantly doffing his sunglasses to left and right at the elderly couples settling themselves out on their porches, staring at each other across the shadow-filled streets.

Five miles to the north, in the empty hotel at Idle End, Holliday usually rested quietly for another hour, and listened to the coral towers, gleaming in the distance like white pagodas, sing and whistle as the temperature gradients cut through them. Twenty miles away he could see the symmetrical peak of Hamilton, nearest of the Bermuda Islands, rising off the dry ocean floor like a flat-topped mountain, the narrow ring of white beach still visible in the sunset, a scum line left by sinking ocean.

* * *

That evening he felt even more reluctant than usual to drive down into the town. Not only would Granger be in his private booth at the Neptune, dispensing the same mixture of humor and homily—he was virtually the only person Holliday could talk to, and inevitably he had come to resent his dependence on the older man—but Holliday would have his final interview with the migration officer and make the decision which would determine his entire future.

In a sense the decision had already been made, as Bullen, the migration officer, had realized on his trip a month earlier. He did not bother to press Holliday, who had no special skills to offer, no qualities of character or leadership which would be of use on the new worlds. However, Bullen pointed out one small but relevant fact, which Holliday duly noted and thought over in the intervening month.

"Remember, Holliday," he warned him at the end of the interview in the requisitioned office at the rear of the sheriff's cabin, "the average age of the settlement is over sixty. In ten years' time you and Granger may well be the only two left here, and if that lung of his goes you'll be on your own."

He paused to let this prospect sink in, then added quietly, "All the kids are leaving on the next trip—the Merryweathers' two boys, Tom Juranda (*That lout! Good riddance,* Holliday thought to himself. *Look out, Mars*)—do you realize you'll literally be the only one here under the age of fifty?"

"Katy Summers is staying," Holliday pointed out quickly, the sudden vision of a white organdy dress and long straw hair giving him courage.

The migration officer had glanced at his application list and nodded grudgingly. "Yes, but she's just looking after her grandmother. As soon as the old girl dies Katy will be off like a flash. After all, there's nothing to keep her here, is there?"

"No," Holliday had agreed automatically.

There wasn't now. For a long while he had mistakenly believed there was. Katy was his own age, twenty-two, the only person, apart from Granger, who seemed to understand his determination to stay behind and keep watch over a forgotten Earth. But the grandmother died three days after the migration officer left, and the next day Katy had begun to pack. In some insane way Holliday had assumed that she would stay behind, and what worried him

was that all his assumptions about himself might be based on equally false premises.

Climbing off the hammock, he went onto the terrace and looked out at the phosphorescent glitter of the trace minerals in the salt banks stretching away from the hotel. His quarters were in the penthouse suite on the tenth floor, the only heat-sealed unit in the building, but its steady settlement into the ocean bed had opened in the load walls wide cracks which would soon reach up to the roof. The ground floor had already disappeared. By the time the next floor went—six months at the outside—he would have been forced to leave the old pleasure resort and return to the town. Inevitably, that would mean sharing a chalet with Granger.

A mile away, an engine droned. Through the dusk Holliday saw the migration officer's helicopter whirling along toward the hotel, the only local landmark, then veer off once Bullen identified the town and brake slowly toward the landing strip.

Eight o'clock, Holliday noted. His interview was at 8:30 the next morning. Bullen would rest the night with the sheriff, carry out his other duties as graves commissioner and justice of the peace, and then set off after seeing Holliday on the next leg of his journey. For twelve hours Holliday was free, still able to make absolute decisions (or, more accurately, not to make them) but after that he would have committed himself. This was the migration officer's last trip, his final circuit from the deserted cities near St. Helena up through the Azores and Bermudas around to the main Atlantic ferry site at the Canaries. Only two of the big launching platforms were still in navigable orbit—hundreds of others were continuously falling out of the sky—and once they came down Earth was, to all intents, abandoned. From then on the only people likely to be picked up would be a few military communications personnel.

Twice on his way into the town Holliday had to lower the salt plough fastened to the front bumper of the jeep and ram back the drifts which had melted across the wire roadway during the afternoon. Mutating kelp, their gene shifts accelerated by the radiophosphorus, reared up into the air on either side of the road like enormous cacti, turning the dark salt banks into a white lunar garden. But this evidence of the encroaching wilderness only served to strengthen Holliday's need to stay behind on Earth. Most of the nights, when he wasn't arguing with Granger at the Neptune, trying to explain his philosophy to him, he would drive

around the ocean floor, climbing over the crashed launching platforms, or wander with Katy Summers through the kelp forests. Sometimes he would persuade Granger to come with them, hoping that the older man's expertise—he had originally been a marine biologist—would help to sharpen his own awareness of the bathypelagic flora, but the original sea bed was buried under the endless salt hills and they might as well have been driving about the Sahara.

As he entered the Neptune—a low cream and chromium saloon which abutted the landing strip and had formerly served as a passenger lounge when thousands of migrants from the Southern Hemisphere were being shipped up to the Canaries—Granger called out to him and rattled his cane against the window, pointing to the dark outline of the migration officer's helicopter parked on the apron fifty yards away.

"I know," Holliday said in a bored voice as he went over with his drink. "Relax, I saw him coming."

Granger grinned at him. Holliday, with his intent serious face under an unruly thatch of blond hair, and his absolute sense of personal responsibility, always amused him.

"*You* relax," Granger said, adjusting the shoulder pad under his Hawaiian shirt which disguised his sunken lung. (He had lost it skindiving thirty years earlier.) "*I'm* not going to fly to Mars next week."

Holliday stared somberly into his glass. "I'm not either." He looked up at Granger's wry saturnine face, then added sardonically, "Or didn't you know?"

Granger roared, tapping the window with his cane as if to dismiss the helicopter. "Seriously, you're not going? You've made up your mind?"

"Wrong. And right. I haven't made up my mind yet—but at the same time I'm not going. You appreciate the distinction?"

"Perfectly, Dr. Schopenhauer." Granger began to grin again. He pushed away his glass. "You know, Holliday, your whole trouble is that you take yourself too seriously. You don't realize how ludicrous you are."

"Ludicrous? Why?" Holliday asked guardedly.

"What does it matter whether you've made up your mind or not? The only thing that counts now is to get together enough courage to head straight for the Canaries and take off into the wide blue yonder. For heaven's sake, what are you staying for? Earth is dead

and buried. Past, present, and future no longer exist here. Don't you feel any responsibility to your own biological destiny?"

"Spare me that." Holliday pulled a ration card from his shirt pocket and passed it across to Granger, who was responsible for the stores allocations. "I need a new pump on the lounge refrigerator, 30-watt Frigidaire. Any left?"

Granger groaned, took the card with a snort of exasperation. "Good God, man, you're just a Robinson Crusoe in reverse, tinkering about with all these bits of old junk, trying to fit them together. You're the last man on the beach who decides to stay behind after everyone else has left. Maybe you are a poet and dreamer, but don't you realize that those two species are extinct now?"

Holliday stared out at the helicopter on the apron, at the lights of the settlement reflected against the salt hills that encircled the town. Each day they moved in a little further. Already it was difficult to get together a weekly squad to push them back. In ten years' time his position might well be that of a Crusoe. Luckily the big water and kerosene tanks—giant cylinders, the size of gasometers—held enough for fifty years. Without them, of course, he would have had no choice.

"Let's give me a rest," he said to Granger. "You're merely trying to find in me a justification for your own enforced stay. Perhaps I am extinct, but I'd rather cling to life here than vanish completely. Anyway, I have a hunch that one day they'll be coming back. Someone's got to stay behind and keep alive a sense of what life here has meant. This isn't an old husk we can throw away when we've finished with it. We were born here. It's the only place we really remember."

Granger nodded slowly. He was about to speak when a brilliant white arc crossed the darkened window, then soared out of sight, its point of impact with the ground lost behind one of the storage tanks.

Holliday stood up and craned out of the window.

"Must be a launching platform. Looked like a big one, probably one of the Russians'." A long rolling crump reverberated through the night air, echoing away among the coral towers. Flashes of light flared up briefly. There was a series of smaller explosions, and then a wide diffuse pall of steam fanned out across the northwest.

"Lake Atlantic," Granger commented. "Let's drive out there

and have a look. It may have uncovered something interesting."

Half an hour later, with a set of Granger's old sample beakers, slides, and mounting equipment in the back seat, they set off in the jeep toward the southern tip of Lake Atlantic ten miles away.

It was here that Holliday discovered the fish.

Lake Atlantic, a narrow ribbon of stagnant brine ten miles in length by a mile wide, to the north of the Bermuda Islands, was all that remained of the former Atlantic Ocean, and was, in fact, the sole remnant of the oceans which had once covered two thirds of the Earth's surface. The frantic mining of the oceans in the previous century to provide oxygen for the atmospheres of the new planets had made their decline swift and irreversible, and with their death had come climatic and other geophysical changes which ensured the extinction of Earth itself. As the oxygen extracted electrolytically from sea water was compressed and shipped away, the hydrogen released was discharged into the atmosphere. Eventually only a narrow layer of denser, oxygen-containing air was left, little more than a mile in depth, and those people remaining on Earth were forced to retreat into the ocean beds, abandoning the poisoned continental tables.

At the hotel at Idle End, Holliday spent uncounted hours going through the library he had accumulated of magazines and books about the cities of the old Earth, and Granger often described to him his own youth when the seas had been half full and he had worked as a marine biologist at the University of Miami, a fabulous laboratory unfolding itself for him on the lengthening beaches.

"The seas are our corporate memory," he often said to Holliday. "In draining them we deliberately obliterated our own pasts, to a large extent our own self-identities. That's another reason why you should leave. Without the sea, life is unsupportable. We become nothing more than the ghosts of memories, blind and homeless, flitting through the dry chambers of a gutted skull."

They reached the lake within half an hour, and worked their way through the swamps which formed its banks. In the dim light the gray salt dunes ran on for miles, their hollows cracked into hexagonal plates, a dense cloud of vapor obscuring the surface of the water. They parked on a low promontory by the edge of the lake and looked up at the great circular shell of the launching platform. This was one of the larger vehicles, almost three hundred

yards in diameter, lying upside down in the shallow water, its hull dented and burnt, riven by huge punctures where the power plants had torn themselves loose on impact and exploded off across the lake. A quarter of a mile away, hidden by the blur, they could just see a cluster of rotors pointing up into the sky.

Walking along the bank, the main body of the lake on their right, they moved nearer the platform, tracing out its riveted CCCP markings along the rim. The giant vehicle had cut enormous grooves through the nexus of pools just beyond the tip of the lake, and Granger waded through the warm water, searching for specimens. Here and there were small anemones and starfish, stunted bodies twisted by cancers. Weblike algae draped themselves over his rubber boots, their nuclei beading like jewels in the phosphorescent light. They paused by one of the largest pools, a circular basin three hundred feet across, draining slowly as the water poured out through a breach in its side. Granger moved carefully down the deepening bank, forking specimens into the rack of beakers, while Holliday stood on the narrow causeway between the pool and the lake, looking up at the dark overhang of the space platform as it loomed into the darkness above him like the stern of a ship.

He was examining the shattered airlock of one of the crew domes when he saw something suddenly move across the surface of the deck. For a moment he imagined that he had seen a passenger who had somehow survived the vehicle's crash, then realized that it was merely the reflection in the aluminized skin of a ripple in the pool behind him.

He turned around to see Granger, ten feet below him, up to his knees in the water, staring out carefully across the pool.

"Did you throw something?" Granger asked quietly.

Holliday shook his head. "No." Without thinking, he added, "Must have been a fish jumping."

"Fish? There isn't a single fish alive on the entire planet. The whole zoological class died out ten years ago. Funny, though."

Just then the fish jumped again.

For a few moments, standing motionless in the half-light, they watched it together, as its slim silver body leapt frantically out of the tepid shallow water, its short glistening arcs carrying it to and fro across the pool.

"Dogfish," Granger muttered. "Shark family. Highly adaptable. It would need to be, to have survived here. Damn it, it may well be the only fish still living."

Holliday moved down the bank, his feet sinking in the oozing mud. "Isn't the water too salty?"

Granger bent down and scooped up some of the water, sipped it tentatively. "Saline, but comparatively dilute." He glanced over his shoulder at the lake. "Perhaps there's continuous evaporation off the lake surface and local condensation here. A freak distillation couple." He slapped Holliday on the shoulder. "Holliday, this should be interesting."

The dogfish was leaping frantically toward them, its two-foot body twisting and flicking. Low mud banks were emerging all over the surface of the pool; in only a few places toward the center was the water more than a foot deep.

Holliday pointed to the breach in the bank fifty yards away, gestured Granger after him and began to run toward it.

Five minutes later they had effectively dammed up the breach. Then Holliday returned for the jeep and drove it carefully through the winding saddles between the pools. He lowered the ramp and began to force the sides of the fish pool in toward each other. After two or three hours he had narrowed the diameter from a hundred yards to under sixty, and the depth of the water had increased to over two feet. The dogfish had ceased to jump and swam smoothly just below the surface, snapping at the countless small plants which had been tumbled into the water by the jeep's ramp. Its slim white body seemed white and unmarked, the small fins trim and powerful.

Granger sat on the hood of the jeep, his back against the windshield, watching Holliday with admiration.

"You obviously have hidden reserves," he said ungrudgingly. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Holliday washed his hands in the water, then stepped over the churned mud which formed the boundary of the pool. A few feet behind him the dogfish veered and lunged.

"I want to keep it alive," Holliday said matter-of-factly. "Don't you see, Granger, the fish stayed behind when the first amphibians emerged from the seas two hundred million years ago, just as you and I, in turn, are staying behind now. In a sense all fish are images of ourselves seen in the sea's mirror."

He slumped down on the running board. His clothes were soaked and streaked with salt, and he gasped at the damp air. To the east, just above the long bulk of the Florida coastline, rising from the ocean floor like an enormous aircraft carrier, were the

first dawn thermal fronts. "Will it be all right to leave it until this evening?"

Granger climbed into the driving seat. "Don't worry. Come on, you need a rest." He pointed up at the overhanging rim of the launching platform. "That should shade it for a few hours, help to keep the temperature down."

As they neared the town Granger slowed to wave to the old people retreating from their porches, fixing the shutters on the steel cabins.

"What about your interview with Bullen?" he asked Holliday soberly. "He'll be waiting for you."

"Leave here? After last night? It's out of the question."

Granger shook his head as he parked the car outside the Neptune. "Aren't you rather overestimating the importance of one dogfish? There were millions of them once; they were the vermin of the sea."

"You're missing the point," Holliday said, sinking back into the seat, trying to wipe the salt out of his eyes. "That fish means that there's still something to be done here. Earth isn't dead and exhausted after all. We can breed new forms of life, a completely new biological kingdom."

Eyes fixed on this private vision, Holliday sat holding the steering wheel while Granger went into the bar to collect a crate of beer. On his return the migration officer was with him.

Bullen put a foot on the running board, looked into the car. "Well, how about it, Holliday? I'd like to make an early start. If you're not interested I'll be off. There's a rich new life out there; it's the first step to the stars. Tom Juranda and the Merryweather boys are leaving next week. Do you want to be with them?"

"Sorry," Holliday said curtly. He pulled the crate of beer into the car and let out the clutch, then gunned the jeep away down the empty street in a roar of dust.

Half an hour later, as he stepped out onto the terrace at Idle End, cool and refreshed after his shower, he watched the helicopter roar overhead, its black propeller scudding, then disappear over the kelp flats toward the hull of the wrecked space platform.

"Come on, let's go! What's the matter?"

"Hold it," Granger said. "You're getting overeager. Don't interfere too much, you'll kill the damn thing with kindness. What have

you got there?" He pointed to the can Holliday had placed in the dashboard compartment.

"Bread crumbs."

Granger sighed, then gently closed the door. "I'm impressed. I really am. I wish you'd look after me this way. I'm gasping for air too."

They were five miles from the lake when Holliday leaned forward over the wheel and pointed to the crisp tire prints in the soft salt flowing over the road ahead.

"Someone's there already."

Granger shrugged. "What of it? They've probably gone to look at the platform." He chuckled quietly. "Don't you want to share the New Eden with anyone else? Or just you alone, and a consultant biologist?"

Holliday laughed. "Those platforms annoy me, the way they're hurled down as if Earth were a garbage dump. Still, if it wasn't for this one I wouldn't have found the fish."

They reached the lake and made their way toward the pool, the erratic track of the car ahead winding in and out of the pools. Two hundred yards from the platform it had been parked, blocking the route for Holliday and Granger, its passengers having gone ahead on foot.

"That's the Merryweathers' car," Holliday said as they walked around the big stripped-down Buick, slashed with yellow paint and fitted with sirens and pennants. "The two boys must have come out here."

Granger pointed. "One of them's up on the platform."

The younger brother had scaled onto the rim and was shouting down like an umpire at the antics of two other boys, one his brother, the other Tom Juranda, a tall broad-shouldered youth in a space cadet's jerkin. They were standing at the edge of the fish pool, stones and salt blocks in their hands, hurling them into the pool.

Leaving Granger, Holliday sprinted on ahead, shouting at the top of his voice. Too preoccupied to hear him, the boys continued to throw their missiles into the pool, while the younger Merryweather egged them on from the platform above. Just before Holliday reached them Tom Juranda ran a few yards along the bank and began to kick the mud wall into the air, then resumed his target throwing.

"Juranda! Get away from there!" Holliday bellowed. "Put those stones down!"

He reached Juranda as the youth was about to hurl a brick-sized lump of salt into the pool, seized him by the shoulder and flung him round, knocking the salt out of his hand into a shower of damp crystals, then lunged at the elder Merryweather boy, kicking him away.

The pool had been drained. A deep breach had been cut through the bank and the water had poured out into the surrounding gullies and pools. Down in the center of the basin, in a litter of stones and spattered salt, was the crushed but still wriggling body of the dogfish, twisting itself helplessly in the bare inch of water that remained. Dark red blood poured from wounds in its body, staining the salt.

Holliday hurled himself at Juranda, shook the youth savagely by the shoulders.

"Juranda! Do you realize what you've done, you—" Exhausted, Holliday released him and staggered down into the center of the pool, kicked away the stones, and stood looking at the fish twitching spasmodically at his feet.

"Sorry, Holliday," the older Merryweather boy said tentatively behind him. "We didn't know it was your fish."

Holliday waved him away, then let his arms fall limply to his sides. He felt numbed and baffled, unable to resolve his anger and frustration.

Tom Juranda suddenly began to laugh, and shouted something derisively. Their tension broken, the boys turned and ran off together across the dunes toward their car, yelling and playing catch with each other, mimicking Holliday's outrage.

Granger let them go by, then walked across to the pool, wincing when he saw the empty basin.

"Holliday," he called. "Come on, man."

Holliday shook his head, his eyes staring at the beaten body of the fish.

Granger stepped down the bank to him. Sirens hooted in the distance as the Buick roared off. "Those damn children." He took Holliday gently by the arm. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "But it's not the end of the world."

Bending down, Holliday reached toward the fish, lying still now, the mud around it slick with blood. His hands hesitated, then retreated.

"Nothing we can do, is there?" he said impersonally.

Granger examined the fish. Apart from the large wound in its

side and the flattened skull the skin was intact. "Why not have it stuffed?" he suggested seriously.

Holliday stared at him incredulously, his face contorting. For a moment he said nothing. Then, almost berserk, he shouted, "Have it stuffed? Are you crazy? Do you think I want to make a dummy of myself, fill my own head with straw?"

Turning on his heel, he shouldered past Granger and swung himself roughly out of the pool.