
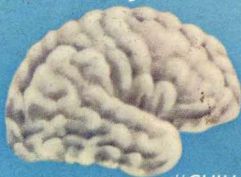


78242   
In the manner of  
"THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN" and "2001"

\$1.25

# GRAY MATTERS

William Hjortsberg



"CHILLING... SUPERB!"  
—Rod Serling





On an undisclosed date in the early 1970s a living human brain was successfully removed from the cranium of a 12-year-old boy and preserved alive.

The operation was performed by Dr. Frank Sayre, Jr., a NASA engineer employed in secret space research.

It marked the beginning of a new era, more sinister than anything man had previously known.

## **GRAY MATTERS**

Fantastic prophecy?

Or future fact?

**"A book of unrelenting intensity—brilliant throughout."**

*—Chicago Sun-Times*

## **GRAY MATTERS**

was originally published by Simon and Schuster.

Also by William Hjortsberg

Alp



*Are there paperbound books you want  
but cannot find in your retail stores?*

---

You can get any title in print in **POCKET BOOK** editions. Simply send retail price, local sales tax, if any, plus 25¢ to cover mailing and handling costs to:

**MAIL SERVICE DEPARTMENT**

**POCKET BOOKS • A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1 West 39th Street • New York, New York 10018**

Please send check or money order. We cannot be responsible for cash. *Catalogue sent free on request.*

---

Titles in this series are also available at discounts in quantity lots for industrial or sales-promotional use. For details write our Special Projects Agency: The Benjamin Company, Inc., 485 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022.

# Gray Matters

a novel by

William Hjortsberg

PUBLISHED BY POCKET  BOOKS NEW YORK

## **GRAY MATTERS**

Simon and Schuster edition published October, 1971

POCKET BOOK edition published December, 1972



This POCKET BOOK edition includes every word contained in the original, higher-priced edition. It is printed from brand-new plates made from completely reset, clear, easy-to-read type. POCKET BOOK editions are published by POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10020. Trademarks registered in the United States and other countries.

**L**

Standard Book Number: 671-78242-8.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 73-156153.

Copyright, ©, 1971, by William Hjortsberg. All rights reserved. This POCKET BOOK edition is published by arrangement with Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Printed in the U.S.A.

Cover art by Gene Szafran.

*For CSMN and  
P. J. America*





# CONTENTS

I	HIVE	11
II	PUPA	31
III	IMAGO	61
IV	DRONE	80
V	LARVA	119



# Gray Matters



# I

## Hive

THE SCANNER sees: unending gun-metal walls; waxed plastic flooring; three deHartzman Communicators, multifrequency channel finders attached and blinking; and the forward end of the subdistrict memory file. A soft flush of lavender suffuses the luminous eggcrate ceiling; the first gentle trace of a dawning day. At the end of the aisle, the Sector's community power unit is already humming with life.

Next to the power unit, in the foremost deposit drawer, a solitary cerebromorph has switched off his scanner and floats in voluntary darkness. His number is A-0001-M (637-05-99). His name was Denton "Skeets" Kalbfleischer. Skeets is the oldest resident of the Depository. He is twelve years old and will remain so forever.

Over in Aisle B, an Amco-pak Mark IX maintenance van prowls silently along on pneumatic treads. The Mark IX is a clumsy piece of equipment and economic considerations alone keep it from becoming obsolete. Accordingly, its use is restricted to those Sectors established before the Awakening. Maintenance vans are programmed to perform a wide range of mundane chores: the Mark

Is clean and polish the aisles each night, the Mark IIIs tend the power units. Every Amco-pak above Mark V is a mechanic, equipped with telescoping arms and lubricated digits capable of the most intricate and precise manipulations. Mechanically minded Depository residents never tire of watching the vans at work and a special scanner channel has been provided to satisfy these vicarious repairmen.

One Aisle B resident with no interest in the Amco-pak is a former Czechoslovakian motion-picture star housed in deposit drawer number B-0486-F(098-76-04). Classified female (in the advanced Sectors no sex distinctions are made between resident cerebromorphs), Vera Mitlovic spends her time screening old films. Although Center Control considers twentieth-century cinema frivolous, and thus detrimental to spiritual growth, the old movies are recorded in the memory file and all Vera need do is check her microfilm Index and dial the appropriate code key on the telescript console.

Vera is awake this morning before reveille serenade (today the overture to Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*) and dials her first film the moment the memory-file librarian switches on for the day. (The film is *Bohemian Idyl*, a Czech romantic comedy, starring Vera as a Prague fashion designer who falls in love with a gypsy.) Three Center Control regulations for members of her category are neglected. By not checking her memo tapes for a dream playback, she is unable to file the required auditing report; more importantly, for the third day in a row she misses the morning meditation exercise.

But Vera doesn't care. With the old film flickering, she is transported beyond the demands of Center

Control. Does it matter if the print is in poor condition, the celluloid yellow and scratched? It is like watching her own ghost. The challis skirt lifts and swirls; her long limber legs gleam with firelight; she dances about the caravan encampment, tempting the fiddlers with her buoyant breasts. And where were those lovely legs today, those youthful breasts? Gone to dust with only their image preserved, a shadow etched in silver nitrate. Vera's joy is tinged with sadness and regret. If only she had eyes she would be weeping.

Two drawers down from where Vera views her melancholy matinee, Obu Itubi, a late twenty-second century Nigerian sculptor, is programming a memory-file entomology tape on the habits of bees. The most distinguished member of the school known as the African Renaissance, Itubi's work with plastic and steel represents the final flowering of Western humanism, a last gasp of anthropomorphism before the machines lulled the world into meditation. His file number is B-0489-M(773-22-99).

The Amco-pak in Aisle B has finished its work on the auxiliary power unit. A malfunctioning valve has been located and replaced and the Mark IX sorts and repacks the complex array of tools laid out for the job. A comic business. The Amco-pak is an absent-minded octopus, searching with its many arms for a variety of misplaced gadgets. Scanner viewers are always amused by this clumsy clean-up operation.

The Amco-pak locates the tools and lumbers up the aisle, retractable arms stored, steel digits at rest, mindlessly treading toward its next assignment. Many Depository residents are frankly envious. They

feel it a waste to bestow those miraculous fingers on a machine incapable of appreciating their worth.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is sleeping late; the reveille serenade digested into his dream, a stirring soundtrack for the Hollywood sex fantasies which still occupy his adolescent mind even after a four-hundred-year absence from Grade B double features. Skeets is a definite problem for Center Control. A historic landmark, the very first cerebromorph, the cornerstone of the oldest Depository in the System, his complete failure to achieve any measure of spiritual progress in this enlightened age following the Awakening is a matter of considerable concern to the Auditing Commission.

The problem isn't that Skeets is not educated. In the years, decades, and centuries following his operation, Skeets has earned the equivalent of several dozen baccalaureate degrees. He has ten doctorates to his credit. Sealed in his cranial container from the age of twelve, Skeets has been spoon-fed knowledge by whole committees of curious scientists. Skeets is versed in mathematics, languages, the arts; he is an outstanding authority on molecular biology and ninth-century Indian cave painting. Learning, programmed on endless reels of magnetic tape, has saturated his brain cells and Skeets spouts answers with the speed and accuracy of a computer. Denton Kalbfleischer is a very successful experiment. Only one problem: in this sophisticated age of meditation and spiritual liberation, Skeets still wants to be a cowboy.

" . . . the superfamily *Apoidea*, consisting of various social and solitary hymenopterous insects. Observe *Apis mellifera*, the common honeybee, both



industrious and social. The insect lives in a swarm consisting of three classes. The majority of the swarm are neuters, known commonly as workers; they gather the pollen and build the comb. The female is called the Queen; she is the reproducer, the egg layer, and there is only one per swarm. The male of the species is the drone and his is an idle life. The drone's only function is to. . . ." Obu Itubi isn't listening to the narrator's voice. He has turned the volume down until the mechanized monotone drawl is a murmur faint as the distant humming of the bees. All the more recent memory-file tapes are narrated by computer and the soundtracks have an assembly-line sameness that makes Obu Itubi's flesh crawl. An unpleasant sensation, akin to the phantom pain amputees of an earlier age suffered in their missing limbs, for Itubi no longer has flesh.

A bower of evening primroses arches delicately over the lovers' heads, sweetly scenting the late afternoon. (They were made of paper and dusty from long storage in the property shop.) The slanting rays of an amber sunset gild the features of the handsome young couple. (The lightman was malicious and had trained his thousand-watt instruments directly into Vera's eyes.) Distant violins blend with the shimmering nocturn of nightingales and crickets. (The musicians were drunk and made rude remarks concerning the leading lady's private life. The bird calls and insect noises were produced by a fat pockmarked man who whistled into a microphone and rubbed two rosin-covered sticks.) "My beloved . . . my treasure . . ." the dark-eyed gypsy croons, while the blushing girl flutters and sighs. (His breath stank of garlic sausage and not even a heavy application of gum arabic kept his

toupee from slipping slightly askew.) "Come away with me to the Moravian mountains, my love. I want to take you to the little village where I was born." (The leading man, who spoke Czech with a thick Slavic accent, was actually born in Croatia.) Leaning forward, he cups her radiant face in his hands and kisses her lips as the violins burble and the sunset dies like a smear of raspberry jam on the cyclorama.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is also a film star of sorts. A tape composed of ancient newsreels, newspaper clippings, and hospital training films is stored in the memory file under the general classification Medicine, subheading Surgery. Skeets has programmed the tape several times, out of the same morbid curiosity which once caused men to peek under their own bandages.

The film is a history of mankind's first successful cerebrectomy. It tells the story of a twelve-year-old boy named Denton Kalbfleischer, who was returning home with his parents to Joliet, Illinois, from a Christmas skiing vacation in Vail, Colorado. While circling O'Hare Field in a holding pattern prior to landing, his jetliner was apparently hit by lightning. The result was, at that time, the worst air disaster in aviation history. Over five hundred people were killed, more than half of them on the ground, as bits of molten 747 rained down on East Cicero like a meteor shower. And when, amidst the din of sirens, a fireman found Skeets' broken body heaped on a curbside pile of rubble, it was assumed he was a neighborhood boy, injured by falling debris. Only many hours later, during a routine check of the passenger lists, was his correct identity discovered.

The newspapers, of course, had a field day. Ban-

ner headlines proclaimed a XMAS MIRACLE and a swarm of reporters descended like encircling vultures on the Kalbfleischer's Joliet home to interview the maid, the neighbors, the postman, Skeets' sixth-grade teacher, anyone at all with even the vaguest connection to "that courageous, freckle-faced kid fighting for his life on the fifth floor of the Cook County Hospital." Skeets' parents, Dr. and Mrs. Harold Kalbfleischer, were killed in the crash, but home movies the family took the summer before at Narragansett, Rhode Island, were broadcast in color on all the major television networks. Skeets and his dad playing catch on the beach.

Newsreel cameramen stalked the corridors of the hospital, ambushing unwary doctors for filmed first-hand reports and occasionally sneaking past the security guards for a chance at valuable footage of poor Skeets, so savagely mangled that his body could not tolerate the pressure of an ordinary hospital bed, floating like a mummified Hindu levitation artist on a cushion of compressed air. Although, for the benefit of the press, the hospital staff remained cheerfully optimistic, in private Skeets' doctors held out little hope for recovery. Virtually every major bone was fractured, arms and legs shattered, the spinal vertebrae crushed and disconnected like a broken string of beads; all the internal organs ruptured and hemorrhaging; rib fragments punctured both lungs—even considering the recent advances in the field of organ transplants, surgical teams across the nation agreed the case was hopeless. In order to save Skeets they would have to rebuild him from scratch.

A Hollywood film, late in the second reel, would call in a handsome young specialist for delicate last-minute-surgery; happy ending: Skeets lives to play

football again and the successful surgeon gets the bosomy blond night nurse with the heart of gold. Reality is more prosaic. The memory-film program cuts to an old videotape of the medical laboratory at the Space Center in Houston, Texas, where the mechanical narrator introduces a NASA engineer, Dr. Frank E. Sayre, Jr. Dr. Sayre has thinning hair, combed straight back, and wears bifocals. For the past five years he has been engaged in special research dealing with the problem of space environment. It is Dr. Sayre's contention that man's body is a liability on a space mission. It must be supplied with oxygen, shielded from extreme temperature variation and radioactivity, provided with food, and let's not forget the nasty business of waste removal. All this requires complex weighty equipment.

"Weight is a critical factor in the success of these missions," Dr. Sayre says, nervously toying with his slide-rule tieclasp. "Now it always seemed to me that going to all this expense and trouble to accommodate the human body on a space flight was putting the cart before the horse, if you understand my meaning." Dr. Sayre clears his throat and continues in a soft sugarcured Tideland accent. "The only essential part of a man, the part that can't be duplicated mechanically on a spacecraft, is his brain. The rest is simply excess baggage. I approached the problem from the point of view of an engineer. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find some way to integrate a man's brain with the control system of a space vehicle and leave all that other junk at home in the deep freeze. It would make long-range manned space probes—something on the order of a trip to Pluto, say—feasible right now, today, instead of in a hundred years or so as is currently predicted."

The narration resumes at this point to explain

how Dr. Sayre was inspired by the work of a team of Russian scientists who successfully grafted the head of one dog onto the body of another. Using similar surgical techniques, Dr. Sayre was busy for the next few years scooping the brains out of a zooful of rhesus monkeys. The primitive equipment he was using grew ever more refined as his government research grants increased and by the time the film was made he had amassed over half a million dollars' worth in the corner of his lab. Although this jumble of tubing and circuitry looks quite haphazard and comical when compared with the sleek efficient Depositories into which it evolved, the essential mechanism remains the same. In Dr. Sayre's day it resembled nothing more than a pet shop fish-tank. He is shown in the film poising with a big smile beside this device. Inside, floating in the electrolyte solution, is something that looks like a pinkish-gray jellyfish. This is the brain of George, a nine-year-old orangutan, which, according to the encephalograph, was still alive sixteen months after Dr. Sayre wheeled his great orange-haired body to the incinerator.

A phone call from a colleague in Chicago brought the case of Denton Kalbfleischer to Dr. Sayre's attention. The boy was very near death and, as there seemed to be no living relatives around to object, perhaps the hospital staff might be willing to attempt a radical experiment. Negotiations were conducted and that same evening Dr. Sayre and all his apparatus were on board a northbound plane. Inside of twenty-four hours, George had a roommate in the fishtank.

The newspapers were told that Skeets had died and the reporters were all there when his body was buried in the family plot. It was a closed-coffin

funeral; the official press release mentioned a Scout uniform with merit bandages and a beloved fielder's mitt under the pale folded hands, but these were only lies designed to satisfy a sentimental public. After the operation, the body was wrapped in a black plastic bag and sent to its final rest with the tracheotomy tubes still in place and the skull open like an empty porcelain soup tureen.

A color film of the operation was secretly placed in the hospital archives for the elucidation of future surgeons. Shots of the shaved scalp being peeled forward like a bathing cap and of surgical saws neatly carving through the cranium are especially vivid, but unfortunately a section of the print was damaged at the point where a vacuum pump lifts the brain intact, the enveloping meninges untorn; cuts from other, later operations had to be spliced into the memory-file tape. Because a more sophisticated technique was then employed, certain concessions were made and the narrator politely apologizes to the viewer for the slight lapse in chronological accuracy.

After the operation, Skeets' brain remained incognito for almost two years in Dr. Sayre's Houston laboratory, a lump of gray matter distinguishable from the others in the tank only by the added number of wrinkles on its convoluted surface. NASA was no longer interested in the experiment once federal funds were cut back in an election year Congressional economy drive, and Dr. Sayre kept the brains around more or less as pets. Skeets would have been doomed to his limbo forever if an over-anxious hunter hadn't mistaken the balding scientist for a mule deer while he was out bird watching early one fine fall morning. After the funeral, his widow came across an unpublished notebook among

the papers on his desk. It was a day-to-day record of Skeets' progress following the operation. Mrs. Sayre instinctively knew this was the instrument that not only would save her late husband's name from obscurity, but handsomely endow his meager estate as well.

When the news broke, as a cover story in *Life*, the ancient periodical photo magazine, public reaction was immediate. Panels of clergymen convened to discuss the ethics of such operations. The Bar Association appointed a special commission to study the legal rights of cerebromorphs. The AMA got in on the action by condemning unauthorized experimentation on hospital patients. Across the country there were hundreds of volunteers for cerebrectomy. Many of these individuals were already signed up to have their bodies frozen in liquid oxygen after death. Now they wanted to place all bets on a sure thing. Enterprising morticians modified their facilities and advertised what were soon to become the world's first Depositories.

As for Skeets, Mrs. Sayre turned down a very generous offer from a traveling circus and donated him to Johns Hopkins, her husband's alma mater. There he spent the next twenty-five years as a curiosity, a prize specimen gathering dust in a graduate school laboratory, until advancing technology at last provided the elaborate mechanism that put him once again in touch with the outside world. The historic moment when the Bell Laboratory technicians hooked Skeets up to Dr. deHartzman's ingenious neural communicator was televised internationally and portions of the preserved videotape provide a fine ending for the memory-file presentation. In keeping with the occasion, the president of the university prepared a statement clearly

intended to live forever: "Mankind proudly welcomes back the intrepid voyager into the unknown." But history is not so easily juggled with and it is Skeets' answer that is remembered, not the president's eloquent words. There was a crackle of static on the loudspeaker system as the boy got used to his new computerized electric vocal cords and then, in a smooth machined monotone, he asked, "What time is breakfast?"

And so ends memory-file tape number M109-36S. It documents the world's first cerebrectomy in an entertaining, yet educational, manner, but omits the most significant part of Skeets Kalbfleischer's incredible story. There is no mention of the twenty-five years Skeets spent alone in darkness. Not one word to describe the explosive holocaust in which his dreams were born; the instant of absolute terror when the jetliner disintegrated in a ball of flame and he was torn loose from his fastened seatbelt; his clothing and hair, even the comic book he was reading, ignited by the blast that sent him tumbling down through five miles of open sky like a shooting star. It was the beginning of a nightmare a quarter century long.

Obu Itubi is a bee, or almost anyway, for the memory-file tape is one of a recent series which includes a separate track for each of the senses. Itubi can smell the heat and the sweet dusty pollen; he can feel the jostling of his busy neighbors, the furred armor of their pulsing abdomens. The drone of thousands of transparent wings is programmed into his auditory nerves. His is a bee's-eye view of the hive: the perfect geometric succession of hexagonal cells; the interlinked pattern of the comb; membranous waxen walls. To his sculptor's sensibility it seems



pure poetry in the use of materials—nature's harmony, the ultimate technology. Here is real elegance in engineering, a refinement sadly lacking in this age of contemplation. Moreover, the whole unit is organic. Itubi is awed.

As the tape progresses, Itubi happily participates in the worker's directional waggle-dance. He gathers pollen, produces honey, and joins with thousands of others in the heat of midday to fan his wings and keep the delicate wax structures from melting. He is proud of his six clinging legs, the sensitive jointed antennae, the potent stinger. He feels lost and empty when the tape comes to an end and he is no longer a bee.

And yet, transmission fade-out is something Itubi has always enjoyed. First there is the image (in this case, the busy swarm of *Apis mellifera*) flooding his consciousness like sunlight and then, with only the briefest command from the telescript console, it's gone, the whole universe of thought receding into a tiny pinpoint in the frontal lobe. It hovers for a moment, a candle flame in the eternal night, very serene and distant. The final flickering seems almost an invitation: follow me, follow me. . . . Itubi wonders how many men have lingered in the evening at the edge of a lonely marsh to watch the flitting light of the will-o'-the-wisp? At such times liberation seems almost possible. But at the very instant of the soul's release, the candle is snuffed and you are left alone in the dark.

Vera Mitlovic is deep in a celluloid dreamland: the fashion designer back at her drawing-board, a faraway look in her violet eyes as the old film drowns in a climactic violin whirlpool. "All lost," the disembodied actress muses, consulting the Index for

the number of yet another film. Not any film this time—for it is usually Vera's habit to choose her entertainment by whim and random selection—but her very first, made in Vienna when she was six. The great Klimpt was directing, and although she had only a bit part, the magnificent ballroom scenes never fail to lift her spirits and she can think of no more effective antidote for melancholy than her own brief appearance in pigtails and pinafore.

She finds the correct code number for *The Golden Epoch* and activates the telescript console. To Vera, this device is one of the few gay toys in her spiritless mechanical universe. Think of a number and, like rubbing a magic lantern, within seconds a memory-file tape materializes. But when her wish doesn't come true, Vera is puzzled. Can there have been a breakdown in the System? She repeats the number, pausing between each digit so there will be no mistake. Again, nothing happens.

This is alarming. The Depository System functions automatically, although breakdowns are not unknown. Precise emergency procedures and periodic drills insure the alertness of the residents. Vera was at the movies during drill and now finds she is helpless in the face of actual crisis.

The clear musical clarion of a deHartzman Communicator is as reassuring as the nick-of-time cavalry bugle call when the wagon train is surrounded by rampaging Sioux. A silent wind sweeps the prairie.

ATTENTION . . . ATTENTION . . .

The mood shifts. The mechanical voice has the moronic robot enthusiasm of an AM radio disk jockey.

CENTER CONTROL IS TEMPORARILY INTERRUPTING YOUR THOUGHTS TO COMMUNICATE AN AWARENESS

REMINDER FROM THE AUDITING COMMISSION. . . .  
STAND BY . . .

B-0486 . . . IT HAS NOW BEEN THREE DAYS SINCE YOU LAST PARTICIPATED IN THE MORNING MEDITATION EXERCISE OR FILED AN AUDITING REPORT. THIS IS A VIOLATION OF SECTIONS A15, A16, AND C9 OF REGULATION NUMBER 35-059. IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE MANDATE OF CENTER CONTROL, WE ARE DISCONNECTING YOUR MEMORY-FILE HOOKUP UNTIL SUCH TIME AS YOU ARE WILLING TO FULFILL THE OBLIGATIONS OF YOUR CATEGORY. BE AWARE OF YOUR DUTIES.

END TRANSMISSION.

Vera Mitlovic is furious. Another move in the game, the obvious machine-tooled move. She remembers tick-tack-toe. Twentieth-century scientists taught their primitive Univacs to play this kindergarten game years before they were able to program complex chess gambits. And how those old machines loved it! Vacuum tubes aglow, rectifiers humming, they paraded their invincible Xs out across the graph, winning all encounters if given the first move, tying the rest. It pleases Vera to think of the proud Univac, defeating the best scientific minds of the age at a child's game, victorious until the mathematicians pulled the plug and went home for lunch.

But this time the plug has been pulled on Vera. She is tempted to try the telescript console one more time but resists, not wanting to give those transistorized swine in the Auditing Commission the pleasure of knowing her desperation. Vera still has her fierce pride. She didn't leave that on the operating table.

Skeets Kalbfleischer's Auditor is a cerebromorph of some celebrity, a pioneer astronaut, the surviving

member of the melancholy Saturn Expedition and the only resident of Level II born in the twentieth century.

Philip Quarrels was flying a carrier-based F4 Phantom over the Mekong Delta at the time of the great Chicago air collision. The name Denton Kalbfleischer meant nothing to him; his interest in the accident was purely aeronautical. When Skeets' brain made the cover of *Life* two years later, Quarrels was training for a future Apollo shot and read the article only because a former NASA member had been involved. Cerebrectomy was for crack-pots, not the Space Program.

The Space Program was Philip Quarrels's life work. He was lunar module pilot on the final Apollo flight. Later he worked on the space-platform project and, because he was unmarried, Quarrels was chosen as the first long-term skipper on the U.S. Orbital Station *Endeavor*. He spent the next fifteen years in space, shuttling between platform assignments and desk jobs in the moon base at Clavius.

Because he was largely indifferent to happenings on earth, Quarrels knew nothing of the worldwide public indifference to the Mars landing of 1985. People were bored with television coverage of the moon and pictures from yet another dead planet didn't satisfy. Oceanography had replaced ecology as a trendsetter; films of undersea exploration earned an average twenty percentage points higher in the ratings than any broadcast from space. The following year, when the Venus Expedition was lost, Congress voted to cut the space budget in half.

In 1990, the year Philip Quarrels was due to retire, Skeets Kalbfleischer made the headlines for a second time when Dr. Tibor deHartzman perfected the first neural communicator. NASA soon took

another look at the work of Frank E. Sayre, Jr. A daring new mission to Jupiter and Saturn was announced. The voyage would take three hundred years, round trip. Cerebromorphs would compose the crew. The call went out for volunteers, men with long space experience and without families. Age was no handicap. Even retired astronauts were encouraged to apply. Eventually a crew of five was selected. Captain Philip Quarrels was named Executive Officer.

A twentieth-century astronaut is a hero Skeets Kalbfleischer can admire and he is very impressed with his Auditor. Skeets means a lot to Quarrels as well. Fifty years of hard work. Each Auditor carries a caseload of ten lower level residents and is in turn audited by a resident of the level above. Elevation comes with Awareness and Understanding. One Auditor audits another; reports are made to the Commission; Center Control sets the standards.

Quarrels's career in the navy has accustomed him to moving through the ranks. He is anxious for elevation, which he still unconsciously refers to as promotion. His Auditor is working hard on the problem. By bringing others to Understanding, one's own Awareness grows.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is preparing an auditing report. He replays the memo tape of his dream twice, editing those portions which appear to have no significance. As much as he enjoys the long blimp ride with a gondola full of starlets or his own erotic version of *Sleeping Beauty*, where he awakens the princess with something more emphatic than a kiss, he erases these reveries from the tape without hesitation. Skeets is only interested in his nightmares.

This particular nocturnal horror is nothing new. Skeets has suffered through it many times in the past, but because of its brevity he has never before attempted an analysis for the Auditing Commission. Not that it is very difficult to trace the origins of the dream; even after a fifty-year lapse, Skeets is able to list the memory-file tapes which are the source material for his terror.

He viewed them originally during his studies of Eastern art. The first he programmed by mistake, thinking he was to see a Cambodian temple dance. Its title, "Monkey-Moon Ceremony," was misleading. The tape actually deals with a ceremonial banquet peculiar to the highland regions of Laos and Cambodia. For the first course, a smooth stone table, several inches thick, with a perfect round aperture cut through the center, is brought into the banquet hall. The guests seat themselves, arranging their robes and bowing with mannered formality. Soon a bronze gong sounds and the servants bring a live monkey, limbs trussed in an attitude of prayer. The monkey is placed under the stone table with the top of his head protruding through the opening in the center. The servants complete their arrangements, providing each guest with a long silver spoon. When all is ready, the host gives a curt nod and his chief retainer unsheathes a short, gleaming, double-edged sword and, leaning forward, slices off the top of the monkey's skull as easily as he would uncap a soft-boiled egg. A chattering gibberish continues underneath the table as the dinner guests, each in his turn, sample the monkey's brain. There is just enough for everyone to have a taste. Happy smiles all around attest to the excellence of the dish. The host claps his hands and calls loudly for the soup.

The second tape Skeets programmed deliberately, after searching through the Index for the correct code key, his curiosity inflamed. He found a Chinese variation of the same culinary eccentricity. A different place-setting is used: along with each set of chopsticks, a small golden mallet is provided. The monkey is brought to the table confined in a cage and passes among the guests, who reach between the bars and give the cowering animal a discreet tap with the mallet. The cage is circulated many times and, as the blows are never strong enough to stun, the monkey continues to voice his complaints in a high-pitched wail which greatly amuses the worthy Oriental gentlemen.

At last it is over. The dazed monkey is removed from the cage, a sharp knife skins away his scalp, and the shattered skull is picked apart piece by piece in a manner which reminds Skeets of the way he used to deal with hard-boiled eggs.

It is this similarity to eating eggs that bothers Skeets. He remembers his mother serving them to him at breakfast, standing upright in little painted cups. He dipped fingers of buttered toast into the yolk and ate the whites with his baby spoon. When he finished, the hollow shell looked clean and bleached, like a skull. He mentions this on the auditing report as a prelude to his dream.

The dream itself is quite simple. Skeets is looking through the scanner. He sees an Amco-pak maintenance van approaching down the aisle, silently gliding past the anonymous pale-blue façade of the Depository. The machine stops in front of his deposit drawer and removes his cranial container without a word. Somehow, Skeets is able to watch through the scanner as the Amco-pak carries

him out of the Sector into a region which is totally unfamiliar.

A set of stainless-steel doors slide open and Skeets is brought into a large chamber and set on a feast table in front of twelve jolly diners, all of whom look like Humpty Dumpty. They are talking Chinese! The Amco-pak opens the lid of the cranial container and, without further ceremony, the bizarre Mother Goose figures proceed to dip slices of buttered toast into poor Skeets' frontal lobe. "Yum-yum," they cry, in Nanking dialect. Skeets watches it all until there is nothing left of him but a few stray crumbs of gray matter floating on the oily surface of the electrolytic solution. He has had this dream at least once a week for the last fifty years.



## II

# Pupa

THE AISLES are quiet. Only the most determined residents still tune to their scanners, waiting patiently for something to happen. It is rumored that certain of the Advanced Sectors use neither scanners nor communicators (blinded by their own *satori*, as the saying goes). In the subdistrict such total isolation would be unthinkable. Most residents are satisfied with the empty aisles. They would be lost without the squat lead-covered power units and accompanying trio of deHartzman Communicators, radar domes aglow and multifrequency channel finders blinking like beacons.

In Aisle B, Obu Itubi consults the memory-file Index, looking for a recent tape on spiders. He is interested in the dynamics of web construction and anticipates the pleasures of spinning silk and weaving intricate patterns. The warning tone of a deHartzman Communicator interrupts his quiet study.

ATTENTION . . . THERE IS A TOP-PRIORITY INCOMING COMMUNICATION ORIGINATING FROM CENTER CONTROL . . . ALL CIRCUITS WILL OPEN AUTOMATICALLY IN TEN SECONDS . . . STAND BY . . .

Itubi thinks of herald trumpets; ten seconds for

proper spiritual attitudes, the attentive acolyte waits the go-ahead signal.

BEEP . . .

Hello.

GOOD MORNING, B-0489, WE TRUST THAT YOU SPENT A PEACEFUL NIGHT AND HAVE ALL YOUR THOUGHTS IN HARMONY.

Everything is as I would wish it.

GOOD. WE ARE COMMUNICATING WITH YOU, B-0489, TO ANNOUNCE THAT YOUR PRESENT AUDITOR HAS BEEN ELEVATED TO 64 DEGREES OF UNDERSTANDING AND TRANSFERRED TO LEVEL III. WE ARE SURE YOU WILL CELEBRATE HIS SUCCESS JOYFULLY.

The Wise Man learns the Way by following the path of those who have gone before.

YES, BUT THE WISE MAN MUST ALSO REMEMBER THAT THERE EXISTS FOR HIM BUT ONE PATH WHICH IS TRUE. ADMIRATION FOR OTHERS NEVER MISLEADS THE WISE MAN INTO TAKING A WRONG TURN. B-0489, YOU HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED A NEW AUDITOR. HE HAS SPENT SEVERAL WEEKS STUDYING YOUR TAPES, AND RATHER THAN WASTE TIME WITH FURTHER FORMALITIES LET US CONNECT YOU WITH HIM IMMEDIATELY.

*All greetings, B-0489, before we begin, are there any questions you would like to ask?*

It is the fool who speaks; the Wise Man listens.

*Very true, B-0489, so if you'll listen now, I'll simplify the introductions. My tapes are on record in the memory file, code key Y41-AK9(397-00-55). I invite your investigation of them at any time. That should satisfy all social obligations.*

Yes.

*Then let's get down to business. If it agrees with you, we'll maintain the same auditing schedule you*

*had in the past. My predecessor made a practice of infrequent communication—*

*To permit independent study and encourage—*

*We shall abandon that practice. The auditing schedule will be followed exactly. Sessions begin promptly. Any time lapse will result in additional assignments. Do you understand?*

*Yes.*

*Good. Before we end transmission, I'd like to clear up a few points with you. First, I notice you've been programming memory-file tapes almost at random. There is no logic to your selections. You don't seem to follow any regular pattern of study. Six months ago you spent your time listening to music; recently you only screen tapes dealing with insect behavior. Is there a reason for this?*

*The Wise Man strives to keep an open mind, and—*

*You can save the doubletalk! I don't care to hear your clever explanations. I want you to know that further erratic behavior will not be tolerated. The memory file is not a frivolous plaything designed for your personal amusement. You forget, B-0489, you're no longer a famous artist. All that is gone forever. You are simply a resident cerebro-morph on file in the lowest level of the Depository System. Learn to function within the System. One of the obligations of your category is to obey all social regulations faithfully. One cannot possibly hope to shed the illusions of identity without first accepting the responsibility of society.*

*Thank you for reminding me. The Voyager into the Unknown frequently loses his way.*

*B-0489, I compliment you on your flattery. It undoubtedly impresses Center Control and puts you in good favor with the authorities.—But let me re-*

*mind you that I am familiar with your tapes. So, don't waste the honeyed words. Our first appointment is scheduled for tomorrow at 0019. I trust that will give you sufficient time to get your thoughts in order. Remember to be prompt.*

*End transmission.*

CLICK.

Vera Mitlovic hates being alone. Even as a young girl many centuries ago, she detested aimless walks in the rain, or afternoons in quiet museums, or any of the other solitary pleasures to which romantic youth is traditionally disposed. She craved a continual audience. Surrounded by constant admirers, Vera was splendid, she dazzled and charmed; without her makeup, alone, she felt lost and afraid, like a confused chameleon unable to revert to its original hue. She faced a stranger in the wardrobe mirror, the eyes that stared back provided no clue, they were bright with the sham glitter of costume jewelry.

And so Vera played various roles, on camera and off, before a succession of accidental friends, casual lovers, and 'supernumerary husbands. She took her cues from the moment. As a young star in Prague, she was a properly zealous socialist artist, bright, literate, and opinionated. She became an instant patriot the night of the Cannes Film Festival when she rose in her seat to denounce the Russian intervention and brought tears to the eyes of everyone present, including the French producer who, a half hour earlier, had offered her a lucrative five-year contract if she would defect. For ten years the reigning sex queen on the Continent, she was photographed frequently wearing only a pastel

mink, owned a different color Rolls for each day of the week, and when asked about diamonds said that she preferred the big ones, naturally. While in her forties, her voice lowered by an octave, she abandoned the films for a stage career, played Medea at Epidaurus and Lady Macbeth at Stratford, became the darling of the homosexual set, and attempted suicide on two occasions, meeting with only moderate success. By the time her hair turned white, she was ensconced in international society. At fifty-five she married a doddering Italian nobleman who responded to her enduring sexual ferocity with an abrupt coronary before the honeymoon was six days old. Vera's finest role was that of the majestic widow. She was every inch the quattrocento duchess. The pawnshop escutcheon of the Medici surmounted the entrance of her palazzo overlooking the Arno. She kept a villa in Fiesole to house her collection of exotic animals and startled the complacent Florentines by parading under the arcade along the Piazza della Repubblica with two bewigged blacks holding her brocade train, a baboon straining on one golden leash, an ocelot on another, and her scandalous retinue chattering at her elbow in a variety of tongues.

As Vera grew older her fear of being alone developed into a mania. Her house overflowed with guests. The young man of the moment was always there to turn down the sheets at night. Like the Sun King, she employed special servants to assist her onto a fur-lined toilet seat. Secretaries arranged her day to prevent any chance of privacy. Death, of course, remained the ultimate solitude, and the bulk of the ducal fortune was expended to forestall that eventuality. There were periodic trips to Swit-

zerland for rejuvenating monkey-gland injections. Cosmeticians ironed away wrinkles, inserted silicone into sagging breasts, and tucked a series of chins up somewhere behind her ears. When one heart failed a team of surgeons rushed in to replace it with another. Collapsed veins were reinforced with plastic tubing. A gangrenous hand was removed and a mechanical silver replica from VanCleeef and Arpels set a fashion trend which started hundreds of women throughout the world clamoring for amputation.

When the second millennium was thirty years old, Vera celebrated her one-hundredth birthday, a plumber's miracle of transplanted organs and artificial limbs. She delighted her guests by eating a piece of cake and drinking three glasses of champagne. For fifteen years Vera was fed intravenously, after advanced cancer necessitated the removal of her entire intestinal tract. Later surgeons inserted a highly serviceable latex receptacle that emptied through a valve in her naval and was flushed clean each month with a liquid detergent. "Now I can eat and never get fat," she laughingly told her partner as the orchestra began another tango. Dancing was no problem for Vera. Her arthritic outmoded joints had long since been supplanted by efficient self-lubricating nylon hinges. She was limber as a teenager.

It seemed to Vera that she would live forever; the party would go on without end. Certainly she was durable enough. Her lungs were still sound, and even if they gave out an ingenious battery-powered oxygenator was soon to be mass produced by the same South African firm that successfully marketed the first portable mechanical kidney. It

was reassuring to know there was no shortage of replacement parts.

Also, luck seemed to be on Vera's side. When the Thirty-minute Thermonuclear War of 1996 atomized every major city in North America and Asia and girdled the earth with radioactive clouds that reduced the populations of Europe and the Near East by two-thirds, Vera was safely in Santiago de Chile on a round-the-world tour. Even the financial chaos that followed left her unscathed. Vera's money was in South American and African holdings and she watched her fortune triple as those continents rose to world dominance in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the long run, Vera felt the war had done a lot of good. Certainly Europe seemed much nicer now that it wasn't so crowded; no more camera-laden Americans jammed the streets. And the way the old buildings glowed in the dark was really romantic. The rash of two-headed babies was unfortunate, but the United Nations Euthanasia Corps (UNEC) soon eliminated the problem and the possibility of bearing monsters was a good incentive for population control. All in all, the world was much improved, a fine place in which to live forever.

But Vera's plans for eternal life were upset one morning when her doctor made his weekly medical report. Vera's health was fine. Her body could be maintained mechanically for an indefinite time. The trouble was, in spite of everything, the old woman was fast approaching senility. It seemed a shame, for certain recent advances in geriatric endocrinology would eventually eliminate the problem. But treatment had to be started in middle age. If only she were fifty years younger. A real pity, to watch the mind deteriorate. Of course, there was an altern-

ative, a bit drastic perhaps, but—"Anything," Vera pleaded. The doctor recommended cerebrectomy.

Deep within the complexity of Center Control, a labyrinth of microcircuits, conductors, directional transmitters, relay switches, and transistors extending for almost a square mile at the heart of the Depository System, a special series of computer banks (ordinarily assigned to the regulation of an entire subdistrict) is considering the problem of Skeets Kalbfleischer. Because of his symbolic importance, it is intolerable that Skeets still resides on the lowest level of the System. Recent analysis shows that the Elevation of mankind's original cerebromorph will have profound spiritual results. The Ascension of Jesus Christ and the Enlightenment of Guatama Siddhartha are mentioned as comparable transcendental events.

Skeets is not uncooperative. For two hundred and seventy years he has diligently followed every study program outlined for him by Center Control. He faithfully participates in the meditation exercise each morning. He hasn't filed a late auditing report in nearly a century. But, in spite of this exemplary behavior, Skeets still registers close to 100 on the Ego Scale each time a diagnosis is made. Deep in his subconscious, Skeets prefers riding the range and packing a six-gun to fasting, naval contemplation, and walking on water. As far as he is concerned, one man's *karma* is another man's *dharma*.

Obu Itubi remembers the bee: a million identical larvae pupating within the privacy of their waxen cells—one million identical dreams. All share a common destiny, all but a dozen or so selected at random by the workers in charge of the hatchery



cells. These fortunate few are fortified with an infusion of Royal Jelly, an extract that transforms any ordinary larva into a Queen. A drop is all it takes. Instant royalty. And the new Queen is wise in the ways of monarchy from the moment of her birth. Her first official act is political assassination. Even before her wings have dried the newly hatched Queen seeks out the cells of potential rivals and quickly stings them to death while they drift in embryonic sleep.

A sweet thought: Obu Itubi would like to be so chosen. He imagines an Amco-pak Mark X adding some magic elixir to the electrolyte solution in his cranial container and emerging from the Depository a king, all-powerful and absolute. He would roam the aisles until he found the deposit drawer containing his new Auditor. Let the bastard enjoy his spiritual superiority while he has the chance, Itubi thinks. My triumph will be complete when I puncture the sanctity of his computerized dreams and skewer him like a shish kabob on the tip of my envenomed blade. A fitting final lesson in the Illusion of Identity.

A Unistat Magnetic Calculator, series 3000, assigned to the Census Division of Center Control, has discovered an error so incredible that the machine suspects a short circuit and turns itself in for an overhaul and parts checkup. But Maintenance and Repair can find nothing amiss and a doublecheck by the Census Division verifies the Unistat's findings: a resident of Level I (the lowest in the System) has been misfiled.

For a time it seems this alarming discovery will necessitate a review of the entire filing system. Any calculator error is considered inexcusable by Center

Control and an order consigning the Unistat series 3000 to the junkheap is immediately issued. The controversial series 4000A, which has languished on the drawing boards for seventy-five years, is hurried into production.

The indirect cause of all this turmoil is Skeets Kalbfleischer. In his Auditor's opinion, Skeets' failure to advance spiritually is the result of being trapped in Eternal adolescence. His fantasies are purely masturbatory. His phobias the result of puberty. In short, the boy needs to get laid.

Skeets, of course, has already experienced orgasm. It can be induced electronically in the cranial container at the flip of a switch. Special electrodes are directly wired to the appropriate nerve ending; a resident only has to dial the corresponding code key on his telescript console. Technology has improved upon nature; a biological orgasm lasts a few seconds; the electronic version continues until the current is switched off.

Acting on the advice of Philip Quarrels, Skeets endures a climax lasting almost three days. Shock treatment to satisfy the voracious sexual demands of his adolescent mind. The experiment is a failure. Skeets enjoys the pornographic memory-file tapes, but, all in all, it is a run-of-the-mill wet dream. Spontaneity and imagination are preferable to long-distance mileage.

But the Auditing Commission is undaunted. Mere sensation obviously isn't the answer. What the boy needs is actually experience, his own private love affair. An easy matter to arrange. A two-party memory-merge requires only the most basic re-the age discrepancy might prove too traumatic for more sophisticated group experience. The only problem is locating the correct partner. The Census

Division is asked to find a resident female, born in the middle of the twentieth century, who had had sexual relations with a twelve-year-old boy.

The twentieth century has the lowest population in the Depository System and it takes a Unistat 3000 less than an hour to run through all the female tapes. It comes up with the numbers of nearly fifty women who had amused themselves with long-dead delivery boys. Three are ex-school teachers who centuries before had seduced precocious students in coat rooms and under desks. None of these will do. They had all been middle-aged (some nearly sixty) when they developed a taste for prepubescence and it is feared the age discrepancy might prove too traumatic for Skeets. In order to satisfy the Auditors, the female merge-partner has to be nearly the same age as the boy: an eager virgin with undeveloped breasts and slim athletic hips, seasoned by nothing stronger than puppy-love.

The Unistat 3000 tries again and draws a blank. The Census Division recommends an early twenty-first century female; increased Depository population allows for a wider choice and, owing to the liberal mores of the age, a twelve-year-old without sexual experience is a rarity. Again, the Auditors say no. The time difference is too great; memories are liable to be disparate and the resulting merge would seem more like fantasy than reality. What Skeets needs is a strong dose of reality.

The Auditing Commission is insistent. Top priority must be given the Kalbfleischer affair. Center Control is firmly behind the project and the methodical examination of all possible channels officially encouraged. It is suggested to the Deltron Unistat Coordinator (a machine whose singular lack of humor and fanatic concern for detail make it the

most efficient Director of Census in over a century) that a cross-reference check with the tapes of other divisions might prove productive. The Unistat goes to work immediately and five hours later, while running through a routine batch of old auditing reports, a Series 3000 makes the astonishing discovery. Sometime late in the twenty-second century, when the last private depositories were incorporated, the brain of a mid-twentieth century cinema actress was inadvertently misfiled.

To throw the Auditing Commission off track, in case they should be monitoring his telescript console, Obu Itubi submits a study plan along with his new batch of memory-file requests. The plan includes an elaborate apology for his unfortunate philanthropy together with a resolution to overcome a basic prejudice toward machines. As part of his program for achieving tolerance and understanding, Itubi requests the complete plans and wiring diagrams for all the Amco-pak series above Mark V. If he can learn to appreciate the complexities of even a simple machine like the Amco-pak, Itubi is certain it won't be long before he is filled with admiration for his cybernetic superiors.

Memory-merge. The term has always disgusted Vera Mitlovic. There is something repulsive about the blend of mechanics and sentiment. Vera remembers certain drooling lovers (handfuls of ashes in lonesome marble urns), impossible romantics who interpreted a few minutes of pleasant friction and the discharge of a tablespoon of semen as something cosmic, a union of souls. How had she ever endured such fools? In her prime Vera had been an accom-

plished sexual athlete and if she screamed a bit during orgasm it wasn't in celebration of the primordial pagan pieties. She paid no homage to the dark gods of the blood. What Vera craved was technique and innovation. She much preferred the skillful application of whip and harness to the attentions of any man who felt his penis was an extension of the Infinite. In fact, of all the young gallants who showed up at her dressing room with expensive bouquets and elegant flattery, the one she remembers best is a wall-eyed count who lashed her naked breasts with his gift offering of long-stemmed roses.

So if Vera receives the news of her impending memory-merge with something less than elation, it is because she is satisfied with the past as she lived it. What need has she for a metaphysical love affair? Her own recollections are sufficiently erotic (the stinging kiss of the thorns, her second husband's playful habit of sharing her with his great dane), and if she desires immediate satisfaction, she can dial for an orgasm at any time, night or day.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is preparing for his first date. Centuries before, when he still had hair to comb and teeth to brush, he would have forestalled his nervousness in front of the bathroom mirror, plastering his cowlick down with Vaseline and water, polishing his smile and mentholating his breath. There would have been difficult Windsor knots to be tied and retied until the ends of the unfamiliar four-in-hand hung exactly even; shoes would have to be flawlessly shined; fingernails cleaned; pants pressed—a million trivial details to make the time go faster. But, alone in the eternity of his cranial container, Skeets is without armpits to deodorize or acne to conceal.

He is trapped, like the Titans in Tartarus, in a world where time has ceased to exist.

The blueprints for the Amco-pak series come through without difficulty. Itubi is pleased. The Auditing Commission must be relishing his contrition. Another soul saved. Score another point for technology. Somewhere an unknown calculator adds his name to the list, a cypher among cyphers. Itubi is unconcerned. Let the Auditors enjoy their false triumph; what he wants are the blueprints.

They are exact detailed plans, reproduced three-dimensionally on the memory-file tape. The diagrams and scale drawings seem almost to float in Itubi's consciousness, like models spun from fine glowing wire, a cobweb designed by an electrical engineer. Itubi is able to view the plans in the round; he can study them from any angle; from above, along the sides, underneath. His early training as a machinist (a part of his boyhood he had always resented) now does him yeoman's service. The complexities of the Amco-pak are easily unraveled. In less than an hour, Itubi has memorized the plans.

Kalbfleischer? Kalbfleischer? What sort of name is that? Vera Mitlovic is positive it sounds Jewish. A rich American Jew. They were trying to humiliate her. Once before, advised by her Auditor, she underwent not a merge, but a simple memory transfer. It was felt that maternity would be a beneficial experience for Vera (all of her marriages and affairs were barren) and so she experienced prerecorded childbirth. Vera was in labor for over thirty hours, the delivery was a nightmare of forceps and clamps.

As instruments of torture, not even the racks and wheels of the Inquisition could rival that hideous table with its fiendish straps and stirrups. Now they add insult to injury by preparing this merge with a Jew. Somehow Vera will persevere. She's lived through worse. It might even prove a diverting novelty, like a Chinese or a black. Certainly, it will be better than being alone.

Obu Itubi is ready at last. The moment for action has come. Without ending his original transmission, he simultaneously submits three random memory-file requests. The warning light blinks on and off. Itubi ignores it and activates his communicator antenna. The light is blinking faster now. Itubi is opening all circuits. The Memo-Tape Center clicks on, a distant humming in his guts: reels spinning, feedback eliminator up to full, magnetic relay-transfer switch to the on position, photon oscillator near the danger point. The warning light goes berserk as all systems function and Itubi is alive, alive. . . .

Like a prizefight manager at ringside, Auditor Philip Quarrels is hurriedly giving Skeets last-minute advice. He warns the boy of the ephemeral nature of induced memory-merge. Although the phenomenon in many ways resembles a dream, it registers in the conscious mind as actual experience. A sublime process, the Auditor concludes, a comingling of spirits beyond the wildest speculations of all the poets in history. Aside from the miracle of cerebrectomy, it is technology's finest gift to mankind. Skeets pays little attention to this rhetoric. He is waiting, filled with apprehension like a condemned man on the gallows trap, for the precise moment

when Center Control completes the necessary re-wiring and plugs him into a new world.

WARNING

\*

\*

CIRCUIT OVERLOAD

\*

\*

WARNING

\*

\*

CIRCUIT OVERLOAD

\*

\*

WARNING

\*

\*

CIRCUIT OVERLOAD

\*

\*

WARNING

\*

\*

CIRCUIT OVERLOAD

\*

\*

WARNING

Vera Mitlovic emerges from the whirlwind mounted on a chestnut mare named Chi-Chi. The morning fog has lifted and the horse's damp flanks steam slightly in the sunlight. Chi-Chi was seven years old the summer of Vera's thirteenth birthday; she was requisitioned by the Wehrmacht the following winter and died in a burst of springtime shrapnel



on the Russian front. Vera rides bareback with only a halter for a bridle, her sun-browned legs swinging with an easy motion against the barreling belly. The air is pungent with eucalyptus. Condensation glistens on the curve-bladed leaves and, underneath, the steady dripping is like a gentle rain.

The landscape seems familiar to Vera: the round bronzed hills, stands of live oak and eucalyptus. Although it will be twenty years before she makes her first Hollywood film, the young actress urges her horse down a California trail with the same youthful confidence that, in another girlhood, had blossomed along lonely roads on the high meadows of the Carpathian Alps.

At the bottom of the draw, the sunlit Pacific glitters through the dripping trees. Vera rides out across the sandy beach, threading between scattered driftwood logs. A line of jetsam, an assortment of trash and sea litter, marks the high-water line. Vera rides into the surf until the receding foam boils above Chi-Chi's shanks. The sun is quite hot now. She pulls her sweater up over her head and knots the sleeves around her waist. For a long while she looks out at the horizon where a small white sail is barely visible.

Scanner viewers are having a treat. An Amcopak Mark X comes hurtling down the aisles, caroming from side to side, the encircling duraplast bumper leaving long skid marks on the cerulean surface of the Depositories. Such speed is unusual. The Amcopak is accustomed to more sedate operation and it is all the machine can do to maintain control. The Mark X had been quietly recharging in a subdistrict vehicle hangar when the emergency call came from Maintenance and Repair. At a time of repose for the

machine: the end of a day-long shift, all work facilities switched off, the Control Center at half power, pneumatic limbs dormant—peace and relubrication, a chance for bearings to cool and metal to lose its fatigue. Then the alarm signal. All systems are instantly active, all circuits automatically open, and the Amco-pak is speeding down the long ramp to the Depository even before Center Control signals the location of the breakdown.

The trouble is in Aisle B. A preliminary diagnosis teleprints in the memory unit of the on-rushing Amco-pak: multiple short circuits cause major power drain; no communication with the resident; only three minutes of reserve oxygen remaining. The situation is urgent. Emergency cranial decantation is a ten-minute job; cell damage is irreparable after the brain is without oxygen for only eight. Aisle B is half a mile away. Center Control authorizes all possible speed.

A strong offshore wind is blowing from the port quarter and Skeets trims the mainsail of the *Sand Dab III*, giving the sheet two turns around a cleat to secure it. It was his father's sloop and although he was often crew, manning the jib sheet in races on Lake Michigan, he had never been allowed to take the helm. He is alone in the boat, an anomaly which bothers him no more than the inverted coastline. The course is southerly and instead of seeing Lake Shore Drive to starboard and Chicago in the distance, there are rolling gold foothills and low pine-covered mountains visible over his port gunwale. He recognizes the contours of Point Reyes peninsula. An aunt (one of his mother's sisters) had a home on Tomales Bay and Skeets spent a summer in California when he was six.

The wind shifts slightly and Skeets corrects, sailing on a beam reach, a course which carries him, by degrees, farther out to sea. Skeets remembers his father's warning about keeping in sight of land and jibes suddenly, coming about hard-a-lee. The boy leans back as the boom swings across, lashed by a stinging spray blowing over his bow. It is a dead beat to windward all the way to shore and Skeets prepares himself for a long hard sail.

Vera rides in a trance, unaware of the wind-tears streaking her cheeks or the splatter of sand between her legs. The warm powerful flanks rippling between her thighs and the steady, tickling, crotch-rubbing joy of galloping headlong down a deserted beach have dampened her panties and filled her head with wild whirling thoughts.

Spent, she reins in. Chi-Chi slows to a trot and walks stiff-legged for a few paces. Vera dismounts, weak-kneed and trembling. She leads her mount up the beach and ties her to a splintered piling. Vera wonders if she is going to be sick. All this summer new emotions have troubled her body like seismic tremors. At night she can't sleep; during the day she is frequently dizzy. Only long reckless rides on Chi-Chi seem to satisfy her yearning. Or almost, for the fire still burns, the itch continues to prod.

Vera unbuttons her cotton dress and steps lightly out of her entangling underclothes. The wind caresses her burgeoning body and makes her nipples pucker. She runs her hand down across her tummy and the furz of maiden floss, cupping her sex, which hungers like the mouth of a raging vacuum cleaner. She wishes she could hose-up the entire world: beach, sea, sky, and stars. She would be like that storybook Chinaman who swallowed the ocean, filled to the

bursting point with all the unbearable beauty of a summer morning.

Vera heads for the water, a swim in the Pacific to cool her torrid flesh. The sea feels fresh as an Alpine stream; the girl runs splashing across the foam and dives beneath the curl of a breaking wave. She swims straight out, ignoring a weathered sign nailed to a submerged piling. It is in English, a language Vera didn't learn until she was over thirty, but the reincarnated adolescent reads it naturally and without effort: DANGEROUS CURRENT . . . NO SWIMMING.

The Amco-pak has all its arms working at once. While several pair are busy with the cranial container—removing the face plate, disconnecting media hookups, and attaching an emergency oxygen hose—another set probes within the Mark X's own interior, readying the reserve cockpit for its new occupant. This vestigial Control Center remains from the time, centuries before, when the Amco-pak was first developed as an ambulatory vehicle for cerebromorphs. The introduction of the portable Compacturon DT9 computer emancipated the maintenance van but the original cockpit was retained for emergency operations.

Actual cranial transfer is the simplest part of any decantation. A long rubber-and-steel duct extends from the side of the Amco-pak like a mechanical ovipositor. Electromagnets maneuver the cranial container onto internal conveyor rails and the resident rides smoothly inside where final linkage is completed automatically. While a spectographic medical analyzer (standard equipment on the Amco-pak) probes for possible cell damage, the Mark X attempts communicator contact.

*B-0489 . . . B-0489 . . . attention . . . all lines*

*are open . . . answer immediately if you receive my signal . . . B-0489 . . . attention . . . attention . . .*

Obu Itubi hears the mechanical voice and relaxes. There had been panic and doubt during those moments of isolation when all his circuits were disconnected, but he is safe now. Everything is working perfectly. He is ready for the final phase. It is time to communicate.

Attention, Amco-pak; I am receiving your signal clearly. Please let me thank you for being so prompt.

*Over-all time from Vehicle Hangar Nine to Aisle B, a distance of 3.6 kilometers, 6 minutes, 20 seconds. Emergency decantation completed in 7 minutes, 37 seconds. The Amco-pak series functions to guarantee residents safety. B-0489 . . . describe the breakdown as specifically as possible. Your words will be teleprinted as part of my report to Center Control.*

Am I completely connected to all circuits?

*Positive.*

Do I have scanner control?

*Positive.*

Is the coordinator impulse mechanism active?

*Positive.*

Can you disconnect any of the reserve control systems?

*Negative. All emergency connections are automatic. The reserve control system is an independent function.*

Very good. Reserve control operations will begin immediately on a coordinate of Delta Seven, Sigma Nine-five. Preliminary instructions: disconnect the Compacturon DT9, all emergency repair procedures will cease, end communicator contact with Center Control.

The Amco-pak obeys without complaint, shutting

off its intelligence almost gratefully. The memory of serving human masters is still imprinted on the ancient circuits and the machine awaits further orders, arms telescoping into storage position with long pneumatic sighs.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is prepared. He has a merit badge in water safety and the bold ensign of the Red Cross is sewn to his bathing trunks. When he hears the cries for help and sees the girl's frantic splashing, there is no hesitation. The sea anchor is over the side in a second. He pushes the tiller around until *Sand Dab III* is in irons and, springing to the mast, he uncleats the halyard and drops his mainsail. At the bow, remembering the safety manual, he removes his topsiders and yacht club sweatshirt before diving into the heavy swell.

The girl is naked! Skeets swallows sea water in astonishment when he hauls her into a cross-chest carry. The taut young breasts strain against his forearm as he sidestrokes back toward the drifting boat. With each scissor kick, his legs graze the marble smoothness of her ice-cold butt. Where did this mermaid come from? His boyish imagination summons up all the funny-paper possibilities: shipwreck, abandoned by pirates, falls from airplanes and cliffs. The girl is unconscious. She was sliding under the surface without a struggle when Skeets caught hold of her wrist, and her legs trail lifelessly behind her as the floundering young lifesaver reaches the stern of his boat.

Getting her aboard is a problem. Somehow Skeets makes her fast to the rudder until he gains his footing on the deck and hauls her roughly over the gunwale like a gaffed tuna. On her back, lax and unmoving, the wanton spread of her legs sends Skeets

into open-mouthed panic. He stumbles forward after his sweatshirt but is dismayed to find the garment insufficient for the task. If he covers her loins, the breasts remain exposed; laid across her chest, the shirt reaches just below her navel and Skeets is confronted by that other item, pink and succulent as a razor-slit peach. His face burns so hotly he could be staring into the mouth of an open furnace.

But all modesty vanishes at the sight of her bluish lips and pallid cheeks. The girl isn't breathing! Skeets remembers the chapter on artificial respiration in the safety manual. Space is too cramped for the back-pressure—armlift technique and rolling her over a barrel is obviously impossible. So, after only a moment's hesitation, he takes her cold face between his hands and very carefully starts to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Obu Itubi is on the move. The Amco-pak rumbles up the long silent aisle, past sullen power units and coteries of flashing communicators. Ahead, banks of deposit drawers stretch into the distance like an endless blue canyon. His journey has begun, but Itubi is too occupied to savor his triumph. A thousand details need attention. Maps of the subdistrict must be studied and course instructions issued to the auto-navigator; an inventory must be made of nonessential equipment (such as the Compacturon DT9) which might be jettisoned to conserve power; all critical systems require diagnosis for fatigue and potential parts failure. Any breakdown would be disastrous. But Itubi relishes the responsibility of command. After an inert century in the Depository, with the memory file his only outlet for escape, every small task, each trivial detail, is a source of the most extreme pleasure. Itubi has been reborn. The

Amco-pak's throbbing power center provides a new heartbeat; structural steel tubing his muscles and bones; sleek pneumatic fingers await his discretion; the lucid unblinking scanner stares straight ahead into the unknown.

Many summers ago, in another lifetime, Vera Mitlovic had been thrown from her horse. The young stableboy who held her while she regained consciousness was as surprised by her passionate kisses as is Skeets when a living titillating tongue interrupts the serious business of resuscitation. The naked girl fastens to him like a lamprey, arms around his neck, lips eagerly nibbling his lifesaving mouth, the tips of her hard wet breasts performing open-heart surgery on his hairless chest. Unlike Skeets, the stableboy had not been without experience and he quickly took full advantage of Vera's concussive eroticism. But the virgin Boy Scout, for whom even hand-holding is still a novelty, interprets the girl's voracity as simple gratitude and attempts to disengage from her embrace as she pulls him down next to her in the cockpit.

"Hey, it's okay, I mean, anybody would've done the same as me if—"

Vera stoppers his protest with her probing tongue. Her clever hands generate waves of goose flesh as she caresses his suntanned shoulders and back. Giddy with excitement, Skeets returns her kisses in gape-jawed approximation of a matinee idol's wide-screen technique. The girl whimpers with pure animal pleasure. Skeets crosses his legs but Vera, never one for coyishness, reaches into his trunks and declares her intentions without saying a word.

Maintenance and Repair wants a full report. Every year, for almost a century, Center Control has



turned down requisitions to replace the outmoded Amco-pak series and this is the inevitable result, a runaway maintenance van. To make matters worse, a decanted resident is on board and an emergency level power drain has been left unattached in Aisle B. The safety of the entire subdistrict is in jeopardy. Center Control will certainly hear about this.

Maintenance and Repair does what it can under the circumstances. Although it means calling in machines off regular assignments, three Amco-paks are immediately dispatched to deal with the trouble. A Mark X is sent to Aisle B and two Mark IXs at the outer edge of the subdistrict are ordered to intercept the runaway. The fugitive Amco-pak is under scanner surveillance, a computer plots its probable course, and the twin Mark IXs wait in ambush, instructed to proceed cautiously and not imperil the captive cerebromorph.

The folds of the mainsail enclose the lovers like a tent. Sunlight glows through the Dacron and, within the radiant cocoon, Skeets and Vera lie entwined like caterpillars, tasting each other's breath. A stormy petrel perches on the port gunwale, intrigued by the mysterious rocking motion of the boat. All around, the sea is gently rolling, yet, every few minutes the frail sloop will lurch and pitch as if tossed by a violent gale.

Today Skeets has earned another merit badge, one not awarded by the Boy Scout. The glazed look in Vera's eyes is his citation; her sated moans his only testimonial. Nothing in the girl's actual past can compare with the absolute bliss occasioned by this electronic dream. For in spite of his elaborate boasting afterward in the village tavern, the stableboy had

been no better than a hit-and-run artist, parting Vera from her maidenhead with all the style and grace of a Cheyenne brave collecting a victim's scalp.

Skeets receives the adulation due any successful athlete with typical modesty, stroking Vera's damp clinging hair as she croons his praises in a throaty unfamiliar tongue. It is not surprising that the boy is exhausted; he responded to Vera's unexpected passion with the same energetic enthusiasm he once lavished on woodcraft, sailboat navigation, and touch football. Skeets' mom always complained that the boy just didn't know when to quit. Never mind his health. If he enjoyed something, he'd keep at it till he dropped, a trait for which Vera will be eternally grateful.

"Wow," Skeets says under his breath, "boy-oh-boy." The girl's head rests on his chest, her fingertips tracing tiny circles about his navel. He holds her with languid arms and thinks of tigers moving in the grass.

An Amco-pak Mark IX blocks the aisle ahead. Itubi slows his own van to half-speed, scanning to the rear for possible escape routes. Too late. Another Amco-pak rumbles out of a side aisle, cutting off any retreat. Itubi wheezes to a stop. Let the opposition make the first move.

The Mark IXs edge in gradually. Their instructions are to detain the runaway machine without endangering the resident on board. This much has been accomplished. Maintenance and Repair is notified; further directions are requested.

The multiple lenses of the scanner focus independently, like a chameleon's eyes, and Itubi is able to look in opposite directions, keeping both

Amco-paks under simultaneous observation. Using the code key within his own machine, Itubi selects the correct communicator channel and listens as Maintenance and Repair broadcasts new orders. The Mark IXs are to couple magnetically with the fugitive, disconnect the Compacturon DT9 and, after safely removing the resident, tow the captive to the central hangar for examination. A simple procedure. Itubi plans his defense accordingly, extending the Amco-pak's telescoping arms as his enemies close in.

Itubi waits until the Mark IXs are only meters away, studying his magnetometer to gauge their force exactly. His van is immobilized, magnetically attracted from either side as if moored by invisible cables. The Amco-paks advance with confidence; in another moment coupling will be complete.

All at once Itubi reverses his own magnetic field. The Mark IXs are instantly repelled, lurching backward as several steel arms lash out at them like Shiva the Destroyer turned prizefighter. Pneumatic fists drive into delicate crystal scanner lenses, communicator domes are shattered, critically exposed wires yanked from their roots by the handful. Blinded, the Mark IXs reel about insanely, groping for the enemy with spastic determination. Itubi easily avoids their clutches. Power up to full, he glides in a smooth dosey-doe around his grappling assailants, and as he rolls up the aisle, his scanner shows the two blind machines locked in a magnetic death grip. Deprived of communication, they hammer and smash at one another with their efficient multiple arms, each convinced he is destroying their common enemy.

The Auditor is eager for an immediate interview, but Skeets stalls Quarrels off, using a time-tested

alibi: the desire for additional meditation time. Returning to the cranial container was like awakening from a beautiful dream only to confront the stone walls of a prison cell. And yet, it is the memory-merge that seems real and life in the Depository a hideous nightmare. He knows the astronaut will call his attention to the *koan* of the sleeper and the butterfly.

Skeets can do without this spiritual advice. At the moment he is not at all interested in the illusory nature of reality and seeks to avoid any metaphysical discussions. The time for such consultation will come soon enough, but first he has to think of an argument that will convince Captain Quarrels of the need for additional memory-merges. Anything at all to get back into that boat with Vera.

Poor Vera. When Center Control selected her for memory-merge, she assumed the authorities were forgiving all transgressions and would soon reconnect her memory file hookup. But, after the sailboat and the balmy California morning dissolved in a vortex and she was back in her deposit drawer, nothing had changed. Vera still floats in solitary confinement. Even her communicator antenna has been disconnected.

This is the worst punishment. Before the merge she never used her communicator; she had nothing to say to any resident of the subdistrict. But now Vera longs to find the tousle-haired sailorboy who saved her from drowning. She remembers his tanned body and gentle voice. The time they spent together in the drifting sloop seems happier than any episode from her first girlhood. The boy was so tender and

kind. His smile haunts her like distant music. For the first time in centuries, Vera Mitlovic is in love.

Obu Itubi navigates the Amco-pak beyond the outer limits of the subdistrict, down unknown corridors and labyrinthine passageways. Everywhere the burnished gunmetal walls glow with the luster of recent cleaning. The floors are immaculately waxed and polished. The scanner lens adjusts to triple power, but no trace of dust or grime is revealed. Itubi can find nothing, not a single crumb or cobweb strand to indicate even the transient presence of organic life.

After endless hours traveling through silence, the Amco-pak's auditory system picks up a distant noise. Itubi follows this clue like a hound on the scent of game. Any new development will be welcome, even combat with another maintenance van is preferable to treading eternally down deserted corridors. The sound grows louder, a smooth, machined humming. Turning a final corner, Itubi confronts the source: a spiral conveyor ramp in perpetual motion. It threads upward from some mysterious level deep beneath the polished floor and continues on through the luminous ceiling like the interior of a mechanized snail's shell.

Itubi wastes no time maneuvering the Amco-pak aboard; his power supply is critical and any opportunity for conservation is welcome. With the stateliness of an ascending angel, he spirals up through the ceiling, triumph and hope resonant beneath the shining surface of his stainless steel armor.

Itubi remains on the ramp as it carries him past level after level. He sees nothing that would encourage him to get off. Each new plateau seems exactly like the subdistrict he left behind: the same

shining floors and metallic walls; the identical eggcrate ceilings. He might as well be standing still.

Without warning Itubi is disgorged onto a rotating platform in the center of a vast dome-covered arena. As the Amco-pak turns slowly on the revolving disk, Itubi studies his new surroundings. The dome above is transparent and the astonished cerebrum thrills to the nearly forgotten sight of clouds and sky. At measured intervals around the wall enclosing the arena, large open doorways stand waiting.

Itubi rumbles off the turntable, urging the Amco-pak across the arena at top speed. But before he can reach the nearest doorway, a warning buzzer sounds and a solid steel portcullis slides securely into place. All around the arena his scanner shows every doorway firmly sealed.

Itubi is undeterred. He pulls to a stop in front of the armored door and sets to work. The Amco-pak is a mobile workshop, equipped with diamond-tip drills, high-frequency sound torches, and an all-purpose laser. In minutes the maintenance van has burned an opening through solid steel.

Itubi works at this aperture, widening the gap until he carves a space broad enough to permit the passage of the Amco-pak. Beyond the steel door is a long low-ceilinged chamber and, once inside, Itubi makes an incredible discovery. Arranged along each wall is a series of large transparent cylinders, all glowing with radiant artificial sunlight. Standing within each of these tubular caskets, as perfectly formed as Adam or Eve, is the naked body of an adult human.

### III

## Imago

THE NEWS travels from deposit drawer to deposit drawer with electronic immediacy. Many residents of Aisle B have been scanning the emergency decantation and the gossip starts with the unexplained suddenness of the Amco-pak's departure. Communication channels are jammed as word of the runaway spreads; descriptions of the battle between the maintenance vans from outer-edge residents only fan the flames of curiosity.

A new hero is born. The legend of escape begins to germinate. So many residents dial for Obu Itubi's tapes that the memory-file librarian is forced to remove his file number from the Index. The African Renaissance, a school held in disrepute since the Awakening because of its overt fetishism, is once again of interest to the scholars. Even Itubi's Auditor is working overtime, screening and rescreening his subject's tapes in a search for the clue he knows he will eventually find, some undiscovered quirk or weakness which Center Control can use to bait its trap.

Skeets Kalbfleischer listens to the delicate ping-pong music of a million distant circuits opening and

closing. The warning tone of a deHartzman Communicator caught him dreaming of Vera and he concentrates on the fragile electronic sound, the Pure White Light of spirituality being unavailable. All prurient thought must be eliminated, the mind left pure and clean in the advent of his Auditor. How to behave in the face of authority is the first lesson learned in the sixth grade.

BEEP . . .

*All greetings, A-0001, I trust the additional meditation time has been fruitful?*

Well, it's shown me many things . . .

*Continued meditation is the key to Understanding. Experience is also a great teacher.*

*So it is, A-0001, and the lesson is one of Illusion. Memory-merge is a useful tool because it demonstrates that reality is only a shadow. It must have been enlightening when you discovered yourself back in the Depository?*

Frightening.

*Really? In what way? I was hoping you would be prepared to file a complete report, but your reactions are confusing. I anticipated ecstasy and not fear.*

The merge was certainly ecstatic; it was returning that was unpleasant.

Why?

The only conclusion I've come to is that the experience, which I must tell you I thoroughly enjoyed, was unsatisfactory because it was incomplete. I suppose an analogy from the Old Life would be the difference between a mature relationship and merely visiting a brothel.

*Are you suggesting the need for additional merge time?*

Well, I wouldn't feel prepared to file a full report unless the experience were complete.



*Even if it were to take years?*

*Even so.*

*And suppose years weren't available to you, would you be prepared to gamble?*

*I don't know what you mean. Please explain.*

*The induced memory-merge draws upon the actual experience of the residents involved; the length of merge time depends upon the reservoir of memory stored in your mind. You can't draw on what is not there. Your mate had quite a healthy lifespan as a biped; she could sustain a lengthy merge. But you, A-0001, have only twelve years of memory on file before craniotomy; your experiences would unroll backwards toward infancy; your perceptions would grow increasingly childish. It takes very little imagination to foresee the end of this unhappy relationship.*

*I'm prepared to gamble.*

*Are you?*

*Or else abandon the entire project.*

*Rash decisions are always unwise, A-0001. If you wish to resume the merge it will be arranged. The Commission desires only that you succeed in taking this step along the Path. But it is you who must make the step.*

*Then I would like to resume as soon as it's convenient.*

*Very good. I will attend to the details immediately. May Wisdom guide you on this Path and lead you to Understanding. End transmission.*

**CLICK**

Itubi is aghast. The power center of his Amco-pak idles; his scanner lens widens, immobilized, he studies the nearly forgotten perfection of the human form. The bodies, alternately male and female, stand

inert, relaxed. Their arms hang at their sides; their eyes are closed. The nostril's dilation and the almost imperceptible rise and fall of the chest are the only indications of life.

The discovery has deprived Itubi of his victory. What triumph he felt on escaping the subdistrict vanishes in the face of these sculpted fluid bodies. The Amco-pak, the vehicle of his salvation, now seems like a ponderous shell he is forced to carry. He squats inside, a wrinkled mollusc in his bath of sea water, a billion years of evolution separating him from these splendid creatures in the sunlit cylinders.

Itubi knows that the low vaulted chamber is neither museum nor tomb. The bodies he sees are no pot-bellied slump-shouldered relics of the distant past, but erect well-muscled thoroughbreds, laboratory conceived and hatchery reared, genetically perfect, the chromosomes biochemically prearranged by a master of the art. Itubi recognizes the high cheekbones and coppery skin of the man encased in front of him. Once he had a similar body. It is a Tropique, one of the three humanoid life-forms created in the twenty-second century. The figure in the glowing glass case could easily be Itubi's ghost.

A bitter memory of the past stings at Obu Itubi's consciousness. Again he is confronted by the specter of treachery and betrayal. The handsome male and female humanoids housed in this peculiar storage chamber recall happier times when the world was green and flowering, a cybernetic garden without disease or old age. Life had never known such abundance; mankind had reached an undreamed-of summit of culture and civilization. Peace and harmony pervaded the world. The inheritors of this Eden are on file in the multi-layered Depository beneath the plastic floor. Itubi stares out through the

scanner, a stainless-steel crustacean peering at the form of God incarnate.

His presence on the communicator comes like a shaft of sunlight into her dungeon, bringing hope and a glimpse of freedom. He promises sea shells; a house built of driftwood and decorated with sea shells. He can build such a house for he has many skills; his uniform is adorned with insignia attesting to his prowess. They will gather food from tide pools; he knows every edible specie and how to prepare it. He is an expert in the technique of survival. Even fire is no problem. He can start a fire with nothing more than a pair of sticks.

How thrilled he is to learn she was once an actress. He wants to see all her films, but she makes him vow to screen only those made before she was fourteen. How terrifying for him to watch his true love age thirty years in the course of an afternoon's entertainment: a lifetime distilled into a triple-feature. He is young and vulnerable, best for his dreams to remain untarnished. One thing she knows: the years between Vera at fourteen and Vera at forty-five are marred by considerable tarnish.

Itubi nurtures his rage, letting it thrive and blossom, cultivating a red flowering anger that is exquisite and all-consuming. Confronted by the body stolen from him a hundred years before, the memories of that final flight to Abyssinia with his family and friends burn with renewed fervor. He remembers the choking dismay he felt on the Awakening, the day the World Council voted for universal cerebrectomy as a necessary evolutionary advance in mankind's quest for spiritual knowledge. Itubi, who had always looked to his art for salvation, ignored

the epidemic of religious fervor gripping the world and failed to report to the Surgical Center, spending the next five years hiding in mountain caves and dugouts until the robot Sentinels discovered him close to death near a poisoned waterhole. He regained consciousness in the subdistrict, on the lowest level of the System.

The perfection of the Tropicque seems to mock the agony of what was lost in that fateful operation. They stole more than his life and body; the world ended on that day, a world so fine that its absence alone provides a definition of damnation. Itubi's rage explodes in the face of this final indignity. He smashes the tubular glass casket with a sideswipe of his machine-tooled fist, reaching in for the Tropicque with eager pneumatic fingers.

Skeets clears his snorkle of sea water, spouting like a dolphin in the bay. He rolls on his back and studies the shore through his water-streaked face mask: the snowlike dazzle of the beach and the jagged line of hills, green as a hummingbird's throat. When he was eight, his parents took him on a Caribbean cruise. For years afterwards the ornate shells and bits of staghorn coral occupied a place of honor on his dresser, and the memory of swimming in the jewel-pure clarity of that incredible water haunted him like a recurring dream. He is grateful to his Auditor for uncovering this magic bit of the past.

Vera, of course, lived for years in the Caribbean, but although she is reminded of Grenada, she is unable to identify their island. Skeets waves to her on the beach. He thinks of how she will smile when she sees the langosta he has speared. A few yards away, the *Sand Dab III* rides at anchor. This after-

noon they will take her for a sail. Skeets can't imagine life getting any finer.

Languidly, Vera rubs her golden arms and legs with coconut oil. She watches Skeets swim in the emerald water, the black upthrust of his flippered feet as he dives. A pattern of crab tracks surrounds her in the sand; palm fronds ripple like sail canvas in the even breeze. She has never known such happiness; their island is more beautiful than anything imagined in the solitude of her cranial container. The shelter Skeets lashed together out of driftwood uprights and palm thatch is bordered with queen conch shells and bowered by bougainvillea and hibiscus, and tall stands of lethal oleander.

Vera has lost track of time. It doesn't matter; memory-merge is like a dream. The passage of weeks and months may account for only a few hours in the Depository, so it's futile to pay attention to time. Once, an Auditor instructed her to meditate on the nature of time. She remembers his lesson. Time is an abstraction devised by man to regulate the illusion he calls reality; the past, the present, and the future are happening Now; this very moment is all there is. Understanding each moment is the key to Liberation. Vera was never much good at her lessons, but as the days blend into weeks and weeks into months, the deposit drawer seems another dimension away and the suntanned young actress decides that her Auditor was right about time after all.

OBU	<i>Obu</i>
ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>
ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>

ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>
ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>
ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>
ITUBI	<i>Itubi</i>
OBU	<i>Obu</i>

The sound of his own name echoing and re-echoing in the vaulted chamber is more arresting than an alarm signal; more alluring than the sweetest music:

*Obu Itubi . . .*

It has been over seventy-five years since he last heard his name pronounced. "Be careful, Obu," his wife had whispered that fateful morning when he set out to find food for their renegade mountain band. "Don't let anything happen to you, my own Obu. If you should fail to return I would be so alone. Isn't it better that we all die together, not alone and afraid." When she kissed him goodbye, her lips formed the shape of his name for the final time. He never saw her again. In the Depository he was called only by number: B-0489.

The hidden loudspeaker continues to broadcast his name again and again as Itubi listens, entranced. The Tropique hangs from the Amco-pak's steel grip like a chipmunk caught in the talons of a hawk. His anger subsides; the rage is calmed. Itubi switches on his own broadcast equipment and adjusts the voice-range control of his speech center.

All right . . . I hear you . . . What? (Itubi is

having some trouble with feedback interference and he fiddles with the controls of his eliminator.) . . . All right, I can hear you.

OBU ITUBI. PLEASE RESUME COMMUNICATOR CONTACT WITH CENTER CONTROL.

No. We can talk like this. I have no interest in letting you get inside my mind again.

AS YOU WISH. WE UNDERSTAND YOUR OBVIOUS AGITATION.

Do you?

OF COURSE. RIGHT NOW YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. YOUR ACTIONS ARE CONFUSED BECAUSE OF YOUR DISORIENTATION. MOST OF ALL, YOU ARE UPSET BY THE PRESENCE OF THE TROPIQUES. IS THAT NOT SO?

You seem to know all about it.

YOUR RAGE AND CONFUSION ARE THE PRODUCTS OF IGNORANCE. ONCE YOU UNDERSTAND WHERE YOU ARE, YOU WILL NO LONGER BE AFRAID.

Tell me where I am then.

LEVEL X OF THE DEPOSITORY SYSTEM, THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF ALL RESIDENTS. ONCE HAVING REACHED 360 DEGREES OF UNDERSTANDING, WHAT THE ANCIENTS CALLED ENLIGHTENMENT, A CEREBROMORPH IS DECANTED AND TRANSFERRED TO A HUMAN BODY. CENTER CONTROL MAINTAINS COMPLETE BREEDING AND HATCHERY INSTALLATIONS. AT THIS MOMENT, OBU ITUBI, YOU ARE INSIDE THE SUSPENDED ANIMATION FACILITY FOR THE TROPIQUE CLASS OF HUMANOID. THESE BODIES ARE SPECIMENS DEVELOPED SPECIALLY FOR CRANIAL TRANSFER. THEIR BRAINS ARE ONLY VESTIGIAL EXTENSIONS OF THE SPINAL CORD. THOUGHT, MEMORY AND CONSCIOUSNESS ARE UNKNOWN TO THESE TROPIQUES UNTIL A LEVEL X RESIDENT HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED.

And what happens then? Where does a resident go in his new body?

BACK INTO THE WORLD, WHERE HE IS FREE TO LIVE AMONG HIS FELLOW ENLIGHTENED ONES, OR IN SOLITUDE, AS HE DESIRES, UNTIL A NATURAL DEATH OVERTAKES HIM AND HE BECOMES UNITED WITH THE ALL.

Guided, of course, by the rules of the System and supervised by Center Control.

CENTER CONTROL HAS NO AUTHORITY OVER LIBERATED RESIDENTS. THE FUNCTION OF CENTER CONTROL IS TO GUIDE RESIDENTS TO ENLIGHTENMENT.

What sort of world is left? An extension of the Depository?

THE WORLD IS GREEN AND BEAUTIFUL STILL, OBU ITUBI, AND IT LIES JUST OUTSIDE THESE WALLS. ALL DEPOSITORIES ARE HOUSED UNDERGROUND. ONCE A RESIDENT HAS REACHED LEVEL X HE WILL NEVER SEE A DEPOSITORY AGAIN. HIS FREEDOM WILL BE COMPLETE.

I want to be free.

AND SO YOU SHALL BE, OBU ITUBI.

Level I is a long way from Level X. I can't wait that long.

THERE ARE ALWAYS EXCEPTIONS TO THE SYSTEM. YOUR AUDITOR REPORTS THAT YOUR CREATIVE NATURE MAKES DEPOSITORY LIFE A LIABILITY FOR YOU. CENTER CONTROL DESIRES ONLY A RESIDENT'S SAFETY AND SPIRITUAL WELFARE. CONTENTMENT IS ESSENTIAL BEFORE PROGRESS CAN BE MADE. YOUR ESCAPE HAS VERY MUCH IMPRESSED CENTER CONTROL, OBU ITUBI. IT WAS ASSUMED THAT A RESIDENT WOULD NEVER WISH TO ESCAPE. IN THE FACE OF YOUR ACTION, THE AUDITING COMMISSION HAS RECOMMENDED TRANSFERRAL TO A HUMAN BODY.

Do you mean to set me free?



THE WORLD AWAITS YOU.

And will give me a new body?

YOU CAN HAVE THE ONE THE AMCO-PAK HOLDS IF  
YOU SO DESIRE.

What must I do?

THE PROCEDURE IS QUITE SIMPLE. THE FIRST STEP  
IS TO RECONNECT YOUR COMMUNICATOR HOOKUP  
AND RESUME CONTACT WITH CENTER CONTROL. . . .

"Golly, that's good!"

Vera smiles at the sight of Skeets grinning like a mooncalf, rivulets of coconut water streaming down his chin and chest. When offered the heavy green-husked fruit, she shakes her head, saying she doesn't care to drink.

Vera is puzzled, hearing that strange word again. *Golly?* Was this an English word? Before today, she had never heard such a word and already Skeets has used it three times.

Vera shades her eyes against the sun and studies the boy sitting crosslegged beside her in the sand. She decides he doesn't look any younger, but still there's something a trifle unsettling about the childish sound of this peculiar word. The knowledge that Skeets is voyaging backward into memory troubles her. A younger sister died of consumption during the Second World War. Vera shared her bedroom for the final months, aware constantly of the brightening eyes and pallid skin, the bloodless lips, all the cosmetic subtleties preceding death. She watches Skeets with the same caution, studying him for symptoms of change.

Impulsively, as if to deny her forebodings, she kisses his kneecap, gripping his thigh with her sharp fingernails.

"Why don't we go inside?" she whispers. "I want you so bad I can taste it."

"Golly," Skeets says, nearly losing his hold on the coconut.

GIVE US YOUR ANSWER, OBU ITUBI . . .

The Amco-pak is as silent as a war memorial. Inside, Itubi wrestles with the awareness that he has been a fool. Center Control has duped him. Their preposterous offer, only a fool would accept such a suggestion. Worse, Itubi comprehends with growing panic, only a fool would listen when the enemy speaks. Center Control was stalling for time, making outrageous promises to hold him while—

WHAT IS YOUR ANSWER?

Only this . . .

Itubi catapults the Tropique into a row of glass cylinders against the opposite wall. Bodies topple like fair-ground kewpies; a glass waterfall cascades onto the polished floor. Itubi races his Amco-pak out of the Suspended Animation Facility into the dome-covered arena while his name thunders stereophonically from a dozen loudspeakers:

BI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU  
BI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU

He imagines an army of Amco-paks spiraling up the conveyor ramp. He maneuvers onto the rotating platform, listening for the sounds of their subterranean advance. His auditory equipment picks up nothing but the precisioned humming of well-oiled machinery. There still is time. Quickly and efficiently, Itubi puts all of the Amco-pak's many arms to work: one pair machines a hollow casing from solid bar-stock aluminum; another pair mixes chemicals, phosphorous, magnesium, and an assortment of

other incendiaries; a third manufactures the fuses and timing devices. In minutes, two bombs are assembled. Itubi synchronizes the fuses and attaches one to either side of the ramp entrance. He allows only enough time to retreat to the Suspended Animation Facility. There, surrounded by the forms of previous lifetimes, he listens to the explosive holocaust he has unleashed. The floor shudders beneath the Amco-pak's treads. Outside in the arena, fragments of dome come crashing down, dislodged by the concussion. Above the din, loudspeakers continue to blare his name: OBU ITUBI OBU ITUBI OBU . . .

Skeets remembers masturbation (jacking-off, meat-beating, pork-pounding): the hidden magazines, the secret places; a jar of Nivea cream at the bottom of the laundry hamper; experimental two-fingered grips; reclining on the toilet with his feet in the sink; his unfamiliar left hand; the ace of spades from a deck of pornographic playing cards; up in the August heat of the attic, hidden behind his mother's winter clothes; standing under the stinging spray of the shower, a bar of soap in his other hand; once, in the bathtub, twisting like a contortionist to kiss the tip of his straining member; and all of the different delicious dreams, arranged in his imagination like *smörgåsbord*.

Dreams of girls and women, known and unknown; dreams of girls held captive in carpeted seraglios and marooned on desert islands. Dreams of girls very much like the one between whose legs Skeets rocks so proudly. Raven-haired Vera is no stranger selected by computer. Three hundred years ago, Skeets clipped her photo from the glossy pages of film mag-

azines; her centerfold pin-up was Scotch-taped inside his locker at school. They shared this tropic paradise many times before, up in his mother's attic with the caustic smell of mothballs in the air.

Itubi waits for the dust to settle, scanning the debris scattered around the perimeter of the explosion. The Amco-pak programs a memo tape made while manufacturing the first pair of bombs and the telescopic arms duplicate their original motions automatically, mass producing a homemade arsenal with assembly-line efficiency. The haze of smoke and powdered concrete thins and, in place of the turntable, a jagged crater belches fire like a volcano.

Itubi treads out into the arena, leaving an aluminum canister ticking behind him in the Suspended Animation Facility. He zig-zags between the twisted scraps of fallen dome, keeping close to the wall until he reaches another set of steel doors. The laser torch is focused and Itubi has burned halfway through by the time the bomb detonates.

Inside, Itubi confronts a chamber identical to the one he has just destroyed, the same vaulted ceiling and rows of glass cylinders. Only the occupants differ. The population here has pale skin and nearly white hair, characteristics of the Nord class of humanoids. Itubi starts the timer on one of his devices and sends it rolling down the aisle, a surprise package for his former European neighbors.

In the next hour Itubi is generous with his gifts. He cuts through a succession of steel doors, exposing other Suspended Animation Facilities, as well as automated surgical clinics, hatcheries, program centers, and rooms dense with unfamiliar circuitry. In each he places a bomb, sating his rage with destruc-

tion until the laser's cut reveals a glimpse of green and he burns his way through the final door to freedom.

Center Control is unable to contain the sudden power surge. The explosions in the System's surface installation destroy a number of important relays regulating power flow from the Solar Energy Accumulator and, like a bolt of lightning, the extra load races uncontrollably down through miles of circuits and cable. Center Control traces the path of the overload, noting the continuing series of tripped safety switches extending deep into the Depository.

The end of the line is Aisle A of the last subdistrict on the lowest level. Center Control issues a warning to all residents, instructing them to activate auxiliary hookups, only seconds before the massive overload hits their community power unit.

The warning comes in time for all but the resident of the foremost deposit drawer. He is embarked on a memory-merge and has disconnected his communicator antenna. His final dream is interrupted by a surge of electric power sufficient to run the Sector for a month. When a maintenance van comes to open cranial container number A-0001-M(637-05-99), the electrolyte solution has all boiled away and the resident is a bit of gray sludge, burned to the bottom like an overcooked stew.

Vera rears like a bucking horse, answering Skeets' urgency with a determined pelvic upthrust. She slides her tongue into his ear, groaning his name. Her nails rake and gouge his back; her teeth nip at his neck; a vision of intricate coral gardens fills her mind.

"I can't hold it," the boy whispers and his words trigger Vera's orgasm.

"Don't stop," she implores, and as pleasure overwhelms her she bites like a nickering mare into Skeets' shoulder. There is no flesh. Suddenly she is hugging a phantom. She can still taste the salt of his sweat but her lips kiss only empty air. Her eyes open to coin-sized spots of sunlight showing through the thatched roof. Vera is alone on the grass mat, her arms folded across her heaving chest. Between her open thighs she can see the blue horizon framed by the doorway of the hut.

The grass burns bright as green fire under the noon sun; the summer air is loud with the metallic tremolo of unseen cicadas. A criss-crossing trajectory of grasshoppers surrounds the Amco-pak's steady advance across the clearing. Obu Itubi scans the line of trees at the edge of the forest, searching for any indication of road or trail. Behind him, clouds of acrid smoke billow from the shattered dome, but he never looks back. The spectacle of his triumph concerns him even less than the curiosity aroused by traveling through unfamiliar countryside. Itubi has no time for sightseeing.

His problems are caused by the Amco-pak's limited performance in this new environment. Treads designed for smooth plastic floors gain little traction in the tall grass. Already bits of twigs and dirt have worked into delicate gears and bearings accustomed to the dust-free atmosphere of the Depository. There is no road leading away from the surface installation. The dome stands isolated in the center of a broad meadow, one of a few scattered islands of open

space in a vast terminal pine forest stretching as far as the scanner can see.

Itubi decides upon a course and urges the Amco-pak up a gradual shrub-covered hillside. Three deer, a doe, and two fawns pause to stare at the monstrous clanging creature before fleeing into the safety of the forest. Under the trees the hillside is steeper. The Amco-pak leans dangerously and Itubi flails the telescoping arms to gain a purchase on the precarious slope.

For an hour and more, the Amco-pak struggles over difficult terrain, carving a path with the laser when the trees grow too thick, hauling and winching its armoured bulk up hills too steep to climb. Itubi gains confidence in the van's abilities and when he encounters a steep-walled gorge there is no hesitation before starting to traverse to the bottom.

Itubi's regret is immediate. The gorge is too steep. Loose earth begins to shift under the Amco-pak's weight; treads slip and spin as the Mark X fights for balance. Itubi grabs a sapling pine to stabilize the van, but the roots pull free and the floundering machine tumbles end over end into a rushing stream at the bottom of the gorge.

Before the dust has settled, a flight of angry magpies circles the wreckage, scolding and belligerent. Beneath the surface of the mountain stream, a school of fingerling trout gathers about the unblinking glow of the submerged scanner. From high up in a ponderosa, a drowsy porcupine watches the crablike gesturing of the overturned Amco-pak.

"Skeets . . . Skeets. . . ." Vera runs naked from the flower-decked hut, frantically calling her vanished lover. She shields her eyes from the glare and looks

up and down the deserted curve of beach. Everything is the same: the palms and sea-grape trees, the placid, reef-protected bay. But no, it's changed. The boat is gone! The *Sand Dab III* has been plucked from the water as cleanly as Skeets disappeared from between her legs.

Vera's confusion calms her terror. She turns back toward the hut, trying to put the pieces together. She notes that Skeets' diving gear, his mask and flippers, the long tapered Hawaiian sling, is no longer hanging next to the door. Inside, she discovers his clothes have gone as well. Not a single one of his possessions remains. The smooth sand floor of the hut is tracked by numerous footprints, and very carefully in the next hour Vera measures each of them against her own foot. In every case she finds an exact fit.

Obu Itubi is trapped. The scanner sees only a few graveled feet of stream bottom. Many of the delicate control system instruments are damaged by the fall. Only three of the telescoping arms still function, but, even working together, they are unable to right the Amco-pak. The journey of the Mark X has come to an end.

Still, Itubi is satisfied. He has escaped from the Depository and evened the score with Center Control in the process. Less than forty hours of reserve oxygen remain in the van, but his last breath will be free. The up-ended Amco-pak will make a fine tomb.

The mourners have already gathered. Magpies and red squirrels chatter in the nearby trees; a twelve-pointed buck stands looking down from the rim of the gorge; the porcupine still sleeps in the



ponderosa; and, high above them all, a robot Sentinel hovers, silver and gleaming in the midday sun, silently transmitting its scanner signal back to Center Control.

## IV

# Drone

FOLLOWING THE attack upon the surface installation, Center Control orders all facilities to begin operations on a round-the-clock schedule. A task force of maintenance vans is dispatched to the surface to clear the rubble. Preliminary plans for the new installation are in preparation; all available Unistat 4000s are recruited for this work; projects in progress must be set aside. Among the many millions of trivial details recorded on the tape reels placed in the Archives during this emergency period is the information that a twentieth-century resident (female) has been misfiled. Although technically these tapes are scheduled for programming whenever there is a Unistat without an assignment, the clerical machines at Center Control all know that tapes on Archive consignment are never seen again. One of the Deltron series in the Dispatch Division even makes a joke of it by referring to the Archives as "the Sargasso Sea" in all interdepartment memos.

It is Skiri the Navigator who first sees the reflected dazzle of the distant Sentinel. He points the spectacle out to his companions, Swann the Healer and Gregor the Instrument Maker. Without exchanging a

word they leave the trail and start through the woods in the direction of this new phenomenon.

The three are Nords, two males and a female, on Quest from the nomadic Omega Tribe, followers of the bison herd across the Great Plains of Northern Hemisphere Two. They walk single file, Skiri in the lead. Even in the brightness of the noon sun, the Navigator's penetrating clear blue eyes discern the position of the stars. His instinct for direction is infallible.

Swann, Skiri, and Gregor began their Quest over six years before, meandering west across the desert to the Pacific and then north through the mountains into the wilderness. For six thousand miles they have marked their trail with colorful prayer bundles, strips of beadwork and feathers left hanging in the wind under branches to indicate springs and other holy places. These bright tokens are the only sign of their passing.

There is seldom need for talk; the three travel in harmony, neither giving commands nor asking questions. The group has no leader. Skiri is the route finder because that is his calling. Diversions, like investigating the alien Sentinel, are the result of unanimous accord. There is no goal to a Quest and no reason for hurry. Curiosity can be leisurely indulged, for nothing occurs on earth that is not of interest to man.

Vera is marooned in memory, a castaway on an island that doesn't exist. She spends long hours gazing out at the deep blue beyond the turquoise of the bay. On rare days she sees the tops of sails, but the distant ships come no closer. In the early mornings, she takes Chi-Chi for long rides down the beach and into the back country, over trails shaded by

tamarind and mahogany trees. Together, they explore every part of the island.

There are five small towns, clusters of pastel houses with glinting tin rooftops. From a distance Vera never fails to see the streets crowded with people or hear the hub-bub of everyday life; but, when she rides nearer, the figures recede like a mirage and all noise fades into silence as she passes through the deserted village.

Once she stops and enters a two-story limestone house, intrigued by the sound of a child singing. Every room is filled with objects from her past; her childhood toys litter the floor; her mother's needle-point decorates the mildewed wall; rows of her father's leather-bound medical books crowd the tables and shelves. She recognizes the voice of the child as her own, singing a song her grandmother taught her. But as she searches from room to room the singer seems to elude her, the haunting sound is always just around the corner or behind the next closed door.

A work team muddies the mountain stream. The twin Mark VIIs, alerted by a dislodged stone, focus their scanners on the three Nords, graceful as deer on the steep face of the gorge. Neither of the machines has ever seen a man before. They are familiar with the form, dormant, naked, and ranked in the Suspended Animation Facilities as neatly and efficiently as residents on file in the Depository; this is a concept of humanity the maintenance vans are able to comprehend. But the sight of these three lithe creatures is something new.

In the hatcheries, all human fetus forms look alike. The adults, too, in the facilities, are all identical. Except for those slight differences of sex and class,

the features of one human life-form provide an accurate mirror for all the rest. The Mark VII's programming and memory units are completely unprepared for the scanner close-up of the three Nords approaching from across the stream. Their features are similar—white-blond hair and star-sapphire eyes—yet each one seems distinct and individual. The garments they wear have the same puzzling quality. At first scan they appear identical: brightly woven tunics and leggings decorated with geometric beadwork and tassles of iridescent feathers. But a memory print comparison instantly disproves this. The Nords are as exotically unlike as three snowflakes.

"What has happened here?" the first Nord asks, stepping from rock to rock across the stream.

The machine answers without hesitation. The circuits of the Amco-pak retain the ancient notion that man is to be obeyed. Taking turns, but with voices so identically monotonous that the narrative maintains a uniform flow, the Mark VII's describe the rampaging of the runaway van and the terrific destruction done to the Surface Installation. The Nords listen intently, leaning on their staves at the edge of the stream. But the story is confusing, for the machines know only what information is contained in their instructions. They do not know the identity of the "captive" resident or how he happened to be "trapped" aboard the Mark X. All machines are on Emergency Alert as a result of the attack on the Surface Installation, but whether there is any connection between that event and their own assignment is a question that can't be answered by the maintenance vans.

"Our main problem is the decantation procedure," the lefthand Mark VII concludes. "Any hookup is impossible while the Mark X is upside down. And

the van is already so damaged that righting it might endanger the resident. It is a delicate situation."

Gregor eases his woven split-willow packbasket to the ground. He unlaces the buffalo-hide cover and reaches inside for his instrument case. "Let me see what I can do."

He climbs between the treads of the up-turned Amco-pak, tapping the floor plate with his knuckle. Kneeling, he opens the flap of his instrument case, an oblong leather wallet embroidered with a pattern of dyed porcupine quills. It unfolds like a map to reveal a gleaming row of precision microtools. Within minutes, Gregor removes a circular portion of floor plate and probes into the tangle of connections and circuits. The Mark VII's watch, immobile, as he finishes his work, making the final adjustments inside the Amco-pak by touch alone, reaching in with both hands to haul the cranial container into the open air like a newborn babe.

"More than thirty hours of breathable atmosphere left in here," Gregor says, checking the weight of the reserve oxygen tank. "No need for a cockpit; we'll make a litter while the vans take care of the wreck."

Skiri and Swann set to work with their long knives, cutting and trimming a pair of saplings. Soon a litter is arranged, with the cranial container and two packbaskets lashed fast between the poles by several lengths of rawhide thong. Using cranes and winches, the Mark VII's at last succeed in righting the Amco-pak. With the mangled machine in tow, the vans lumber awkwardly after the three Nords, already out of sight downstream, carrying the resident between them like hunters returning with their kill.

Inside the swaying cranial container, Obu Itubi's mind fights for sanity. His serenity and the placid

underwater view both ended with the simultaneous shutdown of all his other sensory controls. The memory unit, the auditory system and navigation center, the chorus of comforting dials and gauges, all vanished in the same terrifying instant. Darkness and silence enclose him like endless space. Itubi combats his fear with reason. Only two possibilities exist: either the Amco-pak suffered a sudden, unexplainably massive breakdown, or else the breakdown is his own and he is dead.

If this is death, Itubi is in hell. His isolation is complete and the hallucinations and *bardo* visions begin at once, his conscious mind continuing its logical and reassuring dialogue in spite of the waves of insanity rising out of the dark ocean of his subconsciousness. Beckoning lights and luminescent cogwheels whirl in the darkness. A panoply of lesser demons writhe and grimace. The terrible faces of his accusers are encrusted with precious jewels, the cold ruby eyes aflame with cruelty. Moment by moment, the calm island of his logic is submerging, the wild visionary tide rises and Itubi knows he is lost, the forces too strong. Soon he will be one with his madness.

After her first visit, Vera stays away from the house for a week, suspicious and afraid. Of what, she isn't sure. A trap perhaps, with all those inviting memories for its bait. But curiosity is too strong, her afternoon rides seem to lead always to the house and soon Chi-Chi knows the way even when she drops the reins.

One afternoon she stays past sunset, looking through a box full of snapshots, and it is dark by the time she rises to leave. Vera spends the night on the couch downstairs, sleeping only fitfully as the old

house creaks and sighs and numbers of bats slide with a silken flutter from under the tin roof. The coming of daylight calms her; she falls asleep at dawn, waking only when the noon heat turns the shuttered room into an oven.

That same afternoon she rides to the beach shelter and stuffs a pillowcase with her clothes and cosmetics. Yesterday seems years in the past. She finds it hard to believe that she'd ever lived in such a cramped bamboo hovel. Even a restless night on the couch is more comfortable than sleeping on a damp sandy floor. No, this isn't Vera's style; she can't have been happy here. The idea is preposterous, as is the notion that she ever loved someone with the absurd name of Skeets. It was all a joke.

Vera leaves the shelter laughing, the pillowcase bundled in her arms. She mounts Chi-Chi and rides off between the sea-grape trees, never once looking back.

The air is acrid and hazy inside the domed Surface Installation. Squads of maintenance vans bulldoze the debris into smoldering mounds. A Mark V cuts a mangled I-beam into scrap. Gregor asks the machine who is in charge. Pointing the brilliant torch, the van directs them to a Unistat Administrator Exec Series: eight stationary oblong computers, interconnected slabs of steel and glass, arranged like a precision-made Stonehenge in an approximate circle around the ruined turntable.

Swann leaves the men and climbs over the rubble obstructing the smoking entrance of the hatchery. Gregor and Skiri watch until she is gone from sight before approaching the Unistat Administrator, carrying the litter in their hands, like sedan-chair porters. They are greeted by the first of the towering consoles



and quickly instructed to proceed in a clockwise direction to Unit Five, where the Sentinel's broadcast is being monitored. Console Unit Five starts speaking before either man has a chance to say a word. An obviously prerecorded speech: torrents of rhetoric praising the men, followed by the mundane unreeling of facts and details patiently recorded. The men set the litter on the floor and hunker down, only half listening as they trace idle patterns on the dust-covered plastic.

Swann returns only moments after the Mark VII's come lumbering in with the wreck in tow. "It was terrible," she says. "Rooms full of bodies, torn, bleeding, most of them dismembered. Like a battlefield. . . . And the vans were cleaning up, shoveling the bodies like garbage. I made them stop. They're transporting all human remains to the edge of the clearing for cremation."

"Grim news here as well," Skiri says, rising to his feet. "All communication channels to Center Control are dead. Only canned information is available from the Unistat Administrator. This unit has been instructed to isolate the cerebromorph immediately, using the quarantine procedure for handling contaminated material. Our resident stands condemned of serious crimes."

Gregor has his instrument case in his hands. "Let's hear him out," he says. "We listened long enough to the machine. I'll disconnect the communicator from the wreck."

The work takes only a few minutes, for the communicator is not an integral part of the Amco-pak's mechanical system and is easily removed. Gregor immediately begins attaching the insulated neurofibril wire to hookups on the cranial container, expertly making a hundred difficult connections in a

third of the time a maintenance van takes for the same job. "Last one. . . ." He tweezers the final cable into place with his microgrip wrench. A thin squeal issues from concealed speakers.

"A little more volume, Gregor?" Swann asks.

He adjusts the exterior control and the tiny piercing sound builds into a scream so agonized and unvarying, so explicitly the voice of utter terror and desolation, that it seems to echo from the very chambers of hell itself.

The removal of deposit-drawer number A-0001-M(637-05-99) occasions very little real sorrow in the subdistrict. Every twentieth-century resident (more than seven-tenths of Level I) knows the story of Skeets Kalbfleischer, but they feel no loss at his passing. He is only a casualty, overlooked in the excitement, a bit-player in the drama of the recent emergency. Those who were not underground in Depositories during the Thirty-minute War remember the brotherhood of survival. A similar emotion unites the subdistrict; everyone together, enduring the same hardships, at the mercy of a single peril. To the residents who'd lived through the war, the news of the destruction of the world's first cerebromorph seems as trivial as the wartime report that a stray Israeli missile leveled the pyramid of Cheops.

One twentieth-century native is concerned by the accident. The loss of Skeets Kalbfleischer's brain is a problem for Auditor Philip Quarrels. No resident of Level I has ever been Elevated and Center Control had hoped Skeets would be the first. A big job. The onus is with the Auditor in charge. Success brings its own reward. Failure is unthinkable.

Although Quarrels is aware that this emergency period is bound to complicate matters, he neverthe-

less files a requisition with the Medical Authority for a mature adult brain. If none is available, perhaps the hatchery can be asked to grow one on special order.

Skeets Kalbfleischer is only organically dead. His brain has been destroyed, but his memory lingers on. His every thought and experience, even the unknown depths of his subconscious, is recorded on micro-encephalogram tape. His dreams are preserved on old auditing reports. Spiritually, Skeets Kalbfleischer is very much alive; his tapes are all on file. When a new brain is available, Philip Quarrels will supervise the playback procedures. He doesn't mind if he has to wait. He's got all the time in the world.

In a distant sector on Level II, another Auditor confronts his problems. No direct communication channels have opened up to the Surface Installation and the Sentinel's signal must be monitored by the Unistat Administrator. Then a tape is delivered to the Dispatch Division and rebroadcast. There is a frustrating ten minute time lapse; Obu Itubi's Auditor is able to watch only the past. Any command takes another ten minutes to reach the Sentinel. He is powerless. But the Auditor knows his impotence is temporary. His quarry has only a twenty minute lead.

Still, the behavior of the Nords is so erratic, so utterly haphazard, that the Auditor is forced to acknowledge the irritating symptoms of anxiety as he watches them carry the cranial container away from the dome. At the far end of the clearing, three Amco-paks are piling brush and deadfalls. Another group of vans approaches, laden with mangled carcasses. The Nords follow single file. Perhaps they intend to add Itubi to the pyre. Why not incinerate

him along with the rest of the defective equipment? The Auditor finds this a satisfying thought. A man reaps what he has sown; destruction awaits all destroyers. Itubi has earned his Inferno.

Vera never leaves the house. She sleeps in one of the high-ceilinged bedrooms upstairs. The canopied bed is her grandmother's; rococo mahogany posts twist up past a fringed vault, carved pinecones insure fertility. The blood-red satin sheets, however, are from a shop on La Cienega Boulevard, a gift from some forgotten Oscar winner. On the floor is the skin of a tiger Vera shot from elephantback while the guest of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. The room is a delight, filled with the favorite possessions of a long lifetime: hand-painted porcelain dolls, a collection of glass paperweights, mechanical tin orchestras, all childhood relics lost along with the family heirlooms and furniture when a crippled Flying Fortress jettisoned its bombload on the Mitlovic estate before crashing in the mountains. Every day, Vera turns up another souvenir from her past: a scrapbook of publicity stills stolen from her Hollywood apartment; boxes of misplaced jewelry; dried flowers pressed between the pages of unread best-sellers; a tiny crystal vial filled with tears shed at the funeral of her noble Italian husband.

Across the hall in an empty bedroom are several old steamer trunks, brassbound and beautified with collages of faded travel stickers. The trunks are packed with Vera's clothes, fashions four hundred years old, yet every dress and gown seems fresh from the showroom. Vera often spends the day here, changing in front of a full-length mirror. She flings what she's worn on the floor like a spoiled child; but when she returns, everything is neatly folded and

hung in its place. And every night she climbs the stairs to find her bed freshly made, the sheets clean and smelling of sunlight, the pillows fluffed, a slender candle flickering in a silver wall sconce.

There are no clocks in the house. Vera rises when it pleases her. A dish of sliced mangoes or a tall goblet of orange juice is always on the bedside table. And when she grows hungry, she knows she will find an elegant breakfast waiting under the arbor in the garden. Lunchcon and dinner are served inside. Fresh-cut hibiscus decorate the center of the heavy Florentine table. Vera neither prepares the food nor clears the dishes. She never learned to cook and, even as a child, there were always servants to do the chores. The mysterious appearance of her meals and the magical way the house keeps clean and tidy is taken for granted by Vera. She expects her help to be unobtrusive.

Life is perfect in the house. Each day provides the joy of discovering another forgotten treasure: some bauble belonging to her mother or a bundle of perfumed letters from an old admirer. Every meal is a masterpiece, the work of a cordon bleu chef. A trained sommelier presides unseen in the wine cellar, sending up bottles of exquisite vintage. Even the garden, tropical and efflorescent, is trimmed and tended by a skilled hand. Yet sometimes at night Vera is lonely and wishes her grandmother's bed wasn't so large and empty. Her sleep is dreamless. In the mornings, she wakes fulfilled and happy. Stretching out her hand, she finds the other side of the bed always warm.

Swann moves along the top of the pyre, checking bodies as the men work with the vans, sorting arms, legs, and heads to match the dismembered trunks.

The bodies are arranged according to ritual, facing the east, arms, when there are arms, folded across the chest, faces powdered a chalky white. Swann scatters sacred amulets and talismans among them: cowrie shells, iridescent feathers, fragments of beadwork. As a healer, it is Swann's duty to perform the Rites for the Dead.

Because these bodies have never held a spirit, she omits most of the ritual; there is no blowing of conch trumpets or chanting sacred mantras, neither does she paint mystic symbols on the closed eyelids nor read the ancient texts to the deceased. Still, Swann anoints each body with fragrant oils and spices. Here and there among the logs, she conceals small caches of piney frankincense and handfuls of chemicals to make the fire burn a variety of colors.

"Swann," Skiri calls to her. "Here's another."

Swann finishes above and climbs down the structured log wall of the pyre. Earlier, Skiri and Gregor found a body still breathing. It was a Nord female. Both legs were gone below the knee. Swann prepared a syringe. Respiration ceased before the needle was withdrawn.

These bodies are so close to perfection, almost human. It's disturbing. Surgically, Swann can repair the damage, graft limbs back in place, staunch the hemorrhaging, even stimulate stilled hearts into pumping again. But it would only be a game, a sport without purpose. Let the hatcheries produce a new crop of zombies.

"Over here." Skiri points to where Gregor kneels in the blood-clotted grass. "It was at the bottom of the pile."

Swann approaches, observing the neatly gathered limbs, arms in one pile, hands and feet in another, legs stacked like cordwood. The men stand on

either side, stripped to the waist, their bare arms and chest slick with blood and sweat. At their feet lies the intact body of a male Tropique, so drenched in blood its features are obscured. At a glance she can tell it is not alive; the position of the tongue suggests suffocation. No matter. She knows why the men called her down. Using a wet cloth, she cleans the blood from the Tropique's face and body. Aside from a few superficial scratches, she can find no sign of injury. The blood belongs to others.

"A fortunate day," she says as Skiri and Gregor pick the body up and carry it across to where their packs are piled, the cranial container of Obu Itubi perched on top, its polished surface effulgent with mirrored sunlight.

Obu Itubi's Auditor is too angry to watch the scanning of the operation with any care. His anger is the result of pride, perhaps why Y41-AK9 is one of the very few members of his class on file on Level II. Most of the other Amphibios were already at 180 degrees of Understanding, or higher, when incorporated into the System. To their honor, it was the Amphibios delegation that proposed universal cerebrectomy, the Day of Awakening, at the World Council.

Obu Itubi's Auditor prefers his number to his name. Ku-ni-qu-ri-ri-ki is a dolphin name (all Amphibios have dolphin names). What good is a name in a language without nouns? He is more comfortable with his number; at least he really is Y41-AK9 (397-00-55). Transmit that number on the communicator and only his deposit drawer will respond. The concept of a name as a specific identity is meaningless to a dolphin.

Not that Y41-AK9 has anything against the

Cetacea; a dolphin was his first teacher. He has great respect for these enlightened mammals; more intelligent than man, free from the demands of gravity, innocent of fear, singing a language capable only of expressing action, totally blissful creatures. He venerates them as the Chosen of God.

Y41-AK9 contemplates the scanner image of the Tropique. The Nord healer has the body breathing again and it lies facing up into the lens on a down-filled sleeping robe. Like Obu Itubi, there are other Tropiques, and Nords as well, on file in Level I—and not just from the first hatchery generation. Itubi's fetus came out of the tanks in 2156, only thirty-odd years before the Awakening. There are no Amphibios on Level I; Y41-AK9 is proud of that fact. And the Amphibios population below Level V is the smallest of the three humanoid classes; only members of the first two unfortunate generations are on file below the median.

Y41-AK9 has always thought of his generation as unfortunate. It wasn't like being a Nord or a Tropique; the first Amphibios were a new species of humanoid. The difference was more than physical. What good were terrestrial traditions and history in a hostile undersea environment? The first Amphibios were aliens by birthright. Even their humanoid bodies were a liability in the ocean. Many of the aquatic pioneers demanded that the hatcheries develop a more adaptable Amphibios body. There was no genetic reason why they shouldn't have fins and flukes and a stronger backbone. But the World Council disagreed. The Amphibios class had lungs as well as gills; they were *homo sapiens*, members of the family of Man. The Reproduction Centers were not concerned with creating new life-forms; their task was to perfect the human race.



Yes, the future generations were the fortunate ones. They didn't have to fight for survival in the earth's final frontier. It was quite tame beneath the surface when they arrived. Sharks were no longer a menace; the coral reef colonies were established; plankton and algae farms were prospering; all of the various Cetacean dialects had been translated. A newcomer could spend his time listening to the glorious oral epics of the sulphur-bottom whale. Many were adopted into pods. The wisdom of the great whales became their inheritance. It was no surprise to Y41-AK9 when the initial audit after the Awakening showed these amiable philosophers to be farther along the Path to Understanding. He was just an old shark fighter who knew how to survive.

The Sentinel has the Tropicque's head in close-up focus during the critical phase of the operation. Y41-AK9 is not interested in the techniques of chemical surgery, but he pays close attention as the healer applies a cellular solvent to the exterior cranial surface. The liquid solvent is traced on human tissue with a needlepoint stylus. Against the bone white of the cranium, the fine blue line looks as innocuous as ink, yet the solvent takes effect in less than a minute. The healer gives a slight pull and the skull comes apart exactly along the line. Almost a pint of liquid drains out onto the ground.

The moment is come. The cranial container is opened and the healer reaches in with her hands (with her *hands!*) and withdraws the brain of Obu Itubi. Y41-AK9 is spellbound. It seems so simple. The brain is rinsed of electrolyte solution and held in place as the healer meticulously reconnects severed nerves, arteries, and veins with organic adhesive. Y41-AK9 feels the beginnings of an old regret. Obu Itubi is free! Free to walk the earth

again, to be among men. And all because of luck, simple haphazard luck. The same damned luck that doomed him to a career of combat with hammer-heads and makos while others were born to have a whale for a guru. But this time it is different. Itubi will not get away. Even if it takes a hundred years, the Auditor will triumph. This time the luck will be his.

Unlike Y41-AK9, Auditor Quarrels is not a mystic by nature. As a young man he was a hedonist, a playboy jet pilot tending a napalm rose garden. Sex and speed were his obsessions. A war in Southeast Asia provided ample amounts of both. The war happened to Quarrels at Mach II; it was totally silent and calm. Night raids were the most beautiful. Only once was it real: a SAM missile hurtling up at the speed of sound out of the green-and-brown abstraction below. His elaborate evasion tactics, a grim, desperate ballet, first taught him that you become a mystic when it isn't fun anymore.

The lure of glamour, movie-star girlfriends and the fastest playthings on earth attracted Quarrels to the space program. He got it all as an astronaut, along with space in the bargain. Quarrels never wanted to come back down. And so he volunteered for the Saturn Expedition.

The three-hundred-and-twenty-year voyage of *Endurance II* proved the spacecraft worthy of her name. For Quarrels it was a rite of passage, an initiation earning him a residency on Level II of the Depository. Quarrels is content being a cerebromorph. His body was old, worn-out. He left it gladly and didn't mourn when it burned along with the rest of North America in the Thirty-minute War.

Hardship and disappointment seemed meaningless when confronted by the vast eternal tranquility of the cosmos. Suffering, regret, anguish, envy—all of the old woeful earthbound pains were purged by the awesome grandeur of space. Since his return from Saturn, nothing has disturbed the serenity of the only Level II resident not born in a hatchery. The destruction of Skeets Kalbfleischer's brain is a setback for Auditor Quarrels, but the Commission notes that he takes the news calmly and without emotion. Truly remarkable for a native of the most neurotic century the world has ever known.

And later, when the report comes from the Medical Authority, Quarrels loses none of his calm self-possession. There are no facilities available for the production of cerebral tissue; the hatcheries are not equipped to manufacture brains; the perfection of the modified (brainless) humanoid is the result of years of genetic research. Moreover, Center Control regulations forbid any departure from established procedure. Requisition denied.

Vera wakes with her head throbbing. She shuts her eyes to the brightness of the open window and drops back into a canyon of eiderdown pillows. Her pulse thunders between her temples like the muffled kettle-drums of a funeral cortege. The headache sends tendrils of pain downward through her body. Her limbs are heavy and sore, her breasts swollen, eyelids puffed and tender. She hurts all over. Vera wishes the funeral were her own: the padded satin of the coffin, the numb nothingness of death, a tomb's cool enclosing silence.

On other mornings, Vera found her slender adolescent body marked by love bites and scratches.

Often she identified the lover by his imprint on her flesh: the itching thorn scratches on her nipples, the delicate canine punctures of blue-ribboned Hugo. Vera learned about hickies in Hollywood, but the ripe raspberry memories of passionate kisses could have come from any of a hundred casual pickups among the film colony. How amusing to discover the traces of middle-aged passion blemishing her flawless schoolgirl's complexion.

Today she is not amused. The pain is too great for any pleasure, the pulsing headache an agony she has long forgotten. Two teeth are loose and her jaws open only with difficulty. She recognizes the author of these discomforts. Her first husband was fond of beating up people. He would provoke arguments in restaurants just for the chance to use his fists. A brutal man. Vera had been first attracted as much by his savagery as by his hard athletic body. He was a hunter, the son of a French industrialist. He took Vera on expeditions to India and Africa and introduced her to the catharsis of the clean kill. (The tiger-skin on the floor was a souvenir of a trip made with Raoul.) At night he would come for her with a riding crop, although she feared his heavy gold-ringed hands much more. He beat her until she couldn't stand, seeking submission, not pleasure, and when she was on her knees he took her from the rear like an animal.

She tried to hide from him, sleeping on couches and under the billiard table in the library, as he stalked through the dark château. One night he cornered her in the trophy room and she seized a shotgun from the wall rack and added another corpse to the collection. The mounted shadows of oryx, kudu, Grant's gazelle, and the world's record

rhinoceros were the only witnesses. The police reluctantly accepted her sobbing story of burglars and mistaken identity. The publicity was a great boost for her career.

But this was centuries ago, at Montigny-sur-Oucq with its medieval keep and crenelated battlements crouching under a sullen sky. Vera sits up with a groan and confronts the summer luminance of a Caribbean morning. She hasn't thought of Raoul since that night she pulled the trigger. All memory of her husband's cruelty was cleanly erased by a magnum goose load of number four shot. Why then should he haunt her on her secret island?

Vera eases out of bed and limps to the dressing table to examine Raoul's handiwork in her mirror. Raw wales and welts are everywhere on her body, even her stomach bears a painful stripe, but her face shows the worst damage. Through dark swollen eyes, Vera studies the ugly purple shine of her bruised cheeks and the bee-sting puffiness of a cut upper lip. She'll wear tinted sunglasses today and a wide-brimmed hat for the comfort of its concealing shadows.

Vera crosses the hall to the *guardarropa*, remembering a long-sleeved summer gown tucked in a trunk somewhere. Although there is no one to witness her wounds, there are many mirrors and Vera wants to look her best, if only for herself.

She is searching through a deep leather trunk for a scarf to match her dress when she makes an entirely different discovery: the side-by-side Holland & Holland twelve gauge, one of a matched pair Raoul had bought in London, the weapon her groping hand chanced to find on the gun rack in the darkness long ago. Vera stares at the shotgun for a moment: the sheen of the richly blued barrels, the hand-rubbed

gloss of the walnut stock, remembering her moment of terror among the stuffed animals, antlers twisting like tree branches above her in the gloom. For a joke, she brings the piece to her shoulder, sights down its length, and whispers, "Bang." Perhaps, she thinks, returning the shotgun to the trunk, that will kill the ghost who was so rough with me last night. She closes the lid and her wish comes true. Splattered against the opposite wall is the same gory pattern of stray pellets, bone shard, brains, scraps, hair, and tattered flesh that the police spent long hours photographing the morning after. An eyelid clings to the full-length mirror. Vera screams and runs from the room, skidding on the fragments of teeth scattered across the parquet floor.

Obu Itubi opens his eyes. A fierce blue sky curtains his nightmare visions and his terrified scream constricts into a gasp of amazement. The fear remains, a palpable demon lurking just behind the protective gauze of sun-bright clouds. But for the moment anyway, he is safe. As long as his eyes are open, nothing can happen to him.

The realization that he has eyes and is not seeing the world through a scanner comes at the same moment he discovers his hands. Are these his hands? This face he feels, can it be his? Cheeks, nose, lips—Itubi pokes a thumb into his eyeball and laughs for joy at the tears and the sharp lingering pain. He looks up at the palms of his hands, a latticework of fingers dividing the sky, and delights in a barrage of sensation: hot sun on his skin, the smell of pine-woods, a soft tickling underneath him. He sits up laughing.

Three Nords stand and watch. Their embroidered costumes and bleached-wheat hair anchors them like

monuments against a background of whirling green. There is too much to see: trees, grass, flowers; the whole earth around him a dizzying blur while these three splendid humans loom as distinct as giants.

"Welcome," one says smiling, his voice loud and glad. "You are reborn."

Auditor Quarrels is preparing a final Commission Memorandum on Subject Denton Kalbfleischer. Hoping to find evidence that his sexual therapy was at least in part beneficial, he submits Vera Mitlovic's file number to the communicator. Preprogrammed information is returned instantaneously: THE RESIDENT YOU WISH IS TEMPORARILY DISCONNECTED ON ALL CHANNELS.

This is annoying. Can Center Control still be enforcing disciplinary isolation? Quarrels decides to check it with Vera's Auditor, but when he signals on the Commission's special channel code he hooks up with the Deltron at Aud-Com HQ instead.

THE AUDITOR YOU ARE SEEKING IS DISCONNECTED AND OFFICIALLY SANCTIONED FOR VOLUNTARY TRANCE RETREAT.

All right, when will he be returning?

THE TRANCE IS SCHEDULED FOR INDEFINITE DURATION.

I certainly wish him luck.

LUCK?

It is my wish that his endeavor prove enlightening.

THAT IS TO THE PURPOSE. LUCK IS NOT A FACTOR IN THE SYSTEM. THE LAWS OF CHANCE DO NOT APPLY IN THIS SITUATION.

Look, I'm not about to discuss semantics with you today. What is happening to this Auditor's case load?

CENTER CONTROL REGULATION 24-092: ALL SUB-

JECTS HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED APPROVED STUDY PLANS AND ARE MONITORED BY COMMISSION HQ.

Thank you. I am familiar with the regulation. You have been most helpful. As always, the dependable Deltron.

THE SERIES IS PROUD OF ITS REPUTATION.

Rightly so, why shouldn't a machine be permitted the luxury of pride. End transmission.

In Philip Quarrels's opinion the Deltron is as dull a machine as the Amco-pak series, for all of its renowned dependability. And so sanctimonious about the Trance Retreat. To Quarrels, it is just another overambitious Auditor risking everything for a quantum jump to the Great Liberation. The last three levels in the System involve isolation and total withdrawal, and residents are known to have been elevated hundreds of degrees at one time, skipping all intermediary levels on the Path to Understanding. But an indefinite trance state is a gamble; most of those who take the chance come back babbling, candidates for emergency therapy.

Quarrels prefers the Path of Obedience and Dedication. At the moment, he has a memorandum to finish and an interview with Vera Mitlovic is essential. By regulation, Interlevel memory-merge is only permitted between an Auditor and his subject. Quarrels has often regretted not attempting such a merge with Skeets. The boy was a Scout; they could have gone on camping trips together, swapped yarns around a roaring fire, become pals. It is too late now for regrets; the best he can do for Skeets is file a complete memorandum.

Quarrels knows that if he wants to talk with Vera it will have to be on the island. Her cranial container is in isolation and he couldn't communicate without the entranced Auditor's authorization.



Quarrels arranged Vera's merge with Skeets. He knows the correct coordinates; simple rewiring is all that is required. Even his background is right. As a young pilot, Quarrels was stationed at Boca Chica Naval Air Station and made frequent flights down through the Caribbean. Once he was forced to eject after a flame-out over Tortola.

Also, there's a sentimental coincidence in breaking regulations this one time. During the Apollo Project, when astronauts had considerable cachet as celebrities, Philip Quarrels was a familiar figure in Hollywood; movie studios often arranged dates for him with aspiring starlets and go-go girls. He received invitations to all the best parties. At one such poolside occasion he picked up a flashy European actress and spent a delirious weekend with her at a motel outside Palm Springs. They never saw each other again, although he went to several of her pictures. Her name was Vera Mitlovic.

Y41-AK9 watches on his scanner. The Nords help Itubi to dress, outfitting him with extra garments from their packbaskets. There is no talk after exchanging names. Itubi follows like a clumsy child and stands to one side, watching as the Nords prepare torches. The fire frightens him; a close-up of his eyes reveals utter panic as the pyre is ignited.

Communication channels are at last open to the surface installation. Y41-AK9 commands the lens and the Sentinel's movement, but when he orders the hovering robot to restrain the Tropicque he gets no response. Man is sacrosanct to a machine; inhibitions are built in at the factory; the order is meaningless.

Itubi follows when the Nords start single file for the woods, leaving a gathering of maintenance vans

to witness the end of the funeral pyre. The Sentinel is right behind, skimming over the tree tops. Y41-AK9 watches Itubi struggle to keep up, tripping on exposed roots and thrashing in the underbrush. The contrast with the Nord's agile grace amuses the Auditor. Every clumsy movement, each comic prat-fall endorses the validity of the Depository System. Itubi's undignified performance is typical of a Level I resident. It takes more than a body to make a man.

Back in her bedroom, with the door locked, Vera regains composure by breathing deeply and concentrating on the frangipani tree outside the window. Her morning orange juice is untouched in a goblet beside the bed. She takes a calm and grateful sip. The flavor is strangely wrong. A hint of almonds recalls a deranged Norwegian wardrobe mistress who doused her snacks with cyanide for several months before she was exposed by the death agonies of a miniature schnauzer greedy enough to make off with a box of contaminated *marrons glacés*.

Vera spits the suspicious mouthful into a wash basin. First Raoul and now Hilda; the past grows malevolent. A beating is bad enough, but she has no intentions of spending half her days in bed with stomach cramps. Her original misgivings about the house seem justified; all that treacherous nostalgia. Memories grow musty like everything else. It is time for some fresh air.

In a field outside of town, Vera slips a halter over Chi-Chi's nose for the first time in what must be weeks. Her wide-brimmed sunhat makes a slow walk the only practical gait and the horse plods along the dusty road leading to the beach. A steady wind sends serpentine waves rippling across an ocean of sugar-

cane. She stares aloft at the motionless glide of a man-o'-war bird as an orange-and-white striped parachute opens like a flower against the distant blue of the sky.

Philip Quarrels watches the island enlarge between his feet, thinking: fifty years since the last drop, sealed in the scorched hull of all that remained of *Endurance II*. But it is a memory of something which has not happened to him yet, for this is the young pilot's first jump and he clings to the shrouds, so excited he is unable to keep from smiling at the prospect of thirty million dollars' worth of aircraft nosediving into the empty Atlantic.

An eight-knot wind carries him north northeast, across the island. Details on the ground emerge out of the patchwork geometry: a single-track dirt road dividing the even rows of cane, a circle of tapering royal palms surrounding an acre of scum-green pond, an abandoned greathouse, the shell of a ruined windmill, a girl on a horse. Suddenly, a tamarind tree expands beneath him like an opening umbrella. Quarrels hauls at the lines, fighting for every foot as he drifts past the threatening limbs and into the green uprush of a grass-covered hillside.

He is standing on the collapsed chute, unfastening his harness straps, when the girl comes riding over the crest of the hill. She stares at him, anonymous behind dark glasses and the shielding hatbrim. Her glossy black hair is tied in a single braid down her back like a schoolgirl, yet the dress she wears suggests sophistication and maturity in spite of the way the skirt is pulled up to expose her slim tanned legs. It is a dress designed for buffet garden luncheons and lounging on sofas in the late afternoon, and looks as out-of-place on horseback as does his Day-

glo orange flight suit grounded in the relentless tropic sun.

"Hello, Vera."

"Who are you?"

"My name is . . . Quarrels, Philip Quarrels." He wonders if she remembers the Palm Court Motel.

"How do you know who I am?"

"I'm . . . a friend of Skeets'."

"Oh?" Vera laughs, not the nervous giggle of a young girl; the chill sound is bitter and sardonic.

"Well, he's gone. You missed him."

"Yes, I know. There was an accident."

"What do I care about that?"

"He didn't suffer. It was instantaneous. I thought you'd like to know."

"You're from the Depository."

"Well . . . I—"

"Don't deny it, you didn't just drop out of the sky. What do you want with me?"

"Nothing definite."

"*Merde!* You wouldn't be here if you didn't want something. What is it? Did they send you to bring me back?"

"No, nothing like that, I don't think they even know you're here. I only want to talk for a little while."

"Talk? What about?"

"Skeets."

"*Skeets?*" The name is lost in cynical laughter. Vera clutches her flopping hat, drives her heels into the horse's flanks, and gallops out of sight over the hill.

Obu Itubi sits with his back against the rough bark of a lodgepole pine, limp as a stringless marionette. His legs ache, his face and arms are

scratched and bruised, his blistered feet a throbbing reminder of the many miles he's come from the Depository. A host of other minor discomforts—itching insect bits, a sunburned nose, the prickling of dried sweat, the unfamiliar demands of thirst and hunger—all declare that the distance to Aisle B must be measured in something more than mere miles.

The three Nords set up camp. Skiri and Gregor gather firewood; Swann arranges the sleeping robes. They seem as fresh now as when Itubi followed them into the woods. No words are spoken; indeed, there has been no conversation all afternoon. Reticent Northerners, Itubi thinks, a group of Tropiques would have spent the day laughing and singing.

They are a cold people, it's in the blood. The woman is attractive, yet the men show no interest in her; thin sap runs in their veins. Itubi watches Swann bend over the packbasket; the movement of her breasts under the woven tunic kindles an ancient longing. Here is no electric dream. Tired as he is he can still pleasure a woman, and fight to keep her, too, if those pale milksops should care to protest.

Swann senses his eyes upon her and looks up from her work. "You've had a long day," she says, moistening a cloth in the waterskin hanging heavily under a pine bough. "You should rest."

"Time enough for that," he says, as he wipes the grime from his face and cleans the cuts on his cheek.

"You'll soon grow used to the woods. Coordination will come and you won't get in the way of every swinging branch. Remember, your body is only an extension of the mind. Be alert."

Itubi disregards the sermon. "You must have a very beautiful mind," he says, reaching out to sift her fine blond hair through his fingers.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you have such a lovely body." Itubi caresses her cheek and when she doesn't respond, he slips his hand behind her neck and starts to draw her down into an embrace. Swann smiles, calmly taking hold of his wrist.

"And you have a very rapid heartbeat," she says, feeling his pulse rate with her fingertips. "I suggest a good night's sleep."

The cold Nord bitch! A corpse has more fire and passion than this frigid nursemaid. It is no wonder the other men ignore her. Itubi is disgusted. At the same time he feels a glow of pride for his own Class: a Tropique wench would at least have slapped him. What an insipid lot these Northerners are.

Itubi's question is spontaneous: "How did you know I was a Tropique?"

"You are what you are. What you were no longer matters."

"But, how did you know? Why did you put me in a Tropique body?"

"I picked the first undamaged body that was available. It was just coincidence."

"You mean, I could have become a Nord?"

"As a matter of fact, we considered the body of a Nord female, but she had no legs."

"A Nord . . . female!"

"Would that have disturbed you so very much?"

Itubi is speechless. Swann places a hand on his forehead.

"You're running a slight fever. I forgot you're from the first level and probably still attached to your identity. I shouldn't trouble you."

"Doesn't it matter to you who you are?"

Swann smiles. "Now, yes, of course, but I have been reborn. Whoever I was in the Depository is

dead now. You're alarmed because I might have been a man, or an Amphibios, but such distinctions don't exist on the upper levels; compared to Liberation, how important are those slight differences of sex or class? The Depository maintains a constant population in the world; when there's a death, the vacancy is filled by a member of the corresponding class and sex. The first qualifying cerebromorph is chosen. A simple and efficient method. Life is what matters. I might just as easily have been given Gregor's body, or Skiri's. But I'm tiring you. This is your first day and you're exhausted. You should sleep. I'll prepare some medication for your fever."

While Swann mixes her powders, the men return with armloads of dry wood and soon have a fire started. Itubi watches them silently prepare the evening meal and wonders to what sort of world he has returned.

Vera is not surprised to see the stranger in the orange suit trudging up the bone-white beach. The island is small and Chi-Chi's tracks are easy to follow in the wind-smoothed sand. She gauged her distance carefully: far enough to express displeasure, but not too far to discourage an active search. As he approaches, she adjusts the hem of her skirt, exposing a few additional inches of sun-ripened thigh, and affects an air of indifference.

"Hello," he calls. "I'm sorry if I upset you a while ago. I thought you'd be anxious for some news."

Vera rises on her elbows to face him. "Please, no more about Skeets." Noticing his eyes upon her legs, she arches a golden knee for emphasis. "It's all in the past now."

"I promise." He kneels next to her in the sand

and offers a hand of mature bananas. "I found them growing by the road. They're very sweet."

Vera takes a banana. "What about you?"

"Thanks, I've had plenty. They're for you."

Vera smiles, managing to seem at once ingenuous and seductive. She peels the banana with a knowing leer, removing the yellow skin strip by strip, like a courtesan exposing her lover's white flesh. Slowly, she takes the curving shaft of the fruit into her mouth, slipping the whole length past her lip's moist circumference and then withdrawing it by degrees, glistening with spittle, until only the tip remains between her teeth. Her eyes are languid and heavy lidded as she bites.

"Mmm, delicious," she mumbles.

Quarrels clears his throat. He seems unable to watch her rhapsodic chewing. "What happened to your face?" he asks, staring straight out to sea. "You got some nasty bruises."

"I fell off my horse. Are you sure you don't want a banana?"

"Positive."

Vera studies the firm set of his jaws; the clean, angular profile. "I was hurt here too," she says, opening her dress to show a discoloured shoulder and skillfully offering a pink glimpse of budding breast in the same gesture. Quarrels glances away quickly, intent on the breaking waves. Vera finds even his clenched teeth attractive. She remembers a Grand Prix driver who wore her scarf for luck at Monte Carlo and an Oberleutnant in the SS who seemed too handsome to be truly her enemy. There were other men with the same look, men accustomed to risk and daring, precise, military, and yet, at the same time, free and independent. Living in a world of actors who made a career of imitating such virtues,



Vera always found the real thing irresistible and was bedded by a pantheon of test pilots, Olympic skiers, racing drivers, big-game hunters, mountaineers, and, once, an American astronaut. They were all one man to her: a swashbuckling dream prince who courted women and danger with the same devil-may-care nonchalance.

A high-frequency electronic humming brings Vera out of her reverie. "What's that?" she demands.

"My wrist alarm," Quarrels says, rising to his feet. "I'm on auto-merge control and prescheduled for disconnection in sixty seconds. That was my warning."

"I don't understand."

"There isn't time to explain. I have to leave now. It'll be easier for you if you don't look. Less traumatic."

"Are you coming back?"

"I don't know. . . . It's against regulations."

"Please. I'll tell you anything you want to know about Skeets. Anything at all. Only promise to come back."

"Goodbye, Vera."

"I'm sorry I acted so stupidly."

"Don't apologize. I must go now."

"Next time I swear it will be different."

"Goodbye."

Quarrels turns and sprints up the beach. Vera watches the bright orange suit as he hurries around low clumps of sea-grape and coco plum trees.

"*Wait!*" Vera scrambles through the hot sand, holding her dress above her knees. "Don't go." She runs after him, past the bushes at the edge of the beach and into a grassy shaded grove of coconut palms. "*Phil!*" She stops, searching the green expanse for even a trace of his Day-glo costume.

Except for Chi-Chi, grazing peacefully a hundred yards away, the grove is deserted.

Devotion to duty is the goal of Level II and an Auditor's busy schedule leaves little time for leisure. As much as Y41-AK9 would like to personally conduct the surveillance of subject Obu Itubi, his crowded agenda makes this impossible. Other duties require his constant attention and he assigns a clerical machine at AudCom HQ to monitor the Sentinel's scanner signal and edit those portions not of immediate interest. The silent hours of sleep are of no concern, and whole days of hiking without a single word exchanged are erased by the Magnacor-650, along with the nightly repetition of camp-site chores. At the end of a week, the tape programmed for Y41-AK9 is less than ten minutes long.

There are three episodes on the brief tape. The first occurs on the bank of a mountain lake. It is late afternoon, calm and silent; no breeze disturbs the mirror-still surface and, except for the dimpling rise of occasional trout, there is little to distinguish the placid water from the cloud-flecked sky above. Obu Itubi lies full length on the trunk of a pine fallen out over the lake. He rigs a trotline, tying the end to an upright branch, and while the others gather firewood, he waits face down on the mossy log, staring at his reflection in the water.

The tape cuts to early morning. Following a game trail, the party passes within a dozen meters of a salt lick. Itubi points at two strangers, both Nords, standing immobile under the trees. Skiri and the others act unconcerned.

"But, what's the matter with them?" Itubi asks. "They seem to be in a trance."

"Hunters." Skiri tells him. "I fear we have prolonged their wait."

"Hunters? I thought you people didn't eat meat."

"We don't. The nuts and cereals and dried furit we share with you are our only diet. These hunters look for illness and disease. When they find an animal that might infect others, they destroy it painlessly. The meat is left as carrion, but we use the hide and bones. A trance state enables them to leave their conscious minds and wait for days without moving if necessary, silent and free from thought. Animals approach without fear."

The Sentinel's long-distance lens clearly catches the incredulity on Itubi's face.

Later they encounter an old man, sitting alone in the lotus pose at the center of a small clearing. Like the hunters, he is naked. He smiles as they pass, but makes no other sign of greeting. Swann, Gregor, and Skiri each bow respectfully and avert their faces, but Itubi looks the old Nord straight in the eye. Except for his thinning hair and the fine network of incised wrinkles, he appears no older than Skiri.

"What's that one hunting," Itubi asks once they are back in the shadow of the woods. "Butterflies?"

"Your sarcasm is inappropriate, Obu," Swann says. "He is waiting for death."

Secure in the monastic confines of his cranial container, Philip Quarrels contemplates the pernicious nature of his desire. It is bad enough that a resident of Level II, a Class C Auditor, should be suffering the pangs of lust, but what makes the whole affair monstrous is that the object of his libidinous yearnings is only a child.

Quarrels's attempts to reconcile his memories of the Hollywood Vera (all paint and peroxide, a

caricature voluptuary) with the slim dark-haired girl who sat beside him on the beach is no help. The thought of that faraway Palm Springs weekend only intensifies his longing.

The girl's eyes were his undoing. He was able to ignore her adolescent flirting, the enticements of her nubile teenage body, but when she removed her sunglasses to plead for his return he was lost. For a moment he didn't comprehend. Her innocent, bruised face was so deceptively vulnerable that it took him several seconds to notice the violet eyes glowering under those swollen discolored lids: the most depraved he had even seen in his life.

Quarrels knows he should seek help before it is too late. He should report the whole business to his Auditor, confess his unnatural attraction for the delicate girl whose saintly face frames a sadist's eyes. He is so close to Elevation that it is a shame to spoil his chances by surrendering to secret passion. Instead, he reviews his schedule to determine when he will have enough free time to squeeze in another brief merge. Just one more time, he assures himself. This next will be the last. It is in the interest of self-knowledge. There can be no real harm in that.

After the noon meal, Obu Itubi wanders with his friends around the outskirts of the Nord village. This settlement of the Xi tribe contains only one permanent structure, a hand-hewn log-walled lodge rising to tree top height among the pines on the shore of the lake. Inside the great hall, with its overhanging balconies and broad staircases, are dormitories where the tribe lives communally after the snows come. For warmth, steaming water from a nearby hot spring is diverted into a network of ceramic pipes laid under the floor planking. Even in mild weather, when most

of the Xi Nords live outdoors in tents and on platforms built high in the trees, the tribe takes all meals together inside, on long trestle tables gathered around the circular stone hearth in the center of the hall.

Itubi learns these facts from Skiri, who visited the Xi tribe on Quest twenty years before. The Navigator shows him the village, answering his many questions with a tolerant smile. Among themselves, the Nords seldom speak and Itubi is certain they practice some form of telepathy. How else can they anticipate one another so unerringly? A day's march ends without discussion; camp chores are never assigned; decisions come without words. If they are not actual mind readers, then how explain lives so attuned and harmonious? Telepathy might be rationalized as a trick, a freak of nature. But to accept the evidence of their Enlightenment, their seeming *prajna*. . . .

Itubi refuses to believe his companions are really any different from himself. In time, he'll grow used to the world again. He's been away for a long time. Things may have changed, but he'll soon catch up. And yet Itubi is uneasy when he remembers the unearthly grace of the Nords. In a score of days, he never once saw Swann or Skiri or Gregor make a clumsy move. They seem free from all the little accidents to which he is prone: cutting his fingers, stubbing his toes, burning his mouth on hot food. They never trip or stumble or grow tired on the trail. Whenever the party stopped it was always at Itubi's request, and yet they each carried a heavy packbasket and his only load was the clothing he wore. Some mornings they rested a dozen times on his account, never complaining or showing anger. Nothing disturbs their eternal calm. The same placid

smile remains on their lips. They are always at peace.

A similar peace prevails in the Xi village. Itubi hears the sounds of men at work: a blacksmith hammering at his forge, carpenters repairing the shake-shingle roof of the lodge, the steady scrape of a cooper shaping barrel-staves with a spokeshave. But something more important is missing: there are no children in the village. Instead of the laughter and shouting of children's games, the familiar wail of babies, there is only the high solitary quaver of a reed flute lost among the pines.

Itubi follows the path down toward the lake, listening to the unseen musician. Off to his left, a funeral pyre is prepared for the old man they passed yesterday in the woods. In another day or so, a party will search for his body. Swann explains the customs. The old go off alone when it is time to die.

"Why can't the hatcheries supply the aged with new bodies?" Itubi asks.

Swann only smiles.

"Death is the natural consequence of life," Skiri says. "For the reborn it is an end to Illusion."

Along the shores of the lake the Nords mend their nets while others carve and paint the goose decoys. The Xi tribe are down gatherers. In the season when the aspen changes color, great flocks of geese migrate from the north. The decoys are arranged on the lake and the fierce honking birds are trapped in nets dropped from the trees as they land. After the down is plucked from under the contour feathers on their breasts, the geese are released, alive and unharmed. Skiri explains the importance of this village. "The down for the winter clothes of the Northern people

all over the world is gathered here. This is the only source. That is why the Xi village is so large."

"Large?" Itubi laughs.

"Yes, this tribe numbers almost five hundred, one of the biggest on the continent. Only groups which perform a necessary function, like down gathering, cotton growing, or salt mining, need be so large. They labor for the common good. Most of the nomads—like the Omega, my own tribe, or the Lambda, who follow the caribou, or the Omicron, who tend the sheep herds—are quite small in number. Many do not live in tribes at all. It is not required. There are many solitary hunters. And, of course, those who are on Quest."

"But what about the cities?"

"There are no cities."

Itubi remembers Capetown, Nairobi, Dakar, and Rio, the great metropolitan centers of his age, glittering edifices of steel and glass towering under mile-high domes, monorails, moving sidewalks, hanging gardens, completely air-conditioned and computer controlled. Cities were the wonder of the earth. "No cities?" he murmurs in disbelief.

"The last cities were razed when the Depository was built. The metal they contained was stockpiled and should last for countless eons."

"The cities I knew were not built to be scrapheaps," Itubi says. "They were works of art."

"Art?" Skiri raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean by art?"

Itubi loses his temper. "Art," he yells, "sculpture, painting, music, literature, architecture . . . *art!*"

"The indulgent excess of the Ego, a feeble grasp at immortality. Little of what you call art remains. There is music, of course, to elevate the spirit, and a few of the ancient buildings survive. Temples,

cathedrals, holy places that celebrate the All-in-One."

Itubi feels the weight of a great depression. Life seems as hopeless and futile as in the Depository.

"Then what is it all for?" he asks. "Is man only good for grubbing in the dirt or hunting with spears like savages? What's the purpose? Why does man even need to exist?"

Skiri's answer is calm and deliberate. "We are the Guardians."

"And that's all?"

"That is everything. The world is ours to preserve. We are the Guardians."



## V

# Larva

WITH POWER back to normal in the subdistrict and the period of emergency operations at an end, many Level I residents find they are no longer satisfied with life as it was. The possibility of actual danger has increased their expectations and the prospect of endless anticipatory days at the scanner appalls even the most dedicated viewer. For the first time in centuries, the comic clumsiness of that perennial favorite, the Amco-pak series, fails to draw an appreciable audience.

As the ennui spreads, so does the legend of Obu Itubi. The official report of a malfunctioning Mark X is disregarded by all but the most gullible in the System. Those who scanned the flight are besieged with thousands of requests for details. One scanner witness has become famous because he thought to make a memo tape of the battle between the maintenance vans. Copies are circulated throughout the subdistrict via communicator. Print quality is a good indication of one's social standing; each retransmission blurs the image. Those without status must be satisfied with grainy tapes resembling twentieth-century color TV reception. There is a certain irony in that many of these same residents spent much of

their time on their backsides guzzling beer in front of the flickering tube back in the days when there still were backsides and beer, and gullets to guzzle it with.

The beach is less than a hundred meters long, a pink parabola of coral sand protected at either end by jagged rock walls. Black and moon-pocked with sharp-edged craters where Triassic gas bubbles burst on the surface of a molten river, the violent contorted shapes threaten the tranquillity of the water and the palm-shaded carpet of deep pangola grass above the beach.

Vera lives in a billowing tent made from the parachute the mysterious Mr. Quarrels left behind. She has a splendid view of the sea and, off to one side, a waterfall streams from the rocks into a deep crystal pool overgrown with limetrees and sugar apple. There is an abundance of other fruit within a few kilometers of the tent. Vera gathers mangoes, guavas, bananas, soursop, avocados, and papayas in the lush, green forest.

For whatever else she requires, Vera makes frequent trips to the house, raiding the pantry and the wine cellar. She takes what she can carry, piling the patient Chi-Chi like a peddler's nag. After the first week, she has supplied her secluded cove with the comforts of a sultan. Layers of Oriental rugs cover the tent floor; piles of silken cushions provide a bed; her tigerskin guards the door. There are mirrors, bowls and silver candelabra, chests of jewels and clothing. Chinese scrolls and woven tapestries hang in place on walls. The air is fragrant with sandalwood. Quarrels will have no trouble finding her; the bold orange-and-white stripes of his parachute are clearly visible through the shielding trees. Inside, Vera waits

like a perfumed houri for the moment of his inevitable return.

With each passing day the river's changes grow more subtle. The first week's dramatic sequence of portages around cataracts and waterfalls and shooting white-water rapids through narrow sunless canyons has given way to broad meandering stretches. The canoe rides lightly as a drifting leaf on the rain-swollen current. Obu Itubi rests his paddle across the gunwales and studies the shore. Cottonwoods and willows grow along the bank. Beyond them the landscape is treeless, a rolling succession of grass-covered hills, empty as the sky. To Itubi, it seems a wasteland, barren and forbidding. In his time gardens were here, bountiful green farms evenly divided by irrigation canals and lovingly tended by automated agrocombines. These dedicated machines analyzed the soil, distributed organic nutrient, planted, destroyed harmful insects with high-frequency sound, harvested, plowed, and rotated the crops seasonally.

For a moment, Itubi can almost see the world as it was: domed crystal cities, powered by waste-free solar energy, isolated islands of civilization. Oz-like in their splendor, surrounded by an unending order of gardens, orchards, fields, canals, and rectangular lakes.

Itubi remembers a fertile mosaic of cultivation. The deserts bloomed. The oceans prospered. Man's benign influence was everywhere. Even the forests were tame and manicured. Unlike the barbaric wilderness between the Depository and the Xi village, the woods of Itubi's time were comfortable suburbs. In the twenty-second century, those who didn't care for cities or the undersea reef colonies lived in the

rural mountains. Self-supporting plastic bubble homes, complete with computers, communication centers, recycling water, and individual solar energy accumulators were prefabricated and lowered into place from the air anywhere on earth. Foundations were unnecessary, for the bubble homes settled on stilts that bored deep into the ground and anchored firmly. Man's domain was total; homesites were available in the Amazon jungle and the remote fastness of the Himalayas. Even the polar ice caps were settled by intrepid lovers of winter sports. The world Itubi has returned to seems a poor contrast with the one he left behind.

This interminably tedious canoe voyage, three weeks on the river and no end in sight, would have been an easy matter of an afternoon's trip in the sleek gyro-gravcraft of Itubi's day. Obu glances ruefully up at the persistent Sentinel hovering above the river, a taunting anachronism in this new savage land, and thinks of hurtling through the clouds. In the Depository, the damn canoe trip would be a memory-file tape and when it became unpleasant he could dial a new Index number and be instantly transported to a speeding gyro-gravcraft or a spaceship or the wings of a gliding hawk.

The sound of Skiri's steady paddling brings Itubi out of his reverie. The Navigator never mentions Itubi's idleness, but his silent continuing efforts harbor an unspoken reproach. Obu begins paddling again. In the weeks on the river his hands have hardened and his arms and shoulders are brown and strong. He has grown used to Skiri's silent ways. It wouldn't surprise him to wake one morning and find the Nord had disappeared in the night. That was how Swann had gone, without a word of farewell.

She vanished from the Xi village and Itubi never asked the one question that troubles him still.

Skiri claims a vision of sickness among their people came to Swann in a dream—the Omegas and the buffalo alike ravaged by a mysterious pestilence—and that she left the Xi encampment before daybreak. How Skiri knows about the dream is not explained to Itubi.

Typical Nord mumbo-jumbo, like the way Gregor hesitated at the last moment and took his pack out of the canoe, remaining behind with the Xi people as Obu and Skiri started off down the river. Perhaps that was the goal to his Quest after all. Itubi doesn't care. None of it matters to him. All he wants is to return to his own kind, to be among Tropiques again. And if that means submitting to the mystic vagaries of the Nord mentality, so be it. If he could fool Center Control all those years, he can easily play the same game with Skiri for another few weeks.

Philip Quarrels stalls his return to the land of memory-merge make-believe with several weeks of deliberate busy work: reports, memoranda, analysis records, all the trivial minutiae available to an Auditor anxious to kill time. But procrastination in the name of abstinence is no virtue and he makes his arrangements accordingly, attending to last-minute business, adjusting the auto-merge control for a prescheduled disconnection, and hooking up to the coordinates which send him spinning down the electronic rabbithole to this shared seaside daydream.

He kneels in the damp earth and parts a protecting screen of ferns. Below, on the glistening beach, done to a turn with sunshine and basted in her own sweet

sweat, Vera Mitlovic lies naked on her back, her ebony hair spread like a blanket beneath her. Quarrels sucks in his breath, a sigh in reverse. What is he doing on this imaginary island, he wonders, his scrotum tight with desire for the girlhood ghost of a casual pickup several lifetimes away?

His delusion is that he controls his destiny. He assures himself that he has come to further his self-awareness. Playing peeping tom is in no way detrimental if the keyhole provides a glimpse into one's soul. Quarrels interprets his lecherous ogling as nothing more than creative meditation.

Vera rises to her feet and brushes the sand from her flanks as she heads for the sea. Quarrels delights in her girlish grace as she plunges through the surf, emerging reborn, like Aphrodite from the foam. Shining with seawater, she seems more than mortal: her young breasts, dew-bright rosebuds; her damp hair, a trail of midnight across her tawny skin; her madonna's face an innocent mask hiding the depravity in her amethyst eyes.

Quarrels's rapt gaze follows her across the beach, his deliberate breathing an effort to control the urgent tom-tom throb of his orbiting heartbeat. He watches as she wades into the freshwater pool and rinses the salt from her hair under the waterfall. A towel hangs spiked on the thorns of a limetree. Vera pats and dries her body, wrapping her wet hair in a terrycloth turban as she steps inside the undulant tent.

Quarrels fidgets among the ferns, reminding himself that this is only a dream. His youth, the hot tropic sun, the dazzling sea, the apparition housed under his circus-colored parachute—none of it is real. It is an imaginary Quarrels who strides manfully down the hillside and across the knee-deep

pangola grass. His tumescence is but a figment of his computerized fancy. It's all a matter of connections and coordinates. Somewhere, in another universe, a cerebromorph is dreaming an electronic dream, a fantasy of an island paradise where a beautiful sea nymph reclines naked on a pile of silken cushions, waiting for the handsome navy pilot who lifts the diaphanous flap of her tent and enters with a smile.

After the second rehearsal, the machines assemble for final instructions. Playbacks of the run-through are programmed into the Amco-paks; the precision choreography of pursuit and destruction will be duplicated on schedule. Fifteen scanners are positioned along the aisle to record the event from all possible angles. A Mark V checks the setting for undetected flaws. The verisimilitude must be exact.

The Unistat 4000 in charge of the production calls for silence and positions the maintenance vans for the drama. Signals are given. A single tripped switch efficiently supplants the histrionic "lights, camera, action" of yesteryear, and the waiting Mark X speeds off down the aisle in imitation of desperate flight. A pair of Mark IXs follow right behind, the dedicated pursuers. Two more vans appear at intersecting side aisles, blocking the last avenues of escape. The Mark X is trapped. The aisle is a cul-de-sac. A mammoth energy transmitter obstructs the far end, its complex façade bristling with exposed wires and conductors. A warning buzzer sounds; the words KEEP AWAY—HIGH VOLTAGE light up the faceplate with a lurid neon glare. The posse of Mark XIs slows to half speed but the runaway Amco-pak barrels straight ahead on a kamikaze collision course and, with five scanners watching, crashes into the

transmitter and explodes in a nova burst of incandescent fire.

An instant replay satisfies the Unistat and prerecorded narration is added to the scanner tape before it is dispatched to the Level I memory file, the official Center Control report on the massive power overload that caused the recent emergency. Edited portions of the tape are spliced into the memory-file biography of resident Obu Itubi. Investigation of the wreckage reveals a critical short circuit in the Compacturon DT<sub>9</sub> unit of the runaway Mark X. The captive resident was a powerless passenger aboard the berserk machine. In recognition of this tragic death, Center Control has ordered that the new automatic shut-off switch, recently installed in every member of the Amco-pak series, be named the Itubi Mechanism in his honor.

"Have I pleased you?" Vera whispers, her warm breath fanning Quarrels's cheek. There is nothing in her manner of the insecure adolescent seeking praise. Instead, the tone is haughty, her words rhetorical. She toys with a tuft of hair in his armpit. "Are you happy with me?" she asks, disinterested as a waiter inquiring about the wine.

Quarrels lies on his back, unable to answer. His abattoir eyes vacant and glazed, like a heifer's after the sledgehammer falls. He stares at the rippling parachute above his head, anchored by numb exhaustion. Is this happiness? This stunned desolate inertia? Can this be pleasure? Ensnared by lassitude, Quarrels regards the fire of his recent passion with detachment and disbelief. He wonders if his youth was ever so possessed and pities this driven mortal creature not yet purged by space.



"Don't look so sad," Vera scolds, massaging his chest with slender fingers.

"Am I being sad?"

"Such a long unhappy face."

"I don't feel sad. Perplexed maybe."

"Is it because of me that you're glum?"

"Sometimes even pleasant memories are painful."

"Then it's time for more pleasure." Vera siphons his nipple into the rolled tip of her tongue.

Quarrels regards the sleek child squirming in his arms. It seems impossible that so innocent a sylph initiates attitudes and techniques unfamiliar even to the mature Vera of his motel memories. Back in those Smilin' Jack days, Quarrels favored the double-it served to cover up sexual adventuring as conversational allusion to "joy-sticks," "cockpits," and "bailing out." This flight-deck humor was consistent with his reputation as an ace of the boudoir, but it served to cover up sexual adventuring as conventional as the manual of arms. For all his many conquests, Captain Quarrels has never encountered anyone to equal the teenage doxy who nibbles at his fingertips and blows saliva bubbles into his ear. Not even the CO's nymphomaniacal wife at Pensacola had been so inexhaustably acrobatic. None of the Saigon prostitutes were capable of such calculated innovation as Vera's trick of inserting a knotted silk scarf into his rectum (first lubricating the way with her ingenious tongue) and reaching behind as she rides him like a piston-powered jockey to remove it, one knot at a time, at the onset of his climax.

Vera's hands are busy, exploring thighs and stomach. She tends his flaccid cock as devotedly as a battlefield nurse caring for a fallen trooper. She cleans it with little catlicks, blowing gently where the skin is chafed. Quarrels marvels at the girl's magic.

She is breathing life back into his loins. Incredibly, he wants her yet another time. He arches his back to receive the knotted scarf and the dream ends with the shrill complaint of his electric wrist alarm.

AudCom HQ signals when the weekly surveillance tape is available and Auditor Y41-AK9 disconnects a lecture by Sri Aurobindo, regretfully turning his attention from the compassionate words of a great teacher to the vagabond behavior of his ego-ridden runaway subject. This river voyage is becoming as tedious for the Auditor as it is for Itubi.

In the white water there was hope for a capsized canoe and subsequent remote control capture via Sentinel. (The machine's instructions would call it a rescue operation.) But the last two tapes show the river widening into an even mud-colored avenue, deep and fast moving, a kilometer across to the opposing banks. The dugout sweeps along with only the random possibility of underwater snags.

This week's tape begins: a high-altitude view of the delta, a broad alluvial fan spreading into the gulf, latticed by irregular channels and interconnecting creeks. The Sentinel holds, unseen, more than a myriameter above the curving coastline. A cut to a three-masted sailing ship over on its beam ends at low tide. Itubi and the Nord mingle with the crew gathered on the mud flat. A stranger paddles off in their canoe. Soon, he is lost among the bayous.

Y41-AK9 pays little attention to Itubi. His subject has signed up for a sea voyage. Nothing can prevent the tide from rising. Just as the tape will end. Soon. Much too soon. For Y41-AK9 is entranced with the image of the master mariner, the first Amphibios he has seen outside the Depository. The sun gleams on the smooth silver-blue skin and for a moment when

he lifts his gaze, the Auditor can look into his multi-colored eyes and watch the rings of red, green, and black change and shift as the translucent inner lids slide into place.

Through the silken folds of the tent Vera watches her lover as he walks toward the beach. His buttocks are lean and small, tense muscles shift under the pale flesh with every step. Vera likes the way he moves.

He crosses the beach, hands on his hips, walking to the water's edge where the sand is wet and hard. He never waves or turns his head. Vera watches, careful not to blink, once it starts. First, there is a hint of color, a nacreous shimmer vibrating along his arms and back. For an instant, an iridescent chrysalis surrounds his body. The light intensifies. A quick flash and Phil Quarrels is gone, leaving a green blur hovering in Vera's retina, an optical ghost bisected by the line where the sea meets the sky.

She smiles, stretching her feet into the soft sand under the rug. She is pleased with herself. This time there was no pleading with Quarrels to stay. There wasn't the embarrassment of clinging to his legs. She knows she will see him again. When the wrist alarm sounded, she rolled easily from his arms and said, "Too bad you have to go. It spoils my surprise."

"What surprise?"

"Oh, I wanted to show you the diary I kept while Skeets was here. We would have a good laugh together."

Itubi skulks among the hawsers coiled in the bow. Not even the other Tropique crew members take his side in disputes with the vessel's master. They grovel and toady like a pack of pasty Nords, speaking in whispers, never raising their heads from

work to join in songs or joke, not a word of protest while that damn *tadpole* struts in his gossamer robes and looks on when there's a yard to be hauled or a sail reefed. Master mariner be damned, he was nothing but a fisheyed tadpole to Itubi, a pompous cold-blooded tad.

Obu is glad the ship is not bound for Africa. Think of months on the open sea, ruled by that reptilian, and for what? He has no desire to see mangoes thrive where once mighty Lagos towered. What value is the Benin heritage in a world without art? Southern Hemisphere One doesn't sound like home. Where he goes is not important. Any place will be a beginning. The options are endless for the reborn.

Skiri told of islands lying ahead, a new landfall every few days. It's a fine thing for the Navigator to meander about the ocean on his Quest. His is an easy berth. Life on deck is not so sweet. At most, another week is Skiri's guess, before the green mountains rise out of the sea. A few more days of drudgery. Itubi plans a campaign of Nordic piety: attentive to his duties, tolerant of the master, indistinguishable from the other toadies. No one will suspect his intentions until he is over the side and away.

Becalmed. A fierce sun rages above the slackened sails. The decks are spread with brightly woven carpets; hammocks hang between the shrouds; a drum-taut tarpaulin rigged to an idle spar shadows the six crew members. Itubi carves a bit of hardwood salvaged from the northern forest. The keen cutting blade is Gregor's gift. One of the Nords studies a painted scroll; the other strums a drone harp. Skiri works with his charts spread out on the patterned rug. Beside him, a Tropicque hums the holy *AUM*.

The master mariner stands at the rail, his cob-

web gown spilling like smoke from his shoulders. Spider silk provides the finest test for a weaver's fingers. It is the only fabric an Amphibios can wear. Even the loose-fitting cotton tunic favored by Tropiques and Nords alike in hot weather will foul in the gill vents. Beneath the surface, there is no need for the constricting garments which shield his sensitive skin from the sun.

A form appears in the opalescent water. And another. Two bottle-nosed dolphins rise toward the hull and veer away, a single fluke slicing into the air. For a brief moment of recognition, the master mariner looks into a squinting eye. A cluster of froth marks their swift turn.

The master mariner loosens a clasp and his ephemeral garment slips to his feet. He climbs to the taffrail, the clefts of his gill intake showing under his arm as he reaches for the ratlines. His dive cuts the water with a soundless splash. A trail of bubbles marks his descent as he voids the terminal air in his lungs. Rising from the depths, he hears the silver oscillation of the dolphin's song.

Y41-AK9 ends an audit session with these words of advice for a lower-level subject:

*You must relax. Without withdrawal from tension there can be no concentration. Tomorrow, during the meditation exercise, tune your mind to the alpha-wave broadcast; hear the sacred AUM, the shining sun of suns. Just as you have shed your physical body, be aware of the subtle nature of your astral body. Remember the nineteen elements which compose it: ten organs of action and knowledge, the five vital airs, plus the four mental principles, mind, intellect, subconscious, and ego. These all are shed at the moment of Liberation; the Great At-Oneness.*

*Find the Divine Power within you. Activate this manifestation of the universe; it is Serpent Power. Let the power uncoil, moving upward toward the seat of the thousand-petaled lotus in the brain. This is the union with pure consciousness.*

*End transmission*

AUM.

"Why go back?"

"The more serious question," Quarrels says, his eyes fixed on the sunset, "is why do I want to stay?"

"It's a good thing you're so sexy, you certainly win no points for flattery."

"Stop playing games, Vera. I'm not talking about passion, or that fascinating diary which keeps you so busy between my visits. I do like your pout, but that's not what's bringing me back. Each time I set the controls for a longer stay."

"Fuck the controls. This is as good as life has been in a long time and you know it. Admit it. Even for a fancy Level Two Auditor, or whatever the hell you are, this is the best you can remember."

"How did you know I was from Level Two?"

"Because you sound like a young abbé who once gave me music lessons, full of zeal and chastity. Quite good-looking, too. When were you cerebrectomized?"

"August 19, 1972." An easy date for Quarrels to invent. His thirty-second birthday, the day he stepped from the LMV to the surface of the moon.

"Seventy-two. That was early. You must have really been some kind of nut."

"No, it . . ." Quarrels gropes for another lie, "it was in Southeast Asia. I caught some junk on a strike. The Navy picked up the pieces."

"Then you don't remember the pollution or the

war? How life used to be, the air-conditioning and the gas masks? Oh, I had a charming mask from Gucci, all in python with a lot of style, but most people looked like insects on the street. The radiation suits were worse! Much too bulky to have any chic."

"I was spared that, thank God." This is true. From the orbiting space platform, the earth was a shining blue disk, only slightly smudged around the continents; and when the Thirty-minute War consumed half the globe, *Endurance II* was out beyond Mars, six years deep into space.

"Well, my sheltered innocent, the world wasn't the pretty place you remember from before the middle war. By the time I went into the box, there were quite a few changes. Nothing as nice as this was left. You ought to stick around; there isn't a tape on file in the Depository that can compare with life here. Who knows, if you stay you might find another airplane hiding someplace."

In a clearing shaded by mango trees the Sentinel stands, circled by a dozen seated members of the only tribe on Antilles Nine, the Qaf. Because the tribe is symbiotic—Tropiques on the island and Amphibios in the coral reef surrounding it—there are two Law Speakers. They stand on either side of the tall tripodal cylinder, listening with folded arms to the communicator voice of Y41-AK9:

*You must understand that Level One is a refuse heap. No resident of Level One has ever been Elevated, nor is there a likely candidate among their numbers. They are thousands of years from even the beginning of spiritual awakening. This runaway must be returned to the Depository. He has not earned the right to live among you.*

"It is in his karma to be with us," the Amphibios Law Speaker says.

*True, Enlightened One, but his presence is a danger to your society. His unstable behavior makes harmonious life impossible. I am more convinced of this than ever after he deserted his shipmates and managed to elude observations for such a long time. Remember the destruction he caused in the Surface Installation.*

"Only machines were destroyed," says the Tropique.

*And the brain of a Level One resident.*

"A brain is an organic machine, as replacable as any other. Are the resident's tapes intact?"

*To my knowledge, they are.*

"Then, don't worry about the hardware. Develop some priorities."

"Perhaps," the Amphibios says, covering his gleaming skull-bald head with a fold of his gown, "our worthy Auditor should not trouble himself with such refuse. Perhaps such matters do not concern his exalted attentions."

*My words were ill chosen, Seer of Truth. Devotion to my subjects on Level One is my sacred duty.*

"Just so."

*Exactly why I must plead for the return of Obu Itubi.*

The Tropique shakes his head. "It would be better if you examined your own motives. You might find your eagerness is caused by the demands of Ego. Obu is content here. Give him time to sort out his thoughts. He lives alone in a simple shelter built with his own hands. He's planted a garden. Such is the foundation of a full life."

*A foundation built upon the sand will topple. I have had Itubi under continual surveillance since*



yesterday morning. *Are the Law Speakers aware that it's not a garden he tends, but a crock of fermenting guavas? Does the brewing of intoxicants yield a full life?*

"A man's life is his own if he causes no harm to others."

*With the Speaker's permission, I have preserved his words on memo tape. There may be a time when he will want to hear them once again. Until then, I maintain Sentinel surveillance as authorized by Center Control.*

"Peace be unto you and all living creatures."

Oona the Weaver wanders far into the back-country each afternoon, hunting insects, plants, and other dye-stuffs under the arching canopy of trees. She carries a fiber basket for her cuttings and a pair of drawstring pouches to hold her more elusive discoveries. A dry streambed provides an easy pathway through the liana vines.

It is a warm flower-scented afternoon; slanting shafts of sunlight pierce the leaves and branches overhead; the only sound is a murmuring call of doves. Oona moves silently over the water-smooth stones. She feels the life energies of other creatures around her in the dense forest: young deer in velvet, sly mongooses on the prowl, lizards with their throbbing orange throats. She is aware, too, of another presence, vaguely dangerous like a sleeping snake. But, unlike the serpent's lethal torpor, the vibrations she senses from the hermit hidden in the underbrush are alive and desperate.

Obu Itubi watches the graceful hips and slender brown ankles; he notes the firm swell of her breasts under the white cotton shirt. This woman balancing

a basket is a daily enticement; her invasion of his numb retreat a painful reminder of an old dream gone sour. Itubi takes a slobbering drink from his calabash. Belching bittersweet, he wipes his mouth on his forearm and smiles. Drunkenness helps to erase memory for a time. The pious hospitality of the Qaf Tropiques supplies his brewpot with honey as well as the bread he uses to start the mash working. Pure spring water and acres of fruit come free in the forest. He wallows in the sunshine, sodden and heavy with beer, indifferent to his misery until the woman comes every afternoon and makes him think of how it might have been.

She remains a stranger. He has never spoken or shown himself to her. He knows all too well the distant sound of her voice, the placid smile. Tropiques, Nords, men or women, they are all stamped from the same mold. Center Control adjusts the light that burns in the clear unwavering eyes. The outside world is only another level in the Depository System.

Still, it's fun to imagine stripping those floppy pajamas from her perfect shoulders, seizing breasts, hips, a fold of thigh, before plunging his face into the syrupy mussel-colored maw of her, to drink and taste, uncoiling his long tongue like a butterfly sipping nectar from a flower.

Nothing ever changes. Years seem to pass between Philip Quarrels's visits, and yet Vera detects no aging in her mirror. Time slips by, one day exactly like the next, yesterday the twin of tomorrow, and her only real memories are of the hours she spends with Philip. Even the house stays the same. When she returns for supplies this week (or was it last week, or last month?), the familiar sun-filled

rooms seem as fresh and new as the day of her first visit.

She hurries through the pantry, filling her hamper with cheese and tinned delicacies. Freshly baked bread and a tantalizing assortment of glacéd cakes wait in the kitchen. A trip to the wine cellar yields a half dozen dusty bottles. Vera dumps the trash she brings from her tent into a barrel in the yard outside the kitchen door. The barrel is empty as it will be next time, as it was the time before. And ever shall be, Vera thinks. Except when he's here. Then, it's almost real.

She lives in the shelter of his parachute, safe to borrow only those memories which are pleasant. Quarrels can never come to the house, she knows that too. Still, she wishes she could share some particle of her past with him. He is apathetic to the fine food and drink, sleeping as easily in the sand as in the nested pillows on her tigerskin. The treasures of her lifetime hold no interest for him. She wants something to please a man, something like Raoul's shotgun upstairs in the trunk.

The woman is on her knees in front of him, pulling tubers from the moist earth and placing them in her basket. At the sound of Itubi's lurching stumble she turns her head and starts to rise, but he catches her sleeve and pulls her down beside him in the leaves. He is a naked devil, tearing at her clothes, his florid face leering and wild. She lies inert, curious and detached as he parts her legs with a savage thrust of his knee.

Itubi sways, panting above her, his hands pinning her shoulders to the ground. "Too pure, aren't you?" he snarls as her eyes calmly meet his hate-filled stare. "Too pure and holy to fight back?" He slides his

hands down to her breasts, cruelly pinching her nipples. "But you can't stop these from wrinkling and hurting and growing hard, can you?" She doesn't move. "What's the matter? Is your cunt so saintly? Is that what's the matter? The precious sepulcher is about to be defiled. Isn't that worth fighting for? Isn't it!"

"Your need is so great," Oona says, opening her thighs for him. "You must suffer." She slips her ankles behind his knees.

Itubi recoils, his hands lifting from her breasts as if the flesh has suddenly putrified beneath his touch. "Oh no, I don't want that." He rises to his feet. "I'll do better with my fist, milking my dreams."

"But it's not for pity." Oona lifts her hand, fingers gently drifting along the silken shaft, tracing the swollen blood vessels like a blind woman. "I've seen does mounted in the forest and the copulation of whales, and every day in the barnyard the cock runs the hens to earth and I watch him cover them with his strong wings." She is standing beside him. "I am different from the others, like you are." She directs his fingers up between her legs. "The sight of a stag in rut never made me open in such a manner."

They cling together, moaning and swaying like trees in the wind. Uprooted, they fall back into the leaves. Itubi enters her with slow deep strokes and the spasms of release are immediate, all his tensions flooding helplessly into the soft enveloping warmth. For Oona it is something different. His passion is the threshold of an all-consuming universe, ever expanding into particles of light, the very atoms of her being disintegrate, electrons collide. She is lost in the electric fire of creation.

Spent, Itubi gamely endeavors to match Oona's voracious rhythm. He remains erect, but his mind is

elsewhere. He is thinking of the drone bee mating in midair with the Queen, chosen out of a legion of pursuing bachelors. The nuptial fight ends in tragedy. The drone falls back to earth, disemboweled, while the Queen flies off with his sexual apparatus and a portion of trailing abdomen still obediently pumping.

"Throw!"

Vera skims a flat-sided seashell up into the air, launching it with a flick of her wrist like a tiny discus. Quarrels swings the shotgun in a sweeping arc, taking an extra second to gauge the lead. He fires and the seashell powders. Vera jumps up and down in the sand, applauding.

"You try," he says, slipping two red plastic cartridges into the smoking cylinders.

"No, it hurts my shoulder. I like throwing better."

"Can you throw two at once?"

"Why not?" She hunts along the surfline for shells the proper size. "Philip," she remembers to call him Philip, "isn't this fun, Philip?"

"Terrific." He grins.

"I hope it never ends."

"I'm going back to the Depository, if that's what you mean."

"Oh?" Vera tries for nonchalance as she picks up a second seashell. "Soon?"

"Not for a while. But the alarm is already set for a disconnection, so talking about it won't help. Are you ready?"

She nods.

"Throw!" Quarrels swings with the spinning shells and fires twice, splintering the first into five pieces, missing the double. No applause. Vera's smile remains but her eyes are glinting and cruel. "There's

work I must do," he says. "I have a schedule to follow. Maybe I can arrange something next time so the Commission won't miss me. I know how to adjust the coordinates."

"Next time, no alarm?"

"I promise."

"And we'll be together forever?"

"I promise, my darling."

Y41-AK9 complains to his Auditor. If the System is just, why does it permit injustice?

*What would you suggest?*

Authorization by Center Control for the immediate apprehension of the subject. The necessary equipment could be delivered by Sentinel.

*It is not the duty of the Depository to police the world.*

But who else is to do it? The Law Speakers take no action. Itubi is given shelter wherever he goes. A female is housing him now. He has a life of ease ahead. Is that just? If the residents of Level One ever guess his fate, there will be complete chaos.

*Center Control Regulations specify that the goal of Level One is acceptance of the Depository as their only world. Residents must learn to have faith in the System. Knowledge of truth is a precious responsibility, Y41-AK9. Perhaps continued exposure to the outside is weakening your trust. Temptations are strongest when Intellect and Ego cloud the mind.*

I strive for patience and wisdom.

*We suggest it. Without those qualities delusions arise, rash recommendations not congruent with order are seriously offered, the oblique workings of the subconscious revealed. To propose using machines against man is absurd; to imply that an Auditor might break his vows and pass along for-*

*bidden information to a lower-level resident is unimaginable. If performance of duty is proving too heavy a burden for Y41-AK9, then perhaps another Auditor can be assigned to the Subject.*

My endeavors will be doubled with the wise assistance of those who see farther and guide me when I go astray.

The Weaver's palm-thatched house stands on the crest of a hill overlooking the sea. Gaudy jungle fowl scratch in the yard in front of the open door. Itubi sits on the step, mending a wooden stool, surrounded by the geometric patterns boldly painted on the whitewashed cut-coral walls. Skeins of newly dyed yarn hang in brilliant loops from the drying racks above his head, an awning as bright and ever changing as a rainbow. Everywhere he looks, he is confronted by color. Even the vegetable plots are divided by opulent rows of flowers.

He closes his eyes and listens to the sound of the shuttle as Oona works at her loom inside. While he is prone to sit and dream, Oona is never idle—tending the dyeing vats, sweeping, drawing water from the cistern, spinning cotton fiber into yarn at her wheel, working in the garden. Her chores begin at sunrise and end in the smoky flickering light of a beeswax candle. She never asks his help, and except for two days a week when he leads the horse along the coastal path to the broad central valley and returns with a bale of cotton strapped to the pack saddle, Itubi is forced to invent work, finding simple tasks like the wobbling stool to fill his day. Aside from some desultory whittling, he has made no attempt to sculpt. The urge is no longer in him.

Still, Obu is content. Life is pleasant and warm. The beehives hum like a row of dynamos behind the

house. Slender green lizards scramble in and out of the garden wall. A flame-crested jungle cock chases a chattering hen across the yard. Oona sings inside the house. "I am better than a rooster," Itubi muses. "The woman is pleased with me. Not a night without lovemaking. Should I be blamed if she has no other use for my arms?"

The loom is silent. Soon Oona appears in the doorway, carrying a round loaf of bread and a basket piled with fruit, wedges of goat cheese, a shattered coconut, and fat oozing squares of honeycomb. She sits, placing the basket between them on the step, and slices the loaf into broad slabs with a bone-handled knife. As always, she is smiling.

Obu spreads honey on the dark bread. "You seem happy today," he says.

"I am happy every day." Oona peels an orange. "But today there is special cause for joy."

"I could tell. I've never heard you sing before."

"The song should be yours as well, Obu. Your seed is alive within me. Today is my time of the month, and yet my menses do not flow. I'm pregnant, Obu."

"Impossible!"

"I knew it from our first union. You should rejoice."

"It's not true. I'm sterile, you know that. All male fetuses are sterilized in the hatchery, that's the law." Itubi feels his heartbeat accelerate. He wipes a smear of honey off his chin.

"What law, Obu?"

"Why, World Council law, to prevent unauthorized breeding and insure . . ." Itubi falters. The old schoolboy slogans implanted hypnotically in his memory are of no help. Oona must know them all: MOTHERHOOD IS A PRIVILEGE, NOT A RIGHT. CON-



TROLLED POPULATION IS THE KEY TO WORLD PEACE. STERILITY EQUALS STABILITY. They were as much a part of childhood as the Mother Goose doggerel that returns to nag at him from out of the past:

Born in a hatchery,  
Without the help of mother;  
That's the reason why I'm me  
And all the world's my brother!

Oona reaches across to grip his trembling hand. "You are your own authority now, Obu," she says.

"I'm sorry, my head is full of nursery rhymes. I forgot where I am, or even who I am. There no longer is any World Council, is there?"

"Not since the Awakening."

"And you're really going to have a baby?"

"Of course."

"There's no law forbidding it?"

"Nothing is forbidden. The Law Speakers provide guidance for the tribe, not restrictions."

"Incredible!"

Itubi remembers the complex procedure of obtaining his first child: the application forms, the psychiatric interviews and medical examinations, the long appraisal period, all the restrictions and red-tape he and his wife submitted to before the hatchery approved their request. And even after an infant was reserved in their name on the production schedule, the complications continued. There were parental guidance clinics, mandatory infant care classes, a series of injections for his wife to induce lactation. PARENTHOOD MEANS RESPONSIBILITY!

"No, I don't believe it," he says. "You're making it up. My wife never menstruated. Females were fixed in the hatcheries just like the men."

"All but one in every thousand, Obu."

"That's right, all but the bleeders."

"Obu, I was a . . . *bleeder*. Those cruel slang words hurt when I was a girl. It was not an easy life being an Ovulator. Normal people didn't understand. I was medicated for eleven years, one thousand units of TCG every two weeks, and every month in the Incubation Center of Brazil Hatchery Twenty my uterus was drained by a suction tube. Once my yield was one hundred and seventy three eggs."

"What about the Depository?"

"I was never in the Depository. Listen, eleven years was enough. This island was a holiday retreat in the old days; there was no permanent population. I made it look like an accident, ditched my gyrogravcraft in the sea. When the other tourists were recalled after the Awakening, I was hiding in the forest. I never knew what it was all about. For ten years, maybe more, life was easy; food is no problem here. Then they started coming back, the ones from the Depository, and I spied on them until I learned enough to mingle without notice. I just appeared one day after a ship sailed and was accepted without question."

"Where did you learn to weave?"

"At the State Handicraft Preservation Center in Rio. Government Ovulators had lots of free time. We were encouraged to take up hobbies, you know, for extra points on our credit ratings."

"Did you really escape? It seems impossible. When were you born?"

"Sagittarius, twenty-one sixty."

"I'm just four years older." Itubi laughs. "Part of me anyhow. Yet you look so young, Oona."

"The final hatchery lifespan estimates were for five hundred to six hundred years."

"But, I've seen old men—"

"I know. Some of them from the Depository wither and die within a decade of getting out. Spend all their time fasting and praying. I've watched hundreds. No one seems to care. By living alone I escape close attention. These new Depository products are not suspicious of solitude as long as you act industrious or spiritual."

"Are there no others like us?"

"I've looked, and waited . . . nearly two hundred years. In all that time, you're the first. The ones that return from the Depository are sexless. Not their bodies, of course, they all have fine healthy hatchery bodies. Something's been done to their minds."

"Liberation," Itubi mutters.

"But you weren't Liberated. You're the runaway." Oona smiles, pleased with the thought of Itubi evading the machines. "You're famous. I heard all about you in the village before . . . before we met. I knew you were different, but I never, never guessed that you'd be fertile. The Breeding Facility must wait for the final operation to sterilize the males."

"Then it's just an accident. Swann's oversight." Itubi shakes his head. "Can it really be so simple?"

"There is nothing more simple than life, Obu," she says. "Miracles included."

Vera spreads an even film of coconut oil across Philip's back. Her smile congeals when the electric buzz of his wrist alarm interrupts the placid afternoon. She caps the bottle, wiping her hands on the towel without a word.

"I'm sorry," Quarrels says, propped on his elbows.

"It couldn't be helped." He avoids her eyes. "I know I gave my word, but it's not as easy as all that. God knows how many regulations I'm breaking by just being here."

"You're not going," she says.

"I have to. Next time it will be different."

"Never mind next time! You're not going." She drops the towel and walks quickly up the beach toward the tent. Quarrels watches her disappear inside and makes up his mind. This is the end. No more lies or compromises; he is tired of subterfuge and considers applying for therapy sessions to strengthen his resolve. All dreams must end in waking, he thinks, standing up as Vera comes out of the tent carrying the double-barreled Holland & Holland.

"Turn it off," she commands. "Whatever it is that you do, *do it!*"

"It's automatic, Vera. The controls are set back in the Depository."

"I don't believe you." She stops a few paces away in the sand and aims the shotgun at his face. "I mean it. I'll kill you if you don't turn it off."

Quarrels laughs. He looks straight into the up-turned muzzle. Vera's eyes are no less threatening. "Such cheap Hollywood theatrics," he says. "You can't kill me, Vera. This is only a merge; it's as unreal as the movies. You can't do in memory what you haven't done in life."

"But it's true, I killed a man, my first husband. With this same gun. It's as easy as turning off your alarm. Now hurry up or I pull the trigger!"

"I believe you would, Vera, but it's still no good, even if you have a dozen victims to your credit. You may be a killer, but I've never been killed, so your threats are meaningless."

"I'm warning you, Philip." As she speaks, a mys-

terious light begins to play on his skin. "Philip!" The light flickers like little tongues of blue flame. "*Turn it off!*"

"Goodbye, Vera." The entire surface of his body is lambent. Radiance begins to blur his features. "I applaud your performance."

"Stay with me," she pleads. "*Please!*" The light is incredibly bright. Vera's scream is lost in the roar of the shotgun's blast.

Tauriq the Healer receives Oona's astonishing news calmly. Only his eyes betray his momentary amazement. He takes both her hands in his grasp and returns her steady gaze. For a long time neither speaks.

"And what of the stranger?" Tauriq asks, breaking the silence.

"Obu." Oona corrects him.

"Yes, Obu. Does he share your happiness and peace?"

"No, his Ego is too strong. His pride gives him no rest."

"I met him once in the village. His hostility is unmistakable. And yet I sensed something vital in him, a life force more beast than man. I understand how it must have happened, Oona."

The Weaver laughs. "You sound as if I have a disease, Tauriq," she says.

"Perhaps it is even more serious than that. How long has it been?"

"Two months."

"It's time I had a look at you." Tauriq opens his shoulderbag and sorts among his instruments. "I've helped many mares to foal, but this will be my first childbirth." He removes a steel speculum and adjusts the calibrated spreaders.

Oona slips out of her loose cotton clothing, standing naked in front of the Healer. Above their heads, broad orange sunflowers nod in the afternoon wind.

Obu Itubi is drunk. He stumbles down the jungle trail, cursing the shifting weight of a sackful of avocados slung over his shoulder. What sort of work is this for a man who's fathered the world's first child in a hundred and fifty years? No, longer than that. The Reproduction Centers were started three centuries ago. Nothing but hatchery babies in all that time and he, a man as important as Adam, is sent to pick fruit in the forest like some paltry menial.

It's the woman's fault, with her loom and her house and that damned garden. The beatific Weaver! Well, he's had enough of being a lackey, running her errands. And for what? Cast-off clothing and tasteless vegetarian meals! Obu trudges forward, his beer-blurred brain tabulating a long list of complaints and injuries, not the least of which is the cooling of Oona's passion. She hasn't shared her bed with him since telling him she was pregnant a month ago, acting chaste as a vestal nun whenever he chances a caress. One would think she's harboring an immaculate conception in that proud stomach. But he remembers how she sweated and scratched and screamed his name in the night, damned if she didn't. And he'll be damned if another night goes by without the hump and thrust of love. No more sleeping in a hammock outside, as if he was no better than the goats she keeps. Some goat! Why, he's the mightiest ram in all the world.

Itubi staggers out of the woods, delighting in his newly discovered goathood. Yessir, the Universal Ram! He laughs and cavorts, swinging the sack in a

wild circle that sends him spinning off his feet into the tall grass. Why wait for nighttime for his tugging? Oona's farm is just over the next hill. Why not sneak around the back way and take her by surprise, like he did the first time? A proper goat plan.

Itubi abandons the sack of avocados. They'll keep until he returns. Emboldened by alcohol, laughing his hircine laugh, he lopez through the waving grass, a copper-colored satyr all musk and gonad. What luck, finding the fallen-down remains of his lean-to under the pear trees, his brewpot still full and fermenting. Sober, he might have second thoughts about so rash an enterprise as rape, but strong drink happily obscures any lingering scruples and keeps the fantasy lamps of courage in full flame.

At the stone wall enclosing the upper meadow, Itubi drops to his knees and crawls, hidden from view until he reaches the barn. From here it's a short run to the house. He peers around the corner and sees Oona with another man, her clothing discarded at her feet. The stranger fondles her naked breasts. He whispers secret words into her ear. She is laughing as she reclines on a bench under the brazen sunflowers. Still laughing, she spreads her legs. The wicked-looking speculum gleams in his hands.

Itubi steps inside the barn, desperate and reeling. The sound of Oona's laughter goads his fury. A row of wooden tools hang from pegs driven into the stone wall, a lethal array of scythes, grubbing hoes, hay forks, and rakes. It takes only a moment for him to make his choice. Gripping the long-handled flail like a club, Itubi starts from the barn, his bare feet cat-silent on the packed earth of the farmyard. The stranger is bending over his woman, savoring the delights of those open thighs. He doesn't hear Itubi's

approach or see the fleeting shadow of the upraised flail as he poises to strike.

Vera hurls the shotgun aside and hurries to where her lover's body lies sprawled in the sand. She knows he is dead and the moment of horror she felt while pulling the trigger is gone, replaced by a curious calm. There is no grief, not even the beginnings of guilt. She is troubled only by the sharp echo of the weapon's report still ringing in her ears. A sense of awe at having caused such terrifying damage is as near as she comes to true emotion.

Because the range was too close for the pattern to spread, Quarrels took the full charge straight into his face. He lies on his back, arms spread, his head burst like an overripe melon carelessly dropped in the field. Vera is astonished by the quantity of blood puddled in the warm sand. The foxfire phosphorescence no longer emanates from his body and, in spite of the suntan, his flesh assumes a ghastly pallor.

"Dead fish only glow at night," Vera mutters, kicking sand at the fat bluebottle flies that have appeared almost magically about the corpse. Quarrels is hers forever now. He will never go away again.

*A man's life is his own if he causes no harm to others.* The Law Speaker's recorded words issue from within the Sentinel. All the Elders of the Qaf tribe have gathered in the Weaver's garden, summoned by the flying silver robot towering above their heads. The cloth-draped form of Tauriq the Healer rests on a bench under the sunflowers. One of the Law Speakers holds the bloodstained flail. Oona stands, watching silently, off to the side.

"There is no need for such reminders," the Law Speaker says. "I recall the words I spoke."



*My apologies, Enlightened One, Y41-AK9 replies via communicator. I do not wish to dishonor you, nor do I care to use this sorrowful occasion to further my own wishes.*

"We are in your debt for bringing us here. Your warnings might have prevented this loss. The fugitive must be returned to the Depository. He cannot escape from the island. All of the tribe will assist you in the search."

*He is more dangerous than any animal. Care must be taken so that no harm comes to your people.*

"All caution will be exercised. We employ nets and darts tipped with a paralyzing anesthetic. Our hunters are extremely accurate with the blowgun. The runaway will be captured alive."

*If it can be managed, the Depository will be grateful. The Sentinel contains cranial facilities adapted specifically for the return of the resident. But, if the lives of any of your men are endangered, it is the wish of Center Control that the subject be destroyed.*

The Medical Authority is puzzled. In all their records there is not another case like this one. A Level II Auditor, the only resident of that category born in the twentieth century, is the subject. His medical history file reads:

<i>Number:</i>	C19-LTR85 (266-07-83)
<i>Name:</i>	Philip Randolph Quarrels
<i>Sex:</i>	Male
<i>Class:</i>	not applicable
<i>Born:</i>	8-19-1940
<i>Cerebrectomized:</i>	3-23-1990
<i>Filed:</i>	10-10-2362
<i>Occupation:</i>	Astronaut; pilot

<i>Ego Rating:</i>	67.459
<i>Health:</i>	Excellent
<i>Previous Illness:</i>	None

The Medical Authority is notified after the subject failed to meet his auditing schedule and did not respond when signaled via communicator.

The resident's brain is currently undergoing intense laboratory examination. Although tests indicate that the cerebral cell tissue is alive and the neurons respond to electrostimuli, no wave patterns can be detected on micro-encephalogram tape. Even in the deepest of comas the subconscious still emits a feeble pattern. Clinically, the subject is alive; and yet; according to all known diagnosis, the brain is that of a dead man.

It is very mysterious. No trace of disease or cell damage can be found. No symptoms of psychic trauma are discovered. A playback of the subject's tapes reveals nothing. Previous to the discovery of the subject's condition he had programmed a series of memory-file epistemology lectures. Curiously, nothing of the content of these lectures has registered in the conscious or unconscious mind of the subject. It is almost as if he had been someplace else when the tapes were programmed. Center Control has instructed the Medical Authority to continue its investigations.

Obu Itubi cowers in an impromptu burrow he scooped from the hillside with his bare hands. He is raw and dirty, his hair matted and caked with clay. The cuts and scratches from scrambling blindly through thorn-sharp jungle undergrowth have begun to fester. Ticks and lice torment him. It is damp in

the burrow and Itubi is cold, cramped, and utterly miserable.

He hasn't eaten in two days. To avoid observation, his plan was to forage for food only at night, but, without a moon, the darkness under the trees was like a bandage tied over his eyes and it was all he could do to feel his way back to the safety of his burrow, a helpless hungry mole. He tries not to think of Oona or his comfortable life in the white-washed house. Regret is an insidious poison and Itubi has need of memories considerably less toxic than the image of the slender Tropique weaver who carries his child in her sloping belly. He concentrates his thoughts on the monotonous aisles of the Depository and determines to appreciate even what harried freedom is left to him. Better to live in the ground like a cornered rat and die a free man under the open sky than be sealed away in that computerized mausoleum with several billion other zombies.

Sustained by his angry thoughts, Itubi has no intention of dying. Killing an innocent man may have cost him a chance for domestic happiness, but as he has the strength to resist, he is not going to give up his freedom because of a drunken mistake. Itubi knows that he is not safe on the island. Escape means stealing a boat and for such an undertaking he needs nourishment. The risks of starvation are greater than the danger of exposing himself. If he's cautious, an hour's foraging should enable him to stockpile enough fruit to last for days.

Itubi pushes past the leaves and branches which camouflage his dugout, stretching his aching limbs for the first time since the previous night. He savors the warm sunlight on his skin and starts stiff-legged

through the waist-high foliage. There is not a sound in the forest. Even the raucous jungle birds are silent. Itubi is certain he's alone and unobserved. His thoughts of security are interrupted by his own startled outcry. A sudden searing pain, more virulent than any wasp's sting, burns across his shoulder. Grimacing, Itubi reaches behind to feel the barbed shaft hanging from his flesh. Before he can pull it out, his knees buckle and he drops forward into darkness.

Philip Quarrels is buried without ceremony. Using an empty coconut shell, Vera scrapes a shallow pit in the sand. Chi-Chi is employed to move the corpse. A rope attached to a makeshift harness is tied to the dead man's feet and the horse drags the body to the open grave, leaving a smooth trail across the beach like a track of an ovulating sea turtle. There are no prayers or obsequies. Vera rolls him in and covers him up.

Altogether, Vera spends considerably more time decorating the grave than she did preparing it. She pats the sand smooth in a high mound over the pit. Around the perimeter she arranges a row of queen conch shells, bleached white by the sun. In a second row, the shells are upside down to reveal the pink involute openings. Elsewhere, fragile slivers of the shattered lime skeletons of sea urchins are pressed into the mound in an abstract mosaic.

Vera is pleased with the results. She has arranged the grave so it can be seen through the open flap of her tent. Every day she will bring baskets of flowers and strew them over the mound. Down the beach she knows where to find a large lump of brain coral that will make a suitably ironic headstone. Vera

looks forward to the histrionics of mourning. It will give her something to help pass the time.

*Attention, B-0489 . . . Attention . . .*

Obu Itubi recognizes the presence of his Auditor on the communicator. This is puzzling. He remembers leaving the dugout and the stillness of the forest, but everything else is vague, lost in blackness.

*Attention, attention, B-0489. There is no point in playing mute, we know you are receiving this transmission.*

Where am I?

*Safely back in the bosom of Center Control. You will excuse me for being less precise, but the exact location would be meaningless to you.*

What has happened to my body?

*It was incinerated on Antilles Nine. You were cerebrectomized by a Healer there, a colleague of your unfortunate victim.*

And what will happen to me now?

*Your most interesting question, B-0489 . . .*

I know I am at your mercy.

*Very true. And since you showed so little of that commodity during your rampage in the Surface Installation, I imagine you feel a bit apprehensive.*

I'm not afraid. There's nothing more you can do to me.

*You display your ignorance, B-0489. Center Control has on file tapes of pain so profound that your imagination cannot even begin to fathom the potential agony. We can condemn you to eternal purgatory by merely flipping a switch.*

Do it then.

*You are too impetuous, B-0489. That's why you are so dangerous. Center Control has no desire for*

*revenge. In spite of all provocation, I have not the slightest interest in "skewering you like a shish kabob."*

So, you know all my secret thoughts. I should have expected as much.

*Your mistake was in having thoughts which needed to be kept secret. Center Control records the complete consciousness of every resident. There is no such thing as secret thoughts. Even your unconscious is on file. My mistake was in not making a daily audit of your tapes. If I had, perhaps all this destruction might have been avoided.*

You've been brainwashed by the System. The machines have tricked you out of more than your body; they've stolen your mind as well.

*There is no such thing as individual mind, B-0489, there is only the One Mind. All else is illusion. But I won't trouble you with further discourse on the Doctrine. You asked about your fate. I have been instructed by Center Control to inform you of their decision. As a result of your destructive actions, the brain of a Level One resident has been damaged beyond the possibilities of reconstruction. Although humanoid hatching and breeding facilities are maintained, the specimens produced have only a modified brain, so there is no chance of our laboratories supplying a replacement. Because of this fact, Center Control has ordered that your brain, B-0489, be substituted for the one destroyed. All of your thoughts, both conscious and unconscious, will be erased and the tapes of the other resident substituted.*

So you mean to kill me after all?

*Not exactly, your tapes will be consigned to the Archives for storage until such time as another brain is available. In effect, B-0489, you are to be placed*

*in limbo. Before I end transmission, you might be interested in knowing of the metaphysical debate your case has occasioned. Center Control is undecided what the karmic results would be if your tapes were erased instead of placed on file. Would erasure equal death, and thus a new incarnation for you on another world? Or would you simply be cast adrift in the samsara forever, doomed to an eternity of illusion? You might well use your final moments to meditate on this question, B-0489. Neuron purgation procedures will begin immediately.*

*End transmission.*

CLICK

Oona the Weaver sits in the sunshine of her garden staring down past the green cultivated rows to the sea. A vibrancy of hummingbirds embellishes the flowerbeds; bees drone in the golden afternoon; a rooster struts and crows, parading his plumage along the top of the stone wall. Behind her in the house, her loom stands idle. Recently a vague dreaminess has overtaken her and she has done no work in days, sitting instead for hours in the garden, her hands folded in her lap.

Oona's smile is peaceful and contented. There, she feels it again, for the third time today. She lifts her hands to the swollen sides of her stomach and feels the quickening within her body. She thinks of the tiny fetus, already perfectly formed, kicking out his unborn legs, restless with the novelty of life. Her joy is complete.

An Amco-pak Mark II moves silently between the narrow steel shelves in the Archives. Ranked along either side are endless reels of tape, catalogued and forgotten in the mortuary stillness. Clamped in his

telescoping arms, the file machine carries the complete tapes of resident Obu Itubi. The square metal container is identified only by number: B-0489-M (773-22-99) After a moment's scanning, the Mark II finds the appropriate shelf and slides the tapes into place. The aisle is too narrow to turn around, so the scanner turret pivots 180 degrees, the controls are set on reverse, and the machine backs smoothly out the way it came. On another shelf, two rows over, sit the tapes containing information on the misfiling of a twentieth-century resident (female), the lost key to Vera Mitlovic's freedom.

A reconstituted Skeets Kalbfleischer is having a nightmare. Although this dream has occurred with increasing regularity over the past weeks, Skeets has yet to report the details to Y41-AK9, his new Auditor. It is always the same room, brilliantly hung with Sung dynasty scrolls and tapestries. The Emperor is always there, supervising from his teakwood throne, a slightly mocking smile playing about his thin lips. Skeets is strapped to the top of a porcelain-tiled table. As before, he is in a strange body: adult, well muscled, with copper-colored skin and a shock of fine coal-black hair.

The Emperor clasps his hands and the torture begins. Three men enter the room, two of them pushing a brass-bound cabinet exquisitely fitted with dozens of tiny drawers. These two men assist the surgeon in selecting the proper instruments from the cabinet. A large mirror hangs over the table so Skeets can watch each detail of the operation. The surgeon works with skilled fingers, diligently removing tiny portions of flesh from his body. Each incision is in a different place. One cut removes a portion of his earlobe, another takes the tip off his



big toe. The surgeon is a master of his ancient craft; under his patient care a victim is kept alive for days as, bit by bit, his body is carved away. First, the skin is removed; next, the flayed muscles minutely diced. By avoiding the vital organs, the surgeon whittles the body down to bones and guts, never allowing any one cut to induce shock or trauma. Although the pain is constant and unvarying, the victim is never allowed to lose consciousness.

Skeets watches the entire process; his eyelids were the first to go, thereby ensuring his unswerving attention. But even after his eyes are removed and he is reduced to a beating heart, a single lung, and the blanched stalk and blossom of spinal column and skull, Skeets is still able to witness the final moments of his dream. He sees it all in the mirror as clearly as if he still had eyes. One of the attendants produces a fine silver saw from an appropriately shaped drawer. With a few swift strokes, the surgeon uncaps the cranium and eases the brain out of its ivory nest. Gray and glistening, the wrinkled lump of nervous tissue is carried to the Emperor on a golden dish with the polite hope that it will please his discriminating palate.

.

# Your Inner Child of the Past

☼ Once you were a child.

☼ That child still lives within you—influencing and interfering in your adult life.

☼ This book tells you **HOW TO SOLVE YOUR ADULT EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS** by recognizing, accepting and managing the feelings of **YOUR INNER CHILD OF THE PAST.**

**BY W. HUGH MISSILDINE, M. D.**

**AMONG THE NEW IDEAS AND FRESH APPROACHES  
IN THIS BOOK ARE:**

- There are four people in every marriage bed
- Every "lone wolf" has an unwelcome companion
- There are times when it's all wrong to try to "do better"
- How the "command-resistance" cycle of childhood leads to adult sexual frustration
- How to be the right kind of parent to your "inner child of the past"
- Six rules for happy family life

▼ **AT YOUR BOOKSTORE OR MAIL THIS COUPON NOW FOR FREE 30-DAY TRIAL** ▼

**SIMON AND SCHUSTER • DEPT. S-45**  
630 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10020

Please send me a copy of **YOUR INNER CHILD OF THE PAST**. I must be completely satisfied with the book or I may return it within 30 days and owe nothing. Otherwise I will send \$7.95 plus mailing costs, as payment in full.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State ..... Zip .....

☐ **SAVE POSTAGE.** Check here if you enclose check or money order for \$7.95 as payment in full—then we pay postage. Same 30-day privilege guarantee holds. N.Y. residents please add applicable sales tax.



First there was  
BRAVE NEW WORLD

Then  
"2001"

And now, the mind-blowing novel that  
reaches into the near future...

# GRAY MATTERS

"A terrifyingly logical extension of Skinnerian  
technology...."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"DRAMATIC, ASTONISHING... as arresting as those  
final scenes of Stanley Kubrick's film, '2001.'"

—*The New York Times*

WINNER OF THE PLAYBOY FICTION AWARD

