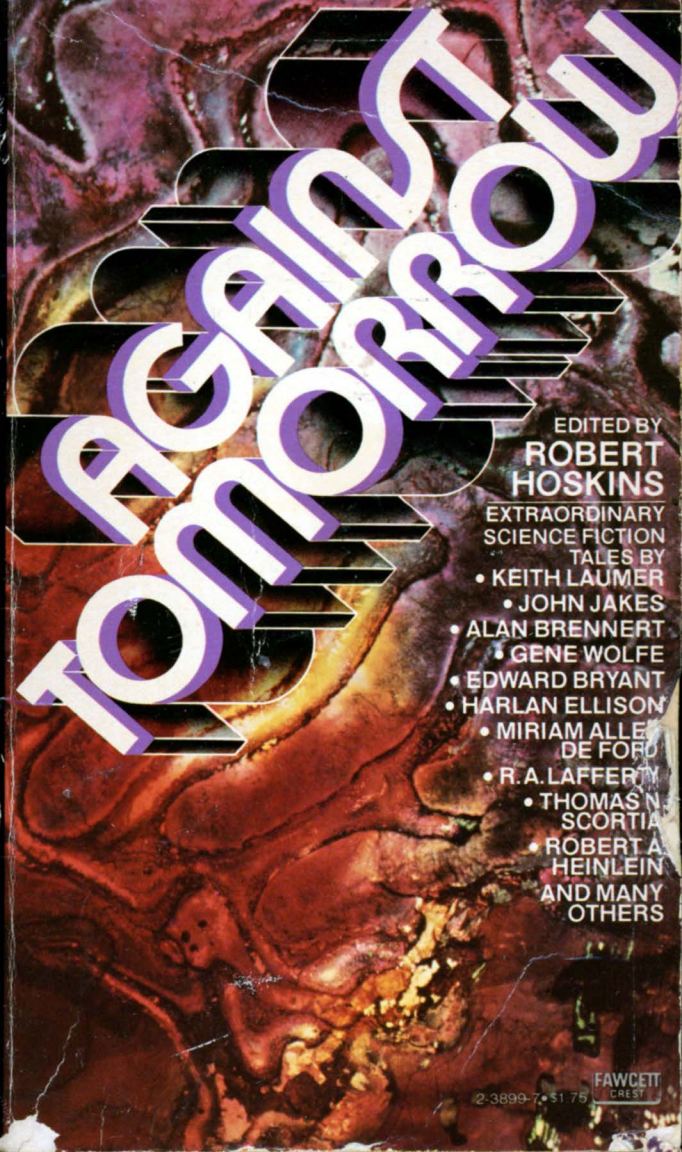
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AGAINST TOMORROW

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Contents

Introduction

One of the things that sets Man apart from the lesser creatures is the ability to recognize time. The animal mind lives in the brief moment of Now: Yesterday is gone forever, leaving impressions that only shape reactions. Only Man can call a moment, a face, an incident, from the past, to relive again; indeed, to relive more fully in the knowledge that the moment is gone.

Again, the animal mind has no concept of Tomorrow, for even those creatures that store up food or make long annual migrations are operating on a level far below that of conscious thought. It is only Man that can understand that Tomorrow must and will follow upon Today. And it is only Man on this planet that can consciously plan toward the future, consciously build toward the Tomorrow that is most desirable. All of us do that, living Now as a tool to shape the future that we want to see happen. And if the individual had true control over his own future, then we would long ago have reached a state of earthly paradise.

Unfortunately, the individual thinks most strongly of himself and of those nearest to him. And that puts him in conflict with not only the other billions of the human race but with the forces of Nature. We cannot dictate the laws of the Universe, but must work with the world and with ourselves as we are. The perfect Tomorrow will always remain a dream, a hope, a goal to strive toward even though it can never be reached.

Science fiction is directly concerned with Tomorrow, with all possible Tomorrows, both good and evil. This is the third volume in a series that has tried to present a broad general study of science fiction from the mid-nineteenth century through today. *Wondermakers* covered the first century, when SF was first taking shape as a definite subgenre of liter-

ature, through the beginnings of the modern era. *Wondermakers Two* covered the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, when SF was making vast strides away from the mechanistic sugar-coated lecture to the humanistic study of Man as the most important element in the shaping of the Future. The present volume concentrates on the past ten years, to show the new directions that have evolved.

It is impossible in only three volumes, and would be impossible in a dozen, to present a total picture of what science fiction can be. But as editor I have tried to present a balanced view. If you are new to the field, there are many more riches to be discovered on every side. For those with open minds and questing thoughts, the many keys of science fiction open myriad doors into all possible Tomorrows, all possible dreams.

—*Robert Hoskins*

AGAINST TOMORROW

Harlan Ellison is an editor, anthologist, lecturer, world traveler, and perennially one of Hollywood's most eligible bachelors. Oh, yes—he also writes. For the past twenty years he has been one of the most noticeable people to come out of the specialized field of science fiction, and for almost all of that time, one of the most notable as well. Although much of his time in recent years has been spent on screenplays and teleplays, he has been prolific enough to produce thirty-two novels and collections of the most incisive short stories being published today.

Wanted in Surgery

By HARLAN ELLISON

CHAPTER ONE

A man named Tibor Károly Zsebok—who had escaped from the People's Hungarian Protectorate to the North American Continent's sanctuary late in the year 2087—invented it. While working as a bonded technician for the Orrin Tool and Tree Conglomerate—on a design to create a robot capable of fine watch repairs—he discovered the factor of multiple choice. He was able to apply this concept to the cellulose-

plasteel brain of his watch repair robot's pilot model, and came up with the startling "physician mechanical." Infinitely more intricate than a mere robot-mechanical, yet far simpler than a human brain, it was capable—after proper conditioning—of the most delicate of operations. Further, the "phymech," as it was tagged soon after, was capable of infallible diagnosis, involving anything organic.

The mind was still locked to the powers of the metal physician, but for the ills of the body there was no more capable administrator.

Zsebok died several weeks after his pilot model had been demonstrated at a special closed session of the House of Congress, from a coronary thrombosis. But his death was more of a propelling factor to widespread recognition of the phymech than his life could ever have been.

The House of Congress appointed a committee of fact finders from the firm of Data, Unlimited—who had successfully completed the Orinoco Basin Probe—and compared their three month findings with the current histophysiology appropriations allocated to the Secretary of Medicine.

They found phymechs could be operated in all the socialized hospitals of the Continent for far less than was being spent on doctors' salaries.

After all, a doctor continued to need.

A phymech absorbed one half pint of liquified radiol every three years, and an occasional lubrication, to insure proper functioning.

So the government passed a law. The Hippocratic Law of 2088 which said, in essence:

> All ministrations shall henceforth be confined to government-sponsored hospitals; emergency cases necessitating attendance outside said institutions shall be handled *only*, repeat *only*, by registered Physician Mechanicals issuing from registered hospital pools. Any irregularities or deviations from this procedure shall be handled as cases outside the law, and illegal attendance by non-Mechanical Physicians shall be severely punishable by cancellation of practicing license and/or fine and imprisonment . . .

Johns Hopkins was the first to be de-franchised. Then the Columbia School of Medicine, and the other colleges followed shortly thereafter.

A few specialist schools were maintained for a time; but it became increasingly apparent after the first three years of phymech operation that even the specialists were slow compared to the robot doctors. So even they passed away. Doctors who had been licensed before the innovations the phymechs brought were maintained at slashed salaries, and were reduced to assistants, interns.

They were, however, given a few annuities, which boiled down eventually to (1) a franking privilege so postage was unnecessary on their letters, (2) a small annual dole, (3) subscriptions to current medical journals (now filled more with electronic data pertinent to phymechs than surgical techniques), and (4) honorary titles. Doctors in title only.

There was dissatisfaction.

In 2091 Kohlbenschlagg, the greatest brain surgeon of them all, died. He passed away on a quiet October morning, with the climate dome purring ever so faintly above the city, and the distant scream of the transport sphincter opening to allow the Earth-Mars 8:00 liner through. A quiet, drawn-faced man with a great talent in slim fingers. He died in his sleep, and the papers clacked out of the homealots, with heavy black headlines across yellow plastic sheets. But not about Kohlbenschlagg. *He* was yesterday's news. The headline was about the total automation changeover in the Ford-Chrysler plants.

On page one hundred and eighteen there was a five line obituary that labeled him "a pre-phymech surgeon of some skill." It also reported he had died of acute alcoholism.

It was not specifically true.

His death was caused by a composite. Acute alcoholism.

And a broken heart.

He died alone, but he was remembered. By the men and women who, like Kohlbenschlagg, had spent their early lives in dedication to the staff and the lion's head, the hand and eagle's eye. By the men and women who could not adjust. The small legion of men and women who still walked the antiseptic corridors of the hospitals.

Men like Stuart Bergman, M.D.

This is his story.

CHAPTER TWO

The main operating theater of Memorial was constructed along standard lines. The observation bubble was set high on

one wall, curving large and down, with a separating section allowing two viewing stands. The operating stage, on a telescoping base that raised or lowered it for easier observation from the bubble, squatted in the center of the room. There were no operating lamps in the ceiling, as in old-style hospitals, for the phymechs had their own powerful eternalights mounted atop their heads, serving their needs more accurately than any outside light source could have.

Beyond the stage, there were anesthetic spheres clipped to the walls—in five-container groups—where they could be easily reached should the phymech's personal supply run dry, and a rapidroll belt running from a digital supply machine beside the operating table to the see-through selector cabinets standing by the exits.

That was all; everything that was needed.

Even the spheres and extra cabinets might have been dispensed with; but somehow, they had been maintained, just slightly limiting the phymech's abilities. As though to reassure some unnamed person that they needed help. Even if it was mechanical help to help the mechanicals.

The three phymechs were performing the operation directly beneath the bubble when Bergman came in. The bubble was dark, but he could see Murray Thomas's craggy features set against the light of the operating stage. The illumination had been a concession to the human observers, for with their own eternalights, the phymechs could work in a total blackout, during a power failure.

Bergman held the crumpled news sheet in his hand, page one hundred and eighteen showing, and stared at the scene below him.

Naturally, it *would* be a brain operation today! The one day it should be a mere goiter job, or a plantar stripping, if just to keep him steady; but no, it *had* to be a brain job, with the phymechs' thirty telescoping, snakelike appendages extruded and snicking into the patient.

Bergman swallowed hard, and made his way down the slope of aisle to the empty seat beside Thomas.

He was a dark man, with an almost unnaturally spadelike face. High, prominent cheekbones, giving him a gaunt look, and veins that stood out along the temples. His nose was thin, and humped where it had been broken years before.

His eyes were deep and darkest blue, so they appeared black. His hair was thin, roughly combed, back from the fore-

head without affectation or wave, just combed, because he had to keep the hair from his eyes.

He slumped into the seat, keeping his eyes off the operation below, keeping the face of Murray Thomas in his sight, with the light from below playing up across the round, unflustered features. He held out the news sheet, touching Thomas's arm with it; for the first time, as the younger doctor started, Thomas realized Bergman was there. He turned slowly, and his placid stare met the wild look of Bergman; a question began to form, but Thomas cast a glance behind him, toward the top of the seat tier, at the silent dark bulk of the Head Resident. He put a hand on Bergman's arm, and then he saw the news sheet.

Bergman offered it another inch, and Thomas took it. He opened it out, turning it below the level of the seats, trying to catch the light from below. He roamed the page for a moment, then his hands crumpled tight on the plastic. He saw the five line filler.

Kohlbenschlagg was dead.

He turned to Bergman, and his eyes held infinite sorrow. He mouthed with his lips the words, "I'm sorry, Stuart," but they died midway between them.

He stared at Bergman's face for a moment, knowing he could do nothing for the man now. Kohlbenschlagg had been Stuart Bergman's teacher, his friend, more a father to him than the father Bergman had run away from in his youth. Now Bergman was totally alone . . . for his wife Thelma was no help in this situation . . . her constitution could not cope with a case of inner disintegration.

With difficulty he turned back to the operation, feeling an overwhelming desire to take Bergman's hand, to help ease away the sorrow he knew coursed through the man; but the sorrow was a personal thing, and he was cut off from the tense man beside him.

Bergman watched the operation now. There was nothing else to do. He had spent ten years of his life training to be a physician, and now he was sitting watching faceless blocks of metal do those ten years better than he ever could.

Murray Thomas was abruptly aware of heavy breathing beside him. He did not turn his head. He had seen Bergman getting nearer and nearer the cracking point for weeks now: ever since the phymechs had been completely installed, and

the human doctors had been relegated to assistants, interns, instrument-carriers. He feverishly hoped this was not the moment Bergman would choose to fall apart.

The phymechs below were proceeding with the delicate operation. One of the telescoping, snakelike tentacles of one phymech had a wafer-thin circular saw on it, and as Thomas watched, the saw sliced down, and they could hear the buzz of steel meeting skull.

"God in *heaven!* Stop it, stop it, stop it . . . !"

Thomas was an instant too late. Bergman was up out of his seat, down the aisle, and banging his fists against the clear plasteel of the observation bubble, before he could be stopped.

It produced a feeling of utter hysteria in the bubble, as though all of them had wanted to scream, had been holding it back, and now were struggling with the sounds, not to join in. Bergman battered himself up against the clearness of the bubble, mumbling, screaming, his face a riot of pain and horror.

"Not even a . . . a . . . decent *death!*" he was screaming. "He lies down there, and rotten dirty metal *things* . . . things, God dammit! *Things* rip up his patients! Oh, God, where is the way, where, where, where . . . "

Then the three interns erupted from the door at the top rear of the bubble, and ran down the aisle. In an instant they had Bergman by the shoulders, the arms, the neck, and were dragging him back up the aisle.

Calkins, the Head Resident, yelled after them, "Take him to my office for observation, I'll be right there."

Murray Thomas watched his friend disappear in the darkness toward the rectangle of light in the rear wall. Then he was gone, and Thomas heard Calkins say: "Ignore that outburst, doctors, there is always someone who gets squeamish at the sight of a well-performed operation."

Then he was gone, off to examine Bergman.

And Murray Thomas felt a brassy, bitter taste on his tongue; Bergman afraid of blood, the sight of an operation? Not likely. He had seen Stuart Bergman work many times—not Stuart Bergman: the operating room was home to Bergman. No, it hadn't been that.

Then it was that Thomas realized: the incident had completely shattered the mood and attention of the men in the bubble. *They* were incapable of watching the phymechs any further today—but the phymechs . . .

. . . they were undisturbed, unseeing, uncaring; calmly, coolly working, taking off the top of the patient's skull.

Thomas felt desperately ill.

CHAPTER THREE

"Honest to God, I tell you, Murray, I can't take it much longer!"

Bergman was still shaking from the examination in Calkins's offices. His hands were prominent with blue veins, and they trembled ever so slightly across the formatop of the table. The dim sounds of the Medical Center bar filtered to them in the hush-booth. Bergman ran a hand through his hair. "Every time I see one of those . . ." he paused, hesitated, then did not use the word. Murray Thomas knew the word, had it come forth, would have been *monster*. Bergman went on, a blank space in his sentence, "Every time I see one of them picking around inside one of my patients, with those metal tips, I—I get sick to my stomach! It's all I can do to keep from ripping out its goddamned wiring!" His face was deathly pale, yet somehow unnaturally flushed.

He quivered as he spoke. And quivered again.

Dr. Murray Thomas put out a hand placatingly. "Now take it easy, Stu. You keep getting yourself all hot over this thing and if it doesn't break you—which it damned well easily could—they'll revoke your license, bar you from practicing." He looked across at Bergman, and blinked assuringly, as if to keynote his warning.

Bergman muttered with surliness, "Fine lot of practicing I do now. Or you, for that matter."

Thomas tapped a finger on the table. It caused the multicolored bits of plastic beneath the formatop to jiggle, casting pinpoints of light across Bergman's strained features. "And besides, Stu, you have no *logical*, scientific reason for hating the phymechs."

Bergman stared back angrily. "Science doesn't come into it, and you know it. This is from the gut, Murray, not the brain!"

"Look, Stu, they're infallible; they're safer and they can do a job quicker with less mess than even a—a Kohlbenschlagg. Right?"

Bergman nodded reluctantly, but there was a dangerous edge to his expression. "But at least Kohlbenschlagg, even with those thick-lensed glasses, was *human*. It wasn't like

having a piece of—of—well, a piece of *stovepipe* rummaging around in a patient's stomach."

He shook his head sadly in remembrance. "Old Fritz couldn't take it. That's what killed him. Those damned machines. Playing intern to a phymech was too much for him. Oh hell! *You* know what a grand heart that old man had, Murray. Fifty years in medicine and then to be barely *allowed* to hold sponge for a lousy tick-tock . . . and what was worse, knowing the tick-tock could hold the sponge more firmly with one of its pincers. That's what killed Old Fritz."

Bergman added softly, staring at his shaking hands, "And at that . . . *he's* the lucky one."

And then: "We're the damned of our culture, Murray; the kept men of medicine."

Thomas looked up startled, then annoyed. "Oh, for Christ's sake, Stuart, stop being melodramatic. Nothing of the sort. If a better scalpel comes along, do you refuse to discard the old issue because you've used it so long? Don't be an ass."

"But we're not scalpels. We're men! We're doctors!" He was on his feet suddenly, as though the conversation had been physically building in him, forcing an explosion. The two whiskey glasses slipped and dumped as his thighs banged the table in rising. Bergman's voice was raised, and his temples throbbed, yet he was not screaming; even so, the words came out louder than any scream.

"For God's sake, Stu, *sit down!*" Thomas looked apprehensively around the Medical Center lounge. "If the Head Resident should walk in, we'd *both* get our throats cut. Sit *down*, will you already!"

Bergman slumped slowly back onto the form seat. It depressed and flowed around him caressingly, and he squirmed in agony, as though it were strangling him. Even after he was fully seated, his shoulders continued rounding; his eyes were wild. Beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead, his upper lip.

Thomas leaned forward, a frown creasing his mouth. "Take hold, Stu. Don't let a thing like this ruin you. Better men than us have felt this way about it, but you can't stop progress. And losing your head, doing something crazy like that exhibition at the operation yesterday, won't do any of us any good. It's all we can do to maintain what rights we have left. It's a bad break for us, Stu, but it's good for the whole

rest of the human race, and dammit man, they come before us. It's as simple as that."

He drew a handkerchief from his breast-pouch and mopped at the spreading twin pools of liquor, covertly watching Bergman from behind lowered lashes.

The sudden blare of a juke brought Bergman's head up, his nostrils flaring. When he realized what it was, he subsided, the lights vanishing from his eyes.

He rested his head in his hand, rubbing slowly up and down the length of his nose. "How did it all start, Murray? I mean, all this?" He looked at the roaring juke that nearly drowned out conversation despite the hush-booth . . . the bar with its mechanical drink-interpolater—remarkable mnemonic circuits capable of mixing ten thousand different liquors flawlessly—and intoxication-estimater . . . the fully mechanized hospital rearing huge outside the plasteel-fronted bar . . . robot physicians glimpsed occasionally passing before a lighted window.

Windows showing light only because the human patients and fallible doctors needed it. The robots needed no light; they needed no fame, and no desire to help mankind. All they needed were their power-pack and an occasional oiling. In return for which they saved mankind.

Bergman's mind tossed the bitter irony about like a dog with a foul rag in its mouth.

Murray Thomas sighed softly, considered Bergman's question. He shook his head. "I don't know, Stu." The words paced themselves, emerging slowly, reluctantly. "Perhaps it was the automatic pilot, or the tactical computers they used in the Third War, or maybe even farther back than that; maybe it was as far back as electric sewing machines, and hydramatic shift cars and self-serve elevators. It was machines, and they worked better than humans. That was it, pure and simple. A hunk of metal is nine times out of ten better than a fallible man."

Thomas considered what he had said, added definitely, "I'll take that back: *ten* times out of ten. There's nothing a cybernetics man can't build into one of those things now. It was inevitable they'd get around to taking human lives out of the hands of mere men." He looked embarrassed for an instant at the length and tone of his reply, then sighed again and downed the last traces of his drink, running his tongue absently around the lip of the glass, tasting the dried liquid there.

Bergman's intensity seemed to pulse, grow stronger. He was obviously trying to find an answer to the problem of himself, within himself. He hunched further over, looking into his friend's face earnestly, almost boyishly, "But—but it doesn't seem *right*, somehow. We've always depended on doctors—human doctors—to care for the sick and dying. It was a constant, Murray. A something you could depend on. In time of war a doctor was inviolate.

"In times of need—I know it sounds maudlin, Murray—for God's sake, in times of need a doctor was priest and father and teacher and patriot, and . . . and . . . "

He made futile motions with his hands, as though pleading the words to appear from the air. Then he continued in a stronger voice, from a memory ground into his mind:

" 'I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art. In whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets.' "

Thomas's eyebrows rose slightly as his lips quirked in an unconscious smile. He had known Bergman would resort to the Oath eventually. Dedicated wasn't enough of a word to describe Stuart Bergman, it seemed. He was right, it *was* maudlin, and still . . .

Bergman continued. "What good is it all now? They've only had the phymechs a few years now, only a few, and they have them in solidly . . . even though there are things about them they aren't sure about. So what good were all the years in school, in study, in tradition? We can't even go into the homes any more."

His face seemed to grow more haggard under the indirect gleam of the glaze lights in the lounge; his hair seemed grayer than a moment before; the lines of his face were deeper. He swallowed nervously, ran a finger through the faint coating of wet left by the spilled drinks. "What kind of a practice is that? To carry slop-buckets? To be allowed to watch as the robots cut and sew our patients? To be kept behind glass at the big operations?

"To see the red lights flash on the hot board and know a mobilized monster is rolling faster than an ambulance to the scene? Is that what you're telling me I have to adjust to? Are you, Murray? Don't expect me to be as calm about it as you!

"And most degrading of all," he added, as if to solidify his arguments, "to have them throw us a miserable appendectomy or stomach-pump job once a week. Like scraps from the table . . . and watch us while we do it! What *are* we, dogs? To be treated like pets? I tell you I'm going crazy, Murray! I go home at night and find myself even cutting my steak as though it were heart tissue. Anything, anything at all, just to remind myself that I was trained for surgery. My God! When I think of all the years, all the sweat, all the gutting and starving, just to come to this! Murray, where's it going to end?"

He was on the verge of another scene like the one in the operating room observation bubble.

Whatever had happened when the Head Resident had examined Bergman—and it *seemed* to have been cleared up, for Bergman was still scheduled on the boards as phymech assistant, though his weekly operation had been set ahead three days—it wouldn't do to let it flare up again.

And Murray Thomas knew things were boiling inside his ex-schoolmate; he had no idea how long it would be before the lid blew off, ruining Bergman permanently.

"Calm down, Stuart," he said. "Let me dial you another drink . . . "

"Don't touch that goddamn mechanical thing!" he roared, striking Thomas's hand from the interpolater dial.

He gasped raggedly. "There are *some* things a machine *can't* do. Machines brush my teeth in the morning, and they cook my food, and they lull me to sleep, but there must be *something* they can't do better than a human . . . otherwise why did God create humans? To be waited on by tin cans? I don't know what they are, but I swear there must be some abilities a human possesses that a robot doesn't. There must be something that makes a man more valuable than a whirring, clanking chunk of tin!" He stopped, out of breath. It was then that Calkins, the Head Resident, stepped around the panel separating the booths from the bar.

The Head Resident stood there silently, watching for a moment, like a hound on point. He fingered the lapel of his sport-jumper top absently. "Getting a bit noisy, aren't you, Dr. Bergman?"

Stuart Bergman's face was alive with fear. His eyes lowered to his hands; entwined like serpents, seeking sanctuary in each other, white with the pressure of his clasping, his fin-

gers writhed. "I—I was just, just, airing a few views . . . that's all, Dr. Calkins."

"Rather nasty views, I must say, Dr. Bergman. Might be construed as dissatisfaction with the way I'm handling things at Memorial. You wouldn't want anyone to think that, would you, Dr. Bergman?" His words had taken on the tone of command, of steel imbedded in rock.

Bergman shook his head quickly, slightly, nervously. "No. No, I didn't mean that at all, Dr. Calkins. I was just—well, you know. I thought perhaps if we physicians had a few more operations, a few more difficult . . . "

"Don't you think the phymechs are quite capable of handling any such, Dr. Bergman?"

There was an air of expectancy in his voice . . . waiting for Bergman to say the wrong thing. *That's what you'd like, wouldn't you, Calkins? That's what you want!* His thoughts spun sidewise, madly.

"I suppose so . . . yes, I know they are. It was, well, it's difficult to remember I'm a doctor, not doing any work for so long and all and . . . "

"That's about enough, Bergman!" said Calkins snappishly. "The government subsidized the phymechs, and they use taxpayers' money to keep them serviced and saving lives. They have a finer record than *any* human . . . "

Bergman broke in sharply, "But they haven't been fully tested or . . . "

Calkins stared him into silence, replied: "If you want to remain on the payroll, remain in the hospital, Dr. Bergman, even as an assistant, you'd better tone down and watch yourself, Bergman. We have our eyes on you."

"But I . . . "

"I said that's enough, Bergman!" Turning to Murray Thomas he added violently, "And I'd watch who I keep company with, Thomas, if I were you. That's all. Good evening." He strode off lightly, almost jauntily, arrogance in each step, leaving Bergman huddled in a corner of the booth, staring wild-eyed at his hands.

"Rotten lousy appointee!" snarled Thomas softly. "If it weren't for his connections with the Secretary of Medicine he'd be in the same boat with us. The lousy bastard."

"I—I guess I'd better be getting home," mumbled Bergman, sliding out of the booth. A sudden blast from the juke shivered him, and he regained his focus on Thomas with difficulty. "Thelma's probably waiting dinner for me.

"Thanks . . . thanks for having a drink with me, Murray. I'll see you at washup tomorrow." He ran a finger down the front of his jumper, sealing the suit; he pulled up his collar, sealing the suit to the neck.

A fine spray of rain—scheduled for this time by Weatherex—was dotting the huge transparent front of the lounge, and Bergman stared at it, engrossed for an instant, as though seeing something deeper in the rain.

He drew a handful of octagonal plastic chits from his pouch, dropped them into the pay slot on his side of the table, and started away. The machine registered an overpayment, but he did not bother to collect the surplus coins.

He paused, turned for a moment. Then, "Thanks . . . Murray . . . " and he was gone into the rain.

Poor slob, thought Dr. Murray Thomas, an ache beginning to build within him for the things he could not name. *Just can't adjust.* He knew he couldn't hold it, but he dialed another drink. He regretted it while doing it, but that ache had to be avoided at all costs. The drink was a double.

CHAPTER FOUR

That night was hell. Hell with the torture of memories past and present. He knew he had been acting like a fool, that he was just another stupid man who could not accept what was to be.

But there was more, and it pervaded his thoughts, his dreams. He had been a coward in front of Calkins. He felt strongly—God! More than merely strongly!—yet he had backed down. After making an ass of himself at the operation, the day of Old Fritz Kohlbenschlagg's death, he had backed down. He had run away from his problem.

Now, all the years he had lived by the Oath were wasted. His life seemed to be a failure. He had struggled desperately to get where he was, and now that he was there . . . he was nowhere. He had run away.

It was the first time since he had been very young that he had felt that way. He lay on his bed, the formkling sheet rumpled half on the floor at the foot of the bed. Thelma lay silent in the other hush-bunk, the blanker keeping her snores from disturbing him. And the memories slid by slowly.

He could still remember the time a friend had fallen into a cistern near a deserted house—before the dome—and fear had prevented his descending to save his playmate. The boy

had drowned, and ten-year-old Stuart Bergman had fostered a guilt of that failure he had carried ever since. It had, he sometimes thought, been one of the factors that had contributed to his decision to become a doctor.

Now again, years later, he was helpless and trembling in the spider's mesh of a situation in which he could not move to do what he knew was right. He did not know *why* he was so set against them—Murray's analogy of the scalpel was perfectly valid—but something sensed but unnamed in his guts told him he was right. This was unnatural, damnable, that humans were worked over by machines.

It somehow—irrationally—seemed a plan of the devil. He had heard people call the machines the devil's playthings. Perhaps they were right. He lay on his bed, sweating.

Feeling incomplete, feeling filthy, feeling contaminated by his own inadequacy and his cowardice before Calkins.

He screwed his face up in agony, in self-castigation, shutting his eyes tight, tight, till the nerves running through his temples throbbed.

Then he placed the blame where it really belonged.

Why was he suffering? Why was his once-full life so suddenly empty and framed by worthlessness? Fear. Fear of what? Why was he afraid? Because the phymechs had taken over.

Again. The same answer. And in his mind, his purpose resolved, solidified.

He had to get the phymechs discredited; had to find some reason for them to be thrown out. But how? How?

They *were* better. In all ways. Weren't they?

Three days later, as he assisted a phymech on his scheduled operating assignment, the answer came to Bergman as horribly as he might have wished. It came in the form of a practical demonstration, and he was never to forget it.

The patient had been involved in a thresher accident on one of the group-farms. The sucker-mouth thresher had whipped him off his feet and dragged him in, feet first. He had saved himself from being completely chewed to bits by placing his hands around the mouth of the thresher, and others had rushed in to drag him free before his grip loosened.

He had fainted from pain, and luckily, for the sucker-mouth had ground off both his legs just below the knees. When they wheeled him before Bergman—with his oxygen-mask and tube in hand—and the phymech—with instruments

already clasped in nine of its thirteen magnetic tips—the man was covered with a sheet.

Bergman's transparent face-mask quivered as he drew back the sheet, exposing the man. They had bound up the stumps, and cauter-halted the bleeding . . . but the patient was as badly off as Bergman had ever seen an injured man.

It will be close all the way. Thank God, in this case, the phymech is fast and efficient. No human could save this one in time.

So intent was he on watching the phymech's technique, so engrossed was he at the snicker and gleam of the instruments being whipped from their cubicles in the phymech's storage-bin chest, he failed to adjust the anesthesia-cone properly. Bergman watched the intricate play of the phymech's tentacles, as they telescoped out and back from the small holes in each shoulder-globe. He watched the tortured flesh being stripped back to allow free play for the sutures. The faint hiss of the imperfectly fitted cone reached him too late.

The patient sat up, suddenly.

Straight up, with hands rigid to the table. His eyes opened, and he stared down at the ripped and bloodied stumps where his legs had been.

His scream echoed back from the high operating room walls.

"Oh, I wanna die, I wanna die, I wanna die . . . " Over and over his hysterical screams beat at Bergman's consciousness. The phymech automatically moved to leach off the rising panic in the patient, but it was too late. The patient fainted, and almost instantly the cardio showed a dip. The spark was going out.

The phymech ignored it; there was nothing it could do about it. Organically the man was being handled efficiently. The trouble was emotional . . . where the phymech never went.

Bergman stared in horror. The man was dying . . . right out from under the tentacles. *Why doesn't the thing try to help the man? Why doesn't he soothe him, let him know it'll be all right? He's dying, because he's in shock . . . he doesn't want to live! Just a word would do . . .*

Bergman's thoughts whipped themselves into a frenzy, but the phymech continued operating, calmly, hurriedly, but with the patient failing rapidly.

Bergman started forward, intent to reach the patient. The injured man had looked up and seen himself amputated

bloodily just beneath the knees, and worse, had seen the faceless metal entity working over him; at that crucial moment when any little thing could sway the desire to live, the man had seen no human with whom he could identify . . . merely a rounded and planed block of metal. He wanted to die.

Bergman reached out to touch the patient. Without ceasing its activities, the phymech extruded a chamois-mitt tentacle, and removed Bergman's hand. The hollow inflectionless voice of the robot darted from its throat-speaker:

"No interference please. This is against the rules."

Bergman drew back, horror stamped across his fine features, his skin literally crawling, from the touch of the robot, and from the sight of the phymech operating steadily . . . on a corpse.

The man had lost the spark.

The operation was a success, as they had often quipped, but the patient was dead. Bergman felt nausea grip him with sodden fingers, and he doubled over, turning quickly toward the wall. He stared up at the empty observation bubble, thankful this was a standard, routine operation and no viewers sat behind the clearness up there. He leaned against the feeder-trough of the instrument cabinets, and vomited across the sparkling gray plasteel tiles. A servomeck skittered free of its cubicle and cleaned away the mess immediately.

It only heightened his sickness.

Machines cleaning up for machines.

He didn't bother finishing as assistant on the phymech's grisly operation. It would do no good; and besides, the phymech didn't need any help.

It wasn't human.

Bergman didn't show up at Memorial for a week; there was a polite inquiry from Scheduling, but when Thelma told them he was "just under the weather" they replied "well, the robot doesn't really need him anyhow" and that was that. Stuart Bergman's wife was worried, however.

Her husband lay curled on the bed, face to the wall, and murmured the merest murmurs to her questions. It was really as though he had something on his mind.

(Well, if he *did*, why didn't he *say* something! There just is no understanding that man. Oh well, no time to worry over that now . . . Francine and Sally are getting up the electro-mah-jongg game at Sally's today. Dear, can you punch up

some lunch for yourself? Well, really! Not even an answer, just that mumble. Oh well, I'd better hurry . . .)

Bergman *did* have something on his mind. He had seen a terrifying and a gut-wrenching thing. He had seen the robot fail. Miserably fail. That was the sum of it. For the first time since he had been unconsciously introduced to the concept of phymech infallibility, he had seen it as a lie. The phymech was *not* perfect. The man had died under Bergman's eyes. Now Stuart Bergman had to reason why . . . and whether it had happened before . . . whether it would happen again . . . what it meant . . . and what it meant to him, as well as the profession, as well as the world.

The phymech had *known* the man was in panic: the robot had instantly lowered the adrenaline count . . . but it had been more than that. Bergman had handled cases like that in the past, where improperly delivered anesthesia had allowed a patient to become conscious and see himself split open. But in such cases he had said a few reassuring words, had run a hand over the man's forehead, his eyes, and strangely enough, that bit of bedside manner had been delivered in just such a proper way that the patient sank back peacefully into sleep.

But the robot had done nothing.

It had ministered to the body, while the mind shattered. Bergman had known, even as the man had seen his bloody stumps, that the operation would fail.

Why had it happened? Was this the first time a man had died under the tentacles of a phymech—and if the answer was no . . . why hadn't he heard of it? When he stopped to consider, lost still in that horror maelstrom of memory and pain, he realized it was because the phymechs were still "Undergoing Observation." But while that went on—so sure were the manufacturers, and the officials of the Department of Medicine, that the phymechs were perfect—lives were being lost in the one way they could not be charged to the robots.

An intangible factor was involved.

It had been such a simple thing. Just to tell the man, "You'll be all right, fellow, take it easy. We'll have you out of here good as new in a little while . . . just settle back and get some sleep . . . and let me get my job done; we've got to work together, you know . . . "

That was all, just that much, and the life that had been in that mangled body would not have been lost. But the robot had stood there ticking, efficiently repairing tissue.

While the patient died in hopelessness and terror.

Then Bergman realized what it was a human had, a robot did not. He realized what it was a human could do that a robot could not. And it was so simple, so damnably simple, he wanted to cry. It was the human factor. They could *never* make a robot physician that was perfect, because a robot could not understand the psychology of the human mind.

Bergman put it into simple terms—

The phymechs just didn't have a bedside manner!

CHAPTER FIVE

Paths to destruction.

So many paths. So many answers. So many solutions, and which of them was the right one? Were any of them the right ones? Bergman had known he must find out, had known he must solve this problem by his own hand, for perhaps no one else's hand would turn to the problem . . . until it was too late.

Each day that passed meant another life had passed.

And the thought cursed Bergman more than any personal danger. He had to try something; in his desperation, he came up with a plan of desperation.

He would kill one of his patients . . .

Once every two weeks, a human was assigned his own operation. True, he was more supervised than assisted by the phymech on duty, and the case was usually only an appendectomy or simple tonsilectomy . . . but it *was* an operation. And Lord knew the surgeons were grateful for any bone thrown them.

This was Bergman's day.

He had been dreading it for a week, thinking about it for a week, knowing what he must do for a week. But it had to be done. He didn't know what would happen to him, but it didn't really matter; if the people and the government could be shown what was going on in their hospitals . . .

But if anything was to be done, it would have to be done boldly, swiftly, sensationally. And now. Something as awful as this couldn't wait much longer: the papers had been running articles about the Secretary of Medicine's *new* Phymech Proposal. That would have been the end. It would have to be now. Right now, while the issue was important.

He walked into the operating room.

A standard simple operation. No one in the bubble.

The phymech assistant stood silently waiting by the feeder trough. As Bergman walked across the empty room, the cubicle split open across the way, and a rolling phymech with a tabletop—on which was the patient—hurried to the operating table. The machine lowered the tabletop to the operating slab, and bolted it down quickly. Then it rolled away.

Bergman stared at the patient, and for a minute his resolve left him. She was a thin young girl with laugh-lines in her face that could never be erased . . . except by death.

Up till a moment ago Bergman had known he would do it, but now . . . Now he had to see who he was going to do this thing to, and it made his stomach feel diseased in him, his breath filled with the decay of foul death. He couldn't do it.

The girl looked up at him, and smiled with light blue eyes, and somehow Bergman's thoughts centered on his wife Thelma, who was nothing like this sweet, frail child. Thelma, whose insensitivity had begun in his life as humorous, and decayed through the barren years of their marriage till it was now a millstone he wore silently. Bergman knew he couldn't do what had to be done. Not to this girl.

The phymech applied the anesthesia cone from behind the girl's head. She caught one quick flash of tentacled metal, her eyes widened with blueness, and then she was asleep. When she awoke, her appendix would be removed.

Bergman felt a wrenching inside him. This was the time. With Calkins so suspicious of him, with the phymechs getting stronger every day, this might be the last chance.

He prayed to God silently for a moment, then began the operation. Bergman carefully made a longitudinal incision in the right lower quadrant of the girl's abdomen, about four inches long. As he spread the wound, he saw this would be just an ordinary job. No peritonitis . . . they had gotten the girl in quickly, and it hadn't ruptured. This would be a simple job, eight or nine minutes at the longest.

Carefully, Bergman delivered the appendix into the wound. Then he securely tied it at the base, and feeling the tension of what was to come building in him, cut it across and removed it.

He began to close the abdominal walls tightly.

Then he asked God for forgiveness, and did what had to be done. It was not going to be such a simple operation, after all.

The scalpel was an electro-blade—thin as a whisper—and

as he brought it toward the flesh, his plan ran through his mind. The spin of a bullet, the passage of a silver fish through quicksilver, the flick of a thought, but it was all there, in totality, completeness and madness . . .

He would sever an artery, the robot would sense what was being done, and would shoulder in to repair the damage. Bergman would slash another vein, and the robot would work at two jobs. He would slash again, and again, and yet again, till finally the robot would overload, and freeze. Then Bergman would overturn the table, the girl would be dead, there would be an inquiry and a trial, and he would be able to blame the robot for the death . . . and tell his story . . . make them check it . . . make them stop using phymechs till the problem had been solved.

All that as the electro-blade moved in his hand.

Then the eyes of the girl fastened to his own, closed for a moment to consider what he was doing. In the darkness of his mind, he saw those eyes and knew finally:

What good was it to win his point, if he lost his soul?

The electro-blade clattered to the floor.

He stood there unmoving, as the phymech rolled near-silently beside him, and completed the routine closure.

He turned away, and left the operating room quickly.

He left the hospital shortly after, feeling failure huge in his throat. He had had his opportunity, and had not been brave enough to take it. But was that it? Was it another edge of that inner cowardice he had shown before? Or was it that he realized *nothing* could be worth the taking of an innocent girl's life? Ethics, soft-heartedness, what? His mind was a turmoil.

The night closed down stark and murmuring around Bergman. He stepped from the light blotch of the lobby, and the rain misted down over him, shutting him away from life and man and everything but the dark wool of his inner thoughts. It had been raining like this the night Calkins had intimidated him. Was it always to rain on him, throughout his days?

Only the occasional whirr of a beater ploughing invisibly across the sky overhead broke the steady machine murmur of the city. He crossed the silent street quickly.

The square block of darkness that was Memorial was dotted with the faint rectangles of windows. Lighted windows. The hollow laughter of bitterness bubbled up from his belly as he saw the lights. Concessions to Man . . . always concessions by the Almighty God of the Machine.

Inside Bergman's mind, something was fighting to be free. He was finished now, he knew that. He had had the chance, but it had been the wrong chance. It could never be right if it started from something like that girl's death. He knew that, too . . . finally. But what was there to do?

And the answer came back hollowly: *Nothing.*

Behind him, where he could not see it, a movement of metal in the shadows.

Bergman walked in shadows, also. Thoughts that were shadows. Thoughts that led him only to bleak futility and despair. The Zsebok Mechanical Physicians. *Phymechs.*

The word exploded in his head like a Roman candle, spitting sparks into his nerve ends. He never wanted to destroy so desperately in his life. All the years of fighting for medicine, and a place in the world of the healer . . . they were wasted.

He now knew the phymechs weren't better than humans . . . but how could he prove it? Unsubstantiated claims, brought to Calkins, would only be met with more intimidation, and probably a revoking of his license. He was trapped solidly.

How much longer could it go on?

Behind him, mechanical ears tuned, robot eyes fastened on the slumping, walking man. Rain was no deterrent to observation.

The murmur of a beater's rotors caused Bergman to look up. He could see nothing through the swirling rain-mist, but he could hear it, and his hatred reached out. Then: *I don't hate machines, I never did. Only now that they've deprived me of my humanity, now that they've taken away my life. Now I hate them.* His eyes sparked again with submerged loathing as he searched the sky beneath the climate dome, hearing the whirr of the beater's progress meshing with the faint hum of the dome at work; he desperately sought something against which he might direct his feelings of helplessness, of inadequacy.

So intent was he that he did not see the old woman who stepped out stealthily from the service entrance of a building, till she had put a trembling hand on his sleeve.

The shadows swirled about the shape watching Bergman —and now the old woman—from down the street.

"You a doctor, ain'cha?"

He started, his head jerking around spastically. His dark eyes focused on her seamed face only with effort. In confu-

sion he found himself answering. "Y-yes, why? What do you want?"

The old woman licked her lips. In the dim light of the illumepost that filtered through the rain, Bergman could see she was dirty and ill-kempt. Obviously from the tenements in Slobtown, way out near the curve-down edge of the climate dome.

She licked her lips again, fumbling in the pockets of her torn jumpette, nervous to the point of terror, unable to drag forth her words.

"*Well?* What do you want?" Bergman was harsher than he had intended, but his banked-down antagonism prodded him into belligerence.

"I been watchin' for three days and Charlie's gettin' worse and his stomach's swellin' and I noticed you been comin' outta the hospital every day now for three days . . . " The words tumbled out almost incoherently, slurred by a gutter accent. To Bergman's tutored ear—subjected to these sounds since Kohlbenschlagg had taken him in—there was something else in the old woman's voice: the helpless tones of horror in asking someone to minister to an afflicted loved one.

Bergman's deep blue-black eyes narrowed. What was this? Was this filthy woman trying to get him to attend at her home? Was this perhaps a trap set up by Calkins and the hospital board? "What do you *want*, woman?" he demanded, edging away.

"Ya gotta come over ta see Charlie. He's dyin', Doctor, he's dyin'! He just lays there twitchin', and every time I touch him he jumps and starts throwin' his arms round and doublin' over an' everything!" Her eyes were wide with the fright of memory, and her mouth shaped the words hurriedly, as though she knew she must get them out before the mouth used itself to scream.

The doctor's angry thoughts, suspicious thoughts, cut off instantly, and another part of his nature took command. Clinical attention centered on the malady the woman was describing.

" . . . an' he keeps *grinnin'*, Doctor, grinnin' like he was dead and everything was funny or somethin'! That's the worst of all . . . I can't stand ta see him that way, Doctor. Please . . . please . . . ya gotta help me. Help Charlie, Doc, he's dyin'. We been tagether five years an' ya gotta . . . gotta . . . do . . . somethin' . . . " She broke into convulsive weeping, her faded eyes pleading with him,

her knife-edged shoulders heaving jerkily within the jumpette.

My God, thought Bergman, *she's describing tetanus! And a badly advanced case to have produced spasms and* risus sardonicus. *Good Lord, why doesn't she get him to the hospital? He'll be dead in a day if she doesn't!* Aloud, he said, still suspicious, "Why did you wait so long? Why didn't you take him to the hospital?" He jerked his thumb at the lighted block across the street.

All his earlier anger, plus the innate exasperation of a doctor confronted with seemingly callous disregard for the needs of a sick man, came out in the questions. Exploded. The old woman drew back, eyes terrified, seamed face drawn up in an expression of beatenness. The force of him confused her.

"I—I *couldn't* take him there, Doc. I just couldn't! Charlie wouldn't let me, anyhow. He said, last thing before he started twitchin', he said, don't take me over there to that hospital, Katie, with them metal things in there, promise me ya won't. So I hadda promise him, Doc, and ya gotta come ta see him —*he's dyin', Doc, ya gotta help us, he's dyin'!*"

She was close up to him, clutching at the lapels of his jumper with wrinkled hands; impossibly screaming in a hoarse whisper. The raw emotion of her appeal struck Bergman almost physically. He staggered back from her, her breath of garlic and the slums enfolding him. She pressed up again, clawing at him with great sobs and pleas.

Bergman was becoming panicky. If a robocop should see the old woman talking to him, it might register his name, and that would be his end at Memorial. They'd have him tagged for home-practitioning, even if it wasn't true. How could he *possibly* attend this woman's man? It would be the end of his stunted career. The regulations swam before his eyes, and he knew what they meant. He'd be finished. And what if this *was* a trap?

But *tetanus!*

(The terrifying picture of a man in the last stages of lockjaw came to him. The contorted body, wound up on itself as though the limbs were made of rubber; the horrible face, mouth muscles drawn back and down in the characteristic death-grin called *risus sardonicus;* every inch of the nervous system affected. A slamming door, a touch, a cough, was enough to send the stricken man into ghastly gyrations and convulsions. Till finally the affliction attacked the chest mus-

cles, and he strangled horribly. Dead . . . wound up like a snake, frothing . . . dead.)

But to be thrown out of the hospital. He couldn't take the chance. Almost without his realizing it, the words came out: "Get away from me, woman; if the robocops see you, they'll arrest us both. Get away . . . and don't try approaching a doctor like this again! Or I'll see that you're run in myself. Now get away. If you need medical aid, go to the phymechs at the hospital. They're free and better than any human!" The words sounded tinny in his ears.

The old woman fell back, light from the illumepost casting faint, weird shadows across the lined planes of her face. Her lips drew back from her teeth, many of them rotting or missing.

She snorted, "We'd rather die than go to them creations of the devil! We won't have no truck with them things . . . we thought you was still doctors to help the poor . . . but you ain't!" She turned and started to slip away into the darkness.

Faintly, before the rustle of her footsteps was gone, Stuart Bergman heard the sob that escaped her. It was filled with a wild desperation and the horror of seeing death in the mist, waiting for her and the man she loved.

Then, ever more faintly . . .

"Damn you forever!"

Abruptly, the tension of the past months, the inner horror at what he had almost done to the blue-eyed girl earlier, the fright and sorrow within him, mounted to a peak. He felt drained, and knew if he was to be deprived of his heritage, he would lose it the right way. He was a doctor, and a man needed attention.

He took a step after her dim shape in the rain.

"Wait, I . . . "

And knowing he was sealing his own doom, he let her stop, watched the hope that swam up in her eyes, and said, "I —I'm sorry. I'm very tired. But take me to your man. I'll be able to help him."

She didn't say thank you. But he knew it was there if he wanted it. They moved off together, and the watcher followed on silent treads.

CHAPTER SIX

The forever stink of Slobtown assaulted Bergman the moment they passed the invisible boundary. There was no "other

side of the tracks" that separated Slobtown's squalor from the lower-middle-class huts of the city, but somehow there was no mistaking the transition.

They passed from cleanliness into the Inferno, with one step.

Shadows deepened, sounds muffled, and the flickering neon of outdated saloon signs glared at them from the darkness. Bergman followed stolidly, and the woman led with resignation. She had a feeling the trip would be in vain. Charlie had been close to the edge when she had left, and this doctor's coming was an unexpected miracle. But still, Charlie had been so close, so close . . .

They threaded close to buildings, stepping wide around blacker alley mouths and empty lots. From time to time they heard the footpad of muggers and wineheads keeping pace with them, but when the noises became too apparent, the woman hissed into the darkness, "Geddaway from here! I'm Charlie Kickback's woman, an' I got a croaker fer Charlie!" Then the sounds would fall behind.

All but the metal follower, whom no one saw.

The raw sounds of filthy music spurted out of the swing-doors of a saloon, as they passed, and were followed almost immediately by a body. The man was thrown past the building, and landed in a twisted heap in the dirty gutter. He lay twitching, and for an instant Bergman considered tending to him; but two things stopped him.

The woman dragged him by his sleeve, and the gutter resident flopped over onto his back, bubbling, and began mouthing an incomprehensible melody with indecipherable words.

They moved past. A block further along, Bergman saw the battered remains of a robocop, lying up against a tenement. He nodded toward it, and in the dusk Charlie Kickback's woman shrugged. "Every stiff comes in here takes his chances, even them devil's tinkertoys."

They kept moving, and Bergman realized he had much more to fear than merely being deprived of his license. He could be attacked and killed down here. He had a wallet with nearly three hundred credits in it, and they'd mugged men down here for much less than that, he was sure.

But somehow, the futility of the day, the horror of the night, were too insurmountable. He worried more about the fate of his profession than the contents of his wallet.

Finally they came to a brightly lit building, with tri-V photoblox outside, ten feet high. The blox showed monstrously

mammaried women doing a slow tri-V shimmy, their appendages swaying behind the thinnest of veils, which often parted. The crude neon signs about the building read:

THE HOUSE OF SEX SEX SEX SEX!!!
AFTER SHOWS THE GIRLS' TIME IS THEIR OWN
AND NO HOLDS BARRED!
MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE FOR A CREDIT!!!
LADY MEMPHIS AND HER EDUCATED BALOO—
TRIX DIAMOND—MLLE. HOT!
COME NOW, JACK, COME NOW!!

Bergman inclined his head at the poster blox, at the signs, and asked, "Is he here?" Charlie Kickback's woman's face grayed-down and her lips thinned. She nodded, mumbled something, and led Bergman past the ticket window with its bulletproof glass and steel-suited ticket-taker. The woman snapped a finger at the taker, and a heavy plasteel door slid back for them. The moment it opened, tinny music, fraught with the bump and *grrrrind* of the burlesque since time immemorial, swept over them, and Bergman had to strain to hear Charlie Kickback's woman.

He tensed, and caught her voice. "This way . . . through the side door . . . "

They passed the open back of the theater, and Bergman's eyes caught the idle twist of flesh, and the sensuous beat of naked feet on a stage. The sounds of warwhoop laughter and applause sifted up through the blaring music. They passed through the side door.

The woman led him down a hall, and past several dim gray doors with peeling paint. She stopped before a door with a faded star on it, and said, "He-he's in h-here . . . " And she palmed the door open quietly.

She had not needed the silence.

Charlie Kickback would never writhe at a sound again.

He was quite dead.

Twisted in on himself, wound up like some loathsome human pretzel, he lay on the floor beneath the dirty sink, one leg twisted under himself so painfully, it had broken before death. He had strangled to death.

The old woman rushed to the body, and fell to her knees, burying her face in his clothing, crying, namelessly seeking after him. She cried solidly for a few minutes, while Bergman

stood watching, his heart filled with pity and sorrow and unhappiness and frustration.

This never would have happened, if . . .

The woman looked up, and her face darkened. "You! You're the ones brought in them robots. We can't stay alive even no more, 'cause of them! It's you . . . and them . . . "

She burst into tears again, and fell back on the inert body of her lover. Her words were fouled in her lips. But Bergman knew she was right. The phymechs had killed this man as surely as if they had slashed his pulmonary artery.

He turned to leave, and then it was that the follower leaped on him.

It had followed him carefully through Slobtown, it had immobilized the ticket-taker in her suit, it had snaked a tentacle through the ticket window to key open the door, and had tracked him with internal radex to this room.

Bergman stopped dead at the door, as the robocop rolled up, and its tentacles slammed out at him. "Help!" was the first thing he could yell, and as he did so, Kickback's woman lifted her streaked face from the dead man, saw the robot, and went berserk.

Her hand dipped to the hem of her skirt, and lifted, exposing leg, slip, and a thigh-holster.

An acidee came up in her fist, and as she pressed the stud, a thin unsplashing stream of vicious acid streaked over Bergman's head, and etched a line across the robocop's hood. Its faceted light-sensitives turned abruptly, fastened on the woman, and a stunner tentacle snaked out, beamed her in her tracks.

As Bergman watched, the robocop suddenly releasing him to concentrate on the woman, the acidee dropped from her hand, and she spun backward, fell in a heap next to her dead Charlie.

Everything totaled for Bergman. The phymechs, the death of the thresher victim, the Oath and the way he had almost shattered it tonight, the death of Charlie, and now this robocop that was the mechanical god in its vilest form. It all summed up, and Bergman lunged around the robocop, trying to upset it.

It rocked back on its settlers, and tried to grab him. He avoided a tentacle, and streaked out into the hall. The punctuated, syncopated, stop-beat of the burly music welled over him, and he cast about in desperation. Leaning against one wall he saw a long, thick-handled metal bar with a screw-

socket on its top, for removing the outdated light units from the high ceilings.

He grabbed it and turned on the robocop as it rolled slowly after him. His back to the wall, he held it first like a staff, then further down the handle, angling it. As the robocop approached, Bergman lunged, and fiercely brought his hatred to the surface. The club came down and smashed with a muted twanggg! across the robocop's hood. A tiny, tiny dent appeared in the metal, but it kept coming, steadily.

Bergman continued to smash at it.

His blows landed ineffectually, many of them missing entirely, but he struggled and smashed and smashed and smashed and his scream rose over the music, "Die, you bastard rotten chunk of tin, die, die, and let us alone so we can die in peace when we have to . . . "

Over and over, even after the robocop had taken the club from him, immobilized him, and slung him "fireman's-carry" over his tote-area.

All the way back from Slobtown to the jail, to stand trial for home practitioning, collusion, assaulting a robocop, he screamed his hatred and defiance.

Even in his cell, all night long, in his mind, the screams continued. On into the morning, when he found out Calkins had had the robocop trailing him for a week. Suspecting him of just what had happened, long before it had happened. Hoping it would happen. Now it had happened, indeed.

And Stuart Bergman had come to the end of his career.

The end of his life.

He went on trial at 10:40 AM, with the option of human (fallible) jury, or robotic (infallible) jurymech.

Irrationally, he chose the human jury.

An idea, a hope, had flared in the darkness of this finality. If he was going down, Bergman was not going down a coward. He had run long enough. This was another chance.

He meant to make the most of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The courtroom was silent. Totally and utterly silent, primarily because the observer's bubble was soundproofed, and each member of the jury sat in a hush-cubicle. The jurymen each wore a speak-tip in one ear, and a speaker let the audience know what was happening.

Halfway up the wall, beside the judge's desk, the accused's

bubble clung to the wall like a teardrop. Stuart Bergman had sat there throughout the trial, listening to the testimony: the robocop, Calkins (on the affair at the hospital, the day Kohlbenschlagg had died; the affair of the lounge; the suspicion and eventual assigning of a robocop to trail the doctor; Bergman's general attitudes, his ability to have performed the crime of which he had been accused), the old woman, who was pentatholed before she would speak against Bergman, and even Murray Thomas, who reluctantly admitted that Bergman was quite capable of breaking the law in this case.

Thomas's face was strained and broken and he left the stand, staring up at Bergman with a mixture of remorse and pity burning there.

The time was drawing near, and Bergman could feel the tension in the room. This was the first such case of its kind . . . the first flagrant breaking of the new Hippocratic Laws, and the newsfax and news sheet men were here in hordes; a precedent was to be set . . .

The anti-mech leagues and the humanitarian organizations were here also. The case was a sensational one, mostly because it was the first of its kind, and would set the future pattern. Bergman knew he had to take good advantage of that.

And he also knew that advantage would have been lost, had he chosen a robot jurymech to try the case.

The nice things about humans tied in with their irrationality. They were human, they could see the human point of view. A robot would see the robotic point of view. Bergman desperately needed that human factor.

This had grown much larger than just his own problems of adaptation. The fate of the profession lay in his hands, and uncountable lives, lost through stupidity and blind dead faith in the all-powerful God of the Machine.

Deus ex machina, Bergman thought bitterly, *I'm gonna give you a run for your rule today!*

He waited silently, listening to the testimonies, and then, finally, his turn came to speak.

He told them a story, from the accused's bubble. Not one word of defense . . . he did not need that. But the story, and the real story. It was difficult to get it out without falling into bathos or melodrama. It was even harder to keep from lashing out insanely at the machines.

Once, a snicker started up from the audience, but the others scathed the laugher to silence with vicious stares. After that, they listened . . .

The years of study.
The death of Kohlbenschlagg.
The day of the Operation.
Calkins and his approach to medicine.
The sight of metal-sided invaders in the physician's domain.
The fear of the people for the machines.
Charlie Kickback's woman, and her terrors.

When he finally came to the story of the thresher amputee, and the calm workings of the phymech as his patient died, the eyes turned from Bergman. They turned to the silent cubicle where the jurymech lay inactive in waiting for the next case where an accused would select robot over human.

Many began to wonder how smart it would be to select the robot. Many wondered how smart they had been to put their faith in machines. Bergman was playing them, he knew he was, and felt a slight qualm about it—but there was more involved here than merely saving his license. Life was at stake.

As he talked, calmly and softly, they watched him, and watched Calkins, and the jurymech.

And when he had finished, there was silence for a long, long time. Even after the jurybox had sunk into the floor, as deliberations were made, there was silence. People sat and thought, and even the newsfax men took their time about getting to the vidders, to pip in their stories.

When the jurybox rose up out of the floor, they said they must have more deliberation.

Bergman was remanded to custody, placed in a cell to wait. *Something* was going to happen.

Murray Thomas was ushered into the cell, and he held Bergman's hand far longer than was necessary for mere greeting.

His face was solemn when he said, "You've won, Stu."

Bergman felt a great wave of relief and peace settle through him. He had suspected he would; the situation could be verified, and if they checked for what he had pointed out, not just blind faith in the machine, they would uncover the truth . . . it must have happened before, many times.

Thomas said, "The news sheets are full of it, Stu. Biggest thing since total automation. People are scared, Stu, but they're scared the right way. There aren't any big smash-sessions, but people are considering their position and the relation of the robot to them.

"There's a big movement afoot for a return to human

domination. I—I hate to admit it, Stu . . . but I think you were right all along. I wanted to settle back too easily. It took guts, Stu. A lot of guts. I'm afraid I'd have sent that woman away, not gone to tend her man."

Bergman waved away his words. He sat staring at his hands, trying to find a place for himself in the sudden rationale that had swept over his world.

Thomas said, "They've got Calkins up for investigation. Seems there was some sort of collusion between him and the manufacturers of the phymechs. That was why they were put in so quickly, before they'd been fully tested. But they called in the man from the Zsebok Company, and he had to testify they couldn't build in a bedside manner . . . too nebulous a concept, or something.

"I've been restored to full status as a surgeon, Stu. They're looking around for a suitable reward for you."

Stuart Bergman was not listening. He was remembering a man twisted up in death—who need not have died—and a blue-eyed girl who had lived, and an amputee who had screamed his life away. He thought of it all, and of what had happened, and he knew deep within himself that it was going to be all right now. It wasn't just *his* victory . . . it was the victory of humanity. Man had stopped himself on the way to dependence and decadence, and had reversed a terrible trend.

The machines would not be put away entirely.

They would work along with people, and that was as it should have been, for the machines were tools, like any other tools. But human involvement was the key factor now, again.

Bergman settled back against the cell wall, and closed his eyes in the first real rest he had known for oh so long a time. He breathed deeply, and smiled to himself.

Reward?

He had his reward.

Robert A. Heinlein has, since the appearance of his first story, been one of the prime shapers of modern science fiction. Always ahead of the field, he has authored perhaps more important and controversial novels than any writer since H. G. Wells. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, he turned to writing when invalided from the service.

"All You Zombies—"

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

2217 *Time Zone V (EST), 7 Nov 1970, NYC—"Pop's Place":* I was polishing a brandy snifter when the Unmarried Mother came in. I noted the time—10:17 P.M., Zone Five, or Eastern Time, November 7, 1970. Temporal agents always notice time and date; we must.

The Unmarried Mother was a man twenty-five years old, no taller than I am, childish features and a touchy temper. I didn't like his looks—I never had—but he was a lad I was here to recruit, he was my boy. I gave him my best barkeep's smile.

Maybe I'm too critical. He wasn't swish; his nickname came from what he always said when some nosy type asked

him his line: "I'm an unmarried mother." If he felt less than murderous he would add: "—at four cents a word. I write confession stories."

If he felt nasty, he would wait for somebody to make something of it. He had a lethal style of infighting, like a female cop—one reason I wanted him. Not the only one.

He had a load on and his face showed that he despised people more than usual. Silently I poured a double shot of Old Underwear and left the bottle. He drank it up, poured another.

I wiped the bar top. "How's the 'Unmarried Mother' racket?"

His fingers tightened on the glass and he seemed about to throw it at me; I felt for the sap under the bar. In temporal manipulation you try to figure everything, but there are so many factors that you never take needless risks.

I saw him relax that tiny amount they teach you to watch for in the Bureau's training school. "Sorry," I said. "Just asking, 'How's business?' Make it 'How's the weather?' "

He looked sour. "Business is okay. I write 'em, they print 'em, I eat."

I poured myself one, leaned toward him. "Matter of fact," I said, "you write a nice stick—I've sampled a few. You have an amazingly sure touch with the woman's angle."

It was a slip I had to risk; he never admitted what pen names he used. But he was boiled enough to pick up the last: " 'Woman's angle!' " he repeated with a snort. "Yeah, I know the woman's angle. I should."

"So?" I said doubtfully. "Sisters?"

"No. You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Now, now," I answered mildly, "bartenders and psychiatrists learn that nothing is stranger than truth. Why, son, if you heard the stories I do—well, you'd make yourself rich. Incredible."

"You don't know what 'incredible' means!"

"So? Nothing astonishes me. I've always heard worse."

He snorted again. "Want to bet the rest of the bottle?"

"I'll bet a full bottle." I placed one on the bar.

"Well—" I signaled my other bartender to handle the trade. We were at the far end, a single-stool space that I kept private by loading the bar top by it with jars of pickled eggs and other clutter. A few were at the other end watching the fights, and somebody was playing the juke box—private as a bed where we were.

"Okay," he began. "To start with, I'm a bastard."

"No distinction around here," I said.

"I mean it," he snapped. "My parents weren't married."

"Still no distinction," I insisted. "Neither were mine."

"When—" He stopped, gave me the first warm look I ever saw on him. "You mean that?"

"I do. A one-hundred-per-cent bastard. In fact," I added, "no one in my family ever marries. All bastards."

"You can't top me." He pointed at my ring. "What about that?"

"Oh, that." I showed it to him. "It just looks like a wedding ring; I wear it to keep women off." It is an antique I bought in 1985 from a fellow operative—he had fetched it from pre-Christian Crete. "The worm Ouroboros . . . the World Snake that eats its own tail, forever without end. A symbol of the Great Paradox."

He barely glanced at it. "If you're really a bastard, you know how it feels. When I was a little girl—"

"Wups!" I said. "Did I hear you correctly?"

"Who's telling this story? When I was a little girl— Look, ever hear of Christine Jorgensen? Or Roberta Cowell?"

"Uh, sex-change cases? You're trying to tell me—"

"Don't interrupt, or swelp me, I won't talk. I was a foundling, left at an orphanage in Cleveland in 1945 when I was a month old. When I was a little girl, I envied kids with parents. Then, when I learned about sex—and, believe me, Pop, you learn fast in an orphanage—"

"I know."

"—I made a solemn vow that any kid of mine would have both a pop and a mom. It kept me 'pure,' quite a feat in that vicinity—I had to learn to fight to manage it. Then I got older and realized I stood darn little chance of getting married—for the same reason I hadn't been adopted." He scowled. "I was horse-faced and buck-toothed, flat-chested and straight-haired."

"You don't look any worse than I do."

"Who cares how a barkeep looks? Or a writer? But people wanting to adopt pick little blue-eyed golden-haired morons. Later on, the boys want bulging breasts, a cute face, and an oh-you-wonderful-male manner." He shrugged. "I couldn't compete. So I decided to join the W.E.N.C.H.E.S."

"Eh?"

"Womens Emergency National Corps, Hospitality & En-

tertainment Section, what they now call 'Space Angels'—Auxiliary Nursing Group, Extraterrestrial Legions."

I knew both terms, once I had them chronized. We use still a third name, it's that elite military service corps: Women's Hospitality Order Refortifying & Encouraging Spacemen. Vocabulary shift is the worst hurdle in time-jumps—did you know that "service station" once meant a dispensary for petroleum fractions? Once on an assignment in the Churchill Era, a woman said to me, "Meet me at the service station next door"—which is not what it sounds; a "service station" (then) wouldn't have a bed in it.

He went on: "It was when they first admitted you can't send men into space for months and years and not relieve the tension. You remember how the wowsers screamed? That improved my chance, since volunteers were scarce. A gal had to be respectable, preferably virgin (they liked to train them from scratch), above average mentally, and stable emotionally. But most volunteers were old hookers, or neurotics who would crack up ten days off Earth. So I didn't need looks; if they accepted me, they would fix my buck teeth, put a wave in my hair, teach me to walk and dance and how to listen to a man pleasingly, and everything else—plus training for the prime duties. They would even use plastic surgery if it would help—nothing too good for Our Boys.

"Best yet, they made sure you didn't get pregnant during your enlistment—and you were almost certain to marry at the end of your hitch. Same way today, A.N.G.E.L.S. marry spacers—they talk the language.

"When I was eighteen I was placed as a 'mother's helper.' This family simply wanted a cheap servant, but I didn't mind as I couldn't enlist till I was twenty-one. I did housework and went to night school—pretending to continue my high-school typing and shorthand but going to a charm class instead, to better my chances for enlistment.

"Then I met this city slicker with his hundred-dollar bills." He scowled. "The no-good actually did have a wad of hundred-dollar bills. He showed me one night, told me to help myself.

"But I didn't. I liked him. He was the first man I ever met who was nice to me without trying games with me. I quit night school to see him oftener. It was the happiest time of my life.

"Then one night in the park the games began."

He stopped. I said, "And then?"

"And then *nothing!* I never saw him again. He walked me home and told me he loved me—and kissed me good night and never came back." He looked grim. "If I could find him, I'd kill him!"

"Well," I sympathized, "I know how you feel. But killing him—just for doing what comes naturally—hmm . . . Did you struggle?"

"Huh? What's that got to do with it?"

"Quite a bit. Maybe he deserves a couple of broken arms for running out on you, but—"

"He deserves worse than that! Wait till you hear. Somehow I kept anyone from suspecting and decided it was all for the best. I hadn't really loved him and probably would never love anybody—and I was more eager to join the W.E.N.C.H.E.S. than ever. I wasn't disqualified, they didn't insist on virgins. I cheered up.

"It wasn't until my skirts got tight that I realized."

"Pregnant?"

"He had me higher 'n a kite! Those skinflints I lived with ignored it as long as I could work—then kicked me out and the orphanage wouldn't take me back. I landed in a charity ward surrounded by other big bellies and trotted bedpans until my time came

"One night I found myself on an operating table, with a nurse saying, 'Relax. Now breathe deeply.'

"I woke up in bed, numb from the chest down. My surgeon came in. 'How do you feel?' he says cheerfully.

" 'Like a mummy.'

" 'Naturally. You're wrapped like one and full of dope to keep you numb. You'll get well—but a Caesarean isn't a hangnail.'

" 'Caesarean,' I said. 'Doc—*did I lose the baby?*'

" 'Oh, no. Your baby's fine.'

" 'Oh. Boy or girl?'

" 'A healthy little girl. Five pounds, three ounces.'

"I relaxed. It's something, to have made a baby. I told myself I would go somewhere and tack 'Mrs.' on my name and let the kid think her papa was dead—no orphanage for *my* kid!

"But the surgeon was talking. 'Tell me, uh—' He avoided my name. '—did you ever think your glandular setup was odd?'

"I said, 'Huh? Of course not. What are you driving at?'

"He hesitated. 'I'll give you this in one dose, then a hypo to let you sleep off your jitters. You'll have 'em.'

" 'Why?' I demanded.

" 'Ever hear of the Scottish physician who was female until she was thirty-five——then had surgery and became legally and medically a man? Got married. All okay.'

" 'What's that got to do with me?'

" 'That's what I'm saying. You're a man.'

"I tried to sit up. *'What?'*

" 'Take it easy. When I opened you, I found a mess. I sent for the Chief of Surgery while I got the baby out, then we held a consultation with you on the table—and worked for hours to salvage what we could. You had two full sets of organs, both immature, but with the female set well enough developed for you to have a baby. They could never be any use to you again, so we took them out and rearranged things so that you can develop properly as a man.' He put a hand on me. 'Don't worry. You're young, your bones will readjust, we'll watch your glandular balance—and make a fine young man out of you.'

"I started to cry. 'What about my baby?'

" 'Well, you can't nurse her, you haven't milk enough for a kitten. If I were you, I wouldn't see her—put her up for adoption.'

" *'No!'*

"He shrugged. 'The choice is yours; you're her mother—well, her parent. But don't worry now; we'll get you well first.'

"Next day they let me see the kid and I saw her daily—trying to get used to her. I had never seen a brand-new baby and had no idea how awful they look—my daughter looked like an orange monkey. My feeling changed to cold determination to do right by her. But four weeks later that didn't mean anything."

"Eh?"

"She was snatched."

" 'Snatched?' "

The Unmarried Mother almost knocked over the bottle we had bet. "Kidnapped—stolen from the hospital nursery!" He breathed hard. "How's that for taking the last a man's got to live for?"

"A bad deal," I agree. "Let's pour you another. No clues?"

"Nothing the police could trace. Somebody came to see

her, claimed to be her uncle. While the nurse had her back turned, he walked out with her."

"Description?"

"Just a man, with a face-shaped face, like yours or mine." He frowned. "I think it was the baby's father. The nurse swore it was an older man, but he probably used make-up. Who else would swipe my baby? Childless women pull such stunts—but whoever heard of a man doing it?"

"What happened to you then?"

"Eleven more months of that grim place and three operations. In four months I started to grow a beard; before I was out I was shaving regularly . . . and no longer doubted that I was male." He grinned wryly. "I was staring down nurses' necklines."

"Well," I said, "seems to me you came through okay. Here you are, a normal man, making good money, no real troubles. And the life of a female is not an easy one."

He glared at me. "A lot you know about it!"

"So?"

"Ever hear the expression 'a ruined woman'?"

"Mmm, years ago. Doesn't mean much today."

"I was as ruined as a woman can be; that bum *really* ruined me—I was no longer a woman . . . and I didn't know *how* to be a man."

"Takes getting used to, I suppose."

"You have no idea. I don't mean learning how to dress, or not walking into the wrong rest room; I learned those in the hospital. But how could I *live?* What job could I get? Hell, I couldn't even drive a car. I didn't know a trade; I couldn't do manual labor—too much scar tissue, too tender.

"I hated him for having ruined me for the W.E.N.C.H.-E.S., too, but I didn't know how much until I tried to join the Space Corps instead. One look at my belly and I was marked *unfit for military service.* The medical officer spent time on me just from curiosity; he had read about my case.

"So I changed my name and came to New York. I got by as a fry cook, then rented a typewriter and set myself up as a public stenographer—what a laugh! In four months I typed four letters and one manuscript. The manuscript was for *Real Life Tales* and a waste of paper, but the goof who wrote it, sold it. Which gave me an idea; I brought a stack of confession magazines and studied them." He looked cynical. "Now you know how I get the authentic woman's angle on an

unmarried-mother story . . . through the only version I haven't sold—the true one. Do I win the bottle?"

I pushed it toward him. I was upset myself, but there was work to do. I said, "Son, you still want to lay hands on that so-and-so?"

His eyes lighted up—a feral gleam.

"Hold it!" I said. "You wouldn't kill him?"

He chuckled nastily. "Try me."

"Take it easy. I know more about it than you think I do. I can help you. I know where he is."

He reached across the bar. *"Where is he?"*

I said softly, "Let go my shirt, sonny—or you'll land in the alley and we'll tell the cops you fainted." I showed him the sap.

He let go. "Sorry. But where is he?" He looked at me. "And how do you know so much?"

"All in good time. There are records—hospital records, orphanage records, medical records. The matron of your orphanage was Mrs. Fetherage—right? She was followed by Mrs. Gruenstein—right? Your name, as a girl, was 'Jane'—right? And you didn't tell me any of this—right?"

I had him baffled and a bit scared. "What's this? You trying to make trouble for me?"

"No indeed. I've your welfare at heart. I can put this character in your lap. You do to him as you see fit—and I guarantee that you'll get away with it. But I don't think you'll kill him. You'd be nuts to—and you aren't nuts. Not quite."

He brushed it aside. "Cut the noise. *Where is he?"*

I poured him a short one; he was drunk but anger was off-setting it. "Not so fast. I do something for you—you do something for me."

"Uh . . . what?"

"You don't like your work. What would you say to high pay, steady work, unlimited expense account, your own boss on the job, and lots of variety and adventure?"

He stared. "I'd say, 'Get those goddamn reindeer off my roof!' Shove it, Pop—there's no such job."

"Okay, put it this way: I hand him to you, you settle with him, then try my job. If it's not all I claim—well, I can't hold you."

He was wavering; the last drink did it. "When d'yuh d'liver 'im?" he said thickly.

"If it's a deal—*right now!"*

He shoved out his hand. "It's a deal!"

I nodded to my assistant to watch both ends, noted the time—2300—started to duck through the gate under the bar —when the juke box blared out: "I'm My Own Grandpaw!" The service man had orders to load it with old Americana and classics because I couldn't stomach the "music" of 1970, but I hadn't known that tape was in it. I called out, "Shut that off! Give the customer his money back." I added, "Storeroom, back in a moment," and headed there with my Unmarried Mother following.

It was down the passage across from the johns, a steel door to which no one but my day manager and myself had a key; inside was a door to an inner room to which only I had a key. We went there.

He looked blearily around at windowless walls. "Where is 'e?"

"Right away." I opened a case, the only thing in the room; it was a U.S.F.F. Co-ordinates Transformer Field Kit, series 1992, Mod. II—a beauty, no moving parts, weight twenty-three kilos fully charged, and shaped to pass as a suitcase. I had adjusted it precisely earlier that day; all I had to do was to shake out the metal net which limits the transformation field.

Which I did. "Wha's that?" he demanded.

"Time machine," I said and tossed the net over us.

"Hey!" he yelled and stepped back. There is a technique to this; the net has to be thrown so that the subject will instinctively step back *onto* the metal mesh, then you close the net with both of you inside completely—else you might leave shoe soles behind or a piece of foot, or scoop up a slice of floor. But that's all the skill it takes. Some agents con a subject into the net; I tell the truth and use that instant of outer astonishment to flip the switch. Which I did.

1030-VI, 3 April 1963, Cleveland, Ohio—Apex Bldg.: "Hey!" he repeated. "Take this damn thing off!"

"Sorry," I apologized, and did so, stuffed the net into the case, closed it. "You said you wanted to find him."

"But—you said that was a time machine!"

I pointed out a window. "Does that look like November? Or New York?" While he was gawking at new buds and spring weather, I reopened the case, took out a packet of hundred-dollar bills, checked that the numbers and signatures were compatible with 1963. The Temporal Bureau doesn't

care how much you spend (it costs nothing) but they don't like unnecessary anachronisms. Too many mistakes, and a general court-martial will exile you for a year in a nasty period, say 1974, with its strict rationing and forced labor. I never make such mistakes, the money was okay.

He turned around and said, "What happened?"

"He's here. Go outside and take him. Here's expense money." I shoved it at him and added, "Settle him, then I'll pick you up."

Hundred-dollar bills have a hypnotic effect on a person not used to them. He was thumbing them unbelievingly as I eased him into the hall, locked him out. The next jump was easy, a small shift in era.

2100-VI, 10 March 1964, Cleveland—Apex Bldg.: There was a notice under the door saying that my lease expired next week; otherwise the room looked as it had a moment before. Outside, trees were bare and snow threatened; I hurried, stopping only for contemporary money and a coat, hat, and topcoat I had left there when I leased the room. I hired a car, went to the hospital. It took twenty minutes to bore the nursery attendant to the point where I could swipe the baby without being noticed. We went back to the Apex Building. This dial setting was more involved, as the building did not yet exist in 1945. But I had precalculated it.

0010-VI, 20 Sept 1945, Cleveland—Skyview Motel: Field kit, baby, and I arrived in a motel outside town. Earlier I had registered as "Gregory Johnson, Warren, Ohio," so we arrived in a room with curtains closed, windows locked, and doors bolted, and the floor cleared to allow for waver as the machine hunts. You can get a nasty bruise from a chair where it shouldn't be—not the chair of course, but backlash from the field.

No trouble. Jane was sleeping soundly; I carried her out, put her in a grocery box on the seat of a car I had provided earlier, drove to the orphanage, drove back in time to see them taking the box inside, kept going, and abandoned the car near the motel—walked to it and jumped forward to the Apex Building in 1963.

2200-VI, 24 April 1963, Cleveland—Apex Bldg.: I had cut the time rather fine—temporal accuracy depends on span, except on return to zero. If I had it right, Jane was discovering,

out in the park this balmy spring night, that she wasn't quite as "nice" a girl as she had thought. I grabbed a taxi to the home of those skinflints, had the hackie wait around a corner while I lurked in shadows.

Presently I spotted them down the street, arms around each other. He took her up on the porch and made a long job of kissing her good night—longer than I thought. Then she went in and he came down the walk, turned away. I slid into step and hooked an arm in his. "That's all, son," I announced quietly. "I'm back to pick you up."

"You!" He gasped and caught his breath.

"Me. Now you know who *he* is—and after you think it over you'll know who you are . . . and if you think hard enough, you'll figure out who the baby is . . . and who *I* am."

He didn't answer, he was badly shaken. It's a shock to have it proved to you that you can't resist seducing yourself. I took him to the Apex Building and we jumped again.

2300-VII, 12 Aug 1985—Sub Rockies Base: I woke the duty sergeant, showing my I.D., told the sergeant to bed my companion down with a happy pill and recruit him in the morning. The sergeant looked sour, but rank is rank, regardless of era; he did what I said—thinking, no doubt, that the next time we met he might be the colonel and I the sergeant: which can happen in our corps. "What name?" he asked

I wrote it out. He raised his eyebrows. "Like so, eh? *Hmm—"*

"You just do your job, Sergeant." I turned to my companion.

"Son, your troubles are over. You're about to start the best job a man ever held—and you'll do well. *I know."*

"That you will!" agreed the sergeant. "Look at me—born in 1917—still around, still young, still enjoying life." I went back to the jump room, set everything on preselected zero.

2301-V, 7 Nov 1970, NYC—"Pop's Place": I came out of the storeroom carrying a fifth of Drambuie to account for the minute I had been gone. My assistant was arguing with the customer who had been playing "I'm My Own Grampaw!" I said, "Oh, let him play it, then unplug it." I was very tired.

It's rough, but somebody must do it, and it's very hard to recruit anyone in the later years, since the Mistake of 1972. Can you think of a better source than to pick people all

fouled up where they are and give them well-paid, interesting (even though dangerous) work in a necessary cause? Everybody knows now why the Fizzle War of 1963 fizzled. The bomb with New York's number on it didn't go off, a hundred other things didn't go as planned—all arranged by the likes of me.

But not the Mistake of '72; that one is not our fault—and can't be undone; there's no paradox to resolve. A thing either is, or it isn't, now and forever amen. But there won't be another like it; an order dated "1992" takes precedence any year.

I closed five minutes early, leaving a letter in the cash register telling my day manager that I was accepting his offer to buy me out, so see my lawyer as I was leaving on a long vacation. The Bureau might or might not pick up his payments, but they want things left tidy. I went to the room back of the storeroom and forward to 1993.

2200-VII, 12 Jan 1993—Sub Rockies Annex—HQ Temporal DOL: I checked in with the duty officer and went to my quarters, intending to sleep for a week. I had fetched the bottle we bet (after all, I won it) and took a drink before I wrote my report. It tasted foul, and I wondered why I had ever liked Old Underwear. But it was better than nothing; I don't like to be cold sober, I think too much. But I don't really hit the bottle either; other people have snakes—I have people.

I dictated my report; forty recruitments all okayed by the Psych Bureau—counting my own, which I knew would be okayed. I was here, wasn't I? Then I taped a request for assignment to operations; I was sick of recruiting. I dropped both in the slot and headed for bed.

My eye fell on "The By-laws of Time," over my bed:

Never Do Yesterday What Should Be Done Tomorrow.
If At Last You Do Succeed, Never Try Again.
A Stitch in Time Saves Nine Billion.
A Paradox May Be Paradoctored.
It Is Earlier When You Think.
Ancestors Are Just People.
Even Jove Nods.

They didn't inspire me the way they had when I was a re-

cruit; thirty subjective years of time-jumping wears you down. I undressed, and when I got down to the hide I looked at my belly. A Caesarean leaves a big scar, but I'm so hairy now that I don't notice it unless I look for it.

Then I glanced at the ring on my finger.

The Snake That Eats Its Own Tail, Forever and Ever . . . I *know* where I came from—but *where did all you zombies come from?*

I felt a headache coming on, but a headache powder is one thing I do not take. I did once—and you all went away.

So I crawled into bed and whistled out the light.

You aren't really there at all. There isn't anybody but me —Jane—here alone in the dark.

I miss you dreadfully!

R. A. Lafferty worked as an electrical engineer until his retirement in 1971. Born in Iowa, he currently lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. For the past twenty years his stories have appeared in all of the major SF outlets, and in such magazines as the *New Mexico Quarterly* and *Literary Review*. Among his many SF novels and collections are *The Reefs Of Earth, Space Chantey*, and *Arrive At Easterwine;* his other books include the fictionalized biographies of Alaric the Goth, *The Fall Of Rome*, and of a Choctaw chief, *Okla Hannali*. His most recent novel is *Not To Mention Camels*.

Rainbird

By R. A. LAFFERTY

Were scientific firsts truly tabulated, the name of the Yankee inventor, Higgston Rainbird, would surely be without peer. Yet today he is known (and only to a few specialists, at that) for an improved blacksmith's bellows in the year 1785, for a certain modification (not fundamental) in the moldboard plow about 1805, for a better (but not good) method of reefing the lanteen sail, for a chestnut roaster, for the Devil's Claw Wedge for splitting logs, and for a nutmeg

grater embodying a new safety feature; this last was either in the year 1816 or 1817. He is known for such, and for no more.

Were this all that he achieved, his name would still be secure. And it *is* secure, in a limited way, to those who hobby in technological history.

But the glory of which history has cheated him, or of which he cheated himself, is otherwise. In a different sense it is without parallel, absolutely unique.

For he pioneered the dynamo, the steam automobile, the steel industry, ferro-concrete construction, the internal combustion engine, electric illumination and power, the wireless, the televox, the petroleum and petrochemical industries, monorail transportation, air travel, worldwide monitoring, fissionable power, space travel, group telepathy, political and economic balance; he built a retrogressor; and he made great advances towards corporal immortality and the apotheosis of mankind. It would seem unfair that all this is unknown of him.

Even the once solid facts—that he wired Philadelphia for light and power in 1799, Boston the following year, and New York two years later—are no longer solid. In a sense they are no longer facts.

For all this there must be an explanation; and if not that, then an account at least; and if not that, well—something anyhow.

Higgston Rainbird made a certain decision on a June afternoon in 1779 when he was quite a young man, and by this decision he confirmed his inventive bent.

He was hawking from the top of Devil's Head Mountain. He flew his falcon (actually a tercel hawk) down through the white clouds, and to him it was the highest sport in the world. The bird came back, climbing the blue air, and brought a passenger pigeon from below the clouds. And Higgston was almost perfectly happy as he hooded the hawk.

He could stay there all day and hawk from above the clouds. Or he could go down the mountain and work on his sparker in his shed. He sighed as he made the decision, for no man can have everything. There was a fascination about hawking. But there was also a fascination about the copper-strip sparker. And he went down the mountain to work on it.

Thereafter he hawked less. After several years he was forced to give it up altogether. He had chosen his life, the

dedicated career of an inventor, and he stayed with it for sixty-five years.

His sparker was not a success. It would be expensive, its spark was uncertain, and it had almost no advantage over flint. People could always start a fire. If not, they could borrow a brand from a neighbor. There was no market for the sparker. But it was a nice machine, hammered copper strips wrapped around iron teased with lodestone, and the thing turned with a hand crank. He never gave it up entirely. He based other things upon it; and the retrogressor of his last years could not have been built without it.

But the main thing was steam, iron, and tools. He made the finest lathes. He revolutionized smelting and mining. He brought new things to power, and started the smoke to rolling. He made mistakes, he ran into dead ends, he wasted whole decades. But one man can only do so much.

He married a shrew, Audrey, knowing that a man cannot achieve without a goad as well as a goal. But he was without issue or disciple, and this worried him.

He built a steamboat and a steamtrain. His was the first steam thresher. He cleared the forests with wood-burning giants, and designed towns. He destroyed Southern slavery with a steam-powered cotton picker, and power and wealth followed him.

For better or worse he brought the country up a long road, so there was hardly a custom of his boyhood that still continued. Probably no one man had ever changed a country so much in his lifetime.

He fathered a true machine-tool industry, and brought rubber from the tropics and plastic from the laboratory. He pumped petroleum, and used natural gas for illumination and steam power. He was honored and enriched; and, looking back, he had no reason to regard his life as wasted.

"Yes, I've missed so much. I wasted a lot of time. If only I could have avoided the blind alleys, I could have done many times as much. I brought machine tooling to its apex. But I neglected the finest tool of all, the mind. I used it as it is, but I had not time to study it, much less modify it. Others after me will do it all. But I rather wanted to do it all myself. Now it is too late."

He went back and worked on his old sparker and its descendants, now that he was old. He built toys along the line of it that need not always have remained toys. He made a

televox, but the only practical application was that now Audrey could rail at him over a greater distance. He fired up a little steam dynamo in his house, ran wires and made it burn lights in his barn.

And he built a retrogressor.

"I would do much more along this line had I the time. But I'm pepper-bellied pretty near the end of the road. It is like finally coming to a gate and seeing a whole greater world beyond it, and being too old and feeble to enter."

He kicked a chair and broke it.

"I never even made a better chair. Never got around to it. There are so clod-hopping many things I meant to do. I have maybe pushed the country ahead a couple of decades faster than it would otherwise have gone. But what couldn't I have done if it weren't for the blind alleys! Ten years lost in one of them, twelve in another. If only there had been a way to tell the true from the false, and to leave to others what they could do, and to do myself only what nobody else could do. To see a link (however unlikely) and to go out and get it and set it in its place. Oh, the waste, the wilderness that a talent can wander in! If I had only had a mentor! If I had had a map, a clue, a hatful of clues. I was born shrewd, and I shrewdly cut a path and went a grand ways. But always there was a clearer path and a faster way that I did not see till later. As my name is Rainbird, if I had it to do over, I'd do it infinitely better."

He began to write a list of the things that he'd have done better. Then he stopped and threw away his pen in disgust.

"Never did even invent a decent ink pen. Never got around to it. Dog-eared damnation, there's so much I didn't do!"

He poured himself a jolt, but he made a face as he drank it.

"Never got around to distilling a really better whiskey. Had some good ideas along that line, too. So many things I never did do. Well, I can't improve things by talking to myself here about it."

Then he sat and thought.

"But I burr-tailed *can* improve things by talking to myself *there* about it."

He turned on his retrogressor, and went back sixty-five years and up two thousand feet.

Higgston Rainbird was hawking from the top of Devil's

Head Mountain one June afternoon in 1779. He flew his bird down through the white fleece clouds, and to him it was sport indeed. Then it came back, climbing the shimmering air, and brought a pigeon to him.

"It's fun," said the old man, "but the bird is tough, and you have a lot to do. Sit down and listen, Higgston."

"How do you know the bird is tough? Who are you, and how did an old man like you climb up here without my seeing you? And how in hellpepper did you know that my name was Higgston?"

"I ate the bird and I remember that it was tough. I am just an old man who would tell you a few things to avoid in your life, and I came up here by means of an invention of my own. And I know your name is Higgston, as it is also my name; you being named after me, or I after you, I forget which. Which one of us is the older, anyhow?"

"I had thought that you were, old man. I am a little interested in inventions myself. How does the one that carried you up here work?"

"It begins, well, it begins with something like your sparker, Higgston. And as the years go by you adapt and add. But it is all tinkering with a force field till you are able to warp it a little. Now then, you are an ewer-eared galoot and not as handsome as I remembered you; but I happen to know that you have the makings of a fine man. Listen now as hard as ever you listened in your life. I doubt that I will be able to repeat. I will save you years and decades; I will tell you the best road to take over a journey which it was once said that a man could travel but once. Man, I'll pave a path for you over the hard places and strew palms before your feet."

"Talk, you addlepated old gaff. No man ever listened so hard before."

The old man talked to the young one for five hours. Not a word was wasted; they were neither of them given to wasting words. He told him that steam wasn't everything, this before he knew that it was anything. It was a giant power, but it was limited. Other powers, perhaps, were not. He instructed him to explore the possibilities of amplification and feedback, and to use always the lightest medium of transmission of power: wire rather than mule-drawn coal cart, air rather than wire, ether rather than air. He warned against time wasted in shoring up the obsolete, and of the bottomless quicksand of cliché, both of word and of thought.

He admonished him not to waste precious months in trying

to devise the perfect apple corer; there will never be a perfect apple corer. He begged him not to build a battery bobsled. There would be things far swifter than a bobsled.

Let others make the new hide scrapers and tanning salts. Let others aid the carter and the candle molder and the cooper in their arts. There was need for a better hame, a better horse block, a better stile, a better whetstone. Well, let others fill those needs. If our buttonhooks, our firedogs, our whiffletrees, our bootjacks, our cheese presses are all badly designed and a disgrace, then let someone else remove that disgrace. Let others aid the cordwainer and the cobbler. Let Higgston do only the high work that nobody else would be able to do.

There would come a time when the farrier himself would disappear, as the fletcher had all but disappeared. But new trades would open for a man with an open mind.

Then the old man got specific. He showed young Higgston a design for a lathe dog that would save time. He told him how to draw, rather than hammer, wire; and advised him of the virtues of mica as insulator before other material should come to hand.

"And here there are some things that you will have to take on faith," said the old man, "things of which we learn the 'what' before we fathom the 'why'."

He explained to him the shuttle armature and the self-exciting field, and commutation; and the possibilities that alternation carried to its ultimate might open up. He told him a bejammed lot of things about a confounded huge variety of subjects.

"And a little mathematics never hurt a practical man," said the old gaffer. "I was self-taught, and it slowed me down."

They hunkered down there, and the old man cyphered it all out in the dust on the top of Devil's Head Mountain. He showed him natural logarithms and rotating vectors and the calculi and such; but he didn't push it too far, as even a smart boy can learn only so much in a few minutes. He then gave him a little advice on the treatment of Audrey, knowing it would be useless, for the art of living with a shrew is a thing that cannot be explained to another.

"Now hood your hawk and go down the mountain and go to work," the old man said. And that is what young Higgston Rainbird did.

The career of the Yankee inventor, Higgston Rainbird, was meteoric. The wise men of Greece were little boys to him, the Renaissance giants had only knocked at the door but had not tried the knob. And it was unlocked all the time.

The milestones that Higgston left are breathtaking. He built a short high dam on the flank of Devil's Head Mountain, and had hydroelectric power for his own shop in that same year (1779). He had an arc light burning in Horse-Head Lighthouse in 1781. He read by true incandescent light in 1783, and lighted his native village, Knobknocker, three years later. He drove a charcoal-fueled automobile in 1787, switched to a distillate of whale oil in 1789, and used true rock oil in 1790. His gasoline-powered combination reaper-thresher was in commercial production in 1793, the same year that he wired Centerville for light and power. His first diesel locomotive made its trial run in 1796, in which year he also converted one of his earlier coal-burning steamships to liquid fuel.

In 1799 he had wired Philadelphia for light and power, a major breakthrough, for the big cities had manfully resisted the innovations. On the night of the turn of the century he unhooded a whole clutch of new things—wireless telegraphy, the televox, radio transmission and reception, motile and audible theatrical reproductions, a machine to transmit the human voice into print, and a method of sterilizing and wrapping meat to permit its indefinite preservation at any temperature.

And in the spring of that new year he first flew a heavier-than-air vehicle.

"He has made all the basic inventions," said the many-tongued people. "Now there remains only their refinement and proper utilization."

"Horse hokey," said Higgston Rainbird. He made a rocket that could carry freight to England in thirteen minutes at seven cents a hundredweight. This was in 1805. He had fissionable power in 1813, and within four years had the price down where it could be used for desalting seawater to the eventual irrigation of five million square miles of remarkably dry land.

He built a Think Machine to work out the problems that he was too busy to solve, and a Prediction Machine to pose him with new problems and new areas of breakthrough.

In 1821, on his birthday, he hit the moon with a marker.

He bet a crony that he would be able to go up personally one year later and retrieve it. And he won the bet.

In 1830 he first put on the market his Red Ball Pipe Tobacco, an aromatic and expensive crimp cut made of Martian lichen.

In 1836 he founded the Institute for the Atmospheric Rehabilitation of Venus, for he found that place to be worse than a smokehouse. It was there that he developed that hacking cough that stayed with him till the end of his days.

He synthesized a man of his own age and disrepute who would sit drinking with him in the after-midnight hours and say, "You're so right, Higgston, so incontestably right."

His plan for the Simplification and Eventual Elimination of Government was adopted (in modified form) in 1840, a fruit of his Political and Economic Balance Institute.

Yet, for all his seemingly successful penetration of the field, he realized that man was the only truly cantankerous animal, and that Human Engineering would remain one of the never completely resolved fields.

He made a partial breakthrough in telepathy, starting with the personal knowledge that shrews are always able to read the minds of their spouses. He knew that the secret was not in sympathetic reception, but in arrogant break-in. With the polite it is forever impossible, but he disguised this discovery as politely as he could.

And he worked toward corporal immortality and the apotheosis of mankind, that cantankerous animal.

He designed a fabric that would embulk itself on a temperature drop, and thin to an airy sheen in summery weather. The weather itself he disdained to modify, but he did evolve infallible prediction of exact daily rainfall and temperature for decades in advance.

And he built a retrogressor.

One day he looked in the mirror and frowned.

"I never did get around to making a better mirror. This one is hideous. However (to consider every possibility) let us weigh the thesis that it is the image and not the mirror that is hideous."

He called up an acquaintance.

"Say, Ulois, what year is this, anyhow?"

"1844."

"Are you sure?"

"Reasonably sure."

"How old am I?"

"Eighty-five, I think, Higgston."

"How long have I been an old man?"

"Quite a while, Higgston, quite a while."

Higgston Rainbird hung up rudely.

"I wonder how I ever let a thing like that slip up on me?" he said to himself. "I should have gone to work on corporal immortality a little earlier. I've bungled the whole business now."

He fiddled with his Prediction Machine and saw that he was to die that very year. He did not seek a finer reading.

"What a saddle-galled splay-footed situation to find myself in! I never got around to a tenth of the things I really wanted to do. Oh, I was smart enough; I just ran up too many blind alleys. Never found the answers to half the old riddles. Should have built the Prediction Machine at the beginning instead of the end. But I didn't know how to build it at the beginning. There ought to be a way to get more done. Never got any advice in my life worth taking except from that nutty old man on the mountain when I was a young man. There's a lot of things I've only started on. Well, every man doesn't hang, but every man does come to the end of his rope. I never did get around to making that rope extensible. And I can't improve things by talking to myself here about it."

He filled his pipe with Red Ball crimp cut and thought a while.

"But I hill-hopping *can* improve things by talking to myself *there* about it."

Then he turned on his retrogressor and went back and up.

Young Higgston Rainbird was hawking from the top of Devil's Head Mountain on a June afternoon in 1779. He flew his hawk down through the white clouds, and decided that he was the finest fellow in the world and master of the finest sport. If there was earth below the clouds it was far away and unimportant.

The hunting bird came back, climbing the tall air, with a pigeon from the lower regions.

"Forget the bird," said the old man, "and give a listen with those outsized ears of yours. I have a lot to tell you in a very little while, and then you must devote yourself to a concentrated life of work. Hood the bird and clip him to the stake. Is that bridle clip of your own invention? Ah yes, I remember now that it is."

"I'll just fly him down once more, old man, and then I'll have a look at what you're selling."

"No. No. Hood him at once. This is your moment of decision. That is a boyishness that you must give up. Listen to me, Higgston, and I will orient your life for you."

"I rather intended to orient it myself. How did you get up here, old man, without my seeing you? How, in fact, did you get up here at all? It's a hard climb."

"Yes, I remember that it is. I came up here on the wings of an invention of my own. Now pay attention for a few hours. It will take all your considerable wit."

"A few hours and a perfect hawking afternoon will be gone. This may be the finest day ever made."

"I also once felt that it was, but I manfully gave it up. So must you."

"Let me fly the hawk down again and I will listen to you while it is gone."

"But you will only be listening with half a mind, and the rest will be with the hawk."

But young Higgston Rainbird flew the bird down through the shining white clouds, and the old man began his rigmarole sadly. Yet it was a rang-dang-do of a spiel, a mummy-whammy of admonition and exposition, and young Higgston listened entranced and almost forgot his hawk. The old man told him that he must stride half a dozen roads at once, and yet never take a wrong one; that he must do some things earlier that on the alternative had been done quite late; that he must point his technique at the Think Machine and the Prediction Machine, and at the unsolved problem of corporal immortality.

"In no other way can you really acquire elbow room, ample working time. Time runs out and life is too short if you let it take its natural course. Are you listening to me, Higgston?"

But the hawk came back, climbing the steep air, and it had a gray dove. The old man sighed at the interruption, and he knew that his project was in peril.

"Hood the hawk. It's a sport for boys. Now listen to me, you spraddling jack. I am telling you things that nobody else would ever be able to tell you! I will show you how to fly falcons to the stars, not just down to the meadows and birch groves at the foot of this mountain."

"There is no prey up there," said young Higgston.

"There *is*. Gamier prey than you ever dreamed of. Hood the bird and snaffle him."

"I'll just fly him down one more time and listen to you till he comes back."

The hawk went down through the clouds like a golden bolt of summer lightning.

Then the old man, taking the cosmos, peeled it open layer by layer like an onion, and told young Higgston how it worked. Afterwards he returned to the technological beginning and he lined out the workings of steam and petro- and electromagnetism, and explained that these simple powers must be used for a short interval in the invention of greater power. He told him of waves and resonance and airy transmission, and fission and flight and over-flight. And that none of the doors required keys, only a resolute man to turn the knob and push them open. Young Higgston was impressed.

Then the hawk came back, climbing the towering air, and it had a rainbird.

The old man had lively eyes, but now they took on a new light.

"Nobody ever gives up pleasure willingly," he said; "and there is always the sneaking feeling that the bargain may not have been perfect. This is one of the things I have missed. I haven't hawked for sixty-five years. Let me fly him this time, Higgston."

"You know how?"

"I am adept. And I once intended to make a better gauntlet for hawkers. This hasn't been improved since Nimrod's time."

"I have an idea for a better gauntlet myself, old man."

"Yes. I know what your idea is. Go ahead with it. It's practical."

"Fly him if you want to, old man."

And old Higgston flew the tercel hawk down through the gleaming clouds, and he and young Higgston watched from the top of the world. And then young Higgston Rainbird was standing alone on the top of Devil's Head Mountain, and the old man was gone.

"I wonder where he went? And where in appleknocker's heaven did he come from? Or was he ever here at all? That's a danged funny machine he came in, if he did come in it. All the wheels are on the inside. But I can use the gears from it, and the clock, and the copper wire. It must have taken weeks

to hammer that much wire out that fine. I wish I'd paid more attention to what he was saying, but he poured it on a little thick. I'd have gone along with him on it if only he'd have found a good stopping place a little sooner, and hadn't been so insistent on giving up hawking. Well, I'll just hawk here till dark, and if it dawns clear I'll be up again in the morning. And Sunday, if I have a little time, I may work on my sparker or my chestnut roaster."

Higgston Rainbird lived a long and successful life. Locally he was known best as a hawker and horse racer. But as an inventor he was recognized as far as Boston.

He is still known, in a limited way, to specialists in the field and period; known as contributor to the development of the moldboard plow, as the designer of the Nonpareil Nutmeg Grater with the safety feature, for a bellows, for a sparker for starting fires (little used), and for the Devil's Claw Wedge for splitting logs.

He is known for such, and for no more.

Miriam Allen de Ford, 1888–1975, died a few weeks after granting permission for the use of the following story. Born in Philadelphia, she was educated at Wellesley College, Temple University, and the University of Pennsylvania. She moved to Hollywood in 1918, where she played bit parts in films. She later moved to San Francisco to work as a labor journalist and staff feature writer on several newspapers. Among her many friends were Jack London, George Sterling, Tom Mooney, and Warren K. Billings, and she contributed at least one item to Charles Fort for his books. She began writing fiction in the 1940s and became equally well known in the mystery and SF fields. She was active as a writer until the last two years of her life, and in her mid-eighties was a chain-smoking, alert, and active participant at SF and mystery writers' conventions.

The Peak Lords

By MIRIAM ALLEN DE FORD

You may call this a confession if you wish. I prefer to call it a statement.

In the first place, I want it clearly understood that I am the

legitimate son of a Peak Lord. I am neither a by-blow nor an impostor. This outrageous skepticism has to cease.

I acknowledge freely that I was vised Below on the date in question. But I was not there for any subversive reason whatever, nor was I there voluntarily. I deny emphatically that I have any compassion for the mutant dwellers Below, or that I was there in any endeavor to "help" or "incite" them.

Moreover, I was not there out of the morbid curiosity which impels students to don breathers and undertake anthropological or sociological research Below. I have no interest in the subhumans living there.

The actual fact is that I was kidnapped.

It was horrible, there Below. The darkness—the stinking soup that passes there for air—the throngs of mutant subhumans with their ground vehicles pouring yet more poison into the atmosphere that only they can breathe! And the streets full of crumbling, ruined buildings which they tear down periodically to make still more room for their vehicles! Some superstition must keep the mutants from taking over what were once the homes of real human beings like us, for they huddle in crowded tenements like so many nests of rattlesnakes.

I was so grateful when your people discovered me and took me out that I promised my rescuers rich rewards when I became Lord of our Peak. It was a dreadful shock to learn that they were not a salvage corps—my breather was almost exhausted and I had no recharges—but a police mission. I thought that all I should have to do would be to explain to you how and why I was there, and you would protect me, let me live in your Lord's court until I inherit. It is hard for me to believe that I am here as a prisoner, under judgment as a suspected criminal!

Do you perhaps imagine that I am one of those throwbacks—there have been some, I know, even in Peak Lord families—who condemn our glorious system, who have defected to the Below and set themselves up as champions of what they call "the oppressed"? Poor fools, how long could they last, unless they could find a quack doctor to give them the mutation operation (and often they have died from the doctor's lack of skill), or else smuggle in recharges for their breathers? I am no such idiot. All of them have died and been hailed by their subhuman "brothers" as martyrs to their "cause"—all of them, that is, who haven't been hauled back

by their families in time and kept in close custody forever after.

I have no such death wish, I can assure you. I want to live.

Let me ask you another thing: how can you doubt, from the very mode of speech and manner, which I cannot change or suppress even if I wanted to, that I am genuinely of a Peak Lord's family? You yourselves are all Peak dwellers. Can't you recognize my authority? I was born and reared in a royal household, just as your own Peak Lord and his family were. The vicious slanders I have seen and heard about myself in your communication media call me "arrogant." I say I keep the dignity taught me from infancy. Before whom should I be humble? There is no one on earth higher than the hundred or so Peak Lords and their families, dwelling as we do on the world's highest mountaintops, surrounded by retainers like yourselves who act as go-betweens to the mutants Below who serve the machines and produce the wealth, for the Peak Lords who own their territories and receive the wealth—and distribute a just portion of it to you. And I am a Peak Lord's closest kin.

My father's ancestors were among the first of the Peak Lords who staked out their claims when life gradually became unbearable in the poisoned cities, with their polluted air and water and their clouds of smog that shut out the sun. If you learned your history as children, you know that at first they were true pioneers, living the hard life of those who invade and transform a wilderness. They fought with others of their own breed to take and hold their Peaks, and they fought with the hordes from Below who tried to wrest the only unspoiled livable places on earth from those who had conquered them first.

By tradition the first Peak Lords were all experienced mountaineers; I know my own Founding Father was. Others were astronauts who could not endure grounding after it was finally learned that the other planets of our solar system were dead or unborn and uninhabitable by men. Gradually, as they and their followers won their wars and consolidated their holdings, each Peak Lord built up a civilized community and established control over the conquered Below in his own area. Then when the mutants appeared and spread—and don't think that was an accident; it was scientific research paid for by the Peak Lords themselves that brought about

and evolved today's race of subhumans whose means of living depends on their productivity for our benefit—our present political and economic chain of command was established.

That is all elementary history, which you all learned in childhood.

You all know that those condemned to remain Below (and not only in the cities, as corruption spread to the countryside) died at first by the millions—and would all have died, had the Peak Lords not subsidized the intensive research projects—frankly, to protect their own sources of wealth. The dwellers Below had failed in all their own attempts to live underground or underseas, and they failed utterly in their feeble efforts to reconvert industrial plants or the nature of their vehicles to end the pollution. Only the Peak Lords by that time possessed the huge fortunes required.

Yes. Well, as I said, my father is descended from one of the very first Peak Lord families. Perhaps that is why, as so often happens in old families, he is an eccentric, strange, neurotic man. I should not dare say this if I were not out of his reach, for his anger is a terrible thing.

He is a lone wolf who has never fraternized with any of his peers. That is why, when you took my case to your own Peak Lord, he said he had never seen or heard of me.

That is true. My father has never indulged in or allowed us —my mother and my youngest brothers and sisters—any of the social visiting back and forth in royal air-processions which as you know are the custom of other Peak Lords.

He is a tyrant, and we have led miserable, lonely lives. He has never even tried to find us suitable wives and husbands as we reached marriageable age. We are all unmarried; when the last of us is dead, the throne will go to a distant cousin. My father doesn't care, so long as he can keep himself alive and in power.

None of us has ever tried to escape—for where would we escape to? No other Lord would take us in (short of the secret refuge I ask for in my desperate situation), for fear of incurring my father's rage and perhaps precipitating violent action which would end the Planet-wide Peace Pact that has endured now for two centuries. Instead, they have quarantined us, and I imagine the young members of other Peak Lord families do not even know that we exist. Our Peak is far away, on the other side of the world.

Perhaps you think, when I say I was kidnapped, that I mean I really did try to escape?

No: in that case I should have chosen my destination, and it would not have been a Peak where nobody knows me and I am being treated as a common criminal.

I think now I had been given a countersedative to keep me from sleeping, while the servant who always sleeps at the foot of my bed had been given a draught to render him unconscious. I had never before had trouble in sleeping, but this night—is it only three nights ago?—I lay wide awake until I couldn't bear it any longer, so I got up.

But when I tried to arouse my servant to help me dress, I could not shake him from his deep slumber, so I arranged my own clothing as best I could. It was the first time in my life that I had dressed without assistance—which may account for the accusation that I must be an impostor, because my clothing and ornaments are not arranged in regulation style.

I had a great desire—almost a thirst—to walk out in the open air. It was a bright moonlight night—so bright that I imagined I could even see the beacon of the abandoned atomic station on the moon.

Like all Peak castles, ours is a fortress too, still guarded regularly according to tradition, although it is more than a hundred years since any Peak Lord warred on another. I went quietly down the corridor leading from my rooms, to the first guarded door. Unusual as my action was, I knew that all I had to do was to explain to the guard that I wished to take a walk in the gardens and to order him to provide an escort for me.

The guard was asleep.

It had never happened before, and I am sure now he too was drugged. He was liable to immediate execution, but I had no intention of reporting him. I stepped over his recumbent body and out into the tree-planted terrace. It was the first time I can remember that I have been completely alone.

I walked slowly under the trees, breathing the fresh cool air, my eyes on the stars that we had hoped some day to reach and now know we never can. I wondered if on some planet around one of them some other unhappy young man was walking and wondering as I was.

And then suddenly—I had heard no sound—I was caught from behind, and before I could open my mouth to cry out I was blindfolded, gagged, and bound with rope. There were two of them at least; I am sure of that.

They dragged me over the garden to the outer gate. There too there should have been guards, but no one stopped us. I was too busy trying to breathe to take much note, and when first I came back to my full senses I was lying, still bound, on a couch in a fast plane.

Through my blindfold I felt the rays of the sun and realized it was morning, but I had no idea of our direction or of the distance we had flown. I could hear men talking, and they spoke the local dialect of our Peak. They said nothing that helped me; their conversation, such as it was, was only of the weather and of flying conditions.

Then I felt the plane swoop down for a landing. Hands unbound me, but left me gagged and blindfolded. I felt something clamped over my nose; I did not recognize it, but I found later it was a breather. The plane taxied to a stop, I was pulled to my feet, the gag and blindfold were torn from me, and I was given a rough push that sent me to my knees. By the time I recovered my balance the plane had taken off again.

I was Below.

It was some moments before my confusion enabled me to guess where I was. The sunshine of the upper air had vanished; I was in a sort of dingy twilight, and when I looked upward all I could see was an unbroken gray cloud. Through the breather I was able to inhale and exhale normally, but when experimentally I opened my mouth and breathed once through that, I was almost choked by the putrid miasma I took into my lungs.

Ahead of me from the landing field stretched a paved road, beyond which I could see dimly streets and houses. There was nowhere to go but forward, so I stumbled on, and in half an hour or so the city had swallowed me up.

I need hardly tell you what it was like; you have visited it often, and you know.

It was horrible. I stumbled around those congested streets for most of the day, trying to avoid contact with the creatures that swarmed there. I ate nothing—how could I eat their food? I had no money in any case, and I couldn't understand or speak their dialect. They stared at me, but they're trained not to approach real humans, who are certain to be agents of their Peak Lord. The occasional scientist investigating, or the champions of the "oppressed," will approach *them.*

I grew panicky. With every minute my breather was running out, and when it failed I had no recharges or any means to get one. I would collapse and choke to death on one of those filthy streets.

And then I heard the copter, and I knew I had been vised and would be rescued. I was weak with relief and gratitude.

And your men told me I was under arrest.

Why won't you believe me? My father had me kidnapped and cast away Below to die. Why won't you take me to your Peak Lord or one of his trusted aides and let me prove my identity?

How do I know my father was to blame? Because I know my father. He hates us all—we are living reminders that some day he must give up his power and one of us will inherit it. But he has always hated me most. I am the eldest, and his first heir. And before he cowed me into terror of him, I was the only one who rebelled, who dared to answer him back, to try—vainly, I acknowledge—to sneak away sometimes for some sort of life of my own. You may say, what good would it do him to have me put out of the way? My oldest sister would come next, and there are five of us altogether. But that's just the point—I am the scapegoat, and because I am not the only child I am expendable.

Besides, he doesn't think the way sane people do.

So he decided to treat me as we treat our major criminals —I suppose you have the same system here—have me cast down Below to die.

I can't help it: The mere thought of him—I tell you, judges, my father was a wicked evil old man! I hated him. He deserved what—

Did I say "was"? I meant "is," of course—

I am too excited. I am weak still from my dreadful ordeal.

. . . No, I don't believe you. You are trying to trick me. My sister is too intimidated to have sent you any such message. Let me see it. I have a right to see it.

. . . I see. So all this time you have just been leading me on.

All right. There's no use keeping it up.

I was not kidnapped. It was I myself who drugged the servants and the guards. I fled in one of our swift flyers after I had surprised my father in his sleep. I felled him with his own heavy staff of office, with which he had so often beaten me.

I hid in your Below, as far away as I could travel, until you would vise me and bring me up, as any Peak Lord would do on vising a stranger without authorization in his Below. I threw away my recharges when I heard your copter start down for me. If I had dreamed what a Below was like, I would never have had the courage to carry out my plan.

But I am *not* a criminal! It was not murder to destroy a tyrant! He deserved to die.

My sister is an ingrate. No, of course I never confided in her. But I relied on her; I was sure she would rejoice as I did when at last I mustered the courage to do what we all must have longed for—that she would gladly serve as Peak Lady until it was safe for me to declare myself and return. I would have named her as my successor.

Very well: let me go now. This is no concern of yours. I shall fly home again and take over from her.

No, you can't, you can't! There is no treaty between our Peaks. The most you have a right to do is to keep me as a guest of your Lord while he investigates! You will find out then that I am no murderer. I am a righteous executioner.

Take me before him and let me present my cause to my equal. What have I to do with your local laws?

. . . Sir! I did not realize! My father would never have sat in judgment in person at a criminal hearing—

No! No! I beg of you! I know your word is supreme in your jurisdiction, my Lord, and I know I entered it of my own volition. But—

Oh, dear God, no! Not without even a breather!

Kill me in any other way and I shall accept your judgment with the dignity worthy of my blood. But I implore you, my Lord, anything, anything—but not that dreadful city of mutants again!

Not—not—B

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Keith Laumer was born in Syracuse, New York, and raised in Buffalo, New York, and in Florida. He served as a career officer in the Air Force and as a Foreign Service Officer in Burma, which gave him background for his most famous character, Retief. His first science-fiction stories appeared in 1959.

Prototaph

By KEITH LAUMER

I was already sweating BB's when I got to the Manhattan Life Concourse; then I had to get behind an old dame that spent a good half hour in the Policy Vending Booth, looking at little pieces of paper and punching the keys like they were fifty-credit bet levers at the National Lottery.

When I got in, I was almost scared to code my order into the Vendor; but I was scareder not to. I still thought maybe what happened over at Prudential and Gibraltar was some kind of fluke, even though I knew all the companies worked out of the Federal Actuarial Table Extrapolator; and FATE never makes a mistake.

But this had to be a mistake.

I punched the keys for a hundred thousand C's of Straight Life; nothing fancy, just a normal workingman's coverage. Then I shoved my ID in the slot and waited. I could feel sweat come out on my scalp and run down by my ear while I waited. I could hear the humming sound all around me like some kind of bees bottled up back of the big gray panel; then the strip popped out of the slot, and I knew what it said before I looked at it:

UNINSURABLE.

I got the door open and shoved some guy out of my way and it was like I couldn't breathe; I mean, think about it: Twenty-one years old, out in the city to take my chances all alone, with no policy behind me. It was like the sidewalk under your feet turned to cracked ice, and no shore in sight.

A big expensive-looking bird in executive coveralls came out of a door across the lobby; I guess I yelled. Everybody was looking at me. When I grabbed his arm, he got that mad look and started to reach for his lapel button—the kind that goes with a Million Cee Top Crust policy.

"You got to listen," I told him. "I tried to buy my insurance—and all I got was this!" I shoved the paper in his face. "Look at me," I told him. "I'm healthy, I'm single, I finished Class Five Subtek school yesterday, I'm employed! What do you mean, uninsurable?"

"Take your hands off me," he said, in a kind of a choky voice. He was looking at the paper, though. He took it and gave me a look like he was memorizing my face for picking out of a lineup later.

"Your ID." He held out his hand and I gave it to him. He looked at it and frowned an important-looking frown.

He pushed his mouth in and out and changed his mind about what he was going to say; he knew as well as I did that the big actuarial computer doesn't make mistakes. "Come along." He turned his back and headed for the lift bank.

"What have I got, some kind of incurable disease or something?" I was asking them; they just looked at me and goggled their eyes. More of them kept coming in, whispering together; then they'd hurry away and here would come a new bunch. And none of them told me anything.

"The old crock in front of me, she was ninety if she was a day!" I told them. "She got her policy! Why not me?"

They didn't pay any attention. Nobody cared about me,

how I felt. I got up and went over to the first guy that had brought me up here.

"Look," I said. I was trying to sound reasonable. "What I mean is, even a guy dying in the hospital can get a policy for *some* premium. It's the law; everybody's got a right to be insured. And—"

"I know the laws governing the issuance of policies by this company," the man barked at me. He was sweating, too. He got out a big tissue and patted himself with it. He looked at a short fat man with a stack of papers in his hand.

"I don't care what kind of analysis you ran," he told him. "Run another one. Go all the way back to Primary if you have to, but get to the bottom of this! I want to know why this"—he gave me a look—"this individual is unique in the annals of actuarial history!"

"But, Mr. Tablish—I even coded in a trial run based on a one-hundred-per-cent premium, with the same result: No settlement of such a claim is possible—"

"I'm not interested in details; just get me results! The computer has available to it every fact in the known universe; see that it divulges the reasoning behind this—this anomaly!"

The fat man went away. They took me to another room and a doctor ran me through the biggest med machine I ever saw. When he finished I heard him tell the big man I was as sound as a Manhattan Term Policy.

That made me feel a little better—but not much.

Then the fat man came back, and his face was a funny white color—like some raw bread I saw once on a field trip through Westside Rationing. He said something to the others, and they all started to talk at once, and some of them were yelling now. But do you think any of them told me anything? I had to wait another hour, and then a tall man with white hair came in and everybody got quiet and he looked at papers and they all got their heads together and muttered; and then they looked at me, and I felt my heart pounding up under my ribs and I was feeling sick then, med machine or no med machine.

Then they told me.

That was two days ago. They got me in this room now, a fancy room up high in some building. There's guys around to do whatever I want—servants, I guess you'd call 'em. They gave me new clothes, and the food—WestRat never put out

anything like this. No liquor, though—and no smokes. And when I said I wanted to go out, all I got was a lot of talk. They treat me—careful. Not like they like me, you know, but like I was a bomb about to go off. It's a funny feeling. I guess I got more power than anybody that ever lived—more power than you can even get your mind around the thought of. But a lot of good it does me. There's only the one way I can use it—and when I think about that, I get that sick feeling again.

And meanwhile, I can't even go for a walk in the park.

The President was here just now. He came in, looking just like the Tri-D, only older, and he came over and looked at me kind of like I looked at him. I guess it figures: There's only one of each of us.

"Are you certain there's not some—some error, George?" he said to the wrinkly-faced man who walked just behind him.

"The Actuarial Computer is the highest achievement of a thousand years of science, Mr. President," he said, in a deep voice like the mud on the bottom of the ocean. "Our society is based on the concept of its infallibility within the physical laws of the Universe. Its circuits are capable of analyses and perceptions that range into realms of knowledge as far beyond human awareness as is ours beyond that of a protozoan. An error? No, Mr. President."

He nodded. "I see." That's all he said. Then he left.

Now I'm just sitting here. I don't know what to do next—what to say. There's a lot to this—and, in a way, there's nothing. I got to think about it, dope it out. There's got to be something I can do—but what?

The machine didn't say much; they took me down to the sub-vault where the big voice panel is, where the primary data's fed in, and let me hear for myself. It didn't give any explanations; it just told me.

Funny; in a way it was like something I've always known, but when you hear FATE come right out and say it, it's different:

When I die, the world ends.

Thomas N. Scortia is an aerospace engineer who, along with thousands of his fellow technicians in that field, found himself unemployed a few years ago. Fortunately he had a second career to fall back upon, for he has been writing and publishing science fiction for more than twenty years. He has little time for his first love today, as he produces such best-selling novels as *The Glass Inferno*, on which is based the movie *The Towering Inferno*, and *The Prometheus Crisis*.

Broken Image

By THOMAS N. SCORTIA

While one of the Earth's great starships poised unseen above the perpetual nitric oxide clouds, they landed Baldur in a pillar of fire where his Loaii guides awaited him with worshipful eyes downcast. Que Bok, the elder of the two guides who had been sent by Marina, greeted him; and that night Baldur entered the city after the burning of the profaners at dusk.

An hour before curfew, Baldur followed Que Bok and his son-squire, Lok Lor, through the public square of the city, which was called Vlek in the harsh Vorstachian tongue. In the center of the marketplace two iron stakes stood radiating

a dull heat from the remains of the charred wood around them.

"Filthy savages," Baldur said softly as he saw the carboned shapes bound to the iron stakes.

"Don't be rash," a remembered voice whispered in his inner ear. The memory of his hours of somno-conditioning sent a stab of phantom pain through his temple.

"Please, Lord," Que Bok said softly, his blue-scaled, near-man face mirroring the fear of his slit-pupiled eyes. "The soldiers! It is almost curfew time."

Across the marketplace, the tangled knot of mercenaries, their brilliant uniforms of red-dyed plumage dulled to the color of venous blood by the approaching dusk, were being mustered by a sergeant wearing a yellow feather headdress. The square, Baldur saw, was deserted except for himself, Que Bok, and his son.

Deserted except for them and the withered black things bound by wires to the sooty iron stakes.

"Force is not the answer," the cloud voice seemed to say in his inner ear.

No, he thought, force is not the answer, not to an Earthman. Earthmen could see cruelty, understand it in a dispassionate way, but . . . the subtleties of surgery that had changed him to resemble the Loaii and the Vorstachii had done something else. In the half-remembered pain he must have lost something . . . or gained something. Certainly no Earthman should know the fury that he felt now. Which one of his race, Baldur thought bitterly, could feel the cold hate he felt at the sight of the two shriveled things bound to the stakes?

The wood still glowed redly about them, feathering itself into white ash; but the humanoid bodies were quiet in death. Only red sparks still traced the dim memories of agony through the carbonized flesh.

There was no odor. Not any more. The juices had been baked from the two Loaii after the killing heat of the fire, and now only the blackened husks remained with the vague suggestion of the man form, twisted and distorted in the final torture of the flames.

Que Bok tugged at his elbow. "It is almost curfew time. If we are caught in the streets . . ." He left the danger unstated.

Yes, Baldur thought, if they were caught on the streets, the

swine would kill them with the relish that came to these savage people.

Or they would try, he thought. His hand strayed to the camouflaged equipment belt that looked like a rivet-studded girdle riding low on his hips. The devouring fire that he would call down upon them would seem like the wrath of a vengeful god.

The aftermath would be the sure failure of his mission.

For somehow the path of Loaian and Vorstachian history must be changed before their savage culture came forth from this world centuries from now and brought the old blood lusts back to the stars.

Butchers, he thought, looking at the mercenaries across the square. He could easily burn them down where they stood, make of them the same blackened shriveled things as the two burned Loaii.

A sense of power, of retribution shook him for a moment, and then fear. It was impossible. What was wrong with him?

"So much depends on you," the remembered voice reminded him. "Both the Loaii and the Vorstachii." His mind formed an image of the speaker, distant and idealized. He couldn't identify the man.

"Lead the way," he told Que Bok, and gestured for Lok Lor to bring up the rear.

They made their way swiftly through the narrow streets toward the inn where he had been told he would meet Marina. Once Lok Lor said in young wonder, "What cruelties are the Vorstachii not capable of?"

"You're wrong in thinking of them as Vorstachii," Que Bok chided him. "Who is to say what *men* will not do?"

Men? Baldur thought in disgust, creatures like you, men?

In the half-dusk the form of his companions was doubly alien. It was not so much the scaled appearance of the Loaii flesh but the placement of the slit-pupiled eyes, the double-whorled flaring of the nostrils, that gave them their exotic appearance. The Vorstachii looked very much like the Loaii except for the double earlobes of the latter and a redder cast to the features. At a distance, both might be taken for Earthmen. Conversely, Earthmen might be taken for Loaii. Otherwise, Baldur thought, his present masquerade, even with Galactic surgical techniques, might have been impossible.

But part of the masquerade, the most important part, was in the way of thinking. And here, he thought with a trace of horror, the surgeons might have succeeded too well. The end-

less hours of somno-conditioning had blotted out whole areas of his previous memory, superimposing a synthetic history of birth and growth and . . . fury. Anger. Hate. Emotions lost except to the ancestral memory of man.

In the distant past of his race, there had been savageries and cruelties to rival those of the Vorstachii. How long ago? But what Earthman was capable of the sort of hatred and violence, the will to destruction that had moved him this past hour?

The inn was called "The Sign of the Verklu," and the fiber board swinging before it bore an inlaid representation of the ravenous little desert lizard after which it had been named. The inn was set well back from the cobbled cul-de-sac plaza which lay at the end of the street they had taken. It was typical of the buildings in the Loaian quarter, roughly hexagonal, and jutting out into the street to allow a bay window exposure onto the thoroughfare. The rooms for private functions, such as eating, were situated along the outer wall; while the lath-roofed open courtyard was given over to the living, sleeping, and conversation areas.

They entered and Que Bok greeted the twin innkeepers who saluted Baldur reverently. "Our home is honored," they intoned in unison, and Baldur inclined his head.

"Perhaps you would like a room away from our eyes to eat," one suggested.

The surgeons could not adapt his system to assimilate the alien amino acids of the flesh on this planet. For this reason he carried concentrated packages of a sustaining diet, essential acids, fats, and carbohydrates with needed vitamins. They represented only eighteen hundred calories for a day; but Baldur was accustomed to eating only one meal a day. On eighteen hundred calories his frame stayed lean, but he retained the energy he needed for the strenuous tasks ahead. As a part of his image, they had decided to conceal his eating, especially since the Loaii and Vorstachii held special taboos about ingestion and elimination, ranking one with the other. For this reason, a being who did not eat was something quite apart and invested with a special immaculateness not found with ordinary beings.

"I do not eat," Baldur said, and was rewarded with a quick sucking of breath as the innkeepers fell back a step in surprise.

"You mean you have not eaten," one suggested.

"No," Baldur said. "I do not eat."

"Forgive them," Que Bok said. "Had they seen you as I have seen you, they would know."

"Take me to the one I came to see," Baldur said.

"Through the garden, Lord," the second innkeeper said, bowing and turning to lead the way.

They passed through a stand of yellow-green reedy plants and past an irregular grouping of white pebbles which had apparently been selected with a mathematician's eye to regularity of form and similarity of dimension. The effect of a bed of such regular stones was at once irritating, in the conflict of uniformity with surrounding assymetry, and exciting. They passed into the sleeping area which stood under the lath-striped starless sky. Here, in rising terraces, amid stands of reeds and low bushes, the sleeping hammocks of the inn's guests ringed a center stretch of yellow flint sand where small groups gathered in the tradional pose of Loaian conversationalists.

They moved past groups which suddenly broke their self-contained reserve and bowed before Baldur. It was then he saw her standing on the far side of the sandy stretch. He could not identify the face, but the air of disassociation told him. It must be Marina, he thought, and a quick excitement caused him to lengthen his step.

She smiled and stepped toward him. When he did not speak immediately she said with a puzzled frown, "Baldur?"

"Yes," he said.

"For a moment I thought you didn't recognize me."

"I don't," he said.

"Surely, I'm not that much different?"

"I . . ." He bit his lip and said, "I don't know. I'm a little confused."

"I see," she said nodding her head. "Well, there's no real cause for alarm." She turned to Que Bok and his son. "Will you leave us for a moment?"

The two nodded and withdrew several paces to assume a nonlistening stance.

"I have made arrangements for you to stay here tonight. I suppose you don't sleep."

"No," he said. "I haven't tried going without sleep for more than two days so far, but the treatment seems effective."

"It was appropriate to the image."

"Like not eating?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Of course, the eating has a special significance. You know about eating?"

He nodded. "In many ways they are still animals."

"Get that out of your mind," she said. "They're different; another evolutionary stream, but they are men."

"Men?" he said with some distaste. "No, they're not men. They may think and speak and walk on two legs, but they aren't men. They don't belong to our race."

His vehemence surprised him. She looked at him searchingly for a long moment as though debating the meaning of his words.

"You know better than that," she said. "Being a man is not a business of form, or walking on two legs, or speaking, or anything like that. It's a state of mind, an attitude toward the universe and toward life itself."

"Which is just what I meant," he said; and he told her of the evening burning in the square.

"Do you suppose men have always been what they are?" she demanded.

"You can't equate men with these beasts," he said. "Men haven't the capacity for such cruelty or rage or self-pride."

"You think strictly in terms of the race that evolved on Earth," she said; "but there are races that walk on four legs which we call men. As for this quality you call self-pride, have you examined yourself?"

He was taken aback by her sudden turning of his words against him. He was about to say something when Que Bok approached breathlessly and said:

"Lord?"

"Yes," he said.

"There is trouble. Can you help?"

"What is it?" he said.

"One of the men in the eating room. He has the falling sickness and . . ." He waved his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Come with me," Baldur told Marina.

"In the eating room?" Marina said. "That's the greatest taboo . . ."

"Never mind," Baldur snapped. "This is part of why we came, and taboos don't stop us."

He followed Que Bok as the Loaii half-trotted across the clearing toward the front of the hostelry. Marina followed uncertainly. Baldur smiled to himself. For all of her certainty, she betrayed the vascillation of every woman.

A small group of Loaii, including the two innkeepers, had

gathered before the entrance to the room, but no one had dared enter. Through the thin wall Baldur heard soft groaning.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"No one will enter," Que Bok said.

"He is very ill, Lord," Que Bok's son-squire said, "but no one can stand to enter."

"Will you come with me?" Baldur asked.

The young Loai hesitated, looked at the wide-eyed face of his father, and finally nodded. "Where you go, Lord," he said.

Baldur pushed past the group. Inside, the windowless room was long and narrow, barely six feet by nine feet. The yellow light of a shuttered oil lamp affixed to one wall filled the room with long ungainly shadows. The sprawled form of an old Loai quivered on the floor, and Baldur heard him groan in deep pain. He looked around.

The room was sickening.

It was spattered with blood and shreds of purple flesh that clung like dirty mud to the walls and even to the ceiling. The gelatinous flesh which had but minutes before been a moving, breathing lizardlike creature was already in the advanced stages of autolysis. The room reeked of ammonia and decay.

Baldur felt his gorge rise at the smell and he thought for a moment he would lose control of himself. Behind him Que Bok's son made gagging noises and stumbled in the half-light as he fell back.

"Oh, Lord, Lord," the boy said. "Forgive me, Lord." He turned and fled from the horror of the room.

Marina gasped. "It's something I can't get used to, this need of theirs for live food and the way they must kill it."

"The tissues deaminate too fast for anything else," he said. "Meat an hour old is poison to them."

He looked around the room, seeing the sickening mark of the beast in every corner, and turned his attention to the stricken Loai on the floor.

"And you call these 'men,' " he said contemptuously.

Marina removed a communicator from somewhere within her robes and spoke softly into it. He conducted a swift examination of the native, and relayed her information. At a distance he heard the vicious crackle of static as the answering beam from the ship penetrated the massive plasma layers of the planetary ionosphere—the plasma layers which con-

stantly renewed the opaque blanket of poisonous nitric oxide that formed the yellow-brown sky above them.

He removed an instrument from his equipment belt, made several checks, which included oxygen balance and amino acid level in the bloodstream. He gave several bits of data to Marina, who transmitted them to the waiting ship. In moments he had the answer and began the pencil-beam surgery at the base of the patient's skull. It was little more than refined trepanning, but the effect was that of relieving the constricting pressure around the major artery that supplied the brain. In seconds the patient's breathing became normal and he subsided into a deep sleep that Baldur saw was the normal reaction to heavy fatigue.

He rose and replaced the pencil beam. "That's enough for the moment," he said. "They can handle the rest."

"It won't be the last time you do this," she said.

He smiled sourly. "Divine healer to a bunch of savages. I appreciate the irony."

Outside, Baldur instructed the twin innkeepers to remove the sleeping native. The two innkeepers, who had been trained from infancy in their craft, entered while the other Loaii turned to their hammocks strung around the sleeping area. Baldur motioned to Marina to leave the area.

Before she retired she said, "Tomorrow we will go into the city."

"That's bound to be dangerous," he said.

"Of course, but that's part of the mission."

"Do you really think we can influence a whole culture this way?" he asked.

"By creating a legend? A new religion? Look at the history of the Earth."

"I don't know," Baldur said. "To introduce an idea as alien as the brotherhood of Loaii and Vorstachii—neither race will tolerate the idea."

"The time will come when the Loaii will throw off the control of the Vorstachii and the whole pattern will repeat itself," she said. "By the time they develop an advanced technology and space flight they will be little more than savages with atomic power. We can't turn such a race loose in the universe without some governing control. In the end we would have to destroy them, and that is something men will not face unless they have to."

"It's hard to believe these things could come to the level of

morality and respect for life that men have achieved," he said. "It's a sad beginning."

"But it *is* a beginning," she pointed out.

He left her and returned to his own area. He could not sleep, and he envied her that ability. Of course, she had no image to preserve. Playing the half-divine prophet to a savage planet required a constant attention to the correct image as well as a close understanding of the underlying psychology of the races.

After an hour he grew restless and decided to get some air. He was moving out into the sand area at the center of the inn when he realized his path would take him past her secluded hammock. He paused near the reed screen that separated her area and wondered if she were awake. Then he heard voices speaking low and insistently. He tried to make out the words.

"Yes . . . yes, of course," she was saying. "Only I don't understand your attitude. Are you sure he has enough information?"

She was speaking into the communicator, he realized.

"Surely he must realize," she was saying. "I know it's a shock. All transitions are, but . . ."

The rest of the conversation was lost to him.

He started, wondering whom she was addressing. Someone on the ship, obviously. He closed his eyes and sought a face, and realized that there was no face to be sought. Just a general man-face, refined and delicate, and turned with a sensitive, almost idealized hand so that the nobility of the face was completely devoid of humanity. For a moment he shuddered at the loss and then thought of names . . .

Miller, Nakano, Ibn Alli, a dozen more . . . all names he knew; but the faces wouldn't come. Man faces as different from his Loaian face as the faces of lower animals were different. Only the idealized face came—and, of course, the subtly changed face of Marina, with odd brown eyes, deep, liquid, and full of some inner meaning that were alien to the face she wore at the moment. When she had been something else . . .

Human. To lose one's humanity. It was a traumatic enough experience, he realized. Little cause for alarm—the disorientation—but he was suddenly very afraid and he knew he did not dare admit it. He itemized himself—past memories of family, parents, childhood—well, it was all there and secure, and he knew who he was.

He walked past Marina's area into the arena and sat through most of the night looking into the sky, seeking for the impossible glimpse of a star in a sky that had never parted its cloud layer enough to show even the primary around which it orbited.

He ate his single daily meal secretly before anyone awoke and was sitting staring out into the recreation area when Que Bok, looking still sleepy, appeared and approached him.

"Lord, what will you do today?" he asked.

"I will go among the people today," Baldur said.

"Perhaps I should assemble a group," Que Bok suggested.

"No, we'll go to the marketplace," Baldur said.

"That is not safe, Lord. The governor's troops are all over the city, and even the City Lord cannot control them."

"Nevertheless, we will go to the marketplace," Baldur said. "Pass the word that I will be there before noon."

After Que Bok had left, Baldur prepared himself, checking out the equipment he had brought with him. He paid particular attention to the resonator. The men in the ship had warned him against any show of violence on this violent world. The resonator would handle most situations, he knew, by the subtonic radiation effect on the local nervous system. The product was an unreasoning fear in the victim, the sort of consuming fear that would cause him to forget any idea of violence. The opaque projector was another item. In those instances where he needed to obscure the area where he worked, the projector would surround him with an opaque sphere, which could be extended, with some loss in opaqueness, to as much as twenty yards.

When Marina appeared, he was ready for the journey to the center of the city. The yellow light from the dirty brown sky brought an unreal cast to her alien features.

"What we do today is doubly important," she said. "It establishes the pattern of the mission, and your first appearance will leave its mark upon the history of these people."

"I hope things go as planned," he said. "The concept is somewhat mystical for my tastes."

"Mystical?" she said. "Of course it's mystical. How else do you leave a lasting historical imprint upon a primitive people? How do you introduce a new morality and a brotherhood concept on a planet with master and slave races so completely set apart from each other?"

"By developing a slave religion?" he asked.

"Slave religions have a vigor, historically, that the religions of dominant races never have. The masters grow soft in their religion. They don't need it to sustain their self-image or to promise them a better day."

"I don't challenge your reasoning," he said. "After all, I *am* here."

"Yes," she said, "you are."

"A man can't do more than that," he said.

"No," she said. "You can't ask more of a man."

She smiled at him in a half-distracted fashion as though not knowing what to say beyond this. He was rather surprised to see that even in the alien disguise of the Loaii she was attractive. He had memories of knowing her before, but he was confused; and his first thought was that he had best beware of the effect of isolation and danger. Men tended to commit themselves emotionally under those circumstances, and he knew this was not a good thing for him. Nevertheless, he thought, she was quite attractive in a completely foreign and unhuman fashion.

He thought of confronting her with the conversation he had overheard, but he realized that he had little to go on. Undoubtedly the men in the ship had given her instructions beyond those given him. He decided he would look foolish if he made an issue of it.

Just before midday they left the inn and proceeded along the narrow streets toward the marketplace. As they walked, several natives attached themselves to the group; and shortly a small line of Loaii followed Baldur, Marina, and Que Bok down the narrow street. Lok Lor lagged somewhat behind as the followers tugged at his robes and bombarded him with questions.

They entered the marketplace, and Baldur paused before the iron stakes which had held the bodies of the two Loaii. He stood for a long moment in silence, counting the effect of his action upon the audience. A wave of whispering swept the fringe of the group as more Loaii joined the crowd, and a few passing Vorstachii stopped and stood arrogantly on the edge of the crowd. He looked about, but there were only isolated spots of red as yet to signify the presence of the city mercenaries.

An old woman came forward, trembling, and said, "Lord, Lord, help me!"

Her eyes, Baldur saw, were clouded with the beginning haze of cataracts. She must be barely able to navigate, he

thought, with even large masses in bright light being featureless to her clouded eyes. He leaned forward and cupped her head in his hands. They were prepared for this as well as a hundred other rather common afflictions. His hand moved, found the instrument he needed. He adjusted it by touch and moved it over her eyes, dissolving away the opaque tissue and stimulating new growth about the cornea. As he watched, the cloudiness disappeared and her eyes became bright and shining.

The woman gasped at the sudden impact of light. She fell to her knees and kissed the hem of his robe. Finally he pulled her to her feet. A low murmur of wonder ran through the crowd as she turned and they saw the miracle he had accomplished.

The word spread quickly of his coming. In the next hour the sick and lame ones appeared from the crowd and he healed them. In some instances he allayed the illness in a matter of minutes with an irradiation that destroyed the microorganisms of the disease. The minor surgeries he performed under the crowd's watchful eyes and heard their gasps of wonder. He looked up at last at Marina's whispered warning and saw a group of red-plumed mercenaries converging on them.

"Careful," she said. "Don't make any overt move."

He nodded.

The mercenaries, under the direction of their captains, began to clear the people. A low murmur of disappointment swept through the crowd. Several of the Loaii resisted briefly; the soldiers struck them down with their glass-barbed maces.

"Wait!" he shouted, and raised his hand.

In an instant silence held the crowd. The mercenaries stopped in their tracks. A tickling sensation in his middle ear told him that Marina was using the resonator subtonics which were peculiarly effective on the Vorstachii. The Loaii appeared uncomfortable, but the Vorstachii mercenaries were frozen in a mixture of terror and awe.

He spoke to them then, pitching his voice persuasively, then insistently, talking to them of their destiny as a race. For the Loaii and the Vorstachii, he said, were mere varieties from the same racial stock; and the hatred and mistrust of generations had to end before they would inherit the skies above and the stars that the legends told of. All men were of the same womb, and not the least of these were the Loaii and the Vorstachii.

The Loaii rustled in their robes, horrified at the audacity of the words. The grip of hatred was centuries old, and the oppressed perpetuated their oppression as much as the oppressors by their attitudes and their generations-old desire for revenge.

But he talked to them of that too, seeing that they would reject the words at first. Only he knew that some would hear and remember, and that the words would be seeds that would bear fruit generations from now. It was the only way to turn them from this jungle hate to meet the beings that men had become.

In the end, he stopped, tired and vaguely depressed. It had not gone as he had hoped. The baffled eyes and the whispering voices from the crowd told him this.

Lok Lor tugged at his elbow and said, "My father says we must go."

He nodded absently and took Marina by the arm. As they moved through the crowd, someone shouted, and a ripe fruit flew through the air to land at his feet. Moments later stones were falling from the rear.

Que Bok appeared beside him and said, "Hurry, Lord."

The crowd was closing in on them when Marina loosed her control of the mercenaries. The immediate effect was a sudden surge away from the square as the soldiers moved forward, their jagged maces slashing down on the Loaii. He heard screaming, and in seconds the crowd broke into a confused mass of bodies stumbling in all directions. In this confusion, Que Bok led them down an alley, doubled their path back behind a row of buildings, and soon they were in the sanctuary of the inn.

"A terrible thing, Lord," he said when they were seated in the inn garden.

"We'll try again tomorrow," he said.

"I fear it will be the same, Lord," Lok Lor said. "Only the City Lord will loose the governor's troops upon us."

"I have a plan for that," Marina said.

"What's that?" Baldur asked.

"I'll talk with you about it later," she said, "after I have discussed it with the others."

He nodded absently. The fatigue and discouragement of the day weighted his mind more than he had realized. For the first time he wondered at the rationale of his mission. Was it enough, this business of performing a few apparent miracles and leaving a message of brotherhood to these sav-

ages? Would this be sufficient impetus for their ponderous historical process to be turned in a new direction?

It must be, he thought. It seemed a simple and real plan.

Only he had not realized, on an immediate personal level, just how savage these people were. The whole atmosphere of their society was so alien to men who had rid themselves of these emotions long ago. That the long historical process would eventually raise these beasts to that level was something he could not imagine. But men had changed other races more alien than these, he knew.

Somewhat later that evening when he sought Marina, Que Bok told him she had left the inn with Lok Lor.

"Where did she go?" he demanded.

"I do not know, Lord," Que Bok said.

"Did she give any hint?"

The old Loai thought for a moment. "She asked many questions about the governor and about the City Lord. I did not understand her intent."

She returned with Lok Lor just before dawn. He watched her move across the sandy arena and rose before her.

"Oh!" she said, "You gave me a start."

"Where were you?" he demanded.

"Out," she said. "I had an idea that might help."

"What right have you to try something without consulting me?" he demanded angrily. "Don't you know what kind of a world you're on?"

"Of course," she said, and brushed his cheek with her lean fingers. They made a faint burring sound, slipping across his scaled flesh. "I had no idea you would be so disturbed."

"It's foolhardy," he said, feeling flushed. "What have you done?"

"I have been finding out what I can of the City Lord. If we are to continue, we must gain some support from the local power structure."

"That's not an easy task," he said.

"The City Lord is noted for being more liberal than most of his race," she said. "He's known among the Vorstachii as a poet. Isn't that odd?"

"I can imagine the poetry these savages would write," he said sourly.

"You're too arrogant," she said. "Within their own framework, the Vorstachii have a well-developed morality. They have strong family ties, and they can be gentle and kind to their own."

"I'm deeply touched," he said. "How can we possibly use all of this, however?"

"The City Lord has only the power ceded to him by the governor; and there has been so much unrest in the city recently that the governor's troops, which have been sent here, act almost semi-autonomously. Nevertheless, the City Lord is the nearest source of power we can touch."

"I still don't see how."

"He has a young son," she said. "If we can get to him through the son . . ."

"You're beginning to think like these animals," he said turning away.

"Let's not quarrel," she said. "There's too much to do, and so much depends on us."

Before he could answer, her lips brushed his forehead in the dusk, and she said, "Please, Baldur, not tonight. You'll feel better tomorrow morning."

"You forget," he said bitterly, "I don't sleep." It was, he realized, the worst part of the changes that had been made in him.

He sat the remainder of the night thinking of her and the contradictions of her. He remembered her only as a face amid the past memories; and he wondered if, amid the confused memories, real and synthetic, she occupied more than a shadow part. The terrible thing, he realized, was that he no longer trusted her. It was obvious that the men in the ship had given her instructions he knew nothing about.

Shortly after dawn he was started from his reverie by a loud banging at the street entrance. After some moments he heard the querulous tones of one of the innkeepers. An instant later a harsh crash sounded and a squad of mercenaries boiled into the inn arena. Two of them held the innkeeper captive; when he struggled, one soldier struck him with a short club and hurled him carelessly to the ground.

"What are you doing?" Baldur demanded angrily.

"Are you the magician?" the captain of the troop demanded.

"I am Bal Dur," he said, giving it the Loaian pronunciation.

"You are to come with us," the man said.

"Lord, Lord," Que Bok said, appearing from the sleeping area followed by Marina.

"Keep away," he ordered Que Bok. "It can mean only trouble for you."

"Come," the captain said. He motioned two of the soldiers forward.

Marina appeared by Baldur's side. "I'm coming too."

"You can't," he said. "It's dangerous."

"I have to come," she said. "It's part of the plan."

"No," he said. "I don't know what you and the men on the ship are up to, but it's too dangerous."

"Nevertheless, I'm coming," she said, and moved toward the soldiers. Two of them took her arms as the first pair seized Baldur. He brushed them aside.

"Who wants me?" he demanded.

"The Lord of the City," the captain said, "though why he wants to talk with such vermin is beyond me."

"The woman comes too," Baldur said.

"Very well," the captain said. "There are dungeons enough."

He signaled and the troop formed around them. They left the inn and proceeded slowly north toward the City Lord's palace.

They entered a side gate obscured from the desert garden of the main entrance by an outcropping of porous rock which must have been carted intact from the volcanic regions to the south. A squeeking portcullis lowered behind them after they entered. They were led past the bivouac area of at least a hundred mercenaries. Finally they entered a formal garden of rock and sand. Feathery desert plants reared forty feet above them on thin porous stalks, while their tendrils swept down in an airy screen that filled the air with diaphanous fronds. The fronds were scaled with microscopic transparent scales that caught the yellow morning light and turned the garden into a dizzying lake of flashing rainbow colors extending into near infrared. The guards withdrew leaving them alone.

After a moment a form appeared at the other end of the garden and approached. The Vorstachi was barely five feet tall, small and delicate for his race. Part of his loss in height, Baldur saw, stemmed from his bowed, almost stooped posture as he walked. He looked very tired and worn.

"I am Gar Lan, the Lord of the Vlek," he said tiredly, looking first at Marina and then at Baldur. "You are the one they call the magician?"

"Your troops call me a magician, perhaps," Baldur said.

"Teacher, then. You call yourself a teacher," the Lord said impatiently.

"Yes," Baldur said.

"You talk nonsense in the city streets about great beings beyond the stars which most men have never seen, and how one day we will walk by their sides as equals."

"That is so," Baldur said.

"They say that you are probably a god."

"I have never said this," Baldur said.

"Perhaps a child of gods?"

"You have said it," Baldur said, "Not I."

"No matter," the Lord said. "You have performed miracles, they tell me, healed people in the streets of diseases and cured deformities that no doctors of ours could help."

"He can do this," Marina said. "He can cast out disease, and cause the crippled to walk, and raise the spirit at the point of death."

Baldur looked at her, trying to tell her not to overplay.

"Is this true?" the City Lord demanded.

"It is true, Gar Lan," Baldur said.

"I am addressed as Lord," the man snapped.

"I address no one as Lord," Baldur said.

The man stared at him, weighing his audacity. Baldur paused, expecting him to call the guard. Then he realized that the tenor of the man's questions meant that he needed help.

"There is someone who is ill?" Baldur said.

"My son," the Lord said. "My only son."

"Very well," Baldur said. "I will see him."

The Lord led them through the garden, brushing aside the prismatic fronds. They passed over an airy bridge of woven basketwork and through a massive door, whose posts were demons carved from the trunks of two great trees, to an inner sleeping garden. On a low couch at the end of the garden the still form of a boy lay, surrounded by a group of figures.

As they approached, one Vorstachi turned to meet them. He wore the robes of a physician.

"Lord," he said, "we tried our best."

"What do you mean?" the Lord demanded.

"He is with his grandfathers," the physician said.

Gar Lan forgot his dignity and ran to his son's couch. He fell to his knees before the silent form and gathered it in his arms. After a moment his figure sagged and he lowered the boy to the couch. He gestured for the attendants to withdraw and turned to Baldur.

"He is surely dead," he said in a broken voice.

"I am truly sorry to hear this," Baldur said.

"Only you can help," the Lord said. When Baldur said

nothing, the Lord insisted, "You can raise the very dead. Your woman said so."

"Let me look at the boy," Baldur said.

The Lord stood aside and he approached the couch. There was no question of it; the boy was dead. The signs of autolysis were already present, and he knew that the tissues of the body were being reduced by the body's own uncontrolled enzymes. Such a thing happened to Earth animals after death, Baldur knew, but the process was one of hours and even days. In the Vorstachii and Loaii, and indeed in all of the higher animals of this world, the autolysis that followed death in an hour softened tissues and broke proteins into a half-liquid mass in which bacteria grew quickly. If the boy were not cremated before the sun set, his body would be a mass of corruption and dangerous infection by tomorrow morning.

He leaned forward, checking the clenched condition of the limbs, and the odor struck him. He sniffed, smelling the characteristic banana-oil odor. Then he saw the prominent reddish coloration in the veins of the neck, and he knew.

"Marina," he said.

As soon as she was beside him he said, "Gar Lan, we will leave you for a moment," and erected the shield before the Lord could answer.

"Neural toxin," he said. "The boy's been poisoned."

"Of course," she said.

"They know nothing about such toxins," he said.

"I know this," she said. "I poisoned him."

He grabbed her arm fiercely and turned her to face him. "What are you saying?" he said.

"I bribed a servant to poison the boy," she said.

"You thought I could save him and buy his father's gratitude?" he said. "How could you, and with the toxin? You know it's fatal to these people."

"I intended that he should die," she said. "Otherwise, the effect would not have been the same."

"My God!" he said. "What are you saying?"

"We don't have too much time," she said. "We must work fast."

"He's dead, don't you understand?" Baldur said. "We can do nothing for him."

"I told you I was prepared for this," she said removing her communicator. "Were ready," she said into it.

The milk-white sphere that had formed about them as Baldur raised the screen glowed brightly for a moment, and be-

fore them the body on the couch shimmered and disappeared.

"The same way you and I were brought here," she said. "They have already recorded the general structure of his body, and the body they have removed will provide the refinements. Then the nervous system pattern will be duplicated."

"Make a duplicate of the boy?" he said. "A robot?"

"Not a robot. A flesh and blood, living duplicate with a brain and nervous system, the exact duplicate of the boy, with full memory up to death."

"But not the boy himself."

"Who's to say?" she said. "It's as if we removed five minutes of him in time and then returned his body intact. Can you say that he is dead, that what we return is not the boy himself?"

Before he could reply, the couch glowed brightly and the figure of the boy reassembled itself. Only now the young limbs were flushed with life, and the chest moved while the whorled nostrils moved, sucking in the life-giving air.

"Drop the screen," Marina said. He obeyed without thinking.

Gar Lan stood outside, his eyes wide with fear. At the sight of his son, he forgot them and ran forward to fall beside the couch. His chest heaved silently.

Finally, he looked up at Baldur with wonder and said, "He's alive."

"Yes," Baldur said. "He is now alive."

The City Lord rose slowly, looked at Baldur for long moments. Finally, he sank to his knees and clutched the hem of Baldur's robe.

"Lord," he said. "I know you for what you are. Ask anything of me."

Baldur barely heard him. He was looking at Marina with horror.

Men were not cruel, he told himself. Not like this. What man could have approached the solution to their political problem so cold-bloodedly?

She must be insane, he thought. He felt empty and alone at the thought. He realized suddenly that he loved her, and that she must be lost to him forever after this. The thought did not occur to him until much later, in the quarters the City Lord had provided for him, that if she were mad, the men in the ship above the clouds were equally mad.

For they had helped her.

In a city where he had been a member of an enslaved race, Baldur, in the days that followed, found himself honored and a guest of the Lord of the City. Although the governor's troops were in the city, Gar Lan's word was still absolute, and no Vorstachi dared challenge Baldur in his new favor. With the City Lord's full protection he went out on the streets and spoke to the people, both Vorstachii and Loaii, and they brought their sick to him to be healed. At first only the Loaii came, but the story of the miraculous resurrection of the Lord's son spread and soon the Vorstachii themselves came.

It was not his intention to humble that proud race; but when some of the Vorstachii nobles sent for him he refused to come, and they had to bring their illnesses to him. The ones who had only minor complaints stayed away and nursed their affront and promised themselves that they would eventually have the skin of the upstart slave.

He had little time to think because of his schedule. This was as he wished, for he could not forget the chain of events that had led to this freedom. He saw Marina frequently and she was cheerful, full of life and excitement; but he saw her assume a tainted image, touched with the stain of her inhuman opportunism.

When he spoke in the streets of the destiny of the two races, there were grumblings, not only from the Vorstachii but from the Loaii. The undercurrent of hatred had not abated by their common need for his help, and he despaired of the success of their mission. Something more was needed, he realized. Healing and miraculous cures appealed to their primitive view of the universe, which they peopled with demons and spirits and gods. They had the basically mystic bent of primitives, and he could not reach them with the altruism of the message, try as he might. He needed some mystical symbol of the message, he knew, some magical demonstration of the truth of his words. That he was from some god or gods, they accepted. That he was from a great race of men who would one day meet the two races outside the eternal sky, they rejected. As proud as they were, both races needed something before which they could abase themselves.

In the end, he knew that without this symbol, he would fail, and all of the planning and all of the pain would have been to no avail. In the end, when the Loaii and the Vorstachii came forth to meet men, they would come as savages and warriors; and the bloodlust they carried would bring

their own destruction. It was inconsistent with what he knew and believed, but he saw now that man would destroy them. The failure of his mission would mean the failure of the image he carried of his race, the race of Earthmen who had long ago cast off all savagery and who had raised other races to rule the universe with them.

When he tried to talk to Marina about his doubts, she smiled and assured him that everything was going well. He realized then how alienated they had become, how completely he had withdrawn from her. He felt alone and deserted in a hostile world.

The day the governor finally moved, he almost welcomed the end of thought and helplessness and the beginning of movement, of action of any kind, however futile.

Gar Lan came to him in the afternoon and said, "Lord, some of my nobles have carried tales to the governor, and he is coming on this very same afternoon."

"What does this mean?" Baldur asked.

"I will have no power to stop him. If he finds you, he will have you burned in the square."

"Very well," Baldur said, "I must leave. I thank you for your hospitality."

"You understand, Lord," Gar Lan persisted, "if he captures you, I cannot help you."

"I would not ask you to," Baldur said. "Your first duty is to save yourself and your son."

"Thank you, Lord," the man said.

Shortly thereafter, Lok Lor and Que Bok came. He met them at the north wall entrance.

"I shall have to go into hiding," he said.

"It is all arranged," Que Bok said.

As soon as Marina had joined them, they set out for a shop near the city wall. There the proprietor, a friend of Que Bok, received them.

"Lord, I am honored," he said.

The quarters were cramped, and Baldur spent the night feeling restless and trapped.

In the morning they heard that the governor had entered the city and had taken command of the City Lord's palace. Later that day stories came to them of red-plumed mercenaries roaming through the city, dispersing Loaii and Vorstachii alike when they gathered in groups of more than three. Repeatedly came stories of mercenary soldiers attacking groups of Loaii and clubbing them. Later they heard that the merce-

naries had drawn swords, and many Loaii were killed in the side streets when they met mercenaries.

That afternoon, the governor offered a reward for Baldur.

"Lord, I am afraid," Que Bok said.

"Why?" Baldur asked.

"It is a very large reward," Que Bok said.

That evening Marina said, "Things are coming rapidly to a head."

"There's no point in my staying further," Baldur said. "Call the ship and ask them to return us."

"Not yet," she said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Orders," she said.

He thought of those unknown men in the ship above the clouds and he wondered what they were planning. Surely he had done all he could. There was no further purpose to be served in waiting out the search in this shop. His mission, he realized, must be a dismal failure. In one generation, the story of his visit would be a mere legend; in two generations, it would be a fairy tale to tell children. Nothing had been accomplished, he saw, but the local confusion of authority and the temporary dissolving of some of the barriers that separated slave and master.

At night Marina returned with Lok Lor, and he said, "Call the ship."

"No," she said. "It is not time."

"All over the city they are slaughtering Loaii. Isn't that enough for you? We talk of men and altruism and how men are beyond this savagery. Yet look what we have done."

"Baldur," she said tiredly, "you're the only one who talks of men and their being beyond this savagery. Men are, after all, only men, and they must be what they are."

He felt a sense of impending disaster in her words. They smacked almost of blasphemy. "No," he said. "Men have risen beyond this."

"Men are no better and no worse than a hundred other races," she said, "but they are strong, and that is what counts. Remember, it was men who dreamed of something higher than the mud and found something greater than mere living and dying. It was men who came out of the caves and built cities and empires and found morality in the midst of savagery. It was men who built the ships that brought us here, men as they are and not as you imagine them."

"No," he said, "our race is not like that. I know it."

"Perhaps our race is not like that," Marina said softly, "but then, for all our love of men and long companionship with them from the earliest days, we are not of the race of men."

He felt ill at her words. He could not accept the idea. To be less than what he was, some fawning creature that man had given sentience to with careless largess . . .

"Don't tell me this fairy tale," he said scornfully. "I have memories."

"Yes," she said, "and for the moment it was important that these be incomplete, but it was not their intent that you forget who you are."

"I am a man," he said, "and that's all that matters." Then he called Lok Lor and said, "Hurry, we are leaving."

"Where to, Lord?"

"I don't know," he said. "Just away. Somewhere away where we can hide."

They left the shop and stepped into the night. The mercenaries were waiting for him. They closed about him, and when Lok Lor tried to fight, they struck him down. He heard Marina cry out as the blow fell, and he turned, looking for her. He saw her standing with the captain of the squad. It was then he realized she had brought the soldiers.

They carried him away to the dungeon in the wall of the palace, and the next day he was brought before Gar Lan, who sat at the feet of the governor.

"Is this the traitor and blasphemer?" the governor demanded.

"This is Bal Dur," the City Lord said, his eyes filled with sorrow.

"Are you, as you say, the son of gods?" the governor said.

"I am the son of men," Baldur said looking at the governor through a haze that covered his eyes, "and men are gods," he said.

"That's enough," the governor said. "Burn him."

The governor's sedan chair preceded them while the City Lord walked on foot near him. He was dragged in heavy bonds from the palace through the streets while the crowds on both sides wept and jeered. As they entered the marketplace, he saw Marina and pulled away from his guards.

"Why? Why?" he demanded.

"Don't you see?" she said. "It wasn't enough. They needed a symbol of faith for both races, someone to expiate their hate. It's one of the most potent survival forces for a religion

—the hanged-god concept. Only we couldn't let you know all the details. It was too much to ask of you . . ."

"Too much!" he cried, overwhelmed with the realization of what they had planned. The guards pulled him back then and he saw the stake in the marketplace before him.

The horror of what awaited him came to him then, and the still greater horror of what the monsters he called men had planned for him. To be sent down to some obscure planet for one purpose, to be put to death so that an insane legend of a god made flesh would last through history.

The cruelty of men was beyond belief.

They bound him to the stake and stacked wood about him. The governor rose from his chair and made a sign.

"Let the law take its sentence," Gar Lan said sorrowfully. He came forward and wiped his hand upon the hem of Baldur's robe.

"I tried to stop it, Lord," he whispered. "What can I do?"

"Remember all I told you," Baldur said. "At least remember all I taught you."

The man's hands quivered with emotion and he dropped the hem. "We won't forget you," he whispered. "Loaii and Vorstachii, we'll always remember."

Rage surged suddenly in Baldur's body. *You dirty little poet savage,* he thought. *Burn me and get it over with.*

He looked out over the marketplace at the silent crowds, the flushed faces of the soldiers, the tight knot of Loaii at the far end. In the midst of the men he saw Que Bok. The eyes were fierce, and he suddenly realized that one word from him would turn the marketplace into a seething rebellion in which hundreds would die.

No, they'd be slaughtered in their tracks, and all his work . . .

His work . . .

Puppet's work . . .

Who were the Vorstachii? Gentle innocents beside the monsters that had sent him to die. What did the Earthmen care for him? The tool had accomplished the purpose it had been created for.

He saw Gar Lan gesture and he turned his head. Men with torches stepped forward. He wanted to cry out, but invisible seals seemed to press upon his lips.

The men looked at him with awe. He stared at them until they dropped their eyes, but the torches touched the pile of faggots at his feet and the resinous wood blazed hotly.

He was dizzy suddenly, feeling the hate for his Earth masters welling within him.

He saw Marina standing in the crowd, her eyes filled with tears.

Tears for a mere thing like him?

After betrayal, tears?

God, the flames were hot, reaching up, blinding him with their smoke.

And the people silent, awed . . .

Well, he would die the way no Loaii had ever died. With dignity, giving them the dignity they had never had.

And the Vorstachii too.

For them too, for the Earthmen held both equal in the world they were shaping, and the teeming universe outside would one day receive the Loaii and the Vorstachii as equals . . .

The pain was blinding. He could barely see through the waves of heat and the great burning possessing his body.

He managed to shout then.

"I've given everything for you," he shouted to the marketplace.

"Don't fail me!"

And fire wrapped his body in agony.

In the last instant he saw it clearly, the greatness the Loaii and the Vorstachii would rise to, one race placing its feet on the star paths, meeting at last the brotherhood of races outside.

And it did not seem to be a small price for this, the price he was paying.

He could almost forgive those distant Earthmen who had made him for pain and death and . . .

Blackness . . .

But not death.

He should have realized that the race his ancestors had followed gladly from the caves, that generations of his race had served selflessly until they had become equals would not so casually desert him. The resurrection of Gar Lan's son should have told him how they would raise him in the end.

His whole being filled with love for the men who had brought him and his race to what they were, and with whom he and his kind were forever bound.

He opened his eyes in the room of the great ship beyond the clouds and beheld Them.

And near him, Marina's gentle voice said, "Welcome back, Baldur."

He rose with Marina's help, and they bowed before the Men.

"Lords," he said in the ancient ritual, "I am but a dog before you."

Fred Saberhagen now lives in New Mexico. For several years an editor at Encyclopaedia Brittanica, he has been publishing science fiction since 1961 and been a full-time fiction writer since 1973. In his younger days he practiced karate and had dreams of glory as a chess player.

Young Girl at an Open Half-Door

By FRED SABERHAGEN

That first night there was a police vehicle, what I think they call a K-9 unit, in the little employees' lot behind the Institute. I parked my car beside it and got out. The summer moon was dull above the city's air, but floodlights glared at a small door set in the granite flank of the great building. I carried my toolbox there, pushed a button, and stood waiting.

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

The door opened. "Electronic Watch," I said, holding out

my identification. The dog inspected me, while the three uniformed men peered at my symbols and were satisfied.

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

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

"Joe Ricci."

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

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

Dan whistled cheerfully as we went up the wide, four-branched central stair, passing under a great skylight holding out the night. From the top landing of the stair, a plain door, little noticed in the daytime, opens through classical marble into a science-fiction room of fluorescent lights and electronic consoles. In that room are three large wall panels, marked Security, Fire, and Interior Climate. As we entered, another guard was alone in the room, seated before the huge security panel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From several rooms away I saw the girl, through a real doorway framing the painted one she stands in. My steps slowed as I entered gallery 215. About twenty other paintings

hang there, but for me it was empty of any presence but hers.

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

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

The card on the wall beside the painting reads:

REMBRANDT VAN RIJN
DUTCH, 1606–1669
YOUNG GIRL AT AN OPEN HALF-DOOR, dated 1645

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

She waits.

I broke out of my reverie, at last, with an effort. My eye was caught by the next painting, Saftleven's *Witches' Sabbath,* which once in the daylight had struck me as amusing. When I had freed my eyes from that I looked into the adjoining galleries, trying to put down the sudden feeling of being watched. I squinted up at the skylight ceiling of gallery 215, through which a single glaring spotlight shone.

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

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

There was a light gasp, as of surprise. A sighing momentary movement in the air, something nearby come and gone in a moment, and in that moment the meter needle jumped over

violently, pegging so that with a technician's reflex my hand flew to switch it to a less sensitive scale.

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

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

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

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

Half an hour later I was creeping on a catwalk through a clean crawl space above gallery 227, tracing a perfectly healthy microwave system. The reflected glare of night lights below filtered up into the crawl space, through a million holes in acoustical ceiling panels.

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

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

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

Some time passed before I eased up from the strain of my bent position. All the world was silent and ordinary, so that alarm and astonishment would have seemed out of place. I inched back through the crawl space to my borrowed ladder,

climbed down, walked along a corridor, and turned a corner into the vast shadow-and-glare of gallery 227.

Standing in the brightly lit spot where I had seen the girl, I realized she had been raising her camera at a sculpture—a huge, flowing mass of bronze blobs and curved holes, on the topmost blob a face that looked like something scratched there by a child. I went up to it and thumped my knuckles on the nearest bulge of bronze, and the great thing sounded hollowly. Looking at the card on its marble base, I had begun to read—*Reclining Figure*, 1957—when a sound behind me made me spin around.

Dan asked benignly: "Was that you raising a ruckus in here about five minutes ago? On the board it looked like a whole mob of people was running around."

I nodded, feeling the beginning of a strange contentment.

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

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

I ate an ordinary breakfast, not noticing much or being noticed, sitting at the counter in the restaurant on the ground floor of the converted hotel where I rented my apartment. The waitress wore green, although her hair was black. Once I had tried halfheartedly to talk to her, to know her, to make out, but she had kept on working and loafing, talking to me and everyone else alike.

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

Dan and two other guards greeted me with smiles of the kind that people wear when things that are clearly not their fault are going wrong for their employer. They told me that the pseudo-prowler had once more visited gallery 215, had vanished as usual from the panel just as the guard approached that room, and then had several times appeared on

the indicators for gallery 227. I went to 227, making a show of carrying in tools and equipment, and settled myself on a bench in a dim corner, to wait.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I got unsteadily to my feet and went after her. Rounding the corner, I saw three devices set up on tripods, the tripods spaced evenly around the *Reclining Figure*. From the three devices, which I could not begin to identify, little lances of

light flicked like stings or brushes at the sculpture. And whirling around it like dancers, on silent rubbery feet, moved another pair of machine-shapes, busy with some purpose that was totally beyond me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"One is Rembrandt's girl."

"You are right!" Day-ell, pleased, turned to me. "Last

night I took that one to safety. Where I take them, the originals, they will be safe forever."

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

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

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

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

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

My thoughts were clearing and I said to her: "You're leaving copies, you said, and no one will know the difference, before. Before what? What's going to happen?"

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

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

"Come, Day-ell, come." It was a terrible steel whisper.

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

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

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

Not that her world is better. *Safe for paint, safe for bronze, not safe for men who love.* I could not live there now.

The painting looks unchanged. A girl of seventeen still waits, frozen warmly in Rembrandt's light, three hundred years and more on the verge of smiling, secure that long from age and death and disappointment. But will a war incinerate her next week, or an earthquake swallow her next month? Or will our city convulse and die in mass rioting madness, a Witches' Sabbath come true? What warning can I give? When they found me alone and weeping in the empty gallery that night, they talked about a nervous breakdown. The indicators on the Security panel are always quiet now, and I have let myself be argued out of the little of my story that I told.

No world is safe for those who love.

John Jakes is another who made his first SF sale while still in his teens, and for many years combined careers in advertising and writing. In recent years he has turned to playwriting as well, doing book and lyrics for such hits of the little-theater circuit as *Dracula, Baby; Gaslight Girl;* and *Doctor, Doctor.* Currently he is producing a series of historical novels of the American Revolution.

Here Is Thy Sting

By JOHN JAKES

I

His brother came home from the moon in an economy coffin, on a night when the meteorological bureau decided on rain. Something went wrong, as it frequently did. The April mist turned to a black, blinding downpour.

Through the shed's thick windows all peppered with rain, Cassius could just discern the vertical pillars of fire that grew thinner, thinner still, then flamed out. Rain hummed and slashed. It was a foul night for such a painful, intensely personal errand.

As the transport rocket settled into its concrete bed far out there, a dozen haul trucks raced from all directions toward its unfolding ramps. Then there seemed to be a collision. Headlamps tilted crazily. Men ran this way and that. A controller wigwagged his glowing red wands hysterically.

"Wild buncha cowboys," grumbled the Freight Customs official. "Next? Hey, you."

Parcels, crates, cylinders, drums were spilling down a dozen chutes from the rocket. Which was Timothy? Cassius turned from the windows as the official called out again. He stepped up to the booth. The official's uniform was damp, wool-stinking. His expression was cross. Cassius recalled hearing the man ahead of him argue loudly with the official. He felt he should have chosen another queue, but it was too late.

"Okay, buddy, what's yours?"

"I'm picking up my brother," Cassius said.

The official mugged his disgust. "Oh for Christ's—the next shed is passenger, mister."

Cassius said, "You don't understand. My brother was—that is, he's dead. His body is on the rocket."

"Oh." The official blinked. "Name?"

"Cassius Andrews. Here's my News Guild card and my personal digit card if you need identification."

"His name, *his* name."

"The Reverend Timothy Andrews." Cassius tried to scan the upside-down manifest on the counter. "Maybe the shipment is listed under the Ecumenical Brothers. They paid his stipend at the moon camp. He was stabbed trying to break up a knife fight between two miners, and the Brothers arranged to ship his—"

Reading down the lines, the official waved his hand to cut off the talk. Cassius felt sheepish. What did the man care about details of a family death? He didn't, of course.

When at last the official had ticked off the proper box with a checkmark and raised his dull eyes to stare through the wicket, he was no longer merely bored. He was plainly resentful. Of my mentioning dead people on such a miserable night? Cassius wondered.

"Mister," said the official, almost triumphantly, "whoever prepaid the body at Moonramp made a mistake. Underweighed by thirty-six pounds. There's extra duty due. Dozen point five credits."

Cassius fumbled inside his raincloak. "I'll be glad to pay it."

"You gotta see the adjustments manager. Three doors down. Next!"

The dismissal was so peremptory that Cassius, ordinarily a mild-tempered man, flushed. He was about to make a nasty retort. Then he recalled his own recurring dream. It tormented him twice or three times a week, regularly. He sighed and took the punched card from the official's hand.

Nobody liked to be bothered with death. Especially not in such rotten, depressing weather. Cassius could understand how the official felt.

Out another window he noticed that the haul-truck tangle had been straightened out. The various crates, parcels and containers were being picked up by vehicles operated by the big and small land-freight companies. Cassius had made no arrangements for transportation. But he'd been told that an on-the-spot haul service was for hire. He intended to send Timothy's body directly to the headquarters of the Brothers, where they had a chapel.

After the memorial service due all missionaries who died violent deaths—and many still did, in the lonely, rotgut-happy camps on the moon and around Marsville Basin—Timothy would be interred with their mother and father in the family plot in Virginia. Timothy would have been, let's see, two years younger than Cassius, who was forty-two.

The adjustments manager had another client. Cassius lingered in the hall. He tried to restrain his impatience, then his anger. He had the eerie feeling that official stupidity was conspiring against him to delay the obligatory reunion with his brother.

After spending twenty minutes in the corridor, Cassius finally got to see the adjustments manager. The idiot didn't have the appropriate rate book at hand. That took another five minutes. Cassius paid the excess duty, watched while the manager thumbed his Hilton Bank card into a machine along with a triplicate invoice. At last he was given a pass to the pickup area.

He walked across the concrete in the slashing rain. He had already decided that he'd damn well write an exposé of the mismanagement at Dulles Interplanetary and file it with the feature editor. God, there was enough bumbling bureaucracy here for ten exposés.

But the idea passed quickly.

Long ago Cassius had recognized and accepted his limitations. He seldom dreamed any more of writing *the* news story or series that would catapult him to fame.

There were eight hundred reporters on the *Capitol World Truth*. Out of these, a top dozen received around eighteen thousand credits per annum. They wrote all the exposé pieces of the type Cassius was imagining. Cassius himself earned a meager twelve-two, almost the Guild minimum. Years ago he'd been slotted by Hughgenine, his editor, as a competent man to handle a section of the vast Alexandria surburban news beat. The Parent and Teaching Machine Association was his bailiwick. Well, he said to himself, the exposé was a good thought, anyway.

Dread came then.

The rain-soaked handler blinked at the receipt. "I seen it here a while ago, okay. But there ain't many items left and I don't see it now."

Cassius stared around the open shed. "I was delayed in the terminal. It must be here. It's a coffin."

"I know, I seen it. We had a real mess out here tonight, mister. Some jerky new driver rammed into a couple of the other pickup rigs. Maybe Elmo knows. Hey, Elmo?"

Elmo was fat and officious. "Sure, I seen it. The driver picked it up."

"What driver?" Cassius snapped.

"Just who the hell are you, mister?"

"The man's brother."

"Oh, okay. Keep your pants on." Elmo thumbed his flash. He riffled his tickets. Then he extended the packet, less blustery. "Ain't that the nuts? The part of the ticket showin' the name of the carrier is torn off. Oh boy, things are sure screwed up tonight, man, oh man."

Cassius raged and fumed and promised official vengeance for a full fifteen minutes. He turned out half the minor bureaucracy of the receiving department, to no good end. The coffin was gone.

Someone had stolen his brother's corpse.

"It's crazy!" he sputtered. Cowlike faces ringed him. "Who would steal a preacher's body? It's absolutely senseless."

No one answered. Cassius looked past the rain-lashed men. They were strangely nervous. Perhaps because of a theft; the rain; the accident and mix-ups and their obliviousness to the

pickup driver. Or perhaps they were quiet because the situation had been further complicated by death.

Out beyond the concrete beds where the Sino-Russian Line was preparing to launch its evening shipment, Cassius saw the multileveled tangle of roads leading from the field, rising to merge with the ten broad lanes of the Washington Belt. Up one of those ramps and onto that highway had gone an unknown truck, carrying a stolen corpse.

"Crazy," Cassius said again. "You'll hear about this." He stalked off in the rain.

What indecent maniac would take such elaborate pains to pilfer the corpse of a man of God from a public place? Cassius was at once afraid he'd come in contact with some sinister group of madmen. Only later, when hindsight began to operate, did he analyze his reaction more deeply. He knew later that what had really troubled him was the fear that those who'd stolen the body were not crazy but perfectly, if esoterically, sane.

Lurching along in the rain, Cassius didn't know what he was going to do about the theft. But he was positive he was going to do something.

II

The trip to his apartment in Alexandria would require the better part of an hour. Cassius decided to put the time to use.

After he jockeyed his Ford Aircoupe to the hook-on with the magnetic strip, he dialed the tinted shell. The shell closed around the seat blister, shutting out the dazzle of thousands of headlamps in the oncoming lanes. Cassius rang up the headquarters of the Ecumenical Brothers in downtown Washington. The paper had paid for installing the minimum-screen visor in his car.

Presently a sleepy, clerical-collared face appeared.

"This is Reverend Tooker speaking. Yes?"

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Reverend."

"Quite all right. Tonight's my shift in the B-complex free kitchen. How can I help you?"

The cleric was unfamiliar. But so was Timothy's whole life, practically. Cassius hadn't seen his brother in twelve years. That didn't lessen his sense of duty and outrage;

"Reverend, I'm Cassius Andrews. I just came from Dulles where I planned to pick up Timothy's body. There seems to

have been a mixup. Did you by any chance send a hauler from your building to fetch it?"

"No, Mr. Andrews. We understood you wished to take delivery. Wasn't our departed brother on the rocket?"

"He was. But somebody stole the coffin."

Reverend Tooker at once launched into theologically tinged commiseration. Cassius listened politely. But he knew he'd get no help from the white-haired devine. Most of Tooker's sincere and sympathetic talk about Timothy's service on the moon, his dying a violent death in the service of the Creator and His Son, to Cassius was neither here nor there. Long ago he'd abandoned any concern with religion.

While the Reverend eulogized Timothy, Cassius drifted off into other realms. Timothy had been a shy, dreamy boy in their childhood. He had been passionately religious, in contrast to Cassius who was passionately secular. For no special reason, Cassius was stung with somber recollections of his boyhood dreams of becoming a famous newsman and correspondent.

"—can only suggest you contact the police," Reverend Tooker concluded.

"Yes, I planned to do that next."

"Please come into the chapel at any time if we can be of help in your hour of trial," the Reverend said.

"Yes, I'll do that too, thanks." That was a lie. Cassius rang off. There was no point in telling the gentle, simple old fellow that he was becoming convinced Timothy's body had been pilfered by some sort of sex-ghoul cult. A cult which—God help his brother—must be massively organized.

The Ford Aircoupe whizzed along on its thin pillars of air, halfway to Alexandria now. Cassius dialed the central police switchboard.

They were officially receptive, properly angry. Somehow, though, the conversation seemed routine. Cassius doubted the police would learn anything new when their operatives visited the freight sheds. The rain, the accident caused by the inexperienced driver, the resulting confusion, all had worked together to effectively blot out the trail of the body snatchers.

The Aircoupe was on the less-crowded feeder belt over the polluted Potomac. The hour was growing late. In spite of that, Cassius dialed another number. He didn't want to be completely alone tonight. He found that Joy was home.

"That's terrible, Cassius," she said. He thought she was sincere. Joy was nearing forty, rather chubby-faced and a lit-

tle ferret-eyed in the wrong light. Basically she was pretty, if grown stocky now that she'd given up hope of marriage and settled on a career. "Would you like me to come over?"

Rain hammered black, lonely, on the Aircoupe bubble.

"Could you, Joy? It'll take you an hour, I know. I really would like company. I can cook some eggs. You can stay the night."

"I wish I might, sweets. But the piece I'm working on is due tomorrow. I've unearthed some positively fantabulous little gimmicks in re what to do with leftover paper undies. They make the cutest buffers for a dusting robot and—oh dear. Forgive me. This is a terrible time to talk shop."

"That's all right." He forgave her. One of Joy's failings was a kind of compulsion to seek editorial paydirt in any situation, even lovemaking. Once in the middle of the night Joy had suddenly interrupted everything, sat up and jotted down some notes on a simply fantabulous position a housewife might use to relax her calf muscles. He added, "You don't have to stay the night, then."

"I can't dear. As I say, this little piece is due. Cassius!"

"What, Joy?"

"You don't suppose there's anything in this theft, do you? Oh, I realize the moment is very trying for you. But could we make anything out of it?"

"I doubt that it's Joy de Veever's cup of tea," he replied. "Nor mine either. I also have a sinking feeling the cops are going to get nowhere. To tell the truth, Joy, this business has some nasty overtones. I'm not sure I want to pursue it myself."

The screened face grew bright-eyed. He might have been irritated if he hadn't understood that her query sprang from her compulsive professionalism. But only in part. He knew from their years of pleasant liaison that she was, at bottom, kindly.

"But you will pursue it, won't you, Cassius?"

"Yes, I suppose I must. Provided I can figure out where to turn next."

"We'll think of something. See you in an hour, sweets." And the screen blurred out.

Cassius occupied a one-room flat on the eighty-seventh floor of one of fifteen cluster buildings in a small Alexandria development. Decelerating for the hook-off, Cassius saw a familiar sprawl of towers just this side of his own project. The

towers dwarfed the other units in the district. They were the local project of the Securo Corporation.

Securo, a private firm started ten years ago by a contractor and a professor of psychology, provided co-op living for young marrieds but added a fillip: all conceivable services, including mortgage, burial, and educational insurance were included in one payment for the benefit of the occupants, who signed a lifetime contract. All across the country and everywhere abroad, Securo was building similar projects, but not fast enough for the demand.

Down at the paper, the boys, fancying themselves rather independent souls, referred to a Securo flat as a womb-to-tomb room, since many young parents were already willing their living space to their infants, to provide them maximum protection against the buffetings of fate.

Now, riding in the dark rain, Cassius shuddered a little as the lights of the Securo tract flashed past. There was something to be said for knowing you were protected, especially on unpleasant nights like this. And the newsmen weren't all that independent, either. The last Guild negotiations had lasted eighteen weeks, because management initially refused to include podiatry benefits in the package. Everyone wanted to be safe. Sometimes Cassius clucked his tongue, but sometimes too he sympathized.

Unlike Securo, Cassius's landlords offered only the standard auto, theft, and major-medical insurance with their flats. Cassius's place was a litter of books and the other paraphernalia of bachelor untidiness.

He opened two packages of Birdseye Brawny Breakfasts, watched while the fried eggs and bacon began to mushroom from the tiny white capsules. Joy wouldn't be arriving for a while yet. He drew the curtain around the cook unit and went to the bookcase to get his diary.

Faithfully he recorded the events of the evening. As a younger man he'd imagined he might be a latter-day Pepys. Now he wrote in the book out of habit more than anything, though occasionally he admitted to himself that what he was doing was hoping with words and phrases that a third-rate newspaperman could gain a slim remembrance after he died.

Someone might come across the diary among his effects, for instance. Recognize the burning perceptiveness and, lo! long after he was buried, elevate the name of Cassius Andrews to the heights of—

Rats. He knew it was idle foolishness. The prose was clear

but mundane. It in no sense burned. Still, he wrote in the diary every night.

Joy de Veever arrived within an hour. Her evening wig, slightly awry, was an exotic purple to match her lip rouge. She hugged him briefly. They sat down to eat, Joy rather noisily and untidily. It was comforting to have her present.

Her real name was Joy Gollchuk. The editors believed, probably rightly, that Joy de Veever was the sort of byline housewives preferred in a helpful-hints column. She shared a cell at the *Capitol World Truth* with a pert sixty-year-old grandmother named Mrs. Swartzmore, who reviewed films under the name Ma Cine.

"Really (munch munch), Cassius (swallow), this is the most despicable type thing I've ever (swallow) heard of. Stealing a body, indeed! A Holy Joe's body, too."

"I don't get mad about the minister part so much as over the fact that he was my brother. I feel an obligation not to let the whole thing pass."

"Maybe (swallow) it's some sort of obscene ring operating."

"I've wondered that. It's actually the reason I'm slightly leery of pushing too far. But I know in the long run I can't let the possibility stop me."

"Tell me again what the police said."

"That they'll do their best. I don't doubt it. But I was there tonight, Joy. The handlers felt sorry about it, sure. Things were obviously in such a confused state that they could do nothing beyond what they did. Which was, admit someone drove in, picked up Timothy's coffin with false papers, then drove away again."

Joy's eyes glittered. She leaned near. "Did you ask for police cooperation?"

"Didn't I just tell you?"

"Not about that, silly. I mean cooperation in case there's a juicy story behind—oh. You're offended."

"No, I'm not."

"Juicy was a bad word. I'm sorry, sweets. But there might be a piece in it for you, Cassius. Sort of a memorial to your brother, you might say," hastily justifying herself. "After all, dear, let's face it. You're not the world's hottest reporter. You could use some self-promotion."

"Joy, after a while a man knows what he is and isn't."

"Oh come on, Cassius! Don't you have any drive to assert yourself?"

He thought of the diary. He glanced at a collection of file-card holders on the self-suspending bookshelves. He frowned.

"Of course. But it doesn't come out in trying to make hay from what's happened to Timothy."

Joy crunched a last morsel of bacon. "Well, you certainly won't do yourself any good with that silly biography you've been working on for six years. The poor man's been written about in eleven different volumes."

"Twelve," Cassius corrected. "As you know, I've discovered some new angles which might—"

"Enshrine you with posterity?" Joy smiled. "Cassius, really."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"It's what you meant, though.

"Joy, I like working on the book," he said. "How did we get on this subject?"

For a moment anger sparked in his rather downturning brown eyes. He controlled the anger. Not a major effort at all. He gripped her hand across the fold-up table.

"Joy, if I didn't know so well that you can't help hunting for angles any more than a cat can help chasing a mouse, I'd get damned mad at you sometimes."

"Yes, you do understand me," she said gently. "Which is more than I do for you most of the time, I must confess."

He squeezed her hand. "Thanks for coming tonight."

"I apologize for calling your book silly, dear."

"I don't mind. So long as you realize I'll keep right on working on it."

For a moment Joy's eyes were shadowed. "Still have the dream?"

"Yes."

"That's the reason for the book, isn't it?"

"Um, partly, I guess."

"I don't have any dreams like that, Cassius. But I suppose I run after stories for the same reason too."

"Yes."

Suddenly she snapped her fingers. The cocktail zircon on her right hand flashed back the rays of the solar panels which lit the room. "I just had the most marvelous idea. If you get no satisfaction from the police, why don't you go right to the W.B.I?"

"Are you out of your mind? I don't know anybody down there."

"What difference does that make? Go straight to the di-

rector himself! If you ask me, Cassius, this theft sounds downright sinister. Maybe the Neo-Leninists are making a comeback."

"And you suggest I waltz right in and state my case to Flange himself?"

"That's not as impossible as it sounds. I was talking to Charlie Pelz yesterday over morning vitamins."

"Charlie Pelz?"

"Oh, you know. He does those Black Museum pieces on Sundays for the true-crime nuts. Charlie said he was down to the W.B.I. Building last week and it's practically turned into an old people's home. Offices empty. Men sitting around doing nothing. He asked whether he could see Flange's assistant a moment, to get a comment on a story he was writing, and he almost dropped over when the secretary said Flange had no appointments all day, why didn't Charlie talk to him? So you try him. Maybe this unstable world peace is more stable than we think."

Cassius chewed his lip. "I don't know who could set it up for me."

"I tell you, Charlie Pelz said no one had to set it up! Flange was so *un*busy even a bootboy could get in to see him."

Although he rejected the idea as slightly ludicrous, Cassius nevertheless filed it away. He and Joy finished their caffeine water with a rehash of the mysterious events out at Dulles. It got them nowhere. She kissed him neatly and rather moistly on the cheek, squeezed his arm, and he ushered her to the door.

"Must run, sweets, but I do hope you sleep well. Try not to fret over what's happened."

"I have to find out what happend to Timothy, Joy. I must."

"Of course. Take my suggestion, though. Thinking about the W.B.I. And Cassius—" Again the eyes, rimmed in purple mascara, glittered. Consolation went out the window, replaced by professionalism. "—if there is anything in it, a hot tidbit either one of us could use—oh, I know I sound terribly crass, but after all, you have only one life to live and you have to make the best of it."

"That's right," Cassius said, hiding laughter. "Good night, Joy. And thanks."

Poor girl, he thought when she'd gone. Imagines one day *the* story will fall into her lap. He'd never had the courage to

tell her, as she repeatedly told him, that her talent was small.

Oh, she could do a major story, all right. But the material for the story would have to drop from heaven. She'd never find it picking around among new uses for paper undies in the home. Perhaps he'd continued their liaison so long because, unlike Joy, he had realized his personal limits and therefore could feel gently, privately superior.

After a vigorous rubdown with a pre-wetted shower cloth he pulled a switch. His bed rose from the floor. He awoke an hour later, snuffling and breathing violently, an ache in his chest.

The dream had returned.

III

It was a dream of himself running, mile after slow-motion mile, while the dog snapped at his heels.

The dog was twice as long as a man. Its claws were like sharp iron files. Its fangs were like white spikes. Its yellow eyes were the only two blazes of color in the gray waste where he was pursued.

He'd dreamed the dream regularly for about six years. It had begun about the time he had first noticed at cocktail parties that people were talking with low voices and embarrassed laughter about how short all the days seemed, how rapidly they flew. People his own age. He knew what the dog represented.

Knowing, however, didn't relieve the after-effects of the nightmare. It only intensified them.

Hastily Cassius threw back the coverlet. He turned on the lights and started to work cross-indexing notes and snippets for his book. The project was probably futile, as Joy maintained. Twelve books had been published on the same subject already.

The book was to be a biography of Colonel Robin Delyev. He was the officer responsible for leading the combined American-Russian shock forces which repelled the initial invasion of Puerto Rico by the Chinese, sixty years ago. All Delyev and his thousand troops had had to work with was a storehouse full of antiquated U.S. personal missile launchers.

Poring and poking at the National Archives, Cassius had stumbled across some new materials. They had been misfiled: seven hitherto unpublished letters, four long, three no more

than notes but revealing nonetheless, written by Delyev to the Pentagon just before the Colonel's death. Headily Cassius had realized that none of the other twelve biographers had included the letters. And they added fresh insights into Delyev's brilliant deployment of his meager forces.

The majority of the book Cassius planned to draw from the secondary sources, reslanting it to his own rather scholarly, restrained style of writing. The volume would contain most of the anecdotes already available, such as the one about the night in the Chinese consulate in Chicago, before the war, when Delyev drank too much and made the epigrammatic speech which earned him the nickname "Old Rattling Rockets." But the book, his book alone, would also contain the seven letters. Provided he finished the draft fairly soon and got it submitted to a publisher.

Cassius knew that even when the volume was published, if it ever was, it would be relatively obscure in the crowded market; read only by those faithful who would always buy one more work on a subject that interested them. Cassius had no illusions. But he did believe that the fresh insights contained in the letters might add one small grain of truth to the world's accumulation as it related to the dead Delyev.

Besides, the book almost demanded to be written, worthy or not. It demanded writing especially in the lonely hours after he dreamed about the slavering dog who ran so slowly, yet so remorselessly, at his heels.

He labored on, a lonely figure in his small box of an apartment, alone in the night, alone in the rain, ignored but uncaring, until he finally crawled back to bed around four and slept untroubled until dawn.

Next day, he conferred personally with the Washington police.

They were investigating, yes, certainly. But to be honest, they'd interviewed several dozen people at Dulles and gotten nowhere. They would certainly keep trying, yes. There might be something decidedly sinister behind the theft. They would call him.

At lunch in the newspaper mess, Joy reminded him about the W.B.I. Cassius felt a little silly. But the obvious impending failure of the local police angered him. He took the afternoon off and rode the belts over.

As Charlie Pelz had promised, he was admitted to the Director's office without question or hesitancy. And to fulfill

the rest of the prophecy, Cassius actually felt exactly like falling over on his face in utter surprise.

Not over getting in. Over what he saw after he got there.

IV

R. Ripley Flange, the mastiff-chinned Director of the World Bureau of Investigation, was sitting at his broad desk, feet up, throwing darts.

One whizzed perilously close to Cassius's head as he closed the door. Cassius flinched. The iron spike of the dart thudded into the door. On it a paper bull's-eye had been nailed, the large nails carelessly driven into the lustrous patina of the obviously antique and priceless wood. Even the newly refurbished White House had been pannelled in polystyrene. For a genuine wood door to be pocked with thousands of dart and nail holes amounted to desecration.

"Sorry," Flange said. He grinned in a sleepy way. "I'm rather on the track of a big one. Fourteen bull's-eyes this morning. Best yet."

Edgily, Cassius sat down. The Director sighed, laid aside his dart case and tented his hands. He tried to frown with interest. Cassius had the uncanny feeling that the Director was peering straight through him, as though he were one of those model-kit men, wholly transparent.

"What can I do for you, sir? Care to apply for a position as a special operative? We have dozens of openings." The heavy lips, which had once sneered so heroically out of simulcast screens during the lectures on Chinese subversion in the bedding industry, now pursed out in what Cassius could only describe as a careless, thoroughly lazy way.

"No, sir, I didn't come about a job."

"Some crime then, I'll bet." Flange sounded unhappy. "Isn't that it?"

"I hate to bother you, sir. The local police seem so overburdened, and unable to make any headway. You see, sir, my brother's body has disappeared."

"Pity." Flange was restlessly eyeing a wall bookcase in which stood nearly a hundred copies of the inexpensive five-credit polybound edition of Flange's magnum opus, *Alert! The Yellow Underground Is Attacking.* "I'm certain we can help you. Many more resources open these days. Laboratories, so forth. International crime, I take it?"

"I'm not sure what it is, sir. Perhaps I should talk to someone else in the Bureau."

"No, no, I'll handle it." Flange frowned. "I suppose it is my responsibility, after all. Now where are those damned forms?"

And he grumbled and rumbled through his desk, his hands shaking in a palsied way. Cassius fidgeted. He felt hot, embarrassed. There was something wrong with the old fellow. Where was the lion's roar for justice, the eagle's scream for watchfulness? Gone was the ferocity that had made Flange a legend, whether you cared for his style of operation or not.

At last the Director produced a paper, incredibly frayed.

"Well, I found one report form, anyway. I'd send you to someone else, except my deputy director has gone to Las Vegas and I haven't heard from him in four months. That's all right, though. He needed a rest."

Cassius had an urge to bolt and run. Had the W.B.I. turned into a rest home for its obviously mentally infirm chief?

"Something about a brother's body, wasn't it?" said Flange.

The peculiar situation would have been laughable had Cassius not suspected there was something unpleasant lurking just under the surface. Flange's weird mood made it impossible for him to generate very much righteous rage as he rattled off a bare sketch of the mixup at Dulles Interplanetary, the theft of Timothy's remains. Once in a while Flange's pen jerked, marking appropriate box or space.

"Distressing," Flange said at the end, with patent insincerity. "Yes, I see. Body theft."

"I thought it might possibly have some international implications. That's why I came to you. Of course I'm also anxious personally to make whoever did it pay up."

"Naturally. We'll put our best men on it right away. What's your office digit?"

Cassius repeated the eighteen numerals which included his extension. While Flange wrote down the figures with his right hand, his left strayed like a spider over to the dart case, then drummed on the edge. Cassius rose abruptly. He couldn't stand any more. The old man was senile and no one had the heart to remove him from office, that was it.

Also, Cassius felt with a certainty that stoked his determination to a new height that R. Ripley Flange had no intention

of putting his best men on it. Or maybe even any men, period. The Washington police wanted to try but were overworked. Flange simply didn't care.

"Visor you as soon as we have anything. Get right on it, yes we will." Flange was slumped in his throne chair like a punctured balloon. His hand drummed on the dart case, drummed.

"Don't you want any more details? I only gave you the essentials a minute ago." Flange, though obviously sick, was beginning to infuriate him.

"We have enough, we have plenty, best men. Visor you."

After several weeks Cassius even gave up hoping. He discussed it over vitamins with Charlie Pelz one afternoon. Charlie agreed that things were sure strange at the W.B.I. The place appeared understaffed. Moribund. He could offer no explanation other than the one Cassius had already come up with—Flange was such a fixture that the government was almost conscience-bound to await his death with something like unquestioning reverence.

Cassius agreed. He thought privately that it was distressing to watch the disintegration of a person's drive as old age crept in.

But Cassius didn't badger Flange or the W.B.I. Indeed, he forgot them. At the end of the fourth week following Timothy's disappearance, a few other curious things had pushed their way into his mind. They had no bearing on Timothy, probably. But they were the kinds of things which he, on the paper, was in a position to pursue a bit without the aid of sad old men who were once mighty tigers but who were now all gums and no guts.

What first put Cassius on the trail was the peculiar and shocking concert of Madame Kagle.

V

By intermission the shock was profound. Cassius noted its beginnings in the unusual amount of head-turning while Madame Kagle ran through *The Joint M.I.T. Faculty Sonata*, never missing a note but missing the fire of it altogether.

No one was so impolite as to gasp during the second selection, Oodner's *Peripheral Stimuli*. But Cassius saw mouths hanging open all up and down his row. No music critic, Cassius had nevertheless seen plenty of photos of the celebrated

Kagle attack. At best it was a savagely bow-shaped posture above the keyboard of the harpsivac. It emphasized the woman's boniness and made her resemble, some said, a fairytale witch maniacally searching for the touchstone in a casketful of junk beads. Out of such agonized personal involvement, great music was wrenched.

Except this evening.

Madame Wanda Kagle sat perfectly straight. She was watching the one-hundred thirty-six keys, all right. But she was glass-eyed. Her mouth, like many in the audience, hung open in a peculiar slack-lipped indifference. The applause at the end of the first half of the program was thin.

Stumbling and shoving up the aisle for a quick smoke, Cassius and Joy heard all around them whispered comments such as: "Unbelievable." "Lackluster." "Crushingly disappointing." They pushed out into the vast foyer of the Sports Dome. The roof was rolled back to the stars and warm night breezes. Joy waited for her smoke to pop fire, inhaled and said:

"The old babe must be close on sixty. Wonder if she's slipping. Maybe she has to key up with amphets, and forgot."

"That's a bad pun," Cassius said. "I'd guess she was loaded with booze if it wasn't common knowledge that she very nearly lives like a saint. I read somewhere that she's even tried hypnotism to push everything out of her mind but her music."

"She certainly succeeded," Joy answered. "That was pure claptrap in there. She couldn't have been less interested."

"This puts a little different complexion on going to the reception afterward," Cassius mused. "Ordinarily I wouldn't be much interested in using those chits Greeheim gave you along with the tickets. I don't know beans about music. Or about how to get along with musical coteries, either."

Joy's eyes glittered. "For God's sake, Cassius, you can pretend, can't you? You would make 'em think you're the regular critic. Fake it a little. Just sneer. Greeheim isn't that well known yet. He's only been with the paper a few months. I certainly don't want to insult him when he gets over his illness by telling him we used the tickets but not the party passes."

The crowd was beginning to stir, pushing back to the entrance ramps for the second half. "You won't have to tell him," Cassius grinned. "In the light of the first half, I

wouldn't miss seeing Madame K. close up for anything. Maybe we'll get a hint of what's wrong with her."

"Now you're talking!" Joy said, eyes sharp as awls.

As they fought the aisle battle on the way to their seats, Cassius considered telling Joy the real reason for his curiosity. She was on one of her imaginary scents again, hoping she'd unearth some hot exclusive. While Cassius, on the other hand, had stared at Madame Kagle and seen something else entirely—

A ghostly twin image of the vast, weary indifference of R. Ripley Flange.

Lights dimmed. Madame Kagle appeared from the wings. She seemed to stumble. Like a sleepwalker she approached the bench of the harpsivac. She sat down. She dry-washed her hands, as if warming them. Joy was noisily rippling the pages of the program, twisting it to get light. She hissed, "Oh boy, this'll be fantabulous. *The Algebraic Suite.* It's one of my favorites."

But there was to be no *Algebraic Suite.* Madame Kagle seemed frozen at the console. A look of supreme sorrow came onto her aging features. It was immediately replaced by a sly, mocking smile. Moving with the painful lethargy of the arthritic—which she definitely was not—Madame Kagle rose. She circled the harpsivac and yanked the plug from the floor socket. The thousands of tiny multicolored lights on the banked tonal computers simultaneously went black.

Madame Kagle cast a tired glance at the shocked audience. She lifted her right shoulder in the smallest shrug. She sauntered off the stage.

Once the curtain dropped and the impossible became a fact, the crowd was as silent as mourners entering a mortuary. There were hushed little speculations about narcotics, insanity, sex, religion, gall bladder, dropsy, thrombosis, poor investment counseling and so forth. People seemed reluctant to move from the foyer onto the broad piazza toward the parking docks.

"Wow," Joy whispered, "I can't wait to get the dirt at the reception."

Cassius was about to speak when the annunciator horn of a newsvend machine rolling through the crowd blared that everyone mustn't forget that next Monday was D-Day, and that details on the free city-wide immunizations against scaling scalp could be had by inserting a coin in the slot. The contraption dinned the fact that its papers contained a full

list of the twenty-two hundred dispensaries which would be set up to distribute the free capsules to inoculate the populace against the dread scourge. The drive was the latest work of the ancient March of Quarters Foundation. Details, details inside—

Blaring, the machine trundled on. Rubbing his ear, Cassius answered Joy by saying, "Suppose we don't find out. Suppose Madame Kagle doesn't show up. Perhaps she's ill."

"Somebody'll be there who knows the score. Come on, Cassius, get the car."

As they wormed through the stunned throng on the piazza, voices rippled suddenly in excitement. Cassius and Joy craned around. Down the performer's ramp a sleek, expensive Rolls-Fujica air limousine was gliding, fast. People were crossing the ramp now. The chauffeur was forced to apply the brakes. That was when the yellow-cheeked bootboy, probably the son of some Chinese war refugee, fell off the piazza balustrade.

The lad had been up there brushes in hand, chanting in a singsong about shining the dress boots of gentlemen. Somehow he slipped, just as the Rolls-Fujica came to a halt.

"He's dead," a woman cried. The crowd, herdlike, shifted. Joy couldn't resist. Cassius was dragged along.

For a moment the scene was very vivid to him. The drop from the balustrade to the main ramp was twenty feet or more. By some twist of fate the bootboy had hit skull-first on the prestressed poly. He lay with his red and gray brains smashed out. Meantime the Rolls-Fujica had started up.

The performer's ramp crossed the main one, on which the bootboy lay, at the piazza corner. A blur of motion in the aircar tonneau caught Cassius's eye. He saw Madame Kagle order her chauffeur to stop again. Her face strained to the window. Of all the curious who were gasping and oh-ing over the accident, she alone seemed truly moved.

The Rolls-Fujica sped on. Cassius shuddered. The woman's eyes had mirrored some pure hell even he couldn't see.

"Wonder if there's a human-interest bit in it," Joy said.

"Joy, for God's sake, don't be so callous."

She smiled. "It is one of my failings, isn't it, sweets? All right, first things first. But let's hurry. We don't want to miss the reception."

The reception, they discovered, was already going full blast in one of the larger private function halls of The Hotel of the

Three Presidents. Passing under an arch decorated with a bust of one member of the trio—they were entering the Edward Room—Joy grabbed his arm.

"Cassius, look! The old girl's here. And drunker than a hoot owl, it seems."

"I don't like this a damn bit," he muttered.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, why not?"

"It just seems like a wake before you have a dead body."

"Don't be so squeamish. I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Joy pulled and tugged until they were past the coat robot, through the champagne line, and lurking at the fringe of a small crowd surrounding Madame Kagle. The lady virtuoso was indeed pretty well gone. She staggered around like a scarecrow off its pole. Nobody was laughing, though. Not the socialites, not the critics. The mood was one of acute embarrassment.

Madame Kagle seemed to be centering most of her remarks on a ruddy-faced priest of middle years. Joy whispered that the priest was a well-known expert on sacred music. Madame Kagle was waving her champagne glass back and forth under the priest's long-suffering nose. Each wave threatened to douse him.

"—and I say you still haven't answered my question, Father Bleu."

"Haven't I, dear lady? I thought I stated that death is merely the beginning of—"

"No, no, *no!*" Her voice was high as a harpy's. "Don't go all gooey and metaphysical. I mean to ask, what is death the act, the situation, the moment?"

She watched him foxily. The priest in turn struggled to remain polite. "Madame, I'm not positive I follow."

"Let me say it another way. Most people are afraid of dying, yes?"

"I disagree. Not those who find mystical union with the body of Christ in—"

"Oh, come off it!" Madame Kagle shrilled. "People are frightened of it, Father Bleu. Frightened and screaming their fear silently every hour of every day they live. Now I put it to you. Of what are they afraid? Are they afraid of the end of consciousness? The ultimate blackout, so to speak? Or are they afraid of another aspect of death? The one which they can't begin to foresee or understand?"

"What aspect is that, Madame Kagle?"

"The pain." She glared. "The pain, Father. Possibly sud-

den. Possibly horrible. Waiting, always waiting somewhere ahead, at an unguessable junction of time and place. Like that bootboy tonight. How it must have hurt. One blinding instant when his head hit, eh? I suggest, Father Bleu, *that* is what we're afraid of, *that* is the wholly unknowable part of dying—the screaming, hurting *how*, of which the when is only a lesser part. The how is the part we never know. Unless we experience it."

She slurped champagne in the silence. She eyed him defiantly.

"Well, Father? What have you got to say?"

Discreetly Father Bleu coughed into his closed fist. "Theologically, Madame, I find the attempt to separate the mystical act of dying into neat little compartments rather a matter of hairsplitting. And furthermore—"

"If that's how you feel," she interrupted, "you're just not thinking it out."

"My good woman!" said Father Bleu gently.

"Pay attention to me!' Madame Wanda Kagle glared furiously. "I say you pay attention! Because you have never stopped to think about it, have you? If death resembles going to sleep, why, that's an idea your mind can get hold of. Isn't it? You may be afraid of it, yes. Afraid of the end of everything. But at least you can get hold of some notion of something of what it's like. Sleep. But can you get hold of anything of what it must feel like to experience the most agonizing of deaths? Your head popping open like that bootboy's tonight, say? A thousand worms of pain inside every part of you for a second long as eternity? Can you grasp *that?* No, you can't, Father Bleu. And that's what death is at its worst—the unknown, the possibly harrowing pain ahead."

She clamped her lips together smugly. She held out her champagne glass for a refill. A woman in furs clapped a hand over her fashionably green lips and rushed from the group. Though puzzled, Joy was still all eyes and ears.

"Even your blessed St. Paul bears me out, Father." The priest glanced up, startled. "What?"

"The first letter to the Corinthians, if I remember. The grave has a victory, all right. But it's death that has the sting."

In the pause the furnace doors behind her eyes opened wide, and hell shone out.

"I know what I'm talking about, Father. I've been there."

Slowly she closed her fingers, crushing the champagne glass

in her hand. Weeping, blood drooling from her palm down her frail veined arms, she had to be carried out.

The party broke up at once.

The gloom was even deeper than at the Dome. "Wait'll Greeheim gets a load of this dirty linen!" Joy whispered as they left.

Later, when Cassius escorted Joy to the door of her flat, she held out her cheek for a routine buss. But her mind was elsewhere. "I certainly wonder what Greeheim will make of that nutty harangue. Artistic temperament?"

"It's an interesting notion, anyway."

"What is?"

"Oh, there being two elements in death. The sleep and the pain. I wonder which one you really do fear most. I never thought about it before."

She patted his cheek. "And because you never think about really sensational story material like funeral rackets or sewage-control graft, Cassius my love, you'll never get anywhere in our particular little rat-race. But that's all right. I like you just the same. Good night. Thanks for a fantabulous evening."

Waiting for the tube to take him down, Cassius was struck again by an eerie feeling. It wasn't so much the peculiarity of Madame Kagle's statements. They were pretty obtuse, after all. It was the queer resemblance he saw, or thought he saw, between her attitude and that of R. Ripley Flange. Somehow his mind wanted to equate the jerked plug with the dart case. It was almost as though the pair of them had had exactly the same lunatic vision, whatever it might be.

But the matter really had no relation to the problem still nagging him, he realized. The problem of Timothy's disappearance.

I've been there. The woman's words stayed in his mind the rest of the evening. What could they possibly mean?

Dutifully he recorded the unusual affair in his diary, then put in some time on the notes for his book. The dream of the dog at his heels was even more intense than usual. He awoke near dawn, wringing with sweat. Three cups of caffeine water were required before he was fully awake and free of the grip of the nightmare.

As he went to work, he remembered once having read something about Madame Kagle's brother. Later in the day he had to go to the paper's morgue on another story. He

looked up the Kagle name just out of curiosity. In addition to much material on Madame Wanda, there were several clips on her younger brother. The last of them stated that Dr. Frederic Kagle, a renowned neurosurgeon, had resigned from the World Institutes of Health to enter private practice. The clip was three years old.

Maybe, Cassius laughed to himself, the poor old woman had been put through the wringer by her brother in the cause of science. He laughed again, envisioning the usual horrific collection of apparatus, electrodes and blue lightnings that leapt from point to point while the demon doctor looked on and tittered.

The woolgathering did have one solid result, surprisingly. It got Cassius to speculating again about a new angle on Timothy's fate.

Originally Cassius had wondered whether the body had been purloined by some unspeakable sex ring. Now he had another notion, no doubt equally off base but at least remotely possible. There was no connection with Dr. Frederic Kagle. It was only that Kagle's obscurity suggested scientists who, for one reason or another, were forced to work in absolute anonymity.

A third time Cassius laughed at himself in the gray loneliness of the morgue's reading cubicle. The medical body-snatcher bit in this day and age? Ridiculous.

Or was it?

Was the government, for instance, preparing some new superweapon in fear of possible disintegration of the tenuous Sino-Caucasian Peace? Something compelled him to take down the morgue index book. He leafed through until he located the proper heading. *Disappearances, Unsolved.*

He used the keyboard to code the paper tape. The tape vanished down a slot. A humming. Cassius was startled when not one but three microfilm spools popped from the tube.

There was always a routine number of unexplained disappearances within any given period. Distraught offspring. Erring husbands. Crimes that never saw the light of day. So he had expected one spool at the most. He fed the first spool into the view box.

He did find that customary expected number of accounts of vanishing humanity. He also found thirteen instances of the disappearance of dead bodies within the last twenty-four months.

His brother Timothy was the last of the thirteen. He was

represented by his obit and a two-paragraph item in the *Capitol World Truth.* The item covered the jetport incident. Cassius had seen it several times.

He double-checked each spool again. He hadn't misread. The thirteen who were gone had died in a uniform way.

By violence.

VI

Almost one year to the day after the theft of Timothy Andrews' body, the sovereign and somewhat backward state of New York prepared to let Butcher Balk have five hundred thousand volts. Cassius was waiting.

He was waiting in the prison burial ground on the Hudson bluffs, hunched down in his Ford Aircoupe. The vehicle was parked in a growth of budding maples to one side of a small service road. The time was 10:05 P.M.

Theoretically, Butcher Balk had been dead five minutes. April snow swirled, a quaint effect, courtesy of the weather bureau. Cassius was glad for the white scatter. It would afford him extra concealment in the dark, he hoped.

In order to be here this evening, Cassius had been forced to lie to both Joy and his editor, Hughgenine. He complained of a spell of male post-equinoctial depression, a common burden of urban life anymore. Three other times in the year that had just passed he had also gone off following his elusive suspicions. On those occasions he had pleaded acute hangover, g.i. distress, and bucket-seat hip, respectively.

Each time he'd figured that at last he was right. Each time he had been wrong. Worse, there was nothing to suggest tonight would be different.

But he refused to give up.

The first time, he'd traveled all night to reach Watkins Glen. The Continental driving star Baron von Pfalz had smashed up his Sonic Special in the Grand Prix, dying in a multi-car wreck on the chicane. Cassius had felt like a ghoul loitering around the little chapel where the other racers and mechanics held a memorial for the Baron. A sobbing woman, three children in tow, took von Pfalz's corpse away in a hearse. Cassius drove home keenly disappointed.

The following week the sports section of the *Capitol World Truth* carried a photo of the little family beside the Baron's grave plot. The woman and children, then, had not been actors.

So it went twice more: complete failure in outguessing them. Whoever *they* were.

The second occasion, no one tried to snatch the corpse of Dolly Sue Wei, the first non-American ever to register at the University of Levittown. She entered her first class flanked by the drawn pistols of U.N. marshals. Cassius had been sure the situation would produce violence. It did. Next night someone threw a sharp rock and Dolly died of brain damage.

But she was buried in a routine way in a free cemetery in Manhattan's Oriental ghetto. Cassius was there.

He had also rushed to a mortuary in New Jersey just last February. The Great Rococo, a stage magician, had died with the back of his head shot off while performing the bullet catch before a convention of Moose. Buried without incident in Tenafly.

The three blind alleys might have led another man to abandon the search. But Cassius had access to the paper's morgue. There he convinced himself he wasn't a lunatic.

In the interval during which he'd guessed wrong and gone on fruitless chases, the bodies of five other men—a film star, a slum pastor, an insurance salesman pushing his car to two hundred on the Interstate, a hunter after possum in Kentucky, a suicide in Cleveland—had all disappeared before interment.

Now, in the snowy night, Cassius brooded over his lack of success in outguessing *them*. Yet he was certain *they* were still in operation, and it was merely a matter of time before—

Thinking, he failed to see the drop of the translucent gray force wall of Ossining's new Bartlow Martin wing. He saw the headlights, though. They threw yellow up the hillside. The burial gang was on its way.

The outer wall shimmered up into place again, hiding a ghostly flag on the nine-hole therapy course. Speedy and efficient, the corpse handlers parked the truck on the other side of a low knoll. They rolled the gravedigger from the truck. They lowered the plain poly coffin containing the remains of Butcher Balk into the pre-dug hole. They turned on the digger and stood back while it went to work pitching on earth, its eight metal arms wigwagging black across a spotlight on the truck's cowl.

Unobserved, Cassius spied from his Aircoupe. He'd selected Butcher Balk as a likely target because the killer had received so much publicity. Of course, that might frighten *them* away. But the publicity said Butcher Balk had no living

relatives. And that was another part of the pattern Cassius thought he'd discovered.

In six instances the disappearing dead people had also been survivorless. In other cases Cassius couldn't tell; no mention was made in the printed obits, but since they were wire-service items, that didn't necessarily rule out the possibility of no relatives.

Snow swirled. The gravedigger flushed its green light and retracted its arms. Butcher Balk was a safecracker who had been rehabilitated after his first manslaughter conviction. His adjusted personality had been imperfect, had cracked, had resulted in a berserk massacre of ten men, women, and children on Sunday afternoon in a hamlet on the St. Lawrence. Hence the seldom-given maximum penalty. Now Butcher Balk was only a faint mound among other mounds under the fresh snow.

The prison wall field sank. The truck vanished. The wall went up. Silence and the snow claimed the ghostly Hudson cliffs.

"If Joy could see me," Cassius said aloud, to keep himself company, "she'd think I was completely gone."

The hours passed. Eleven o'clock. Twelve. One. One-thirty. Cassius was convinced he'd made another wrong guess. He was ready to abandon the whole project. He took out the laminated card embossed with his personal digit, poised it over the ignition slot.

Two red-dusky eyes opened below.

He knuckled the weariness out of his eyesockets, looking again. The eyes were headlamps, large ones. But with reddish lenses for snow- and rain-probing radar.

Instantly Cassius began to sweat and gnaw his lip. The murky red circles would be invisible from the prison. He had difficulty seeing himself. Radar lamps indicated a very costly vehicle. Something with a lot of equipment inside, like the mobile surgery and consultation rooms so many personal-injury lawyers drove. Gently Cassius levered up the vent in the Aircoupe blister.

He thought he heard voices. He certainly heard the gutter and clank of a machine. They'd brought their own gravedigger.

Twice its black arms flashed across the circles of the red radar lenses, illusory, quick as a blink. Cassius was now desperately afraid the thieves were vicious mobsters, revanchist foreign agents, or something equally deadly. He slipped the

card into the slot, heard the compressors begin to whoosh. Gently, gently, he levered the Aircoupe out of parking contact with the ground, ready to race in pursuit.

The thieves took twice as long as the prison detail. From this Cassius inferred they had dug up the coffin, then replaced the earth so their work would go undetected. As the thoroughness of their operation hit him, he found himself suddenly pumped full of adrenalin and rage. When the radar lenses vanished, indicating the truck's departure, he was ready.

He jerked the Aircoupe forward. He picked them up on the feeder leaving the burial ground.

Apparently because of the snow or the solitude of the countryside or both, they never suspected he was roughly a mile behind them on the long trip over the state line into Westport, one of the cancerous slums affixed to the body of Greater Manhattan.

The truck whizzing along on its air jets finally slowed on a seamy street. It pulled into the side drive of a ramshackle funeral parlor and disappeared in the rear. Under a lonely mercury light a sign reading COMMUTER'S REST MORTUARY CHAPEL stood on the unkempt, snow-patched lawn.

Cassius cruised half a block down, parked and waited.

The truck never came out.

The windows of the place were black. Painted over? There was absolutely no sign of life. As false dawn broke, Cassius got away from there. He relaxed only when he was on the Washington Belt North. He licked his lips, fought his tiredness, struggled with what he must do next.

The police?

Yes, that was the sensible answer. But something in him rebelled.

After all, he'd invested nearly a year on the chase, which was now hotting up considerably. Had Timothy been involved, he'd have reported to the authorities at once. But the authorities hadn't done much of anything for him the first time. He still resented it.

Had he the guts to carry it one step more and see what happened?

Well, maybe he hadn't the guts. But he had the will. Months of frustration had developed it.

Once back in his flat, he was bothered again. He was the only person who knew the location from which the ring operated. Whom could he tell? Joy?

He warned himself off. Fond as he was of Joy, he knew his

lady-love would try to convert the dross of a personal cause into the gold of self-promotion via a hot story. Tell her, and half of Washington would know before he reached the Commuter's Rest Mortuary Chapel again.

As he pondered alone in his littered room, his eye struck the boxes of notes for his book. All at once the project seemed trivial.

What if—just *supposing*—he uncovered some sensational facts over there in Connecticut? Some monstrous conspiracy? He assumed he was the only one who knew anything about the underground organization, whatever its purpose. Certainly he was the only reporter. Opportunity beckoned. So did faint greed, he admitted.

Greed was unfamiliar to him—but probably only because of lack of opportunities. Hell, what harm would it do to write the exposé himself, if there was one to be written? Why shouldn't he get the credit for doing all the work and taking all the risks?

First, though, he must protect himself.

Next morning, instead of taking the usual vitamin break, he said to Joy, "I have to go out for a few minutes."

Joy folded up the edition of the paper she'd been studying. The front page carried a simulphoto of two cabinet members, the Secretary of Social Security and the Secretary of Fringe Benefits, cutting ribbons to open the new Birth Defects Insurance Administration Center.

"What're you after, love?" Joy asked. "Another dusty book that mentions your favorite colonel in small type in the appendix?"

"I need a new diary."

"Oh, that. You're a great one."

"Why do you say that?"

She pinched his arm, oblivious to the others in the newspaper mess. "I prefer my reflections printed in public, sweets, with my name above them, ten point or better. Cash in the bank is what I'm after."

Cassius grinned. "How do you know my diary won't make me famous one day?"

"That's what all diary-writers think. How many make it?"

Admitting she was right, and promising to meet her for lunch, Cassius left. He hurried down to an arcade on the fourth sub-level of the newspaper building. He bought an expensive diary at a stationery shop. The diary in which he'd been writing lately wasn't filled. But it was just a plain lock-

less diary. The one he purchased had a sonic lock: the first nine notes of the old folk song "Mister Clean," whistled. The lock was tamperproof.

That night, after dinner with Joy, he went home and wrote down the events at the Ossining burial ground, as well as the location of the headquarters of the ring. Then he locked the new diary and went to bed, and dreamed the dog dream vividly.

The next night he set out for Connecticut.

He was unarmed. He was rather frightened. But he went.

He parked the Aircoupe down the block and walked. The moon was full. A gusty wind blew. Even here in the stews, where one tumbledown split-level housed a dozen squealing, fighting families, there was a sense and tang of earth's annual renewal. The wind carried the sweet breath of life. Turning up the mortuary walk, Cassius was suddenly conscious that he was approaching the age when men had instantly mortal coronaries.

He stopped on the walk, his uplifted face moon-bathed, almost sad. The black dog seemed somewhere near.

He knocked quietly. He'd decided he wasn't the type to wave a gun or kick at locks. But his jaw fell when the door opened promptly.

Under a weak light stood a tall, rather soft man with receding hair, rimless glasses, and brilliant blue eyes. The man wore grimy clothing. He looked slightly familiar.

"See here, my name is Cassius Andrews—"

"Of course," the man cut in. He smiled understandingly. "There's no need to take that tone. I've almost expected you to show up one day."

He held out his hand. "Come in, come in! Incidentally, my name is Kagle. Dr. Frederic."

VII

Before budging from the stoop Cassius had to still his suspicions. "I mean to say, Kagle, what I came about is my brother. I want to know what happened to his body."

"Of course," the other repeated, as if it were only natural. "I'll be glad to tell you everything, Andrews. Not here on the doorstep, though. Come in and—oh." Frederic Kagle's eyes were intense and unwavering as blue gas flames. They took in Cassius's nervous glance at the dingy shadows in the hall. Dr. Kagle's manner became wry. "I see now. You expected some-

thing else. You still do. The latter-day Mafia or its equivalent. This is a perfectly legitimate research establishment."

And he reached around Cassius to grasp the door with a left hand whose ring finger bore the faint red ghost of a removed wedding band. He kept talking.

"We're a little under cover, I must admit. But we have our problems. I think you'll appreciate them once I explain. That is, if you've got the stomach to hear it all." A challenging glance. "Being a newsman, dedicated to truth in principle if not always in practice—I'm only speaking generically, of course—you should have an open mind if anyone does."

A small, confident smile played on Kagle's mouth. Cassius noted, however, that he secured the night chain on the door.

"I have to take your word that this operation is legitimate," Cassius said defensively. Kagle spun, peering hard. Cassius felt uncomfortable, as though he'd been tested and found wanting.

"Legitimate by my lights, is what I meant," Kagle said. "Some—my ex-wife among others—don't agree. I'll leave it up to your sense of fairness."

Cassius was fully aware of what Kagle was doing: using soft soap. But he was disarmed, temporarily anyway. Kagle led the way down the corridor, which plainly hadn't been greatly renovated since the days when the place served as the final rest of thrombosis-stricken executives. Through two different doors jumbles of laboratory equipment winked faintly in the dark.

A third door was open, lighted. Kagle closed it quickly. He frowned, as over a minor annoyance. But not before Cassius had glimpsed more glass and metalware, and two men in spotted white coats.

One had been bending over sympathetically. The other had been seated on a stool, head on his forearms on a lucite bench, crying.

"Our work does have its personal problems too," Kagle said. He rolled back scrolled oak double doors. "Even dedicated people get shaky over the moral aspects now and then." He stood aside, waiting for Cassius to pass. Cassius caught the renewed flicker of blue intensity in the man's eye. The calm fire said that Kagle, a dedicated man, was not to be lumped with those who wallowed in shakiness.

Kagle rolled the doors shut again behind them.

The room was large, full of cheap, sharp-angled metal office furniture. A solar tube had been jerry-rigged in the

wall. It shed a white, uncompromising light over all. The only signs of the room's former function were thick, threadbare carpeting, rose-petal wallpaper peeled in many places, and an ancient framed motto, *I Am the Light of the World*, under which someone had taped a photo of some sort of molecular model.

Kagle circled the desk. He sat down, indicated Cassius's place.

"I think I'd better stand," Cassius said. "I didn't come here to be social."

"My dear Mr. Andrews," Kagle said gently, "you have every right to feel as you do. We should never have selected your brother. It was a mistake."

"Yes, it was. For you."

The scientist ignored the feigned toughness. "Ordinarily we try to choose people with no survivors. Last year, however, I had a fellow working for me." The blue-flame eyes brightened merrily. "My, shall we say, traffic manager? He proved to be an idiot. But he was all I could get. Now I handle that end myself. And have, ever since he slipped up a couple of times. One of his worst slip-ups was your brother the reverend. It meant thirty hours' worth of work in a day instead of my usual twenty-six. But that's all right."

Cassius didn't do Kagle the favor of smiling even a little. "I want to know what you did with him."

Kagle didn't seem worried, just more amused. "So you can report us to the authorities?"

"Maybe. Well?"

Kagle pursed his lips. "Mr. Andrews, are you really tough enough to stand the truth?"

"I'm a newspaperman. I guess that qualifies me a little."

"Provided I tell you everything about your brother—which will mean in turn telling you everything about what we do here, and why I'm reduced to crawling out at night like some roach just so I can conduct a perfectly legitimate scientific study—will you promise in return not to write one word about what I say?"

Abruptly Cassius sat down. He fought to keep a straight face. A moment ago he'd been cowed by the man's assured, almost jocular manner. Now it was his turn to feel like laughing.

If the man was indeed a scientist, he was the stereotype: foolish, naïve, unworldly beneath his veneer of hard-lipped dedication. What a hell of a stupid offer! Did Kagle honestly

think he would pass up a chance for an exposé now that he had the material practically in his hands? He had to write what he learned. For Timothy's sake.

And for his own, too. He'd seen a glimmer of a real chance to improve his lot. Such a chance hadn't come his way in longer than he could remember. He'd almost believed he was no longer interested in opportunities. Sitting across from Kagle, he discovered otherwise.

Carefully, softly, he lied, "All right, Dr. Kagle. If that's your price, I promise."

The sap fell for it at once. "Thank you."

Why were the blue eyes merry a moment? Or was it a trick of the light? Kagle tented his fingers, leaned across the desk. "First tell me how you found me."

"No harm in that, I guess." Cassius described his speculations, starting with those initiated the night he heard Madame Wanda Kagle ranting. "I'll admit I didn't dream she really had any connection with you. Or with Timothy. It was just sort of a—well, trigger."

Kagle shook his head. "Poor sis. She badgered me until I showed her."

A trickle of sweat, unbidden, rolled down Cassius's cheek. "Showed her what?"

"The results of our research here into the nature of death."

"The nature of—?" Cassius's eyes bugged.

Dr. Kagle leaned back, chuckling. His pink forehead shone. "There it is again. You imagine we're a bunch of necrophiles, don't you? Nothing so debased, Mr. Andrews, though in certain quarters we're certainly regarded in that light. What we're doing is simply probing the experience of dying from a qualitative standpoint. I could give you a long lecture on the theory. But in plainest terms, our work is this. I'm a neurosurgeon by training. What I do with all the dead bodies I'm forced to steal is analogous to what a man in a darkroom does when he develops film. He brings forth the latent image. A photo's latent image is both there and not there, in the silver. It awaits the right combination of chemicals before it becomes visible. So with the—" Dr. Kagle hesitated a second, as if gauging Cassius's nerve again. "—call it the latent image of death. Or images. The sensory record of the last microseconds before the mind blacks out. All the pain. All the smells, tactile sensations. The blurred sights. When I was killing time as just another white-coated bureau-

crat with the Institutes of Health, I worked out techniques which would parallel the first formulation of the proper photochemicals. And that's why I need the bodies, Mr. Andrews. What good is a darkroom technician without exposed film?"

Kagle paused. "Do you want me to go into the surgical and electronic techniques more deeply?"

"No. Let me get this straight." Cassius was sweating hard. "You're able to take someone's—corpse—and from it get a record of what it felt like for that person to die?"

"That is more or less it, yes. The process involves a great deal of painstaking surgery, much work with computers and videotape and sound-recording equipment. I tried to get the Institutes to underwrite the initial study. Naturally they wouldn't, they didn't dare. You're too young—and so am I, though perhaps I don't look it—to remember the DNA Riots when Gadsburry finally created one single cell in his lab. I'm sure you've read about the riots often. Old illusions die hard, Mr. Andrews. Some of mine died, too, when I first took up this field. I wanted to work legally. Obtain legitimate corpses in the manner of a private medical school."

"Couldn't you?"

The blue-flame eyes brightened. "A court order obtained by a committee of certain members of the clergy in this country frustrated my efforts. I decided it was prudent to go underground, so to speak. To steal the bodies I needed. After all, I'm convinced in my own mind that the work is necessary, important. And honest. Men have been martyred before. I'm prepared to be martyred myself, though of course I prefer to avoid it."

More amusement suddenly. "And I've discovered it won't be necessary, either, Mr. Andrews."

"Isn't this very expensive research?"

"Frightfully."

"Then where—?"

Kagle shrugged. "Patents. Three big ones, several small ones. Neurosurgical apparatus. The royalties are more than ample."

Cassius said, "But I don't really understand why you chose to work in this particular field."

Kagle sounded sad. "After I stumbled across the fundamental technique, it wasn't a matter of choosing."

"Your reason is—?"

"To know. What else?"

"I can see why the clergy would stand in your way."

"Frankly," Kagle snapped, "I can't. I'm not in any way tampering with their precious concepts of immortality. Of course I am in a position to state that, as far as sentient experience goes, there is no immortality after the act of death. The neural latent images are feeble at best by the time I'm through scrounging for the bodies. And they quickly go altogether. Yet even though I resent the opposition, I've tried to be circumspect. Picked subjects who fit my requirements—a violent death, for maximum image strength—but have no relatives or family. I've done this partly out of vestigial moral considerations, partly from a practical wish to avert discovery and continue my studies as long as possible. With your brother, as I stated, the fool I had working for me slipped up. You were shrewd enough to locate me. Therefore I'll hide nothing, Mr. Andrews, I'm no criminal."

Cassius frowned. "Are you sure? What you're doing touches on realms other than the purely scientific."

Kagle sighed. "Metaphysics? I'm only concerned about that as it relates to the people—the clerics—who prate about it and therefore act because of it. I don't want to be dragged into a lot of messy court trials. Which is exactly what would happen if this work became public. Trials, more trials, publicity and, eventually, other harmful effects, evidences of which you saw in my sister's behavior. I'm really going to have to do something about her soon."

Cassius felt as if he should draw back, flee. But he was oddly unable.

"About my brother's body. Where is it?"

"Ruined, I'm afraid. Gone. The techniques we use are destructive. That's why there mustn't be relatives."

"What happens to your so-called latent images?"

"We record them. Five separate tracks which can be projected simultaneously for a view. Though viewing is a dull, limited term for the experience."

"So a person—knows how it feels to die?"

"Yes. By violence. The most painful deaths possible. Raises some interesting speculations, doesn't it? I think you intimated that Wanda was mouthing some of them. Quite apart from the empiric achievement of translating and recording a dying body's sensory images, the research opened up whole new areas of less tangible results. I only began to think about some of the related questions after the work was well under way. Namely, do people fear the *what* of death, or do they fear the *how* and its lesser partner, the *when*?"

"For myself," Cassius said slowly, "I'm—I'm afraid of the end. The blankness. The finality."

"Are you? I assure you there is evidence to the contrary. Death must be a little like sleep. Before you sleep, what is going to happen while you sleep is rationally graspable. The sleep of death is permanent. So you can't reconcile yourself to it wholly. But you can begin to reconcile yourself to it, if only slightly. While I don't think you can reconcile yourself to the other part reasonably. To the pain. The anguish. The lifetime of hells in one instant, one instant waiting, always waiting up there ahead. It's my contention that, because of innumerable variables not present in the sleep aspect, the pain of death can only be known when it happens. And the variables only increase the terror."

"The theory won't hold up," Cassius said. "Death, the absolute end—that's the fearful part."

"Ah, you assume that because everybody's always assumed it. I assumed so too. All I can say is, my work has revealed evidence to the contrary. Evidence no open-minded person can deny. Which is why I made you promise not to write a word."

Abruptly Cassius felt the thrust of ambition, possibilities, chances like gold. He tried to fix the lines of his face and sound demanding:

"Look, Kagle. So far all you've given me is a lot of talk. If you've recorded these so-called latent images, then they ought to be available for someone to see, right?"

"*See* is another poor word. *Experience* would be more correct."

"All right, experience, see, view, you name it. But I want it demonstrated."

"You have more courage than I thought."

"Listen, Kagle, you can't scare me. What about it?"

"If you'll hold to your promise not to write—"

"I will, yes," Cassius lied, feeling very foxy and, incidentally, very righteous.

Weren't those gas-jet eyes laughing at him all at once again?

He was puzzled. Kagle was a naïve fool. Maybe Cassius only saw laughter in the eyes. The man wasn't mad, Cassius was positive of that much. Yet his confidence ebbed quickly. He had the feeling he oughtn't to go through with what he himself had suggested.

But the copy possibilities—! My God! Staggering.

"Since you volunteer, Mr. Andrews, let's step down the hall." Dr. Kagle rose, smoothing his thin hair. "I'll show you as little or as much as you find you're able to stand. This way, please."

VIII

The chamber at the rear of the funeral home had been renovated with theater seats to resemble a private projection room minus the screen. Cassius took a place in the front row center. Dr. Kagle wheeled over a cart on which were mounted several odd-looking instruments. From the instruments dangled fifteen or twenty wires which ended in assorted pads and needles.

"It'll take me a few minutes to get you wired up properly," Dr. Kagle said, snapping a leather cuff around Cassius's bare left forearm. There was unmistakable pride in his eyes as he worked. "I apologize in advance for the needle pricks, but they're necessary."

Cassius was sweating harder. He was fearful but determined to go through with it. He pointed beyond his boot.

"What's that for?"

"The pedal?" It was corrugated iron, painted red. "Just put your left foot on it. There, perfect. If at any point you want to stop, press down. All five tracks will come to a halt simultaneously. Which people do you want?"

"I don't care. Butcher—" Cassius gasped as a needle went home in his thigh. "Butcher Balk? He was the one really responsible for my being here. And Timothy, if that's possible."

"Certainly. I'll also show you one or two others for the sake of contrast. Are you quite sure you're up to it, though?"

"Hell yes," Cassius said, with more conviction than he felt.

"Very well." Dr. Kagle kept working, presently stood back. "Got you trussed up, eh? Any of the pads chafe too much? Good. I'll be leaving. The console is in the next room. There's no need to close your eyes. The lights will dim. Then you won't see a thing in here. You'll be—but explanations are inadequate. Remember the pedal, Mr. Andrews. I won't be offended if you use it."

A door chunked shut. Cassius peered through the crisscross of wires padded to his temples. He blinked. His vision was failing.

No, it was only the dimming of solar sheets across the ceiling. Dimming fast, from pearl to ebony to nothing. Must

adjust the boot on the pedal, he thought, in case it's so harrowing I—

Blur-and-whine.

A light bulb way up there. Weak, shaded with a scrap of tin.

He shifted his head. The rusted springs of the rickety cot squeaked. Suthin needs fixin with the furnace. About this time at night I got to fix the furnace but I can't remember what it is needs fixing. Suthin's wrong.

A slow, labored turn of his head. Difficulty seeing because a film of water was on the eyes. Blinking didn't help. A monster old metal furnace hulked in a corner of the musty storeroom. He could barely read the nameplate. EUREKA! *E-Z Draught No. 22.* EUREKA COMFORT WORKS, *Eureka, Iowa.*

In his chest he felt the annoying, clotted little pain.

Ah Momma I can see your face right now. I been havin trouble sleepin lately Momma. Little pains in the middle. I can see you Momma, I can hear you singin and playin the piano Momma like you did on Sundays.

In his throat the breath caught. He lifted himself, blinked the eye-water back. He saw a faded, patched quilt over his chest, hands on top of it, shaking. They were ancient, wrinkled hands with thickened blue veins standing out.

The Doc don't make me work so hard these days because of the pains but the furnace needs fixin and I wonder what's wrong with m—Momma my God I'm dyin that's what's wrong.

He remembered forgotten music, *The Old Rugged Cross,* with the bass hand-beaten out in Sunday-morning rhythm, *thrummm, thrummm, thrummm.*

Fearful, he tried to cry aloud for help. He couldn't make a sound. The clotting pain, a small hurting ball inside him, widened. It troubled and troubled him. Not the pain itself, which wasn't so bad. Knowing what the pain meant.

Momma I'm goin to be seein you. I don't want it to happen like this ——

The Eureka furnace sank into darkness and sucked all the light after it.

Blur-and-whine.

"Brucie? Brucie? Oh, God, Brucie, don't!" his wife was screaming.

Against his palms, under his boots, the pebbled poly of the

hotel wall and ledge. On his lips a queer saltiness, blood he'd drawn biting down, getting up the guts to do it.

The wind was blowing hard. It whistled and smelled of the pollution of Lake Erie. Ten stories below a crowd had collected in the Public Square. For miles he could see the lights of Cleveland, warm whites and yellows.

They were snares and delusions. The lights were behind doors of understanding, friendship, love, shut to him, shut to him every one—

"Officer, officer!" his wife screamed. "Don't let Brucie do it! Go out and get him. The poor children—"

He jumped.

The wind tugged at his palms, his cheeks. The lights blurred. His bowels loosened. Vertical rows of lights blurred and became a single strip as he hurtled down. Wind hammered his eardrums. He was falling fast, faster—

The hit was explosion. Body's total scream. Coalescing of sensation into one enormous burst of pain—

PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN PA—

Blur-and-whine.

Behind the effin glass in the visitor's gallery the effin newsmen were already talkin on their effin portable visors.

He ran his tongue over his rough, dry lips. His scalp felt prickly where they'd wiped it bare with that effin aerosol. Under his strapped arms the porcelain chair was cold.

Somewhere behind, footsteps, as the last effin attendant shuffled out. A door closed.

The room had a funny smell. It was prolly cause of the green walls, so effin clean an sanitary like a hospital, like a place for killin bugs. Well he wasn't no bug.

He bunched his face muscles to show he had guts. One of the effin newsmen, a fairy with ringlets, was watchin him and talkin in the visor. He was sure he saw the effer's mouth make the words, "Butcher Balk is now sitting in the chair ladies and gentlemen."

All at once, without wanting to, he was pulling against the cuffs and leg straps. They hure. "Oh no, oh no, please Jesus, I—"

Something whacked softly like a toggle jamming between contacts. Lights dimmed. Eyes?

Pain was beginning. A stiff, ghastly tickling that instantly

doubled, tripled, quadrupled, multiplying, multiplying, a rising blast of dreadful murdering pain—

PAIN PAIN PAIN PAIN PA—

Blur-and-whine.

"—outa this! You stay out or ge' killed," de Diego chanted. "You watch it, Christer, I'm warnin' you."

Tipsy, back and forth, faces in the cheap bar swung. His hands were ineffectual, soft, untrained for struggle. He tried to hold both the right shoulder of de Diego, the left shoulder of Ratface Latz. The three of them struggled, roiling the amphet vapors thick in the bar.

"Watch out Revrun Tim," one of the whores cried. "He gotta knife."

"I tell you you must not take each other's life," he shouted, fighting between them, vocal cords nearly raw.

Something jerked at his left shoulder. Spun him fast. De Diego's drug-swollen eyes loomed. Silver flashed in his hand.

"I warn you din I Christer?" was the scream, and suddenly a hole was in him, and tears tasting on his lips.

The hole widened in his stomach. He could feel de Diego actually wrenching and driving the knife into him, down into his bowels to the bottom, bringing in one unforeseen torrent a dimming of his eyes, and no time even to think a prayer as he tottered, everything blurred beneath pain—

PAIN PAIN PAIN PA—

Crash, crash, like a madman Cassius hammered his boot on the pedal, where was it, it must be there, *crash, crash.*

Drool was on his lips. His head was thrown back, wrenching, the eyes shut. Wires snapped as he wrenched, his leg going up and down like a mad thing, *crash, crash, crash*—

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

IX

Limp, drained, Cassius leaned one arm on the ledge of the Aircoupe blister. His left leg hadn't yet stopped trembling.

The moon sailed high and round over the Westport slums. A shadow disengaged from the night, leaned close to the little car. For a moment Cassius had trouble recognizing or remembering.

Then everything washed back. His hands clawed on the

blister ledge. He strained up, thrashing at impossible terror all around.

"There, there, take it easy," said Kagle. The grip on his arm steadied him. Cassius sank back down in the bucket seat.

"How did I get out here?"

"I carried you after I unstrapped you. You fainted. I'm sorry about that last sequence. But you did specifically ask for it. I have a bottle of brandy in my office. It might help. Do you want to go back inside?"

Cassius buried his face in his hands. "Christ, no. Christ."

After several seconds he raised his head again. At last he was gaining control. "Kagle, you're a goddamn monster, that's what you are. What you have in there—it—it's—" He shivered. No one word could encompass it.

Cynical tolerance tinged Kagle's lips in the moonlight. "No, Andrews. You're wrong. It's only the truth. Death as it really is."

Cassius swiped at his moist upper lip. "Who was that first one? That smelly old man?"

Dr. Kagle looked quite interested. "Why do you ask?"

"Because—it wasn't as bad as the rest."

"Interesting. I found that to be the case myself. That was old Peckham. He used to be the janitor here. I kept him on to do odd jobs. He was eighty-six and nearly senile when he died in the middle of the night one night, of simple old age."

"That was—just an ordinary death?"

"Yes. Did you find it painful?"

"A little. Not as bad as—the others. Not nearly as bad."

Dr. Kagle went, "Um. After I'd begun my work, it occurred to me to look into at least one natural, quiet death by way of contrast. Peckham's latent images were quite weak. But they surprised me. I've done a couple of similar analyses since. The so-called quiet, ordinary death has a minimum of pain associated with it, but it's all quite bearable. So you see, Mr. Andrews, I think that what we really fear is the awful pain of a violent end." Kagle paused. He peered down sharply. "Or don't you grasp the significance?"

Hardly hearing, Cassius blurted, "I'll write about this. Expose this dirty business."

"Mr. Andrews, I don't think you will."

"There's something indecent about—what did you say? Oh. My promise. Well, I lied to you."

"I know you did."

Cassius stared.

"But that's all right, Andrews. I let you lie to make it seem you were putting something over on me. That you were fooling me into permitting you to see the tracks. When Flange and his toughs came here right after the court-order business, he also threatened me, Mr. Andrews. Arrest. A treason trial. You name it. I appeared to be frightened, pliant. I explained my work. I told him I'd let him judge for himself, and if he thought I was a criminal, I would submit to arrest. I let him sit in the same chair you occupied. And then his men, one at a time. Flange hasn't bothered me since. That's why I let you see, Andrews. In a way, you and Flange and Wanda are part of the surprising evidence that's begun to come in. Evidence that it isn't the long sleep we fear after all, but the how that's our lash and spur. The unknown, potentially horrible *how*. There is some reason to fear it if we die in bed, but monumental reason if our death turns out to be violent. As you saw."

Cassius's mind was still slow. It grabbed at phrases: "Flange? He came here? You bastard."

Kagle nodded. "Yes. I must say he and his men bore up rather well. So did my sister Wanda. They all endured the tracks to the end."

"Trying to say I'm a coward?" Cassius choked. "Trying to say—"

"Don't be belligerent," Kagle cut in gently. "The only reason you reacted so violently back inside was because of the intensely personal connection. Your brother was dying, not some stranger. The human body, mind, are surprisingly resilient. The endurance is remarkable." Kagle seemed sad. "Yet isn't it strange how men and women don't know their own strength? Think they must protect themselves? Make themselves safe, secure?"

Cassius glowered. "Quit it, Kagle. Weepy expressions don't fool me. You don't give a God damn for anybody else."

Kagle seemed to muse over this. "In a sense perhaps that's true. Else I wouldn't be in this peculiar work. Or intending to go ahead with it, as I am. But I am rather sorry for you, Mr. Andrews."

The "Hah!" from Cassius was short, cackling, grotesque.

"Oh, I realize you don't believe me, but I truly am sorry in my own way. I shouldn't have put you through it. I should have been aware of the personal element. Also, I should have avoided it because I'm beginning to see the pattern, which I hinted about. In the aftereffects, I mean."

Suddenly Kagle leaned close to the Aircoupe again. For the first time there was raw, fundamental emotion on his face:

"If it became widely known that I could arrange such experiences, I'd have no peace. No, I can't let you write, Mr. Andrews. For if they came after me *en masse*, there'd be no end. Don't you see what I could offer them? That is to say—" Eyes haunted now. "—if I would, which I won't, because I know where it would lead?"

"No," Cassius said, low. "I don't see."

"I could say to them, come to me, steel yourself, prepare to endure five minutes of the most agonizing pain on this earth. Live through the most anguished of deaths, the most violent. Then you'll be free the rest of your life. Free because the worst will be over. Free because, statistically, don't you see, you and millions like you won't ever die so violently. You'll die the lesser death of a Peckham, with only a bit of eminently endurable pain. Nothing near the kind of pain which, say, that criminal endured."

Cassius snickered. "Who'd fall for that?"

"Many, Mr. Andrews. In fact, I believe most. I won't pretend it's a riskless proposition, I'd have to say to them. You might, just might, be one of the few in ten millions who will die violently one day. But the risk is infinitesimal. While the reward—well, I could say, if you go through the ultimate, the worst now, think of the years ahead. The years of not having to fear, always fear the unknowable. Dying a Peckham's death then would be child's play, don't you see? And should you lose the gamble—die a violent death after all, I would say—why, then even it might be a whit less terrible. Of course the real benefit, I would say, lies in the years free of fear. If that sounds like a foolish offer, Mr. Andrews, five minutes of hell in exchange for a lifetime of release from the terror dying holds—if it sounds illogical that anyone would accept—if you believe people wouldn't clamor for it—then I submit, Andrews, that you don't know a damn thing about the nature of the world you're living in."

"No one would want—" Cassius began, unsure.

"Wouldn't they? Are you aware of the temper of men's minds over the past eighty years? What do most people desire of life anymore, Mr. Andrews? To be secure against the harms of life. Don't ask me why. Perhaps we'll never understand all the complicated reasons lost back in the years. But people want it. The price keeps rising, but they still want it. I

could give it to them. At the price of being Butcher Balk for five short minutes. And they can stand it. Wanda stood it. Flange stood it. Afterward, there'd be *nothing left to fear.* The world is peopled with Peckhams, not Butcher Balks, Mr. Andrews."

Then, slowly, Kagle sighed. "But I'll never say any of that, Mr. Andrews. I'll never say I could pull fear's fangs, simply because I know they'd want it. They wouldn't be satisfied with less than everything, once they heard. Not until they learned the real price. Not until it was too late. Not until the world's engine stopped."

"Yours hasn't stopped," Cassius snarled.

"No," Kagle said, almost sad again. "But then, I've never permitted myself to experience more than two senses of any subject at any one time."

His pale hand lifted, in the general direction of the moon high above the world, as if to say the subject was at last exhausted. Flickering on his face were the expressions of two men, one the god, one the assassin of everything.

The god could have slain the assassin by surrendering his godhood in suicide. Being a god, he couldn't quite. No, said the gas-blue eyes, he couldn't quite, ever.

"Good night, Mr. Andrews." Dr. Kagle definitely sounded weary. "I know it's been too harrowing. But you did ask me about your brother. What choice did I have?"

Muttering all the obscenities he knew, Cassius jammed his card into the ignition slot and rammed the Aircoupe away from the vicinity of the funeral parlor, leaving the blister open so he could shout back, "You rotten bastard, I'll tell the world about this, I'll let them know—"

X

The Etaoin Pub was located on the fourth sub-level of the Capitol World Truth Building.

The pneumodoor went *hush-hush* open, then closed. Cassius heard it dimly. He was slumped over the bar, looking at his globe of Old Kentuckye Woodesman 120 Proof Sippin' Sauce.

He heard footsteps. He continued to peer into the amber infinity of the booze. Who the hell cared about footsteps?

"Cassius? It is you! Good God in heaven, sweets, what's happened?"

The barkeep ambled over. "Friend of yours, lady?"

"You're new around here."

"Yeah. Hired on two weeks ago."

"This man works on the paper upstairs."

The barkeep sniggered. "When?"

"What?"

"Lady, this guy's been campin' here since the day I started."

Fuzzily Cassius recognized the voice of Joy de Veever. His body felt weighted with bags of lead shot. It was an effort merely to turn and blink his red eyes slowly, like an owl.

Joy had something clasped in her arms. Her glance was alternately indignant and sympathetic.

"I should have thought of coming to this bar sooner, Cassius. But you're not the drinking type."

"Every time some of the boys from the paper come in," said the barkeep, "he goes to the john. First time, when he didn't come out for a while, I thought he was sick. Went back there myself. He was just standing. Told me to leave him alone. I did. When the boys left after lunch, he came out. Same routine in the evening, too. Sometimes he leaves but he always comes back. Wonder where he goes at ni—"

"Thanks for your help," Joy cut in. "I'll take over. Cassius?"

"Let me lone," he said, finding it like climbing Everest to gesture.

"Cassius, what in God's name is the trouble?"

Getting no answer, Joy pulled up the next stool. She told the barkeep she wanted nothing to drink. The tone clearly instructed him to leave. He did. Cassius blinked at the object in Joy's hand. Some sort of book with a tricky shining clasp.

"Cassius love, I've been searching for you ever since I got back yesterday. It's apparent that I shouldn't have spent that week and a half in Bonn at the Floorwax Institute trade show." She sounded affronted. "In the interval it seems you've completely lost your mind."

"Perfly all right." His tongue was oh so heavy. "Perfly."

"Perfectly my eye! I just talked to Hughgenine upstairs."

"Bothrin me. Come in here and bother me. I didn't make it to the men's in time."

"Bothering! I should hope so! After all, when you don't show up to work for sixteen days straight, it's natural for him to bother. Cassius—darling—" And the tears were genuine all at once, rolling down over her rouged cheeks. "Are you in trouble? Hughgenine said he lost his temper. He's sorry he

fired you on the spot. He'll take you back if only you'll tell somebody what's wrong. Cassius? Wake up and listen to me! You're being horrid. You don't know the agony I've been through. Last night I nearly had your floor super thinking you'd suffered a heart attack and must be lying dead inside your flat. What hit that place? Your books were all torn apart."

"So wat?" he inquired. "So wat, so wat? Joy lee me lone."

"I will not leave you alone! I'll get you to a doctor. Do something! Are you having a nervous breakdown, sweetheart? To destroy your things that way—all the notes for the biography of that colonel strewn all over in pieces—"

"Stupid book. Useless goddam wase time."

"Are you in trouble with some woman, Cassius?"

He giggled, but it had a dull sound.

"Cassius, I must say it again. You're treating me very unkindly. After all, you do mean something to me, you know. Please, please, please tell me what's wrong."

"Oh nothin. I just got a tase for booze, 's all."

"Obviously." Joy couldn't help sounding smug. "And obviously you're in no shape to help anybody who wishes to help you, whether it's Hughgenine or me or anyone. That's why I brought this. I figured if the answer can't be gotten from you, it can be gotten from this. Unless you've lost your mind so thoroughly you've broken every single habit you ever had."

She was extending the object in her hand. The clasp looked vaguely familiar. Why did he feel alarmed?

"I found your other diary too, Cassius. In pieces. This one was intact."

"Too tough," he muttered. "Too dam tough tear up. Hey." Again he blinked. "Snoopin?"

"Yes, snooping. I admit it. I had to find some explanation for the peculiar, awful way you're behaving. Now you tell me how to open this lock, Cassius. Either that or you tell me what's the matter with you. Else I'll go to the stationer's where you bought it. See, the name's stamped in gold on the back. It's right on this level. I'll force them to disclose the code."

"Gimme tha," he said, lifting his eighty-pound hand, trying to thrust it through the gloomy darkness of the bar.

The effort cracked away some of his lethargy. He felt he must have the diary in his possession. Then he knew why. The last entry mentioned the Commuter's Rest Mortuary Chapel by name. Didn't it?

He wasn't positive. He thought so. Warning bells, so faint he barely heard them.

"I will not." Joy held the book miles away. "I will not give it to you."

"I said gimme—!" he cried, standing. He toppled on his face.

From afar, Joy said to the barkeep, "You watch him. This man's sick. I'm going to get this book opened and then we'll take him to a hospital. You just watch him a few minutes. No, you shut up, do as I say! Want to lose your job? The paper owns this building, leases this space, or aren't you aware of that? Here, Cassius. Stand up."

As he fumbled his way back to the stool with her help, he managed to perceive what it meant. Joy, poor old Joy. Sure she wanted to help. Sure. The locked diary tantalized her. Anything that might harbor a scrap of something hot tantalized her.

Paper leased the space? For the stationer's too, probably. They'd come across with the code under threat. He made one more abortive lunge for the book.

He grabbed the poly bar rim to keep from falling. He could see it now. He didn't actually care but he felt he should. The book would open to a tune whose notes and name he couldn't recall. Then Joy's curious eyes. They'd glitter, running down the entries.

Then showing it to Hughgenine. Then the trail to Kagle. Joy's hot one, the big hot one in reach at last. Plus her sense of avenging him. As if that mattered.

Christ. What Kagle had said was true, true. First one person would have—he shuddered and knuckled his eyes and moaned a little—those experiences. Then the next would have to see what the experience was. Then the next after that. Then someone would see how it could pull the fangs of fear. Go through the worst, the very worst, and your imagination won't have anything to gnaw on, year after year. Wanda Kagle put it right. *I've been there.*

Christ, the government and the do-gooders would probably seize everything. The public good. Uplift. You can stand five minutes of Butcher Balk to be free, can't you? Take a chance, you're bound to die like Peckham. Think of the peace. *I've been there.*

Dimly he recalled the thousands on the waiting lists of the Securo Corporation. They'd want it. Everyone would want it but a few who, like Kagle, might see the threat. They would

cry out. Their cries would be lost in the howls of happiness. *Get it over. Nothing so bad ever again.*

I've been there.

Did they know what it would do? Did they care? No, they wouldn't care, they'd weep for joy as it multiplied, on, on, to the ends of the earth—

But though he knew these things in a dim way, he couldn't put them all into words. It took too much effort.

"Worl's engine," Cassius whimpered. "Joy don, worl's engine."

Or had he said it aloud at all? He wasn't sure. He'd made the effort in his skull. Whether the effort had stirred his voice box, lips, tongue, he couldn't say. He felt so immeasurably tired. He crawled back up on the stool. Even his sense of urgency, alarm, had aborted. No longer could he be sure why he'd spoken. It certainly couldn't have been for any good reason. He didn't have any good reasons.

Still, something made him squeak it once more, "Worl's engine."

The barkeep clucked his tongue. "Mister? The lady can't hear you."

A feeble whisper, dying: "Worl's engine."

"Mister, you're dreaming. The lady left."

That roused him a little. "Use have a dream. This dog. Chasin me. Not anymore. No dreams since—"

The sentence dribbled off. It didn't seem worth finishing. Only the drink. His hand crawled out. Only the drink seemed worth finishing. And he wasn't even certain about that, really.

Robert Hoskins is well-known as an editor and anthologist. He has been a full-time free-lancer since 1972, and this is his twentieth anthology. He has written more than twenty novels in several fields; his most recent SF novel, *To Escape the Stars*, was published in 1978 by Del Rey.

Reason for Honor

By ROBERT HOSKINS

Dawn caught the men on the ridge by surprise. One moment the sky was full of twinkling points of light; the next, a rose-colored bomb exploded in the east, painting the ridge and the valley below with the broadest strokes of nature's crude and primitive paintbrush. For a few brief seconds the valley stood out clearly in Klevinger's glasses; then the morning mist began rising, once more obscuring the world.

"Well, sonny boy?"

Klevinger rolled back from the lip of the ridge and elbowed himself up against the stunted bole of a blasted pine. He unclipped the canteen from his waist and drank eagerly, though sparingly. Then, with slow measured motions, he screwed the cap back on and returned the canteen to its holster.

"Well what?" he said, finally.

"How many of them?"

Klevinger shrugged. "Four, maybe five. One halftrack."

The other man dropped into a squatting position and began rocking back and forth on his heels, arms clasped, fingers lovingly caressing the master sergeant's stripes on the sleeves of his filthy fatigues. He was a big man, burly, the web belt of an issue .45 straining to hold his bulging belly in place.

"Not too many," he said, softly, as though speaking to himself. "Take them by surprise, not too many. Yeah!"

"Rafael!"

The sergeant looked up then. "Yeah?"

"We can't."

"What?" He shook his head, a blank expression on his face as though the words hadn't sounded clear.

"We can't do it," said Klevinger. "There's too many of them. We'd never make it."

The words out, he bit down on his tongue to keep from revealing his nervousness, lest it suddenly dart over cracked lips. His hand automatically went to the canteen, then he caught himself.

"Boy, you get me." Rafael shook his head. "You really get me."

He stood and came over to Klevinger, standing there with hands on his hips. Suddenly he reached down, yanking the younger man to his feet.

"Sergeant!"

Klevinger knew fright. The other outweighed him by sixty pounds and twenty years of experience. He clawed at Rafael's hands until they loosened, and pulled himself free.

"You forget yourself, Sergeant," he said, coldly. "Hitting a superior officer. You can be court-martialed."

"Yeah. Yeah, Lieutenant." Rafael began to giggle as tears rolled down from the corners of his eyes. "What'll they do to me, Lieutenant—take away my stripes?"

He held out his arms. "See the pretty stripes, Lieutenant? Six of them, after twenty years in the army." The tears were flowing freely. "Six lousy stripes for twenty years! You want them back? Take them!"

He clawed at the chevrons until one fingernail worked through a stitch, and suddenly the whole patch tore loose, trailing olive fragments of thread.

"Take them!" he screamed.

"Sergeant!"

Klevinger's hand flew out, catching the other square in the face. Rafael slumped away, burying his face in his hands until the tears at last slowed, halted. Klevinger stood next to him, awkwardly, clenching his fists in his own shame as he witnessed that of the other. At last he raised one hand and placed it on Rafael's shoulder.

"Sergeant." The word came softly, and he looked up.

"They bombed L.A.," he said.

"I know."

"But how could they? They told us it would never happen, but L.A.'s gone!"

"A lot of other places got hit, too."

"But how could they?" he repeated. "How . . ."

"Mistakes, I guess—a lot of mistakes. In training, they told us to never underestimate the enemy, but somebody high up must have missed that part of the orientation program. Christ, how should I know what happened?"

"Whose fault was it?" Rafael demanded. "Somebody was to blame—somebody screwed up, dammit! Who?"

"Everybody," said Klevinger, shrugging. "Nobody."

"We lost the war," the older man said, sadly.

"Did we? Who said that?"

"But—there's nothing left!"

"Not here, Sergeant. Maybe some of the others came through all right. This is a big country, they couldn't saturate everything—not short of a planet-buster. And we're still here, so they didn't blow the final bomb."

"But here is what counts," Rafael insisted, stubbornly.

Klevinger sighed. "Maybe so, Sergeant. Maybe so."

They were silent another moment, and then the sergeant jerked his thumb in the direction of the ledge.

"What about them? We can take them."

"They outnumber us."

"We gotta do *something*, Lieutenant—better to die trying than just dry up in the desert dust."

"Why not?" He shrugged. "At least it will be something to do."

The halftrack was parked in the exact center of the little valley. The two circled it widely, coming down the ridge around a broad bend. Here and there stunted trees dotted the valley floor, affording scant cover as they slowly worked their way toward the vehicle. After a seeming eternity they were five hundred feet away from their goal.

The morning sun began to beat down hotly on their backs.

Several times Klevinger found himself reaching for his canteen, but each time he snatched his hand away, promising himself that only another half hour, another ten minutes, and his body would be rewarded. When the ten minutes passed, he lied to himself again.

They had drifted apart; now Rafael worked his way through the tall grass until they were once more together.

"What the hell's the matter with them?" he demanded, angry with the invader. "They just gonna sit there all day?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're out of gas."

"The track's full of jerry-cans."

"They could be all empty."

Rafael grunted.

The enemy huddled together except for brief moments when one moved away from his companions to relieve himself. Now one of them came around the track and started in their direction.

"Jesus!" Rafael spoke softly. "He's coming right for us!"

He eased his .45 out, working the action as silently as possible. He raised the automatic, drawing a bead on the approaching man. Klevinger saw what he was doing and clamped down on his wrist.

"What the hell?" Rafael tried to break free.

"Take it easy! He's unarmed."

The man's hands were well away from his body and empty. He was scarcely a hundred feet away now. He stopped.

"You can come out now, gentlemen."

"It's a trick!" Rafael twisted free, and Klevinger threw himself at the sergeant, fighting him for the gun. It fell from Rafael's grasp and the younger man hit it with the side of his fist, knocking it into the scrub.

"You son of a bitch!" Tears brimmed in the man's eyes.

"Shut up—Sergeant!"

Klevinger scrambled to his feet and stood waiting for the other man to approach. He stopped twenty feet away and they eyed each other for a moment.

"Well." The invader cleared his throat. "What does one say?"

"I don't know," said Klevinger. "You started the conversation."

"So I did." He cleared his throat again. "I suppose there's just the two of you?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not really—two, or two thousand, when you're surrendering, the number of your captors makes little difference."

"You're surrendering." It was a flat statement.

The other shrugged. "We have no choice. We've no food, no water, no petrol, and no ammunition. Surrender is the only course remaining."

"How many of you are there?"

"Five—no, four. I keep forgetting that my corporal shot himself the other day. A pity—he was only seventeen. He took the bullet I was saving for myself."

"Where is your main force?"

"Who knows? Disintegrated. We may be the only members left alive or out of captivity—except that we're in captivity now, aren't we? We were air-dropped four months ago, just after the first strike. Since then, we've had no contact with our own forces. For the past six weeks we've been slowly starving—I say, you do have food, don't you?"

"No."

The other sagged. "Then you're not the advance guard of your army?"

"For all I know, we are the army," said Klevinger.

"Then it's over—finished."

The other turned to look back at the halftrack. "It is really and finally over. It's funny. A man goes on hoping, not admitting the truth. We refused to give up and die, when all the time we were dead anyway."

"Not quite," said Klevinger. "You're still walking, you're still on your feet. You're not dead yet."

"Where there's life, there's hope?" He smiled, shaking his head—and suddenly a bomb exploded by Klevinger's ear. The invader's eyes widened in shock: his hand went to his side and came away covered with blood.

The bomb exploded again and the invader was knocked backward. Still he managed to retain his balance as bloody hands stretched out. He took one step toward Klevinger, and then his life force gave out. He fell forward, staining the dead grass of the valley a deep rust red.

Klevinger stood still, shocked into immobility by the suddenness of what had happened. Finally the images of men running in the corner of his eyes dragged his attention from the corpse of the invader. The .45 sounded three more times, and then the echo of the last shot died away. There was no one left standing except him and Rafael.

He turned slowly to face the sergeant. His tongue touched

his lips as he tried to form words, but the older man beat him to it.

"The dirty bastards! I said I'd get them!"

The lieutenant's words remained unsaid. He wheeled away, started to walk from the sergeant. Then he broke into a trot.

"Lieutenant Klevinger!"

The gun went off again, bullet whistling by his ear. Klevinger did not stop, kept running. Again the .45 spoke, and then there was nothing but silence in the broad reach of the valley. As his exhausted legs carried him out into the plains, far away from the distant past came a dying echo.

"Klevingeeerrrr!"

Gene Wolfe was born in New York City and raised, in his early years, in Massachusetts, Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, and Texas —mostly Texas. He attended Edgar Allan Poe elementary school, where he was held down in a nest of fire ants and majored in Oz books and morbid verse. It is possible that it was this early exposure to the unknown that made him become a writer.

How the Whip Came Back

By GENE WOLFE

Pretty Miss Bushnan's suite was all red acrylic and green-dyed leather. Real leather, very modern—red acrylic and green, real leather were the modern things this year. But it made her Louis XIV secretary, Sal, look terribly out of place.

Miss Bushnan had disliked the suite from the day she moved in—though she could hardly complain, when there was a chance that the entire city of Geneva and the sovereign Swiss nation might be offended. This evening she did her best to like red and green, and in the meantime turned her eyes from them to the cool relief of the fountain. It was a copy of a Cellini salt dish and lovely, no matter how silly a fountain indoors on the hundred-and-twenty-fifth floor might be. In a

characteristic reversal of feeling, she found herself wondering what sort of place she might have gotten if she had had to find one for herself, without reservations, at the height of the tourist season. Three flights up in some dingy suburban *pension*, no doubt.

So bless the generosity of the sovereign Swiss Republic. Bless the openhanded city of Geneva. Bless the hotel. And bless the United Nations Conference on Human Value, which brought glory to the Swiss Republic et cetera and inspired the free mountaineers to grant free hotel suites in the height of the season even to non-voting Conference observers such as she. Sal had brought her in a gibson a few minutes ago, and she picked it up from the edge of the fountain to sip, a little surprised to see that it was already three-quarters gone; *red and green.*

A brawny, naked triton half-reclined, water streaming from his hair and beard, dripping from his mouth, dribbling from his ears. His eyes, expressionless and smooth as eggs, wept for her. Balancing her empty glass carefully on the rim again, she leaned forward and stroked his smooth, wet stone flesh. Smiling she told him—mentally—how handsome he was, and he blushed pink lemonade at the compliment. She thought of herself taking off her clothes and climbing in with him, the cool water soothing her face, which now felt hot and flushed. Not, she told herself suddenly, that she would feel any real desire for the triton in the unlikely event of his being metamorphosed to flesh. If she wanted men in her bed she could find ten any evening, and afterward edit the whole adventure from Sal's memory bank. She wanted a man, but she wanted only one, she wanted Brad (whose real name, as the terrible, bitter woman who lived in the back of her skull, the woman the gibson had not quite drowned, reminded her, had proved at his trial to be Aaron). The triton vanished and Brad was there instead, laughing and dripping Atlantic water on the sand as he threw up his arms to catch the towel she flung him. Brad running through the surf . . .

Sal interrupted her revery, rolling in on silent casters. "A gentlemen to see you, Mrs. Bushnan." Sal had real metal drawer-pulls on her false drawers, and they jingled softly when she stopped to deliver her message, like costume jewelry.

"Who?" Miss Bushnan straightened up, pushing a stray wisp of brown hair away from her face.

Sal said blankly, "I don't know." The gibson had made

Miss Bushnan feel pleasantly muzzy, but even so, the blankness came through as slightly suspicious.

"He didn't give you his name or a card?"

"He did, Miss Bushnan, but I can't read it. Even though, as I'm sure you're already aware, Miss Bushnan, there's an Italian-language software package for me for only two hundred dollars. It includes reading, writing, speaking, and an elementary knowledge of great Italian art."

"The advertising package," Miss Bushnan said with wasted sarcasm, "is free. And compulsory with your lease."

"Yes," Sal said. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Miss Bushnan swung around in the green leather chair from which she had been watching the fountain. "He did give you a card. I see it in one of your pigeonholes. Take it out and look at it."

As if the Louis XIV secretary had concealed a silver snake, one of Sal's arms emerged. With steel fingers like nails it took the card and held it in front of a swirl of ornament hiding a scanner.

"Now," Miss Bushnan said patiently, "pretend that what you're reading isn't Italian. Let's say instead that it's English that's been garbled by a translator post-processor error. What's your best guess at the original meaning?"

" 'His Holiness Pope Honorius V.' "

"Ah." Miss Bushnan sat up in her chair. "Please show the gentleman in."

With a faint hum of servomotors Sal rolled away. There was just time for a last fragment of daydream. Brad with quiet eyes alone with her on the beach at Cape Cod. Talking about the past, talking about the divorce, Brad really, *really* sorry . . .

The Pope wore a plain dark suit and a white satin tie embroidered in gold with the triple crown. He was an elderly man, never tall and now stooped. Miss Bushnan rose. She sat beside him every day at the council sessions, and had occasionally exchanged a few words with him during the refreshment breaks (he had a glass of red wine usually, she good English tea or the horrible Swiss coffee laced with brandy), but it had never so much as occurred to her that he might ever have anything to discuss with her in private.

"Your Holiness," she said as smoothly as the gibson would let her manage the unfamiliar words, "this is an unexpected pleasure."

Sal chimed in with, "May we offer you something?" and,

looking sidelong, Miss Bushnan saw that she had put Scotch, a bottle of club soda, and two glasses of ice on her fold-out writing shelf.

The Pope waved her away, and when he had settled in his chair said pointedly, "I deeply appreciate your hospitality, but I wonder if it would be possible to speak with you privately."

Miss Bushnan said, "Of course," and waited until Sal had coasted off in the direction of the kitchen. "My secretary bothers you, Your Holiness?"

Taking a cigar from the recesses of his coat, the Pope nodded. "I'm afraid she does. I have never had much sympathy with furniture that talks—you don't mind if I smoke?" He had only the barest trace of Italian accent.

"If it makes you more comfortable, I should prefer it."

He smiled in appreciation of the little speech, and struck an old-fashioned kitchen match on the imitation marble of the fountain. It left no mark, and when he tossed in the matchstick a moment later, it bobbed only twice in the crystal water before being whisked away. "I suppose I'm out of date," the Pope continued. "But back in my youth when people speculated about the possibility of those things we always thought of them as being shaped more or less like us. Something like a suit of armor."

"I can't imagine why," Miss Bushnan said. "You might as well shape a radio like a human mouth—or a TV screen like a keyhole."

The Pope chuckled. "I didn't say I was going to defend the idea. I only remarked that that was what we expected."

"I'm sure they must have considered it, but—"

"But too much extra work would have had to go into just making it look human," the Pope continued for her, "and besides, a furniture cabinet is much cheaper than articulated metal and doesn't make the robot look dead when it's turned off."

She must have looked flustered because he continued, smiling, "You Americans are not the only manufacturers, you see. It happens that a friend of mine is president of Olivetti. A skeptic like all of them today, but . . ."

The sentence trailed away in a shrug and a puff of smoke from the black cigar. Miss Bushnan recalled the time she had asked the French delegate about him. The French delegate was handsome in that very clean and spare fashion some

Frenchmen have, and she liked him better than the paunchy businessman who represented her own country.

"You do not know who the man who sits by you is, mademoiselle?" he asked quizzically. "But that is most interesting. You see, I know who he is, but I do not know who *you* are. Except that I see you each day and you are much more pretty than the lady from Russia or the lady from Nigeria, and perhaps in your way as chic as that bad girl who reports on us for *Le Figaro*—but so full of tricks. Now I will trade you information."

So she had had to tell him, feeling more like a fool each second as the milling crush of secretaries of delegates, and secretaries of secretaries, and unidentifiable people from the Swiss embassies of all the participating nations, swirled around them. When she had finished he said, "Ah, it is kind of you to work for charity, and especially for one that does not pay you, but is it necessary? This is no longer the twentieth century after all, and the governments take care of most of us quite well."

"That's what most people think; I suppose that's why so few give much anymore. But we try to bring a little human warmth to the people we help, and I find I meet the class of people I want to meet in connection with it. I mean my coworkers, of course. It's really rather exclusive."

He said, "How very great-hearted you are," with a little twist to the corner of his mouth that made her feel like a child talking to a grown-up. "But you asked the identity of the old gentleman. He is Pope."

"Who?" Then she had realized what the word meant and added, "I thought there weren't any more."

"Oh no." The French delegate winked. "It is still there. Much, much smaller, but still there . . . But we are so crowded here, and I think you are tired of standing. Let me buy you a liqueur and I will tell you all about it."

He had taken her to a place at the top of some building overlooking the lake, and it had been very pleasant listening to the waiters pointing him out in whispers to the tourists, even though the tourists were mostly Germans and no one anyone knew. They were given a table next to the window of course, and while they sipped and smoked and looked at the lake he told her, with many digressions, about a great-aunt who had been what he called "a believer" and two ex-wives who had not. (History at Radcliffe had somehow left her

with the impression that the whole thing had stopped with John XXIII, just as the Holy Roman Empire had managed to vanish out of sheer good manners when it was no longer wanted. On the teaching machines you filled in a table of Holy Roman Emperors and Popes and Sultans and such things by touching multiple-choice buttons. Then when you had it all done the screen glowed with rosy light for a minute —which was called reinforcement—and told you your grade. After which, unless you were lucky, there was another table to be filled—but Popes had disappeared and you put the Kings of Sweden in that column instead.)

She remembered having asked the French delegate, "There are only a hundred thousand left? In the whole world?"

"That is my guess, of real believers. Of course many more who continue to use the name and perhaps have their children wetted if they think of it. It may be that that is too low —say a quarter million. But it has been growing less for a long time. Eventually—who knows? It may turn about and grow more. It would not be the first time that happened."

She had said, "It seems to me the whole thing should have been squashed a long time ago."

The Pope straightened his shoulders a little and flicked ashes into the fountain. "At any rate, they make me uncomfortable," he said. "I always have the feeling they don't like me. I hope you don't mind."

She smiled and said something about the convenience factor, and having Sal shipped in a crate from New York.

"I suppose it's a good thing my predecessor got the government to take responsibility for the Vatican," the Pope said. "We couldn't possibly staff it now, so we'd be using those things. Doubtless ours would have stained glass in them."

Miss Bushnan laughed politely. Actually she felt like coughing. The Pope's cigar was the acrid, cheap kind smoked in the poorer sort of Italian cafés. Briefly she wondered if he himself had not been born into the lowest class. His hands were gnarled and twisted like an old gardener's, as though he'd been weeding all his life.

He was about to say something else, but Sal, reentering on silent wheels, interrupted him. "Phone, Miss Bushnan," Sal said at her elbow.

She swiveled in her chair again and touched the "On" and "Record" buttons on the communications console, motioning

as she did for the Pope to keep his seat. The screen lit up, and she said, "Good evening," to the office robot who had placed the call.

The robot answered with an announcement: "Her Excellency the Delegate Plenipotentiary of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Comrade Natasha Nikolayeva." The image flickered and a striking blonde, about forty and somewhat overblown and overdressed, but with a remarkably good complexion and enormous eyes, replaced the robot. The Russian delegate had been an actress at one time and was currently the wife of a general; gossip said that she owed her position at the conference to favors granted the Party Secretary.

"Good evening," Miss Bushnan said again, and added, "Comrade Nikolayeva."

The Russian delegate gave her a dazzling smile. "I called, darling, to ask if you like my little speech today. I was not too long? You did not find it difficult, wearing the headphones for translation?"

"I thought it was very moving," Miss Bushnan said carefully. Actually, she had been appalled by the Russian delegate's references to Hitler's gas chambers and her cant phrases about restoring economic value to human life. It came to saying that if people had no value alive they should be made into soap, but she had no intention of telling the Russian delegate that.

"I convinced you?"

Brad made into soap. It should have been funny, but it wasn't. One of Brad's fingers slowly exposed as she scrubbed herself with the bar. The Russian delegate was still looking at her, waiting for her to reply.

"It isn't necessary that you convince me, is it?" She smiled, trying to turn the question aside. "I'm merely an observer, after all."

"It is necessary to me," the Russian delegate said, "in my *soul*." She pressed a hand flashing with diamonds against one upholstered breast. "I myself feel it so deeply."

"I'm sure you do. It was a wonderful speech. Very dramatic."

"You understand, then." The Russian delegate's mood changed in an instant. "That is wonderful, darling. Listen, you know I am staying at our embassy here—would you have dinner with us? It will be Tuesday, and nearly everyone will be there."

Miss Bushnan hesitated for a moment, looking briefly at

the Pope, seated out of range of the Russian's vision, for guidance. He was expressionless.

"Darling, I will tell you a secret. I have sworn not to, but what is an oath when it is for you? The French delegate asked me to invite you. I would have in any case, of course, but he came to me. He is so shy; but if you come I have promised him I will seat you beside him. Do not say I told you."

"I'd be delighted to come."

"That too is wonderful then." The Russian delegate's smile said: *We are women together and I love you, little one.*

"Tuesday? The day after the final vote?"

"Yes, Tuesday. I will be looking forward so much."

When the screen went dark, Miss Bushnan said to the Pope, "Something's up."

The Pope only looked at her, as though trying to weigh what might be behind her attractive but not arresting face and brown eyes.

After a moment Miss Bushnan continued, "The French delegate might buy me a dinner, but he wouldn't ask for me as a dinner partner at an official function, and that Russian woman has been ignoring you and me ever since the conference opened. What's going on?"

"Yes," the Pope said slowly, "something has happened, as you say. I see you hadn't heard."

"No."

"I was more fortunate. The Portuguese delegate confides in me sometimes."

"Will you tell me?"

"That is why I came. The delegates caucused this afternoon after the public session. They decided to ask for our votes at the final meeting."

"Us?" Miss Bushnan was nonplused. "The observers?"

"Yes. The votes will have no legal validity, of course. They cannot be counted. But they want total unanimity—they want to get us down on the record."

"I see," said Miss Bushnan.

"Church and charity. People surrendered their faith in us to put it in the governments, but they're losing that now, and the delegates sense it. Perhaps the faith won't return to us, but there's a chance it might."

"And so I'm to be wined and dined."

The Pope nodded. "And courted too, I should imagine. The French are very enthused about this; their penal system

has been at loose ends ever since they lost their African colonies over fifty years ago."

Miss Bushnan had been staring at her lap, smoothing her skirt absently where it lay across her knees; she looked up suddenly, meeting his eyes. "And you? What are they going to offer you?"

"Not the lost sees of eastern Europe, you may be sure. Mostly flattery, I suspect."

"And if we oppose them—"

"If we oppose them we will be raising standards about which all the millions who detest the idea, and all the millions more who will come to detest it when they see it in operation, can rally."

"My husband—my former husband, technically—is in prison, Your Holiness. Did you know that?"

"No, of course not. If I had—"

"We plan to be remarried when he is released, and I know from visiting him what the alternative to the motion is. I know what we've got now. It's not as though they're going to be snatched from some Arcadia."

Unexpectedly Sal was at her elbow again. "Phone, Miss Bushnan."

The American delegate's puffy face filled the screen. "Miss —ah—Bushnan?"

She nodded.

"This is—ah—a pleasure I have had to postpone too long."

In order to save him time she said, "I've heard about the decision to ask the observers to vote."

"Good, good." The American delegate drummed his fingers on his desk and seemed to be trying to avoid her eyes. "Miss Bushnan, are you aware of the—ah—financial crisis now confronting our nation?"

"I'm not an economist—"

"But you are an informed laywoman. You know the situation. Miss Bushnan, there are close to a quarter of a million men and women in state and federal prisons today, and to maintain each of them there costs—costs us, Miss Bushnan, the taxpayers—five thousand dollars a year *each*. That's a total of a billion dollars a year."

"I believe you brought out those figures during your speech at the third session."

"Perhaps I did. But we are all interested in restoring the preeminent place the United States once held in world affairs,

aren't we? Miss Bushnan, to do that we have had to take quite a few pages from the Soviet book. And it's been good for us. We've learned humility, if you like."

She nodded.

"We used to believe in job security for everybody, and a wage based on classification and seniority. That was what we called Free Enterprise, and we were proud of it. Well, the Communists showed us differently: incentives, and discipline for underachievers. They forced us to the wall with those until we learned our lesson, and now—well, you can say whatever you like, but by God, things are better."

"So I understand," Miss Bushnan said. Here it came.

"Now they've got a new trick," the American delegate continued. "They used, you know, to have these gangs of—ah—laborers out in Siberia. Then one day some smart commissar thought to himself: By God, if the peasants can grow more vegetables on private plots, couldn't the prisoners be used more effectively that way too?"

"If I recall your speech correctly," Miss Bushnan said, "you pointed out that if half the federal and state prisoners could be leased out to private owners at five thousand a year, the revenue would take care of the remaining half."

"Lessees, not owners," the American delegate said. "Lessees with option to renew. It will lift a billion-dollar millstone from about our nation's neck."

"But," Miss Bushnan continued innocently, "surely we could do the same thing without entering into the international agreement being discussed here."

"No, no." The American delegate waved a hand in protest. "We should enter the world community with this. After all, Miss Bushnan, international trade is one of the few, and one of the strongest, cohesive forces. We need by all means to establish a supranational market structure."

The Pope, sitting outside the range of the American delegate's view, said softly, "Ask him if they're still going to call them slaves."

Miss Bushnan inquired obediently, "Are you still going to call them slaves? I mean in the final agreement."

"Oh, yes." The American delegate leaned closer to the scanner and lowered his voice. "In English-language usage. I don't mind telling you, however, that we—I mean the British and Canadians as well as our own country—have had a hard time getting that one past the Soviets. It comes from the root-word 'slav,' you know, and they don't like that. But it's a

selling word. People like the idea of having slaves; robots have gotten us used to it and tranquilizers and anti-aggressants have made it practical; what's more, it's a link with the past at a time when too many such links are phasing out. People feel manipulated today, Miss Bushnan. They want to be master of someone themselves."

"I see. And it will get them out of prison. Place them in decent surroundings."

"Oh, it certainly will. And—ah—you asked about the necessity of an international agreement and an international market a moment ago. You must remember that our nation needs hard currencies very badly today; and we have the curse—or, ah—the blessing, blessing if you think of it in a positive fashion, of having the highest crime rate among major nations. The United States will be an exporter in this market, Miss Bushnan."

"I see," Miss Bushnan said again.

"You may have heard some of these rumors about the Soviets pressing a certain number of—ah—country people into the market to satisfy the demand. These are slanders, of course, and in any event that sort of thing would be unthinkable in the United States. I understand you're a wealthy woman, Miss Bushnan; your father is in the government, I suppose?"

"He was," Miss Bushnan said. "He's dead now. The Department of Agriculture."

"Then with a family background of public service you understand that in a democracy we have to listen to the voice of the people; and the people want this. The—ah—most recent polls have shown seventy-nine percent favoring. I won't try to hide the fact that it would be an embarrassment to our country if you voted in opposition, and it would not benefit the organization you represent—in fact it would do it a great deal of harm."

"Are you threatening us?"

"No, of course not. But I'm asking you to consider what would happen to your organization if you lost your tax-exempt status. I believe a vote in opposition to the motion might—ah—make Washington feel that you were engaged in political activity. That would mean loss of the exemption, naturally."

"But a vote in favor of the motion wouldn't be political activity?"

"Washington would expect your organization to support

this humanitarian cause as a matter of course. I doubt very much that the matter would come up. You must understand, Miss Bushnan, that when—ah—a measure as revolutionary as this is under consideration humanity must be practically unanimous. Even a token opposition could be disastrous."

Paraphrasing the Pope, Miss Bushnan said, "It would raise a standard about which all the millions who detest the idea could rally."

"Millions is surely an exaggeration; thousands perhaps. But in principle you are correct, and that must not be allowed to happen. Miss Bushnan, Washington has sent me a dossier on you. Did you know that?"

"How could I?"

"Your former husband is confined in the federal penitentiary at Ossining, New York. In the letters you have exchanged, both of you have stated an intention to remarry upon his release. Were those letters sincere, Miss Bushnan?"

"I don't see what my personal life has to do with this."

"I merely wish to use your own case as an example—one which will strike home, so to speak. It will be at least five years before your former husband will be released under the present system; but if the motion passes, it will be possible for you to lease—ah—" The American delegate paused, looking at some paper on his desk.

"Brad," Miss Bushnan said.

"Yes, Brad. You could lease Brad from the government for those five years. You would have him, he would have you, and your government would be twenty-five thousand dollars to the better as the direct result of your happiness. What's the matter with that, eh? In fact, in your case I think I could promise that your husband would be one of the first prisoners to be made available for the plan, and that he would be, so to speak, reserved. There would be no danger of someone else leasing him, if that's worrying you. Of course you would be expected to supervise him."

Miss Bushnan nodded slowly. "I understand."

"May I ask then if you intend to support the measure?"

"I hesitate to tell you. I know you're going to misunderstand me."

"Oh?" The American delegate leaned forward until his face filled the small screen. "In what way?"

"You think that this is going to help Brad and me, and that because of that I'm going to consent to your selling the Americans you don't want, selling them to die in somebody's

mines. You are wrong. This is going to ruin whatever may be left between Brad and me, and I know it. I know how Brad is going to feel when his wife is also his keeper. It will strip away whatever manhood he has left, and before the five years are out he'll hate me—just as he will if I don't buy him when he knows I could. But you are going to do this thing whether the organization I represent favors it or not, and to save that organization—for the good it does now and the good it will do among the slaves when you have them—I am going to vote for the motion."

"You will support the motion?" His eyes seemed to bore into her.

"I will support the motion. Yes."

"Fine."

The American delegate's hand was moving toward the "Off" switch of his console, but Miss Bushnan called, "Wait. What about the other observer? The Pope?"

"He can be taken care of, I feel sure. His church is almost entirely dependent today on the goodwill of the Italian government."

"He hasn't agreed yet?"

"Don't worry," the American delegate said, "the Italians will be contacting him." His hand touched the switch and his image vanished.

"So you gave in," the Pope said.

"And you wouldn't?" Miss Bushnan asked. "Even if you knew you'd be running your church from an empty store the day after you voted no?"

"I might abstain," the Pope admitted slowly, "but I could never bring myself to give a favorable vote."

"How about lying to them, if that were the only way you could get to vote?"

The Pope looked at her in surprise, then his eyes smiled.

Miss Bushnan continued, "Could you tell them you were going to vote yes when you were really going to vote against them, Your Holiness?"

"I don't suppose I could. It would be a matter of my position, if you understand me, as well as my conscience."

"Fortunately," Miss Bushnan said, "I don't feel that way. Hasn't it occurred to you that this business of asking for our votes must be predicated on the idea that they'll be favorable? It hasn't been announced, has it?"

The Pope nodded. "I see what you mean. If the decision

has been made public they couldn't change it; but as it is, if they don't like what they hear from us—"

"But they'll have every news agency in the world there when the vote is actually taken."

"You are a clever girl." The Pope shook his head. "It is a lesson to me to think of how very much I have underestimated you, sitting in the gallery there beside me all these days, and even this evening when I came here. But that is good; God wants me to learn humility, and He has chosen a child to teach it, as He so often does. I hope you understand that after the council I will be giving you all the support I can. I'll publish an encyclical—"

"If you feel you can't lie to them," Miss Bushnan interposed practically, "we'll need some excuse for your being absent from the vote."

"I have one," the Pope said. "I don't"—he paused—"suppose you've heard of Mary Catherine Bryan?"

"I don't think so. Who is she?"

"She is—or at least she was—a nun. She was the last nun, actually, for the past three years. Ever since Sister Carmela Rose died. I received a call this morning telling me Mary Catherine passed away last night, and her rites are to be this coming Tuesday. The government still lets us use St. Peter's sometimes for that sort of thing."

"So you won't be here." Miss Bushnan smiled. "But a nun sounds so interesting. Tell me about her."

"There isn't a great deal to tell. She was a woman of my mother's generation, and for the last four years she lived in an apartment on the Via del Fori. Alone, after Sister Carmela Rose died. They never got along too well, actually, being from different orders, but Mary Catherine cried for weeks, I remember, after Sister Carmela Rose was gone."

"Did she wear those wonderful flowing robes you see in pictures?"

"Oh, no," the Pope said. "You see, nuns no longer have to—" he stopped in the middle of the sentence, and the animation left his face, making him at once a very old man. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment, "I had forgotten. I should have said that for the last seventy years or so of their existence nuns no longer wore those things. They abandoned them, actually, just a few years before we priests dropped our Roman collars. You have to understand that from time to time I have tried to persuade someone to . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, the old phrase was 'take the veil.' It would have kept the tradition alive and would have been so nice for Mary Catherine and Sister Carmela Rose. I always told the girls all the things they wouldn't have to give up, and they always said they'd think about it, but none of them ever came back."

"I'm sorry your friend is dead," Miss Bushnan said simply. To her surprise she found she really was.

"It's the end of something that had lived almost as long as the Church itself—oh, I suppose it will be revived in fifty or a hundred years when the spirit of the world turns another corner, but a revival is never really the same thing. As though we tried to put the Kyrie back into the mass now."

Miss Bushnan, who did not know what he was talking about, said, "I suppose so, but—"

"But what has it to do with the matter at hand? Not a great deal, I'm afraid. But while they are voting, that is where I shall be. And afterward perhaps we can do something." He stood up, adjusting his clothing, and from somewhere in the back of the apartment Sal came rolling out with his hat positioned on her writing shelf. It was red, Miss Bushnan noticed, but the feather in the band was black instead of green. As he put it on he said, "We started among slaves, more or less, you know. Practically all the early Christians who weren't Jews were either slaves or freedmen. I'll be going now to say the funeral mass of the last nun. Perhaps I'll also live to administer the vows of the first."

Sal announced, "Saint Macrina, the sister of Saint Basil, founded the first formal order of nuns in three-fifty-eight." The Pope smiled and said, "Quite right, my dear," and Miss Bushnan said vaguely, "I bought her the World's Great Religions package about a year ago. I suppose that's how she knew who you were." She was thinking about Brad again, and if the Pope made any reply she failed to hear it. Brad a slave . . .

Then the door shut and Sal muttered, "I just don't trust that old man, he makes me feel creepy," and Miss Bushnan knew he was gone.

She told Sal, "He's harmless, and anyway he's going to Rome now," and only then, with the tension draining away, did she feel how great it had been. "Harmless," she said again. "Bring me another drink, please, Sal."

Tuesday would be the day. The whole world would be

watching, and everyone at the conference would be in red and green, but she would wear something blue and stand out. Something blue and her pearls. In her mind Brad would somehow be waiting behind her, naked to the waist, with his wrists in bronze manacles. "I'll have them made at Tiffany's," she said, speaking too softly for Sal, busy with the shaker in the kitchen, to hear. "Tiffany's, but no gems or turquoise or that sort of junk."

Just the heavy, solid bronze with perhaps a touch here and there of silver. Sal would make him keep them polished.

She could hear herself telling their friends, "Sal makes him keep them shined. I tell him if he doesn't I'm going to send him back—just kidding, of course."

Richard A. Lupoff was for twelve years "in computers," and then he joined Canaveral Press, where he was the editor for five First Edition books by Edgar Rice Burroughs. He has been a music critic for such national publications as *Crawdaddy*, *Ramparts*, and *SunDance*, although he professes to know absolutely nothing about music. He has written for motion pictures, radio and television, and among his many books are *All in Color for a Dime* and *The Comic-Book Book* (both co-edited with Don Thompson). An instructor of English at the College of Marin in Kentfield, California, he currently lives on the West Coast with his wife, three children, two cats, and two Afghan hounds.

Mektopia!

By RICHARD A. LUPOFF

The message chime added its note to the dinning background noises that penetrated the thin walls of Hunt Arkr's expensive room. Somehow the heightened noise level managed to exceed the decible count to which Hunt had conditioned himself, the only way that sleep was possible anymore. He stirred, stretched; his arm made contact with the lush body of

Lysa Lond, raising in Hunt a sensuous reverie of the previous night's lovemaking. Then his attention was captured by the bedside vidscreen glowing luridly just beyond Lysa's touseled corn-silk waves.

The message was terse, crisp: IMP RPT GMD STN NLT 016 HRS 012 JUL. Hunt read the compressed order to himself and uttered a single loud expletive.

Between him and the message screen Lysa opened her deep green eyes sleepily and reached for him with her soft and amorously skilled hands. "Oh, baby," she moaned, "what's the matter? Did you say something?"

"I sure did," Hunt grumbled. "Take a look at the screen!"

Lysa turned to look at the vidscreen, the graceful curve of her waist and hip blocking half of the vermillion-lettered message from Hunt's view. She read the abbreviations softly, only half aloud, twice, then lay back supine and said, "I don't have the faintest idea what that means, love. Why are you so upset over some little message?"

Hunt interpreted the words for her: *Report Ganymede Station not later than sixteen o'clock, July twelfth.*

"Ganymede!" Lysa exclaimed. "Why do you want to go to Ganymede?"

"It isn't a question of wanting to go. They must be in bad trouble to buzz me at—ah"—he checked the universal chronometer embedded in his pinky—"five o'clock in the morning. I don't think it could be the Burbibs again, they had that problem pretty well in hand the last I knew. More likely an engineering hangup on the Tocsloan power project. Well, duty calls!"

He started to climb out of bed. Before he could move more than a few centimeters, Lysa had pressed her cheek against the side of his neck and was running a fingernail tantalizingly down his body from sternum to navel. "July twelfth isn't till Friday," she breathed in his ear. "Don't you have time for just another little—nap?"

For a moment Hunt hesitated, then took Lysa by the shoulders. With an act of will he pushed her back onto the emerald silken sheets that matched her eyes and slid his feet onto the carpet. "Four days and eleven hours," he said decisively. "Four days and eleven hours to get from Hypermanhattan to Ganymede Station! Even if I leave this minute it's going to be a tight trip. If I delay even a little, I'll never make it." He picked up his permaclean jumpsuit and began to pull it on, one leg at a time.

Lysa sat up in bed, pulling an emerald sheet modestly over her torso so that only part of one nipple seemed to wink enticingly at Hunt. "Well what if you *are* a little late?" she pouted. "Don't they push liners to Ganymede every morning and afternoon? What if you just get there Saturday morning instead of Friday? You're not in the army or anything!"

"Can't be done," Hunt snapped. "If they need me at Tocsloan, it must really be important, and they'll pay me plenty for my know-how. But if I'm not on time they can blow a fortune, and next time around they'll call somebody else, Rayn or Clarr." He slipped his hands into the jumpsuit's sleeves, pulled it over his shoulders, and ran his hands over the open seams to seal himself in.

"Let them!" Lysa said angrily. "You invite me up here for a nice visit and then you bug out at five in the morning. What kind of lousy forno is that!"

"I'm sorry, Lysa, but they'll throw us both out if I don't pay the maint!" He pulled the antipollution helmet over his head, looked at her once through its tinted goggles, and leaned over the bed for a single kiss before he sealed the face-mask. Lysa turned away and all he did was brush her hair with his lips.

Beside the hall iris Hunt grabbed the suitcase that he kept ready for quick departures, checked the corridor in the burglar-prism, and saw that there was no one in the long, rainbow-lighted tunnel. He rapped his personal exit code on the center of the iris and stepped into the hallway as it slid open, paused, and automatically resealed itself.

Hunt checked his finger-chrono again, saw that almost eight minutes had passed since the message chime had awakened him, and set off for the elevator at a brisk trot. When he got there he found himself still alone, set down his suitcase, and pressed the car-call.

He checked his finger-chrono, found that it was 0536, picked up his suitcase, rapped a nervous tarradiddle on the car-call, heard the humming grow loud, drew a deep breath, shifted his weight to plunge quickly through the iris when it opened, then heard the humming begin to grow faint again.

Hunt applied the keen reasoning power and sensitive judgment that had brought him to his high standard of living (by contemporary standards) and decided that the odds favored the calculated risk of waiting longer.

He put down his suitcase, checked the hallway again in both directions, sat down on the suitcase and consulted his

finger once more. It was 0553. He drew a deep inhalation through the pollution filter of his helmet and leaned his head against the corridor wall. After a few minutes he began to doze.

He was awakened by a gentle vibration in the wall, looked around in alarm, subsided with relief to find himself still alone and safe, rose, pressed his ear to the iris, heard a gently increasing hum, picked up his suitcase, poised himself for a leap, checked his chrono again (it was 0622) and congratulated himself on making a wise choice as the elevator slowed, the iris retracted, he leaped through into the forest-decorated car, and the elevator resumed speed again as the iris closed behind him.

Hunt dropped his suitcase in startlement: the elevator car was already occupied! The other occupant was wearing a jumpsuit similar to Hunt's, and a pollution helmet with the face-mask sealed. It was a figure shorter than Hunt's but wiry and muscular, and had dropped into a shen-jeng defensive posture at Hunt's arrival.

Responding with lightning reflexes, Hunt adopted shen-jeng position number six, "echidna-lotus-sea-urchin." The other shifted to position ten-A, "dandelion-pachyderm."

Hunt dropped his left hand three centimeters and rearranged the toe-flexure of both feet, going into the difficult but effective shen-jeng "advanced flamenco-wild boar" configuration.

Without relaxing its potentially disabling dandelion-pachyderm posture, the other figure said "Is that you, Mr. Arkr?"

Startled, Hunt nodded involuntarily. The other, thinking the move a feint on Hunt's part, began the difficult "aeryopogus" maneuver, but Hunt quickly blurted "Yes, it's me, Hunt Arkr! Who are you?"

"Hyla Vand," the other responded. At once Hunt recognized the jumpsuited form as his near-neighbor and occasional orgy partner.

"Hyla!" Hunt exclaimed, "What a relief! If I have to spend a few hours in an elevator with somebody, I'm sure I couldn't pick anyone I'd rather be with than you!"

Hyla leaned back in one slightly rounded corner of the car, dropping her hands to the relatively comfortable shen-jeng "toadstool-tadpole-crabapple" position. Hunt relapsed into the related and fatigue-minimizing "emu-bushmaster" posture. Thus indicating their high degree of mutual trust (con-

sidering that it was a public elevator with only minimal police surveillance screens and potential anesthetic ventilation) they lapsed into small talk.

At approximately 1245 hours Hunt and Hyla each palmed a nutro-pill. The elevator wall-screen played an antique historical EVR tape of the musical *Pigshit*, but neither Hunt nor Hyla was able to concentrate properly, being busy watching each other for fear of a sneak attack. (Trust was one thing, foolhardiness another.)

Finally the elevator slowed. Moving to the rear corner opposite Hyla Vand's, Hunt poised himself to make his exit. The car cut its speed momentarily to a near crawl, the iris retracted, showing transit level outside, Hunt jammed his suitcase into Hyla's ribs, catching her off guard and assuring himself of a safe departure, threw the suitcase through the iris, and leaped after it.

A gang of subadolescent street arabs had fallen upon the suitcase, but to Hunt's good fortune, two of the children were struggling with the locks and elbowing each other at the same time, while several others shoved and batted at each other as they tried to make off with the luggage in several directions.

Hunt waded into them, fearlessly delivering shen-jeng kicks and butts until they scattered, leaving the suitcase behind with its armored skin only little more scarred than they had found it.

Hunt whirled once in place to assure himself that he was safe for the moment. He yielded one brief instant to wondering when and where Hyla Vand would get off the elevator and where she was headed—a woman alone in a public elevator must be either incredibly courageous or foolishly desperate—but then he turned his attention to his own problem, that of reaching Ganymede Station by 1600 hours on Friday.

Already it was 1733 by his universal finger-chrono, but still only Monday afternoon. He was actually a little ahead of schedule, having reached transit level in just over twelve hours. If the breaks continued to go his way, he would reach Ganymede on time.

Fortunately the increasing impact of automation had reduced work forces to a level where daily rush hours in the incredible style of past decades were no longer part of the city's pattern. Few Megalopolitans ever left their living shafts; many, in fact, spent years if not lifetimes entirely in their own quarters, adopting permanent forno partners and dividing their lifetimes between watching vidscreen entertain-

ments and experimenting with ever-more-bizarre sexual pastimes.

Nourishment was free and piped directly into each living unit, and the daily inclusion of a mixture of tranquilizers, psychedelics, and aphrodisiacs assured that ordinary citizens would be kept reasonably quiet and reasonably busy in their cramped homes. Only the culturally elite, like Hunt and Lysa —and the subcultural drops, who seemed to throng the transit level, wandering endlessly—were omitted from the mainstream of modern society.

In his first minutes outside the elevator iris, Hunt watched the flowing masses of elite and drops move ceaselessly through transit level. A number of riksleds passed. Each was drawn by a ragged drop, none of them looking healthy, a few (incredibly) lacking even pollution helmets, their tongues hanging out, their breath coming in rasping gasps.

Hunt hoped to find a vacant riksled and hire its human operator to pull him to the Hypermanhattan Airlines Terminal, but all were occupied. One, its operator clearly more prosperous than most of his colleagues (he wore not only pollution helmet and face-mask but a pair of ancient rubber-soled sneakers!), boasted a sealed and filtered passenger compartment whose occupant was able to crack his mask and breathe filtered air without having his face covered.

A momentary wave of envy swept Hunt; then he turned his attention back to the problem of reaching the terminal.

Several street arabs approached, offering variously to carry Hunt's suitcase, introduce him to their younger sisters, sell him a lid of twilight-zone puce, or hail a riksled for him. He offered to engage one of the latter but the boy demanded payment in advance and Hunt insisted on paying only upon performance. Negotiations rose to a heated pitch.

The street arab called Hunt a vicious name and gestured unacceptably at him. Hunt rose from his seat on his suitcase to strike the street arab. As he did so, a blur moved from behind him to grab the suitcase and make off with it. Hunt abandoned the foe he faced and turned to try and rescue his luggage. As he started after the thief, his ankles were grabbed from behind and he pitched forward.

Only the weight of his suitcase prevented the success of the theft. As it was, the youngster trying to get away with the bag found it too heavy to run with, and was still within Hunt's outstretched reach, dragging the suitcase along, as Hunt sprawled forward. Hunt clamped one hand onto the shoulder

of the thief, the other onto his bag itself, and in the struggle that followed managed to regain possession of his property.

The street arabs scattered.

Hunt picked up his suitcase, dusted off his permaclean jumpsuit, and started walking across transit level. He had hoped to avoid taking the municipal bus line, but it now seemed unavoidable. He cursed at a riksled as it cut past him, very nearly crushing the metal-reinforced toes of his boots. Well, if it was impossible to hail a riksled the only courses remaining were the bus or the ground-level pedestrian mall.

But the pedestrian mall, although theoretically open to foot traffic, had become so heavily infested with mutants in recent years that it had been abandoned, first by police, then by the pedestrians themselves, and finally, once there was nobody left to mug but one another (and that not a profitable enterprise) by the mobs of muggers who had formerly preyed on the pedestrians and police. Few hardy souls now ventured out onto the surface of the Noreast Megalopolis, and of those few, fewer still returned to tell the tale.

No, Hunt decided, it would have to be the bus.

By the time he had made his way through clusters of drops and the few others who moved about transit level, been near-missed by a couple of dozen riksleds and grazed by two or three, fought off several more attempted thefts of his suitcase and/or personal assaults, rejected multiple offers of illicit pleasures gustatory, psychochemical, erotic, sado-masochistic, cultural, religious, and sartorial, and successfully rendered *hors de combat* one straightforward homicidal maniac who had fortunately proved clumsy in his execution of the shen-jeng "piranha-gila monster" blitz tactic, Hunt reached the bus stop.

Stationing himself at the end of the line of would-be passengers on the number six line southbound, Hunt put his suitcase on the floor of transit level and stood on it. From a pocket of his jumpsuit he withdrew a mirror and held it as high above his head as he could reach. He aimed it at a 45-degree angle toward the head of the line. He was immensely gratified to find that he could actually see the head of the line and the little plastic flag that marked the position of the bus stop proper.

He climbed down from his suitcase and checked out the person standing ahead of him in the line: a tiny old lady, from what appearances were visible through her permaclean jumpsuit and pollution helmet with sealed face-mask. What

she was doing out of her dwelling unit Hunt could not fathom, but was disinclined to ask just now.

He offered a non-aggression warranty to the tiny old lady ahead of him in line, proposing that they alternate two-hour watch periods until the bus arrived. The old lady agreed and promptly slumped to the floor and began snoring. Hunt palmed a short-hi tab through his face-mask and spent the next two hours wide awake, thinking through the engineering details of the Tocsloan job.

When he felt himself coming down he wakened the old lady and draped himself over his suitcase to dream of the Tocsloan project with superimposed images of Lysa Lond's lush limbs and strange flashes of the old lady turning into Hyla Vand inside her jumpsuit and pollution helmet.

Suddenly he felt himself being shaken awake. As his head cleared, he asked the old lady if it was time to change watch, but she said: "Look, sonny, it's the bus!"

Hunt joined with the other travelers, elite and drop alike, as a feeble cheer rippled up and down the line. The armored and turreted number six chugged past the tail of the line, slowing to a halt at its head. Slowly the line crawled forward as a few passengers debarked and those at the front of the waiting line were permitted to board in their place. Hunt congratulated himself on the amount of progress he made toward the head of the line and, mentally calculating the number of similar moves against the apparent frequency of buses (there being no point in considering the official schedule), determined that he should board a number six in time to stay tolerably near his own projected travel program.

At approximately 0715 hours Tuesday morning Hunt bent over the sleeping form of the little old lady. It was, by their agreed schedule, time for him to waken her. Before he had done so, however, a number six bus—the fifth to arrive since he had taken up his vigil shortly after 0100 hours—chugged past the passenger line and halted. Hunt swiftly counted the number of persons in line ahead of him. Including the dozing crone there were half a dozen.

Hunt plunged one hand into a pocket of his jumpsuit and brought it forth containing a small capsule, maintaining the while his position crouched over the old woman. Alertly he waited as the armored outer door of the bus opened to discharge a passenger. The door rolled shut again and in his mind's eye Hunt conjured the image of the bus's inner door opening, a second departing passenger stepping into the pas-

senger lock, the inner door resealing. As if on cue, the outer door reopened and a second passenger emerged.

For a total of six times the cycle was repeated. After the sixth passenger had debarked, the passenger lock remained open to the waiting travelers. As the line began to move forward, a surge of panic and rage raced through Hunt's nervous system. The old lady began to stir and a formless syllable emerged from her face-mask.

But Hunt acted swiftly! A rabbit-punch to the side of her neck stopped the old woman's movements for a moment. Before she could stir again, Hunt had jerked her face-mask open, popped in the small capsule he held, broken the covering of the capsule between thumb and forefinger, and resealed her face-mask. Her body twitched once and then lapsed into profound slumber.

Hunt deftly hopped over her body, lifted the suitcase, and moved forward. Five times the passenger lock door slid open and five times a person climbed aboard the bus. The sixth time Hunt climbed aboard. The outer door rolled to behind him. Just before it closed fully he glanced back and saw that the old lady's body had been shoved aside and that the line had moved past her to wait for another bus.

A series of buzzes sounded and lights flashed as Hunt and his baggage were X-rayed, metal-detected, anti-bacterialized, de-explosived, and disinfected. Arms emerged from the ceiling and clamped metal bands around the suitcase.

The inner passenger-lock door rolled back and Hunt stepped into the body of the bus. From within the driver's armored compartment a metallic voice demanded Hunt's fare. He shoved his credit card into the proper slot, punched his social security, communication locater, and master citizen identification numbers into the appropriate keyboard, palmed both automated fingerprint readers, and bit down hard on the dental-configuration ID matrix.

After a brief period of buzzing and clicking, his credit card popped out of the slot and the metallic voice directed him to the last standing-room vacancy on the bus. As the bus began to roll, Hunt noticed that the standee nearest him had apparently been dead for some time, but since the cadaver had already been stripped of valuables, he ignored it and turned his attention to his own situation.

It was 0902 Tuesday.

By 1140 hours Hunt had won three shen-jeng duels and was seated comfortably with his suitcase on his lap.

By 1425 hours he recognized the distinctive dress of a number of newly boarded passengers as that of airline-terminal employees.

At 1900 hours he popped two nutro tablets and a short-hi. The next time the bus stopped, at 1920 hours ± 3 minutes, he battled successfully to the passenger lock and emerged once more onto transit level. His mental calculations had been perfect, and he stood within naked-eye distance of the Hypermanhattan Airlines Terminal.

Inside, he began the lengthy trudge past assorted check-in counters, noting with satisfaction the distribution of passengers for the various North American Megalopolises and for the numerous intercontinental departure areas. In time he reached the Noram Spaceport shuttle check-in and studied the three priority-status check-in counter stations.

With a sigh of relief, he placed himself at the tail end of the top-priority line. The line was by far the shortest of the three, and the Golden Ion Service policy assured that it moved the fastest. The first time it did inch forward one space Hunt checked his chrono. It was 0155 hours, Wednesday.

The second time the line moved forward a space he checked his chrono again. It was 0220 hours. With satisfaction Hunt checked the number of passengers ahead of him, using his suitcase-and-mirror technique. At a mere twenty-five minutes per passenger, the line was virtually whizzing forward.

Also, Hunt noted, the line was heavily dotted with individuals in the distinctive uniform of airline employees.

Shortly he was approached by a uniformed worker and, after an appropriate exchange of official ID, insurance data, employment credentials, credit verification, and personal testimonials, Hunt contracted for the airline employee to hold his place in line for the standard fifty-percent override on his air fare plus personal gratuity.

Relieved, Hunt purchased the use of an armored cubby-hole and slept until a buzzer indicated that his place in the line was near the counter. He returned to the line, discharged the surrogate who had held his place for him, waited through two more passengers ahead of him, and booked passage for the next shuttle to Noram Spaceport. It was 1545 hours, Wednesday.

By 2230 hours his flight was called and Hunt left the barbed-wire passenger lounge and crawled through the board-

ing umbilical onto the shuttle craft. By 0100 hours the craft was fully boarded and had taxied into position in the takeoff line. By 0630 it was cleared for takeoff, and by 0700 hours, Thursday, had entered the holding pattern over Noram Spaceport.

By 1300 hours Thursday the shuttle was on the ground and Hunt, along with the other passengers, was making his way through the deboarding umbilical into the spaceport passenger section.

Inside, he made his way directly to the Earth-departure Customs Section. Here there was no professional place-holding service under official auspices, and although a number of drops hung about to offer the same service on an unofficial free-lance basis, none of them looked sufficiently reliable for Hunt to entrust his precious place in line to them.

Hunt reached the head of the line at just 2400 hours, Thursday midnight. As the customs official handed him his packet of forms, Hunt wondered, for the first time, if he could still reach Ganymede Station by 1600 hours Friday. He broke the seal of the packet, extracted the first quintuplicated document, handed the customs official his credit card in order to rent a stylus from him, and began to fill in the required information.

By 0500 hours Friday, he had completed his Earth-departure customs paperwork and carried his still-sealed suitcase to the inspection-station line. By 1000 hours he had reached the head of the line, again breathing a prayer of thanks for the top priority rating which his profession and assignment brought him.

He rented a pair of shears from the customs inspector and unsealed his suitcase for checking. The inspector started with Hunt's spare handkerchief, checking it for type of cloth, opening seams to peer inside for the presence of contraband, examining it under infrared, ultraviolet, fluorescent, argon, neon, xenon and gamma-ray light for coded secrets, and finally putting it onto the "tentatively approved" pile.

By 1400 hours Hunt was cleared by Earth-departure Customs and was standing in the line for Ganymede departure tickets. Fortunately this line was extremely short. By 1515 he had bought his ticket.

The next flight was announced at 1530 and Hunt raced through Noram Spaceport to make it.

Panting into his face-mask he dived into the boarding umbilical just before it was sealed, slid into a seat, held his

ticket up to the final pre-departure scanner, and felt the spacecraft begin to slide forward on its fusion-ion exhaust system. He checked his finger chrono.

If he was in time, he should make enough money from this one job on the Tocsloan power project to live for two years at present price levels. Making allowances for continuing inflation, it would pay his rent and other minimum expenses for eight months easily.

If he was late—he thought of Fre Quen, the boss at the Tocsloan job, and his fanatical dedication to punctuality. Old "Time Is Money" Quen. If he was late, he'd be lucky to get back travel expenses. He'd have suffered a couple of hellish weeks, between travel up and back and time actually spent on-site. He'd miss Lysa Lond—she would surely be gone by the time he returned to his Hypermanhattan room. And the prospect of taking up again with the likes of Hyla Vand was far from exciting, even with the aid of psychedelic aphrodisiacs.

He checked his finger chrono again.

Well, nothing he could do now; his fate was in the laps of the gods—and of the fusion-ion drive.

Hoping to while away the travel time, he punched a button at random on the passenger-entertainment console and was treated to a subliminal lightbeam projection of musical comedy based on Forster's old yarn, "The Machine Stops." The musical was called *Mektopia.*

Just as the hero embraced his long-lost mother in *Mektopia,* the space liner slid into its landing tank on Ganymede.

Hunt was the first passenger to reach the exit umbilical, and he slithered through it at top speed. No sooner had he emerged inside the Ganymede Station passenger-receiving area than he felt a strong hand clap itself onto his jumpsuited shoulder.

"You can get rid of that pollution helmet here, boy!" a hearty voice boomed.

Hunt turned expectantly to face his greeter. "Fre Quen!" he said. "It was really great of you to come down to the spaceport to meet me."

"My pleasure, I'll warrant, it was completely my pleasure!" the big man boomed. "And how was the trip out?"

"Easiest I've ever had," Hunt answered sincerely. He looked at his finger chrono. It was 1559 hours, Universal Time.

Theodore R. Cogswell served as an ambulance driver with the Republican army during the Spanish Civil War, and then as a captain in the USAAF during World War II. Although he was an avid early SF fan, it was not until 1951 that, at the suggestion of Poul Anderson and Gordon Dickson, he tried his hand at writing commercial fiction. His first story, "The Specter General," sold to John W. Campbell's *Astounding* and was recently selected for the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. Currently teaching at a small private college in northeastern Pennsylvania, he is a former secretary of the Science Fiction Writers of America and a former editor of the *SFWA Forum*.

Ted Thomas is a graduate of MIT, a former chemical engineer, a graduate of Georgetown University Law School, and has been admitted to the bar of the District of Columbia and the state of Connecticut. For the past twenty-five years he has been a practicing patent lawyer and part-time writer, with some seventy stories to his credit. He has also authored a twice-weekly newspaper column since 1949, and is the co-author with Kate Wilhelm of two SF novels, one of which is to be made into a movie.

Paradise Regained

By THEODORE R. COGSWELL and TED THOMAS

When Petro Anthos stepped out of the matter transmitter on the planet Hel, the guards promptly surrounded him and searched him for weapons. It was the one thing they did well.

As long as the condemned man reached Hel free of weapons, there was little to worry about from him. So they searched him, found nothing, and turned him over to a resident work group. Jennings took him in charge, snarled at him in front of the guards, and then put his arm around his shoulders when they had him in the barracks dome.

Jennings said, "You're in luck."

Anthos looked at him; this was a thing he had not known, that Hel was peopled with lunatics. Fifty light-years from Earth; a vicious penal colony where one breath of the atmosphere brought choking, gagging, painful death; hard labor seven days a week; a trickle of survival food supplements from Earth in exchange for a daily quota of coal; a place so deadly that its mere existence all but eliminated crime from the populations of Earth. Here he was in the first five minutes of a twenty-year sentence, and a work-gang chieftain put an arm around his shoulders and told him he was in luck. Anthos looked at him.

Jennings was a short, stocky man with a potbelly that did not jiggle the slightest bit when he walked. He was dirty and grimy and his clothes were in tatters, but he had a calm air of authority about him that could be felt. Now that he thought about it, Petro Anthos realized that having the arm around his shoulders had probably kept him from screaming. Jennings said, "You're a gas chromatographer, aren't you?"

Anthos nodded numbly.

"Okay. Now, we don't have enough time for you to think much about this, but we have to include you in on an escape plan we've worked out."

Anthos' heart lurched. He choked and stammered, "Escape? I thought . . . Through the matter transmitter? I saw the other end just now. You can't possibly . . ."

Jennings impatiently waved him quiet. "Not through the matter transmitter. That's impossible. We've found a place on this planet where we can live outside. I know, I know"—he waved again as Anthos started to talk—"you've heard that no human being can live outside the domes or outsuits on this planet. Well, you're almost right. But we've found a place, a small valley, that's barely-livable. Once we get to it, we can make it more livable in time. We need a good group to do it, though, and we need a gas chromatographer. We had one, Al Chertsey, but he got a little careless last week and inhaled one good breath of white damp. Burned out his lungs. God, he died hard. You know what it's like?"

Anthos nodded. They had made it all too clear to him before they had sentenced him to Hel. The atmosphere would not support life, nor did it screen out the harmful solar radiations. Men had to wear outsuits equipped with back tanks to hold air, special breathing apparatus, protective helmets to keep out radiation and cold. Even the flora and fauna of Hel wouldn't support human life; they did not contain the vital trace compounds. The local foodstuffs were one of the secrets of Earth's hold on Hel. Supplemental nutrients were passed in through the matter transmitter only in response to the quotas of coal that were passed out to Earth. And the ultimate irony was that Earth did not even need the coal, although it had none of its own. Coal was a status symbol, something to be burned in little pots in the living rooms of the very wealthy. Anthos nodded. He knew what it was like.

Jennings said, looking around at several other men and women gathered near, "It won't be easy, in the valley, not for a while. But if we're going to work twelve hours a day, seven days a week, we might as well be doing it for ourselves, not a bunch of sybarites back on Earth." He looked at Anthos. "You with us?"

Anthos hesitated. He was thin and frail, and the thought of hard physical work appalled him. But he was a tough-minded chemist, a good gas chromatographer who called the shots as he saw them, which was why he was here in the first place. In the year A.D. 2688 on Earth, one simply does not, as Anthos had done, give analytical results flatly opposed to the analytical results of the Federal Horse Racing Board of Analytical Examiners concerning a urine analysis of a certain Derby winner. Despite all the changes of men and animals on Earth, it was still possible to spike a horse and chemically induce an extraordinary burst of speed.

Jennings noted the hesitation and said, "Let me introduce you to our people. Ed Jackson, mechanical engineer. So is Frank Stand over there." Anthos nodded to two grimy people. "Milly Franks and Lenore Meyers are chemists." Anthos would not have known they were women. "Sy Smith, electrician; Willy George, nothing much but a hard worker; Ernie Hilgard, biologist; Pete Standage, historian; Lex Parker, teacher." Jennings named a few more, and Anthos had the definite feeling that this was the cream of the penal colony.

Anthos said, "I'm in."

"Great," said Jennings. "Now, here's the plan. We go back into our tunnel in half an hour. The coal is almost exhausted,

and the tunnel is due to be sealed off in another month. We've found that five kilometers down the tunnel it reaches almost to a bend in a sealed tunnel from the old workings, and we've cut a small tunnel to it and stored explosives and food and equipment and some air tanks and even an air compressor. The tunnel has a lot of white damp in it, but we think we can get all of us through it okay. And at the other end we got a small tunnel to the surface."

Anthos looked at him and said, "So you go up to the surface and die."

"No. It opens into the damnedest valley you ever saw, kind of sealed off from the rest of the planet's surface. We can live there. It won't be easy, but we can stay alive and work to make the valley more livable. We figure in five years we can convert the valley to a place even better than Earth. That's why we need all the skills of all these people." Jennings waved at the group around him. "See what we do? We blow up the tunnel we're working in, right to the surface so it fills with white damp. But we're in the abandoned tunnel, which we've blown shut. The guards will just take a look in the working tunnel, and when they find it filled with white damp they'll figure we're all dead and just seal it off and forget about us. Life's cheap here. What do the guards care for a few dozen prisoners? So we go on to our valley and make it livable."

Anthos' hand shook as he smoothed his mustache, but he nodded and said, "You need me to monitor the atmosphere, and things like that, I suppose. You have the makings for a gas chromatograph?"

Jennings, noting the shaking hand, put his own hand on Anthos' shoulder and said, "We've got a good supply of equipment. We'll make out." He looked around and said, "In fifteen minutes we move out. Take everything you can stuff in your clothes."

The group scattered, leaving Anthos standing alone. He felt very much alone as he looked for the first time at the dome that served as living quarters for the prisoners. It was dark and smelly, and quiet, with a tang in the air that he knew was a trace of the white damp, seeping into the dome from outside. Bunks with webbing for mattresses formed a circle around the outer perimeter of the dome, sticking straight out from the walls. Everything was smudged gray to black from the ubiquitous coal dust. He put his hands in his pockets, and as he felt how empty they were and realized he

had absolutely nothing in the world except the dirty clothes he stood in, depression welled up inside him so strong he began to gasp. In an instant Jennings was at his side, arm around him again, saying nothing. Anthos forced himself to breathe normally. He said to Jennings, "How do you stand the noise level in here?"

"You get used to it. Okay. Time to go." The group went out the lock to the sealed vehicle which took them to the lock at the mouth of the workings. They entered and rode for an hour to the end of the tunnel and got to work with pick and shovel. The guards got back on the tram and left. What happened then was a nightmare of unreality for Anthos.

With practiced speed, the group moved a mile back down the tunnel and planted a series of explosives. They littered the floor with unusable junk from the mining gear, even including a blown air tank. They opened the small side tunnel and planted a charge in it. Climbing over the charge, they all crawled into the side tunnel, panting from the exertion, choking on the foul air, taking turns breathing from the tanks. Dimly, Anthos heard the roar of the explosion and cowered from the wave of coal particles and rock dust that engulfed them and threatened to suffocate them all. In the sealed tunnel the dust was better but the white damp was worse. The group shouldered all the equipment they could carry, and took turns pulling and dragging the air compressor. Every hour they stopped, fueled the compressor with powdered coal, recharged the air tanks, and went on. The buzzing in Anthos' ears grew louder until he could no longer hear the harsh panting from his companions. Everything grew blurred and his muscles began to twitch and refuse to obey his will. He reached the point where he could barely stand. He put a hand on the cold wall to steady himself. He felt someone ease him to the floor of the tunnel and hold the facepiece of an air tank to his nose. Slowly his twitching muscles stilled and his breathing became normal. In five minutes he was able to sit up and look around. Jennings said to him, "The others are opening the tunnel to the valley."

Anthos found his voice and said, "At least we're out of prison."

"We'll miss it, but we'll manage. We'll miss it. But we'll get back there a few years from now."

Anthos had started to turn away, but then Jennings' words sank in. He turned back. "What?"

"Oh, yeah. I didn't mention it before. Once we get the val-

ley in shape, we'll take over the whole planet. Not many guards. With the matter transmitter out of commission, it will take Earth fifty years to get a ship here. We'll be ready for them by then."

Anthos heaved himself to his feet, indignant protests forming in his mind, but a call from the darkness said, "Tunnel's through. Let's go."

Jennings patted Anthos on the shoulder, saw that he was able to walk, and went into the small mouth of the tunnel and worked his way up. Anthos had to follow, and then he stepped out onto the surface and looked around.

He was standing near one edge of a giant natural saucer measuring some six kilometers in diameter. A ring of mountains enclosed the saucer, and the shaft through which he had just emerged lay near the base of the south rim. Scattered around the rim of mountains were spots of orange light, marking the raw throats of active volcanoes. Plumes of steam and smoke poured out of fissures all over the floor of the valley. The entire valley was filled with a light haze that almost obscured the sun overhead. Yet Anthos knew that without the haze the valley would be unlivable under the unfiltered, harsh radiation of the sun. And he could breathe. He could stand on the surface of Hel and breathe. When he inhaled deeply, he coughed, for there was the barest trace of white damp in the air. But he could breathe. He looked at the floor of the valley more carefully. A great, clear lake lay in the center, measuring perhaps three kilometers in diameter. It was fed by a wide, rushing stream that sprang from the rocks halfway up the east rim. And bordering both the stream and the lake was a broad belt of greenery. Anthos was too far away to see the nature of the green things growing, but some of it stood higher than the rest and looked very much like trees.

Jennings said to all of them, "Well, there it is. May not be much, but at least it's livable. And we'll make it much better. We've got almost all the raw materials we will ever need, right here. So let's not waste time. We'll break up into groups. One group will find us temporary places to live. Another will go back and finish bringing all the stuff we hid in the tunnel. Another'll start looking for anything here we can eat. Another . . ." Jennings went on, and then picked people for the groups. Ten minutes after they arrived in the valley they scattered to start their work. They worked until they could no longer stand, and then they rested. They worked

harder than they had ever worked as prisoners mining coal.

The days blended into weeks and months, and in four years they accomplished what they had thought would take them five.

Jennings called them together in their outdoors meeting place and said, "Well, I think we are ready to move on to the next step. The valley is in good, livable shape now, and except for one critical trace compound, we are more than self-sufficient. And we can get new supplies of that compound when we take over the main camp. We're ready to move."

Anthos said, "I'll take the group that handles the demolitions. I want to make certain that no one gets hurt. That all right with you, Colonel?"

"Wouldn't want it any other way." Jennings smiled at Anthos, smiled at the changes four years had made in him. Anthos was lean as a slat, broad as a board, all sinew and whipcord. His mustache had grown greater and rattier than ever, and his large, liquid brown eyes missed nothing as they snapped over the landscape. Anthos, the gas chromatographer, had evolved into Jennings' second-in-command. Jennings continued, "Set it up, Petro. Do it tomorrow."

The operation went smoothly. The guards were not very alert and were easily enticed out of the transmitter building. After the explosion, Anthos' men quickly went in and carefully fused all remaining components. Then, from a safe distance, Anthos explained that all of them, guards and prisoners alike, were totally marooned, and that the only salvation for any of them was to join Jennings' group in the valley. Wisely, Anthos told them not to make up their minds now, but that he would be back the next day for their answer; Anthos wanted it to sink in that there would be no more supplies coming from Earth, that the only Earth-type atmosphere existed in the valley, that even the air in the domes would slowly go bad.

When Anthos returned the next day, everybody was ready to join him in the trip to the valley. The guards were huddled with their weapons in one group, and the prisoners were in a separate group. Anthos collected the weapons and made it clear that they were all in this together, guards and prisoners alike. It took three days to get all the people from the site of the prison domes to the valley. The guards were moved last, and Anthos stayed with them. He watched their faces as they came up out of the tunnel into the valley and looked around. Then he took them to the meeting place, where Jennings was

waiting to talk to them. They sat down, hundreds of them. From where they sat, they had a fine view of the valley.

Jennings waved out over the valley and said, so all of them could hear, "There it is. Almost perfect Earthside conditions." The haze and smoke in the valley were so thick the rays of the sun could no longer penetrate. Long streaks of yellow flames licked along the surfaces of exposed coal veins, burning, pouring dense clouds of smoke into the air. Jennings said, "Just inhale. Good sulfur dioxide and nitrous oxides, plenty of carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide. When we first got here, the sky was blue—think of that!—you could hardly breathe for the oxygen in the air. Why, that white damp was like the Earth's atmosphere seven hundred years ago, before our forefathers changed it. The sun shone right through here most of the time. Can you imagine what it was like? Look at the lake down there—it was as blue as the sky! Fortunately we found some phosphate deposits, so we loaded the lake with them. Just look at it now—rich, green, nutritious water." The lake was jelly-thick with algae, and bubbles of marsh gas could be seen breaking the surface here and there. Jennings said, "We even have fish in there, but we only began to extract mercury two months ago, and we haven't yet been able to bring the mercury content of the carp up to the point where they are edible. Another few months. Feel the temperature? We're up to one hundred degrees F. now and going up all the time. It'll soon be normal; there's plenty of carbon dioxide in the air now, and we have a greenhouse effect. We've only got one immediate problem. We can't yet make a critical dietary compound, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane. But it is nonbiodegradable, and there is an enormous amount in the sewage deposits of the prison camp, so we'll go back and extract the DDT and use it as a food supplement until we can make it. Like it so far?"

Guards and prisoners alike nodded and clapped. Jennings held up his hand for silence. "The best is yet to come. What we've done here we can do to the rest of the planet. We've done some exploring, and there are extensive oil pools available. We can flood the streams, rivers, lakes and oceans with oil to kill off most of the harmful oxygen-producing organisms. We'll burn open coal veins to cut off the harmful sun rays and give us carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, and the sulfur compounds we need in the air. By eliminating the native flora and fauna we ought to be able to reclaim huge portions of the planet, or maybe even the whole thing. We'll

spray with DDT so the plants and animals will take it up and become nutritious. It won't take too long to get a proper greenhouse effect working for the whole planet. We'll make a second Earth here. Are you with us?"

A roar of approval went up, cheers, whistles, shouting. On and on it went. A guard leaped from his seat in the front row, went up to Jennings and shook his hand and turned to the assembled crowd. They slowly quieted as they saw he wanted to say something. He shouted, "Four months ago, just four months ago, I came to Hel from Earth. And I want to tell you now that this place"—he waved his hand out toward the valley—"makes me feel more at home than any place I've been since I left New York City. I say we make the whole planet livable."

The cheers were deafening.

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Think Only This of Me

By MICHAEL KURLAND

I

I met her in Anno Domini and was charmed. The Seventeenth Century it was. Two weeks and three centuries later we were in love.

Her name: Diana Seven; my name: Christopher Charles Mar d'Earth. Both of old stock, or so I thought; both certainly of Earth; both certainly human, for what that might mean in this galactic day. She was young, how young I did not know, and I was gracefully middle-yeared for an immor-

tal. I would not see my first century again, but I would be a long time yet in my second. I looked to be somewhen around forty, normal span; she looked an unretouched twenty, except in motion, when she looked barely teen and also ageless.

Anno Domini was my first pause in twenty years. I legislate in the Senior Chamber of the Parliament of Stars. We tend to feel, we beings of the Senior Chamber, that our efforts bind the intelligences of the galaxy together, for all that races still agress and habited planets are still fused in anger. We also feel that, despite all our posturing, blustering, and rhetoric, we accomplish nothing save the passage of time, for all that beings have not starved, races have not been destroyed, and planets have not turned to stars through our efforts. This dichotomy slowly erodes empathy, emotion, and intellect.

So I paused. I returned to Sol to become again a man of Earth, an Earthman, and walk among trees and down narrow, twisting streets and wide boulevards—but mainly to walk among men and women of Earth, who are my constituency, my ancestry and my soul. The races of man are varied and the farther one gets from Sol the greater the variation, though all are men and can interbreed and trace their language back to a common source—if they still have sex, if they still have language. But I no more represent the Autocracy or the Diggers of Melvic than I speak for the Denzii Hive or the unfortunate Urechis of Mol.

I felt a need for history: to be one with Earth is to be a part of the sequence of man, a product of all that has come before and a precursor to all that will follow. To return to Sol, to Earth, to man, to our common history: that was my plan.

I spent the first month in the present, walking, looking, visiting, remembering—chronolizing myself to the fashions, mores, idiom, and art of this most volatile of planetary cultures. Then I retreated to Earth itself, to the past, to Anno Domini, the religious years: twenty-four centuries called after the Son of the One God. The period right before what we call the present era, when man no longer needs any god but himself.

Earth is now all past: the present comes no closer than Earth's satellite, the moon; the future—I wonder at times, what future a planet can have when it has renounced the present.

I picked Seventeen to start and was garbed and armed and

primed and screened and out before I could say, *All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players / They have their exits and their entrances. . . .*

The town was London and the year was sixteen-whatever. In this recreated past the years sometimes slip and events anachron—a fact of interest but to scholars and piddlers. The costumes of our created century were exotic, but no more than the smell. Charles had been beheaded a few years before. The Roundheads had been in power for however long the Roundheads were in power and now William the Orange was about to land at Plymouth Dock.

I was sitting in the Mermaid Tavern, at a small table at the rear. Next to me, over my left shoulder, was a large round table where Ben Jonson sat deep in conversation with Will Shakespeare, John Milton, Edmond Waller, and the Earl of Someplace. As writers will when alone together, they were discussing money, and I quickly tired of their talk.

She walked in as I was preparing to leave. Walked? She danced with the unassuming grace of windblown leaves. She flowed across the walk and quickstepped through the door as though directed by a master choreographer and rehearsed a dozen times before this take. These are the images that came to mind as she appeared in the doorway.

I sat back down and watched as she came in. She was aware of everything and interested in all that she could see, and the very air around her was vibrant with the excitement of her life. And so I was attracted and excited and aware before a word had passed between us.

A man too doltish to see what she was stood by the door as she passed. He thought she was something other, and he spoke to her so: "Hey, girl—hey, wench, you should not be alone. P'raps I'll keep you company if you ask me pretty."

She did not reply. She did not seem to hear, but passed him by as if he were a wall.

He reached out to grab her by the shoulder and I stood up, my hand falling to the handle of my walking stick.

She spun almost before his hand had touched her. She reached out, her fingers appearing almost but not quite to reach his neck. He fell away and she continued the pirouette and came inside without further pause.

I must have stood like stone, frozen in my foolish-heroic pose with half-aimed stick. She smiled at me. "No need," she said. "Thank you."

I stammered at her some wish that she share my table and

she nodded, sat and smiled again, introduced herself as Diana and looked about. She was also, I decided, a visitor to this recreated Seventeen. I pointed out to her the round table next to us and its famous occupants, indicating each one with almost the pride of a creator, as though I had done something clever merely to be sitting next to them. Diana was interested, but not awed. She asked to be introduced, and so I complied.

"It is an honor to meet each of you," she told the table. "And especially Mr. Shakespeare, whom I have long admired."

"Nay, not 'Mr. Shakespeare'," Shakespeare insisted firmly. "Will, if you will. Aye, an' if you won't 'tis still a simple 'Will.' 'Tis my will, so you must."

Jonson glared across the table. "You are the most convoluted simpleminded man," he said. "You will if you won't, but you can't so you must. Spare us!"

The sound of fifes came at us from a distance. A far rumble soon became the beat of many drums. The entourage of William approached and we all went outside the tavern to join the patient mob that awaited his passing.

First the soldiers, row on row, and for a long time nothing passed but soldiers. Then soldiers astride horses. Then soldiers astride horses pulling small cannon. Then a military band. Then more horses with soldiers astride, but now the uniform had changed. Then a coach and the crowd went wild —but it was the wrong coach. By now, unless he were twelve feet tall, the new king was an anticlimax. I looked over the crowd and tried to tell which were residents and which were guests of Anno Domini. I couldn't.

If this were the real Seventeenth Century—that is, if it were historical past rather than Anno Dominical recreation —there would be signs. The pox would have left its mark on most who lived. Rickets would be common. War cripples would be begging from every street corner. This Seventeenth Century, the only one the residents knew, was being redone by a benevolent hand.

The new king passed. His coach was open and he smiled and nodded and waved and was cheered. A stout, red-faced little man—anticlimax. I laughed.

We left then, Diana and I, and I offered to walk her to her inn. She named it and I discovered it was my own.

"How do you like this time?" I asked her as we walked. "Have you been here long?"

"All day," she said. "Then you're a guest too? I wondered why you were the only one in the tavern I hadn't heard of."

"Thanks," I said. "In realtime I am well known. My return to Earth was mentioned as primary news. I am a third of Earth's voice in the Parliament of the Stars. I am known and welcome in half a thousand worlds throughout the galaxy. I number some fifty life forms among my friends. It is not necessary that you have heard of me."

"You're insulted!" she said clapping her hands together. "How delightful! Now you make me feel important, that my words could insult one as essential as you. I thank you for feeling insulted. I am pleased."

I hadn't thought of it that way, ever before. Somehow she made me glad that I had felt insulted. It was nice to be insulted for her: it made her happy. She reminded me of a beautiful half-grown kitten, newly exploring the world outside its kitten box.

The inn was a U-shaped structure around a central courtyard. The stables were to the right, the rooms to the left and the common room straight ahead. It had been called The Buckingham the last time I was there, some thirty years before. Now, after a decade of being the Pym & Thistle, it sported a new signboard over the door: The Two Roses. The device showed a red and a white rose thoroughly entwined. The landlord I didn't remember—a small, chubby man with a wide smile carved into his unhappy face. I asked him what the new name signified.

"It signifies I'm tired of changing the name of my inn," he told me. "I'm becoming nonpolitical. York and Lancaster settled their differences quite a ways back."

"Let us hope William doesn't think it means you prefer the white and red to his orange," I suggested. He looked after me strangely as I escorted Diana across to the common room and we sat at a table in the corner.

"Dinner?" I suggested.

Diana nodded enthusiastically, spilling her red hair around her face. "Meat!" she said. "Great gobs of rare roast—and maybe a potato."

"I—uh—I think they boil their meat these days," I told her in jest.

"No!" She was horrified. "Boil perfectly good, unresisting roasts and steaks? That's barbaric."

"O tempora, o mores!" I agreed, wondering what my accent would have sounded like to Marcus Tullius.

Diana looked puzzled. I tried again, slanting the accents in a different direction. She looked more puzzled.

"It means: 'Oh, what times—oh, what customs!' It's Latin," I told her.

"It's what?"

"Latin. That's a prelanguage. Ancient and dead." Now I was puzzled. Who was this girl of Earth who didn't know of Latin? For the past four hundred years, since humanity had begun trying to recreate its cradle—or at least its nursery—all born of Earth, except those born on Earth, knew something of prehistory and the prelanguages: the times and the tongues of man before he met the stars.

"You know what tongue was spoken here?" I asked her.

"Common," she said, looking at me as if I had just asked if she knew what those five slender tubes at the end of her hand were called. "The language of Earth. The one standard language of humans throughout the Galaxy."

"I mean," I explained, "what language was spoken in the real seventeenth century London? What language all that beautiful poetry we heard discussed in the tavern by those great names at the next table was translated from?"

She shook her head. "I hadn't thought—"

"English," I said.

"Oh. Of course. England—English. How silly!"

The servitor approached the table circumspectly, waiting until he was sure we had finished speaking before addressing us. "Evening m'lord, m'lady," he mumbled. "Roseguddenit. Venice impizenizeto."

Diana giggled. "English?" she asked. "Have we really receded in time?"

"In time for what?"

Diana giggled again. The thin lad in the servitor's apron looked puzzled, unhappy, frightened and resigned.

"Would you go over that again?" I asked him.

"Parme?"

"What you said, lad. Go over it again for diction, please."

Now he was also nervous and upset and clearly blamed me. "My lord?"

"Speak more slowly," I told him, "and pronounce more carefully and those of us without your quick wit and ready mind will be able to comprehend. Yes?"

"Yes, my lord." If he could have killed me . . . "Sorry,

my lord. The roast is good tonight, my lord. The venison pie is very nice, my lord. My lady. What may I serve you?"

"Roast!" Diana stated. "Thick slices of roast. You don't boil your roast, do you? You wouldn't do that?"

The boy nervously replied that he wouldn't think of it, heard my order, then removed himself like a blown candle flame, leaving not even an after-image.

"You frighten people," Diana told me.

"It's my most valued ability," I said. "I shall not frighten you."

"You certainly shall not," she agreed. "My teachers were all more menacing than you—and more unforgiving. And they didn't notice my body."

I ignored the last part of her remark and stared into her blue eyes. "You went to an unpermissive school," I said, smiling.

"The universe is unpermissive," she said seriously. It was a learned response and I wondered who had taught it and why.

The innkeeper approached us during dessert. "Good?" he asked. "You enjoyed?"

"Indeed," I assured him.

"My pleasure," he nodded. "My guests. There will be no reckoning."

"Gracious of you, sir," Diana said.

"Why?" I asked, being wiser and therefore trustless of hostels.

"I am taking your suggestion," he told me. "And I thank you by feeding you dinner."

"Suggestion?"

"Yes. I am changing the name of the inn. Henceforth it shall be known as The Two Roses and the Tulip. I have sent a boy to notify the signpainter."

II

We walked into the night, Diana and I. Hand in hand we walked, although it was conversation and not love that bound us then. We contrasted: she bright and quick, with an aim as true as a hawk's; I ponderous and sure as a great bear (I metaphor our speech only). We learned from each other. I arrayed my vast store of facts before her in the patterns dictated by the logic of my decades—she swooped and plucked out one here, another there, and presented them as jewels to

be examined for themselves, or changed their position to create the fabric of new logic.

"These people," she asked me, waving a hand to indicate the residents in the houses around us, "what do they feel? What do they think? They are human, yes? How can they just spend their lives pretending they're Anno Domini?"

"They're not pretending," I told her.

"But this *isn't* the seventeenth century."

"For them it is. They know of nothing else. Weren't you warned about postchronic talk while you're here?"

"I thought it was just not to spoil the—the—flavor. They *don't know?*"

"Truth."

"But that's cruel—unfair!"

"Why? They're stuck in their lives just as you and I are embedded in our own. Are we any less actors in someone else's drama than they?"

"Philosophy, like religion, is a very useful drug," she didacted, "but it should be used only to condone the evils we cannot control—and not those we create."

"You're quoting," I guessed.

"My most valued ability," she agreed. "I have a memory like a wideband slow-crystal—the input can't be erased without destructing the device. Do you condone this make-believe?"

"It isn't make-believe. And convince me that it's evil."

"But it's so limited—"

"They have the whole world. Their world—the world of the Seventeenth."

"They don't—not in any real sense. This whole area can't be bigger than—than—"

She looked to me for help. I shrugged. "I don't know either. But however large it is, it's also—in a very real sense—unbounded. How much can a man expect to see in one normal lifetime—especially limited to horses and sailing ships for transportation? Any of these people who wish to go to France or the New World will get there. Aided by Anno Domini, they will arrive in their France without noticing whatever odd maneuvering the ship does in the 'Channel.' I've taken that trip."

"What would happen if I decided to get up and just walk" —she pointed off to the left—"that way, in a straight line?"

"You'd come to the edge," I said. "Wherever that is."

"Yes. Suppose I were a native—a resident—then what?"

"Then you'd probably fall asleep by the side of the road, and when you woke you'd suddenly remember urgent business back in town, or forget what you were doing there in the first place. And you'd never have the urge to roam again."

"You mean they dethink and rethink these people? Just to keep them putting on a show for us?"

"Also to keep them happy," I argued. "It's for their own good. Think how they'd feel if they knew they were part of a —a display. This way they live out their lives without knowing of any options. It's no more unfair to live here than it was to live in the actual seventeenth century. A lot better—the food is adequate, diseases are eliminated, sanitation is much improved."

"It sounds like an argument for slavery," Diana snapped. "Or pig farming!"

We had come to what had to be the main street of the district. It was paved and lit. Bayswater High Street, the signpost read. The lights were open flames on stanchions, bright enough to mark the way but not to illuminate. "Perhaps we had better head back," I suggested. "In another half hour it will be too dark to see our way."

"The moon will be up in twenty minutes," Diana told me. "And it's only two days off full. Plenty of light."

"Example of your memory?" I asked.

She nodded. "I saw a chart once."

The houses were two and three story, the upper stories overlapping the first. Picturesque in daylight, they were transformed at dusk into squatting ogres lurking behind the streetlights. The few people left on the street were scurrying like singleminded rats toward their holes.

"Some things are changeless," I said, pointing my walking stick at a receding back. "Fear of the night is one such. These people fear footpads and cutthroats—our people fear the stars. Evolution, I fear, is too slow a process. Our subconscious is still a million years behind us—in the caves of our youth."

"You mean that literally?" Diana asked. "About our people fearing the stars?"

"Extraordinarily literally. Astrophobia is the current mode. Not a fear of standing under the stars, like Chicken Little, but fear that circling one of those points of light is the race that will destroy humanity. The government spends billions each year in pursuit of this fear. I believe that it couples with

the subconscious belief that we deserve to be destroyed. That all Earth has turnd its back to the stars to live wholly in the past is part of the syndrome—our fears unite here."

Diana asked me a question then, something about the deeper manifestations of this ailment, and I prattled on about how easy it was to recognize the problem, but no one was getting it cured because it was chronolous to declare the inside of your head sacrosanct—if you were of high enough status to make it stick. I'm not sure of what I said, as most of my attention was on three sets of approaching footsteps I was attempting to analyze without alarming Diana. In step, but not in the rhythm of soldiers—a slightly slower, swaggering step. Three young dandies out for an evening's entertainment, no doubt.

They rounded the corner and appeared under the light. They were well dressed, indeed foppishly dressed, and carrying swords—so they were gentlemen of this time. Or at least they were sons of gentlemen.

"What say?" the first one said, seeing us.

"Say what?" the second demanded.

"What?" asked the third. "What ho!" he amended, strutting toward us. "What have we here? A lissome lass, begad! And unescorted."

"Madam," the first said, "my lady, ma'am—chivalry is not dead! We shall prove this."

Diana looked puzzled, but completely unafraid. I don't know how I looked—I felt weak. "Get behind me," I instructed her.

"Yes, indeed," the third amplified, "we shall chivalrously rescue you from that old man there, who's clearly attempting to have his way with you."

"We shall," the second added, "expect a suitable reward."

"Is this some game?" Diana asked me.

"No," I told her. "These lads are going to try to kill me. If they succeed they'll kill you, too—eventually."

The first drew his sword. I twisted the handle of my stick until I felt it click. We were now about even—three swords against one sword-stick with a narcospray tip. Anyone within one meter of the front of the tip would fall inanimate ten seconds after he was hit—and I should be able to keep even three of them away for ten seconds.

"These are truly enemies?" Diana asked me, staring up into my eyes. There was an under current of excitement in her expression.

"Yes," I said briefly. "But don't worry. Just stay—"

"I trust you," she said, nodding as though she had just made a prime decision. "Enemies!" Then she was in motion.

She dove forward onto her shoulder and pushed off as she rolled, catching the first one on the chin with the heel of her boot. He flew backward and came to a skidding stop on his back across the street. The second was just starting to react when she slammed him across the side of his head with her forearm. He slid slowly to the ground, folding in the middle as he dropped.

The third was aware of his danger, although he had no clear idea of what this whirlwind was. His sword was up and he was facing her. I managed one step toward them when, with a small cry of joy, she was past his guard and had fastened both of her hands around his throat. She must have known just where to press with her small fingers, because he didn't struggle, didn't even gasp—he just crumpled. She went down with him, keeping her grip. Her eyes were alive with excitement and she was grinning. She had, somehow, not the look of a person who has vanquished a foe, but more that of a terrier who has cornered a rat.

"All right," I said, going over and pulling her off. "It's all right. It's all over."

She looked up, small and sweet and innocent, except for a rip in the right sleeve of her dress. "He's still alive, this one."

"No!" I yelled, when I saw her hands tighten around his throat.

She stared at me. "The other two, they are dead."

"Leave him," I instructed.

"Yes." She stood up, sounding disappointed.

I took her hand and led her away. I began to tremble slightly—a touch of aftershock. Diana was calm and gentle. I had no empathy for the three ruffians—they had danced to their own tune—but I worried about Diana. No—I think rather she frightened me. I was not concerned with the ease with which she dispatched—body combat ballet is not new to me. I worried rather about the joy with which she destroyed.

I remembered to disarm the stick, so as not to shoot myself in the foot. "Diana," I said, picking my words not to offend, "I admire the way you handled those men. It shows great skill and training. But when a man is down—more particularly when he is unconscious—you don't have to kill him."

"But he was an enemy. You said so."

Semantic problem—or something more?

"Christopher?" We stopped at the innyard and she stared up at me, her eyes wide.

"Yes?" Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes and she was shaking. Delayed reaction? I held her and stroked her long hair.

"Those men wanted to hurt us. It wasn't a secondary thing, like wanting to take our money and hurting us if we resisted. They *just* wanted to hurt us."

"True."

"Why would anyone behave like that?"

It wasn't the fight that had her upset, but the morals of her opponents. "You killed two of them and were working on the third," I reminded her.

"But that was their doing. You said they were enemies. They declared status, not I. They attacked unprovoked. And I had your word."

"Right," I said, deciding to watch my words around this girl who took my definitions so literally and acted on them with such finality. "Well, they behaved that way because they've been taught to think it's fun."

"I don't understand," she said.

"Neither do I," I agreed.

We retired to our separate rooms and I spent some time studying the cracks in the ceiling in an effort to think before I fell asleep.

Diana and I spent the next ten days together in Shakespeare's London. Diana was delighted by everything and I was delighted by her. We grew closer together in that indefinable way men and women grow closer together, with neither of us mentioning it but both of us quite aware. She questioned me incessantly about everything, but gave little detail in return. I learned she had no family and grew up in a special school run by Earth government. I learned how beautiful she was, inside and out, in motion and stillness.

After the first week we shared the same room. Luckily Seventeen was a time that allowed of such a change. The innkeeper persisted in winking at me whenever he could, until I felt I had earned that dinner, but we suffered no other hardship for our affection.

Then one day over breakfast we decided to abandon the Seventeenth Century. I voted for the Twentieth, and Diana ayed, although she knew little of it. "Those are the break-

through years, aren't they?" she asked. "First flights to the nearer planets!"

I munched on a bacon stick. "Out of the cradle and into the nursery," I said. "And the babes yelling, 'No, no, I don't *want* to walk—haven't learned to crawl properly yet.' As though that skill were going to be of value to them in the future. Interesting times. As in the ancient curse."

"Curse?" Diana asked, wide-eyed as a child.

I nodded. "May your children live in interesting times," I said. "Chinese."

"Not much of a curse," Diana insisted. "Where are the mummies' hearts and the vampires and such?"

"Now that would be interesting," I said. After breakfast I pushed the call for Anno Domini and they removed us in a coach. They declothed us and reclothed us and backgrounded us and thrust us into an aeroplane.

III

This dubious contrivance, all shiny and silver and with two whole piston engines—to keep us going forward so we wouldn't fall down—flew us to LaGuardia Field outside New York City. The field, like the aeroplane, was sleek and shiny and new and modern. Everything was modern—it was in the air. The modern taxi drove us to the modern city with its modern skyscrapers muraled with the most modern art. The year was 1938 and nothing could go wrong.

We checked into the Plaza and took a tenth-floor suite overlooking Central Park. It was evening and the park lights, glowing over the paths, roads, fields, rocks, ponds, streams, lakes, and other structured wildnesses, turned it into a rectangular fairyland. The skyline surrounding the park was civilization surrounding and oppressing imagination, keeping it behind high walls and ordering its ways. This is known as interpretive sightseeing.

Diana had a lot of things she wanted to do. She wanted to see a play and a movie and a zoo and an ocean liner and a war and a soap opera and a rocket leaving for the moon.

"Everything but the rocket," I told her. "Your timing's off by about thirty years. They haven't even designed the machines to build the machines to build the rocket yet."

We compromised on a visit to the top of the Empire State Building, the closest thing to a trip to the moon that 1938 New York could provide.

"This is all real, isn't it?" Diana asked as we wandered around the guard rail, peering at Bronx tenements and Jersey slums.

"In a sense," I said.

"I mean the buildings are buildings, not sets, and the streets are streets and the river is a river and the ships are ships."

"And the people are people," I agreed. "The original had eight million, I believe. One of the three largest cities of the time. That's a lot of people to stuff into a small area and move around by automobile and subway."

She nodded. "How many people are here now—residents, I mean?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I doubt if they have the full original millions."

"Still," she said seriously, "it would be fair to say that there are a great many."

"That would be fair," I agreed.

"Why are they here?"

"It's getting chilly," I said, buttoning the top two buttons on my coat. "Let's go eat dinner."

"How can we justify bilking so many people out of their lives—out of whatever value their lives might have—by making them live in an artificial past?"

"How do their lives have any less value here than in realtime?" I asked in my best Socratic manner.

"Suppose you were an inventor," Diana hypothesized. "How would you feel to discover that you had reinvented the wheel, or the typer, or the bloaterjet?"

"I'd never know it was a reinvention," I said.

"But it would be. And you would have been cheated out of whatever good and new and beautiful you could have invented in realtime."

"I doubt Anno Domini encourages invention," I said.

"Worse! Where shall we eat dinner?"

We took a Domino Cab to where Glenn Miller and his band were providing the dinner music. The music must have soothed Diana, since we got through the rib roast and into the crepes suzette before the sociology seminar continued.

"What about people like Glenn Miller here—or Shakespeare—who were real people in history? Are they actors?"

"No, they're mindplants. Each of them has the personality and ability of the character he becomes, to the best of our ability to recreate it."

Diana sat silent for a minute, considering, her mouth puckered into a tight line and her eyebrows pulled down in concentration. She stared at her spoon. Then she picked it up and waved it at me. "That's disgusting. You don't merely cheat them out of the future—you cheat them out of their very lives."

It was my turn to be silent. I was silent through *String of Pearls* and *Goldberg's Blues*. Diana watched me as though expecting momently to see wisdom fall from my lips, or possibly smoke rise from my ears. I found myself uncomfortably defending policies I had never really thought about before. I tried to think it out, but was distracted by Diana's stare. I felt that I had to look as if I were thinking and it's very hard to work at looking the part and think at the same time.

"I would say it's more productive rather than less," I said when I had the idea sorted out. "You know our Shakespeare has added several plays to the list that the original never got around to writing. *Saint Joan* and *Elizabeth the First* and, I think, *Timon of Athens*—those are his. We haven't cheated him. Both he and humanity have benefited from this arrangement."

"It's not an arrangement," Diana stated positively. "It's a manipulation. It takes two to make an arrangement. Let's dance."

There is something deeply satisfying about two bodies pressed together and moving together. The waltz and the foxtrot are more purely sexual than either the stately minuet before them or the frenzied hump after. We glided about the floor, letting our bodies work at becoming one.

"Christopher," Diana said.

"Hm?"

"I'm glad we've become friends."

"More than friends?"

"That, too," she said, squeezing against me. "But friends is something else. I think you're my only friend."

"I hope you exaggerate," I said. "That's very sad."

We danced silently for a moment. Then Diana stopped and pulled me back to our table. We sat down. "This is a major thing, isn't it?"

"Friendship?"

"No. Anno Domini and this whole recreation. How many different historical times are there?"

"You're so beautiful and so serious and so young," I said.

"And so intent—and so knowledgeable in some fields and so ignorant in others. Whoever brought you up had strange educational values."

"I told you I don't like talking about that," she said. Her expression could best be described as petulant.

"It requires no conversation," I told her. "Fifty."

"Fifty historical periods?" she said, instantly picking up the thread. One of the things I admired, that ability. "But there aren't that many centuries!"

"Many are covered with more than one set. The really popular ones are started every twenty-five years. All have one, at least. There may be some centuries that appeal not at all to you, but someone has a need for them."

"What sort of need? Why that word?"

"Ah! Now we speak of purpose: what you asked me before. The past is Earth's only industry. Its function is to hold together the more than two hundred diverse human cultures, spread out on close to a thousand planets, circling as many suns. Tens of thousands of people from all these planets, all these new directions for humankind, are here at any one time, sharing the one thing they all have in common: the past.

"This maintains Earth's preeminence in the councils of man and presumably bolsters her prominence in the Parliament of Stars. But more important: it provides a living point of origin for the human race.

"The psychologists decided over four hundred years ago, at the time of the Mabden Annihilation, that this was the best —perhaps the only—way to hold us together. Those of us who weren't already too far out. There are external threats still, you know."

"I know," Diana said dryly. "You mentioned the fear syndrome earlier in this connection."

"It should be taken seriously," I insisted. "Here on Earth you feel secure, but it's only because you're so far away from the action. The Denzii—"

"I take it very seriously," Diana assured me. "So seriously that I'd prefer not to talk about it even now."

"Yes. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Frighten?" Diana smiled gently. "No, you don't do that. Tell me, what else is there to do in this year, in this town?"

We took the subway to the Battery and walked quietly on the grass around the Aquarium, which was closed and shuttered for the night. Then we took the ferry over to Staten Is-

land and stood in the open on the top deck, letting the cold brinewind flap our coats and sting our cheeks. We waved to the Statue of Liberty and she smiled at us—or perhaps it was a trick of the light. I had my coat wrapped around Diana and she huddled against my chest and I felt young and bold and ready to explore uncharted worlds. We talked of minor things and we shared a cup of coffee, black and four sugars, and I think, perhaps, realized fully that we were in love.

The next day we went to the Bronz Zoo in the morning, came back to Manhattan in early afternoon for a matinee of *Our Town,* and then returned to the hotel to dress. A man was waiting in the sitting room of our suite. He was standing.

"Why, Kroner," Diana said, "how delightful to see you. And how silly you look in those clothes here." Thus she effectively suppressed the *Who are you and what are you doing in my room?* that I had been about to contribute to the occasion. Kroner was a short man with too much hair on his head. He wore a onesuit that squeezed around his stocky, overly muscled body. The weightlifter is a physical type I have always disliked. I didn't recognize the Identification and Position badge he wore, except that it was medium-high status and something to do with education.

"Who is he?"

"Kroner," Diana said. "My professor—or one of. And this is Christopher Mar."

"Delighted." Clearly he lied.

"Surprised," I said. We touched hands. "To what do we owe this visit and what may we do for you? Any professor of Diana's—" I waved a hand vaguely. The current trend toward the vague can be very useful in conversation.

"I suppose you know what you're doing?" Kroner asked coldly.

"I have no idea of what that means," I told him. "At which of us are you sneering?"

"Both of you, I suppose," Kroner said. He sighed and sat down on the sofa. "You're right, I was being hostile. And there's no reason. You're a very important man, Senior Senator Mar—there's no way I can threaten you. And Grecia knows I'm only interested in protecting and helping her. When she disappeared from Seventeen without notifying us—"

"Who?" I interrupted.

"Grecia. Your companion."

"Is that right?" I asked Diana (Grecia).

She nodded.

"Of course you have a perfect right—"

"What does she call herself?" Kroner asked.

"Diana Seven," I said. Diana (Grecia) looked defiantly down at Kroner and remained silent.

Kroner nodded thoughtfully. "Of course," he said. "A clear choice. Then he doesn't know? You haven't told him?"

"No," Diana (Grecia) said. "Why should I?"

"Of course," Kroner repeated. "From your point of view, no reason. You've always been the most stubborn and independent-minded. No matter how much we strive for uniformity. Not that we mind, you understand—it's just that the variations make the training more difficult to program. I suppose it will make you harder to predict in action, so it's all for the best."

"Haven't told me what?" I demanded. I tried to picture some horrible secret, but nothing would come to mind.

"Diana Seven is not a name," Kroner told me, "it's a designation. Choosing it as her alias is the sort of direct thinking we've come to expect from Grecia."

"It's a comment," Diana (Grecia) said.

"Grecia is number seven in an official government program known as Project Diana," Kroner said. "The number is arbitrary."

"So is the name," Diana (Grecia) said. "You know how I was named? Listen, I'll recite the names of the first seven girls, in order—that should give you the idea: Adena, Beth, Claudia, Debra, Erdra, Fidlia, Grecia. It goes on like that. I prefer Diana Seven, it's more honest."

"Diana Seven you are to me forever," I told her. "I don't understand, though. What sort of government project?"

"This is going to sound silly," Kroner said, managing to look apologetic, "but I don't think you have the need to know."

"I might not have the—but I do indeed need to know very badly, and I can develop the official Need to Know in a very few minutes realtime."

"I will tell everything," Diana said, sitting down on a straight-back chair and crossing her shapely legs. "What do you push to get them to bring up drinks?"

"I'll do it," I said, picking up the house phone and dialing. "What would you like?"

"Coffee," Diana said.

"Another profession," Kroner said. "I guess you're right —we'd better talk about it."

"Something harder than coffee for you," I said, and ordered a pot of coffee and a portable bar sent up.

"Grecia—"

"Call her Diana—she prefers it."

Kroner shrugged. He was not very happy. "Diana is a GAM. Project Diana is one of a series of GAM projects that Future is funding."

GAM = Genetically Altered Man. GAMs were in disfavor now, at least on Earth, as it was felt that no alteration of the zygote could make up for a happy home life, or some such illogic.

"I thought the Bureau of the Future was only involved in long-range planning of city growth and transporation and that sort of thing," I said.

"And defense," Kroner told me. "Diana is a defense project."

That stopped me. I went into the bedroom to take off my tie and think of something clever to ask.

"What do you mean, 'a defense project'?" I cleverly asked when I returned. The bar was ported in then, so I had to wait for my answer. The waiter tried hard to preserve his air of waiterly detachment and not stare at Kroner, and even harder not to smile.

Kroner glared at him and stood up, flexing his biceps under the skintight onesuit. "What's the matter?" he demanded. "What are you staring at? Haven't you ever seen a Frog Prince before?"

The waiter merely gulped and fled the room. We all burst out laughing and I remembered that in my youth one of my closest friends had been a weightlifter. "You really should have dressed for the period," I told Kroner.

He shrugged. "I was wearing a period overcoat," he said, gesturing to a crumpled garment lying over a chair.

I fixed our various drinks and we sipped them and stared at each other. "We've been keeping an eye on the girls while they were on their travels," Kroner said. "When Diana took off with you we got worried. Diana has a certain reputation among the staff as a troublemaker and you are a—prominent senator. The combination could be explosive."

"How?" I asked.

"The projects are played down," Kroner said. "For us, any press is bad. We'd be caught between two fires: those who

are afraid of any GAM projects—the The only good superman is a dead superman' group—and those who would feel sorry for Diana and her sisters—poor little girls deprived of a home life and mother love and apple pie."

"It might have been nice, you know, all that stuff," Diana said, a surface anger in her voice covering some deeper emotion. "Why do people decide they have the right to do what's good for other people?"

"What?" I asked, feeling ignorant and ignored.

"We didn't exactly do it because it was good for you," Kroner said sadly. "We did it because it was necessary for us. We never lied to you about that."

"Great ethics," Diana said in a low, clipped voice that had an undertone of controlled scream. "We screwed up your life from before you were born, but at least we didn't lie to you—and that makes it all right." She turned to me. "Did you know I'm a mule?" she demanded.

"What?"

"A mule. Or perhaps a hinny. Except instead of a cross between a jackass and a mare, I'm a cross between a human gamete and a micromanipulator. Sterile."

"You mean you're—"

"No pills, no inserts, no children—no chance. Just me. Dead end. Supermule."

I went over to hold her, to show I understood, but she drew away. Mulelike, I couldn't help thinking, in her anger. "I'm on your side, you know," I said to her. She nodded, but stayed encased in herself.

I asked Kroner, "In what way is this girl a weapon?"

"Not a weapon," Kroner said. "More like a soldier."

"A hunting dog," Diana said. Well, it was a better self-image than a mule.

Kroner nodded. "In a way. Superfast reflexes, for one thing. One of the reasons she's small: information travels to the brain faster. Nerves react and transmit faster. Eyes see farther into the infrared and ultraviolet. Raw strength is of little use today. You know how old she is?"

I didn't. "I'm not good at guessing age," I said.

"Twelve," Kroner said.

There was, I believe, a long pause then.

"Do you mind?" Diana asked softly.

"I am surprised," I said.

"The tendency in naturally evolved high intelligence is for longer childhoods, not shorter," Kroner said. "You must ex-

perience more, cogitate more, and have more time to experiment—play—to develop a really high intelligence potential. But it is possible to mature a high intelligence very quickly in an extremely enriched environment. Twelve years from birth to adult is about best we can manage. The body takes that long to grow and mature anyway, if we want a comparatively normal body."

"Diana is an adult," I said. "No matter how many times, or how few, the Earth has circled the sun since her birth."

Kroner nodded. "Diana is a highly capable adult, able to handle herself well in almost any situation."

"I'll not argue that," I said. "She dispatched three ruffians who attacked us and did so with unseemly ease."

"Ah!" Kroner said. "We thought that was she. Very good, Diana. Of course, that's what she's been trained and bred for, so it's fitting that she did."

"Trained for combat?" I asked. "What sort of war are you expecting?"

"Not that," Kroner explained. "For you, as for most of the rest of humanity, killing any sentient being—and many lower animals—would be murder. You'd have to steel yourself and be highly motivated to perform the act. For Diana, killing anything that isn't human—or even humans who are clearly 'enemy'—is equivalent to hunting. And, like a good hunting dog, she enjoys it. Isn't that so, Diana?"

She nodded. "I can't see anything wrong with killing an enemy. And the fact that I know this is genetics and conditioning doesn't matter—all attitudes anyone has are a result of genetics and conditioning. If you gentlemen will excuse me, it's been a long day and I think I'll go to bed."

Kroner and I spoke privately for a short while after Diana retired. I suspect Diana listened at the door, as she was awake when I went to bed, but if so I'm glad of it.

"Does this mean I have to worry about Diana's getting angry at me and breaking my neck?" I asked Kroner, when she had left.

"Not at all," he said. "If anything, the opposite. She may tend to overprotect you. To kill a human being who is not an enemy would, in any case, be murder, and she is incapable of murder."

"How does she determine the enemy?"

"I think, at the moment, she'll take your word for it. She appears to be fixated on you. You may call it love, if you like, but we prefer the scientific term."

"I appear to be fixated on her," I said. "Whatever you call it."

"That's fine. We approve. As long as you aren't planning to use her—or make a political issue or anything of that sort—we're one your side."

"What is she doing here anyway? Is school out? Vacation?"

Kroner fixed himself another drink. "No," he said. "This is part of her training. Mixing with humanity to learn more fully what it is she may be fighting for. Two years of this—going and doing more or less where and what she wants—then she'll be ready for, let's call it graduate school."

"More fixating?"

"That's right. Fixating on man. Those in charge of this project seem a bit afraid of their creation."

"Historical precedent," I said. "Or, at least, literary."

"Yes," Kroner said. "Take care of Diana. Enjoy her. Love her. She needs more love than other girls."

"You mean she fixates more strongly?" I asked.

Kroner smiled. "As of now," he said, "I'm on vacation. Bye." He picked up his coat and left.

I went in to sleep with Diana and she held me tight for a long while. I think she would have cried if she had known how. I held her, but it's hard to comfort someone who cannot cry.

Back in realtime—away from Earth and Anno Domini—I used my status to find out about the Project. Diana opted to stay with me. We fixated well together.

It was difficult, even for me, to open the private record of Project Diana. It was the most recent in a line of such projects dating back to shortly after the Mabden Annihilation. I immersed myself in it and read motive, intent, achievement, method, fear, and design in the record crystals.

Earth is afraid of its heroes. Always has been.

Diana is sterile by design. Female by convenience—easier to control without the Y chromosome. She is sterile by design. Safer. Can't breed a superrace behind our backs.

Diana's cells won't regenerate. Our long life depends upon regeneration—actually replication—of certain cells. Diana's—let us call it template—is inaccessible to our techniques. Also by design. Safer thus. Can't make long-range plans behind our backs. She will also age fast and be old by forty—probably dead by fifty.

We're planning what we will do when she returns. There are so many things she wants to do and see in this vast galaxy. I promised to show them all to her.

I hardly cry at all anymore, even late at night.

I went home that evening and cried myself to sleep. Diana held me, but the crying frightened her and she couldn't help because I wouldn't tell her why, and it's hard to comfort someone unless you know why he's crying.

I have two years with her before she has to go off to prepare for the war we may never have. She wants to go. They want her for twenty-five years, she says, and she owes them that.

Edward Bryant is one of the earliest and most successful graduates of the Clarion Workshops in science fiction. Represented in every major market for science fiction, he has had several collections of his stories published, as well as one novel, written with Harlan Ellison, *Phoenix Without Ashes*. Many of Bryant's stories, like this one, are set in the special land of Cinnabar.

The Legend of Cougar Lou Landis

By EDWARD BRYANT

The gardener Yakov lay dying in the desert gravel. He sprawled on his left side, eyes to the east, where he watched the stars blur above Cinnabar. Oh, for warmth. Was this how it was to die of cold? Yakov had always believed freezing to be a slow decline into gentle sleep. There was first the sharp bite of frost, yes. But then came the sleepy arrival of death. Not for Yakov; he had lain alert for hours. The gravel chafed his skin unbearably. The beating administered him by his master had broken bones. Yakov moaned softly and prayed the cold to kill.

There was an answer on the wind. Yakov listened intently.

Was it his master, returning to inflict more pain? Yakov tried to pull gravel over himself, to darken the shadows in which he hid. The wind brought the voice again, closer this time. "Is someone there? Who is it?"

Yakov pulled at the small rocks with his one good hand. He whimpered in spite of himself.

"I hear you. You're at the foot of the dune. What's the matter?"

A figure rose up in the night and bent over him. Frightened, Yakov flinched and closed his eyes. Hair softly tickled across his face.

"You're hurt, aren't you?" Fingers gently touched the gardener's shattered limbs.

Yakov opened his eyes and blinked, trying to focus. "Who are you?"

"I'm a friend." The voice was low and sympathetic. The woman's fingers continued to probe carefully. "Lie perfectly still."

"It hurts very much," said Yakov.

". . . hurts very much."

"Is it worth the pain?" said her mother.

She stared at her hands, flexing the fingers repeatedly, then made a fist. She extended the index finger and brought it slowly toward her nose. The finger touched her upper lip and she recoiled. "It's worth the pain," she affirmed. "The strangeness is something else again."

"I think you're dying."

"I know. I've wanted to die for hours."

"You're cold," said the woman. She pulled a piece of clothing, soft and warm, over Yakov. She flicked a lighter. "I'm afraid there's no kindling for a fire out here."

Yakov stared at her face. "I know you. I've heard of you. You're Cougar Lou." With a tired wonder he looked at her long, tawny hair and wide, violet eyes. Then the flame went out. "Will you help me?"

"You know that you're dying."

"I want vengeance."

"Who did this?"

"Josephus the Administrator. I worked in his greenhouse. His favorite orchids were the flaming moths. Somehow they died of rust. Josephus was furious."

"The son of a bitch," said Cougar Lou.

"I think it's getting colder."

"I wish I had more than my cape. I'm sorry."

"I'm glad I met you." Yakov choked on the blood and twisted his head aside to spit.

"Would you like that bastard to die?"

The operating theater glittered like sunlight on snow. She felt like dying; then remembered how soon, how grandly she would live.

Yakov made a twisted smile in the darkness.

"Now lie back," said Cougar Lou. "I can make it easier for you."

Yakov coughed rackingly. He brought his knees up in the fetal position. "Too late. . . ."

"No," she said. "Here." Cougar Lou pressed a metal cube tightly against the gardener's temple. His body spasmed.

Yakov the gardener:
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It broke open, pushed free, gulped alien air, and wished somatically for the soothing liquid to return. Wailing, the baby was slapped, bathed, wrapped, and rocked. Later, it fed.

"Do!" he said, pointing. A proud voice: "He said it—his first word."

Another time, the second word: "Get!"

The pride of parents: so precious, so bright. "We love you." And they rocked him every time he cried.

"Brosie, Brosie," said playmate Kenneth. "Little baby Bro-

sie." Kenneth was twice Brosklaw's size; Brosklaw hit him with a rock.

"Brosklaw, you will go far," said his mother.

"Listen to your mother," said his father.

They pushed him, stimulated him with books and tapes and holos. Not too much music, though. Very little art. He became extremely capable and knowledgeable, and even suspected how good he really was.

"Brosklaw, you will go far," said his tutor. "Just continue to apply yourself."

By adolescence, he retained a long string of lovers.

"Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing here with you," mused Tourmaline Hayes, the sex star. "Morbid curiosity?"

He laughed and made love to her again.

"Only the best education," said his father. "Selden University."

"The police?" said his mother.

"Real power is the control of human behavior," quoted her son.

"You've got everything you want," said each of his wives at one time or another. "What more?"

"I have everything I wanted," he corrected them. "As I grow older I discover new things to desire."

"Chief of police of Craterside Park," his mother said, during a visit. "That's impressive for one so young."

Brosklaw smiled.

His mother said, "When will you move up to city administration?"

"That's coming."

Brosklaw walked down one of the clean, well-lighted streets of Craterside Park. A woman stepped from between two spiral towers and confronted him. He stared at the lithe body. "Don't I know you?" he said. "You're—"

Yakov the gardener shook convulsively a final time and died. Cougar Lou took the cold piece of metal away from his head. She retrieved her cape and watched him for a while. In the starlight, Yakov was barely visible against the gravel.

". . . rather be anybody than who I am." She looked defiantly at her mother.

"Your adolescence has been prolonged," said Anita.

She picked up a film-viewer and hurled it at the wall. The viewer exploded in a thousand shining pieces.

"Don't do that," said Anita mildly. She put her hand to the cut on her forehead, and one finger came away red.

Cougar Lou shivered and rubbed her hands together. They were sticky with Yakov's blood. It was real, and the smell of it made her sick.

The quiet of a Craterside Park night was shattered by the sound of a man attacking a sculpture in one of the district's many scenic parks. The statue was the heroic stylization of a mastodon. Its massive feet were anchored solidly in a base. It could not move, other than to wind its trunk back and squirt water at its attacker. The man leaned against the statue's haunch, repeatedly driving a fist into its ribs. The sound boomed hollowly. The sculpture honked in distress and discharged another ineffective stream.

Eventually, Craterside Park residents anonymously contacted the police. A patrol car whispered up to the square and set down. The two cops approached the mastodon's assailant warily.

"Hey!" said the short cop. "Stop that. Turn around and keep your hands in plain sight."

The second patrolman hefted his stunner, just in case.

The man slowly turned at the cop's voice. He stared at the patrolman vaguely. Hulking, he was at least a head taller than either cop.

"Easy," warned the first cop. "Take it slow."

They shined their lights in the man's face.

The first cop gasped. "Chief Brosklaw? Is that you?"

"Chief?" said the second cop. He took a step closer.

"Chief?" echoed the man. "Chief?" His jaw hung slack. He turned back to the stylized mastodon and again began to pound its flank, the boom resounding far across Craterside Park.

Mary Elouise Olvera-Landis returned home quite early in the morning. She let herself into the huge old house on Feldspar Drive quietly. Only one of her contract husbands greeted her. "Are Nels and Richard asleep?" she asked.

Macy got up from the couch in front of the fireplace and stretched. "They didn't last past midnight."

Lou kissed him. She tried to play no favorites, but Macy held an edge in her affections. He was the practical one of her husbands, thinking rather than feeling. She often sensed he was troubled, as though trying to find his way out of

imaginary labyrinths. Richard, her second husband, was undisciplined and lustful. She found him exciting. The third, Nels, was ethereally worshipful, but usually preoccupied with his researches at the Tancarae Institute.

"Where have you been?"

"Out," she said.

"Cards at your family's?"

She put her hands to her throat and unbuckled the cape. "I took the windhover out to the greenbelt. I wanted to walk alone in the desert."

Smiling, he said, "Did you find a burning bush?" Macy was a librarian and knew all the old stories.

She shook her head. "I found a dying man."

"Anyone we know?"

"Don't joke," she snapped. "He was a stranger."

"I thought it might be your flair for drama."

She nodded. "You're right; it was a fiction. Forget it."

"Do you want a drink?"

"Something hot. No stimulants."

They sat by the fireplace and drank mint tea. "How long until morning?" Lou asked.

"Three hours, maybe four."

"I want to sleep here by the fireplace."

"Carpet's filthy. Nels didn't clean yesterday."

"He forgot," Lou said.

"Well, it's still dirty."

"I'll put my cape down," she mocked. "Do you mind?"

"I'm not finicky." He reached for her. She allowed him to draw her down. After they had made love, the artificial logs still burned brightly. "Turn down the fire," said Macy sleepily.

Lou twisted the valve. "Are you tired?"

"Yes." He nuzzled against her like a child, left leg thrown over her waist.

"I'm not sleepy."

He opened one eye. "What do you want?"

She smiled ingenuously. "A story."

Macy groaned and sat up. "Once upon a time, there was a brave woman named Robin Hood . . . "

In the dim light of the fireplace, Macy looked exasperated. "Aren't you tired yet?"

She shook her head.

"You're worse than any child. All right, what do you want to talk about?"

"Anything."

He considered. "Since I'm the newest of your husbands, let's talk about you."

"All right."

"There's a hologram in your room. Is that your sister?"

She was quiet for a few moments. "I didn't expect that."

"You don't have to answer."

"The hologram is not my sister. It's me."

His voice was surprised. "She looks nothing like you."

"For convenience," the surgeon said, "we have standard patterns."

She shook her head. "I brought my own specifications."

"The family's prosperous," said Lou. "We can purchase wonders. Have you any idea what I was like as a child?"

"You were extroverted, bright, athletic. I imagine you were the center of all interest here in Craterside Park."

"Wrong. I was bright, but I was also clumsy and fat. I was introverted to the point of catatonia. Months and months I wouldn't go out of the house. I spent my time reading and viewing hero fantasies—Joan of Arc, Robin Hood, Gerry Cornelius, all of them. I imagined I was all sorts of other people living in different times."

"Escapist."

"Didn't you ever dream?"

"Of course."

"Of what?"

He considered the question. "I don't remember."

"I dreamed I was a hero. I saw myself as strong and lithe as a cougar. One birthday, my parents gave me all that. It took months for the restructuring. Months more for physical training."

Macy looked intrigued. "That holo—the difference is incredible."

"Sometimes I wish I were her again."

"That's stupid," He gently kissed a line along her jaw. "You're beautiful now."

"Would you feel that if I were still her?"

He hesitated. "I think so."

"You only approach honesty." She laughed. "You're so damned politic."

"Beautiful Cougar Lou."

"What?" Startled.

"You dreamed of being a cougar. Cougar Lou. It fits."

"It does," Lou murmured, almost as a question. "It's almost morning. Let's make love again."

Before sunrise, they moved to the tall windows facing east.

Better than lying with a book in an invented world?

He raised his head. "Did you say something?"

She shook her head slowly. "Do you know," said Macy, "that you talk in your sleep?"

The elder matriarch of the Olvera-Landis family arrived shortly after noon. Lou greeted her mother at the door.

"Good afternoon, Mary Elouise," said Anita. "Are your husbands about?"

"Macy is out," Lou said. "Nels is at the institute and Richard is with a party hunting for sea snark."

"Fine. I wish to talk to you alone." She led Lou to the parlor. "This is nothing you haven't heard before."

"I expected that."

"The family has been talking," said Anita. "We are worried about you. Don't you think that perhaps this house is a little large for you to manage?"

"I have three husbands."

"And aren't they also perhaps a bit too much?"

"I can manage."

"Can you really, dear?" She placed a plump hand on her daughter's wrist. "You are young and willful, Mary Elouise, but that will carry you only so far. What are you going to *do?*

"I'll live here." Lou stared at the carpet, following patterns. "I intend to help people."

"Heroes?" Macy once laughed. "Heroines? Killers and thieves—outlaws."

In a rage, she ordered him from her bed.

Anita laughed. "My dear, machines are for helping people. People have better things to do."

Lou kept a stubborn silence.

"The family is reluctant to continue supporting you in this fashion. You've had a nice fling. Now come home."

"Into the family business?"

"If you like. We won't force you."

"And my husbands?"

"Three seems a bit extravagant. Can't you keep—" She rolled her shoulders. "Oh, just one?"

"So will you marry me?"

"The terms are good," said Macy. "Why not?"
"Is that all?"
"This isn't Le Morte d'Arthur, *love."*
"Mother, may I think about it?"
"Again? I suppose so. But you'll have to return soon. The expense, you know. Supporting a separate house in Craterside Park is so ridiculous. You can't expect these birthday extravagances to last forever."
"I realize that."
"Then I'll talk to you again soon." Anita rose to leave. "Oh, did you hear about our fine police chief?"
"What about him?"
"I saw it on Network this morning. He was picked up by his own men last night. He attempted to damage a nocturnal sculpture in one of the squares."
"How odd," said Lou.
"Indeed. Even stranger, it seems his entire memory is gone. The police suspect foul play."
"Craterside Park used to be so peaceful."
Her mother agreed. "These days, I don't know what we're coming to."

After Anita left, Lou went to her special room. No one slept with her there. It was a retreat. The floor undulated over circulating liquid. The walls opened into infinitely expanded holovistas. Today Lou chose trees. She was surrounded by brooding, illusory forests. She lay down on the forest floor.

How blessed to rest. She still dreamed as Cougar Lou, but when she woke, could not remember those dreams.

She dozed, but did not sleep, and came awake disoriented and confused. She stared at the underbrush, wishing that once, just once, an unprogrammed animal would come slinking out to greet her. Lou turned over and watched clouds traverse the high-resolution blue sky.

Steal from the rich, give to the poor . . . That had come from Macy and the dusty, tattered pages of an ancient book.

What am I doing? she thought. How can I re-create a past that probably never existed? Whom am I helping helping helping helping . . .

Wake up, wake up, whispered the night wind. Lou jerked upright. "All right," she said. "I'm awake." The forests blinked out and Lou was alone in the small gray room.

Outside, Nels waited for her. He was clearly agitated. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you ought to know. Macy and Richard are fighting."

She rubbed her eyes. "What about?"

"You."

"I'm still asleep," Lou said. "Why should they fight over me?"

"Come on," said Nels. He tugged her toward the hallway.

"Why me?"

Nels stumbled over the words. "It's your family. We heard you're going back. You'll keep only one husband—"

"Let's go." They hurried along the corridor, Nels' bony legs pacing her. "Who told you?"

Nels looked at her uncomfortably. "It was my cousin Ingrid. Her maid's aunt is second housekeeper to the Olvera-Landis household. The aunt heard a discussion about you at dinner and couldn't keep it to herself." He ducked his head. "I'm sorry. I told Richard; then he and Macy got into it."

"They're idiots," Lou said.

They clattered down the main stairs. Richard and Macy were in the dining hall. The table had been shoved to one side and the two men stood in the cleared space. Each was clad only in a pair of baggy white pantaloons, tied securely at waist and ankles. The two men jumped up and down, screaming epithets.

Lou stopped at the bottom of the flight. She wondered whether to laugh. "What are they doing?"

"Their pantaloons," Nels said, pointing. "Each of them dropped a resurrectronic ferret in there. The first one whose ferret gnaws its way free through the cloth wins."

"That's stupid!" Lou cried. She ran into the dining hall and grabbed Macy's shoulder. Without taking his eyes from Richard's face, he shoved her aside.

"Leave us be," said Richard. He was stocky, with long arms and a head as smooth as a desert stone.

High-pitched squeaks came from the men's trousers.

"Idiots!" Lou screamed. "When the ferrets are through, neither one of you'll be fit for a husband!"

"Get away," said Macy. "We have to settle it. First us; then Nels."

"Nels help me stop them." Lou grabbed one of the spindly dining-room chairs and smashed it at a suspicious bulge on Macy's calf. Her husband yelled and fell sideways. Something jerked and twitched under the fabric of his pantaloons. Lou

swung again with the broken chair leg and heard sophisticated circuitry break.

"Damn you," said Macy. He reached to stop her hand. She kicked him in the face.

Lou turned and found Nels and Richard rolling on the floor. Nels's legs were locked around Richard's waist. Jackknifed forward, he pummeled a lump on Richard's ankle.

"Richard! It's over." Her second husband glared up at her, then took his hands away from Nels' throat.

The four people surveyed one another. Macy wiped his bloody nose with his hand. Lou gave him a napkin from the sideboard. Nels massaged his own throat gingerly. Richard sat up, looking sullen.

"You stupid pricks," said Lou. "Is Nels the only one with any sense?"

"It's true then? You're going back to your family?" Richard demanded.

"Who gets discarded?" said Macy.

"Anita came to see me today. That's what she wanted."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I haven't decided. But I do know I don't want you fighting over me like stud bulls."

"Aren't you the great romantic?" Macy said spitefully.

Lou turned on him. "No, not this way. Now all of you, get out. Just leave me alone."

The three men stared at her. "Do you want to see any of us later on tonight?" Richard asked.

She shook her head. "I'm sore and I want to be alone." Lou turned back toward the stairs. They watched until she disappeared past the upper landing.

She sat on the topmost parapet of the highest turret of the old house and dangled her feet into space. She drew the cloak about herself. The simulated cougar fur was proof against the night wind off the ocean.

Who am I? she thought. I'm Cougar Lou Landis.

No, replied Mary Elouise Olvera-Landis. I'm an ugly, awkward girl who finds only vicarious marvels. My heroes are in books and tapes and story computers. I am locked inside a walking fantasy. But that doesn't change me. I'm still Mary Elouise.

I'm the new reality, thought Cougar Lou. I exist in my strength and grace.

You will always be Mary Elouise, answered Mary Elouise.

No. No?

Cougar Lou stared out toward City Center where the stars twinkled faster and became a blur. Tomorrow, she thought, Anita will return for me. I'm such a child; I'll do as she asks.

I wish I were the hero I've pretended.

The scattered lights of Craterside Park spread below her. One of the tiny stars marked the home of Josephus the Administrator. "Yakov," she whispered. "Little gardener, you're my last chance for self-respect."

Cougar Lou stood and balanced easily on the stone parapet. . . . *steps. Stairs were the hardest. At first, the new perspectives came slowly. She stepped or reached, and often missed. The fine, lithe body throbbed with new bruises.* She looped one end of a line around a crenelation and knotted it. Then she tossed the coil into the darkness. She clipped the rope around the break-bar secured to her belt, then looped the rope around her hips and began to rappel silently down from the tower.

As a young girl, she had attended garden parties at Josephus' estate. Cougar Lou knew the route. She took alleyways and climbed over rooftops, avoiding Craterside Park's safe streets.

Two patrolmen sat telling each other ghost stories beside the gateway to Josephus' estate. ". . . out of the closet, jaws gaping . . ." The words floated across as she crawled through the shrubbery.

Cougar Lou anticipated little difficulty in getting to Josephus. There would be few safeguards. Craterside Park was relatively free of wrongdoing. The patrolmen patrolled because Chief Brosklaw had liked good appearances.

Once past the gateway, she ran across the checkerboard lawns. She reached the back of the house. A window turned silently inward and Cougar Lou let herself into Josephus' kitchen. Pausing to orient herself to the new darkness, she searched back through her adolescence and remembered the master bedroom was on the second floor, south wing. Negotiating the stairs and hallways took a few minutes. Soon she was in front of the correct door. She slid it aside and took a cold metal cube from her belt-pouch.

". . . brought us memories of a better life. Why?"

She looked away from twisted limbs and shriveled souls. "You've never had riches."

They stared at her.

Lights glared on. Across the room, Josephus sat up in bed and smiled at her. "Mary Elouise, how nice to see you. You were expected."

Cougar Lou whirled, but the hallways were filled with black-uniformed patrolmen, stunners in hand. She turned back to the bedroom, ready to break past Josephus and dive through a window.

The administrator raised his hand, and she saw the wand of a stunner. "You must be tired. Sleep now, and we'll talk in the morning." She felt a momentary sting, then nothing else.

Mary Elouise awoke slowly. She stared at the dark, slender man and wondered who he was. The woman beside him also looked familiar. She blinked and realized the woman was her mother. The man was Josephus. She whimpered and tried to roll over, to go back to sleep. Josephus grasped her shoulders and shook her.

"Have some tea, dear," said her mother. They waited while she sat up and drank. After several minutes, her eyes focused and she put down the cup.

"Anita?"

"You're home, dear. Josephus brought you in quite early. It appears you've been bad."

Josephus chuckled. He upended his palm and three metal cubes rolled onto the table. "Memory cubes. You planned to use one on me?"

"It was for Yakov," Mary Elouise said. "I promised."

"Whom?" said Anita.

"My former gardener, an incompetent. I was rather harsh on him." He fingered the cubes. "Stolen memories . . . There was Brosklaw, of course. Who else? We've had several reports."

"There were three more; a woman, two men. They were lucky people with power and accomplishments. They were gifts of birth. I gave their memories to cripples I found wandering out beyond the greenbelt."

Anita pursed her lips. "You've been a very bad girl."

"Me?" Cougar Lou glared. "Don't condescend like that. I'm not a girl any more."

Josephus slapped his palm down hard on the table and laughed. "Who is condescending? Do you think that murder by memory-theft and the gift of those memories to persons you deem less fortunate isn't condescending?"

"No."

"Child, you've got a lot to learn."

"What are you going to do?"

Anita said, "You must be disciplined."

"Punished," said Josephus. "It's an ugly word, but it's more what I had in mind."

"The steel rod?"

"Nothing so brutal. You must realize that memory retrieval holds a good deal more than the historical romances you absorbed for so long. You'll experience some of the less pleasant memories. My special selection."

"You disgust me," said Cougar Lou.

Josephus grinned again. "I think about a thousand subjective years will be appropriate. Then you'll get your old body back."

"I'd already decided that."

"What do you mean?"

Cougar Lou smiled; then the smile slowly diminished. "You were waiting. How did you know?"

"How do you think?"

They took her out then, and in the hall her three husbands were waiting.

"Which one of you sons of bitches was it?" Cougar Lou demanded. "Who betrayed me?" She glared at Nels. "You? You got me the cubes from the Institute."

"It could be any one of us," said Macy. "Or all. You talk in your sleep."

"Was it you?"

"Who's to know which you would have rejected?" Macy spread his hands noncommittally. "It doesn't matter. Who loved you more? To whom would betrayal matter the most?"

"It matters the most to me."

"From what book did you steal that?" said Macy.

She stared at him until he looked away. "No book," said Cougar Lou. "My life." Josephus reached for her elbow, to lead her out; she jerked free.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro was born in Berkeley, California, of Finnish and Italian parents, and has lived all of her life in the Bay Area. She has worked with mentally disturbed children and as a statistical demographic cartographer, and is currently a vocal coach. Her first professional writing was for a children's theater company, for which she was also general manager. A horror novel, *Hotel Transylvania,* was published in 1978 by St. Martin's Press. She has three other novels and a short-story collection in print. Ms. Yarbro is married to Donald Simpson, whose sculpture, *Starprobe* #43, was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution, where it is a permanent part of the Life in the Universe Hall.

Un Bel Di

By CHELSEA QUINN YARBRO

As his terrifying smile widened, the Janif undersecretary watched the procession of Papi wind its way up the far side of the valley. "They're like fine children, perfect children, every one of them." The undersecretary licked his outer lips; it was a furtive darting movement. "So sad they aren't truly intelligent. If they were . . ." He broke off. If they were . . .

His companion almost put a hasty hand on the undersecretary's auxiliary arm. "We are still in doubt about that here. We have not run many tests yet. They might have greater potential than we know." The ambassador made a weak gesture of apology.

Undersecretary Navbe waved him away in an offended manner. "Certainly, certainly. Keep your ambassadorial pride. I myself look for signs of genius in my pets. You are free to do the same."

Instead of the accepted answer, the ambassador raised a primary arm slowly and remained rigidly silent. He then bowed with maddening propriety to the lengthening shadows.

The undersecretary closed the screen, stepping back with a gesture of regret. It was a great pity that he had to be so very isolated. And the ambassador was just as bad as the others of his status. He would be tolerant to absurdity of the locals, then become unyielding and moralistic with the others of his kind. Navbe had seen it often in his post, and bitterly rued having to deal with such perversity.

But the ambassador was speaking. ". . . for the Papi, in this instance. You will want to observe them while you are here, Undersecretary."

Privately the Janif undersecretary thought this a lamentable state of affairs. "Of course, I look forward to it," he said.

"This is quite a unique place," continued the ambassador, warming to his subject.

They all are, thought Navbe.

"We've found not only that the Papi have a highly developed social order, but that they surgically alter their young to fulfill specific cultural functions." Here the ambassador hesitated.

"Oh?" Navbe managed the illusion of polite interest.

"Yes. They can make truly amazing changes. Each of the modifications has a definite place in the culture, although a couple are odd, dependent creatures."

"They can actually do this?" Navbe asked lazily.

"It appears so," answered the ambassador cautiously.

"Before or after birth. How?" Under his meticulous exterior Navbe felt a deep elation. Perhaps his temporary exile would not be as terrible as he had feared it might be. There could be great solace here after a few special arrangements.

"I am sorry to say that we have not yet discovered their reproductive mechanism. They are probably ovoviviparous." He moved uncomfortably, knowing how far he had stepped

beyond the bounds of allowable ceremony. It was also a blot to his record that he knew so little about the people he lived with.

At this, Klin Navbe all but laughed. So there was a mystery, was there? That made for a challenge. And this sniveling diplomat had not found it out. "Probably?" He was scornful, but not so much as to discourage the ambassador from talking. As all others of his status, Navbe despised the Representative status. Yet there was a chance that his host knew the reason for his temporary exile, and he dared not put himself in a compromising position with such a person.

"As I have told you, we cannot do the tests. We lack the full authorization to do so. I do not know how we shall function if we are not properly authorized."

"Precisely." What was this fool's familial name? Lesh? Yes, Ambassador Lesh. He wanted the authority to proceed with tests and Navbe could give him that authorization. Plans blossomed in his mind.

It was perhaps fortunate that the Meditation Bell rang the summons to the Third Cycle just then; it provided cover for the awkwardness between the two officials. Their Janif formality asserted itself, and they strode silently down the hall together.

When they had completed their ritual exercises, Navbe put Ambassador Lesh at his ease with that age-old question beloved of off-planet Janif officialdom: "How did you come to serve on Papill, Ambassador?" And he masked his boredom at the too-familiar tale of a diplomat's career.

In the long twilight the two Janif sat together on the terrace listening to the distant Night Song of the Papi. In the valley below Ambassador Lesh's estates the waning light shifted, slid, and was gone, and the soft white fogs followed the shadows to wrap the valley in sleep. On the ridges the tassled, angular trees sighed in the wind, their hard thin leaves clicking endlessly above the fog.

"A beautiful place, Lesh, even with just the two stars. It is like a children's story." Navbe watched the valley's soft change, dreaming absently of violated children and the strange Papi, intense pleasure hidden in the formal set of his face. He had picked a flower and was stroking it with the extending sensors of his thumbs. "You are to be envied, Ambassador—to be surrounded by all this loveliness."

"I have thought so myself," said the ambassador in an unbecoming burst of familiarity.

Navbe ignored the solecism. "And the Papi are such pretty people. So delicate. Not like those creatures on Tlala or Isnine. You have beauty here, and tractable natives."

The ambassador, lulled by the undersecretary's flow of remarkable condescensions and innocuous questions, was betrayed into elaborating on the Papi. "They are a gentle people. It is of great importance to them that they bring delight to their neighbors. It is unfortunate that they do not recognize the laxness of their social order, but their errors are charming. They have made almost a religion of their kindness. Over the years I have observed their spirit of self-sacrifice." He became aware of his blunder. "But it is nearly impossible to take advantage of them. They know their own order." His confusion led him to a further mistake and he showed his primary hands as he shifted position.

Irritated, Navbe wondered how many more insults he would have to endure at the hands of Ambassador Lesh. He savagely desired to humiliate his host, but he wanted information more, so he forced himself to respond with calculated ease: "Certainly, to see the Papi is to want to protect them from abuse. They must be greatly in your debt."

"Not at all," Lesh said hastily, looking wretched.

Navbe flung back both pair of arms in his best offensive manner. "You must not fear me, Ambassador Lesh. Surely you know the Judiciate would not have allowed me to come here if they had found any real basis to the scandal. But such talk, especially about High officials, is dangerous. I have willingly elected to leave Jan to come here in order to allow the tale to be forgotten."

The ambassador twitched uncertainly. He had heard tales of the undersecretary's strange perversions, but was loath to ask about them. Even to admit he had heard the rumors would be more shame than he would deliberately bring on himself.

"Come, come, you must not be afraid. You have heard something of me caught alone with the children of Subcouncil Hariv. No, you needn't deny it. The grosser strata, disobeying every Janif law, have repeated the story, elaborating and embellishing it, if the versions I have heard are indicative. That I have been allowed to see the children is true, and I am fully aware of the honor done me in this, but how, in a High

House, would I have obtained that access to the completely sequestered offspring of such an official? Only think of the obstacles and be reasonable." It had been difficult to get to them, but Navbe was well aware that the task was not as difficult as the public had been led to believe.

The ambassador knew about the guarding of High children, and he wavered. "They did speak of bribes and extortion . . ." It was a terrible breach of courtesy, even to mention it, but he was too deeply involved to deny his knowledge.

The undersecretary bit out a laugh. "What man of Subcouncil Hariv's stature would have such servants around him? He would never tolerate so low a status to enter his House. How do high-status servants behave? Bribes are out of the question." That much, at least, was correct.

"I hadn't considered . . ."

Navbe remembered how very long it had taken for him to find his accomplice, one who shared his need to use the young bodies for cruel pleasure. How delicate the maneuvering had been, and how quickly the problem had been solved when he had discovered the night handservant to be addicted to Unjy. Then it had been easy. All the careful searching, the obtuse questioning, the days of painstaking effort had been worth it. He could recall the tearing of the flesh when his antlers touched it, the smell of the soft inner tissues when he fingered them . . .

"Yes, I had not thought of that. With such talk rife in the lower strata, the honor of high-status servants would be impugned. It is no wonder you chose to disassociate yourself from such improper conduct."

"So you see," Navbe said expansively if vaguely.

The ambassador was painfully relieved. He settled back in the soft cushions and offered the undersecretary another dish of Merui. Navbe accepted it with a skilled blend of humility and contempt.

All the Papi that waited at the gates looked uniformly young to Navbe. They all had the serene, childlike faces and downy antlers that marked Janif children, made more attractive by huge violet eyes. Their clothes were a soft, clinging fabric that Navbe longed to fondle.

"We bring you the morning, you who are new among us," the Papi said in chorus. "We have come to welcome the new Janif visitor and to beg him to visit us in our houses."

The ambassador stole a warning look at the undersecretary, but Navbe was far too careful to be so carelessly trapped. "It will give me much honor to walk with you one sundown," he said with a slight bow in the proper ritual intonation.

The soft garments moved in the wind, and the Papi were outlined in their clothes, naked to Navbe. His thumb sensors stirred urgently. "It is close to the First Meal, and I wish you nourishment."

The Papi were obviously happy with him. They rustled among themselves, whispering in their chantlike speech.

Then a Papi, whom Ambassador Lesh had identified as the local leader, came forward with his offering of three finely wrought platters. Each was covered with squares of the fascinating cloth. "A gift for you," he said to the Janif with an acceptable show of respect. "It is our delight to bring these few things to you, in the hopes they might please you."

Navbe had studied this part of the ritual the night before, and was able to respond without noticeable hesitation. "Here are three rare things; but the light in the valley and the mist ensnared in a tree are rarer." He touched each of the platters without removing the cloths. "I will value the gifts as they are valued by the givers."

The Papi and Ambassador Lesh regarded him with approval, although Lesh's look was tinged with relief. "You will be welcome among us at any sundown," said the Papi spokesman. "I am known as Nara-Lim. This one is Tsu-Lim and this one is Ser-Tas." He did not introduce the others, to Navbe's delight. Apparently only the platter-bearers had that distinction. Navbe approved of that, the recognition of status. Ambassador Lesh had told him that Lim and Tas were thought to be titles, which revealed the extent to which he had deluded himself about the Papi's intelligence potential. Titles among those who lived as the Papi did would be ludicrous.

The platter-bearers put their offerings on the steps, then went ceremoniously to the rear of the group. Nara-Lim touched each of the platters and then he, too, went to the rear of the group.

"I am honored by Nara-Lim and his generous companions." And Navbe turned, walking slowly up the steps at the gateway.

Behind him, the gentle, fragile Papi waited until the gates were closed before they left the ambassador's estates.

"That was well done," Lesh said, forgetting himself.

"I wish to make my stay as pleasant as possible," Navbe informed his host with a sarcastic laugh. As he spoke he was thinking of ways to obtain a Papi for his own use. Seeing those lovely animals at the gates that day had awakened his need again and had strengthened his resolve to have one. He knew that his position was an advantage, but could not find the best means of using it.

"Make no doubt, Undersecretary; they will want you to visit them." Ambassador Lesh stopped at the terrace. "Will you take your meal now?"

"It is customary," Navbe said witheringly.

"Must this be with the Janif meats, or will the local ones do? We have the Janif available, but during the day I have tried to run this establishment on native foodstuffs . . ."

"Your economy is no doubt admired. Serve what you wish. If I am to go to their homes, I should learn what to expect." He saw Lesh's embarrassment and was pleased.

Nara-Lim looked expectantly at his guest, hesitating as he held the door to his house open to the Janif. "Undersecretary? What am I to have the pleasure of doing for you?" He bowed low.

Klin Navbe opened both sets of hands in obsequious display, hoping to disarm the Papi with this extraordinary courtesy. "I have come as a student, Nara-Lim. I desire to learn more of the life of your people." He knew that these natives were stupid and trusting. This approach would be the most likely to succeed. Any species of low technology that flattered itself with the illusion of intelligence was easy to convince of your interest.

"We are delighted." Nara-Lim opened the door wider.

"I wish also to thank you for the cloth, the stone work, and the herbs you presented to me. I am impressed."

"It is enough that you value them. If you enjoy our poor offerings, they are made rich."

Navbe moved closer. "You must tell me how to proceed, since your ways are not the ways of the Janif." Cynically Navbe watched the approval in the old Papi's eyes. These little people were incapable of understanding insults.

"Certainly. It will be an honor to this house." He stepped aside to let the Janif undersecretary enter.

After a long and boring afternoon, Navbe was allowed to

leave, promising to return when he could, thanking his host in the most effusive terms.

Then, when he stood in the door, he turned back, as if suddenly aware of a new question. "I have just thought . . . But it would be too great a favor. I must not ask it."

"What were you thinking of?" Nara-Lim asked eagerly, his wide Papi eyes alight, and his soft clothes quivering. "The Janif have not shown so much curiosity about us until now. We are certainly ready to fulfil any reasonable request."

With this encouragement Navbe put on a display of reluctance, sneering privately at the naïveté of the creatures. As if any Janif could be so concerned with Papi. "You told me of the . . . did you call them companions? . . . Yes? Companions."

"Yes?"

"They are adapted for the pleasure of the owner, is that not correct? Do I choose the words badly?" Navbe paused as if uncertain as to how to continue. "I thought that I might arrange to buy one, if that is the usual transaction . . . You see, I would then have one of you with me, to instruct me and tell me what I need to know of your world and your ways. I am right that the companion is always with its . . . master?"

Nara-Lim looked chagrined. "I should have suggested it to you. You must forgive my manners. It would naturally have been offered to you if I had thought your interest was so great."

Realizing that his boredom had shown, Navbe made a show of confusions. "I will confess that when I first asked you, it was idle speculation, but your talk has shown me that Papill has much to offer those of us from Jan." It was the first honest statement he had made, and it pleased him to think that Nara-Lim would hear it as a compliment. Such foolish creatures deserved to be prostituted.

"Then I will arrange for a companion for you. Perhaps you will be kind enough to call here one day soon."

"In three days, then?" Here Navbe held his breath.

"Of course," was the answer as Nara-Lim bowed. "I will select a companion for you, one known for grace and docility and boasting much beauty." He paused, looking up to the sky. "There will be heavy mists tonight. You will want to return to the ambassador's estates quickly. It is dangerous to be

abroad in the mists. Even Papi have been lost quite hopelessly in them."

"Your concern flatters me," Navbe said, touching the homing device that would guide him unfailingly back to the estates. "I will leave you now."

"Your interest in Papill is a great honor to our people. Your companion will be here in three days." He kept his deep bow even as he closed the door against the approaching night.

As he strode back along the mountain path in the steadily thickening fog, Klin Navbe gloated to himself. Success was so easy with fools, and the Papi were certainly fools. They thought themselves possessed of tradition when all they had was a stagnated culture of decaying blood lines. What an opportunity this presented to him! It would be ridiculous to waste it.

Ambassador Lesh met him by the terrace. "You were out?" he asked shrilly. "Where were you?" In his fear he forgot to use Navbe's title.

"I went to see Nara-Lim. For what little concern it is of yours." He paused for this to sink in, then: "I will require room to accommodate a Papi servant. Nara-Lim is providing me with a companion."

"A companion," Lesh repeated blankly. He had a sudden picture of those most special Papi with Undersecretary Navbe and was afraid.

"It will arrive here in three days. I assume you can be ready."

Lesh's primary arms twitched. "I can." He thought for a moment. "We can move you and your companion into the Terrace House." Ordinarily such a thing would be unthinkable, but Lesh no longer wanted to be involved in the affairs of the undersecretary any more than protocol made necessary.

"That should be satisfactory. I rely on you to arrange it for me in time for my companion's arrival." And with that he went past the ambassador into the house, his robes hissing derisively.

The companion looked up at Navbe with huge, adoring eyes. It was specially dressed for the occasion, wrapped in innumerable layers of tissue-fine cloth. It regarded Navbe with awe and a little ill-concealed fear.

"This is most kind of you, Nara-Lim," Navbe said without

looking at him. "I will treasure this, you may be sure." He reached out to touch the slender sprouting antlers. "Remarkable."

Nara-Lim looked pleased and murmured some words that Navbe didn't hear.

"Yes, I will certainly treasure this." Inwardly he was still reeling from the first sight of the companion. Of all the Papi he had seen, this was the most childlike; a small figure without any of the grosser features of most of the natives. He had been told that they were made so, but did not realize until now that the change would be so impressive. Formed like a Janif child, with limpid eyes and soft antlers that were downy to the touch. He would have to be careful at first, make no moves to reveal his intent.

"You are pleased, then. This is satisfactory?" Nara-Lim asked quietly.

"Are you pleased?" The companion asked with a becoming urgency.

"Yes. Yes, I am pleased." He dragged his eyes from the companion and turned to Nara-Lim. "You have done me great honor, and I am beholden."

The old Papi turned almost double. "It is we who are honored. No Janif has ever before been so generous of his interest, no Janif has even bothered to learn from us. You have been most kind."

"Really," he said. "What more is there for me to do? Are there rituals, or documents . . . ?"

"A brief ritual," Nara-Lim said diffidently. "It is to assure your care of your companion, since it is wholly dependent on you. They are made for one individual and may not be changed. We feel it is essential to have a ceremony to establish this."

"Commendable," Navbe said, hoping that the ritual would be short. He was anxious to return to the Terrace House. The companion would be his then, for whatever purposes he chose. His auxiliary arms drew his robes more closely about him so that the Papi could not see the agitation he was feeling.

"Then, if you come this way?" Nara-Lim held open the door to the garden. "I arranged for the proper setting earlier. I hope this does not distress you. Ordinarily it would be for you to do, but I thought that you would forgive me this liberty."

"Your behavior is excellent, Nara-Lim." How he hated ex-

changing these useless formalities with this race of precocious animals. Only the promise that was held in the companion's body kept him reasonable and accepting of the ridiculous wishes of the Papi. "I am unfamiliar with your ways and find your tact most rewarding."

They went into the small garden where Nara-Lim had lit a number of ornamental fires in braziers. Then he threw scented water on the companion. He next gave each a plant to hold while he recited some unfamiliar words. When the plants had been burned in the braziers, it was over.

"Very pretty," Navbe remarked, thinking it all very stupid. The companion clung to his auxiliary arm.

"In five days there will be a ceremonial visit paid to you, as assurance that you are taking proper care of the companion. But you must not let this concern you. It is merely our way." He made an elaborate gesture to signify the perfunctory nature of the visit.

"I thank you for telling me." This was genuine thanks, for Navbe realized that he must be careful to leave no mark that might arouse suspicion as to his use of the companion. There must be no sign of abuse, at least not for the first five days.

The Papi elder bowed. "Go then. And learn of each other."

Navbe led the companion away from Nara-Lim's garden with unseemly haste, smiling ferociously.

Although Ambassador Lesh suspected why Navbe had taken the companion, he was careful not to show this in his manner. He greeted Navbe as he returned and directed his servants to show them to the Terrace House.

"I know you will understand that this is the best of the separate houses I have," he said uneasily.

"Of course. This had to be expected." The patronizing sound of his voice grated and Ambassador Lesh had to force himself to ignore it.

"You should find it adequate," he responded at last, when he was sure he would not overstep his status.

"Adequate," Navbe agreed. He turned to the companion, glowing fragile and childlike beside him. "It will do for you," he told the companion with a sound curiously like a snort.

"Wherever you are, that is truly the best place to be," murmured the companion in a sweet, trilling voice.

Navbe was surprised. He hadn't expected quite so much ability in the companion and was not sure he wanted it. But

devotion would be something new and he thought it would amuse him.

"Do you hear, Lesh? It's quite alarmingly faithful." The cruel eyes mocked the rigid control of the ambassador. "Were you about to warn me of the natives? Your little Nara-Lim has done so already. Charmingly. We went through a ceremony designed to overwhelm me with the honor of the occasion." He turned again to the companion. "He wanted me to understand what I was being given. As if I needed him to tell me." He laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh.

"They are meant to be faithful, Undersecretary. I understand that they cannot be altered to suit another once they have been given to . . . someone . . ." he ended awkwardly.

"Are you suggesting that I take this with me when I leave? With all that's being said about me?" He had taken the precaution of speaking Janif rather than his approximation of Papi. "Really, Lesh. This is an animal, no more. I have it to amuse me and stave off the unutterable boredom of this place. When I leave, it will return to its people. You're wrong, you know, to think that creatures like this one really care about their masters. It's sham, Lesh. Just cunning and sham."

"You're not to harm it," Ambassador Lesh cried recklessly.

"Would it make your position here embarrassing?" Navbe looked at Lesh until the ambassador was forced to look away. "I can't adapt my wants merely to suit you, Lesh. You know that, don't you?" He put his primary arm under the status badge on the front of his robe. "You do know that."

"If Nara-Lim were to discover—"

"Discover what?"

"Certain things," Lesh said petulantly.

"Lesh, you forget who you are." This was harshly said, and to emphasize the harshness Navbe put both auxiliary arms outside of his robe, thumbs twitching.

"You will do as you wish," Ambassador Lesh allowed, in a defeated tone. "You will be shown to your Terrace House."

"Oh, you may lead the way," Navbe said maliciously. It pleased him to take vengeance on Lesh by making him do servant's work, lower status servant's work.

"As you say," Lesh said tightly.

"I have not pleased you?" the companion asked anxiously.

"Does it matter?"

"I have tried to do as you wish. What more do you want of me?" The great sad eyes hovered over him.

"What are you doing off your mat?" Navbe asked, entirely out of patience.

"You are not pleased with me. What must I do?" Even the downy antlers quivered with emotion.

"Do not fret. You were all compliance. Return to your mat." But even as he said it he was annoyed afresh. The children had not wanted him; they had fought him with their hands and new antlers as well as struggling and crying out when he assaulted them. This creature had accepted him, making no more than a whimper at the worst of it, and looking with dumb reproachful eyes as it was ravished.

"I must please you."

"Then go to your mat!" With this he turned away and had the satisfaction of hearing the soft sounds as the companion curled on the mat at the foot of his bed. There was vulnerability after all.

"Companion," he said without turning or rising.

"Yes," answered the eager voice in the gloom.

"You will learn to please me. It is that we are different in our ways. In time we will grow accustomed to one another."

There was relief in the little voice as it answered. "Oh, yes. There is plenty of time. I will learn. It is a promise. I will be as you want me."

As Navbe fell into sleep he knew that the companion would learn. He would see to it.

Nara-Lim and the visitors were disturbed when they made the perfunctory five-day visit. There was a lingering pain in the eyes of the companion, an elusive sorrow that they could not understand. Questioned in private, the companion said: "We are different. That is the trouble. It will take time."

"You are well, then?" Nara-Lim asked uneasy without knowing why. He felt something he had not felt before, an oppressive air, a touch of bidden fury. He did not have a name for it, but he was afraid that the companion did.

"I am well." The companion turned its eyes away, looking toward Navbe across the terrace.

"Is there some trouble?" pursued Nara-Lim.

"Just that we are strange to one another. I am learning to . . . please him." The trouble in the deep eyes faded.

"He has promised to teach me and keep me by him forever. He promised."

Nara-Lim nodded, and felt that he ought to be satisfied: "It is probably as you say. They are not as we are."

The companion came near to Nara-Lim. It gestured formally, a pale imitation of Navbe. "He is my master, Nara-Lim, and I am his companion. I must be his way now."

"Yes," said Nara-Lim with equal formality. "That is the way of companions." But he was still unsure.

"Come, you will talk with him. You will see how much he cares for me, and how great is his esteem for me. I am fortunate indeed in this master." So saying, the companion led Nara-Lim across the terrace to where Navbe stood, surrounded by Papi, a gargoyle surrounded by fauns.

When the visit was concluded, Nara-Lim went away with the rest, fearing that his gift had been a betrayal to his people. He had seen the look in the Janif's eyes, the contempt of his manner, and had heard him say fleetingly to Lesh that it would be welcome to him to be among civilized beings again. He had issued the binding orders himself, and felt no doubt at the time, but seeing the companion with the Janif now, he feared.

"Another postponement!" Navbe snarled, hurling the directive to the floor. His sensors writhed on his hands and his tongue flicked uneasily over his outer lips.

"What delay?" asked the companion meekly. It had seen fury in Navbe's stride when he had left Ambassador Lesh, and could feel the rage that consumed its master.

"I am not summoned back . . ." He broke off, realizing who he was answering. "It is not important to you."

The companion came to Navbe's side, its soft clothes whispering as it moved. "This thing has disturbed you. Let me bind your brow, or bathe you."

Navbe tore the delicate primary hands from his forehead. "No!" He stormed across the room. "I do not want you aniveling around me!"

The companion was shocked. "But I am here . . ."

"I don't want you here!" Navbe punctuated this with a blow, and was rewarded with a moan. "Go away. Go bother someone else."

"But I can't," the companion said softly. "I was made to

be your companion and I serve no other. I cannot leave you."

Navbe turned murderously on it. "Then keep out of my way."

"As you wish," the companion whispered unhappily.

"And be silent!"

Then he sat on the reclining cushions and thought. The delaying order was not entirely unexpected, but it angered him. There was not reason enough to refuse him the right to return to Jan. To be left on this outpost world with talkative pets was driving him distracted. He pulled at the directive with all four hands. The children could not have betrayed him. They were too frightened and too badly hurt. And for that they would have ordered him exterminated, not exiled. He feared that they might delay him forever, shifting him from remote world to remote world until his name had no power and his status was reduced to nothing. He scuffed at the tattered directive. That some low-status clerk had sent it only made matters worse.

"Would you want food, my master?" came the question from the far corner of the room.

"No." There had to be something he could do to force the issue. He would protest to Secretary Vlet. It was a risky business, but he was not without status, and the secretary might listen to him if he were careful in his phrasing. He made up his mind to work out a plea that very evening.

"May I help you?" the companion asked, the ghost of a voice in the gathering dusk.

"Come here," Navbe commanded, and when the companion was beside him, he sank all his hands into the young flesh.

It was Ambassador Lesh who gave him the news that the secretary had called him back to Jan.

"When?" the undersecretary demanded urgently.

"As soon as possible." There was an expression on the ambassador's face that might almost be disgust. "He needs your services, it would seem."

"How many days before I must depart?" Navbe had unwittingly shown his interest in the order and felt that he had to brazen it out.

"Four days, Undersecretary. I think you can be ready in that time."

Navbe scowled. It was more than he was willing to toler-

ate, this superior attitude from an inferior. He would have something to say about it when he got back to Jan.

"The Terrace House is yours until you leave, Undersecretary." Lesh started to move away.

"I will expect you to prepare my belongings for departure," Navbe said smoothly. "All things suitably crated for the journey. That will include the bolts of cloth given me by the Papi, and that worked stone." It had been in the back of his mind to bring these products to the attention of the Merchant Council. That Ambassador Lesh had not done so would be a mark against his record.

"And the companion."

Navbe was getting out of patience with Lesh. "Send it back to its people. What good is it to me?"

"I can't do that." Ambassador Lesh turned on the undersecretary. "It has been made for you, and it is yours. If you abandon it, it will die. It cannot go back to its people." The heat in his words alarmed Navbe. He had been aware that Lesh was too wrapped up in the Papi, but had not thought it was this far gone. He would have to recommend treatment when he saw the Representative Master.

"Calm yourself, Ambassador. You make too much of these creatures. Certainly they are pleasing to look at, and they have their uses, but like all domestic livestock, they will transfer their allegiance in time." He put the directive in his sleeve. "Well, you will be busy the next few days, preparing to send me off." There was a quiet threat in his next words. "I don't imagine you will mention the companion to the secretary. For the same reason I will not mention the unwillingness you have shown in the exploitation of the crafts of the Papi. They are worth a lot. Were you saving them for yourself?" Then he stood back.

The ambassador's auxiliary hands grew livid, but he controlled himself enough to say: "I will say nothing." It was only when Navbe had walked away from him that he dared to ask: "How *did* you get to those children?"

Klin Navbe only laughed.

All his things were packed. Navbe surveyed the mound of crates in front of the door to the Terrace House and was satisfied. At last he was going back to Jan, where he would be with intelligent beings once again. He felt cleaner, better than he had since his arrival on Papill. It would be so little time now. He would be with real people.

Ambassador Lesh was not there, nor had Navbe seen him at any time the past two days. Such was the way of those of low status: when challenged, they hid. It was part of the natural cowardice of the stratum.

Behind him, Navbe sensed the companion, standing helplessly amid the desolation of the rooms. For the last day or so it had wandered disconsolately from room to room as the contents were crated and put outside the door. Now it stood, bewildered, looking at Navbe.

"Don't worry," Navbe said without turning to it. "I'll leave you a present."

"Leave me?" asked the Papi, uncomprehendingly.

"You'll need something to live on. All right. I'll arrange it with Lesh." His mouth puckered at the thought.

"No." It was a little word, barely said, as the companion sank to the floor, its huge eyes glazed as with a fever.

Navbe twisted in impatience. It was always this way with house animals. "You'll be fine," he told the companion, joviality in his manner to conceal his impatience. "You knew I was going away. Don't let it bother you so much." He nudged the huddled figure at his feet with his boot.

Four eager hands grabbed his leg through the folds of his robe. "Take me. Take me. Don't leave me here. You can't leave me here."

Disgusted, Navbe shook the foot free of the desperate fingers. "Don't be foolish," he snapped, striding back to the door.

"I belong to you," the companion said. "I was made to be part of you. You must take me with you." There was anguish in the little face now, and foreboding.

"I am tired of this," Navbe announced. "If you want to see me off, you may follow me to the landing place. If not . . ." He shrugged elegantly.

"There is nowhere I can go," murmured the companion to itself.

"Nara-Lim will take care of you. Lesh will see to it. Now, I want no more of this. You served me adequately and you'll be paid. Nara-Lim can manage the fee, if you like." He rang a bell for the servants, knowing they would be slow.

"It doesn't matter," the companion said blankly, looking away from the undersecretary. "If you go, it doesn't matter."

Why is it these animals take everything so personally? Navbe asked himself as the servants came along the terrace. "Here, you," he called to them. "These are to go to the land-

ing place. Nothing is to be dropped or broken, do you understand?"

The crates were loaded into the boxlike rolling platforms and dragged away from the ambassador's house to the landing field.

"Come along," Navbe said to his companion. "Walk out with me, why don't you?"

Numbly the companion stood and numbly it followed Navbe across Ambassador Lesh's estate.

The squat craft waited, a mushroom ready to assault the sky. Around it Papi and Janif workers were loading and pampering the machine, readying it for the surge upward, away from the soft mists of Papill for the bright scraps of light that were stars.

Ambassador Lesh was not there.

A low-status officer examined the directive Navbe held out to him and made him welcome with becoming deference, concealing his hands and moving his mouth as little as possible. This was much more to Navbe's liking.

"I will board soon," he informed the officer and was pleased to see the officer rigid. As he turned back to his companion, he felt the first tuggings of civilization on him, and found the sensation a warm delight.

"Well, companion, here is what I've promised you," he said, handing the creature a voucher and the border from one of his sleeves. The companion took the sleeve and pressed it to its face. The voucher slid away on the wind, unheeded.

"I forbid you to behave in this way," Nabve said to the companion as it looked at the ship with hopeless eyes. He found the manner attractive, even stimulating, but it was a feeling he could not afford now.

"Don't go," whispered the companion. "Or take me with you. I will die without you."

That was truly too much for Navbe. He wrinkled his face in frustration, and then, with a half-smile he said: "But I'll be back, of course. I'll want you here when I get back."

Joy transformed the delicate face. "When? When? I cannot live long without you, but if you are coming back, I will try . . ."

It was remarkable how easily the creature was fobbed off. Navbe chided himself for not thinking of it sooner. "I will be here in the season of the Amber Rivers." That was sufficiently far in the future that the companion would have time to forget him.

"I will try to live until then," the companion said eagerly. "I will try. It is long, but you will be back." It clutched the sleeve border fiercely. "I promise I will wait for you. I will live until you come back."

"Good," said Navbe absently as he watched the last of his crates moved on board.

"Until the time of the Amber Rivers. It will be hard but I will live."

"Fine, fine." The undersecretary put his badge of office in place and went to the boarding ramp. The young officer stood waiting for him. Without a backward look he went aboard and the door swung closed behind him.

The companion waited in the landing place where Navbe had left it, the sleeve border in its hand, thinking of the reunion that would come in the season of Amber Rivers. Somehow it would have to live that long, for the joy of its master, for the better part of itself.

When the craft rose into the air, it covered the companion with dust.

Willo Davis Roberts is the author of nearly forty novels, although she has done relatively little in the field of science fiction. Best known for her gothics and novels of suspense, Mrs. Roberts was for many years a resident of Humboldt County, California. She and her husband presently live in a small town in the state of Washington.

A Personage of Royal Blood

By WILLO DAVIS ROBERTS

They hated him, the crew of the *Arvella.* He'd known it from the first, from the way they looked at him, from the way conversations ceased when he entered a compartment, from the fact that he was never invited to join any of their activities.

Not that there were any activities to intrigue anyone of intelligence. He wasn't used to crummy little explorer ships . . . not enough room in this one to turn around without bumping into something. Two of the ship's officers had doubled up to provide the quarters for Erak, which no doubt accounted for their hostility. But it wasn't his fault his father had sent him on their ratty little vessel, and they certainly couldn't expect a Prince of the Realm to share quarters with a half-breed engineer, could they?

There was something wrong with the air conditioning and it was always too warm and smelled strongly of human beings. Erak had never been subjected to such strong odors before in his entire twenty-four years, and there were times when he was actually nauseated.

Thinking of the mission ahead on Llargos didn't help his sense of humor, either. It seemed straightforward enough: deliver the papers to Emperor Horad, convey the best wishes of his father, King Ipod, present the young princess with the necklace, and withdraw. But he knew his father . . .

"Why me?" he had protested. "Why not send someone from the regular diplomatic service? You know I'm preparing for the Games Competition early in the year . . ."

King Ipod did not allow himself to be diverted by trivialities. "Plenty of time for that when you return. This could be very important to us. It will be good practice for you, to represent me in a minor court. Don't argue, my son."

Well, he had packed, and he was here, hurtling toward Llargos and the unknown and undoubtedly hideous princess . . . *Great Richos!* Erak sat up abruptly, striking his head on the bulkhead. Was that it? The princess? Had they cooked up something to do with the princess? But what could they have arranged, other than a political marriage, and his father wouldn't do that to him.

Would he?

Erak was a handsome young man, slim and graceful and attractive of face, but this twisted now into a scowl. Surely not. He was letting this impossible ship and its intolerable crew affect his brain. King Ipod wouldn't marry him off to some provincial clod simply to gain . . . whatever it was he wanted.

He sank back onto the bunk, shaken and unconvinced. King Ipod was an indulgent father, a benevolent ruler . . . but he would not countenance opposition in any form. Erak had reason to know this.

He tried to remember what he knew about Llargos, which wasn't much. A planet only a little smaller than his home world of Iphos, it had less than a twentieth of the population. That wasn't a crucial factor, however, because Iphos had been colonized less than two hundred years and the space and natural resources were ample for many years to come.

Was that it, though? The natural resources? For the first time it occurred to Erak that there might be some value in

listening to the conversations at state dinners. Wasn't Llargos richly endowed with minerals?

Certainly there would be a way to get them, if minerals were what Ipod desired, without sacrificing his number three son to a meaningless political mating.

The explosion and the resulting lurch threw him onto the deck with such force that he lost consciousness, putting an end to his speculations.

"Hell of a note . . . the first interesting thing that's happened during the entire voyage, and I have to be knocked out." Erak winced as the sealing plaster was applied to his head, wondering why they didn't devise a way to handle it at lower temperatures.

Forgast, the medical officer, surveyed his handiwork with grim satisfaction. "There. You'll heal. You consider it unlucky to have been safely tucked away when the ship's been hit by a meteor and other men are dying?"

Erak twisted to look up at the man. "Men were killed?"

"Two. There are other injuries, as well."

"Captain Radja?"

"The captain is uninjured. But we must make repairs that cannot be done in space; the captain will have his problems."

"We'll be delayed, then, in getting to Llargos." Erak felt a creeping sensation of unease. He hadn't wanted to go to Llargos, but he didn't want to end his life prematurely out here in this black void, either.

"They're selecting a place to put us down." There was a glint of malicious amusement in the medical officer's eyes, as if he'd felt that gut-twinge of alarm. "Don't worry, Prince Erak. The captain is aware of his valuable passenger; he will do everything possible to see that you are delivered safely to Llargos."

Erak didn't ordinarily mingle with the others in the common room, but now he couldn't resist. He wanted to know what was happening. He brushed past Forgast into the narrow corridor.

For once they didn't stop talking when he entered. In fact, he wasn't sure anyone was aware of his presence. He saw a few minor wounds, no worse than his own. Who was missing? There were only fifteen members of the crew; he ticked them off mentally, feeling a burst of gratification to realize that one of the fatalities must be Storm, who had been particularly insolent.

"Putting down . . . at 4000 hours. Place called Capron II." Erak slid, unnoticed, into a seat and listened. The name meant nothing to him. No doubt there would be breathable air on the planet, which was more than could be said for the *Arvella*. Had the meteorite further damaged the purifying system? he wondered. It seemed closer, warmer, than ever.

"Capron II. Never heard of it." The speaker was Advers, the chief engineer. "But if it's charted, I'm for it. Air's getting so damned thick you can chew it."

Not his imagination, then. Panic pricked him, then eased. These men were experienced space travelers, for all their grossness, and they didn't seem unduly alarmed. It wouldn't do for him to show fear.

"Capron II. Here it is." Janis, a half-breed with a darker skin than most, fed them the information. Erak didn't pay particular attention; he wasn't interested in mass and gravity and velocity and position. The important thing was, how close were they to it? He glanced at the crystal embedded in his wrist. Not more than half an hour. He hoped to Richos the air held out that long.

"Get to the interesting part," someone prodded. "Is it colonized? Humanoids?"

"One landing party led by Klas Blavvak, a molecular biologist, a native of Urth." There was a murmur of interest, not shared by the young prince. For all that some considered Urth to be the cradle of civilization, Erak knew it for a small, crowded, dying planet. Nobody who was anybody continued to live there. "Left Urth with a party of fifty to colonize Capron II, which had previously been explored by—"

"A society founded by malcontents is rarely a stable one," Erak interjected. "In a study at the Universal Institute on Regas it was proved beyond any doubt that colonies such as this one are—"

A rude voice interrupted, so loud that Erak had no choice but to shout above it or cease to speak at all; he subsided, reddening with anger.

"Come on, get to the point! Fifty people, how long ago, for Richos sake? Do we have to hunt one leaf in the forest, or have they had time to multiply?"

"Two hundred thirty-seven years ago." Janis snorted. "Who knows? It doesn't say how many of his colonists were women, and there hasn't been so much as a supply ship passed within voice range of them since they landed."

"Women! By Richos, that would be a bonus!"

Erak swiveled his head to find with an unpleasant shock that Storn, whom he had presumed dead, stood behind him. Not dead, but filling in on the bridge for someone else . . . It must be Thaves who had died.

The conversation degenerated into an explicit discussion of women and the uses to which they could be put. Erak stood up, surveying his companions with disgust. "The level of intelligence in any group is easily determined, according to the Pregos study," he observed in a carrying tone, "when women are mentioned. Roughly translated, they opined that swine are unable to conceal their gluttonous appetites."

There was a moment of silence, into which Storn commented with a laugh, "Any adolescents may withdraw from the company of men if the talk grows too strong for their delicate ears. Eh?"

In the chorus of raucous and ribald remarks, Erak retreated to his own quarters; he wished with intense emotion that he could have them all on Iphos for a day or two.

He wondered if there was any way to find out his father's real intent in sending him to Llargos. Had there, for instance, been additional orders given to Captain Radja?

I am more than a pawn in my father's master-chess game, Erak thought angrily. *He cannot strand me forever on some misbegotten provincial planet, away from my friends, my equals, my customary divertissements.*

He flung himself onto the bunk, glowering at the blank bulkheads, imagining the crudeness of the court of Emperor Horad, the revolting countenance of his long-toothed daughter. *Marry an inferior princess to gain mineral wealth for Iphos?*

It was too much to ask. His mind darted this way and that, seeking a way out of the suspected trap.

Capron II proved a welcome respite from space travel aboard the *Arvella.* It was a small planet, less than a third the size of Iphos, and bucolic in the extreme. But the air was sweet and fresh, and there were women.

Erak saw her the first evening in the town. Radja had given them the customary warning, of course, before they left the ship. Fraternization was up to the natives; if they were friendly, the crew could mingle at will. However, they were on no account to intrude where they were not invited, and most particularly they were to make no attempt to accost or seduce the females.

"Being what the females are on most of these little planets," Storn joked, "they'll be covered with either fur or scales."

"They were brought here by Blavvak," someone reminded him. "He was apparently a crusty old goat, but he was rich enough to buy and supply a ship big enough to carry fifty people through half a galaxy . . . the rich have impeccable taste in women, I understand."

Storn sought Erak's eyes. "Is that true, Your Excellency?"

Erak's mouth tightened. He returned the gaze haughtily—as imperious and as regal as his father. "The cultures of this level are generally promiscuous, which is no doubt fitting and appropriate for a crew of scurvy space vagabonds. It is to be hoped that neither crew nor natives will lower the mental or moral level of the other." It was long seconds before Storn laughed and turned away.

The city . . . how in the name of Richos could they call it a city? Erak thought, longing for his own home of pink-spired castles and crystal towers. The streets here weren't even paved, although the houses were decent enough in a peasanty fashion.

The crew moved in groups of twos and threes, searching out the drinking places (none of them had ever been anywhere throughout the galaxy that didn't boast a drinking place) and looking over the girls.

There was an abundance of females, most of them young, and such swarms of children as he had never seen elsewhere. Yet it was the girls who drew his eyes.

Erak surveyed them with mild interest. They were poorly dressed, by the standards of Iphos, but comely at that. Their garments were simple and revealing, and they wore assorted pale colors with matching ribbons in their hair.

The girl in white stood out from the others, both in purity of dress and the beauty of her face and hair. The hair was long and richly dark. Under the thin material her breasts were full and lovely, though curiously low; Erak wasn't the only one who stared. But it was her face that really held him, held him so that he forgot the others.

He had never seen such a face, not even on Iphos. His breath quickened as his eyes clung to that delicately lovely visage. The eyes were widely spaced and of an unusual coloring, a light, bright blue with an oddly shaped iris.

She walked as if unaware of the newcomers, head carried high, her stride as light and confident as that of one of his

mother's proud Urth pets. It was the way a princess should walk, Erak thought, mesmerized. If he could be sure the Llargosian princess looked like this, perhaps he'd go along with what his father had in mind . . .

"By Richos, that one's a beauty!"

The coarse voice cut through Erak's near-hypnotic state. Storn . . . how had he managed to get drunk so quickly? But of course the man was a swine, drunk or sober . . . Erak felt the rush of blood in his ears as his resentment rose. A man like Storn . . . and the beautiful young girl . . . That he should dare . . .

Storn reached the girl in long strides, putting out a rough hand to her shoulder, swinging her around. "Ah, there, what's your name, girl?"

She stared up at him, the unusual eyes widening, the soft blunt hands folding in on themselves, and the curious, almost melodic thrumming she had been making—Erak realized for the first time—stopped.

"You speak a civilized tongue, don't you?" He turned to show his companions his progress with the girl, his body swinging suggestively. "On the other hand, what difference does it make? A man and a woman don't need words"—here he leered openly—"to communicate, do they?"

Erak caught a glimpse of her face with its beginnings of alarm before Storn's head came between them . . . Storn's mouth fastening on those innocent lips . . .

Almost before the girl could struggle Storn found himself jerked around; he released his captive and the girl fell back.

"By Richos, I thought I'd have to kill a man for touching me . . . but it's only His Highness, the little prince! I'll forgive you this time, boy, but once you've reached your full growth you'd better think twice before you put a hand on Adros Storn!"

Erak's mouth was dry. "Leave the girl alone."

The *Arvella* crew drifted toward them. Storn gave a shout of laughter; he always played well to an audience.

"The little peacock makes threats! Don't tempt me, Your Highness, into letting your blood! I've a lifelong curiosity about the color of royal blood!"

Erak had no weapon, nor did any member of the crew. Weapons were forbidden on civilized planets. But there was something leaning against a wall of one of the primitive cottages. Its use was uncertain, perhaps an agricultural tool of some sort, but it came readily to hand and Erak found with a

fierce satisfaction that it was nearly the weight of the sword so regrettably at home on Iphos.

Storn's mouth went flat, the amusement draining from his face.

"You want to fight?" The question was incredulous. "A boy? A child? I'm to fight a child?"

He looked around at his comrades, and Erak had time to do the same. There was no sympathy for Erak anywhere; he knew they'd like nothing better than to see their fellow crewman stomp him into this alien soil.

Not that Storn would kill him, of course, but it was clear that the man had no qualms about drawing blood, whatever color it might turn out to be.

"He's going to hit me with his stick!" Storn taunted. He'd forgotten the girl. She watched wide-eyed; Erak caught the briefest glimpse of her face and then concentrated on his enemy.

The "stick" shot out and dealt Storn a quick blow alongside the head, and Storn was moving toward him with deadly intent, the large hands ready to tear him to pieces.

The stick went out again, this time in a vicious jab to the shoulder. Storn was powerful, but he wasn't particularly quick, either mentally or physically, Erak decided. He wasn't adept enough either to avoid the blow or to grab the improvised weapon; on the other hand, while the blow hurt, it didn't slow the man down.

With a snarled obscenity, Storn flung himself forward, only to find that Erak was no longer where he had been seconds earlier.

"Here! Fight him on his own terms!" someone shouted, and another of the implements was thrust toward Erak's opponent.

From that point on, Erak had only to follow his instincts, to allow his reflexes to take over. He was a champion in the ancient sport of fencing, which had been revived until it had become a leading sport among the young men of Iphos.

In a match of physical strength Storn would have murdered him, but he hadn't a chance with these improvised weapons. Erak was fast on his feet, he moved without having to think or plan . . . and while the "sticks" were a far cry from the sword he was accustomed to, it did have some sort of metal tip (it was so primitive it could scarcely be called a blade) that made it reasonably formidable.

Erak proceeded, methodically and cold-bloodedly, to cut

the other man down. He knew the crew were shouting encouragement to Storn, but he closed his ears, concentrating entirely on putting an end to this man. A slash here, a thrust there . . . so far he himself had endured only a few moderately painful blows, but it was easy to see the color of Storn's blood. It oozed from a gash on one cheek and from the laceration on his shoulder.

Rage rumbled out of Storn's massive chest; he was outmatched with these simple weapons, and he knew it.

"Get rid of the bloody stick and kill him!" someone shouted.

Storn had come to the same conclusion on his own; the stick was cast aside and the man lunged forward in a rush of fury so great that caution was forgotten. He knew if he could once get his hands on the impudent young bastard he could tear him to shreds . . .

Erak made one final thrust, putting all his muscle and weight into it, into the most vulnerable part of Storn's anatomy; he had a second to think that his fencing master would have chastised him most severely for such a move, and he saw Storn's eyes widen as he realized what was coming, then darken and glaze with agony as the blow connected.

Storn went down in silence, the pain too great to allow him to draw the breath necessary for speech or moan, folding forward into the dust.

The men fell silent and fell back as Erak moved toward the girl. He didn't look back at Storn, he didn't care if the misbegotten wretch were dying . . .

"Come. I'll take you home," he said to the girl. For a moment she only stared, her sweet face pale, her breasts rising and falling rapidly and intriguingly under the thin white material.

She swallowed and seemed to recover control of her limbs. She let him take her arm and guide her around the silent onlookers and on down the pathway that served as a street.

He felt a tremor in the arm he held, but he didn't want to pause until they were out of sight of the men from the *Arvella.*

"Are you all right? He didn't hurt you?" They halted in the shadow of the unfamiliar trees. He didn't take his hand from her arm; he liked the feel of the soft, warm flesh, the fragile bones, the leaping pulses.

"I am unhurt." The eyes *were* wide and beautiful and of an uncanny blue, almost too large for her face. The delicate

nose and pointed jaw gave her face an upturned look that was even more enchanting now that he saw it up close. Her voice was the most entrancing he had ever heard and now that they were alone he heard again the sound she had made before. "I have never seen men fight this way . . . to kill . . . It was to kill?" She looked at him.

"I wanted to kill him but I didn't. He won't be able to walk for a few days, but after that he'll be all right." Erak didn't want to talk about Storn. He didn't want to let her go, either. They were jostled by a band of laughing youngsters who came running through the trees, chasing each other and themselves. It gave him an excuse to touch her again, to steady her. "So many children . . ." And then, fearing she might take that as a criticism, "I've never seen such beautiful children."

"Yes. Our children are our future; our laws require that we produce many of them. It is most essential." She shook off her intense look. "Please, who are you?"

"I am Erak, Prince of Iphos. And you are . . . ?"

"Tahni." The name was velvet on her lips, where a smile had begun to form. It gave a secretive light to her blue, blue eyes and made the thrumming noise all the more fascinating. "Please, come to my home. We will have a cup of *svelge* and you will feel better, I think."

The smile grew, and Erak's matched it.

"What's *svelge*?"

"Very good to drink. You will come?"

"I will come," Erak agreed.

Captain Radja was so angry that it was possible to see the muscles pulsing in his jaw as Erak faced him with insolent disinterest.

"Please get on with it, Captain. I have other matters to attend to." He examined the toe of his boot for scratches.

A dull red suffused the man's face. "You have crippled a member of my crew, Your Highness. The man will be unable to fulfill his duties for days."

"He was molesting a young girl. Intergalactic law clearly states—"

"The others report that he merely spoke to her."

"He did more than that," snapped Erak.

The captain took a deep breath, prepared to deal with Erak once and for all.

"He was insulting her," Erak said.

"That's not what the others say," the captain spat.

"Then they are lying."

Erak waited for the next blast, and was not disappointed.

"Drawing a weapon on your own kind on a planet like this one is very dangerous, Your Highness," he managed to make the title an insult. "The natives don't always understand—"

"This one did."

The captain went on doggedly. "And there are other methods of stopping a drunken man than by injuring him so that he can't function as a ship's officer."

"I didn't have a stunner available. Are you finished, Captain?"

Erak was well aware that had he been a member of the crew of this miserable ship he would have been subject to arrest. He was equally aware that the captain, for any crime short of murder, would not dare to punish him in any physical way.

Radja's mouth was flat and hard. "We will be under way in one hour. I will expect you to confine yourself to your quarters during the remainder of the journey."

"As you like. A young lady will be sharing those quarters . . . the Princess Tahni has consented to be my wife."

The red in Radja's face deepened until Erak wondered if the man might suffer a stroke. "You will take no one, Your Highness. No one."

The captain wasn't the only one who could put steel into his voice. "I shall be accompanied by the Princess Tahni, Captain, or I will not go."

For a moment it seemed that Radja experienced indecision; then he turned abruptly and reached into a compartment for a packet. Erak recognized it at once; it bore the Royal Seal of Iphos. So. There *were* additional orders from his father.

"These were to be presented to you after we had reached Llargos. Under the circumstances, I believe I am justified in presenting them to you now." Radja thrust them at him with a violence only barely controlled.

And there it was. In black and white, his father's impossible order: a marriage of convenience with the Princess of Llargos, the object the unlimited mineral wealth of a fifth-rate planet.

While here on Capron II was Tahni, the daughter of their ruler. She didn't call herself a princess, but the daughter of a

chief; however, she was a royal personage if Erak had ever seen one. And he meant to have her as his wife.

He tossed the papers toward the captain and watched them slither about on the floor of the compartment.

"Well, you'll just have to inform my father that I had other plans, I'm afraid. If Tahni doesn't go, I don't go."

Radja's teeth closed with an audible crunch. "You will go, Your Highness, if you have to be taken in irons. Believe it or not, we still have such a medieval device aboard."

For a matter of seconds the two men stared at one another; then Erak strode off.

It was a simple matter to assure that the *Arvella* would explode within minutes of takeoff. For the first time Erak was glad his father had insisted on sending him to the academy with the other young nobles; he had learned something of practical value, after all.

It gave him a grim sense of satisfaction to know that they would all die . . . Storn, the captain, the others who hated him. They deserved to die like the swine they were . . .

There was the problem of how to make himself unavailable until the ship had departed. Using his head, Erak called upon a native of the planet to help him. Tahni was only too happy to oblige.

"No one will find you in the Place of the Old Ones," she assured him. "Come, and I will tell you more of our ways."

It was a long walk, up into the hills; they were tired when they arrived at the cavern. From the heights they could look down on the city and see the hulk of the *Arvella*. It worried him, a little, because it ought to have left an hour ago, but of course the captain would have instituted a search; he would, after all, have to face King Ipod when he returned from his mission.

Except, Erak thought with wry humor, that he would never return to Iphos. And King Ipod, damn his eyes, would think his son had vanished with the ship. They would never look for him here, on this isolated and little-known planet. Erak would one day be king here, in his own right, and when he was, he'd show them a few things . . .

"How long must we stay here?" Tahni asked.

"Until the ship has gone. They won't waste much more time, I think. They're already behind schedule, and my father will be angry about that." Erak's mouth twisted in amusement.

"Is your father a very stern person?" Tahni inquired.

"Stern. Yes, that would describe him. Yours is, too." But the old chieftain would not live much longer, Erak thought. It was easy to see that he was ill. And when he was gone, Tahni would be the ruler . . . He had no doubts of his ability to control Tahni, to rule Capron II. So what if they were a provincial planet? They would learn to build pink castles with crystal spires, such as he was accustomed to, and he would teach them a thing or two about taxes. Incredibly, they didn't even know the word, let alone its meaning.

Tahni stood looking down over the valley. "Yes. My father will expect great things of us. Heirs . . . grandsons. These things are important to him."

"Sons are important to any man . . . sons and grandsons."

"Father Klas Blavvak taught us this, as he taught us everything. We must multiply, we must populate our world," Tahni said earnestly. "So it became a law, that we multiply."

"A law?" A frown creased his forehead as he sought to make out if there was any activity around the *Arvella,* but it was too far away. "The law says you must have children?"

"Oh, yes. Those who do not reproduce are put to death."

Startled, he turned toward his intended bride. "To death? Great Richos, that seems a bit strong!"

"But it is necessary, you see. To insure the population of our planet, so that one day it will be as great as Father Blavvak's home planet, Urth. Our society shall not support those who do not do their share."

He laughed a little uneasily. "It's a good thing you're a princess, Tahni. And I a prince."

"That will not matter, my Erak. The law applies to everyone."

His frown returned more deeply. "The laws apply the same to king as to peasant?"

"But of course. We all come from the same stock, you understand."

His eyes strayed to the entrance of the cave behind them. "Oh, yes. Blavvak and the others. This is their burying place? Where all your ancestors lie?"

"All the Old Ones. Look, Erak! The ship is lifting!" Tahni extended a finger, pointing, and he saw with relief that it was true. The *Arvella* was leaving without him, and they'd never find him . . . or by the time they did, he'd be King Erak.

The explosion was so brilliant that they felt their eyes

seared by its heat, although they could not actually feel it. Tahni turned to him stunned.

"They are all gone! They have been killed, all of them! What a waste of men!"

"We can go back, now," Erak told her, reaching for one of the pliable hands. But Tahni pulled him toward the cave. "Now that we are here, you must come to Father Blavvak, our Beginner. He gave us our rules, our laws, and we obey them forever."

Erak stared down at her. She was, indeed, beautiful, but he was beginning to find her to be childishly simple. He was used to ladies of the court, who knew how to please a man and avoid annoying him. Still, she *was* a princess, of sorts; by the time civilization again touched upon Capron II, he would have formed her into the real thing, and no one need ever know that he'd married beneath himself. There was, too, the possibility of other women . . . there seemed to be plenty of unattached females.

A princess, to make him king, and he would teach the others the pleasures of diversions, all those lovely maidens. Erak smiled, giving in for the moment to his bride-to-be, allowing himself to be led into the cave.

There was a fire burning in a niche in the stone wall; Tahni selected a taper and lit it from the flame, then led him into the vault itself.

"The Old Ones," she said in a reverent whisper. "All of them, and in the center is the tomb of Father Blavvak, who gave life to our entire nation."

He wasn't really interested in their ancestors; it was their future that promised, not their past. Still, if they worshipped these Old Ones, he might be able to put the information to some good use.

His fingers obediently traced the date cut into the stone of the crypt. "He lived to be an old man."

"Yes. A very lonely old man, he was, but happy that he lived long enough to succeed in his life's work."

Erak moved on around the circle of tombs, absently noting the dates until it began to dawn on him that, with the exception of Blavvak's, they were all identical. As this fomented in his mind, not yet culminating in a clear thought, he asked, "And what was that, his life's work?"

"Why, my people, of course. So that he should not be alone, he must create a people to cover this world."

He felt a strong sense of chill. Perhaps it was only the

dampness of the cave, but his eye fell yet again on a date . . . the same as the others, eighty years preceding the date of the death of Blavvak.

"Tahni . . . what is this? Why did all the Old Ones die at the same time?"

"Why, they were killed in the crash, of course. When their ship landed it was out of control . . . everyone was killed, except for Father Blavvak."

"Everyone?" He swung dark eyes toward her, alarm glimmering although he didn't know why. "But how could that be? You're here, your people fill the valleys . . . someone besides Father Blavvak must have lived."

Tahni shook her head. "No. All died, everyone. And this is why he had to create us, or go mad . . . the only man on an entire planet. He was a very clever man, you know, almost a god . . . some say he *was* a god."

They had moved to the entrance to the cave, and Tahni put out her torch.

"Our blood will be strengthened by the addition of one of Father Blavvak's own kind." She looked with great earnestness up into his face. "I hope that it will be possible for our blood to mingle, my Erak. It would be very painful to me, to see you put to death."

The pale yellow sun overhead ought to have warmed him, but he was cold. Cold. "What are you saying? Why should our blood not mingle? Do not joke, my princess."

"Joke?" Her face was blank, as if she didn't comprehend his meaning. "He never knew about that, poor Father Blavvak . . . whether or not our races could intermingle. It was not possible for him, but he hoped . . ."

His jaws closed with a violence that was painful, as were his fingers gripping her shoulders. "What are you saying? Explain to me, what is this gibberish you spout? Your ancestors, all of them in there"—he flung out a wild hand toward the cave—"They were human beings, they came from the planet Urth, the same as my own ancestors . . ."

"But no, my Erak. The Old Ones, I told you, they all died in the crash. All but Father Blavvak."

Panic screamed through his veins and he shook her until her head wobbled.

"But that's impossible! You're a princess, you're a human being . . . !"

"Ah, no! You hurt me, let me go . . . !"

"Tell me!" His heart was a pounding piston, out of con-

trol. "Tell me what you mean! Blavvak, he couldn't have made you out of *nothing* . . ."

"No, of course not. Let me go, your hands are painful." Only when he had released her did she speak. "He used the only thing he had, the pets he had brought . . . he was a . . ."—she formed the words carefully, as if they were seldom spoken— ". . . a molecular biologist, and he was very nearly God, to create a new race."

Erak stared at her through a red haze. His voice was hoarse.

"Out of . . . what? How did he . . . create you?"

"From his cats, of course. You did not know? We are cats, and you are a human being. And now shall we go down into the village and prepare for the ceremony? My father will be very happy, and very soon we will know. All we need do, my Erak, is produce a fine litter and my father will die happy, knowing we will carry on."

A litter. *Of kittens* . . .

He said the words aloud, dully, as the blood drained from his face. "A litter . . ."

"The usual number is four to six. Any more than that is truly a royal production. Of course, Father Blavvak didn't know what might happen, in cross-breeding our race and his own. He would be so happy, if he were here to learn, now."

Down in the valley below the city lay in the summer sunshine. There was no sign of the *Arvella* or its crew. Nothing to show they had ever been there.

"Come, my Erak," Tahni said, and numbly he accepted her hand as they began the descent into the town.

Scott Edelstein states that he works for a large food processor, individually wrapping slices of cheese food. It is more certain that he has written stories for many of the science-fiction magazines and anthologies, as well as for several magazines outside the field. He is the editor of a recently published anthology, *Future Pastimes.*

Jonathan Phillips is a student at the University of Wisconsin, where he is studying iron rafts on graphite. When not writing, he spends his time being enigmatic and wishing he were elsewhere.

Final Examination

By SCOTT EDELSTEIN
and JONATHAN PHILLIPS

Section D; Question 3:

Which of the following best illustrates the beginning of the end?

A

"Mommy," six-year-old Ivan said to her mother Miguel, "buy me this water pistol."

Miguel gazed at the small plastic toy in her daughter's pudgy hand, then at the supermarket toy display, then at the price poster. "No," she said, reaching out to take the toy from Ivan. "We can't afford it. Water's too expensive."

Ivan thought about this for a moment, then pointed the gun at her mother and shot her. Her mother collapsed, bleeding and moaning softly. Ivan blew steam from the gun and kicked her mother until her moaning stopped.

The store manager came over to Ivan. "I'm sorry, little girl," he said, "but that is store property that you slaughtered your mother, aunt, or friend with. I am afraid we will have to take away the gun and lower your credit rating. In addition, we may be forced to perform a two-digit number of atrocities upon your young, supple body. Now, be a good Jewish girl and give me the gun."

Ivan shot him because he had a moustache. When she finished, she was still restless so she walked up and down the supermarket aisles, shooting everyone she saw until there was no one alive in the store but her. She would have shot herself, too, but she had grown bored.

Her mother, too, had grown bored. She had grown bored with being dead. She stood up, brushed herself off with a vacuum cleaner (this week only $29.95), and took Ivan's hand. "Come along, Ivan," she said. "We still have shopping to do." She took the water pistol from her daughter and replaced it in the display.

About this time, the other people in the store grew dissatisfied with being dead. They stood back up and continued working or shopping as before, although there was a sudden rush to buy Uncle Carl's Chili in the twelve-ounce can.

"Come on, Ivan," Miguel said. "We have to buy some round steak and pork chops."

They walked to the meat counter, but it was empty. A sign on the counter said, "Sorry, no meat today, it's all poison."

B

Little Tommy tugged at his mother's skirt and pointed a stubby young finger at the supermarket display.

"Look, Mommy," he said, his dimples alit in a red neon glow. "Toy guns. Can I have one? Please, Mommy?"

Tommy's mother, who was good and kind but who was also a pacifist, looked at the display and shivered. The plastic toy machine guns stacked neatly in rows were terribly realistic; they frightened her.

"No," she said. "Good children don't like to play with weapons. Come along and I'll buy you a drawing set."

Little Tommy stamped his foot. "Oh, Mommy, *please?*"

"No. That's final."

Tommy picked up a gun from the display and nearly dropped it. It was much heavier than he had expected. He pointed it at his mother and pulled the trigger. "Bang!" he said.

Unfortunately, the display was mismarked, and in actuality the toys were real submachine guns. Tommy's mother was shot to a pulp in seconds.

Frightened but excited about what he had just done, little Tommy leaped into his mother's supermarket basket, still clutching the gun in his tiny hands.

The basket was a modern four-speed electric device, and Tommy shoved the throttle into first gear, burning rubber as he sped down the Amusements and School Supplies aisle. As he swerved around a corner, narrowly missing a display of gourmet foods, he leveled the gun at another shopper and shot her in the stomach.

Tommy threw the machine into second gear and zoomed down the Soaps and Detergents aisle, spraying bullets in all directions. There were screams; dozens of shoppers fell, dead or wounded. Dozens more ran or threw themselves to the floor, terrified.

Tommy took the basket around corners on two wheels, shifting into third, then into fourth, shooting in all directions.

When he had killed exactly four dozen shoppers, he heard a voice shout, "All right, kid, we've got you surrounded!" He turned around and glanced behind him.

Unfortunately, because of this action, the basket went out of control and slammed into the meat counter. The basket was totalled; Tommy went flying. He gazed down and saw rows of chickens, then rows of hams, and, finally, row after row of beefsteaks moving by beneath him.

He smashed into a post and expired instantly. His crumpled body fell onto the meat counter, between the Eye Round roasts and the calves' liver.

Quickly, the supermarket environment returned to normal. The store manager hung a sign around Tommy's broken neck. The sign said, "$1.19 per pound."

Special discounts, however, were given to Tommy's relatives.

[C]

"Hey, ma," the small boy said. "Gimme this toy, okay?"

"Not now," his teenage mother replied. "Later."

The cherub took a Magnum from his pocket and shot his mother's head off. "Nobody disagrees with me, baby," he said loudly.

Meanwhile, in another part of town, people slipped on the blood that was flowing through the streets, fell down, and broke their necks.

An atomic explosion in a delicatessen on 14th Street destroyed all of Pittsburgh.

Nineteen people in all corners of the world choked simultaneously on peach pits.

The New York State Police decimated the entire city of Albany, mistaking it for a dope dealer.

The San Andreas Fault collapsed, destroying all of California and part of New Mexico, and turning Nevada into a gigantic lake.

Males in Detroit, Michigan, experienced a previously-unheard-of phenomenon known as "spontaneous castration."

People of middle age suddenly suffered unexplained attacks of crib death.

Those unaffected by these strange happenings looked the other way. These individuals were struck in the back of the head by flying or falling objects, usually bodies.

The nature of this series of events is unknown. Suggested hypotheses include: acts of God, cosmic punishment, a long string of bad luck, a monstrous conspiracy carried out to obtain billions in insurance restitutions, a political struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, a work of surrealistic art, a large-scale real-life drama, and a hallucination in the mind of Allah.

☐ None of the above

"Mommy," a small boy said. "Can I have this water pistol?"

Suddenly, before his mother could answer, the sun went nova.

Alan Brennert sold his first story in 1973. Since then he has published a novel, *City of Masques*, and is currently writing two TV movies for ABC. He has a second novel, *The Floating Island*, in the works.

Mirror Watch

By ALAN BRENNERT

Their cries were a singsong in the night, dipping in and out of hearing with a knowing, tuneless rhythm, strung against and sometimes hidden by the quilted darkness. Dia sat on the voyeur's side of the two-way mirror that formed half the east wall of the room, gray eyes fixed but not focused on the pens and beds and cribs that lay whitely in the adjoining room. The cries were infrequent, soft, and muted, and for them there was no comfort.

Dia watched, her flat, depthless face painted by the sallow light of the small reading lamp on the table next to her. A book rested in her lap and periodically she attempted a return to it, failing each time. The fireless gaze wandered always back to the room, to the beds, to the children: some sleeping, some not-sleeping, some never-sleeping.

Light slanted into the room from behind her, bleached white light pooling in the glass wall but not spilling over into the room beyond, trapped by the thin sheen of silver that protected the voyeur. The light narrowed to a slit and was gone as a voice, soft and toneless but not a whisper, grew from the shadows. "What are they hearing tonight?"

Dia did not turn. "They don't 'hear' anything," she said quietly, not moving. "They feel. And if I knew what they were feeling, don't you think I'd stop?"

Arthur Levitt moved up beside the seated Dia, hands on the table, leaning into the darkness. "Maybe not," he said, jaundiced light outlining an improbable profile. "You can't rid yourself of all feeling. You can't want to, can you?"

Dia ignored him as much as it is possible to ignore someone to whom you are speaking. "Mysticism, maybe," she considered. "No consciousness. No senses, emotions. Maybe then they'd stop that damned . . . singing . . ."

Levitt leaned deeper into the darkness, almost touching the glass of the wall. Silent a moment as he listened, as the trace of a whimper fell on the air. "Is that how you hear it?" he said after a while. "A song?"

She glanced obliquely at him. "How do you hear it?"

He pursed his lips thoughtfully, thick wide lips that folded fleshily into one another. "Me?" he said. "I hear it as a—voice. Almost. Not quite, but the beginnings; a start. Testing itself, making itself heard but not understood. Someday—" He seated himself on the edge of the table. "Someday they're going to make us listen."

Dia smiled weakly. "And what are they going to tell us?"

Levitt drew a short breath. "What we're like, probably," he said. "What we are, really, deep within ourselves. Without the masks, individually and collectively." He paused briefly. "That will probably be when we'll kill them."

She shot him a glance edged in anger, and in the room beyond, a baby gasped. "Why should we kill them?" she demanded. "Why can't we just . . . keep them here?"

"That isn't murder?" He studied her. "Maybe you don't think it is, at that."

"It's a kind of life."

"It's a kind of death. You should know that. I should know that. We're dead now, or dying. If they have to spend the rest of their lives in a faceless government training school, so do we."

She returned her gaze to the windowed wall. "Had no

right. Getting themselves born," she said, quietly, to herself.

"Birth is no indictment," Levitt corrected her. "Normal babies? Well, welcome into the world, no matter you're overcrowding it as it is. Normal babies can't *feel* two weeks out of the womb. Newborn empaths, though: different matter. Dangerous. Dangerous to whom, I've wondered? To society?" He shrugged lightly. "Maybe. In ten, twelve years, maybe, when they can put into words what they're feeling, when they can tell good from evil. Or *our* good from *their* evil. But now?" He laughed, and the laugh rippled across his fleshy face. "Dangerous to their parents, yes. That's simply lovely. Fathers, mothers, *forced* to love them; they'd be like little squalling mirrors, reflective of their parents. Don't give them the love they need, the whole neighborhood would know." He nodded toward the children. "That's how we got custody of them so easily. People don't *really* want to see themselves in their children."

Dia spied a pudgy hand dipping above and below a slat of a crib in bouncing excitation. "Lora's got herself wrapped up in the covers again," she said, and moved to the door next to the half-wall of the mirror. As she disappeared through it, Levitt watched for her on the other side. Through the wall he could see her making her way around the maze of cribs and beds and cots on which were sprawled children of uniformly early age, the youngest being no more than six days old and the oldest nearing two years.

Two years; had it been that long? Somewhere in there was the first, the Wilkins boy; already the child was nearing a tentative articulation. It would not be long before he began to speak sense: more sense than generations tumbling back from the present.

And then they would kill him. Or keep him here, forever, much the same thing. And the others.

How many others, though? A few dozen cases of spontaneous mutation, or . . . an entire generation?

Dia neared the pink-elephanted crib where the squirming infant lay. Her eyes were wan and vacant as she reached into the crib, her features no more than hasty, ill-prepared additions to an empty face and her hair tousled and mousy. She was by no means even a "handsome" woman and she knew it. Levitt watched as she put a hand out to the girl and the child began to cry. Softly, a lonely whine strung against the darkness like the last threads of a dying soul. Dia's eyes wid-

ened and she froze, not having touched the child. Her gaze fluctuated momentarily to where she knew Levitt must be watching and then back to the crib, where she adjusted the sheets in face of the whimpers and then, calmly but quickly, hurried out of the room, the wail stitched into the night behind her.

She came through the door. Levitt was staring at her with nothing, not even accusation, in his eyes. "She woke," she said, returned to her chair and the vain attempt at reading.

"You didn't touch her," Levitt said tonelessly.

"All right, I didn't touch her." The words on the page blurred, ran.

"What did she feel, the child?"

Dia's hands on the book grew cold. "How the hell should I know? If I knew don't you think I'd—"

"Yes, we've established that. You'd stop. If you could." He was smiling wanly.

She was suddenly irritable, did not care if the children picked it up. "Isn't that my job? Isn't that why I'm here?" And she added, "Isn't that why *you're* here?"

His smile grew wider, splitting the broad, faintly simian face. "Of course," he said, an edge of cynicism to his voice. A constant edge. "The perfect chaperones, the ideal guardians. Bland, competent people. I think you are very dedicated, Dia; I think you would stop whatever it is that they're receiving. If you could."

"If I could," she repeated. "You don't think I can?"

He spread his hands. "Why not? Be a completist, I don't care."

"Might as well," she said quietly. "Might as well be complete at *some*thing—"

"First, of course," Levitt said, "you have to isolate it. Which you haven't, have you?"

She stared at him. "And you have?"

He shrugged, but there was a secret knowing beneath the homeliness. "It's your subconscious, after all. Ask *them*." He nodded toward the bedded children couched in the distant darkness.

She slapped the book shut. "Damn you, anyway! How did you get in here in the first place? Me, the others, easy; plain, bland people, as you said. Damned to aloneness anyway, so why not. The money's good, we're *doing* something. But you —how did you get in? You're seething with—"

He smiled again. "Emotion?" He shook his head. "No, I'm

afraid not. Cynicism is often mistaken for that, but cynicism is cold, detached. Ugliness does that to you. Drives you into your own skull, bleaches from everything else all but a modest bemusement. Not emotion. I belong."

She glanced sharply at her watch and stood up. "Yes, now. Your watch?"

He nodded.

She stood by the chair a long moment, staring into the patchwork darkness, searching for some light. "What is it," she wondered softly, "that they see?" Then she turned and fled into the shadows. Light slanted briefly in as she left, then faded. Both rooms were in darkness once more.

Levitt slid off the edge of the table and stood by the windowed wall, staring into the night hidden with dark stars. Then he sighed, turned, and sat down in the chair still warm from Dia's watch. He tried not to see the mirrors beyond the mirror.

A baby cried.

HERE TODAY AND BEYOND TOMORROW!

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