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Real-Time World

Christopher Priest



REAL-TIME WORLD

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Real-Time World

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Introduction

The science fiction short story is not only surviving, but seems by all accounts to be in a fine state of health. Almost everywhere else, we're sometimes told, the short story form as a viable publishing venture is in disarray, but sf stories roar as lustily as ever. This is an aspect of sf publishing that baffles those who do not know the field well. But why should it be so?

Well, it could be that people enjoy reading sf short stories, if one is to be forgiven a banality this early in a book. Equally important is sf's traditional short story medium, the specialised magazine. (Since 1926 there has always been at least one regularly-issued sf magazine, and for most of this honourable half-century there have been considerably more; even in these inflationary times, when publishers are bedevilled by paper-shortages and readers by huge demands on their pockets, there are around ten regularly-produced sf magazines). Consequently, most sf-writers turn first to the short story form and catch the habit for life, even though they will probably go on to write novels as well. Writers of some other kinds of fiction do not have similar outlets of such high quality and will aim at the outset to establish a reputation as a novelist.

Sf is the literature of imaginative and speculative notions, and these notions come in varying degrees of complexity. In general, the more complex ideas are presented as novels, and the simpler ideas are presented as short stories; both kinds have the capacity to entertain the unique sort of person who is attracted to sf.

Of the stories in this volume, perhaps *Real-Time World* is based on the most complex idea: if an enclosed society were to be deprived of access to news of events in the outside world, would

it matter? Would the members of that society notice? Would they care? If they noticed and cared, how would they replace what was missing? We live ourselves in a society where great premium is placed on information about external events and developments . . . but how much of it directly affects us? While it's of manifest relevance that we learn that Income Tax is to be raised or lowered, what can an individual *do* about it? And why should we be so concerned to hear about a plane-crash in Uruguay, or a landslide in Nepal?

Real-Time World, like several of the other stories in this book, is about the effects of stress on people. In that case it is a particularly sophisticated and refined form of mental stress; in *The Run* (which was my first-published story, presented here in all its pristine melodrama) it is a more obvious stress brought on by threatening behaviour. I do not care to speculate about the emotional and psychological stresses that must have dramatised the childhood and adolescence of Todd Alborne in *The Head and the Hand*, for his reaction to them when an adult, as described in the story, still appals me.

Not all the stories are so sombre in tone. *Breeding Ground* is a comedy, intended to make light of an irrational horror, about the dilemma that confronts a man who finds the thing he most wants surrounded by the thing he most dreads. (He wins). And *The Perihelion Man* was an attempt to write a kind of story I had never done before (and haven't done since): the man who gets in a spaceship to go somewhere to do something. (He wins too).

Nor are my protagonists all winners. Would you say that my character Maast in *Fire Storm* was a winner or a loser? I'm still not sure, even if he does get what he appears to want. It seems to me that this particular story contains threads of many of my themes in sf . . . but don't feel you should miss the others, because I might be wrong.

Being wrong is one of the pleasures of writing sf. Wouldn't it have been dull if some sf-writer really had predicted the Apollo missions in every detail? Down to the reading of Genesis on Apollo 8, and Armstrong's homilies as he created television history? No sf-writer, thank goodness, would have even tried to get away with that, and no sf-reader would have let him even if he had so erred. I believe that sf should plough its traditional furrow of unpredictiveness (and unpredictability), and that's what I think you'll find here: a bookful of wrong guesses.

Christopher Priest

1

The Head and the Hand

On that morning at Racine House we were taking exercise in the grounds. There had been a frost overnight, and the grass lay white and brittle. The sky was unclouded, and the sun threw long blue shadows. Our breath cast clouds of vapour behind us. There was no sound, no wind, no movement. The park was ours, and we were alone.

Our walks in the mornings had a clearly defined route, and as we came to the eastern end of the path at the bottom of the long sloping lawn I prepared for the turn, pressing down hard on the controlling handles at the back of the carriage. I am a large man, and well-muscled, but the combined weight of the invalid carriage and the master was almost beyond the limit of my strength.

That day the master was in a difficult mood. Though before we set out he had clearly stated that I was to wheel him as far as the disused summer lodge, as I tried to lift him round he waved his head from side to side.

'No, Lasken!' he said irritably. 'To the lake today. I want to see the swans.'

I said to him: 'Of course, sir.'

I swung the carriage back into the direction in which we had been travelling, and continued with our walk. I waited for him to say something to me, for it was unusual that he would give me untempered instructions without qualifying them a few moments later with some more intimate remark. Our relationship was a formal one, but memories of what had once existed between us still affected our behaviour and attitudes. Though we were of a

similar age and social background, Todd's career had affected us considerably. Never again could there be any kind of equality between us.

I waited, and in the end he turned his head and said: 'The park is beautiful today, Edward. This afternoon we must ride through it with Elizabeth, before the weather gets warmer. The trees are so stark, so black.'

'Yes sir.' I said, glancing at the woods to our right. When he bought the house, the first action he had taken was to have all the evergreen trees felled, and the remainder sprayed so that their greenery would be inhibited. With the passage of years they had regained their growth, and now the master would spend the summer months inside the house, the windows shuttered and the curtains drawn. Only with the coming of autumn would he return to the open air, obsessively watching the orange and brown leaves dropping to the ground and swirling across the lawns.

The lake appeared before us as we rounded the edge of the wood. The grounds dropped down to it in a shallow and undulating incline from the house, which was above us and to our left.

A hundred yards from the water's edge I turned my head and looked towards the house, and saw the tall figure of Elizabeth moving down towards us, her long maroon dress sweeping across the grass.

Knowing he would not see her, I said nothing to Todd.

We stopped at the edge of the lake. In the night a crust of ice had formed on its surface.

'The swans, Edward. Where are they?'

He moved his head to the right, and placed his lips on one of the switches there. At once, the batteries built into the base of the carriage turned the motors of the servos, and the backrest slid upwards, bringing him into a position that was almost upright.

He moved his head from side to side, a frown creasing his eyebrow-less face.

'Go and find their nests, Lasken. I must see them today.'

'It's the ice, sir,' I said. 'It has probably driven them from the water.'

I heard the rustle of silk on frosted grass, and turned. Elizabeth stood a few yards behind us, holding an envelope in her hands.

She held it up, and looked at me with her eyebrows raised. I nodded silently: that is the one. She smiled at me quickly. The master would not yet know that she was there. The outer mem-

brane of his ears had been removed, rendering his hearing unfocused and undirectional.

She swept past me in the peremptory manner she knew he approved of, and stood before him. He appeared unsurprised to see her.

'There's a letter, Todd,' she said.

'Later,' he said without looking at it. 'Lasken can deal with it. I have no time now.'

'It's from Gaston I think. It looks like his stationery.'

'Read it to me.'

He swung his head backwards sharply. It was his instruction to me: move out of earshot. Obediently I stepped away to a place where I knew he could not see me or hear me.

Elizabeth bent down and kissed him on his lips.

'Todd, whatever it is, please don't do it.'

'Read it to me,' he said again.

She slit the envelope with her thumb and pulled out a sheet of thin white paper, folded in three. I knew what the letter contained; Gaston had read it to me over the telephone the day before. He and I had arranged the details, and we knew that no higher price could be obtained, even for Todd. There had been difficulties with the television concessions, and for a while it had looked as if the French government was going to intervene.

Gaston's letter was a short one. It said that Todd's popularity had never been higher, and that the Théâtre Alhambra and its consortium had offered eight million francs for another appearance. I listened to Elizabeth's voice as she read, marvelling at the emotionless monotone of her articulation. She had warned me earlier that she did not think she was going to be able to read the letter to him.

When she'd finished, Todd asked her to read it again. She did this, then placed the open letter in front of him, brushed her lips against his face and walked away from him. As she passed me she laid a hand on my arm for a moment, then continued on up towards the house. I watched her for a few seconds, seeing her slim beauty accentuated by the sunlight that fell sideways across her face, and strands of her hair blown behind by the wind.

The master waved his head from side to side.

'Lasken! Lasken!'

I went back to him.

'Do you see this?'

I picked it up and glanced at it.

'I shall write to him of course,' I said. 'It is out of the question.'

'No, no, I must consider. We must always consider. I have so much at stake.'

I kept my expression steady.

'But it is impossible. You can give no more performances!'

'There is a way, Edward,' he said, in as gentle a voice as I had ever heard him use. 'I must find that way.'

I caught sight of a water-fowl a few yards from us, in the reeds at the edge of the lake. It waddled out on to the ice, confused by the frozen surface. I took one of the long poles from the side of the carriage and broke a section of the ice. The bird slithered across the ice and flew away, terrified by the noise.

I walked back to Todd.

'There. If there is some open water, the swans will return.'

The expression on his face was agitated.

'The Théâtre Alhambra,' he said. 'What shall we do?'

'I will speak to your solicitor. It is an outrage that the theatre should approach you. They know that you cannot go back.'

'But eight million francs.'

'The money does not matter. You said that yourself once.'

'No, it is not the money. Nor the public. It is everything.'

We waited by the lake for the swans, as the sun rose higher in the sky. I was exhilarated by the pale colours of the park, by the quiet and the calm. It was an aesthetic, sterile reaction, for the house and its grounds had oppressed me from the start. Only the transient beauty of the morning – a frozen, fragile countenance – stirred something in me.

The master had lapsed into silence, and had returned the backrest to the horizontal position he found most relaxing. Though his eyes were closed I knew he would not be asleep.

I walked away from him, out of his earshot, and strolled around the perimeter of the lake, always keeping a watch for movement on the carriage. I wondered if he would be able to resist the offer from the Théâtre Alhambra, fearing that if he did there would be no greater attraction.

The time was right . . . he had not been seen in public for nearly four and a half years. The mood of the public was right . . . for the media had recently returned their interest to him, criticising his many imitators and demanding his return. None of this was lost on the master. There was only one Todd Alborne, and only he could have gone so far. No one could compete with him.

Everything was right, and only the participation of the master was needed to complete it.

The electric klaxon I had fitted to the carriage sounded. Looking back at him across the ice I saw that he had moved his face to the switch. I turned back, and went to him.

'I want to see Elizabeth,' he said.

'You know what she will say.'

'Yes. But I must speak to her.'

I turned the carriage round, and began the long and difficult return up the slope to the house.

As we left the side of the lake I saw white birds flying low in the distance, headed away from the house. I hoped that Todd had not seen them.

He looked from side to side as we moved past the wood. I saw on the branches the new buds that would burst in the next few weeks; I think he saw only the bare black twigs, the stark geometry of the naked trees.

In the house I took him to his study, and lifted his body from the carriage he used for outside expeditions to the motorised one in which he moved about the house. He spent the rest of the day with Elizabeth, and I saw her only when she came down to collect for him the meals I prepared. In those moments we had time only to exchange glances, to intertwine fingers, to kiss lightly. She would say nothing of what he was thinking.

He retired early and Elizabeth with him, going to the room next to his, sleeping alone as she had done for five years.

When she was sure he was asleep, she left her bed and came to mine. We made love at once. Afterwards we lay together in the dark, our hands clasped possessively; only then would she tell me what she thought his decision would be.

'He's going to do it,' she said. 'I haven't seen him as excited as this for years.'

I have known Todd Alborne since we were both eighteen. Our families had known one another, and chance brought us together one year during a European holiday. Though we did not become close friends immediately, I found his company fascinating and on our return to England we stayed in touch with each other.

The fascination he held over me was not one I admired, but neither could I resist it: he possessed a fanatical and passionate dedication to what he was doing, and once started he would be deterred by nothing. He conducted several disastrous love-affairs,

and twice lost most of his money in unsuccessful business ventures. But he had a general aimlessness that disturbed me; I felt that once pressed into a direction he could control, he would be able to exploit his unusual talents.

It was his sudden and unexpected fame that separated us. No one had anticipated it, least of all Todd. Yet when he recognised its potential, he embraced it readily.

I was not with him when it began, though I saw him soon after. He told me what happened, and though it differs from the popular anecdote I believe it.

He was drinking with some friends when an accident with a knife occurred. One of his companions had been cut badly, and had fainted. During the commotion that followed, a stranger made a wager with Todd that he would not voluntarily inflict a wound on his own body.

Todd slashed the skin of his forearm, and collected his money. The stranger offered to double the stake if Todd would amputate a finger.

Placing his left hand on the table in front of him, Todd removed his index finger. A few minutes later, with no further encouragement from the stranger – who by this time had left – Todd cut off another finger. The following day a television company had picked up the story, and Todd was invited to the studio to relate what had happened. During the live transmission, and against the wishes of the interviewer, Todd repeated the operation.

It was the reaction to this first broadcast – a wave of prurient shock from the public, and an hysterical condemnation in the media – that revealed to Todd the potential in such a display of self-mutilation.

Finding a promoter, he commenced a tour of Europe, performing his act to paying audiences only.

It was at this point – seeing his arrangements for publicity, and learning of the sums of money he was confident of earning – that I made the effort of dissociating myself from him. Purposely, I isolated myself from news of his exploits and would take no interest in the various public stunts he performed. It was the element of ritual in what he did that sickened me, and his native flair for showmanship only made him the more offensive to me.

It was a year after this alienation that we met again. It was he who sought me out, and though I resisted him at first I was unable to maintain the distance I desired.

I learned that in the intervening period he had married.

At first I was repelled by Elizabeth, for I thought that she loved Todd for his obsession, in the way the blood-hungry public loved him. But as I grew to know her better I realised that she saw herself in some messianic role. It was then that I understood her to be as vulnerable as Todd – though in an entirely different way – and I found myself agreeing to work for Todd and to do for him whatever he requested. At first I refused to assist him with the mutilations, but later did as he asked. My change of mind in this instance was initiated by Elizabeth.

The condition of his body when I started to work for him was so bad that he was almost entirely crippled. Though at first he had had several organs grafted back on to his body after mutilation, such operations could be carried out only a limited number of times, and while healing, prevented further performances.

His left arm below the elbow had been removed; his left leg was almost intact beyond the two removed toes. His right leg was intact. One of his ears had been removed, and he had been scalped. All fingers but the thumb and index on his right hand had been removed.

As a result of these injuries he was incapable of administering the amputations himself, and in addition to the various assistants he employed for his act he required me to operate the mutilating apparatus during the actual performances.

He attested a disclaimer form for the injuries to which I was to be an accessory, and his career continued.

And it went on, between spells for recovery, for another two years. In spite of the apparent contempt he had for his body, Todd bought the most expensive medical supervision he could find, and the recovery from each amputation was strictly observed before another performance.

But the human body is finite, and his eventual retirement was inevitable.

At his final performance, his genital organs were removed amid the greatest storm of publicity and outrage he had known. Afterwards, he made no further public appearance, and spent a long spell of convalescence in a private nursing-home. Elizabeth and I stayed with him, and when he bought Racine House fifty miles from Paris, we went there with him.

And from that day we had played out the masque; each pretending to the others that his career had reached its climax, each knowing that inside the limbless, earless, hairless, castrated

man there was a flame burning still for its final extinguishment.

And outside the gates of Racine House, Todd's private world waited for him. And he knew they waited, and Elizabeth and I knew they waited.

Meanwhile our life went on, and he was the master.

There was an interval of three weeks between my confirming to Gaston that Todd was to make another appearance and the actual night itself. There was much to be done.

While we left the publicity arrangements to Gaston, Todd and I began the job of designing and building the equipment for the show. This was a process that in the past had been one of extreme distaste to me. It wrought an unpleasant tension between Elizabeth and myself, for she would not allow me to tell her about the equipment.

This time, though, there was no such strain between us. Halfway through the work she asked me about the apparatus I was building, and that night, after Todd had fallen asleep, I took her down to the workshop. For ten minutes she walked from one instrument to another, testing the smoothness of the mechanism and the sharpness of the blades.

Finally, she looked at me without expression, then nodded.

I contacted Todd's former assistants, and confirmed with them that they would be present at the performance. Once or twice I telephoned Gaston, and learned of the wave of speculation that was anticipating Todd's return.

As for the master himself, he was taken with a burst of energy and excitement that stretched to its limits the prosthetic machinery which surrounded him. He seemed unable to sleep, and several nights would call for Elizabeth. For this period she did not come to my room, though I often visited her for an hour or two. One night Todd called her while I was there, and I lay in bed listening to him talk to her, his voice unnaturally high-pitched, though never uncontrolled or over-excited.

When the day of the performance arrived I asked him if he wanted to drive to the Alhambra in our specially built car, or to use the carriage and horses that I knew he preferred for public appearances. He chose the latter.

We departed early, knowing that in addition to the distance we had to cover there would be several delays caused by admirers.

We placed Todd at the front of the carriage, next to the driver, sitting him up in the seat I had built for him. Elizabeth and I sat

behind, her hand resting lightly on my leg. Every so often, Todd would half turn his head and speak to us. On these occasions, either she or I would lean forward to acknowledge him and reply.

Once we were on the main road into Paris we encountered many large groups of admirers. Some cheered or called; some stood in silence. Todd acknowledged them all, but when one woman tried to scramble up into the carriage he became agitated and nervous and screamed at me to get her away from him.

The only place where he came into close contact with any of his admirers was during our stop to change horses. Then he spoke volubly and amiably, though afterwards he was noticeably tired.

Our arrival at the Théâtre Alhambra had been planned in great detail, and the police had cordoned off the crowd. There was a broad channel left free through which Todd could be wheeled. As the carriage halted the crowd began to cheer, and the horses became nervous.

I wheeled Todd in through the stage door, responding in spite of myself to the hysteria of the crowds. Elizabeth was close behind us. Todd took the reception well and professionally, smiling round from side to side, unable to acknowledge the acclaim in any other way. He appeared not to notice the small but determined and vociferous section of the crowd chanting the slogans that they bore on placards.

Once inside his dressing-room we were able to relax for a while. The show was not scheduled to start for another two and a half hours. After a short nap, Todd was bathed by Elizabeth, and then dressed in his stage costume.

Twenty minutes before he was due to give his performance, one of the female staff of the theatre came into the dressing-room and presented him with a bouquet of flowers. Elizabeth took them from the woman and laid them uncertainly before him, knowing well his dislike of flowers.

'Thank you,' he said to the woman. 'Flowers. What beautiful colours.'

Gaston came in fifteen minutes later, accompanied by the manager of the Alhambra. Both men shook hands with me, Gaston kissed Elizabeth on her cheek, and the manager tried to strike up a conversation with Todd. Todd did not reply, and a little later I noticed that the manager was weeping silently. Todd stared at us all.

It had been decided by Todd that there was to be no special

ceremony surrounding this performance. There were to be no speeches, no public remarks from Todd. No interviews to be granted. The act on the stage would follow carefully the instructions he had dictated to me, and the rehearsals that the other assistants had been following for the last week.

He turned to Elizabeth, and put his face up towards her. She kissed him tenderly, and I turned away.

After nearly a minute he said: 'All right, Lasken. I'm ready.'

I took the handle of his carriage and wheeled him out of the dressing-room and down the corridor towards the wings of the stage.

We heard a man's voice talking in French of Todd, and a great roar of applause from the audience. The muscles of my stomach contracted. The expression on Todd's face did not change.

Two assistants came forward, and lifted Todd into his harness. This was connected by two thin wires to a pulley in the flies, and when operated by one of the assistants in the wings would move Todd around the stage. When he was secure, his four false limbs were strapped in place.

He nodded to me, and I prepared myself. For a second, I saw the expression in Elizabeth's eyes. Todd was not looking in our direction, but I made no response to her.

I stepped on to the stage. A woman screamed, then the whole audience rose to its feet. My heart raced.

The equipment was already on the stage, covered with heavy velvet curtains. I walked to the centre of the stage, and bowed to the audience. Then I walked from one piece of apparatus to another, removing the curtains.

As each piece was revealed the audience roared its approval. The voice of the manager crackled over the P.A. system, imploring them to return to their seats. As I had done at previous performances, I stood still until the audience was seated once more. Each movement was provocative.

I finished revealing the equipment. To my eye it was ugly and utilitarian, but the audience relished the appearance of the razor-sharp blades.

I walked to the footlights.

'*Mesdames. Messieurs.*' Silence fell abruptly. '*Le maître.*'

I moved downstage, holding out my hand in the direction of Todd. I tried purposely to disregard the audience. I could see Todd in the wings, hanging in his harness beside Elizabeth. He

was not talking to her or looking at her. His head was bent forward, and he was concentrating on the sound from the audience.

They were still in silence . . . the anticipatory motionlessness of the voyeur.

Seconds passed, and still Todd waited. Somewhere in the audience a voice spoke quietly. Abruptly, the audience roared.

It was Todd's moment. He nodded to the assistant, who wound the pulley ropes and propelled Todd out on to the stage.

The movement was eerie and unnatural. He floated on the wire so that his false legs just scraped the canvas of the stage. His false arms hung limply at his side. Only his head was alert, greeting and acknowledging the audience.

I had expected them to applaud . . . but at his appearance they subsided again into silence. I had forgotten about that in the intervening years. It was the silences that had always appalled me.

The pulley-assistant propelled Todd to a couch standing to the right of the stage. I helped him lie down on it. Another assistant – who was a qualified medical doctor – came on to the stage, and carried out a brief examination.

He wrote something on a piece of paper, and handed it to me. Then he went to the front of the stage and made his statement to the audience.

I have examined the master. He is fit. He is sane. He is in full possession of his senses, and knows what he is about to undertake. I have signed a statement to this effect.

The pulley-assistant raised Todd once more, and propelled him around the stage, from one piece of equipment to another. When he had inspected them all, he nodded his agreement.

At the front of the stage, in the centre, I unstrapped his false legs. As they fell away from his body, one or two men in the audience gasped.

Todd's arms were removed.

I then pulled forward one of the pieces of equipment: a long, white-covered table with a large mirror above it.

I swung Todd's torso on to the table, then removed the harness and signalled for it to be lifted away. I positioned Todd so that he was lying with his head towards the audience, and with his whole body visible to them in the mirror. I was working amidst silence. I did not look towards the audience. I did not look towards the wings. I was perspiring. Todd said nothing to me.

When Todd was in the position he required, he nodded to me

and I turned towards the audience, bowing and indicating that the performance was about to commence. There was a ripple of applause, soon finished.

I stood back, and watched Todd without reaction. He was feeling the audience again. In a performance consisting of one solitary action, and a mute one at that, for best effect his timing had to be accurate. There was only one piece of apparatus on the stage which was to be used this evening; the others were there for the effect of their presence.

Todd and I both knew which one it was to be: I would wheel it over at the appropriate time.

The audience was silent again, but restless. I felt that it was poised critically; one movement would explode it into reaction. Todd nodded to me.

I walked again from one piece of apparatus to the next. On each one I put my hand to the blade, as if feeling its sharpness. By the time I had been to each one, the audience was ready. I could feel it, and I knew Todd could.

I went back to the apparatus Todd had selected: a guillotine made from tubular aluminium and with a blade of finest stainless steel. I trundled it over to his table, and connected it with the brackets for that purpose. I tested its solidity, and made a visual check that the release mechanism would work properly.

Todd was positioned now so that his head overhung the edge of the table, and was directly underneath the blade. The guillotine was so constructed that it did not obscure the view of his body in the mirror.

I removed his costume.

He was naked. The audience gasped when they saw his scars, but returned to silence.

I took the wire loop of the release mechanism and, as Todd had instructed me, tied it tightly around the thick meat of his tongue. To take up the slack of the wire, I adjusted it at the side of the apparatus.

I leaned over him, and asked if he was ready. He nodded.

'Edward,' he said indistinctly. 'Come closer.'

I leaned forward so that my face was near his. To do this I had to pass my own neck under the guillotine blade. The audience approved of this action.

'What is it?' I said.

'I know, Edward. About you and Elizabeth.'

I looked into the wings, where she was still standing.

I said: 'And you still want to . . . ?'

He nodded again, this time more violently. The wire release on his tongue tightened and the mechanism clicked open. He nearly caught me in the apparatus. I jumped away as the blade plummeted down. I turned from him, looking desperately into the wings at Elizabeth as the first screams from the audience filled the theatre.

Elizabeth stepped out on to the stage. She was looking at Todd. I went to her.

Todd's torso lay on the table. His heart was still beating, for blood spurted rhythmically in thick gouts from his severed neck. His hairless head swung from the apparatus. Where the wire gripped his tongue, it had wrenched it nearly from his throat. His eyes were still open.

We turned and faced the audience. The change that had come over them was total; in under five seconds they had panicked. A few people had fainted; the rest were standing. The noise of their shouting was unbelievable. They moved towards the doors. None looked at the stage. One man swung his fist at another; was knocked down from behind. A woman was having hysterics, tearing at her clothes. No one paid her any attention. I heard a shot, and ducked instinctively, pulling Elizabeth down with me. Women screamed; men shouted. I heard the P.A. click on, but no voice came through. Abruptly, the doors of the auditorium swung open simultaneously on all sides, and armed riot-police burst in. It had been planned carefully. As the police attacked them, the crowd fought back. I heard another shot, then several more in rapid succession.

I took Elizabeth by the hand, and led her from the stage.

In the dressing-room we watched through a window as the police attacked the crowds in the street. Many people were shot. Tear-gas was released, a helicopter hovered overhead.

We stood together in silence, Elizabeth crying. We were obliged to stay within the safety of the theatre building for another twelve hours. The next day we returned to Racine House, and the first leaves were spreading.

2

Fire Storm

The city lay in the valley, quiet in the late-winter sun.

Captain Maast looked at it through his binoculars, his trained and experienced eyes missing nothing of importance.

The refugees were nearly clear. The route they had been directed to, through a low pass on the north-eastern side, would get the last of them away before nightfall. Maast looked towards the pass, but could detect no movement. Refugees were a part of this business he could do without. There were bound to be many casualties among the old and frail. The days were getting warmer, but the wind at night was bitter.

It was better this way, than that they remained in the city. Maast was conservative in his methods.

At his side stood Lieutenant Andreek, his young aide.

Andreek said, 'Lt Ruud reports spasmodic resistance in the docks still, sir.' Around his neck hung the lead from his headphones, plugging into the large transceiver kit on his back.

'Right.'

Maast swung his binoculars towards the docks.

A broad river flowed through the south-eastern quarter of the city, and here the former inhabitants had built several shallow-draught docks. In the warehouses adjoining, the invading soldiers had found grain, beer, machine-tools, timber, bales of wool, tyres, nylon ropes, electric batteries, sewer-pipes. . . .

All these, and a hard-core of determined last-ditch defenders.

A ferocious and bloody skirmish had broken out, and there had been casualties on both sides. At this stage it was vital that no serious damage be done to the city, and Maast had withdrawn

the majority of his troops from the area. Now he had only two hundred men down there, and the situation remained unresolved.

From here, the docks seemed quiet. Four thousand feet above the city, there were no sounds of a fracas.

'Call up Miils,' he said to the Lieutenant. 'I want to know if there's any news yet.'

Andreek worked the tuner on the kit with the long, chromi-um handle.

A voice came through tinnily, amplified through the minute grille on the top of the transceiver.

'Miils, sir.'

'What developments?' Maast said.

'The council's still in session, sir. They're taking a meal at the moment, but they anticipate another three hours.'

'What about the artillery?'

'It's on its way now. We can't let you have much, but it will be sufficient if the decision is positive.'

Maast grunted. 'Who's in charge of it?'

A pause. Then, 'Taaruk, sir.'

'Good.'

'Air cover will be on stand-by as of 72 hours from now.'

'No sooner?'

'No, sir.' Respectfully.

'Hold on.' Maast turned away from the transceiver on Andreek's back, and lifted his binoculars again. The horizon, a line of grey bleak hills on the opposite side of the valley, was blank. There were no buildings on them anywhere. The edges of the city seemed to follow the natural floor of the valley, but not to expand elsewhere. The city was like a layer of lumpy soup, coagulating in the bottom of an oval dish.

He said to Andreek, 'I want an immediate weapons-count. Leave the kit with me, and report back.'

Andreek said, 'Yes, sir.'

He slipped through the shoulder-harness, and laid it on the ground. He saluted perfunctorily to Maast's back, and walked quickly to the encampment area.

Maast picked up the microphone.

'Miils.'

'Sir?'

'I don't care where you get them from, but I want rocket-launchers. As many as you can find.'

Doubtfully, 'Yes, sir.'

'And a meteorology report for the next eight days.' Maast glanced at the sky. 'I want to know how long this weather's going to hold.'

'Anything else?'

'No. Stay where I can get you, and call me as soon as you know anything.'

He snapped off, and clicked the tuner downwards.

'Ruud.'

'Sir?'

'Get back here when you can, and abandon the docks. We're wasting time there now.'

He flipped off the communicator button again, and disconnected the whole kit. With strong arms he lifted it, and swung it across his broad shoulders.

He walked back to where his temporary HQ was being erected; a low marquee that would hold him and his aide, and the equipment with which he would direct the destruction of the city.

The tent was about three hundred yards from the cliff-edge where Maast had stood, and he covered the distance in just under two minutes. Pushing past the ordinary soldiers hurrying to get the marquee secured, he lifted the flap and went inside.

'Andreek!' he bellowed.

There was no one inside, and Maast swore. A soldier said, 'He's setting up an arsenal, sir.'

'Where?'

'Further along the ridge, sir. He said to tell you.'

Maast put down the transceiver kit, and went back into the open air. He looked in the direction the soldier had pointed, and saw Andreek still on his way across to where many soldiers were unloading crates from a VTOL craft.

He turned back. 'Who's your officer?'

The soldier said, 'Major Wuulsen, sir.'

'Get him.'

The man scurried away, and Maast went back inside the tent. The men outside, evidently spurred by his presence, finished the work they were doing and moved away.

At the back of the tent, Maast found the crate he was looking for and wrenched off the lid.

Inside were many different electronic instruments, neatly stowed and bulwarked against handling damage. Wood-wool surrounded each piece, tightly compressed. Pulling it away,

Maast took out the instruments one by one, and laid them on the stunted grass. Up here, where the HQ had been laid, the moors were open to the sky and unprotected, and nothing could grow except this tough, sharp-edged grass.

A Major came in, and saluted.

'Major Wuulsen?'

'Sir.'

'Major, I want you to form an immediate reconstitution party. Take as many men as you'll need, and get down there straight away. You won't have much trouble, the city's in good order.'

'Sir?'

'What is it?'

'The council has already given a negative?'

Maast threw aside a pile of wood-wool with such vehemence that the Major jumped nervously.

'No. But I'm working on the basis that it will.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Listen, I want that city like it was three days ago. I want everything in order. Everything, do you understand?'

The Major said, 'Everything, sir.'

'I want all the street-lamps on, and as many private houses and public buildings lit as you can manage. I want every power-station working. I want the gas-holders full, the sewers flowing, the radio-stations transmitting. Have you done reconstitution work before?'

'Yes, sir. At Malgasster.'

'Malgasster. There was trouble there, wasn't there?'

The Major said, a little uncomfortably. 'That was where the nuclear power-station wasn't primed properly.'

'Was that your fault?'

'No, sir.'

'I'll give you a day. Report back every four hours. Now get on with it.'

The Major saluted smartly, and Maast turned away. He had no time for the protocols of army discipline.

On an afterthought he said, 'Wuulsen. You'd better keep away from the docks if you can. There's a spot of bother there.'

'Yes, sir.'

Exactly a day later, Maast walked back to the edge of the plateau. Superficially, everything about the city was as he had seen it before. The sun was a little brighter, and there was a

steady breeze blowing. Meteorology warned him of a cyclonic depression approaching, but he had at least three days.

The pocket of resistance in the docks had been evacuated after Major Wuulsen's men had returned to camp. They had been unable to prevent the defenders from stoking up the boilers on one of the steam-driven ships moored at the harbour. According to Wuulsen's calculations the boiler would probably blow in an hour or two. Maast looked down at the ship, laying quietly at berth. In its hold was a quantity of pure potassium. If the ship sank, half the docks would go up.

It was already too late to do anything about it.

Lieutenant Ruud and his men had returned to the HQ the previous evening, and had taken a detachment of artillery, twelve cannon, almost half of the available weapons, around to a hillside on the northern fringe of the city. Lt Taaruk was in charge of the remaining thirteen cannon on the south side.

More was known about the city.

Its name was Anthus, and it had housed about a million citizens. Its shape was an irregular oval, three miles wide at its broadest, and five miles long. It had two parks, about seven hundred shops and stores of varying sizes, one nuclear power station, seven coal-fired power stations, three oil-fired power stations, and one small hydro-electric station on the northern outskirts. It had a small system of underground railways, all electrified, and a surface-level system that was hauled by steam engines. In the streets of the city there were many hundreds of thousands of vehicles with internal-combustion engines. Gas, presumably natural as there was no gas-making plant anywhere in or around the city, was piped throughout the city and many houses, particularly in the industrial sections, were heated and lit by it.

In addition to this there were two museums, one concert hall, one library, about forty police-stations, twenty-seven main fire-prevention stations, and . . .

Maast was not interested.

Wuulsen's men had done a reasonable job on the city. Only in one place had a fire been started by the rearguard of stalwarts that had not been extinguishable. During the night it had burned itself out. Maast looked at it without expression through his glasses. A minor blemish.

Anthus had probably been a good city to live in.

Maast turned, and found that Andreek had come up behind him, and was now standing quietly at his elbow.

'Where are you going to start, sir?' he said.

Maast looked back at the city.

'I'm undecided. But I think the docks——'

'The ship?'

'Yes. It's due to go any time now.'

Andreek said, 'You still haven't had word from the council?'

Maast lowered his binoculars. 'No. I don't want to wait much longer.'

'What are you going to do, sir?'

'Wait. What else?'

Andreek said, 'I thought you might like to see Ruud's artillery emplacements. We could take the VTOL across the valley.'

'Yes. We'll go now.'

The VTOL aircraft circled slowly over the docks. It was the only aircraft in the sky, and Maast wished for the hundredth time that it could be converted efficiently into carrying arms.

The aircraft was a wedge-shaped machine, built for a combination of capacity and manoeuvrability. In its belly there were four massive down-pointing jets, and alongside, two horizontally-mounted engines provided the forward thrust. As a military machine, it was good for little more than carrying a massive load a long way fast. It had no combative use, except, as Maast had once sourly put it, for standing at the hatch and throwing H.E. overboard.

Maast had ordered the pilot to hover above the ship, so he could watch its end from the air. He had no particular desire to see Ruud's emplacements, beyond the minor luxury of assuring himself the man would be able to do a competent job when called upon.

Suddenly, Andreek said, 'The boiler's gone!'

The deck of the ship was shrouded in white vapour, pouring out from many parts of the lower hull. Maast watched keenly. He said to the pilot, 'What height are we?'

'Four thousand feet, sir.'

'Better take her up a bit more, and back off a little.' To Andreek, 'How much potassium is there in the hold?'

'Wuulsen said about five tons.'

Maast nodded.

About twelve minutes later, the ship exploded. It had been

settling for some time, and water was presumably pouring in through several holes in the walls of the boiler-house. There was a dazzling burst of white-crimson glare, then another. Large chunks of the superstructure of the ship buckled and flew apart.

Two blast-waves hit the VTOL in quick succession. Maast fell heavily against Andreek, who was crushed against the glass of the cabin observation-port. They pulled themselves upright, and looked down again. The jets of the aircraft roared violently as the pilot pulled it higher into the air.

The ship began to heel over towards the dock at which it was moored. As it rolled onto its side, an even larger explosion tore through the ship and completely obscured it from their view.

Maast said to the pilot, 'Take me back to HQ. I want to talk to the council.'

Wordlessly, the pilot complied and they flew back to their encampment, Ruud's emplacements on the other side of the valley totally forgotten.

Maast walked alone by the edge of the plateau in the late evening. To his right and far below on the valley floor lay the city, blazing all over with light. Lying there, Maast thought, ready for the taking, but untouchable. The smudge of orange flame in the docks, and the thick cloud of smoke, reminded him of what he would have to face if the council's decision were negative.

The explosion of the ship had fired two warehouses adjoining the dock, and one of those had itself later exploded. Now the whole area around the docks was ablaze, fed by the westerly breeze that blew through the valley.

It was a start, Maast thought, but premature. Too premature.

This was the difficult period. The condition of the city had to be maintained until the pronouncements of the council were made. Wilful damage by the evacuating inhabitants had to be kept to a minimum. If fighting broke out in the streets between the invaders and the defenders, the invaders had to withdraw or hold back. Ideally not a pane of glass should be broken, not a stone dislodged. If sabotage took place, it must be repaired.

It was a delicate balance between black and white. The only palpable weapon Maast had at this stage, and one which he deployed to its fullest psychological effect, was the pending council decision. He knew, as did all the people in the city, that flame and death could pour down on the city in an instant once he had the word.

But until then the city had to be maintained in its former condition. If he was kept waiting any longer, he would have to send a fire-fighting crew down to the docks.

His interchange with Miils earlier in the afternoon had been short and frustrating. There was nothing available. No news. No decisions. No more arms beyond what he had, or what was already on its way. No action.

Categorically, no action.

He was now ready, or as ready as he would ever be. Never before, in all his experience, had he been so deprived of weaponry. His only strength was the artillery. The rocket-launchers had not arrived, though Miils promised them by the morning.

In some respects, he preferred to do it simply. There were some of his compatriots, who given the same job would use nuclear weapons and finish the city off in a few seconds. Others would use nothing but H.E. and take as long as a month over it. His own preference was something of a middle road; to do the job cleanly and swiftly, using tactical weapons of immense conventional power.

In this, Maast felt, lay the greatest satisfaction.

So with twenty-five pieces of artillery, several thousand rounds of assorted projectiles, a toothless VTOL and a handful of promised rockets, Maast and his men confronted the unarmed city of Anthus.

Maast stopped, and looked back towards the camp. The bright yellow beacon had been switched on above his tent!

The council had reached a decision.

He broke into a run, and covered the distance between the edge of the plateau and his camp in half a minute.

He rushed in breathlessly, nearly colliding with Andreek who was on his way out.

'Captain Maast! The council says—'

'What? Come on!'

'Positive, sir. *Positive!*'

The destruct-order. Positive. The city must die. Destruct the city in the way you please. Burn it; bomb it; explode it; even dismantle it brick by brick if that's your way.

But the city must no longer exist.

Destruct.

Maast moved quickly to his seat, where the electronic instruments he had unpacked the day before were now stacked orderly

on their special stands, forming a console from which, if he chose, he could direct the whole destruct.

He flipped a switch. 'Ruud!'

'Sir?'

'Arm your weapons.'

'Sir!'

'Taaruk!'

'Weapons armed, sir.' Taaruk had been doing this almost as long as himself, and had probably sensed the council's decision before they had reached it themselves.

'Andreek!'

'Sir?' He was behind him.

'I want you to take over manual control of these instruments. I will direct you verbally from above the city.'

'Yes, sir.' He slid into the seat as Maast climbed out of it, and took hold of the main controls.

Yours is the hand that flies the bullet, thought Maast, looking at the back of the young man's head as he familiarised himself with the readings on each of the tiny screens. *And mine*, he added, *is the finger that points the aim*.

'Are you going alone, sir?' Andreek asked.

'Yes. You're in control here.' He moved towards the flap of the tent.

'I'll be back before dawn. Keep me informed about the rocket-launchers.'

'Sir.'

Maast was gone.

The fuel-tank of the VTOL was full, and the machine had enough for up to twenty-four hours' constant hovering. Maast lifted the machine off, and headed it out into the valley.

The plateau on which his camp had been made was about four thousand feet above the mean height of the city, and he added another two thousand as a safety-margin. Laid out in the cabin before him was a detailed map of the city, and a comprehensive list of map-references of all the major parts of the city.

Anthus lay below him, blazing with apparent life.

Maast was one of the few destructors who had almost an obsessional neuroticism about the cities for which he was responsible. Reconstitution-crews, such as the one Major Wuulsen had led, were rarely used by other destructors for the work of re-fashioning an abandoned city.

But Maast retained some old ideals. He was probably too near middle-age for a war like this. He had grown up in a traditional, conservative background of warfare, where destructing had taken on some of the aspects of an art.

Evacuation was another symptom of this approach. The policy of most destructors was harsh.

Maast wondered whether any of the million-odd refugees were in the hills, watching the city and awaiting its end. Should he, perhaps, have left them to die with it? It was always a decision that worried him.

The VTOL had reached the geographical centre of the city and he aligned his position to the map, so that he hovered directly above a main square. This would do.

He flicked the controls of the VTOL to automatic, and went down into the destruct-gallery of the machine.

On the floor of the gallery was a padded couch, and he lay along this on his chest. His hands fell forward, in easy reach of a compact range of controls, mikes and cut-ins. Before his face was the clear plastic port of the gallery, giving him a panoramic view directly down onto the whole of the city.

He settled his head in the forehead-rest provided, and switched on his contact with the camp HQ.

'Andreek.'

'Sir?'

Immediate response. The boy was good. Almost as good as Taaruk. Which one would eventually succeed him?

'You are at full stand-by.' Not a question.

'Affirmative.'

While he had flown the machine to its present position, Andreek had evidently prepared the others. Everything was ready. All he had to do was select targets and weapons, and Andreek would be able to bring them to bear immediately. Anywhere in the city was under the muzzle of his artillery. Anywhere.

He selected a reference, already worked out as a prime target by Wuulsen's team. There was no spade-work left in destructing. Get a good team under you, and a city like this can be set up overnight.

'H.E. Reference 74.'

'Confirmed. H.E. 74.'

A moment passed, and Maast watched the tiny building far below him. It was an oil-fired power station, a minor part of the

city, providing current for the underground railway.

Another moment, and an explosion tore at it.

'H.E. Reference 74 + 1.'

'H.E. 74 + 1.'

Another two moments, and another explosion.

'Incend. 74 + 1.'

'Incend 74 + 1.'

Brilliant flames leaped around the building; white light glared; faded; glared again.

'Scatter-incend. 74 + 2.'

'Confirmed.'

As the second incendiaries fell a dull, deep-orange ball of flame grew like an ugly tumour in the wreckage of the power station. An area nearly a square-mile in diameter was now ablaze. Maast shifted his attention. Somewhere else on the periphery.

He selected a densely-built area where factories and cheap houses crowded one another. In the centre was a cluster of gas-holders. Three scatter-incendiaries were sufficient, and in minutes a blaze half a mile long was roaring.

Again Maast moved his attention, like a dilettante god prodding his creation.

Another power station was exploded (two H.E.s were enough to blast it out of existence and ignite a large area around it); and the dwindling fires in the docks were re-ignited by a burst of scatter-incendiaries.

His excitement mounting, Maast lowered the height of the VTOL by five hundred feet. An idea was beginning to form in his mind. He was too high . . . too aloof. The back of his throat was dry, and perspiration was running down his body. He set the automatic pilot on the machine to start a slow, but very steady, descent. Imperceptibly, the machine began to drop.

He was still too high.

More targets. His hands were wet as his fingers flipped from his talk-control to his reference selector. A pattern of destruction began to form.

On the outskirts of the city, at the very foot of the mountains, the houses of the city sprawled over each other, climbed into each others' back yards, fought for space. Here, his scatter-bombs threw flame like dust. Twisted scars of fire crawled around the edge of the city, joining in places to form long weals of flame,

rolling in sluggish patterns toward the still undamaged parts of the inner suburbs.

'Captain Maast, sir!' Andreek's voice broke into his excitement.

'What is it?' he barked, forgetting that he and the Lieutenant should be able to demand equal attention of each other in the course of a destruct.

'Report on the rocket-launchers, sir. They'll be here tomorrow evening.'

Maast said, 'The hell with that.'

And still the VTOL dropped slowly. Maast checked his height as Andreek cut off. 3,800 feet. He was now below the altitude of the camp.

'Taaruk!'

'Sir?'

'How many incends have you left?'

'About two thousand rounds, sir.'

'Good. You, Ruud?'

'A few more.'

He chose another reference, almost at random. H.E. and incends flew in, exploded at once. A semi-circle of fire lay like an obscene white slash around half the diameter of the city.

'Sir!' Andreek again.

'What?' he snapped back.

'The nuclear power station is almost in the fire-zone.'

Maast looked down his list of references, couldn't see it at first glance.

'Give it H.E.'

'Confirmed.'

An explosion racked at a large complex of buildings near the edge of one of the shorter tongues of fire. The blast subsided, no flames took.

'H.E. Again!'

'Confirmed.'

Another concussion in the building, and flame leaped about it. His height was down to 3,500 feet.

A large area of the diameter of the city seemed undamaged, and he found the reference. There was no major target here: houses, a few factories, schools, fire-station. Irony. He called for scatter-incends, again and again. Patches of flame took, subsided, then caught. His concentration was intense, and he could hardly feel the bucking of the VTOL in the rising thermal gales.

In the hands of one man was the death of a city. The council had decided it must go, and he was the one to do it. His hands trembled with the thought of the indomitable power he commanded.

He was too high. He could see the flame, not feel it. The machine continued to drop remorselessly.

'Sir!' It was Andreek.

'Yes?'

'Where is your location? We cannot scan you any more.'

Maast glanced at his height, saw he was approaching 2,000 feet.

'I've moved away to the other side of the valley.' He looked down through the port, saw that there was now a complete ring of fire around the city, broken only where the river crept through. 'It was getting too warm.'

Andreek was silent. Did he suspect something?

'I'm coming back to camp. Prepare for me to land.'

A pause.

'Confirmed. Sir.'

Taaruk's voice came in. 'Captain Maast.'

'Yes, Taaruk?'

'Can we have more firing-references. My men are getting restless. They want to finish the city off.'

Maast looked down through his port again, remembering his own first destructs, when he was on a mortar-incendiary crew. The excitement of lobbing fire-bombs into an holocaust was infectious.

'Fire at will. No reference.'

'Confirmed. No reference. *Total destruct.*'

Andreek's voice echoed, 'Total destruct.'

Maast levered himself off the couch, and was thrown against the bulkhead. He hadn't realised, in his prone position, how much the VTOL was bucking in the thermals and vacuum-winds blowing into the city.

He climbed up to the control-cabin, flipped off the automatic, and flew it on manual.

In the city, the fire was spreading at a terrifying rate, roaring in towards the centre. High-force winds, at over a hundred miles an hour, would be blowing down the valley and into the city now, fanning the flames and spreading the fire at an ever-accelerating pace.

He dropped straight down towards the square, aiming for a patch of open space between the buildings. A hundred feet from the ground he slowed his descent and landed the machine with military precision in the centre of the square, facing northwards.

He stood up, walked through the belly of the machine and opened the rear hatch. He dropped through onto the ground.

He could see no flames, yet the sky was a terrible yellow all around him. Not far away a shell exploded, probably H.E. There seemed to be no air. Here, at the eye of the fire-storm, no wind or breath of air moved.

Buildings seemed to waver before his eyes. He was feeling giddy. Incendiaries exploded nearby, yet failed to ignite.

Was there no oxygen?

A dull roaring he had subconsciously placed in the distance began to grow around him. It began to climb the scale of volume. Was it in fact approaching, or was it just getting louder? He couldn't tell.

He coughed, and dropped to his knees.

A building at the side of the square, a formidable construction of huge crags of masonry, great walls of granite, a fascia of pillars and stone carvings, imploded and crumpled into a flimsy shower of flame. The building to its left disintegrated into an explosion of slow-flying white-hot concrete.

The roaring reached its peak. It could get no louder.

Scatter-incends fell around him, sheeted into white, liquid flame. The VTOL melted and flowed over him.

The fire-storm was total. And the destruction complete.

3

Double Consummation

Transition day, and two hundred feet below, the motorway carried its morning rush of traffic. Clive Tiptree sat at his breakfast-table on the glazed-in balcony, idly stirring what was left of his coffee, and watching the cars beneath him.

From this height he could see several miles of motorway in each direction: from where it swung around the huge I.C.I. complex near Sleaford to where it became lost in the industrial haze and a cluster of flyovers to the south of Lincoln. The motorway was wide: five lanes for each direction, far greater than was necessary for the average density of vehicles. Tiptree had only once seen the motorway blocked, and that was when an automatic lorry had left its guide-strip on the inside lane, and slewed across the other four lanes.

Transition day, and Tiptree watched the spasmodic flow of traffic coldly. His mind felt cramped, like a limb deprived of blood.

He felt as if he had been unable to think for a week, that only now were clarity and coherence emerging. He saw his life with a peculiar lucidity, viewing both its facets as if either were able to exist alongside the other.

Across the table from him sat Nicola, her head thrown backwards so that she seemed to be looking at the ceiling. He looked at her long throat, the smooth skin white and unblemished. And he looked round at the contents of the room: the furniture, the curtains, the carpet, the untidy scattering of soiled disposable clothes kicked against one of the walls.

In this moment of vision Tiptree was able to see both – the

material contents of the room, and Nicola – in two ways.

He could go across to her, put his hands on her shoulders and lower his face to kiss hers. . . . Equally, he could sit here dispassionately, staring at the expanse of throat, reacting not at all. . . . And this apartment and its contents. While remembering the care and attention he and Nicola had devoted to furnishing it in the last couple of years, he could see, almost as if it were with another pair of eyes, that the furnishing of the room was done in a style quite unlike anything he would have chosen himself. There were too many colours, too garish a blend of styles.

So he sat there for a few seconds until it passed, seeing himself and his surroundings, Nicola and the things he associated with her, in two quite distinct moods.

Then it was done, and he felt the mental cramp intensify a little. This was the transition proper, of which what had just happened had been only a sample.

He sat in his chair, his gaze fixed on Nicola's uptilted head, trying not to move, trying not to think, trying not to exist.

There was a swirling intensity of emotions: anger, love, happiness, fear. Like hypnagogic imagery he seemed to hear voices from within, see distant sublimities of colour, detect motion where nothing moved. For a second or two his forehead throbbed, his ears sang with imagined noise, his eyes were blinded with impossible light.

Then, quickly, everything faded and he found himself sitting at his breakfast-table high above the motorway, his right hand still compulsively stirring the remains of his coffee.

He dropped the plastic spoon, and raised the cup to his lips. The liquid was cool, and he swallowed it quickly. With an expression of distaste he returned it to the table; it was some brand of instant coffee he did not like.

Opposite him, Nicola suddenly moved, and brought her face down towards him. She looked at him, keeping her expression neutral.

He nodded to her.

'Finished?' he said.

'Yes.'

They looked at each other for a moment then as if at some unseen signal they both looked away; Nicola to look around the room, Tiptree to stare down at the traffic once more.

Always this moment of awkward silence, of anticlimax, always this sense of impending embarrassment. And always, inevitably

happening each time, a foreshortening of the contact, a formal farewell, a hasty departure.

Tiptree never failed to be sensitive to this moment. Even though the transition-drug could alter certain aspects of personality it could not erase memory. And he could remember the Nicola he had seen the night before.

They lay together across the carpet, immediately after intercourse, Nicola crying. Himself depressed and apprehensive at the thought of the coming transition. Both knowing there was nothing either of them could or would do. . . . And this morning, before they each took the pill, a last, lasting embrace.

Then this.

Nicola stood up, and moved towards the heap of dirty under-clothing against the wall.

'I'd better get rid of this,' she said.

Tiptree glanced at the untidy pile.

'No, leave it. It'll be all right where it is.'

'Until next week,' she said, finishing for him the thought he had not expressed. Nicola had always adapted more quickly to the transition.

'Yes,' he said, aware of a blank mood-vacuum around them. He stood up awkwardly, and picked up the two aluminium-foil packets that lay on the table. Attached to each was a small piece of white plastic card.

Tiptree looked at them, ensuring that each bore the same date, and both his signature and Nicola's. He passed one to her, and she took it.

'See you next week then,' Nicola said, and offered her hand.

Tiptree took it, and they shook formally. For a few seconds their gaze met, and as he looked into her eyes Tiptree felt as he had often done in the past that there must somehow be a particle of warmth between them. But for all this, he found his emotions steady; Nicola was now just an acquaintance, and there had never been anything between them.

But Nicola. . . . Did the grip of her hand on his seem unusually firm? She seemed reluctant to let go, there was an inner gleam in her expression. . . .

He must be imagining it. The transition-drug was infallible, and they had both taken it this morning. If he imagined that there was still some shadow of the previous week's passion between them, then it could only be illusory.

He said to her: 'Are you leaving now?'

She shook her head. 'In a few minutes.'

'All right.'

Tiptree looked around the room again, feeling its strangeness. He slipped his foil packet into an inside pocket, then moved to the door. He took a jacket from a closet, put it on, then looked back at Nicola.

'Good-bye,' he said.

She nodded, then sat down again at the breakfast-table. Lying amidst the debris of the meal were the empty husks of the foil packets they had each opened that morning. One, Tiptree, knew, bore today's date and his signature and Anne's. The other bore Nicola's signature and that of a man of whom he had probably never heard. In an undebated point of confidence, neither he nor Nicola had inquired as to the identity of their alternating partner. It was not something of curiosity; what each did during the transitions had little personal bearing on the other.

Transition day for Clive Tiptree and Nicola Woodfield, and for all the tragic, impenetrable mood of the night before, it was now merely a memory.

As Tiptree left the apartment to catch a monorail from the fifteenth level, he saw Nicola sitting at the table, staring disinterestedly into space. Already, less than five minutes from transition, she was unfamiliar to him.

Concentration on his work was never easy for Tiptree on a transition day, and today was for some reason even harder than normal. Several times during the morning he found his attention wandering, and at one point he nearly succumbed to a temptation to call Anne.

In his capacity as Parliamentary Executive to Lincoln Adhesives Ltd, Tiptree's working day demanded not so much his attention as his presence. It was the kind of position that was widespread in British industrial politics of the twenty-first century; one that required a certain kind of training, a certain kind of background and a certain kind of personality. It so happened that Tiptree possessed a degree in Political Science, and was the sort of man instinctively loyal to the cause for which he worked; he was thus perfectly suited to his work.

Politics in Britain had become such an intrinsic part of everyday life, with the strings of power delicately woven to maintain the status quo, that every major employer was now required to include in its executive staff a representative of the government.

Although it was in many respects no different from many other executive positions, the work of a Parliamentary Executive had one important distinction.

On a local level, and sometimes on a national level, the P.E. was in the public eye.

As a result, it was necessary to support the government in the event of dissent, and to implement its policies. In the main, this entailed little more than sitting in an office and acting as general counsel or arbiter in the event of some interpretation of regulations being required.

So on this day, Tiptree went through the necessary motions of his job, dictated a couple of reports, answered three or four routine calls from other executives.

He signed off an hour early at the Control section, and went down to the car-park where one of his cars was waiting for him.

He found it with some difficulty – unsure partly of which one he had brought here last, and partly because it was over a week since he had thought about driving – started it up, and drove it slowly down to the slip-road.

He accelerated until he was at the required minimum speed, then moved the car across the automatic lane reserved for commercial vehicles and into the nearest driving lane.

When he had reached the cruising-speed he wanted, a comfortable one hundred and twenty kilometres an hour, Tiptree relaxed a little. However much his work might lack physical or mental strain, it was always good to leave the building as it often induced in him a feeling of oppression.

But as he drove, he felt first twinges of a vague guilt, the sort that always came to him when he knew he hadn't devoted himself to his work as much as he should. Though not the sort of man whose conscientiousness dominated his life, he was nevertheless aware of the necessity of his job. If he wasn't like this, he would have never passed the screening.

As a sort of compromise, he reached forward and switched on the car's radio, tuning it to a light-music channel. Then he lost track to absorb whatever sublimages were being transmitted today.

It was one of the closest-guarded secrets of the present government, that radio and television transmissions carried subliminal undertones. Few people appreciated the hairbreadth narrowness of the international political structure, and the high probability of internal troubles in a country upsetting this. So, unpleasantly of every member of every government for the last twenty-three years

had readily admitted they were, the sublimages were used to mould the nation's moods and fashions.

As the music began to play, Tiptree felt the subsonic undertones take his mind subtly, leading it around some of the topics of the day: vague worry about the latest escalation in the Cambodian war, interest in the continuing and ever-growing housing-surplus, concern about the rising cost of natural food.

After a few minutes the direct sublimages seemed to stop, and Tiptree thought there must be a temporary lull. He drove on, listening to the gush of insipid music from the radio.

In a while, he found himself settling into a glow of pleasure at the thought of seeing Anne again shortly. It was comforting to think of the arrangement he had with her, and the other one with Nicola Woodfield, pleasant to consider the two apartments he ran, the three cars he possessed, the consequent high standard of living and his position in society. . . .

Tiptree shook his head, as if throwing off a dream, and snapped the radio into silence. Immediately the smug glow faded, and he wondered for a moment at the strength of the transmission these days. It was odd how they drilled into your mind, even when you knew they existed.

But in a way he felt a little resentful at what had just happened. He felt he didn't need to be reminded by some subconscious suggestion that his life was partly the product of government direction. He drove on.

The motorway ran in a series of curves between the continual grey embankments of concrete: factories, apartments, schools, office-blocks, entertainment complexes. The entire neighbourhood of the motorways, the landscape of twenty-first century Britain, was grey, bleak and drab.

And underpopulated.

It wasn't until the end of the twentieth century that someone had drawn attention to the fact that the so-called population explosion wasn't so much a biological phenomenon as a social one. . . .

And the social explosion had never come to Britain, India - West Africa - Central Europe - South-East Asia - millions died every year: some of starvation, some from war, others of disease, all as one by-product or another of excess population. In other places, North and South America, Western Europe, Russia, they kept apace, just, with increased technology, improved agricultural methods, stretching resources to the limit.

In Britain, though, the birthrate fell, and from about 1980 the overall population began to dwindle. In 2021, at the last full census, the population was down to less than thirty millions.

Sociologists, at first caught unawares and divided by the decline, put the reasons eventually as a combination of several hang-over factors of the late twentieth century: the introduction of an oral contraceptive for men as well as women, an increasing trend towards casual and ephemeral sexual relationships, a steady and deep-rooted mistrust of the future, and, curiously the most decisive of all, the unique economic situation in which Britain found herself during the 1990s.

In a world whose financial and political interdependencies were so finely edged, so precariously balanced, Britain existed only by ever increasing her internal productivity.

And, as the population began to dwindle, and the production of consumer goods began to rise, so vast surpluses mounted. And production could not slow. The economic disasters that widescale redundancies would bring, already aggravated by the spread of automation, could be the final stab.

So the consumer was encouraged to over-consume.

But society wasn't geared to it. A family, say two adults and two children, required only one television set, one automatic laundering machine, one telephone, one or perhaps two cars, one house. . . .

So families were persuaded to duplicate their possessions, then triplicate them wherever possible.

And then it was seen that the family unit was no longer an ideal consuming entity. It didn't buy enough.

With the development of transition-drugs, linked to post-hypnotic suggestion, the single family broke down completely . . . The Marriage (Reform) Act was passed, making the marriage contract non-recognisable under law, and the way was made legally clear. Within a decade, society had adapted, helped and nudged into it by the widening use of subliminal imagery.

And by now it had reached the point where two people who chose to live together, and to bring up their own children (rather than using the government crèches) were afforded the kind of social attitude once given to couples who lived out of wedlock.

As Tiptree swung off the main freeway onto the branch motorway that led to Arcady House, the half-deserted apartment building in which he and Anne had a flat, he thought of her again, and how she and Nicola saw different aspects of him.

Anne: warm, quiet, appreciative. Their flat at the back of Arcady House overlooked a strip of greenery. He drove three cars. They enjoyed each other's company, were happy doing nothing together. Their sex was occasional, tender.

Nicola: sharp-witted, intelligent, amusing. Their apartment overlooked a main freeway. He commuted by monorail. They drank a lot, ate a lot, laughed a lot. They enjoyed their love-making, admired each other physically.

It was odd now to think of Nicola in this way. He tried to see her as he had done the night before: laughing, making love, crying later. But he shook his head. Not Nicola. Or at least, not the Nicola he had seen in the morning.

And how had he thought of Anne yesterday?

Someone who alternated with Nicola. Someone who came to Arcady House with him, to live for one week out of every two. Someone who went, while he was with Nicola, to live with some other man he had never met nor was he likely to.

But Anne dominated his thoughts today.

As he pulled into the automatic park at the rear of Arcady House the sun was setting in the west, casting a glow of deep orange light across the grey, bleak wilderness.

He closed the door of the apartment and stood in the cool, dark hall. The place had a feeling of emptiness about it, like a room without carpets. It was unusually quiet.

It took him less than half a minute to establish that Anne was not there.

He went into the main room, and sat down in one of the easy-chairs that cluttered the room. In spite of Anne's absence, the place had a comforting feeling of familiarity. He poured himself a drink from a flagon in a cabinet, and sipped it slowly.

It wasn't like Anne not to be here.

An hour later, he was becoming concerned. By now he had washed, and changed his clothes. Sipping his drink disinterestedly, he watched an old film on television. He was getting restless. He felt a compulsion to go for a walk, make telephone calls, go for a drive. It was strangely disorientating to expect to meet Anne and find her absent.

For some reason, he went to her closet and saw her clothes hanging there. He shook his head.

When, after two hours, she had still not appeared, an idea came to him. An idea he did not like.

He went to the bathroom, and pulled out their box of transition pills. What he expected was there. He pulled it out slowly, then fumbled it open. It was a small white envelope, with his name written on it in Anne's handwriting.

Inside was a sheet of paper, with a transition pill and its plastic tag stapled to the top left-hand corner. It was the standard agreement-breach form, the only formality required by law.

It gave the names and addresses of the two parties, their solicitors, the agreed cause of the breach, and their signatures.

Anne had filled in the form, leaving blank only those parts of it he had to sign. Everything had been done for him. In the section describing the causes of the breach Anne had written: 'Mutual wish.'

Attached to the back of the form was another, smaller, piece of paper. On this Anne had written:

Clive,

Sorry about this. I'm sure it's for the best. I know you will understand in the end. I'll be coming back here at the end of this transition to collect my clothes etc. If you want to talk to me, call me then. I don't think there will be any legal difficulties, so long as you just sign the form. Mail it to my solicitor, and he'll do the rest. I'm sorry again.

Anne

He put it down. No reason, no excuse. Just a brief, if not unfeeling, farewell.

He went back into the main room, and poured himself another drink. There was nothing, in theory or in practice, he could do to get Anne back. It was part of the agreement they had signed, when they began cohabiting two years before. If one party wished to change his or her arrangements, then there was nothing for it but to allow them to do it. At best, the cohabiting arrangements were based on a continuing-temporary basis, the agreement renewed once a fortnight when the transition pills were exchanged.

He looked at the foil packet attached to the top of the form. It was the one he and Anne had signed eight days before. It was unbroken. As he had said, all he had to do now was to sign the form and that would be the end of it. It took about a month to clear the legal side of it, provided there had been no children, and after that it would be as if they had never known one another. If they wished to live together again, they would have to wait a year.

He laid the form aside, and finished his drink.

It was too difficult to finish all at once. He needed time to absorb it. The main problem now was the fact that he was still under the influence of the transition drug, and would be for another week or eight days. While that lasted, his life would be orientated around Anne and this flat.

The only way he could break the transition would be to slip back to his alternate, to Nicola. Though, for physiological reasons, he wouldn't be able to do that until the morning. There had to be a minimum of twenty-four hours between each transition.

And for more practical reasons . . . He couldn't return to Nicola this week. She would be in her own alternate life, and wouldn't welcome his intrusion.

It looked as if he was obliged to sweat out the rest of this week alone.

A couple of hours later he went to bed, and slept badly, thinking about Anne and missing her presence in the bed next to him.

In the morning he awoke with a dry mouth and an aching desire for Anne. Suddenly realising that he could not go on like this, he took a transition pill with his breakfast, and a few minutes later was thinking of Nicola once more.

He then felt capable of signing the form, dropped it into a mail-chute, and packed the few belongings he wanted to take with him.

He knew he couldn't see Nicola for another six days, but at least he would live less miserably.

Locking up the flat for the last time, he went down to the car-park, then set off down the motorway towards Sleaford.

The apartment he shared with Nicola was in one of the comparatively rare parts where the concentration of population was sufficiently high to justify public transport. In the linear cities that had grown along Britain's motorways, like a coating of slime on an old net, the population was spread thinly. Around Sleaford, more by chance than anything else, there were several industries that still required employees in any number. As a result, the apartment-buildings along this stretch of the motorway were rarely less than three-quarters full. A complicated and fully-automatic system of monorail trains served the factories, and the use of cars for commuting was unnecessary.

Tiptree stepped from the car-park portal, and moved towards

the entrance to the vacuum ascent-tube. As he did so, two men came out from behind the entrance to the next portal and moved quickly towards him. One man was carrying a microphone, and the other a portable videotape machine.

'Mr Tiptree!' called the one with the microphone. 'Can you spare a moment for the cameras?'

Tiptree turned towards him. 'Not now,' he said. 'Call me tomorrow, and I'll grant you an interview then.'

'It'll only take a moment, sir.'

As he said this, a red light mounted on the front of the machine began to glow, and Tiptree heard the motors inside whirr softly.

The reporter moved to his side, and turned to face the recorder.

'I'm with Parliamentary Executive Clive Tiptree,' he said without preamble, evidently having recorded his introductory comments earlier, 'and I'm going to find out from him the facts behind the latest rumours. Sir, could you give us your statement on the government's recent introduction of direct taxation on food?'

Tiptree thought quickly, knowing the ease with which a skilled tape-editor could warp the meaning of a recorded interview.

'I think you'll find,' he said, 'that the results of the public inquiry contain anything you want to know about this. There's nothing I can add to that.'

'Then you will agree that there is some substance in the current reports of subliminal advertising to increase food-sales?'

'I can't comment on that. All I can say is that Parliament's attitude towards subliminals remains the same as it has been since last year's government White Paper.'

Without waiting for the next question, he moved past the reporter, and into the ascent-tube. As the doors closed he breathed a small sigh of relief. It could have been worse. The government deliberately kept rumours of subliminal advertising circulating from time to time, with the purpose of obscuring the real use of sublimages.

Inside the tube, he felt his public manner, which he had donned automatically and unconsciously, begin to slip from him. However much he tried to keep to himself, no P.E. could ever be certain of total privacy.

He wrenched his thoughts back to Nicola. As she wouldn't be here until next week, he could spend the rest of the week at work,

and thus give himself more free time next week. Out of every fortnight, a P.E. was expected to attend work six days, though the decision as to how he apportioned it was left to him.

As he reached the door to the apartment he thought again, thankfully, of the effectiveness of the transition-drugs; already the frustration and imbalance caused by Anne was a cold, unemotional memory. It would not be pleasant to see her next week to settle the material aspects of the break-up, but he would be able to ride it.

By then, he hoped, he would have been able to find another alternate. He couldn't stay here in this apartment for ever.

As he closed the door, he became aware of a movement. He turned.

'Nicola! What are you doing here?'

She came across to him. He looked at her in the frank surprise of seeing her here at this time.

'Clive.' She put her hands on his shoulders, and kissed him. 'Thank God you've come today. I'd thought you might leave it until the next transition.'

He dropped his valise on to the floor, and put his jacket across the back of a chair.

'You mean you were expecting me?'

She nodded. 'I know all about Anne.'

'But how?'

'I called her.' She stared at him expressionlessly. 'Clive, I called her and told her to break the agreement she had with you. I told her I wanted you to breach the agreement, with her and with anyone else. Anyone except me. Do you understand?'

Tiptree moved across the room and sat down. Nicola sat in a chair opposite him, and laid a hand on his knee.

He said to her: 'I think I know what you mean.'

'Do you? Do you really?'

'I think so. You're pregnant, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

He sat for a while watching her. During the previous transition he had heard her in the bathroom one morning being sick. Neither of them had said anything about it, though for a while Tiptree had fought down stirrings of anger inside him. He'd suspected for some time that Nicola had been substituting his contraceptive pills with dummies. He hadn't become annoyed so much at her pregnancy as that she had tried to deceive him.

'Why did you call Anne?'

'If I tell you, will you let me finish? Without interruption?'

'All right.'

'You're not going to like it.'

'Go on,' Tiptree said.

'I'm in love with you, Clive. Not because of the transition pills. I stopped taking those weeks ago.' Tiptree opened his mouth, but she went on. 'I really love you. I want to have your baby. If I'd told you this before, you wouldn't have allowed me to. That's all.'

'But why call Anne? Even if I'd objected, you needn't have fouled up my arrangement with her.'

Nicola moved across and sat next to him.

'Because I don't want to share you. I'm jealous of her, and anyone else I don't know about. *Is there anyone else?*'

'No, but I don't see—'

'Then we can do what I want. When I spoke to Anne she said she wasn't going to renew the agreement when it expired. She thought the reasons I gave her were sound, and said she'd breach it now.'

Tiptree said: 'What *do* you want?'

She put her hand on to his arm, and gripped his muscle.

'I want to get married.'

Tiptree closed his eyes.

The day the transition drug is taken the emotional responses to the hypnotic suggestions are stronger than on any other day. This accounted for the difficulty, the night before, he had had in adjusting to Anne's departure. And it accounted for his present reaction.

In the apartment he felt instinctively relaxed, and with Nicola he felt an immediate rapport. Whatever feelings the transition drugs awakened, they were as near to a loving warmth as could be artificially rendered. But it was artificial.

He looked at her carefully.

'I'm sorry. It's out of the question.'

'For God's sake, why?'

'It wouldn't work. The feelings I have for you aren't my own. They're given to me by the drug. And anyway, as you should know, I couldn't get married. It would ruin my career.'

She let go his arm.

'Which of those reasons is more important to you?'

'I don't know,' he said, as honestly as possible. Honest to her and to himself. 'Human feelings are no longer real. My love for

you at this moment seems indistinguishably my own. But yesterday I felt the same way about Anne.'

She said: 'Take the transition negative, Clive. That's what I did.'

'What do you mean?'

'One day I wanted to try to find out what my real feelings for you were. I took the negative . . . and it was as if nothing had happened. I went on loving you.'

'And . . .?'

'And I haven't taken a transition pill since.'

'But I've seen you taking them.'

She shook her head.

He sat in silence for a while, trying to put his thoughts into a sensible order. He could not rely on whatever his heart told him at this moment. His mind, his emotions, his entire orientation around this woman was the product of a drug.

And from the point of view of his career, marriage could be disastrous. At this time, when the whole process of government was delegated to men like himself, Executives whom the ordinary man could see any day, it was vital that they toed the government line. If Tiptree were to marry, it would be only a matter of days before he was replaced. The entire governmental structure depended on maintenance of the transition-drug usage, so that the delicately-balanced cycle of production and consumption would not be upset. Marriage to one woman, creation of a single family unit, would bring public disgrace to him.

He said as much to Nicola. She listened in silence until he had finished.

Then she said: 'That's the one thing I expected you to say today. But you're wrong, and you've got to appreciate it. Can't you see that whatever you or anyone else in the government does now, nothing can stop the inevitable? We're chasing something that has no ending. Every year the population gets smaller and smaller, and the whole framework of politics, economics, *everything*, gets weaker and weaker. It's no good depending on a shrinking population to consume more. We must start expanding again.'

'No, no,' Tiptree said. 'Look at what's happening abroad!'

'But in an industrial society, what's happening in Britain is as disastrous as over-population in an agricultural one.'

'It's a vicious circle,' she went on. 'The longer we're cajoled into consuming more, the less chance there is of the birthrate

picking up again. While these transient relationships between men and women are actively encouraged, things will go on slipping.'

'So what are you suggesting?' Tiptree said, already half-forming in his mind what he knew she was going to say.

'Marry me,' Nicola said. 'Marry me, and take whatever disgrace society will heap on you. Then . . . start to rebuild. Work against the system from the outside. Someone has to do it. Let it be you.'

Tiptree closed his eyes again, and leaned back in the seat. It was not a comfortable notion.

A few seconds later he opened them again.

'Why do you want me to do this?'

Nicola touched his hand with hers. 'I *love* you, Clive. That's all. Thinking about where everything's going just makes me think logically that you should do it. My own feelings, the fact that I want to live with you and only you, have as many children of ours as I can, and bring them up by ourselves, this *tells* me I'm right.'

He said, as gently as he could: 'But my feelings for you are only transitional ones.'

'Take the negative, Clive. See what will happen. It's the only way.'

He sat in silence again.

'What are you thinking?' she said.

'About what you said.'

'And?'

'I don't know yet.'

His imagination wandered for a few minutes. He let himself think a few years into the future, when Britain, like the trunk of a rotting tree, would collapse from the inside. A nation of empty apartment-blocks and factories built along deserted motorways, where grass came seeping up through new cracks. And the total breakdown of real feelings, where what one said or thought or loved was entirely dependent upon the hypnotic suggestion that someone had implanted in adolescence. And outside Britain . . . some countries going the same way, others bursting with unwanted children and littered with emaciated corpses. The future, if there had ever been one or if there was ever to be one, must lie with controlled population. Not an exploding one, not an imploding one. Controlled growth . . .

He walked to the window, and looked down at the motorway.

It was two-thirty in the afternoon, and few cars drove along it.

A little later Nicola went to the kitchen and cooked a meal. They ate it in silence. For a while they watched television, and then they ate again. After that they made love on the bed, then again on the floor. Tiptree left her in the bedroom, and came out by himself into the main room. In the last few hours he had said very little. He sat by himself for half an hour, then went back into the bedroom. Nicola was asleep.

He went into the kitchen.

It took him two minutes to find the transition-negatives in one of the cupboards. He shook out one of the small pink pills, and laid it in the palm of his hand. He ran a tumbler of water, then placed the pill on his tongue.

He drank the water slowly.

4

A Woman Naked

The crime was sexual promiscuity; the punishment was probation. Now she walked to the courthouse for her appeal, a woman naked.

It was midday, and the streets of the city were crowded. Mistress L—— walked at a steady pace, knowing that the court would not admit her before the appointed time, and that the distance of the walk had been carefully measured so that if all went well she should not have to wait more than a few minutes at the court. She knew also that if she ran she would only attract more attention to herself, even as she wanted to shorten the agony and humiliation of this obligatory display of her moral weakness. Already she had attracted a small crowd of men who were following her; she had no way of knowing what their intentions were, but she hoped that all they wanted was to look at her.

If the worst happened — and it was not unlikely — she knew that there would be no one to help her, even though her brother and his friend were walking a few yards behind. There was no penalty for the rape of a woman naked, but the punishment was severe for anyone who tried to protect her. A convicted promiscuous woman had by her actions admitted to her consent.

Six months she had survived as a woman naked; not by good fortune alone, but also by the care of sympathetic friends. She did not envy those women who were forced to pass their probation in the cities; in this she had been lucky, even as it had been those friends who had inadvertently initiated the crime.

Remorse was long past, and she sought now only to return to

normal life. The shame had been temporarily revived by this day, but on the whole she had learned to live with it. The fear persisted, the terror of sexual violation. She had grown up in this society where morals were legislated – for women at least – and accepted its standards, but there could be no growing accustomed to the daily fear of assault that had been hers during the probation. The law protected those women who were chaste, monogamous, faithful to their husbands; it punished severely those who strayed.

Sometimes during her probation she had thought uselessly of the nature of her crime.

Just three men . . . but the number was irrelevant. Cognisance of the number involved did nothing to lessen the severity of her plight, but it had indeed been just three men, two if she discounted her husband. The first of her extra-marital crimes had been a brief, casual acquaintanceship, consummated and concluded during one night. After that she had worried, knowing the penalty for adultery, but with the passing of time she had allowed it to recede into insignificance. It had been a long time ago; four years, five?

She had now covered about half of the distance to the courthouse. The law laid down that on the day of the appeal a woman naked must cover the distance from the probation registry office to the court, alone and on foot. There could be no evasion of this: cameras monitored the whole route. If she deviated from the route – in fact or in spirit – her appeal might not be heard, the probation could be extended indefinitely.

Behind her, the small crowd of men followed in silence.

About two years ago she and her husband had entered a new circle of friends. Her husband had a small talent as a painter, and he had hoped that by meeting people connected with the professional literary and artistic world he might gain recognition. The people they had met styled themselves as free-thinkers, intellectual radicals in a society where conformity was fashionable. They derided the moralistic laws, claimed the privileges of humanism and self-expression . . . and in their company both she and her husband had allowed themselves to believe that the laws may indeed have no real effect.

It was in this mood of affected radicalism that she had met the third man. One evening, while the others were debating some minor political issue, he had taken her to another room and given her some illicitly-distilled liquor. Later, he seduced her, and

afterwards she rationalised her actions as a radical statement against the repressive laws.

Within a week she was arrested.

She came to a street intersection, and had to wait by the kerb until the traffic allowed her to cross. At her side was a pillar bearing one of the court television cameras. The crowd of men waited behind her; they did not come too close – for which she was thankful – but she wondered if they were waiting for some more opportune moment to close in on her.

As she crossed the street she passed a group of women. They glanced at her, then looked deliberately away. No sympathy, not even a flicker of understanding. She wanted to call out to them to help her, perhaps to walk with her as far as the court, but there was never any help for a woman naked.

While waiting for the trial it had become clear to her that one of the group of her radical friends must have been a police informer. It was this knowledge which frightened her, for when her husband left her she realised she was on her own. As she had no conception of whom the informer might be, she dared not ask the friends for help. During the trial, none of them appeared in her defence, and the prosecution evidence was given in secret. Such was the privilege of the male.

After the verdict was pronounced and she was given the temporary name Mistress L——, she returned to her apartment and for a week tried to carry on a normal life. She stayed inside, ordering food by telephone. She felt the emptiness of the flat, her husband and all his possessions gone. It was too difficult, too lonely. She could not leave without baring herself and knew that if she tried, and was caught, her punishment could become permanent. Every footfall in the corridor outside became that of a violator, every man who paused for more than a moment beyond her window became a potential rapist, the streets of the city became in her mind a maze of darkened alleyways and lurking shadows.

Finally, with no one else to turn to, she took off her clothes and drove over to the home of her nearest friend, taking the chance that it was not he who had been the informer. In fear of some further kind of betrayal she asked his help . . . and to her surprise he had been willing and able.

Someone he knew had a large house in the country, some fifty

miles from the centre of the city. It would be possible for her to serve her sentence there.

Once away from the city she felt much safer. She still had to bare herself in public, and for the first few weeks was the centre of considerable local hostility, but she felt – correctly, as it turned out – that in the countryside there was less chance of being attacked.

Her brother heard of her plight, and visited her several times. He could help her no more than anyone else, but he provided her with company.

Towards the end of the probation a new frustration arose in her: she had lived all her life in the city, and the sight of the countryside beyond the grounds of the house tantalised her with its beauty. Just once, she went for a walk with her brother, but a woman naked is recognised everywhere.

So the probation passed. No one attacked her, her body remained inviolate.

On the last night of the probation she returned to her city apartment with her brother and his friend, and in the morning she reported to the probation registry office.

From there, the three-mile walk to the courthouse.

She realised that some of the men behind her were talking. This was a hopeful sign. Her brother had told her that he and his friend would do whatever they could to keep the inevitable crowd from becoming a mob: silence, he said, was dangerous. If an attack began some men would be self-conscious in a crowd of others . . . but they would be in a minority. In silence, there would be tacit approval by the majority of any direct movement towards her.

Now she heard a few remarks about her body, and they were in general good-natured. She knew that her brother would be trying to initiate a verbal response to her appearance.

A man stepped forward from the crowd, and walked for a few paces at her side. He glanced at her, appraising her body, but she stared back at him to meet his gaze.

At once, he looked away and turned from her, heading into a shop doorway.

All her life she had lived with an awareness of the realities of sexual vulnerability. As a child she had been taught to be demure and modest, to respect her father and brother, to beware of men

she did not know. Later, she had followed her mother's advice and only mixed socially in large groups of people. She was not unusual in this: as she made her own friends and talked to them she discovered that they had been brought up in the same fashion. Only as she became an adult in her own right did she fully understand the reasons behind this; that men outnumbered women several times over, that although by nature of her sex she was accorded special treatment in society, it was only so long as she lived by society's rules.

There was none so sweet as an innocent woman; there was none so guilty as one who erred.

At last the courthouse was in sight, and still the crowd of men behind her remained small. She wondered if they were the same men who had been following her from the beginning, or whether the number had stayed constant while individual men had come and gone. As she had done so often before she thanked the chance that had allocated her a daytime hearing. The newspapers, although not too caring about the fate of women naked, often published news-items reporting the rape or murder of women naked on their way to night-time probationary appeals.

Until her own arrest, she had taken not much notice of the affairs of convicted women, assuming that it was a fate that would never befall her, but on the realisation of her own prospects she became aware of just how much she really did know about the punishment, and what was likely to happen to the offenders.

She knew, too, what form the present appeal would take.

She glanced over her shoulder. The crowd had mainly dispersed, perhaps understanding where she was heading. She saw her brother and his friend, walking along about ten yards behind her in a group of about a dozen other men. The worst appeared to be over. Now she was within a few hundred yards of the courthouse she felt less conspicuous, had grown accustomed to the feeling of walking naked through the streets.

The other women naked, she wondered, did they too grow accustomed to it? Or did they all stay behind closed doors, as she had done?

The court building stood in a small square, the centre of which was laid out in the form of a garden with many overhanging trees. She passed through these, leaving behind the sound of the traffic and most of the crowds. Once more, she looked behind:

in addition to her brother and his friend, only five men now followed her.

The entrance to the appeal-court was at the side of the building and she turned the corner and walked down the narrow passageway. Here she discovered that a crowd of about forty men were clustered about the door.

Her brother stepped forward, walked at her side. As she pushed her way through the crowd he stayed at her side, trying not to appear to be with her. That too was covered by the law: women naked were supposed to report to the court unaccompanied, though she surmised that few women took that risk if there was someone willing to help them clandestinely.

She noticed that standing beside the door was another girl. She was very young, hardly out of her teens. Naked, she faced the wall, trying to shield her body from the hands that reached out to touch her.

The girl saw Mistress L—— approaching, and looked at her with relief . . . but at that moment the door opened and a man in a uniform appeared.

‘You’re next,’ he said to the girl.

He helped her through the door, and Mistress L—— moved forward.

‘What about me?’

‘After her. You’re early.’

The door closed, and Mistress L—— turned to face the crowd.

She discovered that by staring at the men’s faces she could avoid provoking them. By her side her brother stood facing her, trying to behave like the other men yet standing covertly in their way.

They seemed not greatly interested in her. Perhaps she was older than they would have liked her to be, or feared the consequences of an attack on her here on the steps of the courthouse. Why then were they here at all? Simple voyeurism? A few stood away from her, talking in small groups. She hated all of them, seeing them for what they were: the men who had no place in society, yet who took advantage of the rejects from that society. She knew that if they decided to attack her, here or anywhere else, she would die. There were too many of them, and they were not organised in any way: they would scrap and kick for her body, and in the confusion they would destroy her.

But they seemed not greatly interested in her, and the minutes passed uneventfully.

The door opened and the man appeared once more.

'Name?'

'I'm known as Mistress L——.'

'That's right. You're next. Wait here.'

The door closed again, and she realised that the men in the crowd were looking expectantly at it.

Another minute passed, and then the door opened again. The young girl appeared, still naked.

The doorman thrust her roughly down the steps, and she fell.

'Come in, you,' he said to Mistress L——.

She looked down at where the girl lay, and up at the crowd of men who were moving in on her.

'But——'

'In!'

Her wrist was seized and she was dragged through the doorway. As the door closed she heard the men shouting, and over it the girl was screaming.

'What happened?'

'She lost her appeal. This way.'

She was taken along a short corridor towards a flight of steps, and at the bottom of these was a small ante-room. The doorman showed her what was inside.

'If you win your appeal, you dress in here.'

'What if I don't?'

'I'll conduct you safely to the exit.'

Inside the room were several racks of clothing. Each of the garments was a one-piece, grey dungaree, made of rough, badly-cut material.

He nodded towards the steps. 'Up there.'

She ascended them slowly. At the top was a narrow platform raised high over the courtroom. There was a narrow rail, and she gripped it.

The court of appeal was assembled below. The courtroom was approximately fan-shaped, with the raised platform on which she stood at the apex. There was none of the air of formality she had anticipated: the seats were facing her, arranged in the manner of an auditorium, and people moved about, some talking quietly in the background. The first few rows of seats were packed tight with members of the public, and immediately

behind these was an enclosed section in which sat the various court officials and dignitaries. Beyond this were more seats, but not all of these were occupied.

Everyone present was male.

Two lights were concentrated on the platform, and she blinked in the sudden dazzle. In the judiciary section a man stood up and spoke almost inaudibly over the background noise.

'The court of appeal is in session——'

Slowly, silence fell.

'The court of appeal is in session to hear representations from the woman currently known as Mistress L——. Would the appellant identify herself.'

'I am Mistress L——,' she said, and she realised that on one side of the courtroom recording-machines were turning.

'Very well. I am your counsel. To establish your appeal I have to obtain from you a statement. You are reminded that the oath you swore at your previous trial is still binding. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The nature of your appeal is in the form of a sworn confession. You must relate to the court the details of your crime. Your account will be compared with the sworn testimony of the prosecution witnesses, and if it in any way differs you will be called upon, under cross-examination, to account for the discrepancies. If you are not able to satisfy the court as to the authenticity of your confession, your appeal will not be upheld. Do you have any questions?'

'Sir . . . what degree of detail does the court require?'

'Your statement should be complete to every last detail. Your every thought, move and desire. You must describe minutely the experiences you had, and how you reacted to them. Leave out no detail, however trivial it might seem to be.' He sat down. 'Please now begin.'

Mistress L—— was the focus of all attention. She opened her mouth and started the account of her crimes. The rape had begun.

5

Transplant

The street was long and straight. Glancing down it quickly, a disinterested observer would see two lines of terraced houses, dirty cars parked on each side of the road and would experience an overwhelming sense of greyness and decay. It was like many others on this side of the city: drab, barren, and with a feeling of timelessness. A battle might be fought a hundred yards away, and still the street would reflect no change.

Trees had been planted on each side of the street a century before. Now they were nearly all dead, spreading up from the pavement to wave stiff, leafless branches towards the grey sky.

Only in one place did the trees still show greenery, and that was where two of them grew close together on one side of the road. Each bore its full complement of leaves, a discordancy of natural colour untinged by city dirt. In contrast with the others, these two still waved supple branches in the breeze.

Beneath the two green trees were parked three cars. Each one was in showroom condition, its paint unscratched, its windows clean, and its tyres still black and with mould-marks on the tread. Other cars in the street were not in such a finely-preserved state. Even those next to the three were covered in the humus of the leaves of last year's autumn. Further down the street, cars squatted half on and off the pavement with broken fenders, wheel-surrounds gaping black holes, their bodies rusted and glassless remnants. Finely-shattered windscreen fragments made walking treacherous.

The houses in the street were empty and dilapidated, like an

abandoned film-set. Only by the new cars and the two green trees was there a house that showed any signs of habitation.

This, like the trees and the cars, was distinctive in the street by its state of preservation. It was the house of Arthur Knowland, and he stood now at the door, looking out at the cars. He was a tall man in his late fifties, stooping slightly and wearing old, shapeless clothes.

At the windows of his house, the net curtaining was clean and freshly pressed. On one of the sills was a row of six porcelain pots containing cacti. In another window a hyacinth bulb sat on top of a conical glass bottle, tiny tendrils of white root just starting to reach down to the surface of the water an inch below. Next to it, a dark green vase fashioned in the shape of a grotesque fish, bent in the middle so its tail touched its open mouth.

As with the other houses the interior of his rooms facing onto the road could not be seen from the outside. The architecture of the houses was very old. Light trickling in through the window panes was scant.

Knowland put his hand in his trouser-pocket to check that he had his front-door key. He looked at the sky to make sure it wouldn't rain, saw that the clouds were a featureless grey and were covering the entire sky, then closed the door behind him with slow, precise movements.

He walked down the tiny pathway to the gate.

In his garden, nothing grew. Arthur Knowland favoured it with less than a glance as he passed through.

He opened the gate and walked out into the street, glancing up at the trees and admiring their greenery. Such trees—— Not like the others in the street, it was comforting to him that they should continue to grow here. It was a part of his daily routine to stand and stare at them.

After a minute or two he walked on, past the line of cars and down the street toward the intersection. As he walked his interest in his surroundings dwindled sharply, and he slipped back into the reverie which now occupied virtually the whole of his waking moments.

As he approached the intersection a man came round the corner from the right and walked up to him.

Knowland said: 'Ah, Mr Ridgway. Good afternoon to you.'

Ridgway opened his mouth and started to speak. For a second, no sound could be heard.

Then: 'Good afternoon, Mr Knowland. Fine day, is it not?'

Knowland stared at him. The man's speech was out of synchronisation with the movements of his mouth. The last three words were still being spoken as he closed his mouth and smiled.

'Er - I beg your pardon?' Knowland said, a trifle confused. He shook his head, and concentrated harder.

'I said I thought it was a fine day,' Ridgway repeated, his voice now firmly synchronised with his lips, but too loud. Far too loud.

'Yes. Yes, of course,' Knowland said. 'I'm sorry. I think I mis-heard.'

He glanced at the sky, noted that it was still its oppressive grey, and wondered what was fine about the weather. Although it was far from being cold or otherwise unpleasant, this was not his conception of fine weather. Not that he cared unduly. For a moment he thought he caught a glimpse of the sun breaking through the cloud, but nothing happened.

Ridgway smiled again.

'Ah well,' he said. 'On my way. See you tomorrow, Mr Knowland.'

His voice was at normal volume again, and everything was as it should be.

Knowland nodded, and walked on.

Had he made a mistake about the man's lips? he wondered. Yet he had been certain of the effect.

Where, he wondered, did Ridgway live? And stopped short again. That was the first time, he realised, that he had ever thought to ask himself that. It must be somewhere around here, as he always seemed to meet him at the intersection.

He looked round at the houses, and knew that the man could not live here. Everywhere was derelict; doors hanging from hinges, windows smashed or frameless, chimney stacks fallen into the tileless roofs. Yet everywhere was like this. The man must live somewhere.

Perhaps in one of the less decayed buildings . . . ?

Knowland looked round again until he saw a house which, although uninhabitable by normal standards, at least had its roof intact. He stared at it.

Now he studied it, he wondered why he had not noticed it before. Although the brickwork was as dirty as on all the houses, its front door was still whole, and none of the windows was broken. He took half a step toward it, then paused. Something was wrong. . . .

He couldn't remember ever specifically studying each house individually, but he was certain that all of them here were in the same state. He hadn't given them more than a sideways glance for days, but nothing ever changed in this street.

Undeniably, however, the house was intact.

He stepped off the kerb, walked across the narrow street, and looked closely at the house. Now he was nearer to it he could see that the glass in the windows was not only whole but clean too. And inside . . . curtains!

Drab curtains, crumpled maybe. But a sign that this house had been recently lived in, if not now. He glanced at the door, and saw that the brass handle was smooth, as if it had been often used.

A mild kind of excitement mounting in him, Knowland grasped the metal fence and stood on tiptoe, trying to see into the front rooms.

Could this be Ridgway's house?

Slight doubt struck him. The man always came from the opposite direction, from the road down which Knowland would walk to Veronica's old house. He'd never seen Ridgway at any other time or in any other place. If he did live in this house, it was strange he had not seen him walking past his window. Knowland spent most of his time in the front room, looking out at the two trees and three cars that were outside his house. If any people passed, particularly Ridgway whom he knew by sight and name, then he would see them.

Even as he looked at the house, more of it came to his attention. The paint seemed brighter than when he'd first looked at it, the rubble in the tiny front garden less untidily scattered among the weeds. The railings he gripped felt no longer brittle and rusty, but as if they'd been regularly painted to preserve them from the ravages of the atmosphere.

But no one lived here. . . . No one.

Not Ridgway, nor anyone else. He was totally alone. It was self-indulgent fantasy even to imagine anyone lived in this house.

His fingers loosened from around the rail, and he backed away from the house. He was only a few yards from the intersection here, and he crossed back to the other side.

He glanced at his watch. Already he was beginning to feel a little tired. If he walked around the block, past Veronica's old house, and back to his own he would have enough time to make himself some tea before going to bed. Was it getting dark

already? He looked at the sky, and saw as he'd suspected that the clouds were darkening.

He stepped out a little faster, down the side-road toward Veronica.

Behind him, the house he'd been looking at began to settle. First the paint darkened, taking on its customary coat of atmospheric grime. Then the weeds grew thicker in the tiny front garden, and the rubble of bricks, old bottles and pieces of peeled-off stucco heaped together untidily. The front door swung on its upper hinge so that the base of the door fell into the hallway, revealing a dark corridor lined with brown, peeling wallpaper. A crack appeared at the bottom of the main window, crept upwards across the glass, then down again sharply. The window fell inwards and smashed on the linoleum-bare floors inside. One tile skidded down the angled roof and crashed into the overgrown garden, quickly followed by several more.

Two hundred yards away, Knowland heard the sound of breaking tile and glass as a whisper on the breeze.

And ignored it.

Doctor William Samuelson sat in his swivel-chair at the window of his office, looking down at the crowded hospital car-park twelve storeys below. He was deep in thought.

His secretary, Nurse Donalds, knocked at the door and stepped in. She stood by the open door, and waited patiently for the doctor to turn. He did at last, a concerned frown across his forehead.

'I have a Mr Wylatt to see you, sir,' the nurse said. 'He says he has an appointment, though I have no record of it in——'

'No. That's all right. Show him in. He telephoned this morning.'

'Yes, Doctor.'

She backed out of the door, and Samuelson heard her say: 'Doctor Samuelson will see you now.' A few seconds later, Wylatt came in and closed the door behind him. He walked over to the doctor and extended his right hand.

'Good morning, Doctor Samuelson,' he said. 'It was good of you to see me.'

'Not at all.' He waved the man into the seat opposite.

The man carried on talking as if Samuelson had not responded to his first sentence. 'The TDPS is anxious to remain on pleasant relations with the medical profession, and you must consider my

visit today as most informal. I'm sure you will understand. Now I wonder——'

Samuelson said: 'Cigarette, Mr Wylatt?' He pushed an open box toward the man, effectively cutting off the flow. Wylatt took a cigarette, and lit it.

'Now what is it the Donors' Protection Society wants from me?' Samuelson asked carefully.

Wylatt took a deep breath, and opened his mouth.

'Is it about our latest patient?' Samuelson said quickly.

'Yes, Doctor.'

'I thought it might be. Well, go ahead.'

Wylatt said: 'The TDPS is representing the next-of-kin of Michael Arnson, as I expect you had anticipated.'

Samuelson nodded gravely.

'That's the first part of my mission today,' Wylatt went on. 'But I have also been approached by a Mrs Knowland who having no one to turn to, in her own words Doctor, has come to us. Mrs Knowland was in a state of near-desperation when I saw her this morning, which you can imagine was——'

'I saw her last week. She was very upset.'

'Er – yes. Well Mrs Knowland is herself a member of the TDPS, and she thought we could help her in some way.'

Samuelson watched the other man steadily. It wasn't his first encounter with the TDPS – a charitable organisation which had the aim of protecting its members from irresponsible and unnecessary donation of their organs in the event of severe accident – but this could easily be his most potentially hazardous. The society had no backing in law, which now stated firmly that if clinical death was established, then organ-transplantation may legally be effected, but nevertheless it was gaining very great popular support.

This case, involving the pathetically-sick Arthur Knowland, could develop into a trial-by-press, with the whole future of medical organ-transplants in this country at stake.

'Did you conduct the operation yourself, Dr Samuelson?'

'No. But the case had my personal written sanction, and I, observed the operation from the gallery. The surgeon was Dr Jennser – the ablest heart specialist in the country. There is no question that the operation should not have taken place.'

'No, of course not,' Wylatt interjected quickly, as if afraid he had offered an impertinence. 'I'm sure the condition of the sick

man, or the skill of the medical staff involved, was never in doubt.'

'Well please state your case, Mr Wylatt. I'm confident of your sincerity, but I am exceptionally busy at the moment.'

Wylatt had a flat black valise on his knee and he opened it.

'My case, as you put it, is more or less what you have doubtless anticipated. Michael Arnson, a member of our protection-scheme, had a vital organ, to wit his heart, removed from his body against his own wishes as clearly stated in the testamentary document he lodged with the Society. I have a photostat of it here.'

He passed it across to Samuelson, who took it and laid it on his desk before him.

'Under the Charter of the Society this constitutes a trespass of person and a breach of private rights.

'Secondly, another member of our scheme, Mrs Veronica Knowland, has complained to the Society regarding the medical treatment given to her late husband at the time of his operation.'

Doctor Samuelson looked politely at the photostated document in front of him, though he had seen its like before. It was a signed and witnessed declaration regarding the disposal of bodily remains. Specific organs were listed as being the private property of the signed: heart, kidneys, lungs, liver, eye-corneae, stomach, certain glands and other minor functional organs of the body. These were to be disposed of, together with the whole corpse, by cremation upon death.

'You appreciate, Mr Wylatt, that the medical profession does not recognise this?'

'So we gather. But we have grounds to believe that were it to be tested in a court of law then it would be upheld. We understand that it is legal as a testamentary document. We took Counsel several years ago.'

'I'm sure you did,' Samuelson said. 'And yet it still hasn't been tried?'

'No. At least, not yet.'

So the test-case, thought Samuelson, will not just be a popular one. The law itself is to be tried.

'How well acquainted are you, Mr Wylatt, with the facts of this case?'

The other man shrugged. 'I know what was reported in the newspapers. And I have spoken with Arnson's mother and Mrs Knowland.'

'So you know the full outcome of the operation?'

'Yes.'

Samuelson swivelled round in his chair so that he faced the window.

'But I'm afraid you don't. There are more than superficial factors involved. And I think before we proceed with the claims of your society I should explain them to you.'

He turned back to his desk, and opened a slim manilla file that lay there.

Michael Arnson was admitted to this hospital fourteen days ago, after having been involved in a motor-accident. I won't detail the specific injuries he suffered, but there was extensive breakage of his ribs, his shoulders and his skull. We suspected massive brain damage on first inspection, and under surgery this was confirmed. When he first arrived at the hospital Arnson was still breathing, and his heart was still beating.

'It took several hours to contact his mother – whose address, incidentally, we got from the card issued to Arnson by your society – and he died before we could get in touch with her.'

Wylatt opened his mouth to say something, but the doctor waved him to silence.

'I know you contest our definition of death, but I think we have no need to discuss that here and now. Suffice it to say that by our standard operating procedure, when we could detect no measurable activity from the brain, and the patient stopped breathing, we considered him to be clinically dead.'

'During this time, a patient in our coronary ward, Arthur Knowland, was in the last stages of a long and painful heart disease. Arnson's blood-group was acceptably close to Knowland's, and we decided to effect an immediate transplant. If it were successful, we knew we could promise Knowland a return to normal life.'

Wylatt said: 'But he didn't receive Arnson's heart. Knowland never recovered.'

Samuelson stared at him. 'So this outcome, by your code of ethics, denies our right to attempt it?'

'Yes.'

'Maybe. But in this instance there was more involved. Forget the ethics for a moment; one man's life was certainly over, another's was equally certainly doomed without an efficient heart. We went ahead anyway, and removed Knowland's old heart. As is standard procedure, for the time being a heart-lung

machine controlled his blood-circulation while the donor's heart was prepared. This time——'

Wylatt's eyebrows rose. "The operation failed?"

'No. It was successfully removed. And would, we are certain, have been a successful transplant. But we were unable to place it in Knowland's body for the reason that Arnson's heart was equally diseased. We discovered a malignant tumour on the upper ventricle wall.

'Arnson had cancer. There was nothing we could do.'

Knowland walked on down the side street, aware that this was neutral territory. He carried in his mind a clear conception of the arrangement of the streets and knew, almost to the last foot, the precise distance he had to walk to the next intersection.

His own street ran roughly east-west, with the main shopping street at the eastern end. The intersection where he normally met Ridgway was about a mile from the shops, with his house about three-quarters of that distance along it. This road he was walking in now was parallel to the main street, and was less than a quarter mile in length.

On each side of the road was a dark brick wall of medium height. Although it was just above the level of his head, Knowland knew that if he could somehow raise himself to peer over it, he would see the overgrown gardens at the back of the derelict houses. But he had no interest in these, and always kept his head hunched down into his shoulders along this stretch of his daily walk.

The encounter with Ridgway had disturbed him somehow, in a way in which he did not care to consider. Did he control in some fashion his experience?

There had been that earlier puzzle of his heart.

Awakening one morning, he found himself panting for breath as often happened. Yet before he could reach for his pills he felt an overriding compulsion that the pain was habitual rather than actual. He had winced at the agony in his chest, but knew in the same instant that it *could* be psychosomatic. The doctors had once even treated him for that kind of disorder. The memory had helped, and he had concentrated on the pain.

In seconds, his breathing had steadied. In minutes, his heart was an almost imperceptible movement in his chest.

And in days, he had virtually forgotten what it was like to live in constant pain and fear.

He reached the second intersection, and turned to the right

again. This street, like his own, led down to the shopping street a mile or so away. He walked on, hardly seeing the houses around him. Houses like those he lived among, with gaping doors and windows, crumbling staircases and vacant, tileless roofs. The whole environment of this place was a depressant to him. He wondered sometimes why he continued his walks, but the long habit of years was difficult to break.

After about ten minutes he came to Veronica's house, or at least, the house that Veronica had lived in with her parents years ago, before he'd married her. He stared at it for several minutes, seeing the old-fashioned wallpaper and curtains. The door was painted a drab, dirty maroon, as he had always known it.

And the house was empty as he had known it would be, and would stay that way. He walked on.

He came to the main street, and braced himself against its presence as he turned the corner. Here the sidewalks were crowded with people, milling slowly from store to store. Each window was brightly lit, its wares a garish blend of coloured packaging and lighting. In the road, traffic roared by endlessly in both directions. It seemed darker now, and the pavement was wet. The light from the shop windows was reflected in the street and the lights on the passing cars and lorries dazzled him. This was the part of his walk that he liked the least, and he hurried now, his head bent down as if in defence against the onslaught of the noise and movement. Voices echoed around him, seeming to be without source or direction. Wordless voices that made little sense and added no comfort to his feelings. He collided several times with people; drab women loaded down with heavy baskets, tall men who hurried past without apology.

He reached the corner of his own street, and turned into it gratefully. Silence fell abruptly.

The sky was darkening steadily, and he maintained his hurried pace. His street had no lamps and in the night became a black canyon of fear. His walk had tired him, and the thought of sleep was a pleasant one. An early night, he thought. I get tired so easily. If Veronica were here, she would understand.

He reached his house and went inside. He warmed some milk through, drank it, got undressed and went to bed. He slept lightly, often waking to lie trembling in the black silence of the night and think of his wife.

When he awoke in the morning, Veronica lay next to him, and was laughing.

Doctor William Samuelson and his visitor from the TDPS stood together in silence as the lift descended slowly. Finally it stopped on the second floor, and the hydraulic doors opened. Samuelson led the way down a long corridor.

'It's best for you to see Knowland yourself,' he said. 'I think you'll appreciate our problem when you have.'

Wylatt said: 'But the fact of Arnson's other illness doesn't alter the moral position, Doctor. His body was violated against his will.'

Samuelson gestured impatiently. 'Under normal circumstances, Mr Wylatt, I would have difficulty in maintaining the position of the profession in this kind of dispute. We all have our personal feelings, and I tend to the liberal view myself. But in spite of this, I think you'll agree that in this instance there is a lack of precedent.'

'Maybe, maybe. But one must always consider principles. I refuse to abandon mine and the ones of my Society.'

'Of course.'

They walked on in silence.

The hospital was quiet. They passed several boards pointing toward various surgical units and wards, all of which appeared to be in other parts of the hospital.

By way of explanation, Samuelson said: 'This is our convalescent and therapeutic wing. Knowland was brought here after the operation because of the fatal ease with which a delicate process can be disrupted in a busy hospital. We have had to set aside a whole suite to maintain the sterile conditions we need.'

Wylatt nodded.

They came eventually to a pair of swing doors, and Samuelson walked through, holding the door open for the other man. A nurse on the other side stood up when she saw the doctor, and led them into a room adjacent to her tiny office.

Samuelson said: 'Thank you, nurse.'

She went out again, leaving the two men alone.

The room was fairly small, containing three rows of wooden seats. In the wall opposite these was a large window, looking into the next room. Samuelson sat down in one of the seats, and indicated Wylatt to sit next to him. He pointed toward the window.

'That's Knowland there,' he said.

The next room was brightly lit. Its walls were white, and in the

ceiling a battery of lamps poured light down into the room. The effect was a startling brilliance. In the centre of the room was a high, padded table, on which lay the body of a man. He was dressed in a featureless smock that covered his legs, chest and arms. On his head was a white cloth that lay over his forehead. His face was bare, and his eyes were closed.

By the side of the table was an array of complicated machinery: a confusion of shining brass, black rubber and gleaming strands of copper wire. Two white-coated, white-masked men stood by the bed. One held a board in his hand, and transferred to it readings from a row of dials on the machine. The other stood back, carefully watching the registrations on a slowly moving electroencephalograph.

Wylatt took in the scene for several seconds.

'But I thought Knowland was dead.'

'He is,' Samuelson replied. 'Knowland is what we call discorporeally dead.'

Wylatt said: 'I don't see that there is any subtlety about the definition of death.'

'Don't you? I thought your Society was keen on a proper definition of death.'

'It is,' Wyatt said. 'Death occurs when the heart no longer beats.'

'In which case, Knowland is well and truly dead. He has no heart at all. But . . . his brain is still conscious, and so we must consider him to maintain an identity.'

'He is *conscious*?'

'As far as we can tell, yes. We have his brain constantly monitored by EEG. From the time of his operation his mind has shown entirely normal activity.'

Wylatt said: 'But what is keeping it alive?'

'That machine,' the doctor said, pointing, 'is called a heart-lung machine. It's highly complex and very expensive. But its effect is more or less as its name implies. It artificially supplants the work of a human heart and lungs, in that it maintains blood at normal bodily temperature, re-oxygenates it and circulates it through the body.'

'And Knowland has been using the machine for how long?'

'Fourteen days. Ever since the operation, in fact.'

Wylatt got up from his seat and walked to the window. He pressed his face against the thick glass and peered in at the man lying on the table.

'But if you say the machine replaces his heart, how can he be dead and conscious at the same time?'

The doctor got up, and stood beside him.

'His body and nervous system have stopped functioning, that is all we know. There was a short delay in supplying a glucose nutrient to the brain, and we suspect the motor-functions of the main nervous system may have been damaged. The higher activity of the brain, though, is unimpaired. Of this we are absolutely certain. The electrical emission from the man's brain is normal. You can see there,' the doctor pointed to the EEG, 'that there is nothing abnormal. He even sleeps and, as far as we can tell, dreams.'

Wylatt looked at the long roll of graph paper slowly emerging from the machine, but could glean no sense from it.

Finally he said: 'So what is to be done?'

Samuelson shrugged. 'What can we do? We provide a steady supply of blood to the brain, and we feed it with glucose. We monitor the brain's activity and keep careful note of anything that happens. We anticipate that if the brain survives it will provide us with immense knowledge about its workings, but it's still too early to tell. We've already learned, for instance, that sleep fulfils a cerebral need as well as a physical one.'

'You mean you are using this man as a guinea pig?'

'If you like.'

'But that's inhuman!'

The doctor shrugged again. 'What should we do? Switch off the machines and let the brain die? That would be murder.'

Wylatt stared at the man inside the sterile room.

'He's dead already——'

'——and his widow has a death certificate,' Samuelson finished for him. 'I signed it myself.'

'Then the brain should be disconnected.'

'But we think that would be unethical.' The doctor went back and sat in his seat. 'Which brings us to the purpose of your visit today. On a point of ethics you say the removal of a healthy organ from an otherwise dead body is a moral wrong; and yet by the same token to give continuing life to a human consciousness is equally wrong, and should be stopped.'

Wylatt said nothing.

'Do you see the dilemma we are in, Mr Wylatt?'

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, I think I do.'

'And furthermore, do you now see why it would be wrong to

make a moral test-case of this unfortunate man? Think what an effect it would have on his widow. Death is a tragedy from which we can all eventually recover; but not the sure knowledge that although the body has ceased to function the mind goes simmering on unreachably. Because while Knowland's mind still lives and is sane, we say he has a right to life.

'If you want to question to right of surgeons to transplant vital organs from one human to another, then find another case to champion. You'll find enough of them in this hospital alone. But with Arthur Knowland, the fact that he still lives is a miracle itself. The attention of the public at large should not be drawn to what is happening.'

Wylatt said: 'No, I agree.' He bent down and picked up his black valise from the floor. 'I don't think any purpose would be served by my staying any longer.'

He moved towards the door.

'Mr Wylatt!'

'Yes?'

'You'll be tactful with Knowland's widow, I trust.'

'Of course. Though I don't know what I can tell her. Just offer sympathy, I suppose.'

Samuelson nodded.

Wylatt said: 'What do you suppose he's thinking about, Doctor Samuelson? I mean, as he lies there all day?'

'I don't think we'll ever know. He can't see anything, hear anything or touch anything. He cannot react to any thoughts he might have, and cannot express himself in any way. Everything he thinks about must be wish-fulfilment and, for all we know, he can imagine anything. His mind is liberated, you see. Anything he imagines, wishes or expects would be entirely real to him. He could build a whole world, I suppose, and it would be totally real and have substance and existence. In some ways, it's man's oldest dream.'

'But in others . . . it's a hell we cannot conceive.'

Wylatt stared at him for several seconds. His face, which had been jaunty and alert when he arrived, was now sombre and thoughtful.

'Yes,' he said, and extended his hand to the doctor. 'Thank you for your time, and for showing me . . .'

He backed away toward the door, and stumbled through in sudden confusion.

Samuelson waited until the man had been ushered out by the

nurse in the outer office, then stood up and walked to the glass window. He stared in at the remains of Arthur Knowland and watched the expressionless movements of the dials and needles. In that embalmed human body lay an active brain; conscious, sane, and with an existence unique and precious. What dreams of a liberated brain? What hopes or visions? What life?

He opened his eyes again, and she was still there.

'Veronica!'

She laughed. 'You weren't expecting to find anyone else here were you?'

And then he was laughing too.

Much later he got out of bed and walked to the window. Down below was the street, looking as he'd always known it was supposed to look. Cars, new ones and old ones, lined the pavements . . . and the leaves were dropping with autumnal imprecision from trees the length of the street. In the houses opposite lights shone, and people moved behind clean, unbroken window-panes. A car raced along the street towards the shops, and overhead a big jet liner whistled down toward the airport on the other side of the city.

It was as it should be, as he'd always remembered it to be. Suddenly, Veronica's presence had brought perspective to the world.

Momentarily, his hand lifted to the left side of his chest, and his fingers explored between his ribs, for the feel of that erratic flutter that had crippled the major part of his life. But that had cured itself. His heart was as it should be, as one would assume without thought.

He turned back to the bed. Veronica was a beautiful as the day he had married her. He stepped toward her, and caught a sight of himself in the tall mirror on the wardrobe door. He too had lost thirty years, and stood upright in the cool light of the morning.

He placed his hands on the edge of the mattress, leaned over and kissed her. She reached up with her arms, and pulled him down on top of her.

Outside, the world created by Arthur Knowland went on as he knew it should.

6

Breeding Ground

Luke Caston stood in the airlock of the *Merchant Princess*, pumping the manual revolving-gear. Inside his spacesuit he was sweating hard, and not because of the effort.

As the outer hatch opened on to deep space, he threw himself through with little regard for his own safety. The line attached to the magnetic grapple holding the two spaceships together passed within inches of the airlock, and he seized it thankfully.

Hand over hand, not bothering with the finesse of his personal propulsion jet-kit, he hauled himself across the intervening yards to his own ship, the *Glory Whore*.

Reaching his airlock, he clambered into it.

He was shuddering.

The hatch opened on to the main cabin of the *Whore*, and he floated in, switching on the artificial gravity and whirling into an upright position in one practised movement.

For a moment he stood where he was, breathing heavily inside his suit. Then he clumped across to the bunk that lay directly behind the control-seats, and sat down. He opened the face-panel of his helmet, and lit a cigar.

This was one hell of a problem. He shuddered again.

He leaned over and picked up a plastic tissue from a nearby rack, and wiped his face.

There was only one kind of alien life in the universe of which Luke Caston was afraid, and the *Merchant Princess* was lousy with it.

Space-mites.

And they were the biggest, fattest, *hairiest* space-mites he had seen this side of Aldebaran.

Imagine a tiny coil, like the tungsten element of a light-bulb. Imagine it three inches long, shiny and black, throbbing with life and sprouting miniscule hair-like tendrils. Imagine a parthenogenetic form of reproduction with a rate of division that would make the half-life of Helium-7 seem like death of old age.

Imagine these wisps of inorganic life drifting randomly through the vacuum of space, breeding only where there is an abundance of electrical or particle energy.

Imagine them. . . .

Caston shook his body compulsively again. Like many other spacemen, the strange creatures induced in him a violent and irrational fear. It wasn't just their millipedal appearance, but the fact that material objects presented no limitation on their movement. The hardened plastisteel walls of a spaceship, for instance, presented as much of an obstacle to them as a piece of thin cotton did to smoke.

Get a space-mite inside your suit, the old lay of the spacemen went, and before it suffocates it'll drive you half crazy.

A mite finding a human body was as happy as a moth finding a lighted candle in a cellar, and just as efficiently killed. The surface-electricity of human skin was enough to keep a mite in good spirits, but it couldn't survive in any oxygen atmosphere. The decease of a mite was slow (ten minutes was the longest Caston had heard of, though the average was two) and invariably accompanied by an exchange of electricity which, though insignificant to a man, was sufficient to set his flesh jumping.

Some of the stories Caston had heard, about spacemen who, on stripping off their suits, found hundreds of the suffocated mites, had kept him awake more nights than he cared to remember.

Caston pulled at his cigar, his fingers still trembling slightly.

He was reminded of a friend of his, working in the admin. offices of one of the space-salvage corporations. This man had worked all his life with one ambition in mind: that was, to save enough out of his salary to buy a genuine, centuries-old thatched cottage in the English countryside. This he had finally done, and moved in. Then moved out again a week later, when he found that the much-coveted roof was riddled with spiders. . . .

Now Caston was in the same predicament.

He was sitting not a hundred feet from one of the richest wrecks in the spaceways, and he was paralysed from the head down with a fear that was as real and palpable as it was illogical.

So what were a few tiny electric shocks compared with the richness of the *Merchant Princess*?

Caston remembered the heaving revulsion of his first sight of the passageways of the *Princess*, covered with millions and millions of the mites as if with fur. . . .

The decaying reactors of the *Princess*, and the automatic rad-beacons bleating out their signals of distress, and the miles and miles of circuitry and switchgear must have attracted the mites like a piece of rotting cheese will attract a mouse.

And even today, two hundred years after the *Princess* hit a fault of some kind in her sub-drive and blew herself a hundred parsecs from her course, the mites clung on to the dying ship.

There were no two ways about it: he was going to have to get inside the *Princess*. There was too much to lose if he didn't.

For almost the whole of the two hundred years since her loss, men had been searching for the *Princess*. The entire industry of space-salvage owed its existence to her loss. She had been the first of the big ships to blow out, and was still the biggest wreck in space. In her holds were known to be several tons of gems, the first pickings from the vast diamond-deposits on Procyon IV. The gems alone were worth billions to the insurance-companies; the salvage-value of the wreck itself would almost certainly equal that bounty.

The salvage-company or syndicate that found the *Princess* would, quite literally, never have to work again. And Luke Caston, by sheer random chance, had found her drifting in the dark between the stars.

All he had to do now was to board her, find her navigation-room, remove her sub-drive navigation-bowl and replace it with his own salvager's seal. The claim would be made, would be unbreakable under interstellar law, and the *Merchant Princess* would be his inalienable property.

But he had to be quick about it.

Space-salvage was big business and big money. The rivalry between the various syndicates in finding and claiming wrecks was hot. With an average of one sizeable wreck per sidereal month – interstellar trade was expanding quickly, and thousands of merchant ships, from lowly cargo tramps to super-luxurious passenger cruisers, constantly plied the space-lanes – the salvage

corporations spent huge sums on plotting the courses of every known ship.

And his ship, his lowly *Glory Whore*, would be one of them.

It wouldn't be long before some bright spark in one of the other syndicates would be wondering why he had changed course and stopped. And would send out a ship to investigate. . .

Whoever was on it, Caston was sure, wouldn't give a starman's damn about space-mites and their invidious characteristics.

So that was the problem in a nutshell: sheer materialistic necessity against inarguable and irrational *fear*. A neatly balanced equation of indecision that left him sitting here in a cold funk and smoking a three-weeks' stale cigar.

He threw aside the butt and stood up. He needed a second opinion.

He sat down in the control-seat, and flicked the sub-field communication-screen switch.

It took several seconds to clear, then the green 'hold' signal flashed up. He moved restlessly in his seat. Morreston would not be pleased to hear from him.

Suddenly the screen cleared, and showed Henry Morreston's office. Morreston was sitting at his desk, and a girl, presumably a secretary, though Caston hadn't seen this one before, was standing to one side. Morreston was a huge man, with a round puffy face. His hair looked as if it had been hastily smoothed down. It didn't take much to guess what the few seconds' delay had been.

He glared up at Caston from the screen.

'What is it?'

'Henry,' Caston began. 'I've got a problem.'

'Don't tell me. You've broken down. Is that why you stopped?'

'No.'

Morreston's apparent ennui in the office had not prevented him from keeping tabs on his movement.

'Listen, Luke,' Morreston said. 'It'd better be good. We can't afford another *Wayfarer*.'

Caston winced, trying to keep his face steady. Morreston would never let him forget that one. He'd spent six days trying to drill his way into the old tramp *Wayfarer*, not knowing that it hadn't been totally abandoned by the crew. His reception inside had not, to say the least, been friendly.

But this time he had a trump-card. A moment of triumph was approaching.

'Forget the past, Henry,' he said, trying to keep the tone of pleading from his voice. 'You can forget the future too. It's all sewn up.'

The man's face seemed to narrow slightly.

'What are you saying?'

The moment was here.

'I've found the *Merchant Princess*.'

'Shit!'

The moment had passed.

'No shit,' he said. He found it difficult not to laugh. 'I've found it.'

Did Morreston's face seem whiter? Were his hands gripping the edge of the desk any tighter?

'I don't believe it.' His lips hardly moved, his teeth seemed to be clamped together. Was his tongue caught between them? 'Prove it to me, Luke baby. Prove it to me. *Quickly!*'

Caston snapped off the two-way link, and cut into the circuit the remote-controlled television scanner that was mounted in the bow of the *Whore*. He watched the image on the screen as he panned the camera across the hull with deliberate slowness. When he had shown the entire ship, he zoomed in with a close-up of the ship's name, clearly etched into the identity plate by the main port. Then he went back, and played the camera over the hull again. He gloried in this moment, even though he could not see Morreston's reaction, piling on the undeniable veracity of his discovery, battering home the fact that this was indisputably and incontrovertibly the *Merchant Princess* of every salvage-man's dream.

After five minutes he broke the circuit, and cut back in the two-way link. Morreston's office appeared to be empty.

The secretary appeared. She walked over to the screen and peered up into it towards Luke.

'I'm afraid Mr Morreston's been taken ill, sir,' she said. 'He seems to have fainted.'

Caston nodded. He had almost expected as much. But the girl's 'sir' had been a surprise. And it meant a lot.

He said: 'OK. Get him to call me back.'

He cut off the link before she could reply.

He sat back in his seat, lit a second cigar and watched his distorted reflection in the *Whore's* own silver nav-bowl above his head. Morreston would be so pleased at the discovery that he was sure to understand Caston's predicament about the space-mites.

In fact, if he knew Henry the man might even rouse his fat bulk and come out here and do the job himself. Stranger things had happened. Meanwhile, he could sit tight and make sure no one jumped his claim.

He began to breathe easier; the uncomfortable itching beneath his armpits eased for the first time since going aboard the *Princess*.

Ten minutes later, Morreston came on again.

Caston looked at him curiously. The man had visibly paled, and there was a half-empty glass of water by his hand. The secretary had vanished, and the man carried an air of purpose.

'Luke!' he said as soon as he saw him. 'My confidence in you has been rewarded.'

'Not too fast,' Caston said. 'I've got problems. Remember?' Morreston frowned.

'You've got the nav-bowl, haven't you? I mean, you *have* got it?'

Caston shook his head slowly.

'No,' he said. 'At least, not yet.'

'*Not yet*, for Christsakes!' The man swung round in his seat, and glared desperately at the interstellar chart that Caston knew was on the wall at the side, but which was out of view of the screen.

'I can't get it, Henry,' Luke said, carefully.

Morreston turned back and faced him. He leaned forward across the desk, and to Luke's eyes seemed to be reaching out of the screen towards him.

'Luke baby, listen to me. You just get in there and get that bowl! Do you hear?'

Caston repeated: 'I'm not going in there. I can't!'

Now Morreston smiled at him: a gentle, friendly smile.

'Why, Luke? Why can't you get in there?'

Caston told him.

'SPACE-MITES? Goddam little bugs getting between you and me and a billion credits! You must be crazy! Now you just fasten down that fancy helmet of yours and get *out* there, or I'll——'

'I can't, Henry,' Caston said weakly. 'It's no good. There's something about those crawlies that just, well, *scares* me.'

Morreston turned away with an expensive gesture of despair, and pulled open a drawer in his desk. A long keyboard slid out, that Caston knew fed into a computer somewhere downtown.

Morreston began tapping a series of digits into the keyboard, pausing occasionally to let the machine print out information, and occasionally consulting the interstellar chart on his wall. As he worked, the frown on his face grew deeper, and Caston found he was trembling again.

The machine reeled out numbers, and Morreston watched them silently. When the information stopped, he ripped off the sheet and laid it on the desk before him. He studied it intently.

Caston tried to read it upside down, but the definition on the screen was not sufficiently sharp.

Finally, Morreston straightened, and looked back at him.

'The position is this,' he said. 'You're going in there. And no argument. Is that clear?'

Luke shook his head again. 'No it's not. I'm not going.'

'You're forgetting our arrangement, Luke baby,' Morreston said, and Caston detected a note of menace creeping into his voice. 'I'm the money and brains behind this operation, and you're the muscle and go-place. Is that right?'

'That's right,' Caston confirmed.

'And I'm telling you now that if you don't go-places across to that ship right this minute and bring back the nav-bowl and show it to me, then I'll get hold of your——'

Luke reached across and turned down the volume on the speaker. Whatever it was he was going to do (and knowing Morreston's vocabulary it was sure to be either physically uncomfortable or plain impossible) he didn't want to know. When the man had subsided, he turned the volume back up.

'OK,' he said, resignedly. 'I'll do it. But not this minute. I need to work things out. How much time have I got?'

The man consulted the sheet of paper in front of him again.

'Let's put it this way. If I left here in the next five minutes, and subbed to you direct at maximum drive, I'd be there in two days. And that'd be pushing it. On the other hand, there are at least three other ships in the vicinity moving towards your position, and the first one'll be with you in just over five hours. Do I make myself clear?'

Luke nodded dumbly. He didn't want to lose the bounty any more than Morreston, and the interstellar law on salvage was unequivocal: the salvager must have clear and total possession of the navigation-bowl to stake his claim. Until that time, the ship in question was deemed to be in a wrecked state.

'You've got five hours, Caston. Don't bother coming through to me unless you've got the bowl. Understand?'

He understood. Morreston had more interests going for him than just salvage-work, and some of his other associates were rough with their hands. Luke had seen some of their work, and knew what they could do. If he bungled this, it would be a dark alley and a battered head for him.

'All right, Henry. You'll have your ship.'

The screen went black.

Two hours later, Caston had a plan of sorts. He didn't like it one bit, but he could see no other way.

He sat again on the bunk behind the control-seats, and waited patiently while the compressors evacuated the air from his cabin and pumped it into metal cylinders.

The *Glory Whore's* hull was completely pressurised and compartmented. As with most spaceships, she carried in her hold several spare cylinders of compressed air against possible emergencies. But everything she had would hardly be sufficient for his requirements.

Like all salvage-men, Caston had the plan of the control-section of the *Merchant Princess* indelibly etched on his memory. He knew that to find the navigation-bowl he would have to pass through the main crew airlock, down one curving corridor, through two air-tight doors which he would have to open, and along a second corridor which led directly into the navigation room.

Here his task would be ended. The navigation-bowl, as on all ships, was mounted on a pedestal in the control-section, and could be removed in seconds. His personal seal would be put in its place, and bonded there immovably.

From that point on, the *Princess* would be his.

All very simple in theory, but for the space-mites.

Soon after Morreston had broken the connection, Caston had dug a book out of the *Whore's* library, and found out what little he could about the mites.

... impossible to study in captivity (the book had said) since no vacuum-container will hold them long enough to permit examination while alive. A dead mite reverts to an inorganic substance we know as tektinum, comprised mainly of silicon and ferric derivatives.

It is not known why a mite cannot survive in gaseous sur-

roundings, though it is supposed that the 'death' is caused by chemical interaction on their bodies.

What the book didn't mention, Caston reflected, was that half the men in space went in mortal dread of meeting them. But what it said about the effect of air on the mites had given him his idea.

The certain fact that within very few minutes he would be inside a spaceship teeming with the little horrors, did nothing to soothe his nerves.

His only hope was the air.

In space, a wrecked ship does not decay. In the case of a ship like the *Princess*, which hung helplessly in space without drive-force while its inhabitants slowly starved to death, its condition would be identical to when it was fully operational. That is: air-tight. Age does not weary.

If he could pump enough air into the ship, the space-mites would die.

The original air in the ship would have long vanished, otherwise the mites would not be there; the ship whose walls did not allow seepage had not yet been built. But Caston was sure he could build up enough pressure to get rid of the mites.

The only problem was, if he used too much air, he would have none left for the trip home.

The way to solve this, he had planned, would be to collect together every ounce of compressed air he could manage, set aside as little as he would need for the return journey if he kept his spacesuit on, and use the rest to fumigate the *Princess*.

It would mean living in his suit for two days in an airless ship, but in the long run it would pay off. Bounty-fever had got him, and he didn't care. The nearness of that silver nav-bowl and what it would mean to him off-set most of the discomforts he would have to undergo for it.

But he still had to dispose of those space-mites.

As the pressure in the cabin dropped steadily, Caston stood up, walked to the artificial-gravity generator, and switched it off. Released of the burden of weight, he pulled himself out of the cabin, and down to the hold. Here, the emergency air-bottles linked into the pressurising system, stood in a neat row.

He disconnected them, checked the contents of each on the dials by the valve, and tugged them laboriously one by one into the cabin.

Air-pressure was now getting low, and he closed his face-plate.

He waited patiently for the compressor to finish, wishing he

could smoke a cigar. That was something else he would be deprived of for the next couple of days.

The warning-light on the top of the compressor began flashing, and he turned it off. Air-pressure in the cabin was now as near to nil as it could get. He noted how many cubic yards of air he had compressed, added that to the total already in the other cylinders, and did a few quick calculations.

If he breathed steadily and did no major physical exercise, two cylinders should be ample with which to get him home. That left, and he looked at the dull-metal objects floating in the airless, weightless cabin, seventeen full or nearly-full cylinders. He wished it were more.

He snaked a long piece of cable through the handles of each of the cylinders, and manhandled them to the airlock.

With no atmosphere inside the ship, the use of the airlock became redundant, and he set it at its fully-open position. Any air that had remained in the ship would now have gone.

When the last of the air-cylinders was out of the ship, Caston swung out after them, and with painful slowness began inching his way across the grapple-line, the cylinders bobbing and bouncing behind him. He caught a glimpse of his wrist-chronometer, and saw that two and a quarter hours had elapsed. His time was almost halfway up.

As he pulled himself across he glanced round at the stars. He couldn't see Sol from here; it was somewhere lost behind one of the star-clusters on the far side of the galaxy. Even with the sub-drive making possible instantaneous hops across space, Earth was a long way away.

At the airlock of the *Princess* he paused. Now came the tricky bit.

He flashed his torch around the lock anxiously. It was clear. No mites hung on the smooth metal.

He edged his way into the lock, and pulled the first of the air-cylinders after him. Attached to its end was a short nozzle with a universal-locking nipple. He searched round for the usual recompression-valve on the airlock, located it, and clipped the nipple on to it.

Air rushed in silently. He watched the dial on the nozzle as it whirled round, then came to rest at nil.

He unlocked the nozzle, pushed the empty cylinder back into space, and pulled the second one forward.

Each cylinder took about two minutes to release into the old

ship, and it was nearly three-quarters of an hour before he was down to the last one.

He knew that if the air hadn't worked as planned on the mites, he'd have to go in anyway. Now he'd come this far, nothing would keep him from getting the bowl.

Caston pulled the last cylinder towards him, and tucked it beneath his arm. Trembling slightly at what he might find on the other side, he began to crank the manual revolving-gear.

The airlock opened slowly, and stopped at its widest extremity.

Before he switched on his torch, Caston lifted the nozzle of the cylinder, and sprayed air into the corridor like an infantryman splashing liquid flame into an enemy pillbox.

He turned on his light, and flashed it down the corridor.

Dead mites floated like a cloud of frozen locusts. Caston shuddered.

He released more air at them, and they billowed away from him. It was difficult to estimate, but somehow there didn't seem to be as many as there had been before. Perhaps it was because they were floating in the corridor, and not hanging to its walls. Or maybe his first horrified glance had exaggerated what he saw. They'd seemed, in those first awful seconds, like the rippling savannah on a South American plain, or the luxuriant fur of a Cetian wool-cat, so thickly had they clung together.

He saw several close to the airlock, buried half in and half out of the metal walls. In their dying seconds, the little monsters must have tried to escape in the only way known to them.

Caston wondered momentarily, as had so many scientists attempting to study them, how the insect-like things could worm their way through even the thickest of metals.

He moved slowly down the corridor, pausing as he went to blow the space-mites before him. He caught a mental image of himself doing this here, and he almost shook his head with disbelief. Luke Caston alone with a million space-mites – it was incredible.

Abruptly, he came up against the first of the airtight doors, with a huge wheel on its surface. He turned it, and at once the door slid back.

Air rushed in. He couldn't hear it, and he couldn't feel it pass him, but he saw part of the cloud of dead mites swoop past the door and into the space behind. When the movement stopped.

Caston turned the wheel in the opposite direction, and leaned against the door.

Two minutes would be enough. . . .

He gave it five to be sure, then wound back the door. Dead mites hung before him.

He moved to the second door, and repeated the procedure.

This time the rush of air was greater, and continued for a longer period. The space behind – the corridor and the control-section – was larger. He put the nozzle of his cylinder round the edge of the door, and released most of the remainder of the air for good measure.

When the movement of the air had slowed, he closed the door and waited again.

Another five minutes passed; for Luke Caston, with terrible slowness. Dead space-mites still hung in the confined space between the doors and, thoroughly dead as they appeared to be, they made his flesh creep to look at them.

Finally, he pulled the door open and kicked himself down the short corridor to the control section, spraying air before him. The room, wide and high, was a mass of the dead mites.

But in the centre . . . was the navigation-bowl.

Without any further delay, Caston floated across to it, and laid his hands on its smooth surface. Several times before he'd done this, but on other ships, where the prize wasn't so great. He took his releasing-key and seal from the belt of his suit, inserted the key in the stand, and the bowl came free.

With his other hand, Caston snapped his seal into place, and headed back for the corridor.

The *Princess* was his.

With this, thy nav-bowl, I plight my troth.

With the haste that comes of a suddenly-realised wish to be away from somewhere, he kicked and thrust his way along the corridor to the airlock. Inside, the revolving-gear turned with almost intolerable slowness, and virtually before the lock was fully open, he was outside the ship and floating free in space.

And he shuddered. The muscles in his back and shoulders shook with the reaction of the long minutes unconsciously tensed against the touch of the mites.

Those wire-like bodies, and the fine tendrils that would sting. . . .

Floating free in interstellar space, between two ships with the names of women; both airless, both his. He wheeled in the

vacuum, legs hunched up against his chest, his arms clenched firmly around the heart of the *Princess*.

When the feeling had passed, he used his jets to push himself to the line; then tugged himself across to the battered *Whore*.

Luke Caston, the richest salvage-man in the business. Or the richest retired salvage-man, to put it more accurately.

Inside the *Whore*, he flicked on the artificial gravity, and walked to the control-seat. He checked the reading on the dial that showed how much air was left in his breathing-kit, and re-filled it from one of the two remaining cylinders.

Carefully, he placed the gleaming silver nav-bowl on the empty seat next to his, then made to call up Morreston.

He stopped.

There was a piece of black, furry wire lying on the screen.

He stood up hastily, and clambered clumsily over the back of the seat. Behind him, the walls of the *Whore* were already specked with the mites.

His ship. . . . A glowing hunk of circuits and transistors and sub-drives and reactors, that would attract mites like a magnet would attract iron filings. . . .

Hadn't he just displaced hundreds of thousands of them from their last home?

He backed away, feeling the sudden sweat run down his body.

As he watched, the numbers seemed to re-double. Were they coming through the walls? Or was it just their rate of reproduction? In the right circumstances, like a fully operational but airless spaceship, these things bred like rabbits. . . .

He stepped back to the control seat, and sat down. There was nothing he could do. He thought of calling up Morreston, but stopped again.

Let the bastard sweat for a bit.

Two days it would take, to get back to Earth. He looked down at the surface of the screen. Already, there were eight of the mites squatting there.

In front of him was the *Whore's* own nav-bowl, and he set it for his first reading. As the in-board computer correlated the necessary data, he cut in the sub-drive generators.

A few seconds later, the first short hop took place, and the

Mchant Princess was no longer hanging outside his ports.

He looked at the seat to his side, and saw the nav-bowl beside him. He chuckled.

Five minutes later, he felt a prickle against the skin of his buttocks, as the first of a thousand mites began its death-throes inside his suit.

7

Sentence in Binary Code

If you're going to lose your body, then the Institute of Corrective Therapy would seem to be as good a place as any. That's where Joseph Turatsky lost his, at least.

After a short imprisonment they told him he was what they called politically undesirable, and conducted him under heavy guard to the Institute's HQ in Greenland. Properly applied corrective therapy, they told him, was what he needed.

The panacea for sedition, they called it. But it had to be done properly . . . and they knew all about that.

The precise method was discovered by Turatsky on his second day. After a night in a cell he was taken to a room remarkable for its air of stark functionality. Here they strapped him to a bench, gave him an intravenous injection, then connected his wrists, ankles and cranium to a complicated set of electrodes.

Then someone pulled a switch set into a wall and everything – as the saying goes – went black.

Turatsky hung in a timeless spaceless void for an eternity . . . then a voice said in his ear: 'Hi, bub.'

He tried to look round, but was severely inconvenienced by what felt like a sudden lack of a head. In panic he tried to struggle, then gave that up too.

He didn't have a body either.

But . . . he had heard a voice. Pretty remarkable for someone who had recently discovered he had no head, and hence, presumably, no ears. A good trick, that, but how was it done?

The voice said: 'No trick, friend. It's all done by electronics. The experts call it a digital micro-pulse, and that's what you

think you're hearing. But don't think of it as a voice. You've lost that for good. We all have.'

Turatsky considered this for a moment. "'We'?" he thought experimentally.

'That's right. You and I, and approximately two thousand others, are in electronically-stimulated mental contact with each other.'

'Then where are all the others?'

'They're working, bub. We do a twelve-hour shift here.' The voice seemed to be very close.

'Want to see yourself?' it said suddenly.

At once, a flash of light dazzled him, seeming to come from directly in front. It settled, and took the shape of a square frame, looking down into a brightly-lit room. Seven white-coated men were standing in the room operating various instruments. Against the far wall a figure in a drab grey coverall was lying limply on a bench. As he watched, a stretcher was wheeled in and the body laid upon it. It passed directly beneath his line of vision as they wheeled it out, and the face stared blankly up at him.

The frame faded.

'That was you,' said the voice unnecessarily. 'Remember that sight, bub. It's all you'll be seeing for a long time.'

In the darkness that had followed the glimpse of life, Turatsky felt again a sense of helpless blindness.

'Where is this?' he asked numbly.

'It won't do you much good to know it,' the voice replied. 'But you're in the heart of a computer. Not in body, of course, but your mind and identity are separate and whole . . . locked in here. Specifically, you're now part of one ferrite core in a circuitry containing several thousand.'

'In other words, you're inside a memory bank.'

With an effort, Turatsky absorbed this calmly.

'I'm not dead then?'

'Your body is, although they probably preserve it outside. But your consciousness is alive and will be kept that way as long as possible. We're all lifers here.'

'Thanks, friend.'

'Call me Hank, bub.'

After the initial shock had made itself felt, had become a part of his existence, and then had finally been forgotten, Turatsky

settled into his new life without much difficulty.

The hours were long but fatigue was something now unknown, even though there were no distractions to break the routine. For twelve hours of every day, data was fed into his core in binary impulses. He absorbed it, collated it and stored it.

Around him, two thousand inhabited ferrite cores, Hank and the other lifers, did the same.

At the end of the twelve hours they would pool their information, consolidate it into the bulk of the overall program, then feed this by direct link into the huge analogue Defence Computer at Elmira.

Then the cycle would start again. About once every ten days their computer would be closed down for maintenance work, this being the only kind of rest-period the lifers received.

Once, during one of these maintenance breaks, Turatsky heard Hank and four of the others conferring in minimal micro-pulse. Only fragments of the conversation reached him.

Then Hank said to him: 'We're planning a mass break-out, Joe.'

'You think there's a way out?'

An old lag named Constantine said: 'There's a new guy here. Reckons he knows a way. Says he worked on computers before he was arrested.'

'That's right, ain't it bub?'

A new micro-pulse, one Turatsky hadn't heard before, said: 'Yeah. The way I see it is that we're here for what they call "corrective therapy". And we're learning masses of stuff the whole time - right? And. . . .'

They never had time to hear the rest of it. The input-circuit warmed up without warning, and binary impulses poured into their cores.

But what the new guy had started to say made Turatsky do some thinking. He let the impulses collect in his core and tried to carry on the man's line of thought.

They were receiving data every day, but what were they doing with it all? It was like catching rainwater in a bucket, then throwing it into the river.

Suppose they held some of it back?

More to the point: suppose *he* held some of it back?

The next rest-period, he took the initiative from the new guy and straight away approached the others on the subject.

Hank was frankly sceptical.

'You say we hold out some of the data?' he said. 'But what's the point? It's no use to us!'

The others within hearing laughed.

'There must be some way out of this,' argued Turatsky. 'Otherwise why should they preserve our bodies? That single fact seems to me to indicate that they're expecting to get us out of here sometime.'

'That ain't necessarily the case,' said Constantine. 'What if they keep the bodies just for the sake of appearances?'

'Maybe. But this isn't just a penitentiary. We're here for *correction*. This data coming in all the time – it can't all be for defence. More likely it's a subtle form of psychological conditioning.'

The new guy said: 'Hey! He's got something there.' But the others weren't convinced. Hank, in particular, couldn't see what Turatsky was getting at.

As soon as the next shift started, Turatsky carefully analysed the incoming impulses.

A lot of them were of little apparent use to his theory. One was a long catalogue of various fuel-weights; and another a detailed mathematical analysis of inertia-factors on various kinds of moving parts.

But other pieces of data seemed to have rather more bearing on what he was thinking of.

One was a broad summary of human psychology under physical strain. Another, a justification of total defence-preparedness as a basis for government. This latter in particular was likely to be straight propaganda, and therefore very relevant.

At the end of the long input shift, he went through the data collected by the other lifers. No immediate pattern emerged, but Turatsky stored anything at all that he thought might have some use.

Data accumulated quickly and soon he was able to collect more selectively.

The lifers compared notes frequently, but he realised that most of the others had no real idea of what they were working towards, or why. Only the new guy, whose name had been Manton, Turatsky discovered, had any kind of method at all but even he had no really clear conception of how it could ultimately be used.

Once, Hank said to him quietly: 'Listen bub, I think you're

wasting our time. This propaganda junk isn't going to help us any.'

Turatsky said nothing.

Even he wasn't yet sure how his idea could be put into effect.

Then, halfway through an input-shift, it came to him, and he knew what he had to do.

Input-data was pouring into his ferrite core at its normal rate. He had long since trained his mind to work against this flow and concentrate on other things. Now, not even sure himself of the mechanics of what he was doing, he cut off all incoming pulses. He held the core in a kind of electronic limbo, balancing the pressure of the input flow against the power he found himself able to exert.

Mentally, he sorted the data he held in his memory-bank, then reversed the flow.

From his ferrite core poured a stream of the strongest and purest examples of government propaganda he could find. All his mental energy poured into the effort and for a moment he wondered how long he could sustain it. Out it poured: a paraphrased binary stream of patriotic fervour, as artificially reproduced in his mind as it had been implanted there.

Hank's micropulse came in feebly against the stream.

'What are you doing Joe?' he said, an edge of panic colouring the tone of his electronically-stimulated voice.

Turatsky tried to answer, but before he could do anything he became aware of a total and impermeable quietness.

All the time he'd been inside the computer, he'd never been properly aware of the background sensation of movement and noise. Now in its absence, he was aware of it. An unprecedented silence surrounded him, and he lay inside his core and waited.

In his isolation he thought of Hank, and of Constantine, and of Manton the new guy, and of the others. It worried him to wonder whether he, in his opportunistic use of the raw material available to them all, had in some way betrayed them.

Turatsky opened his eyes.

Sensations threatened to swamp him, his nerve-ends signalled a surplus of information to his spinal complex. There was pressure on his back from a hard bench. And light in his eyes from overhead arcs. And an odour of formaldehyde in his nasal passages. And wetness against his skin. And cold.

The luxury of sensation. . . .

Fluid surrounded the lower half of his body, and trickled away through grooves in the bench he lay upon. He was in a plastic case, and as he moved the sides dropped away and allowed more of the outside air to enter. It was excruciatingly cold.

Overwhelmed by physical sensations he moved experimentally, and rolled off the bench. He fell heavily to the floor, and with trembling arms and legs tried to stand up. Using the top of the bench he levered himself to a semblance of standing, and peered round.

Attached to the casing he noticed a neatly-printed sign bearing his name. Underneath was the legend:

Rehabilitation Committee

**ESCAPED PRISONERS PLEASE REPORT
TO BLOCK D FOR REHABILITATION**

He looked around the vast hall he was in, and saw hundreds of plastic cases similar to the one he had been in. Each one contained the body of a man.

In the next case to his lay the body of a small, wiry negro.

On his sign was written the name: Henry Lucas Wilkes.

Turatsky looked at the negro for several minutes, his hands resting lightly on the lid of the case. Finally he muttered: 'Sorry, bub.'

He shivered, and walked away to find Block D, wondering how long he could successfully play his new role of patriot.

At the end of the next shift, Hank and the other lifers sensed Turatsky's absence.

'The louse,' micro-pulsed Hank, spitting into the void.

8

The Perihelion Man

ONE

In the air-conditioned quietness of the office, Jason Farrell was conscious of a noisy spring somewhere at the back of his black leather swivel chair. In the painful clarity of a morning hangover, Farrell was too aware of the sound, the only disruption of perfection in this wasteland of sterile glass and plastic.

'... on the other hand,' the man on the other side of the desk was saying, a Mr Edward Law, according to the discreet label on his outer-office door. 'On the other hand, we could just give you a lump sum in lieu of your pension, and that would be that.'

'Yes,' Farrell said.

'Well, which do you prefer?'

Farrell tried hard to concentrate. His career was at stake now, decided on by office-bound civilians like this.

'I don't see why I have to be taken off flight-duty,' he said. 'I'm fully recovered and as fit as the next man. My record's good, isn't it?'

Law had a neat pile of quarto paper on his desk and sat with his left hand resting on the top. His fingers tapped slowly.

He nodded. 'Your record's good, but I'm afraid your psych-count isn't. It seems that the accident had brought out one or two deep-laid psychoses in your behaviour-pattern.'

'What the hell do you mean by that?' Farrell demanded, sitting forward sharply.

Law looked at him calmly.

'If you want it in plain English, you drink too much.'

'I've been on leave for six months. You expect me to live it up on milk?'

'We're not interested in effects, Captain Farrell. We think more of causes. The inarguable fact is that within two weeks of being discharged from the Alliance military hospital you were arrested twice for being disorderly. Since then, you've evidently kept out of the way of the law, but your periodic check-ups have shown that you are developing alcoholic tendencies.'

'That's crap, Law,' Farrell said. 'So okay, I do drink a lot more than I did, but I'd be able to stop when I went on flight-duty.'

'It isn't only the drink.'

'What then?'

Law picked up the top sheet of paper and looked at it. He put it aside and took the second sheet.

'Your nerve-reactions are down to 170 on the Cornelius scale. The minimum requirement for space-pilots is 210. Your eye-sight has developed a minor astigmatic variable of just over 97 per cent. A pilot must have 100 per cent eye-sight. The surface electricity of your skin when stimulated by adrenal fluid is insufficient: more than one unit too low. Your passivity rating has dropped sharply and you have developed an aggressivity-quotient of nearly 72. Do you want to hear more?'

'Is there more?'

Law nodded slowly.

'You're finished as a pilot, Farrell.'

'But, hell, that's hardly my fault.'

'We're quite aware of that. Your case has been the subject of a lot of discussion. The Alliance is prepared to be financially generous to you, but can do no more.'

Farrell sat back again in his chair wondering why he hadn't guessed this would happen. God knows, he'd had plenty of advance warning. The long leave, the dozens of medical examinations, the continuing delay in receiving a posting.

For the last two months he'd been in Nassau, soaking into his body as much wine and sunshine as he could manage. From the relative normality of a Bahaman beach, the sun had felt benign and Farrell had been able to convince himself he could come to terms with life again.

'Of course, the Space Administration will be sorry to lose you. You were, I believe, one of their top pilots.'

Farrell said: 'No, that was Tretchi.'

Law shrugged. 'I think he used to say the same about you.'

'Maybe.'

The other man nodded, in a semblance of knowing and understanding. Farrell looked at him with a mixture of contempt and bitter amusement. Law had probably read all that crap that had appeared in the papers after the accident, about Jerry Tretchi dying in space to save his life-long buddy Jason Farrell from a death worse than death. The truth of it was, Farrell thought, that he and Tretchi had hardly known each other before the incident, although they had gone through training at about the same time. Tretchi's photographs had passed into the currency of popular heroes, and his face was now familiar to Farrell. Before the accident, though, he would not have recognised him any more than a dozen other of his fellow-officers.

Tretchi had just happened to be around at the time, that was all. It was a pity he'd died, but that was the way it was. Jerry Tretchi was a dead hero, and Jason Farrell was a live has-been.

'So we come back to the alternatives facing you,' Law said. 'The EASA is willing to find you a good job in one of their Earthbound technical establishments, or even perhaps on one of the Beampower satellites. If this doesn't suit you, you can take advantage of our placement office and find a job in some other industry. Or, as I said earlier, you can just opt out altogether and we'll give you full gratuity and pension rights.'

Farrell stared at the man for a moment. Had he, Farrell wondered, ever been out into space? How could a man talk in terms of money and jobs when a career in space had suddenly ended?

Farrell was no romantic and scoffed at the so-called poets of the space-age. Their lines of verse about the loneliness of the skies and the stellar majesties of space hardly scraped the surface of what it was all about. To Farrell it was a very personal thing something he'd never managed to communicate to the other spacemen he'd known, even though they all had their own reasons for going into space. It was nothing he could ever say in words, nor convey to others. Something about leaving a planet so far behind that it became little more than a point of faint light . . . then returning to it, and seeing it grow in your scan-screen. . . . It was a break with security that carried a kick like sex and it never wore off.

When he died, Farrell had once promised himself, it would be at the station on Mars. Lonely, it was, and perhaps a little primitive too. But the sight of Earth in the deep-blue morning

skies of Mars was something he'd seen once and he hungered for it again.

'Well?'

'You want me to tell you now?'

'If you want time to decide, it's up to you. But we'd prefer it if you'd tell us now.'

'There's no way round it?'

Law shook his head slowly.

'Not even a non-piloting job in space?'

'No,' Law said. 'You know the regulation as it stands now: Every member of a ship's crew in space must conform to maximum health specifications whatever their allotted task. There is nothing, absolutely nothing you can do, Captain Farrell, to get back into the Alliance force.'

'I see.'

Farrell looked at the other man and found his composure suddenly irritating. He sat back in his seat now, half in profile, so that he looked at Farrell from an angle. His hand rested again on the pile of papers, those papers that stood between him and his life, and his fingers tapped.

Farrell leaped to his feet in a surge of anger that surprised himself and leaned forward across the desk.

'Listen, you smug bastard!' he shouted. 'You don't give a damn about what happens to people like me. Just because I'm not a bloody hero like Tretchi, I'm penalised!'

'Sit down, Farrell.' Law had raised his voice too.

'No! The Earth Alliance has full control of spaceflight and you know it. If you can't fly for EASA, you can't fly. And you talk about forms and pensions.'

Law reached across his desk and pressed a button.

'This hysteria you're showing now is part of the reason you've had it. It was the outcome of the accident. We can do nothing. We're sorry.'

Two uniformed Planetary Marines had come into the office and they saluted to Law.

He said: 'Captain Farrell's just leaving.'

Farrell turned and looked at them. 'So I get an escort from the building, do I? Like I'm some troublemaker.'

Law said, 'Don't make it worse. This isn't anyone's fault and it's certainly not mine. You're allowing your instincts to overrule your judgment. If you went into space now you'd be a hazard

not only to yourself but to other people. You've had it, Farrell. You've had it.'

He nodded to the two Marines who stood to attention. Farrell looked at Law for ten long seconds, then turned and walked towards the door.

'Let us know within a week, Farrell. We'll do our best for you.'

Farrell said nothing and walked out of the office. Although the Marines followed him through the building, he ignored them. Down on the street he grabbed a shuttle-cab to the airport, and took the first strato-jet back to Nassau.

Two weeks later he was reconciled to his new life, though still had no idea of what he was going to do with it.

His first instinct on leaving the Earth Alliance Space Administration building had been to go on a drunk, but his pride had intervened in time. That, he'd told himself on the strato-jet, would be precisely what Law would expect him to do. If he had no alternative about his future, then he'd be damned if he'd conform to what was expected of him.

In Nassau, his life quickly reverted to what it had been before Law's summons to the EASA, but without the alcohol.

During the day he would alternately swim in the warm blue Caribbean, eat with little interest of the local foods, and lie for hours at a time in the hot, white sunshine. He could not get enough of the sun, thirsting for it in the night and gorging himself in its liquid heat during the long days. By now, his body was a shiny, chestnut brown and the object of admiring curiosity from the many young women using the same beaches. Oblivious of their presence, Farrell ate and swam and slept, trying to lose the irrational urge to get back into space.

Before his interview with Law, Farrell's patience had been fed by the knowledge that everything was a matter of time. Now, in one blow, his hopes ruined by the laws of medicine, impatience was a sensation not one quarter of what he fought down.

And two weeks later, the memory of the metal ships in the spaces between Earth, the Moon, Mars, and Venus was a hard, unpleasant knot that he was able to ignore most of the time.

The thought of Venus roused in him the vague, uneasy sensation most spacemen experienced at the mention of that silent and enigmatic planet. To date, no man had set foot on the clouded planet; or at least perhaps man had, but had not lived to tell the story. For after the first six ships from Earth had disappeared without trace, taking with them over a hundred and twenty

crew-members, man had given Venus a wide berth.

The wild stories that had sprung up over the years and the legends passed on down the generations of spacemen, attributed to Venus a mantle of myth and mystery that survived even until today.

The Earth Alliance spread across the inner reaches of the Solar System, encompassing Earth, the Moon, and Mars. On the Moon, several cities existed, living by the raw-material mines that the Moon's rich crust yielded. On Mars, a solitary scientific station in Syrtis Major expanded slowly year by year. One day, too, there would be cities on Mars; sometime, centuries away perhaps, Mars would be terraformed completely and man could use it as a second home. Now expeditions pushed out into the asteroids. Man's spreading through the Solar System was slow, but it was sure.

Only Venus remained defiantly outside man's reach.

It was near Venus that Farrell's accident had happened. He had been captain of a ship with fifteen men aboard when an explosion had torn at the central hull. In seconds, everyone on board, with the exception of Farrell and his second-in-command who had been in the control-capsule at the time, had been dead. Drifting without power or control, Farrell's ship had started to fall into the sun . . .

He opened his eyes sharply, as a shadow fell across his face. 'Captain Farrell?'

Farrell squinted up. It was a man, his head coronaed by the sun so Farrell could not see his face. He rolled over.

'Yes.'

The man sat down on the sand beside him. Farrell sat up and looked at him.

He was dressed, like Farrell, in shorts. His body, though was white and unhealthy-looking in the bright sunshine. Farrell thought: he shouldn't be in the sun like that, he'll catch sun-stroke.

'On holiday, Captain Farrell?' the man said.

'How did you know who I was?'

The man laughed. 'Instinct, I suppose. Anyway, I asked at your hotel.'

'Are you from EASA?'

'No. Why did you ask?'

Farrell said, 'For some reason I've been expecting them to come here.'

'I don't think they'll do that, Captain. I've told them I was coming to see you. Although they don't exactly approve of what I want to talk to you about, they won't be interfering.'

'What do you want?' Farrell said in a way that was just this side of impoliteness.

'I've come to offer you a job.'

Farrell closed his eyes and lay back on the sand.

'I'm not interested. I'll worry about work when the gratuity runs out.'

Beside him, the man started scooping up handfuls of the fine white sand and making furrows.

'I think you should listen, Captain Farrell. It's a job in space.'

He opened his eyes.

'You're not serious.'

'Why shouldn't I be?' the man said.

'If EASA really did know about this, they wouldn't let you within a hundred miles of me. I'm banned for life, by courtesy of the medics.'

The man glanced round, looking at the other people on the beach, some of whom were within earshot.

He said to Farrell: 'I'm serious Captain Farrell, but I'd rather we didn't talk about it here. Could we walk?'

Farrell climbed to his feet, and grinned.

TWO

'My name's Jervis, by the way,' the man said. 'Nicholas Jervis.'

Farrell said: 'Glad to know you, Mr Jervis.'

They were walking along the edge of the sea, where tiny wavelets spread across smooth pebbles. Down here by the sea, a soft wind blew against their bodies, tempering the harsh sunlight.

Jervis put his hand in a pocket and pulled out a blue tee-shirt made of a light fabric. He slipped it on over his chest and Farrell mentally felt relief, knowing well enough the harmful effects of too much sun.

He said, after they had walked well away from the crowd, 'Excuse my eagerness, Mr Jervis, but you mentioned a space job.'

'I take it you're interested already?'

Farrell grinned again. 'If it's in space, it's enough for me.'

'I think you should know more about it before we settle the deal,' Jervis said. 'Not many men would do this.'

'Well, try me.'

They'd left the main beach and had entered a small cove cut out of the high cliffs that rose here. They stepped over small rocks that now replaced the pebbles along the shore.

'Before I say anything else,' Jervis said, 'I should tell you that I represent the Disarmament Preservation Administration.'

'I've not heard of it.'

'I shouldn't think you have. Very few people have, indeed. It was first formed about eighty years ago and became a dormant entity about ten years later. And it stayed that way until only recently.'

'You may not know this, but during the Cold War and its after-effects, during the later part of the twentieth century, many hundreds of satellites were put into orbit around the Earth. A lot of these were for ostensibly peaceful or scientific purposes, but not all. Both sides put into orbit several hundred nuclear weapons, as well as a large quantity of micro-bacteriological weapons.'

'When the Alliance of Nations was eventually formed to take over world government in 2047 everyone tried to keep quiet about these devices. When the secret finally broke there was a hell of a storm and the DPA was formed.'

Farrell said, 'I take it the satellites weren't the only reason.'

'No. Of course, once everyone disarmed, supervision by the Alliance had to be extremely close for many years. The problem presented by the satellites was much greater. The bacteriological ones, strangely enough, were the simplest to dispose of – the germ-plasma had a determinable life-span and after that they were declared harmless.'

'However, the nuclear devices were in most cases made of materials with extremely long life. Most of them are still in perfect condition today.'

'Today?' Farrell said.

Jervis nodded. 'It was eventually decided that by this time the Alliance was so strong that there was nobody on Earth who could or would be able to use the devices. Under the circumstances of the time, the best policy seemed to be to leave the satellites just where they were – safely in orbit. This was done, the DPA was disbanded, and an annual check was conducted from space that all the satellites were still there.'

'This was done until last year. Then it was discovered that about a hundred of the satellites were no longer in orbit.'

He paused to let this sink in.

'Then's who's got them?' Farrell asked.

Jervis shrugged. 'I don't know and neither does the Council of the Alliance. The DPA was rapidly re-formed and its been our baby ever since.'

'What's the position now?'

'As soon as we found out, steps were taken to get the remainder back down to Earth. This was completed in three months, done at crash-priority level. But not before another two hundred and fifty had disappeared.'

Farrell whistled. 'How would they be stolen? By matching velocities?'

'Yes. Nothing could be easier. It could almost be done by some enthusiastic youngster in a space-yacht. Anybody, any bloody person on Earth almost, could have done it. They were there for the taking and someone took them.'

'So where do I come into it?'

Jervis looked at him. 'We want them back.'

They had stopped walking now and were standing on a large boulder that lay by the water's edge. Waves splashed gently against it. Farrell sat down and dangled his feet into the clear, warm water.

'Do you know where they are?'

Jervis said: 'Not until three weeks ago, we didn't. But we know where most of them are now. An astronomer saw what he thought was a large cloud of meteors or minor asteroids occulting the sun, looked more closely - and there they were.'

Farrell looked up in surprise.

'Whoever's done it means business,' Jervis said. 'There are two hundred and fifty thermonuclear bombs orbiting the sun between Mercury and Venus and there's a spaceship guarding them.'

Minutes passed. Farrell was watching a tiny piece of bright-green seaweed below the surface of the water. As the waves went backwards and forwards over it, it waved its fronds to and fro.

Finally, he said, 'I'll do it, on two conditions.'

'Name them.'

'One, you guarantee me a space-side job afterwards until normal retirement age.'

'Done.'

Farrell looked surprised, then pleased.

'Secondly, you tell me why the Council of the Alliance doesn't send out the EASA in force and blow the ship to stardust.'

Jervis said, thoughtfully, 'I expected you to ask that. The answer isn't easy.'

'On this issue, the Council is in something of a political pickle. You see, it has had to accept full responsibility for the theft of the devices. The sins of the forefathers and all that. If the bombs hadn't been allowed to remain in orbit when they were, nobody would have been able to steal them. So the Council itself, which has the final say in the administration of the Alliance, is in no position to take a strong line here.'

'In the second place, there is a strong movement at the moment in the Asian countries for self-determination. This sort of thing has happened before and the Alliance has survived it. But coming at this moment, when the culprit country or vested interest is totally unknown, it is felt that a move of force against this spaceship could endanger the whole structure of the Alliance itself if in fact one of the Asian countries were responsible.'

'So whoever goes out to tackle our unknown friends in the spaceship must be totally discreet and acting alone. He must not fly under the Alliance colours, nor appear to represent the Alliance in any way. On the other hand, he will have the total resources of the Alliance behind him.'

Farrell said: 'Is that a hint about a fee?'

'It is,' Jervis said gravely.

'Well, you can forget it. I wouldn't do this for money. You can cover my expenses if you like, but that's all. It might sound trite, but if this is a way back into space, I'll take it.'

Jervis said, 'I assume then that you have no objection to starting almost at once?'

'No, of course not.' He climbed to his feet, and the two men started back towards the main beach.

A thought struck Farrell and he said, 'Why did you come after me in particular, Jervis? There must have been dozens of better pilots in the EASA you could have talked into doing this.'

'There are, of course. But you have one advantage over all the others. You're rather unique you know, Farrell. Do you realise that you are the one human being who has been closest to the sun and lived? When Tretchi rescued you, your ship was less than sixty million miles from the sun.'

'You can withstand heat, Captain Farrell. We don't know

why, but your body is burn-resistant. No one else in EASA could get anywhere near that ship.'

Farrell said: 'But what——?'

'I know what you're going to say. It's what we all want to know. *What* is inside that spaceship?'

Three days later Captain Jason Farrell, newly recommissioned into EASA, blasted off from Beampower Station No 18 and began the long drop down into the sun.

The ship he flew, which he had immediately christened *The Lawless* more as a gesture to his desk-flying adversary at EASA headquarters than anything else, was a converted Alliance transport. He was familiar with the type, having once bucketed one all over the Martian sky for several weeks, but this had been converted almost out of all recognition.

For a start, its hull had been fined down and glazed, so that it shone like a mirror. Then, over this original hull they had laid on fifteen separate outer skins, made of black non-inflammable fibre. When he'd asked one of the technicians at Beampower 18 why they'd stopped at fifteen, the man said: 'You were ready to leave. We could have added them almost indefinitely . . .'

When Farrell approached the spaceship guarding the bombs, he'd be coming down out of the black. If even a square foot of his insulated hull showed at the time he'd stand out like a candle in a darkened room. The black outer hulls would vaporise off relatively quickly, but until they were all gone he would be almost invisible to any observer on the spaceship.

Around the cabin, the technicians had rigged heavy radiation-shielding. Enough, Jervis told him, to keep out almost anything the sun could throw at him. His main problem would be the heat – and the glazed hull and refrigeration plant should be sufficient to keep that down to levels he could survive.

The second major modification they'd made to *The Lawless* was the armaments. They'd given Farrell the choice of virtually every portable weapon to man, but he'd finally plumped for a vacuum-torpedo tube slung underneath the belly of the ship and an array of self-aiming heavy lasers. If he had time to stand and aim at anything hostile, he'd argued to Jervis, he could use the torpedoes. If he had to run, or scrap around in weightless conditions, he'd need something relatively light for in-fighting.

But privately Farrell was hoping he wouldn't have to use the weapons.

The third modification was definitely not to his liking. The normal ion drive engines had been ripped out and replaced by a Beampower pulse engine.

'What the hell's that bloody thing in there for?' he'd howled at Jervis when he saw it. 'If I have to run for it, I'll need to change direction at will.'

Jervis had held out his fingers and patiently counted off the reasons.

'One: we've had to take out the navigational computer to expand the hold. At the same time we put in Beampower shields. Two: without a computer you'll never find what you've gone for. Three: we aren't sure a computer would work that near to the sun anyway. Four: an ion drive engine wouldn't be powerful enough to get you away from the sun afterwards. Five: you won't need to carry inflammable fuel near the sun. Six: you——'

'All right, all right,' Farrell had said. 'You win.'

The snag with Beampower, or paser to give it its more widely used name, was that you could only go in one direction. That is, in whichever direction the Beam was pointing and no other. If the Beam moved, then so did you. A paser did for sub-atomic energy what a laser did for light. A narrow beam of energy was laid across space in any chosen direction and as many ships as required could blast up and down it without carrying their own fuel. The difference between a conventional rocket and a Beampower pulser was analogous to that between the old steam-engines and the later electric locomotives. Normally, Beampower was used for regular trade-routes between planets and satellites, but because of the ever-changing conjunctions of the planets, the Beams were transmitted from specially built satellites around the primaries and which homed in on each other constantly.

But before a Beam was laid, a receiving station had to be built. So the conventional rockets still blasted their way out to new frontiers and only afterwards could the stolid pulsers follow.

'What are you going to do about a receiver for the Beam?' Farrell had asked. 'You can't tell me you've already built one.'

Jervis and the technicians had laughed.

'We don't need one. We just point the Beam into the sun . . .'

There were other disadvantages too, ones that Farrell hadn't foreseen. The first was that the technicians could not point the Beam directly towards the spaceship. If they did, the Beam would be detected immediately. Not only this, Jervis had added,

but if the nuclear piles inside the hydrogen bombs were exposed to an unshielded Beam for more than a few seconds they detonated.

So although the Beam could be directed with pinpoint accuracy, the one that Farrell would ride would deliberately miss his target.

To further complicate matters, if he was forced to leave the Beam he could do so, but his batteries would last only minutes.

'That,' Farrell had observed morosely, 'would make dog-fighting a peach.'

Once away from the Beampower satellite orbiting the Earth, Farrell felt immediately better. In spite of his slightly grudging attitude towards Jervis and the technicians he had to admit that *The Lawless* handled like a dream. The feeling of solid accelerative push was comforting to Farrell and although the ship could move with perfect safety on automatics, he spent several hours at the controls, just savouring the feel of it.

Away from Earth . . .

Farrell watched his rear scan-screen with fascination, seeing the brilliant globe of Earth begin to dwindle behind him. However far down into the sun he went, the Earth would remain a brilliant star at zenith.

Down into the sun . . .

As once before, in fifteen hours of pain and fear, Farrell had fallen in the wrecked remains of his ship, into the sun.

THREE

Three days away from Earth, he reversed the polarity of the pulsers and began the long deceleration. He did this early, wanting to be at a manoeuvrable speed well before reaching what he was beginning to think of as the combat zone. Also, he was unsure of the effect of the sun's gravity on his overall velocity.

Jervis had told him that the nuclear devices and their mysterious watchdog spaceship were orbiting the sun at a height of about sixty-five million miles, or just inside the orbit of Venus. The sun's effect at this distance on even a properly-refrigerated spaceship would be most uncomfortable.

Alone now, Farrell began to think again of the accident. Already, the refrigeration equipment on *The Lawless* was full on

and the temperature was slowly beginning to mount. The temperature of the outermost fibre skin was high, nearing 250 degrees. Melting point for that was 600.

He shut his eyes and relaxed on his deceleration-couch.

Hawkins has brought him some of the ersatz coffee in which the ship specialises. Everyone on board is feeling edgy because of that clouded planet that's looming up in the starboard scanners and nervous jokes spatter across the crew's quarters. Only that cheerful bastard Farrell doesn't show any signs of nerve and he just flies on. Only, thinks Farrell, they can't feel this band of nervous sweat around my waist, or that saliva in my mouth. Then the ship explodes and Hawkins is thrown against him with his leg torn off at the hip-bone, and his blood is everywhere. Somehow, the control-capsule is airtight still and the tiny coolant system is working. Apart from that there's silence. Oh God, let it be quick. Slowly, the ship starts to tumble . . . mercifully away from Venus, but into mother sun. Hawkins grins up at me, his lips are white with pain. I look at the poor swine helplessly, apologising profusely and uselessly before blowing his brains out with the emergency-pistol. Hawkins still grins at Farrell and in the cramped space there is nowhere else to look. And down and down, wheeling faster now, as the temperature starts to mount and the coolant system begins to make a whining noise that must surely mean it will pack up. What is the highest temperature man can sustain? thinks Farrell and I puke into my lap and across Hawkins' grinning face. The dosimeter on the bulkhead is in the red, my gamma-count must be impossibly high. Regulation two hundred and fourteen I must report for hospitalisation at the nearest medical base equipped with standard equipment serial number . . . and I rip the dosimeter from the wall and smash it against the instrument-panel making my hand bleed and the blood too drips on poor Hawkins who only grins. Farrell's eyes lose vision in the fourteenth hour and his hands lose sensation. Only his ears go on working in the killing heat and the deathful silence. Flocculent saliva specks his lips and he defecates constantly into his uniform. The barrel of the pistol is in his mouth and his finger is tightening on the trigger and his foot is braced against something soft that is probably part of Hawkins' leg, when I hear a crunch of metal on metal and the wheeling stops with a lurch that throws me violently to the right and I smash my head against the other bulkhead and I think I'm dead. Someone grabs me and I feel the burn of hot metal against my skin where

a vacuum suit touches me and everything starts to howl.

And Farrell opens his eyes in a scoutship, where a man called Jerry Tretchi lies dead from extreme heat-exhaustion . . .

And Farrell opened his eyes and found he was sweating.

On the sixth day, Farrell was coasting in the gravity of the sun, using his decelerative pulsers to maintain control and speed. He crossed the orbit of Venus in the plane of the ecliptic, relieved with the instinctive and irrational tradition of the spaceman that the planet was millions of miles away and in sight merely as a disc of light whose crescent-shaped brilliance was dimmed only by the immensity of the sun.

What of Venus? he wondered. Were the stories of it based only on superstition? Could it be inhabited, as some people and most spacemen guessed? If so, any intelligent life-form would have to exist either in buildings or caves far underground; or on oxygen-starved plains where winds of carbon-dioxide reached three hundred miles an hour and in impossible temperatures.

Or perhaps the early losses of men and ships could be accounted for by accidents. There was talk, even now, of getting up a seventh expedition.

The explosion of his own ship left many questions unanswered.

But Farrell's main concern now was the sun.

Occupying the whole of his forward scanner, stopped down to a gain-rate of virtually nonexistent proportions, the white disc of the sun dominated Farrell's vision and thoughts. Already the outer skin of his ship had dropped away and the second one was nearing 600 degrees.

By dead reckoning, the location of his objective should be somewhere here. There was very little Farrell could do himself. His scanners would pick up any metal in the vicinity, and to use his eyes on the vision-screen the whole time was not only superfluous, but tiring too.

Again, aware that the crucial minutes were approaching, he lay back on his deceleration couch and tried to relax.

In minutes, he was startled by the abrupt ringing of his alarm. He ran to the controls and took his seat.

The scanners reported an object or objects some five miles to his port. Farrell mentally offered apologies to Jervis for doubting that the passer could be used with such accuracy. Across twenty-seven million miles of space and to be five miles out and intend

to be, was the nearest thing to scientific precision he was ever likely to experience.

He checked his velocity immediately and adjusted the deceleration-pulses of the engine to match exactly the pull of the sun. Now, to all purposes, he was in the same orbit as the object.

Farrell glanced at his hull-readings and saw to his alarm that in the last few minutes the ship had lost another six of its skins. He was now down to seven and even as he watched the dials another one shrivelled away. He thought quickly. At that rate, and Jervis had warned him they would vaporise progressively quicker the more that were lost, he had about ten minutes left. There was, quite literally, no time to waste.

He switched off the Beam receptors and cut in the bank of solid-state batteries, then moved forward out of the paser-beam towards the object his scanners showed.

He peered anxiously at his vision-screen, knowing that if he was to survive he must sight and identify the other ship first. If he was seen when his mirror-bright hull was finally exposed and he still had not positively located the other, then he would lose all his advantage.

The sixth remaining outer skin suddenly vaporised. Five left.

He glanced at his thermometer and found to his surprise that the cabin-temperature was now more than 110 degrees Fahrenheit. He saw that the cooling-system was turned up full, but still the needle of the dial crept round remorselessly.

His target materialised on his vision-screen and Farrell looked at it intently.

The definition on his screen was not fine enough to pick out each object individually, but what could only be a crowded mass of the old nuclear satellites clustered round each other in space. Farrell saw them on his screen as a haze of black specks and streaks.

But above and behind the cloud of satellites squatted the spaceship he had come to find.

He looked closely at its image in the screen.

What nation on Earth could have built this? He had seen nothing like it before. It was shaped like two long white cylinders bisecting each other at right angles. It was rotating slowly, not along the axis of either of the cylindrical hulls but in its own plane, like the spokes of a space-station without the circumference hull.

Farrell stared at it with a mounting sense of horror. *Could* this

have been built on Earth? If so, then where? Certainly, he had never seen anything like it before.

Simultaneously, a dial before his eyes registered zero and the spaceship stopped rotating.

Farrell glanced at the dial – he had lost the last of his outer skins. Now his polished hull, shined to beat back as much of the sun's heat as it could, would itself be blazing like a minor sun.

But the other ship had stopped rotating.

Somehow, Farrell knew that he had been seen. The ship had stopped and it was because of him.

His tiny *Lawless* moved on slowly towards the other ship.

Immediately in front of him an explosion of light fogged out his vision-screen and a sharp blast-wave rocked his ship. His cabin-lights flicked out, then flicked on again. Farrell swore.

He jabbed at the controls and changed direction. At once, a second explosion shattered the approximate part of space he would have been in. In front of him he saw the cross-shaped ship rear up and away from the cloud of nuclear bombs and come directly towards him. Its movements were sudden and quick as it bore down towards him.

'Right, you bloody bastards,' he swore under his breath. If that's the way you want it.'

He lined up *The Lawless* on a dead-ahead line, with the big ship fully in his screen. He kicked his foot against the firing-pedal and felt a jolt of adrenalin go through his body as the recoil from the torpedo-tube ran through the ship.

He changed direction as soon as he felt the two torpedoes go, then again and again. Explosions sheeted around his ship, frightening him with their accuracy. One was no more than a hundred feet from his ship, but its blast-effect was minor. That first one, Farrell thought, must have been *really* close. In space, there's nothing to carry a blast wave.

He watched the spaceship in his screen, counting off the seconds. Another explosion dead ahead scared him badly but did little damage.

And then the other ship exploded as the self-homing torpedoes hit home.

Farrell watched in fascination. The first spurt of flame came from near the centre, where the two hulls joined each other. A second later, spouts of white-hot flame exploded outwards, breaking the back of the ship. It folded in half, then part of it dropped away. Another explosion tore at it, spinning the wreck

away from him in a grotesque, staggering cartwheel of torn metal.

Farrell glanced at his thermometer. The temperature in the cabin was approaching 135 degrees Fahrenheit and his hands were shaking. Moisture ran down his face, and over his lips.

Five Earthside days later, Farrell eased *The Lawless* back into the bay of the satellite Beampower 18. In the hold of the ship lay between a hundred and fifty and two hundred of the nuclear devices, all that he had been able to get aboard. The rest still lay in a loose formation, orbiting the sun.

The actual job of collecting and stowing the bombs had been arduous and extremely tiring.

Because his batteries lasted for a maximum of thirty minutes, he had had to return continually to the paser-beam to recharge them. As a result, he'd made about twenty sorties to grab the bombs with the electromagnetic grapples, the whole time working in the impossible heat.

Finally, hardly caring whether or not the nuclear weapons were adequately shielded from the Beam, he had slumped back on to his couch and spent the major part of the return trip asleep.

As he slid *The Lawless* backwards into the launching bay, Farrell noticed that dozens of men in combat-suits stood in loose groups. Each one carried a hand-laser, and, at the neck of the bay, Farrell saw that two heavy-duty cannons had been discreetly mounted.

He suited up and climbed down out of the confined cabin, through the body of the ship and came out on to the bay platform. A soldier came up to him and Farrell realised suddenly that the uniforms they were wearing were not EASA ones, but of the Planetary Marines.

The man saluted him.

'Captain Farrell, sir. Major M'gawi. Mr Jervis requested that you report to his office as soon as you return.'

Farrell looked round.

'What's going on here, M'gawi?'

'Full alert, sir. Mr Jervis is anxious to see you.' He stepped backwards and Farrell moved past him.

Inside the recompression lock, he took off his space helmet. He had only once before seen Planetary Marines carrying arms and that had been during a crew-mutiny at a small station on the Moon. Even then, they had not had to use them. Everything

seemed peaceable enough, he thought, looking round as he moved up through the levels towards Jervis's office.

He stopped at the hatch, banged his first against it, and walked in.

Jervis was sitting at a large desk, looking tired and distraught. At one side a makeshift bunk had been made and it was covered untidily with crumpled sheets and blankets.

The man stood up as Farrell walked in.

'Thank God you're back,' he said. 'What happened?'

Farrell recounted what had happened with the other ship and described it to him.

'The bastards shot first,' he said. 'I had no opportunity to get near them.'

'That's all right,' Jervis said. 'The ship was destroyed, though?'

'Yes.'

'Describe it to me in as much detail as you can.'

Farrell complied, drawing a rough sketch of the strange ship.

'I've never seen anything like it. It was rotating when I first saw it, but as soon as it sighted me it stopped.'

Jervis said, 'Did you get the bombs?'

'Not all of them. I couldn't fit them into the hold.'

'Where are the rest of them?'

'I left them where they were. I figured no one would be coming back for them in a hurry.'

Jervis sat back in his seat.

'Someone will, I'm afraid. If they haven't done so already.'

'What?'

Jervis shrugged. 'Did you see the Marines down there?'

'I was going to ask you about that.'

'I'll bet you were.' Jervis opened a drawer in his desk, and pulled out a tiny tape-cassette machine. 'Listen to this.'

He pressed a button and a high-pitched grating noise came out, reminding Farrell of the sound created by two sharp metallic edges rubbing against each other.

'That, believe it or not, is English. The distortion isn't electronic, although you would be excused for thinking that. In fact, we gather that that is the way they talk.'

'They?'

The other man shrugged again.

'They,' he repeated. 'We don't know, either. About two days ago every radio and television channel on Earth was jammed with this noise. It went on for twelve hours, until some boffin down

there managed to get it transcribed into something recognisable. By that time, Melbourne had already been destroyed.'

Farrell sat forward sharply. 'Melbourne? Destroyed?'
'I'm afraid so.'

Jervis leaned across the desk and picked up Farrell's sketch of the spaceship. He tossed it back to him.

'That's not the only one of its kind. There are another thirty of them orbiting Earth at the moment. They're hostile.'

He stopped the noise coming out of the cassette machine.

'Translated, that recording says something like this: That we people of Earth agree to provide the peoples of somewhere unpronounceable with a certain quantity of fissionable material every year. That quantity, incidentally, is impossible to attain – somewhere in the region of ten thousand tons a year so far as we can gather. Until such time as we agree to it, reprisals will be effected upon our cities. Melbourne was H-bombed yesterday. We gather that another city will be destroyed some time tomorrow.'

Farrell sat in silence for nearly two minutes.

'Why doesn't the Council attempt to negotiate?' he asked finally.

'They did. For two hours there was no reply, then the message started up again.'

'I see. There's no doubt, then, that they mean business?'

Jervis shook his head slowly. 'None whatsoever.'

'Then why don't we——?'

'Send someone up to shoot them down? We have.'

'And——?'

'And nothing. Apparently our friends were ready for them. Meanwhile, they continue to broadcast their terms.'

Again Farrell sat silently.

'You said they came from somewhere unpronounceable. Where's that?'

Jervis looked at a piece of paper before him.

'The nearest we can get to it is something like: "Yehkhathech". But that's an approximation. You should hear the way *they* say it.'

'That's what they call it. What do we call it?'

Jervis looked at him. 'We don't know for certain,' he said. 'But there are rumours . . .'

'You mean Venus?'

'There's nowhere else. Everything points to it, however impossible it is to imagine.'

Farrell nodded dumbly.

'One thing is absolutely certain. They're not from Earth. Every member-nation has solemnly sworn ignorance of these ships. Even the breakaway Asian countries have reaffirmed their solidarity with the Alliance.'

'Where are the ships now?'

Again Jervis looked at some paper in his desk.

'They're in a tight bunch, orbiting the Earth at about seven thousand miles. It's not a fixed orbit, as they vary it directionally every few minutes. But we've got a fix on them and changes are immediately recorded. The Council's got an electronic map of their orbital path.'

'And there aren't any more of them?'

'No . . . At least, not at the moment.'

Farrell was thinking quickly.

'How many raids have we sent up against them?'

'After the first one we sent up two more, but both of those broke off almost as soon as they were in sight. There's a lot of defensive hardware around.'

'What's the orbital height of this Beampower satellite?'

'Nineteen thousand miles.'

'So we're a considerable height above them. Do you think they know we're here?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'But they're leaving us alone.'

Jervis nodded. 'And all the other satellites so far.'

'Good.'

He scribbled hastily on a piece of paper on Jervis's desk.

'Will you give me a chance to have a go at them?' he said without looking up.

'No,' Jervis said coldly.

'Why the hell not?'

'We don't want to lose you.'

As Jervis had once done to him, Farrell held up his hand and spread out his fingers. He thrust them under the other man's face.

'One: I've got a ship out there fully armed. Two: I'll be coming at them from a direction they won't be expecting - above. Three: I've fought these bastards before and not only survived but beaten them. Four: you can afford to lose me. Five: if

someone acts now we might save the lives of the people that live in whichever city it is to be bombed.'

'It's still no.'

'Why?'

'Because – because you'll be wasting your time and your life.'

Farrell said, 'You didn't mind that a week ago.'

The other man stared at him for a second or two. 'All right. But I'll have to warn the Council.'

'No. If you do that the message might be monitored. I want to be able to surprise them.'

Jervis jumped to his feet and came round the desk. He grabbed Farrell's hand and pumped it.

'I'll get my men on the beam to give you every assistance. But on one condition.'

'Which is?'

'I get my H-bombs back before you go.'

Farrell laughed. 'You're welcome to them,' he said.

FOUR

An hour later, Jason Farrell was in space again, hovering in *The Lawless* about a mile from the Beampower satellite. He was strapped into the control-seat in an immovable web of harness. Because of the varying orbital directions of the alien craft it was possible that the paser-beam would have to be moved while he was in flight. Although this was possible, unless all shipboard crew were firmly strapped down the resultant inertial sideways movements could kill them.

Farrell's plan was crude, but of necessity simple.

He was restricted to flying along the Beam and then only when it was pointing into the sun. So he and the directional crew on the Beampower satellite had to wait until the aliens' orbit brought them over the horizon of the Earth and up into the sunrise. For a few brief minutes they would be in the region of the paser-beam and during that time Farrell could attack.

Using the combined forces of the pulse engine, the gravitational field of the sun and the Earth, Farrell hoped to build up enough speed to make one fast passing attack and be away before he was seen.

Because of the radio-silence – no one had yet come up with an effective way of speaking by tele-communications to a ship inside

the paser-beam – there was no way he could call on the satellite for help.

So he was on his own.

He looked at the chronometer, set to Greenwich normal time, on the control-console. 14.07 hours. It was estimated that the first signs of the alien ships coming over the horizon would be around 14.22.

Directly in front of him was the sun, touching on the Earth's horizon. Its energy was dissipated; the stunning heat of it where he had been a few days before was still a kind of mental enervation in Farrell's memory. He watched it dispassionately. Somewhere in that molten ball of nuclear reaction were the constituent molecules of his old ship.

14.12. He selected the forward polarity, and *The Lawless* began to move forward at an acceleration of one gravity. Slowly, but slowly, it built up speed.

In the vacuum torpedo tubes slung beneath the belly of the ship there were twelve torpedoes ready to be fired. He had only to pass within ten or twelve miles of the alien fleet, fire off the torpedoes and with any luck whatsoever he should be able to cut the number of ships by half.

At 14.21 the alien fleet appeared over the horizon of the Earth.

On his long-range screen they showed as a series of tiny blips. He slammed his control-lever forward and felt the surge of acceleration as his pulse motor developed its full power.

And down into the Earth . . .

Before him lay the curving lip of Earth, white and dazzling with the sun close beside it.

And into the sun.

On his screen the blips had now resolved themselves into thirty clearly-defined shapes. Huge crossed cylinders, spinning for some mysterious purpose known only to those who flew them and those who built them. Lazy, rolling like the slow-moving propellers of an idling sea-ship, wedged tight in against one another in an impenetrable formation. A bizarrerie of alien machinery against a sudden sky and down below a wrecked Australian city with a million charred corpses. An intrusion of evil into a planet which, after more than two thousand years of war, had at last found a semblance of lasting peace and was growing to live with it. And, crippled by that very peace, the planet would die for the lack of preparedness.

The Lawless roared on down. Farrell watched his forward screen constantly.

With an abruptness that horrified him, the alien ships stopped rotating.

Had they seen him?

He kept his hands hard on the control-lever, knowing that nothing now, short of the collapse of the Beam, could stop him. He felt as if he hung in the webbing of his belts, falling from the heavens on to the fleet of alien craft.

In his screen, he lost the ships.

He took one hand from the control-lever, worked the finder mechanism so that the field of coverage was widened. The ships moved, broken their orbit and were lifting away towards him.

He peered from time to time through the clear plaspex of the cabin port, trying to spot the ships by eye, but they were too far.

And he accelerated down.

He lost the ships again. They'd made a sudden jab to the right, as if in an evasive pattern. He widened the coverage yet again and the alien ships loomed into view once more.

In the satellite Jervis was evidently holding the Beam steady. There wasn't much movement he could play with, but it would be enough to give Farrell a manoeuvre pattern of his own. A prisoner of the paser-beam, his attack was directed by the line of invisible energy.

His speed was now prodigious: approaching twenty thousand miles an hour. He slackened his rate of acceleration to one gravity. If he touched the Earth's atmosphere at this speed on his overshoot . . .

The alien ships moved again, this time away from the Earth and positively towards him. He marvelled at the sudden accelerations at which the ships must move. Did they somehow defy inertia? Surely, no human thing could exist inside a ship of that size and be subjected to such abrupt changes of direction?

Now they were climbing fast and Farrell realised the logic of their move. If they went much higher they would be between him and the sun, and thus invisible. From their point of view he would be a shining splinter of metal, reflecting the sun from the mirror-bright hull.

Once again, this insulating safeguard was endangering his life.

How far away were they? Farrell could see the alien ships as brilliant sparks, almost at the edge of the sun. One thousand? Two thousand miles away? What was their speed?

Then their path took them in front of the sun and abruptly they disappeared from Farrell's view. He shielded his eyes with his hands, and turned back to the scanner. There was too much light from the sun; however he adjusted the gain, he could no longer pick up the craft.

They were totally lost to his sight.

He plummeted on down, still gaining speed at the rate of thirty-two feet per second, every second. But now his advantage was lost. Not only did he lack surprise, he lacked vision too.

Farrell had a sudden intruding mental image of a long piece of string held down with a heavy stone. Down the string fell a bead, irreversibly destined for the end however much the string may be twirled about. And he was that bead, joined to the sun by a string of pulsed energy – with the alien ships squatting across the string.

A pain-contorted face with white lips half-appeared before his eyes. The dying scream of Hawkins, as he pulled the trigger in a cauldron of agony, rolled around the inner recesses of his ears. *Like Hawkins, I too will die before I reach the sun.*

Whichever way he struggled now, even if he were to leave the paser-beam and take evasive action to one side on his batteries, the alien craft would be able to pick him off. And even if they should miss, the accumulated power in his batteries would not hold out long enough for him to land safely on Earth. Instead, he would flutter down without control, into a soupy atmosphere at a mere twenty thousand miles an hour . . .

Incredibly, the sun brightened.

Brighter now than the white it had been. In quality of density, the sun became a greater fire, like a doubling of arc-lamps to an already-blinded eye. Then larger, too, the sun became the greater heat, expanding and widening its diameter in a rushing burst of energy like a multi-core explosion, each detonation adding fresh strength to an already overkill of blast.

Something Jervis had said. . . . *If you leave a fusion bomb in a paser-beam for more than a few seconds, it will detonate. That's why the hold must be shielded . . .*

Each of the alien ships must be carrying at least one of the bombs that had been stolen.

Now the fireball filled the whole of his vision, a white, glaring mound of nuclear release and deadly radiation. And he was hurtling towards it at over twenty thousand miles an hour. Even as he reversed the polarity of the pulse engine and his control-seat slammed round backwards to compensate for the decelera-

tive gravity-force, Farrell knew that the paser-beam would take him irresistably into the heart of the fireball.

And down, into the thermonuclear sun . . .

He watched the ball in his screen, which he could now only see by craning his neck against the reversed gravity-force and looking over his shoulder. Even as he watched more detonations, seeming to come from the very heart of the ball, fed the artificial sun and strengthened the structure of it.

Without the decaying effects of atmosphere or planetary gravity, the nuclear fireball took on an existence of its own. It expanded and expanded, with no apparent limit to its size or intensity. Now black streaks of cloud appeared against its sides, now they were overtaken by the ever-expanding whiteness of the nuclear fury.

If nothing else, man had found a defensive weapon against the aliens should they return.

Radiant heat from the explosion surrounded the tiny craft and for the second time Farrell knew death by sun.

And down . . .

He became aware, through the mounting heat and dazzling light in which his cabin was immersed, of a variation in the thrust. It seemed to add to the decelerative gee-force, yet not from the blast of the nuclear bombs. Somehow, beneath him. Pushing him away. *Upwards*.

But there is no *up* in space, just as there is no blast, nor weight, nor oxygen. Define your terms, Jason Farrell, he told himself through a pain-ridden mist of heat. *Up* is the opposite of *down*, and the result of differentiation of direction when down is the predominance.

Lucid, for a dying man.

And *down* into the sun becomes *up* when there is a differentiation of that and if that differentiation is now, then the direction is away from the bomb and sideways to the open sky . . .

Lifted bodily on the paser-beam, wielded at its satellite source by the men of science, up and away, through the outer fringe of the blackening fireball collapsing and imploding in upon itself no longer fed from within, the tiny spacecraft of Jason Farrell sped out from the Earth and the heat and tumbled without control into the dark, cool sanity of space.

And cocooned inside, across white lips now reddening, a man began to laugh and found he was no longer sweating.

9

The Run

As he left the Base, Senator Robbins heard the alarm begin its screaming warning. For most of the morning he'd toured the Base. With the Pan-Asians agitating and an election due he couldn't afford to substantiate his anti-pacifistic claims with anything less than well-publicised tour.

Behind his car he could see the vid-crews piling their equipment into their transports.

He drove at a leisurely pace towards the main gate, and its attendant barrage of security checks. These days, driving was the only way he could relax; he scorned the idea of a chauffeur.

The security was suspiciously officious. He'd half-expected them to let him through with the most cursory of examinations, but they insisted on a complete check-over of all his identifications. These fact-finding tours stirred up the military, after all.

As he left the security lodge and approached the main gates, the last of the rockets fired. That was something he'd investigated today: the constant total-readiness practices cost more than they were perhaps worth. He made a mental note to get his secretary to prepare a report. The rocket was the usual manned sort, a sliver of dusty metal scarcely visible in the overcast. It disappeared quickly, its after-glow illuminating a small patch of the clouds.

Through the thick plastic of his car's body, Robbins could feel the sonic throb of the rocket's huge motors.

He turned out of the Base, on to the grey slip-road that led to

the major freeway. As his car accelerated silently along the aluminium strip another flight of rockets, presumably from some other nearby base, swept overhead. They were flying low these days: the new defence pattern he'd been told about. A wash of noise seemed to make his car shake on its plates. He closed the windows and turned the air-conditioner full up.

He came eventually to the freeway, and followed the filter-strip on to its width. It looked like a photograph Robbins had seen once, of one of the old railway marshalling-yards. Tracks crossed and re-crossed, merged and divided. He filtered until he was in the med-fast lane, and pushed the speed up to the maximum allowed.

He leaned forward against the restraint of his safety-webbing and raised his secretary on the call-kit.

'Anderson? Robbins here.'

His secretary's voice came through, sounding strained. 'Boss. Get back here as quick as you can. Big trouble.'

'What is it? Can you tell me over the line?'

'Code E, boss. Code E.'

The kit went dead, his secretary had switched off. He made to recall him, then stopped. Anderson never acted like that unless something was seriously wrong. He'd worked out a private series with Anderson when the trouble with the Pan-Asians had first blown up. Code E was national-scale. That was all.

He drove on, his mind working hard. Overhead, another low flight of silver rockets added weight to his forebodings.

Five kilometres up the freeway, Robbins took another filter-strip and followed it as it wound into a minor side-track. His speed dropped away, compensating for the sharper bends he'd encounter.

He caught a glimpse of the Sessions Hall, a bleak modern building soaring into the sky over the surrounding forest.

Decentralised government seemed fruitless when housed in a building as prominent as that. Or perhaps there was something more subtle about it, something he hadn't realised.

The track began to climb a little, and the trees became thicker along its side. Very soon, he came to the junction; a single-track dipping down through the trees, losing itself between wooded banks. He approached the turning carefully, waiting for the signal to flash green.

The pole-barrier raised itself automatically, and his car

slipped through. He switched off the identifying beam, and behind him the pole dropped back into place.

He accelerated quickly, impatient to get back to his office. Anderson's cryptic message meant war at worst, crisis at best. Either way he needed to be at hand. The government's foreign policy, in Robbins' opinion, was flaccid. It listened to public opinion too much, and varied with the currency of popular ideals. The pacifists had had their way now for seven years, allowing the Pan-Asians to infiltrate every civilised country they bordered on. The time had come to show a little strength; pull a few triggers, push a few buttons. They'd give way soon enough, shown a few strong-arm tactics.

Robbins found he'd unconsciously pushed his speed too far, and he let it drop away a little. This was low-speed strip, not stressed for fast cornering. Ahead of him, the aluminium track wound over the undulating countryside. About two kilometres ahead it disappeared around the sharp turn at Packer's Mill.

A movement caught his eye. He saw a human figure for a brief moment, disappearing behind one of the many trees. He looked again at the spot, then saw the youth.

He was a thin fellow, dressed in a drab grey coverall, long hair flopping over his face. Behind him, standing among the trees, the Senator could see many others dressed identically.

What were they doing in the forest? It was supposed to be patrolled from the air, warning off any strays. They were probably part of a gang of Juvies – Robbins had heard that several had been seen in the vicinity lately. He looked on the other side of the track, and noted with a sudden unaccountable twinge that there were many on that side too. Instinctively he slowed the car a little, hesitating.

As he did so, several of the Juvies levered themselves away from the trees they were leaning against, and walked purposefully towards the track. Robbins drove on cautiously.

He began to see more and more youths, some of them clustering in bunches near the track. As he passed one of these bunches a Juvie spat deliberately at the car, his spittle splaying across the windscreen.

The first trace of real alarm nudged at Robbins' mind, and he looked into his rear-view screen. The track behind him was crowded, Juvies walking easily along behind him. Some of the youths were running, as if trying to pace the car. He increased his speed again, a little nervously. The car surged forward, its

blunt nose thrusting as the lineal plates increased their field, hugging the aluminium strip.

On either side of the track, the numbers grew. Most of the Juvies just watched, but some of them – the younger ones, Robbins guessed – were shouting insults and waving sticks. The track before him streamed away in a grey curve of dull ribbon, disappearing around Packer's. At the bend, Robbins could see a crowd of the youths looking towards his car expectantly. There must be a hundred in that part alone, he guessed.

The little knot of alarm had grown inside him, swollen by an unreasoned certainty that they had been waiting for him.

He found he was still accelerating, and glanced at his speedometer. It showed 120 kph, and rising. Another look at the screen showed him more Juvies climbing down behind him. He looked around; everywhere, it seemed, he could see the drably-dressed youths flowing on to the track.

His car shot silently towards the bend at Packer's.

Standing out like a promontory, the tree-lined bank convexed down to the edge of the track, bearing its cargo of young humanity jeering and cheering as the Senator ploughed towards them.

He was going too fast for the bend, he'd have to slow. He jabbed at his reverse-flow, and the speed dropped away a little. The cheering rose as his momentum died, and the Juvies pressed nearer to the track. He went into the corner too fast. He grappled with the emergency braking, fighting against the violent shuddering that tore through the cabin. Bucking and pitching, the plates ground against the strip, threatening to leave their guides.

As he came out of the bend something metallic and heavy crashed against the roof of the cabin, and a roar of approval came from the perilously-balanced crowd of Juvies. In his screen he saw a great iron girder roll against the aluminium strip.

And then he was round the corner. His car righted itself immediately, its gyro holding it level again.

Ahead the track was empty, straight and true it ran for a full kilometre, slipping gently down the long incline. Dead ahead, he could see the tall shape of the Sessions Hall standing like a beacon on the horizon. A strange flash caught his eye, then another. Twin streaks of flame shot upwards from near the base of the Hall, and lost themselves in the cloud. Two more followed them, and Robbins realised what they were.

The anti-missile site, unmanned and fully automatic, was

being brought against something. It very much looked as if the Senator's worst fears were justified.

Immediately, it was all the more imperative that he get back to the Hall.

He looked into his rear-view screen. Behind him, the bend was crowded with Juvies. They were making no attempt to follow him, evidently preferring to watch his progress. He checked his speed, and saw that he had almost halted.

What had happened there? Had they been trying to kill him on the corner? It seemed unlikely; from what little he knew of Juvie habits, the Senator was certain that whatever they did they made sure would work. And with the biggest gang he'd ever seen or heard of, he would expect something a little more positive than terror-tactics. He sweated at the thought. If that was so, then they hadn't finished with him yet.

He craned forward against the restraining pull of his safety-webbing. At the end of the slope, he caught movement. Even as he watched, hundreds of Juvies wormed out of the trees. Pushing and jostling, they fought for position along the edge of the track. There was nothing orderly about their movement, it was as if they'd been released from a stockade all at once. They fought and shoved, several of them stumbling on to the track and over the aluminium strip. With horror, Robbins saw that those that fell stayed there, making no effort to move. Many more were throwing themselves against the strip, deliberately placing their bodies in his path.

Torn with indecision, he looked desperately around. What were they doing? Did they want to kill themselves?

An idea struck him, and he reached across for the call-kit. As he waited for a reply, he saw that the Juvies by the corner were walking down towards him. The leaders, five rangy youths in ill-fitting overalls, were near the car and he could see now that they were carrying weapons. He turned back to the call-kit, and held his finger down on the button.

No reply. What the hell was going on?

Then he remembered the girder that had hit the roof: it must have damaged the aerial.

There was a crash, and his rear window starred into opacity. His screen showed some of the youths throwing stones. He'd have to move.

Reluctantly, he started the car moving again – down the slope towards the others. A great cheer rose as he began to move, a

taunting ovation of derision and scorn. It died away to be replaced by a chant. An insidious and growing beat; a pounding, droning, throbbing drum of voices – frightening and stimulating.

The mocking hymn grew and grew, and suddenly he caught the words. At last he understood what the whole thing was about. The chant was one word, one whose semantic roots lay far into the past, whose meaning had grown and swollen with the years, and one that now meant a semi-religious cult of suicidal magnitude.

And all around Senator Robbins, the whole world shouted the word.

Chicken.

Chicken, they screamed. Chicken, *Chicken*. CHICKEN. CHICKEN.

The full implication struck Robbins as his car reached the 50 kph mark. He had unwittingly let himself in for a Run, something that only happened to other people. He allowed his speed to build up a little more.

His mind worked frantically. What was he going to do? Rather, what could he do? There seemed little choice: behind him was a hard knot of Juvies, running now, he could see. Ahead of him, the pressing mob had overflowed right on to the track, the aluminium strip flying into their bodies like a grey arrow. All along the track, the Juvies stared at his car, watching defiantly as he accelerated towards them.

Robbins' fear suddenly evaporated, to be replaced by a strident wave of anger. These damned Juvies couldn't push him around! Besotted with drugs, drunk with unwonted power, these unemployed and unemployable delinquents thought they ruled the Earth. Thought! That was ironic, Robbins reflected as he encouraged more and more speed out of his car, they practically did rule some parts of the country. He shuddered as he thought of a world ruled by aging louts, the ignorant and cowardly, the weak-minded and strong-bodied. Every year's new unemployment figures added millions to their ranks.

Another flash on the horizon worried the corner of his vision. Somewhere, in another world it seemed, a war had started.

He glanced at his speed-meter and saw that he still had plenty of speed in hand. He wasn't far from the nearest Juvies and began to imagine that he could see their faces. In fact, all he could see was a blur of white and brown, an untidy heap of

humanity testing their bravery against his. He held his speed at a steady 100, and braced himself. Nearer, ever nearer.

All around him the chanting screamed and throbbed, urging and pushing him to hold his speed.

What was he doing, what was there to prove? He wasn't a coward, he knew that. Why did he have to test himself in front of these morons? There was no bravery in throwing a ton of plastic and steel at a mountain of human bodies, mangling and maiming; killing to prove himself. He wasn't a Juvie, he wasn't ruled by any mob. He was a civilised person in a civilised community; a respected person in a position of trust. He was a Senator, and had the faith of twenty thousand voters behind him, trusting his dignity and discretion. And, most important, he was human. It was abhorrent to his very nature to kill for its own sake, to plough through a hundred bodies, destroying life and making it a pleasure.

He was a hundred metres from the mound of Juvies.

The chanting throbbed into his consciousness, exciting and stimulating him; beating like the jungle drums of primitive people. It seemed to get faster and faster in crescendo of hate, mounting and spiralling as he sped ever closer. He could see their faces now, pink and white and grey – all of them staring fixedly at his car, waiting for him to break. He could see their mouths opening and closing as they chanted.

They'd never break, there were too many of them. They'd sit there until he killed them all. They'd sit there watching him, watching as he rammed them.

He made his decision: grabbed the emergency brake, and applied full reverse thrust.

He slammed forward into the webbing of straps, seeming to hang there as the great plates fought against the momentum. No scream of brakes, no squeal of rubber. A silent, steady, remorseless pull of power, acting like a barrier of unyielding cotton wool. He felt as if he hung there for an eternity, his reactions nil, eyes blinded by a sudden fireball.

And then he was free. He slumped into his seat as the car stopped, a bare metre from the nearest Juvie. He lolled forward, sliding down inside the straps, eyes still blind from the sun-white glare.

Outside, a hot wind blew, and a great hand lifted his car.

There was a terrible silence when he came round.

The first thing he saw was his watch, still ticking and apparently undamaged. He'd been unconscious only a few minutes. There was something wrong with his vision, as if he were seeing everything through a maze of retinal shadow.

He moved experimentally. There was a pain in his side, but nothing else seemed to be damaged.

Automatically, he reached for his webbing-release and freed himself. The car, with most of its windows smashed, was lying on its side a long way from the track. He climbed up through what had been the windscreen, treading cautiously on the broken remains of the controls.

Outside, there was inferno.

The Sessions Hall had vanished, replaced instead by a great trunk of cloud. On all sides, the trees had been flattened and stripped of their leaves. Many were burning, their smoke adding to the desolate cloud of nuclear release.

And all around, the bodies of the Juvies lay. All had been burned, all were now dead.

Robbins stood there for a long long time. Presently, he began to cough, and blood trickled through his lips. He turned his back on what had once been the Hall, and walked erratically up the way he had come so recently.

Overhead, a low flight of yellow rockets skimmed away from the black cloud.

10

Real-Time World

This is not relevant, but it serves to illustrate the pedantic and languid attitude to life on the observatory we have all developed.

The accommodation cabins of the observatory have been built on the periphery, in such a way that each cabin has at least one wall against vacuum. As the laboratory is moved from place to place, structural tensions come out in the form of cracks in the outer shell.

In the cabin I share with my wife Clare, there are twenty-three cracks, each one of which would be capable of evacuating our cabin of its air if it were not periodically checked and re-sealed. This number of cracks is fairly typical; there is no cabin which does not have at least half a dozen.

The largest crack in the wall opened one night while we were asleep, and in spite of the fact that we had rigged elaborate pressure-reduction alarms, we were in an advanced state of hypoxia before we were awakened. That crack affected several other cabins at the same time, and it was after this that there was a move among some of the staff to abandon the accommodation section altogether, and sleep in one of the common rooms.

Nothing came of the idea: on the observatory the twin evils of boredom and lethargy go hand in hand.

Thorensen came into my office and dumped a handwritten report on my desk. He is a large, ugly man, with graceless mannerisms. He has participated heavily in the social side of life on the observatory, and it is rumoured that he is an alcoholic. No one cares much about these things under normal circumstances, but when Thorensen is drunk he is boorish and noisy. Ordinarily, he is slow-moving, virtually reactionless.

'Here,' he said. 'Observed reproductive cycle in one of the echinoderms. Don't bother to try to understand it. You'll get the gist.'

'Thanks,' I said. I have grown accustomed to the intellectual snobbery of some of the scientists. I'm the only non-specialist on the observatory. 'Does it have to be dealt with today?'

'Suit yourself. I don't suppose anyone is waiting for it.'

'I'll do it tomorrow'

'OK.' He turned to leave.

'I've got your daily sheet for you,' I said. 'Do you want it?'

He turned back. 'Let's have it.'

He glanced at it uninterestedly, looking quickly across the two or three lines of print-out. I watched his expression, not sure exactly what I was trying to glean from it. Some of the staff don't read the sheets in my presence, but fold them up, place them in a pocket and read them in private. That is how it was expected they would be read, but not everyone reacts the same.

Thorensen had perhaps less to worry about at home, or less interest.

I waited for him to finish.

Then I said: 'Marriott was in here yesterday. He says that a fire killed seven hundred people in New York.'

Interest came in Thorensen's eyes. 'Yes, I heard that too. Do you know anything more about it?'

'Only what Marriott told me. Apparently it was in a block of apartments. The fire started on the fourth floor, and no one above it could escape.'

'Isn't that fascinating? Seven hundred people, just like that.'

'It was a terrible disaster,' I said.

'Yes, yes. Terrible. But not as bad as that . . .' He leaned forward and put the palms of his hands on the far side of my desk. 'Did you hear that? There was a riot somewhere in South America. Bolivia, I think. They called in troops to deal with it, things got out of hand and nearly two thousand people died.'

This was new to me.

I said: 'Who told you this?'

'One of the others. Norbert, I think.'

'Two thousand,' I said. 'That's fascinating. . . .'

Thorensen straightened.

'Anyway, I've got to get back. Will you be down in the bar this evening?'

'Probably,' I said.

When Thorensen had left I looked at the report he had brought in. My function was to absorb the sense of the report, rewrite it into non-technical language as far as possible, then prepare it for transmission back to Earth via the transor. Thorensen's original would then be photostated and returned to him, the copy being filed away in my office until our return to Earth.

I had a dozen other reports outstanding, and Thorensen's would have to go to the bottom of the pile. Neither he nor the people on Earth would care when it was sent.

And in any event there was no hurry. The next transor-conjunction was that same evening, and it was obvious I wouldn't have it ready by then. The conjunction after this was four weeks away.

Putting aside the report, I went to the door of my office and locked it, switching on the electric sign on the outside which said: TRANSOR ROOM - DO NOT DISTURB. Then I unlocked one of my cabinets and removed from it the rumour dissemination file.

I wrote down: 'Thorensen/New York/700 deaths/apartment building. Ex Marriott/ditto.' Then underneath: 'Thorensen/Bolivia (?)/2000 deaths/riot. Ex Norbert Colston (?).'

As the Bolivian story was a new one to me, I had to conduct a search through the Affectance Quotient 84 files. This would take some time. I had checked out the New York story the day before, and found that it probably related to a fire in an office-building in Boston three days earlier, when 683 people had died. None of them was related in any way to members of the staff of the observatory.

In the AQ 84 files, I searched first through entries for Bolivia. There had been no major riots or public disorders there in the last four weeks. It was possible that the rumour related to an event earlier than this, but not probable. After Bolivia, I tried the other South American countries, but again drew a negative.

There had been a demonstration in Brazil the week before, but only a few people had been injured, and no one killed.

I shifted to Central America, and ran similar checks in the various republics there. I chose to discount countries in North America or Europe, since it was not likely that if two thousand people had died, there would be no connection with any of the staff here.

I finally found the reference in Africa; under Tanzania. Nine hundred and sixty people massacred by panicking police when a

hunger-march degenerated into a riot. I looked at the trans-report dispassionately, seeing the event as a statistic, another entry in my dissemination file. Before putting away the report, I took a note of the AQ. 27. Comparatively high.

In my rumour dissemination file I wrote: 'Thorensen/Bolivia . . . read Tanzania? Await confirmation.'

I then added the date, and initialled it.

When I unlocked the office door Clare, my wife, was waiting outside. She was crying.

I have this problem with which I must live: in some respects I'm on my own at the observatory. Let me try to explain that.

If there is a group of people all basically similar, or even if there is a group of individuals making up a coherent and recognisable social unit, then there is companionship. If, on the other hand, there is no form of intercourse between the individuals, then a different kind of social structure exists. I wouldn't know what to call it, but it certainly does not constitute a unit. Something of the sort happens in big cities: millions of people co-existing on a few hundred square miles of land and yet, with certain exceptions, there is no real unitary construction to their society. Two people can live next door to one another and yet never know each other's name. People living alone in a building full of others can die of loneliness.

But there's another kind of solitude when in a group, and that's what is happening to me. It's one of sanity. Or intellect. Or awareness.

In cold factual language: I'm a sane man in an insane society.

But the particular thing is that everyone on the observatory is *individually* just as sane as I am. But collectively, they're not.

Now there's a reason for this, and it accounts for my presence on the observatory at all. For the benefit of the others I have been given this other work of rewriting their reports and acting in general as press officer.

But the real reason is one of far greater importance. I'm the observer of the observatory.

I watch the staff, I take notes on their behaviour and I channel information about them back to Earth. Not the most desirable of jobs, it may seem.

One of the staff I must observe, spy upon, treat clinically, is my wife.

Clare and I no longer get on with each other. There is nothing

tempestuous between us; we've reached a state of acceptance of the mutual hostility, and there it stays. I won't dwell on the less pleasant incidents between us. The cabin-walls of the accommodation section are thin, and any hatred to be vented must be done in near-silence. The observatory has made us like this; we are a product of our environment. Before the observatory we lived together in peace – perhaps when we get back home we may once more do so. But for the moment that is how it is.

I have said enough.

But Clare was crying . . . and she had come to me.

I opened the door, let her in.

'Dan,' she said, 'it's terrible about those children.'

It registered at once. When Clare comes to me in my office, I do not know straight away whether she comes as a wife or as a member of the staff. This time, she was the latter.

'I know, I know,' I said, as soothingly as I could manage. 'But they will be doing everything they can.'

'I feel so *helpless* here. If only I could do something.'

'How are the others taking the news?'

She shrugged. 'Melinda told me. She seemed to be very upset. But not——'

'Not as much as you? But then she hasn't been so involved with children.' I had guessed that when the story of the refugees reached Clare it would upset her. Before coming to the observatory with me she had been a child-care welfare officer. Now she had to be content with study of the humanoid children outside.

'I hope the people responsible are satisfied,' she said.

'Have you heard any more details?' I prompted her.

'No. But Melinda said that Jackson, the doctor who works with her, told her that the New Zealand authorities were calling in the United Nations.'

I nodded. I'd heard this earlier in the day from Clifford Makin, the arachnologist. I had expected the further detail to be in full currency by about this time.

I said: 'You heard about that fire in New York?'

'No?'

I told her about it, in substantially the same detail as Thorensen had told me.

When I'd finished she stood still for a while, her head bent forward.

'I wish we could go home,' she said in the end. I had my wife in the office now.

I said: 'So do I. Just as soon as we finish. . . .'

She glared at me. I knew as well as she that the progress of the work had no bearing on the length of our stay here. And in any case, I was doing nothing to further that work. Only I, of all the staff, contribute nothing to the progress.

'Forget it, Dan,' she said. 'There's nothing at home for either of us now.'

'What makes you say that?'

'If you don't know, I'm not going to spell it out for you.'

A veiled reference to our crumbling relationship. I wondered, as I had done many times before, if even a break with the closed environment of the observatory would ever restore what we had had.

'All right,' I said. 'Let's leave it at that.'

'Anyway, with all these things we hear, I'm not sure I want to go back.'

'Not ever?'

'I don't know. I hear—— I hear that things on Earth are worse, far worse, than we are told about.'

I found myself breaking out of my role as husband, became the observer once again.

'What do you mean? That there's some form of censorship?'

She nodded. 'Only I don't see what harm it would do for us to know what is going on.'

'Well, that's your best argument against censorship.'

She nodded again.

I had on my desk a small pile of unclaimed daily sheets. I would leave the pile to mount up for a few days, then take them round myself and deliver them. I wasn't too keen on the idea of delivering them. The attitude of several of the staff towards the sheets was casual anyway, and if they got the idea I would deliver them anyway then they wouldn't collect them at all.

The worst offender in this respect was Mike Querrel, who had never, to my knowledge, come of his own accord to collect his sheets. A gloomy bachelor whose parents had died while he was still a child, he had told me once that he had nothing at home of which to receive news, so why did we have to bother about the sheets.

True enough, his daily sheets had the least news on them of

anybody's, but there was no point in the experiment unless everyone took their sheets.

I sifted through the pile before me. There were eleven of Mike's, two or three others which had not been claimed, and those of Sebastion, the only man who had so far died on the observatory. Sebastion's death had been one of the factors that had gone unanticipated, and there was no way for me to deprogram the computer on board. On the real-time simulator back on Earth, Sebastion's identity had been removed.

Once every twenty-four hours the computer would print out the daily news-sheets, one for each person on board. The staff had been told that the news came up every day through the transor, but this was not the truth.

The news came in once in every four weeks, was fed direct into the computer, and then released in twenty-nine daily instalments, roughly in the order in which it had occurred. This day, as I have said, there was to be another transor-conjunction and the next four weeks' news would arrive. I would have access to the unprocessed bulk of it at once if I wished, but for the rest of the staff the news would have to trickle out at daily intervals.

There was no way of short-circuiting the system; even I could not get out of the computer the personal sheets of the 'next' day until the appropriate time.

Every person on board, including myself, had one sheet of personalised news, once a day, every day.

I decided to clear the accumulated pile and took them around the observatory, delivering them as necessary. Then I returned to my office.

Some time before the expedition in the observatory had been conceived, a man named Tolneuve had invented a system for classifying news of current events into a graded table of what he called Affectance Quotients. This ran from nought to one hundred; from nil affectance to complete affectance.

Tolneuve's argument was that in the normal course news of current affairs had little relevance – or affectance – to personal life. One could read of distant wars, or social disturbances, or disasters, or one could experience them vicariously through the visual media, but one was not *affected* in any way.

On the other hand, some items of news did have relevance, even if it was only of a very long term, or in a very indirect way.

Tolneuve once cited an example of this.

While one's life could be measurably affected by the news, say,

of the demise of a well-loved and well-endowed uncle, it would not be so easy to estimate the impact of a rise in the price of some industrial commodity such as manganese. If the cost of living of one individual could be ultimately affected and measured, then the same could be said of everybody's. A large number of people would have low AQs for most news, and only a small proportion of the population would have very high ones.

Tolneuve acknowledged this, and derived his graded table. Applied to an individual whose entire social situation could be established, it was possible to apply an AQ to any item of news. To one man, the rich uncle's legacy might produce a 95% AQ or higher; more expensive manganese a 10% AQ or lower. To another man (for example, a distant relative of the first man who was a broker in industrial metals) the same two items might have exactly opposite percentages.

It was an almost entirely useless piece of sociological research. It was played around with for a year or two by the news-dissemination agencies, then put aside. It just had no practical use.

But then the observatory was conceived, and a use for it was found.

It would be secondary to the main purpose of the scientific work to be conducted, but an entirely closed social structure composed of intelligent and trained personnel, and one depending exclusively on one source for its news of the outside world, would be a perfect way of putting to experimental use what Tolneuve had theorised.

The intention of the scheme was specific: what, *precisely* what, would be the effect on a community deprived of news?

Or in another sense: does an awareness of current events really matter?

It was the kind of social experiment which in absolute terms would not be worthwhile unless other circumstances suited it. In the case of the Joliot-Curie observatory, it was decided they would. Provided that such a scheme did not interfere with the normal work of the scientists, there could be no possible objection.

How the details were worked out is not fully known to me, as I was brought in as a collaborator only towards the end. However, what was done was as follows.

During the selection of the observatory personnel, detailed dossiers on each potential member were raised. At the end of the selections, those of the people not joining the staff were destroyed.

The others were analysed by computer, and Tolneuve ratings established for each person.

During training for the mission dummy runs were carried out, but the scheme was not properly initiated until the laboratory was in full operation. Then, when we began our observation, the system of personalised news-sheets was introduced and the experiment began.

The news-sheet of each person carried only that news which had an AQ of 85% or higher, for that person. All other news with a lower percentage was printed out onto what I came to call the 84 file, and stored in my office.

Thus, each person received information on external events only to a level of high personal concern. Family news came through, and local news; word of social changes in their country of origin, or where they had made their home. And news from Earth, of course, of the reactions to the work of the observatory.

But more general information – national or international events, sporting results, disasters, political changes, criminal news – passed into the 84 file.

Of all the people on the observatory only I had access to that information. My function was to record what happened, if anything, and pass the information back to Earth. Because Tolneuve's theory was that people raised in a high-stimulus environment became a product of their society, and could not keep their orientation without some knowledge of what was outside their sphere.

I often sought, and found, companionship with Mike Querrel. Although he held a Master's degree in bacteriology, and was a part of the micro-organism survey team, he spent much of his time working on the central power generators. This gave him something of the manner of a non-specialist, and in fact he and I managed to get along surprisingly well.

On this day, though, Querrel was in one of his moods of deliberate reticence. When I had passed him his accumulated pile of news-sheets, he took them from me and turned away without comment.

'Is anything wrong, Mike?' I said.

'No. But this place gets me down.'

'It affects all of us.'

'You too?'

I nodded.

'That's odd. I didn't think you were the type.'

I said: 'That's a matter of viewpoint. I live with the same prospect of metal walls as anybody. I eat the same food, hear the same stories, see the same faces.'

'Would it help if you had something more constructive to do? If you wanted, I could fit you in on some of the research.'

His manner of fellowship as a non-specialist was only superficial. He saw the social difference between me and the others exactly the same as any of them.

Back in my office, I pulled one of the reports across and skimmed through it. Then I found some clean paper, put it in the typewriter and began to rewrite the report into lay English.

I wondered how the present situation with Clare had arisen. A variety of possibilities presented themselves.

We had grown over-familiar with each other in the claustrophobic environment of the observatory;

We were not and never had been 'suited' for one another – I disliked the word, distrusted the concept – and the environment had merely brought things to a head earlier than would have been normal;

It was merely a phase, ending either naturally or when we left the observatory;

I had unwittingly behaved in such a manner as to initiate a vicious circle . . . or Clare had unwittingly done so;

Clare had taken a lover . . . or she suspected me of doing so; There was some other factor I had not anticipated.

Such were the possibilities. The awkward thing with such a situation is that only those two people involved are aware of the true state of affairs. And through no fault of their own, they are incapable of assessing it objectively or reliably. Much as I could recognise the breach between Clare and myself, I was helpless to do anything about it. While there was no overt love between us, paradoxically there remained a surface level of interaction where we could behave acceptably with one another in company. And on the observatory there was always company.

One of the reports I rewrote was from Mike Querrel, on the current state of the main generators.

As I have said, the generators were not Querrel's main interest, but he had by and large done all the research-work in his own particular line that he had intended to do. As our tour of duty on

the observatory had been extended indefinitely, he had been left with time to spare, and had involved himself with the servicing of the engines.

These were intended to be fully automatic, requiring no attention. It was fortunate, therefore, that Querrel had taken the interest he did as he discovered a fault that might, had it been left unattended, have created a great deal of danger to all of us.

After this, he had received formal authority from mission headquarters on Earth, and had been submitting regular reports ever since.

The generators were crucial to the existence of the observatory, for in addition to providing all electrical power – and thus all heat, motor-power, light and life-supports – they also provided the field which produced the elocation effect which kept us alive and operating on this planet.

Elocation had about as much relation to time-travel as a flight of stairs has to space-travel. That should give you some idea of the relative scale. All the elocation-field can do is to push the observatory back in time by about one nanosecond – but that was enough, and more would be equally unnecessary and inconvenient.

One nanosecond of elocated time allows the observatory to move about the surface of this planet in what amounts to complete invisibility to the inhabitants, in a state of recurring non-existence. Practically, it is ideal for the work of ecological surveys, as it allows complete freedom of movement without any pollution of or interference with the external environment. By use of localised field-abrogators it is possible to view chosen pieces of the outside – such as a plant or animal, or a piece of soil or rock – and thus conduct the scientific work of the observatory.

That is the official version, the one the staff know . . . and for the moment that will do.

Querrel's report was not much more than a listing of various readings taken from the equipment. These would be used on Earth to update the real-time simulators, and allow the controllers to keep accurate note of our progress. Most of the automatic readings would be transored back by the computers, but Querrel's figures covered the parts of the equipment which had had manual over-ride.

Bored with thinking about the observatory, bored with being confined inescapably in the observatory, bored through and

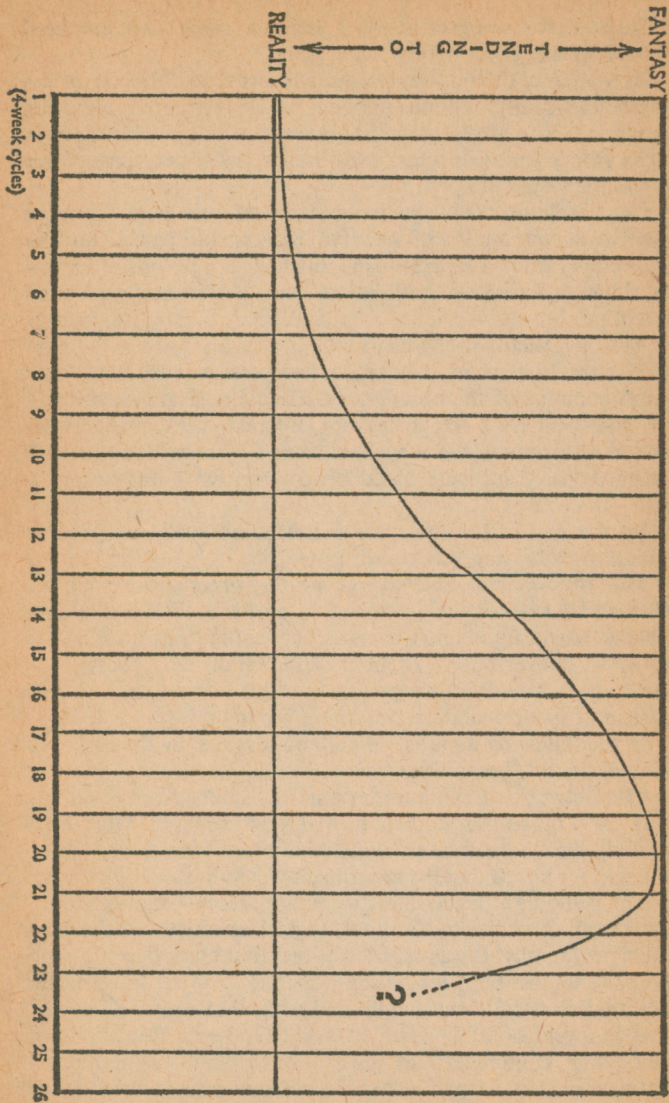
through *with* the observatory, I left my office and wandered around one or two of the viewing ports.

Here, although I could see what was being observed of the outside, I came into closer contact with the scientists. It is not paranoia which causes me to say that I am not liked. I know it for a fact. I would be liked even less if the true nature of my duties were known.

The problem about Clare was still nagging at me, as it always did. It was not made easier by the awareness – growing by the day – that our protracted stay in the laboratory was futile. Whatever purpose may have been served within the originally intended tour of duty certainly could not justify this extension. Though many of the scientists – including Clare – claimed that their work could not be finished in the foreseeable future, I knew that everything on the observatory would be ultimately unavailing.

I passed through five of the observation-bays. Conversations stopped, resumed behind me as I passed. I exist in a world of silence: forcing another silence on those around me.

The results of the Tolneuve experiment are known, but the final inferences have yet to be drawn. Through my confusions the simple beauty of what has happened shines through. What is to come is not so clear. I can show you the results (without the conclusions) in the form of a chart:



I like that chart – it is of my own devising. But it is not complete, for things are going wrong.

The REALITY line represents what is true, what is real. It symbolises sanity and reason, what we hope we may ultimately return to. The FANTASY line we have reached, and moved away from. That was when the observatory-society passed into an insane state.

The result of the Tolneuve experiment was now apparent: deprive a community of news of the outside world, and the community finds a replacement. In short, it develops a network of rumours based on speculation, imagination and wish-fulfilment.

This is reflected in my chart.

For the first six months or so, everyone was reacting to the fresh stimulus of the observatory. Their interests were oriented around themselves and their work. Interest in the outside world was at a minimum. What conversations I overheard in that time, or participated in, were based broadly on what was known or remembered.

By the end of the first year – four-week cycle no. 13 – the situation had changed.

The environment and society of the observatory were not enough to sustain the imagination of these highly intelligent people. Curiosity about what was happening back on Earth led to direct conversations about it. Speculation . . . guesses . . . gossip . . . I detected exaggerated stories of past exploits. The system of fact-orientation was being broken down.

In the following months, up until approximately the end of the 20th cycle, this became extreme.

The network of rumours became the main obsession of the staff, and by and large their formal work suffered. During this period, the controllers on Earth became alarmed and it was thought for a time that the experiment would have to be curtailed.

The rumours lost any basis in reality, became fantastic, wild, demented. And the staff – cool, logical scientists – believed in them profoundly. It was asserted as fact that black became white, that the impossible became the possible . . . that governments fell, that wars had been fought and won, that cities had burned, that life went on after death . . . that God was alive, God was dead, that continents had sunk. It wasn't the assumptions in themselves that were so incredible as the way in which they were accepted.

During this time, life went on as normal on the observatory and on Earth, and the regular daily sheets were handed out to staff. And the work proceeded – erratically, but still there was progress.

And then. . . . Then the fantastic aspects of the rumours diminished. Traces of fact crept back into what was being said. By the end of the 23rd cycle, eight weeks ago, it was clear that the speculation was returning, spontaneously, to reality.

And incredibly, the rumours began to anticipate fact.

Word would go round, stemming unprompted from God knew where, about some clearly-defined event: a natural disaster, a sporting result, the death of a statesman. And when I checked through the 84 file, I would find that it had a collateral in reality.

A rumoured landslide in Greece would be an earth-tremor in Yugoslavia; a rumoured change of government in South-East Asia would correspond with a coup somewhere else; a rumoured policy-change in the attitude of the public towards this very mission would be nearly accurate. And then there were other stories that I could not check. Things like unexpected famines, or increasing crime-rates, or social dissent – events which would not normally get into the news anyway.

With this change, a conclusion came into sight: that in due course the rootless network of rumour would return of its own accord to reality. Reflecting it accurately, anticipating it accurately. If this happened, the social consequences – in the broadest sense – would be unprecedented.

But for some reason this conclusion was not in sight. The network had stagnated. The return to reality had been postponed. My beautiful chart ended in a query.

The transor-conjunction was scheduled for 23:30 hours, and I had the whole evening to kill. We followed real-time days for the sake of convenience. Had we adapted to the day-cycles of the planet, the simulators on Earth would have had to be continually modified.

I stayed in my office until after 20:00 hours, working on a few more of the reports. I sent out for food, and this was brought to me by Caroline Newison, botanist wife of one of the bacteriological team.

She told me the rumour about the Bolivian riot, fleshing it out with the detail that just over a thousand people had died. This was nearer the actual figure, and it pleased me. In turn, I passed

on the word about the New York fire, but she had already heard this.

It always struck me as curious that individual members of the staff were friendlier to me than they were as a whole. It was consistent, though, with the overall behaviour of the staff: this difference between individual and collective behaviour or attitudes.

Later, I locked my filing-cabinets, closed my desk and went in search of Clare. I had ready all the necessary work for the time of the conjunction.

What I could not understand about the postponement of what I had reasoned would be a return to reality-based conjecture was that most of the other factors in Tolneuve's theory held good.

But the rumouring had not progressed. The staff were still passing word about events of the same kind as they had been doing eight weeks ago. And there was less speculative activity.

Could it be that the lethargy which affected us all was similarly causing a renewed lack of interest in the outside world?

If the flow of my chart had gone as I had extrapolated, by now – the end of the 25th cycle – we would be again aware of what was happening on Earth. The sensational ability to anticipate what could not otherwise be known would be established.

Thorensen was holding forth when I went into the bar. He was slightly drunk.

'... and I think we shouldn't. He's the only one who can talk with them. I don't trust it.'

He turned as I walked towards him.

'Will you have a drink, Dan?' he said.

'No thanks. I'm looking for Clare. Has she been here?'

'She was in a little earlier. We thought she was with you.'

The group of four or five men with Thorensen listened to the exchange without expression.

'I've only just left my office,' I said. 'I haven't seen her since this morning.'

O'Brien, standing next to Thorensen, said: 'I think she was going back to your room. She said she had a headache.'

I thanked him, and moved out of the bar. I knew Clare's headaches. She often used some minor physical symptom as a cover for a deeper emotion, and though she had been genuinely upset earlier, I didn't think the rumoured death of the children

in New Zealand would be still affecting her. The reaction of all members of the staff to the stories they generated, however disastrous or seemingly important, was superficial.

When I reached our room, she was not there. As far as I could recall, the room looked much as it had done when we had left it in the morning. There was no sign that Clare had been back.

I walked around the observatory, growing increasingly puzzled at her absence. There were not all that many places in which she could be, unless she was deliberately avoiding me. I tried all the observation-ports, all the social and communal rooms and even, in the end, the generators. She was there with Mike Querrel, and they were kissing.

The truth of it was that by all accounts the situation on Earth was in a very delicate state. In a political sense the division between the East and the West had widened, and in the uncommitted territories in which the different ideologies met there was continuous tension. In a social sense, the environment had exhausted itself. Here it was the developed and under-developed countries which had grown apart.

When we had left Earth two years before, the situation had been very bad, and in the intervening period things had worsened. Crop-failures were widespread – soil-exhaustion and unbalanced atmospheric ecology being the main factors. Consequently, any country not attuned to a high level of technology suffered famine and disease. Large areas of land which had been irrigated and cultivated fell into disuse. There was an increasing blind dependence on technology. In the developed countries, pollution was the main social problem, with inter-racial conflict running a close second. These internal factors aggravated the international political situation; each side blamed the other for its contribution, but neither could afford practical help either for itself or for its economic dependencies. There were too many complexities involved: too many vested interests in uncommitted nations from too many sides. All this was reflected in the news-sheets which came up to the observatory; none of it directly affected the members of the staff, and none of it got into their personalised daily sheets. If I scanned through my 84 file, from any one of the two dozen transors we had had since being here, I would see the facts reflected there: famines, riots, civil uprisings, territorial demands by one state on another, conventions of environmental pundits who could see what was coming but were powerless to do

anything about it, disasters in the cities caused by the fine tuning of technology, and fighting in the streets, and murder of security forces, and bomb outrages, and sabotage, and political assassinations and break-down of diplomatic relationships and the ending of trade agreements and the stockpiling of weapons . . . and over it all a growing awareness of and a clamouring for the war which was now inevitable. . . .

And no one except me on the observatory had any formal access to this information, and I had felt that their speculations would have developed to it, and they hadn't, and I didn't know why.

Later, when Clare had gone, I stood alone with Querrel by the main generators.

The scene that had just taken place could have happened only on the observatory. Each of us knew the mental and physical strains being undergone by the others, as each of us were subjected to the same. That Clare had gone to another man did not surprise me . . . it was only the shock of discovering it was Querrel. As far as he and Clare were concerned, I assumed that each of them must have known that their affair could not have gone on for long before I discovered it. So there could be no genuine shame there. Nor could they have hoped to continue it if and when we left the observatory.

We had said very little. Clare pulled away from Querrel, I tried to grab her but she evaded me. Querrel turned away, and Clare said she was going up to our room.

When she had gone, I lit a cigarette.

'How long has this been going on?' I said, aware of the honour time had lent to the phrase.

'It doesn't matter,' Querrel said.

'It does to me.'

'Long enough. About seven weeks.'

'Are you sure that's all?'

'Seven weeks. You know it was your fault, Winter. Clare really resents what you are doing to her.'

'What do you mean?'

He didn't reply, but sat down on the edge of one of the machine housings. Around us, the generators worked on smoothly.

'Come on,' I said. 'What did you mean?'

He shrugged. 'Clare will tell you. I can't.'

I said: 'Who started it? You or Clare?'

'She did. Though it comes back to you. She said it was a reaction against you.'

'And you didn't mind being used like that.'

He didn't reply. I wasn't so blind as to be unaware that when a marriage is betrayed both parties are equally to blame. Though what Querrel meant by Clare's resentment was lost on me. I had not to my knowledge done anything that would cause this reaction. Just then, Clare came back into the generator room with Andrew Jenson, the chief ecologist on board the observatory.

He nodded briefly at Querrel, then looked at me. 'Has Querrel told you?'

'Told me what?'

Querrel said: 'No I haven't. This hasn't exactly been a convenient moment.'

In spite of my involvement, I registered the understatement. I said to Jenson: 'Did you know about this?'

'I think we must be talking about something else.'

I had wondered what connection Jenson had with the affair between Querrel and my wife.

Querrel got up from his perch on the edge of the housing, and went towards the door. 'Excuse me for copping out of this,' he said. 'I've had enough for one day.'

I stared after him as he left us.

It will have been noticed that during my descriptions of the work on the observatory there has been a certain amount of circum-spectness as regards detail. There are reasons for this.

It could be said, for instance, that in an environment where one's whole existence is centred around some activity such as scientific study of an alien planet, then one's behaviour should be very much coloured by what is going on. I have remained in this account remarkably free of the excitement of the staff over the various discoveries of minerals, bacteria and various higher life-forms.

The main reason for my reluctance to go into detail is that there is a disparity between the activities of the staff and what I know to be their true function here.

This is a necessarily cryptic state of affairs; not altogether without analogy to Tolneuve's theories.

But consider: the year is 2019, the planet we are supposed to be exploring cannot logically be within our solar system, mankind has not developed his technology to a point which would enable

him to reach such a planet. A vacuum surrounds our observatory – unarguably there, as the air-leaks from our cabins continually testify – and yet outside there appears to be life. None of the staff has ever queried these things.

Jenson went to the intercom, and spoke for a few minutes to one or two other people. Taking advantage of the fact that we were alone, Clare and I exchanged a few words. At first she was sullen and unforthcoming. Then she let go, and spoke to me freely.

She said that for several weeks she had been bored and depressed, anxious about me. That she had been unable to communicate with me. That I would not respond. She had suspected, for a time, that I had taken up with another woman, but discreet investigations had ruled this out to her own satisfaction. She said that she had been forced by the attitude of the other scientists to separate herself from me in certain respects, and that her personal attitude to me had changed in a parallel way. I asked her what she meant by this, and she said that that was what Jenson was here for. She said that she and Querrel had started their affair more or less as a consequence of this, and that had I not acted in such a secretive way it would have never happened.

‘So you mean you think I’m holding something back?’ I said.

‘Yes.’

‘But I’m not. At least, not as far as you and I are concerned.’

She turned away. ‘I don’t believe you.’

Jenson put down the intercom handset for the last time, and came back to us. His face bore an expression, the like of which I had rarely seen on the observatory. One commonly sees a kind of blankness in the faces, but Jenson’s showed purpose, intent.

‘You’ve got one of your transor-conjunctions tonight, haven’t you?’

‘At eleven thirty, real-time.’

‘O.K. As soon as that’s finished, we’re leaving the observatory. Are you coming with us?’

I gaped at him. What he had just said amounted almost to treason against his own identity. It was impossible for him, or any other members of the staff, to conceive independently of the notion of leaving the observatory. Every member of the staff had been fully conditioned *against* such a concept.

Clare said: ‘This is what I meant. We’ve been planning to get

out for several weeks. The others told me not to talk to you about it.'

'But that's impossible!'

'To get out?' Jenson smiled at me as if I were to be patronised. 'We intend to use the abort mode. Nothing could be simpler.'

Whatever may or may not be outside the observatory – whether you accept the official rationale of the observatory or, like me, you are aware of the true state of affairs – there is certainly a great deal of hard vacuum. Either the vacuum of elocated space, or the other and more common kind. No human being could hope to exist outside without full portable life-supports. Jenson knew this; everyone knew it.

'You're insane,' I said. 'You're incapable of assessing the true state of affairs.' I meant this emotionally and literally. He was acting in a deranged way, and by definition, by the way he and all the others behaved in the sense of group response, he was insane. 'You don't know what's outside.'

Clare said: 'We do, Dan. We've known for some time.'

'The planet's uninhabitable,' I said. 'The life-forms you've been observing are incompatible with the hydro-carbon cycle. Even if you could get through the elocation field, you'd never survive.'

I was sticking to the official line. Jenson and Clare glanced at each other. Even as I spoke, I realised that none of this was their intention.

This is relevant:

The moon orbits the Earth at a distance of roughly a quarter-million miles. As it completes one orbit, so its own period of revolution ends. Result – we see only one face. However, the orbital path of the moon is elliptical and thus its speed in orbit varies, depending on its distance from Earth. Result – an observer on Earth sees the face of the moon moving very slightly from side to side as if it were shaking its head. It is therefore possible to see fractionally more of the moon's surface than that on the side facing Earth. This movement is known as libration. On the north-east edge of the moon's near side, as viewed from the Earth, is a crater named Joliot-Curie. For just over 28 days of every lunar month the crater is invisible from Earth. But for a few hours every month an observer inside the crater would see the Earth creep into sight over the horizon.

On the floor of the crater, operating in a narrow strip of land from which the Earth can be seen at this time, is the observatory.

I glanced at my wrist-watch. I said: "What has the next transor-conjunction to do with this?"

"Some of the others want to have a look at the whole communication as it arrives. This is a genuine transor, isn't it?"

"As opposed to . . . ?"

"Those times when you close your office to get up to God only knows what. We know that there's only one transor every four weeks. Winter. And that the observatory is run from Earth on a real-time basis of four-weekly cycles."

"How do you know that?"

"We're not entirely subject to the controllers' whims," said Clare. "We have some access to what's going on."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," I said. It had been comforting to be the only person on the observatory with the knowledge of what was really going on. Now it looked as if the others has somehow found out.

"Look, Winter," said Jenson. "Will you accept that we *do* know what the real situation is? You don't run the observatory, you know."

"But I do have control of information," I said.

Jenson gestured impatiently. "You had," he corrected. "It's been common knowledge for some time that the mission's purpose has had to be changed. We know about the troubles on Earth."

I thought about that for a moment.

"Why do you want to get out of the observatory just at this moment?"

Jenson shrugged. "This is the time," he said. "We're tired of being cooped up in here. Now we know exactly what's going on, we especially resent being here for no good reason. Some of us have members of our families on Earth . . . with the trouble brewing up, not unnaturally we want to be with them. Also, there is a strong current of feeling that if a war does break out on Earth, we may well be stranded inside here. It's apparent that the experiment as it was has come to an end."

Clare had moved across to me. Now she laid a hand on my arm. The touch of her felt vaguely alien, yet also reassuring.

"We must get out of here, Dan," she said. "For both of us."

I tried to give her a cold look; the memory of what I had found her doing with Querrel still a disconcerting thought in the back of my mind.

"You say you know what's happening. I don't believe you do."

Jenson said: 'It isn't just me. Everyone on board knows. There's no point in arguing about it.'

'I'm not arguing.'

'O.K. But for God's sake let's forget the official line about surveying an alien planet.'

By the manner in which Jenson was talking, I knew that he wasn't trying to extract information from me . . . though at another time this might have been an acceptable motive within the terms of the experiment. Rather, it was as if we were both living with a falsehood, both knew it, and both should abandon it.

I said: 'All right. We're not on an alien planet. What do you think the observatory is?'

'We don't think,' said Clare. 'We know.'

Jenson nodded to her. 'We know that what we are expected to believe is a series of implanted reactions to pre-programmed stimuli. That the scientific reports we give to you to relay to Earth are in fact viewed in the sense of how well we have reacted rather than what our reaction has actually been. We also know that a large number of our assumptions about the observatory are artificial, and were conditioned into us before we came here.'

I said: 'I'll concede you that so far.'

'What we don't know, on the other hand, is the exact purpose of the experiment, though there have been several speculations that we are a kind of control-group. In the same way that we have been told that this mission is simulated on Earth by computers. so we are ourselves a kind of simulation for some other expedition . . . perhaps one even on another planet. Or an expedition which is intended to go to another planet.'

I had no idea how they had reached this knowledge, but what Jenson was saying was almost exactly so.

'There is also some other kind of experiment going on, but of this we have no knowledge at all. We think, though, that it is connected with you, and accounts for your presence here.'

I said: 'How have you found this out?'

'By common deduction.'

'There's just one more thing,' I said. 'You are proposing to leave the observatory. Do you *know* what's outside?'

Clare glanced up at Jenson, and he laughed.

'Office-blocks, motels, smog, grass. . . I don't know, anything you like.'

'If you try to get outside the observatory you'll die,' I said.

'There's literally nothing outside. No air . . . certainly no grass or smog.'

'What do you mean?'

'We're on the moon,' I said. 'Earth's moon. You've been right in everything you've said so far . . . but you're wrong about this. The observatory is on the moon.'

They exchanged glances again. 'I don't believe it,' Clare said. 'We've never left Earth. Everyone knows that.'

'I can prove it,' I said.

I turned to an equipment bay behind me, and took a steel lever from its rack. I held it in my hand before them, then let go. It floated gently to the floor . . . one-sixth gee, lunar gravity.

'What does that prove?' Jenson said. 'You've dropped a lever. So what?'

'So we're in the lunar field of gravity.'

Jenson picked up the lever, dropped it again. 'Does this look to you as if it's falling slowly?' he said.

I nodded.

'What about you, Clare?'

She said with a slight frown? 'It looks perfectly normal to me.'

I put my hands on Jenson's shoulders, pushed backwards. He moved away lightly, recovered easily.

'On Earth,' I said, 'you would have fallen heavily.'

'On the moon,' Jenson replied, 'you couldn't have pushed so hard.'

We picked up the lever, and dropped it again and again to the floor. Each time it fell smoothly and gently to the floor, bouncing two or three times with light ringing noises. And yet they maintained that it fell as if under normal gravity.

Who, I began to wonder, was imagining what?

Before the escalation of the troubles on Earth, an expedition had been planned. I don't know where it was intended to go, nor how it was supposed it would be transported there. The members of the expedition would live and work in a mobile laboratory, carrying out various facets of ecological research.

The Joliot-Curie observatory was a practice run – deliberately placed in a relatively inaccessible area of the moon, deliberately rigged to mislead the occupants into believing they were working in the field.

So conditioned were they that no one until this moment had ever questioned the mission, or speculated as to its purpose. What

they saw of the unnamed planet was pre-recorded films, prepared slides, pre-taped responses on the EEGs. What was observed at the observatory was the observer.

We moved along the main corridor to my office. At Jenson's request, several of the others had joined us. I noticed Thorensen was among them, but not Querrel. We walked with the habitual slow grace of the observatory . . . light, bounding steps to get the most out of the lunar gravity.

But the distracting thought persisted: if no one else but I could detect the effects of the low gravity, how did their bodies' metabolism compensate? It was a new development to me, and one that should have occurred before. I knew that they had been conditioned to ignore the low gravity, to react to it as if it were normal, but I had not seen before that if one's mind and one's body are oriented around differing physical phenomena, then at the very lowest level of reaction there would be inefficient synchronisation of movement, and at the highest level there would be ultimate mental breakdown.

We arrived at the office about six minutes before the transor-conjunction was due to commence.

The conjunction begins as the edge of the Earth rises slowly over the south-western horizon. It takes a few minutes for a direct line-of-sight tight-beam to be locked on. As soon as this has been accomplished, the stored data in our computers is fed back to Earth. This takes around twenty seconds. Immediately after, the controllers on Earth send up the various messages and information direct into our computer. This can take anything between five minutes and three hours.

I said nothing about the files in my cabinets, and showed the staff the equipment for the transor, and how it may be monitored. Very few of them showed interest.

At 23:32 hours, the conjunction began. A series of red pilot-lights along the console showed that we had locked on to the automatic tracking equipment on Earth. Exactly where the equipment was situated I never knew, as it depended on the configuration of the Earth and the moon at the time of the conjunction. There were twelve stations situated at various parts of the globe.

I switched in the data transmitter and we waited while this was sent to Earth. There was an uncomfortable silence in the office;

neither from concentration nor anticipation, but more a kind of patient waiting.

When the console showed that our transmission was concluded, I switched in the acquisition circuit. And we waited.

Ten minutes later, we were still waiting. The circuit was dead. Jenson said: 'I think that confirms it.'

'It didn't need to be confirmed,' said one of the others.

I looked at Thorensen, then Clare. Their faces showed no surprise, still that expression of patience.

'The experiment's over,' Jenson said. 'We can go home.'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'You know about the war on Earth? It's been threatening for months. Now it has started.'

'Ten days ago,' Thorensen said. 'Or at least, that was what we heard.'

I said: 'But there's been no news of it.'

Jenson shrugged. 'You won't be getting any more from that,' he said, nodding towards the console. 'You might as well turn the bloody thing off.'

'How did you know about the war?' I said.

'We've known for some time. In fact, we anticipated it by several days.'

'Why didn't anyone say anything?'

Thorensen said bluntly: 'They did . . . but not to you.'

Clare came over and stood by my side. 'We had to be careful, Dan. We knew you were holding back information from us, and we didn't know what would happen if we told you we knew.'

I said: 'Thanks, Clare.'

On one of the sides of the observatory is a tunnel large enough to accommodate at one time the entire staff. It is the abort mode. It has been designed to stay provisioned and airtight long enough to keep everyone alive in the event of an emergency until help can be sent from Earth.

It is also the only access point to the inside of the observatory, and had the experiment ended at the originally-designated time, we would have passed down the tunnel on our way to the relief modules.

We periodically pressurised and checked out the abort tunnel, and everyone on the observatory knew how to operate it.

Jenson said: 'We're getting out.'

'You can't.'

The others looked round at each other. Two of the men moved towards the door.

'We have a choice,' Jenson said. 'We can die in here, or we can get outside. What the conditions are like out there, we don't know. Probably there is a high level of radioactivity. But we do know that the observatory is somewhere on Earth. Last night we took a vote on it, and it was unanimously agreed that we're not staying here.'

'What about you, Clare?'

She said: 'I'm going too.'

I sat at my desk, staring at the 84 file. Everything was in here. All the pieces that made up a picture of the world committing suicide. I had had those pieces, but the staff hadn't. And yet the absence of that information had somehow generated an awareness of its existence, and they had known what was happening. But I hadn't.

I thought again of my chart which, had it finished, would have returned to the line of reality about now. I could see what had gone wrong with the chart – that the staff had deliberately excluded me from the more important of their rumours. That as their stories drew nearer and nearer to what was real, they had said nothing to me.

So they had built reality from speculation in exactly the way I had theorised, yet had hardly dared to believe.

Jenson came back to my office about an hour later.

'Are you going to come, Winter?' he said.

I shook my head. 'You don't know what you are doing. You're going to step out of that tunnel into the moon's vacuum. You'll die instantly.'

'You're wrong,' he said. 'About this, and other things. You say we've been conditioned – well we'll accept that. But what about you? How can you tell that everything you think about the observatory is accurate?'

'But I *know*,' I said.

'And a madman knows he is the only one sane.'

'If you like.'

Jenson extended his hand to shake mine. 'Well, see you outside, then.'

'I'm not going to go.'

'Perhaps not now, but later maybe.'

I shook my head again, emphatically. 'Is Clare going with you?'

'Yes.'

'Will you ask her to come in here for a moment?'

He said: 'She's already in the tunnel. She said it would not be a good thing to see you at the moment.'

I shook his hand, and he left the office.

A few minutes ago I went down to the abort tunnel.

The outer door was open, and the tunnel was empty. I closed the door with the remote-control wheel, and repressurized the tunnel.

I have been right through the observatory, and I have confirmed that I am alone. It is very quiet in here. I sit at my desk, holding a part of my 84 file. Every now and again I hold it out from the desk, and watch it fall slowly to the floor. Its movement is gentle, and very graceful. I could watch it for hours.

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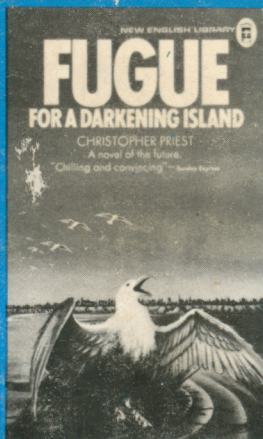
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