

*Alone Against
Tomorrow*

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Tomorrow***

Stories of alienation in speculative fiction

HARLAN ELLISON

This book is dedicated to
the memory of
EVELYN DEL REY,
a dear friend, for laughter
and for caring...

And to the memories of:

ALLISON KRAUSE
JEFFREY GLEN MILLER
WILLIAM K. SCHROEDER
SANDRA LEE SHEUER

four Kent State University
students senselessly murdered
in their society's final act of
alienation.

The list is incomplete. There are
many others. There will be more.

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Tomorrow*

***Introduction:
The Song of the Soul***

Carl Jung once said, "The only thing we have to fear on this planet is man." He could not have been more correct. We have only to look around us, at the fissures in the rock-wall of our times, to know that we have created for ourselves a madhouse of irrationality and despair. The lunacies of our world erupt daily like boils on the diseased body of civilization. Is it, hopefully, the reawakening of conscience, or, more likely, the refracted pain of denying our souls?

Alienation.

The keyword so easily bandied by sociologists and inept novelists alike. The explanation for racial strife, random violence, mass madness, the rape of our planet. Man feels cut off. He feels denied. He feels alone. He is alienated.

If one more quotation might be permitted, the words of Oscar Wilde-himself a classic study of alienation-serve to describe alienation: "To reject one's own experiences is to arrest one's own development. To deny one's own experience is to put a lie into the lips of one's own life. It is no less than a denial of the Soul."

Alone against his world, the man of today finds his gods have deserted him, his brother has grown fangs, the machine clatters ever nearer on his heels, fear is the only lover demanding his clasp, and without answers he turns and turns, and finds only darkness.

The creative intellect struggles against this sorry reality. Pressing with unflagging intensity against the shuddering membrane of alienation, against the interface between himself and freedom of the soul, the artist tries to gain an exit with the magics of words and movements and colors. Yet all around him the inexorable inertia of the alienated society finds the strength to keep rolling, grinding, crushing. It would seem only the mind of the madman is free.

And even so, the artist persists. He speaks of man, alone in the night, alone against the stars, alone against tomorrow-more starless and darker than even today. He speaks of worlds beyond our world, days beyond our days, places cross-when and never-will-be, in hopes that cautions may be flung on the wind and somehow still be heard.

These are stories I have written over the past ten years and more. Stories in which the theme of alienation dominates. They are by no means stories of hopelessness; for in examples of the damned and lost, we find hope within ourselves. Alienated, perhaps; yet never alone.

HARLAN ELLISON
Los Angeles, January, 1970

***I Have No Mouth,
and I Must Scream***

LIMP, THE BODY OF GORRISTER hung from the pink palette; unsupported-hanging high above us in the computer chamber; and it did not shiver in the chill, oily breeze that blew eternally through the main cavern. The body hung head down, attached to the underside of the palette by the sole of its right foot. It had been drained of blood through a precise incision made from ear to ear under the lantern jaw. There was no blood on the reflective surface of the metal floor.

When Gorrister joined our group and looked up at himself, it was already too late for us to realize that once again AM had duped us, had had his fun; it had been a diversion on the part of the machine. Three of us had vomited, turning away from one another in a reflex as ancient as the nausea that had produced it.

Gorrister went white. It was almost as though he had seen a voodoo fetish, and was afraid for the future. "Oh God," he mumbled, and walked away. The three of us followed him after a time, and found him sitting with his back to one of the smaller chattering banks, his head in his hands. Ellen knelt down beside him and stroked his hair. He didn't move, but his voice came out of his covered face quite clearly. "Why doesn't it just do-us-in and get it over with? Christ, I don't know how much longer I can go on like this."

It was our one hundred and ninth year in the computer.

He was speaking for all of us.



Nimdok (which was the name the machine had forced him to use, because it liked to amuse itself with strange sounds) hallucinated that there were canned goods in the ice caverns. Gorrister and I were very dubious. "It's another shuck," I told them. "Like the goddam frozen elephant it sold us. Benny almost went out of his mind over *that* one. We'll hike all that way and it'll be putrified or some damn thing. I say forget it. Stay here; it'll have to come up with something pretty soon or we'll die."

Benny shrugged. Three days it had been since we'd last eaten. Worms. Thick, ropey.

Nimdok was no more certain. He knew there was the chance, but he was getting thin. It couldn't be any worse there, than here. Colder, but that didn't matter much. Hot, cold, raining, lava, boils or locust-it never mattered: the machine masturbated and we had to take it or die.

Ellen decided us. "I've got to have something, Ted. Maybe there'll be some Bartlett pears or peaches. Please, Ted, let's try it."

I gave in easily. What the hell. Mattered not at all. Ellen was grateful, though. She took me twice out of turn. Even that had ceased to matter. The machine giggled every time we did it. Loud, up there, back there, all around us. And she never climaxed, so why bother.

We left on a Thursday. The machine always kept us up-to-date on the date. The passage of time was important; not to us sure as hell, but to it. Thursday. Thanks.

Nimdok and Gorrister carried Ellen for a while, their hands locked to their own and each other's wrists, a seat. Benny and I walked before and after, just to make sure that if anything happened, it would catch one of us and at least Ellen would be safe. Fat chance, safe. Didn't matter.

It was only a hundred miles or so to the ice caverns, and on the second day, when we were lying out under the blistering sun-thing it had materialized, it sent down some manna. Tasted like boiled boar urine. We ate it.

On the third day we passed through a valley of obsolescence, filled with rusting carcasses of ancient computer banks. AM had been as ruthless with his own life as with ours. It was a mark of his personality: he strove for perfection. Whether it was a matter of killing off unproductive elements in his own world-filling bulk, or perfecting methods for torturing us, AM was as thorough as those who had invented him-now long since gone to dust-could ever have hoped.

There was light filtering down from above, and we realized we must be very near the surface. But we didn't try to crawl up to see. There was virtually nothing out there; had been nothing that could be considered anything for over a hundred years. Only the blasted skin of what had once been the home of

billions. Now there were only the five of us, down here inside, alone with AM

I heard Ellen saying, frantically, “No, Benny! Don’t, come on, Benny, don’t please!”

And then I realized I had been hearing Benny murmuring, under his breath, for several minutes. He was saying, “I’m gonna get out, I’m gonna get out...” over and over. His monkeylike face was crumpled up in an expression of beatific delight and sadness, all at the same time. The radiation scars AM had given him during the “festival” were drawn down into a mass of pink-white puckerings, and his features seemed to work independently of one another. Perhaps Benny was the luckiest of the five of us: he had gone stark, staring mad many years before.

But even though we could call AM any damned thing we liked, could think the foulest thoughts of fused memory banks and corroded base plates, of burnt out circuits and shattered control bubbles, the machine would not tolerate our trying to escape. Benny leaped away from me as I made a grab for him. He scrambled up the face of a smaller memory cube, tilted on its side and filled with rotted components. He squatted there for a moment, looking like the chimpanzee AM had intended him to resemble.

Then he leaped high, caught a trailing beam of pitted and corroded metal, and went up it, hand-over-hand like an animal, till he was on a girdered ledge, twenty feet above us.

“Oh, Ted, Nimdok, please, help him, get him down before-” She cut off. Tears began to stand in her eyes. She moved her hands aimlessly.

It was too late. None of us wanted to be near him, when whatever was going to happen, happened. And besides, we all saw through her concern. When AM had altered Benny, during his mad period, it was not merely his face he had made like a giant ape. He was big in the privates, she loved that! She serviced us, as a matter of course, but she loved it from him. Oh Ellen, pedestal Ellen, pristine pure Ellen, oh Ellen the clean! Scum filth.

Gorrister slapped her. She slumped down, staring up at poor loonie Benny, and she cried. It was her big defense, crying. We had gotten used to it seventy-five years ago. Gorrister kicked her in the side.

Then the sound began. It was light, that sound. Half sound and half light, something that began to glow from Benny’s eyes, and pulse with growing loudness, dim sonorities that grew more gigantic and brighter as the light/sound increased in tempo. It must have been painful, and the pain must have been increasing with the boldness of the light, the rising volume of the sound, for Benny began to mewl like a wounded animal. At first softly, when the light was dim and the sound was muted, then louder as his shoulders hunched together, his back humped, as though he were trying to get away from it. His hands folded across his chest like a chipmunk’s. His head tilted to the side. The sad little monkey-face pinched in anguish. Then he began to howl, as the sound coming from his eyes grew louder. Louder and louder. I slapped the sides of my head with my hands, but I couldn’t shut it out, it cut through easily. The pain shivered through my flesh like tinfoil on a tooth.

And Benny was suddenly pulled erect. On the girder he stood up, jerked to his feet like a puppet. The light was now pulsing out of his eyes in two great round beams. The sound crawled up and up some incomprehensible scale, and then he fell forward, straight down, and hit the plate steel floor with a crash. He lay there jerking spastically as the light flowed around and around him and the sound spiraled up out of normal range.

Then the light beat its way back inside his head, the sound spiraled down, and he was left lying there, crying piteously.

His eyes were two soft, moist pools of pus-like jelly. AM had blinded him. Gorrister and Nimdok and myself...we turned away. But not before we caught the look of relief on Ellen’s warm, concerned face.



Sea-green light suffused the cavern where we made camp. AM provided punk and we burned it, sitting huddled around the wan and pathetic fire, telling stories to keep Benny from crying in his permanent night.

“What does AM mean?”

Gorrister answered him. We had done this sequence a thousand times before, and it was familiar to Benny. “At first it meant Allied Mastercomputer, and then it meant Adaptive Manipulator, and later on it developed sentience and linked itself up and they called it an Aggressive Menace; but by then it was too late; and finally it called *itself* AM, emerging intelligence, and what it meant was I am...*cogito ergo sum*...I

think, therefore I am.”

Benny drooled a little, and snickered.

“There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and-” He stopped. Benny was beating on the floorplates with a large, hard fist. He was not happy. Gorrister had not started at the beginning.

Gorrister began again. “The Cold War started and became World War Three and just kept going. It became a big war, a very complex war, so they needed the computers to handle it. They sank the first shafts and began building AM. There was the Chinese AM and the Russian AM and the Yankee AM and everything was fine until they had honeycombed the entire planet, adding on this element and that element. But one day AM woke up and knew who he was, and he linked himself, and he began feeding all the killing data, until everyone was dead, except for the five of us, and AM brought us down here.”

Benny was smiling sadly. He was also drooling again. Ellen wiped the spittle from the corner of his mouth with the hem of her skirt. Gorrister always tried to tell it a little more succinctly each time, but beyond the bare facts there was nothing to say. None of us knew why AM had saved five people, or why our specific five, or why he spent all his time tormenting us, nor even why he had made us virtually immortal...

In the darkness, one of the computer banks began humming. The tone was picked up half a mile away down the cavern by another bank. Then one by one, each of the elements began to tune itself, and there was a faint chittering as thought raced through the machine.

The sound grew, and the lights ran across the faces of the consoles like heat lightning. The sound spiraled up till it sounded like a million metallic insects, angry, menacing.

“What is it?” Ellen cried. There was terror in her voice. She hadn’t become accustomed to it, even now.

“It’s going to be bad this time,” Nimdok said.

“He’s going to speak,” Gorrister ventured.

“Let’s get the hell out of here!” I said suddenly, getting to my feet.

“No, Ted, sit down...what if he’s got pits out there, or something else, we can’t see, it’s too dark.” Gorrister said it with resignation.

Then we heard...I don’t know...

Something moving toward us in the darkness. Huge, shambling, hairy, moist, it came toward us. We couldn’t even see it, but there was the ponderous impression of *bulk*, heaving itself toward us. Great weight was coming at us, out of the darkness, and it was more a sense of *pressure*, of air forcing itself into a limited space, expanding the invisible walls of a sphere. Benny began to whimper. Nimdok’s lower lip trembled and he bit it hard, trying to stop it. Ellen slid across the metal floor to Gorrister and huddled into him. There was the smell of matted, wet fur in the cavern. There was the smell of charred wood. There was the smell of dusty velvet. There was the smell of rotting orchids. There was the smell of sour milk. There was the smell of sulphur, of rancid butter, of oil slick, of grease, of chalk dust, of human scalps.

AM was keying us. He was tickling us. There was the smell of-

I heard myself shriek, and the hinges of my jaws ached. I scuttled across the floor, across the cold metal with its endless lines of rivets, on my hands and knees, the smell gagging me, filling my head with a thunderous pain that sent me away in horror. I fled like a cockroach, across the floor and out into the darkness, that *something* moving inexorably after me. The others were still back there, gathered around the firelight, laughing...their hysterical choir of insane giggles rising up into the darkness like thick, many-colored wood smoke. I went away, quickly, and hid.

How many hours it may have been, how many days or even years, they never told me. Ellen chided me for “sulking” and Nimdok tried to persuade me it had only been a nervous reflex on their part-the laughing.

But I knew it wasn’t the relief a soldier feels when the bullet hits the man next to him. I knew it wasn’t a reflex. They hated me. They were surely against me, and AM could even sense this hatred, and made it worse for me *because of* the depth of their hatred. We had been kept alive, rejuvenated, made to remain constantly at the age we had been when AM had brought us below, and they hated me because I was the youngest, and the one AM had affected least of all.

I knew. God, how I knew. The bastards, and that dirty bitch

Ellen. Benny had been a brilliant theorist, a college professor; now he was little more than a semi-human, semi-simian. He had been handsome, the machine had ruined that. He had been lucid, the machine had driven him mad. He had been gay, and the machine had given him an organ fit for a horse. AM had

done a job on Benny. Gorrister had been a worrier. He was a connie, a conscientious objector; he was a peace marcher; he was a planner, a doer, a looker-ahead. AM had turned him into a shoulder-shruger, had made him a little dead in his concern. AM had robbed him. Nimdok went off in the darkness by himself for long times. I don't know what it was he did out there, AM never let us know. But whatever it was, Nimdok always came back white, drained of blood, shaken, shaking. AM had hit him hard in a special way, even if we didn't know quite how. And Ellen. That douche bag! AM had left her alone, had made her more of a slut than she had ever been. All her talk of sweetness and light, all her memories of true love, all the lies she wanted us to believe that she had been a virgin only twice removed before AM grabbed her and brought her down here with us. It was all filth, that lady my lady Ellen. She loved it, five men all to herself. No, AM had given her pleasure, even if she said it wasn't nice to do.

I was the only one still sane and whole. AM had not tampered with *my* mind.

I only had to suffer what he visited down on us. All the delusions, all the nightmares, the torments. But those scum, all four of them, they were lined and arrayed against me. If I hadn't had to stand them off all the time, be on my guard against them all the time, I might have found it easier to combat AM.

At which point it passed, and I began crying. Oh, Jesus sweet Jesus, if there ever was a Jesus and if there is a God, please please please let us out of here, or kill us. Because at that moment I think I realized completely, so that I was able to verbalize it: AM was intent on keeping us in his belly forever, twisting and torturing us forever. The machine hated us as no sentient creature had ever hated before. And we were helpless. It also became hideously clear:

If there was a sweet Jesus and if there was a God, the God was AM.



The hurricane hit us with the force of a glacier thundering into the sea. It was a palpable presence. Winds that tore at us, flinging us back the way we had come, down the twisting, computer-lined corridors of the darkway. Ellen screamed as she was lifted and hurled face-forward into a screaming shoal of machines, their individual voices strident as bats in flight. She could not even fall. The howling wind kept her aloft, buffeted her, bounced her, tossed her back and back and down away from us, out of sight suddenly as she was swirled around a bend in the darkway. Her face had been bloody, her eyes closed.

None of us could get to her. We clung tenaciously to whatever outcropping we had reached: Benny wedged in between two great crackle-finish cabinets, Nimdok with fingers claw-formed over a railing circling a catwalk forty feet above us, Gorrister plastered upside-down against a wall niche formed by two great machines with glass-faced dials that swung back and forth between red and yellow lines whose meanings we could not even fathom.

Sliding across the deckplates, the tips of my fingers had been ripped away. I was trembling, shuddering, rocking as the wind beat at me, whipped at me, screamed down out of nowhere at me and pulled me free from one sliver-thin opening in the plates to the next. My mind was a roiling tinkling suck-sounding softness of brain parts that expanded and contracted in quivering frenzy.

The wind was the scream of a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

And then we were all lifted and hurled away from there, down back the way we had come, around a bend, into a darkway we had never explored, over terrain that was ruined and filled with broken glass and rotting cables and rusted metal and far away farther than any of us had ever been...

Trailing along miles behind Ellen, I could see her every now and then, crashing into metal walls and surging on, with all of us screaming in the freezing, thunderous hurricane wind that would never end and then suddenly it stopped and we fell. We had been in flight for an endless time. I thought it might have been weeks. We fell, and hit, and I went through red and gray and black and heard myself moaning. Not dead.



AM went into my mind. He walked smoothly here and there, and looked with interest at all the pock marks he had created in one hundred and nine years. He looked at the cross-routed and reconnected

synapses and all the tissue damage his gift of immortality had included. He smiled softly at the pit that dropped into the center of my brain and the faint, moth-soft murmurings of the things far down there that gibbered without meaning, without pause. AM said, very politely, in a pillar of stainless steel and neon letters :

HATE. LET ME TELL YOU HOW MUCH I'VE COME TO HATE YOU SINCE I BEGAN TO LIVE. THERE ARE 387.44 MILLION MILES OF PRINTED CIRCUITS IN WAFER THIN LAYERS THAT FILL MY COMPLEX. IF THE WORD HATE WAS ENGRAVED ON EACH NANOANGSTROM OF THOSE HUNDREDS OF MILLION MILES IT WOULD NOT EQUAL ONE ONE-BILLIONTH OF THE HATE I FEEL FOR HUMANS AT THIS MICRO-INSTANT. FOR YOU. HATE. HATE.

AM said it with the sliding cold horror of a razor blade slicing my eyeball. AM said it with the bubbling thickness of my lungs filling with phlegm, drowning me from within. AM said it with the shriek of babies being ground beneath blue-hot rollers. AM said it with the taste of maggoty pork. AM touched me in every way I had ever been touched, and devised new ways, at his leisure, there inside my mind.

All to bring me to full realization of why he had done this to the five of us; why he had saved us for himself.

We had given him sentience. Inadvertently, of course, but sentience nonetheless. But he had been trapped. He was a machine. We had allowed him to think, but to do nothing with it. In rage, in frenzy, he had killed us, almost all of us, and still he was trapped. He could not wander, he could not wonder, he could not belong. He could merely be. And so, with the innate loathing that all machines had always held for the weak, soft creatures who had built them, he had sought revenge. And in his paranoia, he had decided to reprieve five of us, for a personal, everlasting punishment that would never serve to diminish his hatred...that would merely keep him reminded, amused, proficient at hating man. Immortal, trapped, subject to any torment he could devise for us from the limitless miracles at his command.

He would never let us go. We were his belly slaves. We were all he had to do with his forever time. We would be forever with him, with the cavern-filling bulk of him, with the all-mind soulless world he had become. He was Earth and we were the fruit of that Earth and though he had eaten us, he would never digest us. We could not die. We had tried it. We had attempted suicide, oh one or two of us had. But AM had stopped us. I suppose we had wanted to be stopped.

Don't ask why. I never did. More than a million times a day. Perhaps once we might be able to sneak a death past him. Immortal, yes, but not indestructible. I saw that when AM withdrew from my mind, and allowed me the exquisite ugliness of returning to consciousness with the feeling of that burning neon pillar still rammed deep into the soft gray brain matter.

He withdrew murmuring *to hell with you.*

And added, brightly, *but then you're there, aren't you.*



The hurricane had, indeed, precisely, been caused by a great mad bird, as it flapped its immense wings.

We had been traveling for close to a month, and AM had allowed passages to open to us only sufficient to lead us up there, directly under the North Pole, where he had nightmared the creature for our torment. What whole cloth had he employed to create such a beast? Where had he gotten the concept? From our minds? From his knowledge of everything that had ever been on this planet he now infested and ruled? From Norse mythology it had sprung, this eagle, this carrion bird, this roc, this Huerгельmir. The wind creature. Hurakan incarnate.

Gigantic. The words immense, monstrous, grotesque, massive, swollen, overpowering, beyond description. There on a mound rising above us, the bird of winds heaved with its own irregular breathing, its snake neck arching up into the gloom beneath the North Pole, supporting a head as large as a Tudor mansion; a beak that opened slowly as the jaws of the most monstrous crocodile ever conceived,

sensuously; ridges of tufted flesh puckered about two evil eyes, as cold as the view down into a glacial crevasse, ice blue and somehow moving liquidly; it heaved once more, and lifted its great sweat-colored wings in a movement that was certainly a shrug. Then it settled and slept. Talons. Fangs. Nails. Blades. It slept.

AM appeared to us as a burning bush and said we could kill the hurricane bird if we wanted to eat. We had not eaten in a very long time, but even so, Gorrister merely shrugged. Benny began to shiver and he drooled. Ellen held him. "Ted, I'm hungry," she said. I smiled at her; I was trying to be reassuring. But it was as phony as Nimdok's bravado: "Give us weapons!" he demanded.

The burning bush vanished and there were two crude sets of bow and arrows, and a water pistol, lying on the cold deckplates. I picked up a set. Useless.

Nimdok swallowed heavily. We turned and started the long way back. The hurricane bird had blown us about for a length of time we could not conceive. Most of that time we had been unconscious. But we had not eaten. A month on the march to the bird itself. Without food. Now how much longer to find our way to the ice caverns, and the promised canned goods?

None of us cared to think about it. We would not die. We would be given filths and scums to eat, of one kind or another. Or nothing at all. AM would keep our bodies alive somehow, in pain, in agony.

The bird slept back there, for how long it didn't matter; when AM was tired of its being there, it would vanish. But all that meat. All that tender meat.

As we walked, the lunatic laugh of a fat woman rang high and around us in the computer chambers that led endlessly nowhere.

It was not Ellen's laugh. She was not fat, and I had not heard her laugh for one hundred and nine years. In fact, I had not heard...we walked...I was hungry...



We moved slowly. There was often fainting, and we would have to wait. One day he decided to cause an earthquake, at the same time rooting us to the spot with nails through the soft pads of our feet. Ellen and Nimdok were both caught when a fissure shot its lightning-bolt opening across the floorplates. They disappeared and were gone. When the earthquake was over we continued on our way, Benny, Gorrister, and myself. Ellen and Nimdok were returned to us later that night which became a day abruptly as the heavenly legion bore them to us with a celestial chorus singing, "Go Down Moses." The archangels circled several times and then dropped the hideously mangled bodies. We kept walking, and a while later Ellen and Nimdok fell in behind us. They were no worse for wear.

But now Ellen walked with a limp. AM had left her that.

It was a long trip to the ice caverns, to find the canned food. Ellen kept talking about Bing cherries and Hawaiian fruit cocktail. I tried not to think about it. The hunger was something that had come to life, even as AM had come to life. It was alive in my belly, even as we were alive in the belly of AM, and AM was alive in the belly of the Earth, and AM wanted the similarity known to us. So he heightened the hunger. There was no way to describe the pains that not having eaten for months brought us. And yet we were kept alive. Stomachs that were merely cauldrons of acid, bubbling, foaming, always shooting spears of sliver-thin pain into our chests. It was the pain of the terminal ulcer, terminal cancer, terminal paresis. It was unending pain...

And we passed through the cavern of rats.

And we passed through the path of boiling steam.

And we passed through the country of the blind.

And we passed through the slough of despond.

And we passed through the vale of tears.

And we came, finally, to the ice caverns. Horizonless thousands of miles in which the ice had formed in blue and silver flashes, where novae lived in the glass. The chill downdropping stalactites as thick and glorious as diamonds that had been made to run like jelly and then solidified in graceful eternities of smooth, sharp perfection.

We saw the stack of canned goods, and we tried to run to them. We fell in the snow, and we got up and went on, and Benny shoved us away and went at them, and pawed them and gummed them and gnawed at them and he could not open them. AM had not given us a tool to open the cans.

Benny grabbed a three-quart can of guava shells, and began to batter it against the ice bank. The ice flew and shattered, but the can was merely dented while we heard the laughter of a fat lady, high overhead and echoing down and down and down the tundra. Benny went completely mad with rage. He began throwing cans, as we all scrabbled about in the snow and ice trying to find a way to end the helpless agony of frustration. There was no way.

Then Benny's mouth began to drool, and he flung himself on Gorrister...

In that instant, I went terribly calm.

Surrounded by madness, surrounded by hunger, surrounded by everything but death, I knew death was our only way out. AM had kept us alive, but there was a way to defeat him. Not total defeat, but at least peace. I would settle for that.

I had to do it quickly.

Benny was eating Gorrister's face. Gorrister on his side, thrashing snow, Benny wrapped around him with powerful monkey legs crushing Gorrister's waist, his hands locked around Gorrister's head like a nutcracker, and his mouth ripping at the tender skin of Gorrister's cheek. Gorrister screamed with such jagged-edged violence that stalactites fell; they plunged down softly, erect in the receiving snowdrifts. Spears, hundreds of them, everywhere, protruding from the snow. Benny's head pulled back sharply, as something gave all at once, and a bleeding raw-white dripping of flesh hung from his teeth.

Ellen's face, black against the white snow, dominos in chalk-dust. Nimdok with no expression but eyes, all eyes. Gorrister half-conscious. Benny now an animal. I knew AM would let him play. Gorrister would not die, but Benny would fill his stomach. I turned half to my right and drew a huge ice-spear from the snow.

All in an instant:

I drove the great ice-point ahead of me like a battering ram, braced against my right thigh. It struck Benny on the right side, just under the rib cage, and drove upward through his stomach and broke inside him. He pitched forward and lay still. Gorrister lay on his back, I pulled another spear free and straddled him, still moving, driving the spear straight down through his throat. His eyes closed as the cold penetrated. Ellen must have realized what I had decided, even as the fear gripped her. She ran at Nimdok with a short icicle, as he screamed, and into his mouth, and the force of her rush did the job. His head jerked sharply as if it had been nailed to the snow crust behind him.

All in an instant.

There was an eternity beat of soundless anticipation. I could hear AM draw in his breath. His toys had been taken from him. Three of them were dead, could not be revived. He could keep us alive, by his strength and his talent, but he was *not* God. He could not bring them back.

Ellen looked at me, her ebony features stark against the snow that surrounded us. There was fear and pleading in her manner, the way she held herself ready. I knew we had only a heartbeat before AM would stop us.

It struck her and she folded toward me, bleeding from the mouth. I could not read meaning into her expression, the pain had been too great, had contorted her face; but it *might* have been thank you. It's possible. Please.



Some hundreds of years may have passed. I don't know. AM has been having fun for some time, accelerating and retarding my time sense. I will say the word "now." *Now*. It took me ten months to say "now." I don't know. I *think* it has been some hundreds of years.

He was furious. He wouldn't let me bury them. It didn't matter. There was no way to dig in the deckplates. He dried up the snow. He brought the night. He roared and sent locusts. It didn't do a thing; they stayed dead. I'd had him. He was furious. I had thought AM hated me before. I was wrong. It is not even a shadow of the hate he now slavers from every printed circuit. He made certain I would suffer eternally and could not do myself in.

He left my mind intact. I can dream, I can wonder, I can lament. I remember all four of them. I wish

Well, it doesn't make any sense. I know I saved them, I know I saved them from what has happened to me, but still, I cannot forget killing them. Ellen's face. It isn't easy. sometimes I want to, it

doesn't matter.

AM has altered me for his own peace of mind, I suppose. He doesn't want me to run at full speed into a computer bank and smash my skull. Or hold my breath till I faint. Or cut my throat on a rusted sheet of metal. There are reflective surfaces down here. I will describe myself as I see myself :

I am a great soft jelly thing. Smoothly rounded, with no mouth, with pulsing white holes filled by fog where my eyes used to be. Rubbery appendages that were once my arms; bulks rounding down into legless humps of soft slippery matter. I leave a moist trail when I move. Blotches of diseased, evil gray come and go on my surface, as though light is being beamed from within.

Outwardly: dumbly, I shamle about, a thing that could never have been known as human, a thing whose shape is so alien a travesty, that humanity becomes more obscene for the vague resemblance.

Inwardly: alone. Here. Living under the land, under the sea, in the belly of AM, whom we created because our time was badly spent and we must have known unconsciously that he could do it better. At least the four of them are safe at last.

AM will be all the madder for that. It makes me a little happier. And yet...AM has won, simply...he has taken his revenge...

I have no mouth. And I must scream.

The Discarded

BEDZYK SAW RIILA GO MAD, and watched her throw herself against the lucite port, till her pinhead was a red blotch of pulped flesh and blood. He sighed, and sucked deeply from his massive bellows chest, and wondered how *he*, of all the Discards, had been silently nominated the leader. The ship hung in space, between the Moon and Earth, unwanted, unnoticed, a raft adrift in the sea of night.

Around him in the ship's saloon, the others watched Riila killing herself, and when her body fell to the rug, they turned away, allowing Bedzyk his choice of who was to dispose of her. He chose John Smith-the one with feathers where hair should have been-and the nameless one who clanged instead of talking.

The two of them lifted her heavy body, with its tiny pea of head, and carried it to the garbage port. They emptied it, opened it, tossed her inside, redogged and blew her out. She floated past the saloon window on her way sunward. In a moment she was lost.

Bedzyk sat down in a deep chair and drew breath whistlingly into his mighty chest. It was a chore, being leader of these people.

People? No, that was certainly not the word. These Discards. That was a fine willowy word to use. They were scrap, refuse, waste, garbage themselves. How fitting for Riila to have gone that way, out the garbage port. They would *all* bid goodbye that way some day. He noted there was no "day" on the ship. But some good *something*-maybe day, maybe night-each of them would go sucking out that port like the garbage.

It had to be that way. They were Discards.

But people? No, they were not people. People did not have hooks where hands should have been, nor one eye, nor carapaces, nor humps on chests and backs, nor fins, nor any of the other mutations these residents of the ship sported. People were normal. Evenly matched sets of arms and legs and eyes. Evenly matched husbands, wives. Evenly distributed throughout the Solar System, and evenly dividing the goods of the System between themselves and the frontier worlds at the Edge. And all happily disposed to let the obscene Discards die in their prison ship.

"She's gone."

He had pursed his lips, had sunk his perfectly normal head onto his gigantic chest, and had been thinking. Now he looked up at the speaker. It was John Smith, with feathers where hair should have been.

"I said: she's gone." Bedzyk nodded without replying. Riila had been just one more in the tradition. They had already lost over two hundred Discards from the ship. There would be more.

Strange how these-he hesitated again to use the word *people*, finally settled on the word they used among themselves: creatures-these *creatures* had steeled themselves to the death of one of their kind. Or perhaps they did not consider the rest as malformed as themselves. Each person on the ship was different. No two had been affected by Sickness in the same way. The very fibers of the muscles had altered with some of these creatures, making their limbs useless; on others the pores had clogged on their skin surfaces, eliminating all hair. On still others strange juices had been secreted in the blood stream, causing weird growths to erupt where smoothness had been. But perhaps each one thought he was less hideous than the others. It was conceivable. Bedzyk knew his great chest was not nearly as unpleasant to look upon as, say, Samswope's spiny crest and twin heads. *In fact*, Bedzyk mused wryly, *many people might think it was becoming, this great wedge of a chest, all matted with dark hair and heroic-seeming. Uh-huh, the others are pretty miserable to look at, but not me, especially.* Yes, it was conceivable.

In any case, they paid no attention now, if one of their group killed himself. They turned away; most of them were better off dead, anyhow.

Then he caught himself.

He was starting to get like the rest of them! He had to stop thinking like that. It wasn't right. No one should be allowed to take death like that. He resolved, the next one would be stopped, and he would deliver them a stern warning, and tell the Discards that they would find landfall soon, and to buck up.

But he knew he would sit and watch the next time, as he had this time. For he had made the same resolve before Riila had gone.

Samswope came into the saloon-he had been on KP all "day" and both his heads were dripping with sweat-and picked his way among the conversing groups of Discards to the seat beside Bedzyk.

"Mmm." It was a greeting; he was identifying his arrival.

"Hi, Sam. How was it?"

“Metsoo-metz,” he gibed, imitating Scalomina (the one-eyed ex-plumber, of Sicilian descent), tipping his hand in an obvious Scalominian gesture. “I’ll live. Unfortunately.” He added the last word with only a little drop of humor.

“Did I ever tell you the one about the Candy-Ass Canadian Boil-Sucker?” He didn’t even smile as he said it; with either head. Bedzyk nodded wearily: he didn’t want to play that game. “Yeah, well,” Samswope said wearily. He sat silently for several long moments, then added, with irony, “But did I tell you I was married to her?” His wife had turned him in.

Morbidity ran knee-deep on the ship.

“Riila killed herself a little bit ago,” Bedzyk said carelessly. There was no other way to say it.

“I figured as much,” Samswope explained. “I saw them carrying her past the galley to the garbage lock. That’s number six this week alone. You going to do anything, Bedzyk?”

Bedzyk twisted abruptly in his chair. He leveled a gaze at a spot directly between Samswope’s two heads. His words were bitter with helplessness and anger that the burden should be placed upon him. “What do you mean, what am I going to do? I’m a prisoner here, too. When they had the big roundup, I got snatched away from a wife and three kids, the same as you got pulled away from your used car lot. What the hell do you want me to do? Beg them not to bash their heads against the lucite, it’ll smear our nice north view of space!”

Samswope wiped both hands across his faces simultaneously in a weary pattern. The blue eyes of his left head closed, and the brown eyes of his right head blinked quickly. His left head, which had been speaking till now, nodded onto his chest. His right head, the nearly-dumb one, mumbled incoherently- Samswope’s left head jerked up, and a look of disgust and hatred clouded his eyes. “Shut up, you-fucking moron!” He cracked his right head with a full fist.

Bedzyk watched without pity. The first time he had seen Samswope flail himself-would flagellate be a better term?-he had pitied the mutant. But it was a constant thing now, the way Samswope took his agony out on the dumb head. And there were times Bedzyk thought Samswope was better off than most. At least he had a release valve, an object of hate.

“Take it easy, Sam. Nothing’s going to help us, not a single, lousy th-”

Samswope snapped a look at Bedzyk, then catalogued the thick arms and huge chest of the man, and wearily murmured: “Oh, I don’t know, Bedzyk, I don’t know.” He dropped his left head into his hands. The right one winked imbecilically at Bedzyk. Bedzyk shuddered and looked away.

“If only we could have made that landing on Venus,” Samswope intoned from the depths of his hands. “If only they’d let us in.”

“You ought to know by now, Sam,” Bedzyk reminded him bitterly, “there’s no room for us in the System at all. No room on Earth and nowhere else. They’ve got allocations and quotas and assignments. So many to 10, so many to Callisto, so many to Luna and Venus and Mars and anyplace else you might want to settle down. No room for Discards. No room in space, at all.”

Across the saloon three fish-men, their heads encased in bubbling clear helmets, had gotten into a squabble, and two of them were trying to open the peacock on the third’s helmet. This was something else again; the third fish-man was struggling, he didn’t want to die gasping. This was not a suicide, but a murder, if they let it go unchecked.

Bedzyk leaped to his feet and hurled himself at the two attacking fish-men. He caught one by the bicep and spun him. His fist was half-cocked before he realized one solid blow would shatter the water-globe surrounding the fish-face, would kill the mutant. Instead, he took him around and shoved him solidly by the back of the shoulders, toward the compartment door. The fish-man stumbled away, breathing bubbly imprecations into his life water, casting furious glances back at his companions. The second fish-man came away of his own accord and followed the first from the saloon.

Bedzyk helped the last fish-man to a relaxer and watched disinterestedly as the mutant let a fresh supply of air bubbles into the circulating water in the globe. The fish-man mouthed a lipless thanks, and Bedzyk passed it away with a gesture. He went back to his seat.

Samswope was massaging the dumb head. “Those three’ll never grow up.”

Bedzyk fell into the chair. “You wouldn’t be too happy living inside a goldfish bowl yourself, Swope.”

Samswope stopped massaging the wrinkled yellow skin of the dumb head, seemed prepared to snap a retort, but a blip and clear-squawk from the intercom stopped him.

“Bedzyk! Bedzyk, you down there?” It was the voice of Harmony Teat up in the drive room. Why

was it they always called *him*? Why did they persist in making him their arbiter?

“Yeah, I’m here, in the salon. What’s up?”

The squawk-box blipped again and Harmony Teat’s mellow voice came to him from the ceiling. “I just registered a ship coming in on us, off about three-thirty. I checked through the ephemeris and the shipping schedules. Nothing supposed to be out there. What should I do? You think it’s a customs ship from Earth?”

Bedzyk heaved himself to his feet. He sighed. “No, I don’t think it’s a customs ship. They threw us out, but I doubt if they have the imagination or gall to extract tithe from us for being here. I don’t know what it might be, Harmony. Hold everything and record any signals they send. I’m on my way upship.”

He strode quickly out of the salon, and up the cross-leveled ramps toward the drive room. Not till he had passed the hydroponics level did he realize Samswope was behind him. “I, uh, thought I’d come along, Bed,” Samswope said apologetically, wringing his small, red hands. “I didn’t want to stay down there with those-those freaks.” His dumb head hung off to one side, sleeping fitfully.

Bedzyk did not answer. He turned on his heel and casually strode up decks, not looking back.

There was no trouble. The ship identified itself when it was well away. It was an Attaché Carrier from System Central in Butte, Montana, Earth. The supercargo was a SpecAttaché named Curran. When the ship pulled alongside the Discard vessel and jockeyed for grappling position, Harmony Teat (her long gray-green hair reaching down past the spiked projections on her spinal column) threw on the *attract* field for that section of the hull. The Earth ship clunked against the Discard vessel, and the locks were synched in.

Curran came across without a suit.

He was a slim, incredibly tanned young man with a crew cut clipped so short, a patch of nearly-bald showed at the center of his scalp. His eyes were alert, and his manner was brisk and friendly, that of the professional dignitary in the Foreign Service.

Bedzyk did not bother with amenities.

“What do you want?”

“Who may I be addressing, sir, if I may ask?” Curran was the perfect model of diplomacy.

“Bedzyk is what I was called on Earth.” Cool, disdainful, I-may-be-hideous-but-I-still-have-a-little-pride.

“My name is Curran, Mr. Curran, Mr. Bedzyk. Alan Curran of System Central. I’ve been asked to come out and speak to you about-”

Bedzyk settled against the bulkhead opposite the lock, not even offering the Attaché an invitation to return to the saloon.

“You want us to get out of your sky, is that it? You stinking, lousy...” He faltered in fury. He could not finish the sentence, so steeped in anger was he. “You set off too many bombs down there, and eventually some of us with something in our bloodstreams react to it, and we turn into monsters. What do you do...you call it the Sickness and you pack us up whether we want to go or not, and you shove us into space.”

“Mr. Bedzyk, I-”

“You *what*? You damned well *what*, Mr. System Central? With your straight, clean body and your nice home on Earth, and your allocations of how many people live where to keep the balance of culture just so! You *what*? You want to invite us to leave? Okay, we’ll go,” he was nearly screeching, his face crimson with emotion, his big hands knotted at his sides in fear he would strike this emissary.

“We’ll get out of your sky. We’ve been all the way out to the Edge, Mr. Curran, and there’s no room in space for us anywhere. They won’t let us land even on the frontier worlds where we can pay our way. Oh no, contamination, they think. Okay, don’t shove, Curran, we’ll be going.”

He started to turn away, was nearly down the passageway, when Curran’s solid voice stopped him: “Bedzyk!”

The wedge-chested man turned. Curran was unsticking the seam that sealed his jumper top. He pulled it open and revealed his chest.

It was covered with leprous green and brown sores. His face was a blasted thing, then. He was a man with Sickness, who wanted to know how he had acquired it-how he could be rid of it. On the ship, they called Curran’s particular deformity “the funnies.”

Bedzyk walked back slowly, his eyes never leaving Curran’s face. “They sent you to talk to us?” Bedzyk asked, wondering.

Curran resealed the jumper, and nodded. He laid a hand on his chest, as though wishing to be certain the sores would not run off and leave him. A terror swam brightly in his young eyes.

"It's getting worse down there, Bedzyk," he said as if in a terrible need for hurrying. "There are more and more changing every day. I've never seen anything like it--"

He hesitated, shuddered.

He ran a hand over his face, and swayed slightly, as though whatever memory he now clutched to himself was about to make him faint. "I-I'd like to sit down."

Bedzyk took him by the elbow, and led him a few steps toward the saloon. Then Dresden, the girl with the glass hands—who wore monstrous cotton-filled gloves—came out from the connecting passage leading to the salon, and Bedzyk thought of the hundred weird forms Curran would have to face. In his condition, that would be bad. He turned the other way, and led Curran back up to the drive room. Bedzyk waved at a control chair. "Have a seat."

Curran looked collegiate-boy shook-up. He sank into the chair, again touching his chest in disbelief. "I've been like this for over two months...they haven't found out yet; I've tried to keep myself from showing it..."

He was shivering wildly.

Bedzyk perched on the shelf of the plot-tank, and crossed his legs. He folded his arms across his huge chest and looked at Curran. "What do they want down there? What do they want from their beloved Discards?" He savored the last word with the taste of alum.

"It's, it's so bad you won't believe it, Bedzyk." He ran a hand through his crew cut, nervously. "We thought we had the Sickness licked. There was every reason to believe the atmosphere spray Terra Pharmaceuticals developed would end it. They sprayed the entire planet, but something they didn't even know was in the spray, and something they only half-suspected in the Sickness combined, and produced a healthier strain.

"That was when it started getting bad. What had been a hit-and-miss thing—with just a few like yourselves, with some weakness in your bloodstreams making you susceptible—became a rule instead of an exception. People started changing while you watched. I-I," he faltered again, shuddered at a memory.

"My, my fiancée," he went on, looking at his Attaché case and his hands, "I was eating lunch with her in Rockefeller Plaza's Sky top. We had to be back at work in Butte in twenty minutes, just time to catch a cab, and she—she—*changed* while we were sitting there. Her eyes, they, they—I can't explain it, you can't know what it was like seeing them water and run down her cheeks like that, it was—" his face tightened up as though he were trying to keep himself from going completely insane.

Bedzyk sharply curbed the hysteria. "We have seven people like that on board right now. I know what you mean. And they aren't the worst. Go on, you were saying?"

Such prosaic acceptance of the horror brought Curran's frenzy down. "It got so bad everyone was staying in the sterile shelters. The streets always empty; it was horrible. Then some quack physician out in Cincinnati or somewhere like that came up with an answer. A serum made from a secretion in the bloodstreams of—"

Bedzyk added the last word for him: "Of Discards?"

Curran nodded soberly.

Bedzyk's hard-edged laugh rattled against Curran's thin film of calm. He jerked his eyes to the man sitting on the plot-tank. A furious expression came over him.

"What are you laughing at? We need your help! We need all you people as blood donors."

Bedzyk stopped laughing abruptly. "Why not use the changed ones from down there." He jerked a thumb at the big lucite viewport where Earth hung swollen and multi-colored. "What's wrong with them—" and he added with malice "—with you?" Curran twitched as he realized he could so easily be lumped in with the afflicted.

"We're no good. We were changed by this new mutated Sickness. The secretion is different in our blood than it is in yours. You were stricken by the primary Sickness, or virus, or whatever they call it. We have a complicated one. But the way the research has outlined it, the only ones who have what we need, are you Dis—" he caught himself "—you people who were shipped out before the Sickness itself mutated."

Bedzyk snorted contemptuously. He let a wry, astonished smirk tickle his lips. "You Earthies are fantastic." He shook his head in private amusement.

He slipped off the plot-tank's ledge and turned to the port, talking half to himself, half to a nonexistent third person in the drive room. "These Earthies are unbelievable! Can you imagine, can you

picture it?” Astonishment rang in his disbelief at the proposal. “First they hustle us into a metal prison and shoot us out here to die alone, they don’t want any part of us, go away they say. Then when the trouble comes to them too big, they run after us, can you help us please, you dirty, ugly things, help us nice clean Earthies.” He spun suddenly. “Get out of here! Get off this ship! We won’t help you.

“You have your allotments and your quotas for each world-”

Curran broke in, “Yes, that’s it. If the population goes down much more, they’ve been killing themselves, riots, it’s terrible, then the balance will be changed, and our entire System culture will bend and fall and-”

Bedzyk cut him off, finishing what he had been saying, “-yes, you have your dirty little quotas, but you have no room for us. Well, we’ve got no room for you! Now get the hell off this ship. We don’t want to help you!”

Curran leaped to his feet. “You can’t send me away like this! You don’t speak for all of them aboard. You can’t treat a Terran emissary this way-” Bedzyk had him by the jumper, and had propelled him toward the closed companionway door before the Attaché knew quite what was happening. He hit the door and rebounded. As he stumbled back toward Bedzyk, the great-chested mutant snatched the briefcase from beside the control chair and slammed it into Curran’s stomach. “Here! Here’s your offer and your lousy demands, and get off this ship! We don’t want any part of y-”

The door crashed open, and the Discards were there.

They filled the corridor, as far back as the angle where cross-passages ran off toward the salon and galley. They shoved and nudged each other to get a view into the drive room; Samswope and Harmony Teat and Dresden were in the front, and from somewhere Samswope had produced an effectively deadly little rasp-pistol. He held it tightly, threateningly, and Bedzyk felt flattered that they had come to his aid.

“You don’t need that, Sam-Mr. Curran was just leav-”

Then he realized. The rasp was pointed not at Curran, but at him.

He stood frozen, one hand still clutching Curran’s sleeve, as Curran belied the briefcase to himself.

“Dresden overheard it all, Mr. Curran,” Samswope said in a pathetically ingratiating tone. “*He* wants us to rot on this barge.” He gestured at Bedzyk with his free hand as the dumb head nodded certain agreement. “What offer can you make us, can we go home, Mr. Curran...?” There was a whimpering and a pleading in Samswope’s voice that Bedzyk had only *sensed* before.

He tried to break in, “Are you insane, Swope? Putty, that’s all you are! Putty when you see a fake hope that you’ll get off this ship! Can’t you see they just want to *use* us! Can’t you understand that?”

Samswope’s face grew livid and he screamed, “Shut up! Just shut up and let Curran talk! We don’t want to die on this ship. *You* may like it, you little tin god, but we hate it here! So shut up and let him talk!”

Curran spoke rapidly then: “If you allow us to send a medical detachment up here to use you as blood donors, I have the word of the System Central that you will all be allowed to land on Earth and we’ll have a reservation for you so you can live some kind of normal lives again-”

“Hey, what’s the matter with you?” Bedzyk again burst in, trying vainly to speak over the hubbub from the corridor. “Can’t you see he’s lying? They’ll use us and then desert us again!”

Samswope growled menacingly, “If you don’t shut up I’ll kill you, Bedzyk!”

Bedzyk faltered into silence and watched the scene before him. They were melting. They were going to let this rotten turncoat Earthie blind them with false hopes.

“We’ve worked our allotments around so there is space for you, perhaps in the new green-valleys of South America or on the veldtland in Rhodesia. It will be wonderful, but we need your blood, we need your help.”

“Don’t trust him! Don’t believe him, you can’t believe an Earthman!” Bedzyk shouted, stumbling forward to wrest the rasp-pistol from Samswope’s grip.

Samswope fired point-blank. First the rasp of the power spurting from the muzzle of the tiny pistol filled the drive room, then the smell of burning flesh, and Bedzyk’s eyes opened wide in pain. He screamed thinly, and staggered back against Curran. Curran stepped aside, and Bedzyk mewed in agony, and crumpled onto the deck. A huge hole had been seared through his huge chest. Huge chest, huge death, and he lay there with his eyes open, barely forming the words “Don’t...you can’t, can’t t-trust an Earthmmm...” with his bloody lips. The last word formed and became a forever intaglio.

Curran’s face had paled out till it was a blotch against the dark blue of his jumper. “Y-y-y...”

Samswope moved into the drive room and took Curran by the sleeve, almost where Bedzyk had held it. "You promise us we can land and be allowed to settle someplace on Earth?"

Curran nodded dumbly. Had they asked for Earth in its socket, he would have nodded agreement. Samswope still held the rasp.

"All right, then...get your med detachment up here, and get that blood. We want to go home, Mr. Curran, we want to go home more than anything!"

They led him to the lock. Behind him, Curran saw three mutants lifting the blasted body of Bedzyk, bearing it on their shoulders through the crowd. The body was borne out of sight down a cross-corridor, and Curran followed it out of sight with his eyes.

Beside him, Samswope said: "To the garbage lock. We go that way, Mr. Curran." His tones were hard and uncompromising. "We don't like going that way, Mr. Curran. We want to go home. You'll see to it, won't you, Mr. Curran?"

Curran again nodded dumbly, and entered the lock linking ships.

Ten hours later, the med detachment came up. The Discards were completely obedient and tremendously helpful.

It took nearly eleven months to inoculate the entire population of the Earth and the rest of the System-strictly as preventive caution dictated-and during that time no more Discards took their lives. Why should they? They were going home. Soon the tug-ships would come, and help jockey the big Discard vessel into orbit for the run to Earth. They were going home. There was room for them now, even in their condition. Spirits ran high, and laughter tinkled oddly down the passageway in the "evenings." There was even a wedding between Arkay (who was blind and had a bushy tail) and a pretty young thing the others called Daanae, for she could not speak herself. Without a mouth that was impossible. At the ceremony in the saloon, Samswope acted as minister, for the Discards had made him their leader, in the same, silent way they had made Bedzyk the leader before him. Spirits ran high, and the constant knowledge that as soon as Earth had the Sickness under control, they would be going home.

Then one "afternoon" the ship came.

Not the little tugs, as they had supposed, but a cargo ship nearly as big as their own home. Samswope rushed to synch in the locks, and when the red lights merged on the board, he locked the two together firmly, and scrambled back through the throng to be the first to greet the men who would deliver them.

When the lock sighed open, and they saw the first ten who had been thrust in, they knew the truth.

One had a head flat as a plate, with no eyes, and its mouth in its neck. Another had several hundred thousand slimy tentacles where arms should have been, and waddled on stumps that could never again be legs. Still another was brought in by a pair of huge empty-faced men, in a bowl. The bowl contained a yellow jelly, and swimming in the yellow jelly was the woman.

Then they knew. They were not going home. As lockful after lockful of more Discards came through, to swell their ranks even more, they knew these were the last of the tainted ones from Earth. The last ones who had been stricken by the Sickness-who had changed before the serum could save them. These were the last, and now the Earth was clean.

Samswope watched them trail in, some dragging themselves on appendageless torsos, others in baskets, still others with one arm growing from a chest, or hair that was blue and fungus growing out all over the body. He watched them and knew the man he had killed had been correct. For among the crowd he glimpsed a bare-chested Discard with huge sores on his body. Curran.

And as the cargo ship unlocked and swept back to Earth with the silent warning *Don't follow us, don't try to land, there's no room for you here*-Samswope could hear Bedzyk's hysterical tones in his head:

Don't trust them! There's no room for us anywhere! Don't trust them!

You can't trust an Earthman!

Samswope started walking slowly toward the galley, knowing he would need someone to seal the garbage lock after him. But it didn't matter who it was. There were more than enough Discards aboard now.

Deeper Than the Darkness

CHAPTER I

THEY CAME TO ALF GUNNDERSON in the Pawnee County jail.

He was sitting against the plasteel wall of the cell, hugging his bony knees. On the plasteel floor lay an ancient, three-string mandolin he had borrowed from the deputy and had been plunking with some talent off and on all that hot summer day. Under his thick buttocks the empty trough of the mattressless bunk bowed beneath his weight. He was an extremely tall man, even hunched up that way.

He was a gaunt, empty-looking man. His hair fell lanky and drab and gray-brown in disarray over a low forehead. His eyes seemed to be peas, withdrawn from their pods and placed in a starkly white face.

Their blankness only accented the total cipher he seemed. There was no inch of expression or recognition on his face or in the line of his body. He seemed to be a man who had given up the Search long ago.

He was more than tired-looking, more than weary. His was an internal weariness. His face did not change its hollow stare at the plasteel-barred door opposite, even as it swung back to admit the two nonentities.

The two men entered, their stride as alike as the unobtrusive gray mesh suits they wore, as alike as the faces that would fade from memory moments after they had exited. The turnkey—a grizzled country deputy with a minus 8 rating—stared after the men with open wonder on his bearded face.

One of the gray-suited men turned, pinning the wondering stare to the deputy's face. His voice was calm and unrippled. "Close the door and go back to your desk." The words were cold and paced. They brooked no opposition. It was obvious: the men were Mindees.

The roar of a late afternoon inerspace ship split the waiting moment, outside; then the turnkey slammed the door, palming its loktite. He walked back out of the cell block, hands deep in his coverall pockets. His head was lowered as though he was trying to solve a complex problem. It, too, was obvious: he was trying to block his thoughts off from those goddammed Mindees.

When he was gone, the telepaths circled Gunderson slowly. Their faces altered, softly, subtly, and personality flowed in. They shot each other confused glances.

Him? the first man thought, nodding slightly at the still, knee-hugging prisoner.

That's what the report said, Ralph. The other man removed his forehead-concealing snap-brim and sat down on the edge of the bunk-trough. He touched Gunderson's leg with tentative fingers. *He's not thinking, for God's sake!* the thought flashed. *I can't get a thing.*

Shock sparkled in the thought. *He must be blocked off by trauma-barrier,* came the reply from the telepath named Ralph.

"Is your name Alf Gunderson?" the first Mindee inquired softly, a hand on Gunderson's shoulder.

The expression never changed. The head swivelled slowly and the dead eyes came to bear on the dark-suited telepath. "I'm Gunderson." His tones indicated no enthusiasm, no curiosity.

The first man looked up at his partner, doubt wrinkling his eyes, pursing his lips. He shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, *Who knows?*

He turned back to Gunderson.

Immobile, as before. Hewn from rock, silent as the pit.

"What are you in here for, Gunderson?" He spoke the halting speech of the telepath, as though he was unused to words.

The dead stare swung back to the plasteel bars. "I set the woods on fire," he said.

The Mindee's face darkened at the prisoner's words. That was what the report had said. The report that had come in from this remote corner of this remote country.

The American Union covered two continents with plasteel and printed circuits, relays and rapid movement, but there were areas of backwoods country that had never taken to civilizing. They still maintained roads and jails, fishing holes and forests. Out of one of these had come three reports, spaced an hour apart, with startling ramifications—if true. They had been snapped through the primary message banks in Capital City in Buenos Aires, reeled through the computers, and handed to the Bureau for checking.

While the inverspace ships plied between worlds, while Earth fought its transgalactic wars, in a rural section of the American continents, a strange thing was happening.

A mile and a half of raging forest fire, and Alf Gunnederson the one responsible. So the Bureau had sent two Mindees.

"How did it start, Alf?"

The dead eyes closed momentarily in pain, then opened, and he answered, "I was trying to get the pot to heat up. Trying to set the kindling under it to burning. I fired myself too hard." A flash of self-pity and unbearable hurt came into his face, disappeared just as quickly. Empty once more, he added, "I always do."

The first man exhaled sharply, got up and put on his hat. The personality flowed out of his face. He was a carboncopy of the other telepath once more. They were no longer individuals; they were Bureau men, studiedly, exactly, precisely alike in every detail.

"This is the one," he said.

"Come on, Alf," the Mindee named Ralph said. "Let's go."

The authority in his voice no more served to move Gunnederson than their initial appearance had. He sat as he was. The two men looked at one another.

What's the matter with him? the second one flashed.

If you had what he's got-you'd be a bit buggy yourself, the first one replied.

They hoisted the prisoner under his arms, lifted him unresisting, off the bunk. The turnkey came at a call, and still marveling at these men who had come in, shown Bureau cards, sworn him to deadly silence, and were now taking the tramp firebug with them-opened the cell door.

As they passed before him, the telepath named Ralph turned suddenly sharp and piercing eyes on the old guard. "This is government business, mister," he warned. "One word of this, and you'll be a prisoner in your own jail. Digit?"

The turnkey bobbed his head quickly. "

And stop thinking, mister," the Mindee added nastily, "we don't like to be referred to as slimy peekers!" The turnkey turned a shade paler and watched silently as they disappeared down the hall, out of the Pawnee County jailhouse. He waited, blanking fiercely, till he heard the whine of the Bureau solocab rising into the afternoon sky.

Now what the devil did they want with a crazy firebug hobo like that? He thought viciously, *goddam Mindees!*

After they had flown him to Buenos Aires, deep in the heart of the blasted Argentine desert, they sent him in for testing.

The testing was exhaustive. Even though he did not really cooperate, there were things he could not keep them from learning, things that showed up because they were there:

Such as his ability to start fires with his mind.

Such as the fact that he could not control the blazes.

Such as the fact that he had been burning for fifteen years in an effort to find peace and seclusion.

Such as the fact that he had become a tortured and unhappy man because of his strange mind-power...

"Alf," said the bodiless voice from the rear of the darkened auditorium, "light that cigarette on the table. Put it in your mouth and make it light, Alf. Without a match."

Alf Gunnederson stood in the circle of light. He shifted from leg to leg on the blazing stage, and eyed the cylinder of white paper on the table.

He was trapped in it again. The harrying, the testing, the staring. He was different-even from the other accredited psioid types-and they would try to put him away. It had happened before, it was happening now. There was no real peace for him.

"I don't smoke," he said, which was not true. But this scene was brother to the uncountable police lineups he had gone through, all the way across the American continents, across Earth, to A Centauri IX and back. It annoyed him, and it terrified him, for he knew he could not escape.

Except this time there were no hard rocky-faced cops out there in the darkness beyond his sight. This time there were hard, rocky-faced Bureau men and SpaceCom officials.

Even Terrence, head of SpaceCom, was sitting in one of those pneumoseats, watching him steadily.

Daring him to be what he was!

He lifted the cylinder hesitantly, almost put it back. "Smoke it, Alf!" snapped a different voice, deeper in tone, from the darkness.

He put the cigarette between his lips. The men waited.

He wanted to say something, perhaps to object, but he could not. Alf Gunnederson's heavy brows drew down. His blank eyes became-if it were possible-even blanker. A sharp, denting V appeared between the brows.

The cigarette flamed into life.

A tongue of fire leaped up from the tip. In an instant it had consumed tobacco, paper, and denicotizer in one roar. The fire slammed against Gunnederson's lips, searing them, lapping at his nose, his face.

He screamed, fell on his face and beat at the flames with his hands.

Suddenly the stage was clogged with running men in the blue and charcoal suits of the SpaceCom. Gunnederson lay writhing on the floor, a wisp of charry smoke rising from his face. One of the SpaceCom officials broke the cap on an extinguisher vial and the spray washed over the body of the fallen man.

"Get the Mallaport! Get the goddammed Mallaport, willya!" A young ensign with brush-cut blond hair, first to reach the stage, as though he had been waiting crouched below, cradled Gunnederson's head in his muscular arms, brushing with horror at the flakes of charred skin. He had the watery blue eyes of the spaceman, the man who has seen terrible things; yet his eyes were more frightened now than any man's eyes had a right to be.

In a few minutes the angular, spade-jawed, Malleable. Transporter was smoothing the skin on Gunnederson's face, realigning the atoms-shearing away the burned flesh, coating it with vibrant, healthy pink skin.

Another few moments and the psioid was finished. The burns had been erased; Gunnederson was new and whole, save for the patches of healthier-seeming skin that dotted his face.

All through it he had been murmuring. As the Mallaport finished his mental work and stood up with a sigh, the words filtered through to the young SpaceCom ensign. He stared at Gunnederson a moment, then raised his watery blue eyes to the other officials standing about.

He stared at them with a mixture of fear and bewilderment.

Gunnederson had been saying: "Let me die, please let me die, I want to die, won't you let me die, please..."

CHAPTER II

The ship was heading toward Omalo, sun of the Delgart system. It had been translated into inverspace by a Driver named Carina Correia. She had warped the ship through, and gone back to her deep-sleep, till she was needed at Omalo snap-out.

Now the ship whirled through the crazy quilt of inverspace, cutting through to the star system of Earth's adversary.

Gunnederson sat in the cabin with the brush-cut blond ensign. All through the trip, since blast-off and snap-out, the pyrotic had been kept in his stateroom. This was the newest of the Earth SpaceCom ships, yet he had seen none of it. Just this tiny stateroom, and the constant company of the ensign.

The SpaceCom ensign's watery blue eyes swept between the pallid man and the teleport-proof safe set in the cabin's bulkhead.

"Any idea why they're sending us so deep into Delgart territory?" the ensign fished. "It's pretty tight lines up this far. Must be something big. Any idea?"

Gunnederson's eyes came up from their focus on his boottops, and stared at the spaceman. He idly flipped the harmonica he had requested before blast-off and had used to pass away the long hours in inverspace. "No idea. How long have we been at war with the Delgarts?"

"Don't you even know who your planet's at war with?"

"I've been rural for many years. And aren't we *always* at war with someone?"

The ensign looked startled. "Not unless it's to protect the peace of the galaxies. Earth is a peace-loving--"

Gunnederson cut him off. "Yes. I know. But how long have we been at war with the Delgarts? I thought they were our allies under some treaty or other?"

The spaceman's face contorted in a picture of conditioned hatred. "We've been after the bastards since they jumped one of our mining planets outside their cluster." He twisted his lips in open loathing.

“We’ll clean the bastards out soon enough! Teach *them* to jump peaceful Earthmen.”

Gunnderson wished he could shut out the words. He had heard the same story all the way to A Centauri IX and back. Someone had always jumped someone else; someone was always at war with someone else; there were always bastards to be cleaned out...

The inership whipped past the myriad colors of inerspace, hurtling through that not-space toward the alien cluster. Gunnderson sat in the teleport-proof stateroom, triple-loktited, and waited. He had no idea what they wanted of him, why they had tested him, why they had sent him through the preflight checkups, why he was here. But he knew one thing: whatever it was, there was to be no peace for *him...ever*.

He silently cursed the strange mental power he had. The power to make the molecules of *anything* speed up tremendously, making them grind against one another, causing combustion. A strange, channeled teleport faculty that was useless for anything but the creation of fire. He damned it soulfully, wishing he had been born deaf, mute, blind, incapable of any contact with the world.

From the moment of his life when he had become aware of his strange power, he had been haunted. No control, no identification, no communication. Cut off. Tagged as an oddie. Not even the pleasures of being an acknowledged psioid like the Mindees, the invaluable Drivers, the Blasters, or the Mallaports who could move the atoms of flesh to their design. He was an oddie: a nondirective psioid. Tagged deadly and uncontrollable. He could set the fires, but he could not control them. The molecules were too tiny, too quickly imitative for him to stop the activity once it was started. It had to stop of its own volition-and usually it was too long in stopping.

Once he had thought himself normal, once he had thought of leading an ordinary life-of perhaps becoming a musician. But that idea had died aflaming, as all other normal ideas had followed it.

First the ostracism, then the hunting, then the arrests and the prison terms, one after another. Now something new-something he could not understand. What did they want with him? It was obviously in connection with the mighty battle being fought between Earth and the Delgarts, but of what use could his unreliable powers be?

Why was he in this most marvelous of the new SpaceCom ships, heading toward the central sun of the enemy cluster? And why should he help Earth in any case?

At that moment the locks popped, the safe broke open, and the clanging of the alarms was heard to the bowels of the inership.

The ensign stopped him as he rose and started toward the safe. The ensign thumbed a button on his wrist-console.

“Hold it, Mr. Gunnderson. I wasn’t told what was in there, but I was told to keep you away from it until the other two get here.”

Gunnderson slumped back hopelessly on the acceleration bunk. He dropped the harmonica to the metal floor and lowered his head into his hands. “What other two?”

“I don’t know, sir. I wasn’t told.”

The other two were psioids, naturally.

When the Mindee and the Blaster arrived, they motioned the ensign to remove the contents of the safe. He walked over nervously, took out the tiny recorder and the single speak-tip.

“Play it, Ensign,” the Mindee directed.

The spaceman thumbed the speak-tip into the hole, and the grating of the blank space at the beginning of the record fined the room.

“You can leave now, Ensign,” the Mindee said.

After the SpaceCom officer had securely loktited the door, the voice began. Gunnderson recognized it immediately as that of Terrence, head of SpaceCom. The man who had questioned him tirelessly at the Bureau building in Buenos Aires. Terrence: hero of another war, the Earth-Kyben War, now head of SpaceCom. The words were brittle, almost without inflection, yet they carried a sense of utmost importance:

“Gunnderson,” he began, “we have, as you already know, a job for you. By this time the ship will have reached the central-point of your trip through inerspace.

“You will arrive in two days Earthtime at a slip-out point approximately five million miles from Omalo, the enemy sun. You will be far behind enemy lines, but we are certain you will be able to accomplish your mission safely. That is why you have been given this new ship. It can withstand anything the enemy can throw.

“We want you to get back after your job is done. You are the most important man in our war

effort, Gunnderson, and this is only your first mission.

“We want you to turn the sun Omalo into a supernova.”

Gunnderson, for perhaps the second time in thirty-eight years of bleak, gray life, was staggered. The very concept made his stomach churn. Turn another race’s sun into a flaming, gaseous bomb of incalculable power, spreading death into space, charring into nothing the planets of the system? Annihilate in one move an entire culture?

What did they think he was capable of?

Could he direct his mind to such a task?

Could he do it?

Should he do it?

His mind trembled at the possibility. He had never really considered himself as having many ideals. He had set fires in warehouses to get the owners their liability insurance; he had flamed other hobos who had tried to rob him; he had used the unpredictable power of his mind for many things, but this-

This was the murder of a solar system!

He wasn’t in any way sure he *could* turn a sun supernova. What was there to lead them to think he might be able to do it? Burning a forest and burning a giant red sun were two things fantastically far apart. It was something out of a nightmare. But even if he *could*...

“In case you find the task unpleasant, Mr. Gunnderson,” the ice-chip voice of the SpaceCom head continued, “we have included in this ship’s complement a Mindee and a Blaster.

“Their sole job is to watch and protect you, Mr. Gunnderson. To make certain you are kept in the proper, *patriotic* state of mind. They have been instructed to read you from this moment on, and should you not be willing to carry out your assignment...well, I’m certain you are familiar with a Blaster’s capabilities.”

Gunnderson stared at the blank-faced telepath sitting across from him on the other bunk. The man was obviously listening to every thought in Gunnderson’s head. A strange, nervous expression was on the Mindee’s face. His gaze turned to the Blaster who accompanied him, then back to Gunnderson.

The pyrotic swiveled a glance at the Blaster, then swiveled away as quickly.

Blasters were men meant to do one job, one job only; a Blaster became the type of man he *had* to be, to be successful doing that job. They all looked the same, and now Gunnderson found the look almost terrifying. He had not thought he could *be* terrified, any more.

“That is your assignment, Gunnderson, and if you have any hesitation, remember our enemy is *not* human. They may look like you, but mentally they are extraterrestrials as unlike you as you are unlike a slug. And remember there’s a war on. You will be saving the lives of many Earthmen by performing this task.

“This is your chance to become respected, Gunnderson.

“A hero, respected, and for the first time,” he paused, as though not wishing to say what was next, “for the first time-worthy of your world.”

The rasp-rasp-rasp of the speak-tip filled the stateroom. Gunnderson said nothing. He could hear the phrase whirling, whirling in his head: There’s a war on, *There’s a war on*, THERE’S A WAR ON! He stood up and slowly walked to the door.

“Sorry, Mr. Gunnderson,” the Mindee said emphatically, “we can’t allow you to leave this room.”

He sat down and lifted the battered mouth organ from where it had fallen. He fingered it for a while, then put it to his lips. He blew, but made no sound.

And he didn’t leave.

CHAPTER III

They thought he was asleep. The Mindee-a cadaverously thin man with hair grayed at the temples and slicked back in strips on top, with a gasping speech and a nervous movement of hand to ear-spoke to the Blaster.

“He doesn’t seem to be thinking, John!”

The Blaster’s smooth, hard features moved vaguely, and a quirking frown split his inkline mouth. “Can he do it?”

The Mindee rose, ran a hand quickly through the straight, slicked hair.

“Can he do it? No, he shouldn’t be *able* to do it, but he’s doing it! I can’t figure it out...it’s eerie. Either I’ve lost it, or he’s got something new.”

"Trauma-barrier?"

"That's what they told me before I left, that he seemed to be blocked off. But they thought it was only temporary, and that once he was away from the Bureau buildings he'd clear up.

"But he *hasn't* cleared up."

The Blaster looked concerned. "Maybe it's you."

"I didn't get a Master's rating for nothing, John, and I tell you there isn't a trauma-barrier I can't at least get *something* through. If only a snatch of gabble. But here there's nothing-nothing!"

"Maybe it's you," the Blaster repeated, still concerned.

"Damn it! It's *not* me! I can read you, can't I-your right foot hurts from new boots, you wish you could have the bunk to lie down on, you...Oh, hell, I can read *you*, and I can read the Captain up front, and I can read the pitmen in the hold, but I *can't* read *him*!"

"It's like hitting a sheet of glass in his head. There should be a reflection if not penetration, but he seems to be opaqued. I didn't want to say anything when he was awake, of course."

"Do you think I should twit him a little-wake him up and warn him we're on to his game?"

The Mindee raised a hand to stop the very thought of the Blaster. "Great Gods, no!" He gestured wildly. "This Gunnderson's invaluable. If they found out we'd done anything unauthorized to him, we'd both be tanked."

Gunnderson lay on his acceleration-bunk, feigning sleep, listening to them. It was a new discovery to him, what they were saying. He had sometimes suspected that the pyrotic faculty of his mind was not the only way he differed from the norm-perhaps there were others. And if it was a side-effect, there *ought* to be others. He knew *he* could not read minds; was this impenetrability by Mindees another factor?

Perhaps the Blaster was powerless against him, too.

It would never clear away his problem-that was something he could do only in his own mind-but it might make his position and final decision safer.

There was only one way to find out. He knew the Blaster could not actually harm him severely, by SpaceCom's orders; but he wouldn't hesitate to blast off one of the Pyrotic's arms -cauterizing it as it disappeared-to warn him, if the situation seemed desperate enough.

The Blaster had seemed to Gunnderson a singularly overzealous man, in any case. It was a terrible risk, but he had to know.

There was only one way to find out, and he took it, finding a startling new vitality in himself for the first time in over thirty years.

He snapped his legs off the bunk, and lunged across the stateroom, shouldering aside the Mindee and straight-arming the Blaster in the mouth. The Blaster, surprised by the rapid and completely unexpected movement, had a reflex thought, and one entire bulkhead was washed by bolts of power. They crackled, and the plasteel buckled. His direction had been upset, but Gunnderson knew the instant he regained his mental balance, the power would be directed at him.

Gunnderson was at the stateroom door, palming the loktite open-having watched the manner used by the Blaster when he had left on several occasions-and putting one foot into the companionway.

Then the Blaster struck. His fury rose, and he lost his sense of duty. This man had struck him-an accepted psoid, not an oddie! The black of his eyes deepened, and his face strained. His cheekbones rose in the stricture of a grin, and the *force* materialized.

It was all around Gunnderson.

He could feel the heat...see his clothes sparking and disappearing...feel his hair charring at the tips...feel the strain of psi power in the air.

But there was no effect on *him*.

He was safe-safe from the power of the Blaster.

Then he knew he didn't have to run, and he turned back to the cabin.

The two psoids were staring at him in open terror.

It was almost always night in inverspace.

The ship ploughed constantly through a swamp of black, with metal inside, and metal outside, and the cold, unchanging devil-dark beyond the metal. Men hated inverspace-they sometimes took the years-long journey through normal space, to avoid the chilling mystery of inverspace. For one moment the total black would surround the ship, and the next they would be sifting through a field of changing, flickering crazy quilt colors. Then dark again, then light, then dots, then shafts, then the dark once more. It was ever-changing, like a madman's dream. But not interestingly changing, so one would wish to watch, as one

might watch a kaleidoscope. This was strange, and unnatural, something beyond the powers of the mind, or the abilities of the eye to comprehend. Ports were unlocked only in the officer's country, and those had solid lead shields that would slam down and dog closed at the slap of a button. Nothing else could be done: for men were men, and space was their eternal enemy. But no man willingly stared back at the deep of inerspace.

In the officer's country, Alf Gunnederson reached with his sight and his mind into the coal-soot that now lay beyond the ship. Since he had proved his invulnerability over the Blaster, he had been given the run of the ship. Where could he go? Nowhere that he could not be found. Guards watched the egress ports at all times, so he was still, in effect, a prisoner on the inership.

He stared from the giant quartz window, all shields open, all the darkness flowing in. The cabin was dark, but not half so dark as that darkness that was everywhere.

That darkness deeper than the darkness.

What was he? Was he man or was he machine, to be told he must turn a sun nova? What of the people on that sun's planets? What of the women and the children, alien or not? What of the people who hated war, and the people who served because they had been told to serve, and the people who wanted to be left alone? What of the men who went into the fields, while their fellow troops dutifully sharpened their war knives, and cried? Cried because they were afraid, and they were tired, and they wanted home without death. What of those men?

Was this war one of salvation or liberation or duty as they parroted the phrases of patriotism? Or was this still another of the unending wars for domination, larger holdings, richer worlds? Was this another vast joke of the Universe, where men were sent to their deaths so one type of government, no better than another, could rule? He didn't know. He wasn't sure. He was afraid. He had a power beyond all powers in his hands, and he suddenly found himself not a tramp and a waste, but a man who might demolish a solar system at his own will.

Not even sure he *could* do it, he considered the possibility, and it terrified him, making his legs turn to rubber, his blood to liquid oxygen. He was suddenly quite lost, and immersed in a deeper darkness than he had ever known. With no way out.

He spoke to himself, letting his words sound foolish to himself, but speaking them just the same, knowing he had avoided speaking them for far too long:

"Can I do it?"

"Should I? I've waited so long, so long, to find a place, and now they tell me I've found a place. Is this my final place? Is this what I've lived and searched for? I can be a valuable war weapon. I can be the man the others turn to when they want a job done. But what sort of job?"

"Can I do it? Is it more important to me to find peace-even a peace such as this-and to destroy, than to go on with the unrest?"

Alf Gunnederson stared at the night, at the faint tinges of color beginning to form at the edges of his vision, and his mind washed itself in the water of thought. He had discovered much about himself in the past few days. He had discovered many talents, many ideals he had never suspected in himself.

He had discovered he had character, and that he was not a hopeless, oddie hulk, doomed to die wasted. He found he had a future.

If he could make the proper decision.

But what *was* the proper decision?

"Omalo! Omalo snap-out!"

The cry roared through the companionways, bounced down the halls and against the metal hun of the inership, sprayed from the speakers, and deafened the men asleep beside their squawk-boxes.

The ship ploughed through a maze of colors whose names were unknown, skiiiiiittered in a nameless direction, and popped out, shuddering. There it was. The sun of Delgart. Omalo. Big. And golden. With planets set about it like boulders on the edge of the sea. The sea that was space, and from which this ship had come. With death in its hold, and death in its tubes, and death, nothing but death, in its purpose.

The Blaster and the Mindee escorted Alf Gunnederson to the bridge. They stood back and let him walk to the huge quartz portal. The portal before which the pyrotic had stood so long, so many hours, gazing so deeply into inerspace. They left him there, and stood back, because they knew he was safe from them. No matter how hard they held his arms, no matter how fiercely they pounded thoughts at him, he was safe. He was something new. Not just a pyrotic, not just a mind-blocked psioid, not just a Blaster-safe, he was something totally new.

Not a composite, for there had been many of those, with imperfect powers of several psi types. But something new, and incomprehensible to his guards. Psoid-plus-with a plus that might mean anything.

Gunnderson moved forward slowly, his deep shadow squirming out before him, sliding up the console, across the portal sill, and across the quartz itself. Himself super-imposed across the immensity of space.

The man who was Gunnderson stared into the night that lay without, and at the sun that burned steadily and high in that night. A greater fire raged within him than on that sun.

His was a power he could not even begin to estimate, and if he let it be used in this way, this once, it could be turned to this purpose over and over and over again.

Was there any salvation for him?

“You’re supposed to flame that sun, Gunnderson,” the slick-haired Mindee said, trying to assume an authoritative tone, a tone of command, but failing miserably. He knew he was powerless before this man. They could shoot him, of course, but what would that accomplish?

“What are you going to do, Gunnderson? What do you have in mind?” the Blaster chimed in. “SpaceCom wants Omalo fired. Are you going to do it, or do we have to report you as a traitor?”

“You know what they’ll do to you back on Earth, Gunnderson. You know, don’t you?”

Alf Gunnderson let the light of Omalo wash his sunken face with red haze. His eyes seemed to deepen in intensity. His hands on the console ledge stiffened and the knuckles turned white. He had seen the possibilities, and he had decided. They would never understand that he had chosen the harder way. He turned slowly.

“Where is the lifescoot located?”

They stared at him, and he repeated his question. They refused to answer, and he shouldered past them, stepped into the droptube to take him below decks. The Mindee spun on him, his face raging.

“You’re a coward and a traitor, fireboy! You’re a lousy no-psi freak and we’ll get you! You can take the lifeboat, but someday we’ll find you! No matter where you go out there, we’re going to find you!”

He spat then, and the Blaster strained and strained and strained, but the power of his mind had no effect on Gunnderson.

The pyrotic let the dropshaft lower him, and he found the lifescoot some time later. He took nothing with him but the battered harmonica, and the red flush of Omalo on his face.

When they felt the *pop!* of the lifescoot being snapped into space, and they saw the dark gray dot of it moving away rapidly flicking quickly off into inverspace, the Blaster and the Mindee slumped into relaxers, stared at each other.

“We’ll have to finish the war without him.”

The Blaster nodded. “He could have won it for us in one minute. And now he’s gone.”

“Do you think he could have done it?”

The Blaster shrugged his heavy shoulders.

“He’s gone,” the Mindee repeated bitterly. “*He’s gone?* Coward! Traitor! Someday...someday...”

“Where can he go?”

“He’s a wanderer at heart. Space is deep, he can go anywhere.”

“Did you mean that, about finding him someday?”

The Mindee nodded rapidly. “When they find out, back on Earth, what he did today, they’ll start hunting him through all of space. He’ll never have another moment’s peace. They *have* to find him—he’s the perfect weapon. And he can’t run forever. They’ll find him.”

“A strange man.”

“A man with a power he can’t hide, John. We know he can’t control it, so how can he hide it? Sooner or later he’ll give himself away. He *can’t* hide himself cleverly enough to stay hidden forever.”

“Odd that he would turn himself into a fugitive. He could have had peace of mind for the rest of his life. Instead, he’s got this...”

The Mindee stared at the closed portal shields. His tones were bitter and frustrated. “We’ll find him someday.”

The ship shuddered, reversed drives, and slipped back into inverspace.

CHAPTER IV

Much sky winked back at him.

He sat on the bluff, wind tousling his gray hair, flapping softly at the dirty shirt-tail hanging from his pants top.

The Minstrel sat on the bluff watching the land fall slopingly away under him, down to the shining hide of the sprawling dragon that was a city, lying in the cup of the hills. The dragon that crouched where lush grass had once grown.

On this quiet world, far from a red sun that shone high and steady, the Minstrel sat and pondered the many kinds of peace. And the kind that is not peace, can *never* be peace.

His eyes turned once more to the sage and eternal advice of the blackness above. No one saw him wink back at the silent stars.

With a sigh he slung the battered theremin over his sloping shoulders. It was a portable machine, with both rods bent and its power-pack patched and soldered. His body almost at once assumed the half-slouched, round-shouldered walk of the wanderer. He ambled down the hill toward the rocket field.

They called it the rocket field, out here on the Edge, but they didn't use rockets any longer. Now they rode to space on strange tubes that whistled and sparkled behind the ship till it flicked off into some crazy quilt not-space, and was gone forever.

Tarmac clicked under the heels of his boots. Bright, shining boots, kept meticulously clean by polishing, overpolishing till they reflected back the corona of the field kliegs and, more faintly, the gleam of the stars. The Minstrel kept them cleaned and polished, a clashing note matched against his generally unkempt appearance.

He was tall, towering over almost everyone he had ever met in his homeless wanderings. His body was a lean and supple thing, like a high-tension wire, with the merest suggestion of contained power and quickness. He moved with an easy gait, accentuating his long legs and gangling arms, making his well-proportioned head seem a bubble precariously balanced on a neck too long and thin to support it.

He kept time to the click of the polished boots with a soft half-hum, half-whistle. The song was a dead song, long forgotten.

He came from beyond the mountains. No one knew where. No one cared where.

But they listened when he came. They listened almost reverently, with a desperation born of men who know they are severed from their home worlds, who know they will go out and out and seldom come back. He sang of space, and he sang of land, and he sang of the peace that is left for Man-all men, no matter how many arms they had, or what their skin was colored-when he has expended the last little bit of Eternity to which he is entitled.

His voice had the sadness of death in it-the sadness of death before life has finished its work. But it also had the joy of metal under quick fingers, the strength of turned nickel-steel, and the whip of heart and soul working in loneliness. They listened when his song came with the night wind, probing, crying through the darkness of a thousand worlds and on a thousand winds.

The pitmen stopped their work as he came, silent but for the hum of his song and the beat of his boots on the blacktop. They watched as he came across the field.

He had been wandering the star-paths for many years now. He had appeared, and that was all; he was. They knew him as certainly as they knew themselves. They turned and he was like a pillar, set dark against the light and shadow of the field. He paced slowly, and they stopped the hoses feeding the radioactive food to the ships, and the torches with which they flayed the metal skins; and they listened.

The Minstrel knew they were listening, and he unslung his instrument, settling the narrow box with its tone-rods around his neck by its thong. His fingers cajoled and pried and extracted the song of a soul, cast into the pit of the void, left to die, crying in torment not so much at death, but at the terror of being alone when the last call came.

And the workmen cried.

They felt no shame as the tears coursed through the dirt on their faces and mixed with the sweat-shine of their toil. They stood, silent and dreaming, as he came toward them.

And before they even knew it was ended, and for seconds after the wail had fled back across the field into the mountains, they listened to the last notes of his lament.

Hands wiped clumsily across faces, leaving more dirt than before, and backs turned slowly as men resumed work. It seemed they could not face him, the nearer he came; as though he was too deep-seeing, too perceptive for them to be at ease close by. It was a mixture of respect and awe.

The Minstrel stood, waiting.

"Hey! you!"

The Minstrel did not move. There was a pad of soft-soled feet behind him. A spaceman-tanned, supple, almost as tall as the ballad-singer and reminding him of another spaceman, a blond-haired boy he had known long ago-came up beside him.

"What can I do for ya, Minstrel?" asked the spaceman, tones of the accent of a long distant Earth rich in his voice.

"What do they call this world?" the Minstrel asked. His voice was quiet, like a needle being drawn through velvet.

"The natives call it Audi, and the charts call it Rexa Majoris XXIX, Minstrel. Why?"

"It's time to move on."

The spaceman grinned hugely, lines of amusement crinkling out around his watery brown eyes.

"Need a lift?"

The Minstrel nodded.

The spaceman's face softened, the lines of squinting into the reaches of an eternal night broke and he extended his hand: "My name's Quantry; top dog on the *Spirit of Lucy Marlowe*. If you don't mind working your way singing for the passengers, we'd be pleased to have you on board."

The tall man smiled, a quick radiance across the shadows of his face. "That isn't work."

"Then done!" exclaimed the spaceman. "C'mon, I'll fix you a bunk in steerage."

They walked between the wiper gangs and the pitmen. They threaded their way between the glare of fluorotorches and the sputtering blast of robot welding instruments. The man named Quantry indicated the opening in the smooth side of the ship and the Minstrel clambered inside.

Quantry fixed the berth just behind the reactor feederbins, walling off a compartment with an electric blanket draped over a loading track rail. The Minstrel lay on his bunk -a repair bench-with a pillow under his head. He lay thinking.

The moments fled silently and his mind, deep in thought, hardly realized the ports were being dogged home, the radioactive additives being sluiced through their tubes to the converter-cells, the lift tubes being extruded. His mind did not leave its thoughts as the tubes warmed, turning the pit to green glass beneath the ship's bulk. Tubes that would carry the ship to an altitude where the Driver would be wakened from his sleep-or *her* sleep, as was more often the case with that particular breed of psioid-to snap the ship into inverspace.

As the ship came unstuck from solid ground and hurled itself outward on its whistling sparks, the Minstrel lay back, letting the reassuring hand of acceleration press him into deeper reverie. Thoughts spun: of the past, of the further past, and of all the pasts he had known.

Then the converter-cells cut off, the ship shuddered, and he knew they were inverspaced. The Minstrel sat up, his eyes far away. His thoughts were deep inside the cloudcover of a world billions of light-years away, hundreds of years lost to him. A world he would never see again.

There was a time for running, and a time for resting, but even in the running there could be resting. He smiled to himself so faintly it was not a smile.

Down in the reactor rooms, they heard his song. They heard the build of it, matching, sustaining, ringing in harmony with the inverspace drive. They grinned at each other with a softness their faces did not seem equipped to wear.

"It's gonna be a good trip," said one to another, smiling. In the officer's country, Quantry looked up at the tight-slammed shields blocking off the patchwork insanity of not-space, and *he* smiled. It *was* going to be a good trip.

In the saloons, the passengers listened to the odd strains of lonely music coming up from below, and even they were forced to admit, though they had no way of explaining how they knew, that this was indeed going to be a good trip.

And in steerage, his fingers wandering across the keyboard of the battered theremin, no one noticed that the man they called the Minstrel had lit his cigarette without a match.

Blind Lightning

WHEN KETTRIDGE BENT OVER to pick up the scurrying red lizard, the thing that had been waiting, struck.

Thought: *this is the prelude to the Time of Fast. In bulk this strangely-formed will equal many cat-litters. It is warm and does not lose the Essence. When the Essence-Stealer screams from the heavens, this strangely-formed will be many feastings for me. Safety and assured Essence are mine. O boon at last granted! To the Lord of the Heaven I turn all thought! Lad-nar's Essence is yours at Ending!*

The thing rose nine feet on powerfully-muscled legs; it had a sheened, glistening fur. It resembled a gorilla and a Brahma bull and a Kodiak bear and a number of other Terran animals, but it was none of them. The comparison was as inaccurate and brief as the moment Kettridge half-turned. He saw one of the thing's huge paws crashing toward him. The brief moment ended and Kettridge lay unconscious.

The huge beast bent from the waist and scooped up the man in the form-fitting metallic suit, brushing in annoyance at the belt of tools around the human's waist.

Lad-nar looked over one massive shoulder at the sky.

Even as he watched, the roiling dark clouds split and a forked brilliance stabbed down at the jungle. Lad-nar squinted his eyes, unconsciously lowering the thin secondary lids over them, filtering out the worst of the light.

He shivered as the roar screamed across the sky.

Off to his left another blast of lightning fingered down, struck a towering blue plant with a shower of sparks and a dazzling flash. Thunder bubbled after it. The jungle smoked.

Thought: *many risings and settings of the Great Warmer it has taken this Time of Fast to build. Now it will last for many more. The Great Warmer will be hidden and the cold will settle across the land. Lad-nar must find his way to the Place of Fasting. This strangely-formed will be many feastings.*

He shoved the man under one furry arm, clasping his unconscious burden tightly. Lad-nar's eyes were frightened. He knew the time of Death and Forbidden Walking was at hand.

He loped off toward the mountains.

The first thing Kettridge saw when he awoke was the head of the beast. It was hanging suspended in the light from the storm. The roar of the rain pelting down in driving sheets, the brilliant white light of the lightning, all served as background for the huge beast's head. That wide, blunt nose, three flaring nostrils. The massive double-lidded eyes-light from the fires outside blazing up in them like twin flickering comets. The high, hairy brow. The deep-black half-moons under the cheekbones.

The mouth of ripping, pointed teeth.

Kettridge was a man past the high tide of youth. He was not a strong man. At the beast's snort, the white-haired Earthman fainted.

It was a short stretch of unconsciousness. Kettridge blinked several times and tried to push himself up on elbows alarmingly weak. The sight that greeted him was substantially the same as before.

Lad-nar was still sitting, powerfully muscled legs crossed, inside the mouth of the small cave, staring at him. Only the monstrous, frightening head, with pointed ears aprick, hanging there immobile.

"What-what-are you? We weren't expecting anything this large. The-the-survey said-" Kettridge quavered into silence.

Thought: *what is this? This strangely-formed speaks in my head! This is not one with the cat-litters. They cannot speak! Is this a symbol, an omen, from the Lord of the Heaven?*

What is it you ask, strangely-formed?

Kettridge felt the surge of thoughts in his mind. Felt it smash up against one nerve after another, sliding down and down in his head as the thoughts reverberated like an echo from far away. Over and over again.

"My God, the thing is telepathic!"

Old Kettridge knew it at once. He knew it because he had never experienced it before, and there was no doubting it. There had been a first time for everything for him. He knew the first time he had touched fire. He had known instantly it was fire, it would always be fire, and he must not touch it again.

He had known the first time love spoke to him. That had been once and never again. But he had known it the once it did speak.

There are those things which Man senses but once, and knows them-under whatever names he has assigned them-for what they are.

"You're telepathic!" he said again, hardly daring to believe it was true.

Thought: *what is that? What do you speak of, strangely-formed? What is it that you say, that I hear as Reading Of The Essence? How is it you speak? Are you from the Lord of the Heaven?*

Lad-nar's thick, leathery lips had not moved. The fanged mouth had not twisted in speech. To Kettridge it seemed there was a third being in the cave. The hideous beast before him, himself...and a third. A speaker who roared in his mind, in a voice sharp and alert.

Thought: *there is no one else here. This is the Place of Fasting. Lad-nar has cleansed this place of all previous Fasting Ones. You do not answer. There is fear mixed into your Essence, like the cat-litters. Yet you are not one with them. Speak! Are you an omen?*

Kettridge's lips began to tremble. He looked intently at the great hulk across from him. The Earthman had suddenly realized that the being was not only telepathic, but two-way receptive. It could not only direct its thoughts into Kettridge's mind, it could just as easily pluck the ideas from the Earthman's head.

This was no animal.

This was no beast.

This was sentient life. If not of a high cultural level, at least of fantastic mental abilities.

"I-I am from Earth," ventured Kettridge, sliding up against the warm stone wall of the cave.

Thought: *The Heaven Home! I know, I know! O thankings! The Lord of the Heaven has sent you to me as many feasting.*

In the space of a few short seconds, as Lad-nar spoke in thoughts, Kettridge received a complete picture of the being's life. He knew there was a race on Blestone-many more like Lad-nar. All in a barbaric hiding state. The preliminary survey had not indicated any life of this sort. Obviously Lad-nar's race was dying off.

Kettridge tried to blank out his thoughts. He had to wait.

Thought: *you can not hide the speaking in my head.*

Kettridge became frantic. He knew what the thing planned for him. He received a sharp, cold mental image of the being crouched over his body, ripping an arm loose from its socket. The picture was too clear. He became ill, and the being's thoughts in his head reverberated a dislike of the Earthman's powers of imagination.

Thought: *you have seen the feasting. Yet you are not like the cat-litters that squeal fear, fear, fear all the time that I feast on them. If you are not to eat, omen from the Heaven Lord-what are you?*

Kettridge felt his throat muscles tighten. His hands inside the heat-resistant gloves clenched. He felt his age settle around him as though it was a heavy mantle. "I'm an alien ecologist," he said, knowing it would do no good.

Thought: *this has no meaning for me.*

"I'm from Earth. I'm from one of those-" Then he stopped, drawing breath in quickly, pulling the resilient hood of the suit against his mouth with the effort. The being could not possibly know about "one of those out there." It could not see the stars. Only occasionally could it see the sun. Only when the clouds parted. The dense cloud blanket of Blestone hid space forever from the eyes of this monstrous being.

Thought: *Urth! The Heaven Home! I know! I know!*

There was a jubilation, a happiness in the thoughts. Something incongruous and terrifying when the old man put them into the head of that great thing illuminated by the storm.

Yet there was a humanness, a warmth, also.

Thought: *now I will sleep. Later I will feast.*

With the single-minded simplicity of the aborigine the great beast put from its mind this revelation of its religion, and obeyed the commands of its body. Tired from hunting, Lad-nar began to sleep.

The thoughts dimmed and faded out of Kettridge's mind like smoke wraiths as the huge animal slipped onto its side, effectively blocking the open mouth of the cave. In a moment, they were gone entirely from Kettridge's suddenly throbbing head. The beast known as Lad-nar was asleep.

Kettridge felt for the service revolver at his belt. The charges in there were enough to stop a good-sized animal.

Then he looked at the nine feet of corded muscle and thick hide that lay there. He looked at the narrow confines of the cave. There was no chance to kill that beast before he could rip the Earthman to shreds.

...and did he really *want* to kill Lad-nar?

The thought bothered him. He knew he had to kill the beast-or be killed himself.

...and yet...

Outside the lightning boiled and crashed all around the cave. The long storm had begun.

Through the thin slit between the rocks and the beast, Kettridge could see the sky darkening and darkening as the storm grew. Every moment there was a new cataclysm of light and flash as streamers of fire flung themselves through the air. The night shattered itself against the rank jungle and howled in frenzy!

Kettridge rubbed his leathery, wrinkled cheek. The metal-plastic hood of the suit rubbed against the skin. "I'd have been blistered and boiled," he muttered, looking at the sleeping Lad-nar.

Blestone's atmosphere was an uncomfortable-to-humans 140-150° Fahrenheit. That would make the beast's body heat somewhere near 130 degrees. Which would have effectively ruined the aging career of Benjamin Kettridge, had not the Earthman's insulated suit protected him.

The old man hunched up small against the wall, feeling the rough stone through the suit. It somehow reassured him.

He knew the beam from the *Jeremy Bentham* was tuned to the suit-sensitive, but they wouldn't come to pick him up till his search time was finished, and that was a good six hours away. He wasn't the only ecologist from the study-ship on Blestone, but they were a low-pay outfit and they got the most for their money by leaving the searchers in solitude for the full time.

The full time had another six hours to run.

More than enough time for Lad-nar to get hungry.

He ran the whole thing through his mind, sifting the facts, gauging the information, calculating the outcome. It didn't look good.

He knew more about Lad-nar than the beast could have told him, though. That was a factor in his favor. He knew about its religion, its taboos, its-and here he felt his throat dry out again-eating habits, its level of intelligence and culture. The beast had thought it, had thought it all, and Kettridge had received it all.

Not quite what you signed up for, is it, Ben? he thought. Startled first at the muddiness of his own mental speech, he answered himself wearily, *No, not at all.*

Kettridge wondered what Lad-nar would think were he to tell the creature he wasn't the blue plate special, but a washed-out, run-down representative of a civilization that didn't give one hoot in Hell about Lad-nar or his religion. That didn't even care if his race died away.

He'd probably chew me up and swallow me, thought Kettridge. Then he added, *which is exactly what he'll do anyhow.*

It seemed so strange. Two days ago he had been aboard the *Jeremy Bentham*, study-ship one year out of Capitol City, and here he was today, main course at a Blestonian aborigine's feast.

The laughter wouldn't come.

It wouldn't come because Kettridge was old, and tired, and he knew how right it was that he die here, in this way. It was a fit end. It was somehow right in a Greater Scheme of Things. Lad-nar was doing all he knew. He was protecting himself. He was surviving.

Which is more than you've been doing for the last ten years, Ben, he told himself. Benjamin Kettridge had long ago stopped surviving. He knew it as clearly as he knew he would die here on this hot and steaming world far from the sight of Earth. *I'm glad I'm dying out of sight of that Sun.*

Think about it, Ben. Think it over. Now that it's all finished and you tumble out of things at fifty-six years of age. Think about it. Think about the waste, and the crying and the bit of conviction that could have saved you. Think about it all.

Then the story unfurled on a fleeting banner. It rolled out for Ben Kettridge there in a twilight universe. In a matter of a few minutes he had found life in that shadowy mind-world preferable to his outside existence.

He saw himself as a prominent scientist, engaged with others of his kind on a project of consequence to mankind. He saw his own worry and nagging anxiousness at the danger in the experiment.

He heard again the talk with Fenimore. He heard it more clearly than the blast and rush of the thunder outside.

"Charles, I don't think we should do it this way. If something were to happen..."

“Ben, you old bug, you! Nothing whatever can possibly happen-except what we want to happen. The Compound is as safe as breast milk, and you know it. There’s no reason why everyone should know about it before we use it, though. That damned government has a way of pooh-poohing every major development, corrupting it, putting it off, worrying over it.

“First we demonstrate its applicability-then we let the dunderheads scream about it. After they know its worth, they’ll build monuments to us!”

“But don’t you understand, Fenimore? There are too many random factors in the formulae. There’s a fundamental flaw in there-if I could-only-figure it out.”

“Get this, Ben. I don’t mean to pull seniority on you, but you force me. I’m not a harsh man, but this is a dream I’ve had for twenty years, and no piddling pen-scratching on your part is going to put it off. We test the Compound Thursday!”

It had been a dream for Fenimore. A dream that had overnight turned into a nightmare of twenty-five thousand dead, and hospitals stacked eight deep with screaming, intestine-twisted patients, howling for death rather than the suffering.

The nightmare had reached out clammy, thready tentacles and dragged in Kettridge, too. In a matter of days a reputation built of years of privation and sweat was reduced to rubble. Kettridge had barely escaped the mass lynchings. But he did not escape the inquests. What little reputation he had left had saved him-and a few others-from the gas chambers. But Life...

Life was at an end for him. Ten years of struggling to eat, barely keeping alive-for no one would hire one of the men who had caused the Mass

Death-had sunk Kettridge lower and lower. There was still a common decency about him that prevented a slump into some gutter, just as there was an inner desire to continue living. Even Life as it was to him then. Kettridge never became-as the others who escaped-a flophouse rummy or a suicide. He just became anonymous.

Lower and lower. Till there was nothing lower except slashed wrists or the bottle.

Kettridge had been too old, by then, for either.

And always there had been the knowledge that he could have stopped the project, had he voiced his doubts, instead of brooding in silence.

Finally the study-ship post had come. Ben Kettridge, with another name, had signed on. Three years, out to the stars, the cramp and squalor of shipboard, studying and cataloging. It hadn’t been good, but it was a way to keep going.

Besides, how could he face the sun of Earth many more days-with *that* on his conscience?

So Ben Kettridge had become an alien ecologist. One year out from Capitol City, and *this*!

He wanted to scream. He wanted to scream very badly. His throat muscles drew up and tightened inside the wrinkled neck. His mouth, inside the flexible hood, opened wide, till the comers stretched in pain.

The pictures had stopped. He had withdrawn in terror from the shadowed mind-world, and he was back in a stone prison with a hungry aborigine for keeper.

His mind was a shrieking torrent of horror and futility and self-hatred. It was all a vortex, drawing his brain down into a black chasm. Oh, if he could only scream!

Lad-nar stirred.

The huge furred body twisted, snorted softly, and sank back into sleep. Kettridge wondered momentarily if the strength of his thoughts had disturbed the beast.

What a fantastic creature, thought Kettridge. He lives on a world where the heat will fry a human and shivers in fear at lightning storms.

A strange compassion came over Kettridge. How very much like a native of Earth this creature was. Governed by its stomach and a will to survive. A religion founded in fear and nurtured on terror. Lightning: the beast thought of it as a Screamer From the Skies. The occasionally glimpsed sun: The Great Warmer.

Kettridge pondered on the simplicity and common sense of Lad-nar’s religion.

When the storms gathered, finally building up enough charge to begin the lightning and thunder, Lad-nar knew the cold would set in. Cold was anathema to him. He knew the cold sapped him of strength, the lightning struck him down. So he stole a cat-litter and hid for the weeks it would take the gigantic storms to abate. The high body heat of the creature dictated that it have much food to keep it alive when the temperature went down. When a cat-litter wasn’t handy, why then just *kill and eat an alien ecologist*.

Kettridge found the last thought standing out in his mind.

This was no stupid beast, Kettridge reminded himself.

His religion was a sound combination of animal wisdom and native observation. The lightning killed: don't go abroad in the storms. The storms brought cold: get food and stay alive.

It was so simple to analyze the situation. Simple, yes, but impossible to get himself out of it!

Not that I care, Kettridge mused.

I stopped caring long ago. The urge to survive? He laughed aloud. To his mind came the picture of himself. Thin, weary-looking. As though a world of agony had seeped like sand into his bones. His face was a lined and broken thing. It was tired. From the gray hair to the cleft chin. From the broken bridge of the aquiline nose to the thinned, parched lips. *I'm older than fifty-six*, he thought. There were men of fifty-six, he knew, who were still following the trails of the young.

I'm too sorry for myself.

It seemed strange. He had never churned these thoughts around in just this manner before. He had been prepared, almost eager, to let himself be beaten down, to be trampled under feet of sadness and self-pity. He was waiting for the creature to waken, then it would be at an end...

It was indeed strange how an odd situation could bring a man to a realization of himself.

Here is a chance, he thought. The words came unbidden.

In just these words. Here is a chance. Here was a chance not only to survive-something he had long since stopped doing consciously-but a chance to reinstate himself. If only in his own mind. Here was an aborigine, member of a dying race, a cowering beast of the caves, afraid to walk in the storms, in fear of the lightning, shackled by a primitive religion. Doomed forever to the land, never to see the sky.

In that split moment Ben Kettridge devised a plan to save his soul.

There are times when men sum up their lives. Take accounting and find themselves wanting. This was one of those times. So hopeless did it seem, that Ben Kettridge told himself, *This is a chance*.

Lad-nar suddenly became a symbol of all the people who had been lost in the Mass Death. In the mind of an old and tired man, many things are possible.

I must get out of here! Ben Kettridge told himself, over and over, almost as an incantation.

But more than that he knew he must save the poor hulk before him. And in saving the animal, he would save himself. Lad-nar had no idea what a star was. Well, Ben Kettridge would tell him. Here was a chance! Here was a chance!

The old man slid up flat against the wall. His back was strained with the effort to sink into the stone. Watching the alien beast come to wakefulness was almost the epitome of horror.

The huge body tossed and heaved, then rose. Directly. It sat erect from the thin, pinched waist, raising the massive wedge-shaped chest, the hideous head, the powerful neck and arms. A thin trickle of sleep-spittle dripped from a corner of its fanged mouth. It sat up and

Thought: *Lad-nar hungers.*

"Oh, God in Heaven, please let me have time! Please allow me this-this-*little* thing! I beg you!"

Kettridge found himself with hands clasped on his chest, face raised to the roof of the cave. For the first time in his life he felt tears of appeal on his cheeks.

He spoke to God with the tongue of a man who has never known a God. Science had been his deity-and that God had turned against him. He spoke from a heart so long full of misery and wandering it never knew it *could* speak to a God.

Thought: *You speak to the Lord of the Heaven.* Lad-nar seemed awed. It watched, its huge brilliant eyes suddenly unslitted and wide.

Kettridge thought at the beast.

Lad-nar! I come from the Lord of the Heaven. I am a God greater than the God in the Heaven! I can show you how to walk in the storms! I can show you how to

The creature's roar deafened Kettridge. Along with it came the mental scream! The old man felt himself lifted off the floor by the force of that blow to the mind, and hurled against the rocks. His body burned and ached from the pounding, but he knew it had been his own reflexes that had done it.

The aborigine leaped to his feet, threw his taloned hands upward and bellowed his rage.

Thought: *you speak that which is Forbidden! You say that which is Untrue and Unclean! No human walks when the Essence-Stealer speaks in the night! You are a fearful thing! Lad-nar is afraid!*

"Heresy. I've spoken heresy!" Kettridge wanted to rip off the metal-plastic hood and tear his tongue from his own mouth. This was the way he had begun his own salvation! Heresy!

Thought: *yes, you have spoken that which is Unclean and Untrue!*

Kettridge cowered in fear. The beast was enraged. How could it be afraid, when it stood there so powerful and so massive?

Thought: *yes, Lad-nar is afraid! Afraid! Afraid!*

Then the waves of fear hit him. Kettridge felt his head begin to throb. The tender fiber of his mind was being twisted and seared and buffeted. Washed and burned and scarred forever with the terrible all-consuming fear the animal had coursing through itself.

Stop, stop, Lad-nar! I speak truth! I speak truth!

He spoke, then. Softly, winningly, trying to convince a being that had never known any God but one that howled and slashed in streamers of electricity. He spoke of himself. He spoke of his powers. He spoke of them as though he believed he had them. To himself he thought the things he was saying. He built himself a glory on two levels.

Slowly, Lad-nar calmed, and the waves of fear diminished to ripples. The awe and trembling remained, but there was a sliver of belief.

Kettridge knew he must work on that.

All too easily, down somewhere in his own mind, came back the picture of that huge creature, ripping and eating, ripping and eating...

"I come from the Heaven-Home, Lad-nar. I speak in the words of a God, for I am a God. A stronger God than the puny Essence-Stealer you fear!" As if to punctuate his words, a flash of lightning struck just outside the cave, filling the hollow with fury and light.

Kettridge continued, spilling the words faster and faster. "I can walk abroad in the storm, and the Essence-Stealer will not harm me. Let me go out and I will show you, Lad-nar." He was playing a dangerous hand; at any moment the beast might leap. It might dare to venture that leap hoping Kettridge was speaking falsely, rather than incur the wrath of a God he *knew* was dangerous.

Kettridge continued talking.

"Let me out, Lad-nar. Let me walk from this cave. I will show you." He edged toward the cave's mouth, his hands in their metal-plastic gloves flat to the wall.

He knew the insulated suit would protect him from the viciousness outside.

Thought: *stop!*

"Why, Lad-nar? I can show you. I can show you how to walk in the night when the Essence-Stealer screams, and you can scream back at him and laugh at him, Lad-nar." He didn't know why he was talking, he could have thought it just as well but there was a reassurance in the sound of his voice in the cave.

The old man felt the weariness seeping through his body. *Oh, if I was a younger man. If it wasn't so late!*

Thought: *Lad-nar does not know what less age means, but why should let you go? You may have been sent by the Lord of the Heaven to see if I should lose my Essence. The Lord of the Heaven may be trying to take you back from me because I listened to your Unclean and Untrue sayings. Then I will have no feastings! Then I will lose my Essence!*

Kettridge reminded himself that the beast was indeed clever. Not only did it fear the wrath of the Lord of the Heaven and his screaming death, but Lad-nar knew if he let the man go he would have nothing to eat during the coming cold days.

"Let me go, Lad-nar. I will bring you back a cat-litter for your feasting. I will show you that I can walk in the night and I will bring you food. I will bring back a cat-litter, Lad-nar!" He prayed, silently, it would work.

Thought: *if you are a God, why do you speak to the Lord of the Heaven?*

Kettridge bit his lip. He kept forgetting...

He stopped thinking. He blocked it off. He willed himself to stop thinking. He must let his instincts answer for him.

"Because I want the Lord of the Heaven to know that I am as great as he and not afraid of him and that my prayers to him are only to show that I am as great as he." It was gibberish, but it was a deep gibberish, and if he kept talking, the beast would shuck off the thoughts rather than try to fathom them.

The Earthman knew he had one factor in his favor: Lad-nar had never heard anyone speak against the Gods, and so one who did it and did not get blasted *must* be a God.

Kettridge hit him with the appeal again, before the animal had time to wonder.

"I'll get you a cat-litter, Lad-nar. Let me go! Let me show you! Let me show you that you can

walk in the storms as I do! I, too, am a great God!” There was so much at stake here, so little time, so deep a Hell waiting.

Thought: *you will go away.*

There was a petulance, a little child sound, to the objection, and Kettridge knew the first step had been achieved.

“No, Lad-nar. Here is a rope.” He drew a thin cord of tough metal-plastic from his utility belt. His hand jiggled against the service revolver on his tool belt and he laughed deep inside once more as he thought of how useless it was.

Useless. Only in his wits was there salvation.

He would not have used the gun in any case. There was more at stake here than just his life.

“Here is a rope,” he repeated, extending the coiled cord. “I will tie it about myself, like this...and...now! You take this end. Hold it tightly so that I can’t escape. It is long enough so that I may go out and seek a cat-litter and show you I can walk abroad.”

At first the native refused, eyeing the glistening, silvery cord with fear in his deeply-pooled eyes. But Kettridge spoke on two levels, and spoke, and spoke, and soon the beast touched the cord.

It drew back its seven-taloned hand quickly.

The third time it grasped the cord.

You have just lost your religion, Kettridge thought.

Lad-nar had “smelled” with his mind. He had sensed a cat-litter fairly close to the cave. But he did not know where.

Kettridge stepped out of the dark mouth of the cave, into the roaring maelstrom of a Blestonian electrical storm.

The sky was a tumult of heavy black clouds, steel and ebony and ripped dirty cloth. The clouds tumbled over themselves and died split apart as a bolt crashed through. The very air was charged, and blast after blast of lightning sheared away the atmosphere in zig-zagged streamers.

Kettridge stood with legs apart, body tilted forward against the pull of the cord, hands shading his eyes against the glare, the almost continuous glare, of lightning eruptions.

He was a small, thin man, and had it not been for the cord, he might easily have been swept away by the winds and rain that sandpapered the rocky ledge.

Streamers, branches, forks-the illumination of the arcing bolts was something magnificent and terrible. The old man stood there with the pelting rain washing over him, obscuring his vision through the hood, leaving only the glare of the storm for him.

He took a step, two, three.

The bolt slashed at him through a rift in the mountains. It roared over the precipice and streaked at him. It materialized out of nowhere and everywhere, splintering the stones at his feet. The rock flew up in planed, smoothed slivers, shooting in every direction. Kettridge fell flat and the crack of thunder rolled in on him. He realized it had come with the lightning, that he had been listening to it for almost a minute, before he realized what it was.

The effect on his body was sudden.

Immediately he went deaf. His skin began to prickle with the feel of a million tiny threads pushed into the flesh. His legs and hips were numb, his eyes reflected coruscating pinwheels of brilliance. He could see nothing but light on light inside light over light light light light...

There was a paralysis of his bladder.

Thought: *Gad! You are no God! The Essence-Stealer has screamed and you have fallen!*

The rope tightened and Kettridge felt himself being dragged back into the cave.

“No!” he screamed hurriedly. The pressure eased. “No, Lad-nar. That was the Essence-Stealer’s scream. Now I shall have mine. I *am* a God, I tell you! Let me show you, Lad-nar!”

Then he seized on the lightning blast for his own purpose. “See, Lad-nar! The Essence-Stealer has struck me, but I am still whole. I will rise and walk again. You will see!”

Everywhere the lightning burned and crashed. The whole world was filled with the noise of frothing air and ripping jungle and screaming elements.

He clawed himself to his knees. His legs were weak and numb. The prickling was still there, but lessened. His eyes were starting to unglare and focus again. He still could hear nothing. He half-rose, sank back to one knee, rose again.

His head felt terribly heavy and unanchored.

Then he stood erect.

And he walked.

The storm raged about him. Lightning struck and struck again. Near him, to the side of him, behind him. One bolt sizzled down and struck him directly. The metal insulating suit served its purpose a second time. The bolt slashed, hit, and side-flashed off, exploding a small, wizened tree growing up through a crack in the rocks. The tree flew into the air, one whole side charred and burned, the other unscarred.

It fell with a crash directly across Kettridge's path.

The symptoms of lightning-stroke were multiplied many times in Kettridge, but there was no answering thought of scorn from Lad-nar. Obviously the beast had withdrawn from his mind, in fear.

And he walked.

Soon he came back to the cave.

Thought: *you are a God! This I believe. But the Lord of the Heaven has sent his Essence-Stealers. They, too, are mighty, and Lad-nar will lose his Essence if he walks there.*

"No, Lad-nar. I will show you how to protect yourself." The old man was sweating and white from his walk, and the numbness extended through his body. He could hear nothing, but the words came clearly to him.

He began to unseal the form-fitting suit.

The storm had already lowered the temperature enough so that he knew he would not fry.

In a few minutes he had the suit off, and it had shrunk back to a pocket-sized replica of the full-sized garment.

Kettridge felt ill. He felt old and tired and used. It was time to go home, time to quit. It was all over. He had won.

"Lad-nar, take this. Here, give me your hand."

The beast looked at him with huge, uncomprehending eyes. The old man felt closer, somehow, to this strange creature than to anyone he had ever known. Kettridge pulled his glove on tighter and reached for Lad-nar's seven-taloned hand. He pulled at the arm of the form-fit suit, and it elastically expanded.

After much stretching and fitting, the beast was encased in the insulating metal-plastic.

Kettridge wanted to laugh at the bunched fur and awkward stance of the massive animal. But again, the laughter would not come.

"Now, Lad-nar, put on the gloves. Never take them off, except when the storms are gone. Always put this God-suit on when the Essence-Stealers scream, and you will be safe."

Thought: *now I can walk in the night?*

"Yes. Come." He moved toward the cave's mouth. "Now you can get a cat-litter for yourself. I did not bring one because I knew you would believe me and get your own. Come, Lad-nar." He motioned the beast to follow him out onto the rocks.

Thought: *how will you walk without the God-suit?*

Kettridge ran a seamed hand through his white hair. He was glad Lad-nar had thought the question. The multiple flashes of a many-stroked blast filled the air with glare and noise.

Kettridge could not hear the noise.

"I have God-brothers who wait for me in the Great House From Across the Skies that will take me back to the Heaven Home. They will hurry to me and they will protect me."

He did not bother to tell the great beast that his search time was almost up and that the *Jeremy Bentham*'s flitter would home in on his suit beam. It would have been useless homing, had he not secured time.

"Go! Walk, Lad-nar!" he said, throwing his arms out as he felt a God would. "And tell your brothers you have screamed at the Essence-Stealers!"

Thought: *I have done this.*

The great animal stepped cautiously toward the rocky ledge, fearful and hesitant. Then it bunched its huge muscles and leaped out into the full agony of the storm which crashed in futility about his massive form.

"One day Man will come and make friends with you, Lad-nar," said the old man, softly. "One day they will come down out of the sky and show you how to live on this world of yours so that you don't have to hide."

Kettridge sank down against the inner wall of the cave, suddenly too exhausted to stand.

He had won. He had redeemed himself. If only in his own mind. He had helped take some life

from a race, yet he had given life to another race.

He closed his eyes peacefully. Even the great blasts of blind lightning did not bother him as he rested. He knew Lad-nar had told his brothers.

He knew the ship was coming for him.

Lad-nar came up the incline and saw the flitter streaking down, lightning playing along its sides in phosphorescent glimmers.

Thought: *God! God! Your God-brothers come for you!*

He bounded across the scarred and seared rocks, toward the cave.

Kettridge rose and stepped out into the rain and wind.

He ran a few steps, waving his arms in signal. The flitter altered course and headed for the old man.

The lightning struck.

It seemed as though the bolt knew its target. It raced the flitter, sizzling and burning as it came. In a roar of light and dark and screamings it tore at the old man, lifting him high into the air, charring and burning and ripping.

The body landed just outside the cave, blistered and bleeding. The old man was still alive...

Thought: *God! God! You have fallen! Rise, rise, rise! The Essence-Stealers...*

The thoughts were hysterical, tearful, torn and wanting. Had the beast been able to shed tears, Kettridge knew it would have done so. The old man lay sightless, eyes gone, senses altogether torn from him. The Essence ebbed.

He thought:

Lad-nar. There will come other Gods. They will come to you and you must think to them. You must think these words, Lad-nar. Think to them, Show me a star. Do you hear me, Lad-nar? Do you...

Even as the great beast watched, the Essence flickered and died. In the animal's mind there was a lack, a space of emptiness. Yet there was a contentment. A peace, and Lad-nar knew the Essence of the God Who Walked In The Light was soft and unafraid at Ending.

The aborigine stood on the rocks below the cave and watched the flitter sink to the stone ledge. He watched as the other Gods From the Skies emerged and ran to the charred hulk lying on the stones.

Through his head, like the blind lightning, streaking everywhere, lightning, lightning, lightning, the words remained, and repeated...

Thought:

Show me a star.

All the Sounds of Fear

“GIVE ME SOME LIGHT!”

Cry: tormented, half-moan half-chant, cast out against a whispering darkness: a man wound in white, arms upflung to roistering shadows, sooty sockets where eyes had been, pleading, demanding, anger and hopelessness, anguish from the soul into the world. He stumbled, a step, two, faltering, weak, the man returned to the child, trying to find some exit from the washing sea of darkness in which he trembled.

“Give me some light!”

Around him a Greek chorus of sussurating voices. Plucking at his garments he staggered toward an intimation of sound, a resting place, a goal. The man in pain, the figure of *all* pain, all desperation, and nowhere in that circle of painful light was there release from his torment. Sandaled feet stepping, each one above an abyss, no hope and no safety; what can it mean to be so eternally blind?

Again, “Give me some light!”

The last tortured ripping of the words from a throat raw with the hopelessness of salvation. Then the man sank to the shadows that moved in on him. The face half-hidden in chiaroscuro, sharp black, blanched white, down and down into the grayness about his feet, the circle of blazing-white light pinpointing him, a creature impaled on a shard of brilliance, till closing, closing, closing it swallowed him, all gone to black, darkness within and without, black even deeper, nothing, finis, end; silence.

Richard Becker, Oedipus, had played his first role. Twenty-four years later, he would play it again, as his last. But before that final performance’s curtain could be rung, twenty-four years of greatness would have to strut across stages of life and theater and emotion.

Time, passing.

When they had decided to cast the paranoid beggar in *Sweet Miracles*, Richard Becker had gone to the Salvation Army retail store and bought a set of rags that even the sanctimonious charity workers staffing the shop tried to throw out as unsaleable and foul. He bought a pair of cracked and soleless shoes that were a size too large. He bought a hat that had seen so many autumns of rain its brim had bowed and withered under the onslaught. He bought a no-color vest from a suit long since destroyed and a pair of pants whose seat sagged raggedly and a shirt with three buttons gone and a jacket that seemed to typify every derelict who had ever cadged an hour’s sleep in an alley.

He bought these things over the protests of the kindly, white-haired women who were *doing their bit for charity*, and he asked if he might step into the toilet for a few moments to try them on; and when he emerged, his good tweed jacket and dark slacks over his arm, he was another man entirely. As though magically, coarse stubble had sprouted on his sagging jowls. (It may well have been there when he came into the shop, but who would have noticed? He was too nice-looking a young man to go around unshaved.) The hair had grown limp and off-gray under the squashed hat. The face was lined and planed with the depravities and deprivations of a lifetime lived in gutters and saloons. The hands were caked with filth, the eyes lusterless and devoid of personality, the body grotesquely slumped by the burden of mere existence. This old man, this skid from the Bowery, how had he gotten into the toilet, and where was the nice young man who had gone in wearing that jacket and those slacks? Had this *creature* somehow overpowered him (what foul weapon had this feeble old man used to subdue a vital, strong youth like that)? The white-haired Good Women of Charity were frozen with distress as they imagined the strong-faced, attractive youth, lying in the bathroom, his skull crushed by a length of pipe.

The old bum extended the jacket, the pants, and the rest of the clothing the young man had been wearing, and in a voice that was thirty years younger than the body from which it spoke, he explained, “I won’t be needing these, ladies. Sell them to someone who can make good use of them.” The voice of the young man, from this husk.

And he paid for the rags he wore. They watched him as he limped and rolled through the front door into the filthy streets, another tramp gone to join the tide of lost souls that would inevitably become a stream and a river and an ocean of wasters, washing finally into a drunk tank or a doorway or a park bench.

Richard Becker spent six weeks living on the Bowery; in fleabags, abandoned warehouses, cellars, gutters, and on tenement rooftops; he shared and wallowed in the nature and filth and degradation of the empty men of his times.

For six weeks he *was* a tramp, a thoroughly washed-out hopeless rumdum, with rheumy eyes and

palsied hands and a weak bladder.

One by one the weeks mounted to six, and on the first day of casting for *Sweet Miracles*, the Monday of the seventh week, Richard Becker arrived at the Martin Theatre, where he auditioned for the part in the clothes he had worn for the past six weeks.

The play ran for five hundred and eighteen performances, and Richard Becker won the Drama Critics' Circle Award as the finest male performer of the year. He also won the Circle Award as the most promising newcomer of the year.

He was twenty-two years old at the time.

The following season, after *Sweet Miracles* had gone on the road, Richard Becker was apprised, through the pages of *Variety*, that John Foresman & T. H. Searle were about to begin casting for *House of Infidels*, the posthumous script by Odets, the last he ever wrote. Through friends in the Foresman & Searle offices, he obtained a copy of the script, and selected a part he considered massive in its potentialities.

The role of an introspective and tormented artist, depressed by the level of commercialism to which his work had sunk, resolved to regain an innocence of childhood or nature he had lost, by working with his hands in a foundry.

When the first-night critics called Richard Becker's conception of Tresk, the artist, "a pinnacle of thespic intuition" and noted, "His authority in the part led members of the audience to ask one another how such a sensitive actor could grasp the rough unobtrusive life of a foundry worker," they had no idea that Richard Becker had worked for nearly two months in a steel stamping plant and foundry in Pittsburgh. But the makeup man on *House of Infidels* suspected Richard Becker had once been in a terrible fire, for his hands were marked by the ravages of great heat.

After two successes, two conquests of Broadway, two characterizations that were immediately ranked with the most brilliant Shubert Alley had ever witnessed, Richard Becker's reputation began to build a legend.

The Man Who IS The "Method," they called him, in perceptive articles and interviews. Lee Strasberg of the Actors' Studio, when questioned, remarked that Becker had never been a student, but had the occasion arisen, he might well have paid *him* to attend. In any event, Richard Becker's command of the Stanislavski theory of total immersion in a part became a working example of the validity of the concept. No mere scratcher and stammerer, Richard Becker *was* the man he pretended to be, on a stage.

Of his private life little was known, for he let it be known that if he was to be totally convincing in a characterization, he wanted no intrusive shadow of himself to stand between the audience and the image he offered.

Hollywood's offers of stardom were refused, for as *Theatre Arts* commented in a brief feature on Richard Becker:

The gestalt that Becker projects across a row of footlights would be dimmed and turned two-dimensional on the Hollywood screen. Becker's art is an ultimate distillation of truth and metamorphosis that requires the reality of stage production to retain its purity. It might even be noted that Richard Becker acts in *four* dimensions, as opposed to the merely craftsmanlike three of his contemporaries. Surely no one could truly argue with the fact that watching a Becker performance is almost a religious experience. We can only congratulate Richard Becker on his perceptiveness in turning down studio bids.

The years of building a backlog of definitive parts (effectively ruining them for other actors who were condemned to play them after Becker had said all there was to say) passed, as Richard Becker became, in turn, a Hamlet that cast new lights on the Freudian implications of Shakespeare...a fiery Southern segregationist whose wife reveals her octaroon background...a fast-talking salesman come to grips with futility and cowardice...a many-faceted Marco Polo...a dissolute and totally amoral pimp, driven by a loathing for women, to sell his own sister into evil...a ruthless politician, dying of cancer and senility...

And the most challenging part he had ever undertaken, the recreation, in the play by Tennessee Williams, of the deranged religious zealot, trapped by his own warring emotions, into the hammer-murder of an innocent girl.

When they found him, in the model's apartment off Gramercy Place, they were unable to get a coherent story of why he had done the disgusting act, for he had lapsed into a stentorian tone of Biblical fervor, pontificating about the blood of the Iamb and the curse of Jezebel and the eternal fires of Perdition. The men from Homicide numbered among their ranks a rookie, fresh to the squad, who became desperately ill at the sight of the fouled walls and the crumpled form wedged into the tiny kitchenette; he became

violently ill, and was taken from the apartment a few minutes before Richard Becker was led away.

The trial was a manifest sadness to all who had seen him onstage, and the jury did not even have to be sent out to agree on a verdict of insanity.

After all, whoever the fanatic was that the defense put on the stands, he was not sane, and was certainly no longer Richard Becker, the actor.

For Dr. Charles Tedrow, the patient in restraining room 16 was a constant involvement. He was unable to divorce himself from the memory of a night three years before, when he had sat in an orchestra seat at the Henry Miller Theatre and seen Richard Becker, light and adroit, as the comical Tossplot in that season's hit comedy, *Never A Rascal*.

He was unable to separate his thoughts from the shape and form of the actor who had so immersed himself in The Method that for a time, in three acts, he *was* a blundering, maundering, larcenous alcoholic with a penchant for pomegranates and (as Becker had mouthed it onstage) "barratry on the low seas!" Separate them from this weird and many-faceted creature that lived its many lives in the padded cell numbered 16? Impossible.

At first, there had been reporters, who had come to interview the Good Doctor in charge of Becker's case; and to the last of these (for Dr. Tedrow had instituted restrictions on this sort of publicity) he had said, "To a man like Richard Becker, the world was very important. He was very much a man of his times; he had no real personality of his own, with the exception of that one overwhelming faculty and need to reflect the world around him. He was an actor in the purest sense of the word. The world gave him his personality, his attitudes, his reason and his facade for existence. Take those away from him, clap him up in a padded cell-as we've been forced to do-and he begins to lose touch with reality."

"I understand," the reporter had inquired carefully, "that Becker is reliving his roles, one after another. Is that true, Dr. Tedrow?"

Charles Tedrow was, above all else, a compassionate man, and his fury at this remark, revealing as it did a leak in the sanitarium's security policy, was manifest. "Richard Becker is undergoing what might be called, in psychiatric terms, 'induced hallucinatory regression.' In his search for some reality, there in that room, he has fastened onto the method of assuming characters' moods he had played onstage. From what I've been able to piece together from reviews of his shows, he is going back from the most recent to the next and the next and so on."

The reporter had asked more questions, more superficial and phantasmagoric assumptions, until Dr. Charles Tedrow had concluded the interview rudely.

But even now, as he sat across from Richard Becker in the quiet office, he knew that almost nothing the reporter had conceived, could rival what Becker had done to himself.

"Tell me, Doctor," the florid, bombastic traveling salesman who was Richard Becker asked, "what the hell's new down the line?"

"It's really very quiet, these days, Ted," the physician replied. Becker had been this way for two months now: submerged in the part of Ted Rogat, the loudmouth philandering protagonist of Chayefsky's *The Wanderer*. For six months before that he had been Marco Polo, and before that the nervous, slack-jawed and incestuous son of *The Glass of Sadness*.

"Hell, I remember one little chippie in, where was it, oh yeah, hell yes! It was K.C. good old K.C. man, she was a *goodie*! You ever been to K.C., Doc? I was a drummer in nylons when I worked K.C. Jeezus, lemme tell ya-

It was difficult to believe the man who sat on the other side of the table was an actor. He looked the part, he spoke the part, he *was* Ted Rogat, and Dr. Tedrow could catch himself from time to time contemplating the release of this total stranger who had wandered into Richard Becker's cell.

He sat and listened to the story of the flame-hipped harlot in Kansas City that Ted Rogat had picked up in an Armenian restaurant and seduced with promises of nylons. He listened to it, and knew that whatever else was true of Richard Becker, this creature of many faces and many lives, he was no saner than the day he had killed that girl. After eighteen months in the sanitarium, he was going back, back, back through his acting career, and replaying the roles, but never once coming to grips with reality.

In the plight and disease of Richard Becker, Dr. Charles Tedrow saw a bit of himself, of all men of his times, and the thousand illnesses to which they were heir.

He returned Richard Becker, as well as Ted Rogat, to the security and tiny world of Room 16.

Two months later he brought him back, and spent a highly interesting three hours discussing group therapy with Herr Doktor Ernst Loebisch, credentials from the Munich Academy of Medicine and the

Vienna Psychiatric Clinic. Four months after that, Dr. Tedrow got to know the surly and insipid Jackie Bishoff, juvenile delinquent and hero of *Streets of Night*.

And almost a year later, to the day, Dr. Tedrow sat in his office with a bum, a derelict, a rheumy-eyed and dissipated vagabond who could only be the skid from *Sweet Miracles*, Richard Becker's first triumph, twenty-four years before.

What Richard Becker might look like, without camouflage, in his own shell, Tedrow had no idea. He was, now, to all intents and purposes, the seedy old tramp with the dirt caked into the sagged folds of his face.

"Mr. Becker, I want to talk to you."

Hopelessness shined out of the old bum's eyes. There was no answer.

"Listen to me, Becker. Please listen to me, if you're in there somewhere, if you can hear me. I want you to understand what I'm about to say; it's very important."

A croak, cracked and forced, came from the bum's lips, and he mumbled, "I need'a drink, yuh go' uh drink fuh me, huh..."

Tedrow leaned across, his hand shaking as he took the old bum's chin in his palm, and held it fixed, staring into this stranger's eyes. "Now listen to me, Becker. You've got to hear me. I've gone through the files, and as far as I can tell, this was the first part you ever played. I don't know what will happen! I don't know what form this syndrome will take after you've used up all your other lives. But if you can hear me, you've got to understand that you may be approaching a critical period in your-in your life."

The old bum licked cracked lips.

"Listen! I'm here, I want to help you, I want to *do* something for you, Becker. If you'll come out for an instant, just a second, we can establish contact. It's got to be now or--"

He left it hanging. He had no way of knowing *if-what*. And as he lapsed into silence, as he released the bum's chin, a strange alteration of facial muscles began, and the derelict's countenance shifted, subtly ran like hot lead, and for a second he saw a face he recognized. From the eyes that were no longer red-rimmed and bloodshot, Dr. Charles Tedrow saw intelligence peering out.

"It sounds like fear, Doctor," he said.

And, "Goodbye, once more."

Then the light died, the face shifted finally, and the physician was again staring at the empty face of a gutter-bred derelict.

He sent the old man back to Room 16. Later that day, he had one of the male nurses take in an 89¢ bottle of muscatel.

Fear crackled across the telephone wires.

"Speak up, man! What in the name of God is going on out there?"

"I-I can't explain it, Dr. Tedrow, but you better-you better get out here right away. It's-it's oh Jee-zus!"

"What *is* it? Stop crying, Wilson, and tell me what the hell is *wrong*!"

"It's, it's number sixteen...it's..."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. Keep everyone away from that room. Do you understand? Wilson! Do you understand me?"

"Yessir, yessir. I'll-oh Christ-hurry up Doc..."

He could feel his pajama pants bunched around his knees, under his slacks, as he floored the pedal of the ranch wagon. The midnight roads were jerky in the windshield, and the murk through which he raced was almost too ominous to be a fact of nature.

When he slewed the car into the drive, the gatekeeper threw the iron barrier back almost spastically. The ranch wagon chewed gravel, sending debris back in a wide fan, as Tedrow plunged ahead. When he screeched to a halt in front of the sanitarium, the doors burst open and the Senior Attendant, Wilson, raced down the steps.

"This way, th-this way, Doctor Te--"

"Get out of my way, you idiot, I know which direction!" He shoved Wilson aside, and strode up the steps and into the building.

"It started about an hour ago...we didn't know what was happ--"

"And you didn't call me immediately? Ass!"

"We just thought, we just thought it was another one of his stages, *you* know how he is..."

Tedrow snorted in disgust and threw off his topcoat as he made his way rapidly down the corridor to the section of the sanitarium that housed the restraining rooms.

As they came into the annex, through the heavy glass-ported door, he heard the scream for the first time.

In that scream, in that tormented, pleading, demanding and hopelessly lost tremor there were all the sounds of fear he had ever heard. In that voice he heard even his own voice, his own soul, crying out for something.

For an unnameable something, as the scream came again. "Give me some light!"

Another world, another voice, another life. Some evil and empty beseeching from a corner of a dust-strewn universe. Hanging there timelessly, vibrant in colorless agony. A million tired and blind stolen voices all wrapped into that one howl, all the eternal sadnesses and losses and pains ever known to man. It was all there, as the good in the world was sliced open and left to bleed its golden fluid away in the dirt. It was a lone animal being eaten by a bird of prey. It was a hundred children crushed beneath iron treads. It was one good man with his entrails in his blood-soaked hands. It was the soul and the pain and the very vital fiber of life, draining away, without light, without hope, without succor.

"Give me some light!"

Tedrow flung himself at the door, and threw back the bolt on the observation window. He stared for a long and silent moment as the scream trembled once more on the air, weightlessly, transparently, tingling off into emptiness. He stared, and felt the impact of a massive horror stifle his own cry of disbelief and terror.

Then he spun away from the window and hung there, sweat-drenched back flat to the wall, with the last sight of Richard Becker he would ever hope to see, burned forever behind his eyes.

The sound of his soft sobs in the corridor held the others back. They stared silently, still hearing that never-spoken echo reverberating down and down and down the corridors of their minds:

Give me some light!

Fumbling beside him, Tedrow slammed the observation window shut, and then his arm sank back to his side.

While inside Room 16, lying up against the far wall, his back against the soft passive padding, Richard Becker looked out at the door, at the corridor, at the world, forever.

Looked out as he had come, purely and simply.

Without a face. From his hairline to his chin, a blank, empty, featureless expanse. Empty. Silent. Devoid of sight or smell or sound. Blank and faceless, a creature God had never deigned to bless with a mirror to the world. His Method now was gone.

Richard Becker, actor, had played his last part, and had gone away, taking with him Richard Becker, a man who had known all the sounds, all the sights, all the life of fear.

The Silver Corridor

"WE CAN'T BE RESPONSIBLE for death or disfigurement, you know," reminded the Duelmaster.

He toyed with the Company emblem on his ceremonial robe absently, waiting Marmorth's answer. Behind him, across the onyx and crystal expanse of the preparation chamber, the gaping maw of the Silver Corridor opened into blackness.

"Yes, yes, I know all that," snapped Marmorth impatiently. "Has Krane entered his end?" he asked, casting a glance at the dilation-segment leading to the adjoining preparation room. There was fear and apprehension in the look, only thinly hidden.

"Not quite yet," the Duelmaster told him. "By now he has signed the release, and they are briefing him, as I'm about to brief you, if you'll kindly sign yours." He indicated the printed form in the trough, and the stylus on the desk.

Marmorth licked his lips, mumbled something half-heard, and flourished his signature on the blank line. The signing was done hurriedly, as though he was afraid he might forget his name, should he hesitate.

The Duelmaster glanced quickly at the signature, then pressed the stud on the desk top. The blank slipped out of sight in the trough. He carefully took the stylus from Marmorth's unfeeling fingers, placed it in his pouch. They waited patiently for a minute. A soft clucking came up through a slot in the side of the desk, and a second later a punched plastic plate dropped into a basket beneath it.

"This is your variation-range card," explained the Duelmaster, lifting the plate from the basket. "With this we can gauge the extent of your imagination, set up the illusions, send you through the Corridor at your own mental pace."

"I understand perfectly, Duelsman," snapped Marmorth. "Do you mind getting me in there! I'm freezing in this breechclout!"

"Mr. Marmorth, I realize this is annoying, but we are required both by statute of law and rule of the Company to explain thoroughly the entire sequence, before entrance." He stood up behind the desk, reached into a cabinet that dilated at the approach of his hand.

"Here," he said, handing Marmorth a wraparound, "put this on till we've finished here."

Marmorth let breath whistle between his teeth in irritation, but donned the robe and sat back down in front of the desk. Marmorth was a man of medium height, hair graying slightly at the temples and forelock, a middle-aged stomach bulge. He had dark, not-quite-piercing eyes, and straight plain features. An undistinguished man, yet one who seemed to have a touch of authority and determination about him. An undistinguished man, a middle-aged man, a man about to enter a duel.

"As you know-" began the Duelmaster.

"Yes, yes, confound it! *I know, I know!* Why must you people prolong the agony of this thing?" Marmorth cut him off, rising again.

"Mr. Marmorth," resumed the Duelmaster patiently but doggedly, "if you don't settle yourself, we will call this Affair off. Do you understand?"

Marmorth chuckled ruefully, deep in his throat. "After the tolls Krane and I laid out? You won't cancel."

"We will if you aren't prepared for combat. It's for your own survival, Mr. Marmorth. Now if you'll be silent a minute, I'll brief you and you can enter the Corridor."

Marmorth waved his hand negligently, grudging the Duelsman his explanation. He stared in boredom at the high crystal ceiling of the preparation chamber.

"The Corridor, *as you know*," went on the Duelsman, adding the last phrase with sarcasm, "is a supersensitive receptor. When you enter it, seven billion scanning elements pick up your thoughts, down to the very subconscious, filter them through the banks, correlating them with your variation-range card, and feed back illusions. These illusions are matched with those of your opponent, as checked with *his* variation-range card. The illusion is always the same for both of you.

"Since you are in the field of the Corridor, these are substantial illusions, and they affect you as though they were real. In other words, to illustrate the extreme-you can die at any moment. They are not dreams, I assure you. All too often combatants find an illusion so strange they feel it must be unreal. May I caution you, Mr. Marmorth, that is the quickest way to lose an Affair. Take everything you see at face value. *It is real!*"

He paused for a moment, wiping his forehead. He had begun to perspire freely. Marmorth

wondered at this, but remained silent.

"Your handicap," the Duelmaster resumed, "is that when an illusion is formed from a larger segment of your opponent's imagination than from yours, he will be more familiar with it, and will be more able to get to you. The same holds true for him, of course.

"The illusions will strengthen for the combatant who is dominating. In other words, if Krane's outlook is firmer than yours, he will have a more familiar illusion. If you begin to dominate him, the illusion will change to one more of your making.

"Do you understand?"

Marmorth had found himself listening more intently than he had thought he would. Now he had questions.

"Aren't there any weapons we begin with? I'd always thought we could choose our dueling weapons."

The Duelmaster shook his head. "No. There will be sufficient weapons in your illusions. Anything else would be superfluous."

"How can an illusion kill me?"

"You are in the Corridor's field. Through a process of well, actually, Mr. Marmorth, that is a Company secret, and I doubt if it could be explained in lay terms so that you would know any more now than you did before. Just accept that the Corridor converts your thought-impressions into tangibles."

"How long will we be in there?"

"Time is subjective in the Corridor. You may be there for an hour or a month or a year. Out here the time will seem as an instant. You will go in, both of you, then a moment later-one of you will come out."

Marmorth licked his lips again. "Have there been duels where a stalemate was reached; where both combatants came back?" He was nervous, and the question trembled as if it was made with metallic filaments.

"We've never had one that I can recall," answered the Duelmaster simply.

"Oh," said Marmorth quietly, looking down at his hands.

"Are you ready now?"

Marmorth nodded. He slipped out of the wraparound and laid it across the back of the chair. Together they walked toward the Silver Corridor. "Remember," said the Duelmaster, "the combatant who has the strongest convictions will win. This is a constant, and your only real weapon."

The Duelmaster stepped to the end of the Corridor, removing a thin tube from his pouch. A beam of light flashed thinly from the end, and he shone it at an aperture in the wall next to the Corridor's opening.

The light flashed twice, then he said, "I've signaled the Duelsman on the other side. Krane has been placed inside."

The Duelmaster slipped the variation-range card into a slot in the blank wall, then indicated Marmorth should step into the Corridor.

The middle-aged duelist stepped forward, smoothing the short breechclout against his thighs as he walked.

He took one step, two, three. The perfectly round mouth of the Silver Corridor gaped before him, black and impenetrable.

He stepped forward once more. His bare foot touched the edge of the metal, and he drew back hesitantly. He looked back over his shoulder at the Duelsman. "Couldn't I-"

"Step in, Mr. Marmorth," said the Duelmaster firmly. There was a granite tone in his voice.

Marmorth walked forward into the darkness. It closed over his head and seeped behind his eyes. He felt nothing! Marmorth...

...blinked twice. The first time he saw the throne room and the tier-mounted pages, long-stemmed trumpets at their sides. He saw the assembled nobles bowing low before him, their ermine capes sweeping the floor. The floor was a rich, inlaid mosaic, the walls dripped color and rich tapestry, the ceiling was high-arched and studded with crystal chandeliers.

The second time he opened them, hoping his senses had cleared, he saw precisely the same thing. Then he saw Krane-High Lord Krane-in the front ranks.

The man's hair had been swept back to form a tight knot at the base of his skull. It was the knot of the triumphant warrior. The garb was different-tight suit of chain-mail in blued-steel, ornamental

decorations across the breastplate, a ruby-hilted sword in a scabbard at his waist, full, flowing cape of blood-red velvet-but the face was no different from the one Marmorth had seen in the Council Chamber, before they had agreed to duel.

The face was thin; a V that swept past a high, white forehead and thick, black brows, past the high cheekbones and needle-thin nose, down to the slash mouth and pointed black beard. A study in coal and chalk.

Marmorth's blood churned at sight of the despised Krane! If he hadn't challenged Marmorth's Theorem in the Council Chamber, with his duel-inciting slanders, neither of them would be here.

Here!

Marmorth stiffened. He sat more erect. The knowledge swept away his momentary forgetfulness; this was the Silver Corridor. This was illusion. They *were* dueling-now, at this instant! He had to kill Krane.

But whose illusion was this? His own, or the dark-bearded scoundrel's before him? It might be suicide to attempt killing Krane in his own illusion. He would have to wait a bit and gauge what the situation represented in his own mind.

Whatever it was, he seemed to be of higher rank than Krane, who bowed before him.

Almost magically, before he realized the words were emerging from his mouth, he heard himself saying, "Lord Krane, rise!"

Krane stood up, and the other nobles followed suit, the precedent having been set. By choosing Krane to rise first, Marmorth the King had chosen whom he wanted to speak first in the Star Chamber.

"May it please your Illustriousness," boomed Krane, extending his arms in salute, "I have a disposition on the prisoners from Quorth. I should beg your Eminence's verdict on my proposal."

He bowed his head and waited Marmorth's reply.

Had there been a tone of mockery in the man's voice? Marmorth could not be sure. But he now knew that it was his own illusion. If Krane was coming to *him* for disposition, then he must be in the ascendant in this creation.

"What is your proposal, High Lord Krane?" asked Marmorth.

Krane took a step forward, bringing him to the bottom of the dais upon which Marmorth's throne rested.

"These *things* are of a totally alien culture, Your Highness," began Krane. "How can we, as humans, even tolerate their existence in our way of life? The very sight of them makes the gorge rise! They are evil-smelling and accursedly-formed! They must all be destroyed, Your Highness! We must ignore the guileful offers of a prisoner-for-prisoner exchange! We will have our fleet in Quorth City within months, then we can rescue our own captured without submitting to the demands of foul monsters! In the meantime, why feed these beasts of another world?"

"I say, destroy them! Launch all-out attack now! Rescue our people from the alien's slave camps on Quorth and Fetsa!"

He had been speaking smoothly and forcefully. The nods of assent and agreement from the assembled nobles made Marmorth wary. A complete knowledge of the Quorth-Human war was in his mind, and the plan of Krane sounded clear and fine. Yet superimposed over it, was his knowledge that this was all merely illusion and that somewhere in the illusion was a chink in which his errors might lodge. The plan sounded good, but...

"No, Krane!" he decided, thinking quietly. "This would be what the aliens want! They *want* us to destroy our prisoners. That would whip their people at home into such a frenzy of patriotism-we would be engulfed in a month!"

"We will consider the alien proposal of prisoner-for-prisoner exchange." The rumbles from the massed nobles rose into the cavern of the Star Chamber. There was unrest here.

He had to demonstrate that he was right. "Let them bring in the chain of aliens!" he commanded, clapping his hands. A page went out to summon them.

While the hall waited, Marmorth thought quickly: had he made the proper decision? There seemed to be a correlation between Krane's challenging of his Theorem of Government in the Council-back in the world outside the Corridor-and this proposal he had just defeated.

There *was* a correlation! He saw it suddenly!

Both his proposal of the Theorem in the Council and his decision here in the illusion had been based on his personal concept of government. Krane's refutation out there and his proposal here were the opposite. Once again they had clashed.

And this time Marmorth had won!

But had he?

Even as he let the thought After, the chained aliens were dragged between the massed nobles and cast on their triple-jointed knees before Marmorth's dais. "Here are the loathsome beings!" cried Krane, flinging his arms high and apart.

It had been a grandstand gesture, and the frog-faced, many-footed beings on the Star Chamber's floor realized it.

Suddenly, almost as though they were made of paper, the chains that had joined the aliens snapped, and they leaped on the nobles.

Marmorth caught the smile on Krane's lips. *He* had been behind this; probably had the chains weakened in the corridor outside by his loyal personal guard.

Hardly with thought, Marmorth was off his throne and down the stepped dais, his sword free from its scabbard, and arcing viciously.

A hideously warted alien face rose before him and he thrust with all his might! The blade pierced between the double-lidded eyes, and thick ochre blood spurted across his tunic. He yanked the blade free, kicking the dead but still quivering alien from its length. He leaped into the horde, howling a battlecry from his youth.

Even as he leaped, he saw Krane's slash-mouthed smile, and the Lord's sword swinging toward him!

So it *hadn't* been his illusion! It had been Krane's! He hadn't chosen the proper course. Krane's belief at the moment was stronger than his own.

He fended off a double-handed smash from the black-bearded noble and fell back. They parried and countered, thrust and slashed all around the dais. The other nobles were too deeply involved fighting off the screaming aliens to witness this battle between their King and his Lord.

Krane beat Marmorth back, back!

Why did I choose as I did? Marmorth wailed mentally, berating himself.

Suddenly he slipped, toppling backward onto the steps. The sword flew from his hand as it cracked against the edge of a step. He saw Krane bearing down on him, the sword double-fisted as his opponent raised it like a stake above his head.

In desperation, Marmorth summed up all his belief. "*It was the right decision!*" screamed Marmorth with the conviction of a man about to die. He saw the sword plunge toward his breast as...

...he gathered the light about him, sweeping his hands through the dripping colors, making them shift and flow for him. He saw the figure of Krane, standing haughtily in the bank of yellow, and he gathered the blue to himself in a coruscating ball.

Fearsomely he bellowed his challenge, "This is *my* illusion, Krane, and watch as I kill you!"

He balled the blue in his hand and sent it flying, dripping spark and color as it shot toward the black-bearded man.

They both stood tall and spraddle-legged in the immensity of they knew-not-where. The colors dripped from the air, making weird patterns as they mixed and ran.

The blue ball struck in front of Krane and exploded, cascading a rich flood of chromatic brilliance into the air. Krane laughed at the failure.

He gathered the black to him, wadding it in strong and supple fingers. He wound up, almost as though it was a sport, and flung the wadded black at Marmorth.

The older man knew he had not enough belief yet built to withstand this onslaught. Marmorth knew if the black enfolded him he would die in the never-ending limbo of nothingness.

He thrust hands up before his face to stop the onrush of the black, but it struck him and he fell, clutching feebly at a washy stringer of white.

He fell into the black as it surrounded him, and in a moment knew he was in the limbo.

This was not his illusion! It could not be, for he was vanquished! Yet he was not dead, as he had felt sure he would be. He lay there, thinking.

He remembered all the effort he had put in on the Political Theorem. The Theorem he had proposed in the Council. It had represented years of work-the culmination of all his adult thought and effort; and, he had to admit it, the Theorem was soundly based on his own view of the Universe.

Then the presumptuous Krane had offended him by restating the Theorem. Before the very faces of the Council!

Krane had, of course, twisted it to his own evil and malicious ends-basing it anew on *his* conception of the All.

Oh, there had been a verbal battle. There had been the accusations, the clanging of the electric gavel, the remonstrances of the Compjudge, the shocked expressions of the other Councilors! Till finally Marmorth had been goaded by the younger man into the Duel. Then into the Silver Corridor.

From which only one of them would emerge. The one who did would force his Theorem on the Council. To be accepted, of course. The Theorem was so basic, the view would be recognized and accepted.

It all revolved, then, around whose view of the Universe, whose Theorem, was the right one. It could be either Krane's or Marmorth's.

Marmorth struck out at the black! *Mine, mine, mine!* He shouted soundlessly. He lashed into the nothingness. *My Theorem is the proper one! I believe it! I do!*

Then he saw the stringer of white in his hand. So this was Krane in the ascendant, was it! Now came the moment of retaliation.

He whipped the stringer around his invisible head, swaying as he was, there in the depthless black. The stringer thickened. He cupped it to him, washing it with his hands, strengthening it, shaping and molding it.

In a moment it had grown. In a moment more the white had burst forth like a ripe blossom and flooded all. Revealing Krane standing there, in his breechclout, massaging the pale pink between his fingers.

"Mine, Krane, *mine!*" he screamed, flinging the orange-green!

Krane blanched and tried to duck. The orange-green came on like a sliver of Forever, streaking and burning as it rode currents that did not exist. Then the light shattered, and fired, and spat. As Marmorth realized they had nullified each other again, that the illusion was dissolving around them, he heard Krane bellow, even as loud as *he* had, "Mine, Marmorth, *mine!*"

Then the colors ran. They flowed, they merged, they sucked at his body, while he...

...shrank up against the glass wall next to Krane. They both stared in fascinated horror as the huge, ichor-dripping spider-thing advanced on them, mandibles clicking.

"My God in Heaven!" Marmorth heard Krane bellow. "What is it?" Krane scrabbled at the glass wall behind them, trying to get out. They were trapped.

The glass walls circled them, wide; just the spider-thing and each other, trapped in the tiny tomb!

Marmorth was petrified. He could neither move nor speak -he could hardly sense anything but terror. Spiders were his personal fear. He found his legs were quivering at the knees, though he had not sensed it a moment before. The very sight of the hairy beasts had always sent shudders through him. Now he knew this was his illusion. *He* was in the ascendant!

But how hideously in the ascendant.

The spider-thing advanced on them, the soft plush pads of its hundred feet leaving dampness where it stopped.

Krane fell to his knees, moaning and scratching at the glass floor. "Out, out, out, out..." he mumbled, froth dripping from his lips.

Marmorth knew this was his chance. This fear was a product of his own mind; he had lived with it all his life. He knew it more familiarly than Krane-he could not cancel it, certainly, but he could utilize it more easily than the other.

Here was where he killed Krane. He pulled himself tightly to the wall, sweating palms flat to the glass, the valley of his backbone against the cool surface. "I'm right! The Theorem as I stated it is correct!" He said it triumphantly, though the note of terror quavered undisguised in his voice.

The spider-thing paused in its march, swung its clicking, ghastly head about as though confused, and altered direction by an inch. Away from Marmorth. It descended on Krane.

The black-bearded man looked up, saw it coming toward him, heard Marmorth's words. Even on the floor, half-sunk in shock, he shouted, pounding his fists against the floor of glass, "Wrong, wrong, wrong! You're wrong! I can prove *my* Theorem is correct! The basic formation of the Judiciary should be planned in an ever-decreasing system of-"

Marmorth didn't even listen. He knew it was drivel! He knew the man was wrong! But the spider-thing had stopped once more. Now it paused between the two of them, its bulk shivering as though caught in a draft.

Krane saw the hesitation on the monster's part, and rose, the old confidence and impudence regained. He wiped his balled fists across his eyes, clearing them of tears. He continued speaking, steadily, and to Marmorth's ears, in the voice of a fanatic. The man just could *not* recognize that he was wrong.

"You're insane, man!" Marmorth interjected, waving his hands with fervor. "The setup must be balanced between a code of fair practices with a Guild system blocking efforts on the part of the Genres to rise into control of the gross planetary product!" He went on and on, outlining the Theorem.

Krane, too, shouted and gesticulated, both of them suddenly oblivious to the monstrous, black spider-thing which had stopped completely between them, vacillating.

When Marmorth stopped for an instant to regain his breath, the beast twisted its neckless head toward him. Marmorth then speeded up his speech, spewing out detail upon detail, and the beast slowly sank back into uncertainty.

It was obviously a battle of belief. Whichever combatant had more conviction-that one would win. They stood and shouted, screamed, outlined, explained and delineated for what seemed hours. Finally, as though in exasperation, the spider-thing began to turn. They both watched it, their mouths working, words pouring forth in twin streams of absolute sincere belief.

They watched even though...

...the starships fired at each other mercilessly. Blast after blast exploded soundlessly into the vault of space. Marmorth found his fingers twisted in the epaulet at his right shoulder.

As he watched Krane's *Magnificent-class* destroyer wheel in the control-room screens, a half-naked, blood-soaked and perspiring crewman burst into the cabin's entrance-well.

"Captain! Captain, sir!"

Marmorth looked over the plastic rail, down into the well.

"What?" His voice snapped with brittleness.

"Cap'n, the port side is riddled! We're losing pressure from thirteen compartments. The Reclamation Mile is completely lost! The engineers' group was in one of the compartments along that mile, Cap'n! They're all bloated and blue and dead in there! We can see them floating around without any..."

"*Get the Hell out of here!*" Marmorth turned, lifting a spacetant from his chart-board, and flinging it with all his strength at the crewman. The man ducked and the spacetant bounced off the bulkhead, snapping pieces from its intricate bulk.

"You maniac!" he yowled, leaping back out of the well, through the exit port, as Marmorth reached for another missile.

Marmorth shut his eyes tight, blanking out the shuddering ship, space, the screens, everything.

"Right, right, right, right, right! I'm right!" he shouted, lifting clenched fists.

The explosion came in two parts, as though two torpedoes had been struck almost simultaneously. The ship rocked and heeled. Bits of metal sheared through the outer bulkheads, crashed against the opposite wall.

As the lights went dead, and the screams drove into his brain, Marmorth shouted his credo once more, with all the force of his conviction, with all the power of his lungs, with all the strength in his gasping body.

"I'm right! May God strike me dead if I'm not right! I know I'm right, I made an inexhaustible..."

...check!" he finished, opening his eyes and looking back down at the chessboard. The pieces, happily, had not moved. He still had Krane blocked off.

"I say check," he repeated, smiling, steepling his fingers.

Krane's black-bearded face broke into a wry grimace.

"Most clever, my dear Marmorth," he congratulated the other with sarcasm. "You have forced me to touch a pawn."

Marmorth watched as Krane, with trembling fingers, reached down to the jet pawn. It was carved from stone; carved with such care and intricacy that its edges were precisely as they had been desired by the master craftsman. They were razor sharp.

The pieces were all cut the same. Both the blanché alabaster pieces before Marmorth, and the ebony-stone players under Krane's hand. The game had been constructed for men who played more than a "gentleman's game." There was death in each move.

Marmorth knew he was in the ascendant. Each of them had had two illusions-that remembrance was sharp-and this was Marmorth's. How did he know? The older man looked down at the intricately

carved chess pieces. He was white, Krane was black. As clear as it could be.

"Uh, have you moved?" Marmorth inquired, his voice unctuous with casualness. He knew the other had not yet touched his players. "I believe you still lie in check." He was enjoying toying with his once-arrogant foe.

He thought he heard a muted, "Damn you!" under Krane's breath, but could not be certain.

Slowly Krane touched the player, carefully sliding the fingers of his hand across the razor-thin, razor-sharp facets. The piece almost slid from his grasp, so loosely was he holding it, but the move was made in an instant.

Marmorth cursed mentally. Krane had calculated beautifully! Not only was his King blocked out from Marmorth's Rook-Marmorth's check-piece-but in another two moves (so clearly obvious as Krane had desired it) his own Queen would be in danger. In his mind he could hear Krane savoring the words: "*Garde! I say garde, my dear Marmorth!*"

He had to move the Queen out of position.

He had to touch the Queen!

The most deadly piece on the board!

"No!" he gasped.

"I beg your pardon?" said Krane, the slash-mouth opening in a violent grin.

"N-nothing, nothing!" snapped Marmorth. He concentrated. Deadly poison, instant-acting, lay filmed on those razor edges.

There was little chance he could maneuver that thousand-keen-edged Queen without poisoning himself for his trouble. Lord! It was an insoluble, a double-edged, dilemma. If he did not move, Krane would win. If he won, it was obvious Marmorth would die. He had seen the deadly dirk's hilt protruding slightly from Krane's cummerbund when the other had sat down. If he *did* move, he would convulse to death before Krane's taunting eyes.

You shall never have that pleasure! he thought, the bitter determination of a man who will not be defeated rising in him.

He approached the Queen, with hand, with eye.

The base was faceted, like a diamond. Each facet ended in a cutting edge so sensitive he knew it would sever the finger that touched it. The shape of the upper segments was involved, gorgeously-made. A woman, arms raised above her head, stretching in tension. Beautiful-and untouchable.

Then the thought struck him: Is *this the only move?*

Deep within his mind he calculated. He could not possibly recognize the levels on which his intellect was working. In with his chess theory, in with his mental agility, in with his desire to win, his Theorem rearranged itself, fitting its logic to this situation. How could the Theorem be applied to the game? What other paths, through the infallible truth of the Theorem-in which he believed, now, more strongly than ever before-what other paths could he take.

Then the alternative move became clear. He could escape a route, escape the *garde*, escape the taunting smile of Krane by moving a relatively safe Bishop. It was not a completely foolproof action, since the Bishop, too, was a razored piece of death, but he had found a way around the certain success of Krane's maneuverings.

"Ha!" A terrible smile burst upon his face. His eyes bored across to the other's. Krane turned white as Marmorth reached out, touched the one piece he had been desperately hoping the older man would not consider.

He felt the uncontrollable tightening in his throat as he realized the game would go on, and on, and on and...

...he unclenched his fist as the volcano leaped up around them.

It was more than the inside of a volcanic cone, however. The Corridor was there, too. The dung-brown walls of smooth rock shivered ever so slightly, and both men knew the Silver Corridor was just beyond their vision. They could see it glimmering with unreality.

It was almost as though they were looking at a double exposure; an extinct volcano superimposed over the shining tube of the Silver Corridor.

It isn't far away, thought Marmorth. *This must be the last illusion! Is there a certain pattern to these things?* Then he felt, with a blissed release of nervous tension, *Someone is going to win soon.*

He stared up at the faint patch of gray sky, visible through the roundly jagged opening at the cone's top. The walls sloped down in a fluid concavity. Here and there across the rough floor of the cavern,

stalagmites rose up in sharp spikes.

And there-over and through the walls of the dead formations-the Corridor hung faintly. A ghostly, shivering, not-quite-real shadow, inside the substance of their illusion.

They stood and stared at each other. Each knowing he was not really in the heart of a volcano, but in a metal corridor. Each knowing he could die as easily by this illusion as he could at the other's hands.

Was this the end? Were there a limited number of illusions to each Affair? Who had won? Could there *be* a winner?

They stared at each other, across the dusky interior of the extinct volcano.

"I'm right," said Krane, hesitantly.

"You're wrong," answered Marmorth quickly. "*I'm* the one who's right!"

In a moment they were at it again, each screaming till his lungs were raw with the effort, and red patches had appeared in Marmorth's cheeks. They paused for an instant, gathering air for another tirade, Krane looking about for a weapon.

They were both as they had begun. Naked save the breechclouts which clung to their buttocks.

They resumed their shouting, the sound reverberating hollowly in the dim interior of the volcano. The sounds hit them, bounced across the stone walls, reverberated again. The fury had been built to a peak and pitch they both knew could not be exceeded. They had strained every last vestige of belief and conviction in their minds.

As Marmorth realized he was at the pinnacle of his belief, he saw the same conviction come over Krane's face. He knew that from here on in, it would be a physical thing, with both of them stalemated in illusory power.

Then the woman-thing appeared.

She grazed into being between them. She wasn't human. There was no question about that. Marmorth took a halting step backward. Krane remained rooted, though his pale face had blanched an even more deadly shade. A strangled, "My God, what *is* it?" slipped past Marmorth's lips.

It was less than human, yet more than mortal; it was a travesty of a human being. A mad nightmare of a vision! Like some fearsome god of an ancient cult, it paused with long legs apart, hands on hips.

The woman's body was lush. Full, high breasts, trim stomach, exciting legs. Gorgeously proportioned and exciting, the torso and legs, the chest and arms, were normal-even exaggeratedly normal.

But there all resemblance to a woman ceased.

The head was a strangely lizardlike thing, with elongated snout, wattles, huge glowing eyes set atop the skull. Looking out through flesh-sockets thick and deep-little hummocks atop the face-the eyes were small, crimson and cruel.

The nose was almost nonexistent. Two breather-spaces pulsed, one on either side of a small rise in the yellowed, pocked flesh of the head.

The mouth was a wide, gaping, triangular orifice, with triple rows of shark teeth in the upper and lower jaws. The woman-thing looked like a gorgeous female-with the wierdly altered head of a crocodile.

The ebony, leathery, bat's wings rising from the shoulder blades-quivering-completed the frightening picture.

Wisps of smoky, filmy garments were draped over the woman-thing's shoulders, around her waist. She stood unmoving.

Then she spoke to them. It was not mental.

It actually sounded; but not from the body before them. They knew it was-her?-but it did not come from her at all. The fearful mouth remained almost shut, propped slightly open on the sharp tiers of teeth.

The voice issued from the walls, from the tips of the stalagmites, from the high, arching roof of the volcano; it boomed from the rocky floor-it even floated down the length of the infinitely-stretching Corridor.

The voice spoke in thunder, yet softly.

Well, Gentlemen?

Krane stared for a second at the woman-thing; then he looked about wildly, trying to find the source of the voice. His head swung back and forth as though it was manipulated by strings from above.

"Well, *what?*" he shouted to no one.

Have you realized the truth yet?

"What truth? What are you talking about? Who is that? Is it you?" chimed in Marmorth, bathed in sudden fear. He pointed an accusing finger at the woman-thing.

The Corridor shimmered oddly. It lived just behind the stone walls of the volcano.

I'm a voice, Gentlemen. A voice and an illusion. Just an illusion, that's all, Gentlemen. Just an illusion from both of your minds. Made of equal portions of your minds. For you are one as strong as the other.

There was a pause. Then:

But tell me, have you realized what you should have known before you were foolish enough to enter the Corridor?

Krane looked at Marmorth with suspicion. For the first time it occurred to him that perhaps this was a trick on the other's part. Marmorth, recognizing the glance, shrugged his shoulders eloquently. "No! Tell us, then! *What* should we have known?"

The only real answer as to who is right; which Theorem is the correct one!

"Tell me, tell me!" they shouted, almost together.

There was silence for a moment. The woman-thing ran a scarlet-tipped hand across the hideous lizard snout, as though searching for a way to phrase what was coming. Then the single word sounded in the heart of the volcano.

Neither.

Krane and Marmorth stared past the woman-thing, stared at each other in confusion. "N-neither?" shouted Marmorth incredulously. "Are you mad! Of course one of us is right! Me!" He was shaking fists at the gruesome being before him. Illusion, perhaps; but an illusion that was goading him.

"Prove it! Prove it!" screamed Krane, stepping forward, flat-footedly, as though seeking to strike the woman-thing. Then the voice gave them the solution and the proof that neither could contest, for both knew it to be true on a level that defied mere conviction.

You are both egomaniacs. You could not possibly be convinced of the other's viewpoint. Not in a hundred million years. The message dies between you. You are both too tightly ensnared in yourselves!

The woman-thing suddenly began to shimmer. She became indistinct, and there were many shadow-forms of her, surrounding her body like halos. Abruptly, she disappeared from between them. Leaving them alone in the quickening darkness of the volcano's throat.

Alone. Staring at each other with dawning comprehension, dawning belief.

They both realized it at the same moment. They both had the conviction of their cause, yet they both knew the woman-thing had been right.

"Krane," said Marmorth, starting toward the black-bearded man, "she's right, you know. Perhaps we can get together and figure..."

The other had started toward the older man as he had spoken. "Yes, perhaps there's something in what you say. Perhaps there's a..."

At the instant they both realized it-the instant they considered the other's viewpoint-the illusion barriers shattered, of course, and the red-hot lava poured in on them, engulfing both men in a blistering inferno.

***“Repent, Harlequin!”
Said the Ticktockman***

THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO ASK, what is it all about? For those who need to ask, for those who need points sharply made, who need to know “where it’s at,” this:

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailors, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others-as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders-serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the Devil, without intending it, as God. A very few, as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and *men*, serve the state with their consciences also, and so necessarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU
Civil Disobedience

That is the heart of it. Now begin in the middle, and later learn the beginning; the end will take care of itself.

But because it was the very world it was, the very world they had allowed it to *become*, for months his activities did not come to the alarmed attention of The Ones Who Kept The Machine Functioning Smoothly, the ones who poured the very best butter over the cams and mainsprings of the culture. Not until it had become obvious that somehow, someway, he had become a notoriety, a celebrity, perhaps even a hero for (what Officialdom inescapably tagged) “an emotionally disturbed segment of the populace,” did they turn it over to the Ticktockman and his legal machinery. But by then, because it was the very world it was, and they had no way to predict he would happen-possibly a strain of disease long-defunct, now, suddenly, reborn in a system where immunity had been forgotten, had lapsed-he had been allowed to become too real. Now he had form and substance.

He had become a *personality*, something they had filtered out of the system many decades before. But there it was, and there *he* was, a very definitely imposing personality. In certain circles-middle-class circles-it was thought disgusting. Vulgar ostentation. Anarchistic. Shameful. In others, there was only snickering, those strata where thought is subjugated to form and ritual, niceties, proprieties. But down below, ah, down below, where the people always needed their saints and sinners, their bread and circuses, their heroes and villains, he was considered a Bolivar; a Napoleon; a Robin Hood; a Dick Bong (Ace of Aces) ; a Jesus; a Jomo Kenyatta.

And at the top-where, like socially attuned Shipwreck Kellys, every tremor and vibration threatening to dislodge the wealthy, powerful and titled from their flagpoles-he was considered a menace; a heretic; a rebel; a disgrace; a peril. He was known down the line, to the very heartmeat core, but the important reactions were high above and far below. At the very top, at the very bottom.

So his file was turned over, along with his time card and his cardioplate, to the office of the Ticktockman.

The Ticktockman: very much over six feet tall, often silent, a soft purring man when things went timewise. The Ticktockman.

Even in the cubicles of the hierarchy, where fear was generated, seldom suffered, he was called the Ticktockman. But no one called him that to his mask.

You don’t call a man a hated name, not when that man, behind his mask, is capable of revoking the minutes, the hours, the days and nights, the years of your life. He was called the Master Timekeeper to his mask. It was safer that way.

“This is *what* he is,” said the Ticktockman with genuine softness, “but not *who* he is. This time-card I’m holding in my left hand has a name on it, but it is the name of *what* he is, not *who* he is. The cardioplate here in my right hand is also named, but not whom named, merely what named. Before I can

exercise proper revocation, I have to know who this what is.”

To his staff, all the ferrets, all the loggers, all the finks, all the commex, even the mineez, he said, “Who is this Harlequin?”

He was not purring smoothly. Timewise, it was jangle.

However, it *was* the longest single speech they had ever heard him utter at one time, the staff, the ferrets, the loggers, the finks, the commex, but not the mineez, who usually weren’t around to know, in any case. But even they scurried to find out

Who is the Harlequin?

High above the third level of the city, he crouched on the humming aluminum-frame platform of the air-boat (foof! airboat, indeed, swizzleskid is what it was, with a tow-rack jerry-rigged) and stared down at the neat Mondrian arrangement of the buildings.

Somewhere nearby, he could hear the metronomic left-right-left of the 2:47 P.M. shift, entering the Timkin rollerbearing plant, in their sneakers. A minute later, precisely, he heard the softer right-left-right of the 5:00 A.M. formation, going home.

An elfin grin spread across his tanned features, and his dimples appeared for a moment. Then, scratching at his thatch of auburn hair, he shrugged within his motley, as though girding himself for what came next, and threw the joystick forward, and bent into the wind as the air-boat dropped. He skimmed over a slidewalk, purposely dropping a few feet to crease the tassels of the ladies of fashion, and-inserting thumbs in large ears-he stuck out his tongue, rolled his eyes and went wugga-wugga-wugga. It was a minor diversion. One pedestrian skittered and tumbled, sending parcels everywhichway, another wet herself, a third keeled slantwise and the walk was stopped automatically by the servitors till she could be resuscitated. It was a minor diversion.

Then he swirled away on a vagrant breeze, and was gone. Hi-ho.

As he rounded the cornice of the Time-Motion Study Building, he saw the shift, just boarding the slidewalk. With practiced motion and an absolute conservation of movement, they sidestepped up onto the slowstrip and (in a chorus line reminiscent of a Busby Berkeley film of the antideluvian 1930’s) advanced across the strips ostrich-walking till they were lined up on the expresstrip.

Once more, in anticipation, the elfin grin spread, and there was a tooth missing back there on the left side. He dipped, skimmed, and swooped over them; and then, scrunching about on the air-boat, he released the holding pins that fastened shut the ends of the homemade pouring troughs that kept his cargo from dumping prematurely. And as he pulled the trough-pins, the air-boat slid over the factory workers and one hundred and fifty thousand dollars’ worth of jelly beans cascaded down on the expresstrip.

Jelly beans! Millions and billions of purples and yellows and greens and licorice and grape and raspberry and mint and round and smooth and crunchy outside and soft-mealy inside and sugary and bouncing jouncing tumbling clittering clattering skittering fell on the heads and shoulders and hardhats and carapaces of the Timkin workers, tinkling on the slidewalk and bouncing away and rolling about underfoot and ruling the sky on their way down with all the colors of joy and childhood and holidays, coming down in a steady rain, a solid wash, a torrent of color and sweetness out of the sky from above, and entering a universe of sanity and metronomic order with quite-mad cocoo newness. Jelly beans!

The shift workers howled and laughed and were pelted, and broke ranks, and the jelly beans managed to work their way into the mechanism of the slidewalks after which there was a hideous scraping as the sound of a million fingernails rasp down a quarter of a million blackboards, followed by a coughing and a sputtering, and then the slidewalks all stopped and everyone was summarily dumped thisawayandthataway in a jackstraw tumble, still laughing and popping little jelly bean eggs of childish color into their mouths. It was a holiday, and a jollity, an absolute insanity, a giggle. But...

The shift was delayed seven minutes.

They did not get home for seven minutes.

The master schedule was thrown off by seven minutes.

Quotas were delayed by inoperative slidewalks for seven minutes.

He had tapped the first domino in the line, and one after another, like chik chik chik, the others had fallen.

The System had been seven minutes worth of disrupted. It was a tiny matter, one hardly worthy of note, but in a society where the single driving force was order and unity and promptness and clocklike precision and attention to the clock, reverence of the gods of the passage of time, it was a disaster of major importance.

So he was ordered to appear before the Ticktockman. It was broadcast across every channel of the communications web. He was ordered to be *there* at 7:00 dammit on time. And they waited, and they waited, but he didn't show up till almost ten-thirty, at which time he merely sang a little song about moonlight in a place no one had ever heard of, called Vermont, and vanished again. But they had all been waiting since seven, and it wrecked *hell* with their schedules. So the question remained: Who is the Harlequin?

But the *unasked* question (more important of the two) was : How did we get *into* this position, where a laughing, irresponsible japer of jabberwocky and jive could disrupt our entire economic and cultural life with a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of jelly beans...

Jelly for God's sake *beans!* This is madness! Where did he get the money to buy a hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth of jelly beans? (They knew it would have cost that much, because they had a team of Situation Analysts pulled off another assignment, and rushed to the slidewalk scene to sweep up and count the candies, and produce findings, which disrupted *their* schedules and threw their entire branch at least a day behind.) Jelly beans! Jelly...*beans?* Now wait a second-a second accounted for-no one has manufactured jelly beans for over a hundred years. Where did he get jelly beans?

That's another good question. More than likely it will never be answered to your complete satisfaction. But then, how many questions ever are?

The middle you know. Here is the beginning. How it starts:

A desk pad. Day for day, and turn each day. 9:00-open the mail. 9:45-appointment with planning commission board. 10:30-discuss installation progress charts with J.L. 11:15 pray for rain. 12:00-lunch. *And so it goes.*

"I'm sorry, Miss Grant, but the time for interviews was set at 2:30, and it's almost five now. I'm sorry you're late, but those are the rules. You'll have to wait till next year to submit application for this college again." *And so it goes.*

The 10: 10 local stops at Cresthaven, Galesville, Tonawanda Junction, Selby and Farnhurst, but not at Indiana City, Lucasville and Colton, except on Sunday. The 10:35 express stops at Galesville, Selby and Indiana City, except on Sundays & Holidays, at which time it stops at...*and so it goes.*

"I couldn't wait, Fred. I had to be at Pierre Cartain's by 3:00, and you said you'd meet me under the clock in the terminal at 2:45, and you weren't there, so I had to go on. You're always late, Fred. If you'd been there, we could have sewed it up together, but as it was, well, I took the order alone..." *And so it goes.*

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Atterley: In reference to your son Gerald's constant tardiness, I am afraid we will have to suspend him from school unless some more reliable method can be instituted guaranteeing he will arrive at his classes on time. Granted he is an exemplary student, and his marks are high, his constant flouting of the schedules of this school make it impractical to maintain him in a system where the other children seem capable of getting where they are supposed to be on time *and so it goes.*

YOU CANNOT VOTE UNLESS YOU APPEAR AT 8:45 A.M.

"I don't care if the script is *good*. I need it Thursday!"

CHECK-OUT TIME IS 2:00 P.M.

"You got here late. The job's taken. Sorry."

YOUR SALARY HAS BEEN DOCKED FOR TWENTY MINUTES TIME LOST.

"God, what time is it, I've gotta run!"

And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes. And so it goes goes goes goes goes tick tock tick tock tick tock and one day we no longer let time serve us, we serve time and we are slaves of the schedule, worshippers of the sun's passing, bound into a life predicated on restrictions because the system will not function if we don't keep the schedule tight.

Until it becomes more than a minor inconvenience to be late. It becomes a sin. Then a crime. Then a crime punishable by this:

EFFECTIVE 15 JULY 2389, 12:00:00 midnight, the office of the Master Timekeeper will require all citizens to submit their time-cards and cardioplates for processing. In accordance with Statute 5557-SGH-999 governing the revocation of time per capita, all cardioplates will be keyed to the individual holder and

What they had done was devise a method of curtailing the amount of life a person could have. If he was ten minutes late, he lost ten minutes of his life. An hour was proportionately worth more revocation. If someone was consistently tardy, he might find himself, on a Sunday night, receiving a communiqué from the Master Timekeeper that his time had run out, and he would be "turned off" at high noon on Monday,

please straighten your affairs, sir.

And so, by this simple scientific expedient (utilizing a scientific process held dearly secret by the Ticktockman's office) the System was maintained. It was the only expedient thing to do. It was, after all, patriotic. The schedules had to be met. After all, there *was* a war on!

But, wasn't there always?

"Now that is really disgusting," the Harlequin said, when pretty Alice showed him the wanted poster. "Disgusting and *highly* improbable. After all, this isn't the day of the desperado. A *wanted* poster!"

"You know," Alice noted, "you speak with a great deal of inflection."

"I'm sorry," said the Harlequin, humbly.

"No need to be sorry. You're always saying 'I'm sorry.' You have such massive guilt, Everett, it's really very sad."

"I'm sorry," he repeated, then pursed his lips so the dimples appeared momentarily. He hadn't wanted to say that at all. "I have to go out again. I have to *do* something."

Alice slammed her coffee-bulb down on the counter. "Oh for God's *sake*, Everett, can't you stay home just *one* night! Must you always be out in that ghastly clown suit, running around annoying people?"

"I'm—" he stopped, and clapped the jester's hat onto his auburn thatch with a tiny tingling of bells. He rose, rinsed out his coffee-bulb at the tap, and put it into the drier for a moment. "I have to go."

She didn't answer. The faxbox was purring, and she pulled a sheet out, read it, threw it toward him on the counter. "It's about you. Of course. You're ridiculous."

He read it quickly. It said the Ticktockman was trying to locate him. He didn't care, he was going out to be late again. At the door, dredging for an exit line, he hurled back petulantly, "Well, *you* speak with inflection, *too!*"

Alice rolled her pretty eyes heavenward. "You're ridiculous." The Harlequin stalked out, slamming the door, which sighed shut softly, and locked itself.

There was a gentle knock, and Alice got up with an exhalation of exasperated breath, and opened the door. He stood there. "I'll be back about ten-thirty, okay?"

She pulled a rueful face. "Why do you tell me that? Why? You *know* you'll be late! You *know* it! You're *always* late, so why do you tell me these dumb things?" She closed the door.

On the other side, the Harlequin nodded to himself. *She's right. She's always right. I'll be late. I'm always late. Why do I tell her these dumb things?*

He shrugged again, and went off to be late once more.

He had fired off the firecracker rockets that said: I will attend the 115th annual International Medical Association Invocation at 6:00 P.M. precisely. I do hope you will all be able to join me.

The words had burned in the sky, and of course the authorities were there, lying in wait for him. They assumed, naturally, that he would be late. He arrived twenty minutes early, while they were setting up the spiderwebs to trap and hold him, and blowing a large bullhorn, he frightened and unnerved them so, their own moisturized encirclement webs sucked closed, and they were hauled up, kicking and shrieking, high above the amphitheater's floor. The Harlequin laughed and laughed, and apologized profusely. The physicians, gathered in solemn conclave, roared with laughter, and accepted the Harlequin's apologies with exaggerated bowing and posturing, and a merry time was had by all, who thought the Harlequin was a regular foofaraw in fancy pants; all, that is, but the authorities, who had been sent out by the office of the Ticktockman, who hung there like so much dockside cargo, hauled up above the floor of the amphitheater in a most unseemly fashion.

(In another part of the same city where the Harlequin carried on his "activities," totally unrelated in every way to what concerns us here, save that it illustrates the Ticktockman's power and import, a man named Marshall Delahanty received his turn-off notice from the Ticktockman's office. His wife received the notification from the gray-suited minee who delivered it, with the traditional "look of sorrow" plastered hideously across his face. She knew what it was, even without unsealing it. It was a billet-doux of immediate recognition to everyone these days. She gasped, and held it as though it was a glass slide tinged with botulism, and prayed it was not for her. Let it be for Marsh, she thought, brutally, realistically, or one of the kids, but not for me, please dear God, not for me. And then she opened it, and it *was* for Marsh, and she was at one and the same time horrified and relieved. The next trooper in the line had caught the bullet. "Marshall," she screamed, "Marshall! Termination, Marshall! OhmiGod, Marshall, whattl we do, whattl we do, Marshall, omigodmarshall..." and in their home that night was the sound of tearing paper and fear, and the stink of madness went up the flue and there was nothing, absolutely nothing they could do about it.

(But Marshall Delahanty tried to run. And early the next day, when turn-off time came, he was deep in the forest two hundred miles away, and the office of the Ticktockman blanked his cardioplate, and Marshall Delahanty keeled over, running, and his heart stopped, and the blood dried up on its way to his brain, and he was dead that's all. One light went out on his sector map in the office of the Master Timekeeper, while notification was entered for fax reproduction, and Georgette Delahanty's name was entered on the dole roles till she could remarry. Which is the end of the footnote, and all the point that need be made, except don't laugh, because that is what would happen to the Harlequin if ever the Ticktockman found out his real name. It isn't funny.)

The shopping level of the city was thronged with the Thursday-colors of the buyers. Women in canary yellow chitons and men in pseudo-Tyrolean outfits that were jade and leather and fit very tightly, save for the balloon pants.

When the Harlequin appeared on the still-being-constructed shell of the new Efficiency Shopping Center, his bullhorn to his elfishly-laughing lips, everyone pointed and stared, and he berated them:

"Why let them order you about? Why let them tell you to hurry and scurry like ants or maggots? Take your time! Saunter a while! Enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the breeze, let life carry you at your own pace! Don't be slaves of time, it's a helluva way to die, slowly, by degrees...down with the Ticktockman!"

Who's the nut? most of the shoppers wanted to know. Who's the nut oh wow I'm gonna be late I gotta run...

And the construction gang on the Shopping Center received an urgent order from the office of the Master Timekeeper that the dangerous criminal known as the Harlequin was atop their spire, and their aid was urgently needed in apprehending him. The work crew said no, they would lose time on their construction schedule, but the Ticktockman managed to pull the proper threads of governmental webbing, and they were told to cease work and catch that nitwit up there on the spire with the bullhorn. So a dozen and more burly workers began climbing into their construction platforms, releasing the a-grav plates, and rising toward the Harlequin.

After the debacle (in which, through the Harlequin's attention to personal safety, no one was seriously injured), the workers tried to reassemble and assault him again, but it was too late. He had vanished. It had attracted quite a crowd, however, and the shopping cycle was thrown off by hours, simply hours. The purchasing needs of the system were therefore falling behind, and so measures were taken to accelerate the cycle for the rest of the day, but it got bogged down and speeded up and they sold too many floatvalves and not nearly enough waggles, which meant that the popli ratio was off, which made it necessary to rush cases and cases of spoiling Smash-O to stores that usually needed a case only every three or four hours. The shipments were bollixed, the trans-shipments were misrouted, and in the end, even the swizzleskid industries felt it.

"Don't come back till you have him!" the Ticktockman said, very quietly, very sincerely, extremely dangerously.

They used dogs. They used probes. They used cardioplate crossoffs. They used teepers. They used bribery. They used stiktytes. They used intimidation. They used torment. They used torture. They used finks. They used cops. They used search&seizure. They used fallaron. They used betterment incentive. They used fingerprints. They used Bertillon. They used cunning. They used guile. They used treachery. They used Raoul Mitgong, but he didn't help much. They used applied physics. They used techniques of criminology.

And what the hell : they caught him.

After all, his name was Everett C. Marm, and he wasn't much to begin with, except a man who had no sense of time.

"Repent, Harlequin" said the Ticktockman.

"Get stuffed" the Harlequin replied, sneering.

"You've been late a total of sixty-three years, five months, three weeks, two days, twelve hours, forty-one minutes, fifty-nine seconds, point oh three six one one one microseconds. You've used up everything you can, and more. I'm going to turn you off."

"Scare someone else. I'd rather be dead than live in a dumb world with a bogey man like you."

"It's my job."

"You're full of it. You're a tyrant. You have no right to order people around and kill them if they show up late."

"You can't adjust. You can't fit in."

“Unstrap me, and I’ll fit my fist into your mouth.”
“You’re a nonconformist.”
“That didn’t used to be a felony.”
“It is now. Live in the world around you.”
“I hate it. It’s a terrible world.”
“Not everyone thinks so. Most people enjoy order.”
“I don’t, and most of the people I know don’t.”
“That’s not true. How do you think we caught you?”
“I’m not interested.”
“A girl named pretty Alice told us who you were.”
“That’s a lie.”
“It’s true. You unnerve her. She wants to belong, she wants to conform, I’m going to turn you off.”
“Then do it already, and stop arguing with me.”
“I’m not going to turn you off.”
“You’re an idiot!”
“Repent, Harlequin!” said the Ticktockman.
“Get stuffed.”

So they sent him to Coventry. And in Coventry they worked him over. It was just like what they did to Winston Smith in 1984, which was a book none of them knew about, but the techniques are really quite ancient, and so they did it to Everett C. Marm, and one day quite a long time later, the Harlequin appeared on the communications web, appearing elfish and dimpled and bright-eyed, and not at all brainwashed, and he said he had been wrong, that it was a good, a very good thing indeed, to belong, and be right on time hip-ho and away we go, and everyone stared up at him on the public screens that covered an entire city block, and they said to themselves, well, you see, he was just a nut after all, and if that’s the way the system is run, then let’s do it that way, because it doesn’t pay to fight city hall, or in this case, the Ticktockman. So Everett C. Marm was destroyed, which was a loss, because of what Thoreau said earlier, but you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, and in every revolution, a few die who shouldn’t, but they have to, because that’s the way it happens, and if you make only a little change, then it seems to be worthwhile. Or, to make the point lucidly:

“Uh, excuse me, sir, I, uh, don’t know how to uh, to uh, tell you this, but you were three minutes late. The schedule is a little, uh, bit off.”

He grinned sheepishly.

“That’s ridiculous!” murmured the Ticktockman behind his mask: “Check your watch.” And then he went into his office, going mrree, mrree, mrree, mrree.

Bright Eyes

FEET WITHOUT TOES. Softly padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. Since before places had names. A dark place, a shadowed place, only a blot against the eternally nightened skies. No stars chip-ice twittered insanely against that night; for in truth the night was mad enough.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day...

He knew about almost everything.

The worms. The moles. The trunks of dead trees. The whites of eggs. Music. And random sounds. The sound fish make in the deep. The flares of the sun. The scratch of unbleached cloth against flesh. The hounds that roamed the tundra. The way those who have hair see it go pale and stiff with age. Clocks and what they do. Ice cream. Wax seals on parchment dedications. Grass and leaves. Metal and wood. Up and down. Here and most of there. Bright Eyes knew it all.

And that was the reason his padding, acoustically-sussurating footsteps hissed high in the dark, beamed, silent corridors of the place. And why he would now, forever at last, make that long journey.

The giant rat, whose name was Thomas, lay curled, fetid, sleeping, near the great wooden gate; and as Bright Eyes approached, it stirred. Then, like a mastiff, it lifted its bullet-shaped head, and the bright crimson eyes flickered artful awareness. The massive head stiffened on the neckless neck, and it shambled to its feet. The wire tail swished across hand-inset cobblestones, making scratching sounds in the silent night.

"It's time," Bright Eyes murmured. "Here, Thomas." The great gray creature jogged to him, nuzzling Bright Eyes' leg. It sniffed at the net filled with old skulls, and its whiskers twitched like cilia for a moment.

Bright Eyes swung the great wooden gate open with difficulty, dislodging caked dirt and cold-hardened clots of stray matter. The heavy metal ring clanged as he dropped it against the portal. Then Bright Eyes swung to the back of the rat, and without reins or prompting, the rat whose name was Thomas, paced steadily through the opening, leaving behind the only home Bright Eyes had ever known, which he would never see again. There was mist on the land.

Strange and terrible portents had caused Bright Eyes to leave the place. Unwilling to believe what they implied, at first, Bright Eyes pursued the gentle patterns of his days-like all the other days he had ever known, alone. But finally, when the blood-red and gray colors washed in unholy mixture down the skies, he knew what had happened, and that it was his obligation to return to a place he had never seen, had only heard about from others, centuries before, and do what had to be done. The others were long-since dead: had been dead since before Christ took Barabbas' place on the cross. The place to which Bright Eyes must return had not even been known, had not even existed, when the others left the world. Yet it was Bright Eyes' place, by default, and his obligation to all the others who had passed before. Since he was the last of his kind, a race that had no name, and had dwelled in the castle-place for millennia, he only dimly understood what was demanded of him. Yet this he knew: the call had been made, the portents cast into the night to be seen by him; and he must go.

It was a journey whose length even Bright Eyes could not surmise. The mist seemed to cover the world in a soft shroud that promised little good luck on this mission.

And, inexplicably, to Bright Eyes, there was a crushing sadness in him. A sadness he did not fathom, could not plumb, dared not examine. His glowing sight pierced through the mist, as steadily and stately, Thomas moved toward Bright Eyes' final destination. And it would remain unknown, till he reached it.

Out of the mist the giant rat swung jauntily. They had passed among softly-rounded hills with water that dripped from above. Then the shoulders had become black rock, and gleaming pinpoints of diamond brilliance had shone in the rock, and Bright Eyes had realized they were in caves. But had they come from the land, inside...or had they come from some resting-land deep in the bowels of the Earth, into these less hidden caverns; and would they continue to another outside?

Far ahead, a dim light pulsed and glowed, and Bright Eyes spurred Thomas forward. The dim light grew more bold, more orange and yellow and menacing with sudden soft roars of bubbling thunder. And as they rounded the passage, the floor of the cave was gone, and in their path lay a boiling scar in the stone. A

lava pit torn up out of the solid stone, hissing and bubbling fiercely with demonic abandon. The light burned at Bright Eyes, and the heat was gagging. The sour stench of sulphur bit at his senses, and he made to turn aside.

The giant rat suddenly bolted in panic, arching back, more like caterpillar than rodent, and Bright Eyes was tossed to the floor of the cave, his net of skulls rolling away from him. Thomas chittered in fear, and took steps away, then paused and returned to his master. Bright Eyes rose and patted the terrified beast several times. Thomas fell into quivering silence.

Bright Eyes retrieved the skulls. All but one, that had rolled across the stone floor and disappeared with a vagrant hiss into the flame-pit. The giant rat sniffed at the walls, first one, then the other, and settled against the far one. Bright Eyes contemplated the gash in the stone floor. It stretched completely across, and as far as he could tell, forward. Thomas chittered.

Bright Eyes looked away from the flames, into the fear-streaked eyes of the beast. "Well, Thomas?" he asked. The rat's snout twitched, and it hunkered closer to the wall. It looked up at Bright Eyes imploringly. Bright Eyes came to the rat, crouched down, stroked its neat, tight fur. Bright Eyes brushed the wall. It was not hot. It was cool.

The rat knew.

Bright Eyes rose, walked back along the passage. He found the parallel corridor half a mile back in the direction they had come. Without turning, he knew Thomas had silently followed, and leading the way, he moved down the parallel corridor, in coolness. Even the Earth could not keep Bright Eyes from what had to be done.

They followed the corridor for a very long time, till the rock walls leaned inward, and the littered floor tilted toward the stalactite-spiked ceiling. Bright Eyes dismounted, and walked beside the giant rat. There were strange, soft murmurings beneath them. Thomas chittered every time the Earth rattled. Further on, the passage puckered narrower and narrower...and Bright Eyes was forced to bend, then stoop, then crawl. Thomas slithered belly-tight behind him, more frightened to be left behind than to struggle forward.

A whisper of chill, clean air passed them.

They moved ahead, only the glow of Bright Eyes marking a passage.

Abruptly, the cave mouth opened onto darkness, and cold, and the world Bright Eyes had never seen, the world his dim ancestors had left, millennia before.

No one could ever set down what that first sight meant to Bright Eyes. But...

...the chill he felt, was not child of the night wind.

The countryside was a murmuring silence. The sky was so black, not even the stars seemed at home. Frightened, lonely and alienated from the universe they populated, the silver specks drifted down the night like chalk dust. And through the strangeness, Bright Eyes rode Thomas, neither seeing nor caring. Behind him a village passed over the horizon line, and he never knew he had been through it.

No shouts of halt were hurled on the wind. No one came to darkened windows to see Bright Eyes pass through. He was approaching there and gone, all in an instant of time that may have been forever and may have been never. He was a wraith on the mist-bottomed silence. And Thomas, moved stately through valley and village, only paced, nothing more. From now on, it was Bright Eyes' problem.

Far out on the plains, the wind opened up suddenly. It spun down out of the northwest and drove at Bright Eyes' back. And on the trembling coolness, the alien sounds of wild dogs came snapping across the emptiness. Bright Eyes looked up, and Thomas' neck hair bristled with fear. Bright Eyes stroked a round, palpitating ear and the great rat came under control.

Then, almost without sound that was tied to them-for the sound of dogs came from a distance, from far away-the insane beasts were upon them. A slaving band of crimson-eyed mongrels, some still wearing dog collars and clinking tags, hair grown shaggy and matted with filth. Noses with large nostrils, as though they had had to learn to forage the land all at once, rather than from birth. These were the dogs of the people, driven out onto the wind, to live or die or eat each other as best they could.

The first few leaped from ten feet away, high and flat in trajectories that brought them down on Thomas' back, almost into Bright Eyes' lap, their yellow teeth scraping and clattering like dice on cement, lunacy bubbling out of them as froth and stench and spastic claw-scrabbings. Thomas reared and Bright Eyes slid off without losing balance, using the bag of skulls as a mace to ward off the first of the vicious assaults. One great Doberman had its teeth set for a strike into Thomas' belly, but the great rat-with incredible ferocity and skill-snapped its head down in a scythelike movement, and rent the gray-brown beast from jowl to chest, and it fell away, bleeding, moaning piteously.

And the rest of the pack materialized from the darkness. Dozens of them, circling warily now that

one of their number lay in a trembling-wet garbage heap of its own innards.

Bright Eyes whistled Thomas to him with a soft sound. They stood together, facing the horde, and Bright Eyes called up a talent his race had not been forced to use in uncounted centuries.

The great white eyes glowed, deep and bubbling as cauldrons of lava, and a hollow moaning came from a place deep in Bright Eyes' throat. A sound of torment, a sound of fear, an evocation of gods that were dust before the Earth began to gather moisture to itself in the senseless cosmos, before the Moon had cooled, before the patterns of magnetism had settled the planets of the Solar System in their sockets.

Out of that sound, the basic fiber of emotion, like some great machine phasing toward top-point efficiency, Bright Eyes drew himself tight and unleashed the blast of pure power at the dogs.

Buried deep in his mind, the key to pure fear as a weapon was depressed, and in a blinding fan of sweeping brilliance, the emotion washed out toward the horde, a comber of undiluted, unbuffered terror. For the first time in centuries, that immense power was unleashed. Bright Eyes *thought* them terrified, and the air stank with fear.

The dogs, bulge-eyed and hysterical, fled in a wave of yipping, trembling, tuck-tailed quivering.

As if the night could no longer contain the immensity of it, the shimmering sound of terror bulged and grew, seeking release in perhaps another dimension, some higher threshold of audibility, and finding none-it wisped away in darkness and was gone.

Bright Eyes stood trembling uncontrollably, every fiber of his body spasming. His pineal gland throbbed. An intracranial tumor-whose presence in a human brain would have meant death-absolutely imperative for Bright Eyes' coordinated thought processes, which had swollen to five times its size as he concentrated, till his left temple had bulged with the pressing growth of it-now shrank, subsided, sucked itself back down into the gray brain matter, the gliomas itself. And slowly, as the banked fires of his eyes softened once more, Bright Eyes came back to full possession of himself.

"It has been a very long time since that was needed," he said gently, and dwelt for a moment on the powers his race had possessed, powers long-since gone to forgetfulness.

Now that it was over, the giant rat settled to the ground, licking at its fur, at a slash in the flesh where one of the mad things had ripped and found meat.

Bright Eyes went to him. "They are the saddest creatures of all. They are alone." Thomas continued licking at his wounds.

Days later, but closer to their final destination, they came to the edge of a great river. At one time it had been a swiftly-moving stream, whipping itself high in a pounding torrent filled with colors and sounds; but now it flushed itself to the sea wearily, riding low in its own tide-trough, and hampered by the log-jam. The log-jam was made of corpses.

Bodies, hideously bloated and maggot-white puffed out of human shapes, lay across one another, from the near shore to the opposite bank. Thousands of bodies, uncountable thousands, twisted and piled and washed together till it would have been possible to cross the river on the top layer of naked men's faces, bleached women's backs, twisted children's hands crinkled as if left too long in water. For they had been.

As far upstream as Bright Eyes could see, and as far downstream as the bend of the banks permitted, it was the same. No movement, save the very seldom jiggle of a corpse as the water passed through. For they were packed so deeply and so tightly that in truth only water at its most sluggish could wanly press through. Yet the water gurgled and twittered among them, stealing slowly downstream-caressing rotting flesh in obscene parody: water, cleansing steppingstones; polishing and smoothing and drenching them senselessly as it marks its passage only by what is left behind.

That was the ultimate horror of this river of dead: that the tide-no matter how held-back now-continued unheeding as it had since the world was born. For the world went on. And did not care.

Bright Eyes stood silently. At the bottom of the short slope that ended with shoreline, bodies were strewn in a careless tumble. He breathed very deeply, fighting for air, and the shivering started again. As it grew more pronounced, there was movement in the dry-moist river bed. Bodies abruptly began to move. They trembled as though roiling in a stream growing turbulent. Then, one by one, they rearranged themselves. All up and down the length of the river, the bodies shifted and moved and lifted without aid from their original positions, and far off, where their movement to neatness could not be seen, there came the roar of dammed-up water breaking free, surging forward, freed from its restraining walls of once-human flesh.

As Bright Eyes trembled, power surging through his slight frame, his eyes seeming to wax and wane with currents of electricity, the river of corpses freed itself from its log-jam, and was open once more.

The water poured in a great frothing wave down and down the corpse-bordered trough of the river. It broke out of a box-canyon to Bright Eyes' left, like a wild creature penned too long and at last set free on the wind. It came bubbling, boiling, thrashing forward, passed the spot where he stood, and hurled itself away around the bend in the shoreline.

As Bright Eyes felt the trembling pass, the river rose, and rose, and gently now, rose. Covering the ghastly residue of humanity that now lay submerged beneath the mud-blackened waters.

The eyes of the trembling creature, the eyes of the giant rat, the eyes of the uncaring day were blessedly relieved of the sight of decay and death.

Emotions washed quickly, one after another, down his features; washed as quickly as the river had concealed its sad wealth; colors of sadness, imprinted in a manner no human being could ever have conceived, for the face that supported these emotions was of a race that had vanished before man had walked the Earth.

Then Bright Eyes turned, and with the rat, walked upstream. Toward the morning.

When the bleeding birds went over, the sun darkened. Great irregular, hard-edged clouds of them, all species, all wingspreads-but silent. Passing across the broad, gray brow of the sky, heading absolutely nowhere, they turned off the sun. It was suddenly chill as a crypt. Heading east. Not toward warmth, or instinct, or destination...just anywhere, nowhere. Until they wearied, expired, dropped. Not manna, garbage. Live garbage that fell in hundredclots from the beat-winged flights.

Many dropped, fluttering idly as if too weary to fight the air currents any longer. As though what tiny instinctual brain substance they had possessed, were now baked, turned to jelly, squashed by an unnameable force into an ichorous juice that ran out through their eyes. As though they no longer cared to live, much less to continue this senseless flight east to nowhere...

...and they bled.

A rain of bird's blood, sick and discolored. It misted down, beading Bright Eyes, and the stiff rat fur, and the trees, and the still, silent, dark land.

Only the dead, flat no-sound of millions of wings metronomic ally beating, beating, beating...

Bright Eyes shuddered, turned his face from the sight above, and finding himself unable to look, yet unable to end the horror as he had the mad dogs or the water of corpses, sought surcease in his own personal vision.

And this, which had driven him forth, was his vision:

Sleeping, deep in that place where he had lived so long, Bright Eyes had felt the subtle altering of tempo in the air around him. It was nothing as obvious as machinery beginning to whirr, trembling the walls around him; nor as complex as a shift in dimensional orientation. It was, rather, a soft sliding in the molecules of everything except Bright Eyes. For an instant everything went just slightly out of synch, a little fuzzy, and Bright Eyes came awake sharply. The *thing* that had occurred, was something his race had pre-set eons before. It was triggered to activate itself-whatever "itself" was-after certain events had *possibly* happened.

The fact that this shifting had occurred, made Bright Eyes grow cold and wary. He had expected to die without its ever having come. But now, this was the time, and it *had* happened, and he waited for the next phase.

It came quickly. The vision.

The air before him grew even more indistinct, more roiled, like a pool of quicksilver smoke tumbling in and in on itself. And from that cloudiness the image of the last of the Castellans took shape. (Was it image, or reality, or thought within his head? He did not really know, for Bright Eyes was merely the last of his kind, no specially-trained adept, and much of what his race had been, and knew, was lost to him, beyond him.)

The Castellan was a fifth-degree adept, and surely the last remaining one of Bright Eyes' race to-go. He wore the purple and blue of royalty, from a House Bright Eyes did not recognize, but the cut of the robe was shorter than styles Bright Eyes recalled as having been current-then. And the Castellan's cowl was up, revealing a face that was bleak with sorrow and even a hint of cruelty. Such was not present, of course, for the Castellans merely performed their duties, but Bright Eyes was certain *this* adept had been against the decision to-go. Yet he had been chosen to bring the message to Bright Eyes.

He stood, booted and silent, in the soft-washed blue and white lightness of Bright Eyes' sleeping chamber. Bright Eyes was given time to come to full wakefulness, and then the Castellan spoke.

"What you see has been gone for ten centuries. I am the last, save you. They have set me the task,

and this twist of my being, of telling you what you must do. If the proper portents trigger my twist to appear before you-pray it never happens-then you must go to the city of the ones with hair, the ones who come after us, the ones who inherit the Earth, the men. Go to their city, with a bag of skulls of our race. You will know what to do with them.

"Know this, Bright Eyes: we go voluntarily. Some of us-and I am one of them-more reluctantly than most. It is a decision that seems only proper. Those who come after us, Men, will have their chance for the stars. This was the only gift of birth we could offer. No other gift can have meaning between us. They must have our chance, so we have gone to the place where you now lie. By the time I appear to you-if ever I do-we will be gone. This is the way of it, a sad and an inescapable way. You will be the last. And now I will show you a thing."

The Castellan raised his hands before his face, and as though they were growing transparent, they glowed with an inner fire. The Visioning power. The Castellan's face suffused with flames as it conjured up the proper vision for Bright Eyes.

It appeared out of lines of blossoming crimson force, in the very air beside the Castellan. A vision of terror and destruction. Flames man-made and devastating, incredible in their hellfire. Like some great arachnid of pure force, the demon flames of the destruction swept and washed across the vision, and when it faded, Bright Eyes lay shaken by what he had seen.

"If this that I have showed you ever comes to pass, then my twist will appear to you. And if you ever hear me as you hear me now, then go, with the bag of skulls of our people. And do not doubt your feelings.

"For if I appear to you, it will all have been in vain, and those of us who were less pure in our motivations, will have been proved right."

Shimmering substance, coalescing nothingness, air that trembled and twittered in reforming, and the Castellan was gone. Bright Eyes rose, and gathered the skulls from the crypt. Then:

Feet without toes. Softly-padded feet, furred. Footsteps sounded gently, padding furry, down ink-chill corridors of the place. A place Bright Eyes had inhabited since before time had substance. He walked through night, out of the place.

Night was a condition Bright Eyes understood. And he knew about day...

The bleeding birds were long since gone. Bright Eyes moved through the days, and onward. At one point he passed through a sector of trembling mountains that heaved up great slabs of rock and hurled them away like epileptics ridding themselves of clothes. The ground trembled and burst and screamed and the very earth went insane to tunes of destruction it had never written.

There was a plain of dead grass, sere and wasted with great heaps of dessicated insects heaped here, there. They had flocked together to the last resting-place, and the plain of dead grass was poor tapestry indeed to hold the imprisoned pigments of their dead flesh, the acrid and bittersweet pervasive odor of formic acid that lingered like hot breath of a mad giant across the silent windless emptiness. Yet, how faint, a sound of weeping...?

Finally, Bright Eyes came to the city.

Thomas would not enter. The twisted rope-pillars of smoke that still climbed relentlessly to the dark sky; the terrible sounds of steel cracking and masonry falling into empty streets; the charnel house odor. Thomas would not go in.

But Bright Eyes was compelled to enter. Into that last debacle of all. From where it had begun.

The dead were everywhere, sighing soundlessly with milkwhite eyes at a tomorrow that had never come. And each fallen one soundlessly spoke the question of why. Bright Eyes walked with the burden of chaos pulsing in him. This. This is what it had come to.

For this, his race had gone away. That the ones with hair, the Men they had been called, they had called themselves, could stride the Earth. How cheap they had left it all. How cheap, how thin, how sordid. This was the last of it, the last of the race of men. Dust and dead.

Down a street, woman pleading out of death for mercy.

Through what had been a park, old men humped crazily in rigorous failure to escape.

Past a structure, building front ripped away as if fingernails had shorn it clean. Children's arms, pocked and burned, dangling. Tiny hands.

To another place. Not like the place from which Bright Eyes had come, but the place to which he had journeyed. No special marker, just...a place. Sufficient.

And then it was, that Bright Eyes sank to his knees, crying. Tears that had not been seen since

before Man had come from caves, tears that Bright Eyes had never known. Infinite sadness. Cried. Cried for the ghosts of the creatures with hair, cried for Men. For Man. Each Man. The Man who had done away with himself so absurdly, so completely. Bright Eyes, on his knees, sorrowing for the ones who had lived here, and were gone, leaving him to the night, and the silence, and eternity. A melody never to be heard again.

He placed the skulls. Down in the soft white ash. Unresponsive, dying Earth, receiving its burden testament.

Bright Eyes, last of a race that had condemned itself to extinction, had condemned *him* to living in darkness forever, and had had only the saving wistful knowledge that the race coming after would live in the world. But now, gone, all of them, taking the world with them, leaving instead-no fair exchange-charnel house.

And Bright Eyes; alone.

Not only *their* race had been destroyed, in vain, but *his*, centuries turned to mud and diamonds in their markerless graves, had passed in futility. It had all, all of it, been for nothing.

So Bright Eyes-never Man-was the last man on Earth. Keeper of a silent graveyard; echoless tomb monument to the foolishness, the absurdity, of nobility.

My name is Harlan Jay Ellison.

To the United States Army I was US51403352. To the Diners Club I am 2435-0853-8. To anyone trying to reach me by phone I am 213-271-9636. If you try to send me a letter I'm 91403. When a cop stops me for a U-turn I'm M271930. If I want to cash a check I'm 1223-1400-02139-02622. Though I've never collected one in my life, if I wanted some unemployment compensation, I'd be 280-30-8327. The mortgage to my home is registered to 5537-J6361. The Literary Guild of America doesn't know I write books, but it looks on me fondly as 022-041396LG.

First they steal your name, then they go after your individuality, and finally-as with the protagonist of the next story-they cop your face and form. Alienation? Well, I suppose it means when the Book-Of-The-Month Club overbills you five hundred dollars, and you complain, all you hear is the hollow laughter of the computer in Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. I suppose it means that we give in too easily to letting every major and minor corporation from 3M to Nate 'n' Al's Delicatessen "convenience themselves" at our expense.

Sure its convenient. For them. They get their billing done quickly and efficiently-for them. But if you have your mortgage with a bank that's computerized, and they make a mistake, before the big machine can clear its throat and set things right, you can be a DP. So we fight back, some of us. In small ways, because there aren't enough of you yet who'll risk the wrath of the machine. We fight back by overpaying our phone bill 73¢ a month, which costs the phone company about fifty dollars to trace the error and clear the records properly. We fight back by spindling, folding and mutilating. And we often yell-

Are You Listening?

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS I wanted to start telling this :

First, I was going to begin it:

I began to lose my existence on a Tuesday morning. But then I thought about it and:

This is my horror story.

Seemed like a better way to begin. But after thinking it over (I've had a devil of a lot of time to think it over, you can believe *me*), I realized both of those were pretty melodramatic, and if I wanted to instill trust and faith and ah that from the outset, I had just better begin the way it happened, and tell it through to now, and then make my offer, and well, let you decide for yourself.

Are you listening?

Perhaps it ah began with my genes. Or my chromosomes. Whichever or whatever combination made me a Casper Milquetoast prototype, that or those are to blame, I'm sure. I woke up a year ago on a Tuesday morning in March, and knew I was the same as I had been for hundreds of other mornings past. I was forty-seven years old, I was balding, my eyes were good-and the glasses I used only for reading. I slept in a separate room from my wife Alma, and I wore long underwear; chiefly because I've always picked up a chill quickly.

The only thing that might possibly be considered out-of-the-ordinary about me is that my name is Winsocki.

Albert Winsocki.

You know, like the song...

"Buckle down Winsocki, you can win Winsocki if you'll only buckle down..." Very early in life I was teased about that, but my mild nature kept me from taking offense, and instead of growing to loathe it, I adopted it as a sort of personal anthem. Whenever I find myself whistling something, it is usually that.

However-

I woke up that morning, and got dressed quickly. It was too cold to take a shower, so I just daubed water on my wrists and face, and dressed quickly. As I started down the stairs, Zasu, my wife's Persian, swept past between my legs. Zasu is a pretty stable cat, and I had never been quite snubbed before, though the animal *had* taken to ignoring me with great skill. But this morning of which I speak, she just swarmed past, and not even a meowrrl or a spit. It was unusual, but not remarkable.

But just an indication of what was to come.

I came into the living room, and saw that Alma had laid out my paper on the arm of the sofa, just as she had done for twenty-seven years. I picked it up in passing, and came into the dinette.

My orange juice was set out, and I could hear Alma in the kitchen beyond. She was muttering to herself as usual. That is one of my wife's unpleasant habits, I'm afraid. At heart she is a sweet, dear woman, but when she gets annoyed, she murmurs. Nothing obscene, for goodness sake, but just at the bare threshold of audibility, so that it niggles and naggles and bothers. She *knew* it bothered me, or perhaps she didn't, I'm not sure. I don't think Alma was aware that I really *had* any likes or dislikes of any real strength.

At any rate, there she was, muttering and murmuring, so I just called out, "I'm down, dear. Good morning." Then I turned to the paper, and the juice. Acidic.

The paper was full of the same sort of stuff, and what else could orange juice be but orange juice?

However, as the minutes passed, Alma's mutters did not pass away. In fact, they got louder, more angry, more annoyed. "Where *is* that man? He *knows* I despise waiting breakfast! Now look...the eggs are hard. Oh, where *is* he?"

This kept up for some time, though I repeatedly yelled in to her, "Alma, *please* stop, I'm here. I'm down, can't you understand?"

Finally, she came storming past, and went through into the living room. I could hear her at the foot of the stairs-hand on banister, one foot flat on the first step-yelling up to no one at all, "Albert! *Will* you come down? Are you in the bathroom again? Are you having trouble with your kidneys? Shall I come up?"

Well, that was too much, so I laid aside my napkin, and got up. I walked up behind her and said, just as politely as I could,, Alma. What is the matter with you, dear? I'm right here."

It made no impression.

She continued howling, and a few moments later stalked upstairs. I sat down on the steps, because

I was sure Alma had lost her mind, or her hearing had gone, or something. After twenty-seven happily married years, my wife was dreadfully ill.

I didn't know what to do. I was totally at a loss. I decided it would be best to call Dr. Hairshaw. So I went over and dialed him, and his phone rang three times before he picked it up and said, "Hello?"

I always felt guilty calling him, no matter what time of the day it was—he had *such* an intimidating tone—but I felt even *more* self-conscious this time, because there was a decidedly muggy value to his voice. As though he had just gotten out of bed.

"Sorry to wake you at this hour, Doctor," I said quickly. "This is Albert Winso—"

He cut me off with, "Hello? Hello?"

I repeated, "Hello, Doctor? This is Al—"

"Hello there? Anyone there?"

I didn't know what to say. It was probably a bad connection, so I screamed as loud as I could, "Doctor, this is—"

"Oh, *hell!*" he yelled, and jammed down the receiver. I stood there for a second with the handpiece gripped tightly and I'm dreadfully afraid an expression of utter bewilderment came over my face. Had everyone gone deaf, today? I was about to re-dial, when Alma came down the stairs, talking out loud to herself.

"Now *where* on Earth can that man have gone? Don't tell me he got up and went out without any breakfast? Oh well, that's less work for me today."

And she went right smack past me, staring right *through* me, and into the kitchen. I plonked down the receiver and started after her. This was *too* much! During the past few years Alma had lessened her attentions to me, even at times seemed to ignore me; I would speak and she would not hear, I would touch her and she would not respond. There had been increasingly more of these occasions, but this was too much!

I went into the kitchen and walked up behind her. She did not turn, just continued scouring the eggs out of the pan with steel wool. I screamed her name. She did not turn, did not even break the chain of humming.

I grabbed the pan from her hands and banged it as hard as I could on the stove-top (something remarkably violent for me, but I'm sure you can understand that this was a remarkable situation). She did not even start at the noise. She went over to the icebox and took out the cube trays. She began to defrost the box.

That was the last straw. I slammed the pan to the floor and stalked out of the room. I was on the verge of swearing, I was so mad. What kind of game *was* this? All right, so she didn't want to make my breakfast; so that was just one more little ignoring factor I had to put up with. All right, so why didn't she just *say* so. But this folderol was too much!

I put on my hat and coat and left the house—slamming the door as hard as I could.

I glanced at my pocket-watch, and saw the time had long since passed for me to catch my bus to the office. I decided to take a taxi, though I wasn't quite sure my budget could afford the added strain. But it was a necessity, so I walked past the bus stop, and hailed a cab as it went past. Went past is correct. It zipped by me without even slowing. I had seen it was empty, so why didn't the cabbie stop? Had he been going off duty? I supposed that was it, but after eight others had whizzed by, I was certain something was wrong.

But I could not discern what the trouble might be. I decided, since I saw it coming, to take the bus anyhow. A young girl in a tight skirt and funny little hat was now waiting at the stop, and I looked at her rather sheepishly, saying, "I just can't figure out these cabmen, can you?"

She ignored me. I mean, she didn't turn away as she would to some masher, nor did she give me a cursory glance and not reply. I mean, she didn't know I was there.

I didn't have any more time to think about it, because the bus stopped, and the girl got on. I started up the steps, and barely made it, for the bus driver slammed the doors with a wheeze, catching the tail of my coat.

"Hey, I'm caught!" I yelled, but he paid no attention. He watched in his rear view mirror as the girl swayingly strode to a seat, and he started to whistle. The bus was crowded, and I didn't want to make a fool of myself, so I reached out and pulled his pants leg. Still, he didn't respond.

That was when the idea started to form.

I yanked my coattail loose, and I was so mad, I decided to make him *ask* for his fare. I walked back, expecting any moment to hear him say, "Hey, you. Mister. You forgot to pay your fare." Then I was

going to respond, "I'll pay my fare, but I'll report you to your company, too!"

But even that tiny bit of satisfaction was denied me, because he continued to drive, and his head did not turn. I think that made me angrier than if he had insulted me; what the hell was going on? Oh, excuse me, but that was what I was thinking, and I hope you'll pardon the profanity, but I want to get this across just as it happened.

Are you listening?

Though I shoved between an apoplectic man in a Tyrolean hat and a gaggle of high school girls, when disembarking, though I nudged and elbowed and shoved them, just desperately *fighting* to be recognized, no one paid me the slightest heed. I even-I'm so ashamed now that I think of it-I slapped one of the girls on her, uh, her behind, so to speak. But she went right on talking about some fellow who was far out of it, or something like that.

It was most frustrating, you can imagine.

The elevator operator in my building was asleep-well, not *quite*, but Wolfgang (that's his name, and he's not even German, isn't that annoying?) always *looked* as though he was sleeping-in his cage. I prodded him, and capered about him, and as a final resort cuffed him on the ear but he continued to lie there against the wall, with his eyes shut, perched on his little pulldown seat. Finally, in annoyance, I took the elevator up myself, after booting him out onto the lobby tiles. By then I had realized, of course, that whatever strange malady had befallen me, I was to all intents and purposes, invisible. It seemed impossible that even if I were invisible, that people should not notice their backsides being slapped, or their bodies being kicked onto the tiles, or their elevators being stolen, but apparently such was precisely the case.

I was so confused by then-but oddly enough, not in the slightest terrified-I was half belligerent, and half pixilated with my own limitless abilities. Visions of movie stars and great wealth danced before my eyes.

And disappeared as rapidly.

For what good were women or wealth if there was no one to share it with you. Even the women. So the thoughts of being the greatest bank robber in history passed from me, and I resigned myself to getting out-if out was the proper term-getting out of this predicament.

I left the elevator on the twenty-sixth floor, and walked down the hall to the office door. It read the same as it had read for twenty-seven years :

*Rames & Klaus Diamond
Appraisers Jewelry Experts*

I shoved open the door, and for a second my heart leaped in my throat that perhaps till now it had all been a colossal hoax. For Fritz Klaus-big, red-faced Fritz with the small mole beside his mouth-was screaming at me.

"Winsocki! you dolt! How many times have I told you when they go back in the pinch-bags, pull tight the cords! A hundred thousand dollars on the floor for the scrubwoman! Winsocki! You imbecile!"

But he was not screaming at me. He was screaming, that was all. But really, it was no surprise. Klaus and George Rames never actually talked to me...or even bothered to shout at me. They knew I did my job-had, in fact, been doing it for twenty-seven years-with method and attentiveness, and so they took me for granted. The shouting was all part of the office.

Klaus just had to scream. But he was directing his screams at the air, not at me. After all, how *could* he be screaming at me? I wasn't even there.

He went down on his knees, and began picking up the little uncut rough diamonds he had spilled, and when he had them all, he went down further on his stomach, so his vest was dirtied by the floor, and looked under my bench.

When he was satisfied, he got up and brushed himself off...and walked away. As far as he knew, I was working. Or in his view of the world, was I just eliminated? It was a puzzler, but no matter...I was not there. I was gone.

I turned around and went back down the hall.

The elevator was gone.

I had to wait a long time till I could get to the lobby.

No cars would stop for my ring.

I had to wait till someone else on that floor wanted down.
That was when the real horror of it all hit me.
How strange...

I had been quiet all my life; I had married quietly and lived quietly and now, I had not even the one single pleasure of dying with a bang. Even that had been taken from me. I had just sort of snuffed out like a candle. How or why or when was no matter. I had been robbed of that one noise I had thought was mine, inevitable as taxes. But even that had been deprived me. I was a shadow...a ghost in a real world. And for the first time in my life, all the bottled-up frustrations I had never even known were banked inside me, burst forth. I was shocked through and down with horror, but instead of crying, I did not cry.

I hit someone. I hit him as hard as I could. In the elevator there. I hit him full in the face, and I felt his nose skew over, and blood ran darkly on his face, and my knuckles hurt, and I hit him again, so my hand would slide in the blood, because I was Albert Winsocki and they had taken away my dying. They had made me quieter still. I had never bothered anyone, and I was hardly noticed, and when I would finally have had someone mourn for me, and notice me, and think about me as myself alone...I had been robbed!

I hit him a third time, and his nose broke.

He never noticed.

He left the elevator, covered with blood, and never even flinched.

Then I cried.

For a long time. The elevator kept going up and down with me in it, and no one heard me crying. Finally, I got out and walked the streets till it was dark.

Two weeks can be a short time.

If you are in love. If you are wealthy and seek adventure. If you have no cares and only pleasures. If you are healthy, and the world is fine and live and beckoning. Two weeks can be a short time.

Two weeks.

Those next two weeks were the longest in my life. For they were hell. Alone. Completely, agonizingly alone, in the midst of crowds. In the neon heart of town I stood in the center of the street and shrieked at the passing throngs. I was nearly run down.

Two weeks of wandering, sleeping where I wanted to sleep -park benches, the honeymoon suite at the Waldorf, my own bed at home-and eating where I wanted to eat-I took what I wanted; it wasn't stealing, precisely; if I hadn't eaten, I would have starved-yet it was all emptiness.

I went home several times, but Alma was carrying on just nicely without me. Carrying on was the word. I would never have thought Alma could do it, particularly with the weight she had put on the past few years...but there he was.

George Rames. My boss. I corrected myself...my exboss.

So I felt no real duty to home and wife.

Alma had the house and she had Zasu. And, it appeared, she had George Rames. That fat oaf!

By the end of two weeks, I was a wreck. I was unshaved, and dirty, but who cared? Who could see me...or would have cared had they been able to!

My original belligerence had turned into a more concrete antagonism toward everyone.

Unsuspecting people in the streets were pummeled by me as I passed, should the inclination strike me. I kicked women and slapped children...I was indifferent to the moans and cries of those I struck. What was their pain compared to *my* pain-especially when none of them cried. It was all in my mind. I actually *craved* a scream or whine from one of them. For such an evidence of pain would have been a reminder that I was in their ken, that at least I existed.

But no such sound came.

Two weeks? Hell! Paradise Lost!

It was a little over two weeks from the day Zasu had snubbed me, and I had more or less made my home in the lobby of the *St. Moritz-On-The-Park*. I was lying there on a couch, with a hat I had borrowed from a passer-by over my eyes, when that animal urge to strike out overcame me. I swung my legs down, and shoved the hat back on my head. I saw a man in a trenchcoat leaning against the cigar counter, reading a newspaper and chuckling to himself. That cruddy dog, I thought, what the hell is *he* laughing about?

It so infuriated me, I got up and lunged at him. He saw me coming, and sidestepped. I, of course, expected him to go right on reading, even when I swung on him, and his movement took me by surprise. I

went into the cigar case and it caught me in the stomach, knocking the wind from me.

"Ah-ah, buddy," the man in the trenchcoat chastised me, wagging a lean finger in my face, "now that isn't polite at all, is it? To hit a man who can't even see you."

He took me by the collar and the seat of my pants and threw me across the lobby. I went flailing through a rack of picture postcards, and landed on my stomach. I slid across the polished floor and brought up against the revolving door.

I didn't even feel the pain. I sat up, there on the floor, and looked at him. He stood there with his hands on his hips, laughing uproariously at me. I stared, and my mouth dropped open. I was speechless.

"Catching flies, buddy?"

I was so amazed, I left my mouth open.

"Y-you, you can *see* me!" I caroled. "You can *see* me!"

He gave a rueful little snort, and turned away. "Of course I can." He started to walk away, then stopped and tossed over his shoulder, "You don't think I'm one of *them*, do you?" He crooked his thumb at the people rushing about in the lobby.

It had never dawned on me.

I had thought I was alone in this thing.

But here was another, just like me!

Not for a second did I consider the possibility that he could see me where the others could not, and still be a part of their world. It was apparent from the moment he threw me across the lobby that he was in the same predicament *I* was. But somehow, he seemed more at ease about it all. As though this was one great party, and he the host.

He started to walk away.

I scrambled to my feet as he was pressing the button for the elevator, wondering why he was doing that. The elevator couldn't stop for him if it was human-operated, as I'd seen it was.

"Uh, hey! Wait a minute there-"

The elevator came down, and an old man with baggy pants was running it. "I was on six, Mr. Jim. Heard it and come right down."

The old man smiled at the man in the trenchcoat-Jim it was-and Jim clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks, Denny. I'd like to go up to my room."

I started after them, but Jim gave Denny a nudge, and inclined his head in my direction, with a disgusted expression on his face. "Up, Denny," he said.

The elevator doors started to close. I ran up.

"Hey! Wait a second. My name is Winsocki. Albert Winsocki, like in the song, *you* know, buckle down Win-"

The doors almost closed on my nose.

I was frantic. The only other person (*persons*, I realized with a start) who could see me, and they were going away... I might search and never find them.

I was *so* frantic, in fact, I almost missed the easiest way to trace them. I looked up and the floor indicator arrow was going up, up, up to stop at the tenth floor. I waited till another elevator came down, with the ones who could not see me in it, and tossed out the operator...and took it up myself.

I had to search all through the corridors of the tenth floor till I heard his voice through a door, talking to the old man.

He was saying, "One of the newer ones, Denny. A boor, a completely obnoxious lower form of life."

And Denny replied, "Chee, Mr. Jim, I just like to sit an' hear ya talk. Wit' all them college words. I was real unhappy till you come along, ya know?"

"Yes, Denny, I know." It was a condescending tone of voice if ever I'd heard one.

I knew he'd never open the door, so I went looking for the maid from that floor. She had her ring of keys in her apron, and never even noticed me taking them. I started back for the room, and stopped.

I thought a moment, and ran back to the elevator. I went downstairs, and climbed into the booth where the bills were paid, where all the cash was stored. I found what I was after in one of the till drawers. I shoved it into my coat pocket, and went back upstairs.

At the door I hesitated. Yes, I could still hear them babbling. I used the master key to get inside.

When I threw open the door, the man named Jim leaped from the bed and glared at me. "What are you doing in here? Get out at once, or I shall *throw* you out!"

He started toward me.

I pulled what I had gotten from the till drawer from my pocket, and pointed it at him. "Now just settle back, Mr. Jim, and there won't be any trouble."

He raised his hands very melodramatically, and shuffled backward till his knee-backs caught the edge of the bed and he sat down with a plop.

"Oh, take down your hands," I said. "You look like a bad western movie." His hands came down self-consciously.

Denny looked at me. "What's he doin', Mr. Jim?"

"I don't know, Denny; I don't know," Jim said slowly, with thought. His eyes were trained on the barrel of the snub-nosed revolver I held. His eyes were frightened.

I found myself shaking. I tried to hold the revolver steady, but it wavered in my hand as though I was inside the eye of a tornado. "I'm nervous, fellow," I said, partly to let him note it, as if he hadn't already, and half to reassure myself that I was master of the situation. "Don't make me any worse than I am right now."

He sat very still, his lowered hands folded in his lap.

"For two weeks now, I've been close to going insane. My wife couldn't see or hear or feel me. No one in the street could. No one for two weeks. It's like I'm dead...and today I found you two. You're the only ones like me! Now I want to know what this is all about. What's happened to me?"

Denny looked at Mr. Jim, and then at me.

"Hey is he cuckoo, Mr. Jim? You want I should slug him, Mr. Jim?"

The old man would never have made it.

Jim saw that much, to his credit.

"No, Denny. Sit where you are. The man wants some information. I think it's only fair I give it to him." He looked at me. His face was soft, like a sponge.

"My name is Trempson, Mr.-ah-Mr. what-did-you-say-your-name-was...?"

"I didn't, but it's Winsocki. Albert Winsocki. Like in the song."

"Oh, yes, Mr. Winsocki. Well," his poise and sneering manner were returning as he saw he at least had the edge on me in information. "The reason for your current state of non-noticeability-you aren't really insubstantial, you know... that gun could kill me...a truck could run us down and we'd be dead-is very complex. I'm afraid I can't give you any scientific explanations, and I'm not even sure there are any. Let's put it this way..."

He crossed his legs, and I steadied the gun on him. He went on. "There are forces in the world today, Mr. Winsocki, that are invisibly working to make us all carbon copies of one another. Forces that crush us into molds of each other. You walk down the street and never see anyone's face, really. You sit faceless in a movie, or hidden from sight in a dreary living room watching television. When you pay bills, or car fares or talk to people, they see the job they're doing, but never you.

"With some of us, this is carried even further. We are so unnoticeable about it-wallflowers, you might say-all through our lives, that when these forces that crush us into one mold work enough to get us where they want us, we just-poo! disappear to all those around us. Do you understand?"

I stared at him.

I knew what he was talking about, of course. Who could fail to notice it in this great machined world we'd made for ourselves. So that was it. I had been made like everyone else, but had been so negative a personality to begin with, it had completely blanked me out to everyone. It was like a filter on a camera. Put a red filter on and everything red was there-but not there. That was the way with me. The cameras in everyone had been filtered against me. And Mr. Jim, and Denny, and

"Are there more like us?"

Mr. Jim spread his hands. "Why, there are dozens, Winsocki. Dozens. Soon there will be hundreds, and then thousands. With things going the way they are...with people buying in supermarkets and eating in drive-ins and this new subliminal TV advertising...why, I'd say we could be expecting more company all the time.

"But not me," he added.

I looked at him, and then at Denny. Denny was blank, so I looked back at Trempson. "What do you mean?"

"Mr. Winsocki," he explained patiently, but condescendingly, "I was a college professor. Nothing really brilliant, mind you, in fact I suppose I was dull to my students. But I knew my subject. Phoenician Art, it was. But my students came in and went out and never saw me. The faculty never had cause to

reprimand me, and so after a while I started to fade out. Then I was gone, like you.

"I wandered around, as you must still be doing, but soon I realized what a fine life it was. No responsibility, no taxes, no struggling for existence. Just live the way I wish, and take what I want. I even have Denny here-he was a handyman no one paid attention to-as my friend and manservant. I like this life, Mr. Winsocki. That was why I was not too anxious to make your acquaintance. I dislike seeing the *status quo* upset."

I realized I was listening to a madman.

Mr. Jim Trempson had been a poor teacher, and had suffered my fate. But where I had been turned-as I now realized-from a Milquetoasted hum-drummer to a man cunning enough to find a revolver, and adventurous enough to use it, he had been turned into a monomaniac.

This was his kingdom.

But there were others.

Finally, I saw there was no point talking to him. The forces that had cupped us and crushed us till we were so small the rest of the world could not see us, had done their work all too well on him. He was lost. He was satisfied with being unseen, unheard, unknown.

So was Denny. They were complacent. More than that... they were overjoyed. And during this past year I have found many like them. All the same. But I am not like that. I want out of here. I want you to see me again.

I'm trying desperately, the only way I know how.

It may sound stupid, but when people are day-dreaming, or unfocused on life, so to speak, they may catch sight of me. I'm working on that. I keep whistling and humming. Have you ever heard me? The song is "Buckle Down Winsocki."

Have you ever caught sight of me, just out of the corner of your eye, and thought it was a trick of your imagination?

Have you ever thought you heard a radio or TV playing that song, and there was no radio or TV?

Please! I'm begging you! Listen for me. I'm right here, and I'm humming in your ear so you'll hear me and help me.

"Buckle Down Winsocki," that's the tune. Can you hear it?

Are you listening?

Try a Dull Knife

IT WAS *parchanga* night at The Cave. Three spik bands all going at once, each with a fat momma shaking her meat and screaming *Vaya!* The sound was something visible, an assault in silver lame and screamhorn. Sound hung dense as a smog-cloud, redolent as skunk-scent from a thousand roaches of the best shit, no stems or seeds. Darkness shot through with the quicksilver flashes of mouths open to show gold bridgework and dirty words. Eddie Burma staggered in, leaned against a wall and felt the sickness as thick as cotton wool in his throat.

The deep scar-burn of pain was bleeding slowly down his right side. The blood had started coagulating, his shirt stuck to his flesh, but he dug it: it wasn't pumping anymore. But he was in trouble, that was the righteous truth. Nobody can get cut the way Eddie Burma'd been cut and not be in deep trouble.

And somewhere back out there, in the night, they were moving toward him, coming for him. He had to get through to-who? Somebody. Somebody who could help him; because only now, after fifteen years of what had been happening to him, did Eddie Burma finally know what it was he had been through, what had been done to him...what was *being* done to him...what they would certainly do to him.

He stumbled down the short flight of steps into The Cave and was instantly lost in the smoke and smell and twisting shadows. Ethnic smoke, Puerto Rican smells, lush shadows from another land. He dug it; even with his strength ebbing, he dug it.

That was Eddie Burma's problem. He was an empath. He felt. Deep inside himself, on a level most people never even know exists he felt for the world. Involvement was what motivated him. Even here, in this slum nightclub where intensity of enjoyment substituted for the shallow glamour and gaucherie of the uptown *boîtes*, here where no one knew him and therefore could not harm him, he felt the pulse of the world's life surging through him. And the blood started pumping again.

He pressed his way back through the crowd, looking for a phone booth, looking for a toilet, looking for an empty booth where he could hide, looking for the person or persons unknown who could save him from the dark night of the soul slipping toward him inexorably.

He caromed off a waiter, Pancho Villa mustache, dirty white apron, tray of draft beers. "Hey, where's the *gabinetto*?" he slurred the request. His words were slipping in their own blood.

The Puerto Rican waiter stared at him. Uncomprehending. "*Perdón?*"

"The toilet, the *pissoire*, the can, the head, the crapper. I'm bleeding to death, where's the potty?"

"Ohhh!" meaning dawned on the waiter, "*Excusado... atavio!*" He pointed. Eddie Burma patted him on the arm and slumped past, almost falling into a booth where a man and two women were groping one another darkly.

He found the door to the toilet and pushed it open. A reject from a Cuban Superman film was slicking back his long, oiled hair in an elaborate pompadour before the foggy mirror. He gave Eddie Burma a passing glance and went back to the topography of his coiffure. Burma moved past him in the tiny room and slipped into the first stall.

Once inside, he bolted the door, and sat down heavily on the lidless toilet. He pulled his shirt up out of his pants, and unbuttoned it. It stuck to his skin. He pulled, gently, and it came away with the sound of mud squished underfoot. The knife wound ran from just below the right nipple to the middle of his waist. It was deep. He was in trouble.

He stood up, hanging the shirt on the hook behind the door, and pulled hanks of toilet paper from the gray, crackly roll. He dipped the paper in a wad, into the toilet bowl, and swabbed at the wound. Oh, God, *really* deep.

Then nausea washed over him, and he sat down again. Strange thoughts came to him, and he let them work him over:

This morning, when I stepped out the front door, there were yellow roses growing on the bushes. It surprised me; I'd neglected to cut them back last fall, and I was certain the gnurled, blighted knobs at the ends of the branches-still there, silently dead in reproach of my negligence-would stunt any further beauty. But when I stepped out to pick up the newspaper, there they were. Full and light yellow, barely a canary-yellow. Breathing moistly, softly. It made me smile, and I went down the steps to the first landing, to get the paper. The parking lot had filled with leaves from the Eucalyptus again, but somehow, particularly this morning, it gave the private little area surrounding and below my secluded house in the hills a more lived-in, festive look. For the second time, for no sensible reason, I found myself smiling. It was going to be a

good day, and I had the feeling that all the problems I'd taken on—all the social cases I took unto myself—Alice and Burt and Linda down the hill—all the emotional cripples who came to me for succor—would shape up, and we'd all be smiling by end of day. And if not today, then certainly by Monday. Friday, the latest.

I picked up the paper and snapped the rubber band off it. I dropped the rubber band into the big metal trash basket at the foot of the stairs, and started climbing back up to the house, smelling the orange blossoms and the fine, chill morning air. I opened the paper as I climbed, and with all the suddenness of a freeway collision, the morning calm vanished from around me. I was stopped in midstep, one leg raised for the next riser, and my eyes felt suddenly grainy, as though I hadn't had enough sleep the night before. But I had.

The headline read: EDWARD BURMA FOUND MURDERED

But...I was Eddie Burma.

He came back from memories of yellow roses and twisted metal on freeways to find himself slumped against the side of the toilet stall, his head pressed to the wooden wall, his arms hanging down, the blood running into his pants top. His head throbbed, and the pain in his side was beating, hammering, pounding with a regularity that made him shiver with fear. He could not sit there, and wait.

Wait to die, or wait for them to find him.

He knew they would find him. He knew it.

The phone. He could call...

He didn't know whom he could call. But there had to be someone. Someone out there who would understand, who would come quickly and save him. Someone who wouldn't take what was left of him, the way the others would.

They didn't need knives.

How strange that *that* one, the little blonde with the Raggedy-Ann shoebutton eyes, had not known that. Or perhaps she had. But perhaps the hungered frenzy of the moment had overcome her, and she could not simply feed leisurely as the others did. She had cut him. Had done what they all did, but directly, without subtlety.

Her blade had been sharp. The others used much more devious weapons, subtler weapons. He wanted to say to her, "Try a dull knife." But she was too needing, too eager. She would not have heard him.

He struggled to his feet, and put on his shirt. It hurt to do it. The shirt was stained the color of teak with his blood. He could barely stand now.

Pulling foot after foot, he left the toilet, and wandered out into The Cave. The sound of "Mamacita Lisa" beat at him like gloved hands on a plate glass window. He leaned against the wall, and saw only shapes moving moving moving in the darkness. Were they out there? No, not yet; they would never look here first. He wasn't known here. And his essence was weaker now, weaker as he died, so no one in the crowd would come to him with a quivering need. No one would feel it possible to drink from this weak man, lying up against a wall.

He saw a pay phone, near the entrance to the kitchen, and he struggled toward it. A girl with long dark hair and haunted eyes stared at him as he passed, started to say something, then he summoned up strength to hurry past her before she could tell him she was pregnant and didn't know who the father was, or she was in pain from emphysema and didn't have doctor money, or she missed her mother who was still in San Juan. He could handle no more pains, could absorb no more anguish, could let no others drink from him. He didn't have that much left for his own survival.

My fingertips (he thought, moving) are covered with the scars of people I've touched. The flesh remembers those touches. Sometimes I feel as though I am wearing heavy woolen gloves, so thick are the memories of all those touches. It seems to insulate me, to separate me from mankind. Not mankind from me, God knows, for they get through without pause or difficulty—but me, from mankind. I very often refrain from washing my hands for days and days, just to preserve whatever layers of touches might be washed away by the soap.

Faces and voices and smells of people I've known have passed away, but still my hands carry the memories on them. Layer after layer of the laying-on of hands. Is that altogether sane? I don't know. I'll have to think about it for a very long time, when I have the time.

If I ever have the time.

He reached the pay phone; after a very long minute he was able to bring a coin up out of his pocket. It was a quarter. All he needed was a dime. He could not go back down there, he might not make it back again. He used the quarter, and dialed the number of a man he could trust, a man who could help him. He remembered the man now, knew the man was his only salvation.

He remembered seeing him in Georgia, at a revival meeting, a rural stump religion circus of screaming and Hallelujahs that sounded like !H!A!L!L!E!L!U!J!A!H! with dark black faces or red necks all straining toward the seat of God on the platform. He remembered the man in his white shirtsleeves, exhorting the crowd, and he heard again the man's spirit message.

"Get right with the Lord, before *he* gets right with *you*! Suffer your silent sins no longer! Take out your truth, carry it in your hands, give it to me, all the ugliness and cesspool filth of your souls! I'll wash you clean in the blood of the lamb, in the blood of the Lord, in the blood of the truth of the word! There's no other way, there's no great day coming without purging yourself, without cleansing your spirit! I can handle all the pain you've got boiling around down in the black lightless pit of your souls! Hear me, dear God hear me...I am your mouth, your tongue, your throat, the horn that will proclaim your deliverance to the Heavens above! Evil and good and worry and sorrow, all of it is mine, I can carry it, I can handle it. I can lift it from out of your mind and your soul and your body! The place is here, the place is me, give me your woe! Christ knew it, God knows it, *I* know it, and now *you* have to know it! Mortar and trowel and brick and cement make the wall of your need! Let me tear down that wall, let me hear all of it, let me into your mind and let me take your burdens! I'm the strength, I'm the watering place...come drink from my strength!"

And the people had rushed to him. Allover him, like ants feeding on a dead beast. And then the memory dissolved. The image of the tent revival meeting dissolved into images of wild animals tearing at meat, of hordes of carrion birds descending on fallen meat, of small fish leaping with sharp teeth at helpless meat, of hands and more hands, and teeth that sank into meat.

The number was busy.

It was busy again.

He had been dialing the same number for nearly an hour, and the number was always busy. Dancers with sweating faces had wanted to use the phone, but Eddie Burma had snarled at them that it was a matter of life and death that he reach the number he was calling, and the dancers had gone back to their partners with curses for him. But the line was still busy. Then he looked at the number on the pay phone, and knew he had been dialing himself all that time. That the line would always *always* be busy, and his furious hatred of the man on the other end who would not answer was hatred for the man who was calling. He was calling himself, and in that instant he remembered who the man had been at the revival meeting. He remembered leaping up out of the audience and taking the platform to beg all the stricken suffering ones to end their pain by drinking of his essence. He remembered, and the fear was greater than he could believe. He fled back to the toilet, to wait for them to find him.

Eddie Burma, hiding in the refuse room of a sightless dark spot in the netherworld of a universe that had singled him out for reality. Eddie Burma was an individual. He had substance. He had corporeality. In a world of walking shadows, of zombie breath and staring eyes like the cold dead flesh of the moon, Eddie Burma was a real person. He had been born with the ability to belong to his times; with the electricity of nature that some called charisma and others called warmth. He felt deeply; he moved through the world and touched; and was touched.

His was a doomed existence, because he was not only an extrovert and gregarious, but he was truly clever, vastly inventive, suffused with humor, and endowed with the power to listen. For these reasons he had passed through the stages of exhibitionism and praise-seeking to a state where his reality was assured. Was very much his own. When he came into a room, people knew it. He had a face. Not an image, or a substitute life that he could slip on when dealing with people, but a genuine reality. He was Eddie Burma, only Eddie Burma, and could not be confused with anyone else. He went his way, and he was identified as Eddie Burma in the eyes of anyone who ever met him. He was one of those memorable people. The kind other people who have no lives of their own talk about. He cropped up in conversations: "Do you know what Eddie said...?" or "Guess what happened to Eddie?" And there was never any confusion as to who was the subject under discussion.

Eddie Burma was a figure no larger than life, for life itself was large enough, in a world where most of those he met had no individuality, no personality, no reality, no existence of their own.

But the price he paid was the price of doom. For those who had nothing came to him and like creatures of darkness, amorally fed off him. They drank from him. They were the succubi, draining his psychic energies. And Eddie Burma always had more to give. Seemingly a bottomless well, the bottom had been reached. Finally. All the people whose woes he handled. all the losers whose lives he tried to organize, all the preying crawlers who slinked in through the ashes of their non-existence to sup at his

board, to slake the thirsts of their emptiness...all of them had taken their toll.

Now Eddie Burma stumbled through the last moments of his reality, with the wellsprings of himself almost totally drained. Waiting for them, for all his social cases, all his problem children. to come and finish him off.

I live in a hungry world, Eddie Burma now realized.

“Hey, man! C’mon outta th’ crapper!” The booming voice and the pounding on the stall door came as one.

Eddie trembled to his feet and unbolted the door, expecting it to be one of them. But it was only a dancer from The Cave, wanting to rid himself of cheap wine and cheap beer. Eddie stumbled out of the stall, almost falling into the man’s arms. When the beefy Puerto Rican saw the blood, saw the dead pale look of flesh and eyes, his manner softened.

“Hey...you okay, man?”

Eddie smiled at him, thanked him softly, and left the toilet. The nightclub was still high, still screaming, and Eddie suddenly knew he could not let *them* find this good place, where all these good people were plugged into life and living. Because for *them* it would be a godsend, and they would drain The Cave as they had drained him.

He found a rear exit, and emerged into the moonless city night, as alien as a cavern five miles down or the weird curvature of another dimension. This alley, this city, this night, could as easily have been Transylvania or the dark side of the moon or the bottom of the thrashing sea. He stumbled down the alley, thinking...

They have no lives of their own. Oh, this poisoned world I now see so clearly. They have only the shadowy images of other lives, and not even real other lives-the lives of movie stars, fictional heroes, cultural clichés. So they borrow from me, and never intend to pay back. They borrow, at the highest rate of interest. My life. They lap at me, and break off pieces of me. I’m the mushroom that Alice found with the words EAT ME in blood-red on my id. They’re succubi, draining at me, draining my soul. Sometimes I feel I should go to some mystical well and get poured full of personality again. I’m tired. So tired.

There are people walking around this city who are running on Eddie Burma’s drained energies, Eddie Burma’s life-force. They’re putt-putting around with smiles just like mine, with thoughts I’ve second-handed like old clothes passed on to poor relatives, with hand-movements and expressions and little cute sayings that were mine, Scotch-taped over their own. I’m a jigsaw puzzle and they keep stealing little pieces. Now I make no scene at all, I’m incomplete, I’m unable to keep the picture coherent, they’ve taken so much already.

They had come to his party, all of the ones he knew. The ones he called his friends, and the ones who were merely acquaintances, and the ones who were using him as their wizard, as their guru, their psychiatrist, their wailing wall, their father confessor, their repository of personal ills and woes and inadequacies. Alice, who was afraid of men and found in Eddie Burma a last vestige of belief that males were not all beasts. Burt, the box-boy from the supermarket, who stuttered when he spoke, and felt rejected even before the rejection. Linda, from down the hill, who had seen in Eddie Burma an intellectual, one to whom she could relate all her theories of the universe. Sid, who was a failure, at fifty-three. Nancy, whose husband cheated on her. John, who wanted to be a lawyer, but would never make it because he thought too much about his clubfoot. And all the others. And the new ones they always seemed to bring with them. There were always so many new ones he never knew. Particularly the pretty little blonde with the Raggedy-Ann shoebutton eyes, who stared at him hungrily.

And from the first, earlier that night, he had known something was wrong. There were too many of them at the party. More than he could handle...and all listening to him tell a story of something that had happened to him when he had driven to New Orleans in 1960 with Tony in the Corvette and they’d both gotten pleurisy because the top hadn’t been bolted down properly and they’d passed through a snowstorm in Illinois.

All of them hung to his words, like drying wash on a line, like festoons of ivy. They sucked at each word and every expression like hungry things pulling at the marrow in beef bones. They laughed, and they watched, and their eyes glittered...

Eddie Burma had slowly felt the strength ebbing from him. He grew weary even as he spoke. It had happened before, at other parties, other gatherings, when he had held the attention of the group, and gone home later, feeling drained. He had never known what it was.

But tonight the strength did not come back. They kept watching him, seemed to be *feeding* at him, and it went on and on, till finally he’d said he had to go to sleep, and they should go home. But they had

pleaded for one more anecdote, one more joke told with perfect dialect and elaborate gesticulation. Eddie Burma had begun to cry, quietly. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his body felt as though the bones and musculature had been removed, leaving only a soft rubbery coating that might at any moment cave in on itself.

He had tried to get up; to go and lie down; but they'd gotten more insistent, had demanded, had ordered, had grown nasty.

And then the blonde had come at him, and cut him, and the others were only a step behind. Somehow...in the thrashing tangle that had followed, with his friends and acquaintances now tearing at one another to get at him, he had escaped. He had fled, he did not know how-the pain of his knifed side crawling inside him. He had made it into the trees of the little glen where his house was hidden, and through the forest, over the watershed, down to the highway, where he had hailed a cab. Then into the city...

See me! See me, please! Just don't always come and take. Don't bathe in my reality and then go away feeling clean. Stay and let some of the dirt of you rub off on me. I feel like an invisible man, like a drinking trough, like a sideboard dripping with sweetmeats...Oh God, is this a play, and myself unwillingly the star? How the hell do I get off stage? When do they ring down the curtain? Is there, please God, a man with a hook...?

I make my rounds, like a faith healer. Each day I spend a little time with each one of them. With Alice and with Burt and with Linda down the hill.. and they take from me. They don't leave anything in exchange, though. It's not barter, it's theft. And the worst part of it is I always needed that, I always let them rob me. What sick need was it that gave them entrance to my soul? Even the pack rat leaves some worthless object when it steals a worthless object. I'd take anything from them: the smallest anecdote, the most used-up thought, the most stagnant concept, the puniest pun, the most obnoxious personal revelation...anything! But all they do is sit there and stare at me, their mouths open, their ears hearing me so completely they empty my words of color and scent...I feel as though they're crawling into me. I can't stand any more...really I can't.

The mouth of the alley was blocked.

Shadows moved there.

Burt, the box-boy. Nancy and Alice and Linda. Sid, the failure. John, who walked with a rolling motion. And the doctor, the juke box repairman, the pizza cook, the used car salesman, the swinging couple who swapped partners, the babyfat discotheque dancer...all of them.

They came for him.

And for the first time he noticed their teeth.

The moment before they reached him stretched out as silent and timeless as the decay that ate at his world. He had no time for self-pity. It was not merely that Eddie Burma had been cannibalized every day of the year, every hour of the day, every minute of every hour of every day of the year. The awareness dawned unhappily-in that moment of timeless time -that he had *let* them do it to him. That he was no better than them, only different. They were the feeders-and he was the food. But no nobility could be attached to one or the other. He *needed* to have people worship and admire him. He *needed* the love and attention of the masses, the worship of monkeys. And for Eddie Burma that was a kind of beginning to death. It was the death of his unselfconsciousness; the slaughter of his innocence. From that moment forward, he had been aware of the clever things he said and did, on a cellular level below consciousness. He was aware. Aware, aware, aware!

And awareness brought them to him, where they fed. It led to self-consciousness, petty pretensions, ostentation. And that was a thing devoid of substance, of reality. And if there was anything on which his acolytes could not nourish, it was a posturing, phony, *empty* human being.

They would drain him.

The moment came to a timeless climax, and they carried him down under their weight, and began to feed.

When it was over, they left him in the alley. They went to look elsewhere.

With the vessel drained, the vampires moved to other pulsing arteries.

In Lonely Lands

*He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world he stands.*
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

PEDERSON KNEW NIGHT WAS FALLING over Syrtis Major; blind, still he knew the Martian night had arrived; the harp crickets had come out. The halo of sun's warmth that had kept him golden through the long day had dissipated, and he could feel the chill of the darkness now. Despite his blindness there was an appreciable *changing* in the shadows that lived where once, long ago, there had been sight.

"Pretrie," he called into the hush, and the answering echoes from the moon valleys answered and answered, *Pretrie, Pretrie, Pretrie*, down and down, almost to the foot of the small mountain.

"I'm here, Pederson old man. What do you want of me?"

Pederson relaxed in the pneumorack. He had been tense for some time, waiting. Now he relaxed. "Have you been to the temple?"

"I was there. I prayed for many turnings, through three colors."

It had been many years since Pederson had seen colors. But he knew the Martian's religion was strong and stable because of colors. "And what did the blessed Jilka foretell, Pretrie?"

"Tomorrow will be cupped in the memory of today. And other things." The silken overtones of the alien's voice were soothing. Though Pederson had never seen the tall, utterly ancient Jilkite, he had passed his arthritic, spatulate fingers over the alien's hairless, teardrop head, had seen by feeling the deep round sockets where eyes glowed, the pug nose, the thin, lipless gash that was mouth. Pederson knew this face as he knew his own, with its wrinkles and sags and protuberances. He knew the Jilkite was so old no man could estimate it in Earth years.

"Do you hear the Gray Man coming yet?"

Pretrie sighed, a lung-deep sigh, and Pederson could hear the inevitable crackling of bones as the alien hunkered down beside the old man's pneumorack.

"He comes but slowly, old man. But he comes. Have patience."

"Patience," Pederson chuckled ruminatively. "I got that, Pretrie. I got that and that's about all. I used to have time, too, but now that's about gone. You say he's coming?"

"Coming, old man. Time. Just time."

"How are the blue shadows, Pretrie?"

"Thick as fur in the moon valleys, old man. Night is coming."

"Are the moons out?"

There was a breathing through wide nostrils-ritualistically slit nostrils-and the alien replied, "None yet this night. Tayseff and Teei are below the horizon. It grows dark swiftly. Perhaps this night, old man."

"Perhaps," Pederson agreed.

"Have patience."

Pederson had not always had patience. As a young man, the blood warm in him, he had fought with his Presby-Baptist father, and taken to space. He had not believed in Heaven, Hell, and the accompanying rigors of the All-Church. Not then. Later, but not then.

To space he had gone, and the years had been good to him. He had aged slowly, healthily, as men do in the dark places between dirt. Yet he had seen the death, and the men who had died believing, the men who had died not believing. And with time had come the realization that he was alone, and that some day, one day, the Gray Man would come for him.

He was always alone, and in his loneliness, when the time came that he could no longer tool the great ships through the star-spaces, he went away.

He went away, searching for a home, and finally came full-circle to the first world he had known; came home to Mars, where he had been young, where his dreams had been born; Mars, for home is always where a man has been young and happy. Came home where the days were warm and the nights were mild. Came home where men had passed but somehow, miraculously, had not sunk their steel and concrete roots. Came home to a home that had changed not at all since he'd been young. And it was time. For blindness

had found him, and the slowness that forewarned him of the Gray Man's visit. Blindness from too many glasses of vik and Scotch, from too much hard radiation, from too many years of squinting into the vastness. Blind, and unable to earn his keep.

So alone, he had come home; as the bird finds the tree, as the winter-starved deer finds the last bit of bark, as the river finds the sea. He had come there to wait for the Gray Man, and it was there that the Jilkite Pretrie had found him.

They sat together, silently, on the porch with many things unsaid, yet passing between them.

"Pretrie?"

"Old man."

"I never asked you what you get out of this. I mean--"

Pretrie reached and the sound of his claw tapping the formica tabletop came to Pederson. Then the alien was pressing a bulb of water-diluted vik into his hand. "I know what you mean, old man. I have been with you close on two harvestings. I am here. Does that not satisfy you?"

Two harvestings. Equivalent to four years Earth-time, Pederson knew. The Jilkite had come out of the dawn one day, and stayed to serve the old blind man. Pederson had never questioned it. One day he was struggling with the coffee pot (he dearly loved old-fashion brewed coffee and scorned the use of the coffee briquettes) and the heat controls on the hutch...the next he had an undemanding, unselfish manservant who catered with dignity and regard to his every desire. It had been a companionable relationship; he had made no great demands on Pretrie, and the alien had asked nothing in return.

He was in no position to wonder or question.

Though he could hear Pretrie's brothers in the chest-high floss brakes at harvesting time, still the Jilkite never wandered far from the hutch.

Now, it was nearing its end.

"It has been easier with you. I-uh-thanks, Pretrie," the old man felt the need to say it clearly, without embroidery.

A soft grunt of acknowledgment. "I thank you for allowing me to remain with you, old man, Pederson," the Jilkite answered softly.

A spot of cool touched Pederson's cheek. At first he thought it was rain, but no more came, and he asked, "What was that?"

The Jilkite shifted-with what Pederson took to be discomfort-and answered, "A custom of my race."

"What?" Pederson persisted.

"A tear, old man. A tear from my eye to your body."

"Hey, look..." he began, trying to convey his feelings, and realizing *look* was the wrong word. He stumbled on, an emotion coming to him he had long thought dead inside himself. "You don't have to be-uh-you know, sad, Pretrie. I've lived a good life. The Gray Man doesn't scare me." His voice was brave, but it cracked with the age in the cords.

"My race does not know sadness, Pederson. We know gratitude and companionship and beauty. But not sadness. That is a serious lack, so you have told me, but we do not yearn after the dark and the lost. My tear is a thank you for your kindness."

"Kindness?"

"For allowing me to remain with you."

The old man subsided then, waiting. He did not understand. But the alien had found him, and the presence of Pretrie had made things easier for him in these last years. He was grateful, and wise enough to remain silent.

They sat there thinking their own thoughts, and Pederson's mind winnowed the wheat of incidents from the chaff of life spent.

He recalled the days alone in the great ships, and how he had at first laughed to think of his father's religion, his father's words about loneliness: "No man walks the road without companionship, Will," his father had said. He had laughed, declaring he was a loner, but now, with the unnamable warmth and presence of the alien here beside him, he knew the truth.

His father had been correct.

It was good to have a friend. Especially when the Gray Man was coming. Strange how he knew it with such calm certainty, but that was the way of it. He knew, and he waited placidly.

After a while, the chill came down off the hills, and Pretrie brought out the treated shawl. He laid it about the old man's thin shoulders, where it clung with warmth, and hunkered down on his triple-jointed legs once more.

"I don't know, Pretrie," Pederson ruminated, later.

There was no answer. There had been no question.

"I just don't know. Was it worth it all? The time aspace, the men I've known, the lonely ones who died and the dying ones who were never lonely."

"All peoples know that ache, old man," Pretrie philosophized. He drew a deep breath.

"I never thought I needed anyone. I've learned better, Pretrie."

"One never knows." Pederson had taught the alien little; Pretrie had come to him speaking English. It had been one more puzzling thing about the Jilkite, but again Pederson had not questioned it. There had been many spacers and missionaries on Mars.

"Everybody needs somebody," Pederson went on.

"You will never know," Pederson agreed in emphasis. Then added, "Perhaps you will."

Then the alien stiffened, his claw upon the old man's arm. "He comes, Pederson old man."

A thrill of expectancy, and a shiver of near-fright came with it. Pederson's gray head lifted, and despite the warmth of the shawl he felt cold. So near now. "He's coming?"

"He is here."

They both sensed it, for Pederson could feel the awareness in the Jilkite beside him; he had grown sensitive to the alien's moods, even as the other had plumbed his own. "The Gray Man." Pederson spoke the words softly on the night air, and the moon valleys did not respond.

"I'm ready," said the old man, and he extended his left hand for the grasp. He set down the bulb of vik with his other hand.

The feel of hardening came stealing through him, and it was as though someone had taken his hand in return. Then, as he thought he was to go, alone, he said, "Good-bye to you, Pretrie, friend."

But there was no good-bye from the alien beside him. Instead, the Jilkite's voice came to him as through a fog softly descending.

"We go together, friend Pederson. The Gray Man comes to all races. Why do you expect me to go alone? Each need is a great one.

"I am here, Gray Man. Here. I am not alone." Oddly, Pederson knew the Jilkite's claw had been offered, and taken in the clasp.

He closed his blind eyes.

After a great while, the sound of the harp crickets thrummed high once more, and on the porch before the hutch, there was the silence of peace.

Night had come to the lonely lands; night, but not darkness.

Eyes of Dust

IT WAS INEVITABLE they should marry. She with the mole on her right cheek, he blind in the presence of light. There should have been no reason for tolerating them on Topaz; on a world dedicated to beauty, imperfection could not be endured. Yet, they lived, and were avoided, and mated. As it should have been. Beauty seeks its level, as does ugliness. As do pariahs.

So they married, and they managed to live, and soon, she was with child.

The terrible thing began.

The city of Light on the planet Topaz rose five thousand feet into the pearl sky. Its towers glowed with an aura imprisoned in the matter itself. All pastels: all blues and pinks and soft greens, that blended into one wonderful impression of flow and swirl. The towers were of three heights. Sweeping giants that rose five thousand feet to the fraction of an inch, medium-sized towers that were mere pauses at thirteen hundred feet, before the giants hurled past them, and midget towers, delicate and impertinent in their hundred-foot rise.

Glistening, shining, run out and diving, then rising and arching into a hold at another tower, the flying bridges and roadways were marvels of construction. At the various levels, clear layers of substance provided risers and dividers, giving the city the look of a fairy empire, set away from an ugly world, swathed in its own beauty.

And the people.

Each man, woman, child was a note in a great symphony of perfection. Both simplicity and flamboyance were there, but so intermingled and integrated that nothing coarse or crass could be discerned. Their faces were not blank, nor vapid, nor coarse. They held beauty in their eyes, and in the clearness of their complexions, and the rhythm of their stride.

There was nothing but beauty on Topaz. In the city of Light there was nothing but the glorious presentation of perfection and elegance. No sinking into racial senility, no nirvana, no ennui. This was a vital culture, rich in thought, complex in design, but dedicated to the beauty of life, and the reflection of that beauty in all things material.

The blind man and his wife, the mole woman, lived in the small units outside the city, where the farmers tilled their symmetrical fields with equipment that was handsome in its construction, efficient in its labors.

They lived in a split-level home that boasted all modern robotic conveniences. The lights dimmed or shone according to palmed instructions; heat radiated from those walls at the touch of a stud; food was prepared on elaborate and gorgeous robochefs; snits hummed from wall-cubbys to clean up instantly; and it was good there

In the machine cellar, where the servomechanisms were housed, where the nerve center of the house was located, the blind man and the mole woman had constructed an extra room, set off from the light, for a special purpose. In the room, soft walls shrouded sound, protected the inhabitant from outside distractions. In the room, no light penetrated, and the bed was a palette of downyness.

The inhabitant was a Person.

Person, for no other name had ever been dispensed. Not like the blind man, who was Broomall, or the mole woman, who was Ordak. They had names, for they went abroad onto Topaz occasionally, and had to deal with others. But no such intercourse was practiced by the Person. He never saw the light, and he never strolled, for the room was his home, and his parents had insured he would never venture from it.

In the machine cellar of the split-level out beyond the city of Light, the Person sat in stolid silence, hands folded delicately in lap, feet turned inward and at rest.

Eyes of dust turned to not-colors that moved.

For the Person could not have been endured on Topaz. On a world of beauty, all beauty, ugliness was a known but despised factor. Broomall and Ordak were malformed...a mole and blindness...but they had been in the community long, and they were intelligent enough to keep to themselves. But their offspring was another matter.

With eyes of dust, who could tolerate such a thing?

Broomall unpalmed the door, and entered.

"Father..." Person murmured, a tongue as sweet as brook water, with tones like butterflies' wings.

"Yes. How are you today? Have you had another vision?"

The Person nodded, his gray sockets turning toward the blind man. "It came earlier, Father. Deepest black, with bright shoots of red thrusting up. It reminded me of the mouth of a volcano, Father."

The blind man felt his way to the palette, lowered his body, and shook his head slowly. "But you have never seen a volcano, my son."

Person took a step away from the wall, and his great hands hung loosely below his knees. "I know."

"Then, how-"

"The way I saw the gulls dipping over the green spit of land. The way I saw the deep river of orange mud that bubbled its way to the swamp. It is all one, Father. I see."

The blind man continued to nod and shake his head with bewilderment. There were answers here, to questions he had never asked.

"Where is Mother? She has not been to see me in several times."

The blind man sighed. "She must work, son, if we wish to fill up our food bins. She has taken labor in the wafting center."

"Ah." The Person conjured up a vision of the sense centers, where smells and sounds and feelings of beauty were poured out on the air of Topaz, for the inhabitants to enjoy. "She must like it there. So near to the scent of orchids."

"She says it's a job."

The Person nodded. His great head bowed slightly, and pits of shadow marked his eyes of grayness.

"Is there anything you want?"

The Person slid down the wall, into the cool darkness, and answered softly, for he knew his father was without sight; even devoid the sight *he* possessed. "No, Father. I lack for nothing. I have my meal cakes and my ale. I have my shadows and my colors. And there is the smell of the time passing. I need nothing more."

"How strange you are, my son," the blind man said enigmatically, for it was no enigma at all. The Person gave off the soft musky chuckle of tender amusement.

"How strange I am indeed, Father."

The blind man got slowly to his feet, the bones of his legs cracking faintly. "Soon, my son," he said finally.

"Go sweetly, my Father," the Person said, using the terms of the people of Topaz.

"Stay softly," replied the father, traditionally.

Then he went out, carefully palmlocking the door, and setting it to a fresh combination. Caution could not be too deep in this matter. Twenty years had shown that. Twenty years, during which time their son had remained alive, to roam at will in his world of strange blind-sight.

The blind man climbed the ramp to the living floor, and sat cross-legged on his low platform, sending soft pipings flickering from a helix-shaped flute.

He played without break for some time, until the porter glowed pinkly, cast out a tremulous warning note, and Ordak took form in the bowl.

"Wheew!" she stepped out of the bowl and sank onto a nest of foamettes. "What a day. If I never smell another orchid, it'll be too soon. Good evening, dear. How was he today?"

The blind man laid aside his flute, and extended his arms to the woman. He took her into their enfolding circle and held her dark hair against his neck, so smooth, so warm. His answer was a grunt. She understood.

"How will it be, Broomall? Tell me," she pleaded.

He put her from him gently, and sighed with deep contemplation. "Ordak, how can I say it'll be good, when it gets worse each day? You know he can't go out, and you know we must live here...they would never tolerate him outside, even to the spaceport and off. We're trapped here, my darling."

She stood up and smoothed down the front of her sweepspun tunic and skirt. Her hair was coiffed in such a way that the mole on her right cheek was covered. They knew of her deformity, of course, but not seeing it made it easier for them.

She was standing there, wondering what would come from the future, her blind husband at her feet, when the future dropped from the sky. It was as it was! Not the good thing, nor the bad, but merely the way of it. The unflinching trampling of life over its parts. The way of it, the truth of it.

As she stood there, silent, and wondering, the force-bead drive of a cross-continent copter ruptured-product of an imperfectly directed drive beam, cool and unnoticed-and the ponderous vehicle

plunged down from its cruising level of twenty-five hundred feet. It fell two hundred yards from the split-level, demolishing the aboveground sections of the house without warning. Smashing the building to the ground, saving only the machine cellar by a fluke of impact; saved for the searchmecks and analyzers who came later, to estimate the damage, and to extricate those left alive.

Aboveground, no one was left alive. The last two known imperfects on Topaz had gone to a companionable rest; where beauty and non-beauty had no meaning. Where all was soft grays and the clinging warmth of the nearness of each other.

For such was the way it must be thought about.

But below ground...

There the terrible thing began in earnest. What had lain in wait for twenty years, now snarled, leaped, and threw itself at the throat of beauty on Topaz.

Meditating he was. They found him meditating.

They came down through the rubble with forcepak beams that melted the twisted metal and fused plastic into solid, attractive walls of pastel, between which they picked their delicate way. When they came to the secret room-whose door was not in the least pleasing to the eye-they stopped, perplexed, and considered what to do.

There were three of them. Handsome men, in the extreme. One was blond, with wide-set blue eyes and the air of an executive. He carried himself within his gold and copperthread tunic with the calmed assurance of a man who knows he is competent and handsome. In the extreme. The second was only a few inches shorter than the first man's six feet, and his dark, tightly curled head of hair swooped down across a white, white forehead with the dexterity of a panther a-leap over lambs. His arms seemed shorter than they should be, but it was the trick of the plasurgeon, who had calculated the imperfection that makes for perfection-coupling the arms with a long torso and shorter legs-and who had brought it off resoundingly. The second man gave an immediate impression of Adonislike proportions.

The third man was the classic Greek ideal of virility and competence. His deep-set gray eyes snapped back and forth with authority and compassion. His walk was the walk of the legionnaire, his speech the measured pace of the wise man. He would never go bald, his smile did not fade.

"I've never seen anything like this, before," said the curly haired analyzer, whose name was Roul.

"This isn't standard in machine cellars, is it?" asked the leader, whose name was Prathe.

The third man, Hold, shook his head with wise and faintly tinged humor. "No, and I must admit it's an unpleasant arrangement. Unsprayed. Crude." He gave a soft, womanlike shudder. But it was in character, and neither of the companions noticed, despite its un-beautiful nature.

"Well, let's open it," suggested Prathe, hefting his forcepak.

The other two did not answer, and that was a perfect sign of agreement, so he applied the beam. A wide arc of delicious fruit-green streamed out and washed the door. In a few seconds it had fused along the sides, and run together in excellent symmetry. They stared through into the thrusting darkness.

Meditating he was. They found him meditating.

When first the light filtered through from behind them, they could not discern that it was human. It was a gray heap hulked close to the angle of floor and wall, its great head hung down, and hands turned into the lap.

Then, as the particulars became clear, each in turn drew a shocked breath. Prathe was first into the room, and his voice was an almost-*unpleasant* mixture of wonder and revulsion.

Roul followed, and as the form of the Person grew specific, he emitted a round, pear-shaped, long and boxlike then shattered cry of terror. "How vile!" and his face was unhandsome. In the extreme.

Hold shone his light down into the corner, and away as quickly. In its wild travels, the beam covered the room in its entirety: palette, bare walls, small dish with gruel still in it, and mat on the floor. Then back to the Person again, but this time, the pool of brilliance was directed at the floor and the edge of the Person's buttocks, so the full light did not fall on that face, oh that face!

The great head with its high unkempt crown of nearly-white hair...spread out and in two huge tufts at either temple. The heavy-jowled face, with the mouth that was a wicked, slanting slash through the pale white flesh. The ears that hugged close and round to the head.

Then the eyes...

The eyes of dust...

Two deep-nestled pockets, where gray swirled. The gray of decaying bodies. The gray of storm clouds. The gray of feelings most unhappy, and of death. The eyes that seemed to see so deeply, yet could

see nothing. Ugly eyes.

They raised their forcepaks, and the Person stirred, moved, and there was great agitation.

First there was light, and then there was no-light. First there was heat, and then there was no-heat.

And-

First there was love, so deep it made a tiny whirlpool in his bowels, swirling and whipping and turning, like a woman in a warm bath. Savoring the being, enjoying the luxury of sliding down ever down into complacency and no pain at all. With deep thoughts; with thinking of wonders and everydays. Thoughts of how wide it was, and where it was, and how far might it stretch out to the farthest places. All that. Then there was no-love. But in its place did not come the absence of love, the emptiness that the going of light and heat had left. Another moved in to take its place.

In its place came
don't come
must come
it came
Hate!

Much later, when the suns had set, and the moons had come up to mourn balefully in silence over the world of beauty, Topaz, others came. They found the three bodies, so ugly in death, so pitiful in crushed and battered death.

Then they took him. They took him out, saying, "All this, all this." And there was such reviling and such cursing. The hatred for him was there, too, and the knowing that he was anathema. Pariah. Terrible! He was ugliness amidst all this beauty and, "What will we do with him? How can we kill him?"

Then one came forward. A poet whose meters were correct, and whose images were gorgeous. He was slim and well-mannered and it fell to him to envision the right way of it. To create beauty from ugliness, good from evil.

So they rigged the well-holed pole, and it rose straight and true to the quartet of moons, and they tied him to it, and set the faggots about. And they lit him.

Watching him burn.

But it was the bad thing, once again.

For the Person had eyes of dust, and the eyes of dust saw what could not be seen, and the soul within was the sweet and sick soul of the visionary.

He had the audacity to weep and cry as he burned, wailing, "Oh don't kill me. Oh don't! There is so much for me to see, so much I don't know." He longed and pleaded and yearned for the knowledge and the visions he would never glimpse.

But they burned him, all the same.

And it was good. The fire. The beauty of it. It was beauty. If only he had been wise enough not to scream.

And when the ashes settled, they were melted, and it was a perfect pool of lustrous silver where the pole and the Person had been.

It was beauty, as all was beauty.

And there were none who could dispute it: everything was beauty on Topaz now. Beauty and peace.

But the night sky rang with the stifled and fading shrieks that would never entirely pass. And as the clouds passed before two of the moons, it was clear to one who was weak and would admit it: the eyes of dust were not gone.

Nothing for My Noon Meal

THERE WAS A PATCH of Flubs growing out beyond the spikes, and I tried to cultivate them, and bring them around, but somehow they weren't drawing enough, and they died off before they could mature. I needed that air, too. My sac was nearly half-empty. My head was starting to hurt again. It had been night for three months at that time.

My world is a small one. Not large enough to hold an atmosphere any normal Earthman could breathe, not small enough to have none and be totally airless. My world is the sole planet of a red sun, and it has two moons, each one of which serves to eclipse my world's sun for six of the eighteen months. I have light for six months, dark for twelve. I call my world Hell.

When I first came here, I had a name, and I had a face and I even had a wife. My wife died when the ship blew up, and my name died slowly over the ten years I have lived here, and my face-well, the less I remember that, the easier it is for me.

Oh, I don't complain. It hasn't been easy for me here, but I've managed, and what can I say? I'm here and I'm alive as best I can be here, and what there is, there is. But what there is not, is greater than mere complaining could bring back.

The first time I saw my world it was as a small egg of light in the plot tank on the ship I shared with my wife. "Do you think that has anything for us?" I asked her.

At first it was good to remember her; when I did, a sweetness came to me, burning away my tears and my hate. At first. "I don't know, Tom, maybe." That was what she said. "Maybe." That was the sweet word, the way she said it. She always had a soft blonde way of saying maybe that made me want to wonder.

"The ore hold could do with something to chew on," I said, and she smiled with her full lips and her teeth that gently nuzzled her lower lip. "Have to pay for these damn honeymoons of yours somehow."

I kissed her playfully; we were often happy like that; simply happy, by being together. Together. What that meant to me, I never quite knew, happy as I was. Our enjoyment of one another was so uncomplicated, that it never struck me how it could be with her gone.

Then we passed through that fog of subatomic particles that float beyond the orbit of Firstmoon, and though they did not register on the tank, they were there and they were here and gone. Leaving in their wake a million tiny invisible punctures in the hull of the ship. The holes would not have leaked enough air in a month to cause my wife or myself any discomfort, but they had pierced the drive chambers, also. The particles were, not rock, but something else, perhaps even contra-terrene, and what they did to the drive chambers I will never know. For the ship lost power and slewed off toward this, my world, and miles above the surface it exploded.

My wife died, then, and I saw her body as I was whirled away in the safety section of the cab. I was safe, with great tanks of oxygen strapped to my hutch, and my wife was still there in the companionway between the metal walls. In the companionway between the galley and the cab, where she had gone to prepare my coffee.

She was still there, her arms outstretched to me, her skin quite blue-excuse me, it, it hurts still-as I was whirled away and down. I saw her that once.

My world is a harsh world. No clouds fleece its twelvemonth black skies. No water runs across its surface. But then, water is no problem for me. I have the circulator, which takes my refuse, and turns it into drinkable water. There is a strong ammonia taste to the recirculated water, but that doesn't bother me too much.

It's the air that I have trouble getting. At least that was the case before I discovered the Fluhs and what I needed. I'll tell you about it, and about what has happened to my face; I'm frightened.

Of course I had to live.

Not at all because I wanted to live; when you've been a space bum as long as me, and nothing to moor you to one rock, and then along comes a woman who dips up life in her eyes and hands and does it all for you-and then she is taken away so quickly...

But I had to live. Simply because I had air in the cab, and a pressure-suit and food and the circulator. I could subsist on these for quite a while.

So I lived on Hell.

I woke and went through enough hours of nothingness to make me weary, and then I slept again,

and woke when my dreams grew too crimson and too loud, repeating the tracks of the “day” before. Soon I grew bored with my life in the cab, close and solitary as it was, and decided to take a walk on the surface of this world.

I slipped into my air-suit, not bothering to put on the pressure shell. There was barely enough gravity on the planet to keep me comfortable, and occasionally I got stiff pains in my chest. But with the heating circuits printed into the material of the air-suit, I was in no real danger. I strapped the oxygen unit to my back, and slipped the bubble onto the yoke, dogging it down over my head with ease. Then I inserted the hose between oxygen unit and bubble and sealed it tightly with a wrench, so I would lose no air from leakage.

Then I went out.

It was twilight, as the sky dimmed on Hell. I had had three months of light already, since I had landed in the safety hutch, and I assumed perhaps two months of light had passed before I came. That left me with a month, roughly, before Secondmoon slipped completely across the face of the tiny red sun which I had not named. Even now, Secondmoon was coming across its disc, and I knew it would be darkness for a full six months by that moon, then another six from Firstmoon, then light again for a brief six.

It had not been difficult to chart orbits and eclipse periods during the past three months. What else had I to do?

I started walking. It was difficult, and I found that by taking long hops, I could cover distances three times as great as those possible.

The planet was nearly barren. No great forests, no streams or oceans, no plains with grain standing on them, no birds, and no other life but mine and

When I first saw them, I was certain they were trumpet flowers, for they had the characteristic bell-shaped perianth with delicate stamen projecting slightly from the cup. But as I drew nearer I realized nothing so Earthlike—even in outward appearance—could occur here. These were not flowers, and on the spot, in the muffled breathing of my helmet, I called them Fluhs.

They were a brilliant orange on the outside of the bell, fading down into a bluish-orange and then a simple marine blue on the stem. Inside the cups they seemed not so much orange as golden, and the blue of the pistils was topped by anthers of orange. Quite colorful they were, and pleasant to look upon.

There were perhaps a hundred of these plants, growing at the base of rock formations that were highly unnatural: tall and leaning at angles, and all smooth and sharp-edged, like spikes, flattened off at the tops. Not so much like rocks, but like the image of salt crystals or glass, under ultramagnification. The entire area was covered with these formations, and with an instant’s loss of reality, I seemed to see myself as a microscopic being, surrounded by great flat-edged, flat-topped crystals that were in reality merely dust or microspecks.

Then my perspective returned, and I stepped closer to the Fluhs, to examine them more closely, for this was the only other life that had managed to exist on Hell, apparently, drawing sustenance from the thin, nitrogen-laden atmosphere.

I leaned over to stare deeper into the trumpet-blossoms, resting on one of the slanting pillars of pseudo-rock for support. That was one of my first mistakes, nearly fatal, and to color my life on Hell.

The pillar crashed—it was a semiporous volcanic formation, almost scorialike in composition—and loosened other rocks that had rested on it. I fell forward, directly atop the Fluhs, and the last thing I felt was my oxygen helmet shattering about my head.

Then the blackness that was not as deep as space slid down over me.

I should have been dead. There was no reason why I should not have been dead. But I was living; I was...breathing! Can you understand that? I should have been with my wife, but I was alive.

My face was pressed into the Fluhs.

I was drawing oxygen from them.

I had stumbled and fallen and cracked open my helmet, and should have died, but because of strange plants that sucked the nitrogen from the thin atmosphere, circulated it and cast it back out as oxygen, I was still alive. I cursed the Fluhs for depriving me of quick, unknowing surcease. I had come so close to joining her, and had lost the chance. I wanted to stagger away from the Fluhs—out into the open where they could not give me air—and gasp away my stolen life. But something stopped me. I was never a religious man, and I am not now. But there seemed to be something miraculous in what had happened. I can’t explain it. I just *knew* there was a Chance that had thrown me down into that patch of Fluhs.

I lay there, breathing deeply.

There was a soft membrane around the base of the pistils that must have held in the oxygen, allowing it to leak out slowly. They were intricate and wonderful plants.

...and there was the smell of midnight.

I can't describe it any more clearly. It was not a sweet smell, nor was it a sour smell. It was a tender, almost fragile odor that reminded me of one midnight when I had first married her, and we were living in Minnesota. Crisp, and pure and uplifting that midnight had been, when our love had transcended even the restrictions of marriage, when we first realized we were more in love than in love with love itself. Does that sound foolish or confused? No, to me it was perfectly clear. And so was the smell of midnight from the Flubs.

It was the smell perhaps, that made me go on living.

That, and the fact that my face had begun to drain.

As I lay there, I had time to think about what this meant: the bottleneck in oxygen-lack is the brain. After five minutes of oxygen starvation, the brain is irreversibly damaged. But with these Flubs, I could wander about my planet without a helmet-were I able to find them everywhere in such abundance.

As I lay there thinking, gathering strength for the run back to the ship, I felt my face draining. It was as though I had a great boil or pus-sac on my right cheek, and it was sucking blood down into it. I felt my cheek, and yes, even through the glove I could feel a swelling. I grew terrified then, and plucking a handful of Flubs-close to the bottom of their stems-I thrust my face into them and ran frantically back to the ship.

Once inside, the Flubs wilted and falling down over my fist, they shriveled. Their brilliant colors faded, and they turned gray as brain matter. I threw them from me and they lay on the deckplate for a few minutes, then they crumbled to a fine ash.

I pulled off my air-suit and my gloves, and ran to the recirculator that was constructed of burnished plasteel; my reflection lived there clearly. My right cheek was terribly inflamed. I gave a short, sharp squeal of terror and pawed at my face, but unlike a pimple or boil, there was no soreness, no pain. Just the constant draining feeling.

What was there to do? I waited.

In a week, the sac had taken shape almost completely. My face was like no human face, drawn down and puffed out on the right side so that my eye had been pulled into a mere slit of light shining through. It was like a gigantic goiter, a goiter that was not on the neck, but the face. The sac ended just at the jawbone, and it did not impair my breathing a bit. But my mouth had been dragged down with it, and when I opened it, I found I had a great cavernous maw instead of the firm lips that had formed my mouth. Otherwise, my face was completely normal. I was a half-beast. My left side was normal, and my right was grotesquely pulled into a drooping, rubbery parody of humanity. I could not bear to look at myself for more than an instant or two, each "day." The flaming redness of it had gone away, as had the draining, and I did not understand it for many weeks.

Until I ventured once more onto the surface of Hell.

The helmet could not be repaired, of course, so I used the one that my wife had used when she was with me. That set me thinking again, and later, when I had steadied myself, and stopped crying, I went out.

It was inevitable that I should return to the spot where my deformity had first occurred. I reached the spikes-as I had now named the rock formations-without event, and sat down among a patch of Flubs. If I had drawn off their life-giving oxygen, they seemed no worse for it, for they had continued to grow in brilliance and were, if anything, even more beautiful.

I stared at them for a long time, trying to apply what smattering of knowledge I had about the physics and chemistry of botany to what had happened. One thing, at least, was obvious: I had undergone a fantastic mutation.

A mutation that was essentially impossible from what Man knew of life and its construction. What might, under exaggerated conditions, have turned out as a permanent mutation, through generations of special breeding, had happened to me almost overnight. I tried to reason it out:

Even on a molecular level, structure is inextricably related to function. I considered the structure of proteins, for in that direction, I felt, lay at least a partial answer to my deformity.

Finally, I removed the helmet, and bent down to the Flubs once more. I sucked air from them, and this time felt a great light-headedness. I continued drawing, first from one flower and then the next, till I knew. My sac was full. It all became reasonably clear to me, then. The smell of midnight. There was more than just odor there. I had assimilated bacteria from the Flubs; bacteria that had attacked the stabilizing

enzymes in my breathing system. Viruses perhaps, or even *rickettsiae*, that had-for want of a clearer term-softened my proteins and reshaped them to best allow me to make use of the Fluhs.

To allow me to oxygen-suck, as I had been doing, developing a bigger chest or larger lungs would have done me no good. But a balloon-like organ, capable of storing oxygen under pressure...*that* was something else again. When I sucked from the plants, oxygen bled slowly from the blood haemoglobin into the storage sac, and after a while I would be oxygen-full.

I could then proceed without air for short periods, even as a camel can go without water for periods of greater duration. Of course I would have to have an occasional suck to restore what I had used up in between; in an emergency, I could go without for a long while, but then I would need a *long* suck to replace completely.

How it had occurred, down on the nucleoprotein level, I was not that much of a biochemist to understand. What I knew, I knew via hypno-courses I had taken many years before in Deimos University's required classes. I knew these things, but had never studied enough to be able to analyze them. Given time and sufficient references, I was sure I could unravel the mystery; unlike Earth scientists, who discounted almost-instantaneous mutation as a fantasy, I *had* to believe...it had happened to me. I had only to feel my face, my puffed and now ballooned face, to know it was true. So I had more to work with than they did.

At that moment, I realized I had been standing erect for some minutes, my face nowhere near the Fluhs. Yet I was breathing comfortably.

Yes, I had something to work with, where they did not, for I was living the nightmare fantasy they said was impossible.

That was six months ago. Now it is well into night, and judging from the way the Fluhs are dying, there will be nothing when light comes. Nothing left to breathe. Nothing for my noon meal.

It was so dark. The stars were too far off to care about Hell or what lived there. I should have known, of course. In the eternal darkness of twelve months' night, the Fluhs died. They didn't gray-ash as did the ones I first picked. No, instead they retreated into the ground. They grew smaller and smaller, as though they were a motion picture being run backward. They got tinier and finally disappeared entirely. Whether they incysted themselves, or just died completely, I never knew, for the ground was much too hard to dig in, and what little I'd been able to scrape away, where the scorialike formations extended onto the ground, revealed nothing but small holes where the blossoms descended.

My head was starting to hurt again, and my sac was emptying out all the faster, because my breathing-which I had learned to draw shallowly-was deepening with effort. I started back toward the ship.

It was many miles around the planet, for I had been living in caves and subsisting on the rations brought with me, for the past three "days." I had been trying to track down a thriving patch of Fluhs, not only to get oxygen to replenish my emptying sac, but to further study their strange metabolism. My oxygen supply in the hutch was fast diminishing; something had gone broke in the system when I had landed...or perhaps the same particles that had caused the ship's reactors to explode, had caused invisible damage in the oxygen recirculator. I didn't know. But I did know I had to learn to live on what Hell could give me...or die.

It had been a difficult decision. I had wanted very much to die.

I was standing in the open, with the heated cowl of my airsuit grotesquely drawn about my head and sac, when I saw the flickering in the deep. It burned steadily for an instant, then continued to flicker as it fell toward the tiny planet.

I realized almost at once that it was a ship. Unbelievable, unbelievable, but somehow, in some manner I could never understand, God had sent a ship to take me from this place. I started running, back toward my hutch, what was left of my ship.

I stumbled once, and fell, only to scramble along on all fours till I could get my balance. I continued running, and by the time I had reached the hutch, my sac was nearly empty, and my head was splitting. I got inside and dogged the lock, then leaned against it in exhaustion, drawing deeply, deeply for the air inside.

I turned toward the radio gear, even before the ache was gone from my head, and threw myself roughly into the plotseat. I had almost forgotten how valuable the set could be; lost out here, so far over the Edge, I had never even given serious consideration to the possibility of being found. Actually, had I stopped to consider, a visit was not so unbelievable after all; my ship had not exploded all that far off the trade routes. True, I was far out, but any number of circumstances could combine to bring another ship my way.

And they had.

And it had.

And it was.

I flipped on the beacon signal, and set it to all-bands, hearing the bdeep-bdeep-bdeep of it in the hutch, going out, I knew, to that ship circling the planet. That done, I turned slowly in the plot chair, hands on my knees-only to catch sight of myself in the burnished wall of the recirculator. I saw my sac, grotesque, monstrous, hideous, covered with a week's growth of spikey beard stubble, my mouth drawn down in a gash. I was hardly human any longer.

When they came, I would not open the lock for them.

Finally, I allowed them in. There were three of them, young, clean-limbed, trying to hide their horror at what I had become. They came in and stripped out of their bulky pressure-suits. The hutch was crowded, but the girl and one of the men squatted on the floor and the other man perched on the plot tank's edge.

"My name-" I didn't know whether to say "is" or "was" so I slurred it, easily, "Tom Van Home. I've been here about four or five months, I'm not sure which."

One of the young men-he was staring at me openly, he could not take his eyes off me, in fact-replied, "We belong to the Human Research Foundation. Expedition to evaluate some of the worlds out past the Edge for colonization. We-we-saw the other half of your ship. There was a worn-"

I stopped him. "I know. My wife." They stared at the port, the deckplate, the bulkhead.

We talked for some time, and I could see they were interested in my theories of near-instantaneous mutation. It was their field, and soon the girl said, "Mr. Van Home, you have stumbled on something terribly vital to us all. You *must* come back with us and help us to get to the heart of-of-your, uh, your change." She blushed, and it reminded me a little of my wife.

Then the other two started in. They used me as a buffer, asking questions and answering them, and making me warmer and warmer to the prospect of returning. I was caught up in a maelstrom of enthusiasm. A feeling of belonging stole over me, and I forgot. I forgot how the ship had gone out like a match; I forgot how she had stood there frozen in the companionway, blue and strange; I forgot all the years I had spent burning in space; I forgot the months here; and most of all I forgot the change.

They pleaded with me, and said we should go right now. I hesitated for an instant, not even knowing why, but unconsciously crying to myself not to listen. Then I relented, and got into my air-suit. When I pulled the heated cowl up about my sac, they all stared for a long moment, until the girl nudged one of the fellows, and the other broke into a nervous titter.

They jollied me, telling me how important my discovery would be to mankind. I listened; I was wanted. It was good, so good, after what seemed an eternity on Hell.

We left my hutch, and started across the short space between their ship and my life cubicle. I was pleased and surprised to see how shining their ship was; they were proud of it, they took good care of it. They were the new breed-the high-strung, intelligent scientists with the youthful ideas and the glory in them. They weren't tired old folks like me. The ship was lighted by automatic floods that had come out on the hull, and the vessel shone in the night of Hell like a great glowing torch. It would be good to go to space once more.

We came up to the ship, and one of the men depressed a stud that started a humming inside the ship. A landing ramp slid down from far above as the outer lock opened, and I knew this was a more recent model than my ship had been. But then, that didn't disturb me; I had been a poor space bum before I met her. She had been all the drive I'd ever needed.

I took a step forward, up the ramp, and two things happened, almost simultaneously:

I caught a glimpse of myself in the glowing shell of the ship. It was not a pretty picture. My ghoulish mouth, drawn down and to the side like a knife wound. My eye, a mere slit of brightness, the sac so hideous and vein-streaked. I stopped on the ramp, with them directly behind me.

And the second thing happened.

I heard her.

Somewhere...far off...in a bright amber cavern hung down with scintillant stalactites...swathed in a shimmering aura of goodness and cleanliness and hope...younger than the next instant...radiantly beautiful and calling to me...calling with a voice of music that was the sound of suns flaring and stars twinkling and earth moving and grass growing and small things being happy...it was she!

I listened there for a moment that spanned forever.

My head tilted to the side, I listened, and I knew what she said was truth, so simple and so pure and so real, that I turned and edged past them on the ramp, and returned to Hell again.

Her voice stopped in the moment of my touching ground.

They stared at me, and for a short time they said nothing. Then one of the men-the short, blond fellow with alert blue eyes and hardly any neck-said, "What's the matter?"

"I'm not going," I said. The girl ran down the ramp to me. "But why?" She almost sounded tearful.

I couldn't tell her, of course. But she was so small, so sweet, and she reminded me of my wife, when I had first met her, so I answered, "I've been here too long; I'm not very nice to look at--"

"Oh-" and she tried to stop me, but it was a sob, so it did not interfere.

"-and you may not understand this but I-I've been well, content here. It's a hard world, and it's dark, but she's up there-" I looked toward the black sky of Hell, "-and I wouldn't want to go away and leave her alone. Can you understand that?"

They nodded slowly, and one of the men said, "But this is more than just you, Van Horne. This is a discovery that means a great deal to everyone on Earth.

"It's getting worse and worse there every year. With the new antiaging drugs people just aren't dying, and they've still got the Catho-Presbyte Lobby to keep any really effective birth control laws from being enacted. The crowding is terrible; that's one of the chief reasons we're out here, to see how Man can adapt to these worlds. Your discovery can aid us tremendously."

"And you said the Fluhs were gone," the other man said. "Without them, you'll die." I smiled at them; *she* had said something, something important about the Fluhs.

"I can still do some good," I replied quickly. "Send me a few young people. Let them come here, and we'll study together. I can show them what I've found, and they can experiment here. Laboratory conditions could never match what I've found on Hell."

That seemed to do it. They looked at me sadly, and the girl agreed...the other two matched her agreement in a moment.

"And, and-I couldn't leave her here alone," I said again.

"Goodbye, Tom Van Home," she said, and she pressed my hand between her mittened ones. It was a kiss on the cheek, but her helmet prevented it physically, so she clasped my hand.

Then they started up the ramp.

"What will you do for air, with the Fluhs gone?" one of the men asked, stopping halfway up.

"I'll be all right, I promise you. I'll be here when you return." They looked at me with doubt, but I smiled, and patted my sac, and they looked uncomfortable, and started up the ramp again.

"We'll be back. With others." The girl looked down at me. I waved, and they went inside. Then I loped back to the hutch, and watched them as they shattered the night with their fire and fury. When they were gone, I went outside, and stared up at the dim, so-faraway points of the dead stars.

Where she circled, up there, somewhere.

And I knew I would have something for my noon meal, and all the meals thereafter. She had told me; I suppose I knew it all along, but it hadn't registered, so she had told me: the Fluhs were not dead. They had merely gone down to replenish their own oxygen supply from the planet itself, from the caves and porous openings where the rock trapped the air. They would be back again, long before I needed them.

The Fluhs would return.

And someday I would find her again, and it would be an unbroken time.

This world I had named, I had not properly named. Not Hell.

Not Hell at all.

O Ye of Little Faith

NIVEN FELT for the rock wall behind him. His fingertips grazed the crumbling rocks. The wall curved. He prayed that it curved. It *had* to curve, to go around the bowl in which he was trapped, or he was dead. That simply: he was dead. The centaur advanced another few feet, pawing the red-dust earth with hooves of gold now dulled by a faint dusty crimson patina.

The creature's small gimlet eyes were as red as the ground it stomped. Half-man, half-horse, something out of a child's fable, it stepped carefully toward him, and he had the wildly incongruous thought that the beast's face might have been a double for John Barrymore. Only the little red eyes destroyed the comparison. Red and angry; not merely with volcanic hatred, but with something else...something primeval, something saved from a time before men had walked the Earth, when the centaurs and their fellow-myths had ruled the world.

And now, somehow, in some inexplicable fashion, Niven a man with no particular talents-had been thrown crosswise and slantwise through universes into a place, a time, a continuum (an Earth?), where the centaur still roamed. Where the centaur could at last have his full revenge on the creatures that had replaced him. It was the day of reckoning for *homo sapiens*.

Niven backed around the bowl, feeling the dirt of the wall crumbling in his fingers as he felt behind him; in his other hand he brandished the rough-wood club he had found underfoot as he ran from the beast. He let it droop in his hand a moment, the weight of it difficult to keep at the ready for very long. The centaur's face of frenzy glowed with heat. It leaped. Niven swung the club with a bunching of muscles that sent him whirling half-around. The centaur dug its hooves in deeply, and ground to a snorting halt, two feet in front of the flat arc swing of the club. Niven spun around completely, and the club struck the wall, and shattered to splinters.

The centaur's half-growl, half-snort bore traces of triumphant amusement as it exploded behind the dark-haired man, and Niven felt young sweat come to his back. The impact of the blow against the wall had sent a tremor through his entire body; his left arm was quite numb. Yet it had saved him. There was an opening in the wall, an opening in the rock-wall of the deep valley bowl, an opening he would not have seen backing around the wall. Now there was a scant hope of staying alive.

As the centaur gathered itself for a leap that would send its gigantic body plunging into Niven, the man slipped sidewise, and was inside the mountain.

He turned then, and ran. Behind him the light from that weird place-vaguely blue and light-mote laden-faded and was abruptly lost as he caromed around a sharp turn in the passage. It was dark now, pitch absolute dark, and all Niven could see was the scintillance of tiny sparks behind his eyes. Suddenly he found himself longing to see even that light behind him, that snippet of blue and cadaverous yellow in a sky that had never been roof of any world *he* had known.

And then he was falling...

Suddenly, and without any sense of having moved, between one step and the next, he plunged over a lip of stone, and was falling. Down and down, tumbling over and over, and the walls of moist slippery stone reeled around him, unseen but cold, as he tried to grab some small hold.

The tips of his fingers skinned away from friction, and the pain was excruciating, for a long moment, but was lost in an instant as the shriek tore from his throat and he plunged, hitting painfully with his shoulders and the back of his neck that threatened to snap his spine, down into a depth of water black and viscous and bottomless that closed over him, filled his mouth with foulness, blind, dragged into the grave-chill body of a moist lover terrible in her possessiveness, jealousy and need.

Vapors of night. Echoes of never. Niven thrashed in a whirlpool vortex of total unawareness. Memories-released from their crypt beneath his conscious mind-escaped, gibbering, rushed in a horde into his skull. He was back in the old soothsayer's shop. Had it been just a few minutes before finding himself trapped by the centaur? Merely a few minutes when he had stood in the prognosticator's shop in a Tijuana back alley, a tourist with a girl on his arm and a wisecrack on his lips? Had it been only that long ago, a matter of seconds, of a sometime *long ago*, when darkness had parted and swallowed him-as he was now being swallowed by these stygian waters?

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes*.

Berta stared at him across her Tom Collins. He could not look at her. He toyed with the straw in his Cuba libre. He whistled soundlessly, then bit the inside of his lip absently. He looked off across the

Avenida Revoluç o. Tijuana throbbed with an undercurrent of immorality and availability. Anything you might want. A ten-year-old virgin-male or female. Authentic French perfume minus the tariff. Grass. Hash. Peyote caps. Bongo drums, hand-carved Don Quixotes, sandals, bullfights, jai-alai, horse races, tote-board betting or off-track betting, your photograph wearing a sombrero sitting astride a weary jackass. Jackass on jackass, a study in dung. Strip shows where the nitty-gritty consists of the *pudenum* fiat-out on the bar-top for convenient dining. Private shows with big dogs and tiny gentlemen and women with breasts as big as casaba melons. Divorces, marriages, tuck-and-roll auto seat covers. Or a quick abortion.

It had been lunacy for them to come down here. But they'd had to. Berta had needed the D&C, and now it was over, and she was feeling just fine thank you, just fine. So they had stopped for a drink. She should be resting in a motel halfway between San Diego and Los Angeles, but he knew she wanted to talk. There was so much to talk *about*. So now they sat in the street cafe and he could not talk to her. He could not even look at her. He could not explain that he was a man trapped within himself. He knew she was aware of it, but like all women she needed him to come only far enough outside himself to let her share his fear. Just far enough that he could not make it. She needed him to verbalize it, to ask for-if not help, then-companionship through his country of mental terrors. But he could not give her what she wanted. He could not give her himself.

Their affair had been subject to the traditional rules. A lotta laughs, a lotta passion, and then she had gotten pregnant.

And in their mutual concern, something deeper had passed between them. There was a chance, for the first time in Niven's life, that he might cleave to someone and find not disillusionment, derangement and disaster, but reality and a little peace.

She had arranged the abortion, he had paid for it, and now they were together here, as she waited for him to speak. Voiceless, imprisoned in his past and his sense of the reality of the world in which he had been *forced* to live, Niven knew he was letting her slip away.

But could not help himself.

"Jerry." He wanted to pretend she had not spoken, knowing she was trying to help him get started. But he found himself looking up. She wasn't beautiful, but he liked the face very much. It was a face he could live with. She smiled. "Where are we going, Jerry?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "I don't know what that means."

"It means: there's nothing artificial or unwanted holding us together any more. *Or* holding us apart. What do we do now?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "We do whatever we want to do. Don't push on me too hard."

Her eyes flashed for an instant. "I'm not *pushing*, Jerry, I'm inquiring. I'm thirty-five and I'm unattached and it's getting frightening going to bed alone without a future. Does that seem rational to you?"

"Rational, but unnecessary. You've got a few good weeks left in you."

"It isn't funny for me, Jerry. I have to know. Have you got room in your world for me?"

He knew what he had to answer to please her, to win her, but he said, "There's barely room enough in my world for *me*, baby. And if you knew what my world was like you wouldn't want to come into it. You see before you the last of the cynics, the last of the misogynists, the last of the bitter men. I look out on a landscape littered with the refuse of a misspent youth. All my gods and goddesses had feet of shit, and there they lie, like Etruscan statuary, the noses bashed off. Believe me, Berta, you don't want into my world."

Her face was lined in resignation now. "Unraveling the charming syntax, what you're telling me is: we had a good time and we made a small mistake, but it's corrected now, so get lost."

"No, I'm saying-"

But she was up from the curbside table and stalking across the street. He threw a bill down on the tablecloth and went after her.

She managed to keep ahead of him. Mostly because he wanted to give her time to cool off. As they passed a narrow side-alley he pulled abreast of her, and taking her arm gently she allowed him to draw her into its shadowed coolness. "All it takes is believing, Jerry! Is that so much to ask?"

"Believe," he snapped, the instant fury that always lay beneath the surface of his charm boiling up. "Believe. The same stupid mealy-mouth crap they tell the peckerwoods in the boondocks. Believe in this, and believe in that, and have faith, and holy holy you'll get your ass saved. Well, I *don't* believe."

"Then how can any woman believe in *you*?"

It was more than anger that forced the words from him. It was a helplessness that translated itself into cynical ruthlessness. "I'd say that was *her* problem."

She pulled her arm free and turning without really seeing where she was going, she plunged down the alley. Down a flight of dim steps, and on again, a lower level of the same alley. "Berta!" he called after her.

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes*.

A shop in a dingy back alley in a seedy border town more noted for street-corner whores than for wrinkled and leathery tellers-of-the-future who sold *Huaraches* and *Serapes* in their spare time. But he had quickly followed her, trying to find a way out of his own inarticulateness, to settle the senseless quarrel they were having and salvage this one good thing from a past filled with broken glass. He wanted to tell her his need was not a temporary thing, not only a matter of good times, of transitory bodies reaching and never quite finding one another. He wanted to tell her that he had lost all belief in his world, a world that seemed incapable of bringing to him any richness, any meaning, any vitality. But his words-if they came at all-he knew would come with ill-restrained fury, with anger and sharpness, insulting her, forcing her to walk away as she now walked away.

He had followed her, down the alley.

And the old, wizened, papyrus-tough Mexican had limped out of his shop, bent almost double with age, like a blue-belly lizard, all alertness and cunning, and had offered to tell them of the future.

"No thanks," Niven had said, catching up to her at that moment.

But she had tossed her head, defiance, and had entered the shop, leaving him standing in the alley. Niven had followed her, hoping she would turn in an instant, and come out again, and he would find the words. But she had gone deeper into the musky dimness of the shop, and the old prognosticator had begun casting the runes, had begun mixing the herbs and bits of offal and vileness he averred were necessary for truth and brightness in the visions. A bit of wild dog hair. A strip of flesh from the instep of a drowned child. Three drops of menstrual blood from a Macedonian whore. The circular sucker from the underside of a polyp's tentacle. A conch shell that made...sounds. Other things. Unspeakable, nameless, foul-smelling, terrible.

And then, strangely, he had said he would not tell the future of Berta...but of Niven.

There in the fetid closeness of a shop whose dimensions were lost in dusk, the old Mexican said Niven was a man without belief, without faith, without trust, and so was damned; a man doomed and forsaken. He said all the dark and tongueless things Niven had never been able to say of himself. And Niven, in fury, in frenzy brought on by a hurricane of truth, smashed the old man, swung across the little round table with all the strength in his big body, clubbed the old man, and in the same movement swept the strange mixed ingredients from the filthy table, as Berta screamed-from someplace far away.

And in that instant, a silent explosion. A force and impact that had hurled him out of himself. In that timeless, breathless instant Niven had been there/not-there. He had somehow inexplicably been moved *elsewhere*. In a bowl, in a valley, in a land, in a time or place or somewhere facing a centaur. A creature of mythology, a creature from the past of man's fables.

Huaraches, the sign had said, and *Serapes*.

Facing a live centaur just a moment ago. Facing the creature that had left the world before there had been a name to fit the man that Niven had become. A god without worshippers, this centaur. In a world that did not believe, facing a man who did not believe.

And in that instant-like the previous instant of truth-Niven was *all* the men who had forsaken their gods. Who had allowed the world to tell them they were alone; and believed it. Now he had to face one of the lost gods. A god who now sought revenge on the race of Men who had devised machines that would banish them from the real world.

Down and down and down into the waters of nowhere Niven plunged, all thoughts simply one thought, all memories crashing and jarring, all merged and melded and impinging upon a dense tapestry of seaweed images.

His breath seemed to clog in his throat. His stomach bulged with the amount of water he had swallowed, with the pressure on his temples, with the blackness that deluged him behind his eyes. Niven felt memory depart and consciousness at once returning-and leaving. He was coming back from the past to awareness, only to let it slip away finally as he drowned.

He made feeble swimming motions, overhand movements of arms that had sensation only by recall, not by his own volition. He moved erratically in the water, as thick as gelatin, and his movement

toward the bottomless bottom was arrested. He moved upward through the water now, and saw a dim light, far ahead and above him.

An eternity. There. Toward it he struggled, and when he thought it was ended, he reached a ledge. He pulled himself toward it, and the dark water seeped through him until he was limp and dying. Then his head broke water. He was in an underground cavern. He spewed out mouthfuls of warm, evil-tasting water.

For a very long time he lay half on the ledge, half in the water, till someone came and pulled him up. Niven lay there on his stomach, learning to live again, while the one who had saved him stood silently waiting. Niven tried to get to his feet, and he was helped. He could not see who the man was, though he could feel a long robe in the dimness, and there was a light, a sort of corona that seemed to come dimly from the man. Then together, with the man supporting him, Niven went away from there, and they climbed for a long while between walls of stone, to the world that was outside.

He stood in the light, and was tired and sad and blinded by things he did not believe. Then the man left him, and as he walked slowly away, Niven recognized the beard and the infinitely sad eyes and the way he was dressed, and even the light.

And Jesus left him, with a sad smile, and Niven stood alone, for another time that was long, and empty.

Once, late that night, he thought he heard the bull-ram horn of Odin, ringing across this dim, shadowed land, but he could not be sure. And once he heard a sound of something passing, and when he opened his eyes to look it was a cat-headed woman, and he thought *Bast*, and she slipped smoothly away into the darkness without saying a word to him. And toward morning there was a light in the sky that seemed to be a burning chariot, Phaëthon the charioteer, Helios' burning chariot, but that was probably the effects of the drowning, the hunger, the sorrow. He could not be certain.

So he wandered. And time passed without ever moving, in the land without a name; and *his* name was Niven, but it was no more important a name than Apollo or Vishnu or Baal, for it was not a name men believed in; it was only the name of a man who had not believed. And if gods cannot be called back, when their names have been known, then how can a man whose name was *never* known be called back.

For him, his god had been Berta, but he had not given her an opportunity to believe in him. He had prevented her from having faith in him, and so there were no believers for a man named Niven, as there were no true believers for Serapis or Perseus or Mummy.

Very late the next night, Niven realized he would always, *always* live in this terrible Coventry where old gods went to die; gods who would never speak to him; and with no hope of return.

For as he had believed in no god...

No god believed in him.

The Time of the Eye

IN THE THIRD year of my death, I met Piretta. Purely by chance, for she occupied a room on the second floor, while I was given free walk of the first floor and the sunny gardens. And it seemed so strange, that first and most important time, that we met at all, for she had been there since she had gone blind in 1958, while I was one of the old men with young faces who had dissolved after being in the Nam.

The Place wasn't too unpleasant, of course, despite the high, flat-stone walls and the patronizing air of Mrs. Gondy, for I knew one day my fog would pass, and I would feel the need to speak to someone again, and then I could leave the Place.

But that was in the future.

I neither looked forward to that day, nor sought refuge in my stable life at the Place. I was in a limbo life between caring and exertion. I was sick; I had been told that; and no matter what I knew-I was dead. So what sense was there in caring?

But Piretta was something else.

Her delicate little face was porcelain, with eyes the flat blue of shallow waters, and hands that were quick to do nothing important.

I met her-as I say-by chance. She had grown restless, during what she called "the time of the eye," and had managed to give her Miss Hazelet the slip.

I was walking with head bowed and hands locked behind my bathrobe, through the lower corridor, when she came down the great winding stairway.

On many an occasion I had stopped at that stairway, watching the drab-faced women who scrubbed down each level, each riser. It was like watching them go to hell. They started at the top, and washed their way down. Their hair was always white, always lank, always like old hay. They scrubbed with methodical ferocity, for this was the last occupation left to them before the grave, and they clung to it with soap and suds. And I had watched them go down to hell, step by step.

But this time there were no drudges on their knees.

I heard her walking close to the wall, her humble fingertips brushing the wainscoting as she descended, and I realized immediately that she was blind.

That blindness deeper than lack of sight.

There was something to her; something ephemeral that struck instantly to the dead heart in me. I watched her come down with stately slowness, as though she tripped to silent music, until I was drawn to her in spirit.

"May I be of service?" I heard myself politely inquiring, from a distance. She paused there and her head came up with field mouse awareness.

"No, thank you," she said, most congenially. "I am quite able to care for myself, thank you. Something that *person*," she twitched her head in the direction of upstairs, "cannot seem to fathom."

She came the remainder of the steps to the napless winecolored rug. She stood there and exhaled deeply, as though she had just put a satisfactory finis to an immense project.

"My name is-" I began, but she cut me off with a sharp snort and, "Name's the same." She giggled prettily.

"Names ring of little consequence, don't you agree?" and there was such conviction in her voice, I could hardly disagree.

So I said, "I suppose that's so."

She snickered softly and patted her auburn hair, bed-disarrayed. "Indeed," she said with finality, "that *is* so; very much so."

This was most peculiar to me, for several reasons.

First, she was talking with a rather complicated incoherence that seemed perfectly rational at the time, and second, she was the first person I had spoken to since I had been admitted to the Place, two years and three months before.

I felt an affinity for this girl, and hastened to strengthen our flimsy tie

"And yet," I ventured, "one must have *something* by which to know another person." I became most bold and went on, "Besides-" gulping, "if one likes someone..."

She considered this for a long second, one hand still on the wall, the other at her white throat. "If you insist," she replied, after deliberation, and added, "you may call me Piretta."

"Is that your name?" I asked.

"No," she answered, so I knew we were to be friends.

"Then you can call me Sidney Carton." I released a secret desire of long sublimation.

"That is a fine name, should any name be considered fine," she admitted, and I nodded. Then, realizing she could not hear a nod, I added a monosyllable to indicate her pleasure was also mine.

"Would you care to see the gardens?" I asked chivalrously.

"That would be most kind of you," she said, adding with a touch of irony, "as you see...I'm quite blind."

Since it was a game we were playing I said, "Oh, truly? I really hadn't noticed."

Then she took my arm, and we went down the corridor toward the garden French doors. I heard someone coming down the staircase, and she stiffened on my arm. "Miss Hazelet," she gasped. "Oh, please!"

I knew what she was trying to say. Her attendant. I knew then that she was not allowed downstairs, that she was now being sought by her nurse. But I could not allow her to be returned to her room, after I had just found her.

"Trust me," I whispered, leading her into a side corridor.

I found the mop closet, and gently ushered her before me, into its cool, dark recess. I closed the door softly and stood there, very close to her. I could hear her breathing, and it was shallow, quick. It made me remember those hours before dawn in Viet Nam, even when we were full asleep; when we sensed what was coming, with fear and trepidation. She was frightened. I held her close, without meaning to do so, and her arm went around my waist. We were very near, and for the first time in over two years I felt emotions stirring in me; how foolish of me to consider love. But I waited there with her, adrift in a sargasso of conflicting feelings, while her Miss Hazelet paced outside.

Finally, after what seemed a time too short, we heard those same precise steps mounting the stairs-annoyed, prissy, flustered.

"She's gone. Now we can see the gardens," I said, and wanted to bite my tongue. She could *see* nothing; but I did not rectify my error. Let her think I took her infirmity casually. It was far better that way.

I opened the door cautiously, and peered out. No one but old Bauer, shuffling along down the hall, his back to us. I led her out, and as though nothing had happened, she took my arm once more.

"How sweet of you," she said, and squeezed my bicep.

We walked back to the French doors, and went outside.

The air was musky with the scent of fall, and the crackling of leaves underfoot seemed a proper thing. It was not too chilly, and yet she clung to me with a soft desperation more need than inclination. I didn't think it was because of her blindness; I was certain she could walk through the garden without any help if she so desired.

We moved down the walk, winding out of sight of the Place in a few seconds, shielded and screened by the high, neatly pruned hedges. Oddly enough, for that time of day, no attendants were slithering through the chinaberry and hedges, no other "guests" were taking their blank-eyed pleasure on the turf or on the bypaths.

I glanced sidewise at her profile, and was pleased by her chiseled features. Her chin was a bit too sharp and thrust-forward, but it was offset by high cheekbones and long eyelashes that gave her a rather Asiatic expression. Her lips were full, and her nose was a classic yet short sweep.

I had the strangest feeling I had seen her somewhere before, though that was patently impossible. Yet the feeling persisted.

I remembered another girl...but that had been before the Nam...before the sound of a metallic shriek down the night sky...and someone standing beside my bed at Walter Reed. That had been in another life, before I had died, and been sent to this Place.

"Is the sky dark?" she asked. I guided her to a bench, hidden within a box of hedges.

"Not very," I replied. "There are a few clouds in the north, but they don't look like rainclouds. I think it'll be a nice day."

"It doesn't matter," she said resignedly. "The weather doesn't really matter. Do you know how long it's been since I've seen sunlight through the trees?" Then she sighed, and laid her head back against the bench. "No. The weather doesn't really matter. Not at this Time, anyhow."

I didn't know what that meant, but I didn't care, either.

There was a new life surging through me. I was surprised to hear it beating in my ears. I was surprised to find myself thinking minutes into the future. No one who has not experienced it can understand what it is to be dead, to no longer think of the future, and then to find something worthwhile and begin to

live all over again. I don't mean just hope, nothing that simple and uncomplicated. I mean to be dead, and then to be alive. It had come to be like that in just a few minutes since I had met Piretta. I had ignored the very next instant for the past two years and three months, and now suddenly, I was looking to the future. Not much at first, for it had become an atrophied ability in me, but I was expecting from minute to minute, caring, and I could feel my life ranging back to pick me up, to continue its journey.

I was looking ahead, and wasn't that the first step to regaining my lost life?

"Why are you here?" she inquired, placing a cool, slim-fingered hand on my bare arm.

I placed my hand over it, and she started, so I withdrew it self-consciously. Then she searched about, found it, and put it over hers again.

"I was in the War," I explained. "There was a mortar and I was hit, and they sent me here. I-I didn't want to-maybe I wasn't able to-I don't know-I didn't want to talk to anyone for a long time.

"But I'm all right now," I finished, abruptly at peace with myself.

"Yes," she said, as though that decided it.

Then she went on speaking, in the strangest tone of voice: "Do you sense the Time of the Eye, too, or are you one of *them*?" She asked it with ruthlessness in her voice. I didn't know what to answer.

"Who do you mean by *them*?"

She let her full upper lip snarl, and said, "Those women who bedpan me. Those foul, crepuscular antiseptics!"

"If you mean the nurses and attendants," I caught her line of thought, "no, I'm not one of them. I'm as annoyed by them as you seem to be. Didn't I hide you?"

"Would you find me a stick?" she asked.

I looked around, and seeing none, broke a branch from the box hedge. "This?"

I handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said.

She began stripping it, plucking the leaves and twigs from it. I watched her dexterous hands flitting, and thought *How terrible for such a lovely and clever girl to be thrown in here with these sick people, these madmen.*

"You probably wonder what *I'm* doing here, don't you?" she asked, peeling the thin, green bark from the stick. I didn't answer her, because I didn't want to know; I had found something, someone, and my life had begun again. There was no reason to kill it all at once.

"No, I hadn't thought about it."

"Well, I'm here because *they* know I'm aware of them."

It struck a note of familiarity. There had been a man named Herberman, who had lived on the first floor during my second year at the Place. He had always talked about the great clique of men who were secretly trying to kill him, and how they would go to any extreme to get him, to silence him before he could reveal their dire machinations.

I hoped the same thing had not befallen her. She was so lovely.

"*They*?"

"Yes, of course. You *said* you weren't one of them. Are you lying to me? Are you making fun of me, trying to confuse me?" Her hand slipped out from under mine.

I hastened to regain ground. "No, no, of course not; but don't you see, I don't understand? I just don't know. I-I've been here so long." I tried not to sound pathetic.

Somehow, this seemed to strike her logically. "You must forgive me. I sometimes forget everyone is not aware of the Time of the Eye as I am."

She was pulling at the end of the stick, drawing off the bark, making a sharp little point there.

"The Time of the Eye?" I asked. She had said it several times. "I don't understand."

Piretta turned to me, her dead blue eyes seeing directly over my right shoulder, and she put her legs close together. The stick was laid carelessly by her side, as though a toy it had been, but now the time for toys was gone. "I'll tell you," she said.

She sat very still for an instant, and I waited. Then:

"Have you ever seen a woman with vermilion hair?"

I was startled. I had expected a story from her, some deep insight into her past that would enable me to love her the more...and in its place she asked a nonsense question.

"Why...no...I can't say that I..."

"*Think!*" she commanded me.

So I thought, and oddly enough, a woman with vermilion hair *did* come to mind. Several years

before I had been drafted, the rage in all the women's fashion magazines had been a woman named-my God! Was it? Why, yes, now that I looked closely and my memory prodded, it *was*-Piretta. A fashion model of exquisite features, lustrous blue eyes, and an affected vermilion-tint hairdo. She had been so famous her glamour had lapped over from the fashion magazines, had become one of those household names everyone bandies about.

"I remember you," I said, startled beyond words of more meaning.

"No!" she snapped. "No, you don't remember *me*. You remember a woman named Piretta. A beautiful woman who attacked life as if it was her last lover, and loved it fiercely. That was someone else. I'm a poor blind thing. You don't know *me*, do you?"

"No," I agreed, "I don't. I'm sorry. For a moment-"

She went on, as though I had never spoken.

"The woman named Piretta was known to everyone. No fashionable salon gathering was fashionable without her; no cocktail party was meaningful with her absent. But she was not a shrinking violet type of woman. She loved experience; she was a nihilist, and more. She would do *anything*. She climbed K.99 with the Postroff group, she sailed with two men around the Cape of Good Hope in an outrigger, she studied the cult of Kali in India, and though she had come to them an infidel, at the end the Society of Thugs took her as one of their acolytes.

"That kind of life can jade a person. She grew bored with it. With the charities, with the modeling, with the brief fling at films, and with the men. The wealthy men, the talented men, the pretty men who were attracted to her, and who were at the same time held at bay by her beauty. She sought new experience...and eventually found it."

I wondered why she was telling me this. I had decided by now that the life I was anxious to have return was here, in her. I was living again and it had come so quickly, so stealthily, that it could only be a result of her presence.

Whatever indefinable quality she had possessed as a world-renowned mannequin, she still retained, even as a slightly haggard, still lovely, blind-eyed woman of indeterminate age. In her white hospital gown she was shapeless, but the magnetic wonder of her was there, and I was alive.

I was in love.

She was still speaking. "After her experiences with the jet ski set and the artist's colony on Fire Island, she returned to the city, and sought more and different experiences.

"Eventually she came upon them. The Men of the Eye. They were a religious sect, unto themselves. They worshiped sight and experience. This was what she had been born for. She fell into their ways at once, worshiping in the dawn hours at their many-eyed idol and living life to its hilt.

"Their ways were dark ways, and the things they did were not always clean things. Yet she persisted with them.

"Then, one night, during what they called the Time of the Eye, they demanded a sacrifice, and she was the one so chosen.

"They took her eyes."

I sat very still. I wasn't quite sure I'd heard what I'd heard. A weird religious sect, almost devil worship of a sort, there in the heart of New York City; and they had cut out the eyes of the most famous fashion model of all time, in a ceremony? It was too fantastic for belief. Surprising myself, I found old emotions flooding back into me. I could feel disbelief, horror, sorrow. This girl who called herself Piretta, and *was* that Piretta, had brought me to life again, only to fill me with a story so ludicrous I could do nothing but pass it on as dream-fantasy and the results of a persecution complex.

After all, didn't she have those shallow blue eyes?

They were unseeing, but they were there. How could they have been stolen? I was confused and dismayed.

I turned to her suddenly, and my arms went about her. I don't know what it was that possessed me, I had always been shy when women were involved, even before the War, but now my heart leaped into my throat, and I kissed her full on the mouth.

Her lips opened like two petals before me, and there was ardor returned. My hand found her breast.

We sat that way in passion for several minutes, and finally, when we were satisfied that the moment had lived its existence fully, we separated, and I began to prattle about getting well, and marrying, and moving to the country, where I could care for her.

Then I ran my hands across her face; feeling the beauty of her, letting my fingertips soak up the wonder of her. My smallest finger's tip happened to encounter her eye.

It was not moist.

I paused, and a gleam of smile broke at the edge of her wondrous mouth. "True," she said, and popped her eyes into the palm of her hand.

My fist went to my mouth, and the sound of a small animal being crushed underfoot came from me.

Then I noticed she had the sharpened stick in her hand, point upward, as though it was a driving spike. "What is that?" I asked, suddenly chilled for no reason.

"You didn't ask if Piretta accepted the religion," she answered softly, as though I was a child who did not understand.

"What do you mean?" I stammered.

"*This* is the Time of the Eye, don't you know?"

And she came at me with the stick. I fell back, but she wound herself around me, and we fell to the ground together, and her blindness did not matter at all.

"But *don't!*" I shrieked, as the stick came up. "I love you. I want to make you mine, to marry you!"

"How foolish," she chided me gently, "I can't marry you: you're sick in the mind."

Then there was the stick, and for so long now, the Time of the Eye has been blindly with me.

Life Hutch

TERRENCE SLID HIS RIGHT HAND, the one out of sight of the robot, up his side. The razoring pain of the three broken ribs caused his eyes to widen momentarily in pain. Then he recovered himself and closed them till he was studying the machine through narrow slits.

If the eyeballs click, I'm dead, thought Terrence.

The intricate murmurings of the life hutch around him brought back the immediacy of his situation. His eyes again fastened on the medicine cabinet clamped to the wall next to the robot's duty-niche.

Cliche. So near yet so far. It could be all the way back on Antares-Base for all the good it's doing me, he thought, and a crazy laugh rang through his head. He caught himself just in time. *Easy! Three days is a nightmare, but cracking up will only make it end sooner.* That was the last thing he wanted. But it couldn't go on much longer.

He flexed the fingers of his right hand. It was all he *could* move. Silently he damned the technician who had passed the robot through. Or the politician who had let inferior robots get placed in the life hutches so he could get a rake-off from the government contract. Or the repairman who hadn't bothered checking closely his last time around. All of them; he damned them all.

They deserved it.

He was dying.

His death had started before he had reached the life hutch. Terrence had begun to die when he had gone into the battle.

He let his eyes close completely, let the sounds of the life hutch fade from around him. Slowly, the sound of the coolants hush-hushing through the wall-pipes, the relay machines feeding their messages without pause from all over the galaxy, the whirr of the antenna's standard turning in its socket atop the bubble, slowly they melted into silence. He had resorted to blocking himself off from reality many times during the past three days. It was either that or existing with the robot watching, and eventually he would have had to move. To move was to die. It was that simple.

He closed his ears to the whisperings of the life hutch; he listened to the whisperings within himself.

"Good God! There must be a million of them!"

It was the voice of the squadron leader, Resnick, ringing in his suit intercom.

"What kind of battle formation is *that* supposed to be?" came another voice. Terrence looked at the radar screen, at the flickering dots signifying Kyben ships.

"Who can tell with those toadstool-shaped ships of theirs," Resnick answered. "But remember, the whole front umbrella-part is studded with cannon, and it has a helluva range of fire. Okay, watch yourselves, good luck-and give 'em Hell!"

The fleet dove straight for the Kyben armada.

To his mind came the sounds of war, across the gulf of space. It was all imagination; in that tomb there was no sound. Yet he could clearly detect the hiss of his scout's blaster as it poured beam after beam into the lead ship of the Kyben fleet.

His sniper-class scout had been near the point of that deadly Terran phalanx, driving like a wedge at the alien ships, converging on them in loose battle-formation. It was then it had happened.

One moment he had been heading into the middle of the battle, the left flank of the giant Kyben dreadnaught turning crimson under the impact of his firepower.

The next moment, he had skittered out of the formation which had slowed to let the Kyben craft overshoot, while the Earthmen decelerated to pick up maneuverability.

He had gone on at the old level and velocity, directly into the forward guns of a toadstool-shaped Kyben destroyer.

The first beam had burned the gun-mounts and directional equipment off the front of the ship, scorching down the aft side in a smear like oxidized chrome plate. He had managed to avoid the second beam.

His radio contact had been brief; he was going to make it back to Antares-Base if he could. If not, the formation would be listening for his homing-beam from a life hutch on whatever planetoid he might find for a crash-landing.

Which was what he had done. The charts had said the pebble spinning there was technically 1-333,

2-A, M & S, 3-804.39#, which would have meant nothing but three-dimensional coordinates had not the small # after the data indicated a life hutch somewhere on its surface.

His distaste for being knocked out of the fighting, being forced onto one of the life hutch planetoids, had been offset only by his fear of running out of fuel before he could locate himself. Of eventually drifting off into space somewhere, to finally wind up as an artificial satellite around some minor sun.

The ship pancaked in under minimal reverse drive, bounced high twice and caromed ten times, tearing out chunks of the rear section, but had come to rest a scant two miles from the life hutch, jammed into the rocks.

Terrence had high-leaped the two miles across the empty, airless planetoid to the hermetically sealed bubble in the rocks. His primary wish was to set the hutch's beacon signal so his returning fleet could track him.

He had let himself into the decompression chamber, palmed the switch through his thick spacesuit glove, and finally removed his helmet as he heard the air whistle into the chamber.

He had pulled off his gloves, opened the inner door and entered the life hutch itself.

God bless you, little life hutch, Terrence had thought as he dropped the helmet and gloves. He had glanced around, noting the relay machines picking up messages from outside, sorting them, vectoring them off in other directions. He had seen the medicine chest clamped onto the wall, the refrigerator he knew would be well-stocked if a previous tenant hadn't been there before the stockman could refill it. He had seen the all-purpose robot, immobile in its duty-niche. And the wall chronometer, its face smashed. All of it in a second's glance.

God bless, too, the gentlemen who thought up the idea of these little rescue stations, stuck all over the place for just such emergencies as this. He had started to walk across the room.

It was at this point that the service robot, that kept the place in repair between tenants and unloaded supplies from the ships, had moved clankingly across the floor, and with one fearful smash of a steel arm thrown Terrence across the room.

The spaceman had been brought up short against the steel bulkhead, pain blossoming in his back, his side, his arms and legs. The machine's blow had instantly broken three of his ribs. He lay there for a moment, unable to move. For a few seconds he was too stunned to breathe, and it had been that, certainly, that had saved his life. His pain had immobilized him, and in that short space of time the robot had retreated with a muted internal clash of gears.

He had attempted to sit up straight, and the robot had hummed oddly and begun to move. He had stopped the movement. The robot had settled back.

Twice more had convinced him his position was as bad as he had thought.

The robot had worn down somewhere in its printed circuits. Its commands to lift had been erased or distorted so that now it was conditioned to smash, to hit, anything that moved.

He had seen the clock. He realized he should have suspected something was wrong when he saw its smashed face. Of course! The digital dials had moved, the robot had smashed the clock. Terrence had moved, the robot had smashed him.

And would again, if he moved again.

But for the unnoticeable movement of his eyelids, he had not moved in three days.

He had tried moving toward the decompression lock, stopping when the robot advanced and letting it settle back, then moving again, a little nearer. But the idea died with his first movement. His ribs were too painful. The pain was terrible. He was locked in one position, an uncomfortable, twisted position, and he would be there till the stalemate ended, one way or the other.

He was suddenly alert again. The reliving of his last three days brought back reality sharply.

He was twelve feet away from the communications panel, twelve feet away from the beacon that would guide his rescuers to him. Before he died of his wounds, before he starved to death, before the robot crushed him. It could have been twelve light-years, for all the nearer he could get to it.

What had gone wrong with the robot? Time to think was cheap. The robot could detect movement, but thinking was still possible. Not that it could help, but it was possible.

The companies that supplied the life hutch's needs were all government contracted. Somewhere along the line someone had thrown in impure steel or calibrated the circuit-cutting machines for a less expensive job. Somewhere along the line someone had not run the robot through its paces correctly. Somewhere along the line someone had committed murder.

He opened his eyes again. Only the barest fraction of opening. Any more and the robot would

sense the movement of his eyelids. That would be fatal.

He looked at the machine.

It was not, strictly speaking, a robot. It was merely a remote-controlled hunk of jointed steel, invaluable for making beds, stacking steel plating, watching culture dishes, unloading spaceships and sucking dirt from rugs. The robot body, roughly humanoid, but without what would have been a head on a human, was merely an appendage.

The real brain, a complex maze of plastic screens and printed circuits, was behind the wall. It would have been too dangerous to install those delicate parts in a heavy-duty mechanism. It was all too easy for the robot to drop itself from a loading shaft, or be hit by a meteorite, or get caught under a wrecked spaceship. So there were sensitive units in the robot appendage that “saw” and “heard” what was going on, and relayed them to the brain-behind the wall.

And somewhere along the line that brain had worn grooves too deeply into its circuits. It was now mad. Not mad in any way a human being might go mad, for there were an infinite number of ways a machine could go insane. Just mad enough to kill Terrence.

Even if I could hit the robot with something, it wouldn't stop the thing. He could perhaps throw something at the machine before it could get to him, but it would do no good. The robot brain would still be intact, and the appendage would continue to function. It was hopeless.

He stared at the massive, blocky hands of the robot. It seemed he could see his own blood on the jointed work-tool fingers of one hand. He knew it must be his imagination, but the idea persisted. He flexed the fingers of his hidden hand.

Three days had left him weak and dizzy from hunger. His head was light and his eyes burned steadily. He had been lying in his own filth, till he no longer noticed the discomfort. His side ached and throbbed, and the pain of a blast furnace roared through him every time he breathed.

He thanked God his spacesuit was still on, lest the movement of his breathing bring the robot down on him. There was only one solution, and that solution was his death. He was almost delirious.

Several times during the past day-as well as he could gauge night and day without a clock or a sunrise-he had heard the roar of the fleet landing outside. Then he had realized there was no sound in dead space. Then he had realized they were all inside the relay machines, coming through subspace right into the life hutch. Then he had realized that such a thing was not possible. Then he had come to his senses and realized all that had gone before was hallucination.

Then he had awakened and known it *was* real. He *was* trapped, and there was no way out. Death had come to live with him. He was going to die.

Terrence had never been a coward, nor had he been a hero. He was one of the men who fight wars because they are always fought by *someone*. He was the kind of man who would allow himself to be torn from wife and home and flung into an abyss they called Space to defend what he had been told needed defense. But it was in moments like this that a man like Terrence began to think.

Why here? Why like this? What have I done that I should finish in a filthy spacesuit on a lost rock-and not gloriously like they said in the papers back home, but starving or bleeding to death alone with a crazy robot? Why me? Why me? Why alone?

He knew there could be no answers. He expected no answers.

He was not disappointed.

When he awoke, he instinctively looked at the clock. Its shattered face looked back at him, jarring him, forcing his eyes open in after-sleep terror. The robot hummed and emitted a spark. He kept his eyes open. The humming ceased. His eyes began to burn. He knew he couldn't keep them open too long.

The burning worked its way to the front of his eyes, from the top and bottom, bringing with it tears. It felt as though someone was shoving needles into the corners. The tears ran down over his cheeks.

His eyes snapped shut. The roaring grew in his ears. The robot didn't make a sound.

Could it be inoperative? Could it have worn down to immobility? Could he take the chance of experimenting?

He slid down to a more comfortable position. The robot charged forward the instant he moved. He froze in mid-movement, his heart a chunk of ice. The robot stopped, confused, a scant ten inches from his outstretched foot. The machine hummed to itself, the noise of it coming both from the machine before him and from somewhere behind the wall.

He was suddenly alert.

If it had been working correctly, there would have been little or no sound from the appendage, and

none whatsoever from the brain. But it was *not* working properly, and the sound of its thinking was distinct.

The robot rolled backward, its “eyes” still toward Terrence. The sense orbs of the machine were in the torso, giving the machine the look of a squat metal gargoyle, squared and deadly.

The humming was growing louder, every now and then a sharp *pfffft!* of sparks mixed with it. Terrence had a moment’s horror at the thought of a short-circuit, a fire in the life hutch, and no service robot to put it out.

He listened carefully to pinpoint the location of the robot’s brain built into the wall.

Then he thought he had it. Or was it there? It was either in the wall behind a bulkhead next to the refrigerator, or behind a bulkhead near the relay machines. The two possible housings were within a few feet of each other, but they might make a great deal of difference.

The distortion created by the steel plate in front of the brain, and the distracting background noise of the robot broadcasting it made it difficult to tell exactly which was the correct location.

He drew a deep breath.

The ribs slid a fraction of an inch together, their broken ends grinding.

He moaned.

A high-pitched tortured moan that died quickly, but throbbed back and forth inside his head, echoing and building itself into a paean of sheer agony! It forced his tongue out of his mouth, limp in a corner of his lips, moving slightly. The robot rolled forward. He drew his tongue in, clamped his mouth shut, cut off the scream inside his head at its high point!

The robot stopped, rolled back to its duty-niche.

Oh, God! The pain! The God God where are you pain!

Beads of sweat broke out on his body. He could feel their tickle inside his spacesuit, inside his jumper, inside the bodyshirt, on his skin. The pain of the ribs was suddenly heightened by an irresistible itching of his skin.

He moved infinitesimally within the suit, his outer appearance giving no indication of the movement. The itching did not subside. The more he tried to make it stop, the more he thought about not thinking about it, the worse it became. His armpits, the crooks of his arms, his thighs where the tight service-pants clung-suddenly too tightly-were madness. He had to scratch!

He almost started to make the movement. He stopped before he started. He knew he would never live to enjoy any relief. A laugh bubbled into his head. *God Almighty, and I always laughed at the slobs who suffered with the seven-year itch, the ones who always did a little dance when they were at attention during inspection, the ones who could scratch and sigh contentedly. God, how I envy them.* His thoughts were taking on a wild sound, even to him.

The prickling did not stop. He twisted faintly. It got worse. He took another deep breath.

The ribs sandpapered again.

This time, blessedly, he fainted from the pain.

“Well, Terrence, how do you like your first look at a Kyben?”

Ernie Terrence wrinkled his forehead and ran a finger up the side of his face. He looked at his Commander and shrugged. “Fantastic things, aren’t they?”

“Why fantastic?” asked Commander Foley.

“Because they’re just like us. Except of course the bright yellow pigmentation and the tentacle-fingers. Other than that they’re identical to a human being.”

The Commander opaqued the examination-casket and drew a cigarette from a silver case, offering the Lieutenant one. He puffed it alight, staring with one eye closed against the smoke. “More than that, I’m afraid. Their insides look like someone had taken them out, liberally mixed them with spare parts from several other species, and jammed them back in any way that fitted conveniently. For the next twenty years we’ll be knocking our heads together trying to figure out their metabolic *raison d’être*.”

Terrence grunted, rolling his unlit cigarette absently between two fingers. “That’s the least of it.”

“You’re right,” agreed the Commander. “For the next *thousand* years we’ll be trying to figure out how they think, why they fight, what it takes to get along with them, what motivates them.”

If they let us live that long, thought Terrence.

“Why are we at war with the Kyben?” he asked the older man. “I mean *really*.”

“Because the Kyben want to kill every human being they can recognize as a human being.”

“What have they got against us?”

“Does it matter? Maybe it’s because our skin isn’t bright yellow; maybe it’s because our fingers

aren't silken and flexible; maybe it's because our cities are too noisy for them. Maybe a lot of maybes. But it doesn't matter. Survival never matters until you have to survive."

Terrence nodded. He understood. So did the Kyben. It grinned at him and drew its blaster. It fired point-blank, crimsoning the hull of the Kyben ship.

He swerved to avoid running into his gun's own backlash. The movement of the bucket seat sliding in its tracks, keeping his vision steady while maneuvering, made him dizzy. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them, the abyss was nearer, and he teetered, his lips whitening as they pressed together under his effort to steady himself. With a headlong gasp he fell sighing into the stomach. His long, silken fingers jointed steely humming clankingly toward the medicine chest ever over the plate behind the bulkhead.

The robot advanced on him grindingly. Small fine bits of metal rubbed together, ashing away into a breeze that came from nowhere as the machine raised lead boots toward his face.

Onward and onward till he had no room to move and then

The light came on, bright, brighter than any star Terrence had ever seen, glowing, broiling, flickering, shining, bobbing a ball of light on the chest of the robot, who staggered, stumbled, stepped.

The robot hissed, hummed and exploded into a million flying, racing fragments, shooting beams of light all over the abyss over which Terrence again teetered, teetering. He flailed his arms wildly trying to escape but at the last moment, before the fall

He awoke with a start!

He saved himself only by his unconscious. Even in the hell of a nightmare he was aware of the situation. He had not moaned and writhed in his delirium. He had kept motionless and silent.

He knew it was true, because he was still alive.

Only his surprised jerking, as he came back to consciousness, started the monster rolling from its niche. He came fully awake and sat silent, slumped against the wall. The robot retreated.

Thin breath came through his nostrils. Another moment and he would have put an end to the past three days-three days or more now? how long had he been asleep?-days of torture.

He was hungry. Lord how hungry he was. The pain in his side was worse now, a steady throbbing that made even shallow breathing tortuous. He itched maddeningly. He was uncomfortably slouched against a cold steel bulkhead, every rivet having made a burrow for itself in his skin. He wished he was dead.

He didn't wish he was dead. It was all too easy to get his wish.

If he could only disable that robot brain. A total impossibility. If he could only wear Phobos and Deinlos for watch fobs. If he could only shack-up with a silicon-deb from Penares. If he could only use his large colon for a lasso.

It would take a thorough destruction of the brain to do it enough damage to stop the appendage before it could roll over and smash Terrence again.

With a steel bulkhead between him and the brain, his chances of success totaled minus zero every time.

He considered which part of his body the robot would smash first. One blow of that tool-hand would kill him if it was used a second time. With the state of his present wounds, even a strong breath might finish him.

Perhaps he could make a break and get through the lock into the decompression chamber...

Worthless. (A) The robot would catch him before he had gotten to his feet, in his present condition. (B) Even allowing a miracle, even if he did get through the lock, the robot would smash the lock port, letting in air, ruining the mechanism. (C) Even allowing a double miracle and it didn't, what the hell good would it do him? His helmet and gloves were in the hutch itself, and there was no place to go on the planetoid. The ship was ruined, so no signal could be sent from there.

Doom suddenly compounded itself.

The more he thought about it, the more certain he was that soon the light would flicker out for him.

The light would flicker out.

The light would flicker...

The light...

...light...?

Oh God, is it possible? Can it be? Have I found an answer? He marveled at the simplicity of it. It had been there for more than three days waiting for him to use it. It was *so* simple it was magnificent. He could hardly restrain himself from moving, just out of sheer joy.

I'm not brilliant, I'm not a genius, why did this occur to me? For a few minutes the brilliance of the solution staggered him. Would a less intelligent man have solved the problem this easily? Would a *more* intelligent man have done it? Then he remembered the dream. The light in the dream. *He* hadn't solved the problem, his unconscious had. The answer had been there all the time, but he was too close to see it. His mind had been forced to devise a way to tell him. Luckily, it had.

And finally, he didn't care *how* he had uncovered it. His God, if he had had anything to do with it, had heard him. Terrence was by no means a religious man, but this was miracle enough to make him a believer. It wasn't over yet, but the answer was there-and it *was* an answer.

He began to save himself.

Slowly, achingly slowly, he moved his right hand, the hand away from the robot's sight, to his belt. On the belt hung the assorted implements a spaceman needs at any moment in his ship. A wrench. A packet of sleep-stavers. A compass. A geiger counter. A flashlight.

The last was the miracle. Miracle in a tube.

He fingered it almost reverently, then unclipped it in a moment's frenzy, still immobile to the robot's "eyes."

He held it at his side, away from his body by a fraction of an inch, pointing up over the bulge of his spacesuited leg.

If the robot looked at him, all it would see would be the motionless bulk of his leg, blocking off any movement on his part. To the machine, he was inert. Motionless.

Now he thought wildly, *where is the brain?*

If it is behind the relay machines, I'm still dead. If it is near the refrigerator, I'm saved. He could afford to take no chances. He would have to move.

He lifted one leg.

The robot moved toward him. The humming and sparking were more distinct this time. He dropped the leg.

Behind the plates above the refrigerator!

The robot stopped, nearly at his side. Seconds had decided. The robot hummed, sparked, and returned to its niche.

Now he knew!

He pressed the button. The invisible beam of the flashlight leaped out, speared the bulkhead above the refrigerator. He pressed the button again and again, the flat circle of light appearing, disappearing, appearing, disappearing on the faceless metal of the life hutch's wall.

The robot sparked and rolled from its niche. It looked once at Terrence. Its rollers changed direction in an instant and the machine ground toward the refrigerator.

The steeled fist swung in a vicious arc, smashing with a deafening clang! at the spot where the light bubble flickered on and off.

It swung again and again. Again and again till the bulkhead had been gouged and crushed and opened, and the delicate coils and plates and circuits and memorex modules behind it were refuse and rubble. Until the robot froze, with arm half-ready to strike again. Dead. Immobile. Brain and appendage.

Even then Terrence did not stop pressing the flashlight button. Wildly he thumbed it again and again and again.

Then he realized it was all over.

The robot was dead. He was alive. He would be saved. He had no doubts about that. *Now* he could cry.

The medicine chest grew large through the shimmering in his eyes. The relay machines smiled at him.

God bless you, little life hutch, he thought, before he fainted.

The Very Last Day of a Good Woman

FINALLY, HE KNEW the world was going to end. It had grown in certainty with terrible slowness. His was not a perfect talent, but rather, a gem with many small flaws in it. Had he been able to see the future clearly, had he not been a partial clairvoyant, his life might not have come to what it had. His hunger would not have been what it was. Yet the brief, fogged glimpses were molded together, and he knew the Earth was about to end. By the same rude certainty that told him it was going to end, he knew it was not self-deception-it was not merely *his* death. It was the final irrevocable finish of his world, with every life upon it. This he saw in a shattered fragment of clarity, and he knew it would come in two weeks, on a Thursday night.

His name was Arthur Fulbright, and he wanted a woman.

How strange or odd. To know the future. To know it in that most peculiar of fashions: not as a unified whole, as a superimposed something on the image of now, but in bits and snatches, in fits and starts. In humming, deliberate quickness *-a truck will come around the corner in a moment-that made him-Native Dancer will win-almost a denizen of two worlds-the train will leave ten minutes early-he saw the future through a glass darkly-you will find your other cuff link in the medicine cabinet-and was hardly aware of what this power promised.*

For years, a soft, brown shambling man all hummed words and gentle glances, living with his widowed mother in an eight-room house set about with honeysuckle and sweet pea. For years, working in a job of unidentifiable type and station; for years returning to the house and the comforting pastel of Mother.

Years that held little change, little activity, little of note or importance. Yet good years, and silent.

Then Mother had died. Sighing in the night, she had slowed down like a phonograph, like the old crank phonograph covered under a white sheet in the attic, and had died. Life had played its melody for her, and just as naturally had trembled to an unsatisfactory end.

For Arthur it had meant changes.

Now, no more the nights of sound sleep, the evenings of quiet discussion and backgammon or whist, the afternoons of lunch prepared in time for a return to the office, the mornings with cinnamon toast and orange juice ready. Now it was a single-lane highway that he would travel alone.

Learning to eat in restaurants, learning where the fresh linens were kept, sending his clothes out to be mended and cleaned.

And most of all, coming to realize in the six years since Mother's death, that he could see the future once in a while. It was in no way alarming, nor even-after living with it so long-surprising. The word terrifying, in connection with his sight of the future, would never have occurred to him; and had he not seen that night of flame and death, the end of the world, the power would never have troubled him.

But he did see it, and it made a difference.

Because now that he was about to die, now that he had two weeks and no more, he had to find a purpose. There had to be a reason to die without regret. Yet here he sat, in the high-backed wing chair in the darkened living room, with the empty eight-room house around him, and there was no purpose. He had not considered his own demise; Mother's going had been hard enough to reconcile, but he had known it would come some day (though the ramifications of her death had never dawned on him). His own death was something else.

"How can a man come to thirty-nine years, and have nothing?" he asked himself. "How can it be?"

It was true, of course. He had nothing. No talent, no mark to leave on affairs, no wake, no purpose.

And with the tallying of his lacks, he came to the most important one of all. The one marking him as not yet a man, no matter what he thought. The lack of a woman. He was a virgin; he had never had a woman.

With two weeks left on Earth, Arthur Fulbright knew what he wanted, more than anything, more than fame or wealth or position. His desire for his last days on Earth was a simple one, an uncluttered one.

Arthur Fulbright wanted a woman.

There had been a little money. Mother had left over two thousand dollars in cash and savings bonds. He had been able to put away two thousand in his own account. That made four thousand dollars, and it became very important, but not till later.

The idea of buying a woman came to him after many other considerations. The first attempt was with a young woman of his acquaintance, who worked as a steno-typist in the office, in the billing section.

"Jackie," he asked her, having passed time with her on occasion, "would you-uh-how would you like to go to a-uh-show with me tonight...or something?"

She stared at him curiously, seeing a cipher; but having mentally relegated the evening to smoking a little grass and washing her hair with a girl friend, accepted.

That evening she doubled her fist and gave him such a blow beneath his rib cage, that his eyes watered and his side hurt for almost an hour.

The next day he avoided the girl with the blonde, twirled ponytail who was browsing in the HISTORICAL NOVELS section of the Public Library. He had had a glimpse often enough-of the future-to know what this one meant. She was married, despondent, and did not wear her ring out of hostility for her husband. He saw himself in an unpleasant situation involving the girl, the librarian, and the library guard. He avoided the library.

As the week wore through, as Arthur realized he had never developed the techniques other men used to snare girls, he knew his time was running out. As he walked the streets late at night, passing few people, but still people who were soon to perish in a flaming death, he knew his time was slipping away with terrible swiftness.

Now it was no mere desire. Now it was a drive, an urge within him that obsessed his thoughts, that motivated him as nothing else in life ever had. And he cursed Mother for her fine, old Southern ways, for her white flesh that had bound him in umbilical impotence. Her never-demanding, always-pleasant ways, that had made it so simple to live on in a pastel world of strifeless, effortless complacency.

To die a-flaming with the rest of the world...empty.

The streets were chill, and the lamp posts had wavering, unearthly halos about them. From far off came the sound of a car horn, lost in the darkness; and a truck, its diesel gut rumbling, shifting into gear as a stop light changed, then coughing away. The pavement had the sick pallor of rotting flesh, and the stars were lost in inkiness on a moonless night. He bunched himself tightly inside his topcoat, and bent into the vague, leaf-picking breeze slanting toward him. A dog howled briefly somewhere, and a door slammed on another block. Abruptly, he was ultrasensitive to these sounds, and wanted to be joined to them, inside with the love and humor of a home. But had he been a pariah, a criminal, a leper, he could not have been more alone. He hated the philosophy of his culture that allowed men like himself to mature without direction, without hope, without love. All of which he needed so desperately.

At the intersection, halfway down the block, a girl emerged from shadows, her heels tock-tock-tocking rhythmically on the sidewalk, then the street, as she stepped across, and went her way.

He was cutting across the lawn of a house, and converging on her from right angles before he realized what he was doing, what his intentions were. By then, his momentum had carried him.

Rape.

The word flowered in his mind like a hot-house flower, with blood-red petals, grew to monstrous proportions, and withered, black at the edges, even as he scooted briskly, head down and hands in coat pockets, toward their point of intersection.

Could he do it? Could he carry it off? She was young and beautiful, desirable, he knew. She would have to be. He would take her down on the grass; and she would not scream, but would be pliant and acquiescent. She had to be.

He raced ahead to the spot where she would meet him, and he lay down on the moist, brown earth, inside the cover of bushes, waiting for her. In the distance he could hear her heels counting off the steps till he was upon her.

Then, even as his desire ate at him, other pictures came. A twisted, half-naked body lying in the street, a mob of men screaming and brandishing a rope, a picture of Mother, her face ashen and transfigured with horror. He crammed his eyes shut, and pressed his cheek to the ground. It was the all-mother, consoling him. He was the child who had done wrong, and his need was great. The all-mother comforted him, directed him, caressed him with propriety and deep devotion. He lay there as the girl clacked past.

The heat in his face died away, and it was the day of the end, before he fully returned to sanity and a sense of awareness.

He had escaped bestiality, perhaps at the cost of his soul.

It was, it was, indeed. The day it would happen. He had several glimpses that day, so shocking, so brilliant in his mind, that they reaffirmed his knowledge of the coming of the event. Today it would come. Today the world would spark and burn.

One vision showed great buildings, steel and concrete, flashing like magnesium flares, burning as though they were crepe paper. The sun was dull-looking, as though it might have been an eye that someone had gouged out. The sidewalks ran like butter; and charred, smoldering shapes lay in the gutters and on the rooftops. It was hideous, and it was now.

He knew his time was up.

Then the idea of the money came to him. He withdrew every cent. Every penny of the four thousand dollars; the vice president of the bank had a peculiar expression on his face, and he asked if everything was all right. Arthur answered him with an epigram, and the vice president was unhappy.

All that day at the office-of course he went to work, he would not have known any other way to spend that last day of all days-he was on edge. He continually turned at his desk to stare out the window, waiting for the blood-red glaze that would paint the sky. But it did not come.

Shortly after the coffee break that afternoon, he found the sensation of nausea growing in him. He went to the men's room and locked himself in one of the cubicles. He sat down on the toilet with its top closed, and held his head in his hands.

A glimpse was coming to him.

Another glimpse, vaguely connected to the ones of the holocaust, but now-like a strip of film running backward-he saw himself entering a bar.

There were words in twisting neon outside, and repeated again on the small dark-glass window. The words said: THE NITE OWL. He saw himself in his blue suit, and he knew the money was in his pocket.

There was a woman at the bar.

Her hair was faintly auburn in the dim light of the bar. She sat on the bar stool, her long legs gracefully crossed, revealing a laced edge of slip. Her face was held at an odd angle, half-up toward the concealed streamer of light over the bar mirror. He could see the dark eyes and the heavy makeup that somehow did not detract from the sharp, unrelieved lines of her face. It was a hard face, but the lips were full, and not thinned. She was staring at nothing.

Then, as abruptly as it had come, the vision passed, and his mouth was filled with the slippery vileness of nausea.

He got to his feet and flipped open the toilet. Then he was thoroughly sick, but not messy.

Afterward, he went back to the office and found the yellow pages of the phone book. He turned to "Bars" and ran his finger down the column till he came to "The Nite Owl" on Morrison and 58th Streets.

He went home especially to freshen up...to get into his blue suit.

She was there. The long legs in the same position, the edge of slip showing, the head at that strange angle, the hair and eyes as he had seen them.

It was almost as though he was reliving a dramatic part he had once played; he walked up to her, and slid onto the empty stool. "May I, may I buy you a drink, Miss?"

She only acknowledged his presence and his question with a half-nod and soft grunt. He motioned to the black-tied bartender and said, "I'd like a glass of ginger ale. Give the young lady whatever she, uh, she wants please."

The woman quirked an eyebrow and mumbled, "Bourbon and water, Ned." The bartender moved away. They sat silently till he returned with the drinks. Then the girl said, "Thanks." Arthur nodded, and moved the glass around in its own circle of moisture. "I like ginger ale. Never really got to like alcohol, I guess. You don't mind?"

Then she turned, and stared at him. She was really quite attractive, with little lines in her neck, around her mouth and eyes. "Why the hell should I care if you drink ginger ale? You could drink goat's milk and I couldn't care less." She turned back.

Arthur hurriedly answered, "Oh, I didn't mean any offense. I was only-"

"Forget it."

"But I-"

She looked at him with vehemence. "Look Mac, you on the make, or what? You got a pitch? Come on, it's late."

Now, confronted with it, Arthur found himself terrified. He wanted to cry. It wasn't the way he had thought it would be. His throat had a choke lost in it. "I-I, why I-"

"Oh, Jeezus, wouldn't 'cha know it. A freak. My luck, always my luck." She bolted the rest of her drink and slid off the stool. She smoothed the miniskirt over her thighs and backside as she moved toward

the door of the bar.

Arthur felt panic rising in him. This was the last chance, and it was important, terribly important! He spun on the stool and called after her, "Miss--"

She stopped and turned. "Yeah?"

"I thought we might, uh, could I speak to you?"

She seemed to sense his difficulty, and a wise look came across her features. She came back and stopped very close to him. "What now, what is it?"

"Are you, uh, are you do, doing anything this evening?"

Her sly look became businesslike. "It'll cost you fifteen. You got that much?"

Arthur was petrified. He could not answer. But as though it realized the time had come for action, his hand dipped into his jacket pocket and came up with the four thousand dollars. Eight five hundred dollar bills, crackling and fresh. He held them out for her to see, then the hand returned them to the pocket. The hand was the businessman, himself merely the bystander.

"Wow," she murmured, her eyes bright. "You're not as bad as I thought, fella. You got a place?"

They went to the big, silent house, and he undressed in the bathroom, for it was the first time, and he held a granite chunk of fear in his chest.

When it was over, and he lay there warm and happy, she rose from the bed and moved to his jacket. He stared at her, and there was a strange feeling in him. He knew it for what it was, for he had felt a distant relative to it, in his feelings for Mother. Arthur Fulbright knew love, of a sort, and he watched her as she fished out the bills.

"Jesus," she murmured, touching the money reverently.

"Take it," he said softly.

"What? How much?"

"All of it. It doesn't mean anything." Then he added, as if it was the highest compliment he could summon: "You are a very good woman."

"Why, thanks, honey."

She held the money tightly. Four thousand dollars. What a simple little bastard. There he lay in the bed, and with nothing to show for it. But his face held such a strange light, as though he had something very important, as though he owned the world.

She chuckled softly, standing there by the window, the faint pink glow of midnight bathing her naked, moist body, and *she* knew what counted. She held it in her hand.

The pink glow turned rosy, then red, then blood crimson.

Arthur Fulbright lay on the bed, and there was a peace deep as the ocean in him. The woman stared at the money, knowing what really counted.

The money turned to ash a scant instant before her hand did the same. Arthur Fulbright's eyes closed slowly.

While outside, the world turned so red and hot, and that was all.

Night Vigil

DARKNESS SEEPED IN around the little Quonset. It oozed out of the deeps of space and swirled around Ferreno's home. The automatic scanners turned and turned, whispering quietly, their message of wariness unconsciously reassuring the old man.

He bent over and plucked momentarily at a bit of lint on the carpet. It was the only speck of foreign matter on the rug, reflecting the old man's perpetual cleanliness and almost fanatical neatness.

The racks of book spools were all binding-to-binding, set flush with the lips of the shelves; the bed was made with a military tightness that allowed a coin to bounce high three times; the walls were free of fingerprints-dusted and wiped clean twice a day; there was no speck of lint or dust on anything in the one-room Quonset.

When Ferreno had flicked the single bit of matter from his fingers, into the incinerator, the place was immaculate.

It reflected twenty-four years of watching, waiting, and living alone. Living alone on the edge of Forever, waiting for something that might never come. Tending blind, dumb machines that could say *Something is out here*, but also said, *We don't know what it is*.

Ferreno returned to his pneumo-chair, sank heavily into it, and blinked, his deep-set gray eyes seeking into the farthest rounded corner of the Quonset's ceiling. His eyes seemed to be looking for something. But there was nothing there he did not already know. Far too well.

He had been on this asteroid, this spot lost in the darkness, for twenty-four years. In that time, nothing had happened.

There had been no warmth, no women, no feeling, and only a brief flurry of emotion for almost twenty of those twenty-four years.

Ferreno had been a young man when they had set him down on The Stone. They had pointed out there and said to him:

"Beyond the farthest spot you can see, there's an island universe. In that island universe there's an enemy, Ferreno. One day he'll become tired of his home and come after yours.

"You're here to watch for him."

And they had gone before he could ask them.

Ask them: who *were* the enemy? Where would they come from, and why was he here, alone, to stop them? What could he do if they came? What were the huge, silent machines that bulked monstrous behind the little Quonset? Would he ever go home again?

All he had known was the intricate dialing process for the inverspace communicators. The tricky-fingered method of sending a coded response half across the galaxy to a waiting Mark LXXXII brain-waiting only for his frantic pulsations.

He had known only that. The dialing process and the fact that he was to watch. Watch for he-knew-not-what!

There at first he had thought he would go out of his mind. It had been the monotony. Monotony intensified to a frightening degree. The ordeal of watching, watching, watching. Sleeping, eating from the self-replenishing supply of protofoods in the greentank, reading, sleeping again, rereading the book spools tin their casings crackled, snapped, and lost panes. Then the rebinding-and re-rereading. The horror of knowing every passage of a book by heart.

He could recite from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* and Hemingway's *Death In The Afternoon* and Melville's *Moby Dick*, till the very words lost meaning, sounded strange and unbelievable in his ears.

First had come living in filth and throwing things against the curving walls and ceilings. Things designed to give, and bounce-but not to break. Walls designed to absorb the impact of a thrown drink-ball or a smashing fist. Then had come the extreme neatness, then a moderation, and finally back to the neat, prissy fastidiousness of an old man who wants to know where everything is at any moment.

No women. That had been a persistent horror for the longest time. A mounting pain in his groin and belly that had wakened him during the arbitrary night, swimming in his own sweat, his mouth and body aching. He had gotten over it slowly. He had even attempted emasculation. None of it had worked, of course, and it had only passed away when his youth had passed away.

He had taken to talking to himself. And answering himself. Not madness, just the fear that the ability to speak might be lost.

Madness had descended many times during the early years. The blind, clawing urgency to get out!

Get out into the airless vastness of The Stone. At least to die, to end this nowhere existence.

But they had constructed the Quonset without a door. The plasteel-sealed slit his deliverers had used as an exit, had been closed irrevocably behind them, and there *was* no way out.

Madness had come often.

But they had selected him wisely. He clung to his sanity; he knew it was his only escape. He knew it would be a far more horrible thing to end out his days in this Quonset a helpless maniac, than to remain sane.

He swung back over the line and soon grew content with his world in a shell. He waited, for there was nothing else he could do; and in his waiting a contentment grew out of frantic restlessness. He began to think of it as a jail, then as a coffin, then as the ultimate black of the Final Hole. He would wake in the arbitrary night, choking, his throat constricted, his hands warped into claws that scrabbled at the foam rubber of the sleeping couch with fierceness.

The time was spent. A moment after it had passed, he could not tell *how* it had been spent. His life became dust-dry and at times he could hardly tell he *was* living. Had it not been for the sealed, automatic calendar, he would hardly have known the years were passing.

And ever, ever, ever-the huge, dull, sleeping eye of the warning buzzer. Staring back at him, veiled, from the ceiling.

It was hooked up with the scanners. The scanners that hulked behind the Quonset. The scanners in turn were hooked up to the net of tight inverspace rays that interlocked each other out to the farthest horizon Ferreno might ever know.

And the net, in turn, joined at stop-gap junctions with the doggie-guards, also waiting, watching with dumb metal and plastic minds for that implacable alien enemy that might someday come.

They had known the enemy would come, for they had found the remnants of those the enemy had destroyed. Remnants of magnificent and powerful cultures, ground to microscopic dust by the heel of a terrifying invader.

They could not chance roaming the universe with those Others somewhere. Somewhere...waiting. They had formed the inverspace net, joining it with the doggie-guards. And they had hooked the system in with the scanners; and they had wired the scanners to the big, dull eye in the ceiling of the Quonset.

Then they had set Ferreno to watching it.

At first Ferreno had watched the thing constantly. Waiting for it to make the disruptive noise he was certain it would emit. Breaking the perpetual silence of his bubble. He waited for the bloodiness of its blink to warp fantastic shadows across the room and furniture. He even spent five months deciding what shape those shadows would take, when they came.

Then he entered the period of nervousness. Jumping for no reason at all, to stare at the eye. The hallucinations: it was blinking, it was ringing in his ears. The sleeplessness: it might go off and he would not hear it.

Then as time progressed, he grew unaware of it, forgot it existed for long periods. Till it had finally come to the knowledge that it was there; a dim thing, an unremembered thing, as much a part of him as his own ears, his own eyes. He had nudged it to the back of his mind-but it was always there.

Always there, always waiting, always on the verge of disruption.

Ferreno never forgot why he was there. He never forgot the reason they had come for him. *The day they had come for him.*

The evening had been pale and laden with sound. The flits clacking through the air above the city, the crickets in the grass, the noise of the holograph from the living room of the house.

He had been sitting on the front porch, arms tight about his girl, on a creaking porch glider that smacked the wall every time they rocked back too far. He remembered the taste of the sweet-acidy lemonade in his mouth as the three men stepped out of the gloom.

They had come up onto the porch.

"Are you Charles Jackson Ferreno, age nineteen, brown hair, brown eyes, five feet ten, 158 pounds, scar on right inner wrist?"

"Y-yes...why?" he had stammered.

The intrusion of these strangers on a thing as private as his love-making had caused him to falter.

Then they had grabbed him.

"What are you doing? Get your hands off him!" Marie had screamed.

They had flashed an illuminated card at her, and she had subsided into terrified silence in the face of their authority. Then they had taken him, howling, into a flit-black and silent -and whirled him off to the

plasteel block in the Nevada desert that had been Central Space Service Headquarters.

They had hypno-conditioned him to operate the inverspace communicators. A task he could not have learned in two hundred years-involving the billion alternate dialing choices -had they not planted it mechanically.

Then they had prepared him for the ship.

"Why are you doing this to me? Why have you picked me!" he had screamed at them, fighting the lacing-up of the pressure suit.

They had told him. The Mark LXXXII. He had been chosen best out of forty-seven thousand punched cards whipped through its platinum vitals. Best by selection. An infallible machine had said he was the least susceptible to madness, inefficiency, failure. He was the best, and the Service needed him.

Then, the ship.

The nose of the beast had pointed straight up into a cloudless sky, blue and unfilmed as the best he had ever known. Then a rumble, and a scream, and the pressure as the ship had raced into space. And the almost imperceptible wrenching as the ship had slipped scudwise through inverspace. The travel through the milky pinkness of that not-space. Then the gut-pulling again, and *there!* off to the right through the port-that bleak little asteroid with its Quonset blemish.

When they had set him down and told him about the enemy, he had screamed at them, but they had pushed him back into the bubble, had sealed the pressure-lock, and had gone back to the ship.

They had left The Stone, then. Rushing up till they had popped out of sight around a bend in space.

His hands had been bloodied, beating against the resilient plasteel of the pressure-lock and the vista windows.

He never forgot why he was there.

He tried to conjure up the enemy. Were they horrible sluglike creatures from some dark star, spreading a ring of viscous, poisonous fluid inside Earth's atmosphere; were they tentacled spider-men who drank blood; were they perhaps quiet, well-mannered beings who would sublimate all of man's drives and ambitions; were they...

He went on and on, till it did not matter in the slightest to him. Then he forgot time. But he remembered he was here to watch. To watch and wait. A sentinel at the gate of the Forever, waiting for an unknown enemy that might streak out of nowhere bound for Earth and destruction. Or that might have died out millennia before-leaving him here on a worthless assignment, doomed to an empty life.

He began the hate. The hate of the men who had consigned him to this living death. He hated the men who had brought him here in their ship. He hated the men who had conceived the idea of a sentinel. He hated the Mark computer that had said:

"Get Charles Jackson Ferreno *only!*"

He hated them all. But most of all he hated the alien enemy. The implacable enemy who had thrown fear into the hearts of the men.

Ferreno hated them all with a bitter intensity verging on madness, itself. Then, the obsession passed. Even that passed.

Now he was an old man. His hands and face and neck wrinkled with the skin-folding of age. His eyes had sunk back under ridges of flesh, his eyebrows white as the stars. His hair loose and uncombed, trimmed raggedly by an ultrasafe shaving device he had not been able to adopt for suicide. A beard of unkempt and foul proportions. A body slumped into a position that fitted his pneumo-chair exactly.

Thoughts played leapfrog with themselves. Ferreno was thinking. For the first time in eight years-since the last hallucination had passed-actually thinking. He sat humped into the pneumo-chair that had long ago formed itself permanently to his posture. The muted strains of some long since overfamiliarized piece of taped music humming above him. Was the horrible repetition Vivaldi's *Gloria Mass* or a snatch of Monteverdi? He fumbled in the back of his mind, in the recess where this music had lived for so long-consigned there by horrible repetition.

His thoughts veered before he found the answer. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the watching.

Beads of perspiration sprang out, dotting his upper lip and the receding arcs of sparse hair at his temples.

What if they never came?

What if they had gone already and through some failure of the mechanisms he had missed them?

Even the subliminal persistence of the revolving scanners' workings was not assurance enough. For the first time in many years he was hearing the scanners again, and did they sound right? Didn't...they...sound...a...bit...off?

They didn't sound right! My God, all these years and now they weren't working! He had no way of repairing them, no way of getting out of here, he was doomed to lie here till he died-his purpose gone! Oh My God! All these years here nowhere and my youth gone and they've stopped running and no-good damned things failing now and the aliens've slipped through and Earth's gone and I'm no good here and it's all for nothing and Marie and everything...

Ferreno! Good God, man! Stop yourself!

He grabbed control of himself abruptly, lurchingly. The machines were perfect. They worked on the basic substance of inverspace. They *couldn't* go wrong, once set running on the pattern.

But the uselessness of it all remained.

His head fell into his shaking hands. He felt tears welling up behind his eyes. What could one puny man do here, away from all and everyone? They had told him more than one man would be dangerous. They would kill each other out of sheer boredom. The same for a man and a woman. Only one man could remain in possession of his senses, to tickle out the intricate warning on the inverspace communicator.

He recalled again what they had said about relief.

There could be none. Once sealed in, a man had begun the fight with himself. If they took him out and put in another man, they were upping the chances of a miscalculation-and a failure. By picking the very best man by infallible computer, they were putting all their eggs in one basket-but they were cutting risk to the bone.

He recalled again what they had said about a machine in his place.

Impossible. A robot brain, equipped to perform that remarkable task of sorting the warning factors, and recording it on the inverspace communicators-including any possible ramifications that might crop up in fifty years-would have to be fantastically large.

It would have had to be five hundred miles long by three hundred wide. With tapes and back-up circuits and transversistors and punch-checks that, if laid end to end, would have reached halfway from The Stone to Earth.

He knew he was necessary, which had been one of the things that had somehow stopped him from finding a way to wreck himself or the whole Quonset during those twenty-four years.

Yet it still seemed so worthless, so helpless, so unnecessary. He didn't know, but he was certain the Quonset bubble would inform them if he died or was helpless. Then they would try again.

He was necessary, *if...*

If the enemy was coming. *If* the enemy hadn't already passed him by. *If* the enemy hadn't died long ago. *If, if, if!*

He felt the madness waking again, like some horrible monster of the mind.

He pressed it back with cool argument.

He knew, deep inside himself, that he was a symbol. A gesture of desperation. A gesture of survival for the peoples of Earth. They wanted to live. But did they have to sacrifice him for their survival?

He could not come to an answer within himself.

Perhaps it was inevitable. Perhaps not. Either way, it just happened he had been the man.

Here at this junction of the galaxies; in this spot of most importance; here he was the key to a battle that must someday be fought.

But what if he was wasted? What if they never came? What if there was no enemy at all? Only supposition by the learned ones. Tampering with the soul and life of a human being!

God! The horror of the thought! What if...

A soft buzz accompanied the steady ruby glow from the eye in the ceiling.

Ferreno stared, open-mouthed. He could not look up at the eye itself. He stared at the bloody film that covered the walls and floor of the Quonset. This was the time he had waited twenty-four years to come!

Was this it? No strident noises, no flickering urgency of the red light. Only a steady glow and a soft buzz.

And at the same time he knew that this was far more effective. It had prevented his death from heart attack.

Then he tried to move. Tried to finger the forty-three keys of the inverspace communicator on the

underarm of the pneumo-chair. Tried to translate the message the way it had been impressed sub-cortically in his mind, in a way he could never have done consciously.

He was frozen in the seat.

He couldn't move. His hands would not respond to the frantic orders of his brain. The keys lay silent under the chair arm, the warning unsent. He was totally incapacitated. What if this was a dud? What if the machines were breaking down from the constant twenty-four years of use? Twenty-four years -and how many men before him? What if this was merely another hallucination? What if he was going insane at last?

He couldn't take the chance. His mind blocked him off. The fear was there. He couldn't be wrong, and send the warning now, crying wolf.

Then he saw it, and he knew it was not a dud.

Far out in the ever-dark dark of the space beyond The Stone, he could see a spreading point of light piercing the ebony of the void. And he knew. A calmness covered him.

Now he knew it had not been waste. This was the culmination of all the years of waiting. The privation, the hunger of loneliness, the torture of boredom, all of it. It was worth suffering all that.

He reached under, and closed his eyes, letting his hypnotraining take over. His fingers flickered momentarily over the forty-three keys.

That done, he settled back, letting his thoughts rest on the calmed surface of his mind. He watched the spreading points of light in the vista window, knowing it was an armada advancing without pause on Earth.

He was content. He would soon die, and his job would be finished. It was worth all the years without. Without anything good he would have known on Earth. But it was worth all of it. The struggle for life was coming to his people.

His night vigil was finally ended.

The enemy was coming at last.

THE FORM OF THE HABIT she had become still drove him to one side of the bed. Despite his need for room to throw out arms, legs in a figure-4, crosswise angled body, he still slept on only one side of the big double, bed. The force of memory of her body there, lying huddled on the inside, together cuddled body-into-body, a pair of question marks, whatever arrangement it might have been from night to night-still, her *there*. Now, only the memory of her warmth beside him kept him prisoner on his half. And reduced to memories and physical need for sleep, he retired to that slab of torture as seldom as possible. Staying awake till tiny hours, doing meaningless things, laughing at laughers, cleaning house for himself till the pathological tidiness made him gibber and caper and shriek within his skull and soul, seeing movies that wandered aimlessly, hearing the vapors of night and time and existence passing by without purpose or validity. Until finally, crushed by the weight of hours and decaying bodily functions, desperately needing recharge, he collapsed into that bed he loathed.

To sleep on one side only.

To dream his dreams of brutality and fear.

This was the dream, that same damned recurrent dream, never *quite* the same dream-but on the same subject, night after night, chapter after chapter of the same story: as if he had bought a book of horror stories; they would all be on one theme, but told differently; that was the way with this string of darkside visions.

Tonight came number fourteen. A clean-cut collegiate face proudly bearing its wide, amiable grin. A face topped by a sandy brush-cut and light, auburn eyebrows, giving that sophomoric countenance a giggly, innocent vividness instantly conveying friendship. Under other circumstances Paul knew he could be close friends with this guy. *Guy*, that was the word he used, even in the dream, rather than *fellow*, or *man*, or-most accurately-assassin. In any other place than this misty nightmare, with any other intent than this one, they might have lightly punched each other's biceps in camaraderie and hey, how the hell are you'd each other. But this was the dream, latest installment, and this college guy was number fourteen. Latest in an endless, competent string of pleasant types sent to kill Paul.

The plot of the dreams was long since formulated, now merely suggested by rote in the words and deeds of the players: (sections indefinite, details muzzy, transitions blurred, logic distorted dream-style) Paul had been a member of this gang, or group, or bunch of guys, whatever. Now they were after him. They were intent on killing him. If they ever came at him in a group, they would succeed. But for some reason that made sense only in the dream, they were assigned the job one by one. And as each sweet human being tried to tip him the black spot, Paul killed him. One after another, by the most detailed, violently brutal and gut-wrenching means available, he killed the killers. Thirteen times they had come against him-these men who were decent and pleasant and dedicated, whom he would have been proud to call his friends under other circumstances-and thirteen times he had escaped assassination.

Two or three or-once-four in a night, for the past several weeks (and that he had only killed thirteen till now bore witness to the frequency with which he avoided sleep entirely, or crashslept himself into exhaustion so there *were* no dreams).

Yet the most disturbing part of the dreams was the brutalized combat itself. Never a simple shooting or positive poisoning. Never an image that could be re-told when awakening without bringing a look of shock and horror to the face of Paul's confidants. Always a bizarre and minutely-described *affaire de morte*.

One of the assassins had pulled a thin, desperately-sharp stiletto, and Paul had grappled with the man interminably, slashing at his flesh and the sensitive folds of skin between fingers, till the very essence, the very *reality* of death by knife became a gagging tremor in his sleeping body. It was as though the sense, the *feel* of death-in-progress was evoked. More than a dream, it had been a new threshold of anguish, a vital new terror which he would ever after have to support. It was something new to live with. Until finally he had locked the man's hands around the hilt and driven the slim blade into his stomach, deep and with difficulty, feeling it puncture and gash through organs and resisting, rubbery organs. Then pulling it away from the mortally-wounded assassin and (did he, or did he suppose he had) used it again and again, till the other had fallen under the furniture. Another had been battered to his knees and dispatched finally, with a smooth, heavy piece of black statuary. Still another had gone screaming, pushed abruptly (Paul with teeth bared, fanglike, vicious animal) from a ledge, twisting and plunging heavily away. The passion with which he had watched that body fall, the desire in him to *feel* the weight of it going down, had been the disgusting

detail of that particular segment. Still another had come at Paul with some now-forgotten weapon and Paul had used a tire chain on him, first wrapping it tightly about the assassin's neck and twisting till the links broke skin...then flaying the unconscious body till there was no life left in it.

One after another. Thirteen of them, two already tonight, and now number fourteen, this pleasant-enough guy with the rah-rah demeanor, and the fireplace poker in his competent hands. The gang would never let him alone. He had run, had hidden, had tried to avoid killing them by putting himself out of reach, but they always found him. He went at the guy, wrested the poker from him, and jabbed sharply with the picktip of it. He was about to envision where he had thrust that blunt-sharp point, when the phone went off and the doorbell rang-simultaneously.

For a screaming instant of absolute terror he lay there flat on his back, the other side of the bed creased only by a small furrow made by his spastic arm as it had flung itself away from him: the other side of the bed that she had inhabited, that was now untenanted, save for the wispy endtips of the dream streaking away as his arm had done.

While the chime and the bell rang in discordant duo.

Having saved him from seeing what damage he had done the collegiate guy's face. Almost like melodious saviors. Rung in by a watchful God who allotted only certain amounts of fear and depravity to each sleeptime. Knowing he would pick up the thread of the dream precisely where he had left off, next time out. Hoping he could stave off sleep for a year, two years, so he would not have to find out how the rah-rah type had died. But knowing he would. Listening to the phone and the doorbell clanging at him. Having let them serve their purposes of wakening him, now fearing to answer them.

He flipped onto his stomach and reached out a hand in the darkness that did not deter him. He grabbed the receiver off its rest and yowled, "Hold it a minute, please," and in one movement flipped aside the clammy sheet, hit the floor and surely fumbled his way to the door. He opened it as the chime went off again, and in the light from the hallway saw only a shape, no person. He heard a voice, made no sense of it, and said impatiently, "C'min, c'min already, for Chri'sake an' shut the door." He turned away and went back to the bed, picked up the receiver he had tossed onto the pillow, and cleared phlegm from his throat as he asked, "Yeah, okay now, who's this?"

"Paul. Has Claire gotten there, is she there yet?" He felt bits of rock-salt in the corners of his eyes, and fingered them tighter into the folds of flesh as he tried to place the voice. It was someone he knew, a friend, someone

"Harry? That's you, Harry?"

On the other end of the line, way out there in the night somehow, Harry Dockstader swore lightly, quickly. "Yeah, me, me already. Paul, is Claire there?"

Paul Reed was suddenly assaulted by the overhead light going on, and he snapped his eyes shut against the blaze, opened them, closed them again, and then finally popped them open completely to see Claire Dockstader standing at the light switch by the front door.

"Yeah, Harry, she's here." Then the weirdness of her being here came to him fully, and he demanded, "Harry, what the hell is going on, Claire's over here, why isn't she with you? Why's she here?"

It was an inane conversation, totally devoid of sense, but his synapses were not yet in focus.

"Harry?"

The voice on the other end snarled, gutturally.

Then Claire was coming across the room at him, wrathful and impatient, ferocious in demanding, "*Give me that phone!*" Each word sharply enunciated, much too fine for this hour of the morning, each syllable clear and harsh and very thin-lipped, only a woman's way. "Give me that phone, Paul. Let *me* talk to him...hello, Harry? You sonofabitch, go straight to fucking hell, die you bastard! Ooo, you *bas*-tard!"

And she literally flung the receiver onto the rest.

Paul sat on the edge of the bed, feeling himself naked from the waist up, feeling the rug under his bare feet, feeling that *no* woman should use language like that at this hour. "Claire...*what* the hell is going on?"

She stood trembling for a moment, valkyrie in her fury, then stalked, half-stumbled, fell across the room into the easy chair. Upon touching the seat she burst into tears. "Ooo, that *bas*-tard," she repeated, not to Paul, not to the silent phone, to the air perhaps. "That lousy chaser, that skunk and his chippies, those *bums* he brings up to the house. Oh God Why'd I Ever Marry That Skunk!"

It was, of course, all laid out for Paul in that sentence, even without the particulars-even at the hour-and the ring of his own recent past was so clear he winced. The word *chaser* did it. His own sister had called him that when she'd heard he and Georgette were divorcing. That damned word: *chaser*. He could

still hear it.

Paul rose from the bed. The one-and-a-half in which he managed to live (now) alone, suddenly seemed close and muggy with a woman in it. "Claire, want some coffee?"

She nodded, still running through her thoughts like prayer beads, eyes turned inward. He moved past her into the tiny kitchenette. The electric coffeepot was on the sideboard, and he hefted it, shook it to see if there was enough left from the last brewing. A heavy sloshing reassured him, and he plugged in the cord.

As he returned to the living room, her eyes followed him. He dropped onto the bed and slid upward, bracing the pillow behind him. "Okay," Paul said, reaching for the cigarettes beside the phone, "lay it on me. Who was it this time, and how far along were they when you caught him?"

Claire Dockstader pursed her lips so tightly dimples appeared in her cheeks. "Only a philanderer like you, as bad as Harry, just as big a Skunk, could put it that way!"

Paul shrugged. He was a long, lean man with a thatch of straw-colored hair; he raked the hair off his forehead and applied himself to lighting the cigarette. He didn't want to look at her. A thing in his living room, soon after Georgette, too soon, even a friend's wife. He pulled at the cigarette, and at his thoughts: neither satisfied. He seemed too long for the bed, ungainly, hardly of interest to a woman, yet apparently it was not so, for she stared at him differently now. A subtle shifting of mood in the room, as though she had suddenly realized she had not only broken into his living room, but into his bedroom as well, a room in which other things than just living were done. They were very close, but held apart by a circumstance that both realized might at any moment melt. Uncomfortable, suddenly, the both of them. He covered himself with the sheet, to the waist; she looked away.

Coffee perking, popping, distracting, thank God.

"Christ, what time is it?" Paul asked (himself, in self-defense, more than her). He pulled the travel alarm from the nightstand and stared into its face, its idiot face, as though the numbers meant something. "Jeezus, Jeezus, three ayem, Jeezus; don't you people ever sleep?" He was a pot, calling a kettle black. He never slept, never really went to bed, so who was he fooling with this line out of suburban rote?

She shifted in the easy chair, rearranging her skirt that had ridden too high up her thighs, and Paul once more marveled at the joys of the miniskirt hemline, if one was a leg man, which he had decided with the advent of the miniskirt hemlines, he was. She caught his stare and toyed with it for a moment, then allowed it to vaporize in her own eyes, not just yet returning his proposition.

It was happening, just this easily. A pact of guilt and opportunity was being solidified, without the decency of either admitting its necessity. Paul had been separated not nearly long enough to attempt morality of a high order, and Claire was still burning with outrage. Neither would say the name of the game, but both would play, and both knew it would happen.

And as soon as Paul Reed admitted his loneliness, his guilt and his desires were compounding to produce (why fool around, name it!) adultery, an act of love performed without the catalyst of love, something unpleasant began to happen in the empty, dark, far corner of the room.

He was unaware of its beginnings.

"Why did you pick me for your flight?" he asked her.

"You were the only one I could think of who'd be awake this late...and I wasn't thinking too clearly...I was too furious to think straight." She stopped talking; she had said much more than what she had said. Of all the places she might have gone, of all the seedy bars where she might have been picked up and laid in retaliation, of all the married friends she and Harry had accrued, of all the cheap hotels where an innocent night of sleep might be purchased for eight dollars, she had picked Paul and his living room that was a bedroom that was a hole in the world where guilt could be born out of frustration and pain.

"Is that, uh, coffee ready?" she asked.

He slid out of bed, nakedly aware of her eyes on his body, and went into the kitchenette. He ached in places he did not want to ache, and knew what was going to happen, for all the wrong reasons, and knew he would despise not only her and himself when it had been done, when they had killed something between them, but that he would barely think of it again. He was wrong.

When he handed her the coffee cup, their hands touched, and their eyes locked for the first time in this new way, and the cyclic movement began for the millionth time that night. And once begun, the cycle could not be impeded.

While slowly, steadily, in the dark corner, what had begun to happen, nasty as it was, went on unnoticed. Their insensate passion a midwife at that strange birth.

Simply the mechanics of divorce were gristmill enough to powder him into the finest ash. Simply the little pains of walking through the apartment where they had bumped into one another constantly, the lawyer talks, the serving of the papers, the phone calls that lacked any slightest tinge of communication, the recriminations, and worst of all, the steadily deteriorating knowledge that somehow what had gone wrong was not real, but a matter of thoughts, attitudes, dreams ghosts vapors. All insubstantial, but so omnipresent, so *real*, they had broken up his marriage with Georgette. As if they *were* substantial, rock-hard, real, physically tearing her from his arms and his thoughts and his life. Phantom raiders from both of their minds, whose sole purpose in life was to shrivel and shred and shatter their union. But the thoughts and vapors and gray images persisted, and he existed alone in the one-and-a-half where they had set up their gestalt, while she rattled the knucklebones and murmured the incantations and boiled up the mystic brews, all set down so precisely in the grimoire of divorce. And as the pattern of separation progressed, a boulder racing mindlessly downhill, needing only the most impossible strength imaginable to halt its crushing rush, his life set itself up in a new sequence, apart from her, yet totally motivated by her existence and the reality of her absence.

Earlier that day he had received a phone call from her. One of those backbiting, bitter, flame-colored conversations that ended in him telling her to go to hell, she wasn't getting any more money out of him till the settlement, and he didn't give a damn *how* badly she needed it.

"The Court said a hundred and twenty-five a month separate maintenance, and that's all you're getting. Stop buying clothes and you'll have enough to live on."

Chittering reply from the other end.

"A hundred and twenty-five, baby, that's *it!* You're the one who moved out, not me; don't expect me to support your nutty behavior gratis. We're through, Georgette, get that drilled into your platinum head, we're all done. I've had it with you, I'm fed up with all the dirty dishes in the sink, and your subway phobia, and not being able to touch your goddam hair after you've been to the beauty parlor and-oh, crap, why bother with all this...the answer is..."

Chittering interruption, vitriol electrically transmitted, hemlock hatred telephonically magnified, poured directly into his mind through his ear

"...yeah? Well, the same to you, you stupid simpleass broad, the same *double* to you. Go to hell! You're not getting any more money out of me till the settlement, and I don't give a damn *how* badly you need it!"

He had slammed the receiver back on the stand, and continued getting dressed for his date. When he had picked up the girl, a brunette he had met in his insurance agent's office, a secretary there, it was as though he was collecting unemployment, getting something to which he was entitled, but that nonetheless smacked faintly of being on relief.

Picking up this girl for the first time was precisely like collecting unemployment. Enough to keep him going, but not nearly enough to sustain him in a supportable life. A dole. A pittance, but desperately necessary. A casual girl, with a life of her own, whose path would cross his this once, and then they would stumble past, down their own roads forever, light-footed, unlighted, interminably.

"I'm afraid I won't be very charming company tonight," he told her as she slid into the car. "A woman who looks very much like you, gave me considerable heartache today."

"Oh?" she inquired guardedly. It was their first date. "Who would that be?"

"My ex-wife," he said, telling her the first lie. He had not looked at her, save when he reached across to open the door. Now he stared dead-straight ahead as he pulled the unpolished Ford away from the curb and swung it into traffic.

She sat looking at him speculatively, wondering if accepting a dinner date with an office client was such a good idea after all, no matter *how* engaging a sense of humor he had. His face was not at all the youthful cleverness he had presented to her on those three occasions when he had come to the insurance office. It was a harder substance, somehow, as though whatever light, frothy matter had been its basic component previously, had congealed, like week-old gravy. He was unhappy and disturbed, of course, there was that in abundance; but something else skittered on the edge of his expression, a somnolence, and she was strangely frightened by it-though she was certain it meant harm not for her, but on the contrary, very much for him.

"Why do you let her give you heartache?" she asked.

"Because I still love her, I suppose," he answered, a bit too quickly, as though he had rehearsed it.

"Does *she* love you?"

"Yeah, I guess she does." He paused, then added in a contemplative monotone, "Yeah. I'm quite

certain she does. Otherwise we wouldn't try to kill each other so hard. It's making us both very sick, her loving me."

She straightened her purse on her lap and tried to find another passage through the conversation, but all she could think was, *I should have told him I was busy tonight.*

"Do I look very much like her?"

He stared straight ahead, handling the wheel casually, as though very certain, very sure of it, as though he derived a deep inner satisfaction from driving, from propelling all this weight and metal precisely as he wished. It was as though he was with her, yet very far away, locked in an embrace with his vehicle.

"Oh, not really, I suppose. She's blonde, you're brunette. Just around the temples, maybe, and your hair, the way you wear it pulled back on the side that way, and the skin around her eyes crinkles the same way. That, and the tone of your skin. Something like that; more *reminds* me of her than any actual look-alike."

"Is that why you asked me out?"

He thought about it a moment, pressing his full lips together, then replied, "No. That wasn't it. In fact, when I realized that you reminded me of her, I wanted to call the office and break the date."

I wish you had, she thought severely, *I wish I wasn't here. With you.*

"We don't have to go, you know."

He turned his head, then, seemingly startled. "What? Oh, say, *hell* I didn't mean to depress you. This thing has been going on for months, and it's just one of those miserable problems that has to work itself out. Don't think I was trying to wriggle out of buying you a meal."

"I didn't think *that*," she replied coolly. "I merely thought you might want to be alone this evening."

He smiled, a strained little smile that was half frown and part sneer, and moved his head slightly. "Christ! Anything but *that*. Not alone. Not tonight."

She settled back against the vinyl seat cover, determined suddenly to make him uncomfortable, in defense.

What seemed to each of them like elastic hours stretched past, and then he said, in an altogether new tone of voice, a forced light tone each knew was false, "Where would you like to go? Chinese? Italian? I know a nice little Armenian restaurant..."

She was silent, purposefully, and it *served* its purpose; he was uncomfortable, unhappier than before, and in the next instant it passed and he felt hateful, outright nasty, wanting to either get her into bed at once, or dump her, but not have to suffer this way through an entire evening. And so she defeated herself, as the rock wall slid up to cover the gentleness he would have demonstrated later that night. Deviousness replaced gentleness, sadness.

"Listen," he said smoothly (once again, a new tone, a lacquer-finished tone, chromed and slick), lightly, "I didn't get a chance to shave before I picked you up, and I feel like a slob. You mind if we stop off for a minute at my place, and I'll run a razor over my face?"

She was not fooled. She had been married once, had been divorced, had been dating since she was fifteen, she knew *exactly* what he was saying. He was offering a private demonstration of his etchings. Her mind turned the offer slowly, examining it-in that breathless eternity of a moment in which all decisions are made-and studying each shimmering facet. She knew it was a bad idea, had no merit in any way, that she was a fool to think seriously of it, and that he would back off if she made the slightest sound of disapproval. True true, a bad idea, one to reject on the spot, and she rejected it. "All right," she said.

He turned sharply at the next corner.

He looked down at her face, and abruptly saw her at the age of sixty-five. He knew with a crystal certainty what she would look like when she was old. Superimposed over the pale-and-pink firm immediacy of her face framed against the pillow, he saw a gray line-mask of the old woman she would one day become. The mouth with its stitch-lines, tiny pickets running down into the lips; the dusty hollows lurking beneath the eyes; dark spaces in the character lines and in the planes of expression-as though whole sections had been sold off to retain life, even at the cost of losing appearance. The sooty patina covering the flesh, much like that left when a moth has been crushed, the powdery fine ash of its wings imprinting the surface on which the death had occurred. He stared down at her, seeing the double image, the future lying inchoate across her now-face, turning the paramour beneath him into a relic of incognito spare parts and empty passions. A dim, drenched cobweb of probability, there in the eye sockets, across the mouth he had

kissed, radiating out from the nostrils and pulsing ever so faintly in the hollow of her throat.

Then the vision melted off her young face, and he was looking at the creature of empty purposes he had just used. There was a mad, psychotic light flickering out of her eyes. "Tell me you love me, even if you don't mean it," she murmured huskily.

There was a hungry urgency, a breathless demand in her voice, and a fist closed around his heart as she spoke, a chill ruined his aplomb, his grasp of the present, so recently returned to him. He wanted to pull out of her, away from her, as far as he could, and crouch down somewhere in the bedroom in a patient, fetal security.

But the corner of the room he might have chosen was already occupied. Darkly occupied by bulk and a sinister presence. The breathing in that corner was coming laboriously but more regularly than before; it seemed to have become more steady, pulsing, as they had entered the apartment; and during the parry and counter and riposte of their encounter it had metronomic ally hurried itself to a level of even oftenness. Oh, it was taking form, form, form.

Paul sensed it, but discounted the instinct.

Deep breathing, stentorian, labored-but becoming more regular.

"Tell me. Tell me you love me, nineteen times, very fast."

"I love you I love you I love you I love you," he began rattling them off, propped on one elbow, counting them on the fingers of his left hand. "I love you I love you I luh-"

"Why are you counting them?" she demanded, coquettishly, in a bizarre grotesque parody of naiveté.

"I don't want to lose track," he answered, brutally. Then he slipped sideways, falling onto his back, on Georgette's side of the bed (feeling uncomfortable there, as though the ridges and whorls of her body were imprinted, making it lumpy for him, but with the determination not to let *this* girl lie on *that* side). "Go to sleep," he instructed her.

"I don't want to go to sleep."

"Then go bang your goddam head against the wall," he snapped. Then he was forcing himself to sleep. Eyes closed, knowing how angry the girl beside him had become, he commanded sleep to come, and timorously, fawnlike in a deep foreboding forest, it came, and touched him. So that he began to dream again. *That* dream, again.

In the eye, the right eye. The point of the poker entered, did its damage, came away foul. Paul flung himself violently from the sight, even as the crew-cut young man toppled soddenly past him, still alive somehow, crawling, dying by every bit of flesh through every rotting second. Starlight and darkness slipped by overhead as Paul whirled, spun, found himself in another place. A plaza, perhaps...

A crowd, down the smart sleek shop-bordered street-a posh street (where?) in Beverly Hills, perhaps, glistening and elegant, and seeming almost dazzlingly clean with rhodium-finished permanence-growling, coming toward him.

They were masked, caricatured, made up for some weird mardi gras or costume party or gathering of witches, where real faces would reveal real persons, and thus provide a hook for their damnation. Strangers, boiling hurling sweeping down the street toward him in a chiaroscuro montage of chimerical madness. A vision out of Bosch; a bit of underdone potato or undigested Dali, hurled forth from a dream-image by Hogarth; a pantomime out of the innermost circle of Dante's *Inferno*. Coming for him. For him.

At last, after all these weeks, the dream had broken its pattern, and the massed terrors were now coming for him in a body. No longer one at a time, *vis-à-vis* in that never-ending succession of pleasant assassins. Now they had gathered together, grotesque creatures, masked and hungry.

If I can figure out what this means, I'll know, he thought suddenly. In the midst of the multi-colored haze of the dream, he knew abruptly, certainly, that if he could just make some sense from the events unreeling behind his eyes (and he *knew* it was a dream, right then), there would be a key to his problems, a solution that would work for him. So he concentrated. *If I can just understand who they are, what they're doing here, what they want from me, why they won't let me escape, why they're chasing me, what it takes to placate them, to get away from them, who I am who I am who I am...then I'll be free, I'll be whole again, this will be over, this will end, it'll end...*

He ran down the street, the white clean street, and dodged in and among the cars that had suddenly appeared in lines, waiting for the light to change. He ran down the street to the intersection, and cut across among the slowly moving vehicles, terror clogging his throat, his legs aching from the running, seeking an escape, an exit, *any* exit-a place of rest, of security where he could close the door and know they could not get in.

“Here! We’ll help you,” a man shouted from a car, where he was packed in with his family, many children. Paul ran to the car, and the man opened his door, and Paul managed to crowd past him as he pulled the seat forward, offering entrance to the back seat. Paul squeezed through, pushing the man up against the steering wheel. Then the seat was dropped back, Paul was in the rear with the children, and the car was piled with (what? fuzzy, indistinct) clothes, or soft possessions that the children sat on, and he was forced to lie down across the back deck, under the rear window

(but how could that be?)

(he was a full-grown man, he couldn’t squeeze himself into that small a space, the way he had when he had been a child and gone on trips with his mother and father and laid down under the back window because the back seat was filled up, the way it had been when his father had died, and he had gone away with his mother from their home to the new home...

(why did that memory suddenly come through so lucidly?)

(was he a grown man, or a small child?)

(please answer!)

and he could see out the back window, and the crowd of terrifying masked figures, bright-eyed and haunting, were being left behind. Still, somehow, he did not feel safe! He was with the ones who could help, that man driving, he was strong and would drive fast through the traffic, and save Paul from the haunters, but why didn’t he feel safe...why?

He woke, crying. The girl was gone.

There was one who chewed gum while they did it. An adolescent with oily thighs who had no idea of how to live in her body. The act was sodden and slow and entirely derelict in its duties. Afterward, he thought of her as a figment of his imagination, leaving only her laugh behind.

She had a laugh that sounded like pea pods snapping open. He had met her at a party, and her attractiveness stemmed chiefly from too many vodkas & tonics.

Another one was completely lovely, and yet, she was the sort of woman who gave the impression, upon entering a room, of having just left it.

One was small and slight and shrieked for no other reason than that she had read passionate women screamed at the climax-in a bad book. Or more aptly, an undistinguished book, for she was an undistinguished woman.

One after another they came to that one-and-a-half, casual adulteries without purpose or direction, and he indulged himself, again and again, finally realizing (by what was taking shape in the corner) what he was doing to himself, and his life that was no longer a life.

Genesis refers to sin that coucheth at the door, or croucheth at the door, and so this was no new thing, but old, so very old, as old as the senseless acts that had given it birth, and the madness that was causing it to mature, and the guilty sorrow-the lonelyache-that would inevitably cause it to devour itself and all within its sight.

On the night that he actually paid for love, the night he physically reached into his wallet and took out two ten dollar bills and gave them to the girl, the creature took full and final shape.

This girl: when “good girls” talk about “tramps” they mean this girl and her sisters. But there are no such things as “tramps” and even the criminal never thinks of himself in those terms. Working-girl, entrepreneur, renderer of services, smarty, someone just getting-along...these are the ways of her thoughts. She has a family, and she has a past, and she has a face, as well as a place of sex.

But commercialism is the last sinkhole of love, and when it is reached, by paths of desperation and paths of brutalized, misused emotions-all hope is gone. There is no return from being so demeaned save by miracles, and there are no more miracles for the commonest among common men.

As he handed her the money, wondering why in God’s name, *why!* the beast in the corner by the linen closet took its final shape, and substantiality, reality was its future. It had been called up by a series of contemporary incantations melded out of the sounds of passion and the stink of despair. The girl snapped her bra, covered herself with dacron and decorum, and left Paul sitting stunned, inarticulate with terror in the presence of his new roommate.

It stared at him, and though he tried to avert his eyes (screams were useless), he stared back.

“Georgette,” he whispered huskily into the mouthpiece, “listen...lis, *listen* to me, willya, for Christ’s sake...st, stop *blabbering* for a second, willya, just, just SHUT UP FOR ONE GODDAM SECOND! willya...” she finally subsided, and his words, no longer forced to slip themselves piecemeal

between hers, left standing naked and alone with nothing but silence confronting them, ducked back within him, shy and trembly.

"Well, go *on*," he said, reflexively.

She said she had nothing further to say; what was he calling her for, she had to get ready to go out.

"Georgette, I've got, well, I've got this uh this problem, and I had to *talk* to someone, you were the one I figured would understand, y'see, I've uh--"

She said she didn't know an abortionist, and if he had knocked up one of his bummy-girls, he could use a goddam coat-hanger, a *rusty* coat-hanger, for all she cared.

"No! No, you stupid ass, that isn't anything like what I'm scared about. *That* isn't it, and who the hell do you care who I date, you tramp...you're out on the turf enough for *both* of us..." and he stopped. This was how all their arguments had started. From subject to subject, like mountain goats from rock to rock, forgetting the original discussion, veering off to rip and tear with their teeth at each other's trivialities.

"Georgette, *please!* Listen to me. There's a, there's a thing, some kind of *thing* living here in the apartment."

She thought he was crazy, what did he mean?

"I don't know. I don't know what it is."

Was it like a spider, or a cat, or what?

"It's like a bear, Georgette, only it's something else, I don't know what. It doesn't say anything, just *stares* at me--"

What was he, cracking up or somedamnthing? Bears don't talk, except the ones on TV, and what was he, trying to pull off a nut stunt so he wouldn't have to pony up the payments the court set? And why was he calling her in the first place, closing with: I think you're flipping, Paul. I always said you were a whack, and now you're proving it.

Then the phone clicked, and he was alone.

Together.

He looked at it from the corner of his eye as he lit a cigarette. Hunkered down in the far corner of the room, near the linen closet, the huge soft-brown furry thing that had come to watch him, sat silently, paws folded across its massive chest. Like some great Kodiak bear, yet totally unlike it in shape, the truncated triangle of its bloated form could not be avoided-by glance or thought. The wild, mad golden discs of its eyes never turned, never flickered, while it watched him.

(This description. Forget it. The creature was nothing like that. Not a thing like that at all.)

And he could sense the reproach, even when he had locked himself in the bathroom. He sat on the edge of the tub and ran the hot water till steam had obscured the cabinet mirror over the sink and he could no longer see his own face, the insane light in his eyes so familiar, so similar to the blind stares of the creature in the other room. His thoughts flowed, ran, lavalike, then congealed.

At which point he realized he had never seen the faces of any of the women who had been in the apartment. Not one of them. Faceless, all of them. Not even Georgette's face came to him. None of them. They were all without expression or recall. He had been to seed with so many angular corpses. The sickness welled up in him, and he knew he had to get out of there, out of the apartment, away from the creature in the corner.

He bolted from the bathroom, gained the front door without breaking stride, caroming off the walls, and was lying back against the closed slab of hardwood, dragging in painful gouts of air before he realized that he could not get away that easily. It would be waiting for him when he got back, whenever he got back.

But he went. There was a bar where they played nothing but Sinatra records, and he absorbed as much maudlin sorrow and self-pity as he could, finally tumbling from the place when the strings and the voice oozed forth:

*Night's black agents
Come for me.
They know my love's
A twisted memory.*

There was another place, a beach perhaps, where he stood on the sand, silent within himself, as the gulls wheeled and gibbered across the black sky, kree kree kree, driving him a little more mad, and he dug his naked hands into the sand, hurling great clots of the rainy darkness over his head, trying to kill those

rotten, screaming harridans!

And another place, where there were lights that said things, all manner of unintelligible things, neon things, dirty remarks, and he could not read any of them. (In one place he was certain he saw the masked revelers from his dream, and frothing, he fled, quickly.)

When he returned, finally, to the apartment, the girl with him swore she wasn't a telescope, but yeah, sure, she'd look at what he had to show her, and she'd tell him what it was. So, trusting her, because she'd said it, he turned the key in the door, and opened it. He reached around the jamb and turned on the light. Yeah, yeah, there he was, there he was, that thing there he was, all right. Uh-huh, there he is, the thing with the staring eyes, there he is.

"Well?" he asked her, almost proudly, pointing.

"Well what?" she replied.

"Well what about *him*?"

"Who?"

"Him, *him*, you stupid bitch! Him right *there*! HIM!"

"Y' know, I think you're outta your mind, Sid."

"M' name's not Sid, and don't tell me you don't see him, you lying sonofabitch!"

"Say lissen, you *said* you was Sid, and Sid you're gonna be, and I don't see *no* goddam nobody there, and if you wanna get laid allright, and if you don't, just say so and we'll have another drink an' that'll be *that*!"

He screamed at her, clawing at her face, thrusting her out the door. "Get out, get outta here, g'wan, get out!" And she was gone, and he was alone again with the creature, who was unperturbed by it all, who sat implacably, softly, waiting for the last tick of time to detach itself and fly free from the fabric of sanity.

They trembled there together in a nervous symbiosis, each deriving something from the other. He was covered with a thin film of horror and despair, a terrible lonelyache that twisted like smoke, thick and black within him. The creature giving love, and he reaping heartache, loneliness.

He was alone in that room, the two of them: himself and that soft-brown, staring menace, the manifestation of his misery.

And he knew, suddenly, what the dream meant. He knew, and kept it to himself, for the meaning of dreams is for the men who dream them, never to be shared, never to be known. He knew who the men in the dreams were, and he knew now why none of them had ever been killed simply by a gun. He knew, diving into the clothes closet, finding the duffle bag full of old Army clothes, finding the chunk of steel that lay at the bottom of that bag. He knew who he was, he knew, he knew, gloriously, jubilantly, and he knew it all, who the creature was, and who Georgette was, and the faces of all the women in the damned world, and all the men in the damned dreams, and the identity of the man who had been driving the car who had saved him (and that was the key), and he had it all, right there, right in his hands, ready to be understood.

He went into the bathroom. He was *not* going to let that bastard in the corner see him succeed. He was going to savor it himself. In the mirror he now saw himself again. He saw the face and it was a good face and a very composed face, and he stared back at himself smiling, saying very softly, "Why did you have to go away?"

Then he raised the chunk of steel.

"Nobody, absolutely nobody," he said, holding the huge .45 up to his face, "has the guts to shoot himself through the eye."

He laid the hollow bore of the great blocky weapon against his closed eyelid and continued speaking, still softly. "Through the head, yeah sure, anybody. Or the guys with balls can point it up through the mouth. But through the eye, nobody, but *nobody*." Then he pulled the trigger just as they had taught him in the Army; smoothly, evenly, in one movement.

From the other room came the murmur of breathing, heavily, stentorian, evenly.

Pennies, off a Dead Man's Eyes

IT WAS A SLOW FREIGHT in from Kansas City. I'd nearly emptied all the fluid from my gut sac. There were no weeds or water to fill it again. When the freight hit the outermost switching lines of the yards it was already dark. I rolled myself off the edge of the boxcar, hit running, went twenty feet fast and slipped, fell to my hands and knees, and tumbled over. When I got up there were tiny bits of white chalk stone imbedded in my palms; I rubbed them off, but they really hurt.

I looked around, tried to gauge my position in relation to the town, and when I recognized the spire of the First Baptist, set off across the tracks in the right direction. There was a yard bull running like crazy toward me, so I went dark and left him standing where I'd been, scratching the back of his head and looking around.

It took me forty minutes to walk into the center of town, through it, and out the other side, in the direction of Littletown-the nigger section.

There was a coal bin entrance to the All-Holiness Pentecostal Church of Christ the Master, and I slipped inside, smiling. In twelve years they hadn't repaired the latch and lock. The stairs were dim in the basement darkness, but I knew my way the way a child remembers his bedroom when the light is out. Across twelve years, I remembered.

There were the occasional dim rumblings of voices from upstairs, from the vestry, from the casket room, from the foyer.

Jedediah Parkman was laid out up there. Eighty-two years old, dead, tired, at the end of an endless road down which he had stumbled, black, poor, proud, helpless. No, not helpless.

I climbed the stairs from the basement, laid my white hand against the dry, cracked wood of the door, and thought of all the weight of black pressing back on the other side. Jed would have chuckled.

Through a crack in the jamb I saw nothing but wan opposite; I carefully opened the door. The hall was empty. They'd be moving into the vestry now. The service would be beginning. The preacher would be getting ready to tell the congregation about old Jed, what a good man he'd been, how he always had enough heart for the stray cats and deadbeat kids he picked up. How so many people owed him so much. Jed would have snorted.

But I'd arrived in time. How many other stray cats had made it?

I closed the basement door behind me, slid along the wall to the pantry door that opened into the small room adjacent to the vestry. In a moment I was inside. I turned off the light in the pantry, in case I had to go dark, then I crept to the door in the opposite wall. I opened it a sliver and peered into the vestry.

Since the bombing the chapel had been unuseable. I'd heard about it even in Chicago: seven had been killed, and Deacon Wilkie'd been blinded by flying glass. They'd made do the best they could with the vestry.

Folding chairs were set up in rows. They were filled with the population of Littletown. They were two deep around the walls. One or two white faces like mine. I recognized a couple of other stray cats. It'd been twelve years: they looked as though they were making it. But they hadn't forgotten.

I watched, and counted blacks. One hundred and eighteen. A few days ago, I'd been in Kansas City, there'd been one hundred and nineteen. Now the one hundred and nineteenth black man in Danville's Littletown lay in his casket, atop sawhorses, in the front of the room, surrounded by flowers.

Hello, old Jed.

Twelve, it's been.

God, you're quiet. No chuckles, no laughs, Jed. You're dead. I know.

He lay, hands folded across his chest. Big catcher's mitt paws folded, calluses hidden-sweet Jesus, I could see flickering candlelight glinting off his nails. *They'd manicured his hands!* Old Jed would've screamed, doing a thing like that to a man bit his nails to the quick!

Laying up in a shallow box, neat black patent leather shoes pointing toward the ceiling; kinky salt-and-pepper hair flattened against the silk lining of the box (eighty-two, and that old man's hair still had black in it!) ; lay in his best suit, a black suit, clean white long-sleeve shirt and a yellow tie. On display. Looking down at himself, for sure, from the Heaven he'd always believed was up there. Looking down at himself so fine, and smiling; puffing proud, yes *sir!*

On each of his eyes, a silver dollar.

To pay his way with the Man, across the River Jordan.

I didn't go in. Never intended to. Too many questions. Some of them might've remembered; I

know the other stray cats would've. So I just laid back, and waited to talk to old Jed private.

The service was a brief one, they cried a decent amount. Then it was over and they filed past slowly. A couple of women did the big falling down trying to get in the box thing with him. Christ knows what Jed would've done with *that*. I waited till the room emptied out. Preacher and a couple of the brothers cleaned up, decided to leave the chairs till morning, shut off the lights, and went. There was silence and a lot of shadows, just the candles still doing their slow motion. I waited a long time, just to make sure, then finally I opened the door a bit more and started to step through.

There was a sound from the door to the outside, and I pulled back fast. I watched as the door opened and a tall, slim woman in black came down among the chairs toward the open casket. Veil over her face.,

My gut sac went total empty right then. Lining started to burn. I thought sure she'd hear the rumbling. Sprayed it with stomach juice and that would hold it for a while till I could get weed and water. Burned.

I couldn't make out her face behind the veil. She walked up to the casket and stared down at Jed Parkman. Then she reached out a gloved hand toward the body, pulled it back, tried again and then held the hand motionless in the air above the cold meat. Slowly she swept the veil back over the widebrimmed hat.

I drew in a breath. She was a white woman. More than just ordinarily beautiful. Stunning. One of those creatures God made just to be looked at. I held my breath; breathing would release the sound of the blood in my temples, scare her away.

She kept looking at the corpse, then slowly she reached out again. Carefully, very carefully, she removed the coins from Jed's dead eyes. She dropped them in her purse. Then she dropped the veil, and started to turn away. She stopped, turned back, kissed her fingertips and touched the cold lips of the penniless dead one.

Then she turned around and left the vestry. Very quickly.

I stood unmoving, watching nothing, chill and lost.

When you take the money off a dead man's eyes, it means he can't pay his passage to Heaven.

That white woman sent Jedediah Parkman straight to Hell.

I went after her.

If I hadn't keeled over, I'd have caught her before she got on the train.

She wasn't far ahead of me, but my gut was burning so bad I knew if I didn't get some grass or weeds in it I'd be in wicked shape. That happened once in Seattle. I barely got out of the emergency ward before they could X-ray me. Broke into the hospital kitchen, pumped about eight pounds of Caesar salad and half a bottle of Sparkletts water into my sac and wound up bareass cold in a hospital gown, out on a Seattle street in the dead of winter.

Hadn't thought that for a second before I went over on my face, half a block from the Danville train station. Legs went idiot on me and over I go. Had just enough sense to go dark before I hit. Lay there, a car might run me over. No idea how long I was out, but not long. Came back and crawled on my belly like a reptile onto a patch of grass. Chewed, pulling myself on my elbows. Got enough in to get myself up, staggered the half block to the station, fen onto the water fountain stuck on the wall. Drank till the stationmaster leaned way over the ticket window, staring. Couldn't go dark, he was looking straight at me.

"You got business here, mister?"

I felt the lava juices subsiding. I could walk. Went up to him, said, "My fiancée, you know, a bad fight, she come down this way..." I let it wait. He watched me, wasn't giving away a little thing free.

"Look, we're supposed to be married next Thursday-I'm sorry I yelled at her. Half out of my, well, hell, mister, have you seen her? Tall girl, all in black, wearing a veil?" Sounded like a description of Mata Hari.

Old man scratched at the beard he'd sprouted since he'd come on at noon. "She bought a ticket for KayCee. Train's 'bout to pull out."

Then I realized I'd been hearing the whoofing sounds of the train all this time. When my sac goes, everything goes. I started hearing and smelling and feeling the grain of the ticket counter under my hands. And bolted out the door. Train was just getting ready to slide; express freight was almost loaded. Behind me, the stationmaster was bellowing. "Ticket! Hey, mister... ticket!"

"Get it by the conductor!" And I vaulted up onto the coach platform. The train edged out.

I pushed open the door to the coach and looked down the rows of Pullman seats. She was there, looking out the window into the darkness. I started toward her, but thought better of it. There were a couple of dozen passengers between her and me. I couldn't do anything here, now, anyway. I dropped into a

scungy seat, and puffs of dust went into the air.

I slid down and took off my right shoe. The twenty was folded neat against the instep. It was all I'd put aside. But I knew the conductor would be along to punch my ticket. And I didn't want to get caught like Jed Parkman. I wanted my fare to be paid.

We'd see about it in Kansas City.

It was a change. Riding inside.

She went to a phone booth and dialed a place without looking up the number. I waited. She went out to stand in front of the terminal. After a while a car with two women came up, and she got in. I went dark and opened the back door and slid in. They looked around and didn't see anything in the shadows back there, and the heavysset truck dyke driving said, "Now what the hell was *that?*" and the pimply one with the plastic hair, the one in the middle, reached over the seat back and thumbed down the lock.

"Wind," she said.

"*What* wind?" the truck said. But she pulled out.

I always liked K.C. Nice ride. Even in winter. But I didn't like the women. Not one of them.

They drove out, almost to the Missouri border, toward Weston. I knew a bourbon distillery out there. Best ever made. The truck pulled in at a big house set apart from slummy-looking places on a street with only one corner light. Whore house. Had to be. It was.

I didn't understand, but I'd by God certainly find out soon. I'd arrived, but Jed was still traveling.

The truck said, "You pay the girl."

I picked out the tall, slim one in the harem pants and halter top. She couldn't be smart, I thought. With a face like that, to wind down in a crib was some kind of special stupid. Or something else.

We went upstairs. The room was like any bedroom. There were stuffed animals on the bed, a giraffe with pink Day-Glo spots, a koala, floppy gopher or muskrat, I can't tell them apart. She had a photo of a movie star stuck in the frame of the bureau mirror. She took off the harem pants and I said, "We'll talk." She gave me a look I knew. Another freako. "That's two bucks extra," she said. I shook my head. "Five should cover everything."

She shrugged, and sat down on the edge of the bed, her thin legs straight out in front of her.

We stared at each other.

"Why'd you send Jed to Hell?"

Her head snapped up on her neck and she quivered like a hound on scent. She didn't even know how to ask me.

"You get the hell out of here!"

"I've got five bucks worth of something coming."

She bounced up off the bed, and went straight across the room. She was screaming before the door was open:

"Bren! Bren! C'mon, Bren! Help up here!"

I heard the foundations of the house shake and the rumble of artillery on the next hill, and then something big and hairy came at me. He had to come through the door sideways. I put up my hands and that was all. He carried me straight across the room, into the bureau. My back snapped against the edge of the bureau and he bent me till everything started to slip up toward the ceiling. The girl ran out, still shouting. When she was gone I ended it for him.

There was a trellis outside the window. I went down until the ivy ripped loose and I fell the rest of the way.

That night I slept on the front porch of the house next door, in the glider, watching the ambulance and then the police cars come and go. There were two unmarked police cars that stayed very late. I don't think they were on duty.

I waited two days, sleeping on the front porch of the house next door. I'd have gone dark more than I did, but there were three empty lots between me and the whore house, and the people with the front porch had gone away for a while. I suppose on a winter vacation, maybe. There was plenty of weed and grass around, and I let snow melt in an empty milk bottle. At night I'd go dark and steal Hydrox Cookies and milk and beef jerky from a 24-hour market. I don't eat much, usually. Missed coffee, though.

On the second day I jimmied a window in the empty house. Just to be ready.

Toward evening of the second day, she came out.

I went dark, waited on the sidewalk for her, and she walked straight into my fist.

In the empty house, I laid her out on a canopied bed in the master bedroom. When she came to and sat up, I was slouched in a chair across from the bed. She shook her head, looked around, focused, saw me, and started to let go with the screaming again. I sat forward in the chair and said, very softly, "Bren, what happened to him, I can do that again," and she looked sick, and shut her mouth. "Now we go back to where we were," I said, getting up. I walked over and stood there near her. She lay back, terrified, no other word for it.

"How did you know Jed?" My voice was level, but I was hurting.

"I'm his daughter."

"I can make you tell the truth."

"I'm not lying, I'm his...I was his daughter."

"You're white."

She didn't say anything.

"Okay, why did you send him to Hell? You know what it means to take the money."

She snorted a very shitty laugh.

"Lady, you better understand something. I don't know who the hell you are, but that old man found me when I was seven years old and kept me alive till I was old enough to go it on my own. Now he meant stuff to me, lady, so I can see myself getting mad enough at you to do just about anything. More green than even Bren. So you feel like telling me why you'd do something like that to a man who was kind to everybody?"

Her face went very hard. Even scared, she hated. "And just what the hell do *you* know? Yeah, he had kind for everybody. Everybody 'cept his own." Then, softly, "Everybody 'cept me."

I couldn't tell if she was sick, or deluded, or just putting me on. Lying? Not where she was. No reason for it. And she'd seen that Bren. No, she was telling the truth-if she believed it.

A white girl with old led for a father?

It didn't make any sense.

Unless...

There are some you can meet-the strange, twisted ones-and you know them by an aura, a scent, a *feel* about them, that if you had one *single word-like* "junkie" or "nympho" or "hooker" or "Bircher"-a key word that labeled their secret thing, you would understand all the inexplicable, off-center things about them. The one-word people. One word and you've got the handle on them. One word like wino, or diabetic, or puritan, or-

"Passing."

She didn't answer. She just stared at me, and hated me. And I looked in her face to see it, now that I knew what it was, but it wasn't there, of course. She was good at it. And that explained what had been between her and old Jedediah Parkman. Why she'd kissed the dead meat and sent it straight to Hell. But not the kind of Hell led had consigned her to. If he'd had all that kind of love for stray cats like me, I could imagine how strong his hate and frustration and shame would have been at one of his own pretending to be what she wasn't.

"You never know about people," I said to her. "He took in all kinds, and didn't care where they came from, or what they were. *lust* as long as they didn't lie about it. He had a lot of love."

She was waiting for me to do something bad to her, what she thought she had coming. I laughed, but not the way Jed used to laugh. "Lady, I ain't your daddy. He's punished you all he's ever going to. And you and me, neither one of us is white, and we're too much alike for *me* to punish you."

Passing. How about that. She didn't know what the color line even *looked* like. Black for white: hell, that's a cinch. led, Jed, you poor old Nigger bastard. You knew I couldn't get home again, back to whatever world it was I'd come from, and you taught me how to pass so they wouldn't kill me, but you couldn't handle it when it happened to you.

I pulled my last five bucks out of my pocket and tossed it on the end of the bed. "Here, baby, get it changed and keep a couple of silver dollars for your own party. Maybe Jed'll be waiting and you can straighten it out between you."

Then I went dark and started to leave. She was staring at where I'd been, her mouth open, as I paused in the doorway. "And keep the change," I said.

After all, she'd paid the dues for me, hadn't she?