

Dean Koontz – Anti-man

[Version 2.0 by BuddyDk - august 3 2003]
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I HAD SAVED HIM, KNOWING HE COULD DESTROY OUR WORLD.

In a world of nine billion people, it's sui-cidal to bring anyone back from the dead. The android could reshape His fingers into three-molecule-thick knives that could go into a man's skin like a miniature surgeon and heal—even resurrect. He declined to stop.

Faced with an order to “disassemble” Him, I kidnapped Him. Then He began to change —His shape, His voice, His goals.

Watching Him, I was less frightened of our pursuers than I was of what I had done. Was the final change going to be the ugly caterpillar into the lovely, colorful butterfly, or would the lovely butterfly revert into an ugly—*deadly*—worm?

ANTI-MAN

Dean R. Koontz

PAPERBACK LIBRARY
New York

PAPERBACK LIBRARY EDITION

First Printing: July, 1970

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For Edward L. Ferman who helped at the start of things . . .

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I

It was really too much to hope for, but we seemed to have lost them. We had jumped from Knoxville to Pierre, South Dakota, from that drab terminal to Bismark, North Dakota, and on to San Francisco. In the City of the Sun, we had walked unknown with our hands in our pockets and our faces open to the sky, feeling less like fugitives than we had any right to, grabbing a day of much needed rest and a moment to collect our thoughts before dashing on. We had spent the day buying gear for the last leg of our escape, eating our first decent meal in two days, and sitting through some atrocious toto-experience film just because it was dark in the theater and, therefore, safer for the two most wanted men in the world. At mid-night, we had bought tickets and boarded the next Pole-crossing rocket flight that would take us over Alaska. As the high-altitude craft flashed above North-ern California and into Oregon, I took Him into the bathroom at the end of the First Class compartment (fugitives should always travel First Class, for the rich are always too concerned with the way they look to notice anyone else) and locked the door. "Take off your coat and shirt," I told Him. "I want to see that wound."

"I tell you, it's hardly anything at all." He had been telling me that for a day and a half, stalling me, keep-ing me from looking at it. Right from the beginning, He had been somewhat indecipherable. Part of His personality was a closed door beyond which might lay a room or a mansion. I could not tell which. Now, again indecipherable, He seemed willing to risk infec-tion, blood poisoning, maybe even death rather than let me examine the wound! But I had seen the World Authority copper shoot in the Pierre terminal, and I wasn't going to let Him go until I had given Him some sort of care. I had seen the blood, lots of blood, fountain up from His shoulder when the pin had torn into Him.

Him. Not much of a name, but what do you call the first android? Adam? No, too trite. Anyone who would have seriously suggested something like that would have been drummed right out of the labora-tories, wrapped in a coat of tar and chicken pluckings. And would have deserved every bit of it. So, then, how about Harry? Or George? Leo? Sam? Actually, He was a scientific milestone of the first order, one of Man's most brilliant achievements. Somehow, naming a milestone Sam did not seem right to any of us. I had a dog once that I had never called anything but Dog, and I guess the situation with Him was much the same. The dog was totally doggy, everything a dog should be, the archetype of all canines, an oddly true stereotype of Man's Best Friend. He could hold no other name but Dog. To have called him Prince or Rover or Blackie would have been a gross indignity. And our android, flawless as a hydroponics apple, was the archetype, so it seemed, of Man. He: a fitting title.

"You've been putting me off now for—" I tried to argue.

"Don't worry about it," He said, His eyes blue-white and penetrating. It had always been His eyes that had upset the senators who came to investigate the project as a publicity boost for their sagging political reputa-tions. Later, they would remember other peculiarities about Him and begin to question those too, but it always started with His eyes. Imagine a sky reflected blearily in a heavily-frosted pane of milk glass. Cut out two circles of that rimed blue and paste them in two globes of veinless white marble as alabaster-like as the skin of a Greek statue. Those were His eyes. There was no denying them, no escaping. They gleamed like ice in the sun, a droplet of mercury mirroring the ocean.

"Strip anyway," I said. He knew I was stubborn. Everyone that knew me could attest to that. "I want to see it. I'm the doctor around here."

"Not any longer."

"I can resign from society without giving up my degree and skills. Don't pride yourself that I would cancel out all my medical interests, hopes and dreams just for you, boy. Now get that coat and shirt off!" It felt good to be forceful after letting Him derail me so many times before. Funny that I should be con-sidered the terror of interns for eight years, the scowl-ing, black-eyed dragon who ate young doctors whole if they so much as appeared with wrinkled whites for duty, and yet allow myself to be put off by this non-man so easily. Wasn't I the same doctor whose nurse, work-ing the same floor and duty shift with him, arrived half an hour early and left half an hour late rather than forget to prepare or finish something? Yet I must wrangle with this Adam for the simple purpose of perhaps saving His arm from

gangrene. Perhaps, I told myself, it was because we were running, because I was a criminal and afraid. I had set up a new life style for myself, and the whorls of its pattern had rocked my self-confidence. That would have to change. What was I without my bluster? My towering rage? I scowled the intern-paralyzing scowl. "Hurry up!"

When it was put that bluntly, a severe command, He obeyed. He always obeyed commands. He was almost the perfect android. There had just been one incident when He had refused to obey a command, and that had been the same incident that had revealed the fact that He was developing abilities far beyond any we had anticipated. Considering the fact that World Authority research administrators anticipate *everything* (or so they proudly proclaim at every opportunity), the dis-covery shook up quite a few people. Quite a few of the wrong people.

I had been with Him that day on the ground floor of the testing lab, working on analysis of His reflex pattern (which had just then begun to show an extra-ordinary rapidity, especially in the areas of heat and light tropism) when the explosion had rocked the re-search complex. The floor trembled, windows rattled, plaster dust sifted down onto us. I didn't think about Him or leaving Him alone, but I grabbed my bag and ran, following the intercom directions to the sector of the disaster.

I worked for two hours in the smoking ruins, trying to do preliminary patchwork on the dying bodies-trying to convince myself that they still had a chance-while we waited for the base and the town ambulances to return from their agonizingly slow trips to the local hospital. When I had seen the animated form of a man I had earlier left for dead—damn dead!—under a crushing pile of debris, I thought I had finally flipped out of rational thought ways. Then I began to see others, six in all, men certainly dead only a short time before. He was doing it. *He*. I became aware of the military standing around, almost every important officer on the base and enough MPs to make a war movie. They were ordering Him to stop reviving peo-ple. It should have been that simple. Command and obedience. Instead, He wouldn't listen to them. He repeatedly disobeyed. Finally, they shot Him with nar-codarts and put Him on ice until they could decide what was to be done.

Under the current social mores, it was perfectly correct and noble to keep someone from suffering or dying prematurely. The operative word there is "pre-maturely." In a world of nine billion, it was taboo—and suicidal—to bring anyone back from the dead. The ranks of the living, God knew, were almost more than the planet could bear. The government had suc-cessfully discredited the Crionics Association, had squashed all possibilities of producing Mercer Serum to regress the effects of aging. Here was a new threat every bit as frightening and impossible as anything they had faced before.

They talked to Him, explained to Him what dis-aster this could bring into the world. They examined His fingers and watched as He demonstrated His ability to reshape His hands into flesh scalpels, thin His fingers into three-molecule-thickness knives that could penetrate another man's skin, go into him and work like a miniature surgeon. They were horrified by the possible applications of such a talent. Try as they might, however, they could not convey their horror to Him. He had been given a mind freer than any mind in history. Where a man rarely uses a third of his brain, He used nearly a hundred percent of His. Completely unshackled as He was, He held true to what He had deduced as the highest values of exist-ence. One of these was to prolong human life as long as possible, as healthfully as possible. Since He re-fused to let men die when He could delve into them and correct or heal them with His magic fingers, let the strange time-reversal touch draw together their de-teriorating flesh, He was a menace to World Authority. Since He could get into parts of the liver or kidneys where no mortal surgeon could ever reach, delve into the alveoli of the lungs and scrape out the cancer cell-by-goddamned-cell, He could not be allowed to exist. We had given Him a conscience, and He had given Himself new systems that enabled Him to re-shape His hands. We had given Him a complex human-type brain that was almost totally operative, and He had begun to surpass Man in a speeded evo-lution consciously wrought. Given all that we knew about Him, all we had built into Him, we should have expected something like this. But we had not. And now the panic began.

It was decided by the project directors, who sit behind large desks with nothing to do but decide things they know absolutely nothing about, to junk the project and disassemble—*disassemble*: that's just the word the idiots used!—the first android, partly be-cause of His ability to increase Man's lifespan

(after scientists had been working frantically to hold it down to eighty-five, after World Authority Secret Police had liquidated countless researchers who were trying to lick the immortality secret on the sly in private laboratories), and mostly because it was frightening for the military to face a superhuman who could evolve Him-self, who could adapt His body, given sufficient time, to the optimum efficiency. They saw Him as a poten-tial threat, not as a tool by which men could learn and grow. They didn't even want to know how He was able to restructure Himself. They just wanted to “disassemble” as completely and swiftly as possible, striking all knowledge of the project from the records.

That same night, I kidnapped Him.

Don't ask my why. If we had to explain ourselves, life would be one constant flow of words, and still the angels would shake their heads in dissatisfaction. I guess it had to do with seeing Him revive men I had left for dead. That shakes a physician, believe me. I just could not allow those marvelous hands or the mind that made them to be broken down into pseudo-flesh components, smashed and burned in modern witch-craft. It was as if Picasso had been standing by when the drunken SS troops destroyed priceless paintings on Paris museum walls with the points of their bayonets. What was there to do but act?

I went to the lab that night, woke Him, told Him the situation, and left with Him. I had the keys to the lab, keys to His quarters, and the guards thought nothing of my coming and going. They thought nothing of me taking Him with me, for they had never seen Him, had no way of knowing He was more than just another doctor or technician. The laboratory remained peaceful. Until the next morning.

That had been a week ago. We had been running ever since.

Fast.

Now, in the bathroom of the world-circling com-mercial rocket miles above the western edge of the old United States, He removed His shirt and stood before me, a magnificent specimen, all muscle and no fat He had developed a new tissue-building process, He told me, by which all food material not used for energy was converted into a new sort of muscle fiber which dissolved as easily as fat when needed to pro-duce energy, though the body- did not have to suffer the burden of useless tissue when it was not needed. The wound on His right shoulder was an inch or so deep and three to four inches long. It had stopped bleeding, though no scab or clotting seemed to have formed. I guess He stopped the blood, though I don't know exactly how.

“It'll need stitches,” I said, spreading the sides of it and surveying the torn flesh. It wasn't pretty at all, and it had a faintly bluish tinge that I could not identify except as a bruise, which it was not. “I can do a rough stitching with what I have in my bag, but-”

“No,” He said. “I'm completing new systems.”

“So?”

“I'll be able to speed heal myself in another half hour.”

“You serious?” Sometimes I am exceedingly dense.

“That's why I said you did not have to bother.”

I swallowed, let the wound go. The flesh snapped back into place as if it were made of rubber. “I see.”

He put His arm on my shoulder, and we had quite suddenly exchanged roles so that He was the father image, I the son. Again I wondered how the terror of the interns had come to this low point. There was paternal concern in His stabbing blue eyes, a faint, anxious smile playing about His thin, red lips. “I still need you, Jacob. I'll always need someone to talk to, someone who understands me. You're such a part of me now that our relationship can never cease to be a vibrant one.”

“Well,” I said, avoiding His eyes, “let's get back to the debarking hold. It'll soon be time to make our drop, and we don't want to miss that.”

We left the bathroom and walked the length of the main passenger compartment where two hundred travelers read magazines or sipped one of their three allotted drinks, or puffed their allotted joint of pot, or even napped. Oh, yes, or watched Mason Chambers on their individual Comscreens; The famous muck-raker leaned toward his audience, his thin cap of gray-black hair threatening to part and bare his carefully concealed baldness, and said: “Just who does Secre-tary Libermann think we are—cretins?”

We cannot be convinced that the World Authority Police cannot capture the android and the infamous Dr. Kennelmen. With all of the facilities available to the police, such a thing isn't feasible. No, dear viewers, it is some-thing else—something more sinister. Conjecture this, if you will: The World Authority has discovered some-thing about the android that makes it the most im-portant find of the century, something so valuable that no price can be placed on it. Something the Coun-cil would like to keep to itself and its own, to the privileged of this world. By staging this false escape, proclaiming the android dangerous and killing it on sight, they will impress on the public the fact that the research on androids has been abandoned. They will be free to continue it secretly to reap the benefits themselves!" He smiled triumphantly and looked at his notes. He was tough on everyone, even the sacro-sanct Council. There would be a lot of lights burning in the Capitol tonight as the best minds in the govern-ment tried to find some way to silence Mason Cham-bers. Too bad the old boy was on the wrong track. He was right about the marvelous discovery, the value of the century, but that was as far as he carried it correctly.

The length of our walk down the main compartment, I waited tensely for someone to leap and shout, "That's them!" But no one did. We stepped through the open hatch into the debarking chamber and breathed a little easier. The officer on duty was a slim, dark-haired man in his early thirties. He had a long nose, separat-ing slow, heavy-lidded eyes that gave him a slightly saurian and very stupid look. He sat reading a low-quality papsheet and puffing on a cigarette, letting the smoke leak out of a tiny hole at the edge of his mouth. It was almost impossible that he could be ignorant of our presence, but he studied the sheet intensely and pretended we were not there. At last, I said, "We'll be disembarking at Cantwell, Alaska."

He looked up reluctantly and folded the papsheet. "That's a helluva place." He shivered and grimaced. "Had a duty station with the airline there for two months once. Cold. Snow. Wind like you wouldn't believe. Threatened to quit, so they transferred me."

"We have relatives there," I said, trying to sound as natural as I could. I am not the greatest thespian to walk the boards since Burton, believe me. My feet freeze, and my head turns to mud when I have to speak to a group of interns. Perhaps that's why I am so tough and hard-boiled around them: because they scare me. Despite my shyness, I had been surprised these last few days how easily I could fool people when my life was staked on pulling the wool over their eyes. Necessity may be the mother of invention, but naked fear was the bitch that gave birth to my cool-ness.

"Ticket?" He looked us over thoroughly while I fumbled for the two yellow pieces of paper, the ciga-rette bobbling in his mouth, the ash dangerously long. I was afraid that somewhere in his simple brain-box two synapses would flop open, and he would connect pictures he had seen in the papsheet with the two rumped men standing before him. Over the week He and I had been playing cat and mouse with the World Authority, running and running like mechanical wind-up toys, trying to gain time for Him to develop Him-self to the point where He wouldn't have to run, our pictures and descriptions had graced the front pages of every papsheet in the world at least six out of the seven days. Here we were spotted in Lisbon, here in Acapulco, here in New York City. Luckily, the debark-ing officer on this ship seemed the type to skip the news sections and dwell on the gossip pages and the comics. For the first time in my life, I thanked the powers that be for anti-intellectualism.

"Ticket," I repeated, finally producing our stubs and handing them over without so much as a single nervous tremor.

"You're paid up clear into Roosha," he said, looking us over again. He had apparently never been taught that it was rude to peruse a person as thoroughly as you did a book. "Do you know that you're paid up clear into Roosha? Why pay up clear into Roosha if you were going to get off here?"

"A last minute change of plans," I said. I was feel-ing the strain of two days and nights without sleep and without benefit of honest-to-Hippocrates warm food except for that meal we had gotten at the backstreet restaurant in San Francisco. I didn't know if my lies were coming out like lies or whether he would accept what I said at face value. Apparently, there was some degree of verisimilitude to my rantings, for he shrugged and carefully entered the numbers of our stubs in the departure book. If the World Authority crashed the fake names we were now using—and they certainly would,

eventually—here was a record, a set of clerical footprints for them to seize upon and follow.

“That capsule at the end,” he said. He consulted a pendant watch that hung on a fine chain around his neck. “We’ll be dropping you in eleven minutes.”

We moved down the line of egg-shaped, crimson globes that nested in the bays in the floor. The officer came after us, slid back the heavy cover on the last egg. “Dropped before?” he asked, obviously hopeful that we would say no and allow him to show his superiority with a long, detailed, condescending lecture.

“Many times,” I said. I wondered what he would have done if I had said fourteen times in the past week.

“Remember to strap tight. Grip the padded wheel until the beam contact is made, and don’t unstrap until ground control directs you to.”

I waited until He moved into the capsule and took the left seat, then I squeezed through the oval entrance-way and climbed into the right. The officer frowned. “Let’s see you grip the wheel,” he snapped. We gripped it, though there was no need to prepare this far ahead. “That’s better,” he said. He eyed me suspiciously, obviously trying to remember something. “Don’t let go of that wheel until beam contact,” he repeated. He was getting to be a bore.

“We won’t.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. You people never seem to learn. Lots of people drop without gripping the wheel. Then, when freefall surprises them, they get excited and grab for anything, cut themselves on file console— And when the jolt from beam contact comes— Brother! Fireworks! They jump and throw their arms around, break their fingers on things—”

“We’ll grip the wheel,” I said, feeling as if I were confronted with a broken record. I longed to reach out and swat him so that he could get on with other parts of his speech.

“Be sure to.”

“We will.”

“We sure will,” He said, smiling at the officer with that winning grin of His.

The officer nodded, hesitated as if there were some-thing he wanted to say. And, of course, there was something he wanted to say. Down deep in the sticky mud of his brain, there was a little voice telling him just who we were and what he should do about it. Fortunately for us, the voice was muffled by so much mud that he could not understand what it was saying. Finally he shrugged again, slid the cover shut and turned the latches on the outside, locking us in. I knew that his mind was struggling to make connections. I had come to know that look by now, the gaze of some-one who is sure he knows us. Sooner or later, this drop officer would remember who we were. I only hoped it was not until we were out of Cantwell Port and on our way.

“Don’t worry, Jacob,” He said, flashing His chalk-white teeth in a broad, flawless smile and eating into me with those ice eyes of His.

He was trying to cheer me.

So I smiled.

Suddenly, lights flashed and buzzers bleeped. We dropped. . .

II

Down . . .

Dropping from a high-altitude passenger rocket is not uncommon. Thousands of capsules are discharged every day, millions in a year, though I suppose the process will remain a marvel to the earth-bound masses for another twenty years. When you have an over-crowded world with billions of people who want to move often and rapidly, you cannot have a transportation system that stops at every station on the route. Not too many years ago, the answer was to change flights. Take a regular major airline into the nearest big city to your destination, then transfer to a smaller company for the last leg of

the journey. But the ports grew too crowded, the air controllers too frantic. With the coming of the rockets, the best answer was found swiftly and employed even faster. You encapsulate the passengers who want off at backwater places and shoot them, like a bomb, out of the rocket's belly without lessening the speed of the mother ship. They fall for a mile, two, three, then are caught by a control beam broadcast from the alerted receiving station and lowered gently into the receptor pod. But those first few moments of freefall . . .

After what seemed like an overlong fall, we were gripped by a control beam. For a moment, I had the fleeting paranoid fear that they had recognized us and deemed to eliminate us simply by letting us smash unbraked into the unyielding earth of Cantwell, Alaska. Then we were safe, floating softly, being drawn down. The beam settled us into a pod, and the officers there, a wizened old gentleman surely past retirement age and a young trainee who watched and listened to his superior with carefully feigned awe, unlatched the hatch and slid it back, helped us out. We signed our arrival forms with our fake names, waited while the old man copied our stub numbers in a ledger (the boy looking eagerly over his shoulder but unable to completely mask his boredom), and we were on our way.

From the capsule pods, we walked down a long, gray fluorescent-lighted service tunnel and into the main lobby of the Port Building. I found the passenger service desk and inquired about a package I had mailed myself when we had first set foot in San Francisco just a day earlier. We had gone to a ski shop and purchased complete arctic rigging, packaged it in two boxes, and mailed it from Kenneth Jacobson to Kenneth Jacobson, the pseudonym I was then using, to be held for pickup at the passenger service desk in Cantwell. I had to sign a claim check and wait while the clerk checked the signature with that on the stub. When he was satisfied, he handed over the packages. We each took one and moved outside to the taxi stalls.

Outside, it was snowing. The wind howled across the broad promenade and echoed like hungry wolves in the thrusting beams of the porch roof. It carried puffs of snow with it that clogged in the window ledges and drifted against the walls. The drop officer aboard the high-altitude rocket had been right. Cantwell was a place of cold and snow and, most of all, wind. Still in all, the place has an undeniable charm, especially if you were addicted to Jack London Yukon stories when you were a boy.

We went down a set of stairs into the auto-taxi docking area and found a four-seater in the line. The taxis were fairly busy with arrivals, and I realized we had been unlucky enough to arrive just before a scheduled rocket landing and pickup. I opened the back door of the taxi and put my box in, turned to take His. Just then, a taxi bulleted into the stall next to us and flung open its doors.

"Quick!" I said to Him, grabbing his box of gear and sliding it onto the back seat alongside my own.

A tall, elegantly dressed man got out of the other car and pushed past us toward the stairs without even an "excuse me" or a "pardon." I didn't really care, just so he kept going and left us alone. But that was not to be the way of things. He went up two steps and stopped as if he had just been knifed. He whirled, his mouth open, his hand fumbling for a weapon beneath his bulky coat.

He must have been employed by World Authority in some capacity, for he could not otherwise have possessed a weapon. But I had worked for World Authority too. I drew my narcodart pistol and sprayed him with six low-velocity pins in the legs where the bulky coat could not deflect them. He staggered, went down on his knees. He plucked at the darts, then realized it was too late for that; the drugs they contain, chiefly Sodium Pentothal, react much too fast to be torn free. He was a big man, and he was fighting the drowsiness as best he could, though it was just a matter of time until he would be out of action. I fired again, fast, but before he passed out, he managed to get in a weak but audible call for help. It echoed through the Alaskan night.

I opened the front door of the taxi and grabbed Him by the elbow to usher Him in. A spatter of pins broke across the roof, inches from my face, ricocheting away like little slivers of light. The gunman had been trying for the back of my neck but had misjudged and fired slightly to the left. I whirled, searched the taxi stalls for the gun-man.

Ping, ping, ping . . . Another burst rattled over the roof of the car, nowhere near us this time.

"I saw movement to the right," He said, crouching with me. "Back there by that blue and yellow two-seater." He had drawn His own dart pistol, one He had "pro-cured" in that sports shop where we

had gotten the arctic gear, lifting it and an ammunition clip from the shelf while I distracted the clerk with our big order. “Do you see which one I mean?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps I should—”

“Wait here,” I said, lying on my stomach and slithering along the retaining wall, keeping under the cars parked there, working my way toward the vehicle He had pointed out. There was a hard-packed layer of snow on the lot and my front side nearly froze as I slithered over it. Now and then, the snow was melted into slush where a warm taxi engine had rested near it. I felt absurd, like some cheap movie actor, but I was also afraid, which blotted out any embarrassment I might otherwise have felt. Fear can work miracles. I had hitched my star to His. If they caught us now, before He had finished His revolutionary evolution, I had no idea what they might do to me.

Behind me, He stood and fired a barrage toward our enemy, drew an answering hail for His trouble. That helped me pinpoint the location of our gunman. I moved cautiously, trying to make as little noise as possible. Still, my shoes dragged on the snow and the pavement and gave off little scraping noises that carried well in the cold air.

I circled around him, always beneath taxis except for the short spaces between them when I had to wriggle across three or four feet of exposed territory. When I had gone a row beyond him, I came out in the open and moved in on his rear. I slid along behind a limousine taxi for large parties until I felt I was directly behind his position. Raising my head carefully—narcodarts could blister and scar delicate facial tissues, puncture an eye and sink into the vulnerable brain—I looked around. Our target was a Port guard in World Authority uniform. I could not tell whether he had recognized us as the first man had or whether he was shooting just because he had seen me take out the other fellow. Either way, I had to stop him. I stepped out into the open and aimed at his buttocks.

I must have made some noise, for he turned in the last second, almost lost his balance on the slippery surface.

I struck him with a dozen pins, and he toppled to the left, grasping at the taxi. For a moment, it appeared that he was going to make a valiant effort to rise and return my fire. Then he slid noisily to the pavement and laid still, breathing softly.

For a moment, I felt good.

Then bad luck returned.

The watchman patrolling the taxi lot via closed-circuit television must have spotted some of the action. It was pure bad luck, for if he had been occupied with any of the other dozen cameras that scanned other portions of the port, he would not have found anything until we were long gone. Overhead, the big arc lights came on so that filming could proceed. If there was to be a court case, the film, taken by sealed cameras, would be admissible. I dropped behind the taxis and laid panting, trying to think. In minutes, that watchman would have sent someone out to investigate, someone with weapons, and we would have to handle them too if we expected to get out of here as free men. But our luck could not continue forever, not as it had through all the narrow escapes of the last week. So what was I mad about? Why not just give up? I could say to Him, in way of explanation: “Well, you know how luck changes. You can't expect luck to stay good for long.” And He would smile, and that would be that. Like hell! I didn't fancy going back with World Authority guards to some trial where my chances were, simply put, miserable. Still, I wasn't a fighting man. I would make a mistake when I came up against the professionals. Several mistakes. One mistake too many. Then it would be all over. Perhaps forever . . .

“Jacob!” He called in a loud whisper.

Staying behind cars and away from the line of sight of the two mounted cameras, I hurried back to Him where He crouched at our taxi. We would have to move damned fast now. The watchman *might* know who had been causing the trouble, but the stranger in the great-coat would most definitely have an alarm out for Dr. Jacob Kennelmen and His Fearsome Android within five minutes of his revival.

Rotten luck, rotten luck, rotten luck, I cursed to myself. If we could have left that lot unnoticed, we would have been perfectly in the clear—at least for a few months, long enough for Him to develop into a complete creature. Now World Authority would have police and soldiers swarming over Cantwell by

morning. Yes, I could have killed the elegant stranger lying there on the steps, pressed the barrel of the narcodart pistol against his eyeballs and shot pins into his brain. But that was not the purpose of kidnapping Him and giving Him a chance to develop. The purpose was to eventually save lives. There was no sense in starting out by destroy-ing a few with the excuse that He could make up for it later. We climbed into our taxi and were about to scoot out of there when I thought of something.

“Wait here,” I said, slipping out of the car.

“Where are you going, Jacob?”

I didn't take time to answer. There were police on their way, perhaps only a minute or two until they would be on us. I moved quickly among the three nearest taxis, opening their doors, slipping five cred bills into their pay slots and punching out random destina-tions on their keyboards. When they started to purr and pull away, I ran back to our car, jumped in, slammed the door before the automatic closing device could do the job for me, and punched the keyboard for Mount McKinley National Park—and held my breath until we were out of the parking area.

Snow pelted the windscreen, and wind moaned eerily along the sides of the teardrop craft. I was reminded of my childhood in Ohio with drifts mounting against the windows, being tucked in bed where I could look out and watch the snow pile up and up as if it would never cease. But memories could not hold me for long. We were in the clear—for now, at least—and we had many things to do if we were to continue to enjoy our freedom.

We changed clothes as we drove until we were both decked out in insulated suits, gloves, goggles, boots, and snowshoes lashed across packs that we carried strapped to our backs.

“How's the arm?” I asked Him.

“All healed,” He said, grinning broadly. “Just like I said it would be.” There was no sense of the braggart in his voice, just the tone of a happy child who has learned something new.

“All healed,” I echoed numbly. I was feeling numb all over, as if the constant brushing with Death over the last seven days had acted as sandpaper to wear down my receptors until life was a slick, textureless film through which I slid on greased runners. A doctor, of course, knows of Death and understands the prince. But the context in which he knows and understands him is different than what I had been encountering in this long chase. The physician sees Death in a clinical sense, as a phenomenon of Nature, as something to be combatted on a scientific level. It is something else altogether when Death sets out to claim you and you are fighting, only with your cunning and guile, to keep him from claiming you.

The auto-taxi glided to a halt before the gates of Mount McKinley National Park, the gray shape of the twin-peaked, towering colossus a lighter dark against the night. A pine forest loomed directly ahead through which the road wound in a carefree, unbusinesslike manner. “This taxi is prohibited from making runs into the park after eight o'clock at night. Please advise.” The car's voice tape had been recorded by a nasal-toned woman in her late twenties or early thirties, and its metallic yet feminine quality seemed out of place com-ing from the wire speaker grid in the dashboard. I cannot get used to machines sounding like the sort of woman you might want to seduce. I was born and raised before the use of the Kelbert Brain. I like silent ma-chines, mute computers. Old-fashioned, I guess.

I stuffed four poscred bills in the payment slot, two to cover our trip and two more to pay for what I was about to request. “Drive at random for the next half-hour, then return to your stall at the Port.”

“At random?” it asked.

I should have realized that, even with the Kelbert

Brain, it was too stupid to carry on much of a con-versation. It was limited in scope to the sort of thing a customer might ask or propose, not something out of the ordinary. Just like, I thought, most of the women I had seduced whose voices were similar to the ma-chine's. I leaned over the keyboard and punched a random series of numbers and, finally, the code series for the Port as it was listed on the directory chart beside the console. “That should do,” I said. “Let's go.”

The doors sprung open when we touched the release panels, and we clambered out into the night, taking our bundle of old clothes with us. The car closed up, thrummed like a hummingbird for a moment, then executed a swift turn and whizzed back the way we had come, its amber lights receding and leaving

us alone in the darkness.

“What now?” He asked, coming up beside me, shifting the weight of the pack on His back until it settled just as He wanted it to.

“We hide these clothes we had on,” I said, moving to a drainage ditch and pushing my bundle back into the culvert, out of sight. He followed my example, reaching even farther with His longer arms. “And now we climb the fence into the park.”

“Wait,” He said, moving past me to the gate where He stopped, examining the lock. He took off His gloves and placed His hands on the padlock. He stared at the thing a moment, as if imprinting the mechanism on His mind. Finally, He grunted and sucked in huge lungfulls of air. While I watched, the tip of His finger elongated, thinned to the thickness of a coathanger wire, and snaked into the keyhole on the face of the lock. A minute or so passed with the wind beating on us like a hundred rubber sledgehammers. Then something clicked. Clicked again, louder. That was the most joyous sound I had ever heard, for I had not been looking for-ward to the prospect of scrambling over an eight-foot fence in twenty to thirty mile-an-hour winds with a twenty-five pound pack on my back. Perhaps I'm timid and afraid of new adventures, but I preferred walking through to climbing over. He withdrew His hand, re-formed His finger into more conventional shape, put on His gloves, and pushed the big gates inward with a dramatic flourish that showed He had seen or read some pretty melodramatic stuff in His free time back at the laboratory.

“Very tricky,” I said, slapping Him on the back. “You should think about going into show business. Get your-self the proper manager and go on the circuit with a magic act.”

We moved inside, closing the gate behind and locking it again. Except for our prints in the newly fallen snow, there was no sign that the night park had been violated, and the continuing storm would cover even those traces in a few minutes. With that flimsy gate between us and the Port, I felt relieved, though I had no reason to. “We'll follow the road for a while,” I said. “It isn't likely anyone will be on it at this hour of the morning and in this weather.”

We began walking, goggles over our eyes and face masks pulled down to thwart the biting cold and the tremendous, razor-edged whip' of the wind. The road had been plowed open after a recent storm, but the new snow was rapidly covering it once more. The snow-banks that had been formed on either side by the plows were layered, so many feet thick for each storm of the season. If this rugged weather continued all winter, the road would be closed before spring with nowhere to shove the succeeding deluges. We had not gone more than half a mile when He pulled off His face mask and said, “Tell me about this place we're going.”

I reluctantly pulled down my own mask and winced at the stinging air. It dried my lips almost instantly and started cracking them until I could almost feel the skin slowly splitting under hard fingers of air. I shivered, blew out a cloud of steam. In the true Arctic, I am given to believe from various works I have read, the tempera-tures drop so far below zero that the breath, upon exiting the body, really and truly does freeze—at least the moisture in it does. The lungs, in this infernal cold, are susceptible to freezing from contact with the icy, dry air, and one must breathe shallowly to avoid this fate. Now, as we trudged along this park road, far from the ice plains of the true Arctic, I marveled that there could be any place in the world with temperatures so cold that these would be classified as a warm spell. “Is it so important to know that I have to risk freezing my mouth and picking up a lovely blue haze on my pretty face?”

“I'd just like to know,” He said.

I shrugged. “At the base of the mountain and up to about five thousand feet, they lease cabins to prominent citizens for vacation retreats. Don't misunderstand me. The World Authority wouldn't want anyone thinking little things like these are reserved for the elite. That wouldn't fit the Great Democracy claims. It isn't exactly exclusively set aside for prominent people, but the prices are so stiff that only prominent people can afford to rent here. Same difference, though the politicians like the fine lines drawn in. Harry Leach—Doctor Harry Leach—the old man who ran City General when I interned there, leases one in the second level. It's secluded. Nearest other cabin is slightly over a mile away. He keeps it stocked with food and fuel for sudden whimsical weekends.” Whenever a new student nurse happens to catch his eye and he can convince her an old codger like himself would do anything for such a lovely,

young piece of candy, I thought. Those were about as whimsical as his weekends got.

“He doesn't mind our using it?” He asked. I could see that He was consciously slowing His giant stride so that I could keep up and—indeed—so it appeared I was setting the pace. Another indication of His growing fatherly attitude?

“He'll never have to know,” I said. “In fact, what he doesn't know will be to his benefit.”

“And they won't find us?”

“How long do you need?” I asked. “I have some idea how long we're going to have.”

He grimaced, calculating. His eyes almost shined in the darkness like a cat's eyes, phosphorescent blue like the edges of lightning bolts caught on the night horizon. Though He had His goggles shoved up, He did not seem to blink those eyes, and they were not watering. He rubbed a hand over His face to wipe the snow off His eyebrows and lashes. “Three days should do it. Things are coming along faster than ever, much faster than I had at first anticipated.”

I had planned, once we seemed free of our tails in San Francisco, to stay at the cabin a few months, knowing Harry rarely came in the wintertime, his carousing saps apparently low until the rebirth of spring. But now that we had been spotted in Cantwell, our time would be severely cut short. Three days would be stretching it some. “Well,” I said, trying to sound as confident as possible under the circumstances, “the first thing they are going to do is check monorail and low-altitude air traffic records to see whether we transferred to some other system and left Cantwell—which is what they will be expecting. We have been running for seven days, skipping from port to port, and there is no reason for them to presume that we have suddenly changed our operating procedure. When they find that we did not leave by other means, they'll go over the travel records of our taxi and the three decoys I dispatched with every electronic wonder instrument in the Investigation Bureau bag. They won't find much. We can count on that, at least. They'll see maybe thirty or forty trip records from those four taxis that departed the Port at the same general time. In minutes, they'll be down to the four that are important. True, one of those records will show that someone came to the park, but that will be expected to be a tourist's taxi, or one belonging to some-one who rents one of these cabins. Even if it's narrowed down farther, the taxi will show that it came to the park and then followed a random pattern. That should arouse their suspicions. It will present the possibility that we jumped out of the cab somewhere along that impromptu route. So we should have a day or two days before they start thoroughly investigating the park. They might think to do it earlier, but they'll put it off until last, because it is such a damnably big job.”

“I'm interested in the food,” He said.

“What do you mean?”

“I hope there'll be a lot of it. I'm going to need it to get energy for the changes I'm making in myself.”

“Big changes?” I asked.

He grinned again. “Just wait, Jacob. Just wait.”

I pulled my mask back up and worked my jaw to un-stiffen it. He did not bother to replace His mask. The cold no longer bothered Him. He had adapted to it . . .

III

We left the road when I judged we were nearing the fork that would reveal to us the first ranger station and tourist information bureau. Getting over the plowed snowbanks at the edge of the road proved even more difficult than it looked, and it looked quite difficult indeed. Somehow, we clambered through, damp and disheveled when we came out into the snowy, but more or less open fields,

I had only been in the park three times before, all three back when I had been an intern and Harry had given me the keys and wished me luck with whatever nurse had recently fallen for my limited charms and unlimited line. Admittedly, an unusual act of friendship for a hospital staff director to show to a lowly intern, but then Harry was the one who had gotten me interested in medicine back when I was still toddling around in wet pants (he had given me a doctor play kit), the one who took care of me after my

mother and father were killed in one of the early intercontinental rocket flights, the one who had seen that I prepared for and was accepted by the best medical school in the country. Our relationship at City General, then, was bound to be somewhat unorthodox. Harry never made my internship easy, understand. It was only socially that he treated me kindly; in the hospital I was as gruffly handled as the rest, perhaps even more so. I wondered what Harry thought of me now. Then the brush grew denser, the snow deeper and more heavily drifted, and there was not time for thinking about anything but breaking through into open country.

He moved ahead now, breaking a path with His larger bulk, kicking the drifts apart and forging on like a flesh tank or a large, thick-skinned jungle animal that has never met the immovable object. Thorn vines snagged our suits and held us up, but I was confident we could make the cabin by morning. It was only a matter of keeping a steady pace, even a somewhat cautious one hampered by drifts and thorns. In time, we came out into fields and stopped for a breather, though He would not have required one. I checked the compass, which had a luminous face, and looked at the softly glowing map I had brought out of my wallet. The background of the map was a gently shimmering green, the various lines and grids either crimson or orange or white. At arms length, it somewhat resembled an old-fashioned psychedelic light show. "Straight across that field," I said. "And we had better break out the snowshoes."

Halfway across the open land on our way toward the next clump of pines that stood like skinny sentinels in the darkness, black patches against the snowy hills, we found that the snowshoes had not been instruments of over-caution. The field dropped ten feet within three yards, forming a breaking point for drift winds, and the rest of the broad flatlands, clear to the woods, was buried in a good six feet of snow. We treaded carefully despite the fact that the crust seemed everywhere thick enough to support us. We stayed ten feet apart to dis-tribute our weight and help prevent too great a strain on the crisp outer layer of the drift. I felt like a stunt man trying to prove he could walk on softboiled eggs without disaster. A hundred yards from the trees, I felt the crust cracking under me, slowly but relentlessly. Then I heard it: painful whining and a low, dull moan.

I panicked, was about to run to avoid disaster, and remembered that would not help the situation at all. No running. Walk as if you were that damn fool stunt-man on the softboiled eggs. But by the time I remem-bered, I had convulsively leaped a single step to escape the weak area, smashed through the crust with all the force of my 160 pounds, and fell through snow over my head.

When I was a kid, the other kids used to call me Bucket Feet Kennelmen.

Now I knew why.

I flailed, trying to beat away the endless slide of white powder that covered my face, creeping coldly up my nostrils, came close to suffocating, and broke through so that I was looking up the hole I had made at the dense night clouds and the ever-faster fall of snow. I stood very still, afraid to move lest the loose snow be-neath the crust and on all sides of the shaft come down on top of me, making my position that much more impossible. It seemed like slightly over six months, but it was no more than a minute or two before His face appeared and He came to the rim of the broken crust, cautious not to get too close, but leaning out towards me.

"Don't you fall in too," I warned. "Any ideas on getting me out of here?"

"I'll dig a sloping path into you and pack the snow as I come," He said. "It's the only way. I can't pull you out. That would break the crust here and bring me down with you."

"What are you going to dig with?" I asked. "We haven't any shovels or tools."

"Wait," He said.

The wind howled above. A gust of it blew a film of snow over my face.

He removed His gloves and stripped off the in-sulated jacket and undershirt beneath. His chest and shoulders and arms bulged and rippled with fantastic muscle development. These were muscles the size of those you can get lifting weights every day until you drop, but they were not blocky like weight-lifting muscles; they were leaner, giving hint to a usefulness that a muscle-bound exerciser can never know. The cold should have had Him huddled and trembling, but He didn't even seem to notice it. He was the supreme study in detachment, in nonchalance. The snow fluttered down and struck His bare shoulders and chest, melted and ran off Him in cold streams of glistening water.

He held His hands out before Him as if doing a stretching exercise, held His fingers close together, closed His eyes and stood solid as a great pine, unmoved even when the wind suddenly picked up and began howling again. I could see very little in the dim light, but I *could* make out that some transformation was taking place in His hands. When He finally opened His eyes and set to work making a sloping path into me, I saw that the transformation was startling. The fingers had fused together so that the hands were flat scoops. The palms had broadened and lengthened until they were as large as the blade of a spade. He turned and walked out of sight to begin work. Working quickly, He removed the crust from the snow twenty-five feet away and began angling toward me, packing the snow in steps. Two hours later, after a second minor cave-in that required Him to reclear an area of His path, we were both on top of the drift, suited again, and headed toward the woods at the end of the field.

When we reached the trees, I stopped and looked at His hands but could find no trace of the previous transformation. His fingers were back in place, five to a hand, all perfectly formed. “How much of your body can you—change when you want to?” I asked. I had been afraid, back there when I had fallen through the crust, that He would just leave me there. What did He need me for, after all? It seemed that, already, He was going to be too much for World Authority to handle, even with their superior fire power and all their cunning little think tank men. There did not appear to be any need for me, even though He assured me there was.

Of course, that was not His way, abandoning someone to die.

“I can change most of it,” He said matter-of-factly.

“Your face?”

“I’m working on that.”

“And how far have you progressed?”

“I need to be able to exert more delicate control on the bone tissue. It, too, must be changed along with the facial features of the flesh.”

“When you control that, we can stop running,” I said. “You can change your face and go unrecognized.” In-deed, He could assume a different face every few weeks, every week if necessary, and be always a few steps ahead of the authorities with no fear of their ever catch-ing Him.

“Someone would recognize me sooner or later, Jacob. It isn’t just my face. It’s everything about me that singles me out, makes people suspicious of me. I’m— well—different.” He grinned that damned infectious, winning grin of His and spread His hands in a show of helplessness. All for my benefit. He was about as helpless as a full-grown bull elephant.

But what He said had some truth to it. He would always be an outcast. There was an indefinable, un-scientific aura about Him that gave Him an indisputably alien air. I knew what it was. He *was* alien, in that He was a superman, a supergenius too, who could no more pass for a man than a man could pass for a monkey in some jungle ape society. “But a change of face could gain you time to complete your evolution,” I said.

“Get me to the cabin,” He said, gripping my shoulder in His mammoth hand, “and I will only need the three days you promised. Then face-changing won’t be neces-sary.”

I put on my goggles and mask, for my face was already prickled with numbness that felt like a huge injection of novocaine had been rammed into both my cheeks. I fumbled the compass out and read it, pointed straight ahead. He took the lead, breaking a trail, spray-ing the snow to both sides, tramping it down, charging through it at a brisk pace. As we walked, I noticed something new about Him. His hand, when He had gripped my shoulder, had been enormous, not just large. Now I saw that He was enormous in every respect. An insulated suit, meant to be bulky, was strained to burst-ing with His giant body. His head seemed higher, larger, with a much greater expanse of forehead. His footprints were half again as large as mine. He lumbered through the dark woods like a fairy-tale giant, crushing or thrusting aside all that got in His way, silent, somewhat mysterious. Again, I was conscious of that part of His personality that always remained shrouded, the eerie side of Him that I had never been able to understand.

It was not exactly the result of the wind or the cold, but I shivered.

Half an hour later, He stopped and squatted in a small clearing, wiping snowflakes from His face and

looking about as if He were searching for something He had left behind on a previous trip through these same parts, though He could never have been here before. His head tilted, swayed from side to side like a pendulum through molasses, His lips compressed and bloodless.

“What is it?” I asked, coming up behind Him. “I’m not tired yet, if that’s what you’re troubled about.”

“How far to the cabin, Jacob?” He asked anxiously, His voice closer to a show of emotion than it usually got. It was the first time I had seen anxiety in Him; He was usually the pinnacle of patience, easygoing and willing to wait for all things.

“Well—” I took the map out of my coat pocket, un-folded it, and squinted to see in the gloom. After a moment, the glowing characters were clear and easy to read. “We’re right about here somewhere,” I said, pointing to a shaded forest area. “Halfway through this section of the forest. Then we have to cover this series of foothills, not rugged but quite steep in some places. Skirt this final copse, and we’re there. Maybe two and a half hours yet.”

“That’s much too long.”

“It’s the shortest way. I checked it several times in San Francisco when we ate dinner, remember? And again in the movie theater when that damned show became intolerable. This always measured the shortest and easiest route. Less hills than if we moved east to take advantage of that temporary ravine, less forests than if we went west along the ridge here.” I pointed to the corresponding portions of the map.

He didn’t answer.

I sat down next to Him. The snow was falling harder now, though it still might be only a local storm or even a short-term squall. He didn’t speak, and I didn’t feel like interrogating Him. We sat for about five minutes until the warmth we had gained from marching drained out and the cold began seeping back into my bones. He had given way completely to that unknown part of His personality, and I could not see how to approach Him, how to ask what was the matter. When another five minutes passed, I decided on the blunt route. “What is it?” I asked.

“Jacob, I am sitting here in a quandary, faced with two decisions, each of which will be in some way un-pleasant.” He spoke in that same, deep, even tone that denied emotion. That was what a machine should sound like - not like a seductress. “One of the courses of action that is open to me will end with your becoming a little less sure of me, a little frightened of me.”

“No,” I said.

“Yes, it will I know. You will be slightly disgusted, and it will have a bearing on the way you feel about me. Maybe small, maybe large. I don’t want to lose your friendship.”

“The second alternative?”

“I can postpone continuation of the changes going on in me, lose the momentum of biological processes, and wait until we are to the cabin to begin. It might mean a lost day.”

“What are you trying to say?” Despite myself, I let a note of fear slip through my words. It must have showed, for He grinned and slapped my back.

“I need food,” He said. “I can’t wait until we get to the cabin. I’ve started new systems, and I would suffer a complete setback if I had to wait much longer for food to create the energy needed to form large quantities of muscle tissue.”

“I don’t see how you propose to get food out here. Also, I don’t see what you could possibly do to upset me.”

“All right,” He said. “I will not postpone the changes. If you do not like what happens, try to remember that it is necessary.”

He took off His gloves again and knelt on the earth. He pressed His fingers against the ground after brushing the snow away over a two-foot square area. As I watched, His hands seemed to melt and run into the soil. The frozen ground cracked and spattered up as His lengthening fingers probed and displaced it. Several minutes later, He smiled and withdrew His hands, His fingers flowing back into normal shape as if they had been rubber that had been stretched and now released. “I found two of them,” He said mysteriously. “Over there.”

“What?” I asked.

“Watch.”

I followed him across the clearing to a jumble of rotting logs and brush. He hefted the logs aside effort-lessly, revealing a burrow of some sort. He reached into it, and He made His arm grow longer now, not just His fingers. Abruptly, there was a squealing and thrash-ing from inside the burrow. He drew His arm back out, a snow rabbit clutched in His fist. The animal had been strangled. A few moments later, He had done the same thing to a second rabbit and had brought it out and placed it next to the first. “This is the part you may find disgusting,” He said. “I’ll have to eat them raw. No time for a fire and too risky to start one anyway.”

“Doesn’t bother me,” I said, though I was not too sure what I felt. The blood wouldn’t bother me, certainly, nor would the spilling of intestines and gore. If it did, then I might as well give up being a doctor. Eating a raw, warm rabbit, though . . .

He lifted the first rabbit in His left hand while He thinned His right fingers and slid the tiny tips into the game, loosening the hide from the inside. The animal peeled, literally, like a banana. He did the second one the same way, then set to devouring them before they could stiffen and freeze. He took large bites of the greasy flesh, blood dribbling down His chin, until He had consumed everything but the bones and the fur that He had previously skinned off. He hardly seemed to chew the food, but bolted it down in an effort to finish the unpleasant business as swiftly as possible. “Okay,” He said, standing and wiping the mess from His cheeks and lips. “Time to go.”

His eyes glittered.

My stomach flipped like a dying animal looking for a cozy place to have that final wrenching spasm, despite my concentrated efforts to control myself. I turned and led the way this time, for the snow under the trees was considerably less than it had been in the open and in the less dense sections of the woods. As I walked, I tried to sort out the confusing mass of conflicting emotions throbbing through my brain. He was the greatest boon to mankind in centuries, was He not? Of course He was I Look at the power in His hands, the ability to heal that burned in every cell of His body. This was not just a steam engine or an electric lightbulb or a more powerful rocket booster that had been discovered; this was a panacea for all that physically ailed the race. I should discount little things like His wild appetite, His energetic consumption of the rabbits—blood, guts, and all. Shouldn’t I? Of course I should. Only a small-minded man will overlook intrinsic worth because of superfluous surface defects.

The wind blew.

The snow beat my face.

Cold . . .

But there was one thing troubling me: Yes, perhaps He was benevolent in His previous stage when I had

kidnapped Him, when He had brought the explosion and fire victims back from the dead. But did that neces-sarily mean He would look kindly upon mankind in one of His later stages, after He had *changed*?

Wouldn’t we seem very inferior? And sort of pitiful. And maybe worthless. And, just maybe, pests to be dealt with out-of-hand?

I shivered.

Damn! I was acting like some superstitious child, or some senile old ninnie. This wasn’t a retelling of the hoary Frankenstein tale! My artificial human was not going to turn on me like a senseless brute and bash my head in. I shook my head and tried to dispel any more such thoughts. I knew they were unhealthy.

Thirty-five minutes later, we came out of the trees to the edge of the foothills. We had taken off our snow-shoes when we had entered the last woods, now we unstrapped them from our packs and put them on again. I made a mental note to be especially careful if we en-counterred any drifts. We couldn’t afford another two-hour delay while He shoveled me out with His hands. It would be dawn before we reached the cabin now, and I didn’t want to stay out in daylight any longer than was absolutely necessary. We moved across the barren slopes, and we had just crested the rise when the sound came to us.

“What is that?” He asked, taking my arm and stop-ping me.

I peeled off my mask and waited. It came again, low and hollow. “Wolves,” I said. “A pack of

wolves.”

IV

We stood a third of the way down the next slope, nothing behind which we might hide, no trees to climb, nothing at all to do but wait and hope that they passed us by, crossed another hill, went down a distant ravine and never knew our presence. But my scalp tightened and cold chills crept up my spine, flushing through all parts of my body when I considered the unlikelihood of that. A wolf is a formidable opponent. It has ex-ceedingly sharp senses, among the keenest in the animal kingdom. And with the wind blowing our scent in the direction of the guttural, melancholy howls, there was almost no chance at all that we would escape detection.

“I’ve read only a little about wolves,” He said. “But they are vicious, very vicious, when they are hungry and hunting. Am I right?”

“Too right,” I told Him, drawing my pin gun and wish-ing, now that I was going to have to face beasts instead of men, that I had something more lethal than narcodarts. It had been a harsh winter; I could tell that from the depth of the drifts, the bow of the trees after they had borne so many weeks of heavy snow. The wolves had been driven out of the higher levels of the park, down from the dense upper forests into the more civil-ized areas. Food would be scarce up there in this weather. Farther down, there was still good hunting . . . “They must have caught the odor of blood—maybe from the rabbits you skinned. If that’s the case, they’ve been searching for some time now, and they’re bound to be near mad with excitement.”

Just as I finished, the first wolf loped into sight, a scout of the main pack. He came over the brow of the next hill and stood looking at us across the little valley that separated him from us. His eyes were hot coals, feverish, gleaming between the beads of the snow curtain that draped the night. His muzzle quivered, and he bared his teeth. Two prominent fangs arched up from his lower jaw and shone wickedly yellow-white in the gloom, fangs that could rip out a man’s throat in seconds, free the bubbling blood in human veins. He danced backward, then forward again, examining us, his excitement growing by the second. Then he raised his head and dropped his lower jaw to howl.

I leveled my gun and fired a burst of pins that caught him in the throat. He gagged, shook his head, and toppled over. He writhed a moment, his legs kicking spasmodically, and lay still, sleeping. But the sounds of his comrades indicated little gap between the scout and the body of the main force. They would be on us in seconds. Their reaction to the limp body of their companion would decide our fate—whether they ad-vanced for revenge or turned tail and ran. Somehow, the latter seemed unlikely.

The other wolves crested the ridge and stopped like a line of Indians confronting the cavalry in a cheap Western movie. They moved around uncertainly, taking turns sniffing the scout’s body. When they realized he was not dead but sleeping, some of their bravura was restored. They pranced around more lightly now, their feet hardly touching the ground, springing like wind-up toys—though their teeth were real enough. A few threw their heads back and let go some really wild howls at the low sky. The echo beat around the foothills, carried to the wall at the base of the mountain and boomed back in a loud whisper.

“What should we do?” He asked, though He didn’t seem very concerned—nowhere near as concerned as I was when I looked at those brutes.

“Let’s wait and see what move they make,” I said. “If we try to run, that might give them enough con-fidence to attack.”

Meanwhile, I counted them. With the scout, there were sixteen.

Sixteen.

I could swear it got colder and that the wind blew the snow more insistently than ever, but it may have been my imagination. Besides, I was sweating, a switch if ever I saw one. We waited.

They made their move. Three of the braver beasts started down the opposite slope, gained

confidence and loped full speed across the small valley which they easily covered in a dozen strides. When they reached the base of our hill, I shouted, "Fire!"

We opened with our pin guns and stopped them before they were halfway up our hill. They kicked, jerked, went down in a tangle of legs, lay very still, the drugs doing quick work on them. One of them, the largest and most darkly-furred, snored.

The other beasts snorted and snarled among them-selves, much like football players planning strategy in a huddle. They milled around, looking at each other, then at us, then back to each other.

"Maybe they'll go away now," He said.

"Not a wolf. For one thing, we've insulted them. A wolf is too proud a creature to give up without a fight. Besides, they look rangy, hungry. They won't stop as long as they think they've found their supper. And that's just what we must look like to them."

Just then, four more wolves flashed down the slope and after us, snarling, foam flecking the corners of their twisted mouths, their eyes fierce and glowing like crim-son gems. The attack was a surprise and launched with startling swiftness, almost as if they had mutually agreed to take us unaware. But our vantage point was too good, too safe. I brought the last one down only a dozen feet away from me. Just in time to hear the vicious growl behind us!

We whirled.

Two wolves had detached from the main pack and had slunk around behind us and had come up the back of our hill, almost in the footprints we had made. Now we were surrounded. I caught one with a narcodart burst as he leaped for me. He twisted in midflight, his entire body wracked with spasms as the drugs relaxed his mind and released his tense muscles from their con-striction, draining the savage fury from him like a tap drains a keg. He crashed short of me by two feet, throwing up a spray of snow. He choked, tried to get up, and slammed back to the ground, passed out. The second wolf had come too fast and had landed on His shoulders, bearing Him to the ground and sinking teeth into His pseudo-flesh. Apparently, the pseudo-flesh, the cultured meat that was grown in the Artificial Wombs, was as good as regular meat, for the wolf did not draw back, but went after its prey in a frenzy.

It swung its head down to tear open my android's neck. I fired a round of pins, but they rolled just then, and the narcodarts sank uselessly into the snow. The next moment, the beast's teeth raked over the exposed skin of His neck, but did not sink in very deeply. Little rivulets of blood ran down His skin. I was searching for an opening, when He suddenly swung His fist against the side of the wolf's head and crushed its skull as completely as if He had used an iron mallet. He had evidently hardened His flesh into a hammer-like weapon, just as He had earlier shaped it into a scoop. The wolf gurgled once and fell off Him.

"Your face," I said. His cheek had been badly chewed, and He was bleeding profusely.

"It'll be all right." Even as He spoke, the bleeding slowed and stopped. His cheek seemed to crawl with a life of its own, wriggling, shivering, pulsating. He reached up and tore away the flap of flesh the wolf had loosened. I could see, beneath, the welling bright-ness of smooth, new skin. In moments, there was no sign of His wound; He had healed completely. "The other six," He said, indicating the last of our enemy.

But they were slinking off along the ridge, watching us carefully but with no apparent intent of attack. They had seen ten of their kind fall before us, and they had suddenly lost some of their pride—enough, anyway, to let them give up in hopes of finding easier prey.

"Let's go," I said, "before they change their minds and come back. Or before their comrades wake up."

"Just a minute," He said, kneeling before the wolf He had killed with His hand. He flopped it onto its back and began working on it. In a minute, He had skinned it as He had the rabbits. He tore large chunks of meat from its flanks and stuffed them into His mouth, ripping with His teeth just as the wolves would have ripped us had we not been too much for them.

"Wolf meat should be stringy," I said inanely.

"I need it," He answered. "I don't much care about the taste or the texture. The changes are accelerating, Jacob. I'll only be a few minutes here." He swallowed noisily. "Okay?"

“Yeah. Sure.”

“Good,” He said.

He continued cramming the bloody meat into his mouth, swallowing it with the minimum of chewing. I guess He had adapted His digestive system in some way to handle what He was throwing at it. Such a bolted meal of raw flesh would have had anyone else retching for the next three days as the stomach cleansed itself. I would have given just about anything at that moment to have been able to X-ray Him, run tests on Him to see exactly what He had done to Himself. It was the doctor in me, the medical curiosity surfacing even while wolves stalked in the night and World Authority police ranged somewhere behind, closing the gap. Ten minutes later, He had devoured most of the animal and was ready to go.

We walked down the slope and across the wolf-strewn valley.

I kept looking behind, expecting the flash of teeth, a guttural snarl, ripping claws.

It was going to be a bad night . . .

An hour and forty-five minutes after dawn, afraid every minute that we would be seen and apprehended even though the park seemed deserted, we reached the cabin. The sight of it filled me with the first warmth I had felt since the wolves had set me to sweating inside my bulky insulated clothing. The place was as I re-remembered it, a comfy nook nestled in a grove of pine trees with its back door facing a sheer cliff and its front door giving view to a breathtaking panorama of snow and trees and gentle foothills. It was not the sort of place a hardy outdoorsman would go to rough it. Harry and others like him paid well for the modern conveniences in the trappings of rustic simplicity.

I had no key this time. Even if I had thought of coming here right from the beginning, I would not have gone to Harry and implicated him by getting a key. This was my folly, and I would have to bear all the grief and punishment if things fell down around my head. I had to break a pane of glass in the door, fumble around for the inside latch, all the time wondering when someone would come running into the living room shouting, “burglar,” and wielding a twenty-gauge shot-gun. But the place was empty as I had imagined it would be.

Inside, we found a cardboard box and used one of the sides to cover the hole I'd made, thereby keeping out the worst of the wind. I plugged the heaters in after He started the generator in the attached utility shed to the rear of the cabin, and I thanked the gods that Harry had electric heaters as well as fireplaces. The fireplaces would give off smoke that would have every World Authority ranger and copper down on our backs inside of the hour. The electric jobs would keep the living room sufficiently warm and the remainder of the house just comfortable. And that was sufficient. We could not expect total luxury in our position. This little bit of peace and quiet and rest, after our days and days of running, did seem like total luxury. The heavy, whining noise from the generator would have to be risked. It was well-muffled, and if anyone got close enough to hear its low *whumpa-whumpa*, then chances were they were already suspicious and investigating the cabin.

“Good,” I said, watching the coils begin to glow inside the heaters and feeling the first warm drafts of air as the blowers came on.

“The food,” He said. “I want to see what I have to work with.”

“This way,” I said, taking Him down into the natural icebox of the cellar. There was very nearly a whole cow hung from meat hooks embedded in the ceiling. The meat was frozen solid and filmed by a thin coat of fuzzy frost. It was most probably a tank-grown cow, but the meat would still be tender and tasty. The walls of the room, natural rock, were coated with thick, brown-white ice, as was the floor. The cellar had been carved directly from the base of the mountain for the purpose of food storage; it was a fine job.

Next, I led Him back upstairs and showed Him the pantry where Harry kept about two hundred cans of various fruits, vegetables, and meats. At one time, when World Authority was threatened with a power crisis and looked as if it might topple at any moment, Harry had rented the cabin and had fixed it up as the perfect bomb shelter here in the Alaskan polar winds that would be relatively free from fallout. He had never quite gotten over the fear of a world holocaust, and he kept his pantry regularly stocked against it, though the present solidarity of World Authority seemed permanent.

“Take out everything you will need to keep you for three days,” He said. “I'll take all that's left plus

the beef down there in the cellar.”

“You're going to need all that?” I asked, incredulous.

“Maybe more.”

“More?”

“I can't really say yet. Not until I'm farther along with the changes. But you might have to go hunting for me, Jacob. Can you hunt?”

“I've done a little. Mostly gamebirds, though. Duck, pheasant, a bit of turkey. And it has been three or four years since I've even been out for those. What would I hunt here?”

“Well, we've seen that there are wolves. Geese, if it's that time of the year. Rabbits. I understand the park is noted for its elk herds and its white-tailed deer.”

I laughed.

“I'm serious,” He said.

“Let's see you eat what you have here first. That should take a month. If you manage that, then we'll talk about hunting.”

I went to the window to check the weather. It was still snowing hard, and there did not appear to be any breaks in the cloud cover. The wind was whipping up the white stuff and jamming it against the cabin in dandy drifts. I was all for a blizzard. Aesthetically, I enjoyed the beauty of it. Also, and more importantly, it was unlikely that a search of the park could be initiated now even if some bright young World Authority executive candidate had thought of it. Helicopters couldn't move in that soup, and foot parties could easily get separated and lost. It was snowing much harder than before. The wind seemed strong enough to snap the towering pines all around us. Satisfied that we would not be interrupted by any nasty WA patrols, I went into one of the two bedrooms, stripped, and fell into bed. I didn't even mind that there were no sheets, just the spread. For all I knew, I could have been in the Astor, high up in the best suite available, curled on a five-thousand-dollar bed.

I had bad dreams. Real bad.

I was running through a dark, thick, silent forest in the first dream, pursued by some nameless, faceless hulk that moaned as it crashed through the brush. Several times, its long, thick fingers touched the nape of my neck, tried to draw me into its murderous grasp. Each time, I would have to double my speed to put more ground between us. But the night wore on and on, and the beast was tiring more slowly than I. It would get me. I knew it. As I ran, I screamed ... In another dream, I was in an old, many-roomed castle at midnight, again pursued by something nameless that breathed heavily, chasing me from room to room, gurgling thickly in its throat and chuckling now and then when it almost trapped me in a deadend hallway or on a stair when I tripped and fell.

But the dreams failed to wake me. I woke naturally that evening, having slept the morning and afternoon through, with a faint sense of nausea from the unreal exertion of my nightmare chases. I felt a moment of terror as I realized I had allowed myself to sleep so soundly with the enemy breathing down our necks. Then I remembered the snow and slowed my heartbeat by deep breathing and conscious effort. I dressed and went into the living room. He was nowhere in sight, I called His name. There was no answer.

He's gone, I thought.

I had been expecting it all along, ever since that moment when we took flight from the laboratories. All along the line, I had been looking for Him to leave me high and dry, to strike out on His own. It was that concealed facet of His personality that gave me such pessimistic visions. I wondered if that secret portion of His soul knew that He did not need me, that He was, in fact, superior and needed no one. Now He was gone. Now it had happened. I felt a curious mixture of sadness and relief. I could go back now, give myself up. What would they do to me? Jail? Death? Conceivably noth-ing? It would be interesting to find out. I decided to get something to eat and then to leave for the trek back to the main gate, back to Cantwell, back to New York and the World Authority labs. I walked into the kitchen—and found Him.

He had changed.

Changed . . .

“What the hell—” I began, backing toward the door, my heart laboring, my lungs momentarily forgetting their function.

“It’s all right, Jacob,” He said. His voice was deeper and just a little difficult to understand. Still, it was parental, soothing, reassuring.

“All right?” I asked, looking Him over. The floor was littered with nearly two hundred empty cans. He must have been eating steadily since I went to bed that morn-ing. Every can seemed to have been licked clean; there was no residue in any of them. He squatted on the floor in the middle of the tin mess, half again as large as when I had left Him. He had gained a good hundred and twenty-five pounds, maybe more. There was vir-tually no distinction between His head and neck, just one solid mass that connected with His shoulders. He had His shirt and trousers off, quite naked. Of course, He could never have fitted in them now. His chest was ringed with folds of tissue, though it was muscle and not fat. His arms were huge, as big around as gallon jugs at the biceps and a good eleven or twelve inches at the wrists. His manhood was lost in pouches of muscle that made Him sexless, hung between His legs Me some grotesquerie of Nature. His legs were swollen pillars now, shiny like sausages. The bones of His knees were invisible, padded beneath pounds of muscle that must surely hinder the use of the joint. His feet were buckets, the toes like fat cucumbers painted a flesh color, the nails engulfed by flesh, peeking out only here and there.

I had the feeling that I was in some small, tasteless carnival sideshow gawking at the strangest freak to come down the pike in centuries. *Come and See Muscle-man!* the signs would read outside the tent. *So Bound With Muscles He Can Barely Move! Something To Tell Your Grandchildren About! One of the Marvels of the Modern Age!*

He laughed. It was a fat, unpleasant chuckling sound far down in the tight mass of His throat. “Jacob, Jacob, Jacob,” He crooned. “Have faith. I told you I was changing.”

“But whatever good is a change like this?” I could not take my eyes from Him, for I did not know if I could pull them back again once I had looked away. It was like the sensation you feel at the scene of a bad accident where parts of bodies are strewn around like old weeds. You do not want to look, but you are transfixed, know-ing you *must* look if only to grasp for a short while the immediacy of Death.

“This is only an intermediate step, Jacob. This form is no good at all. It is what I am heading for that will matter, that will be important. Can you understand that? Or am I making no sense at all?”

“I don’t know,” I said quite honestly. “What is it that you are heading towards?”

“You’ll see,” He said. “You’ll see, Jacob.”

“How did you manage to gain all this—tissue in so few hours? And from just a couple of hundred cans of fruit and vegetables?” Medical curiosity again. It all started with Harry giving me that doctor play kit when I was a toddler.

“My system,” He said. “My system doesn’t waste anything. It employs nearly all of what I consume. Precious little feces. Can you imagine that, Jacob? It works at converting all matter, not just the nutritious elements. Everything is convertible. When I take in a pound of food, I create nearly a pound of tissue.”

“Impossible!”

“Not so, Jacob. Oh, there is water loss, to be sure. But that is all. And I manage to contain a good deal of the water, for my new systems need it. Still, I’m afraid I had to make a good many trips outside.”

I sat down at the kitchen table, my knees weak and trembling, and I looked at Him. My head seemed ready to pop off my shoulders and balloon around the room. “I don’t know,” I said, still examining Him in detail. “At first I thought you were something good, something that could help mankind. I guess I’m still an idealist even after all these years. But now I am no longer sure of you. You’re grotesque!”

He was silent a moment, very still. If I squinted my eyes, He faded into a brown-gray blob, something un-living, a pile of wood or grass. Then: “I need two more days, Jacob. That’s all I ask of you. After that, I *will* benefit your people. I *will* revolutionize the world, your lives, Jacob. I can bring mankind an unlimited life-span. I can teach you the many things I have learned. Yes, I can even teach Man to heal himself and shape his own body just as I am able to do. Will you trust me for two days?”

I looked at Him. What did I have to lose? He was going to develop with or without me. I might as

well stay along for the ride. Besides, I might be able to discover what was going on in Him, satisfy some of my longing for knowledge about his lightning evolution. "All right," I said. "I trust you."

"So now I have to ask you for something," He said.

"What is that?"

"I have had this radio on several times today, listening for word of the hunt. It seems that they are narrowing the area of search much more rapidly than we anticipated. They are forming a massive search network to start on the park tonight."

I sat up straight. "They will think of the cabins relatively early in the search. If they haven't already thought of them."

"Exactly," He said, His new, deep voice a little more palatable now that I was getting used to it.

"But I don't see what we can do."

"I've thought. I have an idea."

"Which is?"

His strange, bloated face looked concerned. "It will be dangerous for you, I'm afraid. This close to the end, I would not want to see you killed, shot down so far away that I can't reach you in time to resurrect you."

"I haven't worried about getting shot for seven days," I said. "The first day, I was scared. Then after flying bullets became common, I got used to it. What's the idea?"

"If you could leave here," He said, "and go back out of the park, you could take a flivver or rocket or mono-rail to someplace far away from here. Let yourself be seen, recognized. Then the chase will switch, and the heat will be off us, at least until they trace you and discover you came back here. But by then—"

"Down through the park again," I said.

"I know it will be one helluva job."

"But you're right," I said disconsolately. "It's the only thing we have to do."

"When?" He said.

"I'll leave as soon as I grab something to eat and get into my gear."

V

I opened a can of thick beef stew and heated it in an old aluminum pan that I found in the cupboard under the sink. I ate directly from the pan to save time and dishes. I was getting so used to His new appearance that I did not have to leave the room to eat, as I thought, at first, I might. Indeed, I sat watching Him and talking to Him while I gobbled the meat and potatoes. I finished supper with a can of pears, then went and struggled into my arctic traveling gear. When I came back into the kitchen to tell Him that I was leaving, He said, "I almost forgot about it."

"What's that?"

"When I was out in the utility shed starting the generator this morning, I noticed it on a platform near the back wall. Didn't think much of it then, but it will come in handy now. A magnetic sled."

"How big?" I asked.

"Two-man. You can handle it easily. It'll save a devil of a lot of walking."

"That it will," I said. I turned and walked into the living room.

"Be careful," He called after me from where he lay in the kitchen like a beached whale.

"Don't worry."

Then I was through the door, closing it behind, and into the white and black world of the early Alaskan night. The wind buffeted me, and the snow stung my face. I held my goggles and mask in my right hand, walked down the steps and hurried around the cabin to the utility shed. The door was a heavy metal one, bent slightly because He had had to smash it repeatedly to break its lock. It rattled now, gently, as the wind rocked it against the frame. I pushed it open. It grated unpleasantly where the buckled

metal worked against the hinges.

Inside the shed, I fumbled for a light switch, found one two feet from the door, off to the right. A dim bulb popped into life, revealing the fact that Harry did not keep his tool shed too neat. Everything was stacked haphazardly around the bulk of the generator and the mammoth bulge of the water storage tank that de-scended from the ceiling like a pus sack. Back against the far wall, there was a platform of wooden beams nailed crudely together, and the magnetic sled perched there—a very welcome sight.

I went back to it and checked it out. It was a relatively expensive model. It was just under seven feet long, three feet wide. The front was swept up in a snowshield curve, and the metal metamorphosed into a plexiglass window to cut down the battering ram of the wind. There were two seats, one behind the other, and a set of controls before the first. I examined the controls, saw that there was nothing fancy. Behind the second seat, the oblong box of the drive mechanism jutted like a barnacle off the sleek hide of this beast-machine. I went to it, thumbed the rotating catches, flipped them back, and lifted the lid. The battery was totally dead.

For a moment, I was ready to kick the damn sled and to curse Harry with every four- and five- and six-letter dirty word I had in my vocabulary. That would have wasted a rather large chunk of time, considering the extensiveness of my known oaths. Then I relented and allowed my brain to do the thinking instead of my gut. It took just seconds to realize that Harry must have some way to recharge that battery. After all, it would have been dead for him, too.

I went to the generator first and found exactly what I had expected. There was a large battery on the floor next to the generator, and a trickle feedline kept this spare constantly charged. I disconnected the jumper cables from this live battery and hefted it, staggered back to the sled and set it down. Taking out the old battery, I replaced it with this healthier one, then took it back to the generator for its session of reactivation. Now I was ready to move.

But now there was another problem. The sled weighed a hundred and twenty or thirty pounds. I could not see myself lifting it and carrying it through the twisting aisles between the junk, turning it sideways at the narrow places, swinging it around the sharp bend between the generator and the open door. The urge to kick and curse returned. Then I won the battle with my gut and my brain was once again in charge. If I couldn't lift it and carry it out, neither could Harry, for he was smaller than I. Which meant there was some other way out of the shed. I examined the wall against which the sled rested, found the handle that slid a wide piece of it back. I flipped off the bolt lock, slid it back, and was looking out onto the snow. In fact, the sled was facing that way, ready to move.

I crawled into it, strapped the belt around my waist and made certain it was secure. When you are going anywhere on a magnetic sled and you are in a hurry, your life can easily depend on that strap of nylon cloth. As comfortable as possible, I switched on the ignition in the steering column. The sled hummed to life, purring quietly like a contented cat being stroked beneath the chin. Giving the controls another once-over, I put the sled in gear and pressed down ever so gently on the accelerator that tapped the battery. The sled moved forward, off the wooden platform and bumped onto the carpet of snow.

The magnetic sled is the only end product of what, at one time, promised to be a revolution in transportation. Dr. Kesey and his associates, working under Ford auspices, had cracked the wall blocking Man from the use of magnetic forces in transportation. The Kesey people developed a sled that could move across a body of water—or at least across their testing lake—on a magnetic cushion. It was very simple, as Kesey explained it, though, of course, he pared the details down to a layman's level of understanding. The bottom of the sled was plated with a magnetized layer of iron. Suspended from the bottom of the sled by four steel arms (one at each corner of the rectangular craft) was an electrified wire mesh that produced another magnetic field exactly like the first. The pattern of the field waves were constructed so that the two fields pushed against each other. The weight of the sled and its driver was, in effect, nullified. The wire mesh was bottomed with a thin layer of non-magnetic aluminum, which skimmed across the water. A set of propellers, driven by an electric battery, spun at the rear, pushing the—in effect, again—weightless craft across the surface of the lake.

Ford thought they had come up with something that was going to do away with the wheel. Then the hitches began to develop. The sled worked well on a lake, on any small body of water. But in a large

lake or on the ocean, it was useless. The waves swamped it, for it rode on the water, not above it like a flivver. Ocean travel was out. Secondly, and far worse, further testing proved that the magnetic sled would not function on land. It required a surface with a high degree of give and resilience, such as water—or snow. When driven on the ground or a pavement, the aluminum was shredded away in seconds, the wire grid torn loose immediately afterward, and the sled came to a slamming, banging halt. Finally, Kesey discovered that there was a limitation to the size of the magnetic sled. A one-man sled worked exceedingly well. A two-man sled was slightly more difficult to handle. A three-man sled required a competent and experienced driver. A four-man sled required two men and two separate wheels to control the bucking. A five-man sled was too erratic for use. The Kesey-Ford dream of revolutionizing the world suffered a severe setback.

The sleds went into production as pleasure craft. It wasn't long before they had replaced the small boat as the favorite middle-class luxury item. The snowmobile, so popular for thirty years, died overnight. The magnetic sled could never get stuck, could never break a tread, and moved faster. It could also go places the snowmobile could never reach. Ford made money. Kesey was kept on at his research lab. But the revolution never came.

Now I rested outside the cabin on the snow, drifting slightly forward. I accelerated a bit more, brought the craft smoothly ahead, and took it around the cabin, under the trees. I pointed the front end down the white stretch of the long slope below the cabin and stepped up the propeller speed. They whined behind me. I surged forward, the trees and mounds of snow flashing past. I kept the machine at twenty, not daring to go much faster. There was just enough light reflected off the snow from the pale moon to see by, and I kept a sharp lookout for sharp rises in the landscape. If the land dropped abruptly, the sled would fall gently back to the surface without disaster. But if there was a rise that I did not pull back on the wheel to compensate for, the sled would glide into it, smash nose-first and tip over. Even if I didn't get hurt, such an accident would damage the sled so that I would be forced to walk the rest of the way. And that was not a pleasant prospect.

When I came to the first section of woods, I decided to circle it rather than hunt a wide enough path through. Even if I did find a deer trail, I would have to slow up, for the woods were very treacherous for a sled. I soared past, curving in a wide arc around the trees. It would be an extra couple of miles around the stand of pine, but the increased speed would more than compensate for it. I moved sharply in the last moments of the high point of the arc, sending a spray of snow in a long geyser behind. The ride was exhilarating. For the first time in a long time, I felt like laughing.

I crossed more open fields beyond the wood, bringing the speed up to thirty, now that I was more sure of my-self. Five minutes like that brought me to another section of forest. As I approached, I saw that it stretched to both sides, far out of sight. It looked as if I would be forced to go through the trees here. I slowed to fifteen and cruised along the edge of the woods, looking for a path. I disregarded the first two because they were windy and narrow, but the third showed regular use by elk or deer and had been beaten into a fairly well-traveled and wide thoroughfare. I turned into it, dropped my speed to eight miles an hour, and proceeded with care.

The trees went by at a steady clip. It was slightly over two miles before I saw the opening at the end of the woods and the fields beyond. With a hundred feet to go through the tunnel of wood, I tramped down on the accelerator. The sled leaped ahead. I could see that the remainder of the path was wide and free of branches. The only thing I did not see was the white-tailed deer to the left of the hole leading into the field. He moved in front of my exit just as I reached it . . .

I hit the brakes almost instantly, but it was too late to avoid him completely. Startled, he tried some evasive action of his own, turning and leaping back. The sled smacked into his brown rump, leaped into the air, came down on its magnetic field, slapping the surface hard, tilted onto its side, and careened along the field for fifty feet, nosing into the snow until the propellers became clogged and the motor stalled.

I had not been able to get free, for I was strapped tight. Perhaps it was fortunate that I rode out the wreck. Otherwise, I might have been thrown off and had my neck broken. As it was, my goggles had been rammed down onto my nose with such force that the old pro-boscis had started bleeding. My back

had been wrenched, and the stiffness reached up into my neck. A little bit of a whiplash and a bloody nose, I thought. Not too bad. Not considering.

Then I remembered the sled. And the long walk with-out it.

And I was suddenly much more concerned about it than I was about anything that might have happened to my body.

I unfastened the belt and crawled away from the sled. The snow had blown off this field and had packed in among the trees, so there was not more than two and a half feet on the surface. Halfway up my thigh. Which made for tough walking, but which, at least, could not gulp me down and smother me. I turned around and moved carefully to the sled. It was lodged in the snow, only a few inches of the side sticking out. I set to work scooping the snow away from it, wishing my hands could reform themselves as His had. Ten minutes later, I was able to pull it free and turn it right side up in the hole it had made. The underside looked amazingly in-tact. The drive box had not been breached. I thumbed the ignition, and was delighted beyond words when the propeller fluttered and the motor hummed.

There was a noise behind me, perhaps twenty feet off. I turned, startled, and remembered the deer. There were about two dozen of them, standing in an area where the wind seemed to have scoured away all but three or four inches of snow. I could not tell which of them was the one I had hit a glancing blow with the sled. They watched me, snorting among themselves and blinking their large, dark eyes.

I turned back to the sled, muscled it up out of the snow and onto the undisturbed surface, its motor idling, the field on and holding it on the thin crust. I climbed aboard, buckled up, and started out again. I kept it at a decent twenty miles an hour as I had at first, and I kept it like that until I had come down through all the foothills and had reached the fence at the edge of the park.

Beyond the fence, there was a plowed and cindered road banked with snow on both sides. I realized that I could not be far from the main gate where He and I had first entered. But, of course, it would be nothing but suicide to go back there. The World Authority coppers would be congregated at the first ranger station, would have secured that primary gate. All gates, in fact. If I were to get out, I would have to climb the fence.

I lugged the sled to a clump of brush, brown and dry and dead from the battering of winter. I tucked it into them, then stood back and examined it. It was still noticeable from the road, I was certain. I went behind the bushes, dug out snow and threw it on the sled. Five minutes later, I was satisfied. The contours of its hidden shape were irregular and unnatural, but the smooth blanket of falling snow would take care of that in an-other hour. I went back to the fence and spent a good fifteen minutes climbing and falling off before I went over and dropped in the snow on the other side.

On each of the fence posts, there was a small red plate with a number stamped into it. I checked the number on this one: 878. Now all I would have to do when I returned was get on this park access highway and follow the fence posts down or up until I came to 878. I felt proud of my ingenuity, so proud that I almost stepped out onto the road before I noticed the low, rumbling sound of an approaching jeep.

VI

I was standing in the snow bank that the plows had thrown up. I had not yet broken through to the road, and now I dropped quickly until I was snuggled down in a hole that would be invisible to the WA searchers. The sound of the jeep engine grew louder until, finally, I knew it was just beyond the bank. A powerful light swept over the snow as the vehicle moved slowly past. Could they know? Could they already know that I was leaving the park? Had they captured Him and—no, no. This was probably just a routine patrol. They would be looking along the perimeters of the park for any place where the snow bank might be broken, any place where we might have exited behind their backs.

When the engine was sufficiently distant, I stood up and looked after the jeep. It was a heavy, truck-bedded vehicle carrying half a dozen armed WA troops. Then it turned a bend and was out of

sight. Quickly, I broke through onto the road, then turned around to look at the hole I had made. It would do no good for them to see this, investigate, and discover the sled. I'd come strolling back, confident about fooling them, and they would be sitting in the trees with their guns ready, grin-ning with a satisfaction of their own. I set to work scrap-ing snow off the front of the bank and packing it into the exit I had made. When the spot was well enough hidden to pass searchlight inspection, I crossed to the other side of the road, broke through the snow wall there, packed it behind me. Then, paralleling the road, but hidden by the wall of snow, I began walking back toward Cantwell.

When I reached the town proper, the banks of snow along the roads disappeared, for full snow-removal op-erations were in effect in the city limits. Now I would have to walk in the open, out where I could easily be seen, recognized, and apprehended. Except they did not expect me by myself, but were looking for two men. Also, they would not think to search here in the town where hundreds of WA cops and troops milled.

That was what I hoped, anyway.

Soon, I had a chance to try the theory. Three blocks from the Port, a group of half a dozen uniformed men came out of a low, lighted building and started my way, talking animatedly among themselves.

I hunched my shoulders and lowered my head, even though I still wore the mask. The goggles had seemed too conspicuous for a walk in the city, so I had stuffed them in a jacket pocket. Then, the closer I got to the group, the more I began to think that hunched shoul-ders and lowered head would draw more attention than a straightforward, shoulders-back approach. I un-hunched and raised my head. When we passed, I said hello and they said hello, and we left each other without any nasty physical encounters.

At the edge of the Port area, I stopped to consider what my next move should be. True, they would not expect me to brazen my way up to the desk and buy a ticket on the next rocket out. But that still might be idiotic. Earlier, the Port employees would not have been thinking about Jacob Kennelmen and an android. Now, we would be on their minds. The chances of being recognized were correspondingly higher than they had been the night before. And there wouldn't be just the ticket seller to get by. There would be the crew of the rocket, the other passengers, the debarking officer . . . No, that was out. What, then?

I thought over the possible methods of transportation: monorail, flivver, copter (which would be grounded to-night.) None of these were particularly appealing. They all involved being around too many people.

Then I had it.

I hurried past the front of the Port building, moving between about fifty WA special troops loitering on the promenade awaiting orders. When I came to the steps down into the taxi docking area, I took them two at a time. I went along the rows of vehicles to the last in the line. It was almost totally blocked from the view of anyone using the lot, and it would afford me more privacy to work. I opened the door on the driver's side and slid in, closing it behind so that the ceiling light went off.

I inspected the controls and the keyboard to be cer-tain that this was no different than the standard auto-taxi I had used for so many years in New York City. On the bottom of the directory chart, I found the in-structions I had been hoping for:

IN THE EVENT THAT THIS VEHICLE SHOULD ENCOUNTER MECHANICAL
DIFFI-CULTY THAT THREATENS IN ANY WAY TO INJURE OR KILL THE
OCCUPANTS, THE PATRON OR PATRONS ARE LEGALLY EM-POWERED TO
ASSUME CONTROL OF THE CRAFT. CONVERSION FROM AUTO TO
MAN-UAL IS ACCOMPLISHED BY PUNCHING OUT E-M-E-R-G-E-N-C-Y ON
THE KEYBOARD. A BUZZER WILL SIGNAL WHEN THE CON-VERSION HAS
BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, AT WHICH TIME PATRON OR PATRONS MAY
OPERATE THIS VEHICLE AS ANY MANUAL STEERING CAR. NOTE: IF ANY
PATRON OR PATRONS CONVERTS THIS VEHICLE FROM AUTO TO MANUAL

FOR THE PURPOSE OF AVOIDING HONEST FARES OR FOR THE PURPOSE OF STEALING THIS VEHICLE, THEY WILL BE TRIED AND PUNISHED ACCORDING TO SECTION 3, PARAGRAPH 16 OF THE WORLD AUTHORITY TRANSPORTATION AGENT PROTECTION LAWS WHICH PROVIDE FOR NOT LESS THAN ONE YEAR AND NOT MORE THAN FIVE YEARS IN A WORLD AUTHORITY CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION.

I felt like laughing again. One to five years would mean nothing to Jacob Kennelmen on top of what he was going to receive anyway if he were caught. I wrestled my wallet out of the zippered sidepocket on my insulated trousers, took out a poscred bill and dropped it in the payment slot. The keyboard lighted instantly. Slowly, I typed out E-M-E-R-G-E-N-C-Y. There was a click, a series of grumbling sounds, and the buzzer sounded that the car was now a manually operated vehicle. I shifted it into reverse, backed it out of its stall, and left the lot at a reasonable speed. Once on the highway, I turned toward Anchorage. Keeping the taxi at top speed as much as possible, I reached that city a little over two hours later, at eleven-thirty.

I parked on the outskirts at a self-service recharging station for electric cars. There was an automat attached. It was well lighted, but empty. I went in, purchased a synthe-ham sandwich and a carton of chocolate artificial milk, went back to the taxi that I had parked at the edge of the lot. While I ate, I tried to plan the next step. I wanted them to know I was in Anchorage, wanted them to shift their search down here and take the heat off the park. But how to do it? If I moved into someplace where there were a lot of people, I would surely be recognized sooner or later—recognized and trapped.

I had not come all this way to sacrifice myself. Besides, letting them catch me would be utterly foolish. With the right drugs, they would have me babbling everything inside of half an hour, spouting happily where He was at the moment. There must be some other way. A man in a dark blue sedan pulled up before the building at the charging station, plugged in his car, cleaned his windscreen, and drove away. By the time he left, I knew what I was going to do.

Walking to the far end of the station and around the corner, I found the phones. I stepped into the last so that I was not visible from the front of the station and punched out Harry Leach's home number.

There was a little musical set of tones that reminded me of the old-fashioned bells triggered when you opened the door at Harnwockers Book Store back in New York. The tones sounded five times, and I was just beginning to think that Harry was going to fink out on me in my hour of need when the screen rolled once and came back up with his homely, balding head looking out at me.

"My God, Jake!" he said, his eyes going wide.

"Harry, I have to talk fast, so don't try to interrupt me."

"But—" he began.

"You don't have to help if you don't want to. I am not forcing you to—"

"Jake—"

"—do anything you don't want," I said, talking louder and drowning him out. "But I need help. Look, they think we're in that park up at Cantwell. I heard it on the radio. But we're—"

"Jake, don't you realize they are—"

"Shut up! We're really here in Anchorage. I'm at a little self-service recharging place right now. Now what I want—"

"Jake—" he began. It was time to let him tell me what I knew he had been trying to tell me all along. "Jake, this phone is bugged!"

"Damn!" I said, and I slammed the receiver into its cradle, disconnecting myself. Harry blinked off the screen.

I stood there for a moment, content with how well it had gone. I had known, of course, that they would tap Harry's phone. He was my best friend, my father image. It was logical that I should contact him if anyone. The trick had been not to let Harry tell me the bad news until after I had spilled our false position. But I had held him off, had gotten in the bit about Anchorage before he could tell me. The WA boys in the investigation Bureau offices must be frantic at this moment, slapping each other on the back

and congratulating each other profusely. We'll have that bastard Kennelmen in hours, boys. He can't get away from us now. We have him cornered in goddamned old Anchor-age. Then I remembered that they would have me cornered if I didn't beat it the hell out of there.

I opened the door of the booth, went out and around the front of the building. Across the lot, a local patrol car had pulled up next to the stolen auto-taxi. The cop, in a state uniform, tending toward plumpness, was looking at the yellow letters on the side: *Cantwell Port Auto-Taxi Service*.

A WA cop would have pegged it for a hot car as soon as he saw it. This fuzz might be more slow-witted, but he would not require more than another few seconds to reach a similar conclusion.

I thought of turning and getting out of there before he turned and saw me. Run, run, move, my mind told me. Or was it my emotional gut again? I forced myself to be calm, then continued across the lot toward the car. "Officer!" I shouted. "Thank God you're here!"

He turned around and looked at me. He was a big, heavy-jowled man. His fur hat was brought down around his ears and snapped under his chin. It gave him the look of a small, arctic animal. He made no sign of going for the pin-gun on his hip, but stood with his arms folded across his chest, waiting for me. I realized I must look rather strange, wearing full outdoor gear in a city like this, but the strangeness did not seem to be enough to set him on edge. After all, I had called to him and said I was glad to see him. A criminal never did that sort of thing.

"What's the matter?" he asked when I reached him.

"Name's Andrews," I said. "I work at the Port Building in Cantwell. Passenger service desk. This fellow came through customs from Region One, going into the North American Economic Grid. Of course, we were going to search his luggage like we always do. He thought different. Pulled a gun. I mean a projectile gun, not a narcodart pistol. Made me leave the terminal with him, illegally took this taxi and—Well, anyway, I got a chance to go for him and—but you don't want the whole story right away. Look here in the back seat and see what you think we ought to do with him."

He turned back to the car, slightly confused but still not suspecting me of anything illegal.

I grasped one hand in the other, clenched my fists to make a solid club, and brought them down on the back of his neck. He staggered forward, tripping over his own feet, and went down on his knees. Unfortunately, the fur cap had absorbed some of the blow, and he was fumbling for his pistol, still conscious, though evidently woozy. I slammed my hands on his neck again, then a third time. I tried to remember to keep the blows hard enough—without making them so hard they'd crack his spine or snap the bones in his neck. I could see how a man could get carried away with the thrill of striking an enemy, could so very easily apply just a little too much pressure . . . After the third blow, he pitched forward onto the snow and lay still, snoring.

I stood there for a moment, panting, trying to regain my composure and shake off the seething animal blood-lust that was trying to take control of me. When my heart slowed a little, I took out my pin-gun and put half a dozen darts in his legs. Then I dragged him to his patrol car and was about to get him inside when I had a better thought. I turned, struggled him back to the auto-taxi, got the passenger-side door open, and muscled him onto the back seat. Closing the door, I went around to the driver's side and got in. Just then, another car pulled into the recharging station and the driver climbed out.

I held my breath while he went about his business. It took him one helluva long time, or maybe it only seemed that way. He cleaned his windshield without bothering to plug his battery in first. Then he went inside, got something to eat, and brought it out to the car. He started on it while he plugged in the battery. Twice, he looked our way but made no show of interest and did not appear to be going to approach us. When the battery light flashed a soft blue, he disconnected the leads, closed the panel on the side of the car, and got in, still eating. When he departed, I started the patrol car and drove it around to the phones, then farther, completely behind the building and out of sight.

I left the taxi running and set to work securing him. I took off his uniform jacket and put it on over my arctic coat. Sitting down, behind the wheel of his patrol car, I would look a little more authentic. Then I stripped off his trousers and split them up the crotch. Using the two separated legs, I bound his hands and feet as securely as I could. I closed the taxi door and waited there a moment, making certain I hadn't forgotten anything. The car would not be noticed back here, not until the proprietor of the station made

his daily check of the premises. The cop would not freeze, for the taxi had enough power to run until tomorrow afternoon sometime, and the heater would keep him comfortable. Satisfied, I walked out front, back to the patrol car.

It was a luxurious tank, built for speed and reliability, yet not without such comforts as a small refrigerator in the dash for keeping something cold to drink, a little circular heating plate for warming cold coffee. I got down on the floor of the front seat and searched for the wires leading to the communications box to the right of the steering wheel. I found nine of them and spent twenty minutes tracing their connections before I felt confident enough to rip three of them loose. If I had examined the setup carefully enough, the communications box now lacked a visual pickup. That would make it easier to fool any central headquarters that might want to talk with the officer who should be in the patrol car.

I drew the car over to the charging posts and made certain the battery level was up to the top. When the blue light flashed, I disconnected, jumped behind the wheel and swung out of there, back onto the highway, bound for Cantwell, the park, the cabin, and Him.

For the first forty miles, I held the big car at slightly over a hundred, which was nowhere near its top speed, it being a much swifter vehicle than my auto-taxi on the trip down to Anchorage. I could have used the robot mechanism for even greater speed. The highway was eight lanes wide and equipped with auto-guide for robot vehicles. Somehow, I did not feel safe with a computer driving me in these circumstances: a fugitive running directly into the same forces he was trying to get away from. True, the computer system under the hood could have compensated for the slick roadway much more easily than I, could have maintained a speed probably in excess of fifty percent more than I now traveled. There was one drawback that bothered me enough to keep me from relinquishing the car's control. A robot vehicle is attuned to a "siren" carried on all World Authority police wagons. When said siren wails, all robot vehicles in the immediate vicinity will curb and stop, will lock so that manual control cannot be restored. On the other hand, with me driving, even that slim chance of apprehension would disappear, for I would rather kill myself than submit to an easy catch after all that I had gone through.

I was wrestling with the wheel, barreling wildly along, when the first of the WA troops from Cantwell came roaring toward Anchorage on the wild-goose chase I had initiated. There were two buses of them, robot systems hurtling them along at better than a hundred and forty miles an hour. They shot by on the other side of the medial wall and were gone in the night and the snow. From that point on, I passed another WA vehicle every minute or so. I fancied that by the time I reached Cantwell there would be little or no WA force in evidence.

Two hours later, I parked the patrol car on a backstreet in Cantwell, got out and casually strolled away. When I had turned the corner, I stripped off the uniform jacket, balled it up, and stuffed it under the snow. I found the access highway to the park, slipped into the ditch behind the snowbank alongside it and worked back, following the growing value of the fence post numbers. When I found number 878, I clambered over the fence, dropped to the other side, suddenly aware of how tense I had been. My gut relaxed now, and my body shook violently, as if flinging off the sup-pressed terror that had filled me. I went to the bushes where I had left the sled, uncovered it, dragged it out, and turned it on. Then I was aboard, heading back up the long slopes toward the cabin and its warmth.

Forty minutes later, I brought the sled back through the panel in the wall of the utility shed, coasted it to its parking platform, and shut it down. I was home. Safe. Still free. And with the heat momentarily reflected elsewhere. I closed the twisted shed door, stomped through the driving snow back to the front door, and went inside, stripping away my gear before I could start sweating.

When I was down to my insulated trousers and boots, I walked into the kitchen, found that He was not there. "Hey!" I shouted. "I'm back. It worked."

"Here," He said.

I followed the sound of His voice to the cellar steps. It was somehow different than it had been only six or seven hours ago, thicker, even more difficult to understand. He was halfway down the cellar steps in a painstakingly slow descent, like an elephant trying to negotiate a ladder. He almost filled the narrow stairwell from wall to wall. His head narrowly escaped brushing the ceiling.

"You've grown even more." I said.

“A little.” He did not turn to look at me, but moved down another step. His weight settled, making the steps creak and groan, and His great bulk shimmered and trembled.

“Why are you going down there?” I asked.

“The beef.”

“You need it already?”

“Yes,” He said, taking another step.

“I could have gotten it for you. I could have brought it up in chunks.”

“It's better for me to go down. It's more private here. I can change without upsetting you.”

“The temperature.”

“I won't mind it,” He said. “I can adapt.”

“But the beef is frozen.”

“I can eat it that way,” He said.

I stood there, trying to think of another argument. For some reason, I did not want Him to go into the cellar, to continue His changes down there. I guess I had read too many stories about cellars, about dark rooms under the house where sinister things went on.

“I have to ask you for something now,” He said, interrupting my search for another argument.

“What?”

“Food,” He said. “I am going to need more food, maybe even before morning.”

Down another step. Creak, squeak, groan, moan of wood.

“What kind?” I asked.

“Whatever you can bring back.”

“Okay.” I started to turn.

“Jacob?”

“What?”

“I'm glad it worked. Thanks for the trouble.”

“It's my neck as well as yours,” I said.

He went down another step into the cellar . . .

VII

I went outside with one of Harry's guns and a pocketful of ammunition on the pretense of hunting. True, I was going to hunt. But the chief reason was that I had to get away from Him, gain time to think things out a little more thoroughly than I had up to this point. I am basically a man of intellect, logic, and reason, not a man of violent passions and heroic actions. The most gut-inspired thing I had ever done was to kidnap Him. In fact, it was the *only* gut-inspired thing I had done. Even my relationships with women had been carefully planned intellectual plays with all the acts and scenes tediously considered before the affair started. It was not that I was cold and unfeeling, just that I liked to be sure of what I was getting into before I stuck out something that could be chopped off. Now things were being thrown at me faster than I could duck, and I needed to tote them up and find a sum that made sense.

The old Frankenstein tale kept coming back to me so that I could not think clearly. Mary Shelley be damned! She had written a book that still haunted me and which clashed too closely with my present reality. I knew He was not a beast that strangled little girls. I was not afraid of a great, stitched graveyard monster with a crazy-quilt body of once-dead parts who crept around in the night and looked for victims. But I *was* afraid of whatever the android was becoming. It was something I had not bargained for, something I might not be able to accept. Was the final change going to be that of the ugly caterpillar into the lovely, colorful butterfly—or was it going to be a strange reversal wherein the butterfly reverted into an ugly, stinging worm? Whatever, it was definitely more werewolfian than any writer of weird fiction had ever envisioned.

Yet He assured me so sincerely that these changes were necessary so that He might use His powers

to help mankind. Did Dr. Frankenstein's demon whisper sweet words in his ear too, promises of wonderful things to come? No! Wrong train of thought, Jacob Kennelmen. I believed Him. Despite the horrid mutation He had become, I still put credence in His words, still trusted Him as I had trusted no man since Harry. Suddenly, I laughed out loud at my comparison, for the android was not even a man! I was placing my trust in an artificially-cultured mass of tissues and organs that had been made—thanks to a science apparently better than God's—superior to men. So be it. If I could not trust a being superior to Man, then it must follow that Man, being morally and intellectually lesser, was even, more untrustworthy. No, I had to stick with Him. I had promised Him that much. If He turned on me and devoured me to feed His great need for energy, then it would be as if the angels themselves had double-crossed me. Which was a distinct possibility, considering all of Man's holy books reported the fickleness of angels, but a possibility that I would not bother myself with.

Having irrevocably committed myself to a course of action, I felt greatly relieved. I am like that. I despise sitting on a tight rope. If I can't reach the other side safely, I would rather leap off and to hell with it. I was still afraid, but the anxiety over whether I was going to do the right or wrong thing drained away like the last of a filthy flood and left me purged. I unslung the rifle from my shoulder, loaded it, slammed the breech shut, and seriously set out for elk.

I found more wolves instead. Nasty looking fellows.

I didn't know whether it was the same pack that He and I had fought off the previous night or whether it was a different bunch. I heard their howls before I saw them, lonesome and penetrating, animal and yet some-how human in tone. I had a heavy gun with me now, plus the narcodart pistol, and I was feeling braver than I really had any right to. I topped a hill that gave me a clear view down the length of a small valley that ran for approximately a mile before a crossrun of foot-hills broke it off. A hundred yards down that valley, a pack of eight wolves were worrying something they had killed. I could tell from the racket they were making that they had eaten their fill and were now merely showing off for the benefit of any other beast in the neighborhood, also playing a game with the tattered carcass, tearing it from each other and running a few steps with it. After a few minutes of this, they left the dead thing, turned as a group, and wandered up the valley toward me.

I dropped to the ground and flattened myself as much as I could, blending into the scenery. If they spotted me before I wanted them to, it would ruin my hunting plans—and might even get a little sticky when they charged. Eight of them coming at full tilt would make a formidable wall of teeth and claws.

The wind was blowing my way, away from the wolves. I knew they wouldn't scent me. They broke into a lope for a few seconds, slowed and ambled again. When they were no more than a hundred feet from me, I aimed at the center of the lead demon's skull and slowly squeezed the trigger.

Wham!

The blast slammed around the hilly countryside and mushroomed back at me with the force of a dozen heavy cannons. The wolf's head shattered, and he was flung backwards six feet where he rolled over in the snow, leaking blood and dead, beyond question. The rest of the pack turned tail and ran down the valley until the darkness swallowed them. When we had fought them off with pin-guns, there had been no noise; it was the powerful rifle's retort that had scared them off this time. Indeed, that blast had been louder than I had expected. When it came, it startled me as much as it did them. I waited a few minutes until I heard one of the wolves howl at the sky. I knew, if I lay still, they would come back. And wolves were easier to carry home than elk.

Ten minutes passed before the first of the pack sneaked back along the edge of the ravine, trying to conceal himself in the scanty vegetation there, slinking, visibly trembling, but still full of the desire and the ability to kill. I would not have seen him but for a barren spot through which he had to pass. I caught the dark movement out of the corner of my eye and turned to watch him. I left him alone. Timidly, he moved opposite the body of his former brother and approached the corpse, sniffing it all over and casting wary glances in all directions as if he sensed the presence of the force that had dealt the death blow. He raised his head and smelled the wind, but my scent was being carried the wrong way. He howled.

Shortly, his friends came to join him, prancing a little and trying to look brave.

I raised the rifle and sighted on the largest of the group, then had a better idea. Quietly, I put the rifle

down and took out my narcodart pistol. It was smaller, and I had to remove even the thin gloves I was wearing to be able to handle it right. I leveled it at the group, swept them from left to right as I depressed the trigger. All were hit. I swept back again, just to make certain. Some of them tried to run but got only a few feet when the drugs affected them, sent them tumbling into the snow, legs akimbo.

I put the pistol away and walked down to the sleeping demons. They lay with their mouths open, their teeth bare and wet with saliva. They smelled of the dead meat they had eaten. Raising the rifle, I shot two of them and decided to let the others go. Making live flesh into dead flesh did not appeal to me. I wanted to do as little of it as possible.

With cord from my pack, I tied the three dead wolves together and dragged them back to the cabin. The three together outweighed me, and it was not an easy job. I thought, too late now, that I should have brought the magnetic sled at least part of the way. Fortunately, the snow packed in their coats and turned to ice under the influence of their dissipating body heat so that they formed a sort of sled of their own that glided across the spots the wind had made bare and across the places where there was a heavy crust.

When I got back to the cabin, I stacked the wolves on the porch and went inside. I opened the cellar door and flipped on the light which He had not bothered with. I went down the first two steps when His voice came from below, hollow and strange, His voice, and yet not remotely His voice, much different than it had been an hour and a half ago. "Jacob, stay where you are," He said.

He meant it.

I stopped, looking down toward the bottom. The stairs came into one end of the cellar, and it was impossible to see anything of the basement room if you stood at the top of them. "What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing wrong," He said.

"Then I'm coming down."

"No! I'm not—not pleasant to look at," He said. "There has been a major change within the last hour. You had best stay up there."

The voice was something like a seventy-eight r.p.m. recording being played at forty-five, though it was intelligible and still carried enough of His former tones to let me know it was definitely Him. "I think I can take it," I said, starting down again.

"No!"

It was such a definite negative that I stopped on the fourth step, then turned and went to the top landing again. I was shaking all over. Scenes from the old horror story wound through my mind despite my earlier proclamation. Bolts in the neck . . . A series of heavy stitches across the forehead . . . malevolent eyes, eyes of a dead man . . .

"The changes," I said. "What—"

"It became necessary to adapt my circulatory system to my newer form," He said. It was eerie talking to Him and not being able to see Him. My mind conjured up worse apparitions, I was sure, than the one He must truly have possessed at that point. "It could not support the tissue I was making. I restructured it into a triple pump with external as well as internal vessels."

I sat down on the top step because I did not trust myself to remain standing. "I see," I said, seeing nothing. I have this complex about seeming stupid. It comes from having lived with Harry Leach for so many years. He would explain something to me, something so complex that only a team of specialists could fully understand it, and then he would say, "See?" And if I said no, he sulked and slunk around looking for simpler language to put it in, inevitably putting it so simply as to embarrass both of us. He never inferred that I was not as swift as he, but the aura of his frustration made me feel somehow inadequate. It was years and years, until I was finished with interning and had gained some confidence as a full-fledged doctor working on my own, that I came to understand myself in this respect, this threatening inferiority complex. I understand it now. I still can't shake it.

He went on. "And my eyes were insufficient. I did away with those. Other systems are more efficient. A great number of organs—Jacob, in short, I am not human—not even android—any longer. Not even remotely."

Frankenstein!

Nonsense! Or was it?

For a time, we honored silence. It was the old inferiority thing again as I groped about for some understanding, some interpretation that would present my mind's eye with a coherent theory-picture. It was hard, sweaty work, even though it was totally mental. Finally, I said, "What good are you like this? Are you even mobile?"

"No. Too much tissue."

"If you're not mobile," I said, "They'll get you in a few days. Sooner or later, they'll find out we crossed them, and they'll come here and find you waiting for them like a plastic duck in a shooting gallery."

"No," He said confidently. His voice was still garbled and strange. "I can never die, Jacob."

"Invulnerability now? Are you certain it will hold up even to nuclear weapons? They'll use limited atomics, I should think, if there is no other way to get to you. They hated you that much. And they will hate you more when they see whatever it is you have come to be. And when they fully understand that you think you can give men unlimited Me spans."

It was laughter, I think, that rolled up from that cold cellar. At least, it was as close as He could come to making the sound of mirth now that He had forsaken human form. Instead of conveying good humor, however, it left me uneasy and with a nagging desire to keep looking over my shoulder. "I'm not invulnerable, Jacob. I am not, you see, the immovable object. I am the irresistible force."

"I'm afraid you've lost me," I said.

"No mind."

Silence a minute.

"Did you bring food?" He asked.

"Three wolves."

"Throw them down. I'll get them when you have gone. You'll have to do some more work for me. The beef is almost finished. I'll need more than three wolves."

"How much more?"

"As much as you can bring me, Jacob."

"I had better go hunting now while I'm a little fresh so that I can sleep later," I said.

"Jacob?"

"Yes?"

"Don't give up on me, Jacob. Keep your faith a little longer. Not much longer. One more day, Jacob. Things are moving faster than I had expected. Faster and faster all the time."

I got up and went out for the wolves. I threw them down the steps one at a time. Each landed with a sickening plop and bled on the floor. I closed the door and stood in the living room, listening. A few seconds passed, then I heard a heavy, rapid breathing sound, a wet slithering, and a short series of deep, guttural sounds of joy. Then silence. I got more shells from the gun cabinet, drank a cup of coffee, and went outside again, looking for something else to kill . . .

VIII

Dry, bullet-like flakes of snow blew in sheets across the wintry landscape. The wind had picked up a bit and was punctuated by stiff gusts that almost rocked me off my feet. The clouds were so low that they seemed to pick up the glitter of them and reflect it yet again.

I was feeling terribly alone, and the desolation of the blizzard did not help to relieve my spirits any. I have always been what some people call a loner, one of those types who seldom find a deep need for the companionship of other people. Oh, there is Harry, of course. It is hard to imagine what the world would be like without Harry and his pot gut, his rather rank little cigars, his bushy eyebrows raised in surprise or lowered in consternation when he had to re-explain something to me. Harry was a fixture of the reality of this world, a familiar rock formation that would always exist. There had been women, too. There had

been many women, really, but only two that counted. Yes, Jake Kennelmen had been in love twice, the loner him-self. The first time had been with Jenny, blonde and thin with breasts like apples stuffed beneath her blouse, all out-thrusting and ripe. Cool Jenny with all of her books, her Salinger and Heller books, everything else that was resurrected avant-garde. Why I loved her, I don't know, though there was more to her than the hip, suave, cool, beautiful exterior. There was a basic tenderness to her, an animal warmth, a place to go and find sympathy and understanding after a journey on rough seas. And she had left me. Who wants a gangling, somewhat skinny, tousle-haired, long-faced physician when you can swing with any man you want? A good question. It must have occurred to Jenny. One night she was there, the next morning gone. And there had been Kim with dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, dark brown skin. There had also been the fire . . . The fire and the crisped corpse, the shriveled, charred limbs just two weeks before the wedding. Other than those three, I had no real friends. Now one was gone off with someone else. Another was dead. The third was a couple of thousand miles away in New York City. Right now, I wished I had all three of them with me, all three cuddled against me. I would even have appreciated Harry's cigar smoke in my face.

The android was not really a friend.

He was less than a friend and, perversely, more than a friend. I could not understand Him or any relationship with Him. Our personalities crossed, webbed, and formed something, though what it was remained a mystery insoluble. I concentrated on hunting, trying to dispel some of the gloomy melancholy I was giving myself over to.

I got the magnetic sled from the shed and took it along the row of foothills upon which Harry's cabin perched, drove two miles away. Touring the edge of the tree line, I eventually found a place where the snow was beaten down, and where the ground was blanketed by fresh deer tracks, still uncovered by new snow. Pulling the sled into a nook in the pines, I stopped it, checked my gun and the narcodart pistol, and waited.

Fifteen minutes later, a male elk trotted out of the trees and stood at the brink of open land, sniffing the air and pawing the ground a little. I waited until he had ventured out far enough, then, still sitting strapped in the sled seat, raised the rifle and fired. The shot missed, and the animal leaped forward, startled, and began heaving itself through the snow that came up to its knees. It started down the slope, heading toward another arm of the forest. I dropped the rifle, clutched my pin-gun, and, steering with one hand, took the sled after him.

It was hard going for him. The snow retarded his progress, flew up in his face and blinded him as he ran. I glided past him, fired a burst of pins. But he had seen me going by and had executed a turn to his left.

I went after him, came in on his right flank. He bellowed. I fired.

This time, he went down, twisting his neck, his legs kicking for a moment before he slipped into uncon-sciousness.

I stopped the sled next to him and got out, carrying the rifle now. I placed the barrel against his head, then realized I could not watch what I was doing. I turned my head sideways, pulled the trigger, then put the rifle back on the sled.

He was much too large to load on the sled all at once. I would have to do some butchering before I could move him. I got my knives out of my backpack and knelt to the chore. I needed a meat saw and cursed myself for not thinking of that earlier. I hacked and ripped with the two pieces of cutlery I carried, managed to saw off two large slabs of about forty or fifty pounds each. I loaded them in the back seat of the sled and took them back to the cabin. I tossed them down the steps to the cellar floor, closed the door, and went back for the remainder of the meat. He had not said any-thing, and I did not feel like initiating a conversation.

The trip back to the sight of the killing seemed much longer than two miles. And I could not help thinking about the new Jacob Kennelmen, the slaughterer of animals. When I finally arrived at the butchered elk, I just wanted to get this thing over with as quickly as possible. I jumped out, waded to the bloody meat, and dragged the main mass of it back to the sled. I was almost finished loading it when a bright flashlight swept the sled and me, outlining us against the sparkling snow.

The gun, the heavy rifle, was standing on the seat, its butt against the leatherette, its barrel pointing sky-wards. I grabbed, swung it into my arms, and came around, firing. There was a startled yelp. The light fell into the snow, face down, and was effectively shut off. For a moment, I felt a little exhilaration. Then I stopped to think for the first time in several minutes, and I realized I had just shot a man.

A *man*. Which is different from an elk. Much different.

I stood very still, looking out at the humped form of the body. I prayed that more of them would come out of the trees, that he would prove to be a WA soldier bent on killing me. That would make it self-defense, you see. That would make it, in some small way, pardonable. But he was alone. There were no back-up forces. When all my excuses failed me, I dropped the rifle and started off toward the man I had shot, walking at first, then running, pumping my legs up and down, my lungs afire, snow flowering up around me as I kicked it out of the way.

I fell down beside him and rolled him over. He was not in a uniform. He was a man of forty or forty-five, tall, relatively thin, sporting a gray-black moustache. His mouth was slack now, his eyes closed. Frantically, I searched him and found where the bullet had struck. It was not as bad as I thought. It had lodged in his right thigh. I probed through his uninsulated trousers, could feel no broken bones. He was bleeding freely, but it was not gushing. He was unconscious, evidently, because the force of the impact and the realization that he had been shot had been enough to throw him into a faint—and probably into a state of shock.

Two or three minutes later, I found myself staring out across the snow, daydreaming. Think, Jacob! I yelled at myself. Don't let it crack you up. You've shot a man. You. You've got to face it. And you've got to do something. Fast. If I took him back to the cabin, I could get the bullet out with kitchen utensils if I had to. I could stop the bleeding. Then the shock . . .

The next thing I knew, I was loading him into the second seat of the sled. I looked for a weapon, found he had been carrying none. He probably rented a cabin just like Harry's, a cabin hidden behind this rim of trees, perhaps. He had heard me shooting, had come and had found the elk, had waited to see if I would return. Just a good man trying to catch someone poaching game on government reserves. Now he had a hole in his leg.

I swung into the driver's seat, strapped myself down, and accelerated away down the slope, moving around trees, going much too fast. I was almost to the fence, twenty minutes later, when I realized I was not taking him back to the cabin. I was taking him to the hospital and to hell with being recognized.

But by then my emotions were a bit settled. I began to think more rationally again. I had shot a man. Not fatally. Sure, it was up to me to see that he received good medical care. But it wasn't up to me to jeopardize everything now, not now that we had come this far and achieved this much towards His goal. When I decided what I should do, I felt better. I turned the sled toward the main gate and the chief ranger station.

I stopped the sled five hundred feet away and looked down the road at the building, the windows warmly lighted. Quickly, I undid the straps binding my victim, hefted him more easily than I would have thought possible, and went down the road to the front door of the place. I stood him up against the door, leaning him into it so that he would not fall, then rapped sharply and ran.

Back at the sled, I jumped into the front seat and watched to see what would happen. Several seconds passed, so many that I began to think I would have to go back and knock louder. Then the door opened and my victim fell forward into the arms of a ranger. I swung the sled around, accelerated back up the mountain, broke over the snowbanks and into the open fields, moving fast . . .

The ranger would see the wound. He would get the man to the Cantwell medical center faster than I could, for he would have a jeep. The bullet would come out. The blood would stop. There would be no gangrene. But I had still shot him . . . It was still my moral responsibility. I would never forget it.

I did not want to return to the elk, but I knew I had to. It had fallen off when I was getting the victim in the seat, and He needed that meat.

He . . .

Suddenly, I realized that I could have taken the wounded man to Him and that He could have healed him in moments. The man could have been well, would not have had to suffer this long. I realized that I

had been doing a great deal of gut-thinking these last few hours. If I didn't manage to return to my accustomed logicity, I was going to be in a great deal of trouble. They say the first signs of madness are changes in the most common of thinking patterns. A man who has always been a slow-mover begins flitting about in a great rush. A man who has been friendly withdraws; the loner begins seeking companionship. And the logical man begins letting his emotions rule him . . .

I loaded the elk aboard and took it back to the cabin. I tugged and twisted and heaved at it until I had it to the cellar steps, thrown inside to crash down the steps to the floor. I looked down at the frozen meat and said, "I'm tired." It sounded like someone else's voice, a distant, metallic ringing that was faintly like syllables, like words, but only faintly. It was the sort of voice you hear in a fever dream when demons and gnomes crawl at you. "I just can't do any more."

"That's all right, Jacob," the voice said, even stranger and more ominous than before. "I've almost stopped the metamorphosis. I just need enough calories now to maintain my functions and to provide substance for my productions. I can use the elk for that, plus a little of what I've stored and don't need."

I did not question the word "productions." I was far too tired to bother. I mumbled something, staggered off to bed, and slept until late afternoon, a sleep deep and almost dreamless. Almost. Now and then, I would dream of a huge gun barrel pointed at my head. I would hear the trigger click as it left primary position . . .

When I woke, the snow had stopped falling except for thin, light flakes that struck and melted against the glass. The only sound was a strange noise. I cocked my head and listened for a moment before I was able to identify it: helicopter blades pounding directly over-head . . .

IX

I had been so tired and dejected that I had slept in my clothes, and I wasted no time now in getting to the window. I wiped a thin film of steam from it and pressed my face against the cold pane. But there was nothing to see; I was at a bad vantage point, looking out on the cliffs, most of the sky shielded by tall pines. I went into the living room to the row of windows that stretched across the front of the house. I could see it from there, hanging a hundred feet out from the cabin, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet in the air. It had the giant green letters W-A bent to form a globe painted on its side, the symbol of the World Authority military. It was not a troop transport, however. Only a scout. It swung out and swept along the hill, down to the base, up over a rise, and was gone. Abruptly, it turned and came back, drifting over the house, turning again, going away fast. I knew we had been found. The snow had stopped soon after I had come in the last time. It had not covered my last few sets of footprints.

The sound of chopper blades faded. Died completely.

Our time was up.

I looked out at the snow, at the telltale markings, the ugly crimson stain of the elk's blood, the frozen red puddles. For the first time, I was retchingly nauseated with my killing spree. At the time, it had seemed an urgent assignment. I had plodded through it, shooting, hacking apart, dragging to the cabin, throwing down the cellar stairs, numb from my effort, sapped by cold and exhaustion. And all that had led to a reflex grab for the gun when that man had spotted me with the flashlight.

Before, hunting had always been a sport, a pleasant test of my shooting skills. I had only shot birds, for there is something about a dead bird that carries no guilt. It is not the same as killing a warm rabbit, a soft-skinned elk. A bird is hard: pinions and beak and claws. It is almost not living, almost a mechanical construction. But the slaughter last night had been different, had been directed against other empathy-arousing beasts. It was not like me, not like me at all. I wondered, briefly, whether He had had anything to do with my sudden surge of blood lust.

But that sort of talk could lead me nowhere but back to the Frankenstein theory, and I had outgrown that. Hadn't I? Yes. He was a boon to mankind. A few animal deaths were petty compared to what He would be able to do when He had finished changing and was ready to aid us.

I started toward the cellar, checked myself. There was nothing He could do about the situation, for He was immobile. And perhaps I had been misinterpreting the helicopter. Maybe they didn't suspect. No, I was deluding myself by being optimistic. The wounded man had aroused suspicions. I got the rifle, loaded it, and checked the level of pins in my narcodart pistol. I pulled a chair up to the window and settled down to wait. I had promised Him time to finish whatever He was doing. I would see that He got it.

I tried to set aside thoughts of murder. I tried to see what I would have to do as my duty, nothing more. Duty. Duty. Dutydutydutyduty . . . I ran the word through my mind like a rat in a maze, and it bounced off deadends everywhere it went. Duty. Wasn't it my duty to see that mankind got a chance at immortality? Wasn't it my duty to see that death was stopped, that—perhaps—aging was reversed, that youth, was a right and not a privilege to be eventually taken away by Time? I talked to myself, sitting there by the window. The words sounded hollow; they seemed to strike things in the room, slide to the floor, lying about my feet like cold grease-puddles gone hard. I imagined killing a man, what it would be like. I had almost done it last night. I could do it, I told myself. I could kill a man as long as I did not have to see the corpse at close range. Duty. Murder. Immortality. Death. Duty. Duty.

When the troop transport came an hour and twenty minutes later, my nerves were shot. My hands trembled on the gun, and a tic had developed in my left cheek. The transport settled down two hills below, disgorging forty men in white snowsuits, all armed. I pushed back the curtain, slid the window open, and knocked out the screen with the rifle butt. I waited.

Duty. Murder. Duty.

I sighted on the lead man, wrapped a finger around the trigger, and promptly put the gun down without shooting. I had lost the battle with myself. Or, perhaps, I had won it. After fifteen years of living and breathing the code of a physician, after eight years of practicing that code, I could not fire at the man. The incident last night had been a freak. I had acted by reflex, under pressure. That was not the same as cold-blooded murder. Not the same at all.

The troops were crossing the open space quickly, hunched and running, guns held out to their sides, obviously expecting a bullet in the shoulder or face at any minute. I turned and ran to the cellar door, went down the steps two at a time . . .

“Jacob!”

It was an excuse to go down, and I knew it. There was danger, yes, but I had confronted Him now chiefly because my curiosity needed salving.

“Jacob, you shouldn't have!”

And, truly, maybe I shouldn't have. I stopped and moved back against the wall, unable to speak. He had changed more than I had guessed. I knew that He was not human, but I had not been prepared for this. He filled half the cellar, a great pulsing mass of hideous, veined flesh, reddish-brown in color with patches of black cancer-like cells pocketing Him. He was attached to the walls with pseudopods that bored away into the stone, anchoring Him. To my left, a tangle of fleshy membranes and tubes formed his vocal apparatus. A deformed, overlarge mouth was set in a fold of flesh. There were no teeth in it and no evidence of the rest of His face anywhere around it. It was obviously just for communicating with me. I sensed, without being told, that He no longer consumed His food as a man would, but more like an amoeba, engulfing it whole.

Frankenstein! my mind screamed.

That strange, horrid laughter came again, freezing me even more solidly to the floor. I choked down my terror and concentrated on remembering Him as He had been—and remembering the promises He had made, the promises to help mankind if only I could gain Him some time, time enough. Well, now was the moment when I would discover His true nature and the value of all promises. “They're coming,” I said. “I was going to shoot some of them to hold them up—but I can't.”

“I know,” He said. His voice was one of compassion and friendship. He was silent a moment. The vocal apparatus writhed, enlarged, grew into a many-petaled flower. When He spoke again, it was with His old voice. “I've been meaning to work on that all along,” He said apologetically, referring to the ominous voice He had used before. “Just didn't have the time.”

“What will you do?” I asked.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I leaped, my heart pounding. He laughed.

I turned, expecting the WA police with guns, hand-cuffs, and nasty faces. Instead, I stood looking at an android, an exact copy of Him as He had been back at the laboratory. “It's you!” I managed to say.

“I made it,” He said. “It is a different facet of the same jewel, another me, not just another android. It has all the abilities I have gathered through the steps of my transformation, but has them without making those same transformations itself.”

“But what purpose—”

Frankenstein, Frankenstein!

“To help mankind, as I told you, Jacob. Forget your Frankensteins. Yes, I have known what you've been thinking. Another ability of mine. But I certainly don't hold anything against you. I couldn't even if I should, because I have developed above the level of revenge and vendetta. Jacob, believe me, I only want to help mankind. I can use my powers to liberate each man's brain so that it is one hundred percent operable as is mine. Every man can become a superman.”

“And develop into what you've become?”

“No, no, no. This is only a stage, Jacob, that a few android facets of me will have to undergo in order to produce more androids—a highly sophisticated form of budding. That's how I created this other me. Man will always look like Man, but will now have abilities far beyond anything he ever dreamed of.”

I believed Him now. There was nothing else for me to do. “Then we'll explain it to the police—”

“No, Jacob,” He said. “There will be a long, drawn-out fight before I am accepted by mankind. We have to play for more time.”

“How, for God's sake!” I thought of the advancing troops.

“You'll take this one with you and let them kill him. They'll think they have finished off the menace of the Android-Who-Wouldn't-Take-Orders. That will give me time enough.”

I stood, looking at the android who would die, the part of Him that was to be sacrificed. “One thing,” I said.

“What is that, Jacob?” He could read my mind and find out, but He was being polite and letting me have my speeches.

“What *will* we do for room? You'll not only be making Man nearly immortal, but you'll be flooding the world with replicas of yourself, with Doppelgängers. Where will we put everyone?”

“With his entire intellect at hand, with all of his brain open to use, Man will move out into the stars, Jacob. There are no limits any longer. There is more than enough room, Jacob. I saw to that.”

“*You* saw to it?”

“When I formed it, Jacob. When I created the uni-verse.”

I choked, almost fell. The new android gripped me and grinned His old grin. I looked back to the blob of tissue pulsing before me. “You are trying to say that—”

“You had no idea how unusual my flesh was, did you, Jacob? It's *the* flesh, Jacob. Sorry to break it to you so suddenly, but—as you know—there is so very little time. The soldiers are almost at the front door, by the way. You had better get my other self upstairs and let them kill him. I won't let them do anything to you, Jacob. As soon as things are straightened out here, I'll send one of my selves to you. I'll always be with you.”

I turned and started up the stairs behind the android. My mind was spinning wildly, unable to settle on any orderly thought progression.

“And Jacob,” He said behind me. I turned. “Man will not be *nearly* immortal. He will be *completely* im-mortal. The time has come. There will soon be an end to death.”

We went upstairs into the living room. We walked to the door and threw it open, stepping onto the porch overlooking all that grand scenery. He walked down the steps into the snow, His arms outstretched, and they shot Him. Half a dozen marksmen opened fire. He jerked spasmodically, danced across the white carpet, and crashed to His face, blood pouring out of His body in twenty different places.

I raised my hands and stepped outside. It was Him they wanted to kill. They would take me prisoner

and decide my fate later. Two WA policemen flanked me, cuffed my hands together, and led me across the frozen earth toward the copter on the far hill.

It was not snowing at all now. The wind had ceased to blow.

Once, I looked back at the bloody corpse. He had said there would soon be an end to death. I realized that this could not be called death. Not really. They had merely shot a husk. He lived on in the amoeboid flesh in the old ice cellar. And there would be thousands of other husks shortly. He was with us at last. He. And, of course, His name had always been spelled with a capital letter. He . . . Man was moving out. Man was immortal. The mystery of His flesh wrapped us like a blanket and carried us into the New World.

TWO: *The enemy is self* . . .

X

New York City is a weird conglomeration of old, new and experimental that staggers the mind of any-one who has not lived in a city its size. Harboring approximately eighty-five million souls, it is the second largest metropolis in the world. Size alone would be enough to awe men from urban areas (which comprise sixty percent of North America) where only a few hundred thousand live in small communities, for his neighborhood still supports individual houses (though even there they are beginning to dwindle in number), still has streets open to the air and paved of concrete and macadam, still permits automobiles on roads other than the mammoth freeways. New York City, of course, has none of these things.

All of New York City's inhabitants live in high-rise apartment buildings, some as long as three and four blocks, the newest ones towering to two-hundred stories in some places. You can get a one-bedroom apartment or anything up to eight bedrooms, living room, dining room, two dens, playroom, reception room, two kitchens, and a library. These last suites are few and far between, for even in our Great Democracy, there are just not that many citizens able to shell out four thousand poscreds a month for a place to live. And to buy it—make certain you've just hit the first new oil well in the last ten years, have found a way to triple the life of a car battery between rechargings, or have discovered the answer to the food problem so that all the synthetic meats will taste as juicy and tender as the real thing.

And New York, of course, no longer has conventional streets, and would not allow an automobile into its great, throbbing mass of humanity even if it did. There is just no more room for individual vehicles in a metrop-olis of this size. Imagine eighty-five million people out on the roads of one city, and you'll have some idea of the sort of traffic jam that the city fathers used to have nightmares about before the Renovation.

Renovation . . . That period of the city's history was a landmark not only for the city and the nation, but for the entire world. There was a time when New York City was a part of New York State. During this time, the mayor could get little if any aid from the state government in Albany. The state was glad to take sales tax and state income tax from the metropolis' citizens, but was reluctant to pay back on an equal basis. Finally, when the situation became critical, when the city had an unbearable population of fifty-seven million, the mayor and the council arranged to bring before the people of the city a proposal that they seek to become another state. This was shortly before World Authority began to function as a valid international organization. The vote was cast and returned in favor of the proposal. The mayor proceeded to declare the city independent of the state.

The Governor, a rather stupid man who had been elected because of his appearance and his family name, who had been nominated for his faithful party work for thirty years, and who had been allowed into party poli-tics in the first place simply because his family was a large contributor to candidate funds, thought the city's proclamation could be laughed off. He cut off all state funds to the city and sat back to wait them out.

He never finished waiting. The city leveled its own income tax, now that it did not have to worry about state levies at a percentage just above what they would need to start renovating the metropolis, and just below what the citizens would accept without revolution. There followed a ten-year building program wherein the city was restructured to accommodate its people. Space previously given over to streets was done away with. Instead, a series of underground tubes, much faster and more extensive than the subways, was installed. The existing buildings were connected with new sections of new buildings, until most of the city was one struc-ture. Then, shoved through these structures, other transportation facilities were constructed, especially the computer-channeled Bubble Drops that webbed the city with hundreds of thousands of tubeways in which single-passenger plastic bubbles were bulleted along by compressed air cartridges slung under them. The interior of each of the tubeways was perhaps two feet

wider than necessary to accept the bubbles. Projecting from the walls were thousands of soft wire cilia per square foot. When a capsule shot by these, the pressure they exerted on the cilia helped the computer to keep track of the exact position of all capsules in the network. With the new subways, the Bubble Drops, the ever-present high-speed elevators, the conveyor-belts pedways that connected the city on twelve different levels, and the buildings grown together into one structure tens of miles square and as much as a mile and a half high, New York City became an anthill of sorts, a colony closed off from the sun, a maze of corridors and rooms and pedways and tubes. But it survived. And survived so well that the Renovation was used as a pattern for other troubled cities in other parts of the world. The food problem for the ballooning population had been solved long ago through the culture vats for synthe-meats and the hydroponics farms that produced huge quantities of fat vegetables. Now, at last, the problem of living space and big-city transportation had been licked. As long as the population could be maintained at its present point, the world would survive.

After the WA boys arrested me in Cantwell, outside Harry's cabin, I was taken to the great city, landed by helicopter on the roof of one of the highest sectors of the city. They hustled me onto the roof, keeping their guns in their hands as if I were some mad killer, some psychotic who had poisoned the water supply or planted a bomb in a community meeting cellar. We walked across the tarmac to a small extension of one of the building's elevator shafts, signaled for the cab, and got in when it arrived. We dropped so fast that my stomach tried to crawl up my throat. We went down and down, until I knew that we had gone below the ground floor and under the surface, perhaps as deep as fifteen or twenty floors under ground level.

We got out of the elevator and stepped into a tunnel-like corridor lighted by inset blue fluorescents, spotlessly clean, decorated in blue and white tile. Every so often, the continuity of the floor-tile pattern would be broken by large letters—WA—formed out of green tile and bent to form a globe. We walked perhaps a block until we came to a widening of the passage. Here, a man sat at a broad desk, surrounded by panels of electronic instruments and a huge board with fifty television screens off to his right. Each of the screens was no more than three inches by three inches, and each had a different picture on it, though the details of the various scenes were almost too small to decipher. We stopped before this desk and waited.

The man at the desk was pudgy and had a second chin that puffed out farther than his first. His arms were like large, ready-to-burst sausages as they swept over the controls on the desk. Oddly, his head was luxuriant with black-gray hair that was obviously the result of Volper Stimulants to correct baldness. If he did not mind being heavy, why did he mind being bald? He did not look up at us immediately, but flipped another switch and turned to his right in his swivel chair. One of the three-inch screens on the big board moved out from the wall on an extensor arm, glided four feet, right up to his face, and stopped. The man examined the scene carefully. I could see what it was now: a cell. Each of those screens represented a cell in a maximum security prison, and the men in those cells were almost constantly being observed. When the clerk was satisfied with the behavior of the prisoner he was watching, he directed the extensor arm back, and the screen settled into its niche in the board. At last, he turned to us and said, "Yes?"

"Kennelmen," the armed guard on my right said.

The jailer's eyebrows raised an inch.

"You want us to stay with him?" the guard asked.

"No," the jailer said. "Just wait until I get my Clancy hooked up to him. He won't bother me then."

I had heard about the Clancy used by WA police, though I had never had occasion to see one in use-let alone being attached to one. The Clancy is a robot, only as large as a beachball, spherical. Extending from apposite halves of its ball-shaped body are two strong, steel-nickle cable tentacles that terminate in handcuffs of a peculiar design. The cuffs are really heavier loops of the cable with a structured elasticity that allows them to conform to whatever wrist-size they are expected to encompass. Yet, the Clancy is more than a sophisticated set of cuffs. It floats before the prisoner on its anti-grav plate, directly out from his chest, three or four feet away (they had the same problem with anti-grav plates as they did with Kesey's magnetic sleds: the plates can only be developed to a limited size,

eighteen inches by eighteen inches. From then on, the field they generate is so erratic as to be totally unsafe. But the Clancy is the right size and can make good use of the anti-grav mechanisms). The cop can tell the Clancy where to take the prisoner, and the Clancy obeys, dragging its keep behind. If the prisoner gets unruly, the Clancy has a very efficient method of settling him down. The cuffs are contracted around the wrists, tighter and tighter, until the pain convinces the scoundrel that he really doesn't mind being arrested. If that doesn't work, the cables can transmit a stunning shock from the Clancy's battery. In short, the Clancy is the policeman's best friend.

Why a name like Clancy? Well, it was this Irish cop that originally came up with the idea of using the grav-plates for such a purpose, patented the idea, and named it after himself. Probably the only cop in the city's history to immortalize himself.

The jailer worked over his switches and dials, then turned to the wall behind him. A moment later, a section of the wall slid up, the blue Clancy sphere floated out, its cable tentacles dangling to either side like thick lanks of greasy hair. The jailer directed it, then leaned back and watched as it set about doing its duty.

I tensed as the machine came toward me, moving silently, evenly, its single sight receptor nodule (set at the top and able to scan in all directions) shimmering a pretty green. The tentacles snaked out, the loop of cuffs opened at the end so that the cuff looked like two fingers or talons. The talons slipped around my right hand and tightened, even though I tried to pull away. I offered my left hand without battle. Still following the jailer's instructions, the Clancy led me to the sliding door in the wall and opened it by emitting an audible beep. Beyond, the tunnel-like corridor continued. With the Clancy dragging me along, we went through the door into the WA prison. The door slid shut behind.

Once, I tried to work against the machine. I set my heels and refused to move. It tugged at me, harder and harder, then jerked so suddenly that I tipped forward, staggered, could not regain my balance, and went down on my shoulder on the hard floor. The Clancy floated above, tilted a bit so that its sight nodule could scan me. Its tentacles were stretched to the limit. It tried to pull me up, but could not manage the task. Then I felt the tightening of the cuffs. My hands began to grow numb and took on a bluish coloration. When it grew painful enough, I gave up this childishness and stood. I cooperated from then on.

It led me down the tunnel a good way, then through a second door; this, a dilating circle that cycled open at another electronic signal and admitted us to the chamber beyond. This was the prison proper, the area of the cells. Along each wall were dilating doors of heavy metal, each about twenty feet apart. The Clancy led me to the sixth door on the right, dilated it with another beep, and took me inside.

The cell was spacious, well-lighted, and comfortably furnished. Indeed, I was a little surprised at the lavish-ness of it. There was a network comscreen for news and entertainment, a chute from the library where stat copies of articles or reprints of novel tapes would be delivered on request. The toilet was enclosed and at the far right corner. When the standard melodrama relates a picture of the average modern prison as a hell-hole full of rats, lice, and sadistic jailers, it is giving the viewer a representation of the standard prison of the Fifties, maybe even through the Seventies and early Eighties. But prison reforms have been drastic in the last couple of decades, and prisoners are no longer treated as animals.

The Clancy led me to the cot, backed me into it until I understood that I was to sit. I plopped backward, and was pleased with the springiness, the softness of what had looked like only a mediocre bed. The cuffs opened, fell away to hang at the Clancy's side. It floated back to the dilated door, went through, letting the portal spiral shut in its wake.

Seconds later, the central mail delivery chute next to the library receptacle made a buzzing sound, and something dropped into the tray beneath it. I got up and went to the wall, picked the small, blue square of plastic out of the tray. It was a penitentiary credit card with my name and number. The jailer had sub-mitted my name to the central city banks and had discovered, within a minute or so, that I was a good credit risk and had plenty of cards already. Upon discovering this, he had punched the prison computer to issue me a card for my stay in jail. With it, I could order any-thing over the phone (which was set next to the wall of the bathroom) and have it delivered by mail. The bill would go to my wife (if I had one, which I did not), to my lawyer (if a professional firm handled all my credit payments, which

Alton-Boskone and Fenner did for me), or to my bank, where, the moment I had been checked into my cell, my accounts had been frozen by government order. In the end, the prisoner paid, but at least he lived well enough during his confinement.

That day, my lawyer, Leonard Fenner, came to visit me in my cell. Using pressure in the right places, he managed to bring Harry with him. We sat and talked for more than two hours, about inconsequentialities at first, then, increasingly about my predicament. It would not be so bad, Leonard asserted; if they could only charge me with kidnapping Him. First of all, the an-droid was not considered a citizen, and, therefore, was a piece of property belonging to the State. Kidnapping could not be upheld in court; it was only a matter of grand larceny. But I had not just stolen Him. I had assaulted the WA representative who had recognized us that night in the Cantwell Port lot. I had killed game on a government preserve. I had assaulted a police officer in Anchorage at that recharging station. I had illegally converted a taxi from auto-to-manual and then had stolen it I had stolen a police car belonging to the Alaskan state patrol. And, most serious of all, I shot North American Supreme Court Justice Charles Parnel in the leg. The WA was charging me with intent to kill.

“Intent to kill?” Harry screeche'd. “Why, that's absurd! This boy couldn't kill anyone if—”

“Harry,” I said, “let Leonard spell the story out. No matter what we would like, we have to face things as they're going to be.”

“It's ridiculous!” Harry huffed, but he kept quiet.

I was not so certain that the charge was ridiculous. What had I been trying to do when I grabbed that rifle and whirled? I had fired into the light. I must have known there would be someone behind it I must also have known that the bullet would hurt or kill whoever was there. Couldn't that be termed intent to kill? Even if it was a gut reaction, something I had done without thinking.

“Here's what we aren't worried about,” Leonard said. “One, they will never be able to uphold a charge of grand larceny. First of all, they were going to destroy the android anyway. It is not as if you stole something precious. And they will not dare tell in public what the android did to get itself condemned.”

“You know?” I asked, surprised.

“I told him,” Harry said. “He ought to know all the circumstances if he's to do his best for you. To hell with security.”

“Go on,” I said to Fenner.

“Anyway,” he went on, “grand larceny will fall through. Maybe petty or nuisance theft, but that usually only requires a double reimbursement to the victim by the victimizer. Used to be punishable by a prison sen-tence, but not under WA law. Next, they will charge you with assaulting the WA rep in the taxi lot at Cantwell. Tell me the situation.”

I told him.

“He did not draw first?” my crafty little attorney queried.

“No.”

“Think. Did he go for a gun?”

“Yes, but I shot him before—”

“Then he went for a gun?”

“Yes.”

Fenner chuckled. “Did he start for it before you pulled your own?”

“I can't remember,” I said.

“You're right,” he said. “Of course he drew first. And you had no way of knowing it was not a contraband weapon held by a non-WA Citizen. So much for that charge. Now, killing game on a government preserve only allows for a fine. Hellishly stiff. But maybe we can get it reduced since we can prove you didn't eat any of it. You didn't, did you?”

“No. But how did you—”

“My guess,” Harry said. “If the android was continu-ing to evolve, I thought He might find it essential to have large quantities of energy foods. I knew you weren't the type to kill for the fun of it.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Hell's bells, men,” Fenner said, “will you let your shyster lawyer lay out his news and views?”

“Go ahead, Leo,” Harry said.

“Gee, thanks,” Leonard said. He continued pacing across the floor to the toilet, then back to the bunk where we sat. He punctuated all his words with his hands, waving them, slamming them together, slapping them against his hips. “Next, we have the problem of the stolen cars. You are going to admit to stealing both of them. There is no way around it, no way to disguise what you did. But we can argue that, since both vehicles were government property, you should be dealt with less severely than you would be for stealing private property. The case of *Halderbon vs. World Authority* sets a precedent for such an argument, whether it will get us anywhere or not.”

“Now we're to the bad part,” I said.

“You've got it right,” Leonard said, pacing faster, slapping both hands into both hips in time to his step. “In the case of the Anchorage cop, you're still a little in the clear. We can easily prove you did not initiate the assault with intent to kill. After all, you tied him up, left the heat on so he would not freeze. That's simple assault, and we can handle that. But the big problem comes with Justice Parnel—who you so unkindly shot in the leg. What in good hell were you doing, boy?”

I recounted the experience, went over it time and again from the moment Parnel had turned the light on me, until I had left him in the arms of the ranger at the main ranger station.

“You did see that he got medical attention,” Leonard said. “We can argue that this proves you did not intend to kill. But they are going to fight like hell to keep the bigger charge, 'cause it's their only way to strike back at you for all you've done. I'm going to talk to Parnel tomorrow. I'll try to talk him into dropping the charges to simple assault. He, being the victim, can do that whether WA likes it or not.”

Then they went, leaving me alone in the cell that night, the next day, the next night, and all of the following morning. But at noon on my third day in prison, as I was trying to concentrate on the melodic intricacies of a Lennon-extrapolated symphony that was playing in my wall stereo, Fenner returned with my bail papers, ushered me out to the desk where I signed another set of yellow sheets. From there, a WA clerk led us out of the prison complex, onto the roof of the building to the same landing pad that I had been brought in on, days earlier.

“Wait a minute,” I said, grabbing Fenner by the arm and towing him to the wall at the edge of the roof, away from the landing pad where there was a busy rush of arriving and departing officers. “What the devil is going on? I thought I was in serious straits. They don't issue bail to people in the maximum security cells.”

“You were put into maximum security only because the WA wanted to make a big issue of your apprehension. All of your crimes areailable except assault with intent to kill. But I have talked with Justice Parnel.”

“And he reduced the charge?”

“Not only that. He withdrew his complaint altogether.”

“What?”

“He dropped the charges.”

“I shoot a man, send him to the hospital for a week or two, and he drops the charges?” I shook my head. “What was his price?”

“You don't buy the Justice Parnel!” Fenner said.

“Then who is your mutual relationship?”

“You insinuate that I deal illegally to get my clients lighter sentences?” His tone of voice had changed. It bordered on anger now, was tainted with a sour, ugly streak.

“Okay,” I said. “It was done honestly. But, Leonard, how in hell *did* you do it?”

He smiled and was his old, jovial self again. “I had a long talk with the Justice. I know his political leanings. I researched him well before I went to see him. I convinced him, without directly perjuring myself, that you had the same leanings and that your stealing the android that had been condemned to destruction was a manifestation of your political beliefs. I told him that I could not reveal all the circumstances behind the decision to destroy the android and behind your decision to rescue Him, but Justice Parnel was speaking warmly of you when I departed. He understood your ideals behind the theft,

understood you thought he was a WA trooper about to shoot you when you returned fire. It was enough, I guess.” He shrugged his shoulders.

“You’re fantastic,” I told him.

“Never. Just thorough. Now, can I drop you some-place in my copter?”

“At the *Cul-de-sac*. Grid 40I. You know it?”

“Best French restaurant in town,” he said. “Of course, I know it. We lawyers are not necessarily slobs.”

At the *Cul-de-sac*, the *maitre d'* gave me a corner table in a dark section of the main room and left me to the top-heavy, young blonde waitress who gave me a menu, requested my wine order, asked if I wanted a drink of any sort, and went away to get my Whiskey Sour while I perused the menu. All in all, it was a delightful meal, and I managed not to think about anything but the taste of the food—and whether or not the young blonde’s blouse-bulging attributes were real or silicone-induced. I had no compunction against marrying a girl with chemically-created allurements, so long as they were indistinguishable from the real thing. As far as I could tell, these were. I played a game with myself, trying to decide whether or not I should ask her to marry me. I listed what I could see of her faults and her virtues. In the end, I decided to come back in a day or two and look the merchandise over again.

Outside, in the corridor, I boarded a pedwalk, one of the faster ones, and rode it a block and a half to a Bubble Drop station. There, I got off, moved through the turnstile, and onto the drop platform. The destination keyboard slid quickly down in front of me. I keyed my address in less than five seconds, then walked forward and sat down in the hard plastic seat that had slid in front of me. Attached to the bottom of the seat were the compressed air cylinders. A moment later, the chair moved into the tunnel, through the bubbling foyer where it moved over a discharge vent that blew the plastic around me in a teardrop. The plastic hardened instantly, and I shot forward into the sucking wind of the tunnel, pulled by the constant currents kept in operation there and also propelled by my own cylinders. At the hundreds of crossroads where tube slashed through tube, I sped by Bubbles going opposite ways, sped across the intersections inches ahead of them, saw others zip behind me, missing me by millimeters. The computer routed perfectly, but it was still a bit difficult to sit and watch the journey in a Bubble Drop tubeway.

So I thought. I had been trying not to think, but there was no way to deny what was going through my mind. I had spent hours on the concept in the prison, and I had still reached no conclusions. The android was God. He had said so. But why would He choose to come to Earth in such a laborious manner? And what was He planning to do here? Was this the Second Coming? Or wasn’t He the Christian God? Was He the Buddhist version? The Jewish? The Hindu? Or, and this seemed most likely, was He not like any version of God that Man subscribed to?

I knew the last must be correct. We had never understood the nature of God. Our religions, all our religions, with all their extensive theories, doctrines and dogmas, all of them were totally wrong. But I am one who does not believe in criticizing something until you can replace it with something better. And I could not formulate any theories on the nature of this God of ours. His nature was a mystery beyond my immediate comprehension.

I worried about what was going to happen to the world when He began to bring His changes. Was the fabric of our reality going to change so drastically that many of us would not learn to fit into it? No, He had said we would be changed intellectually, our minds opened to full awareness. What a world of geniuses would be like was a toss-up question. In theory, it sounded quite lovely. In practice, it might be intolerable. A society of cold, thinking machines was not what I considered Utopia.

Before I knew it, I was shunted out of the main tubeways and into an exit tunnel. The Bubble swept through the exit foyer, crossing a suction vent where the molecules of the Bubble were instantly broken down, and the powdery residue slid down through the grating to be reconstructed into another Bubble, and another after that, and so on, for as long as the Bubble Drop system was operational. The chair stopped on a ramp; I stood, and walked off into the corridor.

I caught an elevator up, rose 104 floors to my level and debarked. In this apartment level, there were no pedways, for this was a relatively exclusive area. I walked along the thick carpeting to the door to my apartment, placed my thumb on the identification lock, and waited for the computer in the Yale system to

decide I was one of those authorized to enter. A moment later, the door began to slide back. As I stepped through, two bullets smashed in the frame of the door and showered me with chips of wood. I fell, rolled inside, and made a vocal order to close the door.

It slid shut just as the killer on the other side slammed into it. I got shakily to my feet, trying to figure out what I should do. I was almost in a state of shock, for the killer I had seen when I rolled into the apartment was a dead ringer for the android in His humanoid form . . .

XI

I went to the nearest easy chair and collapsed in it. My mind was in a state of pandemonium, trying to rationalize what I had seen. It did not help any when the recurring word *Frankenstein* whispered across the front of my brain like a cold, dry wind. At first, I tried to tell myself that it was just chance resemblance—that a thief had come up to this floor, had waited for someone to come so that he might rob them. But why would a thief bother coming up this far? It would be just that much more difficult to get out, for he would have to use the elevator to go down enough levels to reach a Bubble Drop station. The elevator could be stopped as soon as I turned in the alarm, and there was an alarm call-box not ten feet away. And if he had planned on robbing me, why shoot to kill? Why not just take the money and run? No, I was only deluding myself. There was nothing so simple as chance resemblance here. That man in the corridor had been one of His android selves, and it had been trying to kill me.

Now, why? Why . . .

The only reason I could find was that, perhaps, He thought I would tell the WA people where He was, that He had not been killed after all. But that was senseless. Surely, He would know that I would keep faith, would not turn Him in. Even if I had wanted to, surely the time to have done it would have been while I was in jail and without much hope. I could have done it then to make my sentence easier. But to kill me now was pointless.

Besides, He was God. And God did not kill without some sort of divine reason. Wasn't that right? Or was it? I reminded myself that He was not the sort of God we had envisioned. He differed physically. Why not men-tally? Why not a God who is sadistic? And maybe He had been lying to me. Who said that God did not lie? But what in the hell was He trying to do? Why kill me? What possible purpose could be served? I was right back where I started, nothing solved, but a great deal of apprehension spread on where there had not been any before.

Then I heard the noise. I had thought that He had gone away when the door closed Him out. Now I could hear Him forcing His weight against the heavy panel in an effort to either snap the lock or throw the door off its sliding track.

I stood up, suddenly frantic.

The door squeaked. I looked for a weapon. The door rattled as the bottom coasters slipped out of their grooves.

There was no weapon.

The door lifted, started bending inward. The wheels on the upper track snapped, popped, and scraped out of their track. The door swung inward.

I ran for the bedroom, slid that portal shut behind me, and thumbed the lock on it. A slug snapped into the door, came through, leaving a hole as big as a quarter near the top, and cracking the plastic of the portal, until it looked like a spider web. That would go down in a second. One solid push, and the pieces would fall inward, and He would be on top of me.

I turned, started for the bathroom, and remembered the guard-bot alarm that would bring a mechanical policeman from the storage vault at the far end of this floor. I ran to the bed, depressed the button in the wall, then hurried into the bathroom as He struck the bed-room door behind me. I slammed this final barrier, locked it, and looked around for something to push against it. There was nothing. Everything in the bath was bolted down. I sat on the commode to the left of the door, out of line of any

bullets, and waited for the guard-bot, hoping it would make it in time.

I could hear Him in the bedroom. The door to the living room had given in with a crash, and He was through, only one plastic door away from me. Then He was against the bathroom door, and His voice came to me through the plastic, faint, husky, a dry whisper. "Jacob . . . Jacob, are you in there?"

"What do you want?" I asked.

"You," He said.

"But why?"

"Jacob. . . ."

"Help!" I shouted as loud as I could. It was useless, of course. The apartments in that building were almost perfectly soundproof. And the most isolated room of all was the bath. Still, I shouted, because I felt a need to vocalize my terror. There was something in His voice, in the harsh, ugly tones of His whisper that I had never heard before. It was, I fancied, madness. He spoke like a psychotic, His words couched in a madman's cadences.

I do not know how long I shouted. When I stopped, my voice hoarse, I was aware of a rapping on the door. For a moment, I almost laughed at the absurdity of His knocking now, after blasting His way this far. Then I heard the voice, which must have been calling me for some time. "Dr. Kennelmen," it said. It was not a whisper, but a healthy male baritone. "This is your guard-bot. You called me. I have come in response. Dr. Kennelmen. This is your guard-bot. You called me. I have come—"

I unlocked the door, pushed it open, and stepped into the bedroom. The guard-bot, a slightly more complex form of the Clancy, hovered a few feet away, its pin-gun barrels uncapped and pointing out of the roundness of its underside. "You called me," it said. "I have come. Is anything wrong?"

"Come with me," I said, leading the way through the apartment. I searched all the rooms and closets until I was satisfied that He had gone. I had expected Him to stay, for I was certain it would be nothing for Him to handle the guard-bot. But the place was empty.

"Is there anything you want?" the guard-bot asked, the words coming out of its speaker grid with a faint whistling sound.

"Stay right here," I said. "I'm packing to leave. If you see or hear anyone approaching, summon me at once." And I left him in the living room while I stuffed clothes and toiletries into an overnight case. He walked me to the elevator and rode to the roof with me, waited while I got a helicar. When I lifted off into the night sky over New York City, he turned and floated back into the lift, sent it down with an electric signal.

The computer under the dash of the helicar asked me my roof destination. When I could not think of anything to say, the central traffic control computer housed in the old Empire State Building, cut in, demanded immediate notification of destination, and warned that I would be set down and my helicar privileges canceled if I tried to sabotage the traffic control pattern. I asked for a random flight out of the City, over the Atlantic. The central computer cut out, and my car's own brain began devouring information sent it by central and plotting a random course to slip between the lines of regular traffic.

When you have a few hundred thousand vehicles in the air over one city—from passenger liners to military craft to helicars to drop capsules being spit out of intercontinental rocket bellies—you need a highly complex regulator like the central traffic control computer in eighty-one floors of the Empire State. The other floors of the building house the offices and work areas of the technicians and staff who care for that same computer. One accident in the air can be like a domino collapse. If two craft on a top level of traffic collide, they may take down a dozen or two other pieces of air traffic before they smash into the roofs below.

For a full twenty minutes, we wove in and out of the pattern, swinging to all points of the compass, rising and going back down to make way for commercial and private craft already assigned to that position. Other craft slid by us on all sides, sometimes as close as five or ten feet, the drivers inside perfectly visible in the glow of their cabin lights. Then we were into clearer air, over the Atlantic, beyond the most used airlines, even out past the holding patterns for transoceanic flights. I could lean against the window and look down on the sea below, where medium-sized waves curled off toward the continent, capped with white foam, other-wise black as oil. Above, there was a heavy cloud layer from which a

light snow filtered. The wipers clicked on and thumped back and forth across the windscreen.

I asked the dash computer if it would be possible to go above the clouds since they were so low, and it obliged, because it could work out the maneuver with-out disturbing the traffic pattern. Suddenly, the clouds were below me, and the almost-full moon lay cold and serene in the black sky overhead.

“What do you do when God is out to get you?” I asked aloud.

“Pardon?” the computer said.

“Ignore me,” I said.

“That is impossible, sir. My pickups function con-stantly and are beyond my control.”

“That must get boring,” I said, “listening to all your passengers' problems.”

“On the contrary,” the helicar said, “that is my only contact with the outside world.”

I knew then that the central traffic computer had tapped this cab again to see if things were functioning properly. The simple brain and simple voice-tapes of the helicar would not have been up to this sort of banter.

“I'll try not to talk aloud,” I said.

“Very well.”

And there was silence again.

But what could you do when the omniscient was watching? When the omnipotent was about to make His move. But was He omniscient? No, that was doubt-ful. He had not shown any signs of knowing all that was going on and would go on. He was not omnipotent either, or He would not have been frightened off by the guard-bot. What had He said there in Harry's cabin? He had denied that He was the immovable object, but had stated that He was the irresistible force. And that summed Him up quite well. Parts of Him could be killed. He could be temporarily defeated. But, in the end, He would win because He could tap the flow of life and return to fight again and again in other copies of Himself. So the answer to the question, “What can you do when God is out to get you,” was—“Nothing.”

No. Wait. There was one thing.

“Kill Him,” I said.

“Who?” the computer asked.

“Sorry. Thinking aloud.”

“I don't mind. Passengers are my only—”

“Link to the outside,” I finished for it. Then we were both quiet again.

Kill Him. Yes, it was possible. Maybe. Perhaps. Possibly. I would have to go back to Cantwell, back to the mother body in the cellar of Harry's cabin. I would have to go well enough armed to take Him out quickly and completely, so He had no chance to heal Himself. I would have to get near enough without arousing His suspicions, or without letting Him kill me. How? Well, I could think about that. I could work on it and come up with something.

Why? Why would I want to kill Him when I had gone to all that trouble to help Him? Why kill Him after I knew that He was God, and, therefore, the great-est force for good in the universe. Or was He? Who could state with assurance that this God was a bene-volent one? Suddenly, I could see one instance in which He might wish to see me dead. Suppose He was not benevolent. Suppose He was not even God, as He claimed. Suppose, instead, He was what He logically appeared to be: a superior species, the first of its kind, able to reproduce in hours and at will. And suppose He would be more pleased in a world composed of his own kind. Suppose all those things, and you could not help but be a little frightened. If He were about to initiate a war against mankind, it would be quite sensible to destroy me before continuing, for I was the only one who knew His sanctuary, the only one who even parti-ally understood what had happened to Him in the last several days.

We dipped through the clouds as a huge airliner roared into our traffic lane. The helicar bumped about in the turbulence of the other craft's jets, then came up out of the clouds once more and leveled off, running out to sea.

So what could I do? Contact World Authority? Bring in the nukes and blast Cantwell and Harry's cabin to hell-and-gone? At first, that seemed like the most intelli-gent thing to do. Then the longer I thought about it, the more stupid it appeared. How many android selves would He have circulating by

this time? Enough, surely, to keep track of things to the extent that He would notice any sudden troop maneuvers, and be able to extrapolate their meaning. I reminded myself that each of His android selves had a rubber face that could be restructured in seconds. He could impersonate anyone. If He were out for world domination, He could have already moved His plastic-faded androids into WA positions of authority. He very likely had. And He would know of any proposed bombing strike. And even if the mother body were destroyed, any one of the android selves could metamorphose into another mother body. The only chance of working against Him, then, was to work in total secrecy. And that ruled out the WA.

I would have to go after the mother body itself. Maybe I could get into the cellar and talk with Him. He might let me in before killing me, just to please whatever sadistic streaks there were in Him. I could, at least, find out how many android selves there were, how many other facets of Him we would have to hunt down.

Problem: He can read my mind. So He knows when I come in the cellar that I have a means of destroying Him. And He will not let me do it. And even if I manage to kill Him, I will very likely kill myself without being able to transmit information about the other android selves. In effect, I would not hurt Him at all.

"I must make a turn," the dash computer said. "If we continue out to sea, we will enter another traffic pattern not controlled by the New York central."

"Okay," I said.

We turned, gracefully, easily, moving back.

"Could we go under the clouds now?" I asked.

"Certainly."

We went down. Below the cover, the snow had picked up as I thought it might have. The wipers came back on, though I would have preferred to let the snow cover the glass, and there was no driver to require a clear view.

I had reached a dead end. There was no way to stop Him. All that was left was to wait for Him to kill me, or give up trying and launch His attack on civilization with, perhaps, a hundred mother bodies producing warriors.

I had never been so depressed in my life. Not only was the situation hopeless, but I had helped to make it so. And, to make my position worse, I could not share the problem with anyone else without making them as paranoid and depressed as I. There was no help anywhere.

"Take me to the Manhattan Colossus," I said to the computer. The Colossus was the best hotel in the city, but I felt as if I wanted to splurge tonight.

"Destination acknowledged," the computer said.

The snow beat at us, swept by the car, whirled and eddied around the corners of the windscreen.

We settled on the roof of the Colossus, and I fumbled my credit card out of my wallet, slipped it in the payment slot. When the central computer checked with the main banking computer for the city and discovered my card was good, it popped it back out to me and opened the doors so I could get out. I stepped onto the tarmac, carrying my overnight case, and had to fend off three human bellboys who wanted to heft it for me. I don't mind giving tips, but I despise being treated like a cripple, or a weakling who can't manage a single case without assistance. I went to the elevator, dropped down to the first reception desk on the 109th floor, and checked in under my own name.

In my room, I stripped, showered, and fell into bed. I did not know whether I could sleep or not. How does a man sleep when he knows the world may crash down around him at any moment? Somehow, I drifted to the very edge of awareness, ready to slip away into darkness, when the room phone rang. I reached out and picked it up.

"Yes?" I said sleepily.

"Jacob . . ."

It was His voice. I hung up.

A moment later, the phone rang again. I could not help myself. I answered it.

"Jacob, I know where you are," He said. "I know just exactly where you are."

XII

His face glared up at me from the screen of the phone. He was grinning. It was not the warm, winning grin that I had seen so many times before, but a twisted, unnatural thing that made me feel cold and afraid. He winked at me, then reached out to a panel below His screen and dropped His receiver into the cradle. The picture blinked off. The call was completed. Numb, I hung up too.

I lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, and the patterns of holes in the acoustical tile. It was possible, if you thought hard enough, to see all sorts of things in those patterns. I could make out the face of an ape in one square. Another, tilted at a slightly different angle, revealed a pair of eyes, staring wide, with a subtle look of uncertainty. Suddenly, I shoved to the edge of the bed and got up. He knew where I was, dammit. He would be coming for me. There was nothing to do but get out of there. Sure, I could not run from Him forever. He would find me sooner or later. But no man likes to die. And, I thought, if I could just gain some time, I might think of something, something to do to get to Him. Maybe it was a false hope, a dream, but it was one I would have to hold on to if I were to keep my sanity . . .

I dressed quickly, threw everything back into my suitcase, and stopped before the door into the corridor, trying to outline a course of action before I plunged on. He had evidently followed my helicar and had known I checked into the Colossus. How He found my room number was a mystery, but it could be worked out by someone determined enough. To lose Him, I would have to change vehicles again and again, move like the pea in that old walnut-shell con-game, move and move until He had no idea where I was.

And then what? I thought. Sit in some sleazy hotel, waiting for the world to end. Watching the streets through my windows, trying to see if the battles between men and androids had begun- yet? That did not particularly excite me. Running was necessary if I were to stay alive to think. But, in the end, what good would thinking do? I had already thought it out, and I had already decided He was unreachable. All right, then. I would lose the android self that now tailed me, then take a trip to Cantwell, go back up to Harry's cabin. I might not be able to do a thing, but it was my only chance.

I stepped into the hallway, expecting a spatter of bullets, hurried to the elevator, dropped. Too fast. By the time we were down ninety floors, my internal parts were frantically trying to crawl back to their proper locations.

Next, I went to the Bubble Drop station on that floor, punched out a midtown destination, and stepped forward, sat down on the chair, and was moving into the departure foyer where a Bubble would be sprayed up around me by the automatic equipment. Another cap-sule was just leaving the foyer and entering the tube-ways. I slipped in behind it, and barreled after it. A quarter of a mile later, I became aware of the fact that the rider of the other Bubble had turned around in the seat and was looking back. He waved at me. It was the android . . .

He must have been waiting outside my room when I was planning what to do. Or perhaps He had been near me at some other point on my trip to the Bubble Drop station. Somewhere along the line, He had been close enough to read my mind, to pick out my plans. But why hadn't He killed me when He was close? Why wait until now and do it this way? But if He was a sadist, if He was a deranged, antagonistic creature rather than God, He would act just like this. He would be enjoying my terror as we barreled down the tubeways, both of us going for the same departure point. He would know that I would realize He would be waiting for me when I came out of the exit foyer. Waiting to kill me . . .

He wanted to terrorize me. He was succeeding.

I looked behind my Bubble in the wild hope that there was someone behind me who was coming to the same station; but there was only empty space back there. I turned around again, saw that He was still waving. I could not bring myself to wave back, for I could see that twisted grin, that leer that He had shown me over the phone in my hotel room. We had as much as three or four minutes before the high-speed Bubble would pull into the station I had punched for. This gave me no more than two minutes

to think of something.

We whizzed through an intersection, and another Bubble whined past my back end on the cross-tube, missing me by inches. If only, I thought, it would have struck me. The computer would have shut down these tubeways and sent help of some sort. And from that impossible wish grew my idea. What if I were to wreck myself? The computer would stop everything just as thoroughly as if another vehicle had struck me.

Perhaps a minute left.

He was still grinning.

I lifted my suitcase, picked a spot on the side of the Bubble to my left, and smashed the hard edge of the case into the shell. There was a resounding *thwack!* that stung my ears, but the shell held. I drew the case back as far as I could, and let go with as much force as I could muster. The shell cracked, webbed with a hundred lines radiating out from the impact point. The Bubble kept moving. Frantically, I swung, again and again. The last blow made a hole in the shell and spread the cracks out until they covered most of the Bubble. I swung once more, was rewarded with a horrendous crashing sound, as the pieces of the shell fell away to both sides.

The Bubble had shielded me from the compressed-air cylinders under the chair, for the cylinders had been slung so that the plastic was blown above them. Now I could reach them. With the wind whistling over me, pulling my hair straight back behind me, I brought the edge of my battered suitcase down on the cylinders, knocking them awry. I struck again, knocked them off altogether. The seat, *sans* Bubble and propulsion system, wobbled, collided with a wall, and turned over, spilling me onto the floor of the shaft, my face slashed by the soft wires, the rest of my body protected by my clothes.

His capsule bulleted away, almost out of sight before the computer shut down the air suction in the tunnel, and directed all Bubbles to stop-position through remote control shut-off in their propulsion systems.

“Please stay where you are. If you have been involved in an accident within the tubeways, please remain stationary.” The computer's voice was heavy, even, reassuring. “Assistance is already on the way to the point of the accident. Remain where you are.”

Disregarding the computer, I grabbed my suitcase and started back along the tunnel, away from His cap-sule. The going was not easy, for the floor, as well as the walls and ceiling, projected thousands of soft wires which were usually used to monitor the Bubble capsules. I walked carefully, pressing the flat of my foot against the sides of them, and forcing them down before me. As I walked, the ones I had trod down sprang erect again behind. Now and then, one of them would slip out from under my foot, and slide painfully up my pants leg, gouging my shins and calves. I could feel my socks getting damp with blood.

Behind, I heard His Bubble capsule shattering. He had probably formed His hands into mallets. I tried to hurry.

“Someone,” the computer said, its voice echoing through the tubeways, “is moving through the tubeways without a capsule. I can pinpoint your location through my sensor cilia. Please sit and wait for the ambulance. It will be there momentarily.”

I turned into a branching tubeway that was blocked by a capsule at rest. I moved up beside it, pressed my body sideways against the wires projecting from the wall. I did not do that maneuver smoothly enough, and some of the cilia punched painfully into my back. I tried again, pressed them flat, and slid around the shell of the Bubble. The man inside looked out at me, wide-eyed, and said something that I couldn't hear through the plastic Bubble. I did not ask him to repeat it, but moved in front of his capsule, and hurried, as well as I could, down the tunnel toward the bulk of another car, a hundred feet ahead.

“I detect,” the computer said, perhaps a bit more loudly than before, “two distinct movements within the tubeways. There are two individuals moving without benefit of Bubbles. I direct both to cease and desist, and await the arrival of the ambulance.”

I stumbled and fell, managed to throw the suitcase up in front of my chest and groin. I wire-punctured my shoulder, and sent a hot pain through my flesh, but I was otherwise unscathed. I stood, blessing my

suitcase, and continued toward the next vehicle blocking the tunnel.

“Hey!”

I pretended I did not hear.

“Jacob!”

I could not stop myself. I looked over my shoulder. He was a hundred feet behind, back at the last capsule. He was waving at me. I turned, squeezed against the wires, and moved between the tube wall and the shell of the Bubble. On the other side, I moved more quickly than before, oblivious to what the stray wires were doing to my ankles and calves.

“This is a command to stop,” the computer said.

I kept moving, almost a slow run now, and I was certain He had not stopped following me.

“Halt!” the computer boomed. “From preliminary scan of my sensory cilia, neither of you seemed to be wounded. From that same information scan, it is apparent the second of you is in pursuit of the first.”

I ran.

“You are both guilty of sabotaging the public transportation system, a crime which is punishable by not less than one and not more than five years in prison.”

This was not going to help my case on the other charges I had sustained in my flight with Him to Cantwell. Here was Jacob Kennelmen, probably the most timid, law-abiding citizen in North America, and he was involved in his seventh crime in less than two weeks. Leonard Fenner would have one helluva time explaining to the judge and jury just how basically good a man I was. Even if I did escape Him and this entire mess were settled somehow, I would end up spending some seventy-odd years in a WA prison.

Three hundred feet beyond the second capsule, there was a third blocking the way. As I was squeezing around it, trying to smile at the matronly woman inside who cringed against the far wall, He shouted to me from the other car a hundred yards back. “Jacob!”

“Go to Hell,” I said.

“Look what I can do, Jacob.”

As I squeezed, I looked back through the wires that partially cut off my vision. He had taken off His shoes, and had formed His feet into large, gray blocks. He trod the wires down without care. His feet were iron-hard, and He could walk almost as fast here as He could on a concrete corridor floor. He moved quickly after me.

I tore around the car, slashing shallow grooves in my left cheek. Ahead, there was a crossway, I moved to it, plunged into the tunnel to my right. Ahead, seven or eight feet, there was another motionless Bubble waiting for the system to become operational again. I slid by it, snagging my clothes on the wires, my hands bleeding now. On the other side, I found another Bubble car only a dozen feet ahead of the last. I moved around it. There was a kid inside, maybe ten or eleven-years-old. He watched me with obvious fascination until I had reached the front of his Bubble.

“Hey!” he called loudly through the plastic. “You crazy?”

“No!” I said, nodding my head. “Being chased.”

He looked absolutely elated.

I stood there, panting, and realized I did not have very much more strength in me—not nearly enough to keep up this pace more than another five minutes. As soon as I slowed down, He would gain, and gain fast, if He was not already gaining now on His hard, re-formed feet. Ahead lay another Bubble car, only nine feet away. I was not even sure I could make that. The thought of squeezing around yet another Bubble with the wires gouging me was not at all pleasant. Then I had the idea. It came to me from sheer desperation.

“The authorities have been alerted and will arrive with the ambulance,” the computer said. “You are urged to stop and make things easier on yourself. The sentence for sabotaging the public transportation system is no less than one year and—”

I paid no attention to the machine-mind's ramblings. I moved around to the opposite side of the kid's Bubble and dropped to the floor, hunched at the corner next to the tube wall, nestled back in among the wires. Hopefully, when He squeezed by on the other side, He would not see me through the plastic. I

should be shielded by the kid's body. Then, when He went on, I could double-back and be rid of Him.

"What are you doing?" the kid asked.

"It's a trick," I said. "Will you help me?"

"Who's the good guy?" he asked.

"The one coming wants to kill me. He is not a policeman."

The kid nodded.

Just then, I heard him coming up behind the kid's capsule, the wires singing as he leaped through them. I tried to huddle even deeper into the wires, did not mind that they prodded me mercilessly. On the other side of the Bubble, He pressed between the plastic and the wall. I could see His dark form.

"Hey!" the kid said, "you chasing a fellow with a suitcase?"

"That's right," He said.

My heart came up into my throat. That rotten kid, I thought.

Then the kid said, "He went up past that Bubble."

He nodded, kept going, did not look back. I slipped past the kid's Bubble, looked in at him and mouthed, "Thanks."

I think he blushed.

I moved back to the crossways and started to turn back to my smashed vehicle when I remembered the police and the ambulance would be there, or soon arriving. They would take me into custody, and I would never get out. I would not be able to go to Cantwell. Even the slim chance I had against Him would be destroyed. I walked into another side passage instead, and plodded along it, moving more slowly than I had when He had been hot on my tail. Now that I could relax a little, I was aware of the pain in my ankles, hands and face. I would have to get out of the system and find someplace to buy bandages and antiseptics.

"You are approaching an exit foyer," the computer said. "Do not proceed further, or I will have to initiate a deterrent until police can arrive at the same foyer."

I kept moving. It was good to know that a foyer lay ahead and that I would reach it before any police could be there. Indeed, I could see the circular-membrane hatch at the end of the tubeway. I walked faster. A few more cuts would not bother me.

Then the computer's deterrent was thrown at me. The wires in that area made perfect conductors for a localized shock. The electricity bounced through me, standing my hair on-end, then flushed away. I had gone down, ramming a wire into my hand. I plucked it free and stood.

"Sabotaging the public transportation system is punishable by no less than one year and no more than—" the computer began.

I ran now, the wires whining and waving about me, gouging me, hurting me. Twenty feet from the diaphragm, another shock hit me. I managed to keep on my feet, but I could barely see. My eyes were watering and stinging, and I was certain I had burst a small vessel on my right eyeball. I felt cold inside my stomach, cold down through my intestines. My bones ached and spurted fire through my body. I put my head down, hugged my suitcase against my chest with both hands in the event I fell forward, and plunged on.

The damned computer shocked me again.

"Halt!" it demanded. "You will not be bothered if you come to a full stop."

I had not fallen this time either. Indeed, the electricity had seemed to shoot up through me and keep me erect. Another shock came, but none of the wires were touching me anywhere except on the bottoms of my feet. I could feel the power humming beneath my shoes, but it did not reach me. Then I was through the membrane, into the exit foyer.

"You are directed to halt," the computer said. It began repeating the sentence for sabotaging the public transportation system.

I moved out of the foyer and into the station platform. There was an open corridor beyond, lined with shops on both sides, a great number of people on the pedways. But no police. I walked out, trying to look as natural as possible, but not succeeding too well, considering my slashed face, torn clothes and limp (my feet felt as if something wicked and sharp-toothed had been chewing on them). I was on the

first pedway, the slowest outer one, half a block from the Bubble Drop station and trying to get into the innermost pedway, the other slow-moving belt, when the WA police siren wailed out ahead of me . . .

XIII

Coming along the emergency belt on the other side of the street, half a dozen WA police searched the belts for anyone who looked suspicious. They must also be looking for anyone bleeding and in torn clothes, for they would certainly know what a stroll through the tubeways would do to a man. They kept their hands on their black holsters, ready to draw and use their narcodart weapons if they spotted their quarry. Every-one around me began chattering about the excitement and trying to see what the police were after. It would only be a few seconds before the cops were even with me—and would see me—and even if they overlooked me, the people on the pedwalks would notice my blood and ripped clothes.

I stopped waiting for an opening, and shoved off the slow belt, onto the next one, almost knocking a dignified gray-haired man on his behind. The next belt was relatively clear, being the fastest one. I crossed to it, felt the jolt of a few extra miles an hour, then made the last crossing to the slower, innermost belt that passed the fronts of the stores. When I came to a drugstore, I got off and went through the swinging glass door.

The clerk was highly solicitous when I told him that some fool had changed pedways without looking, and had knocked me off into the narrow paved sections between opposing rows of belts. He helped me gather what I needed, and showed me the rest room where I could perform first aid on myself. I locked the door of the bathroom, put the lid down on the commode, and sat down to take stock of my injuries. I took off my shoes and socks, winced at the cuts on my legs. None of them were particularly deep, though they all trickled a little blood. I took a gauze pad from the large box I had bought and swabbed away the blood with alcohol from the (also large) bottle I had purchased. Then I coated them with a clotting and antiseptic agent, put my shoes back on. The socks were a loss. I treated my palm wound and the scratches on my hand, cleaned and swabbed my face. When I was finished, I did not look so bad at all, except for my clothes. And the pain was considerably lessened by the antiseptics and the clotting agents.

I deposited all my medicinal purchases in the toilet waste can and went back outside on the pedways. I remained on the slowest of the belts until I found a clothing store, where I purchased a new outfit and changed in their dressing room.

After that, there was only one more stop. I found a sporting-goods center and purchased another arctic suit. I emptied everything else out of my suitcase into a public trash receptacle, and packed in the insulated clothing.

Thirty minutes later, I was aboard a high-altitude rocket that would take me over Anchorage, Alaska. The journey might have been nostalgic, this heading to Alaska in the dead of night, this feeling of being chased permeating everything about me, everything I thought and did. But all I had to do was think of Him in the cellar of Harry's cabin, think of the warped grin on the face of the android who had tried to kill me and had chased me through the tubeways. Then all nostalgia drained swiftly away. And was replaced with anger. And fear . . .

I went down into Anchorage in a drop capsule, rented a car, and drove up the familiar freeway to Cantwell. At the Port, I found a concession area where I could rent a magnetic sled. In the small shopping plaza under-ground, I bought a pair of heavy-duty wire clippers in a variety store. I loaded the sled and clippers in the car and drove out to the park. The gate was closed, of course, but I had never allowed that to stop me before. Parking the car along the fence near post number 878, I changed into my arctic clothes and boots, then unloaded the sled and struggled with it to the fence. I clipped at the thick wire for perhaps twenty minutes, finally made a hole wide enough, and shoved the sled through. I clambered after it, turned on its magnetic field, and boarded it, strapping myself in. In half an hour, forty

minutes at the most, I would be at the cabin. I trembled, thought about turning back, then pressed down on the accelerator and shot forward to-ward the trees.

I handled the sled like a veteran now. That wild, careening trip with the wounded Justice Parnel had broken my fear into pieces, smashed those pieces to powder, and blew them away. I was reckless, but in a calculating way. Once, I almost missed a rise that came on me suddenly, almost tipped the sled over, but I pulled back on the wheel at the last possible second, and we glided up and over it without catastrophe.

I was a mile from Harry's cabin, passing some cabins on the first level, when it happened. As I was coming up a long slope, the unlighted cabin off to my right, a white-tailed deer pranced over the brow of the hill and stood looking around. He had not spotted me, but I was certain he would in seconds. Instead, he died in an instant while I watched. Out of the ground, on all sides of him, a shimmering pink-tan sheath of jelly-like sub-stance rose into the air like tentacles of some sea beast. The deer jumped, squealed, and tried to run. The ten-tacles collapsed on him, dragging him down into the snow. He thumped about for a few moments, trying to shake this hoary sheath, and was still at last.

Not tentacles, I thought—pseudopods. Like the extensions of His new form that anchored Him to the walls in Harry's basement.

I stopped the sled twenty feet from the dead deer. I could see the amoeba-like flesh wriggling over the animal, breaking it down and devouring it. Could He have grown this large? Could He have extended Himself out of the cellar to the distance of a mile and more? And if He had extended Himself through the earth of this part of the park, wouldn't He be certain to know that I was on my way?

Again, I wanted to turn around. I had no weapons but a pin gun and a heavy projectile rifle, both purchased at that sporting-goods store. They were pitiful weapons indeed, when you thought of facing something like Him with them. Before I could give in to the part of me that wished to run, I slammed down on the accelerator and moved forward, around the deer that was all but dissolved by now. Five minutes later. I stopped in front of the cabin and looked at the dark windows and wondered what was behind them, watching me . . .

I took the two guns out of the sled, prepared them both for firing, and went up the front porch steps. There was no use being quiet, I decided. I pushed open the door, which had never been relocked after our capture, and went into the dark livingroom.

“You can put the guns down, Jacob,” He said from the cellar. “I badly need your help.”

XIV

I stood still, wondering whether I should try charging into the cellar. But for what purpose? I dropped the guns and walked to the cellar steps. “What help?” I asked.

“There have been complications.”

I looked down into the darkness, into the cold, ice-walled hole which was His home, and I tried to keep from thinking about the shapeless thing that rested down there. “What complications?” I asked.

“Come down. We have much to talk about, the two of us. Come down here where we can do it more easily.”

“No,” I said.

“What?” He sounded perplexed, as if He did not know what I was talking about, could not fathom why I would refuse Him.

“Why did you try to kill me?” I asked.

“It was not me.”

“I saw you,” I said. “You knew me by name. You even read my mind.”

“That is what I want to talk to you about. Come down.”

“You'll kill me.”

“And I could just as easily kill you where you are standing,” He said. “There would be no necessity

to have you in the cellar to kill you. Now quit this nonsense and come down here. You know damn well I would not harm you.”

It did not make sense. If it had not been Him, who had it been in the tubeways? I had seen the creature chasing me, had seen the face—and the feet that had changed into tough plates to trod down the sensory cilia. That had not been my imagination. I had the cuts and bruises to prove it had all really happened. Yet, somehow, and for some unknown reason, I believed Him now. He would not kill me. Surely, He was as good as He said. I opened the cellar door and went down the steps, turning the light on when I passed the switch.

He was in the same form as before, perhaps a bit larger. Although He had no eyes, but a prismatic ball set in a fold of flesh, I knew He was watching me intently. Although there were no apparent ears on His body, I knew He was listening. I stopped before Him, half expecting a death blow from a pseudopod, half hoping there really was some explanation for His recent behavior. “How did you know about my being chased? You say it wasn't you, and yet—”

“You're upset, Jacob. You're not thinking. I read your mind when you pulled up outside, of course.”

“That doesn't matter,” I said. “Let's get on with it. If that wasn't you back there in the tubeways, and if that wasn't you that shot at me and broke into my apartment, who was it?”

He hesitated.

“It was you, wasn't it,” I said.

“Not exactly.”

“Then tell me, damn it!”

“I'm trying to think how best to phrase it,” He said.

I waited.

Later He said, “It was the Devil, Jacob.”

“The Devil?” He was joking with me, I thought. He was leading me on, laughing quietly at me, getting me primed for the moment when He would strike me down.

“I am not going to strike you down!” He said, slightly exasperated.

“And I'm supposed to take you seriously when you tell me it is the Devil that has been chasing me, the Devil in your form?”

“Wait,” He said. He was quiet for a time, then spoke again, His tone designed to be even more soothing and convincing than usual. “I have made a mistake. I have been couching all of my explanations in terms that you would more easily understand. I implied that I was your God, thus letting you fall back on your standard religious theories. You are what—Christian? Jewish?”

“My father was Jewish, my mother Christian. I was raised by a Christian. If I am anything—and sometimes I have my doubts—I am a Christian. But I still don't see what you are getting at.”

“Forget what I said about being God. Forget what I said about your being chased by the Devil.”

“Forgotten.”

“I'll try to explain this in more realistic terms, with less emotional and romantic trappings than religious theories possess. First, it is true that I am the creature—or a facet of the creature—that created this universe, one of many universes. The *why* for this, I cannot convey to you. It is on an aesthetic level that you could not begin to conceive of. I wrought the matter of the uni-verse, set into motion the patterns and laws and pro-cesses that formed the solar systems. I did not take a direct hand in the evolution of life, for the aesthetic values of creation are in the monumental forces of uni-verse-making, not in the creation of life, which will happen anyway if you do a good job on the making of the universe itself.”

“You are saying that you are merely another living creature—admittedly on a different plane of existence—and that you created a universe where there was, pre-viously, nothing.”

“Not just void,” He corrected me. “Chaos. The basic forces were there. I had but to enlarge upon them and order them.”

“I'll accept that much,” I said. “I had already accepted the fact that you were God. This is only a variation.”

I sat down on the bottom cellar step, a little less apprehensive, but still not happy. “But why did you come to us? You've been content, you say, to let life develop by itself. You said you weren't interested in

the evolu-tion of life, but only in the artistic value of ordering and setting the universe into motion.”

“I didn't say I wasn't interested. I just said that the evolution of life is secondary to the larger and more beautiful work of the universe *in toto*. Believe me, Jacob, there is much more of beauty in the singing of the galaxies, in the patterns of multi-galactic revolution and rotation, than there can ever be in the life of a single creature, even a creature with the intelligence of your species. But your species, after all, is a part of my creation. To ignore it would be tantamount to not caring about the exactness of my creation. For example, a painter may do a hundred-foot mural, a thing of grand scale. But that does not mean that he will not be exasperated if only one square inch of the canvas is ineptly done. He will, instead, be more concerned with that single badly done square inch than with the entire hundreds of square feet that are done well.”

I thought a moment. “You are saying, then, that man, my species, is that flaw on your great canvas, that one square inch that somehow did not turn out right.”

“No,” He said. “You are not even equal to one- square inch in this universe. There are many races that have evolved into flawed species. When I am finished here, I will go to other places. Indeed, other facets of me are working on other races at this very moment. Re-member, what you see before you is only a small frag-ment of me, less than one millionth of my sum per-sonality and power.”

He was not leading me on. What He was saying should have struck a false note, should have seemed unreal, but it was delivered with such assurance and in such a level tone that I knew what He said was per-fectly true. “But why enter our world in the form of the android? That seems so roundabout.”

“Try to picture me, Jacob. I am not just big, not just huge, but vast. Only part of my intellect, part of my life power, can be introduced into your world at once. Otherwise, the balance of this arm of the universe would be upset. And even this minor part of me is not easily insinuated into your world. It must assume a living presence, yet it would not be possible to contain it in a human child. The nerves, the brain cells, would burn out if I tried to house my life power in human flesh.”

“But the android is suitable?”

“Because I can shape it,” He said. “I can restructure it like putty. The android's flesh is quite different, as you know, from real flesh. I can adapt its nervous system to contain my life energy. It was the only door into your world that I could find.”

“And so you came to us through the android. Why?”

“As I have said before, to help you. You have not evolved along standard lines. Most species, at your race's age, would be able to control its body, its aging. Most species would be immortal and nearly invulner-able. I have come to see that you develop as you should have.”

“And when you have finished that?”

“I will leave. Your section of the creation will be finished. There will be no reason to remain. The painter, after having perfected his mural, does not spend the rest of his life returning to it each day to check how well the paints are weathering. I do not insinuate that this analogy of me to a painter is fully accurate, but it is the closest explanation I can give you.”

“One more thing, then,” I said.

“The Devil we spoke of earlier, the android that has come to harm you.”

“Yes.”

“I have explained to you,” He said, “that I am not actually a God as you would think of one, but a living creature, as yourself, who is much, much more complex than you will ever be, and who lives on a higher plane of existence than you can ever reach. As with any living creature, my personality is compounded of various strains, from good and kindness to what you would term wickedness and evil. Any given part of my person-ality is composed of equal parts of all these various characteristics. The day following your arrest, the “evil” part of this tiny facet of me, enclosed in this android mother body, split from the good part, and entered the second android self I made. Before I realized what had happened, he was gone and out of my reach.”

“Jekyll and Hyde,” I said.

“Yes. I read that back at the laboratory. It is much like the infamous Hyde, this other android that is now out of my control.”

“What could I do?” I asked. I could not quite see how I, a mere mortal, could assist a creature of His dimensions. It was like a man asking a polywog for help against a stampeding herd of cattle.

“The android that attempted to kill you,” He said, “was most likely manufactured by the Hyde android that I created and which escaped from here three days ago. I believe the Hyde android found a place, perhaps nearby, where it could hide and develop into a mother body capable of creating more Hyde androids. The first one, it sent to kill you—or at least to harass you into making an attempt to return here and destroy me. That last is likely.”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. I was thinking about the pseudopods that had come out of the earth and had engulfed that white-tailed deer. I explained what I had seen, and He waited for me to finish, though He must have read my mind ahead of me and must have known what I would say.

“I have a similar method of trapping game,” He said. “But it does not extend nearly as far as a mile. I believe you have found our Hyde.”

“Now what?”

“I can send this other self I have created to destroy the Hyde mother body. Unfortunately, I have taken time to extend my game-catching network and have not created more than this single android. And the Hyde android, of course, which we are seeking.”

“I’ll accompany it,” I said. “I might not be much help, but at least there will be two of us.”

“Thank you, Jacob.”

“Do we start now?” I asked.

“Now,” the mother body said.

The android walked up the stairs with me to where I had dropped the guns. I picked them up now. “How will we kill it?” I asked.

“I have better ways than any weapons you could find, Jacob,” He said. “Let’s go.”

We went out into the cold and the whipping snow . . .

XV

I should have felt some tremendous elation, I suppose. I had found out that He was, after all, everything that He claimed to be, that He did want to help mankind, that He was going to be a great benefit to us. I was standing on the threshold of a revolution, the likes of which the world had never before seen, and I could not summon up enough excitement to make a dog wag its tail. Perhaps it was because, in showing me what wonders lay ahead for Man, He had also shown me that Man was, in essence, a very small portion of things, a piece of a painting by a being so far superior, so much his intellectual master, that he could never hope to understand the real basis upon which the universe turned. One day, Man would reach the end of his explorations, and there would be nowhere else to go. This alone would not be so bad, but he would also have to cope with the understanding that there was more beyond what he knew, more than he could ever hope to grasp. The quitting would not be what hurt Man. It would be the knowing that he had quit before absolutely everything had been conquered.

The only emotion I felt as we boarded the sled was fear.

Hyde, after all, was every bit as formidable as the good part of His personality. A very deadly creature . . .

The android climbed in behind me, did not bother buckling himself in. After all, He was not prone to fatal accidents, not with a healing system that would patch up a torn artery or vein in seconds. I switched on the field, felt the sudden bouyancy as it hummed to life. The wheel trembled under my hands—or was it my hands that trembled? I put the sled in gear, tramped on the accelerator, and took it down the snowy slope, around the sharper rises, toward the edge of the woods around which I would have to navigate. In a few minutes we were moving in behind the cabin, near the spots where the pseudopods of the Hyde mother body had leaped out of the ground and had brought down the deer. I slowed, eased-off on the accelerator, and coasted to within fifty feet of the cabin, stopped the sled altogether, and shut down the

magnetic field. With the motor oft, I knew for certain that it was my hands that trembled, not the wheel.

“You walk behind me,” He said.

We got out of the sled.

“We have two things to worry about,” He went on. “One, the mother body. It is immobile and offers us the smallest problem. It is set in its present form and cannot change to escape. Two, there is the Hyde android it has created. It may not be anywhere in the area, as far as that goes. It may still be back in New York, trying to find you. But if it is here, in this area, it may try to circle around behind us while we are at work on the mother body. Remember, as soon as the mother body knows we are here, the Hyde android will know as well, for they are one and the same organ-ism.”

I nodded. I was listening to what He said, yet I felt as if I were in a dream, as if none of this could really be happening to me.

We started for the house.

The snow here was only half a foot deep, for the wind had scoured the knoll upon which the cabin rested, carrying away the other few feet that had originally been deposited. There were even patches where the hard, bare earth was exposed. Fleeting, I thought how much easier that would make things if we had to turn tail and run . . .

We were no more than a dozen feet from the front steps of the little house when I felt the ground tremble beneath me. At first, I thought of an earthquake, then quickly remembered what I had seen the Hyde mother body do to that white-tailed deer. Abruptly, there were pseudopods of pink-tan jelly flesh springing up around the Jekyll android walking before me. He turned, as if looking for a way out, then raised His hands to defend Himself. At that point, my view was cut off, because a second group of the slimy tentacles leaped up on all sides of me—quivering, swaying columns of shapeless flesh. I had been carrying my rifle in ready position, the pin-gun tucked in an open pocket where it could be reached easily, if the need arose not to be lethal. I dropped to one knee, raised the rifle, and fired into the fleshiest of the pseudopods. The blast tore a chunk of the flesh loose and sent it spiraling away, presumably to land in the snow, where it would wither and die, separated from the healing influences of the Hyde mother body. The pseudopod hesitated, drew back, then started down again, apparently more anxious than before to have me. I fired again, ripped all of the head of the false arm loose with that blast. But it was too late now. The other tentacles dropped onto me, melting together and encasing me in a digestive vacuole.

I tried to pull on the rifle trigger again, but the false flesh had poured over me like cement, had engulfed me so thoroughly that I could not move my fingers. I could not lift my arms to bring the rifle into a firing position that would not blow off my own foot.

Trapped . . .

I felt a strange, prickly wetness on my face, the sensation of dampness against my clothing. For a moment, I could not imagine what was happening, and then I understood in a flash of horrible insight. The first of the digestive enzymes were seeping out of the vacuole wall. My face would be the first to dissolve under the strong acid. My clothes would rot, fall away, and the rest of my body would be prey to the mother body's juices.

I screamed. It came out as a dead, muffled sound. Like a child crying in his blankets . . .

I struggled against the rubbery flesh, tried to kick and squirm my way out of its death hold, but I soon found out why the deer had been unable to escape. The cloying, sticky-cold pseudo-flesh was glue-like and could not be shaken off.

I felt vomit rising in my throat, tried to force it back down. There was no time for upchucking now, no time at all. There was only time to think, think, think like crazy. Or, maybe, there was only time to die . . .

I screamed. But when I opened my mouth, the pseudo-flesh crept into it, sour tasting. I tried to spit it out, could not manage that. I gagged and realized I was going to suffocate before I could be dissolved by the enzymes. At least, I thought, that is something to be thankful for.

Then, abruptly, the vacuole broke open, split back like a speedpod ready to spill its inner fruits. A cold draft of Alaskan air blew across my face, drying the enzymes before they could do more than set my flesh to burning with a pimpled rash. I had cursed the cold of Cantwell before. Now I blessed it. It was

infinitely more preferable to the sticky, warm closeness of the digestive vacuole. The false flesh began to shrivel around me, wrinkle and draw away as if I was un-pleasant to touch. Or taste. In minutes, I was lying free, the flesh curled about me like burned paper, gray, dry and powdery.

“That was close,” He said, bending over me and offering me a hand.

“What—”

“The Hyde could have done the same thing to me if it had thought of it first. I simply used my fingers to reach inside its body and start minor molecular changes. Once I started the process, it continued, a chain reaction that coursed back to the mother body along the line of the pseudopod.”

“You mean the Hyde mother body is already dead?”

“We’ll see,” He said.

I followed Him up the porch steps and into the house. The door was unlocked, and a window in it was broken out. We searched the upstairs rooms, were satisfied there was nothing there, nothing like a dead mother body, then went to the cellar door. He opened it and looked down the stairs into what must have been a cellar, almost identical to Harry's. We could not see it, for it was in pitch darkness. He reached for the light switch, flipped it on. Nothing happened.

We stood there, looking down into the dark. Deep, ugly dark . . .

“It's dead,” I said.

“We have to be certain.”

“You said there was a chain reaction.”

“There was.”

“Then it would have died.”

“I'm going down,” He said. “I have to be sure, and there is no way to check it out except to go look. You stand guard here, in case the Hyde android is some-where about. If you see it, don't try to be a hero. Shout. I may be reading your mind, and I may not, so give me vocal warning.”

“But—”

He did not give me time to frame another argument. He went down the steps, leaving me alone in the living room. I was as frightened as a child in an unlighted bedroom who sees shadows moving on his walls, and can see nothing that could make them. I fumbled along the wall until I found the light-switch for the living room. I flipped it up. Then back. Then up again. Noth-ing, except darkness.

I took my position by the living room door, where I could watch the cellarway and the porch outside without being forced to move back and forth from one vantage point to another. The snow outside would make a perfect backdrop against which to spot any movement. I shifted my eyes back and forth from one door to the other, waiting . . .

I heard Him step off the last riser onto the cellar floor. There was a very long moment of silence in which I could hear the cabin settling, the creak of its boards, the slight moan of the night wind, the brisk scratching sound of hard snow driven against the window glass. Then came the crashing noise that shook the floor and made me jump and almost turn to run.

“Hey!” I called.

He did not answer.

I strained my ears and could hear the sounds of combat of some sort. There was a shuffling sound of feet on ice, a slapping of flesh as if blows were being exchanged, the grunting and breathing of heavy exer-tion. But there were no screams or curses as you would expect, and the lack of them made the inhuman aspect of the battle all the more pronounced.

“Are you all right?”

Still no answer.

Except the grunting and shuffling and heavy breath-ing.

I started toward the cellar stairs, thinking I might help Him somehow, then had the prickly sensation in the back of my neck that the Hyde android had come in from outside while I had not been looking. I imagined I could feel His eyes on me, sense His straining fingers as He reached out to grasp my neck ... I whirled back to the door, ready to cry out, and saw that there was no one there. Just the same, I went back to the door and waited out the battle, hoping the Hyde mother body would succumb to the Jekyll

android—though I had nothing to offer, but hope.

The sounds of battle suddenly changed. The shuffling and grunting ceased and were replaced by a harsh hissing noise that reminded me of air escaping from a balloon. I recognized that sound as the same the pseudo-flesh had made outside when the Jekyll android had burned it away from me. One or the other of them was burning the moisture out of its enemy's flesh, turning it into dry, gray powder. "Are you all right?" I asked again.

Silence, but for the hissing.

"Hey!"

Hissing . . .

I looked over the snow fields, searching for movement, almost wishing I would see some, so that I would not feel as utterly useless as I did now. But there was nothing out there—just whiteness and coldness and wind.

Then the hissing ceased, and there were footsteps on the stairs. I sighed with relief, for I knew the Hyde mother body could not walk. It had to be my Jekyll android coming back. Or ... The thought came to me like a grenade exploding in front of my face. Or: the Hyde android, the one who had shot at me, and who had broken into my apartment, the one who had chased me through the tubeways of the Bubble Drop system . . . The Hyde android might have been down there when the mother body was destroyed through the Jekyll's chain reaction in its molecular structure. The Hyde may have been waiting for the Jekyll. And, now that the fight was over, it could be either of them coming up those stairs . . .

XVI

For an eternity, for eons and eons, the footsteps sounded on the cellar stairs, rising slowly toward me. My hands trembled, so that the rifle would not remain steady, and I was sweating although there was no heat in the cabin. Frantically, I tried to think of some way to differentiate between the benevolent Jekyll android and the malevolent Hyde. They looked exactly the same, were of the same height and the same weight. Un-doubtedly, they would walk the same, sound the same, gesture in the exact same way. There was only one thing . . . I would never forget the difference in their eyes. The eyes of the Hyde android were wild, rimmed with white all around, open wider than the eyes of the Jekyll android.

Then the cellar door pushed open wider, and an android entered the room. In the shadows, I could not see its eyes . . .

"It wasn't quite dead," the android said. "I finished it off."

"Wait a minute," I managed to say, my words hoarse and dry in my throat.

The android stopped, a dozen feet from me, still hidden by the shadows of the room. A swath of moon-light cut through a window and fell four feet in front of it, but where it now stood was in total blackness. "What's the matter, Jacob?"

"I'm not sure about you," I said, holding the rifle on it, my hands shaking, but my finger ready on the trigger.

"Not sure?" He started forward.

"Stop!"

He stopped. "Jacob, I don't understand what you're saying. It's me. I'm not going to hurt you. The Hyde mother body is dead. Down there in the cellar. You want to go down and take a look? You want to prove it to yourself?"

"I'm sure the mother body is dead," I said. "But how can I know if the Hyde android was also down there—and that maybe it defeated the Jekyll android I came with?"

"You think I'm the Hyde android? The one that chased you through the tubeways?"

"That's right."

He laughed and started forward, holding out His hands. He took two steps casually, then, as He was about to step into the swath of moonlight where I would be able to see His eyes, He leaped.

Unsteady as I was, I managed to fire the rifle and score a hit. The sound of the explosion in the room was like a thunderclap in a closet. The windows rattled, and my ears popped. The bullet must have ripped through His left shoulder, for He spun around like a top, clutching at it with His other hand, and went down in a heap. His fingers scrabbled at the baseboard as He tried to pull Himself up. I backed away from Him, until I was up against the doorsill. "You are Hyde, aren't you?"

Despite the wound, He got to His feet and stood swaying, looking at me with eyes that were now plainly in view in the swath of moonlight. Mad, wild, ugly eyes. He did not answer me. He did not have to.

I fired again. The impact of the slug knocked Him off His feet, backwards into a chair which He toppled over as He went down. He landed hard, bouncing His head on the bare floor, and laid there, motionless for a moment. Dead? It was possible that I had inflicted too great a wound for Him to heal. Perhaps too many in-ternal organs had been ripped apart, and He had ceased to function before He could bring his recuperative powers into play. Then I heard something that cancelled that train of thought: the heavy, rapid beating of His heart . . .

I stood there, watching Him for a while, wondering what I should do. I was partly, surprised that I had been able to gun Him down so easily, even if He was the baser Hyde, part of the original mother body's character. Still, He resembled a man, and it was a wonder that resemblance had not kept me from shooting. But as I listened to His heart, I realized He was healing Himself as He laid there, and I knew what I had to do. I stepped forward to put another bullet in His back at a point where it would shatter His heart.

When I was three or four feet from Him, I realized that He had changed, that He was no longer in the form of a human being. He had maintained the rough outline of a sprawled body, apparently to lure me closer, but He was in an amoeboid form like the other mother bodies, a blob of flesh with exterior veins and no human features. I remembered what the Jekyll mother body had told me: after the first android had worked out the metamorphosis from human form to amoeboid form, the android selves that came later could make the change almost instantaneously without going through the laborious intermediate steps. I back-stepped, trying to get out of His way. As I moved, I saw the quick movement of the growing pseudopod as it lifted out of the main flesh mass and came at me, rising over my head like the arm of Death.

I backed into a hassock, fell over it, and rolled to the wall. The change of direction confused the pseu-dopod, and it smashed into the bare floor and groped around for a moment as if it could not quite believe I had avoided it. But I knew I would not avoid it again, or for long. It was more intelligent, faster, more sensitive. This was a one-sided fight, and we both knew it. I hunched against the wall and fired the rifle at the mother body. The slug tore through the gelatinous mass and out the other side, carrying a good hunk of tissue with it. The pseudopod that had been projected at me quivered, rippled as if in spasm, and drew back into the mother body to convalesce.

I got to my feet and started moving as carefully as possible toward the door which was ten feet to my right, I knew that if I made much noise getting there, the mother body would be alerted by the vibrations and snare me before I was halfway there. Still, the floor creaked under me, the beast sensed my flight, and a thick arm of flesh shot out and slammed into the wall inches before me, blocking the way.

I shot into the mother body to make it withdraw its arm, but it shivered, contracted, and kept the arm in place.

Trapped . . .

The arm turned and began to corral me back the way I had come, back into a corner formed by a heavy chair and the wall. Once in that corner, I would be unable to escape. I could crawl over the chair, perhaps, but I would most assuredly be snared before I had clambered beyond it. I was surprised, momentarily, at how clear and quick my mind was. In the presence of death, with fear sharper and greater than at any other time in my life, my senses had been honed to their sharpest edge. Then I felt the backs of my thighs touch the chair, and I knew there was absolutely nowhere else to go. The mother body would know that too. The pseudopod came at me, suddenly moving with the greatest speed.

What I did next was a small miracle. No, not really a miracle. It was the result of a natural function of

the body. You hear about similar cases all the time in the newspapers and stats. A monorail slips off the track and falls to the earth with a full complement of passengers. A man's wife is pinned in the wreckage. Without think-ing, he lifts a ton or ton and a half of debris and heaves it off her, a feat he would never be able to perform if he were not ridden by the demon Fear. It is, of course, the result of an extra helping of adrenalin pumped into his system, not a supernatural act. To a lesser degree, I performed a similar feat when the pseudopod swept at my face. I whirled, grasped the chair and lifted it above my head. The chair only weighed fifty or sixty pounds—but it had been bolted to the cabin floor at each of its four legs. I had torn those bolts loose in one wrenching spasm of effort. I swung the chair, thrust it into the pseudopod. The amoeboid flesh curled around the chair, momentarily unaware that it had not grasped me. While it figured out the situation, I turned, got to the window, used the butt of my rifle to smash it open, and went through onto the porch, down onto the snow to the magnetic sled.

I started to get into the front seat, then stopped. If I left, nothing would have been gained. The Hyde mother body inside that cabin would go into the cellar—or remain where it was—and set up a food-seeking network, secure deer, wolves and rabbits, and begin to produce other android selves. The Jekyll mother body back in Harry's cellar would not be able to come seeking it until it had produced androids of its own. Then they would be evenly matched, just where we had started less than an hour ago. No, the only hope for any of us was for me to go back in there and kill the Hyde mother body.

I didn't relish that idea.

But I stopped trying to run. I turned back to the cabin.

At the doorway, the Hyde mother body was dragging itself outside.

I took ammunition out of my pocket and loaded the rifle to its full eight-shot capacity. Then, walking to the porch steps and going to the top of them, I aimed into the mass of pink-tan flesh and fired. Once. Twice. Three times.

The Hyde mother body jerked, rolled backwards. Chunks of it laid behind it, dead, but the main mass sealed the wounds and tried to recover.

I fired the other five bullets into it, then quickly re-loaded.

The mother body had pulled away from the door and was six feet inside. I walked to the doorway and pumped four more shots into it. It flopped around now, moved away from me as swiftly as it could. It was trying to get to the cellar steps. I moved around it and fired the other four shots into it, making it move into the living room instead. It was obviously quite badly hurt, for the holes were not healing as quickly now. Some of them seemed not to be healing at all. Some of the veins had been punctured and had let loose quantities of blood. It had sealed those off and re-directed the blood flow, but the loss had still weakened it. I was wounding it faster than it could recover.

While I reloaded, my fingers steady now, the mother body moved deeper into the living room, seeking escape and finding none. When I slipped the eight shells into the rifle chambers, I was left with only three more in my pocket. I would have to bring all of this to an end with eleven shots. With what I had in mind, it was just possible—just maybe. I slammed the gun together and fired four times into the mass of flesh, aiming for the largest, pulsating veins. I hit them twice. Blood spurted up, then settled to a steady flow. I turned and ran into the kitchen, hoping the place was stocked the way it was intended to be.

I scurried about, flung open cupboard doors on all sides until, at the next to the last place to look, I found what I wanted. There was a lantern and a gallon can of kerosene, a box of matches. Even in this modern day and age, a generator had been known to break down. The ancient lantern would come in handy at such times. Besides, it helped preserve the illusion that those living in the cabins were roughing it; it was a con-versation piece to show their friends when they came up for a weekend.

I took out the matches and the kerosene and hurried back into the living room. It occurred to me, as I went through the door between rooms, that the mother body might be waiting for me. Luckily, it was still concerned with getting itself in shape. Crossing toward it, I fired two more bullets into it to keep it busy, then opened the can of kerosene and poured the contents over the thing. It did not like the burning fluid and wriggled to get away from it. I stepped back a dozen feet, struck a big kitchen match on the side of the matchbox, and threw it onto the Hyde mother body.

The flames burst up like a crimson blossom.

The Hyde mother body stood on end, rippled up into a tower of flesh. It began attempting to change itself back into the android form, but could only half form the legs and arms and head of a humanoid creature. The mass pitched forward, writhing.

I fired the last two shots into it, got the other three bullets from my pocket, loaded, and used those too. The fire was intense, catching the wooden floor and curling away to the walls and ceiling. In a moment, the place would be an inferno. I went to the door and looked back. The Hyde mother body was considerably smaller. It seemed to be cracking apart, trying to separate itself from those parts already hopelessly de-stroyed by fire and bullets. But the flames closed in more relentlessly. At last, I went out into the night and boarded my sled, confident that the schizoid split of His personality had been rectified. Jekyll lived, back in Harry's cellar. Hyde had been done away with. I started the sled and took it back up the slope, back to tell the Jekyll about our success.

I stopped outside the cabin, got out, leaving my guns.

I went up the steps, across the porch, into the living room.

The lights were still on.

"Congratulations," He said.

"How—"

"I read your mind, Jacob."

"Of course," I said. I would have to get used to that, have to learn to accept the fact that He knew what was going on inside my head every bit as well as I did.

"We can go ahead now. I have defeated myself and am free to proceed."

"One thing," I said. "I'm curious. When you have changed us, will we have the ability to read each other's minds?"

"Yes," He said.

"But what is that going to do to the world?"

"It will be difficult at first—"

I went down the cellar steps. "I would imagine!"

"But remember that your intellects will increase in every way. You will not merely receive new abilities and retain your old, more savage outlook on things. You will be able to learn to accept mind reading as a natural part of life."

"The death of language," I said, suddenly startled by this implication.

"That's correct," He said. "There will be a single, universal language, the telepathic language of the mind."

I sat down on the steps.

"Come closer," He said.

"What now?"

"What we have been fighting for, what we have been looking forward to. What you kidnapped me from the laboratory for. What we ran and hid for."

I stood up and went to the pulsating mass of the Jekyll mother body, realized that I could drop the identifying tags now that the Hyde creatures had been destroyed. "I'm afraid," I said, feeling a tinge of my old inferiority complex, "that I am just a little too dense to get your meaning."

"It's time," He said.

He touched me.

His flesh was cool, but not unpleasant.

"It's time to begin," He said. -

My flesh tingled.

His pseudopods thinned down and His flesh entered my body, reached into my cells, up my spinal column . . .

"You will be the first," He said.

. . . into my brain . . .

"The first of the new race of man," He said.

“You are changing me,” I said.

“Yes.”

Tingling, burning, turning inside me. . .

“I am changing you, Jacob. I am changing you at last . . .”

XVII

When dawn came, He released me, withdrew His flesh from my body, and ceased tinkering with my cells. I stood before Him, and things were not as they had been. Things would never be as they had been, for the savagery of Man was a thing of the past. I could see now with different eyes, see new aspects of things as simple as the ice on the walls, the hair on my arms. I had gained new ears, I could hear beyond the range of mortal men. If I listened closely I could hear the very singing of the atoms. There were new odors for my nose to inhale. I knew there would be new aspects to the taste of things now, new qualities to be savoured.

I had been Jacob Kennelmen. I was someone else now. Someone greater.

Without speaking, He told me that it was time to depart. We exchanged last thoughts there in the cold basement, oblivious of the cold, oblivious of all but the touching of our minds. When at last there was nothing more to say, I climbed the steps into the living room and went outside to the sled.

It was snowing lightly. Big flakes.

Without trying too hard, I could see the minute pat-terns, the lacy edges and holes.

I raised my hands and felt the winds, was conscious of a thousand eddies, a hundred different subcurrents that I would never have noticed before my transforma-tion.

The world was a gem to be cherished, a thing with so many facets that it could never be fully explored.

And there would be the stars.

I looked up. Although it was daylight, I could see the stars hiding in the sky. They could not hide any longer. They would be ours in a decade. The universe in a thousand years. Then . . . I was touched with a deep regret as I contemplated what would come after we had reached the limits of the universe. But I fought down any fear that started to rise. We were different now. When the universe was conquered, we would find other things to grasp and wrestle. Perhaps we would never move into His plane of existence, but what was to say there were not planes below ours that we could reach—or planes parallel to ours?

I took the sled down the mountain to the main ranger station and went in to see the park employee there. I reached out for him. At first, he thought I was threatening him, tried to rise quickly and defend him-self. Then I reached out with my mind and grasped him, soothed him.

We stood there for six hours as I did to him what the Jekyll mother body had taught me to do. And he grew.

He grew.

Together, we went forth.

The first of the apostles.

To evangelize . . .

The mystery of His flesh was no longer a thing apart, but an integral portion of all of us . . .

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