

COCOON

Sid Throndyke overrode his respirator to heave a deep sigh.

"Wow!" he said, flipping to his wife's personal channel. "A tough day on the Office channel."

The contact screens attached to his eyeballs stayed blank: Cluster was out. Impatiently, Sid toed the console, checking the channels: Light, Medium and Deep Sitcom; auto-hypno; Light and Deep Narco; four, six, and eighty-party Social; and finally, muttering to himself, Psychan. Cluster's identity symbol appeared on his screens.

"There you are," he grieved. "Psychan again. After a hard day, the least a man expects is to find his wife tuned to his channel--"

"Oh, Sid; there's this wonderful analyst. A new model. It's doing so much for me, really wonderful. . . ."

"I know," Sid grumped. "That orgasm-association technique. That's all I hear. I'd think you'd want to keep in touch with the Sitcoms, so you know what's going on; but I suppose you've been tied into Psychan all day-while I burned my skull out on Office."

"Now, Sid; didn't I program your dinner and everything?"

"Um." Mollified, Sid groped with his tongue for the dinner lever, eased the limp plastic tube into his mouth. He sucked a mouthful of the soft paste-

"Cluster! You know I hate Vege-pap. Looks like you could at least dial a nice Prote-sim or Sucromash. . . ."

"Sid, you ought to tune to Psychan. It would do you a world of good. . . ." Her sub-vocalized voice trailed off in the earphones. Sid snorted, dialed a double Prote-sim and a Sucromash, fuming at the delay. He gulped his dinner, not even noticing the rich gluey consistency; then, in a somewhat better mood, flipped to the Light Sitcom.

It was good enough stuff, he conceded; the husband was a congenital psychopathic inferior who maintained his family in luxury by a series of fantastic accidents. You had to chuckle when his suicide attempt failed at the last moment, after he'd lost all that blood. The look on his face when they dragged him back. . . .

But somehow it wasn't enough. Sid dialed the medium; it wasn't much better. The deep, maybe.

Sid viewed for a few minutes with growing impatience. Sure, you had to hand it to the Sitcom people; there was a lot of meat in the deep sitcom. It was pretty subtle stuff, the way the wife got the money the husband had been saving and spent it for a vacation trip for her Chihuahua; had a real social content, too deep for most folks. But like the rest of the sitcoms, it was historical. Sure, using old-time settings gave a lot of scope for action. But how about something more pertinent to the contemporary situation? Nowadays, even though people led the kind of rich, full lives that Vital Programming supplied, there was still a certain lack. Maybe it was just a

sort of atavistic need for gross muscular exertion. He'd viewed a discussion of the idea a few nights earlier on the usual Wednesday night four-party hookup with the boys. Still, in his case, he had plenty of muscle tone. He'd spent plenty on a micro-spasm attachment for use with the narco channel. . .

That was a thought. Sid didn't usually like narco; too synthetic, as he'd explained to the boys. They hadn't liked the remark, he remembered. Probably they were all narco fans. But what the hell, a man had a right to a few maverick notions.

Sid tuned to the Narco channel. It was a traditional sex fantasy, in which the familiar colorless hero repeatedly fended off the advances of coitus-seeking girls. It was beautifully staged, with plenty of action, but like the sitcoms, laid in one of those never-never historical settings. Sid flipped past with a sub-vocal grunt. It wasn't much better than Cluster's orgasm-association treatments.

The stylized identity-symbol of the Pubinf announcer flashed on Sid's screens, vibrating in resonance with the impersonal voice of the Official announcer:

" cause for concern. CentProg states that control will have been re-established within the hour. Some discomfort may result from vibration in sectors north of Civic Center, but normalcy will be restored shortly. Now, a word on the food situation."

A hearty, gelatinous voice took over: "Say, folks, have you considered switching to Vege-pap? Vege-pap now comes in a variety of rich flavors, all, of course, equally nourishing, every big swallow loaded with the kind of molecule that keeps those metabolisms rocking along at the pace of today's more-fun-than-ever sitcoms-and today's stimulating narco and social channels, too!

"Starting with First Feeding tomorrow, you'll have that opportunity you've wanted to try Vege-pap. Old-fashioned foods, like Prote-sim and Sucromash, will continue to be available of course, where exceptional situations warrant. Now-"

"What's that!" Sid sub-vocalized. He toed the replay key, listened again. Then he dug a toe viciously against the tuning key, flipping to the Psychan monitor.

"Cluster!" he barked at his wife's identity pattern. "Have you heard about this nonsense? Some damn fool on Pubinf is blathering about Vege-pap for everybody! By God, this is a free country. I'd like to see anyone try-"

"Sid," Cluster's voice came faintly, imploring. "P-P-Please, S-S-Sid. . . ."

"Damn it, Cluster. . . . !" Sid stopped talking, coughed, gulped. His throat was burning. In his excitement he'd been vocalizing. The realization steadied him. He'd have to calm down. He'd been behaving like an animal. . .

"Cluster, darling. Kindly interrupt your treatment. I have to talk to you.

Now. It's important." Confound it, if she didn't switch to his channel now-

"Yes, Sid." Cluster's voice had a ragged undertone. Sid half-suspected she was vocalizing then too. . . .

"I was listening to Pubinf," he said, aware of a sense of dignity in the telling. No narco-addict he, but a mature-minded auditor of a serious channel like Pubinf. "They're raving about cutting off Prote-sim. Never heard of such nonsense. Have you heard anything about this?"

"No, Sid. You should know I never-

"I know! But I thought maybe you'd heard something. . . ."

"Sid, I've been under treatment all day-except the time I spent programming your dinner."

"You can get Prote-sim in exceptional situations, they said! I wonder what that's supposed to mean? Why, I've been a Prote-sim man for years. . . ."

"Maybe it will do you good, Sid. Something different. . . ."

"Different? What in the world do I want with something different? I have a comfortable routine, well-balanced, creative. I'm not interested in having any government fat-head telling me what to eat."

"But Vege-sim might be good; build you up or something."

"Build me up? What are you talking about? I view sports regularly; and aren't you forgetting my Micro-spasm accessory? Hah! I'm a very physically-minded man, when it comes to that."

"I know you are, Sid. I didn't mean. . . . I only meant, maybe a little variety. . . ."

Sid was silent, thinking. Variety. HmMMM. Might be something in that. Maybe he was in a rut, a little.

"Cluster," he said suddenly. "You know, it's a funny thing; I've kind of gotten out of touch. Oh, I don't mean with important affairs. Heck, I hardly ever tune in Narco, or auto-hypno, for that matter. But I mean, after all, it's been quite a while now I guess, since we gave up well, you know, physical contact."

"Sid! If you're going to be awful, I'm switching right back to my Psychan-

"I don't mean to be getting personal, Cluster. I was just thinking. . . . By golly, how long has it been since that first contract with CentProg?"

"Why. . . . I haven't any idea. That was so long ago. I can't see what difference it makes. Heavens, Sid, life today is so rich and full-

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking about wanting to change, or anything idiotic. Just wondering. You know."

"Poor Sid. If you could spend more time with wonderful channels like Psychan, and not have to bother with that boring old Office. . . ."

Sid chuckled sub-vocally. "A man needs the feeling of achievement he gets from doing a job, Cluster. I wouldn't be happy, just relaxing with Sitcom all the time. And after all, Indexing is an important job. If we fellows in the game all quit, where'd CentProg be? Eh?"

"I hadn't thought of it like that, Sid. I guess it is pretty important."

"Darn right, kid. They haven't built the computer yet that can handle Indexing-or Value Judgment, or Criticism-. It'll be a while yet before the machine replaces man." Sid chuckled again. Cluster was such a kid in a lot of ways.

Still, it had been a long time. Funny, how you didn't think much about time, under Vital Programming. After all, your program was so full, you didn't have time to moon over the past. You popped out of Dream-stim, had a fast breakfast (Vege-pap; hah! He'd see about that!), then over to Office channel. That kept a fellow on his toes, right up till quitting time. Then dinner with Cluster, and right into the evening's round of Sitcoms, Socials, Narcos-whatever you wanted.

But how long had it been? A long time, no doubt. Measured in, say, years, the way folks used to be in the habit of thinking.

Years and year. Yes, by golly. Years and years.

Quite suddenly, Sid was uneasy. How long had it been? He had been about twenty-eight-the term came awkwardly to mind-twenty-eight when he and Cluster first met. Then there was that first anniversary-a wild time that had been with friends over for TV. And then Vital Programming had come along. He and Cluster had been among the first to sign up.

God, what a long time it had been. TV. Imagine sitting. The thought of being propped up against coarse chairs, out in the open, made Sid wince. And other people around-faces right out in the open and everything. Staring at a little screen no more than five feet square. How in the world had people stood it? Still, it was all in what you were used to. People were adaptable. They had had to be to survive in those primitive conditions. You had to give the old-timers credit. He and Cluster were a pretty lucky couple to have lived in the era when Vital Programming was developed. They could see the contrast right in their own lives. The younger folks, now-

"Sid," Cluster broke in plaintively. "May I finish my treatment now?"

Sid dialed off, annoyed. Cluster wasn't interested in his problems. She was so wrapped up in Psychan these days, she couldn't even discuss the sitcoms intelligently. Well, Sid Throndyke wasn't a man to be pushed around. He nudged the 'fone switch, gave a number. An operator answered.

"I want the Pubinf office."

There was a moment's silence. "That number is unavailable," the recorded voice said.

"Unavailable, hell! I want to talk to them down there! What's all this about cutting off Prote-sim?"

"That information is not available."

"Look," Sid said, calming himself with an effort. "I want to talk to someone at Pubinf-"

"The line is available now."

An unfamiliar identity pattern appeared on Sid's screens.

"I want to find out about this food business," Sid began-

"A temporary measure," a harassed voice said. "Due to the emergency."

"What emergency?" Sid stared at the pattern belligerently. As he watched, it wavered, almost imperceptibly. A moment later, he felt a distinct tremor through the form-hugging plastic cocoon.

"What. . . !" he gasped, "what was that?!"

"There's no cause for alarm," the Pubinf voice said. "You'll be kept fully informed through regular-"

A second shock rumbled. Sid gasped. "What the devil's going on. . . ?"

The Pubinf pattern was gone. Sid blinked at the blank screens, then switched to his monitor channel. He had to talk to someone. Cluster would be furious at another interruption, but-

"Sid!" Cluster's voice rasped in Sid's hemispherical canals. She was vocalizing now for sure, he thought wildly.

"They broke right in!" Cluster cried. "Just as I was ready to climax-"

"Who?" Sid demanded. "What's going on here? What are you raving about?"

"Not an identity pattern, either," Cluster wailed. "Sid, it was a-a-face."

"What?" Sid blinked. He hadn't heard Cluster use obscenity before. This must be serious.

"Calm yourself," he said. "Now tell me exactly what happened."

"I told you: a-face. It was horrible, Sid. On the Psychan channel. And he was shouting-"

"Shouting what?"

"I don't know. Something about 'Get out.' Oh, Sid, I've never been so humiliated. . . ."

"Listen, Cluster," Sid said. "You tune in to a nice narco now, and get some rest. I'll deal with this."

"A face," Cluster sobbed. "A great, nasty hairy face-"

"That's enough!" Sid snapped. He cut Cluster's identity pattern with an impatient gouge of his toe. Sometimes it seemed like women enjoyed obscenity. . . .

Now what? He was far from giving up on the Vege-pap issue, and now this: a respectable married woman insulted right in her own cocoon. Things were going to hell. But he'd soon see about that. With a decisive twist of the ankle, Sid flipped to the Police channel.

"I want to report an outrage."

The police identity pattern blanked abruptly. Then a face appeared.

Sid sucked in a breath out of phase with his respirator. This wasn't the police channel. The face stared at him, mouth working: a pale face, with whiskers sprouting from hollow cheeks, lips sunken over toothless gums. Then the audio came in, in midsentence:

". . . . to warn you. You've got to listen, you fools! You'll all die here! It's already at the north edge of the city. The big barrier wall's holding, but-"

The screen blanked; the bland police pattern reappeared.

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg," a taped voice said smoothly. "Normal service will now be resumed."

"Police!" Sid yelled. He was vocalizing now, and be damned to it! There was just so much a decent citizen would stand for-

The screen flickered again. The police pattern disappeared. Sid held his breath-

A face appeared. This was a different one, Sid was sure. It was hairier than the other one, but not as hollow-cheeked. He watched in dumb shock as the mouth opened-

"Listen," a hoarse voice said. "Everybody, listen. We're blanketing all the channels this time-I hope. This is our last try. There's only a few of us. It wasn't easy getting into here-and there's no time left. We've got to move fast."

The voice stopped as the man on the screen breathed hoarsely, swallowed. Then he went on:

"It's the ice; it's moving down on us, fast, a god-awful big glacier. The walls can't stand much longer. It'll either wipe the city off the map or bury it. Either way, anybody that stays is done for.

"Listen; it won't be easy, but you've got to try. Don't try to go down. You can't get out below because of the drifts. Go up, onto the roofs. It's your only chance-you must go up."

The image on Sid's contact screens trembled violently, then blanked. Moments later, Sid felt a tremor-worse, this time. His cocoon seemed to pull at him. For a moment he was aware of the drag of a hundred tiny contacts grafted to the skin, a hundred tiny conductors penetrating to nerve conduits-

An almost suffocating wave of claustrophobia swept over him. The universe

seemed to be crushing in on him, immobile, helpless, a grub buried in an immense anthill-

The shock passed. Slowly, Sid regained a grip on himself. His respirator was cycling erratically, attempting to match to his ragged breathing impulses. His chest ached from the strain. He groped with a toe, keyed in Cluster's identity pattern.

"Cluster! Did you feel it? Everything was rocking. . . ."

There was no reply. Sid called again. No answer. Was she ignoring him, or- Maybe she was hurt, alone and helpless-

Sid fought for calm. No need for panic. Dial CentProg, report the malfunction. He felt with trembling toes, and punched the keys. . . .

CentProg's channel was dark, lifeless. Sid stared, unbelieving. It wasn't possible. He switched wildly to the light sitcom-

Everything normal here. The husband fell down the stairs, smashing his new camera. . . .

But this was no time to get involved. Sid flipped through the medium and deep Sitcoms: all normal. Maybe he could get through to the police now-

Mel Goldfarb's pattern blinked on the personal call code. Sid tuned him in.

"Mel! What's it all about? My God, that earthquake-"

"I don't like it, Sid. I felt it, over here in South Sector. The. . . . uh. . . . face. . . . said the North Sector. You're over that side. What did you-"

"My God, I thought the roof was going to fall in, Mel. It was terrible! Look, I'm trying to get through to the police. Keep in touch, hey?"

"Wait, Sid; I'm worried-"

Sid cut the switch, flipped to the police channel. If that depraved son of a bitch showed his face again-

The police pattern appeared. Sid paused to gather his thoughts. First things first. . . .

"That earthquake," he said. "What's happening? And the maniac who's been exposing his face. My wife-"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

"What are you talking about? Nothing is beyond the control of CentProg-"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

"That's enough of your damned nonsense! What about this crazy guy showing his bare face? How do I know that he won't-"

"The foregoing interruption was the result of circumstances beyond the control of CentProg. Normal service will now be resumed."

Sid stared, aghast. A taped voice! A brush-off! He was supposed to settle for that? Well, by God, he had a contract. . . .

Mel's code flashed again. Sid tuned him in. "Mel, this is a damned outrage. I called the police channel and do you know what I got? A canned announcement-"

"Sid," Mel cut in. "Do you suppose it meant anything? I mean the. . . . uh. . . . guy with the. . . . uh. . . . face. All that about getting out, and the glacier wiping out the city."

"What?" Sid stared at Mel's pattern, trying to make sense of what he was saying. "Glacier?" he said. "Wipe out what?"

"You saw him, didn't you? The crazy bird, cut in on all channels. He said the ice was going to wipe out the city. . . ."

Sid thought back. The damned obscene face. He hadn't really listened to what it was raving about. But it was something about getting out. . . .

"Tell me that again, Mel."

Mel repeated the bare-faced man's warning. "Do you suppose there's anything in it? I mean, the shocks, and everything. And you can't get the police channel. And I tried to tune in to Pubinf just now and I got a canned voice, just like you did. . . ."

"It's crazy, Mel. It can't. . . ."

"I don't know. I've tried to reach a couple of the fellows; I can't get through. . . ."

"Mel," Sid asked suddenly. "How long has it been? I mean, how long since CentProg has been handling things?"

"What? My God, Sid, what a question. I don't know."

"A long time, eh, Mel? A lot could have happened outside."

"My contract-"

"But how do we know? I was talking to Cluster just now; we couldn't remember. I mean, how can you gauge a thing like that? We have our routine, and everything goes along, and nobody thinks about anything like. . . . outside. Then all of a sudden-"

"I'm trying Pubinf again," Mel said. "I don't like this-"

Mel was gone. Sid tried to think. Pubinf was handing out canned brush-offs, just like Police Channel. CentProg. . . . maybe it was okay now. . . .

CentProg was still dark. Sid was staring at the blank screens when a new shock sent heavy vibrations through his cocoon. Sid gasped, tried to keep cool. It would pass; it wasn't anything, it couldn't be. . . .

The vibrations built, heavy, hard shocks that drove the air from Sid's lungs, yanked painfully at arms, legs, neck, and his groin. . . .

It was a long time before the nausea passed. Sid lay, drawing breath painfully, fighting down the vertigo. The pain-it was a help, in a way. It helped to clear his head. Something was wrong, badly wrong. He had to think now, do the right thing. It wouldn't do to panic. If only there wouldn't be another earthquake. . . .

Something wet splattered against Sid's half-open mouth. He recoiled, automatically spitting the mucky stuff, snorting-

It was Vege-pap, gushing down from the feeding tube. Sid averted his face, felt the cool semi-liquid pattering against the cocoon, spreading over it, sloshing down the sides. Something was broken. . . .

Sid groped for the cut-off with his tongue, gagging at the viscous mess pouring over his face. Of course, it hadn't actually touched his skin, except for his lips; the cocoon protected him. But he could feel the thick weight of it, awash in the fluid that supported the plastic cocoon. He could sense it quite clearly, flowing under him, forcing him up in the chamber as the hydrostatic balance was upset. With a shock of pain, Sid felt a set of neuro contacts along his spinal cord come taut. He gritted his teeth, felt searing agony as the contacts ripped loose.

Half of the world went dark and cold. Sid was only dimly aware of the pressure against his face and chest as he pressed against the cell roof. All sensation was gone from his legs now, from his left arm, his back. His left contact screen was blank, unseeing. Groaning with the effort, Sid strained to reach out with a toe, key the emergency signal-

Hopeless. Without the boosters he could never make it. His legs were dead, paralyzed. He was helpless.

He tried to scream, choked, fought silently in the swaddling cocoon, no longer a euphorically caressing second skin but a dead, clammy weight, blinding him. He twisted, feeling unused muscles cramp at the effort, touched the lever that controlled the face-plate. He'd had a reputation as an open-air fiend once-but that had been-he didn't know how long. The lever was stiff. Sid lunged against it again. It gave. There was a sudden lessening of pressure as the burden of Vege-pap slopped out through the opening. Sid sank away from the ceiling of the tiny cubicle, felt his cocoon ground on the bottom.

For a long time Sid lay, dazed by pain and shock, not even thinking, waiting for the agony to subside. . . .

Then the itching began. It penetrated Sid's daze, set him twitching in a frenzy of discomfort. The tearing loose of the dorsal contacts had opened dozens of tiny rents in the cocoon; a sticky mixture of the supporting water bath and Vege-pap seeped in, irritating the tender skin. Sid writhed, struggled to scratch-and discovered that, miraculously, the left arm responded now. The motor nerves which had been stunned by the electroneural trickle-flow through the contacts were recovering control. Feebly, Sid's groping hand reached his inflamed hip-and scrabbled against

the smooth sheath of plastic.

He had to get out. The cocoon was a confining nightmare, a dead husk that had to be shed. The face-plate was open. Sid felt upward, found the edge, tugged-

Slippery as an eel, he slithered from the cocoon, hung for an instant as the remaining contacts came taut, then slammed to the floor a foot below. Sid didn't feel the pain of the fall; as the contacts ripped free, he fainted.

When Sid recovered consciousness, his first thought was that the narco channel was getting a little too graphic. He groped for a tuning switch-

Then he remembered. The earthquake, Mel, the canned announcement-

And he had opened his face-plate and fought to get out-and here he was. He blinked dully, then moved his left hand. It took a long time, but he managed to peel the contact screens from his eyes. He looked around. He was lying on the floor in a rectangular tunnel. A dim light came from a glowing green spot along the corridor. Sid remembered seeing it before, a long time ago. . . . the day he and Cluster had entered their cocoons.

Now that he was detached from the stimuli of the cocoon, it seemed to Sid, he was able to think a little more clearly. It had hurt to be torn free from the security of the cocoon, but it wasn't so bad now. A sort of numbness had set in. But he couldn't lie here and rest; he had to do something, fast. First, there was Cluster. She hadn't answered. Her cocoon was situated right next to his-

Sid tried to move; his leg twitched; his arm fumbled over the floor. It was smooth and wet, gummy with the Vege-pap that was still spilling down from the open face-plate. The smell of the stuff was sickening. Irrationally, Sid had a sudden mouth-watering hunger for Prote-sim.

Sid fixed his eyes on the green light, trying to remember. He and Cluster had been wheeled along the corridor, laughing and talking gaily. Somehow, out here, things took on a different perspective. That had been-God! Years ago. How long? Maybe-twenty years? Longer. Fifty, maybe. Maybe longer. How could you know? For a while they had tuned to Pubinf, followed the news, kept up with friends on the outside. But more and more of their friends had signed contracts with CentProg. The news sort of dried up. You lost interest.

But what mattered now wasn't how long, it was what he was going to do. Of course, an attendant would be along soon in any case to check up, but meanwhile, Cluster might be in trouble-

* * *

The tremor was bad this time. Sid felt the floor rock, felt the hard paving under him ripple like the surface of a pond. Somewhere, a rumbling sound rolled, and somewhere something heavy fell. The green light flickered, then burned steadily again.

A shape moved in the gloom of the corridor; there was the wet slap of

footsteps. Sid sub-vocalized a calm "Hi, fellows." The silence rang in his ears. My God, of course they couldn't hear him. He tried again, consciously vocalizing, a tremendous shout-

A feeble croak, and a fit of coughing. When he recovered his breath, a bare and hairy face, greenish white, was bending over him.

" . . . this poor devil," the man was saying in a thin choked voice.

Another face appeared over the first face's shoulder. Sid recognized them both. They were the two that had been breaking into decent channels, with their wild talk about a glacier. . . .

"Listen, fellow," one of the bare-faced men said. Sid stared with fascinated disgust at the clammy pale skin, the sprouting hairs, the loose toothless mouth, the darting pink tongue. God, people were horrible to look at!

" . . . be along after a while. Didn't mean to stir up anybody in your shape. You been in too long, fellow. You can't make it."

"I'm. . . good. . . shape. . . ." Sid whispered indignantly.

"We can't do anything for you. You'll have to wait till the maintenance unit comes along. I'm pretty sure you'll be okay. The ice's piled itself up in a wall now, and split around the city walls. I think they'll hold. Course, the ice will cover the city, but that won't matter. CentProg will still handle everything. Plenty of energy from the pile and the solar cells, and the recycling will handle the food okay. . . ."

" . . . Cluster. . . ." Sid gasped. The bare-faced man leaned closer. Sid explained about his wife. The man checked nearby face-plates. He came back and knelt by Sid. "Rest easy, fellow," he said. "They all look all right. Your wife's okay. Now, we're going to have to go on. But you'll be okay. Plenty of Vege-pap around, I see. Just eat a little now and then. The Maintenance machine will be along and get you tucked back in."

"Where. . . ?" Sid managed.

"Us? We're heading south. Matt here knows where we can get clothes and supplies, maybe even a flier. We never were too set on this Vital Programming. We've only been in maybe a few years and we always did a lot of auto-gym work, keeping in shape. Didn't like the idea of wasting away. . . . Matt's the one found out about the ice. He came for me. . . ."

Sid was aware of the other man talking. It was hard to hear him.

A sudden thought struck Sid. " . . . how long. . . ?" he asked.

It took three tries, but the bare-faced man got the idea at last.

"I'll take a look, fellow," he said. He went to Sid's open face-plate, peered at it, called the other man over. Then he came back, his feet spattering in the puddled Vege-pap.

"Your record says. . . 2043," he said. He looked at Sid with wide eyes. They were red and irritated, Sid saw. It made his own eyes itch.

"If that's right, you been here since the beginning. My God, that's over. . . . two hundred years. . . ."

The second bare-faced man, Matt, was pulling the other away. He was saying something, but Sid wasn't listening. Two hundred years. It seemed impossible. But after all, why not? In a controlled environment, with no wear and tear, no disease, you could live as long as CentProg kept everything running. But two hundred years. . . .

Sid looked around. The two men were gone. He tried to remember just what had happened, but it was too hard. The ice, they had said, wouldn't crush the city. But it would flow around it, encase it in ice, and the snow would fall, and cover it, and the city would lie under the ice.

Ages might pass. In the cells, the cocoons would keep everyone snug and happy. There would be the traditional sitcoms, and Narco, and Psychan. . . .

And up above, the ice.

Sid remembered the awful moments in the cocoon, when the shock waves had rocked him; the black wave of fear that had closed in; the paralyzing claustrophobia.

The ice would build up and build up. Ice, two miles thick. . . .

Why hadn't they waited? Sid groped, pushed himself up, rolled over. He was stronger already. Why hadn't they waited? He'd used the micro-spasm unit regularly-every so often. He had good muscle tone. It was just that he was a little stiff. He scrabbled at the floor, moved his body a few inches. Nothing to it. He remembered the reason for the green light; it was the elevator. They had brought him and Cluster down in it. All he had to do was get to it, and-

What about Cluster? He could try to bring her along. It would be lonely to be without her. But she wouldn't want to leave. She'd been here-two hundred years. Sid almost chuckled. Cluster wouldn't like the idea of being as old as that. . . .

No, he'd go alone. He couldn't stay, of course. It would never be the same again for him. He pulled himself along, an inch, another. He rested, sucked up some Vege-pap from where it spread near his mouth. . . .

He went on. It was a long way to the green light, but if you took it an inch at a time, an inch at a time. . . .

He reached the door. There hadn't been any more shocks. Along the corridor, the glass face-plates stood closed, peaceful, orderly. The mess on the floor was the only thing. But the maintenance units would be along. The bare-faced man had said so.

You opened the door to the elevator by breaking a beam of light; Sid remembered that. He raised his arm; it was getting strong, all right. It was hardly any effort to lift it right up-

The door opened with a whoosh of air. Sid worked his way inside. Halfway

in, the door tried to close on him; his weight must have triggered the door-closing mechanism. But it touched him and flew open again. It was working fine, Sid thought.

He pulled his legs in, then rested. He would have to get up to the switch, somehow, and that was going to be tricky. Still, he had gotten this far okay. Just a little farther, and he'd catch up with the bare-faced men, and they'd set out together.

It took Sid an hour of hard work, but he managed to reach, first, the low stool, then the chrome-plated control button. With a lurch the car started up. Sid fell back to the floor and fought back wave on wave of vertigo. It was hectic, being outside. But he wouldn't go back now; not even to see Cluster's familiar identity pattern again. Never again. He had to get out.

The elevator came to a stop. The door slid open-and a blast of sub-arctic air struck Sid like a blow from a giant hammer. His naked body-mere flaccid skin over atrophied bones-curled like a grub in the flames. For a long moment all sensation was washed away in the shock of the cold. Then there was pain; pain that went on and on. . . .

* * *

And then the pain went, and it was almost like being back again, back in the cocoon, warm and comfortable, secure and protected and safe. But not quite the same. A thought stirred in Sid's mind. He pushed at the fog of cotton-wool, fought to grasp the thought that bobbed on the surface of the blissful warmth.

He opened his eyes. Out across the white expanse of roof-tops, beyond the last rim of the snow, the glittering jagged shape of the ice-face reared up, crystal-blue, gigantic; and in the high arched blue-black sky, a star burned with a brilliant fire.

This was what he wanted to tell Cluster, Sid thought. This, about the deep sky, and the star, so far away-and yet a man could see it.

But it was too late now to tell Cluster, too late to tell anyone. The bare-faced men were gone. Sid was alone; alone now under the sky.

Long ago, Sid thought, on the shore of some warm and muddy sea, some yearning sea-thing had crawled out to blink at the open sky, gulp a few breaths of burning oxygen, and die.

But not in vain. The urge to climb out was the thing. That was the force that was bigger than all the laws of nature, greater than all the distant suns blazing in their meaningless lonely splendor.

The other ones, the ones below, the secure and comfortable ones in their snug cocoons under the snow, they had lost the great urge. The thing that made a man.

But he, Sid Throndyke-he had made it.

Sid lay with his eyes on the star and the silent snow drifted over him to form a still, small mound; and then the mound was buried, and then the

city.

And only the ice and the star remained.