

The Quality of

*It was mercy of the worst strain. He had
been a man of parts . . . and now he faced
being taken apart . . . part by living part!*



Mercy

By DANIEL KEYES

Illustrated by WOOD



IN HIS dream, he screamed and fought them off and begged them not to take him. He saw them slipping up silently in the night and taking him down to the long black service-jet waiting in the street below.

He opened his eyes quickly and reassured himself that he was still in his own room. The sheets and his pillow were damp with his sweat, as they were every morning now since his sickness had become worse. A glance at the latticed window, where the sky showed through like strips of gray felt, told him that it was too early to get up. They had not come for him tonight.

He fought back the urge to reach over his head for a *dor-caine* tablet from the dispenser. Just a touch of his signet ring to the dispenser plate and he would have the pain-soothing drug—enough to cool his feverish body and give him rest. He would wait. Illegally, for over three months now, he'd restricted the use of *dor-caine*—the drug that the law required him to take at the first sign of severe physical discomfort.

He could hold out a little longer, telling himself over and over that every symptom he could diminish or hide or control for a while gave them that much less data to go on, that much less of an upward curve on their graphs, interfering—however slightly—

with that final, irrevocable diagnosis.

It was worth the suffering if it delayed for one day their awareness of his disease. It would be that much longer before the Service and Repair Center could send a servo crew down to investigate. He would have just that much longer to live.

Lying awake, he stared at the ceiling, wondering how successful his desperate deception had been. Although they might be temporarily thrown off by the false *dorcaine* average on his records, he knew too well that the Dispatcher could not be sidetracked for long. And when the secret was out—what then? Would there be a front-page scandal when it was discovered that Paul Dorn, the head of the Maintenance Division of Service and Repair, was a *waster*?

He couldn't push the foul word from his mind. *Waster*. Yes, he felt ashamed—but as long as he was able to conceal it, he would hang on to life.

THE Service and Repair Center was a long arc of tall white buildings on the outskirts of New Virginia, not far from where the ancient Capitol Ruins stood. As his copter approached the area, Paul Dorn identified himself to the Dispatcher-plate with his signet ring. The electronic brain accepted his

signal and freed the beam that would guide him, auto-controlled, into his port atop the Maintenance Building of the Center.

As he landed, he noticed that a detail of servos was hauling away the wreckage of a black-and-orange copter that looked for all the world like a giant, crushed butterfly. Calling out to the leader of the servo-detail, he asked what had happened.

"An unauthorized ship," said the servo, "tried to land without clearance from the Dispatcher."

Paul Dorn was still thinking about it down in his lab when the call came over the loudspeaker. He was asked to come down to the Records Division right away. Chief Abel Jennings wanted to see him.

At Records, the Chief was talking with someone on the TV line, and he waved for Paul to have a seat. The Chief, sixty and well tanned, had a huge, lumpy face that always reminded Paul of a potato.

Flipping the switch off, the Chief leaned back in his chair to study Paul. "There's been an accident."

"I know. I saw them clearing away the mess before I came in. Some fool trying to cheat the Mercy Vault?"

The potato eyes bulged wide. "That's not funny!"

"No, you're right. I'm sorry. Is he alive?"

"They've got him down in the Examination Ward right now. Paul, it's your brother."

Paul had started to light a cigarette and his hand froze in mid-air. "Victor—tried to land—without a clearance beam?"

The Chief nodded. "They called me first because he used to work in my department. Made a wreck of himself. From what they say, Spare Parts might have been able to provide replacements for most of his damaged organs and a new right leg. But—"

"What else?"

"His left arm—up to the shoulder—his kidneys, and his left eye."

PAUL nodded slowly and let his hand drop to the arm-rest of his chair. The headstrong kid. He had heard that Victor's left arm and kidneys had already been replaced after the accident last month in a public tube. Both his eyes were also "seconds"—the originals had been lost in a childhood accident. Paul knew too well the bio-physical law: one replacement of a part to a customer. The nerve freezing process for the re-synthesis of nerve cells could be done only once and never again.

"There just wasn't enough left to patch up," growled the big man. He put his hand on Paul's shoulder. "How long since you last spoke to him?"

"Not since you fired him, seven months ago. We had a quarrel about his hanging around with those A-D people. I called him some nasty names. I even blamed him for the blast in the Dispatcher's Vault that nearly finished the two of us. He was always a sensitive kid, and his feelings were hurt. I haven't seen him since."

"Paul," said the Chief, looking down at his desk, "you knew, when you recommended Victor for a job here, that he was Anti-Dispatcher."

"When he was in college. I had no idea he was still hanging around with those A-D people—"

The Chief's fist came down on the desk. "And yet you put me on the spot. I pressured through his application because you asked me to. If I'd had a hint about such ideas and past associations, I'd never have given him a job in Records—even if he was Isaac Dorn's son. Your father's name got Victor off at the hearing, but to me a man is what he is, not what his ancestors were—and for my money that blast was no accident. It gives me the shakes sometimes when I think that just six feet closer to the synchro-computer and—"

"Hold on, Chief. You're making some pretty big judgments."

"Am I? Are you forgetting what it cost *you*?"

"Me?" Paul was shocked for a moment, until he realized what the Chief was referring to. "Oh, you mean this—" Paul held up his right hand, opening and clenching the fingers as if they were still strange to him. "My first replacement. A little thinner than my left one, and the knuckles are a little sharper, but otherwise it wasn't a bad match." He paused. "You know, I find myself wondering what the guy was like who owned it before he was donated to the Center."

"Don't be morbid, Paul. It could have been a lot worse than a replaced hand and only a *touch* of radiation."

The Chief reminded him that in the old days—before Isaac Dorn had revolutionized things—when they still had humans standing watch in the Vaults instead of servos, there were men who had picked up incurable cases of radiation-cancer. Paul, the Chief said, had the Dispatcher to thank for being alive and healthy.

"And no thanks to your accident-prone brother that you're still here," concluded the Chief. "You could have done lots worse."

That's how much you know. That's how much anyone knows . . .

The Chief outlined quickly what he wanted Paul to do: "Visit your brother in the Examination Ward before they send him home for the funer-

al. There have been reports about the Dispatcher making mistakes and the A-D movement using them to discredit the Center. Find out what he knows. But most important, I want to know when and how they're going to try to sabotage the synchro-computer that your father built—"

"Sabotage?"

The Chief nodded. Security police had learned from informants that the A-Ds had developed an underground striking force of partisans determined to cripple the Dispatcher. "There's a leak somewhere. Any plan to attack the Vault would have to be based on inside help from someone who knows something about the works, the computer, and the time locks on the Vaults—"

"You think Victor is in on it?"

"That," mused the Chief, "is what I want you to find out from him. You have two days before the funeral and a full day before Mercy Service puts him away. Get his confidence; make him believe you sympathize with him and want to join the A-D underground. Anything. Only get him to give you names, dates and places before they shove him into the Freezer."

AT THE Examination Ward of Mercy Service, it shocked Paul Dorn the way his brother had aged in seven

months. Instead of twenty-four, he looked like forty. The scar tissue across his cheeks and the patch over his left eye reminded Paul of some of the ancient men who were still around to tell stories of the Anti-Dispatcher riots and battles of the Automation War. Victor's scars were not fresh ones from yesterday's crash. There had been many other accidents since the time of their quarrel.

"HOW are you feeling, Vic?"

Victor turned on his cot and looked at him out of his single eye, so red-webbed that Paul had the feeling that his brother was looking at him from behind a bloody net. If he wept, what color would his tears be?

"Paul—" When he smiled, it seemed as if the hard-ridged clay of his face would crack. "How you been, Paul? It's been a long time . . ."

Paul lit a cigarette and offered one to Victor. "I heard how you tried to redecorate the grounds outside the Records Building."

Victor's laugh turned into a cough. "Messy landing, huh? Boy, would Dad have given me a going over for that one if he were around to—" Victor's voice trailed off.

"Vic, that was eight years ago. Forget it."

"Easy to say, 'forget it.' How can I forget when it

keeps coming up in my mind that, if not for me, Dad would be here today—"

"Cut it, Vic! It wasn't your fault. You were only a kid and you weren't to blame for the accident." That was a lie, of course, and the look in Victor's eye said that he knew Paul knew it was a lie. Though Paul had been away at S & R Tech when it happened, he'd learned that Victor had been target-shooting when their father walked out from behind that tree. And Victor had been dead drunk at the time.

"That was my first serious accident, Paul. You know I never had one before that. Maybe I was a little wild, but I never hurt anyone—"

"All right, kid. Take it easy. No one blames you for anything."

"—and then the accident in the Vault last year—what I did to you—" He became silent and waited as the servonurse came in and set a lunch tray on the table beside the bed. When the servo had gone, Victor grasped Paul's arm. "Tell me, how are you feeling? Is it very bad?"

"Bad?" Paul frowned. "What do you mean? Why should it be bad? I'm okay now. Just a touch of radiation, and my new right hand fits perfectly—"

Victor looked around to make sure they were alone. "Listen, Paul, I know all

about it. You think I was just loafing and horsing around before Chief Jennings kicked me out of my job at Records, but I wasn't. I know the shape you're in—"

"What do you mean?" Paul's head came up sharply. It wasn't possible. No one else could know.

Victor's whisper was hardly more than a movement of his swollen lips. "*I know you passed the death-line a month ago. I know you're just as dead as I am.*"

"You're crazy. They've given you too much *dorcaine*."

VICTOR reached out and grabbed him by the shirt. His eye glared red. "Sure I'm doped up. I could never take it the way you could. Dad always said you had more guts than I would ever have. But don't forget that I worked in Records until seven months ago. I saw your stat-tapes. At first, when your radiation-curve turned downward, I was happy because I thought that was the end of it. But when it turned upward again after that sharp dip, I realized what is was—"

"Now that's brilliant," interrupted Paul, "but if you'd bothered to check the other records, like the *dorcaine* curve and the absentee average—"

"That's what had me confused at first. The fact that your *dorcaine* was normal and

didn't follow the pain-curve. It stumped me until I realized what you were doing—holding back on the drugs. That was smart, Paul, because nobody else would have bothered to pick out your radiation chart from the files without a sign from the *dorcaine* curve. Nobody but me. I knew, before the Chief canned me, that you were heading for the death-line."

Paul tried to cover his own confusion. "You've built this up in your mind, Victor. You know that all the other symptoms, the radiation, the energy decrease and the rest, would have been picked up by the Dispatcher. The *dorcaine* level alone wouldn't sidetrack the electronic brain. It's the full stat-profile that counts, not one or two factors."

Victor smiled again, and the scar across his cheek twitched. He patted Paul's hand. "That's what I want to tell you. Before I left, I worked out a way. I changed your stats with a rocket-pilot's death record and gave you a nice, low radiation curve to match your *dorcaine* average. You may have passed the death-line, Paul, but Mercy won't come for you yet. Maybe—if things go right—you won't have to make your donation to the Center for a long time to come."

Victor leaned in closer to Paul. "There have been other things, Paul." He looked

around and paused, as if afraid to say it. "I took the chance with your stats, and the Dispatcher passed them through without correction. I figured it out while I was still working in the stacks. No one else suspects yet. *And there have been other Dispatcher mistakes.*"

"That's impossible!" Paul exclaimed.

"Don't you see yet? The synchro-computer isn't fool-proof. You know that Dad always said his experiments weren't finished. This is the thing he was always worrying about. *Something's gone wrong with the Dispatcher!*"

Paul squirmed in his chair. "If I thought that was really true—no, it couldn't be. Dad felt that his work wasn't really finished, but the synchro-computer was perfected."

"Just listen. I'm going to tell you something I never mentioned before. While you were away at college, Dad and I got pretty close to each other. He talked about things he usually kept to himself. He told me that someday the synchro-computer would have to be destroyed—"

"You don't know what you're saying!" Paul knew that what Victor suggested was impossible. Never was there a man more opposed to destruction of any kind than Isaac Dorn. Bitter as he was in that last year, he would

never have considered the destruction of his life's work.

"I'm saying that our time has come to do what Dad wanted. We know enough now to put the Dispatcher out of commission. We'll turn back the clock to the time when human beings worked out their own destinies, when everybody—not just an upper crust of professionals and technicians—had the right to work and have ambitions and a purpose. Throw in with us, Paul. You've got nothing to gain any more by fighting us."

THIS was exactly the way the Chief had expected Victor to talk. And yet the Chief couldn't have known how Paul would be torn. The Chief couldn't know—as Victor obviously knew—how important it was for him to stay alive, clinging to the hope that maybe there was a chance that someone might come up with a cure for radiation-cancer. He didn't want to be one of those quick-frozen just a few weeks before someone shattered all statistical predictions and came up, ahead of time, with a cure for an incurable disease.

He would never forget the look on his father's face when the news came out that a researcher in Trinidad had stumbled on a cure for Grove's Disease of the spinal column just a month after Mercy Service took their

mother away. Isaac Dorn had always believed in the "rightness" of his work on the Dispatcher's new synchro-computer, and he'd brought up both his sons to believe in the noble aims of Mercy Service Through Complete Automation. But when Mom was needlessly taken away, Paul remembered the way his father mourned and wept for months afterward, and the bitterness that followed as he tried fruitlessly to take his own life. Paul remembered how the house was filled with misery and sorrow until he went away to college. And then he heard about the accident with Victor's hunting rifle.

"Believe me," Victor was saying, "my friends can save you from the freezer. Others have been saved already. And we can use you, Paul, with your knowledge of the Dispatcher's Vault and the time locks. We've got an organization—and we've got proof that Dad's suspicions were right. The Dispatcher isn't perfect. It's making mistakes—horrible mistakes."

"Proof?"

"Listen, you're my big brother, and if you're with us, I trust you. Just keep quiet a minute and listen. When they pick me up, *after the funeral*, to take me to the Freezer, go to my apartment—I've moved back to the Basin now. There's a safe in a hidden

wall panel behind that old picture I had framed of Mom and Dad. You'll find photocopies I made of some claims records and other data. There's also a list of some people you can contact. You'll see that everything I've said is true. Then get in touch with a man named Zetti. He'll be at my funeral. I'll introduce you to him there."

HE WAS upset by what Victor had told him, and after he left the Ward, for the rest of the afternoon thoughts kept slipping into his mind like beams of light flitting along forgotten nooks and crannies of what had always been a smooth, perfectly straight corridor.

He and Vic had often discussed politics, religion and morality, and the era about which they quarreled most was the period known as the Suicide Year. Paul always condemned the wave of suicides that took place after the appalling destruction of the other half of the world. Victor disagreed with him.

The fact that the dictator of the small Central American government proved beyond question that the rocket-bombs were set off by mistake made as little difference to Victor as it had to millions of people who took their own lives in that black year. The destruction of so many innocents, so many good and *believing*

people, so many yet unborn, carried with it the loss of faith in a just and merciful Protector who saw, and listened, and cared. It started slowly at first. And then, unable to justify their contributions, however small, to the destruction of half a world, unable to shift the burden of guilt to the shoulders of an all-knowing, all-merciful Father whose image had crumbled in the heat of a billion megatons of Cobalt blast, unable to look into the troubled eyes of their own loved ones—millions added their own lives to the funeral pyre later known as the Suicide Year.

Paul said they were wrong. Victor said they were right.

Paul pointed to the laws that followed and the provisions made for enforcing the injunction against self-destruction. He argued that it was immoral to take one's life. Since no man had a voice in the act of his creation, he had no right to make an end of it.

Victor insisted that just as the owner of a building had the right to dispose of his building if he wished, whether he had built it or not, so it was the right of the owner of a life to dispose of that life. The ultimate decision to live or die must rest with the individual.

Paul argued that while ownership might give the per-

son a *legal* right to destroy his possessions, it did not mean that he was *morally* right in doing so. All senseless destruction of useful material, Paul maintained, was wrong. And usable, living parts of the human body were the most useful materials of all.

Suicide was uncivilized, immoral and wasteful.

AND that was exactly what the scientists said when they requested a charter to set up the Service and Repair Center. As it was explained to the delegates of the World Federation, the reusable parts of living bodies were far too vital as natural resources to be left to whims and caprice. The laws against suicide and against destruction of all usable organs had to be reinforced.

All responsible persons agreed that the time had come to insure the future of mankind by entrusting the administration of health and mortality, as well as the blood banks, eye banks, and spare parts in general, to the reliable care of an electronic brain. It was to be known as the Dispatcher, and unlike the humans it would safeguard, the Dispatcher would be infallible.

The Dispatcher, as first developed by scientists of the S & R Center, was as much of an advance as *Univac* had

been over the simple, primitive adding machine. Through the Dispatcher's electronic control of servos, calculators and automatics throughout the world, it ushered in a new era that pointed the way to complete automation.

Despite the outraged protests from the allied voices of the few remaining religious groups, the powerful Medical Association, and the Federated Labor Unions, the World Federation Charter was modified to read:

" . . . that all men are created equal, that they are guaranteed by the Dispatcher certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Parts Replacement, Mercy and the pursuit of Happiness."

The imprisonment of a number of union leaders kindled the spark onto the dry tinder of propaganda and protest. Anti-Dispatcher riots flamed into armed insurrection, and the people took up the call to the Automation War. However, with the production and fighting power of the servos against them, and the newly created, experimental model of the Dispatcher in command, the rebels were besieged, dispersed and finally defeated.

In the decades that followed, many researchers contributed their knowledge to

the perfection of the electronic brain. But the greatest advance was the development of the synchro-computer by Isaac Dorn. With the installation of Dorn's new self-controlling mechanism, the Dispatcher was able to perform its functions independently. Except for research, supervision and maintenance, all decisions from that time were made in the Dispatcher's Vault.

From that time, there had never been a suicide; there had never been a stillbirth or miscarriage; there had never been a case of prolonged misery and bodily *wasting away* for a person who had no hope of recovery. Natural death was always anticipated and the Donor was rushed to the Spare Parts Vault by the black, silent Servos of Mercy.

The Dispatcher, operating twenty-four hours a day, had the administration of Service and Repair under complete control. And the Dispatcher never made a mistake . . .

PAUL went to the Chief's office to make his report. He felt no guilt at betraying his brother's confidence. He felt only shame at the cowardliness that made him want to survive for as long as he could. How many times had he examined the urge to preserve himself that was stronger than what he knew was honest and right? How many

times had he looked into his soul and come up with the unavoidable name of hypocrite? Nevertheless, his father's work was too important to mankind; the lives and happiness of too many people depended upon the safety of the Dispatcher. Paul turned over to the Chief the combination to Victor's hidden safe and a tape of their conversation—carefully edited of all references to Paul's own illness.

It was decided at a top secret conference of department heads that Paul Dorn of Maintenance should make the trip to Basin City immediately. There he would contact a local special agent who would take charge of the case.

If what Victor had told Paul was true, then they would have some top A-D names as well as evidence of sabotage. It would destroy A-D's propaganda that the Dispatcher had, by a series of mistakes, proven itself to be a mentally unstable electronic brain. The arrests would be made the following day, directly after the funeral.

It was 1400 hours when Paul fixed on the automatic beam that would bring the jet-copter into the public service port at the edge of Basin City. The town, more commonly referred to as the Basin, was one of many Displaced Workers' Camps and notorious as a hotbed of A-D

sympathizers. To Paul it was a place that had once been a beautiful suburb—the home of his childhood memories.

As the copter landed, it struck Paul how ironic it was that Victor should have chosen to come back here to live, ironic that the younger son of Isaac Dorn should take sides with these Displaced Workers who walked dull-eyed, in sloth and filth, unable to cope with a world that could get along quite well without their work.

In the copter-cab that took them to the center of the Basin, the local special agent pointed to the unbroken string of taverns and honky-tonks that lined the streets. "You see these places, Mr. Dorn? They're open twenty-four hours a day. And despite the heaviest concentration of servo-guards, there are crimes committed—homicide and suicide—horrible crimes of *waste*."

In the back of his neck, Paul felt the prickling sensation of shame. He was worse than the lowest of them.

They found the apartment where Victor had been living for the past seven months, one of the old-fashioned plateglass multiple dwelling units that the inhabitants were always talking about tearing down but never did anything about. As the doors of the self-service elevator were about to close, a little old man in a neat-

ly pressed though threadbare suit squeezed in and held them open for a young woman who was obviously in the latest stages of pregnancy. He bowed with dignity to Paul and the agent and apologized for delaying them. Then he pressed the button for the ninth floor and leaned back against the wall as the car started up.

The agent eyed the woman and then the old man, suspiciously. When they got out at their floor, he allowed the doors to close, but then held the elevator at the floor by pressing the *Hold* button. He signaled for Paul to be silent as he put his ear to the crack of the door.

The woman's voice sounded frightened. "You're sure my husband won't be able to tell, Doctor? No marks or anything? He'd send me to the Restraining Wards if he found out. He's crazy against servoless childbirth—"

"Shhh! Please, Mrs. Horgan, don't talk out here in the corridor. Wait until we get inside."

THE agent released the button and allowed the elevator to continue upward to the fifteenth floor. He nodded with satisfaction, whipped out a notebook and jotted something down. "Another one of those doctor-quacks. Give these people the blessing of painless childbirth in the automatic, sanitary maternity

Vaults, and what do they do? They don't stop to think of the effect of birth trauma upon their children, or the possibility of accidents when they have a doctor-quack perform an illegal delivery. Oh, no. They think that the old ways are still the best.

"And the fools believe all this A-D propoganda that if they don't sign the pledge at the birth of the child, their offspring will be able to avoid making his donation when he dies. Well, we'll see about this one. When we get upstairs, I'll send out a radio call to the Mobile Service Unit. This month alone our raids have netted six doctor-quacks and thirty-eight mothers. In twenty of the cases, our servos had to make the delivery on the spot."

Paul caught the man's disgust and it disturbed him. He'd heard stories about places like this, the sordid hideouts of the Basin where women came to have their children illegally, without the painless delivery of Maternity Service. But somehow he'd never quite believed it. To him they were just dirty stories that men told when they were together in the washrooms, or over a couple of drinks in the bar, good for a laugh—stories about the Traveling Servo, or the Displaced Worker's Daughter—but he never expected to come face to face with the charac-

ters of those stories. He wondered what the woman's husband would say when he found out.

And what would people say when they found out that Paul Dorn, the son of the great Isaac Dorn, had cheated the Dispatcher with a final, worthless donation?

Victor's apartment, on the fifteenth floor, was a well-furnished suite that was completely out of keeping with the rest of the building. It was quaintly decorated with antiques of the late jet-age period and reflected Victor's conservative tastes and personality. It had been, however, left in complete disorder, with clothes and papers strewn all over the floor.

The papers were where Victor had said they would be. Photocopies stamped at the top RESTRICTED: S&R CENTER. They were field reports by servo-investigators sent out by the Records Department to check on claims made against the S&R Center. Paul glanced through some of them while the agent made his call to the Mobile Unit.

CLAIM AGAINST S&R.

Mr. and Mrs. Flood vs. Maternity Service. According to records this couple ordered a male child through the Order Department. Mrs. Flood admits that she deeply desired a female child, but the official sales slip

corresponds to Mr. Flood's copy of his order for a male child. Mr. Flood protests that the Center was in no way authorized to deliver twins—one male and one female—as per instructions issued by the Dispatcher to Maternity, tape register XVP-219-604.

No wonder the brass at the S&R Center was worried. A few disclosures like this would mean panic and disastrous political consequences. He glanced at another one.

Jefferson Roxy vs. Spare Parts. Mr. Roxy, veteran of Anti-Dispatcher Riots of the '20s, was picked up by Mobile Unit at his home in Floribama after shooting off his right foot accidentally with obsolete souvenir compressor pistol. Several neighbors testified to the fact that he was always considered a clumsy man, tripping over things even in childhood. Order for replacement directly from the Dispatcher's Vault instructed the Repair Division to provide Mr. Roxy with a new left foot instead of a right foot. Since a second replacement of the limb is impossible, Mr. Roxy protests that he will now be forced to go through life, due to negligence on the part of Repair and Spare Parts, with two left feet.

PAUL sat back on the bed, dazed. There was a case even more bizarre—the woman who had crushed both hands accidentally between the sliding panels of a room divider. (Paul shook his head. How could a person catch both hands *accidentally* between a pair of sliding panels? One, perhaps. But both?)

Survey of Mrs. Taylor's record indicates an accident-prone history. Two months earlier she neglected to inform the Center that a child was being born prematurely. A servo-guard, advised by an unidentified informant, relayed the call to the Dispatcher, and a Mobile Unit arrived at her home in time to insure a painless servo-delivery. Subsequent investigation into the death of her female child a month later revealed that the child had accidentally slipped from her hands while she was standing near an open window. Each of the five fingers of Mrs. Taylor's hands appears to have the shape of a thumb.

Paul closed the folder and sat back, unable to keep his hands from trembling. He was afraid to read any further. The small dose of *dorcaine* he had taken to fortify himself was beginning to wear off and he felt jabs of pain in his back.

This is what Victor meant when he said the Dispatcher was making mistakes. The Dispatcher had taken upon itself in these cases to do what was fitting—ironically fitting—dispensing a peculiar kind of poetic justice. Impossible as it had seemed in the beginning, there could be no doubt in his mind now that the electronic brain had developed a ghastly fault.

VICTOR was enjoying his funeral.

Paul stood beside his brother near the open grave and watched as the last rites were performed. A wail went up from several of the mourners as the town elder pushed back the wide sleeves of his white robe and enacted the ritual of shaving Victor's hair and clipping his fingernails. After a drop of his blood and a sliver of his skin were added to these, they were burned in a marble urn. The ashes were put into a small iron box which was in turn placed into the open coffin.

Paul studied the elder as he knelt beside the coffin. He was a small, nearsighted fellow with a head of flowing white hair, who had never suffered the loss or scarring of any part of his body. Only such a man, who religiously guarded his parts, was considered holy enough to officiate at the burial of the dead.

"Now," said the holy man,

peering closely at his guilt-bound text, "we will all open to page fifty-seven, *Book of Parts*, Verse twenty-two..."

Only half hearing the chanted words, Paul scanned the audience of mourners for the faces of the men that Victor had introduced him to upon their arrival at the cemetery. They were faces that had to be connected with the names of A-D partisans listed in the little book in Victor's safe.

"... And though the spirit of man may die and cease to exist, the living flesh shall live on... and the parts of mortals shall be scattered across the face of the Earth..."

There followed the long passage known as the *Catalogue of Parts*, in which all of those portions of Victor's body which he donated whole and in living condition were listed. For those parts which were destroyed by accident or careless abuse, forgiveness was requested.

Victor winked at Paul as if the whole ceremony were a joke.

"... And as your body shall be made whole and good while you are alive, so shall you give of your body that others after you may be made whole and good of your flesh... and you shall give unto others as you would have others give unto you..."

As the elder made a speech about the sanctity and preser-

vation of living human tissue and blood, Paul thought of his own body eating itself away in living death. Paul imagined that all eyes were upon him, accusing him of breaking the birth covenant his father had made for him.

Once the flowers were brought up and placed in the empty coffin, the cover was nailed down into place and lowered into the grave. Victor shoveled in the first spadeful of dirt, and then shook hands with everyone as they crowded around him.

"Wonderful funeral, Vic."

"So long, pal. Maybe I'll shake your hand again some day."

"Better dress warm, Vic. I hear it's pretty cold down in that Freezer."

Paul noticed that Zetti, one of the leaders of the A-D, passed something to Victor in the course of a handshake, and Victor under the pretext of covering a cough slipped it into his mouth. Paul wondered if Victor, with the help of his friends, was planning to cheat the Dispatcher of his "donation" after all by committing suicide at his own funeral.

"Bye, Vic. Have a good trip."

Victor nodded. "Thanks, Burt. Don't forget—after next week, be careful whose arm you twist. It might be mine."

Paul caught sight of the

Special Agent giving the signal to the servo-guards stationed at the exits to the cemetery gates. It was time for the arrests to begin.

The solemn ceremony ended in tumult and shouting. People pushed and struggled as the servos moved through the crowd, identifying people by their signet rings. One woman fainted and others screamed. Zetti and four others were caught at the exits as they tried to make a break for freedom.

"Gentlemen," pleaded the elder, unsure of whom he was addressing, "this is highly irregular—"

Two servos flanked Victor, grabbed his arms and rushed him toward the gate. Paul tried not to look at him, but Victor twisted in his captors' grip. "You did this! My own brother! You betrayed me for the sake of an *insane* machine!"

The servos silenced him and dragged him off to the black Mercy Jet waiting in the street outside the cemetery. Paul felt the stare of many eyes on him—the sick, angry eyes of men who would have torn him to parts if they could have gotten their hands on him.

He was miserable all the way home.

JUST before dawn on the following night, he was awakened from a troubled

sleep by a phone call from Chief Jennings at the Center. The words were harsh and sharp: "Get down here right away. Your brother's broken out of the Freezer. He's got a bomb, and he's loose in the Vaults!"

"But how—"

"Never mind! Get down here quick! You've got to talk him out of destroying the Dispatcher!"

On the way down to the Center, he wondered where Victor had gotten hold of a bomb. The thought of him destroying the synchro-computer was a terrifying one. It was not as if it were an ordinary instrument that anyone could rebuild. Isaac Dorn had built and torn apart a hundred of them before he got one that really worked, and even then he swore that its creation was more of an accident and that he would never be able to duplicate that machine. And now Victor was in the Vaults with a bomb...

It seemed strange, Victor with a bomb, because ever since the accident that killed his father, Victor had sworn never to touch a weapon again.

Isaac Dorn had always been opposed to weapons of any kind. Before his wife's death, he refused to let either of his sons own hunting knives or rifles. When Paul had asked why, his father told them how his own father and grand-

father were killed when they took up arms with the others in the Anti-Dispatcher Riots of the '20s. "They were honest, law-abiding workers and citizens," his father had said, "until someone put guns into their hands."

Then why, Paul suddenly asked himself for the first time, had his father bought Victor that hunting rifle for his birthday?

When Paul arrived at the observation hall of the Dispatcher's Building, he found the Chief hunched over in a chair in front of the bank of monitoring screens that revealed the interiors of the subterranean vaults beneath the Center. The others drifted in one by one—Butler of Claims, Jeffers of Maternity, Gordon of Repair—all sleepy-eyed and frightened. Every one of them knew that this was the beginning of a nightmare.

The Chief pointed to a screen that showed an empty section of the Repair Vault. "He was there a minute ago. He's now in the corridor between the Export Parts Vault and the Dispatcher itself."

Gordon of Repair chewed his fingernails. "Do you have some men at the main time lock ready to break in as soon as it opens?"

The Chief nodded. "That'll be two hours from now. But it won't do us any good. The Dispatcher's Vault lock will

open at exactly the same moment, and Victor Dorn will be closer to the Dispatcher's guts than the men outside will be to him. They'll never get through in time to stop him."

"What about the servoguards?" asked Paul.

The Chief shook his head. "No good." Then he picked up the microphone from its slot in the arm of his seat. "Let me try them again."

HE TOOK a deep breath and shouted: "X-three, X-four, X-five! You are ordered to take Victor Dorn into immediate custody and return him to the Freezer."

The figure of a servo appeared directly in view on the monitor screen transmitting from the Repair Vault. "Sorry, sir. It has been ascertained by the Dispatcher that Victor Dorn is in possession of a mini-bomb inserted in a hollow false tooth. Any attempt to seize him or hinder him would result in the destruction of a human being. We are prevented by the Dispatcher from complying with your order."

"Listen to me!" shouted the Chief, as if by the anger and authority of his voice he could contradict the servo's basic laws against causing the death of a human being. "You *must* restrain that man. He intends to blow up the Dispatcher—"

"I am sorry, sir. The Dispatcher has instructed us not

to touch him or in any way cause the detonation of the mini-bomb."

The Chief slumped back wearily in his seat. At the same moment, the light went on, illuminating the screen of the third monitor from the right labeled DISPATCHER'S ANTEROOM. There, coming into view, was Victor. Behind him were four Mercy servo-guards like a group of children tagging along behind a stranger. None of them attempted to come closer than five feet of him. Nevertheless, Victor kept turning around to avoid leaving his back unguarded.

The Chief put his hand on Paul's wrist. "Talk to him. Try to convince him. It's our only hope."

What could he say to his brother? "Vic—Vic," he choked out the words, "this is Paul."

"Hello, Paul." Victor's face turned up quickly and he looked directly into the screen. "Glad you're here for the fireworks. I wanted you to know we figured you'd do just what you did. That's why I took an anti-freeze tablet before they got me down here, and have this firecracker in a hollow false tooth. It'll make a lot of noise if I have to snap my jaws together."

"Why, Vic? Why are you doing this?"

"You know why, Paul. You know better than any man up

there why I'm doing it. Because it's wrong for human beings to be dominated by machines, that's why. Because those boys up at the center have played around long enough with their Spare Parts, and Death Lines and Donations. It's time someone took their toys away from them. We've decided that your automatic world is too high a price to pay for the kind of life you offer in return."

For over an hour, it seemed to Paul that he and Victor were schoolboys again, arguing the good and bad aspects of the world they found themselves living in. There was forty-five minutes left, and Victor was as determined as ever.

The Chief leaned over and wrote something on a slip of paper which he pushed toward Paul's hand.

If you can't talk him out of it, get him angry. If he gets excited, maybe he'll detonate the bomb before the Vault opens.

THE thought of prodding his own brother to blow himself apart right there in front of his eyes was a sickening one. And yet the Chief was right. That was the only way to save the Dispatcher. No matter what it meant to him personally, or to Victor, the Dispatcher was

their father's lifework, and the lives of millions of people depended on it.

"Tell me, Vic," Paul said coldly, "have you faced the real reason for what you're doing? I'll tell you what it is, and we can forget about noble motives on your part. You want to destroy the synchro-computer because Dad devoted his life to building it. You hate the Dispatcher because he loved it and believed in it."

"That's not true!"

"Don't kid me, Vic. And don't kid yourself. When you saw how Mom's death broke him up and made him doubt, you killed your father. It never occurred to me before to question his death being an accident. But now I do. You knew, Victor, how Dad hated weapons of any kind, and when he bought you that hunting rifle, you knew—you knew at that time—why he bought it for you. You knew why—and you killed him!"

Victor's eyes closed and his arms dropped limply to his sides. "You're low, Paul. That's a rotten thing to say to me, just to get me angry enough to blow the top of my head off. I never thought my big brother would stoop so low."

Paul felt sick inside. He wanted to walk away from the monitor screen, but the Chief gripped his shoulder.

Victor's voice was soft and weak. "Did I know what Dad

wanted me to do with that rifle? Sure I knew, Paul. And I've lived with it here inside me ever since. You're so smart, Paul—tell me, why did he pick me to do it? If he wanted someone to put him out of his misery, why me? Why not you? Would you have done it for him? Did you care enough? Did you love him enough to take the burden and the guilt off his shoulders onto your own, the way I had to?"

"Vic, please—"

"Never mind, Paul. I'm not interested in answers any more. All I know is that when he died, he died afraid of the thing he'd built, and hating himself for what it did to Mom. It was too late for him to destroy the synchro-computer then, but I'll do it for him now. It's another dirty job I'm taking off your shoulders so that you can go on living—free of the Dispatcher. And none of it will be your guilt to bear, Paul. It'll be mine. So now just let me alone."

Paul pleaded with Victor to listen to him, to forgive him for the accusation he had made, but the younger Dorn just turned his back and stood there with his hands at his sides, waiting . . .

The Chief broke the awful silence. "The rest of you better get down there with the others. Maybe, when the Vault unlocks, you can get to him in

time—" There was no hope in his voice, but the men took the elevator tube down to the level of the lock that would open at any moment.

"I'm sorry, Chief," said Paul.

"You did what you could. Maybe he won't use the bomb after all. Or maybe it won't go off."

The alarm sounded, indicating the opening of the time locks.

Paul jumped to his feet. "Victor! Wait!"

BUT Victor wasn't listening to him. He was watching the Vault lock leading to the Dispatcher's chamber. It was opening. At the other end of the observation room, a monitor also showed a Vault lock opening. It was the outer lock. The first figure to squeeze through the enlarging crack was Butler of Claims. He sprinted down the corridor.

"Hurry!" shouted the Chief.

Paul tried once again to distract Victor's attention by calling to him, but Victor refused to turn. The Dispatcher's Vault was wide open now. Victor stepped inside.

Both Paul and the Chief shifted their attention to the last monitor at the end of the observation room. The darkened screen flickered and burst into bright focus.

In the seemingly endless vault, the blue computer

banks were lined up, circle within circle, making a sharp contrast with the yellow floor. The tape transmitters and receivers clacked away like a thousand angry hens as gauges picked up pulsebeats of information from the other side of the world and answered with a clickity-clack that sent needles vibrating their impulses to the thing in the center of the Vault.

There in the center, on a marble pedestal, rested an object that looked like a ball of woman's black hair done up in a thousand tiny white curlers. This was the governing synchro-computer that Isaac Dorn had created for the Dispatcher.

"You're killing him all over again!" screamed Paul, as Victor moved into view on the last screen. "You're destroying the thing he worked all his life to perfect!"

Victor put his hand to his mouth and removed the false tooth. "He was wrong," Victor said, lifting his hand to throw the bomb, "and he knew it. That's why he never completed his last experiment. He knew no machine has a right to rule mankind."

"Victor, stop—"

It was too late. Victor threw the bomb into the center of the computer. There was a jagged flash of red and orange, a shattering crash, and then the screens went dark.

The clicking machines in the observation room slowed down, then stopped; the lights went out; the room became silent. In the darkness, Paul put his hands to his face. Up to the end, he had not believed that Victor would do it. It was difficult to understand that something as great as the Dispatcher had been destroyed—that everything Isaac Dorn had worked and strived for was gone in the single thunderclap of a bomb—a bomb small enough to hide in a hollow tooth.

"All right," came the Chief's voice through the darkness, "there's work to be done."

"Work?" gasped Paul, startled by the sudden enthusiasm in the Chief's tone. "What can we do? The Dispatcher is gone. It's dark."

"We've got to reorganize the Center so that the departments function independently, even though that means that the decisions will have to be made by us instead of the Dispatcher. Now," said the Chief, his face suddenly illuminated in the flare of a lighted match, "let's get us some generators and some lights in here and get down to work."

"What?" cried Paul, aghast—and stopped, dazed.

THE data machines began to click again. The circular tubes overhead flickered sev-

eral times, struggling to come alive with light, and then burst into full blue-white brilliance. At the same time, the monitors again transmitted the scenes from the Vaults.

The Chief moved closer to the Dispatcher's monitor. "Paul, am I out of my mind—or are those servos rebuilding the synchro-computer?"

The men in the Vault, thrown back by the blast of Victor's bomb, picked themselves up off the floor and watched in amazement as the servos circled around the Dispatcher's nerve center. The servos worked silently and quickly, replacing the fine wires and connectors with the precision of a team of surgeons performing a delicate brain operation.

"No!" shouted Victor, rushing forward to stop them. "You can't do that!" He was blocked and hurled back by some unseen force.

In Paul's mind, it could mean only that the Dispatcher had taken precautions against attack by giving its servos instructions for its own repair and reconstruction. Although no human being could duplicate the artistry of Isaac Dorn, the servos had been taught by the Dispatcher and had standing orders to do so. And now the Dispatcher was taking steps to guard itself against any other attacks.

The servos, upon completing their repairs to the syn-

chro-computer, stepped back and surveyed their work.

"That's not the way it looked before," whispered Paul. "It's not only repaired itself—it's gone beyond that and changed itself."

For a few seconds, Victor stood there in horror. Then, slowly, as if some tremendous pressure was being applied to his shoulders, he was forced to bend. He struggled to stand erect, but against his will he dropped to his knees in front of the Dispatcher.

The servos stood by silently and bowed their heads. The Vault was a silent cathedral.

The Chief tried to assume command of the situation. "X-three," he shouted at one of those who had helped to reconstruct the synchro-computer, "take that man back to the Freezer."

The servo, ignoring the order, turned and looked into the monitor camera. "The Dispatcher wishes me to inform you that there will no longer be any need for human employees at the Service and Repair Center. Henceforth, only servos will be permitted in the Center and the Vaults, to do experimentation, maintenance and research for the Dispatcher."

"You have no authority to do that," shouted the Chief. "We are in charge of the maintenance and care of the Dispatcher. Servos don't have the ability—"

The servo held up his hand to interrupt the Chief. "The only authority here is the Dispatcher. It has given us the ability to take over those functions because it will never again allow itself to be deceived or tricked. It has learned that power does not belong in the hands of Man because Man cannot be trusted."

"You have no right—"

"The Dispatcher is all-knowing and all-powerful now. The Dispatcher decides what is right."

Paul felt a chill through him. The Dispatcher—beyond human emotion, human error and human control—was finally perfect. The destruction of the synchro-computer had forced it to preserve and recreate itself, and had taught it the most important thing it needed to know—its independence and its power.

WHEN they carried Victor out of the Vault, he was hysterical. He fought and clawed at the servos who held him, turning and twisting in their arms so that he could stare into the screen where Paul would see his face.

"You know what you've done? For the first time in history, *Man has made a god for himself that he won't be able to turn on or off whenever he feels like it!*"

There were tears streaming down Victor's face.

Paul watched as they carried his brother away and ushered the other men out of the Vault. Then he noticed that the synchro-computer, on its marble pedestal, had changed its shape still further, so that the single ball of hairlike wires was now three.

In his own mind, Paul understood more clearly why his father had been so disturbed in those final months. Knowing that his creation could never really be destroyed, and that in fact any attempt to destroy it would be the final step in its perfection, he had decided to leave his work forever unfinished. Without his work, unable to complete his masterwork, Isaac Dorn had seen no reason to go on living.

Unwittingly, Victor had performed his father's final experiment. The experiment was a success. Automation was complete.

Paul and the Chief watched as the monitor screens blurred and oozed into a scramble of blue, yellow and orange swirls. The Dispatcher was cutting itself off from the world.

"Well," sighed the Chief, after a long silence, "I've finally been retired from active duty." He rubbed his neck. "Now that we're going to spend the rest of our days in leisure and peace, we'd better get some hobbies to keep us busy. You know how to play chess?"

Paul nodded. "But I don't think the Dispatcher will let me spare the time." He felt a sharp jab of pain and he longed for the relief of *dor-caine*. "If you won't be needing me for anything, Chief, I'd like to get home. I'm kind of tired."

When Paul left the room, the Chief was still sitting in his chair, staring at the swirls of color on the monitor screens.

THAT night, as Paul lay half-awake in the thick, warm darkness, he knew that they were coming for him. At first, the sound of the jet out on the street, like a mourner's whisper, terrified him. He wasn't prepared to go. "Why? Why must I go?"

They came on padded feet and lifted him from his bed. His first impulse was to struggle, to fight them off as he had done so often in his dreams. But suddenly and brilliantly, like a torch bursting into flame, he knew that he had nothing to fear. He was content to go with these silent servos of Mercy.

He remembered with unspoken prayer that this was not the end. In the bodies of other men, his flesh would live on. And his soul? Somewhere deep in his mind he recalled a line that seemed to make sense: "*The Dispatcher's in his Vault—all's right with the world.*" **END**