

WORLDS OF Issue No. 25  
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# TOMORROW

SCIENCE FICTION

The Jagged Pink  
Marshmallow Kid

**W. MACFARLANE**

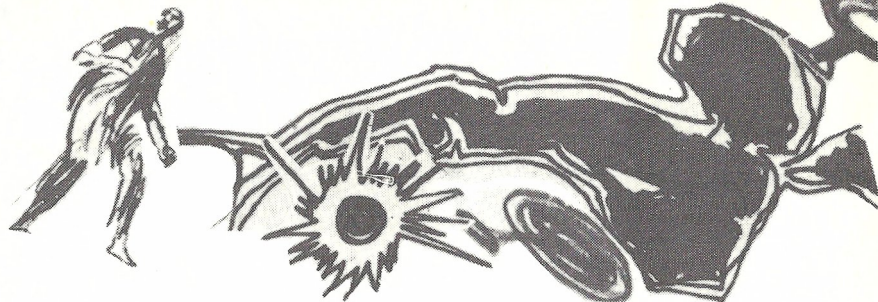


**COMPLETE NOVEL  
IN THIS ISSUE**

The Dream Machine  
**KEITH LAUMER**

Greyspun's Gift  
**NEAL BARRETT, JR.**

Seedling from the Stars  
**JOHN JAKES**

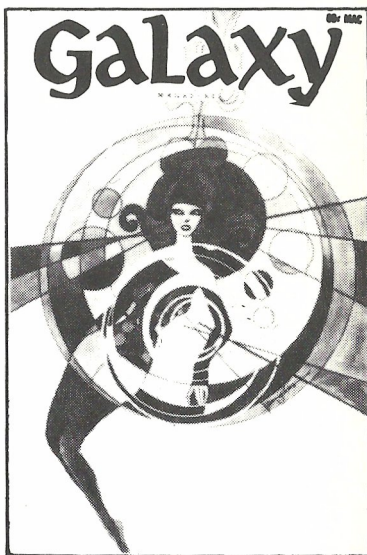


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# WORLDS OF

# TOMORROW

SCIENCE FICTION  
ALL STORIES NEW

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## CONTENTS

### COMPLETE NOVEL

**THE DREAM MACHINE** ..... 4  
Keith Laumer

### NOVELETTE

**UNSEEN WARRIORS** ..... 158  
Dean R. Koontz

### SHORT STORIES

**LOVE STORY** ..... 78  
Gary K. Wolf

**THE JAGGED PINK  
MARSHMALLOW KID** ..... 86  
W. Macfarlane

**SEEDLING FROM THE STARS** .... 98  
John Jakes

**NEWSOCRATS** ..... 116  
Pg Wyal

**THE CARD** ..... 132  
Phil Berger

**GREYSPUN'S GIFT** ..... 145  
Neal Barrett, Jr.

**OTHERMOTHER** ..... 185  
Reginald Whitaker

### FEATURE

**A PAGE FOR TOMORROW** ..... 2

Cover by **GAUGHAN**,  
suggested by **THE DREAM MACHINE**

## A PAGE FOR TOMORROW

*Peace on Earth* If you happened to drive past the Kent State campus on a June night, 1970, a big electric sign blazed the words at you and I guess your feelings were your own. I will not ask to know yours but I will tell you mine.

I felt better.

All around lay Ohio, June-green and strong, a beautiful state and in its own way more attuned to today and tomorrow—at least as a public entity—than much of the noisily “progressive” East. I don’t know, though you may, if Carl Stokes can play on any golf course in the state, but he *is* the mayor of Cleveland and Ohio voters put him there.

One (white) told me, “We don’t think of him as black or white; he’s better than that.”

That’s not backward thinking.

And at least one corporate giant, I know, invariably test-markets its product in Ohio—if Ohio buys it, the rest of the nation will.

So there was that sign—and I don’t think Ohio is buying what happened at Kent State in May of this year, when four students died under guns. Though Jackson, Mississippi, state police bought briefly.

And killed two.

The human young have a hard time—and have had since Herod ordered the deaths of all Bethlehem’s children to prevent one from succeeding him on the throne. And the Kid who survived never wanted the throne. I wonder how much of the latter kind of fear and envy underlies comments by today’s elders, like: “The kids have a helluva lot more now than I ever had—” and stiffens the hard-liners of the before-generation.

This is a young issue of *Worlds of Tomorrow*. About a year ago Keith Laumer and I found occasion to comment to each other on the mundanely incomprehensible antics—much in the news then—of one of our most popular young pols, when Keith said he had a book to write. The result is *The Dream Machine*—make of it what you will. *Love Story* is Gary K. Wolf’s first professional sale. *The Jagged Pink Marshmallow Kid* speaks for himself through W. MacFarlane. *Newsocrats*—does anybody dig Pg Wyal? Other than Pg Wyal?

Take care. The young are irreplaceable and school is open.

—JAKOBSSON

*These great minds were Rosicrucians . . .*



*Benjamin Franklin*



*Isaac Newton*



*Francis Bacon*

## WHAT SECRET POWER DID THEY POSSESS?

*Why were these men great?*

How does anyone — man or woman — achieve greatness? Is it not by mastery of the powers within ourselves?

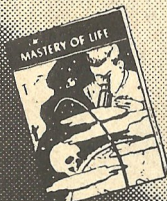
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KEITH LAUMER



# THE DREAM MACHINE

Asleep or awake, do we  
own our dreams—or do  
our dreams own us?

## I

THE room was big with deep rugs and damask walls, a fancy cornice and a big spiral chandelier that must have taken a family of Venetian glass cutters a year to put together. A big fellow with a long, solemn face and a big nose full of broken blood vessels met me just inside the door, shook my hand carefully and led me over to a long table with a deep wax finish where four other men sat waiting.

"Gentlemen, Mr. Florin," he said. The boys behind the table had faces that were curiously alike, and had enough in common with a stuffed flounder to take the edge off my delight in meeting them. If they liked my looks they didn't say so.

"Mr. Florin has consented to assist us—" Big-nose started.

"Not quite," I cut in. "I agreed to listen." I looked at the five faces and they looked back. Nobody offered me a chair.

"These gentlemen," my host said, "are the Senator's personal staff. You may have complete faith in their absolute discretion."

"Fine. What are we being discreet about?"

One of the men leaned forward and clasped hands with himself. He was a wizened little fellow with pinched, clay-pale nostrils and eyes like a bird of prey.

"Mr. Florin, you're aware that anarchists and malcontents threaten our society," he said in a voice like the whisper of conscience. "The candidacy of the Senator for the office of World Leader is our sole hope for continued peaceful progress."

"Maybe. What's it got to do with me?"

"Perhaps you've noticed," a plump man said, "that in recent days

the Senator's current campaign has suffered a loss of momentum."

"I haven't been watching lately."

"There have been complaints," the Bird-man said, "that he's repeating himself, failing to answer his opponents' attacks, that the dynamism is gone from his presentations. The complaints are justified. For three months now we've been feeding doctored tapes to the news media."

They were all looking at me. Silence hummed in the room. I glanced along the table, fixed on a man with bushy white hair and a mouth that was made to clamp onto a bulldog pipe.

"Are you telling me he's dead?" I said.

The white head shook slowly, almost regretfully.

"The Senator," he said solemnly, "is insane."

The silence after the punchline hung as heavy as a washer load of wet laundry. Or maybe heavier. I shifted around in my chair and listened to some throat-clearing. Horns tooted on a distant avenue. Wind boomed against the picture window with its view of lights laid out on blackness all the way to the horizon.

"The burdens under which he has labored for the past three years would have broken an ordinary man in half the time," the Bird-man said. "But the Senator is a fighter—as the pressure grew, he held on. But the strain told on him. He began to see enemies everywhere. In the end his obsessions hardened into a fixed delusional system. Now he thinks every hand is against him."

"He believes," Big-nose said, "that a kidnap plot is afoot. He imagines that his enemies intend to brainwash him, make him their puppet. Accordingly, it becomes his duty to escape."

"Tragic," I said, "but not quite in my line. You need a head doctor, not a beatup gumshoe."

"The finest neuro-psychologists and psychiatrists in the country have attempted to bring the Senator back to reality, Mr. Florin," Big-nose said. "They failed. It is therefore our intention to bring reality to the Senator."

"**O**UR plan is this," the Bird-man said, leaning forward with what was almost an expression on his face. "The Senator is determined to venture out incognito to take his chances alone in the City to discover his enemies. Very well—we'll see to it that he carries off his escape successfully."

"He imagines that by slipping free from his role as a man of



great affairs—by casting off the restraints of power and position—he can lose himself in the masses,” said Big-nose. “But he’ll find matters are not so simple as that. The analysts who’ve studied his case assure us that his sense of duty will not be so easily laid to rest. Difficulties will arise, conjured from the depths of his own mind. And as these imaginary obstacles confront him—he will find that they’re not, after all, imaginary.”

“A man who believes himself to be persecuted by unseen enemies, threatened with death, is, by definition, psychotic,” the Bird-man said. “But if he is, indeed, hunted? *What if his fears are true?*”

“We’ll make him sane by definition, Mr. Florin,” Big Nose said. “And having established a one-to-one relationship with reality, we will lead him back to sanity.”

“Neat,” I said. “But who provides the pink elephants? Or is it silver men in the closet?”

“We’re not without resources,” Big Nose said grimly. “We’ve arranged for a portion of the city to be evacuated, with the exception of certain well-briefed personnel. We’ve set up highly sophisticated equipment, keyed to his cephalic pattern, responsive to his brain. His movements will be tracked, his fantasies monitored—and appropriate phenomena will be produced accordingly—to match his fears.”

I looked along the table at them. They seemed to be serious.

“You gentlemen are expecting a lot from some stock trideo footage,” I said. “The Senator may be as batty as Dracula’s castle—but he’s no fool.”

Big-nose smiled bleakly. “We’re prepared to offer a demonstration, Mr. Florin.” He moved a finger and I heard the growl of heavy engines and a crunching and grinding that got closer and louder. The ash trays rattled on the table. The floor trembled; the chandelier danced. A picture fell from the wall. Then the wall bulged and fell in and the snout of a 10mm infinite repeater set in the bow of a Bolo Mark III pushed into the room and halted. I could smell the stink of dust and hot oil, hear the scream of idling turbines, the thud and rattle of bricks falling.

Big-nose lifted his finger again and the tank winked out and the wall was back in place, picture and all, and the only sound was me, swallowing, or trying to.

I got out my hanky and wiped my forehead and the back of my neck while they smiled at me in a nasty, superior way.

"Yeah," I said. "I take back that last crack."

"Believe me, Mr. Florin, everything the Senator experiences on his foray into the city will be utterly real—to him."

"It still sounds like a nutty scheme to me," I said. "If you brought me here to get the benefit of my advice, I say forget it."

"There's no question of forgetting it," the Bird-man said. "Only of your cooperation."

"Where do I crawl into the picture?"

"When the Senator sets out on his adventure," Big-nose said, "you'll go with him."

"I've heard of people's going crackers," I said. "I never heard of their taking a passenger along."

"You'll guard him, Florin. You'll see him safely through the very real dangers he'll face. And incidentally, you'll provide the channel through which we monitor his progress."

"I see. And what, as the man said, is in it for me?"

Bird-man speared me with a look. "You fancy yourself as a soldier of fortune, a man of honor, a lone warrior against the forces of evil. Now your peculiar talents are needed in a larger cause. You can't turn your back on the call of duty and at the same time maintain your self-image. Accordingly, you'll do as we wish." He sat back with a look that was as pleased as a look of his could ever get.

"It's a new twist," I said. "You're daring me to take your dare."

"The choice is simple," Big-nose said. "You know the situation. The time is now. Will you help, or will you not?"

"You warned me you had the advice of some high-powered psychologists," I said. "I should have known better than to argue. When does the experiment come off?"

"It's already underway. He's waiting for you now."

"He knows about me?"

"He imagines your arrival is a *finèsse* devised by himself."

"You've got all the answers, I see," I said. "Maybe that's good—provided you know all the questions."

"We've covered every eventuality we could foresee. The rest is up to you."

**T**WO of the committee—they called themselves the Inner Council—escorted me to a brightly lit room in the basement. Three silent men with deft hands fitted me into a new street-suit of a soft gray material that Big-nose said was more or less bullet-proof, as well as

being climate-controlled. They gave me two guns, one built into a finger-ring and the other a reasonable facsimile of a clip-pen. One of the technicians produced a small box of the type cultured pearls come in. Inside, nested in cotton, was a flake of pink plastic the size of a fish scale.

“This is a communication device,” he said. “It will be attached to your scalp behind the ear where the hair will conceal it. You will heed it implicitly.”

A pink-cheeked man I hadn't seen before came into the room and conferred with Big-nose in a whisper before he turned to me.

“If you're ready, Mr. Florin—” he said in a voice as soft as a last wish, and didn't wait for my answer. I looked back from the door. Four grim faces looked at me. Nobody waved bye-bye.

## II

I HAD heard of the Senator's summer retreat. It was a modest cottage of eighty-five rooms crowded into fifty acres of lawn and garden in the foothills sixty miles northeast of the city. My pilot dropped me in a clump of big conifers among a lot of cool night air and piny odors half a mile upslope from the lights of the house. Following instructions, I sneaked down through the trees, making not much more noise than a bull elk in mating season, and found the hole in the security fence right where they'd said it would be. A booted man with a slung power gun and a leashed dog paced past me fifty feet away without turning his head. Maybe he, too, was following instructions. When he had passed I moved up to the house.

The service door was almost hidden behind a nice stand of ground juniper. My key let me into a small room full of the smell of disinfectant. Another door let onto a narrow hall. Lights showed in a foyer to the right; I went left, prowled up three flights of narrow stairs, came out in a corridor walled in gray silk that almost reminded me of something—but I brushed that thought away. Up ahead a soft light was shining from an open doorway. I went toward it, through it into dimness and richness and an odor of waxed woodwork and Havana leaf and old money.

He was standing by an open wall safe, his back toward me; he turned as I came through the door. I recognized the shaggy blond-going-gray hair, the square-cut jaw with the cleft that brought in the female vote, the big shoulders in the hand-tailoring. His eyes were

blue and level and looked at me as calmly as if I were the butler he'd rung for.

"Florin," he said in a light, mellow voice that was not quite what I had expected. "You came." He put out his hand; he had a firm grip, well-manicured nails, no calluses.

"What can I do for you, Senator?" I said.

He paused for a moment before he answered, as if remembering an old joke.

"I suppose they've given you the story about my having gone insane? About my imagining there's a plot afoot to kidnap me?" Before I thought of an answer he went on. "That's all lies, of course. The truth is quite otherwise."

"All right," I said. "I'm ready for it."

"They're going to kill me," he said matter-of-factly, "unless you can save my life."

**H**E WAS giving me the old straight-from-the-shoulder look. I opened my mouth to ask the questions but instead went past him to the ivory telephone on the desk. He watched without saying a word while I checked it, checked the light fixtures, the big spray of slightly faded roses on the side table, the plumbing fixtures in the adjoining bathroom. I found three bugs and flushed them down the toilet.

"A properly spotted inductance mike can still hear us," I said. "So much for privacy in our modern world."

"How do things look—outside?" he asked.

I hedged. "About as you'd expect." He nodded as if I had just told him plenty. "By the way," I said, "have we met before, Senator?"

He shook his head, started a smile.

"Under the circumstances," I said, "I'd think you'd want to see some identification."

Maybe he looked a little confused, maybe not. I'm not a great reader of expressions. "You're well known to me by reputation, Mr. Florin," he said.

"Maybe you'd better fill me in just a little, Senator," I said. "I wouldn't want to make any unnecessary mistakes."

"You know the political situation in the city," he said. "Anarchy, riots, lawless mobs roaming the streets—yet the disorder is not as spontaneous as it may appear. The crowd is being manipulated for a purpose—the purpose being treason."

"That's a pretty heavy word, Senator," I said. "You don't hear it much nowadays."

"No doubt you were told of the approaching elections, the dangers of political chaos, economic collapse, planetary disaster."

"Elections were mentioned."

"There's another thing that perhaps was not mentioned. Our planet has been invaded."

"The world has been under a single government for twenty years; obviously, there is no domestic enemy to launch an attack."

"Whom does that leave? The little green men from Andromeda?"

"Not men," he said gravely. "As for Andromeda—I don't know."

"Funny," I said. "I haven't noticed them around."

"You don't believe me."

"Why should I?"

He laughed a little. "Why, indeed?" The faint smile faded. "But suppose I give you proof."

"Go ahead."

"As you might have expected, I don't have it here—nothing that would convince you."

I nodded, watching him. He didn't look wild-eyed—but lots of them don't.

"I realize that what I'm telling you seems to lend credence to what you were told about me," he said calmly. "I took that risk. It's important that I be utterly candid with you."

"All right. Now what?"

"They've been in communication with the enemy—the men who spoke to you. Their leader, by the way, is named Van Wouk. They intend to collaborate. They hope for special rewards under an alien regime; God knows what they've been promised. I intend to stop them."

"How?"

"I have a certain personal following, a small cadre of loyal men of ability. Van Wouk knows that; that's why he's determined on my death."

"What's he waiting for?"

"Raw murder would make a martyr of me. He prefers to discredit me first. The insanity story is the first step. With your help he hoped to drive me into actions that would both cause and justify my death."

"He sent me here to help you escape," I reminded him.

"Via a route leaked to me by his hireling. But I have resources of which he's unaware. That's how I learned of the invasion—and of the other escape route."

"Why didn't you leave sooner?"

"I waited for you."

"What makes me that important?"

He looked me in the eye. "I want you with me as my ally, faithful unto death. That—or nothing."

"You'd get that—or nothing."

"You're aware that you'll be in deadly danger from the moment we deviate from Van Wouk's prepared script?"

"The thought had occurred to me."

"Good," he said, curt again. "Let's get on with it." He went to a closet and took out a trench coat that showed signs of heavy wear and pulled it on. It took a little of the shine off the distinguished look, but not enough. While he was busy with that I took a look in the open wall safe. There was a bundle of official looking documents wrapped with purple ribbon, letters, a thick sheaf of what looked like money except that it was printed in purple ink and had a picture of a lion on it and the words *Legal Tender of the Lastrian Concord For All Debts Public and Private*. There was also a flat handgun of a type I'd never seen.

"What's the Lastrian Concord, Senator?"

"A trade organization in which I hold shares," he said after a hesitation. "Their currency is almost valueless now. I keep it as a souvenir of my bad financial judgment."

He wasn't watching me; I slid the play gun into my side pocket; the Senator was at the window, running his fingers along the gray metal frame.

"It's a long way down," I said. "But I suppose you've got a rope ladder in your sock."

"Better than that, Florin." I heard a soft *snick* and the sash swung into the room like a gate. No blustery night air blew in; there was a featureless gray wall eighteen inches away.

"A repeated panel in the wall," he said. "The house has a number of features Van Wouk would be surprised to know about."

"What was the other route, Senator?" I said. "The one Van Wouk expected you to use?"

"It's an official emergency exit; a panel at the back of the closet

leads down to the garages. A guard is supposed to be bribed to supply a car. This way is somewhat less luxurious but considerably more private."

He stepped in ahead of me, slid away out of sight to the left. As I was about to follow, a cricket chirped behind my ear.

*Good work, a tiny voice whispered. Everything is proceeding nicely. Stay with him.*

I took a last look around the room and followed the Senator into his secret passage.

**WE** CAME out onto the grounds in the shelter of a giant kapok tree that had cost somebody a lot of money to transplant alive. The Senator led the way through an ornamental garden to a row of imported poplars, along that to the fence. From somewhere inside his coat he produced a set of snippers and some jumper wires. He cut a hole for us and we went through it and were in a cornfield under the stars.

Visibility wasn't too bad, once my eyes had adapted to the starlight. The Senator was a competent climber and seemed to know exactly where he was going. We topped the ridge and he pointed out a faint glow in the north that he said was the city, sixty miles away. A copter went over, raking searchlights across the treetops. IR gear might have found us at closer range; but there was an awful lot of virgin-forested hill country for us to be lost in.

The hike took ten minutes over the Senator's estimate, with no breaks. We came sliding down the angle of a steep cut onto a narrow pike that sliced through the rough country like a sabre wound. We moved on a few hundred yards north to a spot beside a gorge that offered better cover if we needed to get out of sight in a hurry. The Senator handed me a small silver flask and a square pill.

"Brandy," he said. "And a metabolic booster."

I tasted the brandy; it was the real stuff. "I get it," I said. "This is the de luxe prison break, American plan."

He laughed. "I've had plenty of time to prepare. It was obvious to me as much as three months ago that Van Wouk and the Council were up to something. I waited until I was sure."

"Are you sure you're sure? Maybe they know things you don't know they know."

"What are you getting at?"

"Maybe the route through the closet was a dummy. Maybe the

phoney window was a plant. Maybe they're watching you right now."

"I could have decided to go south just as easily, to the capitol."

"But you had reasons for coming this way. Maybe they know the reasons."

"Are you just talking at random, Florin? Or—"

"If it were 'or' I wouldn't be talking."

He laughed again, not a loud or merry laugh, but still a laugh. "Where does that line of reasoning end, Florin? Everything is something other than it seems or seems to seem. You have to draw the line somewhere. I prefer to believe I'm thinking my own thoughts and that they're as good as or better than anything Van Wouk can come up with."

"What happens after you meet your contact? The cadre you spoke of?"

"They have access to broadcast facilities. A surprise trideo appearance by me, informing the public of the situation, will tie Van Wouk's hands."

"Or play into them."

"Meaning?"

"Suppose you dreamed these aliens."

"But I didn't. I told you I have proof of their presence, Florin."

"If you can imagine aliens, you can imagine proof."

"If you doubt my sanity, why are you here?"

"I agreed to help you, Senator, not believe all your ideas."

"Indeed? And your idea of helping me might be to lead me docilely to Van Wouk."

"I'm just making conversation, Senator. People do have illusions, you know. And they believe in them. What makes you immune?"

He started to snap off a sharp answer. Instead he shook his head and smiled. "I decline to tackle a paradox at this time of night." He broke off and cocked his head. I heard it too: turbines howling on a grade to the south, not far away.

"Here's our ride," I said. "Just as you predicted, Senator."

"It's common knowledge that this is a cargo artery. Don't try to read anything mystical into it."

"I guess Van Wouk knows that, too."

"Hide in the ditch if you like. I'm flagging it."

"You hide. I'm the one with the bullet-proof vest."

"What the hell?" the Senator said abruptly, sounding a little out



of character. "A man has to trust somebody." He strode to the center of the road, planted himself and waved the flat down as it came in view. We climbed in the back and settled down comfortably among some empty chicken crates.

### III

THE driver dropped us in the warehouse district a block from the waterfront, on a cracked sidewalk where a cold, gusty wind that smelled like dead fish and tarred hemp pushed grit and old newspapers ahead of it. Weak, morgue-colored light from a pole-lamp at the corner shone on store fronts with shaded windows like blinded eyes above them. A few people were in sight, men in felt hats and women in cloches and bare legs and fur boots, bucking the wind.

"What is it, Florin?" the Senator said sharply.

"Nothing much," I said. "It doesn't look like what I expected."

"Were you expecting something in particular?"

"Don't count that one, Senator; it just slipped out. Where to now?"

"A place near here; there's a rendezvous arranged for every fourth hour until I arrive." He looked at a strap watch. "Less than a half-hour now." We went past a closed tailor shop with dummies wearing double-breasted formals with dust on the shoulders, past a candy store, a drug store. All the other pedestrians seemed to be on the other side of the street, though I didn't see anyone cross to avoid us. A surprising number of the women were tall and slim, and wore gray coats with squirrel collars. A Nile-green open car with its side curtains buttoned up tightly rolled slowly by.

Something whispered behind my ear. The miniature voice said, *Florin—there has been a slight hitch. You're to keep the subject away from the rendezvous for the present. Walk east; you'll receive further instructions shortly.*

"I changed my mind," I told the Senator. "Let's skip the meeting. You can make the next one in four hours."

"Damn it, man, every hour counts."

"Only the ones you live, Senator."

"All right. What do you have in mind?"

"Suppose we walk east for a while."

He looked at me warily. "Florin—is there something you're not telling me?"

"I asked you first."

He snarled and pushed past me and headed east. I followed. The blocks looked just like the ones we'd already walked along. A big green car with the top up cruised across an intersection half a block ahead. We kept going.

*All right, Florin, the little voice whispered. Stop at the next corner and wait.*

We came to the intersection and crossed. "You go ahead," I said. "I want to check something."

He gave me a disgusted look, strolled on fifty feet and paused to stare into a dark window. I saw the green car round a corner two blocks down. I faded back and sprinted toward the Senator.

"Now what?" he snarled and put his back to the wall.

"Into the alley—out of sight," I snapped and grabbed his arm.

"What for? What—"

"Hunch." I hustled him into darkness and evil odors and things that crunched under foot. I heard the purr of the big engine; it came closer, then stayed in one place and idled. A door slammed. The car moved on, passed the alley-mouth.

"Why, that's the same car—" the Senator whispered.

"You know the owner?"

"Of course not. What is this, Florin?"

"Somebody's playing games. I get a feeling I don't like the rules."

"Can't you for God's sake speak plainly?"

"No plainer than I can think. Let's get out of here, Senator. That way." I pointed deeper into the alley. He grumbled but moved. We came out on a dark street that was wider but no more fragrant than the alley.

"Where are you leading me, Florin?" the Senator asked in a voice that had gotten noticeably hoarser. "What are you getting me into?"

"I'm playing this one by ear," I said. "Let's find a quiet corner where we can talk—" I got that far with my reasonable proposal before the green car boomed out of a side street. It raked the curb, straightened out and roared down at us. I heard the Senator yell, heard glass tinkle, heard the noise firing, saw flame and felt the sting of brick chips across my cheek. I was turning, grabbing the Senator and shoving him ahead of me, hearing the weapon stutter again, dwindle away and leave us alone in a ringing silence.

The Senator was leaning against the bricks, his back to me, folding slowly at the knees. I got to him and held him up and saw the big stain spreading on his side. Out in the street someone called cautiously. Feet clattered on pavement, coming our way. It was time to go. I got the Senator's arm over my shoulders; his feet fumbled at the bricks underfoot and some of his weight went off me. We did twenty drunken feet that way before I saw the door set back in a deep recess on the left. It didn't look clean or inviting, but I lurched toward it and got the knob turned and we more or less fell into a dark little room with packing cases and scattered excelsior and odds and ends of wire and rope, barely visible in some dirty light leaking over the transom.

I settled the Senator on the floor and checked him and found two holes, low on his side, about six inches apart.

"How bad?" he whispered.

"Busted rib. The slug glanced off. You were lucky."

"They were trying to kill me." He tried to sit up and I pressed him back.

"Don't sound so surprised. You told me that was the idea, remember?"

"Yes, but—" he paused, tried again. "They've gone out of their minds." He let it go. "Florin, what are we going to do?"

"This chum you were supposed to meet," I said. "Tell me about him."

"His name is Eridani. You were right. It was a trap. I can't go there now, I—"

"Hold it, Senator. I had my doubts about your story, but those slugs change things. I'll check out Eridani. If it looks good, I'll bring him here—"

"No—I'm not staying alone—"

"It's the safest way."

He slumped. "I deserve that. I haven't borne up very well in the clutch, have I, Florin? Well, I told you violence wasn't my forté. But I'm all right now. I won't make a fool of myself again."

I finished my first aid and wrapped a strip of shirt around him.

"Think you can walk?"

"Certainly." I helped him get to his feet. There was a faint *click* behind my right ear and a voice the size of a Dutch half-dime said: *All right, Florin; wait there for the next development.*

The Senator was busy buttoning his coat, grunting with pain at

the movement. I felt back of my ear, found the gadget and pried it loose and ground it under my heel. A door across the room opened into a grimy hall that led to a glass door that let us out into the street.

No green Buicks were in sight. Nobody shot at us. We kept to the shadows like a couple of mice caught outside the family hole and headed for the waterfront.

**I**T WAS a mean-looking dive on a street only a little less shabby than the one where we'd been shot up. Two steps led down into dim brown light and the odors of booze and smokables. We took a booth at the back and ordered beer from an ex-heavyweight with broken-down arches and a face that had been hammered flat. He put two smeared glasses in front of us and went back behind the bar to brood. I had used my handkerchief to wipe my face. With the coat folded the other way, the Senator's stains didn't show through his coat. If our host noticed anything unusual for the neighborhood he was thoughtful enough not to mention it.

"He's late," the Senator said nervously. He was sitting on the side facing the door. "I don't like this, Florin. We're sitting ducks. They could fire through the window—"

"They could have done that any time. They didn't; maybe later we'll figure out why."

He wasn't listening; he was looking toward the door. I turned and saw a slim, dark-haired girl wrapped to the eyes in a red fox collar come down the two steps and look around. Her glance may have hesitated for a moment at our booth; or maybe mine was wishful thinking. She had a face like you see in dreams—and even then only at a distance. She walked across the room and disappeared through a door at the back.

"Nice," I said. "On our side?"

"Who?"

"Don't overplay your hand, Senator," I said. "Nobody misses one like that."

He frowned at me. "See here, Florin, I don't care for your tone."

"Could it be there's something you're not telling me, Senator?"

"I've told you everything," he snapped. "This farce has gone far enough." He started to stand and froze that way, staring toward the windows. I turned my head and through the glass saw a Nile-green

Buick ease to a stop at the curb. The near door opened and a gray man stepped out.

He seemed to see me through the windows and halted in mid-stride.

"You know him?" I snapped. The Senator didn't answer. His face was a trifle wavery around the edges. A high, singing noise was coming from somewhere in the middle distance. I tried to get my feet under me to stand, but couldn't seem to find them. The Senator was leaning over me, shouting something, but I couldn't make out the words. They ran together into a booming sound like a fast freight going through a tunnel, with me hanging onto the side. My grip loosened and I fell off and the train hurtled away into the dark, making mournful sounds that trailed away into nothingness.

#### IV

*I WAS lying on my back on hot sand and the sun was burning my face like a blast oven. Fire ants were crawling over me, taking a bite here and there, picking out a place to start lunch. I tried to move but my arms and legs were tied down.*

*"You're a damned coward," somebody was saying.*

*"Damn you, I did all I could! It was all coming apart on me!"*

*The voice came from the sky. I tried to get my eyelids up to see who was talking, but they were tied down like the rest of me.*

*"It's your own fault, Bardell," another voice said. This one reminded me of somebody. Trait. Lenwell Trait, the name came from somewhere a long way off, a long time ago. It didn't sound like the name of anybody I'd know.*

*"My fault, hell! You were the masterminds, the ones who knew what you were doing. I went through hell, I tell you. You don't know what it's like."*

*"You quit—ran out. You ought to be shot."*

*"Shut up—all of you." Big-nose talking. I knew that voice.*

*"Lloyd, reset everything for situation one. Bardell, get ready."*

*"Are you all crazy? I've had enough—"*

*"You're going back. You're a bungling incompetent but you're all we have. No arguments. The time for that's long past."*

*"You can't do it. I've lost confidence. I don't believe in the technique anymore. It would be murder—"*

"Suicide," Big-nose said. "Unless you buck up and meet it. We're committed now. We can't back out."

"I need help—at least give me that. Things aren't breaking the way you said."

"What about it, Lloyd?"

"All right, all right. For God's sake, settle it. I have my hands full."

*There was more talk but another sound was drowning it.*

*The rising wind was hot as a blowtorch across my skin. A buzz-saw started up and sliced its way across the sky; it split and darkness poured in like Niagara, swept away the voices, the ants, the desert, and me . . .*

I OPENED my eyes and the girl was sitting across from me, not wearing her fox skin now, looking at me with an anxious expression.

"Are you all right?" she asked in a voice like doves cooing. Or like a spring breeze among the daffodils. Or like the gurgle of happy waters. Or maybe it was just a voice. Maybe I was slaphappy, coming out of it.

"Far from it," I said, using somebody else's voice by remote control. "I've got the damnedest urge to climb the chandelier and yodel. It's only my years of training that prevent me; that and my rheumatism. How long was I out?"

She frowned. "You mean—"

"That's right, kid. Out. Cold. Doped. You know—unconscious."

"You were just sitting here. You looked a little strange, so I—"

"They got him, huh?"

"Him? You mean your brother. He—just left."

"Which way? Did he go, that is. My drinking buddy, I mean. What makes you think he's my brother?"

"I—just assumed—"

"I don't suppose there's any point in asking where they took him, or why?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"This is where I'm supposed to work you over with my blackjack and get all your secrets. But frankly, honey, I'm not up to it."

I stood. That didn't feel at all good. I sat down again.

"You shouldn't exert yourself."

"What's it to you, doll?"

"Nothing, really. It's just—" She let it go.

“Another time, maybe.” I stood again. This time it worked a little better; but my head still felt like bagged gravel.

“Please wait!” she said and put a hand on my arm.

“Another time I’d linger,” I said. “But duty calls. Or something calls.”

“You’re hurt and sick—”

“Sorry, kid, I’m on my way. Sorry about no tip, but I seem to have left my change in my other suit. By the way, did you ever hear of the Latrian Concord?”

She didn’t answer, just shook her head. When I looked back from the door she was still watching me through those big lovely eyes. I let the door close between us and was back out in the street. A light snow was falling. In the thin layer of slush on the pavement I could see footprints leading back the way the Senator and I had come. I followed them, weaving a little, but still on the job.

The trail retraced the route the Senator and I had taken when we made our daring escape from the assassins, or whatever it was we had escaped from—if we had escaped. It ended at the spot where we had unloaded from the cargo flat. The tailor shop was still closed but the second dummy from the left seemed to have an eye on me.

“Be my guest, buddy,” I said. “We’re two of a kind.” He didn’t answer, which suited me.

I felt as weak as a newborn squirrel and just about as smart. My wrists and ankles hurt. I wanted to lie down on something soft and wait for something nice to happen to me. Instead I moved along to a dark doorway and waited. I didn’t know what I was waiting for. I thought about the girl back in the bar. She was nice to think about. I wondered if she’d been part of the dope dream. I had an urge to go back and check but just then a man stepped out of an alley across the street. He was in a dark overcoat and hat but I knew the face. It was the scruffy red-head who had called at my hotel to invite me to meet the Council.

He looked both ways along the street, then turned and set off at a brisk walk. I let him get to the corner, then followed. When I reached it, he was nowhere in sight. I kept going, passed a dark entry just in time to see the revolving door glide to a stop. I pushed through, was in a small lobby floored with black and white tiles, the small, rectangular unglazed kind, set in a pattern that zigged and zagged—just like my thoughts. The stairs led up to

a landing; I could hear feet up above. They seemed to be in a hurry. I went up after them.

Two flights higher the climb ended in a dark corridor. A faint greenish light was coming under a panel door at the far end. My feet made no sound at all on the green carpet. No sounds came from behind the door. I didn't knock, just turned the knob and walked in.

I saw a nice rug, a filing cabinet, a chair, a desk. And behind the desk, dressed in a snappy gray pin-stripe, a cobra smiled at me.

Well, maybe not a cobra. A lizard. Pale violet, shading to powder blue, white at the throat. Smooth-scaled, glistening, round-snouted, with lidless eyes and a lipless mouth. Something not human. Something that leaned back in the chair and gave a careless wave of what was almost a hand and said:

"Well, Mr Florin—you've surprised us all." His voice was as light and dry as old rose petals.

I groped my gun into view and waved it at him. He lit up what looked like a cigarette and blew smoke through two small, noseless nostrils.

"Are you part of the first nightmare?" I said. "Or is this a double feature?"

He chuckled; a nice, friendly, relaxed chuckle, such as you seldom hear from a reptile. Maybe he was all right at that.

"You're a most amusing fellow, Florin," he said. "But what are you attempting to accomplish? What do you seek in these ghostly rooms, these haunted corridors, eh?"

"You left out the phantom-ridden streets," I said. "I give up. What am I looking for?"

"Let me give you a word of friendly advice, Florin. Let it go. Stop seeking, stop probing. Let life flow past you. Accept what comes. You're Florin, a man of deeds, not philosophies. Accept what is."

"One at a time, or all at once?" I raised the gun and aimed it at the middle of the smile.

"Tell me things," I said. "Anything at all. If I don't like what I hear, I'll shoot."

The reptilian smile floated in a soft haze of smoke. A buzzing sound was coming out of the woodwork. I tried to say something, but there was no air in my lungs, only thick pink fog. I tried to squeeze the trigger but it was welded in place. I strained harder



and the buzzing got louder and the mist thickened and whirled around the little red eyes that gleamed now like two fading sparks far away across the sea and then winked out.

THE girl was sitting across from me, wearing a close-fitting blue dress that shimmered like polished fish scales. She was looking at me with an anxious expression, like a bird-watcher watching a problem bird.

"No good," I said. "No bird watcher ever had eyes like those." The sound of my own voice startled me.

"Are you—all right?" she said. Her voice was smooth as honey, as soft as a morning cloud, as sweet as music. Anyway, it was a nice voice. "Your friend left," she said and looked worried.

I looked around. I was at the table in the beer joint, the same place I'd been the last time I swam up out of a mickey. The Senator was nowhere in sight. Neither was the gray man or the Nile-green car.

"Don't get the wrong idea," I said. "I'm not one of those habitual drunks. What makes you think he's my friend?"

"I—I just assumed—"

"How long was I out?"

"I'm not sure. I mean—you were just sitting here. You looked a little strange, so—" her voice trailed off.

I rubbed my temples; there was a light throbbing behind them that could become a heavy throbbing with very little encouragement.

"Did you ever get the feeling you'd been through a scene before?" I said. "I can almost guess your next line. You're going to suggest that I sit tight until I get to feeling better."

"I—think you should. You don't look well."

"I appreciate your interest, miss—but why would you care?"

"Why wouldn't I? I'm a human being."

"That's more than I can say for some of the folks I've been advised by lately. Say, you didn't see a fellow with a head like a garter snake? Only larger. His head, I mean."

"Please don't talk nonsense." She looked at me with an unreadable expression that I tried to read anyway.

"I knew you'd say that, too. *Déjà vu*, they call it. Or something. Have I come out of the smoke once or twice? A question for the philosophers."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said. "I thought you needed help. If I was wrong—" She started to get up and I caught her hand and pulled her back.

"Don't rush off. You're my sole link with whatever you're my sole link with, if that makes any sense—or even if it doesn't."

She pulled against my grip, but not very hard. I let go and she didn't move.

"Maybe the Senator slipped me something," I said. "Or maybe he didn't. Maybe the gray man shot me with a dope dart."

"You've been shot?"

"At. They got the Senator but it was just a graze. You wouldn't know who?"

She shook her head.

"Did you see the gray man? Or the green car?"

"No."

"But you saw the Senator. He was sitting with me when you came in. He pretended not to notice you. Why?"

"I have no idea."

"I'm his bodyguard," I said. "Or that's what they said. It turned out I was the finger. Dirty pool, don't you agree, Miss—"

"Regis. You're not making sense."

"I kind of don't like that, Miss Regis. I think maybe the Senator's lost confidence after what happened. Can't say I blame him. So maybe he ditched me; or maybe they got him. Either way, I don't care for it."

"Who is the Senator?"

"The Senator. A very big man. But no names. Not for the present. That's what Big-nose said. I wish I knew which side he was on. I wish I knew which side *I* was on—or if there are any sides. How many sides to a ring-around-the-rosy, Miss Regis?"

She shook her head, just watching me.

"You'll have to overlook any little eccentricities I seem to demonstrate," I said. "I've been having a few mild hallucinations. Hard to tell which are which. You for example. Why are you sitting here listening to me? You ought to be in full flight by now, yelling for the boys with the strap-down cots."

"I don't believe you're dangerous," she said calmly.

I nodded. "Swell. That clears that up. Any other points you'd like to cover before I go?"

"Please don't go—wherever it is you mean to go."

“Why not—except for those big blue eyes?” I got to my feet. My legs felt twelve feet long and the diameter of soda straws. I leaned on the table as if intentionally.

“I’ve got stuff to do, baby,” I said. “I’ve got questions that want answers and answers looking for the right questions. And time’s a-wasting.” I tottered away, and she didn’t call after me. I was a little sorry about that but I kept going.

## V

**O**UTSIDE I looked for tracks in the snow but there wasn’t any snow. In a way that was reassuring; the snow was part of the dream. The street was still there; that was something. I turned right and headed the way I had gone the last time, or dreamed I had. Whatever they’d fed me, it was potent stuff. I still felt woozy as a conventioneer discovering it’s Tuesday morning in a strange town.

The streets were empty, even for the wee hours. There were no people in sight, no footprints on the sidewalk, no tire tracks in the street. I had the world to myself.

*It’s a learning process, I told myself. Each time you take a wrong turn in your logic you get sent back to square one. Your subconscious is trying to tell you something.”*

*How about now?* I asked myself, cagy. *Am I really standing here having a friendly conversation with myself like any normal guy, or . . .*

I let it go at that.

It took me twenty minutes to make it back to the spot where I’d last seen Van Wouk and the scruffy man. I went along to the glass door with the big 13. There wasn’t any door. Maybe I’d counted wrong. Maybe somebody had come along and sealed it up just to confuse me. Maybe it hadn’t been there in the first place.

I went on another few feet and stumbled into a revolving door; it revolved and palmed me into the blinding glare of a forty-watt bulb hanging on a kinked wire in a lobby that was either being built or torn down: There were bare lath walls, a rough concrete floor, temporary wooden steps leading up.

*This time, I told myself, you play it a little smoother. No blundering around with a gat in your fist; no pushing open strange doors and sticking your head in to see what they hit it with. Foxy all the way, that’s the motto . . .*

I went up. There was a landing covered with shavings and brick dust. A black fire door had the number 13 in heavy brass above it. With an ear pressed to it I could make out the sound of voices. They expressed disagreement about something. That suited me; I was in a mood to be disagreeable. I tried the knob. it turned and I stepped through into a passage with a plastered wall on one side and obscure glass cubicles on the other. The voices were coming from the third cubicle in line. I softfooted along to it.

“. . . what do you mean, lost him?” Big-nose was saying.

“I tell you, there’s a factor of unpredictability involved! I’m getting interference.” This in a thin, high-pitched tone.

“Get him back—before irreparable damage is done—”

“I don’t understand it. The recovery was made in time—”

“You see?” a voice that was not quite that of the Senator said. “I’m telling you I can’t take many more shocks like the last one.”

“Never mind what you can take. You knew what you were signing up for.”

“Did I? Not even the Professor knows what’s going on—”

“Don’t call me ‘Professor,’ Bardell.”

“Gentlemen—let’s not lose sight of the objective. Everything else is secondary.”

A long silence followed. I breathed through my mouth and tried to read minds through the door. Either I couldn’t read minds or nobody was there. I eased the door open. The room was empty, looked as though it had been empty for a long time. In the closet were three bent coat-hangers and some brown paper on the shelf. That and a few dead flies. A connecting door into the next office had been boarded up. I checked the boards; something clicked and the wall glided back and ochre light blazed through. I palmed my gun and stepped through into a wide avenue of colored tiles.

**I** SQUINTED up at the sky. The strange yellow light was the sun. It was mid-afternoon of a pleasant summer day. Not night. Not a snowstorm. A drop of water ran down my chin. I put the back of my hand against my face; the skin was as cold as frozen fish.

*Fake money, fake Senator, fake weather, Or maybe this is the fake. Maybe I’m in a big room with a sky-blue ceiling and an imitation sun. Could be. The question remains—why?*

*The Senator will know,*

*Sure—but will he talk?*

*When I finish bouncing his phony head off this phony pavement  
he'll sing like three canaries . . .*

*You've got to catch him first.*

*Nothing to it. He can't escape the eagle eye of Florin, the Master Sleuth—unless I happen to stop on my shoelace and rupture my spleen.*

*Do I detect a note of disillusionment? Not getting tired of your tricks, are you, Florin?*

*That's the trouble with tricks. They pall. God, how they pall.*

*Try the park.*

I was looking across the wide avenue at a stretch of downy grass set with tall, feathery trees. Beyond them loomed tall, misty buildings. A vehicle swung a corner and rolled toward me on high wheels. It was light, fragile-looking, like a buggy without a horse, painted a soft purple and decorated with curly corners and a complicated pattern in gold lines. A man and a woman sat in it, looking at each other while the buggy drove itself. They were both dressed in filmy white stuff with flecks of color here and there. The rubber tires made a soft whooshing sound against the tiles as it glided past.

*I knew Henry was planning a big surprise, but I wasn't expecting this . . .*

I realized I was not only talking aloud, I was waiting for an answer. Whatever it was the Senator had used to spike my beer had more side-effects than six months of hormone injections—perhaps including hallucinations involving purple carriages rolling down tile streets under a sun two sizes too big and three shades too yellow. It was time for me to curl up somewhere and sweat it out of my system. I headed for the biggest clump of flowering shrub in sight, rounded it—and almost collided with the Senator.

His head jerked. "You," he said, not sounding pleased. "What are you doing here?"

"Sorry, I dozed off while you were talking," I said. "Rude of me. How's your busted rib?"

"Florin—go back—quickly. You have no business here. This is all wrong—"

"What is this place, Senator?"

He backed away. "I can't tell you. I can't even speak of it."

"Sorry to be insistent," I said and grabbed for him as he jumped back. He ducked aside and ran. I gave chase, using a pair of borrowed legs and towing a head the size of a blimp.

IT WAS a strange chase along the curving, graveled path. We ran past fountains that threw tinkling jets of ink into green, crystal pools, past banked flowers like daubs of fluorescent paint, under the blue shadows of trees with bark like polished lacquer and foliage like antique lace. He ran hard, head down and legs pumping; I floated along behind, watching him get farther and farther away. Then he jumped a hedge, tripped, and was still rolling when I landed on him. He was a big boy and plenty strong, but he didn't know how to use it. A couple of solid hooks to the jaw took the shine off his eyes. I laid him out comfortably under what looked like a juniper except for the little crimson blossoms and worked on getting my wind back. After a while he blinked and sat up. He saw me and looked glum.

"You and I need to have a little talk," I said. "I'm two paradoxes and a miracle behind."

"You're a fool," he snarled. "You don't know what you're involving yourself in."

"But I'd like to know," I said. "By the way, tell me again what the Lastrian Concord is."

He snorted. "I never heard of it."

"Too bad," I said. "I guess I imagined it. I saw this in the same place." I slid the flat gun I had taken from his safe into sight.

"It was laid on with a trowel," I said. "The callers in the night, the fancy reception room, the hints of dark deeds in the offing. And the details were nice: Fake official forms, fake money—maybe even a fake gun." I bounced it on my palm.

"It's a 2mm needler," he said, sounding angry. Or maybe scared. "Be careful with it."

"Yeah, the details were good," I went on. "It's just the big things that fit like a rented tuxedo."

"I'm out of it," the Senator said. "I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"What about the invasion?"

He looked at me and frowned.

"No invasion, huh?" I said. "Too bad. I kind of liked the invasion. It had possibilities. What then?"

His jaw muscles worked. "Aw, hell." He said, and made a face. "My name's Bardell. I'm an actor. I was hired to impersonate the Senator."

"Why?"

"Ask the man who hired me," he said in a nasty tone, and felt of his jaw.

"Hurts, huh?" I said. "I did that. I owed you a couple anyway for the beer. It was worth one without the mickey."

"You're quite a fellow, aren't you? That dose should have held you until..." He cut himself off. "Never mind. I can see we handled it wrong from the beginning."

"Tell me about the beginning." He started to get up and I stood over him and shook my head. "I never hit a man when he's down," I said. "Unless I have to. Talk it up, chum."

He looked at me and grinned. "Florin, the Man of Iron," he said. "Florin, the poor unsuspecting boob who lets himself be roped in with the old call to duty. They fixed you up with a costume and makeup and lines to say—plus a little gadget back of the ear to coach you through the rough spots. And what do you do? You kick a hole in it you could march a Shriners' band through."

"Looks like you've got all the good lines," I said.

"Don't misunderstand me, Florin," he said. "Hell, don't you get it yet?" He tapped the mastoid bulge behind his ear. "I've got the twin to it right here. I was roped in the same way you were."

"By whom?"

"The Council."

"Keep going. You're doing fine."

"All right. They had plans; obviously they aren't working."

"Don't make me coax you, Bardell. I'm the guy who wants to be told things. Start tying it all together. I don't like all these loose ends."

"What I could tell you won't make you any happier."

"Try me."

He gave me a crafty look. "Let me aske you one instead, Florin: how did you get from your room—in a rather seedy hotel, as I recall—to Government House? For that matter, how did you get to the hotel?"

I thought back. I remembered the room. It was seedy, all right. I tried to recall the details of checking in, the face of the room clerk. Nothing. I must have let my poker face slip because Bardell grinned a savage grin.

"What about yesterday, Florin? How about your last case? Your old parents, the long happy days of your boyhood? Tell me about them."

"It must be the dope," I said. My tongue felt thick.

"There seem to be a few small blank spots in the Florin total recall," the ex-Senator jeered. "What's the name of your home town, Florin?"

"Chicago," I said, pronouncing it like a word in a foreign language. The Senator looked puzzled. "Where's that?"

"Between New York and LA, unless you've moved it."

"Ellay? You mean—California? On Earth?"

"You guessed it," I said and paused to moisten my lips with the dry sock I found where my tongue used to be.

"That explains a few things," he muttered. "Brace yourself, fellow. You're in for a shock."

"Go ahead," I said. "But remember my heart murmur."

"We're not on Earth, We're on Grayfell, the fourth planet of the Wolf Nine system, twenty-eight light-years from Sol."

"It's a switch," I said and my voice felt as hollow as a Christmas tree ornament. "We're not being invaded by an alien planet; we've invaded them?"

"You don't have to take my word for it, Florin." A split lip blurred his voice a little; or something did. "Look around you. Do these look like Terran plants? Don't you notice the gravity is eighteen percent light, the air is oxygen-rich? Look at the sun; it's a diffuse yellow giant, four hundred million miles away."

"All right. My old mother, if I had an old mother, always told me to look the truth in the eye. You're not helping much. It was bad enough when I was chasing my tail back in Chi. Start making it all clear, Bardell. Somebody went to a lot of trouble, either to transport me to a place called Grayfell or to build a pretty convincing set. There'll be a reason for that. What is it?"

He looked at me the way a surgeon looks at a leg that has to come off.

"You don't know what you're doing. You're getting in out of your depth; matters aren't what they seem—"

"Don't tell me what they aren't, Bardell; tell me what they are."

"I can't do that." He had something in his hands, was fiddling with it; something with shiny knobs and a crystalline loop at the top that was hard to look at. "I've been patient with you, Florin," he said, but his voice was sliding away from, sounding faster and faster like a runaway Victrola.

My head was throbbing worse than ever; my vision wasn't all it



could have been. I made a grab for the blurry face in front of me; but it slid back out of reach. I saw something glint in the sunlight, and heard a voice from over the hills saying, "... sorry, Florin..."

Pink darkness exploded in my face and I was back on that freight, riding it over a cliff and down into an abyss filled with fading thunder.

## VI

"MR. FLORIN," the feather-light voice was saying, "you're creating something of a problem for us all."

I opened my eyes and the chap with the snake's head smiled his lipless smile at me and puffed pink smoke from his noseless nostrils and glittered his lidless eyes. He was lounging in a deck chair, wearing an open jacket made of orange toweling, and a pair of yellow shorts, the color of which reminded me of something that I couldn't quite get a grip on.

"That's something," I said and sat down in a camp chair. There was a table between us with a blue and white umbrella over it. There was a stretch of white sand behind the terrace that looked like the seashore except that there wasn't any sea. I tried not to look at his glistening silver-violet thighs, the ribby, pale-gray chest with tiny crimson flecks, the finger-thin toes in the wide-strapped sandals. He saw me not looking and made a soft clucking sound that seemed to be laughter.

"Forgive me," he said. "I find this curiosity of yours amazing. I suspect that in the moment of your dissolution, you'd crane your neck to discover the nature of the solvent."

"It's just a harmless eccentricity," I said, "like your taste in clothes."

"You pride yourself on your self control," he said, not quite as genially as before. "But what if your equanimity is presented with anomalies too great to be assimilated? What then, eh?" He raised a hand and snapped his fingers. Fire billowed up around him; his smile rippled in the heat shimmer as gusts of flame whipped toward me. I sat tight, partly from paralysis and partly because I didn't believe it. He snapped his fingers again and green water was all around us, the sun dazzling on the surface ten feet above. A small fish came nosing between us, and he waved it away negligently and snapped his fingers again. Snow was falling. A thick layer of it cov-



ered the table, capped his head. His breath was a plume of ice crystals.

"Neat," I said. "Are you any good at card tricks?"

He waved the ice away and put his fingertips together.

"You're not impressed," he said matter-of-factly. "The manipulation of the Universe implies nothing to you?"

I faked a yawn. Then it wasn't a fake. "The Universe?" I said. "Or my eyeballs?"

"Umm. You're a surprising creature, Florin. What is it you want? What motivates you?"

"Who's asking?"

"You may call me Diss."

"That's not what I asked you."

"Just consider that . . . there are other interested parties than those you traditionally know. You act on a larger stage than you hitherto suspected. You should therefore conduct yourself with circumspection."

I yawned again. "I'm tired," I said. "I'm behind on sleep, on food, on love—on everything except mysterious phonies who drop large hints that big affairs are in the offing and that my best bet is to play along and keep my nose clean. Who are you, Diss? What are you? Do you really look like Alexander the croc, or is that just my bilious outlook?"

"I am a representative of certain powers active in the Cosmos. My appearance is of no importance. The fact of my existence is enough."

"Bardell said something about an invasion."

"A word reflecting a primitive view of reality."

"What are you invading? Earth—or Grayfell?"

I had the pleasure of seeing his head jerk.

"What do you know of Grayfell, Mr. Florin?"

I savored a pause.

"You know—in the Wolf Nine Group, twenty-eight lights from old Chicago." I smiled a big happy smile. He frowned and reached casually for something on the table. I started to get up fast, and a flashbulb as big as the sky winked and folded down on blackness blacker than the inside of a sealed paint can. I lunged across the table. My fingers brushed something as hot as a cookstove, as slippery as raw liver. I heard an angry yell, had a sense of words being shouted faster than I could follow, of a blinding explosion—

**V**OICES came out of the sky.

"... now! Follow emergency procedures, damn you!" That in Big-nose's bell-shaped tones.

"I'm trying—but—" The Bird-man speaking.

"This is no time to blunder, you cretin!"

"I can't—it won't—"

"Here—get out of my way!"

"I tell you, I threw in the wipe circuit. Nothing happened. It's—  
he's—"

"He what? Don't talk like a fool. He's got nothing to do with it—I control this experiment."

Hysterical tittering. "Do you? Do you really? Are you sure? Are you sure we haven't been taken—"

"Damn you, kill the power. All the way back."

"I did—or tried to. Nothing happened!"

"Close down, damn you!" Big-nose's voice rose to a scream. At the same time the pain in my wrists and ankles and the ache in my chest rose to a crescendo, like bands of fire cutting me into pieces. Suddenly thunder rolled and the sky cracked and fell, showering me with sharp-edged fragments that turned to smoke and blew away and I was lying strapped down on my back looking up at the rectangular grid of a glare-ceiling, in a small, green-walled room. And the man I had know as Big-nose was bending over me.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "He's alive after all."

A man with gray hair and a matching face, dressed in a white smock, and a scruffy man in a scruffy coverall came over and looked at me. Somebody finally got around to unstrapping me, unclamping something from my head. I sat up and felt dizzy and they handed me a cup of stuff that tasted terrible but seemed to be the right prescription. The dizziness went away, leaving me with nothing worse than a queasy stomach, a mouth that a family of moles had nested in, a dull headache, and an ache in my wrists and my ankles that wasn't so dull. The gray man—Dr. Eridani was his name, I remembered, the way you remember things you haven't thought about for a long time—smeared some salve over the raw spots. The rest of them were busy looking at the dials on a big console that filled up most of one wall, and muttering together.

"Where's the Senator?" I said. My thoughts seemed to be moving slowly, like heavy animals in deep mud.

Big-nose looked up from his work and frowned.

"He's just kidding," the scruffy man said. His name was Lenwell Trait, and he was a lab assistant. I didn't quite remember how I knew that, but I knew.

Big-nose—Van Wouk to his intimates—came over and looked at me without any visible affection.

"Look here, Bardell," he said, "I don't know what kind of ideas you're getting, but forget them. We have a legal agreement, signed and witnessed. You went into this with your eyes open, you'll get what's coming to you, not a penny more, and that's final."

"You're giving him ideas," Eridani said quietly. Trait handed me a cup of coffee.

"Bardell's not getting any ideas," he said, and grinned a sly grin at me. "He knows better than that."

"Bardell's an actor," I said. My voice sounded weak and old.

"You're a stumblebum we picked out of a gutter and gave an opportunity to," Van Wouk growled. "Like all your kind, you now imagine you're in a position to exert pressure. Well, it won't work. Your health hasn't suffered, so don't start whining."

"Don't kid me, Doc," I said, firing from the hip. "What about the wipe circuits? How about Eta level? Everything jake all down the line?"

That shut them up for a couple seconds.

"Where did you pick up those terms?" Big-nose asked me.

"A little lizard told me," I said and suddenly felt too tired to bother with games. "Forget it—I was just ribbing you. You wouldn't have a drink handy?"

Trait went off and came back in a minute with a flask of rye. I took a couple ounces from the neck and things started to seem a little brighter.

"Something was said about payment," I said.

"One hundred dollars," Big-nose snapped. "Not bad for an hour or two of a rummy's time."

"I had a feeling it was longer," I said. "No damage, eh? How about amnesia?"

"Uh-uh," Trait said lazily. "You know better, Bardell."

"Get him out of here," Van Wouk said. "I'm sick of the sight of him. Here." He grabbed at his pocket and brought out a wallet and extracted some worn currency and pushed it at me. I counted the spots.

"A hundred is right," I said. "But that was the straight dope

about the amnesia. I'm a little confused, gents. I remember you boys—" I looked at them, remembering. "But I kind of don't remember our deal—"

"Get him out!" Van Wouk yelled.

"I'm going," I told Trait. He had hold of my arm, twisting it, moving me toward the door. "You don't have to get tough."

He walked me out into the corridor, green tile like the room, along it to steps that went up with light at the top.

"Just between pals," I said. "What happened to me in there?"

"Nothing, chum. A little scientific experiment, that's all."

"Then how come I don't remember it? Hell, I don't even know where I live. What town is this?"

"Chicago, chum. And you don't live noplacé. You just kind of get by."

We came up into a bigger hall and went along it to double doors that opened out onto concrete steps. There were lawn and trees that looked sort of familiar in the dark.

"The Senator's summer retreat," I said. "Only no searchlights."

"You can't count on them politicians," Trait said. "Take my advice and don't squeeze it, Bardell. You got your century, even if maybe your marbles is scrambled a little, but hell, they wasn't in too good shape when you came in. I'd watch that off-brand Muscatel if I was you, chum."

"The Lastrian Concord," I said. "Diss, Miss Regis. None of that happened, huh?"

"You had like a nightmare. You damn near blew all the tubes in old Pickle-puss's pet Frankenstein. Go tank up and sleep it off and you'll be good as new."

We were down the steps now, and he turned me and pointed me toward the gate.

I hesitated.

"By the way, what color do you call those tiles?" I said.

"Nile Green. Why?"

"Just curious," I said and did a half-turn and rammed the old stiff-finger jab to the breastbone and doubled him over like a broken banana. I held him up and pried my hundred out of his left hand that I'd felt making the touch. Then checked his hip and got thirty more, just for carfare.

"So long, Red," I said. "I never cottoned to you much anyway." I left him there and beat it by a back route out the side gate.

IT GOT cold when the sun went down. The lights were still on in the Public Library. The librarian gave me a sharp look but said nothing. I found a quiet corner and settled down to enjoy as much of the warmth as possible before closing time. There's something soothing about the quiet stacks and the heavy old yellow oak chairs and the smell of dusty paper and bindings, even the whispers and the soft footsteps.

The footsteps stopped and a chair scraped gently, being pulled out. Cloth rustled. I kept my eyes shut and tried to look like an old gent who'd come in to browse through the bound volumes of *Harper's* and just happened to doze off in mid-1931; but I could hear soft breathing and feel eyes on me.

I opened mine and she was sitting across the table from me, looking young and tragic and a bit threadbare.

She asked, "Are you all right?"

"Don't disappear, lady," I said. "Don't turn into smoke and vanish. Don't even get up and walk away. Just sit there and let me get my pulse back down into the low nineties."

She blushed a little and frowned.

"I thought perhaps you were ill," she said, all prim and proper and ready to say all the magic words that made her a conforming member of the current establishment.

"Sure. What about the fellow I came in with? Isn't that the way the next line goes?"

"I haven't any idea what you mean. No one came in with you—not that I saw. And—"

"How long have you been watching me?"

This time she really blushed. "Why, the very idea—"

I reached across and took her hand. It was soft as the first breath of spring, as smooth as ancient brandy, as warm as mother love. My hand closing around it felt like a hawk's talon getting a grip on a baby chick. I let go.

"Let's skip over all the ritual responses," I said. "Something pretty strange is happening. You know it and I know it, right?"

The blush went away and left her pale, her eyes clinging to mine as if maybe I knew the secret that would save a life.

"You—you *know*?" she whispered.

"Maybe not, miss, but I've got a strong suspicion."

It was the wrong word. She tensed up and her lips got stiff and righteous.

“Well! It was merely a Christian impulse—”

“Balls,” I said. “Pardon my crudeness, if it is crudeness. You sat down here, you spoke to me. Why?”

“I told you—”

“I know. Now tell me the real reason.”

She looked at the end of my nose, my left ear, finally my eyes. “I—had a dream,” she said.

“A bar,” I said. “On the shabby side. A booth, on the right of the door as you come in.”

“My God,” she said, like somebody who never takes the name of her deity in vain.

“Me, too,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Regis. Miss Regis.” She stopped as if she’d said too much.

“Go ahead, Miss Regis.”

“In the dream I was someone who was needed,” she said, not really talking to me now but to someone inside herself, maybe, someone who hadn’t had a whole lot of attention in the past. “I was important—not in the sense of rank and titles but because I’d been entrusted with something of importance. I had a duty to perform, a sense of—of honor to live up to.”

I had sense enough not to say anything while she thought about it, remembering how it had been.

“The call came in the middle of the night, the secret message I’d been waiting for. I was ready. I knew there was great danger, but that was unimportant. I knew what to do. I got up, dressed, went to the appointed place. And—you were there.” She looked at me then.

“Go on.”

“I had to warn you. There was danger—I don’t know what sort of danger. You were going to face it alone.”

“You asked me not to go,” I said. “But you knew I had to go anyway.”

She nodded. “And you went. I wanted to cry out, to run after you—but—instead I woke up.” She smiled uncertainly. “I tried to tell myself it was just a foolish dream. And yet—I knew it wasn’t. I knew it was important.” She looked at me, begging for an answer.

“It was an experiment,” I said. “I was the guinea pig. Big machines hooked to my head. They made me dream crazy stuff, all mixed up. Somehow you got mixed into my dream. And the funny thing is—I don’t think they know it.”

“Who are they—the people you’re talking about?”



I waved a hand. "At the university. The lab. Some big-domes, doctors, physicists. I don't know. The kind of guys who spend their time in little rooms full of radio tubes and dials, making marks on a clipboard."

"How did you happen to be taking part in their tests?"

I shook my head. "That's all a little vague. I think I was on the sauce pretty heavy for a long time."

"Where's your family, your home? Won't they be worried about you?"

"Don't waste your sympathy, Miss Regis. I don't have any."

"Nonsense," she said, "no human being exists in a vacuum." But she let it go at that. "You mentioned a university." She tried a new tack. "What university was it?"

"How many you got in your town, lady?"

"Please don't talk like a hobo. You don't have to, you know."

"Apologies, Miss Regis. The one over that way." I jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Nice grounds, big trees. You must have noticed it if you live here."

"I've lived here all my life. There's no university in this town."

"Okay, maybe it's a research lab; a government project."

"There's nothing like that. Not here, Mr. Florin."

"Three blocks from where we're sitting," I said. "Maybe four. Ten acres if it's an inch."

"Are you sure it wasn't part of the dream?"

"I've been living on their money for the last two weeks."

"Can you lead me there?"

"Why?"

She stared at me. "Because we can't just drop it, can we?"

"I guess it can't hurt to take a look," I said.

## VII

**A** BLOCK away I knew something was wrong with my calculations. The stores and gas stations and pawn shops along the way looked all right—but where the high red brick wall should have been was an abandoned warehouse, an acre or so of warped siding and broken glass.

Miss Regis looked at me and I could almost hear her thinking over all the things she might say.

What she came up with was, "What are you going to do?"

I tilted my head toward the warehouse. "Poke my nose in there."  
She looked earnest and businesslike. "Yes, of course, we'll have to."

"Not you. Me."

"Both of us. After all—" she gave me a glimpse of a smile like an angel's sigh—"It's my dream too."

"I keep forgetting," I said. "Let's go."

The doors were locked but I found a loose board and pried it free and we slid into big dark gloom and dust and cobwebs and the flutter of bats' wings—or of something that fluttered. Maybe it was my heart.

"There's nothing here," Miss Regis said. "It's just an old abandoned building."

"Correction. It's a place that looks like an old abandoned building. Maybe that's window dressing. Maybe if you scratch the dust you'll find shiny paint underneath."

She made a mark on the wall with her finger. Under the dust was more dust.

"Proves nothing," I said. "For that matter nothing proves anything. If you can dream a thing you can dream it's real."

"You think you're dreaming now?"

"That's the question, isn't it, Miss Regis? How do you know when you're alive and awake?"

"Dreams aren't like this. They're vague and fuzzy around the edges. They're two-dimensional."

"I remember once thinking about dreams while I was walking up a hill in a college town in the fall. I could feel the dry leaves crunching under my shoes and the pull of gravity at my legs, I could smell leaves burning somewhere and feel the bite of the nippy Autumn air and I thought: 'Dreams aren't like reality. Reality is *real*. All the senses are involved, everything is in color and dimension.' " I paused for effect. "Then I woke up."

She shivered. "Then you can never be sure. A dream within a dream within a dream. I'm dreaming you—or you're dreaming me. We can never know—really."

"Maybe there's a message in that for us. Maybe we should be looking for truths that are true awake or asleep. Permanent things."

"What things?"

"Loyalty," I said. "Courage. Like you. Here with me now."

She said, "Don't be silly—" but she sounded pleased.

"What do we do now? Go back?" she said.

"Let's look around first. Who knows? Maybe it's a game of blind-man's-buff and we're only an inch from winning." I felt my way forward across the littered floor, over scraps of board and paper and cardboard and tangles of baling wire. A rickety door was set in the far wall. It opened into a dark passage no neater than the big room.

"We should have brought a flashlight," Miss Regis said.

"Or a squad car full of cops," I said. "Look—or maybe you'd better not." But she was beside me, staring at what I was staring at. It was the Senator, lying on his back, his head smashed like an egg. I felt the girl go rigid, then relax and laugh shakily.

"You frightened me," she said. "It's only a dummy."

I looked closer and saw the paint peeling from the wooden face.

"It looks—" Miss Regis gave me a troubled look. "It looks like you, Mr. Florin."

"Not me—the Senator," I said. "Maybe they're trying to tell me something."

"Who is the Senator?"

"The man I was hired to protect. I did my usual swell job, as you can see."

"Was he part of the experiment?"

"Or it was part of him. Who knows?" I stepped over the imitation corpse and went on along the passage. It seemed too long to fit inside the building. There were no intersecting corridors for a hundred yards but there was a door at the end and a line of light under it.

"Always another door," I said. The knob turned. The door opened on a room I had seen before. Behind me Miss Regis gasped. Dim moonlight shone through tall windows on damask walls, oriental carpets. I strode across the deep pile to the long mahogany table and pulled out a chair. It felt heavy and smooth, the way a heavy, smooth chair ought to feel. The chandelier caught my eye. For some reason it was hard to look at. The lines of cut-crystal facets spiraled up and up and around in a pattern that wove and reweave itself endlessly.

Miss Regis had paused, her head tilted alertly.

"There's someone near," she whispered. "I can hear men talking."

I soft-footed over and put my ear to the door. Silence. I palmed it open. Darkness. I stepped through and reached back to give her a

hand, but there was something in the way, something invisible and hard, like clean plate glass. She spoke but no sound came through the barrier. I hit it with my shoulder and something splintered, maybe my shoulder, but I plowed on through the enveloping folds of darkness and stumbled out into noise and a blaze of light.

I WAS standing in a desert and the lizard-man was leaning against a rock ten feet away, dressed all in pink and smiling at me lazily.

"Well," he said. "At last. I was beginning to fear you'd never tread the maze to its conclusion."

I took a deep breath of hot, dry air that had a faint smell of eucalyptus, or of something that smelled like eucalyptus, and looked around. Sand, a few pebbles, rocks, plenty of stone, all worn by time and the patient elements. No signs of life, not even a cactus.

"A swell place to visit," I said. "But I wouldn't want to die here."

"No need for any talk of dying," Diss said in his ashes-of-roses voice. "The only danger that existed was to your sanity—and it seems to me you've handled that quite nicely. In fact, you showed unexpected resourcefulness. I was quite surprised, actually."

"That relieves my mind a whole lot," I said. "What do you do now, stick a gold star in my book?"

"Now," he said briskly, "we can begin to deal." He twinkled his little red eyes expectantly at me.

"That's my cue to ask you what kind of deal," I said. "Okay—what kind of deal?"

"There's only one kind of deal, wherever in the Universe one happens to be. There's something you need and something I need. We exchange."

"Sounds simple. What do I need?"

"Information, of course."

"What's your end of it?"

He shifted position and waved a lean, lilac-colored hand. "There's a service you can perform for me."

"Let's start with the information."

"Certainly. What first? The Senator?"

"He's not a senator. He's an actor named Bardell."

"Bardell is Bardell," the lilac lizard stated. "The Senator . . . is the Senator."

"If that's a sample, I don't think we're going to get together."

"You," the lizard-man said with the air of one enjoying himself, "are the victim of a plot."

"I knew it all along."

"Now, Florin, don't discount what I tell you in advance." He produced a long cigarette holder from under his pink vest, fitted a brown cigarette to it and tucked it into a corner of a mouth that was made for catching flies on the wing. He puffed and pale smoke filtered out his nose holes.

"That doesn't make you any easier to believe," I said. "If this pitch is supposed to convince me you're going at it all wrong."

"Oh, I'm not interested in convincing you of anything in particular. I feel the facts will speak for themselves—"

"Where's Miss Regis?"

Diss frowned. Even his cigarette holder drooped.

"Who?"

"The girl. A nice, quiet little lady, not like the rest of the players. She was trying to help me, I don't know why."

Diss was shaking his head. "No," he said judiciously. "Really, Florin, it's time you began to distinguish the actual from the illusory. There is no young lady involved."

I took a step toward him and he recoiled slightly.

"Dear me," he said, sounding amused, "surely it's not necessary for me to point out that I'm not susceptible to any hasty, violent impulses on your part?" He curved the smile at me. "I'm not precisely an ally, Florin, but I mean you no harm—and as I've said, you can be of service to me. Wouldn't it be best if we simply explore matters in a rational way and seek an accommodation?"

"Go ahead," I said. "I'm too tired to argue."

"Ah, there's a clever chap. Now, the plot: A benign plot, you understand, but a plot nonetheless. A plot, to be brief, to restore you to sanity."

"Late reports from the front indicate it's not working. You may not believe this—but at this very moment I'm imagining I'm having a heart-to-heart talk with a fatherly salamander."

Diss opened his mouth and made some hissing sounds that I guessed were supposed to be laughter.

"It must be confusing for you at this point, I concede. However, remember to apply the simple criterion: facts are facts, however revealed. And if my revelations illuminate the situation—why, then, if I'm not real I'm as good as, eh?"

"I've also got a headache," I said. "You just got to where a plot existed to save my sanity. How about mentioning who the plotters are and why they're interested in unscrambling my wits, if I've got any."

"They are the Research Council, a high-level governmental group—of which you were—or are—Chairman."

"You must have the wrong pigeon, Diss. The only research I do is into who pulled the trigger or pushed the breadknife, as the case may be."

He waved that away. "A transparent rationalization. Your own common sense must tell you that it's necessary now to widen the scope of your self-concept. Would I waste my time interviewing an obscure private eye, with or without his wits about him?"

"I pass. Keep talking."

"Your last project as chairman was the development of a device for the study of dreams, an apparatus designed to search the subconscious for operative symbols and concretize and externalize them, making the unconscious mental activities available for study. You insisted on being the first test subject. Unfortunately, due to fatigue and stress factors, you were unequal to the experience. Your mind embraced this new avenue of escape; you slipped away into a fantasy world of your own devising."

"I'm disappointed in me. I'd have thought I could devise something that was more fun than being chased, run away from, shot at, slugged and generally scared to death."

"Indeed?" Diss chuckled, sounding like a safety valve letting off a little extra pressure. "Know thyself, Florin. You're a scientist, a theoretician, not a doer of deeds. You welcomed the opportunity to shed responsibility in a simpler world of brute law of kill or be killed. But your loyal henchmen, naturally enough, were far from content with this turn of events. It was necessary that they bring you back from your dream world. You had escaped into the *persona* of a legendary character of Old Earth—Florin by name. Van Wouk countered this move by setting you a task—in your chosen guise, of course—and thereupon introducing difficulties into your path, with the object of rendering your refuge untenable. Matters proceeded as planned—to a point. You entered the fantasy, accepted the charge. Abruptly things went awry. Unplanned elements cropped up, complicating affairs. Van Wouk attempted to abort the treatment, but found himself unable to do so. Matters had been taken

out of his hands. He was no longer in control of the dream machine."

He paused for the question. I asked it.

"You were now in charge, of course," he said. "Rather than acting as a passive receiver of the impulses fed to your brain, you seized on them and wove them into a new fabric, closer to your needs—specifically, the need to cling to your chosen role."

"What do you mean by 'Old Earth'?"

"You still don't remember, eh?" Diss said. "A portion of your mind has carefully blanked out the evidence of the situation you found insupportable. By supplying the data from another source, I am in effect outflanking your own mental defenses. As for Old Earth—it's the name given to a minor world thought by some to be the original home of humanity."

"I guess this is where I say I thought humanity only had one home."

"Oh, of course—Earth was the setting you chose for yourself, as appropriate to your role as Florin, the Man of Steel. But by now you must be ready to accept the thesis that such a stage is a trifle too small to contain both you and—myself." He gave me the lipless smile.

"Not to mention Grayfell"

Diss made his hissing laughter again. "Van Wouk was growing desperate. He intended to pacify you by offering you an alternate avenue of rational escape, an acceptable alibi to seize on. But you carried his gambit on to a *reductio ad absurdum*, discrediting it. It was at that point that I felt it essential to step in—both to save your sanity and to prevent a wider tragedy."

"I see. You're just a selfless individual out to do a little good in the big bad imaginary world."

"Not quite." He tipped the ashes from his cigarette. "I mentioned that there was a service you could perform for me."

"I guess you'll tell me what it is, whether I coax you or not."

"The dream machine," he said, "is a most ingenious device, too ingenious, I fear. You're to be congratulated, my dear Florin, on your achievement. But it won't do, you know. It will have to be shut down—permanently."

I scratched my jaw, which I discovered hadn't been shaved for quite a while, which might have been a clue to something, but at the moment I didn't stop to chase it down.





"Picture the problems which would be created," Diss went on, "if a band of untutored aborigines on some remote ocean isle accidentally stumbled on a means of generating powerful radio waves. Some incidental byproduct, perhaps, of an improved anti-devil charm. In all innocence they could well disrupt planetary communications, interfere with satellite operations, wreak havoc with trideo and open and close carport doors on the other side of the planet."

"It doesn't sound all bad. But I get the point."

"The dream machine, unhappily, has such side-effects. Unwittingly, when you and your Council set it in operation, you created repercussions in the probability fabric that extend half across the galaxy. This is, of course, an intolerable situation. Yet galactic law closely restricts direct interventions. Candidly, my present activities in confronting you in a semicorporeal state border on the illegal. But I judged that the circumstances warranted a slight bending of regulations."

"What does semicorporeal mean?"

"Only that I'm not actually here—any more than you."

"Where are you?"

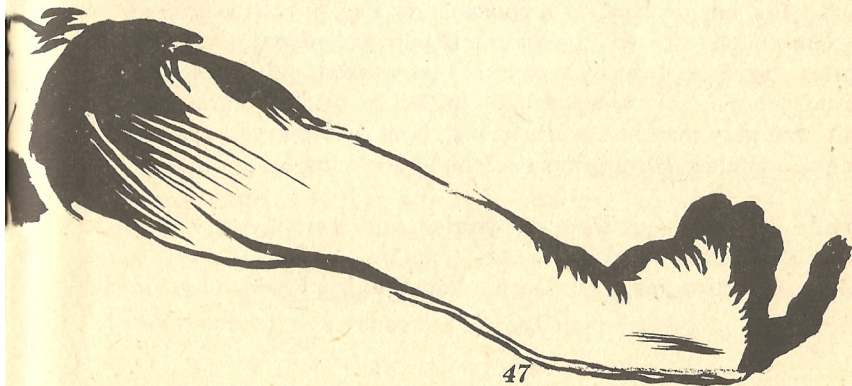
"In the transmission cubicle of my transport, on station some two light-years from Sol. While you, of course, are occupying the dream machine in your own laboratory."

"Why the exotic Saharan background?"

"Oh, you see a desert, do you? You're supplying it from your own fund of imagery, of course. I merely dialed a neutral setting."

I looked at the desert behind him; it looked as real as a desert ever looked. He gave me time for that idea to soak through.

"I'll now intervene in the operation of the machine," he said,



“to bring you back to consciousness—and sanity. In return—you will destroy the machine, including all notes and diagrams. Agreed?”

“No deal,” I said.

“Oh, come now, Florin. Surely you place some value on life and sanity?”

“I don’t like blind deals. Maybe this is all happening and maybe it isn’t. Maybe you can do what you say and maybe you can’t. Maybe I’m a great inventor—and maybe I’m swinging from the chandelier by my tail. You’ll have to show me.”

Diss jammed his cigarette out angrily, shredded the weed into the wind and tucked the holder away.

“You’re a stubborn man, Florin—most stubborn.” He folded his lean arms and drummed his fingers on his biceps. “If I return you to your normal baseline in full possession of your senses and you see that matters are as I described—will you then destroy the machine?”

“I’ll make the decision when I get there.”

“Bah! You’re incorrigible. I don’t know why I waste time with you—but I’m a benign being. I’ll go along. But I warn you—”

“Don’t. It would blight our beautiful friendship.”

He made an impatient gesture and turned and I got a brief, ghostly impression of vertical panels and lines of light. Diss made quick motions with his hands and the light faded, changed quality. The distant horizon rushed closer, blanked out the sky. There was an instant of total darkness and a sound like a series of doors slamming far away. Ideas, names, faces rushed into my mind like water filling a bucket.

Then the lights came up slowly.

I was lying on my back in a room thirty feet on a side, ceiled with glare-panels, floored in patterned tiles, walled with complex apparatus. Big-nose stood by a console that winked and flared with emergency signals that beeped and shrilled in strident alarm. Beside him the gray man in a white smock, bent over a smaller panel, jabbing at switches. Bardell was stretched out on the next cot, snoring.

I made a sound and Big-nose whirled and stared at me. His mouth worked but no words came out.

“You can unstrap me now, Doctor Van Wouk,” I said. “I’m no longer violent.”

A HALF-HOUR had passed, as half-hours are wont to do. The lard-faced man—Dr. Wollf as he was known to his intimates—had unsnapped the contacts, clucked over my wrists and ankles where the straps had cut in, and smeared some salve over the raw spots. The gray man—Dr. Eridani—had hurried out and come back with hot coffee laced with something that restored the glow to my cheeks, if not to my pride. The others—Trait, Tomey, Hyde, Jonas, et al (the names were there, ready in my memory, along with a lot of other things) gathered around and took turns telling me how worried they'd been. The only one who hung back and sulked was Bardell. Eridani had administered a hypo that had brought him out of his doze yelling; they had calmed him down, but he still seemed to be nursing a grudge.

"My God, Jim," Van Wouk said to me, "we thought for a while we'd lost you."

"Nevertheless, I'm here," I said. "Give me a report, the whole thing, from the beginning."

"Of course, Jim. Why, then, on completion of SAVE—the Symbolic Abstractor and Visual Elaborator, that is to say—you authorized an operational test, with yourself as subject. You were placed under light hypnosis and the electrodes were positioned. Calibration proceeded normally. The program was introduced, the integrator energized. Almost at once, power demand jumped tenfold. Feedback protection devices were activated without result. I tried various control and damping measures in an effort to regain control, to no avail. I reluctantly ordered an abort and cut all power—but you remained in deep REM coma, failing to respond to the recall signals. It was as though you were drawing power from some other source, fantastic though that seems.

"In desperation I tried corrective reprogramming, to no avail. Then—out of a clear sky—you snapped out of it."

"Any idea why?"

"None. It was as though an external vector had been introduced. Neural potentials that had been running sky high—at full emergency stimulus level—suddenly dropped back to rest state. The next moment you were with us again."

I tipped my head toward Bardell, who was sitting across the room, nursing a cup of coffee and looking resentful.

"What does he do?"

"Why, that's Bardell. Temporary employee; he was used as an ancillary vector in the mock-ups during the test. A sort of, ah, bit player, you might say."

"All part of the dream machinery, eh?"

"The—? Oh, yes, a very appropriate nickname, Jim."

"How does it work?"

He stared at me. "You mean—"

"Just pretend I've forgotten."

"Yes. Why, then, ah, it's simply a matter of first monitoring the dream mechanism, then stimulating the visual, olfactory and auditory cortexes in accordance with previously determined symbolic coding to create the desired, eh, hallucinatory experiences. The program mockups occupy the adjacent bay—"

"Show me."

"Why, certainly, Jim. Just this way." He walked across to a blank wall and pushed a button. A plain gray panel slid back on two walls of a shabby hotel room, complete with brass bed and broken windows.

He noticed me looking at the latter and chuckled insincerely. "You grew rather violent a time or two, Jim."

He led the way through the conference room—not nearly so plush in a good light—the street scenes—cardboard and plaster—the boarding house; all just shabby, hastily built sets that wouldn't fool a blind man.

"All that was required," Van Wouk explained importantly, "was a triggering stimulus. You supplied the rest from your subconscious."

The series of sets ended at a heavy fire door, locked.

"Our premises end here," Van Wouk said. "Another agency has that space."

The route back led through the warehouse scene. I poked a toe at the broken dummy that looked like Bardell.

"What was this for?"

He seemed to notice it with surprise. "That? Oh, we hoped at first to make use of mannikins; but we soon determined that human actors were necessary." He gave me a twitch of the jowls. "A human being is a rather complex device, not easy to simulate."

"How does all this get into the picture? If I was strapped down in the next room—"

"Oh, that was only at the end. After you, er, ran out of control. We began with you in an ambulatory state, under light narcosis."

"How long since this test began?"

Van Wouk looked at a big watch expensively strapped to his fat hairy wrist.

"Nearly eight hours," he said and wagged his head in sympathy for himself. "A trying eight hours, Jim."

"And now what, Doctor?"

"Now? Why, an analysis of the tapes, determination of just what it was that went wrong, corrective action and then—new tests, I would assume."

"I'd have to authorize that, of course."

"Naturally, sir."

"What would you think of suspending testing?"

Van Wouk pulled at his lower lip; he cocked an eye at me. "That's for you to determine, of course, sir," he murmured, "if you're convinced there's danger—"

"Maybe we ought to smash the machine," I said.

"Hmm. Perhaps you're right."

**I**N THE next room voices were raised excitedly.

"... I don't know what you're trying to pull now," Bardell was yelling, "but I won't stand for it. Unlock this door, damn you! I'm leaving here, right now—"

We went back in. Bardell was at the hall door, wrenching at the knob, his face pink from exertion. Eridani was fluttering around him; Trait was at the side door, rattling the knob. He looked up at Van Wouk.

"Some joker has locked this from the outside," he said. He went across to Bardell, shouldered the bigger man aside, twisted the knob, then stepped back and gave the door a kick at latch height. It looked like it hurt his toe, if not the door.

"Here—what the devil are you doing, Trait!" Van Wouk went to the door and tried it, turned and looked at me with a disturbed expression.

"Do you know—" he started, then changed his tack. "Some error," he said. "Somehow, I suppose, the security system has become engaged."

"You won't get away with this," Bardell shouted. He grabbed up a metal chair and crashed it against the door. It bounced off, one

leg bent. Van Wouk brushed past me into the room we had just come out of, hurried to the window, swung out the frame—and recoiled.

“Is this your doing?” he asked in a choked voice. I went across to see what he was staring at. Solid concrete filled the space where the passage had been.

“That’s right,” I said. “While you were watching Red kick the door I ordered up two yards of readymix and had it poured in here. Sorry, I forgot to scratch my initials in it.”

He snarled and ducked around me, ran back into the green-tiled lab. Eridani and Trait and the others were in a huddle; Bardell was against the wall at the far side, watching everybody. I went to the door he had tried first and pounded on it; it gave back a solid *thunk* that suggested an armored bunker.

“No phone in here?” I asked.

“No nothing,” Eridani said quickly. “Special isolation arrangements—”

“Got a pry bar?”

“Here—a locking bar from the filing cabinet.” Trait hefted the four-foot length of one-inch steel as if he might be thinking about using it on my head; but he went to the door, jimmied the flat end in between door and jamb and heaved. Wood splintered; the door popped wide.

Solid concrete filled the opening.

Trait staggered back. Bardell let out a yelp and scuttled sideways to a corner.

“You plan to kill me,” he yelled. “I’m on to you now—but it won’t work—” He broke off, his eyes fixed on me. “You,” he said. “They’ll get you, too; you’re no safer than I am! Maybe together we can—”

Van Wouk whirled on him. “You damned fool! Don’t appeal to him for help! We’re all his victims! He’s the one who’s responsible for this. It’s his doing—”

“Liar!” Bardell yelled, and swung back to me. “You’re the one they were out to get. They tricked you into the dream machine. They intended to drive you insane—certifiably insane. It was the only way to eliminate you without killing you—”

Trait reached him then, slammed a hard-looking fist into his stomach, straightened him up with a left hook. It didn’t knock him out but it shut him up. He sagged against the wall, his mouth open.

"All right," Van Wouk said, his voice a little high, a trifle shaky. He swallowed hard and lowered his head as if I were a brick wall and he was going to ram me. I pulled out one of my many guns and aimed it at him.

"**M**OTHER OF GOD," Wolff said, and made a magic sign in the air. Van Wouk made a sound that wasn't speech. Eridani flared his nostrils. Trait cursed and reached for his hip.

"Naughty, naughty," I said. "Try anything cute and I'll turn you into an ugly redhead with a bad complexion."

"This has got to stop, Florin," Van Wouk blustered, but weakly. "We can't go on this way any longer."

"I agree," I said. "In fact, we can't go as far as we've gone—but you notice I didn't let that slow me down. Now, who wants to spill the beans? Eridani? Wolff?"

"The truth?" Van Wouk made a noise that might have been a laugh being strangled at birth. "Who knows what the truth is? Who knows anything? Do you, Florin? If so, you have the advantage of us, I assure you."

"The machine must be disabled, put out of action once and for all," Eridani said in a cold voice. "I assume you see that now, Florin?"

"Not yet," I said. "Bardell, come here."

"They tried to kill me," he said in a voice like broken bottles. "I told you they wanted to kill me, and—"

"Skip that," I said. "I'm about to try an experiment. You can help."

"What do you mean?" Van Wouk blurted. "You, and this—this—"

"Yeah. I admit Bardell doesn't have a lot going for him—but you boys don't seem to like him. That makes him a pal. How about it, Bardell? Will you throw in with me or ride it down in flames with Van Wouk and company?"

Bardell looked from them to me and back again. "Now, wait just a minute, Florin—"

"The waiting's over. Now we act. Are you in, or out?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Make up your mind."

He gnawed his lip. He twitched. He opened his mouth to speak, hesitated.

Trait laughed. "You picked a poor stick to lean on, Florin," he said. "That's not a man, it's a bowl full of jelly."

"All right, I'll help you," Bardell said quite calmly and walked over to stand beside me.

"Trait, will you never learn to keep your stupid mouth shut?" Eridani said in a tone stamped out of cold rolled steel.

"Sure, be tricky," I said. "It adds to the game." I waved a hand. "Back against the wall, all of you." They obeyed.

"Bardell, fire up the dream machine."

"But—you're not linked to it."

"Just get the circuits hot. I'll take it from there."

"I demand you tell us what you intend doing," Van Wouk growled.

"Easy," I said. "Up to now I've just been along for the ride. Now I'm taking the wheel."

"Meaning?"

"Somebody along the line dropped hints that I was responsible for certain anomalies. The old 'monsters-from-the-id' idea. According to that theory I've been the prime mover as well as the prime victim—consciously. I'm moving the action over to the conscious area. The next trick you see will be on purpose."

Eridani and Van Wouk made simultaneous inarticulate noises. Trait pushed away from the wall and stopped, poised.

Bardell called, "Activated!"

And a great light flared in my brain.

**T**HE knowledge was all there, crowding into the forefront of my mind; I felt the energies pouring into my brain, filling it, reaching out for contact, while around me the walls faded and dissolved.

And out of the darkness ahead, Diss appeared. I saw him at a great distance, a gigantic figure striding toward me, dinosaurian, magnificent, irresistible, light glinting from his polished purple scale-armor, from his flashing violet eyes. He halted, towering against a backdrop of stars.

"Florin," his voice boomed out, filling all space the way an organ fills a cathedral. "We meet again, then!"

I didn't answer him. I picked a spot on the pale curve of his exposed belly and thought a hole in it—or tried to. Diss didn't seem to notice.

"It's still not too late for an accommodation," he thundered. "I



can, of course, wipe you out of existence, as Bardell so rightly warned you. But I have no vindictiveness toward you, no wish to injure you." He laughed, a gargantuan sound. "Why would I wish to commit any such atrocity? What would I gain from that?"

I narrowed down the scope of my target, concentrated everything I had at it. Diss raised a Herculean hand and scratched idly at the spot.

"I admire your spirit, of course—standing alone, defending your forlorn cause. You see, I am not without emotion. But I can't allow such sentimental considerations to stand in the way of my duty. I asked you once, on a gentlemanly basis, to destroy the dream machine. Well, you didn't do it. Instead you're persisting in your prying. You've turned up a few more small facts—but to what end? Very well, the machine is not quite as innocent as I painted it; your role not quite so minor as that of a delegate representing a trivial planet in Galactic Parliament. But is anything changed—except in scale? The Galactic Concensus is old, Florin—older than your infant race. It can no more tolerate your chaos-producing expansionism than a human body can tolerate cancer cells. As the body marshals its defenses to destroy the malignancy, so we marshal whatever force is needed to contain you. That's all we intend, Florin: to restrict you to your own sector of space, put an end to your disturbances. Surely you see the wisdom now of bowing to the inevitable?"

I didn't answer, concentrating on my attack. He fingered the spot absently and frowned.

"Withdraw, Florin. I assure you, you'll be allowed to dwell in peaceful obscurity hereafter—" He broke off and put a hand over his belly. "Florin," he bellowed. "What are you—" He screeched suddenly and clawed at himself. "Traitor! Under cover of parley you attacked me—" He broke off to beat at the bright purple flames that were licking up around him, curling and blackening the bright scales. Suddenly he looked a lot smaller, as if my whole perspective on him had changed. He wasn't a giant across the plain now, just a man-sized reptile capering in front of me, squealing in fury more than pain, I thought.

I said, "This is easy—and a lot more fun than having it done to me."

"Stop," he cried, in a voice that was half an octave higher than the one he had been using. "I confess I've been misleading you. I'll tell you the truth now—but stop—before it's too late—"

I lowered the heat. "Start talking, Diss," I said.

"What I told you before was true, in the main," he yelled. "I merely distorted certain elements. I see now that was a mistake. My only intention was to avoid complicating matters, settle the affair as quickly and simply as possible. But I misjudged you." He gave me a wild-eyed reptilian look, while the smoke from the damped-down blaze curled about his narrow head. "You are not an easy being to manipulate, Florin.

"As I told you, you voluntarily entered the environmental simulator—the dream machine—but not for the purpose of testing as I said. It was for treatment. You're an important human, Florin. They needed you, you see. You were hypnoted, your superficial memories suppressed, new conditioning taped into your brain—conditioning matching your imagined role. The intention was to manipulate your hallucinations in such a way as to render them an untenable escape and thus to force you back to rationality."

"It sounds kind of familiar," I said. "Except it was the Senator who was off the rails."

Diss looked disconcerted. "But haven't you understood yet?" he said. "You are the Senator."

## IX

"IT'S really quite amusing," Diss said. "You escaped into the *persona* of the legendary Florin, whereupon Van Wouk arranged for you to be engaged—as Florin, the Man of Steel—as bodyguard to the Senator. He set you to guard yourself, thereby presenting you with an insoluble paradox."

"That sounds like a dirty trick. Why didn't it work?"

"With commendable ingenuity, your beleaguered imagination produced a Senator who was yourself, and who was yet not yourself. In due course, as the pressure to recognize yourself mounted, you explained him away by calling him an actor. This was, however, merely begging the question. It left unanswered the mystery of the identity of the real Senator—yourself. You became obsessed with the need to find and confront him. Van Wouk and his group, monitoring your fantasy, attempted without success, to remove Bardell from the scene. In the end they presented you with his corpse—a measure of desperation. But you—or your subconscious—were equal to the challenge. You could not, of course, accept

your own removal from the board. You transformed the impostor into a lifeless puppet and went on to confront your bugaboo yet again—whereupon you promptly drove him apparently to destroy himself. But even then you were dissatisfied; you saw through the deception, and persevered—to the discomfiture of the Galactic Community.”

“So you stepped in and gave me pieces of the story and sent me back to wreck the gizmo you call the dream machine.”

“Which you failed to do. I hope that now you realize you can never rid yourself of yourself, Florin; Your nemesis whom you pursue, and who pursues you—whom you’ve sworn to protect, but must attack—or is it the other way around?” He glittered his eyes at me, regaining his confidence.

“Try as you will, Florin, you’re doomed forever to walk where you would have flown, to crawl where you would have run—dragging always the intolerable but inescapable burden of yourself.”

“Very poetic,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell me I was the Senator to begin with? Why the story about an experiment?”

“I was unsure how you’d accept the news that you had been declared insane,” he said, rather tartly. “Now, having seen your monumental ego in action, I’m not so inhibited.”

“Just that, huh? You make it all so simple and sweet. And I don’t remember any of it because part of the treatment was to blank out my memory, eh? And the joker in the deck was that we were playing with a loaded gun, and you’re the nice policeman who came along to take it away. You know what, Diss? You’re a nice fellow, and I like you, but I think you’re lying.”

“What, me lie? That’s preposterous. Now, I mean. Before, of course, when I hadn’t yet fully assessed your capabilities—”

“Don’t bother, Diss. You’ve developed what they used to call a credibility gap. As polite a way as they could think up for calling a man a damned liar. Why do you want the dream machine smashed?”

“I’ve already explained—”

“I know. And I didn’t believe you. Try again.”

“That’s absurd. What I’ve told you is absolutely factual.”

“You don’t like my playing around with this substitute reality we’re making do with, do you, Diss?” I pictured us boxed in by walls. We were. I turned the walls into backdrops painted to represent the green-tiled lab. Then I made the pictures real. Diss hissed and backed against the big console, where every light in sight was



lit up now. I could see the lettering on them: *Emergency Overload*. Somehow, the lizard man looked smaller in this context; a rather pathetic little lizard in an out-of-style stiff collar and string tie.

“What do you want, Florin?” he whispered. “What do you want?”

“I don’t know,” I said and put a pale blue Persian carpet on the floor. It clashed with the walls. I changed it to pale green. Diss screeched and danced as if the floor had gotten hot under him.

“No more—no more—” he snarled.

“**R**EADY to give up? Before I change this dump into a Playboy Club, complete with cold-blooded bunnies with armor-plated bosoms?”

“Y-you can’t—” His voice had now developed a quaver to go with the soprano pitch.

“I’m getting reckless, Diss. I don’t care if school keeps or not. I want to see something give at the seams.” I took away the green tiles and put flowered wallpaper in their place. I added a window with a view across a landscape that, somewhat to my surprise, was a yellow desert, stretching farther than any desert had a right to stretch. I looked at Diss and he was dressed in a skintight golden uniform, with sparkling insigniae and silver braid and rainbow-colored medals and polished boots and sharp-looking spurs and he held a quirt in his right hand that he *whapped* against his armored shin in a gesture of impatience. Somehow the outfit made him look smaller than ever.

“Very well, Florin, since you leave me no choice, I now inform you that I am a Chief-Inspector of Galactic Security Forces and that you are under arrest.” He yanked a large and elaborate handgun from the bejeweled holster at his lean hip and pointed it at me, left-handed.



“Will you come quietly?” he chirped. “Or will I be forced to place you in ambulatory coma?”

“I’ve already been there,” I said, and shot the gun out of his hand. He whipped a saber out of a sheath I hadn’t noticed and aimed a vicious cut at my head. I got my cutlass up in time and metal clanged on metal. Diss staggered back, whipped out a bamboo tube and propelled a curare-tipped dart in my direction. I ducked under it and he produced a flame-thrower. Flame bellowed and sputtered at me, licking harmlessly off my asbestos suit until I hosed it out, sputtering and smoking, with a big brass nozzle.

Diss was scarcely two feet high now. He lobbed a grenade at me and I bounced it back off a garbage-can lid; the detonation knocked him back against the control panel. All the red lights went to green, and a strident alarm bell began to clang. Diss jumped up on the chart table, no longer wearing his natty gold threads. His hide was a dull purplish-gray. He chittered like an enraged squirrel and threw a thunderbolt that exploded harmlessly, with a crash like a falling cliff, filling the air with the reek of ozone and scorched plastic. A foot high now, Diss danced in fury, shook his fist, and launched a nuclear rocket. I watched it come across the room toward me, and leaned aside, gave it a nudge as it passed; it flipped end-for-end and streaked back toward its owner. He dived over the side—he was about six inches long now—and the whole room blew up in my face. Luckily, I was wearing my full-spectrum invulnerable armor, so no harm came to me. I waded through the ruins and out into yellow sunlight filled with boiling dust. The dust settled and a small pale-violet lizard coiled on a rock just before me uttered a supersonic hiss and spat a stream of venom at my eyes. That annoyed me. I raised my gigantic fly-swatter to crush the grasshopper-sized lizard, and he uttered a piercing miniature shriek and ducked into a crack in the rock, and I jammed my crow-bar in after him and levered and cracks opened all across the stone.

“Florin! I surrender— I yield utterly—only stop now—” His eyes glittered like red sparks from the depths of the cleft. I laughed at him and jammed the pry-bar in deeper.

He was just a cricket chirping in a desert. I levered again and the whole gigantic boulder split with a noise like thunder and fell apart carrying the earth and the sky with it, exposing the velvet blackness of absolute nothingness.

*NICE*, I called into the emptiness. *But a trifle stark for my taste. Let there be light!*

And there was light.

And I saw that it was good and I divided the light from the darkness. It still looked a little empty, so I added a firmament and divided the waters under it from the waters above it. That gave me an ocean with a lot of wet clouds looking down on it.

*Kind of monotonous. Let the waters be gathered together off to the side and let's see a little dry land around here . . .*

And it was so.

*Better, but still dead looking. Let there be life . . .*

Slime spread across the water and elaborated into seaweed and clumps floated ashore and lodged there and put out new shoots that crawled up on the bare rocks and sunned themselves; and the earth brought forth grass and herbs yielding seeds, and fruit trees and lawns and jungles and flower boxes and herbaceous borders and moss and celery and a lot of other green stuff.

*Too static. Let's have some animals.*

And the earth brought forth whales and cattle and fowl and creeping things—and they splashed and mooed and clucked and crept, livening things up a little, but not enough.

*The trouble is, it's too quiet, I pointed out to me. Nothing's happening . . .*

The earth trembled underfoot and the ground heaved and the top of a mountain blew off and lava belched out and set the forested slopes afire, and the black clouds of smoke and pumice came rolling down on me. I coughed and changed my mind and everything was peaceful again.

*What I meant was something pleasant, like a gorgeous sunset with music . . .*

The sky jerked and the sun sank in the south in a glory of purple and green and pink, while chords boomed down from an unseen source in the sky, or inside my head. After it had set I cranked it back up and set it again a few times. I varied it and ran through half a dozen more dusks before I acknowledged that there was still a certain sameness to the spectacle.

*It's hard work, making up a new one each time, I conceded. It gives me a headache. How about just the concert without the light show?*

I played through what I could remember of the various sym-

phonies, laments, concerti, ballads, madrigals and singing commercials. After a while I ran out. I tried to make up one of my own but nothing came. That was an area I would have to look into—later. Right now I wanted fun.

*Skiing*, I specified. *Healthful exercise in the open air, the thrill of speed . . .*

I was rushing down a slope out of control, went head over in-steps and broke both legs.

*Not like that*, I complained, reassembling myself. *No falling down . . .*

I whizzed down the slope, gripped in a sort of invisible padded frame that wrenched me this way and that, insulating me from all shocks.

*Talk about taking a bath in your BVD'S—I might as well be watching it on TV . . .*

I tried surfing, riding the waves in like the rabbit at a dogtrack, locked to the rails. The surf was all around but it had nothing to do with me.

*No good. You have to learn how—and that's hard work. Sky-diving, maybe?*

I gripped the open door frame and stepped out. Wind screamed past me as I hung motionless, watching a pastel-toned tapestry a few feet below grow steadily larger. Suddenly it turned into trees and fields rushing up at me; I grabbed for the ring, yanked—

The jolt almost broke my back. I spun dizzily, swinging like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, and slammed into solid rock.

. . . I was being dragged by the chute. I managed to unbuckle the harness and crawl under a bush to recuperate.

*There's tricks to every trade*, I reminded myself. *Including to being God. What's the point in doing something if I don't enjoy it?*

That started me thinking about what I did enjoy.

*It's all yours, old man*, I pointed out. *How about a million dollars to start with?*

The bills were neatly stacked in bundles of \$1000.00 in tens, twenties, fifties and hundreds. There were quite a lot of them.

*That's not quite it. What good is money perse? It's what you can buy with it. Like for example, a brand new 1936 Auburn boat-tailed Speedster with green leather upholstery . . .*

It was there, parked on the drive. It smelled good. The doors



had a nice slam. I cranked up, gunned it up to fifty along the road that I caused to appear in front of it. I went faster and faster: 90 . . . 110 . . . 200 . . . After a while I got tired of buffeting wind and dust and eliminated them. That left the roar and the jouncing.

*You're earthbound . . .*

I added wings and a prop and was climbing steeply in my Gee Bee Sportster, the wind whipping back past my face bearing a heartening reek of castor oil and high octane. But quite suddenly the stubby racer whip-stalled and crashed in a ploughed field near Peoria. There wasn't enough left of me to pick up with a spoon. I got it together and was in a T-33, going straight up as smooth as Burma-shave. I leveled off and did snap-rolls and loops and chandelles and started getting airsick. I sailed down a canyon that followed a sinuous course between heaped clouds and got sicker. I came in low over the fence, holding her off for a perfect touch-down and barely made it before I urped.

I waved the whole thing away and pictured a cozy little fire on the beach with people sitting around it cross-legged, toasting wieners and marshmallows.

"Ah, the simple life," I said, and moved up to join them and they looked up and a big fellow with a mat of black hair on his chest stood up and said, "Beat it, jack. Private party."

"I just want to join the fun," I said. "Look, I brought my own weenie."

**A** GIRL screamed and Blackie came in fast throwing lefts and rights, most of which I deftly intercepted with my chin. I went down on my back and got a mouthful of callused foot before I whisked the little group out of existence. I spat sand and tried to appreciate the solitude and the quiet slap of the surf and the big moon hanging over the water and might have been making some headway when an insect sank his fangs into that spot under the shoulder blades, the one you can't reach. I eliminated animal life for the moment and paused for thought.

*I've been going about it wrong. What I want is a spot I fit into; a spot where life is simpler and sweeter and has a place for me. What better spot than my own past?*

I let my thoughts slide back down the trail to the memory of a little frame schoolhouse on a dirt road on a summer day, long ago. I was there, eight years old, wearing knickers and sneakers and a

shirt and tie, sitting at a desk covered with carved initials, my hands folded, waiting for the bell to ring. It did, and I jumped up and ran outside into the glorious sunshine of youth and a kid three sizes bigger with bristly red hair and little eyes like a pig. He grabbed me by the hair and scrubbed his knuckles rapidly back and forth across my scalp and threw me down and jumped on me and I felt my nose start to bleed.

So I wrapped him in chains and dropped a seventeen-ton trip hammer on him and was alone again.

*That was all wrong. That wasn't the idea at all. That wasn't facing real life with all its joys and sorrows. That was a copout. The other guy has to have a chance; it has to be man to man, the free interplay of personality—that's what makes for the rich, full life. . .*

I made myself six foot three and magnificently muscled, with crisp golden curls and a square jaw and Pig-eyes came out of an alley with a length of pipe and smashed the side of my head in. I dressed myself in armor with a steel helmet and he came up behind me and slipped a dirk in through the chink where my gorget joined my epaulière. I threw the armor away and slipped into my black belt and went into a *neko-ashi-dashi* stance and ducked his slash and he shot me through the left eye.

I blanked it all out and was back on the beach.

*That's enough acting on impulse.* I told myself sternly. *Hand-to-hand combat isn't really your idea of fun; if you lose, it's unpleasant—and if you always win, why bother?*

I didn't have a good answer for that one. That encouraged me so I went on.

*What you really want is companionship, not rivalry. Just the warmth of human society on a noncompetitive basis.*

At once I was the center of a throng. They weren't doing anything much, just thronging. Warm, panting bodies, pressed close to me. I could smell them. That was perfectly normal, bodies do have smells. Someone stepped on my foot and said, "Excuse me." Somebody else stepped on my other foot and didn't say excuse me. A man fell down and died. Nobody paid any attention. I might not have either, except that the man was me. I cleared the stage and sat on the curb and watched the sad city sunlight shine down on the scrap paper blowing along the sidewalk. It was a dead, dirty city. On impulse I cleaned it up, even removing the grime from the building fronts.

That made it a dead, clean city.

*The ultimate in human companionship, I thought to myself, is that of a desirable and affectionate female of nubile years and willing disposition.*

ACCORDINGLY I was in my penthouse apartment, the hi-fi turned low, the wine chilled—and She was reclining at ease on the commodious and cushion-scattered chaise longue. She was tall, shapely, with abundant reddish-brown hair, smooth skin, large eyes, a small nose. I poured. She wrinkled her nose at the wine and yawned. She had nice teeth.

“Golly, haven’t you got any groovy records?” she asked. Her voice was high, thin, and self-indulgent.

“What would you prefer?” I asked.

“I dunno. Something catchy.” She yawned again and looked at the heavy emerald and diamond bracelet on her wrist.

“Come on, really,” she said. “How much did it cost?”

“I got it free. I have a pal in the business. It’s a demonstrator.”

She took it off and threw it on the inch-thick rug. “I’ve got this terrible headache,” she whined. “Call me a cab.”

*That shows what you really think of the kind of girls who go with penthouses and hi-fi, I told myself, dismissing her with a wave of my hand. What you really want is a home girl, sweet and innocent and unassuming.*

I came up the steps of the little white cottage with the candle in the window and she met me at the door with a plate of cookies. She chattered about her garden and her sewing and her cooking as we dined on cornbread and black-eyed peas with lumps of country ham in it. Afterward she washed and I dried. Then she tatted while I sat by the fire and oiled harness or something of the sort. After a while she said, “Well, good night,” and left the room quietly. I waited five minutes and followed. She was just turning back the patchwork quilt; she was wearing a thick woolen nightgown and her hair was in braids.

“Take it off,” I said. She did. I looked at her. She looked like a woman.

“Uh, let’s go to bed,” I said. We did.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” I wanted to know.

“What shall I say?”

“What’s your name?”

"You didn't give me one."

"You're Charity. Where are you from, Charity?"

"You didn't say."

"You're from near Dothan. How old are you?"

"Forty-one minutes."

"Nonsense! You're at least, ah, twenty-three. You've lived a full, happy life and now you're here with me, the culmination of all your dreams."

"Yes."

"Is that all you have to say? Aren't you happy? Or sad? Don't you have any ideas of your own?"

"Of course. My name is Charity, and I'm twenty-three and I'm here with you—"

"What would you do if I hit you? Suppose I set the house on fire? What if I said I was going to cut your throat?"

"Whatever you say."

I got a good grip on my head and suppressed a yell of fury.

"Wait a minute, Charity—this is all wrong. I didn't mean you to be an automaton, just mouthing what I put in your head. Be a real, live woman. React to me—"

She grabbed the covers up to her chin and screamed.

**I** SAT in the kitchen alone and drank a glass of cold milk and sighed a lot.

Let's think this thing through. *You can make it any way you want it. But you're trying to do it too fast; you're taking too many short-cuts. The trick is to start slowly, build up the details, make it real.*

So I thought up a small midwestern city with wide brick streets of roomy old frame houses under big trees with shady yards and gardens that weren't showplaces, just the comfortable kind where you can swing in a hammock and walk on the grass and pick the flowers without feeling like you're vandalizing a set piece.

I walked along the street, taking it all in, getting the feel of it. It was autumn, and someone was burning leaves somewhere. I climbed the hill, breathing the tangy evening air, being alive. The sound of a piano softly played floated down across the lawn of the big brick house at the top of the hill. Purity Atwater lived there. She was only seventeen and the prettiest girl in town. I had an impulse to turn in right then but I kept going.

*You're a stranger in town, I thought. You have to establish*

*yourself, not just barge in. You have to meet her in the socially accepted way, impress her folks, buy her a soda, take her to the movies. Give her time. Make it real.*

A room at the Y cost fifty cents. I slept well. The next morning I applied for work at only three places before I landed a job at two dollars a day at Siegal's Hardware and Feed. Mr. Siegal was favorably impressed with my frank, open countenance, polite and respectful manner and apparent eagerness for hard work.

After three months, I was raised to \$2.25 per day and took over the bookkeeping. In my room at the boarding house I kept a canary and a shelf of inspirational volumes. I attended divine service regularly and contributed one dime per week to the collection plate. I took a night class in advanced accountancy sent away for Charles Atlas's course, and allowed my muscles to grow no more than could be accounted for by dynamic tension.

In December I met Purity. I was shoveling snow from her father's walk when she emerged from the big house, looking charming in furs. She gave me a smile. I treasured it for a week and schemed to be present at a party attended by her. I dipped punch for the guests. She smiled at me again. She approved of my bronzed good looks, my curly hair, my engaging grin, my puppylike clumsiness. I asked her to the movies. She accepted. On the third date I held her hand briefly. On the tenth I kissed her cheek. Eighteen months later, while I was still kissing her cheek, she left town with the trumpeter from a jazz band I had taken her to hear.

Nothing daunted, I tried again. Hope Berman was the second prettiest girl in town. I wooed her via the same route, jumped ahead to kisses on the lips after only twenty-one dates and was promptly called to an interview with Mr. Berman. He inquired as to my intentions. Her brothers, large men all, also seemed interested. A position with Berman and Sons, Clothiers, was hinted at. Hope giggled. I fled.

**L**ATER in my room I criticized myself sternly. I was ruined in Pottsville. Word was all over town that I was a trifler. I took my back wages, minus some vague deductions and with a resentful speech from Mr. Siegal about ingrates and grasshoppers, and traveled by train to St. Louis. There I met and paid court to Faith, a winsome lass who worked as a secretary in the office of a lawyer whose name was painted on a second-story window on a side street

a few blocks from the more affluent business section. We went to the movies, took long streetcar rides, visited museums, had picnics. I noticed that she perspired moderately in warm weather, had several expensive cavities, was ignorant of many matters and was a very ordinary lay. And afterward she cried and chattered of marriage.

Omaha was a nicer town. I holed up at the Railroad Men's Y there for a week and thought it through. It was apparent I was still acting too hastily. I was not employing my powers correctly. I had exchanged the loneliness of God for the loneliness of Man, a pettier loneliness but no less poignant. The trick was, I saw, to combine the highest skills of each status, to live a human life, nudged here and there in the desired direction.

Inspired, I repaired at once to the maternity ward of the nearest hospital, and was born at 3:27 A.M. on a Friday, a healthy, seven-pound boy whom my parents named Melvin. I ate over four hundred pounds of pabulum before my first taste of meat and potatoes. Afterwards I had a stomach ache. In due course I learned to say bye-bye, walk and pull table cloths off tables in order to hear the crash of crockery. I entered kindergarten and played sand blocks in the band, sometimes doubling in triangle, which was chrome-plated and had a red string. I mastered shoe-tying, pants-buttoning eventually, and roller-skating and falling off my bike. In Junior High I used my twenty cents lunch money for a mayonnaise sandwich, an RC cola half of which I squirted at the ceiling and my classmates and an O Henry. I read many dull books by Louisa May Alcott and A.G. Henty and picked out Patience Froomwall as my intended.

She was a charming redhead with freckles. I took her to proms, picking her up in my first car, one of the early Fords, with a body hand built from planks. After graduation I went away to college, maintaining our relationship via mail. In the summers we saw a lot of each other in a nonanatomical sense.

I received my degree in Business Administration, secured a post with the power company, married Patience and fathered two nippers. They grew up, following much the same pattern as I had, which occasioned some speculation on my part as to how much divine intervention had had to do with my remarkable success. Patience grew less and less like her name, gained weight, developed an interest in church work and gardens and a profound antipathy for everyone else doing church work and gardening.

I worked very hard at all this, never yielding to the temptation to take shortcuts or to improve my lot by turning Patience into a movie starlet or converting our modest six-roomer into a palatial estate in Devon. The hardest part was sweating through a full sixty seconds of subjective time in every minute, sixty minutes every hour . . .

After fifty years of conscientious effort I ended up with a work bench in the garage.

At the local tavern I drank four scotches and pondered my dilemma. After five scotches I became melancholy. After six I became defiant. After seven, angry. At this point the landlord was so injudicious as to suggest that I had had enough. I left in high dudgeon, pausing only long enough to throw a firebomb through the front window. It made a lovely blaze. I went along the street fire-bombing the beauty parlor, the Christian Science Reading Room, the Optometrist, the drug store, the auto parts house, the Income Tax Prepared Here place.

"You're all phonies," I yelled. "All liars, cheats, fakes!"

The crowd which had gathered labored and brought forth a policeman, who shot me and three innocent bystanders. This annoyed me even in my exhilarated mood. I tarred and feathered the officious fellow, then proceeded to blow up the courthouse, the bank, the various churches, the supermarket, and the automobile agency. They burned splendidly.

**I** REJOICED to see the false temples going up in smoke and toyed briefly with setting up my own religion, but at once found myself perplexed with questions of dogma, miracles, fund drives, canonicals, tax-free real estate, nunneries, and inquisitions. I shelved the idea.

All Omaha was blazing nicely now. I moved on other cities, eliminating the dross that had clogged our lives. Pausing to chat with a few survivors in the expectation of overhearing expressions of joy and relief at the lifting of the burden of civilization and praise of the new-found freedom to rebuild a sensible world. I was dismayed to see they seemed more intent on tending their wounds, competing in the pursuit of small game and looting TV sets and cash than in philosophy.

By now the glow of the scotch was fading. I saw I had been hasty. I quickly reestablished order, placing needful authority in the hands

of outstanding Liberals. Since there was still a vociferous body of reactionaries creating unrest and interfering with the establishment of total social justice, it was necessary to designate certain personnel to keep order, dressing them in uniform, garments for ease of identification.

Alas, mild policies failed to convince the wreckers that the people meant business and were not to be robbed of the fruits of their hard-won victory over the bloodsuckers. Sterner measures were of necessity resorted to. Still the stubborn malcontents took advantage of their freedom to agitate, make inflammatory speeches, print disloyal books and in other ways interfere with their comrades' fight for peace and plenty. Temporary controls were accordingly placed on treasonous talk and exemplary executions were carried out. The burden of these duties proving onerous, the leaders found it necessary to retire to the more spacious estates surviving the holocaust and to limit their diets to caviar, champagne, breast of chicken and other therapeutic items in order to keep up their strength for the battle against reaction. Malcontents naturally attributed the leaders' monopoly on limousines, palaces, custom-tailoring and the company of trained nurses of appearance calculated to soothe the weary executive eye as evidence of decadence. Picture their fury and frustration when the State, refusing to tolerate sedition, hustled them off to remote areas where by performing useful labor under simple conditions, they received an opportunity to correct their thinking.

I called on the Prime Leader—affectionately known as the Dictator—and queried him as to his intentions, now that he had consolidated the economy, rooted out traitors and established domestic tranquility.

“I'm thinking about taking over the adjacent continent,” he confided.

“Are they bothering us?” I inquired.

“You bet. Every time I see a good-looking broad on their side of the line and realize she's out of reach—” He ground his teeth.

“Joking aside,” I persisted. “Now that we have peace—”

“Next thing you know the mob will be getting restless,” he said. “Wanting TV sets, cars, ice-boxes—even refrigerators. Just because I and my boys have a few little amenities to help us over the intolerable burdens of leadership they want to get into the act! What do those bums know about the problems we got? Did they ever have to mobilize along a frontier? Did they ever have to make up their





minds: 'tanks or tractors?' Do they have to worry about the old international prestige? Not those bums. All they got to worry about is getting through enough groceries to stay alive long enough to have enough brats so there'll be somebody around to bury 'em—as if that were important."

I thought about it. I sighed. "I can't quite put my finger on it," I told the Dictator, "but something's lacking. It isn't exactly the Utopia I had in mind." I wiped him out and all his works and contemplated the desolation sadly. *Maybe the trouble was I let too many cooks into the broth*, I reflected. *Next time I'll set the whole thing up, complete, just the way I like it—and then turn everybody loose in it.*

**I**T WAS a jolly thought. I did it. I turned the wilderness into a parkland, drained the bogs, planted flowers. I set up towns at wide intervals, each a jewel of design, with cozy dwellings and graceful trees and curving paths and fountains and reflecting pools and open-air theaters that fit into the landscape as if a part of it. I set up clean, well-lighted schools and swimming pools and dredged the rivers and stocked them with fish and provided abundant raw materials and a few well-concealed, nonpolluting factories to turn out the myriad simple, durable, miraculous devices that took all the drudgery out of life, leaving humans free for the activities that only humans can perform, such as original research, art, massage, prostitution and waiting on tables. Then I popped the population into the prepared setting and awaited the glad cries that would greet the realization that everything was perfect.

Somehow I sensed a certain indifference on people's part right from the beginning. I asked a beautiful young couple strolling through a lovely park beside a placid lake if they weren't having a good time.

"I guess so," he said.

"There's nothing to do," she said.

"Think I'll take a nap," he said.

"You don't love me any more," she said.

"Don't bug me," he said.

"I'll kill myself," she said.

"That'll be the day," he said and yawned.

"You son of a bitch," she said.

I moved on. A child with golden curls a lot like mine was playing by the lake. It was drowning a kitten. It was just as well; the kid had already poked the kitten's eyes out. I resisted an impulse to tumble the tot in after the cat and approached an old gentleman with cherubic white locks who was standing on a stone bench, peering bemusedly at a large shrub. At close range I saw that he was peering through the shrub at two nubile maidens disporting themselves naked on the grass. He spun when he heard me coming.

"Scandalous," he quavered. "They've been doing that to each other for the better part of two hours, right out in public where a body can't help seeing them. Makes a body wonder if there aren't enough males to go around."

I had a moment of panic—had I overlooked that detail? But no, of course not. Male and female created i Them. Something else was wrong.

*I know, i cried. i've been doing too much for Them; They're spoiled. What they need is a noble enterprise that They can tackle together, a brave crusade against the forces of evil, with the banners of Right floating overhead.*

We were arrayed in ranks, myself at the head, my loyal soldiery behind me. I rose in my stirrups and pointed to the walls of the embattled town ahead.

"There they are, lads," i cried. "The enemy—the killers, looters, rapists, vandals. Now's the time to get them! Forward once more, dear friends, for Harry, England and St. George!"

We charged, battered our way through the defenses. They surrendered. We rode, triumphant, into the city's streets. My lads leaped from their horses, began hacking at civilians, smashing windows and grabbing handfuls of costume jewelry, TV sets and liquor. They raped all the females, sometimes killing them afterward and sometimes before. They set fire to what they couldn't eat, drink or screw.

"God has won a glorious victory," my priests cried.

It annoyed me to have my name taken in vain; i caused a giant meteorite to crash down in the midst of the revelry. The survivors cited their survival as evidence of God's approval. I sent a plague of stinging flies and half the people burned the other half at the stake to appease me. I sent a flood; they floated around, clinging to fragments of church pews, old TV chassis and the swollen carcasses of dead cows, horses and evangelists, yelling for help and

making promises to me as to how they would behave if they only got out of this one.

I rescued a few and to my delight they set to work at once to save others, whom they immediately formed into platoons, congregations, labor unions, mobs, crowds, lobbies, and political parties. Each group at once attacked another group, usually the one most similar to itself. I gave a terrible yell and swept them all away under a tidal wave. The foaming of the waters around the ruins of temples, legislatures, court houses, clip-joints, chemical factories, and the headquarters of large corporations amused me—I made bigger and better tidal waves and washed away slums, eroded farmland, burnt-off forest areas, silted-up rivers and polluted seas. Adrenalin flooded my system—my lust to destroy was aroused. I pulverized the continents, shattered the crust, splashed around in the magma that boiled forth.

The moon caught my eye, riding aloof above my wrath. The bland smoothness of it annoyed me; i threw a handful of gravel at it, pocking the surface nicely. I grabbed the planet Oedipus and threw it at Saturn; it missed, but the close passage broke it up. Major chunks of rock went into orbit around Saturn and the dust formed rings; a few scraps were captured by Mars and the rest trailed off around the sun.

I found that a satisfying spectacle and turned to invite others to admire it—but, of course, there was no one.

*This is the trouble with being god. I could set up a bunch of nin-compoops to praise me, but what good is that? A fellow wants a response from an equal, dammit. . .*

**S**UDDENLY I was sick and tired of the whole thing. It should have been easy, when you have all the power there is, to make things the way you want them—but it wasn't. Part of the trouble was that I didn't really know what I wanted and another part was that I didn't know how to achieve what I wanted when i did know what it was. And still another part was that when I got what I thought I wanted it turned out not to be what i wanted. Being god was too hard, too complicated. Just being a man was a lot easier. There was a limit on a man's abilities but there was also a limit on his responsibilities.

*I'm only a human being, no matter what kind of thunderbolts I can throw. I need a few hundred thousand years more evolution and then maybe I can handle being god. . .*

I stood—or floated, or drifted—in the midst of the Ylem that was all that was left of all my efforts, and remembered Van Wouk and Lard-face and their big plans for me. They weren't sinister any more, only pathetic. I remembered Diss, the lizard man, and how frightened he had been just at the last. I thought of the Senator, his cowardice and his excuses and suddenly he seemed merely human. And then I thought about me and what a shabby figure I had cut, not just as god, but as a man.

*You looked pretty good in there, I told me, up to a point. You're all right as a loser but you're a lousy winner. Having it all your way is the real problem. Success is the challenge nobody's ever met. Because no matter how many you win, there's always a bigger and harder and more complicated problem ahead—and there always will be—and the secret isn't victory forever but to keep on doing the best you can one day at a time and remember you're a man, not just God. For you there aren't and never will be any easy answers, only questions; and no reasons, only causes; and no meaning, only intelligence; and no kindly magic smiling down from above; and no fires to goad you from below; only yourself and the universe and what you make out of the interface between the two equals.*

And I rested from all my work which I had made.

I OPENED my eyes and she was sitting across the table from me.

"Are you all right?" she said. "You looked so strange, sitting here all alone, I thought perhaps you were sick."

"I feel like I've just made and destroyed the universe," I said. "Or it's made and destroyed me. Or possibly both. Don't go away. There's one more detail I have to see to."

I got up and went across to the door and stepped through it into the Senator's study. He looked at me and gave me the smile that was as real as a billboard and as sincere.

"You've come," he said, in a noble voice.

"I'm turning down the job," I said. "I just wanted you to know."

He looked dismayed. "You can't. I've counted on you."

"Not any more," I said. "Come here; I want to show you something." I went over to the full-length mirror and he came reluctantly to stand beside me and I looked at the reflection: the square jaw, the well-tailored shoulders, the level gaze.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"A four-flusher," I answered. "All they ever asked you to do was

live one little old life. And did you do it? No. You copped out—or tried to. But it didn't work. You're in, like it or not. So you'd better like it."

I turned to object but I was alone in the room.

I WENT to the door and opened it. Councilor Van Wouk looked up from the long table under the spiral chandelier.

"See here, Bardell," he started but I unfolded the newspaper in my hand to the Sunday funnies and dropped it in front of him with the *Florin—the Man of Steel* strip on top.

"He almost went for it," I said. "But he changed his mind."

"Then—that means—"

"It means, forget the whole thing. It never happened."

"Well, in that case," Van Wouk said and began to shrink. He dwindled down to the size of a monkey, a mouse, a *musca domestica*, and wasn't there any more. Wolff was gone too and the Birdman, and the rest.

In the corridor I ran into Trait and Eridani.

"You're fired," I told them. They tipped their hats and silently faded away.

"That leaves you," I said. "What are we going to do with you?"

The question seemed to echo along the gray-walled corridor, as if it hadn't been me that asked it. I tried to follow it to its source, but the walls turned to gray mist that swirled around me as palpable as gray draperies. Suddenly I was tired, too tired to stand. I sat down. My head was heavy. I held it tight in both hands and gave it a half-turn and lifted it off. . .

I WAS sitting behind my desk, holding the curious spiral artifact in my hands.

"Well," the Undersecretary for Science said. "Anything?"

"I thought for a moment you looked a bit odd," the Chief of Staff said stiffly and almost let a smile mar the rigidity of his scruffy red face.

"As I expected," my Science Advisor said and curved down the corners of his mouth. It looked like a line drawn on a saucer of lard.

I got up and went over to the window and looked out at Pennsylvania Avenue and the cherry blossoms and the Washington Monument. I thought about turning it into a big cement doughnut but nothing happened. It was a humid afternoon and the town looked

hot and dirty and full of trouble, like I felt. I turned and looked at the men waiting expectantly, important men all, full of the affairs of the world and their roles therein.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You people brought this gadget to me, claiming it was removed from the wreckage of an apparently alien space vessel which crash-landed and burned in Minnesota last night."

Their faces registered confirmation.

"You recovered the body of a small lizardlike animal and this. No pilot was in evidence."

"I assure you, sir," the gray-faced Director of the FBI said, "he won't get far—or *it* won't get far." He smiled grimly.

"Drop the search," I ordered. I put the spiral gadget on the desk. "Bury this thing at sea," I commanded.

"But—Mr. President—"

I silenced that with a look and glanced at the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.

"Was there something you wanted to tell me, General Trait?"

He look startled. "Why, as a matter of fact, sir—" He cleared his throat. "It's no doubt a hoax—but I've had a report of a radio transmission from space—not from any of our installations, I'm assured. It seems to originate from just beyond the orbit of Mars." He smiled a sickly smile.

"Go on," I said.

"The—ah—caller represents himself as a native of a planet he calls Grayfell. He states that we have, ah, passed preliminary inspection. He wants to open negotiations for a treaty of peace between the Lastrian Concord and Earth."

"Tell him we're willing," I said. "If they don't get too tricky."

There were other matters they wanted to present to me, each of vast importance, requiring my immediate attention. I waved it all away. They looked aghast when I stood and told them the cabinet meeting was over.

She was waiting for me in our apartment.

**I**T WAS twilight. We were walking together in the park. We sat on a bench in the cool of evening and watched the pigeons on the grass.

"How do we know this isn't a dream?" she asked.

"Perhaps it is," I said. "Perhaps nothing in life is real. But it doesn't matter. We have to live it as if it were."

∞







*Gary K. Wolf*

# LOVE STORY

What price parenthood when the planet  
is full and procreation a threat?

**S**OON it will be over.

They start to walk.

Heads turn, row by row, to watch them as they move down the aisle. In the chapel balcony an organ plays the wedding procession-al. For them, only for them.

Their favorite colors project from tiny lights in the chapel dome; their favorite fragrances puff from vents hidden behind chapel statuary.

Straight ahead of them, in front of the altar, a priest waits with open arms.

As they stop in front of him the synthesizer ends the organ music with an intricate flurry of chords.

The age-old ritual begins.

The priest blesses them, walks to his pulpit and delivers a sermon on the sanctity of marriage. Finishing, he asks them to meditate. As they kneel and drop their eyes he moves toward the altar.

He flips a switch.

A cone of silence energizes around them, leaving them in isolation, heads bowed, to ponder their future.

And to bask in the warmly sweet remembrances of their past.

Even though he was born seven years before her, they still had a great deal in common. Even from the very start, when—

They had been carried, seven years apart, to the maternity ward's analytical laboratory to be examined for birth defects. From instrument to instrument they went. Magnetic resonance for cell conformity. Passed. X-ray crystallography for bone composition. Passed. Electrophoresis for hemoglobin and isoenzyme analysis. Passed.

For hours they passed test after test with ridiculous ease. But that was only normal. No newborn had failed to pass a test in almost five centuries.

Seven years separated them. But like all infants, each in turn was subjected to the inviolate routine.

When the laboratory had finished with them they were taken to the hospital nursery and placed under the watchful care of a mechanical nursemaid. By her they were cuddled and suckled, tickled and rocked.

So effective was this nursemaid that both of them retained as their first cogent memory the lyrical cooing that issued from the speaker deep in her breast. That and the comforting throb of her vacuum-pump heart.

After weaning came the Child Care Center.

For both of them their Center years were happy and wonderful. A rearing staff of mechanicals and humans made sure they were never lonely or hungry, never without someone to play with them, laugh with them and kiss away their tears when they cried.

As they grew older a rearer was always on hand to listen to them, talk to them and answer their questions. All they had to do was ask and a rearer would patiently explain to them why things fall down,

how trees grow, where the rain comes from and why the sky is blue.

Even when their questions became less childish, more probingly curious, less concerned with trees and rain and sky, more with birth and death and love, answers came every bit as promptly and were every bit as truthful.

Nothing was ever kept from them.

In response to their queries on self-origin, they were shown a carefully detailed, transparent, life-size model of a pregnant woman.

When they seemed to have absorbed this bit of historical background, they were taken to see latest model Wombette®.

As they stood before it with an audio tape machine hanging from their belts and tiny earphones covering their ears, the soothing voice of a genetic physician thoroughly explained conception. Their attention was directed to the small, partially developed child still encased in the Wombette's hygienically jellular interior. Comparisons were drawn between this developmental method and the more primitive, natural method they had seen demonstrated earlier in the transparent model. After describing the complex series of conformational tests each foetus had to pass before birth, the tape machine automatically shut off.

The lecture was followed by a tour of the nursery.

During question and answer time they asked their *Computer-Tutor*<sup>TM</sup> to clarify why children were no longer conceived naturally.

They were instructed to go to the video room where a pre-recorded program would explain in greater detail.

They watched the video screen intently. The first scene showed a square plot of land with three people on it. This, a narrator told them, represented the average number of people per square mile of land in the year shown in the corner of the screen.

Years began ticking off.

More and more people appeared on the plot.

Finally, when people stood shoulder to shoulder, covering all but a tiny portion of the plot's area, the ticking years stopped abruptly at a date five centuries in the past, and the scene froze. On this date, the narrator declared, the World Council had halted population growth by requiring that specific conditions be met before new children were brought into the world.

A swift series of scene changes revealed what these conditions were.

The show was over.

For the first time in their lives they were afraid.

With the story of conception and childbirth fresh in their minds they asked to be told of their parents.

They were brought to a sensory input room, put into a reclining chair, tranced and connected to the inputer.

*Were it not for my parents, their minds began telling them, I would not be alive today. I must respect and honor my parents always. They were the first to love me.*

The sensory inputer then recycled and delivered the same message again. After it had done so one thousand times, it raised them from their trance and told them they could go.

They left the sensory input room feeling closer to their parents than they ever had before.

Soon after, they asked about death.

That night a gentle voice whispered to them while they slept. The voice assured them that medical technology could keep their life processes functioning perfectly forever. They would probably never have to contend with death. They need never die.

They awoke refreshed.

As they grew older they continued to play, to be happy and to learn. They were lectured on demography, automation, contraception, hydroponics, binary summation and all the other subjects they needed to master to survive.

On their eighteenth birthday they left Center, moved into living complexes with others in their own age groups and began work in the professions they had been taught.

Life became a series of short relationships and casual liaisons. They found pleasure but not contentment. Fun but not meaning.

Until the day they met.

And fell in love.

**N**EVER had either found another so gentle, so kind and giving.

They took out an automatic dissolution bond and moved into a living complex together. When it expired they took out another. Then another. And another still.

Eventually, as years passed and their affection grew, they took out a mutual-consent dissolution bond and promised each other to honor it forever.

Looking back on those days, they were never able to pinpoint ex-

actly what first got them thinking about it. Perhaps they matured. Perhaps they grew melancholy. Maybe they just felt unfulfilled. No matter. After discussing it for quite some time, in the end they made up their minds. They decided to submit a request to have children.

One morning they transported to a forms office where they were given two blank forms to fill out. They went to one of the office's tables, sat down and began to write.

For almost half a day, they labored over Form 1, *Request For Permission To Have Children*, until they had completed all the questions to their satisfaction. They gave up the completed form to the office's data acquisition system which transposed it, through a series of photo-electric processes, into a digital entity it could understand. It flashed a green light to indicate all was in order, then flashed another signal to show it was ready to process the forms of the next person in line.

They went back to the table to tackle the problems posed by Form 2, *Long-Range Guidance Plan For Character Development in Children*.

In an introductory paragraph the form reminded them that if their request were granted and if they went on to meet all the conditions, they would be allowed to conceive one boy and one girl genetically controlled within close tolerances to insure the uniformity necessary for peace and contentment on an overcrowded world. They were told to carry out that portion of child-rearing responsibility left to them—selecting the specific personality refinements their children would acquire at guidance classes in Center. All the options were clearly spelled out on the form before them.

**Motivations and Beliefs** (within applicable limits, please specify.)

**Temperament** (choose one)

Refined.

Good-natured.

Passive.

**Specific Personality Characteristics** (check all that apply.)

Gentle.

Giving.

Kind.

They took the completed form back to the data acquisition sys-

tem where it was hastily scanned, collated and accepted.

Then they went home to wait.

Weeks went by, and they heard nothing. They began to worry. After all, facilities for child rearing were so limited and so expensive. Many were refused. Maybe something in their background prohibited their having children. Perhaps their guidance plan had been too offbeat, too radical.

At last, they received an answer. They read the message together as it appeared on their home viewscreen.

THIS IS TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR REQUEST TO  
HAVE CHILDREN HAS BEEN ACTED UPON FAVORABLY  
PERIOD ONCE YOU HAVE FULFILLED THE REQUIRED  
CONDITIONS, YOUR CHILDREN WILL BE BORN PERIOD  
WRITTEN CONFIRMATION WILL FOLLOW PERIOD CON-  
GRATULATIONS END

They looked at each other, smiled and embraced, fortifying themselves for the ordeal to come.

They liquidated all their belongings. Using the proceeds and their entire life savings, they created a trust fund to handle the costs of education. Once this had been done, they were permitted to go to the Clinic For Genetic Selection and begin creation of their children.

At the clinic, they were probed and tested. Their characteristics were electronically recorded, genetically segmented, studied and refined. Two perfect eggs and two perfect sperm were ultimately selected and combined to form two perfect zygotes. Their future offspring were then placed into a Wombette.

Here their babies would grow, being tested all the while for adherence to standard. Minor deviations could be corrected easily enough by embryonic reinforcement, a delicate interplay of motion, temperature and light. Gross deviations would be cause for termination and would require selection of another egg and another sperm. In either event, passing or failing, there was nothing for them to do now but wait.

Nine months later they were told. Genetic physicians confirmed that their children had passed all pre-natal tests. Once born, the children would meet all cultural specifications.

Thus, with no further gene selection required of them, and with enough assets in trust to assure their children's futures, they were

almost finished. Only the hardest condition remained, the condition that they marry.

**N**OW is their moment.

They raise their heads and gaze at the priest as he disengages the cone of silence.

He comes forward toward them and holds out his hand. Still kneeling, each takes what he offers, a small wafer, a symbol of love.

They eat.

Rising, they turn to each other and cling ever so tightly together. For less than a moment they feel each other breathing.

Then, as the wafer's poison paralyzes their nervous systems, they die in each other's arms.

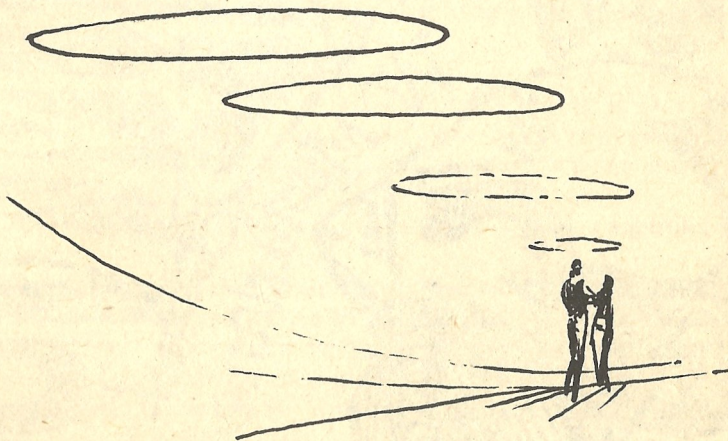
And as their deaths create two empty spaces in a teeming world, their children are born to take their places—to follow in their footsteps.

To live.

Never to be lonely.

And to love.

∞





J



I WAS coiling a freshwater hose on the dock when my Uncle Ninian said, "Hey, Shadda. You want to go to Borot-tch-gai?" I'd seen him last two years before, when I got my first degree at Ann Arbor. He hadn't changed much. He looked casual as ever, slow and lean and lazy. It was a neat trick but his level gray eyes were the giveaway. They were emotional as a fog bank and he never missed a thing. Right now his eyes were squinneyed against the reflection from the little gulf waves.

"What's Borot-tch-gai?" I clucked in the middle of the word, just as he had. I know I had a silly grin on my face. My uncle ignored meetings and farewells and always started a conversation as if we lived in the same house.

"It's a planet I came across. The people are pretty smart. They said, send us somebody to look at for a year and then we'll talk about trade and commerce. You want to be him?"

My Uncle Ninian was an entrepreneur. Most prospering individuals go public and sell stock in themselves, but Ninian Riefsnyder made some salvage money and swapped marbles and jackknives until he could buy a ship of his own. He held an undivided interest in all the off-world notions and merchandise he brought back from the stars. This position was not admired except by renegades such as myself. Equal consumption is the current social golden calf and my uncle consumed very little on Earth. His luxury was that he had bought out his parents, his schools and the government. He was 100% owner of himself.

"First contact planet?"

"Two planets. The other is called Tch-tch-Raneel. It's the next-door neighbor, with the same people on both. I'll pay you Twenty K for your time. If you want to gamble, I'll percentage you in on the trip instead."

"Uncle," I said, "what sort of a snake do you have squirming in this sack?"

"Any new planet's a pig in a poke. A long time ago on Murran all the instruments and tests said go-go-go. The whole crew but me charged out for some fresh air and in twenty seconds they got infected with that airborne coral growth on every mucus membrane." He shook off the memory. "I lifted the freighter and got lost and spent a year on another planet."

"Being alive is dangerous," I said. "But why me?"

"I believe in nepotism and special privilege and stretching your-

self like a man on a rack. Shadda, what are you doing in this boat garage when you own a ticket in geophysics?"

"Messing around with boats," I said. "Want to buy me lunch?"

My uncle is a nut about independence. He persuaded my parents to remit their interest to me and he guaranteed my way through school. He paid the flat fee to the government when I was a day old and when I graduated we had a little talk about personal ownership. Maybe this made me a renegade. I don't think so. We seem to have independently arrived a lot of the same opinions.

"I'll pop for lunch," he said. "What's your answer?"

"Right now, a definite, unqualified maybe. Let me tell you what I've been doing and then you can see if you want me."

We walked to the office and I quit the job. Being handyman at a marina was all right while I came to some sort of terms with myself, but that was done. I was way down on the job list in my specialty and I'd been thinking about more school without enthusiasm. A year on a strange planet should complete my recovery from Leonora.

I told my uncle about her over lunch.

**A**FTER graduation I took a pasear down to Mexico. I was in a grocery off the highway in Tenancingo waiting for the bolsillas to come out of the oven—the hard-cruste little rolls—and the proprietor was pouring me samples of the moscas. They are sweet, sweet liquors in the damnedest flavors, and this woman came in and she was Leonora. She was also candlelight and wine, skinnydipping off Cozumel, archeological excitement at a dig in Chiapas and the endless number of other things ingenious people find to amuse themselves. Months later I realized her unique posture, a tilted head, turned shoulders, a slightly bent elbow, feet a little apart and hips cocked. She was a tawny blonde. That doesn't give much idea of her but that's how we met, over a black-walnut flavored mosca.

I was obsessed for fourteen months.

"Why did you quit?" asked my uncle. "It sounds like a helluva good life. You had it made."

"Well—uncle—dammit—just lucky, I guess. I got the idea I was walking one step away from the real world—I was sort of living on unearned income—time was getting on and nothing done—" I tried again. "Part of it was her crowd. She was honey to those flies.

They wanted to merge into some crazy kind of emotional togetherness and that made me queasy. What was really spooky was that I liked them sometimes. But they kept on bleating about freedom when they were penny stocks with no bid, no call, no trade, and they were sanctimonious about their beautiful ideals. When they started sounding reasonable, I cut out. It wasn't easy."

"You think you're cured, Shadda?"

"Well, the prognosis is good."

"Could you go back?"

"I haven't." That was the indicator. "If you still want me, I'll take the job."

"You're blooded," said Uncle Ninian. "All right. We leave in a week. Meet me in San Francisco."

That night I cleared the accumulated junk out of my room and came across the paperback book I'd bought to read on the plane from Mexico. I'd scribbled on the endpapers instead.

*"Will we meet from time to time?" you said.*

*I said, "From time to time we'll meet."*

*"Will you know me then?" you said.*

*"Oh, I think I will."*

*Not yet parted, I have seen you in a thousand women, your tilt of head, that lilt of walk. I have heard your voice from shadowy passersby. Oh, I'll know you all right, for a cool and questing mind, a dexterity of spirit shifting to other considerations as easily as I've drawn a finger down your back from nape to coccyx. I won't forget.*

*"Are you sure?" you asked.*

*"Yes," I said.*

*"Okay. Goodbye."*

*"So long," I said and went to examine the star-rayed craters on my hidden self and fix a brace against reverberations ringing on and on, up and down, east and west, north and south interminably, like a moon bell.*

I won't apologize for this. I'm just as much a victim and heir of the culture as the next man. Maybe it was psychosomatic, but I broke out into a real sweat, my mouth was dry and my stomach hurt when I punched PAPER instead of HEART'S BLOOD and shoved the book down the recycler.

**I**T TOOK three months to get to Borot-tch-gai. I studied the ship

and the cargo, the contact tapes and the language and got to know my uncle pretty well. He was the most dispassionate man I've ever met. He could take any question out of its emotional matrix and look it over with those gray marble eyes. It is a tricky stance, like living in the eye of a hurricane, with gales of emotion and lightning strikes of reason raging 360° around you. I found it attractive.

We sent out friendly noises as soon as we entered the system. The Borot-tch-gaians were not thick-witted. They used efficient transposers. A transposer insures freedom from door-to-door salesmen. It works only in space but if you transpose a firecracker from your satellites to a spaceship, the trespasser pays attention. If he does not, you transpose a larger one and maybe spend a little time wondering what he had on his mind before you blew it.

We got into static orbit and they sent up a shuttle. Ninian said, "Have a good time," and I said, "See you," and I shoved off. The port stood open, the lock was automatic, but when I cracked my suit inside it got a little exciting. I remembered Ninian's remarks about Murran, but I didn't turn blue or break out all over in spots.

They set me down on a meadow covered with chartreusward, plugged in one-way air and an exhaust analysis laboratory, and I got acquainted with the people and sharpened the language during the eleven days they kept me by myself and the twenty-six with a man in there with me. Don't ask me why, but all hominids are the same. These people were skinnier than Earth average and their color was about like Mexican chocolate with cinnamon in it, so we were a closer approximation than most. My companion was not a xenobiologist or anything fancy. He was *corvée* and got double time for this job. He started me reading and filled me in on the customs and how things were organized after 18,000 years of recorded history.

When they decided there was nothing physically sinister about me, we went out onto the chartreusward and had a formality. I claim there's an inbuilt tendency to masochism when you travel 500 light-years and find a machine that spits out folding chairs and squats down to be a platform. There were speeches about the brotherhood of man and they were in favor of home, mother, and against sin. I responded I was against sin and in favor of the same things, plus apple pie.

What surprised me was the beauty of the place. Communication screens are fine, but they work on two senses and the picture is framed. Outdoors, with a wind blowing and smelling strawberry-

pineapple at first, I was really snockered by the local trees with russet and black and rust trunks and the lavender-blue haze that muted distances. I found the landscape and the people restful, thoughtful and a little melancholy.

Ninian had said, "Don't snap at any judgments. Soak up impressions and information. Don't draw a line and sum it up until you must." I think he was right.

They didn't give me the key to the city because they don't lock things up. But they gave me a credit balance and a card to go with it and showed me around. The people who did that job translated to relationship analysts and they were very pleasant. I got a grand tour of the beauty spots, the Norwegian fjords, the redwoods, the Alps, Yosemite Valley and Tahiti. There were no dangerous animals on the planet and no obvious hazards to man.

They had solved the city problem by not living in them, and the transportation problem by computerized aggie skips they kept out of the way in silos. Their skips looked like bats, swarming up every morning and returning to roost at night. The cities were small. A few were built for 100,000 but most accommodated half that. They were busy with the congregational activities of education, manufacturing, management, entertainment and the rest. They were handsome hardscape—but the people lived in bunches of about a hundred individual houses scattered all over the landscape.

The economy was based on corvée labor. After every kind of government imaginable, this is where they ended up. Sooner or later most men and women fell into some special interest, but until you found a slot, you were computer directed to the 8,000-something job categories corvée filled. A job took about two-fifths of an individual's time and the rest was his own. Application of the ratio was infinitely variable. You could work two years and knock off for three if you wanted or make any combination you chose.

I tried to melt into the society and I had a helluva good time. They had great underwater gear and on top of the water at T'sri straits they had the best surf I've ever seen. A thousand miles from T'sri there was a thick sort of grass that dried slick every summer and made the wildest grass slide you ever heard of.

Ninian had said, "Do what you want to do. Use a little discretion and mind your manners but you can't stay a phony for a year. Never lie casually. Shade the truth or tell a whopper, but nobody can remember common everyday lies."

The relationship analysts evidently decided I was not going to contaminate the culture too much, so they took off my leash when more than half my time on Borot-tch-gai was gone. I took the aptitudes and went *corvée* myself. The job I got was garbage man on an anachronistic island where you could live as your ancestors had 10,000 years before. It was pretty quaint. You cooked raw ingredients over an open flame in a kitchen and all the waste had to be hauled to a hidden conversion plant.

The job was classified distasteful and paid time and a half, because it involved physical labor and hand-operated wheeled vehicles. D'Nord was my partner. Time and a half for working with D'Nord? She was plain downright damn delightful. I should have paid them for the privilege.

What if I had not gone *corvée*? If I had not loved Leonora? If D'Nord of the white-gold hair—oh, sure, what if? This is idiot speculation. What happens is what counts.

**B**ACK in the 5th century B.C., Thucydides wrote, "A collision at sea can ruin your entire day—" and he was right.

When the garbage detail was over, D'Nord and I decided to sail to the mainland. We checked the weather and took all reasonable precautions—but when you went primitive in this milieu you went real primitive. There was no engine aboard the boat and no radio. The wind failed and we sat on the ocean all afternoon. In a fog that night we went onto a reef and snapped the mast and turned ass over teakettle. D'Nord got walloped and I swam her ashore through the breakers. It was pretty exciting.

The next morning we walked four or five miles up the coast and she wept all the way. Not big boo-hoos but silent seeping tears and gulps from time to time and a flickering smile meant to be reassuring. I was helpful as I knew how, polite, brotherly, the perfect gentleman, that was me.

Ninian and I had kicked around the hazards of intimate mingling on the trip to Borot-tch-gai and I'd resolved to opt out of the most fascinating game known to hominids. It's attractive—indeed it is—but there is nothing as rigid as the human mind. Walls of steel are foggy compared to the fortifications a man can build in his head.

We were following a beach that was pinched into the water by a cliff and we had to go back and find a gully to get on top. D'Nord went ahead of me up a stream and I was in great shape until she

slipped on a waterfall and fell. She scooped me off and we splashed into a pool. I slammed my head on a rock but I don't think I ever lost consciousness. I breathed some water and D'Nord hauled me to the bank—the pool was only waist deep—and I hacked and coughed and ran water out my nose and made a nasty spectacle of myself and bled all over her lap.

*So this is what it's like.* Her face was calm and radiant. *I've been so afraid, but bright's the world.* She looked over the lacy grass seedheads across the ocean to the hazed islands. The air was like the idea of wine.

*D'Nord, you're beautiful.*

She looked into my eyes. In my stomach, which the Greeks believed to be the center of emotion, was a warm fire that spread in all directions.

She smiled. *My lovely love.*

*You're beautiful as a painted lily, D'Nord, exciting as a goat-ropin' contest!*

She laughed and perfectly understood the childhood afternoon that was my standard of comparison for everything magnificent, roseate and magical, a goat-ropin' contest in a raunchy little west Texas town when I was eight years old.

There is no convenient time for falling in love.

We stayed by the pool, pretty much paralyzed until late afternoon. She was more curious than a kitten and explored earth and me simultaneously, the snap of a winter apple, Christmas bells in snow-clogged city streets, the scent of a new pair of gloves, the flavor of dusty classrooms at Michigan. In turn, she lifted curtains on nooks of quaint belief, introduced me to avid little hungers, showed me great and placid wonders of accepted love and infinite meadows of security and relief.

*How does celery go again?*

*Crunch-crunch with strings.* "My God, woman, I'm starved!" I spoke for the first time in hours and felt her feathery laughter. *And the sun of our magnificent day is westering.* Love turns me magniloquent.

*Why do they call you Shadow?* She was as hungry as I but she had an overwhelming reluctance to leave the pool.

*Because when the football coach in high school asked what I could do, skinny as I was, I told him I could throw the bomb and run like a shadow.*

When this was clear to her, *My dearest Shadow*, she led the way to the top of the cliff. We walked in the last sunlight and she pulled me down as we overlooked a bay with docks and boats and eating places and skips rising into the sky. It was an awfully noisy place.

*You do not understand, my darling, that love is the most complete of all disasters.* I put my arm around her and swathed her in the warmest pink-down comforter I could imagine. She spread it wide and wrapped it around me. I canoodled at her and she drew away. *You and I are inextricably on a grass slide together and it will soon become intolerable.* Our pink-down comforter turned thin and we were naked to a blustering wind. She was calm and loving and accepted facts as she knew them. Listen.

—*C’Meec won’t give me her dolly and I’ll kill her deader—*

—*she serves me boiled crot, fried crot, raw crot—*

—*love is peril—what a lovely peril is love—*

The first was a three-year-old hating her sister, the second was an old man at the dinner table and the last was a boy with his girl on the beach below us. D’Nord drew the comforter over our heads and the others still intruded with sharp, incessant babble.

—*he will surely find me beautiful with my hair like this—*

—*now there’s a proper bowel movement—*

—*nobody appreciates the work I do—*

—*I’ll drink a glass of billiards to that—*

Un-shut-out-able and louder as I grew more sensitized, my newly found mental eardrums juddered. “Good Christ!” I said aloud.

“It won’t get better.”

I put my hands hopelessly over my ears. “How can we stand it?”

“Tch-tch-Raneel.”

**W**HEN we left Borot-tch-gai on the shuttle I felt like the lady after the tiger ride, chewed to pieces and swallowed up. The ship was automatic. We were the only people aboard. The trauma was well understood. Any ship would take you to the nearest shuttle. There was no doubt about the urgency of the situation. Imagine a hundred trumpets blasting inside your head.

D’Nord and I tentatively entwined tendrils of love. *Like spaghetti*, I sighed with relief from the incessant battering of other thoughts. She smiled wearily at the idea of tomato sauce and parmesan cheese on the pasta of our love. We were very tired. It had been the longest day of my life, from a garbage man to sailor to



shipwreck to ultimate involvement with another person. We found something to eat and we slept immediately.

I woke with an astonishing feeling of loss and well-being. The well-being was pervasive as the fresh air that eddied through the open port. Love and contentment came in with the air. The loss part I forgot immediately.

The shuttle was unloading itself. Computers do very well at dumb things like this. Somewhere back on Borot-tch-gai was the word that another couple had taken residence on Tch-tch-Raneel and would need feeding from this particular station. Food and supplies would be increased to meet the demand. I explained this to myself and D'Nord woke and we "wandered hand in hand with love in summer's wonderland" a long way from Kew Gardens.

There were waking thoughts all around us weaving a magnificent associational tapestry of good feeling. D'Nord spun a silver thread, sparkling bright. My own multi-legged, hot-red pattern scuttled and danced. *There was this butterfly who kept sliding down a cactus. I know it looks silly, said the butterfly, but oh, wow! What a sensation!*

D'Nord's silver thread nuzzled and twined my red lightning, but the world tolled negation. It was not condemnation and a couple who had arrived a day before us and were splashing each other in a pool thought, *Don't verbalize. Words are*—and there was splintered glass and jagged black rocks. I laughed a fuzzy acacia flower laugh and the tapestry joined in approval.

I was stabbed by a loss like a blue-white sword and D'Nord did not notice, nor did the others.

It was beautiful, all this love. D'Nord and I wandered up the valley and every flower was bright, and squealy-minded birds ate bugs that sounded like subliminal static even when you listened closely. It was mating season for those birds and they blew the teeniest

**Featured in the current GALAXY:**

**Robert Silverberg—*The World Outside***

**Robert A. Heinlein—*I Will Fear No Evil***

**William T. Powers—*Readout Time***

horns of elfland on the occasion. There were other small creatures around who formed a background noise like a breeze, unnoticed, but always there.

I can compare it only to swimming in warm lithia water when you've been drinking champagne. Bubbles inside and out. Sensational!

We ate at the station or carried food with us and wore clothes or did not and slept in null-G rooms or on beds or where we pleased. There were a lot of people wandering around and nobody paid much attention to externals. I mused right along in the spirit of things. But every night now, there were those jagged rocks that belonged to me alone on the whole marshmallow world, and nobody knew about it.

D'Nord melded with the others like a cup of custard dropped into a pot of custard. Who cared? It was lovely.

Nights got a little hellish. I would wake up and listen to Tch-tch-Raneel, the background beasts, the sleeping people, the drowsing lovers, the whole schmear.

In a nonhostile world this genetic inheritance would not be a destruction factor. It could be recessive, triggered full-blown by anxiety. It was that transcendental liberating experience that seemed so attractive on my wild and bloody world.

The nights got worse.

Granted that man on earth had the same sort of beginnings, the mush heads were eaten up by cave bears and this malign facility turned pretty damn dormant, though the inclination lingered. It was a self-validating phenomenon, but I'd been there before. I'd beaten the euphoria of mystic love with a bone deep antipathy for wordlessness. Rationality might be a flower of illusion, but it was the one burned into my forehead.

The days were splendid.

The nights were bloody anguish.

I woke to fairly utter despair in the middle of one night, and far away and wee, I got words: *I wonder what's happened to Shadda?* It was Ninian Riefsnyder in the ship, God knows where in the galaxy.

Whambo! I began to understand how this worked. You cannot think without words. Those who surrender individuality wallow in a pink marshmallow glop, a limbo of warm mystical togetherness. They would never be alone again—and they deserved it.

I had been walking on top of this goo because I was imbued with the idea that man was individual and alone. Maybe I take too much credit; maybe I was blooded, partially immune and antibodies had built up and I got away.

Seeing mankind in myself, I wondered idly if this was the end of history's tunnel and I had come out the other side, still an individual and with an added faculty. Whatever, I was jagged obsidian and this was my proper condition.

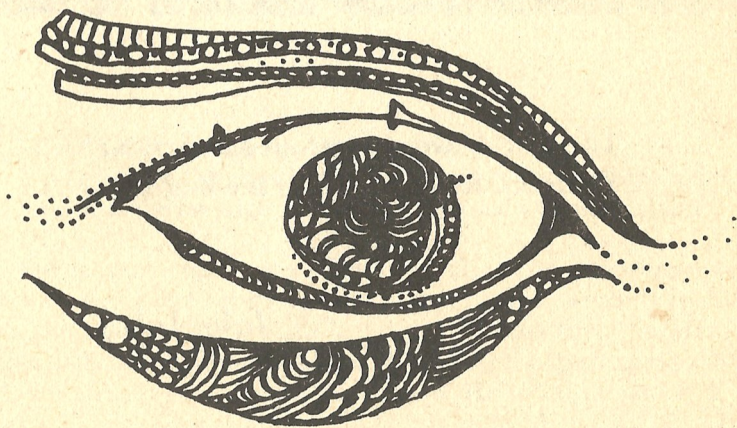
I retrogressed. Completely. There was one thing to be done in the middle of the night. I cut out the noise from Tch-tch-Raneel. I could do it now. With an absolutely fine focus: *Leonora*. "*We'll meet from time to time—I'll know you all right—I won't forget.*"

I got her. 500 light-years away. She was custardhead in a custard pot.

I swung to Ninian. *You son of a bitch, what planet were you lost on for a year?*

I got a sharp hard horselaugh from the stars: *I thought it might be hereditary—*

I chopped him off. *Come and get me, partner*. In the back of his mind were other galaxies—whisperings—I could see there was a lot to learn. I already knew I was a hard-eyed bastard of a man and I liked the idea. It was a good place to begin. ∞

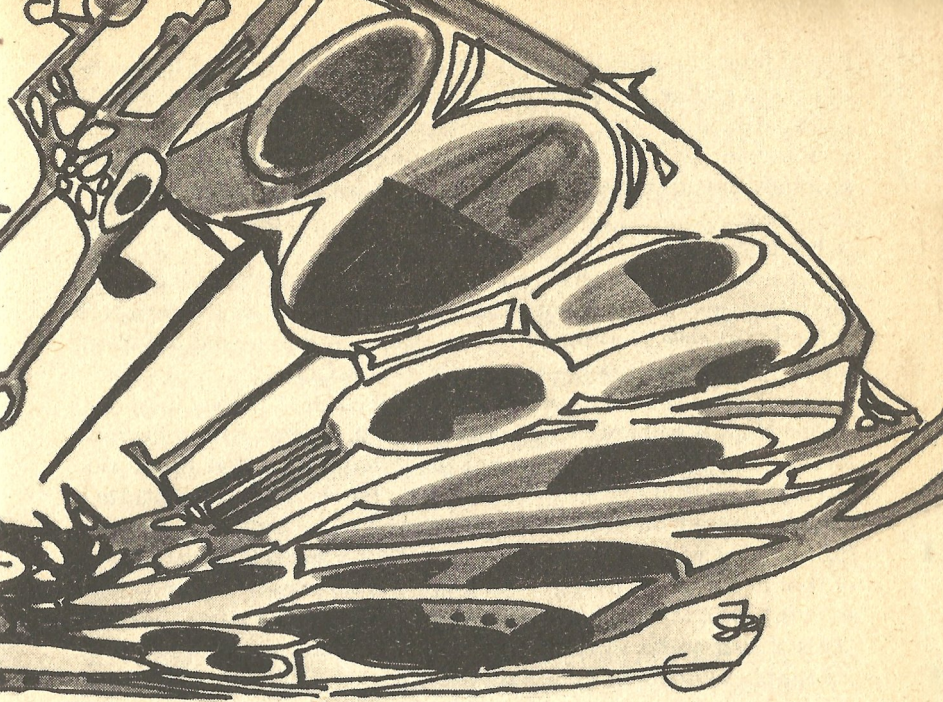




# SEEDLING

The worlds were destroyed and dying.  
Then suddenly he was at the beginning . . .

*John Jakes*



## FROM THE STARS

**H**E AWOKED quite gently to the red dazzle.

A plate above the chamber of the musee crystal shed the red light. He stared at the message, pretending he couldn't understand it.

DEFE TIV

But of course that was a subterfuge, like all the other mazy turns of his mind which, quite against his central will, seemed capable of keeping his body and brain in reasonably sane function. He completed the message instantaneously and with a great sphincter-like clutch of anger that was quickly gone. He toyed around with the game of imagining that he couldn't comprehend, but not long. He'd

forced himself—literally fought that mazy mind that kept him operating—to recline the chair, dial up the crystal with its projected delights, dial down the shields, every last one. He'd gone to sleep writhing in pleasure with ten thousand, give or take a thousand, sopranos shivering his bones, thinking: *At least I didn't fail this last; this dying.*

But he had.

He stood from the chair, sore, achy. He passed the failed musee crystal on his to the companionway. He told the dead, dark rock behind the triple seethrough to copulate itself, but he did it without much enthusiasm, now the first anger had passed.

*I can't die, I can only run down like all the rest . . .*

The ship, it seemed, might never do that, at least within his foreseeable lifetime. That threatened to be long, now that his suicide attempt—carefully built up to for some nine days—had failed. He'd already crossed off starvation; he wanted to be out of it, just out, through, yet without too much physical suffering. He'd had enough of that in his times; plenty. And there was no reason to punish himself with pain to expunge guilt, even though he had a few thousand years of that on his shoulders. All others human carried equal loads. He simply wanted off, some easy way.

Rotten musee crystal. Miserable entertainment toy. Incapable of lasting. Like like everything else.

The ship—he'd been running on her for at least eight months, hunting a haven world; there weren't any—bubbled faintly in its chemical belly and simply sailed on, winking its myriad bridge lights. He stared at them, moody and mad.

A ploymer crest, etch-lit, in the center of the central bank below the views, bore the words *P.M.S. Vermillyon, Dart Line.*

*Dart Line, you built too goddamn well.* He sank down and leaned his chin on his hand and stared at the three-panel views. *But you'll go whack out of commission, too, P.M.S. Vermillyon of the Dart Line, just you wait.* Like innumerable unattended clocks, everything was running down. At a faster or slower rate, depending.

Since his single, self-heralded try at joining the proceedings of destruction had been ruined by the failed crystal, he didn't know what to do next. He ate a meal while he watched the ship drifting on through veils of light. He thought the ship was out toward the rim of the lens but didn't care to program for a certain fix.

He caught a whiff of his armpits. He poked around in the sani-

tary suit until he discovered with mixed emotions that a couple of the key dritubes had failed, pulverized. The lightveils out ahead shimmered from lace white into crimson, whole draperies of stars hanging across his bow.

A light pattern on the bridge instruments changed, altering reflectives. He saw himself partially on the inner surface of one of the views; a rather matte, distorted himself, but the essentials, the exteriors were there: a chemically toned skin, plenty of hair. He looked thirty, felt at least six hundred and was several different ages in between, depending on mood.

The bridge marker revolved chrome numerals. From day 14 to day 15 of 4991.

“Who are you?” he said to the reflected face of himself.

In a game, he answered for the image: *Who aren't you?*

“What are you?”

*What aren't you?*

“Everything, that's what I am. And nothing but one—a goddamn failure.”

**P**ROBABLY he had lost his mind, to carry on such a conversation. But he hadn't lost it entirely. He could remember certain slim peripherals of reality: Capiollo's Landing on the planet Frix—or was it Frax?—where he'd tried to help the so-called Libmove by piloting for M. Wane.

M. Wane was all green, thin, pale as a spring weed of the field in an old Earth dio. M. Wane had been very excited, rasping his mandibs to show it, when his hired captain laid the illegally-bought *Ver-millyon* right over the capital so that M. Wane's associates could lay pods of needle eggs. He, the captain, he matte-glimmering there on the inside of the views, hadn't thought much of the whole business, since M. Wane said the central pipe plant on Frix, or Frax, was failing anyway, the heat level was falling hourly world-wide, and everyone would soon be dead, gov as well as Libmovers. Nevertheless, he carried out the first part of his bargain and dropped M. Wane and party at Capiollo's Landing; Wane was to kidnap—or maybe it was liberated—some person (or weed) important to his movement. Wane left the ship with his party, the captain took *Ver-millyon* up, but when he tried to come down again to pick up his charges, he received a message from the Hoark to the effect that M. Wane and party were no longer in existence.

He remembered now his own fear and frustration when he tried to take *Vermillyon* down to see. He met, shudderingly, the repulsers of the Hoark. So he went full out astern and away, having failed that little escapade, too.

He wondered again about the identity of the Hoark. None had ever been seen outside their ships, and at first no one was even certain their ships had been correctly tagged, tracked and sighted: were those gaseous stellar clouds or collections of arrowlike vessels?

Certainly there were voices in the ether; had been about seven and a half years now, spreading inward slowly from the edges of the lens. The alien ships took sudden, violent possession of planets in a random pattern. No outside observer ever got near enough to one of the captured worlds to authentically report precisely what the Hoark did there. A queer lot, evidently; spectrums were radically altered after their arrival and there was always much fire in the heavens.

Man had spread far, fouling and ruining each world he touched. The arrival of the Hoark simply accelerated the process, breeding hysteria where only slow, ruinous fear had held sway before—

*Getting you nowhere*, he told his reflection, who seemed indifferent, and also smelled bad. *What you going to do to die?*

A series of gongs and a lit panel announced something called the Phaedra Corridor. A scan of the computes revealed that programmatically following this canal between the veils of stars would blast him into the intergalactic space. There, presumably, if and when *Vermillyon* folded up, he would die?

Trouble was, he didn't take to freezing any more than starving.

"Well, you silly son of a bitch, you can't kill yourself talking." So he programmed for the nearest habited cluster.

He slept an hour, maybe twenty, or maybe not at all. He remembered certain times, anecdotes, faces male and female, Terran and non-Terran, from his various life-stages, and there was not one picked-at, half-tried career or relationship that he could recall as successful or satisfying. He'd been raised in a tube farm on Trelawny, an admitted accident. Didn't even have named parents to accuse.

But it wasn't so bad, failing all, as long as everything else was failing, too. He didn't believe the Hoark had produced the galactic-wide destruction. The Hoark had merely helped the whole process along.



Green and gold discs lit to announce a habited cluster coming up nineteen hours over the bow. He programed a scan, saw the six names of strange worlds in Murmur's Freehold and received the information that the cluster was nominally under the UMT flag. Five of the six were dead.

He was determined he wouldn't continue any longer that was absolutely necessary now, so he set course for the sixth, and last, a planet named Murmur's Mercurio, then slept again.

When he woke in the bridge bunk he discovered that his flopping hand—had there been submental nightmares?—had hit the switch and, powerfully, the pullers had picked up some noise through which threaded the sexless sound of a voice singing a very sweet, sad melody. In bursts, he caught the instantly translated lyrics:

*the steel bird is flying susanna—  
the red dwarf is dying susanna—  
where's an end for the pain?  
for the dark? for the rain?  
creation is crying susanna—*

Amen, he thought, nonreligiously, listening for the next stanza, only to be surprised by an interrupting voice.

"This is Free Novotny band point seven bringing you the latest situation analysis. Unidentified vessels of the previously noted configuration have been sight—" Either noise, a lot of it, or a bomb-burst of immense magnitude, hurt his ears for a minute. Then the ether simply scratched—nothing was left.

Another one dead, then. Some dying balladeer had got in his licks bemoaning it. Too bad there wasn't any way the balladeer's last-heard lines could endure but there was not. He, pale captain of the three views, was bound and determined to be dead as soon as possible.

Idly he drifted through the bands until he found the other message, a recorded voice with a metallic wow-wow in it which indicated he wasn't hearing the source first hand but only transmechanized.

"This is a transmission for the fugitive Gilchrist. We have you in range and are proceeding. It will be to your benefit to damp your engines and surrender to—"

He dialed off. Scary, and yet it was like having an old friend nearby. The same message had been on there since he jetted away from

the Hoark who'd taken Frix—or was it Frax?

Even with his fixation on death—not guilt; never; he was simply going along, playing the game with the rest of them in their dying trillions—he hadn't had the slightest urge to turn about and respond to the Hoark summons. He didn't care for unknown, possibly uncomfortable deaths. Sad situation, that. How much easier to surrender to the Hoark and get it over. Another sort of failure, right?

**P**INK and blue discs announced voice range as the ship fell toward Murmur's Mercurio. He sighted the faintly grayed world, heavy looking extremely large, in the left view. He locked on.

"This is *P.M.S. Vermillyon*—" he repeated a lengthy serial—"under lease—" a pretty lie—"to Captain Roberto Gilchrist." Another, bigger one—he had no rank whatsoever. "Request docking, first avail."

Crackling. Then a somewhat harried voice: "'s my pipe? Oh, yes. *Vermillyon? Vermillyon?*"

"Here. Receiving you."

"No avails at any prime city."

"I have no indication you're closed to traffic."

"No, the signals are broken down. But every port's under maximum closure."

"A revolution?" he asked, as if knowing. "Anarchy?"

"Something like that. There is a cadre involved. Plague riots began—bar those doors." The voice lowered, more intense. "Did you get any of that?"

"Yeh."

"They're coming in right now. Our own people. This is one of the last holdouts. Our—own—people—Gilchrist?"

"Yeh?"

"Have you been cruising long?"

"Several months."

"What's it like out there? We've so little communication."

"Much like it is down there, I guess. It's all running down."

"We've heard reports of invaders—"

"Hoark. Apparently they exist. No one is certain whether it's a trick or not, a power maneuver by someone right here in these stars, all fakery. But their ships are real and—"

"Hold those doors or we're all going to get it!" A weird laugh then. "You see why there are no avails?"

"I see," he said.

"Oh God. We've just heard several loud explosions—"

Gilchrist bowed forward. "My views are picking up what look like large white clouds all over the surface."

Now the voice was strident: "Three cities are going out. There go four more. People are mad, mad, afraid—I wish I knew what it was, Captain."

"I wish I were down there with you."

"You can't."

"I do, never mind why."

He had no way of telling accurately except to extrapolate a parallel from his own situation: "As people, I imagine we must not be much damn good. We settled these worlds—I mean our great grandmothers and grandfathers, you understand. But even back before then, when the race was young, we had an infinity of possibilities, it seems, which we've managed to bitch up one by one. All the traffic stopped on Old Earth one day, they say, because of one kar too many in Bad Esse, Jermay, wherever that was. Maybe it's the same with the possibilities of a race—infinity proves to have an end after all, and when the last possibility's gone—"

Gilchrist stopped, feeling flushed and not a little stupid. He had been speaking primarily for his own benefit. While he talked the connection had been fading steadily. Down at the scratchy end of the band he heard the faceless conversationalist desperately cry:

"—coming in here! The doors are giving! Gilchrist? I want to tell you my name. I'd at least like you to remember—"

"What is it? What is it?" he shouted.

"—my name—"

Silence.

Bellflowers, the white clouds grew everywhere across the face of Murmur's Mercutio.

Enough of this equivocating shit, Gilchrist thought, and dropped into the command bucket.

From there he wrapped hands around dual finger levers, shoved them all the way forward. He sat sweating and watching the temps as *P.M.S. Vermillyon* nosedived toward the conflagrations on the planet, blue-shot now.

*Steady on, hold it and you'll be smack in the middle and dead . . .*

When the temperature grew unbearable he reversed, pulled up, swung about and went zooming back and out along Phaedra's Cor-

ridor. He felt nauseated and dizzy. Was that the last possibility? The very last? He had to do something right and positively once. Only once.

He raced between sleeping and waking some six and a half days, till purple and white discs lit to identify a temporarily unidentified body of small mass, to starboard. He discovered the lightveils were thinner out here and quite pale. The ship was heading outward, past star's end to the spaces where he could simply wait for it to run down. Despite the agony of trying self-destruction, that was no longer good enough.

*They've all failed, you do something right . . .*

He drifted through the bands, listened spellbound for an hour to a planet perishing with gear-like shrieks that occasionally articulated into human, mostly female voices. He began playing games with himself again: *all my selves. Nark runner; statistician; boloboy; father—how old would little Lundy of the shimmering aquamarine hair be now? Zero old; little Lundy is probably dead—not to mention tour pimp and fencing artist for three chits the hour. And a hundred others. Ought to have kept count . . .*

For whose benefit?

It was a small, cold peculiar world coming up there to starboard with galaxies streaming beyond, across the void. He dialed on through the bands, reassured when he heard the wow-wow.

“This is a transmission for the fugitive—”

“Yeh, you keep saying that.”

“—to your benefit to damp your engines and surrender to—”

“Yeh, but why haven't you caught me, all these months?”

The message repeated. Suddenly he felt like a simpleton. There blazed the obvious, very disappointing in its way: old *P.M.S. Vermillyon* must be quite fast. Faster than the Hoark, could it be? So far as he knew she was standard L-drive, one of the originals; a plodder. Against a different measure, that began to seem swift. But the vicious thrill of reimagining surrender to the Hoark vanished like a pricked candybubble. He'd squelched that possibility long ago. If he couldn't do it for himself, the Hoark couldn't because he now believed that he could probably stay ahead of the Hoark a long time, if not indefinitely. It was another obscure satisfaction to know that here, again, he had failed by realizing the truth so belatedly, then failed again by realizing it at all.

He asked for an i.d. on the small world ahead, out of curiosity.

Got it, in the form of a cryptic seriologram. Artificial, then. In absolutely deep-space cold. A research rig, no doubt. *Vermillyon* started on by. The discs changed to green and gold.

Life.

*Don't*, he thought, *don't you do it*.

But he did.

**T**HE ship lowered on auto to the hardplate surface of a little planetoid that couldn't be more than five kiloms through its middle, at the absolutely ass end of the running-down galaxy. He suited, contemplating stepping outside with but one cock left undone. That would do it. He procrastinated, fitted on his headpiece and charged up his breathing system; somewhere another door went *bang*.

He'd jockeyed the ship to the receiving lock of the first of five connected, pyramid-like structures jutting from the surface of the planetoid. The lock lights inside his ship now all showed go, to indicate the pyramid's receiving mechanism still in order. He decided to look around a bit before exploring ways to do himself in.

Of course he knew this was his mazy mind at work, delaying again. Here at the rim end of the collapsing stars, all burning, all crumbling, he really ought to quit messing around and take the final step to redeem his life. Simple. Outside. One cock open . . .

But he was sweating; fearful. Afraid of death—and ever afraid of failure.

He progressed through the lock and wandered into white-lit corridors, all clean, purified, with breathable air, according to his gauges. He took off his headpiece. He poked at bench equipment in an obscurely furnished laboratory.

“Hello Charls?”

He turned, more like a jump, and saw a girl in a smock, without a headpiece. She had a bright, clean, youthful face dominated by the largest and most beautiful brown eyes he'd ever seen. So direct and large that he was nervous about staring back at them. Their very beauty made him hate her for a fraction. Then he realized something else.

*Careful*, he thought, and began to stalk her around a bench end. He could move sole-silent when necessary. But she heard him.

“You're back, Charls?”

And saying it, she was moving, not a tall girl but built like a woman despite her youth: smaller breasts, good baby-bearing hips,

strong legs. The legs looked very brown below the hem of her smock. Chemical treatment, no doubt. All at once, eerily, she reached out to caress the corner of a lab bench toward which she was walking; the briefest touch. Then, gracefully, she avoided the corner and stopped.

Gilchrist said, "It isn't Charls."

"Yes." She didn't act frightened. The awesome brown eyes never left him. They tormented him; beauty had no right to existence, especially in these times. "I heard you breathe a minute ago. I knew it wasn't Charls."

"I didn't breathe that loudly."

"For me you did."

She glided forward, no taller than his shoulder. There was a sharp, lemony smell on her skin. Before he could prevent it, she touched his face, finger-read it. The touch angered him. He seized her wrist.

"Are you all alone here?"

"Until Charls returns."

"How do you know I won't rape you or something? You can't see me, can you?"

Worlds were there down in those brown eyes; whole worlds. "Not with my eyes. But I see your voice. It's amber and scarlet. Mostly amber."

He let her go, still angry. "What is this place?"

She tossed her hair because a lock had curled like a backward C across the left side of her forehead. She seemed composed, docile, as if she were truly unworried about being slain; he'd often heard that blind people had that kind of curious equanimity. He had never encountered it before. All at once he was tensely conscious of the silence throughout the planetoid's halls: a silence compounded of the subsound of operating ventilators which had not yet failed.

"I'll tell you if you tell me who you are," she said.

"Roberto Gilchrist. Charter captain. Lost." How easy the lies. He had trouble taking his eyes from the small curves of her breasts, from her strong legs. He made up a rigmarole about lacking provisions. When she didn't argue or question he knew that she was too polite to call him a liar or was too sheltered to know that vessels like *Vermillyon* contained their own internal food-production plants; a development of seventeen years ago.

"I'm Miriam."

"Miriam what?"

“Well, the last is a number and not very pretty.” She smiled, showing nice teeth, wide lips. Externally she looked less than twenty but he saw ages down in her eyes or—damn it—the reflection of some hope in himself that refused to lie down. He stepped on it.

“On Pristobal,” she said, “we’re assigned serials at birth.”

“That’s a world, Pristobal?”

“On the far side of the lens. I’ve never been there. My start came from there but I was born on this seed. I learned all about Pristobal listening to the tapes on the deck below.”

Gilchrist chewed the word: “Seed. Seed—this is a seed?”

“You sound hungry.”

“What?”

“There’s a hungry sound in your voice. Are you?”

Might as well keep the lie moving. “Famished.”

“We have some nourishing bars on the deck above.”

She disengaged from his hard hand, glided to the lab hatch. He was aware again of how womanly she was. Those were wide, strong, manchild hips. He didn’t care for the sound of *some nourishing bars* but he followed her, watching her rear.

**H**E FOUND the nourishing bars to taste of anise and be very chewy. She secured the bars from an oven-like chamber in a spherical white room in which there were a number of comfortable ball-and-cube-shaped inflatables for sitting.

Gilchrist sat and chewed, thinking he had better get the devil out before those eyes got him.

“Exactly what’s a seed, Miriam?”

“A nursery, a schoolroom, a ship to cross the stars—a house for me and Charls.”

“Your assigned mate?”

“You’ve heard of those?”

A lot of planets have them.” *Did*, he amended silently.

“The tapes don’t tell me that. They do tell me eight thousand six hundred pairs of mates were entubed in separate seeds like this. Each two in a seed were launched from Pristobal nineteen years ago. I’m eighteen.”

“Happy birthday,” he said, waving an unchewed bit of his turd-colored nourishing bar.

“I think you smiled then. But my birthday was last Cancer twelfth.”

“Still, happy.” He turned away from the brown eyes above the hands tucked beneath the chin over the crossed strong thighs on one of the inflatables. *You’re talking like an assing child. Get out.*

But he couldn’t help asking, “Why were eight thousand whatever seeds launched, Miriam?”

“To go to other stars. Charls and I were both born aboard. The machines cared for us and schooled us and when I’m twenty-one—Charls will be twenty-one too—we’re to come together and have a living child in my body. All the parts of him from Charls and me were prepicked by the computes, the tapes told me.”

Gilchrist valiantly tried to be nasty but had a hard time. He half believed his own saying of: “Some kind of supergirl, yes?”

“I don’t know. I was made to be strong and smart about basic things, I think.”

“But created blind?”

“Yes, I was.”

“For a reason?”

“It must be, though I haven’t found it yet.”

“No ideas?”

“To make me stronger, perhaps.”

“And you’re to hop to it with this Charls, have your kid and squirt off on this rocket to some other world—which world?”

“The seed knows—I don’t, yet. We’ll be told at the right time.”

“—and live happily ever thereafter in your new Eden? For what reason?”

“When Charls and I were twelve the machines aboard began teaching us that the bureau men on *Pristobal*, together with the computes, decided seeds would be necessary because *Pristobal* wouldn’t be in existence for many more years than twenty—and that was at least twenty years ago. The main compute was a very intelligent thinking complex, the tapes say. At least five hundred kilometers on its long side.”

*Poor smart giant Pristobal*, Gilchrist thought. *Kiss off*. He’d never heard of the planet but the fact didn’t gainsay the existence of a culture far more prescient than most of the others. The others had largely caught up to the crumblecookie destruction as they, themselves, crumbled. Poor, far-seeing *Pristobal*. What good did it do?

“Your folk must have been smart, little Miriam, for it is happening all over—every world either afire or blowing up its neigh-



bor with flyspikes or pulling its own systems down on itself like that—”

He made a tangly gesture which she couldn't see, he realized. So he repeated: “All running down. Men running down, cultures running down—”

“I hear it's a terrible thing,” she said. Gilchrist was transfixed by those brown eyes, to which he wanted to say, *Leave me alone.*

“The tapes told you?”

“I hear it in you.”

The ventilators operated on, at the tickling threshold of the ear. But Gilchrist took a perverse satisfaction in realizing that not much else aboard the seed was operating. It paid accounts, somehow, for his having been fool enough to stop when he had but one rational mission—to die.

“Dear old Pristobal,” he said, rising and tossing the half-eaten, disgusting nourishing bar behind one of the inflatables, where it was promptly absorbed by the white cilialike fibers that covered the interior of the sphere room. “Saving the bloody race and all that. Up the immortals and all that.” He walked over because he wanted to touch her. He bent close, tapping her right cheek gently with his three longest fingers. Gently, but it was cruelty enough. “Well, my dear Miriam, I am sorry to report that, like everything else in the universe, this Pristobal seed has run down. It's going nowhere. It's elliptically drifting. You are not on any voyage to birth a kid in some nice shiny new moon in another galaxy. You are stuck. There are no engines operating.”

She nodded, slowly. “That's why Charls went out.”

“Out where?”

“Outside, to the powerplant.”

“When was that?”

“Seven—no, eight days now. After breakfast.”

“And you still think he's coming back?”

Her lids dropped down over those marvelous brown eyes for only an instant. “I'm always confident—”

“You're a terrible little liar, Miriam.”

It broke her and she cried.

**H**ER whole body moved against him. He reacted by shoving her away. That was in tune with his plan. But they were separated just

the barest moment, for some yawning, unbidden impulse in his gut dragged his arm around her. Miriam's face nestled against his breastbone. He glanced down. She didn't close her brown eyes as she wept. He nearly died of their beauty.

"Look—look for Charls, please, Captain Roberto?"

"I'm not a captain."

"Not—?"

"I'm just a better liar than you."

"Oh."

"What's wrong?"

"What I hear. You hate yourself so."

"Justly. I'm not a captain or anything worth mentioning."

"What are you?"

"An oddjob, a failure, a living, breathing monument to all the failed possibilities of—"

"How sorry for yourself you are."

He shoved her away. "You bitch, at least I have clear eyes—"

"To see." She stared upward, luminous and unhurt. "That's all, just to see."

"To see what is."

"I was taught to see what can be."

"Oh, shit, listen. I had all that when I was little. Men had that since they had hairy faces. It was all wasted. Me and our brethren, Miriam—we've all failed together. Wiped out all the possibilities, you see?" He shook her. "Do you see?"

She shook her head, turned away; the beginning of a tearglimmer there? If so, she was ashamed of it this time. Hid it. He yelled: "You don't understand. You've been cooped and cradled here while everything blows up and the Hoark—" He explained the Hoark. "It's all gone, Miriam. Once there were infinite choices and now there're none."

As if an antidote to his shouting, she asked, "Will you see about Charls?"

"Where? Outside?"

"Behind the last pyramid."

"You really want to know? You smartening up?"

"Now that you've come I need to know."

Unable to fathom that queer remark—*stay obtuse; stay safe; steady on to dying, o my noncaptain*—he bolted his headpiece in place, found a lock and proceeded to explore the chill, light-pricked

exterior of the hardplate world-shaped ship. He found Charls without half trying. A few of Charls's tools still clung to the loxons of his torn suit. Gilchrist filled his glove, zippered it and returned inside.

Miriam accepted the guidance of his other hand: her palm upward, she received a faintly gristly thimbleful of colorless pumice he poured out.

"Your powerplant did fail and Charls ripped his suit. You're feeling what's left of your supermate."

He waited.

He expected hysteria, ranting, a few snuffles at very least. She just threw that C-lock off her forehead again—he turned away from her brown eyes as though blinded; blinded by that infuriating, unimpeachable light.

She said, "Then you have to take me with you."

He guffawed. "Girl, I'm going nowhere. I forgot to tell you—I am on my way to die by the shortest and most comfortable route."

"You can't now."

"What do you mean I can't now?"

"Now you owe me a child in my body."

"I don't owe anybody anything except myself some relief!"

"You have a ship, don't you?"

"Of course I have a ship. But—"

"Then we'll begin again."

"Sweet, sweet—" On the edge of murdering anger, Gilchrist touched both her soft cheeks with his scar-marked palms and bent close, as if instructing an idiot. "I am not—repeat not—anybody's savior, in fact just the opp—"

"But you're a man." She evaded his arms, scanned his features with those quick fingertips. "Not too ugly, either."

"I have never done anything right. Get that? I have—never—done—anything—right. I'm a piece of a clock run down, a sprung spring—I—am—*finished*, my little Miriam, along with everyone else on every planet all the way across the lens. All those other seeds Pristobal sent—don't you suppose they're finished, too? Run down? Of course they are! I am not cowering out, you must understand that. I'm just going the way of the species, and I don't intend to prolong the lights-out process any longer than my gutlessness makes necessary. There is nothing left to do, Miriam. It's all been tried. It's all failed."

She thought about that, then said, "Of course there's no way I can force you to take me aboard."

"Truer words—"

"So you have to choose."

He hit her.

THE blow spun her six lengths down the corridor in whose sterile glare he'd poured the remains of Charls into her palm. What had become of Charls? Little invisible grittys lost on the decking. Why had he stopped here? Why? She was into him, into him so deeply, with soft hooks, with those illuminated eyes. Pity? Love? What was it?

In agony he said, "Miriam, don't make me choose."

"We could begin some place—"

"Die in space getting there, most likely."

"The very act of trying—"

"What do you know? You've never been outside your damn seed."

"I know, Captain Roberto—"

"Will you damn it stop with the captain? I am not a—"

"—that until there's no more new life, there are always new possibilities. If I could have the baby of a different sex, think of how it could begin again."

"Goodbye." He wheeled, starting blind-eyed for the lock.

"You're alive, Captain Roberto. Choose for me—"

He spun. "Stop it."

"No." The brown eyes destroyed him. "Without choosing, there can't be miracles."

"I don't want to go through it again."

"That doesn't make any difference."

"It hurts."

"That doesn't make any difference either." Somehow she reached him and touched him. "I do think I could make you love me after a while. That ought to make it easier, don't you think? At least the tapes say love is a natural antidote for—"

"You and your smartassing tapes," he said in a baboonlike yowl to cover pain and the unwilling, unwished committment. He might have guessed it. Oh yes, he might, from the moment he stared into those brown eyes and doomed himself without knowing. To start

all over again, create a second, infinite range of possibilities—

Of course, a million things might happen. A miscarrying. A failure of the *P.M.S. Vermillyon* in ultradeep space once they left the lens; everything else had run down so why not the ship as well?

But he had no words to tell her, could only strangle on: “You and your stinking educated tapes—”

Through his hot mad tears he heard her laughing like a woman, a sweet, sweet sound.

In an hour, on *Vermillyon's* bridge, with her arms around his middle—she stood behind him and peeked under one of his elbows, like a child, as if she could honestly see—he programed them into the cold abyss, straight out, the lens astern, thinking: *How did I get into this?* He didn't want to go through a single whit more of hurt. What if he had to watch her miscarry, for instance, bloody thighs jerking in pain?

Then why, indeed, was he going through it, because he certainly was. At the same time he felt miserable, he was anticipating what it would taste like to kiss her faintly pink mouth for the first time and stare, as long as he wanted, at close range, into her brown eyes.

He had routinely programed a scan. All at once he heard the wow-wow insistence of his friends the Hoark, who continued to inform him:

“This is a transmission for the fugitive Gilchrist. We have you in range and are proceeding. It will be to your benefit to damp your engines and surrender to—”

He slapped down handbars for a range fix. They were closing. He'd lost distance on the seed. They were in pursuit, already yawing off the last stars of the galaxy, coming into the abyss after him, to catch him if they could.

What about fuel on *P.M.S. Vermillyon*? He didn't have the faintest ideal about the fuel supply. How far were those filmy lightveils of a galaxy beyond, lights seen through views on whose inner surfaces he also saw himself, a ghost?

*Some savior*, he thought. Miriam felt the tension in his body. She nuzzled her head in, and squeezed.

“You feel stronger than Charls.”

“You'll find out. Listen, let go, I've got a million things to do—”

Outward-leaping to all the new possibilities, he began by doing the very first one.

∞



# NEWSOCRATS

“If the election were held tomorrow . . .”

*Pg Wyal*

*I—the cast*

By four o'clock everything was ready. The cameras and radio mikes were set up and concealed within and behind the props. The crew was situated in its remote nest like maggots in rotten meat, invisible. There'd be no other chance; no boom or lens could extend into the picture and ruin the Show. When your margin for error is zero your errors must be zero. Perfection is our only axiom.

The Show would hit pre- and prime-time hours from seven to nine. The impact would hit them, like the kick of a mule in their soft backsides, at just prime time. Prime time is Arthur Bronstein's most effective period. The emotional matrixes are way up then, one of our best conditioned reflexes. Arthur's the anchorman, the cohesive constant in our equations. Arthur spent hours putting on his ash-gray makeup. His mirrored face a sombre darkness somehow not brightened by the circle of fierce light. On the screen, dramatized with the right lighting, he would look stricken, aghast, drained of blood, as if in shock. If he'd ever missed a cue or muffed his timing I'd never seen it. He never hesitated or stammered or stood at a loss for words.

Senator Douglas Westlake had arrived early in the morning. He wanted everything just right for his performance. The Senator was tall, a little gray but straight, not stooped—rather like Arthur the anchorman, only casting a somewhat more solid, dignified and intelligent image on the screen, without all of Arthur's dark emana-

tions and connotations. Those would not suit a presidential candidate at all. The image projected was a calm and serious one, but with foundations of humor and optimism. Arthur was not a wit; Westlake was, profoundly and prominently. Senator Westlake was groomed and grounded in his role by Affiliated World Networks for five years. The screen climax ticked nearer and nearer; he showed no strain through his hypnotized fog; tension twisted and knotted his thoughts but not his good face. Our therapy was kind. It would be his last performance. Nobody suffered.

Naturally, Mrs. Westlake was close by his side. Marcia Westlake was a strong, stable woman, attractive in a deep, substantial manner. No flashy society bitch, her appeal was designed to be broader than that, to strike a common matriarchal chord in all our viewers, for she will be the emotional focus directly after the tragedy and we need an iron woman, a creature of substance behind the symbols; the entire atmosphere of tension and suppressed hysteria we were creating revolved around her. She is the fulcrum upon which we rest our lever, the personality that assimilates the public's objectivized, vicarious torment. Later she will be our tool, to twist and turn the world.

The limousine was ready in the garage, brooded over by batteries of greenly oscillating screens and sharply calibrated meters. It's a beautiful car, a Continental with a rolldown top and dual turbines that sing a throaty keen of power. An authoritative, dignified automobile, suited for its part. Blue and deep, a trembling sky.

I am the director. In my booth buried behind the sphinx-faced facade of AWN Tower I choose strategem, plot battles, make the armies clash on cue. All responsibility is mine; all blame, all profit. The viewers know me as a cipher, a flicker on the credits at the end of newscasts or public events specials. They've never seen the eyes that show them truth—eyes which have no color, no face around them, devouring all light and image without reflection.

Phoenix. That's the town. Phoenix, hunching in the desert like a forest of silver cacti, floods the dry valley from sky to substrata, from fossil beds to foothills, with a complacent and content humanity. Phoenix, calm and efficient, clean and noble, set in the rasping desert wind like a perfect oasis of crystal spires or hypodermic needles, sharp and sterile. Phoenix, the monster that draws itself together out of continual annihilation, to taunt the sky, arrogant and cruel.



Phoenix was the perfect set.

## *II—the teaser*

The motorcade would begin at six, exactly. We spent the day in unhurried preparations. The budget allowed plenty of time for everything. We had anticipated this day for over five years, and knew all the mistakes we could possibly make—an astronomy of error. All our mistakes were corrected before they could be committed. The script called for crowds of certain enthusiasm and intensity; the extras were already on location and the assistant directors and script girls were coaxing them to their correct positions and roles. The local commentators were at their posts; I would personally supervise them from my booth. The spotmen and interviewers were all on location and ready for curtain. The last speech of the campaign, we had advertised, would not go uncovered. If anything, we had announced, it would be overcovered. In order to satisfy a need the need must sometimes be created—so we advertised ourselves. Advertising panders to the unborn urge. Advertising enhances the news; if they don't know what's important, tell them—and they will believe.

Senator Westlake and his wife took off in the big ballistic transport at five. They would orbit once, then arc down upon Phoenix. Eddy, the propman, had done a wonderful job; the transport, used throughout the campaign as the Senator's official vehicle (all entrances and embarkations must be grand and noble), was painted a brilliant mirror silver, with bright, yellow-bordered red lettering around the visual center of gravity. The ship was not the standard metal phallus but a newer model whose connotations were more sedate, cautious—a squat ovoid shape that suggested strength and immovability in crisis. A safe but powerful image, which suited Senator Westlake excellently.

I watched in the control booth as he came down on Phoenix Port at five-fifty exactly. The ship settled down on its hungry fusion torch like a beautiful silver bullet about to slide back into the barrel of a gun. The sun gleamed yellow and fat, sparkling off its mirror rind. Daylight savings had finally been extended the year around, so there was plenty of light by which to see the landing and the tragedy. The landing was even more beautiful, more awe- and love-inspiring than we had computed—its emotional index was

barely below the acceptable upper limit. A quick glance at continuous readout told me we'd have to play down the early stages of the motorcade or go beyond the predictability range of our planning. I made the necessary arrangements with the spotmen and commentators. (Their voices like soft chords behind the solemn keynote Arthur.)

The huge bullet settled down on its pad, vomiting flame, and sat silent for fifteen seconds. When the drama indices of continuous readout indicated saturation I signaled the pilot to open the debarking ramp. It slid down like a shiny tongue from the craft's empty bowels. There was another slight pause until continuous readout told me to bring out the Senator and his party. I gave them the cue and immediately saw them on the monitor, standing, waving and smiling in the portal. Mrs. Westlake was wearing a light blue dress, with her hair (black, streaks of mature silver) in a tight bouffant style. The Senator appeared happy and enthusiastic, delighted to return the crowd's smiles and waves. The crowd was cheering at fifteen decibels, just as planned. The readout showed optimum progress, excellent saturation. The rating was low but would improve.

After another carefully coordinated pause to give the viewers time to recognize and begin to empathize with the characters, I spoke into the throatmike:

"Okay, Senator, begin down the ramp. Walk slowly, don't show too much anxiety or anticipation. Make sure you take at least twenty seconds to reach the bottom of the ramp. Dignified, easy."

He heard me through the receiver buried in the bone behind his left ear. (Eddy's surgical team had left no scar.) Still smiling, he began to hike down the ramp with his wife's left arm entwined in his right. He wore a gray-black suit and a maroon turtleneck, a sober, rational contrast to Marcia's pale blue sheath and pearl necklace. His head shone a casual silver, dry and unoled. Some of the glowing hairs stood out from his head, looking gossamer and electric. He was handsome.

He reached the foot of the ramp and posed for photos. His smile revealed large, long teeth, white and rigid. They were the teeth of a strong man, a leader. They had been implanted at great expense by the best orthodontic surgeons.

Continuous readout, for some reason, sputtered violently across its screen to terminate the picture-taking session immediately. I

rattled a few words into my throatmike, and on the screen marked PUBLIC saw the Senator extract himself graciously from the newsmen and TV cameras. He came across sincerely, nothing phony, even in the harshly real, revealing depths of the holoscreen; a man must be a total actor to effect such composure and certainty on TV. Westlake was a total actor.

The Continental was waiting at the edge of the Port. It seemed to be in motion even with its motors off. The car reflected sunlight with a depthless metallic glow, blue, sky-dark. It was a wheeled dreadnought, an implacable carnivore, a relentless killer. It was the penultimate automobile, the utter male symbol. Its hood was long, its roof low; its lines flowed and ran like translucent seawater around a driving submarine hull. This was a vehicle of power, a coach for imperial means.

The senatorial party climbed in. But our cameras didn't show this action; such are our modern gods, to be spared the undignified, freed from mortal clumsiness. Gods do not stoop—on wings or air they ride, our witnessed kings.

A cut to the distance showed the car begin to flow like a blue wave down the gentle slope, white concrete under liquid steel, cloverleafing, and reeling onto the superhighway. The roof was still raised.

An aerial view showed the car speeding down the road in regal isolation. (Beyond the causeway, a long pan of parched sea-bottom, death's archaic sediments.) We had cleared the highway completely, even to the point of removing the center divider. The vehicle shot directly down the center of the white carpet, its outlines blurred by speed—and camera work.

Overhead the sun burned searingly in a flawless, naked sky. The desert above was as empty and bleak as the desert below, and promised of stars. A low-angle shot silhouetted the Continental against the violet Eastern horizon, followed it as it sped towards the stark, cruel beauty of the city. An orbital camera relayed down a magnified, slightly distorted view of Phoenix from 1,000 kilometers: a grid of broad streets, long shadows of the spires as hard and straight as the spires themselves, the occasional winking and glinting of a needlepoint as it caught the sun and hurled it again into space. All seen through a faintly shimmering blue mist, a wisp of sky below. This shot in intermittent flashes, sandwiched between longshots of the racing blue rapier.

Actually, the car was not traveling too fast. Continuous readout—as well as the script—indicated that the entrance to the city should take at least fifteen minutes, to allow tension and that thin undercurrent of apprehension to build up to a crest. Then the crest could be sustained, guided, and allowed to crash in foam and spray to its ultimate beaching of blood. The computers steered and drove the machine in a direct hookup to continuous readout. There would be no error.

The highway split the city in two. An overhead shot from a chopper showed it running from the Port to the downtown Plaza like an arrow, like a spear, like a tracer-bullet flashing white over the gray flatness of the desert. From the Plaza, the motorcade would commence, head to a large convention hall three miles distant. The convention hall was irrelevant.

The car entered the city.

(Subliminals: sperm-cell lancing ovum. Intercourse. Daggers into flesh.)

I glanced at continuous readout nervously. The ratings were starting to pick up; in fifteen minutes we'd eclipse the afternoon kiddy shows and achieve our first plateau. The emotional indices would begin to achieve predominance over everything else. Our audience was world wide; each time zone would receive the show without warning at exactly prime time. But this was no rehearsal—the tape had to be real, alive. It was a touchy period—the range for slipup and error was more than marginal. A mistake could reduce our intensity level and blow the show.

Arthur's deep, hollow voice was a gloss, a relaxed polish, over the picture. It was not yet a prime factor, but its importance would grow. Arthur was really the Show; his voice and evocations controlled the delicate web of public thought and feeling. Even if the masses did not pay special attention to what he said, their nervous systems would pick up the subsonic subtleties woven so carefully into the way he said it. Of course, nothing would be extemporized.

Eddy the propman now played his part. As the car pulled up briefly in the center of the Plaza and stopped for more picture-taking and adulation, Eddy twisted a dial and caused a slow, slight change in the hue of the Continental. The car did not visibly change color—that would have been too obvious, too crude. Instead, it entered a new reflectory/refractory state in which the light hitting its surface was polarized. Electrically activated liquid crys-

tals under its plastic skin became reoriented to permit only lower-frequency light to reflect from its shimmering surface. Color is one of the mind's most subtle and basic emotion indicators; a change in color is a change in mood. By lowering the frequency of the car's already deeply diffracted light, from sky-blue-of-elation to sky-blue-of-sunset-and-dying, Eddy changed the viewers' mood from one of expectation and elation to scraped nerves, foreboding, sick stomachs.

The top rolled back. Continuous readout showed a sudden leap in apprehension. Excellent—as planned. The ratings were rapidly climbing, now. The intensity of emotion was rapidly whirling into a vortex, a cyclone of vicarious involvement and empathy.

It was a pattern they recognized.

### *III—the climax*

Seven o'clock. The emotional indices soared, like a diver before the plunge, the fall. Continuous Readout splashed happy symbols across the electroluminous screen; PUBLIC showed throngs held in thrall by the charismatic personality of Westlake, minds attuned to a single frequency, a monotonous note. Their faces were not real, but mirage things, some refraction in the air over the desert pan. Our cameras showed them from a hundred calculated angles, closeup and longshot, pan and still. They showed them from the outward image and the inward eye, as shape and as symbol. Great drama was broadcast; great and terrible emotions swelled. By mounting tides we hooked them from their sea.

The Senator and his wife stood up in the car's rear compartment and looked out at the crowds. "Smile," I commanded, and they smiled. Smiled sincerely, smiled honestly, smiled with love and the certainty of the very, very confident. They simply thought of other things. They were actors to the core—what core remained.

The crowd was a froth of faces, a noise of adulation, a color of love and enthusiasm. It registered perfectly on the screen and with continuous readout. Everything was on cue.

The towers of Phoenix were tall, gloomed by shadow. (In the holographic depths like Luna's shadow-naked fangs, needles into our staring eyes.) They afforded a roost, a perch for the cannibal bird. Phoenix that consumes himself in the fires of birth, Phoenix ever young.

Phoenix the grave-robber and the womb-thief.

I muttered into the mike and the cavalcade began. Like a gypsy cortege, moving in a flurry of noise and color, the parade rolled out. The car was a sleek, slow ox plagued by the big hornets of police cars and the small flies of motorcycles. The crowd was hungry for the ox. In their minds was the latent taste of blood. In their eyes the ancient spectacle of slaughter, a roman circus. They were hungry and we knew their hunger.

In the waning sunlight the Senator and his wife looked fine and right, a nexus for what fineness and rightness remained. A camera at ground level caught the confident, clean grin. A closeup of the loose, relaxed hand, so calm and manicured-clean, showed them the firm grip he would have; the grip on fate, security; Big Daddy. His image was deeper in two dimensions than theirs in three. They wanted him.

They wanted him so badly.

I ordered an overhead pan. An electric chopper revealed the straightness of their march; silently it spied on crowd and prince. Camelot was regal that day, Camelot was smooth. The blue limousine stood gallantly at the head of the column, like an arrowhead of blue steel. It was flanked by the knights on wicked motorcycles, each with a cool black rod Excalibur, to deal with the mobs in a symbolic, ceremonial way. The fuel-cell bikes were black death and silver mercy; Continuous readout had no complaints about the motorcycles. Behind the Continental and the bikes were four police cars, side to side, like a phalanx, and then a train of smaller black limousines, the steed of dignitaries and dignitaries-to-be. They were identical, nothing to distract from the Senator and his shining silver head; merely background, margins, something for the Senator to contrast. Behind the train of limousines rolled a single-file line of more motorcycles; these went almost unnoticed. Later they would play a part.

Arthur narrated innocuously. His voice was calm, relaxed, down pat. He knew his part and knew its relation to the rest of the script. Arthur would not miff. Arthur was careful.

Eddy the propman came in and winked at me. "All finished," he joked. Eddy is a big, bluff fellow. He enjoys irony and wit. "I checked the instruments five times." Eddy is not all jokes and spirit; Eddy is careful, too.

"The charge will not go off until three separate studs and tog-

gles are studded and toggled," said Eddy, smiling. He brushed sandy hair out of his rain-gray eyes. "The first two are at station WOR in New York and BBC-2 in London. They've already been activated—so the only one left holding the bag is us."

I looked at the handsome figure now filling the PUBLIC screen. He was waving and smiling.

"When you pull up the cap on the DESTRUCT button, green lights will flash on panels in both London and New York. They'll have fifteen seconds to reverse the sequence or completely deactivate it. Then the computers will arm the device and deactivate their consoles. We'll be on our own."

"And I can push the button," I added absently.

"Yeah," said Eddy. He grinned.

He was a solid man, a good engineer. He did a good job.

Continuous readout reeled off figures. We had reached the critical point in the Countdown. The emotional indices were way up; the crowd could go either way but either way would be violent. Arthur's voice had slowly turned from a smooth bass to a somewhat rasping baritone. The effect upon the viewers was carefully calculated: from undercurrents of anxiety to overtones of apprehension. Nervousness crept into their hearts. Arthur's hair was black, streaked with gray. He was not on screen but his image remained, like some brooding raven, dark and deathlike. The voice that tells of bad things—the timber of time, hollow and honed.

Eddy relaxed in a chair on the other side of the glass. His part was finished. His reflection grinned in the glass. For a second I had the feeling that I could not tell which was Eddy, man or reflection. Presently I realized that it didn't matter—what mattered was which I thought was Eddy.

I began to sweat. Emotions are fine, but they lower efficiency; you can't do a good job all up tight. My palms grew steadily more slick. The screen marked PUBLIC glowed with the calm of late afternoon and a picnic sun. Tension did crackle underneath but the visible scene was smooth, still water, despite the surges of *tsunami* that would soon climb the beaches and drain their tears. The tide, I saw, carried me along with it; are we then all swimmers, drowning in the seas we make?

I did not have time to philosophize. Things were moving on an accelerating curve.

The cameras showed shifting, angled closeups of Westlake. His

forehead loomed pale and sheer above metallic gray eyes. The eyebrow arched into small horns, like arrowpoints. The mouth was a thin line, once full but withered, creased with humor's wear at the corners. His beard had been eradicated by electrolysis; there was no shadow. His chin was smooth and creased vertically in the middle—like buttocks or labia. It was a gentle, strong, masculine face. We scanned its good features constantly.

Arthur's voice:

"... Now the motorcade is passing the halfway mark. The Senator appears calm, seems to be enjoying it. Mrs. Westlake is obviously enjoying things; she's smiling and waving at the crowd as if it were all for her. Marcia Westlake isn't new to this, though. She's been in over six campaigns with her husband, from the first Mayoral contest through his battle for the Filipino governorship, right down to the present presidential duel. They say she's his 'secret weapon'..."

His platitudes buzzed into the background. Continuous readout was puking apoplectic fits of cryptography across its screen. Emotional matrixes, ratings, probability percentages, alternate futures, immediate and extrapolated reactions. Computers from the five major urban centers in this time-zone relayed their bits and glimpses, and continuous readout collated them into a meaningful hologram. Lasered their chaos.

I said that out loud and Eddy laughed.

Eddy is a good guy.

But I couldn't laugh with him. The readout screen was angry with light and symbol. I followed its instructions grimly. First, a cue to Arthur to further lower the timber of his voice. Then an order to the camera crew to shoot dramatic longshots—longshots built tension. (The public, too, knows its cues.) After that I began earnestly studying the emotional matrix figures. The final decision, its timing, was up to me. Everything hinged on that. The Senator had less than a mile to go; he'd have to exit within two or three minutes, at a time when the tension was stimulated, unconsciously, to feverishness. Black wings had to obscure a mythic sun, omens had to fall.

A spotman: "In the next half-mile, what readings indicate greatest dramatic tensions?"

In other words, what landscapes and patterns evoked the best dark dreams.



I told him: A seven-story brick warehouse, a grassy knoll, a clump of bushes.

“Play it up,” I said.

I adjusted the settings on the console in front of me. The cap was up, the idiot-lights like green snake eyes, unblinking. Exactly four hundred yards down that concrete corridor we’d get him.

Nothing to do now. We waited.

Two minutes. I made impotent fists.

Arthur’s voice, a melancholy drone.

Closeup carresses of the Knight, so real and near.

Then—

Continuous readout reeled off a glowing series of numbers:

10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

red red red red red red red red 2 red red red red red red red  
*bluewhite bluewhite bluewhite* 1 *bluewhite bluewhite bluewhite*

At one I inhaled, almost gasped.

Then zero.

“Now!” I shouted and stabbed the button.

On the PUBLIC screen turmoil. Abruptly the gray-silver closeup head, still grinning confidently, coughed apart. Bright blood erupted from the skull, gushing and flowing, with lumps of brain as in a thick raw stew. Audio pickups transmitted a sharp *crack*, like an explosion. The body crumpled into the blue lap of Mrs. Westlake, its shattered white head vomiting blood and brains.

Now blurred camera work, confusion visualized. Subsonic terror and subvisual panic were broadcast in subliminal flickers. Mrs. Westlake stood up with her blue dress soaked in blood, silent jaws working. Someone clambered on the limousine’s trunk. (In their minds, the torment of Jaqueline.) The column of motorcycles crashing into the crowd, churning people crushed and hurled into the air, machine-guns chattering wildly. Arthur’s voice breaking to gibberish.

“*Migod, migod, the President—the Senator’s been shot!*”

A million lies on ten million screens. The scene constantly dissolving and fading out. Snatches of tortured faces, some familiar and some evoking the familiar. Subliminally, the Lords of Camelot. Consciously, the anguish of damnation. Blood and brains and void in his open eyes.

Eddy the propman had done a good job.  
He was always careful.

#### IV—the *dénouement*

It was a perfect job. Everything went smooth and fast. They are blind and stupid and will believe anything we tell them. While our drama unfolded, events transpired as usual. The main collators in New York digested the tragedy and flashed curves of prediction across our screens. It edited the tape for maximum effect, total impact. The West and Mountain zones had seen the assassination live but the Midwest and East would get a carefully spliced and edited rehash during their respective Prime times. The papers, the magazines and the printouts, those that were not owned or controlled by AWN anyway, all got their information through us. They'd release the information as we fed it to them. Actually the prophets of Instant Communication (the Comsat nuts, et al) were completely wrong; it's not instant communication that knits men together, but budgeted communication. As the hours of prime impact hit the various parts of the globe, we would, through our various mechanisms, release the news. The news is important; you can't afford to slop it about as if it were some cheap, common swill. The news is delicate, as demanding of form and rigor as a crystal; it must be handled with mathematical deliberation and logic.

We are always logical.

A couple of hours later came the information that the "assassin" had somehow eluded the net cast after him. The public accepted this news with anxiousness, fear. A couple of hours of commentator speculation and worry after that (allowing for a one-hour delay between time zones), we broadcast that there seemed to be no traces of the killer. Killer, killer, killer. We repeated the word again and again into oversensitive mikes. The broadcast computers were programed to amplify that word, as well as *murderer*, and especially *assassin*.

We drummed it into them. We pounded and hammered at their

naked brains. Hour after hour, Arthur's compulsive voice told them about fear. They listed raptly. For half a day their guts churned hotter and sicker. The paranoid reaction set in quickly. Big Daddy was dead; who was Big Daddy now? By interspersing the monotone of tragedy with bad news from the Ghana front, the student revolt in Tangiers, the strike in Scandanavia, we whipped their reaction into a scum of emotion as thick and heavy as butter.

The assassin, the killer, the loathsome wraith who could be anywhere.

And he would never, ever, be found. Eddy's surgical team had deftly planted a sliver of high explosive fixed to a molecular radio-detonator inside the Senator's skull. Just below the frontal-lobes, a little to the right. When I pressed the button a signal had caused it to ignite and blow the skull apart. The wound was identical to a historical horror we had studied; its effect, broadcast in minute detail, was just as shocking and brutal as the blast itself.

Six billion people saw one man die.

From five feet away. They were almost splattered with the exploding brains, showered in the rain of blood.

That's news.

Like the surges of a tidal wave, emotion churned, heaved, drained and hurtled back in catastrophic thunder. The currents of hatred and suspicion boiled, foamed. There were riots in London. In Houston and Los Angeles, black orgasms of murder and arson. (In the Archives, "Law and Order"; we resurrected this simplism. It was useful). Mobs murdered themselves in Beirut, slamming in human torrents against police armament. In Calcutta and Peking, the masses came out of their hives, illegally, and crushed themselves to death in the streets. The sterile bird Phoenix blazed and shuddered, agonizing in labor and death. The impotent shook their fists against a blank sky, cursing. The grave growled at their television sets. The meek whimpered at their television sets. The indifferent shrugged at their television sets.

The television sets growled, whimpered, yawned back.

All emotions were accounted for and encouraged.

Emotion was the need, any emotion, all emotion.

Mrs. Westlake was a martyr's widow—Mrs. Westlake the power and the dark dignity, shrouded in black veils, sturdy and anguished Marcia Westlake. Through our lens we passed her image, the focus of emotion, a focus for hysteria. The widow—like another widow,

with a red hourglass on its belly, that slays the one who seeded. The widow who inherits. She was his priestess—she minded the altar. She, she, she, night-mother and dream-witch.

Her womb a black destroyer.

Isis, Kali, Joan, Jaqueline. Harlow, Monroe, black-woman-who-swallows.

And the weird shadows of the cave fire. The outrageous breasts and buttocks of the Seed Queen. The first stirrings of night in the hominid heart. The fiend things buried in our past, burning in our present, the thalamal joyless rat.

And the Pied Piper luring him from his nest with dreams, drawing him over the twisted landscape of reflex and response. Into the collapsing caverns, the endless fall, the final lightless vacuum.

Our suggestions were gentle, quiet, logical as music. Visual.

Westlake was a total actor; he played the part of death totally. Marcia, his wife-annihilator, survived him with calm brilliance. She knew every step, commanded every stage.

Soon enough, the play was over. The theater itself dissolved. Curtain.

#### V—the author's reward

It was cold on the wind-scoured inauguration stand, but she was wearing an electrically heated shift. A blue shift identical to the one she wore at her grief. The first lady president, nominated, campaigned for, and elected by the news, by Affiliated World Networks.

She started to speak. I ordered a longshot—a brief one. Then a friendly, straightforward closeup. Her brown eyes shone steadily into six billion faces, in high-resolution 3-D. A solid woman, a strong woman.

A tyrant.

Big Mommy.

Her voice was strong and steady, almost hard. She said things of great optimism and little substance. Things that mattered even if they didn't. Things created in the cold crystalline brain of a vast robot network. Good things, kind and brave things, wise and empty things. All things for all men.

All of them, every one. At prime time, carefully monitored and evaluated and checked. The ratings were a hundred percent—the

emotional indices registered confidence and hope. Even a tiny elation.

And a good strong blast of obedience.

But that was a foregone conclusion.

After all, who can resist something as ubiquitous and totally convincing as the news? Who can even doubt it?

Her voice rang high and steady. Eddy the propman had had the dais built to calculated specifications, computerized to evoke calm and placidity. Just like you design a movie set around a particular pair of boobs. Just like Walter Cronkite's busy-rattling newsroom, or Huntley-Brinkley's oakwood dignity. Her hair matched the varnish; her skin tone blended with the paneling; her eyes were confident against the texture of cork and velvet. Eddy had been careful. Eddy was a pro.

On an upbeat and an upkey she sang to a close.

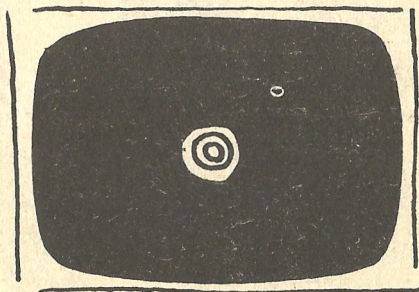
Cheers from the extras, exaltation from Arthur, relief and content from the audience.

Continuous readout gave the signal. The red eye faded out slowly. We were through. Everything was running smoothly, we had done the job well. We were a team—all six billion human beings of us, all men linked. The day's news had been reported with honesty and accuracy, with all the integrity we had. With all the logic and all of logic's appliances and apparatuses. It is part of my dream, the vision for which we labor. We do not work for glory or power—I am a humble man, a servant of my job and of my destiny.

This is my credo, simple and straight:

Let no man be one, let no dark be unlighted, let all ignorance be all knowledge, all loneliness become all love.

News is only what men know.





# THE CARD

*Phil Berger*

**His credit was the best—but he simply had to have another card!**

**T**HE letter came special delivery.

Fiddler was asleep when the postal representative rang the downstairs bell.

“Anything important?” O.E. DeVreaux asked, yawning.

O.E. DeVreaux slept with Fiddler. She was nineteen, younger than he by several years.

The special delivery was a form letter. His name had been typed in.

Dear Mr. Fiddler:

Regrettably, your application for the card has been turned down. Perhaps at another time, when your situation has altered, you might reapply.

Yours,

Margaret Bruns  
Accrediting Manager

"I've been rejected," Fiddler said.

"For what?" O. E. asked.

"The card," he said absently.

"Is it serious?"

"I'm not sure," Fiddler said.

Fiddler sat in his office, stirring his coffee, speaking into the telephone.

"I've got the other cards," he said to an assistant in accrediting.

"They're nice cards," the woman replied evasively.

"Yes, they're nice cards," he said. "A real comfort to me."

"Of course."

"But your card—your card I don't have."

"You were rejected."

"Exactly."

"Yes," she said, pleasantly.

Fiddler was exasperated. "But the point is—"

"The point is," she said briskly, "your rejection puzzles you. It's rather common happenstance around here. Nobody likes rejection."

"It's just that I don't understand. I'm a man of considerable means. I can go anywhere in the country—anywhere in the world—and show my cards and receive the proper deference. Anywhere."

"Not our card," she said.

"No, I don't have your card."

"Of course not."

"What do you mean, of course not?"

"I mean, you were rejected."

"But I didn't even apply."

"Doesn't matter. Apparently someone else did. On your behalf. It's not uncommon," she said cheerily.

"But I've got all the cards. For my vehicle. For its gas tanks. For my bank check. For hotels, motels, diners and airplanes. Department stores, supermarkets, even smart men's shops. Everything."

"Everything but you-know-what," she said, coyly.

"I don't know what," he insisted.

She told him what.

**F**IDDLER canceled all appointments for the day and took a cab to his health club.



"You're early, Fiddle," said Isaac, the ageless masseur.

Fiddler stopped confidentially at the black man's shoulder and whispered, "Know anything about cards, Ike?"

The little man's eyes twinkled. He grabbed Fiddler's forearms with steely fingers and said, "No sweat, Fiddle. Leave it to me." And then with further conspiratorial anti-circulatory gripping and a wink, he added, "I'm well connected for cards."

"Takes a load off my mind," said Fiddler.

Isaac eased his hold and said, "Nothing like cards for what ails a man. Nothing at all."

"That's the truth. The honest to God truth," said Fiddler, disappearing into the steam room with lightened heart.

The health supplicants were on slatted wooden benches. Against one wall a weight-lifter hunched forward and inhaled through his nostrils. At the other wall, on far ends of the bench, sat a jogger and a man drinking no-cal ginger. Fiddler took a place between them.

"You don't look so hot," said the drinker, offering a swig. "Here, it's pretty terrific for your fluids. Try. Enjoy."

"I'm all right," said Fiddler, declining. "I've just had some rough business about a card I needed."

The jogger respectfully cleared his throat. "It's a tough-ie that card," he said, raising an enlightened brow. "Everybody says so. Of those who say anything."

"It'll be okay," Fiddler said. "I talked to Ike."

"He's connected, I gather."

"Yes."

"It doesn't hurt, believe me, fellow."

"They make mistakes," Fiddler said.

"Naturally. But don't take any chances. Be ready."

"For the—"

"Next time. Sure. You don't think I jog for the fun of it, do you?"

"Well, I—"

"Same with me," said the drinker, raising the no-cal ginger. "I don't drink this because I like it, it's on account of the bodily fluids. You can't be too careful at our stage."

"As far as I'm concerned," said the jogger, "it's all in the legs. Without legs, you can forget the card."

"Mess around with regular colas and see what happens to your fluids," warned the drinker.

"Same with foods," said Fiddler, less authoritatively. "Avoid fried meats which angry up the blood."

"I've heard that before," said the jogger.

"Yeah, I think it was Paul Dudley White," said the liquids specialist.

"No, I believe it was—"

"Satchell Paige," said Fiddler.

"Yeah. Maybe. The blacks are great about their bodily fluids. Ever see them drink water? Terrific."

The weightlifter rose from the bench and pulled the cord that regulated the steam. There was a grand hissing from the mechanism and the room became dense with therapeutic clouds of vapor. Fiddler got up and lumbered from the room.

Little Isaac was waiting for him inside.

"Fiddle," he rasped, his eyes darting about the room. "Fiddle, here," pointing to a filing cabinet.

"The card?" said Fiddler.

"Leave it to old Ike," he said, taking a key from his pocket.

Again he looked around to make sure nobody else was there. Then he unlocked the drawer and, eyes gleaming, brought out a stack of cards. Isaac riffled them and smiled, and wagged a finger at Fiddler.

"Okay, okay," said Fiddler, "give me already."

"Which one?" Isaac asked, cagily.

"What's the difference?"

"Fifty-two differences," Isaac said, spreading the deck. "Not the same pose nowhere. What's your liking, Fiddle?"

"Oh, Jesus," he moaned.

**O**.E. LAY naked in bed.

"Of course you're good with me," she said, sniffing a capsule that sent her head on a dizzying high. "Besides which you're considerate and—uh—gentle and kind." She smiled dreamily. "Do you want a popper?"

"Not tonight," Fiddler said.

He cracked his knuckles and thought about his prospects.

"I've never had trouble before," he said. "Any card I wanted I could get."

"They checked your references?"

"I offered."

"It doesn't matter."

"Cards matter, don't kid me."

"Not to us," she said. "Not with our things—which is beautiful—and tender—and, uh—"

"They've got foreign tricks," he insisted.

"Who?"

"The guys who get the card. What do you want to bet they're on to Oriental erotica? Lowered baskets. Distracting herb fragrances. All kinds of exquisite tortures."

"For Christ's sake, Fiddler," she said.

"Or little things. Like French phrases. Don't think Continental touches don't count in some circles."

She sighed.

"Maybe hair-styling and manicures," he went on. "You probably have to be part fag to get it."

"You're being ridiculous," she said. "That card has nothing to do with what we've got."

"Maybe," Fiddler said.

She caressed his face.

"Nothing," she said softly.

"You're probably right," he said, calmer.

"Our thing is so-O-O—"

"Functioning."

"Integral."

"Sane."

"Healthy."

"One of these days," he said, "I'll get wise to myself."

"That's more like it," she said, kissing him.

"My baby."

"My baby."

They nuzzled and then she ground her pelvis against his.

"Let's tonight you be the SS Colonel and I'll be the ravaged farm-girl," she said dreamily.

"WHAT do you look like?" Margaret Bruns asked.

"I'm fair-complected," Fiddler said.

"Are you albino?"

"No."

"I can't stand aberrations," she said. "Otherwise I'm fairly liberal. Aberrations are no fun. You can be damned sure you won't get the card if you were an albino."

"Sure," said Fiddler, sympathetically.

"That's why we require a photo of applicants. I mean, who would want our card if an albino had one? It's just smart business is what it is."

"I'm on the peaches and cream side myself," Fiddler quickly assured her.

"Yes, that's a fun complexion," the accrediting manager said. "Not that it would have made a difference if you were swarthy. For the card, I mean. The machine's fairly liberal herself. It's good business these days."

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"To program a machine as liberal. Can you imagine the bad publicity the card would get if, say, the swarthies got the shaft from our machine?"

"The machine," said Fiddler, haltingly. "It—"

"She," corrected Margaret Bruns. "She's programed like a lady. Drop me a note about yourself."

Dear Margaret Bruns:

This business about the card has caused me no end of concern. Worse, it has had a demoralizing effect on my prowess. Last night with Miss O.E. DeVreux, in the role of a slick-talking pots-and-pans salesman (she was a backward rural type), it was strictly a washout.

The thing that galls me is the impersonal nature of your operation. I'm sure that if all the facts about my case were made known to your people, it would have a beneficial effect on the decision-making processes.

I do not wish to impugn the integrity or validity of your machine. Rather it is my intention merely to suggest that in this complex society mistakes are made by even those with the best intentions. Fallibility is only human.

Perhaps, then, if you could see your way clear to meeting with me, this whole affair could be properly remedied. I remain,

P. F. Fiddler

Dear Mr. Fiddler:

The schedule at this end is quite busy, but there would be a moment at lunchtime.

(Miss) Margaret Bruns  
Accrediting Manager

**M**MARGARET BRUNS, a knockout blonde with a peaches and cream complexion, suggested lunch at her place. Her place was an inner sanctum in the office complex at which the card business was conducted. When Fiddler arrived a tall dark man in starched livery was setting the linen-covered table.

"I sent another of the swarthies for takeout at Chock Full o' Nuts," Miss Bruns said, touching her elaborate coif. "I hope you like vegetable soup."

"Vegetable soup is fine."

"It was between vegetable and split pea."

"I'd have taken vegetable."

"Yes, vegetable is more fun than split pea," she said, smiling.

Lunch was served. The tall dark man set the Chock Full o' Nuts bag on the table and slit it with a few deft strokes of a blade. Quick as a croupier, he placed the orders and gathered the shredded bag, then pivoted smartly and moved off. Miss Bruns called after him.

"Florindo," she called, "don't forget the FM music."

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Fiddler and Margaret Bruns had vegetable soup and tuna-on-rye and large Pepsis in a room filled with FM classical and their own polite conversation.

"People don't know how to dine any more," she said.

"Mozart," Fiddler said, gesturing to the music. "What a prince."

"Handel is also quite nice for lunch."

"Taste is everything," he said agreeably.

"Not for the card," Miss Bruns said. "There are some charming untutored sorts—cowboys and construction workers and the like—who are certified by us."

"Go figure your card"

"They're entitled."

"Are you so eminently qualified as to speak about the credentials of the American cowboy and construction worker?" he asked.

Margaret Bruns kicked her shoes off and matter of factly said, "I am." When she let her hair down, Fiddler became flustered.

“But the machine,” he mumbled. “I thought the machine—”

Miss Bruns stood over him and, unzipping, purred, “Not everybody sees the machine. What do you think we have an accrediting manager for?”

“It’s good for business?” Fiddler said, making a bad joke and loosening his tie.

**W**ITH a heroic effort, Fiddler passed the test.

He was admitted to an anteroom to wait until the machine could see him. A Pinkerton barred his going any further.

“Listen,” Fiddler said to the man, “can I call my office and tell them I’ll be late?”

“You’re either in or out of this, bub. No phone calls.” The Pinkerton took pleasure in saying this.

“It’s just that—”

“It’s just tough titty is all, fellow.”

“Well, all right,” said Fiddler wearily.

The guard eyed the applicant up and down. Fiddler averted his look.

“It’s just a job I got to do,” the guard said. “I didn’t mean nothing personal.”

“Sure, I know,” said Fiddler.

“If I meant it personal, it’d be a helluva life.”

“Of course.”

“I meant it strictly impersonal.”

“Uh—this machine—” said Fiddler, probingly.

“She’s a bitch,” the Pinkerton said. “Tough as nails. All of ’em say it, all the guys like you who are, you know—”

“Disgruntled.”

“Yeah. She’s programed that way. That’s what they tell me. What do I know from programing? I’m strictly from keeping things in their place.”

“Do many of them—”

“No sir, bub. She don’t change her mind on many. She’s a bitch. Don’t you understand? She’s programed that way. This is a business, fella, not a giveaway.”

A red light flashed on the wall.

Fiddler felt his heart thump wildly.

“You’re on, bub,” the guard said.

**S**HE was a beautiful machine, an abstract feminine shape, smooth-textured concrete, in whose pelvic area the intricate steel-and-tubing business end of her was set behind unbreakable glass like a wicked mechanical smile.

When Fiddler entered the room there was a whirring and clicking of parts—he had the impression the machine was taking his measure. Then a prefatory hum, as if the business end of her were rocking slowly before launching into motion. And finally furious commotion of clackety keys and whirling mechanisms until the unbreakable glass slid up and a paper came forth.

The glass lowered into place and the paper was sliced from the machine, Fiddler catching it in midair.

Her message read as follows:

I'm XY-3000078-2245-1010. You may call me simply XY or by my full nomenclature or nothing at all if that's what you wish. It makes no matter. Communications are directed at me verbally. The process of my comprehension is rather complicated, unimportant for your immediate purposes.

Fiddler looked at the message, then stared at the machine. His face crinkled with confusion. The keys clattered and another message inched forward.

Look, mister. This is no tea party, this is a business. You're here, I assume, for a purpose. Get on with it.

Fiddler waved his hand that he understood and then heard his voice say, politely: "Fascinating machine. Really, quite interesting. I wonder—"

The machine anticipated him.

It's the influence that the sculptor Henry Moore had on some pretentious mechanical designer. Moore, I'm sure you know, worked a good deal with feminine forms. All rather boring and irrelevant to our con-

cerns. I wouldn't like to warn you again to stick to business, Fiddler.

"Of course, of course," said Fiddler, raising both hands, apologetically. "It's about the card. I don't understand why I didn't—" XY-3000078-2245-1010 cut him short.

You don't deserve the card. It's as simple as that. But, then, few men do.

Fiddler narrowed his eyes and said, "Why not? I've got all the other cards. You've absolutely no reason for not granting me the card."

That's patently absurd. The card is for men who know what to do. According to our computations you are not this kind of man. This is not to say that you are a loser, Fiddler. On the contrary, you are better than most. Still, it takes considerably more to merit the card. I'm sure you're aware of that.

Fiddler felt the sweat trickling down his sides. His mouth was dry.

"What about Margaret Bruns?" he asked nervously.

A pushover, merely employed so that the clear-cut losers don't waste my time. You're not an obvious loser. I've already told you that. But while we're name-dropping, sport, what about Lucinda Neilsen?

Fiddler blushed. She had him there. "That—that was during a crisis period," he protested.

Admittedly there were extenuating circumstances, Fiddler. But fair is fair. You blew it.

"I've grown," Fiddler explained. "I'm much better with Lucinda types now."



No argument there. But it is not enough. And frankly, there's nothing you've done in person to dissuade me from my decision. I'd be pleased if you'd leave now. Perhaps at another time, when your situation has altered, you might reapply.

Fiddler came forward, touched the machine and was about to speak. He never got a chance to. The XY rattled like mad.

Keep your grubby hands off me.

"You bitch," he muttered.

Watch your tongue. If you can't be civil—

Fiddler pushed it angrily with the palms of both hands. "That really galls me," he said. "You're holding Lucinda against me." And he pushed again.

I'm warning you. Fiddler. I'll be forced to signal for the guard.

Now on your newsstand, Sep.-Oct. IF featuring:

**FIMBULSOMMER**

*Randall Garrett and Michael Kurland*

On sale October 20—Nov.-Dec. IF featuring:

**THE SONG OF KAIA**

*T. J. Bass*

**IF** the magazine of alternatives

“You damned machines,” he snapped.

I'm getting good and tired of this. Must  
you make a scene?

He kicked it in response.

Peter, please don't.

He read the message and stared at the machine. Then he smiled.  
And kicked it again.

Peter.

“I tried to be reasonable with you,” he said, delivering a vicious  
karate chop to its midsection and gesturing impatiently for the  
message. It labored to arrive.

That hurts, dear.

He read it and smirked. And rendered a forearm blow in the next  
instant. The machine sputtered several times, its keys moving  
soundlessly in place, before it could formulate.

Wish you wouldn't, baby.

He ripped it off and nodded and, of course, smashed it again.

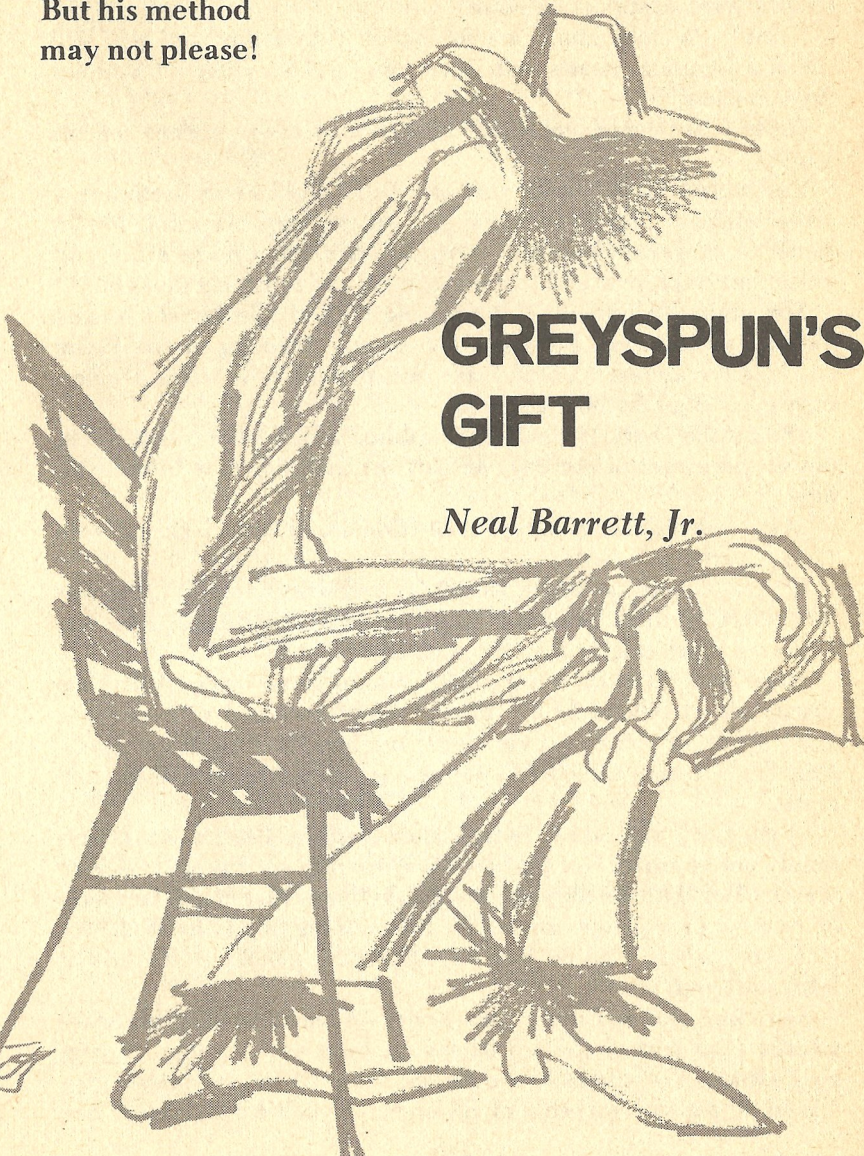
Please don't, Petey.

“Gimme the card, dammit,” he roared.

Petey.

“The card,” he hissed and assaulted XY with fists and feet and  
close-order combat tactics he'd learned in the Army. The machine  
began quivering, as if its insides were experiencing technical diffi-  
culties. Fiddler kept punishing it. Eventually it shook violently,  
made sounds like spring breezes, and ceased. Then the window came  
up and the card was thrust forward. ∞

This alien can  
bestow immortality.  
But his method  
may not please!



## GREYSPUN'S GIFT

*Neal Barrett, Jr.*

MARY ANNE DARLING was just looking. But the pink mini was delightfully zany and Big Charlie would like it since there was hardly anything to like except Mary Anne Darling inside. Even Little Charlie gave an approving noise.

"You," she told him, "are as bad as your father and you will break a thousand hearts and make some girl very happy. Scorpios do, you know."

Little Charlie nodded wisely and chewed at the chrome on his stroller.

She tucked the box under her arm and caught her reflection in a clean window. She was a small girl—pretty, not beautiful, like in exotic or magazine-beautiful. Still, she had Big Charlie's full and enthusiastic approval and that was a warm and satisfying thought.

She smiled to herself. This morning he had told her she looked like a conventioneer lost from the Angels' Meeting at the Plaza, and to have a good time and stay out of trouble. It was a wonderfully nutty Big-Charlie thing to say.

She brushed back her hair and captured a fleck of mascara. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw the man mirrored in the window.

Mary Anne Darling stared, then turned and busied herself with Little Charlie for a better look.

He was across the street, sitting on a bench by himself. He was the tallest, thinnest man she had ever seen. Even sitting, he was really not much shorter than the people walking by.

Mary Anne Darling felt a great, sudden surge of sympathy. He simply didn't belong at all. Fifth Avenue glistened with newness and the greens in Central Park wore brighter than showcard colors. And the tall, thin man didn't say spring—or anything else for that matter.

"I wonder," she said to herself, then stopped. Charlie would definitely not approve. Not that anything would ever happen, because it never had. But she did, admittedly, do things that made Big Charlie uneasy. Like picnic lunches for the men digging in front of Peggler-Dale, where Charlie worked. Or selling pencils to see how it felt to be blind.

And since she was more than pretty—even in smoked glasses—Charlie used part of the \$81.32 she made to pay her fine for begging without a license and gave the rest to the seeing-eye people.

And it had all turned out all right, hadn't it? Everyone had

learned something. Big Charlie just looked at the ceiling like he was talking to someone very high up and didn't say anything.

SHE crossed the street, looking every way but at the tall-thin man, and sat down very casually beside him.

"Do you mind?" she said.

Without glancing at her, he said, "Oh, no, certainly not." His voice was deep and very pleasant, but he was definitely even more—unusual—up close.

His black suit was too tight or too loose in all the wrong places. He wore white cotton gloves and no socks. His wrists and ankles were, well—hairy was the only word she could think of. Hairy as in ape.

Only, she realized with a shudder, it was even more like furry—as in spider.

Without thinking she jerked a little and let out a tiny, "Oh!"

He turned and looked at her. He was wearing an old Lyndon Johnson Hallowe'en mask. She remembered them from October in '64 and wondered where in the world he'd found it.

"Listen," she said earnestly, "you're wearing a mask, and it's the wrong time of year." She thought a minute. "I don't think you *know* it's the wrong time of year, do you?"

He seemed to shrink inside the mask and the black suit.

"I guess they got everything wrong, didn't they? I don't look like a man at all? Not even a little?"

Mary Anne Darling shook her head. "Not very much, I'm afraid."

He sighed. "I didn't think so. It just didn't feel right."

She noticed he was carrying a red-and-white candy-striped sack of flies. Big Charlie said you could get anything in New York if you knew where to ask and she decided he must be right.

Mary Anne Darling bit her lip and studied him thoughtfully, trying very hard not to think about the flies.

"I think," she said, "for a start you'd better take off the mask. You—look okay underneath, don't you?"

He shook his head. "Pretty awful, I'm afraid."

"This is New York." Mary Anne Darling shrugged. "Nobody'll notice. Honestly."

SHE suddenly remembered her grandmother's place in the country, a farm with barns and hay and the smell of new earth. In the

old tool shed where everyone threw the things they thought they'd use later was a rocker her grandad had accidentally blown apart with an unloaded shotgun. The black horsehair stuffing was frozen in wild disarray, like a dark bush growing out of the no longer recognizable cushion—and the whole thing was held together by two tiny red buttons. All together it was a very good likeness of the face under the LBJ mask.

“What do you think?” he asked warily.

Mary Anne Darling swallowed hard and smiled pleasantly. “You'll do fine. Just—you know, kind of brush it down.” She gestured with her fingers over her chin. “Good. Now, let's see—” She reached into her purse and took out her large blue mod sunglasses and handed them to him. Then she realized he had no idea where they went. She demonstrated on herself. He had trouble finding a nose or ears to attach them to but she pushed that thought quickly aside.

“Okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “A very tall, hungry rabbi, maybe. Actually, a very tall, hungry hip rabbi.”

“What?”

“Nothing. We'll have to have socks, of course. Some of Big Charlie's will do. And you simply can't go around in white Mickey Mouse gloves.” She shook her head. “In L.A., maybe, or in the Village. But I don't think so on Fifth Avenue. For now you'll just have to keep your hands in your pockets.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Mary Anne Darling laughed lightly. “The little slits, silly. In your pants.”

“Pants?”

**T**HEY walked along the edge of the park. He wasn't really as tall as she'd thought. Maybe six-eight or so. Tall enough, certainly. But, as she'd tried to explain, it took a great deal more than a six-eight hippie rabbi to draw much of a crowd in New York, though a few people did turn and look.

“People,” he told her earnestly, “What I'm looking for is people. You're really the first people I've talked to.”

“Person,” she corrected.

“Yes. I have much interest in persons. That is what I'm doing here. I want to see persons. I want to see them doing what they do.”

Mary Anne Darling shrugged. "Well, that's kind of a big order, I guess. Persons—people, do a lot of things."

"Oh, no, no, no!" He stopped and faced her. "You do not see, do you? I don't mean just doing—ordinary everyday things. I mean what they *do*. What they *really* do. You see?"

"I guess not," she admitted. "But maybe Big Charlie'll understand. Charlie's good at understanding things."

She stopped at a water fountain and dug out a paper cup from her purse for Little Charlie. He choked and spluttered as she knew he would and she pounded him on the back.

"Listen," she said suddenly, "what do I call you? You never said and—oh, I guess I didn't either." She was on one knee, blotting water off Little Charlie. She looked up at him, a very long look from where she was. It was sort of like talking to a burnt-out Sequoia, she decided.

"Call me?" He seemed puzzled by the question.

"Sure." She stood up. "You know. A name. You have a name, don't you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I might."

Mary Anne Darling wondered what kind of an answer that was.

"Like, I'm Mary Anne, only my husband calls me Mary Anne Darling. Oh, that'll confuse you, won't it? Anyway, he's Big Charlie and this is Little Charlie. Little Charlie's eleven and a half months."

He looked down at Mary Anne Darling. Then he looked at Little Charlie. He scratched his bushy face and stared off into the distance.

"Is that a name?" he said finally.

"What?"

He nodded and Mary Anne Darling looked. There was a gold-painted window in the building across the street. She hadn't realized there were still windows like that on Fifth Avenue.

"Well, yes," she said. "Sort of."

"Good," he said firmly. "Then that is my name. I am pleased to meet you Mary Anne Darling and Little Charlie. I am T. A. Greyspun Small Loans Easy Payments—"

**I**T DIDN'T surprise Big Charlie at all that Mary Anne Darling had brought home a furry-faced beanpole named T. A. Greyspun Small Loans Easy Payments. If there was a lonely, out-of-state

member of the Mafia in town or an Eskimo nun or a Syrian cross-bow salesman, fate and Mary Anne Darling eventually guided them to dinner with Charlie.

"My pleasure, Mr. Payments," Charlie said blandly and Mary Anne Darling shot him a warning frown.

"You can just call him Greyspun, Charlie," she suggested. "He's visiting from out of town."

Charlie looked surprised. "No—really? You're not a native New Yorker, then?"

"Charlie—" said Mary Anne Darling.

**D**INNER was an event Charlie preferred to forget. He had certainly never thought of himself as a nut about table manners but watching Greyspun eat was something else. He managed several *you've done it again* glares at Mary Anne Darling and Mary Anne Darling smiled back sweetly and decided she would probably need the new pink mini, all right. She wondered if it might be possible to take the hem up another inch.

"Charlie," she said in the kitchen, "I don't think you're being a very good host." Then her eyes widened and she bit her lip and frowned. "Charlie! What are you doing?"

"I am having a drink," said Charlie.

"That's a drink?" She watched as the water glass filled with bourbon. "But—you don't drink, Charlie."

"I don't drink often," he corrected. "When I do drink is when I'm entertaining the reincarnation of Oliver Cromwell or the Swedish bullfighter who was raised by sea otters or T.A. Greyspun Small Loans Easy Payments." He stared at her in open wonder. "Honest to God, honey—where did you find this one?"

"Charlie," she protested, "he's not really so—different."

"Mary Anne Darling. I *saw* the sack of flies."

"Oh."

He didn't tell her he was almost sure Greyspun had at least two arms and legs in each sleeve and trouser leg.

"What's he doing now?"

Mary Anne Darling looked up at the ceiling. "Oh, just—sitting."

"Sitting where?" he asked narrowly.

"Kind of in your chair. Watching TV with Little Charlie."

Big Charlie nodded carefully. "Kind of in my chair, watching TV with Little Charlie."



Mary Anne Darling smiled hopefully. "Little Charlie's crazy about him—really."

From the way he lowered the half-empty glass she decided that wasn't exactly the right thing to say.

"**B**IG CHARLIE," asked Greyspun, "what do you *do*?"

Greyspun was sprawled in Charlie's favorite chair. He reminded Charlie of an overstuffed licorice stick. Little Charlie sat in his lap, pulling great tufts of fur from his face with delighted abandon.

Under Mary Anne Darling's stern gaze Big Charlie tried valiantly to explain the stocks and bonds business.

"No, no," said Greyspun. "I mean what do you *really* do? As a people?"

"Well, as a people," Charlie said tightly, "stocks and bonds keep my pretty goddam occupied. I don't have a lot of time for anything else, Greyspun."

He avoided looking at Mary Anne Darling but he could feel her disapproval on the back of his neck.

Greyspun shook his head. "I tried to explain to Mary Anne Darling," he said. "She believed you would understand and expand my knowledge."

"Oh, she did, did she?"

"Yes. You see, Big Charlie, all persons and peoples in the universe *do* something. Something they alone are well suited to do. The Zaliid, for instance, are very fine *dhin*." He paused thoughtfully. "No, there is no proper word. 'Construct' comes as close as any, though *dhin* and construct are not the same."

Big Charlie raised an *oh-boy-get-him* brow at Mary Anne Darling.

"The Cephid, now," said Greyspun. "There is a good example. They are truly beautiful creatures, like—" He searched for a word. "Yes! Like oysters—big, blue oysters with marvelous fat eyes. They come up out of deep pink seas when they have visualized a new color or thought a shape we haven't seen or of a word we haven't heard."

For an hour or more Greyspun told them of the pale green Chepanis of Morad's Star, and how they *fripped*. He told them of the giant Sakun and the tiny Papeen—and of a hundred other wonders. Even Big Charlie was impressed.

“And you, Greyspun,” he asked finally, “what do you—ah—do?”

Greyspun sighed happily and gently patted Little Charlie, asleep in his lap.

“Ah, Big Charlie, we M’arachnae have a very special job.” His red button eyes shined through his bushy face. “We are *bahsi*—and you have a perfect word for that. Enjoyers. The M’arachnae enjoy what others do and we tell the Om about the things we have seen and heard for the Om delight in newness.”

“The Om?” asked Mary Anne Darling.

Greyspun shook his head regretfully. “I am sorry. If I could not explain simplicities such as *dhin* and *fripping* I would be hard-pressed to define the Om. Now,” Greyspun leaned forward. Mary Anne Darling took Little Charlie and carried him to bed. “Do you understand, Big Charlie, what I mean by *doing*?”

“I think so,” said Big Charlie, but—

“Then you will tell me what persons *do*.”

“That’s what’s worrying me, Greyspun,” he said. “I’ve been thinking while you’ve been talking and I’m not sure persons really *do* anything. Oh, they do a lot of things, for sure—but not one special thing. Or at least none that I can think of.”

Greyspun shook his head rapidly. “Big Charlie, that cannot be so.”

Charlie shrugged and Mary Anne Darling walked up behind him and laid her hands on his shoulders.

“Is it possible we *don’t* do anything—special?” she asked.

Greyspun was visibly shaken. “It would be sad if it were so, Mary Anne Darling, but I cannot imagine you are right. And I know that the Om would never believe me if I told them such a thing.”

**C**HARLIE’s customers at Pegglar-Dale always remembered May 15 as Black Tuesday. That was the day Charlie advised against buying American Drift and urged everyone to get in on Consolidated Scow. It was also the day Drift rose 12 points and Scow dropped 16.

As Drake Pegglar himself pointed out stoically, it was something that could happen to anyone. But it wouldn’t happen *again*, would it, Charlie?

It very nearly did, less than an hour later. Charlie wasn’t himself. When he’d left for work, Mary Anne Darling had announced that

she and Little Charlie were going to act as guides for Greyspun, who had decided he wanted to see more of the way "peoples" lived, read some books and talk to more "persons" about what they really did.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" asked Charlie.

"Probably not," said Mary Anne Darling. "But you know how he is, Charlie. If he goes out by himself he's going to wind up in jail—or something."

"Well, that's a relief, anyway," said Charlie. "If Greyspun's in jail I'll know my wife and child are there with him."

"IT'S after seven—why the hell didn't you call or something?"

He met her at the door. She looked awful. Little Charlie was crying. He had something orange and sticky all over him. Greyspun looked like Greyspun. He carried a blue and white balloon that said 'Panama for the Panamanians.'

Mary Anne Darling sank into a chair. She reached out unconsciously and took the water tumbler from Charlie and drained it.

"I hope you're not too hungry," she sighed. "It has been kind of a trying day."

"Oh, yes!" beamed Greyspun. "We have seen much of interest. Still, I am not yet certain what persons *do*—but I believe we are on the correct track. Perhaps tomorrow—"

Charlie looked at Mary Anne Darling. "Greyspun," he said darkly, "there isn't going to be a tomorrow. I'll tell you what 'persons' do—they get tired. Greyspuns don't, maybe, but persons do."

"But Big Charlie—"

Mary Anne Darling smiled weakly. "It wasn't as bad as all that, Charlie. I just need a little rest, that's all."

Charlie exploded. "A little rest? Listen, baby—" But Mary Anne Darling was asleep. Or, he decided, her first iced-tea sized glass of bourbon had gone to her head.

"CHARLIE?"

"Uhuh."

She sat up. "How did I get in *here*?"

"You fell asleep and I put you to bed. Nothing wrong with a guy putting his wife to bed, is there?"

She laughed sleepily. "I think it's a grand idea. I'm only sorry—"

"Yeah. Me too. Like some soup?" He propped pillows behind

her and brought a bowl of soup from the dresser. "Little Charlie and Greyspun thought it was great. I made it up."

Mary Anne Darling sniffed and raised a brow. "What kind of soup is this, Charlie?"

"Well, basically it's banana and sausage—but there's a dash of garlic salt and some cinnamon and a couple of other things." He shrugged indifferently. "You know. Real cooks don't do a lot of measuring and stuff. You either have a feel for it or you don't. How do you like it?"

"It's—good. I guess I'm just kind of tired."

Charlie made a face. "Awful, right?" He laughed and took the bowl away and leaned back on the bed beside her. "Tell me what happened."

Mary Anne Darling sighed. "Well, we saw things—like the Metropolitan and Times Square and the subway and the zoo. We had to leave there. The animals weren't too fond of Greyspun. He copied a list of occupations—things people do—from the library. I think that upset him pretty badly. But mostly we talked to people."

She looked up at him helplessly. "Charlie, people don't like to be asked what they *do*. You know? And—well, Greyspun doesn't make a good first impression. If you're not used to him, I mean."

"You can get used to him?"

"He's very nice, really," she said. "It's just—well, anyway, there was this girl in the Village, and Greyspun asked her what she *did* and she said, 'Anything, man, anything—' and Greyspun was sure he'd hit on something and I couldn't get him to understand he hadn't and I had a terrible time getting him out of there."

Charlie laughed and shook his head. Then he leaned up on one arm and looked at her.

"No more, Mary Anne Darling," he said flatly. "I mean it."

"Charlie." She reached up and blew him a kiss. "I'm okay. I'm just tired. And we simply have to help him, don't we?"

"We simply don't have to do a damn thing. And you may be okay but I'm not. Mary Anne Darling, I cannot go through another day at Pegglar-Dale thinking of you and Little Charlie and Greyspun on the loose. I don't want this month to go down in history as Big Charlie's Crash. Now. Go to sleep and I'll clean up. I think most of the kitchen can be saved . . ."

**BIG CHARLIE** was almost relieved when Mary Anne Darling

called at noon from the Still Waters Funeral Home and Non-Denominational Chapel in Queens. He knew, of course, that a call was coming. It was just a question of when and from where.

"Someone has shot Greyspun, right? Well, I'm sorry, Mary Anne Darling, but perhaps it's better this way. I hope he went quickly."

"No one's shot Greyspun and don't be funny, Charlie, please," she pleaded wearily. Big Charlie heard noise in the background. "Just come. Now."

There were a lot of people at Still Waters. Most of them, Charlie noticed, were policemen.

It wasn't hard to spot Greyspun. He sat stiffly beside Mary Anne Darling. He stared straight ahead through blue mod glasses and trembled. He trembled so hard bushy tufts of fur fell in little clouds from his face. A policeman sneezed violently.

He is freezing, Charlie decided, which is not likely, or something has scared the hell out of Greyspun.

"You okay?" he asked Mary Anne Darling.

She nodded dumbly and patted Greyspun's arm. Little Charlie sat on her lap, chewing a blue folder titled *In Time of Need*.

"What happened?" asked Charlie but before she could answer a short, heavysset policeman turned and faced him.

"You a friend of his?" He glared suspiciously at Charlie. Charlie dug out a card and handed it to him.

"What's the charge?" asked Charlie.

The officer looked at him squarely. "Molesting a body."

Charlie's jaw fell. "What?"

"He was only looking," Mary Anne Darling protested.

The officer let out a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling. "Lady, excuse me, but he was doin' more than looking. He was touching. Now you don't go around touching other people's loved ones, do you?"

Charlie glanced at Greyspun. "What's he shaking like that for? What did you do to him?"

The officer frowned painfully. "Mister, we didn't do anything to him. We may do something to him but that's not up to me. You know?" He looked questioningly at Charlie. "What is he, a foreigner or somethin'?"

"He's—ah—Albanian," said Charlie.

The policeman's eyes narrowed. "Yeah?" He made a note on his pad with a stubby pencil. "Commie, eh?"

"Just the North Albanians," Charlie said quickly. "The ones from the south are on our side. Like Korea and Viet Nam."

"Oh." The officer looked doubtfully at Charlie. He glanced distastefully at Greyspun. "He eats flies. You know that, don't you?"

"I don't see what the eating habits of our allies have to do with anything," Charlie said stiffly.

"Maybe," muttered the officer. "He looks like a Commie to me, though." He shrugged and shook his head. "How can you ever know which side these jokers are on—for sure, huh?"

NEITHER the family of the deceased nor the staff of Still Waters was interested in pressing charges. They were interested in seeing the last of Greyspun and in an assurance that he would never under any circumstances cross the Queensboro Bridge.

Greyspun would say nothing. He had stopped trembling but he wouldn't talk. Charlie questioned him in the cab but Greyspun didn't answer. At the apartment Charlie tried again but Greyspun just stared at nothing—a black-clad totem pole topped by a sad, disheveled nest of hair.

"What the hell happened?" Charlie demanded. Greyspun refused dinner. He was in the guest room with the door shut behind him. Mary Anne had put Little Charlie to bed screaming. Little Charlie wanted Greyspun.

"I don't even know why we went to Queens," she told him.

"Never mind that," he waved her words aside and poured them both tall drinks. "What turned on Greyspun?"

All Mary Anne Darling could remember was walking down the street and going into sweet shops, gun shops, china shops, herb shops and every kind of shop imaginable. She passed the funeral home.

"Naturally," she told Charlie. "Who goes in there unless they have to?"

But Greyspun didn't pass. Greyspun, as she should have known, didn't pass anything. And before she could stop him he was inside, examining the sample coffins, tombstones and flower sprays with the same intent curiosity he had shown for gumdrops, Wedgewood China, Smith & Wesson revolvers and jars of rosemary and celery seed.

Then someone yelled and someone else joined in and there were a lot of police outside and well—Charlie knew the rest.

Mary Anne Darling yawned and slipped into bed beside him. "I think the policemen scared him terribly, Charlie. They kind of—yelled at him a lot. I don't guess he's ever been arrested for molesting a body."

"No," Charlie said sleepily, "I don't imagine so." He opened one eye. "Look, Mary Anne Darling. Greyspun has to go. In the morning. I'm sorry."

"Charlie—"

"Honey," he said patiently, "do you remember last year? The Tibetan monk who wanted to be a deep sea diver? Only he was allergic to water? How you were going to help him—and what happened?"

"Yes, Charlie," she said meekly. "I'm sorry, Charlie—"

Mary Anne Darling wasn't sure why she got up. She sometimes did—because leftovers tasted good in the middle of the night and she liked the way the kitchen looked with just the light from the refrigerator—or she needed to check on Little Charlie or see how the last pages of a book came out.

She was thinking about a very small meat-loaf sandwich when she saw the note. It was propped on the toaster and before she picked it up she knew it was from Greyspun.

Dear Big Charlie and Mary Anne Darling;

I am much saddened to leave but I cannot face you, knowing you will one day be in the Still Waters Funeral Home and Non-denominational Chapel. And I do not blame you for not telling me. While the Om has never doubted me before I wonder if he will believe that this is what persons do? That persons stop being.

Still, some good comes of everything. And do not thank me, please, though I wish I could see your joy as you read this. The Om owes me a favor from many millennia past and I do not think he'll deny me. So—rest assured that as long as Little Charlie is with your friend, T.A. Greyspun Small Loans Easy Payments, he will never need face the Still Waters Funeral Home and . . .

Mary Anne Darling dropped the note and Big Charlie heard the beginnings of her low cry and he was out of bed and running to her . . .

∞



# UNSEEN WARRIORS





*Dean R. Koontz*

They may one day hide in the woman  
you love—or in others you cherish . . .

I CUT the speed of the forticar and turned the corner like a cat expecting a dog on the other side. What I found was something more dangerous than a canine is to a feline—a stack of rubble, five feet high. I slammed to a halt, not completing the turn to a back street known as Arthur Boulevard.

Surely the name had been supplied through someone's grim sense of humor. Even before the last war, before the suburban buildings had been charred and partially demolished by the outer ripples of nuclear explosions, this had not been so much a boulevard as an alley.

Some houses still flanked the dismal stretch of pavement. They were structured in peeling gray clapboard or decaying brick. This heap of junk in front of me could be a pile of rubble, as it seemed, and nothing more—or it could be a trap. I flipped on the scanning screens and set them for a hundred-and-eighty-degree sweep.

The old cat instincts paid off. I found the mine on the second sweep.

I checked again, watched the tell-tale blip as my computer scanned concealed wires and triggers in the seemingly random bricks and reported danger. I blessed the complex of memory cells and logic circuits under the dash, which virtually gave the forticar a soul. She would not bring me knowingly into a trap.

Reversing the forticar until it was well out of blast range, I opened the left launch tube and lobbed a small concussion grenade into the pile. It struck and woofed into white light. The hidden mine erupted dazzlingly, bringing down the wall of the warehouse on the right of the alleyway. Bricks cascaded, bounced off one another, shattered and showered up in bloody dust. They fell onto the forticar with dull, distant plunking and rattling noises. The sounds of explosion came through the car's thick hide like the echo of a sturdy wave pounding a rocky coastline. Nothing more.

I was, after all, in a forticar.

The explosion brought dozens of raggedy youths into Arthur Boulevard, as I had expected it would. They came from doorways, out of broken windows, even from inside a trashcan, lying on its side a hundred feet beyond the mined rubble. They charged down the street, leaping over obstructions, waving homemade swords and spears. Two of them had projectile weapons, remnants of before-

the-war civilization. When they saw the forticar still upright and undamaged, they turned tail and pistoned their legs toward escape, whooping and hollering no doubt, though I couldn't hear them inside my rhino (a forticar resembles the African beast; the nickname was inevitable when you consider man's urge to personalize and familiarize machinery).

I opened the twelve pin barrels of the narcodart system that was housed in the roof cupola and brought down the entire crew. They kicked and squirmed before they slipped into deep drugged sleep. When the last of them had been still for several seconds and I was certain they were all out of commission, I got on the radio and called Police Central, reported a dozen snoozing juvies for the correctional people to pick up. Before headquarters could give me any doubletalk I rang off. I sat back and waited for someone to come clear the trail ahead of its fleshy obstacles.

I was smoking my second cigarette (straight tobacco), when the Correctional Institute's fortibus arrived. It parked between me and the fallen warehouse wall. Attendants, armored against further juvie action, climbed the rubble and carted the sleeping boys out of the alley and into the van. In ten minutes, they had cleared my way and left with their new charges. I moved the forticar back into the head of Arthur Boulevard. I lowered and extended the plow blade, dozed the fallen wall and other rubble out of the way, and continued down the alley, on the lookout for other boobytraps.

I found no others, however. I traveled eleven uneventful blocks along the Boulevard, past deserted houses that had fallen almost completely into ruin, past others that were—after a fashion—lived in. In each of these inhabited domiciles—and I use the more sophisticated language to describe these miserable hovels merely to exhibit a degree of sarcasm equal to that of the man who named Arthur Boulevard—eyes showed at the grimy windows. Filthy shades were lifted or pulled aside to give the eavesdroppers better views. A forticar here was unusual indeed. The elements that inhabited Arthur Boulevard were generally so despicable that the police would rather ignore them than try to clean them out. The sight of my rhino must have panicked every blackheart that saw me.

In the twelfth block, I stopped the big machine and swiveled the remote cameras around to give me a total view of the area. Nothing seemed to be stirring, but I knew juvies and thingies were

equally clever at concealment. I didn't care to meet either—though I thought I would rather face the animal stupidly of a thingie, no matter how grotesque, than the warped intellect of a juvie.

I decided the area was relatively safe. The action at the front of the alley would have carried this far, would have been observed. Any other juvies should have cleared out by now. That left only thingies. And not many of those were likely this far from the hard radioactivity of city center. Not yet—but give them a few more years to adapt.

I strapped on my guns, clipped four implosion grenades to my belt for use in close quarters if a really big thingie did show up. I cycled the hatch open, stepped warily through it and allowed it to swing shut behind me. I stood in the open air of Arthur Boulevard, wrinkling my nose at the foul taint of garbage and dead things.

**I** TOOK a gingerly walk across the street to the house I wanted, a great Victorian place with dust-covered bay windows, rotted balconies and empty railed porches. No one with any wisdom would have been relaxing outdoors, since an evening spent on the porch might mean night in a thingie's belly. I went up the rickety steps and across the sagging floor. I rang the bell. I received no answer the first nine times I rang. I stood there with my thumb depressing the button. Finally, she gave up and opened the door, though only a crack.

"What do you want?" she asked (one gray, cold eye, a wisp of blond hair and a small up-turned nose).

"Police," I said.

"I didn't do anything."

"Bureau of births," I said curtly, though it is difficult to be curt with an attractive woman. "Officer Jason Steele."

"Go away," she said, starting to close the door.

I stuck a foot in the crack and she tried all the harder to close it. That foot-in-the-door bit is good for books and films but it plays hell with a real foot in a real door. Like: real pain. I drew my pistol (the monlethal narcodart one on my left hip) and stuck the barrel in the crack, withdrew my foot and serunched my toes to ease them. I applied a shoulder to the door, pushed hard and sent her sprawling backwards. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me. She sat on her rump, hands to either side to support her. Even without my handy-dandy medical guidebook, I could

tell she was long gone—as pregnant as a due elephant.

“What do you want?” she asked. Her eyes were fierce and harsh. They made me wince inwardly. Her subtle kind of beauty should not have expressed harshness. Ever.

I remained impersonal. A policeman with the Bureau of Births cannot afford a marshmallow manner unless he doesn't mind being roasted and eaten alive.

“You're pregnant,” I said matter-of-factly, but with a sharp, admonishing edge in my voice.

“A thingie could see that,” she said contemptuously. She struggled to her feet, ignoring my offered hand. She propped herself against the stair bannister to her right and looked at me as if I were a particularly ugly insect thingie that had crawled out of the sewer.

“You didn't register with the Bureau,” I said.

“I don't like bureaucrats.”

She wasn't uneducated. I could tell that from her looks as well as from her words. She was crisp, cool, clean. The last, especially was an attribute not often found in quarters like Arthur Boulevard.

“The situation hardly has anything to do with your inclinations,” I said. “The law is the law. All pregnancies must be registered. You know why. You know what you might harbor in your womb. You're not stupid, Mrs.—”

“Smith,” she said coolly. “And my baby will not be a Brain.”

“You've had the tests? The X-rays?”

She suddenly lost her excellent composure. I saw the calm lines in her face develop ticks, saw the crispness wilting. She burst into tears and sank down on the steps, put her head between her knees as best she could and wept long and hard—until I thought her lungs would give out. When she had gained control of herself again she looked up, snuffled winningly and said, “I'm sorry.”

“For crying or for not reporting your pregnancy?”

“Both,” she said. It was a perfect answer and I admired it.

“Why didn't you report?” I asked, sitting next to her.

She gave me a wordy soliloquy about what it meant to be an expectant mother and not know whether your child was a Brain, a mutant of vastly superior intelligence. So superior, in fact, that it regarded men as men regarded thingies—despicable and worthy only of destruction. So superior that it had psionic abilities more than a little bit deadly to mankind as we know it.

In return I talked to her gently and easily. I coaxed her to come

to the Bureau for a check. If she passed, the worry was over. If she failed, she could still save her own life and the lives of countless others who might fall victim to the Brain she might birth.

"My husband," she said at last. I felt depressed at the mention of a husband (formal marriages are rare these days). "I'd like him to come with me."

"He's at work now?"

She nodded.

"Where is work?"

She blushed and lowered her head. I guessed that her husband was a scavenger haunting the unexplored cellars of the old civilization for treasures as yet uncovered. He would be a tough man, if he were willing to risk the darkness full of thingies (old cellars make fine lairs for them) to make his mark on the world. He would provide great strength while she took the tests and would help calm her if it were decided she must have an abortion.

"Could he bring me in tomorrow morning?" she asked.

"Well—"

"Early. Please? Nine o'clock?"

I agreed, knowing how much easier it would be for her than if I took her in now, alone, with no one to offer her support as the tests were administered. Without her husband, she might go mad if the tests proved positive and it were a fact that a Brain were inside her belly, claws hugged close to its outsized head.

Outside, the street still smelled of garbage.

**T**HE next morning, at fifteen minutes past ten o'clock, I decided the lovely and educated Mrs. Smith was not going to arrive per our agreement. I checked my rhino out of the underground garage and drove back toward Arthur Boulevard, cursing my good nature and the charming Mrs. Smith's unreliability. She was probably clean, damn it. Couldn't she see that? Brains occurred in less than two percent of all pregnancies. Easier to check and be reassured than to wonder until labor started and the answer became self-evident. Why are women so all-powerful determined to protect their children even when those children may be monsters?

A few raindrops splattered the cameras. The wipers came on.

I scanned the sky overhead: gray.

I rounded the corner, started to move through the alley mouth.

A bomb, concealed in the rubble I had dozed yesterday ( and therefore mistakenly associated with safety) exploded and slammed the rhino sideways into the still standing left wall of what had been a corner grocery. I was flung forward until the seatbelts caught and held me inches from the dash. The control and scope lights flashed and pulsated wildly.

I scanned the indicators after things settled somewhat, found that the rhino seemed in passable condition. A front left fender was scraping the tread, but I knew that the scraping would wear away long before the tread did. I swung the "steel" glass cameras around and located a pack of juvies. One of them lobbed a grenade.

It struck the side of the rhino, exploded, rocked me back against the grocery wall. In a very lucid moment, I saw their plan. If they could keep lobbing grenades, keep smashing me into the wall, the grocery would come down on top of me, smash my cameras, disable me and leave me ripe for their picking.

I brought the twelve narcodart barrels around to their direction and pressed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

I searched my own roof with the cameras and found the cupola had been severely damaged. I hesitated, then realized that hesitation could mean my end. Another grenade or two might disable the tank totally. I opened fire with the machine guns on the hood. Most of the juvies fell, punctured like well-used pincushions. A few scattered—fast. By chance they had not been hit.

Several minutes later I found myself sitting as if mesmerized, staring at the bodies on the screen. My stomach flopped and I thought I might vomit, though I didn't. I tried to tell myself I had acted in self-defense. I reminded myself of what juvies had done to other officers after prying them out of their rhinos. I remembered Rennie Trenado, hung by his thumbs from that radiation-warped elm, dozens of little thingie insects crawling over him, devouring mucous membrane wherever they found it, nose, mouth and anus.

I cannot say I drove on without guilt. The world was a rotten place. I was forced to meet it violently. That made me part of the rottenness. Yes, I felt guilt. But I did not feel remorse.

In front of the Smith house, I parked close to the door and surveyed the street. Apparently the juvies had been thoroughly scared away by the heavy artillery. I loaded up with violent and non-violent weaponry, went outside, shut the hatch and locked it with my

fingerprint. I walked up the stairs, crossed the porch and rang the bell. Rang it and rang it and rang it some more . . . When I decided no one was going to answer, I aimed my right-hand pistol (the frag slug gun) at the lock and blew a third of the damn door to splinters.

Cautiously, I stepped into the dingy room I remembered from the day before. I called out to Mrs. Smith, though I did not expect an answer. My expectations were fulfilled. Silence. I readied the frag slug gun, palmed my narcodart pistol in the other hand. I walked into the dining room and living room, looked behind moth-eaten couches and raggedy chairs, ripped open countless closet doors while my heart pounded and my gunhand twitched. I examined the kitchen, found remnants of a supper, unwashed dishes. When I had looked everywhere, I came back to the front door and looked up the winding staircase toward the gloom of the second floor. The stairs, though scraped and splintered, appeared sturdy enough to support me.

At the top of the first flight I found a landing dimly lighted by a grimy window facing the stairs. There were four doors, two on either side, all closed. I walked to the first, stood aside and twisted the knob. I threw the door inward and waited for a response. None came. I ventured into the room.

And found Mr. Smith.

Mrs. Smith had not-so-neatly dismembered him with a small axe.

## A BRAIN.

The only thing that could have motivated her to commit this obscenity was a Brain lying conscious in her womb, unwilling to bide its time of birth. Take a human fetus. Subject it to hard radiation. What happens? Many things. Anything from a normal child to a humanoid thingie. Anything from a six-fingered functional to a five-armed moron fit only for merciful disposal. And, some few times—less than two per cent currently—a Brain is created. A mutant with some variety of psionic abilities, including levitation, telepathy and some precognition. And, let us not forget, a mutant so superior in intellect that life aside from its own form seems pointless, stupid and uninteresting to it. Except that it sees humans as enemies, creatures which try to strike it down in their savagery. We are the Neanderthals. The Brains are the Cro-Magnons.

(A pause: I'm trying to tell this objectively. I may be the last



historian. But my emotions... Because of what has happened, it is difficult to be calm, cool. Nevertheless... )

More about Brains? They are aware before they are born. They are cognizant as embryos, as clever when unborn as a man when full grown. At birth, they sever their own cords and usually kill the mother immediately thereafter—more than likely in disgust at their origin. Looks? Like a half-done fetus. Withered legs (because who needs legs when he can levitate and float about?) Huge head to encompass the triple brain. Bulging, watery eyes with thick veins and arteries coursing through the white to supply the enormous surfaces with life fluids. Shrunken, sunken mouths like those of ancient grandmothers. That's a Brain.

And a Brain was harbored within our mysterious Mrs. Smith. It had reached her volition with its stronger mind and had taken control of her. I had met her. I knew she would not have managed a bloody murder on her own. The Brain had directed her to kill her husband, most likely because he had tried to stop her from running away. Even the lower elements, even the juvies, will cooperate with the authorities to turn in a Brain. It had ordered her to flee until the time came for its birth.

I had to find her/it before the Brain was loose. Once it had been delivered of its host, once it could exist by itself, it would be a thousand times more difficult to locate and destroy.

I checked the other three rooms. The upstairs level was deserted. I went downstairs again trying to think.

"She gone?" a voice asked from the darkened living room.

I stopped. My guns, which had been limp in my hands, sprang up as if possessed of a life of their own.

"Hold on," the voice said. "It's only Hap Winestead—and I'm damned if you've any reason to shoot me."

"Winestead?" I asked.

I still held my guns ready, the snub nose of the frag slug pistol punched out a few inches farther than the barrel of the narcodart weapon. When you are wondering if a Brain is floating around free of its mother, you don't rely on small arms.

"I reported her pregnancy," the old man said. He came out of the shadows into the gray light at the foot of the steps. He was a grizzled old character with a shock of fright white hair and black, questioning eyes. "She got away, didn't she?"

"Yes."

“A Brain?”

“I think so.”

He cursed my stupidity in agreeing to let her come to the Bureau on her own. I tried to explain that so few were the bearers of Brains that I had taken a chance on not rushing her. But even as I spoke I knew that beauty and not the percentages had made me give her more than an even break. I tried to convey to Hap Winestead an understanding of the trust she inspired—but he only cursed me louder.

“We’ll get her anyway,” I said. “We always do. Now, unless you have something else to report. I have to organize a search party.”

“I have something,” he said. “She’s still in the neighborhood.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw her leaving here. Just before that I heard the screams. You found her old man dead?” I nodded. “Thought as much. I came to look. Usually in this neighborhood you look the other way when someone screams. Since the noise was coming from here, with her pregnant and unreported, I came to look. Saw her come out, carrying a wood axe. She went down the alley alongside the house and into that warehouse next door. I watched for an hour or so. She didn’t come out.”

“I’ll put a crew on it,” I said.

“You’d best do that.”

Before this enlightened exchange could continue, the explosion boomed loudly in the street. I reached a window just in time to see a band of ragged juvies rushing at the blown door of my rhino. In a few seconds they would find out that I was not inside. Then they would widen their search pattern.

## II

WHEN I turned away from the window Hap Winestead was gone. He had faded out like a scene in a pre-war movie, silently, stealthily, almost while I watched. I called to him once but gave up when he did not respond. I was on my own in hostile territory, hunted by juvies that scare even the old-time conmen like Hap Winestead.

I watched the boys in the street, saw them take a crowbar into the cab of the forticar. They would destroy the radio. Headquar-

ters wouldn't send anyone after me until I didn't show at five o'clock. Then they'd call on the radio. Then, thinking the radio was not functioning, they'd give me a half-hour of grace time. They'd start for me at five-thirty, get here by six. Which gave me some seven hours to keep myself alive before help arrived.

I couldn't wait.

The boys left the forticar and walked briskly toward the house. I moved away from the window, walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Some of them had rounded the side of the house and were coming up the back porch steps. They were painted like Indians, their hair below their shoulders, longer than normal by a good three inches. Their faces were smeared with grime. Some were still too young for beards—others were garishly bearded. I turned away and searched frantically for another exit.

I found the door to the cellar, closed it behind me, waited for my eyes to adjust to the lack of light before going down the steps. I heard the juvies smash the glass of the rear door, then the tramp of their feet on the kitchen tile. I went down the steps to the cellar quietly, quietly.

I examined the cellar walls for the outline of a door. The cellar was L-shaped. I found what I was looking for in the shorter arm of the L. Light seeped grudgingly between the bottom of the door and the sill. I fumbled with the latch. The door opened jerkily. Momentarily blinded by the wash of daytime brilliance, I squinted and looked around. A juvie stood nearby in the alley. He was tall, gangly, wearing chewed-off jeans, a homemade sweater-shirt, a crimson headband—and a holster that held an old Colt .45.

I looked toward the front of the house but it would be suicide to go that way. I would be in the open. Surely some youths were still watching the rhino; I would be caught in a matter of seconds. A gray stone building faced me across the alleyway. The door at street level was slightly ajar. I sucked in breath and launched myself.

The tall boy heard me and whirled.

He drew his Colt.

I still had my guns in my hands. I thought fast. If I narcodarted him he would have time to pull off a round or two before he fell. Later he would revive to tell them I had entered this other building. On the other—more violent—hand, if I used the frag slug gun he would never pull another shot or tell his friends a thing. They might

conclude that I had gone down the alley and escaped them. I tried to envision Rennie hung by his thumbs with the insect thingies eating his tender flesh.

I fired the frag slug weapon. The juvie went down, kicking into death.

I rolled through the door I had aimed for, scrambled to my feet and shut the door quickly behind me.

I seemed to be in a huge storage room where piles of refuse had accumulated. Old packing crates gaped, holding machine parts that had not been worth stealing. I made my way to a ladder that was bolted to the far wall, climbed to a small foreman's loft high above the floor. Sinking down on the loft floor next to the window, I wiped away some grime and looked down on Arthur Boulevard and my broken rhino. The juvies were still around it. I saw them carry the kid I had killed from the spot where I had dropped him to the center of the street. Even while I had desperately hoped they might scatter in search of me, I had known better than to expect such luck. Some of them did leave the vicinity to widen the search pattern, but others remained, guarding the building in which I hid. They had made some quick and accurate guesses.

In a moment of horrible clarity, I realized exactly where I was: in the same warehouse where Mrs. Smith and her unborn Brain were hiding. With an axe. And I had no crew to back me up.

I was alone.

**I** WATCHED the boys outside, waiting for that moment when they would move against the warehouse, discover me and eventually drag me out for their own brutal version of execution. But my attention was not solely on the window. I spent the time uneasily shifting my gaze from the glass to the ladder that had brought me up here. I had, to keep in mind the presence of another, even deadlier danger inside these walls with me.

Three hours after I killed the boy, the searchers came back to join the guards. They talked among themselves, each taking his turn to examine the warehouse with a critical eye. I still had four hours to wait before I could even hope to see a police forticar moving down the street with my rescuers in it. It didn't appear I would last four hours. I held tightly to my guns and sweated. I had four implosion grenades. If I didn't let myself think of what they did

to human bodies, I found some reassurance in my possession of them.

At three-thirty the boys assembled a mound of available wooden objects. They placed the body of their dead comrade on a conglomeration of boards and chairs, dresser drawers and shattered kitchen tables. They stuffed the crevices between objects with old papers and cloth, sprinkled a can of sludge oil over the entire structure. As they settled down I saw that some of them had brought jugs of what was most likely an alcoholic beverage. They squatted around the pyre, drinking and singing an eerie lament that curled up from the street and seemed to vibrate in the window glass. They were having a wake of sorts.

One of them lighted the pyre. Flames, green and soft yellow, flared up in a great whoosh, then settled to a steady rolling blaze. After a few minutes I could smell the sweet inescapable odor of roasting flesh. The smell seemed to fill the world. The boys were dancing arm in arm, whooping and hollering.

I left the window and went down the ladder to the main floor. I stayed away from all the stacks of machine parts, expecting Mrs. Smith to leap out at any moment, brandishing an axe. I made my way to the door through which I had entered, with the hope that perhaps I could sneak away while the juvies were reveling. I paused, listening to the wake on Arthur Boulevard, before I pushed the door very slowly and gently.

Abruptly, a gun cracked twice. Two bullet holes showed in the door at the height of my eyes.

A guard was on duty. There would be one on every door. When the wake was over, when the body had been charred and was only ashes, they would come for me. And there would be no escape.

Briefly I considered pushing the door wide open and shooting the juvie outside. I might stand a chance of breaking through before someone came from the front of the building. Then I cautiously put my eye to one of the bullet holes and looked out. I saw three boys stationed ten feet from each other. They all had guns. I could not possibly drop all of them before they took me. I didn't want to kill anyway. If I could find a way of staying alive until my crew came, I wouldn't have to kill anyone.

I turned back toward the ladder and the loft. From that high vantage point, I could at least hold them off for a while with narco-

darts, perhaps even until help came, especially if they fiddled around much longer with the wake. When I was halfway across the floor, Mrs. Smith said in a soft, come-hither voice, "Mr. Steele?"

I HALTED, swaying like a drunk. The voice had come from the stack of crates on my right. I was glad I had stayed from them. I could picture myself with an axe in my head, and I didn't like the picture.

"Mr. Steele?" she asked again.

I was sweating. I held the guns rigidly in the direction from which the voice issued. I decided she must be behind a formation of five rectangular crates stacked on end. Crazy, I noticed that the second crate was stacked wrong with its THIS END UP warning turned to the side. "What do you want?" I asked.

"I've hurt myself, Mr. Steele. Could you come here and help me?"

The silence was heavy.

"Could you come here and help me, Mr. Steele?"

"I'm afraid not," I said, the words sticking in my throat. I stood still, waiting for her next move.

She was not yet ready to drop the ploy of helpless-woman-seeking-aid. Her voice came again through the dust and the smell of death, soft and silky, promising love, admiration, trust and reward. "I twisted my ankle pretty badly. You see, I can't get up. I'm trapped here—at the mercy of those boys outside."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Oh, please, Mr. Steele," she said. "Oh, please help me." She broke into wracking sobs that were so real I could almost taste tears in my own mouth, salty and wet. She cried for some time—then stopped abruptly like a child who suddenly wonders if tears are going to work. "Mr. Steele?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"Why do you leave me alone here, hurt as I am?"

"You killed your husband with an axe, Mrs. Smith. You are carrying a Brain in your womb. If I come near you'll axe me too."

"That's just not so, Mr. Steele," she said. The quality of her voice suggested a combination of whore and computer. It had the lilting, seducing softness of a prostitute searching for a john, yet the basic tone was cold, emotionless, machinelike. No warmth re-

mained of the voice I remembered from the previous day. "I just would not do all that. And my baby is going to be fine."

"Your baby is a Brain," I insisted.

She was quiet a while.

Then: "Mr. Steele, I am not even pregnant."

Desperation was making her try anything, reasonable or not. Rather, the Brain's desperation was making her try everything and anything, for now the Brain was surely in charge of her mind. I started to answer but was not permitted to finish. She stood suddenly in full sight to the left of the rectangular packing crates. She fired at me with a seven-shot German Mauser.

I dropped, felt a crease in my shoulder. I rolled toward the line of boxes behind me.

She fired again. The bullet ricocheted past my head.

I wanted not to hurt her, only to distract her until I was out of sight. I fired the frag slug gun to her right, smashed a crate beside her. She jumped a foot, whirled behind the box. I scrambled behind the cases on my side of the warehouse and waited.

I realized that I should have checked her husband's body for his gun. His holster had been empty. The fact had not registered at the time. A scavenger like Smith (I was beginning to think the name might be genuine) would never be caught—even dead—without his pistol. Not if he could help it. Now she had a seven-shot Mauser. She had five shots left in the wicked instrument, more than enough if she were careful.

"Mr. Steele?" she asked.

I didn't answer.

"Mr. Steele? I know you aren't dead. I hear you crawling behind the packing cases."

"What do you want?" I snapped, knowing it was hopeless to talk to a Brain but needing to say something, anything, while I tried to analyze my position and discover the avenues left open to me.

"Why don't we forget our hostilities?" she asked, her voice butter and honey—except for the underlying computer stiffness.

"You're talking insanely," I said. "Brain, we aren't as slow-witted as you think. You can cut the pleading angle."

She grew quiet.

I took the moment's respite to rip off the sleeve of my uniform shirt and examine my shoulder wound. The bullet had barely

touched my flesh, had actually cauterized the wound by the heat of its passage. Only a thin trickle of blood seeped down my arm. It hurt like hell but I could live with it. For a while anyway. Until either the Brain inside Mrs. Smith or the juvies outside the warehouse cut me down.

WE WERE both silent, each waiting for the other to give away his position. In another hour and a half the rescue squad would arrive. I kept that in mind and blessed every minute that passed without incident. Each second spared from disaster seemed infinitely precious. But I knew as I lay there, listening for the sound of approaching feet, that Mrs. Smith had to be out of the way before those juvies attacked. If I had to worry about both problems at the moment of crisis, I had almost no chance of escape.

Mrs. Smith still had five shots in her pistol.

I crawled farther along the aisle of crates, grabbed a sprocket from a pile of useless parts and heaved it to the right, into another pile of parts. Mrs. Smith came up like a duck in a shooting gallery and fired two rounds before dropping out of sight again. The Brain was guiding her; otherwise she could not have reacted so swiftly and accurately. The Brain had not thought me bright enough to try to trick it. It thought I was where the crashing sound had occurred. Its attention would be focused there. I moved left, back to the edge of my cover, and looked across the floor at Mrs. Smith. She had moved around to keep a barricade between herself and what she thought was my new hiding place. I took careful aim with the frag slug pistol—and lowered it. It was difficult enough to use that thing against juvies, let alone against a lovely woman. I aimed the narcodart pistol instead.

Somehow she became aware of me. She whirled, opening up with her Mauser, not worrying as I did about the niceties of civilized combat. I fell, shooting a round of drugged needles. I saw some of them sting her. She stood her ground firing three times altogether. The slugs whined by me without doing damage. Then I watched, astounded, as she dragged her heavily-drugged body behind the crates and out of sight. She should have been out cold.

“Mr. Steele,” she said, her voice wet and gurgly.

“What?” I asked, shaken that she did not wilt under the barrage of narcotics and was, indeed, still in the mood for her own brand of unsettling conversation.



"I think you've won, Mr. Steele."

I didn't answer.

The quiet dragged on.

Interminably.

Outside, the wake was drawing to an end at last. The juvies were singing a final prayer with the gusto of whoring sailors in a dock-side bar. The words came eerily, like small snakes slithering through the windows and the cracks in the door. I felt more uncomfortable and afraid than ever. A spasm of chills swept over me.

"I said you've won—Mr. Steele—I have—no—more bullets—helpless—"

I forced my mind to review the action of the past several minutes. She had had five shots left in the Mauser. She had fired two of them into the stack of junk where I had thrown the sprocket. Another three just barely missed me when I had stung her with the narcodarts. That added up to the magic number Five. She was telling the truth.

"I guess—you'll kill—me—now," she said brokenly. Then she sighed heavily, as if the drugs were finally slowing her down, dragging her into unconsciousness. "I—wish—you wouldn't—though, Mr. Steele—" she said.

Then she was quieter than ever.

I moved from behind the crates, though my body screamed for me to remain protected.

There was an ominous silence outside.

The wake was over and done with.

"Mrs. Smith?"

No answer.

I crossed the wide aisle, looked behind the crates where she had crawled with the narcodarts in her.

She was gone.

### III

I STARED at the vacant concrete, unable to think properly. She was nowhere in sight. How she could have moved with the drugs surging through her, I didn't know and I didn't want to guess. How can you hope to combat a superman you can't wound? I looked at the frag slug gun, then holstered it. I'd be damned if I would resort to it except as a last and desperate resort.

I told myself I was foolish, that I was letting her beauty and my interest in her guide me into unsafe waters.

Then I told myself to shut up.

A few minutes later, I noticed a line of droplets—blood—on the gray concrete floor. Pinpricks from a narcodart weapon would not have caused bleeding. Either she had fallen and hurt herself or—more likely—she was entering the first throes of childbirth. Which meant the Brain had reached a point where it could survive on its own and was pushing out of her body.

I gripped the narcodart pistol, unsnapped the holster of the frag slug gun so that I could reach the deadlier weapon swiftly if need arose. Cautiously, I started following the slight but grizzly trail, trying to look both down and ahead. At the end of the wall of crates I took a gingerly step around the corner but was not rewarded with sight of her. The blood was thicker here—she had apparently paused to rest before crawling to the group of boxes where I had thrown the sprocket.

She was going to die if the Brain was born before I could find her. The Brain would see to that.

I was deciding how to approach the crates where she must be hiding, when a sharp rattling sounded behind me. I whirled. My slug pistol, angrily at the ready, had entered my hand almost magically. I saw no one and holstered the little cannon, disgusted at myself for my cowardliness in drawing so swiftly.

The sprocket lay near the far wall. She was playing the same tricks on me that I had played on her, trying to sap my supply of courage and my narcodarts and frag slugs.

I was no longer quite certain who was the hunter and who was the hunted.

But she had no weapon, I told myself. I could walk right into those crates and pump enough pins into her to stop her for the time being, enough drugs so even the Brain could not keep her moving and awake. In fact, I would have to do just that before the Brain was free of her and moving independently. Sweat ran down my face and dripped off the end of my nose. Carefully, but with a little more confidence, I moved behind the next stack of boxes. I followed the meager trail of blood and saw that it crossed an open space to the cases that had hidden me during our first gun duel. I had made a full circle of the warehouse.

Something *chunked* ten feet behind me.

Despite myself and my determination to remain stoic, I whirled and fired a burst of narcodarts. They studded the side of a packing crate and nothing else. She had thrown another decoy object and I had fallen for it. I would continue to fall for it, I thought, because my reactions had been honed by training to make me suspect and respond to any suspicious noise at times like these. And then I would have an empty magazine in my narcodart pistol. And I would be forced to use the frag slugs. And when those were gone?

Then what? What could she do to me then? I was still stronger than she was, outweighed her by sixty pounds. Was the Brain merely buying time until it was out of her?

I followed the crimson droplets again, as wary as ever, ready to shoot my darts at the slightest movement or sound.

The juvies picked that moment to invade the warehouse.

**T**HE door crashed inward, smashed against the wall, broke from its top hinge and hung crazily by the lower one ready to collapse completely at the slightest pressure. Three juvies came through the doorway, two in gypsy outfits of bagged pants and cloth vests, the third dressed something like a cowboy, with a wide-brimmed hat and a tasseled black-and-red shirt.

I fired a burst of pins that dropped two of them to their knees, they swooned into the darkness of drug sleep. The third turned and leaped toward the nearest packing cases. I fired again, a long pull on the trigger. The pins sprinkled over the packing cases. Some managed to find exposed areas of his skin. He fell over, sighing contentedly, and slept.

Others followed the first three invaders. They were moving fast and shooting.

I scuttled behind the crates where Mrs. Smith had first hidden and took out my frag pistol. I knew I would have to use it on the juvies, if only to save the non-violent weapon for the woman whenever she made another appearance. I looked at my watch. More time had passed than I realized. In less than an hour the rescue squad would be here. But lasting an hour in these confines with a swarm of armed juvies was not going to be easy. Actually, it seemed impossible.

A juvie came around the corner of the crates, saw me, whooped happily and shut up abruptly as a frag slug burst apart inside him. He toppled forward and bounced on the floor, dead as the conc-

crete that accepted him. I gagged and looked away, holstered the frag gun and took out the narcodart pistol again. I absolutely had to use my drug darts, rationing them and hoping they would last. I didn't feel up to using frag slugs on anything but a thingie. And juvies were not thingies.

I fell back to the shelter of a second row of boxes and listened to the shuffle of feet as the juvies slunk closer and closer. I heard whispered commands, some giggles, a stealthy tread that did nothing to bolster my confidence.

A few minutes of tense silence—not even the scrape of feet against concrete—broke the pattern. I heard a squeak that seemed to originate from overhead. I looked into the rafters, expecting a Brain to come floating toward me, but could see nothing except ordinary and motionless shadows.

I spied him out of the corner of my eye. One of the juvies was climbing the ladder into the loft where he could watch the entire floor and act as a spotter for his fellows. If he made it up there I was finished, even this close to rescue.

I aimed the narcodart pistol and fired. The burst caught him squarely in the rump. He reached back, swiped at the pins ineffectually, then realized his predicament. He started down the ladder again, jumping rungs. Seconds later and ten rungs from the bottom lost his grip and fell to the floor. There was an ugly snapping, crunching sound as a bone broke. He seemed otherwise uninjured. He lay still.

The sound of shuffling feet resumed. Their plan had not panned out and they could only push on as before. I tried to move back to another row of boxes and came face to face with Mrs. Smith.

She swung the bloodied axe for my head.

**T**HE blade whistled by my head, missing by less than three inches, and lodged firmly in the side of a crate. Wood chips flew in all directions. She wrestled, trying to loosen the tool. Sprawled on the floor as I was, I looked up at her dumbly. My specter. Some ghost loveliness clung to her even in her present state. She had my pins in her arms and legs. One or two showed through her dress, pricking her stomach and breasts. She had not bothered to pull them loose. Those darts contained enough drug to put six grown men to sleep. Yet Mrs. Smith still moved.

I started to raise the narcodart pistol. She pulled the axe free and brought it down in a single smooth gesture. The blade chunked into concrete next to my head.

My hand went to the frag gun. But I couldn't bring myself to draw it.

Chips of concrete rained down on me.

I rolled, felt the wind of her next swing over my back. I came to my knees, aimed the narco pistol. Her fourth swing struck the gun barrel and sent it clattering behind me.

I found the pistol, fumbled, fired another burst of pins. She took the barrage and swung again, not even slowing down. With the Brain using her circulatory system in some unknown manner to null the effects of the drug, my pistol was useless.

The next time she swung I reached under the axe handle and grabbed the thing. I wrenched at it, trying to take it from her. I should not have been surprised to find that the Brain was somehow adding to her muscular prowess. I felt as if I had tackled a man twice my size. She twisted away from me, sent me crashing again to my back. I turned over, scrambled to retrieve my gun. It was useless but I felt relieved when its cool lines fitted once more into my palm. I was ready to shoot.

And she was gone again.

I didn't have time to wonder where she had gone. The juvies, hearing the noise of our struggle, must have thought one of their own number was battling with me. They could not have been aware of her presence. Whooping and chattering excitedly, they came around both ends of the line of crates.

I stretched out, holding the frag slug gun to one side, the narcodart to the other, and opened fire on both groups, certain I would die in seconds. The juvies collapsed, dead on one side and merely sleeping on the other. Fate, I told myself, had chosen which group would live and which would die. The double barrage forced both groups to retreat to the other side of the boxes to map further strategy. I used the break to steal behind the next line of boxes.

I caught a breather.

Checking the drug gun, I found my ammunition was down to ten barrages of ten darts each. I had only six more slugs in the bulky frag pistol. I closed them both, flipped off the safeties and looked around. One more line of boxes remained between this one and the warehouse wall. And something else.

Squinting, I was able to make out the partly opened door. Most of it was concealed by the last row of cases, but the top showed above them. The door did not lead outside, for darkness rather than light came through the open space. Outside or not, what lay beyond that door was a form of sanctuary.

Moving as quietly as possible, I rounded the last row of boxes, went through and slammed the door behind me, threw the heavy lock bolt in place.

Moments later, bodies slammed against the door. It held. They would need something heavy to bash it in, perhaps a sledgehammer. It would take them time to round one up—and the name of the game was stalling.

By the dim light that filtered through a tiny high-set window, I could make out the size of the room where I found myself. It was about half as large as the warehouse proper. Crates and machinery parts were stacked here, too. I started toward the crates and saw something wet on the floor. I touched a finger to it, held the finger up to my face. The stuff was blood. And it wasn't mine.

Mrs. Smith was somewhere in this room.

**I** STAYED next to the door, listening to the rumble of voices outside and scanning the packing cases that filled the room. She might rise from anywhere. As long as I stayed here, I had one last chance. If I aimed the narcodarts for her stomach, perhaps some of the drug would reach the Brain directly.

I thought of what would happen if the Brain came out of her, were free to come at me, free to use its psionic powers to their fullest. I might be able to hold off a pack of juvies and a madwoman with an axe but I sincerely doubted my ability to cope with a Brain and its unhindered capacities.

I wouldn't last ten minutes.

Make that five minutes.

I had two choices—first, I could stand and wait for the freed Brain to come seeking me; second, I could risk Mrs. Smith and her axe, seek her out and be present when the Brain was born, kill it as it came from her. That second approach might not only save me, but her as well.

I set out to follow the sparse droplets of blood.

In moments, I saw the axe. It was lying on the floor, red-streaked where her fingers had grasped the handle. I felt some relief now



that I knew she no longer possessed her wicked weapon. I continued following the widely spaced crimson droplets and found her. She was stretched on the floor, holding her stomach, crying.

I kneeled beside her. "You'll be all right," I said. "I'll kill it when it is born. There's always a minute or so before they can operate well enough—"

"It's already loose," she said. Her words were thin, strained.

She was reporting a fact. It amazed me that the Brain had not taken time to kill her. It must have known I was in the room and had decided to take me first. In her present state, she would offer it little resistance. I put my medical knowledge to use to tie off the cord and give her first aid. If the Brain didn't finish both of us she would be all right until the rescue squad arrived to take her to a hospital.

I was trembling all over. Even the sound of the sledge hammer outside the door was not enough to drown the pounding of my heart. I was seriously considering opening the door and taking our chances with the juvenies when the Brain dropped on me from above, raking its claws down my face.

**I** STRUCK out and knocked it away. It bobbed to the right. I fired a slug and missed, fired again and missed. It weaved erratically toward me. I tried to follow it, fired a double burst. But it was ten feet overhead in an instant and my shots were no good—except, perhaps, for one piece of shrapnel. I swung the barrel up, gasping and sobbing. I fired but abruptly it was in front of me. The overhead shot had been useless. I fired in front. It moved aside. I fired again.

The gun was empty.

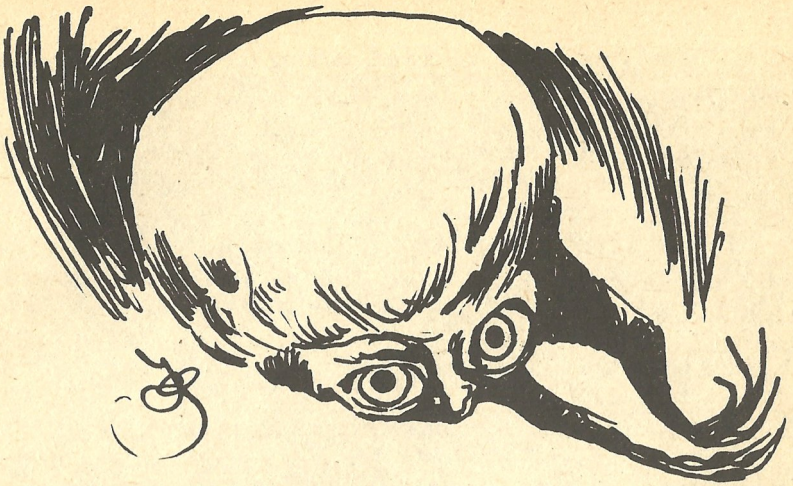
I threw the damn thing at the beast.

The Brain dodged.

The gun went past it, clattered off the dragon neck support of a bandsaw, fell to the floor.

Its huge eyes centered on me, the Brain hung twenty feet away. The blood pulsed in thick arteries that fed the colossal orbs. The shrunken mouth worked open and shut. Its tiny, claw-tipped hands were clasped at the chin of the oversize head. I could see where that shrapnel fragment had penetrated the gristled trunk of the dwarf mutant's body. The skin around the ragged hole was smeared with blood.





I was elated that I had hurt it. I soon had little time for elation, for it was coming toward me, claws extended. One claw held a sphere the size of a pea. Before I could puzzle what this might be, the juvies broke the door down. It crashed between the Brain and me. A juvie leaped through, looking for me and the Brain turned on him, collided with his chest, dug in its claws and carried him to the floor.

The other youths, seeing what manner of beast had downed their comrade, ran across the warehouse floor toward the exit to the alley. The first of them spilled into the dusk in time to meet the rescue squad.

I leaped through the doorway. The lead policeman grinned when he saw me. I shouted. "There's a Brain in the second room."

He lost the grin and had both guns out in less time than it took me to suck in breath. He called to half a dozen others and came across the floor in double time. With fourteen frag slug guns aimed in its direction, the Brain could not avoid absorbing the flying shrapnel.

But the wound I had inflicted had finally taken toll. The infant monster lay beside the juvie, a crumpled mass of brain tissue and gristled flesh.

The squad leader stooped to the juvie, who had passed out, and examined the boy's chest. There was a thin hole scratched in it and the black pea that I had seen earlier lay embedded in that

hole. "What's this?" the cop asked, picking the pea out and holding it up.

"The Brain had it," I said.

The squad leader rolled the mutant over so we could look into its hideous face. "There are more of them around its genitals," he said. "More of these peas."

I kneeled beside him and looked. There were at least twenty of them, each clinging to the Brain's withered genitals by a filament like black, waxed thread. I choked, then forced myself to look closer.

"You're not thinking—" he began.

"Spores."

"But they reproduce like human beings, not like plants."

"How do we know?" I asked. "We've never let one live outside its mother's body very long. We've been lucky enough to stop nearly all of them before birth."

"This means," he said, pulling back from the corpse of the mutant, "that if one of them has the chance it could plant spores in men as well as women. Then it wouldn't be a simple matter of checking all pregnancies. We'd have to be suspicious of all heavy men."

"Not just men," I said.

He looked puzzled. And scared.

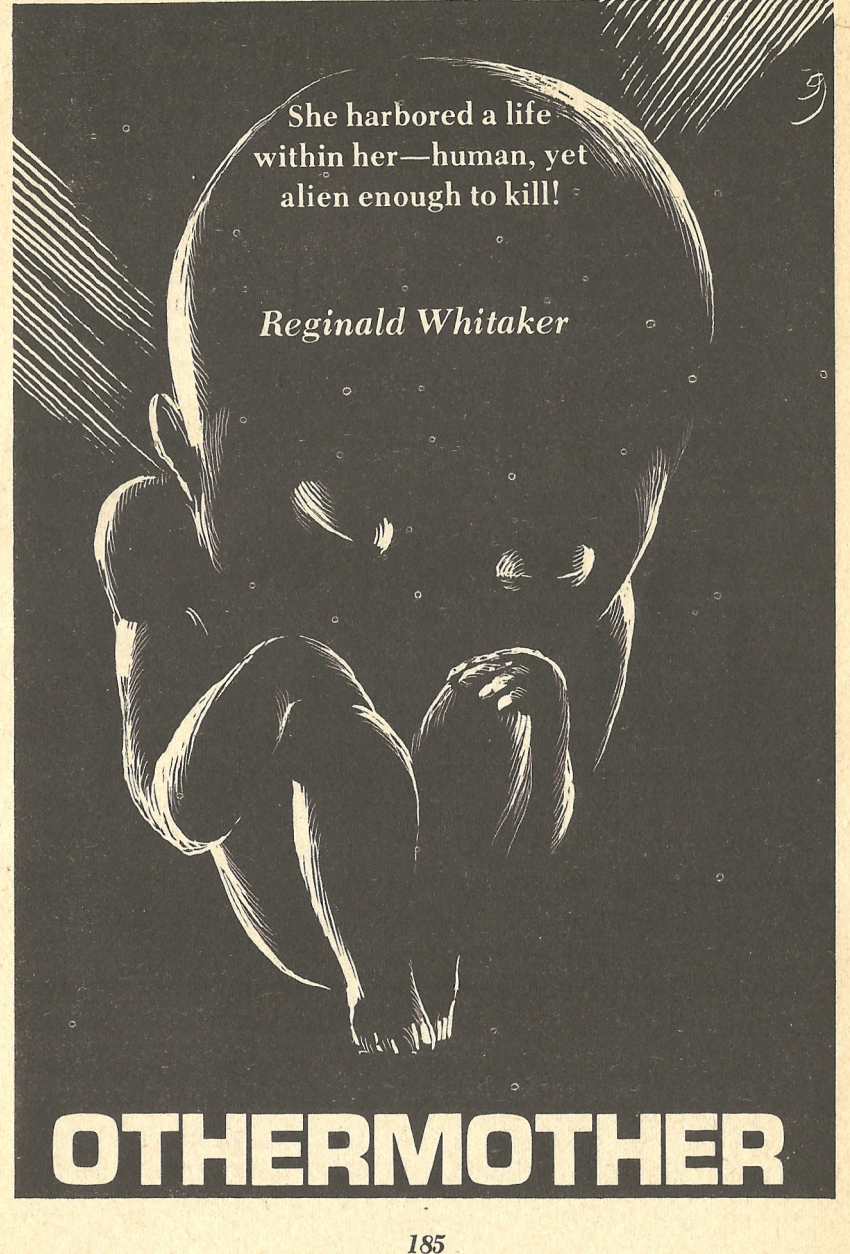
"Cows. Dogs. Horses. All sorts of animals. I have the feeling that this spore requires only warm, flesh to grow in. I doubt whether an umbilical cord is any longer necessary."

We crouched in the gloom for several moments, looking at the dead Brain and wondering when we would miss one and give it the chance it needed. Again I thought of the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons.

Six months have passed since that hour of dusk—six months of anxiety and happiness. We have had happiness because Lisa Smith recovered quite readily. My romantic fantasies were solidly based, for we have found each other mutually attractive. She grows more beautiful every day. But we won't have children. Even if they were normal, could we guarantee them a future? It appears that the earth may be changing hands. I think, as it now looks, we will be fortunate to have our natural lives together.

At night I dream of peaceful cattle herds, carrying within them the seeds of unborn warriors.

∞



She harbored a life  
within her—human, yet  
alien enough to kill!

*Reginald Whitaker*

# OTHERMOTHER

I CAN feel you in there, Jeremy, kicking at my stomach. I know you don't like it when I have a FizzAway—the doctor says it sounds like a thousand bombs going off all at once to you—but my God, my stomach, Jeremy, I need it. You don't care, anyway. What do you know, floating in your little capsule. To you my guts are the whole universe. But the universe has a belly-ache . . .

Laurie feels like laughing at this but it hurts her stomach too much. Hazy patches begin to form around the edges of her sight.

*Am I going to faint again? They told me not to think about it. Perhaps the Wall . . .*

She pushes the Eezee-Switch button on her chair and sees the iridescent colors flare up on the Wall. The cascade subsides into the tanned face of the Channel 37 Info Man: "Scientists and medical authorities deny that there is any validity in the rumors circulating that a popular brand of chewing gum contains dangerous amounts of Zyron-5. This additive has been named as—"

*Damn. What's on the other channels?*

Scenes of Laserburnings against Red guerrillas in Tierra del Fuego dissolve into an ancient Peter Fonda motorcycle movie, then to a teary scene from *As the Moon Turns* and finally to a new quiz show in which male contestants are shown a row of nude women with hooded heads and asked to identify their wives. The quiz show holds Laurie's attention briefly but it makes her think of sex. And sex makes her think of Willow Wendt and Billy Boy McCoy. Thinking of them makes her think of Jeremy. Thinking of Jeremy makes her sick.

*Will you look like her or him? Will you have her famous sexy slenderness or his famous chunky toughness? Will you have his round brown eyes? Or her narrow moist green ones? His curly black tangle of hair or her sinuous blond strands? Her pouting, petal-like mouth or . . .*

Sometimes she wishes savagely that somehow something of her own could come out imprinted on the child. Her floppy brown hair or her wide-boned face, the texture of her skin, even the soft plumpness of her body, so much in contrast to either of them. But she knows that such a hope is forlorn. Her body is simply a hot-house, an incubator. The doctors explained it all to her.

*Yes, yes, I know. But if only . . .*

From the Wall showers of laughter spill. One of the contestants has placed his bets on a certain body, which turns out to be not his

wife but his secretary. The wife is angry and chases him around the studio. Laughter pours out like the waves of the ocean, gathering around her in rising merriment.

*Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink . . .*

Laurie does not smile.

The sea of laughter suddenly vanishes. A dinner appears on the Wall. A voice asks her if she is hungry.

*I don't know . . .*

The Plastic Waitress brings dinner.

Laurie looks at it and orders it returned. The Plastic Waitress glides out. The door panel slides shut, then immediately slides open again. The doctor strides in.

"Laurie, you know that you must keep to a certain diet every day. It's part of the contract. I was just checking my charts this morning and I see that you've fallen behind on three out of the last four days. And yesterday you ate too much. You may think you're pretty smart, talking the Plastic Waitress into bringing two portions but we are not very amused. And now I come in and find you returning your entire dinner." His voice is, as usual, scolding and paternalistic. But there is also a new, hard, edge to it.

Suddenly his eyes narrow, spying the glass beside her. He reaches for it and looks inside. "So? You've gotten into the FizzAway again, have you? How many times do I have to tell you: effervescents are psychologically damaging to unborn children. You have no right to endanger Jeremy's future peace of mind this way."

*I don't care about you any more, Jeremy.*

"What about me, Doctor. Don't I count? What about my peace of mind—and stomach?"

The doctor glowers at her and thrusts his forefinger in the direction of her stomach. "First of all, my dear, if you ate what we told you, this would never happen. And next, you volunteered for this job. Nobody forced you to do it. You made an agreement and we specified the conditions quite clearly. Now you had better abide by them." He pauses, his lips tightening. "I'm not a lawyer but I do know this: if you screw this thing up, you're in trouble. Just because it's illegal doesn't mean that Miss Wendt can't take action against you. She has high-priced legal advice."

Laurie is stunned, her eyes glaze. The doctor has always been polite, at times almost likable . . . The room flickers and wavers around her.

*What is happening to me?*

*Jeremy, I think I am beginning to hate you.*

The doctor's face muscles relax. The metallic glint fades from his eyes. He strokes Laurie's hot forehead.

*I just don't feel right about it, anymore . . .*

"Everything's going to be all right. You do what we say and everything will turn out. I only told you this to shake you out of the defiant mood you've gotten into recently." He smiled. "What's good for Jeremy is good for you. Remember that."

*If that's so, then why didn't she have the baby herself? What's good for Jeremy is good for Willow Wendt. What's good for Laurie is good for Billy Boy. What's good for the doctor is good for the Plastic Waitress . . .*

Laurie faints. The doctor curses. Jeremy kicks. From the Wall, tears come tumbling down.

And somewhere, far away, Willow Wendt and Billy Boy McCoy tell the press of their expected boy child and of how happy they are. And the press tells the public how happy the public is.

"IT'S not easy, being a star." That was what she had said, tossing the remark off like a nickel to a street beggar. Laurie had said nothing. What could she say? Then Willow had given her a look which from anyone else would have been called searching, but from her was merely a squint. "You don't believe me, do you? All you people on the Annual Allowance are the same. You think we like working? You think we like being gaped at and pawed by the likes of you? You think we would do all this just to make extra money?"

She had smiled.

Laurie remembered feeling embarrassed and wanting to be somewhere else.

"Look at you Allowance people. You do nothing and live like goddam kings. While I knock myself out day after day just to make you slobs happy when you go to a movie. You live like kings, but it's not enough for you. So you do this."

The distaste lingering on this last word was somewhat too obvious. Willow quickly added that of course she was very glad that Laurie was willing to do this for her and Billy—and that she would be paid damned handsomely and that, even though no one

else could ever be told about it Laurie would have taken part in an important public event. Etc.

*Live like kings. That's what they always say. If only they would try living like we do, just for a few days. They'd find out then what it's like . . . why we always need more money, with them around showing off their fame and wealth . . .*

Laurie had maintained a blank face despite her churning insides. Willow, of course, took the blankness to mean lack of feeling.

"I believe in generosity." She smiled warmly. "And so—if everything goes right—you will be paid the equivalent of five years' Allowance. One year will be given as an advance. And of course, while you are, um, doing it, you will be maintained in luxurious private quarters with everything that you want—everything that will not harm Jeremy, of course. I'm sure that you will be happy—"

Willow's pale shape fades. Billy's comes into focus.

He was indistinct, like a face on a Wall with interference. He was not very interested in Willow's latest enthusiasm. He was, of course, head of the famous McCoy clone: a half dozen or so younger copies of himself, grown from tissue scrapings—the preferred method now for political, business and entertainment stars. He thought that Willow's idea was just a trifle perverse but he knew that it just might strengthen support for the McCoy for Governor Bandwagon to Prosperity among the more conservative voters. And the fact that the conception had taken place in the climactic love scene of the *Four Astronauts of the Apocalypse* would certainly mean more box-office for the movie which, in turn, could do his Bandwagon no harm. This much Laurie understood. Billy seemed neither to know nor care what she thought.

The doctor's face now, professional and paternal.

"Laurie, you have been selected from among the many, um, applicants, because you alone have sufficient chemical and metabolic similarities to Miss Wendt that the changes we must temporarily induce in order that you may carry Miss Wendt's baby without imparting your own extra-cytological hereditary material to the embryo can be carried out without the slightest danger to either the baby or yourself.

"I have also been authorized by Miss Wendt to inform you of the legal aspects of this entire affair. Now, I need hardly remind you of the fact that carrying transplanted embryos for a fee is, and has been for many years now, illegal." The doctor smiled sympa-

thetically. "You and I know, of course, that such laws are hypocritical and puritanical. You may or may not be aware, for example, that anti-othermother laws were first rammed through by a combination of Population Control fanatics and dyed-in-the-wool Family Lifers. Of course it's not the first time that politics has made such strange bedfellows. The Family Lifers, of course, have always been hopeless cranks. They even argued that othermothering was no better than the sexual prostitution which used to flourish in the old days before the new methods of reproduction allowed sex to be completely liberated. But now that air and water additives have effectively reduced world population levels, I for one fail to see why the Population Controllers maintain their opposition to a liberalization of the laws. Especially when clones are allowed. After all, let's face the fact—no matter how much the moralists complain, you just can't change human nature. As long as people in love have the natural urge to put their old chromosomes together in the form of a new child you're going to have women looking for othermothers. You can't expect a modern woman to carry all her children herself, despite what those Family Lifers say. And that, my dear, is where you come in." He beamed solicitously. "I sincerely hope, Laurie, that you are never ashamed of what you are doing. It's the laws, after all, which are hypocritical, and we—" he emphasized the "we" with a conspiratorial flourish—"are simply doing a job that should be done openly."

The doctor seemed very pleased with himself. He knew that othermothers did not like to be dealt with in a condescending fashion. He prided himself on his frankness. Laurie knew he just liked to hear himself talk. She also knew that he was justifying his conduct, not hers. But Laurie didn't care. She just wanted the money.

"The terms are as follows," he went on. "You will remain under my supervision in private quarters—and very comfortable ones, at that—under absolutely controlled conditions. You must follow my orders to the letter. After the birth you will, of course, never disclose a word of this affair to anyone. There are some Family Lifers around who want to expose the whole othermothering scene, and they may offer you a considerable amount of money to reveal your activities. If you were so foolish as to do so, you would be jailed as a convicted othermother and the money would be of no use to you. Anyway, people know all about othermothering. They just don't want to hear or see anything about it publicly. And they will be-



come very indignant against anyone who brings accusations against stars. After all, what have people on the Annual Allowance got to look forward to other than the chance of becoming stars themselves?"

Laurie wished he would stop lecturing. The doctor was a bore.

HE WAS still speaking. But his manner was changing. "There's no question, Miss Wendt, it's a clear case of rejection . . . no, Miss Wendt, I assure you, it is quite unprecedented in medical science . . . there is no way, Miss Wendt, that I could have known of this . . . I am not incompetent, Miss Wendt, and I resent your implication . . ."

*My God, this is for real. They're talking about me.*

The doctor turns and peers sharply at Laurie. "I saw her eyelids flicker, Miss Wendt. I think we ought to conduct this conversation somewhere else."

Willow Wendt is angry. Her eyes flash in the famous screen style. "What I want to know is this: is my Jeremy in danger? Give me a straight answer, you white-coated quack."

The doctor's hand shakes. "We can keep her on a combination of anti-rejection drugs for four more weeks until it would be quite safe for a slightly premature birth. But the girl might die during the birth. On the other hand, we could simply remove Jeremy now and mature him under Artificial Womb conditions—"

"I don't want any filthy test-tube freak. I want a real baby, a mothered baby. I paid this lousy bitch to do her job and she can damn well finish it. Whoever heard of an othermother who can't carry a baby?"

"But Miss Wendt, the girl's life is at stake—" He gestures helplessly toward Laurie, who feels a terrible scream building up inside of her head.

"So what? She's just a little whore, anyway. Carrying anybody's baby for money—Christ—that's the breaks, as far as I'm concerned. But just don't forget this, doctor dear: Jeremy is the real honest to God result of our famous scene in *Four Astronauts*. The world is looking forward to the birth of our child. All those faked films showing me in maternity dresses, knitting baby clothes! I've got an investment in this thing. And I better get a return." Her voice is bitter now, and menacing.

The doctor sighs and shrugs his shoulders. A shriek seems to tear

out of Laurie's throat but no sound is heard. A layer of deadness seems to envelop her. She can no longer hear the two, only see them hazily as they argue and threaten.

*I am wrapped in death, like a mummy. Like a mummy . . .*

But her frightened laughter carries no further than the shriek.

*Jeremy, I want to kill you. I must kill you . . .*

She floats in the deadness. Jeremy floats inside her. In the timeless silence she struggles with the riddle: how to kill the parasite inside her. Outside the deathly sea in which she floats, others plan her death. Like layers of an onion . . . The riddle is a womb, from which some dark result will be born.

The voice cuts through like a knife. "Doctor, I'm rich, and a star. She is nothing. Everyone knows that the Organ Squad carves up Allowance people to provide organs for stars. Everyone knows it but nobody says it. They're just do-nothings on welfare, for Christ's sake. Doctor, I want my mothered baby, and the public wants it."

*I guess you win, Jeremy. They're all on your side, aren't they? Who am I, just another whore, a call girl.*

She floats further into the darkness.

*How did I get into this mess in the first place? Money . . . money . . . but what can a poor girl do?*

The doctor sticks needles into her arm. Jeremy kicks at her from inside. She floats still further away.

*What can a poor girl do?*

∞

## SCIENCE FICTION REVIEW

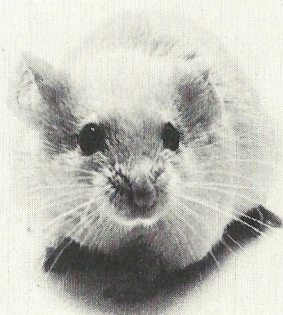
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
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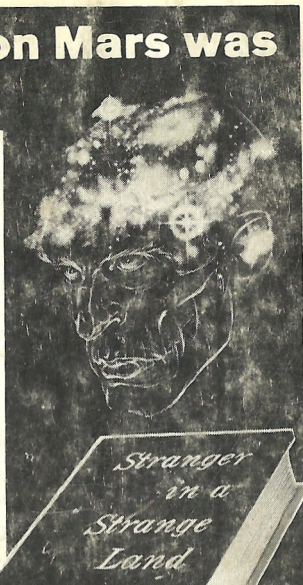
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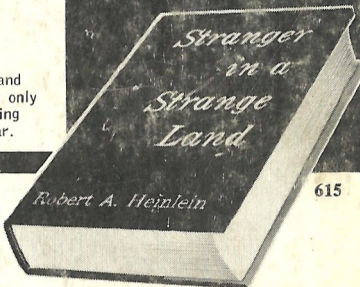


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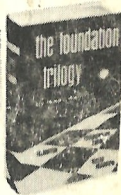
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