CAPITOL
by Orson Scott Card

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To Jay A. Perry,

Who has read everything and made it better

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Preface

Fiction usually does a better job standing on its own, but occasionally a word of explanation can help a reader receive a work as the author means to give it.

Capitol is not a novel; however, it is also not a short story collection. While all the stories in Capitol are completely self-contained, they are placed in the book in chronological order, to gradually unfold the biography of a world and a way of life that is born in "A Steep and a Forgetting" and dies in "The Stars That Blink. " I urge you to read them in order.

Also, Capitol overlaps in time and some characters with Hot Sleep, which is a novel, and which is soon to appear, like Capitol, as an Analog Book. Together, they comprise what is now extant of The Worthing Chronicle.

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A SLEEP AND A FORGETTING

There is no remembrance of former things; neither shall there be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after.

-- Ecclesiastes 1:11

There was nothing remarkable about a rat failing to run a maze. What was remarkable was that five rats ran the maze perfectly-- and five did not.

"My Lord," whispered George Rines.

"Run it again?" asked Vaughn Shirten, the lab assistant who tended the rats.

"Of course."

The five rats who had failed before failed again. The others ran the maze perfectly.

"Vaughn, do you have five rats that have never run a maze at all?"

"Rats of every kind. Smart, stupid, and psychologically virgin." He brought five virgins from the ratroom and put them in their first maze. There was no significant difference between the performance of the virgins and the five rats who had failed to run the maze before.

"My God," whispered George Rines. "What have we done?"

"Made rive smart rats stupid, looks like."

Two days before, all ten rats had run the maze perfectly. They had been divided randomly into two groups. Five of the rats were then given a drug; a day later they were given another. Those were the five that had forgotten how to run the maze.

"I'm not worried about the rats," George said.

"I am," said Vaughn.

"We've been giving that drug to people."

Vaughn looked at him blankly. "People? A stupid drug? Who needs a drug to make people stupid?"

"Somec, Vaughn. Somec."

It was Vaughn's turn to look shocked. "I thought they tested that!"

"All the tests but this one, Vaughn."

"But-- haven't they woken up any of the people who've gone on somec?"

"Not yet." George smiled wanly. "They all had cancer. They didn't want to be wakened until there was a cure."

"Somec." Vaughn laughed. "Some miracle drug!"

"It isn't funny," George said.

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"You signed a contract," Dr. Tell insisted. "You can't publish without my consent."

George shook his head. "I can't publish scholarly papers. So if you won't let me take it to fellow scientists, I'll take it to the press. They'll print the story."

Tell glared; restrained himself from shouting; said, "You bastard. You would."

"It isn't enough just to stop authorizing it. The formula is public knowledge-- what's to stop some grad student from whipping it up in his lab for a friend? Even the life support isn't hard to

arrange."

"You don't seem to understand." Slowly, carefully. The smile that had launched a thousand research projects made a struggle to appear on his face. It failed. "There is more at stake than somec."

George closed his eyes.

"There's a thing called independent research. We checked everything. We were so careful, George. We even did rat tests. Gave somec to some rats, not to others, and then taught them both mazes. There was no effect. How were we to know that somec impaired memory?"

"It doesn't impair, Dr. Tell. It eliminates."

"You don't know that."

"I'm pretty damn sure."

"Pretty damn isn't sure enough, George. There's that jackass of a senator who'll stand up and piously denounce federally funded projects that make basket cases out of people who already have problems. He'll do it, you know, and that'll mean funds cut off from everything."

"So what will you do, pretend everything's all right? They're not that far from curing some types of cancer now, and when they can fix it they'll wake up the sleepers who have that cancer and they'll find that they're vegetables."

"I don't know what we're going to do yet!" Dr. Tell shouted.

"We're going to warn the public."

"We're going to keep it quiet until we know what we're going to do."

"And when will that be?"

"I don't know."

George stood up. "I didn't think so. I know, Dr. Tell. It'd be nice to tell the press, there was a disaster, but this is how we're going to solve it in the future. But we can't do that, can we? So we're going to warn people, and warn them now, that somec does exactly what we've claimed it does, with one side effect. It wipes out memory."

"Dammit, George, we don't know that!"

"We suspect it. That's enough."

"If you do this, George, I can promise you that you'll never have a research or teaching job in the United States of America. Or Britain. Or anywhere!"

"In five years there'll be Russian troops all over America and none of us will have teaching jobs except those of us who know what we're doing in a laboratory. No more fund-raising experts, Dr. Tell. So I'm really not worried about your threat."

"And if the Russians don't come, Cassandra?"

"I will have saved some lives."

"'You're out for headlines, you bastard, if it destroys American science in the process! You want to be a crusader! You want to--"

The door slammed, and George didn't hear the rest of the speech. In a way, he knew Dr. Tell was right. George's own first impulse was to keep his discovery silent. He had wrestled with the problem all night, had hardly slept, but he decided at about four a.m. that he really had no choice. Either he could be the crusader who was hated by other scientists, or he could be one of the bastards who hushed it up, hated by the rest of the world. The rest of the world was bigger.

And none of the scientists would be left mindless.

He returned to his office to clean out his desk and load his books into boxes. The reporters would be meeting him at his home in three hours. There was no point in pretending to stay at the Institute. His letter of resignation was already on the Director's desk. It was, almost a formality, telling Dr. Tell. But he was the man who was supervising the whole somec project-- he had to know.

I feel like a murderer. So much hope for somec. But is it my fault? No. We were too excited. We thought we had tested everything. We deserve to be punished for acting too quickly, too unthoroughly.

Punished? George frowned at the thought. Not a matter of punishment or guilt or anything. Just stop the somec and find a way to get around the problem.

When he pulled the Scientific Americans off the shelf, they scattered in every direction. There were quite a few of them, most of the recent ones dogeared where he meant to read an article sometime soon. It was the only way he had to keep up on fields other than his own.

Perhaps in order to avoid thinking about the announcement he was going to make to the reporters in a couple of hours, or perhaps because moving out of the office was so distasteful to him, George picked up the top magazine and opened it to the first dog-eared page. He skimmed; read two more articles; then opened another magazine. Braintaping was the title of the first article he turned to; "Instantaneous teaching by establishing currents in the brain? It may be within reach." It intrigued George enough to lead him into the magazine. And what he found there meant that he wouldn't pack up after all.

It took half an hour to finish the entire article. It took another ten minutes to get in telephone contact with Doran Waite, the man whose name led off the article. And it took three minutes to verify the hope that the article gave.

"Yes, Dr. Rines, that's right. We can't do it with complicated mammals like primates, but with rats we can take the entire learning of one rat and put it into the head of another. For quite a while, they're okay."

"And after a while?"

"They're not okay. They go crazy."

"Dr. Waite, can you come out here? Or better still, can I go out there?"

It took another fifteen minutes to get reservations, and then George left his office without calling home. The reporters could wait until tomorrow. Then he'd have the hopeful note Dr. Tell wanted, the one that could forestall drastic government action, the one that might save the,hundreds of people whose memories were already irrevocably lost.

When it became clear to the reporters who showed up at his house that George Rines was not there and would not be there, they called his office and were told that he had resigned and left. Most gave up then; a few did not; one actually went to the Institute and talked to everyone. No one would talk. Except for the ratman, the lab assistant who cared for the behavioral testing animals. Vaughn Shirten.

The headline was large-- the editor was willing to go with the story when he saw the copy of the press release that the reporter had found on George's desk-- the one he didn't mean to release. It was quoted from extensively, along with a few juicier quotes from Vaughn. "It seems highly likely that at least some of those who have taken somec have been partially or completely deprived of their memory," said George's release. "That means that a hell of a lot of folks won't even know haw to speak or go to the bathroom," Vaughn added helpfully. "It means that they won't have anything left but their instincts. And human beings don't have as much instinct as a planaria."

It was three a.m. in Berkeley when the motel operator finally agreed to call room 215.

"Yes?" George asked sleepily.

"I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Rines. But they insisted that it's an emergency. I told them they just couldn't because we weren't sure that the G. Rines... but there's a government man on the phone, and a U.S. Senator called, and your wife."

"You're kidding," George said. "Let me talk to my wife."

"It is you then? I'm so relieved."

"Yeah, you're fine, let me talk to my--"

"George!" Aggie's voice was anguished. "Oh, George, how could you have just gone off like this--"

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd end up staying overnight."

"You might have called!"

"It was after midnight here when I got to the motel. It would have been two a.m. there. I didn't want to wake you up."

"Did you think I could sleep?"

"I'm sorry. Now you know where I am--" he yawned-- "can we go back to sleep?"

"George!" she shouted. "Don't fall asleep! You can't tell me you didn't know there'd be phone calls!"

"About what?"

"Your interview in the paper."

"I didn't do an interview--"

"That's what I told the Senator, but he kept demanding until the reporter found that article and the phone numbers on your desk and called Dr. Waite and--"

"You called Dr. Waite?"

"And he said you had been there all day and George, Dr. Tell called and so did Ron Hubbard and they said you're fired, even though you resigned, and George, there've been phone calls all evening--"

"What senator?"

"Maxwell! The anti-science one that everybody hates so bad. He thinks you're a hero."

"He would, the bastard."

"George, what can I do?"

"Tell them all to wait until I come home. Tve got some things to talk about with Waite."

"George, don't you have any sense of responsibility?"

"I have a sense of being very tired. Tell the reporters that we've already got a solution to a lot of the problem. Tell the Institute they want to see me tomorrow afternoon whether they hate me or not. And tell the senator to go shove a bill up his--"

"George, do you have to be profane?"

"Coarse and vulgar, Aggie, but never profane. It's four a.m. I'll see you tomorrow."

"What if I'm not home when you get there, you rotten--"

He hung up. He had a habit of shutting people out when they were getting abusive. It saved him from a lot of unnecessary anguish. Particularly since they were often correct.

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In two weeks he was no longer a pariah, no longer unemployed. Congress had approved the creation of a research office to solve the somec problem. And George Rines was in charge of it., "Your type of science we need more of," the senator told George. "Courageous. Thinking the new angles."

Raking up the muck, George silently filled in. But he accepted the job and went ahead. It meant a move to California, because Waite and all the equipment were at Berkeley. Aggie and the girls raised hell about it.

"Diane has only another year in high school!" Aggie complained.

"Then stay here," George finally exploded. "It's not as if I needed you out there! I can get twice as much done if I don't have to move the whole family."

He regretted saying it. He apologized. It made no difference. Aggie and Diane and Anita stayed behind, and he had beeen in Berkeley only a week when the notice of their legal separation reached him. He tried to call. He even flew back. But they had moved, too, and left no address except the post office box where he'd better send money every month or find himself in court for abandonment, as the lawyer so carefully put it.

For the entire flight back George was distraught. His world was falling apart. He and Aggie had meant everything to each other for years.

Then he got to Berkeley and never thought about his family except when he got to the motel, and later to the apartment, and realized that there was no one there. Damn them anyway, he thought. Who needs baggage? I'm accomplishing things of lasting value. I'm taking a dangerous drug and making it fulfil its potential for good. And if that doesn't matter as much as the stinking last year in a stupid high school...

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The government money poured in and the research quickly took over an entire building in the new research complex. One department carefully verified the extent of somec damage: when chimps, too, reverted to the behavior of newborn infants despite tremendous amounts of previously learned behavior. The memory loss was total.

Another department continuously played with the braintaping techniques and equipment. One branch of research tried to separate certain kinds of knowledge and memory from others-- it met repeated failures and no success at all. Another branch simplified the method of taping brain patterns and imposing them on another subject. It got to the point where even complex chimpanzee behavior could be taught in three minutes with a taper. The trouble was, the chimpanzees were hopelessly insane within fifteen minutes.

It was the third department that George supervised personally. There somec was mixed with braintaping technology. And there they found the first hopes of success.

The somec story had been front-page news. Now, however, the story was buried; each new success seemed to be timed perfectly to coincide with world events that filled the airwaves and the newspapers.

For example, when George first verified that if a trained rat was braintaped before being drugged with somec, and then the tape was reimpinged on the same, rat's brain after it woke up, the rat immediately regained all its former training, with no measurable impairment at all. And for six weeks afterward there was no sign of insanity. The results were encouraging enough to call a news conference. The reporters came.

But the same day, the president announced that aerial photographs proved that while the missiles had been taken out of Quebec, large concentrations of Russian troops were unloading from the trawlers that were making ridiculously heavy traffic between Leningrad and Montreal. There was

only one reason for Russian troops to be in Quebec. "Defense," said the Quebecois PM, during the first interview, before he knew the Russians were going to try to deny it. "Attack," said the U.S. President, and put the troops on alert. "Just try it," said the Russian General Secretary.

The U.S. President didn't, and the somec story was never noticed.

When George found that trained chimps could be taped and their tapes played into other chimps' brains without ill effect provided the receivers had been drugged with somec first, the story was worthy of note, certainly. The reporters thought so, even though the chimps had only been out for a week-- since insanity had always occurred in such a case within an hour, it seemed that the somec had solved the problem. And the Congressional oversight committee authorized George to begin working to try to save the humans who had been put under somec.

However, that news never reached the American public because that week Russian, Polish, Hungarian, and East German troops lurched across the heavily defended border of West Germany and the not particularly heavily defended border of Austria. "Stop," the American President said, "Make us," the General Secretary said. "Use your missiles," cried the Chancellor of West Germany. "We can't be the first to use nuclear weapons," answered the anguished American President. "De Gaulle told you so," the French newspapers, now suddenly Gaullist, cried in print. But no one in Germany read them-- the Russian troops were pouring into Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark by now. And though American troops were dying, the president could not push the button or give the order or even find anyone willing to do it for him. "American promises are a fart in the wind," said the ranking Tory MP, and the Labor PM didn't even deplore the crudity.

George Rines taped the brains of the next of kin of the five healthiest sleepers. They woke up believing they were the other person, but George's staff and the relatives carefully helped the former sleeper realize his true identity and step into that role. Four days after the five humans were awakened, the chimps that had been given another chimp's memories all went crazy. At once. As if on cue.

And only a week, later, the sleepers joined them.

Dialogue with Thomas N. Cortia, the last of the five to remain sane:

Good morning, Tom.

"Morning, George."

No use hiding this from you.

"Mrs. Feean went off the deep end."

You're the miracle man now, Tom. How do you do it?

"Maybe I'm just stubborn and maybe I'm too old to go crazy and maybe I'm already halfway crazy and we don't know it yet."

There's not much hope.

"Can't say I mind."

What's it feel like, Tom?

"Doesn't feel too normal. For one thing, it sounds strange even now to have you calling me Tom. All my memories right now have everybody calling me Bill. My brother, right? Don't feel like my brother. It feels like me."

Really?

"No."

Not really?

"I mean it don't feel like me. I mean those memories-- they just aren't right at all. Not at

all. I know Bill pretty well right now, and I know he'd hate it if he knew how complete my knowledge of his past really is. I never knew he screwed my cousin Sally. At a family reunion, right in the bathroom. That memory's just been eating at me, George. Cause I wouldn't have done that. There's no time in my life I would've rutted on a woman like that. That's not my style."

What is your style, Tom?

"I don't know, dammit. All my memories is telling me that is my style, but it's wrong. Dead wrong. I don't know why."

What about yourself? Tom, not the Bill memories.

"All I know about me is the way Bill remembers me. George, it's impossible to see myself as a stinkin' little tagalong who's worth less than horse manure. I wasn't like that. But Bill knows me better than any other living human being knows me, right? It isn't me, though. Lord, it isn't me. And I wouldn't've said what Bill said."

When?

"Ever! George, you don't know what it's like. As far as I know, I'm Bill. But every damn memory I have is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. I wouldn't act that way. I wouldn't do those things. I wouldn't've married that tight little bitch he picked up in New York. I wouldn't've raised my kids so pussyfoot easy, they all turned into bastards. My life's turned out all wrong, George, and I can't handle that. I've done everything wrong in my life, at least that's how I remember it, and you can tell me it isn't true and tell me I'm really Tom and not Bill but that doesn't change what I remember and what I remember doesn't change the fact that Bill just doesn't act the way I'd act and...

Calm down, now, Tom. Don't let it get to you.

"It was easier the first few days. Hell, George, I was like a man trying out a brand new body. My fingers didn't act right. My legs kept walking shorter than they oughta. I had plenty to occupy my mind. Especially the cancer. My brother's memories don't include himself having any cancer, you know."

They can cure it.

"They can't cure my head. George, I promise you I'll hang on as long as I can, but I'll go bonkers soon enough."

Don't do it on my account.

"No. No sir, wouldn't put myself out none for you."

Tom, when you go crazy, if you do, we'll just put you under somec again. And we'll try to bring you out of it when we know how to do it better.

"Forget it, George. If it means somebody else's head in mine, forget it. It's hell, George. When I die, they're sending me to hell, and it'll be just like this."

See you tomorrow, Tom.

"Fat chance, George. But you're a nice young bastard, even if you are screwing up people's heads. Have a good day."

You too, Tom.

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They tried it again. They started with the assumption that it was too confusing to use a near relative as the source of memories. It was too difficult when the patient knew he had once been someone else. So they took five more; again, those with the least advanced cancer. They gave them the braintapes of people their age and their sex, but told the patients nothing of the experiment. Instead, the patients were told that they had had amnesia and a serious illness, but they were

getting better.

It made no difference.

Dialogue with Marian Williamson, the last of the five to remain sane. She believed her name was Lydia Harper:

Lydia, how did you sleep?

"It was hideous."

Hideous? Why?

"I kept dreaming."

About what?

"You told me you weren't a shrink."

I lied. Haven't you ever lied?

"Yes, Dr. Rines, I have."

Are you good at it?

"Very, very good." [Patient weeps.]

What's wrong, Lydia?

"Doctor, I don't know, I don't know, I keep dreaming terrible dreams, I keep seeing myself doing hideous things, what's wrong with me?"

I don't know. You were sick.

"Not that sick. Oh, I have an occasional pain in my stomach, but nothing too serious, I'm not a hypochondriac, I refuse to complain, but doctor, I can't bear living with myself."

Come now. You've lived with yourself all your life.

"I don't know how I did it. Dr. Rines, is it possible for a person to keep doing things all her life and then suddenly wish she had never done them? Suddenly wonder how in the world she had ever done them?"

Like what?

"I'm not Catholic. I don't like confessing."

Is it that terrible?

"Sometimes."

Tell me the other times.

"It'll sound so silly."

I promise not to laugh unless you laugh first.

"I'll hold you to that, doctor. Because I won't laugh. And I won't tell you something silly. I'll tell you the worst thing of all."

Only if you want to.

"I have to. Oh, God, help me. I'm not an old woman, doctor. I'm only thirty-eight. I haven't seen a mirror since I woke up after my amnesia, but even if I'm ugly now, doctor, I was once quite a pretty young woman. Doctor, I-- even this might sound silly, but it's true-- I haven't been

particularly inhibited, sexually, during my life."

It doesn't seem to be expected these days.

"And I don't regret that. But in college, I was strapped for money. Maybe you don't remember the recession of the seventies, doctor, but my parents couldn't keep me in school any longer and I was determined to get an education. So I started-- I started charging for it."

For sex?

"I was a whore. I'd make appointments through a couple of men I had had as lovers. I charged twenty dollars. I was cheap. But I stayed in college."

You aren't the first woman to have done that.

"I know it. That isn't it, it isn't that I disapprove, though I do. I mean, I disapprove now, but until I woke up just now I never did. What matters is that I can't believe I ever did it."

Yet you remember that you did.

"But I wouldn't do that!"

But you did it. You're just denying the truth.

"I know, I know it, but doctor, in the name of God I swear I would never, never, never do that. It is impossible. I can't live with myself having done that!" [Patient weeps uncontrollably.]

It's just one thing, Lydia.

"It's not. It's the way I wore my makeup, deliberately to be seductive. I can see myself sitting there at the mirror, relishing the effect. The memory makes me sick. And the way I always let my father run my life. For years I did whatever he said to do. I was so sorry when he died. Now I'm glad he's dead. And that's terrible, because I remembered that I loved him. Why should I forget how much I loved him?"

I don't know.

"Because he was a selfish, controlling bastard, that's why. Oh, I can't believe I said that. I don't use language like that, doctor. I sleep with men for money, but I don't use language like that. I'm going crazy, doctor. I'm losing my mind. Nothing in my life seems to fit together anymore. I keep wanting to kill myself."

I hope you won't.

"Do you think these pains in my stomach could be cancer?"

We can have that checked.

"If I have cancer, doctor, I'll kill myself. That would be the last straw."

We'll have you checked. But don't talk about killing yourself.

"I'm sorry. I've never talked that way before. I don't know why I'm talking like that now. Thanks for listening to me, Dr. Rines. Am I really insane?"

You sound quite healthy to me.

"Really? You wouldn't lie?"

I would lie, if I thought it would do any good. But right now I'm not lying.

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

I'll see you tomorrow.

When George saw her the next day, she was catatonic and would not speak.

George examined the dossier that had been vaulted away along with her body when she first went on somec. The dossier on Marian Williamson, not on Lydia Harper. The woman was a ruthless businesswoman, had ruined dozens of other men and women in her race to the top of the business world. She couldn't cope with failure-- she stated that in her own autobiography. She refused to be thwarted, even by cancer. That was why she had taken somec.

The autobiography also mentioned a psychotherapist in Boston, and George used government funds to bring him out to Berkeley.

"Dr. Manwaring, you don't know how much I appreciate your coming."

"When you explained the situation, how could I refuse?"

"I'm going to ask you to violate your ethics, doctor. You know the situation Marian Williamson is in. It would help us a lot to understand what happened to her if you could tell us what she was. like before the somec."

"It's unethical, all right, but I knew that's what you'd want to know, and that's why I came out. I'm prepared to help. I'm sure she'd approve of my violating her confidence if it might help to save her life. She's in favor of survival. Or rather, of survival on the best possible terms."

George Rines showed him transcripts of the dialogues with Marian Williamson, who now believed herself to be Lydia Harper.

"This is odd," Dr. Manwaring pointed out.

"I know," George said. "How odd?"

"Well, I should tell you that I don't believe in a soul. I don't even believe in a mind, apart from brain activity. But I don't know how to explain this without resorting to something like that."

"You haven't told me what you're trying to explain."

"Marian Williamson was a very religious woman. Not in any formal way, of course. Not with any organization. But she believed profoundly in God. And believed that he was taking a direct role in her life. Whenever she overcame a rival for a position in her business, she ascribed the victory to God. Actually, of course, she had undercut the poor devil and eaten the ground out from under him. Or her. She had no favoritism for either sex. She'd shaft anybody. But, you see, in this dialogue it could be Marian. 'Oh, God, help me,' she says. I think she says that in three of the dialogues, doesn't she?"

"Yes.

"And something else. This sex thing. Marian had an active sex life. She was no prude. Never married, never had children, but certainly knew plenty of men and tasted the fruits of the garden of Eden, so to speak. But this passage in the last dialogue, where she talks about selling herself. That was very important to her. She'd neyer sleep with anybody who ever worked in her field. She never involved her business in her love life. She was very emphatic about that-- sex was for love, not for money. You see? This could have been her. Not the speech patterns, necessarily, I'm not an expert on that. But from what you told me of somec, there shouldn't be any survival of memory, should there?"

"Only learned memory is erased. Instinct remains."

"I'm a behaviorist of sorts, Dr. Rines, and I just find it impossible to ascribe this to instinct. Bedwetting and fingersucking I can accept. Even homosexuality might be carried on the genes. But the environment has to have some influence."

"I don't know that much about the different schools of thought."

"I suppose it isn't all that significant. I'm just telling you where I come from, because that

makes my conclusion from all this surprise even me."

"Conclusion?"

"Hypothesis. Remarkable things are carried on the genes. Things we never supposed. A proclivity for surmounting all obstacles. A tendency to divorce sex from business. How can that be genetic? All I can guess is that something in the DNA, or a relationship between various proteins, is compatible with certain responses to the environment and incompatible with others. It's in the genes. In which case, what the hell is a psychotherapist good for?"

George shrugged. "I've always wondered that."

For a moment Dr. Manwaring looked annoyed. Theo he laughed. "So have I. We don't help very many people, and we never help the people who need help the most. You aren't a psychotherapist, are you? Yet I would have been pleased, despite all my years of training, if one of my dialogues with Marian Williamson had gone so smoothly."

"Thank you. You've been a tremendous help."

"Let me read the paper you write."

"I will. You don't mind my using a tape of this conversation?"

"Not at all. What are you going to call it?"

"Call what?"

"This effect. How about, 'The Soul Syndrome.'"

"Scientists who talk seriously about the soul get laughed out of symposiums, Dr. Manwaring."

"Then at least do me a favor and title the article 'The Discovery of the Soul.' Because I think that's what you found here. It may not live on after death, but it sure as hell is an inner force that controls the outer actions. The genuine unconscious. Freud would be proud of you. Even though Freud was an idiot."

They laughed. They had dinner together. And the next day, after George took Dr. Manwaring to the airport, he sat watching the planes take off. It surprised him, vaguely, that the planes were still following their normal domestic schedules. France had surrendered the day before-- millions of American soldiers were coining home under terms of the surrender treaty. Britain was becoming a client state of Russia. A war had been fought and lost in thirty weeks, and during all that time America hadn't stopped, hadn't gone on rationing, hadn't even buckled her belt a little tighter. The airlines still flew. And George Rines had an uninterrupted budget for researching into the human soul, of all things.

No wonder we lost, George thought. We don't even know when we're at war.

He went back to the laboratory and made a decision. The next experiment would have an entirely different purpose. The sleepers were beyond saving. But somec wasn't. Somec might be useful.

In the morning he had his own brain taped. And then, while the assistants were busy speculating on why the boss had done that, he went into another laboratory, put the normal dosage of somec into a syringe, and in front of a horrified graduate student he injected himself with the drug.

It coursed through him quickly and painfully and it surprised him. "Dr. Rines," the graduate student shouted. "That was somec."

"I know," he answered impatiently, "and it hurts like hell. The braintapers have a tape of my own brain. Leave me for a couple of days, revive me, and play myself back into me."

"Why did you do this to yourself?"

"It's against the law to use human beings as guinea pigs. I promised myself I wouldn't sue." And then the somec turned hot in his veins and his memories fled out of his mind and he was asleep.

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He awoke disoriented. He remembered sitting down to be taped, remembered the helmet on his head with the needles that carried the currents. And now, abruptly, he was lying on a bed in the patient section of the lab, surrounded by his assistants.

"Good morning," he said.

"You're an idiot," said Doran Waite. "Scientists don't try their own magic potions anymore."

"I couldn't legally ask anyone else to do this, and we had to know."

"So we'll know. And if we were wrong about the rats and even your own brain patterns don't fit inside your head anymore, what will you do then?"

"Be out of circulation before the Russians come." George laughed. No one else did.

While waiting to see how George turned out, they kept working. They tried a control group, to see if any residual memories did, in fact, remain after the somec. They revived another five patients but did not play any braintapes into their heads. They remained like infants, utterly out of control of their bodies. After two weeks of no more progress than an infant of the same age, they were put back on somec.

And George had no ill effects at all. "No disorientation," he told the assistants who interviewed him. "No feeling that my memories are wrong at all. I feel fine."

When he had said that for five weeks, he started work on writing the final report. It took more than a month, with all the papers to be sorted through and interpreted, but the conclusion was basically this: There was nothing to be done to help the current sleepers, but by pretaping a person's memories and then putting him on somec, with the tape to be replayed after he awakened, a person could be kept alive for an indefinite period of time with no damage whatsoever. It meant that now people who were dying of cancer could be safely put to sleep and revived when the cure was available. It meant that now a crew could be put on a spaceship and sleep their way to the stars and awaken at the other end, probably with no ill effects-- though, of course, there hadn't been time to test the effects of somec over several centuries. But it meant there was a chance.

It meant that immortality of a sort was within reach.

And, report in hand-- or rather, in briefcase-- George Rines flew back to Washington and went straight to Senator Maxwell's office. The senator was in a meeting. George waited. And when the senator returned, George didn't give him time to say hello.

After a few minutes of George explaining all the implications of somec combined with braintaping, the senator wearily shook his head.

"Starships, George? Immortality? Who really gives a damn anymore?"

The despair was so thick in the room that George caught himself holding his breath, as if not to breathe it in. A moment ago he had been excited, had been sure he could communicate that excitement to Senator Maxwell.

Instead the senator handed him a short press release. "Go ahead and read it. The President's reading it to the press right now."

It said:

"Today Russian troops entered New York State and Maine from Quebec. The National Guard is trying to cope with the emergency as U.S. Army units converge on the area. We believe that the aggression will be dealt with shortly, but in, the meantime we are proceeding with an orderly evacuapon of New York City, Buffalo, Rochester, and other major cities that seem to be primary targets for the enemy.

"Throughout our administration we have struggled to maintain at least a semblance of detente. We

have struggled for peace. Let the court of world opinion decide whether we have done badly. But the time for peace and restraint has ended. We will fight as necessary to preserve our great nation.

"Because I know it will be asked, I answer the question, 'Will we use nuclear weapons?' The answer is an unequivocal no. I wish I could say the reason was altruistic. But blood will be shed anyway. The reason we will not launch our missiles is because today our aerial photographs showed that the Russians did not remove their missiles from Quebec or Cuba after all. Today they removed the camouflage so we would know how futile an attempt to launch missiles would be. Because the moment we begin preparations for launch; the enemy will have destroyed us. It is that simple. So we will fight on the ground and in the air and on the sea with conventional weapons, and, God willing, we shall prevail. Pray for our soldiers. And pray for their commanders."

George set the paper back on the senator's desk, slowly.

"We used to joke about the day the Russians invaded."

The senator buried his face in his hands. "The press release doesn't even begin to tell the story; George. The Russians aren't meeting any resistance."

"The National Guard--"

"The National Guard is breaking and running at every confrontation. The National Guard is taking its weapons and going home, presumably to protect their families. And we all saw what our Army can do in Europe. It can run. But it can't fight."

George felt sick. "But I thought--"

"No one thought. Nobody gives a damn. For the last five years we've been in the worst situation the world could possibly be in, and no one stopped making money long enough to notice." The senator picked up the first few folders of George's report. "Starships. I wish I had one now. I would fly far, far away. I'll make a bet with you, George. I'll bet you that the enemy's in Washington within two weeks. And I'll bet you that the U.S. surrenders within a month. And I'll bet you that during all that time, we outnumbered them and outgunned them three or four to one."

"I hope you're wrong."

"I'm being optimistic, George. Now get the hell out of my office and take your starships with you."

George had to call his secretary at Berkeley, which was hard, since the phone lines were crowded, but he got the number of Aggie's lawyer. He caught him in his office just as he was leaving.

"After a year, now, you suddenly decide to call," the lawyer said.

"Things are worse than anyone thinks," George insisted. "Give me Aggies phone number."

"She's forbidden me to give you any information as to her whereabouts, Mr. Rines, and I don't have time to argue with you. I have a case in court in half an hour and I have to leave immediately."

"A case in court! You idiot, I can't believe you're going to a case in court! You're in New Jersey! The Russians aren't two hundred miles away! And you have a case in court!"

"Don't be an alarmist."

"Listen, listen to me. I just talked to Senator Maxwell. He estimates we only have a few days. Days, he said. I have passes and clearances that can let me use high priority aircraft to get Aggie and the girls to California, where it's safer. Do you understand that? I can save their lives or at least let them live without being inconvenienced and heaven knows they love not to be inconvenienced, particularly by bullets, so give me their telephone number and their address and don't give me any more argument."

The lawyer, still reluctantly, gave George the telephone number and the address. It was a Virginia telephone number, and the address was in Sterling Park. Half an hour if the roads were clear.

And, to his surprise, the roads were nearly clear. It was as if there were no war at all. Business as usual. Delivery trucks, the normal number of cars. No exodus into the countryside. No panic. Not even a sense of grim determination to fight. The only grimness was from the habitual speeders who resented the presence of drivers going the normal rate of speed. George was one of those who sped. He turned on the radio-- sure enough, the news was blaring out every fifteen minutes. But in between they were still playing music. The top forty on some stations; easy listening on others; a talk statio was interviewing a man who swam the Chesapeake Bay once a week. "Someday soon I plan to swim it the long way. The only real danger is from the pollution. One swallow of the water is like smoking a pack a day for ten years." Laughter from the studio audience.

Am I living in the same world with these people? George couldn't believe the indifference. If all the world is crazy, I must be the one who's insane.

But he got to Sterling Park, and found his wife and daughters packing a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

"Aggie," he said, and when Agle turned around George was relieved to see that she was happy to see him, that her arms reached out instinctively for him, and he embraced her and told her he could get them to California immediately, it's a good thing they were packing, and hurry.

"We are hurrying," Aggie said. "But George, you don't understand. We've been ready for this for a year now. We knew this was going to happen. We know where we're going to go. And it isn't California."

"But California's safer."

"Wo place is safer, George, except away from the cities. We didn't know you'd be here, George, but we have enough to spare. We even have an extra sleeping bag. Come with us, George."

She meant it. She wanted him. And he remembered the lonely nights coming home to his apartment. He almost said yes. But then he remembered his work at Berkeley.

"I can't," he said. "I have work to do. Why do you think I have the priority passes?"

"Work?" she said, and her face turned, bitter. "Playing with rats?"

"Aggie, I've found the way that we can travel to the stars!"

"And we've found the way we can travel to the hills. Which do you think is more practical?"

She turned her back on him and went back to loading the jeep. He watched for another fifteen minutes or so, trying to think of something to say. Finally he said good-bye.

"Good-bye, Daddy," Diane said.

"I'm afraid for you," he said.

Aggic turned to him and acidly retorted, "Afraid? You'll never notice the war, George."

"I notice it."

"You know it's going on. But it won't change anything, will it? You've got work to do. Save the world. Go to the stars. Clean up rat shit. Nothing, but nothing, can interfere with that."

The words stung. She had said them before, during their many quarrels before the separation, but they stung now, because he saw that he was no different from Aggie's lawyer-- both trying to conduct business as usual, both shutting out the storms that would soon sweep the world away. Almost. Almost he said, "I'll go with you." But he could not. It was impossible.

"It's impossible," he said. "I am what I am. I can't change."

Aggie smiled a little then. "How fatal for you. I am also what I am. I wish it weren't true. I wish I could cultivate your oblivion to reality. "

"I wish I could think my work was as trivial as you do."

"If wishes were fishes."

"We'd never starve." And they laughed in memory of a joke they had shared years ago when they still shared jokes. And then George got back in his car and, because he had priority passes, he was able to get on one of the few airplanes that wasn't shuttling troops to the front, and he was in Berkeley when the news came about the surrender.

The troops had begun fighting, but they kept coming to cities in their slow retreat. And in every city they came to, most of the citizens had refused to evacuate. "Declare us an open city," the mayors would say. "There are too many people to evacuate, and a battle would kill thousands. Millions. Declare us an open city." And so the military declared it an open city and moved on.

In less than a week they were at the outskirts of Washington, D.C., and when the general commanding the division that had just left Baltimore realized that even now Congress couldn't make up its mind, he surrendered and went home. And by that night, the war was over, except for a few futile pockets of resistance in the South and the West and the Midwest.

The first Russian troops to arrive in Berkeley only three days later found George Rines standing guard over his files with a few like-minded graduate assistants, as others, led by Doran Waite, tried to break in to burn the papers. "You can't let the Russians have this!"

"I can't let this knowledge be destroyed!" George yelled back. And then the submachine guns were pointed at them and the fight was over and the files were safe for posterity and it was only then that George realized that what he was fighting for was not knowledge, but his command of it, and the Russian scientists came only a week later and George was out of a job. They occasionally visited him to ask questions, but other than that, he was not allowed into the building. "Security," the Russians told him. "You might try to destroy something."

Eventually, however, they let him back in, offering him a position as a lab assistant. He took it.

And he watched in frustration as they kept making mistakes, kept violating simple rules of procedure, and he realized serious research was dead here. Enough had been done that somec and braintaping could be done on a fairly large scale. It didn't occur to the Russians-- or they were forbidden to let it occur to them-- that there was a great deal more theoretical work to be done on the question of man's soul.

"Am I correct," the Russian supervisor asked him one day, "in believing that your final report declares that these sleepers can never be revived?"

"Not as themselves. Not as sane human beings. They'd have to be cared for as infants."

"And they all have cancer?"

"Or something else."

That evening, at closing time, Goerge heard a Russian casually mention the fact that the bodies of the sleepers had all been sent to the mortuary for cremation.

"What?" George asked. He had heard correctly, they told him. "But they're people!" he insisted, shouting at the supervisor, whom he accosted in the lobby of the research building.

"Hopelessly ill people who can never be productively awakened. By any man's definition they're dead."

"Not by mine!" George insisted.

The Russian laughed. "Angry, aren't you? If you Americans had shown half so much spirit on the battlefield, we might not be here today." And he left.

George went to the files and reread the dialogues. Now he saw easily the real person behind the facade of phony memories. Now he loved them all, and mourned for their deaths. Now he understood why Aggie had left him, because in the long run all his work could be so easily undone, and at the last only the people remain, the only achievements that matter are the people he knew, and he realized he knew the dead sleepers better than he knew his wife, his daughters, or himself.

It was not in his nature to kill himself.

So he went to the braintaping room and erased his braintape. Then he went to the somec lab and injected the somec into his veins. They would cremate him, when they realized they had no hope of reviving him. But he would be asleep, and wouldn't notice.

And in the meantime, his memories were gone, because he knew who he really was, and he couldn't, after all, live with himself. Who you are may be fixed by the genes, he said to himself as the somec swept through him. But it doesn't mean you have to like it.

A THOUSAND DEATHS

Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?

-- Galatians 4:16

"You will make no speeches," said the prosecutor.

"I didn't expect they'd let me," Jerry Crove answered, affecting a confidence he didn't feel. The prosecutor was not hostile; he seemed more like a high school drama coach than a man who was seeking Jerry's death.

"They not only won't let you, " the prosecutor said, "but if you try anything, it will go much worse for you. We have you cold, you know. We don't need anywhere near as much proof as we have."

"You haven't proved anything."

"We've proved you knew about it," the prosecutor insisted mildly. "No point arguing now. Knowing about treason and not reporting it is exactly equal to committing treason."

Jerry shrugged and looked away.

The cell was bare concrete. The door was solid steel. The bed was a hammock hung from hooks on the wall. The toilet was a can with a removable plastic seat. There was no conceivable way to escape. Indeed, there was nothing that could conceivably occupy an intelligent person's mind for more than five minutes. In the three weeks he had been here, he had memorized every crack in the concrete, every bolt in the door. He had nothing to look at, except the prosecutor. Jerry reluctantly met the man's gaze.

"What do you say when the judge asks you how you plead to the charges?"

"Nolo contendere."

"Very good. It would be much nicer if you'd consent to say 'guilty'," the prosecutor said.

"I don't like the word."

"Just remember. Three cameras will be pointing at you. The trial will be broadcast live. To America, you represent all Americans. You must comport yourself with dignity, quietly accepting the fact that your complicity in the Assassination of Peter Anderson--"

"Andreyevitch--"

"Anderson has brought you to the point of death, where all depends on the mercy of the court. And now I'll go have lunch. Tonight we'll see each other again. And remember. No speeches. Nothing embarrassing."

Jerry nodded. This was not the time to argue. He spent the afternoon practicing conjugations of Portuguese irregular verbs, wishing that somehow he could go back and undo the moment when he agreed to speak to the old man who had unfolded all the plans to assassinate Andreyevitch. "Now I must trust you," said the old man. "Temos que conflar no senhor americano. You love liberty, no?"

Love liberty? Who knew anymore? What was liberty? Being free to make a buck? The Russians had been smart enough to know that if they let Americans make money, they really didn't give a damn which language the government was speaking. And, in fact, the government spoke English anyway.

The propaganda that they had been feeding him wasn't funny. It was too true. The United States had never been so peaceful; it was more prosperous than it had been since the Vietnam War boom thirty years before. And the lazy, complacent American people were going about business as usual. As if pictures of Lenin on buildings and billboards were just what they had always wanted.

I was no different, he reminded himself. I sent in my work application, complete with oath of allegiance. I accepted it meekly when they opted me out for a tutorial with a high Party official. I even taught his damnable little children for three years in Rio.

When I should have been writing plays.

But what do I write about? Why not a comedy-- The Yankee and the Commissar, a load of laughs about a woman commissar who marries an American blue blood who manufactures typewriters. There are no women commissars, of course, but one must maintain the illusion of a free and equal society.

"Bruce, my dear," says the commissar in a thick but sexy Russian accent, "your typewriter company is suspiciously close to making a profit."

"And if it were running at a loss, you'd turn me in, yes, my little noodle?" (Riotous laughs from the Russians in the audience; the Americans are not amused, but then, they speak English fluently and don't need broad humor. Besides, the reviews are all approved by the Party, so we don't have to worry about the critics. Keep the Russians happy, and screw the American audience.) Dialogue continues:

"All for the sake of Mother Russia."

"Screw Mother Russia."

"Please do," says Natasha. "Regard me as her personal incarnation."

Oh, but the Russians do love onstage sex. Forbidden in Russia, of course, but Americans are supposed to be decadent.

I might as well have been a ride designer for Disneyland, Jerry thought. Might as well have written shtick for vaudeville. Might as well go stick my head in an oven. But with my luck, it would be electric.

He may have slept. He wasn't sure. But the door opened, and he opened his eyes with no memory of having heard footsteps approach. The calm before the storm: and now, the storm.

The soldiers were young, but unslavic. Slavish but definitely American. Slaves to the Slavs. Put that in a protest poem sometime, he decided, if only there were someone who wanted to read a protest poem.

The young American soldiers (But the uniforms were wrong. I'm not old enough to remember the old ones, but these are not made for American bodies.) escorted him down corridors, up stairs, through doors, until they were outside and they put him into a heavily armored van. What did they think, he was part of a conspiracy and his fellows would come to save him? Didn't they know that a man in

his position would have no friends by now?

Jerry had seen it at Yale. Dr. Swick had been very popular. Best damn professor in the department. He could take the worst drivel and turn it into a play, take terrible actors and make them look good, take apathetic audiences and make them, of all things, enthusiastic and hopeful. And then one day the police had broken into his home and found Swick with four actors putting on a play for a group of maybe a score of friends. What was it-- Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Jerry remembered. A sad script. A despairing script. But a sharp one, nonetheless, one that showed despair as being an ugly, destructive thing, one that showed lies as suicide, one that, in short, made the audience feel that, by God, something was wrong with their lives, that the peace was illusion, that the prosperity was a fraud, that America's ambitions had been cut off and that so much that was good and proud was still undone--

And Jerry realized that he was weeping. The soldiers sitting across from him in the armored van were looking away. Jerry dried his eyes.

As soon as news got out that Swick was arrested, he was suddenly unknown. Everyone who had letters or memos or even class papers that bore his name destroyed them. His name disappeared from address books. His classes were empty as no one showed up. No one even hoping for a substitute, for the university suddenly had no record that there had ever been such a class, ever been such a professor. His house had gone up for sale, his wife had moved, and no one said good-bye. And then, more than a year later, the CBS news (which always showed official trials then) had shown ten minutes of Swick weeping and saying, "Nothing has ever been better for America than Communism. It was just a foolish, immature desire to prove myself by thumbing my nose at authority. It meant nothing. I was wrong. The government's been kinder to me than I deserve." And so on. The words were silly. But as Jerry had sat, watching, he had been utterly convinced. However meaningless the words were, Swick's face was meaningful: he was utterly sincere.

The van stopped, and the doors in the back opened just as Jerry remembered that he had burned his copy of Swick's manual on playwriting. Burned it, but not until he had copied down all the major ideas. Whether Swick knew it or not, he had left something behind. But what will I leave behind? Jerry wondered.

Two Russian children who now speak fluent English and whose father was blown up in their front yard right in front of them, his blood spattering their faces, because Jerry had neglected to warn him? What a legacy.

For a moment he was ashamed. A life is a life, no matter whose or how lived.

Then he remembered the night when Peter Andreyevitch (no-- Anderson. Pretending to be American is fashionable nowadays, so long as everyone can tell at a glance that you're really Russian) had drunkenly sent for Jerry and demanded, as Jerry's employer (i.e., owner), that Jerry recite his poems to the guests at the party. Jerry had tried to laugh it off, but Peter was not that drunk: he insisted, and Jerry went upstairs and got his poems and came down and read them to a group of men who could not understand the poems, to a group of women who understood them and were merely amused. Little Andre said afterward, "The poems were good, Jerry," but Jerry felt like a virgin who had been raped and then given a two-dollar tip by the rapist.

In fact, Peter had given him a bonus. And Jerry had spent it.

Charlie Ridge, Jerry's defense attorney, met him just inside the doors of the courthouse. "Jerry, old boy, looks like you're taking all this pretty well. Haven't even lost any weight."

"On a diet of pure starch, I've had to run around my cell all day just to stay thin." Laughter. Ha ho, what a fun time we're having. What jovial people we are.

"Listen, Jerry, you've got to do this right, you know. They have audience response measurements. They can judge how sincere you seem. You've got to really mean it."

"Wasn't there once a time when defense attorneys tried to get their clients off?" Jerry asked.

"Jerry, that kind of attitude isn't going to get you anywhere. These aren't the good old days when you could get off on a technicality and a lawyer could delay trial for five years. You're

guilty as hell, and so if you cooperate, they won't do anything to you. They'll just deport you."

"What a pal," Jerry said. "With you on my side, I haven't a worry in the world."

"Exactly right," said Charlie. "And don't you forget it."

The courtroom was crowded with cameras. (Jerry had heard that in the old days of freedom of the press, cameras had often been barred from courtrooms. But then, in those days the defendant didn't usually testify and in those days the lawyers didn't both work from the same script. Still, there was the press, looking for all the world as if they thought they were free.)

Jerry had nothing to do for nearly half an hour. The audience (Are they paid? Jerry wondered. In America, they must be.) filed in, and the show began at exactly eight o'clock. The judge came in looking impressive in his robes, and his voice was resonant and strong, like a father on television remonstrating his rebellious son. Everyone who spoke faced the camera with the red light on the top. And Jerry felt very tired.

He did not waver in his determination to try to turn this trial to his own advantage, but he seriously wondered what good,it would do. And was it to his own advantage? They would certainly punish him more severely. Certainly they would be angry, would cut him off. But he had written his speech as if it were an impassioned climactic scene in a play (Crove Against the Communists or perhaps Liberty's Last Cry), and he the hero who would willingly give his life for the chance to instill a little bit of patriotism (a little bit of intelligence, who gives a damn about patriotism!) in the hearts and minds of the millions of Americans who would be watching.

"Gerald Nathan Crove, you have heard the charges against you. Please step forward and state your plea. "

Jerry stood up and walked with, he hoped, dignity to the taped X on the floor where the prosecutor had insisted that he stand. He looked for the camera with the red light on. He stared into it intently, sincerely, and wondered if, after all, it wouldn't be better just to say nolo contendere or even guilty and have an easier time of it.

"Mr. Crove," intoned the judge, "America is watching. How do you plead?"

America was watching indeed. And Jerry opened his mouth and said not the Latin but the English he had rehearsed so often in his mind:

"There is a time for courage and a time for cowardice, a time when a man can give in to those who offer him leniency and a time when he must, instead, resist them for the sake of a higher goal. America was once a free nation. But as long as they pay our salaries, we seem content to be slaves! I plead not guilty, because any act that serves to weaken Russian domination of any nation in the world is a blow for all the things that make life worth living and against those to whom power is the only god worth worshiping!"

Ah. Eloquence. But in his rehearsals he had never dreamed he would get even this far, and yet they still showed no sign of stopping him. He looked away from the camera. He looked at the prosecutor, who was taking notes on a yellow pad. He looked at Charlie, and Charlie was resignedly shaking his head and putting his papers back in his briefcase. No one seemed to be particularly worried that Jerry was saying these things over live television. And the broadcasts were live--they had stressed that, that he must be careful to do everything correctly the first time because it was all live--

They were lying, of course. And Jerry stopped his speech and jammed his hands into his pockets, only to discover that the suit they had provided, for him had no pockets (save money by avoiding nonessentials, said the slogan), and his hands slid uselessly down his hips.

The prosecutor looked up in surprise when the judge cleared his throat. "Oh, I beg your pardon,". he said. "The speeches usually go on much longer. I congratulate you, Mr. Crove, on your brevity."

Jerry nodded in mock acknowledgment, but he felt no mockery.

"We always have a dry run," said the prosecutor, "just to catch you last-chancers."

"Everyone knew that?"

"Well, everyone but you, of course, Mr. Crove. All right, everybody, you can go home now."

The audience arose and quietly shuffled out.

The prosecutor and Charlie got up and walked to the bench. The judge was resting his chin on his hands, looking not at all fatherly now, just a little bored. "How much do you want?" the judge asked.

"Unlimited," said the prosecutor.

"Is he really that important?" Jerry might as well have not been there. "After all, they're doing the actual bombers in Brazil."

"Mr. Crove is an American," said the prosecutor, "who chose to let a Russian ambassador be assassinated."

"All right, all right," said the judge, and Jerry marveled that the man hadn't the slightest trace of a Russian accent.

"Gerald Nathan Crove, the court finds you guilty of murder and treason against the United States of America and its ally, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Do you have anything to say before sentence is pronounced?"

"I just wondered," said Jerry, "why you all speak English."

"Because," said the prosecutor icily, "we are in America."

"Why do you even bother with trials?"

"To stop other imbeciles from trying what you did. He just wants to argue, Your Honor."

The judge slammed down his gavel. "The court sentences Gerald Nathan Crove to be put to death by every available method until such time as he convincingly apologizes for his action to the American people. Court stands adjourned. Lord in heaven, do I have a headache."

They wasted no time. At five o'clock in the morning, Jerry had barely fallen asleep. Perhaps they monitored this, because they promptly woke him up with a brutal electric shock across the metal floor where Jerry was lying. Two guards-- this time Russians-- came in and stripped him and then dragged him to the execution chamber even though, had they let him, he would have walked.

The prosecutor was waiting. "I have been assigned your case," he said, "because you promise to be a challenge. Your psychological profile is interesting, Mr. Crove. You long to be a hero."

"I wasn't aware of that."

"You displayed it in the courtroom, Mr. Crove. You are no doubt aware-- your middle name implies it-- of the last words of the American Revolutionary War espionage agent named Nathan Hale. 'I regret that I have but one life to give for my country,' he said. You shall discover that he was mistaken. He should be very glad he had but one life.

"Since you were arrested several weeks ago in Rio de Janeiro, we have been growing a series of clones for you. Development is quite accelerated, but they have been kept in zero-sensation environments until the present. Their minds are blank.

"You are surely aware of somec, yes, Mr. Crove?"

Jerry nodded. The starship sleep drug.

"We don't need it in this case, of course. But the mind-taping technique we use on interstellar flights-- that is quite useful. When we execute you, Mr. Crove, we shall be continuously taping

your brain. All your memories will be rather indecorously dumped into the head of the first clone, who will immediately become you. However, he will clearly remember all your life up to and including the moment of death.

"It was so easy to be a hero in the old days, Mr. Crove. Then you never knew for sure what death was like. It was compared to sleep, to great emotional pain, to quick departure of the soul from the body. None of these, of course, is particularly accurate. "

Jerry was frightened. He had heard of multiple death before, of course-- it was rumored to exist because of its deterrent value. "They resurrect you and kill you again and again," said the horror story, and now he knew that it was true. Or they wanted him to believe it was true.

What frightened Jerry was the way they planned to kill him. A noose hung from a hook in the ceiling. It could be raised and lowered, but there didn't seem to be the slightest provision for a quick, sharp drop to break his neck. Jerry had once almost choked to death on a salmon bone. The sensation of not being able to breathe terrified him.

"How can I get out of this? " Jerry asked, his palms sweating.

"The first one, not at all," said the prosecutor. "So you might as well be brave and use up your heroism this time around. Afterward we'll give you a screen test and see how convincing your repentance is. We're fair, you know. We try to avoid putting anyone through this unnecessarily. Please sit."

Jerry sat. A man in a lab coat put a metal helmet on his head. A few needles pricked into Jerry's scalp.

"Already," said the prosecutor, "your first clone is becoming aware. He already has all your memories. He is right now living through your panic-- or shall we say your attempts at courage. Make sure you concentrate carefully on what is about to happen to you, Jerry. You want to make sure you remember every detail."

"Please," Jerry said.

"Buck up, my man," said the prosecutor with a grin. "You were wonderful in the courtroom. Let's have some of that noble resistance now."

Then the guards led him to the noose and put it around his neck, being careful not to dislodge the helmet. They pulled it tight and then tied his hands behind his back. The rope was rough on his neck. He waited, his neck tingling for the sensation of being lifted in the air. He flexed his neck muscles, trying to keep them rigid, though he knew the effort would be useless. His knees grew weak, waiting for them to raise the rope.

The room was plain. There was nothing to see, and the prosecutor had left the room. There was, however, a mirror on a wall beside him. He could barely see into it without turning his entire body. He was sure it was an observation window. They would watch, of course.

Jerry needed to go to the bathroom.

Remember, he told himself, I won't really die. I'll he awake in the other room in just a moment.

But his body was not convinced. It didn't matter a bit that a new Jerry Crove would be ready to get up and walk away when this was over. This Jerry Crove would die.

"What are you waiting for?" he demanded, and as if that had been their cue the guards pulled the rope and lifted him into the air.

From the beginning it was worse than he had thought. The rope had an agonizingly tight grip on his neck; there was no question of resisting at all. The suffocation was nothing, at first. Like being under water holding your breath. But the rope itself was painful, and his neck hurt, and he wanted to cry out with the pain; but nothing could escape his throat.

Not at first.

There was some fumbling with the rope, and it jumped up and down as the guards tied it to the hook on the wall. Once Jerry's feet even touched the floor.

By the time the rope held still, however, the effects of the strangling were taking over and the pain was forgotten. The blood was pounding inside Jerry's head. His tongue felt thick. He could not shut his eyes. And now he wanted to breathe. He had to breathe. His body demanded a breath.

His body was not under control. Intellectually, he knew that he could not possibly reach the floor, knew that this death would be temporary, but right now his mind was not having much influence over his body. His legs kicked and struggled to reach the ground. His hands strained at the rope behind him. And all the exertion only made his eyes bulge more with the pressure of the blood that could not get past the rope; only made him need air more desperately.

There was no help for him, but now he tried to scream for help: The sound now escaped his throat but at the cost of air. He felt as if his tongue were being pushed up into his nose. His kicking grew more violent, though every kick was agony. He spun on the rope; he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. His face was turning purple.

How long will it be? Surely not much longer!

But it was much longer.

If he had been underwater, holding his breath, he would now have given up and drowned.

If he had a gun and a free hand, he would kill himself now to end this agony and the sheer physical terror of being unable to breathe. But he had no gun, and there was no question of inhaling-- and the blood throbbed in his head and made his eyes see everything in shades of red, and finally he saw nothing at all.

Saw nothing except what was going through his mind, and that was a jumble, as if his consciousness were madly trying to make some arrangement that would eliminate the strangulation. He kept seeing himself in the creek behind his house, where he had fallen in when he was a child, and someone was throwing him a rope, but he couldn't and he couldn't and he couldn't catch it, and then suddenly it was around his neck and dragging him under.

Spots of black stabbed at his eyes. His body felt bloated, and then it erupted, his bowel and bladder and stomach ejecting all that they contained, except that his vomit was stopped at his throat, where it burned.

The shaking of his body turned into convulsive jerks and spasms, and for a moment Jerry felt himself reaching the welcome state of unconsciousness. Then, suddenly, he discovered that death is not so kind.

There is no such thing as slipping off quietly in your sleep. No such thing as being "killed immediately" or having death mercifully end the pain.

Death woke him from his unconsciousness, for perhaps a tenth of a second. But that tenth of a secdnd was infinite, and in it he experienced the infinite agony of impending nonexistence. His life did not flash before his eyes. The lack of life instead exploded, and in his mind he experienced far greater pain and fear than anything he had felt from the mere hanging.

And then he died.

For an instant he hung in limbo, feeling and seeing nothing. Then-- a light stabbed at his eyes and soft foam peeled away from his skin and the prosecutor stood there, watching as he gasped and retched and clutched at his throat. It seemed incredible that he could now breathe, and if he had experienced only the strangling, he might now sigh with relief and say, "I've been through it once, and now I'm not afraid of death." But the strangling was nothing. The strangling was a prelude. And he was afraid of death.

They forced him to come into the room where he had died. He saw his body hanging, black-faced, from the ceiling, the helmet still on the head, the tongue protruding.

"Cut it down," the prosecutor said, and for a moment Jerry waited for the guards to obey. Instead, a guard handed Jerry a knife.

With death still heavy in his mind, Jerry swung around and lunged at the prosecutor. But a guard caught his hand in an irresistible grip, and the other guard held a pistol pointed at Jerry's head.

"Do you want to die again so soon? " asked the prosecutor, and Jerry whimpered and took the knife and reached up to cut himself down from the noose; in order to reach above the knot, he had to stand close enough to the corpse to touch it. The stench was incredible. And the fact of death was unavoidable. Jerry trembled so badly he could hardly control the knife, but eventually the rope parted and the corpse slumped to the ground, knocking Jerry down as it fell. An arm lay across Jerry's legs. The face looked at Jerry eye-to-eye.

Jerry screamed.

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"You see the camera?"

Jerry nodded, numbly.

"You will look at the camera and you will apologize for having done anything against the government that has brought peace to the earth."

Jerry nodded again, and the prosecutor said, "Roll it."

"Fellow Americans," Jerry said, "I'm sorry. I made a terrible mistake. I was wrong. There's nothing wrong with the Russians. I let an innocent man be killed. Forgive me. The government has been kinder to me than I deserve." And so on. For an hour Jerry babbled, insisting that he was craven, that he was guilty, that he was worthless, that the government was vying with God for respectability.

And when he was through, the prosecutor came back in, shaking his head.

"Mr. Crove, you can do better than that.

"Nobody in the audience believed you for one minute. Nobody in the test sample, not one person, believed that you were the least bit sincere. You still think the government ought to be deposed. And so we have to try the treatment again."

"Let me try to confess again."

"A screen test is a screen test, Mr. Crove. We have to give you a little more experience with death before we can permit you to have any involvement with life.

This time Jerry screamed right from the beginning. He made no attempt at all to bear it well. They hung him by the armpits over a long cylinder filled with boiling oil. They slowly lowered him. Death came when the oil was up to his chest-- by then his legs had been completely cooked and the meat was falling off the bones in large chunks.

They made him come in and, when the oil had cooled enough to touch, fish out the pieces of his own corpse.

He wept all through his confession this time, but the test audience was completely unconvinced. "The man's a phony," they said. "He doesn't believe a word of what he's saying."

"We have a problem," said the prosecutor. "You seem so willing to cooperate after your death. But you have reservations. You aren't speaking from the heart. We'll have to help you again."

Jerry screamed and struck out at the prosecutor. When the guards had pulled him away (and the prosecutor was nursing an injured nose), Jerry shouted, "Of course I'm lying! No matter how often you kill me it won't change the fact that this is a government of fools by vicious, lying bastards!"

"On the contrary," said the prosecutor, trying to maintain his good manners and cheerful demeanor despite the blood pouring out of his nose, "if we kill you enough, you'll completely change your mind."

"You can't change the truth!"

"We've changed it for everyone else who's gone through this. And you are far from being the first who had to go to a third clone. But this time, Mr. Crove, do try to forget about being a hero."

They skinned him alive, arms and legs first, and then, finally, they castrated him and ripped the skin off his belly and chest. He died silently when they cut his larynx out-- no, not silently. just voiceless. He found that without a voice he could still whisper a scream that rang in his ears when he awoke and was forced to go in and carry his bloody corpse to the disposal room. He confessed again, and the audience was not convinced.

They slowly crushed him to death, and he had to scrub the blood out of the crusher when he awoke, but the audience only commented. "Who does the jerk think he's fooling?"

They disemboweled him and burned his guts in front of him. They infected him with rabies and let his death linger for two weeks. "They crucified him and let exposure and thirst kill him. They dropped him a dozen tirnes from the roof of a one-story building until he died.

Yet the audience knew that Jerry Crove had not repented.

"My God, Crove, how long do you think I can keep doing this?" asked the prosecutor. He did not seem cheerful. In fact, Jerry thought he looked almost desperate.

"Getting a little tough on you?" Jerry asked, grateful for the conversation because it meant there would be a few minutes between deaths.

"What kind of man do you think I am? We'll bring him back to life in a minute anyway, I tell myself, but I didn't get into this business in order to find new, hideous ways of killing people."

"You don't like it? And yet you have such a natural talent for it."

The prosecutor looked sharply at Crove. "Irony? Now you can joke? Doesn't death mean anything to you?

Jerry did not answer, only tried to blink back the tears that these days came unbidden every few minutes.

"Crove, this is not cheap. Do you think it's cheap? We've spent literally billions of rubles on you. And even with inflation, that's a hell of a lot of money."

"In a classless society there's no need for money."

"What is this, dammit! Now you're getting rebellious? Now you're trying to be a hero?"

"No."

"No wonder we've had to kill you eight times! You keep thinking up clever arguments against us!"

"I'm sorry. Heaven knows I'm sorry."

"I've asked to be released from this assigrunent. I obviously can't crack you."

"Crack me! As if I didn't long to be cracked."

"You're costing too much. There's a definite benefit in having criminals convincingly recant on television. But you're getting too expensive. The cost-benefit ratio is ridiculous now. There's a limit to how much we can spend on you."

"I have a way for you to save money."

"So do I. Convince the damned audience!"

"Next time you kill me, don't put a helmet on my head."

The prosecutor looked absolutely shocked. "That would be final. That would be capital punishment. We're a humane government. We never kill anybody permanently."

They shot him in the gut and let him bleed to death. They threw him from a cliff into the sea. They let a shark eat him alive. They hung him upside down so that just his head was under water, and when he finally got too tired to hold his head out of the water he drowned.

But through all this, Jerry had become more inured to the pain. His mind had finally learned that none of these deaths was permanent after all. And now when the moment of death came, though it was still terrible, he endured it better. He screamed less. He approached death with greater calm. He even hastened the process, deliberately inhaling great draughts of water, deliberately wriggling to attract the shark. When they had the guards kick him to death he kept yelling, "Harder," until he couldn't yell anymore.

And finally when they set up a screen test, he fervently told the audience that the Russian government was the most terrifying empire the world had ever known, because this time they were efficient at keeping their power, because this time there was no outside for barbarians to come from, and because they had seduced the freest people in history into loving slavery. His speech was from the heart-- he loathed the Russians and loved the memory that once there had been freedom and law and a measure of justice in America.

And the prosecutor came into the room ashenfaced.

"You bastard," he said.

"Oh. You mean the audience was live this time?"

"A hundred loyal citizens. And you corrupted all but three of them."

"Corrupted?"

"Convinced them."

Silence for a moment, and then the prosecutor sat down and buried his head in his hands.

"Going to lose your job?" Jerry asked.

"Of course."

"I'm sorry. You're good at it."

The prosecutor looked at him with loathing. "No one ever failed at this before. And I had never had to take anyone beyond a second death. You've died a dozen times, Crove, and you've got used to it."

"I didn't mean to."

"How did you do it?"

"I don't know."

"What kind of animal are you, Crove? Can't you make up a lie and believe it?"

Crove chuckled. (In the old days, at this level of amusement he would have laughed uproariously. But inured to death or not, he had scars. And he would never laugh loudly again.) "It was my business. As a playwright. The willing suspension of disbelief."

The door opened and a very important looking man in a military uniform covered with medals came in, followed by four Russian soldiers. The prosecutor sighed and stood up. "Good-bye, Crove."

"Good-bye," Jerry said.

"You're a very strong man."

"So, " said Jerry, "are you. " And the prosecutor left.

The soldiers took Jerry out of the prison to a different place entirely. A large complex of buildings in Florida. Cape Canaveral. They were exiling him, Jerry realized.

"What's it like?" he asked the technician who was preparing him for the flight.

"Who knows?" the technician asked. "No one's ever come back. Hell, no one's ever arrived yet."

"After I sleep on somec, will I have any trouble waking up?"

"In the labs, here on earth, no. Out there, who knows?"

"But you think we'll live?"

"We send you to planets that look like they might be habitable. If they aren't, so sorry. You take your chances. The worst that can happen is you die."

"Is that all?" Jerry murmured.

"Now lie down and let me tape your brain."

Jerry lay down and the helmet, once again, recorded his thoughts. It was irresistible, of course: when you are conscious that your thoughts are being taped, Jerry realized, it is impossible not to try to think something important. As if you wer performing. Only the audience would consist of just one person. Yourself when you woke up.

But he thought this: That this starship and the others that would be and had been sent out to colonize in prison worlds were not really what the Russians thought they were. True, the prisoners sent in the Gulag ships would be away from earth for centuries before they landed, and many or most of them would not survive. But some would survive.

I will survive, Jerry thought as the helmet picked up his brain pattern and transferred it to tape.

Out there the Russians are creating their own barbarians. I will be Attila the Hun. My child will be Mohammed. My grandchild will be Genghis Khan.

One of us, someday, will sack Rome.

Then the somec was injected, and it swept through him, taking consciousness with it, and Jerry realized with a shock of recognition that this, too, was death: but a welcome death, and he didn't mind. Because this time when he woke up he would be free.

He hummed cheerfully until he couldn't remember how to hum, and then they put his body with hundreds of others on a starship and pushed them all out into space, where they fell upward endlessly into the stars. Going home.

SKIPPING STONES

Unreal friendship may turn to real. But real friendship, once ended, cannot be mended.

-- T.S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral

Bergen Bishop wanted to be an artist.

Because he said so when he was seven, he was promptly given pencils, paper, charcoal, watercolors, oils, canvas, a palette, an exquisite assortment of brushes, and an instructor who came and taught him once a week. In short, he was given all the paraphernalia money can buy.

The instructor was smart enough to know that when one hopes to make a living teaching the children of the rich, one learns when to be honest and when to lie. Thus, the words "the child has talent" had often passed his lips before. But this time he meant them, and it was difficult to find a way to make the lying words now express the truth.

"The boy has talent!" he declared. "The boy has talent!"

"No one supposed that he hadn't," the boy's mother said, a bit surprised at how effusive the teacher was. The father said nothing, just wondered if the instructor thought he'd get a bonus for declaring it with such fervor.

"That boy has talent. Potential. Great potential," the teacher said (again), and mother, finally grown weary of the effusion of praise, said, "My dear fellow, we don't mind a bit if he has talent. He may keep it. Now come again next Tuesday. Thank you."

Yet despite his parents' unconcern, Bergen applied himself to learning to paint with some vigor. In a short time he had acquired technique well beyond his years.

He was a good-tempered boy with a strong sense of justice. Many young men of his class on the planet Crove used their serving-men as whipping boys. After all, since brothers were out of fashion one had to have someone to pick on. And the serving-men (who were boys the same age as their masters) learned very early that if they defended themselves, they would soon face far worse than their youthful master could mete out.

Bergen, however, was not unfair. Because he was unquarrelsome, he and his serving-man, Dal Vouls, never had harsh words or blows. And because he was fair, when Dal shyly mentioned that he, too, would like to learn to paint, Bergen immediately shared his equipment and his instructor.

The instructor didn't mind teaching the two boys at once-- Dal was obedient and quiet and didn't ask questions. But he was too aware of the possibilities for added income not to mention to Bergen's father that it was customary to give an added stipend when there were two pupils instead of one.

"Dal, have you been wasting the instructor's time?" Locken Bishop asked his son's serving-man.

Dal remained silent, too afraid to speak quickly. Bergen answered. "It was my idea. To have him taught. It doesn't take the teacher any longer."

"The teacher's dunning me for more. You've got to learn the value of money, Bergen. Either you take the lessons alone, or you take them not at all."

Even so, Bergen forced the teacher ("I'll see you're fired and blackballed throughout the city. Throughout the world!") to let Dal sit quietly to one side, just watching. Dal didn't set pencil to paper in the sessions, however.

When he was nine, Bergen tired of painting and dismissed the teacher. He took up riding this time, years before most children did, but this time he insisted and his father purchased two horses; and so Dal rode with Bergen.

It's too easy to depict childhood as an idyll. Certainly there were some frustrations, some times when Dal and Bergen didn't see eye-to-eye. But those times were buried in an avalanche of other memories, so that they were soon forgotten. The rides took them far from Bergen's father's house, but there was no direction in which they could ride and leave his father's land and return home the same day.

And because Bergen was able to forget for hours at a time that he was heir and Dal was only a contracted serving-man, they became friends.

Together they poured hot wax on the stairway, which nearly killed Bergen's sister when she

slipped on it-- and Bergen stoically took the full blame, since he would be confined to his room and Dal, if caught, would be beaten and dismissed. Together they hid in the bushes and watched as a couple who had ridden nude on horseback copulated in the gravel on the edge of a cliff-- they marveled for days at the thought that this was what Bergen's parents did behind closed doors. Together they swam in every untrustworthy waterhole on the estate and started fires in every likely corner, saving each other's lives so often they lost track of who was ahead.

And then, when Bergen was fourteen, he remembered that he had painted as a boy. An uncle visited and said, "And this is Bergen, the boy who paints."

"His painting was just a childish whim," Bergen's mother said. "He outgrew it."

Bergen was not accustomed to getting angry with his mother. But at fourteen, few boys are able to accept the word childish without wrath. Bergen immediately said, "Did I, Mother? Then why is it that I still paint?"

"Where?" she said, disbelieving.

"In my room."

"Show me some of your work then, little artist." The word little was infuriating.

"I burn them. They aren't yet representative of my best work."

At that his mother and the uncle laughed uproariously, and Bergen stomped off to his room, Dal a shadow behind him.

"Where the hell is it!" he said angrily, hunting through the cupboard where the art supplies had been.

Dal coughed. "Bergen, Sir," he said (at twelve Bergen had halfway come of age, and it was the law that he had to be called sir by anyone under contract to him or his father), "I thought you weren't using your painting stuff anymore. I've got it."

Bergen turned in amazement. "I wasn't using it. But I didn't know you were."

"I'm sorry, sir. But I didn't get much chance to try while the instructor was coming. I've been using the materials ever since."

"Did you use them up?"

"There was a good supply. There's no more paper, but there's plenty of canvas. I'll get it."

He went and got it, brought it into the big house in two trips, being careful to use the back stairways so Bergen's parents wouldn't see. "I didn't think you'd mind," Dal said, when it was all brought back.

Bergen looked puzzled. "Of course I don't mind. It's just the old biddy's taken it into her head that I'm still a child. I'm going to paint again. I don't know why I ever quit. I've always wanted to be an artist."

And he set up the easel at the window, so he could see the yard below, dotted with the graceful whiptrees; of Crove that rose fifty meters straight up into the air-- and then, in a storm, lay over completely on the ground, so that no farmer of the Plains could ever be free of the worry of having a whiptree crash against his house in the wind. He began with an undercoat of green and blue, and Dal watched. Bergen hesitated now and then, but it came back quickly, and, in fact, the long separation from art had done him no harm. His eye was truer. His colors were deeper. But still an amateur.

"Perhaps if there were more magenta in the sky under the clouds," Dal offered.

Bergen turned to him coldly. "I'm not through with the sky."

"Sorry."

And Bergen painted on. Everything went well enough, except that he couldn't seem to get the whiptrees right. They kept looking so brown and solid, which wasn't right at all. And when he tried to draw them bent, they were awkward, not true to life. Finally he swore and threw the brush out the window, leaped to his feet and stormed away.

Dal walked to the painting and said, "Bergen, sir, it isn't bad. Not at all. It's good. Just the whiptrees."

"I know about the damned whiptrees," Bergen snarled, furious at his failure to be perfect in his first attempt in years. And he turned to see Dal taking swipes at the canvas, quick strokes with a slender brush. And then Dal turned around, and said, "Perhaps like that, sir."

Bergen walked up to the canvas. The whiptrees were there, by far the most lifelike, most dynamic, most beautiful thing in the painting. Bergen looked at them-- how effortless they seemed, how effortlessly Dal had stroked them into the painting. This was not how it should be. It was Bergen who was going to be the artist, not Dal. It was not just or right or fair that Dal should be able to paint whiptrees.

And in anger Bergen shouted something unintelligible and struck out at Dal, catching him a blow at the side of his head. Dal was stunned. Not from the force of the blow, but from the fact of it.

"You've never hit me before," he said, wonderingly.

"I'm sorry," Bergen said immediately.

"All I did was paint the whiptrees."

"I know. I'm sorry. Hitting servants isn't the kind of thing I do."

And now Dal's surprise turned to fury. "Servants?" he asked. "For a moment I forgot that I'm a servant. I saw us try our hands at the same task and I was better at it than you. I forgot I was a servant."

Bergen was frightened at this turn of events. He hadn't meant anything by his statement-- he just prided himself on not being an uncontrolled master.

"But Dal," he said innocently. "You are a servant."

"That I am. I must remember that in the future. Not to win at any games. To laugh at your jokes even when they're stupid. To let your horse always be a little faster. To always agree that you're right even when you're being a fool."

"I've never wanted anyone to treat me like that!" Bergen said, angry at the unfairness of it.

"That's the way servants treat their masters."

"I don't want you to be a servant. I want you to be my friend!"

"And I thought I was."

"You're a servant and a friend."

Dal laughed. "Bergen, sir, a man is either a servant or a friend. They're opposite directions on the same road. Either you're paid for service, or you do it for love."

"But you're paid for service, and I thought you did it for love!"

Dal shook his head. "I served for love, and I thought you fed and clothed me for love. I felt free with you."

"You are free."

"I have a contract."

"If you ever ask me to break it, I will!"

"Is that a promise?"

"On my life. You aren't a servant, Dal!"

And then the door opened, and Bergen's mother and uncle came in. "We heard shouting," his mother said. "We thought there was a quarrel."

"We were having a pillow fight," Bergen said.

"Then why is the pillow neatly on the bed?"

"We finished and put it back."

The uncle laughed. "What a regular little housemaid you're raising, Selly."

"My Lord, Nooel, he wasn't joking. He still paints." They walked up to the painting and looked at it carefully.

Finally Nooel turned to Bergen and smiled, and put out his hand. "I thought it was just bluster and blow. Just a teenager spouting off. But you've got talent, boy. The sky's a bit rough, and you need some work on detail. But whoever can paint whiptrees like that has a future."

Bergen could not take credit unfairly.

"Dal painted the whiptrees."

Selly Bishop looked furious, but smiled sweetly at Dal nonetheless. "How nice, Dal, that Bergen lets you play with his paintings." Dal said nothing. But Nooel stared at him.

"Contract?" Nooel asked.

Dal nodded.

"I'll buy it," Nooel offered.

"Not for sale," Bergen said quickly.

"Actually," Selly said sweetly, "it's not a bad idea. Think you might want to develop the talent?"

"It's worth developing."

"The contract," Bergen said firmly, "is not for sale."

Selly looked coldly at her son. "Everything that was bought can be sold."

"But what a man loves enough, mother, he'll keep regardless of the price he's offered."

"Loves?"

"Your mind is disgusting, Selly," Nooel said. "Obviously they're friends. Sometimes you can be the worst bitch on the planet."

"You're too kind, Nooel. On this planet it's an achievement. After all, there's the empress."

They both laughed and left the room.

"I'm sorry, Dal," Bergen said.

"I'm used to it," Dal answered. "Your mother and I haven't ever gotten along too well. And I don't care-- there's only one person here I care about."

They looked at each other closely for a short time. Smiled. Then dropped the subject, because at

fourteen there are few gentle emotions that can be openly borne for very long.

When Bergen turned twenty, somec came to their level of society.

"A brilliant stroke," Locken Bishop said. "Do you know what it means? If we qualify, we can sleep for five years at a time and wake up for five years at a time. We'll live for another century beyond what we would have otherwise."

"But will we qualify?" Bergen asked.

His parents laughed uproariously. "It's pure merit, and the boy asks if his family will qualify! Of course we'll qualify, Bergen!"

Bergen was quietly angry, as he usually was with his parents these days. "Why?" he asked.

Locken caught the edge in his son's tone. He turned authoritarian, and pointed at Bergen's chest. "Because your father provides jobs for fifty thousand men and women. Because if I went out of business half this planet would reel under the impact. And because I pay more taxes than all but fifty other men in the Empire."

"Because you're rich, in other words," Bergen said.

"Because I'm rich!" Locken answered angrily.

"Then, it, you don't mind, I'll wait to go on somec until I qualify by my merit, and not by my father's."

Selly laughed. "If I waited until I qualified on my own, I'd never get on somec!"

Bergen looked at her with loathing. "And if there were any justice in the world, you never would."

It surprised Bergen, but neither his mother nor his father said anything at all. It was Dal who spoke to him, later that night, as the two of them sat together putting finishing touches on art pieces-- Dal, a miniature, in oils; Bergen, a massive, almost mural-sized portrait of the houseson the estate as he thought they ought to be, with the house much smaller and the barns large enough to be of some use. And his whiptrees were beautiful.

Weeks later, Bergen slipped off and paid the examination fee and tested high enough in basic intelligence, creativity, and ambition that he was given the right to go on somec for three years and off for five years. He would be a sleeper. And he did it without money.

"Congratulations, son," his father said, more than a little proud at his son's independence.

"I notice you've scheduled it so you wake up two years before us. Time to play around, I imagine," Selly said, looking and sounding more bitter than ever.

Dal said only one thing when he heard Bergen was going on somec. "Free me first."

Bergen looked startled.

"You promised," Dal reminded him.

"But I'm not of age. I can't for a year."

"And do you think your father will? Or that your mother would let him? My contract lets them forbid me to paint, or lets them own anything I produce. They could make me clean the stables. They could make me cut trees with my bare hands. And you won't be back for three years."

Bergen was genuinely distressed. "What can I do?"

"Persuade your father to give me my freedom. Or stay awake until you come of age and can give me my freedom yourself."

"I can't forfeit the somec. You have to use it when you get it. They only have so many openings

a year."

"Then persuade your father."

It took a month of constant badgering before Locken Bishop finally agreed to release Dal from his contract. And the contract had a stipulation. "Seventy-five percent of your income above room and board comes to us for five years or until you have paid us eighty thousand."

"Father," Bergen protested, "that's gouging. I would have freed him eleven months from now anyway. And eighty thousand is ten times what you paid for his contract in the first place-- and you didn't pay it to him."

"I've also fed him for twenty years."

"And he worked for it."

"Worked?" Selly interrupted. "He just played. With you."

Dal spoke, softly enough that they quieted down to hear him. "If I give you that, I won't be able to get enough money to take the somec merit examination."

Locken set his jaw. "That makes no difference. It's that or you stay under contract."

Bergen put his face in his hands. Selly smiled. And Dal nodded. "But I want it in writing."

The words were soft, but the effect was electric. Locken rose to his feet, towering over Dal, who was seated. "What did you say, boy? Were you saying you expected a Bishop to make a written contract with a bastard contract worker?"

"I want it in writing," Dal said softly, meeting Locken's fury with equanimity.

"You have my spoken word, and that's enough!"

"And who are the witnesses? Your son, who'll be asleep for three years, and your wife, who can't be trusted alone with a fifteen-year-old servant boy."

Selly gasped. Locken turned red, but stepped back from Dal. And Bergen was horrified. "What?" he asked.

"I want it in writing," Dal said.

"I want you out of this house," Locken answered, but his voice had a new emotion in it-- hurt and betrayal. Of course, Bergen thought: if Dal really meant that, and Mother certainly isn't denying it, of course Father is hurt.

But Dal looked up at Locken with a smile and said, "Did you think that territory where you trod wbuld always belong to you?"

Now Bergen refused to understand. "What does he mean, father? What is Dal saying?"

"Nothing," Locken insisted, too quickly.

Dal refused to be stopped. "Your father," he said to Bergen, "plays the strangest games with five-year-old boys. I always urged him to invite you to join in, but he never would."

The uproar didn't die down for an hour. Locken kept uselessly pounding his left fist against his thigh, as Selly gleefully attacked him to take the opprobrium for her own dalliances from her shoulders. Only Bergen could honestly grieve. "All those years, Dal. This was happening all those years?"

"To you I was a friend, Bergen," Dal said, forgetting to say sir, "but to them I was a servant."

"You never told me."

"What could you have done?"

And when Dal left at the end of the hour he had the agreement in writing.

When Bergen woke from his first time under somec, he learned from a kindly man in the Sleeproom that his father had died only a few days after Bergen had left home, and his mother had been murdered by a lover two years later. The largest estate on Crove, besides the emperor's, was now Bergen's.

"I don't want it."

"Along with it, you should know," said the kindly man, "comes a five years under and one year up somec privilege."

"I'd only have to live one year in every six?"

"It's the Empire's way of expressing the value of certain large forces in the economy."

"But I want to paint."

"Paint then. But unless you want to visit your parents' graves, the managers of your businesses are doing a remarkably good job, according to the government auditors, and you can go back under to complete your two years of entitlement."

"I have someone I want to see first."

"As you wish. We can put you back under any time within the next three days. After that, you have to complete your year up, and you will have lost two years of sleep."

Bergen spent the first two days trying to find Dal Vouls. He finally succeeded when he remembered that Dal would still be bound by the contract with his father-- the executors of the estate were able to locate him because he was sending in occasional draughts to complete the seventy-five-percent clause.

Dal opened the door and his lice lit up with immediate recognition. "Bergen," he said. "Come in. It's been three years, then, hasn't it?"

"I guess so. Dal, it feels like yesterday to me. It was yesterday. How have you been doing?"

Dal pointed to the walls of the flat. Forty or fifty paintings and drawings hung there. For twenty minutes there was little conversation except "This; I like this" and "How did you manage that?" And then Bergen, thoroughly awed, sat on the floor (there was no furniture) and they talked.

"How is it going?"

"Sales are fairly slow. I don't have a name yet. But people do buy. And the best of it is, the emperor has decreed that all government offices are to be moved to Crove. Even the name of the planet is changing. To Capitol. It seems that if all goes well, every damn planet's going to orbit politically around Crove. And that means customers. It means people who know art instead of the military and commercial bastards who've had a stranglehold on money on this planet since time began."

"You've learned how to talk in long sentences since I last saw you."

Dal laughed. "I've felt freer."

"I brought you a present." Bergen handed him the release from the contract.

Dal read it, laughed, read it again, and then wept.

"Bergen," he said, "you don't know. You don't know how hard it's been."

"I can guess."

"I haven't been able to take the examination. Heaven knows, I've hardly been able to live. But now--"

"More than that," Bergen said. "The examination costs three thousand. I brought it." He handed the money to his friend.

Dal held the money for a few seconds, then handed it back. "Your father's dead, then."

"Yes," Bergen said.

"I'm sorry. It must have been a shock to you."

"You didn't know?"

"I don't read papers. I don't have a radio. And my draughts were never returned."

"Contracts are contracts, the executors figured. Trust my father not to free his contract servants in his will."

They chuckled wryly in memory of the man, whom Dal had last seen three years ago, whom Bergen had last seen yesterday.

"Your mother?"

"The bitch died in heat," Bergen answered, and this time there was emotion. Dal touched his hand. "I'm sorry." And it was Bergen's turn to weep.

"Thank God you're my friend," Bergen said at last.

"And you mine," Dal answered.

And then the door opened and a woman walked in carrying a child that couldn't have been a year old. She was startled to see Bergen there. "Company," she said. "Hello. I'm Anda."

"I'm Bergen," Bergen said.

"My friend Bergen," Dal introduced them. "My wife Anda. My son Bergen."

Anda smiled. "He told me you were bright and beautiful, and so our son had to be named after you. He was right."

"You're too kind."

The conversation was good after that, but it was not what Bergen had expected. There couldn't be the banter, the in-jokes, the delightful gutter talk, the insults that Bergen and Dal bad known for years, not with Anda there. And so they parted with friendship in the air-- but a hollow feeling in Bergen's stomach. Dal had refused his gift of the examination fee, and accepted only his freedom. He would share that freedom with Anda. Bergen went back to the sleeproom and used the rest of his new entitlement.

When he awoke the next time, things had changed. With Crove now called Capitol, there was an incredible building boom. And Bergen's companies were deeply involved.

The building was haphazard, and Bergen began to realize that it wasn't enough just to throw buildings into the air. Capitql would be the center of trade and government for hundreds of planets. Billions of people. He could conceive of it eventually becoming one vast city. And so be began to plan accordingly.

He set his architects to planning a structure that would cover a hundred square miles and house fifty million people, heavy industry, light industry, transportation, distribution, and communication. The roof of the building had to be strong enough not only to handle the takeoffs and landings of landing craft, but also to cope with the weight of the huge starships themselves. It would take years to design-- he gave them the obvious deadline of his next waking after five years of sleep.

And then he spent the rest of the year lobbying with the bureaucrats to get his plan, already taking shape, adopted as the master plan for the planet. Every city designed the same way, so that as the population boomed, the cities could link up floor to floor and pipe to pipe and form a continuous, unbroken city with a spaceport for a roof and its roots deep in the bedrock. When his time was up, he had won-- and the contracts almost all went to Bergen Bishop's companies.

He did not forget Dal, however. He found him by his paintings, which were now gaining some note. It was difficult to talk, however.

"Bergen. The rumors are flying."

"Good to see you, Dal."

"They say you're stripping the planet right down to the bedrock and putting steel on top."

"Here and there."

"They say it's all supposed to interlock."

Bergen shrugged it off. "There'll be huge parks. Huge tracts of land untouched."

"Until the population needs it. Right? Always that reservation."

Bergen was hurt. "I came to talk about your painting."

"Here, then," Dal said. "Have a look." And he handed Bergen a painting of a steel monster that was settling like pus onto the countryside.

"This is repulsive," Bergen said.

"It's your city. I took it from the architect's renderings."

"My city isn't this ugly."

"I know. It's an artist's job to make beauty more beautiful and ugliness uglier."

"The Empire has to have a capital somewhere."

"Does there have to be an empire?"

"What's made you so bitter?" Bergen asked, genuinely concerned. "People have been tearing up planets for years. What's getting to you?"

"Nothing's getting to me."

"Where's Anda? Where's your son?"

"Who knows? Who cares?" Dal walked to a painting of a sunset and shoved his fist through it.

"Dal!" Bergen shouted. "Don't do that!"

"I made it. I can destroy it."

"Why'd she leave?"

"I failed the merit test. She had an offer of marriage from a guy who could take her on somec. She accepted."

"How could you fail the merit test?"

"They can't measure my paintings. And when you're twenty-six years old, the requirements are higher. Much, much higher."

"Twenty-six-- but we're only--"

"You're only twenty-one. I'm twenty-six and aging fast." Dal walked to the door and opened it. "Get out of here, Bergen. I'm dying fast. In a couple of your years I'll be an old man who isn't worth a damn so don't bother looking me up anymore. Get on out there and wreck the planet while there's still a profit in it."

Bergen left, hurt and unable to understand why Dal should suddenly hate him. If Dal had only taken the money Bergen offered two years before, he could have taken the test when he could still have passed it. It was his own fault, not Bergen's. And blaming Bergen for it wasn't fair.

For three wakings, Bergen didn't took Dal up. The memory of Dal's bitterness was too harsh, too hurtful. Instead Bergen concentrated on building his cities. Half a million men were working on them, a dozen cities arising simultaneously on the plain. There was plenty of land left undisturbed, but the cities rose so high that the winds were broken and the whiptrees died. How could anyone have known that the seeds had to fall to the earth from no more than a meter off the ground, and that without wind strong enough to bend the trees all the way to the ground, the seeds would fall too far and break and die? In fifty years the last of the whiptrees would be gone. And it was too late to do anything about it. Bergen grieved for the whiptrees. He was sorry. The cities were already filling up with people. The starships were already coming in to land at the only spaceport in the galaxy large enough and strong enough to hold them. There was no going back.

On his fourth waking, however, Bergen learned that he had been promoted to a one year up, ten years down somec level, and he realized that if Dal still wasn't on somec, the man would be in his mid-forties, and in the next waking would be getting old. Bergen was only in his mid-twenties. And suddenly he regretted having stayed away from Dal for so long. It was a strange thing about somec. It cut you off from people. Put you in different timestreams, and Bergen realized that soon the only people he would know would be those who had exactly the same somec schedule as he.

Most of his old friends he wouldn't mind losing. After all, he had survived losing both his parents in his first sleep. But Dal was a different matter. He hadn't seen Dal for three waking years, and,he missed him. They had been so close up till then.

He found him by simply asking a man with exceptionally good taste if he had ever heard of Dal Vouls.

"Has a Christian ever heard of Jesus?" asked the man, laughing.

Bergen hadn't heard of Jesus or Christians either, but he got the point. And he found Dal in a large studio in a tract of open country where trees hid the view of the eight cities growing here and there in the distance.

"Bergen," Dal said in surprise. "I never thought I'd see you again!"

And Bergen only looked in awe at the man who had been, his boyhood friend. What had been only four years for Bergen had been twenty for Dal, and the difference was staggering. Dal had a belly, was now an impressively stout man with a full beard and a ready grin (this is not Dal! something shouted inside Bergen). Dal was prospering, was friendly, was, it seemed, happy, but Bergen couldn't stop thinking of this stranger as an older man to whom he should show respect.

"Bergen, you haven't changed."

"You have," Bergen answered, trying to smile as if he meant it.

"Come in. Look at my paintings. I promise to stand aside. My wife says I could hide a mural, I'm getting so fat. I tell her I have to be large enough to hold all my money on a single belt." Dal's laugh boomed out, and a middle-aged woman appeared on a balcony inside the studio.

"You make my cakes fall, you break glasses, and now you have to shout loud enough that the birds' nests are falling from the eaves!" she shouted, and Dal lumbered over to her like an amorous bear and kissed her and dragged her back.

"Bergen, meet my wife. Treve, meet Bergen, my friend who returns like a bright shadow out of my past to tie up the last of my loose ends."

"Until we buy you new clothes," Treve complained, "You have no loose ends."

"I married her," Dal said, "because I needed someone to tell me what a bad artist I am."

"He's terrible. Best in the world. But still Rembrandt returns to haunt us!" And Treve punched Dal in the arm, lightly.

I can't stand this, Bergen thought. This isn't Dal. He's too damn cheerful. And who's this woman who takes such liberties with my dignified friend? Who's this fat man with the grin who pretends to be an artist?

"My work," Dal said, suddenly. "Come see my work."

It was then, walking quietly along the walls where the paintings hung, that Bergen knew for sure that it was Dal. True, the voice at his shoulder was still cheerful and middle-aged. But the paintings, the strokes and sweeps and washes of them, they were all Dal. They were born in the pain of slavery on the Bishop estate; but now they were overlaid with a serenity that Dal's paintings had never had before. Yet, looking at them, Bergen realized that that serenity had also been there all the time, waiting for something to bring it out into the open.

And the something was obviously Treve.

At lunch, Bergen shyly admitted to Treve that yes, he was the man who built the cities.

"Very efficient," she said, making short work of a cappasflower.

"My wife hates the cities," Dal said.

"As I remember, you don't love them either."

Dal grinned, and then remembered to swallow what he had been chewing. "Bergen, my friend, I am above such concerns."

"Then," his wife interjected, "those concerns had better be strong enough to support a great amount of weight."

Dal laughed and hugged her and said, "Keep your mouth shut about my weight when I'm eating, Thin Woman, it ruins the lunch."

"The cities don't bother you?"

"The cities are ugly," Dal said. "But I think of them as vast sewage disposal plants. When you have fifteen billion people on a planet that should only have fifteen million, the sewage has go to be put somewhere. So you built huge metal blocks and they kill the trees that grow in the shadows. Can I reach out and stop the tide?"

"Of course you can," Treve said.

"She believes in me. No, Bergen, I don't fight the cities. People in the cities buy my paintings and let me live in luxury like this, making brilliant paintings and sleeping with my beautiful wife."

"If I'm so beautiful, why never a portrait of me?"

"I am incapable of doing justice," Dal said. "I paint Crove. I paint it as it was before they killed it and named the corpse Capitol. These paintings will last hundreds of years. People who see them will maybe say, 'This is what a world looks like. Not corridors of steel and plastic and artificial wood."

"We don't use artificial wood," Bergen protested

"You will," Dal answered. "The trees are nearly gone. And wood is awfully expensive to ship between the stars."

And then Bergen asked the question he had meant to ask since he arrived. "Is it true that you've been offered somec?"

"They practically forced the needle into my arm right here. I had to beat them off with a canvas."

"Then it's true that you turned it down?" Bergen was incredulous.

"Three times. They keep saying, we'll let you sleep ten years, we'll let you sleep fifteen years. But who wants to sleep? I can't paint in my sleep."

"But Dal," Bergen protested. "Somec is like immortality. I'm going on the ten-down-one-up schedule, and that means that when I'm fifty, three hundred years will have passed! Three centuries! And I'll live another five hundred years beyond that. I'll see the Empire rise and fall, I'll see the work of a thousand artists living hundreds of years apart, I'll have broken out of the ties of time--"

"Ties of time. A good phrase. You are ecstatic about progress. I congratulate you. I wish you well. Sleep and sleep and sleep, may you profit from it."

"The prayer of the capitalist," Treve added, smiling and putting more salad on Bergen's plate.

"But Bergen. While you fly, like stones skipping across the water, touching down here and there and barely getting wet, while you are busy doing that, I shall swim. I like to swim. It gets me wet. It wears me out. And when I die, which will happen before you turn thirty, I'm sure, I'll have my paintings to leave behind me."

"Vicarious immortality is rather second rate, isn't it?"

"Is there anything second rate about my work?"

"No," Bergen answered.

"Then eat my food, and look at my paintings again, and go back to building huge cities until there's a roof over all the world and the planet shines in space like a star. There's a kind of beauty in that, too, and your work will live after you. Live however you like. But tell me, Bergen, do you have time to swim naked in a lake?"

Bergen laughed. "I haven't done that in years."

"I did it this morning."

"At your age?" Bergen asked, and then regretted the words. Not because Dal resented them-- he didn't seem to notice them. Bergen regretted the words because they were the end of even the hope of a friendship. Dal, who had painted beautiful whiptrees into his painting, was an older man now, and would get even older in the next few years, and their lives would never cross meaningfully again. It was Treve who bantered with him like a friend.

While I, Bergen realized, I build cities.

When they parted at evening, still cheerful, still friends, Dal asked (and his voice was serious): "Bergen. Do you ever paint?"

Bergen shook his head. "I haven't the time. But I admit-- if I had your talent, Dal, I'd find the time. I haven't that talent, though. Never did."

"That's not true, Bergen. You had more talent than I."

Bergen looked Dal in the eye and realized the man meant it. "Don't say that," Bergen said fervently. "If I believed that, Dal, do you think I could spend my life the way I have to spend it?"

"Oh, my friend," Dal said, smiling. "You have made me sad, sad, sad. Hug me for the boys we were

together."

They embraced, and then Bergen left. They never met again.

Bergen lived to see Capitol covered in steel from pole to pole, with even the oceans encroached upon until they were mere ponds. He once went out in a pleasure cruiser and saw the planet from space. It gleamed. It was beautiful. It was like a star.

Bergen lived long enough to see something else: He visited a store one day that sold rare and old paintings. And there he saw a painting that he recognized immediately. The paint was chipping away; the colors had faded. But it was Dal Vouls's work, and there were whiptrees in the painting, and Bergen demanded of the storekeeper, "Who's let this painting get in such a condition?"

"Such a condition? Sir, don't you know how old this is? Seven hundred years old, sir! It's remarkably well preserved. By a great artist, the greatest of our millennium, but nobody makes paint or canvas that stays unmarred for more than a few centuries. What do you want, miracles?"

And Bergen realized that in his pursuit of immortality, he had got more than he hoped for. For not only did friends drop away and die behind him, but also their works, and all the works of men, had crumbled in his lifetime. Some had crumbled into dust; some were just showing the first cracks. But Bergen had lived long enough to see the one sight the universe usually hides from mankind: entropy.

The universe is winding down, Bergen said as he looked at Dal's painting. Was it worth the cost just to find that out?

He bought the painting. It fell to pieces before he died.

SECOND CHANCE

It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.

-- Gerard Manley Hopkins

By the age of seven Batta was thoroughly trapped, though she scarcely recognized it until she was twenty-two. The bars were so fragile that to most other people they would not have existed at all:

A father, crippled in a freak tube accident and pensioned off by the government months before Batta was born.

A mother, whose heart was gold but whose mind was unable to concentrate meaningfully for more than three minutes at a time.

And brothers and sisters who, in the chaos and depression of the mindless, will-less home, might have come unstuck from the fabric of adjusted society had not Batta decided (without deciding) that she would be mother and father to her siblings, her parents, and herself.

Many another person would have rebelled at having to come home directly after school, with never an opportunity to meet with friends and do the mad things through the endless corridors of Capitol that occupied the time of most adolescents of the middle class. Batta merely returned from school and did homework, fixed dinner, talked to mother (or rather, listened), helped the other children with their problems, and braved the den where father hid from the world, pretending that he had legs or that, lacking them, he had not diminished in worth. ("I fathered five damned children, didn't I?" he insisted from time to time.)

But all was not bleak. Batta loved studying, was, in fact, not far from being a genius-- and she

indulged herself enough to go to college, largely because she got a scholarship and her mother believed in taking advantage of every free thing that came.

Aqd in college there was this one young man.

He was not far from being a genius, too-- from the other side. Batta had never known anyone like him (she didn't realize that she had hardly known anyone at all) but a crazy friendship grew up that ranged from gift-wrapped presents of dissected thwands from Basic Zoology to hours of silence together, studying for examinations.

No held hands. No attempted kisses. No fumbling experimentation in the dark. Batta was unsure of what it was like and whether she would want it (she always imagined her mother making love to a legless man), while she wondered if Abner Doon ever thought of sex at all.

And then college ended, degrees were granted-- hers in physics, his in government service-- and they stopped seeing each other and the months went by and she was twenty-two and it suddenly occurred to her that she was trapped.

"Where are you going? You're through with college, you don't have to go to class anymore, do you?" her mother asked plaintively.

"I thought I'd take a walk," Batta answered.

"But Batta, your father needs you. You know he's only happy when you're here."

Which was true. And Batta spent more and mcne hours inside the three-room flat until one day, almost a year after graduation, a buzzer.

"Abner," she said, more in surprise than in delight. She had almost forgotten him. Indeed, she had almost forgotten that she had a college education.

"Batta. I haven't seen you. I wanted to."

"Well," she said, turning around for him to see her but knowing she looked terrible even as she did it, "here I am."

"You look like hell."

"And you," she said, "look like a specimen that they forgot to dissect."

They laughed. Old times, old magic. He asked her out. She refused. He asked her to go for a walk. She was too busy. And when her father called her out of the room for the fifth time since he had arrived, he decided the conversation was over and had left the apartment before she returned.

And she felt more trapped than ever.

Days passed, and in every day something different happened as the other children grew older (and married or didn't marry but left home anyway) but looking back, Batta felt that the days were all the same, after all, and the illusion of variety was just her mind's own way of keeping itself sane. And at last, when Batta was twenty-seven and a virgin and lonely as hell, all her brothers and sisters were gone and she was alone with her parents.

That was when Abner Doon came again.

He had not been on somec either, she noticed to her surprise as she showed him into the living room (same battered furniture, only older; same color walls, only dirtier; same Batta Heddis, only deader) and he sat, looking her over carefully.

"I thought you'd be on somec by now," she said.

"So did everyone. But there are some things that can't be done while one sleeps the years away. I can't go on somec until I'm ready."

"And when will that be?"

"When I rule the world."

She laughed, thinking it was a joke. "And when they find out I'm Mother's long-lost daughter kidnapped by gypsies and kept by space-pirates, they'll make me empress after her."

"I'm going on somec within the year."

And she didn't laugh. Only looked at him carefully and saw the way worry and work and, perhaps, cruelty had worn certain lines in certain places and given him an expression that made his eyes seem deep and hard to plumb. "You look like you're drowning," she said.

"And you look like you're drowned."

He reached out and took her hand. She was surprised-- he had never done that. But the hand was warm, dry, smooth, firm-- just as she had thought a man's hand ought to feel (not like Father's claw) and she didn't take her hand away.

"I saw how it was when I came before," he said. "I've been waiting till you were free. The last of your loving siblings left a week ago. Your affairs should be in order. Will you marry me now?"

Three hours later, they were halfway across the sector in a modest-seeming apartment (only seeming-- computers and furniture came, literally, out of the walls) and she was shaking her head.

"Ab," she said, "I can't. You don't understand."

He looked concerned. "I thought you'd prefer the contract. It's so much safer for everyone. But if you'd rather we kept it informal--"

"You don't understand. Five minutes before you came I was praying for something like that to happen, anything to get me away from there--"

"Then come away."

"But I keep thinking about my parents. My mother, who can't manage her own life, let alone father's, and father, who does his best to rule everyone and only I can keep him under control and happy. They need me."

"At the risk of being thought trite, so do I."

"Not much," she said, waving her hand to indicate the paraphernalia that proved that he was a man of power and wealth.

"This? In fact, Batta, this is all part of a much grander plan. A direct line leading to something rather fine. But I'd rather share it with you."

"You are a romantic idiot like all the other adolescents," she laughed. "Share it with me, nonsense. What makes you even think you love me?"

"Because, Batta, every now and then my dream fails to keep me warm."

"Women are rather inexpensive."

"Batta isn't even for sale," he reminded her, and then he reached out and touched her as she had never been touched, and she held him as she had never held anyone. For two hours everything was new, every flutter, every smile.

"No," she whispered as he was about to end her long sexual solitude. "Please no."

"Why," he whispered back, "the hell not?"

"Because if you do, I'll never be able to leave you."

"Excellent," he said, and moved again, but she slid away, slid off the bed, began dressing.

"You have very poor timing," he said. "What's wrong?"

"I can't. I can't leave Mother and Father."

"What, are they so loving and kind to you?"

"They need me."

"Dammit, Batta, they're grownup people, they can take care of themselves."

"Maybe when I was seven, they could," she said, "but by the time I was twelve they couldn't. I was dependable. I could do it. And so they lost all their pretenses at adulthood, Ab. I couldn't go off and be happy knowing they'd disintegrate, having to watch them."

"Yes you can. Knowing that if you don't you'd disintegrate. I can put you on somec, Batta, right now. I can put you under for five years and when you woke up they'd have learned to take care of themselves and you could go see them and know that everything was all right."

"Do you have that kind of money?"

"When you get enough power in this lovely little empire," Abner Doon answered, "money becomes unnecessary."

"When I woke up they might be dead."

"Perhaps. And then they'd definitely not need you."

"I'd feel guilty, Ab. It would destroy me."

But Abner Doon was persuasive, and by small stages he got her to lie down on a wheeled table and he put a sleepcap on her head and taped her brain. All her memories, all her personality, all her hopes, all her terrors were recorded and filed in a tape that Abner Doon tossed up and down in his hand.

"When you wake up, I'll play it back into your head, and you won't even notice that you were asleep.

She laughed nervously. "But anything that happens now, the somec wipes out, right?"

"True," Doon answered. "I could ravish you and perform all kinds of obscene acts, and when you make up you'd still think I was a gentleman."

"I never have thought such a thing," she said.

He smiled. "Now let's get you to sleep."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I told you. I'm a year away. I'll be a year older when I wake you up, and we begin our life together, with or without benefit of contract. Good enough?"

But she began to cry and she kept crying until it was near hysteria. He held her, rocked her back and forth, tried to find out why she was crying, tried to understand what he had done, but she answered, "Nothing. Nothing."

Until finally he brought out the somec bottle (but no one has a private supply of somec! It's the law--) and a needle and reached for her to lay her on the table. She pulled away, retreated to the other side of the room.

"No."

"Why not!"

"I can't run away from my parents."

"You've got your own life to live!"

"Ab, I can't do it! Don't you see? Love isn't just a matter of liking somebody. I don't like my parents very much. But they trust me, they lean on me, I'm their whole damn foundation, and I can't just walk away and let them fall down."

"Sure you can! Anybody could! It's sick, what they've done to you, and you have a right to your own life."

"Anybody could do it except me. I, Batta Heddis, am a person who does not walk away. That's who I am! If you want the kind of person who would, then go look somewhere else!" And she ran from the apartment to the tube station, returned home, closed the door and lay on the sofa and wept until her father called impatiently from the other room and she walked in and lovingly stroked his forehead until he could go to sleep.

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When the brothers and sisters were there, Batta could pretend there was variety. Now, there was no pretense. Now, she was the entire focus of their lives and she was being slowly worn down, at first by the constant work and constant pressure (but she grew stronger than ever and soon settled into the routine better than ever until she couldn't conceive of another way) and later simply by the utter loneliness even while she was utterly unable to be alone.

"Batta, I'm doing embroidery, they do it with real cotton in the rich houses but there's no way we could afford that, of course, on your father's pension, but see what a lovely flower I'm making-- or is it a bee? Heaven knows, I've never seen either, but don't you see what a lovely flower it is? Thank you, dear, it's a lovely flower, isn't it? They do it with real cotton in the rich houses, you know, but we could never afford that on your father's pension, could we? So this is a synthetic. It's called embroidery, will you look at the lovely bee I'm making? Isn't it lovely? Thank you, Batta dear, you have such a wonderful way of making me feel just lovely. I'm doing embroidery, you know. Oh, dear, I think your father's calling. I must go to him-- oh, will you? Thank you. I'll just sit here and embroider, if you don't mind."

And in the bedroom, stolid silence. A groan of pain. The legs starting normally at the hip and then suddenly, abruptly, ending (not two centimeters from the crotch) in a steep cliff of sheets and blankets that fell away and left the bed flat and smooth and unslept-in. "Do you remember?" he grunts as she turns the pillow and brings him his pills, "do you remember when Darff was three he came in and said, 'Daddy, you should have my bed and I should have yours, because you're as little as I am.' Damnfool kid, and I picked him up and gave him a hug and wanted to strangle the little bastard."

"I didn't remember."

"Science has done everything else, but they can't figure out how to heal man when he's lost his hams, lost his legs, lost every damn nerve. But one, thank heaven, but one."

She loathed bathing him. The tube had caught him slantwise in the mouth of the tubeway. If he'd been turned around it would have ripped out his abdomen and killed him on the spot. As it was, he had lost his buttocks to the bone, his intestines were a mess, he had no bowel control, and his legs were a fragment of bone. "But they left me enough," he so proudly pointed out, "to father children."

And so it went endlessly day after day and Batta refused to remember Abner Doon, refused to admit that she had once had a chance to get away from these people (if only) and live her own life (if only) and be happy for a while (if only I hadn't-- no, no, can't think that way).

Then mother decided to make a salad while Batta was away shopping and cut her wrist with the knife and apparently forgot that the emergency call button was only a few meters away because she had bled to death before Batta could get home, a look of surprise frozen on her face.

Batta was twenty-nine.

And after a while father began making hints about how a man's sexual drive doesn't diminish with

nonuse, but only increases. She ignored him with gritted teeth until he, too, died one night and the doctor said it had only been a matter of time, the accident had messed him up so badly, and in fact if he hadn't had such excellent care he wouldn't have lasted this long. You should be proud of yourself, girl.

Age thirty.

She sat in the living room of the apartment that she alone controlled. Her father's pension would continue-- the government was kind to victims of chance in the transportation system. She kept staring at the door and wondering why in the world she had longed to get away. After all, what was them to do outside?

The walls closed in on her. The flat bed in her parents' room looked just as it had when father lay there all day, at least from where his legs would be on down. But when she rolled up blankets to look like legs and stretched them under the sheets n the bed, putting legs where she had never see legs before, it occurred to her that she had lost her mind.

She packed her few belongings (everything else belonged to them and they were dead) and left the apartment and went to the nearest colony office because she couldn't think of anything better to do with the rest of her disastrous life than to go off to a colony and work until she died.

"Name?" asked the man behind the counter.

"Batta Heddis."

"This is a wonderful step you've decided to take, Miss Heddis-- single, yes? --because these colonies are the empire's newest way of fighting and winning the war. Only peacefully, you understand. Heddis, did you say? Come this way, please.

"Heddis, did you say?"

Why had he looked so surprised? And so excited (or was it alarmed?)

She followed him to a room a corridor away, a plush, convenient room with only the one door. A guard stood outside it, and she thought with terror that something was wrong, that Mother's Little Boys were going to accuse her of something, and she was innocent but how can you ever prove innocence to people already convinced of their own infallibility?

The wait was interminable-- two hours-- and she was reduced to a wreck by the time the door opened. Reduced to a wreck, that is, by her own perceptions. To an impartial observer coming in the door she was utterly calm-- she had learned to exude calm no matter what the stress years before.

But it was not an impartial observer who walked in the door. It was Abner Doon.

"Hello, Batta," he said.

"My God," she answered, "my dear sweet God, do I have to be punished like this?"

His face went tense somehow, and he looked at her carefully. ""What have they done to you, lady?"

"Nothing. Let me out of here."

"I want to talk to you."

"We forgot it years ago! I forgot it! Now don't remind me!"

He stood by the door, and it was obvious that he was horrified and fascinated-- horrified because as she spoke so passionately her voice remained flat and calm, her body remained erect, there was no hint that she was in any kind of turmoil; fascinated because the body was still Batta, still the woman he had loved and had been willing to share his dream with not that many years before, and yet she was a complete stranger to him now.

"I've been on somec for several years," he said. "This is my first waking. I had them all warned-- a code was to be set off when your name came upfor colonization."

"What made you think it would?"

"Your parents had to die sometime. And when they did, I knew you'd have nowhere to go. People with nowhere to go, go to the colonies. It's politer than suicide."

"Leave me alone, please. Can't you have a little forgiveness for my mistake?"

He looked eager. "Did you call it a mistake? Do you regret it?"

"Yes!" she said, and now her voice raised in pitch, and she actually looked agitated.

"Then, by heaven, let's undo it!"

She looked at him with contempt. "Undo it! It can't be undone! I'm a monster now, Mr. Doon, not a girl anymore, a robot that performs services for revolting people without complaint, not a woman who can respond to anything the way you wanted me to. Nothing can be undone."

And then he reached into his pocket and held out a tape.

"You can go under somec right now and let the drug wipe out all your memories. Then I'll play this back into your mind, and you'll wake up believing that you did not decide to go back to your parents. That you decided to stay with me in the first place. You will be unchanged. The last few years will be erased."

She sat, uncomprehending for a few moments. Then, hoarsely, huskily, she said. "Yes. Yes. Hurry." And he led her to a tape-and-tap where they taped her brain and put her under somec and her mind washed away in the drug.

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"Batta," a voice said softly, and Batta awoke, naked and sweating on a table in a strange place. But the face and the voice were not strange.

"Ab," she said.

"It's been five years," he said. "Your parents both passed away. From natural causes. They weren't unhappy. You made the right choice."

She was conscious of being naked, and the eternal virgin in her made her flush with embarrassment. But he touched her (and the memory of the night they first almost made love was still fresh-- it had been only a few hours ago-- and she was already aroused, already ready) and she was no longer embarrassed.

They went to his apartment, and made love gloriously, and they were blissfully happy for days until she finally admitted what was gnawing at the back of her mind.

"Ab. Ab, I have dreams about them."

"Who?"

"Mother and father. You've told me it's been years, and I know that. But it still feels like yesterday to me, and I feel terrible for having left them alone."

"You'll get over it."

But she did not get over it. She began to think of them more and more, guilt gnawing at her, tearing at her dreams, stabbing like a knife when she made love with Abner Doon, destroying her as she did all the things that she had wished, since she was a child, she could do.

"Oh, Ab," she wept one night-- only six nights since waking-- "Ab, I'd do anything, anything to undo this!"

He stopped moving, just froze. "Do you mean that?"

"No, no, Abner, you know I love you. I've loved you ever since we met, all my life, even before I knew you existed I loved you, don't you know that? But I hate myself! I feel like a coward, like a traitor for having left my family. They needed me. I know it, and I know they were miserable when I left them."

"They were perfectly happy. They never noticed you were gone."

"That's a lie."

"Batta, please forget them."

"I can't. Why couldn't I have done the right thing?"

"And what was that?" He looked afraid. Why is he afraid?

"To stay with them. They only lived a few years. If I'd stayed with them, if I'd helped them through the last few years, then Ab, I could face myself. Even if they were miserable years, I'd feel like a decent person."

"Then feel like a decent person. Because you did stay with them."

And he explained it to her. Everything.

She lay silently on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

"Then this is a fraud, isn't it? Secretly, truly, I'm a miserable bitch of an old maid who rotted away in her parents' house until they had the courtesy to die, a woman without the guts to commit suicide--"

"Absurd--"

"Who was only saved from her fate by a man who contrived to play God."

"Batta, you have the best of both worlds. You did stay with your parents. You did the right thing. But you can go on with your life now without having the memories of what they did to you, without having to become what you became."

"And was I so horrible?"

He thought of lying to her, but decided against it. "Batta, when I saw you in that room in the colonization office, I nearly cried. You looked dead."

She reached over and stroked his cheek, his shoulder. "You saved me from the penalty of my own mistake."

"If you want to look at it that way."

"But there's a contradiction here. Let's be logical. Let's call the woman who decided to stay with her parents Batta A. Batta A actually stayed and went crazy, like you said, and she chose to go off to the colonies and keep her madness to herself."

"But it didn't happen that way--"

"No, listen," Batta insisted, quietly, intensely, and he listened. "Batta B, however, decided not to go back to her parents. She stayed with Abner Doon and tried to be happy, but her conscience tore at her and drove her mad."

"But it didn't happen that way--"

"No, Ab, you don't. You don't understand. Understand at all." Her voice cracked. "This woman lying on the bed beside you-- this is Batta B. This is the woman who turned away from her parents and didn't fulfil her commitment--"

"Dammit, Batta, listen to reason--"

"I have no memory of helping them. They suddenly-- end. I walked out on them--"

"No you didn't!"

"In my own mind I did, Ab, and that's where I have to live! You tell me I helped them but I can't remember it and so it isn't true! That choice-- that was the choice that the real Batta made, staying with them. And so the real Batta was shaped by that experience. The real Batta suffered through those years, even if they were awful."

"Batta, they were worse than awful! They destroyed you!"

"But it was me they destroyed! Me! The Batta who chooses to do what she believes she ought to!"

"What is this, the old-time religion? You have a chance to be spared the consequences of your own suicidal sense of right and wrong! You have a chance to be happy, dammit! What difference does it make which Batta is which? I love you, and you love me, lady, and that's the truth, too!"

"But Ab, how can I be anything but what I am?"

"Listen. You agreed. Instantly. You agreed to let me erase those years, to wake you up and have you live with me as if that agony had never happened. It was voluntary!"

She didn't answer. Only asked, "Did they tape me when they put me under somec? Did they record the way I really am?"

"Yes," he said, knowing what was coming.

"Then put me under again and wake me up with that tape. Send me to a colony."

He stared at her. He got up from the bed and stared at her incredulously and laughed. "Do you realize what you're saying? You're saying, please take me out of heaven, God, and send me to hell."

"I know it," she said, and she began trembling.

"You're insane. This is insane, Batta. Do you know what I've risked, what I've gone through to bring you here? I've broken every law concerning the use of somec that there is--"

"You rule the world, don't you?"

Was she sneering?

"I pull all the strings, but if I make a mistake I could fall anytime. I've deliberately made mistakes for you--"

"And so I owe you something. But what about me? Don't I owe me?"

He was exasperated. He hit the wall with his hand. "Of course you do! You owe yourself a life with a man who loves you more than he loves his life's work! You owe yourself a chance to be pampered, to be coddled, to be cared for--"

"I owe me myself." And she trembled more and more. "Ab. I haven't. I haven't been happy."

Silence.

"Ab, please believe me, because this is the hardest thing I've had to say. Since the moment I woke up, something was wrong. Something was terribly, terribly wrong. I had made the wrong choice. I hadn't gone back to my parents. I have felt wrong. Everything has been colored by that. It's wrong. I wouldn't choose to live with you, and so everything about it is wrong!" She spoke softly, but her voice was intense.

"I would not be here," she said.

"You are here."

"I can't live a lie. I can't live with the contradiction. I must live my own life, bitter or not. Every moment I stay here is pain. It couldn't be worse. Nothing I suffered in my real life could be worse than the agony of living falsely. I must have the memory of having done what I knew was right. Without that memory, I can't keep my sanity. I've been feeling it slip away. Ab--"

And he held her closely, felt her tremble in his arms. "Whatever you want," he whispered. "I didn't know. I thought the somec could-- make things over."

"It can't stop me from being who I--"

"Who you are, I know that, I know it now. But Batta, don't you realize-- if I use that other tape, you won't remember this, you won't remember these days we had together--"

And she began to sob. And he thought of something else.

"You'll-- the last thing you'll remember is my having told you I could erase all the pain. And you saying yes, yes, do it, erase it-- and then you'll wake up with those memories and you'll think that I lied."

She shook her head.

"No," he said. "That's what you'll believe. You'll hate me for having promised you happiness and then not giving it to you. You won't remember this."

"I can't help it," she said, and they held each other and wept together and comforted each other and made love one last time and then he took her to the tape-and-tap where the past was washed away and a crueler life would be restored to her.

"What, is she a criminal?" asked the attendant as Abner Doon substituted the tapes-- for only criminals had their minds wiped and an old tape used to erase all memory of the crime.

"Yes," said Doon, to keep things simple. And so her body was enclosed in the coffin that would satisfy her few needs as her body slowed down to a crawl through the years until he awakened her.

She would awaken on a colony. But one of my choosing, Abner vowed. A kind one, where she might have a chance of making something of her life. And who knows? Maybe hating me will make it all easier for her to bear.

Easier for her. But what about me?

I will not, he decided, spend any more of myself on her. I will close her from my mind. I will-- I will forgetf?

Nonsense.

I will merely devote my life to fulfilling other, older, colder dreams.

BREAKING THE GAME

Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.

-Proverbs 30:33

Herman Nuber's feet were asleep, and every time he shifted his weight they tingled unbearably.

"My feet are asleep," he complained to the sleeproom attendant.

"Happens all the time," answered the attendant, reassuringly.

"I was under for three years," Herman pointed out. "Was the circulation to my feet cut off all that time?"

"It's the somec, Mr. Nuber," said the attendant. "It makes your feet feel that way. But your circulation was never cut off."

Herman grunted and went back to reading the lists on the wall. His feet tingled a little less, and now he began to shift his weight back and forth. The newsheet was boring. Same list of victories for the Empire, victories that half the time left the enemy in possession of the star system with a few Empire ships able to limp home. The gossip sheets were almost as boring. All the big-name lifeloopers screwing their way to fame and fortune. One looper committed suicide-- a novelty, since people who wanted to take themselves out of circulation usually just signed up for the colonies.

The list he studied was, of course, the game sheet. He skimmed down to the International Games list, and there was the notice.

"Europe 1914d, now in G1979. Biggest news this week is that Herman 'Italy' Nuber is up on Thursday, so all non-Italy players, watch out!"

Very flattering, of course, to be named by the waking lists. But it was to be expected. The International Games had been around for years, dating back to well before somec. But there had never been a player like Herman Nuber.

He left the sleeproom, pausing, almost as an afterthought, to dress. This waking would be for only six months-- last time he had won more money than usual on the sidebets, which were strictly illegal but a very safe, pleasant investment. No one gave long odds against him-- when he placed bets on himself the rate of return was only 17 percent. But that was better than a savings bank or government bonds.

"Herman," said a quiet man, even shorter than Herman Nuber.

"Hi, Grey," Nuber said.

"Good waking?"

"Of course." Grey Glamorgan was a good business manager. He always remembered that even though he was something of a financial genius, with many good connections, he was not in business for himself. Trustworthy. A born underling. Herman liked to surround himself with men who were shorter than himself.

"Well?" asked Grey.

Herman looked unconcerned. "Buy Italy, of course."

And Grey nodded. It was a kind of ritual, but the game laws specified that a place in the game only be purchased when the player was awake-- there must always be a waking player at the computer.

Well, I'm awake, Herman said. And unless things had changed considerably, this was the waking when he'd make the grand play-- to end the game by conquering the world.

The computer wall was already warmed up when he got to his flat-- another thoughtful gesture from Grey. Herman tortured himself as he always did, ignoring the screen, refusing to look at it; pretending the computer wasn't waiting for him as he toured the flat, made sure all the arrangements were correct. Herman wasn't really rich; only mildly well-to-do. He couldn't afford to keep an empty flat while he was under. His belongings were stored, instead, or sold each time. Someday, though, I'll be rich enough, he thought. Someday I'll get to the really high somec levels, like five years under for three months up. And I'll own a flat, not just lease one for a waking.

It was everyone's dream, of course. Everyone's plan. And one out of every seven million people in the Empire made it. Horatio Alger is alive and well forever.

At last, orange juice drunk, bed bounced on, woman for the night paid for and picked out, toilet used, he allowed himself to settle down comfortably in the chair before the computer module. But still he kept the screen dead. He punched out the code for Europe 1914d.

He had been twenty-two when he had first decided to invest some of his money in the expensive hobby of International Games. It had cost him two months' salary, and he had only been able to buy a third-ranked position in Italy in the start of a new game. He had chosen Europe 1914, even though it was the fourth game of that name, because he had specialized in twentieth-century strategies in his small-game playing. And now, with an interplanetarily broadcast game, he'd have a chance to see if he was really as good as he had thought.

I am that good, he reminded himself now, flashing on the holo. The globe appeared before him, and he studied it. First the weather patterns were shown; then the political map.

"How is it?" asked Grey, appearing quietly behind Herman.

"Lovely. No one has tried anything rash. Good caretakers."

Italy showed up as pink on the map. Herman remembered the beginning-- an Italy newly united, weak, unsure whether to join Germany and Austria-Hungary. In the real twentieth century, no one of any force had emerged in Italy until after the 1914 War. No one until that nincompoop Mussolini. But in Europe 1914d, Italy had Herman Nuber, and even though he was a third-ranked player, he had bet quite a bit on himself-- and on Italy.

It was three years before his daytime work earned Herman enough money to go on somec for the first time. In that time he had married, had a daughter, and divorced. No time for marriage. She didn't like it when he spent all night on the game. But it had been worth it, in the long run. A bit painful, some emotional scenes, but at the end of the three years, Herman's bets paid off. Forty to one. He had driven out other, less skillful players, and when he went under somec, he did it as dictator of Italy, and Italy had turned savagely on Austria-Hungry, brilliantly defeated the Prussian army (oh, no, actually German, he reminded himself. Have to keep the periods straight) near Munich, and a peace treaty had been signed. America never joined the war, much to the chagrin of the players who had paid heavily for that choice position, only to see it become useless in the real game.

Italy, then, had been the major power in eastern Europe. But now, Herman saw with a smile, Italy was Europe, the entire continent pink, and most of Asia as well. His last waking had been the consummation of the struggle with Russia. And now Italy stood poised on the Pacific, on the Indian Ocean through Persia, and on the Atlantic, ready to try for everything.

"Looks very good, doesn't it?" Herman asked Grey, who was still silent.

"For the Italy player, it does," said Grey, and Herman turned in surprise.

"You mean you didn't buy it?"

Grey looked a little embarrassed. "Actually," he said, "I was afraid of this."

"Afraid of what?"

"Someone's apparently been speculating in Italy. My staff gave me the report when I came up three weeks ago. Someone's been buying and selling Italy in closed bids ever since you went under last."

"That's illegal!"

"Weep, then. We've done it ourselves, you know. Shall we call in an investigation? All the books open?"

"Why didn't you get a good proxy and keep it?"

"They pulled it off again, Herman. The bidding was last night at midnight. Not precisely prime time. But I placed my bid. Frankly, it was ridiculously high. But no taker. The player who got it bid twice what I did."

"Then you should have bid higher still!"

Grey shook his head. "Couldn't. I only have fifty percent power of attorney, remember?"

Herman gasped in spite of himself. "Fifty percent! Grey, fifty percent? It was more than fifty?"

Grey nodded. "More than fifty liquid, anyway. I couldn't match it. Not from your funds. And I just didn't have enough loose money around to add any of my own."

"Well, who's the player?"

"Believe it or not, Herman, it's an assistant minister of colonization, a real flunkie. It's his first time in the broadcast games. No record at all. And no way he could have the money to buy that place in the game himself."

"Find out who the organization is, Grey, and buy that position."

Grey shook his head. "I don't have enough money. Whoever's buying it is serious, and they've got more money than you."

Herman felt weak and cold. This was not expected. Of course there were always speculators in the games. But Herman always paid well for his position, and because he had contributed most to the slot, when he was awake no one could buy Italy but him, as long as he offered at least fifteen percent over the last purchase price. But now the purchase price had been more than half his wealth.

"It doesn't matter," Herman told Grey. "Borrow. Liquidate. I'll give you ninety percent power of attorney. But buy Italy."

"What if they won't sell?"

Herman leaped to his feet, so that he towered (delicious!) over Grey. "They can't! They can only sell to me. They have to be speculating on stripping me. Well, let 'em. This time Italy takes over the world, Grey. And the bets won't be just seventeen percent. We'll be in for the long odds. Do you understand?"

"They don't have to sell to you, Herman," Grey said. "The player who has it isn't on somec."

"I don't care. I'll outlast them. They have to quit sometime. Pay their price. They have a price."

Grey nodded, unsure. Herman turned away, and heard Grey shuffle softly through the carpet as he left. Herman switched on the screen as his stomach churned. Italy was valuable, but only because of Herman Nuber. Only a genius could have taken that second-rate country and made it a world power. Only Herman Nuber, the greatest International Game player in history, dammit. They're just trying to rob me, Herman concluded. Well, let 'em.

And then, though he knew it would torture him, he flashed the screen through to a close-up of current military operations by the Italian Empire. There was a border skirmish in Korea. India was becoming hostile. The Italian agents were doing well at subverting Japanese rule in Arabia.

Everything's perfect, Herman said softly. In three days I can have this game flying. In three days, if I can once get Italy.

Grey didn't come or call all day. By evening, Herman was a nervous wreck. He had already had to watch as three perfect opportunities for quick, decisive action had been missed by the idiot playing Italy. Of course, that kind of thing happened all the time when Herman was on somec-- but he was asleep, he didn't have to watch. And still Grey didn't come.

The buzzer. Not Grey, since the door opened to his hand. Must be the woman. Herman stroked the release strip and the door opened. She was young and had a beautiful smile. Just what the doctor ordered.

At first, because she was beautiful and cheerful and good at her job, Herman forgot the game, or at least was able to concentrate on something else. But then, even as she tried to arouse him again, the pent-up worry flooded back, and he sat up on the bed.

"What's wrong?"

Herman shook his head.

"Too tired?"

Good a reason as any. No reason to pour out your heart to an edna.

"Yeah. I'm tired."

She sighed, leaned back again on the pillows. "Don't I know it. I get tired, too. They give me shots so I can keep going for hours, but it's so nice to get a breather."

A talker. Damn. "Want something to eat?"

"We aren't supposed to."

"Diet or something?"

"Naw. Sometimes they try to drug us."

"I won't drug you."

"Rules are rules," the woman insisted. The girl, rather.

"You're pretty young."

"Working my way through college. I'm older than I look. But they can rent me juvenile, too, so we all get more money."

Money money money. Pay for sex and you get a treatise on the state of the economy. "Look, kid, why not go now?"

"You paid for all night," she said, surprised.

"Fine. You were wonderful. But I'm tired."

"They don't like giving a refund."

"I don't want a refund."

She looked doubtful, but when he started dressing, so did she. "That's an expensive habit," she said.

"What is?"

"Paying for love and then not using up what you pay for."

"Well, right," Herman said, then added wryly, "we wouldn't want any extra love lying around, would we?"

"Everybody's a comic," she answered, but even at that the habits of the trade stayed. It was sexy, her smile and her tone of voice, and for a moment he wondered if he really wanted her to go. But then he thought of Italy and decided he'd rather be alone.

She kissed him good-bye-- it was company policy-- and then left him alone. He sat up all night, watching Italy. The imbecile was letting things go. He could have had Arabia around three in the

morning. But instead, he made a ridiculous peace treaty that actually gave up land in Egypt. Stupid! By morning, Herman had fallen asleep, but he woke with a headache and called Grey.

"Dammit, what's happening?" Herman demanded.

"Herman, please," Grey said. "We're working hard here."

"Yeah, and I'm just sitting around here watching Italy turn to crap."

"Didn't you get an edna tonight?"

"What the hell business is that of yours?" Herman snapped. "Buy Italy, Grey!"

"This Abner Doon, the assistant minister of colonization, he's pretty adamant."

"Offer him the moon."

"It's already owned. But I offered him everything else. He just laughed. He just told you to watch the game and you'd see a real genius at work."

"Genius! The man's a moron! Already he--" and Herman launched into a description of the stupidities of the night before.

"Look, I'm not into International Games," Grey finally said. "You know that, that's why you hired me. OK? So let's just have me do my job and you follow the scoreboard."

"So when are you going to do your job?"

Grey sighed. "Do we have to do this on the phone, with Mother's Little Boys listening in?"

"Let 'em listen."

"All right, I've tried to trace who's controlling this Doon. The man has connections, but they're all legitimate. I can't find a bankroll, all right? So how can I get the people who are paying him to sell out if I can't find who's paying him?"

"Can't he have an accident or something?"

Grey was silent for a moment. "This is the telephone, Mr. Nuber, and it's illegal to suggest criminal activities over the telephone."

"Sorry."

"It's also very stupid. Do you want me to lose my license?"

"They don't listen to every conversation."

"All right, keep praying. But we don't do anything criminal. Now sit and watch the holo or something."

Herman punched off the phone and sat at the computer terminal. Italy had just launched a pointless, half-assed war in Guiana. Guiana! As if anything that happened there mattered. And it was such a naked act of aggression that the alliances were starting to form against Italy. Stupid!

He had to do something to take his mind off the delay. He punched in a private game, offered it for free for any taker, normal specs, and pretty soon he had a good five-man game of Acquitaine going. He won it in seven hours. Pathetic. The great players were all on the broadcast games. What's keeping Grey?

"Nothing's keeping me," Grey insisted when he finally came to Herman's flat that night. "I'm performing heroic tasks for you, Herman."

"Swinging on vines isn't doing a damn bit of good."

Grey smiled, trying to like Herman's sense of humor. "Look, Herman, you're my biggest client.

And you're famous. And you're important. I'd have to be an idiot not to be doing my best for you. I've got three agencies out researching everything about this Doon. And all we can find out is that he's nothing like what we first thought."

"Good. What do we think now?"

"He's rich. Richer than you could imagine."

"I can imagine infinite wealth. Give me credit."

"He's got connections all over Capitol. He knows everybody, or at least knows the people who know everybody. Right? And all his money is in trusts and investments in dummy corporations that own dummy banks that own dummy industries that own half this damn planet."

"In other words," Herman said, "he's self-employed."

"Self-employed, but he ain't sellin', you see. He doesn't need the money. He could lose everything you own in pinochle and still like the guy who won it."

Herman grimaced, "Grey, you sure have a way of making me feel poor."

"I'm trying to tell you what you're up against. Because this guy's twenty-seven years old. I mean, he's young!"

But something didn't fit. "I thought you told me he wasn't on somec."

"That's the craziest thing, Herman. He isn't. He's never gone under at all."

"What is he, a religious fanatic?"

"His only religion seems to be wrecking your life, Mr. Nuber, if I may be so bold. He won't sell. And he won't tell why. And as long as he doesn't go on somec, he doesn't have to sell. It's as simple as that."

"What have I ever done to him? Why should he want to do this to me?"

"He said he hoped you wouldn't take it personally."

Herman shook his head, furious and yet unable to find a reason adequate for his fury-- or an adequate way to express it. The man had to be reachable.

"You know what I said over the phone?"

"You'd be the first suspect, if anything happened to him, Herman," Grey warned. "And it wouldn't help a bit. The game would end for the duration of the investigation. Besides, I'm not in that business."

"Everybody's in that business," Herman said. "At least scare him. At least rough him up."

Grey shrugged. "I'll try it." He stood up to go.

"Herman, I suggest you go back into business for a while. Make a little more money, get the feel of it again. Meet some people; try to get the game out of your system. If you don't play Italy this time, you can play it on your next waking."

Herman didn't answer, and Grey let himself out.

At three o'clock in the morning, Herman, exhausted, finally slept.

At about four-thirty, he was wakened by the alarms going off in his flat. He groggily pulled himself out of bed and staggered to the door of his bedroom. Alarms were pro forma-- no one of his class was ever burglarized, at least not while the residents were at home.

His worries about theft, were soon dispelled, however. The three men who came in all carried small, tight leather bags, filled with something hard. How hard they were Herman wasn't eager to

find out.

"Who are you?"

They said nothing, just approached him silently, slowly. He realized that he was cut off, both from the front door and the emergency exit. He backed into the bedroom. One of the men reached out a hand, and Herman found himself crushed against the doorjamb.

"Don't hurt me," he said.

The first man, taller than the others, tapped Herman's shoulder with his bludgeon. Now Herman knew how hard it was. The tapping continued, getting harder and harder, but the rhythm was steady. Herman stood frozen, unable to move, as the pain gradually increased. And then, suddenly, the man shifted his weight, swung the bludgeon backhand, and Herman's ribs were smashed. The breath left him in a grunt, and pain like great hands tearing apart his insides swept up and down his body.

The agony was unbearable.

They were just beginning.

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"No doctors, no hospital, nothing. No," Herman said, trying to summon a forceful tone of voice from his battered chest.

"Herman," Grey said, "your ribs may be broken."

"They aren't."

"You're not a doctor."

"I have the best medical kit in the city, and it said that nothing was broken. Whoever those bastards were last night, they know what they're doing."

Grey sighed. "I know who those bastards were, Herman."

Herman looked at Grey in surprise, almost rising from the bed, though the pain stopped him as abruptly as if he were strapped down.

"They were the men I hired to rough up Abner Doon."

Herman moaned. "Grey, no, it can't be-- how could he have talked them out of it?"

"They had an ironclad contract. They've worked for me before. I have no idea how Doon subverted them." Grey looked worried. "He has power where I didn't expect it. They've been offered money before-- a lot of money-- but they always kept their contracts. Except when I hired them to teach Doon a lesson."

"I wonder," Herman said, "if he learned anything."

"I wonder," Grey added, more to the point, "if you did."

The days passed, and soon Herman was able to hobble back into the room where the computer screen dominated one wall, where the holo of the world of Europe 1914d rotated slowly. Whatever Doon's motive was, Herman saw countless proofs of the fact that Doon knew nothing about playing International Games. He didn't even learn from his own mistakes. The forcible occupation of Guiana was followed by a pointless attack on Afghanistan, which had already been a client state, driving several other client states to the enemy alliance. But Herman's rage finally faded, and he glumly watched as the position of Italy worsened.

Italy's enemies weren't particularly brilliant. They could have been defeated-- could still be defeated, if only Herman could get to play.

It was when a revolution flared in England that Herman closed his eyes, hoping Grey would drop

dead.

"Forget the game. Buy Italy next time. Doon's got to go under somec sometime."

Herman didn't open his eyes, and Grey went away.

Herman began to rage again.

From the beginning of the game, Herman had established a carefully benign dictatorship as the government of the Italian Empire, with local autonomy on, many matters. It was not oppressive. It was guaranteed to eliminate any chance of revolution. Any rebellions were ruthlessly suppressed, while territories that didn't rebel were lavishly rewarded. It had been years since Herman had had to worry about the internal politics of Italy.

But when the English revolution began, Herman began to scan Doon's activities in the internal affairs of the empire. Doon had pointlessly changed things, taxing the populace, emphasizing the difference between the rich and poor, the powerful and the weak. He had also oppressed local nationalities, compelling them to learn Italian, and the computer had brought the inevitable result-- resentment, rebellion, and at last revolution.

What was Doon doing? Surely he could see the result of his actions. Surely he could tell that he was doing everything-- or at least something-- wrong. Surely he would realize he was out of his class in this game, and sell Italy while he still could. Surely--

"Grey," Herman said over the phone, "this Doon. Is he stupid?"

"If he is, it's the best-kept secret on Capitol."

"His game is too stupid to believed. Totally stupid. He's doing everything wrong. Anything that could be done right, he's done the opposite. Does that sound like him to you?"

"Doon's built up a financial empire from nothing to the largest I've ever heard of on Capitol, and done it in only eleven years since his majority," Grey answered. "That doesn't sound like him."

"Which means that either he's not playing the game himself--"

"No, he's playing, that's the law and the computer says he's following it--"

"Or he's deliberately playing to lose."

Grey's shrug was almost audible. "Why would anybody do that?"

"I want to meet him."

"He'll never come."

"On some neutral ground, someplace that neither of us controls."

"Herman, you don't know this man. If you don't control the ground, he does-- or will, by the time meeting takes place. There is no neutral ground."

"I want to meet him, Grey. I want to find out what the hell he's doing with my empire."

And Herman went back to watching as the revolution in England was put down brutally. Brutally, but not thoroughly. The computer showed armed bands still roaming in Wales and the Scottish highlands, and urban guerrillas still alive in London, Manchester, and Liverpool. Doon could see that information, too. But he chose to ignore it. And chose to ignore the revolutionary movement gaining force in Germany, the brigands harassing the farmers in Mesopotamia, the Chinese encroachments in Siberia.

Asinine.

And the fabric of a well-wrought empire began to come apart.

The telephone sent its gentle buzz into the flexible speaker in his pillow, and Herman awoke. Not even opening his eyes, he said into the pillow, "I'm asleep, drop dead."

"This is Grey."

"You're fired, Grey."

"Doon says he'll meet with you."

"Call my secretary for an appointment."

"But he says he'll only meet with you if you can come to the C24b tube station within thirty minutes."

"That isn't even in my sector," Herman complained.

"So he isn't trying to make it easy for you."

Herman groaned and got out of bed, dressed in a suit that looked far from natty as he sagged out of the flat and into the corridors. The tubes were running a half-schedule at that time of morning, and Herman stumbled into one and followed the route that let him to station C24b. It was even less crowded than Herman's own area, and there on the platform waited an unprepossessing young man, only a little taller than Herman himself. He was alone.

"Doon?" Herman asked.

"Grandfather," the young man answered. Herman looked at him blankly. Grandfather?

"Not possible."

"Abner Doon, colt, out of filly Sylvaii, daughter of Herman Nuber and Birniss Humbol. An admirable pedigree, don't you think?"

Herman was appalled. After all these solitary years, to discover that his young tormentor was a relative-- "Dammit, boy, I have no family. What is this, vengeance for a divorce a hundred years ago? I paid your grandmother well. If you're telling the truth."

But Doon only smiled. "Actually, Grandfather, I don't give a damn about your liaison and lack of it with my grandmother. I don't like her anyway, and we haven't spoken in years. She says I'm too much like you. And so now when she comes out of somec, she doesn't even look me up. I visit her just to be annoying."

"A trait you seem to specialize in."

"You find a long-lost grandchild, and already you're trying to cause division in the family. What an ugly way of dealing with family crises."

And Doon turned on his heel. Since they hadn't yet discussed the game, Herman had no choice but to follow. "Listen, boy," Herman said as he trotted doggedly behind the younger man's brisk walk, "I don't know what your purpose is with my game, but you certainly don't need any money. And you're certainly not going to win any bets, not the way you're playing."

Doon smiled over his shoulder and went on walking down the corridors. "It rather depends, doesn't it, on whit I'm betting on."

"You mean you're betting that you'll lose? The way you're playing, you'd never get any takers."

"No, Grandfather. As a matter of fact, I'm holding bets made months ago. Bets that Italy would be destroyed and utterly gone from Europe 1914d within two months of your waking."

"Uttedy destroyed!" Herman laughed. "Not a chance of that, boy. I built too well, even for a games moron like you."

Doon touched a door and it slid open.

"Come in, Grandfather."

"Not a chance, Doon. What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"A rather small one, actually," Doon said, and Herman followed the younger man's gaze to the two men standing behind him.

"Whore did they come from?" Herman asked stupidly.

"They're my friends. They're coming to this party with us. I like to keep myself surrounded by friends."

Herman followed Doon inside.

The setting was austere, functional, almost middle-class in its plainness. But the walls were lined with real wood-- Herman recognized it at a glance-- and the computer that overwhelmed the small front room was the most expensive, most self-contained model available.

"Grandfather," Doon said, "contrary to what you think, I brought you here tonight because, for all that you've been a remarkably bad parent and grandparent, I feel some residual desire for you not to hate me."

"You lose," Herman replied. The two thugs grinned moronically at him.

"You haven't had much connection with the real world lately," Doon commented.

"More than I wanted."

"Instead you've devoted your life and your fortune building up an empire on a shadow world that exists only in the computer."

"My Lord, boy, you sound like a clergyman."

"Mother wanted me to be a minister," Doon said. "She was always pathetically hunting for her father-- you, if you recall-- but this time a father who'd not desert her. Sadly, sadly, Grandfather, she finally found that surrogate parent in God."

"At least I thought I'd bequeath a child of mine some good sense," Herman said in disgust.

"You've bequeathed more than you know."

The world of Europe 1914d appeared on the holo. Italy was pinkly dominant.

"It's beautiful," Doon said, and Herman was surprised by the honest admiration in his voice.

"Nice of you to notice," Herman replied.

"No one but you could have built it."

"I know."

"How long do you think it would take to destroy it?"

Herman laughed. "Don't you know your history, boy? Rome was falling from the end of the republic on, and it took fifteen hundred years for the last remnant to fall. England's power was fading from the' eventeenth century on, but nobody noticed because it kept gathering real estate. It stayed independent for another four hundred years. Empires don't fall easily, boy."

"What would you say about an empire failing in a week?"

"That it wasn't a well-built empire, then."

"What about yours, Grandfather?"

"Stop calling me that."

"How well have you built?"

Herman glared at Doon. "No one has ever built better."

"Napoleon?"

"His empire didn't outlive him."

"And yours will outlive you?"

"Even a total incompetent could keep it intact."

Doon laughed. "But we're not talking about a total incompetent, Grandfather. We're talking about your own grandson, who has everything you ever had, only more of it."

Herman stood up. "This meeting is pointless. I have no family. I lost custody of my daughter because I didn't want her. I don't know, and I certainly don't want her offspring. I'll be under somec in a few months, and when I wake up I'll take Italy, whatever damage you've done to it, and build it back."

Doon laughed. "But Herman. Once a country has ceased to exist, it can't be brought back into the game. When I'm through with Italy, it'll be a computer standard country, and you won't be able to buy it."

"Look, boy," Herman said coldly, "do you plan to keep me here against my will?"

"Youre the one who asked for a meeting."

"I regret it."

"Seven days, Grandfather, and Italy will be gone."

"Inconceivable."

"I actually plan to do it in four days, but something might go wrong."

"Of all criminals, the worst are those who see beauty only as an opportunity for destruction."

"Good-bye, Grandfather."

But at the door, Herman turned to Doon and pleaded, "Why are you doing this? Why don't you stop?"

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Can't you wait until next time? Can't you let me have Italy for this waking?"

Doon only smiled. "Grandfather, I know how you play. If you had Italy this waking, you'd take over the world, wouldn't you? And then the game would end."

"Of course."

"That's why I have to destroy Italy now-- while I still can."

"Why Italy? Why not go ruin somebody else's empire?"

"Because, Grandfather, it's no challenge to destroy the weak."

Herman left, and the door slid shut behind him. He went back to the tube, and it took him to his home station. At home, the holo of the globe was still dominated by pink. Herman stopped and looked at it, and even as bg watched, a large section of Siberia changed colors. He no longer raged at Doon's incompetence. The boy was obviously compensating for a miserably religious childhood, which he blamed on his grandfather. But no amount of talent the boy might have could

possibly dismember Italy. The computer was too rigidly realistic. Once the computer-simulated populace of Italy realized what Doon's character, the dictator, was doing, the unchanging laws of interaction between government and governed would oust him. He would be compelled to sell, and Herman could buy. And rebuild all the damage.

England rebelled again, and Herman went to bed.

But he woke gasping, and remembered that in his dream he had been crying. Why? But even as he tried to remember, the dream slipped from his mind's grasp, and he could only remember that it had something to do with his former wife.

He went to the computer and cleared it of the game. Birniss Humbol. The computer summoned her picture to the screen, and Herman looked as she went through a sequence of facial expressions. She was beautiful then, and the computer awakened memories.

A courtship that had been oddly chaste-- perhaps religion was already in Birniss's blood, only to surface fully in her daughter. Their wedding night had been their first intercourse, and Herman laughed at how it had been-- Birniss, worldly and wise, so strangely timid as she confessed her unpreparedness to her husband. And Herman, tender and careful, leading her through the mysteries. And at the end, her asking him, "Is that all?"

"It'll be better later," he had said, more than a little hurt.

"It wasn't half as bad as I expected," she answered. "Do it again."

They had done everything together. Everything, that is, but the game. And it was a crucial time for Italy. He began going to bed later and later, talking to her less, and even then talking of nothing but Italy and the affairs of his small but beautiful world.

There was no other man when she divorced him, and to satisfy a whim of curiosity he looked up her name in the vital statistics bank. He wasn't surprised when the computer told him that she had never remarried, though she hadn't kept his name.

Had there been something remarkable about their marriage, so that she'd never marry again? Or was it simply that she had only trusted one man, and then found that marriage wasn't what she'd wanted-- or sex, either, by extension. Her hurt had poisoned their daughter; her hurt had poisoned Doon. Poor boy, Herman thought. The sins of the fathers. But the divorce, however regrettable, had been inevitable. To save the marriage, Herman would have had to sacrifice the game. And never in history, real or feigned, had there been such a thing of beauty as his Italy. Dissertations had been written on it, and he knew that he was acclaimed by the students of alternate histories as the greatest genius ever to have played. "A match for Napolean, Julius, or Augustus." He remembered that one, and likewise the statement of one professor who had pleaded for an interview until Herman's vanity no longer allowed him to resist: "Herman Nuber, not even America, not even England, not even Byzantium compared to your Italy for stability, for grace, for power." High praise, coming from a man who had specialized in real European history, with the chauvinism of the historian for the era he studied.

Doon. Abner Doon, And when the lad had proven himself no match for his grandfather's gifts as a builder, what would happen to him?

Herman found himself, as he dozed at the computer, daydreaming of a reconciliation of some kind. Abner Doon embracing him and saying, Grandfather, you built too well. You built for all time. Forgive my presumption.

Even Herman's dreams, he realized as he awoke, even my dreams require the surrender of everyone around me. Birniss's image was still on the screen. He erased her, and began to scan Italy.

The entire empire was being swept by revolution from one end to the other. Even in the homeland on the Italic Peninsula. Herman stared in disbelief. It had only been overnight, and suddenly all the revolutions had come at once.

It was unprecedented in history. How could the computer have been so mad? It had to be a malfunction. Many empires had faced rebellion, but never, never so general-- never universal

revolution. Even the army was in mutiny. And the enemies of Italy were madly plunging over the borders to take advantage of the situation.

"Grey!" Herman shouted over the phone. "Grey, do you know what hes doing?"

"How can I help it?" Grey asked nastily. "All the gamesplayers on my staff have been chattering about it all morning."

"How did he do it?"

"Look, Herman, you're the games expert. I don't even play, all right? And I've got work to do. Did you meet with him?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He's my grandson."

"I wondered if he'd tell you."

"You knew?"

"Of course," Grey answered. "And I had his psychologicat profile. Do you think I would have let you meet him alone if I hadn't been sure he had no intention of harming you?"

"Not harming me? What about those walking turds he had beat me to a pudding last week?"

"Retaliation, Herman, that's all. He's a good retaliator."

"You're fired!" Herman shouted, slamming the button on the console that disconnected the conversation. And he watched grimly, hour after hour, as the loyal fragments of Italy's army attempted to cope with the mutiny and revolution and invasion all at once. It was impossible, and by late afternoon, the only pink areas on the globe were in Gaul, Iberia, Italy itself, and a small pocket in Poland.

The computer reported that Doon's persona, the dictator of Italy, had vanished, and would-be assassins couldn't put him to death. And as Rome itself fell to an invading army from Nigeria and America, he knew that now defeat and destruction were inevitable. Impossible yesterday, inevitable today.

Still he fought his despair, and sent an urgent message to Grey, forgetting that he had fired him that morning. Grey responded as deferently as ever.

"Offer to buy Italy," Herman said.

"Now? The thing's in ruins."

"I might pull it out. I still might. Surely he's proved his point by now."

"I'll try," Grey said.

But by late evening, there was no pink on the board. The other players and the computer's ironclad adherence to the laws of public behavior had left the game no chance of Italy's rebirth. The information appeared on the status lists. "Iran: newly independent; Italy: discontinued; Japan: at war with China and India over the domination of Siberia..." No special notice. Nothing. Italy: discontinued.

Grimly Herman played back all the information he could find in the computer. How had Doon done it? It was impossible. But for hours as he pored over the information the computer gave him, Herman began to see the endless machinations that Doon had set in motion, always postponing revolution here, advancing it there, antagonizing here, soothing there, so that when the full revolution erupted it was universal; so that when Italy's defeat was obvious, there was no lingering desire to have some fragment of it remain. He had gauged the hatred better than the

computer itself; he had destroyed more thoroughly than any man had ever built. And in his bitterness at the wrecking of his creation, Herman still had to recognize a kind of majesty in what Doon had done. But it was a satanic majesty, a regal power to destroy.

"A mighty hunter before the Lord," said Doon, and Herman whirled to see Doon standing in his living room.

"How did you get in here," Herman stammered.

"I have connections," Doon said, smiling. "I knew you'd never let me in, and I had to see you."

"You've seen me," Herman said, and turned away.

"It went faster than I thought it would," Doon said.

"Glad to know something could surprise you."

Doon might have said more, but at that point Herman's self-control, overstrained that day, broke down. He didn't weep, but he did grip the console of the computer far too tightly, as if afraid that when he let go the centrifugal force of Capitol's rotation would throw him into space.

Grey and two doctors came at Doon's anonymous call, and the doctors pried Herman's fingers away hvm the console and led him to bed. A sedative and some instructions to Grey, and they left again. It was only mild-- too much in one day, that's all. He'd feel much better when he woke up.

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Herman felt much better when he woke up. He had slept dreamlessly-- the sedatives did their work well. The false sunlight streamed through his expensive artificial window, which seemed to open on the countryside outside Florence, though of course in reality nothing but another flat much like his own was on the other side of that wall. Herman looked at the sunlight and wondered if the illusion was good. He had been born on Capitol-- he had no idea whether sunlight really streamed into windows that way.

Under the dazzling light, Abner Doon sat on a chair, asleep. Seeing him brought a flood of feelings back to Herman-- but he retained his control, and the vestiges of the drugs made him oddly calm about things, after all. He watched his grandson's sleeping face and wondered how so much hatred could be hidden there.

Doon awoke. He looked immediately at his grandfather, saw that he was awake, and smiled gently. But he said nothing. Just stood and carried his chair closer to Herman's bed. Herman watched him silently, and wondered what was going to happen. But the drug kept saying, "I don't care what happens," and Herman didn't care what was going to happen.

"Is it all discharged?" he asked softly, and Doon only smiled more broadly.

"You're so young," Doon said. And then, so quickly that Herman had no time (and the drug gave him no inclination) to resist, the younger man reached out and touched Herman's forehead lightly. The hand was dry, and it traced the faint lines that had begun to cleave the skin. "You're so young."

Am I? Herman thought, as he rarely did, of how old he was in real time. He had gone on somec-- what, seventy years ago? At his average rate of one out of four, that meant it had been only seventeen years of subjective time since he had first been able to use the sleeping drug, the gift of eternal life. Seventeen years. And all of them devoted to building Italy. And yet.

And yet those seventeen years hadn't even been half the time he had lived. Subjectively, he wasn't forty yet. Subjectively, he could start again. Subjectively, there was more than enough time for him to make an empire that even Doon couldn't break down.

"But I can't, can I?" Herman asked, unaware that his question arose from private thoughts.

Yet Doon understood. "I've learned everything you know about building, Grandfather," he said. "But you'll never understand what I've learned about tearing down."

Herman smiled wanly, the only kind of smile available to him under the drug. "It's a field of study I largely ignored."

"And yet it's the only one with eternal results. Build well, and eventually your beautiful creation, Grandfather, with or without my help, eventually it will fall. But destroy thoroughly, destroy effectively, and what was wrecked will never be rebuilt. Never."

And the drug took Herman's fury and hatred and turned it into regret and gentle grief. Tears spun from his eyelashes as he blinked.

"Italy was beautiful," he said.

Doon only nodded.

And as the tears now began to flow smoothly onto the pillow, Herman whimpered, "Why'd you do it, boy?"

"It was practice."

"Practice for what?"

"Saving the human race."

The drug permitted Herman to smile a little at that. "Quite a warm-up, boy. What can you dystroy now, after Italy?"

Doon said nothing. He just walked to the window and looked through it.

"Do you know what's going on outside your window?"

Herman mumbled, "No."

"Peasants are pressing olives. And bringing food to Florence. A lovely scene, Grandfather. Very pastoral."

"Does that mean it's spring? Or autumn?"

"Who remembers?" Doon asked. "Who cares? The seasons are what we say they are on every world in the Empire, and on Capitol we care nothing for seasons at all. We've mastered everything, haven't we? The Empire is powerful, and even the attempts of the enemy to attack us are only the annoyance of mosquitoes."

The word mosquito meant nothing to Herman, but he was too weary to ask.

"Grandfather, the Empire is stable. Not as perfect as Italy, perhaps, but strong and stable and with somec keeping the elite alive for centuries, what force could possibly topple the Empire?"

Herman struggled to think. He had never thought of the Empire as being a nation, like those in the International Games. The Empire was-- was reality. Nothing would ever hurt it. "Nothing can hurt the Empire," Herman said.

"I can," Doon said.

"You're insane," Herman answered.

"Probably," Doon said, and then the conversation lagged and the drug decided that Herman would sleep. He slept.

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"I want to see Doon," Herman told Grey.

"I would have thought," Grey answered mildly, "that you'd seen enough of him last month."

"I want to see him."

"Herman, this is becoming an obsession. The doctors say I can't let you do anything to upset yourself. If you'll just behave reasonably for a few months, we can get you back on somec and I can give you back fifty percent of your power of attorney."

"I don't like being considered insane."

"It's just a technicality. It's keeping you alive, you know."

"Grey, all I've done is try to warn--"

"Don't start that. The doctors are monitoring this call. Herman, this Empire isn't interested in your pathetic theories about Doon--"

"He said it himself!"

"Abner Doon destroyed Italy. It was ugly, it was cruel, it was pointless, but it was legal. Now to fantasize that he's also out to destroy the Empire--"

"It's not a fantasy!" Herman roared.

"Herman, the doctors said I have to call it a fantasy to help you see reality."

"He's going to wreck the Empire! He can do it!"

"That kind of talk is treason, Herman. Stop talking like that and we can get you declared legally sane again. But if you say things like that when you're responsible for yourself, you can be executed very quickly by Mother's Little Boys."

"Grey, whether I'm sane or not, I want to talk to Doon!"

"Herman, drop it. Forget it. It was just a game. He was your grandson. He was hurt, he tried to hurt you back. But don't let it damage you like this."

"Grey, tell the doctors I want to talk to Doon!"

Grey sighed. "I'll tell them on one condition."

"What's that?"

"That if they give you one meeting with Doon, you'll never ask for another."

"I promise. I only want one meeting."

"Then I'll do my best."

Grey switched off the phone, and Herman disconnected his end. The telephone now would only connect him to Grey's office. He could make no other calls. He couldn't open the door. And his computer would no longer let him watch the broadcast games.

It was only an hour before Grey was back on the phone.

"Well?" Herman asked eagerly.

"They said yes."

"Connect me then!" Herman demanded.

"I already tried. Impossible."

"How can it be impossible? He'll talk to me! I know he will!"

"He's under somec, Herman. He went under only a few days after he wrecked-- after the game. He won't be awake for three years."

And with a whimper Herman disconnected the phone again.

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It took five years of therapy-- five years without somec-- for Herman at last to admit that his fear of Doon was abnormal, and that actually Doon had never hinted that he meant to wreck the Empire. Of course Herman had said that from the beginning, as soon as he realized that was what the doctors wanted to hear. But the machines enforced truth, and it was not until the machines told the doctors that Herman was not lying when he said those things that the doctors at last pronounced him cured and Grey's staff (Grey was under somec at the time) released fifty percent of Herman's power of attorney to him. Herman promptly signed it all back and went under somec, trying to snatch back the years of somec sleep that had been taken from him while the doctors cured him of his ridiculous delusions.

For nearly a century, Doon's and Herman's wakings failed to coincide. At first Herman hadn't tried to look Doon up-- the cure had taken from him, for a while at least, any curiosity about his grandson. Then he had learned to look back on the strange episode that had so changed his life without fear or anger; and he had pored over the records of the famous game. Many books had been written on it-- The Rise and Fall of Nuber's Italy was over two thousand views long. And as he philosophically studied the structure he had built and the way it had fallen, the desire grew in him to meet his opponent and grandson. Not again, because the doctors had convinced Herman utterly of the truth that he hadn't seen Doon at all after the battle.

But when Herman tried to look up Abner Doon's waking schedule at the sleeproom, he was informed that Doon's wakings were a matter of state security. That meant only one thing-- Doon was sleeping longer than the absolute maximum of ten years and waking less than the absolute minimum of two months. It meant he was in a power group inaccessible even to most government officials. And it increased Herman's desire to see him.

It was not until Herman had reached the subjective age of seventy that he finally succeeded. Centuries of Empire history had passed, and Herman followed them carefully. He read everything he could get into his computer on history-- Empire and otherwise. He wasn't sure what he was looking for; but he was sure that he had never found it. And then one day his inquiry at the sleeproom brought him the information that Abner Doon was awake. They wouldn't tell him how long Doon had been awake or how soon he would sleep again, but it was enough. Herman sent the message, and to his surprise, a message returned that Doon would see him. That Doon would even come to him.

Herman fretted for hours, wondering now what it was he had wanted to see Doon for. There was no filial feeling, Herman decided. Family was nothing to him. It was the wish of a great player to meet the man who had defeated him, that's all. Napolean's wish, just before his death, to talk to Wellington. Hitler's mad craving to speak to Roosevelt. Julius's dying passion to converse, for just a moment as the blood poured from him, with Brutus.

What's in the mind of the man who destroyed you? That was the question that had nagged at Herman's mind for years, and he wondered, now, if he would find the answer. And yet this would be his only chance. Herman's five years of therapy had cost him dearly, and he could see-- as so few others could-- his mortality waiting around the corner. Somec only postponed, it did not end.

"Grandfather," said a gentle voice, and Herman woke abruptly. When had he fallen asleep? No matter. Before him stood the short, now rather portly man that he recognized as his grandson. It was shocking to see how young Doon was, though. Hardly older than when they had locked horns so many, many years ago.

"My legendary opponent," said Herman, extending his hand.

Doon took the offered fingers, but instead of gripping them, he spread the old man's hand on his. "Even somec takes its toll, doesn't it?" he asked, and the sadness in his eyes told Herman that, after all, someone else understood the death that somec so cleverly carried within its life-preserving promise.

"Why did you want to see me?" Doon asked.

And heavy, slow, inexplicable tears rolled out of Herman's aging eyes. "I don't know," he said. "I just wanted to know how you were doing."

"I'm doing well," Doon said. "My department has colonized dozens of worlds in the last few centuries. The enemy's on the run-- we're going to outpopulate him if he doesn't do the same. The Empire's growing."

"I'm so glad. Glad the Empire's growing. Building on empire's such a lovely thing." Pointlessly he added, "I built an empire once."

"I know," Doon said. "I destroyed it."

"Oh yes, yes," Herman said. "That's why I wanted to see you."

Doon nodded and waited for the question.

"I wondered. I wanted to know why you chose me. Why you decided to do it. I can't remember why, you know. My memory isn't all it was."

Doon smiled and held the old man's hand. "No one's memory is, Grandfather. I chose you because you were the greatest. I chose you because you were the highest mountain I could climb."

"But why did you-- why did you tear? Why didn't you build another empire, and rival me?" That was the question. Ah, yes, that's the question, Herman decided. It was so much more satisfying though he still felt a small doubt. Hadn't he once had a conversation with Doon in which Doon answered him? Never. No.

Doon looked distant. "You don't know the answer?"

"Oh," Herman said, laughing, "I was once quite mad, you know, and thought you were out to wreck the Empire. They cured me."

Doon nodded, looking sad.

"But I'm quite better now, and I want to know. Just want to know."

"I tore-- I attacked your empire, Grandfather, because it was too beautiful to finish. If you had finished it, won the game, the game would have ended, and then what would have happened? It wouldn't have been remembered for very long. But now-- it's remembered forever."

"Funny, isn't it," Herman said, losing the thread of the conversation before Doon finished speaking, "that the greatest builder and the greatest wrecker should both come from the same-- should be grandfather and grandson. Funny, isn't it?"

"It's all in the family, isn't it?" Doon said with a smile.

"I'm proud of you, Doon," Herman said, and meant it for the time being. "I'm glad that if someone was strong enough to beat me, it was blood of my blood. Flesh of my--"

"Flesh," Doon interrupted. "So you're religious after all."

"I don't remember," Herman said. "Something happened to my memory, Abner Doon, and I'm not sure of everything. Was I religious? Or was it someone else?"

Doon's eyes filled with sorrow and he reached out to the old man sitting on a soft chair. Doon knelt and embraced him. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't know what it would cost you. I truly didn't."

Herman only laughed. "Oh, I didn't have any bets out that waking. It didn't cost me a dime."

Doon only held him tighter and said, again, "I'm sorry, Grandfather, "

"Oh, well, I don't mind losing," Herman answered. "In the long run, it was only a game, wasn't it?"

LIFELOOP

Jellicle Cats are black and white, Jellicle Cats are rather small; Jellicle Cats are merry and bright, And pleasant to hear when they caterwaul.

-- T. S. Eliot, The Song of the Jellicles

Arran lay on her bed, weeping. The sound of the door slamming still rang through her flat. Finally she rolled over, looked at the ceiling, wiped tears away delicately with her fingers, and then said, "What the hell."

Dramatic pause. And then, at last (at long last) a loud buzzer sounded. "All clear, Arran," said the voice from the concealed speaker, and Arran groaned, swung around to sit on the bed, unstrapped the loop recorder from her naked leg, and threw it tiredly against the wall. It smashed.

"Do you have any idea how much that equipment costs?" Triuff asked, reproachfully.

"I pay you to know," Arran said, putting on a robe. Triuff found the tie and handed it to her. As Arran threaded it through the loops, Triuff exulted. "The best ever. A hundred billion Arran Handully fans are aching to pay their seven chops to get in to watch. And you gave it to them."

"Seventeen days," Arran said, glaring at the other woman. "Seventeen stinking days. And three of them with that bastard Courtney."

"He's paid to be a bastard. It's his persona."

"He's pretty damned convincing. If you get me even three minutes with him next time, I'll sack you."

Arran strode out of her flat, barefoot and clad only in the robe. Triuff followed, her high-heeled shoes making a clicking rhythm that, to Arran anyway, always seemed to be saying, "Money, money, money." Except when it was saying, "Screw your mother, screw your mother." Good manager. Billions in the bank.

"Arran," Triuff said. "I know you're very tired."

"Ha," Arran said.

"But while you were recording I had time to do a little business--"

"While I was recording you had time to manufacture a planet!" Arran snarled. "Seventeen days! I'm an actress, I'm not going for the guiness. I'm the highest paid actress in history, I think you said in your latest press releases. So why do I work my tail off for seventeen days when I'm only awake for twenty-one? Four lousy days of peace, and then the marathon."

"A little business," Triuff went on, unperturbed. "A little business that will let you retire."

"Retire?" And without thinking, Arran slowed down her pace.

"Retire. Imagine-- awake for three weeks, and only guest appearances in other poor slobs' loops. Getting paid for having fun."

"Nights to myself?"

"We'll turn off the recorder."

Arran scowled. Triuff amended: "You can even take the thing off!"

"And what do I have to do to earn so much? Have an affair with a gorilla?"

"It's been done," Triuff said, "and it's beneath you. No, this time we give them total reality. Total!"

"What do we give them now? Sure, you want me crap in a glass toilet!"

"I've made arrangements," Triuff said, "to have a loop recorder in the Sleeproom."

Arran Handully gasped and stared at her manager. "In the Sleeproom! Is nothing sacred!" And then Arran laughed. "You must have spent a fortune! An absolute fortune!"

"Actually, only one bribe was necessary."

"Who'd you bribe, Mother?"

"Very close. Better, in fact, since Mother hasn't got the power to pick her nose without the consent of the Cabinet. It's Farl Baak."

"Baak! And here I thought he was a decent man."

"It wasn't a bribe. At least, not for money."

Arran squinted at Triuff. "Triuff," she said, "I told you that I was willing to act out twenty-four-hour-a-day love affairs. But I choose my own lovers off-camera."

"You'll be able to retire."

"I'm not a whore!"

"And he said he wouldn't even sleep with you, if you didn't want. He just asked for twenty-four hours with you two wakings from now. To talk. To become friends."

Arran leaned against the wall of the corridor. "It'll really make that much money?"

"You forget, Arran. All your fans are in love with you. But no one has ever done what you're going to do. From a half-hour before waking to a half-hour after you've been put to sleep."

"Before waking and after the somec." Arran smiled. "There's nobody in the Empire who's seen that, except the Sleeproom attendants."

"And we can advertise utter reality. No illusion: you'll see everything that happens to Arran Hanto daily for three weeks of waking!"

Arran thoughtfully considered for a moment.

"It'll be hell," she said.

"You can retire afterward," Triuff reminded her.

"All right," Arran agreed. "I'll do it. But I warn you. No Courtneys. No bores. And no little boys!"

Triuff looked hurt. "Arran-- the little boy was five loops ago!"

"I remember every moment of it," Arran said. "He came without an instruction booklet. What the hell do I do with a seven-year-old boy?"

"And it was your best acting up to then. Arran, I can't help it-- I have to spring surprises on you. That's when you're at your best-- dealing with difficulty. That's why you're an artist. That's why you're a legend."

"That's why you're rich," Arran pointed out, and then she walked quickly away, heading for the Sleeproom. Her eligibility began in a half-hour, and every waking moment beyond that was a moment less of life.

Triuff followed her as far as she could, giving last-minute instructions on what to do when she woke, what to expect in the Sleeproom, how the instructions would be given to her in a way that she couldn't miss, but that the audience watching the holos wouldn't notice, and finally Arran made it through the door into the tape and tap, and Triuff had to stay behind.

Gentle and deferent attendants led her to the plush chair where the sleep helmet waited. Arran sighed and sat down, let the helmet slip onto her head, and tried to think happy thoughts as the tapes took her brain pattern-- all her memories, all her personality-- and recorded it to restore her at waking. When it was done, she got up and lazily walked to the table, shedding her robe on the way. She lay down with a groan of relief, and leaned her head back, surprised that the table, which looked so hard, could be soft.

It occurred to her (it always had before, too, but she didn't know it) that she must have done this same thing twenty-two times before, because she had used somec that many times. But since the somec wiped clean all the brain activities during the sleep, including memory, she could never remember anything that happened to her after the taping. Funny. They could have her make love to all the attendants in the Sleeproom, and she'd never know it.

But no, she realized as the sweet and deferent men and women soothingly wheeled the table to a place where monitoring instruments waited for her, no, that could never happen. The Sleeproom is the one place where no jokes are played, where nothing surprising or outrageous is ever done. Something in the world must be secure.

Then she giggled. Until my next waking, that is. And then the Sleeproom will be open to all the billions of poor suckers in the Empire who never get a chance at the somec, who have to live out their measly hundred years all in a row, while sleepers skip through the centuries like stones on a lake, touching down only every few years.

And then the sweet young man with the darling cleft chin (pretty enough to be an actor, Arran noticed) pushed a needle gently into her arm, apologizing softly for the pain.

"That's all right," Arran started to say, but thin she felt a sharp pain in her arm, that spread quick as a fire to every part of her body; a terrible agony of heat the made her sweat leap from her pores. She cried out in pain and surprise-- what was happening? Were they killing her? Who could want her to die?

And then the somec penetrated to her brain and ended all consciousness and all memory. Including the memory of the pain that she had just felt. And when she woke again she would remember nothing of the agony of the somec. It would always and forever be a surprise.

Triuff got the seven thousand eight hundred copies of the latest loop finished-- most of them edited versions that cut out all sleeping hours and bodily functions other than eating and sex, the small minority full loops that truly dedicated (and rich) Arran Handully fans could view in small, private, seventeen-day-long showings. There were fans (crazy people, Triuff had long since decided, but thank Mother for them) who actually leased private copies of the unedited loops and watched them twice through on a single waking. That was one hell of a dedicated fan.

Once the loops were turned over to the distributors (and the advance money was paid into the Arran Handully Corporation credit accounts) Triuff went to the Sleeproom herself. It was the price of being a manager-- up weeks before the star, back under somec weeks after. Triuff would die centuries before Arran. But Triuff was very philosophical about it. After all, she kept reminding herself, she might have been a schoolteacher and never had somec at all.

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Arran woke sweating. Like every other sleeper, she believed that the perspiration was caused by the wake-up drugs, never suspecting that she was in that discomfort for the five years of sleep that had just passed. Her memories were intact, having been played back into her head, only a few moments before. And she immediately realized that something was fastened to her right thigh-- the loop recorder. She was already being taped, along with the room around her. For a brief moment she rebelled, regretting her decision to go along with the scheme. How could she bear to stay in character for the whole three weeks?

But the one unbreakable rule among lifeloop actors was "The loop never stops." No matter what you do, it's being looped, and there was no way to edit a loop. If there was one thing-- one tiny thing-- that had to be edited out in mid-action, the loop could simply be thrown away. The dedicated fans wouldn't stand for a loop that jumped from one scene to another-- they were always sure that something juicy was being left out.

And so, almost by reflex, she composed herself into the tragically beautiful, sweet-souled yet bitter-tongued Arran Handully thit all the fans knew and loved and paid money to watch. She sighed, and the sigh was seductive. She shuddered from the cold air passing across her sweating body, and turned the shiver into an excuse to open her eyes, blinking them delicately (seductively) against the dazzling lights.

And then she got up slowly, looked around. One of the ubiquitous attendants was standing nearby with a robe; Arran let him help her put it on, moving her shoulder just so in a way that made her breast rise just that much (never let it jiggle, nothing uglier than jiggling flesh, she reminded herself); and then she stepped to the newsboards. A quick flash through interplanetary news, and then a close study of Capitol events for the last five years, updating herself on who had done what to whom. And then she glanced at the game reports. Usually she only flipped a few pages and read virtually nothing-- the games bored her-- but this time she looked at it carefully for several minutes, pursuing her lips and making a point of seeming to be dismayed or excited about individual game outcomes.

Actually, of course, she was reading the schedule for the next twenty-one days. Some of the names were new to her, of course-- actors and actresses who were just reaching a level where they could afford to pay to be in an Arran Handully loop. And there were other names that she was quite familiar with, characters her fans would be expecting: Doret, her close friend and roommate seven loops ago, who still came back now and then to catch up on the news; Twern, that seven-year-old boy, now nearly fifteen, one of the youngest people ever to go on somec; old lovers and old friends, and a few leftovers from feuds on ancient loops. Which ones would be catty, and which ones would want to make up? Ah, well, she told herself. Plenty of chances to find that out.

A name far down the list leaped out at her. Hamilton Ferlock! Involuntarily she smiled-- caught herself in the sincere reaction and then decided that it would do no harm-- the Arran Hndully character might smile in just that way over a particular victory in a game. Hamilton Ferlock. Probably the only male actor on Capitol who could be considered to be in her class. They had started out at the same time, too, and he had been her lover in her first five loops, back when she only had a few months on somec between wakings. And now he was going to be in this loop!

She thought a silent blessing for her manager. Triuff had actually done something thoughtful.

And then it was time to dress and leave the Sleeproom and walk the long corridors to her flat.

She noticed as she walked along that the corridor had been redecorated, to give the illusion that somehow even the halls she walked along had class. She touched one of the new panels. Plastic.

She refrained from grimacing. Oh well, the audience will never know it isn't really wood, and it keeps the overhead down. She opened the door of her flat, and Doret screamed in delight and ran to embrace her. Arran decided that this time she should act a little put out at Doret for some imagined slight. Doret looked a little surprised, backed away, and then, like the consummate actress that she was (Arran didn't mind admitting the talents of her co-workers), she took Arran's quite subtle cue and turned it into a beautiful scene, Doret weeping out a confession that she had stolen a lover away from Arran several wakings ago, and Arran at first seeming to punish her, then forgiving. They ended the scene tearfully in each other's arms, and then paused a moment. Dammit, Arran thought, Triuff is at it again. Nobody entered to break the scene. They had to go on after the climax, which meant building it to an even bigger climax within the next three hours Arran was exhausted when Doret finally left. They had had a wrestling match, in which they had ripped each other's clothes to shreds, and finally Doret had pulled a knife on Arran. It was not until Arran managed to get the weapon away from her that Doret finally left, and Arran had a chance to relax for a moment.

Twenty-one days without a break, Arran reminded herself. And Triuff forcing me into exhaustion the first day. I'll fire the bitch, she vowed.

It was the twentieth day, and Arran was sick of the whole thing. Five parties, and a couple of orgies, and sleeping with someone new every night can pall rather quickly, and she had run the gamut of emotion several times. Each time she wept, she tried to put a different edge on it-- tried to improvise new things to say to lovers, to shout in an argument, to use to insult a condescending visitor.

Most of her guests this time had been talented, and Arran certainly hadn't had to pull the full weight all by herself. But it was grueling, all the same.

And the buzzer sounded, and Arran had to get up to answer the door.

Hamilton Ferlock stood there, looking a little unsure of himself. Five centuries of acting, Arran thought to herself, and he still hasn't lost that ingenuous, boyish manner. She cried out his name (seductively, in character) and threw her arms around him.

"Ham," she said, "oh, Ham, you wouldn't believe this waking! I'm so tired."

"Arran," he said softly, and Arran noticed with surprise that he was starting out sounding as if he loved her. Oh no, she thought. Didn't we part with a quarrel the last time? No, no, that was Ryden. Ham left because, because-- oh, yes. Because he was feeling unfulfilled.

"Well, did you find what you were looking for?"

Ham raised an eyebrow. "Looking for?"

"You said you had to do something important with your life. That living with me was turning you into a lovesick shadow." Good phrase, Arran congratulated herself.

"Lovesick shadow. Well, you see, that was true enough," Ham answered. "But I've discovered that shadows only exist where there is light. You're my light, Arran, and only when I'm near you do I really exist."

No wonder he's so highly paid, Arran thought. The line was a bit gooey, but it's men like him who keep the women watching.

"Am I a light?" Arran said. "To think you've come back to me after so long."

"Like a moth to a flame."

And then, as was obligatory in all happy reunion scenes (have I already done a happy reunion in this waking? No) they slowly undressed each other and made love slowly, the kind of copulation that was not so much arousing as emotional, the kind that made both men and women cry and hold each other's hands in the theatre. He was so gentle this time, and the lovemaking was so right, that Arran felt hard-pressed to stay in character. I'm tired, she told herself. How can he carry it off so perfectly? He's a better actor than I remembered.

Afterward, he held her in his arms as they talked softly-- he was always willing to talk afterward, unlike most actors, who thought they had to become surly after sex in order to maintain their macho image with the fans.

"That was beautiful," Arran said, and she noticed with alarm that she wasn't acting. Watch yourself, woman. Don't screw up the loop after you've already invested twenty damned days.

"Was it?" Ham asked.

"Didn't you notice?"

He smiled. "After all these years, Arran, and I was right. There's no woman in the world worth loving with you around."

She giggled softly and ducked her head away from him in embarrassment. It was in character, and

therefore seductive.

"Then why haven't you come back before?" Arran asked.

And Hamilton rolled over and lay on his back. Because he was silent for a few moments, she rubbed her ringers up and down his stomach. He smiled. "I stayed away, Arran, because I loved you too much."

"Love is never a reason to stay away," she said. Ha. Let the fans quote that piece of crap for a couple of years.

"It is," Ham said, "when it's real."

"Even more reason to stay with me!" Arran put on a pout. "You left me, and now you pretend you loved me."

And suddenly Hamilton swung over and sat on the edge of the bed.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Damn!" he said. "Forget the stupid act, will you?"

"Act?" she asked.

"The damn Arran Handully character you're wearing for fun and profit! I know you, Arran, and I'm telling you-- I'm telling you, not some actor, me-- I'm telling you that I love you! Not for the audiences! Not for the loop! For you-- I love you!"

And with a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach Arran realized that, somehow, that stinking Triuff had gotten Ham to be a dirty trick after all. It was the one unspoken rule in the business-- you never, never, never mention the fact that you're acting. For any reason. And now, the ultimate challenge-- admitting to the audience that you're an actress and making them still believe you.

"Not for the loop!" she echoed back, struggling to think of some kind of answer.

"I said not for the loop!" He stood up and walked away from her, then turned back, pointed at her. "All these stupid affairs, all the phony relationships. Haven't you had enough?"

"Enough? This is life, and I'll never have enough of life."

But Ham was determined not to play fair.

"If this is life, Capitol's an asteroid." A clumsy line, not like him. "Do you know what life is, Arran? Life is centuries of playing loop after loop, as I've done, screwing every actress who can raise a fee, all so I can make enough money to buy somec and the luxuries of life. And all of a sudden a few years ago, I realized that the luxuries didn't mean a damn thing, and what did I care if I lived forever? Life was so utterly meaningless, just a succession of high-paid tarts!"

Arran managed to squeeze out some tears of rag, The loop never stops. "Are you calling me a tart?"

"You?" Ham looked absolutely stricken. The man can act, Arran reminded herself, even as she cursed him for throwing her such a rotten curve. "Not you, Arran, don't even think it!"

"What can I think, with you coming here and accusing me of being a phony!"

"No," he said, sitting beside her on the bed again, putting his arm around her bare shoulders. She nestled to him again, as she had a dozen times before, years ago. She looked up at his face, and saw that his eyes were filled with tears.

"Why are you-- why are you crying?" she asked, hesitantly.

"I'm crying for us," he said.

"Why?" she asked. "What do we have to cry over?"

"All the years we've lost."

"I don't know about you, but my years have been pretty full," she said, laughing, hoping he would laugh, too.

He didn't. "We were right for each other. Not just as a team of actors, Arran, but as people. You weren't very good back then at the beginning-- neither was I. I've looked at the loops. When we were with other people, we were as phony as two-bit beginners. But those loops still sold, made us rich, gave us a chance to learn the trade. Do you know why?"

"I don't agree with your assessment of the past," Arran said coldly, wondering what the hell he was trying to accomplish by continuing to refer to the loops instead of staying in character properly.

"We sold those tapes because of each other. Because we actually looked real when we told each other we loved, when we chattered for hours about nothing. We really enjoyed each other's company."

"I wish I were enjoying your company now. Telling me I'm a phony and then saying I have no talent."

"Talent! What a joke," Ham said. He touched her cheek, gently, turning her face so she would look at him. "Of course you have talent, and so have I. We have money, too, and fame, and everything money can buy. Even friends. But tell me, Arran, how long has it been since you really loved anybody?"

Arran thought back through her most recent lovers. Any she wanted to make Ham's character jealous over? No... "I don't think I've ever really loved anybody."

"That's not true," Ham said. "It's not true, you loved me. Centuries ago, Arran, you truly loved me."

"Perhaps," she said. "But what does it have to do with now?"

"Don't you love me now?" Ham asked, and he looked so sincerely concerned that Arran was tempted to break character and laugh with delight, applaud his excellent performance. But the bastard vas still making it hard for her, and so she decided to make it hard for him.

"Love you now?" she asked. "You're just another pair of eager gonads, my friend." That'd shock the fans. And, she hoped, completely mess up Ham's nasty little joke.

But Ham stayed right in character. He looked hurt, pulled away from her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I guess I was wrong." And to Arran's shock he began to dress.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Leaving," he said.

Leaving, Arran thought with panic. Leaving now? Without letting the scene have a climax? All this buildup, all the shattered traditions, and then leaving without a climax? The man was a monster!

"You can't go!"

"I was wrong. I'm sorry. I've embarrassed myself," he said.

"No, no, Ham, don't leave. I haven't seen you in so long!"

"You've never seen me," he answered. "Or you wouldn't have been capable of saying what you just did."

Making me pay for throwing a curve back at him, Arran thought. I'd like to kill him. What a fantastic actor, though. "I'm sorry I said it," Arran said, wearing contrition as if she had been dipped in it. "Forgive me. I didn't mean it."

"You just want me to stay so I won't ruin your damn scene."

Arran gave up in despair. Why am I doing this, anyway? But the realization that breaking character now would wreck the whole loop kept, her going. She went and threw herself on the bed. "That's right!" she said, weeping. "Leave me now, when I want you so much."

Silence. She just lay there. Let him react.

But he said nothing. Just let the pause hang. She couldn't even hear him move.

Finally he spoke. "Do you mean it?"

"Mmm-hmm," she said, managing to hiccough through her tears. A cliche, but it got 'em every time.

"Not as an actress, Arran, please. As yourself. Do you love me? Do you want me?"

She rolled partway onto her side, lifted herself on one elbow, and said, the tears forcing a little catch in her voice, "I need you like I need somec, Ham. Why have you stayed away so long?"

He looked relieved. He walked slowly back to her. And everything was peaceful again. They made love four more times, between each of the courses of dinner, and for variety they let the servants watch. I've done it once before, Arran remembered, but it was five loops ago, about, and these are different servants anyway. Of course the servants, underpaid beginning actors all, used it as an excuse to get some interesting onstage time, and turned it into an orgy among themselves, managing every conceivable sexual act in only an hour and a half. Arran barely noticed them, though. They were the kind of fool who thought the audience wanted quantity. If some sex is good, a lot is better, they think. Arran knew better. Tease them. Let them beg. Let them find beauty in it, too, not just titillation, not just lust. That's why she was a star, and they were playing servants in somebody else's loop.

That night Ham and Arran slept in each other's arms.

And in the morning, Arran woke to find Ham staring at her, his face an odd mixture of love and pain. "Ham," she said softly, stroking his cheek. "What do you want?"

The longing in his face only increased. "Marry me," he said softly.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked, in her little-girl voice.

"I mean it. Time our wakings together, always."

"Always is a long time," she said. It was a good all-purpose line.

"And I mean it," he said. "Marry me. Mother knows we've made enough money over the years. We don't ever have to let these other bastards into our lives again. We don't ever have to wear these damned loop recorders again." And as he said that, he patted the recorder strapped to her thigh.

Arran inwardly groaned. He wasn't through with the games yet. Of course the audience wouldn't know what he meant-- the computer that created the loop from the loop recorder was programmed to delete the recorder itself from the holo. The audience never saw it. And now Ham was referring to it. What was he trying to do, give her a nervous breakdown? Some friend.

Well, I can play his game. "I won't marry you," she said.

"Please," he said. "Don't you see how I love you? Do you think any of these phonies who pay to make love to you will ever feel one shred of real emotion toward you? To them you're a chance to make money, to make a name for themselves, to strike it rich. But I don't need money. I have a name. All I want is you. And all I can give you is me."

"Sweet," she said, coldly, and got up and went to the kitchen. The clock said eleven thirty. They had slept late. She was relieved. At noon she had to leave to get to the Sleeproom. In a half hour this farce would be over. Now to build it to a climax.

"Arran," Ham said, following her. "Arran, I'm serious. I'm not in character!"

That much is obvious, Arran thought but did not say.

"You're a liar," she said, rudely.

He looked puzzled. "Why should I lie? Haven't I made it plain to you that I'm telling the truth? That I'm not acting?"

"Not acting," she said, sneering (but seductively, seductively. Never out of character, she remindead herself), and she turned her back on him. "Not acting. Well, as long as we're being honest about things, and throwing away both pretense and art, I'll play it your way, too. Do you know what I think of you?"

"What?" he asked.

"I think this is the cheapest, dirtiest trick I've ever seen. Coming here like this, doing everything you could to lead me into thinking you loved me, when all the times you were just exploiting me. Worse than all the others! You're the worst!"

He looked stricken. "I'd never exploit you!" he said.

"Marry me!" Arran laughed, mocking him. "Marry me, says you, and then what? What if this poor little girl actually did marry you? What would you do? Force me to stay in the flat forever? Keep away all my other friends, all my other-- yes, even my lovers, you'd make me give them all up! Hundreds of men love me, but you, Hamilton, you want to own me forever, exclusively! What a coup that would be, wouldn't it? No one would ever get to look at my body again," she said, moving her body in such a way that no one in the world could possibly want to look anywhere else, "except you. And you say you don't want to exploit me."

Hamilton came closer to her, tried to touch her, tried to plead with her, but sheonly grew angry, cursed him. "Stay away from me!" she screamed.

"Arran, you can't mean it," Ham said, softly.

"I have never meant anything more thoroughly in my life," she said.

He lookod in her eyes, looked deep. And finally he spoke again. "Either you're so much an actress that the real Arran Handully is lost, or you really do mean that. And either way, there's nothing for me to stay here for." And Arran watched admiringly as Hamilton gathered up his clothing, and, not even bothering to dress, he left, closing the door quietly behind him. A beautiful exit, Arran thought. A lesser actor couldn't have resisted the temptation to say one last line. But not Ham-- and now, if Arran played it right, this grotesque scene could be, after all, a genuine climax to the loop.

And so she played the scene, at first muttering about what a terrible man Ham was, and then progressing quickly to wondering whether he'd ever come back. "I hope he does," she said, and soon was weeping, crying out that she couldn't live without him. "Please come back, Ham!" she said pitifully. "I'm sorry I refused you! I want to marry you."

But then she looked at the clock. Nearly noon. Thank Mother. "But it's time," she said. "Time to go to the Sleeproom. The Sleeproom!" New hope came into her voice. "That's it! I'll go to the Sleeproom! I'll let the years pass by, and when I wake, there he'll be, waiting for me!" She rhapsodized for a few more minutes, then threw a robe around herself and ran lightly, eagerly down the corridors to the Sleeproom.

In the tape-and-tap she chattered gaily to the attendant. "He'll be there waiting for me," she said, smiling. "Everything will be all right." The sleep helmet went on, and Arran kept talking. "You do think there's hope for me, don't you?" she asked, and the woman whose soft hands were now

removing the helmet answered, "There's always hope, ma'am. Everybody has hope."

Arran smiled, then got up and walked briskly to the sleep table. She didn't remember ever doing this before, though she knew she must have-- and then it occurred to her that this time she could watch the actual loop, see what really happened to her when the somec entered her veins.

But because she didn't remember any other administration of somec, she didn't realize the difference when the allendant gently put a needle only a millimeter under the surface of the palm of her hand. "It's so sharp," Arran said, "but I'm glad it doesn't hurt." And instead of the hot pain of somec, a gentle drowsiness filled her, and she was whispering Ham's name as she drifted off to sleep. Whispering his name, but silently cursing him under her breath. He may be a great actor, she told herself, but I ought to kick his head through a garbage chute for giving me a rotten time like that. Oh well. It'll sell seats in the theatres. Yawn. And then she slept.

The loop continued for a few more minutes, as the attendants went through a mumbo-jumbo of nonsensical, meaningless activities. And finally they stepped back as if they were through, Arran's nude body lying on the table. Pause for the loop recorder to take the ending, and then:

A buzzer, and the door opened and Triuff came in, laughing in glee. "What a loop," she said, as she unstrapped the recorder from Arran's leg.

When Triuff had gone, the attendants put the real needle in Arran's arm, and the heat poured through her veins. Asleep though she had already been, Arran cried out in agony, and the sweat drenched the table in only a few minutes. It was ugly, painful, frightening. It just wouldn't do to have the masses see what somec was really like. Let them think the sleep is gentle; let them think the dreams are sweet.

***

When Arran woke, her first thought was to find out if the loop had worked. She had certainly gone through enough effort-- now to see if Triuff's predictions of retirement had been fulfilled.

They had been.

Triuff was waiting right outside the Sleeproom, and hugged Arran tightly. "Arran, you wouldn't believe it!". she said, laughing uproariously. "Your last three loops had already set records-- the highest-grossing loops of all time. But this one! This one!"

"Well?" Arran demanded.

"More than three times the total of those three loops put together!"

Arran smiled. "Then I can retire?"

"Only if you want to," Triuff said. "I have several pretty good deals worked out--"

"Forget it," Arran said.

"They wouldn't take much work, only a few days each--"

"I said forget it. From now on I never strap another recorder to my leg again. I'll guest. But I won't record."

"Fine, fine," Triuff said. "I told them, but they made me promise to ask you anyway."

"And probably paid you a pretty penny, too," Arran answered. Triuff shrugged and smiled.

"You're the greatest ever," Triuff said. "No one has ever done so well as you."

Arran shook her head. "Might be true," she said, "but I was really sweating it. That was a rotten trick you pulled on me, having Ham break character like that."

Triuff shook her head. "No, no, not at all, Arran. That must have been his idea. I told him to threaten to kill you-- a real climax, you know. And then he went in and did what he did. Well, no

harm done. It's an exquisite scene, and because he broke character-- and you, too, there at the end-- the audience believed that it was real. Beautiful. Of course, everybody and his duck is breaking choracter now, but it doesn't work anymore. Everyone knows it's just another device. But the first time, with you and Ham--" and Triuff made an expansive gesture "--it was magnificent."

Arran led the way down the corridor. "Well, I'm glad it worked. But I'm still looking forward to a chance to rake Ham over the coals for it."

"Oh, Arran, I'm sorry," Triuff said.

Arran stopped and faced her manager. "For what?"

Triuff actually looked sad. "Arran, it's Hamilton. Not even a week after you went under-- it was the saddest thing. Everybody talked about it for days."

"What? Did something happen to him?"

"He hung himself. Turned off the lights in his flat so none of the watchers could see him, and hung himself from a light fixture with a bathrobe tie. He died right away, no chance to revive him. It was terrible."

Arran was surprised to find a lump in her throat. A real one. "Ham's dead," she said softly. She remembered all the scenes they had played together, and a real fondness for him came over her. I'm not even acting, she realized. I truly cared for the man. Sweet, wonderful Ham.

"Does anyone know why he did it?" Arran asked.

Triuff shook her head. "No one has the slightest idea. And the thing I just can't believe-- there it was, a scene they've never had before in a loop, a real suicide. And he didn't even record it!"

BURNING

With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jawbone of an ass have I slain a thousand men.

--Judges 15:16

There were exactly twenty ships, and they were exactly alike-vast cylinders, kilometers long and kilometers wide, with slender needles sticking out of one end. The huge cylinders were propulsion; the entire payload was in the needle. It was ridiculously uneconomical; energy costs were phenomenal; the ship's pilots spent most of their lives asleep, allowed by the drug somec to dreamlessly pass the thrice-lightspeed journeys between stars because otherwise they would grow old and die somewhere around the first tenth of the average trip. But the ships took them between the stars, and so they went.

From the outside, of course, all starships looked the same-- there had been no improvement on the fundamental design in centuries. But these ships were different.

First Exchange

From: Starfleet SWIP-e33

To: System-- Harper. Authority: Planets Harper, Harper Moon, Stoddard

Request permission to take on supplies. Captain, Homer Worthing.

From: System-- Harper. Authority: Planets Harper, Harper Moon, Stoddard

Permission denied. How the hell stupid do you think we are? Governor, Dallan Pock.

***

"The bastards," said Captain Worthing.

"Agreed," spattered back the radio. With typical precision the twenty ships of the fleet had already gone into orbit around the three planets of the Harper system.

"Looks like radio has finally caught up with us."

"Or one of Mother's little messenger ships."

"If it's here, I don't see it, and you don't hide a starship."

"Maybe it went away again. We have burned several dozen of Mother's best ships. Can we turn this off?"

"Sure," Worthing said, and the radio fell silent. Instead, Worthing leaned back on his chair and began the other kind of contact with all nineteen of the ship's captains in his fleet.

We're in a precarious position, they told him.

Agreed, he answered.

We're nearly out of supplies. We've been playing this game for two hundred years. These ships were meant to put into port.

Then we must certainly get our supplies here, Worthing replied.

They're resisting. That must mean they're expecting an imperial fleet soon.

This much is obvious.

Well, then, Captain Worthing, what the bloody hell are we going to do?

We, my dear friends, are going to scare their little heads off.

And if they don't scare?

Then we're in trouble, yes?

***

Second Exchange

From: SWIP-e33

To: Our unwise planetside friends

We are a fully equipped fleet. We do not ask, we demand supplies within 24 hours, with unencumbered right to land, or we will be forced to use our armaments against you. There isn't a weapon you have that can harm us. We can defeat any imperial fleet, in case you're expecting rescue. You know who we are. You know what we can do. Our patience is not infinite.

From: Authority

To: The rebels

We don't want any trouble. We know that you can't land anything if we don't want it to land, and we know you don't have any armaments that work against planets. It's a stalemate. So why don't you just go away?

***

"They aren't going," said the colonel to Governor Pock.

"I wish they would," sighed Pock, genuinely distressed.

"Maybe they aren't going because they don't have enough supplies to go on to anyplace else."

"I'm quite sure that's precisely why they're staying, Colonel. But that doesn't change our situation one bit. Do you know what Mother has done to the other governors who've cooperated in any way-- in any way-- with the rebels?"

"It's practically a humanitarian decision. They need supplies. They need water for the engines. We have eighteen oceans, among the three planets. Why not let them down?"

"Do you know what they've done to the chief military officer wherever the rebels have received cooperation?"

The colonel shook his head.

"Governors just lose their jobs and their somec. Soldiers get shot, Colonel."

"They aren't really doing that, are they?"

"On six planets. I'm just very grateful that radio has finally got ahead of them. At least we're warned. And the message said that the imperial fleet would be getting here momentarily."

"Which could mean anytime this year."

"What else do you propose? The only weapon the rebels have that could hurt us is the fusion bomb, and that would burn over the entire planet-- all the planets. They'd never use that. No one has ever systematically killed all the civilians. So we're safe. We'll just sit here and let the fleet come and take care of them and we'll never have to get involved at all."

And, very pleased with himself, Governor Pock closed his eyes to rest. The colonel left.

In the observatories, radioscopes began noting the arrival of a large group of starships. The fleet was already here.

***

Third Exchange:

From: INFL-c89

To: Rebel fleet SWIP-e33

Surrender. You are outnumbered, out of supplies, unable to maneuver, and we can outwait you. Why prolong matters? Captain, Fit Treece.

From: Homer

To: Fit

You know us, Fit. Hell, I saved your life a few times. You know what the bastards tried to do to us. We've proved by now that we have no intention of joining the enemy-- or of surrendering to Mother. So why not just let us go off on our own and forget this stupid war?

From: INFL-c89

To: Rebel fleet SWIP-e33

Her Imperial Majesty cannot brook rebellion. But if you surrender, by jettisoning crews in landers, and blowing up the ships behind you, you will receive a fair and lenient trial, and perhaps the death penalty can be avoided. Certainly we can refrain from confiscating property. And we can wait forever. We are fully supplied.

***

They've got us in a box, Worthing thought to the others.

We've got to do something. You know the bastards'll kill us if they catch us. We're the only rebellion in history that's lasted more than a day. We've lasted two centuries. They've got to make an example of us.

But there's nothing we can do, Worthing answered.

We can threaten to burn the damn planets.

But we'd never do it. Why make threats we'll never carry out? Besides, they know as well as we do that if we burn the planets, we can't get water from them, and then what have we accomplished?

Then let's threaten to burn one. The others'll go along.

Worthing refused, adamantly, shouting, if it were possible. Never. No. That is an atrocity and I won't brook it. If we do that, we don't deserve to survive.

What about me? one captain asked. I'm going to be out of fuel in a couple of days. What about me?

I don't know, Worthing answered.

Maybe they don't mean it. Surely they wouldn't shoot us down.

Surely. Are you willing to risk your life to find out?

Long pause in the thought conversation. A turmoil of emotions. Then:

Yeah. I'm willing.

***

And so the huge fueling craft broke away from the payload section of the ship-- huge, in relation to the antlike man inside, who was the whole crew of the ship and the fueling craft. In relation to the starship itself, of course, the fueler was absurdly small.

The fueler descended gracefully into the atmosphere of Harper Moon, the smallest of the three planets. It was instantly detected by the radar watch of the system military authority. "Well, Governor Pock, will you give the order?"

"I don't want to do it, dammit! Why should a peaceful little system like ours have to kill a man?"

"Because the damned rebels will be out of the sky sometime soon anyway, and the imperial fleet will be here forever!"

"All right, then. Kill him." And Pock left the room, furious at having been compelled to make such a decision. He was trained to administer a vast network of bureaucracy. He was not trained to cope with an interstellar rebellion by Mother's most brilliant ship captains.

The radars locked in. The missiles were launched. They intercepted the relatively slower fueler long before it reached the ocean. It erupted in a ball of flame. No particles large enough to notice survived to reach the ocean.

***

He's dead, Homer pointed out unnecessarily to the others.

I didn't think they'd do it, the bastards, someone else commented.

I say tell 'em we'll burn 'em. If they plan to take part in the war, then let's bring it right to home.

We won't burn anybody.

But we can sure as hell say we'll burn 'em, can't we?

***

Fourth Exchange

From: SWIP-e33

To: The assassins on Harper system

You're not the only ones who can kill. We now have fusion devices ready to launch at Harper Moon. You have four hours to grant permission for fuelers to land or we will burn the planet.

From: Authority

To: The rebels

Look, we warned you. Please go away. Surrender or something. How can we put it any plainer? You can't get onto the planet. Burning the planets, even if you would really do it, would accomplish nothing-- how could you get any water then? And you'd be hunted to the ends of the universe. No one will ever forgive planet burners. Right now, you might very well be forgiven.

***

"That communique was pathetic," the colonel told the governor.

"What, I should have been formal?" Pock retorted. "Official language doesn't communicate. I just want this whole thing to go away."

"It won't," said the colonel.

"But you will," answered Pock. "Until you can put a weapon in my hand that allows me to stop them from burning any planet in the system, I have no intention of following your insane advice and writing insane patriotic messages. Why antagonize them?"

"The only thing that will stop them from getting I antagonized is giving them water, which we won't do," the colonel answered.

"Do you think I don't know that?"

***

The imperial fleet was now close enough to entirely encircle the system-- and the rebels. In previous attempts at encirclement, of course, the rebels, being telepaths-- that was the point of the war, wasn't it-- were able to anticipate every move and broke such circles like child's play. But now they were nearly out of fuel-- they had no maneuvering room; they could not get to another system; they had to either get water from Harper system or surrender.

And in the meantime, the imperial fleet began making feints and false attacks and swift diving runs. The rebels had to react, had to move their ships, for the telepaths could clearly see that the fleet commander would instantly follow up any momentary advantage. And when the rebels stopped responding, he would know that they were out of fuel and would attack. Without fuel to maneuver the ship, telepathy was no longer an advantage.

We're doomed, they told Homer Worthing.

We knew that was a possibility from the start. And if we'd stayed with them, we would have been doomed anyway-- after all, didn't the enemy kill all their telepaths? They didn't trust us, with good reason, and now we're stuck.

Brilliant, somebody said. We know we're stuck. But we don't have to be.

And Homer Worthing felt his authority slipping away from him. What do you mean, we don't have to be? he asked.

I mean that this planet system isn't neutral. Our lack of supplies is the empire's most potent weapon against us. That makes the planets hostile adversaries. Attacking them is legitimate. Theyare no longer civilians.

Just try explaining that to all the innocent people you'd be killing.

Then let them explain to us why they're so eager to kill us? If we had a weapon that would only kill generals, we'd use it. But we don't. But we do have a weapon that will definitely kill the generals-- and everybody else. So let's be ready to use that.

Not while I lead this fleet.

All those in favor?

For the moment, the majority voted to keep Worthing as fleet commander. But only a majority, and not an overwhelming one.

And as time passed and they maneuvered more and more, all but four ships ran out of fuel.

***

Fifth Exchange

From: SWIP-e33

To: The planetside enemy

By refusing to supply us and by attacking a ship attempting to refuel and destroying it, you have removed yourselves from civilian immunity. Perhaps it will convince you that we are serious if we tell you that Homer Worthing is no longer captain of the fleet. The new captain is determined to burn you within four hours unless we have a positive response.

***

"That means," the colonel gloated, "that they're nearly out of fuel! We've got them where we want them!"

"That means," Governor Pock said, "that they're cornered and desperate and may very well do anything, including burning us to a cinder."

"Nonsense. That wouldn't help them and they know it. They've lost-- they'll simply have to admit it and surrender."

"They've lost, and we made them lose," the governor said. "What animal doesn't take one last swipe at the hunter, even though he's already dying?"

"You've shot down too many skeeters, Governor," said the colonel.

"We'll be destroyed. I don't want to get these planets involved."

"A bit too late, isn't it? What do you want to do, send them water?"

"I've been considering it."

"Well, stop considering it, Pock. I have authority to remove you from office and impose military law the moment you attempt to in any way aid the rebels." The presence of the fleet had stiffened his spine.

"I wish you'd told me before, colonel. I could have had you in charge of this whole mess from the start."

"I am also instructed to shoot you."

"In that case I'm grateful that I never tried anything. The people are getting a bit restless

about this." And so am I. What's the fleet doing?

"Rebels are always popular. A focus of resentments. We can cope."

Pock was very tired. Things were obviously out of his control now. "I'm going to bed," he said.

"Fine," said the colonel, and as soon as the governor was gone he drafted a reply to the rebels.

***

Sixth Exchange

From: Authority

To: Traitors and Terrorists

We are not afraid to die for the glorious empire. When we are dead, you shall be dealt with. For making the threat alone, you will be executed in the most ignominious manner possible. Carry out the threat, and we assure you that every telepath in the empire will pay the price.

***

What, do they think the other telepaths have any kind of link with us?

They assume it, Worthing told the new captain of the fleet. And why not? They're afraid of people who can talk to each other so that no one else can hear. Don't you remember? It's not polite to whisper.

We don't have any fuel left.

I suggest we surrender.

We will burn Harper Moon.

I will burn you first, Worthing said.

Rage. The rage of eighteen other captains. We are together, they shouted in their minds. We are together against the enemy, not against each other. We must stick together.

Then a pause.

More reasoned thoughts. More careful thoughts.

The last message. It was obviously written by someone else. Probably the military. It looks as though there has been either a policy or a personnel change.

So the hell what? Whatever we do, we're dead.

So let's surrender and at least they'll make martyrs of us, Homer. suggested.

Laughter. What is this? We didn't sign on to be Jesus. We could have let them make us martyrs long ago.

And Homer Worthing knew they were right. Martyrdom did nothing, really. Who would they be dying for? Who would rally to their cause? They were already as strong as any rebellion would ever be. When they died, all the lights would go out, and the empire would be free to use telepaths as tools, then cast them away at will, with impunity.

And underlying all the mental conversation was the ever more powerful undertone of fear. Fear of death. Fear of failing. Fear that, in the end, they were helpless after all.

***

The imperial fleet tried another sortie. This time there was no resistance. The rebels were entirely out of fuel. The imperials immediately attacked. At the end of the battle, even hampered

as they were, the rebels had lost only seven ships to the nine lost by the imperial fleet. But the imperial fleet could afford losses. And now there were only twelve telepaths left, and they were lost. On the next battle, or the next, they would die.

***

Seventh Exchange

From: SWIP-e33

To: Governor Pock

If you have any humanity in you at all, governor, let us refuel and leave. All we want to do is leave settled space. We threaten no one. We harm no one. And in exchange for this we're being murdered in your skies for lack of the one thing you can spare without any loss-- a few million liters of your ocean. You are destroying us by your unwillingness to let us land. You are murdering us.

From: Authority

To: The traitors

You are out of fuel. You will be destroyed in a matter of days. We regard it as a point of particular pride that we, a minor planetary system, will have been chiefly responsible for the empire's glorious victory. Your begging is undignified. Surrender, and you may yet be spared.

***

The second battle ended, and now only Homer Worthing and two other telepaths were alive.

The panic and rage were getting control now. In any battlefield the death of a soldier's comrades is agonizing, terrifying. The wounded scream, and the music of their dying is madness to all who hear. But fingers can be put in ears, minds can be closed, eyes can focus on the enemy ahead and the battle can go on.

But what if the screams are silent? What if all the fear is played in every soldier's mind, and then the pain, and then the terror of staring into blackness and seeing all too well what waits there?

There is no hiding from the madness then.

Homer Worthing sat before the clean, shining console that commanded the stars and told a great ship how to hurtle through space. But now the ship was helpless, alive but unable to move. And because he had come to think of the ship as an extension of himself, Homer felt that arms and legs had been amputated, that his eyes had been cut out. He tried to close his mind to his own terror and the terror of his friends. His own he could control; his friends were less cooperative.

They've killed us, he kept thinking. They've killed us, and they sit safely on their planets gloating. They have murdered us and we have the power to destroy them, but we've withheld that power and for our mercy we are dying and we will get no thanks for it at all, no honor, no gratitude. In their inhumanity they take advantage of our humanity and because weare decent and cannot murder innocent people in cold blood we can be murdered in our innoceacce.

For a moment he wanted to press the three simple buttons that would release the mammoth fusion devices that would turn the three planets of Harper system into little suns. It would take five minutes, eight, and eleven for the three missiles to get within striking range of the three targets. Then, long before they were in any danger from planet-launched weapons, they would detonate, and the planets would be ended.

But he made the mistake of picturing the ending in his mind. He thought of the woman baking bread for her husband coming home from the field, and how the bread would indeed bake, but would never be tasted. He thought of children in a schoolroom wrestling with a problem that, perhaps, one of them would suddenly understand, and that one would leap to his feet, would say, "I've got it," and in that moment the understanding would be gone, and the grasping of the idea would have

meant nothing.

They knew he could not do it.

He heard one of the others reach his own decision, saw the fusion devices launched. But he fired his own projectiles, which could do what planet-based weapons could not. He stopped the fusion devices in their flight, deflected them, cast them into the sun where their action would cause, perhaps, a solar flare and little more.

His friend wept in rage and frustration and then the next attack came, and there was no meeting it, and Homer's friends were both snuffed out almost instantly, and Homer knew a terrible moment as he saw the projectiles homing in on his own craft, projectiles he could not dodge. It would take four minutes for the first to arrive.

During the first minute he thought frantically of his wife, who would be wakened from her somec and informed. He could hear her cry out with grief, and in his mind he reached out and held her and comforted her hut he knew, in fact, that there would be no comfort for her then.

During the second minute he listened to the minds of the nearest imperial captains. Their thoughts were simple. Victory. Reward. Fame. I made it. That over and over again: I made it. I did it. I did it. Let it be my missile that strikes first. And Homer longed to shout (but they would never hear) are you heroes? What kind of heroes are you who can't kill unless someone ties down the prey and disarms it and stretches out its neck for the knife?

During the third minute he looked around the cockpit of the ship and wondered what he was doing there, what in the world he was doing in a starship two centuries away from his home on Capitol and why hadn't he stayed there and kept his damned gift a secret and not joined the Service at all, where they could teach him to enhance his gift, teach him to be a pilot, teach him to win victories for the empire, and then, when suddenly it became an embarrassment to be breaking the Convention by using telepaths, cast him off, execute him as they had done the first dozen telepathic pilots who had home to port, declare him a traitor for having served them so well. In his mind he undid it and lived a complete life as the scientist he had thought he wanted to be back home, with several children and much honor and many friends but then he looked at the console and the computer told him he had a minute to go and the alarms rang loudly and his ears insisting that he DO SOMETHING NOW but there was nothing that he could do because he couldn't even turn the ship.

During the fourth minute, at the beginning of it, he cast his attention randomly toward Harper, the nearest of the three planets, randomly sorted a mind, randomly listened, randomly sought for what the common man on Harper was thinking of all this and hoping that in the man's mind there was some thought that would make the battle and the death stand for something, be worthwhile somehow.

The mind he found was that of an engineer who was leaning back in his chair wondering what in the world he could do about his mistress, who was also the boss's secretary, and who was now threatening to get revenge for his infidelity to her by telling the boss who it was who really designed the Hadgate bridge. Can I, wondered the engineer, soothe this over by getting her to bed again? She has no self-control in bed. And the engineer reached for a book.

Homer could not bear it. Bad enough to know that the military was gloating. Bad enough to hear the death agonies of his friends. But to know that an intelligent, responsible human being did not give a damn that not far above his head twenty good men had died for daring to want to resist the empire's attempt to murder them, that was unbearable. That was tho ultimate wound that they could cause Homer Worthing, and he screamed, "You're killing me, you bastard!" and his fingers launched the fusion devices. A moment later he changed his mind. A moment later his reason returned and he knew he could never commit such murder. But as his fingers reached for the controls that would abort the fusion devices, the first enemy projectile reached his ship, and he died in fire.

The three fusion devices went their way.

The imperial fleet was not prepared for this. It was so unthinkable, to use those weapons against a planet when their purpose was merely to destroy a ship without hitting it directly-- so unthinkable to commit such an atrocity, that they were utterly unprepared and even though they

fired the intercepting projectiles, they were not quick enough. One of them intercepted the device heading for Harper Moon. But that was not enough.

Stoddard went first, the planet visibly rocking under the shock of having a tenth of its surface instantly converted into an inferno of corrupting atoms breaking down into their constituent parts. After a moment, the reaction spread throughout the planet's core, and it simultaneously exploded and collapsed in a reaction not particularly different from a star, though there was not enough matter to provide enough energy to sustain the reaction, and after only a few seconds of being a star the matter collapsed into a hot, glowing ball of fairly well-mixed elements.

The Stoddard reaction was over before the projectile reached Harper. The performance was repeated, with the addition of a tongue of fire reaching out to lick all the way around Harper Moon. Harper Moon did not explode. But every living thing on its surface died, and the ocean leaped into the atmosphere and then collapsed again, washing away all soil, all hints that anything other than water and rock had ever existed on the surface of the world.

And then all was still.

The captain of tht imperial fleet looked at the starfinder's graphic portrayal of what the ship's instruments had seen. In dozens of other ships, other captains were doing the same: they knew the horror felt by those who, millennia before, had walked into death camps and seen stacks of corpses and soldiers casually murdering civilians and piles of gold teeth and false teeth and a lampshade made of human skin. Only in this case eight billion people had died.

And they were ready to carry the word back to the empire: that the telepaths, the Swipes, had committed an atrocity beside which all other cruelties of humanity in the past became negligible.

The empire would rock with the news, and mobs would hunt down known telepaths and tear them apart in vengeance for the vast crime their kind had committed. Almost a hundred thousand telepaths would die.

But for a brief moment, sitting in front of his starfinder, Captain Fil Treece of the imperial fleet could not figure out why anybody's life should have been any more valuable than Homer Worthing's, and why the murder of one person should be good policy, while the murder of eight billion should be an inhuman crime.

Instead, he remembered a practical joke he and Homer Worthing had played on a professor in pilot school. They had programmed the class battle computer to respond incorrectly to any program that would result in death or damage to any ship. For three hours the professor tried to force the computer to carry out battle instructions, but it would not. Finally the professor realized that the mistakes were not in his program, and he turned to Homer and Fil (since practical jokes usually originated in their little circle of friends) and said, "May every ship you pilot have a computer that acts like this."

At the time it had been a sobering thought-- almost a wish for their certain deaths.

But now, Fil thought, I wish to God it had come true.

He led his fleet from the dead star system and soon they were passing light as if it were standing still. On the way back toward Capitol, their ships woke them from their somec sleep-- an enemy colony ship was heading past them toward a distant star system. According to standing orders, the fleet dispersed: three ships blasted the colony ship out of the sky along with all three hundred or so sleeping passengers aboard the unarmed craft, while the rest of the fleet continued toward Capitol.

And back on Capitol they gave Fil and his fleet medals for having killed the rebels and citations for having destroyed the enemy colonists.

"But I never meant to kill anybody," Fil said to the official who had guided him through the ceremony.

"Shut up," the official responded quietly. "Everybody says that. But you bastards take the medals just the sqme."

"I hope a raise in salary goes along with it," Fil said. And it did, allowing him to purchase a permanent apartment on Capitol, much to his wife's pleasure. Shp decorated it in ancient Chinese style, and every time he was in port they drank tea together and made love afterward on a mat on the floor and Fil was as happy as a person can reasonably expect to be.

And the people of the empire, learning of the terrible crime of the SWIP-e33 fleet, murdered almost a hundred thousand known or suspected or (at least) accused telepaths. Almost everyone agreed it was just. After all, hadn't the telepaths committed an atrocity?

AND WHAT WILL WE DO TOMORROW?

GLENDOWER: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

HOTSPUR: Why, so can I, or so can any man; but will they come when you do call for them?

-- Henry IV part I, 3:1

Of all the people on Capitol, only Mother was allowed to awaken on her own bed, the bed where she had slept with Selvock Gray before his death eight hundred years ago. She did not know that the original bed had fallen apart centuries ago; it was always remade, right down to the nicks and scratches, so that she could awaken on it and lie there for a monient in solitude, remembering.

No attendants murmuring. No flush of fever. Of all the people in Capitol, only Mother was given the delicate combination of drugs that made waking a delight-- that cost more for each of her wakings than the entire budget of a colony ship.

And so she luxuriated in the bed, cool and not feeling particularly old. How old am I? she wondered, and decided that she was probably forty. I am probably middle-aged, she said, and spread out her legs until they touched both sides of the bed.

She ran her hands over her naked stomach, finding it not as flat and firm as it had been when Selvock had come to visit Jerry Crove and had, as an afterthought, seduced his fifteen-year-old granddaughter. But who had seduced whom? Selvock never knew it, but Mother had chosen him as the man most likely to accomplish what her grandfather was too good and her father too weak to accomplish-- the conquest and unification of the human race.

It was my dream, she mid to herself. My dream, that I needed Selvock to fulfil. He bloodied himself in a dozen planetside wars, sent fleets here and there at his command, but it was I who made the plans, I who set the wheels in motion, I who fired the starships and sent them on their way. I found the money by bribing, blackmailing, and assassination.

And then, on the day Selvock was confident of victory, that bastard Russian had shot him with (of all things!) a pistol and Mother was alone.

She lay naked on the bed, remembering the feel of his hand on her flesh, the tense, gentle hand, and she missed him. She missed him, but hadn't needed him after all. For now she ruled the human universe, and there was nothing she wanted that she could not have.

***

Dent Harbock sat in the control room, watching the monitor. Mother was playing with herself on the bed. If the people could only see a holo of this show! he thought. There'd be a revolution within the hour.

Or maybe not. Maybe they really did think of her as-- what had Nab called her? --an earth mother, a figure of fertility. If she was so fertile, how come no children?

Nab walked into the control room. "How's the old bitch doing?"

"Dreaming of conquest. How come she never had any children?"

"If you believe in a god, thank it for that. As it is, things are comfortable. The only royalty in the universe is a middle-aged woman we only have to wake up one day in every five years. No family squabbles. No war of succession. And nobody trying to tell the government what to do."

Dent laughed.

"Better start the music. We have a busy schedule."

The music started and Mother was startled into alertness. Ah, yes. It was time. Being empress wasn't all luxury and pleasant memories. It was also responsibility. There was work to be done.

I'm lazy, now that I'm at the pinnacle of power, she said to herself. But I must keep the wheels turning. I must know what is going on.

She got up and dressed in the simple tunic she had always worn.

"Is she really going to wear that?"

"It was the style when she ruled actively. A lot of heavy sleepers do that-- it keeps a touch of familiarity around them."

"But, Nab, it makes her look like a relic of the pleistocene."

"It keeps her happy. We want her to be happy."

The first item of business was the reports. The ministers had to make the reports personally, and the new ministers who had been appointed since her last waking were on trial as she talked to them. The minister of fleets, the minister of armies, and the minister of peace were first. From them she learned about the war.

"With whom," she said, "are we at war?"

"We aren't at war," said the minister of armies innocently.

"Your budget has doubled, sir, and the number of conscripts is also more than twice what it was yesterday. That's a lot of change for five years. And don't give me any merde about inflation. Whom, my dear friends, are we fighting?"

They glanced at each other, fury barely concealed. It was the minister of fleets who answered, affecting contempt for his fellows. "We didn't want to bother you with it. It's just a border conflict. The governor of Sedgway rebelled awhile ago, and he's managed to attract some support. We'll have it under control in a few years."

She sneered. "Some minister of fleets you are. How do you get something under control in a few years when it takes twenty or thirty years to get from here to there even in our lightships?"

The minister of fleets had nothing to say. The minister of armies intervened. "We meant, of course, a few years after the fleets' arrival."

"Just a border conflict? Then why double the army?"

"It wasn't that large before."

"I conquered-- my husband conquered the known galaxy with a tenth as many soldiers as you have, sir. We considered it a rather large force. I think you're lying to me, gentlemen. I think you're trying to hide the fact that this war is more serious than you thought."

They protested. But even their doctored-up figures couldn't hide the truth from her.

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Nab laughed. "I told them not to lie. Everyone thinks he can outwit a middle-aged woman who

sleeps most of the time, but the bitch is far too clever for them. Wager you five that she fires them."

"Can she do that?"

"She can. And does. It's the only power left to her-- and these fools who think they can make their reports without following my advice always end up losing their jobs."

Dent looked puzzled. "But, Nab, when she fires them, why don't they just stay on the job and send assistants to her?"

"It was tried once, before you were born, my boy. She was able to discover in only three questions th the assistant wasn't used to giving orders like a minister; it took only three questions more to know she had been defrauded. She ordered the poor who tried to fool her brought into her chamber, and she sentenced both him and his assistant to death for treason."

"You're joking."

"To tell you how much of a joke it was, it took two hours to convince her that she ought not to shoot them herself. She kept insisting that she was going make sure it was done right."

"What happened to them?"

"They were dropped from high somec levels and sent out to administer sectors on nearby planets.'

"Couldn't even stay on Capitol?"

"She insisted."

"But then-- then she does rule!"

"Like hell she does."

***

The minister of colonization was next to last. He was new in his job, and frightened to death. He, at least, had believed Nab's warnings.

"Good morning," he said.

"Who are you trying to impress? One thing I hate is cheerful morning greetings. Sit down. Give me your report."

His hand was trembling when he gave her the report. She read it, quickly but thoroughly, dnd turned to him with an eyebrow raised. "Who thought of this cockamamy scheme?"

"Well--" he began.

"Well? What's well?"

"It's a continuing program."

"Continuing?"

"I thought you knew about this from prior reports."

"I do know about it. A unique way of handling war. Outcolonize the bastards. Great plan. It hasn't shown up on any reports until now, fool! Now, who thought of it!"

"I really don't know," he said miserably.

She laughed. "What a prize you are. A cabinet full of ninnies, and you are the worst. Who told you about the program?"

He looked uncomfortable. "The assistant minister of colonization, Mother."

"Name?"

"Doon. Abner Doon."

"Get out of here and tell the chancellor I want to meet this Abner Doon."

The minister of colonization got up and left.

Mother stayed in her chair, looking gloomily at the walls. Things were slipping out of her control.

She could feel it. Last waking there had bait little hints. A touch of smugness. This time they had tried to lie to her several times.

They needed shaking up. I'll shake them up, she decided. And if it's necessary, I'll stay awake two days. Or even a week. The thought was exhilarating. To stay awake for days at a time-- the prospect was exciting.

"Bring me a girl," she said. "A girl about sixteen. I need to talk to someone who will understand."

"Your cue, Hannah," Dent said. Hannah looked nervous. "Don't worry, kid. She's nota pervert or anything. She just wants to talk. Just remember, like Nab said, don't lie. Don't lie about anything."

"Hurry up. She's waiting," Nab interrupted.

The girl left the control room and passed through the hall to the door. She knocked softly.

"Come in," Mother said gently. "Come in."

The girl was lovely, her hair red and sweet and long, her manner confused and shy.

"Come here, girl. What's your name?"

"Hannah."

And they began to converse. A strange conversation, to Hannah, who knew only the gossip of the younger members of uppercrust Capitol society. The middle-aged woman kept insisting on reminiscing, and Hannah didn't know what to say. Soon, however, she realized that there was no need to say much at all. She had only to hear, and occasionally express interest.

And after a while the interest did not have to be feigned. Mother was a relic of an earlier time, a strange time when there were trees on Capitol and the planet was named Crove.

"Are you a virgin?" asked Mother.

Don't lie, Hannah remembered. "No."

"Whom did you give it up to?"

What does it matter? She doesn't know him. "An artist. His name is Fritz."

"Is he good?"

"Everything he does is beautiful. His pieces sell for--"

"I meant in bed."

Hannah blushed. "It was just the once. I wasn't very good. He was kind."

"Kind!" Mother snorted. "Kind. Who asks a man to be kind?"

"I do," Hannah said defiantly.

"A man who is kind is in control of himself, my dear. You wasted a golden opportunity. I gave my virginity to Selvock. Ancient history to you, girl, but it wasn't all that long ago to me. I was a calculating little bitch even then. I knew that whoever I gave it to would be in my debt. And when I saw Selvock Gray I knew immediately that he was the man I wanted to have owe me.

"I took him out riding horses. You don't know horses, there aren't any on Capitol anymore, more's the pity. After a few kilometers I made him take off the saddles so we could ride bareback. And after a few kilometers more I made him take off his clothes and I took off mine. There's nothing like riding a horse bareback, in the nude. And then-- I can't believe I did this-- I forced my horse to trot. Men don't enjoy trotting even when they have stirrups, but without stirrups and without clothes, the trotting was agony for dear Selvock. Damn near castrated the poor man. But he was too proud to say anything. Just gripped the horse, turning white with every jolt. And finally I gave in and let the horse run full out.

"Like flying. And every movement of the horse's muscles under your crotch is like a lover. When we stopped we were covered with horse sweat-- but he was so aroused he couldn't stand it and he took me in the gravel on the edge of a cliff. There were cliffs on Crove then. I wasn't very good, being a novice, but I knew what I was doing. I'd got him so hot he didn't notice I wasn't helping him much. And I bled all over the place. Very impressive. He was incredibly gentle with me. Led the horses so I could ride sideways, and we found our clothes and made love again before we went home. He never left me. Found plenty of women, of course, but he always came back to me."

It was an incredible world, to Hannah, where one could mount an animal and ride for kilometers without meeting anyone, and have sex on a cliff.

"Didn't the gravel hurt? Isn't gravel little rocks?"

"Hurt like hell. I was picking stones out of my back for days!" Mother laughed. "You gave yourself too easily. You could have held out for more."

Hannah looked wistful. "There aren't any conquerors available these days."

"Don't fool yourself, girl. Hannah, I mean. There are more conquerors than you know."

And they talked for another hour, and then Mother remembered there was work to do, and sent the girl away.

"Good job, Hannah. Like a trouper."

"It wasn't bad," the girl said. "I like her."

"She's a nice old lady," Dent laughed.

"She is," Hannah said defensively.

Nab looked her in the eye. "She's personally murdered more than a score of men. And arranged for the deaths of hundreds of others. Not counting wars."

Hannah looked angry. "Then they deserved to die!"

He smiled. "She still weaves the old webs, doesn't she? She caught you well. It doesn't matter. You're on somec now, three years early. Enjoy yourself. Only one woman in every five years gets to meet Mother. And you can't tell anyone about it."

"I know," she said. And then, inexplicably, she cried. Perhaps because she had come to love Mother in that hour of conversation. Or perhaps because there were no horses for her to ride, and herfirst time had been in her parents' bedroom when they were' away for an evening. Stolen, not freely taken in sunlight on a cliff. She wondered what it was like to be at a cliff. She imagined standing on one, looking down. But it was so far below her. Meters and meters down. In her imagination she shied away. Cliffs were for ancient times.

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"So you are Abner Doon."

He nodded. His hand did not tremble. He merely looked at her steadily. His eyes looked deep. She was a little disturbed. She was not used to being looked at so easily. She could almost imagine that his gaze was friendly.

"I understand you thought of the clever plan to colonize planets behind the enemy's holdings."

Abner smiled. "It seemed more productive than wiping out the human race."

"A war fought by outbuilding the enemy. I must say, the idea is novel." She leaned her head against her hand, wondering why she didn't want to go to the attack with this man. Perhaps because she liked him. But she knew herself better than that, knew that she hadn't attacked because she wasn't yet sure where his weakness was. "Tell me, Abner, how extensive the enemy's holdings are."

"About a third of the settled planets," Doon answered.

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Dent was startled, then furious. "He told her! He just told her! The chancellor's going to have his head."

Nab only smiled. "No one's going to have his head. I don't know how he figured it out, but he and that girl, Hannah-- they both understand the bitch. The rule is be accurate, even when you lie."

"He's undoing everything!"

"No, Dent. The other ministers undid themselves. Why should he shoot himself down along with them? The shrimp is smarter than I thought."

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She kept Doon with her for fifteen minutes-- unheard of, when full ministers rarely got an audience of longer than ten. And the chancellor was outside cooling his heels.

"Mr. Doon, how can you bear being so incredibly short?"

Doon was finally taken by surprise, and she felt a small sense of victory.

"Short?" he asked. "Yes, I suppose I am. Well, it isn't anything I have control over. So I don't think about it."

"What do you have control over?"

"The assignments section of the ministry of colonization," he answered.

She laughed. "That isn't a complete list, is it, Mr. Doon?"

He cocked his head. "Do you really want an answer to that?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Doon, I do."

"But I won't give an answer, Mother. Not here."

"Why not?"

"Because there are two men in the control room listening to everything we say and recording everything we do. I'll talk freely to you when there isn't an audience."

"I'll command them to stop listening."

Doon smiled.

"Oh. I see. I may reign, but I don't always rule, is that what you're saying? Well, we'll see

about that. Lead me to the control room."

Doon got up, and she followed him out of the room.

"Nab! Nab, he's bringing her here! What do we do?"

"Just act natural, Dent. Try not to throw up on the looper."

The door to the control room opened, and Doon ushered Mother into the room. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said.

"Good afternoon, Mother. I'm Nab, and this petrified mass of terror is my assistant, Dent."

"So you're the ones who listen in and answer my every request."

"As much as possible, of course." Nab was the image of confidence.

"Monitors. Television! How quaint!"

"It was decided hololoops wouldn't be appropriate."

"Bullshit, Nab," Mother said sweetly. "This is a looper right here."

"Just for the historical record. No one ever watches it. "

"I'm glad to know how closely I'm observed. I'll be more careful how I arrange my body in the morning." She turned to Doon. "Is there anywhere that we can meet where the birds won't be watching from the trees?"

"Actually," Doon answered, "I have the only place on Crove where the birds do watch from the trees. "

She looked shocked. "Real ones?"

"Complete with droppings. You have to watch where you step."

Her voice was husky with eagerness. "Lead me! Take me there!" And she whirled on Nab and Dent. "And you two. I want this looper out of here. You can listen and you can watch, but there is to be no permanent record. Do you understand?"

Nab agreed pleasantly. "It'll be done before you return."

She sneered at him. "You have no intention of doing it, Nab. Do you think I'm a fool?" And she went out the other door, which Doon was holding open.

When the door swung shut, Dent gagged and retched into a wastebasket. Nab watched unconcernedly. "You haven't learned anything, have you, Dent? She's nothing to be afraid of."

Dent only shook his head and wiped his lips. Stomach acid burned in his sinuses and throat.

"Go get the technicians. We have to hook the looper up somewhere else. And have some phony spots ripped out of the wall, so that workmen will be repairing when they get in. It has to look like the lasers have been removed. Hurry it up, boy!"

Dent stopped at the door. "What are they going to do to this Doon?"

"Nothing. Mother likes him. We'll simply use him to, keep her happy later on. The man's a nonentity. "

***

Mother could sense Doon's increasing pleasure as they went (under heavy guard) through corridors that had been cleared before them, until finally they were at a door where Doon told the Little Boys to go wait elsewhere.

"This had better be good, Doon," Mother said, knowing from the way he acted that it would be good.

"It'll be worth the walk. Though you used to walk much farther than this in your childhood," he said.

"Kilometers and kilometers," she said. "What a wonderful word. It even sounds like going up hills and down them again. A traveling word. Kilometers. Show me this place Where the birds sing from the trees."

And Doon opened the door.

She walked in briskly, then slowed, then stopped. And after a moment she began walking briskly among the trees, pausing only to strip off her shoes and dig her bare toes into the grass and the dirt. A bird fluttered past her. A breeze spun her hair out like a fan. She laughed.

Laughing, she leaned against a tree, put her hands on the bark, slid down the tree, sat in the grass. The sun shone brightly above her.

"How did you do it? How did you hold this spot of earth? When I last touched ground like this, I was twenty, and it was one of the few parks left on Capitol!"

"It isn't real," Doon,answered. "The trees and birds and grass are real enough, of course, but the sky is a dome and the sun is artificial. It can tan you, though."

"I always freckled. But I said, 'Damn the freckles, I worship the sun!'"

"I know," Doon said. "I tell everyone that this place is modeled after Garden, a planet where they restrict immigration and industry is kept to a minimum. But you know what this place really is."

"Crove," she said. "My grandfather's world! What this planet used to be before it was sheathed in metal like a vast chastity belt, blocking life from this place forever; oh, Doon, whitever it is you want, you can have, only let me come and spend an afternoon here on every waking!"

"I'll be glad to have you come. Only you know what it means."

"But you want something from me, anyway," she said.

He smiled. "Want to swim?"

"You have water?"

"A lake. Crystal clear water. A bit chilly, though."

"Where!"

He led her to the water, and she unhesitatingly took off her clothes and dove in. Doon met her in the middle of the lake, where she floated on her back, looking upward as a cloud passed before the sun.

"I must have died," she said. "This must be heaven."

"You're a believer?" Doon asked.

"Only in myself. We make our own heavens. And I see, Doon, that you have created a good one. Well, Doon, you're the first man I've talked to today who wasn't an utter ass."

"I do not aspire to surpass my superiors."

She chuckled, fanning her hands to propel herself gently in the water. Doon, too, lay on his back in the water, and they heard each other's words through the rushing sound of water in their ears.

"Now the complete list, Mr. Doon," she said. "All the things, you are in control of."

"As I told you," he said. "Part of the ministry of colonialization."

"And?"

"The rest of the ministry. And the rest of the ministries."

"All of them?" she asked,

"Through one means or another. No one knows it, however. I just own the people who own the people who run it. I don't muck with the everyday affairs."

"Good of you. Let them think they're independent. And?"

"And?"

"The rest of the list?"

"That's the list. All the ministries. And the ministries control everything else."

"Not everything. Not somec," she said.

"Oh, yes. The independent, untouchable agency. Only Mother can make the rules for the Sleeproom."

"But you control that, too, don't you?"

"Actually, I had to take it over first. That let me control who woke up when. Very useful. It lets me get rid of people I don't want. I just put them on a lower level of somec, if they're weak, and they die out very soon. Or I put them on a higher level of somec, if they're strong, and they aren't around often enough to bother me."

"You rule my empire, then?"

"I do," Doon answered.

"Have you brought me here to kill me?"

Doon swung over and treaded water, looking at her in alarm. "You don't believe that, do you?" he, asked. "I'd never do that, Mother, never. I've admired you too much. I've modeled my life on yours. The way you controlled the empire from the start, and everyone thought it was your husband, Selvock, the poor stud."

"He wasn't much of a stud," Mother mused. "He never fathered a child on anyone."

"No, Mother. You're the only person in the world, though, who could stop me. And I knew that sooner or later you'd realize who I was and what I was doing. I've looked forward to this meeting."

"Really? I haven't."

"No?" Doon broke into a crawl stroke and made his way to shore. Not long afterward, Mother followed, to find him lying on the grass.

"You're right," she said. "I have looked forward to meeting you. The thief who would take it all away from me."

"Not at all," Doon said. "Not a thief. Just your heir."

"I plan to live forever," she said.

"And if I have my way, you shall."

"But you don't want just to own my empire, Doon. You don't want to just inherit."

"Consider this a springboard. If you hadn't built this empire, I should have had to. But since it's built, I shall tear it up and use the building blocks to make something better."

"Better than this?" she asked.

"Can't you smell the decay? Nothing is alive on this planet. Not the people. Not the atmosphere, not the rock, nothing, it's all dead, all going nowhere. The whole empire's like that. I'm going to kick it into gear again."

"Kick it into gear!" she giggled. "That was archaic when I was a girl!"

"I study old things," Doon answered. "Old things are the only things that are new anymore. You were great. You built a beautiful thing."

She was happy. The sun was beating down on her for the first time in decades (centuries, actually, but since she hadn't lived the years, she didn't feel them); she had swum in fresh water; and she had met a man who just might be, just might perhaps be her equal.

"What do you want me to do? Make you chancellor? Marry you?"

Doon said no, none of those things. "Just let me go on. Don't challenge me. Don't force my hand. I need a few more centuries. And then it'll all break loose."

"I could still stop you," she said.

"I know it," he answered. "But I'm asking you not to. Nobody was in a position to stop you. I'm asking for my chance."

"You'll have your chance. In return for one favor."

"And that is?"

"When you make your move and everything, as you put it, breaks loose-- take me with you."

"Do you mean it?"

"There'll be no use for Mother in the universe you're making, Abner."

"But there'll be room for Rachel Crove?"

The name struck her like a hammer. No one had called her by her given name since-- since-- And she was a girl again, and a man who was her equal, or nearly so, lay naked beside her, and she reached over and put her arms around him, whispering, "Take me with you. Take me."

He did.

They lay in the grass as the sun set, and she felt more fulfilled than she had since a day on a cliff in Crove when she had begun her career of conquests. Only this time she had been conquered, and she knew it, and she was willing.

"On every waking," she said, "you must tell me your plans. You must show me what you're building, and let me watch."

"I will," he said. "But you can't make any suggestions."

"I wouldn't dream of it. That would be cheating, wouldn't it?"

"You aren't very good at sex," Doon said.

"Neither are you," she answered, laughing. "Who gives a damn?"

Mother did not come back until half an hour before her grand entrance at tke Mother's Waking Party, the highest high society event in Capitol. Nab was distraught.

"Mother, Mother, what a worry you've caused us!"

She only looked at him slantwise, and frowned. "I was in good company. Were you?"

Nab glanced at Dent. "Only second rate, I'm afraid.

Dent laughed nervously.

Mother growled at him. "Can't you even get a little angry, boy? It's so damned boring when everybody tries to be nice. Well, the party's already underway, right? So what am I wearing this time?"

They brought her the dress, and seven women wrapped her in it. She was startled that her nipples showed. "This is really the fashion?"

Nab shook his head. "It's a bit more modest than most. But I thought that perhaps the image you need to present--"

"Modest? Me?" She laughed and laughed. "Oh, this is the best waking in years. Best in years, Nab. You can stay on, but fire the boy. Find an assistant with more gumption. The boy's an ass. And send the chancellor to me."

The chancellor came in, bowing and uttering apologies about the poor status of the reports this waking.

"Everybody's trying to lie to me," she said. "Fire them all. Except, of course, for the minister of colonization. And his assistant. The two of them impressed me. Leave them in. And as for you, I don't want to have another lie in a report again. Understand? Or if you must lie, at least contrive to do it well. None of these could have fooled a five-year-old child."

"I'll never lie to you, Mother."

"I know perfectly well that I'm empress in name only, boy, so don't patronize me. You'd just better make sure that I don't get reminded of it by the sloppy work the cabinet does. Understand?"

"I understand."

"And that assistant minister of colonization. He was refreshing. I want him awake and ready to meet with me again next waking. And leave him in his job. Doubtless a sinecure, but he's sweet."

The chancellor nodded.

"Now give me your arm. To hell with the schedule. We're going down to the party."

Nab watched her go.

"Am I really fired?" Dent asked.

"Yes, boy. I warned you. Act natural. Too bad. You showed some promise."

"But what'll I do?"

Alb shrugged. "They always have good jobs for the people Mother fires. You don't have to worry."

"I want to kill her."

"Why? She did you a favor. Now you won't have to watch her act important every waking. The bitch. Wish she'd sleep for ten years."

Dent was surprised. "You really hate her, don't you?"

"Hate her? I suppose so." And Nab turned away. "Get on out, Dent. If she sees you here again, she'll fire me, too."

Dent left, and Nab went to the files and cursed the next poor fool who would make a stab at satisfying Mother. He had to have an assistant. An assistant's stupidity always made Nab look

better.

Do I hate her, Nab wondered.

He couldn't decide. He only remembered watching her in the morning, as she lay nude on the bed. It wasn't hate he felt then.

The party was long and boring, as all the others had been, but Mother knew the importance of being visible. She had to be seen at every waking, on a set day, or someone could make her disappear and no one would notice. So she circulated, and graciously met the young girls who were just getting to somec, and the fops and fags who hung about the court, and the old men and women who had first met her a few centuries ago when they were young.

She was a reproach to them all. No matter how high a somec level they achieved, she was higher. No matter how many centuries passed before they got old, they would never live to see her get older. I will live forever, she reminded herself.

But as she watched the people who actually believed this party was important, the thought of living forever made her very tired. "I'm tired," she said to the chancellor, and he immediately waved a signal to someone and the orchestra struck up some stirring music from aeons ago (this was old when I was a child, she thought) and the guests lined up and for an hour she bade good-bye to all of them and finally they were gone.

"It's over," she sighed. "Thank heaven." And then she went upstairs to the room where workmen had obviously been knocking up the walls. Pretending to take the hololoop equipment out, she decided, and was amused that they thought she could be so easily fooled. That fellow Nab-- a sharp one. A total bastard, too. The best kind of person to deal with. He'd be around for quite a while.

She sat on the edge of her bed and brushed her hair, not because it needed it but because she was in the mood for it. It felt good. She watched herself in the large mirror, and noticed proudly that she didn't yet sag. That she was still, though not young, desirable. I'm a match for Doon, she said to herself. I'm still a match for any Man, and more than a match for most. I've played their games and won them, and if I'm just a figurehead now, I'm a figurehead they have to be careful with. And Doon-- an ally. He was with her. She could trust him.

Or could she?

She lay back on the bed, looking up at the ceiling, where a fresco had been painted, duplicating an ancient one that had long since fallen to pieces on earth. A nude man was reaching up to touch the finger of God. She knew it was God, because he was the most terrible creature on the ceiling, and that had to be God. I was that, she thought. I was the builder, I was touching fingers and bringing things to life. And now Doon is doing that. Can there be room for two of us?

I'll make room, she decided. He'll never feel threatened by me. Because he might win, and that would be terrible, and it would be more terrible if I won, because I'm lazy and finished and he's just starting. Let us be allies, then, and I'll trust him and he'll trust me, and I can see something new in the universe. A creation that, perhaps, will be better than mine.

"Was that what you hoped for?" she asked the bearded man on the ceiling. "Someone to top you? Or did you snick them all down to size whenever they got too big?" She remembered a story about people who built a tower to get to the stars. God stopped it, as she recalled. Well, we finally got to the stars anyway, but you had moved out by then, making space for us.

I'll move out, making space for Doon. But he'd damn well better not forget me.

***

"The bitch is asleep, Crayn. Call the Sleeproom people."

The new assistant, a nervous girl that would never last, Nab knew, called the Sleeproom people and they moved quickly but silently into the room, taping Mother's brain and then putting her under somec.

When Mother was under, Nab came out into the room.

"Give me the tape," he said, and they gave it to him because he always sealed it away in a special vault. And then they wheeled her out to put her in her coffin in a private sleeproom in a different part of Capitol from most others. With the tightest security.

But Nab still held her mind in his hands. She had slept with Doon, he knew. What the shrimp had, he didn't know, but she had slept with him, had liked him a lot, had asked to see him next time. And he had her tape. There was nothing to stop him from accideittly destroying it, was there? And then she'd wake up not knowing anything about this waking. They'd have to use the old tape, the one they had used this time.

It shouldn't be hard to erase, he thought, and he took the tape into the control room. "Go home, Crayn," he said. "I'll close up."

"What a day," Crayn said as she left.

The door closed, and Nab found the loop eraser. It would work just as well on a braintape. He would have done it, too, if a needle hadn't fired just then and killed him.

Mother's Little Boys took the body out and disposed of it, and Mother's braintape was put into safekeeping by those who would never harm it. A close one. But how had Abner Doon known Nab would do that? The man was an octopus, a finger everywhere. But that was why Mother's Little Boys obeyed him. He was never wrong.

***

Mother had not been asleep when the braintapers came. But she lay their limply, accepting their ministrations.

Today I met my successor and the first man I let make love to me besides Selvock. Today I fired most of the cabinet because they were fools and cheats. Today I stepped back into Crove the way it used to be when it was still beautiful.

Today passed with more variety than yesterday, or three weeks ago, or eight months ago.

Eight months ago. It was only eight months, only a thousand years ago that she had decided to go on somec at this level and live forever. She had noticed her first age wrinkle that day, and realized that she could, after all, get old. So she had decided to skim through time, only touching often enough to see if there was something worth living to experience.

Today she had found it.

And what, she wondered, will we do tomorrow?

KILLING CHILDREN

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.

-- Gerard Manley Hopkins

He heard the door click open but did not turn away from the tall pile of soft plastic blocks he was building. Instead he sought among the blocks scattered on the warm floor an orange block. Orange was definitely required, since it helped make no pattern whatsoever.

"Link?" said an overfamiliar voice behind him, a strange familiar voice that, alone of all voices, could make him turn, startled. I killed her, he thought softly. She is dead.

But he turned around slowly and there, indeed, was his mother, flesh as well as voice, the slender, oh-so-delicious looking body (not forty-five! couldn't be forty-five!) and the immaculate clothing and the terror in her eyes.

"Link?" she asked.

"Hello, Mother," he said stupidly, his voice deep and slow. I sound like a mental cripple, he realized. But he did not repeat the words. He merely smiled at her (the light making her hair seem like a halo, the fabric of her blouse clinging slightly to the undercurve of her breast, no, mustn't notice that, must think instead of motherhood and filial devotion. Why isn't she dead? Was that, please God, the dream, and this the reality? Or is this vision why I'm in this place?) and a tear or two dazzled in his eyes, making it hard for him to see, and in the dimness he supposed for a moment that she was not blond, but brown-haired; but she had always been blond--

Seeing the tear and ignoring the continued madness in his dancing gaze, his mother held out her arms for a second, only a second, and then put her hands on her hips (note the way the point of her hips and the curve of her abdomen leave two slender depressions pointing downward, Link said to himself) and got an angry look, a hurt look on her face, and said, "What, don't I even get a hug from my boy?"

The words were the incantation required to get Link from the floor to his full 190 centimeters of height. He walked to her, reaching out his long arms for her--

"No--" she gurgled, pushing him away. "Don't-- just a little kiss. Just a kiss."

She puckered for a childish kiss, and so he, too, puckered his lips and leaned down. At the last moment, however, she turned her head and he kissed her clumsily on the ear and hair.

"Oh, how wet," she said in her disgusted voice. She reached into her hipbag and pulled out a tissue, wiped her ear, laughing softly, "Clumsy, clumsy boy, Link, you always have been..."

Link stood in confusion. And, as so many times before, puzzled as to what to do next that would not earn a rebuke. He remained in that confusion, knowing that there was something that he ought to do, something that he must decide, but instead deciding nothing, only playing again and again the same loop of thought in the same childish mental voice in which he had always played it, "Mummy mad, mummy mad, mummy mad."

She watched him, her lips forming a sort of half smile (note the natural gloss on the lips, she never painted, never had to, lips always just slightly moist, partly open, the tongue playing gentle love games with the teeth), unsure of what was happening.

"Link?" she said. "Link, don't you have a smile for Mother?"

And Link tried to remember how to smile. What did it feel like? There were muscles that must be pulled, and his face should feel tight--

"No!" she screamed, stepping back from him and encountering the closed door. She apparently had expected it to be open-- as if this were not a mental hospital and patients were free to roam the corridors at will. She whirled and hammered on the door with her fists, shouting frantically, "Let me out of here!"

They lot her out, the tall men with the pleasant smiles who also took Link to the bathroom five times a day because somehow he had forgotten to notice when he needed to. And as the door closed behind her, Link still stood, unable to decide what he should do, and wondering why his hands were stretched out in front of him, the hands set to grip something circular, something vertical and cylindrical, something, perhaps, the shape of a human throat.

***

In Doctor Hort's office, Mrs. Danol sat, poised and beautiful, distractingly so, and Hort wondered whether this was indeed the same woman who had wept in the attendants' arms only a few minutes before.

"All I care about is my son," she said. "He was gone, vanished for seven terrible, terrible months, and all I know now is that I've found him again and I want him home. With me!"

Hort sighed. "Mrs. Danol, Linkeree is criminally insane. This is a govemment facility, remember? He murdered a girl."

"She probably deserved it."

"She had supported him and cared for him for seven months, Mrs. Danol."

"She probably seduced him."

"They had a very active sex life, in which both were eager participants."

Mrs. Danol looked horrified. "Did my son tell you that?"

"No, the tenants downstairs told the police that."

"Hearsay, then."

"The government has a very limited budget on ths planet, Mrs. Danol. Most people live in apartments where privacy is strictly impossible."

And Mrs. Danol shuddered, apparently in disgust at the plight of the poor wretches that huddled in the government compound in this benighted capital of this benighted colony.

"I wish I could leave here," she said.

"It would have been nice at one time," Hort answered. "Your son hates this world. Or, rather, more particularly, he hates what he has seen of this world."

"Well, I can understand that. Those hideous wild people-- and the people in the city aren't much better."

Hort was amused at her reverse democracy-- she esteemed all persons her infinite inferiors, and therefore equal to each other. "Nevertheless, now Linkeree must stay here and we must attempt a cure."

"Oh, that's all I want for my boy. For him to be the sweet, loving child he used to be-- I can't believe he really killed her!"

"There were seventeen witnesses to the strangling, two of them hospitalized when he turned on them after they pried him away from the corpse. He definitely killed her."

"But why," she said emotionally, her breasts heaving with passion in a way that amused Hort-- he had known many such closet exhibitionists in his time. "Why would he kill her?"

"Because, Mrs. Danol, except for hair color and several years of age, she looked almost exactly like you."

Mrs. Danol sat upright. "My God, Doctor, you're joking!"

"Almost the only thing that Link has been consistent about since he arrived here is his firm belief that it was you that he killed."

"This is hideous. This is repulsive."

"Sometimes he weeps and says he's sorry, that he'll never do it again. Most of the time, however, he cackles rather gleefully about it, as if it were a game that he had, after many losses, finally won."

"Is this what passes for psychology on this godforsaken planet?"

"This is what passes for psychology on Capitol itself, Mrs. Danol. That is, you recall, where I got my degree. I assure you I have invented nothing." And dammit, he thought, why am I letting

this woman put me on the defensive? "We thought that the fact of seeing you alive might have some effect on your son."

"He did try to strangle me."

"So you said. You also said you wanted him to come home with you. Is that really consistent?"

"I want you to cure him and send him home. Since his father died, whom else have I had to love?"

Yourself, Holt refrained from saying. My, but I'm getting judgmental.

The buzzer sounded and, relieved at the interruption, Holt pressed the pad that freed the door. It was Gram, the head nurse. He looked upset.

"It was time for Linkeree's toilet," he said, beginning, as usual, in the middle, "and he wasn't there. We've looked everywhere. He's not in the building."

Mrs. Danol gasped. "Not in the building!"

Holt said, "She's his mother," and Gram went on. "He climbed through the ceiling tiles and out the air conditioning system. We had no idea he was that strong."

"Oh, what a fine hospital!"

Holt was irritated. "Mrs. Danol, the quality of this hospital as a hospital is indisputably excellent. The quality of this hospital as a prison is woefully deficient. Take it up with the government." Defensive again, dammit. And the bitch is still throwing her chest at me. I'm beginning to understand Linkeree, I think. "Mrs. Danol, please wait here."

"No."

"Then go home. But I assure you you'll be entirely in the way while we search for your son."

She glared at him and stood her ground.

He merely nodded. "As you will," he said, and picked up the door control from the desk, carried it with him out of the room, and slid the door shut in Mrs. Danol's face as she tried to follow lit got an altogether unhealthy feeling of satisfaction at having done so.

"Wouldn't mind strangling her myself," he said to Gram, who missed the point and looked a bit worried. "A joke, Gram. I'm not getting homicidal. Where did the fellow go?"

Gram had no answer, and so they went outside to see.

***

Linkeree huddled against the fence of the government compound, the miles of heavy metal fencing that separated civilization from the rest of the world. The evening wind was already blowing in from the thick grass and rolling hills of the plain that gave the planet its name, Pampas. The sun was still two fingers off the horizon, however, and Linkeree knew that he was plainly visible from miles away. Visible both to the government people who would surely be looking for him; but also visible to the Vaqs, who he knew waited just over the hill, waiting for a child like him to wander out to be eaten.

No, he thought. I'm not a child.

He looked at his hands. They were large, strong-- and yet unweathered, as sensitive and delicate as an artist's hands.

"You should be an artist," he heard Zad saying.

"Me?" Link answered, softly, a little amused at the suggestion.

"Yes, you," she said. "Look at this," and her hand swept around the room, and because he could not avoid following her hand, he also saw: Tapestries on tapestries on one wall, waiting to be

sold. Another wall devoted to thick rugs and the huge loom that Zad used for her work. And another wall windowed ceiling to floor (glass is cheap, someone told the government architect), showing the shabbily identical government housing project in which most of the capital's people lived, and beyond them the Government Office Building from which the lives of thousands of people were run. Millions, if you counted the Vaqs. But no one counted them.

"No," Zad said, smiling. "Sweet, darling Link, look there. That wall."

And he looked and saw the drawings in pencil, the drawings in crayon, the drawings in chalk.

"You can do that."

"I'm all thumbs." Oh, you're all thumbs, he remembered his mother saying.

Zad took his hands and put them around her waist. "Not all thumbs," she said, giggling.

And so he had reached out, held the charcoal, and with her hand guiding his at first, had sketched a tree.

"Wonderful," she said.

He looked at the ground and saw that he had drawn a tree in the ground. He looked up and saw the fence. They're chasing me, he thought.

"I won't let them catch you," he remembered Zad saying. He was ashamed at having lied to her and told her he was a criminal. But how would she have treated him if she'd known he was only the reclusive son of Mrs. Donal, who owned most of Pampas that could be owned? Then she would have been shy of him. Instead, he was shy of her. She had taken him from the street where he was wandering that night, already having been mugged and beaten up-- the mugging by one man, the beating by two others who had found his hipbag empty.

"What, are you crazy?"

He had shaken his head, but now he knew better. After all, hadn't he murdered his mother?

A siren went off in the mental hospital. With a wrenching sense of despair Linkeree curled up tighter in a ball, wishing that he could turn into a bush. But that wouldn't help, would it? This is a defoliated area.

"What have you drawn?" he remembered Zad asking, and he wept.

A stinger stung him, and he flicked the insect from his hand. The pain brought him up short. What was he doing?

"What am I doing?" he thought. Then he remembered the escape from the mental hospital, the run through the maze of buildings to the perimeter-- the perimeter, because it was safety, the only hope. He vaguely recalled his childhood fear of the open plain-- his mother's horrified stories of how the Vaqs would get you if you weren't good and didn't eat your supper.

"Don't disobey me again, or I'll let the Vaqs at you. And you know what part of little boys they like to eat first."

What a sick lady, Linkeree thought for the millionth time. At least it isn't hereditary.

But it is, isn't it? Aren't I escaping from a mental hospital?

He was confused. But he knew that over the fence was safety, Vaqs or no Vaqs; he couldn't stay at the hospital. Hadn't he killed his mother? Hadn't he told them he was glad of it? And when they realized he wasn't insane at all, that he really, seriously, in cold blood strangled his mother on the public streets of Pampas City, without benefit of madness-- well, they'd kill him.

I will not die at their hands.

The barbed wire scratched him unmercifully, and the electric shock from the top wire would have

stunned a cow, he thought. But grimly he hung on, his body shuddering in the force of the voltage; climbed over; dangled a moment on the barbs until his shirt ripped apart and let him drop; then lay, stunned, on the ground as another alarm went off, this time nearby.

I've told them were I am, he thought. What an ass.

So he stood, his body still trembling from the electricity, and staggered stupidly off into the high grass that began crisply a hundred metets from the fence.

The sun was touching the horizon.

The grass was harsh and sharp.

The wind was bitterly cold.

He had no shirt.

I will freeze to death out here tonight. I will die of exposure. And the part of him that always gloated sneered, "You deserve it, matricide. You deserve it, Oedipus."

No, you've got it all wrong, it's the father you're supposed to kill, right?

"Why, it's a painting of me; isn't it?" asked Zad, seeing what he had, done with the watercolors. "It's excellent, except that I'm not blond, you know."

And he looked at her and wondered, for a moment, why he had thought she was.

He was snapped out of his memory by a sound. He could not identify it, nor even, for sure, the direction from which it had come. He stopped, stood still, listening. Now, aware of where he was, he realized that his arms and hands and stomach and back were scratched and slightly bloody from the rasping grass. The suckers were clinging to his bare body; he brushed them away with a shudder of revulsion. Bloated, they dropped-- one of the curses of the planet, since they left no itch or other pain, and a man could bleed to death without knowing he was even being sucked.

Linkeree turned around and looked back. The lights of the government compound winked behind him. The sun had set, and dusk was only dimly lighting the plain.

The sound came again. He still couldn't identify it, but now the direction was more distinct-- he followed.

Not two meters off was a feebly crying infant, the mucus of birth still clinging to his body, the afterbirth unceremoniously dumped beside him. The placenta was covered with suckers. So was the baby.

Linkeree knelt, brushed away the suckers, looked at the child, whose stubby arms and legs proclaimed him to be a Vaq. Yet apart from that, Link could see no other sign that this was not a human infant-- the dark skin must come after years of exposure to the hot noon sunshine. He remembered clearly that one of the long line of tutors he had studied with had told him about this Vaq custom. It was assumed to be the exact counterpart of the ancient Greek custom of exposing unwanted infants, to keep the population at acceptable levels. The baby cried. And Linkeree was struck bitterly with the unfairness that it was this infant that was chosen to die for the good of the-- tribe? Did Vaqs travel in tribes? If seven percent of infants had to die for the good of the tribe, why couldn't there be a way for seven-hundredths of each child to be done away? Impossible, of course. Linkeree stroked the child's feeble arms. It was much more efficient to rid the world of unwelcome children.

He picked up the infant, gingerly (he had never done so before, only seen them in the incubators in the hospital his father had built and which, therefore, Linkeree was "responsible" for), and held it against his bare chest, wondering at the warmth it still had. For a moment at least the crying stopped, and Link periodically struck off the suckers that leaped from the placenta to the baby's or his bare skin. We are kin, he told the child silently, we are kin, the unwanted children. "If only you'd never been born," he heard his mother saying; this time a saying she had said only once, but the memory was sharp and clear, the moment forever imprinted on his mind. It

was no act. It was no sham, like her hugs and kisses and I'm-so-proud-of-yous. It was a moment, all too rare, of utter sincerity: "If only you'd never been born, I wouldn't be getting old like this on this hideous planet!"

Why, then, mother, didn't you leave me on the plain to die? Much kinder, much, much kinder than to have kept me at home, killing me seven percent at a time.

The baby cried again, hunting for, a breast that by now was surely many kilometers off, leaking pap for the child that would never suckle. Did the mother grieve, perhaps? Or was she only irritated at the sensitivity of her breasts, only anxious for the last remnants of the pregnancy to fade?

Squatting there, holding the infant, Linkeree wondered what he should do. Could he bring the child back into the compound? Unquestionably yes, but at a cost. First, Linkeree would then be caught, would then be reconfined to the hospital where the fact that he was not, was not insane would soon be discovered and they would cleanly and kindly push the needle into his buttocks and put him irrevocably to sleep. And then there was the child. What would they do with a Vaq child in the capital? In an orphanage it would be tortured by the other children who, in their poverty and usual bastardy would welcome the nonhuman as something lower that they could torment and so prove their power. In the schools, the child would be treated as an intellectual pariah, incapable of learning. It would be shunted from institution to institution-- until someday on the street the torment became too much and he strangled somebody and then died for it.

Linkeree lay the baby back down. If your own don't want you, the stranger doesn't want you, either, he said silently. The baby cried desperately. Die, child, Linkeree thought, and be spared. "There's not one damn thing I can do," he said aloud.

"What do you mean, when you can paint like that?" Zad answered. But Link saw more clearly than she. He had meant to paint Zad, but had instead painted his mother. Now he saw what for seven months what he had been blind to-- Zad's resemblance to his mother. That's why he had followed her through the streets that first night, had kept watching her, until finally she had asked him what the hell--

"What the hell?" Zad asked, but Link didn't answer, only wrinkled up the painting clumsily (You're all thumbs, Linky!), pressed the wad against his crotch, and struck the paper and thus himself viciously once. Cried out in agony. Struck himself again.

"Hey! Hey, stop that! Don't--"

And then he saw, felt, smelled, heard his mother lean over him, her hair brushing his face (sweet-smelling hair), and Link was filled with the old helpless fury, a helplessness made worse by clear memories of love-making hour after hour with this woman in an apartment filled with paintings in a government flat in the low part of the city. Now. I'm grown up, he thought, now I'm stronger than her, and still she controls me, still she attacks me, still she expects so damn much and I never know what I should do! And so he stopped striking himself and found a better target.

The baby was still crying. Link was disoriented for a moment, wondering why he was trembling. Then another gust of wind reminded him that tonight was the night he would die in feeble expiation for his sins, he like the baby sucked dry by tiny bites, gnawed to death by the chewers that padded through the night, frozen to death by the wind. The difference would be, of course, that the infant would not understand, would never have understood. Better to die unknowing. Better to have no memories. Better to have no pain.

And Link reached down and put his thumb and forefinger around the baby's throat, to kill it now and spare it the brief agony of death later in the night. But when it was time to squeeze tightly and shut off blood and breath, Link discovered that he could not.

"I am not a killer," Link said. "I can't help you."

And he got up and walked away, leaving behind the child's mewling to be buried in the noise of the wind pushing through the grass. The blades rasped against his naked chest, and he remembered his mother scrubbing him in the bath. "See? Only I can reach your back. You need me, just to stay clean."

I need you.

"That's mother's good boy."

Yes. I am, I am.

"Don't touch me! I won't have any man touch me!"

But you said--

"I'm through with men. You're a bastard and a son of a bastard and you've made me old!"

But Mother--

"No, no, what am I doing? It isn't your fault that men are like that. You're different, you, my sweet little boy, give Mother a hug-- not so tight, for God's sake, you little devil, what are you trying to do? Go to your room!"

He stumbled in the near darkness and fell, cutting his wrist in the grass.

"Why are you hitting me?" he heard the brownhaired woman who ought to be blond crying out. But he hit her again, and she fled the apartment, ran down the stairs, stumbled out into the street. It was the stumbling that let him catch her, and there in the middle of the road he stifled her scream by showing her precisely what a man was like, by throwing her at long, long last away.

A knife pricked into his chest.

He looked up from where he lay in the grass at a short, stocky man-- no, not a man, a Vaq-- and not just one, a half dozen, all armed, though some were just rising from the ground-- and still seemed half asleep. He had stumbled in his daze into a Vaq camping place.

This is better, he thought, than the suckers and chewers, and so with a pillar of blackness and chill in place of his spine, he weakly stood, waiting for the knife.

But the knife pressed no deeper toward his heart, and he grew impatient. Wasn't he the heir of the man who had done most to hurt the Vaqs, whose great tractors had swept away the livelihood of a dozen tribes, whose hunters had killed Vaqs who chanced to wander on land marked out as his? I am the owner of half this world that is worth owning; kill me and free yourselves.

One of the Vaqs hissed impatiently. Press the knife, Link thought he seemed to say. And so he, too, hissed. Impatiently. Act now. Hurry.

In surprise at his having echoed his own death sentence, the Vaq with the knife at his chest withdrew a step, though he still held out the knife, pointing at Linkeree. The Vaq babbled something, something ripe with rolled Rs and hissed Ss-- not a human language, they taught the children in the government schools, even, though as Link well knew there were dozens of anthropological reports pointing out that the Vaq language was merely corrupted Spanish, and the Vaqs were obviously the descendants of the colony ship Argentine that had been thought lost in the first decade of interstellar colonization thousands of years ago, when man had first reached out from the small planet that they had utterly spoiled. Human. Definitely human, however cruel Pampas had selected for ugliness and ignorance and viciousness and inhumanity.

Savages have no monopoly on that.

And Linkeree reached out, gently took the hind that held the blade, and guided it back until the point pressed against his belly. Then he hissed again, impatiently.

The Vaq's eyes widened; And he tuned to look at his fellows, who were equally puzzled. They babbled; some backed away from Link, apparently in fear. Link couldn't understand. He guided the knife deeper into his flesh; blood crept back along the horizontal blade.

The Vaq withdrew his knife, abruptly, and his eyes filled with tears, and he knelt and took Linkeree by the hand.

Link tried to pull his hand away. The Vaq only followed, offering no resistance. The others, also, gathered around. He couldn't understand their language, but he could understand the gestures. They were, he realized, worshipping him.

Gentle hands led him to the center of the encampment. All around, little braziers of peat burned brightly, sizzling constantly as the heatseeking suckers left the Vaqs and gathered to die in the fire.

They sang to him, plaintive melodies that were only deepened and enhanced by the sweep and howl of the wind. They stripped him and touched him all over, gently exploring, then dressed him again and fed him (and he thought bitterly of the child who, because of the lack of food, was even now dying in the grass) and surrounded him and lay down around him to protect him as he slept.

You're cheating me. I came here to die, and you're cheating me.

And he wept bitterly, and they admired his tears, and after a half hour, long before the cold moon rose, he slept, feeling cheated but somehow utterly at peace.

***

Mrs. Danol sat in a chair in Hort's office, her arms folded tightly, her eyes savagely watching every move he made-- or didn't make.

"Mrs. Danol," he finally said, "it would help everyone, including you, if you went home."

"Not," she answered acidly, "until you find my boy."

"Mrs. Danol, we are not even looking!"

"And that's why I'm not leaving."

"The government doesn't send searchers out on the plains in the nighttime. It's suicidal."

"And so Linkeree is going to die. I assure you, Mr. Hort, that the hospital will regret not doing anything."

He sighed. He was sure that the hospital would-- the annual gifts from the Danol family were more than half of the operating budget. Some salaries would go immediately-- primarily his, there was little doubt. And so, knowing that, and also because he was extremely tired, he tossed aside his politic courtesy and pointed out some blunt facts.

"Mrs. Danol, are you aware that in ninety percent of our cases, treating the patient's parents is the most effective step toward a cure?"

Her mouth grew tight and hard.

"And are you aware that your son is not genuinely psychotic at all?"

At that she laughed. "Good. All the more reason to get him away from here-- if he lives through this night out there in that hell that passes for a terraformed planet."

"Actually, your son is quite sane, half the time-- a very intelligent, very creative young man. Very much like his father." That last was intended as a very deep dig. It worked.

She rose from her chair. "I don't want any mention of that son-of-a-bitch!"

"But the other half of the time, he is merely reenacting childhood. Children are insane, all of them-- by adult standards. Their defense strategies, their adaptations, are all such that an adult using them is regarded as utterly mad. Paranoia, acting out, denial, self-destruction. For some reason, Mrs. Danol, your son has been kept penned into the relationship structures of his childhood."

"And you think the reason is me."

"Actually, it's not just a matter of opinion. The only times that Linkeree was sane were the times when he believed he had killed you. Believing you dead, he functions as an adult. Believing you alive, he functions as an infant."

He had gone too far. She shouted in rage and struck out at him across the desk. Her fingers raked his face; her other hand sprawled along his desk, shoving papers and books off onto the floor. He managed to push the call button while he grappled with her with his other hand. But he had lost a handful of hair and gained bruises in his shins by the time the attendants came in and held her back, sedated her, took her to a room in the hospital to rest.

***

Morning. The hairy birds of the plains were awake, foraging briskly in the dawn, eating the now sluggish suckers that had bloated themselves on the night life of the grasslands. Linkeree woke, mildly surprised at how natural and good it felt to awaken in the open, lying on a mat of grass, with birds crying. Is there some racial memory of life in the open land that makes me feel so comfortable? he wondered. But he yawned, stood, stretched, feeling vigorously alive, feeling good.

The Vaqs watched him, even as they pursued their morning tasks-- packing up for the day's journey, fixing a skimpy breakfast of cold meat and hot water. But after the eating, they came to him, touched him again, knelt again, making arcane signs with their hands. When they were through (and Linkeree thought bitterly that it was strange that murder and worship were the only intercourse men could have with the Vaqs) they led Linkeree out of the camp, back in the direction he had come last night.

Now, in daylight, he could see why it was that the Vaqs were such deadly adversaries when met in their native habitat. They were short, and not one of them stood taller than the thickest part of the grass, though Link, not a tall man by any human standard, could see clearly over the crest of the blades. And the grass ate up their footprints, closed behind them, hid their movements from any possible observer or follower. An army of Vaqs could pass by unnoticed a meter from the keenest observer, he thought, with some exaggeration.

And then they arrived. They had brought him back to where the baby had been abandoned. It shocked Linkeree profoundly, that they would return to the scene of their crime. Was there no shame to the murders? At least they could have the decency to forget the existence of the child, instead of coming back to gloat.

But they formed a circle around the small corpse (how had they found him again in the grass?) and Linkeree looked down at the child's body.

A chewer had come in the night, and then several others. The first had (shades of Mother's nighttime threats) chewed off the infant genitals, gnawed into the abdomen at the soft entrails, ignoring the muscle tissue entirely. But the baby and the placenta had attracted a huge concentration of suckers, and these had eagerly transferred to the much warmer chewer, bleeding it to death before its meal was finished, The later chewers were bled to death even faster, as more and more suckers came, sucked, laid eggs, and died.

And then the birds, which had danced skyward when Link and the Vaqs had arrived, eating the dying suckers, but ignoring the sucker eggs which were implanted on the blades of grass, where tonight they would hatch, and the lucky ones would find food before they starved to death, find food and reproduce in a mad, one-night life.

Except for the gnawed away crotch, the child's body was intact.

The Vaqs knelt, nodded toward Link, and began cutting up the child's body. The incisions were neat, precise. Breastbone to crotch, a U-shaped cut around the breasts, a long slice down the arms, the head completely removed; all cuts were quick and deft, and in a moment the body was entirely skinned.

And then they ate.

Link watched, appalled, as they each in turn lifted a strip of raw meat toward him, as if it

were a votive offering. He shook his head each time, and each time the Vaq murmured (in thanks) and ate.

And when the raw bones were left, and the skin, and the heart, the Vaqs opened the skin smoothside up and laid it before Link. They picked up the pile of bones, and held it out to him. He took them-- he was afraid, in the face of such inhumanity, to refuse. Then they waited.

What do I do now? he wondered. They were beginning to look a bit disturbed as he knelt, motionless, with the bones in his hands. And so, vaguely remembering some of his classical history, he tossed down the bones onto the blanket of skin and then stood, wiping the blood off his hands onto his trousers.

The Vaqs all looked at the bones, pointing to this one and that one, though they had landed in no pattern discernible to Link. At last, however, they began to grin, to laugh, to jump up and down and jig in delight at whatever the bones had told them.

Linkeree was more than a little glad that the portents had turned out so well. What would they have done if the bones had somehow spelled disaster?

The Vaqs decided to reward him. They picked up the head and offered it to him.

He refused.

They looked puzzled. So did he. Was he supposed to eat the head? It was ghastly-- the stump had not bled at all, looked like a laboratory specimen, reminded him of--

No, he would not.

But the Vaqs were not angry. They seemed to understand-- they only took the bones, buried each in a separate but shallow hole scrabbled out of the rich deep soil under the grass, and then took the skin and draped it over Link's bare shoulders. It occurred to him that they were signifying that he was the child. The leader's gesture confirmed that they believed that-- he kept gesturing from the skin and the head to Linkeree, and then pausing, waiting for an answer.

Linkeree didn't know how to respond. If he denied he was the child's spirit or successor or something, would they kill him? Or if he admitted that he was, would they finish their sacrifice by killing him? Either choice might end his life, and he was not feeling suicidal this morning.

And then, as he stared into the child's dead face, remembering that last night the infant had been alive, had responded to his touch, he realized that there was more truth than they realized to their belief. Yes, he was the infant, chewed and cut and eaten and cast away to be buried in a hundred tiny graves. Yes, he was dead. And he nodded in acceptance, nodded in agreement.

The Vaqs all nodded, too, and one by one they came to him and kissed him. He was unsure of whether the kiss was a prelude to leaving or to killing; but then they each kissed the child's head that he held in his hands in front of him, and as he saw their lips tenderly rest on the infant forehead or cheeks or mouth he was overcome by self-pity and grief; he wept.

And, seeing his tears, the Vaqs grew afraid, babbled quietly among themselves, and then disappeared silently into the tall grass, leaving Linkeree alone with the child's relics.

***

Dr. Hort went to see Mrs. Danol as soon, as he woke up in the morning. She was sitting in one of the empty private rooms, her hands folded in her lap. He knocked. She looked up, saw him through the window, nodded, and he came in.

"Good morning," he said to her.

"Is it?" she answered. "My son is dead by now, Dr. Hort."

"Perhaps not. He wouldn't be the first to survive a night in the grass, Mrs. Danol."

She only shook her head.

"I'm sorry about last night's fracas," he said. "I was tired."

"You were also too damn right," she answered. "I woke up at four this morning, sedative or no sedative. I thought and thought about it. I'm poison. I've poisoned my son just by being his mother. I wish I could be out there on the plain in his place, dying for him."

"And what the hell good would that do?"

She only cried in answer. He waited. The sobbing let up only a few moments later.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I've been crying off and on all morning." Then she looked at Hort, pleading in her eyes, and said, "Help me."

He smiled-- kindly, not triumphantly-- and said, "I'll try. Why don't you just tell me what you've been thinking about?"

She laughed bitterly. "That's a rat's nest we hardly need to go into. I spent most of the time thinking about my husband."

"Whom you don't like."

"Whom I loathe. He married me because I wouldn't sleep with him otherwise. He slept with me until I got pregnant; then he moved on. When Linkeree turned out to be a boy, he was delighted, and changed his will to leave everything to the boy. Nothing to me. And then, after he had slept with every girl on this planet and half the boys, he was run over by a tractor and I gave a little cheer."

"He was well thought of on the planet."

"People always think well of money."

"They often think well of beauty, too."

And at that she cried again. Through her sobs, in a twisted, little-girl voice, she said, "All I ever wanted was to go to Capitol. To go to Capitol and meet all the famous people and be on somec so that I could live forever and be beautiful forever. It's all I had, being beautiful-- I had no money, no education, and no talent for anything, not even motherhood. Do you know what it means to have only one thing that makes other people love you?"

No, Hort thought to himself, but I can see what a tragedy it is.

"You were your son's guardian. You could have taken him to Capitol."

"No, I couldn't. It's the law, Hort. Planet money must be invested on the planet until it achieves full provincial status. It protects us from exploitation. " She spat the word. "No somec allowed until we're a province. No chance to have life!"

"There are some of us who don't want to sleep for years on end, just to stay young a few years longer," Dr. Hort said.

"Then you're the insane ones," she retorted, and he almost agreed. Eternal life didn't appeal to him. Sleeping through life seemed like a disgusting waste of time. But he knew the draw, knew that most people who came to the colonies were desperate or stupid, that the gifted ones or the rich ones or the hopeful ones stayed where somec was within reach.

"Not only that," she said, "my damnable husband entailed the entire fortune, everything. Not a penny could be taken from Pampas."

"Oh."

"So I stayed, hoping that when my son grew up we could find some way, go anyway--"

"If your son hadn't been born, the money would all have been left to you, unentailed, and you

could have sold it to an offworlder and gone."

She nodded, and began to weep again.

"No wonder you hated your son."

"Chains. Chains, holding me here, stripping away my only asset as the years made hash of my face and my figure."

"You're still beautiful."

"I'm forty-five years old. It's too late. Even if I left for Capitol today, they won't let someone over forty-five go on somec at all. It's the law."

"I know. So--"

"So stay here and make the best of it? Thanks, Doctor, thanks. I might as well have a priest as you."

She turned away from him, and muttered, "And now the boy dies. Now, when it's too late. Why the bloody hell couldn't he have died a year ago?"

***

Linkeree patted the last of the earth over the grave he had dug for the head and skin of the child. The tears had long since dried; now the only liquid on him was sweat from the exertion in the hot sun of digging through the heavy roots of the grass. No wonder the Vaqs had dug shallowly to hide the bones. It was already afternoon, and he had only just finished.

But as he had worked, he had forced himself back, coldly reassembling his memories in his mind, burying them one by one in the child's grave. It was not Mother I killed in the street, it was Zad. Mother is still alive; she visited me yesterday. That was why I fled the hospital; that was why I wanted to die. Because if ever there was a person who deserved to live, it was Zad. And if ever one deserved to die, it was Mother.

Several times he felt himself longing to curl up and hide, to retreat into the cool shade under the standing grass, to deny that any of this had ever happened, to deny that he had ever turned five at all. But he fought off the feeling, insisted on the facts, the whole history of his life, and then hid it under the dirt.

You, child, he thought. I am you. I came out here last night to die in the grassland, to be eaten alive, to have my blood sucked out. And it happened; and the Vaqs ate my flesh and now I'm buried.

I who bury you, child, I am the you who might have been. I am without a past; I have only a future. I will start from here, without a mother, without blood on my hands, rejected by my own tribe and unacceptable to strangers. I will live among the strangers anyway, and live unencumbered. I will be you, and therefore I will be free.

He brushed the dirt off his hands, ignored the painful sunburn on his back, and stood. Around him the sucker eggs on the grassblades were already hatching, and the newborn suckers were devotedly eating each other so that only the few thousand strongest would survive, fed by the others. Link avoided obvious comparisons, merely turned and headed back toward the government compound.

He avoided the gate, instead climbing the fence and enduring the electricity that coursed through him when he gripped the top wire. And then, as the alarms went off, he walked back to the hospital.

***

Dr. Hort was alone in his office, eating a late lunch from a tray that Gram had brought him. Someone tapped at his door. He opened it, and Linkeree walked in.

Hort was surprised, but out of long professional habit, he didn't show it. Instead, he dispassionately watched as Linkeree walked to the chair, sat down comfortably, and leaned back with a sigh.

"Welcome back," Hort said.

"Hope I didn't cause any inconvenience," Linkeree answered.

"How was your night in the grass?"

Linkeree looked down at his scratches and scabs. "Painful. But therapeutic."

Silence for a moment. Hort took another bite of his sandwich.

"Dr. Hort, right now I'm in control. I know that my mother's alive. I know that I killed Zad. I also know that I was insane when I did it. But I understand and I accept those things."

Hort nodded.

"I believe, Doctor, that I am sane right now. I believe that I am viewing the world as accurately as most people, and can function in a capable manner. Except."

"Except?"

"Except that I'm Linkeree Danol, and as soon as it is known that I am capable of running things, I will be forced to take control of a very large fortune and a huge business that employs, in the long run, most of the people on Pampas. I will have to live in a certain house in this city. And in that house will be my mother."

"Ah."

"I don't believe my sanity would last fifteen minutes, Doctor, if I had to live with her again."

"She's changed somewhat," Dr. Hort said. "I understand her a little now."

"I have understood her completely for years, and she'll never change, Dr. Hort. More important, though, is the fact that I'll never change when I'm around her."

Hort sucked in a deep breath, leaned back in his chair. "What happened to you out on the desert?"

Linkme smiled wanly. "I died and buried myself. I can't return to that life. And if it means staying here in this institution all my life, pretending to be insane, I'll do that. But I'll never go back to Mother. If I did that, I'd have to live with all that I've hated all my life--and with the fact that I killed the only person I ever loved. It isn't a pleasant memory. My sanity is not a pleasant thing to hold onto."

Dr. Hort nodded.

There was a knock at the door. Link straightened up. "Who is it?" Hort asked.

"Me. Mrs. Danol."

Linkeree stood up abruptly, walked around the office to a point at the far wall from the door.

"I'm consulting, Mrs. Danol."

Her voice was strident, even through the muffling door. "They told me Linkeree had come back. I heard you talking to him in there."

"Go away, Mrs. Danol," Dr. Hort said. "You will see your son in due time."

"I will see him now. I have a writ that says I can see him. I got it from the court at noon. I want to see him."

Hort turned to Link. "She thinks ahead, doesn't she?"

Link was shaking. "If she comes in, I'll kill her."

"All right, Mrs. Danol. Just a moment."

"No!" Link shouted, making spastic motions as if he wanted to claw his way through the wall backward.

Hort whispered, "Relax, Link. I won't let her near you." Hort opened a closet-- Link started to walk in it. "No, Link." And Hort took his spare suit off the hanger, and a clean shirt. The suit, in the standard one piece, was a little long for Linkeree, but the waist and shoulders were not far wrong, and Link didn't look out of place in it when he had finished dressing.

"I don't know what you hope to gain by stalling, Dr. Hort, but I will see my son," Mrs. Danot shouted. "In three minutes I'll call the police!"

Hort shouted back, "Patience, Mrs. Danol. It takes a moment to prepare your son to see you."

"Nonsense! My son wants to see me!"

Linkeree was trembling, hard. Hort put his arms around the young man, gripped him tight. "Keep control," he whispered.

"I'm trying," Link chattered back, his lower jaw out of control.

Hort reached into his hipbag, pulled out his id and his cred, and handed them to Link. "I won't report them missing until you are on a ship out of here."

"Ship?"

"Go to Capitol. You'll have little trouble there, finding a place. Even without money. There's always room for someone like you."

Link snorted "That's a damn lie and you know it."

"Right. But even if they send you back here, your mother will be dby then."

Linkeree nodded.

"Now here's the door control. When I say, open the door."

"No."

"Open the door and let her in. I'll keep her under control until you get out the door and close it from the outside. There's no way out of here, then, except Gram's masterkey, and this note should take care of that." Hort scribbled a quick note. "He'll cooperate because he hates your mother almost as much as I do. Which is a terrible thing for an impartial psychologist to say, but at this point, who the hell cares?"

Linkeree took the note and the door control and stood beside the door with his back to the wall. "Doctor," he asked, "what'll they do to you for this?"

"Raise holy hell, of course," he said. "But I can only be removed by a council of medical practitioners-- and that's the same group that can have Mrs. Danol committed."

"Committed?"

"She needs help, Link."

Linkeree smiled-- and was surprised to realize it was his first smile in months. Since. Since Zad died.

He touched the open button.

The door slid open and Mrs. Danol swept in. "I knew you'd see reason," she pronounced, then whirled to look as Link stepped out the door, closing it so quickly that he almost got caught in it. His mother was already screaming and pounding as Link handed the note to Gram, who read it, looked closely at the man, and then nodded. "But hurry your ass, boy," Gram said. "What we're doing here is called kidnapping in some courts."

Linkeree set the door control on the desk and left, running.

***

He lay in the ship's passenger hold, recovering from the dizziness that they told him was normal with a person's first mindtaping. The brain patterns that held all his memories and all his personality were now in a cassette securely stored in the ship's cabin, and now he lay on a table waiting for them to drug him with somec. When he woke up and had his memory played back into his mind in Capitol, he would only remember up to the moment of taping. These moments now, between the tape and the tap, would be lost forever.

And that was why he thought back to the infant whose warm body he had held, and why he let himself wish that he could have saved him, could have protected him, could have let him live.

No, I'm living for him.

The hell I am. I'm living for me.

They came and put the needle into his buttocks, not for the cold sleep of death, but for the burning sleep of life. And as the hot agony of somec swept over him, he writhed into a ball on the table and cried out, "Mother! I love you!"

WHEN NO ONE REMEMBERS HIS NAME, DOES GOD RETIRE?

Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled.

This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sbrrow.

-- Isaiah 50:11

The prophet, Amblick, lay dying on a bed they had laid out on the floor of the room the government had provided rent-free for their meetings. He was more than a century old, and since the Church of the Undying Voice had only a few dozen members left, and none of them had professed to hear the Voice, it was plain that the church was also dying; that there would be no prophet to tell them the Way any longer.

Amblick knew it. The congregation knew it. There was little to say as Amblick lay on the bed, looking up at the ceiling with its hidden lights and aging acoustic tiles. His century had been long; he had heard the Voice first when he was fifteen, and had been prophet for ninety-four years. If he had been a better servant of the Voice, he knew, the church would not have shrunk to such straits. He felt guilty and ashamed, but more than that he felt tired. A relentless century in which society had been mockingly indifferent. Preach all you like, the government seemed to say, we'll even give you a meeting place, but you'll make no converts, change no lives. Speak on and publish as you will, the world of Capitol seemed to urge, we'll tolerate you, we'll smile kindly, and for amusement some of us will invite you to visit with us during a waking, but we will not repent and give up somec or give up sex or give up lifeloops or games or war or politics or the petty murders of competitive business.

"So much to be done," said Amblick, "but the ocean of sin sweeps over me, and I have done nothing."

No, murmured his followers. You have been a great man.

But one person watching did not murmur comfort. He did not understand that the dying old man might need comfort. Nor did he see or understand that the death of one man was the death of a faith. Garol Stipock was seven. And Amblick was his great-grandfather, a relation so distant that Garol had always confused references to God or the Voice with his great-grandfather, whose voice seemed to come from everywhere when he spoke and whose eyes hinted at the wisdom that knew all things, had created all things, and could, eventually, accomplish all things.

So it did not occur to Garol that Amblick needed help to go peacefully out of life; it was Garol who needed help.

"Old Father," Garol said, and Amblick and the others looked at him. "Old Father, if you die, who will tell us the words of the Voice?"

Old Father looked sad, and the adults there were embarrassed that a child should bring up the one question they were all trying to avoid. "The Voice chooses his own vessel," Amblick answered softly, his voice bubbling with the liquid in his lungs.

"But Old Father," Garol persisted, and the, adults longed for a way to silence him (but they could not, because children were pure tools of God's hand, and it was fitting, anyway, that Amblick's life should end with the hard questions, and not dodge them), "Old Father, what if the Voice chooses no one? What if no one is worthy?"

"Then," said Amblick, "No one will hear the Voice."

Garol had known this was the answer, and it was a thought too terrible for him to face. Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he said, "Old Father, can't you then give us the last words of the Voice so we'll know how to live after you're gone?"

And Amblick sighed and sank into the, pillows and wondered if the Voice had ever really existed after all. Certainly there had been no words lately, nothing but a feeling of despair and impending doom. But then, wasn't that a sign that the Voice indeed had been real, since now that he needed it so desperately, it had withdrawn itself?

Itself? No, himself. And Amblick tried to grasp and hold to at least the modicum of truth that had told him the Voice was not just an ethereal source of inspiration but was rather a person of some kind. Hold to something, he told himself, and then he cried out with the bubbling in his lungs filling his voice, "Oh, God, where are you? Where is the wall that covers your face? Why do you hide silently in the noise of this world!"

And the congregation sat or stood upright, their eyes riveted on Amblick; the scribes ready to write down every word he uttered. For they knew this voice-- it was the voice of the Voice, and Amblick would, as the boy had asked, give them the last words of God before he died.

"The tigers rage in the forest, and the lions roar on the plain, and the voice of the hunter shall be silent." The pens leaped across the paper, writing. "The hunter shall now watch and wait, for those that sleep will soon never waken, and the tigers shall tear the lion's belly even as the lion rips the tigers' throats.

"Those who borrow from the future must repay, and they will pay in blood and horror and the stars shall go dark, and in the darkness on every world shall man discover again his God, wondering how he could ever have forgotten him in the bright times when the stars were handfuls of gems to be bought and sold. In the darkness will I speak again, because men would not hear me in the light.

"As for my servant Amblick, he was the weakest of all my servants, and yet when he dies the last strength shall go out of the world. Only one of you shall live to see the end. And that one shall not know whether his God won or lost the final battle."

And then Amblick fell silent, and the pens chased his last words and at last came to rest on the periods, and then Amblick reached out to Garol Stipock and embraced him, as if to thank him for demanding the last words of the Voice, and it was thus Garol Stipock who first felt the stiffening and then the relaxing of the hands and arms and knew that the prophet, Amblick, was dead.

They took the body and gave it to the machines, which gave them back ashes and let them pour the ashes into the garden of life. And then they all went home.

Garol's parents had made their decision, and so had made his. With Amblick gone, they decided that the religion could only be followed privately; the preaching and the publication (and, not coincidentally, the constant embarrassment and ostracism) were over. God would be their secret; the neighbors could find their own way without the preaching of the Way.

Not all the congregation reached that decision. Many of them kept holding meetings for a while. One of them even claimed to have the Voice, but when he dictated revelation the scribes refused to write it because there was no ring of truth in it and it didn't burn them with the fire of life as Amblick's words. had. But eventually there was nothing more to say in the meetings, and eventually there was no more money being contributed; when believers lose their faith, their purses discover the fact even before their hearts and minds do.

Amblick's Church of the Undying Voice died only four years after he did. And Garol Stipock, who was then eleven, did not even know it had lasted that long.

Without the congregation to buoy them, Garol's parents soon began to compromise with Capitol; the long war was over. First it was the decision to send Garol to school. He was eight years old when he started, but he learned so quickly that within six months he was caught up to the children his own age, and by the time he was ten he was studying material that bright fourteen-year-olds had trouble with.

His parents made other compromises, too. The first compromise was a quiet one in their own bedroom, where they began taking the medicine that would let them use sex for something other than procreation. The next compromise was a move to a different sector, where they were strangers, and they began to go to parties and invite friends over and Garol's father even joined a group of gamers and Garol's mother became a gourmet cook of sorts. They thought Garol was so young the didn't notice. But he noticed, and though it was not in his nature to say anything, his parents' apostasy shook him to the foundation.

At first he thought his parents had betrayed the faith and wavered between hating them for their infidelity and fearing that God would strike them down.

But, God didn't strike them down, and after a few years Garol discovered that his parents were still decent, good people, and about this time Garol discovered science.

At first it was geology, with the pictures of rocks. He had never seen a rock in his life. To him even granite was a gem, and he lovingly fondled the school's samples of rocks as if just touching them could give him an understanding of a planet and what made it live.

Then it was biology, the endless variety of plants and animals working together to form one vast, planetwide organism. It struck Garol's sense of beauty more than it stimulated his scientific curiosity-- there were few mysteries in biology anymore, and Garol studied it only until he knew how it worked.

And then he found the field where the mysteries still endured: physics. And though he was locked into a planet where nothing grew that was not forced to grow, and where nature was utterly defeated, he became a pioneer for the colony ships. Surely there must be a way to learn, before a ship ever landed on a planet, exactly what mineral deposits there were, and where; exactly what kind of animal life there was, and which animals could be safely killed for food; and what the weather and climate patterns were. His goal was to create a way for an orbiting ship to know everything the colonists would need to know before they landed-- so that the best possible landing site could be chosen, and all necessary precautions could be taken. He was an eclectic-- he knew the questions in other fields that only physics could answer.

He was fifteen and a college graduate when he began his serious work. His professors in his graduate school were uneasy at having a student so young, and their uneasiness turned to outrage when they discovered that he was designing, of all things, machines.

"Mr. Stipock," said the dean to the young man who was quietly listening and obviously not paying the slightest attention, "we are concerned because you seem to be wasting your time with toys."

Garol looked surprised. "Not toys," he said. "Tools."

"Physics is a theoretical science, a mathematical manipulation of the universe, Mr. Stipock. Not a field for magic boxes."

"But Dr. Whickit," Garol protested, "I have to measure minute amounts of radiation. That means I have to have a tool to measure it. And there isn't any such tool."

"If you want to make tools, perhaps you should be in a different program. A technical school."

And Stipock laughed. It was an unnerving laugh, and Whickit was offended. "Dr. Whickit," Garol said, "if you really believe physics is a mathematical game, why do you persist in using data acquired from the telescopes and the accellerators? It isn't the fact that I'm working with tools that bothers you, is it? It's the fact that I know how to ask questions for which there are no tools to get the answers-- and that I am daring to make those tools. If I were so unscientific as to be a psychologist, I'd speculate that you were a bit envious and felt threatened. And since I've already made my tool and it works very well, I'd be perfectly delighted for you to expel me from this university, and I'll just go to Sector H-88 to publish my papers and patent the machines."

Whickit was furious; he shouted, he resented, he plotted, he undermined. But Stipock had already won. His tools did all he meant them to, and Whickit quickly discovered that the administration would trade twenty Whickits for one Stipock any day.

And they offered Stipock somec.

"We need to keep you alive," the Sleeproom people said. "You're one of the ten or twenty most valuable minds in this century. We need to let you live for centuries so you can help answer the questions that arise then."

Stipock said no. "I'm working on several projects that no one can complete except me, and if they could I wouldn't want them to. Come see me when the projects are finished."

The Sleeproom people weren't used to being refused, but his reasons were plausible, and he was only fifteen, and so they waited.

But Garol's reasons were not what he said they were.

"Mother," he said. "Father. They've offered me somec."

He watched his parents carefully. Somec was the worst sin of all the sins of Capitol, and Amblick and the other prophets had condemned it as the Souldestroyer, the Hatemaker, Somec the Lifestealer. Garol knew enough science to know that God was impossible; knew enough of life to know that no one believed in God and few enough remembered he had ever existed in people's hearts. But all that knowledge had never undone the structure of his childhood: sex for pleasure was still unthinkable, somec was still a sin.

And so he watched his parent to see if they, too, still held on to a measure of the old faith.

"Somec?" asked his father. "What level?"

"Seven under, one up."

"That's high," his mother said.

His father looked at his mother for a moment, and then, rather awkwardly, he asked, "Garol, I understand that someone who's at that high a level can choose several close family members to go on somec with him at the same level, so that his life isn't too disrupted."

"Yes," his mother said. "And we're all the family you have."

Their eyes were bright with hope, and Garol felt the last of the religion crash down inside himself. He felt angry, betrayed, hurt; but all he said was, "Of course. I won't be going on for a

few years, but you can come with me."

"A few years?" asked his mother. "Why?"

"I have work to do."

His, father coughed, looked a little upset. "It's your right, I suppose. But remember, Garol, that while you're still young, we're getting a bit on in years."

Garol did nothing to show his contempt. The next day he went to the Sleeproom and told them that he would go on somec in three years, but he wanted his parents to go on somec now.

"But Mr. Stipock," said the man at the Sleeproom, "they can only go on somec at precisely the same level as you. So if they went on now and you went on in three years, they would never see you again. They'd always be asleep when you awoke, and vice-versa."

Garol tapped the desk. "Draw it up, and I'll sign it."

They drew it up, he signed it, and his parents went to the Sleeproom happily, knowing that they were the envy of all their friends. They hadn't even asked whether Garol would be awake when they awoke. Perhaps they merely took it for granted and would be terribly disappointed. But Garol simply assumed they didn't care. And neither, he pretended, did he.

The Stipock Low-Density Radiation Counter was a revolution in physics. Now, because an extremely sensitive machine could detect infinitesimal amounts of radiation from the most inert elements, it was possible to analyze practically to the molecule the makeup of any sample-- whether it was a small rock or the light from a star millions of light-years away.

Garol's new work was more that of a cataloguer than of a scientist-- but he was unable to perceive much difference between theory and practice of science, and saw no contradiction in it. He set up the programs for the Stipock Geologer, which would analyze planets from orbit and lay out incredibly detailed maps of metals, ores, and topography; the Stipock Ecologer, which analyzed the lifesystem of a planet in a single orbit; and the Stipock Climate Analyzer, which could predict weather for a year in advance with fair accuracy, and climatic trends for centuries with near perfect accuracy. It would take years to make the machines work well, but once Garol's groundwork was done, the details could be fleshed out by thousands of much less talented researchers.

It was not work that involved Garol's mind completely, and it seemed to those few who knew him at all well that he seemed determined to keep his mind as disengaged as possible. He asked the wife of a professor to explain sex to him; she did, and they kept practicing for a few weeks before he set out to experience as much of it as possible with as many different partners as possible.

"You don't seem to pay any attention when we make love," a fellow graduate student complained one night.

"Was it good?" he asked.

"Wonderful," she said. "But--"

"Then don't ask for more than that," he said. She soon stopped sleeping with him, however, which he told her was stupid. "What do you expect out of sex," he asked, "emotional involvement?"

"Yes," she answered. "Though how anyone could expect emotional involvement from you I'll never know."

If any of those observing him had had a religious background, they would have seen the pattern he was following. But how could any of them know that there was something unusual about Garol immersing himself briefly in thestudy of business and then systematically turning the millions he earned from royalties on his Low-Density Radiation Counter into billions by investing wisely but daringly in the marketplace.

He briefly played wargames, until he won enough that he got bored. He tried every liquor made

and got drunk several times, until he decided that he didn't like it much and quit again. He watched lifeloops to an extent that brought ridicule from fellow students (they briefly nicknamed him Soapwatcher). He even tried homosexuality, though it wasn't fashionable then, and he soon gave it up.

If anyone had understood the meaning behind his behavior, had thought it was anything more than adolescent experimentation coupled with a brilliant mind, his continuing refusal to go on somec would have caused some alarm. His religion was still, to some degree, controlling him. He knew it; but the fear of somec was not easy to overcome, and so he played hard and worked hard and still had half his mind unused so it could worry constantly about his appointment with the Sleeproom.

"Your contract, Mr. Stipock, says you must enter the Sleeproom in four days. We thought it would be good to remind you so you'd be certain to have your affairs in order."

"Thank you," Garol said, and celebrated his nineteenth birthday by burning the copy of the Word that he had kept all these years. It set off a smoke alarm in his apartment because he was known to be a nonsmoker, and it took three hours to convince the firemen that not only were they not needed, but the damned sprinklers had ruined his furniture.

"Just step in here," said the young woman, "and take off your clothes."

Stipock followed her into a room in the Tape and Tap that was equipped with a soft chair and a wheeled bed and several hooks to hang his clothing. He stripped, and the woman told him to sit in the chair. But he was trembling; he couldn't hang his clothes up. They kept falling.

"First time?" asked the young woman.

He nodded.

"Nothing to be afraid of. The taping is painless, and somec puts you right to sleep like a pleasant dream."

He smiled. He couldn't tell her that despite his stunning record of achievement in science, the God of his childhood was still leaning over his shoulder, forbidding him to eat the fruit of the tree of life.

The young woman put a helmet on his head, and Stipock began to sweat. My mind is being drawn out of my head, he thought, at the same time criticizing himself for being so irrational. His hands were cold; he had to will his legs to relax, so they would stop trembling so visibly, almost violently.

"That's it," the woman said. "Braintape is ready to go."

Stipock's mouth was dry, and he stammered as he asked, "What if something goes wrong with the tape?"

"No chance," she said. "The first time, we make four tapes. The first one is already played back and analyzed to make sure all your brain patterns are present. Another one is sent to the permanent tape archive. Another one is stored here, near where you'll be sleeping-- that's the one we'll wake you with. And the fourth is kept by the government, in case you should commit a crime and have to be awakened with an earlier tape. So, you see, there are four completely separate places where your memory is being stored. Nothing can happen."

Stipock felt somewhat reassured. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Of course, you won't remember a word of this conversation when you wake up, since it isn't on your tape. So I'm leaving a note with your records to make sure this is all explained to you. The last thing you'll remember is worrying about it!" She said it with a charming smile, and Stipock gave her one of his rare smiles back.

"Lie on the table now, and the somec will be ready in a moment."

He lay on his back on the table and looked upward at the hidden lights and the aging acoustic

tile. He remembered Amblick lying on his back twelve years ago, and suddenly he was afraid again. Not worry this time, though-- naked panic, and his legs stiffened and he wanted to urinate.

"I need to go to the bathroom," he said, and his voice shocked him by its calmness.

"No you don't," said the young woman. "Because in exactly three minutes all your bodily functions will be stopped, or nearly stopped, for several years, and when you wake up then you can go to the toilet." The needle slipped into his palm.

But it was not painless. The sleep came not with a pleasant dream, but with a nightmare. The fires of hell burned in his veins, and God's Voice throbbed in his head, crying, "Treason! Treason!" You have killed God, cried the voice in his head. You were the death of the Undying Voice. If only you had listened, you would have heard him call you! And now you take Souldestroyer into your body and negate your soul.

He screamed, and the young woman was afraid, because though she had seen countless others writhe and perspire and moan on the bed as the somec worked its hot destruction, she had never seen anyone lie so rigidly, have such an expression of terror, and scream as if life itself were being taken from him.

But soon he quieted, and soon he slept like a corpse, and she connected him to the lifesupport mechanism and wheeled him to where the attendants waited. They would put him in his coffin and slide him into his place on a shelf and leave him there until he was revived in seven years.

When he awoke, he remembered nothing of the agony of going to sleep. He remembered only that he had been afraid of somec, and he had come out of it perfectly all right.

In his mind he heaved an enormous sigh of relief. And then he settled down to doing the final work on his colony-support machines, making sure the programs did the work they were supposed to do. No more overcompensation for his early inhibitions about sex and fun and profit. His life steadied out. He became stable. He was prepared to let somec keep him alive forever.

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He was thirty subjective years old when the starship captain awoke him and brought him into the control room. It was the first field test of his machines, and he had insisted on being sent along. They were already in orbit around a planet that had been settled for years, and he had only had to sleep for eleven years to get there, since a child genius on Capitol had recently discovered a way to make starships that went ten times faster than they had before-- now to eighty or ninety times the speed of light. I, too, was a child genius, he remembered wistfully. It had been a lonely time, but now genius was merely expected of him, while before it had been exciting to watch how his discoveries brought a gradual increase of power and respect.

The test was easily performed-- a single orbit for each of the analyzers (though in practice, all three could perform their work in the same orbit). The program fed out dozens of maps, and on request could provide thousands more, each map providing detailed information about a particular mineral, a particular species, the weather patterns likely in a particular year.

With the survey done, they descended to the planet in a landing craft and began the painstaking work of comparing the charts with known deposits, and insisting that where the maps revealed new sources of any metal or unusual information about any species the data should be checked meticulously against the facts on the planet.

Soon the business settled into a routine mostly performed by onplanet scientists and students, and Garol had time to himself. And that was why he was alone when the madman tried to kill him.

He was sitting on a bench in one of the many parks in the capital city of the planet he Was working on. An older man came up to him and sat down next to him. Both of them were wearing coats because it wag a chilly afternoon, and the night would be much colder.

"Why are you sitting here?" asked the man.

"I'm busy being amazed," Garol answered with a smile.

"At what?"

"Plants growing right out of the earth without anything between them and bedrock but the soil. A wind that chooses its own direction to blow and sometimes has an uncomfortable temperature. A sky with no ceiling to block the view. A space so large that I can't see the end of it."

The older man nodded. "You're from Capitol."

"I guess there's no hiding that."

"Are you a sleeper?" the old man asked.

"At the moment I'm very much awake, and loving it," Garol answered, with the courtesy of somec-users, who tried to avoid mentioning their virtual immortality around those who did not use it-- why cause hurt feelings?

The older man nodded, and thrust his hands into the pockets of his coat. "You're the genius, aren't you?" he asked. "The man who made the machines they're testing."

His picture had been in every newsloop for weeks-- a visit from a man of his stature and interplanetary fame was a major event, overshadowing all the local happenings. "Yes, I'm Garol Stipock."

"Then you are a sleeper."

Garol nodded absently. "Yes," he said, "I am."

The man lifted his hand out of his pocket and a needle was in it. It was obviously set on full. Garol struck out at the man and that was why the needle tore his arm apart and did not do any damage to his nervous system. He would live.

It took weeks in the hospital, however, before his arm had healed enough that he could leave. Visitors from the project came from time to time to report on progress-- so far his machines had been invariably accurate-- but the first item of business after he could leave the hospital was an appearance in court.

It was a small, private interview. The judge, the lawyers, and the defendant made a small group, comfortably gathered on soft furniture, and they all asked Stipock and the older man questions.

"Why did you try to kill Dr. Stipock?" they asked.

"He's a sleeper," the older man said.

The judge nodded. "You're an Equalizer, then?"

The older man sneered. "An Abolisher, now, even if I was an Equalizer before!"

Stipock caught the judge's eye. The judge explained. "Equalizers want to dismantle the merit system and make somec available for everyone. Abolishers simply want to kill everybody who uses somec."

"No!" the older man said, his face lit up by rage. "No!"

"Whom do you want to kill, then?" Stipock asked. "And why me?"

The older man narrowed his eyes. "I don't want to kill anybody."

Stipock smiled, though his arm suddenly throbbed as if to remind him of how close he had come to death at the hands of this man. "You only want to tear their arms off?"

"I kill where I must."

"I was no threat to you, sir." Stipock was no longer smiling. He recognized something in this man's eyes. "Why did you have to kill me?"

"Somec is the enemy."

"But I'm not in charge of somec. I just use it. Like millions of other people."

"Millions of other people!" the man said scornfully. "To a universe of trillions, they decide who deserves eternity and the rest of us deserve to die like worms!"

"I didn't make the system," Stipock said lamely.

"Yes you did," the older man said. "You keep it alive. You. Single-handedly. And as long as you and people like you live, it will stay alive!"

Stipock looked around at the others in the room, puzzled. The prosecutor leaned over and touched his good arm reassuringly. "Don't expect them to make sense. They're just fanatics, like a religion."

The word religion stirrred a memory, and Stipock turned back to the old man. He remembered those eyes, that expression, now: They were Amblick's eyes, his earnest look.

"This man isn't crazy," Stipock said. "He just believes something."

The older man nodded. "That's right. The truth. I knew that you could see it. Even the liars know it's true, but you're not a liar. You're a man with true greatness," he said.

The judge was exasperated. "Why in the world did you try to kill him, then?"

"Because," the old man said impatiently, as if they should already have known, "as long as great men are on somec, everybody can point to the merit system and say, 'A man like that proves that we need somec-- he proves that the merit system lets the great men live forever.' While most of the somec users are venal little power-hungry bastards like you." And he stared the judge in the, eye, until the judge looked away, his face rigid with anger.

"The proof is obvious, and this questioning is doing nothing but letting a madman have a few listeners to his madness. Guilty. Sentence is prison for five years and then transshipment to another world. Got to stop this cancer before it spreads."

The defender said, "Sir, if you wish to stop the cancer, why do you send him as an emissary to another world?"

"To get him off of this one," the judge answered curtly. And then both the judge and the defender were startled by the older man's laugh.

"What's so funny?" the judge snarled.

"You dig a cesspool and then you swim around in it, complaining of the smell! They'll tear you up, someday! They'll rip you to pieces!"

"Who?" asked Stipock. "Who'll do this?"

"Don't bother, Dr. Stipock," the prosecutor said. "They never admit there's an organization. Even under drugs. I've never seen control like it."

"There is no organization," the old man said. "Who needs an organization? I mean that everybody, all the real people, all those who don't get somec and know they never will-- all of them will rise up and tear you sleepers out of the walls and rip you to pieces and feed you to the animals. They'll kill the starship captains and the scientists and the politicians and the businessmen and the society ladies and the lifeloopers and all the other bastards who think they can live forever while the rest of us die, and there won't be any more somec and people will be human beings like they were meant to be!"

The old man's face was red; he was standing up; he was trembling, and a shaking finger was pointed at Stipock's heart, and the embarrassed judge had them take him out. "I'm so sorry," the judge kept telling Stipock. "But you see how hard it is to keep them under control."

Stipock shook his head, insisting that he was not distressed. "There are criminals everywhere," Stipock said. And then he asked, "What if the man's right? What if everybody who wasn't on somec did revolt?"

The Judge laughed off the idea. "There's no chance of that. There's hardly a soul alive who doesn't live in hope of someday getting enough money or enough power or enough prestige to get on somec. And most of the old people who'll never get on somec are working to help get their kids a chance. They're all the part of the system, and it's only a few lonely old fanatics like this who go crazy. But we can't prevent them. We'd have to watch every single old man and woman in the world, and we just can't do that. Sorry." And the profuse apologies went on.

But Stipock had taken the old man more seriously than he could have imagined. He had never known that anyone but his small and now dead religious group hated somec. But now he remembered all his childhood training-- training he had overcome so well. Somec was evil, but not because God forbade it. It was evil because it formed the universe of people into two groups: the few with eternal life, and the rest condemned to die.

He began noticing how few of the people on somec were in any way remarkable. They were relatives of somec users who were allowed into the Sleeprooms because of the same loophole that had let Garol's parents become sleepers. Or they were rich, lucky winners of the Market sweepstakes. Or they were ruthless businessmen who had forced luck their way. Or they were women who slept with the men who could give them enough money to get on somec. Or they were lifeloopers or fashionable artists or politicians who had won often enough. And some of them Garol could find no conceivable excuse for. They had come in because the merit system was a joke. Garol met no one who, as he had done, had become a sleeper through remarkable achievement.

There aren't that many remarkable achievements in the universe these days, Garol realized.

And he became an enemy of somec.

At first he toyed with the idea of simply going off somec and removing himself as a tool of the system, as the old man had tried to accomplish. But he soon realized (or rationalized-- he was honest enough to admit he wanted immortality as much as anyone) that removing himself from the somec system would hardly cause a shockwave that would bring it down.

Besides, he didn't want to bring it down. He wanted to reform it. Give somec to those few who genuinely merited it-- and then extend the privilege, regardless of wealth or social status, by some fair means, perhaps a lottery scrupulously administered, or a quota of so many individuals per family, or something-- anything but the corrupt method of rewarding wealth and cruelty with immortality.

Somec reform was not a rare topic of discussion, he soon discovered. Others, too, were concerned about inequality or unfairness, and Garol soon made contact with groups of somec-users on the same schedule as himself who were working for reform.

To reform the system, we must reform the government, these groups declared. And to reform the government, we must take over the government.

And so it was that Stipock stepped over the edge from social concern to political conspiracy. Soon he was working for them all the time; he invented weapons that could easily be concealed, devised computer languages that allowed them to steal computer time and memory capacity without allowing anyone else to tap into their programs, and developed a machine that would so disorient a person that he would be unable to keep secrets-- the perfect psychological probe, something that had been hunted for by psychologists as eagerly as alchemists had sought the philosopher's stone.

They got closer and closer to their goal. It seemed as though victory might, within a century, be feasible.

And then Stipock once again was brought up short by reality. A chance remark at a meeting of a small cell of conspirators' forced him to notice something he had been studiously ignorant of for years.

"Stop arguing about reform," a fiery young woman had shouted when the meeting got too heated. "It really doesn't matter how we reform the system, does it, so long as everybody's happy and *we* get somec!"

Everyone laughed nervously and ended the discussion, but Garol Stipock carried her statement to its underlying truth. No one usually mentioned it, but every single conspirator was a somec user, and none of them would ever countenance a somec reform that would take them off somec. It was as if they assumed that merely taking part in the revolution would assure them of meriting somec. Yet very few of them had the slightest conceivable claim to real merit.

Somec reform and our revolution will change nothing, Stipock told himself, and knew that he was right. He went home that night despairing.

His flat was not large; he could have afforded more. Nor was it luxurious. After his fling with hedonism in his adolescence, he had become almost ascetic in many ways. He exercised frequently to keep in top shape. He ate carefully and never too much. His life was ridged and bordered by habits that had become rituals, and when he got home after the meeting he immediately fell into those rituals, preparing his meal, sitting at the regular chair and eating, doing his exercises, reading a book. But his mind would not stay within its normal bounds.

"I am an Abolisher," he finally said, though it had been years since he had heard the older man call himself by that name. "There is no reform. Somec will always create social classes. Unless everyone is on somec exactly equally, in which case there might as well be no somec at all." And, having spoken the words out loud, he knew he had discovered the key.

Somec only gives the illusion of immortality as long as most of lumanky goes along at the regular snail's pace through life. If no one has to die after a mere century, living five or ten centuries has no allure. We feel that we can live only as long as they die-- and that's true. If they once lived as long as we do, we would only plot to live longer.

Soul destroyer. Hatemaker. Somec the Lifestealer. The old condemnations spoken fervently in meetings of the Church of the Undying Voice came back to him. And he realized, after all these years, that the prophets had been right. Somec was a killer. Somec was the destruction of humanity. Somec gave no more years of life to those who used it-- but made the lives of those who did not use it seem worthless, seem infuriatingly short, seem hopeless.

They were right.

And as he sat in his study, already past the time his habits told him he should be in bed, he thought over all the other doctrines he could remember. The church had condemned meaningless sex, and they were right-- he had given up casual or even passionate affairs years ago, without even meaning to. The church condemned profits, and he had seen how cruel the men and women who sought profits had to be. The church condemned pleasures of the flesh, and in his ascetic lifestyle Garol Stipock knew he was happier without them than he had ever been with them.

It was just the matter of God that made the whole church seem pointless. And Stipock, tired and discouraged and despairing that he could ever change anything for the better, went to his computer and put it in the encyclopedia mode. History, he punched. Religion, he typed in. Capitol, he typed, and finally called up information on the Church of the Undying Voice.

He was surprised to find that his name was still listed on the permanent membership list-- which amounted to billions of names and short biographies since the church had been formed back on Earth. At first he was startled that anyone would have gone to go much trouble to assemble information about church members-- then realized that these were simply the standard biographies the census kept up-to-date in the master library, and the list of members of the church had simply called them out of the master census lists.

It was not names he was searching for anyway, and at last, searching through various' files, he finally found Statements of the Prophet Amblick. He pushed the computer ahead to the end of the file. And there was the last statement of the Undying Voice.

The Voice had known. The Voice was the voice of an Abolisher.

"Those who borrow from the future must repay," Amblick had said, and it was true.

In the vague words Garol realized the Voice (no, no, not the Voice, Amblick in his dying words) had predicted a revolution, one that came not because anyone had remembered to believe in the Voice but because the tigers rage in the forest-- those regarded as less than human will discover they have power, and will use it to destroy those who oppressed them. And the end of somec would also be the end of the Empire-- the starships would cease to travel between the stars.

The accuracy of the prophecy was easy enough to explain: The broad trends of the future were easy enough for a wise man to see even two centuries ago-- and Amblick had been a wise man.

What most disturbed Garol was the last part of the prophecy. "Only one of you shall live to see the end," the old man had said. "And that one shall not know whether his God won or lost the final battle."

Who is the last one? I was the youngest one there-- will I therefore live to see the end?

And then he laughed at himself. The fact that he was youngest hardly mattered. What mattered was that he was on very high somec levels-- one up for twelve down, now-- and he would certainly outlive any of the others. For curiosity, he scanned the biographies of the members who had still been alive when Amblick died. All were dead.

All? He realized with alarm that his parents had gone on somec when he got the privilege, and would inevitably have kept the same somec level he kept. They wouldn't be sixty subjective years old yet-- surely they, too, were alive.

But their biographies could not be wrong.

He read them. His parents hadn't died on Capitol. A century ago, they had joined a colony ship together and had voluntarily quit the use of somec. They had given up immortality, and when Stipock's new planet analyzers were just going into use, they had gone out into space to settle a new planet.

Garol knew there was only one reason they would have quit somec. Except for those caught in a crime, no one on high somec levels ever went to the colonies-- only the misfits and the despairing nonsleepers ever volunteered to give up the hope of somec forever.

Garol's parents had changed their minds. They had believed again. They had given up somec and all the sins of Capitol, and had gone to a place where none of those sins would be possible.

They had gone more than a century ago, and so the computer listed them as dead, though in fact they might now still be in space on the way to a very distant assignment. When they landed, though, they would live out their normal lives in hard work and perhaps frequent danger. They would die hundreds of years before their colony qualified for somec.

Garol was indeed the last of the Church of the Undying Voice left on Capitol. And the prophecy spoke to him.

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Garol Stipock could not sleep. The memories of childhood were relentless: they kept pressing him awake, making him restless and uneasy, alternately too hot and too cold. The impulse was irresistible.

He arose from his bed. He took a towel and covered his head, bowed and knelt and then began to speak to God. He spoke the words he had learned to speak in childhood, and because he was tired he overcame the feeling that this was preposterous, that he was a scientist, that he knew better. God had been speaking directly to him in Amblick's voice; and now Garol wanted the Voice to tell him what to do.

"It doesn't mean anything," he kept saying. "I can't accomplish anything. What can I do?"

And because he was tired he was not surprised when the Voice spoke to him. He knew the voice he was hearing was Amblick's; but he felt, nonetheless, that behind the voice he knew was the Voice

he did not know, and it spoke to him with fire, shouting in his mind.

"Everything you have done is worthless," said the Voice.

Stipock withered in despair.

"I have given up talking to men and trying to persuade them. They were too wise. They will not listen to me."

But I will listen, Stipock cried out in his confusion.

"You least of all," said the Voice. "God is silent and so men believe that he is dead, but it is not true. The Undying Voice no longer speaks, but only because the Unsleeping Sword is unsheathed. If men had repented I would have spared them; but they chose to eat the fruit of the tree of life, not knowing that every taste of that fruit brings death so much closer. The end is near. The end is soon. But nothing you can do will hasten or postpone the end by one hour or one day."

Stipock felt the words as blows, and the pain of the Voice's fury made him weep, for mankind that had lost all hope of mercy, for himself who had lost all hope of meaning.

"Then why should I go on living?" he asked.

"Because your death," said the Voice, "would accomplish even less than your life."

And because Stipock was unable to accept utter despair, he shouted defiantly, "Who are you to judge what's meaningful and what isn't? Men refused to listen to you, and now you want to destroy them! A God who can only be worshipped by the ignorant and the weak has to keep men ignorant and weak in order to keep ruling them!"

There was silence, and Stipock reeled under the impact of it. I'm insane, he thought. I've become as mad as Amblick was, crying out prophecies at the point of his death in a vain hunt for some purpose in life.

And just as he had persuaded himself that the voice was a hallucination, it came again. This time it spoke, not with the fury of Amblick shouting prophecies, but with his mother's voice, a gentle voice when he mas small.

"Garol," said the Voice that loved him, "Garol, I only point the way for men to be happy. Is it my fault that whenever they gain more light and knowledge they use it to destroy themselves?"

"No," he answered.

"Garol, my son, my child, my little boy, trust me. It is in my hands. Trust me. Trust me." And Garol climbed into bed, and with trust me ringing in his head, he slept.

He awoke in the morning and remembered the experience of the night before, and laughed at himself for a fool. The Church of the Undying Voice program was still on the computer. He erased it, with a twinge of grief for his parents, who had reverted to religion and chosen certain death in the colonies.

Yet he could understand how it had happened. Even last night, as he had hallucinated the Voice, he had known it was all in his head. But hallucinations can be very convincing-- more convincing than reality. No wonder his parents were fooled. The religion of childhood never really lets go. Garol Stipock, for all his wisdom and understanding and science and self-possession, was still the little boy who had heard too many sermons and believed too many lies.

He dismissed the events of that night. But they still had their effect on him. Because he no longer cared much about the planned revolution; he was bored at the thought of going to the pointless, endless meeting of the conspirators. He stayed away from them. He concentrated again on physics. And even if he did not feel he was really accomplishing much, he was at least enjoying himself.

Mother's Little Boys found him working out a problem on his computer when they broke in to arrest him.

"Arrest me? What for?" he asked.

"What for?" the leader of the Little Boys asked. "Treason, of course?'

Stipock looked puzzled. "But, gentlemen, I changed my mind about the revolution. I'm no longer involved."

The Little Boys looked at each other, bewildered. Then they burst out laughing. "Changed his mind," they said as they took him to prison. "No longer involved!" It was hilarious.

As they laughed, Garol knew there was no hope for him. He'd be deported at the very least. Why hadn't he quit the conspiracy sooner? Why had he believed so long that it would do any good?

"Why, God, didn't you tell me sooner?" he asked ironically. But today he wasn't tired, so the only answer he got from God was a low chuckle in his mind. Garol didn't get the joke, but he laughed right along. Whatever the punch line was, when he finally understood it, he knew it would be good. No one could tell a joke like God.

THE STARS THAT BLINK

If the goodman of die house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up.

Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh.

-- Matthew 24:43-44

The Governor owned a telescope, and knew how to use it. It was far from being the most powerful telescope in the colony, but the others were photographic, and the Governor's was the only scope on Answer that one could look through with the naked eye.

And he looked. Other men might relax with liquor and conversation, or in rough games, or with books, or with sex, but the Governor's diversion was looking at the stars.

Answer was only three hundred years old, as a human colony. But it was a good world, and already the original 334 inhabitants had grown to more than five million. Families averaged six children. There were no natural predators, and disease was rare and never killed. Here where somec never reached, of course, lives were still short-- few lived more than a hundred years. But the Governor, who was only forty, could still remember when there hadn't been a building over two stories tall in the world

Now he stood on the top of the government building, watching the sky. He lived, with his wife and the four children who remained at home, in a suite at the top of the building. It was luxurious by the standards of Answer-- a separate room for each of them, and the cooking and eating were not done in the same place. Luxury. Opulence. But not exorbitant-- dozens of rich families on Answer lived better than he.

Indeed, he was Governor not so much because he was the most outstanding man on Answer, but because he was willing to take the job. And he was willing to take it because it did not take all his day or all his mind. It left him hours and thoughts of peace, and paid him a good living, and gave him and his family respect, and besides, he was quite a good governor and he knew it. He was respected, and his judgments and decisions were honored and obeyed without trouble. They hadn't had to call a legislature since he had been elected.

After the day, however, of duty, he came up here.

"Why do you watch the stars so much?" one of his assistants had asked him one day.

"Because," he answered, "they never fall asleep when I talk to them."

But it was a good question, and he wondered at the answer.

He knew that around many of them (and he could name which ones, and point them out, and say how far away they were) orbited the planets of the Empire. Billions and billions of people-- it was difficult for him to comprehend. He knew that if he could count all the stars he could see through his telescope in one year, it would not equal the number of people in the Empire. And yet when he thought of people, he could only think of Answer, where whole continents were still uninhabited, where no city had more than thirty thousand people, where farms were still being carved in virgin land and mines were still discovering untouched metal. The Empire may be large and old, but here mankind was new, was small, was still humbled by the vastness of a planet, even though men had conquered the far greater distances between stars.

And as he watched the sky, the Governor imagined he could see the starships like threads spanning the reaches between suns. They made a web, and in it he was caught.

We dance on the web of starships, he said to himself (or to the stars), and think they make us free. But it's the absence of starships that frees us.

Once, once the ships liberated us, and we left overcrowded Earth to discover that far more beautiful and productive and homelike planets were available just for the taking. Odd, that Earthbred man should discover so many places that were more like Earth than Earth was. But had there ever been such grace as the mountains of Answer? The clear water that sang or shouted or roared its song through mountains and across plains and in shattering waves against the shore? Had there ever been stone like this? he thought, touching the rough, shining stones of the government building.

The starships brought us here, but now let the web be cut. Let us stand alone on our world, and find our own way around the sun, and if time should come when we want to go visiting, then let us rebuild the links. Until then, why can't the stars be mysterious, their movements miraculous, their light a gift of the gods? Why can't this telescope be a discoverer?

Those with somec lived long enough to see the stars move. Yet none of them, the Governor was sure, none of them ever looked. Someday soon a ship will come to Answer, he realized, will come with an inspection team from the department of colonization and- declare us ready to enter the Empire on equal status, and suddenly somec will come, and I will be put on a high level, and those just under me a lower level, and so on until the majority of the people get no somec at all. Then the governorship will not go to the only man willing and able-- it will go to the greediest and most ambitious, the ones who crave immortality of the easy kind and aren't willing to live forever by making an indelible mark in the hearts of men. The peace of Answer will be gone. Instead there will be jealousy and hatred.

But then, the Governor thought, then I will be able to see the stars move. I will be able to live for centuries and know that the constellations are not where they were, that this star and that one are drifting together.

And if I live long enough, shall I see the stars, one by one, flare up, dazzle for a moment in the sky, and blink out?

He watched the sky, and a light appeared. It moved perceptibly. It moved irregularly. It was a starship. It set up orbit around Answer.

The Governor went downstairs to the offices where the all-night skywatchers worked. They looked up at him as he came in. "Good you're awake, Sir. Starship. REnS-455-t, and they request permission to land a party to meet with you."

"Of course."

The crew of the starship did not look like an inspection team. They were worried, obviously, as they approached the Governor.

"Is something wrong?" the Governor asked.

"You're a colony, right?" the captain asked in return.

"Probably not, after the next inspection. I assume you're not inspectors?"

The captain shook his head. "We have a warship. Loaded with weapons. I warn you, there's still a crew up there, if something happens to us. We're prepared to blast this planet out of the sky."

The Governor's eyes widened in mock surprise. "And you're from the Empire, making threats to a loyal colony?"

The captain looked ashamed. "You wouldn't blame me, if you'd seen what we've seen."

"What have you seen?"

"Capitol," said the captain. "It's dead."

"Of what?"

"Terminal humanity, I suppose. It was a revolution. That bastard usurper, Abner Doon--"

"Usurper?"

"You've been away from the news for a long time. He began messing with somec. And the nonusers got angry and there was a revolution and they killed all the sleepers."

"All!"

"And they've been seizing starships wherever they landed, all over the Empire. The Rebels, too. Killing the crews and smashing the somec. It's mad. Do you realize what it's doing? There aren't any starships going, between planets anymore! And Capitol-- Capitol slit its own throat. The revolution started there, and now they have no food, and there are only a few survivors, and they can't last long. Cannibalism. The planet's dead. A place of savages trying to survive in metal."

"And you?"

"Where could we land? We tried stopping at Garden, but even they've gone crazy. Tried to shoot us down. We went as far as we could, trying to find a colony that didn't have somec yet, where they wouldn't be part of the revolution."

The Governor smiled. "We're not part of any revolution."

The captain relaxed then. "Thank God. We've come so far."

"You're welcome to come down."

"We won't have to live on charity, you know," said the captain. "We have some things you could use. We have enough somec to supply the top people of your world for ages. And our computer knows the formula. And we have a braintaper. And more than two hundred tapes. You can go full status right now, with our equipment. All we ask is to be able to stay on somec ourselves."

"Why would you want to do that?" the Governor asked.

The captain laughed. "Such a sense of humor."

The Governor thought for a moment. "Let me go up to your ship. Let me see this equipment."

The captain looked perturbed. "Of course we have it. How could we have gotten here without it?"

The Governor only smiled. "I didn't doubt that you had it. I only wanted to see it."

They led him to their landing craft and took off. The acceleration was surprisingly powerful. The Governor had never traveled so fast in his life.

And then they did the slow dance of docking, and the Governor experienced weightlessness, and the stars shone without twinkling through the window of the crah.

This is what it feels like, he thought, to be in space. No wonder men have clung so long to it.

And he wanted to go with them to another star.

And soon I will have immortality within reach. I will see the stars move. And he wanted to have his brain taped and go on somec immediately and watch until the stars blinked out.

But then, as the docking slowly moved to completion, he knew that he would not accept the somec. Knew, in fact, that he would continue the revolution. Not with hatred. Not with blood. But because there were trees on Answer that had never been touched, mountains that had never been seen. Who needs immortality, when every day is still full to overflowing? The long sleeps of somec are only useful to those who are bored, who hope that by skipping over time they will live long enough to see something new.

Do I need to see something new? Only the end of the stars. And somec will never let me live so long as that. Because if we let it come to Answer, there would soon be hatred, and before long a revolution, and I would be one of the sleepers who was killed.

They led him aboard the huge starship, and he walked among the weapons, and they took him to the room where the braintaper was. "If anything went wrong to the braintaper, what would happen?" the Governor asked dubiously.

"Well," the captain said with a laugh, "nobody'd want to take somec. If you take somec without a braintape to be played back into your head, you might as well be dead. All your memories gone."

"I just had to be sure," the Governor said with a smile, and then he pressed the button on the hatchet in his pocket and the machine blew up.

The crew was furious, but the captain seemed unsurprised.

"You can kill me if you like," the Governor said. "But it won't repair your machine."

"We'll blast your planet!" cried one of the crew.

The Governor shrugged. "You can if you like. But where would you go then?" And the crew thought about it, and reahzed that they would never fly the starship again.

"We welcome you," the Governor said, "as I told you before. You can come and live with us. All you have to do is send this starship away."

"This is a pretty expensive piece of--" began one of the crew.

The captain interrupted. "Why did you do that?" he asked the Governor. "Got something against immortality?"

"What immorality? Somec doesn't make your life any longer. Just more useless. And it makes other people hate you."

"It makes starships possible," the captain said, and his voice Was grieved.

"But where would you go? Where would we go? You saw our world. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"It is!" the captain said. "I guess you have us cold! We'd be fools to refuse. We're joining your colony, I guess."

"We'll die!" one of the crew whined. "Without somec, we'll live to be a hundred and die!"

The captain. looked at him contemptuously. "You'll live as many days as you would have otherwise. Now get whatever you want to take with you. You have ten minutes."

"No weapons, please," the Governor said. "We try to avoid them."

"Except your hatchet," murmured one of the crew.

"I'm the Governor," he said.

Ten minutes later the landing craft was loaded. The men had pitifully small bundles-- what was

there to accumulate aboard a starship? And the captain piloted them down to Answer.

Once on the ground they looked up, and saw the starship erupt in a burst of flame and begin its journey. "Where is it going?" asked the Governor.

The captain raised his eyebrows. "I sent it into the sun, of course. We plan to be here a long time. A little extra mass will keep the sun burning that much longer."

"The starship will add less than a second."

"Every little bit helps." And the captain laughed.

The Governor didn't. He took him by the arm and led him to the roof of the government building, where the telescope still waited. Not to show hinm the scope. Just to ask him a question.

"Captain, there were two braintapers on that ship, weren't there?"

The captain shrugged.

"There have to have been two. One for the crew, when you awoke them. And one for you alone. The one that wakens you automatically."

The captain nodded. "Yes, that's right. There were two."

"So you could have flown on."

"Yes."

Why? the Governor did not ask.

"This looked like a nice place," the captain answered anyway.

***

The Governor went to sleep at dawn, when the starship people were put to bed in two inns that had vacancies. He was tired, and not at all sure that he had done the right thing. What would the people of Answer say, when they learned what he had done? Would there be a legislature then, and a new governor? Quite possibly. Or, perhaps, recognizing that what was done was done, they would forgive him for having deprived them of somec, and let him stay in office.

The webs between the stars are gone, he thought, and both mourned and rejoiced.

During his sleep he dreamed. He dreamed that he was standing with one foot on Answer and the other foot on the sun, and he could reach out and gather stars. He reached out, but every star he went to touch popped into a tiny nova in his hand, and disappeared. Soon all the stars were blinking out, and at last the only light in the universe was from the sun, which burned brightly under his feet.

And then he awoke, and he was content. He would not live forever, but he had, in fact, seen the stars blink out. Not in person, but the only way man was ever meant to see such things-- in his dreams.

He was content, but he took up gardening to fill his spare time, relaxing by looking down into the earth: Only the spiders used his telescope anymore, and then only as a prop where they could weave their webs.