The Universe Between

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To John W. Campbell, Jr. in appreciation

Part One

The Door Into Nowhere

—1—

They cut the current the instant the trouble began, switched off the main pumps and broke into the vault. Half-dragging the man from the chamber, they tried to slap him into silence as he screamed, cowering and shrieking and covering his face with both hands. Finally a sedative shot quelled the original attack; the man just sat blubbering in a chair, staring at nothing, his whole body shaking violently. Then, like the others, he took a sudden breath and sagged forward. The doctor from the Hoffman Center caught him and eased him down to the floor. They had the resuscitator and heart-stimulator at hand, of course, but it was no good. Five minutes later the man's pulse and blood pressure were gone. He was dead.

Dr. John McEvoy twisted the small round object from his clenched fist and examined it under the arc light: an eight-centimeter ball of rubber, slick and smooth on the outside. With a pocket knife McEvoy sliced through the outer covering of the ball to reveal the fuzzy down that lined the hollow interior. Angrily, he tossed the ball to the technician. "There's your tennis ball," he said.

The doctor was examining the man's body as the rest of the lab crew clustered about. He looked up at McEvoy and spread his hands. "The same as the other two," he said hopelessly. "No marks, no nothing. And the post-mortem won't tell us anything more. Total cardiovascular collapse, with cardiac arrest. Maybe adrenal exhaustion, though I don't see how a psychic trauma could get to the endocrine function so fast."

"Oh, come on, Doc," McEvoy snapped. "Translate it."

"The man died of fear. Or shock. Or both."

McEvoy clenched a heavy fist. "Same wretched thing again, then." He turned away, slamming the fist into his other hand. As director of this whole branch of research in the sprawling Telcom Laboratories, John McEvoy had been trapped in the middle from the beginning. It was his responsibility, even though some of the bright-eyed boys on his staff had actually started the thing. He turned to his assistant. "Well, what about it? Where do we go next?"

The technician tossed the peculiar tennis ball into the air a time or two, staring at the body on the floor. "Well, one thing is certain. We can't go on like this."

"Obviously not," McEvoy said. "But we've got to go on somehow. We can't let this thing slide by. It's right in front of us—right at our fingertips! And we can't seem to touch it. Can't even get near it. But we can't quit now, just because…"

"Just because everybody dies?" The man met McEvoy's eyes. "That's what you're really saying, you know. And you're the one who talked that poor guy into it. 'Nothing to worry about, we've got the bugs out of it this time,' you said. Good old McEvoy, always the persuader. So now he's dead. How would you like to go in there next time?"

"Not I," said McEvoy, glancing quickly away from the body on the floor. "Not after that, not I."

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"The fact remains, Dr. McEvoy, that you're going to have to close it down." The little man with the red face tamped his pipe and applied a match to it. Across the small office room pale afternoon sunlight was filtering in the window. McEvoy felt as bleak as the South Jersey barrens he could see outside. The little man with the pipe stared at him and the Hoffman Center doctor from behind the wide desk. He didn't look like much, this little man, but he was power—the final word at Telcom Laboratories, the co-ordinator of all the research projects under way in this whole great communications-equipment organization. What this little man decided was what was going to happen; McEvoy knew that. "We just can't have any more accidents of this sort on that project," the little man went on quietly. "Telcom has given you free sanction in your work here so far; we don't believe in hiring good men and then handcuffing them. But if you don't clamp down on this now, we will. Already we have a committee of the International Joint Conference on our necks. Did you know that I've spent all day on the Washington line beating off bureaucrats who want to know what on earth you're doing up here that's taken three lives already and put two other good men into a Hoffman Center lock-ward for the mentally deranged? Next thing, we'll be facing a full-fledged government inquiry, with an injunction slapped on everything we're doing here, and Telcom Laboratories doesn't care to have that happen." The red-faced co-ordinator paused. "To say nothing of the moral questions involved."

McEvoy was silent for a moment. The three of them had been hashing it out for over an hour; now McEvoy was tired, more tired than he could ever remember. Finally he spread his hands. "Sir, I've considered all these points very carefully, and I've come to some definite conclusions. I'd like at least to present them."

"Conclusions! Dr. McEvoy, the record shows that since you started this thing back on—" he glanced at a note sheet—"on November 3, 1978, that's just two months ago, you've killed or incapacitated five of the best investigators Telcom had on the payroll, and you have nothing, absolutely nothing, in the way of a solution to offer. Those men would better be alive and working. The only definite conclusion I can reach is that you're fooling with something you can't manage, and I think the time has come to stop you."

McEvoy squirmed. "I can't deny the record. And I wouldn't care to be the next man, either. But we do have a solution to offer." He motioned to the man from the Hoffman Medical Center. "Tell him what we talked about this morning, Doc."

The doctor shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. "We've been in close contact with Dr. McEvoy ever since he got involved in this…this business," he said carefully. "Particularly when abnormal behavior patterns began to develop among the investigators. As you know, the Hoffman Center is acutely interested in problems of human behavior, adaptability, adjustment…normal or abnormal. In fact, we have a very promising young psychologist named Benedict who is working right now with a team of high-adaptive youngsters, trying to learn more about mental adaptation to physical and emotional stress—"

"Yes, yes," the co-ordinator broke in impatiently. "Telcom has worked with your people on any number of projects, I know that. After all, communication involves people as well as electrons."

"Yes, sir. Well, we think we may have a lead to Dr. McEvoy's problem. At least a way to go about investigating it without any more tragedies. There's a pattern to what has happened, and it makes sense. In each case a man has gone into the vault after the…the cube, or whatever it is…has materialized. In each case the man was alone, and instructed as well as possible in techniques of observation. Since we aren't entirely sure just what we're dealing with, it's been hard to tell a man exactly what to look for, you understand. Each one was instructed to observe the phenomenon any way he could." The doctor shrugged. "You know the results."

"Yes," the co-ordinator said. "Deranged minds and dead men."

"The question is why," the doctor went on. "Each of these men was a perfectly ordinary lab person picked at random, trained in physics or electronics but not much else. We think now we're dealing mainly with a problem of adjustment—mental adjustment. These men apparently have been faced with something they have never encountered before, something so completely foreign to their experience that their nervous systems couldn't cope with it. They ran into something so frightening, or startling, or stupendous that their minds saw no escape but total and immediate breakdown. And in three cases the shock brought on physical collapse as well. It was a matter of adjust or crumble. They couldn't adjust, so they crumbled."

The co-ordinator blinked at the doctor. "The theory sounds reasonable enough. I'm no physician, I have to take your word. But what do you suggest, gentlemen? That we just keep feeding good men to this thing?"

Dr. John McEvoy stirred. "Not quite," he said. "Believe me, I don't want any more bodies in the laboratory. But as the doctor says, it may be a matter of adjustment. He claims this man Benedict has proven that people differ greatly in what they can adjust to mentally. He has taken some natural high-adaptives, tested them stage by stage to find the most adaptable ones, and has been training them to adapt even better…right, Doc? What we need is a man with a high adjustment threshold. A very high threshold. Somebody with a

cast-iron nervous system who can adapt to anything, regardless of how strange or shocking it may be. And if I could find a man like that, I'd agree to one more stab at it."

The coordinator knocked out his pipe and looked from McEvoy to the Hoffman Center man and back. "In other words, what you're saying is that somebody who is specially skilled and gifted at adapting to strange situations might—just might be able to investigate where the others have failed."

"Exactly," John McEvoy said.

"But there are no guarantees of that."

"None," McEvoy said flatly.

For a long time the co-ordinator stared out the window at the gloomy countryside. He filled his pipe again, lit it, put it down, picked it up and puffed on it. "John," he said finally, "I've known you and your work for a long time. You're a big man and a tough one; when you get onto something you don't like to let it go. But I've always counted on your judgment. Do you really think that this thing is so important?"

"It's something no scientist in history has ever encountered before," McEvoy said. "It's important."

"And if this new approach of yours fails, you'd drop it?"

The big man hesitated just an instant. "I'd drop it, yes. Until I could find some better way to define it, or something. Yes, I'd close it down."

There was another moment of silence. Then the coordinator nodded. "Very well, John. If you can find the kind of investigator you've described, I'll accept your word that you'll stop if he fails. Even though I don't believe you for a moment."

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John McEvoy took the ball from his briefcase and laid it on the desk before the young man with the tired eyes and the horn-rimmed glasses. "What does that look like to you, Dr. Benedict?"

The young man shook his head impatiently. "Not 'Doctor,' please. Around here that means either an M.D. or a psychiatrist. I'm neither; just a research phychologist." Ed Benedict picked up the ball, examined it closely. Young, thin, obviously intent, he gave McEvoy none of the impression of eager, inexperienced blundering he so often felt with the young mathematicians and physicists coming into his laboratory from their training. So often they thought they had the world by the tail, knew all there was to know and had only to convince everyone else of that simple fact. By contrast, Ed Benedict had a curious manner of reserve about him that McEvoy couldn't quite pin down. Not exactly caution; certainly not hesitation, not fear—maybe wisdom was the right word. A young man, but with a wisdom beyond his years—a wisdom born of experience.

Benedict studied the ball, put a finger into the notch that McEvoy had cut, and looked up, frowning. "It looks to me like a tennis ball somebody turned inside out."

McEvoy nodded. "Right. And how would you go about turning a tennis ball inside out?"

"I don't think I could, without cutting a hole in it to turn it inside out through." The psychologist tossed the ball back onto the desk. "Which, I gather, you did not do. What can I do for you, Dr. McEvoy?"

"You've talked to the Center man who was in my lab yesterday?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid he was pretty vague about the details. He couldn't even say just what this project is that you're working on."

"Neither can I, for sure," McEvoy said. "About two months ago we ran into a peculiar snag in the work we were doing. You know the background: the Mars and Asteroid landings a few years ago, and all the stir about the iron lode they found on Mars, what with the pinch on steel we've been feeling lately. And you've read about the Joint Conference contracts for various kinds of spacecraft, and the trouble with the guidance components on long-range ships because of prolonged low temperature conditions."

Ed Benedict smiled faintly. "I know there's been enough government-supported research in communications equipment to quadruple the value of Telcom stocks in the last five years. Go on."

"Okay, we've had more work than we knew what to do with," McEvoy said. "My lab has been involved with temperature stresses on spacecraft components, especially the effects of extreme cold on guidance systems. We've been working in extremely low temperatures, approaching absolute zero, where molecular motion ceases altogether. A theoretical point, of course, because you're never supposed to be quite able to get there. You get into problems of entropy and energy exchange…actual physical stress…that gets worse the closer you get to the theoretical point. Mass-energy conversion, a lot of otherwise-stable constants that don't seem to obtain under these conditions…the very meat of the project, the reason we're doing it."

Ed Benedict nodded. "I don't understand you, but I think I know what you're talking about."

"Fine. Things were going along very well until one of my men devised a radically new refrigerating pump that worked far better than anybody dreamed it could. We got our test material—a block of tungsten supported on an insulated tripod in the refrigerating vault—down closer to absolute zero than we'd ever hoped for. Maybe we hit absolute and dropped below it…I don't even know that for sure."

The phychologist blinked. "I don't follow. From absolute zero, just where can the temperature drop to?"

"A good question," McEvoy said. "I can't answer it. Below absolute zero you might speculate on some kind of negative molecular motion. Maybe that's what we did get. Certainly something changed. The test block simply evaporated. Vanished. The tripod vanished, and so did the temperature-recording device. All we could see in the vault was a small, glowing hole in the center of the room where the block had been. Nothing in it, nothing. Just a pale, blue, glowing area about six inches across that looked to some of us very strangely like a hypercube."

"A hypercube?"

"A three-dimensional picture of a four-dimensional object; just as you can draw a picture

of a cube in perspective on a flat two-dimensional surface like a piece of paper. It looks like a cube when you look at it, but it doesn't actually have any depth. This glowing area was in three dimensions—cubical—but the lines were distorted as if there were more than one cube in the same space. In fact, it looked very suspiciously like a four-dimensional hole in our three-dimensional space, as if the energy we had been applying had inadvertently cut through a corner or an edge of some…some other universe constructed in four spatial dimensions instead of three."

Ed Benedict was silent for a moment, staring at the tennis ball. "So you investigated," he said finally.

"We investigated…and you know from the doctor what happened."

"What about this?" Benedict pointed to the ball.

"That's one of the characteristics of this thing we are able to investigate. That was an ordinary, normal tennis ball until we dropped it into the area of this hypercube. It came out the other side looking like this. I stuck a pencil into the area and it came out with a thin layer of graphite around a solid wooden core. A light bulb we pushed in just exploded and vaporized."

Benedict toyed with the tennis ball. "And your investigators haven't even been able to look into this little area of space?"

"No. When they've tried it, it's frightened them, or shocked them, or done something to them. As if they had taken on some kind of terrible overload, beyond their ability to adjust."

"It sounds as if you need a tough nervous system," Ed Benedict said. "Somebody tough enough to look in there and investigate and at least come out alive." He smiled. "Have you heard the old story about the South American farmers who tried to carry their goats over the Andes by muleback? The mules crossed the high passes and the narrow mountain trails along dreadful drop-offs just fine. But the goats all died of fright. It was old stuff for the mules, or else they were too stupid to be worried, but the goats couldn't take it. Until they were blindfolded. Then everything went fine."

Ed Benedict stood up, walked to the window and stared out across the growing jumble of buildings of the newly established Hoffman Medical Center. A high-riser was just now about halfway finished, its girders bare to the wind. A sign announced it as the Center's future Administration Building and Main Evaluation Clinic.

"Do you have any idea of the kind of work we've been doing in my laboratory, Dr. McEvoy?"

"Vaguely."

"Patterns of adjustment. Given a new or altered environment, one man can adjust and survive while another breaks down and withdraws to avoid facing new circumstances. We're trying to find out why. Young people usually adjust far more readily than adults. We're trying to learn why. What is the mind's mechanism of adjustment? How does it work? How can someone change his thinking to cope with a new environment? Why can one person adjust and another not? That's what we've been working on."

"And your results?"

Benedict shrugged. "We keep learning as we go. Confront a man with a sudden, radical change in the world around him and he has to do something—adjust or withdraw. His mind

is full of things that he's learned to help him stay alive in his old familiar environment. In the new environment he gets the wrong answers; the data in his mind is no good. So he can do one of two things. He can try to get by on the wrong-answer data, and end up with anything from a mild nervous breakdown to frank derangement, depending on how badly the new environment threatens him. Or—which amounts to the same thing—he can devote himself to wrenching the environment back to the old familiar pattern; okay if it works except that it seldom does and he just ends up frustrated as well.

"Alternatively, a man can recognize that his mental data is wrong, chuck it out as 'no good under these circumstances' and proceed to search for new data that is good. Of course, he has to relate what he can understand to what he can't and use that for a starting place—sometimes a very tough job. But if he can do it, eventually he can adjust. Some people are just naturally good at it. They adjust readily, especially when they've had some training and practice. Others stumble, get wrong answers to begin with, end up with even more dangerously wrong answers, and get so confused and frightened that their minds just block the whole thing off and adjustment becomes impossible."

McEvoy nodded. "But it all depends on having something understandable to hang onto. And you're talking about environments that are only partly different, say an ice station in Antarctica, or an exploratory post on the Moon. What would happen if one of these high-adaptive people were suddenly faced with an environment so completely foreign and incomprehensible that there was nothing he could relate to the world he knew before? No place to stand. What would he do then?"

Ed Benedict took the tennis ball from the desk and studied it for several moments before answering. Then he looked up at McEvoy. "I don't know. I don't think I'd want to be responsible."

McEvoy's face fell. "You mean you think there's be no chance of success?"

"Oh, I didn't say that. Take someone with a very high degree of adaptability, someone with a keen mind and plenty of resourcefulness, and he might find something to work with in such an incomprehensible environment. You'd be amazed at the overload a human nervous system can take without cracking. We've tried everything we could devise on some of these youngsters. Ever try living on a forty-hour day? It's an experience. Varied temperatures, disorientation, persistently irritating noise effects, distorted spacial environments like tilt-houses and such, induced successive dilemmas—everything. We've weeded out dozens of high-adaptives; when one threatens to crack we pull him back, let him get his feet on the ground, and then get him to help us devise new tests for the others. And some don't crack."

"We need someone like that," McEvoy said. "But I can't go sending a child into that vault."

"Of course not. The one I'm thinking of is seventeen years old, and decidedly not a child. Just about the most perfectly adaptable human being I've ever worked with. Fully cooperative, intelligent…possibly just the one you need." The psychologist paused, looked intently at McEvoy. "Possibly. I think I would have to counsel against it, but I couldn't say yes or no. Nobody has the right to make that kind of decision for another person."

"I know, I know." McEvoy nodded excitedly. "But do you think he might be willing to try this with us?"

Ed Benedict smiled. "She might. Why don't you ask her and find out?"

—4—

Gail Talbot disliked John McEvoy from the first moment she set eyes on him. For one thing, he was positively ancient—forty years old at least, and therefore utterly uninteresting to a lively girl of seventeen who regarded anyone over twenty-eight as practically in the grave.

But there was more to it than that. There was a violent, ruthless intensity about this man that scraped her nerves. She had encountered this type before: the raw, unyielding, hard-driving and ambitious ones. Everything went fine, just as long as you agreed with them, but cross them just once, and whammo! She knew. Her father had been like that—just one of the twenty-odd reasons she had spent about half her time in juvenile court during the last four years, until somebody at the Hoffman Center had checked out her psych-testing scores and noticed the staggering discrepancy between her social performance and her actual intellectual potential.

The judge had been glad enough to get rid of her, especially after Ed Benedict had practically guaranteed that the way things were going the court was soon going to have a highly intelligent, belligerent and incorrigibly anti-social young lady on its hands—and she had been ordered to Hoffman Center custody. Her father had been glad to get rid of her, too; he was already bone-weary of the court appearances, the fines and warnings, the rebellion and anger and night-long battles that always started out as "reasonable discussions" and ended up screaming fights. And as for her mother…Gail blocked on that one and turned her blue eyes to McEvoy. At least McEvoy was sober.

He was telling her eagerly about something he wanted her to investigate—a "phenomenon," he kept calling it—and she was confused and bored, but she listened. She yawned, and nodded cleverly in all the right places, and pushed her black hair down into place behind her right ear, a nervous habit that was a red flag to Ed Benedict but of which she was only dimly aware. "This cube isn't like anything you've ever seen before," McEvoy was saying. "And you could have trouble, because it might affect you in some completely unforeseen way. It just hangs there in space all by itself, and glows a little. We think it may be a three-dimensional slice through a fourth dimension, and so far nobody has even been able to look at it without getting badly shaken up or killed."

Gail stared at him in disbelief. "You mean you just want me to go into a room and look into a box or something?"

"Well…yes," McEvoy said lamely.

"And tell you what I see inside? Is that all?"

"That's right. I mean, no! I mean, it may not be all that simple…" McEvoy floundered, thrown completely off balance now by this quiet, black-haired girl who was watching him with a slightly malicious gleam in her clear blue eyes. "I mean, it may require more than you expect, but we need somebody to look at it—"

"Why bother?" Gail cut him off flatly.

"Because there's something there we don't understand." McEvoy was getting angry and raising his voice. "Because we have to know what it is."

"That's fine for you and your physicists. But what's in it for me?"

"Maybe nothing. Nothing but helping to investigate something that somebody has to

investigate. Maybe nothing but having a part in a really major discovery."

"Maybe nothing but having my brains jogged loose," Gail said. "So why me?"

"Because you may be the only person in the world who can do it," McEvoy roared in exasperation. "One more disaster and we're finished. All through! We'll have to close it down."

The girl studied him. Bored or not, she was not stupid. She had heard everything McEvoy had been saying about this project; he had been fair, which was good because there was nothing she hated worse than a liar, and she understood the danger perfectly. Of course, she had been warned in advance, as well. Ed Benedict had urged her to stay away from McEvoy and his project; he'd practically begged her to say no. Now McEvoy reminded her strangely of Ed…some of the same intensity of purpose, the same contagious aura of excitement. Of course, there was no comparison, really; nobody was quite like Ed Benedict, and her feelings toward him always made her feel goopy and confused. Yet oddly enough she knew she wanted to say yes to McEvoy now just precisely because Ed Benedict had begged her to say no. After all, he didn't own her.

"All right," she said. "When do we start?"

"Start! Well…right now. I mean, as soon as we can get you briefed." Once again McEvoy was off balance; the resistance had crumbled too easily. "But you have to understand that this little 'box' you're going to look at may be dangerous. It may affect you very strangely."

Gail Talbot sighed. "Mister, after all the garbage I've had thrown at me in the past four years, I think I could take anything. You name it."

McEvoy eyed her sourly for a minute. "Yes," he finally agreed. "I think you probably could."

—5—

It was cold in the vault, and very dark. As the door clanged shut behind her she paused, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the glow emanating from the center of the room. She stood shivering in the dead silence of the place, and for the first time in her seventeen years Gail Talbot realized that she was afraid.

She knew that in a way she wasn't really alone in there. Outside the vault a dozen people were watching every move she made through thick, insulated panels of oneway glass. McEvoy sat at the main power switch, clenching the intercom microphone in his hand. Ed Benedict was there, too, still furious that his last-minute attempt to talk her out of it had failed. Poor, good-hearted Ed, who had tried so hard to be fair, and then when the chips were down practically fell over himself trying to make her decision for her! And all the others: the Hoffman Center medical team, half a dozen engineers and technicians from McEvoy's staff, help available at any instant if she needed it.

Yet for all that, she knew that it was really she and she alone who was standing in this dark, cold room. All the help in the world might not be enough, if she needed it. There was danger here, and she had to face it alone. It was too late now to turn back. Others had tried and failed, but they had had no preparation at all. Now she was the best hope they had of

finding out about this glowing cube that shimmered in the center of the vault. Maybe their last hope; they couldn't keep on this way. She had the training, the experience, and the one odd, vital ability that the others had lacked. Yet now, in the darkness and silence, she was terribly afraid.

The tiny earphone clicked and she heard McEvoy's voice. "Gail? How are you doing?"

"Fine," she said. "Cold. Waiting for my eyes to adjust." Her own voice sounded scratchy in her ears.

"Good. Can you see it?"

"Oh, yes. I can see it, all right." Through the earphone she could hear the faint swish-swish of a tape recorder and the whirr of the refrigerating pumps below the vault. "It's like you said…kind of a cold blue, almost phosphorescent. It wavers…I can't really focus on it."

"You'll have to go closer," McEvoy said. "Try to describe it, the best you can." He paused. "And Gail, don't be a heroine. Anything funny, let out a yell."

"I know. If it would just hold still a minute." She moved toward the center of the room, her eyes fixed on the luminescent spot in the center. It was clearer now as her eyes adjusted to it. Or at least brighter; the outlines were still indistinct and shimmering. As she moved closer the coldness seemed to increase. She rubbed her hands together, pushed back her hair, and peered into the gloom.

A ghostly thing, she thought suddenly. Shaped like a cube, six inches square, except that the angles weren't quite right. Before the pumps began, it was a block of tungsten on a tripod. Now, just this wavering something, hanging in mid-air…

She moved closer, stared at the shimmering outlines, glowing a frosty blue. Like a box, she thought, but not quite. Like a doorway, with a long corridor leading…somewhere…far, far beyond…It was holding her eyes now, a strange, fascinating thing, half-hypnotizing her. She tried to look away, but the glowing cube held her gaze.

At her ear, McEvoy's voice: "Gail? What do you see?"

"I don't know." She groped for the right words. "This is very odd…it's…I can't describe it. But I think…wait a minute!"

As she stared, the shimmering cube seemed to grow larger, enveloping her as she tried to see inside. There were outlines, shapes in there…vague and indistinct, wavering just beyond her perception. A step closer, a turn of her head…if only her eyes would focus, hold it still for a moment! Somewhere, again, she thought she heard McEvoy's voice calling her name as she was drawn toward this strange, glowing thing…but it seemed far away, unimportant. She didn't even try to answer. Again his voice, urgent this time, calling her name, and then: "Frank, throw the switch! We're losing her!" and the distant rattle of the vault door being thrown open.

The last thing she heard was McEvoy's voice shouting her name, and then, suddenly, she was inside.

There was dead silence in the place, a silence she had never even imagined before. Like a blanket that had fallen when she crossed through. No sound. No possibility of sound. Silence, and darkness.

At first she thought she would suffocate. She could scarcely breathe; a scream rose in her throat but no sound came. As if she had suddenly crossed a threshold into another universe, the vault was gone. The glowing cube was gone. She was somewhere else. In a foreign place, if it was a place at all—utterly alien.

Incomprehensible.

Odd, there was no light here, yet she could see, in a way. At first it seemed that she was standing on a perfectly flat polished floor that stretched out endlessly on all sides. It was like nothing her mind had ever encountered, vast and alien. Then it wasn't a flat surface at all, but a dark, endless tunnel stretching before her with spiraling lines leading down and down, and she was whirling around and around, down toward the vortex of the spiral. She reached out involuntarily to grasp something and stop herself, but there was nothing to grasp. There was substance here, matter, solidity, but somehow she herself was different. Her body wasn't right; part of it seemed to be gone; part was twisted and distorted, several feet away from her, and her muscles were not working right…

She felt panic; the initial sense of dread she had felt was melting now into blind terror. Somehow she had moved through into an alien universe, a place where everything was wrong. A dreadful place that offered her no anchor, no starting place. Nothing to hold onto. Her terror rose as she tried to block the place out of her mind, draw back from it, find a way out fast.

Then she felt her heart thumping in her chest, felt perspiration, sensed the air moving in and out of her lungs, and she fought down her panic. Of course there was something to grasp: she was alive. Everything was wrong here, even her body seemed wrong, but her mind was still working, her heart was still beating, what more did she need? She was here, and alive, obviously.

That was her anchor, then. Her mind narrowed on that single thought. She was here, and this unbelievable place was here, too. There was nothing she could comprehend, but at least she was surviving. All about her she was aware of lines, angles, circles, but none of them were right, the way they should be. Three perfectly parallel lines which met each other at ninety-degree angles to form a perfect square with seven triangular sides…

It couldn't be!

But it was. Right here, all around her. And she was here. It has to be so, she told herself. Adjust to it! She sensed that in crossing the threshold into this universe she had turned a corner, an odd corner, not like any corner she had ever seen before, but her own universe was just inches away, back around that same corner. And, even more strange, she realized that she could get back through to her own universe again any time she wanted to just by turning back through the same strange angle, now that she knew it was there.

Like a desk with a secret drawer, she thought suddenly. Hidden, concealed from view, nobody could get in without knowing where the release spring was. Once you knew that, you could open and close it at will. Of course, you might discover the secret drawer by accident if you were sawing a corner off the desk, but even so, you wouldn't be able to work it without knowing about the hidden release.

What was it McEvoy had said? "We think it may be a three-dimensional slice through a fourth dimension." And he was right. They had found the secret drawer by sawing the corner off the desk. Quite by accident the stresses they had been using on that tungsten block had inadvertently twisted a segment of three-dimensional space and torn a hole through into this place. Accidentally, they had thrown open a door, and nothing they had found inside had been comprehensible to anyone who had crossed through. A door into Nowhere…no wonder they had died of fright! With no training, no experience to fall back on. It was only her own individual experience, her own incredibly high ability to adapt that was shielding her now, and for all her skill her own mind was now reeling to maintain control.

She knew that she could do nothing here. There was nothing that she could tell McEvoy that would make any sense, except that this place meant disaster to anyone who ventured here. No one but a high-adaptive would have the faintest chance of withstanding the mental shock she had encountered. Even she could never correlate anything inside this mad universe with anything outside. To do that, everything would have to be discarded; all the knowledge and data stored up through the years would have to be thrown out entirely, and there was no way that she could do that. No way anyone could do it…unless…

Yes. There was a way; she saw it suddenly, with blinding clarity. Find a human being with a perfect, keen, intelligent mind with no conscious information in it at all. But how? The answer was obvious: the only possible way to study this incredible place was through the only human being who would even have a chance.

A newborn baby. Start him from birth, first on one side of the threshold, then on the other. Let him grow up, first inside, then outside. Two sets of knowledge growing up in his mind about two mutually incomprehensible worlds. Sooner or later that child could go on either side with equal ease. And perhaps the time would come when he could learn how to relate one side to the other.

Gail collected herself and looked for an entrance back to the outside, groping for the secret release spring. McEvoy was determined to bludgeon bis way in here, but a frontal attack would never work. Even she could never explore this universe. Others would die, or lose their minds, and nothing would be gained if McEvoy were not blocked. And there was nothing she could tell McEvoy that he would comprehend. The one thing that she could do to stop the mayhem would be to block him. Make him drop this investigation, force his hand, until the right way could be prepared.

She smiled to herself, more in sadness than malice. McEvoy wouldn't like it. He might even try to force her, but it wouldn't matter. If he got too rough, she could always escape, come back inside to elude him. She didn't need an artificial entrance any more, any place could provide entrance if you knew where to look. And he didn't know there was a secret spring.

She chose a spot near the place she had come through. As she turned that odd corner, leaving the dark alien universe behind her, she heard the vault door bursting open, and McEvoy's hoarse voice shouting, "Gail! Hold on! We're coming!"

—7—

She stood in the corner of the vault, closing her mind to McEvoy and all the rest, staring straight ahead of her and very carefully, deliberately blocking them out of her mind. The

medical team lifted her up, carried her out into the control room and placed her on a stretcher. She held herself rigid. When somebody flashed a bright light in her eyes she winched involuntarily, but gave no other sign of recognition. Even Ed Benedict, leaning over her, begging her to speak, could not draw a response though she wanted to reach out and cling to him for dear life. She knew that she must not, dare not respond until she was far away from here, and McEvoy was thwarted, and the investigation stopped.

They wheeled her down to the first-aid cubicle, and she heard voices all around her—confused, angry, frustrated. McEvoy was beating his fist on his palm in helpless fury as the Hoffman Center doctor worked and strained and finally got her knees bent so he could sit her up on a chair. He lifted her arm and released it; she held it suspended in mid-air as she gazed ahead without expression.

The doctor scratched his head. "I don't get it," he said. "It looks like paranoid withdrawal, but I don't think it is."

"You mean she's going to go like the others?" McEvoy cried.

"No, no. The others who lived were wild. She's alive, and she flinches at the light, she's just keeping tight control. That's what I don't get. I'd swear she's putting it on deliberately."

McEvoy stared at her, unbelieving. "You mean you think she has the solution?"

"I think so," the doctor said. "I think she's seen something and just decided not to tell you about it."

"Why, you cheat." McEvoy whirled on the girl. "You sneaky little cheat!" He slapped her across the face with a heavy hand, started to drag her out of the chair by her blouse.

She felt anger rising swiftly, almost beyond endurance. Just to let him have it, just to sink her teeth into that arm of his, just once…she knew it was showing on her face as the fingers of her suspended hand clenched into a fist. But then…carefully, carefully…control returned and she was gazing steadily ahead again.

McEvoy released her roughly. "She's got to tell," he said to the doctor.

"Maybe. Drugs may help jar it loose from her, once she's recovered a little. Or electroshock, if the drugs won't do it. But Ed Benedict isn't going to like that, I warn you."

"Hang Benedict! Get him out of here. Don't let him near her. And keep her under guard around the clock. She's going to talk, or I'm going to know why not."

Gail stared fixedly at the wall as they turned to leave. Poor McEvoy, she thought. He means it, too. And he couldn't possibly understand a single thing I could tell him. She smiled. There was a way, eventually…but not McEvoy's way. And she knew now that she couldn't stay here and let them probe. A stubborn problem McEvoy could cope with. A stubborn human being was something else. As the men stopped in the corridor and turned to lock her into the cubicle, Gail took a deep breath and turned the strange, invisible corner that she had learned about.

The last thing she saw was John McEvoy's unbelieving face as he stared slack-jawed into a suddenly empty room.

Part Two

The Universe Between

—1—

It was going to be a bad day. Hank Merry knew that, before his feet hit the floor that morning. Hank was too practical a man to believe in psychic emanations, but he knew the crawly feeling of Trouble Coming Up when it met him at dawn, and this day felt like Trouble. He just didn't know how much trouble, was all.

First, he'd overslept—an old failing of his that even modern twenty-first century technology couldn't seem to beat. His alarm blew a tube during the night and failed to ring. The fancy multiple-mirror contraption rigged outside his fourteenth-story window also failed (the sun didn't come out that day); and his call-signal went blinking on the lab switchboard over in Jersey for thirty-five minutes before an answering servo got a circuit free to key in his emergency wake-up call. So when the metallic taped voice from the lab finally blared out cheerfully from the telephone speaker: GOOD MORNING DOCTOR MERRY IT IS SEVEN O'CLOCK AND PLEASE THROW YOUR CUTOFF SWITCH AT ONCE OR I WILL BE LOCKED ON THIS MESSAGE FOR THE REST OF THE DAY it was really 7:45, and his regular 7:30 TV session on the mathematics of wavicle conversions was already three blackboards deep in symbols, and he was so lost it would take him two hours over library tapes that night to catch up. And at that, he would still get an absentee mark for failing to flash his check-in signal to the prof before the session began.

With one eye on the wall screen Hank tossed a breakfast pak into the crisper to heat, and pulled the day's fresh shirt and trousers from the shelf of disposables in the corner. He was usually quite skilled at shaving, watching the TV brain session and cooking breakfast all at the same time; but today he lost the professor's line of reasoning, then jammed his shaver halfway through his shave. He swore at it and fiddled for ten minutes to get it running again, forgetting his breakfast until the toast was scorched, the eggs hard-boiled and the cereal very crisp indeed. He ate them sourly as the TV session progressed, doodling circuit diagrams on a handy scratch pad at the same time.

He remembered now what was waiting for him at the lab that day. Aside from the maze of wires, tubes, transistors, transmogrifiers and activated Hunyadi plates that were always part of his day, there would be a crew of frantic technicians waiting to tell him that the circuits he'd set up yesterday hadn't worked. He already knew this, because at eleven o'clock the night before, as he dozed off to sleep, it had dawned on him that he had totally ignored the effects of feedback in one of the critical loops. This meant that when the boys ran a test charge through it after he left the lab, the whole circuit probably went up in a cloud of smoke.

A bad day. He just didn't know yet how bad.

By nine o'clock the TV session was over and Hank's aircar was waiting on the building roof. The sky was overcast with the peculiar gray-white you saw when the city's weather shield was catching a heavy snowfall, and he was re-routed as far south as Atlantic City District because of the low-flying traffic congestion. He stared down at the sprawling East Coast city below as the little aircar finally swung north again toward its destination: the big new Telcom Laboratories building just west of Newark District. Something caught his eye: the high-rising office buildings being erected on the concrete footings that spanned the Hudson River from Manhattan to New Jersey. Great, bare steel girders, half-finished

buildings, and not a sign of a work crew or welding flare on any of them. Another bottleneck, Hank thought grimly. No steel. Only a trickle from the mills these days, and that seemed to go to South America or Singapore or some place. Of course, sooner or later there was bound to be steel again, and soon even Manhattan District (still fighting to remain an island in the face of the ever-rising metropolitan congestion) would be indistinguishable from the rest of the tight, sky-scraping city that stretched from Maine to Virginia and from the tip of Long Island to the Alleghenies.

Finally Hank Merry's aircar set him down on the laboratory roof, only two hours late, and handed him an automatic receipt for his fare, which had already been charged against his bank account. In the big central dispatching room, the green blinking light on the call board showed that McEvoy hadn't checked in yet…might not be in all day in fact. Probably more conferences down in Washington District, Hank thought gloomily.

The chief seemed to spend most of his time down there these days, walking the tightrope for government funds and trying for the hundredth time to reassure the Joint Conference Committee on Interplanetary Resources that Hank Merry's transmatter really did have a chance of a breakthrough, if he could just get a prototype model built for testing. Of course, Hank suspected that even McEvoy had his private doubts; Hank's approach was radical, and so many other attempts in the last ten years had failed. Sometimes Hank himself wondered if his whole approach to matter-transmission didn't have a hole in it big enough to throw a cat through—one reason that he was working and worrying at the lab from twelve to fifteen hours every day and spending another six hours studying anything and everything that might fill in some of the holes in his knowledge of physics, mathematics and engineering.

Because somebody had to build a practical, working transmatter, and do it soon. There was no question about that.

The elevator let him off in one of the sub-basement rooms where his brain-child—this awkward machine he had been building for the last eighteen months—was under construction. Already its circuits and components filled half a dozen rooms, winding through corridors and covering two full floors of lab space. It reminded Hank of a house he had once seen as a child which contained a huge pipeorgan, with the pipes filling basement and attic, packed into the walls and buried between the floors, so that when you pressed one key of the organ the whole house shook. Aside from his machine, there was a whole warehouse full of giant generators down below, standing ready for the day that the staggering amount of power he knew the finished machine would require in a full-scale test would be demanded.

Such a simple thing, in theory. To take a single cubic centimeter of solid matter at Point A, decompose it into its component sub-atomic wavicles, transmit them like radio waves to a receiver at Point B and there reassemble them in their original order, shape and relationship, atom to atom. If you could do it with a few grams of steel, you could do it with millions of tons of ore from the deserts of Mars, eventually. Such a simple thing, matter-transmission…yet so very elusive when you actually tried to do it.

The whole future economy of an overcrowded and slowly starving Earth hung in the balance while laboratories all over the world labored to find the secret.

In the main workroom a couple of long-faced technicians met Hank Merry at the door with the long-faced tale he had been expecting. Not just one day's circuitry burned out; the idiots had hooked it up to an activated Hunyadi plate during the test, fusing the delicate sheaves of silver mesh in the plate and cooking five hundred gallons of a very special colloidal protein suspension into baked custard…

Hank Merry sighed and dug in for the day.

—2—

When John McEvoy trooped in some eight hours later, he found his young protégé still working amid a great heap of papers, test-calculations, crumpled-up notes, and reams of circuit diagrams. The ruined Hunyadi plate had been dismantled and its components sent up to the shop for salvage, if salvage was possible. One section of the transmatter circuits looked as if a giant hand had reached in and torn out the wiring on one great swipe.

"More trouble, eh?" McEvoy said, surveying the wreckage.

Hank nodded gloomily.

"What happened?"

"Feedback, overload, and blooey. My fault; I should have called last night. It smelled this morning like somebody had been burning feathers in here." He waved a hand at the burned-out wiring. "Come on, give me a hand here."

McEvoy nodded, and together they set to work on the wiring. Hank had noticed the dejected sag of the old man's shoulders when he came in, the tired lines around his mouth. John McEvoy looked far older these day than the spry sixty-three he really was; he still had his stubborn jaw and he still beat his fist against his palm when Fate refused to yield to him, but his hair was now snow white—a recent change—and he always, always looked tired.

McEvoy had never been cut out for politics, yet now he was constantly meeting with politicians, committee heads, bureaucrats, underlings, and the thousand other servants, leaders and hangers-on of the International Joint Conference of Nations that served as the main governing body of the world of March 13, 2001. Now, as McEvoy worked with Hank, he seemed to relax, as though getting his hands on wires, transistors and circuit breakers was a joy. He was eager as a boy with a new kampbell kit.

"Down in Washington again today?" Merry asked casually.

McEvoy nodded. "Another Joint Conference meeting, only full dress this time." He broke off, waved a red-colored wire. "Where does this one go?"

"Right there," Hank told him.

"Wonder you don't go crazy every day with a ball of snakes like this to work with," McEvoy grumbled. He peered again at Hank's new diagram, then at the circuitry they were building.

"I know," Hank said. "And this is only one small part of it. It'll be two more months before it's even built, much less ready to test."

They worked in silence; two hours later, they leaned back to regard their new batch of wires, and grinned at each other. "That should fix this part, anyway," Hank said. "There's still a lot more to be built, but we can test-run this circuit."

"Fine, let's try it." McEvoy stood up and yawned. Against the west wall of the lab the

transmitter plate with its plastic dome was solidly mounted on stainless-steel pillars, with the eight-inch test block of polished aluminum planted in the center of it. Thirty feet across the room was the receiver plate, similarly mounted. A technician was fiddling with a maze of wires connecting the transmitter to the long row of upright sheets of silver meshwork coated with protein colloid, standing like soldiers at attention. These were the precious Hunyadi plates so critical to Hank's whole approach to the transmatter. Patiently now, Hank and McEvoy re-checked the newly laid circuits before testing them under power. Much of the circuitry of the machine wasn't even devised yet, much less built, but at least Hank knew where he was going. Now he took a note pad, nodded to McEvoy and said, "Go ahead, close the circuit."

McEvoy threw the test switch, sending power through the new circuit segment. The aluminum test block suddenly vanished from the transmitter plate and reappeared on the receiver plate thirty feet away.

Hank had been reading dials and didn't notice what had happened at first. McEvoy, who had been watching, simply didn't comprehend until Hank looked up and said, "John, did you move the test block?"

"Did I what? Of course not!"

"Then who did?"

"Look, I didn't go near—"

Hank stared at the block on the receiver plate as if it were bewitched. Then he grabbed the intercom, punched the button for the generator room. "Abe? This is Merry in 408. Did we just pull a whale of a lot of power up here?"

"Not a flicker," the engineer reported. "Why?"

"Never mind. I'll tell you later." Hank slammed down the intercom and walked over to the test block. It looked the same as before. He lifted it gingerly, carried it back to the transmitter plate as if he were walking on eggs. He set it on the plate, then stepped back. "Flip that switch again," he told McEvoy.

Again the block vanished, to reappear across the room. This time McEvoy saw it. "Hank! This crazy thing is working!"

"It can't be working. It isn't even put together yet. Get me that block again!"

They tried it again. And again. And yet again. It was impossible, but McEvoy was perfectly right. The crazy thing was working.

They had an operating transmatter on their hands that couldn't possibly be operating.

—3—

John McEvoy, the Chief of Research and Development of Telcom Laboratories, Inc., held the eight-inch aluminum block in his hands and stared at it. He looked up at the transmitter plate of the uncompleted transmatter, then glanced down the room to the receiver plate. Finally he looked up at Merry. "Okay, Hank," he said at last. "This block went from Point A to

Point B. How?"

"I don't have the vaguest idea," Hank Merry said.

"It didn't just fly," McEvoy said.

"No."

"Then your machine must have sent it."

Merry sighed. "John, it's impossible. The transmatter isn't even built yet. Some of the circuits are ready, yes. The Hunyadi plates are mostly hooked up, and both transmitter and receiver are partly wired, but this thing is built on theory. Even if it were completely put together, there's nothing but theoretical math and physics that says it would actually work. And I don't see any possible way that block could have been shifted thirty feet across the room with this gadget only half-built."

"But you saw it happen," John McEvoy said.

"Yes." Hank reached for the synchronized photos they had taken of the test block on half a dozen runs. "What's more, either that block is in two places at the same time—which even I can't swallow—or it was transferred completely and instantaneously, as far as I can measure."

"And we're back to the first question again," McEvoy said. "How?"

"I don't know how," Hank replied.

"Then we're going to have to find out," McEvoy said, "and find out right soon. Because we haven't got even a day to lose."

Hank Merry looked up at his chief. "What happened in Washington today?"

McEvoy shook his head wearily. "We got the final word from the Joint Conference: get a working transmatter or go back to rocket ships, whole hog. They had everybody down there today, communications and aeronautics people from all over the world, together with the Joint Chiefs and the Space Exploration committee and the Conference treasurer. We practically had to keep him out of a fist fight, before we quit."

"I didn't know it was so tight," Merry said.

"It's tight. Critically tight, now." McEvoy spread his hands. "Half the heavy construction on this continent is bogged down in priority fights. There is one-tenth enough steel to fill current demands, and the supply gets shorter every month. Oil reserves are dangerously low; if those new wells down in Brazil don't prove out, we've hit rock bottom. And radioactive fuels are just as tight. There isn't any place to turn any more, and the treasurer laid it on the line today."

"What do you mean?"

"Either somebody brings in a practical, operating transmatter in a few weeks, or the money goes to interplanetary cargo craft, and if it wrecks the economy of the world, it wrecks it. That's all."

It wasn't a new story to Hank Merry, nor to anyone else, for that matter. The warning signs had been up for over a century: the irreplaceable coal and oil and iron reserves on

Earth were being devoured by an ever-growing population, and sooner or later they would be gone. Exhausted. Back in the 1960's scientists were still hoping that atomic power and synthetic building materials might take up the slack for a while, but they had not counted on the overwhelming surge of industrial development in Asia, Africa and South America after the Great Cold War ended with the establishment of the International Joint Conference. Nobody, really, had realized what was happening until the 1990's, when the rate of growth was already uncontrollable; by then oil and steel reserves were dwindling to the vanishing point, radioactive ores were almost unobtainable, and the situation had become desperate.

Even then, solar system exploration had raised hope. At first that hope had seemed well-founded. After the first manned Moon-landing in 1966, other exploratory teams had landed on Venus, Mars, and the larger Asteroids, and found these places rich with promise. Three-quarters of the surface of Mars was a crust of high-grade iron ore. There were unthinkable oil reserves on Venus, laid down in the eons when that planet had been a lush, hot, rain forest. Coal was there, too; and vast deposits of radioactives were found on the Moon. Enough resources to supply Earth's needs for thousands of years.

And no way in the world to bring those resources home to Earth. Atomic engines could raise a few tons of iron ore into orbit from Mars and bring it home to Earth. A few barrels of oil could be lugged back from Venus, a few carloads of uranium from the Moon, but all at staggering cost, and still only a drop in a very empty bucket. Bound and limited by inexorable gravity, there was no way to bring home the bacon in sufficient quantity to help. The resources were there; but the cost of obtaining them was so great that all the money on Earth could not foot the bill.

Of course, there were plans. Bigger and better ships could be built. There were dreams of great orbiting barges sweeping back and forth from Earth to Mars. Smaller craft could carry payloads down to surface with only perhaps 25 per cent loss into the ocean and a 10 per cent mortality rate for the men running the ferries. But even these dream-ships would cost more at once than all the wars in Earth's history.

The one alternative, of course, was an operating transmatter, if one could be developed in time. The idea of a device to transmit solid matter from one place to another like TV signals was hardly new. Theoretically, it could work: direct shipments of ore, oil, even living human beings, from one point in space to another—even across interplanetary distances—by means of direct transmission from a sending device at one end to a receiving device at the other. Short waves could easily be transmitted from a sending station to a far-distant receiver. Light itself, with its curious wave-qualities, traveled through space at 186,000 miles per second. And scientists had long known that all the matter on Earth was ultimately composed of wavicles. Why couldn't solid matter be broken down into its wave components, transmitted to some distant receiver, and there be recomposed into its original form? Indeed, it had already been done with hydrogen atoms, but an exotic laboratory experiment was not enough. What was needed was a transmitter on Mars that could ship uncounted tons of raw iron ore, and a receiver on Earth capable of recomposing it.

As with so many things, the gulf between theory and practice was enormous. A hundred laboratories had been searching for a practical engineering solution to the Transmatter Project on a crash program for over ten years. Billions had been spent on research; some laboratory prototypes had even been built, but there were problems. Enormous quantities of power had been needed for their operation. Decomposition of the target load wasn't too hard, but reconstitution of the load to its original form was something else again. One laboratory transmitted a gram of solid gold to a receiver ten centimeters away, but ended up with a chamberful of gold vapor so finely atomized that it still hadn't settled out three months

later. Other devices got peculiar things out of the receiver end but not what had been transmitted. All programs were cloaked in secrecy; what the Russians were doing nobody knew for sure, except that it was on a characteristically massive scale. Something had blacked out the whole city of Moscow for a week, but in the absence of earth-shaking announcements, it was assumed that whatever it was had been a failure.

It was then that Hank Merry, a young mathematician at Telcom Laboratories—one of the great electronics and communications organizations that had grown up since the end of the Cold War—had come up with a whole new approach. With John McEvoy he had been working for eighteen months to build a prototype transmatter, and now it was working before it was finished. It was no wonder that they both sat staring at the machine now as if they were holding a stick of dynamite with the fuse burning down.

—4—

Now, together, the two men worked, checking the wiring diagrams and circuits. McEvoy ordered somebody on standby in the generator room to report on power drainage. A crew from Chemical Analysis took a scraping from the aluminum block, and sent down a fast report: normal reagent grade aluminum, with the expected coating of aluminum oxide on the outside.

"No changes in X-ray refraction?" Hank asked sharply.

"None we could see," the chemistry man said.

Hank exchanged glances with McEvoy, and placed the block under the dome in the transmitter plate. Delicate scales recorded its weight to a thousandth of a microgram. Surface temperature was recorded, and it was scanned for radioactivity. Then Hank threw the switch, and the block vanished again, to reappear on the receiver plate. No change in weight. No evidence of radioactivity. No drain on the generators. A fraction of a degree of temperature change…downward. The block was slightly colder.

They tried it again and again. Each time, the same results. Then McEvoy said, "Let's try something else." He handed Hank a lead pencil from his pocket, an ordinary pencil with the red, yellow and green spiral design of the Telcom Laboratories painted on the outside. "Try that."

The pencil disappeared from the transmitter and reappeared on the receiver plate just as the block had. But this time, when Hank picked it up, he whistled. "Now, there's a switch."

An ordinary lead pencil except that now it was wrong. The right shape, size and weight, but the pencil now had a solid core of wood surrounded by a thin coating of graphite on the outside.

McEvoy looked at it, frowning. "Try that again," he said.

They did. The second time, the pencil had wood and graphite intermixed throughout its length. The third time, the rubber eraser turned up in the middle of the pencil's shaft. Each time, the engineer reported only a flicker of power used, no more than if they had turned on a small electric light.

While McEvoy continued to blink at the funny pencil, Hank picked up a small ammeter

sitting on the supply bench, one of the instruments he had been using to test his circuits. "Let's see about function," he said. The ammeter went onto the transmitter plate, and the switch was thrown. Reappearing on the receiver plate, it looked fine but when Hank wired it into a test circuit the needle swung crazily for a moment and then fell dead as a curl of blue smoke rose from the instrument.

"Burnt out!" he muttered. He pried it open, stared at the mass of scorched wires inside. "And how. It's all backwards, completely shorted out in two places, with a cross-short." He tossed the ammeter on the bench in disgust and searched for other bric-a-brac from the workbench. A screwdriver went through completely unchanged. Hank's wristwatch appeared on the receiver plate, still ticking but with the second hand running backward. A machine bolt came through with a left-hand thread.

Hank scratched his head. "I just don't get it, John. Some things move just fine; others get all twisted around."

"So I see," McEvoy muttered, still staring at the funny pencil. "I wonder what would happen to a tennis ball."

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I saw a lead pencil like this once before, years ago, that's all. But there couldn't be any connection."

"A pencil that was all backward?" Hank said. "When?"

"Before your time." McEvoy shrugged. "It was an old project, must have been twenty years ago. We never did get an answer. We were trying for ultra-low temperatures, and somehow we cut into the corner of a four-dimensional space continuum, a sort of doorway or threshold into a four-dimensional universe. Nobody ever figured out how or why…something to do with our application of power, I guess, or interference with molecular motion, or something. We couldn't even investigate it; whatever was across that threshold was so wrong, or alien, or incomprehensible that nobody could tolerate even looking at it. Except for one…"

McEvoy's jaw tightened, and he slammed his fist into his palm. "Well, it doesn't matter. We lost five good men just trying to find out what it was we'd tripped over, and when we finally found someone who could look, she wouldn't tell us what she saw. She was a high-adaptive, one of the Hoffman Center's guinea pigs. Married one of the psych-docs there, later, a man named Benedict. But that's neither here nor there. It's just that when we passed a lead pencil through that four-dimensional corner, it came out like this one."

Hank Merry stared at the older man. "Well, what happened? You didn't just drop it, did you?"

"We had to. The girl was unharmed, but she clammed up. When we tried to crowd her, she used something she learned inside that doorway—to escape. She vanished out of a locked room right under our noses. And when I tried to contact her later, she invoked the Right of Privacy laws. I couldn't even mail her a first-class letter without permission from the court."

McEvoy paced back and forth as if he were suddenly unbearably restless. "So that was that. We had to close down, too much risk of dead men in the laboratory. The directors dropped the whole thing into the hands of the math boys, and they've been trying to figure out the theory ever since. Fun for them, but it's like the medieval monks trying to decide how

many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Lots of theories, but nothing much they could prove without finding some way to get hold of an angel or two." McEvoy tossed the pencil down in disgust. "As I say, no connection, except that when we dropped objects into this four-dimensional threshold they came out funny. Backwards, inside-out, reversed."

They went back to the transmatter. Shifting the receiver to a far corner of the room, they set the rheostats for the proper distance, then placed a shiny steel ball-bearing in the transmitter. It appeared in the receiver, unchanged. McEvoy insisted on trying the funny pencil again. This time it disappeared altogether; McEvoy bellowed in outrage, but the receiver plate was empty. For two hours more they worked, transmitting a dozen small objects—pins, neckties, cigarettes—with varying degrees of success. Finally McEvoy threw up his hands. "Hank, is there any reason you can see why this thing should be working so erratically?"

"I can't see why it works at all," Hank said. "But it does. Even if it fouls things up. The cigarettes went through unchanged. The key was reversed, and the light bulb exploded the instant it appeared in the receiver. Something isn't working right in the scanner plates, the ones that are hooked in, or in the receiver, or somewhere. I don't know. Maybe if I tear it down and re-analyze—"

"Tear it down?" McEvoy roared. "Never! Build another one, following the pattern of this one but don't even touch this one until we know why it's doing what it does."

"But I can always rebuild it."

"Maybe. And maybe not." McEvoy turned to him. "Look, Hank, think for a minute. Whatever makes it go, we've got a working transmatter on our hands! That by itself will hold up any government action until we can get the bugs ironed out."

McEvoy pulled on his hat and coat. "I've got to get on the line to Washington now and get some planning started. You order up any work crew that you need, spend whatever you need, but keep this thing working and make it work right. And we'll clamp down a security blackout with full government sanctions. If word of this thing leaks out, you'll have every TV and newspaper reporter in the hemisphere sitting on your doorstep tomorrow morning. We've got half an answer here; now we've got to get the rest of it. But we can't afford a news break until we have something to say."

Hank Merry went back to the transmatter, while McEvoy went up to begin dragging sundry company and government officials out of bed and onto scrambled telephone circuits. Hank was glad McEvoy could handle that; for him it was enough for one day to be facing an enigma he couldn't explain, the designer of a machine that couldn't possibly be working, but was, all the same. It would be a sleepless night, and somehow he had a sneaky hunch that the news would leak out, and that Telcom Labs would be neck-deep in newsmen by morning, no matter what security measures were taken. He was glad to let McEvoy worry about that, too.

After a quick cup of coffee he sent out a call for an overtime crew of technicians and engineers. A few minutes later he was back at work again. He was right about the sleepless night, but many hours later, as dawn was lightening the eastern sky, he learned that he was wrong about the reporters. They had a bigger story to cover, far more amazing than the vague rumors that had filtered out from Telcom Laboratories. During a coffee break, Hank switched on an early morning newscast, and learned that during the night the lower end of Manhattan Island had swiftly and silently vanished into the sea.

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Robert Benedict stamped the snow off his insulated boots, checked the safety on the old shotgun on his arm, and sat down on a handy stump, pushing blond hair out of his eyes and staring across the fields to the lights of the city beyond the valley.

He was on a rise of land near the edge of the woods, with a good view across the Massachusetts countryside. He wriggled his toes in the wet boots, heard the water squish inside them, and grimaced. Mom would have a fit if she found out he had gone hip-deep through the ice in the swampy woodland area where he had been hunting. She was dead sure that he was going to drown one day, but then, Mom worried about everything, as if he were five years old instead of seventeen. After all, if you were going duck hunting, you had to go where the ducks were and take a calculated risk of getting doused once in a while.

It wasn't really the wet boots or his mother's worry that was bothering Robert Benedict just now. He had been out tramping the woods since classes were over at three o'clock, counting on his usual short cut to get him home quickly when it began to get dark, and now he was wishing that he hadn't taken the short cut even this far. It was a two-mile hike down across the valley to town in wet boots, but he wasn't about to cross back to the Other Side again to shorten the walk.

Not now. Because something was wrong on the Other Side, and that was what was worrying Robert Benedict.

He scratched his head and tried to pin down what had bothered him when he crossed through earlier to start on his trip back. It was hard to get hold of. No particular change over there, exactly, yet something had been very different on the Other Side. Different enough to shake him up thoroughly for a moment, even to frighten him, and with Robert Benedict, that was something that took some doing.

After all, he had been crossing the Threshold back and forth for as long as he could remember. The Other Side was as commonplace to Robert as this side was. But always, before, he had crossed freely and easily, and this time, for a long, jarring moment, it had seemed that something on the Other Side was trying to keep him from crossing back.

He stood up now and started down the hill. It was almost dark, but he knew the trail well. Of course he could cross through again for a short cut…but he shook his head and plodded on. Better not to, until he could at least check with Mom. She was a pain about some things, but she had some pretty sharp ideas about how to deal with things on the Other Side.

Half an hour later, as he reached the paved road and weather-screen of Springfield District, Robert was wondering if he might have been imagining things. This had been a funny day in other ways. First, Mom and Dad had left for the Center at Cambridge just as he was getting up, which was unusual in itself. When Mom had to go in at all, she had always planned things so that he had had breakfast and gotten holed up with the tape scanner in the study before she left. Then during TV classes today he'd been called on four times in a row and couldn't answer once, thanks to skipping his tape-reading the night before, so he got an extra hour of reading assigned for tonight. And then those crazy news reports about Manhattan District…some kind of earthquake, except that the reports were so garbled they didn't seem to make sense.

All in all, he'd been glad to get away by himself this afternoon; sometimes he got to feeling awfully cramped and hemmed in. Dad once said that it was probably part of the price

he had to pay for being able to cross through to the Other Side at will, nice to know, maybe, but strictly no help when he needed open air and space to move around in.

Now he shrugged the thought aside. Here under the weather shield there was no snow, but he was cold and wet and wanted to get home. He flagged down a cruising aircar, and soon was riding high above the ranks of tall apartment houses of Springfield, using his father's bank code for the fare register. He could square the fare with Dad somehow at the end of the month if Ed Benedict happened to notice it on the bill. Sometimes he even squeaked by free.

—4—

As it was, nobody seemed to notice Robert's watersoaked boots when he came into the Benedict living room, nor his unusual lateness either. His father and mother were both watching the late newscast; when he tramped in, Gail just waved to him abstractedly and Ed shushed him up when he started to say something. There was an odd tension in the room, as if he had interrupted a heated argument that he wasn't supposed to know about.

Feeling vaguely uneasy, Robert joined his parents at the wall screen. The announcer was spouting excitedly about the mysterious New York disaster of the early morning, and a TV aircar had evidently carried the cameras in close, for the pictures on the screen were exceptionally sharp and clear. Robert stared at the video image as he picked up the announcer's words:

"…had no explanation to offer for the disaster. Some observers near the cleavage area claimed to have seen a waterspout in New York harbor immediately after the disaster occurred, but reports have been inconsistent. This afternoon trawlers and dredges of the International Coast Guard dragged the harbor for debris from the shattered section of the city, but nothing was recovered, even at depths of three hundred feet.

"In a moment we will have a roundup of reactions from the various world capitals, but first a special on-the-spot interview with an eyewitness to the mysterious calamity."

The camera shifted to an ID shot of Manhattan Island from the air, then moved in to a downtown street scene. Crowds of people, police, and uniformed troops were milling around; the mike picked up a babble of frightened voices. Then the camera centered on a reporter with a hand mike, interviewing a short, balding man dressed in longshoremen's clothes: "…Mr. Jacob Pitkin of 124 Dykeman Street, 17th level…Mr. Pitkin, I understand you were returning home from work when the disaster occurred."

"Yes, sir, that's right, I was actually walking right where it struck, not ten seconds before."

"Can you tell us in your own words what you saw?"

"Yes, sir! I sure can! I was walking north about five o'clock in the morning when I thought I heard a truck coming. So I looked back over my shoulder. I was right, I saw the headlights plain as day, and then the next second the whole street was gone, truck and all."

"You didn't feel any tremor or see any buildings crashing?"

"Nothing at all. Not even any noise, at first. It was just there one second and gone the next. And then I heard a roar like the time the gas tanks blew over in Newark District, and I

saw this waterspout coming up where the street had been—"

Impatiently, Gail Benedict flipped channels, but everywhere it was the same story. One channel was broadcasting an interview with the Russian delegate to the Joint Conference, who insisted angrily that the disaster had been caused by the explosion of a concealed atomic stockpile, but even he acknowledged that no seismograph had recorded any shock wave. On another channel the announcer was just finishing: "…attempted to contact Dr. John McEvoy, Director of Research at Telcom Laboratories, but Dr. McEvoy could not be reached by broadcast time…" Gail and Ed Benedict exchanged glances, and then Gail reached over to flick off the screen.

"Well, was it an earthquake?" Robert asked.

"Without a seismograph record?" Ed Benedict asked sourly. "Who taught you geology?"

"Well what was it, then?"

Gail looked grim. "I don't know, but it wasn't any earthquake." She stood up abruptly and went out in the kitchen, looking more upset than Robert could ever remember. His father just sat glumly, not inviting conversation. Robert shucked his wet boots, now acutely aware that something was seriously wrong.

Something had taken a chunk off the end of Manhattan during the night. If not an earthquake, then what? And why the tension here at home? Mom and Dad were usually as close as hand and glove; this strained silence just wasn't like them. Something had upset them badly, something neither of them wanted to bring out into the open. And it had to do with the disaster in New York.

Robert continued to puzzle over it as he joined his parents for the beginning of a silent meal. Why were they so disturbed about what happened in Manhattan District? Ed's work was in Cambridge, at the Big Mental Adjustment Laboratory of the far-flung Hoffman Medical Center complex. Robert knew that his father was a research psychologist with more experience with problems of human adaptability than anyone else in the country, but he'd never gotten this stirred up about anything that Robert could recall. The same with Gail, who sometimes worked with her husband on special projects but spent most of her time keeping the Benedict household together and working with the Right of Privacy League.

No matter how he looked at it, it didn't add up. What was more, he had a queasy feeling that whatever it was had to do with him as well. Robert knew his parents too well to be easily fooled. They would sometimes block or sidestep indirect questions and subterfuge, but they never dodged a direct frontal attack. He fiddled with his food as the silence deepened, then took the bull by the horns. "Okay," he said, looking his mother straight in the eye. "Let's have it. Something's wrong here, and I'm right in the middle of it. What's the trouble?"

Gail's hand came up to push her hair back from her ear. She glanced at her husband and went on eating. Finally Ed shrugged. "There's nothing wrong," he said awkwardly.

Robert was silent a moment. Then he said, "One time you told me to call you on it flat-footed if I ever caught you lying. So I'm calling you. If you're not lying at least you're dodging. Something's wrong. You've never been like this before."

More silence. "Did you cross the Threshold today?" Gail asked at last.

"Well, of course!" Robert blinked; he hadn't expected that question. "I mean, I usually do,

don't I? You know that."

"But you were late getting home tonight," Ed said. "How come?"

"I walked down from Thompson's Hill."

"That's quite a walk. You usually short-cut."

"Well, I know. But today there was something funny about the Other Side."

Gail looked up at him. "Funny?"

"Well—different, then," Robert said. "I was even going to ask you about it. Something was out of whack over there; it even scared me a little, and that's the first time that ever happened."

Both the older Benedicts had stopped eating. Ed cleared his throat. "Robert, this may be more important than you realize. What was different when you crossed the Theshold today? You know the Other Side far better than we do. Can you tell us what it was?"

"It wasn't anything so terrible," Robert said. "I—I mean, there just seemed to be—that is, I had this strange feeling that somebody…or something…" He bogged down, unable to find the right words to describe exactly what had given him the sudden jolt he had experienced this afternoon. It was the same old story as so many times before: none of the words he could find seemed to be the right ones.

Because there was no describing the Other Side. He'd never been able to. He'd never been able to say, in so many words, what he saw there, or what he did there, or what happened to him, or anything. There weren't any words on this side to tell anybody those things. And the things on this side, and the words to describe them, never seemed to apply to the Other Side, either.

"Just do the best you can," Gail urged him. "I know it's hard, but try. It's important, maybe very important."

Robert shook his head. "All I can say is that it was different. I've always gone back and forth without any hindrance before, any time I wanted to. Nothing on the Other Side ever seemed to bother me, or touch me. I mean, the Thresholds are there, and sometimes when I cross through they're around nearby and sometimes they're not, but it never seemed to make any difference. This time it did. At least, it seemed to. All of a sudden I had the strangest feeling that they knew I was there, as if they were really aware of me for the first time. And somehow this time I couldn't move as freely as I always have. It even seemed hard to come back out again. As if something there were trying to hold me." He spread his hands helplessly.

"It scared me, and I got out of there as fast as I could. I was half sick to my stomach for some time afterwards, it gave me such a jolt. So I decided to walk home." Robert hesitated. "I decided maybe I'd better talk to you before I crossed through again. And then all this hubbub at home. What's wrong, anyway?"

Ed Benedict looked at his son and then at Gail. "I guess mostly we just don't like coincidences," he said. "We're worried about something going on that we don't know about."

"Like what?"

"Like the disaster in New York last night," Gail said. "Something took a bite out of New York City, a big bite, and nobody has any idea what the something was, or what happened to the piece that got bitten off. It was no earthquake. The cleavage line is sharp and clean as polished marble. It took a great hole out of the harbor below the waterline, too. I don't know any force on earth that could do that without leaving some sign of something in its wake. And neither does anybody else, as far as I can see. "It's almost—" she hesitated—"almost as if it vanished into another world."

Robert Benedict saw what Gail was trying to say, and a shiver crept up his back.

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"It doesen't make sense," Robert said later, when dinner was over. "There's never been a Threshold big enough to engulf a whole chunk of a city. And even if there were, why? Why connect this business up with the Other Side at all? It seems to me you're making an awful reach."

Ed Benedict filled his pipe, settled back in the soft living room chair. "I suppose it is," he said, "except that there are some other things, too. Coincidences, maybe, but just too many coincidences. For one thing, there's a transmatter being built down at the Telcom Labs in Jersey, and all of a sudden the security lid has gone down on it so tight that nothing is coming through. Up until now, there's been no great mystery, just a bright young guy building a prototype machine, with regular news reports on his progress. Now all of a sudden, the guy and his machine are in the middle of a Condition B news blackout which began within an hour or so of the New York thing. Coincidence, of course, except that a transmatter project is fooling around with enormous physical energies focused on an extremely small area of space."

"You think a transmatter just dissolved the whole tip end of Manhattan?" Robert asked incredulously.

"Well, not quite," Ed replied. "Not without the energy going somewhere, and there's been no sign of it. It's just that—well, look: if you knew somebody was busy building a magnifying glass out in space big enough to gather half the radiant energy of the sun and focus it on Earth, and then all of a sudden the world caught on fire, you'd suspect some connection, wouldn't you?"

Robert scratched his head. "I suppose so. But I thought transmatters were just laboratory toys, at this stage."

"They always have been, but Dr. Henry Merry has been using a different approach to matter transmission than most other people who had fiddled with it." Ed shrugged. "Okay, that coincidence I could choke down, but the fact that there's a man named John McEvoy mixed up in the middle of it I can't choke down."

"You mean the research director at Telcom?"

Ed Benedict nodded. "He was the one who opened up the first Threshold, twenty years ago. Your mother worked with him briefly, until she found out why unprepared people couldn't deal with the Other Side, or even investigate it. She left the project then, and McEvoy was very bitter about it. But he dropped it, all the same."

"At least we thought he did," Gail added. "Now we're beginning to wonder."

"I see," Robert said. "You think there's a connection between a transmatter project and the Other Side and a piece of New York disappearing. I don't get it, but I know something was different on the Other Side today. And I'd surely like to know what, if I'm going to keep on going through there."

"That's what your father and I were arguing about," Gail said. "We don't think you should go through, until we know what's going on. But somebody needs to go through, to try to find out if something has happened over there. I think it should be me."

Robert stared at her. "What good would that do? You know how it shakes you up, even when you're just taking a short cut. Let's face it, you're pretty clumsy in there. If somebody has to find out something on the Other Side, it had better be me."

He was right, of course, and Ed and Gail both knew it. Now Robert realized that that was precisely the thing that had been troubling them all evening. Because he, at least, could cross back and forth with impunity. He, at least, could move from the orderly three-dimensional universe he lived in through the curious, twisting angle into that other world with all its dimensional nightmares and geometric absurdities without having his wits jogged loose. He had been crossing through and back from infancy; now the crossing that was so violently disturbing to unprepared, rigid adult minds was as commonplace to Robert Benedict as tying his shoelaces.

He knew that that incomprehensible universe did indeed exist, side by side with his own three-dimensional universe. And that universe across the Threshold was just as real to him on the Other Side as a dish of ice cream was real on this side. It was just built differently, shaped by a different geometry, with at least one more spatial dimension than this universe. He got bogged down trying to explain it to anyone, or even to understand clearly himself just precisely what the Other Side was "on the other side of," but he could go there when others couldn't. His mind had enough experience with the Other Side so that he could tolerate what he found there where other minds blocked, rejected and short-circuited out.

But comprehend or explain—that was something else.

How do you explain the unexplainable? It was the wrong wording, of course. All his life Robert had been tripping over words that weren't quite right to express what he had experienced on the Other Side. How do you describe something that you know exists because you've encountered it time and again, but which nobody else can fit into the world they know about in any way, shape or manner? How do you express feelings when you aren't sure yourself what they are? Gail and Ed had patiently tried to help him get around this very strange barrier of meanings, yet even Gail and Ed were helpless. They knew that what he told them about the Other Side meant something…they just couldn't understand what it meant. Only he knew what it meant, sometimes, in rare flashes of comprehension, but even he couldn't explain what it meant in this world.

Some things he knew. There was a world that lay just across the Threshold, a Threshold to a dimension that didn't exist in three-dimensional space. That world was real; there were people there, or creatures, or beings, or inhabitants, or whatever you wanted to call them. These "Thresholders" were intelligent; Robert was certain of that. They lived in a structured universe governed by natural laws just as Robert's own three-dimensional universe was governed, except that the natural laws were different from any that existed in Robert's world. And he was able to pass through…to cross over this dimensional Threshold…into the universe on the Other Side with perfect ease and simplicity, just by turning a corner. But he

couldn't point out that "corner" to anyone else. In fact, "turning a corner" was a totally inaccurate way to describe what it was that Robert did to get there. "Corner" implied three dimensions: length, width and height; and the "corner" that Robert "turned" had nothing to do with any of these. When he used that phrase, he was like the blind man who said, "I see that John is here," when he heard the voice of a close friend in the room. The blind man actually "saw" nothing of the sort, nor did Robert Benedict actually turn any corner that anyone could see.

Yet now, because something was wrong on the Other Side, he was again going to "turn the corner" and see what he could discover, if anything, that was "different" than before on the Other Side, whether he could explain it to anyone or not. His father remained adamantly opposed to his going. Gail continued to insist that she should go instead, but they both knew that Robert would make his own decision. There had been a time, when he was very young, that they had been able to influence his coming and going across the Threshold, but there had been no time since he was five or six years old that they could actually prevent it. He could go when he decided to go. And now they recognized all the earmarks of a determined young man who had made up his mind in spite of them.

"Don't try to travel anywhere or do anything over there," Gail warned. "Just stay put and see if you still feel whatever it was you felt before."

Robert nodded. He had been through this with Gail dozens of times before, and he understood exactly what she meant, even though they both knew that on the Other Side you didn't actually "travel" anywhere. That would imply moving from one point to another, and on the Other Side it was all but impossible to pin down a point to travel from, or a point to travel to. Even so, there were…things…that he could do in order to cross back at some different place than he crossed through, and he wasn't about to do any of those…things…this time. Just staying put would be enough, for now…

"Don't worry," he said. "I won't do anything rash. And I'll be back in no time." It was an old joke; even Gail couldn't help smiling. And then, to Gail and Ed Benedict, it appeared that their son simply vanished from the center of the room.

To Robert, it seemed that he had just turned a corner…twisted through a curious angle that he knew so well. One instant he was in the center of the Benedict living room; the next he was inside.

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At first, as always, there was the fleeting jolt of surprise and change, a moment of mental breath-holding until he could orient himself. It was much the same as flicking off a light and plunging suddenly into darkness: you paused and waited for your eyes to adjust a little. There was even an after-image in his mind, momentarily, of the room and the people he had left behind. But that faded quickly, and then he was across the invisible dimensional line that separated these two so-different universes.

At first, as always, it was dark in this place, utterly silent and utterly empty. He felt neither warmth nor cold; temperature, he had learned, was relative and didn't seem to apply here. He waited; gradually his awareness of the shape and structure of things about him began to sharpen just as an image appears on a developing photograph. He looked behind him, knowing as always that it would be fruitless. He always felt that his own universe was

somehow just behind him, just barely out of reach, around that "corner," but when he looked, of course, it was always gone.

Darkness and silence…and then, gradually, a sense of moving shapes, structures, geometric patterns all about him—wild, senseless patterns, perfectly incomprehensible, yet very commonplace to him. Here they made sense, and it was here that he was, now, not on the other side. Part of the pattern, he knew, was his own body, which seemed fragmented—disjointed and scattered in space around him at odd angles with the fragments moving about lazily in great, sweeping curves. He could see, now, though not exactly with his eyes; there was always an odd smell on this side, although it seemed to him that the smell arose from somewhere deep in his mind rather than from his nose.

Muscular movement and position sense were useless here; although the jigsaw-puzzle pieces of his body seemed to be floating freely, any "movement" here was more a matter of wanting to go somewhere and gradually arriving there than of actually moving muscles and taking steps. And whenever he did "move," something odd always happened: the disjointed fragments of his body began corruscating wildly, shifting and whirling in a frantic meaningless pattern until his desire to "move" was satisfied and he "arrived" wherever he wanted to "move" to.

Ridiculous, he thought, to try to explain these sensations when the only explanation that could make sense was to be here, and being here at all was enough to drive any normal, intelligent adult out of his wits. Even Mom could just barely hold on here and she was an old and crafty hand at adapting to strange environments. But he at least was comfortable here.

Or had been, until now…

But this time, again, something was different. Something to do with the Thresholders themselves. Before, he had always been aware of their presence here and there, whoever or whatever they were, but they had always seemed oblivious to him. He could tell their presence by the changing of the strange structural pattern around him; he could even sense whether they were approaching him, receding from him, or going past him—but for years now he had not even been sure they were aware of him. Now, quite suddenly he sensed them around him in great numbers, and he knew, somehow, they were very acutely aware of him indeed.

It frightened him. He felt the same panic he had felt earlier at this sudden change. Something in his mind told him to bolt, to get out of there and back to his own side fast; earlier, he had done just that, but now he fought down the urge. There was danger here. Something was terribly wrong—but this time he had to try to understand it.

Experimentally, he tried to "move." Nothing happened. The fragments of his body and clothing shimmered and sped about him more swiftly than before, but something seemed to be resisting him now, holding him back, restraining him, and more and more he felt surrounded and trapped by the creatures of this Threshold universe.

Robert pushed against the restraint, his panic rising out of control now. Something was wrong here, something he could neither understand nor handle. He wanted out, wanted back across, but the more he struggled to cross back the more he felt invisible fingers clutching at him, trying to hold him here. Suddenly there was a change in the structure of things around him. Solid fragments of something other than his body suddenly seemed to join into the moving cloud about him. Colors appeared before his eyes, oddly shifting colors, but colors…and he had never before seen colors of any kind in this strange world.

Terrified now, Robert Benedict redoubled his efforts to cross back. Whatever was

happening here, he couldn't understand it, and he felt his own mental control beginning to crack. He was still fighting this strange resistance, trying to move back through the angle to cross out again as the colored fragments swirled closer and closer, when suddenly, without a warning, he was released…

Thrust out…

…And dropped two feet through the air to the living room rug, trembling and terrified, as Ed and Gail Benedict rushed toward him.

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He sat up, shaking his head to clear away the overtones of panic that still filled his mind. He realized he must have seemed stunned for a moment; Gail was clutching his hand, urging him to answer her, while Ed grabbed an opthalmoscope and began flashing it in his eyes. Robert flinched and turned his head. "Okay, okay," he said. "I'm fine. But you're making me dizzy with that light."

"Oh, Robert, honestly!" Gail said, the relief and annoyance in her voice fighting it out to a draw. "I told you not to go anywhere."

"I didn't, exactly," Robert said.

"Then how did you end up two feet off the ground?"

"I don't know about that. I just know I was plenty scared. Something is way out of key on the Other Side and I haven't got the slightest idea what. Except that I was right in the middle of it and they were all around me."

"The Thresholders?" Ed said.

"Yes."

"I thought they always ignored you."

"They always have, before. Not this time." Robert pulled off his shirt; it was dripping with sweat. "We've got one answer, though: they know when I'm there, all right. They were waiting this time, and they moved in on me fast."

"But why?" Gail said. "They've never bothered you before."

Robert shook his head. "I don't know. They seemed to be trying to keep me there, trying to keep me from moving, or maybe pushing me some direction they wanted." He took a deep breath. "Whatever "it was, it scared me silly. And then when I tried to cross back, something seemed to hold me, and then all of a sudden something shoved me out. I didn't come of my own accord." He paused, scratching his head. "But I had the funniest feeling that they were threatening me." He frowned. "No, not threatening, exactly. More as if for the first time they were trying to tell me something."

Gail and Ed Benedict looked at each other. Robert got to his feet, tested his legs, and sank wearily onto the couch. "Well," Gail said finally, "I'm afraid I agree with your father. Too many coincidences. The news blackout on McEvoy's transmatter project, this business in

New York, and now something funny going on across the Threshold…it's too much." She looked at her son. "Was there anything else you can pin down?"

"Not that I can think of, except…well, there was something there that was colored. I've never seen colors before. This was red and yellow and green, I think, something that got closer to me just before I was pushed out. I almost felt I had something in my hand when I came back through, but I couldn't have…or else I dropped it…"

He broke off, staring at the object that was lying on the floor where he had fallen. Gail Benedict reached down, picked it up. A simple thing, with red, yellow and green spirals running down its length…but it had not been in the room before. Gail looked at it closely, then held it up for Ed and Robert to see. "I guess we can forget about coincidences," she said flatly. "If we needed proof that John McEvoy is fooling with the Threshold again, here it is."

The object was an ordinary lead pencil, painted in colored spirals, with the words Telcom Laboratories printed on its side in gold leaf.

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The aircar journey down from Massachusetts to central New Jersey was abnormally long and difficult. Aircar routings were ordinarily handled automatically by the traffic-pattern computers in Atlantic City District of the eastern metropolis, but today they had been thoroughly disrupted by the strange disaster in New York. The whole lower Manhattan area was barred to traffic except for emergencies and official vehicles; some routings had been taken over by human operators to try to avoid bottlenecks and pileups. Even so, Robert and Gail had to wait almost two hours while several thousand south-bound cars were delayed over Westchester District, and then were ultimately re-routed north as far as Buffalo before circling south again toward their destination. Both Gail and her son were tired and tense, totally uncertain what reception would greet them at the Telcom Laboratories. And their apprehension was increased tenfold by a sudden flurry of garbled reports from the aircar radio that the top three floors of an office building in central Philadelphia had suddenly vanished in to thin air at eight thirty that morning, executives, typists and all…

The appearance of the colored pencil in their Springfield District apartment the evening before—the pencil Robert had inadvertently brought back from the Other Side—had made it obvious that something had to be done. There was only one possible conclusion: someone at Telcom Laboratories was tampering in some way with the Threshold project again, and the New York disaster could not possibly be coincidence.

The question was, what to do, and how? Robert and his parents had talked half the night, trying meanwhile to contact Dr. John McEvoy by telephone. No success: all messages to the Telcom switchboard were being answered by mechanical servos that stolidly requested names and numbers so that calls could be returned, but offered no information. Ed Benedict then tried to reach McEvoy through Hoffman Center channels; supposedly there was close liaison between the huge medical and psychological research center and Telcom. But even these channels had failed. A security curtain had fallen that nothing seemed to pierce.

"But we have to reach him," Gail said. "It might take weeks for McEvoy to return our contact, if he ever does, and we don't dare wait that long. He may not even know what he's

doing. Oh, I think he probably does, but we can't be certain."

"He may not listen to you, even if you do reach him," Ed pointed out.

Gail sniffed. "He'll listen to me, all right, don't worry about that. He may try to wring my neck—but he's been wanting to talk to me for a long, long time. And if we're right that he's fooling with the Threshold again, he'll have to listen, sooner or later."

"Why?" Robert said. "Suppose he's just scratched you off his list."

"Look—if that city business was a planned, purposeful reaction on the part of the Thresholders to something that somebody is doing to them on this side, it isn't going to be the last disaster that occurs. I don't know what they did with that chunk of Manhattan, or how they did it. I can't even guess what they might be able to do if they wanted to. But we do know they recognize that Robert comes from this side, and that pencil business suggests that they're trying to communicate something to us in some way. We've just got to contact McEvoy."

Ed Benedict puffed on bis empty pipe. "Well, there's one other way. The Hoffman Center has an emergency line to Telcom that can bypass a Condition B blackout if necessary." He sighed, picked up the phone, and threw the scrambler switch. "I may have to tell the Medical Director a pretty colorful story to convince him it's really an emergency without saying just why, but he can put the arm on McEvoy."

Thirty minutes later Gail heard a familiar voice on the line—angry, impatient, but unmistakably McEvoy. And fifteen minutes after that, as morning light was breaking over Long Island Sound, Gail and Robert were in an air-car heading south.

They hadn't heard of the Philadelphia incident, then.

—11—

John McEvoy looked much older than Gail had expected, when she and Robert were shown into the small office on the eighth floor of the Telcom Laboratories building. She had seen him on TV often enough in recent years, but she was not prepared for the white hair or the tired crow's-feet around his eyes. He pushed back from a desk as she came in, rising to his full six feet and glowering at her.

"So," he said heavily. "Gail Talbot, after twenty years. Except that it's Gail Talbot Benedict now, and this time it's you coming after me."

"That's right," Gail said.

"You don't do things by halves, do you?" McEvoy said bitterly. "When you ran out on me, back then, you picked the worst possible time you could have chosen. Then you got married to the one man who might have helped me get you back to work with me, and damned near had me jailed for invading your privacy. So now you turn up again, at the worst possible time you could have picked. I haven't got enough trouble in my own lab, I have to have this New York business dumped in my lap as well, and now the same thing happening in Philadelphia…" He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Do you have any idea of the number of people I've had crawling down my throat in the past twenty-four hours? Eighteen hours I've spent just talking on that phone—" he stabbed a finger at the offending

instrument—"trying to make up answers to questions I don't know the answers to, and now you, of all people, have to turn up. Well, I don't have time to chat, especially about a lead pencil of all things!" He tossed the colored pencil down on the desk in disgust.

"But I think you lost it," Gail said innocently. "We thought you might like to know it was found."

"There are thousands of pencils around this place," McEvoy said angrily.

"But this one turned up in our living room, several hundred miles from here, under rather peculiar circumstances."

McEvoy looked at her for a moment. Then he picked up the pencil again, inspected it closely. "I don't get it," he said finally. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," Gail said. "I'm saying point-blank that you've been working on the Threshold project again."

"The Threshold project!" McEvoy stared at her, then burst out laughing. "Fat chance I've had to work on that. Do you know what you did when you ducked out of here that day after you went into the vault? You closed the Threshold project down tight, that's what. It's never been reopened since. We were working with an unpredictable, the directors said. Too dangerous for experimentation. Like fooling with an atom bomb in a downtown office building. They closed me down, and that was that. Thanks to you, I might say. And right now I'm too busy trying to get another project under control and raking government investigators out of my hair to want to talk about it very much, since that earthquake in New York."

"You think that was an earthquake?"

"I don't know what it was," McEvoy said. "I'm just a physicist. But a lot of people seem to think I ought to know what it was. Now, if you don't mind—"

"I could make a guess," Gail said. "A very good guess."

McEvoy's eyes narrowed. "Guess? What would you guess?"

"That the New York thing was not an earthquake and that nobody so far has any explanation for it at all. And that the heat is on you, as one of the nation's leading physicists, to try to explain it."

McEvoy shrugged and sank back in his chair. "All right. I haven't been to bed in almost thirty-six hours, and my switchboard hasn't let up for fifteen seconds in all that time. I spent three hours last night at an emergency session of the Joint Planning Conference, just trying to convince them that I didn't know what happened in New York. So what are you getting at?"

Gail pushed her hair back from her ear. "Another guess," she said. "That the transmatter you and your staff have been building has suddenly started working. At approximately the same time that the tip of Manhattan vanished. But that it isn't working quite right, somehow, and that one of the items you were using to test it was a colored lead pencil that went into the thing and never came out again."

For a long moment John McEvoy studied Gail's face. Then his jaw set, and he reached for a phone. "Janet? Hold my calls—yes, all of them, I don't care who it is. And tell Hank Merry to get up here with his transmission data, all of it, and fast." He set the phone aside, and turned back to Gail. "All right, I think we're going to put our cards on the table. I don't know what you know about the transmatter, or think you know, but I can't see any possible

connection between our machine and chunks of cities disappearing. Right now my main concern is that any stories leaking out about our transmatter could very well precipitate an international crisis of major proportions."

"Then you do have a transmatter working," Gail said.

"We do. It's working poorly, inconsistently, but it's working."

"And you started testing it first very shortly before the tip of Manhattan disappeared—am I right?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. About eight hours before. But I can't see what connection there is—"

"A very simple connection," Gail interrupted him. "What happened in New York was no natural disaster. There's reason to think that it was a carefully calculated, premeditated blow—very possibly a retaliatory blow—and that something you have been doing with your transmatter was the direct cause of it. This thing that happened in Philadelphia may have been a second blow, and there may be more to come. Worse ones. These may just have been warnings."

"Warnings from whom?" McEvoy demanded. "About what?"

"From the Thresholders. About what, I don't know, except that I'm certain that it's connected with your transmatter."

"You mean to say that a little fourdimensional hyper-cube has some kind of power to whack off a chunk of a city the size of New York?" McEvoy stared at her, incredulous. "Preposterous!"

"Not preposterous," Gail said. "I'm not talking about a little four-dimensional hypercube. There's another entire universe that we were in contact with in the Threshold project, a whole, organized physical universe. It lies side by side with our own, except that its natural laws are different from ours. The two may be superimposed on each other, maybe even share the very same atoms, for all we know. But in that universe, from our point of view, there are extra spatial dimensions."

She paused for a moment, while McEvoy continued to stare at her.

"There is a crossing point between our universe and theirs, like a tissue-thin divider," Gail went on. "A divider that's invisible to us and probably to them too, so neither side had ever been aware of the other's existence, until you punched a hole through the divider with your ultra-low-temperature experiments twenty years ago. You didn't mean to do it; you didn't even know the divider was there. But apparently you were focusing energy on a single tiny point and broke through. And you couldn't handle it. You couldn't even investigate, but there was a universe beyond that divider, all the same. You pulled back then because you had to; now I think you're somehow punching more holes through, and somebody or something on the other side is getting hurt for some reason and is striking back. And we have no idea what power they may have to strike back with."

Throughout the discussion Robert had remained silent, staring out the window at the gray, overcast sky and trying to remain unobtrusive. Until now. McEvoy had studiously ignored him, but now he sat back, staring first at Gail and then at Robert. "You keep saying 'we,' " he said finally, "and you seem to know a whole lot about this—this other universe. How have you found out about it? And just whom do you mean by 'we'?"

Gail nodded toward Robert. "My son and I. But mostly Robert. And I don't know a whole lot about the Other Side, other than what Robert has learned."

"How has he learned anything?"

"From experience," Gail said. "The only way anybody could learn anything about it—by crossing through. Robert has been going across to the Other Side and back ever since he was a baby."

—12—

Downstairs, Dr. Hank Merry led them through a labyrinth of half-assembled-electrical and electronic equipment to the large laboratory room that housed the transmatter. Merry looked red-eyed and weary, his sandy hair askew, two days' stubble on his chin. One lab bench was littered with paper, coffee cups and the debris from half a dozen box lunches; a cot against the wall had obviously been slept in.

In the center of the room, the transmatter hummed. A technician was weighing, measuring and radio-analyzing a series of graduated metal test blocks,- then placing them one by one on the transmitter plate, and recording results as the blocks vanished and reappeared on the receiver plate. The place was littered with papers and a large blackboard was filled with unintelligible scribbles.

"How's it going?" McEvoy said.

"Not very good." Merry shook his head wearily. "It's almost completely unpredictable and inconsistent, and if anything, it's getting worse instead of better. About half the time now, nothing comes through at all. It's like a door into nowhere. The test blocks just disappear. Or when they do come through they may be molten, or powdered, or chemically altered. It just defies logic, the way this thing is working."

"This woman thinks your gadget here caused that chunk of Manhattan to disappear," McEvoy said.

"Well, I've lost half a ton of steel test blocks into it—" Merry broke off, confused. He looked at McEvoy and back to Gail. "Are you serious?"

"Quite serious," Gail said.

"But I haven't had this thing anywhere near—say, what is this?"

Briefly, McEvoy told him about the conversation upstairs. Robert, listening with one ear, went to peer over the technician's shoulder as he loaded another test block onto the transmitter plate. "So I hated to bother you," McEvoy concluded, "but I thought if she got at look at this machine and a brief rundown on how it works, she might realize how ridiculous this whole idea is."

"Well—" Hank Merry sounded dubious. "I can tell you how it's supposed to work. In theory, that is. What it's actually doing is something else. The idea is to tear down the test block on the transmitter plate, atom by atom, by means of a very high energy force field—a lot like the weather shield we have over the city, but tightly focused. Then when the test block is reduced to its component wavicles, we transmit it to the receiver plate, and reassemble it

there with all the atoms returned to their original position. It's like tearing a house down board by board and nail by nail, and then shipping it to some other place and reassembling it in reverse order, the last board first and so on. Except that it's the molecular structure of the test blocks that we're dealing with, not boards and nails."

Gail nodded. "But you'd have to keep some kind of accurate record of the way the house was taken down, if you ever wanted to get it put back together again right."

"That's right. And that's where the Hunyadi plates come in. The test block is really a collection of subatomic wavicles, held in a particular configuration by certain specific stresses—electromagnetic fields, subnuclear forces, and so on. The plates look complicated, but they're really nothing but sheets of silver mesh coated with a special synthetic protein material. The protein molecules are hooked together in enormously long chains, which are all held in alignment until the transmitter begins decomposing the test block. Then various components of the chain shift alignment and act as a code or pattern to be used when the test block is being reassembled: almost like a dressmaker's pattern. In effect, the plates 'memorize' the subatomic configuration of the test block and then guide the reassembly." Merry paused and looked glum. "At least they're supposed to do that. The trouble is that they aren't all wired in yet, and the transmatter is still reassembling things fine without them—sometimes."

"And sometimes not," Gail said.

"That's right," Merry admitted.

Robert had been listening closely. Now he turned to Hank. "That's what I don't understand," he said. "I always thought that all parts of a machine had to be functioning if you expected the machine to work at all. I mean, if the filament in a light bulb burns out, the light quits working, even if everything else is in perfect working order—right?"

"Of course."

"And if the fuse was blown, you'd be pretty startled to see the light go on, all of a sudden, before you put a new fuse in."

"Yes, you would."

"Then how can this gadget work if all its parts aren't even assembled yet?" Robert asked.

"That's exactly what I'm trying to find out!" Merry said in exasperation. "The point is that it does. Look, watch this."

He crossed the room, set a test block on the transmitter plate, and turned the control switch. The block vanished and reappeared on the receiver plate across the room. He repeated the procedure. Again the block vanished—but this time it didn't reappear at all. "I can't explain it, but it's happening."

"Some other things are happening too," Robert said quietly. "Pieces of New York and Philadelphia are disappearing. Nobody can explain that, either." He picked up one of the test blocks, weighed it in his hand, and looked up at Hank Merry. "Okay, suppose you watch for a minute and see if you can explain this."

With the test block under his arm, Robert walked over to stand beside the transmitter plate. Suddenly he vanished, block and all. At the same instant he reappeared across the room, standing next to the receiver plate, still clutching the block under his arm. As Hank

Merry's jaw sagged, Robert walked back and tossed him the test block. "Now, then. Explain that."

Merry looked at McEvoy, who looked as startled as he did, then back at Robert. "I—I—what did you do?"

"I think I did the same thing your machine here has been doing," Robert said, "only I did a better job of it."

Gail glared at her son, clenching her fists. "I swear," she said angrily, "if you weren't so big I'd just whale you! This is not a magic show!"

Merry continued to stare at the boy. "You were—over here, and then—well, now, wait a minute! Do that again!"

"No, thanks." Robert's face was gray, and sweat was standing out on his forehead. "I'm sorry," he said to Gail. "I guess that wasn't so smart. It was the same as before, except that I went quickly."

"Went where?" Hank demanded.

"She can tell you," Robert said, looking decidedly ill now. "I think I'd better sit down for a minute."

Her anger fading, Gail told Hank Merry what she had told McEvoy earlier. "We can't prove it," she said, "but we know you're creating a highly concentrated stress field on that transmitter plate. You're sending things from Point A to Point B, all right, but you're shoving them through another dimension in order to do it. And something—or somebody—on the Other Side very emphatically doesn't like it a bit. Whatever you're doing is causing trouble that Robert's going and coming has never caused, and it looks as though something on the Other Side has picked up the tip of Manhattan Island and dumped it somewhere, in retaliation. Maybe they twisted it completely out of our space, so that in our universe it just doesn't exist any more. Maybe it was just moved to another time sector. Maybe they dumped it in the middle of the ocean. It might not be hard for the Thresholders. But if they keep it up, it could be catastrophic for us."

"But why?" McEvoy burst out. "What are we doing to hurt them?"

"I don't know. But I think somebody had better find out before you do it any more." She hesitated. "Probably Robert could help find out if you turned that gadget off long enough to give him time. Probably you and Dr. Merry could help, too, if you would."

McEvoy shook his head angrily. "Do you realize what you're asking me to do? You're suggesting that I go before the International Joint Conference—the toughest crowd of practical politicians and businessmen the world has ever known—and tell them, 'Sorry, fellows, but we have to close down this promising transmatter project right now because some spooks from the fourth dimension seem to be taking offense and biting off pieces of our universe.' Oh, this is ridiculous!"

Hank Merry looked at his chief. "You saw what the boy did, John. He didn't go by transmatter."

"I know what I saw," McEvoy snapped. "But I also know this woman, and I know she thinks this Threshold universe is her personal property, somehow, so she can just shut me out any time I get too close to it. Well, she's wrong. There's not a nickel's worth of evidence that your transmatter has anything to do—"

He broke off as the wall speaker suddenly blared his name. "Dr. McEvoy…Dr. McEvoy…extension 301, please. Urgent!" Glowering at Gail Benedict, McEvoy stalked to the lab phone. He spoke sharply into it, then listened in silence for a long moment, his face going gray. "You're dead certain they're onto that?…Yes…Yes…" He shot a glance at Gail. "Look—tell them she's gone. No, I don't know where, just gone. And tell them that we've run into snags and had to close down the machine for a while, and then route the Security people to me personally. I can snarl them up for a while."

McEvoy turned away from the phone, obviously shaken. "Okay, you win," he said to Gail. "Your call through the Hoffman Center was traced by Security, and now somebody in Washington has connected up our old Threshold project with these disasters, and they want you for questioning, very badly. As well as Merry and me. They didn't sound very pleasant about it, either. Especially since there's been another—incident."

"Philadelphia?" Gail said.

"Upstate New York, just a few minutes ago," McEvoy said. He slammed his hand viciously into his palm. "A square mile chunk of farmland disappeared, left a hole forty miles deep. With all of Lake Erie pouring into it."

There was a stunned silence. Then Robert said, "A government interrogation could tie us up for weeks."

"I know. But you're going to have to get out of here fast if you want to avoid it. When the Security boys move in they don't waste time."

"Can you get this machine stopped, and cover for us?"

McEvoy nodded. "I'll stop it as fast as I can get the red tape unwound. But I can't stop it indefinitely. The pressures to get a transmatter operating are going to pull it right out of my hands."

"Then we'll have to work fast," Robert said. "I have an idea of what we might do, but I'll need some help. Can Dr. Merry go with us?"

"If I can help," Hank said.

"Then let's move!" Robert jotted down a Massachusetts phone contact for McEvoy. "This number and address aren't listed, and even Security can't pry it loose without risking a privacy suit. Keep a line open for us; we'll keep you posted on what we're doing."

"You'd better. But get moving; the guards here are already alerted. If Security gets here first, you'll never get out of the building."

"We'll get out," Robert said confidently. "Don't worry."

They started down the corridor from the lab, Gail on one side of Hank Merry, Robert on the other. "Now listen carefully," Robert said to Hank. "We may have to short-cut if we run into trouble. We can take you too, if we have hold of your arms. If you hear me say, 'Here goes!' you shut your eyes and keep them shut, and hold your breath. We'll be able to do the rest—I think."

It seemed like an unnecessary precaution until Robert saw two tall men falling in behind them down the corridor. "Oh, oh," he said. "Walk fast, but don't run." As they quickened their pace, so did the men. The first one caught up with them as they stepped into the elevator. Robert placed both hands on the man's chest and shoved him back into the corridor as Gail

punched the up button for the next higher floor. The door slammed in the man's face and the elevator shot upward.

The next floor looked clear until they spotted a man standing near the stairwell. "The other way," Hank Merry said. "We can get the executive elevator."

"No time," Robert said. The man was already moving in on them. "This way." He started down the corridor away from the man, with Gail and Hank on his heels. He tried a door along the corridor, found it locked. He half-ran to the next door as the Security man broke into a run, shouting at them. Finally a third door opened. "Quick," Robert said. "In here!"

The door slammed in the Security man's face as he approached it. He jerked it open, tumbled into a small lab room; a single technician looked up from his work, startled.

"Where did they go?" the detective demanded.

"Huh? Who?" said the technician.

"The three of them. They just came in here—" The detective stared around the small empty room. There were no other doors. Baffled, he began throwing open cabinets. "I saw them come in."

The technician snorted. "Nobody's opened that door all morning."

The Security man made a choking sound. Turning back to the corridor door, he thrust it open…

…and walked into nothing.

A mile outside the Telcom Laboratory gates a cruising aircar paused to load three passengers, and then buzzed into the sky in a northeasterly direction.

—13—

For the first ten minutes or so, it appeared they had succeeded. The aircar buzzed steadily northward. Robert and Gail got settled in front; Hank Merry sat clutching the arms of the rear seat, looking decidedly green about the gills. He had felt Robert suddenly clutch his arm there in the corridor, and he had closed his eyes as instructed…but he had not been prepared for the sudden lurch, the sudden gaping void of silence and weightlessness, the terrifying sensation of whirling helplessly down into a bottomless pit; and then, equally suddenly, the second lurch and the unexpected blow of solid ground under his feet again as Robert said, "Okay, you can open your eyes now." His stomach was still churning, and he felt so weak and drained that he couldn't even ask what on earth had happened.

Nor could Robert have told him, nor Gail either. Gail had been braced for the jolt when they passed through to the Other Side. For Robert it was an everyday experience. But for a practical scientist who expected two plus two to equal four every time, no matter what, there was no possible preparation that could have helped at all.

Hank was still trying to get his breath when the little aircar suddenly veered from its course, and began to lose altitude rapidly. The loudspeaker on the dashboard suddenly squawked. "Fasten your seat belts, please, and prepare for landing."

"That's funny," Robert said. "They couldn't have spotted us so soon."

Hank glanced at his watch. "I'm afraid they could have. With a fast alarm, the computers could tag every aircar that took off within a fifty-mile radius of the place at the critical time, and drag them all in to the nearest control center."

"But we can't face a dragnet right now," Robert said.

"I think we can beat it," Hank said. "Watch." He crawled into the front seat, threw a switch under the altimeter, and began manipulating control buttons by hand. The speaker fell silent and the car turned northward again. "Now, if we just disconnect the air-ground control, they'll have to scan several hundred thousands cubic miles of space to be sure they've got us," he said. "We may have time to get where we're going."

"I didn't know you could put these things on manual," Robert said wonderingly.

Merry grinned as he reached under the dash and disengaged a wire. "It's against Federal law, except in emergencies. But they couldn't afford to have aircars dropping like rocks all over the place just because a computer went out somewhere. And I suppose you might call this an emergency." He leaned back, handling the controls. "There. We can worry about Federal laws later. Right now, let's just get wherever it is we're going."

Gail told him the Springfield District co-ordinates, and the aircar settled on a steady northerly course. "Fine," Hank said. "And next, maybe you'd better tell me what this Threshold business is. I'm still in the dark."

As briefly as she could, Gail filled him in on the story of the early, disastrous discovery of the Threshold universe, her own first experience there, and its aftermath.

"Then you can cross into this…this place…anytime you want?" Hank asked.

"Pretty much," Gail said. "I don't very often. You got a taste of what it feels like; I have the same sort of reaction, except that I'm prepared for it."

"What about Robert, here?"

"Robert doesn't have the same trouble, partly because he's used to it, and partly because he's been crossing over ever since he was very small." Gail smiled. "My mind is so used to the way things are in this universe, with its three dimensions, its light, color, sound, shape, and everything else that I can't make any sense at all of the Other Side. Things there are just flatly impossible, to my mind. Robert at least has parallel experience with the way things are on the Other Side as well as on this side. Some of his circuits are connected, you might say. He has trouble explaining what he encounters over there, but at least everything there isn't wrong, to him. So he can pass through and back without having his wits jarred loose."

Merry frowned. "Why can't you explain what you find over there?" he asked Robert.

"Well, maybe I can give you an example," Robert said. "Suppose you stuck your hand in a pail of warm water. Your hand would feel warm then, wouldn't it?"

"Of course."

"And you could tell people that, and they'd know what you meant. Right?"

"Yes."

"Fine. Then suppose you stuck your hand in a pail of soapy water, how would that feel?"

"Well, soapy, I suppose. But I don't see—"

Robert shook his head. "That's fine, too, and other people could understand you. But suppose you stuck your hand in a pail of water and your hand felt green. How would you explain that to somebody else?"

"What do you mean, felt green?"

"Just what I said," Robert replied. "Green."

"Well, that's nonsense. Nobody's hand can feel green."

"Ah, but suppose that with this particular pail of water, without any warning, that happens to be exactly how your hand feels—green. Not warm, not cold, not wet, not soapy—just green. How would you explain it? You wouldn't. You couldn't tell anybody how your hand felt, not really. You could tell them it felt funny in some way, odd, different, but you couldn't tell them it felt green. But suppose the simple fact was that that was precisely how it felt, no other way." Robert shrugged. "So you're stuck. Part of your mind tells you, 'This is nonsense, this is impossible,' but another part is telling you at the same time, very distinctly, that your hand feels green, no matter what it looks like. And if you aren't used to this kind of thing, you can block the idea, or deny your senses, or sit chewing your nails down to the elbows trying to figure it out but you won't find any way to explain it, or to accept it. Hand feeling green equals nonsense, and that is that."

Robert looked at Hank and grinned. "Don't look so confused," he said. "I know what I'm talking about. Because in that Threshold universe it just so happens that your hand can feel green. At least mine can. Not always, but sometimes. Just the same way that something on my tongue can taste bright. Or that something I see looks melodic in the key of A minor. Or something sounds slippery. It's all the same thing. None of it is possible, but it's there. You either adjust to it, or it drives you batty. And you can't change it to fit in with your experience. You just have to add on a new item: 'In this place, under these circumstances, for reasons I don't understand and in a way I can't comprehend, my hand feels green.' " Robert grinned. "So there you are. Clear as mud? Or do you see what I'm talking about?"

Hank Merry shook his head. "I'm beginning to see why McEvoy's investigators lost their wits, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that's a start," Robert said. "Adults get their environments lodged pretty firmly in their minds. Tilt the environment a little, and they lie to themselves to overcome the tilt. Have you seen the tilt-houses that they have at the Hoffman Center? Where the walls and ceiling are painted on a slant, and you find yourself bending over trying to climb up a steeply inclined floor, when the floor is really as flat as a desk top? It's a shock; your senses can't adjust, so they start telling you lies. They say the floor has to be tilting up because the rest of the house tilts up; there just isn't any house where the walls tilt up and the floor stays flat. Therefore, it's impossible."

Merry nodded. "And if you throw too many 'impossibles' at a man all at once, he just blocks them all and withdraws."

"Exactly," Robert said. "If the jolt is too rough, he may not come back, either. He may just stay withdrawn, or deranged, or whatever you want to call it."

The aircar hit a down draft and dropped fifty feet, then righted itself. The concentration of

lights in New Haven District lay below them now.

"Okay," Hank said unhappily. "I'll try to gulp that down; but how did your mother manage to come out better than the others?"

"A combination of native ability and experience," Gail said. "Call it a high adjustment threshold, or high adaptability. And I'd actually been working to learn how to adjust better. Even so, I couldn't handle the Other Side. I still can't. I can tolerate it for brief periods, nothing more. Then everything in my mind says it's impossible, and I have to get out of there.

"But Robert started crossing through when he had no conscious data in his mind at all. He literally grew up with it, so that the Other Side became as much a part of his normal experience, when he was there, as this side was when he was here. After all, a tilt-house only throws you because it disagrees with what your mind says is true, from long experience. Put a new-born baby in a tilt-house half the time and in a normal room the other half, and something different happens. The baby grows up recognizing that there are two places, inside the tilt-house and outside. He knows they're different but neither one upsets him, because his whole experience tells him that one set of rules works inside and a different set works outside. He does fine, just as long as he doesn't try to make 'inside' rules apply to 'outside' or vice versa." Gail paused. "My husband thinks it may go deeper than that, with Robert, that he may actually be using some nervous system connections we don't know about, or that aren't normally in use. But when Ed gets into metabolism and neurophysiology, even I get confused."

The aircar had started dropping steadily now, and Springfield District lights spread out below. As they settled down to a landing slot on the roof of the Benedict apartment, Hank Merry sat shaking his head and looking at his hands and wondering how…how…anybody's hand could conceivably feel green.

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They had a quiet dinner, while Robert told Hank more about his experiences on the Other Side. Ed Benedict had little to say; he was upset about the brush with Security and worried about switching the aircar to manual to escape the dragnet. "Those people aren't stopped by the Privacy laws if they don't want to be," he said. "Which means they'll be fixing on you here in short order if we can't block them. And Robert can't drag the whole crew of us through to the Other Side to avoid them." He looked at his son and shook his head. "You'and your bright ideas! I'd better get the Medical Director on the line and brief him; maybe he can help discourage the Security people for a while. But if you have an idea of what can be done to untangle this mess, you'd better put it to work before we're all in detention."

"I wish I really had a good idea," Robert said. "All I can think is that somehow we have to make some kind of contact with the…the people…on the Other Side, to find out how the transmitter has been disturbing them."

"Have you ever had any contact with them before?" Hank asked.

"Not really, that I can remember."

"Are you sure there are people there?"

"Some sort of people, or beings, yes. And I'm sure they've been aware of me crossing back and forth."

Hank shook his head, perplexed. "It seems to me they must have made some kind of effort to communicate with you, at some time, if that were true."

"I think they have," Gail interrupted. "A long time ago." She looked at Robert. "Don't you remember back when you were six or seven, those funny things you kept coming back with? Bits of metal, wood, paper? We never understood what they were supposed to be, but you used to tell us that you thought they were trying to make friends with you, and you didn't know what to do about it."

Robert nodded. "Yes, I remember. They did seem to be interested, then, but nothing ever got through. And then they seemed to give up, and there hasn't been any hint of it for a long time, for years."

"But now apparently there is, again," Hank said.

"Apparently."

"I wonder what would happen if you deliberately tried to contact them, in some way that might connect you up with the transmatter business."

"My idea, exactly," Robert said. "But how?"

"Well, it seems to me one form of contact would be an exchange of artifacts. It sounds as if they handed you that pencil for a purpose. Suppose you took it back to them, along with something else, say a flashlight battery. That might demonstrate that we have knowledge of electricity and magnetism, something we would practically have to be sharing with any physical universe."

Robert considered. "It might work," he said finally. "Certainly it's worth a try, and if we could exchange things that have any meaning to the Other Side, we'd have a chance of moving on from there—" He looked at Gail. "Can we find a flashlight battery around here? And that pencil? I think I'd better go back on through right now."

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Once again, there was something indefinably different when Robert Benedict turned the odd corner to cross over into this strange, dark, silent place.

Once again, he tried to sense what the difference was. After the first shock of the change, he stood very still, listening, peering around him, searching for the source. He was aware of the familiar jumble of confusing impossibilities here, the same distorted geometrical sensations as always, but there was something else now, too. It seemed to him, suddenly, that there had always been something more to his perception of this strange universe than the things he perceived with his ordinary senses. There had always been a strange atmosphere here as well, an aura, a vague, unnameable awareness, as though there were things he could feel about this Threshold universe from deep in his mind, as well as the things he could see and touch and hear. And now the difference he could feel that way was a sense of dreadful wrongness here which he had never felt before, and the overpowering feeling that this time the Thresholders had been waiting for him to come

through.

He felt the thump-thump of his heartbeat and his own labored breathing, as fear and panic began swelling in his mind. But this time he fought for control, deliberately forcing his mind into the hard, tempered channels that had always kept him safe here before. Something was wrong…but what? No sense of menace or danger…not that. Welcome? Not that either, exactly. Expectation? Perhaps. Hope? Closer…closest of all, maybe. A sense of hope combined with threat. Above all, a sense of time running out, a sense of desperation.

He began moving. Not walking—his legs were a part of the crazy patchwork of geometrical shapes that whirled about him in this place, and he could not control them. But in response to the mental impulse that had always allowed him" to move before, he and his body-patchwork began to shift and slide, floating gently downward, it seemed, to some other area of this place. It seemed to him that his body image—his shadow-self, as he had always thought of it—was split-up more intricately than usual, separated in an odd fashion. As always, the shadow parts whirled about him in concentric circles, clearly ordered and revolving in perfect sequence (except that they turned corners). Not strange to Robert; that geometry had always seemed right over here, to his practiced young mind, the eternal kaleidoscopic switch and counterswitch of an insane but orderly geometry. A greater intricacy when he moved, but now something else as well. He paused, watched, listening, trying to crystallize the vague feeling in his vitals, the feeling he had never encountered before in seventeen years of crossing the Threshold.

Fear.

It swept through him like an icy draft, sending chills through his mind. Raw, naked fear, cutting into his mind like a razor, cold and unmistakable. Fear…but not his fear. Their fear.

The Thresholders were desperately afraid!

He knew they were all about him now, appearing as aberrations in the crazy-quilt pattern of things around him. As he moved, they moved with him, and their fear struck him like a physical blow, driving through him in waves, like a tightly directed beam. They were afraid, and more: they were trying to let him know they were afraid. Was that why they had detained him, before? Maybe. He couldn't be sure. He couldn't be sure now of anything but this one certain thing: here, now, in this place, the Thresholders were in mortal terror of something.

He racked his brain, trying to remember. Long ago, it seemed to him, he had sensed emotional contact of this sort before. Back when there had been some attempt to contact him he could remember sensing almost-human emotions here that he had thought were his own, yet clearly came from the universe around him: joy, elation, disapproval, even disciplinary impulses of depression and desolation. But never this desperation, this almost overpowering sense of fear.

The impact was staggering. His own fear began to grow again, responding to the sense of impending disaster he felt here. He probed again with his mind, trying to gather impulses, something that he could comprehend, from the shower of emotion washing through his mind. They were afraid, they were trying to tell him so, but behind their fear was a grim, cold, sense of threat. They were trying almost frantically to make clear contact with his mind, but there was a barrier there, like a brick wall seven feet thick, that stopped them.

And stopped him…as it always had. A barrier, unscalable, unbreakable, totally rock solid.

Suddenly he wanted most desperately to cross back, to talk to Gail, to ask her what to

do. He felt utterly helpless here, and longed for Gail's steady eyes and careful way of trying to help him think. He was suddenly deathly afraid to stay here, afraid because of their fear. Something was horribly wrong, but he could not guess what; all he knew was that it frightened him, and he wanted to get away from it, get away.

Then he remembered the pencil and the flashlight battery. He had come here to give them those. He was aware that they were still part of his own shadow-body, and suddenly he hurled them away from him, crying out silently in his mind, "Here, take these, make something of them, I can't do anything more, I don't know how."

Something changed. Like a sudden lull in a violent gale, he felt the Thresholders' fear recede. The pencil and the battery, part of his shadow-body before, now moved apart to form their own individual patterns of circles, and there was a pause, silent, breathless, waiting.

Suddenly, something else joined the pattern of circles of his shadow-body, and Robert felt something cold to his senses, smooth and metallic. He couldn't tell what it was but suddenly the sense of fear in his mind was gone, replaced by a feeling of warmth and reassurance. Once again he felt himself being moved, the strange object moving with him. Then he was back to the original crossing place, and nothing was holding him back now. Feeling drained and exhausted, he turned through the proper angle—

And flinched at the sudden, familiar light of the apartment, with Gail and Hank Merry and his father staring down at his perspiring face. Robert stood up (he had come back sitting on the floor) and shook his head to clear away the familiar queasy sensation of crossing through.

It was then that he saw the strange object in his hand: a dull gray metallic box.

"What is it?" Gail Benedict asked, when she was sure Robert was all right. She took the box from his hands and turned it over. "How did you get it?"

Robert shook his head. "I don't know. They gave it to me, I think."

"But what are you supposed to do with it?"

"I don't know."

Ed Benedict looked at his son sharply. "You look bushed," he said. "They didn't try to hurt you, did they?"

"Oh, no…no. Nothing like that." Robert rubbed his head. "It's confused. They were really trying to get something across to me, this time, and they were afraid. Then when I gave them the pencil and the battery, they gave me that, whatever it is."

Hank took the box from Gail and studied it closely. It was square, with beveled edges all around, colored a dull metallic gray. About six inches square, Hank guessed, weighing a pound and a half. It felt solid. In the center of one side were four shiny studs; otherwise, there was no break anywhere in its surface. Hank turned it over in his hand, shook it, held it to his ear. "Beats me," he muttered finally. "It seems to be sealed at all the seams."

Ed Benedict looked at the box and handed it back to Robert. "Try to think, son. What could this thing be?"

Robert shook his head again. "I just haven't any idea." He examined the box, trying to remember the last, fleeting sensation he had felt before crossing back—the sudden

relaxation of fear and threat, the odd feeling of warmth and encouragement. "I know it sounds silly," he said, "but I had a peculiar feeling when they gave me this that it was a toy of some kind. Something for me to play with. They were afraid, and they were threatening me, in a way—maybe even trying to frighten me. Yet I felt they were giving me a toy. To play with!"

Robert frowned and bent over the odd gray box, fingering the shiny studs on the side. "Maybe it's supposed to make music," he said. "Or maybe if I press one of these buttons the thing will open up—"

Hank Merry shot out his hand in alarm, trying to stop the boy, but he was too late. Robert had already pressed the first button on the side of the box—

And they watched appalled as the entire wall between the living room and kitchen crumbled gently into dust.

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For a long moment they stood staring in disbelief. The wall had been there a bare instant before, with its painting, its bookshelves, the door into the kitchen. Now tiny whirlwinds of dust rose from a heap of dry powder, and a slight gust of air stirred through the gaping hole.

Robert Benedict stared first at the wall, then at the gray box, horrified. Gail whispered, "Robert! What did you do?"

His hand trembled, and he dropped the thing as if it had burnt him. "Nothing. I just pushed a button, nothing more. It—it didn't even make any noise!"

Hank Merry was down on his knees examining the box again. He touched the smooth surface gingerly, felt the slight increase in warmth. Ed Benedict joined him, but Hank shook his head. "Don't come near it," he warned. "Don't even touch it." He leapt to his feet and crossed the room to peer at the smooth edges of the gutted wall. No ragged border, no rubble, as though a sharp knife had sliced a hole out of the middle of it, eight feet in diameter. The cut edges looked totally undisturbed, almost polished.

Hank picked the box up again and looked at Robert. "That's quite a toy you brought back," he said soberly. "Didn't they warn you about it?"

"When they gave it to me? No. Just the opposite, in fact. I had the feeling that they wanted to please me, make me feel better. They seemed to know I was scared half out of my wits, and this was supposed to make up for frightening me, or something."

Ed Benedict walked through the hole in the wall into the kitchen. A corner of the table was gone there, but no other damage. He stooped to run his fingers through the pile of dust. "It doesn't make sense," he said. "They must have been trying to tell you something, or show you something."

"They were," Robert said. "I'm certain of it. They were trying urgently to contact me. That was part of what was different. They've never seemed to want to bother, before."

"But this time they did," Hank Merry said grimly.

"I thought so," Robert said helplessly. "Oh, they've tried to contact me before, in a way. Every now and then I've gotten impressions from them. Feelings, inside me, the way you suddenly feel very happy about something, or suddenly feel bad because you've done something wrong. Only those feelings I had were never really mine. I knew that I wasn't feeling anything at all; whatever it was, was being pushed into my mind from outside, from them. Their feelings, the Thresholders."

"Only this time something new was added," Ed Benedict said.

"Yes," Robert said. "At least, this was the first time I ever felt fear. They were afraid of me, or of something to do with me. And I had the feeling that unless I did "what they wanted, they would do something to me, and that made me afraid. And then they gave me that box."

Hank Merry had been listening quietly through all this. Now he turned to Ed Benedict. "Maybe I'm dense, but something here just doesn't add up. In all the time Robert has been crossing into this…universe…he's never felt any threat at all?"

"Not in the slightest. Any more than walking into a dark closet and closing the door would be a threat. If he'd ever been menaced in any way, we would have stopped it then and there, at least until Robert started doing his own deciding," Ed smiled ruefully. "We don't decide for him, now. He does his own thinking, and he can be very stubborn when he wants to. Just like his mother."

"But even though he can cross through at will, there's still a barrier between him and these Thresholders?"

"Not a physical barrier," Ed said. "More of a semantic barrier, a barrier of symbols and meanings. Look at it this way: two people can only talk about something if they both use the same symbols—words, for instance—to refer to the same thing. You and I can talk about that gray box there, and discuss it, and puzzle over it, and perhaps reach some conclusions about it, because we're both using the same words and referring to the same thing: a gray box that we both saw behave in a certain peculiar way. But if we were discussing hunting, and I talked about going hunting bear, and you talked about going hunting bare, and neither one of us realized we weren't referring to the same thing, we'd have trouble reaching agreement, wouldn't we?"

"Well—of course. That's simple basic semantics. You've got to agree about what your word refers to."

"Fine. But suppose there's nothing in the Threshold universe that we can describe with any words or symbols. Suppose there's nothing in our universe that the Thresholders have any word or symbol to describe. How do we communicate? How do we make any contact at all? We see a gray box here that plays funny tricks; it came over to this side in Robert's hands. But suppose that gray box is something completely different on the Other Side."

"Like what?"

"I don't know…any more than Robert does." Ed Benedict spread his hands. "Dr. Merry, we've been trying to breach this barrier ever since Robert was knee-high to a grasshopper. We've never made it. He has literally grown up in two universes, this side and that side. We've had every psychological investigator in the whole Hoffman Center organization climbing the walls trying to figure out what is actually happening in Robert's mind. Nobody has any answers, except that Robert probably has a brain that is different from any other human brain in the world."

Merry frowned. "You mean its physical structure is different?"

"Oh, no," Ed said quickly. "Not anatomically. A neuro-anatomist would find that he has a brain made up of nerve cells just like anybody else's, in roughly the same number as anybody else, arranged in the same way, with the same circuits. There's no physical difference. It's a difference in the behavior of those nerve cells, and a difference in the way data is stored in his mind. For one thing, we're virtually certain that Robert is actually using a lot more of his brain than most human beings.

"Normally," Ed went on, "a human being has a bilateral brain structure, a brain divided into two symmetrical halves, with nerve connections just like computer circuits connecting them. And since the early 1900's we've known that the human body is controlled almost entirely from one side of the brain, except for the visual apparatus and some other sensory centers, taste, touch and so forth. But almost all body movement, voluntary or involuntary, and practically all the memory storage is handled by one side only. Usually for a right-handed person it's the left side of the brain that does the work, and vice versa for the left-handed person."

"Okay," Hank said, "but I don't see what that has to do with Robert."

"Maybe quite a lot," Ed replied. "Usually if the inactive side of the brain is damaged suddenly—a bad concussion, say—there isn't much change in control of body activity. But if the controlling side, the dominant side, is injured the same way, you can have all sorts of changes: paralysis, loss of memory, the works. If too much controlling brain tissue is damaged too suddenly, the party is out of luck. But sometimes when the damage to the dominant side comes on slowly—say from a brain tumor slowly destroying nervous tissue—the brain's control can be transferred to the inactive side. People who have been partially paralyzed by strokes or bullet wounds can sometimes even be taught to use the undamaged side of the brain, a transfer of data and function on a large scale. And if it works, they can often be restored to normal function in spite of the damage."

Ed smiled at Robert, who was examining the gray box again closely. "As far as we can tell, Robert is different from most people. He doesn't have this transfer of information from one side to the other in the ordinary sense of the word. He doesn't seem to have any large inactive brain area, either. Instead, it appears that he may have grown up with two separate and distinct nervous systems, each one controlled by a separate half of his brain. One side for this universe, one for the other. Two completely separate sets of data, experience, knowledge, with no significant crossover between them at all."

"But there must be some connection," Hank said. "Some way to correlate information on one side with information on the other."

Ed hesitated. "Well, there are certainly cross-connections between the two sides, one thing that Gail doesn't have. That's what makes it possible for Robert to cross through and back in comfort. The data in his mind for one side is completely useless on the other, but he can correlate to some degree by comparison or analogy. He can also remember on one side what happened on the other. In fact, he can tell us practically everything that his senses pick up over there; he just can't tell us what those things mean. Nor has he ever been able to use his experience to predict what happens next. Of course, that was all right as long as it was safe for him to go through, as long as he wasn't frightened, or hurt, or damaged in some way. But when it comes to bringing back little nightmares like that box there, we're dealing with something else altogether."

"I guess we are!" Hank agreed. He walked over to inspect the disintegrated wall again.

"And he thought it was a toy! More like a loaded gun, I'd say. For a toy, it packs a whale of a wallop. Well, at least it's something tangible he brought back from that side, and he left something over there that he didn't bring back. I'm just very glad that transmatter is turned off until we can explore what's going on over there, hard as it may be on the boy. I'd hate to think what they might start doing if they really got mad at us." Hank frowned, looking around. "Speaking of Robert, where did he go?"

Across the room the video-telephone suddenly rang, cutting sharply into the quiet room. Gail Benedict flipped the speaker switch, listened a brief moment. "Just a moment," she said. "I'll put him on." She nodded to Hank, her eyes puzzled. "It's McEvoy," she said, "and he says to use the scrambler."

Hank crossed the room to the phone, saw McEvoy's worried face on the screen. As he was punching the buttons of his personal scrambler code to unlock the electronically garbled words from the wire, he realized vaguely that Robert had been gone from the room for some time. "Well, John, what is it?"

McEvoy looked terrible, with his face unshaven and his eyes incredibly tired and harried. His voice sounded terrible too, a scratching grate that was half incoherent even unscrambled. "Hank, you've got to get back down here, no matter what's going on there. This gadget of yours is running amok."

Something stirred in Hank's mind, something very unpleasant. "I thought you'd shut it off," he said sharply. "You mean it's still operating?" He glanced around the room again; where was Robert?

McEvoy's voice dissolved into a string of expletives. "You bet your life it's still operating!" he howled. "What do you think I'm talking about? You leave me with this Frankenstein here, and you take off on a joy ride. I tell you—"

"John, what's been happening down there?"

"I can't stop it, that's what. Look—I spent six hours yesterday with the Joint Conference Committee. I laid it on the line to those vultures, told them outright that the transmatter had to go off for a while. I even took the legal staff with me to block any move they might make. Yes, they were ready to slap an injunction on us to keep it operating, with the weight of the World Court behind it. I invoked the Rights of Privacy laws and endangered our whole Joint Conference budget for the next ten years and finally won twenty-four hours, twenty-four hours, mind you, before they would get a court order to take possession of our blueprints and wiring diagrams to turn them over to somebody else to work with. I understand some Russian has been using Hunyadi plates too, and could pick right up where we quit. But I got twenty-four hours' grace, and called on the spot for your boys to break the circuits, and they broke the circuits, all right, cut off all the power—"

Hank took a deep breath of relief. "Then it is off, at least, for twenty-four hours."

Another howl from McEvoy. "That's just it! 'It's still running. It hasn't got any power source, but we put a test block on the transmitter plate and it goes poof and turns up on the receiver—or disappears—or what have you, just the same." McEvoy mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Hank, I just got through testing air-flow in that laboratory. That machine is busy sucking atmospheric air in one end and pushing it out the other when we aren't feeding it something more solid. It's moving two cubic yards of laboratory atmosphere from one side of the room to the other every minute, molecule by molecule."

Hank stared at his chief's face on the screen. "John, it can't be operating without

power."

"Well, maybe it can't, my friend, but it is. And whoever took those bites out of Manhattan and upstate New York isn't any happier than before."

"What do you mean?"

"More land grabs," McEvoy said. "Security blacked them out, as soon as I'd talked to the Joint Conference, but the bottom floor and two sub-basements of a Camden District office building went about an hour ago—just vanished—and the whole forty stories above it fell into the hole. Talk about a mess. And now a theater in Jersey City has been hit. Sliced the whole thing off four feet from ground level, people and all. Only thing it missed were a couple of small children and the theater cat—"

"Like sighting in a rifle," Hank muttered.

"Huh?"

"The old time rifles the Germans used in the First World War," Hank said. "No sight adjustments, so they had to guess distance and windage. Took about three shots before the sniper could get his range. But that fourth shot—hoo, boy!"

"Look, man, I don't know what German rifles have got to do with—"

"I mean that these aren't random strikes," Hank said tightly. "I don't think they're retaliation, either. They want that thing stopped; they're grabbing for the chunk of our universe that has that transmatter in it, and their aim is lousy but they're getting closer. And I don't think they're going to stop until they hit target zero."

"But I'm trying to stop it for them," McEvoy groaned. "If you have some other ideas—"

Hank shook his head, thinking furiously. Some kind of feedback circuit or reverberation that kept it operating with the power cut. The way a radio would keep operating for a few milliseconds after it was unplugged; only a "few seconds" in this case could mean days, maybe weeks—

"John, dismantle the thing."

McEvoy shook his head. "I don't dare. The Joint Conference made that clear. If we tear it down, we're vulnerable to arrest. We've got hold of one we can't let go, Hank. A working transmatter has been too critically important for too long. If word ever got out that one was operating and then was dismantled, every stock exchange in the world would fall apart at the seams. It's that bad. The economy would just crumble." He glanced over his shoulder. "Anyway, I've tried it and it doesn't work. At least I've dismantled some of the circuitry that could be reassembled quickly. It doesn't seem to make a bit of difference. You've got to get back here and help me get it stopped."

"I'm working at it," Hank said. There was an idea in his mind—where was Robert?—only vaguely formulated, but an idea. "I'm getting some impression of what we're dealing with, this other universe, I mean. There isn't any real contact, but there has been some exchange. Something we're doing is stirring up trouble over there, maybe trouble like we never dreamed of. And even dismantling the transmatter may not help now. Look, give me a couple more hours here, and then I'll be back. If there are any more strikes, getting any closer to the lab geographically, call me at once. And John—" Hank hesitated, then took the plunge. "Be sure you have constant contact with at least three points outside the lab, including one on the West Coast and one in Asia, with orders to call me here if—well, if

contact is broken."

"You mean you're thinking—"

"—the same thing you are," Hank said. "That the Thresholders' aim may get better. That they may hit target zero and get the transmatter and you with it."

He flipped off the connection before McEvoy could protest and turned back to the room again just as Robert Benedict reappeared, out of nowhere, with a curious black object in his hand.

"Where did you go?" Hank Merry demanded, as the family crowded around the youth.

"Back through again," Robert said.

"Oh, Robert," Gail said. "You've got to tell us when you're going. Especially after that box thing. It just isn't safe, and if worst came to worst, I could at least go through after you."

Robert looked weary, tired and drained. "I thought I'd never get back; it seemed like hours in there."

"Only a couple of minutes, on this side," Hank said. "But your mother's right."

"That long? It's usually only a fraction of a second on this side. I must have been there a long time."

"But why did you go?" Hank said.

Robert turned angrily. "I didn't have much choice about it, so stop climbing on me. This time they pulled me through."

"You mean they tried to drag you back?"

"They didn't just try. They did it. I didn't even realize what had happened until I was across. And it was the same thing as before, only more so. More pressure, more fear, more tension. And then another of their little presents before they pushed me back out again." He held up the object in his hand, blinking at it. "And the same feeling, that I should be pleased with it, somehow."

He turned the object over in his hands. It looked like a lump of black plastic modelling clay, irregular, but with a smooth hard pellet at one end. He molded it in his hands, fashioning a small animal figure. It took shape readily and held it. "Good clay," he said. "See how soft and smooth it is? Now look." He pressed the pellet in the end and tossed the figure casually to Hank. "Think fast," he said.

Merry caught it, then wrung his hand with a squeal of pain. The figure fell to the floor with a dull thud. Merry picked it up, gaped at it. "Why, it's as hard as rock."

"I'll go one better," Robert said. "It looks like cast steel to me. Now squeeze the pellet again."

It was solid, hard, cool and metallic in his hands. Hank squeezed the pellet end sharply with thumb and forefinger, and suddenly the mass was soft and pliable as putty again. He jammed the nose of the animal figure with his thumb, leaving a deep dent from his nail, and squeezed the pellet again, felt the material abruptly congeal in his fingers, warming slightly as it hardened. He stared at it closely, tapped it with a fingernail. "It is cast steel."

"Yes. With a difference, as you see. They gave it to me. I think they dragged me through to give it to me. They tried to keep me there again, and they're still frightened, plenty frightened, and they tried to frighten me again, too, but this time I was onto them. One thing I was sure of. That last gadget, the box, caused some real chagrin over there. It wasn't supposed to disintegrate walls, at least this was the strong impression that I got. They were horrified to know that something odd had happened with it, and they knew, apparently."

Robert turned to Gail. "And another thing: you can quit worrying. They aren't going to hurt me. They're trying their best to get something across to me, I'm sure of it; they're even afraid that I won't ever come back through when I leave. But why do they give me things like this?"

Hank looked dubiously at the plastic that became steel. "That," he said, "is the prize question. I think an answer to that would clear the air a good bit."

"It would," Gail agreed. "It might offer some way to communicate with them. But what's the answer?" She glared at Robert as if he were personally responsible for bringing this new enigma about. "You're the only one who can tell us. Honestly, I sometimes think you're just playing tricks on us. Or else you have a touch of imbecile about you."

Ed Benedict, who had been examining the funny-putty thoughtfully, looked up slowly at Gail, his eyes suddenly wide. "You know, my girl, I think maybe you've hit the nail right on the head."

The room was suddenly still. Robert blinked at his father, frowned. "I don't understand."

"These gadgets they've given to you," Ed said. "And the way they've tried to keep you from crossing back. And your feeling that they are suddenly, desperately trying to contact you in some way, don't those seem to add up to something?"

"Not much," Robert said.

"Well, they do to me. I'm wondering if these gadgets aren't intended as exactly what you 'felt' they were supposed to be."

"You mean toys?" Robert said.

"Toys. And nothing more."

Hank Merry shook his head. "It seems to me that this box affair is pretty potent for a toy. Like handing a loaded pistol to a five-year-old and telling him to go play with it."

"You mean that it seems to have some pretty potent properties over here," Ed corrected him. "Not necessarily over there. Robert, what did that box appear like over there?"

"A bunch of fragments," Robert said. "Certainly not like a box. Just a collection of perfectly impossibly shaped pieces without any functional connection at all. I've never seen anything exactly like it before, over there, although I've seen things that seemed very similar. They've never stayed with me when I've crossed back, before, but now that I think of it—" He scratched his head. "I'm not even dead sure I was supposed to bring it back. Maybe that was some part of the pressure to stay that I felt. Maybe over there that box was a perfectly innocuous, harmless toy like the steel-clay is. Maybe it wasn't until I brought it back through to this side that it became something dangerous or destructive. Something it wasn't supposed to be at all!"

"Even so, it doesn't make sense," Hank said. "If they're so upset about something over there, and if you're their only real contact with this side where the disturbance seems to be

coming from, why would they be fooling around giving you playthings?"

"Well, think about it!" Ed Benedict said, suddenly excited. "Assume that they're really in trouble, desperate trouble of some kind. And assume they think the trouble originates over here. Then take Robert, wandering back and forth for years, without hindrance, to them a person or thing or being that has access to this side. What better liaison could they look for? What better ambassador, if they could only find some kind of symbol that he could understand and reply to? Wouldn't they leap at the chance?"

"Probably. But why toys?"

They sat silently for a moment. Suddenly Robert laughed. "Dad, whom do you give toys to in your laboratory?"

Ed Benedict looked startled. "Why, to—to—" He blinked at Robert in amazement, then burst out laughing too. "Of course. What else? I think you've hit it on the head!"

"Hit what on the head?" Hank asked, now thoroughly confused.

"The answer. Of course these things are toys! It just never entered my mind—" He broke off. "Look, as Robert knows, we get lots of strange specimens in the Hoffman Center psych-testing labs. Murderers, psychopaths, persecution complexes, the works. We get frightened children and senile old men, mentally impaired youngsters, feeble-mind children, withdrawn children living in such a fog we can't find any way to reach them. All kinds, and always the same problem: getting through to them. Some patients just won't talk or respond at all. Some won't do anything but sit in a corner and blubber, or cringe whenever anybody comes near. Some are so deranged and violent we have to stop them from screaming and climbing the walls long enough even to get their attention. And some may be so far out, so feeble-minded that we can't even find word-symbols we can use that will register with them." Ed Benedict smiled. "In cases like that, when we have to make some kind of contact, there's a technique we use—simple and kind and often very effective. We approach the deranged or feeble-minded patient and offer him candy. Or a toy."

"Well," Gail snapped, "that's fine for a mental case, or a feeble-minded child. But you can't pretend that Robert is—"

"Feeble-minded? Not here, I can't. On this side, Robert is a very bright, clever, perceptive young man. Too bright for his own good, sometimes. He handles problems logically and usually gets the right answers. He uses words and symbols very well, and he's learning how to use them better all the time, over here. But on the Other Side—" The man looked at his son sadly. "I'm afraid that these toys mean just one thing. As far as the people on the Other Side can tell, Robert is nothing more nor less than a blabbering idiot. And if that is the case, and he is our sole ambassador to these people on the other side, our one and only hope of making meaningful contact with them, then we may be in trouble that nobody can get us out of."

—17—

For the first time since the transmatter had started working, and the day Robert Benedict had had his first jolt of fright on the Other Side, it seemed that they had nailed down something solid. Something that meant something, that made sense. The point of a wedge

driven into an impenetrable surface, a foot in the door, one simple fact that might be true on the far side of that vague, mysterious Threshold they were facing that could also be understood in its true meaning on this side.

And it was a fact they couldn't use. A depressing, infuriating, frustrating fact that couldn't be acted upon, tantalizing as it was. A fact that didn't help, that even seemed to dash all hope of help.

They turned it over in every direction they could think of, sitting there in the Benedict living room with its ruined wall, its strange pile of dust and the two specimens on the table before them—a misshapen lump of black plastic that turned to cast steel on command and a wildly dangerous gray box with beveled edges, sealed seams and four studs along the bottom. Who could say what devastation would result from pressing the other three studs? None of them cared in the slightest to find out.

Robert lay on the couch, half-dozing part of the time, aching in every bone and so tired he could hardly keep his eyes open. Ed and Gail were talking urgently, trying to think through the implications of the idea, unable to hide their concern for Robert, worried at the price these trips through to the Other Side were already chalking up in terms of physical exhaustion, and frightened now at whatever nameless dangers he might face if he crossed through again (or was pulled through again; there was that also to consider now, all the more frightening because there was no way they could think of to prevent it or control it). Hank Merry paced the floor, McEvoy's panic call still fresh in his mind, with the ever-present awareness that a machine, his machine, his own creation, was somehow not obeying the commands it was given any longer, and was drawing them all into some kind of vortex of fury that he didn't even dare think of. They talked, and argued, and flared up in anger, and cooled down again, seeking somehow to find some answer that seemed to make some sense or offer some hope.

They came up with nothing whatever but a frustrating sense of failure, and the uneasy certainty that that failure was somehow, inexorably, leading to disaster beyond their imagination.

A busy, overpopulated planet, bursting its seams, hungry for the materials with which to build and grow, utterly unable to reach out for them because of the extortionate, bankrupting cost of reaching. A planet whose people violently needed, not just wanted, but needed those inaccessible materials if they were ultimately to survive. A people faced with the alternatives of war and waste, hatreds, pogroms, riots, bloodshed, violent depopulation, and reversion to conditions so primitive that no one alive could begin to remember what they were like; and along with that reversion, the loss of all that had been gained by those people over the centuries, the utter waste of their minds and capabilities, an end to the growth of knowledge and potential that had always been the legacy of human beings.

And so pointless, with the goal so near. For want of a nail, a shoe was lost; for want of a shoe a horse was lost; for want of a horse a battle was lost; for want of a battle, a kingdom was lost.

Men searched for that elusive nail and found only a pile of iron filings with no means to fashion a nail from it. Not that it couldn't be done; the laws of Nature declared that iron filings and an iron nail were part and parcel of the same substance. It was the how that baffled men. It was natural law that bound men and their space ships to the surface of their planet with the steel hoops of gravity, and natural law that made the transport of precious ores from Mars to Earth an economic disaster to contemplate. But other laws of Nature had hinted vaguely (as laws of Nature do) that other means of transport could be found, and the

Transmatter Project was born—a way to bypass the barrier of gravity and the exhaustingly costly rocket launchings and the staggering problems of re-entry with worthwhile payloads. To men like Hank Merry, confident that the laws of Nature could be discovered and then used in the service of men, the transmatter had been a challenge, a problem to be solved, nothing more. Vastly important, that problem, but solvable.

And so it was, perhaps, until suddenly the transmatter had seemed to leap the barrier of natural law and behave as nothing could behave, uncontrolled and uncontrollable by the men who had devised it in flat contradiction of what ought to be so. In Hank's search for a way to harness natural energies, his machine had inadvertently trespassed into a terra incognita, an area not even suspected, much less understood, where the laws of Nature seemed suspended, with what grim results nobody could guess.

And in a laboratory in New Jersey a machine, never actually completed, now half-dismantled, continued quietly to hum away, busily moving molecules of air from Point A to Point B in its own obscure fashion, and trespassing upon…what?…at the cost of…what?…and controllable…how?…and with something else…what?…on the receiving end not liking it a bit…and slashing back…how? and why? and to what end?

Above all, why? and to what end?

They had talked, and argued and speculated and come up with no answers. Merry told them of McEvoy's frantic plea. "I've got to go back, and without delay," Hank said. "I've got to try to find out why that wretched machine continues operating when it can't be operating, and see what, if anything, I can do to stop it." The others had to agree to that, and then there was the Joint Conference to think of, and McEvoy to think of, and the destruction of eighteen months of hard, painstaking work to think of. There was also physical danger to think of, if bits and pieces of the eastern seaboard were being chopped off and carried to perdition by some angry force across the Threshold. After much discussion it was finally decided that Robert and Gail should go back with Merry, if only in the hope that John McEvoy, on hearing what they had discovered, might think of some fresh lead for them to follow.

For Hank it was especially infuriating because something was in his mind, just out of reach of his consciousness; something that he had thought of before that was now eluding him, that might offer a route of exploration. He wasn't sure if it was something he had just forgotten, or something he had rejected as ridiculous, back when many things had seemed ridiculous that didn't seem so ridiculous now; but forgotten or blocked, it kept nudging his mind, and grope as he would, he couldn't quite recapture it.

So ultimately they had flown back down to New Jersey, after considerable argument from both ends with Security to guarantee unobstructed passage, and at length were met by a gray-faced McEvoy who looked old and tired and didn't seem to know whether to greet them with his usual half-angry bluster or to burst out crying. It was a baffled McEvoy, bad enough to Hank, who could not remember ever having seen McEvoy truly baffled before; and worse, a helpless McEvoy who somehow couldn't seem to do the right thing no matter which way he turned. Consequently, perhaps for 'the first time in his life, he simply sat there immobilized, not so much because he couldn't figure out what to do as because he couldn't figure out what not to do.

In the laboratory office, with the transmatter making its ominous whirring sound in the vaulted lab outside the door, they told McEvoy what they had found, what had happened, what conclusions they had drawn from these things. Hank made a swift examination of his machine, already dismantled far more than he had imagined McEvoy would dismantle it, and still puffing away at the air like some kind of idiot steam engine. McEvoy, for once in his

career, had listened with care, and not interrupted with his own burgeoning ideas, and nodded when he caught something and ticked down a note when there was something he thought he had missed.

McEvoy came to the same conclusion that they had come to earlier. "So our contact man is an idiot, to them," he said glumly. "Or seems to be, at least."

"Probably only seems to be," Gail offered. "A newborn baby in this world behaves like an idiot, too, you know, to someone who doesn't know any better. It has no symbols in its mind, nothing but instincts at first. The baby may have enormous potential, but until it learns about its surroundings from experience, and then learns to connect words up to things, he continues to respond like an idiot."

"That I can understand," John McEvoy said. "But Robert isn't a newborn baby."

"He may be the perfect equivalent on the Other Side," Gail said. "Robert can cross the Threshold, something he learned how to do, and has been practicing for a long time. And he can observe that universe on the Other Side. But what he observes is limited by his human nervous system. The physical universe around him there is tolerable because one part of his brain is packed full of experience—information for survival—that applies to that side of the Threshold. But the way Robert's brain is constructed, he simply can't handle their symbols. He isn't built right. It's like trying to teach a dog to sing 'Mother Machree.' All you get are barks and howls, if you get anything at all. The dog simply hasn't got the equipment to sing 'Mother Machree,' and if the ability to sing is your criterion of dog intelligence, then in that framework every dog on Earth is a canine idiot and always will be."

McEvoy nodded, fiddling with the black modeling clay. He had looked at the gray box earlier, but didn't touch it; he was nervous having a gadget around that could disintegrate walls at the touch of a button. "So if the Thresholders have symbols to express their thoughts, Robert can't pick them up, so his reactions continue to seem imbecilic to them."

"That's right," Gail said. "If the Thresholders really did try to contact him before, they got nowhere and dropped it. When their overtures fell flat, when they got what seemed like nothing but idiot responses, they quit bothering. After all, he wasn't hurting anything, then. But now, suddenly, they have to establish contact with him, idiot or not. Because something this side of the Threshold is doing something that threatens them, something so terrible that they're lashing back at us."

McEvoy looked at Robert. "And you've come to a dead end? You can't think of anything else you can do?"

Robert spread his hands. "Remember this no-contact thing works both ways, Dr. McEvoy. If I'm an idiot to them, they're also idiots to me. If I only had something to stand on—one single thing to get hold of—but I can't think what. I can't even find out what they're so terribly afraid of. Any more than Hank can figure out why his machine in there is working in spite of him. When you think of all the air that that thing has moved aimlessly from one side of that lab to the other—"

Hank Merry looked up suddenly and snapped his fingers. "Yes," he said softly. "Exactly. I knew there was something."

They looked at him. "What do you mean?" Robert asked.

"Something inconsistent. All that air, moving from Point A to Point B. Or those testing blocks, moved from Point A to Point B. We can't deny it happened, and it seems to be

driving the Thresholders to distraction, for some reason."

"But what's inconsistent?" asked Robert.

"You are," Hank said. "This machine moved a test block from one side of the lab to the other, and caused trouble. But you picked up a test block in your hands and moved it from one side of the lab to the other and didn't cause trouble. Why not?"

"Why, because I—I—well, I've been doing the same thing for years!"

"So I understand," Hank said. "Without any trouble. But this gadget tries it, and there's more trouble than you can shake a stick at, then and there. Why?"

Robert saw his point then. "I hadn't thought of it that way. It must mean that from their standpoint we aren't doing the same thing. From our standpoint, the test block gets from Point A to Point B in either case. But when I carried it, I carried it the right way, and when the transmatter carries it, it carries it the wrong way—"

"Like walking through a plate glass window to get outside," Hank said.

John McEvoy looked up. "I don't follow you," he said.

"Well, suppose you wanted to move from Point A inside a room to Point B just outside a plate glass window in the yard. If you walk over to the door at the right, go outside, and then walk back to the window, the way is clear. Of course, you could go directly from Point A to Point B, too, but you'd have to go through the window to do it. You'd get where you wanted to go, but at the expense of a mess of broken glass."

"But nobody in his right mind would do that!" McEvoy said.

"Not if he knew the difference," Robert said. "But I think Hank's right. Suppose you didn't know the difference between the right way and the wrong way! Suppose you couldn't see either the door or the plate glass window at all. You might do a whale of a lot of damage without knowing it, and then wonder why the landlord was suing you."

"Exactly," Hank said. "Apparently you have been going through to the Other Side the right way, and the transmatter has been shoving things through the wrong way. And as a consequence, we're in trouble and getting into much worse trouble very fast." He looked up at Robert.

"I wonder what would happen if you were to go through the wrong way, once. Through the plate glass window."

In the silence that followed, Robert turned and looked at the transmatter, witlessly humming away and shoving volumes of air from Point A to Point B.

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Gail Benedict protested the idea with a tenacity and stubbornness which surprised even McEvoy, first indignantly, then angrily, then bitterly, at last almost tearfully.

"It's bad enough that the boy is the only contact we have at all, and it's bad enough that he can't even go through now without getting tormented and frightened and trounced. But

now you're talking about using him where you know there's danger. You're asking him to try something he may not be able to control at all, and to take chances that you can't even guess at, much less begin to measure, and I'm not going to stand here and let you get away with it."

"It's the same universe over there, regardless of how he gets there," Hank Merry argued. "And he's the same person, with the same brain and the same knowledge."

"Maybe it's the same universe and maybe it's not. How do you know? The things you push through that machine are stirring up trouble. Robert never did. There's a reason, there has to be. You have a volcano that may be about to explode and you want somebody to crawl down in the crater to find out why!"

"There's no other way to find out, as far as we know. And Robert is the only one who has a chance."

"But how do you know that even Robert has a chance?" Gail stormed. They argued on while Robert listened, looking thoughtfully at the transmatter. Even McEvoy stewed and fumed and wondered whether some other approach—he didn't know just what—shouldn't be tried first.

But ultimately, of course, it was Robert who decided. "There isn't much choice," he pointed out to Gail. "I'm scared to go through even the usual way, and I'm not getting anywhere doing that. Apparently they can reach out and grab me any time they want to, or at least they could up in Massachusetts. Maybe they had a fix on me up there so they could grab me easily, and now that I've gone somewhere else they've lost their co-ordinates. Maybe they're taking bites out of our living room right now, trying to grab me. I don't know.

"It certainly looks like they're trying to center in on this laboratory in a grand style, hit or miss, a grab here and a grab there at random. If you check the map, their aim is getting closer. That's a guess—maybe they don't even know there is a transmatter. And I can't tell them anything, either. But maybe if I let the transmatter push me through, I can get some idea why it's taboo and the usual way isn't. If I can't tell them that we want to help, maybe I can at least show them. If they can recognize me right at the center of the source of trouble, right down in the volcano's crater, then maybe they'll recognize that we at least know we're causing some trouble and are trying to do something about it."

Gail shook her head. "You don't know what distortion there might be, going through that way. You don't know what might happen to you, or what shape you might be in when you got back out. You don't even know there'd be any way out again. Maybe the transmatter really is tearing things down and putting them back together again."

"Well, what about it?" Robert challenged Hank. "Do you think that's so?"

"No," Hank said. "I don't think it's doing anything at all to the molecular structure of things. I can't see any way it could be. It's half dismantled. I don't think now that it ever actually did what it was supposed to do. I think it's been taking things and shoving them bodily through someone else's backyard, that's what I think, and somehow tearing up the neighbor's garden in the process. I don't think we're dealing with subatomic forces here. I think we're talking about spatial dimension and direction. We may be talking about the whole energy-structure of a universe. I'm not sure what we're talking about, but I think we have to find out and very soon."

"Then let's find out," Robert said shortly. He cut off Gail's protest. "I don't like it any more than you do, but once I've gone through there I think I can get back out again." He hoped he

sounded more confident than he felt. "Hank, let's get going. How do I go about it?"

"Probably just climb up on the transmitter plate," Hank said. "That's where the draft is moving like smoke down a chimney. If that doesn't do it, we'll try—"

Robert shook his head impatiently and climbed up on the transmitter plate. What happened then was too fast for any of them to comprehend. Gail stared and burst out sobbing. Hank gripped the lab bench until his knuckles were white, totally immobilized. They all stood frozen as they watched, and only later tried to piece together exactly what they saw, or thought they saw, in that brief instant.

Robert disappeared like magic from the metal transmitter plate and reappeared in the precise same instant on the receiver plate. Followed in the same instant by a second Robert, and a third, and a fourth…

Multiple Roberts, moving jerkily back to the transmitter plate, like the images thrown by an old, shaky motion picture camera run far too slowly, like shadow images on a TV screen when the aerial is out of phase, flick, flick, flick, Robert-1, Robert-2, Robert-3, moving back and vanishing again, one by one but all together on the transmitter plate, and in the same instant another Robert reappearing on the receiver plate, but a different Robert; an oddly twisted, distorted, crooked-shaped sort of Robert, the same Robert, not so much different, not in the least horrible, but out of phase, wrong…but even if a crooked Robert, an unhurt Robert who moved back to the transmitter plate again.

And did not reappear at all.

—19—

To Robert it was different, totally different, from anything he had ever experienced crossing the Threshold before. He was unaware of what the others in the laboratory room had seen: to him it seemed that for the first time in his life he couldn't cross through. Something, some force, was pushing him in, powerfully, but just as powerfully he was being thrust out again. He couldn't seem to get planted, couldn't turn the corner because the angles were all wrong, like nothing he had ever seen before, and there was this steady, almost palpable impelling force behind him pushing, and another force meeting him head-on and pushing him back. It was like a rubber ball with a dent in the side: every time you pushed in one side the other side popped out, with a net gain of zero.

And then, after repeated tries (in spite of what they later said they saw, Robert knew he had made a dozen tries and then lost count) he caught hold of something (or something caught hold of him) and he was indeed truly inside, crossed through and holding still, the two opposing forces were suddenly gone, like a gale-force wind that dies abruptly, leaving the canvas that had been ballooning out to fall suddenly slack.

He was through all right, but to a different universe than he had ever encountered before.

Darkness, yes, only not the velvety black darkness he knew from before. There was a gray darkness here, a fog that wavered and swirled and obscured vision most of the time, only offering glimpses through it at rare intervals. Silence, yes…well, no, not silence so much as a continuing background layer of sound just maddeningly at the edge of audibility, bursting through sometimes, then fading (or almost fading) yet never quite gone. The same

ordered confusion of the physical space around him, except that the order wasn't quite as orderly as before, but strangely disordered part of the time.

The same Threshold universe as before, but a strange, distorted, shadow universe that he could hardly convince himself was real. Crooked and wrong. Not threatening. Not dangerous. Not even frightening. Just not right. A shadow- universe that wouldn't quite come in focus for him, somehow, no matter how hard he tried to pin it down. A wavering in-and-out-of-phase universe, and confusing, most confusing, because he couldn't, be sure from one instant to the next that he hadn't slid back across into his own time and space again.

Through the fog, in brief flickering glimpses, it seemed to him that he saw his own uniyerse…only not quite his own universe…like his universe, but with things in it that were most definitely, emphatically not his universe, structures that were no part of Earth structures, people that were almost Earth-people yet unmistakably not of Earth, lines, curves, dimensions that were almost but not quite Earth geometry and dimensions.

And in between, the old Threshold universe that was so much more comfortable to him than this new not-Earth universe, fading in, fading out, back and forth…

The shifting made him begin to feel dizzy; he wanted to grab something to hold onto, felt a piercing headache, tried to focus solidly just for a moment. And then, when the dizziness was reaching a point he could hardly stand, there was a moment of sharp focus, very clear, each detail etched sharp as a razor's edge, and he stared around him at a universe he could hardly believe at all.

Not a four-dimensional incomprehensible universe, but a three-dimensional universe of length and breadth and height. A place with buildings, people, but not his universe. The interior of a great laboratory room, but an unfamiliar room, with no sign of Gail or McEvoy or Hank Merry there; instead a room filled with strange people, odd people but unmistakably people, crowding around him in excitement. Frightened people, angry people, worried people, desperate people, looking at him, talking, gesticulating, supplicating,. interrogating, all at once in a language he had never heard before, but a language—a language of words.

It lasted only a few seconds, that brief flash of clear focus before the fog returned, and then, suddenly, the fog too was gone and he was in the old, familiar incomprehensible Threshold universe he had known for so long, and the Thresholders he had encountered before were there again, and the fear was there again, coldly, far more intense than ever before, spiraling to the breaking point. A blanket of fear pressing down as if to smother him…

His own panic returned. Seventeen years of experience and training for a task he couldn't perform. But it had to be performed now, he knew, and performed well. Once again he sensed that he had left behind a secure and solid universe of air and sky and cities and people and entered a universe of danger.

The people here were afraid—horribly afraid—and their fear struck Robert now like a solid force sledge-hammering his mind, driving deep into the marrow of his bones, seeking some way to break through the barrier to touch him with ideas, with insight or understanding. They were afraid to the point of desperate action, now, and he knew that insight—real communication of ideas—was his only hope. The Thresholders were at the breaking point, desperate beyond expression.

But Robert knew something else, and the realization struck quite suddenly: that the Thresholders had already contacted him, in a way. He could feel their fear, sense their

desperation. If he was a blind man here, he was not totally blind. If he was an idiot, there were glimmerings of comprehension coming through, because he knew their fear, he felt it, and it was something different from the fear in his own mind that rose up in response. This fear came from them, somehow conveyed to him in unmistakable form.

Extrasensory perception? Perhaps…but more than that. An intuitive leap, a guided jump from one idea to another without any symbols to guide him. An educated guess, perhaps, but a guess based on something. No change in the barrier, perhaps, but here was a way of by-passing it. Not breaking it down; not burrowing under it or climbing over; simply letting it stand where it was and reaching beyond it.

Guesswork! his mind told him as his fear rose steadily. Very dangerous guesswork. Who could tell if the guesses were right or wrong? But if a wild guess was all that was available, why not? They had gotten something through to him. Couldn't he get something through to them? Something was wrong here; he needed to know what. He couldn't ask, nor could they tell him. But maybe they could show him!

He fought to stabilize himself, to concentrate his thoughts and focus them on a single idea, a single spearhead to thrust out. "Show me what is wrong." He pushed aside everything else—his fear, his knowledge of the place, his memory of his own universe, everything, and thrust out with that one idea, that one bolt of thought. He thrust it out with all the concentration and strength he could muster, hoping in the face of pure hopelessness that it could pierce the dimensional armor of this universe and the people around him so that they could comprehend it: "Show me! You can't tell me, show me what is wrong!"

Incredibly, something changed. A pause, a sag, as though some terrible pressure had suddenly been released. Their fear was still there, biting into him, but there was something else. He was aware of his body around him in its curious configuration of orderly disorder, its fragments whirling about him like sections of a crazy quilt. Two concentric circles of different radii intersecting each other at three different points. Twisting cubic masses interlacing themselves into the jumbled incredibility of a geometric nightmare. The blackness was around him, the cold of the place dug into him and the fear hung around him like a cloak. He had the hallucinatory sense of being torn apart, roughly, in a jagged line from top to bottom and of seeing, unclearly, the parts of his body in mutilated distortion. Did he appear to them as some grotesque geometric distortion, a crooked, twisted, impossible mass of lines and shadows and forms? He must; they couldn't possibly see him as he saw himself in his own place. Yet something had happened, now he could sense that the Thresholders were all around him, with a pervading sense of excitement.

He brought his mind back to the same spearhead idea again and again, driving it out to them again and again: "Show me what's wrong! Show me!"

Suddenly he was moving, away and downward through bottomless areaways of inky emptiness, down a bottomless spiral, with his own fear seeping back into his mind, growing, blossoming, exploding into horrible fear as he went down and down. Now he was struggling, clinging for dear life to the brink of something into which he dare not go, yet a force was pressing him forward, hurrying him with increasing speed. Like someone banging cymbals rhythmically in his ears, louder, louder, louder, he was moving (or being moved) to a place in this universe that was utterly intolerable to be near, totally unbearable. And then, abruptly, they were no longer with him. They had brought him here—crash, crash, crash went the cymbols, ever louder—and now they had deserted him. They were gone.

And Robert Benedict was writhing and twisting and screaming in the center of cataclysm.

There was no other word for it. This was no Threshold universe he had ever seen; this was a Threshold universe fantastically wrong, twisted, disordered all out of proportion to the ordered insanity he had known here before. His mind reeled, helpless in the storm of roaring destruction raging around him. The circles were twisted, bent into squarish masses, wrenched out of shape. Everything was out of shape, as though he had been taken from a balmy, quiet day in summer, from the midst of green hills and blue sky and billowing white clouds and dropped without warning into the heart of a tropical hurricane.

His thoughts congealed in an awful realization. Somehow, they had heard him. Now they were showing him what was wrong. His spearhead of thought had leaped the barrier, and they had brought him here. And here everything he knew about the Threshold universe was invalid. Everything he had learned, every perception…inapplicable. His survival data was suddenly invalid, here. Wrong answers meant sudden death, and here every answer was wrong.

He knew he had to hide, to protect himself somehow. Everything here was impossibly different. There were sudden, glaring flashes of green and purple light where light had never been. He cringed at the intolerable glare; he wanted to curl up into a tiny ball, to hide himself and cry out at the torture. The very shape and warp of space itself was wrenched into frightful wrongness here; the cymbals crashed and crashed and he felt himself caught up in a cataclysmic eddy, swept on against his every effort to stop, to hold. He felt his body being knotted and twisted and sliced; he burned with an unbearable heat, and knew that things—other things—were being twisted through him, taking part of him along, turning him inside out in a sort of monstrous vice.

Catacylsm. A universe gone mad. He screamed out, fought to back away, heard his own scream reverberating and echoing again and again, fainter and fainter, as though down an infinitely long hallway. And then, abruptly, he was out of the maelstrom, and they were around him again. Miraculously, his body was intact. But he was frightened as he had never before been frightened in all his life.

He had to get back. His control, so rapidly swept away and then regained from that storm of destruction, was disintegrating. He couldn't hold on much longer; he was too frightened to hold on. He struggled against the force that seemed to hold him, trying to move himself back to the crossing place again, feeling their thoughts like arrow shafts: "Don't go! You have to understand, don't go now!" But he thrust their thoughts away, too frightened to care any more, frantic to get away from that swirling maelstrom at any cost. With the last of his strength he struggled to move back to the place where he had crossed—not far, but it seemed like miles—and reached it just as their holding force began to tighten and draw him away. He twisted himself through the angle of the Threshold and collapsed panting on the floor, with Gail and Hank kneeling beside him, wiping his forehead and his eyes as he sobbed, trying only to forget that horrible fear.

He heard a gasp from Gail as the west wall of the laboratory vanished in a sudden gust of moving air. Whack! Then the top of the building went—whack!—and a chunk from somewhere beneath them, so that the floor sagged and tilted down at a crazy angle. Whack! Then the center of the floor went—whack!—only a small bite, a neat, circumscribed, perfectly focused bite that happened to take transmatter, circuit banks, Hunyadi plates and all, leaving a perfectly polished, concave circular hole in the metal floor of the laboratory.

At last it stopped. They looked numbly at the tiny whirlwinds of microscopic dust that spun like devils through the air and settled like a gentle mist, a moment or two before Robert Benedict saw Gail and Hank and the ruined laboratory begin to spin around him, and passed gratefully into an obliterative, exhausted sleep.

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Somewhere at a distance he heard a voice, McEvoy's voice, roaring and indignant: "Let me get my hands on him. Let me get my hands on him and I'll break his skinny neck." And Hank Merry's voice, farther away, shaken but steadier, saying, "John, don't be a fool, he was only trying to help us." Robert opened one eye a slit, saw McEvoy across the room clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Help us! He did it purposely. He led them here. They couldn't hit it, they hadn't gotten anywhere close to it until he went through there and showed them exactly where it was and how to get it and now they've got it, lock, stock and barrel, and what have we got? Nothing is what we've got. No transmatter. No ore, no steel, no oil. Bankruptcy is what we've got. A planet with people on it so thick they're smothering. And we smother, too; everybody smothers. We go broke. We fall apart. The ones that survive go back five hundred years. All because of that brat and his dirty, treasonable—"

Robert opened hish eyes and looked at the Telcom man. "Dr. McEvoy, why don't you shut up?"

McEvoy whirled on him. "So! All rested up now? Do you have a nice, clean-cut explanation figured out to feed us? Any bright ideas how to get our little gadget back from them? Or what I'm supposed to tell the Joint Conference? Or what we're going to do without that machine? Well? What about it?"

"They had to take it," Robert said. "They had to get it stopped. It was tearing them apart."

"You led them to it!"

"Maybe so. I wasn't trying to but they must have known that I came through the transmatter this time, and grabbed until they got it. And we're lucky they did follow me, and get it this easily."

"Lucky!"

"Lucky. Because they would have kept right on taking bites until they got it, even if it meant splitting this Earth in two. They had to, because it was tearing their world apart at the seams."

"How?" McEvoy charged.

"I don't know, except that that machine of Hank's was no transmatter. I'm not sure what it was, but it set up a force field that wrenched open another Threshold. Just the way your low-temperature pump did once before, a different application of force, but just as effective. At least the first Threshold was innocuous. It didn't do any damage to them. But this machine set up a force field strong enough to shove things through a corner of their universe and out the other side. A force they couldn't combat, but strong enough so that it was ripping up their universe by the very roots. Twisting their space, distorting it, destroying it."

McEvoy threw up his hands. "I never heard such nonsense in all my life."

"Look, I was there. I saw what it was doing. They showed me. And I got out quick

enough to survive the shock, but they have to live with it." Robert shook his head, pushing back the memory of his own panic. "No wonder they were afraid. It was tearing their universe to shreds. Warping their dimensions into pretzels. Like turning an inner tube inside out. You can do it, but you don't have an inner tube when you get through, just a torn, twisted gob of useless rubber. In their universe, your transmatter was twisting material objects through places they simply couldn't go. Something had to give, and it was their universe that was giving, pulling apart at the seams. So they had to grab whatever was creating that force on this side. What else could they do?"

There was a long silence. McEvoy mopped his forehead. Then Gail said, "Robert—you said they showed you this destruction. How did they know you wanted to see it?"

"I told them."

"You mean you contacted them?"

"In a way. I seemed to be getting ideas that originated from them, so I tried to push an idea back at them. That was when they moved me to the place where the chaos was going on. But it was odd—" He shook his head, trying to remember the first strange, distorted impression he had when he was forced through by the transmatter. "There was a moment when their universe didn't look the way it always looked to me before. It looked like an ordinary three-dimensional world with length and height and breadth, different from ours, but with the same dimensions. Just turned around at a slightly different angle from ours, so that a fourth spacial dimension had to be crossed through to see that one."

"Nonsense!" McEvoy muttered.

"What I'm trying to say is that maybe to them their universe has very much the same form and structure as ours has to us. To them it may be only a three-dimensional universe. But I got just a glimpse of that before it shifted back to the old distorted picture again."

"But you did contact them?" McEvoy said.

"Yes."

"Then contact them again."

"No," Gail said. "He's done enough contacting."

"You keep out of this," McEvoy snapped at her. "This is between me and the boy. He contacted them. He led them here. And thanks to him, they got what they wanted, for the moment, anyway. But they went too far. I'd have turned the transmatter off if I knew how. I already had it half torn down, but I would never have thrown it out. Maybe it was hurting them, but their taking it is going to hurt us just as much. All right, you gave it to them; now you get it back."

"Suppose I can't?" Robert said.

"You can try. You can try for your very life."

"Suppose I won't try?"

"Then I'll build another one. Merry will help me."

Hank shook his head. "Don't count on it, John. Don't count on it for a minute."

McEvoy glared at him, and his jaw set tight. "Then I'll get someone else to build it. I'll turn the whole thing over to the Joint Conference Committee—the blueprints, the circuits, the math, everything. They could find someone to build it, but it would take them time, and there's no guessing what the Thresholders might be doing in the meantime." He turned back to Robert. "Is it really asking too much? To try to tell them why we need that machine? Can't you tell them, somehow, that their problem may be solved for the moment, but that ours isn't? That sooner or later they're going to have their problem right back in their laps again because we have to solve our problem some way regardless of what it means to them? Can't you tell them we're as desperate as they are?"

"I don't know how," Robert Benedict said miserably. "The contact was so vague, so fleeting; I don't know how to do more."

"But can't you at least try?"

There was a long moment while they looked at each other—the older man, still angry but pleading now, the boy fighting to control his own dread and fright and helplessness and not winning the fight very well. Yet knowing at the bottom of it all that McEvoy was right, that they had to be told, somehow, and that he was the only one who could possibly tell them.

For a moment, as he stared at John McEvoy, Robert knew what it meant to really hate and fear a man. Yet at the same time he knew that McEvoy was not to blame. McEvoy was no more hateful or fearful than anyone else. He was simply trapped, just as Robert was trapped, and fighting just exactly as Robert was fighting, just as anyone would fight when he was trapped and saw no way out. Hate and fear McEvoy, yes, but far more than that, Robert knew in this moment that he admired this man, and that because he admired him he would go back to fight for him.

"All right," he said, and turned away. He pulled his jacket tighter around his neck. Reaching out, he touched Gail's hand softly and briefly; then, without a word he made a slight turn, and vanished from the room.

—21—

He did not know what to do, nor how to do it. He felt drained and helpless, and incredibly tired. If he could have seen some hope, some possible chance, he might have felt different. But he could see no hope whatever.

It was an impossible task to convey to the Thresholders that a gadget—a simple, foolish machine—meant the difference between survival and disaster in his world, to convey all the things that that simple gadget meant to the people of Earth: raw materials from distant planets to shore up an exhausted economy; a place to go, a place to spread out to, for a people who had always had to grow, to explore, to spread, to move on; a people who had never throughout their history faced a future without a frontier and now had no frontier left because the only frontier they had was closed off and unattainable; a people who would ultimately die and decay without that frontier; slowly, perhaps, fighting valiantly every inch of the way; but ultimately doomed to wither and die.

For want of a nail.

It was this he had to tell them, make them understand, and he had no words to use. This

was part of him, as well, important to him as to any other man, and no way to say it. No bridge of understanding, no real contact with them except that vague fleeting touch he had felt so briefly before.

It was dark, and the Threshold universe was in turmoil. No more fear, the fear was gone. But they knew he had come back, and they were strangely excited, eagerly crowding around him, acknowledging that he was there. The moment he crossed through they were all about him, as if they had been waiting impatiently for him to return.

His heart was heavy, his strength nearly gone. He had no stomach for this now; he was frightened, and desperate. But he had to try to convey to them that his world also had needs, that the transmatter was a part of those needs, if the people were to reach for the stars. As they gathered, he felt the hopelessness of telling them. If only I could show them the way they showed me, he thought. But that was impossible. What he had to tell them was only in his mind, and how could he show them his mind? He couldn't. Unless…

It struck him then, clear as crystal. He had already done it, part way. He had conveyed an idea, without words, before; a spearhead he had hurled at them from his own mind. That spearhead had come from deep in his mind, from his memory and knowledge of his own universe, mixed with words he and Gail and Ed had used again and again to try to describe something that couldn't be described in words. Yet he knew that the Thresholders had consciousness, they had demonstrated it, they had not only forced their ideas into his mind, they had received his own.

Suddenly he felt something akin to hope. Suppose thought was a force in itself. Suppose that over here abstract mental images, without words, could be passed from one to another! Suppose the Thresholders used no words or symbols, but had minds so sensitive to receiving thought, so capable of transmitting it, that there was no need for words. Robert had two brains, two memories, two parallel sets of knowledge and experience in his mind, one set related to his own universe, the other to this strange universe across the Threshold. So far he had used only the Threshold part of his brain here.

But why couldn't he show the Thresholders what was in the other side?

Instinctively, he groped for an anchor, rooted himself as solidly as he could. Then, deliberately, he tried to close down the perception he had always used here, to withdraw from his Threshold-mind, to move his mind back to his own world and throw it open while he still remained here. All he needed here was enough for bare survival. With all his strength he grappled with it, as he might-struggle with a huge frozen switch, trying to wrench it closed and cut in the full force of his human mind over here, so that they could see what was there.

It was agony, because the very act wanted to force his body to shift back through to his own side, to tear him away from there. He clung doggedly, twisting and writhing but hanging on. There was pain in his mind, growing and growing; it seemed as though a shorted wire were heating up in his mind—smoking, glowing hideously red, melting, fusing, burning out.

The pain ended. Abruptly. It had lasted only for an instant, but he knew he had done it. He had opened an alien mind—his alien mind—to these Threshold people around him. He had pulled back the curtain for a flickering instant, revealed to them what lay behind it. Not for long; he couldn't have survived for long. But for the barest instant he had done it.

And now…silence. Absence of all motion. What was it? Shock? Horror? Amazement? Or a sudden, absolute clarity of understanding? Yes, that was it! Like a grand pause in a symphony—a sudden, incredible gasp of comprehension. Like that instant that passes from the time a finger touches a hot stove to the time it is jerked away, and then to the time that

the pain is felt, an incredulous, empty pause of understanding.

And then the Thresholders were there, all around him, reaching out to him, twisting him around, wildly excited. There was a subtle alteration from the normal patchwork of whirling motion. He was turning, moving. Or rather, they were turning him, moving him. They were taking him somewhere.

Back to that crater of chaos again? He drew back in horror. Not that—he had seen that, and understood it; why take him back there? But then where? Frightened beyond control, Robert fought them, frantically, but they continued moving him, on and on. Not so much a long distance as through a slightly different angle than he had ever moved before. And then, without warning, he was thrust out.

In the flicker of an eye the Threshold universe was gone. So were the Thresholders. He was back in his own universe again, but there was no sign of the laboratory, nor of McEvoy, nor Merry, nor Gail.

No sign of anybody. It was night and he had fallen a few inches to the ground. In the sky above him a bright moon shone down on the dark sand beneath. It was very cold; he shivered as he pulled himself to his feet and dusted himself off. He seemed hungry for air, actually gasping for air like a man from sea level suddenly dropped on top of a 15,000-foot mountain peak. A cold breeze brushed his cheek, ruffled his hair.

Confused, he shook sand from his jacket, peering about him. He was on a sandy hillside. Not a tree in sight, not a leaf, not a blade of grass. Behind him, in the dim moonlight, a vast expanse of desert and dunes spread out as far as he could see, stretching to the horizon. To the right, a long, low range of worn-down mountains. Ahead of him, blocking his view, a rocky crag and a smaller hill.

This was not New Jersey, nor Massachusetts, nor any other place he had ever seen before. The cold dry air seared his lungs as he struggled breathlessly up the hill, slipping in the sand, stopping to pant every two or three feet. The sand under his feet was cold, smooth, unmarked. Where was he? Could they have moved him through the wrong angle in the Threshold? Dropped him on the desert by mistake? Surely this was a desert, but where? and why?

He reached the top of the hill, wheezing like an old man, grasping at the rock at the top and pulling himself up to peek over the top.

Below him lay more desert—smooth and glistening in the moonlight, every line and contour remarkably sharp and clear, peaceful in the moonlight. It stretched away for endless miles, hillock upon hillock of glistening sand. The rocks on which he lay were a dull red-black in the moonlight, as if dipped in blood. And far down across the valley floor he saw a canyon, long and straight, running in a flawless line toward the far horizon, and directly beside it, parallel with it, another smaller cleft. Straight and true.

He stared down at it, his eyes wide with wonder, drinking in the valley and the blood-red sand and the clefts running straight as arrows, and even as he stood watching, a second moon crept slowly up over the horizon.

To Hank Merry and the others it seemed he had been gone only a few seconds, but he reappeared some twenty feet across the torn-up laboratory floor from where he had crossed through. He stood shivering, literally blue with cold, gasping for air and looking so ill and exhausted that Gail stifled a cry and Hank leaped across to catch his arm before he fell. "Robert! What happened? What did they do to you?"

The boy shook his head numbly as Hank eased him to the floor and loosened his jacket. Robert looked at Gail. "Mom, call Dad right now. Tell him it's going to be all right."

"Easy, fella," Hank said softly. "Just get your breath and rest a minute."

"I told them," Robert muttered weakly. "I told them everything."

Hank looked at McEvoy angrily. "Don't stand there, man! Get some coffee or something." He turned back to Robert. "How did you tell them?"

"I don't know how to explain it. I had to open up for them—my whole mind: just tear it open for them. They got the pattern, the force of my thoughts. They understood." He gulped eagerly at the steaming coffee, took a shaking breath. "Lord, yes. They read me, all right."

McEvoy's eyes glittered. "And the transmatter?"

Robert shook his head. "Nothing about the transmatter. I don't think we ever got that far."

McEvoy cursed. "You sound as if you don't care."

"I don't." Robert faced McEvoy defiantly. "I don't care in the least. The transmatter doesn't count, anyway. We don't need it, not in the least." He lifted his clenched fist and let a handful of rusty-colored sand sift to the floor under McEvoy's nose. "There's your iron ore, Dr. McEvoy. Your first consignment. I've been on Mars."

McEvoy's jaw sagged for a moment as he stared at the sand. He clutched the boy's hand, peering at the dust still sticking to his palm. Then he flushed with anger and he slapped the boy hard in the face with a heavy hand, jerking his head around. "You've got your nerve," he grated. "Making your jokes, making a fool out of me."

"McEvoy, I said I've been on Mars. Can't you understand what I said?"

The old man stopped, shook his head helplessly, wrinkled his forehead. "I don't get it," he said weakly. "Why do you keep joking?"

"I'm not joking. I meant what I said. You can forget about your transmatter. You don't need it, now. All the iron on Mars is yours for the asking. All the uranium on the Moon, all the oil on Venus." The room was silent and Robert held out his hands, almost tearful in his intensity. "I'm not lying, McEvoy. I showed them why we had to have that machine, I showed them why we needed help. They couldn't understand, before. All they knew was that we were tearing them to shreds, and they had to stop us. But I showed them everything in my mind, I made them understand. And we can forget about the transmatter, we can forget about lifting ore from Mars by cargo ship and trying to land it on Earth. There's a universe between us, McEvoy, but the people in that universe are good, they'll help us and work with us, now that they understand."

McEvoy blinked, fighting to comprehend as Robert's voice went on. "They had to make us stop working with that gadget. They literally couldn't tolerate it. And until they understood why we needed it, all they could do was fight back. But now they know. They know we can build another one if we have to but they showed me that we don't have to. They're

bargaining, now. They're offering us free passage through! Guided passage that won't harm them, easy passage to any place in this universe of ours we want to go. Mars, the Moon, Venus…McEvoy, they're offering us the stars if we want them!"

McEvoy stared at Robert Benedict, his face working as he tried to comprehend something that he couldn't believe. He leaned down, picked up a pinch of rusty sand between his fingers, and blinked at it. Incredibly, tears were streaming down his cheeks and he was snatching up the telephone speaker, his fingers fumbling for the dial. They heard his voice as if from a very great distance saying, "Operator, this is McEvoy. Crash priority. I've got to talk to the Joint Conference Chairman, and make it fast!"

Part Three

The Sorcerer's Apprentice

—1—

The bed alarm had been designed for maximum annoyance with minimum noise. Buried in the pillow, a tiny speaker emitted a perfectly electronically modulated imitation of the irregular and unrelenting howl of a hungry baby, the most totally intolerable and sleep-shattering racket known to man. It was designed to wake up the heaviest of all sleepers from a drugged sleep in ten seconds flat and keep him awake until he fell out of bed and raced across the room to turn the wretched thing off—your money back and all contingent damages guaranteed if it failed. It worked splendidly as Dr. Hank Merry jerked awake in the darkness, muttering unmentionables, and stumbled to the bedroom console to pick up the phone.

It was Margie at the office, apologetic but insistent. "Dr. Merry, I hate to bother you like this. I suppose it's the middle of the night there but there's a very nasty man here to see you, and he's mad as hops and he won't leave and he says he's going to have you fired if you don't see him this very instant, and lots of other unpleasant things."

"His name isn't Tarbox, by any chance?"

"Why, yes!" Margie paused. "How did you know?"

Hank Merry groaned as a picture of a pompous little man with a large fat cigar came to mind. "Red hair?" he asked.

"That's the one. And he's smelling up the place with—"

"I know, I know. Someday I'll get him for aggravated assault because of those cigars." Frantically, Hank cast about for escape. "Maybe if you get him a cup of Happy-O—"

"Oh, I tried that. He said I was trying to poison him. Dr. Merry, he's very offensive, and he says you know why he's here, and he wants action right now, whether you're asleep, awake or in limbo."

"I know." Hank sighed. "We've already met." He thought of half a dozen ways to avoid

seeing one Jonathan Tarbox right then, discarding each in turn as either unworkable, inadvisable, or flagrantly illegal. "Okay," he said resignedly. "Tell him I'll get there as soon as I can and start a tape going, in case he gets slanderous. Half an hour, maybe."

A moment later he was riding the elevator up to the aircar on the roof, getting angrier by the minute. The time-slip you could get used to, an inevitable annoyance you just had to put up with when you rode the Threshold. Your trip was always instantaneous as far as you were concerned, but it could involve up to eight hours gain or loss in Earth time from time of departure to time of arrival. The time-slip was an unavoidable annoyance, but a man like Jonathan Tarbox was something else. Hank set the aircar controls for the Los Angeles Threshold Station and settled back with some coffee. Happy-O was more pleasant for waking up, but he didn't want to feel pleasant this morning.

He flipped on a news report, and caught the tail end of an early broadcast: "…said the unexpected agreement of the Chinese delegation makes tri-partisan support of Joint Conference Chairman John McEvoy's program for Venus development almost certain. And now on the Interplanetary front. Threshold Commissioner Henry Merry reported today at a news conference at Ironstone, Mars, that mining operations are 23 per cent ahead of predicted schedule, and that full production of steel can be expected within three years. The commissioner reported that mills at Ironstone might later be built to produce finished steel at the site of the mining, but these plans depend on the number of workers who will permanently colonize Ironstone. And here's a late bulletin: search parties from Titan have returned from the surface of Saturn empty-handed. There is now little hope remaining that the ill-fated exploring party which disappeared on the surface of the ringed planet two weeks ago could have survived, and search efforts have been abandoned. And now we bring you—"

Hank made a wry face and snapped off the report. Aside from the glaring inaccuracies of the report (he had said nothing whatever to the reporter about milling steel at Ironstone) he was irritated at the bright and cheerful way commentators had of reporting the most tragic stories. In a world that had expanded in five years from the surface of Earth to cover half the galaxy, a disaster on the surface of Saturn grew more and more remote from the ordinary round of daily living. It could be reported with detachment, a cheery news note on a frosty morning, but that didn't make the disaster any less tragic for the ones involved. Greedy commentators hungry for news to feed to greedy people…

His mind came back to the unpleasant interview before him. Speaking of greedy people, and a greedy industry! It seemed to Hank that he was doing nothing but dealing with a succession of greedy men and greedy companies these days, instead of what he really wanted to do: study the Benedict Thresholds and how they actually operated. But there he was, and Jonathan Tarbox was waiting most impatiently.

At the Los Angeles Station gate he showed his card, took a chamber ticket from the attendant and rode up the moving incline to the station platform, row upon row of small metal cubicles visible down the brightly lit corridor. He found the door with 23 in fluorescent green over it, pressed the ID plate with his palm and heard three short clicks as the steel door swung open.

The chamber was tiny, hardly big enough for the chair and straps. A blinder-mask grinned at him from the wall; he drew it across his eyes, tightened the straps around his waist (totally functionless, Robert had told him, but it gave a sense of security to the timid) and settled back in the chair. Though he had crossed day after day for years, he couldn't escape the sudden claustrophobic reaction, the sudden momentary sense of bottomless emptiness that coursed through him at the instant of the passage. He had talked to Ed and

Gail about it, the last time they had been out to the Coast, between their behavior-laboratory projects; Gail had claimed the strange sensation never went away. He waited until the soft music from the chamber speaker had relaxed him for a moment, then snapped the activator switch and felt his muscles tense…

It lasted only a fraction of a second, but beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as the chamber door swung open. He pulled off the blindfold, unstrapped, and walked out onto the passenger platform of the Ironstone Threshhold Station.

Ironstone, planet Mars.

Moments later a surface car was whisking him through the odd, spindly city of glass and marble and concrete to the Administration Building, and he turned his mind again to an angry little man with red hair waiting in his office, and to a puddle of molten and congealed iron lying 850 miles away, somewhere out on the Martian desert.

—2—

Hank Merry had almost forgotten what an offensive little man Jonathan Tarbox was, by any scale of judgment. Short, fat, pompous, arrogant, belligerent, loud-mouthed, insulting, with a paunch that quivered indignation and a carrot-top of red hair that stood out wildly in all directions—Hank took a grip on himself and forced a smile to his lips as he walked into his office. Tarbox was smoking a huge yellow cigar, obviously made of Venusian swamp moss, scientifically proven to be non-stimulating, non-depressing, non-habit-forming, non-carcinogenic and perfectly delightful for the smoker, but something less than delightful to the non-smoker in the same room, since it smelled like burning horsehair. Hank suppressed a sudden violent urge to sneeze and motioned the little man into his inner office.

"Nice of you to come so quickly," Tarbox said with exaggerated sarcasm. "Only a two-hour wait, a mere nothing. It must be nice to be the Big Boss of things, so you can come and go as you please."

Hank offered the little man a seat. You are being needled, he thought, and if you respond with anger you will be handing this little vulture his game without any contest. "All right, Jon, something's gone sour. What's the trouble?"

"Trouble!" Tarbox exclaimed. "Trouble! You're lucky I don't have the law on you! Invasion of civil rights, personal and corporation damages, illegal use of a Threshold station for personal gain—"

"All that in one day? And I've hardly gotten out of bed."

The man's face turned red with anger. "Go ahead. Laugh. You won't laugh long. I had to come all the way from Boston to Los Angeles—by airliner, mind you—to get a Threshold chamber at all! Just because you wouldn't return my calls on Earth. And then you have me tailed all the way across the country into the bargain."

Hank frowned. "Somebody tailing you? That's news. Do you need to be tailed?"

"You can joke all you like," the little man raged, jabbing at Hank with his cigar. "But you seem to forget that I represent Interplanetary Oil, Incorporated. And Interplanetary Oil, Incorporated doesn't like to have its agents shadowed like common criminals."

Merry shifted his weight impatiently. "If somebody was tailing you, that's your headache. I didn't assign any shadow."

"Then the government did."

"I'm not the government," Hank said. "I'm just Threshold Commissioner for Ironstone Station, that's all. But if you've got government men tailing you, I'd suggest you start watching your p's and q's. The government doesn't care too much for smart operators and their sharp ways."

Tarbox looked up malevolently. "But as Commissioner at Ironstone, your job is to handle problems and shoot trouble for companies working out of Ironstone and elsewhere on Mars. Right?" '

"You seem to know," Hank said.

"Well, Interplanetary Oil is having trouble. Lots of trouble, and all of it in your range of activity, since the Threshold is to blame."

Merry sat silent for a moment. Then: "Really? What do you mean, exactly?"

"You know what I mean," Tarbox said. "There's oil on Mars, lots of it. You and I had a little scrap four years ago when Interplanetary was trying to sign a few oil leases with the government."

Hank nodded. "I remember. You have some legal angles that would have given you drilling rights to 85 per cent of the planet's surface if I hadn't screamed and pounded the table and made somebody listen to me. Fortunately, somebody did; you only got 25 per cent and a tight throttle on how much drilling you could do, and when."

Jonathan Tarbox grinned unpleasantly. "Yes, but we drilled all the same, and we struck. We've got hundreds of thousands of barrels of prime Martian crude sitting waiting for transport through to Earth. Enough oil to make up for the last ten years' famine. Interplanetary never thinks small. We were thinking big and planning big, getting ready for big production. All we needed was a pipeline, and again we had to fight the government—and you—before we could get it licensed."

The pipeline. That also Hank remembered. A neat scheme, with no legal precedents whatever. Why barrel up oil, they had argued, and then cart the barrels to a Threshold Station, ship them through one at a time and cart them away? Why not just build a pipeline into a permanently leased Threshold chamber, start pumping oil in, throw the switch to perpetual "Go!" and have another pipe Earthside to catch the stuff and carry to straight to the refinery? A splendid argument; not even a question of overload, because the chamber would never be carrying more than the maximum load limit at any given time.

Hank had fought the scheme tooth and nail, not knowing exactly why he opposed it except that there was something about it that seemed to be carrying a good thing too far, somehow. The Joint Conference lawyers had wriggled and twisted and stalled as long as they could and finally, reluctantly said yes, mostly because they couldn't come up with any one specific reason to say no. Of course, there was the revenue from renting the chamber, too, which wasn't to be ignored. "Okay," Hank said. "So you and I differed. You won. You got the deal negotiated. So why all the screaming now?"

"Because we've been sabotaged," Tarbox said. "We signed the papers, legals as could be. Then we bought four hundred miles of ten-inch steel pipe to ship to Ironstone

through the heavy-transport chambers at Los Angeles. We hired five hundred men at a king's ransom per man to come to Ironstone to build the line for us when the pipe got here, and now we have all five hundred men drawing full pay and sitting here on their behinds with nothing to do, because that four hundred miles of ten-inch steel pipe never got through to Ironstone when we shipped it!"

—3—

Hank had known it was going to happen, sooner or later. He'd been afraid that this was it, and it was. There had been a routine report from the Threshold Station at Los Angeles" that a massive shipment of steel pipe was coming through, just the day before, but no pipe had turned up in Ironstone. He had assumed that there had been some delay on the Earthside end until a suspicious report, a thoroughly mystifying report, had come in from the pilot of one of the scout satellites making regular runs circumnavigating Mars every day, about something extraordinary that had appeared out of nowhere in a remote valley some 850 miles from Ironstone on the Martian equator. Something which had proven, upon closer examination to be an immense puddle of molten iron which half-filled the valley and sat there, slowly congealing. Hank had tried to flag down Robert, hating to do it because it seemed that he had to flag Robert down so often these days, except that this time Robert was somewhere out in the Rigellian system patting monkeys on the head, or some such thing, and couldn't be reached. The call was still in, but there had been no response as yet.

And now, Hank knew, there was no question. The puddle of molten iron had originally been four hundred miles of ten-inch steel pipe shipped from Earth via the heavy-transport Threshold chambers in Los Angeles, under a doubtfully moral but unassailably legal license from the International Joint Conference to Interplanetary Oil, Incorporated.

Hank had to explain why to an angry Jonathan Tarbox, doubly indignant because he had been shadowed across country by a shadow Hank Merry had certainly not assigned, for reasons that Hank couldn't begin to fathom.

Hank walked to the window and stared out at the spindly buildings and ramps and archways of the Martian city, Ironstone architecture was strangely anachronistic on this ancient and moldering planet; bright sharp crystalline lines and pointed spires in a place where all the sharp edges had been worn down by eons of sandstorms and the howling, unremitting winds. From the forlorn, primitive outpost of five years ago Ironstone had grown. Grown! Hank almost laughed at the understatement. Like discovering one of the original ice-bound Antarctic outposts transformed into a modern skyscraping metropolis overnight and saying that it had "grown." Ironstone had burgeoned, blossomed, exploded, once Threshold contact had been established.

Some of the builders lived here permanently, fond of the alien desert surroundings; most of them commuted daily, thanks to the Benedict Threshold. But all of them had thrived as the iron ore began pouring back to Earth, and the marble, and the beautifully streaked red sandstone, and the radioactive ores. People had poured into Ironstone, bringing clever architects to plan the buildings suitable to the low-gravity conditions. "The grace of willows, the strength of steel," was the slogan, and it was true. Ironstone had become a beautiful, graceful city, a thriving place, working to support a once-again-thriving Earth.

The Threshold stations had made it possible, of course. Whenever Hank thought of the old, silly, desperate idea of building ships to carry men and materials back and forth, he had

to laugh. It could never have been done, that way. There would have been no Ironstone. A few stinking underground hovels and nothing more. They could never have brought the cement and steel and crystal. They could never have built the dome to cover the city. They could never have brought the hydroponics to supply food and oxygen here; or even if they could have, slowly, at economy-shattering expense, they could never have shouldered the expense of sending things back to Earth. And the Benedict Threshold made it so easy. No problem, no work, no power required, no technology. Just walk into a chamber and press a button and you were there!

But things had happened along the way, things neither Hank nor Robert Benedict himself could either explain or cope with. A puddle of iron on the Martian desert, for example. A slowly growing list of odds and ends of things that had never gotten through, or had gotten through wrong, of time delays, of altered personalities. Hank knew about them. So did Robert, and Robert had tried to straighten them out, time and again, and thought he had succeeded time and again, but they continued to happen. Jonathan Tarbox, facing Hank now in arrogant fury, knew only about a lost load of pipe, not about a puddle in the desert. And nobody but Hank and Robert and a few high government officials knew, for instance, that the exploratory party to the surface of Saturn had gone there by way of the Threshold and not by the scout ship reported in the news, and had never gotten to the surface of Saturn at all, as far as anybody knew.

Now Hank Merry turned to the Interplanetary Oil man. "Do you have any idea how a Benedict Threshold station works?"

Tarbox shrugged with tremendous indifference. "A vague idea. Who cares? Something about a fourth-dimensional warp, and little monsters or something trotting people back and forth. A very haphazard arrangement, it seems to me. But the government endorses it."

"Not so haphazard. And no 'little monsters' that we know of. Things are propelled through a fourth-dimensional warp, that's true. And as a means of interplanetary commerce it's without equal in speed, efficiency and reliability. The time-slip is annoying sometimes, but it's a 1000 per cent improvement over any propelled rocket craft you ever dreamed of." Hank threw up his hands in disgust. "The Threshold is no magician's wonder. There's no hocus-pocus about it. It's a universe, a complete, organized, populated universe, co-existent with ours, contiguous with ours, probably using the same atoms and molecules as ours at the same time, but a universe with four spacial dimensions.

"It's an incomprehensible place; it drove men crazy until Robert Benedict made contact with the people there and showed them that we needed the planets and that our effort to get to them with a transmatter was causing all the chaos they were suffering. So they bargained. We would stop using disrupting force-fields, and they would provide transport. For them, this amounts to turning things through an angle, maybe only a few millimeters across, but popping them out again on Mars. Or Venus. Or any place else in the universe we want to go. Robert Benedict worked out the system with the Thresholders, and he continues to work with them, setting up stations, trying to settle on load limits, helping with routings and policing the system as well as anybody can police it."

Jonathan Tarbox pulled the cigar out of his mouth. His eyes narrowed at Hank Merry. "Policing," he said. "Now that is an interesting choice of word."

"Well, it doesn't mean what you think. Keeping the strings straight, maybe. Troubleshooting, or finding solutions when problems turn up."

"But it also implies keeping track of people," Tarbox said. "Policemen shadow people

they've interested in—right? Only they don't usually use a teen-ager with white-blond hair for a shadow. Too easy to spot. And in my case, altogether too hard to shake; wherever I was, he seemed to be there too, even when he couldn't have known where I was going." The little man looked at his cigar speculatively. "You know this Robert Benedict, I gather? Just out of curiosity, what color is his hair?"

Hank stared at the little man for a minute. Then he said, "His hair is blond. You might even say white-blond."

—4—

Robert Benedict knew before he had been awake two minutes that something was wrong. He lay on the bed, his blond hair tousled, staring through the oval window at the fast reddening sky, catching the odd whisperings outside the door that always greeted him. His small Rigellian attendants would, as always, be hovering outside the chamber, waiting for some sign from him that he wanted to rise and eat. He smiled to himself. If only they would just bang on the door, but no. Their infuriating sense of propriety would never permit any open move to waken him, yet they knew just as well as he did that their whispering and giggling outside the door would waken him as quickly and effectively as someone rushing in and screaming "Fire!" Today there seemed to be more quiet commotion out there than he could ever remember.

He sat up, stretched, breathed deeply of the carefully prepared air that flooded the chamber from the circulator near the door. From outside the window came the faint sounds of gathering business in this incredibly beautiful and busy city on this incredibly beautiful planet, seventh from the sun called Rigel, with its small, kindly, immensely polite and propriety-bound people. The Rigellians looked for all the world like green furry monkeys, yet more than once their intelligence and insight had given Robert cause to stop and think. Now he reviewed his agenda for the day ahead, wondering what might be upsetting his little green friends. There had been no commotion when he went to sleep twelve hours before.

Item: Contact Sharnan at the Philadelphia Hoffman Center at the earliest possible moment and start working with her again. Most important. That lead had been so bright and promising to begin with, only to have the promise fade out as that old familiar fog of fear started building up in her mind. Robert was certain that somehow, in some way, Sharnan had the answer to the problem of communicating with the Thresholders, the final answer, yet every time he tried to move closer, she blocked him because of her fear.

Item: Check with Hank at Ironstone, first thing. He shouldn't have ignored Hank's call even this long. He was sure it was about that oil company deal, and Robert was positive there was the threat of overload there, as well as the danger of some serious economic and sociological problems that would undoubtedly turn up if it were carried out. Problems which would have to wait until the communication problem was solved, of course, but couldn't be ignored in the meantime.

Item: Check again on the whereabouts of one Jonathan Tarbox, Earthman. The uneasiness in Robert's mind suddenly crystallized. Something wrong there, very wrong indeed. The tie-in with Interplanetary Oil and all the rest. Tarbox was on Earth now—correction—on Mars, and if that was what Hank's call had been about—

Robert scrambled out of bed and started groping for his clothes. Almost instantly the

door opened and the soft, fluid syllables of his small Rigellian attendant floated up to him: "May I serve, good sir?"

Robert looked down at the tiny creature which had hopped up to perch on the bed post. "Trouble, my friend?" he asked.

"Trouble? Oh, no, good sir, but another message came from Dr. Merry, marked 'very urgent.' We waited only for you to waken."

"I know." Robert groaned to himself. If they could only have called him! But he responded to the creature with the proper formula of oblique compliments and effusive thanks. "No, no breakfast, thanks. I'm going to have to go immediately."

The little green creature blinked his sad eyes at Robert with an expression of infinite reproach. "So soon? But the good sir said his stay would be long this time."

Robert smiled down at the creature, touched the soft green fur behind its ears. "I know," he said quietly. "I would like nothing better, but I can't. Of course, I'll be back."

The Rigellian watched him somberly. "You're going to the Otherworld."

"For a while. There's trouble." Robert smiled again as confusion crossed the little elfin face. "I know, you don't understand. No trouble for you, little one, just for me." He strapped his trousers around his waist. "Better go now," he added. "You know it bothers you, the way I go."

The little creature hopped down from the bed and scurried to the door. "Take care, good sir."

Robert stared about the room for a moment, undecided. He wanted most of all to see Sharnan first, but there was no choice now. Urgent from Hank meant really urgent, so Ironstone it was.

Filled with apprehension, he made a curious half-turn and vanished from the room on Rigel VII. A brief instant later he appeared on the platform of the Threshold station in Ironstone, Mars.

—5—

To Hank Merry it was always a shock to see Robert these days. He looked so very young, virtually unchanged since they had first met at the Telcom Laboratories in New Jersey those five long years ago. The time had aged Hank, bringing touches of gray to his hair and tired lines around his eyes; but Robert Benedict had spent a large part of this time in the Threshold universe, and there was something about time there—something neither Hank nor Robert understood—that seemed to retard aging. Hours, days or weeks spent across the Threshold seemed like only a few seconds elapsed time on Earth, and Robert, for all his twenty-two years, still looked exactly like a seventeen-year-old high school senior.

Now Merry greeted him with obvious relief. "Friend, you had me worried. I couldn't stir you up anywhere, and I was beginning to wonder."

"I know," Robert said, "It was mostly my fault. I've been bushed, the last few days, and

then you had Rigellian protocol to deal with, too. There are certain things those imps just will not do, and waking me up with a message is one of them."

Robert looked out the window at the busy streets and ramps of Ironstone. The sun, fainter than on Earth, but without the eerie red coloring of the Rigellian sun, seemed to emphasize the lights and darks here. Ironstone was a city of black shadows and brilliant, crystalline highlights.

"The place is booming, I see," he remarked. "That one over there—apartment house?—wasn't there two weeks ago. And the dome has been extended."

"You can do wonders with pre-fabs," Merry admitted. "And lots of people object to the commuting. Of course, a lot of them move back in a few months. Let's face it, Mars isn't much more varied than the Gobi Desert. Once you've seen a sandstorm or two from inside the dome, and gotten used to our two little moons, the novelty wears off. But even a few months, with steady turnover, is good." He sat down at his desk, the desk he hadn't left for almost twenty hours now, and sighed. "Unfortunately, some other things aren't so good."

"I know," Robert said, sprawling in a chair across from Hank's desk. "That Saturn business, for instance. I still don't know what happened to those men, and I can't seem to find out. Except that something obviously did, because they've never shown up anywhere."

"No progress on communicating with the Other Side?" Hank said.

Robert hesitated, thinking of Sharnan. "No progress to report, let's put it that way. I thought I had a real live lead, for a while, but now I'm not so sure."

"Well, I've run into some snarlups, too," Hank said. "Bad ones. One of them has red hair and smokes smelly cigars and I almost had to sedate him forcibly to get him out of this office a few hours ago."

"Oh, yes," Robert said without enthusiasm. "Him."

Hank looked up. "You know about Jonathan Tarbox?"

"I know about him, all right. I've had to keep somebody on him for months, and now with things really tight I've been trying to keep tabs on him myself, and of course he spotted me. So now I don't know what to do. I keep hoping he'll break a leg or something."

"Don't count on it," Hank said sourly. "Those people never oblige. And Tarbox has an unassailable claim on us now, all tied up in pink ribbons. A shipment of steel pipe left Earth two days ago, four hundred miles of it, in two-yard sections. The shipment was legal, transport rentals paid, everything tidy. It just never arrived in Ironstone, and I haven't told him yet that his pipe is a frozen puddle of iron out in the desert right now. I haven't had the guts."

"Don't tell him," Robert said. "Just get a test crew out there to analyze the contents of that puddle before you worry yourself to death."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Tarbox is a thief," Robert said flatly. "With full blessings of Interplanetary Oil. That pipe was packed with more concealed hardware and junk than you could shake a stick at: machine tools, disassembled drilling equipment, nuts, bolts, extra underwear, everything else. To say nothing of five thousand pounds of candy bars."

"Ouch," Hank Merry said.

"Yes. So you know about candy bars on Mars."

Hank nodded. The Hoffman Center doctors had never pinned it down precisely…something about the amount of cosmic radiation, or the Martian atmosphere components used to dilute the bottled oxygen used under the dome, or magic, or spooks, or something…but these were subtle changes in human metabolism here which involved the body's utilization of glucose, so that the more sugar you ate on Mars, the more you wanted, craved, had to have, would do anything to get. Candy and sweets had been legally banned on Mars since the first colonists came back with a strange, insatiable craving, and everyone who employed men on Mars was watched with high suspicion to see that no one slipped any of the habit-forming stuff to the work crews on the sly, at least not while they were on Mars.

"You mean Interplanetary Oil had that pipe stuffed with all that junk?" Hank said.

"They were taking you to the cleaners," Robert said. "Paying for the pipe weight and using it to ship about twice the weight in contraband, transport-free, with a little smuggling thrown in on the side. Unfortunately, they overloaded the heavy-transport chamber in the process. More solid volume than the chamber could handle per unit time, which is how I first got onto it."

Hank Merry shook his head. "Robert, if you knew all this, why haven't you tipped off Security to put the arm on this red-headed plague who's been crawling down my throat all day?"

"Use your head," Robert said. "Tarbox is Interplanetary Oil's contact man. He's a pain, but at least we know whom to watch. And we can stop them when we need to. The trouble is, there's more to it than that. I thought at first that the Thresholders dumped all that stuff someplace—anyplace they could get rid of it fast enough—because of the overload. But as far as I can tell now, they thought they'd delivered it to Ironstone in spite of the overload." Robert stood up, a worried frown on his face. "Hank, there have been too many misfires lately. Something is sour and getting more sour all the time. I don't know why, but there have been too many odd things happening. Like that very thin colonist who just turned up here from the Cygni system."

Hank gaped at his young friend. "Now how did you know about that? The man just turned up here a few hours ago, along with three others. The medics are still trying to figure him out."

"I'd like to figure him out, too," Robert said, "especially because I don't think the medics are going to succeed. And I don't know why."

"Want to see him?"

"The sooner the better."

"Then let's go," Hank said, "because if you can figure this out, you're a better man than I am. And this bird may not be around to see for very long."

—6—

The man in the infirmary bed was shrunken and emaciated, so thin and wizened that he

looked like a raisin that had been left out in the sun too long. His eyes were sunken deep in their sockets, and looked dangerously bright. "At least he isn't babbling any more," the doctor said apologetically as he led them into the sterile observation booth adjoining the room. "He was delirious when he first got here. He's in an ice jacket now, and his temp is still up to 104 degrees, but at least he can talk. There were three of them, you know. The others are down the hall."

"Why are you keeping them here?" Robert asked, horrified. "Surely the Hoffman Center—"

The doctor spread his hands. "These people were barely alive at all when they turned up here. They're still in no shape to be moved anywhere, and from what this guy says, you couldn't get him into a Threshold chamber again without a court order. Something's funny. At first I chalked all his babbling up to fever and delirium, but he sticks to his story. Says the colony on Cygni has disappeared.

"His body metabolism is all out of whack. Like an eight-cylinder engine trying to do twelve-cylinder work. We must have fed him 14,000 calories in the past eight hours, and he's still lost another pound of weight in that time."

"And this was the colony on 61 Cygni IV?" Robert asked.

"That's the one," Hank said. "Or was. I guess. The only thing identifiable about this man is his fingerprints, but they identify him as one of the Cygni colonists. He turned up here at Ironstone in one of the starjump chambers, along with his friends. From what he says, they had to get out of there and fast…they didn't care where to."

Robert peered through the glass at the emaciated man lying in the ice jacket. He switched on the two-way intercom. "Can you hear me?" he asked gently.

The man reared up on one elbow. "Who's that? What do you want?"

"I'm Robert Benedict. I work with the Thresholders."

The man stared at him, and began shouting and gesticulating. "They stole it, clean away! Gone! And what was left, we couldn't stay in! Hot! Lordy, it was hot."

"Better start at the beginning," Robert said. "I thought 61 Cygni was a paradise colony. With about five thousand people on it by now."

The man's voice cracked. "It is—or it was. That's what I'm trying to tell these idiots. They say I'm delirious."

"What happened, Mr. Jonner?"

"Janner, Mike Janner. I don't know what happened." The man paused. "Did you say Benedict? Then you've seen Cygni. You scouted it in the beginning, didn't you?"

Robert nodded. He had scouted 61 Cygni. He remembered clearly the balmy, temperate jungle of the fourth planet of that distant star—warm, sunny, plenty of water, dozens of edible fruits and immense grazing lands for herds of beef cattle, lambs, chickens. After the transmatter trouble was settled, Robert had spent most of two years in the Threshold universe, scouting out habitable colony planets, an escape valve for Earth's dangerous overcrowding. It had been an exhausting business because the Thresholders couldn't tell one planet or star system from the next, from a human point of view. And most planets had flaws—too hot, too cold, wrong atmosphere, incompatible flora, dangerous

fauna, uncontrollable bacteria, lethal viruses, one thing or another.

But of all of them, 61 Cygni IV had been perfect, truly a paradise planet. After him scientific and exploratory crews had gone to 61 Cygni, checking out what Robert did not have the means or knowledge to check. Then a test colony had gone out, backed by the knowledge that they could return to Earth in an instant by way of a starjump Threshold station in the event of any trouble, and the test colony had found no trouble.

It was a perfect planet, so perfect that half the test colony thumbed their noses at the Joint Conference's request that they return for examination, electing to stay right there. Mike Janner was one of them, soon to become a leader and administrator of the colony, and within two years five thousand others had joined them, working to make way for the potential fifty million colonists that the planet could eventually absorb.

"It was fine," Mike Janner was saying now, in his dry, cracked voice. "Plenty of building materials there, plenty of men to work, so we built. Some thought they didn't like it and came back, but most of them spent about three days on Earth and then petitioned to return to Cygni, and plenty of room for them, too. Then I came back for the Joint Conference meeting on other star colonies, with two other delegates, and starjumped back after the meeting—and the whole colony was gone! People, buildings, livestock, everything. It looked as though nobody had ever been there before—the ground wasn't even broken, even though the Threshold station was still there."

Robert stared at him. "Just…gone?"

"Gone. We thought maybe the time-slip was playing tricks on us, or that maybe the station had been moved, even though it was in the same valley, with the same background, the same trees, the same mountains. But all was empty. Nothing there, nobody…"

"What did you do?" Robert asked.

"We started searching. For the colony." The man shrugged weakly. "I know, we should have turned back right then and checked with the commission first, but we never thought of it. All we wanted was to find the colony, so we started looking. And then the heat began."

"The heat?" Robert said. "You mean the temperature went up?"

Janner looked at him, his sunken eyes frightened. "I don't know. It looked like the temperature stayed just the same as it ever was, a nice, comfortable 75 degrees. Bright sun. Nice breeze, like always. No, we were the ones that started getting hot. We thought at first it was just the contrast with things back home, thought maybe our blood had gotten thicker. But we started panting, and sweating, and pretty soon it seemed like we were roasting alive and we couldn't get cool. And hungry! Within two hours we were so hungry we could hardly stand it. I swear that in two more hours we'd started to lose so much weight you could notice the skin sagging. But it wasn't hot outside. And then Stevie starting going barmy, babbling like he had a fever, and I felt his forehead and saw that he was burning up, and I wasn't feeling too good then myself, and began to feel like I was going crazy."

The medic shook his head in warning, waved the agitated man back, but Janner crawled up to sit on the edge of the bed, his arms so skinny they looked like bones covered with parchment. "I tell you, doc—no, you're not doc—but I tell you, we weren't there four hours before we were roasting in our own skins! Our hearts were pounding like crazy, and no sign of the others anywhere, and losing weight and getting so weak we could hardly drag ourselves into the station again, and all the time that beautiful sun smilin' down on us like nothing was wrong."

"I'm sorry," the doctor broke in, nodding to a nurse standing by. "He isn't in condition—"

"Just one more question, Mr. Janner," Robert said. "What do you think was happening to you? What do you think was wrong?"

"I don't know, it just didn't make sense, but I do know one thing—"

Somebody opened the cubicle door, handed Hank Merry a blue memo sheet. He looked at it and grimaced as Robert asked: "What do you know, Mr. Janner?"

"I know what Cygni is like!" the man choked. "I've lived there five years, now, and you can't fool me. I don't know where your Threshold dumped me, but it wasn't on any Cygni I ever saw before, or else I'm losing my mind."

Robert looked at the doctor. "How much weight did he lose?"

"Seventy pounds," the doctor said. "And not just water, either. Fat and protein as well."

Hank handed Robert the blue memo. "Read that," he said.

Robert started, then looked at the memo sheet. It was signed by Margie, marked urgent to Hank Merry. "Need you back at the office fast," it read. "The colony on 61 Cygni IV just radioed a general alarm. Delegate Mike Janner and two others never returned to the colony. Twelve hours overdue, and the colony is up in arms. All five thousand of them."

Hank and Robert looked at each other. The messenger waited. "Any reply, Dr. Merry?"

"Yes, yes. Send somebody out there…oh, my. No, don't. Send them a message that their delegates were delayed because of—illness—and are safe at Ironstone. And tell them to acknowledge the signal but not to send anyone back. Get that?"

The messenger nodded and hurried out. The doctor was already in the cubicle with the nurse, helping to restrain the agitated man in the bed, who was insisting upon setting up on his spindly legs, gesticulating wildly and still talking, even less coherently than before. "Well," Hank said finally, "we've got a mess on our hands."

"That's the right word," Robert said glumly. "I'm afraid that man hit it right on target. Whenever the Threshold dumped him, it wasn't any Cygni he ever saw before—or anybody else, I'm afraid."

—7—

Later, in Hank's office, they tried to piece it together. At first they had Jonathan Tarbox to deal with, waving his yellow cigar and threatening unmentionable things, but Robert dispatched a brief call to Earth, and within twenty minutes had two heavy-jawed Security men waiting in the anteroom to escort Tarbox back to Earth for interrogation, a development the little man had not anticipated. "It may be some years before they get through interrogating him," Robert said dryly. "Security can be very thorough when it wants to be. But Tarbox and his pipeline are only part of the picture. Right now there are more important things to think about. Like a man who has lost seventy pounds of weight in four hours, for a start."

Alone in the office, Hank and Robert stared at each other in moody silence.

"I don't get it," Robert said finally. "I don't know where he could have been sent to. But Mike Janner obviously didn't get back to where he thought he was going."

"How can you be sure?" Hank said.

"Because colonies don't disappear overnight," Robert returned. "On the other hand, the odds of some other planet somewhere having the same physical appearance and characteristics as Cygni—enough to fool a resident of the place—are so slender they're ridiculous. And the alarm message, too. Obviously, there's a colony out there on 61 Cygni IV wondering why Mike Janner failed to arrive on schedule. Mike Janner just didn't get to where the colony is, that's all."

"Then where did he get to?" asked Hank.

"I don't know. Maybe the Thresholders made a mistake. They never have understood routing, as far as I can tell. That's why I had to work with them so long; finding the routes was a hit and miss proposition. Once I had a given route established, they could follow it all right, or seemed to. But suppose now they've gotten the angle just a whisker off? They must have, somehow. But even so, I don't see how the thing Mike Janner told us could have happened, Anywhere. Much less on Cygni."

Hank Merry scratched his chin. "I could tell you what it sounds like," he said. "Ever hear of entropy?"

Robert grimaced. "If I remember right, that's one of those things that scientists all agree is there but none of them can define."

"It's hard to define, all right. And it wouldn't mean very much to most people even if we could define it. All the same, it's a concept that we live with all the time. It has to do with the exchange of heat between objects of different temperature until equilibrium is reached. We just accept as fact that something that's warmer than the air around it tends to cool off while the air around it tends to warm up until the temperatures are equal. Same with things cooler than their surroundings; they tend to grow warmer, while the surroundings get cooler, until the heat content is the same. That's why you make the tea strong if you want to pour it over ice cubes. Put cold ice cubes and hot tea side by side, and the ice cubes get warmer and melt, the tea gets cooler and weaker, and you end up with an equilibrium where the ice cubes and the tea are essentially the same temperature. And if it's a very hot day, the whole mess tends to warm up to room temperature."

Robert nodded. "But the room air doesn't get any cooler."

"Yes it does. You just can't notice it because there's so little iced tea and so much room. It's the tea that registers the measurable change in heat content."

"Well—okay," Robert said dubiously. "I still don't see what all this has to do with Mike Janner."

Hank shook his head. "Maybe nothing. It was just that his whole story sounded like an entropy system gone all out of whack. Certainly something happened to him. Something bad, from his viewpoint; he didn't lose seventy pounds in four hours for no reason. And it sounds like it involves heat exchange in some way."

"Well, if Cygni had suddenly become terribly hot, he'd start warming up too, I suppose," Robert said.

"Exactly. Only the planet didn't look any different than it ever had. A man can take pretty dreadful heat before he starts to dehydrate from it, certainly before it starts pushing his body metabolism up. Mike Janner's body literally burned off those seventy pounds, but he didn't see any grass turning brown around him. No parched trees, no streams dry and baked. The breeze felf cool on his cheek." Hank Merry shook his head. "I don't think the planet was any hotter than it ever was. But if Janner's story is true, his body was warmer than the atmosphere when he got there—by Jove!" Hank broke off, picked up the intercom. "Jerry? What was the temperature in that starjump chamber that brought the man back from 61 Cygni?" He paused and Robert heard gabble from the phone receiver. "I see," Hank said. "No possible mistake?"

He hung up. "They're still chipping the icicles off it," he said. "It was so cold the door mechanism jammed when it arrived here. And the man inside it was roasting in his own skin."

"I don't get it," Robert said.

"Neither do I," Hank admitted. "A warm man on a temperate planet getting warmer and warmer, while the cool Threshold chamber that carried him there was getting colder and colder. Robert, it's all backwards. It should have been the other way around!"

"But it wasn't," Robert said.

"I'm sorry, but the laws of Nature say it had to be the other way around. There just isn't any place in this universe that has negative entropy. Nor in the Threshold universe either, as far as I know."

"No." Robert stood up, paced the room, finally turned to Hank. "At least, then, we know that Janner and his friends will recover as soon as their body temperatures stabilize. But other things have been happening other places, too. Jonathan Tarbox's steel pipe may have carried an overload of contraband, but it went somewhere that reduced it to a heap of molten slag before it got to Mars at all. And those men exploring Saturn—"

"What about them?"

"It's not very cheering. We've had Threshold chambers turn up in awkward places before, on exploratory missions, but we've never had one just disappear before. Those men took a chamber with them down to the surface of Saturn, to bring them back to Titan when they were ready. The spot was even triangulated and located on the surface by satellite observers, but the instant that they jumped, they and the receiver both vanished. And they didn't vanish into the Threshold universe, either. I don't know where they vanished to, but I think we have to find out. And it's the same old story again."

"Communication with the Thresholders," Hank said glumly.

"Exactly. As far as I can tell, the Thresholders don't know what's going wrong either, but we really have to be able to compare notes and work together if we're going to find out. A vague, fleeting contact won't do it." Robert sighed. "I've been afraid all along that it wouldn't, that something was going to make real communication necessary. And I'm not sure it's possible. I've been digging in every direction I could think of, without much change. But there's one person who might be able to help, if we could find a way to beat out fear."

"Who's that?"

"A girl. At the Hoffman Center. I can't explain, you'll have to see her. At first I thought she

might lead me right to the core of the question, and then all of a sudden she was too frightened to keep working." Robert stood up and walked to the window, looked out at the red desert beyond the city. "Her name is Sharnan, and she's quite a girl. I think you should meet her, because I have a hunch that she's the one hope we have of getting control of something that's getting farther out of control every minute."

Something in Robert's tone made Hank look up at his young friend intently. "You're worried about this business, aren't you?"

"I'm worried sick about it. Hank, I'm out of my depth in this thing. I'm so far over my head I've forgotten what it feels like to breathe. And I don't know what to do." He turned from the window. "Do you remember the story of the sorcerer's apprentice?"

Hank nodded. "A foolish boy who tried to use his master's magic spells," he said.

"That's right," Robert said. "He used magic that he didn't understand to make a broomstick carry water for him. It worked fine at first, the broomstick came to life and started filling the cauldron with water. Too much water—the apprentice found out too late that he didn't know how to turn the broomstick off again, and it kept right on hauling water until it nearly drowned him." Robert shrugged. "That's the way I feel: that I've started something going that I can't understand and I can't control it, and I can't stop it. I don't know what to do."

Hank shook his head angrily. "You can't take all the blame. You were under terrific pressure from McEvoy, from me, from the Thresholders. It wasn't even your fault you were the goat; your own parents put you on the spot years before, much as they regretted it later."

"But I'm still on the spot. And the broomstick keeps hauling that water in."

"The broomstick was controllable, wasn't it? The apprentice couldn't stop it, but there was a counter-spell that could."

"So who knows the counter-spell to this one?" Robert said.

Hank spread his hands. "You've got me. I don't know any magic word."

"Nor do I," Robert said forlornly. "About all I can hope right now is that 'Sharnan' might be the magic word."

—8—

To anyone who had never seen it before, the Hoffman Medical Center in Philadelphia District was always something of a shock. If people were looking for a great hospital, they were disappointed. Sprawling hospital facilities were there, but the Hoffman Center was no more just a hospital than it was just a doctors' clinic, or just a research center. Originating in the early 1980's as a central clearing house for medical knowledge and research efforts throughout the world, the Hoffman Center had grown beyond any expectation, piling building upon building, wing upon wing, spawning branch centers for specialized research in a hundred different corners of the world, in burgeoning geometric progression. Like the early sprawling Telcom organization, which had come to dominate most of the research in physics, electronics and communications by the turn of the century, the Hoffman Center now dominated all aspects of medical training and investigation. And as the last organic diseases of man began to yield to research—cancer curable, heart disease at last

controllable—it was inevitable that more and more attention at the Hoffman Center was focused on the last and deepest medical mystery of all: the mystery of the human mind and how it worked.

Hank Merry and Robert Benedict had been silent on the trip through Ironstone Threshold to the receiver station in Philadelphia. Hank was suddenly and acutely uneasy about riding the Threshold at all, Robert was just preoccupied with his thoughts. A quick aircar jaunt from the station set them down on the parking ramp of the main Hoffman Center building complex, a haphazard pile of high-rising glass-and-concrete buildings. It was only the part of the iceberg that was visible above water, Hank had heard, with many miles of underground corridors hidden below, miles of rooms, laboratories, treatment rooms, maybe even dungeons—who could say? There had always been rumors about medicine and hospitals, and there were rumors about what went on in this great medical research center, too, some of them most disquieting. But as they came down into the great reception hall and receiving room, all that Hank saw had a look of busyness and well controlled function about it. Whatever happened here, the place seemed to say, didn't happen by accident.

"Who is this girl?" Hank asked finally. "Where did you run into her?"

"Oh, she's one who's been working with Dad," Robert answered vaguely.

Hank frowned. "She's not one of the Mercy Men, is she?"

"No, no, nothing like that. No indenture, no big fees." Robert knew that there were still programs here using Mercy Men, the hired medical mercenaries who signed contracts to serve as experimental guinea pigs in some of the more dangerous research areas, in return for high wages if they survived. But those programs had never been very fruitful, and under the inevitable pressure of social and political disapproval, the Mercy Men were almost a thing of the past. "No, Sharnan is a healthy, interested, cooperative girl, working here because she chooses to. A very gifted girl, too, in many ways." Robert grinned. "You'll notice I didn't say she's normal, so don't be too surprised. She's very odd, but it's just exactly the right kind of oddness to make her highly helpful. Not to mention that she's a good kid and I happen to like her quite a lot."

They had taken an elevator up to one of the skyscraping towers, and hopped aboard a jitney heading down a long corridor. Finally they reached an office room stacked with dusty journals and a tape reader and other disordered paraphernalia, with Ed Benedict planted in the middle of it all, doing something to an electroencephalograph tracing on his desk with a pair of calipers.

He stood up, shook hands with Hank. "Good to see you! Robert said you'd be coming along. Gail would like to have been here, but she's still tied up with that survey McEvoy asked her to do over in England. They're getting to be old friends, those two. And as for you, my lad—" He turned to Robert and sighed. "What a mess you've got me into. That girl—" He threw up his hands in dismay.

"We'd like to see her if she's around," Robert said.

"She's as much around as she's ever going to get, as far as I can tell. But these new tracings are no more help than the last ones, maybe even less. Of course, she's still scared silly. Maybe you can cheer her up, or something."

"She hasn't withdrawn?"

"Oh, no. She isn't that scared. It's just—well, you know."

Robert looked relieved. "I was afraid maybe I'd scared her off altogether."

"The fact is, I think you're the main reason she's stayed," Ed said, smiling. "Of course, that's just a psychologist's hunch, but you've caught her eye. After all, she is a girl, with a mind of her own."

Robert flushed. "I've gotten a hint or two," he said. "Sharnan may be way out, but she's no dope. It just seems a little ridiculous, under the circumstances."

Ed glanced at Hank. "Does he know anything about her?"

"Not much," Robert said. "I thought it might be better for him to see for himself."

"Maybe so," Ed Benedict said. "Well, good luck."

Down another corridor they knocked on a door and walked into a spacious room, more like a well-appointed apartment than a reaction-and-behavior laboratory or a hospital suite. It was bright and cheerful, with shelves of video tapes, and drapes covering the one-way glass windows into the control room, to insure privacy. There was also a TV screen with a functioning cut-off switch. All these things Robert had personally insisted on. In the center of the room was a girl, perhaps eighteen years old, sitting on a straight chair. She wore a green skirt and blouse; her brown hair was held back in a pony-tail. A strikingly pretty girl, Hank thought, as she rose to greet them. She regarded Hank without interest, turning to Robert with a warm smile. Instantly Hank was aware of something odd about the girl, something very odd that he couldn't quite pin down until she looked straight at him and he saw her eyes.

Her eyes: Not blue eyes, not gray, not green nor brown nor hazel. Incredible eyes, Hank thought, a deep, startling shade of clear violet. They set off her face; they caught your own eyes, made you look again, made you wonder if you were seeing quite right. Violet. Strange eyes, too, as though when you looked past the surface you were stopped by an impenetrable barrier.

"Sharnan," Robert said, "this is Dr. Merry, an old friend. He helped me with our problem, once before."

The girl smiled and said something to Hank in a pleasant musical voice, but Hank couldn't quite catch the words.

"I'm glad to meet you," he said. "Robert has told me—'*

She laughed, cutting him off in mid-sentence, and gestured helplessly to Robert. Again she spoke in her odd musical way. Robert shook his head at Hank. "Don't try to catch the words," he said. "You won't be able to understand them. And she can't understand a thing either of us have said."

Hank blinked. "Doesn't she speak International?" he asked, amazed.

"No. Nor American. Nor Russian, nor Swahili, nor any other language that you ever heard of. She has her own language, maybe very uniquely her own. I can't understand it either, and she hasn't been able to teach me, or else she hasn't chosen to." He paused. "She can read minds, though, sometimes, so watch your step. It can be embarrassing. Like right now: she doesn't like what I've been thinking a bit."

And indeed, the girl's smile had faded, and she turned her back on the two men as though they had suddenly ceased to exist. Walking across the room, she fed a tape into the

reading machine, and sat watching the flickering image on the screen. After a moment or two she pressed her hands over her ears and looked up at Robert with fear in her violet eyes.

"I know," Robert said to her gently. "So am I. But we've tried everything else." He sat down facing her, holding out his hand. For the moment Hank was totally out of it, ignored; he had the uncanny feeling that he was witnessing a curious dream, in which two people were talking to each other in different languages, yet understanding each other perfectly. "We've got to do it," Robert was saying to the girl. "We've never really tried it before, not both of us. And I know I can't do it by myself."

Sharnan shook her head violently. Was she actually crying, or was it the way the light caught those strange eyes? Her voice was pleading, vehement but incomprehensible.

"I know you're afraid," Robert said. "Just as much as I am, but sooner or later it's going to have to happen, isn't it? You know that."

More magic talk, with the girl still shaking her head as if in despair.

"I'll shield you the best I can," Robert said. "If I can protect you, I will. But there has to be some contact with them now, real contact, and you have to help me make it."

Strangely, Hank Merry began to understand. They were talking together, in a way, and their talk had to do with the Threshold universe, and going there together. "Robert, wait!" he said in alarm.

Robert looked up. "What is it?"

"Are you thinking of taking her to the Other Side with you?"

"Of course. What else?"

"But you can't do that! This girl is a cripple. She isn't even compos mentis; only sick minds make up their own languages—"

Before he had finished Sharnan whirled on him angrily. Hank's scalp prickled; she had understood him perfectly. Not his words—his thoughts. But Robert interrupted. "She's not sick," he said. "And she's no more crippled than I am. Different, yes. Crippled, no."

"Robert, you're forgetting. Even a high-adaptive like your mother can't stay on the Other Side for long. You know what happened to McEvoy's men. And you can't help anybody else handle what they'd run into over there."

"That's right," Robert said. "Nobody else except Sharnan."

"What makes her so different from anybody else?"

Robert smiled. "Just the fact that she can go through by herself and do just fine. She can cross the Threshold back and forth just as well as I can, maybe better. She's not even afraid for herself, so much, going together; she's afraid for me."

"You mean somebody else has been trained to cross the Threshold the way you were trained?"

"In a way, yes, but not quite the way you mean." Robert looked up at his friend. "Hank, where do you think this girl came from?"

Hank blinked as Robert's words hit home, and he stared at the girl, met her violet eyes and the blank wall that lay behind them. "Moons of Mars," he said softly. "From the Other Side."

"Of course," Robert said. "Now you see why she's different, and why she might be able to help. And why she is just as frightened as I am."

—9—

Later, Robert tried to explain the best that he could. "The Thresholders obviously have known of our existence just as long as we've known of theirs," he said. "Maybe longer. I'm not at all sure that they hadn't already pushed a Threshold through from their side long before McEvoy started fiddling with his low-temperature vault. There are some things that have always made me wonder—time travel reports, for instance; unexplained disappearances; that Nagasaki bomb that failed to go off and that nobody could ever find. Maybe they had a Threshold and we just didn't know it. But at least from the time Gail walked into McEvoy's vault on, they've known."

They were all more comfortable now. Ed Benedict had brought up some lunch when he joined them; Sharnan did not eat, but she was over her anger, working quietly at the tape machine, apparently giving it her full attention except for an occasional glance at Robert. Hearing every word, Hank Merry thought, and not understanding a single one. But catching the thoughts just the same.

"So it isn't surprising," Robert continued, "that they should have sent someone across, just as we did. We learned how to train someone to cope with their universe—namely me—and to cross through at will. So did they. Sharnan is my counterpart from the Other Side. Whether she was trained the same way I was, I don't know. I know she's special; no other Thresholder comes through. And I know that our universe, here, is just as confusing and incomprehensible to her as their universe on the Other Side is to me. She looks pretty much like us, over here, but then I probably look like one of them when I'm on the Other Side. I don't know if I have a language over there or not. Maybe what thoughts I have come through as their counterpart to language.

"Certainly I stick out like a sore thumb over there now, when they're expecting me…but there may have been a long period when they didn't even know I was crossing through. She wasn't so lucky: when she first crossed over she turned up stark naked in a midtown Manhattan intersection, babbling nonsense, and they had the riot squad out in two minutes flat. The police dumped her in the city Psych ward, and they sent her to the Hoffman Center as fast as they could. Then once she got her crossing co-ordinates straight, and crossed back and forth a few times to the same place, Dad got word of it and knew exactly what was happening. So he called me."

"But the language—"

"Yes, we worked on that first. We had every linguist in the Western hemisphere fooling around her trying to crack it, and they couldn't do it. Like the ancient Mayan hieroglyphs, there were no referents, so there was no way to break the language. The same word-sound seems to mean something different every time she uses it, or else there are soundwave overtones that we're missing, or else there's a telepathic auxiliary that we can't pick up, grooved right into the language. "It's like trying to understand a language tape when half the

words are cut out and the tape is running through the reader backwards. Well, we got nowhere with the language, but some things did get through, at least between Sharnan and me. She didn't understand my words, but she could pick up thought patterns, and I seem to read her, too, part of the time. That looked promising, until she started crossing back to try to find specific answers to things I wanted to know, and started to get more and more scared every time."

Hank looked puzzled. "Scared of what?"

"I'm not sure, except that it had to do with me. Just as I might be scared if I could see some kind of threat to her because of her crossing through to this side, because I wouldn't want her hurt."

Sharnan looked up suddenly, staring intently at Robert. He grinned at her. "Hit it right on the head, didn't I?" he said.

There was a slight movement, a flicker of her eyes. Not a nod, but an affirmative nevertheless.

"But you know we can't make any real contact from here, don't you?"

Again, a reluctant affirmative.

"We have to go through to your side together, and you're afraid this might hurt me in some way, and you're trying to protect me."

The girl took a deep breath, and put her hands to her head avoiding his eyes.

"Isn't that so?"

Most reluctantly, she nodded.

"But you know we've got to do it. Because we're in trouble, both sides—our universe and yours."

A strong affirmative from the girl. Even Hank could feel it, deep in his mind, along with a cold wind of fear.

"Something has gone badly wrong," Robert went on, "and if we don't make contact somehow, both sides are going to be hurt. And you'll be hurt too, and I don't want to risk that." He looked directly at the girl. "Don't try to protect me, Sharnan. You're only putting things off. We're going to make a try together, whether I get hurt or not."

And then, very, very clearly, Hank Merry caught the wisp of thought, resigned, frightened, tender, massively reluctant: Yes. We have to try.

—10—

The crossing this time was the same as it had always been for Robert—a sudden, breathtaking leap into the abyss—but this time it was different, too, because Sharnan had crossed with him. They had never crossed together before. Robert was quite sure that they had been together on the Other Side at one time or another; they had even crossed through in tandem, one after the other, on one or two occasions. But somehow crossing through

together, hand in hand, at the same instant, was something quite different. Sharnan had never agreed to that, before. She had always been strangely afraid, a fear Robert could not understand but felt was always primarily fear for him, not for herself.

But now, at last, she had reluctantly, in desperation, agreed.

He was aware of her very close to him, almost a part of his own, wild, whirling fragmented shadow-body. He knew that he must always present to her a similar confusing, distorted geometrical appearance while she was on his side of the Threshold that she presented to him on her side, even though he could not imagine himself appearing that way to her eyes. He also knew that he carried with him here, on her side, his own memory of her as she appeared on his side—a lovely girl, graceful, attractive, with long hair and violet eyes. He knew that it was this "human" picture of her that he had found increasingly attractive, but that she must carry whatever picture of him she saw now on her own side, as her picture of him. And that this was the Robert, here, to whom she was so clearly drawn, not the Robert of his world.

Confusing. Hard even to think about. Impossible to put into words. It seemed that he had been trying to fight his way around words for so long, in dealing with this universe beyond the Threshold, and that those rare, brief moments of contact had occurred only when-—somehow—words had been brushed aside, or circumvented. Could it be that words alone were the barrier he had been fighting to break down? Maybe. Certainly part of it. Two minds, trying to understand each other, and no way to bridge the gulf of words that stood between them.

Here, now, they moved gently downward through the darkness together, as he had moved alone before. Other Thresholders were around them as they moved. He even thought he recognized some individuals from the familiarity of the physical patterns he saw. And there was surprise here, and apprehension; not fear so much as concern and an eagerness, a tension…

As though they realized, as he had realized, that a final breaking point had come. As though they knew that now, at last, the gulf had to be permanently bridged, that something new, perhaps something very dangerous, had to be attempted.

He agreed. He knew it too, he had forced it. But now he was floundering. Maybe so…but what?

Suddenly, he felt something stirring in his mind. It was an odd feeling, as though a hesitant voice was speaking without words, very cautiously, very gentle, deep in his mind. A girl's voice, not violating him or forcing its way in, but merely tapping for admittance, gently tapping. Sharnan, of course. There was no mistaking that. A different Sharnan than he had yet known, but clearly Sharnan, tapping for attention, trying not to frighten him. It was similar to the faint, feeble touch of her thoughts and feelings that he had felt in his mind there at the Hoffman Center, but so much sharper, so much deeper, that the keenness left him breathless. 'Robert, don't be afraid, but there is something we have to do. Mostly you…it is more natural for me. Words are no good, and side-stepping words is too limited. We have to go beyond that.'

'But how?' he answered her.

'By opening your mind to them all the way. It's the only chance. It may be dangerous, we don't know. You stood it briefly before, but this must be far longer and deeper. If I can shield you, be a buffer for the blow, soak up some of the shock, it may work.'

Holding himself tight, Robert tried to focus his mind as he did once before, in a single channel, to get through one idea, but this time directed at the girl: 'I'm willing to try, but how?'

'Mostly just let it happen; don't panic and don't fight. Just remember that nobody here will willfully hurt you, and try not to fight.'

And then, as his assent seemed to touch her, he felt other thoughts moving into his mind, the Thresholders, not just Sharnan, probing gently, then more firmly, then fiercely. He tried to open his mind, to fight down the panic that was growing suddenly, even against his bidding, as contact grew, came closer and closer. He held tight and forced himself, like sticking out his finger to touch a red-hot stove. He knew it would burn; he had to force it, inch by inch, closer and closer, but he had to now, there was no turning back—

It burned. In a violent burst, pain and fear and grief flared in his mind; blinding pain, the sort of pain that comes from suddenly staring into the full glare of the noonday sun. He flinched, fought, flailed against it, but Sharnan was there too, fighting to protect him, helping to hold him, acting almost as a buffer, a channeling device for the force of thought that came pounding at him; encouraging him, reassuring him, and channeling his thought to the Thresholders as well.

The pain and fear exploded and billowed in his mind and still he went on, letting them in, trying not to fight.

And then, amazingly, thoughts were passing back and forth, not tenuously, but clear as crystal. At the same time the Threshold world seemed to be changing, drawing into focus. It had happened once before, fleetingly, when he had come here through the distorting energy-field of the transmatter; he had seen a comprehensible world about him then, for just an instant. Now he saw it again, for more than an instant. It seemed to materialize from the fog, and he knew that it was Sharnan who was doing this. He was actually seeing through Sharnan's eyes, hearing through her ears, catching the thought of other Thresholders through her mind, and they were receiving his thought clearly, also through her mind. But if it was hurting him, it was hurting her, too. 'Sharnan! Are you all right?'

'Yes, yes…all right…and you?'

Relief, and something more. 'Yes. It's harder than I dreamed. But I'm all right.'

'Then listen. Listen closely.'

For a moment, a confusion of thought, muddled and incoherent. Then, a spokesman, not Sharnan but another Thresholder. 'Can you understand me? Can you hear?'

'Yes, I can hear.'

'Then you know there is trouble. Something is wrong, the routes we arranged aren't working all the time. Sometimes we get off slightly and things go to the wrong places.'

Wrong places? Robert struggled to comprehend. 'What places? What other places are there…'

'Many other places, of course. Who knows what places, or how many?'

He was really confused now. 'But there is my universe and yours. Where else?'

A long pause, then amazement, confusion. 'Yours and ours, of course…but surely you don't think that your universe and ours are the only ones that exist!'

Something flickered in Robert's mind, a horrible, sinking sense of comprehension. Other places…other places…

'What about 61 Cygni? What happened to that man?'

'We were off, somehow. We must have, been off, the routing wasn't right. But we couldn't control it. We followed your routing as closely as we could but the angle was off. Maybe only infinitesimally off, but off, and he went to another Cygni.'

'Another Cygni? How many 61 Cygnis are there?' Incomprehension, as if he had asked them, "How green is red?" Silence, awful and abysmal.

Then a babble of puzzlement and confusion. The Thresholders seemed to be conferring, and then a thought came through, very tentatively: 'We don't understand. There are as many Cygnis as there are. We've never explored or tried to count…how could we? The natural laws are all so different. And who cares? Should there be just so many and no more? Does it matter?'

Now it was Robert who was confused. What could they mean? The effort to hold his thought in tight control was getting out of hand, draining him, and he was suddenly terribly frightened. 'I don't understand…can you show me what you mean?'

(More conferring.) 'Far too dangerous. But some pictures might help.' Something changed. It was not that they released his mind, but something was superimposed on their thoughts, a series of images or pictures, each clear as crystal, changing rapidly from one to the next, with Sharnan very close to him, helping and holding and channeling the pictures. Pictures of places, of planets, each sharply in focus, utterly incredible, but clear, unmistakable:

A 61 Cygni IV where hot things got hotter and cold things got colder; a Cygni which was part of a totally different universe than his; a Cygni that looked the same but existed under different natural laws. Robert knew what had happened to Mike Janner and his party and what had happened to the colony they were returning to, a colony that had never existed on that 61 Cygni.

A Mars like any Mars should be, except that on this Mars there was no Ironstone, and steel melted at normal atmospheric temperature into a puddle of slag, melted so very quickly that it was fluid before the Thresholders could pull it back through and try the angle again. And then in their horror and confusion, they overshot their mark on the right Mars by 850 miles; and just as well for the Ironstone on that Mars, too, even if displeasing to a red-haired man with a fat yellow cigar in his mouth.

A Saturn like any other Saturn except that the protons of its atoms carried a negative electrical charge and its electrons a positive charge; a contra-terrene Saturn where any atoms from Robert's universe touching it would instantly be annihilated, and annihilate the corresponding contra-terrene atoms in return, all vanishing poof in a horrendous, silent, total transformation of mass into energy, more violent than a thousand hydrogen bombs silently erupting simultaneously. Heartsick, Robert knew why neither men nor Threshold station had ever again been seen after their tragic, inadvertent encounter with that Saturn instead of the one they had been heading for.

A strange planet in a universe where the speed of light was six hundred feet per second and the "sunlight" the inhabitants were seeing one day was the "sunlight" radiated from their sun long years before, just before the sun went nova, so the inhabitants one day were fried in their shoes with no warning. A strange universe in which any aircraft that traveled more than

150 miles an hour became noticeably more massive, and could not stay aloft at three hundred miles an hour because of its mass. A universe so utterly at the mercy of the relation between time and distance that the energies of a great and brilliant race had been turned to understanding the nature of time and control of travel through it, a goal they were within a hairs-breadth of achieving, with all the benefits and paradoxes inherent in time travel just a brief step away…

Another planet in a universe where other physical constants were different, a universe whose quanta were such that most phenomena appeared as step functions, instead of continuous movement, like a motion picture film being shoved through the projector bump-bump-bump, one frame at a time, frame…pause…frame…pause…frame…pause…

And another planet…and another…and another…all impossible, yet all real, all existing. A multitude of universes, an infinity of universes, some parallel, some at dimensional angles, some sharing the self-same atoms and molecules of his own, some using one phase of subatomic vibration while his own used another phase…incredible, beautiful, rich, frightening universes…

Slowly, the pictures faded from Robert's mind, or rather dissolved back into the Threshold universe again, but a Threshold universe he could see more clearly than ever before. A Threshold universe of cities, aircars, people, Sharnan, scientists crowding around him. 'Do you understand now? Do you understand why we can't hit the target right, all the time? We can't control the routing. It may be mathematical, or technological, but we don't know what to do.'

And Robert knew the answer, then, so very simple. 'We have scientists, mathematicians, engineers. A man like Dr. Merry could solve that problem for you. He could plan and plot the routing angles to fifty decimal places if necessary. He could build automatic routing devices, and pass them and their blueprints and their theory through me to you. It would solve our immediate problem, and yours, and open the door…'

Open the door! Incredible. A door he never even knew existed.

The Thresholders heard him, eagerly, excitedly. 'Yes, yes, we need to know how. We don't have the knowledge to do it alone, but together, perhaps together…'

Abruptly, Robert Benedict seemed to reach a limit, a saturation point. It was as much as he could take. Sharnan sensed it too; sharply, quickly, she moved in blocking off the wave of Thresholders' thoughts, covering for him as he closed the doors of his mind, urging him now to cross back to the place he knew best, to the universe from which he had come. For now.

She did not cross back with him. It was not necessary, now. They both knew that the first work would have to be done on her side. And he would come back and carry on from the place he had stopped this time, if he found that his own mind had stood the shock and that he was intact.

An instant later he was back in Sharnan's room in the Hoffman Center. He was exhausted, drained, like a man strained to his bottommost limits, but Hank Merry and Ed Benedict were there, and the room was there, and he saw the fading daylight outside and knew that his mind was intact, that soon he could go back through again and that Sharnan would be waiting.

And that the doors could indeed be opened.

—11—

He went back, of course, again and again, before he told anybody very much of what was going on. That first return, all he could do was sit and pant, catching his breath, brushing aside Hank's questions, and then eating and eating and eating…he felt as though he was starving…and finally falling into a solid twenty-four hours of sleep troubled by the wildest nightmares he had ever known. But before that he told Hank to order all the Threshold stations closed down. There need be no panic, it would only be a temporary interruption of service except for real emergencies: like stopping a train until a hotbox cooled.

When he woke up he immediately crossed through to the Other Side again, without telling a soul. That time he came back equally starved but looking brighter of eye and firmer of cheek. He ate another huge meal and then had a long huddle with Hank, explaining about the routing problem and the task Hank had in front of him. Hank went back to Telcom Laboratories and disappeared into a fog of mathematics and electronics and dimensional mechanics while Robert went back to the Other Side a third time, and a fourth, and a fifth. By then Hank was beginning to comprehend some small part of what Robert was asking him to do, and beginning to have some faint glimmering of an idea of how to go about doing it.

"They can't control the routing," Robert explained. "They just don't have the science, or the math, or the technology. It was blind luck as much as anything else that the particular Mars they shipped me to that first time happened to be the right one, and not a Mars with negative entropy so I just baked in my own skin."

"Well, the routing can be handled," Hank said. "It's got to be a matter of fixing exact angles for each and every destination, exact to fractions of seconds of degrees, and then taping the angles and feeding them into their transport mechanism on computers so that the exact same route co-ordinates are used every time. That means somebody is going to have to go to every destination point we need, to make sure they're the right ones, and to get the exact angles fixed." He looked at Robert. "And I guess you will be the goat, you or Sharnan, and I doubt if she could tell for sure whether she was going right or not. We'll have to cook up some kind of an advance scanner to be sure you don't get into a contra-terrene universe, and I'll have to find some device you can use to record the angles, so that you can bring back the data for me to punch into the tapes. Wow! No wonder the Thresholders were at sea. We're not all that far ahead, but without the math there would be no way in the world that they could have done this alone…and no way in the world that we could have done it alone, either."

"And no way in the world that we could do it together without communication," Robert added. "Without full, free exchange of thoughts, ideas, understanding."

"I still don't follow what happened."

"I know. It's hard to comprehend. Without some anchor to hang onto, some place to start, there wasn't any way to establish contact. Just an unbridgeable gulf. But an anchor on one side wasn't enough, either. They had to have one, too. We managed to bypass it before, because of the violence the transmatter was bringing about and the crashing urgency to stop it. But they knew perfectly well that my mind couldn't tolerate the sort of raw, naked contact that real communication with them would require. They knew what happened to McEvoy's early workers, too. They knew that Gail was stronger than the others, in some way…her own adaptability, as we know. They knew that I was not only stronger, but different as well, the anchor on our side, but the one time they really tried to touch my mind, or I theirs,

it was almost all I could stand even briefly under pressure of violent urgency.

"And at that time Sharnan, whom they were training along the same lines I had been trained, wasn't yet skillful enough to help. So they limped along and hoped, and unfortunately their worst fears were correct, even though they did remarkably well, for what they knew. Sort of like figuring out the general trajectory of a moon rocket based on orbital timing calculated on an abacus, and then hurling the rocket out in the right general direction, hoping it might connect. Fine for a start, but they knew all along that the flaws in the system were going to catch up with us all sooner or later."

"And these other universes—" Hank scratched his head, searching for words. "There're…there? They really exist?"

"They're there, all right. They're here, too. They're everywhere. They're a part of existence, a part we never dreamed of, a part we've never been able to perceive, but they've always been there. The Threshold universe hadn't perceived them, either, until a few decades ago, when they started focusing energy in odd ways in their own research and found out they were truly a Universe Between…a touch-point for multitudes of universes. Maybe we are too, and just haven't yet discovered it. But they seemed to be like,a universe in a very flimsy tissue-paper bag. They couldn't see outside, but every place they touched they pushed a hole through into somewhere else. And then one 'somewhere else' suddenly pushed a hole through to them, and very shortly started to tear the bag apart as well. Not particularly comfortable for them, and it's a measure of the kind of minds they have that they worked to seek a solution, instead of just indiscriminately striking back."

Robert stood up and stretched. "The trouble was, they couldn't do it without having their own anchor, Sharnan, to work with me. They were afraid that if they forced access to my mind, I would go to pieces just like McEvoy's workers did. But by working through Sharnan, using her mind as a filter, you might say, they thought it might work. They weren't sure. Sharnan was afraid, deathly afraid, for me. But it did work, and now each time, it works a little easier. Each time there is a little more contact."

"And now the first job is the routing," Hank Merry said.

"That has to come first. Without it, our Earth is in trouble. But that's the easiest part. After that—Hank, the door is open. There are a million universes, maybe an infinity of universes, to explore. Universes of every kind conceivable, just waiting on the other side of the door. The Threshold universe is a route through; I have a hunch that none of those universes would be accessible to us here without the Universe Between as a touch-point and traffic center. But we have the touch-point, and the Thresholders want to explore every bit as much as we do. And what there is to explore!"

Robert laughed. "Did you know that there was a time when the physicists and chemists on this Earth of ours thought they had learned all there was to learn? That they knew all the answers, or all the ones that mattered? That all that was left was a sort of mopping-up exercise? Of course, that was before anybody discovered radioactivity, or X-rays, or atom bombs. That was before scientists started publishing their ideas about relativity, and that was just in this universe, our own private little corner of existence."

They sat in silence for a moment, the graying physicist and his youthful, blond-haired friend. The sunset had faded and it was night outside. Tomorrow another sunrise. They both were thinking of a door opening, a door that no one had ever known was there before, opening into a segment of existence that had been guessed at, perhaps, but never really proven or identified.

After a long while Hank Merry broke the silence. "It looks as if there's work to be done. A lot of work. For me, for you, for anybody else that feels like working in the least."

"There's work to be done, all right."

"What about you and Sharnan?"

"Personally?" Robert shook his head. "I don't know. It's odd. She's looked into the deepest corners of my mind, and I into hers, and even so we are two people from two different places and I don't know how close we can really come. Now or ever." He looked up at Hank. "She's an exciting girl, when she's on this side. On the other side she doesn't exactly send me. And I'm not quite sure how it seems to her, on this side, to be courted by a jigsaw puzzle. Probably not everything she could hope for. Of course, it isn't always like that. Sometimes I think I do see her world her way, and she sees mine my way."

Robert walked over to stare out the window. "It's very strange, Hank. Sometimes I think their universe as they perceive it is an ordinary, pedestrian three-dimensional universe just like ours. Very similar to ours, in fact, just somehow turned around at an off angle so that we can only perceive each other through another spatial dimension. But sometimes I think that they see themselves very much the same as we see ourselves, with their people, their cities, their social problems—"

"But not the same ones," Hank said, alarmed.

"Not quite the same, but off the same stalk. A variation of ours." Robert rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I've learned a little of their history, and it's amazing. They had roughly the same emergence of science as we did, in the long run, but along slightly different lines. Their great theoretical mathematician had a different name, for instance, and came to slightly different conclusions, ultimately just as wrong as ours. In our universe the United States never did break away from the mother country; in their universe, it did. Our Civil War fell apart after six months because of the great freeze and famine in the south in 1883; theirs came sooner, and lasted four years without solving anything. They faced the same Cold War between freedom and slavery in the twentieth century that we did, except our Joint Conference finally made peace, while they are still limping along with a 'United Nations,' or some such thing. Our president who got the Joint Conference started lived to serve as its chairman for three full terms, and still plays soccer with his grandchildren up in Massachusetts; theirs was assassinated in some place they call 'Texas' before he ever really got started, and somebody else took over. No, it's a different place, The Other Side. I'm only beginning to learn."

"And you're going back now?" Hank asked.

"Yes, I think I'd better," Robert laughed. "I've found the magic words, all right, but that broomstick keeps wiggling. Have you got enough to keep you busy for a while?"

"For a day or two," Hank Merry said sourly. "Maybe even for three."

"Then I won't stay too long. And I'll be in touch." Robert Benedict tossed his friend a mock salute, grinned, and moved back through to the Other Side.

Sharnan was waiting for him there. As he had known she would be.

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