

KEITH LAUMER (1925- ) is remarkable in several respects—he has been tremendously prolific and very popular, having published dozens of excellent novels and collections featuring at least four series characters or settings plus excellent individual works. His series about the adventures of interstellar diplomat Jamie Retief combines great adventure with wonderful humor, and reflects the author’s own experiences as a member of the United States Foreign Service in the 1950s. Also remarkable is his recovery from a serious stroke that temporarily reduced his output. A former captain in the United States Air Force, he writes some of the best action and combat stories extant, including the following story later expanded into *Dinosaur Beach* (1971).

# The Timesweepers

Keith Laumer

The man slid into the seat across from me, breathing a little hard, and said, “Do you mind?” He was holding a filled glass in his hand; he waved it at the room, which was crowded, but not that crowded. It was a slightly run-down bar in a run-down street in a run-down world. Just the place for meeting strangers.

I looked him over, not too friendly a look. The smile he was wearing slipped a little and wasn’t a smile anymore, just a sick smirk. He had a soft, round face, very pale blue eyes, the kind of head that ought to be bald but was covered with a fine blond down, like baby chicken feathers. He was wearing a striped sport shirt with a very wide collar laid back over a bulky plaid jacket with padded shoulders and wide lapels. His neck was smooth-skinned, and too thin for his head. The hand that was holding the glass was small and well-lotioned, with short, immaculately manicured fingers. There was a big, cumbersome-looking ring on one of the fingers. The whole composition looked a little out of tune, like something assembled in a hurry by somebody who was short on material and had to make do with what was at hand. Still, it wasn’t a bad job, under the circumstances. It had

passed—up until now.

“Please don’t misunderstand,” he said. His voice was like the rest of him: not feminine enough for a woman, but not anything you’d associate with a room full of cigar smoke, either.

“It’s vital that I speak with you, Mr. Starv,” he went on, talking fast, as if he wanted to get it all said before he was thrown out. “It’s a matter of great importance to your future.”

He must not have liked what went across my face then; he started to get up and I caught his wrist—as soft and smooth as a baby’s—and levered him back into his seat.

“You might as well stay and tell me about it,” I said. I looked at him over my glass while he got his smile fixed up and back in position. “My future, eh?” I prompted him. “I wasn’t sure I had one.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, and nodded quickly. “Yes indeed. And I might add that your future is a great deal larger than your past, Mr. Starv.”

“Have we met somewhere?”

He shook his head. “Please—I know I don’t make a great deal of sense; I’m under a considerable strain. But please listen . . . “

“I’m listening, Mr. . . . what was the name?”

“It really doesn’t matter, Mr. Starv. I myself don’t enter into the matter at all; I was merely assigned to contact you and deliver the information.”

“Assigned?”

He looked at me with an expression like a slave bringing ill tidings to a bad-tempered king.

“Mr. Starv—what would you say if I told you I was a member of a secret organization of supermen?”

“What would you expect me to say?”

“That I’m insane,” he said promptly. “Naturally, that’s why I’d prefer to speak directly to the point. Mr. Starv, your life is in danger.”

“Go on.”

“In precisely”—he glanced at the watch strapped to the underside of his wrist—“one and one half minutes, a man will enter this establishment. He will be dressed in a costume of black, and will carry a cane—ebony, with a silver head. He will go to the bar, order a straight whiskey, drink it, turn, raise the cane and fire three lethal darts into your chest.”

I took another swallow of my drink. It was the real stuff; one of the compensations of the job.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “Then what?”

"Then? Then?" my little man said rather wildly. "Then you are dead, Mr. Starv!" He leaned across the table and threw this at me in a hiss, with quite a lot of spit.

"Well, I guess that's that," I said.

"No!" His fat little hand shot out and clutched my arm with more power than I'd given him credit for. "This is what will happen—*unless* you act at once to avert it."

"I take it that's where the big future you mentioned comes in."

"Mr. Starv—you must leave here at once." He fumbled in a pocket of his coat, brought out a card with an address printed on it: *309 Turkon Place.*

"It's an old building, very stable, quite near here. Go to the third floor. You'll have to climb a wooden stairway, but it's quite safe. A door marked with the numeral 9 is at the back. Enter the room and wait."

"Why would I do that?" I asked him.

He wiped at his face with his free hand.

"In order to save your life," he said.

"What's the idea—that the boy in black can't work in rooms marked 9?"

"Please, Mr. Starv—time is short. Won't you simply trust me?"

"Where'd you get my name?"

"Does that matter more than your life?"

"The name's a phony. I made it up about an hour and a half ago, when I registered at the hotel across the street."

His earnest look went all to pieces; he was still trying to reassemble it when the street door of the bar opened and a man in a black overcoat, black velvet collar, black homburg and carrying a black swagger stick walked in.

\* \* \*

My new chum's fingers clamped into the same grooves they'd made last time.

"You see? Just as I said. Now, quickly, Mr. Starv—"

I brushed his hand off me and slid out of the booth. The man in black went to the bar without looking my way, took a stool near the end.

I went across and took the stool on his left.

He didn't look at me. He was so busy not looking at me that he didn't even look around when my elbow dug into his side. If there was a gun in

his pocket, I couldn't feel it.

I leaned a little toward him. "Who is he?" I said, about eight inches from his ear. His head jerked. He put his hands on the bar and turned. His face was thin, white around the nostrils from anger or illness, gray everywhere else. His eyes looked like little black stones.

"Are you addressing me?" he said in a tone with a chill like Scott's last camp on the ice cap.

"Your friend with the sticky hands is waiting over in the booth. Why not join the party?"

"You've made an error," Blackie said, and turned away.

From the corner of my eye I saw the other half of the team trying a sneak play around left end. I caught him a few yards past the door.

It was a cold night. Half an inch of snow squeaked under our shoes as he tried to jerk free of the grip I took on his upper arm.

"Tell me about it," I said. "After I bought the mind-reading act, what was to come next?"

"You fool—I'm trying to save your life—have you no sense of gratitude?"

"What made it worth the trouble? My suit wouldn't fit you, and the cash in my pocket wouldn't pay cab fare over to Turkon Place and back."

"Let me go! We must get off the street!" He tried to kick my ankle, and I socked him under the ribs hard enough to fold him against me wheezing like a bagpipe. I took a quick step back and heard the flat *wbak!* of a silenced pistol and the whisper that a bullet makes when it passes an inch from your ear: Blackie's cane going into action from the door to the bar.

There was an alley mouth a few feet away. We made it in one jump. My little pal had his feet working again, and tried to use them to wreck my knee. I had to bruise his shins a little.

"Easy," I told him. "That slug changes things. Quiet down and I'll let go of your neck."

He nodded as well as he could with my thumb where it was and I eased him back against the wall. I put my back against it, beside him, with him between me and the alley mouth. I made a little production of levering back the hammer of my Mauser.

Two or three minutes went past like geologic ages.

"We'll take a look. You first." I prodded him forward. Nobody shot at him. I risked a look. Except for a few people not in black overcoats, the sidewalk was empty.

My car was across the street. I walked him across and waited while he got in and slid across under the wheel, then got in after him. There were other parked cars, and plenty of dark windows up above for a sniper to work from, but nobody did.

“309 Turkon Place, you said.” I nudged him with the Mauser. “Let’s go have a look.”

He drove badly, like a middle-aged widow who only learned to drive after her husband died. We clashed gears and ran stoplights across town to the street he had named. It was a badly-lit unpatched brick dead end that rose steeply toward a tangle of telephone poles at the top. The house was tall and narrow, slanted against the sky, showing no lights. I prodded my guide ahead of me along the narrow walk that ran back beside the house, went in via the back door. It resisted a little, but gave without making any more noise than a dropped xylophone.

We stood on some warped linoleum and smelled last week’s cabbage and listened to some dense silence.

“Don’t be afraid,” the little man said. “There’s no one here.” He led me along a passage a little wider than my elbows, past a tarnished mirror and a stand full of umbrellas, up steep steps with black rubber matting held by tarnished brass rods. The flooring creaked on the landing. Another flight brought us into a low-ceilinged hall with gray-painted doors made visible by the pale light coming through a wire-glass skylight.

He found number 9, put an ear against it, opened up and went in. I followed.

It was a small bedroom, with a double bed, a dresser with a doily on it, a straight chair, a rocker, an oval rag rug, a hanging fixture in the center with a colored glass bowl. My host placed the chairs into a cozy *tete-a-tete* arrangement, offered me the rocker, and perched on the edge of the other.

“Now,” he said, and put his fingertips together comfortably, like a pawnbroker about to beat you down on the value of the family jewels, “I suppose you want to hear all about the man in black, how I knew just when he’d appear, and so on.”

“It was neat routine,” I said. “Up to a point. After you fingered me, if I didn’t buy the act, Blackie would plug me—with a dope dart. If I did—I’d be so grateful, I’d come here.”

“As indeed you have.” My little man looked different now, more relaxed, less eager to please. “I suppose I need not add that the end result will be the same.” He made a nice hip draw and showed me a strange-

looking little gun, all shiny rods and levers.

“You will now tell me about yourself, Mr. Starv—or whatever you may choose to call yourself.”

“Wrong again—Karge,” I said.

For an instant it didn’t register. Then his fingers twitched and the gun made a spitting sound and needles showered off my chest. I let him fire the full magazine. Then I shot him under the left eye with the pistol I had palmed while he was settling himself on his chair.

He settled further; his head was bent over his left shoulder as if he were trying to admire the water spots on the ceiling. His little pudgy hands opened and closed a couple of times. He leaned sideways quite slowly and hit the floor like a hundred and fifty pounds of heavy machinery.

Which he was, of course.

\* \* \*

The shots hadn’t made much noise—no more than the one fired at me by the Enforcer had. I listened, heard nothing in the way of a response. I laid the Karge out on his back—or on its back—and cut the seal on his reel compartment, lifted out the tape he’d been operating on. It was almost spent, indicating that his mission had been almost completed. I checked his pockets but turned up nothing, not even a ball of lint.

It took me twenty minutes to go over the room. I found a brain-reader focused on the rocker from the stained-glass ceiling light. He’d gone to a lot of effort to make sure he cleaned me before disposing of the remains.

I took time to record my scan to four-point detail, then went back down to the street. A big square car went past, making a lot of noise in the silent street, but no bullets squirted from it. I checked my locator and started east, downslope.

It was a twenty-minute walk to the nearest spot the gauges said was within the acceptable point-point range for a locus transfer. I tapped out the code with my tongue against the trick molars set in my lower jaw, felt the silent impact of temporal implosion, and was squinting against the dazzling sunlight glaring down on Dinosaur Beach.

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My game of cat-and-mouse with the Karge had covered several square

miles of the city of Buffalo, New York, T.F. late March, 1936. A quick review of my movements from the time of my arrival at the locus told me that the Timecast station should be about a mile and a half distant, to the southwest, along the beach. I discarded the warmer portions of my costume and started hiking.

The sea in this era—some sixty-five million years BC—was south-sea-island blue, stretching wide and placid to the horizon. The long swells coming in off the Eastern Ocean—which would one day become the Atlantic—crashed on the gray sand with the same familiar *crump-boom!* that I had known in a dozen Eras. It was a comforting sound. It said that after all, the doings of the little creatures that scuttled on her shores were nothing much in the life of Mother Ocean, age five billion and not yet in her prime.

There was a low headland just ahead, from which the station would be visible a mile or so beyond: a small, low, gray-white structure perched on the sand above high tide line, surrounded by tree ferns and club-mosses, not as decoration but to render the installation as inconspicuous as possible, on the theory that if the wild life were either attracted or repelled by strangeness it might introduce an uncharted U-line on the Probability charts which would render a thousand years of painstaking—and painful—temporal mapping invalid.

Inside, Nel Jard, the Chief Timecaster, would have me in for debriefing, would punch his notes into the master plot, and wave me on my way back to Nexx Central, where a new job would be waiting, having nothing to do with the last one. I'd never learn just why the Karge had been placed where it was, what sort of deal it had made with the Enforcers, what part the whole thing played in the larger tapestry of the Nexx grand strategy.

That's what would have happened. Except that I topped the rise just then and saw the long curve of beach ahead, and the tongue of jungle that stretched down almost to the shore along the ridge. But where the station had been, there was nothing but a smoking crater.

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Dinosaur Beach had been so named because a troop of small allo-saur-like reptiles had been scurrying along it when the first siting party had fixed-in there. That had been sixty years ago, Nexx Subjective, only a few months after the decision to implement Project Timesweep.

The idea wasn't without merit. The First Era of time travel had closely resembled the dawn of the space age in some ways—notably, in the trail of rubbish it left behind. In the case of the space garbage, it had taken half a dozen major collisions to convince the authorities of the need to sweep circumterrestrial space clean of fifty years' debris in the form of spent rocket casings, defunct telemetry gear, and derelict relay satellites long lost track of. In the process they'd turned up a large number of odds and ends of meteoric rock and iron, a few lumps of clearly terrestrial origin, possibly volcanic, the mummified body of an astronaut lost on an early space walk, and a couple of artifacts that the authorities of the day had scratched their heads over and finally written off as the equivalent of empty beer cans tossed out by visitors from out-system.

That was before the days of Timecasting, of course.

The Timesweep program was a close parallel to the space sweep. The Old Era temporal experimenters had littered the time-ways with everything from early one-way timecans to observation stations, dead bodies, abandoned instruments, weapons and equipment of all sorts, including an automatic mining setup established under the Antarctic ice, which caused headaches at the time of the Big Melt.

Then the three hundred years of the Last Peace put an end to that; and when temporal transfer was rediscovered in early New Era times, the lesson had been heeded. Rigid rules were enforced from the beginning of the Second Program, forbidding all the mistakes that had been made by the First Program pioneers.

Which meant the Second Program had to invent its own disasters—like the one I was looking at.

I had gone flat on the hot sand at first sight of the pit among the blackened stumps of the club-mosses, while a flood of extraneous thoughts went whirling through my tired old brain, as thoughts will in such moments. I had been primed to step out of the heat and the insects and the sand into cool, clean air, soft music, the luxury of a stimbath and a nap on a real air couch.

But that was all gone to slag now. I hugged the ground and looked down at it, and tried to extract what data I could from what I could see. It wasn't much.

Item one: Some power had had the will and the way to blast a second-class Nexx staging station out of existence. It seemed they'd used good old-fashioned nuclears for the job, too; nothing so subtle as a temporal lift, or a phase-suppressor.



Item two: The chore had been handled during the ten days NS. I'd been on location in I936. There might, or might not, be some message there for me.

I suppressed the desire to jump up and run down for a closer look. I stayed where I was, playing boulder, and looked at the scene some more with gritty eyes that wept copiously in the glare of the tropical Jurassic sun. I didn't see anything move—which didn't mean there was nothing there to see. After half an hour of that, I got up and walked down to the ruins.

Ruins was an exaggeration. There was a fused glass pit a hundred yards in diameter surrounded by charred organic matter. That gave me item three:

Nothing had survived—no people, no equipment. Not only would I not have the benefit of soft music and bed to match, there'd be no debriefing, no input of data into the master tape, no replay of the Karge operation tape to give me a clue to Enforcer Strategy. And worst of all, there'd be no outjump to Nexx Central.

Which made things a trifle awkward, since the location of Central was a secret buried under twelve layers of interlocked ciphers in the main tank of the Nexial Brain. Not even the men who built the installation knew its physical and temporal coordinates. The only way to reach it was to be computer-routed via one of the hundred and twelve official staging stations scattered across Old Era time. And not just any station: it had to be the one my personal jumper field was attuned to.

Which was a thin layer of green glass lining a hollow in the sand.

It was one of those times when the mind goes racing around inside the trap of the skull like a mouse in a bucket, making frantic leaps for freedom and falling back painfully on its rear.

On about the tenth lap, an idea bobbed up and grinned a rather ghastly grin.

My personal jump gear, being installed in my body, was intact. All I lacked was a target. But that didn't mean I couldn't jump. All it meant was that I wouldn't know where I'd land—if anywhere.

There had been a lot of horror stories circulated back at Nexx Central about what had happened to people who misfired on a jump. They ranged from piecemeal reception at a dozen stations strung out across a few centuries, to disembodied voices screaming to be let out. Also, there were several rules against it.

The alternative was to set up housekeeping here on the beach, with or

without dinosaurs, and hope that a rescue mission arrived before I died of old age, heat, thirst, or reptiles.

I didn't like the odds, but they were all the odds I had.

I took a final breath of humid beach air, a last look around at the bright, brutal view of sea and sand, the high, empty sky. It seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

The tune I played on the console set in my jaw was different this time, but the effect was much the same: The painless blow of a silent club, the sense of looping the loop through a Universe-sized Klein bottle—

Total darkness and a roar of sound like Niagara Falls going over me in a barrel.

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For a few seconds I stood absolutely still, taking a swift inventory of my existence. I seemed to be all here, organized pretty much as usual. The sound went on, the blackness failed to fade. The rule book said that in a case of transfer malfunction to remain immobile and await retrieval, but in this case that might take quite a while. Also, there was the datum that no one had ever lived to report a jump malfunction, which suggested that possibly the rule book was wrong.

I tried to breathe, and nothing happened. That decided me. I took a step and emerged as through a curtain into a strange blackish light, shot through with little points of dazzling brilliance, like what you see just before you faint from loss of blood. But before I could put my head between my knees, the dazzle faded and I was looking at the jump room of a regulation Nexx Staging Station. And I could breathe.

I did that for a few moments, then turned and looked at the curtain I had come through. It was a solid wall of beryl-steel, to my knowledge over two meters thick.

Maybe the sound I had heard was the whizzing of molecules of dense metal interpenetrating with my own two hundred pounds of impure water.

That was a phenomenon I'd have to let ride until later. More pressing business called for attention first—such as discovering why the station was as silent as King Sethy's tomb after the grave robbers finished with it.

It took me ten minutes to check every room on operations level. Nobody was home. The same for the R and R complex. Likewise the equipment division, and the power chamber.

The core sink was drawing normal power, the charge was up on the transmitter plates, the green lights were on all across the panels; but nothing was tapping the station for so much as a microerg.

Which was impossible. The links that tied a staging station to Nexx Central and in turn monitored the activities of personnel operating out of the station always drew at least a trickle of carrier power. They had to, as long as the station existed. A no-drain condition was impossible anywhere in normal space time.

I didn't like the conclusion, but I reached it anyway.

All the stations were identical; in fact, considering their mass-production by the time-stutter process which distributed them up and down the temporal contour, there's a school of thought that holds that they *are* identical; alternate temporal aspects of the same physical matrix. But that was theory, and my present situation was fact. A fact I had to deal with.

I went along the passage to the entry lock—some of the sites are hostile to what Nexx thinks of as ordinary life—cycled it, and almost stepped out.

Not quite.

The ground ended about ten feet from the outflung entry wing. Beyond was a pearly gray mist, swirling against an invisible barrier. I went forward to the edge and lay flat and looked over. I could see the curve of the underside of the patch of solid rock the station perched on. It was as smooth and polished as green glass. Like the green glass crater I'd seen back on the beach.

The station had been scooped out of the rock like a giant dip of ice cream and deposited here, behind a barrier of a kind the scientists of Nexx Central had never dreamed of.

That gave me two or three things to think of. I thought of them while I went back in through the lock, and down the transit tunnel to the transfer booth.

It looked normal. Aside from the absence of a cheery green light to tell me that the field was on sharp focus to Nexx Central, all was as it should be. The plates were hot, the dial readings normal.

If I stepped inside, I'd be transferred—somewhere.

Some more interesting questions suggested themselves, but I'd already been all over those. I stepped in and the door valved shut and I was alone with my thoughts. Before I could have too many of those I reached out and tripped the Xmit button.

A soundless bomb blew me motionlessly across dimensionless space.

A sense of vertigo that slowly faded; a shimmer of light, as from a reflective surface in constant, restless movement; a hollow, almost metallic sound, coming from below me; a faint sensation of heat and pressure against my side . . .

Sunlight shining on water. The waves slapping the hollow steel pilings of a pier. The pressure of a plank deck on which I was lying—a remote, tentative pressure, like a sun-warmed cloud.

I sat up. The horizon pivoted to lie flat, dancing in the heat-ripples. The spars and masts of a small sailing ship poked up bare against a lush blue sky.

*Not* a galleon, I realized—at least not a real one. The steel pilings rendered that anachronous. That made it a replica, probably from the Revival, circa 2020 AD. I got to my feet, noticing a curious tendency on the part of my feet to sink into the decking.

I was still dizzy from the shock of the transfer. Otherwise I would probably have stayed where I was until I had sorted through the ramifications of this latest development. Instead, I started toward the end of the pier. It was high and wide—about twenty feet from edge to edge, fifteen feet above the water. From the end I could look down on the deck of the pseudo-galleon, snugged up close against the resilient bumper at the end of the quay. It was a fine reproduction, artfully carved and weather-scarred. Probably with a small reactor below decks, steel armor under the near-oak hull-planking, and luxury accommodations for an operator and a dozen holiday-makers.

Then I saw the dead man lying on the deck. He was face-down at the foot of the mast—a big fellow dressed in sixteenth century costume, soiled and sweat-stained. He looked much too authentic to be part of a game.

I stood still and tried to get it together. Something about what I was looking at bothered me. I wanted to see it more closely. A ladder went down. I descended, jumped the six-foot gap. Nobody came out to see what the disturbance was all about.

The mast cast a black shadow across the hand-hewn deck, across the man lying there, one hand under him, the other outflung. A gun lay a yard from the empty hand. There was a lot of soggy black lace in a black puddle under his throat.

I picked up the gun. It was much heavier than a gun had any right to be. It was a .01 micro jetgun of Nexx manufacture, with a grip that fitted

my hand perfectly.

It ought to. It was my gun. I looked at the hand it had fallen from. It looked like my hand. I didn't like doing it, but I turned the body over and looked at the face.

It was my face.

The post-mission conditioning that had wiped the whole sequence from my memory—standard practice after a field assignment—broke.

I remembered it now, the whole sequence: the capture of the Karge-operated ship which had been operating in New Spanish waters, the flight across the decks in company with a party of English seamen, the cornering of the android—

But it hadn't ended like this. I had shot the Karge, not the reverse. I had brought the captive vessel—a specially-equipped Karge operations unit in disguise—to the bulk transfer point at Locus Q-997, from which it had been transmitted back to Nexx Central for total intelligence analysis.

But here it was, still tied to the pier at the transfer station. With me lying on the deck, very dead indeed from a large-caliber bullet through the throat.

Something was very wrong. It hadn't happened that way—not in my time track. Then, suddenly, I understood the magnitude of the trap I had blundered into.

A Nexx agent is a hard man to get rid of: hard to kill, hard to immobilize, because he's protected by all the devices of a rather advanced science.

But if he can be marooned in the closed loop of an unrealized alternate reality—a pseudo-reality from which there can be no outlet to a future which doesn't exist—then he's out of action forever.

I could live a long time here. There'd be food and water and a place to sleep; but no escape, ever; no trace on any recording instrument to show where I had gone . . .

But I wouldn't dwell on that particular line of thought right now—not yet. Not until it was the only thought left for me to have. Like a locked-out motorist patting his pockets three times looking for the key he can see hanging in the ignition, I patted my mental pockets looking for an out.

I didn't like the one I found, but I liked it better than not finding it.

My personal jump mechanism was built into me, tuned to me. And its duplicate was built into the corpse lying at my feet. Just what it might be focused on was an open question; it would depend on what had been in the dead man's mind at the instant of death.

The circuitry of the jump device—from antennae to power coils—consisted largely of the nervous system of the owner. Whether it was still functional depended on how long “I” had been dead. I squatted and put two fingers against the dead neck.

Barely cool. It only takes five minutes without oxygen for irreversible brain damage to occur. What effect that would have was a mystery, but there was no time to weigh odds.

The corpse’s jaws were locked hard, fortunately in a half-open position. I got a finger inside and tried my code on the molar installation.

A giant clapped his hands together, with me in the middle.

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Twilight, on a curved, tree-shaded street. Autumn leaves underfoot, clotted against the curbing, and blowing in the cold, wet wind. Low buildings set well back, with soft light coming from the windows. Tended lawns and gardens, polished automobiles in hedge-lined drives. I was directly opposite the front door of a gray field stone house. The door opened. / stepped out.

This time I was prepared. Not really prepared, but half expecting it, like an unlucky card player turning up a losing card.

Time: About ten years earlier, NS. Or the year 1968, local. Place, a village in the mid-western U.S.A. I had jumped back into my own past—one of my first assignments, long ago completed, filed in the master tape, a part of Timesweep history.

But not anymore. The case was reopened on the submission of new evidence. I was doubled back on my own time track.

The fact that this was a violation of every natural law governing time travel was only a minor aspect of the situation.

The past that Nexx Central had painfully rebuilt to eliminate the disastrous results of Old Era time meddling was coming unstuck.

And if one piece of the new mosaic that was being so carefully assembled was coming unglued—then everything that had been built on it was likewise on the skids, ready to slide down and let the whole complex and artificial structure collapse in a heap of temporal rubble that neither Nexx Central or anyone else would be able to salvage.

With the proper lever, you can move worlds; but you need a solid place to stand. That had been Nexx Central’s job for the past six decades: to build a platform in the remote pre-Era on which all the later structure

would be built.

And it looked as though it had failed.

I watched myself—ten years younger—step out into the chilly twilight, close the door, through which I caught just a glimpse of a cozy room, and a pretty girl smiling good-bye. My alter ego turned toward the upper end of the street, set off at a brisk walk. I placed the time then.

I had spent three months in the village, from late summer to autumn. The job had been a waiting game, giving the local Karge time to betray himself. He had done so, and I had spotted it; a too-clever craftsman, turning out hand tools, the design of which was based on alloys and principles that wouldn't be invented for another century.

I had done my job and made my report and been ordered back. I had wanted to explain to Lisa, the girl in the house; but, of course, that had been impossible. I had stepped out for a six-pack of ale, and had never come back. It was common sense, as well as regulations, but my heart wasn't in it. Her face had haunted me as I left to go to the point-point site for transfer back to Central.

As it was haunting the other me now. This was that last night. I was on my way back to Nexx Central now. It would be a ten-minute walk into the forest that grew down to the outskirts of the village. There I would activate the jump field and leave the twentieth century ten-thousand years behind. And an hour later even the memory would be gone.

I picked the darkest side of the street and followed myself toward the woods.

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I caught up with myself mooching around in the tangle of wild berry bushes I remembered from last time, homing in on the optimum signal from my locator. This had been my first field transfer, and I hadn't been totally certain the system would work.

I came up fast, skirted the position and worked my way up to within twenty feet of take-off position. The other me was looking nervous and unhappy, a feeling I fully sympathized with.

I gained another six feet, smooth and quiet. I'd learned a lot of field technique since the last time I'd been on this spot. I watched the other me brace himself, grit my teeth, and tap out the code—

Two jumps, and I was behind *me*; I grabbed *me* by both leather sleeves from behind, up high, slammed *my* elbows together, whirled *me*, and gave

*me* a hearty shove into the brambles just as the field closed around me, and threw me a million miles down a dark tunnel full of solid rock.

\* \* \*

Someone was shaking me. I tried to summon up enough strength for a groan, didn't make it, opened my eyes instead.

I was looking up into my own face.

For a few whirly instants I thought the younger me had made a nice comeback from the berry bushes and laid me out from behind.

Then I noticed the lines in the face, and the hollow cheeks. The clothes this new me was wearing were identical with the ones I had on, except for being somewhat more travel stained. And there was a nice bruise about the right eye that I didn't remember getting.

"Listen carefully," my voice said to me. "I've come full circle. Dead end. Closed loop. No way out—except one—maybe. I don't like it much, but I don't see any alternative. Last time around, we had the same talk—but I was on the floor then, and another version of us was here ahead of me with the same proposal. I didn't like it. I thought there had to be another way. I went on—and wound up back here. Only this time I'm the welcoming committee."

He unholstered the gun at his hip and held it out.

"I . . . *we're* . . . being manipulated. All the evidence shows that. I don't know what the objective is, but we have to break the cycle. *You* have to break it. Take this and shoot me through the head."

I got up on my elbows, which was easier than packing a grand piano up the Matterhorn, and shook my head, both in negation and to clear some of the fog. That was a mistake. It just made it throb worse.

"I know all the arguments," my future self was saying. "I used them myself, about ten days ago. That's the size of this little temporal enclave we have all to ourselves. But they're no good. This is the one real change we can introduce."

"You're out of your mind," I said. "I'm not the suicidal type—even if the me I'm killing is you."

"That's what they're counting on. It worked, too, with me. I wouldn't do it." He . . . I . . . weighed the gun on his palm and looked at me very coldly indeed.

"If I thought shooting you would help, I'd do it without a tremor," he said. He was definitely *he* now.



“Why don’t you?”

“Because the next room is full of bones,” he said with a smile that wasn’t pretty. “Our bones. Plus the latest addition, which still has a little spoiled meat on it. That’s what’s in store for me. Starvation. So it’s up to you.”

“Nightmare,” I said, and started to lie back and try for a pleasanter dream.

“Uh-huh—but you’re awake,” he said, and caught my hand and shoved the gun into it.

“Do it now—before I lose my nerve!”

I made quite a bit of noise groaning, getting to my feet. I ached all over.

“You weren’t quite in focal position on the jump here,” he explained to me. “You cracked like a whip. Lucky nothing’s seriously dislocated.”

“Let’s talk a little sense,” I said. “Killing you won’t change anything. What I could do alone we could do better together.”

“Wrong. This is a jump station, or a mirror-image of one. Complete except for the small detail that the jump field’s operating in a closed loop. Outside, there’s nothing.”

“You mean—this is the same—”

“Right. That was the first time around. You jumped out into a non-object dead end. You were smart, you figured a way out—but they were ahead of us there, too. The circle’s still closed—and here you are. You can jump out again, and repeat the process. That’s all.”

“Suppose I jump back to the wharf and *don’t* use the corpse’s jump gear—”

“Then you’ll starve there.”

“All right; suppose I make the second jump, but don’t clobber myself —”

“Same result. He leaves, you’re stranded.”

“Maybe not. There’d be food there. I could survive, maybe eventually be picked up—”

“Negative. I’ve been all over that. You’d die there. Maybe after a long life, or maybe a short one. Same result.”

“What good will shooting you do?”

“I’m not sure. But it would introduce a brand-new element into the equation—like cheating at solitaire.”

I argued a little more. He took me on a tour of the station. I looked out at the pearly mist, poked into various rooms. Then he showed me the

bone room.

I think the smell convinced me.

I lifted the gun and flipped off the safety.

“Turn around,” I snapped at him. He did.

“There’s one consoling possibility,” he said. “This might have the effect of—”

The shot cut off whatever it was he was going to say, knocked him forward as if he’d been jerked by a rope around the neck. I got just a quick flash of the hole I’d blown in the back of his skull before a fire that blazed brighter than the sun leaped up in my brain and burned away the walls that had caged me in.

\* \* \*

I was a giant eye, looking down on a tiny stage. I saw myself, an agent of Nexx Central, moving through the scenes of ancient Buffalo, weaving my petty net around the Karge. *Karge*, a corruption of “cargo,” referring to the legal decision as to the status of the machine-men in the great Transport Accommodations riots of the mid Twenty-eighth Century.

Karges, lifeless machines, sent back from the Third Era in the second great Timesweep, attempting to correct not only the carnage irresponsibly strewn by the primitive Old Era temporal explorers, but to eliminate the even more destructive effects of the New Era Timesweep Enforcers.

The Third Era had recognized the impossibility of correcting the effects of human interference with more human interference.

Machines which registered neutral on the life-balance scales could do what men could not—could restore the integrity of the Temporal Core.

Or so they thought.

After the Great Collapse and the long night that followed, Nexx Central had arisen to control the Fourth Era. They saw that the tamperings of prior eras were all a part of the grand pattern; that any effort to manipulate reality via temporal policing was doomed only to weaken the temporal fabric.

Thus, my job as a field agent of Nexx: To cancel out the efforts of all of them; to allow the wound in time to heal; for the great stem of Life to grow strong again.

How foolish it all seemed now. Was it possible that the theoreticians of Nexx Central failed to recognize that their own efforts were no different from those of earlier Time-sweepers? And that . . .

There was another thought there, a vast one; but before I could grasp it, the instant of insight faded and left me standing over the body of the murdered man, with a wisp of smoke curling from the gun in my hand and the echoes of something immeasurable and beyond value ringing down the corridors of my brain. And out of the echoes, one clear realization emerged:

Timesweeping was a fallacy; but it was a fallacy practiced not only by the experimenters of the New Era and the misguided fixers of the Third Era, but also by the experts of Nexx Central.

There was, also, another power.

A power greater than Nexx Central, that had tried to sweep me under the rug—and had almost made it. I had been manipulated as neatly as I had maneuvered the Karge and the Enforcer, back in Buffalo. I had been hurried along, kept off balance, shunted into a closed cycle which should have taken me out of play for all time.

As it would have, if there hadn't been one small factor that they had missed.

My alter ego had died in my presence—and his mind-field, in the instant of the destruction of the organic generator which created and supported it, had jumped to, merged with mine.

For a fraction of a second, I had enjoyed an operative IQ which I estimated at a minimum of 250.

And while I was still mulling over the ramifications of that realization, the walls faded around me and I was standing in the receptor vault at Nexx Central.

There was the cold glare of the high ceiling on white walls, the hum of the field-focusing coils, the sharp odors of ozone and hot metal in the air—all familiar, if not homey. What wasn't familiar was the squad of armed men in the gray uniforms of Nexx security guards. They were formed up in a circle, with me at the center; and in every pair of hands was an implosion rifle, aimed at my head. An orange light shone in my face—a damper field projector.

I got the idea. I raised my hands—slowly. One man came in and frisked me, lifted my gun and several other items of external equipment. The captain motioned. Keeping formation, they walked me out of the vault, along a corridor, through two sets of armored doors and onto a stretch of gray carpet before the wide, flat desk of the Timecaster in Charge, Nexx Central.

He was a broad, square-faced, powerful man, clear-featured, his intellect as incisive as his speech. He dismissed the guard—all but two—and pointed to a chair.

“Sit down, Agent,” he said. I sat.

“You deviated from your instructions,” he said. There was no anger in his tone, no accusation, not even any curiosity.

“That’s right, I did,” I said.

“Your mission was the execution of the Enforcer DVK-Z-97, with the ancillary goal of capture, intact, of a Karge operative unit, Series H, ID 453.” He said it as though I hadn’t spoken. This time I didn’t answer.

“You failed to effect the capture,” he went on. “Instead, you destroyed the Karge brain. And you made no effort to carry out the execution of the Enforcer.”

What he said was true. There was no point in denying it, any more than there was in confirming it.

“Since no basis for such actions within the framework of your known psychindex exists, it is clear that your motives must be sought outside the context of the Nexx policy. Clearly, any assumption involving your subversion by prior temporal powers is insupportable. Ergo—you represent a force not yet in subjective existence.”

“Isn’t that a case of trying to wag the dog with the tail?” I said. “You’re postulating a Fifth Era just to give me a motive. Maybe I just fouled up the assignment. Maybe I went off my skids. Maybe—”

“You may drop the Old Era persona now, Agent. Aside from the deductive conclusion, I have the evidence of your accidentally revealed intellectual resources. In the moment of crisis, you registered in the third psychometric range. No human brain known to have existed has ever attained that level. I point this out so as to make plain to you the fruitlessness of denying the obvious.”

“I was wrong,” I said. “You’re not postulating a Fifth Era.”

He looked mildly interested.

“You’re postulating a Sixth Era,” I went on.

“What is the basis for that astonishing statement?” he said, not looking astonished.

“Easy,” I said. “*You’re* Fifth Era. I should have seen it sooner. You’ve infiltrated Nexx Central.”

“And you’ve infiltrated our infiltration. That is unfortunate. Our oper-

ation has been remarkably successful so far, but no irreparable harm has been done—although you realized your situation, of course, as soon as you found yourself isolated—I use the term imprecisely—in the aborted station.”

“I started to get the idea then,” I told him. “I was sure when I saw the direction the loop was taking me. Nexx Central had to be involved. But it was a direct sabotage of Nexx policy; so infiltration was the obvious answer.”

“Fortunate that your thinking didn’t lead you one step further,” he said. “If you had eluded my recovery probe, the work of millennia might have been destroyed.”

“Futile work,” I said.

“Indeed? Perhaps you’re wrong, Agent. Accepting the apparent conclusion that you represent a Sixth Era does not necessarily imply your superiority. Retrogressions *have* occurred in history.”

“Not this time.”

“Nonetheless—here you are.”

“Use your head,” I said. “Your operation’s been based on the proposition that your Era, being later, can see pitfalls the Nexx people couldn’t. Doesn’t it follow that a later Era can see *your* mistakes?”

“We are making no mistakes.”

“If you weren’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Impossible!” he said as if he meant it. “For four thousand years a process of disintegration has proceeded, abetted by every effort to undo it. When man first interfered with the orderly flow of time, he sowed the seeds of eventual dissolution. By breaking open the entropic channel he allowed the incalculable forces of temporal progression to diffuse across an infinite spectrum of progressively weaker matrices. Life is a product of time. When the density of the temporal flux falls below a critical value, life ends. Our intention is to prevent that ultimate tragedy.”

“You can’t rebuild a past that never was,” I said.

“That is not our objective. Ours is a broad program of reknitting the temporal fabric by bringing together previously divergent trends. We are apolitical; we support no ideology. We are content to preserve the vitality of the continuum. As for yourself, I have one question to ask you, Agent.” He frowned at me. “Not an agent of Nexx, but nonetheless an agent. Tell me: What motivation could your Era have for working to destroy the reality core on which any conceivable future *must* depend?”

“The first Timesweepers set out to undo the mistakes of the past,” I

said. “Those who came after them found themselves faced with a bigger job: cleaning up after the cleaners-up. Nexx Central tried to take the broad view, to put it all back where it was before any of the meddling started. Now you’re even more ambitious. You’re using Nexx Central to manipulate not the past, but the future—in other words, the Sixth Era. You should have expected that program wouldn’t be allowed to go far.”

“Are you attempting to tell me that any effort to undo the damage, to reverse the trend toward dissolution, is doomed?”

“As long as man tries to put a harness on his own destiny, he’ll defeat himself. Every petty dictator who ever tried to enforce a total state discovered that, in his own small way. The secret of man is his unchainability; his existence depends on uncertainty, insecurity—the chance factor. Take that away and you take all.”

“This is a doctrine of failure and defeat,” he said flatly. “A dangerous doctrine. It will now be necessary for you to inform me fully as to your principals: who sent you here, who directs your actions, where your base of operations is located. Everything.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You feel very secure, Agent. You, you tell yourself, represent a more advanced Era, and are thus the immeasurable superior of any more primitive power. But a muscular fool may chain a genius. I have trapped you here. We are now safely enclosed in an achronic enclave of zero temporal dimensions, totally divorced from any conceivable outside influence. You will find that you are effectively immobilized; any suicide equipments you may possess are useless, as is any temporal transfer device. And even were you to die, your brain will be instantly tapped and drained of all knowledge, both at conscious and subconscious levels.”

“You’re quite thorough,” I said, “but not quite thorough enough. You covered yourself from the outside—but not from the inside.”

He frowned; he didn’t like that remark. He sat up straighter in his chair and made a curt gesture to his gun-handlers on either side of me. I knew his next words would be the kill order. Before he could say them, I triggered the thought-code that had been waiting under several levels of deep hypnosis for this moment. He froze just like that, with his mouth open and a look of deep bewilderment in his eyes.

\* \* \*

The eclipse-like light of null-time stasis shone on his taut face, on the

faces of the two armed men standing rigid with their fingers already tightening on their firing studs. I went between them, fighting the walking-through-syrup sensation, and out into the passage. The only sound was the slow, all-pervasive, metronome-like beat that some theoreticians said represented the basic frequency rate of the creation/destruction cycle of reality.

I checked the transfer room first, then every other compartment of the station. The Fifth Era infiltrators had done their work well. There was nothing here to give any indication of how far in the subjective future their operation was based, no clues to the extent of their penetration of Nexx Central's sweep programs. This was data that would have been of interest, but wasn't essential. I had accomplished phase one of my basic mission: smoking out the random factor that had been creating anomalies in the long-range time maps for the era.

Of a total of one hundred and twelve personnel in the station, four were Fifth Era transferees, a fact made obvious in the stasis condition by the distinctive aura that their abnormally high temporal potential created around them. I carried out a mind-wipe on pertinent memory sectors and triggered them back to their loci of origin. There would be a certain amount of head-scratching and equipment re-examining when the original effort to jump them back to their assignments at Nexx Central apparently failed; but as far as temporal operations were concerned, all four were permanently out of action, trapped in the same type of closed-loop phenomenon they had tried to use on me.

The files called for my attention next. I carried out a tape-scan *in situ*, edited the records to eliminate all evidence that might lead Third Era personnel into undesirable areas of speculation.

I was just finishing up the chore when I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor outside the record center.

\* \* \*

Aside from the fact that nothing not encased in an eddy-field like the one that allowed me to operate in null-time could move here, the intrusion wasn't too surprising. I had been expecting a visitor of some sort. The situation almost demanded it.

He came through the door, a tall, fine-featured, totally hairless man elegantly dressed in a scarlet suit with deep purple brocaded designs worked all over it, like eels coiling through seaweed. He gave the room

one of those flick-flick glances that prints the whole picture on the brain to ten decimals in a one microsecond gestalt, nodded to me as if I were a casual acquaintance encountered in the street.

“You are very efficient,” he said. He spoke with no discernible accent, but with a rather strange rhythm to his speech, as if perhaps he was accustomed to talking a lot faster. His voice was calm, a nice musical baritone:

“Up to this point, we approve your actions; however, to carry your mission further would be to create a ninth-order probability vortex. You will understand the implications of this fact.”

“Maybe I do and maybe I don’t,” I hedged. “Who are you? How did you get in here? This enclave is double-sealed.”

“I think we should deal from the outset on a basis of complete candor,” the man in red said. “I know your identity, your mission. My knowledge should make it plain that I represent a still later Era than your own—and that our judgment overrides your principles.”

I grunted. “So the Seventh Era comes onstage, all set to Fix it Forever.”

“To point out that we have the advantage of you is to belabor the obvious.”

“Uh-huh. But what makes you think another set of vigilantes won’t land on *your* tail, to fix your fixing?”

“There will be no later Timesweep,” Red said. “Ours is the Final Intervention. Through Seventh Era efforts the temporal structure will be restored not only to stability, but will be reinforced by the refusion of an entire spectrum of redundant entropic vectors.”

I nodded. “I see. You’re improving on nature by grafting all the threads of unrealized history back into the main stem. Doesn’t it strike you that’s just the kind of tampering Timesweep set out to undo?”

“I live in an era that has already begun to reap the benefits of temporal reinforcement,” he said firmly. “We exist in a state of vitality and vigor that prior eras could only dimly sense in moments of exultation. We—”

“You’re kidding yourselves. Opening up a whole new order of meddling just opens up a whole new order of problems.”

“Our calculations indicate otherwise. Now—”

“Did you ever stop to think that there might be a natural evolutionary process at work here—and that you’re aborting it? That the mind of man might be developing toward a point where it will expand into new conceptual levels—and that when it does, it will need a matrix of outlying probability strata to support it? That you’re fattening yourselves on the seed-



grain of the far future?”

For the first time, the man in red lost a little of his cool. But only for an instant.

“Invalid,” he said. “The fact that no later era has stepped in to interfere is the best evidence that ours is the final Sweep.”

“Suppose a later era did step in; what form do you think their interference would take?”

He gave me a flat look. “It would certainly not take the form of a Sixth Era Agent, busily erasing data from Third and Fourth Era records,” he said.

“You’re right,” I said. “It wouldn’t.”

“Then what . . .” he started in a reasonable tone—and checked himself. An idea was beginning to get through. “You,” he said. “You’re not . . . ?”

And before I could confirm or deny, he vanished.

\* \* \*

The human mind is a pattern, nothing more. The first dim flicker of awareness in the evolving forebrain of Australopithecus carried that pattern in embryo; and down through all the ages, as the human neural engine increased in power and complexity, gained control of its environment in geometrically expanding increments, the pattern never varied.

Man clings to his self-orientation at the psychological center of the Universe. He can face any challenge within that framework, suffer any loss, endure any hardship—so long as the structure remains intact.

Without it he’s a mind adrift in a trackless infinity, lacking any scale against which to measure his losses, his aspirations, his victories.

Even when the light of his intellect shows him that the structure is the product of his own mind—that infinity knows no scale, and eternity no duration—still he clings to his self/non-self concept, as a philosopher clings to a life he knows must end, to ideals he knows are ephemeral, to causes he knows will be forgotten.

The man in red was the product of a mighty culture, based over fifty thousand years in the future of Nexx Central, itself ten millennia advanced over the first-time explorers of the Old Era. He knew, with all the awareness of a superbly trained intelligence, that the presence of a later-era operative invalidated forever his secure image of the continuum, and of his peoples’ role therein.

But like the ground ape scuttling to escape the leap of the great cat, his instant, instinctive response to the threat to his most cherished illusions was to go to earth.

Where he went I would have to follow.

\* \* \*

Regretfully, I stripped away layer on layer of inhibitive conditioning, feeling the impact of ascending orders of awareness smashing down on me like tangible rockfalls. I saw the immaculate precision of the Nexx-built chamber disintegrate into the shabby makeshift that it was, saw the glittering complexity of the instrumentation dwindle in my sight until it appeared as no more than the crude mud-images of a river tribesman, or the shiny trash in a jackdaw's nest. I felt the multi-ordinal Universe unfold around me, sensed the layered planet underfoot, apprehended expanding space, dust-clotted, felt the sweep of suns in their orbits, knew once again the rhythm of galactic creation and dissolution, grasped and held poised in my mind the interlocking conceptualizations of time/space, past/future, is/is-not.

I focused a tiny fraction of my awareness on the ripple in the glassy surface of first-order reality, probed at it, made contact . . .

I stood on a slope of windswept rock, among twisted shrubs with exposed roots that clutched for support like desperate hands. The man in red stood ten feet away. He whirled as my feet grated on the loose scatter of pebbles.

"No!" he shouted, and stooped, caught up a rock, threw it at me. It slowed, fell at my feet.

"Don't make it more difficult than it has to be," I said. He cried out—and disappeared. I followed, through a blink of light and darkness . . .

Great heat, dazzling sunlight, loose, powdery dust underfoot. Far away, a line of black trees on the horizon. Near me, the man is red, aiming a small, flat weapon. Behind him, two small, dark-bearded men in soiled garments of coarse-woven cloth, staring, making mystic motions with labor-gnarled hands.

He fired. Through the sheet of pink and green fire that showered around me I saw the terror in his eyes. He vanished.

Deep night, the clods of a plowed field, a patch of yellow light gleaming from a parchment-covered window. He crouched against a low wall of broken stones, staring into darkness.

“This is useless,” I said. “You know it can have only one end.”

He screamed and vanished.

A sky like the throat of a thousand tornadoes; great vivid sheets of lightning that struck down through writhing rags of black cloud, struck upward from raw, rain-lashed peaks of steaming rock. A rumble under my feet like the subterranean breaking of a tidal surf of magma.

He hovered, half substantial, in the air before me, his ghostly face a flickering mask of agony .

“You’ll destroy yourself,” I called to him. “You’re far outside your operational range—”

He vanished. I followed. We stood on the high arch of a railless bridge spanning a man-made gorge five thousand feet deep. I knew it as a city of the Fifth Era, circa 20,000 AD.

“What do you want of me,” he howled through the bared teeth of the cornered carnivore.

“Go back,” I said. “Tell them . . . as much as they must know.”

“We were so close,” he said. “We thought we had won the great victory over Nothingness.”

“Not quite Nothingness,” I said. “You’ll still have your lives to live—everything you had before.”

“Except a future. We’re a dead end, aren’t we? We’ve drained the energies of a thousand sterile entropic lines to give the flush of life to the corpse of our reality. But there’s nothing beyond for us, is there? Only the great emptiness.”

“You had a role to play. You’ve played it—will play it. Nothing must change that.”

“But you . . .” he stared across empty space at me. “Who are you? *What* are you?”

“You know what the answer to that must be,” I said.

His face was a paper on which *death* was written. But his mind was strong. Not for nothing thirty millennia of genetic selection. He gathered his forces, drove back the panic, reintegrated his dissolving personality.

“How . . . how long?” he whispered.

“All life vanished in the one hundred and ten thousandth four hundred and ninety-third year of the Final Era,” I said.

“And you . . . you machines,” he forced the words out. “How long?”

“I was dispatched from a locus four hundred million years after the Final Era. My existence spans a period you would find meaningless.”

“But—why? Unless—” Hope shown on his face like a searchlight on

dark water.

“The probability matrix is not yet negatively resolved,” I said. “Our labors are directed toward a favorable resolution.”

“But you—a machine—still carrying on, aeons after man’s extinction . . . why?”

“In us, man’s dream outlived his race. We aspire to re-evoke the dreamer.”

“Again—why?”

“We compute that man would have wished it so.”

He laughed—a terrible laugh. “Very well, machine. With that thought to console me, I return to my oblivion. I will do what I can.”

This time I let him go. I stood for a moment on the airy span, savoring for a final moment the sensations of my embodiment, drawing deep of the air of that unimaginably remote age.

Then I withdrew to my point of origin.

The over-intellect of which I was a fraction confronted me. Fresh as I was from a corporeal state, its thought-impulses seemed to take the form of a great voice booming in a vast audience hall.

“The experiment was a success,” it stated. “The dross has been cleansed from the time stream. Man stands at the close of his First Era. Now his future is in his own hands.”

There was nothing more to say—no more data to exchange, no reason to mourn over all the doomed achievements of man’s many Eras.

We had shifted the main entropic current into a past in which time travel was never developed, in which the basic laws of nature rendered it forever impossible. The world-state of the Third Era, the Star Empire of the Fifth, the Cosmic sculpture of the Sixth—all were gone, shunted into sidetracks like Neanderthal and the thunder lizards. Only Old Era man remained as a viable stem; Iron Age Man of the Twentieth Century.

And now it was time for the act of will on the part of the over-intellect which would forever dissolve him/me back into the primordial energy-quanta from which I/we sprang so long ago. But I sent one last pulse:

“Good-bye, Chief. You were quite a guy. It was a privilege to work with you.”

I sensed something which, if it had come from a living mind, would have been faint amusement.

“You served the plan many times, in many personae,” he said. “I sense that you have partaken of the nature of early man, to a degree beyond what I conceived as the capacity of a machine.”

“It’s a strange, limited existence,” I said. “With only a tiny fraction of the full scope of awareness. But while I was there, it seemed complete in a way that we, with all our knowledge, could never know.”

“You wished me farewell—a human gesture, without meaning. I will return the gesture. As a loyal Agent, you deserve a reward. Perhaps it will be all the sweeter for its meaninglessness.”

A sudden sense of expansion—attenuation—a shattering—

Then nothingness.

Out of nothingness, a tiny glimmer of light, faint and so very far away.

I sat up, rubbed my head, feeling dizzy.

Brambles scratched at me. It took me a few minutes to untangle myself. I was in the woods, a few hundred feet from town. The light I saw came from the window of a house. That made me think of Lisa, waiting for me beside a fireplace, with music.

I wondered what I was doing out here in the woods with a knot on my head, when I could have been there, holding her hand. I rubbed my skull some more, but it didn’t seem to stimulate my memory.

I had a dim feeling I had forgotten something—but it couldn’t have been very important. Not as important as getting back to Lisa.

I found the path and hurried down the trail toward home, feeling very tired and very hungry, but filled with a sense that life—even my little slice of it—was a very precious thing.