

## The Eve of RUMOKO

I was in the control room when the J-9 unit flaked out on us. I was there for purposes of doing some idiot maintenance work, among other things.

There were two men below in the capsule, inspecting the Highway to Hell, that shaft screwed into the ocean's bottom thousands of fathoms beneath us and soon to be opened for traffic. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have worried, as there were two J-9 technicians on the payroll. Only, one of them was on leave in Spitzbergen and the other had entered sick bay just that morning. As a sudden combination of wind and turbulent waters rocked the Aquina and I reflected that it was now the Eve of RUMOKO, I made my decision. I crossed the room and removed a side panel.

"Schweitzer! You're not authorized to fool around with that!" said Doctor Asquith.

I studied the circuits, and, "Do you want to work on it?" I asked him.

"Of course not. I wouldn't know how to begin. But ... "

"Do you want to see Martin and Demmy die?"

"You know I don't. Only you're not ... "

"Then tell me who is," I said. "That capsule down there is controlled from up here, and we've just blown something. If you know somebody better fit to work on it, then you'd better send for him. Otherwise, I'll try to repair the J-9 myself."

He shut up then, and I began to see where the trouble was. They had been somewhat obvious about things. They had even used solder. Four circuits had been rigged, and they had fed the whole mess back through one of the timers ...

So I began unscrewing the thing. Asquith was an oceanographer and so should know little about electronic circuits. I guessed that he couldn't tell that I was undoing sabotage. I worked for about ten minutes, and the drifting capsule hundreds of fathoms beneath us began to function once again.

As I worked, I had reflected upon the powers soon to be invoked, the forces that would traverse the Highway to Hell for a brief time, and then like the Devil's envoy or the Devil himself, perhaps, be released, there in the mid-Atlantic. The bleak weather that prevails in these latitudes at this time of year did little to improve my mood. A deadly force was to be employed, atomic energy, to release an even more powerful phenomenon, live magma, which seethed and bubbled now miles beneath the sea itself. That anyone should play senseless games with something like this was beyond my comprehension. Once again, the ship was shaken by the waves.

"Okay," I said. "There were a few shorts and I straightened them out" I replaced the side panel. "There shouldn't be any more trouble."

He regarded the monitor. "It seems to be functioning all right now. Let me check ... "

He flipped the toggle and said, "Aquina to capsule. Do you read me?"

"Yes," came the reply. "What happened?"

"Short circuit in the J-9," he answered. "It has been repaired. What is your condition?"

"All systems returned to normal. Instructions?"

"Proceed with your mission," he said, then turned to me. "I'll recommend you for something or other," he said. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I didn't know you could service the J-9."

"I'm an electrical engineer," I replied, "and I've studied this thing. I know it's restricted. If I hadn't been able to figure out what was wrong, I wouldn't have touched it."

"I take it you'd rather not be recommended for something or other?"

"That is correct."

"Then I will not do it."

Which was a very good thing, for the nonce, as I'd also disconnected a small bomb, which then resided in my left-hand jacket pocket and would soon be tossed overboard. It had had another five to eight minutes to go and would have blotted the record completely. As for me, I didn't even want a record; but if there had to be one, it would be mine, not the enemy's.

I excused myself and departed. I disposed of the evidence. I thought upon the day's doings.

Someone had tried to sabotage the project. So Don Walsh had been right. The assumed threat had been for real. Consume that and digest it. It meant that there was something big involved. The main question was, "What?" The second was, "What next?"

I lit a cigarette and leaned on the Aquina's rail. I watched the cold north sea attack the hull. My hands shook. It was a decent, humanitarian project. Also, a highly dangerous one. Even forgetting the great risks, though, I could not come up with a good counter-interest. Obviously, however, there was one.

Would Asquith report me? Probably. Though he would not realize what he was doing. He would have to explain the discontinuance of function in the capsule in order to make his report jibe with the capsule's log. He would say that I had repaired a short circuit. That's all.

That would be enough.

I had already decided that the enemy had access to the main log. They would know about the disconnected bomb not being reported. They would also know who had stopped them; and they might be interested enough, at a critical time like this, to do something rash. Good. That was precisely what I wanted.

... Because I had already wasted an entire month waiting for this break. I hoped they would come after me soon and try to question me. I took a deep drag on the cigarette and watched a distant iceberg glisten in the sun. This was going to be a strange one, I had that feeling. The skies were gray and the oceans were dark. Somewhere, someone disapproved of what was going on here, but for the life of me I could not guess why.

Well, the hell with them all. I like cloudy days. I was born on one. I'd do my best to enjoy this one.

I went back to my cabin and mixed myself a drink, as I was then officially off duty.

After a time, there came a knocking on my door.

"Turn the handle and push," I said.

It opened and a young man named Rawlings entered.

"Mister Schweitzer," he said, "Carol Deith would like to speak with you."

"Tell her I'm on my way," I said.

"All right," and he departed.

I combed my sort of blond hair and changed my shirt, because she was pretty and young. She was the ship's Security Officer, though, so I had a good idea as to what she was really after.

I walked to her office and knocked twice on the door.

As I entered, I bore in mind the fact that it probably involved the J-9 and my doings of a half hour before. This would tend to indicate that she was right on top of everything.

"Hello," I said. "I believe you sent for me?"

"Schweitzer? Yes, I did. Have a seat, huh?" and she gestured at one on the other side of her expensive desk.

I took it.

"What do you want?"

"You repaired the J-9 this afternoon."

I shrugged. "Are you asking me or telling me?"

"You are not authorized to touch the thing."

"If you want, I can go back and screw it up and leave it the way I found it."

"Then you admit you worked on it?"

"Yes."

She sighed.

"Look, I don't care," she said. "You probably saved two lives today, so I'm not about to fault you for a security violation. What I want to know is something different."

"What?"

"Was it sabotage?"

And there it was. I had felt it coming.

"No," I said. "It was not. There were some short circuits ... "

"Bull," she told me.

"I'm sorry. I don't understand ... "

"You understand, all right. Somebody gimmicked that thing. You undid it, and it was trickier than a couple of short circuits. And there was a bomb. We monitored its explosion off the port bow about half an hour ago."

"You said it," I said. "I didn't."

"What's your game?" she asked me. "You cleaned up for us, and now you're covering up for somebody else. What do you want?"

"Nothing," I said.

I studied her. Her hair was sort of reddish and she had freckles, lots of them. Her eyes were green. They seemed to be set quite far apart beneath the ruddy line of her bangs. She was fairly tall, like five-ten, though she was not standing at the moment I had danced with her once at a shipboard party.

"Well?"

"Quite well," I said. "And yourself?"

"I want an answer."

"To what?"

"Was it sabotage?"

"No," I said. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"There have been other attempts, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

She blushed suddenly, highlighting her freckles. What had caused that?

"Well, there have been. We stopped all of them, obviously. But they were there."

"Who did it?"

"We don't know."

"Why not?"

"We never got hold of the people involved."

"How come?"

"They were clever."

I lit a cigarette.

"Well, you're wrong," I said. "There were some short circuits. I'm an electrical engineer and I spotted them. That was all, though."

She found one someplace, and I lit it for her.

"Okay," she said. "I guess I've got everything you want to tell me."

I stood then.

" ... By the way, I ran another check on you."

"Yes?"

"Nothing. You're clean as snow and swansdown."

"Glad to hear it."

"Don't be. Mister Schweitzer. I'm not finished with you yet"

"Try everything," I said. "You'll find nothing else."

... And I was sure of that.

So I left her, wondering when they would reach me.

I send one Christmas card each year, and it is unsigned. All it bears, in block print, is a list of four bars and the cities in which they exist. On Easter, May Day, the first day of summer, and Halloween, I sit in those bars and sip drinks from nine until midnight, local time. Then I go away. Each year, they're different bars.

Always, I pay cash, rather than using the Universal Credit Card which most people carry these days. The bars are generally dives, located in out-of-the-way places.

Sometimes Don Walsh shows up, sits down next to me and orders a beer. We strike up a conversation, then take a walk. Sometimes he doesn't show up. He never misses two in a row, though. And the second time he always brings me some cash.

A couple of months ago, on the day when summer came bustling into the world, I was seated at a table in the back of the Inferno, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. It was a cool evening, as they all are in that place, and the air had been clean and the stars very bright as I walked up the flagstone streets of that national monument. After a time, I saw Don enter, wearing a dark, fake-wool suit and yellow sport shirt, opened at the neck. He moved to the bar, ordered something, turned and let his eyes wander

about the tables. I nodded when he grinned and waved. He moved toward me with a glass in one hand and a Carta Blanca in the other.

"I know you," he said.

"Yeah, I think so. Have a seat?"

He pulled out a chair and seated himself across from me at the small table. The ashtray was filled to overflowing, but not because of me. The odor of tequila was on the breeze, make that "draft", from the opened front of the narrow barroom, and all about us two-dimensional nudes fought with bullfight posters for wall space.

"Your name is ... ?"

"Frank," I said, pulling it out of me air. "Wasn't it in New Orleans ... ?"

"Yeah, at Mardi Gras, a couple years ago."

"That's right. And you're ... ?"

"George."

"Right. I remember now. We went drinking together. Played poker all night long. Had a hell of a good time."

" ... And you took me for about two hundred bucks."

I grinned.

"So what've you been up to?" I asked him.

"Oh, the usual business. There are big sales and small sales. I've got a big one going now."

"Congratulations. I'm glad to hear that. Hope it works out."

"Me, too."

So we made small talk while he finished his beer; then, "Have you seen much of this town?" I asked.

"Not really. I hear it's quite a place."

"Oh, I think you'll like it. I was here for their Festival once. Everybody takes bennies to stay awake for the whole three days. Indios come down from the hills and put on dances. They still hold paseos here, too, you know? And they have the only Gothic cathedral in all of Mexico. It was designed by an illiterate Indian, who had seen pictures of the things on postcards from Europe. They didn't think it would stay up when they took the scaffolding down, but it did and has done so for a long time."

"I wish I could stick around, but I'm only here for a day or so. I thought I'd buy some souvenirs to take home to the family."

"This is the place. Stuff is cheap here. Jewelry, especially."

"I wish I had more time to see some of the sights."

"There is a Toltec ruin atop a hill to the northeast, which you might have noticed because of the three crosses set at its summit. It is interesting because the government still refuses to admit it exists. The view from up there is great."

"I'd like to see it. How do you get in?"

"You just walk out there and climb it. It doesn't exist, so there are no restrictions."

"How long a hike?"

"Less than an hour, from here. Finish your beer, and we'll take a walk."

He did, and we did.

He was breathing heavily in a short time. But then, he lived near sea level and this was like 6,500 feet, elevation.

We made it up to the top, though, and wandered amid cacti. We seated ourselves on some big stones.

"So, this place doesn't exist," he said, "the same as you."

"That's right."

"Then it's not bugged, no, it couldn't be, the way most bars are these days."

"It's still a bit of wilderness."

"I hope it stays this way."

"Me, too."

"Thanks for the Christmas card. You looking for a job?"

"You know it."

"All right. I've got one for you."

And that's how this one started.

"Do you know about the Leeward and Windward Islands?" he asked me. "Or Surtsey?"

"No. Tell me."

"Down in the West Indies, in the Lesser Antilles system, starting in an arc heading southeasterly from Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands toward South America, are those islands north, of Guadeloupe which represent the high points of a subterranean ridge ranging from forty to two hundred miles in width. These are oceanic islands, built up from volcanic materials. Every peak is a volcano, extinct or otherwise."

"So?"

"The Hawaiians grew up in the same fashion ... Surtsey, though, was a twentieth-century phenomenon: a volcanically created island which grew up in a very brief time, somewhat to the west of the Vestmanna Islands, near Iceland. That was in 1963. Capelinhos, in the Azores, was the same way, and had its origin undersea."

"So?" But I already knew, as I said it. I already knew about Project RUMOKO, after the Maori god of volcanoes and earthquakes. Back in the twentieth century, there had been an aborted Mohole Project and there had been natural-gas-mining deals which had involved deep drilling and the use of "shaped" atomic charges.

"RUMOKO," he said. "Do you know about it?"

"Somewhat. Mainly from the Times Science Section."

"That's enough. We're involved."

"How so?"

"Someone is attempting to sabotage the thing. I have been retained to find out who and how and why, and to stop him. I've tried, and have been eminently unsuccessful to date. In fact, I lost two of my men under rather strange circumstances. Then I received your Christmas card."

I turned toward him, and his green eyes seemed to glow in the dark. He was about four inches shorter than me and perhaps forty pounds lighter, which still made him a pretty big man. But he had straightened into a nearly military posture, so that he seemed bigger and stronger than the guy who had been wheezing beside me on the way up.

"You want me to move in?"

"Yes."

"What's in it for me?"

"Fifty thousand. Maybe a hundred fifty, depending on the results."

I lit a cigarette.

"What will I have to do?" I finally asked.

"Get yourself assigned as a crewman on the Aquina, better yet, a technician of some kind. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Well, do it. Then find out who is trying to screw the thing up. Then report back to me, or else take them out of the picture any way you see fit. Then report back to me."

I chuckled.

"It sounds like a big job. Who is your client?"

"A U.S. Senator," he said, "who shall remain nameless."

"With that I can guess," I said, "but I won't."

"You'll do it?"

"Yes. I could use the money."

"It will be dangerous."

"They all are."

We regarded the crosses, with the packs of cigarettes and other various goodies tied to them in the way of religious offerings.

"Good," he said. "When will you start?"

"Before the month is out."

"Okay. When will you report to me?"

I shrugged, under starlight.

"When I've got something to say."

"That's not good enough, this time. September 15 is the target date."

"... If it goes off without a hitch?"

"Fifty grand."

"If it gets tricky, and I have to dispose of a corpus or three?"

"Like I said."

"Okay. You're on. Before September 15."

"No reports?"

"... Unless I need help, or have something important to say."

"You may, this time."

I extended my hand.

"You've got yourself a deal, Don."

He bowed his head, nodding to the crosses.

"Give me this one," he finally said. "I want this one. The men I lost were very good men."

"I'll try. I'll give you as much as I can."

"I don't understand you, mister. I wish I knew how you ... "

"Good. I'd be crushed if you ever knew how!"

And we walked back down the hill, and I left him off at the place where he was staying that night.

"Let me buy you a drink," said Martin, as I passed him on the foredeck on my way out of Carol Deith's cabin.

"All right," and we walked to the ship's lounge and had one.

"I've got to thank you for what you did while Demmy and I were down there. It ... "

"It was nothing," I said. "You could have fixed it yourself in a minute if somebody else had been down and you'd been up here."

"It didn't work out that way, though, and we're happy you were handy."

"I consider myself thanked," I said, raising the plastic beer stein, they're all plastic these days. Damn it!

"What kind of shape was that shaft in?" I asked him.

"Excellent," he said, furrowing his wide, ruddy forehead and putting lots of wrinkles around his bluish eyes.

"You don't look as confident as you sound."

He chuckled then, took a small sip.

"Well, it's never been done before. Naturally, we're all a little scared ... "

I took that as a mild appraisal of the situation.

"But, top to bottom, the shaft was in good shape?" I asked.

He looked around him, probably wondering whether the place was bugged. It was, but he wasn't saying anything that could hurt him, or me. If he had been, I'd have shut him up.

"Yes," he agreed.

"Good," and I thought back on the sayings of the short man with the wide shoulders. "Very good."

"That's a strange attitude," he said. "You're just a paid technician."

"I take a certain pride in my work."

He gave me a look I did not understand, then, "That sounds strangely like a twentieth-century attitude."

I shrugged.

"I'm old-fashioned. Can't get away from it."

"I like that," he said. "I wish more people were that way, these days."

"What's Demmy up to, now?"

"He's sleeping."

"Good."

"They ought to promote you."

"I hope not."

"Why not?"

"I don't like responsibilities."

"But you take them on yourself, and you handle them well."

"I was lucky, once. Who knows what will happen, next time ... ?"

He gave me a furtive look.

"What do you mean, 'next time'?"

"I mean, if it happens again," I said. "I just happened to be in the control room ... "

I knew then that he was trying to find out what I knew, so neither of us knew much, though we both knew that something was wrong.

He stared at me, sipped his beer, kept staring at me, then nodded. "You're trying to say that you're lazy?"

"That's right."

"Crap."

I shrugged and sipped mine.

Back around 1957, fifty years ago, there was a thing called AMSOC, and it was a joke. It was a takeoff on the funny names of alphabetized scientific organizations. It stood for the American Miscellaneous Society. It represented something other than a joke on the organization man, however. This was because Doctor Walter Munk of Scripps Institution of Oceanography and Doctor Harry Hess of Princeton were members, and they had come up with a strange proposal which later died for lack of funds. Like John Brown, however, while it lay moldering in its grave, its spirit kept churning its feet.

It is true that the Mohole Project died stillborn, but that which eventually came of the notion was even grander and more creative.

Most people know that the crust of the Earth is twenty-five or more miles thick under the continents, and that it would be rough drilling there. Many also know that under the oceans the crust is much thinner. It would be quite possible to drill there, into the top of the mantle, penetrating the Mohorovicic Discontinuity, however. They had talked about all kinds of data that could be picked up. Well, okay. But consider something else: sure, it's true that a sampling of the mantle would provide some answers to questions involving radioactivity and heat flow, geological structure and the age of the Earth. Working with natural materials, we would know boundaries, thicknesses of various layers within the crust; and we could check these against what we had learned from the seismic waves of earthquakes gone by. All that and more. A sample of the sediments would

give us a complete record of the Earth's history, before man ever made the scene. But there is more involved than that, a lot more.

"Another one?" Martin asked me.

"Yeah. Thanks."

If you study the International Union of Geology and Geophysics publication, Active Volcanoes of the World, and if you map out all those which are no longer active, you will note certain volcanic and seismic belts. There is the "Ring of Fire" surrounding the Pacific Ocean. Start along the Pacific coast of South America, and you can follow it up north through Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Central America, Mexico, the western United States, Canada, and Alaska, then around and down through Kamchatka, the Kuriles, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and New Zealand. Forgetting about the Mediterranean, there is also an area in the Atlantic, near Iceland.

We sat there.

I raised mine and took a sip.

There are over six hundred volcanoes in the world which could be classified as active, though actually they don't do much most of the time.

We were going to add one more.

We were going to create a volcano in the Atlantic Ocean. More specifically, a volcanic island, like Surtsey. This was Project RUMOKO.

"I'm going down again," said Martin. "Sometime during the next few hours, I guess. I'd appreciate it if you would do me the favor of keeping an eye on that goddam machine next time around. I'd make it up to you, some way."

"Okay," I said. "Let me know when the next time is, as soon as you know it, and I'll try to hang around the control room. In case something does go wrong. I'll try to do what I did earlier, if there's no one around who can do any better."

He slapped me on the shoulder.

"That's good enough for me. Thanks."

"You're scared."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"This damned thing seems jinxed. You've been my good-luck charm. I'll buy you beers from here to hell and back again, just to hang around. I don't know what's wrong. Just bad luck, I guess."

"Maybe," I said.

I stared at him for a second, then turned my attention to my drink.

"The isothermic maps show that this is the right place, the right part of the

Atlantic," I said. "The only thing I'm scared about is none of my business."

"What's that?" he asked.

"There are various things about magma," I said, "and some of them frighten me."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You don't know what it's going to do, once it's released. It could be anything from a Krakatoa to an Etna.

The magma itself may be of any composition. Its exposure to water and air could produce any results."

"I thought we had a guarantee it was safe?"

"A guess. An educated guess, but only a guess. That's all."

"You're scared?"

"You bet your ass."

"We're in danger ... ?"

"Not us so much, since we'll be the hell out of the way. But this thing could affect world temperatures, tides, weather. I'm a little leery, I'll admit it."

He shook his head. "I don't like it."

"You probably had all your bad luck already," I said. "I wouldn't lose any sleep ... "

"I guess you're right."

We finished our beers and I stood.

"I've got to be running."

"Can I buy you another?"

"No, thanks. I've got some work to do."

"Well, I'll be seeing you."

"Yes. Take it easy," and I left the lounge and moved back to the upper decks.

The moon spilled sufficient light to make shadows about me, and the evening was chilly enough for me to button my collar.

I watched the waves for a little while, then returned to my cabin.

I took a shower, listened to the late news, read for a time. Finally, I turned in and took the book to bed with me. After a while, I got drowsy, set the book on the bedside table, turned out the lamp, and let the ship rock me to sleep.

... Had to get a good night's sleep. After all, tomorrow was RUMOKO.  
How long? A few hours, I guess. Then I was awakened by something.  
My door was quietly unlocked, and I heard a light footfall.

I lay there, wide awake, with my eyes dosed, waiting.

I heard the door close, lock.

Then the light came on, and there was a piece of steel near to my head,  
and a hand was upon my shoulder.

"Wake up, mister!" someone said.

I pretended to do so, slowly.

There were two of them, and I blinked and rubbed my eyes, regarding the  
gun about twenty inches away from my head.

"What the hell is this?" I said.

"No," said the man holding the metal. "We ask. You answer. It is not the  
other way around."

I sat up, leaned back against the headboard.

"Okay," I said. "What do you want?"

"Who are you?"

"Albert Schweitzer," I replied.

"We know the name you're using. Who are you, really?"

"That's it," I said.

"We don't think so."

"I'm sorry."

"So are we."

"So?"

"You will tell us about yourself and your mission."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Get up!"

"Then please give me my robe. It's hanging on the hook inside the  
bathroom door."

The gunsel leaned toward the other. "Get it, check it, give it to him," he  
said.

And I regarded him.

He had a handkerchief over the lower part of his face. So did the other guy. Which was kind of professional. Amateurs tend to wear masks. Upper type. Masks of this sort conceal very little. The lower part of the face is the most easily identifiable.

"Thanks," I said, when the one guy handed me my blue terry-cloth robe.

He nodded, and I threw it about my shoulders, put my arms into the sleeves, whipped it about me, and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"Okay," I said. "What do you want?"

"Who are you working for?" said the first.

"Project RUMOKO," I replied.

He slapped me, lightly, with his left hand, still holding the gun steady.

"No," he said. "The whole story, please."

"I don't know what you're talking about, but may I have a cigarette?"

"All right, No. Wait. Take one of mine. I don't know what might be in your pack."

I took one, lit it, inhaled, breathed smoke.

"I don't understand you," I said. "Give me a better clue as to what you want to know and maybe I can help you. I'm not looking for trouble."

This seemed to relax them slightly, because they both sighed. The man asking the questions was about five foot eight in height, the other about five-ten. The taller man was heavy, though. Around two hundred pounds, I'd say.

They seated themselves in two nearby chairs. The gun was leveled at my breast.

"Relax, then, Mister Schweitzer. We don't want trouble, either," said the talkative one.

"Great," said I. "Ask me anything and I'll give you honest answers," prepared to lie my head off. "Ask away."

"You repaired the J-9 unit today."

"I guess everybody knows that."

"Why did you do it?"

"Because two men were going to die, and I knew how."

"How did you acquire this expertise?"

"For Chrissakes, I'm an electrical engineer!" I said. "I know how to figure circuits! Lots of people do!"

The taller guy looked at the shorter one. He nodded. "Then why did you try

to silence Asquith?" the taller one asked me.

"Because I broke a regulation by touching the unit," I said. "I'm not authorized to service it."

He nodded again. Both of them had very black and clean-looking hair and well-developed pectorals and biceps, as seen through their light shirts.

"You seem to be an ordinary, honest citizen," said the tall one, "who went to the school of his choice, graduated, remained unmarried, took this job. Perhaps everything is as you say, in which case we do you wrong. However, the circumstances are very suspicious. You repaired a complex machine which you had no right to repair ... "

I nodded.

"Why?" he asked,

"I've got a funny thing about death: I don't like to see people do it," I said. Then, "Who do you work for?" I asked. "Some sort of intelligence agency?"

The shorter one smiled. The other said, "We are not permitted to say. You obviously understand these things, however. Our interest is only a certain curiosity as to why you kept quiet with respect to what was obviously sabotage."

"So, I've told you."

"Yes, but you are lying. People do not disobey orders the way you did."

"Crap! There were lives at stake!"

He shook his head.

"I fear that we must question you further, and in a different manner."

Whenever I am awaiting the outcome of peril or reflecting upon the few lessons that can be learned in the course of a misspent life, a few bubbles of memory appear before me, are struck by all the color changes the skin of a bubble undergoes in the space of an instant, burst then, having endured no longer than a bubble, and persist as feelings for a long while after.

Bubbles ... There is one down in the Caribbean called New Eden. Depth, approximately 175 fathoms. As of the most recent census, it was home to over 100,000 people. A huge, illuminated geodesic dome it is, providing an overhead view with which Euclid would have been pleased. For great distances about this dome, strung lights like street lamps line avenues among rocks, bridges over canyons, thoroughfares through mountains. The bottom-going seamobiles move like tanks along these ways; minisubs hover or pass at various altitudes; slick-seeming swimmers in tight and colorful garb come and go, entering and departing the bubble or working about it.

I vacationed there for a couple of weeks one time, and although I discovered claustrophobic tendencies of which I had previously been unaware, it was still quite pleasant. The people were different from surface

dwellers. They were rather like what I fancy the old explorers and frontiersmen to have been. Somewhat more individualistic and independent than the average topside citizen, but with a certain sense of community and the feelings of responsibility attendant thereto. This is doubtless because they are frontiersmen, having volunteered for combinations of programs involving both the relief of minor population pressures and the exploitation of the ocean's resources. Whatever, they accept tourists. They accepted me, and I went there and swam with them, toured on their subs, viewed their mines and hydroponic gardens, their homes and their public buildings. I remember the beauty of it, I remember the people, I remember the way the sea hung overhead like the night sky as seen through the faceted eye of some insect. Or maybe like a giant insect on the other side, looking in. Yes, that seems more likely. Perhaps the personality of the place appealed to a certain rebellious tendency I occasionally felt stirring fathoms deep within my own psyche.

While it was not really an Eden Under Glass, and while those crazy and delightful little bubble cities are definitely not for me, there was something there that turned it into one of those funny, colorful things that sometimes come to me, bubblelike, whenever I am awaiting the outcome of peril or reflecting upon the few lessons that can be learned in the course of a misspent life.

I sighed, took a final drag on my cigarette and crushed it out, knowing that in a moment my bubble would burst.

What is it like to be the only man in the world who does not exist? It is difficult to say. It is not easy to generalize when you are only sure of the particulars in one case, your own. With me, it was a kind of unusual deal, and I doubt there is a parallel one, anywhere. I used to bitch and moan over progressive mechanization. No more.

It was strange, the way that it happened:

Once I wrote programs for computers. That is how the whole thing got started.

One day, I learned an unusual and frightening piece of news ...

I learned that the whole world was going to exist on tape.

How?

Well, it's tricky.

Everybody, nowadays, has a birth certificate, academic record, credit rating, a history of all his travels and places of residence and, ultimately, there is a death certificate somewhere on file. Once, all things of this sort existed in separate places. Then, some people set out to combine them. They called it a Central Data Bank. It resulted in massive changes in the order of human existence. Not all of these changes, I am now certain, were for the better.

I was one of those people, and it was not until things were well along that I began to have second thoughts on the matter. By then, it was too late to

do anything about it, I supposed.

What the people in my project were doing was linking every data bank in existence, so that public records, financial records, medical records, specialized technical records all existed and were available from one source, through key stations whose personnel had access to this information at various levels of confidentiality.

I have never considered anything to be wholly good or wholly evil. But this time, I came close to the former feeling. I had thought that it was going to be a very good thing indeed. I had thought that in the wonderful, electrified fin de siècle of McLuhan in which we lived, a thing like this was necessary: every home with closed-circuit access to any book ever written, or any play ever recorded on tape or in a crystal, or any college lecture in the past couple of decades, or any bits of general statistical knowledge desired (you can't lie with statistics, theoretically, if everybody has access to your source, and can question it directly); every commercial and government outfit with access to your assets, your income, and a list of every expenditure you've ever made; every attorney with a court order with access to a list of every place you've ever resided, and with whom, and every commercial vehicle on which you've ever traveled, and with whom. Your whole life, all your actions, laid out like a chart of the nervous system in a neurology class, this impressed me as good.

For one thing, it seemed that it would eliminate crime. Only a crazy man, I thought, would care to err with all that to stand against him; and since medical records were all on file, even the psychopath could be stopped.

... And speaking of medicine, how fine if the computer and medical people diagnosing you for anything had instant access to all your past medical history! Think of all the cures which could be effected! Think of the deaths prevented!

Think of the status of the world economy, when it is known where every dime exists and where it is headed.

Think of the solving of traffic-control problems, land, sea, and air, when everything is regulated.

Think of ... Oh, hell!

I foresaw the coming of a Golden Era.

Crap!

A friend of mine having peripheral connections with the Mafia, it was, laughed at me, all starry in my eyes and just up from the university and into the federal service.

"Do you seriously believe that every asset will be registered? Every transaction recorded?" he'd asked me.

"Eventually."

"They haven't pierced Switzerland yet; and if they do, other places will be found."

"There will be a certain allowance for residuals."

"Then don't forget mattresses, and holes in the backyard. Nobody knows how much money there really is in the world, and no one ever will."

So I stopped and thought and read up on economics. He was right. The things for which we were writing programs in this area were, basically, estimates and approximates, vis-à-vis that which got registered, a reconciliation factor included.

So I thought about travel. How many unregistered vessels? Nobody knew. You can't keep statistics on items for which you have no data. And if there is to be unregistered money, more vessels could be constructed. There is a lot of coastline in the world. So traffic control might not be as perfect as I had envisioned.

Medical? Doctors are as human and lazy as the rest of us. I suddenly realized that all medical reports might not get filed, especially if someone wanted to pocket the cash and not pay taxes on it, and was not asked for a receipt.

When it came to people, I had forgotten the human factor.

There were the shady ones, there were people who just liked their privacy, and there were those who would honestly foul up the reporting of necessary information. All of them people who would prove that the system was not perfect.

Which meant that the thing might not work in precisely the fashion anticipated. There might also be some resentment, some resistance, along with actual evasion. And perhaps these might even be warranted ...

But there was not much overt resistance, so the project proceeded. It occurred over a period of three years. I worked in the central office, starting out as a programmer. After I'd devised a system whereby key weather stations and meteorological observation satellites fed their reports directly into the central system, I was promoted to the position of senior programmer and given some supervisory responsibility.

By then, I had learned sufficient of the project so that my doubts had picked up a few small fears as companions. I found myself beginning to dislike the work, which made me study it all the more intensely. They kidded me about taking work home with me. No one seemed to realize that it was not dedication, but rather a desire, born of my fears, to learn all that I could about the project. Since my superiors misread my actions, they saw that I was promoted once more.

This was fine, because it gave me access to more information, at the policy level. Then, for a variety of reasons, there came a spate of deaths, promotions, resignations, retirements. This left things wide open for fair-haired boys, and I rose higher within the group.

I came to be an adviser to old John Colgate, who was in charge of the entire operation.

One day, when we had just about achieved our mission, I told him of my fears and my doubts. I told the gray-haired, sallow-faced, spaniel-eyed old man that I felt we might be creating a monster and committing the ultimate invasion of human privacy.

He stared at me for a long while, fingering the pink coral paperweight on his desk; then, "You may be right," he said. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I just wanted to tell you my feelings on the matter."

He sighed then and turned in his swivel chair and stared out the window.

After a time, I thought he had gone to sleep, as he sometimes did right after lunch.

Finally, though, he spoke: "Don't you think I've heard those arguments a thousand times before?"

"Probably," I replied, "and I've always wondered how you might have answered them."

"I have no answers," he said abruptly. "I feel it is for the better, or I would not be associated with it. I could be wrong, though. I will admit that. But some means has to be found to record and regulate all the significant features of a society as complex as ours has become. If you think of a better way of running the show, tell me about it."

I was silent. I lit a cigarette and waited for his next words. I did not know at the time that he only had about six months of life remaining to him.

"Did you ever consider buying out?" he finally asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Resigning. Quitting the system."

"I'm not sure that I understand ... "

"We in the system will be the last to have our personal records programmed in."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted it that way, in case anyone came to me as you have today and asked me what you have asked me."

"Has anyone else done it?"

"I would not say if they had, to keep the intended purity of the thing complete."

" 'Buying out.' By this, I take it that you mean destroying my personal data before someone enters it into the system?"

"That is correct," he said.

"But I would not be able to get another job, with no academic record, no past work history ... "

"That would be your problem."

"I couldn't purchase anything with no credit rating."

"I suppose you would have to pay cash."

"It's all recorded."

He swiveled back and gave me a smile. "Is it?" he asked me. "Is it really?"

"Well, not all of it," I admitted.

"So?"

I thought about it while he lit his pipe, smoke invading wide, white sideburns. Was he just kidding me along, being sarcastic? Or was he serious?

As if in answer to my thought, he rose from his chair, crossed the room, opened a file cabinet. He rummaged around in it for a time, then returned holding a sheaf of punchcards like a poker hand. He dropped them onto the desk in front of me.

"That's you," he said. "Next week, you go into the system, like everybody else," and he puffed a smoke ring and reseated himself.

"Take them home with you and put them under your pillow," he said. "Sleep on them. Decide what you want to do with them."

"I don't understand."

"I am leaving it up to you."

"What if I tore them up? What would you do?"

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not care."

"That's not true. You're head of this thing."

He shrugged.

"Don't you believe in the value of the system yourself?"

He dropped his eyes and drew on his pipe.

"I am no longer so certain as once I was," he stated.

"If I did this thing I would cease to exist, officially," I said.

"Yes."

"What would become of me?"

"That would be your problem."

I thought about it for a moment; then, "Give me the cards," I said.

He did, with a gesture.

I picked them up, placed them in my inside coat pocket.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Sleep on them, as you suggested," I said.

"Just see that you have them back by next Tuesday morning."

"Of course."

And he smiled, nodded, and that was it.

I took them, went home with them. But I didn't sleep.

No, that's not it. I wouldn't sleep, couldn't sleep.

I thought about it for centuries, well, all night long, pacing and smoking. To exist outside the system ... How could I do anything if it did not recognize my existence?

Then, about four in the morning, I decided that I should have phrased that question the other way around.

How could the system recognize me, no matter what I did?

I sat down then and made some careful plans. In the morning, I tore my cards through the middle, burned them, and stirred the ashes.

Over a minute must have gone by; then, "All right, tell us the whole story," he said.

"I obtained this job through a placement bureau," I told him. "I accepted it, came to work, performed my duties, met you. That's it."

"It has been said for some time, and we believe it to be true, that the government can obtain permission, for security reasons, to create a fictitious individual in the central records. An agent is then fitted into that slot in life. If anyone is able to check on him, his credentials appear to be bona fide."

I didn't answer him.

"Is that true?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It has been said that this can be done. I don't know whether it's true or not, though."

"You do not admit to being such an agent?"

"No."

Then they whispered to one another for a time. Finally, I heard a metal case click open.

"You are lying."

"No, I'm not. I maybe save a couple guys' lives and you start calling me names. I don't know why, though I'd like to. What have I done that's wrong?"

"I'll ask the questions. Mister Schweitzer."

"I'm just curious. Perhaps if you would tell me ... "

"Roll up your sleeve. Either one, it doesn't matter."

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

"What are you going to do?"

"Administer an injection."

"Are you an M.D.?"

"That is none of your business."

"Well, I refuse it, for the record. After the cops get hold of you, for a variety of reasons, I'll even see to it that the Medical Association is on your back."

"Your sleeve, please."

"Under protest," I observed, and I rolled up the left one. "If you're to kill me when you've finished playing games," I added, "murder is kind of serious. If you are not, I'll be after you. I may find you one day ... "

I felt a sting behind my biceps.

"Mind telling me what you gave me?" I asked.

"It's called TC-6," he replied. "Perhaps you've read about it. You will retain consciousness, as I might need your full reasoning abilities. But you will answer me honestly."

I chuckled, which they doubtless attributed to the effects of the drug, and I continued practicing my yoga breathing techniques. These could not stop the drug, but they made me feel better. Maybe they gave me a few extra seconds, also, along with the detached feeling I had been building up.

I keep up on things like TC-6. This one, I knew, left you rational, unable to lie, and somewhat literal-minded. I figured on making the most of its weak points by flowing with the current. Also, I had a final trick remaining.

The thing that I disliked most about TC-6 was that it sometimes had a bad side effect, cardiac-wise.

I did not exactly feel myself going under. I was just suddenly there, and it did not feel that different from the way I always feel. I knew that to be an illusion. I wished I had had prior access to the antidote kit I kept within a standard-looking first-aid kit hidden in my dresser.

"You hear me, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes," I heard myself saying.

"What is your name?"

"Albert Schweitzer," I replied.

There were a couple of quick breaths taken behind me, and my questioner silenced the other fellow, who had started to say something.

Then, "What do you do?" he asked me.

"I'm a technician."

"I know that much. What else?"

"I do many things ... "

"Do you work for the government, any government?"

"I pay taxes, which means I work for the government, part of the time. Yes."

"I did not mean it in that sense. Are you a secret agent in the employ of any government?"

"No."

"A known agent?"

"No."

"Then why are you here?"

"I am a technician. I service the machines."

"What else?"

"I do not ... "

"What else? Who else do you work for, besides the Project?"

"Myself."

"What do you mean?"

"My activities are directed to maintaining my personal economic status and physical well-being."

"I am talking about other employers. Have you any?"

"No."

From the other man, I heard, "He sounds clean."

"Maybe." Then, to me, "What would you do if you met me somewhere and recognized me?"

"Bring you to law."

" ... And failing that?"

"If I were able, I would hurt you severely. Perhaps I would kill you, if I were able to give it the appearance of self-defense or make it seem to be an accident."

"Why?"

"Because I wish to preserve my own physical wellbeing. The fact that you had disturbed it once means that you might attempt it again. I will not permit this access to me."

"I doubt that I will attempt it again."

"Your doubts mean nothing to me."

"So you saved two lives today, yet you are willing to take one."

I did not reply.

"Answer me."

"You did not ask me a question."

"Could he have drug-consciousness?" asked the other.

"I never thought of that ... Do you?"

"I do not understand the question."

"This drug allows you to remain oriented in all three spheres. You know who you are, where you are, and when you are. It saps that thing called the will, however, which is why you must answer my questions. A person with a lot of experience with truth drugs can sometimes beat them, by rephrasing the questions to himself and giving a literally honest reply. Is this what you are doing?"

"That's the wrong question," said the other.

"What's right?"

"Have you had any prior experience with drugs?" that one asked me.

"Yes."

"What ones?"

"I've had aspirin, nicotine, caffeine, alcohol ... "

"Truth serums," he said. "Things like this, things that make you talk. Have you had them before?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At Northwestern University."

"Why?"

"I volunteered for a series of experiments."

"What did they involve?"

"The effects of drugs on consciousness."

"Mental reservations," he said to the other. "It could take days. I think he has primed himself."

"Can you beat a truth drug?" the other one asked me.

"I do not understand."

"Can you lie to us, now?"

"No."

"Wrong question, again," said the shorter. "He is not lying. Anything he says is literally true."

"So how do we get an answer out of him?"

"I'm not sure."

So they continued to hit me with questions. After a time, things began to wane.

"He's got us," said the shorter one. "It would take days to beat him down."

"Should we ... ?"

"No. We've got the tape. We've got his answers. Let's let a computer worry about it."

But by then it was near morning, and I had the funny feeling, accompanied by cold flashes on the back of my neck, that I might be able to manage a fib or three once again. There was some light on the other side of my portholes. They had been going at me for what seemed to be many hours. I decided to try.

"I think this place is bugged," I said.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Ship's Security," I stated. "I believe all technicians are so monitored."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know."

"We've got to find it," said the one.

"What good will it do?" said the other, in a whisper, for which I respected him, as whispers do not often get recorded. "They'd have been here long before this, if it were."

"Unless they're waiting, letting us hang ourselves."

The first began looking, however, and I rose, met with no objections, and staggered across the room to collapse upon the bed.

My right hand slipped down around the headboard, as though by accident. It found the gun.

I flipped off the safety as I withdrew it. I sat upon the bed and pointed it at them.

"All right, morons," I said. "Now you answer my questions."

The big one made a move toward his belt and I shot him in the shoulder.

"Next?" I asked, tearing away the silencer, which had done its work, and replacing it with a pillow.

The other man raised his hands and looked at his buddy.

"Let him bleed," I said.

He nodded and stepped back.

"Sit down," I told them both.

They did.

I moved over behind the two of them.

"Give me that arm," and I took it. I cleaned it and dressed it, as the bullet had gone on through. I had placed their weapons on the dresser. I tore off their hankies and studied their faces. I did not know them from anywhere.

"Okay, why are you here?" I asked. "And why do you want to know what you want to know?"

There were no replies.

"I don't have as much time as you did," I said. "So I'm about to tape you in place. I don't think I can afford to fool around with drugs."

I fetched the adhesive tape from the medicine chest and did it.

"These places are pretty soundproof," I remarked, putting the gun aside, "and I lied about them being bugged ... So you can do a bit of screaming if you want. I caution you against it, however. Each one earns you one broken bone.

"So who do you work for?" I repeated.

"I'm a maintenance man on the shuttler," said the shorter one. "My friend is

a pilot."

He received a dirty look for this.

"Okay," I said. "I'll buy that, because I've never seen you around here before. Think carefully over your answer to the next one: who do you really work for?"

I asked this knowing that they did not have the advantages that I had had. I work for myself because I am self-employed, an independent contractor. My name is Albert Schweitzer right now, so that's what it is, period.

I always become the person I must. Had they asked me who I had been before, they might have gotten a different answer. It's a matter of conditioning and mental attitudes.

"Who pulls the strings?" I asked.

No replies.

"All right," I said. "I guess I'll have to ask you in a different fashion."

Heads turned toward me.

"You were willing to violate my physiology for the sake of a few answers," I said. "Okay. I guess I'll return the favor upon your anatomy. I'll get an answer or three, I promise. Only I'll be a little more basic about it. I'll simply torture you until you talk."

"You wouldn't do that," said the taller man. "You have a low violence index."

I chuckled.

"Let's see," I said.

How do you go about ceasing to exist while continuing your existence? I found it quite easy. But then, I was in on the project from the first, was trusted, had been given an option ...

After I tore up my cards, I returned to work as usual. There, I sought and located the necessary input point. That was my last day on the job.

It was Thule, way up where it's cold, a weather station ...

An old guy who liked rum ran the place. I can still remember the day when I took my ship, the Proteus, into his harbor and complained of rough seas.

"I'll put you up," he said to me.

The computer had not let me down.

"Thanks."

He led me in, fed me, talked to me about the seas, the weather. I brought in a case of Bacardi and turned him loose on it.

"Ain't things pretty much automatic here?" I asked.

"That's right."

"Then what do they need you for?"

He laughed a little and said, "My uncle was a Senator. I needed a place to go. He fixed me up ... Let's see your ship ... So what if it's raining?"

So we did.

It was a decent-sized cabin cruiser with powerful engines, and way out of its territory.

"It's a bet," I told him. "I wanted to hit the Arctic Circle and get proof that I did."

"Kid, you're nuts."

"I know, but I'll win."

"Prob'ly," he agreed. "I was like you once, all full of the necessary ingredients and ready to go ... Gettin' much action these days?" And he stroked his pepper-and-salt beard and gave me an evil grin from inside it.

"Enough," I said, and, "Have a drink," because he had made me think of Eva.

He did, and I left it at, "Enough," for a time. She was not like that, though. I mean, it was not something he would really want to hear about.

It had been about four months earlier that we had broken up. It was not religion or politics; it was much more basic.

So I lied to him about an imaginary girl and made him happy.

I had met her in New York, back when I was doing the same things she was, vacationing and seeing plays and pix.

She was a tall girl, with close-cropped blond hair. I helped her find a subway station, got on with her, got off with her, asked her to dinner, was told to go to hell.

Scene:

"I'm not like that."

"Neither am I. But I'm hungry ... So will you?"

"What are you looking for?"

"Someone to talk to," I said. "I'm lonesome."

"I think you're looking in the wrong place."

"Probably."

"I don't know you from anywhere."

"That makes two of us, but I could sure use some spaghetti with meat sauce and a glass of Chianti."

"Will you be hard to get rid of?"

"No. I go quietly."

"Okay. I'll eat spaghetti with you."

And we did.

That month we kept getting closer and closer until we were there. The fact that she lived in one of those crazy little bubble cities under the sea meant nothing. I was liberal enough to appreciate the fact that the Sierra Club had known what it was doing in pushing for their construction.

I probably should have gone along with her when she went back. She had asked me.

She had been on vacation, seeing the Big Place, and so had I, I didn't get into New York that often.

"Marry me," though, I'd said.

But she would not give up her bubble and I would not give up my dream. I wanted the big, above-the-waves world, all of it. I loved that blue-eyed bitch from five hundred fathoms, though, and I realize now that I probably should have taken her on her own terms. I'm too damned independent. If either of us had been normal ... Well, we weren't, and that's that.

Eva, wherever you are, I hope you and Jim are happy.

"Yeah, with Coke," I said. "It's good that way," and I drank Cokes and he drank doubles with Cokes until he announced his weariness.

"It's starting to get to me. Mister Hemingway," he said.

"Well, let's sack out."

"Okay. You can have the couch there."

"Great."

"I showed you where the blankets are?"

"Yes."

"Then good night, Ernie. See you in the morning."

"You bet, Bill. I'll make breakfast for us."

"Thanks."

And he yawned and stretched and went away.

I gave him half an hour and went to work.

His weather station had a direct line into the central computer. I was able

to provide for a nice little cut-in. Actuated by short wave. Little-used band. I concealed my tamperings well.

When I was finished, I knew that I had it made.

I could tell Central anything through that thing, from hundreds of miles away, and it would take it as fact.

I was damn near a god.

Eva, maybe I should have gone the other way. I'll never know.

I helped Bill Mellings over his hangover the following morning, and he didn't suspect a thing. He was a very decent old guy, and I was comforted by the fact that he would never get into trouble over what I had done. This was because nobody would ever catch me; I was sure. And even if they do, I don't think he'll get into trouble. After all, his uncle was a Senator.

I had the ability to make it as anybody I cared to. I'd have to whip up the entire past history, birth, name, academics, and et cet, and I could then fit myself in anywhere I wanted in modern society. All I had to do was tell Central via the weather station via short wave. The record would be created and I would have existence in any incarnation I desired. Ab initio, like.

But Eva, I wanted you. I, Well ...

I think the government does occasionally play the same tricks. But I am positive they don't suspect the existence of an independent contractor.

I know most of that which is worth knowing, more than is necessary, in fact, with respect to lie detectors and truth serums. I hold my name sacred. Nobody gets it. Do you know that the polygraph can be beaten in no fewer than seventeen different ways? It has not been much improved since the mid-twentieth century. A lower-chest strap plus some fingertip perspiration detectors could do it wonders. But things like this never get the appropriations. Maybe a few universities play around with it from this standpoint, but that's about it. I could design one today that damn near nobody could beat, but its record still wouldn't be worth much in court. Drugs, now, they're another matter.

A pathological liar can beat Amytal and Pentothal.

So can a drug-conscious guy. What is drug-consciousness?

Ever go looking for a job and get an intelligence test or an aptitude test or a personality inventory for your pains? Sure. Everybody has by now, and they're all on me in Central. You get used to taking them after a time. They start you in early, and throughout your life you learn about taking the goddamn things. You get to be what psychologists refer to as "test-conscious." What it means is that you get so damned used to them that you know what kind of asininity is right, according to the book.

So okay. You learn to give them the answers they're looking for. You learn all the little time-saving tricks. You feel secure, you know it is a game and you are game-conscious.

It's the same thing.

If you do not get scared, and if you have tried a few drugs before for this express purpose, you can beat them.

Drug-consciousness is nothing more than knowing how to handle yourself under that particular kind of fire.

"Go to hell. You answer my questions," I said. I think that the old tried-and-true method of getting answers is the best: pain, threatened and actual. I used it.

I got up early in the morning and made breakfast. I took him a glass of orange juice and shook him by the shoulder.

"What the goddam ... !"

"Breakfast," I said. "Drink this."

He did, and then we went out to the kitchen and ate.

"The sea looks pretty good today," I said. "I guess I can be moving on."

He nodded above his eggs.

"You ever up this way, you stop in again. Hear?"

"I will," I said, and I have, several times since, because I came to like him. It was funny.

We talked all that morning, going through three pots of coffee. He was an M.D. who had once had a fairly large practice going for him. (At a later date, he dug a few bullets out of me and kept quiet about their having been there.) He had also been one of the early astronauts, briefly. I learned subsequently that his wife had died of cancer some six years earlier. He gave up his practice at that time, and he did not remarry. He had looked for a way to retire from the world, found one, done it.

Though we are very close friends now, I have never told him that he's harboring a bastard input unit. I may, one day, as I know he is one of the few guys I can trust. On the other hand, I do not want to make him a genuine accomplice to what I do. Why trouble your friends and make them morally liable for your strange doings?

So I became the man who did not exist. But I had acquired the potential for becoming anybody I chose. All I had to do was write the program and feed it to Central via that station. All I needed then was a means of living. This latter was a bit tricky.

I wanted an occupation where payment would always be made to me in cash. Also, I wanted one where payment would be large enough for me to live as I desired.

This narrowed the field considerably and threw out lots of legitimate things. I could provide myself with a conventional-seeming background in any area that amused me, and work as an employee there. Why should I, though?

I created a new personality and moved into it. Those little things you always toy with and dismiss as frivolous whims, I did them then. I lived aboard the Proteus, which at that time was anchored in the cove of a small island off the New Jersey coast.

I studied judo. There are three schools of it, you know: there is the Kodokon, or the pure Japanese style, and there are the Budo Kwai and the French Federation systems. The latter two have pretty much adopted the rules of the former, with this exception: while they use the same chokes, throws, bone-locks, and such, they're sloppier about it. They feel that the pure style was designed to accommodate the needs of a smaller race, with reliance upon speed, leverage, and agility, rather than strength. So they attempted to adapt the basic techniques to the needs of a larger race. They allowed for the use of strength and let the techniques be a little less than perfect. This was fine so far as I was concerned, because I'm a big, sloppy guy. Only, I may be haunted one day because of my laxity. If you learn it the Kodokon way, you can be eighty years old and still carry off a nage-no-kata perfectly. This is because there is very little effort involved; it's all technique. My way, though, when you start pushing fifty, it gets rougher and rougher because you're not as strong as you once were. Well, that still gave me a couple of decades in which to refine my form. Maybe I'll make it. I made Nidan with the French Federation, so I'm not a complete slouch. And I try to stay in shape.

While I was going for all this physical activity I took a locksmith course. It took me weeks to learn to pick even the simplest lock, and I still think that the most efficient way, in a pinch, is to break the door in, get what you want, and run like hell.

I was not cut out to be a criminal, I guess. Some guys have it and some don't.

I studied every little thing I could think of that I thought would help me get by. I still do. While I am probably not an expert in anything, except perhaps for my own peculiar mode of existence, I know a little bit about lots of esoteric things. And I have the advantage of not existing going for me.

When I ran low on cash, I went to see Don Walsh. I knew who he was, although he knew nothing about me, and I hoped that he never would. I'd chosen him as my modus vivendi.

That was over ten years ago, and I still can't complain. Maybe I am even a little better with the locks and nages these days, as a result thereof, not to mention the drugs and bugs.

Anyhow, that is a part of it, and I send Don a card every Christmas.

I couldn't tell whether they thought I was bluffing. They had said I had a low violence index, which meant they had had access to my personnel file or to Central. Which meant I had to try keeping them off balance for the time I had remaining, there on the Eve of RUMOKO. But my bedside alarm showed five till six, and I went on duty at eight o'clock. If they knew as much as they seemed to know, they probably had access to the duty

rosters also.

So here was the break I had spent the entire month seeking, right in the palm of my hand on the Eve of RUMOKO's rumble. Only, if they knew how much time I actually had in which to work them over, they might, probably could, be able to hold out on me. I was not about to leave them in my cabin all day; and the only alternative was to turn them over to Ship's Security before I reported for duty. I was loath to do this, as I did not know whether there were any others aboard, whoever they were, or if they had anything more planned, since the J-9 trouble had not come off as they had expected. Had it succeeded, it would surely have postponed the September 15 target date.

I had a fee to earn, which meant I had a package to deliver. The box was pretty empty, so far.

"Gentlemen," I said, my voice sounding strange to me and my reflexes seeming slow. I therefore attempted to restrict my movements as much as possible, and to speak slowly and carefully. "Gentlemen, you've had your turn. Now it is mine." I turned a chair backward and seated myself upon it, resting my gun hand on my forearm and my forearm on the back of the chair. "I will, however," I continued, "preface my actions with that which I have surmised concerning yourselves.

"You are not government agents," I said, glancing from one to the other. "No. You represent a private interest of some sort. If you are agents, you should doubtless have been able to ascertain that I am not one. You resorted to the extreme of questioning me in this fashion, however, so my guess is that you are civilians and perhaps somewhat desperate at this point. This leads me to link you with the attempted sabotage of the J-9 unit this previous afternoon ... Yes, let's call it sabotage. You know that it was, and you know that I know it, since I worked on the thing and it didn't come off as planned. This obviously prompted your actions of this evening. Therefore, I shan't even ask you the question.

"Next, and predicated upon my first assumption, I know that your credentials are genuine. I could fetch them from your pockets in a moment, if they are there, but your names would mean nothing to me. So I will not even go looking. There is really only one question that I want answered, and it probably won't even hurt your employer or employers, who will doubtless disavow any knowledge of you.

"I want to know who you represent," I said.

"Why?" asked the larger man, his frown revealing a lip-side scar which I had not noticed at his unmasking.

"I want to know who put you up to being so casual with my person," I said.

"To what end?"

I shrugged.

"Personal vengeance, perhaps."

He shook his head.

"You're working for somebody, too," he said. "If it is not the government, it is still somebody we wouldn't like."

"So you admit you are not independent operators. If you will not tell me who you work for, will you tell me why you want to stop the project?"

"No."

"All right. Drop that one ... I see you as associated with some large contractor who got cut out on something connected with this job. How does that sound? Maybe I can even make suggestions."

The other guy laughed, and the big one killed it with a quick glare.

"Well, that's out," I said. "Thanks. Now, let's consider another thing: I can simply turn you in for breaking and entering. I might even be willing to say you were drunk and indicated that you thought this cabin belonged to a friend of yours who didn't mind a little foolery and who you thought might stand you to a final round before you staggered off to bed. How does that sound?"

"Is this place bugged, or isn't it?" asked the shorter one, who seemed a bit younger than the other.

"Of course not," said his partner. "Just keep your mouth shut."

"Well, how does it sound?" I asked.

He shook his head again.

"Well, the alternative is my telling the whole story, drugs, questions, and all. How does that sound? How will you stand up under protracted questioning?"

The big one thought about it, shook his head again.

"Will you?" he finally asked me.

"Yes, I will."

He seemed to consider this.

"... Then," I concluded, "I cannot save you the pain, as I wish to. Even if you possess drug-consciousness, you know that you will break within a couple of days if they use drugs as well as all the other tricks. It is simply a matter of talking now or talking later. Since you prefer to defer it, I can only assume that you have something else planned to stop RUMOKO ... "

"He's too damned smart!"

"Tell him to shut up again," I said. "He's giving me my answers too fast and depriving me of my fun ... So what is it? Come on," I said. "I'll get it, one way or another, you know."

"He is right," said the man with the scar. "You are too damned smart. Your

I.Q. and your Personality Profile show nothing like this. Would you be open to an offer?"

"Maybe," I said. "But it would have to be a big one. Give me the terms, and tell me who's offering."

"Terms: a quarter of a million dollars, cash," he said, "and that is the maximum I can offer. Turn us loose and go about your business. Forget about tonight."

I did think about it. Let's face it, it was tempting. But I go through a lot of money in a few years' time, and I hated to report failure to Walsh's Private Investigations, the third-largest detective agency in the world, with whom I wished to continue associating myself, as an independent contractor.

"So who foots the bill? How? And why?"

"I can get you half that amount tonight, in cash, and the other half in a week to ten days. You tell us how you want it, and that is the way it will be. 'Why?' though, do not ask that question. It will be one of the things we will be buying."

"Your boss obviously has a lot of money to throw around," I said, glancing at me clock and seeing that it was now six fifteen. "No, I must refuse your offer."

"Then you could not be a government man. One of them would take it, and then make an arrest."

"I already told you that. So what else is new?"

"We seem to have reached an impasse, Mister Schweitzer."

"Hardly," I replied. "We have simply reached the end of my preface. Since reasoning with you has failed, I must now take positive action. I apologize for this, but it is necessary."

"You are really going to resort to physical violence?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "And don't worry. I expected a hangover this morning, so I signed for sick leave last night. I have all day. You already have a painful flesh wound, so I'll give you a break this time around."

Then I stood, cautiously, and the room swayed, but I did not let it show. I crossed to the smaller guy's chair and seized its arms and his together and raised them up from off the floor. Woozy, I was; but not weak.

I carried him off to the bathroom and set him, chair and all, in the shower stall, avoiding the forward thrustings of his head.

Then I returned to the other.

"Just to keep you abreast of what is going on," I said, "it all depends on the time of day. I have measured the temperature of the hot water in that stall at various times, and it can come out of there at anything from 140° to 180° Fahrenheit. Your buddy is about to get it, hot and full blast, as

soon as I open his shirt and trousers and expose as much bare flesh as possible. You understand?"

"I understand."

I went back inside and opened him up and turned the shower on, using the hot water only. Then I went back to the main room. I studied the features of his buddy, who I then noted bore him something of a resemblance. It struck me that they might be relatives.

When the screaming began, he sought to compose his features. But I could see I was getting through to him.

He tested his restraints once again, looked at my clock, looked at me.

"Turn it off. God damn you!" he cried.

"Your cousin?" I asked him.

"My half brother! Shut it down, you baboon!"

"Only if you've got something to say to me."

"Okay! But leave him in there and close the door!"

I dashed and did it. My head was beginning to clear, though I still felt like hell.

I burned my right hand shutting the thing down. I left my chosen victim slouched there in the steam, and I shut the door behind me as I returned to the main room.

"What do you have to say?"

"Could you give me one free hand and a cigarette?"

"No, but you can have a cigarette."

"How about the right one? I can hardly move it."

I considered, and said, "Okay," picking up my gun again.

I lit the stick, stuck it in his mouth, then cut the tape and tore it off his right forearm. He dropped the cigarette when I did it, and I picked it up and restored it to him.

"All right," I said, "take ten seconds and enjoy yourself. After that, we talk cases."

He nodded, looked around the room, took a deep drag, and exhaled.

"I guess you do know how to hurt," he said. "If you are not government, I guess your file is very much off."

"I am not government."

"Then I wish you were on our side, because it is a pretty bad thing. Whatever you are, or do," he stated, "I hope you are aware of the full

implications."

... And he glanced at my clock, again.

Six twenty-five.

He had done it several times, and I had dismissed it. But now it seemed something more than a desire to know the time.

"When does it go off?" I asked, on chance.

Buying that, on chance, he replied, "Bring my brother back, where I can see him."

"When does it go off?" I repeated.

"Too soon," he replied, "and then it will not matter. You are too late."

"I don't think so," I said. "But now that I know, I'll have to move, fast. So ... Don't lose any sleep over it. I think I am going to turn you in now."

"What if I could offer you more money?"

"Don't. You'd only embarrass me. And I'd still say, 'No.'"

"Okay. But bring him back, please, and take care of his burns."

So I did.

"You guys will remain here for a brief while," I finally said, snuffing the older one's cigarette and retaping his wrist. Then I moved toward the door.

"You don't know, you really don't know!" I heard from behind me.

"Don't fool yourself," I said, over my shoulder.

I didn't know. I really didn't know.

But I could guess.

I stormed through the corridors until I reached Carol Deith's cabin. There I banged upon the door until I heard some muffled cursing and a "Wait a minute!" Then the door opened and she stared out at me, her eyes winking at the light, a slumber cap of sorts upon her head and a bulky robe about her.

"What do you want?" she asked me.

"Today is the day indeed," I said. "I've got to talk to you. May I come in?"

"No," she said. "I'm not accustomed to ... "

"Sabotage," I said. "I know. That's what it's all about, and it isn't finished yet ... Please ... "

"Come in." The door was suddenly wide open and she was standing to one side.

I entered.

She closed the door behind me, leaned back against it and said, "All right, what is it?"

There was a feeble light glowing, and a messed-up bed from which I had obviously aroused her.

"Look, maybe I didn't give you the whole story the other day," I told her. "Yes, it was sabotage, and there was a bomb, and I disposed of it. That's over and done with. Today is the big day, though, and the final attempt is in the offing. I know that for a fact. I think I know what it is and where it is. Can you help me? Can I help you? Help."

"Sit down," she said.

"There isn't much time."

"Sit down, please. I have to get dressed."

"Please hurry."

She stepped into the next room and left the door open. I was around the corner from it, though, so it should not have bothered her if she trusted me, and I guess she did, because she did.

"What is it?" she asked me, amidst the rustle of clothing.

"I believe that one or more of our three atomic charges has been booby-trapped, so that the bird will sing a bit prematurely within its cage."

"Why?" she said.

"Because there are two men back in my cabin, both of them taped to chairs, who tried to make me talk earlier this evening, with respect to my servicing of the J-9."

"What does that prove?"

"They were kind of rough on me."

"So?"

"When I got the upper hand, I got the same way with them. I made them talk."

"How?"

"None of your business. But they talked. I think RUMOKO's igniters need another check."

"I can pick them up in your cabin?"

"Yes."

"How did you apprehend them?"

"They didn't know I had a gun."

"I see. Neither did I ... We'll get them, don't worry. But you are telling me that you took both of them and beat some answers out of them?"

"More or less," I said, "and yes and no, and off the record, in case this place is bugged. Is it?"

She came in, nodded her head and put a finger to her lips.

"Well, let's go do something," I said. "We'd better act quickly, I don't want these guys fouling the project all up."

"They won't. Okay. I'll give it to you that you know what you are doing. I will take you at face value as a strange creature. You did something which nobody expected of you. This does happen occasionally. We sometimes meet up with a guy who knows his job thoroughly and can see when something is going wrong, and who cares enough about it to proceed from there and damn the torpedoes. You say an atomic bomb will soon be going off aboard this ship. Right?"

"Yes."

"You think one of the charges has been attached, and has a timer cued in?"

"Right," and I looked at my wristwatch and saw that it was going on seven. "I'd bet less than an hour from now."

"They're going down in a few minutes," she told me.

"What are you going to do about it?"

She picked up the telephone on the little table next to her bed.

"Operations," she said. "Stop the countdown." Then, "Give me the barracks."

"Sergeant," she then said, "I want you to make some arrests." She looked at me. "What is your room number?" she asked.

"Six-forty," I replied.

"Six-forty," she said. "Two men ... Right ... Yes ... Thank you." And she hung up.

"They're taken care of," she told me. "So, you think a charge might go off prematurely?"

"That's what I said, twice."

"Could you stop it?"

"With the proper equipment, though I'd rather you send in a service ... "

"Get it," she said to me.

"Okay," and I went and did that thing.

I came back to her cabin around five minutes later, with a heavy pack slung

over my shoulder.

"I had to sign my name in blood," I told her. "But I've got what I need ... Why don't you get yourself a good physicist?"

"I want you," she said. "You were in from the beginning. You know what you're doing. Let's keep the group small and tight."

"Tell me where to go to do it," I said, and she led the way.

It was pushing seven by then.

It took me ten minutes to find out which one they had done it to.

It was child's play. They had used the motor from an advanced kid's erector set, with self-contained power unit. It was to be actuated by a standard clock-type timer, which would cause it to pull the lead shielding. The damned thing would go off while it was on the way down.

It took me less than ten minutes to disarm it.

We stood near the railing, and I leaned upon it.

"Good," I said.

"Very good," she said.

"While you're at it," she continued, "get on your guard. You are about to be the subject of the biggest security investigation I have ever set off."

"Go ahead. I'm pure as snow and swansdown."

"You aren't real," she told me. "They don't make people like that."

"So touch me," I said. "I am sorry if you don't like the way I go about existing."

"If you don't turn into a frog come midnight, a girl could learn to like a guy like you."

"That would require a very stupid girl," I said. And she gave me a strange look which I did not really care to try interpreting.

Then she stared me straight in the eyes. "You've got some kind of secret I do not quite understand yet," she said. "You seem like a leftover from the Old Days."

"Maybe I am. Look, you've already said that I've been of help. Why not leave it at that? I haven't done anything wrong."

"I've got a job to do. But, on the other hand, you're right. You have helped, and you haven't really broken any regs ... Except with reference to the J-9, for which I'm sure nobody is going to cause you trouble. On the opposite hand, I've got a report to write. Of necessity, your actions will figure in it prominently. I can't very well leave you out."

"I wasn't asking that," I said.

"What do you want me to do?"

Once it got into Central, I knew, I could kill it. But prior to that, it would be filtered through a mess of humans. They could cause trouble. "You kept the group small and tight," I said. "You could drop one."

"No."

"Okay. I could be a draftee, from the beginning."

"That's better."

"Then maybe we could let it be that way."

"I see no great problems."

"You'll do it?"

"I will see what I can do."

"That's enough. Thanks."

"What will you do when your job here is finished?"

"I don't know. Take a vacation, maybe."

"All alone?"

"Maybe."

"Look, I like you. I'll do things to keep you out of trouble."

"I'd appreciate that."

"You seem to have answers for everything."

"Thank you."

"What about a girl?"

"What do you mean?"

"Could you use one, in whatever you do?"

"I thought you had a pretty good job here."

"I do. That's not what I'm talking about ... Do you have one?"

"One what?"

"Stop playing the stupid role ... A girl, is what I mean."

"No."

"Well?"

"You're nuts," I said. "What the hell could I do with an Intelligence-type girl? Do you mean that you would actually take the chance of teaming up with a stranger?"

"I've watched you in action, and I'm not afraid of you. Yes, I would take the chance."

"This is the strangest proposal I've ever received."

"Think quick," she said.

"You don't know what you're asking," I told her.

"What if I like you, an awful lot?"

"Well, I disarmed your bomb ... "

"I'm not talking about being grateful ... But thanks, anyway ... The answer, I take it, is, 'No.' "

"Stop that! Can't you give a man a chance to think?"

"Okay," she said, and turned away.

"Wait. Don't be that way. You can't hurt me, so I can talk honestly. I do have a crush on you. I have been a confirmed bachelor for many years, though. You are a complication."

"Let's look at it this way," she told me. "You're different, I know that. I wish I could do different things."

"Like what?"

"Lie to computers and get away with it."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's the only answer, if you're real."

"I'm real."

"Then you know how to beat the system."

"I doubt it."

"Take me along," she said. "I'd like to do the same thing."

And I looked at her. A little wisp of hair was touching her cheek, and she looked as if she wanted to cry.

"I'm your last chance, aren't I? You met me at a strange moment in your life, and you want to gamble."

"Yes."

"You're nuts, and I can't promise you security unless you want to quit the game, and I can't. I play it by my own rules, though, and they're kind of strange. If you and I got together, you would probably be a young widow ... So you would have that going for you."

"You're tough enough to disarm bombs."

"I will meet an early grave. I do lots of stupid things when I have to."

"I think I might be in love with you."

"Then, for gods' sakes, let me talk to you later. I have lots of things to think about, now."

"All right."

"You're a dumb broad."

"I don't think so."

"Well, we'll see."

After I woke up from one of the deepest sleeps in my life, I went and signed for duty.

"You're late," said Morrey.

"So have them dock me."

I went then and watched the thing itself begin to occur.

RUMOKO was in the works.

They went down, Martin and Demmy, and planted the charge. They did the necessary things, and we got out of there. Everything was set, and waiting for our radio signal. My cabin had been emptied of intruders, and I was grateful.

We got far enough away, and the signal was given. All was silent for a time. Then the bomb went off. Over the port bow, I saw the man stand up. He was old and gray and wore a wide-brimmed hat. He stood, slouched, fell on his face.

"We've just polluted the atmosphere some more," said Martin.

"Hell," said Demmy.

The oceans rose and assailed us. The ship held anchor.

For a time, there was nothing. Then, it began.

The ship shook, like a wet dog. I clung to the rail and watched. Next came a mess of waves, and they were bastards, but we rode them out.

"We've got the first reading," said Carol. "It's beginning to build."

I nodded and did not say anything. There wasn't much to say.

"It's getting bigger," she said, after a minute, and I nodded again.

Finally, later on that morning, the whole thing that had come loose made its scene upon the surface.

The waters had been bubbling for a long while by then. The bubbles grew larger. The temperature readings rose. There came a glow.

Then there was one fantastic spout. It was blasted into the air to a great height, golden in the morning sunshine, like Zeus when he had visited one of his girlfriends or other. It was accompanied by a loud roar. It hung there for a few brief moments, then descended in a shower of sparks.

Immediately thereafter, there was greater turbulence.

It increased and I watched, the regular way and by means of the instruments.

The waters frothed and glistened. The roaring came and went. There came another spout, and another. The waters burned beneath the waves. Four more spouts, each larger than its predecessor ...

Then an ocean-riving blast caught the Aquina in something close to a tidal wave ...

We were ready, though, built that way, and faced into it.

We rode with it, and there was no let-up.

We were miles away, and it seemed as if but an arm's distance separated us.

The next spout just kept going up, until it became a topless pillar. It pierced the sky, and a certain darkness began at that point. It began to swell, and there were fires all about its base.

After a time, the entire sky was fading over into a false twilight, and a fine dust filled the air, the eyes, the lungs. Occasionally, a crowd of ashes passed in the distance, like a covey of dark birds. I lit a cigarette to protect my lungs against pollution, and watched the fires rise.

With our early evening, the seas darkened. The kraken himself, disturbed, might have been licking our hull. The glow continued, and a dark form appeared.

RUMOKO.

It was the cone. An artificially created island. A piece of long-sunk Atlantis itself, perhaps, was rising in the distance. Man had succeeded in creating a landmass. One day it would be habitable. Now, if we made a chain of them ...

Yes. Perhaps another Japan. More room for the expanding human race. More space. More places in which to live.

Why had I been questioned? Who had opposed this? It was a good thing, as I saw it.

I went away. I went and had dinner.

Carol came into the commissary and joined me, as if by accident. I nodded, and she seated herself across from me and ordered.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"Maybe you've done some of your thinking by now?" she said, between the salad and the ersatz beef.

"Yes," I replied.

"What are the results?"

"I still don't know. It was awfully quick and, frankly, I'd like the opportunity to get to know you a little better."

"Signifying what?"

"There is an ancient custom known as 'dating.' Let's do it for a little while."

"You don't like me? I've checked our compatibility indices. They show that we would be okay together, buying you at face value, that is, but I think I know more of you than that."

"Outside of the fact that I'm not for sale, what does that mean?"

"I've made lots of guesses and I think I could also get along with an individualist who knows how to play the right games with machines."

I knew that the commissary was bugged, and I guessed that she didn't know that I did. Therefore, she had a reason for saying what she had said, and she didn't think I knew about it.

"Sorry. Too quick," I told her. "Give a man a chance, will you?"

"Why don't we go someplace and discuss it?"

We were ready for dessert at that point.

"Where?"

"Spitzbergen."

I thought about it, then, "Okay," I said.

"I'll be ready in about an hour and a half."

"Whoa!" I said. "I thought you meant, like, perhaps this weekend. There are still tests to run, and I'm scheduled for duty."

"But your job here is finished, isn't it?"

I started in on my dessert, apple pie, and pretty good, too, with a chunk of cheddar, and I sipped coffee along with it. Over the rim of the cup, I cocked my head at her and shook it, slowly, from one side to the other.

"I can get you off duty for a day," she told me. "There will be no harm done."

"Sorry. I'm interested in the results of the tests. Let's make it this weekend."

She seemed to think about this for a while.

"All right," she said finally, and I nodded and continued with my dessert.

The "all right" instead of a "yes" or an "okay" or a "sure" must have been a key word of some sort. Or perhaps it was something else that she did or said. I don't know. I don't care any more.

When we left the commissary, she was slightly ahead of me, as I had opened the door for her, and a man moved in from either side.

She stopped and turned.

"Don't bother saying it," I said. "I wasn't quick enough, so I'm under arrest. Please don't recite my rights. I know what they are," and I raised my hands when I saw the steel in one man's hand. "Merry Christmas," I added.

But she recited my rights anyway, and I stared at her all the while. She didn't meet my eyes.

Hell, the whole proposition had been too good to be true. I didn't think she was very used to the role she had played, though, and I wondered, idly, whether she would have gone through with it, if circumstances dictated. She had been right about my job aboard the Aquina being ended, however. I would have to be moving along, and seeing that Albert Schweitzer died within the next twenty-four hours.

"You are going to Spitzbergen tonight," she said, "where there are better facilities for questioning you."

How was I going to manage it? Well ... As if reading my thoughts, she said, "Since you seem to be somewhat dangerous, I wish to advise you that your escorts are highly trained men."

"Then you won't be coming with me, after all?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Too bad. Then this is going to have to be 'Goodbye.' I'd like to have gotten to know you somewhat better."

"That meant nothing!" she said. "It was just to get you there."

"Maybe. But you will always wonder, and now you will never know."

"I am afraid we are going to have to handcuff you," said one of the men.

"Of course."

I held my hands out and he said, almost apologetically, "No, sir. Behind your back, please."

So I did, but I watched the men move in and I got a look at the cuffs. They were kind of old-fashioned. Government budgets generally produce such handy savings. If I bent over backward, I could step over them, and then they would be in front of me. Give me, say, twenty seconds ...

"One thing," I asked. "Just for the sake of curiosity and because I told it to you straight. Did you ever find out why those two guys broke into my room to question me, and what they really wanted? If you're allowed to tell me, I would like to know, because it made for some rough sleeping."

She bit her lip, thought a moment, I guess, then said, "They were from New Salem, a bubble city off the North American continental shelf. They were afraid that RUMOKO would crack their dome."

"Did it?" I asked.

She paused.

"We don't know yet," she said. "The place has been silent for a while. We have tried to get through to them, but there seems to be some interference."

"What do you mean by that?"

"We have not yet succeeded in reestablishing contact."

"You mean to say that we might have killed a city?"

"No. The chances were minimal, according to the scientists."

"Your scientists," I said. "Theirs must have felt differently about it."

"Of course," she told me. "There are always obstructionists. They sent saboteurs because they did not trust our scientists. The inference ... "

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?"

"That I put a guy into a shower ... Okay. Thanks. I can read all about it in the papers. Send me to Spitzbergen now."

"Please," she said. "I do what I must. I think it's right. You may be as clean as snow and swansdown. If that is the case, they will know in a very short time, Al. Then, then I'd like you to bear in mind that what I said before may still be good."

I chuckled.

"Sure, and I've already said, 'Good-bye.' Thanks for answering my question, though."

"Don't hate me."

"I don't. But I could never trust you."

She turned away.

"Good night, " I said.

And they escorted me to the helicopter. They helped me aboard. There were just the two of them and the pilot.

"She liked you," said the man with the gun.

"No." I said.

"If she's right and you're clean, will you see her again?"

"I'll never see her again," I said. He seated me, to the rear of the craft. Then he and his buddy took window seats and gave a signal. The engines throbbed, and suddenly we rose. In the distance, RUMOKO rumbled, burned, and spat.

Eva, I am sorry. I didn't know. I'd never guessed it might have done what it did.

"You're supposed to be dangerous," said the man on my right. "Please don't try anything."

Ave, atque, avatque, I said, in my heart of hearts, like.

Twenty-four hours, I told Schweitzer.

After I collected my money from Walsh, I returned to the Proteus and practiced meditation for a few days. Since it did not produce the desired results, I went up and got drunk with Bill Mellings. After all, I had used his equipment to kill Schweitzer. I didn't tell him anything, except for a made-up story about a ni-hi girl with large mammaries.

Then we went fishing, two weeks' worth.

I did not exist any longer. I had erased Albert Schweitzer from the world. I kept telling myself that I did not want to exist any longer.

If you have to murder a man, have to, I mean, like no choice in the matter, I feel that it should be a bloody and horrible thing, so that it burns itself into your soul and gives you a better appreciation of the value of human existence.

It had not been that way, however.

It had been quiet and viral. It was a thing to which I have immunized myself, but of which very few other persons have even heard. I had opened my ring and released the spores. That was all. I had never known the names of my escorts or the pilot. I had not even had a good look at their faces.

It had killed them within thirty seconds, and I had the cuffs off in less than the twenty seconds I'd guessed. I crashed the 'copter on the beach, sprained my right wrist doing it, got the hell out of the vehicle, and started walking.

They'd look like myocardial infarcts or arteriosclerotic brain syndromes, depending on how it hit them.

Which meant I should lay low for a while. I value my own existence slightly more than that of anyone who wishes to disturb it. This does not mean that I didn't feel like hell, though.

Carol will suspect, I think, but Central only buys facts. And I saw that there was enough sea water in the plane to take care of the spores. No test known to man could prove that I had murdered them.

The body of Albert Schweitzer had doubtless been washed out to sea through the sprung door.

If I ever meet with anybody who had known Al, so briefly, I'd be somebody else by then, with appropriate identification, and that person would be mistaken.

Very neat. But maybe I'm in me wrong line of work. I still feel like hell.

RUMOKO from all those fathoms fumed and grew like those Hollywood monsters that used to get blamed on science fiction. In a few months, it was predicted, its fires would desist. A layer of soil would then be imported, spread, and migrating birds would be encouraged to stop and rest, maybe nest, and to use the place as a lavatory. Mutant red mangroves would be rooted there, linking the sea and the land. Insects would even be brought aboard. One day, according to theory, it would be a habitable island. One other day, it would be one of a chain of habitable islands.

A double-pronged answer to the population problem, you might say: create a new place for men to live, and in doing so kill off a crowd of them living elsewhere.

Yes, the seismic shocks had cracked New Salem's dome. Many people had died.

And Project RUMOKO's second son is nevertheless scheduled for next summer.

The people in Baltimore II are worried, but the Congressional investigation showed that the fault lay with the constructors of New Salem, who should have provided against the vicissitudes. The courts held several of the contractors liable, and two of them went into receivership despite the connections that had gotten them the contracts in the first place.

It ain't pretty, and it's big, and I sort of wish I had never put that guy into the shower. He is all alive and well, I understand, a New Salem man, but I know that he will never be the same.

More precautions are supposed to be taken with the next one, whatever that means. I do not trust these precautions worth a damn. But then, I do not trust anything anymore.

If another bubble city goes, as yours did, Eva, I think it will slow things down. But I do not believe it will stop the RUMOKO Project. I think they will find another excuse then. I think they will try for a third one after that.

While it has been proved that we can create such things, I do not believe that the answer to our population problem lies in the manufacturing of new lands. No.

Offhand, I would say that since everything else is controlled these days, we might as well do it with the population, too. I will even get myself an

identity, many identities, in fact, and vote for it, if it ever comes to a referendum. And I submit that there should be more bubble cities, and increased appropriations with respect to the exploration of outer space. But no more RUMOKO's. No.

Despite past reservations, I am taking on a free one. Walsh will never know. Hopefully, no one will. I am no altruist, but I guess I owe something to the race that I leech off of. After all, I was once a member ...

Taking advantage of my nonexistence, I am going to sabotage that bastard so well that it will be the last.

How?

I will see that it is a Krakatoa, at least. As a result of the last one, Central knows a lot more about magma, and as a result of this, so do I.

I will manipulate the charge, probably even make it a multiple.

When that baby goes off, I will have arranged for it to be the worst seismic disturbance in the memory of man. It should not be too difficult to do.

I could possibly murder thousands of people by this action, and certainly I will kill some. However, RUMOKO in its shattering of New Salem scared the hell out of so many folks that I think RUMOKO II will scare even more. I am hoping that there will be a lot of topside vacations about that time. Add to this the fact that I know how rumors get started, and I can do it myself. I will.

I am at least going to clear the decks as much as I can.

They will get results, all right, the planners, like a Mount Everest in the middle of the Atlantic and some fractured domes. Laugh that off, and you are a good man.

I baited the line and threw it overboard. Bill took a drink of orange juice and I took a drag on my cigarette. "You're a consulting engineer these days?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"What are you up to now?"

"I've got a job in mind. Kind of tricky."

"Will you take it?"

"Yes."

"I sometimes wish I had something going for me now, the way you do."

"Don't. It's not worth it."

I looked out over the dark waters, able to bear prodigies. The morning sun was just licking the waves, and my decision was, like, solid. The wind was chilly and pleasant. The sky was going to be beautiful. I could tell from the breaks in the cloud cover.

"It sounds interesting. This is demolition work, you say?"

And I, Judas Iscariot, turned a glance his way and said, "Pass me the bait can, please. I think I've got something on the line."

"Me, too. Wait a minute."

The day, like a mess of silver dollars, fell upon the deck.

I landed mine and hit it on the back of the head with the stick, to be merciful.

I kept telling myself that I did not exist. I hope it is true, even though I feel that it is not. I seem to see old Colgate's face beneath an occasional whitecap.

Eva, Eva ...

Forgive me, my Eva. I would welcome your hand on my brow.

It is pretty, the silver. The waves are blue and green this morning, and God! how lovely the light!

"Here's the bait"

"Thanks."

I took it and we drifted.

Eventually, everybody dies, I noted. But it did not make me feel any better.

But nothing, really, could.

The next card will be for Christmas, as usual, Don, one year late this time around.

Never ask me why.