



## On the Sand Planet

This is the story of the sand planet itself, Mizzer, which had lost all hope when the tyrant Wedder imposed the reign of terror and virtue. And its liberator, Casher O'Neill of whom strange things were told, from the day of blood in which he fled from his native city of Kaheer, until he came back to end the shedding of blood for all the rest of his years.

Everywhere that Casher had gone, he had had only one thought in his mind deliverance of his home country from the tyrants whom he himself had let slip into power when they had conspired against his uncle, the unspeakable Kuraf. He never forgot, whether waking or sleeping. He never forgot Kaheer itself along the First Nile, where the horses raced on the turf with the sand nearby. He never forgot the blue skies of his home and the great dunes of the desert between one Nile and the others. He remembered the freedom of a planet built and dedicated to freedom. He never forgot that the price of blood is blood, that the price of freedom is fighting, that the risk of fighting is death. But he was not a fool. He was willing, if he had to, to risk his own death, but he wanted odds on the battle which would not merely snare him home, like a rabbit to be caught in a steel trap, by the police of the dictator Wedder.

And then, he met the solution of his crusade without knowing it at first. He had come to the end of all things, all problems, all worries. He had also come to the end of all ordinary hope. He met T'ruth. Now her subtle powers belonged to Casher O'Neill, to do with as he pleased.

It pleased him to return to Mizzer, to enter Kaheer itself, and to confront Wedder.

Why should he not come? It was his home and he thirsted for revenge. More than revenge he hungered for justice. He had lived many years for this hour and this hour came.

He entered the north gate of Kaheer.

Casher walked into Mizzer wearing the uniform of a medical technician in Wedder's own military service. He had assumed the appearance and the name of a dead man named Bindaoud. Casher walked with nothing more than his hands as weapons, and his hands swung freely at the end of his arms.

Only the steadfastness of his feet, the resolute grace with which he took each step, betrayed his purpose. The crowds in the street saw him pass but they did not see him. They looked at a man and they did not realize that they saw their own history going step by step through their various streets. Casher O'Neill had entered the city of Kaheer; he knew that he was being followed. He could feel it.

He glanced around.

He had learned in his many years of fighting and struggle, on strange planets, countless rules of unremembered hazards.

To be alert, he knew what this was. It was a suchesache. The suchesache at the moment had taken the shape of a small witless boy, some eight years old, who had two trails of stained mucus pouring down from his nostrils, who had forever-open lips ready to call with the harsh bark of idiocy, who had eyes that did not focus right. Casher O'Neill knew that this was a boy and not a boy. It was a hunting and searching device often employed by police lords when they presumed to make themselves into kings or tyrants, a device which flitted from shape to shape, from child to butterfly or bird, which moved with the suchesache and watched the victim; watching, saying nothing, following. He hated the suchesache and was tempted to throw all the powers of his strange mind at it so that the boy might die and the machine hidden within it might perish. But he knew that this would lead to a cascade of fire and splashing of blood. He had already seen blood in Kaheer long ago; he had no wish to see it in the city again.

Instead he stopped the pacing which had been following his cadenced walk through the street. He turned calmly and kindly and looked at the boy, and he said to the boy and to the hideous machine within the boy,

"Come along with me; I'm going straightway to the palace and you would like to see that."

The machine, confronted, had no further choice.

The idiot boy put his hand in Casher's hand and somehow or other Casher O'Neill managed to resume the rolling deliberate march which had marked so many of his years, while keeping a grip on the hand of the demented child who skipped beside him. Casher could still feel the machine watching him from within the eyes of the boy. He did not care; he was not afraid of guns; he could stop them. He was not afraid of poison; he could resist it. He was not afraid of hypnotism; he could take it in and spit

it back. He was not afraid of fear; he had been on Henriada. He had come home through space-three. There was nothing left to fear.

Straightway went he to the palace. The midday gleamed in the bright yellow sun which rode the skies of Kaheer. The whitewashed walls in the arabesque design stayed as they had been for thousands of years. Only at the door was he challenged, but the sentry hesitated as Casher spoke: "I am Bindaoud, loyal servant to Colonel Wedder, and this is a child of the streets whom I propose to heal in order to show our good Colonel Wedder a fair demonstration of my powers."

The sentry said something into a little box which sat in the wall.

Casher passed freely. The suchesache trotted beside him. As he went through the corridors, laid with rich rugs, military and civilians moving back and forth, he felt happy. This was not the palace of Wedder, though Wedder lived in it. It was his own palace. He, Casher, had been born in it. He knew it. He knew every corridor.

The changes of the years were very few. Casher turned left into an open courtyard. He smelled the smell of salt water and the sand and the horses nearby. He sighed a little at the familiarity of it, the good and kind welcome. He turned right again and ascended long, long stairs. Each step was carpeted in a different design.

His uncle Kuraf had stood at the head of these very stairs while men and women, boys and girls were brought to him to become toys of his evil pleasures. Kuraf had been too fat to walk down these stairs to greet them. He always let the captives come up to himself and to his den of pleasures. Casher reached the top of the stairs and turned left.

This was no den of pleasures now.

It was the office of Colonel Wedder. He, Casher, had reached it.

How strange it was to reach this office, this target of all his hopes, this one fevered pinpoint in all the universe for which his revenge had thirsted until he thought himself mad. He had thought of bombing this office from outer space, or of cutting it with the thin arc of a laser beam, or of poisoning it with chemicals, or of assaulting it with troops. He had thought of pouring fire on this building, or water. He had dreamed of making Mizzer free even at the price of the lovely city of Kaheer itself by finding a small asteroid somewhere and crashing it, in an interplanetary tragedy, directly into the city itself. And the city, under the roar of that impact, would have blazed into thermonuclear incandescence and would have become a poison lake at the end of the Twelve Niles. He had thought of a thousand ways of entering the city and of destroying the city, merely in order to destroy Wedder.

Now he was here. So too was Wedder.

Wedder did not know that he, Casher O'Neill, had come back.

Even less did Wedder know who Casher O'Neill had become, the master of space, the traveler who traveled without ships, the vehicle for devices stranger than any mind on Mizzer had ever conceived.

Very calm, very relaxed, very quiet, very assured, the doom which was Casher O'Neill walked into the antechamber of Wedder. Very modestly, he asked for Wedder.

The dictator happened to be free.

He had changed little since Casher last saw him, a little older, a little fatter, a little wiser all these perhaps. Casher was not sure. Every cell and filament in his living body had risen to the alert. He was ready to do the work for which the light-years had ached, for which the worlds had turned, and he knew that within an instant it would be done. He confronted Wedder, gave Wedder a modest assured smile.

"Your servant, the technician Bindaoud, sir and colonel,"

said Casher O'Neill. Wedder looked at him strangely. He reached out his hand, and, even as their hands touched, Wedder said the last words he would ever say on his own.

Within that handclasp, Wedder spoke again and his voice was strange: "Who are you?"

Casher had dreamed that he would say,

"I am Casher O'Neill come back from unimaginable distances to punish you," or that he would say,

"I am Casher O'Neill and I have ridden star lanes for years upon years to find your destruction." Or he had even thought that he might say,

"Surrender or die, Wedder, your time has come." Sometimes he had dreamed he would say,

"Here, Wedder," and then show him the knife with which to take his blood.

Yet this was the climax and none of these things occurred.

The idiot boy with the machine within it stood at ease.

Casher O'Neill merely held Wedder's hand and said quite simply,

"Your friend."

As he said that, he searched back and forth. He could feel inner eyes within his own head, eyes which did not move within the sockets of his face, eyes which he did not have and with which he could nevertheless see. These were the eyes of his perception.

Quickly, he adjusted the anatomy of Wedder, working kin esthetically squeezing an artery there, pinching off a gland here. Here, harden the tissue, through which the secretions of a given endocrine material had to come. In less time than it would take an ordinary doctor to describe the process, he had changed Wedder. Wedder had been tuned down like a radio with dials realigned, like a spaceship with its lock sheets reset.

The work which Casher had done was less than any pilot does in the course of an ordinary landing; but the piloting he had done was within the

biochemical system of Wedder himself. And the changes which he had effected were irreversible.

The new Wedder was the old Wedder. The same mind. The same will, the same personality. Yet its permutations were different. And its method of expression already slightly different.

More benign. More tolerant. More calm, more human. Even a little corrupt, as he smiled and said,

"I remember you, now, Bindaoud. Can you help that boy?"

The supposed Bindaoud ran his hands over the boy. The boy wept with pain and shock for a moment. He wiped his dirty nose and upper lip on his sleeves. His eyes came into focus. His lips compressed. His mind burned brightly as its old worn channels became human instead of idiot. The suchesache machine knew it was out of place and fled for another refuge. The boy, given his brains, but no words, no education yet, stood there and hiccupped with joy.

Wedder said very pleasantly,

"That is remarkable. Is it all that you have to show me?"

"All," said Casher O'Neill.

"You were not he."

He turned his back on Wedder and did so in perfect safety.

He knew Wedder would never kill another man.

Casher stopped at the door and looked back. He could tell from the posture of Wedder that that which had to be done, had been done: the changes within the man were larger than the man himself. The planet was free and Casher's own work was indeed done. The suddenly frightened child, which had lost the suchesache, followed him out of blind instinct.

The colonels and the staff officers did not know whether to salute or nod when they saw their chief stand at the doorway, and waved with unexpected friendliness at Casher O'Neill as Casher descended the broad carpeted steps, the child stumbling behind him. At the furthest steps, Casher looked one last time at the enemy who had become almost a part of himself. There stood Wedder, the man of blood. And now, he himself, Casher O'Neill, had expunged the blood, had redone the past, and reshaped the future. All Mizzer was heading back to the openness and freedom which it had enjoyed in the time of the old Republic of the Twelve Niles. He walked on, shifting from one corridor to the other and using short-cuts to the courtyards, until he came to the doorway of the palace. The sentry presented arms.

"At ease," said Casher. The man put down his gun.

Casher stood outside the palace, that palace which had been his uncle's, which had been his own, which had really been himself. He felt the clear air of Mizzer. He looked at the clear blue skies which he had always loved. He looked at the world to which he had promised he would return, with justice, with vengeance, with thunder, with power. Thanks to the strange





of Man and subtle capacities which he had learned from the turtle-girl, T'ruth, hidden in her own world amid the storm-churned atmosphere of Henriada, he had not needed to fight.

Casher turned to the boy and said,

"I am a sword which has been put into its scabbard. I am a pistol with the cartridges dropped out. I am a wire point with no battery behind it. I am a man, but I am very empty."

The boy made strangled, confused sounds as though he were trying to think, to become himself, to make up for all the lost time he had spent in idiocy.

Casher acted on impulse. Curiously, he gave to the boy his own native speech of Kaheer. He felt his muscles go tight, shoulders, neck, fingertips, as he concentrated with the arts he had learned in the palace of Beauregard where the girl T'ruth governed almost-forever in the name of Mister and Owner Murray Madigan. He took the arts and memories he sought. He seized the boy roughly but tightly by the shoulders. He peered into frightened crying eyes and then, in a single blast of thought, he gave the boy speech, words, memory, ambition, skills. The boy stood there dazed.

At last the boy spoke and he asked,

"Who am I?"

Casher could not answer that one. He patted the child on the shoulder. He said,

"Go back to the city and find out. I have other needs. I have to find out who I myself may be. Good-bye and peace be with you."

Casher remembered that his mother still lived here. He had often forgotten her. It would have been easier to forget her. Her name was Trihaep, and she had been sister to Kuraf. Where Kuraf had been vicious, she had been virtuous. Where Kuraf had sometimes been grateful, she had been thrifty and shifty. Where Kuraf, with all his evils, had acquired a toleration for men and things and ideas, she remained set on the pattern of thought which her parents had long ago taught her.

Casher O'Neill did something he thought he would never do.

He had never really even thought about doing it. It was too simple. He went home.

At the gate of the house, his mother's old servant knew him, despite the change in his face, and she said, with a terrible awe in her voice,

"It seems to me that I am looking at Casher O'Neill."

"I use the name Bindaoud," said Casher, "but I am Casher O'Neill. Let me in and tell my mother that I am here."

He went into the private apartment of his mother. The old furniture was still there. The polished bricabrac of a hundred ages, the old paintings and the old mirrors, and the dead people whom he had never

known,

represented by their pictures and their mementos. He felt just as ill at ease as he felt when he was a small boy, when he had visited the same room, before his uncle came to take him to the palace.

His mother came in. She had not changed.

He half-thought that she would reach out her arms to him, and cry in a deliberately modern passion,

"My baby! My precious!

Come back to me!"

She did no such thing.

She looked at him coldly as though he were a complete stranger.

She said to him,

"You don't look like my son, but I suppose that you are. You have made trouble enough in your time. Are you making trouble now?"

"I make no malicious trouble. Mother, and I never have," said Casher, "no matter what you may think of me. I did what I had to do. I did what was right."

"Betraying your uncle was right? Letting down our family was right? Disgracing us all was right? You must be a fool to talk like this. I heard that you were a wanderer, that you had great adventures, and had seen many worlds. You don't sound any different to me. You're an old man. You almost seem as old as I do. I had a baby once, but how could that be you? You are an enemy of the house of Kuraf O'Neill. You're one of the people who brought it down in blood. But they came from outside with their principles and their thoughts and their dreams of power. And you stole from inside like a cur. You opened the door and you let in ruin. Who are you that I should forgive you?"

"I do not ask your forgiveness. Mother," said Casher.

"I do not even ask your understanding. I have other places to go and other things yet to do. May peace be upon you."

She stared at him, said nothing.

He went on,

"You will find Mizzer a more pleasant place to live in, since I talked to Wedder this morning."

"You talked to Wedder?" cried she.

"And he did not kill you?"

"He did not know me."

"Wedder did not know you?"

"I assure you, Mother, he did not know me."

"You must be a very powerful man, my son. Perhaps you can repair the

fortune of the house of Kuraf O'Neill after all the harm you have done, and all the heartbreak you brought to my brother.

I suppose you know your wife's dead?"

"I had heard that," said Casher.

"I hope she died instantly in an accident and without pain."

"Of course it was an accident. How else do people die these days? She and her husband tried out one of those new boats, and it overturned."

"I'm sorry, I wasn't there."

"I know that. I know that perfectly well, my son. You were outside there, so that I had to look up at the stars with fear. I could look up in the sky and stare for the man who was my son lurking up there with blood and ruin. With vengeance upon vengeance heaped upon all of us, just because he thought he knew what was right. I've been afraid of you for a long long time, and I thought if I ever met you again I would fear you with my whole heart. You don't quite seem to be what I expected, Cashier. Perhaps I can like you. Perhaps I can even love you as a mother should. Not that it matters. You and I are too old now."

"I'm not working on that kind of mission any longer, Mother. I have been in this old room long enough and I wish you well. But I wish many other people well, too. I have done what I had to do. Perhaps I had better say good-bye, and much later perhaps, I will come back and see you again. When both of us know more about what we have to do."

"Don't you even want to see your daughter?"

"Daughter?" said Cashier O'Neill.

"Do I have a daughter?"

"Oh, poor fool, you. Didn't you even find that out after you left? She bore your child, all right. She even went through the old-fashioned business of a natural birth. The child even looks something like the way you used to look. Matter of fact, she's rather arrogant, like you. You can call on her if you want to."

She lives in the house which is just outside the square in Golden Laut in the leather workers' area. Her husband's name is Ali Ali. Look her up if you want to."

She extended a hand. Cashier took the hand as though she had been a queen. And he kissed the cool fingers. As he looked her in the face, here, too, he brought his skills from Henriada in place. He surveyed and felt her personally as though he were a surgeon of the soul, but in this case there was nothing for him to do. This was not a dynamic personality struggling and fighting and moving against the forces of life and hope and disappointment. This was something else, a person set in life, immobile, determined, rigid even for a man with healing arts who could destroy a fleet with his thoughts or who could bring an idiot to normality by mere command. He could see that this was a case beyond his powers.

He patted the old hand affectionately and she smiled warmly at him, not knowing what it meant.

"If anyone asks,"

said Cashier, "the name I have been using is that of the Doctor Bindaoud. Bindaoud the technician. Can you remember that, Mother?"

"Bindaoud the technician," she echoed, as she led him out the door to walk in the street.

Within twenty minutes he was knocking at his daughter's door.



II

The daughter herself answered the door. She flung it open.

She looked at the strange man, surveyed him from head to heels.

She noted the medical insignia on his uniform. She noted his mark of rank. She appraised him shrewdly, quickly, and she knew he had no business there in the quarters of the leather workers.

"Who are you?" she sang out, quickly and clearly.

"In these hours and at this time, I pass under the name of the expert Bindaoud, a technician and medical man back from the special forces of Colonel Wedder. I'm just on leave, you see, but sometime later, madam, you might find out who I really am, and I thought you better hear it from my lips. I'm your father."

She did not move. The significant thing is that she did not move at all. Casher studied her and could see the cast of his own bones in the shape of her face, could see the length of his own fingers repeated in her hands. He had sensed that the storms of duty which had blown him from sorrow to sorrow, the wind of conscience which had kept alive his dreams of vengeance, had turned into something very different in her. It, too, was a force, but not the kind of force he understood.

"I have children now and I would just as soon you not meet them. As a matter of fact, you have never done me a good deed except to beget me. You have never done me an ill deed except to threaten my life from beyond the stars. I am tired of you and I am tired of everything you were or might have been. Let's forget it.

Can't you go your way and let me be? I may be your daughter, but I can't help that."

"As you wish, madam. I have had many adventures, and I do not propose to tell them to you. I can see quickly enough that you have what is seemingly a good life, and I hope that my deeds this morning in the palace will have made it better. You'll find out soon enough. Good-bye."

The door closed upon him and he walked back through the sun-drenched market of the leather workers. There were golden hides there. Hides of animals which had then been artfully engraved with very fine strips of beaten gold so that they gleamed in the sunlight. Casher looked upward and around.

Where do I go now? thought he. Where do I go when I've done everything I had to do? When I've loved everyone I have wanted to love, when I have been everything I have had to be? What does a man with a mission do when the mission is fulfilled? Who can be more hollow than a victor? If I had lost, I could still want revenge. But I haven't. I've won. And I've won nothing. I've wanted nothing for myself from this dear city. I want nothing from this dear world. It's not in my power to give it or to take it.

Where do

of Man I go when I have nowhere to go? What do I become when I am not ready for death and I have no reason whatsoever for life?

There sprang into his mind the memory of the world of Henriada with the twisting snakes of the little tornadoes. He could see the slender, pale, hushed face of the girl T'ruth and he remembered at last that which it was which she had held in her hand. It was the magic. It was the secret sign of the Old Strong Religion. There was the man forever dying nailed to two pieces of wood. It was the mystery behind the civilization of all these stars. It was the thrill of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One, the Third Forbidden One. It was the mystery on which the robot, rat, and Copt agreed when they came back from space-three. He knew what he had to do.

He could not find himself because there was no himself to be found. He was a used tool. A discarded vessel. He was a shard tossed on the ruins of time, and yet he was a man with eyes and brains to think and with many unaccustomed powers.

He reached into the sky with his mind, calling for a public flying machine.

"Come and get me," he said, and the great winged birdlike machine came soaring over the rooftops and dropped gently into the square.

"I thought I heard you call, sir."

Casher reached into his pocket and took out his imaginary pass signed by Wedder, authorizing him to use all the vehicles of the republic in the secret service of the regime of Colonel Wedder. The sergeant recognized the pass and almost popped out his eyes in respect.

"The Ninth Nile, can you reach it with this machine?"

"Easily," said the sergeant.

"But you better get some shoes first. Iron shoes because the ground there is mostly volcanic glass."

"Wait here for me," said Casher.

"Where can I get the shoes?"

"Two streets over and better get two water bottles, too."

IV

Within a matter of minutes he was back. The sergeant watched him fill the bottles in the fountain. He looked at his medical insignia without doubt and showed him how to sit on the cramped emergency seat inside the great machine bird. They snapped their seat belts and the sergeant said,

"Ready?" and the ornithopter spread out its wings, and flew into the air.

The huge wings were like oars digging into a big sea. They rose rapidly and soon Kaheer was below them, the fragile minarets and the white sand with the racing turf along the river, and the green fields, and even the pyramids copied from something on Ancient Earth.





The operator did something and the machine flew harder. The wings, although far slower than any jet aircraft, were steady, and they moved with respectable speed across the broad dry desert.

Casher still wore his decimal watch from Henriada, and it was two whole decimal hours before the sergeant turned around, pinched him gently awake from the drowse into which he had fallen, shouted something, and pointed down. A strip of silver matched by two strips of green wandering through a wilderness of black, gleaming glittering black, with the beige sands of the everlasting desert stretching everywhere in the distance.

"The Ninth Nile?" shouted Casher. The sergeant smiled the smile of a man who had heard nothing but wanted to be agreeable, and the ornithopter dived with a lurching suddenness toward the twist in the river. A few buildings became visible.

They were modest and small. Verandas, perhaps, for the use of a visitor. Nothing more.

It was not the sergeant's business to query anyone on secret orders from Colonel Wedder. He showed the cramped Casher O'Neill how to get out of the ornithopter, and then, standing in his seat, saluted, and said,

"Anything else, sir?"

Casher said,

"No. I'll make my own way. If they ask you who I was, I am the Doctor Bindaoud and you have left me here under orders."

"Right, sir," said the sergeant, and the great machine reached out its gleaming wings, flapped, spiraled, climbed, became a dot, and vanished.

Casher stood there alone. Utterly alone. For many years he had been supported by a sense of purpose, by a drive to do something, and now the drives and the purpose were gone, and his life was gone, and the use of his future was gone, and he had nothing. All he had was the ultimate imagination, health, and great skills. These were not what he wanted. He wanted the liberation of all Mizzer. But he had gotten that, so what was it?

He almost stumbled towards one of the nearby buildings.

A voice spoke up. A woman's voice. The friendly voice of an old woman.

Very unexpectedly, she said,

"I've been waiting for you, Casher; come on in.

V

He stared at her.

"I've seen you," he said.

"I've seen you somewhere. I know you well. You've affected my fate.

You did something to me and yet I don't know who you are. How could you be here to meet me when I didn't know I was coming?"

"Everything in its time," said the woman.

"With a time for everything

of Man and what you need now is rest. I'm D'alma, the dog-woman from Pontoppidan. The one who washed the dishes."

"Her," cried he.

"Me," she said.

"But you but you how did you get here?"

"I got here," she said.

"Isn't that obvious?"

"Who sent you?"

"You're part of the way to the truth," she said.

"You might as well hear a little more of it. I was sent here by a lord whose name I will never mention. A lord of the under people Acting from Earth. He sent out another dog-woman to take my place. And he had me shipped here as simple baggage. I worked in the hospital where you recovered and I read your mind as you got well. I knew what you would do to Wedder and I was pretty sure that you would come up here to the Ninth Nile, because that is the road that all searchers must take."

"Do you mean," he said, "that you know the road to " He hesitated and then plunged into his question, " the Holy of Unholies, the Thirteenth Nile?"

"I don't see that it means anything, Casher. Except that you'd better take off those iron shoes; you don't need them yet. You'd better come in here. Come on in."

He pushed the beaded curtains aside and entered the bungalow. It was a simple frontier official dwelling. There were cots hither and yon, a room to the rear which seemed to be hers; a dining room to the right and there were papers, a viewing machine, cards, and games on the table. The room itself was astonishingly cool.

She said,

"Casher, you've got to relax. And that is the hardest of all things to do. To relax, when you had a mission for many many years."

"I know it," said he.

"I know it. But knowing it and doing it aren't the same things."

"Now you can do it," said D'alma.

"Do what?" he snapped.

"Relax, as we were talking about. All you have to do here is to have some good meals. Just sleep a few times, swim in the river if you want to. I have sent everyone away except myself, and you and I shall have this house. And I am an old woman, not even a human being. You're a man, a true man, who's conquered a thousand worlds. And who has finally triumphed over Wedder. I think we'll get along. And when you're ready for the trip, I'll take you."

The days did pass as she said they would. With insistent but firm kindness, she made him play games with her: simple, childish games with

dice and cards. Once or twice he tried to hypnotize her. To throw the dice his own way. He changed the cards in her hand. He found that she had very little telepathic offensive power, but that her defenses were superb. She smiled at him whenever she caught him playing tricks. And his tricks failed.

With this kind of atmosphere he really began to relax. She was the woman who had spelled happiness for him on Pontoppidan when he didn't know what happiness was. When he had abandoned the lovely Genevieve to go on with his quest for vengeance.

Once he said to her,

"Is that old horse still alive?"

"Of course he is," she said.

"That horse will probably outlive you and me. He thinks he's on Mizzer by galloping around a patrol capsule. Come on back; it's your turn to play."

He put down the cards, and slowly the peace, the simplicity, the reassuring, calm sweetness of it all stole over him and he began to perceive the nature of her therapy. It was to do nothing but slow him down. He was to meet himself again.

It may have been the tenth day, perhaps it was the fourteenth, that he said to her,

"When do we go?"

She said,

"I've been waiting for that question and we're ready now. We go."

"When?"

"Right now. Put on your shoes. You won't need them very much," she said, "but you might need them where we land. I am taking you part way there."

Within a few minutes, they went out into the yard. The river in which he had swum lay below. A shed, which he did not remember having noticed before, lay at the far end of the yard.

She did something to the door, removing a lock, and the door flung open. And she pulled out a skeletonized ornithopter motor, wings, tails. The body was just a bracket of metal. The source of power was as usual an ultra-miniaturized, nuclear-powered battery. Instead of seats, there were two tiny saddles, like the saddles used in the bicycles of old, old Earth which he had seen in museums.

"You can fly that?" he asked.

"Of course I can fly it. It's better than going 200 miles over broken glass. We are leaving civilization now. We are leaving everything that was on any map. We are flying directly to the Thirteenth Nile, as you well knew it should be that."

"I knew that," he said.

"I never expected to reach it so soon.

Does this have anything to do with that Sign of the Fish you were talking about?"

"Everything, Casher. Everything. But everything in its place.

Climb in behind me." He sat on top of the ornithopter, and this one ran down the

of Man yard on its tall, graceful mechanical legs before the flaps of its wings put it in the air. She was a better pilot than the sergeant had been; she soared more and beat the wings less. She flew over country that he, a native of Mizzer, had never dreamed about.

They came to a city gaudy in color. He could see large fires burning alongside the river, and brightly painted people with their hands lifted in prayer. He saw temples and strange gods in them.

He saw markets with goods, which he never thought to see marketed.

"Where are we?" he asked.

D'alma said,

"This is the City of Hopeless Hope." She put the ornithopter down and, as they climbed out of the saddles, it lifted itself into the air and flew back, in the direction from whence they had come.

"You are staying with me?" asked Casher.

"Of course I am. I was sent to be with you."

"What for?"

"You are important to all the worlds, Casher, not just Mizzer.

By the authority of the friends I have, they have sent me here to help you."

"But what do you get out of it?"

"I get nothing, Casher. I find my own destruction, perhaps, but I will accept that. Even the loss of my own hope if it only moves you further on in your voyage. Come, let us enter the City of Hopeless Hope."

VI

They walked through the strange streets. Almost everyone in the streets seemed to be engaged in the practice of religion. The stench of the burning dead was all round them. Talismans, luck charms, and funeral supplies were in universal abundance.

Casher said, speaking rather quietly to D'alma,

"I never knew there was anything like this on any civilized planet."

"Obviously," she replied, "there must be many people who believe in worry about death; there are many who do know about this place. Otherwise there would not be the throngs here. These are the people who have the wrong hope and who go to no place at all, who find under this earth and under the stars their final fulfillment. These are the ones who are so sure that they are right that they never will be right. We must pass through them quickly, Casher, lest we, too, start believing."

No one impeded their passage in the streets, although many people paused to see that a soldier, even a medical soldier, in uniform, had the audacity to come there.





They were even more surprised that an old hospital attendant who seemed to be an off-world dog walked along beside him.

"We cross the bridge now, Casher, and this bridge is the most terrible thing I've ever seen, whereas now we are going to come to the Jwindz, and the Jwindz oppose you and me and everything you stand for."

"Who are the Jwindz?" asked Casher.

"The Jwindz are the perfect ones. They are perfect in this earth. You will see soon enough."

VII

As they crossed the bridge, a tall, blithe police official, clad in a neat black uniform, stepped up to them and said,

"Go back.

People from your city are not welcome here."

"We are not from that city," said D'alma.

"We are travelers."

"Where are you bound?" asked the police official.

"We are bound for the source of the Thirteenth Nile."

"Nobody goes there," said the guard.

"We are going there," said D'alma.

"By what authority?"

Casher reached into his pocket and took out a genuine card.

He had remade one, from the memories he had retained in his mind. It was an all-world pass, authorized by the Instrumentality.

The police official looked at it and his eyes widened.

"Sir and master, I thought you were merely one of Wedder's men. You must be someone of great importance. I will notify the scholars in the Hall of Learning at the middle of the city. They will want to see you. Wait here. A vehicle will come."

D'alma and Casher O'Neill did not have long to wait. She said nothing at all in this time. Her air of good humor and competence ebbed perceptibly. She was distressed by the cleanliness and perfection around her, by the silence, by the dignity of the people.

When the vehicle came, it had a driver, as correct, as smooth, and as courteous as the guard at the bridge. He opened the door and waved them in. They climbed in and they sped noiselessly through the well-groomed streets: houses, each one in immaculate taste; trees, planted the way in which trees should be planted.

In the center square of the city, they stopped. The driver got out, walked around the vehicle, opened their door.

He pointed at the archway of the large building and he said, "They are expecting you."

of Man Casher and D'alma walked up the steps reluctantly. She was reluctant because she had some sense of what this place was, a special dwelling for quiet doom and arrogant finality. He was reluctant because he could feel that in every bone of her body she resented this place. And he resented it, too.

They were led through the archway and across a patio to a large, elegant conference room.

Within the room a circular table had already been set in preparation of a meal.

Ten handsome men rose to greet them.

The first one said,

"You are Casher O'Neill. You are the wanderer. You are the man dedicated to this planet and we appreciate what you have done for us, even though the power of Colonel Wedder never reached here."

"Thank you," said Casher.

"I am surprised to hear that you know of me."

"That's nothing," said the man.

"We know of everyone. And you, woman," said the same man to D'alma, "you know full well that we never entertain women here. And you are the only under person in this city. A dog at that. But in honor of our guest we shall let you pass. Sit down if you wish. We want to talk to you."

A meal was served. Little squares of sweet unknown meat, fresh fruits, bits of melon, chased with harmonious drinks which cleared the mind and stimulated it, without intoxicating or drugging.

The language of their conversations was clear and elevated.

All questions were answered swiftly, smoothly, and with positive clarity.

Finally, Casher was moved to ask,

"I do not seem to have heard of you, Jwindz; who are you?"

"We are the perfect ones," said the oldest Jwindz.

"We have all the answers; there is nothing else left to find."

"How do you get here?" said Casher.

"We are selected from many worlds."

"Where are your families?"

"We don't bring them with us."

"How do you keep out intruders?"

"If they are good, they wish to stay. If they are not good, we destroy

them."

Casher still shocked by his experience of fulfilling all his life's work in the confrontation with Wedder though his life might be at stake, asked casually,

"Have you decided yet whether I am perfect enough to join you? Or am I not perfect and to be destroyed?"

The heaviest of all the Jwindz, a tall, portly man, with a great bushy shock of black hair, replied ponderously.

"Sir, you are forcing our decision, but I think that you may be some-

thing exceptional. We cannot accept you. There is too much force in you. You may be perfect, but you are more than perfect. We are men, sir, and I do not think that you are any longer a mere man.

You are almost a machine. You are yourself dead people. You are the magic of ancient battles coming to strike among us. We are all of us a little afraid of you, and yet we do not know what to do with you. If you were to stay here a while, if you calmed down, we might give you hope. We know perfectly well what that dog woman of yours calls our city. She calls it the City of the Perfect Ones. We just call it Jwindz Jo, in memory of the ancient Rule of the Jwindz, which somewhere once obtained upon old Earth. And therefore, we think that we will neither kill you nor accept you.

We think do we not, gentlemen? that we will speed you on your way, as we have sped no other traveler. And that we will send you, then, to a place which few people pass. But you have the strength and if you are going to the source of the Thirteenth Nile, you will need it."

"I will need strength?" Casher asked.

The first Jwindz who had met them at the door said,

"Indeed you will need strength, if you go to Mortoval. We may be dangerous to the uninitiated. Mortoval is worse than dangerous.

It is a trap many times worse than death. But go there if you must."

VIII

Casher O'Neill and D'alma reached Mortoval on a one wheeled cart, which ran on a high wire past picturesque mountain gorges, soaring over two serrated series of peaks and finally dropping down to another bend in the same river, the illegal and forgotten Thirteenth Nile.

When the vehicle stopped, they got out. No one had accompanied them. The vehicle, held in place by gyroscopes and compasses, felt itself relieved of their weight and hurried home.

This time there was no city: just one great arch. D'alma clung close to him. She even took his arm and pulled it over her shoulder as though she needed protection. She whined a little as they walked up a low hill and finally reached the arch. They walked into the arch and a voice not made of sound cried out to them.

"I am youth and am everything that you have been or ever will be. Know this now before I show you more."

Casher was brave, and this time he was cheerfully hopeless, so he said,

"I know who I am. Who are you?"

"I am the force of the Gunung Banga. I am the power of this planet which keeps everyone in this planet and which assures the order which

of Man persists among the stars, and promises that the dead shall not walk among the men. And I serve of the fate and the hope of the future. Pass if you think you can."

Casher searched with his own mind and he found what he wanted. He found the memory of a young child, T'ruth, who had been almost a thousand years on the planet of Henriada. A child, soft and gentle on the outside, but wise and formidable and terrible beyond belief, in the powers which she had carried, which had been imprinted upon her.

As he walked through the arch he cast the images of truth here and there. Therefore he was not one person but a multitude. And the machine and the living being which hid behind the machine, the Gunung Banga, obviously could see him and could see D'alma walking through, but the machine was not prepared to recognize whole multitudes of crying throngs.

"Who are you thousands that you should come here now? Who are you multitudes that you should be two people? I sense all of you. The fighters and the ships and the men of blood, the searchers and the forgetters there's even an Old North Australian renunciant here. And the great Go-Captain Tree, and there are even a couple of men of Old Earth. You are all walking through me. How can I cope with you?"

"Make us, us," said Casher firmly.

"Make you, you," replied the machine.

"Make you, you. How can I make you, you, when I do not know who you are, when you flit like ghosts and you confuse my computers? There are too many, I say. There are too many of you. It is ordained that you should pass."

"If it is so ordained, then let us pass." D'alma suddenly stood proud and erect.

They walked on through.

She said,

"You got us through." They had indeed passed beyond the arch, and there, beyond the arch, lay a gentle riverside with skiffs pulled up along the beach.

"This seems to be next," said Casher O'Neill.

D'alma nodded.

"I'm your dog, master. We go where you think."

They climbed into a skiff. Echoes of tumult followed from the arch.

"Good-bye to troubles," the echoes said.

"Had they been people they would have been stopped. But she was a dog and a servant, who had lived many years in the happiness of the Sign of the Fish. And he was a combat-ready man who had incorporated within himself the memories of adversaries and friends, too tumultuous for any scanner to measure, too complex for any computer to assess." The echoes resounded across the river.

There was even a dock on the other side. Casher tied the skiff to the dock and he helped the dog-woman go toward the buildings that they saw beyond some trees.



IX

D'Alma said,

"I have seen pictures of this place; this is the Kermesse Dorgiieil, and here we may lose our way, because this is the place where all the happy things of this world come together, but where the man and the two pieces of wood never filter through. We shall see no one unhappy, no one sick, no one unbalanced; everyone will be enjoying the good things of life; perhaps I will enjoy it, too. May the Sign of the Fish help me that I not become perfect too soon."

"You won't be," Casher promised.

At the gate of this city, there was no guard at all. They walked on past a few people who seemed to be promenading outside the town. Within the city they approached what seemed to be a hotel and an inn or a hospital. At any rate it was a place where many people were fed.

A man came out and said,

"Well, this is a strange sight; I never knew that the Colonel Wedder let his officers get this far from home, and as for you, woman, you're not even a human being. You're an odd couple and you're not in love with each other. Can we do anything for you?"

Casher reached into his pocket and tossed several credit pieces of five denominations in front of the man.

"Don't these mean anything?" asked Casher.

Catching them in his fingers, the man said,

"Oh, we can use money! We use it occasionally for important things; we don't need yours. We live well here, and we have a nice life, not like those two places across the river, which stay away from life. All men who are perfect are nothing but talk Jwindz they call themselves, the perfect ones well, we're not that perfect. We've got families and good food and good clothes, and we get the latest news from all the worlds."

"News," said Casher.

"I thought that was illegal."

"We get anything. You would be surprised at what we have here. It's a very civilized place. Come on in; this is the hotel of the Singing Swans and you can live here as long as you wish. When I say that, I mean it. Our treasure has unusual resources, and I can see that you are unusual people. You are not a medical technician, despite that uniform, and your follower is not a mere dogunderperson or you wouldn't have gotten this far."

They entered a promenade two stories high; little shops lined each side of the corridor with the treasures of all the worlds on exhibit. The prices were marked explaining them, but there was no one in the stalls.

The smell of good food came from a cool dining room in the inn.

"Come into my office and have a drink. My name is Howard."

"That's an old Earth name," said Cashier.

"Why shouldn't it be?" asked Howard.

"I came here from old Earth. I

looked for the best of all places, and it took me a long time to find it. This is it the Kermesse Dorgiieil. We have nothing here but simple and clean pleasures; we have only those vices which help and support. We accomplish the possible; we reject the impossible. We live life, not death. Our talk is about things and not about ideas. We have nothing but scorn for that city behind you, the City of the Perfect Ones. And we have nothing but pity for the holier than holies far back where they claim to have Hopeless Hope, and practice nothing but evil religion. I passed through those places too, although I had to go around the City of the Perfect Ones. I know what they are and I've come all the way from Earth, and if I have come all the way from old old Earth I should know what this is. You should take my word for it."

"I've been on Earth myself," said Casher, rather dryly.

"It's not that unusual."

The man stopped with surprise.

"My name," said Casher, "is Casher O'Neill."

The man halted and then gave him a deep bow.

"If you are Casher O'Neill, you have changed this world; you have come back, my lord and master. Welcome. We are no longer your host. This is your city. What do you wish of us?"

"To look a while, to rest a while, to ask directions for the voyage."

"Directions? Why should anyone want directions away from here? People come here and ask directions from a thousand places to get to Kermesse Dorgiieil."

"Let's not argue this now," said Casher.

"Show us the rooms, let us clean ourselves up. Two separate rooms."

Howard walked upstairs. With an intricate twist of his hand he unlocked two rooms.

"At your service," he said.

"Call me with your voice; I can hear you anywhere in the building."

Casher called once for sleeping gear, toothbrushes, shaving equipment. He insisted that they send the shampooer, a woman of apparent Earth origin, in to attend to D'alma; and D'alma actually knocked at his door and begged that he not shower her with these attentions.

He said,

"You with your deep kindness have helped me so far.

I am helping you very little."

They ate a light repast together in the garden just below their two rooms, and then they went to their rooms and slept.

It was only on the morning of the second day that they went with Howard

into the city to see what could be found.

Everywhere the city was strong with happiness. The population could not have been very large, twenty or thirty thousand persons at most.

At one point, Casher stopped; he could smell the scorch of ozone in the air. He knew the atmosphere itself had been burned and that meant only one thing, spaceships coming in or going out.

He asked,

"Where is the spaceport for Earth?"

Howard looked at him quickly and keenly.

"If you were not the lord Casher O'Neill, I'd never tell you. We have a small spaceport there. That is the way that we avoid our traffic with most of Mizzer. Do you need it, sir?"

"Not now," said Casher.

"I just wondered where it was." They came to a woman who danced as she sang to the accompaniment of two men with wild archaic guitars. Her feet did not have the laughter of ordinary dance, but they had the positiveness, the compulsion of a meaning. Howard looked at her appreciatively; he even ran the tip of his tongue across his upper lip.

"She is not yet spoken for," said Howard.

"And yet she is a very unusual thing. A resigned ex-lady of the Instrumentality."

"I find that unusual, indeed. What is her name?"

"Celalta," said Howard.

"Celalta, the other one. She has been in many worlds, perhaps as many worlds as you have, sir. She's faced dangers like the ones you've faced. And oh, my lord and master, forgive me for saying it, but when I look at her dancing, and I see you looking at her, I can see a little bit into the future; and I can see you both dead together, the winds slowly blowing the flesh off your bones. And your bones anonymous and white, lying two valleys over from this very place."

"That's an odd enough prophecy," said Casher.

"Especially from someone who seems not to be poetic. What is that?"

"I seem to see you in the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene. There's a road out of here that goes there and some people, not many, go there, and when they go there, they die. I don't know why," said Howard.

"Don't ask me."

D'alma whispered,

"That is the road to the Shrine of Shrines.

That's the place to the Quel itself. Find out where it starts."

"Where does that road start?" asked Casher.

"Oh, you'll find out; there's nothing you won't find out. Sorry, my lord and master. The road starts just beyond that bright orange roof."

He pointed to a roof and then turned back.

Without saying anything more, he clapped his hands at the dancer and she gave him a scornful look. Howard clapped his hands again; she stopped dancing and walked over.

"And what is it you want now, Howard?"

He gave her a deep bow.

"My former lady, my mistress, here is the lord and master of this planet, Casher O'Neill."

"I am not really the lord and master," said Casher O'Neill.

"I

merely would have been if Wedder had not taken the rule away from my uncle."

"Should I care about that?" asked the woman.

Casher smiled back.

"I don't see why you should."

"Do you have anything you want to say to me?"

"Yes," said Casher. He reached over and seized her wrist. Her wrist was almost as strong as his.

"You have danced your last dance, madam, at least for the time. You and I are going to a place that this man knows about, and he says that we are going to die there, and our bones will be blown with the wind."

"You give me commands," she cried.

"I give you commands," he said.

"What is your authority?" she asked scornfully.

"Me," he said.

She looked at him, he looked back at her, still holding her wrist.

She said,

"I have powers. Don't make me use them."

He said,

"I have powers, too; nobody can make me use mine."

"I'm not afraid of you; go ahead."

Fire shot at him as he felt the lunge of her mind toward his, her attack, her flight for freedom, but he kept her wrist and she said nothing.

But with his mind responding to hers he unfolded the many worlds, the old Earth itself, the gem planet, Olympia of the blind brokers, the storm planet, Henriada, and a thousand other places that most people only knew in stories and dreams. And then, just for a little bit, he showed her who he was, a native of Mizzer who had become a citizen of the Universe. A fighter who had been transformed into a doer. He let her know that in his own mind he carried the powers of Truth the turtle-girl, and behind T'ruth herself, he carried the personalities of the Hechizera of Gonfalon.

He let her see the ships in the sky turning and twisting as they fought nothing at all, because his mind, or another mind which had become his, had commanded them to.

And then with the shock of a sudden vision, he projected to her the two pieces of wood, the image of a man in pain. And gently, but with the simple rhetoric of profound faith, he pronounced: "This is the call of the First Forbidden One, and the Second Forbidden One, and the Third Forbidden One. This is the symbol of the Sign of the Fish. For this you are going to leave this town, and you are going with me, and it may

be that you and I shall become lovers."

Behind him a voice spoke.

"And I," said D'alma, "will stay here."

He turned around to her.

"D'alma, you've come this far; you've got to come further."

"I can't, my lord. I read my duty as I see it. If the authorities who sent me want me enough, they will send me back to my dishwasher on Pontoppidan, otherwise they will leave me here. I am temporarily beautiful and I'm rich and I'm happy and I don't know what to do with myself, but I know I have seen you as far as I can. May the Sign of the Fish be with you."

Howard merely stood aside, making no attempt to hinder them or to help them.

Celalta walked beside Casher like a wild animal which had never been captured before.

Casher O'Neill never let go of her wrist.

"Do we need food for this trip?" he asked of Howard.

"No one knows what you need."

"Should we take food?"

"I don't see why," said Howard.

"You have water. You can always walk back here if you have disappointments. It's really not very far."

"Will you rescue me?"

"If you insist on it," said Howard.

"I suppose somewhere people will come out and bring you back, but I don't think you will insist because that is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene, and the people who go in there do not want to come out, and do not want to eat, and they do not want to go forward. We have never seen anyone vanish to the other side, but you might make it."

"I am looking," said Casher, "for something which is more than power between the worlds. I am looking for a sphinx that is bigger than the sphinx on old Earth. For weapons which cut sharper than lasers, for forces that move faster than bullets. I am looking for something which will take the power away from me and put the simple humanity back into me. I am looking for something which will be nothing, but a nothing I can serve and can believe in."

"You sound like the right kind of man," said Howard, "for that kind of trip. Go in peace, both of you."

Celalta said,

"I do not really know who you are, my lord, master, but I have danced



my last dance. I see what you mean.

This is the road that leads away from happiness. This is the path which leaves good clothes and warm shops behind. There are no restaurants where we are going, no hotels, no river anymore.

There are neither believers nor unbelievers; but there is something that comes out of the soil which makes people die. But if you think, Casher O'Neill, that you can triumph over it, I will go with you. And if you do not think it, I will die with you."

"We are going, Celalta, I didn't know that it was just going to be the two of us, but we are going and we are going now."

X

It was actually less than two kilometers to get over the ridge away from the trees, away from the moisture-laden air along the river, and into a dry, calm valley which had a clean blessed quietness which Casher had never seen before. Celalta was almost gay.

"This, this is the Deep Dry Lake of the Damned Irene?"

"I suppose it is," said Casher, "but I propose to keep on walking. It isn't very big."

As they walked their bodies became burdensome; they carried not only their own weight but the weight of every month of their lives. The decision seemed good to them that they should lie down in the valley and rest amid the skeletons, rest as the others had rested. Celalta became disoriented. She stumbled, and her eyes became unfocused.

Not for nothing had Casher O'Neill learned all the arts of battle of a thousand worlds. Not for nothing had he come through space-three. This valley might have been tempting if already he had not ridden the cosmos on his eyes alone.

He had. He knew the way out. It was merely through. Celalta seemed to come more to life as they reached the top of the ridge.

The whole world was suddenly transformed by not more than ten steps. Far behind them, several kilometers, perhaps, there were still visible the last rooftops of the Kermesse Dorgtieil. Behind them lay the bleaching skeletons, in front in front of them was the final source and the mystery, the Quel of the Thirteenth Nile.

XI

There was no sign of a house, but there were fruits and melons and grain growing, and there were deep trees at the edges of caves, and there were here and there signs of people that had been there long ago. There were no signs of present occupancy.

"My lord," said the once-lady Celalta, "my lord," she repeated, "I think this is it."

"But this is nothing," said Casher.

"Exactly. Nothing is victory, nothing is arrival, nowhere is getting there. Don't you see now why she left us?"

"She?" asked Casher.

"Yes, your faithful companion, the dog-woman D'alma."

"No, I don't see it. Why did she leave this to us?"

Celalta laughed.

"We're Adam and Eve in a way. It's not up to us to be

given a god or to be given a faith. It's up to us to find the power and this is the quietest and last of the searching places. The others were just phantoms, hazards on our route. The best way to find freedom is not to look for it, just as you obtained your utter revenge on Wedder by doing him a little bit of good. Can't you see it, Casher? You have won at last the immense victory that makes all battles seem vain. There is food around us; we can even walk back to the Kermesse Dorgiieil, if we want clothing or company or if we want to hear the news. But, most of all, this is the place in which I feel the presence of the First Forbidden One, the Second Forbidden One, and the Third Forbidden One. We don't need a church for this, though I suppose there are still churches on some planets. What we need is a place to find ourselves and be ourselves and I'm not sure that this chance exists in many other places than this one spot."

"You mean," said Casher, "that everywhere is nowhere?"

"Not quite that," said Celalta.

"We have some work to do getting this place in shape, feeding ourselves. Do you know how to cook? Well, I can cook better. We can catch a few things to eat; we can shut ourselves in that cave and then" and then Celalta smiled, her face more beautiful than he ever expected he would find a face to be "we have each other."

Casher stood battle-ready, facing the most beautiful dancer he had ever met. He realized that she had once been a part of the Instrumentality, a governor of worlds, a genuine advisor in the destination of mankind. He did not know what strange motives had caused her to quit authority and to come up to this hard-to-find river, unmarked on maps. He didn't even know why the man Howard should have paired them so quickly: perhaps there was another force. A force behind that dog-woman which had sent him to his final destination.

He looked down at Celalta and then he looked up at the sky, and he said,

"Day is ending; I will catch a few of those birds if you know how to cook them. We seem to be a sort of Adam and Eve, and I do not know whether this is paradise or hell. But I know that you are in it with me, and that I can think about you because you ask nothing of me."

"That is true, my lord, I ask nothing of you. I, too, am looking for both of us, not myself alone. I can make a sacrifice for you, but I look for those things which only we two, acting together, can find in this valley."

He nodded in serious agreement.

"Look," she said, "that is the Quel itself, there the Thirteenth Nile comes out of the rocks, and here are the woods below. I seem to have heard of it. Well, we'll have plenty of time. I'll start the fire, but you go catch two of those chickens. I don't even think they're wild birds. I think they are just left over people-chickens that have grown wild since their previous owners left. . . ."

"Or died," said Casher.

"Or died," repeated Celalta.

"Isn't that a risk anybody has to take? Let us live, my lord, you and me, and let us find the magic, the deliverance which strange fates have thrown in front of you and me. You have liberated Mizzer, is that not enough?"

Simply by touching Wedder, you have done what otherwise could have been accomplished at the price of battle and great suffering."

"Thank you," said Casher.

"I was once Instrumentality, my lord, and I know that the Instrumentality likes to do things suddenly and victoriously.

When I was there we never accepted defeat, but we never paid anything extra. The shortest route between two points might look like the long way around; it isn't. It's merely the cheapest human way of getting there. Has it ever occurred to you, that the Instrumentality might be rewarding you for what you have done for this planet?"

"I hadn't thought of it," said Casher.

"You hadn't thought of it?" She smiled.

"Well. . ." said Casher, embarrassed and at a loss for words.

"I am a very special kind of woman," said Celalta.

"You will be finding that out in the next few weeks. Why else do you think that I would be given to you?"

He did not go to hunt the chickens, not just then. He reached his arms out to her and, with more trust and less fear than he had felt in many years, he held her in his arms, and kissed her on the lips. This time there was no secret reserve in his mind, no promise that after this he would get on with his journey to Mizzer. He had won, his victory was behind him, and in front of him there lay nothing, but this beautiful and powerful place and . . . Celalta.