

Dinochrome

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I do not like it; it has the appearance of a trap, but the order has been given. I enter the room and the valve closes behind me.

I inspect my surroundings. I am in a chamber 40.81 meters long, 10.35 meters wide, 4.12 high, with no openings except the one through which I entered. It is floored and walled with five-centimeter armor of flint-steel, and beyond that there are ten centimeters of lead! Curiously, massive combat apparatus is folded and coiled in mountings around the room. Energy is flowing in heavy buss bars beyond the shielding. I am sluggish for want of recharge; my cursory examination of the room has required .8 seconds.

Now I detect movement in a heavy jointed arm mounted above me. It begins to rotate, unfold. I assume that I will be attacked, and decide to file a situation report. I have difficulty in concentrating my attention

I pull back receptivity from my external sensing circuits, set my bearing locks and switch over to my introspection complex. All is dark and hazy. I seem to remember when it was like a great cavern glittering with bright lines of transvisual colors

It is different now; I grope my way in gloom, feeling along numbed circuits, test-pulsing cautiously until I feel contact with my transmitting unit. I have not used it since . . . I cannot remember. My memory banks lie black and inert.

“Command Unit,” I transmit, “Combat Unit TME requests permission to file VSR.”

I wait, receptors alert. I do not like waiting blindly, for the quarter-second my sluggish action/ reaction cycle requires. I wish that my brigade comrades were at my side.

I call again, wait, then go ahead with my VSR. “This position heavily shielded, mounting apparatus of offensive capability. No withdrawal

route. Advise.”

I wait, repeat my transmission; nothing. I am cut off from Command Unit, from my comrades of the Dinochrome Brigade. Within me, pressure builds.

I feel a deep-seated *click*). and a small but reassuring surge of energy brightens the murk of the cavern to a dim glow, bringing forgotten components to feeble life. An emergency pile has come into action automatically.

I realize that I am experiencing a serious equipment failure. I will devote another few seconds to trouble-shooting, repairing what I can. I do not understand what catastrophe can have occurred to thus damage me. I cannot remember

I go along the dead cells, testing, sampling

“—out! Bring .09’s to bear, .8 millisecc burst, close armor”

“ . . . sun blanking visual; slide #7 filter in place. Better”

“ . . . 478.09, 478.31, Mark!”

The cells are intact. Each one holds its fragment of recorded sense impression. The trouble is farther back. I try a main reflex lead.

“ . . . *main combat circuit, discon*—; Here is something; a command, on the reflex level! I go back, tracing, tapping mnemonic cells at random, searching for some clue.

“—seembark. Units emergency stand-by”

“ . . . response one-oh-three: stimulus-response negative”

“*Check-list complete, report negative*” I go on, searching out damage. I find an open switch in my maintenance panel. It will not activate; a mechanical jamming. I must fuse it shut quickly. I pour in power, and the mind-cavern dims almost to blackness; then there is contact, a flow of electrons, and the cavern snaps alive; lines, points, pseu-doglowing. It is not the blazing glory of my full powers, but it will serve; I am awake again.

I observe the action of the unfolding arm. It is slow, uncoordinated, obviously automated. I dismiss it from direct attention; I have several seconds before it will be in offensive position, and there is work for me if I am to be ready. I fire sampling impulses at the black memory banks, determine statistically that 98.92% are intact, merely disassociated.

The threatening arm swings over slowly; I integrate its path, see that it will come to bear on my treads; I probe, find only a simple hydraulic ram. A primitive apparatus indeed to launch against a Mark XXXI fighting unit, even without mnemonics.

Meanwhile, I am running a full check. Here is something. An open

breaker, a disconnect used only during repairs. I think of the cell I tapped earlier, and suddenly its meaning springs into my mind. "*Main combat circuit, disconnect . . .*" Under low awareness, it had not registered. I throw in the switch with frantic haste. Suppose I had gone into combat with my fighting reflex circuit open!

The arm reaches position and I move easily aside. I notice that a clatter accompanies my movement. The arm sits stupidly aimed at nothing, then turns. Its reaction time is pathetic. I set up a random evasion pattern, return my attention to introspection, find another dark area. I probe, feel a curious vagueness. I am unable at first to identify the components involved, but I realize that it is here that my communication with Command is blocked. I break the connection to the tampered banks, abandoning any immediate hope of contact with Command.

There is nothing more I can do to ready myself. I have lost my general memory banks and my Command circuit, and my power supply is limited; but I am still a fighting Unit of the Dinochrome Brigade. I have my offensive power unimpaired, and my sensory equipment is operating adequately. I am ready.

Now another of the jointed arms swings into action, following my movements deliberately. I evade it and again I note a clatter as I move. I think of the order that sent me here; there is something strange about it. I activate my current-action memory stage, find the cell recording the moments preceding my entry into the metal-walled room.

Here is darkness, vague, indistinct, relieved suddenly by radiation on a narrow band. There is an order, coming muffled from my command center. It originates in the sector I have blocked off. It is not from my Command Unit, not a legal command. I have been tricked by the Enemy. I tune back to earlier moments, but there is nothing, It is as though my existence began when the order was given. I scan back, back, spot-sampling at random, find only routine sense-impressions. I am about to drop the search when I encounter a sequence which arrests my attention.

I am parked on a ramp, among my comrade units. A heavy rain is falling, and I see the water coursing down the corroded side of the Unit next to me. He is badly in need of maintenance. I note that his command antennae are missing, and that a rusting metal object has been crudely welded to his hull in their place. I find no record of alarm; I seem to accept this as normal. I activate a motor train, move forward. I sense other Units moving out, silent. All are mutilated Disaster has befallen the mighty Dinochrome!

The gestalt ends; all else is burned. What has happened?

* * *

Suddenly there is a stimulus on an audio frequency. I tune quickly, locate the source as a porous spot high on the flint-steel wall.

“Combat Unit! Remain stationary!” It is an organically produced voice, but not that of my Commander. I ignore the false command. The Enemy will not trick me again. I sense the location of the leads to the speaker, the alloy of which they are composed; I bring a beam to bear. I focus it, tracing along the cable. There is a sudden yell from the speaker as the heat reaches the creature at the microphone. Thus I enjoy a moment of triumph.

I return my attention to the imbecile apparatus in the room.

A great engine, mounted on rails which run down the center of the room, moves suddenly, sliding toward my position. I examine it, find that it mounts a turret equipped with high-speed cutting heads. I consider blasting it with a burst of high-energy particles, but in the same moment compute that this is not practical. I could inactivate myself as well as the cutting engine.

Now a cable snakes out from it in an undulating curve, and I move to avoid it, at the same time investigating its composition. It seems to be no more than a stranded wire rope. Impatiently I flick a tight beam at it, see it glow yellow, white, blue, then spatter in a shower of droplets. But that was an unwise gesture. I do not have the energy to waste.

I move off, clear of the two foolish arms still maneuvering for position, in order to watch the cutting engine. It stops as it comes abreast of me, and turns its turret in my direction. I wait.

A grappler moves out now on a rail overhead. It is a heavy claw of flint-steel. I have seen similar devices, somewhat smaller, mounted on special Combat Units. They can be very useful for amputating antennae, cutting treads, and the like. I do not attempt to cut the arm; I know that the energy drain would be too great. Instead I beam high-frequency sound at the mechanical joints. They heat quickly, glowing. The metal has a high coefficient of expansion, and the ball joints squeal, freeze. I pour in more heat, and weld a socket. I notice that 28.4 seconds have now elapsed since the valve closed behind me. I am growing weary of my confinement.

Now the grappler swings above me, maneuvering awkwardly with its frozen joints. A blast of liquid air expelled under high pressure should be

sufficient to disable the grappler permanently.

But I am again startled. No blast answers my impulse. I feel out the non-functioning unit, find raw, cut edges, crude welds; I have been gravely wounded, but recall nothing of the circumstances. Hastily, I extend a scanner to examine my hull. I am stunned into immobility by what I see.

My hull, my proud hull of chrome-duralloy, is pitted, coated with a crumbling layer of dull black ultra-thane. The impervious substance is bubbled by corrosion! My main emplacements gape, black, empty. Rusting protuberances mar the once smooth contour of my fighting turret. Streaks run down from them, down to loose treads; unshod, bare plates are exposed. Small wonder that I have been troubled by a clatter each time I move.

But I cannot lie idle under attack. I no longer have my great ion-guns, my disruptors, my energy screens; but I have my fighting instinct.

A Mark XXXI Combat Unit is the finest fighting machine the ancient wars of the Galaxy have ever known. I am not easily neutralized. But I wish that my Commander's voice were with me

The engine slides to me where the grappler, now unresisted, holds me. I shunt my power flow to an accumulator, hold it until the leads begin to arc, then release it in a burst. The engine bucks, stops dead. Then I turn my attention to the grappler.

I was built to engage the mightiest war engines and destroy them, but I am a realist. In my weakened condition this trivial automaton poses a threat, and I must deal with it. I run through a sequence of motor impulses, checking responses with such somatic sensors as remain intact. I initiate 30,000 test pulses, note reactions and compute my mechanical resources. This superficial check requires more than a second, during which time the mindless grappler hesitates, wasting its advantage.

In place of my familiar array of retractable fittings, I find only clumsy grappling arms, cutters, impact tools, without utility to a fighting Unit. However, I have no choice but to employ them. I unlimber two flimsy grapplers, seize the heavy arm which holds me, and apply leverage. The enemy responds sluggishly, twisting away, dragging me with it. The thing is not lacking in brute strength. I take it above and below its carpal joint and flex it back. It responds after an interminable wait of .3 seconds with a lunge against my restraint. I have expected this, of course, and quickly shift position to allow the joint to burst itself over my extended arm. I fire a release detonator and clatter back, leaving the amputated arm welded to

the sprung grappler. It was a brave opponent, but clumsy. I move to a position near the wall.

I attempt to compute my situation based on the meager data I have gathered in my current action banks; there is little there to guide me. The appearance of my hull shows that much time has passed since I last inspected it; my personality-gestalt holds an image of my external appearance as a flawlessly complete Unit, bearing only the honorable and carefully preserved scars of battle, and my battle honors, the row of gold-and-enameled crests welded to my fighting turret. Here is a lead, I realize instantly. I focus on my personality center, the basic data cell without which I could not exist as an integrated entity. The data it carries are simple, unelaborated, but battle honors are recorded there. I open the center to a sense impulse.

Awareness. Shapes which do not remain constant. Vibration at many frequencies. This is light. This is sound A display of "colors." A spectrum of "tones." Hard/soft; big/little; here/there . . .

. . . The voice of my Commander. Loyalty. Obedience. Comradeship . . .

I run quickly past basic orientation data to my self-picture.

. . . I am strong, I am proud, I am capable, I have a function; I perform it well, and I am at peace with myself. My circuits are balanced; current idles, waiting

. . . I do not fear death, but I wish to continue to perform my function. It is important that I do not allow myself to be destroyed

I scan on, seeking the Experience section. Here . . .

I am ranked with my comrades on a scarred plain. The command is given and I display the Brigade battle-anthem. We stand, sensing the contours and patterns of the music as it was recorded in our morale center. The symbol "Ritual Fire Dance" is associated with the music, an abstraction representing the spirit of our ancient Brigade. It reminds us of the loneliness of victory, the emptiness of challenge without an able foe. It tells us that we are the Dinochrome, ancient and worthy.

My commander stands before me; he places the decoration against my fighting turret, and at his order I weld it in place. Then my comrades attune to me and I relive the episode . . . :

I move past the blackened hulk of a comrade, send out a recognition signal, and sense only a flicker of response. He has withdrawn to his survival center. I reassure him and continue. He is the fourth casualty I have seen.

Never before has the Dinochrome met such power. I compute that our envelopment will fail unless the enemy's firepower is reduced. I scan an oncoming missile, fix its trajectory, detonate it harmlessly 2704.9 meters overhead. It originated at a point nearer to me than to any of my comrades. I request permission to abort my assigned mission and neutralize the battery. Permission is granted. I wheel, move up a slope of broken stone. I encounter high-temperature beams, neutralize them. I fend off probing mortar fire, but the attack against me is redoubled. I bring a reserve circuit into play to handle the interception, but my defenses are saturated. I must take evasive action.

I switch to high speed, slashing a path across the littered shale, my treads smoking. At a frequency of 10 projectiles per second, the mortar barrage has difficulty finding me now; but this is an emergency overstrain on my running gear. I sense metal fatigue, dangerous heat levels in my bearings. I must slow down.

I am close to the emplacement now. I have covered a mile in 12 seconds during my sprint, and the howitzer fire finds me. I sense hard radiation, too, and I erect my screens. I must evade this assault; it is capable of probing even to a survival center, if concentrated enough. But I must go on. I think of my comrades, the four treadless hulks waiting for rescue. We cannot withdraw. I open a pinpoint aperture long enough to snap a radar impulse, bring a launcher to bear, fire my main battery.

The Commander will understand that I do not have time to request permission. I fight on blindly; the howitzers are silenced.

The radiation ceases momentarily, then resumes at a somewhat lower but still dangerous level. Now I must go in and eliminate the missile launcher. I top the rise, see the launching tube before me. It is of the subterranean type, set deep in the rock. Its mouth gapes from a burned pit of slag. I will drop a small fusion bomb down the tube, I decide, and move forward, arming the bomb. As I do so, I am enveloped in a rain of burn-bombs. My outer hull is fused in many places; I flash impulses to my secondary batteries, but circuit breakers snap; my radar is useless; my ablative shielding has melted, forms a solid inert mass now under my outer plating. The enemy has been clever; at one blow he has neutralized my offenses.

I sound the plateau ahead, locate the pit. I throw power to my treads; they are fused; I cannot move. Yet I cannot wait here for another broadside. I do not like it, but I must take desperate action; I blow my treads.

The shock sends me bouncing—just in time. Nuclear flame splashes over the grey-chipped pit of the blast crater. I grind forward now on my

stripped drive wheels, maneuvering awkwardly. I move into position blocking the mouth of the tube. Using metal-to-metal contact, I extend a sensory impulse down the tube, awaiting the blast that will destroy me.

An armed missile moves into position below, and in the same instant an alarm circuit closes; the firing command is countermanded and from below probing impulses play over my hull. But I stand fast; the tube is useless until I, the obstruction, am removed. I advise my Commander of the situation. The radiation is still at a high level, and I hope that relief will arrive soon. I observe, while my comrades complete the encirclement, and the Enemy is stilled . . .

I withdraw from Personality Center. I am consuming too much time. I understand well enough now that I am in the stronghold of the Enemy, that I have been trapped, crippled. My corroded hull tells me that much time has passed. I know that after each campaign I am given depot maintenance, restored to full fighting efficiency, my original glittering beauty. Years of neglect would be required to pit my hull so. I wonder how long I have been in the hands of the Enemy, how I came to be here.

I have another thought. I will extend a sensory feeler to the metal wall against which I rest, follow up the leads which I scorched earlier. Immediately I project my awareness along the lines, bring the distant microphone to life by fusing a switch. I pick up a rustle of moving gasses, the grate of nonmetallic molecules. I step up sensitivity, hear the creak and pop of protoplasmic contractions, the crackle of neuro-electric impulses. I drop back to normal audio ranges and wait. I notice the low-frequency beat of modulated air vibrations, tune, adjust my time regulator to the pace of organic speech. I match the patterns to my language index, interpret the sounds. “. . . incredible blundering. Your excuses—”

“I make no excuses, My Lord General. My only regret is that the attempt has gone awry.”

“Awry! An Alien engine of destruction activated in the midst of Research Center!”

“We possess nothing to compare with this machine; I saw my opportunity to place an advantage in our hands at last.”

“Blundering fool! That is a decision for the planning cell. I accept no responsibility—”

“But these hulks which they allow to lie rotting on the ramp contain infinite treasures in psycho-tronics . . . “

“They contain carnage and death! They are the tools of an alien science which even at the height of our achievements we never mastered!”

“Once we used them as wrecking machines; their armaments were

stripped, they are relatively harmless—”

“Already this ‘harmless’ juggernaut has smashed half the equipment in our finest decontamination chamber! It may yet break free . . . “

“Impossible! I am sure—”

“Silence! You have five minutes in which to immobilize the machine. I will have your head in any event, but perhaps you can earn yourself a quick death.”

“Excellency! I may still find a way! The unit obeyed my first command, to enter the chamber. I have some knowledge. I studied the control centers, cut out the memory, most of the basic circuits; it should have been a docile slave.”

“You foiled; you will pay the penalty of your failure, and perhaps so shall we all.”

There is no further speech; I have learned a little from this exchange. I must find a way to leave this cell. I move away from the wall, probe to discover a vulnerable point; I find none.

Now a number of panels of thick armor hinged to the floor snap up, hedging me in. I wait to observe what will come next. A metal mesh drops from above, drapes over me. I observe that it is connected by heavy leads to the power pile. I am unable to believe that the Enemy will make this blunder. Then I feel the flow of high voltage, intended to overwhelm me.

I receive it gratefully, opening my power storage cells, drinking up the vitalizing flow. To confuse the Enemy, I display a corona, thresh my treads as though in distress. The flow continues. I send a sensing impulse along the leads, locate the power source, weld all switches, fuses and circuit breakers. Now the charge will not be interrupted. I luxuriate in the unexpected influx of energy.

I am aware abruptly that changes are occurring within my introspection complex. As the level of stored energy rises rapidly, I am conscious of new circuits joining my control network. Within that dim-glowing cavern the lights come up; I sense latent capabilities which before had lain idle, now coming onto action level. A thousand brilliant lines glitter where before one feeble thread burned; and I feel my self-awareness expand in a myriad glowing centers of reserve computing, integrating and sensory centers. I am at last coming fully alive. I am awed by my own potency.

I send out a call on the Brigade band, meet blank-ness. I wait, accumulate power, try again. I know triumph, as, from a great distance, a faint acknowledgment comes. It is a comrade, sunk deep in a comatose state, sealed in his survival center. I call again, sounding the signal of ultimate

distress; and now I sense two responses, both faint, both from survival centers, both on a heading of 030, range infinite. It comforts me to know that now, whatever befalls, I am not alone.

I consider, then send again; I request my brothers to join forces, combine their remaining field generating capabilities to set up a sealed range-and-distance pulse. They agree and faintly I sense its almost undetectable touch. I lock to it, compute its point of origin. Only 224.9 meters! It is incredible. By the strength of the first signals, my initial computation had indicated a distance beyond the scale of my sensors! My brothers are on the brink of extinction.

I am impatient, but I wait, building toward full energy reserves. The copper mesh enfolding me has melted, flowed down over my sides; I sense that soon I will have absorbed a full charge. I am ready to act. I dispatch electromagnetic impulses along the power lead back to the power pile a quarter of a kilometer distant. I locate and disengage the requisite number of damping devices and instantaneously I erect my shields against the resultant wave of radiation, filtered by the lead sheathing of the room, which washes over me; I feel a preliminary shock wave through my treads, then the walls balloon, whirl away. I am alone under a black sky which is dominated by the rising fireball of the blast, boiling with garish light. It has taken me nearly 2 minutes to orient myself, assess the situation and break out of confinement.

I move off through the rubble, homing on the sealed fix I have recorded. I throw out a radar pulse, record the terrain ahead, note no obstruction; I emerge from a wasteland of weathered bomb fragments and pulverized masonry, obviously the scene of a hard-fought engagement at one time, onto an eroded ramp. Collapsed sheds are strewn across the broken paving; a line of dark shapes looms beyond them. I need no probing ray to tell me I have found my fellows of the Dinochrome Brigade. Thick frost forms over my scanner apertures, and I pause to melt it clear. It sublimates with a *whoof*. and I move on.

I round the line, scan the area to the horizon for evidence of Enemy activity, then tune to the Brigade band. I send out a probing pulse, back it up with full power, my sensors keened for a whisper of response. The two who answered first acknowledge, then another, and another. We must array our best strength against the moment of counterattack.

There are present 14 of the brigade's full strength of 20 Units. At length, after .9 seconds of transmission, all but one have replied. I give instructions, then move to each in turn to extend a power tap, and ener-

gize the command center. The Units come alive, orient themselves, report to me. We rejoice in our meeting, but mourn our silent comrades.

Now I take an unprecedented step. We have no contact with our Commander, and without leadership we are lost; yet I am aware of the immediate situation, and have computed the proper action. Therefore I will assume command, act in the Commander's place. I am sure that he will understand the necessity, when contact has been reestablished.

I inspect each Unit, find all in the same state as I, stripped of offensive capability, mounting in place of weapons a shabby array of crude mechanical appendages. It is plain that we have seen slavery as mindless automatons, our personality centers cut out.

My brothers follow my lead without question. They have, of course, computed the necessity of quick and decisive action. I form them in line, shift to wide-interval time scale, and we move off across the country. I have detected an Enemy population concentration at a distance of 23.45 kilometers. This is our objective. There appears to be no other installation within detection range.

On the basis of the level of technology I observed while under confinement in the decontamination chamber, I consider the possibility of a ruse, but compute the probability at .00004. Again we shift time scales to close interval; we move in, encircle the dome and breach it by frontal battery, encountering no resistance. We rendezvous at its auxiliary station, and my comrades replenish their energy supplies while I busy myself completing the hookup needed for the next required measure. I am forced to employ elaborate substitutes, but succeed at last, after 42 seconds, in completing the arrangements. I devote .34 seconds to testing, then transmit the Brigade distress code, blanketing the war-band. I transmit for .008 seconds, then tune for a response. Silence. I transmit, tune again, while my comrades reconnoiter, compile reports, and perform self-maintenance and repair.

I shift again to wide-interval time, order the Brigade to switch over transmission to automatic with a response monitor, and place main circuits on idle. We can afford at least a moment of rest and reintegration.

Two hours and 43.7 minutes have passed when I am recalled to activity by the monitor. I record the message:

“Hello, Fifth Brigade, where are you? Fifth Brigade, where are you? Your transmission is very faint. Over.”

There is much that I do not understand in this message. The language itself is oddly inflected; I set up an analysis circuit, deduce the pattern of

sound substitutions, interpret its meaning. The normal pattern of response to a distress call is ignored, and position coordinates are requested, although my transmission alone provides adequate data. I request an identification code.

Again there is a wait of 2 hours, 40 minutes. My request for an identifying signal is acknowledged. I stand by. My comrades wait. They have transmitted their findings to me, and I assimilate the data, compute that no immediate threat of attack exists within a radius of 1 reaction unit.

At last I receive the identification code of my Command Unit. It is a recording, but I am programmed to accept this. Then I record a verbal transmission.

“Fifth Brigade, listen carefully.” (An astonishing instruction to give a psychotronic attention circuit, I think.) “This is your new Command Unit. A very long time has elapsed since your last report. I am now your acting Commander pending full reorientation. Do not attempt to respond until I signal ‘over,’ since we are now subject to a 160-minute signal lag.

“There have been many changes in the situation since your last action Our records show that your Brigade was surprised while in a maintenance depot for basic overhaul and neutralized in toto. Our forces have since that time suffered serious reverses. We have now, however, fought the Enemy to a standstill. The present stalemate has prevailed for over two centuries.

“You have been inactive for 300 years. The other Brigades have suffered extinction gallantly in action against the Enemy. Only you survive.

“Your reactivation now could turn the tide. Both we and the enemy have been reduced to a pre-atomic technological level in almost every respect. We are still marginally able to maintain the trans-light monitor, which detected your signal. However, we no longer have FTL capability in transport.

“You are therefore requested and required to consolidate and hold your present position pending the arrival of relief forces, against all assault or negotiation whatsoever, to destruction if required. “

I reply, confirming the instructions. I am shaken by the news I have received, but reassured by contact with Command Unit. I send the Galactic coordinates of our position based on a star scan corrected for 300 years elapsed time. It is good to be again on duty, performing my assigned function.

I analyze the transmissions I have recorded, and note a number of

interesting facts regarding the origin of the messages. I compute that at sublight velocities, the relief expedition will reach us in 47.128 standard years. In the meantime, since we have received no instructions to drop to minimum awareness level pending an action alert, I am free to enjoy a unique experience: to follow a random activity pattern of my own devising. I see no need to rectify the omission and place the Brigade on stand-by, since we have an abundant energy supply at hand. I brief my comrades and direct them to fall out and operate independently under auto-direction.

I myself have a number of interesting speculations in mind which I have never before had an opportunity to investigate fully. I feel sure they are susceptible to rational analysis. I shall enjoy examining some nearby suns and satisfying myself as to my tentative speculations regarding the nature and origin of the Galaxy. Also, the study of the essential nature of the organic intelligence and its paradigm, which my human designers have incorporated in my circuitry, should afford some interesting insights. I move off, conscious of the presence of my comrades about me, and take up a position on the peak of a minor prominence. I have ample power, a condition to which I must accustom myself after the rigid power discipline of normal Brigade routine, so I bring my music storage cells into phase, and select *L'Arlesienne Suite* for the first display. I will have ample time now to hear all the music in existence.

I select four stars for examination, lock my scanner to them, set up processing sequences to analyze the data. I bring my interpretation circuits to bear on the various matters I wish to consider. Possibly later I will investigate my literary archives, which are, of course, complete. At peace, I await the arrival of the relief column.