

The Nets of Space

By Emil Petaja

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To

Harold Taves

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1

That some kind of a party was going on above him was obvious from the noise.

Exactly what kind of a party it was, Donald Quick was unable to determine. He was too busy dodging and sliding and squirming. But he could hear the dull stentorian rumble of their voices, the clicking together of great claws, and, magnified to giant proportions, the general clamor and

movement of people who were enjoying themselves. The unseen sounds blasted randomly across the high rim of the bowl in which he writhed, along with the others.

Don scrambled and slipped and gulped in air between furious wriggles so that he would not smother to death as others around him were doing, or be snatched up out of the bowl as others were being snatched up. By main effort, he managed to wriggle his long, sinewy body up to the top layer of the slimy bowl, where he could at least find breath. The naked bodies around him (some carefully washed but now bathed in brine and perspiration) made his progress more difficult, at times next to impossible.

He reached the top. This wasn't so good, either, he found. He could breathe, true. But every now and again, with ceremonial slowness, a gigantic claw would dip down out of the sky, blotting out the sun or whatever made light up there. This claw would reach down and fumble among the bodies at the top of the bowl. It would select one, rather daintily, and the screaming wretch would be flown up over the bowl and away to a flatter one. This flat bowl, transparent like the big bowl, was filled with viscous red stuff so that it was like the Red Sea. The wriggling, naked human would be dipped down into the round sea-saucer, then vanish up into the sky, its screams dwindling before they broke off altogether.

How the grating thunder of the two voices hanging overhead made their speech known to Don was never quite demonstrated, but it was most likely some kind of careless telepathy between them that found its way into his brain and came out in spoken ideas.

"Some Sacred Feast, yes?"

"Indeed. Sacred Priestess Poogli can always be relied on for something unusual."

"She has that saintly reputation. She serves the best Sacred Potables in all of the Seventy Systems."

"Truth. Speaking of unusual, how do you like the Wrigglers?"

"My turn hasn't come yet but I can hardly wait. We're only allowed one since this Sacred Feast is in the nature of a tryout. What manner of Sacred Food are the Wrigglers, anyway?"

"Ugly little brutes, aren't they? Priestess Poogli always has Kleeng, her Sacred Fisher, combing the most improbable new special areas! These came from down under the Hole!"

"No! I thought that the thin place around the Down-Funneling Hole was like—well, like a galactic sewer!"

"As you say, a noisesome spot. Yet it seems that Poogli has had Kleeng probing a micromatic eye-instrument down under the Hole for decades. Our hostess has some exceptional ideas, as you know, even—well, never mind. Anyway, Fisher Kleeng's microinstruments finally located an odd little mudball simply crawling with these Wrigglers!"

"Clever."

"What's more, these maggots are semi-intelligent, it seems. They keep building awkward cities and making abortive attempts to strike off toward other mudballs in their microscopic universe. Very primitive, of course; nothing like our intergalactic beams."

"Have they enough food?"

"As yet they have plenty, although they themselves are the only creatures on this mudball that can be termed Sacred Food for us, according to the Covenant."

"Because they are intelligent."

"However primitively."

"And I suppose Kleeng snaked down a grab-probe and scooped up these samples?"

"No. The range is too far. Kleeng observed them for a long while in his micro, but whipping about down there among those stars with his beam-probes was too touchy; it would require an all-out fleet expedition of Sacred Fishers. Besides, the Holy Diet must convene and declare the Wrigglers fit for Sacred Food before this can be arranged."

"Then where did these tidbits come from?"

"Kleeng was about to give up his vigil at the Hole when to his surprise the Wrigglers struck out beyond their own sun system—some primitive containers. Luckily they flew netting distance."

"Fortunate."

"Quite. By some strange quirk the star system they chose for their initial time-space leap was exactly right, and a simple cast of his nets caught all three of them. Truly, the Gods were with us in our hour of great need!"

"Quite so. Priestess Poogli was indeed generous to invite her sister Priestesses for this tasting ceremony before the Holy Diet convenes for their edict."

"It is your turn, I believe. Try one."

"I hope they've been properly tested for poisonous aftereffects. Still, I don't see anyone showing evidence of illness. Glad I wasn't first, though."

"Don't worry. The outer coverings were peeled off, of course and they were well scrubbed. But they were handled very gently, since Sacred Food must be live to be Sacred."

"What odd variations in color!"

"One of Poogli's Sacred Cooks tried some experimental recipes, I was told. But they flake away too easily, much like the zelt-worm creatures. Actually, the best way to prepare Wrigglers is to strip, wash, and sprinkle lightly with salt before icing. Serve chilled, but not too cold. Icing renders them sluggish for handling. Watch how it's done! One dips down delicately—so—then dips the morsel rapidly into the sauce and..."

The telepathic hold on his mind was like a vise. Don found himself frozen into immobility by the hypnotic demand for attention radiating down on him. It was only when the babble stopped momentarily that he could even begin to move, to react. The satisfied crunch of bones being daintily masticated made him retch. Still, a kind of horrifying power-aura those giant minds possessed pulled him up on his feet, fascinated.

"I see. My turn now."

"Better grab one while you can. Poogli has already laid formal claim to all fishing rights. There'll be a big row when the Diet convenes, and we from the Outer Systems may find ourselves eating the half-dead dregs, which would be unfortunate. While the Covenant declares that 'All Food is Good' only prime live food from intelligent sources is Sacred Food and only with the brain processes intact is immortality assured."

"Which Wiggler shall I choose! My juices are all eagerly waiting!"

"I recommend the dark ones."

"How is that, since we're each only permitted one?"

"Observation. Besides I took the trouble to consult with Poogli's cooks and tasters in the Sacred Kitchen."

"Oh?"

"The dark ones have more muscle meat on their bones, while the yellow

ones are smaller and the pinks are fatty."

"Look! Here's a long-legged pink one standing right up staring at me! It's as if he were saying, 'Take me I'm the best!' Isn't that cute?"

"I still say—dark brown."

"He seems so beseeching about it, as if he knew how important he is, to be feeding one of the Sacred Priestesses of the Seventy—Oh! He's getting away! All of a sudden he's scuttling down under the others so that I can't tell which is which!"

"I still say pick a brown one."

"Very well, since you're such an expert."

2

August night pressed down on him like a clinging, warm-breasted succubus. Outside the large aluminum-frame window fog from off Richardson's Bay had drifted up the mountain to hang on the conifers and shrubs like a winding sheet. Everything was so still—the redwoods farther uphill, the summer-sered plum trees behind the untended lanai and the unclipped hedge, the wild-fingered blackberry bushes between the dark cedars—all vague and ominous out there, unfriendly and strange-shaped. Later in autumn would come the brisk night breezes to keep things stirred up here on the steep side of Tamalpais; then the winter rains would come. But right now—a stealthy nothing. It was as if the whole mountainside were covered with some kind of silent, death-dealing fungus.

Donald Quick woke, shivering.

Sweating too. Sweating and shivering. His tan Dacron pants clung to him and his gaudy plaid-check shirt was all twisted and knotted up under him. His lanky frame was sodden from his own sweat, yet he was covered with goose bumps.

Don hadn't undressed after he found the unopened Christmas bottle of Smirnoffs; he had just dropped his brown loafers on the oiled planking under the driftwood coffee table and started in to make up for lost time. Funny drinking alone like that. Funny drinking at all, period. It had been such a damn long time. Don lifted up dizzily and glared at the half-empty bottle of vodka, the empty bottle of Schweppe's, and the tall glass by it in a muddle of drying rings.

He hiked up on one elbow, wincing. He wanted to drag his back up off the soggy wide-wale corduroy that made what was his bed at night a reasonable facsimile of a sofa in the daytime. He swiped a trembling hand across his beaded forehead, then mopped further down across his lean, somewhat cadaverous, and sharp-planed face, ending at the jaunty fringe of ragged chestnut colored beard that, together with the prominent balls of cheekbone and deeply inset green eyes, gave him a kind of old-woodcut look.

"Christ," he grated. It was a prayer.

With an animal shake of his shaggy, unkempt head, he swung his legs down and sat curled over in an arc as if he was seventy, not twenty-eight. His head was weighted down with booze and guilt, not to mention the residuum of his incredible nightmare. Slowly, as if to assure himself he was here—not *there*—he looked around the large, untidy studio that comprised the sum total of his lonely mountain cabin. His look traveled over the twelve-foot rectangle of view window where gray half-light leaked in, across

to the breakfast bar with the kitchen facilities behind it (all rather untidy from his long absence and furred over with dust) and the bolted Dutch door at the end. The other end of the studio had a windowed alcove built to jut out into the trees. The artist who had transformed the tottery old cabin into a studio before Don bought it had used this alcove for his work spot because the light was good and the bathroom was handy. There were three or more schools of thought about that artist. One had him jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. One said Napa and a rubber room. One took the cheerful view—had him bouncing off to Paris or Rome and living happily ever after. Anyway, whatever, he'd left his old easel and a lot of crazy daubs behind. The chromos hung lopsidedly where he'd left them, and the easel had Don's drip-dry socks hanging on it. They too were furry with dust from the long wait.

Don's sullen look whipped back to the big window directly in front of him, with the art-haunted studio, the rumpled couch, the accusing mess on the coffee table, and his own hollow-eyed, hungover face staring back at him, ghosted against the pale fog.

Don himself was no artist. Unless, as he sometimes said, he was a foul-up artist. He had leased the studio because it was cheap (it just missed the Tam Valley boundary line and was denied road and sewage privileges) and so he could play Richard Strauss loud as hell on his stereo and read *Don Quixote de la Mancha* out loud with nobody but the chipmunks to protest or call him kook. The studio cabin represented some kind of a goal, an unstatus symbol, after a decade of wind-driven roaming.

"Christ," he repeated out loud. "What *are* patterns for?" *Amy Lowell never found out. Why should I?*

His glance drifted toward the half-empty vodka bottle. His long fingers twisted and his lips worked thoughtfully. He reached out slowly, casually, until his fingers curled around it and hauled it close. He twisted off the cap, his hands still shaking, and poured out a liberal tot into the almost empty glass, spilling some but not too much. It took both hands to lift the glass up to drinking level.

God! No wonder I'm shaking! What a dream! I've had nightmares, but Priestess Poogli—you are something else!

Now that relief was within inches, he could pause and reflect with the smug insouciance of a lost weekender who has checked all the chandeliers and found his crafty hordes untouched.

He thought about Doc. Dr. Leonard Kelter.

"All right, Don. I know how sick and tired you are of this room, of this hospital and *all* hospitals. How long has it been? Three months? Four? Anyway, I agree that a change might do you good at this point. You've been a good boy on the whole, lately, and my—uh—unorthodox treatments seem to have put you back in shape. Still, your Marin County studio up on the mountain? Alone? I'm not sure about that...."

Don's pleas had been both stubborn and nagging.

"Very well, Don. But—will you promise to behave yourself? Will you report back twice a week for a checkup? Above all, stick to the prescribed diet. Bland foods. Rest. Lots of rest. And keep miles away from alcohol and all other stimulants! This is absolutely vital!"

Don had grinned and pointed out that the little studio cabin was literally miles away from any bar or potables vendor and about the only thing a guy *could* do up there was rest. He wanted to get away from all this poking and pampering, damn it! He wanted to be alone. All alone. A psychiatrist like

"Well?" she snapped. "Can I come in?"

Don was still baffled and amazed. She was like some kind of apparition—and what a change from Priestess Poogli! He just stood there, grinning, until the girl reached across the open door-half, unbolted the lower half, and pushed past him into the studio. Don followed her, mentally floundering back four months ago and longer for old girl friends. Nothing came of it. Anyway, for a long time even before he got sick he had been too damn busy with the Centaur Project, which also explained why the cabin was in such an almighty mess.

"Better close the door," the girl suggested, turning and smiling faintly.

Don shrugged and obeyed. "Your voice *is* familiar," he said. "But I'll be damned if—"

She laughed while she unbuttoned and unbelted her coat. Don stared, blinking. The sleek silver coat couldn't hide her curves; without it, wearing a buttercup yellow frock with a lacy white collar open at the throat, she was dreamy. She was small, almost dainty; yet there was a kind of inner verve to the fragility, as if she were a dainty figurine made out of some bright, rich golden alloy. Her complexion was *cafécon crema*, the Latin hallmark, and her dark large eyes glowed with amused fire from between long sooty lashes. Don pulled her into the light and loomed over her, trying to remember where he had seen Donna Elena Dulce before.

And what was she doing up here in the middle of the night? He hadn't told anybody he was leaving the hospital. Such had been his lonely, peregrinacious life that there wasn't anybody to tell, not really. A couple of hit-and-miss gal friends, but they must have given him up as a lost cause long before now. He hadn't even picked up any groceries at the supermarket at the Tam Junction when he made the Stinson Beach turnoff. So who in the bloody hell...?

He gaped down and plunked his hands against the wall on each side of her. His heart started jumping up and down in his chest. Donna Elena brushed her sooty eyelashes and gave his trapping arms a smiling glance.

"I oughtn't to have come, I guess."

"Sure you ought. Why not? Can I offer you something?" He moved his face closer in, but something in her eyes told him to take it easy. He moved back, sighing. "Siddown. Siddown." One must not look a gift horse in the mouth. Anyway, Donna Elena's smile was dazzlingly perfect. He didn't know her but she knew him. He frowned, watching her fold her silvery coat across her lap neatly while she sat down in the only honest chair in the room, a shabby cretonne-cushioned rattan.

Don perched himself on the couch again, as near her as possible, staring and wondering. "You are Spanish," he said. "Or Mexican. I like both. Did some fishing down in Baja and Mazatlan. Also my favorite book is—"

"I know," she smiled. "*Don Quixote de la Mancha*."

He nodded, crinkling up a grin. Don Quixote was his idol and his alter ego. Perhaps Don's name had something to do with it (his father had admired the Woeful Knight, too), or perhaps it was his facility for getting himself into the damndest scrapes by trying to help whenever he saw anything that needed helping, from a kid getting worsted in a street brawl to a revolution in South America. Somehow the knight-errant in him always prodded him into action, even if he ended up in the jug for his pains.

"You're quite a guy, Don Quick," the girl said softly.

Don winced. "Let's talk about you. Spanish?"

"Half Spanish. My father was the under-professor of medicine in Madrid

before he"—she tasted something unpleasant—"said something in a lecture that displeased Those in High Places. He was something like you, my father—had to speak out. So... he ended up in Mazatlan, exiled, where he met my mother. They were very poor but happy until she died." She broke off. "But I came here to check up on you, Don. How are you?"

"Fine."

She gave him a cool, careful look. "You don't look it."

"I've been—sick. You seem to know so damn much about me, you ought to know that."

"I do, Don. And I don't think Dr. Kelter should have let you come home yet. It's too soon."

"Soon! Four damn months!"

Her eyes flashed sympathy. "I know. But time has nothing to do with it. Some of these things take years. You're obviously not ready to be left by yourself yet. I was hoping all the way up here that I would find you peacefully sleeping. That's what you should be doing."

"Sleep!" Don shuddered. He leaned forward, gave her a pinch-eyed stare. "*Hey! I think I know you!*"

The girl laughed. "You ought to. You saw enough of me. Every day, every night, for more than three months after Dr. Kelter took charge of you. I've seen you at your worst—and believe me, your worst is pretty bad. I've seen you raw. I've—"

"Damn!" The sudden leap of remembering was like a hypo jabbing into him, Don's hand moved down involuntarily to massage a place where it still twinged.

"Funny, Donna Elena. Going through all that misery in Doc's Frankenstein lab, with you moving efficiently in and out like a brisk little mouse. How was I supposed to realize that Doc's nurse had a face?"

3

"No use your going, if it's to let me sleep. I can't sleep. Besides, it's getting light, see?" Don's smile became crafty "Of course, you need *your* beauty sleep, Donna Elena."

In the wash of side-lit lampglow the girl's cheeks showed sudden blush spots. "Fat chance by the time I got back to Dr. Kelter's lab. Nope. That I lost a night's sleep might be your fault, Donald Quick, but you didn't ask for it." She looked away, into the reluctant stir of sunrise off toward the lumpy eastern hills covered by unseen tract houses and traffic beginning to move onto the San Francisco freeway. "You didn't ask me to get so involved." She stabbed a swift, narrowed look at him. "Are you sure you didn't remember me? We talked a lot. I even read you *Don Quixote*."

Don's smile was a lemon twist. "Damn this fouled-up brain of mine! For those first months it was like my mind was on fire; it was hell even to think about thinking. By the time I got over that..." He stared at her and blinked. "Yeah—I do remember you, now. It took some prodding. Besides, I've just come out of a new and more horrible kind of spin."

Her eyes flashed alarm. "What land of spin?"

"A nightmare. Never mind. I don't want to talk about it. Tell me nice things for an antidote."

"Such as?"

"Anything."

"Well, you know me now. All those months I was always there, in the background. I know everything there is to know about you, Don. Besides being Dr. Kelter's assistant, I took notes and handled the tapes when you sounded off. I know you so well."

"For instance?" He shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, you were born in Great Falls, Montana. June 17, 1966. See? I even remember the date. I've got that kind of a mind. I know about your father and mother being killed in that Livingston landslide. How you were tossed around like a handball among cousins and uncles who didn't much want you, before you struck out on your own. Seventeen, wasn't it? When you joined the army, lying about your age. Then the moonship. Then that phony revolution in South America. Then..."

Don's eyes turned inward, remembering. His long jaw went tight. Nothing had turned out right since he had seen his mother and father engulfed in that freak earthquake and slide. He was only four, but he would never forget waking up to find the world shaking and rumbling under them. They were on a summer camping and fishing trip in Yellowstone. His mother grabbed him up and they started to run. Then his father grabbed him away from her so they could make more time. The thunder noise behind them made him poke his head up over his father's shoulder—and he saw the big black mountain rip loose and fling itself at them.

"I've had nightmares about it," he murmured. "God knows how many."

"It had a traumatic effect, Dr. Kelter thinks. The helpless terror of it, and then lying there under your father's body for so many hours before they found you. He thinks that mountain grew to represent a kind of relentless Fate in your mind. The overwhelmingness of it, like the world tumbling to pieces. It shook your confidence in your ability to battle Fate—to accomplish anything you set out to do." Her voice was husky-gentle. "That's been your pattern, Don. You try so hard—then something inside of you says you can't win, any more than your father could win out against that crashing-down mountain. So you give up."

Don shook his head. "Nope. I'm just a twenty-carat loser, Donna Elena. Failure prone. You name it." He shrugged. "Like when I wrangled into the Centaur Project. I really thought I'd made it for once in my life. If it hadn't been for that imbalance bug in my ears—"

"Neuropathic labyrinthitis. Probably induced by that early traumatic shock. But Don, it's so slight!"

It wasn't even picked up until he was half through his starflight training. But it had been enough to make the medics wash him out. He had known from the beginning that only thirty-six would be on Centaur III when it took off through Professor Masterson's shortcut through time into Alpha Centauri, thirty-six out of two hundred seven trainees. The odds weren't much to begin with, and the time jump made it absolutely necessary that the auric nerve centers of the men selected be perfect. It was only one factor among so many.... But hard as he'd tried, he still couldn't rationalize it away.

"It was that damn black mountain. It's still chasing me." He cracked his muscles and stood up with a sudden bounce. "I was so sure. I wanted off this planet and away from that mountain, and I thought I had it. I could almost taste it." He moved restlessly to the window and stared glumly at the uneasy light stirring down beyond the Richardson Bay Bridge. Angel Island and the Tiburon point were bluely visible as the crouching fog began to evaporate.

The girl's voice startled him out of his brooding regrets. "You stuck with the Project all the way. You've got that, Don. Also, Centaur III might never have taken off if it hadn't been for you."

Don's mind flung itself back. Back into that other dusky dawn. Centaur Project Base on the lonely flats of San Benito County, some eighteen miles east and south of the enormous World Space Center in Sunnyvale. The tulle fog hanging across the tarmac like spidery wedding veils; the star-pointed ship stabbing sky next to the erector-set gantry. It was a matter of hours now before takeoff, and Don bummed a ride in the fuel truck from the World Space Complex, where he bunked, to fuss around and watch nth hour procedures, as he'd done every spare minute since he'd been dumped from the chosen thirty-six and drained off with the other unluckies into groundling participation in the third incredible leap across time and void into another sun system. The other planets under Sol's domination had been visited, or at least probed, and to some extent were being colonized and exploited—but on the whole they had proved disappointing. No life to speak of. No intelligent residuum. So man swallowed his disappointment and struck out with three giant leaps, the three Centaurs, still brashly hopeful. Like most of the other washouts, Don couldn't let go, and the skills he had learned under the aegis of Centaur Project in were useful enough to keep him busy fifteen hours a day in the army of groundlings who, minus the glamor, also served.

Alpha Centauri. A new sun! Professor Masterson's prideful time-space computer, Big Ben, had advised the building of three starships rather than just one. Such a monumental new concept as time-deflect made a bulls-eye first crack seem improbable if not impossible. What with the unguessable perils lurking under Sol's nearest neighbor—a mere matter of some 4.3 light-years away—and the finding of a suitable planet to land on after—and if—the time trek worked and they made it, the incredible odds would be lessened by sending three rather than one. Since the cost must also be considered, to build three ships and train three crews at the same time minimized the fantastic tax drain when compared with sending one, waiting, then another, and so on. Six or a dozen would be better, Big Ben computed, but the cost factor made this prohibitive. The warless world of taxpayers wouldn't stand still for it. Three was a lucky number, wasn't it?

So Centaur I took the time-space leap. And was never heard from again. And Centaur II—also never heard from. Yet even that was not enough to discourage the triple Project. Communication across such a void within a few weeks' time was a chancy thing, no matter what steps Professor Torwald Masterson and the other geniuses took. Man was still fumbling with his cosmic keys and hoping...

Now Centaur III was poised and anxious, awaiting only the final touch, the time-gas fueling.

Maybe it was me, Don thought. I'm the original jinx, ain't I?

"Careful," he told the deck crew members who were jockeying the huge lead-alloy tubes into position for the uphoist.

"Shut up," one gritted. All four were sweating.

It was a matter of seconds later that it happened. A foot slipped. The second tank clanked against an outjutting ship's fin. The sealed feed-nipple bumped. Don heard the snake's hiss of gas escaping, then saw the little green tendrils puffing out of the rift. Somebody yelled. There was a panicked scramble—away. The green tendrils found something combustible

to eat on the fuel truck and turned into little licking flames.

When it hits the gas tank the whole thing will blast!

Don didn't stop to think. He jumped. He flung himself bodily across the still small river of green flame, smothering it; then he wrapped himself around the feed-in nipple where it was cracked open. His arms and his chest were the corks that held the hissing fuel in until the panicked ground crew stopped their running and one of them came pelting with a mastic gun of some kind and squirted a leadlike glue over the break and Don's arms as well.

How much of the green gas Don took into his lungs —and what it might do to him besides kill him —became a matter of reams of conjecture later on. His first sensation after his reflexive leap to save the ship was one of euphoria. His mind seemed to explode in all directions, but joyfully. Then, in a matter of seconds, came the intolerable agony that shot his soul down into the black hell's pit that became his home for more than three months.

"Anyway," he heard Donna Elena's voice assuring him from some distant planet, "the pain and the terror, they're all over. It's incredible, according to Professor Masterson, that your brain was able to endure what it had to in sloughing off the effects of the time gas. What it should have done was kill you outright, or at least send your thinking brain into some timeless limbo—"

"How about a drink?" Don broke in rawly.

"Drink!"

"Coffee," Don switched handily. "There's an unopened jar of instant on the shelf over the bar. I know how to boil water. I'll—"

"Never mind, I'll do it." The girl was up and bustling around behind the messy formica, decanting water and washing out some heavy ceramic mugs she found in the loaded sink. "Not that you ought to have coffee," she clucked, shooting him a reproving but indulgent look, "Dr. Kelter wouldn't like it. Well, I'll make it weak."

"Dishwater, I suppose." Don moved to the coffee table and picked up the bottle of Smirnoff's.

"What's that?" Donna Elena's voice was suddenly sharp.

"What's it look like?"

"Don't tell me you—" His grin told her and she broke off with a gasp. "No! *Don!*" She set down the glass coffeemaker bottom with a jolt that threatened to shatter it and swept around the bar to the coffee table. She took the bottle away from him, went to the open window, and flung it out. When she came back her eyes brimmed up at him with anger and dismay.

"You drank! Dr. Kelter said not to, but you did anyway!"

"It was a Christmas present from a very nice young lady."

"So?"

"So I needed something, damn it. I felt so good, for the first time in—Lord knows. I'm really not a lush, honest."

Her face was white with worry and vexation. "Don't you realize what a miracle it was that Dr. Kelter was able to patch your mind back together at all? Isn't it worth something that he dropped everything and brought you up to his experimental lab and made you his—his—"

"Guinea pig?" Don finished wryly. "After all, he got his kicks. Ever since his early experiments with LSD and the other psychedelic drugs, he's been famous for his research with illusion- and delusion-producing chemicals. I was ready-made. I can just see his round face lighting up like a Christmas

tree when he heard about my bout with the time gas. Golly gee! Here's a potential acid head to end them all! What fun and games I'll drag out of him!"

"That's not fair."

"Okay, so maybe I don't feel like being fair." Don flopped down with a low grunt. Forgetting about the coffee, Donna Elena sat down by him on the corduroy coverlet and took hold of his hand impulsively.

He grugged her a contrite look, shrugged. "Did Doc send you here to check up on me?"

"No. It was entirely my idea. I—I couldn't sleep. I'd got so used to you being there and—well, something inside of me said Dr. Kelter was wrong to let you go off on your own. Dead wrong. Finally I had to get dressed and drive up here to make sure you were all right." Her hand tightened on his. "Don. The vodka did something to you, didn't it? It cracked open the psychological scar tissue. You said you had a nightmare. It wasn't about the landslide, was it?"

Don went stiff. For a fractionary second he was seeing great purplish clouds suspended over a wide wriggling bowl. Clouds with claws.

"No."

"Tell me," she urged.

"No. I don't want to think about it."

She nodded. Then, "It might help you to sleep."

"Sleep!" It was an angry derisive snort.

"They say dreams disappear if we don't make the effort of recalling them right away."

"Not this one. I'll never forget Priestess Poogli."

"Who?" Her voice trembled with a desire to laugh, "Sounds kind of funny."

"Oh, it was a barrel of laughs." He put his arm around her and kissed her, hard. There was no libidinal passion to his action, just the sudden overwhelming need for compassionate human warmth. Suddenly he knew he could and must tell Donna Elena everything. He took in a deep, ragged breath.

4

The rhythm of the Ford's wheels on the wet macadam had a soothing effect on Don's nerves. Donna Elena's competent small hands were fast on the wheel. The hardtop compact buzzed and darted around the rising turns into the rolling summer-saffroned hills west of Redwood City and then into the high country south of the reservoir, in the direction of Dr. Leonard Kelter's mountain lab. Don drowsed back against his headrest, content to return to cocoon living where others did and he droned. But with a difference, a heartlifting difference. Covertly, through lidded eyes, he sneaked looks at the girl. Donna Elena sat up stiffly, as if wired to her post; her face was set and pale to the lips. She looked like a mannequin in that silver trench-coat, with the curling comma of dark hair spilling out from under the yellow chiffon scarf she'd hurriedly tied on before they fled. Fled was exactly what they had done, as if Don's Tamalpais cabin was Priestess Poogli's natural habitat. Donna Elena's face had taken on that pale-gold-wax look while Don had spilled out his nightmare.

All she said when he finished his vivid tale of the Sacred Fishers and the

Holy Diet was "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Where'd you think?"

Don grumbled a little, but permitted her to hustle him into a jacket and down the steep scrambling footpath to the barriered buildup where her little Ford had been hastily parked. *Why not? Anybody who had dreams like that couldn't be let run loose.*

Now a neural weariness intense as any death wish took hold of him and forced shut his eyelids. It was painful to urge them back open, but he must not fall asleep. That was obvious! He forced his drooping look to follow the nod-making dips in the road and the sudden twists when they left the main coast road and hit gray cliff chops. Inertia swung him from side to side in the bucket seat while his lazy glances moved past the leafy live oaks fronting the glen estates of a swank subdivision. Behind, across the bay, the late summer dawn was coming up in truth, an umbrous, cloudy affair with hints of bright seeping through.

As the road lifted deeper into the tangle of shadowy conifers, potholes and washboard effect bumped his head monotonously against the headrest; mental and psychological exhaustion had him by the tail and only the nearness of Donna Elena and the silent hurt in her eyes—for him—laved him into a kind of false security and thrust aside the desire to panic.

He thought about the little six-by-ten cubicle off Dr. Kelter's long research lab, and somehow it represented a haven. And now there was Donna Elena. Sure. Things were going to be different. Doc had said he was cured, hadn't he? He'd said that! If only he hadn't drunk that vodka everything would be okay.... Donna Elena cared about him. She cared what the hell happened to him. There had never been anyone in his life before who had given a damn whether he continued to breathe and take up space or not. Not really. Maybe that was his own fault, running around the world like a nut trying to find someplace where he felt he belonged. Yeah, Donna Elena was kind of a miracle, when you thought about it. The best thing that had ever happened to him—and she was right there beside him, worrying about him....

He sighed. His brain danced with colored lights. The whitewalls trembled on the loose gravel....

"Are they all gone?"

"Yes, all. The last of the Seventy Sacred Priestesses beamed off from the star room just now. It's all ours!"

"All! They didn't leave much, for truth."

"Do they ever? Only the usual mess for us males to clean up, hoping for some half-dead gleanings."

"Still and all, Priestess Poogli does make the effort to keep us alive, at least. I've heard some dreadful stories about the cannibalizing males that goes on among the other sun systems. False accusations and trials. Then the executions...."

"Aye. These are perilous times, and as you say, Priestess Poogli is more lenient and liberal than most. Sacred Food is so scarce now! I am older than you are, and I recall Feasts when every male got his fill of scraps—and not dead, unSacred scraps either!" A sigh like a wind between worlds. *"In those days the machines were still running. There were tenders left who understood their strange functions. Priestess Poogli tried to get the others of the Priestesshood to save them, not just the star-beams, but*

they went with the outside workers during the Cannibal Wars, until now all that remains are the Priestesses and half-starved male servants" Another vast gale-sigh.

"Well, stop drooling about the good old days, and let's get feeding before the others gobble up everything!"

Indeterminate scraping and crunching sounds. Then:

"Yes, we were all happy and well fed in my youth."

"I find that hard to swallow."

"Soak some more red sauce into it."

"Not this bit of zelt-worm, old fool! I was referring to your senile maunderings about the machines and all that nonsense. What good are they? You can't eat them!"

"Ah, youth! How could you possibly understand what life was like in those days? When artistic endeavor and scientific achievement meant something!"

"And everybody's belly was full, I suppose. Well, when food was still plentiful in the Seventy Systems I imagine there was time out from ingenious foraging for your froufrou."

"Those were delicious times indeed. You are still young; your carapace has not yet hardened for between-star flying, and it probably never will, things being as they are and getting worse all the time. As for myself, in my early years I beamed through the star-labyrinth many times. Why, once I accompanied Priestess Poogli all the way to—"

"Shut up, Old One, and get feeding! We still have the Feast Chambers to clean, and if your strength fails you, you know what will happen. I have some feelings for you, Old One—Sacred Entrails knows why—but there are others who have their eyes on you, drooling and waiting for you to falter...."

A period of silence, interspersed with significant claw-sounds and slaverings.

"What's this? Something new?"

"This bowl in the center, on the dais? Yes. Sacred Taster Baltu told me about it. It is quite new. They're called Wrigglers and they come from under the Hole."

"The Hole? You mean the thin membrane they used to break through for disposing of radioactive trash? I thought that was just the drain-off and led nowhere but to some noisesome limbo!"

"So did we all. All except Priestess Poogli and her perspicacious Sacred Fisher Kleeng. There is no end to our Priestess's cleverness—and the empathy between Her Holiness and Kleeng is quite—ah—extraordinary."

"Be careful, Old One. One hint of blasphemy and you're finished."

"Sorry."

"You should be. Just because you are old and remember many strange customs doesn't permit you to be disgusting. About these Wrigglers? Are they Sacred?"

"Not yet. Not by Covenant. The Holy Diet convenes tomorrow and will decide if the Wrigglers are suitable for Priestess food or not. My guess is they will decide favorably. After all, the Fishers keep roving farther and farther and finding nothing. The netting of these few specimens may well open rich new preserves; indeed, Kleeng's discovery might save us from another disastrous Cannibal War!"

The purple clouds hung low. Thunder rolled when the bowl was touched and tilted.

"They seem to be dead, all of them."

"What did you expect? Everybody likes a new tidbit. Sacred Colon knows there is little enough these terrible times. Help yourself."

"After you, Old One."

"Thank you, youth."

The voices in the sky had registered sharply on his mind, but Don's muscles were unable to react. Until the claw reached down and scraped among the bits and pieces lying in the saline-encrusted bottom of the lakelike bowl he could only lie there. Hopefully, if he didn't move, if he just lay there playing possum and didn't admit to all this, it would go away. If you rejected a nightmare it would vanish, wouldn't it? It would have to! The putrefaction around him was so rank he could hardly bear it without retching, yet he was too weak. When one of the mauve claws scraped him and toppled him over, he lifted, an involuntary movement that started with a convulsive shudder beginning in his bowels and rippling out to his toetips and his hair-roots.

"Look! I think I saw one of them move!"

Don froze. He tried not to shudder.

"Impossible. We all have these hopeful illusions now and then. Its our forlorn male hope for immortality. We still keep hoping to produce seed. Feeding does that to us."

"I still say it moved."

"No, youth. Be guided by one wise in years."

"Humph. Well, I shall just stir the Wrigglers up a bit to make sure."

"First let me pick out these torn-off limbs and this half a torso...."

The bowl shook and rumbled violently when the claws draped across it, appropriating vagrant scraps of bodies. His frenzy to escape made Don react. He wriggled and shuddered his arms over his ears and eyes to shut off his senses. He yelled out once, then lay there on his back moaning, eyes smashed shut under his befouled arms. *Get it over with quick*, was all he prayed at this point. *Get it over with!*

The thunder roll of sounds when the bodies and hunks of bodies began to spin around on the salt-crusted glass made it impossible for his mind to register coherent thoughts from the telepathized communication between the Old One and the Young One. His body was scratched and smeared with blood, some of it his own. When the bowl spun faster and something bumped him, he opened his eyes. He screamed. He screamed because he knew that half-face. It was a familiar face. A friend. Torn off, bloody, frosted, and skin-cracked from dried salt, it was still a part of somebody he had known well. Those bleared eyes had once danced with zest and good humor; now they were popped out like a gar's. That once-easy-laughing mouth was now a wrenched-down gash of frozen agony and horror. Don shouted a name. He lurched to his feet and tried to run.

The claw caught him easily, triumphantly. The chitinous, toothed nippers took hold delicately, not to spoil such an unexpected treat. Live food! How fortunate!

Don lashed out and screamed. "No! Don't eat me! I'm no good! I'm too small! I'm poison!" Some inner bid toward racial dignity during the upward flight made him change his tack. "Don't you realize what you're eating, you bastards? WE ARE INTELLIGENT BEINGS, LIKE YOU!"

The claw poised, as if his mouse-thoughts actually registered on the prodigious if degenerated brain. The stalked optics weaved in for a closer look. Tears blurred Don's vision of the overwhelmingly huge maw he hovered before. It was no use. No use at all. He was not telepathic like

them. He could receive their thoughts but they could not receive his. Theirs were god-large; his were rodent-puny.

Here it comes. Death...

But no. First the down-dipping in the crimson *salsa piccante*. This triumphant youth intended to have the full treatment.

"Put down that Wiggler!"

The new voice was an octave higher in pitch than the others; in it flamed icy rage mingled with knife-sharp self-assurance. There was no doubt to whom it belonged. It was none less than the mistress of the menage herself. Sacred Priestess Poogli. Don felt the claw that held him tremble. The indeterminate sounds elsewhere in the chamber vanished. The silence was a vacuum.

"Put down the Live Food instantly, mongrel male! And do it very gently!"

The voyage back down to the bowl was a careful agitated arc, and Don thought he detected a regretful sigh stirring across the sky. Gone, alas, this bid of a young male toward immortality. The pincers relaxed their hold. He was free. He wanted to run, but his legs were like rubber. He slipped, collapsing in an untidy heap.

"Out, males!" Princess Poogli cried. *"All of you! Out!"*

"But—we're not finished cleaning up, Your Holiness," the Old One ventured. *"Are we not to be permitted the leavings, according to tradition?"*

"I have been far too lenient as it is. Sacred Food is far too rare these days to squander it on males. Long ago the Priestesses of the Seventy Systems evolved beyond need for partners in procreation."

"Yet—if we were permitted Sacred Food—"

"Why should we? Why waste Food where it does no good?"

"Still, Your Holiness, I have heard that Fisher Kleeng... that you..."

"Silence! Leave the Feast Chamber before I take offense!"

"At once, Your Holiness."

It was as if Priestess Poogli spoke to herself, since the degenerated males, reduced to insignificant satellites around a great mother planet, were too low to waste thoughts on. *"The great eras of the Procreative Rites are long gone, alas. Perhaps beyond the mere physical manifestations there were psychological yearnings and needs which might one day be permitted again to flower. I must remind myself to get rid of that old male. He remembers too much and sees too much. What's more, he blabbers, while the others are only interested in the scraps I throw them."* Her Holy Presence moved in like a windstorm out of space. *"You must not be dead, little Wiggler. The Holy Diet must have a specimen to gawk at when they make their decision, and you are it!"*

5

They were hitting him, with baseball bats. Two teams seemed to be involved, working him over from either side alternately. Some preferred to use knotted fists, some to just grab and slap. Years passed before they wearied of this sport and some dropped out. Finally there were only two of them left.

"Dr. Kelter, let me! You're too rough!"

"We have got to wake him out of it! Do you realize how long it has been?"

"Five hours." The voice was half sob.

"Five hours thirty-seven minutes, to be exact, since I carried him in from the car. That makes it closer to six hours. Six hours in this comatose state, lying there like a dead man."

"Dr. Kelter," the feminine voice pleased, "he isn't—"

"Not quite, but his pulse rate is incredibly slow. It's as if his entire metabolism has slowed to some kind of hibernation level."

"Doctor—that crusty stuff on his face and neck. What is it?"

A pause, as if to test, then, "Salt."

"Salt! Where does it come from? And those reddish brown streaks and blotches! Like dried blood!"

"They come from inside Don, of course. Where else? He wasn't bruised when he slumped down in his seat, as you described. As for the salt, there's been some subtle kind of glandular reaction to parallel the nightmare he's been having."

"Like—like stigmata?"

"Something like that. The dream he told you about was peculiarly vivid. His physical body must create a manifestation of reality to fortify his delusion."

"The smell, Dr. Kelter! It's—horrible! Like a—"

"An abattoir? A slaughterhouse? Yes, that's close. Remember the cadavers and the dying he dreamed about before? My guess is he's dreaming the same thing again. This form of delusion is apt to recur; it reinforces itself. And of course the catalyst that sparked it is still there. His blood still has a fair alcoholic content. Under normal conditions a man as young and physically healthy as Don is would have taken all that vodka in stride—been sick maybe, but over it by now. But you must remember what Don's mind has been through and the fact that he's been on the wagon for so long. It hit him like a ton of bricks."

The familiar voice rose querulously. "There's another smell, Dr. Kelter. Like rotten shellfish. Like behind the balnearios in Mazatlan when I was a girl on the beach, where they piled up the *camaron* and *langosta* shells. Don't tell me *that's* from inside Don!"

"Of course it is, Donna. We still don't know much about the true effects our minds can produce on our bodies, especially under the impetus of psychedelic drugs—not to mention what effect the time gas had on Don! My guess is that the 'monsters' we imagine originate within ourselves."

"How?"

"From our origins. Dip-ups from the long, tenuous threads of our ancestry. We all originated in the ocean, and prenatally we follow the threads all over again. Wouldn't it be natural for some of these mind-imploding drugs—especially the time gas—to thrust tendrils back to those primordial swamps?"

Don woke up with a groan. His mouth muscles forced his sluggish blood agonizingly through his veins so they could twitch; his demanding neural system put forth all its powers of insistence on his eyelids' muscles and forced them to open. Little by little his curled-up fingers and toes unlocked. He had to concentrate on one part of him at a time to drag himself bodily (it seemed) down and out of that macrocosmic world of Priestess Poogli. It was painful, every cell of his long body suffered, but he made it. He got out.

He lay like a lump, sucking in air. Little by little the tenacious loadstone drag on his brain relented and he was back where he belonged. The soft, harassed voice that chirruped to see him breathing near-normally again and

twitching his limbs was Donna Elena Dulce's voice. The brusque, clipped, anxious baritone was Dr. Leonard Kelter's.

After a while he was able to turn his head and look at them. They were busy doing things, poking him with hypodermics and massaging his arms and legs with renewed vigor. He saw Donna Elena's dusky-creamy face dart overhead, smiled.

"Rozinante," he said.

Dr. Kelter's round moon of a face jerked in surprise. His thin lips pursed into a crinkled rosebud, and behind the heavy horn-rim spectacles his ever-vigilant gray eyes stabbed questions into the air.

"Who?" he demanded.

Don could only smile and stare blissfully at Donna Elena. She touched his forehead. "He's talking about his horse! I don't know whether it's supposed to be a compliment or what, but—"

"Horse? What horse?"

"He's Don Quixote, don't you remember? Off on wild adventures on that old nag of his."

Dr. Kelter grunted. "Very well. I remember now." He nodded and moved briskly about his instrumental assessment of Don's condition. As he unwrapped the blood-pressure meter, his round face relaxed into as close to a smile as it ever permitted itself.

"Okay, Don Quick-Quixote. You've had your nightmare ride. Scared the hell out of us both. You and your vodka binge! When you're better I'm going to take you over my knee."

Don grinned. Donna Elena's face moved in close, so close it almost brushed his cheek, then withdrew, vanished. She was back in less than a minute, pressing a big tattered book between his hands. He looked down at the worn green buckram cover, stroked it wryly. *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, read the faded gold lettering on the spine. Cervantes. Inside the title was more impressive, even. *The Life and Achievements of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha*, by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.

He turned to the author's preface.

"You may depend upon my bare word, reader, without any further security, that I could wish this offspring of my brain were as ingenious, sprightly, and accomplished as yourself could desire; but the mischief of it is, nature will have its course...."

Nature will have its course. Somehow during his indifferent, skittish bouts with formal education, the philosophies of Cervantes' "child of disturbance, extravagant beyond imagination," had caught hold of Don and bound themselves so closely to his being that Don Quixote had become his one true companion, his solitary comrade, his other self. It wasn't that he wanted to copy the Don and rush off on quixotic missions to save damsels from windmills and monsters; he squirmed at the mere idea of romanticizing his own picaresque life to such an extent. It was just that somehow he had caught hold of the Woeful Knight's coattails, like some latter-day Sancho Panza, thereby bringing a cherished secret affinity to every important move he made.

That Donna Elena brought his one tattered treasure to him now proved that she understood. Dr. Kelter? No. He was an important research psychiatrist and he probably knew Don better than anybody else in the world, but this was something you couldn't understand with your brains; even Don couldn't explain it on the endless reels of tape Dr. Kelter had made during those months of prying open the secret cells in his mind. It

just was. He blinked up at Dr. Kelter, at the dented-in bald spot where his hair was thinning out. It gleamed under the light, and a pulse in that wide forehead throbbed. The scowl he gave Don was brisk and clinical; the deft fingers went on with their tasks in the regimen that had gotten to be so monotonous. Don sighed and hunted out Donna Elena's slim figure moving in the background, fetching and carrying and making notes. He watched her and held tight to his book.

"Doc?"

"Yes, Don."

"How come I was out so long? It seemed like—maybe half an hour—in my dream. I thought it was the reverse. Dreams are supposed to last only split seconds."

The medic shrugged. "We don't know how long the dream actually lasted, do we?" He settled in close on a chair, motioning for the girl to set the tape machine revolving. "Speaking of dreams, let's have it, eh? I want to record it while it's fresh in your mind. While every sensory impression is still vivid and clear. Dreams fade away and lose themselves all too soon."

"Not Priestess Poogli," Don said tightly.

"Maybe he should have something to eat first," Donna Elena said. "I've had soup and stuff ready for hours."

Don shook his head, restraining a shudder. "No. Maybe a glass of fruit juice."

"I'll put some protein supplement in it." She snapped off the winding tape, went out, and came back with a tall orange juice, stirring it briskly. Don downed it without enthusiasm, but it did help. His belly was hollow and gnawing, but the spasms inside of him when he thought about solid food moved up into his throat and gagged him.

"Okay?" Dr. Kelter asked impatiently.

"Okay, Doc."

Again the tape rolled and hummed distantly. Don flung a look around the cubicle's bare walls to the draped window which he knew overlooked the lab's herb garden and a thick front of fir forest. The familiar prosaic milieu reassured him about what was the real world and what was merely horrendous illusion, and he took the dive.

"It's—well—embarrassing to talk about it, Doc. Nobody likes to admit he's a ten-carat psycho...."

Dr. Kelter's forehead sprouted italics, his voice was sharp and remonstrative. "We've been through all that! Never mind about the embarrassment! We're your friends—remember?" He reached over and took a firm hold on Don's hand. "Was it her again? Priestess Poogli?"

Hearing that name spoken aloud made every muscle in him go tight, every nerve quiver. He swallowed hard and nodded.

"Yeah. It was her. And company."

If he had to dream wacky nightmares, why such grotesque, beyond-natural-life ones? It made his face burn to think about Priestess Poogli. Why *her*? He didn't like fantastic stuff, never had. You couldn't really call *Don Quixote* fantasy. It was symbolic philosophy, or something like that; it pointed up, a man's wistful dreams that somehow or other always died aborning. As for wild-out weirdo stories—forget it. Don had no use for them

"Well?" Dr. Kelter urged.

"Okay, okay."

To minimize the horrors—the stench, the looming claws, the *feel* of

those sweaty, salty bodies and pieces of bodies touching his—he kept his recital terse and straightline and factual.

6

The mental flogging he took from reliving his adventure left him dizzy. Dr. Kelter refrained from asking any questions. He reached over and snapped off the tape thoughtfully, patted Don's hand, and creaked up out of his chair. He gestured Donna Elena to stay before padding swiftly across the room and into his lab proper, which was next door.

Don closed his eyes and tried not to shiver. After a while he dozed off. When he woke up, Donna Elena was there with a wheeled-in cart of food.

"How about some nice beef broth?"

Don sniffed. His insides gnawed their approval of the idea of food and lots of it. It had been quite a while, and sustenance might slough off some of the shakiness. He stifled back the howls his psyche put up and nodded. The girl moved the tray close to his cranked-up bed and proceeded to spoon-feed him chopped steak and vegetables. Even the lemon flan, which seemed to be a specialty-of-the-house dessert, tasted good with Donna Elena's warmth to spark the blandness. He lingered over it, savoring the scent of her thick, dark hair as it fell across the pillow and tickled his nose, and the sight of the pulse leaping in her ivory throat when he took hold of her arm.

Outside the cubicle window the late afternoon sun sifted down through thick-trunked redwood and pine and dark patches of cedar. A breeze stirred the branches. There was a hint of woodsmoke in it, from the summer cabins along the gulley creek and the countrified crossroads stores that spotted the hill.

Don was almost content. Even the hated hospital bed and the close-to-blank walls that smelled vaguely of lysol took on the comfort of a sanitary hiding place from the unspeakable. The unfriendly residuals of alcohol in his veins were diminishing. But it was Donna Elena's rattle of cheerful small talk, as she poured out decaffeinated coffee for them both, that put Priestess Poogli in her place for fair.

"Tell me about you," Don urged. "You said your father was a professor of medicine in—Cordoba was it?"

The girl laughed. "You've got Cervantes on the brain."

"Have I?"

"*He* was from Cordoba. My father was an under-professor of anatomy and morphology at the University of Madrid. He studied toward internship and medical practice but was sidetracked because the family needed money. A really wonderful man. Lean and tall and white-haired. The gentlest, most penetrating eyes you ever saw. He didn't marry there—I suppose really because the family was poor, and under-professors don't make much money. Reasonably happy in his work, though, until..." She sighed. "I guess you know about the Civil War and how careful even a minor teacher had to be not to say anything that sounded remotely critical about the—"

"About Franco, you mean? I can imagine. Seems kind of out of your father's line, though."

"Not really. When you see people starving, going without medical aid..."

"I get it. Things are better now, but that was twenty years back." His

cocked look sized her up.

"I'm twenty-four," Donna Elena said. "Anyway, there was some intercampus backstabbing, too. So Papa went to Mexico, where he met my mother."

"Mazatlan's terrific," he volunteered.

"Isn't it? My mother was part *India*. Nayarit. She was beautiful. But she had a kind of leukemia and—she died less than a year after I came along. Papa was desolated. He left me with relatives and went off into the wilds to help her people—there wasn't a doctor of any land within a hundred kilometers. He wasn't a medico but he helped a lot. Later he taught again at the University of Guadalajara, where I studied medicine for three years. When he died last year I came up to Stanford on a scholarship."

"Where you met Dr. Kelter."

"Right. I'm not really a psychology major, but I have such a deep regard for Leonard Kelter—for anybody who could be making a fortune holding hands with rich females yet grubs away year after year at research he believes in. Well, that's it." She pulled her hand gently out of his. "Now I've got work to do and I've got to do something about my hair."

"Like what? Looks fine to me."

"Put it up, like it was before."

"Ah! That's why I didn't recognize you, Lady Dulcinea! Your hair was all bunned up under a starched cap. Don't do it."

She laughed. "Maybe some kind of compromise. Sure you'll be all right?"

"I'll give you an hour. Then I'll start yelling."

Don was staring sourly out at the darkening sky. The sunset was a depressing smear of reds and purples, with night fog creeping stealthily down the western slopes to seaward. His throat felt suddenly dry and thick. He was glad when the lab door opened and Dr. Kelter moved briskly in, wearing his oversize white smock and making notes on a clipboard chart.

"Doc."

"How are you, Don? Feel up to a few questions?"

"Why not." His grin was weak but he was glad to have his uneasy thoughts diverted, even if it did mean another psychiatric probe session.

While Dr. Kelter rolled up his padded perch, Donna Elena wheeled in the inevitable tape machine. She flashed Don a smile as she thumbed through her voluminous notecase to augment the thirsty brown ribbon with Dr. Kelter's *sotto voce* asides.

The psychiatrist gave his usual little preliminary cough, then whipped out some brisk questions; he seemed to be checking Don's first recital for changes, alert for any slight variance. Don was forced to drag again through both of his nightmares from beginning to end. He scowled out at the wind-harried trees and the gathering night. The day's color was ebbing away as if sucked gray by some chromatic vampire.

"Funny how the two dreams dovetail," he observed glumly. "I thought recurrent dreams just repeated. Like in stories where somebody's got something on his conscience and can't shake it."

"There are endless varieties of dreams," Dr. Kelter said. "Besides, we're faced here with something without precedent."

"You mean the time gas?"

"Yes. Years ago when LSD and other so-called psychedelics were new and popular with the beatnik groups for 'kicks,' it was frequently postulated that minds under their influence might actually be sensating occurrences in

some other frame of existence."

"Like some other dimension?"

"Yes. I never believed it. In fact, I've written articles and monographs disproving it. No, whatever mishmash delusions any of these drugs induce originate within the minds of the takers, no matter how far out the fantasies seem."

"Where does that leave me?" Don asked.

"Same thing goes for the time gas, so far as anything in your history indicates."

"What part of my history indicates Priestess Poogli, Doc?"

The roly-poly figure squirmed on the chrome stool. "It is true that these new dreams have a curious continuity but there is nothing in them that can't be explained within the boundaries of your early background and your recent experience. The childhood trauma of your father and mother being pursued and overwhelmed by a galloping mountain is suggestive."

"You mean the purple shapes of the Sacred Fishers?"

"Their size suggests that moving mountain, yes. And the impossibility of escape."

"Why the feeling of great expanses of space? I was myself, but suddenly I was so puny—like a bug to be stepped on!"

"That part's easy. You'd spent two years in the Centaur Project, facing a trek into incredible expanses where man has never gone before. The enormity of all that Great Unknown was thrust upon you; you lived with it night and day for all those months. Then there was the perfectly matter-of-fact warning that out there in deep space the Centaur ships were likely to encounter beings or forces that were utterly alien to anything man had ever encountered before."

"Doc, I'm not a fanciful kind of guy. I don't dig anything I can't see and understand and get my teeth into."

"Yet you were programmed under Centaur to be prepared for anything, no matter how weird or strange. That was plain hard-boiled fact. We don't know what is out there, and we have no reason to assume that life under alien stars developed exactly the way ours did. In fact, it's naive to imagine that it would, considering all the billions of evolutionary bypaths possible. The fact that you insisted on delineating your dream beings so carefully falls right in with what you said about not being fanciful. Your 'devouring mountains' had to be endowed with logical purpose, which in turn involved detail work supplied by your awed speculations on what you might find out there in Alpha Centauri."

"But I *didn't* speculate—"

"Yes, you did. You must have. And you heard your co-workers make wild postulations. It was inevitable! Any humorous little guess at what you might run into might have provided the seed for the whole preposterous civilization of Sacred Fishers!"

Don shrugged doubtfully. "Why crablike creatures?"

"Are they crablike?"

"I guess. I don't really know. They're too big to tell!"

"All right, to pluck a typical psychologist's rabbit out of your id, suppose when you were very young you watched live crabs being flung into boiling pots and somebody made some remark about crabs eating you for a change. You ate too much crab and got sick on it, had childish nightmares. Anything like that would do it. The time gas exploded some of those forgotten memories out of all proportion, much the way LSD or other

psychedelic drugs involve a fixation on a wallpaper pattern or a filament in a light bulb. Those random kernels were exploded out into a world beyond time and space, beyond our universe, in fact, by some quirk of the time gas which will take a long time to pin down exactly. I'm working on it. It might take me several lifetimes." Dr. Kelter looked glum about it.

Don scowled and looked at the gentle cleft of flesh where Donna Elena's neat green smock collar fanned out.

"How come I didn't dream Priestess Poogli before?"

"There had to be a catalyst, apparently. Some chemical stimulation of exactly the right kind that would catapult your mind into that oversize universe. My analysis of the exact chemical components of this catalyst suggests—"

"Vodka?" Don grinned.

Dr. Kelter's round face tried to glower angrily, and Don tried to look contrite.

"Think of it this way, Doc," he winced. "Two years with Centaur III and no alcohol allowed. I didn't even give in the day I found out I was washed out of the crew. Then all that agony in the space hospital and up here. You know how it is, or do you? All those months building bedsores gave me a prodigious thirst. Suddenly, after lying here at death's door so long and wishing somebody would push me through—I was out, feeling good, and free! I didn't mean to do it, honest, Doc—but there was that Christmas bottle of Smirnoffs gathering dust in the cupboard and—well, it happened, damn it!"

"Yes," Dr. Kelter said. "It happened." He added, with a malicious quirk, "Your punishment was self-contained within the fatal bottle."

Donna Elena put in, "At least the effects of the fatal bottle are about nil now, according to your last blood check. You ought to sleep like a baby tonight."

"Sleep?" The mere word tasted bad on his tongue. He roved a glance behind her at the cutout oblong of sky. By now it was almost of the same darkness as the ragged points of trees, the whole ghosted over by fog from off the sea some half-dozen miles away. Sleep... He felt an angry stab of jealousy for *them*. For all of the people down there in their smug little ranch-style houses. Going to bed to rest up from their honest toil, snoring, drooling, dreaming lascivious dreams about the latest sexpot. Waking up revitalized, ready to battle the new day's problems. Well, maybe they didn't all have it so good, but at least their dreams had some semblance of normalcy to them, not..

He faced Dr. Kelter sharply. "Doc, what am I?"

Dr. Kelter blinked. "What are you? Why—"

"No, I mean am I nuts? How do I classify?"

The moon face broke into a wide smile. "I hadn't thought about it, exactly. I'll pin it down if you like. Something on the order of reactive or toxic paranoia with a touch of catatonic obsessive minimania. I could dream up a dozen fifty-dollar words—but please, not *nuts*. Nuts means nothing at all. It's a relative condition, dependent on the environment at large."

"How's that?"

"Consider a typical 'well-balanced' human being of one or two thousand years ago suddenly thrust into our 1990 world. Quite apart from our artifacts and speeded-up environment, our everyday behavior would seem nuts to him. Same goes for one of us thrust a thousand years from now. Behavior patterns change. 'Normal' behavior now would be 'nuts', to

somebody from 999 A.D. Abnormal and even psychotic behavior so-called depends on what happens to be the current norm."

"Sounds like doubletalk to me," Don grunted.

"I'm asking you not to call yourself crazy," Dr. Kelter said patiently. "You are having delusions. It is serious. But we're working on it, Don. Ideally, you won't have any more...." He thrust out his lower lip in a characteristic cherubic scowl.

"What'd you mean—ideally?"

"We can't be sure, Don. Sometimes these things are easier started than stopped; sometimes they have to work themselves out by coming to a climax. I'm only telling you this to—"

"I know. To give my subconscious something to chew on. Just in case Priestess Poogli isn't quite through with me yet. I've got to bring myself around to poohpoohing her. Laughing at her." His grim was lopsided, tight. "See? I've read a couple books, too!"

Dr. Kelter stood up briskly and nodded at the girl to shut off the tape. He patted Don's arm. "Your attitude is good, Don. A little bitter, but that's to be expected. You don't know it but you're already fighting this thing inside. You'll lick it, too. The way I look at it, it's the last gasp of the time-gas effect on your brain cells and your neural system."

They started to leave. Don stared after them, gave a rough dry bark—"Doc"—just before the lab door closed.

The medic moved half back in. Don could hear the rumble of the taper-cart's wheels and the click of Donna Elena's heels receding toward the props room.

"Yes, Don?"

"One thing nags me."

"Yes?"

"That half-a-face tumbling down at me when the male servant shook the bowl. I knew the guy, Doc! I *knew* him!"

Dr. Kelter shrugged. "That's not so strange. Most of our dreams involve persons we know, even slightly. Sometimes of grotesque unlikely situations for them." His voice was gentle, casual. "Who was it, Don?"

"I can't remember, Doc! It bugs me, but I just can't put a name to it. My—something won't let me!"

7

"Well, Woeful Knight?"

Don snapped out of it when the girl's enamel-nailed forefinger jabbed his deltoid for the second time. He was still mulling and wincing over that familiar half-a-face and why his mind blocked off the name it should wear. He blinked and gave her a smile to thank her for coming back in to read him to sleep. To face the enemy of night alone with this on his mind was something that shriveled his viscera, no matter how hard he tried to laugh it off

"Yes, yes. What wilt, my Lady Dulcinea?"

She dropped her armload of books on the chrome bed table. "What would you like tonight?"

He gave her a wicked look. "Such as—"

"Such as what shall I read you. By the way, I'm going to sleep in here tonight. I'll curl up in that big chair by the window."

"Why not...?"

She shrugged off his pouncing grip with a laugh. "Why not tell me which book? *Huckleberry Finn*, mayhap, my Lord? How about the *Odyssey*?"

"All those one-eyed giants and saucy sirens! What are you trying to do to me? Drive me nuts? Doc says I'm not. Let's keep it that way." He browsed through the heterogeneous selection with mock seriousness.

"Lemme see. Here we are! Just the thing to go with all that bland pabulum you dish out, Lady Dulcinea. *The Bobbsey Twins on Happy Island!*"

He handed her the copy of *Don Quixote* from under his pillows. Donna Elena took it gravely and settled herself in the bedside chair. Don hiked himself up and closer.

"Where did we leave off last time?" she asked, cracking open the green-and-gold buckram and flicking through the large fine paper pages and the Mueller engravings.

"I think there's a Juicy Fruit wrapper at Book Four."

"Ah, yes. Book Four. 'The Pleasant New Adventure the Curate and Barber Met With in Sierra Morena, or Black Mountain.'" She paused and frowned slightly over Mountain, as a *verboden* reminder of childhood terrors. Don affected not to notice her pause.

"Well?"

She flashed him a red-lipped smile. "Comfy?"

"Like a bug in a—never mind. Read, madam, read!"

" '...for from his generous resolution to revive and restore the ancient order of knight-errantry...' " The low musical timbre of her voice, with a hint of Spanish accent to give the subject matter added piquancy, was a caressing balm on Don's nerves. After ten minutes the meaning of the words blurred into familiar mental ruts, but it didn't matter in the least. The dulcet lilt of her voice speaking them kept him poised on the lip of sleep so they would not vanish altogether.

Why can't I remember his name? a needle-thought jabbed in. He forced it away. When his eyelids drowsed and drooped, he saw racing flecks of light fly past like stars. It was as if he were flying through the void and the dazzle of capillary patterns on his eyelids were alien suns blurred by starship speed. They turned into little stilettos stabbing painfully into his brain, as if to leak out bits of secret knowledge he didn't want to know about.

He made a flying snatch out into those stars.

"I know who it was," he mumbled. "It was..."

"Are you asleep, darling?" Donna Elena's voice was sharp with the worry she'd kept hidden behind that full-lipped smile and airy bravado. Don jerked up from his droop.

"Yeah. I mean, Aye, Lady Dulcinea. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"You mumbled something about—"

"Forget it. Read on, sweet Lady!"

She pulled in a taut breath of air before she continued: " 'Body of me, Sir Don Quixote,' cried Sancho, touched to the quick. 'How is it possible you should stick at striking a bargain with so great a Lady?' "

So great a Lady.

" 'Fortune puts such dainty bits easily in your way out of the very air, perhaps?' "

Dainty bits out of the very air.

" 'I have fed myself with hopes, yet you spend your time in fishing for tidbits from the bottom of the sea. Hold Sire! ' "

Fishing for tidbits from the bottom of the sea.

Don's eyelids fell shut with a silent thud. A plateful of fish wriggled helplessly in front of him, on the membrane of his retina. One by one these fish were being daintily nipped up and eaten. Finally there was only one fish left. A fish with half its face torn away. But the half that was left was a face he knew. Donna Elena's soothing voice washed over him like a warm tide, ebbing, flowing, ebbing; then, quite suddenly, it was gone.

"*Are we finally agreed? Is this Holy Diet at an end at last?*" The voice boomed like thunder across the Temple and across Don's doppelganger mind.

"Yes, Priestess Poogli. The Sacred Seventy are in accord. However, let us review. By this latest allonge to the Sacred Covenant Priestess Poogli agrees to permit an all-out food-netting in her newly discovered preserve at the bottom of our universe. All Seventy Systems will send their prime Sacred Fishers on this Sacred Expedition. Further, Priestess Poogli agrees not to hold back any Sacred Food. Equal distribution of Food has always been our strongest tenet. If our civilization has any hope of enduring, if we are to avoid a recurrence of the pandemoniac Cannibal Wars, we must continue to rely on this Holy Dictum. Furthermore..."

Don had no trouble distinguishing Priestess Poogli's booming voice. *"Sisters, it was my Fisher Kleeng who opened up this new source of Sacred Food. Minuscule as the Wrighglers are, they will serve to revitalize our Sacred selves and our Fishers until new sources of supply can be discovered, perhaps in this same insignificant micro-universe."*

"We know that, Sister."

"Then I should be allowed first choice!"

"But that might lead to a wild disparity of—"

"—and suppose the Wrighglers she leaves are even smaller than this miserable specimen!"

The stormy shock wave that ensued flailed Don's mind like suns crashing in on him, He wanted to clap his hands over his ears, as if that would help any; but of course he couldn't, not with his wrists bound so tightly and suspended as he was from a hook on a kind of dais at the center of the Temple, where the Sacred Priestesses could all give him a critical once-over. He had wakened, as from a long sick fault, to find himself hanging limp as a rag from a kind of ornamental scaffold with lights glaring down from above, a circle of them, so that when he swayed, his radiating shadow-spokes on the altar surface below him swung, too. He moaned and tried to glare his feeble defiance up at the unseen giant shapes beyond the circle of lights. Somehow the torture of having his arms gradually pulled out of their bone sockets was less than the fury of those massed voices sweeping wildly across his mind from every direction. His sweat dripped on the round altar from the light heat.

"Get it over with, damn you all!" he screamed weakly.

His plea was a mere mouse squeak, and it was ignored. The angry thought-voices continued their furor while Don hung and half-fainted, only to be brought to by the incessant pound of those unheard thunders pressing him in on all sides.

At last it was over. The bursting thunder subsided reluctantly.

"We are finally agreed?"

"Yes. Let the Sacred Scribe so enter the terms of the Sacred Food Expedition into the Holy Covenant, stating exactly what Priestess Poogli's

'first choice' signifies."

"And what it does not signify," one voice ventured. There was no answer.

"If times were not so hard, if we might reserve some of the Wrigglers—half, say—for purposes of breeding and multiplication, we might —"

"No, Sister! The need is far too urgent!"

"I said if, Sister! I quite agree that we cannot make any such arrangement at this critical stage. Forget that I mentioned it." The High Priestess's voice softened to a windy coo. "Rest assured, Priestess Poogli. Your perspicacity in engineering the discovery of the Wrigglers—"

"Together with my Fisher Kleeng."

A noticeable coolness. "As you say. But he is a mere male, and of no significance. Your feminine intuition and genius will never be forgotten while the Seventy Systems endure. Your glorious nosing out of Sacred Food will be sung across the beam labyrinths until the end of time itself. Sainthood, I must add, is assured. I shall set up the processes of canonization forthwith. You have saved us all, Priestess Poogli!"

There was a tempest of agreement.

Priestess Poogli was modestly silent. Don sensed surging emotion.

"What about the specimen hanging here?"

"That," thundered the High Priestess, *"is Priestess Poogli's. The dainty tidbit still lives; therefore it is still Sacred. Priestess Poogli, will you kindly honor us and solemnize the successful termination of this Holy Diet by eating this Wiggler?"*

The purple cloud loomed close. Don could feel the wind her sacred claw created as it came down at him, There was nothing he could do. Nothing.

8

His escape this time came by water. He found himself being dunked upside-down into the North Atlantic Ocean, with the occasional variation of having his head banged against the underside of an ice floe.

"Don!" a mock-sad voice screamed from a long way off. "Please come out of it! My God! Don—*please!*"

He straggled toward the voice while some perverse imp inside of him said, A plague on both worlds. To hell with everybody. He'd take nothingness. It didn't hurt so much. But his crafty sojourn in limbo didn't work, either. They had other devices for snatching him back into the land of the living—hot horrors they slammed against his chest, more icebergs.

"I think the alternate heat and cold is working, Donna!" a second voice remarked. "Try the ice pack again. I'll keep massaging his arms and legs. God! They're like lead. But we've got to get the circulation going!"

"Doctor, I'm so tired. I could drop dead."

"I know. It's been so long. But I think he's starting to react. I really think we're almost there. Keep going!"

Ice cold. Hades heat. Flailings.

"Look at his wrists! What are those red rings?"

"Cinctures. As if his wrists had been tied together. And pulled. Yes! Notice the direction of the stress? It's as if he had been tied by the wrists and then suspended from —Lord knows. His arm muscles are drawn tight. The tendons at the joints." A low between-the-teeth whistle.

"Doctor—what does it mean?"

"They're kinesthetic stigmata. Much like that horrible smell he gets. Curious. Notice the elongation of tendons in the *fascia latii* and—"

"What can we do?"

"Nothing, obviously. Just what we are doing. Wake him out of his comatose state. Stop bawling and realize that all this is happening inside of his mind. Look—he's waking up. His heartbeat's increasing. Doubling, in fact. He's coming 'round."

"But—"

"Look, Donna! The stigmatic marks are fading! His mouth muscles are beginning to twitch. Like last time. Notice the down-drawing grimace as if—"

"As if he were trying to scream," Donna Elena's voice sobbed. "He's been *there* again!"

After an eon or so Don was able to force open his eyes; he still couldn't unglue his locked jaws nor turn and look at them. He could just lie there and stare up at the black beige ceiling and feel the warmth of life crawl slowly through his arteries to the ends of his long arms and legs. When the musculature of his lower face and his neck tore loose from its corpse-like rigor, he let fly a wild, passionate shriek, but it came out like a rattling gurgle deep inside his parched throat. From far away he heard the girl cry out as she flung herself down on him with Latin abandon. The flower scent of her perfumed hair cut back the slaughterhouse effluvium as with a knife. The warmth of her breasts and her heart beating against his exorcized Priestess Poogli completely.

Aware suddenly of her indecorous conduct, Donna Elena moved back, shamefaced. Don stared at her with love and protest, cracking his neck to keep her haggard face within sight. He caught sight of the white lab table on wheels by the chrome night stand. It was crammed with ice packs, electric pads, and a small pharmacy. Swinging his look up, he saw Dr. Kelter hovering about. His round face, too, showed the ravages of the long bedside vigil.

They were either too exhausted themselves to prod him about his latest nightmare or still anxious about his welfare. Dr. Kelter made his physical assessments of Don's condition silently, and, Don thought, a little shakily from lack of sleep.

Only later, after Donna Elena had forced him to down a light breakfast and three cups of sanku (he made her eat half of the light-scrambled eggs and crisp bacon) did the inquisition begin.

"Feel better?" Dr. Kelter asked for openers.

"Better than you look," Don grinned. "These acid trips sure take it out of a guy."

"I only wish it were something that simple," the psychiatrist grumbled. "With any of those hallucinatory drugs, we know pretty well where we stand by now. You, my friend, are a phenomenon for the books. Your brain is terra incognita at this stage."

"Little did I dream when I first entered that gloomy old mind," Don quipped.

Dr. Kelter forced a tired smile. "And how was Priestess Poogli?"

"Fine. They're going to make her a saint. By discovering the new source of Sacred Food—us—she has saved her whole great civilization from doom and destruction, cannibal style." Don whistled and combed his fingers across his beard. "Never thought about it before, but when a race, however

great, begins to run out of food, eating each other is the penultimate answer."

"Of course. Instinct for survival comes first." He took time to adjust the tape recorder Donna Elena had wheeled in. "So they had their Holy Diet?"

"Yeah. They had it. I was the center of attraction, as a matter of fact. They had me strung up by the wrists on top of their altar like a—whaddyacallit—in the Catholic and Protestant churches?"

"Host. *Panis angelicus*. The true body and blood of the Savior. There is a curious twisted parallel here. Tell me, Don, did you attend church regularly as a child? I know from your later records that you don't now. You're sort of a heathen...."

"Agnostic," Don corrected. "I believe in something, but I find it hard to pin it down to any of the organized religions, beautiful as they are. As for when I was a kid—not much. My parents were much like I am now. They believed in a God of some kind. They just didn't label Him to suit their convenience. If you're thinking of church ritual and all that, forget it. I never went in for it."

"Just a thought. Go on. Tell us about the Diet."

Don told everything, bluntly, matter-of-factly, keeping the inner torments back as much as he could. Still, when he remembered Priestess Poogli's claw coming down to snatch him, a sense of horror overtook him; he stiffened and then shivered, fear of the black unfaceable lashing out of his eyes. To offset it, Dr. Kelter thrust in an impressive array of psychiatric explanations of each phase of his dream, concluding, "I'm inclined to believe we've seen the last of Priestess Poogli, Donald."

"Yes?" Don's tone held doubt.

"Don't you see? I mentioned a climax. Having the Priestess devour you is it. You can't very well dream any more after being ingested into that sacred stomach, can you?"

Don gave Donna Elena a hopeful grin. "Doc, tell me about the Diet? Where'd I pick up that concept?"

"Probably in your high school history books. A diet is a legislative assembly. The expression is Germanic in origin, I believe. It's usually associated with the name of the city where it is held—the famous Diet of Worms, for example."

"Yuk!" Donna Elena popped. "Excuse my scrambled eggs!"

"Please, Doc. Not so soon after eating."

"You asked me and I told you," Dr. Kelter smiled.

"Okay. So drop it already. But you do think the whole thing's over now that she gobbled me up?"

"Yes."

"How about the Seventy Systems and their Sacred Expedition down the rathole to net us all up? How about that for a climax?"

Dr. Kelter's eyebrow tilted thoughtfully. He got up and began to pace the cubicle. Three steps to the lab door, three steps back. Don and Donna Elena exchanged grimaces and waited. Finally the psychiatrist mumbled something to the girl about removing the breakfast dishes so that the housekeeper, Mrs. Grenfell, could take care of them, adding some further instructions for the rawboned old valley woman whose husband, Jake, took care of the grounds and the garden and occasional minor building repairs.

"You didn't answer my question, Doc," Don prompted after some more paced silence.

Dr. Kelter whirled. "How the devil do I know?" he demanded crankily. "I

wish you would confine your dreams to personalities, not star-flung racial groups." He moved back to the bed, massaging his hands and forcing a contrite if gloomy smile. "Actually, we all take a crack at the end-of-the-world guessing game some time or other. It's there crouching in the back of all our minds, especially since we contrived a way of doing it ourselves."

"And almost did, before what they used to call the Major Powers stopped feuding." Don was silent for a moment. "Guess in the face of all that unknown out there we lost our little local grudges. So now we have to guess the end coming from Out There someplace, and that's what I did? What'd you call that, Doc?"

"Fixative paralogia or..." The psychiatrist shrugged.

"More fifty-buck lingo, eh? And my serialized delusions have run out, you think?"

"I hope they have. I'll do everything I can to prevent more. Lord!" He brushed a shaky hand across his eyes. "They're beginning to get to me!"

"You're just tired. Why not flake out a couple of hours at least? You'll be on your own couch if you don't let up a little. Call in some more help."

The moon-round face cracked a genuine smile. "I honestly believe we're in home stretch, Don. I will get some rest. I will. But first—I want to organize my thoughts on the new material for a little bit longer. Donna!" He called her twice through the open lab door before she showed up with a cup of coffee, this time for him. She pressed it into his hand and made him take his seat again next to the tape machine.

"I'll give you just ten minutes, Doctor," she said severely, consulting her watch. "I don't want two patients on my hands."

"Now..." Dr. Kelter spoke to the machine, not them. "What have we got? A vast—ah—macrocosmic universe of beings who bear the relationship to humans that we bear to, say, shrimps. To them we are hors d'oeuvres, living as we do in a minor-league universe. They have degenerated to racial cannibalism due to the fact that they have eaten their own star systems dry. We know that in their balmier days they possessed great scientific knowledge because of the Labyrinths of Beams by which means they are able to travel from one star system to another. However, most of their other knowledge has been lost along the wayside in their search for food. Only certain dybospheric self-reproducing machines related to interstellar travel remain. The female of the species is always the hardier, so the females have taken charge of things. Food has become their religion."

"Wow!" Don whistled. "What an imagination! Ever think of writing for TV?"

"I'm only collating the building blocks you provided. The race has dwindled perilously, due to a series of Cannibal Wars. A group of females, shrewder than the rest, have designated themselves Priestesses, setting up a religion that glorifies food and makes them sacred. I see them as a greedy, long-lived race when properly fed, and *live* food seems to have the effect of keeping them living. Males have degenerated into servants and are expendable. They've become like puny satellites around that great bulk which is the Priestess and ruling authority of each star system. There are seventy star systems. While the Priestesses grow larger, the males atrophy and die out. Lack of proper food has taken away their virility; in fact the Priestesses are self-propagating. The only exception to what was formerly a sex-partnership procreation system not too unlike our own is that of Priestess Poogli and Fisher Kleeng. There's something between those two.

Perhaps Priestess Poogli is a throwback and senses somehow that this latter-day monosexuality is like a last gasp of a dying civilization and that, food or no food, unless there is a return to the duosexual era, the race of Sacred Fishers is doomed. But this is her secret—hers and Fisher Kleeng's."

"Doc," Don grinned. "I didn't tell you all that!"

"Of course you did! Anyway, do you think psychiatry works by slide rule and computer, like mathematics? Not at all. We psychologists have to have imagination, if only to keep pace with what we dredge up out of the minds we investigate. I'm used to this little game. Your dreamworld, I'll have to admit, is remarkably well defined."

"Glad you like it, Doc. Any more?"

"I could write a book. I might just do that. "

Donna Elena pointed at her watch. "Five minutes to beddybye, Leonard."

The psychiatrist's eyes had a far-off glow. "I like the part about the impinging universes and their variance in size. Seems to be some kind of membrane separating them; Fisher Kleeng had to break through that thin place at the bottom of their macro-universe like a Norwegian fisherman breaking through the ice in the wintertime to drop down his line. Kleeng seemed to have more on the ball than the other Sacred Fishers. That, no doubt, is partially because Priestess Poogli feeds him better and because he has an incentive the others don't have. Anyway, he was lucky. He managed to net up three metal containers of Wrigglers, which he brought back to her like a well-trained retriever."

"Why don't the Fishers just eat whatever they find themselves?"

"Their religion forbids it. Also, if they get caught *they* get eaten. There's always somebody drooling on the sidelines; apparently even the cannibalism taboo is enforced only to keep the race surviving."

"Horrible!" Donna Elena shuddered.

"Not at all, viewed objectively. Survival is the primary law of any species. Our primitives gave offerings of food to their gods, praying for bountiful harvests."

"But—the casual way they do it!" the girl protested. "Treating us like—like *huîtres à l'écaille*. Coolly discussing recipes and holding Holy Diets!"

"You're from Mazatlan," Dr. Kelter smiled. "Famous for shrimp and lobster, I believe. Oysters, too. They're delicious fresh out of the sea. Raw. Live."

Donna Elena mumbled something about never again.

"Anyway," Don said brightly, "we got a right to be proud!"

"Why?"

"We," he bragged, "we are *kosher!*"

9

After he had put in his half-hour stint of exercises and showered, Don got dressed, selecting a loud red sportshirt to go with the brown slacks from the neat plastic bag of dry cleaning Mrs. Grenfell had brought up with her and left, with the broad hint that if he'd absent himself she could finish tidying up. At least he wasn't bedridden. There was that about having his illness confined to his cortex. He was poised at the open window, squinting out with relish at the golden autumn day. The inevitable morning fogs had evaporated; the redwood and cedar and woodfern were awash with light

and color.

"Come on in, Mrs. Grenfell," he called at the light knock. "I'm decent."

It was Donna Elena. She was wearing a bright jonquil and white pinafore affair and she was beautiful. An hour's sleep had softened the blue patches under her eyes and a touch of makeup had put warm color where needed to accent the pallor. For the first time in months Don knew himself to be a man again. He moved over to her and grabbed her hands, grinning down at her to savor the happy hunger in her eyes. He took her in his arms, then, with sudden diffidence, he kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"It's a gorgeous day. Let's take a walk, shake the snakes out of our hair."

"Leonard might need me."

"Leonard might grow another head. C'mon!"

Her eyes danced. "I'll just get a sweater and a scarf. It gets windy up here. You better put on your topcoat."

Don grinned at her motherly anxiousness as he got out his ancient leather jacket that had done yeoman service from South Asia to the moon and had the cracks and small indeterminate blotches on it to prove it.

Donna Elena's sweater wasn't inordinately tight but it did things for her, and the perky yellow scarf over her dark brown hair gave her a little girl look. He gave her an open leer as he zipped up the leather jacket and then grabbed her hand.

"We'll sneak out the back. We might just find us a split-level cave and never come back." He gave his beard a Mephistophelean curl.

They moved out of the rear door past the garbage pails and wooden bunker of dusty pharmaceutical bottles. Donna Elena led the way down the flagstones that led through the garden. Don swept an exultant look across the heights, the gently rocking branches tipped with reflected silver, the wide drop of forested terrain that led to an unseen creek far below, the outcroppings of rock that forced the little private road around the low white building's front side into a bouncy snake dance of twists and curves.

Moisture was still steaming off the graveled clearing and the fenced-in patches of herbs and flowers. Off in the pines a chipmunk scolded, and from far below came the drone of a circular saw; some ambitious retiree who had taken to the woods was piling up firewood against the rainy winter evenings ahead.

Don drank in the beauty with all of his senses. Delusions of special horrors simply couldn't exist under the impact of nature in full majesty. This wonderful green planet moved serenely and splendidly in the middle of the great cosmic mobile, as it always had and always would. Priestess Poogli was a gag; the whole thing was too laughable to be scary. It was for kids, kids and psychiatrists who doted on mental quirks.

Hand in hand like teenagers, they swung down the dogleg of garden around Don's el-cubicle. Off to their left was the shake-roof carport with Dr. Kelter's VW bus in it and Donna Elena's maroon-colored Ford. Jake Grenfell's jeep was carelessly slapped under a natural ceiling of high redwoods onto flattened weeds, although Jake himself was not in evidence. His missus had probably driven it up alone; Jake was not above sleeping in or goldbricking while his wife bore the burden of feeding their step-ladder of seven kids.

Don reached down and plucked a small pale blue gardenia-like bloom from a lacquered green shrub, "What's with the garden?" he asked.

"Don't you like flowers?"

"Sure. Why not? Just never stayed in one place-long enough to watch them sprout up."

"You ought to. There's a joy to gardening that's mighty rare in this world of—of greedy, self-centered people. You know what the French say. 'If you want to be happy for a day, get drunk. If you want to be happy for a year, get married. If you want to be happy all your life, be a gardener.' That shrub with the waxy green leaves and the delicate blooms is very hardy. Grows fast up here. Maybe that's why it's called 'impatiens'."

"Kind of suitable for a hospital, eh? This garden is your idea, then?"

"No. Not really. I just added a few flowers because I love them. Fills in my spare time. Not much to do up here in the hills. Actually, Leonard bedded in pharmaceutical plants for his experiments. That scroungy bush over there is marijuana."

"Hey! Good thing the local pothounds are not on to what gives up here!"

Donna Elena laughed. "We also have, or have had, peyote, *hyoscyamus*, stramonium and opium poppies. Plus other types of narcosis inducers and hallucinatory botanicals. Dr. Kelter has written seven books on his experiments with these and the synthesized hallucinogens. When he got his permits to grow them I pointed out that camouflaging them with geranium and 'poor man's orchid' would keep our occasional snoopers from getting ideas. Also they're labeled in code and kept under severe surveillance."

Don chuckled. "How about you and me taking a trip some black night?"

She made a sour face. "As if you didn't have all the trip trouble one human brain can handle," she said softly. They had reached the serpentine roadcrest. "Now where?"

"Down."

"Maybe we'd better let Leonard know before we go too far."

Don snorted. "Think of it this way, Lady Dulcinea. I'm your charge, right? You have got to keep me in line, right?"

She nodded. "I guess so, but—"

"Well then, c'mon. I'm going down to the crossroads and see the bright lights. All three of 'em. Coming?"

It was late afternoon by the time they slunk guiltily down the back hall toward Don's cubicle. Dr. Kelter met them inside; his face was a storm.

"Where in hell have you two been all this time? I was about to phone the Highway Patrol to start searching the gulley." His accusing look was aimed at the girl. "Donna, you know better."

"Take it easy, Doc," Don soothed. "First ray of sunshine I've had in months. You want me to crawl up out of the quagmires, don't you? Well. We walked hours. Ended up at the Crossroads Cafe for hamburgers and cokes. We played the jukebox. Had a regular bacchanale."

Dr. Kelter whirled on the girl, who was swiftly unbuttoning her sweater and trying to look severe and contrite and not giggle at Don's dancing performance of their wild ball.

"Cokes!"

Don shrugged. "I happen to like cokes,"

"Why didn't you phone me? I'd have driven down to pick you up,"

"We wanted to hike back," Don grinned. "It took longer'n I figured, but then there were those rest stops. Ah, those beautiful rest stops!" He gave Donna Elena a wink and a leer. "By the way, you owe the Crossroads Cafe two bucks for the hamburgers and cokes. I had two of each. The super

deluxe ones."

"Two cokes!"

Donna Elena faced him and now she gave a brief gasp. "My God, I didn't think!"

"What is all this?" Don demanded.

"Leonard," Donna Elena said meekly, "all I thought of was snapping Don out of his nightmares. Pushing them back as long as possible. I forgot! I didn't think! I just—"

"Will somebody interpret, *por favor*?"

Donna Elena wagged dolefully while she wrapped on her green smock. "It's the cokes, Don. They have caffeine in them. Any kind of stimulant is taboo for you yet. I should have remembered, but I was being human and having such an innocent good time—and so happy to see you happy."

Dr. Kelter gave her a swift look and a sigh, herding Don in the direction of his bed. "Don't you see, Don? You are still riding a bicycle on a two-inch rail over a yawning chasm. Any cortical jar or jerk could send you wobbling over the edge."

Don nodded slowly, unzipping his jacket and tossing it on the nearest chair. "I get it. But—hey! If vodka is a depressant and caffeine is a stimulant, wouldn't caffeine have the effect of nullifying the effects the liquor had on me? I mean—"

"I know what you mean. What do you think I've been working on while you were out balling it up? Only I prefer to trust your sanity to formal chemotherapy rather than to commercial bottled products. Go to bed!"

The Knight of the Woeful Figure was risking durance vile in his efforts to save Dorothea (Book Seven), and Sancho's ears were, Cervantes said, hung upon her sidesaddle while she coughed and fluttered in feminine confusion from her mule's back before she began her sad, preposterous story. Don Quixote was starting to remove his clothes to see if, indeed, he did possess a tawny mole like unto a horse's mane (under his left shoulder) when...

"Time for your shot." Dr. Kelter moved in and across the room like a nemesis. "Roll over."

Don obeyed with reluctance. The hypodermic needle struck home. He grunted, then yawned, rubbing the sore spot while he flopped over. "On the whole, I prefer cokes," he groused.

Donna Elena had turned away and was waiting by the door; a new demureness had crept into her nurse's efficiency. Now she came over and planted a swift little kiss on his forehead.

"Sleep tight. You ought to, after that long hike."

"You get some sleep, too."

"I intend to. Right over there by the window."

Dr. Kelter objected, but she was adamant. She had done the wrong thing by permitting Don to indulge in taboo stimulants, and she intended to make up for her laxity in every way she could. She was tiny. The wicker chair was comfortable, honest.

"Go to sleep," she commanded after Dr. Kelter had shrugged and left.

"I'll just finish this chapter," Don nodded. He watched her swing provocatively to her post by the window, plump up the nest of cushions, and pull the plaid woolen car rug over her lissome legs; then he swung back to *Don Quixote*. The Don and his servant were punning about size. The Knight was preening his ego on having merited the esteem of such a high

lady as Dulcinea del Toboso. Sancho quipped, "There you have hit on it, Sire. She is high indeed. Taller than I am by a handsbreadth." When the Don asked how Sancho had managed such an accurate measurement, Sancho told him about lifting a sack of wheat on an ass for the High Lady and being close to her, thus finding her to be taller than he by a full span.

Big. Small. Sizes...

Don's mind lingered on telescopic-microscopic concepts while he forced back a jaw-snapping yawn. Whatever was in the Doc's new drugs seemed to be pinpointing one small section of his mind, thesaurus-like. Or maybe it was the coke. Idle ideas kept flashing up out of the deep ocean of his unconscious, hints of vast cosmic truths.

"Yeah," he murmured sleepily. "Priestess Poogli and the Sacred Fishers are big, and so by taking a drug that squeezes my mind super-small instead of exploding it super-big... Hey, Lady Dulcinea!"

He yelled out the sobriquet. Nothing. He whistled. Nothing. He whistled louder.

"Are you awake?" It was the standard recipe for waking somebody up and it worked again.

"I will be," Donna Elena groaned. "Just give me a minute to force my eyes open."

"Never mind. You need the sleep. I'm a pig. It's just I got this wild idea and I wanted to check it out with you."

"Give me a minute. Just a minute, darling."

Don smiled and shut up. His hiked glance showed her all curled up in the great chair like a golden kitten. Or a doll. Unlike Lady Dulcinea del Toboso, Don's Lady Dulce was small, dainty, diminutive, tiny, miniature, animalcular, microscopic, sub-molecular...

10

"What is it? What is it? What what what what what what!"

They were like insects, frightened little insects. Their buzzing voices were burrs roweling his eardrums. He didn't understand the language, only the panic, but he could intuit their frantic excitement into the obvious question, especially when he bent down to peer through the morning mists and *saw*. It was cold way up here above the snow-tipped mountains, standing astride the peaks like a titan. He shivered. Then he forgot his bodily discomfort in wonder and amazement, realizing where he was—and what.

He blinked down into the wide green valley. It was a beautiful valley, lush with vegetation. It stretched off toward the rising sun. A river like molten silver meandered busily through wide cultivated fields in the direction of a towered city. The city seemed to be quivering with hysterical haste into dawn activity. At the center of the city their uprising metropolitan area pointed proudly at the last stars as they winked out. The alien skyscrapers were knitted together by a complex system of steel ribbons and causeways strung with bands of light; by degrees this ambitious megalopolis dwindled to minor city ganglias and then multiple dwellings interspersed with patterned gardens.

Don gaped and gasped. His limitless vision made him dizzy from what it implied. He could feel the green earthlike planet moving underfoot; the sudden-rising sun glared in his eyes on the palpable curvature of the

horizon. He raised an arm to shield his eyes from the ever-increasing wash of sun. He rocked and teetered, digging his bare toes into the wrinkles of the hills far below so that he wouldn't tumble and shake this world on its axis. When he managed to bend at the hips again and whip a cautious peek down closer in, he saw that the blue forests bristled around him like hairbrushes. The grain and vegetable fields looked not unlike something he might see from a helicopter scouting leisurely over Kansas or Colorado on a bright June morning. A long, divided turnpike highway cut a wide swath along the rambling river toward the city, bridging it at times. There were vehicles moving along it.

"Where am I?" he shouted. What clutched at his bowels and sent him spinning again was not the sight of the little peoplelike creatures gathering below him in anxious wondering knots, but the massive pastel blue pylons shoving down to either side of the frosted range of mountains, the river, the highway. The stocky, fabricked pylons terminated in great pinkish objects with five digits apiece splaying out before them.

"My feet!" Don yelled. "They're my feet! My legs! This time *I'm* the monster!"

There was no doubt about it. Pinching himself and studying the wide-flung area from every sweeping angle (careful not to move his feet for fear of causing more havoc than he already had) only confirmed the facts. The country citizens of this pint-sized planet were foregathering and cluttering fearfully while they waited for the bigwigs from the city to get here and do something about the sudden giant.

Don grinned and took a moment out to enjoy being Colossus of Rhodes. It was a nice change from Priestess Pogli and her entourage. He breathed in great lungfuls of the clean mountain air, which had a spicy fragrance to it. Luckily, he thought, these little creatures lived on a planet much like earth, which they had developed along humanoid lines; they looked, when he squinted closer, like fleshed-out tinker toys with great round heads and the bilateral symmetry of *Homo Sapiens*. Two arms. Two eyes. Two ears. Two legs, which made good time loping into hiding when the giant face weaved ponderously to brush the mountain peaks with its incredible nose.

Oh, well. Don straightened up, sighed. Give them a chance to get used to him. Show them by his actions that he wasn't a menace of any kind.

He turned his attention to the phenomenon of the fast-moving sun. It was halfway to the meridian by now; and even while he watched it, squinting from the dazzle, it hit high noon, and presently long-shadowed late afternoon, and then evening. Stars sprang into being; they, too, moved across the cobalt backdrop of heaven, alien and splendid, as if Don were standing alone in the middle of a terran observatory with the planetarium programmed to turn earth hours into moments. The air was thin up here. The stars were diamond sharp. But they were unfamiliar stars, and there was no satellite moon.

He got tired about midnight. He yawned and thought he would find some clearing where he could stretch out for a while. Too late. A thick stream of larger vehicles of various shapes were already moving out from the city toward him. Some of them had searchlights on their backs and were playing them across his legs and torso. The cascade of lights continued to move throughout the night, until the fields around him were crammed. Like the sun and the planet, the little people moved fast. In direct proportion. His minutes were their hours, and they were not wasting time. The monster had to be dealt with at once!

He couldn't move or sit without causing a good deal of death and destruction. They might look like Jerusalem crickets from up here, but they wore clothes, drove machines, and they had built themselves that fine city. No. His left foot was asleep from cramp, but the best he could do was raise it slightly and wriggle his toes. Otherwise, he must stand pat and see what happened. They were intelligent. Surely they would try to communicate with him before attempting to kill him! Why, on *earth*... On earth *what*? On earth it was highly likely a creature of this size would, out of fear, be shot down on sight. Don could only hope that these little humanoids were less aggressive and less fearful. That they hadn't shown their military might yet was surely a favorable sign. In any case, he must wait. He must not make any overt move or the weapons on those vehicles would start blasting!

He waited, swinging his arms briskly to keep the circulation pumping.

This single two-hour night had wrought miraculous changes in the bucolic green valley. Great land vessels of a scientific or military nature made a wide semicircle around him. Buses of many sizes had moved out of the city with various loads of land warriors and scientists and politicians and the merely curious. He saw banks of vis-cameras aimed up at him behind the bristle of guns. Temporary stands had been constructed, including a speaking platform. Don took a wild guess that some of the machines lined up on the hasty scaffolding were involved with communication. Those swinging radar-antenna-machines must have to do with an attempt by the bustling scientists among them to find out where he had come from and what he was doing there. The guns were for after, or in case....

He yawned and scratched his beard, watching the flunkies move about their nth-hour tasks under the direction of crickets who could only be the planet's top science or military geniuses. His cheeks burned at such a display of his importance. A cocky sense of exhilaration welled up in him despite the muzzles of those weapons being wheeled into place. He was too big and they were too small.

Yet watching them gather and dart and swell was something like watching yeast cells multiply under a microscope. Sidewalk superintendents were still streaming out from the city in a ferment of curiosity that overrode their fear of the giant; the military was having a hard time keeping the crowds from bursting through the cordon laced around the guns and the scientific devices.

"Don't be scared of me," Don whispered down. "I know how I must look to you, but I wouldn't hurt any of you. Honest." He sucked in an awed breath at what a couple of well-placed kicks of his giant foot could do. Send the whole elaborate schmeer tumbling downriver.

He squatted carefully, very carefully and very slowly. He put his giant palms on his giant knees. "I just want a closer look is all," he told them. They couldn't understand the words, but perhaps the scientists behind all those antennalike machines could appreciate his attempt to keep his giant voice at a low and soothing timbre.

Two of the crickets behind the guns panicked. The weapon muzzles puffed smoke, there was a double high-pitched boom, and Don felt the sting of bullets strike his right calf.

"Hey! Take it easy!" The missiles cut skin and hurt, but they would have to do better than that. Don hoped they couldn't, although something told him they could. This was at-a-moment's-notice stuff. The big guns would come later. Perhaps these man-crickets were peaceloving folk and used

weapons only defensively; perhaps the need for them had dwindled down to the nub and those weapons represented mere relics of earlier, more aggressive eras.

It was a hope.

"Creature!"

The voice rang out sharp and clear against the momentary silence that followed the gunfire. There had been no move on the giant's part to retaliate against them, only that understandable yell of protest. The voice came out of the radar-antenna-looking machines. They were amplifiers of some kind, and the machines that fed them not only amplified the speaker's words to the giant's acoustical level but also elongated the sonics and translated them in some way, having dipped out the wherewithal from Don's brain. Such mind-to-mind translators, involving a vast but finite number of idea-concepts, were already in the works at the World Space Complex for use in dealing with presumptive intelligences in other sun systems.

It took a while and Don waited. He blinked down at the curving shelter behind which most of the cricklets had fled. He grinned to see that one little humanoid, bolder than the others, strutted in front of the translator-computer, waving a spindly arm up at Don to indicate his desire to communicate.

Don waved back and said, "Hi!"

"Hi to you, Creature! As you can see for yourself, we are a highly technical race and you had better take care what further depredations you cause among us if you don't wish to be destroyed, big as you are!"

"Further depredations?" Don blurted. "I did nothing."

"Didn't you, Creature? You slew no less than seventeen of our citizens when you fell onto our planet, not to mention the destruction of farming property and livestock!"

Don blinked. "Where are they?"

"Under your feet!"

"I'm sorry," Don said. "I really am. I didn't mean to do it, honest."

Now one of the other machines was wheeled in front of the little complainant, a light flashed on, and Don saw his face leap close by means of a magnifying device of some kind. The head was hairless, unless the bristling cat-whiskers leaping to either side of the round lipless mouth were hair. The eyes were serrate and multiple, and the forward-sloping forehead wore a medal of some kind at the center. The medal was inscribed and glowed with lambent sapphiric fire. This was no ordinary citizen.

"Who are you, Creature?" he demanded after a moment.

Don tried to explain. There was something about that unwinking stare, backlit and magnified to his own size, that swept away his smug aura of self-importance. The little being listened intently, motioning behind him for notes to be taken.

"And you?" Don asked politely.

"Permit me to introduce myself." The little-big alien gave a graceful nod, while the whiskers curled up and then uncurled. "I am Plantiide Kalnischeoraphibalistoibak."

"Quite a mouthful."

"You may call me Plantiide. Actually our names relate to our importance. The measure of a Kastupanenaguan is to be read and heard within his name. I am our foremost scientist when it comes to alien cultures and alien

communication. I am also curator of all of the offworld artifact museums."

"I'm impressed," Don said.

"Of course. Now. Your name is Don Quick. Does that mean your sire was Quick?"

"I guess so. You can call me Don Quixote if you like. I kind of like the idea. Call me Don Quixote."

"Very well. Both names are brief. Are you of any importance on your planet, the one you call Earth?"

"Afraid not."

"Then why have they sent you here?"

"Nobody sent me. It was a—a fluke. A time-space error of some kind. Either that or else I'm dreaming the whole thing. That's what Doc Kelter thinks. These are dreams. I've got my pj's on and bare feet. See?"

Plantiide considered this gravely. "Why should this Doc Kelter imagine that you're dreaming us?"

"Because I keep doing it. Yours is the second universe I've found myself in. I have these delusions, and real as they seem to *me* while I'm in these weird places, they're actually hallucinations produced by a time gas I inhaled plus whatever chemicals Doc pumped into me to save my life—plus, in this case, two cokes."

"Cokes?"

"Yes. You see—"

"Never mind. All this is taking hours. Do you realize how *slowly* you talk, Creature? My colleagues are getting very impatient. Still, I'm a scientist and extremely interested in all alien life forms. Tell me about the other universe you were flung into."

"The Sacred Fishers? Well, it seems that Priestess Pogli and Fisher Kleeng between them discovered how to cast their nets down into our universe and..." Plantiide heard out Don's capsule tale of the hungry Fishers with evident relish.

"You say they worship food, eh?" His stiff, mandible-like organs curled up and uncurled thoughtfully. "I can see how this might come about, with nutrients so scarce. We have life forms in our systems who are still in primitive stages and who think first and foremost of their bellies."

"Some of our primitives went a step further," Don offered. "Some of our tribes felt that by eating an enemy's heart or his liver one absorbed that organ's strength. Others felt that to eat one's parents involved a kind of physical immortality. Of course we of Earth are way beyond such mores by now."

"We, too. We abhor violence of all kinds. That is why we were not able to destroy you at once. The weapons you see came out of our museums. However, never imagine for one moment that we don't possess the acumen to deal with a monster like you, Don Quixote! We have already sent word to one of our mining colonies in another sun system to rush us a mineral from which to synthesize a limbo gas which—"

"You do mean to kill me!"

"Rather, say, rid ourselves of your presence, Creature. Your big feet squashed seventeen of our citizens and created a chaos within our social and economic structure that will take decades to undo. You can't simply dismiss the enormity of your crimes by saying you didn't mean to do it! You *did* it, Don Quixote! What if you had landed in the center of our major city? Think about that!"

"Gosh, Plantiide, tell everybody how damn *sorry* I am. I don't want to

dream these things. Doc's trying to put my brain in shape so that I won't any more."

Plantiide hop-paced in front of the machines for a lightning-fast moment. "This Dr. Kelter of yours. He is sapient?"

"One of the top headshrinkers we've got. Mostly he's interested in research, and right now I am *it*."

"Hmmm. We can't stand around talking indefinitely. As to your Dr. Kelter, I advise you to tell him—if by some chance this fluke of yours gets you back to him—that his theory that you are dreaming all this is pure hogwash! Hogwash!"

"I will," Don said earnestly. "Soon as I wake up."

Apparently that was the right thought to have.

11

Stifling a yawn, Donna Elena moved sleepily over to the bed. "What was it you started to say a couple of minutes ago?"

Dr. Kelter paced and sucked at an empty pipe while he and the tape machine and Donna Elena listened to Don's excited recitation.

"How," wondered the girl, "could all that have happened in those few minutes? I just dozed off after Don whistled at me and asked if I was awake!"

"How about that, Doc?" Don demanded. "My sojourn to Kastupanenagua lasted a week!"

"*Their* week. That part's simple. The time sequence in the small universe is exactly opposite to that in the big one. You were living *their* times. The detail and fretwork really amaze me!"

"Amaze *you!*" Don grouched. "How come my mind conceives these things, anyway? I'm a tech second-grade, not an Einstein!"

Dr. Kelter sucked harder at the empty pipe while he shrugged and turned on his heel. "My boy, the human mind is an enigma wrapped in a dilemma sealed within a puzzle. We will never know it all, never. Best I can suggest right now is that your brain unconsciously assimilated a good deal more of the facts and theories that filtered your way during your years with Centaur III than you realize."

"I went to some of Professor Masterson's sessions. Some of the things he dishes out are pretty wild."

Dr. Kelter nodded. "Take the two opposing delusions one at a time. What caused the Priestess Poogli effect, aside from the time gas of course? What emotion?"

"I wanted on the Centaur III so bad I could taste it. In a way, when the ship took off I *was* on it, I'd dreamed about it and thought about it so damn much!"

"Yes. The emotion was desire, followed by shattering disappointment and a stubborn refusal by your subconscious to give up. Anger was involved. The self-hate kind. Anger is a destructive emotion, and you took yours out on yourself. Your physical self hadn't measured up to what was needed to get you on that ship. You hated it for failing you, so you got even with it by dreaming up Priestess Poogli."

Don nodded. "I get it. I don't quite believe it, but I get it. But what

about Plantiide and Kastupanenagua? Where do they come in on the deal?"

"Let's sort out the Sacred Fishers first. You said you wanted on the Centaur III so bad you could taste it. Your subconscious insisted you were on the trip. You'd had the programming and the priming for just such a trip. So you did go along—in your dreams. Your anger and frustration made the time-space voyage end badly. Everything from your childish trauma of your mother and father being 'eaten up' by that great looming mountain down to Professor Torwald Masterson's suppositions on the terrors you might be expected to encounter in a new sun system..."

"What about the smells? The marks on my body?"

"Kinetic stigmata. To 'prove' your dream. Like Pooh-Bah said, to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative."

"But the odor—it was so alien!"

"We were all seafood once, in a manner of speaking."

Don polished off the sankas Donna Elena had brought in. It was cold. The girl was yawning and hugging the shawl from her rattan nest around her shoulders.

"Sorry to get you up. Lord! I keep forgetting you only got forty winks. I'm bushed too. But"—he turned to Dr. Kelter, who had likewise collapsed into a chair—"What about this new gambit in the micro-universe?"

"You set the stage for it yourself. There were the forbidden cokes and what I gave you, but mostly it was your subconscious again, working overtime, preparing you for it with a kind of morbid concentration of size. This time it was small size. *Don Quixote* helped it along. But the emotional element was strong, same as before."

"What emotion?"

Dr. Kelter side-glanced at Donna Elena. "Must I say it? Your dillydallying with my assistant down to the crossroads and back made you big and strong and all man again, not weak and helpless and beset by a thousand frustrations. Now *you* are the big man and your dreamfolk are the tiny ones." He creaked up and mouthed a sweeping yawn. "Now let's all get some sleep."

Donna Elena groped toward her nest, flinging Don a fingertip kiss in transit.

"One thing, Doc?" Don called for a parting shot.

"Yes?"

"Plantiide is one of the greatest scientists on Kastupanenagua, and according to him your whole delusion theory is a crock of hogwash."

Their afternoon ramble through the woods took Don and Donna Elena uphill to a crag above the lab; a gorge of muted colors opened up abruptly as they emerged hand in hand out of a pocket of dusty cedars and underbrush. When they reached the brink, Don put his arm around her shoulders. They took a long moment to just savor the smoky blue-green beauty, leaning back against a lightning-blasted redwood.

Don's hand tightened on the girl's. "Somebody's got a woodfire going in one of those cabins down by the creek."

"And hating the thought that summer's about over and their vacation retreat will soon be a memory."

"Reminds me of when I was a kid in Montana. My father was big on camping-out trips before the snow started to fly, which up there was all too soon."

"Reminds me of Mazatlan. The little braziers where the poor folks

cooked their *bisteces al carbon*. I've never even seen snow, close to. Realize that?"

"Not even the Sierras, skiing?"

"No. But there's an autumn tang in the air here. Notice? With us in Mexico it was only the rain and—"

"Hey!" Don stiffened and leaped in front of her. "I just remembered something! What day is it today?"

"Let me see. September fifth, I think."

Don's jaw tensed. His look jerked skyward as if his eyes were trying to see something beyond that arch of slate blue.

"What is it?"

He licked his lips. There was that parched dryness in his throat again. He wrenched his look down the furry gorge toward the scant trickle of water at the bottom. It was a minute before he answered her; he didn't want to think about the Centaur III, to remember the agony burning inside his cells the morning he watched the ship leap away from the gantry into time and space—without him. He felt Donna Elena's hand insinuate itself into the slash pocket of his jacket, into his balled fist. Her fingers forced his apart and braided themselves between.

"What is it, Don? Don't bottle these things up. It's not good for you, you know."

Don sighed roughly. "September fifth is the day the Base is supposed to hear from Centaur III, no matter what."

"No matter what?"

"Time jump is so new that communication was all but impossible. Professor Masterson and Big Ben did have it doped out, they thought, although there wasn't any way to test it. There was no way of being sure that the three Centaur ship crews would even make it into Alpha Centauri alive or sane. Communication with home base was a big if. Big Ben thought it was possible, theoretically."

"Tell me about Big Ben."

"You know as much as anyone knows about Big Ben. Big Ben's the titanic computer under the World Space Complex that was designed by Professor Masterson and his eggheads to outline and delineate the various ifs of the Centaur projects. He was the first giant computer programmed to answer questions involved in bypassing time."

"That's why he's called Big Ben."

"He's the big clock to end all big clocks. Getting back to communications—the three Centaurs were each fitted with automatic computers, of course, and with automatic signaling devices which would dispatch back signals at regular intervals. The tapes on board the ships would suck up all the conversation and whatever else they could that went on; then Big Ben would pick up these mathematical code signals. That would tell us what happened, good or bad. Even if the crew didn't make it through the time jump, the auto-signals would still function, short of total destruction."

"And today was the day for this?"

"Yeah. For Centaur III."

"What about the other two? Did the Base pick up the auto-signals from them?"

"No." Don looked bleak. "Nothing."

"I understood that the three ships were supposed to rendezvous at some designated point so that they could keep tabs on each other."

Don nodded. He squeezed her hand. "C'mon. Let's hike up the fire trail a ways, then circle back down that lower ridge."

It was as if Hansel and Gretel had gone back into the house and the barometric witch had come out. The brassy September blue overhead had been obscured by invisible storm clouds. Don's unease communicated itself to Donna Elena whenever their fingers touched, or their eyes. She still gossiped brightly about flowers and shrubs, but his stony nods were indicative of his inner turmoil. As they moved down the flagging toward the garbage pails, the dusty-bottles-bunker and the rear door, a coughing racket overtook them and surprised a glum smile out of Don.

It was the crossroads grocery boy's rattletrap making its triweekly noises as it flung off the hill gravel and around the lab in a practiced semicircle and rasp-braked in front of the concrete back stairs with inches to spare. A teenager, Jack Cutter, wearing tight levis and a jazzy shirt, gave Donna Elena a complimentary whistle, grinning as he swung down, and hiked the two Campbell's soup cartons of groceries down off the pickup bed.

"Hi, Lady Doc. Hi, Don."

Don nodded. "Need some help with those cartons, Jack?"

"Naw. You can open the door for me, though, pretty Doc."

Donna Elena nodded and stepped ahead. The youngster gave her slacked hips a casual grin of appreciation. Don noticed the *Examiner* sticking out of his rear pocket.

"Is that today's paper?"

Jack glanced back while Donna Elena kept the door open. "Yeah. I picked it up in the city an hour ago, when I drove down to pick up some supplies for the Doc."

"Can I have a look?"

"Help yourself." He paused long enough for Don to wedge it out, then gave Donna Elena a sighing grin by way of apology for stepping in front of her.

Don uncrumpled the wadded newspaper and stared at the headlines. Something happened inside his stomach. His feet took roots, and what he read shifted and blurred in front of his eyes.

The scare-case headline shouted:

CENTAUR III MYSTERY SIGNALS!
WHY ARE THE PROJECT HEADS HOLDING OUT?

12

Donna Elena turned, saw the look on his face, and moved back out of the doorway.

"What—?"

"See for yourself."

She read the headline, gasped. "Read it out loud, Don."

Don nodded. " 'September five, *Special*. Space-radio ham Jerry J. Jones of Kensington Road, Livermore, broke the story of signals received from starship Centaur III when he claimed to have intercepted strange code signals with his amateur but highly sophisticated ham equipment. Various

science groups have confirmed these signals. They were faint and in mathematical code, as with interplanetary signals, but local groups who wish to remain anonymous insist that they must indeed have originated on the starship Centaur III. Foreign papers of this date also carry such data. *Pravda* of Moscow issued a special edition in which they scolded the World Space Complex for holding out on the Soviet contingent of the World Space Alliance. London, Paris, Tokyo, and Peking are agog with the unconfirmed reports.

"The *Examiner* wants to know why Professor Torwald Masterson has not as yet released any statement to the press. If ham operator Jerry Jones could pick up the signals, and other countries indicate similar random signals being received, why hasn't Big Ben admitted their existence? Why are they keeping it a secret even from their own allies? Why the mystery? With the fantastic amount of money appropriated for the triple Centaur projects, the world public deserves an immediate answer to this mystery.

"Our attempts to obtain information through official press release channels have met with a stone wall of silence. Representatives of all media have been denied access to the Space Complex. There has never been such a blackout in peacetime. Dr. Charles Manning of Stanford, our own science expert, flew to Washington this afternoon to demand that WSP Publicity be forced to release some kind of statement. He was told...' It's continued on page fourteen, column three."

Don's stiff arms and fingers roughed through the pages. He found what he wanted and read it in grim silence.

"What, Don? What was Manning of Stanford told by Washington?"

"Nothing. Just a rehash of what everybody knows about the Centaur Project. Something about the President having complete confidence in Professor Masterson and that an official statement will be released in due course."

Don followed Donna Elena into the rear hall, aware of small alarm noises drifting across his mind and a small blizzard of fear moving in his bloodstream. Whatever it all meant, he rejected it—for the moment.

They joined Dr. Kelter in the lab, where he was having his afternoon coffee, which wasn't really coffee, but sanko. The decaffeinated beverage was not to keep Don from getting jealous when he prowled about, but because Dr. Kelter was too preoccupied with his work to care. Donna Elena poured them out a mug and refreshed Dr. Kelter's while he read what Don handed him. His forehead grew italics between the eyes, but his shrug was still noncommittal.

"You know newspapers," he said. "Somebody sees a toy balloon and they blow the thing up into a flying saucer from Betelgeuse, prodding the poor guy for copy so that they can make fun of him later. Then there's the political angle. Election comes up in two months. The President has come in for a lot of criticism for all the tax money he's put into the Alpha Centauri projects. They want to make sure they've got something this time."

"But this is *world*, not U.S.! Even Russia and China put up money and talent for the Centaurs. This isn't like some silly-season little green men. This has roots. The whole world's been waiting on this one!"

Don gulped down his coffee, unaware how scalding hot it was. His legs felt weak, his throat thick.

Leonard Kelter damned the grocery boy for letting Don have the paper. "It'll just add fodder to your flames. Why do you think I brought you up here? To keep you away from all that stupid baloney and propaganda! At

least long enough for you to get a toe back into so-called sanity!"

"We can't dismiss facts and happenings because they don't fit into your research, Doc."

Dr. Kelter glared at him and went back to his work at the long, well-equipped table. The mortar made a furtive teeth-on-edge noise in the pestle.

Donna Elena said, "How about a nap, Don?"

Don winced, shrugged, then set down his empty cup. "I guess nepenthe's the answer. Eh, Doc?"

"Go to bed," Kelter scowled.

There was a wall phone by the door leading to Don's cubicle, which originally had been Dr. Kelter's bedroom. As Don passed it, it rang. On impulse he reached the receiver off the hook and said, "Yes?"

"Is this Dr. Leonard Kelter?" Don recognized the brusque Nordic-accented voice. Professor Torwald Masterson. The Great Man himself!

Don's alarm bells sounded loud and jangly, as if the telephone ringing had set them off again.

"Yes," he lied in Dr. Kelter's thin tenor.

"This is Dr. Masterson."

"Yes?"

"*Ja*. We have talked before. Last time was when you took Donald Quick away from the hospital. I have been following your reports of Mr. Quick's progress very carefully."

"Yes?" Don grinned. He felt a thrill leap through him to think that the Great Man himself took an interest in little old him. He waited.

"*Ja*. I am busy, too busy to call you before. Nor do I believe in interfering with a workman I have set on a specific job. But an hour ago one of my assistants, a space medic, put your latest progress report on Patient Quick here on my desk with a note to call my attention to something very peculiar."

"Isn't it all very peculiar?" Don ventured, fighting a chuckle. Priestess Poogli and Plantiide wouldn't read like the usual medical report, surely!

On the other end of the line Professor Masterson was rumbling deep in his throat, angered by what sounded like levity.

"*Give me that phone!*" Dr. Kelter put down his work and started around the tables toward Don. It was evident by now that this was no wrong number or Mrs. Grenfell phoning up to lie excuses for her spouse's latest boozing spree. Donna Elena moved up before Dr. Kelter. She tried to take the phone from Don, but something had him by the throat and wouldn't let him surrender it.

"Sorry, Professor. What particular thing in the report was it that disturbed you?"

The Great Man's voice crisped, sharpened up. "You know that we have received signals from Centaur III? We haven't released any information to the press yet, but it leaked out."

"Yes, I know. What about the signals?"

"They are—ah—difficult to interpret. Quite irrational, in fact. *Ja*. Evidentially the fragments that came through caught the ship right in the middle of some situation of extreme stress."

Dr. Kelter was on him grabbing for the phone.

"What does this have to do with Donald Quick?" Don ripped out, elbowing himself away from both the doctor and Donna Elena. "What's the peculiar thing you mentioned?"

"*Ja*. Well, there are two words in the signal we received, and these words are repeated over and over again. Even filtered through the code they point up a weird coincidence."

"What words, Professor?"

It wasn't that he really wanted to hear them. In a way, he dreaded it. Maybe that was why he let the receiver lag just enough so that Dr. Kelter was able to wrench it out of his hand with a wrathful grunt. But he heard the two words anyway. They swung across the air with the descending arc of the receiver as Dr. Kelter seized it.

Entering his brain, they burned like a white-hot brand.

Two words.

"*Giant net*."

13

The first thing you noticed about Professor Torwald Masterson was his size. He was built like a lumberjack, not a scientist. Big, rawboned, redfaced. His lantern jaw jutted out like a prizefighter's; his nose was prominent, outsized, with blue veins crawling down the nostril flare; his eyes were silver-gray bulbs of flint under tangled black and gray thickets of twisted-piano-wire eyebrows. His thinning hair was Crosshatch wiring, too, and the way the forehead sloped was almost Neanderthal or Cro-Magnon. He gave the appearance of poor construction from droll sketches. Born in a Norwegian village out of Oslo, he had frightened his schoolteachers and his family with an uncanny grasp of natural phenomena (and some not so natural) that bespoke of wizardry. He was ugly even then, and his harsh, rasping voice said surprising, shocking things. Even when he was presented with a Nobel Prize in Physics, he accepted it with a characteristically ungracious grunt-shrug. His grudging public appearances made his sponsors among the world-in-space leaders sweat. Beauty, charm, and polish were utterly lacking in his appearance and in his nature. There was only room in his makeup for one product: genius.

It was Dr. Masterson's genius that took man out into the stars, with Big Ben's help. And of course Big Ben was Masterson's brainchild.

When the chopping blades of the helicopter loudened and the ship touched down in the weeded clearing near the forest, its breath bending the marijuana and Donna Elena's impatient, it was like the beginning of something important, one of those shining peaks in time itself.

Masterson disposed of Dr. Kelter with a few brusque words before he moved in swift, ungainly steps to the adjoining cubicle where Don was already putting on his tweed jacket. Donna Elena was packing his suitcase, bright-eyed with bewilderment. They weren't talking. The air within the cubicle and the lab crackled with electricity.

"You are all dressed and ready, *ja*? This is good. We shall be on our way then, *ja*." Dr. Kelter had followed the physics genius in, but Professor Masterson ignored him. He gestured for his pilot to pick up Don's suitcase when Donna Elena snapped it shut with a kind of forlorn finality.

Don licked his dry lips. "Where we going?"

"To the Space Complex, of course."

"Why? Why can't I stay here?"

Professor Masterson's lumpy face glowered with sudden thunder. "There is no time for discussions and extensive research projects. We must discover at once whether you know anything or not. Whether the time gas has produced some—ah—contact with your crewmate comrades on Centaur III within that muddled brain of yours." He made no effort to be nice about it; he never did. He swung his iceball eyes around at the psychiatrist. "Kelter understands what I'm talking about."

"Yes." Leonard Kelter was holding himself in, plainly. It wasn't pleasant having even such an important figure as Professor Masterson make telephoned demands and then come blustering in like a bull to snatch his patient away right in the middle of his experiments.

Masterson gave his bearish shoulder a twist and sank tentatively in the nearest chair, without, however, removing either his coat or his worn hat.

"I still prefer to stay here," Don said stubbornly. "I don't see why...."

Masterson's large hand swam in air. "We have facilities in the space hospital which Dr. Kelter has not here. Instruments for reading every flicker of your eyelid, and Big Ben to interpret them for us. Not so, Dr. Kelter?"

Kelter nodded slowly, but his eyes were clouded and a little sullen about it. He turned to Don.

"You'll have to do it, Don. It's—important. I'll keep in close touch."

Don gave him a hurt look. "Like hell. If I'm going anywhere you're going with me." He whirled on Masterson, ignoring the geometric designs he was making on the air in protest and the angry pucker of those iceball eyes. "I want Dr. Kelter with me. God! Don't you understand that? He's my psychiatrist. He knows me inside and out. You need him as much as you need me, and to hell with Big Ben if he doesn't think so." He went over to Donna Elena in three long steps and put an arm tight around her shoulder. "And Donna Elena, too. She knows what to do when the bogies start to bite. I won't budge without them both." He pulled in a deep, defiant suck of air. "Take it or leave it, Professor!"

The room they put him in at the space hospital was a deluxe affair three times the size of his hilltop cubicle. Don thought when he stepped in that it must have been designed for several more beds that had been hastily removed elsewhere against his in-patient registry. While he removed his clothes he found out why. They kept wheeling in machines—instruments for assessing his bodily condition and his mind, devices for recording every microminimal action of his organs, his neural, vascular, and muscular systems down to a gnat's eyebrow twitch. There was everything one could think of, even Frankenstein devices invented by Professor Masterson and/or Big Ben. And the technicians to operate them.

Don climbed reluctantly in bed, permitting himself to be wired and tapped and poked and thumped while tapes fed the information to bigger machines next door and then to Big Ben in his lead cocoon down in the third sub-level of the Complex. It all took a long time and seemed even longer. Finally the techs finished and took off, leaving much of the wiring intact.

Don squirmed and cursed and waited.

Finally the door opened. His eyes lighted up when he saw that it was Dr. Kelter and Donna Elena. The needle on the electrocardiograph by his bed jumped, and he dragged himself up on his pillows as far as he could without tearing loose the wires.

"It's about time," he grumbled. "Where have you been while the Spanish

Inquisition has been at me?"

"Getting settled in the residents' wing." Dr. Kelter smiled and right away began a professional perusal of the gadgetry surrounding the bed.

"Poor baby," Donna Elena soothed, bending and touching his forehead lightly with her lips. "Did they feed you?"

"Not a bite."

"They will. First Professor Masterson wanted to read your insides empty and hollow."

"I'm hollow, that's for sure!"

"Another thing, darling. I'm afraid it's going to be tube food and liquids, mostly. No filets or cherries jubilee."

"Damn!" Dan swore. "Astronaut goop!"

Dr. Kelter turned from his examination of the machines. "He wants your environment bland, inside and out. He doesn't want anything to engender dreams of any kind, anything which could interfere with the dreams he is interested in."

Don groaned. "They wouldn't give me anything to read. Not even—"

"This?" Donna Elena laughed and produced the battered copy of *Don Quixote* from her jacket. She gave a conspiratorial look around her to see that nobody was watching. "I smuggled the Woeful Knight past the guards. Of which there are several, I might add. The Professor is taking no chances."

Don took the book and hid it quickly under his pillows. "I won't even read it," he promised. "It's just that I feel lost without my alter ego someplace close by."

"Now we'll have to go," Dr. Kelter said. "We were given strict orders. Five minutes, no more."

"No!" Don exploded. "I'll go nuts staring at the wall! Not even TV commercials to cuss at! Stay a while, please!"

"Sorry, Don. We must obey the Great Man. He wanted your mind freed from all outside influences, and we represent outside influences."

"Hell!"

"We remind you of things. Professor Masterson wants to start from scratch. That's the way he operates."

"How can he start from scratch?" Don bawled. "Priestess Poogli and all the rest of the circus' troop are already inside my skull. You couldn't pry them out with a chisel. He'll play hell turning me into some kind of a slate that's been wiped clean! I don't work that way."

Dr. Kelter gave a swift, wry look around at the walls. Don knew what that look meant. He yelled out, "Hear that, Professor! I know your gremlins are there in the walls, listening! You can pin me down to my bed like a robot, feed me on pablum and baby goop, keep all outside influences away from me until you are blue in the face, but you can't cut out what's already stamped on my brains."

They glanced at each other, waiting.

In a moment the door opened.

"It seems to me that I have shown remarkable tolerance in permitting Kelter and the girl to come here to live, and I am not a man given to tolerant actions." Masterson's face was a rich purple, but most of the storm was kept inside. "You must stop this infantile behavior and realize that everything I do is done for good reason. We are not playing games, Mr. Quick!"

"I know all about that." Don lowered his voice. "All I wanted was

something to do. Trussed up here like a Christmas goose. Nothing to read."

Masterson's jowls relaxed in as close to a smile as anyone was apt to see in the neighborhood of that wide, thick-lipped mouth. "You may keep the book since it means that much to you. But don't read it—without telling me. Every small stimulus has its hairtrigger reaction. Can't you understand that?"

Don sighed. He chuckled, then, "Anyway, I don't have to. I know it by heart."

"I know that too." The Great Man went over to the bedside machinery and did some checking. "I realize," he said, his rough voice surprisingly soft, "that you dislike me. Most people do. I am accustomed to this reaction to my presence." The statements were made in that same irascible dry tone, asking nothing from humanity more than to be allowed to perform the genius-level tasks that prodded him on with a minimum of emotional disturbance on any level. It seemed to Don that the Great Man's one friend was Big Ben and that was how he wanted it. Sympathy was not welcome. He found human relationships less than intolerable and he made no effort to conceal the fact. It was as if his ugly body nurtured a secret carbuncle and almost every human contact brushed its endless roots.

"I've got some questions, Professor Masterson," Don said flatly. "I figure that I'm entitled."

Masterson blinked and moved in; Dr. Kelter caught Donna Elena's eye and they started to leave.

"No, stay. This won't take long."

Dr. Kelter gave Masterson a look. The Great Man's nod was almost imperceptible. The girl and the psychiatrist drifted in, a ghost of a smile touching Kelter's lips.

"Well?" Masterson prompted. "You want to know what all these machines are for, *ja*?"

"No. I wouldn't understand most of it, and anyway I've got the picture. What I want to know, on the level, is—do you think my dreams are real? Is that why I'm here?"

The ice-chunk eyes glowed palely. "No."

"Then why all this? Why the B movie setup?"

The Great Man turned to Kelter impatiently. "Perhaps he will take your explanations with less wear and tear on our equipment. He is accustomed to you."

Dr. Kelter looked bleak about it, hesitant. "It's like this, Donald. As of right now we don't believe anything except what I always have believed. That you are suffering from some unusual comatose states involving peculiarly vivid dreams. Your fantasies might, we are forced now to admit—and I say *might*—involve some manner of extrasensory contact with the men you worked with so long on the Centaur III project. This out-of-the-body sort of thing is called astral projection in the so-called metaphysical sciences. Also it is sometimes called etheric clairvoyance—and Lord knows what else. True science cannot admit these things, in spite of all the work we have done in ESP. Not yet. Still, there was the time gas, and that might have created a climate within your brain, perhaps within the big, functionally unknown part and..." He shrugged glumly.

Masterson carried the ball. "Your obsessive desire to be on the Centaur III made you—how is it they say?—a sitting duck for dreams such as you've had. Your brain cells were tortured beyond the point of normal endurance by

the time gas. *Ja*. As Kelter says, we believe nothing at this point, but we can't afford to take any chances."

"Chances?"

"Chances that your mind might drift over that fine line between sanity and *non compos mentis*."

14

Don whistled through his teeth. So that was it. The royal treatment and his womb-environment—all this was to keep his badgered brain from getting sucked into the maelstrom of complete balminess. He might be useful to science, and they couldn't afford to let his mind slip away into the comfort of idiocy. Right now he was only a wart on Big Ben's side, but a wart that might possibly give them an inkling of cosmic truths before it was removed and dropped in a bottle. Well. So what. Professor Masterson was the one true link mankind had to the tantalizing Out There, and Don might just possibly be a willy-nilly tool. Masterson was like some kind of an angry deity, and it would never do to let primitive mankind see one of their gods fail for want of a random nodule of knowledge like Don Quick!

He smiled crookedly, shaking his silver wires like shackles or so many dogs' leashes.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" he demanded. "Let's get to work! What will it be first? Table-tapping? Witch's cradle?"

Masterson gave a rough growl. "There is no time for humor."

"No?" Don grinned, then sobered. "No, I guess if the Sacred Fishers are coming to get us, there isn't. For a starter, how about letting me hear the signals?"

"At this hour?"

"Why not? Might give my unconscious something to work on, after."

"They wouldn't mean anything to you," Kelter demurred. "They're in code, like the early photos of Mars and Venus. Just a grouping of mathematical symbols."

"No," Masterson said thoughtfully. "Not quite, Dr. Kelter. Big Ben has retranslated the signals by means of the blank portions, the shadings, the density, into language."

"How could he do that?" Don whistled.

"By the synthetic voice. You will remember that this artificial voice was first created in 1966. It is robotically contrived out of simple sound components. Big Ben's version is far more sophisticated. Personal imitation is—I must say it although I detest the concept—uncanny."

While the silent technicians wheeled in an Ampex tape player, Don felt his palms begin to sweat and his throat blot dry as a desert. The attendant with the tape box removed the plastic reel with unhurried matter-of-factness and threaded it deftly through the tapehead and onto the takeup. They watched him in solemn fascination, as if the brown tape slithering between the reels were a snake. Don coughed from the dryness; Donna Elena came over and poured him some water. He gulped it down, smiling thanks over the rim of the plastic cup.

Masterson waited until the two attendants were out of the room before he flicked on the start switch. "As you say, hearing the signal might jar

something loose within your brain, *ja*." His blunt thumb nudged the toggle; the tape gave a small leap and began to roll. There was a kind of inevitability to it, a dreadful, inexorable surety, like the march from birth to death.

They waited. It began to seem as if the attendant had gotten the wrong tape, it was so long before anything happened. The rewind spool was a quarter full before the faint crackling sound commenced. Then, quickly, came a mixed jumble of audio, involving both the highest and the lowest bands in the sound spectrum. Then hollow, strained, shouting voices. The quasi-human grumbles were clipped rags of words, flung out pell-mell from various parts of the ship and picked up by the supersensitive ears of the communications computer banks. None of this was intelligible.

Don strained his ears to distinguish even a fragment of sense in the bawled-out pandemonium of sound. Nothing. Only a kind of howling horror, detectable, retch-making, terrifying, even filtered as it was through time, incredible space, and Big Ben's synthetic vocals.

It wasn't the robot larynx that gave the chaotic feeling of animals howling. It was the primitive reaction of intelligent humans who had been suddenly reduced to the subhuman by the impact of cold, terrible fear...

The horror had struck like a flash. There had been no time to prepare themselves physically or emotionally for such overwhelming, heartbursting disaster. Panic was all-inclusive. Yet Don thought he heard parts of names. Names. The crew members sought refuge in witness. It was as if their tongues swelled up in their throats (as his was doing now) and choked back everything but their fright and a kind of impulse toward mewling silence, like a woods creature seeks a hole or any kind of a cranny and lies death still, hoping *it* will go away.

Then the words. Two words, shrieked out over and over and over again.
"Giant net! Giant net! Giant net! It's—"

It was the voice of Captain Raul Silvers. Don slammed shut his eyes and whirled his face into his pillow. It was the Captain's voice! It was! Familiar to everyone on the Centaur III project, it was unmistakable. What had happened flashed across Don's shut eyelids like something flashed on a beaded screen. He saw Captain Silvers' lean, tunicked frame clinging to the railing on the bridge over the crews' creches. The ship was slamming and rocking. Behind him the controls-cabin door was slid open so that what had taken hold of the Centaur III could be partially seen. Captain Silvers' knuckles were white from his vise-hold on the railing. His head was wrenched back, his eyes bulging at what he was staring at in the fore-vid, his neck muscles tightened to ropes. The insanity raging below him in the main cabin was on him, too, yet Don now saw—or intuited—the Captain's shred of remembered responsibility. He gave one retching glance down at his men; then, inch by inch, he forced himself along the railing toward the banks of computers and the nearest tape mike. He screamed out what he saw over and over, then—

Nothing.

Dead silence. The tape rolled smugly on.

"Will—will you run it again?" Don grated at last.

"No. Look at the dials, Dr. Kelter! His reactions!"

"Run it again." Don glared dizzily at the tape as it flopped free and slapped monotonously until Masterson went to it and snapped it off.

"No." Firmly.

"You've got to! There was something else! Another voice! I didn't quite catch it but—it means something! I've got to hear it again, *right now!*"

Professor Masterson's scowl was black, but he finally gave a growling shrug and rewound the tape, then triggered it forward for a second run. Don closed his eyes. He tried not to think names and faces, but they leaped up anyway. Whitey Jackson, his tech co-worker who had made it. Lafe Roinstad with that buck-toothed grin. Bill Singer, the medic—spindly-tall, dead serious about everything, but likable.

Don opened his eyes again. No, damn it! No names! No faces! Better to remember them the way they were —cocksure, eager, young.

He didn't *want* to hear the tape again. Lord! But behind that panicked hodgepodge there was something else. Something impossible for even Big Ben to explain. A chitter of sound that the tape caught *behind* Captain Silvers' shrieked-out words. *A voice that wasn't human, that wasn't even a voice but a grab of telepathic knowledge based on something Don had heard before.*

It came again. Don cowered, sweating, wanting to deny it. But he could not. It was there. Sacred Fisher Kleeng's gleeful chitter:

"Food! Food! How pleased she will be with me!"

Professor Masterson listened, stonefaced. Dr. Kelter listened. Donna Elena listened. Within his lead box, Big Ben listened.

"He got them just like he got the others," Don finished dully. "They had reached their rendezvous point and he netted all three of them up in one scoop."

"Don!" Elena gasped. "No—!"

There was a hiatus while Dr. Kelter fed Don tranquilizers intravenously and Masterson forgot about making them leave. When the electrocardiograph pen stopped its crazy zigzag, he hung over Don's bedside with a kind of awkward attempt at humanity.

"My boy, this is simply a logical progression of what is already a deeply ingrained obsession. That's all. *Ja. Ja.*"

"*Ja,*" Don repeated glassily. "How come I knew it?"

"You didn't. You couldn't. How would you be able to understand their language anyway?"

"Some kind of telepathy, damn it. I told you! It's all on Doc's tapes. They don't talk to each other; they don't have to. Just ornamentally, like when they had the Holy Diet. Formally. But their minds are so superior to ours, so overwhelming, that they can feed their ideas into ours without even trying to."

Masterson and Kelter retreated to one side of the room for a low-voiced meeting. Donna Elena poured Don more water and hovered close, forcing encouraging smiles but refraining from comment.

"You understand, don't you?" Don demanded. "The Sacred Fishers are fantastically intelligent. Eras beyond us. But the race has retrogressed because of lack of food. That's all they think of now, but the old latent talents are still there. They can imprint their ideas and concepts on our minds the way a dog trainer forces a dog to understand what he wants him to do, forces abilities on him by his superior intelligence."

"I understand what you mean, Don. But I don't believe it's true. I—I *can't.*" She stroked his forehead with her cool hand and the room stopped tilting so much.

The committee moved back to the bed.

Masterson said, "I will try to explain, *ja*. You see this thing from another viewpoint than ours. It is perhaps a moot question which view is the true one, but let us just assume for the moment that our view is it. You have built up an exotic world in your mind, step by step. Two of them, in fact. Now, there is a fierce thread of empathy between you and the crewmen of the Centaur III, and perhaps you even caught flashes of their catastrophe. Such flashes are not unheard of when the bond is strong. We don't understand them yet, but we are forced to admit to some of them. As for the rest..."

"Then the ship was destroyed?"

"*Ja*." The unbeautiful head wagged reluctantly. "That much we must accept. It was no doubt a terrible, violent thing—but not what *you* saw. Yours was only a nightmarish illusion. Your brain cells were damaged by the time gas. *Ja*."

Don stared at him full, wanting to believe that he and Dr. Kelter were right. He *wanted* it to be that way. But he could not. The illusion was too real.

"What about 'giant net'?"

"You are reacting the way a trained psychologist would expect you to. The human ego resents having its fantasies crushed. One tends to insist on them. A child ventures to the second block from his home and sees a tall man. He runs home and tells his mother he saw a giant. His mother tells him there are no giants, so the child's injured ego demands that he elaborate, exaggerate the giant out of all proportion. I suspect that many people who have 'seen' flying saucers do the same thing. It is hard to give in, quite natural to defend one's illusions. *Ja*."

"But I'm not the fanciful type," Don objected. "If I saw a giant walking down Market Street I wouldn't even believe it, much less mention it."

Dr. Kelter put in gently, "As the Professor has pointed out, your mind is not functioning normally now, nor has it been for some time."

"To say the least." Don poured his dry throat another swig of water. His hands shook. "There's one thing, though."

"Yes?" Masterson's voice was sharp, alert.

"While you, two have been blowing up Priestess Poogle and Scientist Plantiide, my defensive mind has popped loose with a name...."

"Name?"

"Yeah. The body with half a face, in the Sacred Food bowl."

Their nods and exchanged glances were uneasy.

"Hearing the tape, thinking names of my old crew buddies. It snapped something loose in my brain that it didn't want to remember. That chewed face was a special buddy of mine on the Centaur III Project. The other Wrigglers were only blurs. I was too busy thinking of my own skin to match them up. But that half-face was little redheaded Johnny Morton, my tech-replacement."

15

After they left and Don was alone with the vague inaudible rhythms of his reader machines to keep him company, he let his mind run over that synthesized signal on the tape and all it implied. No matter how you figured it, it had hit him—hard. All of the officers and computer operators and bio boys and plain mech techs like himself. All dead. Whether they

were eaten by Priestess Poogli and her apostolic sisters or eaten up by the great uncharted maw of deep space so many megaparsecs from anything terran or human—what difference? They were dead. *And Don should have died with them.*

That was it! Doc said that the trigger-mechanism toward *non compos* was frequently, if not always, emotion. And Don's emotion now was—*guilt*. He ought to have died too!

He shuddered. He tried to think of *Don Quixote* and his wild bouts with "hellish monsters" and "Fierce gigantic knights" who mostly turned out to be windmills and broken down shepherders. That was him, too! Battling monsters that didn't exist except inside his head.

They had died. Don had lived. They had been eaten up by the aching vastnesses of deep space. Here he was suffering his guilts and having hysterical pregnancies about it.

Guilt.

Drifting off into what some olden writer has called the small death, Don's mind flung itself up and up and out and out toward the common Centaurian destiny his guilt made manifest and obvious. He, too, had been eaten.

By Priestess Poogli.

He was in her incredible body, part of her prodigious but one-directioned thoughts, sensating with her, drooling her greed for Sacred Food. He knew now that Priestess Poogli was indeed a throwback, because stirring inside that asteroidic hulk were procreative yearnings that at odd moments overpowered even the insatiable greed. Yearnings relating to the opposite sex, not smug and amorphous and inbuilt like all the others. Longings involving Fisher Kleeng and their secret romance. They—they two—would produce the genetic sparks that would save the race of Sacred Fishers from gastronomical self-destruction! Together they would breed a new strong race. Their progeny would reach out beyond anything their forebears had ever dreamed before—fishing strange new star systems in strange universes, on and on, greater and greater!

Shrewdly, Priestess Poogli kept such monumental dreams tightly locked within the secret areas of her telepathic brain. Not even Fisher Kleeng was permitted to guess the full sweep of her cosmic plan. Not just yet...

"Your Holiness."

"Yes, Fisher Kleeng?"

"All is in readiness, Divinity"

"Good. I need not ask about you, Fisher Kleeng. I know that our Fishers are constantly ready and itching to be on the move. It is the others I am worried about. The Far Beam stars, for example."

"It is true that some of the Sacred Fishers had not been out in a long time and that many Sacred Nets needed a good deal of work. The entrapping mucilage was quite congealed and hard in several systems and had to be scraped clean before replacing."

"Lazy sluggards! All this time they have loafed about, waiting for us to trawl new skies and bring them Food. It is too much! Well, if all goes as we have planned with this green mudball of Wrigglers, there will be changes made—and swiftly!"

"I am yours to command, Enchantress."

"I know that, Fisher Kleeng. I dare not speak of my—my appreciation of your splendid piscatorial triumphs in my behalf at this moment, but when you return from this All-Take, there shall be much said and done between

us. That much must suffice until you return, victorious, your nets bulging with Wrighlers."

"Your Holiness is—more than kind."

"Not at all, Fisher Kleeng. You have deserved every benefit I have chosen to bestow on you and, my kindness has but begun. It is true that I have fed you well, Fisher Kleeng, while the other Priestesses have kept their Fishers half-starved, apparently believing that this would spur them on to greater efforts. This is patently not true. How can a half-starved Fisher perform at his best? For that matter, why should he bother when he knows his rewards will still be scanty? No, Kleeng. The others are stupid. This much I admit to you as I have admitted to them by implication.

"The Sacred Race of Star Fishers was once upon a time the penultimate in racial progression. Our sciences and our arts challenged the gods. Then, when the food began to run out in our systems, we panicked. First we discarded the fine arts, then, one by one, the sciences, until only those directly associated with food and communication were left. Even these are self-perpetuating. Finally the degradation of cannibalism, until where we once numbered in the billions we now number a few scant millions and the bulk of these are servant males.

"But we are not lost! This I promise you, Fisher Kleeng! While the others in the Priestesshood shirk and fritter, I have been busy—pondering, planning, biding my time. I have permitted the others to ride along on our net-floats all this time, waiting for just the right moment. That is why this All-Take of the Wrighlers is so terribly important. To you as well as to me, Kleeng. Bear that in mind as you speed your nets along on the space winds!"

"I don't quite understand, Holiness. Perhaps—perhaps it is that I don't quite dare to hope or even dream..."

"Dream, Fisher Kleeng! I command it!"

"O Great Star!"

"You are a male and contemptible, yet I assure you, Kleeng, that my feelings hark back to nobler times and that I bear you a respect which no Sacred Priestess has permitted herself in a thousand beams of the Labyrinth. Now—go! Lead the All-Take Expedition to a triumphant catch! Don't let one miserable non-sacred fleck of life on that miserable planet escape the Sacred Adhesive on your nets! Not one!"

"If we might only permit some of them to breed..."

"A pleasant thought; for them too, no doubt. But we cannot. It isn't only the greed of my Sisters that impelled me to veto such a project. We must have the full added strength of this small world in order to send out other expeditions into this new universe. You shall lead them, Fisher Kleeng. You! And while you are trawling the stars, I shall be taking over full domination of the Systems. That is my plan. Now I have said too much already! Go, and my—my Sacred Stomach goes with you!"

The Don Quick that did not quiver from the euphoria of subtle coup and conquest, while drooling in anticipation of the Sacred Feast to come, trembled. Trembled, sweated, groaned. His tormented writhing and lashing tore loose some of the wires. It was at that point that the two attendants rushed in to the room to make an effort to stop him from screaming.

Big Ben summoned Professor Masterson to the scene. Donna Elena, bolted awake by some emphatic sense of alarm for Don, flung on some clothes and woke Dr. Kelter up on her way to his room. This time it was

electronic impulses in the needles to which Don was attached that lifted him out of his coma and auto-massagers that completed the job of kneading his muscles and nerves and blood cells to life.

Don tried to talk. His teeth chattered so that it was minutes before he could lurch out two coherent words.

"How—how long?"

Masterson consulted the time mechanism. "Seven hours, eighteen minutes, fifty seconds."

"God!" He glared accusingly at the Great Man. "You *knew!* You knew but you didn't wake me!"

The ill-proportioned head wagged. "*Ja*. I knew. I have been keeping check on you every hour. But there was no use trying to wake you up. You were like a corpse. If you will remember, Dr. Kelter couldn't wake you up either, the other times. Big Ben assured me that you were still alive. The heartbeat was still there." He threw up his hands. "What could I do? To force you awake in some drastic way would surely have torn your mind to pieces! Now. Some nutrient directly in the blood—then we talk."

Donna Elena insisted on taking care of the ravenous feeding. It was a full hour before Don's limp cells realized that they were part of a whole and separate organism, not an amalgam of disassociated bits of Priestess Poogli.

They waited, Masterson growing more impatient by the second.

"Now, *ja?*"

Don put a lot of compulsive hostility into his glare, then snarled, "Okay. Okay. But I'll make it short and sour. They are coming here. The Fishers are on their way to All-Take us right this minute. All Seventy Systems of them. The orders of the Holy Diet are to net up every cotton-picking scrap of life, Sacred or nonsacred, from this little green mudball—which is what we are to them—and take us back to their universe later on until all of our star systems are sucked dry." He gave a ragged sobbing chuckle. "Oh, yes. The nets have some kind of adhesive on them that attracts living food to it. Their sciences, even residually, are so far beyond ours that any defense we put up would be laughable. They travel through airless space as is, no suits, no ships. Just them and the nets. Besides, they are so damn *huge!*"

He broke off and stared dully at the ceiling. For a full minute the room was silent as a tomb, then Dr. Kelter gave a dry, nervous cough.

"What else?" Masterson asked presently.

"What'd you want, Professor?" Don choked. "What else is there? We're doomed. That's the program for the human race. We're meat and potatoes to the Sacred Fishers; otherwise their ancient and noble civilization goes kaput. They are desperate and we are it. What more do you want?"

He turned angrily away from their startled faces. It was the first time, the very first, that Don had ever blasted out his wild dream in such blunt, raw, grim fashion. As if he believed every word of it.

And he did.

Now.

He ignored Donna Elena's tear-bright eyes and the numb, pale look on Dr. Kelter's face. It was as if Don were responsible for what was going to happen to the world, somehow. His time-gas-warped psyche had foreseen it, had ridden along with the nemesis to the critical point of attack; ergo, he was somehow or other to blame. He watched Professor Masterson fuss with the machines, reading the dials and graphs for Don's total reaction pattern following his fourth coma.

A sardonic smile crept along Don's lips. Those machines had read his every heartbeat, they had duly recorded every clutch of his bowels, and now the preliminary computers were feeding a digest of such physical manifestations to Big Ben. Big Ben would take in all of this, digest further, interpret, gauge, intercalate, collate the whole of the Donald Quick phenomenon; then, presently, Big Ben would render a decision.

"Well, Professor?" Don asked, as if he were asking if the Great Man thought it might rain tomorrow. "What do you think?"

Masterson continued to be absorbed in his readings and his esoteric communications with his brainchild in the basement for all of ten minutes. Then he looked up at Don. A snort that was like a humorous chuckle rumbled from between those heavy lips.

"Speaking for myself," he said, "I have about reached the pinnacle point of my poor human brain's capacities, when it comes to knowledge of time and the cosmos. If this Sacred Fisher race of yours requires my ugly body for food so that it may survive, perhaps on some level beyond our thought that is all for the best. Who can say? *Ja, ja.*"

Donna Elena whirled on him fiercely. "That's all very well for you, Professor Masterson! You only have a few years left, at best. How about Don and me—and all the millions of others who want to live and function as men and women, and—and contribute *their* bit toward human progress and knowledge?" Her cheeks grew red angry roses. "You're a selfish, spineless old man, Professor Masterson! And furthermore—"

Dr. Kelter took hold of her arm gently. "Donna Elena, for heaven's sake! You're talking as if you believe all this is really going to happen. Let's all have some breakfast and give our nerves a chance to cool off. Professor?"

Masterson was hovering over the main tape deck like a financier over his stock ticker during a Wall Street crisis.

"One moment," he snapped crisply. "Then we shall know whether to take breakfast or not bother."

While they waited, the wide, beefy face lost its lines of grisly humor. Masterson poked studs and squinted down at the thrumming forebrain until Big Ben's brief terminary comment appeared. He stared down at it without expression of any kind. Then a faint, faint sigh escaped his lips. He turned to Dr. Kelter. Don saw a shift of subtle emotion in the psychiatrist's eyes, as if he had seen a handwriting on the walls of some sybaritic palace: *Mene, mene, tekel upharsin...*

"Well?" Don strangled out. "Is it me or is the whole kaboodle of our existence a big joke?"

Masterson spoke grudgingly, his irritation with humanity drained off. "It may or may not be a farce, young man. Even Big Ben cannot tell us that. Nor is the Brain infallible. He can only weigh the evidence we feed him and then sift the mathematical probabilities down to the most logical conclusion."

"And?"

Professor Torwald Masterson lurched slightly, grabbing the metal edge of the computer deck with a closed fist. "First I must check and recheck for mistakes. The error potential is enormous."

"Come *on!*" Don grated harshly. "Tell us what Big Ben decided!"

The physicist's words were hollow with strain.

"If you must, *ja*. Big Ben says yes. They are coming."

October 31. Vigil of All Saints' Day. Halloween. The frost was on the pumpkins in the fields down near Gilroy, and the autumn wind had developed a querulous snarl. Rain threatened here in northern California's peninsula area; but the ocean storms the airport weather man had been predicting kept bypassing, and for this the goblins and elves with their goodies sacks and greedy little bellies were happy. The planet wheeled around her sun, shooting off rocket vessels to her lifeless sister worlds at intervals on abortive and by now routine exploratory runs. Preoccupation with space and its enormous potentials had subsided global wars to occasional angry sputters. Earth was in the best shape she had ever been in, round and tidy and well-fed. Forward-looking, confident, smug.

And it was on this windy but lustrous night that the astronomers blinking through their telescopes discovered something new out there in the vast voids that were to them by now as familiar and predictable as the cutic patterns on their own palms. Some of them thought the mesh of new stars or comets must be flaws on their lenses. Some suspected their own vision and did everything from rubbing their eyes to making memos about appointments with their optometrists. Others, confident in their own judgments, began to compare cautious notes on the phenomena.

San Francisco Examiner (Item—Page 17)

San Francisco, Oct. 15. (Special) Mt. Palomar observers report the appearance of a group of bright objects hurtling across space beyond the area of the constellation known as Sobieski's Shield. These comets appear to be definitely atypical, since most comets move in predictable patterns around their suns in wide elliptical courses. The newly discovered comets have characteristic tails of brilliant gaseous fire, but they seem to be moving en masse rather than as individual gas clouds. What has the scientific world excited is that this group of comets has appeared abruptly from far beyond our galaxy, perhaps even from beyond the universe as far as our telescopes have been able to chart it. While the new "Titian Fleet" (so dubbed because of its vivid scarlet color) is still far too remote for astronomers to ascertain its destination, it seems to be brightening, and they hope that its path will bring it within some proximity of our solar system, as they feel that important new cosmic information could be forthcoming.

Los Angeles World (Page 5—Full column)

WHAT ARE THEY? WHERE DO THEY *COME* FROM?

Los Angeles, Oct. 22. (Special) Ever since our three Centaur ships vanished mysteriously beyond time itself on their history-making journey into a new solar system, Alpha Centauri, the eyes of millions have been turned involuntarily toward the stars. We ask ourselves the questions: Where are they? What happened to them? Will we ever hear from them again? Where are our brave interstellar pioneers?

Professor Torwald Masterson of World Space Complex has regretfully released the statement that the signal the WSP received from Centaur III offered little hope for their survival. The only signal, transmitted

automatically by the ship out of its sonic bank, told a grim, garbled story of sudden and total destruction, with none left of the gallant crew to provide any scrap of detail.

Now enigmatic space has given us something new to wonder about. Observatories all over the world—Lowell, Berlin, Leningrad, Palomar, Wilson—keep issuing reports of a pinpoint cluster of comet-like lights moving ever closer to our sun from the black unknown beyond our universe. Are they comets? Are we sure? Most of the known comets are old friends to astronomers, journeying on wide oval patterns around our Sol. Like Mark Twain and his Halley's Comet, their timetable can be very accurately computed.

Not the Titian Fleet. In the first place, they come from far beyond our sun and far beyond the charted constellations. They don't seem to follow any of the usual cosmic rules. Our science editor, Dr. Josephine DePugh, in an exclusive interview with astronomer Ralph K. Johnstone of the American Academy of Science, received this provocative reply to her query, What are they? Dr. Johnstone said, "Frankly, I can't state positively what the Fleet is. We're as puzzled as everybody else. Fascinated, of course, but puzzled. The group of red lights gets brighter as the Titian Fleet moves further and further into our area of the Milky Way, and we hope to explain how they can defy certain known astrophysical laws, avoiding entrapment by the huge suns they skirt. It is certainly something to keep us on our toes!" When Dr. DePugh jokingly asked if the Fleet could possibly be guided in some manner, Johnstone laughed and shook his head. "I certainly will not stick my neck out by making any such admission as that, even by inference. Shall we wait and see?"

Cosmotheological God-in-All Society Bulletin. (Page 1)

ARMAGEDDON! FAITHFUL PREPARE FOR END OF WORLD!

Saturn City, Calif., Nov. 2 "We must prepare ourselves, body and mind and soul, for the end!" With those solemn words our Reverend Leader, Hermione Zahn-Callendar, opened the Convocation of the Faithful at yesterday's special Saturn-light meet. "You will all remember that when I had my first talk with the Gray leader in the spacecup from Saturn seven years ago on the Arizona desert, he told me that the Grand Council of Planets was angry with Earth. I was dizzy from trudging so long in the hot sun to find the spacecup, but I stood humbly before this great leader and cosmic priest and asked him what we must do to regain the favor of the Council. He told me many things, and these things have become our creed, have they not?"

Now, I know that many scoff at our knowledge that Saturn is inhabited, since Earth's ships have probed as close as they could into the radiant rings and found nothing to indicate life. But we Faithful know better, do we not? The People of Saturn are able to make themselves invisible whenever they want to, and their cups travel too swiftly between the ultraviolet rays for our radar operators to detect them.

"Astrola told me that Earth's days would be numbered and that only we Faithful would be spared. He spoke to me in the Saturn Temple just last night. Those fireballs in the sky are going to rain down on the Earth and destroy it. Why? For its wicked ways, that's why! And because of the way the misguided laugh at the robes we wear and jeer at us when we have our parades around the Los Angeles Square."

Scientists in all fields were badgered into TV panel discussions of the Titian Fleet. Comedians worked them into their routines. Religious leaders quoted scriptural referents, chapter and verse. Astronauts were forced into opinions when they had none. When the Titian Fleet became visible to the naked eye, soon even in the daytime, excitement began to wedge its way toward good-natured alarm. Nobody with any standing in the science world would admit the possibility of the Fleet being controlled or manned. It was too much. Yet.

Professor Masterson was prodded for any kind of an opinion. His only comment, through underlings, was "No comment." This did not, however, stop feature writers from rehearsing some of the physicist's wilder pronouncements, made when he was still speaking to the press. The Great Man had a knack for curtly cutting through the Gordian knots of science, thus antagonizing the public, who felt he was talking down to them. One of his most frequently quoted utterances was something about the end capitulation of time-plus-energy (man's role negligible) being so simple and self-evident that any human mind that tried to understand the truth would obviously fail. One must not strain toward more "intelligence" but let the mind move back toward none at all. "So far," he had said, "the Christian dogma of becoming as little children has truth to it. To understand 'God' we must reach back even before primitive myths and legends to pure uncluttered instinct. Everything folds back in upon itself. Our universe is but one inside a much larger universe inside a much larger one, ad infinitum. And conversely, were I to shrink myself down into the smallest zeta particle, I would eventually find myself on the largest of these universes inside of universes."

This, of course, was talk for talk's sake and not to be taken seriously. Particularly inasmuch as soon after that the Professor scarcely talked at all.

Don flung the Woeful Knight in his tattered green buckram coat down on the bedside table, next to the vacuum water jug. Much as he admired the whimsical Don and his ubiquitous Sancho, he'd had it at last, and his brain was not able to scratch out enough diversion from his idol to make the turning of the pages worth the effort. He was over Big Ben's pronouncement by now, finished with the enormity of it all. His mind had been wiped clean of the lunacy stigma, and that in itself was a relief. He didn't dream any more. He slept like a marmot. Maybe it was what they gave him, it didn't matter. And of course he had no radio, no TV, no newspapers. He knew nothing about the Titian Fleet. In a manner of speaking, he was all through with Priestess Poogli, while the rest of the world was just starting to learn.

He was bored. Nobody told him anything. They relaxed the stringent diet, and Donna Elena and Dr. Kelter dropped in every day for an innocuous little chat. It went on that way for weeks.

Don was bored to death.

Then one day...

Professor Masterson bulked in all of a sudden with Donna Elena and Dr. Kelter close at heel like poodles. After them came a white-jacketed hospital attendant wheeling in, of all things, a portable TV!

"What's up?" Don asked cheerfully.

"You shall see for yourself, *ja*." The wiry eyebrows closed in and the thick mouth twitched nervously until the TV was plugged in and situated in front of Don's upraised bed where he could get the full benefit of its

thirty-inch color tube. Donna Elena moved close to Don's side. Snatching hold of her hand, he noticed the odd pinched look to her mechanical smile and the shadows around her eyes, as if she hadn't been sleeping well lately. He hadn't noticed these things before. It was as if, at this significantly solemn moment, she had permitted despair to reveal itself.

Don turned to the others. They, too. Dr. Kelter's eyes were lidded and glassy, watching Masterson flick on the tube with a kind of anticipatory revulsion.

"Come now," Don quipped. "The commercials aren't really that bad!"

There weren't any commercials. He felt Donna Elena's cold fingers tighten on his when the razor-sharp scene leaped into being.

It was a high-echelon conclave, with Professor Masterson in the center. This was in itself a surprise. Masterson loathed panels of any kind. It would have to be damned important for him to put himself in the middle of such a group of world VIPs. Don recognized among them two Soviet bigs, the British Prime Minister himself, and Secretary of State Milo J. Wilkington, representing the President of the United States. Some of the scientists in the background were vaguely familiar from their pictures on *Time*. If there were any pressmen attending they were making themselves remarkably scarce.

Masterson cleared his throat roughly. "They pretaped the meeting so that it could be shown on all world channels simultaneously. Also there is the hope of preventing a suicidal panic."

"Somebody might get hurt," Don said without humor, but to relax the sudden tightness inside his chest.

The audio was monitored up in the middle of the announcer's statement, with appropriate instant translations, that this videocast was preempting everything on all stations throughout the world. There would be repeats later.

The importance of the meeting was accented by the participants, nervousness and the gaps of dead air, which would have caused a lopping of heads among technicians were this a commercial endeavor. It was plain as the speeches began that even the station engineers were swept along by the gravity etched on the faces of these great. The military seemed embarrassed by the whole procedure, as if someone had impugned their ability to deal with interglobal security. The scientists showed stunned shock. It was as if suddenly these world-famous leaders had had it borne upon them that mankind and its pleasant little planet was nothing at all the way they had always been told it was. Einstein might just be Alice in Wonderland's father. Some looked angry and sullen, some close to tears.

Secretary of State Wilkington read a brief statement, then put some questions to Professor Masterson.

"You actually believe that the Titian Fleet, as the newspapers call it, is controlled by intelligent creatures from another solar system?"

"Not controlled and not another solar system."

"What then?" A pettish murmur of relief.

"Manned, *ja*. And from far beyond our galaxy or any universal space that we know about."

From behind them the shuffling and coughing was thrust through by the crisp, thick-accented voice of a top Soviet astrophysicist named Kolinovich.

"We in the Soviet Union have realized this much from the very first. Since the alien ships were first detected at an enormous distance beyond all catalogued areas of this galaxy, it is obvious that they come from

another universe. Later we were able to prove by chemical spectograph that the cores of the individual red lights were solid, not gaseous. And surely it is obvious to your military from the patterned precision in which they move and the way they are able to change course in order to avoid obstacles in their path, not to mention their incredible speed, that these aliens are extremely clever. Extremely clever." He shook his thick face worriedly. "What we want you to tell us, Professor Masterson, is—have you and your Big Ben deduced anything about where they come from? And where are they going? How close to earth is their trajectory? These are the important questions now."

Professor Masterson nodded slowly. "Being *man*, we find it difficult to conceive life that is utterly alien, or its motivations. Actually, I have never thought of man as being very important. Our racial existence is a dubious circumstance at best. We have speculated a good deal about what creatures outside of our solar system might be like but we seldom dare to project our imaginations *further* out—out into incredible voids that it would strain our minds to even touch upon. Or for that matter, downward to infinite smallness. Still, however strange and monstrous life in these vast places may be, there is at least one thing they have in common with us. They must—"

Kolinovich interrupted fretfully. "No sermons, please! We must deal with the facts that face us, not idle philosophic theorizing! We have all studied the photographs and the chemical charts of the Titian Fleet. We know about the curious netting that trails behind each vessel and the beams of light that link all seventy of them together. We can guess that the light beams are for instantaneous intercommunication and maintaining their fantastic coordination. But the nettings—what are they?"

"Just what you said, Scientist Kolinovich. Nets."

"Nets? Nets?"

"Fish nets."

"Fish nets!" Secretary Wilkington cried. "What would they want fish nets for in outer—excuse me, I know that's meaningless—in *space*?"

"Just what you might imagine." Masterson's voice was burr-rough and the glance he gave the figures on either side of him suggested a doctor letting relatives of a beloved mother know that her hours are numbered, "*Ja*, *ja*. I am not a man who quibbles. You ask for truth and I must give it to you, although I cannot—at least I will not—attempt to explain how I know. The Titian Fleet has come into our universe on a fishing trip."

There was a stunned silence, then some nervous tittering in the background. It was impossible that Professor Masterson could joke at a time like this, yet he was—wasn't he?

"What do you mean, Professor?" Wilkington demanded. "What makes you say a thing like that?"

His grated questions started up a babble which finally had to be monitored down by some equally stunned technicians in the audio department. The camera bored down on the Great Man so that the purple veins on the sides of his lumpy nose stood out like rivulets from a thousand feet up. It was a good five minutes before the chaotic hubbub was stilled enough for him to continue.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I shall not indulge in scientific nitpicking. I will not suggest what defenses your military should put up; that is out of my province and I believe it to be useless in any event." His iceball eyes, softer now, turned toward the camera, registering sadness. "Let those who

can find comfort in religion do so now. Let us all put our houses in order. The Titian Fleet is coming for us, and its ships and nets are far too overwhelming for us to do anything to prevent them from taking us, all of us." He wiped a trembling hand across his eyes. "That, I believe, is their intention. To scoop up all manner of life off this planet in some sort of adhesive magnetized nets."

"Why?" several voices screamed. "What do they want us *for*?"

"For what all life requires. For food."

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Doctor Kelter silently reached over and turned off the TV, as if a doom-button had been pressed. Donna Elena's nails dug into Don's palm. Professor Masterson moved off into a world of his own making at the far end of the room where Don's small athletics gym had been set up. It was Donna Elena who spoke first, and what she said seemed to spring up out of her Nayarit *India* genes.

"Maybe Don was sent to us so that we would be warned."

Dr. Kelter gave her a fast humorless smile. "What good is it for us to know? Maybe it would be better not to."

Don said, "If I was some kind of a big fat Hercules or Mighty Mouse I'd go out there and kill the Fishers with one blow of my fist or something."

Professor Masterson whirled on his heel and loped back into the sad little circle. "I ought to have known, *ja*. But I was as bad as any self-important military genius or Pentagon seat warmer. I was equally smug, *ja*. It was just too embarrassing to imagine that mankind's end could be *this*." He gave the wheeled video a shove in the direction of the door as if it were to blame. "They look to me for answers and I give them puzzles. I resent being idolized because I know how puny my knowledge is, too. How *slightly* over the norm!" He ground his teeth and gave a deep primitive growl of all-inclusive contempt.

Donna Elena turned on him brittly. "Is this the sum total of your philosophy, Professor? Isn't there any fight left in you at all? You're old, cynical, bitter. They've given you all the homage a man like you could want. They've put up with your irascible nature and fanned your ego, given you all the building blocks any scientist could ask for. Now you say you're sorry! For God's sake—do something!"

The physicist met her flashing eyes soberly. "You have been quiet as a mouse up until now, child. To what shall I attribute this outburst? Youth's rebellion against weary age? The female instinct toward survival?"

"Call it anything you want to. It took youth to clean up some of the messes your generation had the world in. We worked hard stopping your pointless wars. Now we want our chance! Aren't you going to do anything?"

"This peril is different," Dr. Kelter suggested. "Priestess Pogli is like a *deus ex machina*. You can't very well blame past—"

"I don't blame anybody for anything!" Donna Elena wailed. "I just say—do something! *Something!*"

Professor Masterson nodded approvingly. "Why do you think I kept Don here in his cocoon all this time? Why do you think I showed him the meeting?"

"Sadism, I suppose." The lid had now flown off all her bottled-up resentment and hostility against a fate that snatched happiness away even

while it gave it, and those who managed or mismanaged it. Don grinned inwardly at her display of Latin temper. "First you deprive him of all information, treat him like a freak, cooping him up and wiring him to your instruments and your Big Ben like some kind of rabbit or just another computer circuit— then you crush him with the truth in one vicious blow!"

Don patted her hand. "You forget, darling, that I guessed the truth before anybody else. Whatever they said to deny it, I never quite swallowed their explanations." He swung a taut look toward Professor Masterson. "I knew. I didn't have to be told. Also, in some wacky way, I knew there was something behind you keeping me cooped up here. You've got something on your mind, Professor. I've got an inkling of it already, but I haven't had time to work on it. What is it? Time's a-wasting!"

"I had to be sure. The facts about the Titian Fleet had to agree with even Big Ben's guess. *Ja*. It was still a guess. Now. The name of the little man in the micro-universe was, I believe, Kalnischeoraphibalistoibak. *Ja?*"

Don winced. "If you say so. It's a mouthful."

"Big Ben remembers."

"And...?"

"Big Ben points out that if Priestess Pogli exists in her micro-universe, then—"

"Scientist K and his little people must exist, too!"

Dr. Kelter objected. "Not necessarily. I hate to sound as if I'm clinging to my old hallucinatory-dreams theory, but we did have a stronger basis for the Sacred Fishers' transmigration, if I may call it that. Don's violent wish to be on that ship with his friends. As for the micro-universe..." He shrugged expressively.

Professor Masterson's attitude was unexpectedly cheerful. "Of course I have Big Ben to back me up, but I choose to believe in Scientist K. Once Donald's mind bounced away from the one extreme, it snapped to the other like a rubber ball. This is a horribly unscientific explanation, but I believe that is just what happened." He gave Donna Elena a quizzical look. "Perhaps it was your gods who did it. Or Dr. Kelter's chemotherapy. Between us, Big Ben and I have examined and reexamined Donald's physical and emotional reactions during both comas, and the implications are identical."

Don felt a great leap of hope stir within him. He turned to Dr. Kelter. "Don't you see, Doc? He hopes that Scientist K might help us!"

Dr. Kelter looked doubtful. "How?" he asked bluntly.

Masterson answered all their questions, crisply, rapidly. "Big Ben pointed the way. He indicated that since there is no solution to our problem here on our earth or within our solar system we must look somewhere else. But where else? Seemingly there is nowhere else, and the time is all too short to flounder or make wrong guesses. The only 'somewhere else' we have is the micro-world of Scientist K, and that is only accessible through Donald Quick's mind!

"It seems ironic that creatures so small might be able to help us giants battle against supergiants—yet if you examine the juxtapositions of our universes within universes you come up with some very interesting and suggestive notions. *Ja, ja!*"

"Don't you see, Doc?" Don yelled out. "Scientist K is already working on a device to rid their universe of a space giant—namely, me—so if I could go down there again, if I could persuade him to give us the formula for his limbo vapor... don't you see?"

"Consider this," Masterson said. "The creatures of Kastupanenagua live through their life cycles very fast, compared to us. They will have solved their own problem by now, and their own problem is much the same as ours!"

Dr. Kelter's jaw dropped lugubriously, but the hope sparking across the room took hold of him. "I begin to understand. But—can we get Don there? These states of his are random. We have never thought of inducing one on purpose!"

"And why should they help us?" Donna Elena wailed.

"They won't! They'll destroy Don, just as Scientist K said they would! Remember?"

Don whistled. "That *is* what the man said!"

"Yet they are more like we are than the Sacred Fishers, and that implies a kind of *simpatico*. They love art. They are insatiably curious scientists. If Donald can manage to capture Scientist K's imagination, appeal to him through just this penchant for science and art...."

"You're forgetting one thing, Professor," Don said, swallowing the lump in his throat. "Scientist K is dead!"

"Of course! Generations will have come and gone. The Kastupanenagua of now—months later—will be changed. The appearance of the sky Giant centuries ago will in itself have wrought many scientific and sociological changes."

Dr. Kelter added grimly, "No doubt their weapons are constantly trained and at the ready. Should the Sky Giant make another appearance above their planet —*poof!*"

In the glum silence that followed, Don saw himself, a Sky Giant with blue trees sticking out between his bare toes, looking down at the little people like Jerusalem crickets, begging them humbly to help his world. He quirked out a grin, then parceled out a droll shrug among the three of them, staring at him with mixed emotions.

"When do I start? The sooner the better, obviously."

18

Alone, Don found his mind plagued by flame-tongued demons. His steed was a thousand times more spavined and uncertain of foot than any Rozinante, his Knightly quest more woeful and dire than anything Cervantes had imagined; nor was there any faithful Sancho Panza to tag at his quixotic heels. Still, how could he help but try? When Donna Elena protested, he reminded her of her own hot words that they must do something, not just sit around until the nets scooped them up.

There was little conversation and no bickering about it after that. They had one chance, and wacky or not, it was their only chance. Don submitted to the injections and hypnotic suggestions Professor Masterson and Dr. Kelter summoned up out of their know-how. His eyes met Donna Elena's once, then resisted another dip into their pleading depths. Masterson began by running and rerunning Don's taped story of his sojourn in Kastupanenagua; he made Don mentally reenact the whole thing several times, while he used hypnotic devices and cryptamnesiac hypodermics calculated to induce a recurrence of the mindflight. Don surrendered himself to all their grim nudgings in the direction of way-down. Last of all, Donna Elena kissed him fiercely, murmuring, "Come back to me, Don Quixote!"

"I'll see what I can do, Sweet Lady," Don told her. Return victorious. If not, why bother to return at all?

He flipped through the thumbed pages of *Libro Cuatro...*

"All this is mighty well," said Don Quixote; "proceed, therefore: you arrived, and how was that queen of beauty then employed...?"

The subtle sedations made him nod and yawn.

"...she is a high lady indeed, sir, for she is taller than I am by a handsbreadth."

"Why, how now, Sancho," said the Knight, "hast thou measured up with her?"

He waited. Nothing. A kind of panic seized him. He was duplicating what had happened before. *What if I'm trying too hard?* Duplication didn't necessarily reproduce the dreams! It didn't always happen that way with Priestess Poogli. He grasped hold firmly of his beloved book and read on.

"...that wisest of all magicians has furthered thee on thy journey unawares: for these are sages of such incredible power, as to take up a knight-errant as you sleeping in his bed, and waken him next morning a thousand leagues from the place where he fell asleep. Suppose me fighting some hellish monster, or fierce gigantic knight, beheld on the top of a flying cloud, or riding in flame...?"

Riding in flame.

Hellish monsters.

Then soar, and promise, tho' in vain,
What reason's self despairs to gain!

It had to happen! It *had* to! Then why didn't it? His eyelids were weighted down with lead but there was something flopping and kicking around in his head that would not accept sleep.

Creature! Giant on the top of the clouds! Where did you come from?

That perfect glory, that immortal fame
Which, like true heroes, nobly you pursue—

Take my advice, Creature, don't dream us again because the next dream will be your last!

But judge ye gods, what we endure
When death or madness be the cure!

"Ho, up there, creature!"

Don blinked down. Below him were banks of frothy white clouds like fields of grazing sheep, but even while he gaped, the alien sun and the low morning wind herded them gently away. Don stared down while giddiness took hold of him, making him gulp and swallow the desire to be sick. He was higher up than the other time. Kastupanenagua lay a perfectly outlined sphere far below, the sun accenting its orange-shapeness and making a diffuse shadow between the night side and the day.

Where in—?

He focused in closer and saw now that he was seated in a metal and plastoid conveyance, straddling a kind of saddle, goggling out through the transparent bulbous top, while before him was a sort of instrument panel and what might be an oval vid-screen, blank at the moment. Below, far

below, the blue-forested planet revolved majestically as it wheeled around its warm golden sun.

He was inside a satellite that followed a swift orbit around Kastupanenagua. Somehow the canny little cricket-man had arranged things so that he would land in this satellite, not plunk down on their planet and seventeen more citizens.

While he blinked out and down again, the shining metropolis came within sight again. It was big, much bigger than before. Much of the blue timber that had shagged the snow-capped mountains had been removed to make room for buildings and roadways and houses. Still, there were trim park areas and gardens. The little crickets appreciated nature, and the toy-world was remarkably clean and well organized. Somehow this, and the satellite in which he was saddled, elicited confidence in his cause.

One of the parks brought a grin. Herbaceous blue shrubbery marked out the park name in giant letters:

DON QUIXOTE

There was some more lettering, graceful curlicue words, but Don couldn't read it, of course. Don Quixote Park couched where his giant feet had dug in; the indentations were marked out in some kind of shining marble and there were steel chains around the footprints to discourage souvenir takers. The hasty platform on which Scientist K had stood during their momentous conversation, as well as the barricades and the guns, had been reproduced in metal to mark the event. At the gardened center of Don Quixote Park there was an enormous half-round building, a domed, artistic affair with pillars at the cut-off side and wide curved stairways leading to the central entrance. Here and there along the nacreous mosaic pathways there were monuments of both marble and steel, some already showing the tread of time.

"Lord! How long has it been?" Don cried out.

At the sound of his voice things began to happen. The instrument panel in front of his saddle began to hum and crackle. He heard an excited squeaking of many voices, voices like crickets rubbing their legs together. It took a while for the lingual devices on the other end of the audio to adjust to the correct sonic spectrum and translate. Then—

"Creature!" the voice babbled on enthusiastically. "How do jubilation. We have waited for your second appearance for more than two hundred years! There were those who considered my great-grandsire a fraud, accusing him of perpetrating a gigantic hoax—but here you are to vindicate his name!"

"Your—great-grandsire!"

"You remember. Scientist Kalnischeoraphibalistoibak? You *are* the same giant? Don Quixote?"

"Yes. Lord!" Don was still floored by the time differential. Two hundred years! Poor Scientist K—dead and in his tomb all this time.

"Your surprise and awe is a fine match with mine, [missing text]"

"Creature Don Quixote!" The voice crackled with [missing text] "you like the chariot we prepared for your second coming? Is it not beautiful and clever? I designed it myself, although no less than thirty-seven members of our Creature Science Museum Project staff worked out all of the details for compelling your giant body to enter it. I don't understand all of the psychical aspects of its drawing powers myself. My task was to head the engineering staff who provided the designs for the building of your orbital chariot. Using your footprints as a guidepost in measuring your bulk—"

"The air in it," Don sniffed pleasantly. "It's perfumed."

"Delicately. Some of our more exotic herbs. I felt that you should be provided with every comfort. You are comfortable?" He sounded anxious.

"Sure. But I don't see any means for controlling it."

The voice took on a guarded tone. "Since it would take you some time to acquaint yourself with our astrotechnology, it seemed wiser to control the chariot from the Creature Museum computers."

"Which are—?"

"Concealed underground. We are an esthetically inclined people. We revere order and beauty."

"And you don't want me deciding suddenly to land on your well-organized planet."

"It could prove catastrophic. By the way, would you like to see me? I can see you, of course, and it seems only fair that you should see me. By some error this factor was omitted. But—just press the stud under the oval grid in front of you. Yes. That's it. Good!"

The metal-framed oval tube brightened in the center, the milky opacity cleared away, then Scientist K's great-grandson was there, perched crosslegged on a flaming red cushion with belled fringes. The exotic communications instruments were out of view; the spindly little saffron-hued cricket-humanoid filled the vid with his agitated presence. His head was round and yellow and hairless, dominated by snapping black eyes, which Don noticed now were actually a network of insectoid sensors. His feelers resembled long curved moustaches, and it was these members that indicated excitement and emotion by the way they curled and weaved about. The mouth was a mere slit under the sweeping nostrils. The humanoid's stick-legs were folded under him on the silklike flame of cushion, but his arms flailed about when he talked, as if augmenting his conversation with subtle semaphoric embellishments. It was a great improvement over the magnifying device his great-grandsire had hastily dreamed up.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the cricket-man chattered. "I am Scientist Bakretleniphibalistoibak. I am said to resemble my esteemed great-grandsire. Wouldn't you say so?"

Don nodded gravely.

"You can't believe how happy I am that you chose to come back during my lifetime! Great-grandfather Kalnischeoraphibalistoibak dropped all of his other scientific endeavors and made you his life's work, you know."

"As a matter of fact—"

"As did his son and his son's son—my revered father. Each of us hoped to have the honor of seeing the Sky Giant in person, not to have to satisfy ourselves with pictorial representations and artifacts. And of course the legendary tapes are threadbare. We had no minimizing cameras in those days, and the photographs of you were most unsatisfactory. Our Giant Museum is a great source of interest to the whole planet and indeed our whole sun system, but it is woefully incomplete." He chortled gleefully as his mandibular appendages curled and uncurled and whipped the air. "But *now!* Now we shall have everything. Not only photographs of all kinds, but adequate voice transcripts, portions of skin and hair for scientific study. There was some difference of opinion as to what else ought to be included. Digits, perhaps. A tooth or two, naturally. Various organs. I voted for the whole head, as did most of my colleagues. Expensive, of course, but hang the expense, I say! Even if we do have to build a new central museum, so

what? How often can such a time-space fluke *happen*, I ask? Once in ten thousand millenia, our astrophysicists estimate! By all means the whole head!"

Don reached up to reassure himself that his head was still where he preferred it to be, giant museums or no giant museums.

"Wouldn't you be satisfied with a finger or two, and some toes?" he wondered. "I could spare those if in return for the favor—"

"You are really an amusing fellow, Don Quixote. Not a bit like some of the fanciful muralists portray you. Long prehensile fangs. Claws dripping with venom. But then you know how artists are! Yes. Your head will make a very handsome centerpiece for the new central Museum. Too bad we couldn't ossify your whole body for the benefit of future generations, but then we can't have everything, can we?"

"Which reminds me what I came for..."

The round, yellowish head cocked waggishly. "And there were those who declared that the whole thing was a hoax! Mass hypnosis! Wasting resources and labor on our defensive limbo gas not to mention the Museum and the orbital chariot!"

"Your limbo gas!" Don cried. "That's what I came about! My world is in deadly peril! We're wasting time—"

"Speaking of wasting time, I'm very much afraid that my enthusiasm is causing me to run on far too long. The fuel in your chariot will soon be exhausted and it will start to fall, with disastrous results. My distinguished colleagues in the underground destruct station keep reminding me that we must hurry along with the dissection and hurl the rest of you into limbo before something dreadful occurs."

Don leaped up in his saddle so fast that his head cracked the plastoid shielding.

"Wait, damn it! *Listen!*"

"I'm afraid there isn't time, Creature. This interview has already consumed several of your hours. I am very sorry that we cannot compare notes on sciences—and the arts, too. We are a very artistic people. We are very fond of legendary, tales of strange, far-off worlds and heroic deeds, for instance. I would enjoy hearing all about the trouble your world is in, but my fellow scientists are becoming very impatient. They remind me that if we dally too long there won't be time to dissect your head before disseminating the limbo gas that will shoot your carcass out of our time-space continuum. See this button on this tasseled cord? I must now press it and release the orbital chariot to my constituents. Goodbye, Don Quixote. This has been a distinct joy, believe me!"

"*Wait!*" Don shouted, rage boiling up. "Why do you have to kill me? Give me a chance!"

Scientist Bakretleniphibalistoibak's tone was reproachful. "Surely all this is obvious. We didn't synthesize the limbo gas for nothing. We can't permit more of our citizenry to die and our whole orderly existence to be interrupted by a Sky Giant who comes and goes as he pleases. Think of all the time and effort we have spent on your destruction! Besides, there's the Museum!"

His spindly hand touched the destruct button.

"Wait!" Don blazed out. "Please wait!"

The stick-thin digit lingered, hesitated. In desperation Don started racking the seat he straddled. This took away the doom-finger, so he kept it up while he yelled into the vid, "You can't do it! I came here voluntarily for your help! And I promise you if you give me the limbo gas formula I'll hightail it out of your universe and never darken your sky again!"

The mandible-moustaches corkscrewed tight. "I don't understand."

"Then let me explain, please!"

"But—the time... Oh, very well. But make it fast. My underground colleagues will seize control of the chariot if I hold back much longer. I am curious, though. Your world must be a rather progressive planet. Not up to ours, of course, still—"

"My world is about to be gobbled up by a race of giants out of the sky!" He gulped and faltered at how this must sound to the little humanoid staring at a Sky Giant spinning somewhere above his planet—pleading for help!

"Proceed," the audio said gently. "But hurry."

"It's the Sacred Fishers. I told your great-grandfather about them. They're on their way to our world with giant nets. They are going to scoop us all up and then eat us."

"Ah, yes. I remember the discussion you had with my great-grandsire about the Fishers. A very interesting race. Quite aside from the parallelism of our positions. You might briefly bring me up to date about the Fishers. *Briefly.*"

Don spun out his tale and he did keep it brief. He tried to arouse sympathy for Earth, pointing out its similarities to Kastupanenagua—how valiant had been Earth's struggles toward scientific progress, how noble its arts. He concluded in a wailing burst of agony that if the scientists of Kastupanenagua didn't see fit to give him the limbo gas formula, thereby providing Earth with a slim chance to survive, there would be nothing for him to go back for.

"Give me the formula!" he begged. "I promise I'll never come back! I'll leave you some of my fingers for your Museum. My whole right arm! You must help us—you *must!*" He waited, shuddering down onto the metal saddle, shuddering and sweating.

The little cricket toyed with the tasseled doom-button while he stood up and did a little hop-skip dance on the garish cushion, angling the little bells on the fringes along with Don's nerves. Something about his sandpapery explosion of alien sound and his hopping suggested amusement.

"It's funny, maybe?" Don cried.

"Yes, the parallel has its aspect of humor. You say that giant sky-fishers are about to devour your world's populace, while for decades Kastupanenaguan mothers have threatened their naughty children with, *you!*"

"I get it. But there's a difference. I didn't come here to hurt anybody. It was purely accidental."

"Still you did, and you might again. Your mere presence in the sky has an alarming effect on every facet of our social life."

"I *said* I'd never darken your sky again!"

"How can we be sure. You say it was an 'accident.' How do we know more of these accidents won't happen?"

Don grabbed hold of his saddle with both hands and jolted up earnestly. "You are a humane race! Help us, out of pure *humanity!*"

"Humanity? What is this humanity to us? What makes your human race so special? We are not 'human'; linking us with you is something of an insult." The little cricket-man folded his legs and sat, bewilderingly rapid of movement. "If these Sacred Fishers from this other universe need food to save their race from complete extinction, why should we not side ourselves with *them* instead of with you? We have no special empathy with 'humans'! Apparently, from what you told me, Priestess Poogli and her paramour, Fisher Kleeng, are showing a good deal of courage and scientific perspicacity. They have noble new plans for their race. We admire that."

Don's heart dropped. "You should see them. They are horrible."

"So," said Scientist Bakretleniphibalistoibak bluntly, "are you."

Don swung from side to side, dizzied, sweating, despairing. It was all over. Plainly. All a matter of viewpoint, and the Kastupanenaguans could not be expected to care what happened to a vague race of Sky Giants. Who would expect a microbe to empathize with a sexy blonde or

Whistler's dear mother? Big fish eats up little fish. Big flea bites little flea, as the old doggerel had it, ad infinitum. Professor Masterson's theory of infinite universes one within another, and never the infinitude shall meet. Don Quick was a fluke. What Scientist B said was all too logical. *Why should man's continued existence be more important than the Sacred Fishers'?*

Exactly what was man besides wormfood?

Donna Elena's face thrust up agonisingly across his mind-vid. It was as if at that moment she were projecting all her love and yearning, and the ESP sparked contact.

Help us, Don Quixote! Come back to me!

Don Quixote, she called him. The Woeful Knight. Man of a thousand failures...

Sitting up stiffly on his orbital Rozinante, he clutched the book tightly between his hopeless hands and—

The book! He had fallen into his cosmic catalepsy with his battered-up hero between his hands and the Don had galloped along with him to Kastupanenagua. And why not? The Woeful Knight had accompanied him in print and in image all these many years, from Yucatan to Alaska, from Vietnam to the Mountains of the Moon. Even more than the crewmen of the Centaur III, the *picaro* had been part of him; in a manner of speaking they were one, and who was to say otherwise?

"Doña Dulcinea!" he groaned. *"Vida de mi vida! Mis ojos no te veres más!"*

From his plump pillow the cricket-scientist rasped an alien utterance of objection. "I didn't catch that, Creature! Please stay with the idiom our robot translators are programmed for. Wait! Oh, I have it now! Your beloved. The Creature you love. You are lamenting that you will never see her again."

"Bastard," Don said.

"Please! You called her Dona Dulcinea. Good. I will add that to our Don Quixote Museum legends. A nice touch. Thank you."

"Go to hell!"

"There isn't time for idle ambling about, Creature. In fact, there is no time left whatsoever. Farewell. It would be pleasant to hear all about your romance with this Dona Dulcinea, but time is of the essence, to dip a cliché out of your mnemonic reservoir. But I would not like you to leave us for limbo thinking that we do not understand the tenderer emotions. We aren't

all science, as I believe I have already pointed out. Our stories and legends tell of wild romantic feats our heroes have performed for their beloveds."

"Don't give me that crap!" Don snarled. "If you had any feelings at all you'd help me to save Donna Elena and my world."

"How about Priestess Poogli and *her* beloved Fisher Kleeng? How about their world—or Seventy Sun Systems, rather? The love between them is no doubt as strong as yours and that of this Dona Dulcinea! Honestly, now—*isn't* their race as worthwhile? Perhaps a wee bit more, considering how important they once were!"

"They've had theirs," Don groaned. "Give us a chance. Don't take their side!"

"But we are not taking *any* side," Scientist B pointed out reasonably. "We choose to remain aloof."

"And do nothing."

"Exactly. A logical and proper attitude on our part, I think."

When the toothpick finger tapped the button, Don's insides shrieked for him to do something fast. Anything. He must go down fighting, at the very least.

He couldn't stop that finger. It was already depressing the doom stud. But—maybe he could outfox the underground crickets by bollixing up whatever invisible thread bound their machines to the orbital chariot. He grabbed hold of the pommel and gave a savage wrench to one side; meanwhile he kicked out at the curving shelf of electronic instruments on three sides of his rocking-horse perch.

"Ride 'em, Donnie!" he yelled, and when the satellite itself started to waver and wobble on its orbital path he increased his wild rocking, held on with one hand now, while the other shot out to smash everything in sight. Neither his fists nor the faithful *Don Quixote* did much damage. But enough. Just enough to snap loose the chariot's umbilical contact with the destruct mechanisms.

I'll give them something for their Museum! he raged. *ME! That's what I'll give them—ALL of me! And the more I kill the merrier!*

Below him the pleasant planet skittered and sideslipped. "Stop!" the little man on the cushion cried out. "You'll throw our whole program out of gear! You know how delicate these components are!"

"What do you think I'm trying to do, stupid?" Don screamed and rolled his eyes maniacally at the little man. "I'll bust every circuit in your fancy program! I'll pulverize a thousand of your citizens this time, damn you!"

The cricket rasped a sigh, followed by a murmur that sounded like "You asked for it." But Don hardly heard it, increasing the wild sweep of his careering and continuing to yell and strike out at everything in reach. Damn them all, he would put a dent in their planet they could never fill up! Crack it wide open! Send skyscrapers tumbling! Knock the little blue-clad world off its axis!

His gleeful rampage halted with a severe jolt. It was as if invisible clamps took hold of his legs, then his torso, then his flailing arms. All he could do was swivel his head back and forth and swear a purple streak.

"That's better," said the cricket on the pillow. "Your momentary frenzy did considerable damage, but luckily the surgical force-sheath is still intact. Likewise the anesthetic release. Stop yelling or I shall order the anesthetic to be released from the vents in your saddle and we shall have no further trouble from you. We might as well be civilized about this while the other instruments are being checked and repaired."

"Go to hell!" Don panted.

"This hell of yours must be a very disagreeable place. In any case I don't propose to do anything of the sort. *Now*. You have created something of a difficulty, but nothing that was not anticipated—as you can see for yourself. Shall we exchange notes while the repairs are being made?"

Don felt the cold beads of sweat on his forehead ball up at the pore openings, then river down into his tearful eyes. He shuddered to think of what might be happening on Earth at this very moment. The Titian Fleet slowing, circling in for the kill, then the seventy sticky nets closing in....

He had tried. With words first. Then with action. Stupid, inane action, like the Woeful Knight tilting at windmills. Even if he had succeeded in jolting the chariot out of its orbit, sent it crashing down on Kastupanenagua and killing countless innocent crickets, what good would that have done? No, this was a time for consummate cunning, not footless, blundering action.

But *what?* He had nothing to bargain with! Nothing!

"I'm like old Don Quixote himself," he groaned out loud. "Striking out to save beauty, going around in circles."

"You are indeed going around in circles," Scientist B agreed. "But what is this *old* Don Quixote to whom you refer? Explain, please?"

"It's just an old story. A wonderful old tale."

"A sample, please. There isn't time for much more than that."

Don blinked at the figure in the vid. He sucked in a deep gulp of the scented air, conscious of a wisp of an idea crouching forlornly in the dregs of his brain. A wonderful, improbable, quixotic tatter of hope....

"You say that you love legends," he fanned the hope slowly.

"Yes, indeed. Especially heroic tales of alien lands and fantastic deeds of great valor. It is our happiest pastime. You yourself, Don Quixote, are destined to become the protagonist, in what shall no doubt be considered by future generations as the most fascinating tale in Kastupanenaguan history. *Don Quixote!* That name will ring out through the ages!"

"It already has," Don said carefully. "But not me. I'm only a puny counterpart of the *real* Don Quixote de la Mancha."

"Oh?" The mandible-moustaches twittered.

"My puny adventures are fluff and milkweed compared to the exploits of the *real* Don Quixote."

"You keep saying 'the real Don Quixote.' I find it not only irritating but—but—"

"Disappointing? I don't doubt it. It's always tough to have to settle for a pale imitation."

"*Imitation?*"

Don managed a deprecating smile. "As a matter of fact, I have the true and complete volume of the Knight's marvelous adventures right here. If I could hold up my hand you could see it for yourself."

"Really?"

"You could see how worn it is from the times I have read and reread and marveled at it. Of course it's more than just a magnificent story. *The Life and Achievements of the Renowned Don Quixote de la Mancha* is far and away the most powerful and memorable work of philosophical literature ever conceived in the mind of any creative genius of any race whatsoever."

"I am impressed. Read me a little."

"I can't move my arms, remember?"

"I'll release them if you *promise*—"

"Sorry. There isn't time. As you pointed out, the fuel in this skyhorse you put me in is running short. And you have a time schedule for cutting my head off and chucking the rest of me into limbo. Still," Don sighed regretfully, "I hate to deprive you." He hesitated, frowning, then shook his head vehemently. "No! This book is like my very soul! When I die, it dies with me. But—you'll never know what you have missed. The glory. The wonder..."

There was a brief silence. The light in the vid-tube went out. Don waited, sweating, until it came on again. The cricket's feeler-organs whipped about triumphantly.

"I have just consulted with the surgeons in charge of the dissections. They tell me that it would be possible to salvage this rare book of yours, with your cooperation. You see, the portions of your anatomy that are to grace our Museum have all been carefully programmed into our electronic machinery, with no variance possible, *unless*—"

"Unless I position the book exactly where it will come within the micronic matter-transmission area! Your intention was to freeze me in position, as I am now, knock me out with the anesthetic, then cut off the parts of me you want for your Museum with some land of laser-scalpel before disposing of the rest of me—chariot and saddle and all—into some limbo between universes where nothing can survive. Right?"

"I saw no reason to harrow you with details," the cricket remarked. "You are substantially correct. Now, if when we release your arms you will place the precious volume—"

"Hell you say!" Don snorted. "Why should I do you any more favors? You're getting my head on a platter as it is! Now you want my soul!"

"Think of it this way. Your race will perish and all its great art along with it, presumably. Would it not be a nice gesture on your part to leave this one magnificent opus as a glowing reminder of a—"

"Not on your tintype, Mr. B! Since my race must die, let their greatest treasure die with them! Go ahead, churlish knave! Press the button! I, who, bruised and ill in plight, jogg'd over many a track on Rozinante's back. But be sure to have your historians write the truth of how hard I tried to save my world, and how science overturn'd art in Kastupanenagua—allowing the greatest book ever written to perish so that your future generations can goggle at my pickled head in your Don Quixote Museum!"

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From Rooftops, from fields, from crowded streets, from ships at sea, the human fish watched the Titian Fleet move down on their green world. Some prayed in cathedrals and synagogues. This was the time of winter harvest. In the great Temples of the Sacred Star Fishers, Priestess Poogli and her Holy Sisters prayed too. Prayed for success and racial continuance. All of their finest Sacred Fishers graced the great Fleet, and if some incalculable disaster were to overtake them, then the Star Fisher race was indeed doomed. The Priestesses themselves could do nothing but eat and procreate, and the nonspecialized servant males were too weak and degenerated to fly at all.

By this time the eyes of the fish burned from the heat of the approaching Fishers. Those on the Fleet side of the planet wore little or no clothing. It was too hot, and modesty was hardly important with doom

breathing down their necks. As they stared up at the spear-shaped network of new scarlet suns flaming down on them, their mood was one of silent resignation. Anger was finished with by now, and hope along with it. It was true that weapons had been set up on hilltops and in various other strategic places, that atomic warheads would be hurled at the sanguinary invaders when they came close enough (which wouldn't be long now), and that Professor Torwald Masterson and his illustrious bag of scientists were supposedly working frantically on some new method of battling the Titian Fleet; but the general belief was that all these things were the kind of propaganda they'd been fed all their lives, one way or another. No. Forget it. It was useless to even dream of doing anything against such overwhelming creatures. They were too *big*. Like great planets thundering across the void.

They watched. They waited. Once in a while somebody would sob out in feeble protest; somebody else would sink in a faint from heat prostration and despair....

Donna Elena watched too. Alone on the solarium of the space hospital. She had chosen to stay here to wait. Her great dark eyes mirrored the crimson fire of the Fleet, and her nearly naked curves were limned out in flame as she stood there on the parapet, staring up at the Fishers.

Don was right! So right! Why hadn't they realized that from the beginning?

Yet how could anyone force himself to believe anything so outrageous, and even if they had believed Don...

Down across the horizon they swept, presaging the disaster to come with the blazing fury of their Jovian brilliance. Now they were slowing—now they were foregathering, getting ready to spread out their nets.

"Don," she sobbed. "Don!"

Even before she heard the click-click of feet running down the tiled hall from the elevator, she knew it was him. Dressed rather like Tarzan of the Apes and panting from his run, he burst out on the wide balcony of serried lounge chairs and plastic-topped tables, and Donna Elena ran into his arms. They clung wetly together, warm body on warm body.

"Take it easy," he said. "It's going to be all right, I think."

Donna Elena gave a choking cry. "It all happened so fast after you came out of your coma. So bewilderingly fast!"

"You said it, Lady Dulcinea! And I'd forgot that by our time only a few minutes had passed. That gave us precious time!"

"I didn't even get one kiss—"

"There was no time. I managed to trade my *Don Quixote* for the limbo gas formula—I knew I was saving him all my life for something!—and Professor Masterson hustled me out to the work-lab to get it written down and working before I forgot it. Luckily the World Space navies had their missiles with the atomic warheads all poised and ready, so that we could use them to discharge the gas....!"

Donna Elena shuddered. "But are you sure? Scientist B could have tricked you!"

"He wouldn't do that," Don said. "And we did manage some small-scale testing while the big tanks were being prepared for the nuclear propulsion."

"You'll never know how hard I prayed," she murmured.

"You'll never know how hard I—never mind.... *Look!*"

Something new and important was happening up there in the western

sky, above the boiling red Pacific. The Fisher Fleet had stopped and were hovering, poised for the All-Take.

"Where are the tanks?" Don groaned. "Now! Now's the time, damn it! *Blast off!*

They waited, breathless, with the rest of the world.

"Wouldn't the new nuclear bombs have done it?" Donna Elena asked.

"What would have happened if we'd used them," he told her grimly, "would have been a total destruction of our solar system. A minor revision in the galaxy. It wouldn't have destroyed them, not all of them. But it would have demolished us. A clean death compared to what Priestess Poogli had in mind." He kept glaring, tight-jawed, at the converging Fleet. Now the great sky-nets were beginning to spread out. "Where are the limbo bombs?" he grated.

"There they are," Donna Elena gasped.

From many points on the encarmined hemisphere of the earth, pinpoints of light trailing light leaped toward the Fleet. They looked so minute against the mammoth red suns, their atomic fire feeble by the blatant wash of flame from the Fishers. Yet each missile contained a tank of compressed limbo gas, synthesized by a micro-race to remove an unwanted Sky Giant. The first converging weapons had scarcely bitten their way into the Fleet when another silent volley was released. Then another, and another, until ten rounds had been fired off.

Don held his breath, gaping.

What happened was strange and terrible. After the missiles containing the limbo gas struck their gigantic targets, an electronic release signal was given for the tanks to release their alien vapor. The whole sky shook. A sonic blast involving a sound spectrum unknown to human ears weakened their cells to a kind of jelly, as if the whole galaxy were about to implode.

Then, all at once, the Fisher Fleet was gone.

"Where—where are they?" Donna Elena gasped.

"*Someplace else.* That's the best I can say. A kind of nothing area beyond or between Professor Masterson's one-inside-the-other universes. Limbo, Scientist B called it. Anyway, they're gone. No more Sacred Fishers. Those who are left will soon cannibalize themselves into extinction, or starve."

"In a way—"

"Don't you start!" Don grinned. "I had enough trouble with Kastupanenagua."

"I'm chilly," Donna Elena shivered. "That's how little confidence we all had in ourselves, knowing that when those blazing red suns suddenly vanished..."

"Come here," Don commanded. "I'll warm you up, like anybody else with any sense is doing about now." He put his mouth firmly on Donna Elena's and drew her slim body close, close.

The December moon was only a faint silver bauble among the winking stars. Somewhere Cervantes smiled.

The End