

The World Outside

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Interface Crew Nine works in a flat, high strip of gloomy space stretching along the outside of the service core of Urban Monad 116 from the 700th to the 730th floors. Though the work area is lofty, it is scarcely more than five meters deep, a skimpy envelope through which dust motes dance toward sucking filters. Standing within it, the ten men of Interface Crew Nine are sandwiched between the urbmon's outlayer of residential and commercial sectors and its hidden heart, the service core, in which the computers are housed.

The crewmen rarely enter the core itself. They function on its periphery, keeping watch over the looming wall that bears the access nodes of the building's master computer nexus. Soft green and yellow lights gleam on the nodes, constantly relaying information about the health of the unseen mechanisms. The men of Interface Crew Nine serve as the ultimate backup for the platoons of self-regulating devices that monitor the workings of the computers. Whenever heavy load causes some facet of the control system to sag, the crewmen quickly prime it so that it can go on bearing its burden. It is not difficult work, but it is vital to the life of the entire gigantic building.

Each day at 1230, when their shift-time begins, Michael Statler and his nine crewmates crawl through the Edinburgh iris-hatch on 700 and make their way into the perpetual dusk of the interface to take up their primer stations. Pushchairs carry them to their assigned levels—Michael starts by monitoring the nodes spanning floors 709 to 712—and as the day progresses they slide up and down the interface to the changing zones of trouble.

Michael is twenty-three years old. He has been a computer-primer in this interface crew for eleven years. By now the work is purely automatic for him; he has become simply an extension of the machinery. Drifting along the interface, he boosts or drains, shunts or couples, blends or splits, meeting every need of the computer he serves, and does it all in cool mindless efficiency, operating on reflex alone. There is nothing reprehensible about this. It is not desirable for a primer to think, merely to act correctly; even here in the fifth century of computer technology the human brain is still given a high rating for its information handling capacity per cubic centimeter, and a properly trained interface crew is in effect a group of ten of these excellent little organically grown computers jacked into the main unit. So Michael follows the shifting patterns of lights, making all necessary adjustments, and the cerebral centers of his mind are left free for other things.

He dreams a great deal as he works.

He dreams of all the strange places outside Urban Monad 116, places that he has seen on the screen. He and his wife Stacion are devoted screen-viewers, and they rarely miss one of the travelog shows. The portrayals of the old pre-urbmon world, of the relics, the dusty remnants. Jerusalem. Istanbul. Rome. The Taj Mahal. The stumps of New York. The tips of London's buildings above the waves. All the bizarre, romantic, alien places beyond the urbmon's skin. Mount Vesuvius. The geysers of Yellowstone. The African plains. The isles of the South Pacific. The Sahara. The North Pole. Vienna. Copenhagen. Moscow. Angkor Wat. The Great Pyramid and the Sphinx. The Grand Canyon. Chichén Itzá. The Amazon jungle. The Great Wall of China.

Do any of these places still exist?

Michael has no idea. A lot of what they show on the screen is a hundred years old or older. He knows that the spread of urbmon civilization has required the demolition of much that is ancient. The wiping away of the cultured past. Everything carefully recorded in three dimensions first, of course. But gone. A puff of white smoke; the smell of pulverized stone, dry on the nostrils, bitter. Gone. Doubtless they've saved the famous monuments. No need to chew up the Pyramids just to make room for more urbmons. But the big sprawls must have been cleaned away. The former cities. After all, here we are in the Chipitts constellation, and he has heard his brother-in-law Jason Quevedo, the historian, say that once there were two cities called Chicago and Pittsburgh that marked the polar ends of the constellation, with a continuous strip of urban settlement between them. Where are Chicago and Pittsburgh now? Not a trace left, Michael knows; the fifty-one towers of the Chipitts constellation rise along that strip. Everything neat and well-organized. We eat our past and excrete urbmons. Poor Jason; he must miss the ancient world. As do I. As do I.

Michael dreams of adventure outside Urban Monad 116.

Why not go outside? Must he spend all his remaining years hanging here in a pushchair on the interface, tickling access nodes? To go out. To breathe the strange unfiltered air with the smell of green plants on it. To see a river. To fly, somehow, around this barbered planet, looking for the shaggy places. Climb the Great Pyramid! Swim in an ocean, any ocean! *Salt water. How curious.* Stand under the naked sky, exposing his skin to the dread solar blaze, letting the chilly moonlight bathe him. The orange glow of Mars. At dawn to blink at Venus.

“Look, I could do it,” he tells his wife. Placid bulgy Stacion. Carrying their fifth little, a girl, coming a few months hence. “It wouldn't be any trouble at all to reprime a node so it would give me an egress pass. And down the shaft and out the building before anybody's the wiser. Running in the grass. Traveling cross-country. I'd go east, I'd go to New York, right by the edge of the sea. They didn't tear New York down, Jason. says so. They just went right around it. A monument to the troubles.”

“How would you get food?” Stacion asks. A practical girl.

“I'd live off the land. Wild seeds and nuts, like the Indians did. Hunt! The herds of bison. Big, slow brown things; I'd come up behind one and jump on its back, right up there on the smelly greasy hump, and my hands into its throat, *yank!* It wouldn't understand. No one hunts any more. Fall down dead, and I'd have meat for weeks. Even eat it raw.”

“There aren't any bison, Michael. There aren't any wild animals at all. You know that.”

“Wasn't serious. Do you think I'd really kill? *Kill?* God bless, I may be peculiar, but I'm not crazy! No. Listen, I'd raid the communes. Sneak in at night, grab off vegetables, a load of proteoid steak, anything that's loose. Those places aren't guarded. They don't *expect* urbmon folk to come sneaking around. I'd eat. And I'd see New York, Stacion, I'd see New York! Maybe even find a whole society of wild men there. With boats, planes, something to take me across the ocean. To Jerusalem! To London! To Africa!”

Stacion laughs. "I love you when you start going flippo like this," she says, and pulls him down next to her. Rests his throbbing head on the smooth taut curve of her gravidity. "Do you hear the little yet?" Stacion asks. "Is she singing in there? God bless, Michael, how I love you."

She doesn't take him seriously. Who would? But he'll go. Hanging there on the interface, flipping switches and palming shunt-plates, he envisions himself as a world traveler. A project: to visit all the real cities for which the cities of Urbmon 116 were named. As many as are left. Warsaw, Reykjavik, Louisville, Colombo, Boston, Rome. Tokyo, Toledo, Paris, Shanghai, Edinburgh, Nairobi. London. Madrid. San Francisco. Birmingham. Leningrad. Vienna, Seattle, Bombay, Prague. Even Chicago and Pittsburgh, unless they really are gone. And the others. Did I name them all? He tries to count up. Warsaw, Reykjavik, Vienna, Colombo. He loses track. But anyway, I'll go out. Even if I can't cover the world. Maybe it's bigger than I imagine it is. But I'll see something. I'll feel rain on my face. Listen to the surf. My toes wriggling in cold wet sand. And the sun! The sun, the sun! Tanning my skin!

Supposedly, scholars still travel around, visiting the ancient places, but Michael doesn't know of anyone who has. Jason, though he specializes in the twentieth century, certainly hasn't gone. He could visit the ruins of New York, couldn't he? Get a more vivid feel of what it was like. Of course, Jason is Jason, he wouldn't go even if he could. But he ought to. I'd go in his place. Were we meant to spend all our lives inside a single building? He has seen some of Jason's cubes of the old days, the open streets, the moving cars, the little buildings housing only a single family, three or four people. Incredibly strange. Irresistibly fascinating. Of course, it didn't work; the whole scrambled society fell apart. We have to have something that's better organized. But Michael understands the pull of that kind of life. He feels the centrifugal yank toward freedom, and wants to taste a bit of it. We don't have to live the way they did, but we don't have to live this way, either. Not all the time. To go out. To experience horizontality. Instead of up and down. Our thousand floors, our Somatic Fulfillment Halls, our sonic centers, our blessmen, our moral engineers, our consolers, our everything. There must be more. A short visit outside: the supreme sensation of my life. I'll do it. Hanging on the interface, serenely nudging his nodes downspectrum as the priming impulses impinge on his reflexes, he promises himself that he won't die with his dream unfulfilled. He'll go out. Someday.

His brother-in-law Jason has unknowingly fed the fires of Michael's secret yearning. His theories about a special race of urbmon people, expressed one night when Michael and Stacion were visiting the Quevedos. What had Jason said?*I'm investigating the notion that urbmon life is breeding a new kind of human being. A type that adapts readily to relatively little living space and a low privacy quotient.* Michael had had his doubts about that. It didn't seem like so much of a genetic thing to him, that people were cooping themselves up in urban monads. More like psychological conditioning. Or even voluntary acceptance of the situation in general. But the more Jason spoke, the more sense his ideas made. Explaining why we don't go outside the urbmons, even though there's no real reason why we can't.*Because we recognize that that's a hopeless fantasy. We stay here, whether we like it or not. And those who don't like it, those who eventually can't take it—well, you know what happens to them.* Michael knows.*Down the chute for the flippos. Those who remain adapt to circumstances. Two centuries of selective breeding, pretty ruthlessly enforced. And all of us so well adapted now to this kind of life.*

And Michael saying, *Ah. Yes. All of us so well adapted.* Not believing it was true about all of us.

With some exceptions. Jason's mild concession.

Michael thinks about that, hanging on the interface. No doubt selective breeding accounts for a lot of it. The universal acceptance of urbmon life. Almost universal. Everybody takes it for granted that this is what life is like, 885,000 people under the same roof, a thousand floors, have lots of littles, cuddle up close. Everybody accepts. With some exceptions. A few of us who look through the windows, out at the naked world, and rage and sweat inside our guts. Wanting to get out there. Are we missing the gene for acceptance?

If Jason is right, if the urbmon population's been bred to enjoy the life it has to lead, then there must be a few recessives in the stack. Laws of genetics. You can't eradicate a gene. You just bury it somewhere, but it pops up to haunt you eight generations along the track. Me. In me. I carry the filthy thing. And so I suffer.

Michael decides to confer with his sister about these matters.

He goes to her one morning, 1100 hours, when he's fairly sure of finding her at home. She is, busy with the littles. His luscious twin, only looking a bit harried just now. Her dark hair askew. Her only garment a dirty towel slung over her shoulder. A smudge on her cheek. Looking around, suspicious, as he enters. "Oh. You." She smiles at him. How lovely she looks, all lean and flat like that. Stacion's breasts are full of milk; they swing and joggle, big juicy bags. He prefers supple women. "Just visiting," he tells Micaela. "Mind if I stay awhile?"

"God bless, whatever you like. Don't mind me. The littles are running me up the wall."

"Can I help you?" But she shakes him no. He sits cross-legged, watching her run around the room. Pop this one under the cleanser, that one into the maintenance slot. The others off at school, thank god. Her legs long and lean, her buttocks tight, unpuckered by excess flesh. He is half tempted to top her, right now, only she's too tense from her morning chores. Somehow he hasn't ever done it, at least not in years and years. Not since they were children. He put it into her then, sure, everybody topped his sister. Especially that they were twins; it was natural to get together. A very special closeness, like having an extra self, only female. Asking each other things. She touching him, when they were maybe nine. "What does it feel like, having all that growing between your legs? Dangling. Don't they get in your way when you walk?" And he trying to explain. Later, when she grew her breasts, he asked her the same sort of question. Actually she developed ahead of him. Hair on hers long before he had any on his. And she was bleeding early. That was a kind of gulf between them for a while, she adult, he still a child, and them wombfellows despite it all. Michael smiles. "If I ask you some things," he says, "will you promise not to tell anyone? Even Jason?"

"Have I ever been a blabber?"

“All right. Just making sure.”

She finishes with the littles and sinks down, exhausted, facing him. Lets the towel drape itself on her thighs. Chastely. He wonders what she would think if he asked her to. Oh, yes, she'd do it, she'd have to, but would she want to? Or be uncomfortable about opening it for her brother. She wasn't once. But that was long ago.

He says, “Have you ever wanted to leave the urbmon, Micaela?”

“To go to another one, you mean?”

“Just to go out. To the Grand Canyon. The Pyramids. Outside. Do you ever feel restless inside the building?”

Her dark eyes glitter. “God bless, yes! Restless. I never thought much about the Pyramids, but there are days when I feel the walls on me like a bunch of hands. Pressing in.”

“You too, then!”

“What are you talking about, Michael?”

“Jason's theory. People who've been bred generation after generation to tolerate urbmon existence. And I was thinking, some of us aren't like that. We're recessives. The wrong genes.”

“Throwbacks.”

“Throwbacks, yes! Like we're out of place in time. We shouldn't have been born now. But when people were free to move around. I know I feel that way. Micaela, I want to leave the building. Just roam around outside.”

“You aren't serious.”

“I think I am. Not that I'll necessarily do it. But I want to. And that means I'm a, well, a throwback. I don't fit into Jason's peaceful population. The way Stacion does. She loves it here. An ideal world. But not me. And if it's a genetic thing, if I'm really not fit for this civilization, you ought to be the same way. You having all my genes and me all yours. So I thought I'd check. To understand myself better. Finding out how well adjusted *you* are.”

“I'm not.”

“I knew it!”

“Not that I want to leave the building,” Micaela says. “But other things. Emotional attitudes. Jealousy, ambition. I have a lot of unblessworthy stuff in my head, Michael. So does Jason. We had a fight over it only last week.” She chuckles. “And we decided that *wewere* throwbacks, the two of us. Like savages out of ancient times. I don't want to go into all the details, but yes, yes, basically I think you're right, you and I aren't really urbmon people inside. It's just a veneer. We pretend.”

“Exactly! A veneer!” Michael slaps his hands together. “All right. It's what I wanted to know.”

“You won't go out of the building, will you?”

“If I do, it'll just be a short while. To see what it's like. But forget I said it.” He detects distress in her eyes. Going to her, pulling her up into his arms, he says, “Don't mess me up, Micaela. If I do it, it'll be because *I have* to. You know me. You understand that. So keep quiet until I'm back. If I go.”

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He has no doubts at all now, except about some of the peripheral problems, like saying good-bye. Shall he slip out without saying a word to Stacion? He'd better; she'd never understand, and she might cause complications. And Micaela. He is tempted to visit her just before he goes. A special farewell. There's no one he's closer to in the entire building, and he might just not return from his outbuilding jaunt. He thinks he'd like to top her, and he suspects she wants him. A loving farewell, just in case. But can he risk it? He mustn't place too much faith in this genetic thing; if she finds out that he's actually planning to leave the urbmon, she might just have him picked up and sent to the moral engineers. For his own sake. No doubt she considers his project a flippo idea. Weighing everything, Michael decides not to say anything to her. He will top her in his mind. Her lips to his, her tongue busy, his hands stroking her springy firmness. The thrust. Their bodies moving in perfect coordination. We are only the sundered halves of a single entity, now joined once more. For this brief moment. It becomes so vivid in his imagination that he nearly abandons his resolution. Nearly.

But in the end he goes without telling anyone.

Done rather easily. He knows how to make the great machine serve his needs. On his regular shift that day he stays a little wider awake than usual, dreams a little less. Monitoring his nodes, riding gain on all the fugitive impulses floating through the giant building's mighty ganglia: food requisitions, birth and death statistics, atmospheric reports, a sonic center's amplification level, the replenishment of groovers in the mechanical dispensers, the urine-recycling figures, communications links, et cetera cetera cetera. And as he makes his adjustments he casually fingers a node and obtains a plug-in to the data reservoir. Now he is in direct contact with the central brain, the big machine. It flashes him a string of brassy spurts of golden light: telling him that it is ready to accept repriming. Very well. He instructs it to issue one egress pass for Michael Statler of apartment 70411, obtainable by the said Statler on demand at any terminal and valid until used. Seeing the possibilities for cowardice in that, he amends the order immediately: valid only for twelve hours after issuance. Plus ingress privileges whenever requested. The node flashes him an acceptance symbol. Good. Now he records two messages, noting them down for delivery fifteen hours after the issuance of the egress pass. To Mrs. Micaela Quevedo, apartment 76124. Dear Sister, I did it, wish me luck. I'll bring you some sand from the seashore. And the other message to Mrs. Stacion Statler, apartment 70411. Explaining briefly where he has gone and why. Telling her he'll be back soon, not to worry, this is something he has to do. So much for farewells.

He finishes his shift. Now it is 1730. It makes no sense to leave the building with night coming on. He returns to Stacion; they have dinner, he plays with the littles, they watch the screen awhile, they make love. Maybe the last time. She says, "You seem very withdrawn tonight, Michael."

"Tired. A lot of shunting on the wall today."

She dozes. He cuddles her in his arms. Soft and warm and big, getting bigger every second. The cells dividing in her belly, the magical mitosis. God bless! He is almost unable to bear the idea of going away from her. But then the screen blazes with images of lands afar. The isle of Capri at sunset, gray sky, gray sea, horizon meeting the zenith, roads winding along a cliff overgrown with lush greenery. Here the villa of the Emperor Tiberius. Farmers and shepherds here, living as they did ten thousand years ago, untouched by the changes in the mainland world. No urbmons here. Lovers rolling in the grass, if they want. Pull up her skirt. Laughter; the thorns of berry-laden vines scratching the pink acreage of her buttocks as she pumps beneath you, but she doesn't mind. Hearty hot-slotted peasant wench. An example of obsolete barbarism. You and she get dirty together, soil between your toes and ground into the skin of your knees. And look here, these men in ragged grimy clothes, they're passing a flask of golden wine around, right in the fields where the grapes are grown. How dark their skins are! Like leather, if that's what leather really looked like—how can you be sure? Brown, tough. Tanned by the authentic sun. Far below ... the waves roll gently in. Grottoes and fantastic sculptured rocks by the edge of the sea. The sun is gone behind the clouds, and the grayness of sky and shore deepens. A fine mist of rain comes. Night. Birds singing their hymns to the coming of darkness. Goats settling down. He walks the leafy paths, avoiding the hot shining turds, pausing to touch the rough bark of this tree, to taste the sweetness of this swollen berry. He can almost smell the salt spray from below. Sees himself running along the beach at dawn with Micaela, both of them naked, the nightfog lifting, the first crimson light splashing their pale skins. The water all golden. They leap in, swim, float, the salty water giving them buoyancy. They dive and paddle underwater, eyes open, studying each other. Her hair streaming out behind her. A trail of bubbles pursuing her kicking feet. He catches up with her and they embrace far from shore. Friendly dolphins watching them. They engender an incestuous little while coupling in the famous Mediterranean. Where Apollo nailed his sister, didn't he? Or was that another god. Classical echoes all around. Textures, tastes, the chilly bite of the dawn breeze as they drag themselves up on shore, the sand sticking to their wet skins, a bit of seaweed tangled in her hair. A boy with a baby goat coming toward them. *Vino? Vino?* Holding out a flask. Smiling. Micaela petting the goat. The boy admiring her slender naked body. *Si*, you say, *vino*, but of course you have no money, and you try to explain, but the boy doesn't care about that. He gives you the flask. You drink deep. Cold wine, alive, tingling. The boy looks at Micaela. *Un bacio?* Why not, you think. No harm in it. *Si, si, un bacio*, you say, and the boy goes to Micaela, puts his lips shyly to hers, reaches up as though to touch her breasts, then does not dare to, and just kisses. And pulls away, grinning, and goes to you and kisses you too, quickly, and then runs, he and his goat, madly down the beach, leaving you with the flask of wine. You pass it to Micaela. The wine dribbling past her chin, leaving bright beads in the brightening sunlight. When the wine is gone you hurl the flask far out to sea. A gift for the mermaids. You take Micaela's hand. Up the cliff, through the brambles, pebbles turning beneath your bare feet. Textures, changes of temperature, scents, sounds. Birds. Laughter. The glorious isle of Capri. The boy with the goat is just ahead, waving to you from beyond a ravine, telling you

to hurry, hurry, come and see. The screen goes dark. You are lying on the sleeping platform beside your drowsy pregnant wife on the 704th floor of Urban Monad 116.

He must leave. *Hemust* leave.

He gets up. Stacion stirs. “Shhh,” he says. “Sleep.”

“Going nightwalking?”

“I think so,” he says. Strips, stands under the cleanser. Then puts on a fresh tunic, sandals, his most durable clothes. What else shall he take? He has nothing. He will go like this.

Kisses Stacion. *Un bacio. Ancora un bacio.* The last one, perhaps. Hand resting lightly on her belly a moment. She'll get his message in the morning. Good-bye, good-bye. To the sleeping littles. He goes out. Looks upward as if seeing through the intervening fifty-odd floors. Good-bye, Micaela. Love. It is 0230 hours. Still long before dawn. He will move slowly. Pausing, he studies the walls about him, the metallic-looking dark plastic with the warmth of burnished bronze. A sturdy building, well-designed. Rivers of unseen cables snaking through the service core. And that huge watchful man-made mind in the middle of everything. So easily deceived. Michael finds a terminal in the corridor and identifies himself. Michael Statler, 70411. One egress pass, please. Of course, sir. Here you are. From the slot a gleaming blue cirlet for his wrist. Slips it on. Takes the dropshaft down. Gets off at 580 for no particular reason. Boston. Well, he has time to kill. Like a visitor from Venus he wanders the hall, occasionally meeting a sleepy nightwalker on his way home. As is his privilege, he opens a few doors, peers in at the people within, some awake, most not. A girl invites him to share her platform. He shakes his head. “Just passing through,” he says, and goes to the dropshaft. Down to 375. San Francisco. The artists live here. He can hear music. Michael has always envied the San Franciscans. They have purpose in life. They have their art. He opens doors here too.

“Come on,” he wants to say, “I have an egress pass, I'm going outside! Come with me, all of you!” Sculptors, poets, musicians, dramatists. He will be the pied piper. But he is not sure his pass will get more than one out of the building, and he says nothing. Down, instead. Birmingham. Pittsburgh, where Jason toils to rescue the past, which is beyond rescue. Tokyo. Prague. Warsaw. Reykjavik. The whole vast building is sitting on his back now. A thousand floors, 885,000 people. A dozen littles are being born as he stands here. A dozen more are being conceived. Maybe someone is dying. And one man is escaping. Shall he say good-bye to the computer? Its tubes and coils, its liquid-filled guts, its tons of skeleton. A million eyes everywhere in the city. Eyes watching him, but it's all right, he has a pass.

First floor. All out.

This is so easy. But where is the exit? *This?* Just a tiny hatch. But he was expecting a grand lobby, onyx floors, alabaster pillars, bright lights, polished brass, a shining swinging glass door. Of course no one important ever uses this exit. High dignitaries travel by quickboat, arriving and departing at the landing stage on the thousandth floor. And the courier pods of farm produce from the communes enter the urbmon far below-ground. Perhaps years at a time go by between each traversal of the first-floor

opening. Yet he will. How shall he do it? Holds his egress pass up, hoping there are scanners nearby. Yes. A red light blazes above the hatch. And it opens. And it opens. He goes forward, finding himself in a long, cool tunnel, poorly lit. The hatch door closing behind him. Yes, well, preventing contamination by outside air, he supposes. He waits, and a second door opens in front of him, creaking a little. Michael sees nothing beyond, only darkness, but he goes through the door, and feels steps, seven or eight of them, and descends them, coming unexpectedly to the last. Bump. And then the ground. Strangely spongy, strangely yielding. Earth. Soil. Dirt. He is outside.

He is outside.

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He feels somewhat like the first man to walk on the moon. A faltering step, not knowing what to expect. So many unfamiliar sensations to absorb at once. The hatch closing behind him. On his own, then. But unafraid. I must concentrate on one thing at a time. The air, first. He pulls it deep into his throat. Yes, it has a different taste, sweeter, more alive, a natural taste; the air seems to expand as he breathes it, seeking out the folds and byways of his lungs. In a minute, though, he can no longer isolate the factors of novelty in it. It is simply air, neutral, familiar. As if he has breathed it all his life. Will it fill him with deadly bacteria? He comes from an aseptic, sealed environment, after all. Lying puffed and discolored on the ground in final agonies an hour from now, maybe. Or strange pollen borne by the breeze, sprouting in his nostrils. Choked by massing fungi. Forget the air. He looks up.

Dawn is still more than an hour away. The sky is blue-black; there are stars everywhere, and a crescent moon is high. From the windows of the urbmon he has seen the heavens, but never like this. Head back, legs flung wide, arms outstretched. Embracing the starlight. A billion icy lances striking his body. He is tempted to strip and lie naked in the night until he is starburned, moonburned. Smiling, he takes another ten steps away from the urbmon. Glancing back then. A pillar of salt. Three kilometers high. It hangs in the air like a toppling mass, terrifying him; he begins to count the floors, but the effort dizzies him and he gives up before the fiftieth. At this angle most of the building is invisible to him, rising so steeply over his head, yet what he sees is enough. Its bulk threatens to crush him. He moves away, into the gardened plaza. The frightening mass of a nearby urbmon looms in front of him, at a distance sufficient to give him a truer picture of its size. Jabbing the stars, almost. So much, so much! All those windows. And behind them 850,000 people, or more, whom he has never met. Littles, nightwalkers, computer-primers, consolers, wives, mothers, a whole world up there. Dead. Dead. He looks to his left. Another urbmon, shrouded in the mists of coming day. To his right. Another. He brings his gaze down, closer to earth. The garden. Formal pathways. This is grass. Kneels, breaks off a blade, feels instant remorse as he cradles the green shaft in his cupped hands. *Killer*. He puts the grass in his mouth; not much taste. He had thought it might be sweet. This is soil. Digs his fingertips in. Blackness under his nails. Draws a grooved row through a flower bed. Sniffs a yellow globe of petals. Looks up at a tree. Hand against the bark.

The robot gardener is moving through the plaza, pruning things, fertilizing things. It swings around on its heavy black base and peers at him. Interrogative. Michael holds up his wrist and lets the gardener scan his egress pass. It loses interest in him.

Now he is far from Urbmon 116. Again he turns and studies it, seeing its full height

at last. Indistinguishable from 117 and 115. He shrugs and follows a path that takes him out of the line in which the row of urbmons is set. A pool: he crouches beside it, dipping his hand in. Then puts his face to its surface and drinks. Splashes the water gaily. Dawn has begun to stain the sky. The stars are gone, the moon is going. Hastily he strips. Slowly into the pool, hissing when the water reaches his loins. Swims carefully, putting his feet down now and then to feel the cold muddy floor, at last coming to a place where he no longer can touch bottom. Birds singing. This is the first morning of the world. Pale light slides across the silent sky. After a while he comes out of the water and stands dripping and naked by the edge of the pool, shivering a little, listening to the birds, watching the red disk of the sun climbing out of the east. Gradually he becomes aware that he is crying. The beauty of it. The solitude. He is alone at time's first dawn. To be naked is right; I am Adam. He touches his genitals. Looking off afar, he sees three urbmons glowing with pearly light, and wonders which is 116. Stacion in there, and Micaela. If only she was with me now. Both of us naked by this pool. And turning to her, and sinking myself into her. While the snake watches from the tree. He laughs. God bless! He is alone and not frightened at all by it, no one within sight and he loves it, though he misses Micaela, Stacion, both, each. Trembling. Hard with desire. Dropping to the moist black earth beside the pool. Still crying a little, hot teardrops trickling down his face occasionally, and he watches the sky turn blue, and puts his hand on himself, and bites his lip, and summons his vision of the beach at Capri, the wine, the boy, the goat, the kisses, Micaela, the two of them bare at dawn, and he gasps as his seed spurts. Fertilizing the naked earth. Two hundred million unborn littles in that sticky puddle. He swims again; then he begins to walk once more, carrying his clothes over his arm, and after perhaps an hour he puts them on, fearing the kiss of the soaring sun on his tender indoor hide.

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By noon plazas and pools and formal gardens are far behind, and he has entered the outlying territory of one of the agricultural communes. The world is wide and flat here, and the distant urbmons are glossy brown spikes on the horizon, receding to east and west. There are no trees. No unruly wild vegetation at all, in fact, none of the chaotic tumble of greenery that was so appealing in that tour of Capri. Michael sees long aisles of low plants, separated by strips of bare dark soil, and here and there an entire tremendous field totally empty, as if awaiting seed. These must be the vegetable fields. He inspects the plants: thousands of something spherical and coiled, clutching itself to itself, and thousands of something vertical and grassy, with dangling tassels, and thousands of another kind, and another, and another. As he walks along the crops keep changing. Is this corn? Beans? Squash? Carrots? Wheat? He has no way of matching the product to its source. His childhood geography lessons have faded and run; all he can do is guess, and probably to guess badly. He breaks leaves from this and this and this. He tastes shoots and pods. Sandals in hand, he walks barefoot through the voluptuous turned-up clods of earth.

He thinks he is heading east. Going toward the place where the sun came from. But now that the sun is high overhead it is hard to determine directions. The dwindling row of urbmons is no help. How far is it to the sea? At the thought of a beach his eyes grow damp again. The heaving surf. The taste of salt. A thousand kilometers? How far is that? He works out an analogy. Lay an urbmon on end, then put another one at its tip, and another one beyond that. It will take 333 urbmons, end to end, to reach from here to the sea, if I am a thousand kilometers from the sea now. His heart sinks.

And he has no real idea of distances. It might be ten thousand kilometers. He imagines what it would be like to walk from Reykjavik to Louisville 333 times, even horizontally. But with patience he can do it. If only he can find something to eat. These leaves, these stalks, these pods do him no good. Which part of the plant is edible, anyway? Must he cook it? How? This journey will be more complex than he imagined. But his alternative is to scurry back to the urbmon, and he will not do that. It would be like dying, never having lived. He goes on.

Tiring. A little lightheaded from hunger, since he's been on the trek six or seven hours now. Physical fatigue, too. This horizontal walking must use different muscles. Going up and down stairs is easy; riding dropshafts and liftshafts is easier still; and the short horizontal walks along the corridors have not prepared him for this. The ache in the backs of the thighs. The rawness in the ankles, as of bone grating against bone. The shoulders struggling to keep the head held high. Scrambling over this irregular earthy surface multiplies the problem. He rests awhile. Soon afterward he comes to a stream, a sort of ditch, cutting across the fields; he drinks, then strips and bathes. The cool water refreshes him. He goes on, stopping three times to sample the unripened crops. Suppose you get too far from the urbmon to get back, if you begin starving? Struggling through these fields as strength leaves you, trying to drag yourself across the kilometers toward the far-off tower. Dying of hunger amidst all this green plenty. No. He'll manage.

Being alone starts to upset him, too. Something of a surprise, that. In the urbmon he frequently was irritated by the sheer surging multiplicitous masses. Littles underfoot everywhere, clots of women in the halls, that kind of thing. Relishing, in a distinctly unblessworthy way, the daily hours on the interface, in the dimness, no one around him except his nine crewmates and they far away, minding their own nodes. For years cherishing this vision of escaping into privacy, his cruel retrogressive fantasy of solitude. Now he has it, and at the beginning he wept for sheer joy of it, but by afternoon it does not seem so charming. He finds himself darting little hopeful glances to the periphery of his sight, as if he might pick up the aura of a passing human being. Perhaps if Micaela had come with him it would be better. Adam, Eve. But of course she wouldn't have. Only his fraternal twin; not precisely the same genes; she's restless but she'd never have done anything as wild as this. He pictures her trudging beside him. Yes. Stopping now and then to top her in the green crops. But the aloneness is getting him.

He shouts. Calls his name, Micaela's, Stacion's. Cries out the names of his littles. "I am a citizen of Edinburgh!" he bellows. "Urban Monad 116! The 704th floor!" The sounds float away toward the fleecy clouds. How lovely the sky is now, blue and gold and white.

A sudden droning sound out of the—north?—growing louder moment by moment. Harsh, throbbing, raucous. Has he brought some monster upon himself by his noise? Shading his eyes. There it is: a long black tube soaring slowly toward him at a height of, oh, maybe a hundred meters at most. Throws himself to the ground, huddles between the rows of cabbages or turnips or whatever. The black thing has a dozen stubby nozzles protruding along its sides, and from each nozzle spurts a cloudy green mist. Michael understands. Spraying the crops, probably. A poison to kill insects and other pests. What will it do to me? He coils, knees to his chest, hands to his face, eyes closed, mouth buried in palm. That terrible roaring overhead; kill me with decibels if

not with your filthy spray. The intensity of the sound diminishes. The thing is past him. The pesticide drifting down, he supposes, trying not to breathe. Lips clamped. Fiery petals dropping from heaven. Flowers of death. There it is, now, a faint dampness on his cheeks, a clinging moist veil. How soon will it kill him? He counts the passing minutes. Still alive. The flying thing no longer in earshot. Cautiously, he opens his eyes and stands up. Perhaps no danger, then; but he runs through the fields toward the glittering ribbon of a nearby creek, and plunges in, peeling in panic, to scrub himself. And only coming out realizes the creek must have been sprayed too. Well, not dead yet, anyway.

How far is it to the nearest commune?

* * * *

Somehow, in their infinite wisdom, the planners of this farm have allowed one low hill to survive. Mounting it in midafternoon, Michael takes stock. There are the urbmons, curiously dwindled. There are the cultivated fields. He sees machines, now, moving in some of the rows, things with many arms, possibly pulling up weeds. No sign of a settlement, though. He descends the hill and shortly encounters one of the agricultural machines. The first company he's had all day. "Hello. Michael Statler, from Urbmon 116. What's your name, machine? What kind of work do you do?"

Baleful yellow eyes study him and turn away. The machine is loosening the soil at the base of each plant in the row. Squirted something milky over the roots. Unfriendly filther, aren't you? Or just not programmed to talk. "I don't mind," he says. "Silence is golden. If you could just tell me where I could get a little to eat, though. Or find some people."

Droning sound again. Crot! Another stinking crop-sprayer! He gets down, ready to curl up again, but no, this flying thing is not spraying, nor does it go past. Hovering overhead, it swings into a tight circle, making an infernal holocaust of noise, and a hatch opens in its belly. Out drops a double strand of fine golden fiber, reaching to the ground. Down it, riding a clip-pod, slides a human being, a woman, followed by a man. They land deftly and come toward him. Grim faces. Beady eyes. Weapons at their waists. Their only garments are glossy red wraps covering them from thigh to belly. Their skins are tanned; their bodies are lean. The man has a stiff, bushy black beard: incredible, grotesque facial hair! The woman's breasts are small and hard. Both of them drawing their weapons now. "Hello!" Michael calls hoarsely. "I'm from an urbmon! Just visiting your country. Friend! Friend! Friend!"

The woman says something unintelligible.

He shrugs. "Sorry, I don't under—"

The weapon poking in his ribs. How cold her face is! The eyes like icy buttons. Will they kill him? Now the man speaks. Slowly and clearly, very loud, as one would speak to a three-year-old. Every syllable an alien one. Accusing him of trespassing in the fields, probably. One of the farming machines must have reported him to the commune. Michael points; the urbmons can still be seen from here. Indicates them, taps his chest. For whatever good that will do. They must know where he's from. His captors nod, unsmiling. A frosty pair. Arrested. Intruder menacing the sanctity of the fields. Woman takes him by the elbow. Well, at least they aren't going to kill him

outright. The devilish noisy flying thing still racketing overhead in its narrow orbit. They guide him toward the dangling fiber strands. The woman is in the clip-pod, now. Goes up. Then the man tells Michael something which he suspects means "Now you." Michael smiles. Cooperation his only hope. Figures out how to get into the clip-pod; the man makes the adjustments, locking him in, and up he goes. The woman, waiting above, depods him and pushes him into a webwork cradle. Keeps her weapon ready. A moment later the man is aboard too; the hatch closes and the flying machine goes roaring off. During the flight both of them interrogate him, hurling little jabbing bursts of words at him, but he can only reply apologetically, "I don't speak your language. How can I tell you what you want to know?"

Minutes later the machine lands. They jostle him out onto a bare reddish-brown field. Along its rim he sees low flat-roofed brick buildings, curious snub-fronted gray vehicles, several many-armed farming machines, and dozens of men and women wearing the glossy red loincloths. Not many children; perhaps they're at school, although it's getting late in the day. Everyone pointing at him. Speaking rapidly. Harsh unintelligible comments. Some laughter. He is frightened somewhat, not by the possibility that he is in peril so much as by the strangeness of everything. He knows this must be an agricultural commune. All this day's walking was prelude; he now has truly passed over from one world to another.

* * * *

The man and woman who captured him push him across the bare field and through the crowd of farming folk into one of the buildings nearby. As he passes, the farmers finger his clothing, touch his bare arms and face, murmur softly. Wonderstruck. Like a man from Mars in their midst. The building is poorly lit, roughly constructed, with crooked walls, low ceilings, warped floors of some pale pocked plastic material. Dumped into a bare, dismal room. A sour smell pervading it: vomit? Before she leaves him, the woman points out the facilities with a few brusque gestures. From this he can get water; it is a basin of some white artificial substance with the texture of smooth stone, yellowing and cracked in places. There is no sleeping platform, but probably he is meant to use the heap of rumpled blankets against one wall. No sign of a cleanser. For excretion he has a single unit, nothing more than a kind of plastic funnel going into the floor, with a button to push when he wishes to clear it. Evidently it is for urine and feces both. An odd arrangement; but then he realizes they wouldn't need to recycle wastes here. The room has no source of artificial light. Through its one window there streams the last feeble sun of the afternoon. The window faces the plaza where the farmers still are gathered, discussing him; he sees them pointing, nodding, nudging each other. There are metal bars on the window, set too close together to permit a man to slip through. A prison cell, then. He checks the door. Locked. How friendly of them. He'll never reach the seacoast this way.

"Listen," he calls to those in the plaza, "I don't mean any harm! You don't need to lock me up!"

They laugh. Two young men stroll over and stare solemnly at him. One of them puts his hand to his mouth and painstakingly covers his entire palm with saliva; when this is done he offers the palm to his companion, who presses his hand against it, and both break into wild laughter. Michael watches, mystified. He has heard about the barbaric customs in the communes. Primitive, incomprehensible. The young men say something contemptuous-sounding to him and walk away. A girl takes their place by

his window. Fifteen, sixteen years old, he guesses. Her breasts are large and deeply tanned, and between them hangs an explicit phallic amulet. She fondles it in what strikes him as lascivious invitation. "I'd love to," he says. "If you can only get me out of here." He puts his hands through the bars as if to caress her. She leaps back, wild-eyed, and makes a fierce gesture, jabbing her left hand at him with the thumb clenched under and the other four fingers aimed at his face. Clearly an obscenity. As she goes, some older people come to stare. A woman taps her chin in slow, steady, apparently meaningful rhythm; a withered man soberly presses his left palm to his right elbow three times; another man stoops, puts his hands on the ground, and rises, lifting them far above his head, perhaps pantomiming the growth of a lofty plant, perhaps the construction of an urban monad. Whatever, he breaks into shrill laughter and stumbles off. Night is coming, now. Through the dusk Michael sees a succession of crop-spraying machines landing in the plaza like birds returning to the nest at sundown, and dozens of many-legged mobile farming units come striding out of the fields. The onlookers vanish; he watches them going into the other buildings around the plaza. Despite the uncertainties of being a prisoner, he is captivated by the alien nature of this place. To live so close to the ground, to walk about all day long under the naked sun, to know nothing of an urbmon's crowded richness—

An armed girl brings him dinner, popping his door open, setting down a tray, leaving without a word. Stewed vegetables, a clear broth, some unfamiliar red fruits, and a capsule of cold wine: the fruits are bruised and, to his taste, overripe, but everything else is excellent. He eats greedily, cleaning the tray. Then he goes to the window. The center of the plaza is still empty, although at the far side eight or ten men, evidently a maintenance crew, have gone to work on the farming machines by the light of three floating luminous globes. His cell now is in complete darkness. Since there is nothing else to do, he removes his clothes and sprawls out on the blankets. Though he is exhausted by his long day's trek, sleep will not come at first: his mind ticks furiously, contemplating options. Doubtless they will interrogate him tomorrow. Someone around here must know the language of the urbmons. With luck he can demonstrate that he means no harm. Smile a lot, act friendly, an air of innocence. Perhaps even get them to escort him out of their territory. Fly him eastward, dump him in some other commune's land, let him make his way to the sea. Will he be arrested at commune after commune? A dreary prospect. Maybe he can find a route that bypasses the agricultural zone—through the ruins of some former cities, possibly. Unless there are wild men living there. At least the farmers are civilized, in their fashion. He envisions himself cooked by cannibals in some blasted rubbleheap, the former Pittsburgh, say. Or just eaten raw. Why are the farmers so suspicious? What can one lone wanderer do to them? The natural xenophobia of an isolated culture, he decides. Just as we wouldn't want a farmer loose in an urbmon. But of course urbmons are closed systems. Everybody numbered, inoculated, assigned to a proper place. These folk have a less rigid system, don't they? They don't need to fear strangers. Try convincing them of that.

He drifts into an uneasy sleep.

He is awakened, not more than an hour or two later, by discordant music, raw and disturbing. Sits up: red shadows flickering on the wall of his cell. Some kind of visual projections? Or a fire outside? Rushes to the window. Yes. An immense mound of dried stems, branches, vegetable debris of all sorts, is ablaze in the middle of the plaza. He has never seen fire before, except sometimes on the screen, and the sight of

it terrifies and delights him. Those wavering bursts of redness rising and vanishing—where do they go? And he can feel the surging heat even from where he stands. The constant flux, the shifting shape of the dancing flames—how incredibly beautiful! And menacing. Aren't they afraid, letting fire loose like this? But of course there's that zone of bare dirt around it. Fire can't cross that. The earth doesn't burn.

He forces his eyes away from the hypnotic frenzy of the fire. A dozen musicians sit close together to the left of the blaze. The instruments weirdly medieval: everything operated by blowing or pounding or scraping or pressing keys, and the sounds are uneven and imprecise, flickering around the proper pitches but missing by a fraction of a tone. The human element; Michael, whose sense of pitch is unusually good, cringes at these tiny but perceptible variations from the absolute. Yet the farmers don't seem to mind. Unspoiled by the mechanical perfection of modern scientific music. Hundreds of them, perhaps the entire population of the village, sit in ragged rows along the perimeter of the plaza, nodding in time to the wailing, screeching melodies, pounding their heels against the ground, rhythmically clapping their hands to their elbows. The light of the fire transforms them into an assemblage of demons; the red glow ripples eerily over their half-nude bodies. He sees children among them, but still not very many. Two here, three there, many adult couples with one or none. Stunned by the realization: *they limit births here*. His skin crawls. He is amused by his own involuntary reaction of horror; it tells him that no matter what configuration his genes may have, he is by conditioning a man of the urbmons.

The music grows even wilder. The fire soars. The farmers begin to dance. Michael expects the dancing to be amorphous and frantic, a helter-skelter flinging-out of arms and legs, but no: surprisingly, it is tight and disciplined, a controlled and formal series of movements. Men in this row, women in that; forward, back, interchange partners, elbows high, head thrown back, knees pumping, now hop, turn around, form lines again, link hands. The pace constantly accelerating, but the rhythms always distinct and coherent. A ritualized progression of patterns. Eyes glazed, lips tight. This is no revel, he is suddenly aware; it is a religious festival. The rites of the commune people. What are they building toward? Is he the sacrificial lamb? Providence has sent them an urbmon man, eh? Panicky, he looks about for signs of a caldron, a spit, a stake, anything on which they might cook him. Tales of the communes circulate gaudily in the urbmon; he has always dismissed them as ignorant myths. But possibly not.

When they come for him, he decides, he will lunge and attack them. Better to be shot down quickly than to die on the village altar.

Yet half an hour passes, and no one has even looked in the direction of his cell. The dancing has continued without a break. Oiled with sweat, the farmers seem like dream figures, glittering, grotesque. Bare breasts bobbling; nostrils distended, eyes aglow. New boughs on the fire. The musicians goading one another into fresh frenzies. And now, what's this? Masked figures parading solemnly into the plaza: three men, three women. Faces hidden by intricate spherical constructions, nightmarish, bestial, garish. The women carry oval baskets in which can be seen products of the commune: seeds, dried ears of corn, ground meal. The men encircle a seventh person, a woman, two of them tugging at her arms and one pushing her from behind. She is pregnant, well along, into her sixth or even seventh month. She wears no mask, and her face is tense and rigid, the lips clamped, the eyes wide and frightened. They fling her down before the fire, and stand flanking her. She kneels, head drooping, long hair almost touching

the ground, swollen breasts swaying with each ragged intake of breath. One of the masked men—it is impossible not to think of them as priests—intones a resonant invocation. One of the masked women places an ear of corn in each hand of the pregnant one. Another sprinkles her back with meal; it sticks to her sweaty skin. The third scatters seeds in her hair. The other two men join the chant. Michael, gripping the bars of his cell, feels as though he has been hurled thousands of years back in time, to some Neolithic festival; it is almost impossible for him to believe that one day's march from here there rises the thousand-story bulk of Urban Monad 116.

They have finished anointing the pregnant woman with produce. Now two of the priests lift her, shaking, to a standing position, and one of the priestesses rips away her single garment. A howl from the villagers. They spin her around. Displaying her nakedness to all. The heavy protruding belly, drum-tight, glistening in the firelight. The broad hips and solid thighs, the meaty buttocks. Sensing something sinister just ahead, Michael presses his face against the bars, fighting off terror. Is she and not he the sacrificial victim? A flashing knife, the unborn fetus ripped from the womb, a devilish propitiation of the harvest gods? Please, no. Maybe he is to be the chosen executioner. His feverish imagination, unbidden, supplies the scenario: he sees himself taken from the cell, thrust into the plaza, a sickle pushed into his hand, the woman lying spread-eagled near the fire, belly upturned, the priests chanting, the priestesses leaping, and in pantomime they tell him what he must do, they indicate the taut curve of her body, draw their fingers across the preferred place of incision, while the music climbs toward insanity and the fire flares ever higher, and. No. No. He turns away, flinging one arm over his eyes. Shivering, nauseated. When he can bring himself to look again, he sees that the villagers are getting up and dancing toward the fire, toward the pregnant woman. She stands flatfooted, bewildered, clutching the ears of corn, pressing her thighs together, wriggling her shoulders in a way that somehow indicates she is shamed by her nudity. And they caper around her. Shouting raucous abuse. Making the four-fingered jab of contempt. Pointing, mocking, accusing. A condemned witch? An adulteress? The woman shrinks into herself. Suddenly the mob closes in on her. He sees them slapping her, pushing her, spitting at her. God bless, no! “Let her alone!” he screams. “You filthy grubbos, get your hands off her!” His wails are drowned by the music. A dozen or so farmers now ring the woman and they are shoving her back and forth. A double-handed push; she staggers, barely managing to stay upright, and stumbles across the ring, only to be seized by her breasts and slammed back the other way. She is panting, wild with terror, searching for escape, but the ring is tight, and they fling her around. When at last she drops, they tug her upright and toss her some more, grabbing her arms and whirling her from hand to hand around the ring. Then the circle opens. Other villagers sweep toward her. More abuse. The blows all are open-handed ones, and no one seems to hit her belly, yet they are delivered with great force; a trickle of blood stains her chin and throat, and one knee and one buttock are scraped raw from when she has been knocked to the ground. She is limping, too; she must have turned an ankle. Vulnerable as she is in her nakedness, she makes no attempt to defend herself or even to protect her pregnancy. Clutching the ears of corn, she simply accepts her torment, letting herself be hurled about, allowing the vindictive hands to poke and pinch and slap her. The mob surges about her, everyone having a turn. How much more can she take? Is the idea to beat her to death? To make her drop her baby while they watch? He has never imagined anything so chilling. He feels the blows as if they are landing on his own body. If he could, he would strike these people dead with thunderbolts. Where is their respect for life? That woman should be sacred, and instead they torture her.

She vanishes under a horde of screaming attackers.

When they clear away, a minute or two later, she is kneeling, half-conscious, close to collapse. Her lips writhe in hysterical choking sobs. Her entire body is trembling. Her head hangs forward. Someone's clawed hand has left a series of parallel bloody tracks across the globe of her right breast. She is smudged everywhere with dirt.

The music grows oddly soft, as if some climax is approaching and momentum must be gained. Now they come for me, Michael thinks. Now I'm supposed to kill her, or top her, or kick her in the belly, or god knows what. But no one even looks toward the building in which he is jailed. The three priests are chanting in unison; the music gains gradually in intensity; the villagers fall back, clustering along the perimeter of the plaza. And the woman rises, shakily, uncertainly. Looks down at her bloodied and battered self. Face wholly blank; she is beyond pain, beyond shame, beyond terror. Slowly walks toward the fire. Stumbles once. Recovers, stays upright. Now she stands by the edge of the fire, almost within reach of the licking tongues of flame. Her back to him. Plump heavy rump, deeply dimpled. Scratches on her back. Wide pelvis, the bones spreading out as the little's time approaches. The music is deafening now. The priests silent, frozen. Obviously the great moment. Does she leap into the flames?

No. Raises her arms. The ears of corn outlined against the brightness of the fire. Throws them in: two quick flares and they vanish. An immense roar from the villagers, a tremendous crashing discord from the musicians. The naked woman stumbles away from the fire, tottering, exhausted. Falls, landing with a thump on her left haunch, lies there sobbing. Priests and priestesses march into the darkness with stiff, pompous strides. The villagers simply fade away, leaving only the woman, crumpled on the plaza. And a man coming toward her, a tall, bearded figure; Michael remembers seeing him in the midst of the mob when they were beating her. Lifts her now. Cradles her tenderly against him. Kisses her scratched breast. Runs his hand lightly over her belly, as though assuring himself that the child is unharmed. She clings close. He talks softly to her; the strange words drift across to Michael's cell. She replies, stammering, her voice thick with shock. Unbothered by her weight, the man slowly carries her away, toward one of the buildings on the opposite side of the plaza. All is still, now. Only the fire remains, crackling harshly, crumbling in upon itself. When after a long while no one appears, Michael turns away from his window and, stunned, baffled, throws himself on his blankets. Silence. Darkness. Images of the bizarre ceremony churn in his mind. He shivers; he trembles; he feels almost at the edge of tears. Finally he sleeps.

* * * *

The arrival of breakfast awakens him. He studies the tray a few minutes before forcing himself to get up. Stiff and sore from yesterday's walking; every muscle protesting. Doubled up, he hobbles to a window: a heap of ashes where the fire had been, villagers moving about on their morning chores, the farming machines already heading toward the fields. He splashes water in his face, voids his wastes, looks automatically for the cleanser, and, not finding it, begins to wonder how he will tolerate the crust of grime that has accumulated on his skin. He had not realized before how ingrained a habit it was for him to get under the ultrasonic wave at the beginning of each day. He goes then to the tray: juice, bread, cold fruit, wine. It will do. Before he is finished eating, his cell door opens and a woman enters, clad in the

usual brief commune costume. He knows instinctively that she is someone of importance; her eyes have the clear cold light of authority, and her expression is an intelligent, perceptive one. She is perhaps thirty years old, and like most of these farming women her body is lean and taut, with supple muscles, long limbs, small breasts. She reminds him in some ways of Micaela, although her hair is auburn and close-cropped, not long and black. A weapon is strapped to her thigh.

“Cover yourself,” she says briskly. “I don't welcome the sight of your nakedness. Cover yourself, and then we can talk.”

She speaks the urbmon tongue! A strange accent, true, with every word cut short as if her sharp shining teeth have clipped its tail as it passes her lips. The vowels blurred and distorted. But unmistakably the language of his native building. Immense relief. Communication at last.

He pulls his clothing hastily on. She watches him, stony-faced. A tough one, she is. He says, “In the urbmons we don't worry much about covering our bodies. We live in what we call a post-privacy culture. I didn't realize—”

“You don't happen to be in an urbmon just now.”

“I realize that. I'm sorry if I've given offense through my ignorance of your customs.”

He is fully dressed. She seems to soften a bit, perhaps at his apology, perhaps merely because he has concealed his nudity. Taking a few steps farther into the room, she says, “It's a long time since we've had a spy from your people among us.”

“I'm not a spy.”

A cool, skeptical smile. “No? Then why are you here?”

“I didn't intend to trespass on your commune's land. I was just passing through, heading eastward. On my way toward the sea.”

“Really?” As though he had said he had set out to walk to Pluto. “Traveling alone, are you?”

“I am.”

“When did this marvelous journey begin?”

“Yesterday morning, very early,” Michael says. “I'm from Urban Monad 116. A computer-primer, if that means anything to you. Suddenly I felt I couldn't stay inside that building any more, that I had to find out what the outside world was like, and so I arranged to get an egress pass and slipped out just before dawn, and started walking, and then I came to your fields and your machines saw me, I guess, and I was picked up, and because of the language problem I couldn't explain to anyone who I—”

“What do you hope to gain by spying on us?”

His shoulders slump. “I told you,” he says wearily. “I'm not a spy.”

“Urbmon people don't slip out of their buildings. I've dealt with your kind for years; I know how your minds work.” Her eyes level with his. Cold, cold. “You'd be paralyzed with terror five minutes after you set out,” she assures him. “Obviously you've been trained for this mission, or you'd never have been able to keep your sanity for a full day in the fields. What I don't understand is why they'd send you. You have your world and we have ours; there's no conflict, no overlapping; there's no need for espionage.”

“I agree,” Michael says. “And that's why I'm not a spy.” He finds himself drawn to her despite the severity of her attitude. Her competence and self-confidence attract him. And if she would only smile she would be quite beautiful. He says, “Look, how can I get you to believe this? I just wanted to see the world outside the urbmon. All my life indoors. Never smelling fresh air, never feeling the sun on my skin. Thousands of people living on top of me. I'm not really well adjusted to urbmon society, I discovered. So I went outside. Not a spy. All I want to do is travel. To the sea, particularly. Have you ever seen the sea? ... No? That's my dream—to walk along the shore, to hear the waves rolling in, to feel the wet sand under my feet—”

Possibly the fervor in his tone is beginning to convince her. She shrugs, looking less flinty, and says, “What's your name?”

“Michael Statler.”

“Age?”

“Twenty-three.”

“We could put you aboard the next courier pod, with the fungus shipment. You'd be back at your urbmon in half an hour.”

“No,” he says softly. “Don't do that. Just let me keep going east. I'm not ready to go back so soon.”

“Haven't gathered enough information, you mean?”

“I told you, I'm not—” He stops, realizing she is teasing him.

“All right. Maybe you aren't a spy. Just a madman, perhaps.” She smiles, for the first time, and slides down until she is squatting against the wall, facing him. In an easy conversational tone she says, “What do you think of our village, Statler?”

“I don't even know where to begin answering that.”

“How do we strike you? Simple? Complicated? Evil? Frightening? Unusual?”

“Strange,” he says.

“Strange in comparison to the kind of people you've lived among, or just strange, absolutely?”

"I'm not sure I know the distinction. It's like another world out here, anyway. I—I— what's your name, by the way?"

"Artha."

"Arthur? Among us that's a man's name."

"A-R-T-H-A."

"Oh. Artha. How interesting. How beautiful." He knots his fingers tightly. "The way you live so close to the soil here, Artha. There's something dreamlike about that for me. These little houses. The plaza. Seeing you walking around in the open. The sun. Building fires. Not having any upstairs or downstairs. And that business last night, the music, the pregnant woman. What was that all about?"

"You mean the unbirth dance?"

"*Is that* what it was? Some kind of"—he falters—"sterility rite?"

"To ensure a good harvest," Artha says. "To keep the crops healthy and childbirths low. We have rules about breeding, you understand."

"And the woman everybody was hitting—she got pregnant illegally, is that it?"

"Oh, no." Artha laughs. "Milcha's child is quite legal."

"Then why—tormenting her like that—she could have lost the child—"

"Someone had to do it," Artha tells him. "The commune has eleven pregnant, just now. They drew lots and Milcha lost. Or won. It isn't punishment, Statler. It's a religious thing: she's the celebrant, the holy scapegoat, the—the—I don't have the words in your language. Through her suffering she brings health and prosperity upon the commune. Ensuring that no unwanted children will come into our women, that all will remain in perfect balance. Of course, it's painful for her. And there's the shame, being naked in front of everyone. But it has to be done. It's a great honor. Milcha will never have to do it again, and she'll have certain privileges for the rest of her life, and of course everyone is grateful to her for accepting our blows. Now we're protected for another year."

"Protected?"

"Against the anger of the gods."

"Gods," he says quietly. Swallowing the word and trying to comprehend it. After a moment he asks, "Why do you try to avoid having children?"

"Do you think we own the world?" she replies, her eyes abruptly fiery. "We have our commune. Our allotted zone of land. We must make food for ourselves and also for the urbmons, right? What would happen to you if we simply bred and bred and bred, until our village sprawled out over half of the present fields, and such remaining food as we produced was merely enough for our own needs? With nothing to spare for you."

Children must be housed. Houses occupy land. How can we farm land covered by a house? We must set limits.”

“But you don't need to sprawl your village out into the fields. You could build upward. As we do. And increase your numbers tenfold without taking up any more land area. Well, of course, you'd need more food and there'd be less to ship to us, that's true, but—”

“You absolutely don't understand,” Artha snaps. “Should we turn our commune into an urbmon? You have your way of life; we have ours. Ours requires us to be a few in number and live in the midst of fertile fields. Why should we become like you? We pride ourselves on not being like you. So if we expand, we must expand horizontally, right? Which would in time cover the surface of the world with a dead crust of paved streets and roads, as in the former days. No. We are beyond such things. We impose limits on ourselves, and live in the proper rhythm of our way, and we are happy. And so it shall be forever with us. Does this seem so wicked? We think the urbmon folk are wicked, for they will not control their breeding. And even *encourage* breeding.”

“There's no need for us to control it,” he tells her. “It's been mathematically proven that we haven't begun to exhaust the possibilities of the planet. Our population could double or even triple, and as long as we continued to live in vertical cities, in urban monads, there'd be room for everyone. Without encroaching on productive farmland. We build a new urbmon every few years, and even so the food supplies aren't diminishing, the rhythm of *our* way holds up, and—”

“Do you think this can continue infinitely?”

“Well, no, not infinitely,” Michael concedes. “But for a long time. Five hundred years, maybe, at the present rate of increase, before we'd feel any squeeze.”

“And then?”

“They can solve that problem when the time comes.”

Artha shakes her head furiously. “No! No! How can you say such a thing? To go on breeding, letting the future worry about it—”

“Look,” he says, “I've talked to my brother-in-law, who's a historian. Specializes in the twentieth century. Back then it was believed that everybody would starve if the world's population got past five or six billion. Much talk of a population crisis, etc., etc. Well, then came the collapse, and afterward things were reorganized, the first urbmons went up, the old horizontal pattern of land use was prohibited, and guess what? We found there was room for ten billion people. And then twenty. And then fifty. And now seventy-five. Taller buildings, more efficient food production, greater concentration of people on the unproductive land. So who are we to say that our descendants won't continue to cope with expanding population, on up to five hundred billion, a thousand billion, who knows? The twentieth century wouldn't have believed it was possible to support this many people on Earth. So if we worry in advance about a problem that may in fact never cause any trouble, if we unblessworthily thwart god by limiting births, we sin against life without any assurance that—”

“Pah!” Artha snorts. “You will never understand us. And I suppose we will never understand you.” Rising, she strides toward the door. “Tell me this, then. If the urbmon way is so wonderful, why did you slip away, and go out wandering in our fields?” And she does not stay for an answer. The door clicks behind her; he goes to it and finds that she has locked it. He is alone. And still a prisoner.

* * * *

A long drab day. No one comes to him, except the girl bringing lunch: in and out. The stench of the cell oppresses him. The lack of a cleanser becomes unbearable; he imagines that the filth gathering on his skin is pitting and corroding it. From his narrow window he watches the life of the commune, craning his neck to see it all. The farming machines coming and going. The husky peasants loading sacks of produce aboard a conveyor belt disappearing into the ground—going, no doubt, to the courier-pod system that carries food to the urbmons and industrial goods to the communes. Last night's scapegoat, Milcha, passes by, limping, bruised, apparently exempt from work today; villagers hail her with obvious reverence. She smiles and pats her belly. He does not see Artha at all. Why do they not release him? He is fairly certain that he has convinced her he is no spy. And in any case can hardly harm the commune. Yet here he remains as the afternoon fades. The busy people outside, sweating, sun-tanned, purposeful. He sees only a speck of the commune: outside the scope of his vision there must be schools, a theater, a governmental building, warehouses, repair shops. Images of last night's unbirth dance glow morbidly in his memory. The barbarism; the wild music; the agony of the woman. But he knows that it is an error to think of these farmers as primitive, simple folk, despite such things. They seem bizarre to him, but their savagery is only superficial, a mask they don to set themselves apart from the urban people. This is a complex society held in a delicate balance. As complex as is his own. Sophisticated machinery to care for. Doubtless a computer center somewhere, controlling the planting and tending and harvesting of the crops, that requires a staff of skilled technicians. Biological needs to consider: pesticides, weed suppression, all the ecological intricacies. And the problems of the barter system that ties the commune to the urbmons. He perceives only the surface of this place, he realizes.

In late afternoon Artha returns to his cell.

“Will they let me go soon?” he asks immediately.

She shakes her head. “It's under discussion. I've recommended your release. But some of them are very suspicious people.”

“Who do you mean?”

“The chiefs. You know, they're old men, most of them, with a natural mistrust of strangers. A couple of them want to sacrifice you to the harvest god.”

“*Sacrifice?*”

Artha grins. There is nothing stony about her now; she is relaxed, clearly friendly. On his side. “It sounds horrid, doesn't it? But it's been known to happen. Our gods occasionally demand lives. Don't you ever take life in the urbmon?”

“When someone threatens the stability of our society, yes,” he admits. “Lawbreakers go down the chute. In the combustion chambers at the bottom of the building. Contributing their body mass to our energy output. But—”

“So you kill for the sake of keeping everything running smoothly. Well, sometimes so do we. Not often. I don't really think they'll kill you. But it isn't decided yet.”

“When will it be?”

“Perhaps tonight. Or tomorrow.”

“How can I represent any threat to the commune?”

“No one says you do,” Artha tells him. “Even so, to offer the life of an urbmon man may have positive values here. Increasing our blessings. It's a philosophical thing, not easy to explain: the urbmons are the ultimate consumers, and if our harvest god symbolically consumed an urbmon instead—in a metaphorical way, taking you to stand for the whole society you come from—it would be a mystic affirmation of the unity of the two societies, the link that binds commune to urbmon and urbmon to commune, and—oh, never mind. Maybe they'll forget about it. It's only the day after the unbirth dance; we don't need any more sacred protection so soon. I've told them that. I'd say your chances of going free are fairly good.”

“Fairly good,” he repeats gloomily. “Wonderful.” The distant sea. The ashy cone of Vesuvius. Jerusalem. The Taj Mahal. As far away as the stars, now. The sea. The sea. This stinking cell. He chokes on despair.

Artha tries to cheer him. Squatting close beside him on the tipsy floor. Her eyes warm, affectionate. Her earlier military brusqueness gone. She seems fond of him. Getting to know him better, as though she has surmounted the barrier of cultural differences that made him seem so alien to her before. And he the same with her. The separations dwindling. Her world is not his, but he thinks he could adjust to some of its unfamiliar assumptions. Strike up a closeness. He's a man, she's a woman, right? The basics. All the rest is façade. But as they talk, he is plunged again and again into new awarenesses of how different she is from him, he from her. He asks her about herself and she says she is unmarried. Stunned, he tells her that there are no unmarried people in the urbmons past the age of twelve or thirteen. She says she is thirty-one. Why has someone so attractive never married? “We have enough married women here,” she replies. “I had no reason to marry.” Does she not want to bear children? No, not at all. The commune has its allotted number of mothers. She has other responsibilities to occupy her. “Such as?” She explains that she is part of the liaison staff handling urbmon commerce. Which is why she can speak the language so well; she deals frequently with the urbmons, arranging for exchanges of produce for manufactured goods, setting up servicing arrangements whenever the commune's machinery suffers a breakdown beyond the skills of the village technicians, and so forth. “I may have monitored your calls occasionally,” he says. “Some of the nodes I prime run through the procurement level. If I ever get back home, I'll listen for you, Artha.” Her smile is dazzling. He begins to suspect that love is blossoming in this cell.

She asks him about the urbmon.

She has never been inside one; all her contacts with the urban monads come via communications channels. A vast curiosity is evident in her. She wants him to describe the residential apartments, the transport system, liftshafts and dropshafts, the schools, the recreational facilities. Who prepares the food? Who decides what professions the children will follow? Can you move from one city to another? Where do you keep all the new people? How do you manage not to hate each other, when you must live so close together? Don't you feel like prisoners? Thousands of you milling about like bees in a hive—how do you stand it? And the stale air, the pale artificial light, the separation from the natural world. Incomprehensible to her: such a narrow, compressed life. And he tries to tell her about the urbmon, how even he, who chose to flee from it, really loves it. The subtle balance of need and want in it, the elaborate social system designed for minimal friction and frustration, the sense of community within one's own city and village, the glorification of parenthood, the colossal mechanical minds in the service core that keep the delicate interplay of urban rhythms coordinated—he makes the building seem a poem of human relationships, a miracle of civilized harmonies. His words soar. Artha seems captivated. He goes on and on, in a kind of rapture of narrative, describing toilet facilities, sleeping arrangements, screens and data terminals, the recycling and reprocessing of urine and feces, the combustion of solid refuse, the auxiliary generators that produce electrical power from accumulated surplus body heat, the air vents and circulation system, the social complexity of the building's different levels, maintenance people here, industrial workers there, scholars, entertainers, engineers, computer technicians, administrators. The senior citizen dorms, the newlywed dorms, the marriage customs, the sweet tolerance of others, the sternly enforced commandment against selfishness. And Artha nods, and fills in words for him when he leaves a sentence half finished to hurry on to the next and her face grows flushed with excitement, as if she too is caught up in the lyricism of his account of the building. Seeing for the first time in her life that it is not necessarily brutal and antihuman to pack hundreds of thousands of people into a single structure in which they spend their entire lives. As he speaks he wonders whether he is not letting himself be carried away by his own rhetoric; the words rushing from him must make him sound like an impassioned propagandist for a way of life about which, after all, he had come to have serious doubts. But yet he goes on describing, and by implication praising, the urbmon. He will not condemn. There was no other way for humanity to develop. The necessity of the vertical city. The beauty of the urbmon. Its wondrous complexity, its intricate texture. Yes, of course, there is beauty outside it, he admits that, he has gone in search of it, but it is folly to think that the urbmon itself is something loathsome, something to be deplored. In its own way magnificent. The unique solution to the population crisis. Heroic response to immense challenge. And he thinks he is getting through to her. This shrewd, cool commune woman, raised under the hot sun. His verbal intoxication transforms itself into something explicitly sexual, now: he is communicating with Artha, he is reaching her mind, they are coming together in a way that neither of them would have thought possible yesterday, and he interprets this new closeness as a physical thing. The natural eroticism of the urbmon dweller: everyone accessible to everyone else at all times. Confirm their closeness by the direct embrace. It seems like the most reasonable extension of their communion, from the conversational to the copulatory. So close already. Her eyes shining. Her small breasts. Reminding him of Micaela. He leans toward her. Left hand slipping around her shoulders, fingers groping for and finding her nearer breast. Cupping it. Nuzzles the line of her jaw with his lips, going toward her earlobe. His other hand at her waist, seeking the secret of her one garment.

In a moment she'll be naked. His body against hers, approaching congruency. Cunning experienced fingers opening the way for his thrust. And then.

“No. Stop.”

“You don't mean that, Artha.” Loosening the glossy red wrap now. Clutching the hard little breast. Hunting for her mouth. “You're all tensed up. Why not relax? Loving is blessing. Loving is—”

“*Stop it.*”

Flinty again. A sharp-edged command. Suddenly struggling in his arms.

Is this the commune mode of lovemaking? The pretense of resistance? She grasps at her wrap, pushes him with her elbow, tries to bring up her knee. He surrounds her with his arms and attempts to press her to the floor. Still caressing. Kissing. Murmuring her name.

“*Get off.*”

This is a wholly new experience for him. A reluctant woman, all sinews and bone, fighting his advances. In the urbmon she could be put to death for this. Unblessworthy thwarting of a fellow citizen. But this is not the urbmon. This is not the urbmon. Her struggles inflame him; as it is he has gone several days without a woman, the longest span of abstinence he can remember, and he is stiff, agonizingly erect, carrying a blazing sword. No finesse possible; he wants in, as quickly as it can be managed. “Artha. Artha. Artha.” Primordial grunts. Her body pinned beneath him. The wrap off; as they fight he catches a glimpse of slender thighs, matted auburn delta. The flat girlish belly of the unchilded. If he can only get his own clothes off somehow, while holding her down. Fighting like a demon. Good thing she wasn't wearing her weapon when she came in. Watch out, the eyes! Panting and gasping. A wild flurry of hammering fists. The salty taste of blood on his split lip. He looks into her eyes and is appalled. Her rigid, murderous gaze. The harder she fights, the more he wants her. A savage! If this is how she fights, how will she love? His knee between her legs, slowly forcing them apart. She starts to scream; he gets his mouth down on her lips; her teeth hunt for his flesh. Fingernails clawing his back. She is surprisingly strong. “Artha,” he begs, “don't fight me. This is insanity. If you'll only—”

“Animal!”

“Let me show you how much I love—”

“Lunatic!”

Her knee suddenly in his crotch. He pivots, avoiding the worst of her attack, but she hurts him anyway. This is no coy game. If he wants to have her, he must break her strength. Immobilize her. Raping an unconscious woman? No. No. It has all gone wrong. Sadness overwhelms him. His lust suddenly subsides. He rolls free of her and kneels near the window, looking at the floor, breathing hard. Go on, tell the old men what I did. Feed me to your god. Naked, standing above him, she sullenly dons her wrap. The harsh sound of her breathing. He says, “In an urbmon, when someone

makes sexual advances, it's considered highly improper to refuse him." His voice hollow with shame. "I was attracted to you, Artha. I thought you were to me. And then it was too late for me to stop myself. The whole idea that someone might refuse me—I just didn't understand—"

"What animals you all must be!"

Unable to meet her eyes. "In context, it makes sense. We can't allow explosive frustration-situations. No room for conflicts in an urbmon. But here—it's different, is it?"

"Very."

"Can you forgive me?"

"We couple with those we deeply love," she says. "We don't open for anyone at all who asks. Nor is it a simple thing. There are rituals of approach. Intermediaries must be employed. Great complications. But how could you have known all that?"

"Exactly. How could I?"

Her voice whiplashing with irritation and exasperation. "We were getting along so well! Why did you have to touch me?"

"You said it yourself. I didn't know. I didn't know. The two of us together—I could feel the attraction growing—it was so natural for me to reach out toward you—"

"And it was so natural for you to try to rape me when you felt me resisting."

"I stopped in time, didn't I?"

A bitter laugh. "So to speak. If you call that stopping. If you call that in time."

"Resistance isn't an easy thing for me to understand, Artha. I thought you were playing a game with me. I didn't realize at first that you were refusing me." Looking up at her now. Her eyes holding mingled contempt and sorrow. "It was all a misunderstanding, Artha. Can't we turn time back half an hour? Can't we try to put things together again?"

"I will remember your hands on my body. I will remember your making me naked."

"Don't carry a grudge. Try to look at it from my point of view. The cultural gulf between us. A different set of assumptions in operation. I—"

She shakes her head slowly. No hope of forgiveness.

"Artha—"

She goes out. He sits alone in the dusk. An hour later, his dinner comes for him. Night descends; he eats with no interest in his food, nursing his bitterness. Engulfed by shame. Although he insists he was not entirely at fault. A clash of irreconcilable

cultures. It was so natural for him. It was so natural. And the sadness. Thinking of how close they had come to be before it happened. How close.

* * * *

Several hours after sundown they begin building a new bonfire in the plaza. He watches gloomily. She has gone to the village elders, then, to tell them of his attack on her. An outrage; they console her and promise vengeance. Now they will surely sacrifice him to their god. His last night of life. All the turmoil of his existence converging on this day. No one to grant a final wish. He'll die miserably, his body unclean. Far from home. So young. Jangling with unfulfilled desires. Never to see the sea.

And what's this, now? A farming machine being trundled up close to the fire, a giant upright thing, five meters high, with eight long, jointed arms, six many-kneed legs, a vast mouth. Some kind of harvester, maybe. Its polished brown metallic skin reflecting the fire's leaping red fingers. Like a mighty idol. Moloch. Baal. He sees his body swept aloft in the great clutching fingers. His head nearing the metal mouth. The villagers capering about him in rhythmic frenzy. Bruised swollen Milcha chanting ecstatically as he goes to his doom. Icy Artha rejoicing in her triumph. Her purity restored by his sacrifice. The priests droning. Please, no. No. Perhaps he's all wrong. Last night, the sterility rite, he thought they were punishing the pregnant one. And she was really the most honored one. But how vicious that machine looks! How deadly!

The plaza is full of villagers now. A major event.

Listen, Artha, it was merely a misunderstanding. I thought you desired me, I was acting within the context of my society's mores, can't you see that? Sex isn't a big complicated operatic thing with us. It's like exchanging smiles. Like touching hands. When two people are together and there's an attraction, they do it, because why not? I only wanted to give you pleasure, really. We were getting along so well together. Really.

The sound of drums. The awful skirling screeches of out-of-tune wind instruments. Orgiastic dancing is starting. God bless, I want to live! Here are the priests and priestesses in their nightmare masks. No doubt of it, the full routine. And I'm the central spectacle tonight.

An hour passes, and more, and the scene in the plaza grows more frenzied, but no one comes to fetch him. Has he misunderstood again? Does tonight's ritual actually concern him as little as did the one last night?

A sound at his door. He hears the lock turning. The door opens. The priests must be coming for him. So now the end is near, eh? He braces himself, hoping for a painless finish. To die for metaphorical reasons, to become a mystic link binding commune to urbmon—such a fate seems improbable and unreal to him. But it is about to befall him all the same.

Artha enters the cell.

She closes the door quickly and presses her back against it. The only illumination is the streaming firelight glaring through his window; it shows her to him with her face

tense and stern, her body rigid. This time she wears her weapon. Taking no chances.

“Artha! I—”

“Quiet. If you want to live, keep your voice down.”

“What's happening out there?”

“They prepare the harvest god.”

“For me?”

“For you.”

He nods. “You told them I tried to rape you, I suppose. And now my punishment. All right. All right. It isn't fair, but who expects fairness?”

“I told them nothing,” she says. “It was their decision, taken at sundown. I did not cause this.”

She sounds sincere. He wonders.

She goes on, “They will take you before the god at midnight. Just now they are praying that he will receive you gracefully. It is a lengthy prayer.” She walks cautiously past him, as though expecting him to pounce on her again, and looks out the window. Nods to herself. Turns. “Very well. No one will notice. Come with me, and make no sound whatever. If I'm caught with you, I'll have to kill you and say you were trying to escape. Otherwise it'll be my life too. Come. Come.”

“Where?”

“*Come!*” A fierce impatient whispered gust.

She leads him from the cell. In wonder he follows her through a labyrinth of passages, through dank subterranean chambers, through tunnels barely wider than himself, and they emerge finally at the back of the building. He shivers: a chill in the night air. Music and chanting floating toward him from the plaza. Artha gestures, runs out between two houses, looks in all directions, gestures again. He runs after her. By quick nervous stages they reach the outer edge of the commune. He glances back; from here he can see the fire, the idol, the tiny dancing figures, like images on a screen. Ahead of him are the fields. Above him the crescent sliver of the moon, the shining sprawl of the stars. A sudden sound. Artha clutches at him and tugs him down, under a clump of shrubs. Her body against his; the tips of her breasts like points of fire. He does not dare to move or speak. Someone goes by: a sentry, maybe. Broad back, thick neck. Out of sight. Artha, trembling, holds his wrists, keeping him down. Then at last getting up. Nodding. Silently saying the way is clear. She slips into the fields, between the burgeoning rows of tall, leafy plants. For perhaps ten minutes they trot away from the village, until his untrained body is gasping for breath. When she halts, the bonfire is only a stain on the distant horizon and the singing is drowned out by the chirping of insects. “From here you go by yourself,” she tells him. “I have to return. If anyone misses me for long, they might suspect.”

“Why did you do this?”

“Because I was unjust to you,” she says, and for the first time since coming to him this evening she manages to smile. A ghost-smile, a quick flicker, the merest specter of the warmth of the afternoon. “You were drawn to me. There was no way for you to know our attitudes about such things. I was cruel, I was hateful—and you were only trying to show love. I’m sorry, Statler. So this is my atonement. Go.”

“If I could tell you how grateful—”

His hand lightly touches her arm. He feels her quiver—in desire, in disgust, what?—and on a sudden insane impulse he pulls her into an embrace. She is taut at first, then melting. Lips to lips. His fingers on her bare muscular back. Do I dare touch her breasts? Her belly pressed to his. He has a quick wild vision of this afternoon’s breach healed: Artha sinking gladly to the sweet earth here, drawing him down on her and into her, the union of their bodies creating that metaphorical link between urbmon and commune that the elders would have forged with his blood. But no. It is an unrealistic vision, however satisfying artistically. There will be no coupling in the moonlit field. Artha lives by her code. Obviously these thoughts have passed through her mind in these few seconds, and she has considered and rejected the possibilities of a passionate farewell, for now she slides free of him, severing the contact moments before he can capitalize on her partial surrender. Her eyes bright and loving in the darkness. Her smile awkward and divided. “Go, now,” she whispers. Turning. Running back a dozen paces toward the commune. Turning again, gesticulating with the flats of her hands, trying to push him into motion. “Go.Go. What are you standing there for?”

* * * *

Hurriedly through the moonsilvered night. Stumbling, lurching, tripping. He does not bother to pick a cautious route between the rows of growing things; in his haste he tramples plants, pushes them aside, leaves a swath of destruction by which, come dawn, he could readily be traced. He knows he must get out of the commune’s territory before morning. Once the crop sprayers are aloft they can easily find him and bring him back to feed him to thwarted Moloch. Possibly they will send the sprayers out by night to hunt for him, as soon as they find that he has escaped. Do those yellow eyes see in the dark? He halts and listens for the horrid droning sound, but all is still. And the farming machines—will they go forth to track him down? He has to hurry. Presumably if he gets beyond the commune’s domain he will be safe from the worshipers of the harvest god.

Where shall he go?

There is only one destination conceivable now. Looking toward the horizon, he sees the awesome columns of the Chipitts urbmons, eight or ten of them visible from here as brilliant beacons, thousands of windows ablaze. He cannot pick out individual windows, but he is aware of constant shiftings and flowings in the patterns of light as switches go on and off. The middle of the evening there. Concerts, somatic contests, glow-duels, all the nightly amusements in full swing. Stacion sitting home, fearful, wondering about him. How long has he been gone? Two days, three? All blurred. The littles crying. Micaela distraught, probably quarreling mercilessly with Jason to ease

her tension. While here he is, many kilometers away, newly fled from a world of idols and rites, of pagan dancing, of unyielding and infertile women. Mud on his shoes, stubble on his cheeks. He must look awful and smell worse. No access to a cleanser. What bacteria now breed in his flesh? He must go back. His muscles ache so desperately that he has passed into a discomfort beyond mere fatigue. The reek of the cell clings to his nostrils. His tongue feels furry and puffed. He imagines that his skin is cracking from exposure to sun, moon, air.

What of the sea? What of Vesuvius and the Taj Mahal?

Not this time. He is willing to admit defeat. He has gone as far as he dares, and for as much time as he can permit himself; now with all his soul he longs for home. His conditioning asserting itself after all. Environment conquering genetics. He has had his adventure; someday, god willing, he will have another; but his fantasy of crossing the continent, slipping from commune to commune, must be abandoned. Too many idols wait with polished jaws, and he may not be lucky enough to find an Artha in the next village. Home, then.

* * * *

His fear ebbs as the hours pass. No one and nothing pursues him. He slips into a steady, mechanical rhythm of march, step and step and step and step, hauling himself robotlike toward the vast towers of the urban monads. He has no idea what time it is, but he supposes it must be past midnight; the moon has swung far across the sky, and the urbmons have grown dimmer as people go to sleep. Nightwalkers now prowl there. Siegmund Kløver of Shanghai dropping in to see Micaela, maybe. Jason on his way to his grubbo sweethearts in Warsaw or Prague. Another few hours, Michael supposes, and he will be home. It took him only from sunrise to late afternoon to reach the commune, and that was with much circuitous rambling; with the towers rising before him at all times he will have no difficulty going straight to his goal.

All is silence. The starry night has a magical beauty. He almost regrets his decision to return to the urbmon. Under the crystalline sky he feels the pull of nature. After perhaps four hours of walking he stops to bathe in an irrigation canal, and emerges naked and refreshed; washing with water is not as satisfying as getting under the ultrasonic cleanser, but at least he no longer need be obsessed with the layers of grime and corruption clinging to his skin. More springily, now, he strides along. His adventure already is receding into history: he encapsulates it and retrospectively relives it. How good to have done this. Tasting the fresh air, the dawn's mist, dirt under his fingernails. Even his imprisonment now seems a high excitement rather than an imposition. Watching the unbirth dance. His fitful, unconsummated love for Artha. Their struggle and their dreamlike reconciliation. The gaping jaws of the idol. The fear of death. His escape. What man of Urbmon 116 has done such things?

This access of self-congratulation gives him strength that sends him plunging on, across the commune's unending fields, in renewed vigor. Only the urbmons seem to be getting no closer. A trick of perspective. His weary eyes. Is he heading, he wonders, toward 116? It would be a sad prank of topography to get turned about and come into the urban constellation at 140 or 145 or so. If, say, he is moving at an angle to his true course, the divergence could be immense by the end of his march, leaving him with a dreadful numbing hypotenuse to traverse. He has no way of knowing which of the urbmons ahead of him is his own. He simply goes onward.

The moon vanishes. The stars fade. Dawn is creeping in.

He has reached the zone of unused land between the commune's rim and the Chipitts constellation. His legs are ablaze, but he forces himself on. So close to the buildings that they seem to hang, unsupported, in midair. The formal gardens in view. Robot gardeners serenely going about their trade. Blossoms opening to the first light of day. Perfume drifting on the soft breeze. Home. Home. Stacion. Micaela. Get some rest before going back on the interface. Find a plausible excuse.

Which is Urbmon 116?

The towers bear no numbers. Those who live inside them know where they live. Half staggering, Michael approaches the nearest building. Its flanks illuminated with radiant dawnlight. Looking up a thousand floors. The delicacy, the complexity, of its myriad tiny chambers. Beneath him the mysterious underground roots, the power plants, the waste-processing plants, the hidden computers, all the concealed wonders that give the urbmon its life. And above, rising like some immense vegetable growth, its sides marvelously intricate, a hatchwork of textures, the urbmon. Within the hundreds of thousands of interwoven lives, artists and scholars, musicians and sculptors, welders and janitors. His eyes are moist. Home. Home. But is it? He goes to the hatch. Holds up his wrist, shows the egress pass. The computer authorized to admit him on demand. "If this is Urbmon 116, open up! I'm Michael Statler." Nothing happening. Scanners scanning him, but all stays sealed. "What building is this?" he asks. Silence. "Come on," he says. "Tell me where I am!"

A voice from an invisible speaker says, "This is Urban Monad 123 of the Chipitts constellation."

123! So many kilometers from home!

But he can only continue. Now the sun is above the horizon and turning quickly from red to gold. If that is the east, then where is Urbmon 116? He calculates with a numbed mind. He must go east. Yes? No? He plods through the interminable series of gardens separating 123 from its eastern neighbor, and interrogates the speaker at the hatch. Yes: this is Urbmon 122. He proceeds. The buildings are set at long diagonals, so that one will not shade the next, and he moves down the center of the constellation, keeping careful count, while the sun climbs and swarms over him. Dizzy, now, with hunger and exhaustion. Is this 116? No, he must have lost count; it will not open for him. Then this?

Yes. The hatch slides back as he offers his pass. Michael clammers in. Waiting as the door rolls shut behind him. Now the inner door to open. Waiting. Well? "Why don't you open?" he asks. "Here. Here. Scan this." Holding up his pass. Perhaps some kind of decontamination procedure. No telling what he's brought in from outside. And now the door opens.

Lights in his eyes. A dazzling glare. "Remain where you are. Make no attempt to leave the entryway." The cold metallic voice nailing him where he stands. Blinking, Michael takes half a step forward, then realizes it might be unwise and stops. A sweet-smelling cloud engulfs him. They have sprayed him with something.

Congealing fast, forming a security cocoon. The lights now go down. Figures blocking his path: four, five of them. Police. "Michael Statler?" one of them asks.

"I have a pass," he says uncertainly. "It's all quite legitimate. You can check the records. I—"

"Under arrest. Alteration of program, illicit departure from building, undesirable harboring of countersocial tendencies. Orders to immobilize you immediately upon your return to building. Now carried out. Mandatory sentence of erasure to follow."

"Wait a minute. I have the right of appeal, don't I? I demand to see—"

"Case has already been considered and referred to us for final disposition." A note of inexorability in the policeman's tone. They are at his sides, now. He cannot move. Sealed within the hardening spray. Whatever alien microorganisms he has collected are sealed in it with him. To the chute? No. No. Please. But what else did he expect? What other outcome could there be? Did he think he had fooled the urbmon? Can you repudiate an entire civilization and hope to slip yourself smoothly back into it? They have loaded him aboard some kind of dolly. Dim shapes outside the cocoon. "Let's get a detailed print of this on the record, boys. Move him toward the scanners. Yes. That's it."

"Can't I see my wife, at least? My sister? I mean, what harm will it do if I just talk to them one last time—"

"Menace to harmony and stability, dangerous countersocial tendencies, immediate removal from environment to prevent spreading of reactive pattern." As though he carries a plague of rebelliousness. He has seen this before: the summary judgment, the instant execution. And never really understood. And never imagined.

Micaela. Stacion. Artha.

Now the cocoon is fully hardened. He sees nothing outside it.

"Listen to me," he says, "whatever you're going to do, I want you to know that *I've been there*. I've seen the sun and the moon and the stars. It wasn't Jerusalem, it wasn't the Taj Mahal, but it was something. That you never saw. That you never will. The possibilities out there. The hope of enlarging your soul. What would you understand about that?"

Droning sounds from the far side of the milky web that contains him. They are reading him the relevant sections of the legal code. Explaining how he threatens the structure of society. Necessary to eradicate the source of peril. The words blend and mingle and are lost to him. The dolly begins to roll forward again.

Micaela. Stacion. Artha.

I love you.

"Okay, open the chute." Clear, unmistakable, unambiguous.

He hears the rushing of the tide. He feels the crash of the waves against the sleek shining sands. He tastes salt water. The sun is high; the sky is aglow, a flawless blue. He has no regrets. It would have been impossible ever to leave the building again; if they had let him live, it would be only under conditions of constant surveillance. The urbmon's million million watching eyes. A lifetime hanging on the interface. What for? This is better. To have lived a little bit, just once. To have seen. The dancing, the bonfire, the smell of growing things. And now he is so tired, anyway. Rest will be welcome. He feels a sense of movement. Pushing the dolly again. In and then down. Good-bye. Good-bye. Good-bye. Calmly descending. In his mind the leafy cliffs of Capri, the boy, the goat, the flask of cool golden wine. Fog and dolphins, thorns and pebbles. God bless! He laughs within his cocoon. Going down. Good-bye. Micaela. Stacion. Artha. A final vision of the building comes to him, its 885,000 people moving blankfaced through the crowded corridors, floating upward or downward in the transportation shafts, jamming themselves into the sonic centers and the Somatic Fulfillment Halls, sending a myriad messages along the communications nexus as they ask for their meals, talk with one another, make assignations, negotiate. Breeding. Fruitful and multiply. Hundreds of thousands of people on interlocking orbits, each traveling his own little circuit within the mighty tower. How beautiful the world is, and all that is in it. The urbmons at sunrise. The farmers' fields. Good-bye.

Darkness.

The journey is over. The source of peril has been eradicated. The urbmon has taken the necessary protective steps, and an enemy of civilization has been removed.