

Patron of the Arts

by William Rotsler

Part of this novel first appeared in *Vertex*, © 1973
Mankind Publishing Co.

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The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

1

She stares out at you from her cube of near blackness, calm, quiet, breathing easily, just looking at you. She is naked to the hips, where a jeweled girdle encircles her, and she sits regally on a pile of luxurious pillows. Her long white hair cascades down over her apricot-colored shoulders and is made to shimmer slightly by some hidden light.

As you come closer to the life-size sensatron the vibrations get to you. The startling reality of the three-dimensional image cannot be overstated, for Michael Cilento's portrait of one of history's greatest society courtesans is a great work of art.

As you view the cube the image of Diana Snowdragon stops being quite so calm and in some subtle way becomes predatory, commanding, compelling. She is *naked*, not nude. The drifting bell sounds of melora musicians are heard . . . almost. The power of her unique personality is overwhelming, as it is in person, but in this artist's interpretation there are many other facets exposed.

Diana's sensatron cube portrait is universally hailed as a masterpiece. The subject was delighted.

The artist was disgusted and told me that the ego of the subject prevented her from seeing the reality he had constructed.

But it was this cube that gave Michael Benton Cilento the fame he wanted, needed, and hated. This was his first major sensatron cube and cubes were just then beginning to be used by artists, instead of scientists. It was becoming “fashionable” to be working in sensatrons then and everywhere there was shop talk of electron brushes, cilli nets, multilayer screens, broadcast areas, blankers, and junction symmetry.

Sensatrons are the ultimate marriage of art and science. At least so far. The sciences are constantly supplying tools to the artists, whether it be fade-safe paint that will be bright a thousand years from now, or an electron brush to make meticulous changes in a scan pattern. Already the *quiver* groups are exploring the new brain-wave instruments that create music *only* in the brain itself.

But the sensatrons are the rage of the moment. Just as the shimmercloth fashions of the *quiver* generation were seized by the media and exploited, the advertising world is impatient for immense sensatrons to be made possible, building-size product replicas with “Buy me!” shouting in your forebrain. In anticipation I have started one of my research labs on a blanker device to shut out the anticipated electronic noise.

The cubes can be so eerily lifelike that the rumors of them taking a piece of your soul persist. Perhaps they are right. Not only do the cameras capture the exterior, providing the basis from which the sensatron artist works, but the alpha and beta recorders, the EEG machines, the subtle heartbeat repeaters, all record what is going on within. Many artists use a blending of many recordings taken over a period of sittings. Some use single specific moments or moods, each recorded and then projected by the differentiated sonic cones and alpha-beta projectors. Along with these projections the artist adds his own interpretation, creating an almost musical concerto of waves, working upon any human brain within the area of reception. It is still the prerogative of the artist to select, eliminate, diminish, or whatever he desires. Some sensatron portrait artists put in the emotional warts as well as the strengths, and others are flatterers. Some artists are experimenting with switched recordings, woman for man, animal for subject, pure abstracts substituting for reality. Every one that attempts it brings to it a new point of view.

All Mike Cilento wanted to do is project the truth as he saw it. Perhaps he did peel off a layer of soul. I have stood next to the living model of a sensatron portrait and found the cube much more interesting than the person, but only when the artist was greater than the subject.

Mike’s portrait of society’s most infamous—and richest—wanton made him famous overnight. Even the repro cubes you can buy today are impressive, but the original, with its original subtle circuits and focused broadcasts, is staggering.

A collector in Rome brought Cilento to my attention and when I had seen the Snowdragon cube I managed an introduction. We met at Santini’s villa in Ostia. Like most young artists he had heard of me.

We met by a pool and his first words were, “You sponsored Wiesenthal for years, didn’t you?” I nodded, wary now, for with every artist you help there are ten who demand it.

“His *Montezuma* opera was trash.”

I smiled. "It was well received."

"He did not understand that Aztec anymore than he understood Cortez." He looked at me with a challenge.

"I agree, but by the time I heard it, it was too late." He relaxed and kicked his foot in the water and squinted at two nearly nude daughters of a lunar mineral baron who were walking by. He seemed to have made his point and had nothing more to say.

Cilento intrigued me. In the course of a number of years of "discovering" artists I had met all types, from the shy ones who hide to the burly ones who demand my patronage. And I had met the kind who seem indifferent to me, as Cilento seemed to be. But many others had acted that way and I had learned to disregard everything but finished work and the potential for work.

"Your Snowdragon cube was superb," I said.

He nodded and squinted in another direction. "Yeah," he said. Then as an afterthought he added, "Thank you." We spoke for a moment of the cube and he told me what he thought of its subject.

"But it made you famous," I said.

He squinted at me and after a moment he said, "Is that what art is about?"

I laughed. "Fame is very useful. It opens doors. It makes things possible. It makes it easier to be even more famous."

"It gets you laid," Cilento said with a smile.

"It can get you killed, too," I added.

"It's a tool, Mr. Thorne, just like molecular circuits or dynamic integration or a screwdriver. But it can give you freedom. I want that freedom; every artist needs it."

"That's why you picked Diana?"

He grinned and nodded. "Besides, that female was a great challenge."

"I imagine so," I said and laughed, thinking of Diana at seventeen, beautiful and predatory, clawing her way up the monolithic walls of society.

We had a drink together, then shared a psychedelic in the ruins of a temple of Vesta, and became Mike and Brian to each other. We sat on old stones and leaned against the stub of a crumbling column and looked down at the lights of Santini's villa.

"An artist needs freedom," Mike said, "more than he needs paint or electricity or cube diagrams or stone. Or food. You can always get the materials, but the freedom to use them is precious. There is only so much time."

"What about money? That's freedom, too," I said.

"Sometimes. You can have money and no freedom, though. But usually fame brings money." I nodded, thinking that in my case it was the other way around.

We looked out at the light of a half-moon on the Tyrrhenian Sea and had our thoughts. I thought of Madelon.

"There's someone I'd like you to do," I said. "A woman. A very special woman."

"Not right now," he said. "Perhaps later. I have several

commissions that I want to do.”

“Keep me in mind when you have time. She’s a very unusual woman.”

He glanced at me and tossed a pebble down the hill. “I’m sure she is,” he said.

“You like to do women, don’t you?” I asked.

He smiled in the moonlight and said, “You figured that out from one cube?”

“No. I bought the three small ones you did before.”

He looked at me sharply. “How did you know they even existed? I hadn’t told anyone.”

“Something as good as the Snowdragon cube couldn’t come out of nowhere. There had to be something earlier. I hunted down the owners and bought them.”

“The old lady is my grandmother,” he said. “I’m a little sorry I sold it, but I needed money.” I made a mental note to have it sent back to him.

“Yes, I like doing women,” he said softly, leaning back against the pale column. “Artists have always liked doing women. To . . . to capture that elusive shadow of a flicker of a glimpse of a moment . . . in paint, in stone, in clay, or in wood, or on film . . . or with molecular constructs.”

“Rubens saw them plump and gay,” I said. “Lautrec saw them depraved and real.”

“To Da Vinci they were mysterious,” he said. “Matisse saw them idle and voluptuous. Michelangelo hardly saw them at all. Picasso saw them in endless mad variety.”

“Gauguin . . . sensuality,” I commented. “Henry Moore saw them as abstracts, a starting point for form. Van Gogh’s women reflected his own mad genius brain.”

“Cezanne saw them as placid cows,” Mike laughed. “Fellini saw them as multifaceted creatures that were part angel, part beast. In the photographs of Andre de Dienes the women are realistic fantasies, erotic and strange.”

“Tennessee Williams saw them as insane cannibals, fascinatingly repulsive. Steinberg’s women were unreal, harsh, dramatic,” I said. “Clayton’s females were predatory fiends.”

“Jason sees them as angels, slightly confused,” Mike said, delighted with the little game. “Coogan saw them as motherly monsters.”

“And you?” I asked.

He stopped and the smile faded. After a long moment he answered. “As illusions, I suppose.”

He rolled a fragment of stone from the time of Caesar in his fingers and spoke softly, almost to himself.

“They . . . aren’t quite real, somehow. The critics say I created a masterpiece of erotic realism, a milestone in figurative art. But . . . they’re . . . wisps. They’re incredibly real for only an instant . . . fantastically shadowy another. Women are never the same from moment to moment. Perhaps that’s why they fascinate me.”

I didn’t see Mike for some time after that, though we kept in touch. He did a portrait of Princess Helga of the Netherlands, quite

modestly clad, the cube filled with its famous dozen golden sculptures and the vibrations of love and peace.

For the monks at Wells, on Mars, Mike did a large cube of Buddha, and it quickly became a tourist attraction. Repro cubes made a small fortune for the monastery.

Anything Mike chose to do was quickly bought and commissions flowed in from individuals, companies and foundations, even from movements. What he did was a simple nude of his mistress of the moment. It was erotic enough in pose, but powerfully pornographic in vibrations, and after Mike left her she received a Universal-Metro contract. The young Shah of Iran bought the cube to install in his long-abuilding Gardens of Babylon.

For his use of alpha, beta, and gamma wave projectors, as well as advances in differentiated sonics, Mike was the subject of an entire issue of *Modern Electronics*.

Mike had paid his dues to art, for while studying at Cal Tech he had worked on the Skyshield Project, a systems approach to electronic defense against low energy particles to use on the space stations. After graduation he had gone to work at the Bell lab in their brain-wave complex on Long Island. He quit when he got a Guggenheim grant for his art.

From his "Pleasurewoman" cube General Electric picked up some of Mike's modifications for their new multilayer image projectors and beta wave generators. For the artists that use models or three-dimensional objects to record the basic image cycle—such as breathing, running water, or repeating events—Nakamura, Ltd. brought out a new camera design in circular pattern distribution that contained many of Mike's suggestions. For the artist working in original abstractions, Mike built his own ultra-fine electron brush and an image generator linked with a graphics computer that produced an almost infinite number of variables. Mike Cilento was proving himself as an innovator and engineer as well as artist, an unusual combination.

I met Mike again at the opening of his "Solar System" series in the Grand Museum in Athens. The ten cubes hung from the ceiling, each with its nonliteral interpretation of the sun and planets, from the powerball of Sol to the hard, shiny ballbearing of Pluto.

Mike seemed caged, a tiger in a trap, but very happy to see me. He was a volunteer kidnaped as I spirited him away to my apartment in the old part of town.

He sighed as we entered, tossed his jacket into a Lifestyle chair and strolled out onto the balcony. I picked up two glasses and a bottle of Cretan wine and joined him.

He sighed again, sank into the chair, and sipped the wine. I chuckled and said, "Fame getting too much for you?"

He grunted at me. "Why do they always want the artist at openings? The art speaks for itself."

"Public relations. To touch the hem of creativity. Maybe some of it will rub off on them." He grunted again, and we lapsed into comfortable silence, looking out at the Parthenon, high up and night-lit.

At last he spoke. "Being an artist is all I ever wanted to be, like

kids growing up to be astronauts or ball players. It's an honor to be able to do it, whatever *it* is. I've painted and I've sculpted. I've done light mosaics and glow dot patterns. I even tried music for awhile. None of them really seemed to be it. But I think molecular constructs are the closest."

"Because of the extreme realism?"

"That's part of it. Abstraction, realism, expressionism—they're just labels. What matters is what *is*, the thoughts and emotions that you transmit. The sensatron units are fairly good tools. You can work almost directly on the emotions. When GE gets the new ones ready, I think it will be possible to get even more subtle shadings with the alpha waves. And, of course, with more units you can get more complex."

"You are as much an engineer as you are an artist," I said.

He smiled and sipped his wine. "Every medium, every technique has those who find that area their particular feast. Look at actors. Once there was only the play, from start to finish, no retakes and live. Then came film and tape and events shot out of sequence. No emotional line to follow from start to finish. It takes a particular kind of actor who can discipline himself to those flashbacks and flashforwards. In the days of mime there were probably superb actors lost because their art was in their voice."

"And today?" I prompted.

"Today the artist who cannot master electronics has a difficult time in many of the arts. Leonardo da Vinci could have, but probably not Michelangelo. There are many fine artists born out of their time, in both directions."

I asked a question I had often asked artists working in nontraditional media. "Why is the sensatron such a good medium for you?"

"It is immensely versatile. A penline can only do a certain number of things and hint at others. An oil painting is static. It attempts to be real but is a frozen moment. But sometimes frozen moments are better than motion. A motion picture, a tape, a play all convey a variety of meanings and emotions, even changes of location and perspective. As such they are very good tools. The more you can communicate the better. With the power of the sensatron you can transmit to the viewer such emotions, such feelings, that he becomes a participant, not just a viewer. Involvement. Commitment. I wouldn't do a sensatron to communicate some things, just because it's so much work and the communication minor. But the sensatron units can do almost anything any other art form can do. That's why I like it. Not because it's the fashionable art form right now."

"You've had no trouble getting your first license?" I asked.

"No, the Guggenheim people fixed it." He shook his head. "The idea of having to have a license to do a piece of art seems bizarre." He lifted his hand before I spoke. "Yeah, I know. If they didn't watch who had control of alpha and omega projectors we'd be trooping to the polls to vote for a dictator and not even know we didn't want to. Or so they think."

"It's a powerful force, difficult to fight. Your own brain is telling you to buy, buy, buy, use, use, use, and that's pretty hard to fight. Think

of it like prescription drugs.”

He nodded his head. “Can’t you just see it? ‘I’m sorry, Michelangelo, but this piece of Carrara marble needs a priority IX license and you have only a IV.’ And Michelangelo says, ‘But I want to do this statue of David, see? Big, tall boy, with a sling, kinda sullen looking. It isn’t because he’ll be nude, is it?’ ‘You just go to the Art Control Board in beautiful downtown Florence, *Signor* Buonarroti, and fill out the papers in triplicate, last name first, first name last. And remember neatness counts. Speak to Pope Julius, maybe he can fix it for you.’ ”

We laughed gently in the night. “But art and technology are coexisting more now than ever,” I said.

“Oh, I understand,” Mike sighed, “but I don’t have to like it.” I thought about the Pornotron someone had given me, hanging from the ceiling of my Moscow apartment. One night with a healthy blonde clarinetist had been enough to convince me I didn’t need artificial enhancement of my sexual pleasures. It was like being force-fed your favorite dessert.

We lapsed into silence. The ancient city murmured at us. I thought about Madelon.

“I still want you to do that portrait of someone very close to me.” I reminded him.

“Soon. I want to do a cube on a girl I know first. But I must find a new place to work. They bother me there, now that they found where I am.”

I mentioned my villa on Sikinos, in the Aegean, and Mike seemed interested, so I offered it to him. “There’s an ancient grain storage there you could use as a studio. They have a controlled plasma fusion plant so there would be as much power as you need. There’s a house, just the couple that takes care of it, and a very small village nearby. I’d be honored if you’d use it.”

He accepted the offer graciously and I talked of Sikinos and its history for awhile.

“The very old civilizations interest me the most,” Mike said. “Babylon, Assyria, Sumer, Egypt, the valley of the Euphrates. Crete seems like a newcomer to me. Everything was new then. There was everything to invent, to see, to believe. The gods were not parted into Christianity and all the others then. There was a god, a belief for everyone, big and small. It was not God and the Anti-gods. Life was simpler then.”

“Also more desperate,” I said. “Despotic kings. Disease. Ignorance. Superstition. There was everything to invent, all right, because nothing much had been invented.”

“You’re confusing technology with progress. They had clean air, new lands, freshness. The world wasn’t used up then.”

“You’re a pioneer, Mike,” I said. “You’re working in a totally new medium.”

He laughed and took a gulp of wine. “Not really. All art began as science and all science began as art. The engineers were using the sensatrons before the artists. Before that there were a dozen lines of thought and invention that crossed at one point to become sensatrons.

The sensations just happen to be a better medium to say certain things. To say other things a pen drawing or a poem or a motion picture might be best. Or even not to say it at all.”

I laughed and said, “The artist doesn’t see things, he sees himself.”

Mike smiled and stared for a long time at the columned structure on the hill. “Yes, he certainly does,” he said softly.

“Is that why you do women so well?” I asked. “Do you see in them what you want to see, those facets of ‘you’ that interest you?”

He turned his shaggy dark head and looked at me. “I thought you were some kind of big businessman, Brian. You sound like an artist to me.”

“I am. Both. A businessman with a talent for money and an artist with no talent at all.”

“There are a lot of artists without talent. They use persistence instead.”

“I often wish they wouldn’t,” I grumbled. “Everyone thinks he’s an artist. If I have any talent at all, it’d be to realize I have none. However, I am a first class appreciator. That’s why I want you to do a cube of my friend.”

“Persistence, see?” He laughed. “I’m going to do a very erotic nude while I’m on Sikinos. Afterwards, perhaps, I’ll want to do something more calmly. Perhaps then I’ll do your friend, if she interests me.”

“She might not be so calming. She’s . . . an original.”

We left it at that and I told him to contact my office in Athens when he was ready to go to the island and that they would arrange everything.

I found out later, almost by accident, from a friend, that Mike had been “drafted” temporarily to work on something called the Guardian Project. I put in a vidcall and found a wall of red tape and security preventing me from talking to him on Station Three, the space medicine research satellite. Luckily, I knew a bluesy general who shared my passion for Eskimo sculpture and old Louis L’Amour westerns. He set it up and I caught Mike coming off duty.

“What do they have you doing, a portrait of the commanding honcho?”

He smiled wearily and slumped on the bunk, kicking the pickup around with his foot to put himself within range. “Nothing that easy. Guardian is Skyshield all over again, only on priority *uno*. They rotated everyone out of here for observation and brought in fresh blood. They seemed to think I could help.” He looked tired and distracted.

“Anything I can do? Want me to see if I can get you out of there? I know a few people.”

He shook his head. “No. Thank you, though. They gave me the choice of an out-and-out priority draft or a contract. I just want to get it over with and back to living my way.” He stared at the papers in his hand with unseeing eyes.

“Is it the low energy particles that’s giving them the trouble?”

He nodded. “Exposure over a long period of time is the problem. There’s a sudden metabolic shift that’s disastrous. Unless we can lick it it

will limit the time man can be in space.” He held up a thumb-size node. “I think this might do it, but I’m not certain. It’s the prototype of a Full Scale Molecular System I designed.”

“Can you get a patent?” I asked automatically.

He shook his head and scratched his face with the node. “Anything I design is theirs. It’s in the contract. You see, the trouble isn’t in this FSMS unit, but in the damned sensing and control systems. First you gotta find the particles, then you gotta get their attention. Christ, if I could just shunt them into subspace and get rid of them, I’d . . .” His voice trailed off and he stared at the bulkhead.

After a moment or two he shook himself and grinned at me. “Sorry. Listen, let me give you a call later on. I just had an idea.”

“Artistic inspiration?” I grinned.

“Huh? Yeah, I suppose so. Excuse me, huh?”

“Sure.” He slapped the control and I was staring at static. I didn’t see him again for five months, then I took his call patched through from the Sahara base to my Peking hotel. He said he couldn’t talk about the Guardian Project but he was free to take me up on the Sikinos offer, if it was still open. I sent him straight up to the island and two more months went by before anything more was heard. I received a pen drawing from him of the view from the terrace at the villa, with a nude girl sunbathing. Then in late August I took a call from him at my General Anomaly office.

“I finished the cube on Sophia. I’m in Athens. Where are you? Your office was very secretive and insisted on patching me through to you.”

“That’s their job. Part of my job is not letting certain people know where I am or what I’m doing. But I’m in New York. I’m going to Bombay Tuesday, but I could stop off there. I’m anxious to see the new cube. Who’s Sophia?”

“A girl. She’s gone now.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“Neither. I’m at Nikki’s, so come on over. I’d like your opinion on the new one.”

I felt suddenly proud. “Tuesday at Nikki’s. Give her and Barry my love.”

I hung up and punched for Madelon.

2

Beautiful Madelon. Rich Madelon. Famous Madelon. Madelon of the superlatives. Madelon the Elusive. Madelon the Illusion.

I saw her at nineteen, slim yet voluptuous, standing at the center of a semicircle of admiring men at a boring party in San Francisco. I wanted her, instantly, with that “shock of recognition” they talk about.

She looked at me between the shoulders of a communications executive and a fossil fuels magnate. Her gaze was steady and her face

quiet. I felt faintly foolish just staring and many of the automatic reflexes that rich men develop to save themselves money and heartbreak went into action. I started to turn away and she smiled.

I stopped, still looking at her, and she excused herself from the man speaking to her and leaned forward. "Are you going now?" she asked.

I nodded, slightly confused. With great charm she excused herself from the reluctant semicircle and came over to me. "I'm ready," she said in that calm, certain way she had. I smiled, my protective circuits all activated and alert, but my ego was touched.

We went into the glass elevator that dropped down the outside of the Fairmont Tower Complex and looked out at the fog coming over the hills near Twin Peaks and flowing down into the city.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Where would you like to go?" I had met a thousand women who attached themselves to me with all the apparently natural lust, delight, and casualness possible between a poor girl and a rich man. Some had been bold, some subtle, some as subtle as it was possible for them to be. A few had frankly offered business arrangements. I had accepted some of each, in my time. But this one . . . this one was either different or more subtle than most.

"You expect me to say 'Wherever you are going,' don't you?" she said with a smile.

"Yes. One way or another." We left the elevator and went into the guarded garage directly. Entering your car on a public street is sometimes dangerous for a rich man.

"Well, where are we going?" She smiled at me as Bowie held the door open for us. The door clicked shut behind us like the safe door it nearly was.

"I had been contemplating two choices. My hotel and work on some papers . . . or Earth, Fire, Air and Water."

"Let's do both. I've never been to either place."

I picked up the intercom. "Bowie, take us to Earth, Fire, Air and Water."

"Yessir; I'll report it to Control."

The girl laughed and said, "Is someone watching you?"

"Yes, my local Control. They must know where I am, even if I don't want to be found. It's the penalty for having businesses in different time zones. By the way, are we using names?"

"Sure, why not?" she smiled. "You are Brian Thorne and I am Madelon Morgana. You're rich and I'm poor."

I looked her over, from the casually tossed hair to the fragile sandals. "No . . . I think you might be without money, but you are not poor."

"Thank you, sir," she said.

San Francisco rolled by, an old but dignified city reluctantly keeping up with the modern world, and often besting it. We turned a corner and saw a small riot ahead, near one of the governmental offices. Bowie blanked out the windows, and turned toward the waterfront. He hit the brakes as he started into the turn and I heard the rattle of rocks on the hood and windshield.

“Hold on,” Bowie said over the comm, and the car thundered into reverse. There was the crunch of something under the tires, then we slammed forward through a hail of rocks and other thumps.

I glanced at Madelon, who was holding onto a strap and looking alertly in every direction, even though the opaqued windows were featureless. “Bowie will handle it,” I said, but my hand was against one of the secret panels behind which was a Smith & Wesson Rioteer, with four big shot cartridges, and the exterior tear gas controls.

The car stopped suddenly, then reversed, throwing us forward against the safety belts, and with a squeal of tires we drove forward up over something, probably a curb. I heard a loud thump, a cry, and we were going fast and straight.

In a few moments Bowie brought back the cityscape and we rolled down one hill and up another. “Anyone hurt?” I asked.

“One zongo with an iron bar bounced off a fender, but I saw him get up and try to chase us. I’ll have to take it in tomorrow to be pounded out, Mr. Thorne.”

“Thank you, Bowie,” I said.

“Does this sort of thing happen to you often?” Madelon asked.

I shrugged. “Frustrated men need targets,” I answered. “A chauffeured car, a beautiful woman . . .” I shrugged again. I couldn’t always blame them. “You don’t want to hurt anyone, but you don’t want to be hurt, either.”

“What was that mob all about, anyway?” Madelon asked Bowie.

“I don’t know, miss. Not many food riots here. It may have been a Work Week bunch, or some of the Zeropop people protesting that new rule. It’s hard to say. Sometimes folks just go zongo over nothing definite, just a sort of sum of everything.”

Madelon sighed and struck her belt to move closer to me. “Help,” she said as we reached for each other’s hand.

When we arrived at Earth, Fire, Air and Water, Bowie called me back apologetically as I was going through the door. I told Madelon to wait and went back to get the report on the interphone. When I joined Madelon inside she smiled at me and asked, “How was my report?”

When I looked innocent she laughed. “If Bowie didn’t have a dossier on me from your Control or whatever it is I’d be very much surprised. Tell me, am I a dangerous type, an anarchist or a blaster or something?”

I smiled, for I like perceptive people. “It says you are the illegitimate daughter of Madame Chiang Kai-Shek and Johnny Potseed with convictions for mopery, drudgery, and penury.”

“What’s mopery?”

“I haven’t the faintest. My omniscient staff tells me you are nineteen, a hick kid from Montana and a half-orphan who worked for eleven months in Great Falls in an office of the Blackfoot National Enterprises.”

Her eyes got big and she gasped. “Found out at last! My desperate secrets revealed!” She took my arm and tugged me into the elevator that would drop us down to the cavern below. She looked up at me with big innocent eyes as we stood in the packed elevator. “Gee, Mr. Thorne, when I agreed to baby-sit for you and Mrs. Thorne I never

knew you'd be taking me out."

I turned my head slowly and looked at her with a granite face, ignoring the curious and the grinning. "The next time I catch you indulging in moperly with my Afghan I'm going to leave you home."

Her eyes got all wet and sad. "No, please, I promise to be good. You can whip me again when we get home."

I raised my eyebrows. "No, I think wearing the collar will be enough." The door opened. "Come, my dear. Excuse me, please."

"Yes, master," she said humbly.

The Earth part of the club was the raw ground under one of the many San Francisco hills, sprayed with a structural plastic so that it looked just like a raw-dug cave, yet quite strong. We went down the curving passage toward the maelstrom of noise that was a famous *quiver* group and came out into the huge hemispherical cave. Overhead, a latticework of concrete supported a transparent swimming pool filled with nude and semi-nude swimmers. Some were guests and some were professional entertainers.

There was a waterfall at one end and torches burned in holders in the wall, while a flickering firelight was projected over everything. The *quiver* group blasted forth from a rough cave hacked into the dirt walls halfway up to the overhead swimming pool.

As I took her arm to guide her into the *quivering* mob on the dance floor I said, "You know there is no Mrs. Thorne."

She smiled at me with a serene confidence. "That's right."

The night swirled around us. Winds blew in, scented and warm, then cool and brisk. People crashed into the water over us with galaxies of bubbles around them. One *quiver* group gave way to another, tawny animals in pseudo-lion skins and shaggy hair, the women bare breasted and wanton.

Madelon was a hundred women in a hundred minutes, but seemingly without effort. They were all her, from sullen siren to goshwowing teenie. I confess to a helpless infatuation and cared not if she was laying a trap for me.

The elemental decor was a stimulant and people joined us, laughed and drank and tripped, and left, and others came. Madelon was a magnet, attracting joy and delight, and I was very proud.

We came to the surface at dawn and I triggered a tag-along for Bowie. We drove out to watch sunup over the Bay, then went to my hotel. In the elevator I said, "I'll have to make that up to Bowie, I don't often stay out like that."

"Oh?" Her face was impish, then softened and we kissed outside my door. She began undressing as we entered, with great naturalness, and laughingly pulled me into the shower even as I was learning the beauty of her lithe young figure. We soaped and slid our bodies over one another and I felt younger and more alive than I had in godknnows.

We made love and music played. Outside, the city awakened and began its business. What can you say about two people making love for the first time? Sometimes it is a disaster, for neither of you knows the other, and that disaster colors the subsequent events. But sometimes it is exciting and new and wonderful and satisfying, making you want to do it again and again.

It changed my life.

I took her to Triton, the bubble city beneath the Mediterranean near Malta, where we marveled at the organic gill research and watched the plankton sweeper-sub's docking. We donned artificial membrane gills and dived among the rocks and fish to great depths. Her hair streamed behind her like a mermaid, and we dipped and rose with a school of swift lantern fish. We "discovered" the crusted remains of a Phoenician war galley and made love at twenty fathoms.

At Kos, the birthplace of Hippocrates, Hilary gave a great party at her villa, and we "premiered" a tape by Thea Simon, and ate fruit on the terrace and watched the ships go into space from Sahara Base.

"That's so beautiful," she said, looking at the firetrails of the shuttles, left behind by the arcing ships. The trails were twisted and spread by the jet winds, becoming neon abstracts in the early evening light.

I nodded in the faint light. Behind us I heard Respighi's *Fountains of Rome* replace the dreamy *Bird of Visions*. Madelon and I sat in the companionable night silence.

The calligraphic neon scrawls had almost faded away when someone turned on a computerized kinetic sculpture in the garden below. It was a wildly whirling dazzle of lights and reflections by Constantine 7, a currently popular kineticist. Its many dipping, zipping, flashing parts were controlled by a random numbers tape, so that it was never repetitive.

Madelon looked at it awhile, then said, "My life used to be like that. Oh, yes. Running around, rushing about, getting nowhere, very bright and *au courant*. I suppose I was trying to find out who I was. I was . . . am . . . very ambitious, but I felt guilty being so."

"Don't be," I said. "Without ambition nothing ever gets done."

"I'm still not certain . . . that I know who I am. Or even what I want." She reached out a hand and touched me. "I know I love you and I want to be with you—"

"But—" I said.

"You are not the world, but you give me the biggest world I know about." Her voice was serious and low as the kinetic sculpture was dialed into darkness, probably by someone putting it out of its misery.

"You have always been different," she said. "Because you are always the same. You're . . . a rock."

I grinned at her in the night. "I sprang full-grown from Jupiter's forehead."

She smiled back at me, and patted my arm. "You know, trying to find out who you are is the loneliest thing there is. If you are not you, who are you?" She sighed, and was quiet a moment. "I have been many people," she said. "But each of those roles was me, a facet of me. But you are always you. I've watched you talk to the famous and the infamous, the nobodies and the somebodies. You're just the same. I've only seen you impatient with the fools and the time wasters. You share your joy and you hide the hurt, but you are always you."

"That's the impression people always have of others, that *they* are full and complete, but that *you* are uncertain, fragmented, incomplete. But it isn't true. We are all in the process of growth. Even a rock

becomes gravel, and gravel sand, and sand becomes sandstone, and sandstone becomes rock.” Then I laughed in the dark and grumbled that I slipped off the edge and got my foot wet in philosophy.

“What were you like as a little girl?” I asked. I knew the photographs from her dossier, but not her.

“I was plain and I had no breasts and I wanted breasts and hips so that I could be a real woman. Then, when I got breasts and hips and all the rest, I found out there was more than that to being a woman. I learned. I survived. What were you like as a boy?”

I thought a moment and said, “Small. Isolated. Full of dreams. Ignorant. Pig-headed. Inquisitive.”

“Did you want to be an artist?”

“Yes. But some connections were missing.”

“But you are famous as an art lover—”

“That’s a long way from being an artist,” I said. “A *long* way.”

Madelon said with a smile, “I love going to museums with you, to galleries and studios and things. You say what’s in your mind and you don’t try to phony it up.”

I took a sip of wine and swirled the glass. “I’ve never been a man who thought you should be especially quiet in a museum. As long as I don’t really bother anyone else, or intrude on their privacy, I’ve always felt free to talk, laugh, discuss, or be silent. Art isn’t holy to me, not in that way.

“Something in a frame or on a pedestal does not require either my silence or my speech. Something in a frame is not automatically art, it is just something someone framed.”

“Sturgeon’s Law?” suggested Madelon. “*Ninety percent of everything is crud. Including this statement.*”

“Yes, and I’m afraid that’s even more so with art. All my adult life people have kept close to me in galleries, because if I am with someone, I talk of what I see and feel, and some people, strangers even, seem to find that interesting. Or maybe it’s just unusual. I try not to talk of what I think the artist meant or felt, but of what *I* felt, of what the artist communicated to me.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Madelon, “how I dislike those who *explain* it to you!”

I laughed, too. “You will never hear me say ‘A unique synthesis of the purely somatic and the archly conceptualized with an almost verbal communication in his aesthetic cognitions.’ I will never attribute motives and intellectualizations to men I don’t know personally, and well.”

“But there *are* obvious influences,” Madelon said.

“Remember that Peruvian exhibit we saw? In the jungle world that those potters and craftsmen lived in, which was their only reality—their only *concept* of reality—they created those jaguar pots that are as fierce and as deadly a manifestation of fear and respect as I’ve ever seen. I might talk of the impact of the Church on some artist, who painted what he felt, then added haloes and touched in the symbols of the saint he had selected.”

“But all artists are influenced by their times,” Madelon insisted. “And the times by the artists.”

“Of course. But I always speak for me, not the artist. If he or she

is any good at all the work speaks louder, clearer, and more concisely than anything I might say, and for a hellava lot longer.”

“What about those new ones, the Fragmentalists? They work with computers and cloud chambers, and never see their work; only knowing that it happened.”

“Yes, it existed, for a nanosecond or two, and then was gone. Since no one can see their art, I suppose that’s why they prattle so much about it. It can’t speak, so they will.”

Madelon smiled at me in the dusk. “Brian, I’ve never known anyone who wasn’t an active, working artist to be as involved with art as you are.”

I shrugged. “It is simply part of my life. I dislike it when people buy art for investment. *Art futures* is a phrase I’ve heard far too often. It might be like buying future orgasms, I don’t know.” I looked again at the fading firetrails. “I have always tried to be myself. But the best possible me. My greatest failures are when I fail myself.”

I turned and smiled at the most beautiful woman I knew. “And what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Me,” she said. “Only the best possible me.”

“Would you be interested in investing in a future orgasm?” I asked.

She unwound gracefully from the chair, smiling and silken. “Are you asking me to forsake Hilary’s many pleasures, my dear sir?”

“I am. I had something more intimate in mind.”

“I was hoping you had been taking your ESP pills, darling. I was thinking along those lines myself.”

We flew to San Salvador and rode through the tall grasses on my cattle ranch there and made love by a stream. Madelon was witness to me disciplining a sloppy supervisor, who had permitted the cattle to consume too high a percentage of precious grains. She didn’t mention it until after our visit to the ecology preserve off the Great Barrier Reef and we were walking on the beach at Bora Bora at sunset.

Madelon looked at me after a long silence. “Sometimes you are very hard on people, you know. You demand much.”

“No. Just the best. You become mediocre when you are satisfied with mediocrity.”

She kicked some sand and grinned as she said, “Modern civilization has placed mediocrity on a level with excellence . . . and then looks down on excellence for having lowered itself.”

“My, my,” I said. “And I’m supposed to be hard on people.”

“Well, you’re famous, and people expect it, I suppose.”

“I have a reputation,” I said. “That means they’ve heard of you, but know nothing about you. If you are famous, they know all about you. If you are notorious, they know all about you whether they want to or not.”

“It sounds as though you’ve made a study,” she said, the setting sun reddening her face.

“Defense mechanism. A public figure is one who has been on the vidstats more than once. A celebrity is someone whose face you know and whose name you can’t remember. Or vice versa. A famous figure is

an old celebrity. A *noted* figure is an old famous figure, while an actress is a young and famous figure.”

She stopped and put her arms around my neck. “I knew you would get around to sex.”

“I thought we had pontificated enough for one evening,” I said, and kissed her.

“Pontificate me right here,” she said, slipping out of the shimmercloth sarong.

“Suppose I dogmatized you.”

“Oh, marvelous!” she said, pulling me down to dark sands under purple clouds edged with rose.

At Ankara we visited the tomb complex carved from a rocky cliff, where three generations of a family had carved a marble fantasy and leased tomb space to the affluent. Madelon commented on all the years of cutting and sanding. “Time has nothing to do with the creation of art,” I said. “It doesn’t matter if it took ten years or ten minutes or ten *generations*. The art must stand by itself. The artist can’t stand next to it saying, ‘Look, this part took me three years and that part was a whole winter.’ Hemingway wrote two of his best short stories before lunch, then went back to work. The Sistine Chapel took years. It only matters to the *artist* how long something takes. If he works slowly it might be difficult to hold the vision together for the time needed. It also limits his total output, and he might be frustrated in not being able to say everything he wants. But working slowly might give more chance to interact with the work. It all depends on the artist.”

“Don’t you like this?” she asked, gesturing toward the cliffline of facades and loggia and columned fronts.

“Yes, but the important fact is that it exists, not the time it took to do it. It’s like saying something is better because it took a long time to do, and that is *certainly* not true.”

“Then what is important is the artist’s vision, and his ability to communicate that vision?”

“To the viewer, yes. To the artist it might be that he had done it, and how close he was to satisfying the ethereal vision with the reality.”

“Then the closer the reality is to the vision the better it is?”

“Well, the more successful, yes. We still have to deal with the worth of the vision.”

“Oh, god, this is endless! How many visions dance on the head of a paintbrush?”

“One at a time.”

The world was a playground, a beautiful toy. We could deplore the harsh, but necessary, methods they were using to reduce the population in India, even as we flew high overhead to Paris, for Andre’s *fête*, where the most beautiful women in Europe appeared in sculptured body jewelry and little else.

I took her to the digs at Ur in the hot, dusty Euphrates Valley, but stayed in an air-conditioned mobile-villa. We sailed the Indian Ocean with Karpolis even as the Bombay riots were killing hundreds of thousands. The rest of the world seemed far away, and I really didn’t

care much, for I was gorging at a love-feast. My man Huo handled the routine matters, and I put almost everything else off for awhile.

We went up to Station One and “danced” in the null-gravity of the so-called “Star Ballroom” in the big can of the central hub. We took the shuttle to the moon, for Madelon’s first visit. I saw Tycho Base with fresh eyes and a sense of adventure and wonder which she generated. We went on up to Copernicus Dome then around to the new Young Observatory on Backside. We looked at the stars together, seeing them so clearly, so close and unblinking. I ached to go all the way out and so did she. Bundled into bulky suits we took a walk on the surface, slightly annoyed to be discreetly watched over by a Lunar Tour guide, there to see that the greenhorns didn’t muck up.

We loved every minute of it. We lay spoon-fashion in our bed at night and talked of the stars and alien life and made lover’s plans for the future.

I was in love. I was blind, raw, sensitive, happy, insane, and madly foolish. I spent an emotional treasure and counted it well-used.

I was indeed in love.

But love cannot stifle, nor can it be bought, not even with love. Love can only be a gift, freely given, freely taken. I used my money as a tool, as Cilento might use a scan pattern, to give us time and pleasure, not to “buy” Madelon.

All these trips cost a fortune, but it was one of the reasons I had money. I could have stopped working at making it long before, except I knew I would seriously drain my capital with commissions and projects and joy rides and women. I was already starting to think of going to Mars with Madelon, but it was a one month trip and that was a big chunk of time to carve from my schedule.

Instead, I introduced her to my world. There were the obvious, public events, the concerts and exhibitions and parties. She shared my enthusiasm in finding and assisting young artists in every field, from the dirt-poor Mexican peasant with a natural talent for clay sculpture to the hairy, sulky Slav with the house full of extraordinary synthecizor tapes, that few had heard.

Madelon’s observations on art, on people and events, on philosophy, on things large and small were always interesting, often deeply probing and full of insight. “Reality is unreal to those not sane,” she said once. “And insanity unreal to the sane.”

During the premiere of *Warlock*, the opera by Douglas Weiss, she whispered to me, “Actors try to fuse the wishes of childhood with the needs of adultery.” I raised my eyebrows at her and she grinned, shrugging. “My mind wanders,” she said.

During a party in a bubble amid the Ondine complex, while a storm raged a hundred fathoms up, she turned to me from watching a group of people. “If you can be nothing more than you are, you must be careful to be all that you can be.”

Lifting from the *Thor Heyerdahl* plankton skimmer she said, “I always say goodbye. That way I am not burdened with appointments I cannot keep.”

She also commented that Texas was the largest glacier-free state in the Union, and that Peter Brueghel was an artist that could draw a

crowd.

But life with Madelon was hardly a life of one-liners and sex. It was varied and complex, simple and fast, slow and comfortable—all of those things.

“How did you get so rich?” Madelon asked one night, after seeing me authorize a considerable expenditure on a project. “Is your family rich?”

“No, my father was an engineer and my mother was a musician. We weren’t poor, but we were certainly not rich. Sometimes I do wonder why I’m rich—or rather, how I got that way. I know why, I suppose. It was to indulge myself. There were things I wanted to do and they took money. I found I had the talent. If you want money badly enough, you can get it.”

“Isn’t that a cliché?” she asked. “I know lots of people who are desperate for money.”

“Desperate, yes, but not willing to do those things that must be done. Or don’t have the talent for it. I’m an exploiter, I suppose. I see a need, and I fill it as best I can. I try not to create a need, which is really just a *want*. My luck was good, my talent was sufficient, and I was willing to do the homework. I worked long hours, hard hours.”

“I’ve worked long, hard hours, too,” Madelon said, “and I had to do a lot of things I didn’t want to do, but I’m not rich.”

“Is that what you want, to be rich?”

“I suppose not. But I want freedom, and that usually takes money.”

“Yes, sometimes. Having money at all offers freedom, too, but there are problems with that condition as well. I know, I’ve had both.”

I continued to show Madelon that private world of the rich, my world, with the “secure” houses in various parts of the world, the private beaches and fast cars, the collections and gatherings and nonsense. I introduced her to worthy friends, like Burbee, the senator, and Dunn, the percussionist; like Hilary, Barbara, Greg, Joan, and the others. She had gowns by Queen Kong, in Shanghai, and custom powerjewels by Simpson. She had things, and experiences, and I shared her delight and interest.

I learned about her, I learned those small, intimate things that are idiomatic, but revealing—the silly, dumb things. She rarely used makeup, but carried five kinds of shampoo. She rarely became ill, but was subject to ingrown toenails. She insisted on sleeping on the right side of the bed and always seemed to get up an hour before I did. She insisted on carrying certain clothes with her everywhere, even though we had wardrobes in houses all over the world. If we were scheduled to meet someone of importance or prominence she read up on them religiously, but always seemed to give that person the impression she reacted to him or her as a person, not as a shah or a crown prince or a Beaux Arts prizewinner.

She had everything she wanted, or so I thought, which was probably my first mistake.

I wanted Madelon and I got her. Getting a woman I wanted was not all that difficult. Standing on my money and fame, I was very tall. Sometimes I wondered how well I might do as a lover without money, but I was too lazy to try.

I wanted Madelon because she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and the least boring. Sooner or later all women bored me, and most men. When there are no surprises even the most attractive people grow stale. Madelon may have aroused a great variety of emotions in me, from love to hate, at times, but she never bored me and boredom is the greatest sin. Even those who *work* at not being boring can become boring because their efforts show.

But Madelon was beautiful inside as well as out, and I had had my fill of beautiful flesh and gargoyle minds.

It wasn't so much that I "got" Madelon as that I married her. I attracted her, our sex life was outstanding, and my wealth was exactly the convenience she needed. My money was *her* freedom.

I opened up to her as I had not to anyone else. I tried to show her my world, at least the art part of it. The business part was the game part, a sort of global chess, or interplanetary poker, and dull to most people.

I took her to a concert by a young synthecizor musician whose career one of my foundations was sponsoring. Afterwards we lay on a fur-covered liquibed under the one-way glass dome of my New York apartment and watched the lights in the towers and the flying insect dots of helos.

"Are all musicians as arrogant as that electronic music composer who cornered you in the foyer?" Madelon asked.

"No, thank god. But when you are convinced you have conceived something the world must experience, you are anxious to have it presented."

"But he was *demanding* you sponsor it!" She shook her head angrily, spreading out her hair on my chest. "What an ego!"

"Everyone has one," I said, my fingertips on her flesh. "People are certain I have a very big one because of all the art and events I assist. But I want the art to come into existence, not to further my own fame or ego."

"Oh, Brian," she said, flipping over and pressing her voluptuous body to mine. "Sometimes you just modest yourself right out the back door!"

I didn't reply. People never understand. She would, I hoped, in time. I wanted to midwife creativity, not scratch my ego onto the base of greatness.

I took a deep breath and said it. "Why don't we get married?"

Her eyes opened wide in astonishment. "*Married?*" She sat up and waved her hand around at the jewel towers of New York. "You mean *legally*, in front of God and everybody?"

I nodded and she seemed amused. "What is the point of that?" she asked. "If I should find I am in that small percentage for whom the shots don't work, I can always abort, or you could sign on as the father. There's no need for marriage, Brian."

"What about your family?" I asked. "From what you tell me your father is an old-fashioned tiger."

"He doesn't tell me what to do, even when he wants to."

"Well, let's just say he might like me better if we were married."

"I didn't think you sought anyone's approval for anything."

"I'm a very self-indulgent person," I said. "I do only what I want to do. I want to go to Mars some day and I shall. I might have to pass on the stars, however. But right now I want us to be married, legally, and in front of whoever."

"And what will you want tomorrow?" she asked. "Not to be?"

I pulled her down to me and kissed her. "You don't seem to understand, my dear. I am a very powerful man and what I want, I get."

She looked at me through slitted eyes. "Oh? Really? Do I have anything to say about that?"

"Anything you want."

"In that case, I say yes."

We were married atop the Temple of the Magicians, in Uxmal, Yucatan, two weeks later. It was sunset and the temple faces east. We had torches, and a few close friends. There was no particular reason for the Mayan pyramid setting, it was just that they had closed the monument for a month to handle the new digs and there were no tourists there.

We drank and feasted half the night, toasting the ancients and getting toasted. Madelon's father was there, a wiry tough man of fifty, who said little and saw much. He and I stood on the sheer western edge of the stone, looking down at the wide, steep steps, and listened to the song that Alison had written, coming from the other side of the temple. We looked out over the dark jungle, seeing the faint bulk of the rains to our right, and the white tent covering the new tomb finds.

"Thorne," said Sam Morgana, "if you hurt her, I'll slice you to dogmeat."

I turned to look at him, a lean, hard face in the night. He took a swallow from his wineglass and looked at me without expression "I don't like threats, Sam," I said. "Not even that kind."

He nodded "Yeah, neither do I." He finished his wine and went back around the temple, leaving me alone. After a little time Madelon came, and put her arm around me.

"How do you feel about virgin sacrifices," I asked.

"I'm disqualified."

"Oh, drat, I knew we should have waited."

"It's not too late to call Rent-A-Virgin."

We stood there for a time and the world was still: There was night and jungle, starlight and the crescent moon silvering a path across the glossy dark leaves below. The people started leaving, laughing and calling out good wishes, going down the steps, but holding onto the safety chain. Sam was the last to leave. He stood a moment, looking at us, then waved and started down. Madelon broke free and ran to him to kiss him goodbye, and then we were alone.

Madelon and I walked back around to the eastern side of the temple and found that our friends had created a pagan couch for us just within the rectangular door. It was covered with fur and a gorgeous shimmercloth canopy hung down over and behind us. There were several large candles flickering in the cool predawn breeze, bowls of fresh fruit and a carafe of wine. The air was scented with exotic flowers and primeval jungle.

As the first light of dawn lightened the east we made love in the spot where Mayan chiefs had stood, hundreds of years before, greeting their sun god.

After our marriage Madelon Morgana became, not Madelon Thorne, but *Madelon Morgana*. She blossomed in a marvelous and delightful way. The instant status that was hers was something she handled well, and with dignity and tact. Being the wife or companion of someone rich, or famous, or powerful is often a troublesome position.

It was interesting watching her test her wings. At first I was a convenient and attractive aid, a refuge, a teacher, a shoulder, an open door, a defender. She liked what I was, then later, even more, *who* I was.

We became friends as well as lovers.

In time, of course, she had other lovers, just as I knew women who interested me, in their own way.

No one owned Madelon, not even I. Her other lovers were infrequent, but quite real. I never kept count, though I knew Control could retrieve the data from the surveillance section's computers. It was not that I had her watched, but that she must be watched for her own protection. It is all part of being rich and how better to extract a few million from me than by the ancient and dishonorable means of kidnapping. Guarding against an assassin was almost impossible, if the man was intelligent and determined, but the watch teams gave me comfort when she was not close. Meanwhile, I studied *mazeru* with Shigeta, when I could, and target shooting with Wesley. Your own reflexes are your best protection.

In four years Madelon had only two lovers that I thought were beneath her. One was a rough miner who had struck it big in the Martian mines near Bradbury and was expending a certain animal vitality along with his new wealth. The second was a tape star, quite charming and beautiful, but essentially hollow. They were momentary liaisons and when she perceived that I was distressed she broke off immediately, something that neither man could understand.

But Madelon and I were friends, as well as man and wife, and one is not knowingly rude to friends. I frequently insult people, but I am never rude to them. Madelon's taste was excellent, and these other relationships were usually fruitful in learning and joy, so that the two that were distasteful to me were very much in the minority.

Michael Cilento was different.

I talked to Madelon, who was in the Aegean with a new lover, and then flew to see Mike at Nikki's. Our meeting was warm. "I can't thank you enough for the villa," he said, hugging me. "It was so beautiful and Nikos and Maria were so very nice to me. I did some drawings of

their daughter. But the island—ah! Beautiful . . . very peaceful, yet . . . exciting, somehow.”

“Where’s the new cube?”

“At the Athena Gallery. They’re having a one-man, one-cube show.”

“Well, let’s go. I’m anxious to see it.” I turned to my man Stamos. “Madelon will be along soon. Please meet her and take her directly to the Athena.” To Mike I said, “Come—I’m excited.”

The cube was life-size, as were all of Mike’s works. Sophia was olive-skinned and full-breasted, lying on a couch covered with deep fur, curled like a cat, yet fully displayed. There was a richness in the work, an opulence reminiscent of Matisse’s odalisques. But the sheer animal eroticism of the girl overpowered everything.

She was the Earth Mother, Eve, and Lilith together. She was the pagan princess, the high priestess of Ba’al, the great whore of Babylon. She was nude, but a sun ornament gleamed dully between her breasts. Beyond her, through an arch of ancient, worn stone, was a dawn world, lush and green beyond a high wall. There was a feeling of time here, a setting far back beyond recorded history, when myths were men and monsters perhaps real.

She lounged on animal furs, with the faint suggestion of a wanton sprawl, with no part of her hidden, and a half-eaten apple in her hand. The direct suggestion of Eve would have been ludicrous, except for the sheer raw power of the piece. Suddenly the symbolism of the Biblical Eve and her apple of knowledge had a reality, a meaning.

Here, somewhere in Man’s past, there was a turning. From simplicity toward complexity, from innocence to knowledge and beyond, perhaps to wisdom. And always the intimate personal secret lusts of the body.

All this in one cube, from one face. I walked to the side. The girl did not change, except that I was now looking at her side, but the view through the arch had changed. It was the sea, stretching under heavy clouds to the unchanging horizon. The waves rolled in, oily and almost silent.

The back view was past the voluptuous girl toward what she looked at: a dim room, a corridor leading to it, lit with flickering torches, going back into darkness . . . into time? Forward into time? The Earth Mother was waiting.

The fourth side was a solid stone wall beyond the waiting woman and on the wall was set a ring and from the ring hung a chain. Symbol? Decoration? But Mike was too much an artist to have something without meaning in his work, for decoration was just design without content.

I turned to Mike to speak, but he was looking at the door.

Madelon stood in the entrance, looking at the cube. Slowly she walked toward it, her eyes intent, secret, searching. I said nothing, but stepped aside. I glanced at Mike and my heart twisted. He was staring at her as intently as she looked at the sensatron cube.

As Madelon walked closer, Mike stepped near me. “Is this your friend?” he asked. I nodded. “I’ll do that cube you wanted,” he said softly.

We waited silently as Madelon walked slowly around the cube. I

could see she was excited. She was tanned and fit, wearing a Draco original, fresh from her submarine exploration of the Aegean with Markos. At last she turned away from the cube and came directly to me with a swirl of her skirt. We kissed and held each other a long time.

We looked into each other's eyes for a long time. "You're well?" I asked her.

"Yes." She looked at me a long moment more, a soft smile on her face, searching my eyes for any hurt she might have caused. In that shorthand, intimate language of old friends and old lovers, she questioned me with her look.

"I'm fine," I said, and meant it. I was always her friend but not so often her lover. But I still had more than most men, and I do not mean my millions. I had her love and respect, while others had usually just her interest.

She turned to Mike with a smile. "You are Michael Cilento. Would you do my portrait, or use me as a subject?" She was perceptive enough to know that there was a more than subtle difference.

"Brian has already spoken to me about it," he said.

"And?" She was not surprised.

"I always need to spend some time with my subject before I can do a cube." Except with the Buddha cube, I thought with a smile.

"Whatever you need," Madelon said.

Mike looked past her at me and raised his eyebrows. I made a gesture of acquiescence. Whatever was needed. I flatter myself that I understand the creative process better than most nonartists. What was needed was needed; what was not needed was unimportant. With Mike, technology had ceased to be anything but a minimal hindrance between him and his art. Now he needed only intimacy and understanding of what he intended to do. And that meant time.

"Use the Transjet," I said. "Blake Mason has finished the house on Malagasy. Use that. Or roam around awhile."

Mike smiled at me. "How many homes do you have, anyway?"

"I like to change environments. It makes life more interesting. And as much as I try to keep my face out of the news it keeps creeping in and I can't be myself in as many places as I'd like."

Mike shrugged. "I thought a little fame would be helpful, and it has, but I know what you mean. After the interviews on *Artworld* and the Jimmy Brand show I can't seem to go anywhere without someone recognizing me."

"The bitter with the sweet," I said.

"Brian uses a number of personas as well," Madelon said. Mike raised his eyebrows. "The secret lives of Brian Thorne, complete with passports and unicards," she laughed.

Mike looked at me and I explained. "It's necessary when you are the center of a power structure. There are times you need to Get Away From It All, or to simply not be you for awhile. It's much like an artist changing styles. The Malagasy house belongs to 'Ben Ford' of Publitec . . . I haven't been there yet, so you be Ben."

People have said that I asked for it. But you cannot stop the tide; it comes in when it wants and it goes when it wants. Madelon was unlike any individual that I had ever known. She owned herself. Few people do. So many are mere reflections of others, mirrors of fame or power or personality. Many let others do their thinking for them. Some are not really people, but statistics.

But Madelon was unlike the others. She took and gave without regard for very many things, demanding only truth. She was hard on her friends, for even friends sometimes require a touch of nontruth to help them out.

She conformed to my own definition of friendship: friends must interest, amuse, help and protect you. They can do nothing more. To what extent they fulfill these criteria defines the degree of friendship. Without interest there is no communication; without amusement there is no zest; without help and protection there is no trust, no truth, no security, no intimacy. Friendship is a two-way street and Madelon was my friend.

Michael Cilento was also unlike most other people. He was an Original, on his way to being a Legend. At the bottom level there are people who are "interesting" or "different." Those below that should not be allowed to waste your time. On the next step above is Unique. Then the Originals, and finally those rare Legends.

I might flatter myself and say that I was certainly different, possibly even Unique on a good day. Madelon was an undisputed Original. But I sensed that Michael Cilento had that something extra, the art, the drive, the vision, the talent that could make him a Legend. Or destroy him.

So they went off together. To Malagasy, off the African coast. To Capri. To New York. Then I heard they were in Algiers. I had my Control keep an extra special eye on them, even more than the usual protective surveillance I kept on Madelon. But I didn't check myself. It was their business.

A vidreport had them on Station One, dancing in the null gravity of the big ballroom balloon. Even without Control I was kept abreast of their actions and whereabouts by that host of people who found delight in telling me where my wife and her lover were. And what they were doing. How they looked. What they said. And so forth.

Somehow none of it surprised me. I knew Madelon and what she liked. I knew beautiful women. I knew that Mike's sensatron cubes were passports to immortality for many women.

Mike was not the only artist working in the medium, of course, for Hayworth and Powers were both exhibiting and Coe had already done his great "Family." But it was Mike the women wanted. Presidents and kings sought out Cinardo and Lisa Araminta. Vidstars thought Hampton fashionable. But Mike was the first choice for all the great beauties.

I was determined that Mike have the time and privacy to do a

sensatron cube of Madelon and I made it mandatory at all my homes, offices, and branches that Mike and Madelon be isolated from the vidhacks and nuts and time wasters as much as possible.

It was the purest ego on my part, that lusting toward a sensatron portrait of Madelon. I suppose I wanted the world to know that she was “mine” as much as she could belong to anyone. I realized that all my commissioning of art was, at the bottom, ego.

Make no mistake—I enjoyed the art I helped make possible, with a few mistakes that kept me alert. But I am a businessman. A very rich one, a very talented one, a very famous one, but no one will remember me beyond the memory of my few good friends.

But the art I help create will make me live on. I am not unique in that. Some people endow colleges, or create scholarships or build stadiums. Some build great houses, or even cause laws to be passed. These are not always acts of pure egotism, but the ego often enters into it, I’m certain, and especially if it is tax deductible.

Over the years I have commissioned Vardi to do the Fates for the Terrace Garden of the General Anomaly complex, my financial base and main corporation. I pressed for Darrin to do the Rocky Mountain sculptures for United Motors. I talked Willoughby into doing his golden beast series at my home in Arizona. Caruthers did his “Man” series of cubes because of a commission from my Manpower company. The panels that are now in the Metropolitan were done for my Tahiti estate by Elinor Ellington. I gave the University of Pennsylvania the money to impregnate those hundreds of sandstone slab carvings on Mars and get them safely to Earth. I subsidized Eldundy for five years before he wrote his *Martian Symphony*. I sponsored the first air music concert at Sydney.

My ego has had a good working out.

I received a tape from Madelon the same day I had a call from the Pope, who wanted me to help him convince Mike to do his tomb sculptures. The new Reformed Church was once again involved in art patronage, a 2,100-year-old tradition.

But getting a tape from Madelon, instead of a call, where I could reply, hurt me. I half-suspected I had lost Madelon.

My armored layers of sophistication told me glibly that I had asked for it, even had intrigued to achieve it. But my beast-gut told me that I had been a fool. This time I had outsmarted myself.

I dropped the tape in the playback. She was recording from a garden of martian lichen in Trumpet Valley, and the granite boulders behind her were covered with the rust and olive green and glossy black of the alien transplants. I arranged for Ecolco to give Tashura the grant that made the transfer from Mars possible. The subtle, subdued colors seemed a suitable background for her beauty, and her message.

“Brian, he’s fantastic. I’ve never met anyone like him.”

I died a little and was sad. Others had amused her, or pleased her lush golden body, or were momentarily mysterious to her, but this time . . . this time I knew it was different.

“He’s going to start the cube next week, in Rome. I’m very excited. I’ll be in touch.” I saw her punch the remote and the tape ended. I put my man Huo on the trace and found her in the Eternal City, looking

radiant.

“How much does he want to do it?” I asked. Sometimes my businessman’s brain likes to keep things orderly and out front, before confusion and misunderstanding sets in. But this time I was abrupt, crass, and rather brutal, though my words were delivered in a normal, light tone. But all I had to offer was the wherewithal that could pay for the sensatron cube.

“Nothing,” she said. “He’s doing it for nothing. Because he wants to, Brian.”

“Nonsense. I commissioned him. Cubes cost money to make. He’s not that rich.”

“He told me to tell you he wants to do it without any money. He’s out now, getting new cilli nets.”

I felt cheated. I had caused the series of events that would end in the creation of a sensatron portrait of Madelon, but I was going to be cheated of my only contribution, my only connection. I had to salvage something.

“It . . . it should be an extraordinary cube. Would Mike object if I built a structure just for it?”

“I thought you wanted to put it in the new house on Battle Mountain.”

“I do, but I thought I might make a special small dome of spraystone. On the point, perhaps. Something extra nice for a Cilento masterpiece.”

“It sounds like a shrine.” Her face was quiet, her eyes looking into me.

“Yes,” I answered slowly, “perhaps it is.” Maybe people shouldn’t get to know you so well that they can read your mind when you cannot. I changed the subject and we talked for a few minutes of various friends. Steve on the Venus probe. A fashionable *couturier* who was showing a line based on the new Martian tablet finds. A new sculptor working in magnaplastics. Blake Mason’s designs for the Gardens of Babylon. A festival in Rio that Jules and Gina had invited us to. The Pope’s desire for Mike to do his tomb. In short, all the gossip, trivia, and things of importance between friends.

I talked of everything except what I wanted to talk about.

When we parted Madelon told me with a sad, proud smile that she had never been so happy. I nodded and punched out, then stared sightlessly at the dark screen. For a long moment I hated Michael Cilento, and he was probably never so near death. But I loved Madelon and she loved Mike, so he must live and be protected. I knew that she loved me, too, but it was and had always been a different kind of love.

I went to a science board meeting at Tycho Base and looked at the green-brown-blue white-streaked Earth “overhead” and only paid minimal attention to the speakers. I came down to a petroleum meeting at Hargesisa, in Somalia. I visited a mistress of mine in Samarkand, sold a company, bought an electrosnake for the Louvre, visited Armand in Nardonne, bought a company, commissioned a concerto from a new composer I liked in Ceylon, and donated an early Caruthers to the Prado.

I came, I went. I thought about Madelon. I thought about Mike.

Then I went back to what I did best: making money, making work, getting things done, making time pass.

I had just come from a policy meeting of the North American Continent Ecology Council when Madelon called to say the cube was finished and would be installed in the Battle Mountain house by the end of the week.

“How is it?” I asked.

She smiled. “See for yourself.”

“Smug bitch,” I grinned.

“It’s his best one, Brian. The best sensatron in the world.”

“I’ll see you Saturday.” I punched out and took the rest of the day off and had an early dinner with two Swedish blondes and did a little fleshly purging. It did not really help very much.

On Saturday I could see the two tiny figures waving at me from the causeway bridging the house with the tip of the spire of rock where the copter pad was. They were holding hands.

Madelon was tanned, fit, glowing, dressed in white with a necklace of Cartier Tempoimplant tattoos across her shoulders and breasts in glowing facets of liquid fire. She waved at Bowie as she came to me, squinting against the dust the copter blades were still swirling about.

Mike was there, dressed in black, looking haunted.

Getting to you, boy? I thought. There was a vicious thrill in thinking it and I shamed myself.

Madelon hugged me and we walked together back over the high causeway and directly to the new spraystone dome in the garden, at the edge of a two-hundred-foot cliff.

The cube was magnificent. There hadn’t been anything like it, ever. Not ever.

It was the largest cube I’d seen. There have been bigger ones since, none has been better. Its impact was stunning.

Madelon sat like a queen on what has come to be known as the Jewel Throne, a great solid thronelike block that seemed to be part temple, part jewel, part dream. It was immensely complex, set with faceted electronic patterns that gave it the effect of a superbly cut jewel that was somehow also liquid. Michael Cilento would have made his place in art history with that throne alone.

But on it sat Madelon. Nude. Her waist-long hair fell in a simple cascade. She looked right out at you, sitting erect, almost primly, with an almost triumphant expression.

It drew me from the doorway. Everyone, everything was forgotten, including the original and the creator with me. There was only the cube. The vibrations were getting to me and my pulse increased. Even knowing that pulse generators were working on my alpha waves and broadcast projectors were doing this and sonics were doing that and my own alpha wave was being synchronized and reprojected did not affect me. Only the cube affected me. All else was forgotten.

There was just the cube and me, with Madelon in it, more real than the reality.

I walked to stand before it. The cube was slightly raised so that she sat well above the floor, as a queen should. Behind her, beyond the

dark violet eyes, beyond the incredible *presence* of the woman, there was a dark, misty background that may or may not have been moving and changing.

I stood there a long time, just looking, experiencing. "It's incredible," I whispered.

"Walk around it," Madelon said. I felt the note of pride in her voice. I moved to the right and it was as if Madelon followed me with her eyes without moving them, following me by sensing me, alert, alive, ready for me. Already, the electronic image on the multilayered surfaces was *real*. Mike's electronic brushes had transformed the straight basic video images in subtle ways, artful shifts and fragile shadings on many levels revealing and emphasizing delicately.

The figure of Madelon sat there, proudly naked, breathing normally with that fantastically lifelike movement possible to the skilled molecular constructors. The figure had none of the flamboyance that Caruthers or Stibbard brought to their figures, so delighted in their ability to bring "life" to their work that they saw nothing else.

But Mike had restraint. He had *power* in his work, understatement, demanding that the viewer put something of himself into it.

I walked around to the back. Madelon was no longer sitting on the throne. It was empty, and beyond it, stretching to the horizon, was an ocean and above the toppling waves, stars. New constellations glowed. A meteor flashed. I stepped back to the side. The throne was unchanged but Madelon was back. She sat there, a queen, waiting.

I walked around the cube. She was on the other side, waiting, breathing, *being*. But in back she was gone.

But to where?

I looked long into the eyes of the figure in the cube. She stared back at me, into me. I seemed to feel her thoughts. Her face changed, seemed about to smile, grew sad, drew back into queenliness.

I drew back into myself. I went to Mike to congratulate him. "I'm stunned. There are no words."

He seemed relieved at my approval. "It's yours," he said. I nodded. There was nothing to say. It was the greatest work of art I knew. It was more than Madelon or the sum of all the Madelons that I knew existed. It was Woman as well as a specific woman. I felt humble in the presence of such great art. It was "mine" only in that I could house it. I could not contain it. It had to belong to the world.

I looked at the two of them. There was something else. I sensed what it was and I died some more. A flicker of hate for both of them flashed across my mind and was gone, leaving only emptiness.

"Madelon is coming with me," Mike said.

I looked at her. She made a slight nod, looking at me gravely, with deep concern in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Brian."

I nodded, my throat constricted suddenly. It was almost a business deal: the greatest work of art for Madelon, even trade. I turned back to look at the sensatron again and this time the image-Madelon seemed sad, yet compassionate. My eyes were wet and the cube shimmered. I heard them leave and long after the throb of the copter had faded away I stood there, looking into the cube, into Madelon, into

myself.

They went to Athens, I heard, then to Russia for awhile. When they went to India so that Mike might do his Holy Men series I called off the discreet monitors Control still had on them. I saw him on a talk show and he seemed withdrawn, and spoke of the pressures fame placed upon him. Madelon was not on the show, nor did he speak of her.

As part of my technology updating I was given an article on Mike, from *Science News*, that spoke of his technical achievements rather than his artistic. It seemed the Full Scale Molecular System was a success and much of the credit was his. The rest of the article was on spinoffs of his basic research.

It all seemed remote from me, but the old habits died hard. My first thought on seeing the new Dolan exhibit was how Madelon would like it. I bought a complete sculptured powerjewel costume from Cartier's before I remembered, and ended up giving it to my companion of a weekend in Mexico City just to get rid of it.

I bought companies. I made things. I commissioned art. I sold companies. I went places. I changed mistresses. I made money. I fought stock control fights. Some I lost. I ruined people. I made others happy and rich. I was alone a lot.

I return often to Battle Mountain. That is where the cube is.

The greatness of it never bores me; it is different each time I see it, for I am different each time. But then Madelon never bored me either, unlike all other women, who sooner or later revealed either their shallowness or my inability to find anything deeper.

I look at the work of Michael Cilento, and I know that he is an artist of his time, yet like many artists, *not* of his time. He uses the technology of his time, the attitude of an alien, and the same basic subject matter that generations of fascinated artists have used.

Michael Cilento is an artist of women. Many have said he is *the* artist who caught women as they were, as they wanted to be, and as *he* saw them, all in one work of art.

When I look at my sensatron cube, and at all the other Cilentos I have acquired, I am proud to have helped cause the creation of such art. But when I look at the Madelon that is in my favorite cube I sometimes wonder if the trade was worth it.

The cube is more than Madelon or the sum of the sum of all the Madelons who ever existed. But the reality of art is not the reality of reality.

After the showing of the Cilento retrospective at the Modern the social grapevine told me nothing about them for several months. Reluctantly, I asked Control to check.

The check revealed their occupancy of a studio in London, but enquiries in the neighborhood showed that they had not emerged in over a month and no one answered a knock. I authorized a discreet illegal entry. Within minutes they were back on the satellite line to me in Tokyo.

"You probably should see this yourself, sir," the man said.

"Are they all right?" I asked, and it hurt to ask.

"They're not here, sir. Clothes, papers, effects, but no trace."

"You checked with customs? You checked the building?"

"Yes, sir, first thing. No one knows anything, but . . ."

“Yes?”

“There’s something here you should see.”

The studio was large, a combination of junk yard, machine shop, mad scientist’s laboratory and art gallery, much as every other sensatron artist’s studio I had ever been in. Later, I was to see the details—the flowerwine bottles painted with gay faces, the tiny sensatron cubes that made you happy just to hold them and watch them change, the art books with new drawings done over the old reproductions, the crates and charts and diagrams.

Later, I would wander through the rubble and litter and museum quality art and see a few primitive daubs on canvo that were undoubtedly Madelon’s. I’d find the barbaric jewelry, the laughing triphotos, the tapes, the Persian helmet stuck with dead flowers, the painted rock wrapped in aluminum foil in the refrigerator, the butterfly in permaplastic, the unfinished sandwich.

But all I saw when I walked in were the cubes.

I bought the building and had certain structural changes made. I didn’t want to move one of the cubes a millimeter. The one that all the vitdabs and reviewers called “The Lovers” I took. I couldn’t keep it from the world, even though it hurt me to show it.

The other cube was more of a tool, a piece of equipment, rough-finished but complete, not really a work of art, and I didn’t want it moved.

Once it was seen people wanted “The Lovers” in a curiously avid way. Museums bid, cajoled, pleaded, compromised, regrouped into phalanxes asking for tours, betrayed each other, regrouped to try again.

In a way it’s all I have left of them. I pursued the lines of obvious investigation but I found no trace of them, not on Earth, not on the Moon, not on Mars. I ordered Control to stop looking when it became obvious they did not want to be found. Or could not be.

But in a way they are still here. Alive. In the Cube.

They are standing facing each other. Nude. Looking into each other’s eyes, hand in hand. There is rich new grass under their feet and tiny flowers growing. In Mike’s free hand he is holding out to Madelon something glowing. A starpoint of energy. A small shining universe. He is offering it to her.

Behind them is the sky. Great beautiful spring clouds move majestically across the blue. Far down, far away are worn ancient rocks, much like Monument Valley in Arizona, or the Crown of Mars, near Burroughs. That’s the first side I saw.

I walked around to the right, slowly. They did not change. They still stared into each other’s eyes, a slight and knowing smile on their lips. But the background was stars. A wall of stars beyond the grass at their feet. Space. Deep space filled with incredible red dwarfs, monstrous blue giants, ice points of glitter, millions upon millions of suns making a starry mist that wandered across the blackness.

The third side was another landscape, seen from a hilltop, with a red-violet sea in the distance and two moons.

The fourth side was darkness. A sort of darkness. *Something* was back in there beyond them. Vague figures formed, disappeared, reformed slightly differently, changed . . .

Then I appeared. I think it's me. I don't know *why* I think it is me. I have never told anyone I think one of the dim faces is me, but I believe it is.

The vibrations were subtle, almost unnoticed until you had looked at the cube a long time. They were peaceful vibrations, yet somehow exciting, as if the brainwave recordings upon which they were based were anticipating something marvelously different. There have been books written about this one cube and each writer has his interpretation.

But none of them saw the other cube.

It's a scenic view and it's the same as the third face of "The Lovers." If you walk around it it's a 360-degree view from a low hillock. In one direction you can see the shore curving around a bay of red-violet water and beyond, dimly seen, are what might be spires or rocks or possibly towers. In the other direction the blue-green waves in the gentle breezes towards the distant mountains. The cycle is long, several times longer than any present sensatron, some thirty hours. But nothing happens. The sun rises and sets and there are two moons, one large and one small. The wind blows, the grass undulates, the tides come and go. A hot G-type sun. Moonlight on the water. Peaceful vibrations. Quiet.

Alone in that studio I touched the smooth glassite surface and it was unyielding, yet an alien world seemed within reach. Or was it? Had Mike's particle research opened some new door for him? I was afraid to have the cube moved for perhaps, in some way, it was aligned.

You see, there are footsteps on the ground.

Two sets, and they start at the cube and go away, toward the distant spires.

I had my best team look it over. They went away with the diagrams and the notes they found on interdimensional space. They even had a stat of some figures scribbled on a tabletop.

Sometimes I plug into the monitor and look at the Cube sitting in the empty, locked studio, and I wonder.

Where are they?

Where are they?

5

For almost two years after Madelon and Mike disappeared I was a sort of robot, going through the motions of being Brian Thorne, being *the* Brian Thorne, almost by reflex. But I was a changed man, less comfortable in my ways, going from moody hermit holed up in a house or an island, to a party-giving playboy. Madelon's leaving triggered a flood of lush-bodied young ladies who had been waiting impatiently in the wings, each promising her intimate version of Valhalla, Paradise, or Hell.

There were times when I lost myself in beds across the world, burrowing into masses of prime young flesh, rutting mindlessly, shamelessly letting my businesses run themselves with minimum attention

from me. Often I would substitute quantity for the quality I really wanted in women and then be disillusioned, and go into meditation about the universe in my belly button.

But the flesh would tug at me and I would break the shell and emerge, racing to the fleshpots, popping sensoids, pushing my body to the limit, overdosing on sex and high speeds and variety, variety in everything. Once I selected a girl named Millicent Abigail Fletcher as my consort simply because her chocolate skin contrasted so well with a golden body jewelry design I had seen. I changed her name to Juno and never let her wear anything but the totally revealing costume, even when we made love. My guilt over making her a nonperson sent me back into another retreat, this time into the Himalayas.

I came back from the snows, impatient with the weather-domed Shangri-La, and dropped into the real world again with a large splash. I acquired a pair of identical twins, blonde and tanned and almost grotesquely voluptuous, and made them my constant companions, calling them Left and Right, and dressing them in a mirror image of each other. I stood on a balcony at the New Metropolitan, waiting for Stephanie and Harold, flanked by my shimmering voluptuaries, and I commented that the nude was an art form invented by the Greeks in the fifth century. "Before that it was religious sex," I said.

"Oh, I am devoutly sexual," Left said.

"Me, too," Right said huskily, the nipple ornament of her left breast denting my jacket, going on automatic with any mention of sex.

The next day I had them signed with a good agent and I was in Berlin. I was moody and unhappy and sorry for myself. An idle comment to Von Arrow that a certain artist was lousy because he traced his nudes almost destroyed the man's career.

It was while I was in these moods that I studied hardest at *mazeru*, becoming violent enough to be given a thumping by Shigeta, then a lecture about control and balance and centering.

I awoke one morning, looking as if I had just gotten up from inside an egg, and realized there was a nude girl on each side of me, naked beneath the satin, and I couldn't remember their names, nor was I certain how they had gotten there. I lay quietly, listening to the untroubled dreams of the stereo nudes, immune and indifferent to the bared firm bosoms and ripe curving hips, all within reach. I stared at the big dead panel of the abstraction channel overhead, now silvered and reflecting the wanton trio below. I saw the rippled, distorted images, the black skin, the white, the golden, and I thought my dark thoughts.

I rose to walk barefoot along a curving Tahitian beach in the early dawn and by the time the nameless, forgettable girls had awakened to a breakfast of fruit, I was at a conference table a thousand kilometers away, discussing interest rates and tax credits.

I do not think I have been callous in my treatment of the young beauties who, in effect, sell themselves to me, or at least rent. They are pleasant companions, and the wisest of them know the time spent with me is an investment. I make outright gifts of stock or jobs, and I open investment opportunities for brothers and fathers, and sometimes husbands. Our relations are businesslike, a bartering process in laughter and sex and companionship.

By no means were all of my female friends in this classification, although I have become friends with many women I met in this manner. Many of my friends are the wives and mistresses or companions of friends, wise and wonderful women whose friendship I value as much as that of any man.

But there is always the matter of sex. Sex has a beginning, a middle, and an end, both in individual acts and in affairs. When the time came that a woman no longer interested me, or I no longer interested her, I might make a suggestion to a film producer, if she was the right type, and wanted it. She might go from my bed to having her name across every teletext on four continents. I might bring some rich-bodied, hot-mouthed wench together with a sensation artist like Coe, give the necessary commission, and the aid of my Publityx firm to "glorify" it, and another star would be born as payment for a week in Madagascar or several delightful days of rutting in the Atlantis undersea world. It was incidental that my publicity company made money, that an artist was helped, that the sensation could be donated, and that my Voyage Productions had a new star. I might do the same sort of thing for someone who had merely pleased me, or someone I admired, without any sex or ego-caresses. It was something I seemed to do by reflex, separating the wheat from the chaff, plucking the good from the poor and making it better.

All this was because of my money, and my money was, in part, because of all this. Money, beyond a certain point, is only wealth. Wealth, after a certain point, is pointless. It's there, you know it's there, but you don't really know how much it is. You really only care when it isn't there. Money is a burden, a responsibility, and just occasionally, a joy.

I bring up the matter of my wealth merely to provide a frame of reference. It is well known that I am one of the world's five hundred wealthiest men. It is not so well known that I am one of the world's most frustrated artists. The press often runs features on me, tied in with some unorthodox venture, and one of their favorite clichés is "The Man With the Midas Touch." This is an oversimplification that I find annoying. They seem to think that all it takes to make money is money. But many a millionaire has been reduced to trust income by making the wrong decisions too many times. Many a minor investor has risen by a series of right decisions at the right times. The sensation press likes to refer to these meteoric rises as a run of luck, a fortunate throw of the dice.

Luck does play a part in any venture when not all the factors are known. My modestly endowed archeological team digging at the Martian ruins near Bradbury was "lucky" enough to discover the treasure that has come to be called the Royal Jewels of Ares, although no scientific proof exists that they are in any way royal, or even if a Martian royalty existed. It is this kind of luck that keeps me in the eye of the press, the darling of Uninews, and the target for more get-rich-quick schemes than you would believe.

Every man with even a one-star credit rating is a mark for swindlers, cheats, ambitious women, and the tax man. Every rich man learns to protect his treasure with information, suspicion, wit, force, research, guile, early warning systems, intelligence, and, often,

ruthlessness. When you become what the press services have dubbed the *super-rich* you are the automatic magnet for countless secret dossiers, plans, lusts, schemes, hatreds, and envy. You are shot at just because you are rich. You are insulted, seduced, ignored, catered to, and charged extra—not because of *you*, but simply because you have money.

But, all in all, it is better to be rich than poor, and it is better to be super-rich than just rich, because it lets you do things few other people can do. For one thing, it gives you some degree of privacy. In a world bulging with eight billion people, and more on the way, real privacy is almost impossible except to the very rich and the incurably insane.

Being rich, I have been able to indulge myself shamelessly in those two things I deem most important: art and women.

It was when I went to Mars that everything changed.

I didn't *need* to go to Mars. Several chairmen of several boards begged me not to, when I mentioned it as a possibility. At least a dozen women saw it as a hopeless tragedy, not because of any great personal concern or love, but because it would thwart the timing of certain ventures they had in mind for me. My *friends*, who knew me, shrugged and wished me luck, but I don't think any of them really expected me to actually go. Few men of my status had ever even considered it seriously. I had no pressing business on Mars, I just wanted to go.

But being the locus of hundreds of lines of power and responsibility makes you a hostage to your own money, and to those who depended upon the stability of my "empire." The only way I could go was to sneak away, and that wasn't easy. I knew that even my own security guards might consider it a higher loyalty, since my life might be in danger, to prevent me from going by leaking the news. Certainly all my company presidents and most of my stockholders considered it unnecessary that I endanger myself. If I went, they went, and I don't mean to Mars.

But the adventure of going beyond the Moon excited me. It always had, but somehow I had just never had the time before. Or made the time. When I was a small boy I saw for the first time a recording of the landing at Touchdown and I had never forgotten the feeling of excitement. Through the crackle and pop I heard that corny but stirring line, "Today Mars, tomorrow the stars!"

My preoccupation with the fourth planet had lead me to invest heavily in almost anything Martian, although my natural caution kept me away from some of the more fraudulent schemes, such as the Martian Estates, the Secret Knowledge Foundation, the Deimos affair, and the ludicrous "Canal Dust" panaceas. It was my Martian Explorations teams that discovered the ancient ruins at Burroughs and Wells, and explored the huge Nix Olympica cone. I must admit it was I who suggested to Mizaki and Villareal, and later to the Tannberg group, that they utilize the names that had so intrigued and delighted us all in our youth.

Yet it was really not *me*, but my money that spoke. All I might expect is a paragraph in art history, like one of the Borgias, or a pope. I was merely the patron of such sensatron artists as Cilento, Caruthers, and Willoughby. It was my money that assisted the creation of Vardi's

gardens, Eklundy's *Martian Symphony # 1*, and Darrin's massive Rocky Mountain sculptures. It was not *I* who had created those works of art. I was no more than a laser operator hanging from a Mt. Elbert cliff or a cement finisher working under Vardi's glare. I provided the brick and electrodes and fusion power. I knew that what any artist really needs is the time and material to do what he must do, the appreciation of someone willing to pay for it, and, most importantly, the freedom to be able to. And that was what I supplied.

Now I wanted the freedom to do something for myself, and going to the Red Planet was it.

The more I thought of going, the more I desired to do so. I was also somewhat impelled by being once again in the news, the result of a retrospective exhibition at the Landau Gallery of Michael Cilento's works. The mystery of his disappearance was dramatic enough to insure another round of publicity and I was being enmeshed again.

It was simply the time to go.

No passports were needed for Mars. The traffic was not all that heavy, and the Chinese, Russian, and American bases are far enough apart so that there was no real friction. All the trip took was reasonable health and an incredible amount of money. Sending Eklundy to stand on the lip of Nix Olympica and to sleep in the Grand Hall had cost over a million Swiss francs, but we received his symphony in return, plus the recent *Icemountain Concerto*, and others that would come. To let Powell walk the rugged John Carter Range had cost even more, but I had thought it well worth while.

I could not simply buy a ticket and go, however. Even after the trip had been reduced from seven months to one month, and had become much less of a dramatic affair, people such as myself would receive far too much publicity. I realize this is supposed to be a free world, freer and more democratic than any in history, but some people are freer than others. I was not one of them. There were those who would raise such a fuss that there would be vibrations down all those lines of power, all through that giant financial and industrial net. There would be fear, breakages, shiftings of power, and even, possibly, deaths. When Jean-Michel Voss thoughtlessly disappeared for a mere eight days, cuddled into a SensoryTrip with a girl of each race and a Memorex-Ten, the rumor that he was dead spread out from Beirut, across Syria and Turkey, and caused the collapse of the shaky Bajazet government, the sabotage of the Karabuk steel plants, and the Ankara Revolt that cost over a hundred thousand lives. Indirectly, it slowed the formation of the Middle Eastern Union and the disruption of their plans for a Martian colony at what is now Grandcanal City.

No, I had to be extremely careful. My Golden Congo Company was in delicate negotiations with United Africa people. My Baluchistan oil company was in trouble with the new government there. The new governor in Maryland was conducting a publicity-seeking probe into the Hagerstown arcology project. General Motors was unsure of cooperating with my General Anomaly complex on the new turbine patent.

No business is static. Life is not static. Even as one project is completed, it begets new projects. The beginning or end of one venture

in a life such as mine is a unit in an intricate house of cards, and I was the dealer. Even when I had little or nothing to do with a project personally, when I was but a tertiary mover, or a simple stockholder, I was still related. If something happened to me, “it” happened all over.

I needed to arrange things indirectly. I called Carol Oakland at Martian Explorations. “How is the documentary on the Vault coming?”

“It’s almost done, sir. Avery will have a closed circuit screening in a few days. We will inform your office. They will have the new edition of the Royal Jewels book out next month, Mr. Thorne. We presume you wish Publitex to handle it.”

She had given me a good opening. “Yes, of course. In fact, I think you could have them handle the Star Palace project as well. Perhaps we should send someone out there in person. Who’s available?”

She smiled. “For that kind of trip they’d all be willing. Kramer, Reiss, possibly Harrison. They’re all good.”

“What about Braddock? He might be the best.” I noted her expression and quickly added, “Don’t worry. I’ll give you a new expropriation just for this. Let him wander around awhile, get the feel of the place, and don’t pressure him for reports.”

“Yes, sir. I’ve never met him, but if you like him . . .” She paused but a moment. “I’ll get through to his service right away.”

“Good. How’s everything else?”

Carol suddenly looked tired. “Cropsey is in jail. He’s the one who was working on the correlations between the Burroughs 45-16 stela and the new Yucatan finds?”

“Yes, I remember. Not much to go on, but if anything develops from it we might prove the Martians visited us here. But what happened to him?”

“He was found with a pet, sir, a . . . Doberman.”

“Jesus. What the hell was the matter with him? He knows damn well those things are over the legal limit. Couldn’t he keep a hamster or even a permakitten? Something that didn’t eat so much?”

“He was very fond of it, sir. He lives—uh, lived—in that old arcology tower in Omaha, one of the real oldies, a charming old place like two intersecting reversed pyramids. Only about five hundred thousand population.”

“Yes, I know the kind they used to build. Go on.”

“Well, there was a raid on some kind of black mass cult that was supposed to be making human sacrifices. You know the sort that springs up, the antitechnology types. Well, the police got the floor numbers reversed and they blew open the wrong door and—well, they found Armand with the animal—”

“What’s his fine?”

“It’s worse than that, Mr. Thorne. It’s his third offense. He had a whole pride of cats in Borneo and an unlicensed collie in Atlanta. You’d think he’d learn . . .” She sighed deeply. “I suppose they’ll let him work in prison, but maybe not—”

“All right. Do what you can for him. You’d think they would learn that we can’t afford pets any longer. Maybe some day, when we get over the food crisis—”

“They didn’t destroy the animal, sir, that’s one nice thing. It was

sent to the preserve in Argentina. Maybe someday—”

“Yes, of course. Someday. They didn’t impound the stela or anything?”

“No, sir. We had all his papers picked up when they cleaned out his apartment. I’ve given the cubestone to Mittleman to study.”

“Fine. You’re doing well, keep it up.”

I thumbed the contact and then punched for Sandler, my chief accountant, signaling for a scrambler circuit. “Lowell, I need about . . . um . . . six million for a private project.” His eyebrows went up and I saw his hand go offscreen to pause over a computer. “There’s some slack in Operation Epsilon, isn’t there?” He nodded.

“Not that much, though,” he said. He didn’t ask me what I wanted it for. His department was *How* and *When*. Mine was *Why*.

“Project Dakota came in under budget and that hasn’t been returned. The Louvre still wants that Picasso. Sell it to them. Move some of my *Lune Fabrique* stock. Put everything in Diego Braddock’s name.”

Again, his eyes searched my face, but he said nothing. His fingers moved and he glanced at the readout. “That will about do it. I might have to sell futures on the Baja marijuana crop, but I’ll see. What time do I have?”

“Will a week do it?”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, then nodded. “Ten days at the outside.” He paused, then asked, “This is, or course, a confidential transaction?” I nodded. “You know there will be some difficulty in accounting for the transfers?”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “I’ll take care of it.” I had almost added “When I get back,” but I caught myself. Sandler was not privy to the Diego Braddock persona ploy, and I saw no reason to endanger him with information he needn’t be concerned with.

I clicked off with a wave and sat back in my chair. I had started the cogs turning that would send “Diego Braddock” to Mars.

Every man of wealth that I know has at least one standby persona, a nonperson complete with official papers, a history, dossiers, bank accounts, health records, an address, and whatever else was needed. These personas are assumed as needed, either for business or personal reasons, or both. They are sometimes created for a lark, much as Harun al-Rashid donned beggar’s rags to roam the Baghdad nights; the lure of becoming someone else, even for an evening, is strong.

I have several of these ongoing personas, plus two that I had needed to terminate, complete with death certificates and burial urns. In various parts of the world there are offices and homes for Andrew Garth, Howard Scott Miles, Waring Brackett, and Diego Braddock. They all had jobs that permitted travel, or were living on stock dividends. I changed the “cast” fairly frequently and only Billy Bob Culberson, a paraplegic genius in Lampasas, Texas, knew them all. He delighted in creating realistic and authentic personalities. Only once did I have to interfere, and that was when he had one persona working for another, and carrying on a correspondence with yet another. It was getting too complex for me, but it amused him.

It is a childish game, but necessary in certain areas of business. Using the existing formats I carefully constructed a schedule that my right

and left hand man, Huo, would follow, once I had left. It was necessary that he know the truth, so he could properly manipulate the “leaks” and reports that would create the illusion of my movement on Earth.

Everyone was to know where I was at all times. Control was kept informed from Huo’s desk. Nothing extraordinary would seem to happen, just the usual restless Thorne zigzag.

Brian Thorne was on a private five-day SensoryTrip in his Battle Mountain home. No communication.

Brian Thorne was to be reported in the Andes, and his destination was “leaked” at the last moment. Many would rush there, thinking I had some inside information on new iron discoveries.

Then I was to be seen in Mississippi, in Tsingtao “incognito,” and sailing on the Tasmanian Sea with Tommi Mitchell.

By that time I should be on Mars. A pretaped report by me would then be given the General Anomaly board of directors by Huo. They would be angry, but too late. In their own interests they would have to keep up the pretense of shuffling Brian Thorne around the world.

I felt like a boy sneaking off to join the circus.

And I loved it.

Diego Braddock was one of my easiest personas to don and maintain, for his job was one of asking questions about anything that suited him, a situation not unlike that of his boss, far up the table of organization, a certain Brian T.

It was as Diego Braddock, Publitex scribbler, space-suited and cleared, that I boarded the shuttle for Station Two from Sahara Base Three. In my inner pocket, sealed by thumb ident, were cargo tickets for six containers, already being transferred to the *Vasco Nunez de Balboa* up at the space station.

The money that I had “stolen” from my own companies had gone for the contents of those six containers, which were, in a way, my trade goods and beads for the natives. They contained frozen bovine ova and sperm, plus the apparatus that would give the nuvomartians their first cattle herds . . . if they lived. There were shimmercloth and entertainment tapes. There were a few cases of wine, all vintages that traveled well, sealed in stasis tubes. The largest container had its own inner environment and held tiny mutant seedlings from the University of California Martian Research Center, trees and plants that the scientists hoped would thrive on the new and still thin Martian atmosphere.

The shuttle thundered up through the overcast that had drifted over from the shallow new Lake Sahara to the south, and then the safety ports slid back and we were in space. The trip was short and fast, and we docked at Station Two without incident.

I unbuckled and let myself drift up, enjoying the familiar weightlessness. I kicked off from the seat top and sealed down the faceplate of my suit, as I came up to the exit port with my fellow passengers.

The steward guided us into the lock, where we were greeted by a no-nonsense technician who directed us to grab a thin guideline and heave ourselves into the transfer tube. Another efficient technician, this one a woman, met us at the other end of the short passage, keeping us moving on into the station. It was a busy place, and there was no time for

gawkers. There would be plenty of time to be struck dumb by the vast beauty of space later on. The romance of going to Mars was reduced to “Keep it moving, hombre,” and a commicator’s order that all passengers for the *Balboa* report to Decontamination at once.

“Don’t they trust the Decon Earthside?” I asked the tech who was hanging up my suit in the six-sided locker tube.

She didn’t even look around. “Don’t wait around, amigo, get your ass to E deck.”

“Have my cargo pods been transferred?”

“Routine transfer through Decon. C’mon, I have to cycle this lock!”

I moved from the weightless center of the big can out through the radial tubes to the Point Eight gravity of the exterior skin, along with the others, past the clearly marked signs to Decon.

I overcompensated in an attempt to avoid a pinwheeling neophyte and bumped my head, not on the padded sides, but on a hatch edge. But in the main the sailing feeling was delightful, somehow much more real than dancing in the big ballroom on Station One. There, I had always been carefully VIPed, but this time I knew the station commander would not give me a personal tour. Diego Braddock was just a hired hand, a nobody.

I was pushed through Decon along with a couple of Marines destined for the Ares Center police garrison who were ahead of me, and a Redplanet Minerals geologist named Pelf behind me. We were resuited and hustled through to the smaller, all-purpose shuttlecraft that ran passengers and cargo hundreds of kilometers out to where the asteroid ships were in parking orbits.

We sailed silently past several of the older extended-flight ships, which had long lost their original global shape beneath the additions of domes, extra pods, stasis cylinders, antennae, modifications, exterior storage tetrahedrons, spidery cargo waldos, and vacuum-welded lumps studded with sensors. Most of these ships were now research vessels or served in the Earth-orbit-to-Moon-orbit run. The obliging copilot pointed out the passenger ship *Emperor Ming-huang*, one of the sleek new moon ships.

Just past it was the *President Kennedy*, under construction, and beyond, *President Washington*, with a swarm of shuttles and tugs transshipping cargo and passengers from Luna City.

“That’s the *Neil A. Armstrong* over there,” the pilot said. “They’re modifying her again.” He laughed and said, “Ships may get old in space, but they rarely die.”

“Old ships never die, they just modify,” the copilot grinned, repeating the old cliché.

Pelf leaned past me to point ahead, where we could just see an irregular blot against the half-moon. “There!”

The pilot nodded and thumbed a stud. “Two-seventeen to *Balboa* NE-five, request approach computation check. Over.”

“Two-seventeen, this is *Balboa* NE-five. Confirm on Fifty-six-five, over.”

“Roger, *Balboa*, out.”

“Look,” Pelf said, “more.”

Ahead of us were the asteroid ships, mountain-sized rocks brought in, mostly from the Asteriod Belt, by PanLunar or Transworld, or by free-lancers. Clusters of sealed living and power units are sent out, the asteroids are found, their center of mass determined, and the big central corings made. The cylindrical units are inserted and sealed, the trim is checked, and if need be, big bull lasers cut off chunks to ballast the rock, and a ship is created. Skeleton crews bring them back into Earth orbit, where cargo holds are scooped out of the ancient rock, tunnels drilled to the surface, for access and observation ports, and a more careful study is made of how the asteroid is to be cut up for efficient self-destruction.

The asteroid ships literally consume themselves. The rock is cut up and fed to the fusion torch for fuel, the cuts monitored carefully to preserve the ship's trim. The asteroid provides fuel, storage capacity, and protection from meteorites and radiation.

They aren't pretty, but they are big and work better and faster than anything yet devised. The old ships had to carry their own fuel, whereas with these bulky beauties the ship *is* the fuel. The seven or eight months' trip has been reduced to four or five weeks, and commerce is still picking up.

The copilot pointed at a work crew fitting a cylindrical unit into a large pitted rock twenty times its size. "That's not the kind of ship Captain Laser uses."

"*Captain Laser*," snorted the pilot. "If my ship had visited as many alien planets as his and had been sabotaged, cut up, zapped, spacewarped, and eaten by intelligent dinosaurs as often as his, it would be in repair orbit ninety percent of the time."

The two pilots began a good-natured argument about the adventures of the legendary space hero seen on television in eighteen languages, but I still watched the space ahead for our destination.

Naturally, I had been to space stations before, and several times I had visited the Moon, on business usually, but twice for pleasure. The Moon was an exotic vacation, expensive but easily possible on any number of commercial flights.

Mars was a different matter.

For all practical purposes the Moon was dead, but there *had* been life on Mars, intelligent life, with an amazingly high civilization, even though we didn't understand much of it yet. It seemed probable that it had developed early, for Mars was indeed younger than Earth, and its civilization developed with great speed, peaking and disappearing centuries before man was much more than a hunter and gatherer.

Mars was as mysterious to us as Africa had been in the nineteenth century, when explorers were searching for the source of the Nile and discovering whole cultures, new species, and great wonders.

With a trip to Mars, a lot of work, and a little luck, a man might get rich. He might be able to get himself up out of the mind-clogging morass of eight billion bodies and into sight of a slice of sky.

Despite all the misfortunes, all the death and suffering, all the expense and disappointments, exploring Mars was romantic.

And I hadn't done anything romantic in a long time.

Wearing bulky all-purpose spacesuits we made the transfer from the shuttle to the receiving tube of the *Balboa*, gathering like sheep inside the big Richter lock, dutifully waiting until the experts told us what to do next.

We floated, weightless and awkward, bumping into each other as we waited, and some of us got upside-down to the others. Not that it mattered, for there would be no gravity until the big engines started pushing us out. But it was disorienting and confusing to most of us, and I saw some holding onto the guidelines and keeping out of the way of one clown who seemed to think kicking his legs and waving his arms would get him all right again, and that the faster he kicked, the quicker he would get back in sync with us.

Mercifully, a crewman snagged him and pulled him to a line, where he hung until the inner lock opened. I had been trying to see who my fellow passengers were, but the sexual and social anonymity of the suits prevented me.

A voice in our suit radios told us to start pulling ourselves along the safety lines that hung on all four walls of the square-cut passage beyond the lock, and we moved out in a ragged line. The more skilled and experienced soon shot through and went slithering off down the passage ahead, skimming the vacuum like seals. The rest struggled with our reflexes and eventually made it all the long way down through to the central core and another airlock.

The pressurized cylinder was the size of a small tower, with special cargo holds at the “front” end, passenger cabins next, then the service modules, the control room, and the fusion power plant at the “back” or “bottom,” or what would be the bottom when the one-g thrust restored gravity.

I had no idea how they decided who bunked with whom, but I drew a cabin with the man named Franklin R. Pelf. He instantly offered his services as an experienced spacer, and I instantly disliked him, although he was polite and considerate.

“This old boat made the third trip to Mars, you know, I mean, of the asteroid ships. You know, the one with Bailey and Russell. Later on I’ll show you the laser scar on A Deck where Russell cut down Bailey, you know, on the way back, after he picked up that vitus worm.”

He was the original stick-with-me-kid type. “Maybe I should have gone out on the *Spirit of the Revolution*, or even the *Leif Ericson III*. They have great yums on those tubes, you know. But my business is just too urgent. I’m in pure ore, you know.”

No, I didn’t know. I was thinking about the historic old ship plugged into the inconceivably ancient chunk of space trash, equating it with the battered old tramp steamers of history, and romanticizing the hell out of it.

But Pelf wouldn’t leave me alone. Once he found out I was from Publitec he started feeding me endless canned pap about the eternal glories of Redplanet Minerals, the beauties of Grabrock, etcetera. I disliked him right from the start, and I never stopped. There was a sort of snake-eyed watchfulness about him that rang the alarm circuits honed by nearly two decades of wheeling and dealing in most of the countries of the world. If I were Brian Thorne instead of the easygoing Diego

Braddock he would never have gotten within ten kilometers of me. That is one sort of protection that money can buy—sharp-witted sharpies who are *your* sharpies to watch out for *other* sharpies.

But here I was, sealed in a small world of two hundred souls for a month, with a podmate whom I already disliked, and we hadn't even left orbit.

We were still stowing luggage and he was well into the "Who are you, what do you do, how can you help me?" routine. Layered over it like chocolate frosting was the ever-present "Boy, can I help *you!*" pitch that I had heard from multimillionaire Arab rug merchants selling oil rights and billionaire service company czars and territorial senators and even a few out-back presidents, ministers, and regents of the throne.

They do favors for you, and they expect them back. If you don't take the favors you are not obligated, but getting out of taking them is often difficult; sovereign countries can make your refusal an international incident and beautiful women can attack your manhood. Pelf was somewhere in between.

I quickly sealed up my gear in the lockers and headed up toward the control decks. As Brian Thorne I would have been invited to the bridge during takeoff, but as Braddock the best I could wangle was permission to be in a pressurized observation blister as we set sail for the planet of the God of War.

Earth was below, all blue and white and beautiful, as familiar an unfamiliar sight as anyone on Earth has seen. A thousand films, ten thousand newscasts, have shown us ourselves, Spaceship Earth, in orbit around a minor star. The diminishing crescent of the Home Planet was as often seen as any vidstar. I remembered seeing it "live and direct" from the torchship *American Eagle* as she went off on the first manned trip to the moons of Jupiter. Only this time it was no wall screen, but the curved plastex dome before me. And out there, Earth's billions.

And Brian Thorne.

The intercom announced the impending firing of the torch and I checked my safety belt, although I knew the ship's movement would be barely discernible at first. We would gradually increase speed until Turnover, then "back down" to Mars orbit.

There was the faintest of tremors and then, very slowly, the crescent of Earth slid to one side of the port, and we were starting into the long curve to the fourth planet.

I stayed in the blister until they called dinner and with a sigh I unbuckled myself and cycled through the lock. I grabbed the guideline and arrowed down to the ship's lock.

I was smiling and I couldn't help feeling the repetitive thrill of the threshold of adventure. I was going to Mars! I was a kid skipping school, an AWOL soldier, a felon out of prison. I felt much younger, an adventurer on his way!

Brian Thorne on Mars.

Brian Thorne versus the Queen of Deneb.

Brian Thorne and the Space Pirates of Medusa IV.

I entered the mess hall with a smile on my face. I started automatically toward the Captain's table before I saw Pelf's wave. Then I remembered that the pecking order was quickly established on a ship,

whether in space or on the water. The Important Ones, relatively speaking, were at the Captain's table the first night out. Everyone, or almost everyone, would make it sometime, but that first night or two would set the social order in cement. Diego Braddock was not invited tonight.

As I slid into my seat I was brought up to date by Our Genial Host, Franklin R. Pelf. He introduced me to the two Marines, to Quam Lem, an administrator going to the People's Republic base at Polecanal, to a biologist and to an ecologist destined for the new colony at Northaxe.

But my eyes were on the Captain's table. The Marine commander, an Ares Center politico, the owner of the Enyo and Eris mines near Northaxe, and the two doctors were just background, just spear carriers as far as I was concerned.

All I saw was the woman.

"Who's that?" I interrupted Pelf's calculatedly charming approach to the placid Quam Lem. He turned to me with irritation, quickly disguised. He followed my eyes to the only possible target.

He smiled. It was a lizard's smile. "Nice, huh?"

"Never mind the editorial. Who is she?"

"Nova Sunstrum."

I tore my eyes away and looked at him. "But she looks oriental, or some sort of mixture."

"She is. Her father practically owns Bradbury, and her mother was one of the first colonists the People's Republic sent out to Polecanal." His lizard's grin grew intimate. "Would you like an introduction?"

I closed the armored leaves of my ego around me once again. The *Don't Give Away A Thing* sign was lit.

"It's a long voyage," I said, digging into my salad. "I imagine I'll run into her."

Pelf grinned at me and murmured, "I'm certain you will," and returned to his conversation with Quam Lem.

I didn't look over at her again. Our eyes had met as I entered and she had been calmly expressionless, apparently listening to the politician next to her, the one with the polished charm. The contact had broken as I sat down.

Beautiful women, I'm happy to say, are not that novel in my life. Keeping them *out* of my life has been the problem for over fifteen years, ever since I appeared on the *TIME* list of the Top Hundred Bachelors. I knew there would be women on the *Balboa*, for they had constituted almost half of the original explorers and colonists, but I had been expecting technicians, a nurse or two, even an administrator or scientist, and certainly a few contract wives, each with a solid degree in some field necessary out there.

So I was not all that surprised at finding a physically beautiful woman, but I *was* surprised at finding magic. That sort of chemistry was just something I was neither looking for, nor expected.

And I could not deny the electric charge of that magic, and it disturbed me. It had passed through my thoughts to "arrange" for some subsidiary of mine to send Arleen or Karin along, or perhaps the exotic

Charla, someone to accompany me on the long voyage there and back. They would have jumped at the chance, mainly to have me, and my millions, alone to themselves. But I had decided I didn't need that, and trusted none of them to keep silent. Taking a beautiful woman along would be like buying an ad in global prime time.

But here was a woman whose beauty had hit a resonating chord within me. She sat like a queen in the steel core of a battered, scarred old freighter. I smiled into my yoghurt. All I needed was fog outside the ports, a secret formula, Hitler's great-grandson with plans to raise the swastika on red soil, a comic character or two, and a drunken doctor to perform the necessary brain surgery. Pelf was a secret agent and Nova Sunstrum was his accomplice. Quam Lem had some dastardly plot to take over Mars concealed in his spacesuit and the ancient race of Martians would be brought alive with the *tanna* leaves that the thin ecologist had secreted in the lining of his jumpsuit.

Brian Thorne and the Empress of Mars.

Strikes Again.

Blues.

I began to think that they had caught on back home and had staged the whole thing to "get it out of his system so he can settle down."

I finished the meal, suited up, and headed toward the observation blister again, without so much as a look at Nova Sunstrum's waist-long black hair, her tilted dark eyes, her golden skin, or her softly smiling mouth.

Only that's just what Brian Thorne would have done. Let 'em come to me. Even the ones that played it smart and didn't seem eager just placed themselves in my path for me to fall over.

Yup. that's what the suave, worldly Brian Thorne would have done all right, so that's what I did. Except that I was Diego Braddock and I was going on being Diego Braddock as long as possible.

I stared out at the ever-so-slowly retreating blue-green-white-tan disk but I was seeing the dark eyes and the fall of black hair.

Nova Sunstrum.

Nova Sunstrum.

There was an unconscious use of her sensuality that I found very exciting, even though I thought she was aware of much of her sexuality. A month of that kind of closeness would surely affect both the male and the bisexual females of the ship. Suddenly I saw the position she was in. She was not the only woman. There were two computer techs, a plump botanist, a brace of nurses, three contract wives with seven degrees between them, and a sturdy adminofficer ticketed through to the Russian base at Nabokov.

But Nova Sunstrum was the obvious physical beauty, the head-turner. She must have been the focus of many desires even on Earth. Shipboard protocol brought us together rather rapidly. The second dinner saw me at the Captain's table, for even a lowly publicist has his status, and his uses to the *Navío Estrella* company that operated the *Balboa*. I was introduced to Nova Sunstrum by Capitano Garcia Ramírez.

Her eyes regarded me calmly. She raised a tulip glass of wine to her lips. "And what do you do, Mr. Braddock?" She sipped the wine as

I thought about my answer.

“I point a finger,” I said. She raised her eyebrows. She ignored the politician on her left who was trying to capture her attention with a tale of how he had mastered a tricky situation with the natives at Ares Center. She was watching me steadily. I felt constrained to explain a little further.

“I point and make appropriate noises and people start paying attention. The pointee becomes famous, or at least noticed.”

“Do you like being a pointer, Mr. Braddock?” she asked.

Just for a second I thought that perhaps the fragile disguise I had concocted for this adventure had been penetrated. A slight dyeing of my hair from dark brown to near-black, a change of name and papers, and the simple unlikelihood of B. Thorne being aboard had seemed sufficient. Somehow, now, I was not so certain.

“Sometimes,” I said, answering her question. “It depends at what I point.”

“Do you point at things or people?” The lady botanist at my side had joined the conversation.

“Both,” I said. “Whichever interests me.”

“He’s a flack for Publitech,” the politician said quickly. “Miss Sunstrum, may I call you Nova? I know your father, of course. Fine man. We are going to be together here for quite some time and —“

“Yes, we are, aren’t we?” She smiled at the politician and said, “There will be time for almost everything, won’t there?” She turned back to me and asked softly, “And what interests you on Mars, Mr. Braddock?”

“Everything,” I said, looking into her dark eyes, trying to read them, and seeing only the tiny blurred reflections of myself.

“Won’t that make it difficult to point at any one thing?” asked Miss Blount.

“I’ll manage to find something to . . . point at, I’m sure,” I answered, but my eyes were still on the Martian-born beauty. Nova smiled and turned her gaze to the soyalgae soup, while Miss Blount buried me under wondrous stories of how they were bringing the dead Martian sands to life, and how well the *Lycoperscion esculentum* had adapted, giving superb tomatoes with their own built-in salty taste.

After dinner I went to my usual spot, the observation blister, which was still on the “down” side, toward Earth. I slumped in the couch, opened my spacesuit, and wondered about a lot of things, from unfinished business to business to finish. Would Warfield be able to pull off the merger with Selenite, Ltd. over the Eratosthenes Crater deal? Would the Mythos fun park hit the estimated attendance? Would Huo keep my marker moving across the map without premature detection? I wondered how Africaine would do in her new film, and if the Valencia project would really result in low-cost housing. I thought about the cost of the archotolog for retired people and if the Malayan hotel complex would open as scheduled.

And I thought about Nova Sunstrum.

Was she a plant by the Navahoe Organization to divert me somehow? Had the boys in Quebec found out about my trip? Had they put Clarke into the picture with his play-rough tactics? Was it something

cooked up by Raeburn's bunch in Toronto?

Angrily, I thrust all these thoughts aside. There was nothing much I could do about any of it. The wheels were rolling, the computers were humming, the people were moving from Square A to Square B. Everything was geared to run without me, at least for awhile. If I died, or was killed, would the General Anomaly board just keep alive the fabrication of Brian Thorne "resting" or "vacationing" or "tripping" while they sliced out chunks of my empire for themselves?

But what did it matter, really? If I were dead I couldn't care. I had long ago arranged for trusts to be established for certain friends. Certain organizations and grants and foundations would be happy. Michele, Louise, Huo, Langley, and Caleb would have theirs. What did it matter now to the world if Brian Thorne never came back? A few artists would find patrons elsewhere. Some music might not be written, some sensations not constructed, some paintings not painted. But the world would go on.

It was not the best batch of thoughts I ever had.

So, instead, I thought full-time about Nova. If I were Brian Thorne I would already have received a coded dossier on her from Huo, with everything worth knowing in it, everything that could be put into words or graphs or on film. But as Diego Braddock I would have to use my gut instincts, the same ones that had brought me up from Brian Thorne, a diversified but minor investor in this and that, to *Brian Thorne*.

I decided I wanted Nova Sunstrum.

I wanted to make love to her, to that voluptuous body, to make love *with* her, with that quicksilver mind I detected. I wanted to penetrate her flesh and to couple with her intimate thoughts. To mate only with flesh, however beautiful, is pleasant, but hardly meaningful. I had had enough of that. I wanted more.

Someone like Madelon.

The thought of her came unasked, trapping me in an awkward moment. Triggered by something perhaps hidden, the images and feelings flooded back. I had loved.

Would I love again? Nova and Madelon popped in and out of my awareness like spacewarping gypsies.

Nova, fresh and unique.

Madelon, lost and special.

It was too soon, and I did not yet know enough. But I knew myself well enough to recognize the tug. I forced the all-too-familiar feelings away, back into the dark closet, where I hoped they would gather dust and melt away, silently, unseen, unfelt. I knew those feelings had been "decontaminated" many times and were but shadows of their former pain, but they had not gone entirely.

Nova was *now*; Madelon was *then*. I had no desire for Madelon now, only curiosity. What I did have was a battered ego, one of life's greatest pains. But I had lived and I had met Nova. I was well aware that I was building a fantasy on a very tenuous foundation. I knew little about her, but I felt much.

Oh, how we trap ourselves!

I heard the lock behind me cycling and I turned my head and saw her appear in the light from the inner lock. She saw me, hesitated a

moment, then mumbled an apology and started to leave.

“Don’t go!” I said quickly.

“I didn’t know anyone was in here,” she said. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“No, please, come in.”

She stepped over the lip of the hatch, thumbing the lock controls to close and recycle. She stood looking out of the port for a moment, then started to remove her suit. “I hate these things. They are like wearing a cardboard box.”

I watched her as she took it off and, as awkward as that procedure is, she did it with grace. I am definitely attracted to graceful women, especially when they can be graceful under disadvantageous circumstances.

She wore only a simple thin white dress that clung to her golden skin like flowing milk. She hugged herself and said, “It’s cold out here!”

“Sit here,” I said and thumbed a heater circuit. She curled into the padded couch like a cat and her lips formed a slight smile as she stared out at Earth. Her scent was delicate and something I couldn’t place.

I let the long moments pass as my eyes moved from one beautiful sight to another.

“Isn’t it exquisite?” she murmured at last.

“Yes,” I said, and meant more.

“It’s only the second time I’ve seen it, you know, I mean, for real. The first time was eight years ago when I came to Earth for school.”

“You were born on Mars, weren’t you? Someone told me.”

“Yes. At Bradbury.”

“You must be glad to rid yourself of Earth’s extra gravity.”

She smiled at me. “Oh, yes, but it made me very strong. I shall be an Amazon back home!” She laughed, softly and delicately, flipping back a wing of long black hair. “Have you been to my planet before, Mr. Braddock?” I shook my head. “Then you will not know at what to point, will you?”

I raised a fist slowly, and slowly a finger swung out from it to point at her. She laughed lightly once again, and asked, “Am I now famous?”

“You are noticed.”

Slowly, with a smile twitching at her mouth, she raised her own small fist, and staring at it instead of me, as if her hand were something apart, she slowly pointed a finger at me. Then she looked along the path of the finger and seemed astonished at what she found.

“By the sword and shield of Ares,” she said solemnly, “I do believe I have noticed someone.”

We sat there a moment with our fingers pointing at each other, then she said, “I was told it was impolite to point.” She closed her fist with a *pop* of her mouth and I made a show of putting my fist into a holster.

“Nova Sunstrum,” I said.

“Diego Braddock,” she said, just as solemnly.

We watched the Earth for awhile, then I asked, “Will you be happy to be getting back?” I thought the question banal, but wanted to

continue the conversation.

“Oh, yes. It has been so long, even though I got tapes on almost every ship. Mars is really growing up fast, almost too fast. There are farms now where there was only desert. An atmosphere is forming. The air of Earth seemed so heavy and thick and filled with stink. The air at home will be cold, but clean.”

She leaned back in her chair, and I couldn't decide if the display of the richness of her body was consciously bold or innocently naive. She sighed, and the only other sounds were the faint hum from deep within the asteroid, transmitted through the rock, and the beeps and clicks of the read-outs on the repeater console before us.

Slowly her face changed expression and a shy smile formed on her lips. There was something about her look that sent the warning signals up. Without looking at me she said, “Do you desire me?” Then her eyes swiveled towards me, dark and slanted.

I waited a beat and nodded, carefully. “Of course. You are beautiful. And . . . my type.” I made a gesture with my hand. “If you are as much a woman inside as outside . . .” I left it unfinished.

“I am a *type*, then?”

“Everyone's a type. Some types we respond to, for whatever reasons, and others we do not.”

“Many men have desired me,” she said.

“Yes, I'm sure, but you need not cite testimonials.” Her smile broke wide and she moved in a very self-aware and sensuous manner. “Then you will protect me?”

I sighed. “Protect you? From men? From the others? Why? You are grownup, a woman, a citizen.”

“I'm tired of being groped,” she said. “I grew up on Mars, with space all around. Living on Earth was living in a box. I always felt confined, pressured. I had so little personal space.” She looked sad now. “I'm so damned tired of it. I want to get home.” She looked up at me again, through her fall of dark hair. “Perhaps if I were, you know, with you, there would not be so much pressure.”

“You desire a champion, my lady? If there were some zongo aboard who *really* wanted you I might be ‘accidented’ to death some dark watch, or find that I had taken a walk on the outside of this pebble without a suit. So would any other man who was foolish enough to try and ‘protect’ you.”

She looked at me angrily and sat up straight, sticking out her chest. “You desire me, but you wouldn't even try to protect me?” She made a rude sound and slumped back, and her long black hair flowed over her shoulders and fell before her face in a black waterfall.

“There were no serious fights when I came to Earth in the *Armstrong*,” she said, “but I was only sixteen then. I am . . . different now.”

“You must have had fun trying out your powers on Earth,” I said with a grin. She blew air at me but did not look. “Granted, the trips now aren't like the old days when they were seven, eight times longer. But even a month in space . . . Well, for example, what would happen if you were to smile at just one crewman, the same crewman, every day?”

She tossed back her hair and looked proudly at me. “He would

fall madly in love with me,” she said casually. “They always do.”

“And that’s the trouble. On Earth, on Luna, perhaps even on Mars, we would not all be confined together, in enforced intimacy, without privacy, stepping on each other’s territory. Even in those massive city-buildings, even in the most crowded archo, we would not be so contained. This is a sealed environment. You, me, everyone, must act in a responsible manner. You do not cry fire in a crowded sensorium.”

She tossed her head and looked down at the crescent of vanishing Earth. “You sound like Primrose or Billinger, my teachers, the old wallabies. Live up to your responsibilities, dear. Act your age. Don’t make waves. What do they know of life, those wizened hags?” She sat up again, defiantly throwing out her ample chest, the lovely heritage of her Scandinavian ancestors. “I’ve spent *years* being controlled by others. Teachers, security people who knew what was best for me, my father’s factors, the people at the bank. I ran away sometimes, catching hell when they traced me.”

She looked at me moodily. “I thought you would be fun to be with. You look powerful and just a little deadly and as though you know a lot, but you are just dried *munga* like the others! ‘Don’t be like that, dear!’ ‘Behave yourself, Nova.’ ” She rose and stood over me, unsteady in the light gravity, the wet-like fabric swirling, glimmering in the faint cold Earthlight and the reddish glow from the heater.

“I will not trouble you. There will not be trouble. I am not promiscuous.”

“Perhaps it would be better if you were,” I said. “It’s when one or a few hog all the goodies that the revolutions start.”

“I—!” She left it unsaid and turned to sit down abruptly. The calm, cool woman of the world had disappeared again. What I was seeing was the protected daughter of wealth, used to the power of her beauty and personality, aching to break loose into the imagined joys of freedom, and unsure of both self and world.

Then very slowly I saw the return of that mood. Her face changed from the stern and unmoving to the serene and elegant. The posture slowly softened and she seemed more at ease.

At last she again turned her gaze toward me. Before she had a chance to speak I said, “I like you better when you are playing the Queen of Outer Space.”

She blinked and then broke into laughter and fell back against the cushioned couch. I liked her laughter, for it was full and unrestrained, and she could laugh at herself. Then she sobered and propped herself up, flipping back her long dark hair.

“You!” she said accusingly, her lips fighting a smile. “How do you know I am *not* the Queen of Space?”

I grinned at her. “I don’t. If anyone is qualified, you are . . . your majesty.”

“Well, I could be,” she said. “If Mars becomes free my father could be king.”

“You will be old and surrounded by grandchildren before Mars is terraformed and independent enough to stand alone. Don’t make it sound as if Mars were being ground under the heel of the Terran oppressors. You get more than your share.”

Her shoulders slumped. "Boy, you're just no fun at all. I paint a pretty little fantasy and you rip it down. It would have been ever so nice to think that I might one day be the Queen of Mars."

I shrugged. "There isn't much romance in a democracy, is there? No twin princes, no princesses stolen by gypsies, no men locked in iron spacesuits, no sudden revelations about lockets given at birth, no mistresses of the king dictating policy in bed . . ."

"You are still mocking me."

"Yes, I am. I apologize." The words were out before I thought. *Brian Thorne never apologized.* Not in words, anyway. People would think it a sign of weakness or indecision. It was nice not to have to be a robber baron all the time.

"Go to bed and dream of the ancient Martians," I said. "They rose from their dusty tombs and entered you at birth. The last royal princess, Xotoly the Fifteenth, is within you, guiding you. One day the chrysalis of this mortal flesh shall split and the first of the *new* Martian royalty shall be born!" Her eyes were shining and her lips parted.

"Great butterfly wings of gossamer dreams shall flutter again under the twin moons," I said dramatically. "The ghosts of the distant, unknown past will gather around you, merging with those present, and they shall carry you to that hidden, ancient, untouched vault of time and mystery, where the long-dead lords of Mars made their sacrifices to the ageless gods, those gods that now sleep beneath the red sands. Mars will grow green again. The canals will flow with clear, life-giving water. The walls and battlements of olden times will rise, greater than before, and the curious barbicans will stand guard. There will be feasts of old wine and fresh fruit, there will be entertainments and marvels, and honors given.

"There will be you, in the glittering jeweled robes of the queen . . . Nova the First, the Queen of Mars . . ."

There was a long pause as she stared at me in wonder. "My god," she said softly. "You are totally *mad!*" She jumped up and threw herself into my lap, hugging me and laughing. She pulled back, looking at me, her eyes sparkling, her mouth a tongue's length away.

My hands were on her bare, smooth arms and I pulled her to me. She came without resisting, her face softening, her eyes closing. We kissed softly, without passion, but with a gentleness and a quiet loving.

After a very long time she moved away slightly and said huskily, "I did not give you permission to approach the throne. . ."

"I always was a rebel," I said and brought her close for another kiss. It was longer and grew more intense. With a sudden low growl Nova grabbed me tighter and our kiss became hunger, and I responded.

Then, after a long moment, she pulled back and looked at me with great seriousness, her dark, slanted eyes searching my face. Then with a kind of brisk, businesslike move she nodded, pushed herself out of my lap and started putting on her suit. I helped her and we did not say anything at all.

We floated up as she thrust herself into the bulky suit, and I buttoned up. Then she grabbed the edge of the hatch, grinned at me, slapped her faceplate shut, and hit the lock control. We went out and down the laser-cut passage, dipping and dodging like dolphins, laughing and grabbing at each other. We seized a line just in time to brake down

and we reentered the central core in relative sobriety.

Mine was the closer cabin, but there was Pelf, so we went on to Nova's. She shared it with a nurse who rarely slept there, and it was on Nova's narrow bunk that we first made love.

No two sexual encounters are exactly alike. Each couple has its interpersonal relationships spelled out in a different set of positions, a different sequence and rhythm, different "body English" and different words from the last couple and, indeed, from the last coupling of the same couple. Each orgasm rockets through the mind uniquely, caroming off memories and senses and fantasies in a different way each time.

From the first Nova and I found that we *fit*. Not just the plumbing, nor the silent agreement of position or choice of act, but the time and place, the pace, the mood, whether gently and loving or frenetic and demanding. There are times when you *make love* and there are times when you *fuck*. We seemed attuned to one another in this and responded wordlessly, for words were not needed, nor would they be adequate.

One of the things I had learned the hard way, but that Nova seemed to understand instinctively was that each person has only his or her kind of love to give, not your own kind. I felt fortunate that the kinds that we gave each other were so alike.

I also had learned that you cannot love a person all the way unless the way was open. What is better to do than love, to be in love, or even to anticipate love?

Love is ego turned inside out, but there must be time spent between loves. I had spent that time wildly and foolishly, and now it was another time. It was time to be the royal escort to the Queen of Mars, by appointment, Lover to the Princess Nova, to be Brian and Nova, perhaps even to be BrianandNova, NovaandBrian.

I must admit she did a fine job of keeping the various proNova factions from exploding. It had been our conceit that it took the other passengers two weeks to find that we were sleeping together, but perhaps lovers are the last to know that others know. To keep the others from becoming too jealous, she spent much of her time dancing and smiling and dining with other men, from the Captain to the lowest rating. Naturally, that drove me crazy, an emotion I found both foreign and degrading. *Brian Thorne would never have gotten jealous*. But I was Diego Braddock.

The month was both short and long. It seemed, in one way, as though we were suddenly there, and yet, in another, it was a long trip because so much happened.

Plump Miss Blount had *affaires de coeur* with the ranking Marine, with the ship's Number Two, and with the wispy little technician she would become engaged to by trip's end. One of the nurses was the subject of a duel between a crewman and one of the Marines. The Marine won and was court-martialed.

There was considerable bed-hopping, which was to be expected, and I felt fortunate in having to deck only two men, a torch-watcher who jumped me and damned near killed me, and the biologist, who had named a variant strain of *Glycine soja* the *Nova* in hopes of attracting her attention. He went zongo during a quiet party in

the lounge and was sedated for the remainder of the journey.

It was Nova's own sweet nature that kept most of the men at bay, and she handled any problems with grace and tact. It is always better to have the woman at least attempt to smooth over ruffled egos. It leaves everyone in a better mood than the aftermath of any violence. I hardly think violence shows an inner strength, but tact and mildness should not be considered weakness, either.

Other things happened as well, like passing close to a robot ore ship on the long, cheap, slow route to Earth orbit, and having a fine look at a phenomenal solar flare. Nothing spectacular, but they broke the monotony of space travel.

Nova and I did not involve ourselves much with the ship's passengers and crew, although there were numerous organized activities that kept the passengers from being idle. At first we were invited to join a handball team, or to go to one of Miss Blount's gourmet dinners, but soon the invitations dwindled as we politely declined again and again.

Most of the time we explored one another. Nova showed an amazing knowledge of Martian archaeology. "I played in the Star Palace as a child, and sat on the throne in the Great Hall, playing Queen of Mars to Georgie's Grand Vizier and Sabra's Counterqueen. I was just a baby, practically, when *Martian Explorations* made all the big finds. Evans used to put me up on his lap and we'd go over the holos together. I used an emerald crystal from the Palace for a paperweight."

"Where do you think the Martians went, or what happened to them?" I asked.

"They ran their cycle, I suppose. They grew up, matured, aged, went senile, and died. Like every other race. Where are the Assyrians, the Maya? Ragged remnants absorbed into other cultures, only on Mars there is no other, absorbent culture. So they died off, like the dinosaurs, the tigers, the musk ox . . ."

"What about all those legends of supermartians developing into creatures of pure energy?"

"Legends. *Human* legends. Human wish-fulfillment, like creating God in their image so they could understand him. Maybe they're right, maybe the Secret Knowledge Foundation has a lock on the truth. With about thirty galaxies for every human being on Earth there is room enough for almost anything," she said.

"And that's in *this* universe."

"Oh, concepts like that are just unreal! It would take a mind or a computer or something much bigger than mine to comprehend more than *one* universe. Even the idea of black holes popping out of space-as-we-know-it and popping back in as quasars is something very difficult to understand."

"If it's true," I said, "then it's comforting to know there *is* an outside and an inside. If there's an 'outside' then there *might* be another universe. If there's *another*, there might be universii."

"There's no such word, Diego."

"I was just checking your alertness. How about universia?"

"No, Diego. The idea of black holes popping out and in is scary. What would happen if there were too many holes punched? The whole thing might fall apart!"

“Quick! This is a job for Captunnnn Laserrr! Planetary catastrophes averted, holocausts under cost, evil beings from OuterWherever vanquished and captured, universes saved. Three FTL ships, no waiting, no out-of-town checks, first come, first saved.”

“Oh, *Diego*. . .”

The time I spent with Nova was instructive, delightful, satisfying, joyous, ecstatic, and quite mind-warping.

I knew I was falling in love, and the great trap to that has always been that you rarely fight it. Once you start, you don’t want to stop. I had a woman who interested me and the time to get know her.

I must confess to a little conceit here. As “Brian Thorne” it was very unusual for me *not* to obtain the woman of my desires. Money, fame, and charm are great aphrodisiacs. But as “Diego Braddock” I felt it was *I* who earned the love of Nova Sunstrum, and I could not have been more pleased.

I told her I loved her in the middle of the second week; it was the first time I had used that phrase since Madelon. Saying it comes easy to some men, but it has never come easily to my lips. Some men say it and believe it, at least for the moment, or say it cynically, knowing its falseness, but believing it to be something the other person wants to hear. I have never said it except honestly, an Nova was only the third woman to whom I had said it.

She was naked in my arms, cuddled in her narrow bunk, when I said it. She pulled back to look up at me, her face serious and concerned. She studied me searchingly, and for a fleeting moment I thought that perhaps I had done the one thing she would not want, that I had somehow ended a “game” whose rules I did not know, doing the one forbidden thing that our days of lovemaking, of learning and laughter, would not permit.

Then she opened her lips and said the words back to me and the fear dissolved, and the joy burst over both of us. We made love in a burst of frenetic delight that left us speechless, exhausted, and very happy.

Sexually, it was as if every *thing*, every *time*, was the first time. There was a freshness to her, a vitality, and at times, great insight. She had both innocence and wisdom; she was pixie and earth mother. She seemed instinctively to have the skills and erotic ingenuity of the Great Whore of Babylon, yet there was no coarseness or hardness.

For a man like me, jaded by a thousand superb bodies and artfully acquired skills, it was like being reborn. To do the same old things for the first time was a miracle of the mind. I had been spoiled by women, sometimes lovingly, always knowingly, for their own reasons or for the best of reasons, but those who counted most—Suzanne, Gloria, Michele, Louise, Vincene, and, of course, Madelon—had ruined me for the others.

There were those with finer bodies, greater eyes, bedroom skills of amazing versatility, fast, shrewd minds, and an inner toughness like steel. Sometimes I thought there was a secret factory someplace that bred those sleek creatures like thoroughbreds, with genetic star lines and platoons of stylish teachers, a faculty of clever predators that trained these women and sent them out. They were a familiar type to every man

of riches, supple-bodied beauties with brilliant minds. The dumb but beautiful ones were weeded out at the lower levels, with corporation presidents and big algae farmers and entertainment executives. The smart ones, the really smart ones, kept rising. They were the women I met almost daily, sometimes accidentally, sometimes by artfully arranged means, designed to show them off to the best advantage. Some even had managers, and always lawyers.

It got so you didn't care. They all wanted out of the mass, and if one was a good example of a type you wanted, you bought her. A simple business deal, no matter how gracefully put. Sometimes the two of you never discussed it, letting it all be handled by lawyers or expeditors.

But Nova was different. That each love is different, that it is somehow hand-made each time, is the conceit of all lovers. Or perhaps it was that Diego Braddock was different from Brian Thorne. As Braddock, as Howard Scott Miles, as Waring Brackett, as Andrew Garth, I had pursued and won the attention of certain women. But in the secret room in the back of my mind there was always the thought that somehow they *knew* I was Brian Thorne.

Perhaps it was the going to Mars that made me leave that room behind, and the thoughts with it. It didn't matter. Maybe I just wanted not to carry that burden of a large question mark. There was a fine feeling of freedom to being someone *other* than Brian Thorne, just as sometimes there was a fine feeling *being* Brian Thorne.

But the simple matter was that I wanted to be in love with someone. I wanted to be in love, not in lust. The time was right, the woman was right, and I was ready.

What a strange world it is when whim is made of steel, when chance seems like destiny, when mood diverts a life. But it is the way of life. You are a leaf upon a river and come rapids or quiet pool, you go down the river. You, the Lord Leaf, proudly declaim your free will, your freedom of choice, your powerful ambitions, and everything changes when the current shifts.

We sat in our favorite nook, the observation blister, looking at the stars. "I have always hoped they would invent a time machine," I said.

"Which direction would you go?"

"Back. It's the only direction I know. I'm going ahead anyway, without a time machine. There are things, I'd like to do."

"Save Joan of Arc? Kennedy? Lincoln?"

"Oh, those are interesting enough, but what I'd really like to do is go back to, oh, 1888, 1889. Probably to a field of sunflowers in Arles. I would go buy a few paintings from a mad and wonderful painter. I wouldn't tell him how famous he would get, or how valuable his work would be, in effect, and even in money. That might ruin him faster than absinthe and madness, faster than loneliness. But I'd like to talk to him and encourage him in the only way artists need encouragement, by buying his work.

"All artists have more than enough *words* given them, what they need is some tangible, pragmatic help. Maybe van Gogh wouldn't go insane so quickly, or even at all. Think of the paintings we would have!"

"You might go to Tahiti," Nova said, "and save the Gauguins that were burned. Or the library at Alexandria."

"Yes, true. But van Gogh is . . . my friend. He has touched me across the years as few others have, the poor, mad, son-of-a-bitch."

"He is always the example people use to point out how misunderstood their work is," Nova said. "He sold one painting in his lifetime, and on top of that they thought him mad, he thought himself mad, he *went* mad. They shut him away in the funny place, too. All that."

I smiled and said, "Oh, I know it is very selfish of me, but I don't care. Imagine spending a few weeks in Arles, seeing Vincent go out at dawn and come back at dusk with a painting, two paintings! My god, what a thrill! Talking art all evening with Gauguin and van Gogh, watching Vincent paint at night, making the stars like those out there, come into swirling life!"

"Fantasy time," Nova grinned.

"Maybe I could take those broke bastards up to Paris and we could see what the others are doing. Poor, broken, drunk Lautrec, who used to walk with his fellow painters, then stop to point out some sight with his cane, and discourse on it, because his stunted, pain-spiked legs needed the rest. Cezanne once cut out a bowl of fruit from a larger painting and traded it for food because that is the only part someone wanted."

"Maybe helping them would be the worst thing you could do," Nova said.

"Yes, I know that. People like Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, that drunk Utrillo, they don't really need help, not enough to screw around with history. But van Gogh . . . to add a year to his life would have added perhaps a hundred paintings! What a treasure! For that I would meddle. Probably along near the end, where if I did something wrong, the loss in paintings wouldn't be too much. But, oh, how I would *love* to do it!"

"Romantic!"

"Yea verily and say it thrice!" I sighed. "Sorry, Vincent," I said to the stars, "I was born a bit too late to help."

We were in her bunk, with Nova turned away from me, quietly resting from a rather prolonged period of loving exploration. I put my hand on her hip, feeling the bone beneath the flesh, and the curve of the waist. I moved my hand and took a full-handed feel of her buttock and really *felt* the great dome of flesh, the texture of skin, the flex and movement of the underlying muscle. It felt different now than it had a few minutes before, as I cupped both hemispheres in the frenzy of orgasm. The skin there was different, different from the skin of her lower leg or her breasts.

I ran my fingers up the long groove of her spine, feeling the knobs beneath. then down again to lightly touch the dimples that flaked the spine at the top of her rounded buttocks.

My hand cupped a full breast and she snuggled back against me, murmuring softly, pressing her body to mine. I felt the weight and curving richness within my hand, and I felt the intimacy of it and her nipples, slowly hardening in my palm.

My hand slid down the flat, taut stomach to caress the warm

furrow below and she tilted her head back with a sigh, her eyes closed and her lips parted. She smiled and said, "Strike while the mind is hot."

"I love you," I said.

"I know," she said.

The first thing I had noticed about Nova was her beauty. Then I saw her *beauty*. The carriage, the awareness of self and others, the alertness, the poise, even in one so young, was phenomenal. Granted, beautiful women can more easily come to poise when they see, directly, how insecure most people are.

But noticing her physical beauty first and *her* second does not make me a shallow person. It means that was her most obvious asset, and the facet I saw first. Unless we know something of a person in advance, that is always the thing we notice first, the way they look and act. I often meet beautiful women and have discarded perfectly fine ladies that others might die for. It doesn't mean that I am insensitive or strange, it just means they were not the right woman for me, or the right woman at the right time. Searching for and hopefully finding the *right* person with whom to share your life takes up a great deal of one's time and attention. Usually we settle for bits and pieces from a lot of different people.

Bernstein, in a profile in *Fortune*, said that I tend to judge things aesthetically first, including women, and noted that I seemed to exclude men from this aesthetic judgement. She was correct in that, but in a world that openly admits and even encourages bi-sexuality, I was simply not interested in the physical aspects of men, not as long as there were women around, at least.

I have seldom cared what other people thought was beautiful. If their tastes agreed with mine, fine. If not, so what? If I thought a woman was beautiful in any way, then she was beautiful, and it didn't matter what others thought. I had learned early that I had the courage of my convictions, at least about beauty, and that others often simply followed the trends, followed the mass, accepting the standards of others.

But physical beauty, or lack of it, is usually the first thing we do notice about anyone, whether we call it by that name or another. If we have advance notice, whether by reputation or pictures or a body of work, or some other thing, we form opinions, then try to adjust those prior opinions to the individual we actually meet. Unfortunately, having clay feet is a very human condition.

I have noticed that reputations are often undeserved, incomplete, or an image, as seen and "known" by others, to have little bearing on reality, so I try to keep that in mind when encountering the reputations of others.

Forming an opinion from the work of someone you do not know can also be a dangerous pastime. I know writers of virile, popular, fast-action stories who are physical cowards and dull plods. I know noble appearing politicians who are all front, the mouthpieces of the interests who own them. I know writers of sensitive prose and monumental insight who have petty, cruel, insensitive streaks. I know drunken slob sculptors, atheist ministers, homosexual he-men, frigid glamour queens, and horny priests. I know actors whose Don Juan

reputation covers their impotence. I know quiet, shy, schoolteachers who are hell in bed. I know startlingly beautiful women, envied by all, who do not think they are at all pretty, and believe people are lying to them.

But as I talked to Nova, first in that observation blister, then everywhere, I was very aware of her womanliness, of her early explorations with the power of that beauty. But she seemed to be finding her way through the mysterious accident of her beauty, discovering the parameters so that she might stabilize herself. She did not seem to be using it for any dictatorial power over others. Her self-confidence in her ability to handle a shipload of men was based on inexperience, not egotism.

As I came to know her mind as well as her voluptuous body, I found her constantly inquiring, eternally interested, and rarely bored. I saw her turn the near-rape by a torch tech into an hour-long lecture by him on the delicate balances that must be maintained in the magnetic bottle so that it works and so that they can open one end of the bottle and let out bits of the sun contained within. She left him glowing, proud of himself, very flattered that she was interested, and a little surprised at himself that his erection had gone away.

The more I knew of Nova the more there was to know.

What greater praise is there?

6

Despite difficulties we all survived, except the crewman who lost the duel, which was played up beyond belief in the vidpress on Earth. The rather plain nurse was dubbed *The Temptress in White* and given other lurid titles and became infamous and sought after.

The *Balboa* went into docking orbit and the shuttle came over from Phobos and took us down to Ares Center, the “capital” of Mars. The disk of Mars was a great tawny-red, brown, and slate globe and the only sign of life was *Elizabeth II* in parking orbit nearby. As we came down we could see the rectangular green fields around Polecanal, then the smudge of Grabrock and Northaxe. Over the pole, down the Rille, Grandcanal City was a dot on the night horizon as we settled down toward Ares Center.

Dawn on Mars.

Thin cold air, thin enough still to require airmasks and bottles despite the years of terraforming, cold enough, even in this “summer,” to necessitate warm suits. Great long rolling sandy stretches, with the soft ellipses of ancient craters and the abrasive grit of the sand getting into everything.

Dawn on Mars.

The rosy light was soft on the side of the shuttle. The last of the passengers disembarked and went beyond the pink cement wall until the ship had lifted off to go back for the cargo. “Come on,” Nova said, “this way.”

We huddled against the blowing sand caused by the ship's takeoff and angled across to the fusion-powered carrier that awaited us. A big-chested man in a patched blue warm suit took one look and jumped off to embrace Nova warmly.

"Nova! Damned if you haven't grown up to be the most beautiful thing I ever—!" He saw me, obviously with her and just as obviously annoyed. He looked from me to her and back again, his face friendly but ready to go either way.

"Johann, this is Diego Braddock. Johann Tarielovich. He's a sort of . . . uncle."

The big man hugged her to him and grinned at me. "Any man a girl calls an uncle will never be anything but a friend, I'm sorry to say." He stuck out a hand, then drew it back and pulled off a glove. I took it, my fingers chilly, and found him carved from icerock.

His eyes went quickly from my face to hers, again scanning for information. Then he grunted, nodded wisely, then shook his head. "Come on, *doch*, climb aboard before we freeze these cleanboots!"

"Dvígat, dvígat!" he snapped at the last two aboard. "Move!" He hopped into the seat and motioned Nova next to him. I sat in the back, next to a Marine who was already cursing his assignment, oblivious to the wonders of being on another planet.

On another planet.

On Mars.

I grinned to myself and scanned the horizon for John Carter as we bumped over the road toward the bubble complex of Ares Center, thinking that those first explorers had not forgotten the heritage of their youth. Since a few things had been named by astronomers, some were named for what happened, like Touchdown, where the first ship landed. Some were named for the way they looked, like Redrock and Mano Rojo and Icemountain. One place was optimistically named because someplace on this planet *had* to be named that, but so far Marsport was a tiny outpost with only a small landing field.

Pride of discovery had made early explorers pretty well ignore the fancy Latin names like Mare Hadtriacum and Syrtis Major and Amazonis and just use those labels they thought they had a right to affix.

Wells.

Bradbury, where they discovered the great Star Palace.

Grandcanal City, which had no canal.

Burroughs, with some of the finest relics and walls yet found.

The Rille, Grabrock, and Northaxe, where they found that most ancient of archaeological finds.

In a range of mountains named after John Carter what could you call the first mine of rare crimson diamonds but the *Dejah Thoris*?

Arlington Burl, who had been on the *Balboa* with us, had named his twin mines Enyo, goddess of battle, and Eris, goddess of discord, who have been described as sister, mother, wife, and daughter of Ares. His sons, Phobos and Deimos, gods of tumult and terror, fly overhead.

But too much fantasy can blind you to reality. A hard bump threw me against Pelf, who had not annoyed me especially on the trip once I became involved with Nova. He grinned, and shoved me back helpfully. I nodded my thanks and squinted against the dust toward the

domes and towers of Ares Center ahead. Newly manufactured air from the fusion torch's mass accelerator poured out of the stack, creating a permanent wind that flowed away in every direction, spreading the new atmosphere over the planet. But my mind was not on the terraforming project, but that nagging concern about Pelf that I couldn't shake. I still felt that Pelf was spying on me, but perhaps he spied on *everyone*. I have grown used to being spied on, directly and indirectly, electronically and by computer-directed dossiers that are supposed to predict my future performance by past records. I have grown used to it but I have never liked it. I had erected a wall between us a month long and higher than he could jump. I was hoping it would hold.

We trundled into the long, segmented zone and I noticed how skillful they had gotten with the sand-silicon sprayfoamed over the complex of balloon structures. The lock cycled and we went on into the oldest dome, now chipped and discolored, but kept serviceable. Johann pulled up to the largest structure in the center of the dome, a four-story building of rosy blocks of fused sand. Most of the older buildings were built in a similar fashion.

"Here you are," he said, killing the engine. "I'll go back out and fetch your cargo when they land it," he added. Several men in worn warm suits and one in a shiny new one came out of the building and approached us. Some were known by my fellow passengers and there was a general conversation, hubbub, chaos, and party. Nova was snatched away and wondered at and kissed and hugged and lusted after and passed from one man to another or snatched away with good natured desire to be marveled over.

Johann stood nearby, thumbs stuck in his harness belt, admiring Nova as she laughed and kissed the welcoming throng. From time to time I felt him eyeing me and at last our eyes met.

He nodded his head toward Nova. "She certainly grew up fast and fine." I agreed, waiting impatiently for her to return to me. Johann dug into one of his zippered pockets and pulled out a pouch, offering me a pinch of what I recognized as *Cannabis sativa Ares III*, which was fantastically expensive on Earth. I shook my head and thanked him. I intended to keep all my original impressions clear. Time enough to stretch my senses when I wished to explore other aspects of this world.

Two slightly drunken men in pale blue warm suits were carrying Nova around on their shoulders and she was yelling at them happily. On the backs of their warm suits there was stitched a large red sunburst with a golden apple in the center.

I ignored Johann's continued inspection of me, and I don't think even Raeburn's computers ever dissected me more deeply. I simply waited until Nova would be "mine" again, though I may not have waited with very good grace. Jealousy was a surprising emotion and I resented being surprised.

Finally Nova writhed back down to the ground and broke free, running to me, flushed and happy. She pulled me forward to introduce me to a group of what the vidtabs are fond of calling *Nuvomartians*. They were none too enthusiastic, especially with Nova hanging on my arm, but they restricted their reaction to glances among themselves.

I shook hands with Iceberg Eddie, D'Mico, Endrace, Big Ivan,

and Little Ivan. I had my hand mauled by Kum Ling, Jalisco, and a hulking solemn brute named—or perhaps engraved—Aleksandrovich. There were others, and latecomers, the names all in a muddle, some happy, some resentful, some undecided, some sour, but most of them civil enough in welcoming me.

As everyone was going back through the lock in bunches I lost Nova to the newest group and found myself flanked by Johann and Endrace.

“What do you think of Mars so far?” Endrace asked me.

“I’m not certain I’m welcome,” I said.

“Oh, hell, don’t you worry too much,” Endrace said. “If Nova decided on one of us there would be fifteen sanders who might figure he wasn’t good enough for her and sandplug him some dark night. But an outsider, well, you’re not one of us so we don’t have to fight each other.”

“Just me, huh?” He grinned at me and we passed into the lock, which was needed only to hold the slightly higher Earth-norm pressure inside. “But you might lose Nova to an outsider.”

“Hell, amigo, she’s the Princess of Mars, didn’t you know that? No sandblasted rock grubber is good enough for her, anyway. Just got to be some visiting prince or other, in the end.”

“Has she been hearing that Princess of Mars stuff since she was a child, from all of you?”

“It seems that way. Her daddy started calling her Princess, the way fathers do, I guess, and it sort of spread, her being so damned pretty and all. She was always really bright and everyone was only too happy to show her stuff, take her places. It just sort of became her way, you know? It keeps most of these hardrock diggers from getting out of line. But if one of them ever did act a bit zongo toward her, there would always be four or five of us willing to converse with him about the error of his ways.”

I stepped out of the lock and felt the higher pressure. I looked at Johann and asked, “Will there be four or five of you coming to have a talk with me some moonless night?”

He grinned and Endrace grinned. “Hardly without a moon up there, compadre, but not much moonlight.” He scratched his jawline and he and Endrace exchanged looks. Johann looked back at me and his grin sort of melted away, into another sort of smile. “I don’t just know yet what we might have to talk to you about.”

The others were already ahead of us, strung out through the streets that curved around the inner domes and other structures. Overhead was the big geodesic main dome, and through the milky, sandblasted triangles I could see the adjoining domes. Already we were being joined by more of the citizens of the Martian capital city, some sober, some not. They surrounded the new nurses and other ladies and some even talked to a few of the men. The Marines were collected by an officer and reluctantly left us.

Johann pointed out some of the local sights—Fosatti’s Emporium, the Sword and Shield Pub, the Grand Martian Hotel, the Royal Bar, and Cluster’s. I kept trying to catch up with Nova, or at least keep her in sight.

But the sights of Mars kept getting my attention, little things as

well as big. There were sand slab walls, rough and uneven, slightly shiny from the plastic that had been pressure-impregnated into them, and the fine mica flakes. These formed many of the topless, flatsided structures within the dome. The inner domes, most with airlocks for safety, were the standard rockfoam construction.

Some of the walls were laser-cut from harder rock, and here and there, imbedded in the sandstone, were museum-quality artifacts, fossils, and sliced rosestones. I saw several weathered carvings in deeper pink and dusty red, as blurred as old coins, alien and indecipherable.

But, of course, *everything* Martian was of museum quality simply because of its novelty and rarity. We stopped momentarily at the Royal Bar; the back wall was a single massive slab of petrified fiber, carved with a convoluted design that could have been purely decorative, the Martians' Eleven Commandments, a political ad, or a shopping list. It was beautiful, but unreadable.

I kept falling further behind diverted by these distractions. By the time I got to middome there was no one close to me, so I stopped to stare, the complete tourist. At the intersection of three narrow streets curving in around the oldest inner domes stood a pylon of ancient rock too big to transport back to Earth, even if the nuvomartians would allow it. It was an object familiar to almost every Earthling. I stopped in amazement, startled and delighted, although I had known it was here someplace.

I let the last of the celebrating miners and others go on down the street, their arms around the laughing nurses. Temporarily, I forgot Nova, for I had found the Colossus of Mars.

That's what it is called, although it isn't that big. Only five meters high, it gives the effect of something huge. It's deep rust-red, its original form melted by time and weather. It stands like a huge shrouded figure, vaguely humanoid, vaguely alien, vaguely anything you care to read into it.

It just *had* to be a representation of an intelligent being, not an abstract carving or a natural formation. There was too much authority, too much "presence" for it to be anything but a portrait or an inspired representation of an ideal.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

Nova was leaning against the light brown wall of a warm suit factory, her hands behind her, watching me look at it.

"I thought you went with the others." She shook her head and smiled. I looked up at the graceful spire of rock that had been carved, experts told us, twenty thousand years before the Egyptians raised Khufu's pyramid. It graced the cover of half the books about Mars, *in situ* usually, with the thick walls of the Grand Hall behind it, half buried in drifting sand.

I reached out and touched it. It was cool and smoothed by the thin winds, yet sensuous under my fingers. The convoluted rills of what had to be drapery but just as easily could have been huge folded wings slid under my palm as I touched time itself.

A burst of distant laughter brought me back from wherever I had been. Already Brian Thorne was imagining what it would cost and how it might be taken back to Earth; but Diego Braddock was saying no, leave

it here. Leave all of the Martian finds here. If people want to see them let them come here. You don't put the Grand Canyon in a trailer and take it around to show.

I laughed at myself. Brian Thorne could afford to come here, but 99.9 percent of the world could not. Would they know what they saw if they saw it? Did *I* know what I saw? All my life I had been hearing the statements in the museums. "He was the crazy one, you know. Cut off his ear to give it to some (whisper!) *prostitute?*"

"Left his wife and family and went off to paint in the South Pacific, he did. But look at him! Can't even paint the sand right. When Wilma and I were down there last year with Tahiti Tours we took some stereos of what it *really* looks like!"

"He was a sort of dwarf, you know. Drank something called absinthe that rots your brain like headpoppers."

"Old Pablo really had 'em all fooled, he did! They'd buy anything he put his name to!"

"The intrinsic value of the negative space is offset by the chromatic change in the positive area, as anyone can see. What the artist meant to say here, in this gray, undulating section, is that the innate nature of man is that of violence and self-defeat. In my opinion . . ."

"Isn't that cute?"

"I'd buy it if it was in blues. I like blue. Would go well with the new Lifestyle furniture, wouldn't it, honey?"

"My four-year-old robot can do *that* well!"

I shook my head. Probably some lice-ridden, fur-clad grump huddled in the Trois-Frères cave grumbled that Ogg was messing up the nice clean limestone walls with his scratchings, and anyway that didn't look a bit like Grunt, the Boar-Killer.

The Colossus of Mars.

I looked up at it again. *I think you're safe from that great devourer of art, Brian Thorne.*

Nova took my hand. "C'mon, everyone's going to the Redplanet Inn."

I raised my eyebrows. The Redplanet Inn was the most notorious restaurant, gambling hall, hotel, and whorehouse in over forty-eight million miles.

"Oh, come on. Everyone goes there."

I went with her down the street, past several assay offices, a sandcat repair shop, and a Bureau of Martian Affairs office. We went through a lock and into another dome, a sort of vast parking lot for sandcats, capsule trailers, big-wheeled prime movers, digger gear, and scooters. In the center was a repair complex and spare parts storage. Nova took me along the left wall, curving around toward a side lock.

I looked at the battered, tough little vehicles and saw one lettered *Nova III* sitting between *Uschi Luv* and *Le Zombie*. Further on I saw *Miss Nova* neatly lettered on a big Caterpillar gouger. The whole left side had been sandblasted down to the bare metal but the name had been carefully repainted.

Nova was indeed known in these parts.

There is something about certain machinery, certain tools, that is beautiful: A sculptor's mallet, the 1860 .44-caliber Army Colt, the

General Electronic C-model fusion plant, the World War II Jeep, the Randall version of the Bowie knife, the GM Lafitte Class torchship, the Colt .2 laser, certain racing cars, Shark-class personal submarines—all are beautiful examples of a merging of art and function. The rugged, bulging, functional Ford sandcat was one of those beauties. No artist designed it, no stylist smoothed over its features with a chocolate coating of thin steel and chrome striping. Few could afford to ship anything but the bare necessities this far, and already the cost of each sandcat was several times the cost of the most expensive scratch-built Sahara racer.

But they had turned out to be a triumph of unadorned beauty, generating a certain affection in their owners. They worked, they responded, they had personalities. Any craftsman knows what it is like to have the *right* tool for the right job, and the miners of Mars knew they had the right tool.

I dawdled behind Nova, inspecting personal modifications, enjoying touching the machines as much as I enjoyed touching a Henry Moore or a Gene Lamont. I saw Nova looking at me with a quizzical smile from the opened lock and I hurried after her.

All my life it has been difficult to explain to others that all art is not on museum walls or in concert halls. A freshly fallen leaf in the gutter, a tool worn to the hand of its user, reflections of a megalopolis in the mirrored side of a building, a distant archotolog pyramid against the sunset were all things that had pleased me as much as a Goya or Piranesi's fanciful engravings or *Turandot*. A cascade of blonde hair across a bare golden back or the esoterica washed up by the tide delighted me as much as a Praxiteles fragment or a performance of *Ten Worlds* by Kerrigan.

I suppose some of those things are not art, but beauty, and perhaps something becomes *art* only when it is touched by the hand or mind of man. But beauty is as much a part of man as his ugliness, his madness, his darkness. To me the ultimate beauty was that of the person, the completeness, not only the cosmetic exterior but the more important interior.

I had found it once in Madelon.

Was I close to it again?

The years of natural caution had prevented me from exposing myself beyond a certain point with Nova. Perhaps it was the secret of the Thorne-Braddock impersonation, perhaps it was the reluctance to once again be hurt. Perhaps it was everything, known and unknown.

I grinned and the dour thoughts that had flooded my mind melted away. "Nice," I said and patted a pockmarked sandcat. She made an expression that was in casual agreement but relegated it all to the everyday. I felt faintly patronized.

The next dome was a noisy one. It was not as large as the first dome, but it was more thickly populated. Various companies and guilds and unions operated "hotels" for their members and employees. Laser-cut letters in one immense sandblock wall announced to all it was the Martian Miners Union Hall and Hostel. Next to it, an imbedded mosaic of semiprecious stones proclaimed the Elysium Tripper. Three yellow-clad men lurched from the entrance as we passed, their faces flushed and their eyes dilated.

An incoherent growl of lust came from the biggest one, almost drowning out the redhead's "Well, hello there, pretty one!" They aimed for us and canted to the right, laughing.

"Haw, Nikolai, you can't navigate any better here than you can out on the Cimmerian!" The redhead laughed at the bigger man, whose face clouded as he pulled his gaze away from Nova's figure. He refocused on the laughing redhead and without warning he struck him by the ear with a meaty fist. The slighter man reeled and fell to one knee.

"Goddamn it, you salt flat romeo! That *hurt?*"

But Nikolai had Nova in his sights. Fresh from the sensory drugs that had aroused him but not satisfied him, he was ready for a woman. Any woman.

"Hold it, amigo," I said, stepping forward. A sudden bearlike arm swept me aside and I fell, my breath knocked out for a moment. I came to my feet to see her struggling in his grasp, her face more annoyed than frightened. I started forward and the third man, hitherto silent, flashed a blade at me.

Perhaps if I had thought I would have been killed. But I didn't think, I just responded. As Shigeta had trained me, I did not go into any predictable response of karate or kung fu, but rather the deceptive blend of many disciplines called *mazeru*, suitable for those who do not wish to completely devote their lives to learning one discipline. I was of the lowest grade, that of *gunjin*, or "soldier" class. I used my knee kick against the knife-man to propel myself at the hulking Nikolai.

I wrapped myself around his head, carrying him with me, rolling as we hit the ground. He came up with a roar, blocking the redhead who was lurching in toward me. I spun, getting Nikolai with a boot in the face and clipping the redhead with a *usui* blow that ruined his throat.

I heard Shigeta's voice. *Except for training or exhibition you never must fight. But if you must, fight to win. Combat is not polite conversation.*

The redhead was down, choking hoarsely. The knife-man was glaring at me, holding his kneecap. "You busted it, you goddamn tank thief!"

Nikolai was on his hands and knees, shaking his head. Blood from his smashed nose was dripping into the pinkish ground. I looked at Nova, who was looking at the three men. Her eyes came up to me with a kind of horror.

"They were just a little borracho. I could have handled them."

I gestured towards the ripped shoulder seam of her warmsuit. "Sure, you could."

The man with the broken kneecap was swearing at me. "You rusted crawler, you slipped your blessed latch! You fucked up my fucking *knee*, you dumb cleanboot!"

"Clear your core," I said to him. "Shut up and we'll get you a medic."

"We just wanted to play with the lady, goddamn it!"

"Maybe the lady didn't want to play," I said.

"You tumbled your gyro or something? Hurting a man like that?"

I didn't mention his knife. I gave Nikolai another look, then I went into the Elysium Tripper and spoke to the lean dispenser just inside.

I came back out and spoke to Nova. “A medic team will be over from Dome Eight in a few minutes.” She was on her knees trying to get the redhead to breathe easier. She gave me a venomous look.

“You could have killed them!”

I rolled my eyes upwards. “Come on,” I said, “let’s go to the Inn.”

“And leave them?” She shrugged away my suggestion and I became angry. One minute they’re trying to rape her and the next she’s being Florence Nightingale on Mars.

“Which way is it?” I asked. She waved an arm toward the noisiest part of the dome. Already a few drunken and curious bystanders were gathering.

“God bless,” one of them said as I shouldered past. “Nikolai and his grunts. I wonder if the Tolliver boys did it to ’em.”

The Redplanet Inn was the biggest structure I had yet seen on the planet. Only a few months younger than the oldest dome, it was older than I was and considerably more famous. A scandal when it was first constructed, it had become a legend simply because the independent nuvomartians wanted it there and to hell with the bluenoses back home. Earth had plenty of sex and entertainment places and computer-controlled roving bisexual professionals. Earth had tri-di sex shows, labor contracts that amounted to slavery in a vastly overpopped world, and specialists galore. Earth had “balancing salons” where men or women could “center” themselves by experiencing carefully applied amounts of everything from extreme pleasure to extreme masochism.

But all Mars had was the Redplanet Inn and others like it.

I can’t say I disapproved. Sex on Earth had become almost ritualistic, determinedly democratic, all-too-casual, and very, very zongo. They sold *everything* with sex, and if that wasn’t enough, the SensoryTrips provided anything you thought you might have missed. Even illegal pleasure-center brain probes were to be had, for a price.

There was something old-fashioned about the Inn. Or perhaps the word is timeless. There was direct and personal social intercourse. This was no Dial-A-Prostie service, impersonal and efficient as hell. “*Whirr-click!* 1.8-meter female, brunette, 101.6—60.96—81.44 centimeters, D-cup. Fellatio skill rating 12, as requested. Conversant with the Baroque Period and the subkingdom Embryophyta. B.A., Saskatchewan College of Erotic Arts. Minimum credit, period one, applied Account XL-7-4522-T-8733. *Whirr-click!* 2.1 meter male, blonde, 29 centimeter penis, Type 6 muscularity, Fornicon rating 11. Conversant with the Zorgasm Method, Early American Football, and interior decoration of the Plastiform Period. M.A., School for Creative Sexuality, Boston; B.A. from Climaxite. Minimum credit, periods one to five, applied Account GA-6-487-W-8990. *Whirr-click!*

As per request.

Just what you’ve always wanted. So perfect you keep buying more of them, trying variations. Pleasure units. Use and discard. “American Concubine, good morning!” Nymphetron, Inc. “Fille de Joie, salut, cherie!” Brutes, Unlimited. “Hello, handsome, here’s my card. I’m with the Adventuress Group.” The Wantons of the World, Ltd. “Fantasy Man, of New York and Paris.” Black Stud, Chicago. “Let us cater your

next affair . . .” Dial-A-Stud, ask for our catalogue of certified service men. “Perhaps you saw our ad on the telly . . .”

At the Redplanet Inn you took your chances. Paramour, Inc. was a few million miles away. The Oscar Wilde Society hadn’t been heard of here. Nymphomania was a word, not a corporation.

Johann thrust a mug of something bitter and alcoholic into my hand. He had his arm around a cheerful woman named Bettina, and they were laughing. Synthetic Martian panels ringed the main room, holding in the noise. The new arrivals were being toasted, especially the flush-faced women.

Hundreds of drama tapes had reconstructed the Inn, usually larger and gaudier than it was. Top vidstars portrayed the golden-hearted whores, with blossoming breasts and costumes of rich fabrics. Laser shootouts had cut the room to ribbons in a dozen adventures. Michael Tackett and Gregory Battle had faced down the heavies here. Margo Masters and Lila Fellini had leaned against various versions of the big bar, cut from a single slab of ruby-rock and polished to a high sheen.

It was *déjà-vu*, multiplied and overlaid.

I was halfway through my second drink of local top-pop when Nova came in. I heard the shouts before I saw her, and she let someone lift her to his shoulders only to be able to find me.

There was fire in her eyes.

“Wheaten just died,” she said. That had to be the redhead. “A good man gone because you had to play hero.”

“I—”

She turned and pushed through the crowd. A few heard, and I got some black looks. Johann put down his mug carefully. Without looking at me he asked about it and I told the story as objectively as I could.

He sighed and took a deep draft of the beer. “He asked for it. He changed a lot since Nova left. He’s been on Nikolai’s team for over two years and they’re a mean bunch. Damned near got thrown out of the Union because of the Planeta Rojo mine affair. Rough, but not nasty too often.” He paused and I felt his eyes on me. “All by yourself, huh?”

I felt foolish. I had never thought of myself as a fighter, a rough-house killer of men. I had studied with Shigeta for exercise and a feeling of confidence. I had never really thought I would ever use it, despite an alley fight in Montevideo’s Canelones sector and one in the “Instant Slums” of the sprawling, shoddy Rangoon archotological complex of three million starving Indians.

But there I had been Brian Thorne. One helicab fare and I was dining with the governor or telling about the affair as an amusing anecdote in the Bolivar Tower’s penthouse.

Here I was Diego Braddock, Publitex outsider, clean-boot intruder, and someone associated with Nova.

Or was I? Was it boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl?

I didn’t ask for those brain-mushed goons to clutch at Nova. She couldn’t have handled it—except by relaxing and enjoying it—despite her newfound earthside *savoir-faire*.

Pelf came out of the crowd and leered at me and melted away. Why couldn’t it have been Pelf who had the glommy hands?

“That’s quite a cargo you brought with you,” Johann said. “Looks more like you plan to open up a business here than pound out copy.”

“I thought they might be needed. Or wanted.”

“Oh, the girls will kiss your left tube for the shimmercloth! That’s for certain. But you must think we’re millionaires out here. That herd of frozen cows you have there will cost a fortune to house and feed. Lucky for you that Casey’s *Lolium italicum* has been working out.”

No luck, just Brian Thorne’s intelligence service feeding him information about almost everything on Mars, including Dr. Lorraine Casey’s transplanted mutated grass, used for holding down the sand and highly suitable for cattle feed.

“If someone here can adapt the beasties to this air pressure,” I said.

“Oh, Doc Hoffman has been working on that with those piglets of his.”

Ralph E. Hoffman, Ph. D., University of California at Davis. See attached bio and time schedule. Return soonest to Red Dossier file.

“Seems to me you are coming out here at about the right time,” admitted Johann. He took another gulp of beer. “Things are sort of coming together. I took care with those seedlings of yours. Those farmers over at Burroughs will pay plenty for first crack at those.”

Marta Dolores Farms, Silva & FitzGerald, Deimos Fecundity, Geoponics, Promised Land, Inc., Burroughs. Astroagronomy, the Alfonso VI Hacienda, Silverberg Kibbutz, Lambardar Ranch, Canalalgae, all near Bradbury. Aragom Rancho, Herbert Farms, Pantheon Nursery, George Grange & Mineral Company, Wells. Olericulture of Mars, the People’s communes, Peteler Ranch, Polecanal.

Thank you, Huo.

“That some sort of drinkables in those stasis capsules?” Johann asked with great solemnity and a twinkle in his eye. I nodded. “I peeked at the invoices. You really have that many Raven Blacksword adventures in that tape library?”

I nodded again and with continued solemnity Johann raised his finger. “Tender of the bar, a drink of *alamajara* for this gentlemen from my personal bottle.” We waited in silence, even if no one else did, until the smokey purple glasses were filled, then he toasted me. “May your air never give out and your strike be a pure one.”

I tipped my glass back at him. “May the wind be at your back and the printouts never fouled.” We drank in silence and the fluid was liquid fire all the way down.

“You!”

There was a great rumbling growl and I turned to see the crowd parting. It became as silent as that place was ever going to get. Faintly I heard the sounds of lovemaking and a gasp of distant passion. Someone laughed near me, then choked it off.

Nikolai stood near the door, the front of his yellow warmsuit drenched in blood. The white sterioplast was startling against his sunburnt face and dark beard. He was glaring at me.

I looked him over. He wasn't armed as far as I could see, which made me feel slightly better. Now that he was forewarned against the *mazeru*, I couldn't hope that he would fall for the same thing again.

I hoped they had a good surgeon in Ares Center.

"Stomp that cleanboot, Nik!" Some partisan to my left.

"Hah! Git 'em, fancy foot! He needs it!" I was not completely alone.

"You kill Wheaten." The gutteral statement was news to some and I felt the shift of sympathy.

Survival of self is a constant. I heard Shigeta speaking. *Never do the expected unless the expected is the unexpected.* I still hadn't quite figured that one out, but then I hadn't intended to use any of this.

He came toward me suddenly, almost at a run, with a determination I found appalling. *We're supposed to be above such things,* I told myself. *We're climbing to the stars, step by step. Fledgling gods in torchships. Apprentice godlets do not have barroom brawls with giant bullies whose brains are mismeshed on Eroticine.*

But no one ever informed Nikolai of his latent godhood, and he knocked me into a wall of miners and tried to stomp me. I rolled aside and kicked upward, kissing his hip with my boot. I rolled again and took a glancing blow in the thigh that all but numbed me. I used a drunk in a worn crimson warmsuit to climb erect, then dodged Nikolai just in time, hitting him a *jinzoo* in the kidneys.

I backed quickly to get some room and when he charged again, with a frightening animal growl, I feinted a face kick and got him in the groin. As he doubled over I brought up my knee and broke his jaw. Blood, teeth, and gobbets of flesh spattered me, but he fell limply to the floor.

There was a silence, then a low roar. With all senses alert I expected someone to take up where he left off, but the roar became a cry for more beer and almajara and hands were slapping me on the back.

"Had it coming to him! Goddamn, boot, you sure toss a mean stomper!"

"Drinks on me, Diego. I never liked that sander anyway."

"Wheaten, huh? Well, the Guild won't ask much blood money for the likes of him."

"Hey, Johann, your bunkie here's not bad!"

"Where the hell did Nikolai get his degree, anyway? Caveman U?"

"Naw, some dinky sheepskin factory in the Urals. Sverdiosk, I think."

"Isn't that where Menshikov came from?"

"Now there was a Russian what am a Russian! Do you remember the time he—"

And they were off in Memory Lane. I rubbed my leg. It hurt like hell, and I was having a hard time slowing my heart down. I took two mugs of almajara and soon was feeling no pain.

That's the way Nova found me, sprawled in a chair with a bare-breasted wench of uncertain name on my lap and a tableful of

equally drunk men around me. The pile of credits I had put on the table had dwindled considerably in the last hour.

I looked up and there she was. I focused on her, then refocused, and kept trying. “Nova!” I said. The others echoed me and Banning, my big scarred buddy Banning, swept her into his lap, but she struggled free.

“Wheaten dead, Antonio with a smashed knee, and now Nikolai with a broken jaw!”

I waved my hand. Somehow it ended up on What’s-her-name’s breast. “Yup. That’s about it. Kuh, oops, ku-clean sweep, honey. Yessir. Best damn fight I ever had.” We all laughed at that, except Nova.

“And I thought you were . . . *ohhh!*” She turned and pushed her way through the mob, slapping at outstretched hands with very unladylike karate chops.

“Boy loses girl,” I said. “But don’t you worry,” I said into What’s-her-name’s breasts, “everything will come out all right.”

About the only thing that came out that night was my dinner and parts of lunch.

When I woke up the next day I found out why they called it top-pop. I hurt, I limped, and I was sore all over. And I must have done *something* with What’s-her-name. Getting dressed it seemed faintly astonishing I was alive. When I got downstairs I found Nova had gone off to Bradbury, a thousand kilometers away, with the cargo train of goods from the *Balboa*.

Johann found me leaning against the front of the Inn, wondering if I should die there or in the street. He laughed and took me back inside to stuff me full of vitamins, and something they jokingly called “Cork.”

“This’ll keep your brain inside your skull,” he said.

About an hour later I decided to go on living and rejoin the human race, providing it wanted me. By lunchtime I was well enough to rent a small sandcat and unpack my warmsuit and breather.

I intended to see the Ruins.

I took no one with me. This was something I wanted to see alone. A beeper would guide me back, and it wasn’t all that far anyway. I headed west, feeling quite good, considering. I passed the cannibalized wreck of a sandcat, but that was the only sign humans had ever been there, except for the tracks.

Fifty kilometers out I came up over a rise and there it was. I saw that the rise was the softened edge of a vast crater, but out in the center was the Grand Hall. It looked like a tumbled mass of half-buried rocks, but it was the accepted center of the ancient Martian race. The Ruins were bigger and more complex than any yet found, but even so they did not cover much more than a few city blocks. Either there had not been so many Martians or the rest of their structures were considerably less durable.

I put the cat in gear and went down the slope, my eyes on the ancient rubble, three kilometers away. There were a few sandcat tracks, but they were all old and windblown. Mars did not have much of a tourist trade as yet, and for that I was grateful. I wanted to be alone.

Like much of Mars and all of Luna the feeling of *déjà vu* comes often to the visitor. In “God of Mars” there had been the eerie *Wargod Symphony* in the air. In fanciful fiction there were always “strange

vibrations” or “the call of the ancient dead” or some such rot. All I heard was the purr of the motor and the hiss and rush of sand falling off the treads.

All I *admit* hearing, that is.

The great blocks of pink and rose and rust formed themselves into complex structures, open-topped, ruined, melted away in the icy winds and carried off by the abrasive sandstorms of the millenia. Most of one dome had fallen, but the arch next to it stood. I parked the sandcat outside and walked in through the Sungate.

Maybe I *could* hear the whispers of the ancients or the first bars of *Wargod*.

As I walked into the first vast courtyard the sound of the slight wind behind me was cut off and it was very quiet. I heard my boots crunch in the sand drifts and I stopped.

Silence.

Twenty-five millennia of silence. Covered and uncovered a hundred times by the sand. A dead city. A dead world. But it had lived once and it would live again.

I knew which way the Great Hall lay but took the other direction. I walked down wide streets and cut through fallen walls. I found where Evans had excavated to the point where the stones were relatively unweathered and proved that they had once been so finely honed together they shamed the magnificent Inca walls of Machu Picchu. But the centuries had eaten at the joins, deepening them, digging at their perfection until the individual stones stood out boldly, each carved away from its neighbors.

I stepped around a fallen column and suddenly there was the Little Palace, a near-perfect structure buried completely except for the minaretlike towers. I circled to where the Evans-Baker team had dug an opening, extracting the sand drifts from within and shoring up the roofs. The plastex sheets across the arch at the bottom of the slope were alien, intrusive, but quickly behind me as I went through the unlocked gate.

My torch threw its beam into the blackness and I saw the foyer and halls and small rooms, each with its mosaics and carved designs. Here the weathering had been considerably less, but still only an instrument could have told whether that smooth-faced wall once held a painted mural. Anything less permanent than rock itself was smoothed away into oblivion.

I stood for a very long time looking at the hunting scene on the wall of the main room. What were those blurred beasts? Did they really have six legs, like John Carter’s thoats? I had to smile, but the smile faded when I saw a crisp yellow Kodak Sunpan box lying nearby. I picked it up and put the anachronism in my pocket. *Sorry*, I said to the ghosts.

I sat on a block for an even longer time scanning the delicate bas-relief in the room that has come to be called the Bedroom of the Little Prince. Was it a child’s room, with a fantasy mural of elves and winged mice and fairy queens? It could almost as easily have been a mural depicting some kind of Waterloo, with attacking armies and flying bat raiders. Almost. It did have a kind of delicacy, but what psychology might these aliens have had? We would never know. We don’t even

know where the Maya went, or why, and that had been only a little before Columbus landed.

Gone, but not forgotten, I said to the ghosts.

I went back out into the weak sunlight and along the Street of Heroes with its sculptured columns blurred into tall rosy lumps protruding from the sand. To my left was the Shell Dome, with the remnants of fossilized crustaceans embedded in the broken shards of dome. Further on to the right was the Treasury, where they had found so many beautiful pieces of what could only be jewelry. Nothing so extravagant as the so-called Royal Jewels of Ares from the Bradbury ruins, but wonderful to look upon and ponder.

I was tempted to enter, but a quick look at the sky showed me I did not have that much time. I hurried on toward the Great Hall.

The Circle of Juno, with its judgment seats. The Romulus and Remus Blocks. Further on, the Athena Stone, definitely graceful, quite feminine, yet regal, and quite, quite beyond recognition.

Then the entrance to the Great Hall. I turned and looked back, wondering at the Grecian and Roman mythology that had been force-fit onto what man had found here. "We have to call it something," Evans had said, "and Athena Stone is better than *Item XV-4, 3 meters high, at coordinates M-12, subsector A-7.*" I had to admit he was right, but I wondered how this nomenclature might blind someone to the discovery of something else. Simpson, in the twentieth century said, "It's good that things can be found by accident—otherwise you'd never find anything you weren't looking for."

So far, everything is "yet." So far we haven't met an intelligent race. Yet. Men are not gods. Yet.

I turned and went in.

There is something about proportions that makes a structure greater than the sum of the parts. The Parthenon, that Doric temple to Athena on the Acropolis, is often cited as the perfect building because of its proportions. The Great Temple of Amon at Luxor, the Aztec Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, the Shinto Shrine at Nikko, the Temple of Heaven at Peking, Persepolis, Angkor Wat, Versailles, and of course the Taj Mahal, have all been lauded as "perfect buildings," and rightly so.

But they were all made by humans. As diverse as their builders were they were all *Homo sapiens*. The *Xeno ares* or, hopefully, the *Homo ares*, were simply alien. Their idea of proportions was different, and possibly everything else about them was different, too.

The Great Hall was unlike Terran structures that were rigid, rectangular or circular or even trisoctahedral. It flowed, an enormous enclosed space of great majesty. It was more like visual music than walls, a floor, and (once) a ceiling. From no one spot could you see all of it, so it was always exciting. The walls tilted and curved and flowed and changed texture and color. The floor rose and fell, becoming a cozy swirl of stone where you might sit with a small group, then rising and becoming a pulpit-like protuberance. It swept away and flowed upwards to become a wall, then down again to become what might have been a pool. Walls thinned and melted away to become windows, then thickened and drew close to form side passages to other, lost, rooms.

I wandered past the spot where the Colossus had once stood

and into a large cul-de-sac of once-bright blood-rock, a cylinder open to the sky. The floor flattened and dipped down in a gentle series of wide terraces toward the Throne.

It could only be that. If it wasn't, it should have been. Only the rounded stubs of something remained in the center of the dais that rose up slightly before the last terrace. No great lord here to stand high above his groveling subjects, but a servant of the people, a listener, a being who was the focus of his subjects.

The sunlight made long dark shadows across the broken floor, accenting the aged rock. Everything stood out in textural relief, reddened by the setting sun. Courtiers and peasants had stood here, judgments had been made, boons awarded, decisions handed down. Perhaps here the last Martian had died, his alien bones long ground into the sand that drifted around the floor, filling the cracks in the stones.

The King is dead, long live the King!

But the Queen is alive.

I turned and went out under the carvings of leaping alien beasts and dim views of what might be seas filled with what might be ships. I turned at the Athena Stone and my boots kicked up plumes of red-brown sand as I went through the Sungate and climbed up into the sandcat. I started the engine, spun the wheel, and raced through the failing light toward the Center.

I had things to do.

7

There was a big sandstorm the next day, out on the Ausonia Borealis between Ares Center and Grandcanal City. Nova had already taken the only fast direct transport to Bradbury, so I had two choices. The short loop up to Grandcanal City and down to Bradbury, which wouldn't start for almost a week, or until the sandstorm eased up. Or the long loop southwest to Redrock, then southeast to Nabokov, east to Marsport, and north to Bradbury. Because the transporter was leaving the next day and I wanted to *move*, as well as to see Mars, I chose the longer way, which actually would be quicker.

The big GM Transporter, with the roller capsules behind, stood ready outside the main dome in the dawn light of the following day. I shook hands with Johann and told him to give what was left of the shimmercloth bolt to What's-her-name. He gave me a maiming blow on the shoulder and shoved me on up into the cabin, slamming the hatch behind me.

Everyone works on Mars. There are no passengers as such. As neophyte cleanboot I was given the simple job of watching the cabin pressure and fuel telltales and punching frozen meals out of the dispenser. By the time we got to Redrock four days later I had been promoted to topwatch, up there in my own little blister-bubble and as important as hell. When I wasn't defrosting yeast pies and algae bricks in the zap

ovens, that is.

It's pretty drab country going down to Redrock. Just sand and craters and all that weathered worn look we're familiar with. The country rises in the Isidis Regio area and becomes more rocky than sandy, then nothing much but rock until the mesa rises at Redrock.

Of course it was *Martian* drabness we were crossing and that alone made it fascinating. Although the trails were clearly marked by previous tracks and by beepers every few kilometers it was common practice to wander off and parallel the route, taking meandering side trips and detours from the meanderings. One literally never knew what might be found this way. The ruins at Burroughs were discovered by a curious tracker named Solari who was taking a big arc from Touchdown to the Grabrock mines, and that find led to the development of the bubble-cluster "city" itself.

Redrock was nothing more than a pair of dusty domes looking much like the castoff brassiere of some giant Amazon. The converging tracks turned the area into patterned facepowder. We made our cargo drop and picked up other material for transport around our route. The ore itself would be run through the fusion torches, fired along the mass accelerator where the disintegrated molecules would be dropped out automatically at their atomic weight. Thus only very pure elements were transported, for things were costly enough as they were. How "pure" the material in the hoppers was depended on how critical the process was or how often the same material was processed. For Earthside shipping it was the purest possible, but less than perfect samples were used at the site.

We didn't even sleep in the domes that night but stayed in our cramped but "homey" transporter. Those big fusion-powered GMs are beauties, with multiple wheels that can roll up over most anything on Mars. The control cabin is self-contained, with an airlock to the personnel capsule behind. Bunks, toilet, Varifreezer with IR oven, and oxy bottles took up almost all the space. Some cargo was carried on top, in racks, but most was in the trainlike capsule rolling along behind. We had two on this trip, but I was told in the flatter area between Ares Center and Bradbury and between Touchdown and Wells they could pull as many as six.

The ore carriers were basically the same, but with bigger control cabins and no personnel carriers at all, just the huge tank cars lumbering behind.

We headed toward the Russian base at Nabokov before dawn the next morning. We were soon into Ice Cream Park, where multicolored layers of bright rock ripple and roll, appearing and disappearing beneath the sand and rusty rock. It was a kind of brittle cold fairyland, with frosty confections of a fantastic nature popping up, writhing along the ground, then disappearing again, all as if in frantic motion but frozen solid for millions of years.

The last of the tutti-frutti goodies dipped under the surface, and we rolled on out onto the bleak Dioscuria Cydonia, as desolate a spot as exists this side of the northern Gobi. Not many transporters cared enough to meander on this morose landscape, and we drove resolutely ahead. Wootten, our driver, grinned thinly and called it Hawaiian Estates

and kept his foot down on the accelerator.

It was a long way and I had plenty of time to think, either rolling in my bunk or staring at the barren land from my transparent topside dome. What I thought about was mostly Nova.

We had managed to be in our own private observation blister at changeover, when the ship turned around and began its long “backdown” to Mars. It was weightless then and we tried out sex in a weightless condition, banging our knees and elbows and my head, until the warning light and communicator told us the torch was going to be lit. We disconnected and made it to the couches just before gravity returned again. About all either of us could say for weightless sex is that we did it, after a fashion, which is somewhat like saying, “We’ve been through the *whole Kama Sutra!*”

But for a month we had been lovers, and in a few minutes she had ripped it apart. It made me wonder just how much she did love me, if she made so little attempt to understand or could not take me on faith.

Staring out at the drab plains and near-black sky I asked myself over and over, coming at it from different points, “Do you *really* want her?” The very things that made her attractive to me also irritated me; her unpredictability, her sudden shifts of mood, her perceptions kept me from being bored with her . . . and drove me crazy at times.

An incident, years old, popped into my head. Barlow’s party atop the new floating airport on Lake Michigan. My companion that evening was Wyoming Magnum, the stunningly beautiful new Universal-Metro star of *Frankenstein on the Moon*. Sleepy-eyed, incredibly voluptuous, satin-smooth, gowned by Lafayette, jeweled by Cartier, the much publicized Borgia ring on her finger, her makeup perfect, her red hair a castle studded with pearls, the rise and fall of her almost completely revealed bosom the focus of every male eye.

Warner joined me, talking to me, but his eyes on the almost-inhuman beauty nearby. “You lucky bastard,” he said with feeling. But I had been bored with her for close to fifteen hours. I had been on time, but it was two hours before she emerged, perfect and untouchable. I, too, had been stunned, and had spent the next two hours ruining her perfection in bed, arising at last feeling as if I had somehow managed a glorious masturbation. Then I waited another two hours while she put everything together again.

“I’ll trade her for an option on that Western Algae property,” I said. He looked at me, then laughed. “I mean it, Gordon,” I said. He jumped at the chance. She went home with him as easily as she had gone with me at the studio’s request.

I believe Gordon ended up marrying Wyoming and hating me. But I made close to a million on the West-Algae land, and while money is only money, it’s better than Wyoming Magnum, the jolly inflatable toy. She bored me, not because she was beautiful, or because she kept me waiting, but because that was *all* she was, just beautiful. I wanted another Madelon, another . . . no, not another Nova . . . I wanted Nova because she was . . . Nova. She was not something made by the quad in vats, not something sleek and vinyl, differing only by a serial number.

Nabokov lies in the curve of a big crater in the Mare Acidalium, or Sea of Lenin as they have come to call it. The area was rich in

tungsten, titanium and other valuable elements, but very short on natural beauty. The mines dominated the area, with the excavated soil heaped into hillocks. We trundled in past the accelerators and to the bubble complex.

There is something eternally schizoid about the Russian. Meet him man-to-man and he's friendly, gregarious, outgoing. Give him a uniform or mention politics and he's Gregor Glum, officious and fussy. He goes all suspicious and starts imagining nefarious plots at the drop of a rubber stamp or the least word of criticism.

I never liked drinking with Russians because I usually lost. I didn't like doing business with them because it was never *just* business, it was always bartering and politics and abrupt changes of direction.

Here at Nabokov they were on their best behavior in the "official" ranks, although Wootten went off and got blasted with some of his buddies from the *Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev Number Two* and said he had a fine time and tumbled a buxom daughter of the steppes.

It appeared that "the word" had gone ahead, bounced off the satellite, that one of the ace reporters of *Publitez* was on his way; I got an A-One reception, packed full of speeches and Instant Boredom. I excused myself as soon as seemed possible, but two hours short of the goal they had set for me, I'm sure. I went off to bed and thought about cool mountain springs and skies that were blue at noon instead of near-black. What I dreamed about was Nova, golden and naked, long black hair spreading in the waters of a brilliantly aqua lagoon . . .

Marsport was almost directly east, just above the edge of Mare Boreum. It was wide and wild across here, with a few rills, but previous transporters had blasted down a few ridges and filled in some of the deeper gulleys and we rolled on very quickly.

There's something amusing about Marsport, or the *idea* of Marsport. It's not much of a place, only four middle-sized domes and a few connecting zome structures. It sits midway between the old ruins and the open pit Princess Aura mines. The citizens of Marsport take the inevitable kidding in good grace and then turn the tables on you by inventing "local customs" that are strictly adhered to (for example, the first three rounds are on the visitors—and the last three).

There's the Raygun Ranch Saloon, the Flash Gorden Hotel, Ming the Merciless Cafe and Dale Arden's, which is a sort of general store. Next to the Planet-wreckers Bar & Grill is the Mongo Assay Office. They called the local beer "xeno" and drank a lot of it. I asked them what they made it from and was told I shouldn't ask; then they told me sunbuds, which sounds fine but turns out to be a sort of sickly gray-green lichen, only fatter.

Marsport was the halfway point on our grand tour, and Wootten let me off for a couple of hours while he did some servicing and checking. I borrowed a sandcat from a prospector in from Tracus Albus with a busted wrist and drove north a couple of kilometers to The Tomb.

Archaeologists have carefully opened the crypts and found nothing of value, not even bones, only a little calcium dust. Apparently the Martians did not, like so many Earth cultures, bury their dead with everything they might need in the afterlife. Either they didn't believe in one, or they didn't think you could take it with you.

The Tomb is only partially excavated on the exterior, but the inside is estimated to be forty percent cleared. It was found by a wildcat prospector intrigued by the unusual vibrations he read on his sonar. Carnegie institute and Interplanetary Projects both were involved in the dig and the only visually significant find, the Starstone, is on exhibition at the Modern.

But it was not treasure or even archaeological knowledge that brought me, in the chilly Martian morning, to stand within the great vault. I wanted to experience everything I could about Mars. Here—perhaps—the ancient kings had been laid to rest. But the place could easily have been the equivalent of a monastery or a Hall of Fame or a prison cemetery. Perhaps we would never know.

But ancient hands, inhuman hands, had built this vault. A groined roof, one of the few left—or discovered—arched overhead. Every footstep was echoed; even my breathing seemed loud. Instinctively I tried to make no noise, although I would have been delighted to raise the dead.

Most of the crypts that were visible were opened, their sealing slabs labeled and set aside. I peered into one of the arched vaults, my torch quickly scanning it. I don't know what I expected. Rats. Moldering bones. Staring eyes. A shrouded figure rising. But there was nothing. Literally and actually nothing but dust. Not much of that.

The next one was the same, and the five after that. Not even bones. The cold dry air must have kept them mummified for centuries upon centuries, but if only a small percentage dried up and disappeared each century there had been so *many* centuries that nothing was left.

Were the experts right? Had Mars once been a garden? Waters flowing from the polar caps, watering verdant forests of—what?—red-leaved trees? Were there *any* experts on Mars?

I walked to the center of the vast vault. Arches were everywhere, branching into more and more passages, more vaults, a giant cemetery of alien dreams.

“Hello!”

My shout echoed and echoed, but did not even raise dust. I ran my light over the ceiling. Unadorned, except for its structural beauty. No Michaelangelo here. No six-fingered hand holding brushes with paint dripping into its tentacles. No royal commissions, no patron, not even a WPA assignment. A place to house the beloved dead, not a pleasure palace.

I went back out and climbed on the cat. I could be back in time for the noon meal and then—on to Bradbury!

We went straight up the Ceraunius, cut west a bit at Lacus Ascaerius then back to north, across the Tracus Albus, through Lux, detoured into Thaumasia to drop off some supplies to a lone miner there, then into the highlands of Lacus Silis and Bradbury.

That's what it said on the log and on the latest Martian Commission Official Map, Sector 5-100. The way Wootten told it was, “We roll up the Cerry until we hit Sandcat Tower, ding a dot westerly over the Crashstrip, through Luxy, then drop off some bits with Old Ed Amendola. We'll break a beaker of top-pop, then tear-ass up the high country and snap it off at Bradbury.”

There is a lot that never appears on any “official” map, whether it be Mars or Michigan.

I was very excited now. Not only was I approaching Nova; I was also going through some of the prettiest country on Mars. I remembered my father telling me how desolate and phony the moon had seemed to him when man first took the giant step. He said it was much the same with the first Martian flybys, and even after the first landing at Touchdown, which *is* a pretty dreary spot. Not until man came down out of the sky and walked around on Mars did he find out how pretty it was.

It takes getting used to, there’s no doubt of that. It’s featureless most of the time, but there are unexpected marvels in the rills, and where the rocks are still showing through the battered, cratered, weathered surface, you can see extraordinary beauty. I’m not the first Mars enthusiast who’s been told that the “great marvels” of Mars could easily go unnoticed in the American Southwest. I won’t even deny it. But these were *Martian* rocks, *Martian* plains, *Martian* desolation. I loved it.

I was still feeling the effects of Amendola’s private-label top-pop when we sighted the first of the farms around Bradbury. Few of the towns had extensive farming areas. Burroughs, Wells, Bradbury, Grandcanal City, a scattering between Grabrock and Northaxe, but for the most part these few thousand acres supplied the bulk of food for the whole population.

The Alfonso VI Hacienda was on our right, and someone waved from the bubble of a tractor ripping a virgin field. We turned at the stone pylon marking the corner of a green field of potatoes, and I felt cramped. We could no longer just go where we pleased. I came down out of the observation dome and helped the others tidy up the interior.

Bradbury is the most prosperous “city” on Mars, mainly because of the water, which makes the farmland possible. There are mines eastward, along the long track to Burroughs, but they are not so important here. The magnificent Star Palace is way out beyond the perimeter, but it contributes little to the economy, except for the money and supplies brought by the archaeologists.

We rolled to a stop at the main warehouse, a series of zones nesting against the westernmost dome. I helped store my seedlings and other cargo in a rented space, then went on with Wootten into his Guild’s wayhouse to wash up.

I stepped out of the sonics feeling refreshed and dug into my pack.

“By the ten thousand tortures of Ares” (Wootten liked synthetic curses), “What kind of outfit is that?”

I looked at the snowsilk blouse, the grained black tights, and the neoteric leather boots and saw them as Wootten did. I grinned and said, “My cleanboot fancy adventurer’s outfit. I left the cape with the blazen symbol back on Earth.”

Wootten plumped down on the bed and fingered the snowsilk. “Hot flaming damn.” He paused, then said carefully, “Look, do you mind if I give you a few pointers?”

“Go ahead.” I hadn’t felt like a neo at anything since I tried to ski fifteen years before.

“*Uno*, this stuff is mighty fine and fancy, but it marks you not only as a cleanboot but as a rich cleanboot.” He squinted thoughtfully at me for a moment, then shrugged almost imperceptibly and said, “You have enough troubles with Nova. *Dos*, you’ll stand out like a vapor trail at a time I think you might like to be inconspicuous. *Tres*, you’ll look like one of them honorary degrees.”

I grinned ruefully and nodded my head. I knew that an “honorary degree” was used as an insult, for these nuvomartians were eminently pragmatic and while most of them had degrees it was because they really needed them to do the job they had.

“What do you suggest?” I asked.

“What else you got?”

We went through my limited wardrobe and selected a similar outfit, in black, but in the plainer, tougher *coriace tissu* material that seemed to be standard wear.

“Dressup is generally just a clean set of whatever you wear regularly,” Wootten told me. “Damned few governor’s balls here.” Then he cackled lewdly and grinned. “Get that stuff on and let’s get ourselves wrapped around some of the local pop-top.”

I groaned at the thought, but dressed quickly enough and followed Wootten out and down the street that wandered through the town. I caught a glimpse of the big cylindrical structure that housed the GE fusion torch and the long zome with the buildings of varying size and form that suckled on the torch, each for the various major elements it needed.

Wootten saw me looking and said, “It goes night and day, y’know. Heavy metals, garbage, everything. Rips the raw material down to the atomic level, or would, if you put it through enough times. We do that for anything we ship back to Earth. It’s cheaper. That torch is why we can go without masks around here and how they can have all the farms, y’know.”

I nodded. “The air-maker.” Garbage, dirt, tons of rock, dead bodies, trash were all stripped down to the basic elements, the nitrogen and oxygen recombined for atmosphere, with dashes of other gases, with pinches of trace elements, and a glug or two of whatever might have slipped through, and the planet Mars was getting itself another blanket of air—breathable, this time, by *Homo sapiens*. Terraforming. Adaptation.

The fusion torch had just barely saved Earth from strangling in its own wastes. Hundred-, two-hundred-year-old trash dumps were mined for material. Some of these sites were the richest sources of heavy metals left on our ruined Mother Planet. My own Ecolocorp had bought options on hundreds of municipal dumps just as soon as I knew a practical and *portable* fusion torch and mass accelerator was feasible. It was cheaper to bring the torch to the trash than the trash to the torch. Great scoops dumped gobs of the planet’s plundered resources on conveyor belts that fed into the hoppers.

Earth was still far from cleaned up. Piles of pure elements did not feed the billions, but they helped, mainly by sustaining the technology. Oil and the heavy metals were recycled. The technology that was needed to recombine the raw elements was even more complex than the technology that produced the raw material.

But *atomically pure* was even better than *chemically pure* and many of the delicate sciences, such as body and brain chemistry were aided by these pure elements, which reduced the X factor. Today, everyone gets at least an annual readout and delicate chemical adjustments are made where the nutritional balance has been disrupted.

The fusion torch and attendant technology have saved man's ass, but man's soul is still in danger.

Maybe that was why I was on Mars.

Kochima's Star Palace was our destination. First a dram of pop-top served in a rosy glass made from local silica, then a thick, tasty slab of algae steak, ragged cubes of soyasen, a few rounds of carrot as thick as my wrist, and some sort of blue-green lettuce. Between the drink and the food were introductions to a score or more of miners, torch technicians, farmers, and biologists. I noticed that whether hard-rock miner or test-tube biologist they all had a common factor of self-reliance, of independence and reliability. I was pleased to note that these traits were not the creation of the vidtab writers and that, as far as I could see, "My word is my bond" was a truism.

Oh, not that everyone loved everyone else, and certainly not that they were all saints. You can be a self-reliant, independent, and reliable assassin or jewel thief or computer criminal. It was simply that these seemed common traits, and I found it comforting. I had been too long in the world of pragmatic business, where truth was a commodity and friendship a matter of whom you were dealing with. Nuvomartians wanted each individual to be what he seemed. They lived close to nature, but it was an alien nature that man was only beginning to understand. The need to trust one's own kind was strong.

Maybe it was a little early, but I felt at home.

I found there were surprising aspects to some of these men. Easton had been in Leavenworth for six years for "adjusting" Union Oil's computers to pay large sums into a dummy account. Now he ran the complex mass accelerator's computers. "Long Jim" Trotter had been James Trotter IV, scion of a New England financial megafamily. Wayland and Migliardi had fought at New Orleans, in the Riots, one on each side. Drayeen had been a space salesman for a vidtab readout magazine. Puma had been Reymundo Santiago, a painter of note, and now a partner in Rojorock, Inc., a small mining company.

They wanted to know all the latest news and gossip about Earth, and I wanted to know about Mars. But there were more of them so I ended up answering the questions.

Yes, Rosita Chavez and Olga Norse, Jr., were lovers but they had recently formed a notorious triad with Ed Avery, the director of *City on Top of Itself*, the muckraking exposé of the predominantly homosexual archotolog called Heaven. No, it would be at least two years before the new Mark IX torch would be ready. Yes, the food riots in India had resulted in the deaths of millions. Peru and parts of the PanArab Republic had also suffered riots. No, there were no plans for saving Kennedy Space Center even as a historical monument. Yes, the White House wanted to chop off aid to Mars.

No, China Corlon was not a transsexual. Yes, President DeVore had called President Goldstein a *mastoc cornard*, and the insult was still

shaking the beds of Washington. No, the Femmikin robots were no substitute for real women, no matter how well programmed to your tastes. Your own suspension of disbelief was their best asset. Yes, the FSA had picked John Grennell and Terry Ballard for the Callisto mission. No, Margarita Silva did not have implants, as far as I knew, just a bounty from nature.

Yes, Utah had gotten an injunction against Femmikin, Inc. after the Secretary of Robotics had fallen in love with one. No, Lila Fellini had not had any special geriatric treatments, nothing that wasn't standard for all of us. Yes, the antipollution vigilantes had been disbanded. No, the Curtain of the Unknown cult had not quite won their election in England.

Yes, some of the plastic surgeons considered certain of their patients to be living works of art, and it was true that Dolores Salazar, Helen Troy, and Illusiane had appeared nude, or in scanty power jewel costumes, on pedestals, at a gallery opening. No, they had not quite perfected the DNA regrowth techniques at Johns Hopkins West, but the RNA research was progressing well. Yes, the subcerebral learning techniques were much improved. No, the bordello bill had been defeated in Australia. Yes, Ron Manuel and Neola Digarth would be doing their next sensafilm on Mars. No, you didn't go insane living in an archo tower complex, it only seemed that way.

I finally begged off by saying that all my talking was preventing me from drinking. They laughed and filled my glass with bubbling purple.

When I was sufficiently drunk I was helped to bed, then got up to help Tanaka and Migliardi to their bunks.

Morning came early, as mornings all too often do. Wootten and I had forgotten to opaque the port and even at 141 million miles the sun was still bright enough to hurt my pop-topped eyes. Luckily, Wootten had some "Cork," and soon we were eating breakfast and looking for a way to get me to the Sunstrum mine. Wootten asked around and found out that Puma was taking a sandcat out past there to Burroughs, and I asked myself along.

It was two hundred kilometers of beauty, for water from the torch was flowing down an ancient watercourse and we paralleled it for half the distance. Transplanted pines and other trees grew thickly, not in tree farms, but in realistic clusters and strings and solitary giants. With water a tiny native plant called Sprinkle blossomed into a lush dark green bush with hundreds of tiny flowers. The fabricated water looked very natural, and very welcome, winding its way through rock and pothole. It was not much more than a creek, but already it was called "the Mississippi of Mars," and was officially labeled Athena River.

Puma filled me in on Nova's parents; his account was less formal than one of Huo's dossiers, but just as accurate and complete.

"Sven Sunstrum came out here with the first shipload of colonists. Those were tough days. He punched holes all over the plate this side of the John Carters. Hit some iridium nodes and got himself a Chinese wife through the People's Republic nobs. It's been what, twelve years? That's Martian years, of course. Nearly twenty-two Terran years. Goddamn, that Nova is growin', isn't she?"

"Well, Li Wing turned out to be a beauty. Sven, he fought a few who wanted to buy her contract, and he lasered a couple who didn't

take no for an answer. They had Nova and they struck a goddamn manganese mountain the same year. He's on the Council and he's past president of the Guild. As tough an old sander as you'll find still turning wheels.

"And don't bypass Li Wing. That is still some woman, y'know? Not many with that kind of class get this far out. One time, back when Nova was just a baby, there were some zongo cleanboots out here that thought this was wide-open country, that they could do as they damn pleased. This was before they had any more than a squad of Marines at Ares.

"They came up on Sunstrum's digs when he was off in Burroughs with a load. They cut down a couple of diggers and cut power on the lift so the rest were trapped. They figured to steal Sunstrum's fabled riches and rape his Chinese wife. But Li Wing gave them a fight and cut one of them zongos right from balls to gullet. She was about ready to whack off any protruberance that came near her when one of those burnouts grabbed the baby. Said he'd slice Nova's throat if the woman didn't behave. Li Wing never hesitated a second. She flipped that sticker around and threw it right through that bastard's throat. Kid dropped into the bunk and Li Wing snatched a laser and cut the legs off all three that were left."

Puma grinned at me. "So don't you let that lady's ways get you to figuring she's out of it. I did a portrait of her about, oh, six, eight turns back. She was young and frisky then and full of hell, for a China lady, that is. They still got it over the bar."

That brought us to a discussion of painters and he was interested in knowing what was going on in the art world back on Earth. He seemed very interested in sensatrons, but figured he could never master the electronics. Later on he added a note to his Sunstrum dossier.

"That Nova . . . well, she's sort of special out here. We tried not to spoil her but that was pretty hard. Not many kids out here, and none as pretty as that one. Everyone wanted to teach her everything. I guess she's handled about every kind of sandcat, transporter, scoop, pinholer, and laser rig there is. It just makes you feel good being around her, doesn't it?"

We topped up over the edge of a crater and a small dome cluster on the far wall told us where the Sunstrum complex was. Puma took us across the flat crater floor at high speed, laughing about the bumps and the big plume of dust behind. "Let 'em know we're coming!" he said. The cargo slugs rattled along behind us and we came to a halt before the main dome lock after pulling three wild circles in the area in front. Puma sounded a couple of incredibly loud beeps on the signal horn and unsealed as several people came out of the lock.

The air was thin and cold here but only Puma and I wore warm suits. I saw the big blonde man first, in a weathered gray jumper, and a couple of grinning, bearded faces beyond. Then they parted for a smiling Oriental woman with thick, piled-up hair, wearing an emerald-green dress.

"Puma!"

"Li Wing, Li Wing, you get better looking every day!"

There were cheek kisses and back slaps and hugs and then

hurried, good-natured complaints as they pulled Puma back toward the warmth of the dome lock. They looked at me with tentative we-haven't-been-introduced-but-any-friend-of-Puma's looks, but all I saw was Nova.

She stood back by the lock, wearing something simple but thin, and the cold had brought out her nipples. She was trying to look both unconcerned and polite, her lady-of-the-manor style that didn't come off all that badly, considering she was nineteen.

Nova.

Daughter of a tigress, daughter of a bear.

Would I ever be able to say, "My Nova"?

She stood by the edge of the lock and her elegant pose was ruined by a sudden hug and cheek kiss from Puma, who evidently had "rights." Then they had swept past her and I was on their heels. She looked at me with a carefully neutral face and I gestured her in. She turned and entered without comment and the lock hissed and thumped home and the air was pumped in to equalize.

Puma was as bombarded with questions as I had been, but most of them were personal, or about people they mutually knew. Nova and I were very much aware of each other.

As the inner door hissed open Sven Sunstrum came over to me and shook my hand in a blonde bearpaw. "Mr. Braddock, you honor us." He grinned shrewdly and said, "I hope you are not going to dramatize our little operation here for some video show."

The way he said *dramatize* told me how he felt about the vidtab way of "electrifying" reality, as they put it. "We take things out of the crust and we barter for the things we cannot make. It's a simple life and we would hate to see it disturbed."

I looked at him and said, "Minimum disturbance on all sensors, Mr. Sunstrum." He smiled with more friendliness and released my hand.

"Nova has told us how you kept her from causing a mutiny on the ship." He smiled fondly at her and I raised my eyebrows slightly. She looked serene and aloof. "Oh, father," she said without rancor.

Sunstrum looked back at me. "My thanks, as well." Then he laughed. "I'm sorry, but your face is so carefully unexpressive! Li Wing!" Nova's mother turned from the cluster around Puma and joined us as we exited the lock. "Li Wing, this is Diego Braddock . . . Mr. Braddock, my wife."

We acknowledged the introductions with pleasantries and then Sunstrum broke in. "I was just thanking Braddock for the way he handled the sexual situation on the *Balboa*."

Li Wing smiled shyly at me and nodded. "Oh, yes. We were very worried about that long trip, with Nova grown."

I shot Nova a look of *What did you tell them?* but she wasn't listening. "Uh, thank you," I said, meaninglessly.

We started across the work area before the dome, to a lock at the curving side. Li Wing took my arm and I found her a most appealing woman. *Knife-thrower, huh?* I couldn't help thinking of the lurid overlay on this petite and ladylike woman.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Braddock. I know that all introductions to sexual life are perilous and I must thank you again."

Introduction to sexual life? I looked back over my shoulder at Nova, but they had been joined by Puma and one of the burly miners and no one was paying attention to me.

We passed through the lock and into a zone that connected to the home dome occupied by the Sunstrums. By the standards of Mars it was palatial. I quickly revised that: by any standards. It was nowhere as large as my smallest home, but it rivaled my best in the immediate feeling of *home*. All too often my expensive decorators had contrived marvelous showpieces, richly appointed sets for their talents. I had simply had too much to do and too many homes to live, or rather stay in, to do more than indicate basic directions and to Monday morning quarterback the results.

The Sunstrum home was warm in tone, with comfortable furniture, some of it the best of the Lifestyle lines, and other pieces homemade by loving hands and with an eye for design and detail. Each had been made for just the place it was in.

There was a big heater in a super-ellipse-shaped hole in one wall, a necessity of the Martian life. There was an enormous music-tape-projection unit by the far wall and a bar to the right. Over the bar was Puma's portrait of Li Wing, and I was startled at how good it was. Back on Earth, when Puma had been Reymundo Santiago, he had been fairly popular, but not always good. Here he was *good*. I suspected he had been more than half in love with the beautiful oriental empress he had painted with such skill and insight.

I was suddenly aware that I was standing before it, and that they were watching me. I made an embarrassed face and a gesture of apology. "Forgive me, I—"

"Forgive, hell!" thundered Puma, "that's the purest compliment you can give! Hot damn! Come on Sven, you dirt grubber, are you going to pour us some of that purple wine or not?"

I glanced at Li Wing and found her eyes coming from the painting back to me. "It is lovely," I said and meant more. As all beautiful women, she understood the compliment and thanked me.

"I'm trying to get Puma to paint Nova," she said.

"Hell, I'll do her anytime," Puma said, "but you sent her off to goddamn Earth!" He looked at her as she stood quietly, attentive but passive. "I do hate to sound like a goddamn cliché, but she sure has grown. Take a bigger canvas now!" He laughed and tasted the wine. He and Sunstrum fell into a conversation about vintages and solar strength and a longer season while I accepted a glass from Li Wing and sat down on the big tan couch.

"And what do you plan to do here on Mars during your visit, Mr. Braddock?" Li Wing asked. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Nova raise her head and she seemed to wait expectantly.

"Look," I said.

"Just look?" There was the faintest blade of disdain in her voice as Nova's mother questioned me. Wastrel. Wanderer. *Tourist*.

"He points," said Nova. Li Wing raised her eyebrows at her daughter. "He points, and what he points at becomes famous," she said.

"I work for Publitech," I said, and felt like a liar. What I really wanted to say was *Actually, I'm Brian Tharne and . . .* and there I had

to stop. What to say then? Even if they believed me, which they probably wouldn't.

"That sounds like interesting work," Mrs. Sunstrum said, as though she meant it.

"It got me here," I said. I started to go on, but Sunstrum came over and sat down.

"Nova tells me you two slept together on the way out," he said conversationally.

I looked at him and suddenly I was just a little tired of being examined, being tested, being the one who had to prove himself. "Yes, that's right," I said. "I love her."

Sunstrum waved his hand, the one with the glass. "A lot of people love Nova."

"I'm not a lot of people."

"Just who are you, Mr. Braddock?"

I turned my head and looked at Nova, who was sitting tensely, trying to look calm, as if we were not talking about her. "I'm her lover."

"Are you certain there are not legions of those?" Mrs. Sunstrum asked quietly.

"Yes." My eyes locked to hers and bit by bit the ice melted.

"You killed a man over her," Sunstrum said.

I did not look at him as I said, "You would have done the same."

"Perhaps." I felt, rather than saw him look at Li Wing. "I have killed. When men need killing they must be killed and no halfway measures. But they need not always be killed."

I did not answer. I was somewhere in those dark eyes.

"Why do you want our daughter?" asked Li Wing.

"Why did Sven Sunstrum want you?"

She hesitated, then said, "First . . . for the sex. Then for love."

I did not answer. Nova rose from her seat and took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving me. "We are going to bed," she announced. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I heard Sunstrum rumble.

"Goodnight, dear," Li Wing said.

I may have said something and I may not have said something. I had said words. Now I would speak with all of me. She took my hand and we went out and down a corridor and into a bedroom. It was not until morning that I discovered it was the bed she had been conceived in.

Nova swung lithely up into the sandcat cabin, and waved down to the others. I took Sunstrum's hand and I kissed Li Wing on the cheek.

"Oh, come on, Diego, we'll be back in a couple of days!"

I climbed into the cabin and sealed the door. Nova thumbed the cat into a throaty roar and started off with a fast left-hand turn and a racing run for the crater rim. I grabbed a stanchion and tumbled into a

bucket seat and belted down.

She was laughing and the long black hair tumbled over the collar of her warm suit and I loved her very much.

We stopped only once, at a place along the Athena where there was a little waist-high waterfall and enough air to go without masks. We made love on a warm rock and splashed briefly in the icy water and she was beautiful and golden-brown, all soft flesh and falling hair and sudden mouth.

It was sunset when we got into Bradbury, and Nova was seen by a group of jolly farmers with the purple Silverberg Kibbutz insignia on their shoulders. They hadn't known she was back, and there was a lot of cheerful kidding and not a little outright lust.

Nova was gay and charming and steered them into gossip about the Canalgae farm, and then we were at Sunstrum's office. His agent there kept a couple of sleeping cubicles that shared a vibrabath. As she rid herself of the day's dust and dried river mud she said, "You know the only thing I *really* liked about Earth was all that water! I love showers, real showers!"

I'll buy you a Niagara of showers, I thought. I'll divert the Nile! Cleopatra's water will flow over your body! "Vibrabaths get you cleaner," I said.

"They only get my body cleaner," she said. "There are other factors to getting clean."

We dressed and went out for dinner and that's when they tried to kill me.

There was a gritty ripping noise and bits of a storage dome fell from a sudden long slit. Nova stared at it curiously, then protested as I grabbed her wrist and threw us into the dark between domes. She protested, both verbally and physically.

"*Here?* My god, Diego, don't you get enough? *Hey*, what are you doing?" I was dragging her, kicking and fighting, further into the dark. I saw a shadow move on the dome across the street and I had no time to explain things. I found her jaw in the dark and punched her out. I lay very still, my heart pounding, my mind racing.

Why were they trying to kill me? *Us?* No, it had to be me. A good marksman could take me out with a laser and leave Nova holding a hand with no arm attached.

I watched the light patch on the dome across the narrow street, hoping to see a shadow, although what I was going to do then I hadn't the faintest idea. I had no weapon, except my brain.

I felt around in the dark and found a rock, a wedge of permoplast, a broken electronic plug-in, all things that had escaped the notice of the cleansweepers. I took a good grip on Nova's wrist and threw the three bits high into the night. I started to drag Nova away and I felt a plasticon box by my foot and I flipped that back toward the light. The bits of trash fell on domes and started sliding to the ground. The box skidded noisily and crashed against the far dome. A shadow moved and I yanked the limp Nova around the curve as I saw the ruby light glowing. Behind me something suddenly hissed and there was a crumbling and a gushing of liquids.

I scooped Nova up in my arms and ran. I zig-zagged in a

stumbling fashion, then found I was at the back of a bar, or at least a place with some people in it. I slumped against the curving dome, drawing air with ragged breaths, still holding Nova. Finally, I eased her to the ground and tried bringing her around, then I stopped.

I had to think before she awoke and came at me with questions. Who the hell was trying to kill me? The first answer was that Nova had a jealous suitor, but I hadn't expected this from any of them. The nuvomartians I had met were stand-up, punch-out types, not backshooters or assassins.

Who, then? I hadn't made any enemies on Mars, except those connected with Nova.

But Brian Thorne had enemies. Nothing personal, mind you, but a thousand men would like to see me dead. A stock shift here, a chairmanship there, a directorate given to someone else. Five-to-four decisions made five-to-four the other direction. Nothing personal, Thorne, but drop dead.

Or one of the Neopolitikons, with their ideas of Communism mixed with a sort of ego fascism. Kill Thorne for the People's Sake. Nothing personal, Thorne, you are just a symbol.

A nut, driven mad in the ghettos of the poor, one day sees me drive by in a car at the moment he goes manic, and I am the focus. Nothing personal, mister, because I am mad.

Or something personal. A failure who blames me. An incompetent employee fired by one of my managers and I am in the crosshairs. The son of a board chairman whom I have caught stealing and who turned suicide as a result of the discovery. The present lover of an ex-mistress who thinks there might be something in my will for her.

A man with a laser.

I knew I would have to check. I wondered if they would have any Null-Edit tapes here. No, that would take too long. A tight beam was the only fast way. Would a Publitec flack be allowed to spend that kind of money? My only hope was that they knew nothing of the way a flack operates.

Then I grinned ruefully. Who was I hiding from? At least one man here knew who I was. I was either being killed because I was Nova's lover or because I was Brian Thorne.

As gently as possible I slapped Nova awake and stifled her groaning questions with a hand over her mouth. I ignored her protests about a broken jaw and told her someone was trying to kill me and did she know who it might be?

"Sure, about ten or twelve diggers, a handful of grubbers, one computer jockey, and a Marine. At last count."

"I'm serious, Nova."

"So am I. But I don't think they'd do it from the dark. Well, maybe one . . . no, he'd switch control units on your sandcat and it would seal the doors and exhaust the oxy about fifteen kilometers out. Or something. Jesus, Diego, don't you have any *old* enemies?"

"You don't seem surprised that people would try."

She rubbed her jaw as she got to her feet. "That's life. And death. Some people buy what they want, some charm it, some build it. Some kill for it. Someone either wants me bad enough to void you, or

there's more to you than flackery."

"Come on," I said wearily. "Let's get in where there are people."

She limped along next to me and shook her head. "Well, I must say being around you is not dull. Why did you knock me out? Oh, never mind, I understand. There was no time to explain. Next time I'll be more alert. It isn't often I'm next to Ground Zero at an assassination."

I looked at her in amazement "Does this happen around here often?"

"No You are the first assassination I know of."

"*Attempted* assassination."

"Yeah, that, too. Well, this isn't exactly Fun City Park, but it's not the Vault of Horror either. The people here feel strongly about things. I'll have Dad's agent get that dome sealed up and the damages paid."

"There are two domes. One full of something wet."

"Oh, dear. We'd better tell Maintenance. Come on, there's a telecom in Flynn's."

She walked on ahead of me, then stopped to take a rock out of her boot. "You sure mess up a girl dragging her like that," she said. "I'm bleeding in a couple of spots."

"Better red than dead," I said.

"Better bed than dead. Listen, Diego, let's make that call and go over to the Guild for tonight, huh? I suddenly feel very interested in life-enhancing actions." She looked up at me with a sudden grin. "Don't get yourself killed, huh? I haven't used you up, yet."

"Oh, thanks," I said.

"You're welcome. But don't get a big head; I tell that to everyone who has failed an assassination assignment. You were a terribly uncooperative assassinee, Diego."

"Goddamn, you are a cheerful demidead person."

"Not me," she grinned. "I am going to live forever and get the money-back offer on my geriatric treatments. Come on."

I followed her, looking carefully into the various darknesses we passed. We made the call to Maintenance, bought a few drinks and evaded hands; all the while I rather nervously scrutinized everyone. We rented a new room for the night, this one guarded by a two-meter hulk who smiled at Nova as though he were a child and it was his birthday, and glowered at me as if I had taken away all the presents. Nova coaxed him into lending me a spare Colt laser that someone had forgotten.

Even as we made love, with that special kind of feverish intensity that people have when life seems short, I knew where that weapon was every second.

In the morning I coded two messages and put them on the net that would move it around to the side facing Earth, or the synchronous satellite that was in equilateral orbit. They would be sent in tightbeam high-speed blurts to Earthcom, then down to the surface. When Huo received it with my *Drop Everything Else* colophon I expected he would do just that, and a reply should be back in a few days at the latest. The message to him was simple and short: *Who is trying to kill me and why?*

The other coded enquiry was to Sandler, my accountant. *Earthside Thorne red herring. Am assassin target here. Investigate,*

inform care of Diego Braddock, Bradbury. I signed it “Brian Thorne.”

Now all I had to do was stay alive.

One of my first reactions was to grab a sandcat and head for some isolated knob and hole up, but my next thought-train said that might be just what they wanted. No witnesses, maybe not even a body. Who would miss one of Publitex’s flacks?

I dug into the gear I had left in Wootten’s guild locker and got out my own Colt laser. I’m fully aware that I am a hopeless romantic, but I didn’t want to be a dead romantic. I did a few fast draws from the molded holster at my hip and felt a little better. It was a minor skill that I had not thought I would ever *really* need, but now I was glad for the hours of practice and the careful gun and holster fittings.

A laser is one of the deadliest weapons ever conceived for close fighting. The millisecond pulse of coherent light is the zapgun of old-time fiction, the disintegrator of popular writing back when we were first thinking of leaving that old ball of mud. There’s a thumb setting for pulse-per-second on the side, turning it from a single pulse firing into a multipulse ray that can slice like an invisible sword. As ruggedly as these weapons are constructed, however, such prolonged firing requires the powerful batteries to deliver their energy at a rate that can melt the circuitry. There is a vernier adjustment for intensity, and both controls can be reached with your thumb as the gun rests in the holster.

In addition, my holster has a telltale that will pick up the radio waves that are emitted during firing and send a tiny alerting shock into my thigh. If you are close enough you can hear laser discharge, but at any distance, or with enough ambient noise, they are pragmatically silent. Thus the telltale can make you aware of laser firings nearby.

The firing range of hand lasers is limited by the batteries, but their accuracy is one hundred percent within any visible range. While the gun is one hundred percent precise the man behind it might not be. That was what I was counting on.

Nova protested violently, but I sent her off toward home in her sandcat, along with four of Sunstrum’s friends. They all looked more than capable, and very angry that anyone would endanger Nova. Me, they didn’t care about. I didn’t blame them. Anyone who seems like a perennial laser target will find he has few friends. At least close friends.

Once Nova had left I suddenly felt very alone. Wootten and Puma were off in other directions, and I knew no one except the casual drinking buddies of the other night. None of them had enough of an investment in me to stay by me, and I didn’t blame them, either.

They were all curious, but kept carefully neutral. Maybe the assassins were some of Nova’s admirers and they didn’t want a blood feud. Killing me wouldn’t affect anything, no Guild or Legion, unless someone else got sliced in the process. I was politely asked to leave two different bars and I went quietly.

This was not the first time I had been the assassin’s target. I was always hoping it would be the last, but somehow it never was. I couldn’t tell anyone who I was, or at least, I didn’t think I could and didn’t think it would do any good anyway. I was beginning to think it might be better to follow my first impulse and get the hell out of Bradbury. I couldn’t shoot down everyone who came near me, and they had the advantage of

anonymity.

It took both my Unicard and my Publitem card to rent a sandcat. I could see the owners were not interested in having one of their valuable machines disabled or ruined. Not even valid assurances of unlimited credit and complete insurance coverage would do it, not until I guaranteed double the full cost of the sandcat, and was backed by the Publitem power. And then I only think they did it to get me out of town.

I headed west, then veered north, messing up a trail turn with my treads so they couldn't be sure which way I went. I cut east when a lucky sandstorm came along. I was driving blind, navigating by bleeper and satellite, taking my bruises as I hit rocks and fell over the edges of small craters and ancient rilles. But the sandcat is built rugged and I had a good seat. I was well east of Bradbury when the storm veered off and I cut south again, this time to combine pleasure with hide-out, and stopped in a gully near the Star Palace about sunset.

I ran the heat sensors over the ruins from a distance and used night-light and sonar and everything else I could find, including squinting. Then I rolled the sand-cat right into the Star Palace and backed it into an odd-shaped exterior room that was part of the base of the structure. I took a light and checked my laser and climbed out of the cat.

I stood listening for a long time, not focusing, only receiving. There was only the sound of a slight wind. The Star Palace was still dead. The cooling metal of the sandcat's engine went *ping* and then there was only the whisper of wind.

The opening I had backed into was large, one of a series that ran around the base of the ruin, opening outward, each a monoclinic or triclinic shape, a negative crystal formation, each facet composed of millions of smaller facets. Even in the dim afterglow of sunset there were fire-sparks here and there at the lower levels and as I looked up there were the fabled crystal spires, the luminous domes that caught the faintest traces of light, the sheer sloping walls of great polished facets, the traceries of gemstone lace, and the incredible structure that science said was a natural formation and logic said could not be. Organically grown and controlled crystalline architecture seemed to be the only answer. But what artists, what architects, had conceived and constructed such a mountain of beauty? It was filled with halls and caverns, small rooms and large, each flowing from one to another so that you were not certain where one stopped and another began.

I roamed for an endless time in this unique and beautiful structure. Tomorrow, in the sunlight, I knew it would be a different experience, as the solar light came down through the crystals, bathing this chamber in emerald green, that one in ruby red, this long high hall in dappled rainbow.

But now, as I wandered, my powerful handbeam sent back refractions from a million surfaces, reflecting and rereflecting until I seemed to stand in space with light above and below, shifting monumentally with each small movement of the torch. I came out on a smooth balcony and looked up at the stars and galaxies and unseen radio giants.

Man was small and the universe was vast beyond comprehension. I thought the standard thoughts of someone faced by

beauty and size he cannot handle, then I went into a corridor of black crystals like orthorhombic mirrors, and further into a series of upward spiraling blue chambers, each smaller, bluer, and more complex than the one before it.

I was standing in the topmost chamber looking at the Queen's Soul, the crystalline star of ice blue, when the telltale touched my thigh with a warning I did not want to feel.

Somewhere close someone had fired a laser.

I jumped for the light, which I had set opposite the Queen's Soul, to shine through it in the night. I switched it off and stood perfectly still. I heard nothing, only, again, the faint rustle of wind.

Cautiously, I moved to an opening at the side of the chamber that lead out to a multilayered balcony of sorts, and stood without moving, listening to the night.

Why would anyone fire, except at me? I had no desire to be egotistical in this matter. There were lots of people I wouldn't mind their firing at, but why would they fire, except at me?

The sandcat. They had disabled the sandcat and now they would be searching for me. The laser was cool in my fist and I hadn't even been aware that I had drawn it.

I looked around me at the spires of crystal, some dark, some faintly shining against the stars. I didn't want a laser battle in this temple. I didn't want a laser battle anywhere. A laser fight is like a knife fight, or maybe a duel with sticks of dynablast, in that nothing gets out of it whole.

I started back down through the crystal corridors, from blue room to blue room, from darkened chamber to cool, smooth pearl-walled room to the vast Star King's Chamber with the hundreds of crystal stalactites that fell behind the thronelike place like a huge curtain. The names were all right out of the minds of the earliest explorers, but they often seem to fit with uncanny accuracy.

My gun touched a crystal growth and a tone sounded through the rooms and I froze. It seemed as loud as a dropped plate, but I heard no reaction. Had my telltale somehow malfunctioned, triggered by a bit of bounced radio waves? Had the crystals amplified something very distant?

I crept down, down, gun in hand, passing unseeing through fantastic glories, and finally felt sand under my boots. The sandcat was around to the right. Would they be waiting in ambush? Had they simply fired a pulse to hurry me to my only way out?

The palace was a dark, flat outline against the stars on this side. Only the spire tips and up-angled surfaces reflected the distant starlight. Everything else was impenetrable blackness.

I realized my grip on the laser was too tight and I flexed my fingers, feeling my heart pound, and imagining the adrenaline flow.

Fear is when you are unsure of your own ability, said Shigeta in my memory's ear *Fear can be a weapon you use. The imagination of your enemy can be your ally.*

Right, Shigeta. Where are you when I need you?

I moved along the curving wall, from chambered opening to sharp-edged arch. Again, as an overlay to the no-noise sounds of the night, I heard Shigeta speak.

It has become unfashionable amid these teeming billions to

be a survival type. Fortunately survival types are not overly affected by such fashions and manage to go on doing that which they do best: to survive, even to survive being unfashionable.

But was I a survival type? There had been times, yes, when I had been tested and thought that I was at least adequate. But the doubts crept in the armor chinks and ran down my mind like rivulets of sweat.

A country or a planet that kills completely the killer in man will be destroyed by any other country, planet, or race that still has that ability. A civilization is created by maintaining a balance between the pragmatic savage and his power and the impractical dreamer.

Yes, but what do you do in the starlit night when some zongo wants to slice you to a few shovelfuls of meat?

Your subconscious is your best aid. Hunter and hunted are symbiotic. Both sets of senses are alert to the same stimuli. Anything may be a sign, a warning, a sense trigger. Often, you do not consciously recognize the warning, for it is in the subconscious perceptions. Trust your instinctual reactions, for these instincts were the first you had and will be the last to go.

Suddenly, in the tense night I grinned. I remembered a beautiful black girl who had once told me, "If someone was after me I'd make sure not to trip."

The sandcat was two openings away. I waited a long time without moving, hardly breathing, still unsure whether the laser telltale had been true or not. I heard nothing, nothing that had not been there earlier. I started to come around the crystal column to move toward the sandcat's "garage."

There was a tiny scrape of something on something, sand gritted under a hard surface. I froze, now fully exposed. I half expected a bright red light to pin me to death.

I heard the faintest of rustles, my ears stretching out over the distance, and I drew back, my feet silent on the soft sands. I stood with my back against the crystals, feeling them press into my warm suit with a hundred sharp points.

Now what? I could get away in the darkness but at daylight they would find my tracks. I scanned the skies. Even to my inexperienced eyes, there seemed no hope of a sandstorm to give me cover. Besides, how would I live? All the food and water was in the sandcat, and it was a long way back to anywhere.

Could I hide in the Star Palace? Quickly I scanned my memory for what I knew of it, of the explorers' tapes and the University of Tokyo's fine film on it. There were lower depths, I thought. I vaguely remembered a single entrance in the bedrock, cut in the style of the Grand Hall, and some mention of older ruins below, a fragment of sentence about the possibility of the building having "grown" on a much older site.

I turned and went along the crystalline base and up the wide stairs, or what might be stairs, and into the Palace the only way I knew how to get in. I ran into several walls in the dark, and cut my cheek, then my elbow. I finally started using the light, dialed to pinpoint and on a low intensity.

It took me over an hour to find the spiral down. It was clogged with sand, and I could barely squeeze through into a small chamber of dark and rather pedestrian crystals. I dialed up the light and found the cut in the rock a little further on. I went back and smoothed over the sand by throwing handfuls back over my tracks. Then I went down into the bedrock.

There were rooms, all empty, all fairly equal in size, with nothing so complex as the triclinic openings and the spiraling open spaces of the fanciful structure high above me. There was the dust of ages and the simplicity of primitive building. It looked as though they had shaped existing caves or widened fractures in the rock.

I finally came to what seemed to be the last room and I stopped. I was tired, physically and emotionally. I sat down on a drifting dune of sand that perhaps had taken thousands of years to get this far down the complex. I lay back and closed my eyes.

Slowly I ran through the disciplines of relaxation, but not going quite so far as to close off my hearing. If they were coming, I wanted to know. I did not like the idea of death at all. I certainly did not welcome it as some do; to me, death was extinction, not a transition to a higher plane.

In a sudden, delayed thought it came to me that I had killed a man. Somehow it didn't seem to me that I had. I hadn't seen him dead, only injured. A wistful hope that they had lied to me persisted, but I knew they hadn't.

I had killed. I had killed not by accident, but with skills I had learned determinedly, killing skills, lethal arts. Like a fire department, I had hoped I would never have to use those abilities for anything but exercise. But I had known quite clearly what I was learning to do, just as I honed my abilities in other areas, such as target practice.

Friends of mine, rich and comfortable behind bonded guards and alarm systems, had sometimes derided me gently for "dabbling" in these deadly arts. They had asked what gunfighting or knife-fighting abilities had to do with our modern world, where most crime was either a sophisticated computer dodge or a mindless riot. There were crimes of passion, but not many. Much of the crime was corporate, huge, impersonal, done at board level or by the manipulations of the Families.

Direct, personal survival skills were seldom needed, or so they thought, disregarding driving hazards, urban riots, defecting guards, faulty alarm systems, and all the other failures of a complex technological civilization.

It seems to me that many, if not all, of those factors that keep an individual alive and functioning in dangerous situations might also be translated into national terms, into a country without tension, because it is confident and secure.

Survival is not just killing. Survival is something as broad as global ecology and as personal as watching both ways, even on a one-way street. It seems to me you should kill to eat, if you wanted meat, or when there is no other way to stay alive, but never just to kill. That is *not* survival, for all the creatures of the system are part of you, and if I survive I want the variety and pleasures of Earth, and Mars, to survive also. But I would kill the last unicorn on Earth if that were

absolutely the only way I could survive, and I would not feel guilty.

The most dangerous enemy man has is man himself. If you do not survive, that in which you believe also does not survive, unless your death somehow sustains it. I can see a man or woman dying for something they believe in, but how much better to fight and live to enjoy it?

Now I asked myself what I believed in so strongly that I would find it worth dying for, and I found nothing. That saddened me, for I really thought every man should have something important enough in his life for him to consider its survival worth his death.

It was very depressing to discover that about myself. Both Madelon and Nova came to mind, of course, but Madelon had removed herself, and Nova . . . I said I loved her, I believed I loved her, and I *wanted* to love her, but in some deep part of me I was actually unsure right now of my ability to open myself up to love.

To divert my mind from bleak depression I opened my eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

At first I just looked up without focusing; then I saw that I was looking at *something*. Across the entire ceiling of this room, an ancient chamber far below a structure last occupied twenty thousand years before, was a mural. It was brighter and clearer than any of those in the other ruins. I sat up, suddenly excited, flashing my beam here and there, revealing more and more of the mural to my astonished eyes.

There was a letdown as I realized the images were still as indistinct and as undecipherable as those found elsewhere, but here, in this oldest of habitations, the mural was the most complete and the brightest in color—and I was the first to discover it.

The images seemed to radiate outward from a center, in long curving arms like that of a spiral galaxy, coming out from a central radiance, gradually forming into more and more distinct shapes as they neared the ends of the spiraling arms. Vaguely amorphous humanoids, which could be winged and could be great insectoids and could be ships and could be decoration.

I lay back on the pile of sand and drank it in, putting my mind in neutral, not probing, just absorbing, drifting toward an assimilation of the whole. When pieces or moments of a work of art stand out it is often because the form is not complete, not unified, not integrated. When a work of art can be experienced all at one time, as in a painting, these factors are clear. When time and motion are involved, as in a dance or a tape or even a sensatron, then there is linear development, hence a variation in reaction, and sometimes this “bright spot, dull spot” theory can work for the artist, providing contrast, rest before activity, part of the selection process.

So I lay there and absorbed and did not judge or concentrate, for that can always be done. I found that I was wondering why man—and the long-dead Martians—created art at all. You didn’t need art to feed your body or to keep you warm or sheltered from the rains. But from the caves onward man had created art with a persistence second only to his desire to feed, to sleep, and to reproduce.

To deny food to your body is to die. To deny sex to your body is to deny life. To reject art is to impoverish yourself, rejecting pleasure and growth. We always think of those who have minimal interest in the

arts as dull clods, as insensitive beasts. But to accept your sexual self, and to accept art, is to add to yourself.

Art depicts the inner and outer manifestations of sex and living and feeling and dreams and frustrations. It reveals us to ourselves, or should.

Man persistently creates art under the most depressing as well as the most enjoyable circumstances. Some men and women create art as easily as breathing. For them, *not* to create would be to die. The mysterious process of creation is something that no one had ever stated clearly, at least to me. Some have said it is to go beyond oneself, to be “other” and “another” and more than the sum of the parts. Goldstone told me it was “to get high,” to become intoxicated with creation. Perhaps artists create to imitate god, to become a god by creating. Art is ego, but the attitude an artist may have about it, before or after, is the purest form of egotism.

Michael Cilento once said that it was to “escape to freedom . . . or to escape *from* freedom.” Freedom seems to be the constant. Freedom to create, freedom to create new images, new thoughts, new philosophies, new anything.

New worlds, perhaps.

Freedom to create Star Palaces and Grand Halls and perhaps the ultimate freedom from self. Maybe that was where the Martians had gone, simply creating the ultimate, artistic self, the purest ego, a disembodied form of energy to wander the universe, shaping it, or simply experiencing what they had found.

The concept of a race that had evolved beyond the flesh was an old one, but a persistent one, as though it was a sort of genetic goal.

I turned off the light and forced sleep upon myself. And the dreams forced themselves upon me.

9

It was hours before I awakened, and when I did I came awake like an animal, instantly alert, not moving, eyes wide in the utter blackness of the deep tomb. When I had determined that I had simply awakened, that nothing had jolted me back, I switched on the light and grinned to myself. I had rarely awakened like that, like a hunted animal. For some reason it was like a proof of skill, oddly pleasing.

I started back up, checking the ceilings of several rooms as I passed; here and there were faint remains of other ceiling murals, very ancient and in a bad state of repair. But my mind was on more immediate things.

Laser in hand, I crept up the curving steps, my light off, with only the faint glow from above to guide me. It was day, and as my head cleared the rock and I was into the lowest level of the crystal palace I was fully alert, with all senses out at the extremes.

I hardly glanced at the rainbow of sunlit glories that I found, from

lemon yellow, intimate enclosures to curved-ceiling sanctums of positive and negative green rosettes, from snowy white salons of milky smooth lumps flowing and blending to tiny cells of patterned intersecting circles, each a convoluted, three-dimensional design of pinpoint-faceted crystals. My eyes followed my gunpoint and I went as silent as a shadow, crossing colorless crystal floors, looking down into a forest of stalagmites that seemed random from some points and clearly designed from others. I went swiftly over smoky, delicate bridges that spanned what seemed like liquid crystal pools of many colors, and through grottos of crimson swirls, and past nooks and niches of amber and azure and palest pink. I went as swiftly as possible through the familiar and the unfamiliar, feeling my way, moving fast, then moving slowly to the final portico and the sight of the sands beyond.

After a period of listening and looking I ran as fast as I could straight out into the sands, threw myself over a dune, rolled, and ran to the right. I moved around the Palace until I found what I hoped was my own track, then followed it, coming in from the desert where, if they were still here, they might least expect me.

I hoped.

I lay on the sand, behind a tiny crystal growth, like a bush in the desert, and surveyed the openings around the base of the big building. Here on this side the prevailing wind had not piled the drifting sand, and there was more open space. And another set of sandcat tracks. They had stopped here, then turned left. But had they dropped off someone with a Magnum Laser equipped with a heatscope and some experience with it?

I backed out into the desert and went to the left. I found their sandcat parked in another compartment a quarter circle on, and saw where they had carelessly backed in and had broken off the edge of the opening, grinding the crystals under the treads. Somehow that made me angrier than their unexplained attempts to murder me. Like the behavior of that mad fool who had used a hammer on Michaelangelo's *Pieta* or of the suicidal Arab who had taken a laser to the Wailing Wall, this was a totally senseless act of destruction. I raised my weapon and sliced into the cab with vicious cuts, trusting the resistance of the metal to keep the beam from going through to the back of the chamber.

The pressurized cabin blew outward but as the pressure inside was not that much greater than that outside there was not much noise. I dropped the muzzle and put a series of pulses through the forward drive train, ruining forever this particular sandcat.

If they were going to get me they would have to walk home—and I didn't think they'd make it.

As soon as I finished firing I started running, for I knew they'd have telltales as well. I went out into the desert, then curved again toward my own vehicle. I had to check it quickly, while they investigated the killing of their cat.

I ran quickly out of the shelter of the dunes, my breath coming hard in the thin air, my heart pounding wildly, fully expecting to feel the silent sword of a laser pulse ripping through me at any moment. I gained the shelter of a crystal opening, but felt no protection behind the millenium-old walls. Their polished surfaces might reflect a portion of the

tight light beam, but not enough. I had to move fast.

I zig-zagged in and out of two more arches and then I was at my machine. Nothing seemed wrong until I saw they had neatly cut away the lock. I jumped up on the step and looked in, wary of booby traps, and saw that they had fused the ignition switch with a low-intensity burn. I jumped back down and then I heard the voices.

“Goddamn it, Ashley, watch that cat!”

I heard the crunch of footsteps in the sand and I ducked into the dark behind the cat, trying to control my ragged breathing. There was a sudden surge of something that was almost joy. It rushed over me in a hot wave, making me tremble, mixing with the fear. Just for a second, just for a fleeting nanosecond or three I was *glad* to be able to strike back, to *do* something. I crouched, primitive and ready, the laser tight in my fist, my finger tense.

Someone came into the crystal cave, paused, grunted faintly as if satisfied no one had been near, and then came quickly around the cat to hide in the dimness behind.

If I hadn't been ready, and scared, he might have gotten me. He was very fast. My beam sliced into his chest and my nervous finger held down the trigger, but by then he was falling, falling through the beam, falling in bloody hunks and sections and gobbets of meat. He hit and sloshed over my feet and rolled against my leg, and his laser scraped the back of the cat but never went off.

The sounds of still-functioning organs were nightmarish. I fought vomiting as I wrenched my foot from under the lump of his head and one shoulder and shoved back against the wall. The blood was soaking into the sands, and he had lost all sphincter and bladder control. The growing stench was nauseating and unforgettable, but I scuffed my bloody feet in the sand and threw myself on the ground just behind the forward track, looking under the machine toward the entry from which the other— or others—should come.

“Ashley!”

Ashley had nothing to say, so they came on carefully and cautiously. I could see two of them.

Grading your opponents should be quite automatic, I heard Shigeta say. When combat comes, if it comes, you take the most dangerous man first . . . and fast.

I shot the one who was the closest through the chest. My hands had been shaking too much for a head shot. I knew I hit him, but I couldn't wait to watch him fall. I rolled over and shot around the bottom of the track at the other one, and missed. I fired again but I was a millisecond late and he burned through the headlight over my head, showering me with glass and bits of molten metal. But he was too far from shelter and I hit him with my next shot. He fell, but I could see I had only slashed into his leg, and before I could aim again he had dragged himself past the curve of the base and out of my sight.

Were there more?

Could I fix the fused ignition and drive away? Could I leave the wounded man? There is something odd about wounded men. By the rules of the game they are supposed to be neutralized, out of the fight, so you treat them with respect and love and care. But that son-of-a-bitch

had tried to kill me. And might again. Game!

I hesitated, then dodged around the arch and ran back up into the Star Palace. I moved through a space composed of latticed crystal fancies and a bowl-shaped atrium of tiered rosettes, open to the dark Martian sky, then onto a wandering balcony, fringed with spires no bigger than my arm, no two alike. I moved along, gun at the ready, trying to estimate where the wounded man had hidden. I kept up a scan of the ground below and the balconies above, nervous as a cat.

It is not so important to win a fight, Shigeta said with unbidden intrusion, but it is important not to let the other man win.

I saw scuffmarks in the sand and a few droplets of blood. I climbed over the balcony, careful of the crystal fancies, and went down the slope on the facets of the lower base. I angled off to the right, beyond where he was secreted. I moved slowly and carefully, watching my shadow, fully exposed should he or another step out into the sand. Finally I crawled into a flat spot and edged slowly to the rim.

I could see one foot. I debated shearing it off and if he had moved it I might have. I felt no bloodlust, only a very desperate need to survive. The removal of his foot would have been no more painful than firing a grossly inefficient employee. I was feeling calmer now, and a bit more confident.

But the foot did not move. When at last I edged further out, my laser aimed and ready, I saw the reason. A large pool of blood. What was the line from *Macbeth*, about not knowing there was so much blood in him?

I felt sick.

When at last I crawled the rest of the way down and dropped onto the sands I knew it was over. Just to be certain I took another quick look through the Palace, but there were only the three. I thought about burying them, but decided the authorities had best see everything the way it was.

I grinned wryly to myself. What authorities? The Marine commandant at Ares? A Guild council head?

The ignition on the assassins' sandcat was untouched. It took me most of the day to take it out, repair my own cat, and transfer what supplies there were. It was almost sunset when I headed toward Bradbury.

Behind me was one of the most beautiful buildings in the System. And three dead men. But I had discovered two important things. First, just before I left I noticed that the broken crystals near the killers' cat had glazed over. I examined the surfaces closely and thought I knew why the Star Palace was still so beautiful, even after all these sandy centuries. The crystals were regrowing, ever so slowly, but regrowing to the original formation, or perhaps to a new configuration.

The second thing I learned was about myself. Three hired killers had come after me and I had vanquished them. Despite the revulsion, despite the fear and pain, I was jubilant. Tested and not found wanting!

This time Shigeta and his eternal admonishments thrust into my consciousness. *Believing yourself the best man can get you killed or defeated. Better to always be a little scared than to walk tough. Beware the reputation that makes men desire to test you.*

I was beginning to understand Shigeta more all the time.

I didn't expect an answer yet from Huo, but I checked anyway, just to be certain. What I did get was a surprise, a Null-Edit tape from Bowie, my chauffeur and personal guard.

"It came in on the *Ivan Dimitri*, right after you touched down," the dispatcher with the leg stumps told me. I kept my eyes off his stumps and kept the images away. "It's been following you all around."

I thanked him and borrowed a reader and the privacy of his toilet. I sat on the ceramic stool and read the code on the outside of the biskit and dialed it into the reader. Nothing. I depressed the personal code key and redialed. Perhaps it was Huo, routed through Bowie as a ruse. But all I got was gibberish.

I redialed, leaving off the personal code. The random numbers tape, on which this had been recorded, had been keyed to my own company code. When I hit the green tab I heard the coded beep on the audio track and knew it was synchronous.

The screen blipped and there was Bowie. He looked very nervous. "Sir," he said almost in a whisper, "I know I'm not supposed to know where you are, but I had to warn you. There's something wrong here. I can't figure out what it is." He looked around, as if in fear of being found. "I . . . I thought it was odd when you didn't take me along, but I figured that was your business. Then I was assigned to Mr. Huo, but only in the outer cells." He looked slightly hurt as he said, "You know my rank. It seemed strange that I'd be . . . well . . . overlooked like that. Unless they thought I was a little too loyal to you. Then I heard something, just a part of a conversation, and I figured you were on Mars."

He grinned into the camera and said, "And good for you! I mean, that's great! So I figured it was all a hush-hush so that you could do your number and everything would be null-zongo. I really envied you, if you want to know the truth."

Bowie grew serious. "Then I saw Osbourne and Sayles going into Mr. Huo's private elevator. They're a shifty pair. No one ever proved anything about that Metaxa affair, but I have my ideas. After that no guardian company would bond them, so they started doing freelance muscle. At least, that's the word."

Bodigard, Commguard, the Burns Agency, and all the rest of the quality security agencies had a standard policy that was quite effective. If any of their bonded agents—a term they preferred over bodyguard and security man—ever violated that bond, the agencies were pledged not only to pursue that violator to the limits of the law, but to pursue him without stop and with little regard to extradition, legality, or anything else; that is, *never* to stop until he was legally or illegally dead, if his crime was sufficient. As a result, the bonded guards were loyal, well-paid, and intelligent.

"Franky, sir, I think they are going out to assassinate you. I'm sending this out on the *Dmitri*, but they are going out on it, too. I hope this gets to you before they do. Go to ground, sir, or get the hell back here in a hurry. Something definitely odd is happening! There's a Brian Thorne out there in the boonies, but now I think it's a double, not just a

marker moving on paper. Watch yourself.”

The screen went blank and there was just electron rubble until the tape ended. I sat staring at the tiny rectangle. *Thank you, Bowie.*

I suppose I should have felt shocked and betrayed, but I was just numb. Huo had been my right-hand man for years, always efficient, always loyal. If Bowie was correct, it was apparently a major change in the man’s character. But maybe this element had been there all the time, hidden, suppressed, kept waiting until the right moment.

It seemed so unlikely. Before Huo started working for me he had been with Randall/Bergstresser, working his way up from junior urbomax programmer to department head. His record was spotless, his dossier portraying a model of the ambitious but ethical man. He had done some minor investing in the market and had made a modest profit, steadily adding to his portfolio over the years. He had bought into a number of my own corporations even before I put him under contract, and, with various stock options, he was respectably well off.

What would Huo gain from my death? If my Mars trip was not revealed to my board of directors they would think I was still running around in the hinterlands, a ruse I myself had help set up. That *could* give Huo time to shift a few million from Column A to Column B, to sell a company off at rock bottom price and to buy it himself, to rig the computer payouts, to rape a company of assets, and so on. But how much could he steal?

I laughed at myself. I remembered when even a million New Dollars seemed like the largest sum of power and energy there was. Yes, Huo could steal more than he would ever make as my assistant, even limiting himself to the “legal” thefts that would never be discovered if I died. He could steal himself a lifetime of luxury in a year. Real power, real luxury, came very high indeed on our overpopulated Earth. Even second-in-command to Brian Thorne could not hope to live as Brian Thorne might.

Just like the boss, huh, Huo?

Women. Lots of women. Big bosomy blondes, all silken and eager. All your sexual fantasies fulfilled, Huo. Overpopulation made life cheap. Fathers sold their daughters into contract slavery just to be certain they survived and were fed. And those women would be quite eager to please, to get out of the megacities, to get out of the lower depths of the arcology cities, to submit to the power of their contractors.

Power. All kinds of power in a world bulging with the weak and the weakened. Toy with lives, change their reality, play God.

And all the rest. Food, homes, delights, services, protection, fame.

But only if I am dead.

And not dead as Brian Thorne, but as Diego Braddock.

Was it so simple that all I had to do was send a tight-beam to my board of directors, saying I was alive and well on Mars and to slap Huo in jail?

No, he’d produce the double. It was probably a good double. When was the last time I had met with the board? Four months before the trip out—that was five months ago. A man can change a lot in five months, Huo would say, if anyone noticed the double’s slight differences.

Wait, I had seen Fredrickson a week or so before I left. No, that still left two months or more, time for a lot of changes.

How long had Huo been planning this? There was all that time after Madelon, all those many, many months of just not wanting to be concerned with all the businesses, all the decisions. Huo had done a fine job then. I had given him an enormous bonus, enough to retire on. But not live in the luxury he saw around me.

Envy is such a useless emotion. At least you can understand greed. Greed was responsible for most of our technology, and I suppose we deserve what we got.

Suppose I just got on a return flight and went home? Could I be certain one of the crew or one of the passengers was not an agent? Was I trapped here? I started getting mad again. No one tells Brian Thorne what to do! Some of my victor's elation returned. I would go home on the next ship, and damn any claw-fingered zongo to stop me! I'd walk into my office and laser that son-of-a-bitch right at my own desk! He'd fall down in bloody chunks and—

I was feeling sick again.

I returned the reader after wiping the tape, then double-wiping it for any residual magnetism. I dropped the tape into a torch-labeled container on the street and checked into a Guild-operated hostel. I paid extra for a private room and I lay there a long time trying to figure it out.

By now Huo knew I knew someone was trying to kill me. He wouldn't know I suspected him, or I thought not, at any rate. Were the three I killed Osbourne and Sayles and some hired gun? Were there others?

I got up, went out, climbed back into my one-eyed sandcat, and took off for the Sunstrum mine. I climbed down off the cat tired and scratch-faced and just stood there, holding onto the door. Sven Sunstrum cycled the lock and came out to me himself. He looked at me and at the beat-up cat and at the patch I had welded over the broken lock so I could pressurize the cabin.

"Come in," he said.

I sat down in the living room of their dome, slumped into a chair. They looked at me expectantly, waiting. "My name isn't Diego Braddock," I said. "It's Brian Thorne."

"*The Brian Thorne?*" Nova asked, her eyes wide.

I nodded. "I came here incognito so I could avoid trouble." I smiled sadly at that. "Now I'm afraid I might get someone hurt."

"Do you need help?" Sunstrum asked.

"Someone is trying to kill me." I took a deep breath and let it out, slowly. "And I don't know why. Or which why."

Sunstrum looked at his daughter, then back at me. "Over Nova?" he said.

I shook my head. "I don't know. Probably not. They are very professional."

Li Wing said, "There are many types of men here. They were many things before. It attracts certain kinds of men, men who would know how to kill." Her eyes went from me to her husband.

"Who would want to kill you?" asked Sunstrum. "As Thorne, I mean."

I shrugged. "Many, I suppose."

"Brian Thorne," Nova said thoughtfully. "I thought you were much older."

I grinned wearily at her. "Right now I am." The exhaustion was setting in as my body ran out of adrenaline.

Nova said to her parents, "He's Brian Thorne."

"I heard him explain, dear," Li Wing said softly.

"No, you don't understand. He's *Brian Thorne*." Her face clouded. "Why didn't you tell me?"

I sighed and her father spoke. "He didn't want you hurt." He looked at me. "What are you going to do now? Do you want us to protect you here? We could get a message off to Earthcom right away."

"No," I said. "To tell the truth, I don't know what I want. I just wanted to tell you . . . Nova and you."

"You didn't tell me before," Nova said, "because you wanted me to love the real you, not all that money, right?"

"Please, dear," Li Wing said.

"Well, isn't it?"

"I've told you now," I said. "I think I'd like to sleep." And I think I did, right then, right there.

10

I awoke in the dark with a warm, soft body slithering up my torso. A fruit-fresh mouth coming to me in the night, bearing gifts of love. I held her rounded bare hips in my hands and said, "No."

"It will make you feel better, darling."

"My mind wouldn't be on it," I said, and grinned. "And that would be a waste."

She took the rebuff without rancor and snuggled next to me, and we held each other. "What are you going to do now?" she asked at length.

"I'm going back to town to see if there is anything in yet." I stopped her protests with fingers on her lips. "I may have gotten them all, so don't worry."

"But suppose you haven't!"

"No one lives forever, not even with the longevity treatments, love. I'll be careful. But I must have information to work on."

She hugged me tighter and I felt the rich bounty of her breasts against my side and the protective thigh across my loins. I breathed her black mist of hair and for moment I just wanted to stay there, safe, until the bad guys went away.

But they weren't going away. They wouldn't be paid for missing. If they were locals recruited for the job they'd want the money. If they were professionals they had their reputations to maintain. *Even assassins have egos and images to maintain*, I thought ruefully.

No, they'd try again. If I had gotten the local crew there would

be another, or the local control would recruit another team. Because of Nova there might be more than a few ready to prepare me for a burial in several parts.

I had to return to town, though. Null-Edit tapes are delivered only to the addressee. I needed information, and even a bland *Don't worry, boss* from Huo would tell me something, in a negative fashion.

Sunstrum had fixed my sandcat's headlight and recharged my laser. Nova took it badly that she couldn't go, and was angry when neither her father nor I would allow any of the miners to go along to watch for backshooters. It wasn't that I didn't want one, I just couldn't ask any of them to risk his life for a man he probably didn't like anyway, just to obey his boss, whom he did like.

I came back into Bradbury from the north, slipping in as the tail-end cat in an ore train down from Arlington Burl's Enyo and Eris mines. Dusty and dented, we pulled into a dump yard and I slipped away without anyone paying much attention.

The legless dispatcher handed me a Null-Edit tape and a tightbeam message and shoved a reader toward me without a word. I went into my "office" and hunkered down on the toilet to see what Huo had to say.

If I hadn't been alerted I wouldn't have been suspicious. There Huo was, sitting at his desk at the General Anomaly office, looking cool and confident, but slightly troubled.

"Sir, I received your tightbeam and hurried to shoot one back for confidential taping." He looked as earnest and as reliable as ever. "But, sir, we have to have more information. Who is trying to kill you? Are these trained personnel or local recruits? Did you recognize any of them?"

He looked at some red-backed reports quickly, and glanced at someone off pickup. "Mr. Thorne, we are investigating this as rapidly as we can. If you keep yourself handy we will get a complete report to you as soon as possible."

Stay still, Thorne, I can shoot better that way. Moving targets are no fair.

"All other business is going well, sir, everything normal."

Stay calm, don't get worried, sit there until the target we painted on you gets dry.

"I'll get back to you as soon as possible, sir." He started to click off, but stopped. A frown of concern creased his brow. "And, sir, watch yourself."

You bet I will, Huo-boy.

Was I being overly suspicious? Was the problem a fantasy of Bowie's? Why, after all these years, should I doubt Huo? But Bowie was neither a drinker nor a psycho, and I had known his courage and loyalty for a long time.

I simply could not take a chance. I had to go back to Earth, and fast.

I ripped open the seal on the tightbeam message. It was from Sandler, and my heart sank. *Expensive joke or poor swindle. Thorne here and in good health. Too busy to play games. Reporting your nonsense to Publitex. Sandler, Gen. Anomaly.*

Either they had gotten to him, or the double was superb. I was suddenly sorry I had not worked out some sort of personal code with Lowell, but it was too late to do anything by long distance.

I returned the reader and cached the tape and the message flimsy in case I needed them later, in court. But somehow I doubted that this sort of thing would be settled in any court.

I borrowed the dispatcher's city communicator and called the shuttle office. "What's the first ship back to Earth?"

"The *Elizabeth II* is going back in, oh, ten hours."

"I have return passage for one, any class. Please verify. The name is Braddock, from Publitec."

There was a long pause and when he spoke the voice was different. "Uh, listen, I have a message here, fella. Your ticket has been nulled. No credit. Sorry. I guess your company has cut off your air."

Yes, I was certain they had. It was a cheap ploy, but it was momentarily effective. And a moment might be all they needed. I was so used to my Unicard that for a moment I was at a loss to figure out how to buy my passage. Then several alternatives occurred to me, from selling the goods I had brought to having someone else buy a ticket.

I started back to the sandcat. I intended to tape a block of explanation and goodbye to Nova, look up someone to buy my goods, head for the Spaceport, and go.

At the Guild office I ran into Johann, who looked at me funny. "Just the man I wanted to see," I said, pulling him aside. "What do you offer me for the stuff I brought in?"

His eyes narrowed and he looked uncomfortable and found it hard to speak. "I need passage money," I said. "Quick. I've got troubles, Johann. All I need is enough to get back."

"You have nothing to sell, Braddock. They slapped an embargo on all your goods and sealed every container. There was some kind of notice from Earth and the Marine captain is looking for you. They say you're a thief. Some kind of computer switch they say."

I looked at him hard. "Do you think I'm a thief?"

"No. But they're looking anyway."

I was neatly boxed. I had no tangibles to transform into a passage ticket. But I might have an intangible. "Johann . . . have you ever heard of Brian Thorne?"

He looked at me narrowly. "He after you?"

"No. I'm him. I'm Brian Thorne."

Johann looked around the bar and his eyes wouldn't meet mine. "Got any proof?" I shook my head.

"I didn't think I'd need any."

Johann looked into the middle distance and spoke slowly. "I don't say you are, and I don't say you aren't, but I heard talk. The *Robert Oppenheimer* got in yesterday and there's a lot of gossip going around."

He paused, looking me over, and I indicated that he should go on.

"The talk is . . . that Brian Thorne has gone busted. It was only mentioned because he was the push behind the archaeological digs around here." He was watching me for reaction, but I ignored him.

So Huo had done more than gouge a few million. He had managed to shift everything. And Sandler either helped or was massively deceived. Probably the latter. They must have a good double, someone who had been in training for years.

Suddenly the full impact of it hit, emotionally as well as intellectually. I was busted, broke, and worse. I had killers after me and I was boxed up on a world almost without friends.

I turned back into an awareness of Johann's inspection. I shrugged. "I'm Thorne. Braddock is just a getaway name, when I want privacy." He shrugged back, indicating a neutral opinion. "I don't blame you," I said. "But I need to get back to Earth. Someone . . . several someones . . . are hunting me."

Johann took another long look and shrugged. "I'd stake you, but I don't think I have the cash. There's something wrong with the net, too; we can receive but we can't see, to send past the satellite. They ought to have it fixed in a day or so. I could get a message through to my bank and have the passage paid for at that end, but . . ."

"Never mind. Thank you. I'll go see the Sunstrums." He nodded agreement. I went out of the bar and was heading toward the sandcat lot when they tried again.

This time I was alert and ready. I took my time making an approach to the sandcat. I stood between two big fertilizer drums and studied the hiding places within sight of the quickest transportation back to the landing field. Everything seemed to be normal. Or as normal as I imagined it should be. There were two dusty drivers checking shocks on the second ore transporter and one lone miner doing some welding on a batter stripper with the Arlington Burl logo.

I edged out and walked quickly and purposefully toward the cat. I was reaching up toward the latch when the door sizzled and the paint boiled and popped.

Throwing myself sideways as I drew, I hit the ground in a roll and kept rolling until I was behind the next vehicle. Either they hadn't set their laser right or they were a long way off, but I was alive. I jumped up and ran in a crouch past two more transporters and halted behind a trencher. I searched the probable area where they might be, but saw nothing.

My boots kicked up puffs of dust as I turned and sprinted for the nearest dome cluster, angling past it and running hard. There was an area between my shoulder blades that just seemed to *wait* for a laser bolt.

My breath was coming hard when I pulled up between a repair dome and a parts storage building. I was also angry. I didn't like running, I didn't like getting shot at, I didn't like not knowing who it was that was shooting. But since there wasn't much I could do about it, I started walking toward the landing site.

It was full dark when I got there but there was one shuttle on the ground besides the gray-colored port lifter. I couldn't read the name, but the logo was Spaceflight's black-and-gold.

They were bound to have someone here, but I had to take that chance. I watched from under a big Caterpillar ore carrier until it seemed safe, then started running towards the Spaceflight shuttle. Far off to my left the fused sand surface of the field bubbled and collapsed in a long rip

at right angles to my run. I broke stride, veering to the left to throw the shooter off, and vaulted the sudden slit bubbling before me. My telltale was pinging furiously and I was scared.

But panicking is a self-destructive state and the worse time to panic is during stresses that produce panic. So I kept running, zigging and zagging as I sought the shelter of the big solid shuttle. At least its bulk would slow down the burn of any hand-held laser.

I careened around the rear end of the shuttle and one of the blinker lights and part of a hatch control were cut off. The bits and pieces clattered to the fused sand as I jumped up on the opposite side of the shuttlecraft from the assassins.

I looked down to see one, two, three long rips appear below me on the surface of the field. They were firing under the landing pods, hoping to cut me off at the ankles. I took a fix, backtracking along the ruler-straight lines, then leaped up to fire over the back hatch. I sent several pulses into the darkness, then swept the arc before me with a dangerous expenditure of energy. There was a crash and a gurgling scream and I pulled back with a laser almost too hot to handle. The blue warning light was blinking and I didn't dare fire it again for awhile.

The entrance port of the shuttle was dogged shut and my pounding produced no response. I felt very much alone out there and scanned the darkness for flanking snipers.

Suddenly I was pinned by a bright cone of light. "What the hell is going on out there?" There was a roar of anger from the port shuttlecraft as the commander flooded the area with light.

You'll be the death of me, I thought grimly as I remained motionless, hugging the steel of the shuffle. *Turn that light off!*

The light swung away and was scanning the area where I had targeted my shots, but I didn't wait to see what damage I had caused. I ran.

The fused sand field beneath my feet gave way suddenly to the soft sand of the desert and I slogged on through the transporter tracks and the churned-up parking areas. I ran blindly and sought darkness as safety.

When I fell at last with gasping exhaustion behind the time-melted lip of a small crater I was without thought. I was grateful to be alive, and very weary. After some time I began to pull myself together. The laser was still hot, but the warning light had gone off. I couldn't check the charge in the dark, but it had to be low.

Slowly, I began to think.

They were watching the port here. Would they be watching it as Ares Center, or Burroughs? How many *were* there? It seemed as if a faceless army was out to get me. Anyone I met on any street could be one of them!

Finally I got to my feet and faced back toward the port. I could see lights and both shuttles were lit up. I could see someone standing up in the hatch of one, and several others against the light. There were two sandcats approaching and one had a flashing red light atop it.

Should I go back and tell the local authorities the problem? How could I be certain some of them had not been bought? My frustration turned again to anger, and I started off to the left, circling the field and

coming up on several sandcats parked near Kochima's Star Palace. The second one was unlocked, provisioned, and ready. I climbed in and took off with a roar, heading out.

I didn't even know what direction I was going in, I was just going fast. I had to think and not be looking over my shoulder at the same time. After a fast hour of thump-and-jerk, I stopped to consult the automap.

I was here. The Sunstrum complex was there. Star Palace was about here. Bradbury was behind me. I was afraid now to go to the Sunstrums. The killers must know about my relationship with Nova and they might try for another kill when I was there. I didn't want to endanger the Sunstrums needlessly, so I headed toward the Star palace. Maybe I could get enough time to think it out and find a solution.

I spun the wheel and took off.

It was bright morning when I crested a dune and saw the Star Palace far ahead, looking like the dropped crown of a rich king. I scanned it with everything in the cat, then prepared myself. I programmed the autopilot and got out on the side-strip. Reaching through the open hatch, I steered as close as I could to the edge of the base.

As the sand cat clanked by, pluming sand behind, I punched in the autopilot and jumped for the dark opening of one of the base's curious garage-like rooms. The sandcat shifted to the right, the hatch slammed shut, and it was off, covering me with sand as it shifted gears.

I watched it head straight across the desert, programmed to miss Burroughs, skirt along the John Carter Range and come in somewhere along Northaxe. Unless they got to it first.

I had radioed the Sunstrums where I would be, and they would come and pick me up at the time I estimated things might have cooled down. "Be careful," Nova had said on the microwave. "We'll have some counterfeit papers ready for you in a day or two." There was a pause and I heard only the hum and crackle of the transmission wave, then she spoke again. "I love you, Brian. Goodbye."

I got up, dusted myself off, and tossed the provision sack over my shoulder. Stepping carefully, I went right up the side of the Palace, a little less worried now about breaking off any of the crystals. I climbed over a balcony of rippled green and blue and went inside to find a quiet place to sit and think.

I rejected the gold and red splendor of a hollow sphere of inward-pointing pyramids and the purple mystery of a low-ceilinged cavern next to it. I chose the tranquility of an emerald green hemisphere floored with smooth clear crystal in rounded lumps. Beneath the water-clear floor was a sea of frozen life, intricate crystalline complexes and strange growths that seemed to wave and move with the reflections of sun and self.

I stretched out on a smooth, flat surface, as if I were floating on an alien sea, and rested my head on a pillow of satin-smooth crystal with a flowerlike red-red growth within.

Slowly I ran through the disciplines of relaxation and at last I slept. In my dreams faceless menaces pursued me through blood-red

crystal corridors with sandy floors, endlessly running, endlessly fleeing.

Noises invaded my dreams and there were mechanical men, tireless, deadly robots chasing me. Then suddenly, in the crystalline trap, they froze. The noises stopped.

I awoke instantly, my gun in my hand and my eyes wildly searching. *What had happened?*

I crept across the crystal lake, through bands of amber and brown light, and out onto a tiny cuplike balcony. It was late afternoon, almost evening, and there was no sound but the soft sighing of the wind. Just beyond the nearest dune there was the faint haze of dust and as I peered narrowly at this I saw the tiniest flash of light. It was a dull red reflection from the distant sun. I saw one, then two tiny spots appear and I ducked low as the flash of lens came at me.

They were scanning the Palace, and their sandcat was parked out beyond the dunes.

They had to be assassins, for any tourist would simply drive right up and climb out. A nuvomartian might not even stop.

Here I go again, I thought angrily.

They couldn't be absolutely certain I was in the Palace and perhaps they might not find me. Hiding in an already scoured lair was better than running, I thought, and watched them come over the dune cautiously. There were two of them and they kept well apart. I tracked one with my gun, but the light was too uncertain for me to risk a shot, and he was moving deceptively, running, crawling, walking, stopping suddenly.

I decided to go back into my former hideout deep in the bowels of the great structure. I moved as quickly and as silently as I could, but this time I had no light, and I kept bumping into sharp corners. I banged my head painfully on a stalactite and barely stifled my curse. I moved on, often stumbling, until I saw below me the brilliant rainbow flashes as two lights scanned a crystal cavern below me.

The lights, moving and reflecting, confused me even further, for now they were the only illumination. The light shifted colors several times a second, bouncing and receding, growing bright and passing through the spectrum as it came up through the layers and rooms and colored crystals.

I stopped and did not move at all, except to breathe and listen. My gun was at my side and I tried to blend with the forest of stalagmites among which I was standing. The two lights below me parted and one grew dim while the other grew brighter and closer.

The light was in my eyes, reflected from a hundred surfaces, coming in at different angles, making multiple shadows, confusing my aim. I fired first, and there was the brittle collapse of an armload of crystals. He fired, but the mirror surfaces of the stalagmite near me reflected most of the beam. It was hot, though; the heat seared my hand and face. I shot again, as close to panic as I had ever gotten, but I don't know if I was even close. I was firing into the hundred lights, but he had me in his sights.

There was a sudden wire-hot lance through my thigh, like a thrust sword, and I gasped with pain. I fired as my leg collapsed, and I held down the trigger. The shattering of a thousand crystals was mixed with

the hoarse scream of a man, and my gun melted. I dropped it from my seared hand as I fell forward. My shoulder hit something hard and my body flipped to fall heavily onto stalagmites like knives. I felt blinding pain.

My fingers probed for my thigh, and I found it wet with blood, a great raw wound. I realized my leg must be almost severed, the image of the assassin lying in his pool of blood flashed into my mind. I felt the rest of my body and found it covered with burns and cuts from the crystals.

The nameless man buried beneath the fallen crystal had killed me.

I inched forward, amazed that I could even think against the pain. There was still one more killer, but my gun was useless. I tried finding the dead man's gun by feel, but couldn't. The light was buried, too, shining out through the beautiful rubble. I dug for it and turned it off. I almost fainted from the effort, and when the world swam back to me I knew I had to get away from there.

I tried to tear a tourniquet from my jumper, but the material was too tough for my weak hands, and slippery with blood. I dug at the huge Martian jewels covering the killer's body, using the light to find his laser. With pain-blurry eyes I examined it and found the charge almost exhausted. I thumbed it to the lowest setting and fanned the beam. Then I took a deep breath and fired a long burst across my great wound.

My scream sounded down through the crystal caverns, echoing and reechoing grotesquely. I lay panting with exhaustion, the laser fallen from my hand, depleted. But my leg was almost cauterized. Maybe I wouldn't bleed to death right away.

It might take an hour.

I started crawling. I wasn't crawling anywhere but *away*. I hoped I would leave a blood trail too faint or too confused by the intricate crystal patterns for the other man to track.

I knew I was dead, but the animal in me kept me going.

I stared down through the floor at involved complexes that could be crystalline structures the size of my hand, or something as big as a transporter and far away. Reality was sharp and painful beneath my torn hands and knees, but at the same time it was floating, shifting, changing, a mind-stream going through the rapids, a blurring and melting of pain and reality and alien fantasy.

Death was ahead of me in time. Death was behind me, clutching a laser. Death dribbled out behind me, in blotches and blobs. I carried it like a mountainous rock. I wanted to lie down and quit, but something kept me moving. I stopped feeling the pain of ripped palms and gashed knees. There was only the *now* of doom and extinction.

I collapsed several times; each time I passed out and awoke knowing, somehow, that it was only a few seconds. I swam through the pain until it was a part of me, a necessary skin and dagger point that covered me.

My hands pulled me through the sands when my legs gave out, and I dragged myself like a broken toy that doesn't know when to quit. I went over a hump of sand in the dark and slid down the other side, filling my mouth with gritty clog. I spat it out and pulled myself on.

The light was gone, somewhere, but I seemed to move through a faint mist of light. The red stone walls grated against this shoulder, then

that, and I broke the side of my face in a drunken lurch.

Sand?

I stopped and fell against the stone and my bloody fingers touched the wall in the dark. I must be somehow in the old part, the deepest part, where the mural was. Maybe I would be safe there.

I forced myself onward until I could go no farther. I lay there against a dune, my mind a sluggish pool of sludge, thinking, *So this is how it is to die*. My tortured body told me it might have been easier to go with a surgical clean laser cut through the torso.

But I lay there in that darkness with images and thoughts coming and going.

Nova.

Madelon.

Cilento and Sunstrum and the great sphere of stars.

My mother, my father, and falling broken into the crystals.

Was my death to be so plebeian, I thought, with my life flashing past like some newsstat bio?

The images blurred and ran, and through my closed lids I saw the mural over my head, glowing in the dark, pulsating, throbbing, the long arms moving. The perspective shifted and stretched, then condensed and ran like melted wax. Madelon was in one of the arms, glisteningly naked, turning, swimming through stars, laughing, her long hair like a net. Nova was in the next arm as the great spiral wheel turned, her hair spreading out like black night, blocking out the galaxies whirling in the distance. Crystal jewels coated her body like light, shifting and running like water as she turned in space. Something else came up on the next spiral arm, a formless form, a rainbow in the shape of a shape, a turning, shimmering dance.

The pain was distant and then gone and I was there in the galaxy dance, part of the farflung arms, part of the stars and atoms and utter void. The arms curved through time and space, becoming one, becoming many, blending, regenerating, purifying, a cascade of color sound, a river of light, a comet of time . . .

My body and mind parted, breaking, disintegrating, each with a reflection of the whole, each with the whole of perfection. I was Nova, I was a star, I was void, I was crystal, I was energy . . .

I was . . . always had been . . .

I linked . . . went back, far back, linking, linking, linking.

I was part of everything . . .

I was Feather of Flame and Lastwarrior.

I was Flowerbringer and Nightwind and Gilgamesh.

I was earth and fire and Xenophon, Demonkiller, and Rainbowsound.

I was Stormsweep and Firestar.

I was Brian Thorne.

I was reflected in man, but I was one—unique—a fragment of all. I was IOK and IOR and Cre-vlar-mora-ma. I was *merah* and *damu* and smoke.

I linked.

I was.

I knew.

The atoms drew together. They formed into the old pattern. Returned, they moved and meshed and I was whole again. But not the same.

I realized I was staring up at the ancient mural. It was dark, yet I could see it plainly, more clearly than I had with the light. The galactic spiral still spun in a frozen moment of time, a millisecond frame from eternity.

The pain was gone.

Startled, I felt in the dark for my thigh.

It was whole.

Complete, uncut, unsevered.

My hands were smooth, my exhaustion gone. I could feel the thin cold Martian air in my lungs. I could sense the pulsebeat of blood and the busy, busy body at work.

I looked up at the mural, but now it seemed too dark to see clearly.

I got to my feet, shaky in mind, but whole in body. I moved my leg and it moved without pain, without thought. I went toward the passage, sure in the dark as if I had been there a thousand times and did not question my knowledge.

It was night in the First Place. I went upward, through the vaults, through the Magician's Hall, through the place where Windbird had crowned, and into the zarri where the Sun had once danced on the children. I crossed the varuna of Starbringer and there, in the crimson purple *salla* of the Lastborn I killed the killer.

He saw me and moved slowly, as if in a gelatin of panic, and his weapon turned toward me, toward the Sunface, toward the Omi, where the Teacher had once stood. I reached out and took his weapon and thought it suitable that I kill him with it.

11

I left the Star Palace and took the killers' machine and went to the Sunstrums. I needed money and they gave it to me. I kissed Nova and went across the sands toward Bradbury.

Now I stood in a spacesuit under the bowl of night. Beneath the jagged rock under my feet was the core of the ship, a whole asteroid christened the *Marshal Ivan Dmitri*, and ahead of me was Earth.

And Huo.

But somehow, confronting Huo seemed the least of my troubles. First I had to get back safely in order to confront him and his double. A double, no matter how good, could not possibly pass a really close professional inspection. I knew enough judges, senators, and power figures at least to get a hearing from some of them, no matter what the public view of the bankrupt Thorne might be.

Or so I thought, anyway.

What had happened to me in the Star Palace was what really

occupied my thoughts.

I was still confused about the utter clarity of what had happened to me. Was the whole thing, no matter how vivid, my imagination? I had been so *sure*, so certain, and two more men had died at my hands.

Had I dreamed my fatal wounding?

I was very clear about *what* had happened, but I was not certain *why* it had happened. If it happened at all, it had happened the way I remembered it, with an incredible spreading of myself, back into the past, forward into the future, and sideways into the *now*.

But I knew that was contemporary verbalizing, a pallid explanation to my logical self. When a whole event is nonverbal, how can you explain it even to yourself? It had happened to me. I had felt and experienced—*something*.

I had killed again, or rather, executed. If I hadn't, he would have killed me, and he certainly had been trying. There was no remorse and no guilt in me, except in that odd abstract way of *What else might I have done to prevent it?*

The rock-encased asteroid-ship shot Earthward at an unimagined speed, but I seemed to stand dead in space, my senses too limited to see anything but the obvious. Yet for that one time—how long?—my senses had seemed almost infinite, a godhood of sorts, or so it seemed by comparison to my normal condition. That had faded, but the residue that remained had changed me. I felt somewhat like a computer terminal, with a universe of knowledge linked to me, waiting only the pressure of the right keys, the right questions, the correct situation.

I stood on the asteroid and the silent internal thrust gave it direction and it loomed over me, a great sugar-loaf of pitted space trash. I waited for them to come out to try to kill me again.

I was weary of killing, yet it seemed very remote. I had come out so that no one else might be hurt, that was all.

Get it over with, I asked them silently. *Make your try and die. I haven't time for you now.*

There were two of them, and one was in a crew suit. I waited patiently until he found me and started to aim. I shot him first, then the other. The crewman leaped backward as he was hit; the explosion of his suit moved him off the surface and he floated, a broken unit, slowly drifting toward the drive end.

The other one was Pelf. I lifted him up and gave him a shove and he floated, too.

That's seven.

I went back inside and decanted and went to my cabin. There was much I had to think about.

We orbited Earth and went into parking orbit out near Station Three. The shuttle picked us up and we went in past the *Tycho Brache* and *George IX* and straight to Decon. I suppose I could have used Pelf's papers but I just didn't feel like it. I did, however, bribe one of the crewmen to let me wear a crewsuit to avoid notice by the newsmen; all the big news was gone from Martian trips, but the Station stringers usually met any incoming ship and culled it for items.

Keeping my faceplate dimmed, I went straight through to the

Earth shuttle and kept myself inconspicuous. We landed at Sahara without incident, and I decanted in crews quarters and lockered the suit.

I used minimal evasion tactics and took a jet for Berlin first, then to Arctica Four, before heading for New York. I did it all mechanically, in a dull haze, with my mind in many elsewheres.

I paused on the pedestrian street level to look up at the General Anomaly building. I felt very remote from it and the pride I had once felt seemed foreign and distant. It was not my building; I had only paid for it. Steelworkers and cement handlers and welders were the ones who built it. Electricians and decorators and airlift operators were the ones who owned it. They had made it, not I.

Huo had put guards out on the street, too. They looked like casual gawkers, but their eyes were too restless, too alert. I walked past the outer perimeter, but they didn't appear to notice me.

Had I changed that much?

The guards at the door recognized me, but I looked at them and they seemed to freeze, uncertain and confused. I went to the executive elevator and there the single burly guard was more certain. But slow.

The elevator door opened on the sealed floor according to the punch code, and there were four of them, ready but unwilling to act. Bowie saved them.

"Easy, boys," he said from the right, his laser steady. "Hi, boss," he said with a grin, standing separate from the other outer guards.

"Thank you, Bowie," I said and walked through the empty floor to my office.

It was as if I had done all this a thousand times before and this was one more dreary performance. Huo was so predictable, so ordinary, that it was almost startling. The surprised look, the frantic reach for the laser in the security drawer, the expression when he knew he would be too late.

I stood looking down at his body and thought my sad thoughts. *How banal.* How ordinary a crook. Who was it that spoke of the true horror of greed being its utter banality?

I went to see Sandler, who became very confused. He showed me tapes of conversations with "Brian Thorne" and I had to admit the double was excellent. Then Lowell gave me the bad news.

"You're broke, Mr. Thorne. It will take you years to get the mess straightened out. His signature was perfect. Even the thumbprint slip-on was made by an expert forger. I'm sorry . . . but you saw him yourself. His mannerisms, his way of speaking, his voice, the nicknames, the special information and—"

I waved him silent. "I understand. It's not really—important. Is there anything at all left? I must repay the Sunstrums for the passage money and I have some . . . research to do."

"I was in the process of liquidating the Itacoatiara Dam stock with the Amazonia Corporation. There's some of that left, and, uh, I haven't sold off the Cortez stock on the deep-drilling wells on Mars, and . . ."

"I'll need about ten million Swiss francs. Do I have it or not?"

"I *think* so, sir. I can let you know in a day or so. Where will you be?" Lowell, ever cautious, ultraconservative.

“London. Control will know.”

“Uh, you don’t have Control, sir. It was sold, along with—”

“All right. I’ll call you. Bank of Luna is the Sunstrum bank. Pay them first, then I’ll want to know how much is left.”

But there would be enough.

I had Cilento’s original papers brought to me in his London studio, and with them the reports of the research teams I had set working two years before. I read everything through once, then again. At first I was confident that my new insights, or what I thought were my new insights, would help me solve the problem quickly.

But I was wrong. For days I stared at the sensatron, reading the notes, the reports, the Probability Analysis papers, the conjectures and wild guesses. Time and again I walked around Michael Cilento’s strange, final sensatron, looking at the red-violet sea, at the footsteps that went off through the grass to the distant rocks at seaside.

Then I had to admit my failure to comprehend. No mere strange metaphysical experience on the fourth planet had prepared me to be a scientist. But I knew that one way to unravel problems was to get people who *liked* to unravel problems and give them the technical assistance necessary.

I attacked the problem as if I were assembling an exhibit or putting on an art festival. I got Coleman from Harvard by buying one of England’s best wine cellars and opening it to him. Gilman Gottlieb came from his hobbit-hole in the Sierras when he was told Coleman was going to beat him to the solution. I poured resources into backup teams from Intertech and Physics International. I gave grants to M. I. T. and Caltech and established the Mark Rhandra Chair of Physics at the University of Mexico, just to free a certain scientist.

I paid top money for top men, but money was not the only consideration. I made it a challenge, and of course, it was. It took eight months, but slowly the pieces began to come together. I found that my “insights” were not so wrong after all.

There is no *time* outside the universe. We found that out when we were able to move aside all the energy, all the particles, all the light, to make a hole in space. The sensors probed through that hole, into the *outside* of curved space, to find another way back in. What we couldn’t be certain of was *where* and *when* the re-entry would be. This was when Cilento’s sensatron provided critical information.

Carefully, we opened it up. Coleman traced the aiming circuits. Gottlieb did the math, and Intertech built the transporter machinery. It took more time to make it self-sufficient, with a portable fusion generator, but I needed it that way.

We sent through several objects, but nothing came back. A laboratory rat went through and returned dead, and very old. A second rat came back dead, but approximately the same age. One half of a matched set of atomic clocks went and were returned. There was a difference of 45.76.3 seconds when they were compared. We were getting there.

Experiment after experiment was tried. Most failed in some way or another. Sensing and recording devices were sent but the magnetism was ruined, film fogged, and other methods were too faulty for any good

use. We had to send a human, the multi-purpose recording and analysis generalist. A machine can only respond to what it is built to respond to, and nothing else. A man can accept variables, sense the unknown, and analyze, somewhat, on the basis of very little information.

I insisted that man be me, but they were not yet ready. The drift factors were the problem: we start out *here* and go *there* and return at once . . . but *here* is several seconds removed. The planet turns, it orbits the sun, the sun moves in relation to other stars, the whole universe is exploding still. There was no relative point to which we could anchor, no benchmark from which we could measure.

“What we need is a kind of step process,” Coleman told me. “We move an approximate distance toward point X in an approximate direction. Then we stop and adjust. Two dings left, one ding high. Then we go to point B and look at point A, where we started, and back at point X, and make another guess at it. And so on. Inching closer with each adjustment.”

“Guess?” I said.

“Sure,” he smiled. “A guess. Fifty, a hundred years from now, when this whole thing is computerized to the nth degree you’ll be able to condense and speed the whole process up. But for now it’s an approximation. Cut and fit. With each cutting and fitting we gain knowledge and expertise.”

“That’s why pioneers got full of arrows,” I sighed.

“But if it works,” he said happily, “we can go anywhere. The first explorations will be cut and fit. Then we’ll get transmitter stations on Centauri, for instance. We can beam in on it, simplifying the whole process. Then on a planet in another direction—with triangularization we can go somewhere else, faster and more accurately.”

I thought a moment. “What if we had a beam signal here on Earth, and the other from Mars?”

“We thought of that. It would broaden the base and give us a more accurate aiming method. The time lag between here and there can be worked out easily enough.”

“How did Cilento do it?”

“Dumb luck, probably. It held together long enough for him to go through, as long as the recording cycle went, and then the hole closed. He could never come back that way.”

“I’ve been having the Young Observatory on Luna analyze the spectrum of the recorded sun and run a comparison test. So far they’ve come up with nine suns within ten light years that are close approximations.”

Coleman rubbed his lip with his thumbnail. “Ah, yes, the target. Wouldn’t you rather just go to Centauri? It would be easier.”

“Easier, but not what I want.”

He shrugged. “I’d be satisfied to get to *any* other sun.”

“I understand that,” I said. “But I want that certain planet.”

“They may be dead . . . or . . . something.”

“Yes, I know.” A sudden thought came to me. The mural in the Star Palace. During that hallucination that I had it seemed to . . . open . . . to become a kind of guide. *Could that mural help me?*

I thought about that in the weeks to come, as my team patiently

built a background of experience with the transporter. We could aim the beam with some degree of accuracy, or at least we could hit the same spot more than once. The trouble was we didn't know whether that spot was down the block, two star systems over—or across the galaxy or across the universe. In theory it could be any of those.

We could shoot blind, but with accuracy. What we needed were eyes. I was beginning to think I knew how it could be done. There was only one way to find out.

Bowie stood with me at Station Two's cargo hatch, watching as they transferred the big stasis cylinder to the shuttle. We didn't have much to say to each other that hadn't been said. The shuttle crew disappeared into the hold, except for one who motioned to me.

I turned to Bowie and we looked at each other for a moment, the lights and the stars glistening on the curving faceplates. "Well, so long, boss," he said. "Good luck."

"Thank you, Bowie," I said. *Thank you.*"

"Look," he said, "about what you did for me, I—"

"Forget it. I won't be needing it and you might enjoy it."

"Uh . . . okay, boss."

"*Let's get a move on, huh?*" The crewman gestured again from the hatch. I shoved off and went down a safety line and into the shuttle. I felt the clang of the hatch through my feet, and then we were moving silently away from the station.

"Clear seventeen for *Libertad*."

"Plane four, spoke ninety. Watch it out by the *Chekov*, Jake, they had some kind of spillage."

"Right. Seventeen out."

We passed close to a cluster of ship's cores and I could see the welders installing framing around the *Steinmetz* and the *Anthony Coogan*, fastening them to the main cluster. Another group going out for asteroid ships. The Solar System was being tamed; the big adventures were now routine assignments.

The shuttle detoured around the old *Einstein*, still in service, and gnarled with modifications. Beyond it was the gambling ship *Eros*, and the *Lao-tzu*, now just a supply ship, but once a history-making vessel. The *Libertad* was out near the edge. I gave only part of my attention to the transfer of the stasis cylinder. What I was really gazing at was old Earth, over my head, looking blue and ruffled with white.

"Goodbye," I said, and went into the ship.

Nova ran across the churned sand and threw herself into my arms. I fell laughing back against the sandcat as I kissed her. "It's very hard to laugh and kiss at the same time," she said, "so shut up."

We went into the lock and along to the Sunstrum dome, where I told them everything. Or as least as much as I could explain, which left out a lot.

"I want to go," Nova said. I saw her parents exchange looks and sad little sighs.

"I don't know if I can go, yet," I said.

"Of course you can," she said with certainty. "I have confidence in you."

Li Wing smiled at me. "I suppose you must try," Sven said.

"Of course he must," said Nova. "It will be terrific!"

"If it works . . ." said Sven Sunstrum, "if it really works, it will change everything. We can go anywhere!"

I nodded. But I didn't want to go just *anywhere*.

"I'll go with you tomorrow," Nova said.

We came toward the Star Palace with the setting sun behind it, and the big crownlike structure glowed like the enormous jewel that it was. I parked the sandcat at the base, near the steps, and we climbed down.

Nova stood next to me as we stared up at the beautiful alien building glowing in the distant light of Sol. "I never tire of coming here," she said. "It's always the same, yet . . . never the same."

I debated whether to unlash the big stasis cylinder holding my equipment now or later, and decided later. The weather satellite had told of a sandstorm to the west, so we put on our spacesuits, just in case. I helped Nova into the straps of her big backpack full of an assortment of equipment and food. Then I pulled on mine, bending with the weight even in this lighter gravity.

I had a difficult time finding the spiraling steps, for in this light everything looked different. That cascade of liquid frozen crystal I remembered as being elsewhere, and that wall of starbursts was entirely new. I supposed I had passed it in the dark and not noticed. We searched through an emerald cavern that looked somewhat familiar, then found ourselves going upward instead of down, through a colonnade of amber trees, and into a bower of bluegreen flowers.

Here we rested and made love and slept. I awoke in the night and felt her next to me, loving and trusting. I looked straight up, through a transparent ceiling that transformed the stars into blossoms of pinpoint suns. I felt calm and, perhaps for the first time in my life, serene.

In the morning we found the opening into the base rock without trouble. Nova and I went out to carry in the transporter equipment. In our suits and backpacks we went into the shaped stone and along the passage to the room with the mural on the ceiling. I set the equipment with the focusing device on the sandpile beneath the mural.

I knew of no other place to find my answers. Perhaps the answers were within me, simply undiscovered, as all magic is unexplained science.

I turned the light on the ceiling to show Nova the mural, but she wasn't looking. Her own light was on a dark blotch in the sand.

"It's your blood, isn't it?"

I nodded. There were the marks of my feet and the disturbed sand where I had twice lain, once in fear and once in pain. "Look up," I said.

She looked and her soft gasp echoed in the small room. "I had forgotten how strange and beautiful it was," she said. She sat down on the sandpile and looked up. "We used to come here sometimes, when I was a child. I found this on our first visit. I was very small, and I got separated from the others. I lay here and . . ."

Her face grew solemn. "I think I slept and I had strange dreams. I woke when I heard them calling me, and I found my way out. I came

here every time after that, down here, and . . .” Her eyes searched the faded mural. “I had forgotten . . . almost . . . it was always very disturbing, but . . . I always came.”

She laughed self-consciously and patted the sand. “Come, touch the sands of Mars,” she said.

Lying next to her I stared up at the galactic swirl of the unformed shapes. What did it mean? Did it mean anything at all? Was this some sort of primitive Martian cave drawing, of no meaning to anyone but the alien artist, or to the pre-historic tribe he belonged to? Or was this some sort of mandala, or focusing image? Was it meaningless decoration, design without content, the painting of a madman locked away forever in a red stone dungeon?

My eyes wandered over the flaked, faded mural, trying to replace the missing parts, merging, blending, brightening . . . *Was there some sort of galactic center to it all?* Did the picture truly represent a spreading of intelligence as it seemed to do?

The silent arms turned without words. The galactic mural spun silently. Eons passed. Suns were born and grew old and shrank to black holes and waited for rebirth. Still the spiral moved, shaping and being shaped, expanding and changing.

Lifeforms proliferated, changed, died, moved on, changed.

The galactic swirl turned in its majestic sweep, the amorphous arms with their tips of life, moving past . . . pulling me along . . . pulling Nova . . . we melted, blended, linked . . .

There was the slightest shift of awareness, a millimeter of reorientation, and the sudden awareness of a new reality. I knew then what the galactic mural’s true function was. It was a focusing device, a cosmic mandala—and beyond that the supreme creation of the ancient Martians. We linked through the mandala to their ultimate concept, a gigantic organic computer, self-perpetuating, self-aware, nearly eternal.

Carried by a flood of shifting reality, we moved into full-phased contact with this incredible storehouse of information, this vast thinking machine, this still-living heart of the Martian civilization.

I suddenly knew how primitive man’s toddler science of mnemonics really was. We were still in the “rhyme to remind” stage and they had created the mural as a focusing and teaching device before man on Earth had left the Bronze Age.

Buried in the sand drift in the old and seemingly meaningless room was a stone bench, a kindergarten chair-and-desk for Martian children. It was a classroom where young Martians had learned the first steps in controlling the racial computer. It had lain, long unused, until I had stumbled into it.

Now I looked, really looked, up through the stone, into the crystal structure above us and saw it for what it really was, not an ancient ruler’s whim, not the crowning achievement of a dynasty, but an organic crystal entity, a storehouse and machine, a function and a personality fused into a living work of art. Each microfleck of crystal was *stressed-just-so* and linked to another, a latticework of knowledge and function that had lasted across the millenia, a matrix of reality that moved out of time and space as it needed. And, like a tool that is decorated, it was also beautiful, and now, for the first time, I saw how beautiful.

I merged into the mental web of the Star Palace and saw things that man had not yet dreamed possible. I saw the simple methods whereby man might control his own body. I saw the techniques of virtually instant regeneration of tissue, any kind of living tissue, man or Martian, animal or crystal. I saw the recording of a man, a microdot on the droplet of frozen gold that was the complete record of the Planet since Man had landed, and that man was me. I saw the severed leg, the bloody flesh, the pounding heart, the snap and sparkle of my brain as I used the techniques of the crystal computer to heal myself.

I felt Nova join me, melding, flowing until we were like one. We saw how the mural had tugged at her, as a child, and laughed at how obvious it had all been. We “looked” with one set of perceptions, joined together, yet each an individual.

We saw the record of all the instruments that kept aware of the very fabric of space, and felt the computer read our simple minds and direct our joined focus to the anomaly we sought, the tiny disruption of that fabric several years before and several millions of miles sunward. We saw where creatures had passed through that momentary and artificial rupture, and where they had gone. We sensed, rather than saw, where Michael and Madelon had gone, and felt a flash of pity for the scientists who assumed that one of nature’s rules regarding electromagnetic radiation held true for physical objects. We saw the way open to the stars.

We perceived where the last of the Martians had gone into the fabric of space, taking themselves outward through space that was not space, outward to a destiny we couldn’t even guess, not even with the help of their great machine. They had gone beyond the use of it, leaving it behind like a discarded toy; or perhaps a marker on a path.

Would man be able to follow? Would mankind’s huge ego allow it to accept a handout of knowledge, even a knowledge so vast? But our minds were already focusing elsewhere.

We tracked the trail from the machine that had momentarily opened a path through the stars to a certain spot—through the non-space that the Martian artifact focused for us—to the center of the lines of gravitic energy that the crystal computer pinpointed as the ball of dirt where Mike and Madelon had gone.

I willed us in that direction, almost unconsciously. There was a little push, an electron moving from this orbit to that, a reading from the probability factors.

We linked . . .

Linked . . . to Seventh Sphere and the Guide.

Firstar . . . Snowflake.

Cornerstone and Mindsword.

The Teacher . . .

linked to the ways they had planned, to knowledge . . . to understanding . . .

it can’t be that easy . . .

knowing how . . .

linking to self . . .

doing . . .

going . . .

the focusing . . .
direction . . . thrust . . .
wind and motion . . .
blurred space . . .
the doing . . .
a sun . . .
two moons . . .
a red-violet sea . . .
fresh new grass beneath our feet . . .
the seawind on our naked bodies, cool and brisk . . .

Brian!

“Brian! My god, where are we?”

“A place,” I said. I started down the grassy slope toward the rocks. “Come on, there are some people I’d like you to meet. Then perhaps we can go someplace else.”

12

The wind from the sea was fresh, with an invigorating tang. I looked at Nova just as she realized we were naked, but neither of us thought that was important. It was warm, and the sea breezes rippled the vast grassland and bent the tiny surfaces of the small flowers. The gravity was a tenth or so less than Earth’s, and comfortable. Looking into the big bowl of sky we could see pale discs and paler veils, even in the bright sunlight.

Nova’s first stunned questions died away. “Brian, what have we done? Where are we?” I said I wasn’t sure, exactly, but we would soon find out. I felt a confidence that, upon examination, was based on very little. But I *knew* it was where I had wanted to go and that the forces within me, and the forces to which we had linked, had brought us here.

We rested twice before we got to the rocks, which were much bigger than I had thought. A fringe of leafy green trees surrounded them and ran up into the crevices and small canyons. They were filled with feathered bird-like creatures that had small mouths instead of beaks, and were very beautiful.

We rested under a large gnarled tree hung with melon-sized blue fruit. I broke one open to find a scented rose-colored interior and a small, polished bead-like seed. We didn’t eat it, but it somehow felt safe.

“Brian,” Nova said. “The sky is—different. We are nowhere near the Solar System.”

“Yes, I know. Don’t worry.”

“Don’t *worry*? I’m not even sure what we did, Brian. It was so strange, so . . . unique. But we’re here, and naked, and some monster could come over that rock and have us for lunch. All that—sensation—is fading, becoming unfocused, sort of. Can we—get back?”

“I think so. Come on. We’ll go over the rocks to the sea.”

We climbed a cleft and startled something in the long thick

grasses, which sprang away, running hard. I saw only a golden-tan blur through the blue-green grass, but I knew that there was some kind of life here.

From the cleft in the rocky spine we could soon see the vast red-violet sea, and the pale pink waves crashing on the rocks below. We went down carefully, and there seemed to be a faint animal trail, which we followed.

We came again into the jungle belt around the rocks and along through the dappled light until we could see and smell the ocean. We went through a small grove of black-limbed trees with purple fruit and crimson flowers, and walked cautiously toward the water.

There was a ring of blackened firestones just back of the treeline, and a collection of curious fish bones were laid out on a rock to dry.

“Look!” said Nova, and pointed down the beach.

There were two figures, human and naked, their bodies gleaming wetly, and they were running toward us. The man was bearded and carried a wooden spear with a broad fish-bone point, and the woman was swinging a large popeyed black fish by the gills.

They were Madelon and Mike.

“My god, it’s Brian!” Madelon said, dropping the fish to run to me. She hugged me tightly, pressing our bodies together, kissing my face. Her eyes were wet and shining and wholly incredulous. “Brian! My god, how did you get here? Mike, it’s Brian!”

Michael Cilento stood looking at us, grinning and not seeming surprised. He looked at Nova. “Hi. I’m Mike Cilento.”

Nova looked from him to Madelon, who was kissing me in a hundred small hungry pecks. “Brian . . . ?”

I pushed Madelon back and put my arm around her. “Nova, this is Madelon and Mike. Lady and gentleman, this is Nova Sunstrum.”

“Doctor Livingston, honey, are we glad you are here!” Madelon gave a joyous whoop and ran to hug Mike. “Darling, I can’t believe it!” She turned to look at the two of us with shining eyes. “How did you ever—?”

“We followed the trail that Mike left,” I said. “We just took a different way to get here.”

“Brian,” Nova said, “will you tell me what is going on?”

I put my arm around Nova. “These are . . . old friends. Mike is an artist. Michael Cilento, remember?” I saw the astonishment in her eyes.

“But you’re dead—or something!” she said.

“Or something,” Mike grinned.

“Mike found a way to . . .” I hesitated. “How do I say it?”

“Slip through space?”

“But what did we do?” asked Nova. “I’ve never experienced anything like that!”

“Oh, never mind that,” Madelon said. “You did it, we did it, we’re all here.” She started walking and we went along. “Our cave is over there,” she said.

“What do you call—this place?” Nova asked.

“We haven’t really decided,” Mike said. “Most of the time we just call it *Here*. But since man seems compelled to label we’ve

considered New Earth, or Terra, which neither of us likes. Starholm, Grassworld, Thor, oh, what else?"

"Flowerworld," Madelon said. "Pacifica. But mostly it's *Here*."

"A world by any other name would be just as sweet," I said. "It's beautiful."

Nude, the four of us walked up the golden beach and around a rock to find the cave house they had created. A border of flowers edged a sand terrace, and an arbor of poles supported a growth of red pear-shaped grapes. The cave was long and twisting and there were beds of moss and, back in the coolness, a carcass of some kind of meat animal.

"We came through naked," Mike said. "Not even our tooth fillings made it. Luckily we only had a couple. We came down here and caught fish bare handed and used their bones for tools. I made spears and tracked the jumpers for meat. They're a bit like deer, but they can jump unbelievably high. There's a kind of grain that grows south of here, and there is the fruit."

His voice petered out and I felt a sudden empathy for him. This Eden-like life was like a vacation, easy and fun, but not a man's world, certainly not Michael Cilento's. I noticed the sun-dried clay sculptures, the fire-hardened pots, the unfinished mural he was scratching into a smooth spot on the rock wall. An artist will always create art, but Mike had known better tools, and he was unsatisfied with the primitive ones he had.

"Do you want to go back?" I asked.

All three looked at me. "Can we?" asked Madelon.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think so." I looked at Nova. "I'm not certain we can do it without . . . them." Mike and Madelon looked at each other questioningly.

"It's the Martians," Nova said, "or something they left behind. I'm not really certain. Brian . . . contacted them, in the Star Palace. We merged with them, somehow. Brian wanted to come here and focused us . . . and we just . . . came." She looked at me confidently. "We can do it."

I was not quite so confident. Some of the sureness was dissipating with new doubts. To avoid thinking of it for awhile, I asked about the fruit in a woven basket, then about the planet in general.

Mike told me that from what he could determine it appeared to be an ocean world and the land a vast prairie, although he had seen only a small portion of it.

"Brian, come see the sunset," Nova said and we all joined her at the entrance to the cave. The western sky was red-orange and the underlit clouds were magnificent far out to sea.

A whirring insect as large as a canary came at me from the eastern darkness, and I raised a hand to bat at it, but Mike caught my wrist. "They won't hurt you unless you hurt them," he laughed. "Believe me, I learned the hard way. There are no tiny annoying buggies here, just three or four species of big ones, sort of all purpose types, to fertilize the trees and flowers. We all—co-exist here."

The two women stepped out further, to stand on a weathered snub of rock and listen to the waves breaking as the unnamed sun set.

Their naked bodies, lithe and voluptuous, were gilded by the sun. They both seemed very alive, very much aware of each other's presence, obviously taking pleasure in the other's beauty. Nova turned toward me to point out the low flight of a fast waterbird and I saw that the apprehension was gone, replaced by a smile. The nipples of her full breasts were hard, and the sunset breeze stirred her long dark hair.

Madelon looked over her shoulder to smile at us, too, to share the beauty and her delight at companionship. Her figure was that delicious combination of the voluptuary and the athlete that it had always been, and her barely suppressed excitement was stimulating.

Mike put his foot on a rock and stood outlined against the sunset. He was also lean and fit, with long shaggy hair and a full beard. He watched the two women run out to the water's edge, their breasts bouncing and their long hair swaying. "This is Eden, Brian," Mike said. "Life is easy, it's beautiful, it's quiet. Just the sort of thing everyone wants to escape to. Until they do it." Mike turned his head to look at me, but I could not see his expression against the sunset. "I have my Eve, but there is no Able, not even a Cain. We don't know why. Our shots wore off well over a year ago. We felt—we knew—that when we died there would be nothing left, only . . ." He waved his hand around. "Only all this space." He hesitated a moment, then said, "I'm glad you came."

Then he turned and shouted at the two women playing in the dark surf. "Hey, you two! We're hungry! Let's make some dinner!"

Madelon and Nova, supple and voluptuous, trotted up the sands and stepped over the rocks, and went past us, up into the cave. They were talking about sunlight on skin. Madelon went to a cup in the rock and fished out a necklace of carved fruit seeds, as Mike built the fire higher. Madelon gave the necklace to Nova, who slipped it over her head and adjusted it between her firm breasts. She looked at me, smiling, and I said it was as beautiful on her as any custom selection from Tiffany's. Nova embraced Madelon, their breasts pressing together, and they kissed.

Mike grinned up at them as he squatted by the fire and spitted a fish. "Yum," he said, and held the fish over the fire. Madelon and Nova released each other after a long look, their hands clasped together, then Madelon began slicing some beetlike vegetables, and Nova started shredding a mound of fist-sized leafy plants. I sat on the grass bed and began washing some wide leaves to use as dishes.

The meal was excellent, and our fingers served us well. Afterward, Madelon came around the fire and threw herself on me, bearing me back into the grass bed. "Oh, I'm so *glad* to see you!" She kissed me long and hard and her skin was smooth and supple against me.

I came up grinning and they laughed at my obvious physical reaction. Nova looked cat-eyed, but smiled anyway, and seemed to mean it.

Some time later Nova came to me and put her arms around my waist as I stood in the cave entrance looking up at the fantasy in the sky. Ragged pale sheets of flaming gas were flung across the sky, netting huge multicolored stars, pale giants that had glowed even in the noonday sun.

"She was your wife, wasn't she?"

I nodded. "Once long ago," I said. "I loved her then," I said in

answer to her unspoken question. “But now . . . I love her . . . but I’m not *in* love with her.”

I took Nova in my arms and the waves splashed thunderously on the rocks. “I love you,” I said into her ear. “You.”

She hugged me tight and kissed me hard. “I love you, too—but I’m scared, Brian. This place is all right for awhile . . . but they are bored, I know it. I would be bored, too, if there were only ice cream.”

I looked up at the night sky and said, “I’ll try.”

Madelon and Mike came out and Mike gestured up at the bright starlight. “Can you figure out where we are? Are we even in Home Galaxy? If we are, is it the Perseus Arm?”

I shrugged. “Homesick?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Madelon. “To be able to go is fine; but to *have* to stay is annoying. Do you think your Martian way will help?”

“I don’t even know how it works,” I said, “except that I seem to . . .” There were no words for it. Focus? Merge? Link? Blend? And would that method work so far from where I started? Could the rock fling itself back from the sea?

“I’m in no hurry to leave,” Nova said, “but I would like to know that we could.”

I agreed with her and we broke up to go to our moss and grass beds. We made love in the night, and heard one another’s gasping orgasms and I utterly amazed myself by thinking, *I’m glad Madelon is happy*. Hearing their unembarrassed intimacies excited Nova and she was perhaps just a little competitive as we made love.

I fell asleep, with Nova cradled in my arms, more amazed at my own reaction to the lovemaking of my former wife than having crossed the stars in a blink of time. But one was emotional and the other was merely intellectual. Crossing space was possible, one way or another; changing oneself is always the hardest task of all.

In the morning Nova went with Mike to fish, while I sat on a sunny rock with Madelon and cut open fruit for breakfast. Some deep red ones had a center of a sweet tasty juice in which tiny seeds floated. The purple-striped green ones tasted minty, and some very small yellow ones tasted a little like apples.

As I cut open some fruit with a fish-bone knife I had time to inspect Madelon, who was fixing a small fire to grill the morning fish. She was deeply and evenly tanned and looked very fit. “This life in Eden seems to agree with you,” I said.

She shrugged and smiled wanly. “It’s nicely primitive, nicely perfect.”

“In other words, you’re tired of it,” I said.

“We have everything here,” she protested. “Privacy, food, beauty, security. For someone raised in archos of three-quarters of a million and up, this is *privacy*.”

“Nice to visit, but you don’t want to live here.”

Madelon looked at me over her tanned shoulder. “You always could read me.” She placed another stick full of food on the fire and stood up, brushing her hands together. She looked around, and sighed deeply, “It’s beautiful, Brian. Alien, and yet—familiar. When Mke found it in the sensatron it seemed perfect. We had to try to go. We didn’t

know we couldn't go back."

"How do you know you can't? Have you tried?"

"When we came through there was this square of space—black space—behind us, just the size of the sensatron. It just hung there in the air, a hand's width above the grass. We started down the hill and I looked back. It was higher—about at knee-level. Mike started running toward it, yelling at me to follow, but it slowly drifted up and eastward. By the time we got there we couldn't reach it. Then it started graying . . . drifting . . . and it was translucent. Then it was gone. Mike said it must have lost focus or we were too far away to keep a lock on it. Anyway, it was gone and we were here."

"I didn't move the sensatron and I kept it powered. There was still an image, cycling—"

"Maybe things just got too far out of phase. After all, we don't know where we are. We could be anywhere."

"But we aren't anywhere. We're here." As soon as I had need for it, I realized I had a perfect image of the Martian mural, stored back in my mind, where the outside world never goes. As I needed the contact I felt it reestablish, in nanoseconds, the time delay somehow measuring the distance from my mind to the Star Palace.

I jumped up. "We can do it!" I said. "We *can* go back!" I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Let's find the others!"

We ran from the rocks out onto the sand and I saw two figures hip-deep in water up the shoreline. They waved, then started wading out as they saw us running, kicking up spurts of golden sand.

We ran into each other, breathlessly. "What's the matter?" Mike said, scanning the rocks behind us.

"We can do it," I said, looking at Nova. "I'm linked . . . you're linked . . . all we have to do is *want* to! That's what the computer is for, to help!" They were looking at me, all touching, and I willed the push.

There was a shifting . . .

The full-space-around us thinned.

We pulsed . . .

flowed . . .

Here became *there*, and then *there* was *here*.

"My god!" Mike gasped.

The four of us, still naked, hung in a cluster in space, millions of miles above a blazing yellow-orange sun. We were neither hot nor cold, and breathing normally. A safe environment was needed, so it was automatically provided.

With a kind of clarity beyond the senses we could all see the Solar System around us. The hot blob of rock near the sun, the mist-shrouded second planet, the blue-green-brown ball of Earth, distant Mars, then the great planets, majestic and unique, and further out the frozen balls of methane and rock. The dust, the asteroids, a comet coming into the plane, the primitive ships, debris and radiation, ions and sunwind. It was all there, every atom tagged and logged.

And beyond, the most beautiful thing of all, the many-armed spiral of our galaxy, and other galaxies, the pliant fabric of space stretching around, bursting stars, glowing nebulae, life, time and non-time.

This is what the Martians have left us, I said in my mind and

the others heard. *A tool. The tool. We will take it and use it and make it ours. Someday, we will meet them . . . and learn how science can become art, and art become science.*

Nova spoke. "It could be years—centuries—since we . . . shifted."

"It doesn't matter," Mike said.

It happened, Madelon thought.

It's only the beginning, I thought. Then we started toward Earth. We wanted to tell them, then we would go elsewhere. There was so much to see and do.