

Washington summer strangled the city, hot white buildings under a nightblind sky. Mankiewicz on his terrace stood ashen in the moonlight, stiff and impassive and poised ready like the *Kouros* statues of ancient Greece. He felt neither poised nor ready for the long night to come.

Inside the second-floor home, Charlene rattled through the dinner-makings: as if dinner really mattered now. Mankiewicz kept the irritation to himself, determined not to question anything tonight. That was how the brief, flickering wars always began, with him searching for a question and finding only an accusation. God, but he didn't want that now. All he wanted were words, the right words. Why did they never come?

The touchplate lay bone-pale on the polished tabletop, catching whitely the frowns and stares of the two men who stood above it. In its oval face fingers poked and pointed and swept close but never made contact. Never touched.

"Ed?" Behind him, Charlene in the living room. He stepped through the half-opened glass door, turning his back on the starless night above Washington.

The room was cool and bright, insulated from the night. Charlene's dark hair and darker eyes seemed the only shadows in the room. somehow. She wore a forced smile but Mankiewicz couldn't complain; his, too, had been purchased at cost. The maid and the cook were gone—she'd dismissed them for the evening—and they were alone. The entire evening was being pushed, painfully, into their joint conception of what such a night should be—as forced as their lovemaking had been these past months, clawing at a peace that was never more than tentative.

"They're clawing, too." The President's voice was as much a dim reflection of a past confidence as the tired stares suspended in the touchplate. "They're reaching for anything that will keep this world afloat. But how do we know the surface of this thing isn't too sheer, too slick?"

"We know it works," Halvorsen said, his deep-set eyes staring almost pleadingly. "We've used it to transmit information—symbols, data—from one mind to another. It's as strong a psionic bond as we can make it."

"Information," the President repeated. "Symbols. Data. This conference would entail a hell of a lot more than that. It's going to mean hopes and dreams and fears, all melting and merging. Should anyone have to account to the whole damned country for their fears and prejudices?"

"Yes," Halvorsen said. "You have to."

"But what if something in my mind sparks war?" His voice was edged in anger, defensive.

Halvorsen smiled weakly. "Then we're back where we started. We're on the brink of war now, or else we wouldn't be attempting this. We're boxed into a corner—and that with us." And he nodded toward the touchplate.

They sat quietly on either side of the low table, polite--dolls for a summer's night. Eating in the living room, alone, was the *right* thing to do; they were trying hard to be sensitive to each other's feelings, but empathy came slowly after so long.

Mankiewicz looked at her finely-drawn features, wondering why he could never tell her anything beyond what he could see, anything beyond that which she had rejected as a catalog of surface qualities. Wondering why she had rejected that beauty in the first place. Wondering why "beauty" had become an epithet: an epithet that seemed to constitute Mankiewicz's entire vocabulary. Wondering about that, too.

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The Oval Room was choked with odors old and stale: smoke, sweat, and the last traces of dreams gone to dust. Halvorsen, late of the late UN, watched as the President eyed the touchplate cautiously.

"Are they using *their* top men, I wonder?" the Chief Executive said at last.

Halvorsen shrugged. "I don't imagine they want to. No one wants to risk presidents and premiers to go mucking about in each other's minds. If we send an ambassador or a go-between, chances are China and Russia will send ambassadors or go-betweens. And that won't do a hell of a lot of good, since none of them will have any real power. But if we send our President, as a gesture of strength, they'll have to send their premiers to save face—or at least their party leaders." Halvorsen's voice became hard, firm. "Mr. President, you've got to go."

The President hesitated. "I'll have to think about it."

"Dammit, how much time do you think we *have*?" Halvorsen snapped. "I'm sick of this damned sidestepping. Yes, you may reveal national secrets! Bloody likely that you will. Every missile configuration, every defense plan that you've committed to memory—there's no way to hide them. They'll become common psionic knowledge. But dammit, it's a two-way street! You'll know their secrets, too. Lord, what's to lose?"

The President looked at him, eyes hard and intent. "Losing's not the worry," he said after a moment's hesitation. "It's winning. Coming away from that peace table knowing, beyond any doubt that we may have now, that we can positively destroy each other because we'll know exactly *how*, right down to the very last strike zone."

"But that would waste the whole damned planet. Do you think anyone is going to chance something like that?" He shook his head. "Your argument's weak as hell and you know it." Halvorsen stared at his President a long moment. "Yes, of course you know it. What the hell *are* you afraid of?"

Mankiewicz watched his hands as he ate. They weren't the hands, tanned and acromegalic, of a truck-driver or a garbageman or a field-laborer, the kind of person you're brought up to think of as dull and blunt when it comes to words and love and touching; they were quick hands, competent hands. Maybe they'd been desensitized from shuffling papers for so long, he thought. Maybe—

He looked up to find Charlene staring at him, brown eyes wide with a sadness and a fear. "It's not going to work, is it?" she said softly.

Mankiewicz sighed, pushed himself away from the table and sat slumped in the low chair. "Not this way. Not with each of us playing out a role, trying to live something we can't. I keep looking for the cue cards but they're never there."

She brushed aside a lock of long black hair, stared down at the table. "Damn it," she said quietly. "If we can't even face the end of the world together, Ed, what kind of people are we?"

"It's not just the defense secrets, is it?" Halvorsen said. "It's every secret that you've ever had. Isn't it?"

The President sucked in a breath sharply. "Hal—"

"Dammit, listen to me! Whatever you betray . . . remember: they'll be as naked as you. Just as exposed. Maybe man just can't fight without his clothes on. We'll find out." He spread his hands in summation. "Good Lord, we've *got* to find out."

The President looked at the touchplate again. Psionic bond: the sound of that made him think of ionic bonds, atoms sharing electrons. And then he had an image of three men drifting in secret orbits, a sudden reaction spinning them together, and then they were one molecule, one mind.

"How long before we have to send someone to Geneva?" he said.

Halvorsen sighed. "We can have Air Force One ready by nine tomorrow morning. That's almost sixteen hours. If the Bloc is as frightened as we are, they won't attempt anything until we make some stab at a treaty."

A treaty of the mind, the President thought. A treaty of souls . . .

He sat down behind his desk. "I'll let you know by dawn. Have an emissary standing by. I'll tell you whether or not we'll need him."

Halvorsen almost said something, then checked himself and nodded.

"Yes, sir. I'll . . . I'll be ready to go."

The President glanced sharply at him. "You?"

"I can't ask anyone else," Halvorsen said. "Could you?"

There was brief, icy silence, and then Halvorsen left the Oval Room, very quickly indeed.

Charlene sat across from Mankiewicz on a bloated red cushion, staring out beyond the terrace into the night. Was she searching for the same words? Why should she—he wanted nothing from her; it was only she who needed the words from him. Jesus. On a night like this. Maybe the last night, maybe the first. Either way it was frightening.

"Charlene?" She looked at him when he spoke, but there was no expectation in her eyes. "Charlene, what do you want me to say?"

She sighed shallowly. "Only what you want to, Ed, nothing more."

"Dammit, I've said it. I love you, you know that."

"Yes," she said without much conviction.

He rubbed his forehead. "I can't give you a sworn affidavit. Who's going to notarize it? God?"

"I don't want an affidavit," she said. "Just the why of it. Something that couldn't be said equally as well of my photograph. God, Ed, you make me feel like a painted paper doll."

Mankiewicz couldn't answer. He flexed his hands nervously on his knees, loving her and knowing why but unable to verbalize it. But . . . why did it have to matter?

Loving her, an inkling of it struck him. Still mute, still unable to tell the why of his love.

"You can't either, can you?" he said.

She stared at him, stunned.

Then she shook her head. "No," she said quietly.

He felt the shock and tried to hide it. He didn't succeed: her eyes became wide, searching for empathy.

"What did you feel just then, Ed? Please."

*Like ice*, he wanted to tell her, somehow hollow and somehow cold. He straightened. "I'll admit," he would admit nothing, "something of a shock, but," oh God maybe she didn't, maybe she *didn't*, "but . . ."

*Stop lying!* "Like ice," he admitted, surrendering. "Like doubt and fear and—I was thinking that maybe you didn't love me, Charl. So help me God I was."

"Because I couldn't say why." "Yes, dammit!" Then, softer: "Why should it be important to us? Why should we care why—why can't we just accept it?"

Her gaze moved to the night again, remained fixed on her own dark reflection in the glass. "Shadows of rape, maybe. Of being used, laid, forgotten. You grow up terrified of your own reflection—alone and lonely if plain and flat, assaulted in the coatroom if not."

He hesitated. "Do you feel I'm using you now, Charlene?"

She looked for all the world like that plain and lonely girl that had never stared out at her from her mirror. "I don't know, Ed. I don't think I know anything right now . . . least of all myself."

He stood up, suddenly tired. "I know the feeling. Deaf, dumb, and blind—we make a lovely pair." He moved over to the window. Charlene stood up behind him, unmoving beside the cushion.

"Are you coming to bed?" she said quietly.

He nodded, not turning. "Yes. In a while."

The President sat staring at the desk in front of him. The smoke and the silence hung over the room. He was alone now—perhaps he had always been alone—and he felt a cold fear.

President Edward Mankiewicz stared at the touchplate that lay whitely at his fingertips, his face reflected in its frosty depths. He sat there a long while before finally reaching out to take it.

President Edward Mankiewicz stared at the touchplate that lay whitely at his fingertips. He squatted uncomfortably in front of the closet in which he had hidden it, staring, debating, at length deciding as he stood up, taking it with him when he went. Charlene was in the bedroom. Without pause he headed for

her, his hands trembling slightly, hoping that man *can't* fight with his clothes off, can only make love and show love and be loved . . .

The bedroom was dim; the blinds on the window crippled the moonlight, turned it weak and pale. Mankiewicz had to wait for his eyes to adjust to the dark, but even without seeing he could feel Charlene's presence in the room. Like an animal sensing the presence of an enemy?

"Charlene?"

She backed away from the closet, pale in a light blue nightgown. Mankiewicz felt almost betrayed by his erection that followed his glimpse of her: *Oh Lord ... do I want to love her—or use her?*

"Ed? Ed—"

Mankiewicz moved over to the unmade bed, dropped the touch-plate onto the sheets. His movements repeated themselves in the mirror on the far wall of the room. Charlene stared at the plate.

"I thought you were going to send an emissary," she said softly.

"I may. But not for now. Not for us."

Charlene's eyes, ink-black in the darkness, turned slowly to the touchplate, then, hesitantly, met his. They remained there for as long as Mankiewicz's breath hung suspended in his chest.

Silently, Mankiewicz slid his fingers beneath the touchplate, lifting it to show her.

"We'd know why," he said gently, as gently as he knew how. "Why we're so glib in war, so mute in peace. Maybe even why we have to use a machine to touch."

Charlene hesitated. "Just touching?"

He nodded, putting the plate back down. "Just touching."

"Why we need each other," she said at last. "The chinks and pockets and lonely corners we fill for each other. The weaknesses. Isn't that what love does—fill them, mortar 'them over? You'd know mine, I'd know yours. Is that it?"

He drew a deep breath. "We'd know ourselves. Each other and ourselves. It scares the hell out of me, Charlene . . . but so does death."

*Dear God, what's to lose?*

She put her hand to the shining touchplate.

*Losing's not the worry . . .*

He put his hand on hers, waited. *It's winning.*

Very early in the dark morning, five-o'clock blackness hanging blind and restless over the city, Mankiewicz slid away from the woman who lay naked beside him. He shambled into the bathroom, avoiding his reflection in the mirror, then forcing himself to accept his own image. And then he vomited for some minutes.

When he was finished he walked slowly into the living room and picked up the phone: the click of fingers stabbing out a number punctuated the silence.

"Hal? Yes . . . You were right, damn it. You never can ask anyone else. Not to face . . . that. Not to do your trusting for you. . . . No, I won't be seeing you until it's over. No, I'm all right. Thanks."

The click of communication ended, the chill of another begun, the memory of another. Mankiewicz glanced toward the bedroom and managed a wan smile; then he went over to the window and stood nude before the city. He stared at the night a long while, a *Kouros* statue, and hoped that the glow off the eastern horizon was the sun.