

Himself in Anachron

And Time there is And Time there was And Time goes on, before But what is the Knot That binds the time That holds it here, and more Oh, the Knot in Time Is a secret place They sought in times of yore Somewhere in Space They seek it still But Tasco hunts no more ... HE FOUND IT from "Mad Dita 's Song " First they threw out every bit of machinery which was not vital to their lives or the function of the ship. Then went Dita's treasured honeymoon items (foolishly and typically she had valued these over the instruments). Next they ejected every bit of nutrient except the minimum for survival for two persons. Tasco knew then. It was not enough. The ship still had to be lightened.

He remembered that the Subchief had said, bitterly enough: "So you got leave to time-travel together! You fool! I don't know whether it was your idea or hers to have a 'honeymoon in time,"

but with everyone watching your marriage you've got the sentimental mob behind you.

"Honeymoon in time," indeed. Why?

Is it that your woman is jealous of your time trips? Don't be an idiot, Tasco. You know that ship's not built for two. You don't even have to go at all; we can send Vomact. He's single. " Tasco remembered, too, the quick warmth of his jealousy at the mention of Vomact. If anything had been needed to steel his determination, that name had done it. How could he possibly have backed out after the publicity over his proposed flight to find the Knot. The Subchief must have realized from the expression on his face something of his feelings; he had said with a knowledgeable grin: "Well, if anybody can find the Knot, it'll be you. But listen, leave her here. Take her later if you like but go first alone." But Tasco could remember, too, Dita 's kitten-soft body as she nestled up to him holding his eyes with her own and murmuring,

"But, darling, you promised..."

Yes, he had been warned, but that didn't make the tragedy any easier. Yes, he could have left her behind, but what kind of marriage would they have had with the blot of her bitterness on the first days of their married life? And how could he have lived with himself if he had let Vomact go in his place? How, even, would Dita have regarded him? He could not deceive himself; he knew that Dita loved him, loved him dearly, but he had been a hero ever since she had known him and how much would she have loved him without the hero image? He loved her enough not to want to find out.

And now, one of them must go, be lost in space and time forever. Tasco looked at her, his beloved. He thought, I have loved you forever, but in our case forever was only three earth days.

Shall I love you there in space and timelessness? To postpone, if only for minutes, the eternal parting, he pretended to find some other instrument which could be disposed of, and sent through the hatch one person' s share of the remaining nutrient. Now the decision was made. Dita came over to stand beside him.

"Does that do it, Tasco? Is the ship light enough now for us to get

out of the Knot? Instead of answering he held her tightly against him. I've done what I had to, he thought. . . Dita, Dita, not to hold you ever again . . .

Softly, not to disturb the moon-pale curve of her hair, he passed his hand over her head. Then he released her.

"Get ready to take over, Dita. I could not murder you, oh my darling, and unless the ship is lightened by the weight of one of us we will both die here in the Knot. You must take it back, you have to take back the ship and all the instrument-gathered data.

It's not you or me or us now. We're the servants of the Instrumentality. You must understand . . ."

Still within his arms, she backed away enough to look at his face. She was dewy-eyed, loving, frightened, her lips trembling with affection. She was adorable, and Cranch! how incompetent.

But she'd make it; she had to. She said nothing at first, trying to hold her lips steady, and then she said the thing that would annoy him most.

"Don't, darling, don't. I couldn't stand it. . . . Please don't leave me."

His reaction was completely spontaneous: His open hand caught her across the cheek, hard. A reciprocal anger flashed across her eyes and mouth, but she gained control of herself. She returned to pleading.

"Tasco, Tasco, don't be bad to me. If we have to die together, I can

face it. Don't leave me, please don't leave me. I don't blame you

.

.. " I don't blame you! he thought. By the Forgotten One, that's really rather good!

He said, as quietly as he could,

"I've told you. Somebody has got to take this ship back to our own time and place. We've found the Knot. This is the Knot in Time. Look."

He pointed. The Merochron swung slightly back and forth, from +1,000,000:1 to 500,000:1.

"Look hard twenty-years-a minute-plus to ten-years-a-minute-minus. The ship has a chance of getting out if the load is lightened. We've thrown everything else we could out. Now I'm going. I love you; you love me. It will be as hard for me to leave you as for you to see me go. A lifetime with you would not have been enough. But, Dita, you owe me this ... to take the ship back safely. Don't make it harder for me.

If you can hold it on Left Subformal Probability, do it. If not, keep on trying to slow down in back time

"But, darling . . ."

He wanted to be tender. Words caught in his throat. But their time had run out. Their honeymoon had been a gamble, their own gamble, and now it and their life together were over. Three earth days! The Instrumentality remained; the Chiefs and Lords waited; a million lives would be a cheap price for a fix on the Knot in Time. Dita could do it. Even she could do it if the ship were lighter by a man.

His farewell kiss was not one she would remember. He was in a hurry now to finish it; the sooner he left, the better her chances were of getting back. And still she looked at him as if she expected him to stay and talk. Something in her eyes made him suspicious that she would try to hinder him. He cut in his helmet speaker and said: "Goodbye. I love you. I have to go now, quickly. Please do as I ask and don't get in my way."

She was weeping now.

"Tasco, you're going to die . . ."

"Maybe," he said.

She reached for him, tried to hold him.

"Darling, don't. Don't go. Don't hurry so."

Roughly he pushed her back into the control seat. He tried to hold his anger that she would not let him do even this right, to die for her. She would make it a scene.

"Sweetheart," he said, "don't make me say it all over again. Anyhow, I may not die. I'll aim for a planet full of nymphs and I'll live a thousand years."

He had half expected to stir her to jealousy or anger... at least some other emotion, but she disregarded his poor joke and went on quietly weeping. A wisp of smoke rising in the hot moving air of the cabin made them look to the control panel. The Probability Selector was glowing. Tasco kept his face

of Man immobile, glad that she did not realize the significance of the reading. Now no one will ever find me, even if I live, he thought.

But go, go, go!

He smiled at her through his shimmering suit. He touched her arm with his metal claw. Then, before she could stop him he backed into the escape hatch, slammed the door on himself, fumbled for the ejector gun, pressed the button. Pressed it hard.

Thunder, and a wash like water. There went his world, his wife, his time, himself... He floated free in ana chron Others had gone astray between the Probabilities; none had come back. They had borne it, he supposed. If they could, he could too. And then it caught him. The others, had they left wives and sweethearts?

Was it for them too a personal tragedy? Himself and Dita, they had not had to come. Vanity, pride, jealousy, stubbornness. They had come. And now: himself in ana chron

He felt himself leaping from Probability to Probability like a pebble bouncing down a corrugated plastic roof. He couldn't even tell whether he was going toward Formal or Resolved. Perhaps he was still somewhere in Left Subformal.

The clatter ceased. He waited for more blows.

One more came. Only one, and sharp.

He felt tension go out of him. He felt the Probabilities firming around him, listened to the selector working in his helmet as it coded him into a time-space combination fit for human life. The thing had a murmur in it which he had never heard in a practice jump, but then, this wasn't practice. He had never before gotten out between the Probabilities, never floated free in ana chron

A feeling of weight and direction made him realize that he was coming back to common space. His feet were touching ground. He stood still, attempting to relax while a world took shape around him. There was something very strange about the whole business.

The grey color of the space around him resembled the grey of fast back timing the blind blur which he had so often seen from the cabin window when, having chosen a Probability, he had coursed it down until the Selectors had given him an opening he could land in. But how could he be back timing with no ship, no power?

Unless Unless the Knot in Time in flinging him out had imparted to him a time-momentum in his own body. But even if that were so he should decelerate. Was he coming down in ratio? This still felt like high timing 10,000:1 or higher.

He tried briefly to think of Dita but his personal situation outweighed everything else. A new worry hit him. What was his own personal consumption of time? With time so high outside his unit was it also rising inside? How

Himself in Anachron long would his nutrients last? He tried to be aware of his own body, to feel hunger, to catch a glimpse of himself. Was the automatic nutrition keeping up with the changing time? On inspiration, he rubbed his face against the mask to see if his whiskers had grown since he left the ship.

He had a beard. Plenty.

Before he could figure that one out, there was one last Snap!

and he fainted.

When he recovered, he was still erect. Some kind of frame supported him. Who had put it there, and how? By the continued grey ness he could tell that his physiological time and external time had not yet met. He felt a violent impatience. There should be some way to slow down. His helmet felt heavy. Disregarding the risks, he clawed at the mask until it came off.

The air was sweet but thick, thick. He had to fight to breathe it in. It was hardly worth the struggle.

He was still high timing more so than he had thought anybody could with an exposed body. He looked down and saw his beard tremble as it grew. He felt the stab of fingernails growing against his palms; there should have been an automatic cut-off but time was going too fast. Clenching his hand, he broke off the nails roughly. His boots had apparently broken off his toenails, and although his feet were uncomfortable the pressure was bearable.

Anyway there was nothing he could do about it.

His immense tiredness warned him that the automatic nutrient system was not keeping up with his bodily time. With effort he fitted his claw to his belt and twisted until the supplementary food vial was released. He felt the needle pierce the skin of his belly; he twisted again until the hot surge of nourishment told him that the food-injector had reached a vein. Almost immediately his strength began to rise.

He watched the blur of buildings flashing into instantaneous shape around him, standing a moment, and then melting slowly away. Now he could see a little more of his surroundings. He seemed to be standing in the mouth of a cave or in a great doorway. It was curious, that, about the buildings. All the other buildings he had seen in time had worked the other way. First the slow up-thrust as they were built, then the greying evenness of age, then the flash of removal. But, he reminded himself tiredly, he was back timing and he thought it probable that no other human being had ever back timed so hard and fast or for so long a time.

He seemed now to be rapidly decelerating. A building appeared around him, then he was outside of it, then back in again. Suddenly a great light shone in front of him.

Now he was inside a large palace. He seemed to be placed on a pedestal, high up at the center of things. Shimmering masses began to take form

of Man around him at rhythmic intervals: people? There was something wrong about the way they moved; why did they move with that strange awkwardness?

As the light persisted and this building seemed solid, he made an effort to squint to try to see more. His eyeballs were the only part of his anatomy that seemed to move freely. His breaking growing breaking fingernails and toenails and the growing beard reminded him to break off another food needle in his vein. His skin itched intolerably. As he realized the increasing immobility of his arms he felt panic and while there was still time pushed the continuous-flow button on the supplementary nutrients. Despite the food, enough to keep him alive in the cold of space, he could no longer move his hands and fingers. And still, it seemed only minutes since he had left the ship. (Dita, Dita, are you out of the Knot ? Did you manage it in time ? If only I calculated the weight load right. . .) The building continued stable around him. He rolled his eyes to try to see where he was, when he was.

I'm still alive, he thought. Nobody else ever got out of 'anachron. That's something. Nobody else ever stepped out of time to be seen again.

Deceleration continued. The bright light before him remained even and he found he could see better. In front of him was a sort of picture, high and large. What was it? Panels, a series of panels, paintings from some remote past.

He peered harder and recognized that the panel at the top left was himself, Tasco Magnon. There he was: shimmering space suit, marble armrests, pedestal below him. But they had given him wings like the wings of angels of the Old Strong Religion.

Great white wings. And they had put a halo around his head. The next panel showed him as he felt: suit shimmering but his face old and tired.

The panels on the lower level were equally curious. The first showed a bed of grass or moss with luminescence glowing above it. The second showed a skeleton standing in a frame.

His tired mind sought to make sense of the panels.

People became plainer in the blur around him. Sometimes he could almost see individuals. The colors of the paintings brightened, brightened, until they flashed gay and bold, then disappeared.

Disappeared completely, flatly.

His brain, so old and tired now, struggled with immense effort to reach the truth. Physiological time was utterly deranged. Each minute seemed years. His thoughts became old memories while he thought them. But the truth came through to him: He was still back timing

He had passed the time of his arrival and resurrection in this world. The

Himself in Anachron 199 resurrection was wisely prophesied by the beings who built the palace, painted the wings and halo around him.

He would die soon, in the remote past of this civilization.

Long afterwards, centuries before his own death, his alien remains would fade into the system of this time-space locus; and in fading, they would seem to glow and to assemble. They must have been untouchable and beyond manipulation. The people who had built the palace and their forefathers had watched dust turn to skeleton, skeleton heave upright, skeleton become mummy, mummy become corpse, corpse become old man, old man become young himself as he had left the spaceship. He had landed in his own tomb, his own temple.

He had yet to fulfill the things which these people had seen him do, and had recorded in the panels of his temple.

Across his fatigue he felt a thrill of weary remote pride: he knew that he was sure to fulfill the godhood which these people had so faithfully recorded. He knew he would become young and glorious, only to disappear. He'd done it, a few minutes or millennia ago.

The clash of time within his body tore at him with peculiar pain. The food needle seemed to have no further effect. His vitals felt dry.

The building glowed as it seemed to come nearer.

The ages thrust against him. He thought,

"I am Tasco Magnon and have been a god. I will become one again."

But his last conscious thought was nothing grandiose. A glimpse of moon-pale hair, a half-turned cheek. In the aching lost silence of his own mind he called, Dita! Dita!

The twisted time ship took form at the Uateport of the Instrumentality. Officials and engineers rushed up, opened the door. The young woman who sat at the controls staring blindly was white-faced beyond all weeping. They tried to rouse her from her trance-like state but she clung desperately to the controls, repeating like a chant: "He jumped out. Tasco jumped out. He jumped out. Alone, alone in ana chron . . ."

Gravely and gently the officials lifted her from the controls so that they could remove the now-priceless instruments.