

The Asenion Solution

by Robert Silverberg

FLETCHER STARED BLEAKLY AT THE SMALL MOUNDS OF GRAY metal that were visible behind the thick window of the storage chamber.

“Plutonium-186,” he muttered. “Nonsense! Absolute nonsense!”

“Dangerous nonsense, Lew,” said Jesse Hammond, standing behind him. “Catastrophic nonsense.”

Fletcher nodded. The very phrase, “plutonium-186,” sounded like gibberish to him. There wasn’t supposed to be any such substance. Plutonium-186 was an impossible isotope, too light by a good fifty neutrons. Or a bad fifty neutrons, considering the risks the stuff was creating as it piled up here and there around the world. But the fact that it was theoretically impossible for plutonium-186 to exist did not change the other, and uglier, fact that he was looking at three kilograms of it right this minute. Or that as the quantity of plutonium-186 in the world continued to increase, so did the chance of an uncontrollable nuclear reaction leading to an atomic holocaust.

“Look at the morning reports,” Fletcher said, waving a sheaf of faxprints at Hammond. “Thirteen grams more turned up at the nucleonics lab of Accra University. Fifty grams in Geneva. Twenty milligrams in—well, that little doesn’t matter. But Chicago, Jesse, Chicago—three hundred grams in a single chunk!”

“Christmas presents from the Devil,” Hammond muttered.

“Not the Devil, no. Just decent serious-minded scientific folk who happen to live in another universe where plutonium-186 is not only possible but also perfectly harmless. And who are so fascinated by the idea that *we’re* fascinated by it that they keep on shipping the stuff to us in wholesale lots! What are we going to do with it all, Jesse? What in God’s name are we going to do with it all?”

Raymond Nikolaus looked up from his desk at the far side of the room.

“Wrap it up in shiny red and green paper and ship it right back to them?” he suggested.

Fletcher laughed hollowly. “Very funny, Raymond. Very, very funny.”

He began to pace the room. In the silence the clicking of his shoes against the flagstone floor seemed to him like the ticking of a detonating device, growing louder, louder, louder...

He—they, all of them—had been wrestling with the problem all year, with an increasing sense of futility. The plutonium-186 had begun mysteriously to appear in laboratories all over the world—wherever supplies of one of the two elements with equivalent atomic weights existed. Gram for gram, atom for atom, the matching elements disappeared just as mysteriously: equal quantities of tungsten-186 or osmium-186.

Where was the tungsten and osmium going? Where was the plutonium coming from? Above all, how was it possible for a plutonium isotope whose atoms had only 92 neutrons in its nucleus to exist even for a fraction of a fraction of an instant? Plutonium was one of the heavier chemical elements, with a whopping 94 protons in the nucleus of each of its atoms. The closest thing to a stable isotope of plutonium was plutonium-244, in which 150 neutrons held those 94 protons together; and even at that, plutonium-244 had an inevitable habit of breaking down in radioactive decay, with a half-life of some 76 million years. Atoms of plutonium-186, if they could exist at all, would come dramatically apart in very much less than one seventy-six millionth of a second.

But the stuff that was turning up in the chemistry labs to replace the tungsten-186 and the osmium-186 had an atomic number of 94, no question about that. And element 94 was plutonium. That couldn’t be disputed either. The defining characteristic of plutonium was the presence of 94 protons in its nucleus. If that was the count, plutonium was what that element had to be.

This impossibly light isotope of plutonium, this plutonium-186, had another impossible characteristic about it: not only was it stable, it was so completely stable that it wasn’t even radioactive. It just sat there,

looking exceedingly unmysterious, not even deigning to emit a smidgen of energy. At least, not when first tested. But a second test revealed positron emission, which a third baffled look confirmed. The trouble was that the third measurement showed an even higher level of radioactivity than the second one. The fourth was higher than the third. And so on and so on.

Nobody had ever heard of any element, of whatever atomic number or weight, that started off stable and then began to demonstrate a steadily increasing intensity of radioactivity. No one knew what was likely to happen, either, if the process continued unchecked, but the possibilities seemed pretty explosive. The best suggestion anyone had was to turn it to powder and mix it with nonradioactive tungsten. That worked for a little while, until the tungsten turned radioactive too. After that graphite was used, with somewhat better results, to damp down the strange element's output of energy. There were no explosions. But more and more plutonium-186 kept arriving.

The only explanation that made any sense—and it did not make *very* much sense—was that it was coming from some unknown and perhaps even unknowable place, some sort of parallel universe, where the laws of nature were different and the binding forces of the atom were so much more powerful that plutonium-186 could be a stable isotope.

Why they were sending odd lumps of plutonium-186 here was something that no one could begin to guess. An even more important question was how they could be made to stop doing it. The radioactive breakdown of the plutonium-186 would eventually transform it into ordinary osmium or tungsten, but the twenty positrons that each plutonium nucleus emitted in the course of that process encountered and annihilated an equal number of electrons. Our universe could afford to lose twenty electrons here and there, no doubt. It could probably afford to go on losing electrons at a constant rate for an astonishingly long time without noticing much difference. But sooner or later the shift toward an overall positive charge that this electron loss created would create grave and perhaps incalculable problems of symmetry and energy conservation. Would the equilibrium of the universe break down? Would nuclear interactions begin to intensify? Would the stars—even the Sun—erupt into supernovas?

"This can't go on," Fletcher said gloomily.

Hammond gave him a sour look. "So? We've been saying that for six months now."

"It's time to do something. They keep shipping us more and more and more, and we don't have any idea how to go about telling them to cut it out."

"We don't even have any idea whether they really exist," Raymond Nikolaus put in.

"Right now that doesn't matter. What matters is that the stuff is arriving constantly, and the more of it we have, the more dangerous it is. We don't have the foggiest idea of how to shut off the shipments. So we've got to find some way to get rid of it as it comes in."

"And what do you have in mind, pray tell?" Hammond asked.

Fletcher said, glaring at his colleague in a way that conveyed the fact that he would brook no opposition, "I'm going to talk to Asenion."

Hammond guffawed. "Asenion? You're crazy!"

"No. *He* is. But he's the only person who can help us."

It was a sad case, the Asenion story, poignant and almost incomprehensible. One of the finest minds atomic physics had ever known, a man to rank with Rutherford, Bohr, Heisenberg, Fermi, Meitner. A Harvard degree at twelve, his doctorate from MIT five years later, after which he had poured forth a dazzling flow of technical papers that probed the deepest mysteries of the nuclear binding forces. As the twenty-first century entered its closing decades he had seemed poised to solve once and for all the eternal riddles of the universe. And then, at the age of twenty-eight, without having given the slightest warning, he walked away from the whole thing.

"I have lost interest," he declared. "Physics is no longer of any importance to me. Why should I concern myself with these issues of the way in which matter is constructed? How tiresome it all is! When one looks at the Parthenon, does one care what the columns are made of, or what sort of scaffolding was needed to put them in place? That the Parthenon exists, and is sublimely beautiful, is all that should

interest us. So too with the universe. I see the universe, and it is beautiful and perfect. Why should I pry into the nature of its scaffolding? Why should anyone?"

And with that he resigned his professorship, burned his papers, and retreated to the thirty-third floor of an apartment building on Manhattan's West Side, where he built an elaborate laboratory-greenhouse in which he intended to conduct experiments in advanced horticulture.

"Bromeliads," said Asenion. "I will create hybrid bromeliads. Bromeliads will be the essence and center of my life from now on."

Romelmeyer, who had been Asenion's mentor at Harvard, attributed his apparent breakdown to overwork, and thought that he would snap back in six or eight months. Jantzen, who had had the rare privilege of being the first to read his astonishing dissertation at MIT, took an equally sympathetic position, arguing that Asenion must have come to some terrifying impasse in his work that had compelled him to retreat dramatically from the brink of madness. "Perhaps he found himself looking right into an abyss of inconsistencies when he thought he was about to find the ultimate answers," Jantzen suggested. "What else could he do but run? But he won't run for long. It isn't in his nature."

Burkhardt, of Cal Tech, whose own work had been carried out in the sphere that Asenion was later to make his own, agreed with Jantzen's analysis. "He must have hit something really dark and hairy. But he'll wake up one morning with the solution in his head, and it'll be goodbye horticulture for him. He'll turn out a paper by noon that will revolutionize everything we think we know about nuclear physics, and that'll be that."

But Jesse Hammond, who had played tennis with Asenion every morning for the last two years of his career as a physicist, took a less charitable position. "He's gone nuts," Hammond said. "He's flipped out altogether, and he's never going to get himself together again."

"You think?" said Lew Fletcher, who had been almost as close to Asenion as Hammond, but who was no tennis player.

Hammond smiled. "No doubt of it. I began noticing a weird look in his eyes starting just about two years back. And then his playing started to turn weird too. He'd serve and not even look where he was serving. He'd double-fault without even caring. And you know what else? He didn't challenge me on a single out-of-bounds call the whole year. That was the key thing. Used to be, he'd fight me every call. Now he just didn't seem to care. He just let everything go by. He was completely indifferent. I said to myself, This guy must be flipping out."

"Or working on some problem that seems more important to him than tennis."

"Same thing," said Hammond. "No, Lew, I tell you—he's gone completely unglued. And nothing's going to glue him again."

That conversation had taken place almost a year ago. Nothing had happened in the interim to change anyone's opinion. The astounding arrival of plutonium-186 in the world had not brought forth any comment from Asenion's Manhattan penthouse. The sudden solemn discussions of fantastic things like parallel universes by otherwise reputable physicists had apparently not aroused him either. He remained closeted with his bromeliads high above the streets of Manhattan.

Well, maybe he *is* crazy, Fletcher thought. But his mind can't have shorted out entirely. And he might just have an idea or two left in him

Asenion said, "Well, you don't look a whole lot older, do you?"

Fletcher felt himself reddening. "Jesus, Ike, it's only been eighteen months since we last saw each other!"

"Is that all?" Asenion said indifferently. "It feels like a lot more to me."

He managed a thin, remote smile. He didn't look very interested in Fletcher or in whatever it was that had brought Fletcher to his secluded eyrie.

Asenion had always been an odd one, of course—aloof, mysterious, with a faint but unmistakable air of superiority about him that nearly everyone found instantly irritating. Of course, he *was* superior. But he had made sure that he let you know it, and never seemed to care that others found the trait less than

endearing.

He appeared more remote than ever, now, stranger and more alien. Outwardly he had not changed at all: the same slender, debonair figure, surprisingly handsome, even striking. Though rumor had it that he had not left his penthouse in more than a year, there was no trace of indoor pallor about him. His skin still had its rich deep olive coloring, almost swarthy, a Mediterranean tone. His hair, thick and dark, tumbled down rakishly over his broad forehead. But there was something different about his dark, gleaming eyes. The old Asenion, however preoccupied he might have been with some abstruse problem of advanced physics, had nearly always had a playful sparkle in his eyes, a kind of amiable devilish glint. This man, this horticultural recluse, wore a different expression altogether—ascetic, mist-shrouded, *absent*. His gaze was as bright as ever, but the brightness was a cold one that seemed to come from some far-off star.

Fletcher said, “The reason I’ve come here”

“We can go into all that later, can’t we, Lew? First come into the greenhouse with me. There’s something I want to show you. Nobody else has seen it yet, in fact.”

“Well, if you—”

“Insist, yes. Come. I promise you, it’s extraordinary.”

He turned and led the way through the intricate pathways of the apartment. The sprawling many-roomed penthouse was furnished in the most offhand way, cheap student furniture badly cared for. Cats wandered everywhere, five, six, eight of them, sharpening their claws on the upholstery, prowling in empty closets whose doors stood ajar, peering down from the tops of bookcases containing jumbled heaps of coverless volumes. There was a rank smell of cat urine in the air.

But then suddenly Asenion turned a corridor and Fletcher, following just behind, found himself staring into what could have been an altogether different world. They had reached the entrance to the spectacular glass-walled extension that had been wrapped like an observation deck around the entire summit of the building. Beyond, dimly visible inside, Fletcher could see hundreds or perhaps thousands of strange-looking plants, some hanging from the ceiling, some mounted along the sides of wooden pillars, some rising in stepped array on benches, some growing out of beds set in the floor.

Asenion briskly tapped out the security-combination code on a diamond-shaped keyboard mounted in the wall, and the glass door slid silently back. A blast of warm humid air came forth.

“Quickly!” he said. “Inside!”

It was like stepping straight into the Amazon jungle. In place of the harsh, dry atmosphere of a Manhattan apartment in mid-winter there was, abruptly, the dense moist sweet closeness of the tropics, enfolding them like folds of wet fabric. Fletcher almost expected to hear parrots screeching overhead.

And the plants! The bizarre plants, clinging to every surface, filling every available square inch!

Most of them followed the same general pattern, rosettes of broad shining strap-shaped leaves radiating outward from a central cup-shaped structure deep enough to hold several ounces of water. But beyond that basic area of similarity they differed wildly from one another. Some were tiny, some were colossal. Some were marked with blazing stripes of yellow and red and purple that ran the length of their thick, succulent leaves. Some were mottled with fierce blotches of shimmering, assertive, bewilderingly complicated combinations of color. Some, whose leaves were green, were a fiery scarlet or crimson, or a somber, mysterious blue, at the place where the leaves came together to form the cup. Some were armed with formidable teeth and looked ready to feed on unwary visitors. Some were topped with gaudy spikes of strangely shaped brilliant-hued flowers taller than a man, which sprang like radiant spears from their centers.

Everything glistened. Everything seemed poised for violent, explosive growth. The scene was alien and terrifying. It was like looking into a vast congregation of hungry monsters. Fletcher had to remind himself that these were merely plants, hothouse specimens that probably wouldn’t last half an hour in the urban environment outside.

“These are bromeliads,” Asenion said, shaping the word sensuously in his throat as though it were the finest word any language had ever produced. “Tropical plants, mainly. South and Central America is

where most of them live. They tend to cling to trees, growing high up in the forks of branches, mainly. Some live at ground level, though. Such as the bromeliad you know best, which is the pineapple. But there are hundreds of others in this room. Thousands. And this is the humid room, where I keep the guzmanias and the vrieseas and some of the aechmeas. As we go around, I'll show you the tillandsias—they like it a lot drier—and the terrestrial ones, the hechtias and the dyckias, and then over on the far side—”

“Ike,” Fletcher said quietly.

“You know I've never liked that name.”

“I'm sorry. I forgot.” That was a lie. Asenion's given name was Ichabod. Neither Fletcher nor anyone Fletcher knew had ever been able to bring himself to call him that. “Look, I think what you've got here is wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. But I don't want to intrude on your time, and there's a very serious problem I need to discuss with—”

“First the plants,” Asenion said. “Indulge me.” His eyes were glowing. In the half-light of the greenhouse he looked like a jungle creature himself, exotic, weird. Without a moment's hesitation, he pranced off down the aisle toward a group of oversized bromeliads near the outer wall. Willy-nilly. Fletcher followed.

Asenion gestured grandly.

“Here it is! Do you see? *Aechmea asenionii*! Discovered in northwestern Brazil two years ago—I sponsored the expedition myself—of course. I never expected them to name it for me. but you know how these things sometimes happen—”

Fletcher stared. The plant was a giant among giants, easily two meters across from leaf-tip to leaf-tip. Its dark green leaves were banded with jagged pale scrawls that looked like the hieroglyphs of some lost race. Out of the central cup, which was the size of a man's head and deep enough to drown rabbits in, rose the strangest flower Fletcher ever hoped to see, a thick yellow stalk of immense length from which sprang something like a cluster of black thunderbolts tipped with ominous red globes like dangling moons. A pervasive odor of rotting flesh came from it.

“The only specimen in North America!” Asenion cried. “Perhaps one of six or seven in the world. And I've succeeded in inducing it to bloom. There'll be seed, Lew, and perhaps there'll be offsets as well—I'll be able to propagate it, and cross it with others—can you imagine it crossed with *Aechmea chantinii*. Fletcher? Or perhaps an interspecific hybrid? With *Neoregelia carcharodon*. say? No. Of course you can't imagine it. What am I saying? But it would be spectacular beyond belief. Take my word for it. “

“I have no doubt.”

“It's a privilege, seeing this plant in bloom. But there are others here you must see too. The puyas—the pitcairnia—there's a clump of *Dyckia marnierlapostollei* in the next room that you wouldn't believe—”

He bubbled with boyish enthusiasm. Fletcher forced himself to be patient. There was no help for it: he would simply have to take the complete tour.

It went on for what seemed like hours, as Asenion led him frantically from one peculiar plant to another, in room after room. Some were actually quite beautiful, Fletcher had to admit. Others seemed excessively flamboyant, or grotesque, or incomprehensibly ordinary to his untutored eye, or downright grotesque. What struck him most forcefully of all was the depth of Asenion's obsession. Nothing in the universe seemed to matter to him except this horde of exotic plants. He had given himself up totally to the strange world he had created here.

But at last even Asenion's manic energies seemed to flag. The pace had been merciless, and both he and Fletcher, drenched with sweat and gasping in the heat, paused for breath in a section of the greenhouse occupied by small gray gnarly plants that seemed to have no roots, and were held to the wall by barely visible wires.

Abruptly Asenion said, “All right. You aren't interested anyway. Tell me what you came here to ask

me, and then get on your way. I have all sorts of things to do this afternoon. “

“It’s about plutonium-186,” Fletcher began.

“Don’t be idiotic. That’s not a legitimate isotope. It can’t possibly exist. “

“I know,” Fletcher said. “But it does.”

Quickly, almost desperately, he outlined the whole fantastic story for the young physicist-turned-botanist. The mysterious substitution of a strange element for tungsten or osmium in various laboratories, the tests indicating that its atomic number was that of plutonium but its atomic weight was far too low, the absurd but necessary theory that the stuff was a gift from some parallel universe and—finally—the fact that the new element, stable when it first arrived, rapidly began to undergo radioactive decay in a startlingly accelerative way.

Asenion’s saturnine face was a study in changing emotions as Fletcher spoke. He seemed bored and irritated at first, then scornful, then, perhaps, furious; but not a word did he utter, and gradually the fury ebbed, turning to distant curiosity and then, finally, a kind of fascination. Or so Fletcher thought. He realized that he might be altogether wrong in his interpretations of what was going on in the unique, mercurial mind of the other man.

When Fletcher fell silent Asenion said, “What are you most afraid of! Critical mass? Or cumulative electron loss?”

“We’ve dealt with the critical mass problem by powdering the stuff, shielding it in graphite, and scattering it in low concentrations to fifty different storage points. But it keeps on coming in—they love to send it to us, it seems. And the thought that every atom of it is giving off positrons that go around looking for electrons to annihilate—” Fletcher shrugged. “On a small scale it’s a useful energy pump, I suppose, tungsten swapped for plutonium with energy gained in each cycle. But on a large scale, as we continue to transfer electrons from our universe to theirs—”

“Yes,” Asenion said.

“So we need a way to dispose of—”

“Yes.” He looked at his watch. “Where are you staying while you’re in town, Fletcher?”

“The Faculty Club, as usual. “

“Good. I’ve got some crosses to make and I don’t want to wait any longer, on account of possible pollen contamination. Go over to the club and keep yourself amused for a few hours. Take a shower. God knows you need one: you smell like something out of the jungle. Relax, have a drink, come back at five o’clock. We can talk about this again then.” He shook his head. “Plutonium-186! What lunacy! It offends me just to say it out loud. It’s like saying—saying—well, *Billbergia yukonensis*. or *Tillandsia bostoniae*. Do you know what I mean? No. No. Of course you don’t.” He waved his hands. “Out! Come back at five!”

It was a long afternoon for Fletcher. He phoned his wife, he phoned Jesse Hammond at the laboratory, he phoned an old friend and made a date for dinner. He showered and changed. He had a drink in the ornate lounge on the Fifth Avenue side of the Club.

But his mood was grim, and not merely because Hammond had told him that another four kilograms of plutonium-186 had been reported from various regions that morning. Asenion’s madness oppressed him.

There was nothing wrong with an interest in plants, of course. Fletcher kept a philodendron and something else, whose name he could never remember, in his own office. But to immerse yourself in one highly specialized field of botany with such intensity—it seemed sheer lunacy. No, Fletcher decided, even that was all right, difficult as it was for him to understand why anyone would want to spend his whole life cloistered with a bunch of eerie plants. What was hard for him to forgive was Asenion’s renunciation of physics. A mind like that—the breadth of its vision—the insight Asenion had had into the greatest of mysteries—dammit, Fletcher thought, he had owed it to the world to stick to it! And instead, to walk away from everything, to hole himself up in a cage of glass

Hammond’s right, Fletcher told himself. Asenion really is crazy.

But it was useless to fret about it. Asenion was not the first supergenius to snap under contemplation of the Ultimate. His withdrawal from physics, Fletcher said sternly to himself, was a matter between Asenion and the universe. All that concerned Fletcher was getting Asenion's solution to the plutonium-186 problem; and then the poor man could be left with his bromeliads in peace.

About half past four Fletcher set out by cab to battle the traffic the short distance uptown to Asenion's place.

Luck was with him. He arrived at ten of five. Asenion's house-robot greeted him solemnly and invited him to wait. "The master is in the greenhouse," the robot declared. "He will be with you when he has completed the pollination."

Fletcher waited. And waited and waited.

Geniuses, he thought bitterly. Pains in the neck, all of them. Pains in the

Just then the robot reappeared. It was half past six. All was blackness outside the window. Fletcher's dinner date was for seven. He would never make it.

"The master will see you now," said the robot.

Asenion looked limp and weary, as though he had spent the entire afternoon smashing up boulders. But the formidable edge seemed gone from him, too. He greeted Fletcher with a pleasant enough smile, offered a word or two of almost-apology for his tardiness, and even had the robot bring Fletcher a sherry. It wasn't very good sherry, but to get anything at all to drink in a teetotaler's house was a blessing, Fletcher figured.

Asenion waited until Fletcher had had a few sips. Then he said, "I have your answer."

"I knew you would."

There was a long silence.

"Thiotimoline," said Asenion finally.

"Thiotimoline?"

"Absolutely. Endochronic disposal. It's the only way. And, as you'll see, it's a *necessary* way."

Fletcher took a hasty gulp of the sherry. Even when he was in a relatively mellow mood, it appeared, Asenion was maddening. And mad. What was this new craziness now? Thiotimoline? How could that preposterous substance, as insane in its way as plutonium-186, have any bearing on the problem?

Asenion said, "I take it you know the special properties of thiotimoline?"

"Of course. Its molecule is distorted into adjacent temporal dimensions. Extends into the future, and, I think, into the past. Thiotimoline powder will dissolve in water one second *before* the water is added."

"Exactly," Asenion said. "And if the water isn't added, it'll go looking for it. In the future."

"What does this have to do with—"

"Look here," said Asenion. He drew a scrap of paper from his shirt pocket. "You want to get rid of something. You put it in this container here. You surround the container with a shell made of polymerized thiotimoline. You surround the shell with a water tank that will deliver water to the thiotimoline on a timed basis, and you set your timer so that the water is due to arrive a few seconds from now. But at the last moment the timing device withholds the water."

Fletcher stared at the younger man in awe.

Asenion said, "The water is always about to arrive, but never quite does. The thiotimoline making up the plastic shell is pulled forward one second into the future to encounter the water. The water has a high probability of being there, but not quite high enough. It's actually another second away from delivery, and always will be. The thiotimoline gets dragged farther and farther into the future. The world goes forward into the future at a rate of one second per second, but the thiotimoline's velocity is essentially infinite. And of course it carries with it the inner container, too. "

"In which we have put our surplus plutonium-186."

“Or anything else you want to dispose of,” said Asenion.

Fletcher felt dizzy. “Which will travel on into the future at an infinite rate—”

“Yes. And because the rate is infinite, the problem of the breakdown of thiotimoline into its stable isochronic form, which has hampered most time-transport experiments, isn’t an issue. Something traveling through time at an infinite velocity isn’t subject to little limitations of that kind. It’ll simply keep going until it can’t go any farther.”

“But how does sending it into the future solve the problem?” Fletcher asked. “The plutonium-186 still stays in our universe, even if we’ve bumped it away from our immediate temporal vicinity. The electron loss continues. Maybe even gets worse, under temporal acceleration. We still haven’t dealt with the fundamental—”

“You never were much of a thinker, were you, Fletcher?” said Asenion quietly, almost gently. But the savage contempt in his eyes had the force of a sun going nova.

“I do my best. But I don’t see—”

Asenion sighed. “The thiotimoline will chase the water in the outer container to the end of time, carrying with it the plutonium in the inner container. To the end of time. *Literally*. “

“And?”

“What happens at the end of time, Fletcher?”

“Why—absolute entropy—the heat-death of the universe—”

“Precisely. The Final Entropic Solution. All molecules equally distributed throughout space. There will be no further place for the water-seeking thiotimoline to go. The end of the line is the end of the line. It, and the plutonium it’s hauling with it, and the water it’s trying to catch up with, will all plunge together over the entropic brink into antitime.”

“Antitime,” said Fletcher in a leaden voice. “Antitime?”

“Naturally. Into the moment before the creation of the universe. Everything is in stasis. Zero time, infinite temperature. All the universal mass contained in a single incomprehensible body. Then the thiotimoline and the plutonium and the water arrive.” Asenion’s eyes were radiant. His face was flushed. He waved his scrap of paper around as though it were the scripture of some new creed. “There will be a tremendous explosion. A Big Bang, so to speak. The beginning of all things. You—or should I say I?—will be responsible for the birth of the universe.”

Fletcher, stunned, said after a moment, “Are you serious?”

“I am never anything but serious. You have your solution. Pack up your plutonium and send it on its way. No matter how many shipments you make, they’ll all arrive at the same instant. And with the same effect. You have no choice, you know. The plutonium *must* be disposed of. And—” His eyes twinkled with some of the old Asenion playfulness. “The universe *must* be created, or else how will any of us get to be where we are? And this is how it was done. *Will* be done. Inevitable, ineluctable, unavoidable, mandatory. Yes? You see?”

“Well, no. Yes. Maybe. That is, I think I do,” said Fletcher, as if in a daze.

“Good. Even if you don’t, you will.”

“I’ll need—to talk to the others—”

“Of course you will. That’s how you people do things. That’s why I’m here and you’re there.” Asenion shrugged. “Well, no hurry about it. Create the universe tomorrow, create it the week after next, what’s the difference? It’ll get done sooner or later. It has to, because it already has been done. You see?”

“Yes. Of course. Of course. And now—if you’ll excuse me—” Fletcher murmured. “I—ah—have a dinner appointment in a little while”

“That can wait too, can’t it?” said Asenion, smiling with sudden surprising amiability. He seemed genuinely glad to have been of assistance. “There’s something I forgot to show you this afternoon. A remarkable plant, possibly unique—a nidularium, it is, Brazilian, not even named yet, as a matter of

fact—just coming into bloom. And this one—wait till you see it, Fletcher, wait till you see it—”