

# DEATH MARCH

**Algis Budrys**

*Death March offers a hypothetical answer to an eternal dilemma. People being what they are, some degree of government is inevitable: how, then, do you immunize the governors from corruption by the fact of governing? Democracy's nostrum is rapid, frequent turn-over, and up to a point this works. But it has two disadvantages - the first, discontinuity; and the second (immensely more serious), the fact that every set of governors has to be relied on, as a matter of honour, to agree to being superseded, when the time for that comes. As recent history has demonstrated, such reliance is strictly a matter of faith.*

*In the present state of science and technology, Budrys's alternative suggestion cannot of course be managed. But that it might be managed one day is not at all inconceivable. In the interim, here is cordon bleu food for thought on the subject, served on a handsome narrative plate.*

## I

**W**hen Kenn Haffey was twenty years old, a thoughtfully cruel man confirmed an already probable destiny and condemned him to death by slow torture. But Kenn didn't know that as he walked down the road to Bessmer.

The road from Inglistone to Bessmer was a yellow, clayey track that began in the forested mountains. As the country sloped down toward the rocky coast and the broad reach of Bessmer Bay, the road began to run between the white fences and long fields of dairy country, bright with the green of springtime.

The air was clear and light, gently stirred by a soft breeze. Soft, dazzling clouds floated overhead, and in the fruit trees beside the road, the nesting birds were chirruping sharply in the morning.

Kenn Haffey walked along with long, enjoyable strides, his pack on his back and the short bit of his pipe clenched between his teeth. He walked at an easy, steady pace, as he'd been doing for the two days past, his head turning as he looked from side to side, watching the countryside come to life under the climbing sun, listening to the gentle whisper of young grass

beside the road. From time to time, he rubbed the itch of the temporary mark tattooed on his forehead.

He was on his way into Bessmer to get his permanent classification and his permanent mark. Somehow, he'd managed to pass the Inglistone district agent's preliminary maturity test, gotten his Candidate's mark, identification papers, and travel permits, and as much to his own surprise as anyone else's, he was on his way.

He puzzled over that as he walked along.

Nobody was more conscious of his shortcomings than he was; he'd been dead sure it'd be at least years before the agent let him go to Bessmer - possibly never. When his twentieth birthday came around, he took the preliminary test because everybody started taking them at twenty. Very few people passed it the first time. Of all people you wouldn't expect to; a kid who couldn't do any kind of work without getting it wrong, who couldn't get the simplest instructions through his head, who was thoughtless and couldn't seem to keep his feet on the ground---

He'd passed it. And now, here he was, on the road to Bessmer.

He remembered his uncle's amazed look at the district agent.

"He *passed* it! *Him?*"

The district agent was a tall, iron-haired man with deep, brooding eyes and a thin, twisted mouth.

"That's right, Haffey," he said flatly. "He passed it."

Kenn saw the agent's eyes flicker over toward him and rest on his face for a minute. It was a peculiar look. The agent's eyes seemed to set themselves even deeper into his skull, and his mouth jerked as though something was chewing at his guts. It wasn't the first time the agent had looked at him like that.

"Now, look, sire," Sam Haffey had said in a strained voice, "Kenn's a good boy. We all like him. But, my gosh, sire!

He " Sam's face grimaced uncomfortably, and he shifted his feet uneasily. "Well... well, look, we had him in the mill for a while. He was willing - I'll say that for him - he was willing." Sam reached over and patted Kenn's shoulder. "But he wasn't there two hours before he ruined the best blade we had, through not keeping his eye on the grain. You know how much time we lost, getting a new blade shipped out and mounting it. You know about that - he was just standing there, thinking - said he was wondering whether plywood siding wasn't better than the slabs he was cutting. He was so busy trying to figure out a waterproof glue, he was only

keeping half an eye on his work."

"Plywood is better, in some cases."

"Well, my gosh, sire, maybe it is! Maybe so! But he was supposed to be cutting slabs. He was supposed to watch the blade. Whether plywood's better or not isn't any of his business! He was given a job. He was supposed to do it - deciding what's better or isn't is somebody else's job."

Kenn had stared shamefacedly down at the floor. The thing was, he hadn't even really been thinking about it like that -not deliberately, or anything. His mind just seemed to go off by itself, and before he knew it he was in the middle of some fool-headed dream. There might be some excuse for him if he set out on purpose to figure up things like a good plywood glue or a new way to saw a log. That was a job you could probably get classified for. But he did that with everything -not just with lumbering, which was what Inglistone did. He couldn't set his mind to anything. Likely as not, if he *was*

classified to being a technician in the mill, he'd spend half his time thinking about some new way to build roads.

Sam was right. He shouldn't ever have passed that test. Sam was a good man, with lots of common sense. He was the best sawyer in Inglistone - even when Kenn's father was alive, before the accident in the mill, people had figured Sam to be much the better of the two. Kenn respected Sam. And Sam treated him pretty decently, considering how disappointed he was in him.

Kenn didn't know what to do. He looked from Sam to the district agent. He should have been happy about his luck at passing the test - even if something might have gone wrong in the machine. And he was, a little. But he knew Sam was right. So he didn't know what to do.

"Sam Haffey," the agent said, "sawyering is your job. Passing Candidates up to the Bessmer tests is mine." He locked his eyes on Sam's, and there was something a little too close to death in them.

Sam's arm jerked up and he touched the deep, burned-in lumberman's classification mark above his eyes. He nodded his head. "Yes, sire."

The agent nodded frostily, and Sam dropped the salute.

"Kenn passed," the agent said. "He's going to Bessmer." For just a second, he looked at Kenn again, and this time Kenn thought there was a twisted kind of pity in the look.

The agent had gone a long way in the Bessmer tests. Long enough to be an unmarked man. Long enough to be a district agent. But he had marks

of a kind on his forehead; deep, slashing furrows that creased the skin and came up like two knife-cuts over his nose, where his eyebrows were drawn together by a pinched, constant look of agony.

## II

As the day grew, he began to meet occasional people with dairymen's marks on the road, or pass them as they stood in farmyards or worked in the fields. He always raised a hand in greeting, and they always answered back. Some of them stopped work long enough to call to him when they made out his mark:

"Good luck, Candidate! Where're you from?"

"Inglistone. Lumber town."

"What're you hoping for?"

"Timber cruiser."

"What's that?"

"Oh... you go out in the woods and look for the right kind of trees to cut."

"Sounds like a soft job."

He grinned back. "Yep!" he waved and went on.

It *was* a soft job. You went out into the woods alone, for weeks at a time, hunting your food and dipping your water out of ice-cold springs and running brooks. And there wasn't any way you could make any mistakes and ruin something for somebody else. Kenn knew he'd waste a lot of time; he wouldn't be much of a good man at it. But at least he'd be out of everybody's way.

He was pretty sure he'd get it. The Bessmer tests were fair. A machine that was something like the district agent's computer asked you what you wanted, and it read your feelings. It knew what you really liked doing, and whether you'd be any good at it. Of course, if it saw that you were really better at something else, it classified you for that, instead - but that was all right, because that turned out to be a job you liked even better than the one you thought you wanted. The machine went down deep - deeper than a man himself could go, sometimes.

He was pretty sure it'd classify him for timber cruising. He liked being alone. And he wasn't any good for anything else.

He walked along, down the road between the white fences. Of course, there was the main maturity test to pass before you took the classification

tests. They wouldn't test you unless you were grown up enough to be at least a little settled in your own mind.

He chewed on his lip. You could just get a postponement, and come back later and try again. Or you could get a permanent failure.

Suppose the agent had made a bad mistake with him? Suppose he'd get an X mark after all, in Bessmer instead of at home? Kenn didn't know what it'd be like if that happened. Well, being a mill helper or something like that for the rest of his life wasn't something he looked forward to - but if he got it, he deserved it, and he guessed there was a fair chance he did.

He passed by the district mansion, where the district noble lived with his ladies, set far up from the road on a high hill in the middle of an immense meadow that was like an island among the farms. The permit inspection box beside the road buzzed and passed him as it sorted out the pattern radiating from his permit for this district, packed in the bundle with the other permits in his pack.

Kenn looked idly at the box as he walked by it. It was a big, heavy box made out of metal, and anchored far down into the ground. There was no way of getting into it or knocking it over.

Well, why would you want to? Well - no, you wouldn't -but suppose... suppose you wanted to get over into the next district - well, you'd get a permit. Suppose you didn't have a permit? Well, if you couldn't get a permit, why did you want to go? Well... suppose you had a reason? What *kind* of reason? Well

He shook his head at himself. There it was again. Drifting off, and waking up in the middle of some wild fancy.

Well - all right, but suppose Well, maybe if you walked across exactly beside a man with a permit? Or sat on his shoulders? No - no, the way the line worked ought to be able to get around that. Anyway, it would if it was any good, and if it wasn't any good, it wouldn't be there. Lots of things - electricity, light, heat or cold; things like that - could skip right through or around a man and touch the man beside him.

He shook his head again. Now what would a man want to cross into another district *for*, that he couldn't go to his agent, get a test from the agent's computer, and have the agent give him a permit? And how many people ever went in the first place? That was like trying to think about what lumbering would be like if there weren't any trees.

Kenn Haffey, he thought to himself, half the time you think like a chipmunk.

That was about right, he guessed. If he didn't watch his thinking, it slipped away from him and jumped and bobbed around every which way.

He remembered Sam telling him that, once. He guessed his father must have had a little of the same thing in him, or he wouldn't have had that accident. Everybody pretty much agreed that he wouldn't have fallen into the saw if he'd watched where he was stepping.

It was too early in the day for the maintenance squad to have come along and cleaned up. There was a dead rabbit lying in the middle of the road, halfway across the line marking the district border. Kenn nudged it into the ditch, and crossed the white line that ran across the road and off over the fields and hills to either side *as far as the eye could see*.

### III

A delivery truck came into sight up on the mansion's hill, and Kenn stopped, watching it come down the drive toward the road. When it turned into the road in his direction, he, stepped to one side to let it go by, but it stopped, instead, and the driver leaned over and put his head out the window.

"Going into Bessmer, Candidate?"

His voice was a tight, indrawn sound. His face, which had once been strong, had gone to seed under pads of soft chubbiness, and deep, petulant lines had worked themselves in around his mouth. And he had a mark. It was a small circle, which was a classification Kenn didn't recognize, but what mattered was that he had a mark and was driving a truck.

"Want a ride, Candidate?" There was something bitter in the man's voice, and a touch of spitefulness. "You're going into Bessmer for your tests, aren't you?"

Kenn nodded. "Oh... yes. Yes, thanks." He climbed awkwardly up through the open door and sat down nervously, not knowing how he was going to take to riding.

"Not used to it, huh?" the driver said peculiarly as he put the truck in motion again. "Nobody but an unmarked man rides, huh? Where would a marked man have to go, that he'd need transportation? Isn't that right, Candidate?" He laughed sharply and worked the gears. "Well, for once you're going somewhere. It's only an errand truck, but you might as well get a taste of how the other half lives."

Kenn looked at him in complete confusion.

"Where're you from, Candidate? One of those farms back there?"

Kenn shook his head. "Inglistone. Lumber. That's in Forestry District 8."

The driver nodded. "You don't look like one of those clover kickers. What's your name?"

"Kenn Haffey." Kenn wasn't sure he should have taken this ride. There was something unpleasant about the driver's chubbiness and the high, fiddlestring tension in his voice. There was something nobody could like about the way he put his words together, and the look on his face. You couldn't be near him without getting jumpy yourself.

"Haffey," the driver repeated. "I don't recognize the name." Now he was making a big show out of pretending to search his mind seriously. Kenn thought he recognized a streak of contempt.

"Maybe you're a cousin of the Hollingsworth family? No?" The driver put an amazed look on his face, even though Kenn hadn't answered. "The Bartrams? Or maybe the Southwarks? Or maybe the... excuse me, Candidate... the rustic branch of the Metersills?"

Kenn shook his head, getting more and more annoyed. "No. I've never heard of any of them."

The driver nodded to himself. "I was afraid of that," he said, pretending to be worried. "Well, Candidate, don't hurry."

"I don't get you."

"No, I guess not," the driver said. He looked up and down at Kenn's clothes. "I guess there's a lot that doesn't get through to the back country. You know your district noble's name?"

Kenn shook his head. "Never seen him. District agent's named Ball."

The driver's forehead wrinkled around the deep mark where the cauterizing iron had burned, and this time he looked like he was actually thinking. "Let's see... Bartram, I think. No, Hollingsworth. Your noble's a Hollingsworth. Mine's a Southwark. How many people in your town?"

"About a hundred."

The driver nodded again. "Yep. They're still keeping you split up. Divide and— But that's no business of mine." He laughed sharply. "Where's your family from?"

"Inglistone."

"Before that."

Kenn shrugged. "Some Earth or other." He didn't want to get into any

arguments with anybody. He hated fighting-fists or words. That was something else that was wrong with him. He never stood up for his rights. But he wasn't too sure of what his rights were. What about a man who gave you a ride, and then talked to you in a wild way that didn't make sense but sounded like he was trying to insult you? He'd done you a favour - did he have a right to climb on your back for it? Kenn shifted his feet uneasily. The driver was making him jumpier and jumpier. Maybe he ought to have him stop the truck and walk it from here.

"Some Earth or other, eh?" the driver was saying. "Don't you know which one? Every planet gets to be called 'Earth' if it's been lived on long enough."

Kenn shook his head. "It's been long enough on this one. Who's going to remember that far back?"

The driver laughed. "Some people do. The Bartrams and the Southwarks do. So do the Hollingsworths and the Metersills. They all came from *the* Earth."

"The *first* one?"

"That's right, Candidate - the very first one. In an unbroken line. What d'you think of that?"

"It's been hundreds of years - maybe a thousand. Who's going to remember that far back?"

"It's easy, Candidate," the driver said with a twist in his mouth. "If your family's never been split up through a thousand classifications... if you've all lived in one place and kept records... if kids grow up where their great-grandfathers were born and know their great-grandchildren are going to live in the same place - then, it's easy."

"But "

"But what, Candidate? Aren't you going to Bessmer to try for the same status?" The driver's face twisted into a mockery of surprise and horror. "You mean you *don't* expect to get all the way to the top? What're you going for, Candidate?"

"Timber-cruiser classification."

"*Timber-cruiser!* Sakes alive, Candidate! Don't you have any *ambition*?"

"Ambition? What kind?"

"Don't you know *everybody* has to take the tests? Even the Hollingsworths and the Metersills?"



Kenn looked at him open-mouthed. "Sure, I know everybody's got to take them!" Then it came to him. "You mean -why don't *I* try to be a *noble*?"

The driver nodded, his mouth a bitter, leering slash. "*That's* it, Candidate! Why don't you try to be a noble? Of course, your name's Haffey and your family's a bunch of backwoods lumberjacks, but why should that be anything against you? The test's fair, isn't it? There's nothing that says you have to be what your father is."

"My father's dead," Kenn said absently, his mind still all mixed up.

The driver thought that was funny. He fought down a broad laugh. He reached over and clapped Kenn on the shoulder, not paying any attention to Kenn's twitch as he tried to pull away. "Well, don't worry, Candidate. They won't do *that* to you, anyway. They might do quite a few things, but they don't kill off a pair of working hands. And as long as you're alive, everything's all right, isn't it? I mean - you're alive, you've got to eat; you can't just sit down and die, can you?"

Kenn moved as far over as he could, and stared straight out the window. An O mark must mean somebody who wasn't right in the head. Or something close to it. It didn't mean anything easy to read. It wasn't like a forester's pine or a dairyman's cloverleaf. It was an O - a nothing. Not even an X. He wondered if they might give him an O.

He caught himself. His mind had drifted away from him again. He was letting himself think all kinds of idle things, when what he should have been doing was trying to think of how to get away from this man.

Be a *noble*! Why not try to be a rainbow?

He realized his hands were trembling. He was nervous as a cat. What was this man trying to do to him? How was he ever going to take the tests with something like this running around in his mind?

He shouldn't have taken this ride. Now he'd fail for certain.

Well, he deserved it. He should have had the spirit to stop the driver's talking, or else get out. He'd wanted to. But he couldn't even do that. His mixed-up mind had wanted to stay and hear the driver out. His mind, that wouldn't learn to tend to its own business!

The driver jerked the truck to a stop. Kenn's eyes focused, and he saw they were beside the main highway into Bessmer, at the next district line. There was another truck pulled up on the other side of the line, with a man standing and waiting beside it.

"This is as far as I go, Candidate," the driver said. "Maybe the other

fellow'll oblige you to Bessmer."

"Thanks," Kenn said shortly, fumbling with the handle until he got his door open. He climbed out quickly and slammed the door, while the driver got out the other side. They walked toward the line. Kenn crossed it with a buzz from the inspection box, but both drivers kept well clear of it.

"Give the Candidate a ride, will you?" the first driver said.

The second driver was a lean, sure-looking man, who looked like he did his job, did it well, and knew how to stay out of trouble. His mark was a spoked wheel. He looked at Kenn and grinned.

"Sure." He winked at Kenn. "Get there fast, get your classification faster, huh, Candidate?"

Kenn smiled back, feeling a lot better. This man was pretty much like his uncle and the rest of the men in Inglstone. "Thanks."

"Nothing to it, Candidate." He turned toward the first driver. "Got your order here, Mule."

"I can see it," Mule answered. "Well, hurry up with it!"

The new driver grinned and pushed a box across the line with a long plastic rod. Mule picked it up, scribbled a receipt on the metal line-clearance tag, tore it loose, and scaled it over. The driver caught it expertly in mid-air and stuck it in his pocket.

"What's in there, Mule?" he asked. "Smells good. Smells like a woman. Perfume for the Southwark ladies?"

Mule scowled. "That's none of your business, Driver! And it better be in undamaged condition, or the noble'll see to you."

"Bushwah, Mule! I do my job. Nobody sees to you as long as you're doing your job. If that stuff's gone bust, some packer's in dutch. Not me." He grinned. "And how'll the ladies know it wasn't you that did it?"

"The ladies know me better," Mule grunted. He turned toward his truck.

"And how *are* the ladies Southwark today, Mule?" the driver asked, giving Kenn a mysterious dig in the ribs. "Safe and sound?"

Mule shot him a murderous look. "We do our job." He strode toward the truck, flung his door open, and slid the box on to the seat beside him. Then he slammed the door behind him.

"Thanks for the ride, Mule," Kenn called politely as he started the motor.

Mule put his head through the window and looked at him for a

moment. Then he said: "My name's not Mule," in his tight, strangling voice. Then he twisted the truck's wheel, and began the drive back toward the mansion.

The driver chuckled beside Kenn. "Well, let's go, Candidate," he said.

Kenn climbed into the truck, and they drove toward Bessmer.

## IV

Bessmer was a big, sprawling city that curved around the bay like a long arm. The road topped a line of cliffs a mile from shore and began to wind down, and Kenn, watching from his seat, saw the broad ships waiting beside the piers and the high buildings rising up in a jagged pile against the blue of the ocean, some of them so tall they had to be seven or eight storeys high.

"Big, isn't it, Candidate? Must be close to fifty thousand people, counting Baystone, Newalk and Bessmer Centre together. Ever seen anything like it?"

Kenn shook his head. "No," he said absently. He was so far away that the driver's voice barely got through to him.

Well, so Mule didn't have a permit to go over the line. Neither did this driver.

Two trucks instead of one. Two men. That doesn't make sense. Unless they don't trust Mule - the Mule - for some reason.

Well, if they don't trust him, what's that mean?

Well - nothing, but... he's classified, isn't he?

So?

So they don't trust a classified man. If they don't trust one classified man, how about ?

You know what you're saying?

I'm just thinking. I'm not *saying* anything. But they don't trust this driver, either.

He came to himself with a snap. He stood off to one side and looked at himself in dry-throated apprehension.

He was getting worse about it. He wasn't just letting his mind get off on something like a new saw design.

He clenched his fists, and little beads of perspiration cropped up on his upper lip. What kind of a classification could he expect out of the tests?

The test machines looked *into* your mind. They saw how it worked. What kind of a freak was he, anyway, to not be able to think straight - to have a mind that wasn't any good for anything useful?

He wrenched his mind back toward the driver, listening intently to what the man was saying, trying to shut himself up. Divide and—

Divide and what?

He twisted uneasily in his seat. He concentrated on the driver as hard as he could, sick over what he deserved to have happen to him in the tests.

"Yes, sir," the driver was saying. "That's Bessmer. The only one of its kind. I live right outside of Baystone. Practically in it."

"Haven't you ever been in it?"

"I have for my tests, sure."

"Never since?"

The driver looked at him. "Not my district," he said. Then he grinned softly. "You know, young fellow, you shouldn't puncture a man's pride like that."

Kenn looked at him, not getting what he was driving at. "Like what?" he asked.

The driver frowned a little. "Like when somebody's trying to sound like a big shot," he said gruffly. "Putting it on a little (hick, like he knew all there was to know about the town."

"But you don't, do you?" Kenn asked, all mixed up.

The driver's jaw clamped. "Listen, Candidate. I gave you your ride. Now don't press your luck." The driver stared straight ahead through the windshield.

"But - look," Kenn said, trying to get it straight, "it's not your fault if you're not more than you are."

The driver turned back toward him. "*You* look, Candidate," he said in a level voice. "You make one more crack about me, and you're walking. Is that clear?"

Kenn nodded, ashamed of himself. "All right. I'm sorry." He looked down at his hands, flushing. He was always saying things to get people mad. That was something else that was wrong with him. No matter how close a watch he kept on himself, he couldn't get himself to be like other people.

What's wrong with me? he thought in panic. What's twisted up in my

head? Other people don't act like this. My brothers don't get themselves in trouble all the time, and I look just like them. Sam's one of the best men in Inglistone. Everybody likes him, and he's my uncle.

What's going to happen to me during my tests? They'll see what I am. They won't even make me a timber-cruiser. They won't make me anything.

"O.K., Candidate," the driver said a little less angrily. "But you better watch yourself during your tests." He shook his head. "You're pretty young."

Kenn worried his upper lip between his teeth. "Can you tell me something?" he asked after a while.

"Depends. What?"

"What do you think about the Southwarks and the Hollingsworths? And the" - he searched his memory - "Bar-trams and the Metersills?"

"What do I think about----!" The driver stared at him.

"What am I supposed to think, Candidate? They have umpteen nobles among them. Nobles tell the agents what to do, and the agents tell me. I do my job. What d'you mean, what do I think? What do *you* think?"

Kenn shook his head. "I never heard of them before today."

The driver stared even harder. "You never heard of them?"

"Well----" Kenn tried to explain, "back in Inglistone, we didn't see our noble. Just our agent. I guess... well, I guess we just never thought much about it. We worked in the mill, or we jacked lumber, and that was that."

"Right! You did your jobs, you did 'em so good nobody *ever* bothered you; you got your food issue and your housing, and you didn't have any trouble." The driver frowned at him. "So why ask me questions like that?"

I don't know. Kenn looked out through the windshield as the truck came off the long grade down the cliffs and began to roll across the flats toward Bessmer. He shrugged. "I don't know," he said aloud, in a different tone of voice than the one he'd used to himself. He was beginning to learn how to get along, a little. "Just something to talk about, I guess."

The driver shook his head. "You sure can pick funny things to talk about." He looked at Kenn. "Well, you're pretty young."

They rode on silently, until they reached the driver's depot, just outside the line into District 1 of Newalk. The driver pulled up in front of the building.

"That's Bessmer, Candidate."

Kenn got out, and looked toward the entry gate in the line. He turned back to the driver. "Thanks for the ride."

"You're welcome, Candidate. And good luck," he added doubtfully. "Say - what're you trying for, anyhow?"

"Timber-cruising, I guess," Kenn said in a voice that came out sounding as hopeless as he'd gotten to feel.

The driver looked at him sharply. "You guess? You better have a better idea of it than that, son."

"I know," Kenn answered. "That is what I started out wanting, anyhow. Well, whatever the tests give me, it'll be all right."

The driver grinned. "Attaboy, Candidate," he said, losing some of his worried and puzzled look. "I guess you'll be all right. It's always easy to do your job, because it's always a job you like. Well - keep your chin up!"

"I will," Kenn said, and walked away toward the line.

## V

Well? he asked himself, in a nervous, frightened voice.

What? he answered angrily, trying to stop himself.

Well, what had the Mule meant by all the things he said? And what about the Mule? Was *he* happy? Did *he* like his job, whatever it is?

What difference does it make?

He wiped his hand over his face. Why am I doing this? he thought. Why am I making it worse all the time? Why don't I stop?

But he *couldn't* stop. The harder he tried, the more his mind wandered. The more he tried to be like other people, the farther he lost himself. His mind kept putting things together, one on top of the other, like something growing in a nightmare. He couldn't forget a single thing, or leave it alone, once it got into his mind. He had to keep turning it over and over, trying to fit it to some other piece, like a crazy stonemason.

What's wrong with me? Am I crazy? Am I going to wind up like the Mule? I deserve to.

If the Mule was a failure, he wouldn't be happy. But he's some kind of special failure - he has to be. He's got a job - a job that's got something to do with the noble's ladies. That's an important job, whatever it is.

Well, if he's got an important job, how can he be wrong in the head?

Why can't I leave it alone? What's going to happen to me?

"Hey, there, Candidate! Sleep-walking?"

He stopped and turned a panic-stricken face toward the man on the other side of the line. His heart was jumping.

The man moved closer, and Kenn saw he didn't have a mark. There was something familiar about him, too. Kenn looked at him searchingly.

"Something wrong, Candidate?" The man stepped across the line, and the inspection box didn't buzz.

Kenn shook his head. "No... no, just tired, I guess," he said quickly.

The man looked at him steadily, and Kenn realized it was the look in his eyes that made him seem familiar, even if he was a lot younger than the district agent in Inglistone and had light hair.

"Sure, Candidate? If you're feeling sick, say so."

Kenn shook his head again. "No, I'm all right. I've come a long way."

"All right." The agent went back across the line and waited beside another metal box like the inspection box. "Let's have a look at your identification."

Kenn nodded and looked up at the marker beside the line, that read: "Borough of Newalk, Bessmer. District 1. Precision Instruments. District 1 classifications only."

"That's not for Candidates," the agent said. "Come across the line."

Kenn moved forward. The box buzzed as he passed it, and the agent's face softened a little as Kenn came up to him.

"That's better. All right, Candidate, I'll look at your identification now." He looked sharply at Kenn's face. "And relax, Candidate."

Kenn touched his mark. "Yes, sire." He reached behind him and fumbled in his pack. He pulled out the identification card and handed it over.

The agent pushed it into a slot in his box without looking at it. He motioned Kenn over to stand on a marked square on the ground.

The box buzzed, and a plate lit up in its top. The agent glanced at it casually, then looked closer. He gave Kenn a sudden look and checked the plate again.

"Kenn Haffey," he said slowly. He straightened up and pulled the card out of the box. The lines between his eyes drew together, and he took another look at Kenn that was the same as the way the Inglistone agent looked at him.

Kenn dropped his eyes away from the look. The agent handed him the card, and he put it away in his pack.

"Straight down this street, Candidate. It's a long walk. If you get hungry, any food issue centre'll service you," the agent said in a tired-sounding voice. "There's one in even block. If you want some rest, you're entitled to dorm space. You'll see signs for both places. Your permits're only validated for this street, and in one direction only. When you get to the test centre, go right in." He stopped for a moment, and Kenn looked up.

"Welcome to Bessmer, Candidate." The agent's eyes were troubled. "And - good luck."

"Thank you, sire," Kenn said, his throat dry. He half-raised his hand, let it fall, and began to walk down the street between the blocky buildings. As he walked away, he felt the weight of the agent's eyes on his back.

District 2, the next block, was marked "Frames." District 3 was "Shells." Four was "Engines," and 5 was "Sub-Assemblies." There was an inspection box on each corner of every street, but there were no more identity card checks. Kenn kept on his way, following the walks that rumbled from the vibration of the product conveyors underfoot.

He passed through District 6, which was classified for "Final Assembly," and 7, which was "Finishing." There was no one else on the walks, and only an occasional unmanned trolley passed him on the streets. From behind the blank walls beside him, he heard the sounds of working machines. There were no windows until what must have been the fourth storey. Then they ran in triple rows around the buildings, all the same size.

He walked without looking around for more than a few moments, and he walked slowly.

He knew he was scared. He didn't know exactly what happened to you when you failed. You went back home, but what happened before that? He wished he was nineteen again, or he wished the agent in Inglistone hadn't made his mistake and passed him through the preliminary test. He wished he could turn around and walk back up the narrow street, with the heavy buildings pressing in on both sides but with the open daylight of the country ahead of him, at least.

No - he didn't wish that. Well - he did. He did, but he didn't wish it to mean it. He was here, now.

He was scared, wasn't he? Then why didn't he turn around and run? He wanted to, didn't he?



Yes, and he wasn't afraid of the district lines. If what he wanted to run from was true, the lines were the best answer. But you could be scared and still want to go on, he guessed. Maybe he wanted to see for himself what was going to happen to him.

He walked along, not swinging out the way he'd done on the road down the foothills, but walking. The sound of his steady footsteps came back to him from the building walls.

He'd given up trying to stop his mind. It'd carried him a little too far. There wasn't any more hope of passing the tests.

He was going to be a failure. The only thing left to wonder about was whether he was going to be sent back to Inglistone with an X burned into his forehead or whether he was somehow going to get the same classification as the Mule. Probably, it was going to be the X. Mules did something important, whatever it was.

It felt a little better, not arguing inside his own head any more. He couldn't do anything about what was already there, but at least he wasn't trying. When the machines looked into his mind, they'd see how twisted he was inside, and whatever happened would be over soon.

There was no getting out of the trap your mind could set for you. Once it began not paying attention to what it was supposed to, there was no stopping it.

He came to a wider street, and stopped for a minute. There was another gate in the line, and another agent waiting beside it. It was marked "Borough of Baystone, Bessmer. District 1. Sorting. District 1 classifications only."

He crossed the street, and came through the gate. The inspection box buzzed, and he took out his identification card and handed it to the agent.

"Why so glum, Candidate?" the agent asked cheerfully. He was a short, bushy-haired man, with glasses, and he glanced curiously at Kenn as he fed the card into the ID confirmation box. "Afraid you won't get your right classification?" he chuckled.

Kenn shook his head. "No, sire. I know I'll get it."

"Oho! You *know*, do you? Well, most of 'em do, most of 'em do." He looked down at the plate in the box. His face fell, and his mouth turned white. "Oh." He jerked the card out of the box and thrust it into Kenn's hand. "Here. Straight on. I suppose you know about where to get food and a bed."

Kenn nodded.

"Well, get going, then!" the agent said shrilly. "What do you want to stand around me for?"

"Yes, sire." Kenn put the card back in his pack and walked away. The agent had been clenching his fists and trembling.

District 2 in Baystone was classified "Washing." Three was "First Boiling." Four was "Canning." Five was "Pressure boiling." Six was "Sealing and Labelling," and the conveyors rumbled underfoot.

Kenn walked along. It was near noon, and he was getting hungry. His face was set, and his walk was steady enough to be mechanical.

## VI

Baystone was the biggest of the three boroughs. It had over forty districts in it, and it was past one o'clock when he crossed the line into Bessmer Centre. The agent at the borough gate hadn't been much like the one at the Baystone line. He'd been an older man, and he only gave Kenn's card back with a grunt and a nod, pinching his thin mouth together.

This part of Bessmer Centre was the fabric processing organization. Kenn walked along, getting hungrier and cursing himself for wondering what it was in a man that let him get hungry when the last thing he wanted to do was eat. But finally, in the fourth district he came to, he turned into a food issue centre, following an arrow that pointed up a flight of stairs and through a door in a setback above the street.

He pushed through the door and looked around.

The room was fairly big, with long tables running the length of it. There were about fifty people in it, eating and talking, and he guessed this was half of the working force in this district.

Why don't I ask somebody, he thought tiredly to himself, and, with a bitter quirk to his mouth, turned toward the issue counter.

The girl behind the counter smiled at him. "Well! A Candidate ! Where from?" She began loading a tray for him, working efficiently, her hands moving quickly and precisely.

"Inglistone," he said, finding a smile somewhere inside him.

"Where's that, Candidate?"

"Up in the mountains."

"Must be lonely."

"No," he started to say, "not for most people." But the girl had already given him his tray and moved off to do something else, humming to

herself, throwing him *a* farewell smile.

He shrugged and grinned, picking up his tray and carrying it to the empty end of a table. Sitting down, he began to eat. The food was tasty, and appetizing. He ate it quickly, keeping his head down.

There wasn't anything to think about. It was all settled, done. There was a strange slowness to his thinking, even while he sat thinking about not thinking. He shook his head. The tricks you could play with a mind were as complicated as a snarled rope. He could sit here and realize he was probably too numb to think at all.

He was about to stand up and go on his way when he saw a Mule sitting at the next table, with nobody near him. The chubby face was even more twisted than the other one's had been, just as the bone structure under it was finer.

Kenn sighed. Well, why not? He leaned over. "Excuse me. Can I ask you something?"

The Mule looked up, and his mouth stretched into a grim smile. "Hello, Candidate. Go ahead."

"Well... look, I know this is something I shouldn't ask, but I'm about to fail my tests." He grinned lopsidedly.

The Mule raised his eyebrows. "Welcome to the fold, brother. What makes you so sure?" He looked interested in Kenn for the first time.

"I " Kenn shrugged. "Anyway, I'm sure. Did you mean you failed, too?"

The Mule barked a laugh. "If you want to call it a test, I failed it, yes."

Kenn blinked. "What does that mean?"

"I passed it, Candidate. I went all the way through to the top. I did everything right. And when I was all finished, the machine said 'Fail.' So I failed it."

Kenn looked at him. "Is it true that if you go all the way through, you're a noble?" he asked in a bewildered voice.

The Mule nodded.

"You got to be a noble, and they made you a Mule?"

The Mule shook his head. "I *told* you. I did exactly what each test situation called for. I know, because if you don't make one, you stop there and don't go on. But I was never a noble. To be a noble, you've got to get the machine to say you passed."

Kenn's mind was spinning again. "Do you... do you think there's

something wrong with the test machines?"

The Mule shook his head. "No." He laughed suddenly. "Look, Candidate, can't you see it? The world's ruled by a hereditary nobility, and the tests are so much window-dressing."

"What's a hereditary nobility?"

The Mule looked at him pityingly. "Don't even know the concept, do you? You're the product of six centuries of it, but you don't recognize it." He shook his head. "I failed that test, Candidate," he said slowly, "not because I had the wrong name, or because I was a dolt like you. I failed it because I made the mistake of telling my respected relatives I thought there was no further purpose in maintaining the farce. My mistake was in being less of a self-deluded hypocrite than they were."

He was clutching the table with both hands, and his knuckles were mottled pink and dead white. "So, when I took the test in accordance with the charming social compulsion, I failed. I failed, and they made sure I'd never haunt them again." He smiled with the deepest bitterness Kenn had ever seen on anyone's face.

"They disposed of me the same way they dispose of those of you who manage to get all the way through the test. But it would have been quite awkward for me to take my... classification's normal place in society. I could hardly serve the ladies of my former associates."

Kenn felt his jaw clench and then relax. "You're from one of the noble families?"

The Mule grinned. "That's right. And there are very few others like me." He waved a hand in an inclusive gesture.

"We erred on the side of candour, and consequently we work in this... this animated factory, precisely the same as those of you to whom this is the peak of aspiration. We differ from them not one whit in status - except that we, unlike your kind, are not," he grimaced, "happy."

Kenn pushed himself back from the table, feeling sick. He stood up clumsily. "Thanks," he said in a choked voice. "I just wanted to know."

## VII

Test Centre was a low, grey building in the middle of the first lawn Kenn had seen in Bessmer. There were other Candidates walking over the park toward it. They were the first he'd met, but he didn't bother to look at their faces and see whether any of them had the same look in their eyes as he did.

He just walked forward, moving woodenly until he was climbing the short flight of steps up to the main doors.

He took one quick look at the windowless walls and the grey of its stones, and then he walked through the archway into a long, high-ceilinged hall.

There was a row of desks lined up against one wall, and he walked down until he came to one without a Candidate standing in front of it and handed his identification card to the unmarked man sitting behind it.

The man smiled at him. "Sit down, Candidate," he said.

"Yes, sire." Kenn took the chair and sat looking straight ahead.

"So you're Haffey?"

Kenn looked directly at the man for the first time. The interviewer's face was deeply lined. His lacklustre brown hair was sparse, and his eyes were almost lifeless, but there was a touch of sadness in them.

"Yes, sire."

"We've been waiting for you."

"Sire?"

"We've got a long report on you. Tell me, what did you see on your Candidate's journey? Did you enjoy your walk through Bessmer?"

Kenn didn't answer. His mouth was a tight line, and his fingertips dug into his thighs.

The interviewer waited a minute. Then he sighed. "You must have seen quite a lot. We thought you might." He waited another minute. "If you've wondered - there's no variation. It's the same all over the world, whatever you've seen." He smiled with a painful hook of his mouth. "For that matter, it's the same throughout this solar system." He smiled sadly. "So, you see, there's no escape."

"I know that. I'd like to take my tests as soon as possible," Kenn said. He sat stiffly.

"You will," the interviewer said. "Tell me, Kenn - what do you expect from your tests?"

"What do you think I expect? I expect to fail. I expect to get my mark and go back to Inglistone or into some factory."

"What you really expect is to be put somewhere where you can't tell anyone what you've seen, isn't it?"

Kenn nodded slowly. He felt a cold knot tighten around his chest.

"I rather think you will be," the interviewer said. He stood up. "Come on, Kenn. We might as well cut this short."

Kenn looked around.

The interviewer shook his head. "There's no running away. Not from what's caught you." Kenn got up numbly, and followed him down the hall to the room where the testing machines were. He watched with wooden detachment while they connected the machine leads to his nervous system and lowered the dome over his head, and he took one deep breath as they closed the first switch.

Something was impossibly wrong. The maturity test he should have failed out of hand was far behind him, and so were the job qualification sections. He'd been a hundred people, done a hundred things in a hundred situations. He'd acted at whim and at random, not caring, and still he was far past the point at which almost everybody failed.

It wasn't possible. Pure chance would never have gotten him through those sections. There was only one answer to it; the test was being rigged in his favour.

At the same time he realized that, the test became a nightmare. A switch turned, and he assumed still another personality.

He was a noble. Or, rather, he was a man who had assumed the supervision of a people. A thousand years before, the wave of human expansion into the stars had faltered - the Union, tenuous and extended through a tremendous volume of space, had fragmented and broken as, in the scattered regions, isolated by enormous distances, a hundred different viewpoints and philosophies developed, reached out to gather in as many solar systems as they could, and then clashed.

The battle was a battle of good will.

Men had always tried to find the best way to live. Every step they'd ever taken was an attempt to learn how to deal with the universe and themselves on the best possible terms.

And each group, cut off by time and distance from its neighbours, left alone for centuries, sometimes, knew it had at least made progress in the right direction.

When those necessarily divergent ideologies had touched, they had conflicted. On a minor scale, at first, as the more vigorous ideologies, sparked by the more forceful, more idealistic individuals, absorbed their lesser neighbours. Then there was a struggle on a scale that wiped the sun

out of the sky until it flickered down and died from lack of fuel, waiting for a fresh wave of expansion and centuries-long recovery to begin the cycle again.

Kenn, in the test, was one of the individuals who had to find an answer.

He was given this much data to work with:

The ideologies that were the most fanatically established were the ones that were deadliest.

The individual leaders who were most convinced of their own righteousness were the ones who built the most vigorous ideologies.

The more single-minded the man, the more fiercely he clung to his beliefs.

Urgency pumped into Kenn's system. There had to be an answer! And his awareness of himself flickered down. The situation stopped being a test and became agonizingly real as the test machine stepped up the power.

Part of an answer suggested itself to him.

Somewhere there had to be men who hated to rule but who were capable of ruling.

And if there weren't enough of them, breed for them.

It had to be done. A handful of planets had to suffer for a few centuries so that a galaxy full of Men could become a reality for millennia.

Kenn felt the leads being withdrawn and retched. He slid feebly off the table and stood on tottering feet, clutching his stomach.

He shook his head weakly. "No."

The interviewer's face was wrenched with sympathy. "You got the answer," he said.

"So... so what!" Kenn choked. "You rigged the test. The machine gave it to me."

The interviewer nodded. "We did. The whole test has to be run. It's set in the machines. But for some individuals that's a waste of time. We don't want you for timber-cruising, Kenn. The last part is the only important one."

"So you gave me the right answer and I passed. Which means I fail, according to your rules."

The interviewer shook his head. "No. You pass. You're a noble - or an

agent, depending on which you train for. It's not arriving at the answer that's important - getting the answer's part of the test. It's your reaction to it that counts.

"You're going to despise yourself every moment of your life from now on," the interviewer said, his eyes mirroring the tortured implacability in his voice. "Or, at least, to some degree at all times and to an intense degree usually. There's not much peace for us. You're conscious of your own shortcomings - or what you consider shortcomings whether they are or not. You know how terribly prone to error every human being must be. You know how confused you are within yourself, and still you're going to be in a position of complete autocratic authority over human beings who believe implicitly in the tightness of your station. You're going to administer the answer that makes you sick."

Kenn shook his head. "No. I won't do it."

"You *will* do it. You don't dare not to. It's working, at least, and no better answer has ever been found. You don't dare reject this answer - you're trapped. If you refuse, you'll have refused a chance to help mankind."

Kenn looked dully at the interviewer. "If it works, it's the end to most human misery?"

"That's right. And you're abnormally sensitive to human misery. So you'll administer the plan.

"Some of it, we'll teach you. The rest we all have to learn."

"Who did this to me?"

"You did," the interviewer said in a gentle voice. "First you were born, and then you learned to think."

Most of the people were happy, Kenn reminded himself. They didn't *want* to be nobles.

"Listen," he said, "if we're all like this - we can't ever be *sure* we're right about anything. We can't ever be *completely* sure that what we're doing to the people isn't the most monstrous thing that's ever been done to human beings."

The interviewer nodded. There was infinite, uncertain pain in his eyes. "That's right."