

# JON'S WORLD

*Philip K. Dick*

Kastner walked around the ship without speaking. He climbed the ramp and entered, disappearing cautiously inside. For a time his outline could be seen, stirring around. He appeared again, his broad face dimly alight.

"Well?" Caleb Ryan said. "What do you think?"

Kastner came down the ramp. "Is it ready to go? Nothing left to work out?"

"It's almost ready. Workmen are finishing up the remaining sections. Relay connections and feed lines. But no major problems exist. None we can predict, at least."

The two men stood together, looking up at the squat metal box with its ports and screens and observation grills. The ship was not lovely. There were no trim lines, no chrome and rexeroid struts to ease the hull into a gradually tapering teardrop. The ship was square and knobby, with turrets and projections rising up everywhere.

"What will they think when we emerge from that?" Kastner murmured.

"We had no time to beautify it. Of course, if you want to wait another two months—"

"Couldn't you take off a few of the knobs? What are they for? What do they do?"

"Valves. You can examine the plans. They drain off the power load when it peaks too far up. Time travel is going to be dangerous. A vast load is collected as the ship moves back. It has to be leaked off gradually—or we'll be an immense bomb charged with millions of volts."

"I'll take your word on it." Kastner picked up his briefcase.

He moved toward one of the exits. League Guards stepped out of his way. "I'll tell the Directors it's almost ready. By the way, I have something to reveal."

"What is it?"

"We've decided who's going along with you."

"Who?"

"I'm going. I've always wanted to know what things were like before the war. You see the history spools, but it isn't the same. I want to *be* there. Walk around. You know, they say there was no ash before the war. The surface was fertile. You could walk for miles without seeing ruins. This I would like to see."

"I didn't know you were interested in the past."

"Oh, yes. My family preserved some illustrated books showing how it was. No wonder USIC wants to get hold of Schonerman's papers. If reconstruction could begin—"

"That's what we all want."

"And maybe we'll get it. I'll see you later."

Ryan watched the plump little businessman depart, his briefcase clutched tightly. The row of League Guards stepped aside for him to pass, filling in behind him as he disappeared through the doorway.

Ryan returned his attention to the ship. So Kastner was to be his companion. USIC—United Synthetic Industries Combine—had held out for equal representation on the trip. One man from the League, one from USIC. USIC had been the source of supply, both commercial and financial, for Project Clock. Without its help the Project would never have got out of the paper stage. Ryan sat down at the bench and sent the blueprints racing through the scanner. They had worked a long time. There was not much left to be done. Only a few finishing touches here and there.

The vidscreen clicked. Ryan halted the scanner and swung to catch the call.

"Ryan."

The League monitor appeared on the screen. The call was coming through League cables. "Emergency call."

Ryan froze. "Put it through."

The monitor faded. After a moment an old face appeared, florid and lined. "Ryan—"

"What's happened?"

"You had better come home. As soon as you can."

"What is it?"

"Jon."

Ryan forced himself to be calm. "Another attack?" His voice was thick.

"Yes."

"Like the others?"

"Exactly like the others."

Ryan's hand jerked to the cut-off switch. "All right. I'll be home at once. Don't let anyone in. Try to keep him quiet. Don't let him out of his room. Double the guard, if necessary."

Ryan broke the circuit. A moment later he was on his way to the roof, toward his inter-city ship parked above him, at the roof field of the building.

His inter-city ship rushed above the unending gray ash, automatic grapples guiding it toward City Four. Ryan stared blankly out the port, only half-seeing the sight below.

He was between cities. The surface was wasted, endless heaps of slag and ash as far as the eye could see. Cities rose up like occasional toadstools, separated by miles of gray. Toadstools here and there, towers and buildings, men and women working. Gradually the surface was being reclaimed. Supplies and equipment were being brought down from the Lunar Base.

During the war human beings had left Terra and gone to the moon. Terra was devastated. Nothing but a globe of ruin and ash. Men had come back gradually, when the war was over.

Actually there had been two wars. The first was man against man. The second was man against the claws—complex robots that had been created as a war weapon. The claws had turned on their makers, designing their own new types and equipment.

Ryan's ship began to descend. He was over City Four. Presently the ship came to rest on the roof of his massive private residence at the center of the city. Ryan leaped quickly out and crossed the roof to the lift.

A moment later he entered his quarters and made his way toward Jon's room.

He found the old man watching Jon through the glass side of the room, his face grave. Jon's room was partly in dark-

ness. Jon was sitting on the edge of his bed, his hands clasped tightly together. His eyes were shut. His mouth was open a little, and from time to time his tongue came out, stiff and rigid.

"How long has he been like that?" Ryan said to the old man beside him.

"About an hour."

"The other attacks followed the same pattern?"

"This is more severe. Each has been more severe."

"No one has seen him but you?"

"Just the two of us. I called you when I was certain. It's almost over. He's coming out of it."

On the other side of the glass Jon stood up and walked away from his bed, his arms folded. His blond hair hung down raggedly in his face. His eyes were still shut. His face was pale and set. His lips twitched.

"He was completely unconscious at first. I had left him alone for awhile. I was in another part of the building. When I came back I found him lying on the floor. He had been reading. The spools were scattered all around him. His face was blue. His breathing was irregular. There were repeated muscular spasms, as before."

"What did you do?"

"I entered the room and carried him to the bed. He was rigid at first, but after a few minutes he began to relax. His body became limp. I tested his pulse. It was very slow. Breathing was coming more easily. And then it began."

"It?"

"The talk."

"Oh." Ryan nodded.

"I wish you could have been here. He talked more than ever before. On and on. Streams of it. Without pause. As if he couldn't stop."

"Was—was it the same talk as before?"

"Exactly the same as it's always been. And his face was lit up. Glowing. As before."

Ryan considered. "Is it all right for me to go into the room?"

"Yes. It's almost over."

Ryan moved to the door. His fingers pressed against the code lock and the door slid back into the wall.

Jon did not notice him as he came quietly into the room.

He paced back and forth, eyes shut, his arms wrapped around his body. He swayed a little, rocking from side to side. Ryan came to the center of the room and stopped.

"Jon!"

The boy blinked. His eyes opened. He shook his head rapidly. "Ryan? What—what did you want?"

"Better sit down."

Jon nodded. "Yes. Thank you." He sat down on the bed uncertainly. His eyes were wide and blue. He pushed his hair back out of his face, smiling a little at Ryan.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel all right."

Ryan sat down across from him, drawing a chair over. He crossed his legs, leaning back. For a long time he studied the boy. Neither of them spoke. "Grant says you had a little attack," Ryan said finally.

Jon nodded.

"You're over it now?"

"Oh, yes. How is the time ship coming?"

"Fine."

"You promised I could see it, when it's ready."

"You can. When it's completely done."

"When will that be?"

"Soon. A few more days."

"I want to see it very much. I've been thinking about it. Imagine going into time. You could go back to Greece. You could go back and see Pericles and Xenophon and—and Epictetus. You could go back to Egypt and talk to Ikhnaton." He grinned. "I can't wait to see it."

Ryan shifted. "Jon, do you really think you're well enough to go outside? Maybe—"

"Well enough? What do you mean?"

"Your attacks. You really think you should go out? Are you strong enough?"

Jon's face clouded. "They're not attacks. Not really. I wish you wouldn't call them attacks."

"Not attacks? What are they?"

Jon hesitated. "I—I shouldn't tell you, Ryan. You wouldn't understand."

Ryan stood up. "All right, Jon. If you feel you can't talk to me I'll go back to the lab." He crossed the room to the door. "It's a shame you can't see the ship. I think you'd like it."

Jon followed him plaintively. "Can't I see it?"

"Maybe if I knew more about your—your attacks I'd know whether you're well enough to go out."

Jon's face flickered. Ryan watched him intently. He could see thoughts crossing Jon's mind, written on his features. He struggled inwardly.

"Don't you want to tell me?"

Jon took a deep breath. "They're *visions*."

"What?"

"They're visions." Jon's face was alive with radiance. "I've known it a long time. Grant says they're not, but they are. If you could see them you'd know, too. They're not like anything else. More real than, well, than this." He thumped the wall. "More real than that."

Ryan lit a cigarette slowly. "Go on."

It all came with a rush. "More real than *anything* else! Like looking through a window. A window into another world. A real world. Much more real than this. It makes all this just a shadow world. Only dim shadows. Shapes. Images."

"Shadows of an ultimate reality?"

"Yes! Exactly. The world behind all this." Jon paced back and forth, animated by excitement. "This, all these things. What we see here. Buildings. The sky. The cities. The endless ash. None is quite real. It's so dim and vague! I don't really feel it, not like the other. And it's becoming less real, all the time. The other is growing, Ryan. Growing more and more vivid! Grant told me it's only my imagination. But it's not. It's real. More real than any of these things here, these things in this room."

"Then why can't we all see it?"

"I don't know. I wish you could. You ought to see it, Ryan. It's beautiful. You'd like it, after you got used to it. It takes time to adjust."

Ryan considered. "Tell me," he said at last. "I want to know exactly what you see. Do you always see the same thing?"

"Yes. Always the same. But more intensely."

"What is it? What do you see that's so real?"

Jon did not answer for awhile. He seemed to have withdrawn. Ryan waited, watching his son. What was going on in his mind? What was he thinking? The boy's eyes were shut again. His hands were pressed together, the fingers white. He

was off again, off in his private world.

"Go on," Ryan said aloud.

So it was *visions* the boy saw. Visions of ultimate reality. Like the Middle Ages. His own son. There was a grim irony in it. Just when it seemed they had finally licked that proclivity in man, his eternal inability to face reality. His eternal dreaming. Would science never be able to realize its ideal? Would man always go on preferring illusion to reality?

His own son. Retrogression. A thousand years lost. Ghosts and gods and devils and the secret inner world. The world of ultimate reality. All the fables and fictions and metaphysics that man had used for centuries to compensate for his fear, his terror of the world. All the dreams he had made up to hide the truth, the harsh world of reality. Myths, religions, fairy tales. A better land, beyond and above. Paradise. All coming back, reappearing again, and in his own son.

"Go on," Ryan said impatiently. "What do you see?"

"I see fields," Jon said. "Yellow fields as bright as the sun. Fields and parks. Endless parks. Green, mixed in with the yellow. Paths, for people to walk."

"What else?"

"Men and women. In robes. Walking along the paths, among the trees. The air fresh and sweet. The sky bright blue. Birds. Animals. Animals moving through the parks. Butterflies. Oceans. Lapping oceans of clear water."

"No cities?"

"Not like our cities. Not the same. People living in the parks. Little wood houses here and there. Among the trees."

"Roads?"

"Only paths. No ships or anything. Only walking."

"What else do you see?"

"That's all." Jon opened his eyes. His cheeks were flushed. His eyes sparkled and danced. "That's all, Ryan. Parks and yellow fields. Men and women in robes. And so many animals. The wonderful animals."

"How do they live?"

"What?"

"How do the people live? What keeps them alive?"

"They grow things. In the fields."

"Is that all? Don't they build? Don't they have factories?"

"I don't think so."

"An agrarian society. Primitive." Ryan frowned. "No busi-

ness or commerce."

"They work in the fields. And discuss things."

"Can you *hear* them?"

"Very faintly. Sometimes I can hear them a little, if I listen very hard. I can't make out any words, though."

"What are they discussing?"

"Things."

"What kind of things?"

Jon gestured vaguely. "Great things. The world. The universe."

There was silence. Ryan grunted. He did not say anything. Finally he put out his cigarette. "Jon—"

"Yes?"

"You think what you see is *real*?"

Jon smiled. "I know it's real."

Ryan's gaze was sharp. "What do you mean, real? In what way is this world of yours real?"

"It exists."

"Where does it exist?"

"I don't know."

"Here? Does it exist here?"

"No. It's not here."

"Some place else? A long way off? Some other part of the universe beyond our range of experience?"

"Not another part of the universe. It has nothing to do with space. It's here." Jon waved around him. "Close by. It's very close. I see it all around me."

"Do you see it now?"

"No. It comes and goes."

"It ceases to exist? It only exists sometimes?"

"No, it's always there. But I can't always make contact with it."

"How do you know it's always there?"

"I just know."

"Why can't *I* see it? Why are you the only one who can see it?"

"I don't know." Jon rubbed his forehead wearily. "I don't know why I'm the only one who can see it. I wish you could see it. I wish everybody could see it."

"How can you demonstrate it isn't an hallucination? You have no objective validation of it. You have only your own



inner sense, your state of consciousness. How could it be presented for empirical analysis?"

"Maybe it can't. I don't know. I don't care. I don't want to present it for empirical analysis."

There was silence. Jon's face was set and grim, his jaw tight. Ryan sighed. Impasse.

"All right, Jon." He moved slowly toward the door. "I'll see you later."

Jon said nothing.

At the door Ryan halted, looking back. "Then your visions are getting stronger, aren't they? Progressively more vivid."

Jon nodded curtly.

Ryan considered awhile. Finally he raised his hand. The door slid away and he passed outside the room, into the hall.

Grant came up to him. "I was watching through the window. He's quite withdrawn, isn't he?"

"It's difficult to talk to him. He seems to believe these attacks are some kind of vision."

"I know. He's told me."

"Why didn't you let me know?"

"I didn't want to alarm you more. I know you've been worried about him."

"The attacks are getting worse. He says they're more vivid. More convincing."

Grant nodded.

Ryan moved along the corridor, deep in thought, Grant a little behind. "It's difficult to be certain of the best course of action. The attacks absorb him more and more. He's beginning to take them seriously. They're usurping the place of the outside world. And in addition—"

"And in addition you're leaving soon."

"I wish we knew more about time travel. A great number of things may happen to us." Ryan rubbed his jaw. "We might not come back. Time is a potent force. No real exploration has been done. We have no idea what we may run into."

He came to the lift and stopped.

"I'll have to make my decision right away. It has to be made before we leave."

"Your decision?"

Ryan entered the lift. "You'll know about it later. Watch Jon constantly from now on. Don't be away from him for

even a moment. Do you understand?"

Grant nodded. "I understand. You want to be sure he doesn't leave his room."

"You'll hear from me either tonight or tomorrow." Ryan ascended to the roof and entered his inter-city ship.

As soon as he was in the sky he clicked on the vidscreen and dialed the League Offices. The face of the League Monitor appeared. "Offices."

"Give me the medical center."

The monitor faded. Presently Walter Timmer, the medical director, appeared on the screen. His eyes flickered as he recognized Ryan. "What can I do for you, Caleb?"

"I want you to get out a medical car and a few good men and come over here to City Four."

"Why?"

"It's a matter I discussed with you several months ago. You recall, I think."

Timmer's expression changed. "Your son?"

"I've decided. I can't wait any longer. He's getting worse, and we'll be leaving soon on the time trip. I want it performed before I leave."

"All right." Timmer made a note. "We'll make immediate arrangements here. And we'll send a ship over to pick him up at once."

Ryan hesitated. "You'll do a good job?"

"Of course. We'll have James Pryor perform the actual operation." Timmer reached up to cut the vidscreen circuit. "Don't worry, Caleb. He'll do a good job. Pryor is the best lobotomist the center has."

Ryan laid out the map, stretching the corners flat against the table. "This is a time map, drawn up in the form of a space projection. So we can see where we're going."

Kastner peered over his shoulder. "Will we be confined to the one Project—getting Schonerman's papers? Or can we move around?"

"Only the one Project is contemplated. But to be certain of success we should make several stops on this side of Schonerman's continuum. Our time map may be inaccurate, or the drive itself may act with some bias."

The work was finished. All the final sections were put in place.

In a corner of the room Jon sat watching, his face expressionless. Ryan glanced toward him. "How does it look to you?"

"Fine."

The time ship was like some stubby insect, overgrown with warts and knobs. A square box with windows and endless turrets. Not really a ship at all.

"I guess you wish you could come," Kastner said to Jon. "Right?"

Jon nodded faintly.

"How are you feeling?" Ryan asked him.

"Fine."

Ryan studied his son. The boy's color had come back. He had regained most of his original vitality. The visions, of course, no longer existed.

"Maybe you can come next time," Kastner said.

Ryan returned to the map. "Schonerman did most of his work between 2030 and 2037. The results were not put to any use until several years later. The decision to use his work in the war was reached only after long consideration. The Governments seemed to have been aware of the dangers."

"But not sufficiently so."

"No." Ryan hesitated. "And we may be getting ourselves into the same situation."

"How do you mean?"

"Schonerman's discovery of the artificial brain was lost when the last claw was destroyed. None of us have been able to duplicate his work. If we bring back his papers we may put society back in jeopardy. We may bring back the claws."

Kastner shook his head. "No. Schonerman's work was not implicitly related to the claws. The development of an artificial brain does not imply lethal usage. Any scientific discovery can be used for destruction. Even the wheel was used in the Assyrian war chariots."

"I suppose so." Ryan glanced up at Kastner. "Are you certain USIC doesn't intend to use Schonerman's work along military lines?"

"USIC is an industrial combine. Not a government."

"It would insure its advantage for a long time."

"USIC is strong enough as it is."

"Let it go." Ryan rolled up the map. "We can start any

minute. I'm anxious to get going. We've worked a long time on this."

"I agree."

Ryan crossed the room to his son. "We're leaving, Jon. We should be back fairly soon. Wish us luck."

Jon nodded. "I wish you luck."

"You're feeling all right?"

"Yes."

"Jon—you feel better now, don't you? Better than before?"

"Yes."

"Aren't you glad they're gone? All the troubles you were having?"

"Yes."

Ryan put his hand awkwardly on the boy's shoulder. "We'll see you later."

Ryan and Kastner made their way up the ramp to the hatch of the time ship. From the corner, Jon watched them silently. A few League Guards lounged at the entrances to the work lab, watching with idle interest.

Ryan paused at the hatch. He called one of the guards over. "Tell Timmer I want him."

The guard went off, pushing through the exit.

"What is it?" Kastner said.

"I have some final instructions to give him."

Kastner shot him a sharp glance. "Final? What's the matter? You think something's going to happen to us?"

"No. Just a precaution."

Timmer came striding in. "You're leaving, Ryan?"

"Everything's ready. There's no reason to hold back any longer."

Timmer came up the ramp. "What did you want me for?"

"This may be unnecessary. But there's always the possibility something might go wrong. In case the ship doesn't reappear according to the schedule I've filed with the League members—"

"You want me to name a protector for Jon."

"That's right."

"There's nothing to worry about."

"I know. But I'd feel better. Someone should watch out for him."

They both glanced at the silent, expressionless boy sitting in the corner of the room. Jon stared straight ahead. His face

was blank. His eyes were dull, listless. There was nothing there.

"Good luck," Timmer said. He and Ryan shook hands. "I hope everything works out."

Kastner climbed inside the ship, setting down his briefcase. Ryan followed him, lowering the hatch into place and bolting it into position. He sealed the inner lock. A bank of automatic lighting came on. Controlled atmosphere began to hiss into the cabin of the ship.

"Air, light, heat," Kastner said. He peered out the port at the League Guards outside. "It's hard to believe. In a few minutes all this will disappear. This building. These guards. Everything."

Ryan seated himself at the control board of the ship, spreading out the time map. He fastened the map into position, crossing the surface with the cable leads from the board before him. "It's my plan to make several observation stops along the way, so we can view some of the past events relevant to our work."

"The war?"

"Mainly. I'm interested in seeing the claws in actual operation. At one time they were in complete control of Terra, according to the War Office records."

"Let's not get too close, Ryan."

Ryan laughed. "We won't land. We'll make our observations from the air. The only actual contact we'll make will be with Schonerman."

Ryan closed the power circuit. Energy flowed through the ship around them, flooding into the meters and indicators on the control board. Needles jumped, registering the load.

"The main thing we have to watch is our energy peak," Ryan explained. "If we build up too much of a load of time ergs the ship won't be able to come out of the time stream. We'll keep moving back into the past, building up a greater and greater charge."

"An enormous bomb."

"That's right." Ryan adjusted the switches before him. The meter readings changed. "Here we go. Better hang on."

He released the controls. The ship shuddered as it polarized into position, easing into the time flow. The vanes and knobs changed their settings, adjusting themselves to the stress.

Relays closed, braking the ship against the current sweeping around them.

"Like the ocean," Ryan murmured. "The most potent energy in the universe. The great dynamic behind all motion. The Prime Mover."

"Maybe this is what they used to mean by God."

Ryan nodded. The ship was vibrating around them. They were in the grip of a giant hand, an immense fist closing silently. They were in motion. Through the port the men and walls had begun to waver, fading out of existence as the ship slipped out of phase with the present, drifting farther and farther into the flow of the time stream.

"It won't be long," Ryan murmured.

All at once the scene beyond the port winked out. There was nothing there. Nothing beyond them.

"We're not phased with any space-time objects," Ryan explained. "We're out of focus with the universe itself. At this moment we exist in non-time. There's no continuum in which we're operating."

"I hope we can get back again." Kastner sat down nervously, his eyes on the blank port. "I feel like the first man who went down in a submarine."

"That was during the American Revolution. The submarine was propelled by a crank which the pilot turned. The other end of the crank was a propellor."

"How could he go very far?"

"He didn't. He cranked his ship under a British frigate and then bored a hole in the frigate's hull."

Kastner glanced up at the hull of the time ship, vibrating and rattling from stress. "What would happen if this ship should break open?"

"We'd be atomized. Dissolved into the stream around us." Ryan lit a cigarette. "We'd become a part of the time flow. We'd move back and forth endlessly, from one end of the universe to the other."

"End?"

"The time ends. Time flows both ways. Right now we're moving back. But energy must move both ways to keep a balance. Otherwise time ergs in vast amounts would collect at one particular continuum and the result would be catastrophic."

"Do you suppose there's some purpose behind all of this? I wonder how the time flow ever got started."

"Your question is meaningless. Questions of purpose have no objective validity. They can't be subjected to any form of empirical investigation."

Kastner lapsed into silence. He picked at his sleeve nervously watching the port.

Across the time map the cable arms moved, tracing a line from the present back into the past. Ryan studied the motion of the arms. "We're reaching the latter part of the war. The final stages. I'm going to rephase the ship and bring it out of the time flow."

"Then we'll be back in the universe again?"

"Among objects. In a specific continuum."

Ryan gripped the power switch. He took a deep breath. The first great test of the ship had passed. They had entered the time stream without accident. Could they leave it as easily? He opened the switch.

The ship leaped. Kastner staggered, catching hold of a wall support. Outside the port a gray sky twisted and wavered. Adjustments fell into place, leveling the ship in the air. Down below them Terra circled and tilted as the ship gained equilibrium.

Kastner hurried to the port to peer out. They were a few hundred feet above the surface, rushing parallel to the ground. Gray ash stretched out in all directions, broken by occasional mounds of rubbish. Ruins of towns, buildings, walls. Wrecks of military equipment. Clouds of ash blew across the sky, darkening the sun.

"Is the war still on?" Kastner asked.

"The claws still possess Terra. We should be able to see them."

Ryan raised the time ship, increasing the scope of their view. Kastner scanned the ground. "What if they fire at us?"

"We can always escape into time."

"They might capture the ship and use it to come to the present."

"I doubt it. At this stage in the war the claws were busy fighting among themselves."

To their right ran a winding road, disappearing into the ash and reappearing again later on. Bomb craters gaped here

and there, breaking the road up. Something was coming slowly along it.

"There," Kastner said. "On the road. A column of some sort."

Ryan maneuvered the ship. They hung above the road, the two of them peering out. The column was dark brown, a marching file making its way steadily along. Men, a column of men, marching silently through the landscape of ash.

Suddenly Kastner gasped. "They're identical! All of them are the same!"

They were seeing a column of claws. Like lead toys, the robots marched along, tramping through the gray ash. Ryan caught his breath. He had expected such a sight, of course. There were only four types of claws. These he saw now had all been turned out in the same underground plant, from the same dies and stampers. Fifty or sixty robots, shaped like young men, marching calmly along. They moved very slowly. Each had only one leg.

"They must have been fighting among themselves," Kastner murmured.

"No. This type was made this way. The Wounded Soldier Type. Originally they were designed to trick human sentries to gain entrance into regular bunkers."

It was weird, watching the silent column of men, identical men, each the same as the next, plodding along the road. Each soldier supported himself with a crutch. Even the crutches were identical. Kastner opened and closed his mouth in revulsion.

"Not very pleasant, is it?" Ryan said. "We're lucky the human race got away to Luna."

"Didn't any of these follow?"

"A few, but by that time we had identified the four types and were ready for them." Ryan took hold of the power switch. "Let's go on."

"Wait." Kastner raised his hand. "Something's going to happen."

To the right of the road a group of figures were slipping rapidly down the side of a rise, through the ash. Ryan let go of the power switch, watching. The figures were identical. Women. The women, in uniforms and boots, advanced quietly toward the column on the road.

"Another variety," Kastner said.



Suddenly the column of soldiers halted. They scattered, hobbling awkwardly in all directions. Some of them fell, stumbling and dropping their crutches. The women rushed out on the road. They were slender and young, with dark hair and eyes. One of the Wounded Soldiers began to fire. A woman fumbled at her belt. She made a throwing motion.

"What—" Kastner muttered. There was a sudden flash. A cloud of white light rose from the center of the road, billowing in all directions.

"Some kind of concussion bomb," Ryan said.

"Maybe we better get out of here."

Ryan threw the switch. The scene below them began to waver. Abruptly it faded. It winked out.

"Thank God that's over," Kastner said. "So that's what the war was like."

"The second part. The major part. Claw against claw. It's a good thing they started fighting with each other. Good for us, I mean."

"Where to now?"

"We'll make one more observation stop. During the early part of the war. Before claws came into use."

"And then Schonerman?"

Ryan set his jaw. "That's right. One more stop and then Schonerman."

Ryan adjusted the controls. The meters moved slightly. Across the map the cable arms traced their path. "It won't be long," Ryan murmured. He gripped the switch, setting the relays in place. "This time we have to be more careful. There'll be more war activity."

"Maybe we shouldn't even—"

"I want to see. This was man against man. The Soviet region against the United Nations. I'm curious to see what it was like."

"What if we're spotted?"

"We can get away quickly."

Kastner said nothing. Ryan manipulated the controls. Time passed. At the edge of the board Ryan's cigarette burned to an ash. At last he straightened up.

"Here we go. Get set." He opened the switch.

Below them green and brown plains stretched out, pocked with bomb craters. Part of a city swept past. It was burning. Towering columns of smoke rose up, drifting into the sky.

Along the roads black dots moved, vehicles and people streaming away.

"A bombing," Kastner said. "Recent."

The city fell behind. They were over open country. Military trucks rushed along. Most of the land was still intact. They could see a few farmers working the fields. The farmers dropped down as the time ship moved over them.

Ryan studied the sky. "Watch out."

"Air craft?"

"I'm not sure where we are. I don't know the locations of the sides in this part of the war. We may be over UN territory, or Soviet territory." Ryan held on tight to the switch.

From the blue sky two dots appeared. The dots grew. Ryan watched them intently. Beside him Kastner gave a nervous grunt. "Ryan, we better—"

The dots separated. Ryan's hand closed over the power switch. He yanked it closed. As the scene dissolved the dots swept past. Then there was nothing but grayness outside.

In their ears the roar of the two planes still echoed.

"That was close," Kastner said.

"Very. They didn't waste any time."

"I hope you don't want to stop any more."

"No. No more observation stops. The Project itself comes next. We're close to Schonerman's time area. I can begin to slow down the velocity of the ship. This is going to be critical."

"Critical?"

"There are going to be problems getting to Schonerman. We must hit his continuum exactly, both in space as well as time. He may be guarded. In any case they won't give us much time to explain who we are." Ryan tapped the time map. "And there's always the chance the information given here is incorrect."

"How long before we rephase with a continuum? Schonerman's continuum?"

Ryan looked at his wrist-watch. "About five or ten minutes. Get ready to leave the ship. Part of this is going to be on foot."

It was night. There was no sound, only unending silence. Kastner strained to hear, his ear against the hull of the ship. "Nothing."

"No. I don't hear anything either." Carefully, Ryan unbolted the hatch, sliding the locks back. He pushed the hatch open, his gun gripped tight. He peered out into the darkness.

The air was fresh and cold. Full of smells of growing things. Trees and flowers. He took a deep breath. He could see nothing. It was pitch black. Far off, a long way off, a cricket chirruped.

"Hear that?" Ryan said.

"What is it?"

"A beetle." Ryan stepped gingerly down. The ground was soft underfoot. He was beginning to adjust to the darkness. Above him a few stars glinted. He could make out trees, a field of trees. And beyond the trees a high fence.

Kastner stepped down beside him. "What now?"

"Keep your voice down." Ryan indicated the fence. "We're going that way. Some kind of building."

They crossed the field to the fence. At the fence Ryan aimed his gun, setting the charge at minimum. The fence charred and sank, the wire glowing red.

Ryan and Kastner stepped over the fence. The side of the building rose, concrete and iron. Ryan nodded to Kastner. "We'll have to move quickly. And low."

He crouched, taking a breath. Then he ran, bent over, Kastner beside him. They crossed the ground to the building. A window loomed up in front of them. Then a door. Ryan threw his weight against the door.

The door opened. Ryan fell inside, staggering. He caught a quick glimpse of startled faces, men leaping to their feet.

Ryan fired, sweeping the interior of the room with his gun. Flame rushed out, crackling around him. Kastner fired past his shoulder. Shapes moved in the flame, dim outlines falling and rolling.

The flames died. Ryan advanced, stepping over charred heaps on the floor. A barracks. Bunks, remains of a table. An overturned lamp and radio.

By the rays of the lamp Ryan studied a battle map pinned on the wall. He traced the map with his finger, deep in thought.

"Are we far?" Kastner asked, standing by the door with his gun ready.

"No. Only a few miles."

"How do we get there?"

"We'll move the time ship. It's safer. We're lucky. It might have been on the other side of the world."

"Will there be many guards?"

"I'll tell you the facts when we get there." Ryan moved to the door. "Come on. Someone may have seen us."

Kastner grabbed up a handful of newspapers from the remains of the table. "I'll bring these. Maybe they'll tell us something."

"Good idea."

Ryan set the ship down in a hollow between two hills. He spread the newspapers out, studying them intently. "We're earlier than I thought. By a few months. Assuming these are new." He fingered the newsprint. "Not turned yellow. Probably only a day or so old."

"What is the date?"

"Autumn, 2030, September 21."

Kastner peered out the port. "The sun is going to be coming up soon. The sky is beginning to turn gray."

"We'll have to work fast."

"I'm a little uncertain. What am I supposed to do?"

"Schonerman is in a small village beyond this hill. We're in the United States. In Kansas. This area is surrounded by troops, a circle of pillboxes and dugouts. We're inside the periphery. Schonerman is virtually unknown at this continuum. His research has never been published. At this time he's working as part of a large Government research project."

"Then he's not especially protected."

"Only later on, when his work has been turned over to the Government will he be protected day and night. Kept in an underground laboratory and never let up to the surface. The Government's most valuable research worker. But right now—"

"How will we know him?"

Ryan handed Kastner a sheaf of photographs. "This is Schonerman. All the pictures that survived up to our own time."

Kastner studied the pictures. Schonerman was a small man with horn-rimmed glasses. He smiled feebly at the camera, a thin nervous man with a prominent forehead. His hands were slender, the fingers long and tapered. In one photograph he sat at his desk, a pipe beside him, his thin chest covered by a

sleeveless wool sweater. In another he sat with his legs crossed, a tabby cat in his lap, a mug of beer in front of him. An old German enamel mug with hunting scenes and Gothic letters.

"So that's the man who invented the claws. Or did the research work."

"That's the man who worked out the principles for the first workable artificial brain."

"Did he know they were going to use his work to make the claws?"

"Not at first. According to reports, Schonerman first learned about it only when the initial batch of claws was released. The United Nations were losing the war. The Soviets gained an original advantage, due to their opening surprise attacks. The claws were hailed as a triumph of Western development. For a time they seemed to have turned the tide of the war."

"And then—"

"And then the claws began to manufacture their own varieties and attack Soviets and Westerners alike. The only humans that survived were those at the UN base on Luna. A few dozen million."

"It was a good thing the claws finally turned on each other."

"Schonerman saw the whole development of his work to the last stages. They say he became greatly embittered."

Kastner passed the pictures back. "And you say he's not especially well guarded?"

"Not at this continuum. No more than any other research worker. He's young. In this continuum he's only twenty-five. Remember that."

"Where'll we find him?"

"The Government Project is located in what was once a school house. Most of the work is done on the surface. No big underground development has begun yet. The research workers have barracks about a quarter mile from their labs." Ryan glanced at his watch. "Our best chance is to nab him as he begins work at his bench in the lab."

"Not in the barracks?"

"The papers are all in the lab. The Government doesn't allow any written work to be taken out. Each worker is searched as he leaves." Ryan touched his coat gingerly. "We

have to be careful. Schonerman must not be harmed. We only want his papers."

"We won't use our blasters?"

"No. We don't dare take the chance of injuring him."

"His papers will definitely be at his bench?"

"He's not allowed to remove them for any reason. We know exactly where we'll find what we want. There's only one place the papers can be."

"Their security precautions play right into our hands."

"Exactly," Ryan murmured.

Ryan and Kastner slipped down the hillside, running between the trees. The ground was hard and cold underfoot. They emerged at the edge of the town. A few people were already up, moving slowly along the street. The town had not been bombed. There was no damage, as yet. The windows of the stores had been boarded up and huge arrows pointed to the underground shelters.

"What do they have on?" Kastner said. "Some of them have something on their faces."

"Bacteria masks. Come on." Ryan gripped his blast pistol as he and Kastner made their way through the town. None of the people paid any attention to them.

"Just two more uniformed people," Kastner said.

"Our main hope is surprise. We're inside the wall of defense. The sky is patrolled against Soviet craft. No Soviet agents could be landed here. And in any case, this is a minor research lab, in the center of the United States. There would be no reason for Soviet agents to come here."

"But there will be guards."

"Everything is guarded. All science. All kinds of research work."

The school house loomed up ahead of them. A few men were milling around the doorway. Ryan's heart constricted. Was Schonerman one of them?

The men were going inside, one by one. A guard in helmet and uniform was checking their badges. A few of the men wore bacteria masks, only their eyes visible. Would he recognize Schonerman? What if he wore a mask? Fear gripped Ryan suddenly. In a mask Schonerman would look like anyone else.

Ryan slipped his blast pistol away, motioning Kastner to

do the same. His fingers closed over the lining of his coat pocket. Sleep-gas crystals. No one this early would have been immunized against sleep-gas. It had not been developed until a year or so later. The gas would put everyone for several hundred feet around into varying periods of sleep. It was a tricky and unpredictable weapon—but perfect for this situation.

"I'm ready," Kastner murmured.

"Wait. We have to wait for *him*."

They waited. The sun rose, warming the cold sky. More research workers appeared, filing up the path and inside the building. They puffed white clouds of frozen moisture and slapped their hands together. Ryan began to become nervous. One of the guards was watching him and Kastner. If they became suspicious—

A small man in a heavy overcoat and horn-rimmed glasses came up the path, hurrying toward the building.

Ryan tensed. Schonerman! Schonerman flashed his badge to the guard. He stamped his feet and went inside the building, stripping off his mittens. It was over in a second. A brisk young man, hurrying to get to his work. To his papers.

"Come on," Ryan said.

He and Kastner moved forward. Ryan pulled the gas crystals loose from the lining of his pocket. The crystals were cold and hard in his hand. Like diamonds. The guard was watching them coming, his gun alert. His face was set. Studying them. He had never seen them before. Ryan, watching the guard's face, could read his thoughts without trouble.

Ryan and Kastner halted at the doorway. "We're from the FBI," Ryan said calmly.

"Identify yourselves." The guard did not move.

"Here are our credentials," Ryan said. He drew his hand out from his coat pocket. And crushed the gas crystals in his fist.

The guard sagged. His face relaxed. Limply, his body slid to the ground. The gas spread. Kastner stepped through the door, peering around, his eyes bright.

The building was small. Lab benches and equipment stretched out on all sides of them. The workers lay where they had been standing, inert heaps on the floor, their arms and legs out, their mouths open.

"Quick." Ryan passed Kastner, hurrying across the lab. At the far end of the room Schonerman lay slumped over his bench, his head resting against the metal surface. His glasses had fallen off. His eyes were open, staring. He had taken his papers out of the drawer. The padlock and key were still on the bench. The papers were under his head and between his hands.

Kastner ran to Schonerman and snatched the papers up, stuffing them into his briefcase.

"Get them all!"

"I have them all." Kastner pulled open the drawer. He grabbed the remaining papers in the drawer. "Every one of them."

"Let's go. The gas will dissipate rapidly."

They ran back outside. A few sprawled bodies lay across the entrance, workers who had come into the area.

"Hurry."

They ran through the town, along the single main street. People gaped at them in astonishment. Kastner gasped for breath, holding on tight to his briefcase as he ran. "I'm—winded."

"Don't stop."

They reached the edge of the town and started up the hillside. Ryan ran between the trees, his body bent forward, not looking back. Some of the workers would be reviving. And other guards would be coming into the area. It would not be long before the alarm would be out.

Behind them a siren whirred into life.

"Here they come." Ryan paused at the top of the hill, waiting for Kastner. Behind them men were swelling rapidly into the street, coming up out of underground bunkers. More sirens wailed, a dismal echoing sound.

"Down!" Ryan ran down the hillside toward the time ship, sliding and slipping on the dry earth. Kastner hurried after him, sobbing for breath. They could hear orders being shouted. Soldiers swarming up the hillside after them.

Ryan reached the ship. He grabbed Kastner and pulled him inside. "Get the hatch shut. Get it closed!"

Ryan ran to the control board. Kastner dropped his briefcase and tugged at the rim of the hatch. At the top of the hill a line of soldiers appeared. They made their way down the hillside, aiming and firing as they ran.



"Get down," Ryan barked. Shells crashed against the hull of the ship. "Down!"

Kastner fired back with his blast pistol. A wave of flame rolled up the hillside at the soldiers. The hatch came shut with a bang. Kastner spun the bolts and slid the inner lock into place. "Ready. All ready."

Ryan threw the power switch. Outside, the remaining soldiers fought through the flame to the side of the ship. Ryan could see their faces through the port, seared and scorched by the blast.

One man raised his gun awkwardly. Most of them were down, rolling and struggling to rise. As the scene dimmed and faded he saw one of them crawling to his knees. The man's clothing was on fire. Smoke billowed from him, from his arms and shoulders. His face was contorted with pain. He reached out, toward the ship, reaching up at Ryan, his hands shaking, his body bent.

Suddenly Ryan froze.

He was still staring fixedly when the scene winked out and there was nothing. Nothing at all. The meters changed reading. Across the time map the arms moved calmly, tracing their lines.

In the last moment Ryan had looked directly into the man's face. The pain-contorted face. The features had been twisted, screwed up out of shape. And the horn-rimmed glasses were gone. But there was no doubt—

It was Schonerman.

Ryan sat down. He ran a shaking hand through his hair.

"You're certain?" Kastner said.

"Yes. He must have come out of the sleep very quickly. It reacts differently on each person. And he was at the far end of the room. He must have come out of it and followed after us."

"Was he badly injured?"

"I don't know."

Kastner opened his briefcase. "Anyhow, we have the papers."

Ryan nodded, only half hearing. Schonerman, injured, blasted, his clothing on fire. That had not been part of the plan.

But more important—*had it been part of history?*

For the first time the ramification of what they had done

was beginning to emerge in his mind. Their only concern had been to obtain Schonerman's papers, so that USIC could make use of the artificial brain. Properly used, Schonerman's discovery could have great value in aiding the restoration of demolished Terra. Armies of worker-robots replanting and rebuilding. A mechanical army to make Terra fertile again. Robots could do in a generation what humans would toil at for years. Terra could be reborn.

But in returning to the past had they introduced new factors? Had a *new* past been created? Had some kind of balance been upset?

Ryan stood up and paced back and forth.

"What is it?" Kastner said. "We got the papers."

"I know."

"USIC will be pleased. The League can expect aid from now on. Whatever it wants. This will set up USIC forever. After all, USIC will manufacture the robots. Worker-robots. The end of human labor. Machines instead of men to work the ground."

Ryan nodded. "Fine."

"Then what's wrong?"

"I'm not worried about our continuum."

"What are you worried about?"

Ryan crossed to the control board and studied the time map. The ship was moving back toward the present, the arms tracing a path back. "I'm worried about new factors we may have introduced into past continuums. There's no record of Schonerman being injured. There's no record of this event. It may have set a different causal chain into motion."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But I intend to find out. We're going to make a stop right away and discover what new factors we've set into motion."

Ryan moved the ship into a continuum immediately following the Schonerman incident. It was early October, a little over a week later. He landed the ship in a farmer's field outside of Des Moines, Iowa, at sunset. A cold autumn night with the ground hard and brittle underfoot.

Ryan and Kastner walked into town, Kastner holding tightly onto his briefcase. Des Moines had been bombed by Russian guided missiles. Most of the industrial sections were gone. Only military men and construction workers still remained

in the city. The civilian population had been evacuated.

Animals roamed around the deserted streets, looking for food. Glass and debris lay everywhere. The city was cold and desolate. The streets were gutted and wrecked from the fires following the bombing. The autumn air was heavy with the decaying smells of vast heaps of rubble and bodies mixed together in mounds at intersections and open lots.

From a boarded-up newsstand Ryan stole a copy of a news magazine, *Week Review*. The magazine was damp and covered with mold. Kastner put it into his briefcase and they returned to the time ship. Occasional soldiers passed them, moving weapons and equipment out of the city. No one challenged them.

They reached the time ship and entered, locking the hatch behind them. The fields around them were deserted. The farm building had been burned down, and the crops were withered and dead. In the driveway the remains of a ruined automobile lay on its side, a charred wreck. A group of ugly pigs nosed around the remains of the farmhouse, searching for something to eat.

Ryan sat down, opened the magazine. He studied it for a long time, turning the damp pages slowly.

"What do you see?" Kastner asked.

"All about the war. It's still in the opening stages. Soviet guided missiles dropping down. American disc bombs showing all over Russia."

"Any mention of Schonerman?"

"Nothing I can find. Too much else going on." Ryan went on studying the magazine. Finally, on one of the back pages, he found what he was looking for. A small item, only a paragraph long.

### SOVIET AGENTS SURPRISED

A group of Soviet agents, attempting to demolish a Government research station at Harristown, Kansas, were fired on by guards and quickly routed. The agents escaped, after attempting to slip past the guards into the work offices of the station. Passing themselves off as FBI men, the Soviet agents tried to gain entry as the early morning shift was beginning work. Alert guards intercepted them and gave chase. No damage was done to the research labs

or equipment. Two guards and one worker were killed in the encounter. The names of the guards

Ryan clutched the magazine.

"What is it?" Kastner hurried over.

Ryan read the rest of the article. He laid down the magazine, pushing it slowly toward Kastner.

"What is it?" Kastner searched the page.

"Schonerman died. Killed by the blast. We killed him. We've changed the past."

Ryan stood up and walked to the port. He lit a cigarette, some of his composure returning. "We set up new factors and started a new line of events. There's no telling where it will end."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone else may discover the artificial brain. Maybe the shift will rectify itself. The time flow will resume its regular course."

"Why should it?"

"I don't know. As it stands, we killed him and stole his papers. There's no way the Government can get hold of his work. They won't even know it ever existed. Unless someone else does the same work, covers the same material—"

"How will we know?"

"We'll have to take more looks. It's the only way to find out."

Ryan selected the year 2051.

In 2051 the first claws had begun to appear. The Soviets had almost won the war. The UN was beginning to bring out the claws in the last desperate attempt to turn the tide of the war.

Ryan landed the time ship at the top of a ridge. Below them a level plain stretched out, criss-crossed with ruins and barbed wire and the remains of weapons.

Kastner unscrewed the hatch and stepped gingerly out onto the ground.

"Be careful," Ryan said. "Remember the claws."

Kastner drew his blast gun. "I'll remember."

"At this stage they were small. About a foot long. Metal. They hid down in the ash. The humanoid types hadn't come into existence, yet."

The sun was high in the sky. It was about noon. The air was warm and thick. Clouds of ash rolled across the ground, blown by the wind.

Suddenly Kastner tensed. "Look. What's that? Coming along the road."

A truck bumped slowly toward them, a heavy brown truck, loaded with soldiers. The truck made its way along the road to the base of the ridge. Ryan drew his blast gun. He and Kastner stood ready.

The truck stopped. Some of the soldiers leaped down and started up the side of the ridge, striding through the ash.

"Get set," Ryan murmured.

The soldiers reached them, halting a few feet away. Ryan and Kastner stood silently, their blast guns up.

One of the soldiers laughed. "Put them away. Don't you know the war's over?"

"Over?"

The soldiers relaxed. Their leader, a big man with a red face, wiped sweat from his forehead and pushed his way up to Ryan. His uniform was ragged and dirty. He wore boots, split and caked with ash. "The war's been over for a week. Come on! There's a lot to do. We'll take you on back."

"Back?"

"We're rounding up all the outposts. You were cut off? No communications?"

"No," Ryan said.

"Be months before everyone knows the war's over. Come along. No time to stand here jawing."

Ryan shifted. "Tell me. You say the war is really over? But—"

"Good thing, too. We couldn't have lasted much longer." The officer tapped his belt. "You don't by any chance have a cigarette, do you?"

Ryan brought out his pack slowly. He took the cigarettes from it and handed them to the officer, crumpling the pack carefully and restoring it to his pocket.

"Thanks." The officer passed the cigarettes around to his men. They lit up. "Yes, it's a good thing. We were almost finished."

Kastner's mouth opened. "The claws. What about the claws?"

The officer scowled. "What?"

"Why did the war end so—so suddenly?"

"Counter-revolution in the Soviet Union. We had been dropping agents and materials for months. Never thought anything would come of it, though. They were a lot weaker than anyone realized."

"Then the war's really ended?"

"Of course." The officer grabbed Ryan by the arm. "Let's go. We have work to do. We're trying to clear this god damn ash away and get things planted."

"Planted? Crops?"

"Of course. What would *you* plant?"

Ryan pulled away. "Let me get this straight. The war is over. No more fighting. And you know nothing about any claws? Any kind of weapon called claws?"

The officer's face wrinkled. "What do you mean?"

"Mechanical killers. Robots. As a weapon."

The circle of soldiers drew back a little. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"You better explain," the officer said, his face suddenly hard. "What's this about claws?"

"No weapon was ever developed along those lines?" Kastner asked.

There was silence. Finally one of the soldiers grunted. "I think I know what he means. He means Dowling's mine."

Ryan turned. "What?"

"An English physicist. He's been experimenting with artificial mines, self-governing. Robot mines. But the mines couldn't repair themselves. So the Government abandoned the project and increased its propaganda work instead."

"That's why the war's over," the officer said. He started off. "Let's go."

The soldiers trailed after him, down the side of the ridge.

"Coming?" The officer halted, looking back at Ryan and Kastner.

"We'll be along later," Ryan said. "We have to get our equipment together."

"All right. The camp is down the road about half a mile. There's a settlement there. People coming back from the moon."

"From the moon?"

"We had started moving units to Luna, but now there isn't

any need. Maybe it's a good thing. Who the hell wants to leave Terra?"

"Thanks for the cigarettes," one of the soldiers called back. The soldiers piled in the back of the truck. The officer slid behind the wheel. The truck started up and continued on its way, rumbling along the road.

Ryan and Kastner watched it go.

"Then Schonerman's death was never balanced," Ryan murmured. "A whole new past—"

"I wonder how far the change carries. I wonder if it carries up to our own time."

"There's only one way to find out."

Kastner nodded. "I want to know right away. The sooner the better. Let's get started."

Ryan nodded, deep in thought. "The sooner the better."

They entered the time ship. Kastner sat down with his briefcase. Ryan adjusted the controls. Outside the port the scene winked out of existence. They were in the time flow again, moving toward the present.

Ryan's face was grim. "I can't believe it. The whole structure of the past changed. An entire new chain set in motion. Expanding through every continuum. Altering more and more of the stream."

"Then it won't be our present, when we get back. There's no telling how different it will be. All stemming from Schonerman's death. A whole new history set in motion from one incident."

"Not from Schonerman's death," Ryan corrected.

"What do you mean?"

"Not from his death but from the loss of his papers. Because Schonerman died the Government didn't obtain a successful methodology by which they could build an artificial brain. Therefore the claws never came into existence."

"It's the same thing."

"Is it?"

Kastner looked up quickly. "Explain."

"Schonerman's death is of no importance. The loss of his papers to the Government is the determining factor." Ryan pointed at Kastner's briefcase. "Where are the papers? In there. We have them."

Kastner nodded. "That's true."

"We can restore the situation by moving back into the past

and delivering the papers to some agency of the Government. Schonerman is unimportant. It's his papers that matter."

Ryan's hand moved toward the power switch.

"Wait!" Kastner said. "Don't we want to see the present? We should see what changes carry down to our own time."

Ryan hesitated. "True."

"Then we can decide what we want to do. Whether we want to restore the papers."

"All right. We'll continue to the present and then make up our minds."

The fingers crossing the time map had returned almost to their original positions. Ryan studied them for a long time, his hand on the power switch. Kastner held on tightly to the briefcase, his arms wrapped around it, the heavy leather bundle resting in his lap.

"We're almost there," Ryan said.

"To our own time?"

"In another few moments." Ryan stood up, gripping the switch. "I wonder what we'll see."

"Probably very little we'll recognize."

Ryan took a deep breath, feeling the cold metal under his fingers. How different would their world be? Would they recognize anything? Had they swept everything familiar out of existence?

A vast chain had been started in motion. A tidal wave moving through time, altering each continuum, echoing down through all the ages to come. The second part of the war had never happened. Before the claws could be invented the war had ended. The concept of the artificial brain had never been transformed into workable practice. The most potent engine of war had never come into existence. Human energies had turned from war to the rebuilding of the planet.

Around Ryan the meters and dials vibrated. In a few seconds they would be back. What would Terra be like? Would anything be the same?

The Fifty Cities. Probably they would not exist. Jon, his son, sitting quietly in his room reading. USIC. The Government. The League and its labs and offices, its buildings and roof fields and guards. The whole complicated social structure. Would it all be gone without a trace? Probably.

And what would he find instead?

"We'll know in a minute," Ryan murmured.



"It won't be long." Kastner got to his feet and moved to the port. "I want to see it. It should be a very unfamiliar world."

Ryan threw the power switch. The ship jerked, pulling out of the time flow. Outside the port something drifted and turned, as the ship righted itself. Automatic gravity controls slipped into place. The ship was rushing above the surface of the ground.

Kastner gasped.

"What do you see?" Ryan demanded, adjusting the velocity of the ship. "What's out there?"

Kastner said nothing.

"What do you see?"

After a long time Kastner turned away from the port. "Very interesting. Look for yourself."

"What's out there?"

Kastner sat down slowly, picking up his briefcase. "This opens up a whole new line of thought."

Ryan made his way to the port and gazed out. Below the ship lay Terra. But not the Terra they had left.

Fields, endless yellow fields. And parks. Parks and yellow fields. Squares of green among the yellow, as far as the eye could see. Nothing else.

"No cities," Ryan said thickly.

"No. Don't you remember? The people are all out in the fields. Or walking in the parks. Discussing the nature of the universe."

"This is what Jon saw."

"Your son was extremely accurate."

Ryan moved back to the controls, his face blank. His mind was numb. He sat down and adjusted the landing grapples. The ship sank lower and lower until it was coasting over the flat fields. Men and women glanced up at the ship, startled. Men and women in robes.

They passed over a park. A herd of animals rushed frantically away. Some kind of deer.

This was the world his son had seen. This was the vision. Fields and parks and men and women in long flowing robes. Walking along the paths. Discussing the problems of the universe.

And the other world, his world, no longer existed. The League was gone. His whole life's work destroyed. In this

world it did not exist. Jon. His son. Snuffed out. He would never see him again. His work, his son, everything he had known had winked out of existence.

"We have to go back," Ryan said suddenly.

Kastner blinked. "Beg pardon?"

"We have to take the papers back to the continuum where they belong. We can't recreate the situation exactly, but we can place the papers in the Government's hands. That will restore all the relevant factors."

"Are you serious?"

Ryan stood up unsteadily, moving toward Kastner. "Give me the papers. This is a very serious situation. We must work quickly. Things have to be put back in place."

Kastner stepped back, whipping out his blaster. Ryan lunged. His shoulder caught Kastner, bowling the little businessman over. The blaster skidded across the floor of the ship, clattering against the wall. The papers fluttered in all directions.

"You damn fool!" Ryan grabbed at the papers, dropping down to his knees.

Kastner chased after the blaster. He scooped it up, his round face set with owlish determination. Ryan saw him out of the corner of his eye. For a moment the temptation to laugh almost overcame him. Kastner's face was flushed, his cheeks burning red. He fumbled with the blaster, trying to aim it.

"Kastner, for God's sake—"

The little businessman's fingers tightened around the trigger. Abrupt fear chilled Ryan. He scrambled to his feet. The blaster roared, flame crackling across the time ship. Ryan leaped out of the way, singed by the trail of fire.

Schoner's papers flared up, glowing where they lay scattered over the floor. For a brief second they burned. Then the glow died out, flickering into charred ash. The thin acrid smell of the blast drifted to Ryan, tickling his nose and making his eyes water.

"Sorry," Kastner murmured. He laid the blaster down on the control board. "Don't you think you better get us down? We're quite close to the surface."

Ryan moved mechanically to the control board. After a moment he took his seat and began to adjust the controls, decreasing the velocity of the ship. He said nothing.

"I'm beginning to understand about Jon," Kastner murmured. "He must have had some kind of parallel time sense. Awareness of other possible futures. As work progressed on the time ship his visions increased, didn't they? Every day his visions became more real. Every day the time ship became more actual."

Ryan nodded.

"This opens up whole new lines of speculation. The mystical visions of medieval saints. Perhaps they were of other futures, other time flows. Visions of hell would be worse time flows. Visions of heaven would be better time flows. Ours must stand some place in the middle. And the vision of the eternal unchanging worked. Perhaps that's an awareness of non-time. Not another world but this world, seen outside of time. We'll have to think more about that, too."

The time ship landed, coming to rest at the edge of one of the parks. Kastner crossed to the port and gazed out at the trees beyond the ship.

"In the books my family saved there were some pictures of trees," he said thoughtfully. "These trees here, by us. They're pepper trees. Those over there are what they call evergreen trees. They stay that way all year around. That's why the name."

Kastner picked up his briefcase, gripping it tightly. He moved toward the hatch.

"Let's go find some of the people. So we can begin, discussing things. Metaphysical things." He grinned at Ryan. "I always did like metaphysical things."